

# The epic night Rik Smits saved the Indiana Pacers

by Jonathan Matthes

***In one of the most clutch moments in Indiana Pacers history, the ball ended up in the hands of Rik Smits. The moment is seared into legend.***

The Indiana Pacers are a franchise defined, and partly built, by clutch moments. Rik Smits clutch shot is one of them.

That wasn't always the case, for a very long time, the Pacers didn't register on the general public's google map. Reggie Miller barely even knew the Pacers existed until he was drafted by them. That's no longer the case. Shots in impossible situations began to fall, the Pacers are relevant because of them. Last year was a taste of it. The spunky Pacers, lead by spunky Victor Oladipo, never quit. They could be down 26 to the Boston Celtics but never fear, we've got Victor, we've got a chance. And they did seemingly always coming back, never being out of any game, always fighting. It was a melody distant but familiar to fans just old enough to remember when that melody was consumingly strong.

Once upon a time, not too long ago, those clutch moments weren't memories resigned for commemorative articles; they were alive, constantly happening. The atmosphere was electric, all the Pacers had to do was keep it close in the fourth, and we will (not "might", but "will") win. Such was the certainty of those times. If the Pacers missed at the buzzer and lost, it was disappointing, but it never dampened the confidence that the Pacers would triumph next time. Back then, in the recent past, thunderous roars were expected. There were two moments that thundered the loudest and provoked the most viscerally raw joy. One was in 1998, against Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls, when Miller shoved Jordan, swept around a screen and launched a three that shattered the night.

The other came a few years earlier in the face of certain defeat. It is a story best learned, like in ages past, through word of mouth. The night when the savior

wasn't a spindly Californian, but a giant Dutchman. A night seared, like a glowing-hot brand on a cattle's hide, in the memory of those who were either there or wished they were. A night that can be summed up by one name: Rik Smits.



**It is May 29, 1995, in Market Square Arena, downtown Indianapolis, for game four of the Eastern Conference Finals. The Orlando Magic lead the Pacers two games to one, in a close series that will ultimately send Orlando to their first ever NBA Finals. They will be swept by the defending champion Houston Rockets. We didn't know that yet.**

To be frank, so much of this story sounds unbelievable. For instance, the setting of this story (Market Square Arena) is long gone, demolished and replaced by the Cummings building. While, since Oladipo, it's easier to imagine that the Pacers were an excellent team, it seems like a stretch to recall that the Chicago Bulls, New York Knicks and Orlando Magic were not lottery teams, but actually the other three Eastern powers.

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The Bulls fell to Orlando in the Eastern Semifinals, after Jordan ended his first retirement and baseball career to return to the basketball court. Jordan, at 31, was already widely accepted as the greatest player to ever live. He played his first game back on the now non-existent floor of Market Square two months earlier, scoring 19 points with 6 rebounds and 6 assists in a loss to the Indiana Pacers. Chicago would win 72 games the next season and still had three championships before them.

The New York Knicks were the defending Eastern Conference champions. They battled valiantly, in defeat, in the 1994 NBA Finals. Patrick Ewing was at the peak of his powers, but he had a weakness: his knees. Ewing was one of the most intimidating players of his day, though his prime would be ending soon. He had only three great seasons left on those knees, before finishing his career a shell of himself in Orlando. The Knicks had forever lorded for the Pacers, but Indiana had finally dispatched their nemesis in the Semifinals when an Ewing [layup rolled off the rim](#). It was no good.

**It's the fourth quarter and it's getting late. With 1:11 to go, Orlando's Shaquille O'Neal and Horace Grant had fouled out. Rik Smits goes 2-for-2 from the line giving the Indiana Pacers an 89-87 lead. He has 19 points. He was not done.**

The Indiana Pacers were still new on the national stage. They had experienced very little success since the NBA-ABA merger but caught fire when Larry Brown replaced Bob Hill as head coach the year before. The Pacers-Knicks rivalry was still fresh and raw, with many more chapters to write. Reggie Miller's famed 8 points in 8.9 seconds had only just happened 22 days prior, which fueled the Pacers to steal game one from [a stunned Knicks](#) team.

The Indiana Pacers were also just beginning a run of contention unseen in Indiana since the ABA glory days. Including 1994, the Pacers reached the Eastern Conference Finals six times in 11 years.

**With 51 seconds left Magic Nick Anderson misses a straightaway three, the Pacers have the chance to put the game on ice, or at least it felt that way, but Miller leaves a deep jumper short. Orlando calls a time-out with 28.4 left. The sellout crowd piques up. Brian Shaw shuts them up with a three from the right top. Orlando 90, Indiana 89.**

That is future Indiana Pacers coach Brian Shaw. His made basket, as you will see, set up a string of haymakers exchanged between the two teams in the game's final 30 seconds. Each successive shot was seismic in nature and as repetitive as the tide. There are very few equivalent moments in team sports where both competitors kept delivering in the clutch like Indiana and Orlando did that night.

