

PALACKÝ UNIVERSITY
PHILOSOPHICAL FACULTY

Department of English and American Studies

Radim Zapletalík

Racism in American professional basketball

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Supervisor: Mgr. Jiří Flajšar, Ph.D.

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PŘEDKLÁDÁ:	ADRESA	OSOBNÍ ČÍSLO
ZAPLETALÍK Radim	Spáčilova 3640 31, Kroměříž	F11732

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Podpis studenta:

Datum:

Podpis vedoucího práce:

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Abstrakt

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Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rasismem v americkém profesionálním basketbalu. V první řadě je popsána společenská situace vzhledem k rasové segregaci při vzniku basketbalu a první týmy, které se skládaly z Afroamerických hráčů a které museli čelit rasové diskriminaci. Další část se zabývá integrací Afroamerických hráčů do nejznámější basketbalové ligy NBA. Tato práce pak dále představuje první Afroamerickou hvězdu Billa Russella a jeho vliv na profesionální basketbal. V poslední části jsou shrnuty okolnosti a důvody, které vedly ke změnám v americkém profesionálním basketbale a jejich výsledek v podobě jednoho z nejúspěšnějších období v historii basketbalu.

Klíčová slova: rasová diskriminace, integrace, profesionální basketbal, Bill Russell, rasová segregace

Abstract

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Name: Radim Zapletalík

Department: Department of English and American Studies

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This bachelor thesis deals with Racism in American professional basketball. First, the social situation regarding racial discrimination during the creation of basketball is described as well as the first teams that consisted of African American players and the racial discrimination that they suffered. Next part of this thesis is concerned with the integration of the NBA and the introduction of the first African American superstar Bill Russell and his influence on the development of professional basketball. The last part summarizes the reasons and circumstances which led to the changes in the American professional basketball and the result of these changes which can be seen in one of the most prosperous periods in the history of basketball.

Key words: racial discrimination, integration, professional basketball, Bill Russell, racial segregation

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Introduction

The modern age of American professional basketball is mostly dominated by African American players and we perceive it as normal to see African Americans as stars of basketball that are known worldwide and that are popular. Some of these examples include players such as LeBron James, Dwyane Wade or Kobe Bryant, these players achieved superstar status and they are known for their excellent performance on court as well as for their commercial activities and as being among the best paid athletes in the world, but in the formative years of professional basketball, African American players were subjects of discrimination and segregation based on race. The aim of this thesis is to provide principal information and examine the issue of racism in American professional basketball. The main goal of this thesis is to examine periods in basketball history beginning with the 1920s in order to characterize forms of racism and segregation in basketball on a professional level and the eventual integration of professional leagues.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is introductory and it should provide the reader the basic understanding of the sport of basketball and the relationship between African American players and professional basketball in 1920s and 1930s.

The main body of this thesis is concerned with the integration of African Americans into professional basketball and breaking the color line in basketball with focus on early professional African American players and their role in ending the racial segregation in the sport which is covered in chapter two.

Chapter three focuses on the first African American superstar Bill Russell and the role he played in opening the gates of basketball to other generations of African American players. This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part is the general introduction of Bill Russell and the next three parts are concerned with his childhood, university basketball and his professional career.

The last chapter consists of an overview of 1960s and the situation in society with regard to the official end of racial segregation by law and the ongoing racial discrimination both in society and in college and professional basketball. The second part of this chapter is focused on the next generation of African American basketball stars such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Julius

Erving that were prominent in the 1970s and the way in which they continued to revolutionized the game of basketball and build on the legacy of Bill Russell. The last section shows the results of the effort of these African American players that can be seen in the era of the Golden Age of Basketball.

Chapter 1

Pre-NBA Era in Professional Basketball

1.1 Invention of basketball and Civil Rights

When examining topic such as racism in basketball, we should begin by asking a few simple questions: why, how and for whom basketball was originally invented, mainly for the reason of getting a better understanding of the sport itself and its origin. Also, it is important to understand the social situation concerning civil rights of African Americans during the time basketball was invented and spread to the mainstream population.

The game of basketball was invented in winter 1891 for the students at International Training School of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Springfield Massachusetts. The young college students were restless and bored for the lack of activities during winter when football, baseball and other sports could not be played. To keep discipline, Dr. James Naismith was given an assignment to invent a game that would keep the students busy during the winter time. After a few failed attempts, Dr. Naismith came up with a game based on his childhood in Canada called Duck on the Rock¹.

"He remembered the most effective way of knocking off the duck (a rock) was to throw one's own rock in arc so that it would not go far if it missed the guard's rock"²

The first game of basketball was played in a gym with two peach baskets, from this came the name basketball, that were elevated on a gymnasium balcony. The game became quickly popular and started spreading to other colleges and before long it turned to a professional level.

In the time when basketball was invented and started to become popular, United States were struggling with the issue of civil rights. After the Civil War, the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitutions was adopted in

¹ Duck on the Rock is a children's game in which one player guards a stone (a duck) on a rock and other players try to knock it off by throwing other stones in turn.

² Frederick McKissack, *Black Hoops: The History of African-Americans in Basketball* (New York:Scholastic, 1999), chap. 1 para. 11. Adobe Digital Edition.

1868 granting African Americans citizenship rights and equal protection of law, but soon after the racial segregation began to happen particularly in the south. The Separation of African Americans began in 1870 starting with separation of race in public schools, restrooms, restaurant and hotels, followed by Jim Crow laws³ and the “one-drop rule.”

“Under the one drop rule anyone with known African ancestry would be considered exclusively black, regardless of physical appearance or any other known ancestry.”⁴

These circumstances enabled the formation of racial groups which led to the attacks on African Americans and by the end of the 19th century the separation of blacks and whites was completed.

The situation in society reflected the treatment of black athletes in sports and it was not just basketball that had suffered from restrictions based on race. Other sports such as jockeys in horse racing, boxing or baseball were struggling with the issue of civil rights. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, all black baseball clubs were created and they were not allowed to play against baseball clubs in Major League Baseball, however, they could play against each other in all-star games after the season or outside the country in places such as Cuba or Mexico during winter. During such games outside their home country, black athletes could use same locker rooms, sleep in the same hotel or eat in the same restaurant as white players.⁵

1.2 College vs. professional basketball

The situation in society and in sports in general was anything but ideal for the development of a sport that was soon to be dominated by African Americans, however, at the beginning of the 20th century basketball was starting to become popular among African American communities, beginning its rise at colleges. College basketball was instrumental in development of professional basketball. Most of the players that became professionals came from a college.

³ Jim Crow laws were racial segregation laws that were in effect until the 1960s

⁴ Aliya Saperstein and Aaron Gullikson, “A 'Mulatto Escape Hatch' in the United States? Examining Evidence of Racial and Social Mobility During the Jim Crow Era,” *Demography* 50, no. 5 (2013): 1922.

⁵ Frederick McKissack, *Black Hoops: The History of African-Americans in Basketball* (New York:Scholastic, 1999), chap. 2 para. 11. Adobe Digital Edition.

One of the first black colleges that had basketball in its curriculum was the Washington D.C. Howard University.

“Howard’s first varsity basketball team took court in 1910-11 season. They played their games in Spaulding Hall, a tight space actually unsuitable for basketball; but the fast-moving games were enough to generate interest and create fans.”⁶

The conditions in which the first games of basketball in black colleges occurred were unsuitable, low ceilings and small courts were typical for such games. It also created a much more physical and faster game that attracted most of the fans.

One of the players that started his career at a college and became instrumental in basketball and baseball history was Cumberland “Cum” Posey Jr. He played for the Penn State for two years and then for the University of Pittsburgh and other colleges before creating a team with his brother The Monticello-Delaney Club and later on he started a new team called the Loendi Big five. Both teams were dominant and introduced a new style of basketball. They played aggressively on the ball, they were not afraid to rough up other teams and they were running up and down the court taking a lot of shots which created a fast pacing game that very much so resembles the game of today’s basketball. Cumberland Posey was also a baseball player and eventually he retired from basketball and became full time baseball player and later an owner and a manager of the baseball team the Homestead Grays.

Professional teams such as Loendi Big Five continued to play college teams and amateur teams during the first half of the 20th century. This created a problem of vague lines between a professional basketball and amateur basketball. Players of clubs such as the Loendi Big Five were paid per game whereas the college students were paid unofficially or not at all.

