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In Praise of the 12th Man

Why that tall, mustachioed guy at the end of the bench mattered

By [Howie Kahn](#) on February 20, 2013 [PRINT](#)

I tried calling Chuck Nevitt at home: no answer. I left a message: no response. The National Basketball Retired Players Association didn't have any additional contact information for the former 7-foot-5 center.¹ Neither did Nevitt's alma mater, North Carolina State, where he averaged three points a game before graduating in 1982. Nevitt's former agent, Keith Glass, hadn't kept tabs on his old client — one of the many '80s-era 12th men in his stable.² Neither did the Lakers, one of Nevitt's six former teams³ and the one with which he won a championship in 1985. I tried to guess Nevitt's work e-mail, writing to several possible name and domain combinations, thinking one of them — cnevitt@..., chuckn@..., c.nevitt@... — would open the door to a fruitful dialogue about the nature of life deep on the bench. I got no bounce-back, but also no answer. My Facebook note went unreturned. Friending felt like a stretch.

To a former player who had warranted coverage only for being very tall and for not playing very much, my efforts might have seemed redundant. Nevitt had long ago completed the expected battery of stories, the best of which was [written by Steve Wulf](#) and appeared in *Sports Illustrated* in 1989, Nevitt's eighth year in the NBA. More recently, Nevitt popped up in *SI* again in a [2011 sidebar](#) — part of a larger story about 7-footers — which called him "eternally affable" and featured a Nevittism that (1) sounded like the end of his basketball narrative, and (2) made being an NBA 12th man seem like reason enough to work through psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief. "My job was preparing the other guys," Nevitt said. "And I was fine with that." Nevitt, apparently, had reached Kübler-Ross's fifth and final stage: acceptance.

When I spoke with Dallas Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle, he conveyed that my attempts

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were more likely something else: ridiculous. After putting in a request to speak with Carlisle about his own time at the bottom of the depth chart, as a player with the Celtics in the mid-'80s, he called me back from a Los Angeles In-N-Out Burger before a December game with the Clippers. Carlisle began, "I'm not sure how you ever sold this, or who's interested, but I'd be happy to give you a couple minutes." He then went on to describe his former teammate Greg Kite, a hard-nosed 12 with highly intelligent elbows, as "physical, a great screener. A great defender and help defender." Which was exactly what I wanted to hear. Nobody ever said nice things about Kite. But Carlisle broke down his game and described him as a tremendous asset. "Greg got things done around the basket," said Carlisle, before returning to his Animal Style Double-Double. I wanted to hear the same kinds of things about Nevitt. A small celebration. A little revisionist history. Some glory for the guy.



BILL BAPTIST/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

"People denigrated Chuck," says Glass. "Chuck was skilled. Chuck had a touch and a feel for the game. Chuck was not bad. Maybe I sound like his agent, and I don't have to anymore, but I really thought Chuck could play." This is evident from [the one existing YouTube clip that highlights Nevitt](#): May 22, 1985, Game 5 of the Western Conference finals. By then, Nevitt had already been waived three times in three seasons. He signed with the Lakers that March to fill a roster spot vacated by the injured Jamaal Wilkes. Prior to the playoffs, Nevitt had appeared in 11 games for the Lakers, playing 59 minutes, blocking 15 shots, and scoring 12 points. This was his second stint with the team — they'd signed him the previous September and released him in November just after the beginning of the season.

But Nevitt stayed on with the Lakers after Glass brokered a unique arrangement with general manager Jerry West. "We worked it out so Chuck would sell tickets," says Glass, "and he'd also be able to work out with the team, post up with Kareem in practice, and if something happened to one of their guys, the Lakers would sign him." While Nevitt sold tickets — sometimes at a local mall — and worked drills, he also auditioned, at Rodney Dangerfield's request, for a part in the comedy *Back to School*. The idea was to place Nevitt inside a Tall and Fat, one of the clothing stores owned by Dangerfield's character, Thornton Melon. It seemed logical — Nevitt had actually worked a similar job at a Houston-area big-and-tall shop called the King Size Company after being cut by the Rocket in 1983. He didn't get the part.

