

Crossover: Race and the Changing Culture of the NBA

By

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“The game of basketball has been everything to me. My place of refuge, place I've always gone where I needed comfort and peace. It's been the site of intense pain and the most intense feelings of joy and satisfaction. It's a relationship that has evolved over time, given me the greatest respect and love for the game”-(Michael Jordan). Basketball has captivated the hearts and minds of people since its creation over 130 years ago. The sport allows players to showcase their natural athletic abilities in a unique and unprecedented way. In contemporary times the pinnacle of the sport of basketball is the National Basketball Association, a professional league comprised of the worlds' most talented and gifted basketball players. From its founding in 1946, the NBA has undergone much change. Rules, styles of play, and the general culture of basketball have changed dramatically over the years. Such changes have not only affected the game itself, they have also affected the world and its people. One of the most impactful changes that the NBA made was its inclusion of African Americans in 1950. This may seem strange considering roughly 80 percent of players in the NBA are African-American today. Desegregation had dramatic effects on the game of basketball and the NBA<sup>1</sup>. This change contributed to social change in America as well as forever reconstructing the very fabric of the game itself.

## Chapter 1: Early Beginnings

In 1891, a thirty-year old Canadian stood perplexed with his lips pursed and arms folded as he contemplated the task before him. Dr. James Naismith was expected to put his degrees in

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<sup>1</sup> *USA Today*. June 25, 2011. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/2013/06/25/nba-racial-and-gender-report-richard-lapchick/2456481/>.

medicine and theology to good use as he was responsible for developing a game that helped improve bodily vigor at the International Training School of the Young Men's Christian Association in Springfield, Massachusetts. His task was to link exercise (including physical education, sporting activities, gymnastics, and calisthenics) with spiritual development in what became known as "muscular Christianity." It was thought that perfection of the body was an integral component of Christian morality. The snowy winter of 1891 caused the students' physical condition to decline, as football season had passed, and baseball season would not begin for several more months<sup>2</sup>.

Dr. Luther Gulick, the head of physical education at the Springfield YMCA, began to create a game to appease his students. He wanted to incorporate various elements in sports with which the students were already familiar. After he and two of his subordinates were unable to come up with a satisfactory game, Dr. James Naismith was given two weeks to do so. The last day of his fourteenth day deadline, Dr. Naismith created the game of basketball.

Basketball as it was originally created, though basic, was still revolutionary. Dr. Naismith created the game with the idea of having inherent components of already created sports that nevertheless set it apart from those other sports. The game was to be centered on a ball rather than a stick or bat as in hockey or baseball because Dr. Naismith felt that requiring players to be skilled with a bat or a stick would make the game too complex. In the original rules, running was prohibited, which removed the possibility of indoor tackling and encouraged teamwork and passing. To make it more accessible to more than the toughest or strongest of players, the basketball goal was put ten feet in the air, which forced players to shoot from a

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<sup>2</sup> George, Nelson. *Elevating the Game*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

distance to score while stressing skill over brute strength. Having the goal ten feet up also made the game more difficult by not allowing teams to stand in front of the goal to prevent the other team from scoring. There was also a time limit instituted which separated it from sports like baseball that have no designated time limit. The sport was to be played with two fifteen minute halves and a five minute intermission.

Dr. Naismith had 13 original rules that were far different than contemporary rules. Dribbling the basketball was not a common practice and running with the ball was a violation. Passing was the key way to move the ball. There were no limits to how many people could be on one team as long as they could all fit on one court, although when the game was first introduced to the students of the YMCA, games were usually nine-on nine since the classes at the school were made up of eighteen students. The goal was not the circular shaped metal rings of today's era, but rather simply two empty peach baskets that were found in the basement of the school. Backboards were eventually installed to prevent spectators from reaching down from elevated running tracks and blocking shots. The inclusion of the backboard inevitably led to the bank shot. Over time players and coaches would redefine and alter the rules as basketball was played more and more. Official games began the following winter of 1892 and quickly spread across New England and to New York. Women were also eligible to play and did so frequently. The first known tournament was held in Brooklyn, New York, in the Central YMCA. The games were witnessed by another YMCA instructor William G. Morgan. After witnessing them, he became inspired and in 1895 created a similar game; volleyball. Basketball was spread across the heartlands of the country from YMCA to YMCA, which is why states like Kentucky, Kansas, and Indiana were then and even today regarded as having the strongest basketball cultures in the

country. Historically, there were many factors that kept blacks in America from participating in the newly created sport.

After the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, African-Americans were no longer slaves and were permitted to engage in activities and sports from which they had previously been excluded from. As slaves many blacks had the responsibility to groom, feed, and train their master's thoroughbred horses. So, whites at first didn't ostracize blacks from being jockeys because they had already been accustomed to seeing them with horses. Over time though this changed with the emergence of laws and social practices meant to keep blacks as second class citizens, commonly known as Jim Crow laws. Originally horse racing was a sport enjoyed for the most part by the wealthy, but as it began to grow in popularity in the early 1900s many common whites grew outraged at the thought of seeing a black jockey, so by the 1920s blacks' right to ride had been stripped away.

In baseball the exclusion of blacks was formally announced in 1867 for amateur teams, although some blacks had gained entry to professional teams by the 1880's. The few baseball players who were allowed faced such opposition (which may be a precursor of the treatment of Jackie Robinson later in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), that the major leagues instituted an unofficial blockade against the admittance of Negroes in baseball. The only sport where blacks consistently had some wiggle room to participate in the late 1800s and on into the 1900s was boxing.

Unfortunately, the reason that whites accepted blacks in the sport of boxing was not to witness their talent or skill, but rather to be entertained by blacks pummeling each other. It was the same concept that made "Mandingo fighting" (where slaves were made to fight to the death

for the amusement of their slave owners) popular during slavery times. Fighters were often blindfolded or told to fight without gloves until there was only one man standing. However, due to the inequality of the time period, blacks received significantly lower wages for their fights than whites, and in some places in America, they were prevented from fighting at all. Blacks were not permitted to fight interracial until 1908, when Jack Johnson fought and beat the current champion Tommy Burns, and became the first black heavyweight champion in the world.<sup>3</sup>

So, when the sport of basketball was created by Dr. James Naismith in 1891 it was not surprising that blacks were not active participants. In 1891 blacks faced limitations in various aspects of their civil lives, including voting, property rights, education, and other athletics activities. Basketball, like so many other things in this time period, was something only meant for the “white world” and its institutions. However, as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century started, the possibility for blacks to begin engaging in the newly created sport emerged, but was exclusively confined to the realm of higher education. A recurring trend in American history is that the first people to engage in activities that their group has previously been excluded (whether it is blacks, women, or any other ostracized group) only receive the opportunity because they are truly sensational. Basketball was no exception to this historical trend. Most of the early players were descendants of the “talented tenth”- the sons of Northern Freedman who actively tried to be non-representative of black stereotypes<sup>2</sup>. To be in college at all required (especially for blacks) a certain level of financial prosperity that the vast majority of African-Americans simply did not have. Since the opportunity to be in college was so treasured and highly valued amongst the few

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<sup>3</sup> *Jack Johnson*. November 11, 2013. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack\\_Johnson\\_\(boxer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Johnson_(boxer)).

who did attend, many black students chose not to participate in athletics, instead they committed all of their time and energy to their studies. The few blacks who were in college had social and financial backgrounds equivalent to their white counterparts. From the turn of the century to the beginning of World War I, only eight blacks were known to have played on white basketball teams; Samuel Ransom at Beloit College, Wilbur Wood at Nebraska, Fenwich Watkins at Vermont, Cumberland Posey at Penn State, William Kindle at Springfield University, Cleve Abbott at South Dakota State, and Paul Robeson at Rutgers.

The first Black collegiate conference was created on February 2, 1916. Nine educators, coaches, and faculty members from Hampton Institute and Shaw, Lincoln, Virginia Union, and Howard University came together and agreed to form a conference for their students to play in and gave their schools a system of unified competition that they had been sorely lacking. The conference was run by the CIAA or the Central Interscholastic Athletic Association. One of its key founders, Ernest J. Marshall, stated that “The league is needed to unite area colleges in a common effort for athletic elevation. It will serve to train students in self-reliance and stimulate race-pride through athletic attainment”.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, the conference even allowed talented high school players to play on college teams. The CIAA attracted attention across the country, which served to increase its enrollment and also created healthy competition and rivalries among schools. By 1920, other black conferences were established such as the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC), and the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC). Poor African-Americans from the North and other places began migrating to these areas in hopes of making a college team and acquiring athletic scholarships. By inspiring more and more young blacks to practice and learn the game, an increasing number of African-Americans participated in sports. Teams like the undefeated Morgan State University

team of 1927 Xavier's team from 1935-1939 became nationally known and highly regarded amongst black Americans.<sup>2</sup>

## Chapter 2: Welcome to the NBA

The National Basketball Association or the NBA was not created until 1946, and although there were several professional basketball leagues before this, they were exclusive to whites. Beginning in the 1920s African-American involvement in the professional arena was spread by the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a time of rich expression and thought as well as numerous cultural contributions within African-American culture in Harlem the 1920s. Poets like Langston Hughes, musicians like Duke Ellington, and orators like Marcus Garvey, all flourished and contributed greatly to the Renaissance. In 1923, Robert L. "Bob" Douglas, who is often times regarded as the "Godfather of Black Basketball", reached an agreement with William Roche, the owner of the popular Harlem Renaissance Casino for use of the Casino's second story ballroom for basketball games. In the agreed-upon terms, the home team was called the Harlem Renaissance (known commonly as the "Rens") as a constant advertisement for the building. Douglas had monthly contracts with his players, and a custom designed team bus, a luxury for any basketball team independent of race. The team played right on the ballroom dance floor with two portable baskets set up. The Harlem "Rens" were very successful winning 2,318 games and only losing 318 between 1923 and 1949, in part by utilizing a team-based approach to the game. Games played during this time period were usually played with a team-centered approach rather than the individual style of play that is seen in modern times in the NBA. At times, players were taken out of the game for trying to bring the ball up the court without passing.

The most well-known professional black team in America prior to 1950 was the Harlem Globetrotters. They were put together and coached originally by a Jewish man by the name of Abe Saperstein. The Harlem Globetrotters are best known for their flashy, razzle-dazzle goofy-like play. They were usually far better than their opponents and embarrassed their opponents to the delight of the crowd. The truth behind the underlying motivation for white fans coming to Globetrotter games perfectly illustrates the hypocrisy that was a part of American society at that time. Many white fans of the Harlem Globetrotters did not come to witness the sheer talent of the players that they were watching, but rather to find enjoyment in watching black men make fools of themselves. Comedy was, and still is, a big part of the Harlem Globetrotter's games. Unfortunately, many viewed the players as servants who had an owner and the games as a form of white paternalism and Black male submission.<sup>2</sup> In a way the Harlem Globetrotters were sacrificing a little of their dignity for a paycheck. Just as in other ground-breaking arenas such as comedic acting or even boxing, they were still pioneers whose actions had large ripple effects down the line. Although the Globetrotters were associated with their comedic style of play, they still managed ways to showcase their talent. On February 28, 1949, the Harlem Globetrotters played the Minneapolis Lakers in a serious and intense basketball game, upsetting one of the Basketball Association of America's best teams by a score of 61-59 before a sellout crowd. 17,583 people watched as a team of black players triumphed over a team of white players. The team that the Globetrotters beat included future Hall of Fame center George Mikan and Jim Pollard. This Minneapolis Laker team, which would go on to win 5 of the next 6 NBA Championships, made it a tradition to play the Harlem Globetrotters in a series every year.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, Ron. *They Cleared the Lane*. University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

Globetrotters provided a blue print for a style of play that many black players would utilize for years to come.

