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The Role of Race and Protest in American Professional Basketball

Pro Basketball's Hidden Fear

Thomas Aiello

“Basketball was originally invented as a white man’s game,” writes philosopher and diplomat Michael Novak, but in the post-World War II culture, its “mythos became more than urban. It became in a symbolic and ritual way uniquely black.” Such was the result of its sophistication, its flashy showmanship, and its association with urban cityscapes. “Basketball, although neither invented by blacks nor played only by blacks, came to allow the mythic world of the black experience to enter directly, with minimal change, into American life.” Baseball was a game with black athletes, as was football, where at least the quarterback was going to be white. Basketball, by contrast, was a black game. Both baseball and football featured position differences and assumptions about intelligence that allowed fans to maintain their racial prejudices and still identify with teams featuring black players. But no professional sport was as associated with blackness as was basketball.¹

Basketball was tethered to ethnicity almost from its inception, as in the 1890s, “Inner-city settlement houses became the breeding grounds for future interscholastic, collegiate, and professional stars,” explains historian Steven Riess, “almost all drawn from inner-city ethnic groups.” As teams began professionalizing in the 1920s, the game grew from those ethnic enclaves, where Jewish teams like the B’nai Brith All-Stars, Irish teams like the original Celtics, and African American teams like the New York Renaissance Big Five dominated.²

It was that urbanity, Riess notes, that ultimately drew black players at or below the poverty line to the game and consequently drove the perception of the game’s blackness in the postwar period as it had its ethnicity prior to World War II. “Other young athletes may learn basketball,” wrote historian Pete Axthelm in 1970, “but city kids live it.” Basketball “is considered a city game in a society which romanticizes the pastoral,” wrote Jeffrey Sammons a generation later.

It has no Ruth, Gehrig, Cobb, Dimaggio, or Matthewson, icons of a white athletic dominance of years gone by. Although basketball is probably far more American than baseball in its pace of play, constant action, and undeniably urban foundations, no enabling mythology has been created for or seen in it historically. Moreover, it is now a black game in numbers, superstars, culture, and symbols.³

John Matthew Smith has noted that though the NBA had integrated by the mid-1950s, interracial collaboration had already occurred on collegiate teams like UCLA, which had featured black stars since Ralph Bunche played guard for the Bruins in the 1920s, and the University of San Francisco, which featured stars like Bill Russell and KC Jones, who would star at the next level, as well. But such successful collegiate teams normalized blackness as a part of organized basketball, further darkening the feeder system for the professional ranks in the second half of the twentieth century.⁴ It was then Russell's rise to professional prominence, along with that of Wilt Chamberlain, Oscar Robertson, Elgin Baylor, and Connie Hawkins, a group historian Nelson George has called "standard-bearers for the Black athletic aesthetic," that normalized the black presence in professional basketball in the late 1950s, "years marked by acceptance and infamy for Blacks."⁵

That being the case, professional basketball's relationship to protest was ingrained in the racial coding given to the game in the process of its evolution. Inevitably, however, when placed within that particular crucible, protest in professional basketball would encompass far more than simply participation in the games themselves. American professional players would fight within the structure of their leagues, and they would use the prominence provided by those leagues to fight for broader civil rights outside the boundary lines created by their wealth and prestige. It was for black professional basketball players a two-front war, a Double-V campaign against discrimination created by the game and discrimination just outside the doors of the arena. That fight would leave a legacy of protest in professional basketball that redounds to those in the twenty-first century who have leveraged the gains from within created by those players who came before them to continue the clarion call for racial equality outside of it.

Basketball moved from its early, moral YMCA origins of the 1890s to swiftly become a competitive game played by many economic and ethnic groups. Though James Naismith and the YMCA movement hoped to use the game to celebrate amateurism and "muscular Christianity," they were unable to contain the rush to competition. It was, in fact, an all-white YMCA team from Buffalo, New York that won the Olympic gold medal at the 1904 St. Louis games before breaking away from the organization and becoming professional. That same year, Edwin Henderson, a gym teacher in Washington, DC's segregated public schools, introduced basketball to his students, seeing it as a way to get many of them into predominantly white northern universities by taking advantage of the schools' interest in competitive teams.⁶

From there, the black game developed rapidly in the District of Columbia metro area and in the African American neighborhoods of New York City. The first independent black basketball team was organized in 1907, the first inter-city competition in Washington in 1908. The first team of black professionals, the New York All-Stars, formed in 1910. Major Aloysius Hart, who created the team, argued, "That this game has taken a firm hold on our people has been demonstrated beyond a doubt." But league organization and proper play was paramount to build on those gains. "We want to play the game as our white friends play it.

That is, in the spirit of fairness and for the benefits that the exercise will give us and the enjoyment we can afford to our friends.”⁷ The shadow of whiteness and white norms, then, hovered over the black game from its inception.

In an attempt to escape from that shadow, Robert L. Douglas founded a new professional team in November 1923, the New York Renaissance Big Five, helping to usher in the age of black professional play known as the Black Fives Era. The team’s home base was Harlem’s Renaissance Casino and Ballroom, and its games were part of the nightlife entertainment. Other teams found themselves in similar situations, which led to a more fast-paced entertaining style of play to satisfy crowds often more concerned with drinking and dancing. By the late 1920s, the Rens and other black professional teams began barnstorming throughout the northeast, and in the early 1930s, they began making trips to the South, where the bulk of the black population still lived.⁸

It could be a fraught endeavor, but one that would be lucrative for Douglas and other owners in the decades that followed. When black professional basketball teams the Harlem Magicians and the New York Olympians scheduled a game in Birmingham in January 1957, for example, the requirement that white and black audiences had to attend separately drew protests from the Birmingham Baptist Ministers Conference and rights organizations like the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and the Emancipation Association of Birmingham, all of whom petitioned promoters to cancel the game unless everyone could attend the same contest.⁹ The petitions went unheeded, the separate games played, much to the dismay of many black residents of the region. One letter-writer from Tuscaloosa pointed out that four black churches and two ministers’ homes had recently been bombed “because of their fight against segregation. I am sure if these outstanding athletes knew that Negroes are now making great sacrifices for first-class citizenship,” the letter explained, “they would not come South to stamp their approval on segregation by playing to segregated groups.”¹⁰

Also in 1957, the Georgia state legislature narrowly failed to pass a new sports segregation law that prohibited any integrated competition in the state, and began making another effort to revive the attempt in 1958. A frustrated Marion Jackson, sports editor of the *Atlanta Daily World*, argued that “the white folks of Georgia are willing to surrender their civil liberties in obedience to the idol god of jimcrow rather than to take a stand for decency and tolerance.” He pointed out that southern legislatures passed no legislation beneficial to black residents following the *Brown* decision, and that new segregation laws like Georgia’s sports effort still proliferated, even though they were cutting off the state’s nose to spite its face, prohibiting both good competition and legitimate revenue.¹¹