In response to the problem of professionals playing amateurs or colleges, a meeting was held at Hampton Institute in 1912 where The Colored Intercollegiate Athlete Association (CIAA) was created. Soon after, most of the all black college associations were being formed all over the country and the main goal was to unite the colleges in an effort to stop using professional

⁶ Frederick McKissack, *Black Hoops: The History of African-Americans in Basketball* (New York:Scholastic, 1999), chap. 3 para. 5. Adobe Digital Edition.

players. Rules against professional players playing for colleges were set in place, however, colleges continued to disregard these rules mainly for economic reasons.

1.3 The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement that started to advance into mainstream in New York in 1920s and it was based around the idea of self-awareness and pride of African Americans. The movement gave rise to African American communities and it started spreading throughout the whole U.S. and even into Europe and other countries. The most prominent forms of development of these cultural ideas were through poetry, literature, music and education of African Americans, but also through a basketball team that had originated in the centre of Harlem called the New York Renaissance.

The New York Renaissance team also known as Renaissance Big Five or The Rens was created by Robert Douglas who is known as the “Father of Black Basketball.” He previously started two amateur teams called the Spartan Braves and the Spartan Hornets, but due to restrictions on paying amateur players, as discussed in the previous section, he decided to create a professional team.

The Rens started playing in the Harlem Renaissance Casino in 1923, one year after the casino opened, however, they were also a barnstorming team which meant that they travelled all over the country playing in small towns mainly for the reason that they did not belong in any league. The team played its home games in the ballroom of the casino which also served as a dance floor after the game finished. The games were considered more of a social event than a sport event. The Rens were playing in the centre of the Harlem Renaissance and they were considered another form of expression that further supported the movement.

They played all sorts of teams from amateur to professional, but the most attractive games were against the Original Celtics.⁷

⁷ Professional white basketball team in the 1920s that was dominant during its era (no relation to today's Boston Celtics)

“The games featuring the Rens and Celtics were hot tickets, with some contests drawing as many as 15,000 fans. The games were hard fought and civil on the court, but off the court was a different story.”⁸

The Rens played over 120 games per year and due to travel they experienced racism all over the country as mentioned by one of the players John Isaacs.

“Sometimes you would sit at a restaurant counter, leafing through the menu,” said Isaacs, “and you didn't see the man coming from behind the counter. And he sees you and walks to the wall and grabs his rifle and says, 'Get out of here.' You didn't have any choice but to leave.”⁹

They experienced this kind of treatment when travelling on the road, especially in the south, they had to change their clothes on the bus, because African American players were not allowed in the locker rooms, they had to sleep in gyms and churches, because they were not allowed in hotels and they could not eat in the restaurants as a result of the racial segregation.

They were one of the best teams in U.S. but they were excluded from the American Basketball League,¹⁰ because the ABL consisted of all white teams. Later on, the Original Celtics declined to join the league as sign of support for the all black teams. Another attempt of creating a professional league resulted in National Basketball League¹¹ that was created in 1937 and the Rens were once again declined admission. Despite all these difficulties, they became one of the most dominant teams that ever played basketball.

“The Rens chose to let their on-court actions do the talking. In their nearly three-decade existence, beginning in 1922, the Rens compiled a 2,588-529 record.”¹²

⁸ John Hareas, “Remembering The Rens,” *NBA Vintage Stories*, accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.nba.com/history/encyclopedia_rens_001214.html.

⁹ John Hareas, “Remembering The Rens,” *NBA Vintage Stories*, accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.nba.com/history/encyclopedia_rens_001214.html.

¹⁰ American Basketball League was an early professional league that consisted of all white teams that started in 1925 and ended because of the Great Depression in 1931

¹¹ National Basketball League was a professional basketball league that would later merge with the Basketball Association of America which created the National Basketball Association (today's NBA) in 1949

¹² John Hareas, “Remembering The Rens,” *NBA Vintage Stories*, accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.nba.com/history/encyclopedia_rens_001214.html.

And for the effort and the important role that the team played in development of African American professional basketball, the New York Renaissance was named to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 1963 as well as the founder of the team Robert L. "Bob" Douglas in 1972 and players Charles "Tarzan" Cooper in 1977 and William "Pop" Gates in 1989.

1.4 The Harlem Globetrotters

Another important team that helped in development of African American professional basketball was the Harlem Globetrotters. The team started playing in 1920s in the Savoy Ballroom in Chicago, however, the name Harlem Globetrotters was chosen mainly because of the Harlem Renaissance that was happening during 1920s as mentioned in the previous section. The team was also barnstorming, same as the Rens and quickly became dominant, but not in the way the Rens did. The Harlem Globetrotters were known for playing an entertaining basketball which meant that during the game, they were making fancy passes over the shoulders and behind the back and this sort of behaviour on the court was considered as "clowning." One of the reasons for putting up this kind of show was presumably because of the dominance and skill they possessed and the fact that no team would want to play against all black team that would dominated the game in such way. The Globetrotters were also managed by a white businessman Abe Saperstein who booked games and also coached the team. Same as the Rens, the Harlem Globetrotters experience racism on the road for being an all black team.

"In Shelby, Montana, for example, gamblers threatened to shoot the team if they won, and the sheriff threatened to shoot the team if they lost. The Globetrotters won the game and had to steal out of town in their uniforms with their clothes under their arms."¹³

Despite the entertaining way the Harlem Globetrotters played, the team was very successful and to get on the team was very difficult. The training camps were hard and it is no surprise that some of the players later on started in the National Basketball Association. For example one of the first African

¹³ Frederick McKissack, *Black Hoops: The History of African-Americans in Basketball* (New York:Scholastic, 1999), chap. 6 para. 12. Adobe Digital Edition.

Americans that played in NBA was Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton who began his career playing for the New York Renaissance and later for the Harlem Globetrotters or a future NBA hall of famer Wilt "The Stilt" Chamberlain who before signing with the Philadelphia Warriors in 1959 played for Harlem Globetrotters as well.

Today, the Harlem Globetrotters is an exhibition basketball team which is known for athleticism as well as comedy. Over the years, the Globetrotters travelled the world and adjusted their performance to involve more comedy and theatrical aspects. Same as the New York Renaissance, the Globetrotters were enshrined in the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2002 and they remain a living legacy in the fight against racism in basketball.

Chapter 2

Integration of the NBA

2.1 The formation of the NBA

Since the invention of basketball in 1891, there were several attempts at creating a professional league that would be able to sustain for a longer period of time. The first serious attempt to create a professional basketball league was made in 1925 with the formation of American Basketball League. The American Basketball League lasted for six seasons and then suspended because of the Great Depression in 1930s. People simply did not have the money to spend on tickets and sports like football and baseball were more popular at the time. The ABL resumed playing in 1933 and lasted until 1955 when it could not survive the competition with the NBA.

Another attempt at creating a professional league in 1930s resulted in the formation of the National Basketball Association that was created in 1937 and it competed with the ABL throughout the rest of 1930s. The late 1930s and the first half of 1940s were a difficult time for both leagues because of the Second World War. Both leagues were fighting to survive and to attract more fans, players volunteer to join the military, teams from both leagues were dropping out, attendance of games was poor, some seasons were cut short and severe cut backs had to be made. After the end of the war, there was a significant improvement in both economical and moral conditions. People begun to spend money and there was an inflow of new players which resulted in growth of both leagues.

The Basketball Association of America was formed in 1946 and it started its first season with 11 teams and it presented a new competition on the market for ABL and NBL. In the second half of the 1940s, there were three professional leagues and both NBL and BAA experienced growth in number of teams and economy whereas the ABL struggled to survive in growing competition with the two leagues. The major problem of the late 1940s was that players and teams

often changed leagues which resulted in the merger of NBL and BAA. The six remaining teams from NBL joined the BAA and a new league was created consisting of 17 teams and it was named the National Basketball Association.

With the formation of a new league consisting of teams from NBL and BAA, the American Basketball Association was over. The ABL lasted until 1953 and then the league suspended operations and officially ended in 1955.

After the first season, the NBA showed a great promise that finally this league could provide stability and could attract wider audiences, however, the first few years continued to present similar problems as before, the major problem being that teams dropped off. In the 1950-51 season, four teams dropped from the league and by the mid-season another team dropped off and by the 1955-56 season the league went down from originally 17 teams to 8.

During the first few seasons, several important changes were made to the game of basketball that were supposed to insure a faster tempo of the game. Changes such as widening the free throw lane¹⁴, implementing the 24-second shot clock¹⁵ and new foul rules were supposed to ensure fast paced games with increase in scoring that would attract larger audiences and help the teams with their financial problems.