In the 1940s there were two main professional basketball leagues. One was the Basketball Association of America (BAA), created on June 6, 1946 by eleven owners, ten of whom owned or operated teams in the National and American Hockey leagues. They formed the league to fill up their arenas during hockey's off-season. The other main league during the 1940s was the National Basketball League (NBL). This league had been formed earlier in 1937 and was comprised of 13 teams in the Northeast and the Midwest. Although it had some teams from big cities, it was dominated by teams from smaller cities. Due to World War II, many of the players left vacant spots on their teams because they were in the military and had to go abroad. Several teams were disbanded due to player shortages, which also led to the signing of black players. The Chicago Studebaker Champions was the first team to integrate fully, with a roster that included four white players, and six black players. This marked the first time that a professional team played with black players; a feat that may not have happened without players creating a vacancy on teams when they left to fight in WWII. There was reportedly little animosity between the integrated players, but rather a sense of mutual respect.<sup>4</sup>

The National Basketball League (NBL) had better players in its league but faced a dilemma because the Basketball Association of America (BAA) had teams located in larger cities. Another problem they faced in the 1948-1949 season was that four of the NBL's strongest teams- The Minneapolis Lakers, the Rochester Royals, Ft. Wayne Pistons, and the Indianapolis Krautskys left the league and went to the BAA. The NBL added four more teams to survive the remainder of the season, but it was forced to disband and six of its teams transferred to the BAA on August 3, 1949. The new merged league was renamed the National Basketball Association

(NBA) and began its first season in 1949 with seventeen teams but without a single African-American player.<sup>4</sup> There was never any official rules prohibiting blacks in the NBA, but it was a general consensus initially that they would not be allowed to play.

April 25, 1950 was one of the biggest days for basketball and for young African Americans. On that day, blacks broke the NBA's color line, just one year after the organization's formation. The timing aligned perfectly with the change in American mentality toward seeing people of color play sports. This change occurred largely due to Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball in 1947. Although there had been other prominent black sports figures in the past such as heavyweight champions Jack Johnson and Joe Lewis, and track and field star Jesse Owens, no black athlete had the same impact on race relations in America as Jackie Robinson. Jackie managed to make the American people view an African American man as something completely contradictory to the lazy, dumb, troublesome and child-like stereotype that was often connected to blacks. For many whites this was the first time they found themselves admiring a black man. What also contributed to the NBA being ripe for integration was the fact that other sports leagues such as the NFL had already integrated. An additional factor was the fact that in the 1940s and 1950s basketball wasn't as popular as it is today. Having a few blacks playing in the NBA wasn't as jaw dropping as having them play in major league baseball, America's pastime. America's most popular sports at this time were professional baseball, hockey, golf, and football. At this time college basketball was more popular than professional basketball.<sup>4</sup>

At any rate, when African Americans entered the league they did so in small numbers. Three highly gifted black players were drafted on April 25, 1950. The first black player drafted was Chuck Cooper. He was selected in the second round of the college draft out of Duquesne

University by Walter Brown, the Boston Celtics' owner. The next black player, drafted in the ninth round, was Earl Lloyd of West Virginia State by the Washington Capitals. With their next pick Washington also chose black guard, Harold Hunter of North Carolina College, who would never play a game in the NBA.<sup>4</sup> A few months after the draft, the New York Knicks purchased Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton's contract from the Harlem Globetrotters. Chuck Cooper was the first African-American in the NBA, but ironically Harold Hunter was the first to sign an actual contract. Hunter's signed a contract for \$4,000 a year. He was quoted as saying "Teachers were starting out at \$1,000 or \$800 a year, so \$4000 was a heck of a salary for me".<sup>4</sup> However, Earl Lloyd on October 31, 1950 in a game in Rochester, New York, became the first African-American, and the first of the initial 3 black players, to play on the court in an NBA uniform.<sup>2</sup>

Up until Walter Brown drafted Chuck Cooper, the Harlem Globetrotters' coach and manger, Abe Saperstein, had a monopoly of the best and talented black players in the country. From then on players had an opportunity to play fewer games at a higher pay without having to clown or make fools of themselves. Many players began focusing their attention on playing in the NBA rather than with the Harlem Globetrotters.<sup>2</sup>

Earl Lloyd went on to have a successful but somewhat underappreciated career. He played for the Washington Capitals until they broke apart in 1951. He averaged 6.1 points in the 7 games that he played. His 6'6" 220 pound frame allowed him to be quickly drafted by the Syracuse Nationals as a power forward where he played for six seasons before playing his final two seasons for Detroit and retiring in 1960. In the 1954-1955 season, his best season, the Syracuse Nationals won the NBA title against Fort Wayne in 7 games. Because Earl Lloyd never played for a big city team and wasn't flashy or a high scorer, his career attracted little

attention from fans or historians. But as the first black player to suit up in the NBA, he paved the way for many future players.

Chuck Cooper had a very different NBA career than that of Earl Lloyd. Cooper was a 6'5" guard/forward and was 24 when he was drafted. At Duquesne University, he had experienced racial prejudices. Some teams even refused to play against a team with a black player. Sometimes players attempted to rile him by shouting out all sorts of derogatory slurs in his direction. He never backed down and often hurled insults right back. A star player in college, he came into the NBA with high expectations, but his impact with the Boston Celtics was modest at best. In his best season with the Celtics he averaged 9.3 points a game gathering 562 rebounds over the course of the season. He often felt that because of the color of his skin, few plays were drawn for him, and his role on the team was to do the "dirty work" which included grabbing rebounds, blocking shots, and going after loose balls instead of having more of an offensive role. Another problem that he voiced and that a lot of Blacks in the league experienced was overcoming racial stereotyping, including the common notion that black people are lazy. When Cooper was injured, he was often thought to be exaggerating his injury and to have a low threshold for pain or an inherent laziness. After six seasons with the Celtics, Cooper left the NBA and went and played for the Harlem Magicians for the remainder of his career. He also managed to create a comfortable life for himself in Pittsburgh as a successful businessman. Eventually he tried to re-enter the game as a coach but there were no opportunities for black coaches in those days.

The most successful of the NBA's original 3 black players was Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, whose nickname stemmed from his avid love for soda pop. In many ways ahead of his time, Clifton was more of a 21<sup>st</sup> century NBA player than his peers. He was known for his

remarkable athletic abilities, including his jumping ability and strength, and he added a bit of pizzazz to the game. He carried over his Harlem Globetrotter charisma, which made him the first black NBA star. In his seven years with the New York Knicks, Clifton averaged 10.3 points a game and even made the 1957 All-Star team. Like the other early black players he felt that he had to alter his game to fit in with the NBA. As he observed, “When I first came to the Knicks I had to change over you know. They didn’t want me to do anything fancy or do anything like that. What I was supposed to do was rebound and play defense.”<sup>22</sup> Clifton tried to showcase some of his Globetrotter moves in a preseason game against the Celtics, and Bob Harris, one of the Celtics’ players, took exception. A fight ensued and Clifton threw the only punch knocking out several of Harris’s teeth. The Boston bench quickly tried to retaliate, but when Clifton met them half way they retreated.

Resistance to the flashy style of play that Clifton and the other early black players tried to incorporate into the game represented a double standard. The Celtic legend Bob Cousy, a white player, was revered for his flashy behind-the-back dribble and his no-look passing. When he did fancy moves he was celebrated. This apparent contradiction highlighted the intense racial tensions during these years. If a black player did something extraordinary, it was dubbed as non-traditional or classless, but the instant a white player did something similar it was revolutionary.

It is also interesting to note that Ned Irish, the part-owner of the Knicks, did not draft Clifton with the intention of trying to integrate the NBA, or to achieve some social goal. He drafted him because at that time the Knicks were in dire need of a gifted center, and Ned Irish felt that Clifton would be able to fill their need as well as add a gate attraction for the public. Irish looked at things from the business side. Having a black player meant that more blacks and

whites were going to come to the games, which meant more revenue for the Knicks' organization.<sup>4</sup>

At any rate, Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton symbolizes the beginning of "Black attitude" in the NBA. Clifton was a glimpse of what the NBA would see from its future black players. All three players, Chuck Cooper, Nat Clifton, and Earl Lloyd demonstrated to the NBA, its fans, and all of America that blacks were more than capable of playing alongside whites. The implications of this small truth helped to spread the idea of social and legal equality in the realm of public opinion in America.

## Part II: New Beginnings

### Chapter 3: The Bigs- Chamberlain and Russell

The emergence of blacks in the NBA in 1950 did not immediately change the game. This process occurred over time as more black players came into the league. By the late 1950s the NBA had acquired Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain, two remarkable players who would alter the very fabric of the NBA. These two players were physically and symbolically Goliaths of their times and together redefined what it meant to be a dominant center in the NBA. Up to this point, NBA centers had been utilized almost exclusively for rebounding and defense. Centers were usually the slowest, least athletic players on the court. The most skillful center up until this point had been George Mikan of the Minneapolis Lakers, who although highly skillful, wasn't known for his strength or superior athletic abilities. Bill Russell at 6'9 1/2" was stronger than most centers on the court and as quick and athletic as smaller guards. He toyed with the slow footed, rigid centers of his day. Russell revolutionized the center position, redefining what it meant to be a dominant defender. When blocking his opponents' shots, he would strategically tap

the ball toward his teammates in order to keep the ball in play. When blocking shots, centers usually paid little attention to the direction that they were hitting the ball, and when they did pay attention they often knocked the ball into the stands to appease the crowd. Russell played basketball with a chess like mentality and saw no reason why he should prevent his team from acquiring an extra possession by knocking the ball out of bounds. He purposefully tried to keep the ball in positions where he or his team could attain possession of the ball.<sup>4</sup> “Russell defended the way Picasso painted, the way Hemmingway wrote, in time, he changed how people understood the craft.”<sup>5</sup>

Chamberlain at 7’1 and at his heaviest weight of 305 pounds was also an unprecedented and unparalleled athlete. Many regard Chamberlain as the strongest player to ever play in the NBA. Chamberlain was known to have worked out with body builder, actor, and former California Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. At his strongest, Chamberlain was able to bench press 550 pounds. Shaquille O’Neal (one of the strongest players in the NBA’s modern era) at his strongest could only lift 450 pounds. At 59 years old, Wilt could still bench 465 pounds. Chamberlain was simply a freakish athlete that the game has not seen the likes of since. He played an average of 46 minutes (out of 48) a game, and in the 1962 season sat out 8 minutes during the entire season.<sup>6</sup> He crushed his opponents, dominating them with his superior strength and skill. Chamberlain was a man among boys and was so dominant that he stated once that sometimes he became bored in games due to the ease of winning.<sup>4</sup> The NBA had never seen a

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<sup>5</sup> Goudsouzian, Aram. *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*. London: University of California Press, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> JT, Richard. "Wilt Chamberlain: Did He Really Play in a Weak Era?" *Bleacher Report*, 2010.

center with Hercules-like strength and profound jumping ability. Nor had it seen a center shoot fade-away jumpers and grab nearly every rebound available. One game, Chamberlain was playing against Washington Bullets' forward Gus Johnson. Johnson managed to drive to the basket and dunk on Wilt. Later in the game Johnson on a fast break tried to dunk on Chamberlain again. This time Chamberlain jumped straight up with him and caught the ball. The force of Wilt's block stopped Johnson's forward motion. Johnson suffered a dislocated shoulder; the first and only time this has happened in the NBA as a result of a blocked shot.<sup>6</sup> Chamberlain once said, "You always need to go up against the best, to bring out the best that's in you".<sup>7</sup> Both Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain were so extraordinary that they still stand unchallenged as the two best centers to ever play in the NBA.

