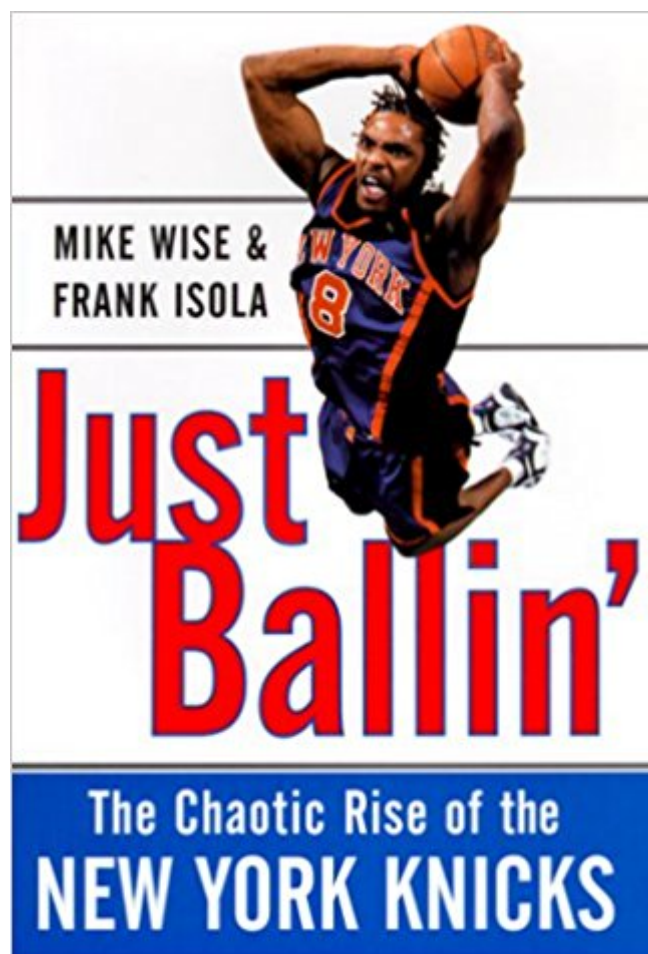


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# Just Ballin': The Chaotic Rise Of The New York Knicks



## Synopsis

Recounts how the New York Knicks went as far as the championship game of the truncated 1999 season after hiring controversial star Latrell Sprewell.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

...both flawed and engaging. -- The New York Times Book Review, Matt Polazzo  
Bob Costas NBC Sports: The 1999 Knicks season went beyond unlikely, and it certainly wasn't a classic -- which is what made it so damn interesting. Mike Wise and Frank Isola were there for the whole ride. Now that they've caught their breath, they've managed to deliver an insider's perspective on a unique NBA season. -- Review

Chapter One: The Interrogation They were sitting across from the most notorious villain in professional sports, four men with the same thought: Was Latrell Sprewell going to help us or kill us? For more than a year, Sprewell had been branded as America's Thug. A self-described loner, he had developed a reputation on the court as a malcontent, and his career was scarred by violent altercations with those who were supposedly on his side. His team, the Golden State Warriors, was going nowhere and Sprewell was feuding with his coach. His frustration and anger boiling inside him, on December 1, 1997, Sprewell had lost his mind and control of his senses. He assaulted P.J. Carlesimo during a practice, grabbing his coach around the throat and threatening to kill him. This reckless incident set off incendiary reactions from network television and national radio commentators and newspaper columnists. Sprewell was the subject of dinner table conversations