It was the late 1950s and 1960s that saw an upturn for the league with stars such as Bill Russell and his Boston Celtics which dominated the 1960s and insured that the whole United States took notice, this meant better television deals and more money that helped stabilize the league for years to come.

2.2 Jackie Robinson

The 1940s were progressive years in sports and first steps to end the racial segregation in sports were made during this time. After the Second World War, the returning African American soldiers wanted their rights which put pressure on the government and as a result the Executive Order 9811 was

¹⁴ Free throw lane is the restricted area, colloquially known as the lane or the paint and it is the area on a basketball court underneath the basket bounded by the endline, the free throw lane was widened in 1951-52 NBA season from 6 feet to 12

¹⁵ The shot clock is a timer designed to increase the pace of the game, the offensive team must attempt a field goal before the shot clock expires

issued by President Harry S. Truman which ended the racial segregation in the United States Armed Forces. However, racial segregation continued in schools, restaurants and other public facilities.

The first major breakthrough in professional sports came in 1947 when Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. Jackie Robinson broke the baseball color line when he started playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers. He opened the gates of baseball to other African American players, but from the beginning of his professional career in baseball, he had encountered racial discrimination and even threats on his life.

“From the day he took the field, Jackie Robinson was subjected to all kinds of abuse, ranging from hate mail to death threats and from fans calling him names to players trying to hurt his legs by sliding into second base, his position, with their cleats up around his shins. Even some of his own teammates refused to accept him simply because he was black.”¹⁶

Despite the racial discrimination, he became a very successful baseball player. He won the MBL Rookie of the Year Award in 1947 and the National League Most Valuable Player Award in 1949 as the first African American to ever do so. He was selected for six consecutive All-Star Games and won the World Series with Brooklyn Dodgers in 1955 and he was inducted to the baseball Hall of Fame in 1962. Jackie Robinson helped integrate the Major League Baseball but he was also one of the first African Americans to succeed in professional sports which helped changing the view of African Americans and eventually played a major role in ending the racial segregation in other sports.

2.3 First African Americans in all white professional basketball teams

The situation for African Americans in basketball in 1940s was also changing, of course, the majority of teams remained segregated, but first signs of ending the racial segregation in basketball occurred during the 1940s. The Harlem Globetrotters were at their best during the 1940s and the all white teams from professional leagues arranged games with them for the simple reason that they sold more tickets than during regular season.

¹⁶ Frederick McKissack, *Black Hoops: The History of African-Americans in Basketball* (New York:Scholastic, 1999), chap. 8 para. 3. Adobe Digital Edition.

One of the first African American players who joined an all white professional team was William McNeil “Bill” Jones. He is considered one of the earliest African Americans professional players who help with the integration of professional basketball. He played for a short time for the Toledo Jim White Chevrolets which was a professional team in National Basketball Association. The Toledo Jim White Chevrolets was not the only team that integrated African Americans, also the Chicago Studebaker Flyers were one of the first all white teams that integrated African American players in the National Basketball Association. Both these teams lasted for a very short period of time in the National Basketball Association, but they were the first to integrated African American players into previously all white professional teams.

Another early example of an African American player who joined previously all white team was William “Pop” Gates who started playing for the New York Renaissance team and then joined the Tri-Cities Blackhawks. He joined the team along with another African American player William “Dolly” King and they both started as one of the earliest African Americans in the Basketball Association of America.

Most of these early African American players who joined previously all white teams went unnoticed by general public and they did not draw to much attention of the media either. It was not until the formation of the National Basketball Association and the 1950 draft when one of the teams picked an African American player in the second round of the draft that the media and the fans took notice.

2.4 The integration of NBA

The first African American player to be drafted by NBA team was Charles Cooper. He was picked by the owner of Boston Celtics Walter Brown in the second round as a 12th overall pick. Charles “Chuck” Cooper previously played for the Duquesne University and when he was drafted, he was on a tour playing for the Globetrotters.

During the same draft, another African American player was picked in the ninth round and that was Earl Lloyd. He was picked by Washington Capitols

and he was the first African American that played in the NBA. Earl Lloyd came from West Virginia State and he played nine seasons in the NBA.

In the 1950 season, another African American Player was added to the roster of NBA team and that was Nathaniel "Sweetwater" Clifton. His contract was purchased by the New York Knicks who bought it from the owner of Harlem Globetrotters Abraham Saperstein. These first African Americans experience racial discrimination during the years they played in the NBA as commented on by Nathaniel "Sweetwater" Clifton.

"I remember in Fort Wayne, Ind., we stayed at a hotel where they let me sleep, but they wouldn't let me eat. They didn't want anyone to see me. Heck, I figured if they let me sleep there, I was at least halfway home. You have to remember, I grew up in segregated Virginia, so I had seen this stuff before. Did it make me bitter? No. If you let yourself become bitter, it will eat away at you inside. If adversity doesn't kill you, it makes you a better person."¹⁷

Charles Cooper played four years for the Boston Celtics and after that he joined the Milwaukee Hawks and he ended his career playing for the Fort Wayne Pistons, he played over 400 games in NBA as a guard and a forward.

"Big Cat" was a nickname that Earl Lloyd was known for, especially for his defensive style. He spent only one year playing for the Washington Capitols and then he was drafted to the army, but he returned to the NBA and played six years for Syracuse National and won the NBA title with them in 1955. He also spent two years playing for Fort Wayne Pistons and he ended his career in 1960. He was also the first African American coach of the Pistons in the 1971-1972 season.

Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton gained his nickname for the love of soft drinks as a child. He was a popular player with the New York Knicks where he spent six years. He entered the league at the age of 27 and he was named as an all-star in 1957.

Charles Cooper, Earl Lloyd and Nathaniel Clifton are considered to be the first African American players that broke the color line in basketball and helped open the gates of basketball to other African American players same as

¹⁷ Jennifer Pottheiser, "Lloyd, Clifton, Cooper combine to blaze new path in NBA," *NBA*, last modified February 27, 2013, accessed February 10, 2015. <http://www.nba.com/history/features/moment-1950-true-pioneers/index.html>.

Jackie Robinson in baseball, however, they did not see themselves as pivotal figures as Jackie Robinson as commented on by Nathaniel Clifton.

"I don't think my situation was anything like Jackie Robinson's -- a guy who played in a very hostile environment, where even some of his own teammates didn't want him around," said Lloyd. "In basketball, folks were used to seeing integrated teams at the college level. There was a different mentality. But of course, the team did stay and eat in some places where I wasn't welcome."¹⁸

These first three African American players are not as well known as Jackie Robinson, but they were the first to enter the National Basketball Association and started the integration of professional basketball in United States and as a result, gradually, more African American players joined the NBA throughout the 1950s. The next step of the integration of professional basketball occurred when Bill Russell entered the NBA in 1956.

¹⁸ Jennifer Pottheiser, "Lloyd, Clifton, Cooper combine to blaze new path in NBA," *NBA*, last modified February 27, 2013, accessed February 10, 2015. <http://www.nba.com/history/features/moment-1950-true-pioneers/index.html>.

Chapter 3

Bill Russell

3.1 Introduction of Bill Russell

The first few years of existence were difficult for the NBA. At first, the new league showed a promise that the merger of Basketball Association of America and National Basketball Association would prove successful, however, the problems that troubled the two leagues continued. The teams were having economical problems and the league did everything it could to attract new audiences by changing the rules so the game would be more entertaining. The emphasis was put on scoring and creating a fast pace game so the teams would take a lot of shots and scored high numbers. It is somewhat ironic that the first basketball star that would help the league popularized basketball was a mostly defensive player who based his game on picking up rebounds, shot blocking and precise defence and his name was Bill Russell.

By the time Bill Russell entered the league, first African Americans were already part of the NBA with pioneers such as Charles “Chuck” Cooper, Earl Lloyd and Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton as mentioned in the previous section, however, Bill Russell was the first African American to achieve superstar status.

Before entering the league, Bill Russell already achieved wide range of popularity. He won two championships with his university team and he also won a golden medal in the Summer Olympics playing for the U.S. national basketball team. He continued to win as a professional basketball player in the NBA and he became one of the most dominant players not only in basketball history, but in sport history.

During his professional career, he played thirteen seasons for the basketball team Boston Celtics and out of the thirteen seasons he won eleven championships with the ball club. He became Most Valuable player of the league five times and was chosen to twelve consecutive NBA all star games.

