



The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, and the Fight That Changed Basketball Forever

John Feinstein

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With unerring insight into the deeper truths of professional sports, John Feinstein explores in riveting detail what happened one night in December 1977 when, as a fistfight broke out on the court between the Houston Rockets and the Los Angeles Lakers, Kermit Washington delivered a punch that nearly killed All-Star Rudy Tomjanovich. The punch-now legendary in the annals of American sports-radically changed the trajectory of both men's lives and reverberates throughout the National Basketball Association to this day. Feinstein's compelling investigation of this single cataclysmic incident and its aftermath casts a light on the NBA's darkest secrets, revealing the true price men pay when they choose a career in sports.

The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, and the Fight That Changed Basketball Forever Details

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From Reader Review *The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, and the Fight That Changed Basketball Forever* for online ebook

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

One act of senseless violence changes everything...for the two men involved and professional sports. Rarely does a single act have such wide repercussions.

John Diaz says

Such a good book. I read this a while ago, but basically this book is about the worst fight ever in NBA history, in 1977, in a game between the Houston Rockets and Los Angeles Lakers. The NBA was rampant with fights and drugs at the time, and this was kind of the culmination of the escalation of this period.

Rudy Tomjanovich, a star forward for the Rockets was entangled with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the star for the Lakers. Kevin Kunnert, an enforcer/forward with the Rockets set out to break it up and Kermit Washington, also an enforcer and forward for the Lakers, came over to help Jabbar. Washington reacted quickly when he saw a punch being thrown and threw a punch of his own and directly landed it into Tomjanovich's face. Washington was 6'9" and about 240 pounds so it was like a train wreck.

A train wreck pretty simply describes Washington's life thereafter, being somewhat blackballed afterward in the NBA and being shunned by Tomjanovich. Washington's life spiraled out of control, his wife left him, his finances went downhill, and if anyone had tried to find out the true story, like Feinstein did, they would find that all the while Washington was largely the same as he'd ever been: a humble, gentle, good person who was caught in the wrong place and that one split second changed his life forever.

Tomjanovich had to have a lot of facial surgery but his life recovered and he became a successful NBA coach. However, he has since refused to talk or forgive Washington, and basically the story ends unresolved. However, that is not Feinstein's fault. He analyzes the fight and the aftermath from every conceivable angle, and I can see why people would think this book is repetitive. But, to me it was not and it was a terrific read. You do not have to be a basketball fan to find this book engaging and interesting from start to finish as it is about more than simply one basketball game; but rather the aftermath of a truly tumultuous and traumatic occasion.

Marlo says

In the book *The Punch*, by John Feinstein, a life changing fight breaks out during a Los Angeles Lakers vs Houston Rockets basketball game. In the month of December, in 1977, L.A. Lakers power forward Kermit Washington sent a near death blow to Rudy Tomjanovich's face. The sound of the punch was resonant, and could be heard all the way in the back of the arena. No one had ever seen someone deliver such a catastrophic punch.

This thrilling sports book tells the story of how one single punch had affected not just Rudy Tomjanovich, but Kermit Washington, and the rest of the NBA. Kermit Washington, a moderately good basketball player, and the "enforcer" of the team had never been labeled as such a bad guy. Off the court, he was a nice and

simplistic guy, but on the court, he was ruthless by default. His primary job was not only to play basketball, but to protect their best player, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. At the other end of the tale, Rudy Tomjanovich was a former Michigan student and in the NBA, was an exceptional shooter. He too, was a friendly guy who didn't want to get into fights, but if he had to, he would intervene to stop one. That night during the game, a small scuffle broke out between Kevin Kunnert and Kermit Washington. Kermit Washington had punched Kunnert and Tomjanovich ran to intercede the fight. Kermit Washington has suddenly turned around and punched Tomjanovich in the face, sending his head immediately to the court. In the months that followed, many people had drastically changed. Tomjanovich had to go through a facial reconstruction and months of rehab. Kermit Washington was suspended from the NBA for about 90 days and had been dropped by the Lakers. He was later signed by the Celtics. The NBA turned into a very superstitious league. They hired more referees per game to prevent another scary incident like the Washington fight.

I thought that this sports book was amazing. It was a real page-turner. My intentions were to learn more about the history of the NBA and this book has definitely exceeded my expectations. Feinstein wrote about each characters lives before and after this event. I was amazed by how the author represented the information. He gathered past information from the people who were there at the time of the event. One thing I would change would be the order in which the information was represented. In the beginning, Feinstein describes the fight, but then, leaves out what happens to Tomjanovich at the hospital soon after the fight. I would recommend this book to any sports fanatic out there, no matter what age, looking to gain more information about the history of the NBA.