In 1961, seven black men were arrested in Savannah after playing basketball on a municipal court designated as whites only. The Georgia NAACP, which was monitoring the case, claimed that it was impossible to tell whether or not the action was intended as a protest because the city did not have any municipal courts that were not designated for whites.¹² The maintenance of such restrictions colored the black South’s response to professional basketball. The bulk of

basketball coverage in the *Atlanta Daily World*, the South's largest black newspaper, the hub of a syndicate that spread throughout the region, emphasized black collegiate basketball in the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, particularly Atlanta schools like Morehouse, Clark, and Morris Brown. There was always an eye, however, on the black professionals in the north, with the New York Renaissance Big Five taking the 1939 championship by winning the first annual World Professional Basketball Tournament, and the Harlem Globetrotters winning the following year. The tournament was sponsored by the *Chicago Herald American*, and over the course of its existence from 1939 to 1948, its winner was generally considered the world champion of basketball. After the Rens and Globetrotters, integrated teams like the Detroit Eagles, the Oshkosh Stars, and the Washington Bears won the tournament, followed by a three-year championship run from 1944 to 1946 by the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons. The *World* kept tabs on such contests, though they all featured northern teams, and the paper, like so many others in the black press, was particularly infatuated with black teams like the New York Rens and the Chicago-based Harlem Globetrotters. Professional teams in the South, meanwhile, were lily white and uniformly ignored by the black southern press. Locality only mattered when coupled with racial inclusion, and so until southern professional teams with black players as either part or all of the roster became a reality, professional basketball in all of its forms would remain tertiary for the black southern population.¹³

Such racial inconsistencies also existed at the national level. As Damion L. Thomas has noted, in the decade following World War II, the State Department "attempted to develop a relationship" with the Harlem Globetrotters, hoping to encourage black Americans to see the American Dream as "available to individual African Americans despite segregation." The State Department did so, Thomas argues, because it saw "the Globetrotters' cooning as well as their degrading caricatures of African Americans" as reflecting "the behavior, attitudes, and mind-set of most black Americans. Hence, State Department arguments simultaneously stressed racial progress, but also the notion that African Americans' 'unsophisticated behavior' made them unfit or at least ill-prepared for full equality." It was a situation that led even black basketball success to work against integration, against the full participation of black players with white, a situation even sponsored by the federal government, making the later racial concern of owners (see below) understandable, if not a *fait accompli*.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the National Basketball Association also struggled with its own racial inconsistencies. The NBA was the result of a merger between existing white professional leagues in the wake of World War II. The Basketball Association of America was founded in 1946 by the owners of hockey arenas in the midwest and northeast, and the modern NBA dates its first contest to the first game of the BAA, played in Toronto between the home Huskies and the New York Knickerbockers. Older leagues like the American Basketball League and the National Basketball League provided early competition, but in 1948, the best teams from both joined the BAA. When the final NBL teams merged with the

new organization in August 1949, the group changed its name to the National Basketball Association. The first black players joined NBA teams the following year, adding a small but significant black presence to the league.¹⁵

It was a significant presence, but it also signified the looming issue that race would remain in the new organization. The *Pittsburgh Courier's* Jack Saunders, for example, took the Philadelphia Warriors to task in 1953 for being one of the last professional basketball holdouts in hiring black players. "Apparently the Philadelphia Warriors have too many good white players to give Negro players a break," wrote Saunders facetiously, despite the fact that "the Warriors had lost 27 of 33 games played." There were many who accused the team of prejudice. "If that be true the owners of the Warriors think more of prejudice than they think of money." The paper cast most of the blame on Eddie Gottlieb, the team's owner and coach, who was rumored to consider quitting because of the team's lack of success, a situation Saunders argued that could have been avoided by incorporating talented black players.¹⁶

"Has the National Basketball Association the strength to protect its players from segregation practices in biased cities?" asked *World* sports editor Marion Jackson. The answer, as of February 1959, seemed to be yes. In response to segregation in West Virginia, Minneapolis Lakers' star forward Elgin Baylor refused to play in an exhibition game. "A pro basketball player dunked a free throw through the hoop of segregation," proclaimed the *Los Angeles Sentinel* in a confused metaphor. When Baylor's Lakers were scheduled to play Cincinnati in Charleston, the city assured Minneapolis president Bob Short that there would be no segregation in the city, but the local hotel refused to accommodate Baylor and his black teammates. The team moved in its entirety to a black hotel, and Baylor refused to participate in the game. "Such is the stuff men are made of," gushed the *Sentinel*. A local promoter for the American Business Club, who sponsored the Charleston game, demanded that the NBA punish its young star for not playing, but the association defended Baylor and responded to the incident with a staunch anti-segregation policy, association president Maurice Podoloff announcing that before any NBA team played in a non-league city, "we will insist on a clause to protect players and clubs from embarrassment." The Lakers agreed, Short announcing that the team would play no further neutral-site games "unless we are guaranteed common facilities for rooming and feeding all our players." The *Sentinel* praised Short, as well, but Baylor was the story. His "refusal to compromise with all the evil that segregation stands for is a tribute to his character and should give the faint-hearted something to think about. He has shown the way."¹⁷

Baylor's actions "will do much to topple ole Jim Crow from the sports picture," guessed black press columnist Brock Brockenbury. "This was an act that even Jackie Robinson might have hesitated to pull." Such was a common theme. Columnist Dan Burley claimed that Baylor "overnight has become the 'Jackie Robinson' of pro basketball in his strictly one-man crusade against southern Jim Crow." Brockenbury encouraged his readers to send letters of thanks to both Baylor and the Lakers to assure officials that "what they did is appreciated by us."¹⁸

Baylor was grateful for the support. "I've appreciated the many replies I've received from various parts of the country," he announced.

I want it understood, however, that I didn't take this stand to become a hero. I just felt it wasn't right for me to play in a town where I couldn't be treated on an equal basis with the rest of the team.¹⁹

While Baylor's refusal to play was new, the segregated treatment of NBA teams was not. Just weeks prior to the West Virginia fiasco, in December 1958, a similar incident occurred when the Lakers played the Boston Celtics in Charlotte, North Carolina. Black players for both teams, including Baylor and Bill Russell, were forced to eat at different restaurants and stay in different lodgings than their white teammates. Both played in the Charlotte game, but neither were happy. "I don't care if we ever go back," said an angry Walter Brown, owner of the Celtics. "I know one thing—I'll never do anything to embarrass my players." Richard Short was similarly upset, just as he would be again in February. It was after the Charlotte incident that Baylor told the team owner that he would not play if a similar incident occurred.²⁰

Though Russell had not been in Charleston for Baylor's refusal to play, he supported him unequivocally. "Elgin didn't do what he did for himself alone," he told the *New York Post*. "He did it for me and every other Negro player in the league." Russell described his own similar experiences in junior college and on the Olympic team. "This is a white man's world," he explained.