from Portland to Poughkeepsie. The National Basketball Association acted swiftly, banning Sprewell for a year. Now, thirteen months after taking his last shot in anger, Sprewell's basketball future, and perhaps his life, rested with the four men sitting on his living room sofa in the dead of winter. Dave Checketts, Ernie Grunfeld, Jeff Van Gundy, and Ed Tapscott flew 1,200 miles to Milwaukee on January 17, 1999. Like the reviled Sprewell, they were on a mission; the four men represented the New York Knicks, one of the NBA's cornerstone franchises, and now they were in the home of the player who had choked his coach. "Anybody want anything to drink?" "You got any Diet Coke?" Van Gundy asked. Their host retreated to his kitchen. He was unshaven and wearing gym clothes. His ultracasual appearance aside, Sprewell seemed personable and polite -- unlike the man portrayed as a menace to sport and society in all the hysterical media accounts of the past year. They sat down on three sofas in front of a large-screen television tuned to The NFL Today, and began talking about the possibility of Sprewell coming to the Knicks. Everyone tried to treat the occasion like a social call, a bunch of guys getting together to watch the AFC Championship Game between the Jets and the Broncos. But eventually the time came to get beyond pleasantries. "Latrell, you mind turning the volume down on the television so we can talk?" Checketts asked. "No problem," Sprewell said. The purpose of the visit became clear. This was Sprewell's parole board hearing. Checketts, the Madison Square Garden president, was the warden. Image-conscious to a fault, the forty-four-year-old Mormon had no patience for outlaws. Nonetheless, he was desperate for a winner; he was willing to soften his hard-line rules of the past if Sprewell said the right things over the next one and a half hours. Grunfeld, the team president and general manager, had his own agenda: He needed to impress his boss, the press, and the fans with a blockbuster deal. Tapscott, the assistant general manager, had done extensive background checks on Sprewell. He had spoken with Sprewell's high school coach, James Gordon; his former teammates at Golden State; NBA security officials -- basically anyone with whom the player had come in contact during his basketball career. Van Gundy, the head coach and the only member of the Knick management team not wearing a sports coat, understood the risk involved in acquiring the volatile shooting guard. He did not see a coach-killer sitting three feet in front of him; Van Gundy saw a job-saver, a slashing, scoring force of a type unseen at Madison Square Garden for the past decade. On the two-hour flight to Bradley County Airport, Checketts had decided how the interview would be conducted. It was vital that Sprewell not feel as if he were on trial, and that Van Gundy spend considerable time speaking with him, so that the player would feel comfortable with his prospective new coach. The conversation was going smoothly. But inevitably, it progressed to that morning when Sprewell attacked Carlesimo. Speaking calmly, Sprewell told them of the background behind

his desperate act. Listening closely, the four executives could appreciate the motivating power of frustration; their coming to Milwaukee was a fairly desperate act of their own. The Knicks had been eliminated four straight years in the second round of the playoffs and were searching for new blood. Sprewell, twenty-eight years old and in his athletic prime, was the best available player out there. He was still under contract with Golden State for two more seasons, but the club had decided he would never play for the Warriors again after he had put his hands around Carlesimo's throat. They would hold an open competition for his talents, and New York was among the highest bidders. In order to conduct this face-to-face interview with Sprewell without risking tampering charges, the Knicks sought and were granted a special dispensation from NBA commissioner David Stern for the visit. Just ten days earlier, the longest and most contentious labor struggle in the fifty-two-year history of the NBA had ended with a new agreement between players and owners -- and a shortened season that would begin February 5. The NBA would try to cram fifty games into ninety days, and would have to do it without its greatest star: Michael Jordan had retired on January 13. Again. The chase for Sprewell was on. For all his baggage, Sprewell's talent was mesmerizing. At Golden State, where he made the All-Star team three times in his first five seasons, the explosiveness and production masked his liabilities. Sprewell's 6-foot-5-inch sinewy frame could dart through mounds of muscle on offense. He played with passion and fire on defense. This was the kind of player the Knicks had long hoped to place alongside All-Star center Patrick Ewing, the scoring threat who could lighten the burden that Ewing had shouldered for so many years. In his first six seasons, Sprewell averaged more than 20 points per game four times, but his teams appeared in the playoffs only once, getting swept in three games by the Phoenix Suns in 1994. That was also Sprewell's breakout year: He averaged 21 points, made the All-Star team for the first time, and became the unquestioned centerpiece of the Warriors. Even Jordan took notice after his first retirement, calling Sprewell one of the top two shooting guards in the game. Yet even with such early success, disturbing signs developed. After that one playoff season the Warriors began to implode; trades and losses mounted, and so did Sprewell's frustration. He feuded and fought with teammates and never accepted a leadership role. During his rookie season in 1992-1993, Sprewell had gotten into a wild, free-swinging brawl with teammate Byron Houston. In 1995, after a fight in practice with Jerome Kersey, he tried to go at Kersey with a 2x4 before two other teammates restrained him. But even these incidents did not prepare anyone for what was to come. If ever a coach and player were likely to clash, it was the freewheeling Sprewell and the hard-nosed Carlesimo. Carlesimo was a taskmaster from the old school, nearing fifty. He had spent twelve seasons at Seton Hall University, taking a program from the bottom of the Big East to within

seconds of winning the 1989 national championship before falling to Michigan in overtime. He also gained a reputation as a screamer, doling out constant criticism that some of his former players construed as verbal abuse. In college, Bob Knight and others can get away with this behavior, but in the NBA, where the majority of the players earn more than the coach and where some have more say in personnel matters, Carlesimo's style was seen as abrasive rather than productive. He became coach of the Portland Trail Blazers in 1993, la

Book was condition good quality bordering on excellent. The book is a great read on the Knicks I grew up watching! Great insight! A must read!

