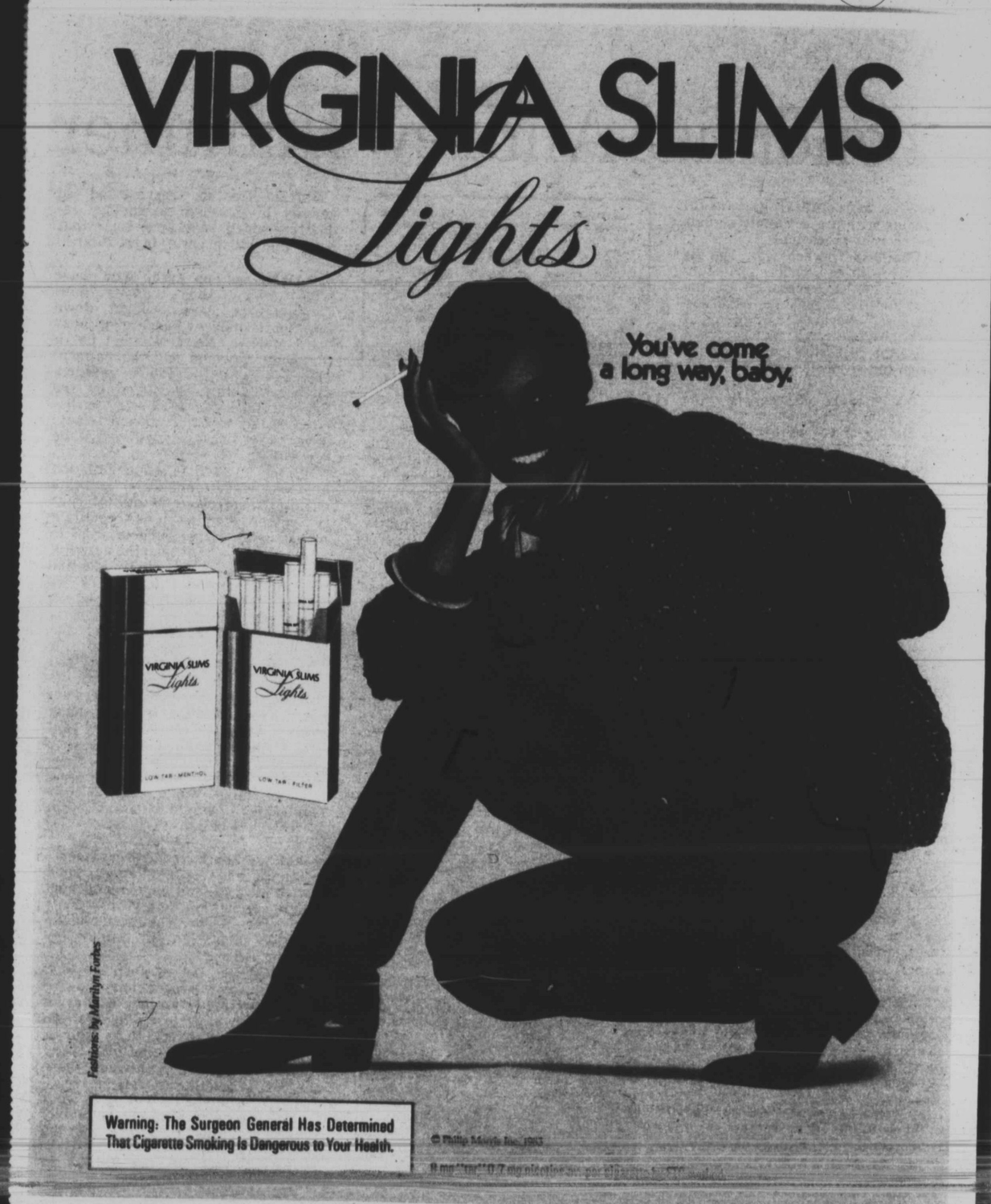

DAWN SPORTS

By Sam Lacy

That 35 Age Barrier

A few weeks ago, some owners of clubs in the National Basketball Association were whispering to their scouts and college connections that it was imperative for them to come up with some white players.