Gary Braham says

I'm not a huge basketball fan. But this story sounded interesting enough, and I always like reading about how professional sports were played in earlier times. John Feinstein is such a good storyteller. This book could have been a newspaper or magazine article, but John does what he does best, and digs in to get the full story. In fact, we're told the story of the punch three times. The first time on fast speed, without a lot of background. Then he goes through the story a bit slower, with lots of focus on the fight, and a bit more background. And then finally, he really starts at the beginning, and goes through the players lives leading up to the punch, and following them from the punch to the present day.

The punch itself was not just a turning point in both these players lives, but also the league in general. While you hardly ever see a fight in basketball these days, back in the 70's it was a lot more commonplace. The NBA had been trying to crack down on fighting when this occurred. After the fight, there was no question that the league would try to eliminate fighting completely. While any news story covering them from that point forward would mention the fight, and most people who recognized them on the street, only talked about the fight, Feinstein reveals two complete human beings, who have done a lot more to be known for. Kermit is a lot more than the goonish thug he was often classified as, many of the people who knew him best were completely shocked by what happened. He's someone who was a good student at a good college, who does considerable charity work. And while everyone recognizes he made a mistake that day, theres a lot more to say about him than he nearly killed someone during a basketball game. Rudy is also someone who has had a remarkable life, both as a player and a coach. And Feinstein proves there are a lot of interesting stories to tell about him besides that one night.

Rajaa Holly says

What did I think of "THE PUNCH"? I think this is a okay book. This book taught me a lot of stuff about the NBA. This book was about the event that changed basketball. This book is a explanation for a lot of things. This book is something I could have read again based on the quality of it. Also I think that if the NBA was like this now it would not be as electrifying. This incident was between Kevin Kunnnett, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Kermit Washington. It started off subtle but it got nasty. I will tell you much more about this book.

I liked many things about this book but there's also things that the author could change. I don't like how the author continued to say the same thing for example he told the punch story with the same words 3 times. I can understand why but I was reading and thought to myself didn't I already read this. I liked how he gave lots of details for the scenario although he said it 3 times he gave perspectives from different people. I also like how he gave background information about the people in the scenario. I liked how he connected this to modern day basketball and why it is how it is. Lastly i think the author could have told lest about outside thing. My thoughts on this book were mostly positive but with a couple changes this could have been perfect. Lastly I like how he told how "THE PUNCH" impacted there lives in basketball and in there families.

I highly recommend this book to basketball lovers. I think this is why I couldn't stop reading it kept teaching me new things. This book will explain to you why the refs act the way they do. John Feinstein you get a thumbs up form me. Overall I really like this book and you would too.

Jason says

outstanding little known piece of basketball history

Elias Hansen says

One cold December night in 1977, the sports world would be rocked to its core. It was about two weeks into the 1977-1978 NBA season, and the Houston Rockets and Los Angeles Lakers were involved in a close, chippy game. Near the beginning of the second half a small skirmish erupted. Soon, a Laker landed a punch on a member of the Rockets, and All-Star Rudy Tomjanovich ran over to the fight to be a peacekeeper. That would be the last thing he would remember for a long time. As he was running closer, the Laker's 6-foot-8-inch power forward Kermit Washington landed one of the most historic punches in sports history.

Tomjanovich suffered a fractured skull, broken jaw, broken nose, and a leakage of spinal fluid. He was told that it was very likely he would not survive his injuries. Tomjanovich went on to lengthy recovery and many surgeries, and that punch would change sports and how it is viewed forever.

Although The Punch is an incredibly important and resonant story, I feel that the way it is written makes it appeal to only extreme sports fans. The structuring reveals the climax very early in the story, and leaves the last 150 pages to explain how the incident changed sports in general. I feel that by making the story more focused on Rudy Tomjanovich and Kermit Washington, it would be a more interesting read for a wider audience.

Besides altering the timing, I feel that more information about the present would make the story feel more important. By including how that punch still alters someone's favorite NBA team today, the story would not

only feel more powerful, but also appeal to younger generations. With just a few tweaks, this book's theme could become much more than just sportsmanship in athletics.

Megan says

I loved this book. I think the author did a fine job of presenting both perspectives while showing the requisite sympathy for Rudy T.

Steven Kent says

"Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and hoping the other guy gets sick."

That was basketball legend Rudy Tomjanovich learned on one of the darkest nights in NBA history.

The Houston Rockets were playing the L.A. Lakers. Kermit Washington, an L.A. Laker hired largely as an on-court enforcer/bodyguard for Kareem Abdul Jabbar, gets in a fight with the Rocket's center. Tomjanovich, an upstanding though possibly naive superstar, runs to help the player Washington has floored. Washington, the former street kid with the street instincts, has gone into full gang fight mode. He hears somebody running up behind him, loads up those massive arms, and just as Tomjanovich arrives, arms low-face unguarded, Washington swings around and unloads.

