

## Section 2. Cultural studies

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### **NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION AND ITS INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

The creation of Jim Crow Segregation laws since the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896 had been the American social and cultural norm for about half a century. Public facilities such as restrooms, restaurants, and parks were segregated between black and white citizens. The first major pushback against this discrimination was the Civil Rights Movement. The common perception of the initiation of this movement was the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which outlawed segregation in school since 1954. It was then followed by a series of social and political efforts to promote African American civil rights, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Civil Rights Act, and Voting Rights Act under Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ)'s presidency, which attempted to challenge pre-existing segregation. Nevertheless, the idea of promoting civil rights for African American had emerged prior to those events.

The desegregation in athletic fields was a precursor to the Civil Rights Movement, which happened from the late 1940s to early 1950s. The most famous story of this was Jackie Robinson who broke the color barrier in the Major League Baseball. However, the impact of integration of African American players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) was less recognized. As a matter of fact, the NBA indeed played an important role in the Civil Rights Movement. The league was a pioneer in desegregating African and White Americans, earlier than that of schools and other public facilities. Eventually, the early success of integration inspired more Black players to join the league, as it transformed a white league with only three Black players into an equally mixed one from 1950 to 1965. The NBA also provided a platform for prominent players, as representative of the nation's Black population, to assert their social influence, specifically on the Civil Rights Movement, and it was an important opportunity for some African American to raise their social economic status.

Integration in the NBA was more successful than other sports leagues because white players are less racist. The 1950 NBA draft was the first wave of integration

in the league, as three black players, Earl Lloyd, Chucker Cooper, and Nat Clifton, joined the league in the same year<sup>1</sup>. Each of them made history in different ways: Lloyd was the first black player to play in a game, Cooper was the first to get drafted, and Clifton was the first to sign a contract<sup>2</sup>. During an interview on Earl Lloyd, Lloyd compared his experience as a black player to Robinson in the Major League Baseball, “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. In basketball, folks were used to seeing integrated teams at the college level. There was a different mentality.”<sup>3</sup> Bob Pettit, Hall of Famer and a former teammate of Clifton, complimented Clifton as “a good defender, good rebounder, and nice guy in general”<sup>4</sup>. In fact, members of the NBA teams embraced the diversity and sought to create a better community for those black players, contributing to the successful NBA integration. Once Earl Lloyd and his team Washington Capitols were in a hotel at Fort Wayne, Indiana, the hotel prohibited him to eat in the restaurant<sup>5</sup>. His coach Bones McKinney joined him to eat with him in the hotel room<sup>6</sup>. Lloyd said,

- “I really appreciate it. What he was telling me was, as far as he was concerned, I was an integral part of his basketball team. You can’t ask for any more than that. Here was a guy from Wake Forest, North Carolina. And he had done something where if he had not done it, nobody would have criticized him. So here was a guy who stepped up when it wasn’t popular. Bones will always remain one of my favorite people”<sup>7</sup>.

Such moments symbolized the successful assimilation of black people into these previously all white teams. It was not only important to Lloyd himself, but also crucial to the success of future widespread integration in the NBA. Moreover, this incident, happening in 1950, showed initial ideas of civil rights and desegregation in parts of the society.

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<sup>1</sup> NBA. “Top Moments: Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, Nat Clifton Blaze New Path in NBA”. NBA.com, last modified September 14, 2021. Accessed: May 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.nba.com/news/history-top-moments-earl-lloyd-chuck-cooper-nat-clifton-new-path-nba>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Earl Lloyd. “50TH ANNIVERSARY: BREAKING the BARRIER the First African-American Player in the NBA Discusses His Historic Role as a Pioneer of the Game”, interview by Brad Herzog, *Basketball Digest* 27, – No. 7. (May 2000): 67. URL: <https://web.pebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=acb9d3c4-52de-4668-b9e4-05d3d146427c%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbgGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=3090833&db=f6h>

<sup>4</sup> “Black History Month: 1950 NBA Draft African-American Pioneers”. Documentary video, 3:06. Youtube, posted by NBA Cares, February 4, 2021. Accessed: May 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWeJtVjYtYE>

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd. “50 TH ANNIVERSARY”. Interview, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

While there was openness toward African Americans among NBA players, these Black pioneers still faced other kinds of discriminations. The NBA fans were less tolerable to Black players at that time. Lloyd's former teammate Johnny "Red" Kerr recalled that while he and Lloyd were hugging to celebrate a victory, fans spit toward Lloyd<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in games at Baltimore or Indiana, the only name fans called Lloyd was "nigger"<sup>2</sup>. He was even asked to show his tails or go back to Africa<sup>3</sup>. The difference in attitude between teammates and fans showed that the integration of the NBA happened during the early stage of the Civil Rights Movement, without the support of the majority of the society.