A great read for any Knicks fan. Mike Wise and Frank Isola give the reader an intimate look at the New York Knicks. As I was reading the book I felt like I was given an in depth look at each of the players and coaches that made up the team. The book is really like watching a soap opera, nothing but drama between players and coaches(John Starks and Don Nelson), General Manager and Coach (Ernie Grunfeld and Jeff Van Gundy),player and analyst(Larry Johnson and Bill Walton)Player and fans (Patrick Ewing and the fans of NY).If you are a Knicks fan or NBA fan for that matter, Just Ballin is a book I certainly recommend.

thanks

This book is a good read, but I could not help feeling disappointed at what might have been. Except for the opening scene where the Knick brass is interviewing Sprewell in his living room in Milwaukee and another where Dave Checketts fires Ernie Grunfeld in a Westchester restaurant, the book is no more than a compendium of the writers' regular columns. There is little insight into the characters' motivations or the reasons why the season went from tragedy to glory and ended with disappointment. The season and the team were rich with intrigue and complex characters, yet the book remains surprisingly bland. The book is poorly written. It never rises above a simple retelling of the facts of the season. In fact the narrative gets lost because the writers settled for a sequential review told from the point of view of outsiders. As a fan of the Knicks, I came away with the feeling of déjà vu. I heard it all before. The writers covered the team for an entire season but the book bears little evidence of that fact. I hope this is not the definitive book on the Knicks improbable run to the NBA championship series. For those readers that did not live and die with the 1998-1999 New York Knicks as I did, the book will be an interesting read. But you will be left wanting more.

I've been a Knicks fan for many years, and, as many others, went through a whirlwind of emotions during last season's crazy ride to the finals. Just Ballin' gave me the behind the scenes story of that ride in amazing detail -- from locker room conversations to vignettes about the players' home and family lives. What I liked best about Just Ballin' is that it not only gave me great insider information into the players themselves -- what it was like to be Allan Houston, Patrick Ewing or Latrell Sprewell during those crazy months -- but also went into the political pressures that were the backdrop of the season -- the rift between Ernie Grunfeld and Jeff van Gundy, and Dave Checkett's role as mastermind of the team. A definite must read for any Knicks fan, old or new!

After reading this book, what can you really say except, WOW! I'm not a Knicks fan at all, but it's amazing how they took all their inner problems and used them to make the most improbable chase to the NBA title ever in '99. Of course I witnessed some of their heroics on national TV, whether it was Allan Houston's lucky bounce that ended Miami's season, or Larry Johnson's dramatic four-point play that killed Indiana's spirit in the conference finals, or Latrell Sprewell's incredible scoring run in Game 5 of the NBA Finals against the Spurs, it was all amazing. But even then, I knew that with Patrick Ewing's injury they wouldn't win the title, because of the Twin Towers problem in the Finals, and it proved too much as the Knicks ran out of gas.

Knicks fans from any era, this is a great read for you. And though I am not a NY fan, I still found the book filled with interesting, behind-the-scenes tidbits I had not read anywhere else. If you're just an NBA fan, you will enjoy this book, too. Lots of new information, and for you Knicks' fans, a definitive chronicle of an almost-championship season, complete with all the potholes and blemishes. "Just Ballin" provides an accurate, inside look into the New York Knicks' lockerroom, complete with head coach Jeff Van Gundy's motivational acronyms and general manager Dave Checketts' True New York Confession. If I had not already read the book, it would be on my Christmas list.

I read Bill Bradley's 'Life on the Run' about 20 years ago and had sworn off sports books since. This current group of Knicks did nothing to make me want to start reading again, but I got the book as a gift and after reading several pages became mesmerized by all the characters on the team. They're not my beloved Knicks from the Seventies, but this book really helped me to understand what the current NBA player is all about. It wasn't always flattering, and I liked that. I'd recommend this book for any old fogey like me who has trouble relating to the new guys.

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