Tomjanovich's skull was broken in half--and that is NOT an exaggeration. People stare at Tomjanovich as he gets up. He thinks it is because he has a broken nose. he even wants to get back in the game.

Washington, now acting like a dog in a fight, tries to coax Tomjanovich into another round as he is rushed to the hospital, all the while saying, "No, I have to get back to the game."

Only when his doctor explains that the "funny taste in his mouth" is actually brain fluid does Tomjanovich realize how much damage has been done.

Don't worry, this was not a spoiler. All of this is explained in the opening moments of the book. The rest of the story tells how one really awful split-second decision ruins the career of one man and the life of another.

Keon Morrison says

The Punch by John Feinstein is about one fight changed basketball forever. One night in 1977 a fight broke out on the Court between the Houston Rockets and the Los Angeles Lakers, Kermit Washington punched Rudy Tomjanovich and almost killed him. The punch is now known as soon as you bring up either one of the players names. This punch changed the way the NBA is now. The NBA takes fights very serious so if you do it you will be suspended or fined.

There is a lot of things I like about this book, and there is not a lot of things don't like. One reason I like this book is because it is about sports and action and I like them both. Another reason why I like this book is

because I wanted to know what happened to the players that were fighting, did the teams do good without them , and did they get in trouble. The last reason why I like this is that I found out everything I wanted to know. My first and only reason why I don't like this book is because of the way Kermit hit Rudy. I didn't like that because Kermit almost killed Rudy the way he punched him but those are the only reason I have.

I recommend The Punch because you will really enjoy it. I think you will enjoy it because the way the author talks about incident is amazing and it will keep you reading the book, you will probably want to read it again because it is so good. Those are my thoughts on the book and I will think you will enjoy it!

Amy says

the best and only sports-oriented book i've ever read. so, with that in mind, i would highly recommend this engrossing book. good read for a sociologist, historian, social justice oriented mind. the timing of this historical event is very relevant to the story, but it's also about two very good basketball players and one moment that changed both their lives for good.

Steven says

On 12/9/77 in a game between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Houston Rockets, an altercation began Kermit Washington and Kevin Kunnert, as was quite common during that era. While running in the direction of the altercation, Rudy Tomjanovich was struck with a punch by Kermit Washington. This punch was so forceful that Tomjanovich later said that it felt like the scoreboard had fallen on him. Indeed, Tomjanovich was nearly killed. This book is about those few seconds, but it is really about much more. Indeed, this book is a biography of Washington and Tomjanovich and recounts how the event impacted their respective lives.

Kermit Washington is a good, honorable and decent man, of that I have no doubt. Although I completely concur that he did not willfully intend to harm Tomjanovich or willfully indeed for the punch to do so much damage, the simple fact of the matter is that he put these events in motion. Despite all the good things he has done in his life, Kermit Washington has never accepted responsibility for these events. (You get the feeling that he is not fully aware of the principle of causation in torts.) Blaming Kevin Kunnert for the entire event, alleging a conspiracy on behalf of the NBA, Kermit has done all of these in more. Although he is indeed a sympathetic figure, I think Mr. Washington's fortunes would improve if he did as Calvin Murphy has suggested and simply said "I'm sorry" and dropped the "but" portion from his apology.

Ice says

In 1977, Rudy Tomjanovich and Kermit Washington became entwined in a single punch that would change not only their lives, but how professional basketball is played today. Because the punch dislodged Tomjanovich's skull and nearly destroyed both men's careers, the scuffle never settled as a dusty bit of NBA trivia. Instead, it nearly superseded both men's notable achievements. The history of that punch (it could not, by any standards, be considered a fight) and the fate of the two men are the subjects of John Feinstein's The Punch.

In the early days of the NBA, teams had their stars and their "enforcers." Enforcers such as Washington protected star players on the court with their willingness to mix it up. With concise prose, Feinstein reports on this era, following strings of trades, drafts, and personal relationships to their nexus. Those who do not think about basketball on a statistical level may occasionally find themselves lost, but Feinstein, ever conscious of his subject, ties the tangents neatly to the core of the scuffle that led to the infamous punch.