His rivalry on court with Wilt Chamberlain attracted media attention and it helped popularized the game of basketball. Together, they were the first true basketball superstars. Wilt Chamberlain was an excellent offensive player and

he is one of the best scorers in the history of the NBA. He is the only player to score more than 100 points during a single game. Their rivalry and the matches between the Boston Celtics and Philadelphia Warriors were considered the best that the NBA could offer at that time. Wilt Chamberlain who was the best offensive player in the league and Bill Russell who was the best defensive player, their competition on court was the reason why people's attention turned to basketball.

Both Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain played pivotal roles in the fight against racism in sports. They were one of the first African Americans in sports that became superstars which gave them privileges and opportunities that were previously impossible for African American players. Because of their superstar status, they were able to fight some of the racist stereotypes and demand from their clubs better conditions and treatment. They helped integrate the professional game of basketball and created a fertile ground for next generations of African Americans in the National Basketball Association.

For his involvement in the fight against racism and overall excellence in sports, Bill Russell was awarded by the president of United States Barack Obama the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. He was also enshrined into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in 1975 and he was named one of the 50 Greatest Players in NBA History.

3.2 Family, childhood and first years of basketball

The Russell family consisted of his parents Kate and Charles, they both came from poor African American families and they lived in a segregated section of Monroe, Louisiana. Since before they had children, Bill's mother Kate was determined to move out of the Deep South state someplace where they would not encounter racial abuse on day to day basis and she wanted her future children to have a college education at any cost.

Their first son was born in 1932 and they named him Charles and their second son was born two years later and Kate Russell was very serious about the idea of both her sons going to college that she named her second son after the president of a college.

“William Felton was president of Southeastern Louisiana College in nearby Hammond. That’s how the second and last child of Kate and Charles Russell became William Felton Russell.”¹⁹

From a very early age, William Felton “Bill” Russell was fascinated by two things. First was his love for trains which continued to grow even to his adulthood and the second was his fascination with his older brother Charles. Charles was a natural athlete and from a very young age, he was good at almost every sport whereas Bill was awkward when trying to play any sport. His aspiration was that one day he would be as good as his brother.

Bill’s father played some baseball but it was his uncle Bob who wanted to become a baseball player for the Negro professional leagues but unfortunately did not make the team that was very supportive of Bill and helped him to become a better athlete, especially in the early years when Bill was not as good as his brother.

In 1940s, the Louisiana environment was not favourable for African Americans and as predicted, the Russell family moved out as soon as they were able to escape the racial segregation. First, they settled for a short period of time in Detroit and then they relocated to the Western Coast in Oakland. The life in Oakland was not an easy one and the Russell family lived in poor conditions.

“Life in Oakland was difficult and the Russells often lived in public housing projects, but their father’s refusal to submit to discrimination was a source of pride to Bill Russell and his older brother, Charlie.”²⁰

Two years after they moved to Oakland, Bill’s mother died which heavily affected her husband and both children. Her dying wish was that her children would receive a college education.

During Bill’s school years, he lived in a shadow of his brother. Charles was one of the best athletes in school and he excelled in baseball, football, basketball and track. His brother’s success made things difficult for Bill, because everybody expected him to be as good as his brother and as a result he was cut from every team he tried out for. He did not make the cut for the

¹⁹ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 14. Adobe Digital Edition.

²⁰ Academy of Achievement, “Bill Russell Biography – Academy of Achievement,” last modified February 23, 2011, accessed March 2, 2015. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/rus0bio-1>.

basketball team and the reason for that was that he was skinny and he was growing fast and it was difficult for Bill to control his body. He was not a natural athlete like his brother and he had to work hard on everything he did. He even changed schools in order to avoid comparison with his brother.

At his new school, he finally made the basketball team, although, he had to share a jersey with one of his teammates. He continued to run awkward and he lacked in confidence, because of his previous failure to make any team, his brother's success and the fact that he was an African American from segregated part of America only further distraught his belief that he could be a basketball player, however, the coach at his new school saw a great potential in Bill, especially because of his physical attributes. He was growing fast and by the time he was sixteen, he was over six feet tall, he had long arms, reach and he was growing strong. His height was his biggest strength but also his biggest weakness. He was ridiculed because of his height and his awkward movement on the court which further discouraged him from playing basketball. It got to a point when he was ready to give up basketball and it was only after the encouragement of his coach that he decided to continue to play basketball.

Bill continued to slowly progress as a basketball player. He learned to take advantage of his height and although he did not get a lot of time on court, he played as if he was to decide the outcome of the game. Hard work and improvement with every practice and every minute on court won him respect and by the end of the season, he was no longer subject of ridicule but he aspired to get a college scholarship just like his mother wanted him to. His mother's dying wish for him to attend college proved to be a great motivation for Bill and one of the reasons why he continued to try to make the basketball team despite the lack of success in his early years.

The last season of basketball at his high school was very different from his previous years. Bill spent his summer working on his strength and when the first game of the season started, he was a different player. He realized that although he was a poor shooter, he had physical abilities outmatching everyone else's, his long arms and strength proved to be a great advantage and he started to focus on his defensive skills. For all these reasons, he started to believe in himself and it also helped that most of the team consisted of African Americans boys which helped him to fit in and accept his race and identity. The

last game of the season was the predication of what was to come in the future regarding Bill's personality and success.

"McLymonds and Oakland High were soon battling for the Bay Area championship. The two teams met in early January, with the winner almost certain to go on to take the title. This was the first important game of Bill's career, and he hoped he wouldn't disgrace himself. But his nerves were jumpy, and he got sick half an hour before the game. Afterward, he sat in front of his locker wondering if he would be able to play."²¹

It became sort of a ritual that Bill Russell was sick before an important game. It followed him throughout his professional career and it was no surprise if he came to his coach before game and told him that he could not play. Bill had an intense personality and his nerves went to work before an important game, but by the time he was on court playing, he was fine. His high school final game was not different and his team won with no small contribution from Bill. Even with his defensive skills and a great potential of becoming a professional player, he was offered only one scholarship at the University of San Francisco. The college basketball was integrated, but African American players were scarce in university teams.

3.3 University basketball and Olympic Games

At university, Bill Russell became a different man. The boy who lived in his brother's shadow and lacked in confidence because he was ridiculed for his height and uncertain about his race and identity, that boy no longer existed and instead, there was a man who believed in himself and was proud to be African American. The reason for this sudden change was that the university showed interest in him and gave him an opportunity to prove what he was capable of. His height was no longer a problem either, rather it became an advantage, not only on court, but also in social situations as well. Because he was towering over everyone else, he became an object of interest and it even helped him to make new friends.

²¹ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 21. Adobe Digital Edition.

In his first season playing for the University of San Francisco, the team was called the Dons, Bill continued to work on his defensive skills but also incorporated new techniques to his offensive repertoire such as the “hook shoot”²² to improve his offensive skills in order to increase his scoring. Together with another African American player K.C. Jones, they created a strong relationship on and off court that would last for years to come even to their professional careers. He quickly became one of the best centres in university basketball and with his new scoring abilities as well as shot blocking and rebounding one of the best basketball players on any university campus.

After Bill’s first season, his second season started with a great promise of success. The university team acquired another African American player and his name was Hal Perry. This was a big step for the integration of university basketball, because now the team had three African Americans that were starters. The young African American players still encountered racial discrimination on court, sometimes even in their hometown.

“Crowds on the road, and even at home in San Francisco, were sometimes vocally hostile towards Russell and his teammates. When Russell and the other black players were denied hotel accommodations in Oakland City during the 1954 All-College tournament, the white players on the team chose to stay with them in a vacant college dormitory.”²³

The team was performing well in the first games of the season with Bill Russell leading the team, however, after a series of injuries, the season was lost. Despite the negative outcome of the season, Bill was praised in press for his defensive abilities, especially for his shot blocking, rebounding and the way he continued to perform well even when the rest of the team did not. He became a famous university basketball player which further boosted his confidence.

The next two seasons of university basketball were a total success. It went as far as that some of the rules of basketball were changed, such as the width of the foul line from six feet to twelve, because of the excellence that Bill Russell produced. They became to be known as “Russell’s Rules.” The Dons

²² A hook shoot is when an offensive player is turned perpendicular to the basket and he throws the ball with a sweeping motion of his arm with an upward arc with a follow-through which ends over his head.

²³ Academy of Achievement, “Bill Russell Biography – Academy of Achievement,” last modified February 23, 2011, accessed March 2, 2015. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/rus0bio-1>.

won the All-College Basketball Tournament in Oklahoma City and Bill won all the individual awards including the Most Valuable Player. After that, they proved to be one of the best teams on the West Coast and it was time to go the nationals. Bill was leading the team and together with K.C. Jones they won the N.C.A.A.²⁴ finals and the Dons became the best university team in United States.