Consequently, those players shared a tight bond between one another to avoid racial injustice. Lloyd claimed that they were responsible for each other, "In New York, Sweets (Clifton) and I would go out after a game. In Boston, Chuck would tell me where to go and where not to go. That was a tough town for black folks. The three of us understood the implications of what we were doing. But usually, when we got together, it was time for something a little lighter. We'd go out to a nightclub, listen to music, that kind of thing"<sup>4</sup>. By developing a cohesive and comfortable black community within the league, it further facilitated the integration and the surge of more black players joining league in future years. Earl Lloyd even expanded his "responsibility" to influence other African Americans down the path of basketball. He became the mentor of Jim Lewis, a former African American basketball coach for George Mason University women's team and the first head coach for the Washington Mystics of WNBA<sup>5</sup>. Lloyd helped Lewis to start his basketball career, earning a basketball scholarship at West Virginia University<sup>6</sup>. Players like Lloyd popularized basketball among black communities, promoting desegregation of the sport beyond the NBA in college level and female leagues.

The 1950 NBA draft had further implications. "It was great that we had the great personalities of the people of Earl Lloyd, Cooper, and Sweetwater to come to be the man who started this for us," said Willis Reed, Hall of Fame Class of 1982<sup>7</sup>. Because of the three black pioneers, more talented black players were inspired to joined NBA,

<sup>1</sup> NBA. "Top Moments". NBA.com.

<sup>2</sup> Bell. "Earl Lloyd" 46.

<sup>3</sup> NBA. "Top Moments". NBA.com.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd. "50 TH ANNIVERSARY". Interview, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Harold Bell. "Earl Lloyd – the perfect case for Black history". New York Amsterdam News 90,– No. 17. (April 22, 1999): 46. URL: <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=b4f08535-6122-4e3c-bdf8-a0ed1758d48c%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d&AN=1815681&db=f6h>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Black History". Video.

which later influenced the Civil Rights Movement. The first group of Black superstars included the rivalry between Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain, emerged in the 1959. Both signed contract that are over hundred thousand dollars in 1965<sup>1</sup>. Their relatively high salary made them the first group of Black high-income class in American society. Bill Russell first elevated the national pride of the African American race. Prior to the NBA, he agreed to President Eisenhower to join the 1956 US Olympic team and won gold medal for the country<sup>2</sup>. During his career in the league, he created the Boston Celtics Dynasty, winning 11 championship titles in total and becoming the Sportsman of the Year in 1968<sup>3</sup>. He had proven that the Negro race are capable to high performance in the sport<sup>4</sup>. Russell became the “first real gate attraction” as Historian Aram Goudsouzian from The University of Memphis wrote in his journal article *Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*, bringing more commercial value and audience to the league<sup>5</sup>.

After earning a high income and social reputation, Bill Russell became a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. Bill Russell, as a Black celebrity, had unprecedented impact to further advance the civil rights in the league and beyond. Goudsouzian further claimed that it was “Russell who started the basketball revolution”<sup>6</sup>. In the early sixties, the league had an unofficial black quota system in which each teams agreed to limit signing Black players, because they were afraid to lose white audience<sup>7</sup>. Russell publicly denounced this practice through newspaper articles and interviews<sup>8</sup>. With his high position in the NBA, he successfully brought an end to this quota. By 1965–66 season, Black players composed half of the league and three-fourth of the All-Stars<sup>9</sup>. The change demonstrated the significant influence of Bill Russell, an African American, to the league. He was able to use his individual impact to transform NBA from a white league into a Black player dominated one.

