

Cold Wars

Kareem Tayyar

1.

I think of long bus rides. Of tired men in cramped seats staring out of dirty windows in the middle of the night. Moonlight shining onto sprawling wheat-fields. Rain falling onto poorly paved highways. Wind swirling like crazed dervishes, like dizzy children, like concussed angels who can no longer tell north from south.

They pass billboards for cheap beer, local diners, smiling politicians. They see wild horses, condemned train depots, broken-down cars with drivers nowhere in sight.

The men play cards. Read paperback books. They sleep, or try to. They complain about a referee from the previous night who was too quick with his whistle. They massage sore knees, sore ankles, sore hamstrings. Some of them wonder if they'll be turned away by a hotel clerk at the next town, or a bartender at the next roadhouse.

These are still the years of "I Like Ike," of Jim Crow, of Joseph McCarthy. America has made the world safe for democracy but not for many of its own citizens. Bill Russell spends the early years of his Celtics' career routinely hearing home fans yelling at him to "go back to Africa." Elgin Baylor and his fellow African-American teammates arrive in Charleston, West Virginia, only to be refused lodging for the night.

The games are, as one might imagine, not the most spectator-friendly. For the first half of the 1950s there is no shot clock, which means the last several minutes of close games often resemble an adult version of keep-away. The floors have dead-spots, and the balls are so poorly designed they often don't bounce where one expects them to.

These men play in shoes with minimal ankle support. They play in gyms with no air-conditioning in the summers, no heat in the winters. They survive on bad food and cheap cigarettes, and are signed to contracts that no union would endorse.

Of course, there is no union. But there are plenty of rich men, all of them white and eager to take advantage of this.



NBA Cold Warriors (left to right): Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, and Elgin Baylor.

2.

So many of those early franchises have been long forgotten by even the hardest of die-hards: the Cleveland Rebels, the Pittsburgh Ironmen, the Providence Steamrollers, the Toronto Huskies, the Washington Capitols. Names that are only passed back and forth by gregarious, you-should-have-been-there-when types in the bars that populate those cities and the occupants of the occasional metropolitan nursing home who had been, back in their days, high-level sports junkies.

To even enter those names into this document causes something of an out-of-body experience for this writer. The thought of an NBA team in Pittsburgh seems as likely as one in Albuquerque, and the thought of one in Providence as plausible as one on the dark side of the moon.

Yet my grandfather once told me about a childhood friend of his who moved to Pittsburgh after the war, and who one night saw the little-used journeyman guard Press Maravich dribble the ball behind his back to avoid an approaching defender and then, upon getting into the lane, throwing a no-look pass over his right shoulder to a trailer for an easy layup. My grandfather said the friend told and retold that story several times over the years the way a man might recount the tale of seeing Bigfoot in the Oregon woods, or the Loch Ness monster while fishing in rural Scotland.

"Do you think it was true?" I asked my grandfather when I was 12 or 13.

"That depends," he said.

"On what?"

"On what type of world you want to live in."

"I think it's true."

"I always knew you were smart, kid."

Sometimes I wish footage survived from some of those early Basketball Association of America games. My guess is I'd probably spend entire nights studying them on YouTube the way Kennedy assassination fanatics pore over the

Zapruder film. But more often I'm glad that nothing — or almost nothing — has survived. Sports needs its mythologies as much as, if not more than, any other part of culture, and the cable, streaming, and digital eras have all but annihilated that possibility.

3.

The problem with being not only the greatest winner in the history of team sports, but also one of the most vital Civil Rights' figures in the story of 20th Century America, is that the specific aspects of your game that made you a first-ballot Hall-of-Famer tend to go unremarked upon. Which is what has made Bill Russell perhaps the most underrated great player in NBA history, even though the game's most prestigious individual award, the MVP of the Finals, is named in his honor. Not that I am going to bore you with Russell's individual stats to make my point. Nor am I going to attempt to emphasize the softness of his hands, his Jessie Owens-esque ability to fill the lane on a fast-break, special in a man of any size but especially in a center like himself, nor his never-equalled gift at blocking an opponent's shot, corralling that block, and then throwing a picture-perfect outlet pass to Bob Cousy in what so often seemed like a single motion.

These things, of course, are all true and, when coupled with Russell's wizard-level instincts when it came to working the defensive glass and his penchant for finishing in the paint against men significantly bigger than him — his most storied rival, Wilt Chamberlain, was four inches taller and 60 pounds heavier — they combine to make Russell one of the three greatest centers of all time by any measure, Chamberlain and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar being his only equals.