“He and K.C. Jones had scored 47 points between them, more than half the Dons’ 77. With his own 23 points he had piled up a total of 118 for five games, a new N.C.A.A. record. Best of all, he had been unanimously named the Most Valuable Player of the tournament.”²⁵

After the third season, Bill decided to try out for track as a high jumper during the summer, because next year was the Olympic year. Because of his height, he naturally excelled at this sport and one day Bill received a letter from the White House.

“When Bill finally managed to open the envelope, he saw that it contained an invitation to attend a gathering of thirty-two athletic celebrities meeting with President Dwight D. Eisenhower to discuss his physical fitness program.”²⁶

This was a great honour for an African American athlete who grew up in a segregated part of a little town and came from a poor family. After all this success, there was no doubt that Bill would become a professional player and the only question that remained was if he turned professional before the Olympic Games.²⁷

After he visited Washington, Bill decided to stay with his relatives in Monroe Louisiana and after a long period of time living in non-segregate part of America, he was reminded that the Jim Crow land was still very much so the reality of many African Americans living in the south.

“He couldn’t ride up front in a bus or eat where he pleased, sit where he wanted in movies or do anything else with the freedom he had become used.

²⁴ National Collegiate Athletic Association is a non-profit association that organizes athletic programs of colleges and universities in United States and Canada

²⁵ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 57. Adobe Digital Edition.

²⁶ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 62. Adobe Digital Edition.

²⁷ Professional players were not allowed to participate in Olympic Games

He wanted to leave, but he couldn't hurt the feeling of his relatives and old friends."²⁸

The visit of his relatives in Monroe left a strong impression on Bill Russell and even though he was famous and he had very promising prospects for his future, he realized that many African Americans were still suffering from racial abuse on every day bases and lived in segregated parts of America, however, it was time to prepare for his last season of university basketball.

In their last season, the Dons proved to be the best university team in United States, they piled up 26 straight wins from the previous season and they continued to win every game. They won again the N.C.A.A. finals even without K.C. Jones and there was no doubt that they were one of the best university teams in basketball history with Bill Russell leading them. He was also chosen the Player of the Year by experts.

"San Francisco came back the next year to win 29 more games for a new college record of 55 straight. That record stood until 1973 UCLA team broke it. The Dons won tournaments in Chicago and New York during that season and smashed Southern Methodist and Iowa in the 1956 NCAA finals. They played the tournament without Jones, who couldn't play because it was his 5th year in college. Russell was again chosen to the All-American teams."²⁹

After the last season, Bill Russell decided to go for the Olympics in Melbourne in 1956 even though it meant that he would miss the first half of the basketball season. Bill gave up his spot on the track team so his two friends could attend the Olympic Games because he was already going with the basketball team.

"Russell returned to Oakland in December 1956 after the U.S. had gone undefeated in Olympic basketball. He came home to marry Rose Swisher. She was a niece of one of his high school teachers. He first met her during his sophomore year in college when his name was becoming familiar to San Francisco sports fans. He was taken back when she didn't know who he was."³⁰

²⁸ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 64. Adobe Digital Edition.

²⁹ Paul Deegan, *Bill Russell* (Chicago: Childrens Press, 1973), 20. Adobe Digital Edition.

³⁰ Paul Deegan, *Bill Russell* (Chicago: Childrens Press, 1973), 20. Adobe Digital Edition.

3.4 Boston Celtics

Bill Russell had several options in store for his professional career. He received one of the highest offers in terms of money from Harlem Globetrotters and he received other offers from various teams outside of NBA. The St. Louis Hawks owned draft rights on Bill Russell if he ever wanted to play in NBA and they were willing to wait for him so that he could participate in the Olympic Games.

It was the Boston Celtics who showed a great interest in acquiring him to their roster when they traded their veteran player Ed Macauley and their rookie Cliff Hagan to St. Louis Hawks for the rights on Bill Russell in the draft. Boston Celtics was a great offensive team who had no problem with scoring, but it was their defence that needed improving if they ever wanted to win the NBA title. Bill Russell was a defensive specialist and according to the Celtics coach Red Auerbach, Bill was the last piece of the puzzle that the Boston Celtics needed in order to win the title.

““He can mean not just one championship, but a whole series of championships. He’ll make us nearly perfect a ball club as you can get. We’ve got everything else – a great backcourt, great shooters, great speed and the fastest-breaking offense in the league. All we need is guy who can get the ball for us.””³¹

It was a great risk to trade two players for the rights on Bill Russell who officially never confirmed that he would play in the NBA, but Red Auerbach was certain that Bill was the kind of basketball player the Celtics needed and he was willing to take risks in order to get him.

Bill Russell signed the contract with the Boston Celtics the night before his wedding and in terms of salary, it was not as high as the Globetrotters offered, but it was the highest that a rookie in the NBA ever received at that time.

When Bill Russell started in the NBA, the teams were already integrated and the team of Boston Celtics had about ten African American players so Bill did not have a problem fitting in, he was immediately accepted in the squad and

³¹ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 94. Adobe Digital Edition.

he became a starter from the very first game. The teams were already integrated, nonetheless, Bill Russell played a pivotal role in shaping the basketball as we know it today. Throughout the years playing for the Celtics, he became a true superstar and helped with his attitude and determination both on and off court to fight racism and to help other African American players in acquiring better conditions in basketball by dominating and showing the kind of potential that African American players had. It all started in his first season that would conclude an unbelievably successful year both in his personal and professional life.

Because of the lucrative contract, Bill was making money and he was able to purchase a house in Boston suburb of Reading and he was even able to fulfil one of his childhood desires when he bought a network of miniature railroads. This was also a big accomplishment for a boy who grew up in segregated part of United States and came from a poor African American family and now he lived in the white suburbs, however, he was not welcomed by the whole community and had to face difficulties and even threats to his life, because he was an African American living in a white neighbourhood.

“When Russell bought a fine home for his family in a historically white neighbourhood, he received threats and insults. On one occasion, vandals broke into his home and splattered the walls with filth and graffiti.”³²

Bill attracted a lot of attention from the very beginning and it was not because of his scoring abilities, but because of his defensive skills. It was a big change for the league and its fans. The league tried to do everything to attract the audience by changing the rules and ensuring that a lot of baskets would be scored, but it was the opposite that fill the arenas and brought more people to their television sets. The attendance of Boston Celtics home games increased from the very first game Bill started in and wherever the team went, people were curious about Bill Russell and whether he would be able to stop the opposite team and its stars from scoring. His height, strength, long arms and reach were the things that Bill Russell as a young boy was most insecure about and ridiculed for and now they were proving to be one of the reasons why the attendance and popularity of basketball was increasing nationwide.

³² Academy of Achievement, “Bill Russell Biography – Academy of Achievement,” last modified February 23, 2011, accessed March 2, 2015. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/rus0bio-1>.

The season concluded with Boston Celtics first championship and with a promise of more to come. For Bill Russell, it was one of the best years in his career, he won three championships with Boston, the Dons and with United States Olympic team and on a personal level, he graduated from university, fulfilling his mother dying wish and got married.

He had fulfilled everything that was possible and the risk that the Celtics took in order to get him had paid off as commented on by the coach Red Auerbach.

““There’s no doubt that Russell did it,” Auerbach said. “He turned a real good team into a great one. And he did it by coming into the league under the worst possible conditions. He joined us with the season nearly half over. He was out of shape. He had never played a minute of pro ball and rarely faced competition he couldn’t easily handle. And he didn’t know beans about the men on the other clubs. Yet he became a star almost overnight, and he’ll continue to be one for many years to come.””³³

The next season started tremendously and Bill broke many of the leagues records in rebounding, he averaged more than 22 rebounds a game. He also won the Most Valuable Player award and he started in his first All-Star game. The Celtics won the division title in East as well as the eastern playoffs, however, in the third game of the finals Bill Russell was injured and the Celtics lost the finals.

““That’s one we’ll never be ashamed of,” said Red Auerbach. “We lost the last two games by a grand total of three points, and we’d have won them both easily if Russell could have played. Just take a look at the record and see what he did up to the time he got hurt.””³⁴

After this disappointment, Bill Russell was determined to win everything. Beginning with the next season, the Boston Celtics won 8 consecutive championships and the team consisted of such legends as Bob Cousy, Sam Jones, John Havlicek or Bill Russell’s friend and teammate from university K.C. Jones, with Bill leading the team. Their streak of championships was cut off by the Philadelphia 76ers when they won the championship in 1967, however, the

³³ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 121. Adobe Digital Edition.

