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Owners, fans waited years before Rockets took off

LOOKING BACK

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WHEN Houston received an NBA team in 1971, it was fittingly called the Rockets. The city was, and is, a major player in the space program.

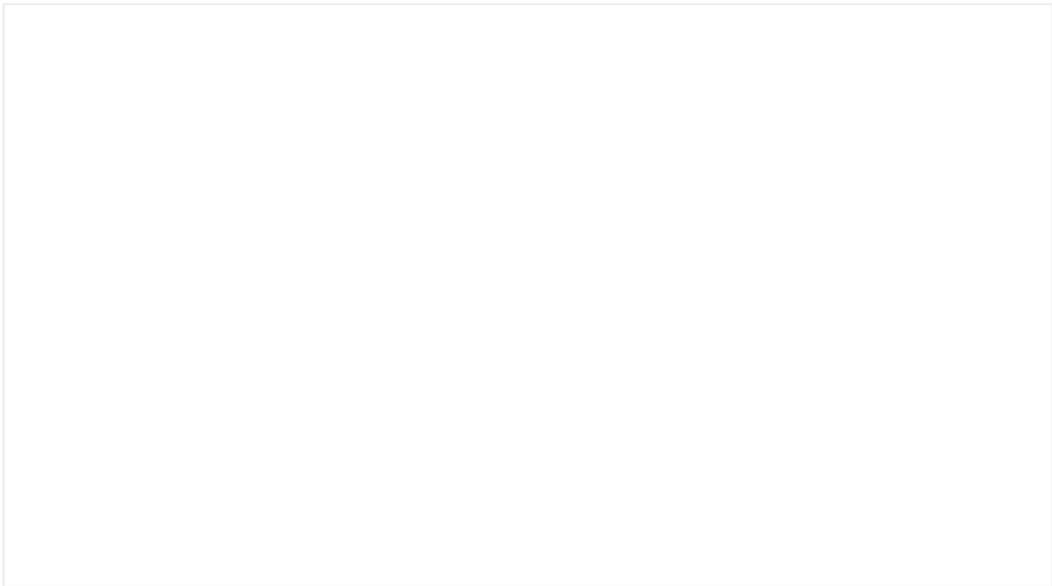
The name may have been appropriate for a Houston team, but it was only so by chance. The team was moved to Houston from San Diego and already bore the name.

In 1967, San Diego used the theme "a city in motion" to boost its image as a first class city, and the Rockets' name lent itself to that effort. The new franchise -- the 12th in the NBA -- was purchased by Robert Breitbard for \$1.75 million. The team played in the San Diego International Sports Arena.

Seattle joined the league at the same time and won a coin flip that allowed it to select one position ahead of San Diego in the college draft. The Rockets, picking seventh, chose **Pat Riley**, an All-American forward from Kentucky who was later to coach the world champion Lakers.

After four years of anemic attendance, Breitbard began looking to sell out. He met with a group of Houstonians, Texas Sports Investments, led by **Wayne Duddleston** and **Billy Goldberg** and including future mayor **Bob Lanier** and developer **Walter Mischer**.

Mickey Herskowitz, now a sportswriter for the Chronicle, was the executive vice president and assistant secretary of TSI.



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The group paid \$5.6 million for the team, which the Sunday, Aug. 1, 1971, Chronicle reported was the most ever paid for a Houston sports franchise.

Duddleston, a prominent Houston builder, and Goldberg, a banker, said they did not buy the team to turn a profit, but as a public service.

The team faced an immediate problem. In an article under the headline "Rockets Need Pad," **Jerry Wizig** and **George White**, reported:

"Houston today has a **National Basketball Association** team, formerly the San Diego Rockets. But, the Rockets apparently have no place to play."