Brent Musburger and Hubie Brown called the game for CBS. Nuggets star Alex English had broken his right thumb a few days before and as a result, Denver, wearing its mosaic rainbow brights, got slaughtered: final score, 153-109. When Nevitt entered the game, with

1. They did have information about how to plan a \$3,625, seven-day Caribbean charity cruise with Mark Aguirre, Rick Barry, and Antoine Walker. Also: a business directory listing the current ventures of former NBA stars, including Lawrence Funderburke's financial planning firm; the offices of mayors Dave Bing and Kevin Johnson; and a couple of Utah fine-dining spots owned by Mark Eaton. Also, (312) 913-9400, which is the number to dial should you decide to book the Legends Band, featuring the vocal stylings of Terry Cummings and Thurl Bailey, for your next family or corporate event.

2. The fourth chapter of Glass's 2007 memoir, *Taking Shots*, is called "Eighty-One Feet of White Centers." He writes, "It really didn't take a genius to realize that for some inexplicable reason the league seemed almost to have a rule: Every team had to have three white centers. They didn't actually have to play, but they had to have them. I am not alleging this in any racist or quota sense. It is just that the league is a copycat league and trends develop. There have been other trends as well. They are based more on types of player rather than color."

3. The others, over the course of 11 seasons: Rockets, Bucks, Pistons, Bulls, and Spurs.

the Lakers up 30, the Forum began to rumble and the last man off the bench — the tallest in the league — peeled away his gold, short-sleeved warm-ups and trotted out onto the court. Nevitt's mustache seemed freshly combed. White tube socks stretched high over his calves, and his shorts revealed far too much thigh. Musburger remarked on the crowd's support and also on Nevitt's height. "Seven *fiiiive*," he said, slyly, like a carnival barker selling tickets to the freak show. Brown went deeper. Nevitt had always been too thin. "They have him on a concentrated weightlifting program," he said. "He's gained 25 pounds. It doesn't look it, but he *has* gained 25 pounds."

Meanwhile, Nevitt looked both extremely sensible and momentarily lost. He headed in one direction until his teammate Mitch Kupchak corrected him, sending him in the other. Nevitt then vanished into the backcourt while Fat Lever shot a couple of free throws. Brown went right on analyzing: "He works extremely hard in practice. And like Pat Riley said, 'He's our 12th man. If you are going to keep a 12th man, why not try to develop someone? You can't invent size, so why not go with a young man who has a great attitude?'"

Seconds later, Nevitt got down on the right block. With his back to the basket, he dropped his near shoulder⁴ and attempted the longest, most languid skyhook imaginable. The ball arced high off his fingers and clanked off the rim. But he snagged the rebound, pump-faked, and threw down a one-handed dunk having barely left the balls of his feet. It all looked very agile, highly athletic — a manifestation of instinct and talent.

Brown marked the moment with an, "*Ohhhhh yessss*" and his voice trilled with delight as if a dunk by a 7-5 professional basketball player could actually be surprising. Shortly after that, Nevitt hit a textbook turnaround jumper on the baseline and intently jogged back down the court as if to say, *Yeah, I always hit that textbook turnaround jumper on the baseline*. Musburger and Brown had nothing more to say. Chuck Nevitt had amassed four points in this short clip.

Four awesome-looking points.

Around the same time I was researching Nevitt's whereabouts, I received an e-mail from another former 12th man who will be kept anonymous. I'll only say he played around the same time as Nevitt, from the early '80s through the early '90s — when the NBA truly penetrated the national consciousness; when Magic, Bird, and Jordan changed basketball for good; when kids started searching in earnest for posters of Xavier McDaniel walking a possessed emerald-eyed Doberman through a smoky abyss.

It was also an era when the end of the bench was flourishing. Not by the same athletic or commercial standards, but for the way a regular cast of hopefuls and grunts sustained their seats for years. "These guys all made the league proud," says Glass, who, also represented Kite, Ed Nealy,⁵ and Stuart Gray.⁶ "They really did, which means a hell of a lot more than whether they were the best players who ever lived. And they weren't! But man, did they work their asses off." Taken together, Chuck Nevitt and his giant cohorts ushered in the Golden Age of the 12th Man. Their skill levels, of course, were secondary to their longevity. They got cut. Got signed. Got claimed. Got released. They journeyed. They changed jobs. They sought work and kept on working.⁷ "Twelfth men now don't stick around the league like they did then," says Glass. "They go to Europe. They play more minutes. They make their agents more money." Which is to say they disappear from our field of vision completely.⁸

"I apologize for not responding sooner," the anonymous 12th man wrote to me at four o'clock on Christmas morning. "The truth is, that I was wondering to myself how I should respond. Part of me would like to speak with you and share my thoughts, but another part

4. "We always joked, Chuck was way better than Kareem," says Glass, "and should have been playing ahead of him."