They take us and they educate us. They say: 'You're going to help. Be on your best behavior.' They give us their religion, their code of ethics, their way to dress and to live and then they don't live up to it.

It was high-order betrayal. "They draw a line and we're not supposed to go over it. What do you think it does to a person inside? Do you think you ever get over it?"²¹ The justifiable anger of the mistreated players was a cut that would leave a scar for all black players in the league.

Even on professional teams with liberal management and general rapport between black and white players, explained columnist Brock Brockenbury, "subtle prejudice pops up in little ways, in the conversation of the players, in their habits, in the little involuntary groupings and the like."²² Those continued problems led Bill Russell in 1962, just three years after the West Virginia incident, to announce that after his playing career he planned to move to Africa.²³ It was that season that Russell experienced yet another indignity, this time at a segregated restaurant in Lexington, Kentucky. After being refused service at a restaurant in Lexington, five Celtics' players and two from the St. Louis Hawks booked tickets on the next flight out of town and did not play. "The people of Lexington, who had a double standard at that time, were not offended at the game that evening," wrote Russell. "They got just what they apparently wanted—a lily-white basketball game."

While the manager of the hotel where the incident occurred claimed that the fiasco was a misunderstanding, Celtics coach Red Auerbach took the players to the airport himself. "I couldn't possibly order them to play," he said.²⁴ Around that same time, Oakland was scheduled to play an exhibition in Houston, and, as Russell explained, "the NAACP asked the Negro players to refuse to play under the segregated seating laws that were in force." There was no such request from the NAACP in Lexington, but there was a frustrated Russell, which served much the same function.²⁵

The same was true when college players came through the region. Chet Walker, a Bradley University standout in 1960, described horrendous treatment when his Illinois team made a swing through the South. His coach told the black players

to expect racism and offensive treatment, that it was just the way things were and there was nothing he or we could do about it. Implicit was the idea that we better not cause any incident that would reflect badly on the team or on Bradley. The message was that the South was going to be different because we were different: this is your lot, accept it, don't make waves if you want to play.²⁶

With such racial incidents mounting—prominent and melodramatic in the South, but present in myriad ways throughout the country—a new upstart promotion, the American Basketball League, began play in 1961. The new league, created by Abe Saperstein, owner of the Harlem Globetrotters, put teams in non-NBA cities in the northeast and far west, including one in Hawaii, as well as directly challenging the association in Chicago and Los Angeles. The ABL was a product of the Globetrotters' owner and emphasized its commitment to black basketball. Saperstein's organization would even be, among other things, the first professional league to feature black head coaches. The league's Pittsburgh franchise called itself the Rens, a homage to legendary Renaissance Big Five from New York. The ABL did not last long, collapsing in 1963 with roughly two million dollars in losses, unable to compete with the NBA in the west and northeast and struggling with an unwieldy travel schedule that included Hawaii. It was a venture that seemed a signpost for future attempts, failing in business but succeeding in the promotion of a more robust black basketball presence.²⁷

The *Pittsburgh Courier* announced in August 1963, just after the ABL's collapse, that professional basketball had "grown by leaps and bounds down through the years and Negro stars have grown with it." It described Elgin Baylor, Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, and Oscar Robertson as the unquestioned leaders in the game.²⁸ What the *Courier* did not include in its celebration, however, was that a roster of black stars was, in the perception of NBA leadership, a drain on the league's popularity.²⁹

That month, August 1963, the NBA Board of Governors held a series of meetings designed to dramatically improve the long-term health of the league. The association had played during the previous season without a television deal and had suffered financially as a consequence. At those meetings, the Board replaced the

association's original president, Maurice Podoloff, with former Harlem Globetrotters publicity director and mayor of Stamford, Connecticut J. Walter Kennedy, who initiated a platform of strict discipline to sanitize the NBA's reputation. "Few professional athletes ever bother to read their contracts," Kennedy explained, because there was "one specific line in their contract which gives me unusual power—the power to ban them from the NBA for life for conduct I feel detrimental to basketball." There were myriad new rules. The players were told not to socialize with gamblers. "They have been told to check carefully before allowing their picture to be taken with people they don't know. And if any NBA players do get into trouble, they can expect no mercy from me." Kennedy even fined Red Auerbach for not leaving the floor after receiving two technical fouls during a game.³⁰

The Board also expanded the maximum active roster from 11 to 12, placing an extra uniformed player at the end of professional benches. With those changes, the association managed a new television contract for a Game of the Week beginning in January 1964. Podoloff, retiring but seeing much progress in the moves, also formed a committee to examine the possibility of expansion to ten teams the following season. Of all such corporate maneuvering, the most curious of the moves was the roster expansion, as all of the others were designed to increase revenues, while the roster expansion would only limit them. The assumption of many, including some of the association's black players, was that as the association's talent became blacker, it became less marketable; thus, the roster expansion was a maneuver to create another active roster spot for a white player to make the teams more marketable.³¹ "The NBA has apparently purged itself of the quota system," Bill Russell wrote in 1970, indicating his belief that though it went without official documentation, one clearly existed. "The day in 1965 that Red [Auerbach] started five blacks—and we went on to win the title—that was the end of the quota system."³²

August 1963 was seminal for the NBA because of the association's Board of Governors' meeting, but the month was better known for a different meeting, the March on Washington, attended by, among more than 200,000 others, Elgin Baylor, Bill Russell, and additional black players. That month, it was also announced that Baylor would play a Nigerian delegate to the United Nations in Bob Hope's new movie, *A Global Affair*, demonstrating that black stars were a lucrative commodity and thus the NBA's racial concerns were ultimately unnecessary.³³

That season was dominated by Baltimore Bullets rookie Gus Johnson, a black power forward from the University of Idaho who would eventually make the NBA's All-Rookie First Team. Johnson was routinely cited by black players as an exemplar of the extra work it took for African Americans to succeed in basketball. Johnson was an Akron high-school standout, but was always overshadowed by Jerry Lucas from Middletown in the southern part of the state. The white Lucas got a scholarship to Ohio State, while Johnson settled for Idaho. When the two got to the NBA, Johnson always made playing against Lucas a priority. "Gus eats him alive, and Jerry doesn't do much against Gus," said one player. "You can see Gus out there and I know he's thinking: 'I had nothing in my life, never had, and this big white kid had everything. I'll show him, I'll show him!'"³⁴