Shaw has had a weird history with the Pacers, especially for a journeyman who had a hard time finding a permanent home. His first trip to the finals came at Indiana's expense, as did his first NBA championship (with the Los Angeles Lakers, in 2000). He just kept bumping into Indiana, and it normally worked out alright for the guy.

**The crowd is tense. Derrick McKey inbound the ball to Rik Smits 30-feet from the basket, Smits drops it back further to Mark Jackson with 9 seconds left, he dribbles twice and finds Miller with 7, Reggie wasn't going to miss again. Indiana 92, Orlando 90. There are 5.2 seconds left.**

Rolling through the Pacers' roster for this game is impressive in a nostalgic sort of way. Miller and Rik Smits, two of the franchise's all-time best, averaged a combined 45.6 a game in the playoffs. Both Antonio (off the bench) and Dale Davis (starting) were key contributors. Mark Jackson was the starting point guard. Indiana had five (past, present or future) all-stars on the roster, and one eventual NBA referee: Haywoode Workman. Byron Scott, the sixth man, had landed the knockout punch against Orlando in the previous year's playoffs.

Speaking of which, what the Knicks were to the Pacers, the Pacers were to the Magic. Indiana was the Goliath who needed slaying in Orlando's eyes. While the Pacers didn't get to the Finals in '95, it was a rather vindictive summer. The Pacers beat the Knicks. The Magic beat the Pacers. The Houston Rockets defended their championship (which appeared very unlikely) provoking Head Coach Rudy Tomjanovich's famous "[don't ever underestimate the heart of a champion](#)" line. Clyde Drexler got his one, and only, championship ring. All that added up sufficiently pissed Michael Jordan off enough to reestablish himself and win the next three championships.

**The Magic go quickly. Orlando screens McKey to force a switch. It works perfectly. Haywoode Workman is now guarding Penny Hardaway. Hardaway catches the inbound far beyond the arch, with his back to the basket. He forces his way past Workman, who tries valiantly. Penny rises from three, with Workman all over him, arms straight up. It didn't matter. Hardaway's shot is true, Orlando 93, Indiana 92 with 1.3 remaining. Market Square is silent.**

The 1995 Orlando Magic are one of the greatest what-should've-beens in NBA history. Shaquille O'Neal entered the league an instant star, his blend of size, power and grace were nearly impossible to contain. Penny Hardaway was another instant superstar, a 6'7" point guard who could see over, and attack, defenses at will. Both were viewed as top 15, maybe top 10 players, and were no-doubt inclusions on the 1996 Dream Team. The roster around them was tremendous. The sage Tree Rollins provided veteran stability, while Horace Grant brought Championship mettle to the starting five. Nick Anderson was the do-everything combo guard that meshed well with Hardaway. Dennis Scott shot 43% from three.

But...

Most teams destined for greatness never attain it. In 2012, the Oklahoma City Thunder made the NBA Finals and lost to the Miami Heat. Everybody assumed the Thunder would be back, they had Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook, James Harden and Serge Ibaka, all 23 or younger. Their supporting cast was molded perfectly to allow those four to carry them to multiple titles. Everyone was wrong.

The Orlando Magic were the Thunder before the Thunder. Everyone thought the Magic would soon be the dominant team in the NBA. Penny was 23, Shaq was 22, they were young, hopeful, a perfect team to represent the Magic Kingdom they called home. But Shaq lusted for Hollywood's lights. While the Magic made and lost the 1996 Conference Finals to Chicago's juggernaut, it would be the last time O'Neal played for Orlando. He left for the Lakers in free agency, building a dynasty there instead. Anderson had an opportunity to seal a game one victory in the 1995 Finals, he just had to hit a free throw. He had four chances. Missed them all. He and his career were never the same.

And then there was Penny Hardaway. Penny was first-team All-NBA in '95 and '96 but he struggled with injuries the following year, then blew out his knee the year after that. Hardaway never fully recovered his superstardom. He was traded to Phoenix before the 1999 season. The Magic, a budding dynasty, was no more. But back to this night...

**The crowd meekly yet hopefully welcomes their Pacers back to the court. Everyone assumes the ball is going to Miller. An uneasy angst floods the Arena as the referee signals the inbound to begin. McKey looks, and looks, Rik Smits sets a screen deep at the baseline before flashing to the foul line. McKey passes, Rik Smits catches, pump fakes Tree Rollins out of the way. 0.01 glares on the clock when the shot is released. A buzzer pieces the silence while the ball rotates in flight. It's tracking well.**

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*It's Good.*