Thorough and thoughtful, Feinstein does not make any excuses, nor does he vilify. He simply traces the web of both men's lives back to their adolescent years when it was not about the NBA, nor the punch, but about the game. Anyone who has ever wondered about these two men, or the history of the NBA, will want to read this book. --Karin Rosman --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Feinstein's latest (after *The Last Amateurs*) tears the scab off one of the deepest wounds in the history of professional sports. In 1977, during a Lakers-Rockets match, L.A. forward Kermit Washington forever altered the course of his career and that of Houston's Rudy Tomjanovich when he threw a punch that nearly killed the Rockets' captain. From that moment on, each man's life became defined by the incident and its aftermath. Seamlessly weaving the event itself into the fabric of pro basketball's rocky pre-Magic/Bird/Jordan history of constantly relocating franchises, dismal television support and chronic violence, Feinstein tells a moving story of two men branded by a moment frozen in time, and how the incident changed the game it could well have destroyed.

The narrative never gets mired in the fawning sycophantism of many sports books or the moral proselytizing of many others. Feinstein's research is sharp, and his time line jumps around effortlessly, like a good Quentin Tarantino film. Most importantly, the author sustains the balance between Washington's burden of guilt and the genuine misfortune that has followed him since. He's a sympathetic character, almost uniformly described as a smart, good-hearted man bearing the never-healing scar of the one great mistake in his life. Yet he is by no means the saint he might have us believe him to be. Feinstein's portrait of each man is compelling; neither is lionized or demonized. Rather, the complexity of the incident and the depth of the personal trauma for both Tomjanovich and Washington fester under the author's microscope in this excellent and engaging book.

Ryan Saulnier says

A very interesting, eventful, detailed book based on a true story in December of 1977. This book takes place in Los Angeles, California in an NBA game between the LA Lakers and the Houston Rockets. About 1 minute into the third quarter, a fight broke out between the two teams. Rockets power forward Rudy Tomjanovich ran into the fight in an attempt to break it up. Lakers power forward Kermit Washington did not know Tomjanovich was trying to break up the fight and thought he was going to be attacked. In an act of what some believe to be self defense and others believe to be a despicable, unnecessary move, Kermit punched Rudy so hard it nearly killed him . This punch changed both men's lives dramatically and is one of the most infamous moments in sports to this day. Feinstein thoroughly explains how the punch affected everyone in Washington's and Tomjanovich's lives saying "While Tomjanovich was in the hospital dealing with great physical pain, Pat Washington (Kermit's wife) was dealing with pain of a different kind at home"(Feinstein, pg.90). Pat Washington was one of many people that was part of either Kermit or Rudy's life and was negatively affected from his incident.

I had previously heard about this event before, but Feinstein put it into a whole new perspective for me. I was shocked reading about how many people this punch affected and how big of an impact it had on the

NBA itself. I was also skeptical when I first started reading this book because I thought it would have a lot of unnecessary information due to how large the book was for it to just be about a punch. However, Feinstein filled every page with new, interesting information. I was never bored or unentertained when reading the book. This book also surprised me by demonstrating how different the NBA was in the 70's than it is today. Basketball in the 70's had different teams, rules, salaries, and consequences compared to today. Overall, this book exceeded my expectations and I would recommend it to anybody.

Ceashia Miller says

Book Review By : Ceashia Miller

Book Title: The Punch

Book Author : John Feinstein

Main Idea - The main idea of this book , is to explain what had actually taken place between Tom & Kermit during their NBA career.

Attention Grabber - Did you know that the force of the punch Kermit Washington Threw To Tomjanovich's face , forced his skull to move out of place.

Body -

December 1977 when a fistfight broke out on the court between the Houston Rockets and the Los Angeles Lakers , Kermit Washington threw a punch that nearly killed all star Rudy Tomjanovich . Causing spinal fluid to leak into his body . It took 5 surgeries to try to undo the damage from one lousy punch. At this point Washington is furious . His Bizarre behavior immediately after the punch , he is remorseless and so ready to go after tomjanovich again , near the locker rooms .

It wasn't until Washington left the arena that he finally understood he had done something very wrong . Even then he understood not because of his common sense and not because of what he had seen on the court .What registered with Washington were the words the parking attendant “ Kermit your in a lot of trouble , Big trouble .

Setting -The Story Took place on (December 9, 1977) in L.A. During a Lakers -Rockets NBA Match.

Plot - The Punch explains how the paths of Rudy Tomjanovich and Kermit Washington crossed that night in what was really more an accident .

Character(s) -

Rudy Tomjanovich

Kermit Washington - Author describes as a mindless brute , ready to fight at any provocation.

Theme - A harrowing hay maker thrown by Kermit Washington that nearly killed Ruby Tomjanovich in a 1977 NBA

Conclusion - Author /Style - In the introduction feinstein tells us how compelling he found this subject and he pursued Tom and Washington rather than writing a book on golf. feinstein was frequently redundant in mentioning the details of the incident over more than one chapter. I would have liked feinstein to have done more in depth exploration on the race played into this incident.