It was Du Bois's double-consciousness writ onto basketball gymnasiums around the country, and it could be motivating or utterly disheartening, depending on the player. "I consider my life up to the present time a waste," Bill Russell explained in April 1963. "I don't consider anything I've done as contributing to society." Playing basketball was "marking time, the most shallow thing in the world." He demonstrated a frustration with race relations that was uncompromising. "I accepted things I shouldn't have," he said. "Little things. Like the fact that a police car stopped every time it went by and a few of us were talking on the corner. I thought it stopped for everybody. Now I know it only stopped for US."³⁵

The racial reality for black players and the racial hand-wringing by white owners would become more prominent in February 1966, when *Sport Magazine* published one of its most controversial articles, an investigation into NBA executives' fears about race. Journalist John Devaney delved into what he called "pro basketball's hidden fear." The exposé began with a provocative question by Howard Cosell to Wilt Chamberlain. "Are we reaching the point," Cosell asked in a WABC radio interview, "where perhaps there are too many Negro players in the National Basketball Association for box office appeal?" It was an intentionally provocative question from an intentionally provocative self-promoter, but Chamberlain's answer was even more surprising: "I definitely think that probably we have."³⁶

Seven of the ten starters in the association's 1965 All-Star Game, for example, were black. "Nobody wants to say anything, but of course the owners are worried," admitted one NBA coach. "How are you going to draw with eleven colored players on your team?" It was a worrisome question to many in the association, while others found it ridiculous. All, however, agreed that the association was blackening. In the 1955–1956 season, six of the NBA's eighty players were black, and one, Maurice Stokes, made the All-Star game. At the beginning of the 1965–1966 season, the association had 99 players, and 47 were black. Of that number, 31 were starters and 14 made the All-Star game. Almost half the players, two-thirds of the starters, and three-quarters of the all-stars were African American, in a league where fans were close to the players, and where those players wore no hats or helmets, far more visible than in any other professional league. Devaney also noted that the best collegiate players in every class were black, meaning that the trend would only continue.³⁷

The problem, argued Devaney, was "race prejudice," and it was everywhere.

The fear of NBA owners, the question that worries them is: in a society that is 90 percent white, is this prejudice—this inability of some white spectators to identify with Negro athletes—deep enough and widespread enough to hold back NBA growth?

The answer of both NBA publicity director Haskell Cohen and commissioner Walter Kennedy was an unqualified no. Both pointed to rising attendance over the same decade that included the rise of the black superstar. "When a team wins,

it draws," Cohen explained. "When it loses, attendance falls off. It's as simple as that." The counter to such claims came in examples such as Boston. The Celtics had been champions for seven straight seasons. The team's average attendance in the 1960–1961 season was 7,448 per game. Four years later, the team averaged 8,779 fans per game. It was, to be sure, an improvement, but the team's arena held 13,909. Chamberlain, in his interview with Cosell, chalked up such relative stagnation amid overwhelming success to the continued blackening of the team, as white stars like Bob Cousy and Bill Sharman were replaced with black stars like Sam Jones and KC Jones. "Why should a team with a record compiled such as it has not draw to capacity crowds," asked Chamberlain, "whereas the hockey team fills the house almost every night?"³⁸

Another consideration was television, the viewers beyond the arena. ABC television paid the AFL two million dollars for 16 football games and paid the NBA \$750,000 for 17 basketball games. "In broadcasting circles," Devaney claimed, "it was said that the reason for the disparity in prices was the lack of a white NBA star." Kennedy, of course, denied such claims, but was not in the broadcasting business. ABC's ratings for professional basketball were not bad, but Devaney seemed on to something. "I'm only being realistic," a television executive told the reporter, "when I say that if a white center were to come along to challenge Chamberlain or Russell, the ratings for those games would jump fifty percent."³⁹

One of the certain victims of the racial worry in the NBA was the black fringe player. One NBA official explained that

up to 1960 or so, you kept a colored player as your ninth or tenth man. You had to pay him only \$6,500 or so, a lot less than you had to pay a white boy. But not anymore. Now the tenth and 11th players are white boys, to balance out the squad.

Teams replaced white players with white players, black players with black players, keeping a racial consistency that would maintain fan expectations. Stories were myriad of team executives being told by management to draft white players to mollify a fan base, ultimately missing out on black players who would become stars. So too were the stories of marginal black players losing jobs at the end of an NBA team bench.⁴⁰

Such was, so the rumors went, the reason rosters had expanded to 11 players in 1963. "Times have changed—for the better—but prejudice did not die with the Civil Rights Act of 1964," wrote Devaney. "The NBA knows it is facing a problem." Again a solution seemed to be expansion, but this time with more teams, rather than more players on the end of the bench. "The thinking is that at least 50 percent of these new jobs would be filled by Negroes, but others would be taken by whites who otherwise would be shut out of the NBA." In addition, expansion would allow the association to divide into four divisions, "giving better balance and more winners. And winners usually do well at the box office."⁴¹

The suggestion of expansion, of course, portended a possible move to the supposedly recovering Jim Crow South. The classical civil rights movement had exploded throughout the region following *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the murder of Emmett Till in 1955. The Montgomery Bus Boycott began later that year after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a local bus, then culminated successfully in December 1956. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 followed, as did the Little Rock school desegregation crisis. The sit-in movement began in February 1960 when four students from North Carolina A&T asked for service at a Greensboro lunch counter. The Freedom Rides in 1961, the Albany Movement in 1962, and the violent summer in Birmingham in 1963. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided remedies for segregation in public accommodations and employment discrimination, but it included nothing about black voting rights, so activists descended on Mississippi for what became known as Freedom Summer, where racial violence killed six civil rights workers. When combined with the voting rights activism in Selma, Alabama the following year, the protests led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The new laws were legitimate successes of the movement, but the white South was reluctant to make the changes they required.⁴²

It left many white leaders selling a new sanitized reputation for the region without actually adhering to the requirements created by a movement they still resented. Both New Orleans and Atlanta had applied for new NBA franchises, for example, and the prospect of such a move seemed at least potentially successful by the mid-1960s. The St. Louis Hawks, a team “with seven Negroes on the squad,” scheduled eight of its games in the 1965–1966 season in Memphis, and those games averaged a respectable 7,501 fans. “An NBA club would go over in the South with 50 percent Negro players,” a white southern player explained, “but the team would have to be a winner.” It was a curious assessment, both ominous and optimistic at the same time.⁴³

