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ROCKFORD, Ill.--- What a long, strange trip it has been.

The coaching history of the Rockford Lightning franchise in the Continental Basketball Association is a spirited bolt from Stormin' Norman to Gentle Zen. When fiery former Chicago Bull Norm Van Lier was vaporized after 12 games as Lightning head coach in December of 1986, their inaugural season was completed with CBA veteran Mauro Panaggio. The Lightning started the 1987-88 campaign behind Charley Rosen, a cerebral coach with an iconoclastic approach.

"Basketball is a very spiritual game," Rosen explained in a recent conversation after the CBA All-Star game here. "It's a chance for a group of people to transcend themselves - transcend their own egos and even sometimes transcend the competition. Sometimes you play a game and you don't know who's winning or who's losing. It's like a fulfillment. Everybody knows their role and everybody sublimates their ego to everybody else."

If this guy sounds a little more well-rounded than your typical basketball coach, you're right. Rosen, 48, has been a hard core fan of the Grateful Dead since 1973, he owns a monster collection of Dead concert cassettes and once wrote an article about bootleg Dead tapes for Rolling Stone magazine. He also has a Master's degree in Medieval Studies from Hofstra University, where his thesis was "Allegory in the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale."

And that's not some medieval Darryl Dawkins dunk.

Rosen is also a successful author. His 1975 book, *Have Jump Shot Will Travel*, was nominated for a National Book Award, and he has profiled Billy Cunningham, Elvin Hayes and Ralph Sampson for *Sport* magazine. For the last nine years, Rosen has been a contributing writer at *Inside Sports* magazine.

Whether writing or coaching, Rosen subscribes to a Zen philosophy. In a league where tomorrows are precious trinkets, he lives for today. "I don't think about aspirations," he said. "I try to take a Zen attitude that what I'm doing at the present moment is where I want to focus my whole energy. . . .

"The future doesn't exist. All you do is extend your ego into the future and make a Christmas list. That leads to frustration, a division in everything - `This is good because it promotes what I want; this is bad because it doesn't' - and then you wind up in a lot of trouble."

That's a necessary philosophy in the CBA. The Lightning, for example, spent most

of the first half of the season leading the league's Western Division. On Jan. 12, starting forward Pace Mannion was picked up by the Detroit Pistons (he has since moved to the Atlanta Hawks), and 10 days later, starting guard and fan favorite Fred Cofield left the team to play in Europe. Finally, starting center Jim Lampley broke his wrist in mid-January. Having lost its last four games, the Lightning is in third place with a 28-19 record.

Rosen has constructed a team in his image. The Lightning play an intense if somewhat conservative style of basketball that subscribes to unity and soul.

The Lightning is a mix of the springtime promise of former Villanova forward Dwayne McClain, the seasoned shadow of guard Kenny Natt, who has spent eight years in the CBA, and the melodic hustle of 5-9 guard Brent "Hoagy" Carmichael.

They mesh.

"These guys are really hand picked," Rosen said. "We just get along and that's important in this league."

Rosen last summer tracked down McClain, a 1985 second-round draft choice of the Indiana Pacers who had been living at home. Rosen signed McClain a couple of weeks before Christmas, and on New Year's Eve McClain had 18 points in leading Rockford to a 108-97 victory over the CBA All-Stars. He was named the game's MVP.

"Dwayne McClain . . . is another guy on (the NBA's) list," Rosen said. "(Whereas) Kenny Natt knows he's not going to the NBA. He's had his shot. He's played with four (NBA) teams. He's just here to have a good time, to go out on a positive experience and hopefully win a championship."

The constant roster transition in the CBA makes it difficult on a team's coaches and players. On top of that is the players' impatience often developed from a one-dimensional offensive perspective.

"Most players think they're going to shoot their way back into the NBA," Rosen said. "You gotta convince guys to play roles and to give the ball up. You gotta convince guys that posting up a 6-3 guy and scoring 40 CBA points - that's not going to do them any good as far as the NBA is concerned. So creating a team concept is difficult in the CBA."

Rosen broke into professional coaching in 1983 as an assistant under current Bulls assistant Phil Jackson when he was coaching at Albany. Rosen had co-written the basketball book "Maverick" with Jackson in 1976. Rosen, who majored in physical education at Hunter College in the Bronx, was working at a health club and writing for Sport Magazine when Jackson hired him. They worked out a deal where Rosen got paid game by game.

"I felt he communicated extremely well with ballplayers," Jackson said. "He's a very good talker to big guys and he knows the post game well. Charley keeps everything in perspective. He's loose enough and yet he's intense about the game."

Rosen stayed with Albany until the 1986-87 season, when he was named head coach of the CBA's Savannah Spirits. The next year, he moved to Rockford, finishing second in the Western Division with a 37-17 record. On the climb up the CBA ladder, Rosen kept writing books.

He began dabbling in fiction in the mid-1960s while teaching English in Middletown, N.Y. Rosen wrote four novels, all of which wound up in an incinerator. When Rosen and his family moved to New York City in 1973, his neighbor was the managing editor of Sport magazine. Rosen began contributing articles to the magazine.

"Have Jump Shot Will Travel" is Rosen's best-known work. Loosely autobiographical about playing minor league hoops, the book follows the trail of Bo Lassner, a 6-8, 225-pound white backup center on the Wellington Rifles of the Atlantic Professional Basketball Association.

Rosen, who is 6-8 and 235 pounds, was the first 1,000-point scorer in the history of Hunter (now Lehman) College. In 1962, Rosen played in the Eastern League, forerunner of the CBA.

In "Have Jump Shot Will Travel," Bo says, "There's too much useless information fermenting inside my head for me to concentrate on anything, let alone basketball . . . The only shot I ever blocked during my career at Hunter was one of my own. I think I was waving to some chick with one hand while I was shooting with the other."

The book did well critically, Rosen said, "but I always thought it was a little pretentious. I tried to load it up with all kinds of Dantesque symbolism. I tried to make it a little more weighty than perhaps it was capable of being. It was kind of poetic and maybe too radical writing for those days."

In 1977, Rosen wrote "A Mile Above The Roof," a novel about the NBA, and he followed that in 1981 with another novel, "God, Man and Basketball Jones."

"That was an intent to talk about the spirituality that underlies basketball," Rosen said.

Rosen's most recent book was "Players and Pretenders," covering a year Rosen spent coaching basketball at Bard College.

How does a renaissance warrior such as Rosen view himself in a jock society?

"It's the same Zen kind of thing," he said. "When it's time to think, you think; when it's time to sit in a locker room and tell Pace Mannion to fuck off, then it's time to do that. I think if you're honest with yourself and you don't have a rigid concept of who you are, then you can be real and experience as much as possible - as many extremes as possible, which really enriches your life.

"It's more fun."