³⁴ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 128. Adobe Digital Edition.

Celtics won two more championships after that with Bill Russell not only as a player, but also as a coach.

This was another very important milestone in American professional basketball, because Bill Russell was the first African American coach in the NBA. He was recommended for the coaching position by Red Auerbach himself.

“Unable to agree on any other choice, Auerbach suggested that Russell assume the role of coach himself, while continuing to play on the team. Auerbach never employed an assistant, Russell resolved that he too would serve without an assistant. The move was a bold one, not only because Russell had agreed to serve simultaneously as player and coach, but because no African American had ever coached a major league sports team in the United States.”³⁵

Despite all this tremendous success, he was still African American and even as popular as he was, he still encountered racial discrimination. When the team travelled through the South, Bill and his African American teammates were still refused the basic rights.

“When he couldn’t stay at a hotel with his teammates in Greensboro, it upset him. When he couldn’t eat in all-night cafeteria in St. Louis, it upset him. When he wasn’t allowed in the same waiting rooms or the same restaurants or even the same sections of town as others, it upset him.”³⁶

Bill Russell was proud to be African American and because of his superstar status and popularity, he was able to fight, on some occasions, the racial segregation laws by refusing to play.

“Once, they cancelled a game in Houston because Texas seating laws prohibited Negroes and white people from sitting together. Had the team gone, Bill still would have refused to play, in accordance with a request from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which at the same time asked all Negro athletes to refrain from performing in Houston.”³⁷

The racial segregation upset Bill Russell and even with the example that he was setting on the basketball court, he wanted to make a difference off the

³⁵ Academy of Achievement, “Bill Russell Biography – Academy of Achievement,” last modified February 23, 2011, accessed March 2, 2015. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/rus0bio-1>.

³⁶ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 151. Adobe Digital Edition.

³⁷ Al Hirshberg, *Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics* (New York: J. Messner, 1963), 153. Adobe Digital Edition.

court as well. He was proud of his African ancestors and he took regular trips to Africa and even bought land where he set up rubber plantation with his businesses associates. When Medgar Evers, one of the leaders of the African American Civil Rights Movement, was assassinated, Bill Russell called his brother and asked him if he could help. As a result, Bill was running an integrated basketball camp in segregated Mississippi in memory of Medgar Evers. He used his superstar status and the fact that he was a famous African American athlete to support the Civil Rights Movement and he also marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1963 March on Washington.

Bill Russell set an example for future African American athletes both on and off court and in his 13 seasons with the Boston Celtics, he achieved what no other professional athlete had before him. He won 11 championships, became a coach and established one of the most dominant teams in any sport. He revolutionized the sport of basketball with his defensive skills and determination and he helped integrated the sport. He opened the gates of basketball to generations of African American players and as a result, basketball grew in popularity and today, the sport of basketball has the highest percentage of African Americans in any major sport in United States.

Chapter 4

The American professional basketball in 1960-80

4.1. College and a new professional league

The 1960s were times of change and the Civil Rights Movement campaign to gain full rights and to end racial segregation and discrimination of African Americans. These campaigns were defined by acts of civil resistance such as nonviolent protests that were happening throughout the country or in form of boycotts. As a result, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed and segregation based on race, national origin or religion was banned in all places including parks, restaurants, hotels, theatres and sports arenas and African Americans could not be denied their basic civil rights based on the colour of their skin. The Civil Rights Act was followed by other pieces of legislation that were supposed to ensure equality of rights such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which prohibit racial discrimination in voting and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 which prohibited discrimination in the sale or rental of property. The racial segregation was officially ended by the law, but racial discrimination continued for years and the sport of basketball that was beginning to be dominated by African Americans was no exception.

College basketball was a source for basketball players that would be drafted to the NBA or played for other teams such as the Harlem Globetrotters as professionals. The development of college basketball was crucial for the professional leagues and although the college basketball was integrated before professional basketball, racial discrimination continued to be a problem on university campuses. The first steps in ending the racial discrimination in college basketball were made in 1950s with teams that had as much as three African American starters such as the team of University of San Francisco as mentioned in the previous section and throughout the 1960s there were teams that had four or even five African American starters, however, some college teams had refused to recruit African Americans.

“Adolph Rupp, also a Hall of Fame coach, had refused to recruit blacks. And why should he? First, his Kentucky Wildcats were doing fine without black players. Second, why put up with the wrath of racists and recruit an African American player?”³⁸

Another reason why African American players were sometimes discriminated was that they were being criticized because although they were excellent basketball players, many of them had low grades. African American players usually came from poor families and education was not a priority, rather they spent most of their time on basketball courts hoping that it would be basketball that would secure their future. An opposite example was found in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar who was one of the best college players in history and he certainly was not one of the players that struggled with grades. He excelled both on court as well as in school and he served as an example of how an African American can succeed both academically and in sport. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar quickly became one of the best college players, he was an excellent scorer and he won three consecutive NCAA championships as well as three Most Valuable Player and College Player of the Year awards from 1967 to 1969.

The NBA continued to grow throughout the 1960s and with stars such as Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain, the popularity of the league was rising amongst the general public, however, sports such as baseball and football were more popular. Another league was formed in 1967 to compete with the NBA and it was the American Basketball Association, it lasted for ten years and then merged with the NBA in 1976. Same as on university campuses, the American Basketball Association had problems with racial discrimination.

“In the 1970s, the Dallas ABA team had drop 4 of their 10 black players because, as a team official said, “Whites in Dallas are simply not interested in paying to see an all-black team, and the black population alone cannot support us.””³⁹

One of the theories why basketball was not as popular as baseball or football was that the sport was starting to be dominated by African American players. The United States struggled with the issue of civil rights and racial

³⁸ Frederick McKissack, *Black Hoops: The History of African-Americans in Basketball* (New York:Scholastic, 1999), chap. 9 para. 3. Adobe Digital Edition.

³⁹ Frederick McKissack, *Black Hoops: The History of African-Americans in Basketball* (New York:Scholastic, 1999), chap. 10 para. 5. Adobe Digital Edition.

discrimination and a certain portion of the audience simply did not want to watch teams that consisted mostly from African Americans. It was the new African American stars that would continue to fight against racism in professional basketball and build on the legacy of Bill Russell.

4.2 Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Dr. J

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was selected as a number one pick in the 1969 draft by the Milwaukee Bucks and it was a perfect time to join the NBA. Bill Russell had just ended his professional career and Wilt Chamberlain was in his mid thirties and there was an opening for a new dominant center that would continue to work on the foundations that Russell and Chamberlain build.

Since the first season, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar became a star, he won the Rookie of the Year award and he ranked among the best scorers in the NBA. The following year, he team up with another African American star Oscar Robinson and together they won the first NBA championship for the Milwaukee Bucks. Lewis Alcindor who converted from Catholicism to Islam and adopted the name Kareem Abdul-Jabbar which translates as "noble, powerful servant" had strong cultural and religious beliefs and as a result he was unhappy with his live in Milwaukee after six successful years, he asked for transfer.

"Live in Milwaukee?" he said in an early magazine interview. "No, I guess you could say I exist in Milwaukee. I am a soldier hired for service and I will perform that service well. Basketball has given me a good life, but this town has nothing to do with my roots. There's no common ground."⁴⁰

He was traded to the Los Angeles Lakers where he spent 15 successful years and won five championships with the ball club.

Another big star that had a significant impact on the game of basketball as we know it today was Julius Erving best known by his nickname Dr. J which he acquired presumably for his precision and skill with the ball and his overall excellent athletic abilities. He was known to play above the rim which meant that he was an excellent jumper and he often scored points by dunking the ball.

⁴⁰ "Kareem Abdul-Jabbar," The Biography.com, accessed March 29, 2015. <http://www.biography.com/people/kareem-abdul-jabbar-9174053>.

His playstyle had influenced generations of future basketball players. Today, we are used to see fast, athletic basketball players that are able to “fly through the air” and dunk, but during Erving’s time in the beginning of his career in 1971, this kind of athleticism was previously unseen.

Dr. J started his career playing for the Virginia Squires in the American Basketball Association and he quickly became ABA’s biggest star. He was transferred to New York Nets in 1973 and he won two ABA championships and three Most Valuable Player awards before the merger with the NBA.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Julius “Dr. J” Erving were the biggest stars of the 1970s and together they help further revolutionize the game of basketball. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar with his dominant presence as a center in the NBA and strong cultural and religious beliefs off the court and Julius Erving with his athleticism and ball handling in the ABA. They continued to build on the legacy of Bill Russell and Walt Chamberlain and as a result of the hard work and effort of these African American basketball superstars, the 1980s became one of the most prosperous times in basketball history and they are commonly known as the Golden Age of Basketball.