The exposé turned out to be “one of the most controversial stories we have ever run.” *Sport Magazine* was inundated with mail parsing every conceivable issue related to race and professional basketball, but *Sport* vigorously stood by its story. “We heard that there was a fear, an anxiety, among the powerbrokers of the NBA,” the magazine wrote several months later, “that pro basketball wasn’t growing the way it should because there were too many Negroes in the league.” The Devaney investigation had proven such rumors true. “He found out that some people in the NBA felt that the preponderance of Negro players was hurting the gate. He found out that some people feared an almost-total takeover of the NBA by Negroes.”⁴⁴

The fear of the NBA was real, but so too was the potential for expansion, and many opportunistic entrepreneurs saw southern cities as ripe for professional basketball. When the American Basketball Association arrived the year following *Sport*’s race investigation to once again challenge the hegemony of the NBA, it followed in the footsteps of other rival upstarts like the American Football League, expressly intent on competing with the established association and forcing a merger. The ABA sought to put teams in new, emerging markets so that they could be successful without directly competing with the established league, hoping to demonstrate

viability and make the possibility of merger more likely.⁴⁵ The South fit that bill, and so despite the league's reluctance to go to the Deep South, it did place teams in Dallas, Houston, Louisville, and New Orleans. Even with that strategy, however, the ABA unapologetically identified itself racially. While the NBA had black stars like Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell, it had struggled with race and its relationship to fans. The NBA hadn't included black players until 1950 and their further inclusion was a slow trickle throughout the decade. The ABA, however, actively pursued black players. As historian James Whiteside has noted, the league was founded "in the immediate wake of the most active and successful period of America's civil rights struggle." The league also wanted a more flamboyant, less fundamental style that officials believed black athletes could bring. Just as the ABA would play in different cities than the NBA, it would attempt to play to a different audience, as well. "The ABA," explained historian Tom Dya, "helped to shift the balance of power in professional basketball to African-Americans by basing its existence on them and not pretending otherwise."⁴⁶

To counter such moves, the NBA would lean heavily on established stars like Russell. The Celtics center was one of those principally responsible for both stabilizing the NBA and beginning the process of its blackening. When Russell debuted, there were only 15 black NBA players, and he would be the first iconic national black figure in the league, taking his place among the likes of Jesse Owens in track, Joe Louis in boxing, and Jackie Robinson in baseball. He became a representation of the race in his chosen sport. And he did it two years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. When Wilt Chamberlain entered the league in 1959, the rivalry that developed between him and Russell drove the success of the NBA through the next decade. "Never before have so many people taken an active interest in professional basketball," wrote *Sport* magazine's Barry Gottlehrer. "Suddenly, housewives and college coeds who generally avoid athletic events with a passion are taking sides in this battle between the giants."⁴⁷

The Chamberlain-Russell rivalry dominated coverage of professional basketball and thus contributed to the assumption by whites that the NBA was a black league, turning many fans who felt alienated by the successes of the civil rights movement away from the sport. Meanwhile, Russell unapologetically used his success to participate in the movement, leading marches in Boston, and participating in others like the March on Washington. He participated in Freedom Summer in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. "I don't like most white people because they are white," Russell famously announced in the early 1960s. "Conversely, I like most Negroes because they are black. Show me the lowest, most downtrodden Negro and I will say to you that man is my brother." By 1965, almost half of the NBA's players were black. Television ratings were up, as was the NBA's overall popularity, but the blackness of the league, combined with statements like those of Russell, only stoked the racial skepticism of white sports fans about the viability of the NBA, much less the forthcoming ABA.⁴⁸

Russell's least favorite place to play was St. Louis, considered by many in the 1950s and early 1960s to be the most racist NBA city. Before the Celtics

and Lakers became championship rivals, the Hawks dominated the West and provided an annual challenge for the Boston juggernaut. The two played for the NBA championship in 1957, 1958, 1960, and 1961. In December 1956, the Celtics played a game in St. Louis's Kiel Auditorium. "The ball went up and Bob Pettit of the Hawks and I jumped for it," recalled Russell.

"Coon."

"Go back to Africa, you baboon."

"Watch out, Pettit, you'll get covered with chocolate."

"Black nigger."

"There was no doubt who the fans were yelling at," Russell said. "I was the only Negro athlete on either team."⁴⁹

It wasn't the kind of reaction that encouraged management to invest in black players, but ultimately the Hawks would have no choice. St. Louis was still an ostensibly southern town with segregationist policies in much of the city. The fan base was white and had racialized expectations of its team. Lenny Wilkens was the second black player in St. Louis history, arriving in 1960 to join Sihugo Green, who signed the year prior. The black players were expected to rebound the ball and pass to the white stars. This racial mixing was new, and most white players, like LSU's Bob Pettit, Kentucky's Cliff Hagan, and Kansas's Clyde Lovellette, had never played with black teammates.⁵⁰

When Green, for example, turned over the ball, as David Halberstam noted, "the whites would not say anything, they would simply raise their eyebrows as if to say, *what can you expect, that's the way they are.*" Away from the court, things weren't much better. Wilkens once received 25 dollars for a promotional event in St. Louis, while his white teammates Bob Pettit and Walter Hagan received 75 dollars. "That was St. Louis," wrote Halberstam.⁵¹

St. Louis was also particularly difficult for visiting black players. It could be "the loneliest town in the world." Bill Russell had experienced brief racial attacks in college, "but in St. Louis it was 'baboon...nigger...black bastard.' Not from the players. Never have I heard a professional ballplayer say anything about race in a game. But the fans were using it as a weapon." It was, for Russell, "the St. Louis of my bitter memories," and the city was notorious throughout the league, some seeing it as an exception, others as an outsized example of slightly milder bigotries in every NBA market.⁵²

Because of such incidents, there was, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a broader critique of the traditionally understood notion that sports was a character-building endeavor. Russell's autobiography in 1966, Harry Edwards's *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* in 1969, Dave Meggyesy's *Out of Their League* and Jim Bouton's *Ball Four* in 1970, and Jack Scott's *The Athletic Revolution* in 1971, each in its own way gave lie to the myth that sports was a cure to the ills of society. At the same time however, sports was also marshaled as a check against such countercultural messages by the likes of Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and Ronald Reagan.

