
In checking on Claire, she mentioned she was quoted in the paper on Tuesday. I hadn't seen it as I don't read the sports pages. Amazing article so I'm taking a chance on annoying everyone and sending another email. It is a great article though. The headline on the sports page!! Very cool for Claire...

SEE STORY UPDATES

NBA ROOTS IN LAS VEGAS

Riots put city in sports spotlight

Thomas & Mack Center rescued L.A. for playoff game

Editor's note: The NBA planted its seeds in Las Vegas during the 1983-84 season and still has a growing relationship with the city. This is the third of a fivepart series detailing the league's history in Las Vegas.

There was a gas leak in eastern Los Angeles.

At least that's what Claire Rothman communicated to the crowd at the Great Western Forum on Wednesday, April 29, 1992. As the building's general manager, that's how she kept spectators calm as word of the rioting began to spread during the Lakers' 121-119 playoff victory over the Portland Trail Blazers, urging them to go west amid the chaos that was consuming the city.

"Everybody got out in record time," recalled Rothman, who concocted the gas leak story in conjunction with local law enforcement. "Nobody was hurt because everybody was calm whether they believed you or they didn't believe you."

With rioting sparked by the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers accused of brutally beating Rodney King, an African American, the Lakers, in consultation with the NBA, moved the following game, Game 4, of their first-round series against the Blazers to the Thomas & Mack Center.

An announced crowd of 15,478 attended Portland's 102-76 victory, ending a forgettable season for the Lakers, who had lost star guard Magic Johnson before the season to HIV. It's the only NBA playoff game contested in Las Vegas.

"Had it been a regular-season game, it may have been canceled. But obviously that wasn't an option for a playoff game," said former Lakers public relations director John

Black. “You play all season long to secure the best record and homecourt advantage. We were giving that up by not being able to play the game at the Forum and having to play at a neutral site.”

The decision

Rothman is 91 now, but still has a vivid recollection of the rioting. She remembers in great detail the gunshots that grazed the hood of her car. The smoke and burning smell that engulfed the area. The fear she felt while she saw the city “disintegrate into its lowest way of operating.”

“The world was erupting around us,” Blazers guard Terry Porter said. “It was just the whole surreal thing, driving around (Los Angeles) while we were there before they told us we were going to move the game. You heard the gunfire. You heard the noise. You saw the smoke in different parts of the city.”

Mayor Tom Bradley instituted a curfew beginning April 30, meaning the Lakers had to find a place to play Game 4, scheduled for May 1. Rothman still had to go into the office to figure out where that would be.

She drove to the Forum and scouted possible locations with the franchise’s brain trust, which included general manager Jerry West. Other local venues were unavailable, but the Lakers had played preseason games in Las Vegas since the 1980s and developed relationships with key local figures such as Thomas & Mack assistant director Pat Christenson.

Naturally, the Thomas & Mack Center emerged as the place to play. Rothman telephoned Christenson to work out the details, and the parties agreed to a deal within an hour.

“Thomas & Mack never operated as a college venue,” said Christenson, now the president of Las Vegas Events. “It was pretty much set up as a professional venue, so a turnaround like that, it sounds like it was a lot. (But) everything really fell into place, and it really wasn’t difficult to do.”

The game

Game 4 was originally scheduled for Friday, May 1, but was postponed until Sunday, May 3, allowing arena staffers ample time to prepare.

Christenson said the arena staff was used to quick turnarounds, having torn down elaborate concert sets the morning before UNLV basketball games. He said he thinks the game probably would have sold out with another day of promotion and preparation.

“We were all really happy. It came off without a hitch in a very unfortunate circumstance,” Christenson said.

The game wasn't competitive, with the Blazers seizing a 49-33 halftime lead and cruising in the second half en route to a 3-1 series victory and an eventual berth in the NBA Finals. Portland wing Clyde Drexler had a game-high 26 points, Danny Ainge scored 19 and Porter 15.

Orange County Register columnist Mark Whicker covered the game and remembered "the crowd was kind of like a Summer League crowd, except a lot bigger. The primary emotion was relief that it was over," he wrote in an email.

"That was a critical time with a lot of social issues when it came to law enforcement and black young men," said Porter, a two-time All-Star point guard now coaching at the University of Portland. "The NBA being the NBA, there were a lot of questions about how we were going to respond. What was going to be our message? For us, it was about going out and playing the game. Going out and doing the things we had to do to take care of our job. Trying to move on the best we could."

Rothman did not attend the game, opting instead to recover emotionally from the distress caused by the riots.

"It's the kind of experience that's engraved in your brain. You're never going to forget it," said Rothman, now a Las Vegas resident. "We were greeted, and we were helped so graciously in a terrible situation."

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