Bill Russell was born on February 12, 1934, in West Monroe, Louisiana to Charles and Katie Russell. The city had relatively good race relations compared to other places in the South, but nonetheless was still under the rule of Jim Crow. Ouachita Parish (the county where West Monroe is located) had been known to have public lynchings prior to the 1930s. Once, Russell's father was denied service at a gas station until after the staff serviced all the white customers. When his father attempted to leave and find a different station, the attendant pointed a shotgun in his face, threatening to kill him unless he stayed and waited his turn. The pride that his father possessed wouldn't allow for him to be humiliated in front of his family, so he rushed at the attendant with a tire iron from his car. The attendant, scared and bewildered, ran away. On another occasion his mother went into town in a new suit and was ordered to return home by a policeman because she was dressed like a "white woman." Opportunities for blacks in West

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<sup>7</sup> *Giants of the Game: Russell and Chamberlain*. 1997.Fim.

Monroe were scarce, and a quality education even more so. Due to the prejudicial culture of the Deep South, the school board withheld school funding for black schools. In his formative years, Russell once attended school in a ramshackle barn propped up by poles. Russell's parents were proud people who raised both him and his older brother to strive for excellence. Despite the dictates of the Jim Crow South, the Russell family imparted values of self-improvement, upward mobility, and independence. To escape the tyranny of Jim Crow, the Russell family took part in the Great Migration, moving first to Detroit, Michigan, and then ultimately to Oakland, California. Jim Crow was still upheld in Oakland, but not nearly to the same extent as it was in Louisiana. Even so, life in Oakland was no cake walk for the Russells. Their first residence was an eight bedroom house that was shared by eight families and there was another family living in the garage.<sup>5</sup>

By the time Bill Russell was enrolled at McClymonds High School his mother had died, and he had become a shy and socially awkward high school student. Although he took an interest in sports, initially he couldn't make any of his school's sports teams. He spent one year as the mascot for his school's football team. However, George Powell, the school's basketball coach, saw promise in him and worked with him to develop his basketball skills. Early on Russell was clumsy and uncoordinated, but Powell worked with him tirelessly to develop his skills. As he grew taller and taller each year he got better, but he never became an exceptional player while in high school. He scored his career high of 14 points in his last high school game at McClymonds.<sup>5</sup>

After graduating, Russell was able to obtain a spot on Brick Swegle's basketball team; a team made up annually of talented seniors who had graduated from high school at mid-year. Swegle organized tours for his team, and traveled across the northwestern United States and

parts of Canada playing against other high schools and some college teams. Here Russell began to develop his basketball niche. He was able to imitate other players' offensive style and merge it with his own, as well as create his own unique style of play defensively. He observed how other players played, analyzed it in his mind's eye and then successfully anticipate their moves when guarding them. He played unorthodox defense, often times leaping to block shots.

Traditionally coaches taught to players to stay on their feet to avoid opponents faking a shot and driving past defenders to score. His mental chess-like defensive tactic, coupled with his size, speed, and jumping ability, made Russell into a lock-down defensive player. His stellar play and newfound confidence attracted scouts from the University of San Francisco, and he was awarded a scholarship. Russell became taller, faster, and smarter with each passing year. While at the University of San Francisco, Russell led his team to 2 consecutive NCAA championship titles, winning 59 consecutive games between the 1955 and 1956 seasons. UCLA coach John Wooden called Russell "the greatest defensive man I've ever seen".<sup>8</sup> He was attracting lots of attention, averaging over 20 points a game while stifling players defensively.

The highly skilled athletic center attracted the attention of the Boston Celtics Coach, Red Auerbach. He was intrigued by Russell's defensive dominance and thought that he could be just what the Celtics needed to win a championship. This was highly irregular at the time because coaches up to this point typically recruited centers for their offensive skills, and most coaches overlooked whether or not a center could play good defense. However, top picks in the NBA are given to teams with poor records, so initially Bill Russell went to the St. Louis Hawks.

Fortunately after some finessing and negotiating, the Celtics were able to acquire Russell from

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<sup>8</sup> Schneider, Bernie. "1953-1956 NCAA Championship Seasons: The Bill Russel Years." *University of San Francisco*, 2006.

the Hawks for Ed Macauley, a day after the 1956 draft.<sup>9</sup> The trade would pay off dividends, as Russell in 13 NBA seasons led his team to 11 NBA Championships. In a 1969 article the *New York Times* raved that Russell had “turned the offensive game into a defensive specialization”.<sup>10</sup> Russell had such a knack for the game that when Red Auerbach retired on April 18, 1966, Bill Russell was named player-coach making him the first African-American head coach of a major sport’s team.<sup>11</sup> However, Russell’s time in the NBA was not without opposition. Over the course of his career he had to battle another game changing center; Wilt Chamberlain.

Wilt Chamberlain once said, “If I played in today’s game I would have probably averaged 60-70 points a game. With the way the rules of the game have changed, and how teams can’t just camp in the lane defending you, 60-70 points a game for me would be easy”.<sup>7</sup> Wilton Norman Chamberlain was born August 21, 1936, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was one of nine children raised by his father William Chamberlain, and his mother Olivia Ruth Johnson. Early on in life Chamberlain stood out from the crowd. At age 10, he had already reached 6 feet tall, and he grew 4 inches in 2 months during the summer prior to his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, reaching a height of 6’ 7”. By the time he was in high school Chamberlain was 6’ 10”. He initially didn’t take basketball seriously and participated in track and field. In track and field he high jumped 6

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<sup>9</sup> Auerbach, Red, and John Feinstein. *Let Me Tell You a Story: A Lifetime in the Game*. Little Brown and Company, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times* 1969. "Celtics Russell Plans to Retire." July 31, 1969: 41.

<sup>11</sup> Jr., Gordon S. White. "Bill Russell Named Boston Celtic Coach." *New York Times*, April 19, 1966.

feet 6 inches, ran the 440 yard dash in 49 seconds, and broad jumped 22 feet.<sup>12</sup> However, basketball was so popular in Philadelphia, Chamberlain decided to take up the sport.

While playing for Shoemaker Junior High School he got the attention of Jack Ryan, a sports reporter for the *Philadelphia Bulletin* nicknamed him “Wilt the Stilt” after his heron like legs. He was also known as the “Hook and Ladder” and as the “Big Dipper”.<sup>13</sup> Chamberlain attended Overbrook High School and at the age of 16, was so tall that he could stand under the basket and nearly touch the rim. His size and skill helped to make his team virtually invincible. His high school team won by an average of 50 points a game. In a game against Roxborough High School, he scored 90 points, winning the game by a score of 123 -21. He was such a stand-out player that he attracted the attention of Haskel Cohen, the public relations manager for the NBA. In 1953, the Kutchers Country Club (a resort in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York) hired some of the country’s top college basketball players to work as bellhops and also play on basketball teams that the resort fielded. Haskel Cohen was so enamored with Chamberlain that he convinced the resort owner Milt Kusher to hire Wilt, even though he was still in high school. The team was coached by legendary Boston Celtic Coach Red Auerbach. Auerbach also marveled at Wilt and just stared at him while he was rushing quickly as a bell hop. He was astonished that a man Wilt’s size could move as gracefully as he did.<sup>13</sup> Auerbach challenged Wilt and pushed him hard during practices. Wilt, at the time, was unreceptive to a lot of Auerbach’s advice because at 16, he had already been lavished with press attention and

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<sup>12</sup> Pierce, Don. "Chamberlain rated greatest in court game." *Sports News*, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, John. *The Rivalry: Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain and the Bolden age of Basketball*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2005.

swarmed by people telling him how great he was. So understandably, he developed a complacent attitude. Still, Auerbach was highly impressed with Chamberlain's skill, speed, and hustle on the court.

In 1953, the NBA had a territorial draft, which allowed NBA teams to supersede the rules of the NBA draft and acquire top college players within their territory. Since Red Auerbach coached the Boston Celtics, he attempted to persuade Chamberlain to attend college in New England. He reportedly asked Chamberlain "Why don't you go to Harvard kid?".<sup>13</sup> Auerbach called Chamberlain "the most fantastic player that he had ever seen and even tried to get \$25,000 to his family as an incentive to get Wilt to attend college in the New England area since no rule formally prevented him from doing so. However, Celtics owner Walter Brown considered it underhanded. Eddie Gottlieb, the owner of the Philadelphia Warriors wanted to draft Wilt as soon as he graduated high school. That would have meant changing the NBA's rules which stated players had to graduate from college before becoming eligible for the NBA draft. Attempting to repeal that rule would have jeopardized the NBA's relationship with colleges. College basketball was like the NBA's minor leagues, and NBA owners did not wish to put their relationship with them at risk. To circumvent this dilemma, Gottlieb got the support of other owners to extend the territorial draft to high school. That way no matter where Chamberlain went to college the Warriors could still draft him. Colleges from all over the country attempted to recruit him, offering him things from no-show jobs, weekly allowances up to \$100 a week, cars, and slush funds totaling in tens of thousands that would accrue interest while he was in college.

Ultimately Chamberlain was persuaded by legendary Kansas coach Phog Allen, a protégé of the inventor of the game James Naismith. The strategy of his recruiting method was to convince Chamberlain that Kansas would offer him an environment with positive race relations.

Allen had some of his black players show Chamberlain around explaining to him how good race relations were at the University. However, it was widely believed that Chamberlain also received \$25,000 to \$30,000 in cash. Chamberlain played 3 years at Kansas University. He was never able to obtain an NCAA title, but he still dominated the game. At the beginning of the 1957 season, *The Saturday Evening Post* interviewed a coach in the Big 7 tournament who stated “When one player can louse up your offense because you can’t go around him and can’t go over him, and he scares you so much that you pay no attention to his teammates while concentrating completely on him, it ought to be illegal”.<sup>14</sup> Chamberlain grew frustrated with college basketball and after his junior year went to play for the Harlem Globetrotters.

After playing a year with the Globetrotters, Chamberlain was drafted by the Philadelphia Warriors in 1959 and instantly became the league’s highest paid player, earning \$30,000 for the year.<sup>15</sup> He made an immediate impact in the league scoring 43 points alongside 28 rebounds in his rookie debut against the New York Knicks. During his rookie season he averaged 37.6 points and 27 rebounds. Wilt was so good in fact, that he was personally responsible for several NBA rule changes. In the 1966 season the NBA instituted a rule that players could not intentionally foul a player off the ball in order to benefit from his poor free throw shooting. If they did, it would result in a technical foul (although this particular rule has since been repealed).<sup>16</sup> Other rule changes included widening the lane, instituting offensive goaltending, and revising rules

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<sup>14</sup> Breslin, Jimmy. "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain." *The Saturday Evening Post*, 1957.