5. Nealy was drafted in the eighth round of the 1982 draft by the Kansas City Kings and averaged 2.7 points per game during a 10-year career with the Kings, Spurs, Bulls, Suns, and Warriors.

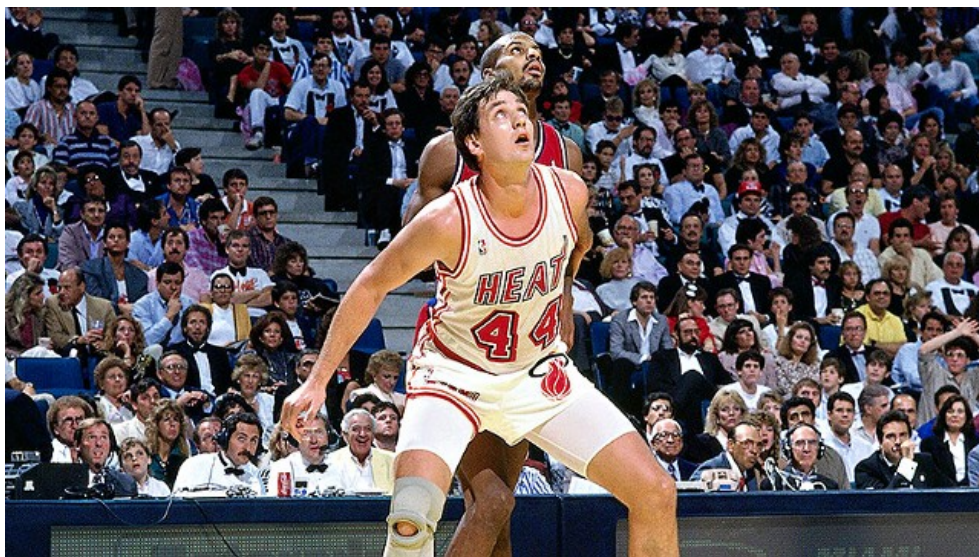
6. Gray was drafted in the second round of the 1984 draft by the Indiana Pacers. He averaged 2.3 points per game during a seven-year run with the Pacers, Hornets, and Knicks.

7. Cue the "I Am Chuck Nevitt" commercial. We are all far more Chuck Nevitt than we ever were Tiger Woods.

8. Paul Shirley is probably the highest-profile 12 in recent years — he blogged for ESPN.com and wrote a book, *Can I Keep My Jersey? 11 Teams, 5 Countries, and 4 Years in My Life as a Basketball Vagabond* about his three years in the league. (Shirley was fired by ESPN from his position as a part-time commentator after [controversial statements he made about Haiti](#) in 2010.)

of me wants to leave that part of my past buried. Hope your holidays are peaceful."

I wondered if Nevitt, too, was experiencing the same ambivalence, which also made me wonder whether his silence carried with it some acknowledgement of pain. One of the stories I'd read, published in the *Charlotte Observer* nearly five years after Nevitt's last NBA game, mentioned a personal history with depression. After the end of his career, a feeling of paralyzing uselessness and deadening frustration rose to the surface. I was suddenly hoping I hadn't sent him back down the rabbit hole.



ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

“Even Jesus had trouble with 12,” said former Jazz general manager Frank Layden. In 1977, league owners moved to reduce the NBA's roster size to 11 men per team. Bristling at the idea of paying a \$60,000 salary to a player who averaged less than four minutes per game, owners, in a league already marred by financial difficulties, argued their collective bargaining agreement permitted the cuts. The National Basketball Players Association countered, filing a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board in hopes of blocking the move. “We think the league should carry 12 players per team,” Players Association general counsel Larry Fleisher⁹ told the *Washington Post* on September 20, 1977. “That's 22 jobs they are wiping out. That's the reason we filed an unfair labor practice charge.” On November 4, famed arbitrator Peter Seitz¹⁰ ruled in favor of the owners.