4.3 The Golden Age of Basketball

The 1980s were defined as a time when basketball stadiums finally became crowded with fans and the league enjoyed tremendous success. The major reason for this change was a rivalry that the NBA had not seen before and it started in the 1979 NCAA finals. The Michigan State University team called the Spartans led by Earvin “Magic” Johnson played against the Indiana State Sycamores led by Larry Bird, the Spartans won the finals and a great rivalry as well as friendship was born between these two future legends that lasted throughout the 1980s.

““We came along at the right time,” says Magic. “That’s all I can say. I needed Larry and he needed me. We pushed each other, meant so much to each other and meant so much to the game. It was a fun time.””⁴¹

⁴¹ Darryl Howerton, "When Larry Met Magic," *NBA*, accessed April 2, 2015. http://www.nba.com/history/encyclopedia_rens_001214.html.

By the time Larry Bird joined the NBA, the game of basketball became to be mostly dominated by African American players and most of the stars were African Americans. It was somewhat of a surprise when Larry Bird, a white player, was able to dominate the game as well as the African American stars. The rivalry between Magic Johnson and Larry Bird had a racial undertone, because whether he liked it or not, Larry Bird was labelled as the “Great White Hope.”

Both players started in the NBA in 1979 and they presented themselves as players that were above all versatile. Magic Johnson was six feet and nine inches tall and he was able to play in a position of a point guard as well as a forward. This was something that was not seen before for a player to be able to compete in two very different positions and be a great scorer, rebounder as well as a passer and for these reasons he gained the nickname “Magic.” He was drafted by Los Angeles Lakers where he teamed up with another African American star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and together they manage to compete in eight NBA finals in 1980s and they won five of them.

Larry Bird was drafted by Boston Celtics and same as Johnson, he was a player that could score, rebound, pass and he was also a great defender and a clutch player who was self-confident and could decide games in the last minute. In his first season, he won the Rookie of the Year Award and Larry Bird competed in five NBA finals out of which the Boston Celtics won three championships.

Combine, the Boston Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers won eight NBA championships during the 1980s and they met three times in the NBA finals with two wins for the Lakers and one for the Celtics. The rivalry between these two clubs and players became legendary and it was one of the reasons why the 1980s were such prosperous times for the NBA.

The 1980s were not defined only by Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. Julius “Dr. J” Erving continued to be a major star for the Philadelphia 76ers until the 1987 when he retired. He won the NBA championship in 1983 and he had a significant impact on future generations of basketball players that modelled themselves according to his playstyle. One of these players was Michael Jordan, a rookie drafted by the Chicago Bulls who became presumably the best player to ever play in the NBA and one of the best athletes in the world.

Michael Jordan was a dominant player from the first year in the NBA and he continued to excel in basketball throughout the 1990s when he won six NBA championships with Chicago Bulls. He became a worldwide known superstar that was recognized not only by his performance on court, but also from commercials and even from movies.

The Golden Age of Basketball was a result of the work of the first African American players that were able to endure and overcome racial discrimination. Teams such as The New York Renaissance and The Harlem Globetrotters, the first African Americans in the NBA Charles Cooper, Earl Lloyd and Nathaniel Clifton and the superstars Bill Russell or Wilt Chamberlain paved the way for the generations of African American players and they contributed with their effort in establishing a decade as prosperous as the 1980s. They also played an important part in creating an environment out of which new stars such as Magic Johnson or Michael Jordan could be born.

Conclusion

Basketball was invented by James Naismith in 1891 for the purposes of entertaining college students during winter when other sports could not be played. Over the years, the game of basketball became widely popular with no small contribution from African American players despite the racial discrimination and segregation during its formative years. Today, basketball in United States is dominated by African American players and these players enjoy wide range of popularity that is the direct result of the effort of the early African American players that entered professional basketball and teams that helped in the fight against racism and strived for equality and better conditions for future generations of African American players.

The aim of this thesis was to provide information and examine racism in basketball and describe the gradual integration of the American professional basketball. The forms of racism and racial segregation were first demonstrated on the teams that were created in the early 1920s and exclusively consisted of African American players. The New York Renaissance and Harlem Globetrotters were presented as examples of such teams and the forms of racism were defined. These include African American players not being allowed in the locker rooms nor hotels and as a result, they had to change their clothes in buses and they had to sleep in churches and gyms, they were threatened and verbally abused during games and they were declined admission to early professional leagues that consisted of all white teams.

The first decades of professional basketball were defined by segregation and racial discrimination that reflected the situation in society, however, teams such as the New York Renaissance and Harlem Globetrotters showed the potential of African American players and they served as a source for players that would later enter professional leagues that previously consisted of all white teams and begun the integration of professional basketball in United States.

Another goal of this thesis was to describe and examine the integration of professional basketball which started with the teams New York Renaissance and Harlem Globetrotters as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Despite the racial discrimination, they became very successful teams and as a result of their

efforts the first African American players joined previously all white teams in 1940s, however, they were mostly unrecognized.

Following the first African Americans in previously all white teams the integration of NBA was presented. It begun in 1950s when the first African American players entered the NBA and the people and the media started to notice the begging of integration of professional basketball. Charles Cooper, Earl Lloyd and Nathaniel Clifton were the first African American players that played in the NBA and they broke the basketball color line and started the integration of NBA.

The integration of professional basketball continued throughout the 1950s, however, African American players encountered similar forms of racial discrimination as before. The change in approach towards African American players started when the first African American star entered the league in 1957.

The second half of 1950s and the 1960s were defined by Bill Russell who further helped to integrate professional basketball and fought racism both on and off court. Bill Russell encountered racial discrimination same as any other African American player at that time, but with the way he dominated the game, he was able to secure better conditions for future generations of African American players.

Another step towards the integration of American professional basketball was made with the next generation of African American basketball stars in 1970s. African American basketball stars such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Julius Erving continued to revolutionize the game of basketball and they build on the legacy of Bill Russell.

The result of the integration that started with teams such as the New York Renaissance and the Harlem Globetrotters and continued with first African American players in professional leagues was realized in 1980s. The game of basketball was beginning to be dominated by African American players and the result was seen in the Golden Age of Basketball when African American players such as Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Michael Jordan and later on Shaquille O'Neal or Kobe Bryant enjoyed great success that was build on the groundwork of the first African Americans players that entered the league and had to struggle against racism.

Resumé

Afroameričtí basketbalisté mají v současném americkém basketbale dominantní postavení a jsou považováni za neodmyslitelnou součást tohoto sportu. Toto postavení však nebylo získáno jednoduše a zcela jednoznačně neplatilo v počátcích amerického profesionálního basketbalu. Tato bakalářská práce má za cíl upozornit na formy rasismu a rasové segregace v profesionálním americkém basketbale. Hlavním cílem této práce je přezkoumat formy rasismu na počátku profesionálního basketbalu a postupnou integraci Afroamerických basketbalistů do neznámější basketbalové ligy světa NBA.

V první kapitole je na úvod definován sport basketbalu, důvody jeho vzniku a společenská situace vztahující se k občanským právům Afroameričanů ve Spojených státech amerických. Na příkladech z jiných sportů je demonstrováno, jak se situace ve společnosti odrážela ve sportu.

V další části první kapitoly je zdůrazněn vliv univerzitního basketbalu na celkový vývoj profesionálního basketbalu, který vedl k vytvoření prvních týmů, které se skládaly z hráčů černé pleti. Jako příklad je uveden Cumberland "Cum" Posey, jeden z hráčů, kteří začali svou basketbalovou kariéru na univerzitě a který později založil tým skládající se z černošských hráčů.

Jako další důležitý krok pro vývoj černošského profesionálního basketbalu je uveden vznik týmu New York Renaissance, který byl spojován s kulturním hnutím Harlemská renesance. Hráči tohoto týmu patřili k nejlepším ve Spojených státech, ale z důvodu rasové segregace jim bylo odmítnuto přijetí do jedné z prvních profesionálních basketbalových lig. Dále jsou pak uvedeny příklady rasové diskriminace, se kterými se hráči týmu New York Renaissance potýkali. Jako druhý velmi důležitý tým, který byl založen ve dvacátých letech dvacátého století a který hrál zásadní roli v boji proti rasismu v basketbale je uveden tým Harlem Globetrotters. Stejně jako New York Renaissance se i Harlem Globetrotters potýkali s rasovou diskriminací a přes všechny tyto obtíže se tyto týmy stali jedny z nejúspěšnějších a sloužili jako ukázka potenciálu hráčů černé pleti.

