



This Day in Buffalo Sports History

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March 29, 1971—‘The Big E’ arrives

Local long-time residents who aren’t basketball fans probably associate the phrase “The Big E” with advertisements for the old Erie County/Erie/Empire Savings Bank. Basketball fans know better, though. “The Big E” was really Elmore Smith (inset).

The Buffalo Braves made Smith their first-round draft choice (third overall, right after Austin Carr and Sidney Wicks) on this date. The Braves were wrapping up a 22-60 regular season. Their best player was an undersized center named Bob Kauffman, who was playing out of position out of necessity. Smith played for tiny Kentucky State in college, but he was 7-feet and had displayed outstanding defensive instincts.

The Braves outbid the Carolina Cougars of the American Basketball Association to sign Smith, and he helped right away. In hindsight, Smith became one of the most underrated players in Buffalo’s basketball history. In his rookie season, he averaged 17 points and 15 rebounds per game. Blocks weren’t tabulated at that point, but he probably would have led the league if someone had been counting.

The numbers were similar the next year, as Smith averaged 18 points and 12 rebounds. None of Smith’s good work helped the team much in the won-loss record, as the Braves couldn’t get beyond that 22-win ceiling during his time here (22 and 21 wins respectively).

Buffalo decided in the summer of 1973 that Bob McAdoo could play center, so Smith was dealt to the Los Angeles Lakers for Jim McMillian. McAdoo emerged as a superstar, and McMillian was a wonderful fit as the Braves went on to make the playoffs. Meanwhile, Smith’s production declined due to knee problems. He spent two years with the Lakers, went to Milwaukee in a trade for Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and finished his NBA career in Cleveland.

—Budd Bailey