Teams did have the option of keeping a 12th man and by 1982, when Nevitt entered the NBA, 15 of the league's 23 franchises kept 12 players on the bench. Philadelphia 76ers general manager Pat Williams told the *New York Times* what he required of his reserviest reserve. “You need a good sitter,” he said. “You don't want an impatient, troublesome guy down there. The guy's not a factor in most situations, but you want someone who understands what his role is.”

Between Williams's subservience theory and Riley's pronouncement that the 12th man is merely an optional project — hopefully a tall and happy project — there wasn't much wiggle room to be anything but adaptive. Some players, like former Indiana Hoosiers star Steve Alford, didn't take kindly to the system. Alford, whose rep did not respond to multiple requests for interview,¹¹ wasn't happy riding the bench in Dallas after being drafted by the Mavericks and demanded more playing time. Alford was soon out of the league. As a guard, he had little to offer the traditional 12th-man slot. He was too small to set effective picks and could do little in the way of wearing down the opposing team's big men — this, in a league dogmatically centered on the largest players.

“My expectations,” says Scott Hastings, “were that I'd make a giant splash in the NBA.”

⁹. Fleisher helped found the NBA Players Association in 1954, served as its president from 1962 to 1968, and remained its general counsel for the next two decades.

¹⁰. Another of Seitz's rulings, two years prior, permitted free agency in Major League Baseball.

¹¹. Alford is head coach of the University of New Mexico's men's basketball team, ranked no. 16 in the country with a record of 22-4.

Hastings came out of the University of Arkansas in 1982 as the school's second all-time leading scorer and was drafted by the Knicks in the second round. He had feathery post-disco hair and a glance, like Jeff Spicoli's, that read as either totally stoked or totally sleepy. By his second season, after he was traded along with some cash to the Atlanta Hawks for Rory Sparrow, Hastings recalibrated his expectations — he mostly set screens. "I realized if I was going to play at all," says Hastings, "it was going to be hitting people."

By the time Hastings signed with the Pistons in 1989, he'd bulked up and taken martial arts classes at the suggestion of a coach in Atlanta. In limited doses, he'd established himself as a physical force.¹² "I feel like I earned my way onto that team," he says. He fit right in with the Bad Boy Pistons.

"The third day of training camp," Hastings recalls, "Bill Laimbeer takes David Greenwood and I to dinner. He's sitting alone on one side of the table like the Godfather and telling us about how the Pistons protect their guards. He was like, 'If somebody puts one of our guards on their back, we put one of their guards on the bench.' It was one of those 'They pull a knife, we pull a gun; they send one of ours to the hospital, we send one of theirs to the morgue.'"

Hitting for a living, however, had its consequences. "I remember one time, we were at Chicago Stadium," says Hastings, "and Jordan picks up Joe [Dumars] around half court and I set myself up and knocked Jordan down pretty good." Dumars took advantage of the open space and hit an easy jumper. "Next time down," says Hastings, "Jordan picks up Joe full court and starts pressing. I'm thinking, *OK, same thing, I'm gonna knock Michael's head off on two blind screens in a row!* And right before he runs into me again, he turns and give me an uppercut right into the old gonads."

Hastings fell to the floor. Jordan smiled down at him. "Then," says Hastings, "he winked." Hastings pauses, still considering the agony of the moment. "I knocked his head off on the play before," he says, "so how stupid was I not to think he'd be ready for me the second time? Whatever, I got to shoot a couple free throws. I made them. We moved on."



RONALD C. MODRA/SPORTS IMAGERY/GETTY IMAGES

It was all dignity and pride. Even a ball-punch from a superstar conferred status. In 1983, when Greg Kite, a 6-11 center out of BYU, joined a peaking Celtics squad with a powerful front line featuring Robert Parish, Larry Bird, and Kevin McHale, there were only 23 teams in the league. With some team rosters topping out at 11, there may have been as few as 253 people playing professional basketball in the NBA. "It was harder in the early '80s to even make a team," says Kite. Today there are 30 teams, some as many as 15 players deep. There are nearly 200 more active NBA players now. "If you were an

¹² He was also a master prankster, habitually dumping water on his sleeping teammates at night, jamming their hotel doors shut with pennies, and, once, firing too many bottle rockets into Tree Rollins's room. "They had to evacuate a 38-story hotel," says Hastings.

