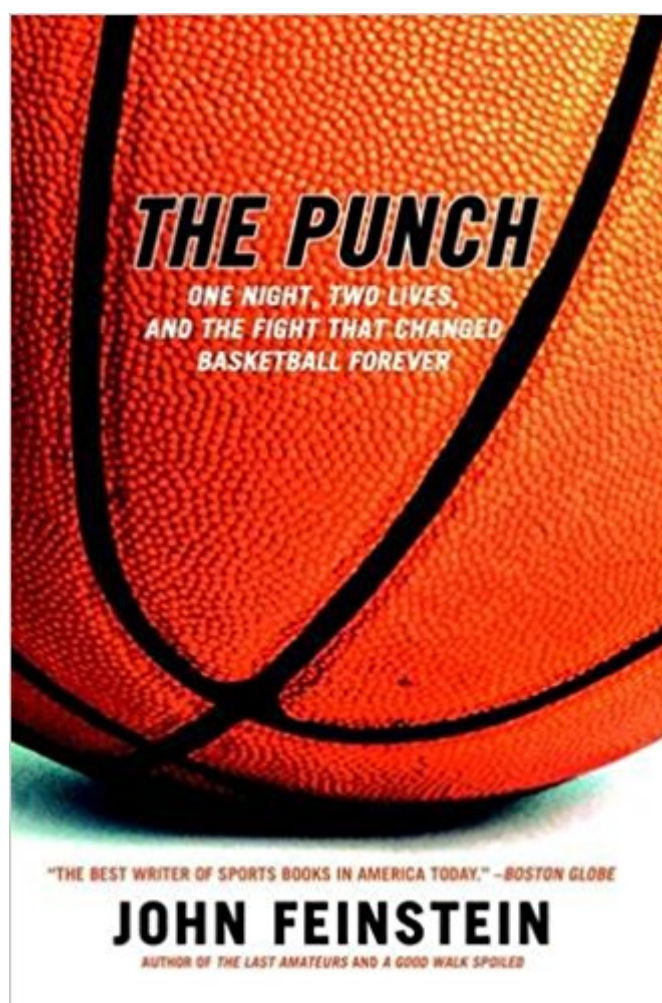


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# The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, And The Fight That Changed Basketball Forever



## Synopsis

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 after-math casts a light on the NBA's darkest secrets, revealing the true price men pay when they choose a career in sports.

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## Customer Reviews

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 Instead, it nearly superseded both men's notable achievements.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. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book was recommended to me by a coworker who thought the lessons of the life-long impact of an incident, and how they dealt with it, on two different people would be applicable to some of my own life events. The recommendation was a solid one, and I appreciated learning about (I can't say more because I never knew about "the punch" until I read the book) "the punch" and how Tomjanovich and Washington dealt with not only the physical aftermath of the incident, but also the emotional and mental aftermath. The lesson is easy, if not predictable, but having it play out as you

read it and realizing two men really experienced this helps to make the lesson more applicable. I was less impressed with the writing, which I felt needed a good editor. Major stories were repeated and quotes were often reused.

"The Punch" was an excellent book. A little repetitious, as other reviewers have indicated, but otherwise the author took a difficult topic and did a fine job. A few points on the content. There is disagreement as to who threw the first punch- Kunnert or Washington. Kermit and Kareem say that Kunnert threw the first punch. Kunnert and referees Bob Rakel and Ed Middleton say that Kermit threw the first punch. Regardless of who threw the first punch, Washington was completely at fault for viciously attacking Tomjanovich, who was trying to break up the fight. If Washington was concerned about his safety, he should have put his hands up or moved elsewhere on the floor. Washington had a history of NBA fights, at least three of which caused his ejection . This includes one fight in practice in which he beat up one of his own teammates. In my opinion, Washington had a chip on his shoulder, and this chip was exacerbated after the fight and seemed to have a racial aspect. According to Washington, his lengthy suspension, loss in the civil suit filed against him and the Lakers, and his inability to find steady, long-term work were due to the fight and to racism on the part of the NBA, the public and the world in general. In 1995 he applied for the job of Athletic Director at American University. He was not chosen because he had no front office experience, but AU said he could come in as an Assistant AD and gain experience. Apparently this wasn't good enough for Washington. He said he should be made the AD because of his name, and the experienced person should be under him as the Assistant AD. He had a lawyer send a letter to the NBA asking for \$5 million dollars because he felt there was a conspiracy to besmirch his name. The NBA paid him nothing. Earlier, when his agent was trying to get the best possible outcome on his suspension, Washington almost loused up his chances by talking about watermelon and fried chicken. He did many good things, his friends spoke well of him, and he had a difficult childhood, but he seemed to be a volcano waiting to erupt.

Feinstein is a fine writer but you wouldn't know it from this. This really should have been a retrospective article in Sports Illustrated, not a full-sized book. I often thought there were printing errors in my copy because I was reading similar passages over and over. But no, I suppose Feinstein needed to get a decent sized book so he did what he had to do. But at least I have a better overall view of Kermit Washington. He's a really great guy in many ways, very charitable and caring. The problem is he's handled just about everything relating to "the punch" poorly. He blames another

player, tells Rudy how much he's suffered in a rare meeting, sues the NBA, etc. etc. I think it was John Lucas who advised him to take responsibility and move on, not say "I'm sorry, but...". Unfortunately, Washington hasn't taken this advice. I hope someday he does, because there's no winning when you look for excuses and scapegoats in something horrific you've done.

Old school Rudy T - awesome man, big man, real man - last of the big league loyalist - what a story, I was a kid when this happened and there's so much more to it than I remember. Rudy T was a helluva player, scout and coach and an easy going kind of guy if you ever met him. John Feinstein is a pretty damn good writer.

Good book and very interesting reading. Some parts a little repetitive but overall a good book.

A BUNCH of info about professional basketball back in the '70's. I HIGHLY recommend

An interesting story that I knew nothing about before I read the book. It's amazing to me how one 5-second incident can affect lives forever. But I think the lesson of the book is that you don't HAVE to let it affect you forever. It is, of course, just the author's take based on his interviews, but it is sad that it seems Kermit Washington has never been able to move on from something that happened in 1977. Bitterness is a nasty poison.

Now, I finally know the when, what, who, how and why of this story. All sports fan should read this book.

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