That check coincided with a rise of sports in the Sunbelt, as new cities in the expanding South and West sought to burnish their reputations with professional teams. In turn, those teams would, at least in the popular mind, take on the conservative values of those cities.⁵³

The St. Louis of Bill Russell's bitter memories would watch as their NBA team moved to Atlanta in 1968, which initially problematized that transition by placing a black team from a black league into the heart of the Deep South at a time of significant racial unrest. Still, following a business model that played not to its employees, but rather to the racial assumptions of its clientele, Hawks management steadily eroded the talent of the team in order to make its appearance more palatable to those conservative Sunbelt values.⁵⁴ Or, as David Halberstam surmised, Atlanta's management, "anxious not to offend its white fans (or, more accurately, hoping to locate them), had broken up a very successful, virtually all-black team, and drafted Maravich out of college." That being the case, "Primarily for racial reasons, [Atlanta] remained a troubled franchise for a decade to come."⁵⁵

And the league more broadly remained troubled by race and the long shadow of civil rights through the rest of the century. In the 1980s and 1990s, the new Reagan conservatism that swept the nation and the commissionership of David Stern, who took over as head of the league in 1984, led the NBA to cultivate a more staid, corporate image. Gone were Elgin Baylor and Bill Russell, replaced with superstars like Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan who parlayed their basketball dominance into advertising prowess that provided financial incentive to maintain the status quo. Jordan was the preeminent star of age, but never spoke out on racial issues as had stars of the previous generation. He was a black talent that was beloved and nonthreatening to white consumers with a carefully manicured reputation in the style of Joe Louis.⁵⁶

When Jordan retired and the century turned, many players began to shed that corporate image, embracing the fashion and culture of hip-hop. Again, white fans wrung their hands about what some saw as problematic performative blackness. It was common fare outside of sports for commentators to associate hip-hop and rap culture with criminality and vice, and the behavior of a small segment of the league's athletes played into the hands of those propagating such narratives, allowing some white fans to assume cornrows and tattoos as signposts of deviance. The team that symbolized the new version of racialized negative associations with professional basketball more than any other was the Portland Trailblazers. Known as the "Jailblazers" for the first several years of the twenty-first century, the club witnessed several of its players in legal jeopardy. Stars Rasheed Wallace and Damion Stoudamire were arrested for marijuana use. Role player Qyntel Woods suffered animal abuse charges for staging dog fights in his house. The team also signed registered sex offender Reuben Patterson to a contract. On the court, things were not much better. Wallace was suspended for threatening a referee. Fights in practice were common. The "Jailblazers" alienated the white fanbase in Portland and many white fans across the country.⁵⁷

In November 2004, a game between the Indiana Pacers and Detroit Pistons became infamous as the “Malice at the Palace.” After a fight on the court between the two teams, a Detroit fan threw a beer at Pacer forward Ron Artest. In response, he charged into the stands to confront the fan, leading to a melee that brought fans onto the court to participate in a larger brawl. The incident stood as a scarlet letter for a league whose reputation had diminished substantially in a decidedly racialized narrative in the early 2000s. To try to counter the white backlash, David Stern attempted what many saw as a racialized solution, instituting a player dress code in 2005. In a reification of Walter Kennedy’s sanitation efforts of 1963, players were required to dress in business attire to and from arenas or at any event representing the NBA. Do-rags, gaudy jewelry, and Timberland boots were banned, as were tee shirts and blue jeans. The policy seemed directed at representations of hip-hop culture, and black hip-hop culture in particular. It was the modern personification of the concern expressed in *Sport Magazine’s* infamous 1966 article about the league’s “hidden fear,” though in the early twenty-first century that fear was not so hidden.⁵⁸

The recapitulation of internal league worries, however, would be matched by a recapitulation of Russell-style activism. Two years prior to Stern’s dress code, a new rookie, LeBron James, entered the NBA. James inaugurated a new willingness of superstars to participate in protest, combining the league dominance, corporate presence, and unthreatening persona of Michael Jordan with the radicalism of Russell and Baylor. James understood that his talent and popularity were larger than whatever backlash might accrue to him for using his platform for racial justice advocacy. James spoke passionately about the Sudanese War in Darfur. He participated in the hoodie campaign after the murder of Trayvon Martin and championed the protests in Ferguson, Missouri after the police killing of Michael Brown. After the New York police killed Eric Garner with an illegal chokehold, he wore a shirt with the phrase “I Can’t Breathe” in warmups before a game. He spoke publicly against racist rallies like that in Charlottesville, Virginia and in support of the national anthem protests of quarterback Colin Kaepernick. His philanthropy supported a variety of causes, many centering around educating underprivileged youth. Finally, after the 2020 protests in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, James lent his voice to the broader cause of the Black Lives Matter movement.⁵⁹

He also, like Russell and Baylor, was willing to take on the league that gave him his platform. He publicly called for the removal of Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling after his private racism became public. When the coronavirus pandemic shortened the 2020 NBA season and the league negotiated with the players to participate in a late-summer shortened schedule in Orlando, Florida, James spearheaded the effort to ensure that the players would be allowed to express their political concerns about racial justice and that the league would not only support those concerns but magnify them. In another mimic of the experiences of his forebears, white racists and conservatives used his activism as a cudgel against the player and the game, the most famous incident coming from right-wing television host Laura Ingraham telling James to “shut up and dribble.”⁶⁰

White tone policing of black voices was nothing new, but neither was the activism that prompted it. Basketball's blackness and its negotiation with that blackness have defined the game since the early twentieth century. No other sport has carried the racial coding that basketball carried since the first introduction of black teams in 1904, and that coding provided both opportunities for protest and hindrances to it, as white powerbrokers and black players engaged in a call-and-response dialogue about the role of protest in sports. It was a dialogue that fundamentally shaped the posture of the NBA and allowed its players to serve as powerful voices for civil rights outside of the boundary lines that separated the athletes from the nation that watched them play. Basketball may have been "originally invented as a white man's game," but it became, through racial activism, a black man's theater, one for both play and protest.

