

PEZZIMENTI: She Was The 'Heart' Of The Celtics

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Susan Sykes was once sort of a cult hero in Boston. Everywhere she went in the city, everybody knew who she was.

In fact, she was almost as famous as Larry Bird or Roger Clemens in mid '80s Beantown.

Sykes' name became synonymous with Bird's best Celtics teams. With the renewal of the Celtics-Lakers rivalry in these NBA Finals, she's re-entered the limelight in a way.

She's done interviews with the Boston Herald and TV stations in both Boston and Los Angeles in the last week and a half.

She was flooded with calls after the Celtics earned their first trip to the Finals since 1987, and the height of her celebrity.

"When they beat Detroit in Detroit," Sykes said of the Celtics' Eastern Conference championship win, "they said the first thing they thought about was me. I said, 'Wow.'"

Sykes has since moved from her native South Boston, but the name she is most known by - and has been known by for quite some time - remains the same. And though she spends a lot of her time in Turtlepoint, Pa., owning and operating the Olean area's most popular gentleman's club, Busty Heart's affinity for the Celtics has also remained strong.

Sykes even has plans to be in the new Boston Garden for Game 6 of the finals, if it's necessary.

That game is scheduled for Tuesday, nearly 21 years to the day she became one of the most identifiable characters in the Celtics-Lakers bitter rivalry.

But to understand the circumstances you must go back to the year before, when Sykes' overnight celebrity story began on a late April day in the Boston Garden.

The Celtics were hosting the Atlanta Hawks in the 1986 Eastern Conference playoffs. Heart was sitting across from the Hawks' bench by then-Georgia Tech star John Salley.

Discovering that Salley, a potential NBA star, was in the crowd and compounded by the fact the Celtics owned the No. 1 pick in upcoming draft (they would take Len Bias), Salley was introduced over the Garden P.A. system. A CBS camera, meanwhile, had keyed on Salley.

"When they did that," Sykes said during a recent phone conversation, "John Salley didn't want to stand up. He's like, 'Well, you stand up.'"

So she did.

And what followed is a sound bite that will never be forgotten.

"I don't know which one is the potential No. 1 draft pick," uttered CBS play-by-play man Brent Musburger in reference to the buxom Sykes, who, at the time, had already begun her long career as an exotic dancer.

"That was 15 seconds of fame that turned into this legacy that's still talked about 21 years later," she said.

The search was on to find out who the curvy blonde was. A Boston radio station offered money to the person who could crack the case. The Boston Globe finally did.

What the paper discovered was that Sykes came from a privileged childhood, the daughter of an IBM executive and school teacher. She graduated from Pine Manor College in Brookline, Mass. in 1979 and worked as an assistant at an investment firm and paralegal for a large law firm before embarking on a career in the entertainment business.

Now she was officially the Celtics unofficial mascot, like Jack Nicholson is to the Lakers or Spike Lee to the Knicks.

Sykes traveled to Houston for the 1986 NBA Finals. During the series a banner hung from the upper deck of the Boston Garden read "Championship or Busty Heart."

Boston got both, and Sykes was invited to the Celtics' victory party after they defeated the Rockets for the title.

"I look at it as an honor," said Sykes, known more these days for her beer-can crushing exploits that have been seen on national television. "It's an honor that people look at you as almost like a lucky charm. At that time in '86 when (Celtics owner) Red Auerbach was alive, they didn't have cheerleaders, they didn't have any type of fanfare."

The next year, Celtics fans called on her to enact a bit of revenge on Nicholson, who mooned the Boston Garden crowd during a game that season. During Game 4 of the 1987 finals series against the Lakers, a bra with basketball cups was lowered to Heart from the upper deck of the Garden.

"On it," Sykes recalled, "was pinned a note that said, 'Get back at Jack. Please place this on Jack Nicholson's head in L.A.'"

To raise money to send Heart to L.A., a radio station did a live remote at the club where she was working. Over ,10,000 was raised and tickets to sit her near Nicholson for Game 6 at the Great Western Forum were purchased.

"That was the start of it," she said.

Just before halftime, Sykes finished it by dramatically placing the bra on Nicholson's head. In a fit of anger, Jack flung it into the stands behind him.

In a way, it was like Kevin McHale clotheslining Kurt Rambis in '84 and the scuffle that ensued.

Neither of the combatants was on hand for the opening two games of this year's Finals in Boston. But Sykes watched Game 1 on television and canceled a trip to Turtlepoint over the weekend so she could stay at her summer home on an island off the coast of Maine to view Game 2.

"I'm a Boston fan at heart," said Sykes, who moved to rural McKean County 11 years ago after falling in love with the area while on the Pennsylvania club circuit.

She's looking forward to the possibility of being in attendance for Game 6.

"I have to clear it with security," she said.

If it all works out, Sykes already knows who her new whipping boy - the heir apparent to Jack - will be.

"I'd like to give it to Kobe Bryant," she said. "He's the No. 1 guy that I want to kind of get on right now. Everybody is comparing him to Michael Jordan, but he's no Michael Jordan. Michael Jordan had class. I don't know about Kobe."

Game on ... again.

(Vinny Pezzimenti is a sports writer for the Olean Times Herald)