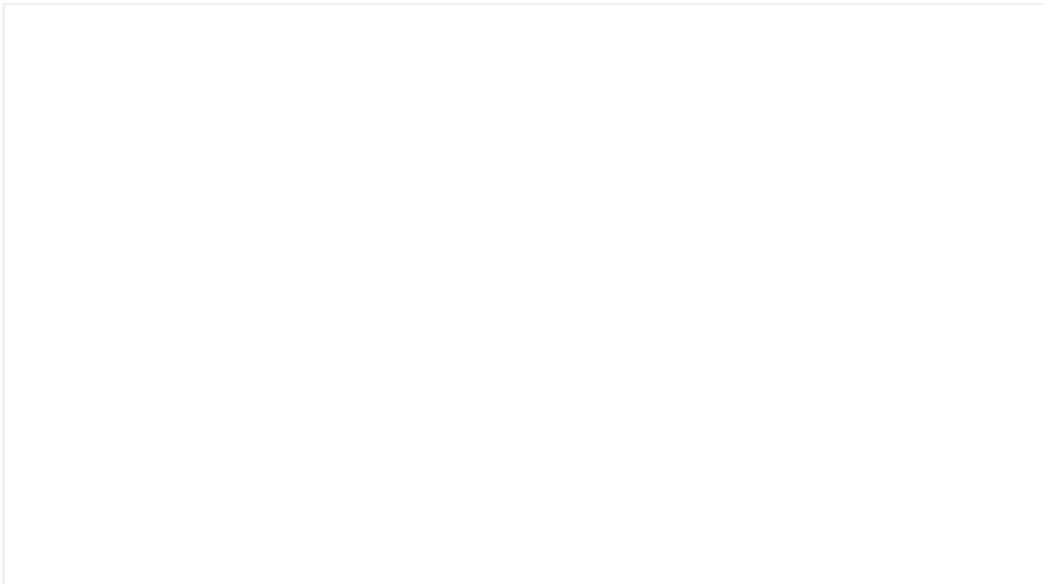
Houston Mayor **Louie Welch** and other officials were supportive but could offer nothing but existing facilities -- the Astroarena, Astrodome, the Sam Houston Coliseum, and **University of Houston's** Hofheinz Pavilion.

Elvin Hayes, the first pick in the 1968 draft from the University of Houston, was excited about returning home -- but would play here only one season before being traded to the Baltimore Bullets for Jack Moran and a 1974 draft choice.

Also on that first team was point guard **Calvin Murphy**, who would later be chosen for the NBA Hall of Fame, and forward **Rudy Tomjanovich**, who would go on to coach the team to two championships.

With a roster in place, the Rockets would name as general manager **Ray Patterson**, who had built the **Milwaukee Bucks**. He would remain with the team for 18 years before retiring in 1990.

The sale of the team came so quick, new owner Duddleston said, "The franchise moved here so fast we hardly had time to get uniforms."



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The schedule too became a problem because games were going to have to be played as if the team was still in San Diego.

In a July 11, 1971, article, Chronicle sports writer George White reported that Duddleston was very optimistic Houston fans would fill the seats for the inaugural season. "Extensive market studies were done in the Houston area and we found out that this is a tremendous market for the NBA," Duddleston said.

However, White added, in 1968 the then-San Diego Rockets played against the Baltimore Bullets in an exhibition game in Houston that drew only 2,000.

Duddleston proved to be wrong, at least the first few years the team played in Houston. Attendance the first year, 1971-72, was 203,599, an

average of just 4,966 per game.

In contrast, in the 1993-94 championship season, the team drew 828,744 spectators, or 15,347 per game.

The team not only had to play in several different venues, but also played some "home" games in Waco, San Antonio, Albuquerque, N.M., and even San Diego.

A brief in the Aug. 10, 1971, Chronicle reported that the team would play two games in San Diego to prevent them from playing one West Coast game, then coming home, and having to return to the West Coast for another.

The two games were lightly attended. And the home games in other cities were just as bad.

One game in Waco drew only 759 and, as sportswriter Herskowitz was to say, "taped crowd noise had to be used for the radio broadcast."

In its second season, the team began playing all its home games in the University of Houston's Hofheinz Pavilion, which seated about 10,000. They used the facility for 25 games.

The first team's first regular-season game as the **Houston Rockets** was played on Oct. 14, 1971, in the Astrodome. They lost to the Philadelphia '76ers and wouldn't win until two weeks later when they beat the Pistons 104-103 in Detroit.

The team would go 34-48 and place fourth in the Pacific Division. Elvin Hayes was the top scorer, averaging 25 points per game.

The Rockets would reach the .500 mark and make the playoffs for the first time in 1975, when they defeated the **New York Knicks** in the first round, then lost to the **Boston Celtics** in the semi-finals.

The following season, the Rockets moved into The Summit.

Houston, with **Moses Malone** and **Mike Dunleavy**, went to its first NBA Finals representing the Western Conference against the Boston Celtics in 1984.

Three years later, the Rockets signed their greatest player ever -- **Hakeem Olajuwon** -- and two years later made the Finals again, only to lose to the Celtics again.

The Rockets finally gave the city its first major sports championship in 1994, beating the Knicks in a seven-game series.

The team repeated in 1995, sweeping the **Orlando Magic**, with **Shaquille O'Neal**, in four games.

In 2003, the team will move into a new \$185 million downtown arena.

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