<sup>15</sup> Cherry, Robert. *Wilt: Larger Than Life*. Chicago: Triumph Books, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Koppett, Leonard. "N.B.A. Outlaws Deliberate Fouling Of Man Not Directly Involved in Play." *New York Times*, December 23, 1966.

governing inbounding the ball and shooting free throws (To shoot free throws, Chamberlain would leap with the ball from behind the foul line and dunk, well before Michael Jordan or Julius Erving did).<sup>17</sup> In the 1962 season, Wilt averaged 50 points a game, including his best game in which he scored 100 points in a single game, which remains the most amount of points scored by any NBA player.<sup>7</sup> In his fourth NBA game, Chamberlain faced the league's premier defensive player Bill Russell. Wilt outscored Russell, but the Celtics won in an epic battle, giving birth to one of the league's most fascinating rivalries.

During the 1960s the most common debate in the NBA questioned who was better, Wilt Chamberlain or Bill Russell. What made this so compelling was that both centers had two completely different styles of play. The NBA had never seen the likes of centers like Chamberlain and Russell. Although they were relatively the same size in height as other centers (the average height of centers at the time they played was 6 feet 10), their physical attributes and skills set them apart. One center showcased his amazing speed and agility defensively, while another used his titan-like strength to become one of the league's most dynamic scorers. Russell helped his team so many times by blocking shots toward his teammates or to himself that his defense alone was responsible for many of the Celtics' victories. Chamberlain was so strong that once he dunked the ball with so much force that it hit the foot of Hall of Famer Johnny "Red" Kerr, breaking his toe. In college, a photographer caught a picture of Chamberlain jumping straight up next to a high bar, 54 inches of the ground. Having a 54 inch vertical leap coupled with his amazing strength made Chamberlain virtually unstoppable.<sup>6</sup> Chamberlain led the NBA in scoring 7 consecutive seasons.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Wilt Chamberlain*. 2014. [http://www.nba.com/history/players/chamberlain\\_bio.html](http://www.nba.com/history/players/chamberlain_bio.html).

The combination of Chamberlain's incredible offense put against Russell's dynamic defense was a matchup that fans flocked to see. One of Chamberlain's teammates Bill Cunningham, once said "There were two games going on, the Philadelphia 76ers versus the Boston Celtics, as well as Wilt Chamberlain versus Bill Russell."<sup>7</sup> Although Chamberlain still dominated offensively against Russell's defense (scoring 62 points and grabbing 55 rebounds in his best game against the Celtics) the Celtics had the better team. The Philadelphia 76ers would lose 7 out of 8 playoff games against the Boston Celtics, as the Celtics would go on to win 11 championships. Chamberlain would win 2 championships, one with the 1967 Philadelphia 76ers, and the other with the 1972 Los Angeles Lakers. Many credit the Russell/Chamberlain rivalry with elevating the NBA to one of the most popularly watched sports in the country. Their games were usually televised on Sunday afternoons, and those games helped the league to capture public attention. What helped to fuel their rivalry was the fact that they played against each other so often. In contemporary NBA basketball, teams meet only a few times a year. Russell and Chamberlain faced each other up to 13 times a season with the potential of 7 more times during the playoffs.<sup>7</sup> Sports Illustrated, in a 1988 article titled "Vanishing Centers: Where Have They Gone," noted that both Chamberlain and Russell were revered for their talents. The article observed that basketball lacks centers who are a "triple threat"- meaning scoring, rebounding and blocking shots like Russell and Chamberlain were able to do. "Teams in the NBA are getting taller and taller, and yet the more dominant players more and more are the smaller, all-around 'versatiles,' those who play every position but center."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mccallum, Jack. "Where are they?" *Sports Illustrated*, 1988: 100-113.

Both Chamberlain and Russell also had a profound effect on the culture of the NBA, and on American perceptions of blacks. Both Russell and Chamberlain exhibited qualities contrary to stereotypes attached to African-American men. They were hard working, strong, intelligent, and successful black men. When they were interviewed, they spoke articulately and with good diction. Both men appeared on talk shows, and on the cover of magazines, showing that black men could be on television for more than just making fools of themselves. Russell and Chamberlain were the NBA's first black superstars. Wilt Chamberlain even co-starred in the 1984 movie *Conan the Destroyer* alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger. Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain were two of the NBA's best all-time players, and paved the way for future black stars.

Another notable player of the 1960s was Walt Bellamy. Bellamy was a dominating force at the center position. He was the first overall draft pick by the Chicago Packers in the 1961 NBA Draft, and was an instant sensation. He won the Rookie of the Year in 1962, playing the best year of his career. During Bellamy's rookie campaign, he scored 31.6 points and grabbed 19.0 rebounds per game, while leading the league with a 51.9 percent field goal percentage. Over the duration of his 13-year career, Bellamy averaged 20.1 points and 13.7 rebounds.<sup>19</sup> After his retirement in 1974, Bellamy was active with the NAACP, serving as a Goodwill Ambassador and member of the Executive Committee of the NAACP's Georgia State Conference.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately for Bellamy, he played center during a decade dominated by two

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<sup>19</sup> *Walt Bellamy*. March 20, 2014. [http://www.nba.com/history/players/bellamy\\_bio.html](http://www.nba.com/history/players/bellamy_bio.html).

<sup>20</sup> Goldstein, Richard. "Walt Bellamy, Hall of Famer and Footnote, Dies at 74." *The New York Times*, November 2, 2013.

other centers: Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain. This meant Bellamy was all but shut out of awards. He was selected to four All-Star Games, but he was never an All-NBA player.

Nate Thurmond of the San Francisco Warriors also played in the 1960s and is ranked among the best centers of all time. Thurmond was one of the few centers able to give unstoppable offensive centers like Wilt Chamberlain and Kareem Abdul-Jabar trouble with his stifling defense. He also is one of the NBA's all-time highest averaging rebounders. Over the course of his 14 year career, Thurmond averaged 15 points and 15 rebounds. Like Bill Russell, Thurmond was a prolific shot blocker, acquiring 553 blocks over his career.

Meanwhile as these players were busy changing how the center position was played and viewed, two other black players, Elgin Baylor and Oscar Robertson, were changing the dynamics of the guard position in the NBA.

#### Chapter 4: Changing of the Guard

During the 1950s America's biggest cities in the East were giving birth to some of the best basketball players in the country, players whom also happened to be African-American. America was beginning to turn the wheels of social justice and racial equality. Doors once shut emphatically on blacks were suddenly held ajar for those who were deemed exceptional. Colleges traditionally reserved for whites began to admit exceptional black athletes across the country. Naturally, this resulted in more and more black players gaining entrance into the NBA. By the end of the 1960's 58 percent of the NBA was African-American.<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, this had a profound effect on the league. The best black players during this time period left their mark on the game, showcasing their unique styles and skills for future players to emulate. The NBA in the 1960s saw a dramatic change in how the guard position was played, and the size of

the players at that position. Typically guards are the smallest people on the court. In the 1960s this began to change as some of the most dominant guards during this time were bigger, muscular guards. One of these premier players introduced basketball fans to the concept of “hang time”. This talented athlete and Future Hall of Famer was Elgin Baylor.

“One of the privileges I have enjoyed as the owner of the Lakers”, Jack Cooke once declared, “has been my association with the man who deserved the reputation ‘superstar’ as much as any athlete that has ever lived.”<sup>21</sup> Elgin Baylor was born September 16, 1934 in Washington D.C., also known as “Chocolate City” (a nickname attributed to its large African-American population). Growing up in D.C., Baylor was well accustomed to the realities of Jim Crow. Baylor once said “There was nothing there: the movies were closed to us. We couldn’t go. We had what was supposed to be a public park, but Blacks and minorities couldn’t play there, so we spent our time entertaining ourselves by playing in the alleys, playing stickball, or maybe football if someone was fortunate enough to find a football. We never had a basketball or anyplace to play it.”<sup>24</sup> Fortunately, a family friend of Baylor’s, Clarence Haynesworth, introduced him to the sport one summer early in Baylor’s youth. Like most NBA players, Baylor was tall at a young age; 6’ 2”, in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Haynesworth found an integrated park where he and Baylor could play, planting the seed for Baylor’s love for the game.

As his skills developed, Baylor attempted to try out for Spingarn High School’s varsity basketball team. When he didn’t make the team, instead of playing another year for the junior varsity team, Baylor sat the year out and played in a recreational league composed of older and better players. His talent grew and the following year he made his school’s varsity team. By his

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<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*. "Baylor Calls It Quits at 37....in 'Fairness to the Fans'." November 5, 1971: 49.

senior year he was such a stand-out player that he was named an All-American. In his best game, Baylor scored 68 points. However, he did not receive much attention from colleges because his skills developed so late in his high school career. Initially Baylor received an athletic scholarship to play for Idaho University, for football rather than basketball. However when he arrived it rained for two weeks straight barring any practices. The football team spent their spare time playing basketball, and word quickly got around the college about how phenomenal Elgin Baylor was at basketball. Soon after, he was given a basketball scholarship in addition to his football scholarship. Baylor was a promising player but after his first season his school began limiting athletic scholarships. Simultaneously, Baylor was approached by Seattle University to play basketball. Baylor agreed to transfer schools, sitting out his first year to attain eligibility. Once eligible, Baylor showcased his skills marvelously.

He incorporated into his game the flashy, dazzling street ball moves common among black players from urban cities. He maneuvered around players with his superior ball handling abilities, pump fakes and speed. However, what truly set him apart were the unique aerial aspects of his game. His “hang time,” or ability to stay in the air for a relatively long time before landing on the ground, was unequalled. Baylor rose up on one side of the basket and did not release the ball until he was on the other side of the basket (also known as a reverse layup). Players in modern times do this routinely, but it was groundbreaking when Baylor first started doing it. He also amazed audiences by rising up for layups and switching hands in mid-air. This, coupled with the fact that Baylor jumped so high that when he shot his hip was often times at his defender’s head, made him a stand-out player. Such moves today are commonplace, but in the late 1950s and 60s they were revolutionary. In a 1971 sports column Wells Twoombly wrote that Baylor seemed “to hover [in the air] for what seemed like forever,” and that “he was an

athlete that actually practiced levitation.”<sup>22</sup> His natural talent coupled with his 6’5” frame (a height that was pretty tall for a guard at the time) made Baylor virtually unstoppable. In 1958, his junior year, Baylor led his college team to the NCAA championship game. His team lost, but Baylor’s college career did not go unnoticed. In his college career Baylor averaged 31.3 points a game and as a guard led the NCAA in rebounds in the 1956-1957 season.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the Minneapolis Lakers were in dire need of a super star caliber player. In the 1956-1957 season the Lakers barely made the playoffs and were eliminated in the first round. At the end of the season, George Mikan, their franchise player who had led them to 7 championships retired, leaving the team sorely lacking on the court and in the stands. Fans had flocked to see the 6’10” center, who showcased his unique scoring ability and athleticism. Without Mikan, the Lakers’ foundation grew unstable. The year following his retirement in the 1957-1958 season, the Lakers ended with a 19-53 record; they were last in their division, and missed the playoffs.<sup>24</sup> The silver lining to their appalling season was that they had been awarded the number 1 draft pick for the 1958 season, meaning that the nation’s highly touted and acrobatic guard would be well within their reach.

The Lakers wasted no time selecting Elgin Baylor as their number 1 draft pick in the summer of 1958. They persuaded Baylor to skip his senior year at Seattle University by offering

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<sup>22</sup> Twombly, Wells. *San Francisco Examiner*, 1971.

<sup>23</sup> Douchant, Mike. "NBA Register." *The Sporting News*, January 1, 1986: 287.