¹³ Mokeski is currently the head coach of the Reno Bighorns in

11th or 12th man back in the '80s," says Paul Mokeski¹³ — who had a 12-year career with five teams from 1979 through 1991, including turns at the 12 spot with Houston and Golden State¹⁴ — "you're a top-seven guy now just because of the numbers. And if you're a 12 in the league now? You probably don't even make a team back then."

Kite eventually grew out of 12th-man relegation, averaging nearly eight minutes a game in his four years in Boston. But because his role was limited to rebounding, fouling, and trading blows with Charles Barkley under the basket, and because he rarely scored — "I always fumbled the ball," he says, "I never let myself relax enough to handle it" — Kite was readily maligned by the press, by fans, and by Magic Johnson.

After Game 1 of the 1985 NBA Finals, a 148-114 Celtics blowout, Johnson told the *Los Angeles Times*, "When you see Greg Kite hitting left-handed hooks, forget it."

Two years later, after another much-needed Finals win in Game 3 against the Lakers (Kite played for a championship all four years he spent in Boston, winning two), Bob Rubin of the *Miami Herald* wrote an 815-word column titled, "In 22 Minutes, The Joke Becomes the Hero," railing on Kite's reputation and making the case that Greg Kite was possibly the most fundamentally flawed player to ever have a meaningful impact on a basketball game.

It starts like this:

Let's hear the sound of bones breaking and garbage cans being overturned. Strike up the Anvil Chorus, trip on the way up to the podium, then knock it over. We're about to salute Ugly. We're about to hail Klutz Power. This is for lummoxes everywhere.

And then it features this, equating Kite, I think, to a talking elephant?

He's extremely big, extremely strong and extremely clumsy. Ever see an elephant count? Clump, clump, clump. That's Greg Kite. Me got him. Oops, me hit him. Aw, me knock him down. Darn, me out of game. Clump, clump, clump.

And there's this quote from Larry Bird, chronicler of America:

"If he took his frustration out in a game they [sic] way he does in practice, he'd kill someone. I just get out of his way. Truth is, Greg don't have a lot of talent."

But after the lengthy setup, Rubin warmly, and rightly, gets behind Kite, who pulled down nine critical rebounds that night despite scoring no points:

He didn't turn into Michael Jordan. He pushed, hacked and whacked five fouls' worth. He sweated and drooled all over Kareem. But the Celtics probably would not have won without his 22 minutes, and if they hadn't won, they'd be dead. The crowd recognized his contribution and saluted it. Greg Kite, Savior. It was crazy. It was funny. It was unbelievable. It was wonderful.

Rubin wasn't writing anything Kite didn't already know — a Golden Age 12th Man is fully self-aware. "Watching me wasn't a pretty picture," says Kite. "I had six fouls to give every night and I couldn't take any of them home, you know?"

Kite — like Nevitt, Hastings, and Mokeski — had serious staying power, suiting up for seven teams over an 11-year stretch. When Kite joined the Orlando Magic for their second season in 1990, he started all 82 games (he still averaged fewer than five points per contest). By then Kite had been amassing more playing time, but his on-court duties hadn't changed much, and because he still never scored he always carried that 12th-man stigma.

the NBA D-League and therefore an expert on contemporary bench-level talent.

14. Mokeski earned a spot with the Warriors, his final team, after calling up Don Nelson, who had coached him in Milwaukee, just after Christmas with a plea: "Nel, you know me. You got Run-TMC, you got a great scoring team. You know I'm a big who knows how to play, knows my role, and can be a great teammate. Fly me out there, try me out, if you like what you see, keep me, sign me to a 10-day. If not, send me home, and I'll buy ya dinner."

"To make it all work, to make it all entertaining," Kite says, "you have to have some Baryshnikovs and you have to have some oafs. I was an oaf."

Whatever labels marked Kite also brought him great happiness. "I once got in a fight with Rony Seikaly [in Orlando]," he recalls, laughing, "and next time we go down to Miami, the mascot there, Burnie, or whatever his name is — he hung me in effigy. They're playing 'Let's Go Fly a Kite' and the Heat mascot is waving a dummy with my jersey on it from a noose up in the balcony."

Kite remembers the glory of 20,000 boos. The paradox of the consummate 12th man: All noise for you is joyous noise.

"That crowd," says Kite, "that crowd was going wild for me."

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