Notes

- 1 Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 101, 105. There are several strong works that deal successfully with the blackness of professional basketball, some that will be cited throughout this chapter. For examples of such studies, see Todd Boyd, "The Day the Niggaz Took Over: Basketball, Commodity Culture, and Black Masculinity," in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*, Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 134–137; Pete Axthelm, *The City Game: Basketball From the Garden to the Playgrounds* (1970; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); John Feinstein, *The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, and the Fight That Changed Basketball Forever* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2003); and Jeffrey Lane, *Under the Boards: The Cultural Revolution in Basketball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007). For examples of studies that include professional basketball in a broader examination of race and sports, see John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (New York: Mariner Books, 1997); Kenneth L. Shropshire, *In Black and White: Race and Sports in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Broadway, 2007); Dave Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2005); and Jeffrey T. Sammons, "Race and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination." *Journal of Sport History* 21 (Fall 1994): 203–278.
- 2 Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 107–108. Quote from 107.
- 3 Riess, *City Games*, 116–117; Axthelm, *The City Game*, ix-x; and Jeffrey T. Sammons, "'Race' and Sport: A Critical Historical Examination," *Journal of Sport History* 21 (Fall 1994): 243–244.
- 4 Smith is careful to note that though such teams were integrated, which did potent symbolic work, the black experience at schools like UCLA was still difficult, as players experienced discrimination in student housing, Greek life, and other areas of collegiate life. John Matthew Smith, *The Sons of Westwood: John Wooden, UCLA, and the*

- Dynasty That Changed College Basketball* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 20–22.
- 5 Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 103–131.
 - 6 David P. Setran, “Following the Broad-Shouldered Jesus: The College YMCA and the Culture of Muscular Christianity in American Campus Life, 1890-1914,” *American Educational History Journal* 32 (Spring 2005): 59–67; Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11–44; Rob Rains, with Helen Carpenter, *James Naismith: The Man Who Invented Basketball* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), 29–64; John McNamara, Andrea Chamblee, and David Elfin, *The Capital of Basketball: A History of DC Area High School Hoops* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 2–8.
 - 7 McNamara, Chamblee, and Elfin, *The Capital of Basketball*, 6–10; 31–34; and Bob Kuska, *Hot Potato: How Washington and New York Gave Birth to Black Basketball and Changed America's Game Forever* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 31–34.
 - 8 Bob Kuska, *Hot Potato*, 145–161, 178–179.
 - 9 The teams had been making tours through the South for several years, including similarly contested stops in Atlanta. *Atlanta Daily World*, 17 January 1957, 1, 16 December 1955, 7.
 - 10 *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 February 1957, A6.
 - 11 *Atlanta Daily World*, 21 January 1958, 5.
 - 12 *Baltimore Afro-American*, 4 February 1961, 6.
 - 13 *Atlanta Daily World*, 28 January 1947, 5, 9 April 1947, 5, 29 October 1947, 5, 1 January 1949, 5. See also John Schleppe, *Chicago's Showcase of Basketball: The World Tournament of Professional Basketball and the College All-Star Game* (Haworth, NJ: St. Johann Press, 2008).
 - 14 Damion L. Thomas, *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 41–74. Quotes from 43.
 - 15 For more on the early professional basketball and the founding of the NBA, see Charley Rosen, *The First Tip-Off: The Incredible Story of the Birth of the NBA* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009); and Robert W. Peterson, *Cages to Jump Shots: Pro Basketball's Early Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
 - 16 *Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 January 1953, 25.
 - 17 *Atlanta Daily World*, 8 February 1959, 8; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 22 January 1959, A6; and Bijan C. Bayne, *Elgin Baylor: The Man Who Changed Basketball* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 43–46.
 - 18 *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 22 January 1959, B5; and *Chicago Defender*, 21 January 1959, 22.
 - 19 *Pittsburgh Courier*, 24 January 1959, 20.
 - 20 *Chicago Defender*, 2 December 1958, A22, 6 December 1958, 12, 23; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 6 December 1958, 1; and *Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 December 1958, A3, 24 January 1959, 20.
 - 21 *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 February 1959, 21. For more on Russell's early life, see Aram Goudsouzian, *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
 - 22 *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 12 November 1964, B2.
 - 23 *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 May 1962, A30.

- 24 The players who refused services were Bill Russell, KC Jones, Tom Sanders, Sam Jones, Al Butler, Woody Sauldsberry, and Cleo Hill. *New York Times*, 18 October 1961, 59. See also Alan Steinberg and Bill Russell, *Red and Me: My Coach, My Lifelong Friend* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
- 25 *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 January 1963, 17. For more on restrictions for black athletes playing in the South, see Oscar Robertson, *The Big O: My Life, My Times, My Game* (New York: Rodale, 2003), 33, 50–55, 99–100, 164–165.
- 26 Bill Russell, *Go Up for Glory* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), 113–115, 116–117, 118–119; Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 31; and Chet Walker, “On the Road in the South, 1960,” in *The Unlevel Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, ed. David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 277–282.
- 27 Murray R. Nelson, *Abe Saperstein and the American Basketball League, 1960-1963* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), 2–11; and Gary Davidson, *Breaking the Game Wide Open* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 34.
- 28 *Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 August 1963, C10.
- 29 *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 August 1963, 20.
- 30 Kennedy expected “growth and prosperity” for the League, including team expansion, under his new authoritarian regime. He was also responding to the diminished reputation of college basketball after a series of gambling scandals in the postwar era damaged the game. When, two years later in 1965, Seattle University had a point-shaving scandal, for example, All-American Charlie Williams was banned from the NBA, having to opt for the ABA instead. *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 August 1963, 7, 23 October 1963, 11, 18 December 1963, 12; and Albert J. Figone, *Cheating the Spread: Gamblers, Point Shavers, and Game Fixers in College Football and Basketball* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 111–112. For more on Kennedy’s early trenchant moves, see *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 December 1963, 13; and *Washington Post*, 14 November 1963, B3. The planned television transition did occur. The month following the Board of Governors meetings, the NBA released a schedule of 11 televised games for January, February, and March 1964. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 14 September 1963, 7.
- 31 *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 August 1963, 7, 18 December 1963, 12. For examples of player skepticism over the racial moves of the NBA, see Joe Caldwell, *Banned from Basketball: The Long Strange Trip of “Pogo” Joe Caldwell* (Tempe: [s.p.], 2003); and John Devaney, “Pro Basketball’s Hidden Fear,” *Sport* (February 1966): 32–33, 89–92. The NBA has a policy of not releasing the minutes of the meetings of the Board of Governors and stated that policy in response to requests by the author for access. The 1963 Board of Governors included Ben Kerner of the St. Louis Hawks, Walter A. Brown of the Boston Celtics, Fred Zollner of the Detroit Pistons (formerly of Ft. Wayne), Franklin Mieuli of the San Francisco Warriors, Robert E. Short of the Los Angeles Lakers, Edward S. “Ned” Irish of the New York Knicks, either John Egan or Isaac “Ike” Richman of the Philadelphia 76ers, either Tom Grace or Louis M. Jacobs of the Cincinnati Royals, and Dave Trager of the Baltimore Bullets. None of those executives, however, have archived papers that include copies of such records. That being the case, reports of league intentions in relation to roster expansion must necessarily be circumstantial. Board members compiled from the research of Robert D. Bradley, founder of the Association for Professional Basketball Research. See “Chairman of

the Board of Governors/Board of Governors,” Association for Professional Basketball Research, <http://www.apbr.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3243>, accessed 1 April 2017.