<sup>24</sup> *George Mikan*. March 15, 2014. [http://www.nba.com/history/players/mikan\\_bio.html](http://www.nba.com/history/players/mikan_bio.html).

him a \$20,000 starting salary.<sup>25</sup> The Lakers were completely invested in Baylor and if he did not pan out they would be at the end of their rope. The Lakers' owner, Bob Shorter, once stated in regards to Baylor "If he had turned me down then, I would have been out of business. The club would have gone bankrupt."<sup>26</sup> Fortunately for Shorter, the investment would pay immediate dividends. In his first 20 games Baylor scored 505 points, averaging 25.3 points a game.<sup>27</sup> As a rookie in the 1958-59 season, Baylor finished fourth in the league in scoring (24.9 ppg), third in rebounding (15.0 rpg), and eighth in assists (4.1 apg). He scored 55 points in a single game, at the time the third-highest mark in league history behind Joe Fulks's 63 and Mikan's 61.

The Lakers finished second in the Western Division at 33-39, 14 victories better than their previous season. They shocked the entire league by making it to the NBA Finals after playoff victories over the Detroit Pistons and the defending NBA-champion St. Louis Hawks. However, the Boston Celtic dynasty led by Bill Russell swept the Lakers in four games.<sup>4</sup> Although Baylor came into the league as a prolific scorer, he possessed a trait that made him stand apart from other scorers. Baylor possessed a sensational passing ability and was unselfish enough to actually capitalize on this skill. Typically, an NBA scorer, and especially a shooting guard, looks primarily to score before looking to pass. However, Baylor was a break from the ordinary and actively looked for others before trying to force a bad shot attempt. This subtle

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<sup>25</sup> *Elgin Baylor*. March 15, 2014. [http://www.nba.com/history/players/baylor\\_bio.html](http://www.nba.com/history/players/baylor_bio.html).

<sup>26</sup> Potter, David L. *African-American Sports Greats: A Biographical Dictionary*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> *The New York Times*. "Elgin Baylor is a Leader." December 3, 1958: 49.

style of play kept defenders guessing as to what he would do with the ball, which translated into easier baskets for the Lakers and ultimately into games won.

Prior to Baylor, the NBA had not seen a 6 foot 6 muscular player at the guard position. Elgin Baylor was also distinct in that he was a complete basketball player. He was known for his scoring, but he could do virtually everything well offensively and defensively and was also an exceptional rebounder. In any era of basketball, averaging 25 points and 15 rebounds as a rookie (and as a guard) is unbelievable. By the 1961-1962 season Baylor had joined together with the man who would later become an NBA icon, Jerry West. Together they formed one of the greatest dynamic duos in NBA history. In that season the two combined for nearly 70 points a game. The Lakers steamrolled through the Western Conference, making it to the NBA Finals. Once, they had to face Bill Russell's Boston Celtics. While the Celtics triumphed in the Game 7, Baylor still shined. In game 5 of the series he scored 61 points (a finals record that would not be broken until Michael Jordan scored 63 points against the Celtics in 1986).<sup>28</sup>

Baylor's impact on the NBA also stretched beyond the parameters of the court. In 1964, he was instrumental in solidifying the membership of the NBA Players Association. In that year he led a rebellion alongside Jerry West and Oscar Robertson, threatening to boycott the NBA's All Star Game over what they felt was an unsatisfactory pension plan. Their tactics worked as owners, fearing the losses they would suffer with no All-Star Game, met the demands of the players. Baylor joined the ranks of Wilt Chamberlain, Nate Thurmond, and Bill Russell as the first African-American NBA players to earn over \$100,000 a year. Over his career Baylor scored 23,149 points averaging 27.4 points a game. Up to 1972 (the year he retired) only Oscar

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<sup>28</sup> Baylor, Elgin, interview by Los Angeles Times. (1971).

Robertson and Wilt Chamberlain scored more points and only four players had averaged more rebounds per game.<sup>21</sup> Elgin Baylor would go on to coach the New Orleans Jazz from 1974 to 1979 as one of the few early black coaches in the NBA.<sup>26</sup>

Although Baylor impressed fans with his creativity, size, and the aerial aspects of his game, he was not the only black guard to revolutionize guard play in the 1960's. The decade saw the rise of a guard whom many consider among the top 10 players of all time. This other oversized guard was the "Big O", Oscar Robertson.

"In a lot of ways, Oscar Robertson was the Michael Jordan of his day," Red Auerbach once declared.<sup>29</sup> Oscar Robertson was one of the most well-rounded basketball players of all time. He wasn't didn't have any flashy or dazzling components to his game. Nearly everything he did was fundamental, textbook, traditional basketball. Nelson George writes "The Big O proved that African-Americans could play the game any way necessary, yet always with a style as personalized as his one-handed jumper."<sup>22</sup> In his best season, in 1961-1962, he averaged 30.8 points, 12.5 rebounds, and 11.4 assists per game, making him the only player in NBA history to average a triple double (meaning he averaged double digits in 3 statistical categories). No player ever has come close to this feat. To attain a triple double in a single game means that a player is virtually controlling the entire game. Typically when a player records a triple double it is in the categories of points, rebounds, and assists. What this means is that a player is dominating the game with their scoring, by controlling the boards, and by getting their teammates involved. Recording a triple double, especially by the margins that Robertson did is inconceivable. There are many who rate Oscar as a better player than Michael Jordan; who is usually the generic

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<sup>29</sup> *Oscar Robertson-ESPN Basketball Documentary*. 2013.

answer in regards to the greatest NBA player of all-time. Robertson used his 6 foot 5, 220 pound frame to dominate and impose his will on smaller defenders. Typically guards in this era were relied upon to control the ball, the pace of the offense, and to get their teammates in positions where they could score. However, when Oscar Robertson stepped on the scene he took it a step further by single handedly completing the roles of all 5 players on the court himself. He controlled the boards with his rebounding ability, which is usually the role of much taller centers. He scored almost at will, which is typically done by shooting guards, and he was a point guard. Robertson was also known for his defense, and toughness.

Every team usually has one player on it who is assigned the role of one of these responsibilities. Robertson was unique in that he could do all of these things on the court, and do them exceptionally. Lou Carnesecca, a Hall of Fame NBA coach, once said in regards to Robertson “You knew what he was going to do, you knew exactly where he was going to go, and you still couldn’t stop him. That’s greatness!”<sup>29</sup> Robertson resented the stereotype of his day that black guards could not handle the ball or control the tempo of the game because they were too dumb and lacked the brainpower. He heard this stereotype constantly over the course of his career and took it upon himself to single handedly dispel this myth. By the end of his career he had succeeded, and the idea that race had anything to do with the ability to handle the ball and have a high basketball IQ had lost traction. America prior to the 1960s was indoctrinated with the social dogma that the smartest, brightest, strongest, and most athletic people on the planet were white. Blacks were incapable of greatness. However, when juxtaposed against the reality that the best player in the NBA, Oscar Robertson, was black, this racist theory lost its credibility.

Oscar Robertson was born in Charlotte, Tennessee, in 1938, and grew up in Indianapolis. As an adolescent he learned the harsh realities and prejudices of Jim Crow. He was born into a

poor family, with his mother at one point working three jobs just to provide the bare necessities. The most popular sport at the time Robertson was coming up was baseball. However, Robertson was drawn to basketball because it was "a poor kids' game." His family could not afford a basketball so he learned how to shoot by tossing tennis balls and rags bound with rubber bands into a peach basket behind his family's home, which is probably why Robertson shot using primarily one hand.<sup>30</sup> From an early age, Oscar Robertson grew to resent the bigotry he had to endure by virtue of being black in America. He hated being told where he could and couldn't go in town, and the accommodations he had to use because of the color of his skin. He marveled at the irony of how when traveling in a bus with his family they were prevented from using the same restrooms as the other passengers when they reached rest stops in places like Kentucky, yet they were still required to pay full price for their bus tickets.

By the time Robertson was enrolled at all-black Crispus Attucks High School he was a basketball prodigy. He was the best player on his team and was exceptional on the court. He saw basketball as a safe haven from his struggles in everyday life. However, he learned that racism was prevalent in basketball as well. Due to his stellar play, Robertson was often the recipient of threats of violence, racial heckling, and even death threats because he was a black man who dared to be better than his white opposition. His team sometimes found it difficult to find games to play because white schools didn't want to be beaten by an all-black team. Robertson once said that "The racism didn't bother me; it just made me play harder".<sup>29</sup> In 1955 Crispus Attucks, led by Robertson, became the first predominately black high school to win

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<sup>30</sup> *Oscar Robertson*. March 17, 2014. [http://www.nba.com/history/players/robertson\\_bio.html](http://www.nba.com/history/players/robertson_bio.html).

Indiana's State Championship. Robertson's team was so good that they accomplished the task the following year as well.

Robertson initially sought to attend Indiana University but after being treated poorly by their coach he refused to go and instead enrolled at the University of Cincinnati. There he was a 3 time College Player of the Year, in addition to winning 3 scoring titles and averaging 33.8 points a game.<sup>30</sup> His team made it to the Final Four of the NCAA tournament twice but was never able to make it to the Finals. While in college, he was again continually confronted with the realities of Jim Crow. On several occasions he was unable to stay in the hotels with his teammates because the hotel did not allow blacks to lodge there. On other occasions he received official letters from the Klu Klux Klan threatening to kill him if he played in certain games. However, Robertson endured the hatred although it did bother him and graduated in 1960. He was given the honor of playing for the U.S. in the 1960 Olympic Games, and won a gold medal; his team won by an average of 42 points. After the Olympics he entered the NBA signing with the Cincinnati Royals with high expectations placed upon him that he would not only meet, but surpass.

In the 1960-1961 season, his rookie season, Robertson averaged 30.8 points a game, earning the Rookie of the Year award. Opposing teams had great difficulty trying to guard his unorthodox one handed shot, finding the shot unblockable. That same year he ended Bob Cousy's 8 year consecutive assists titles by averaging 9.7 a game. By his second season he was larger than life. Robertson shattered other records in assists, formerly held by Bob Cousy, averaging 11.4 assists per game for a total of 899 assists in a single season. His second season was also the year he averaged a triple double, which had never been done before and hasn't been done since. His third season he almost averaged a triple double for a second time, averaging 28.3

points, 10.4 rebounds, and 9.5 assists per game. In the 1964 season Oscar Robertson won the NBA MVP award, which at the time was extremely prestigious because of the fact that the players, and not the coaches, writers, or sports analysts that do so today, voted for the league's MVP. That means that the very people that he was dominating voted for him for MVP honors.<sup>30</sup> What made this achievement even more special was how hard it was for a guard at the time to win MVP. From 1960-1968 Robertson was the only player other than Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell to win MVP.<sup>30</sup> The rest of the NBA stood back in awe as Robertson put up incredible numbers, defying conventional point guard roles, and redefining what it meant to be not only a great guard in the NBA, but also a great player.

Unfortunately for Robertson he was playing during an era when two teams held control over the fate of the NBA Championship; namely Wilt Chamberlain's Philadelphia 76ers and Bill Russell's Boston Celtics. Each year the Cincinnati Royals made the playoffs they were eliminated by one of the two teams. The playoff games that the Royals faced against these two teams made for classic rivalries. Fans flocked to see the guard matchup between Robertson and Celtics great Bob Cousy, and 76ers legend Hal Greer. What it simply came down to was the fact that both the 76ers and the Celtics had the all-around better teams. Unfortunately for Robertson, since he was the undisputed leader and best player on the team, the blame often rested squarely on his shoulders even though individually he was still putting up stellar numbers. By the 1969 season, the Cincinnati Royals hired Celtic great Bob Cousy as head coach. There was a lot of tension between Cousy and Robertson, especially after Cousy activated himself as a player replacing Robertson at point guard for 6 games. His bitterness increased when newspapers started writing that Oscar never did anything for the Royals. Oscar Robertson once stated that "When you are a black athlete you are held to a higher standard. Most people don't want you out

there, so when you are in the game they want you not only to play well, but to win. They would rather you play well and go 12-0 than play great and go 8-3.”<sup>30</sup> Before the start of the 1970-1971 season, Robertson was traded to the Milwaukee Bucks.