Hlavní část této práce je zaměřena na integraci Afroamerických basketbalistů do profesionální ligy NBA a je zaměřena na první Afroamerické

hráče a jejich postavení. Ve druhé kapitole je na začátek shrnut vznik nejznámější americké profesionální ligy NBA. Zmíněny jsou první profesionální ligy a úskalí, se kterými se museli tyto ligy vypořádat ve třicátých a čtyřicátých letech dvacátého století. Dále jsou uvedeny důvody vzniku NBA a je naznačen potenciál, který tato liga představovala.

V druhé části této kapitoly je shrnuta společenská situace ve čtyřicátých letech a jsou zde představeny první kroky k ukončení rasové segregace a to jak ve společnosti, tak i ve sportu. Jako příklad jednoho z prvních Afroamerických hráčů, který překonal rasovou segregaci v profesionálním sportu je uveden Jackie Robinson. Zmíněny jsou jeho úspěchy v profesionálním baseballu a celkový dopad na integraci Afroameričanů do profesionálních sportů ve Spojených státech.

Na to navazuje téma prvních Afroamerických basketbalových hráčů v profesionálních ligách ve čtyřicátých letech. Uvedeny jsou příklady hráčů, kteří byli mezi prvními v týmech, které se skládali z bělošských hráčů a s tím související počátky integrace profesionálního basketbalu.

Tyto počátky integrace jsou dále rozvedeny v další části této kapitoly a to na příkladech prvních hráčů, kteří se dostali do NBA. Tito hráči jsou dále představeni a je zdůrazněna jejich důležitost a vliv na integraci profesionálního basketbalu. Dále jsou zmíněny příklady rasové diskriminace, se kterými se Charles Cooper, Earl Lloyd and Nathaniel Clifton museli vypořádat a na konec této kapitoly je shrnuta situace v padesátých letech.

Třetí kapitola se zaměřuje na život Billa Russella, na kterém je ilustrovaná cesta první opravdové Afroamerické basketbalové hvězdy, která zásadně ovlivnila dějiny basketbalu a otevřela brány basketbalu pro další generace Afroamerických basketbalistů. Tato kapitola je rozdělena na čtyři části a to obecné představení Billa Russella, jeho dětství a začátky v basketbalu, univerzitní basketbal a jeho profesionální kariéra.

Na úvod je představena osoba Billa Russella a zmíněny jsou jeho úspěchy a to jak z hlediska basketbalového, tak i jeho důležitost v rámci integrace profesionálního basketbalu a v rámci boje proti rasismu v basketbalu. Pro srovnání je představen další významný basketbalový hráč Wilt Chamberlain, oba tito hráči představovali na konci padesátých a během

šedesátých let hlavní důvod, proč se basketbal stával více populární a proč postupně basketbal začal být dominován hráči černé pleti.

Další část této kapitoly se soustředí na dětství Billa Russella a sociální podmínky, ve kterých vyrůstal. Tato část je zaměřena na jeho původ, to znamená Afroameričan pocházející z chudé rodiny, která žila v segregovaném městě a jak tyto podmínky ovlivnily jeho osobnost a sebevědomí. Dále pak na jeho motivaci jako mladistvého, který žil ve stínu svého bratra, byl nemotorný a měl problém se probojovat do basketbalového týmu a nakonec jeho přerod v basketbalistu s potenciálem stát se profesionálem.

Třetí část této kapitoly popisuje přeměnu Billa Russella z mladého chlapce, kterému chybělo sebevědomí a který byl předmětem posměchu díky své výšce a nemotornosti v muže, který byl sebevědomý a hrdý na svůj původ. Dále jsou zmíněny úspěchy Billa Russella a vliv, který měl na univerzitní basketbal a s tím související rostoucí sláva, která vyústila v návštěvu Bílého domu a účasti na olympijských hrách. Tato přeměna je dokončena, když se z Billa Russella stal jeden z nejžádanějších basketbalistů v zemi.

Poslední část této kapitoly je zaměřena na profesionální kariéru Billa Russella. V první řadě jsou uvedeny okolnosti přestupu do týmu Boston Celtics, které ilustrují změnu v přístupu k Afroamerickým hráčům. Během čtyřicátých let a na začátku padesátých let byly Afroameričtí basketbalisté minimálně zastoupeni v profesionálních ligách a to především díky rasové segregaci a v druhé půlce padesátých let týmy vynakládali velké úsilí, aby získali hráče, jako byl Bill Russell. Na příkladu kariéry Billa Russela je demonstrován vzestup první Afroamerické basketbalové hvězdy, která měla zásadní vliv na vývoj profesionálního basketbalu a také na přístupu k Afroamerickým hráčům. Tým Boston Celtics dominoval na konci padesátých a během šedesátých let v čele s Afroamerickou hvězdou, což změnilo pohled na Afroamerické hráče a ukázalo jejich potenciál. Dále jsou uvedeny příklady, kdy se Bill Russell potýkal s rasovou diskriminací a způsoby, kterými proti ní bojoval a to jak na basketbalové palubovce tak i v osobním životě. Na konci této kapitoly je shrnut celkový dopad, který Bill Russell měl na vývoj profesionálního basketbalu a důsledky, které z tohoto vlivu vyplývají jsou představeny v následující kapitole.

Na začátku poslední kapitoly je shrnuta společenská situace v šedesátých letech a to z pohledu ukončení rasové segregace a přetrvávající rasové diskriminace a to jak ve společnosti, tak v basketbalu.

Dále je představena situace v univerzitním basketbalu a hlavní důvody, které přispívali k rasové diskriminaci. Jako jeden z těchto důvodů je uvedena nedostatečná úroveň vzdělání Afroamerických basketbalistů. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar slouží jako příklad hráče, který vynikal jak na basketbalovém hřišti, tak i studiem na univerzitě.

Další důležitou událostí šedesátých let byl vznik druhé profesionální ligy, která se také potýkala s rasovou diskriminací, ale zároveň vyprodukovala jednu z největších hvězd sedmdesátých let, kterou byl Julius Erving. Spolu s Kareemem Abdulem-Jabbarem dominovali sedmdesátým létům, každý v jiné lize. Představeny jsou obě hvězdy a jejich vliv na vývoj profesionálního basketbalu, způsob jakým pokračovali v integraci a popularizaci basketbalu, která byla započata v padesátých letech hráči jako Bill Russell a Wilt Chamberlain.

Tato bakalářská práce se závěrem snaží shrnout a zhodnotit okolnosti, které vedly ke změnám v basketbalu a vyústily v jedno z nejúspěšnějších období v dějinách basketbalu, které bylo započato rivalitou mezi Earvinem Johnsonem a Larry Birdem. Tito hráči, podobně jako Bill Russell a Wilt Chamberlain v šedesátých a Kareem Abdul-Jabbar a Julius Erving v sedmdesátých letech, dominovali basketbalu v osmdesátých letech. Toto období je považováno za jedno z nejúspěšnějších v historii profesionálního basketbalu a bylo umožněno prvními hráči, kteří se museli vypořádat s rasovou diskriminací a postupnou integrací amerického profesionálního basketbalu.

Summary

The African American basketball players play a major role in today's American professional basketball and they have a dominant position in the sport. The process of acquiring this position was a difficult one, especially in the beginning of the professional basketball in America. This thesis aims at highlighting forms of racism and racial segregation in American professional basketball. The main goal of this thesis is to examine forms of racism in early professional basketball and the eventual integration of African American basketball players into the NBA.

First, the sport of basketball is defined as well as the social situation during the time of creation of basketball. Next, this thesis discusses the relationship between African American basketball players and the early professional basketball leagues with focus on racial discrimination of teams that exclusively consisted of black players.

The main body of this thesis is concerned with the integration of NBA and the first African American players and their position in the league. The life of Bill Russell serves as an example of success and it illustrates the way of the first African American basketball superstar. It discusses his childhood and social conditions in which he grew up and how these conditions affected his professional career.

Furthermore, this thesis concentrates on the situation in 1960s and the official end of racial segregation and the ongoing racial discrimination both in university and professional basketball.

The last part of this thesis summarizes and evaluates the circumstances which led to the changes in basketball and eventually resulted in one of the most prosperous eras in basketball.

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