Something would have to be done, they said on their private telephone lines and behind locked office doors. The black throughout the league just must be diluted or doom would be on the doorstep before they could say "3-point play."

Except for fellows like Boston's Larry Bird, Bill Walton, Dave Cowens, Jack Sikma of the present; and Jerry West, John Havlicek of the past, white players of quality have disappeared from the NBA horizon. And weaker franchises such as Cleveland, Houston, Atlanta and Chicago are desperately in need of fresh talent.

Fresh, white talent make that, because gradually diminishing TV money (now threatened even more with the expanded football contract held by the March-to-July USFL season) will put a greater burden on league box-offices. And owners feel that box-office revenue is provided by white fans for the most part.

As viewed from here, the fears may have some merit. But the course the clubowners are surveying may not be the answer.

Based on past performances, the black athlete in basketball, as in all the major sports, has a tendency to hang on much longer than there is reason to expect. It can be a long wait to find adequate white replacements.

For years, it was felt that topline athletes were ready for the pasture when they neared the age of mid-thirties. Some few were kept around for sentimental reasons or because their names continued to reap magic in the minds of fans.

Thirty-five was regarded the ultimate. But no more. The arenas, the stadiums, the diamonds, the tennis courts are loaded with "senior citizens."

Last year, Wilt Chamberlain was offered a fantastic contract to make a comeback — at age 43.

Last month, Elvin Hayes set records in games played and points scored, and signed an extended contract with the Houston Rockets. The "Big E" will be 37 before the NBA season ends.

Next month, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar will be 36, and continuing his role as catalyst for the defending champion Los Angeles Lakers.

In football, Elvin Bethea has put off retirement of his "65" jersey by the Houston Oilers because he has

Kareem Jabbar

Wilt Chamberlain

Althea Gibson

Archie Moore

Rod Carew

Willie Davenport

decided he wants to play a 16th NFL season at 37.

There are no better pass catchers in pro football than Frank Lewis (36) of Buffalo, Mel Gray (35) of St. Louis, Charlie Joiner (35) of San Diego, and Harold Carmichael (35) of Philadelphia.

The picture is much the same in major league baseball.

For every Pete Rose, Carl Yastrzemsky or Phil Niekro there are six, seven, eight black senior citizens flaunting their continuing potency.

Tony Perez was signed by the Phillies as this piece was being written. He's 41 years old. At age 40, Ferguson Jenkins was a bone of contention among four rival teams and the Chicago Cubs who inadvertently left him exposed to draft.

Willie Stargell retired last summer, despite the fact the Pirates wanted him to hang around with his 42-year-old body.

Joe Morgan and Lee May, both in rejuvenation — the former with the Phils, the latter with the Royals — will be 40 in midsummer, and each collecting a handsome salary.

Hard to believe that Rod Carew, one of baseball's most feared hitters, is 38? And Reggie Jackson, the prolific homerun swinger is just one year younger?

Jackie Robinson produced 10 years of excitement in the game, even though he was 28 when he got the chance which usually goes to the white rookie at 17.

And Satchel Paige, signed when he was 42 years old (at least) and pitched in the majors until he was 50 (at least).

The boxing ring, the golf links, the cinder track and the tennis court have their share of champions who became champions as "senior citizens."

A mixture of love and sympathy was shown for Muhammad Ali when he insisted on fighting younger men while closing in on his 40th year.

Joe Louis stayed beyond his time, as did Sugar Ray Robinson.

But the kingpin of the seniors, undoubtedly, was Archie Moore. The old warrior did not win his light-heavyweight title until he was 39 years old, then boxed for the last time as a puffed up, 52-year-old heavyweight in 1965.

Lee Elder was 39 when he had his best year on the pro golf tour in 1975. He won the Pensacola and Westchester classics at 43, and was 44 when he made the 1979 U.S. Ryder Cup team. Today, he is still matching strokes with younger players.

Also tangling with the fair-haired youngsters of the PGA is Calvin Peete — 39 years old and the fourth leading

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