The trade would ultimately turn out to be the best for Robertson as he teamed up with future Hall of Famer Lew Alcindor also known as Kareem Abdul-Jabar. Lew Alcindor would play well enough to win the scoring title and NBA MVP award. That, coupled with Robertson’s multifaceted skills and the overall quality of the Milwaukee Bucks that year, resulted in Robertson finally attaining the NBA Championship that eluded him throughout the 1960s. When Robertson retired in 1974, he was, according to the *The New York Times*, the NBA’s “most complete player ever”<sup>31</sup>

Oscar Robertson’s impact on NBA basketball went beyond his sensational and innovative on-the-court play. In the 1970 season Oscar Robertson was president of the NBA’s player Association and fought the NBA for better benefits and representation for the players. He fought for things that have come standard in today’s NBA basketball- things like guaranteed contracts (meaning players still get paid if they get hurt) as well as getting paid for pre-season games and having descent travel accommodations. He also fought for the repeal of the “Reserve Clause,” which stated that players weren’t beholden to teams when their contract ran up. They could become “free agents” and sign with any team they saw fit. Although Robertson was grateful for the opportunities afforded to him by playing basketball in the NBA, his memories are bitter-sweet. He holds on to unforgettable experiences where he had to eat at separate restaurants and

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<sup>31</sup> Goldpaper, Sam. "Robertson Ends Career; NBA Great Accepts CBS-TV Pact." *The New York Times*, September 4, 1974: 33.

lodge at lesser hotels than his white teammates because of the color of his skin. Despite all he had done for the NBA, Robertson to this day can't help but feel undervalued and underappreciated. Nevertheless Robertson left a lasting impact on the NBA and the entire sport of basketball.

In addition to revolutionary players like Wilt Chamberlain and Oscar Robertson, the NBA was buoyed by other prominent black athletes during the 1960s. Players like Sam Jones showcased his speed and agility aiding in 10 of the NBA Championships won by the Boston Celtic dynasty of the 1960s. Jones was known for his bank shot and clutch performances. Another inconspicuous player, Gus Johnson, might have be a household name among basketball fans if he were playing in today's game. Johnson played for the Baltimore Bullets during the 1960's and never really got the reverence that his skills warranted. Johnson was a power forward with skills similar to modern day superstar LeBron James. Johnson's ability to score, pass, and rebound made the Baltimore Bullets a perennial title contender during the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. Led by Johnson the Bullets reached the playoffs six times and advanced to the NBA Finals in the 1970-71 season, losing to Oscar Robertson's Milwaukee Bucks. This NBA Hall of Famer averaged 17.1 points a game and just under 13 rebounds a game. Oscar Robertson stated in an interview that "Gus Johnson was one of the best rebounders that I have ever seen".<sup>30</sup> Hall of Famer Earl "The Pearl" Monroe once said "'Gus was ahead of his time, flying through the air for slam dunks, breaking backboards and throwing full-court passes behind his back. He was spectacular, but he also did the nitty gritty jobs, defense and rebounding. With all the guys in the Hall of Fame, Gus deserves to be there."<sup>32</sup> Wilt Chamberlain's Philadelphia 76ers were

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<sup>32</sup> *Retired Numbers: Gus Johnson*. March 20, 2014.

<http://www.nba.com/wizards/history/gusjohnsonhistorypage.html>.

successful in large part because of their talented point guard, Hal Greer, who scorched opponents with his remarkable jump shot. He averaged 19.2 points a game over the course of 15 seasons.<sup>33</sup>

The 1960's marked the beginning of a radical shift in the NBA. In the 1950s the majority of the top players in the NBA were white, reflecting traditional American perceptions of white supremacy. When Bill Russell entered the NBA in 1957, 93 percent of NBA players were white.<sup>34</sup> By the end of the 1960s, 58 percent of the league was African-American, the best of whom were black. Traditional gameplay in the NBA was now infused with dazzling displays of athleticism and the flashy style that blacks brought into the league that delighted crowds across the country. Fans filled arenas to see the unique ball handling and athletic abilities of players like Earl "The Pearl" Monroe. Monroe was known for his patented "spin move" that had never been seen before. Other players started to emulate the style and moves of players like Monroe (who averaged roughly 19 points a game) changed the very fabric of the NBA. By the end of the 1960s, the highest paid players in the league were black. A sport that had once reflected racial stereotypes and notions of white superiority now showcased African-American success.

The validity of ideas promoting black inferiority that were challenged by the civil rights movement of the 1960s were also challenged on the court, as black players often times dominated their white counterparts. However, the drastic change in the NBA from the 1950s to the 1960s would be virtually dwarfed by the changes that black players prompted in the 1970s. One player more stood above the rest, with skills and physical attributes that the NBA had never

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<sup>33</sup> Hal Greer. March 20, 2014. [http://www.nba.com/history/players/greer\\_bio.html](http://www.nba.com/history/players/greer_bio.html).

<sup>34</sup> Zgoda, Jerry, and Dennis Brackin. "Timberwolves: Pale in Comparison to the rest of the NBA." *Star Tribune*, October 28, 2012.

seen. He would instill pride in Black America and showcase virtues that people regardless of their race wanted to emulate. This NBA pioneer was Julius “Dr. J” Erving. He would help to elevate the popularity of the NBA, after a period of modest decline.

### Part III: A Whole New League

#### Chapter 5: The NBA Needs a Doctor

When the 1970s began, the NBA was a two-division, 14-team league coming off a Boston Celtics monopoly of 10 championships in 11 years. For many fans, the NBA wasn't just dominated by the Celtics, it was the Celtics. However, in the early 70s the NBA was suffering. A major factor influencing the NBA's trouble was that the majority of white Americans were growing tired of watching a sport dominated by black players. Another influential factor was that the NBA began to incorporate the flashy, stylistic “playground” brand of play that mesmerized fans. However, the NBA for the most part was still played with a traditional style, with occasional moments of flare. The NBA began to see many of its viewers turn to another league that started in 1967 that utilized the playground style that fans longed for; the American Basketball Association (ABA). In the NBA things like dunking the basketball were rarely done, and in the ABA it was not only endorsed, but encouraged. Players in the ABA were free to showcase their unique athletic talents and flare, much to their fans' delight. The ABA had other gimmicks to entice viewers to watch it instead of the NBA. The ABA played with an unorthodox red, white, and blue ball, had the 3-point shot, had ball girls cheering on the sidelines, as well as provided bizarre circus-like half-time shows.<sup>35</sup> The ABA was able to

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<sup>35</sup> *NBA Tv's "The Doctor: Julius Erving Documentary*. 2013.

acquire some of the best athletes by signing them to contracts while they were underclassmen in college, and in some cases right out of high school- a tactic the NBA had been adamantly opposed to doing. However, there was an unshakable stigma attached to the ABA as being “the other league.” It was looked upon as the NBA’s little brother, lacking the major television broadcasts and media coverage that the NBA enjoyed. Some of the best players in the world were a part of the ABA, but were virtually unknown to many because they didn’t get the publicity that players in the NBA received. As Bill Walton put it “The ABA was good basketball, it was fun basketball, but it wasn’t the NBA.”<sup>35</sup> By 1976 the ABA had dwindled down to only 7 teams. The ABA was doing so poorly at the box office and troubled so much with finances without a broadcasting contract that its only option was to merge with the NBA. The NBA retained four of the ABA’s premier teams, including the Brooklyn Nets who had in its roster one of the greatest players to ever play the sport; Julius “Dr. J” Erving. The NBA was aware of Julius Erving’s reputation as one of the best players in basketball, as well as his prolific dunks. The league had high hopes for Dr. J, believing that he could be just the spark that it needed to keep their flame burning. Julius Erving would not disappoint.

Julius Winston Erving II was born February 22, 1950, in Roosevelt, New York, as the middle child of Callie and Julius Erving Senior. His parents divorced when he was three, and his father died six years later, leaving Julius and the rest of his family left to be cared for solely by his mother. Due to financial hardship, he grew up in a housing project. Adjacent to the housing project was the Camel Park basketball courts- a court that would serve to establish Erving’s lifelong love for the game of basketball. He worked on his game religiously and by the time he was enrolled at Roosevelt High School he was one of the best players on the team. Here

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one of his close friends and teammates, Leon Saunders, dubbed him “The Doctor”, a name that would stick with Julius for the rest of his life.<sup>35</sup>

Erving drew little college interest due to the fact that he never tried to stand out in high school. He grabbed the attention of only one college scout, Howard Garfinkel, who gave him a sub-par rating. However, Erving attained a bit of a reputation for his skills at local basketball courts. His high school coach, Ray Wilson, came to see him one day and witnessed Julius dunking from the free throw line, 15 feet away from the basket. He was so impressed that he called a friend at the University of Massachusetts(UMass) and talked him into giving Julius a scholarship. At UMass Julius was able to flourish and make a name for himself. Scouts began to marvel at his profound jumping ability and athleticism. By his junior year in college, Julius had grown to 6 foot 6, and was averaging 27 points and 20 rebounds a game. His talents were somewhat shackled because the NCAA up to this point had strict rules prohibiting dunking in games. He would showcase this aspect of his game the summer after his junior year at the famous Rucker Park in Harlem, New York. At Rucker Park, style, creativity, and imagination were essential for players. The only way to be able to play was to showcase things that fans have never seen before. NBA players often played there in the summertime, and even they were amazed at the high-flying powerful dunks that Erving did routinely. After disapproving of other nicknames given to him, he told announcers and fans “If you want to call me anything, call me ‘The Doctor’”.<sup>35</sup> The name caught on quickly as fans packed the streets surrounding Rucker Park to see Erving, they chanted “Doctor J!” repeatedly when he would score. His talent for entertaining fans did not go unnoticed, and he was recruited to play professional basketball in the ABA for the Virginia Squires.

In college, Erving played the traditional brand of basketball that the NBA endorsed, but in the ABA, which endorsed inventiveness, Julius played as if he had been unshackled. He drew scores of fans with his jaw-dropping dunks, and his unique flare. John Betancourt, a teammate of Erving's, stated "I thought I knew Julius as a basketball player. And then I went and watched some guy they called 'Doctor J'. I never saw this guy before."<sup>35</sup> He amazed fans with his acrobatic dunks and scoring ability, averaging over 28 points a game. The NBA took notice of Erving's talents and tried to entice him to switch to the NBA, offering him a higher salary than he was receiving with the Squires. To ensure he stayed with the ABA, Squires owner Earl Foreman set up a trade to send Erving to the New York Nets, a team that could afford to pay a high enough salary to keep him in the ABA. He instantly turned the Nets into a title contender. He gave the Nets, who were a sub-par team prior to his arrival, a sense of togetherness and unity. He told his teammates "I don't think that you should cuss at a guy for missing a pass. You should boost him up by saying something like 'It's alright, we'll get it next time.'"<sup>36</sup> In his first season he won the scoring title and earned MVP honors, while leading the team to its first championship. He would go on to win another championship with the Nets before the 1976 ABA-NBA merger.