32 “As despicable as it was, however,” Russell continued,

I must say that the quota system won a title for the Celtics. In the 1963-64 season Cincinnati had a better team than we did. The Royals could have beaten us, but in my opinion they virtually gave Bob Boozer away to get down to their black quota, and that gave us a championship in the bargain.

Bill Russell, “Success Is A Journey,” *Sports Illustrated*, 8 June 1970, 80–93; and Axthelm, *The City Game*, 127. For more on how a similar phenomenon played out in the 1990s, as black antagonism combined with corporate sponsorship culture to differentiate blackness in professional basketball, see Todd Boyd, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over: Basketball, Commodity Culture, and Black Masculinity,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*, Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 123–143.

33 Bayne, *Elgin Baylor*, 128; and *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 August 1963, 20.

34 *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 December 1963, 11; and Devaney, “Pro Basketball’s Hidden Fear,” 89.

35 *Washington Post*, 22 April 1963, A25.

36 Devaney, “Pro Basketball’s Hidden Fear,” 33.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, 89, 90.

39 *Ibid.*, 90.

40 *Ibid.*, 90.

41 *Ibid.*, 91.

42 The literature on the civil rights movement is vast and beyond the scope of this chapter. For general narratives of this progression, see Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980*, 25th Anniversary Edition (originally published 1981; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage, 2004); Elizabeth Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, The Crisis that Shocked the Nation* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); J. Harvie Wilkinson, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration: 1954-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Charles Wilson and Barbara Whalen, *The Longest Debate: A Legislative History of the 1964 Civil Rights Act* (New York: Mentor, 1986).

43 Devaney, “Pro Basketball’s Hidden Fear,” 90.

44 “The Hidden Fear That Is Not Our Fear,” *Sport* (May 1966): 104.

- 45 Terry Pluto, *Loose Balls: The Short, Wild Life of the American Basketball Association* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 3–4.
- 46 New Orleans *States-Item*, 1 February 1967, 18; James Whiteside, *Colorado: A Sports History* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1999), 315, 317; and Tom Dyja, “History of the NBA,” in *Professional Sports Team Histories: Basketball*, ed. Michael L. LaBlanc (Detroit: Gale Research, 1994), 17.
- 47 Barry Gottehrer, “When Wilt and Russell...,” *Sport* (March 1960): 38–40; and Goudsouzian, “Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution,” 63, 65, 68. Goudsouzian’s article has since been expanded into a book. For a broader treatment of Russell and his relationship to the intersection of race and basketball, see Aram Goudsouzian, *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
- 48 Russell, *Go Up for Glory*, 166, 168–170, 208–213. Goudsouzian, “Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution,” 73–74; John Devaney, “Pro Basketball’s Hidden Fear,” *Sport* (February 1966): 32–33, 89–90; and “The Hidden Fear That Is Not Our Fear,” *Sport* (May 1966): 104.
- 49 Russell, *Go Up for Glory*, 120–121.
- 50 David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 146; and Denberg, Lazenby, and Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 24.
- 51 The italics are his. Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 146–147.
- 52 Russell, *Go Up for Glory*, 155, 163.
- 53 Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, Sixth Edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009), 240–242; Russell, *Go Up for Glory*; Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*; Dave Meggyesy, *Out of Their League* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970); Jim Bouton, *Ball Four: My Life and Hard Times Throwing the Knuckleball in the Big Leagues* (New York: World Publishing, 1970); and Jack Scott, *The Athletic Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1971).
- 54 For more on the NBA’s move to the Deep South, see Thomas Aiello, *Dixieball: Race and Professional Basketball in the Deep South, 1947-1979* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2019).
- 55 It is significant that Phoenix received an expansion team the year Atlanta bought the Hawks. Soon other Sunbelt cities like San Diego, Denver, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas would have NBA teams, as well. Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 79, 80, 148. For more on the modern outgrowth of the black image in the NBA, see Boyd, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over, 123–142.
- 56 There has been an exhaustive accounting of Michael Jordan’s role outside of basketball and various debts and credits that it brought. The most comprehensive of those accounts are David Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000); and Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: WW Norton, 2002).
- 57 For a full accounting of the team and the reputation of the early century NBA more broadly, see Kerry Eggers, *Jail Blazers: How the Portland Trail Blazers Became the Bad Boys of Basketball* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).
- 58 Metta World Peace and Ryan Depsey, *No Malice: My Life in Basketball* (Chicago, IL: Triumph Books, 2018), 143–158; and David J. Leonard, *After Artest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 23–57, 127–180.

- 59 Howard Beck, "Cavalier Seeks Players' Support for Darfur," *New York Times*, 16 May 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/16/sports/basketball/16cavaliers.html>; Dave McMenamin, "Lebron James: Bigger Issues At Play," ESPN, 25 November 2014, https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/11938106/lebron-james-others-comment-ferguson-decision; Dave McMenamin and Mike Mazzeo, "Lebron, Irving in 'I Can't Breathe' Tees," ESPN, 8 December 2014, https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/12001456/lebron-james-kyrie-irving-cleveland-cavaliers-kevin-garnett-deron-williams-brooklyn-nets-wear-breathe-shirt-reference-eric-garner; Alysha Tsuji, "LeBron James saddened by Charlottesville: 'Make America Great Again huh?'," *USA Today*, 12 August 2017, <https://ftw.usatoday.com/2017/08/lebron-james-charlottesville-sad-comment-twitter-politics-nba>; Dave McMenamin, "LeBron James Feels That Colin Kaepernick Is Being Blackballed by NFL," ESPN, 19 November 2017, https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/21474704/lebron-james-agrees-colin-kaepernick-being-blackballed; and Melissa Rohlin, "LeBron James On Killing Of George Floyd: 'Do You Understand NOW,'" *Sports Illustrated*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.si.com/nba/lakers/news/lebron-james-on-killing-of-george-floyd-do-you-understand-now>.
- 60 Michael Wallace, "Lebron: No Place for Sterling," ESPN, 26 April 2014, https://www.espn.com/nba/truehoop/miamiheat/story/_/id/10845651/nba-lebron-james-scores-most-telling-point-sterling; Peter Thompson, "LeBron James hopes protests during NBA restart keep 'our foot on the gas' for social change," *Sporting News*, 31 July 2020, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nba/news/lebron-james-nba-restart-protests/f782omr1wq2latp81f17pyw2>; and Martenzie Johnson, "What Laura Ingraham's attack on LeBron James really means," *The Undefeated*, 16 February 2018, <https://theundefeated.com/features/what-laura-ingrahams-attack-of-lebron-james-really-means/>.

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