*When the Garden Was Eden: Clyde, the Captain, Dollar Bill,
and the Glory Days of the New York Knicks* by Harvey Araton
(review)

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Book Review

Harvey Araton, *When the Garden Was Eden: Clyde, the Captain, Dollar Bill, and the Glory Days of the New York Knicks*. New York: Harper, 2011. Cloth, 368 pp.

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The New York sports media microscope has been known to turn small controversies into big stories—remember the furor over New York Jets coach Rex Ryan’s tattoo? Or more recently, the unrelenting attention to little-used but much-hyped Jets backup quarterback Tim Tebow?

And it can just as easily take a previously obscure player, like then-New York Knicks reserve point guard Jeremy Lin, and, in the wake of one hot streak, turn him into a figure of worldwide acclaim. A Google search reveals continuing media interest in the Asian American player out of Harvard, even though he’s now on the roster of the Rockets of Houston.

Some would argue about the “New York effect” that it has been ever thus, as more than 150 books have been written about the only two NBA championships won by the Knicks, now more than 40 years in the past.

New York Times columnist Harvey Araton adds another one to that list with *When the Garden Was Eden*, a retrospective that’s also part fan memoir of the glory years for one of the league’s founding franchises. And even though the story is now familiar to basketball fans of a certain age, it’s a welcome addition.

As the title suggests, the book takes the reader back to a time that was much simpler in many respects, including the reach and impact of media—no Twitter-fed controversies over rants by disrespected athletes, no talk radio and 24/7 cable TV coverage to second-guess players and coaches.

And it was a time when newspapers still carried major clout, as Araton learned when a story he wrote resulted—so he says—in the firing of his boyhood idol, Willis Reed. At the time, Araton was a young beat reporter

for the *New York Post*, a recent acquisition of media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Reed, not too many years retired from a stellar career as the Knicks center and team captain, was the team's coach.

Reed is a touchstone for Araton in this book, a blue-collar African American player whose career coincided with major changes in race relations both in sports and American society in general. Reed, a Louisiana native who starred at Grambling, a historically black college with a strong athletic tradition, was not militant in racial matters, preferring to let his talent do the talking and secure his place as an equal with white teammates.

"Growing up in his small-town culture of once punitive inequity had prepared him for that challenge," Araton writes. "His days in Bernice (his hometown) had taught him to look past limitations, to imagine what was possible if people could just band together" (p. 23).

Araton, a lifelong New Yorker, starts his book with a fish-out-of-water visit to Reed on his home turf, with the attendant cultural incongruities. From there he traces the building of the Knicks championship team, fueled by the acquisition of Reed and complementary players like guards Walt Frazier and Earl Monroe and forwards Dave DeBusschere and future senator and presidential candidate Bill Bradley.

But the catalyst is the hiring of taciturn but people-smart coach Red Holzman, who molds the team into a championship contender in a few seasons. In an era when Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi was a coaching icon with his "no questions asked" leadership, Holzman was secure enough to let his players figure it out, giving them the freedom to make their own decisions on the court—another example of the evolving athletic cultural norms of the period.

Araton's book is, to the reader's benefit, crammed with this sort of context, portraying the team as being of its time and place. In contrast to some retrospective sports books, there isn't a lot of play-by-play rehashing of old games. And when there is, it's to make a point, as Araton does when viewing grainy black-and-white game film of some of the Knicks' key playoff games from their championship years. (A quaint notion in itself, viewed from today's perspective, when it seems that every game is available somewhere on TV.)

But the media attention was part of the game for the Old Knicks, as Araton calls them.

"It was a tumultuous time and the first time that it seemed the outside world had invaded ballparks and arenas," Araton quotes *Post* columnist Larry Merchant (p. 54).

Araton himself says, “Now, all of a sudden, the questions being asked and the answers given were not always fun and were about much more than games” (p. 54).

As a case in point, Araton recounts an interview of obscure Knicks rookie Bill Hosket with ABC’s acerbic Howard Cosell. The journalist quickly set the tone for the encounter by asking the unsuspecting player about his opinion of US track athletes’ protests at a medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City.

Araton quotes Bill Bradley, a Princeton star and Rhodes Scholar, as saying that he tried to avoid reporters’ questions about the country’s issues related to race, war, and poverty.

“Why were they asking me?” he said. “They were asking me because I was a well-known basketball player and therefore a celebrity. . . . There are a lot of other people whose answer to that question is going to have a lot more impact” (p. 60).

In some cases, media coverage worked to the players’ advantage. Frazier, a quiet and unheralded guard out of Southern Illinois, quickly transformed himself into “Clyde,” a stylish fashion plate who became the subject of many photo shoots.

As even the most ardent Old Knicks fan will admit—and Araton is quick to admit to his bias in favor of the team and against their rivals of the day, like the Boston Celtics and Baltimore Bullets—that era was about as good as it got for the team. The Knicks made the finals in 1994 and 1999 but have fielded forgettable teams for most of the last decade or more.

The teamwork ethic and egalitarian values of the Old Knicks, Araton says, seem out of place in an era when a player can commandeer an hour on ESPN to announce which team will be the next to have the privilege of his services, as LeBron James did in 2010 when he became a member of the Miami Heat. And in fact, Araton contrasts that to Reed’s classy and understated acceptance into the Basketball Hall of Fame that same summer.

He suggests throughout the book, that intentionally or not, the modern media culture is just part of what makes it more and more difficult for a phenomenon like the Old Knicks—as much a creature of *their* media times as they were—to happen again.