By the end of the 1970s the league had ballooned to 22 teams in four divisions and had engulfed the ABA. The Nets, San Antonio Spurs, Denver Nuggets, and Indiana Pacers were all absorbed into the NBA. During the transition, the 70s reversed the preceding decade where only a few teams were title contenders. The merger made the NBA much more competitive, as there were multiple teams now vying for the NBA Championship. Julius Erving added to the

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<sup>36</sup> Carry, Peter. "Big Julie is Doing Nicely-Nicely." *Sports Illustrated*, 1974: 38-41.

anticipation for the coming season through his blossoming reputation. Sport Illustrated stated “Erving’s all-around wizardry makes him the biggest chip in the merger pot.”<sup>37</sup>

Due to the many entrance fees that Nets owner Roy Boe faced, he could no longer afford to pay Julius Erving the salary that he deserved. As a result he reluctantly traded Erving to the Philadelphia 76ers just 24 hours before the start of the 1976-1977 season.<sup>36</sup> Pat Williams, the 76ers general manager, referred to Erving as “The Babe Ruth of basketball.”<sup>35</sup> Erving came into the league at the right time. The NBA was suffering in attendance and was losing its luster in the eyes of many fans. The league was viewed as having too many African-Americans. In the NBA’s early years fans weren’t bothered by seeing the occasional great black player. But now, the league’s best players were virtually all black. Some of the black players were associated with drug use, and many fans resented the idea of seeing black players with million dollar salaries. Sponsors questioned whether they should bestow endorsement deals to players. They were uncertain as to whether they wanted to associate their brand with the perception of the NBA time- overpaid, drug addicted black athletes. To add fuel to the fire, the ABA-NBA merger brought in more players whose style of freelance playground basketball was directly opposite of the traditional style that many NBA fans cherished in basketball. Included in this style was trash-talking, which turned off many white fans because they felt basketball was to be more civil and classy. Nevertheless, there was an undeniably a high level of anticipation of Julius Erving, the player that fans and media had heard of but never seen play.

Erving took the league by storm, showcasing his emphatic dunks and dynamic scoring abilities. The league was taken aback at a player whose game was far superior and completely

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<sup>37</sup> Kirkpartrick, Curry. "A Season For All Men." *Sports Illustrated*, 1976: 34.

different from anything they had ever seen. Hall of Fame coach Pat Riley stated “Who is this guy? There is nobody like him!”<sup>35</sup> The 76ers had a great team to complement Dr. J at the time. Darryl Dawkins, and World B. Free were some of the league’s premier players, and were great complements to Erving. To ensure the team’s success, Erving began taking fewer shots and made conscious efforts to get his other teammates involved. Many felt that Dr. J was coerced into this strategy. A *New York Times* reporter wrote, “The 76ers tried to change his game to fit theirs”.<sup>38</sup> At any rate, the tactic worked as Erving led the 76ers to the 1977 Finals against the Portland Trailblazers. This drew many fans’ attention to the Finals because of what it symbolized. The Trailblazers played with the traditional style that pre-dated the flashy freelance style of basketball that the ABA players brought into the league. It was an epic battle of the old versus the new. The series was filled with physicality and even fights. Portland’s team concept ultimately prevailed in 6 games. The 76ers had a chance to tie the sixth game and potentially send the series to 7 games, but their coach opted to give the ball to George McGinnis instead of Dr. J, who had already scored over 40 points. Despite the frustration that Dr. J and his team suffered, he went to Portland’s locker room and together with his team congratulated Portland on their championship. Actions like these are why Erving was viewed as Magic Johnson once said, “Where greatness meets class”.<sup>35</sup>

Despite losing in the 1977 Finals, Dr. J had earned a reputation as the league’s best player. He drew multitudes of fans wherever he went, helping to revitalize the league. He became one of the league’s ambassadors, volunteering at charity functions, and giving speeches at various events. He was a role model to millions of African-Americans across the country. He

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<sup>38</sup> Seidman, Carrie. "Julius Erving is Finally Getting His Old A.B.A. Act Together." *The Ner York Times*, February 3, 1980: S1.

was the embodiment of what it meant to be “cool.” He wore his hair in a big afro, which during the 70s was popular and symbolized black pride and expression. He spoke clearly, articulately, and intelligently every time he was interviewed. Sports Journalist Mike Wilbon stated that “I remember that I was so happy as a young black man who cared about language, presentation, and image, that Julius Erving sounded the way he sounded”.<sup>35</sup> He was the antithesis of the stereotypical black man, who was thought to be unintelligent, unsuccessful, lazy and a criminal. Because of his stardom and appeal to the masses Dr. J was the first black NBA player to be sought after by major companies for endorsements. He received endorsements for companies like Crest toothpaste, Converse shoes, and Coke-A-Cola. The idea that a black man was chosen as the face of multiple national brands was incredible. He won the hearts of not only millions of black fans, but millions of white fans as well.

Julius Erving would continue to lead his team to the playoffs. He was revered and respected by all. *Sports Illustrated* in a 1976 article dubbed him “The best player in the world”.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately for him he faced some of the best teams of all time, including Larry Bird’s Boston Celtics, and Magic and Kareem’s Los Angeles Lakers. He would play sensationally in every series but the all-around talent of those teams proved insurmountable. Finally in 1982, 76ers owner Patt Williams made a trade for dominant center Moses Malone, believing he would give just the extra spark to help the team get over the hump. The trade worked, as Dr. J and Moses Malone led the 76ers to a NBA Championship, attaining Dr. J’s first NBA championship ring. Dr. J would continue to play for four more seasons before retiring at the age of 37 in 1987. He left the league with an untarnished legacy. Pat Riley told *Sports Illustrated* in 1987 “There may have been *some* better people off the court. Like some mothers and the pope. But there was only

one Dr. J the player”.<sup>39</sup> He came into the league at a time where NBA fans were starting to resent the league for being composed of stereotypical black men. He entered at a time when the league was in bad shape and in need of urgent care. With his famous oversized hands he operated on the league, changing racist perceptions of what it meant to be black in the NBA, as well as reenergizing fan’s enthusiasm for the sport of basketball. The NBA was sick when Julius Erving entered the league. Fortunately for the NBA, its illness was cured by “The Doctor.”

## Chapter 6: It’s Showtime!

Earvin Johnson meant to basketball what George Mikan meant in the 1950s, what Oscar Robertson meant in the 1960s, and what Dr. J meant in the 70s. He took the game by storm and changed basketball forever with his “magic” touch. Earvin Johnson was born August 14, 1959, in Lansing, Michigan. From his formative years he was well regarded as a precocious basketball player. His talent and dynamic flare for the game was so widely known that most of his high school games were televised, and wherever he played the arena was filled with spectators. His speed, coupled with his fundamental skills, drew fans by the thousands. One of the people he impressed was Fred Stabley of the *Lansing State Journal*. Stabley thought that a player with the skills and style that Johnson possessed deserved an equally stylish nickname. After meeting with Johnson to discuss potential names, the two agreed upon “Magic,” a name that Johnson thought would never stick. History would show that he was mistaken.

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<sup>39</sup> McCallum, Jack. "Doc Across America." *Sports Illustrated*, 1987: 74-75.

As Magic's talent and skills grew throughout high school, so did his fame. By his senior year he led the Everett Vikings to win the 1977 state championship title, averaging 28.8 points and 16.8 rebounds.<sup>40</sup> After he attained the championship title, schools from across the country lined up to try to entice him to enroll at their universities. Ultimately, Magic chose to stay close to home and committed to Michigan State University. Due to his 6'9 muscular frame, most schools wanted him to play as a big man instead of as a guard. Jud Heathcote, Michigan State's head coach, told him that he would allow him to play his style of basketball at any position he saw fit. This proved to be the deciding factor for Magic as he committed to the school shortly thereafter.

At Michigan State, he continued to mesmerize fans with his speed, explosiveness, and his trademark no-look passes. Greg Kelsner, a teammate of Johnson's, stated that "Earvin was the type of player who could hit you when you were open and often times knew you were open before you knew it."<sup>40</sup> As a freshman Magic put up impressive numbers, averaging 17 points, 7.9 rebounds, and 7.4 assists per game.<sup>41</sup> However, he and his team failed to win a NCAA championship his freshman year. Many thought he would shrug off the loss and join the NBA after his first year. Magic on the other hand, had a different idea and began his sophomore year with a purpose of winning a NCAA championship. He came out even more aggressive in his sophomore year and led his team swiftly through the NCAA tournament, where he eventually faced Indiana State University led by another legend and future rival, Larry Bird. The game was one of the most anticipated and most watched games in NCAA tournament history. Ultimately,

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<sup>40</sup> *Magic Johnson: Always Showtime*. Directed by John Bennett. 1993.

<sup>41</sup> *NBA Encyclopedia*. April 23, 2014. [http://www.nba.com/history/players/johnsonm\\_bio.html](http://www.nba.com/history/players/johnsonm_bio.html).

Johnson's magic touch proved too much for Indiana State to handle, as Michigan State prevailed, earning Johnson the NCAA title that had eluded him a year earlier. Having seen his dream come to fruition, Magic entered the 1979 NBA draft. Originally, he was supposed to have been drafted by the Utah Jazz. Unfortunately for the Jazz, they had given up their number one draft pick three seasons earlier to the Los Angeles Lakers for Gail Goodrich. The Lakers drafted Magic with the number one overall draft pick. The Lakers had high expectations, especially considering the fact that they already had one of the all-time greatest centers on their roster, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, previously known as Lew Alcindor, was also a college superstar. He was famous for his revolutionary "sky hook," which opponents found virtually un-guardable. He led UCLA to 3 NCAA championships while in college and was drafted to the NBA in 1969 by the Milwaukee Bucks. In his first NBA season he played alongside Oscar Robertson and averaged 28.3 points (ranking 2nd in the league) and averaged 14.5 rebounds (3<sup>rd</sup> in the league). With him on the roster, in 1969-70, the Bucks rose to second place in the Eastern Division with a 56-26 record. Alcindor was an instant superstar, handily winning the NBA Rookie of the Year honors. The following year he was even more sensational, averaging 31.7 points and placing fourth in rebounding with 16.0 rebounds per game.<sup>42</sup> This feat earned him the NBA's Most Valuable Player award, an accomplishment seldom attained by a second-year player. By the time Magic Johnson was drafted in 1979, Jabbar had already won 2 scoring titles and 5 NBA MVP awards. Needless to say, both management and fans had high hopes for the Lakers entering into the 1979 season.

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<sup>42</sup> *NBA Encyclopedia*. April 23, 2014. [http://www.nba.com/history/players/abduljabbar\\_bio.html](http://www.nba.com/history/players/abduljabbar_bio.html).

Magic's entrance into the NBA couldn't have come at a better time. Once again the NBA was beginning to suffer in terms of its fan base and was struggling to fill seats. In the 1970s the NBA had been sparked by the NBA-ABA merger, which had brought in the league's most prolific player, Julius Erving. But after a few years, the NBA's fan base had a growing perception of the league once again becoming "too black." The crowds began to diminish and television ratings were plummeting. College basketball at the time was actually more popular than the NBA, largely due to the star power of Magic Johnson. The NBA was seen as being composed of a bunch of renegades and thugs. Teams like the New York Knicks were all-black entering into the 1979-1980 season and many fans didn't quite know what to make of that. Many white fans felt that it was not only too black in terms of the players, but also in terms of the style of play. The NBA had gone away from the fundamental team-centered style that white-America enjoyed, to the freelance and flashy individualistic style that black players brought into the sport. Team play had been replaced with players seeking to show off their individual skills and talents. Teams were becoming a collection of players on a team, instead of a team made up of players. Furthering the growing disdain for the sport were several drug scandals that surfaced in the media and that involved many of the league's top black players. All of these factors contributed to the decline of attendance and TV viewers entering into the 1980s. The league was in dire need of a jump start to revitalize interest. Magic Johnson would be all too happy to oblige.