Instead I'd like to describe a single highlight of Russell's to you, and explain how, in this 11-second clip, Russell can be seen as Adam in the NBA Garden, the one from whom every other great player to follow was born.

In the clip, a grainy black-and-white video that looks like something Roberto Rossellini might have shot in between *Open City* and *Paisa*, we see Russell skying above everyone else to haul in a rebound. And by sky, I don't mean this figuratively; Russell is so high in the air that he looks eerily like Dominique Wilkins' older brother, part astronaut, part-Greek god. In addition, the ferocity with which he pulls the ball off the glass is something that reminds a middle-aged fan like myself of Moses Malone in his prime.

Unlike Malone, however, Russell does not look to pass the ball to a teammate to begin the fast break. He instead starts the break himself, dribbling with the ease and finesse of Magic Johnson and the footspeed of LeBron James. Indeed, Russell, a champion track-and-field athlete at the University of San Francisco, is fast enough in the clip to make it seem like the video has been artificially sped up, even though this is clearly not the case.

Too much of the American public preferred to see Chamberlain as a towering brute blessed with such incomparable physical gifts that to root for him would have been the equivalent of rooting for the tornado rather than the small town.

Then, after having gone the length of the floor in only five dribbles, Russell leaps towards the basket from just inside the free throw line, hurdling a defender who has stepped in front of him to take the charge.

And when I say hurdle, I mean he jumps completely over the guy — the way we were told as kids that Superman could “leap tall buildings in a single bound,” or the way Blake Griffin, in the 2011 Slam Dunk Contest, leapt over a Kia sedan — before arriving at the rim for a layup.

It is, in a word, insane. The maybe greatest center in the history of the league has transformed from Dominique to Moses to Magic to LeBron to Jordan in a span of 11 seconds, and made it look easy enough to have made this writer begin to think he was hallucinating.

4.

The most impressive stat in league history, amazingly, doesn't belong to Wilt Chamberlain. It belongs to Elgin Baylor, a late-period teammate of Chamberlain's who averaged 38 points a game during the 1961-62 season even though he couldn't attend practice or weekday games because, as an Army reservist, he spent the entire year stationed at Fort Lewis in Washington state.

In other words, playing small forward for the Lakers was his second job, yet Baylor performed it at such a high level that he was named to the Western Conference All-Star squad and the All-NBA team.

Except that isn't what I want to talk about.

It's no surprise that Baylor was the one to accomplish something as impressive as this. During his peak years it seemed there was nothing he couldn't do on a basketball court: he was a high flyer who could also bang in the low post, and a terror on the defensive glass who also possessed a feathery jumper.

What I instead want to talk about is why Elgin Baylor's career always makes me think of Langston Hughes' classic poem, “Let America Be America Again,” especially this verse:

*I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!*

After all, Baylor was of that early cohort of NBA players who were not only playing in a league that had yet to be unionized, but who were often competing under labor conditions so appalling they would have been suitable material for activist writers like Upton Sinclair or Carl Sandburg to chronicle.

So on the night of January 16, 1959, in Charleston, West Virginia, for a game against the Cincinnati Royals, Baylor and Ed Fleming and Boo Ellis, his African American teammates, were refused lodging at a hotel, and refused service at a local restaurant. Baylor, in response, refused to suit up for that night's game, even though he was, no surprise, taunted with racist criticisms to which he said in response, "We're human beings. Not like animals in the circus or something."

Fast forward five years to the 1964 All-Star game in Boston, and the players, having seen the league break its promise to give them "pensions, not to have to play Sunday afternoon games after Saturday night games, and to have trainers at every game," led by Baylor, Oscar Robertson, and Jerry West, refused to leave the locker room for the game unless their demands were met. The typical chaos ensued — the Lakers owner Bob Short was particularly awful—but the players held their ground, led by Baylor.

The owners, realizing that the players could not be intimidated — and aware that the game, the first All-Star game to be televised, was too financially important to cancel — acceded to the players' demands, and the game was played as scheduled.

It is no understatement to state that that particular afternoon — and led in no small part by Elgin Baylor's courage and character — laid the groundwork for the truly remarkable financial wealth and benefits that would ultimately come the players' way in the next six plus decades. And in the story of American labor in this country, a story full of breathtaking highs and devastating lows, it deserves to be seen as something other than a footnote.

5.