Bryant Gumbel stated "He [Magic] lit the place up. He changed the franchise, changed the temperament and changed it from the very first game. In a game versus the lowly Clippers Magic was embracing Kareem as if they had just won their 10<sup>th</sup> straight championship".<sup>43</sup> Pat

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<sup>43</sup> *Magic and Bird: A Courtship of Rivals*. Directed by Ezra Edelman. 2010.

Riley, former Lakers head coach, stated that “Magic had the “It” factor. As far as I was concerned the “It” was not his ability or his size, the “It” was his attitude, his leadership and his mind”.<sup>43</sup> *Sports Illustrated* stated that “Magic has a way of making a spectacular pass that calls attention to itself”.<sup>44</sup>

Magic from the onset came into the NBA, and gave the sport a new definition of versatility. In his rookie season he averaged 18 points, 7.7 rebounds, and 7.3 assists per game, and was the first rookie to start in an NBA All-Star game. Magic alongside Kareem led the Lakers to the NBA finals where they faced Dr. J’s Philadelphia 76ers. In game 6, Magic did something that no one had ever done and hasn’t done since. Magic substituted for Jabbar who had sprained his ankle in the previous game after scoring 40 points. Magic played center and every other position on the floor. He scored 42 points, 15 rebounds, and 7 assists, leading the Lakers to a 123-107 victory and an NBA Championship. Johnson won the NBA Finals MVP award along with instant superstardom. In just a 4 year span, Magic had won championship titles in high school, college, and the NBA. Living in the Mecca of where celebrities lived, Los Angeles, Magic was approached by numerous people that he idolized. Muhammad Ali, Sydney Poitier, and Michael Jackson all met with Magic after his brilliant performance. Lakers owner Jerry Buss signed Magic to a 25 year, 25 million dollar contract, giving him part ownership in the Lakers franchise.

What Magic and Kareem’s Lakers were most known for was their brilliant fast-break offense that was brilliantly “Showtime.” Whenever a fast break started, Magic led the break

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<sup>44</sup> Newman, Bruce. "Together at Center Stage." *Sports Illustrated*, 1984: 38.

with his amazing speed and end it with an amazing no-look pass to an open teammate for an easy score. Magic's trademark offensive move was to utilize his incredible passing ability. He passed in a way that often left his opponents fooled, as they stood bewildered, wondering where the ball went. When the pace of the game slowed down, Kareem dominated utilizing his patented "sky hook shot," virtually scoring at will. Magic and Kareem were a big part of what turned the NBA's TV viewership and fan base around. The classic Lakers-Celtics championship games were the highest rated, and most watched NBA games of all-time up to that point.

By the end of their careers, the Lakers had won 5 NBA titles and appeared in 8 NBA Championships. Magic won 3 NBA MVP awards, and Kareem Kareem won 6. Magic finished his career averaging 19.5 points, 11.2 assists, and 7.2 rebounds per game. Magic remains tied for second place for all-time triple doubles at 138, second only to Oscar Robertson. Kareem finished his career averaging 24.6 points, and 11.2 rebounds per game. He remains the NBA's all-time leading scorer with a total of 38,387 points over his 20 year NBA career.<sup>42</sup> Both Magic and Kareem left the NBA as two of its best all-time players, both were African-American men. At the end of their careers, they handed the torch to the next iconic black player; a player who would gain consideration as the best player of all-time, Michael Jordan.

## Chapter 7: The Air Up There

It could be argued that no player has had a greater impact on basketball than Michael Jordan. He was the embodiment of all the great qualities of players before him coupled with his own uniqueness and creativity. Players like Magic Johnson and Oscar Robertson were known for their all-around play and both synonymous with "complete" basketball players. However, Michael Jordan was the complete package and more. He possessed a higher jumping ability than

Dr. J, the strength of Oscar Robertson, the hang time of Elgin Baylor, the passing ability of a Magic Johnson, the defense of Bill Russell, the closing ability of Jerry West, the heart of Muhammad Ali, and the mentality of an assassin. His game was so great that he almost became basketball itself. People who don't know the first thing about basketball know who Michael Jordan is. Jordan is the measuring stick by which all great players before his time and after are compared.

To be the greatest player means having incredible athleticism and strength. Michael Jordan had a 48 inch vertical leap, the highest in NBA history.<sup>45</sup> For his size he was also exceptionally strong. All of these attributes coupled with his speed and agility made Jordan develop into a great athlete. Jordan was a great rebounder, shot blocker, defender, passer and scorer. He had an unequalled passion and work ethic and utilized these qualities to improve every year that he played.

Michael Jeffrey Jordan was born on February 2, 1963, in Wilmington, North Carolina. At a young age, Michael developed an interest in basketball. He would battle his brother Larry Jordan, in their backyard, which is where his competitive fire was born. He entered Laney High School hoping to play for the varsity team. However, Jordan did not possess the unbelievable skills and attributes that he would later develop, and as a result he failed to make the team. This failure created in Michael an insatiable drive that he would harness for the rest of his life. The following season, he made the team and played well enough on the team to earn a scholarship at the University of North Carolina. At North Carolina, head coach Dean Smith inserted Jordan

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<sup>45</sup> *Vertical Jump Test Results*. March 2013. <http://www.topendsports.com/testing/results/vertical-jump.htm>.

into the starting lineup, which would pay huge dividends. In his freshman year with the Tar Heels Jordan averaged 13.4 points and shot 53.4 percent from the field, earning the ACC Freshman of the Year honors.<sup>46</sup> In the 1982 NCAA championship game against Georgetown University, Jordan hit the game winning shot to win the Championship. This shot was one of the greatest and most memorable shots in NCAA history and propelled him into prominence and the limelight.

After hitting the shot, Jordan gained a newfound confidence and worked tirelessly to improve as a player. He delighted crowds by showcasing his amazing jumping ability and creativity through his breathtaking slam dunks and acrobatic moves. His play increased dramatically, as he became a two-time College Player of the Year. While in college, Jordan averaged 17.7 points 5.0 rebounds, and 1.8 assists per game. In 1984 Jordan was the 3<sup>rd</sup> NBA draft pick by the Chicago Bulls. Many suspected that he would become a good player, but none predicted that he would evolve into the greatest basketball player that ever lived. Jordan electrified the NBA with his high flying dunks and his stellar play. Fans had never seen anyone play quite like Michael Jordan. The closest thing was Dr. J, but Jordan appeared even more sensational than the Doctor. "You had two players who excited you with their play on the floor, myself (Magic Johnson), and Larry Bird, and now here came one that excited you playing in the air"-Earvin "Magic" Johnson.<sup>47</sup> Due to the aerial component of his game, Jordan was commonly referred to as "Air Jordan."

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<sup>46</sup> Bradley, Michael. "Old School." *Slam*, 2009: 15.

<sup>47</sup> *Michael Jordan: His Airness*. 1999.Film.

Jordan's appeal extended beyond his on-the-court play. He became a trendsetter in the league. Typically players in the league wore tight, short gym shorts when playing. Jordan went away from this trend and showcased his own unique style by wearing baggy, longer shorts, which are the norm for players today. He was also one of the first athletes to shave his head which many other players started to emulate as well. He was so good, so talented, and so likeable, that seemingly everything he did became popular. Sponsors lined up in attempts to get Jordan to sponsor their brands. He had shoe deals, movie deals, and contracts with brands like Wheaties Cereal.

On the court, Jordan's career would continue to thrive. After consecutive years losing to the Detroit Pistons, Jordan took it upon himself to do whatever was necessary to win. Scoring, shooting, passing, rebounding, defending; no part of the game was beyond his control. He was not only a jack of many trades, but he was the master of them all, too. He averaged 30.1 points, 6.3 rebounds and 5.3 assists over the course of his career. He won every NBA Championship that he ever played in for a total of 6. He was the NBA's 5-time NBA Most Valuable player and 10-time scoring champion. He was a 14-time All-Star as well as a 1-time Defensive Player of the Year. Off the court he was a successful entrepreneur and businessman, having a net worth according to Forbes Magazine in 2013 of 650 million dollars. Jordan's accomplishments during his career were numerous, but his actual impact on the NBA was beyond description. When Jordan retired, Scoop Jackson of *Slam Magazine* wrote "Without Jordan, the world as we know it would have been a far different place."<sup>48</sup> He handled himself with style and grace, spoke

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<sup>48</sup> Jackson, Scoop. "R U Still Down? (Remember Mike)." *Slam Magazine*, 1999.

eloquently, and as arguably the best player who ever lived, further proved the notion that greatness is colorblind.

## Conclusion

The National Basketball Association is essentially a completely different league than the league created in 1949. Starting out as a league exclusive to white players who played with a rigid, traditional style, it has evolved into a league composed of players from around the world with various styles and approaches to the game. The major behind this remarkable evolution has been the participation of black basketball players that began in 1950. Allowing athletes with different cultures and styles into the game changed the game for the better.

Currently the league's top players are a melting pot of varying ethnicities. Players from Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America, all play in the NBA. According to the 2013 Racial and Gender Report Card, African-Americans comprise 76.3% of all NBA players, and 81% of all players are players of color.<sup>49</sup> European players have been steadily impacting the game in recent years, as a record-breaking 92 international players from 39 countries and territories feature on opening-night rosters for the 2013-14 NBA season.<sup>50</sup> Asian players like Yao Ming and Jeremy Lin, have helped to increase the NBA's popularity in places like China.

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<sup>49</sup> Lapchick, Richard. "The 2013 Racial and Gender Report Card: National Basketball Association." *University of Central Florida College of Business*, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> *NBA Tips Off 2013-14 Season With Record International Player Presence*. October 29, 2013. [http://www.nba.com/global/nba\\_tips\\_off\\_201314\\_season\\_with\\_record\\_international\\_presence\\_2013\\_10\\_29.html](http://www.nba.com/global/nba_tips_off_201314_season_with_record_international_presence_2013_10_29.html) (accessed April 29, 2014).

These players all contribute to the leagues' ever-changing DNA, and add to its global appeal. New offensive moves like the "Euro-step" have been incorporated into basketball due to the unique style of European players. Without the entry of black players, some of the world's best athletes would have never been seen. There would have been no Wilt Chamberlain, no Shaquille O'Neal, no Dr. J, and no Michael Jordan. And international players like Dirk Nowitzki and Tim Duncan, some of the NBA's greatest forwards, might never have occurred.

Allowing the cancer of prejudice and racial hatred to dictate who can and cannot participate in certain sports and other institutions is immoral and counter-productive. True progress comes from inclusiveness and unity. On April 29, 2014, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver showed how far the NBA has come, by banning Los Angeles Clipper owner, Donald Sterling, from the league after he made racist comments directed toward African-Americans. The NBA stands unique as the only league or institution to transition from predominately white participation, to predominantly black, while still retaining its universal appeal. The crossover of the culture of the NBA proves that greatness and strength lie in the diversity of the human spirit irrespective of race.

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