Wilt Chamberlain sits in his white Philadelphia Warriors jersey in front of his locker and holds a small sign upon which the number "100" is written. It remains, even all these years later, the most famous still photograph in league history, commemorating as it does a seminal moment in American sports: the game where a man has just scored 100 points in a victory over the visiting New York Knicks.

There is that unmistakable smile, the never-cooler-on-anyone-else mustache, and there is an almost boyish enthusiasm that radiates from the pride he obviously feels at his accomplishment.

Though he is clearly a man of significant height and Olympian physique, he is too good-natured, too open-hearted, too down-to-earth to be mistaken for a modern-day Beowulf. Instead he just seems like the biggest kid on the playground, one as eager to make friends as he is to score points.

Except too much of the American public refused to accept these obvious truths. They preferred to see him as a towering brute blessed with such incomparable physical gifts that to root for him would have been the equivalent of rooting for the tornado rather than the small town.

"Nobody roots for Goliath," the man famously said.

He wasn't wrong, especially in that era, when sports fans were all too willing to chalk up his dominance to the simple fact that he was bigger and stronger than everyone else.

But so what that he was? For all of the ways in which sports can be a reflection of real life, it is also supposed to be a place where the limits of what's possible can be transcended, at least for the duration of the game.

And there is no one, in basketball or any other sport, that was a better, more thrilling example of this than Wilt Chamberlain, the closest thing to a Marvel Comics superhero that this country has ever seen.

Pull up his highlights on YouTube, and even now it doesn't seem possible. He leaps so quickly, and with such force, for not only a man his size but any size, that it seems as if he has miniature trampolines in his shoes. Yet at the top of his jump, when his defenders have long since returned to earth, he unveils the softest of finger-rolls with the kind of gentle touch that a nursing mother might show to her newborn infant.

Or, in the spirit of the real-life superhero that he always was, forget YouTube. Power down your computer, turn off the television. Instead close your eyes and imagine 1972. The Lakers are in the midst of a never-been-broken 33 game winning streak. Chamberlain, wearing his home team's gold uniform with the purple trim — and looking as regal as Thor on his home planet of Asgard in between missions to Earth to aid his fellow Avengers — corrals an offensive rebound off a Jerry West miss, and initially goes back up with a relatively uninspired put-back attempt. When it is unsuccessful, Chamberlain decides to kick into overdrive, pulls down a second offensive rebound, gathers himself, and explodes towards the rim for a thunderous dunk.

Now play it again in your mind's eye, this time in slow motion. Cherish the scene. It is the sporting equivalent of a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo, or Marlon Brando performing *A Streetcar Named Desire* on Broadway. It isn't meant to last; just the opposite. Its beauty is in its impermanence, its ephemerality. Don't take this for granted, your memory reminds you. We love sports for the same reason we love art: it shows us that sometimes what shouldn't be possible actually is.

6.

It is an era too steeped in injustice to feel nostalgic for its passing. Terms like “structural racism” and “systemic inequality” are well-suited to describing the conditions the players endured. But such injustices make it even more necessary not to forget these men — what they accomplished, both on and off the court — and to recognize that the contemporary game that we love so much has been made possible by their struggles, their sacrifices, and their refusal to surrender.

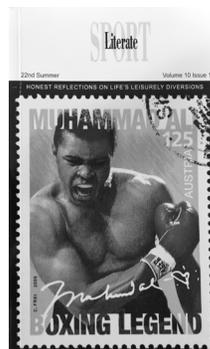
At the end of *Saving Private Ryan*, Steven Spielberg's seminal World War II film, Captain Miller, in the moments before he dies, tells Private Ryan: “Earn this.” It is clear to Ryan, as it is to the viewer, that what Miller means is that Ryan shouldn't squander the enormous opportunity his fellow soldiers have afforded him. He has been granted a future, and it is a gift of such significance and sanctity that to do anything other than cherish it would be a mortal sin.

I think about that line sometimes when I'm watching a game on television, or have gone with a few friends up to Los Angeles to watch a Lakers or Clippers home game. The early years of the NBA were full of Captain Millers, and even all these many decades later, their legacies should be constant reminders to all of us who love this game that it is our responsibility to honor the world that they helped create.

Kareem Tayyar's most recent collection, *Keats in San Francisco & Other Poems*, was released in 2022 by Lily Poetry Review Books, and his work has appeared in literary journals, including *Poetry Magazine*, *Prarie Schooner*, and *Alaska Quarterly Review*.

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