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<sup>1</sup> Winnie Muriuki. “Bill Russell Net worth 2022: Age, Height, Weight, Wife, Kids, Bio-Wiki”. *Wealthy Persons*, February 2, 2022. Accessed May 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.wealthypersons.com/bill-russell-net-worth-2020-2021>

<sup>2</sup> Aram Goudsouzian. “Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution”. *American Studies* 47,– No. 3/4 (2006): 62. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40643954>

<sup>3</sup> George Plimpton. “Sportsman of the Year BILL RUSSELL”. *Sports Illustrated* 29,– No. 26. (December 23, 1968): 40. URL: <https://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=16&sid=b7abd02c-1107-444d-8c34-ffe732491ec0%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtG12ZQ%3d%3d#AN=54028886&db=f6h>

<sup>4</sup> Plimpton. “Sportsman of the Year”. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Goudsouzian. “Bill Russell”. 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 72.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Goudsouzian. “Bill Russell”.

Russel's "basketball revolution" had wider impact in American society beyond changing the racial demographic in the league. He had his own idea of individualism to advocate for civil rights: to "see each other as men, judge a guy by his character"<sup>1</sup>. He questioned the effectiveness Martin Luther King's nonviolence protest, believing that if people did not firmly express their dissatisfaction, the society would ignore them<sup>2</sup>. He was also active in many 1960s civil rights demonstration. Condemning the racial climate in Boston, Russel led a 10,000-person human rights rally from Roxbury to Boston Common<sup>3</sup>. He even participated in other major civil rights demonstration as well, such as the March on to Washington and the Freedom Summer campaign. Bill Russel was a civil rights activist whose influence was overwhelmed by his basketball talent.

As a result of the demographic transformation of the league, Russel was able to uplift the social status of the Black race by opening basketball related career to them. African American player and the league mutually benefited from the broadened integration. The league signed more broadcasting contracts and received larger market values from talented Black players. Those players themselves improved their social economic status through the league. This change was also successful in ending any de facto segregation from the management teams of the league. Different from other desegregation like *Brown v. Board* case, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act, all of which faced opposition made by white communities, opening the league to more Black players came easier. It was a natural shift that no one had questioned. In the early 1960s when the league was still primarily white, problems of Black class rigidity were prevalent. Most of the Black population remained in the lower class. Even though the US government made it unconstitutional to separate schools by race, African American students still received limited quality education because of the Massive Resistance toward the *Brown v. Board* case. Consequently, African Americans struggled to work their way up to middle class. Luckily, Russell sought a solution to this problem: challenge the black quota rule and open the door of NBA to more Black people. Average NBA players income was over 5,000 dollars, which was slightly higher than the national average in 1968<sup>4</sup>. Not to mention that higher proportion of the All Stars are Black, earning much higher income than the average. These statistics showed playing in the league was an effective way to raise economic status for African Americans. In fact, being an All-Star player meant even

<sup>1</sup> Boston Globe. 6 May, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Goudsouzian. "Bill Russell". – 71 p.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. – 70 p.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bradley. Labor Pains Nothing New to the NBA, 1. Accessed: May 26, 2022. URL: <https://www.apbr.org/labor.html#:~:text=Its%20origin%20in%20basketball%20can,there%20were%20a%20few%20exceptions.>

higher social status and influence, becoming the “elite” African American class. It was life changing for poor Black men to play in the league. Because of this, they had the wealth to integrate and to live in better communities, providing better environment to raise their next generation. Bill Russell himself, integrated his family into a white suburban community<sup>1</sup>. Even though they faced some opposition, it was the first step of creating a truly desegregated American society. While only the top few talented African Americans basketball players could make it to the league and raise their individual socio-economic status, it was a major step on improving the social standing of African Americans as a whole, because the change demonstrated that blacks are equally if not more competent than whites in certain fields. Without Russell or other elite black basketball players, African Americans still would remain being the minorities in the league and the lower class of the society and the Civil Rights Movement would have been not as effective as it was; the history of complete desegregation of African American in the nation’s society would be postponed.

The National Basketball Association was crucial in the American Civil Rights Movement History. Not only it was a pioneer of desegregation, but the league also made the black race proud of themselves. The NBA created prominent African Americans like Bill Russell to advance the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, the league continued to be an important part of the Civil Rights Movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Percentage of black players in the league skyrocketed to over 80 percent and there are no signs of decreasing in the future<sup>2</sup>. Even though NBA players grew to become the top percentage income class in America, earning much more than average Americans and becoming the center of media attention, they still served as the representatives of the African American community of the country. When African American George Floyd was innocently killed because of police suspicions in 2020, his death sparked the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Almost all NBA players also participated in the movement, protesting for the discriminated treatment from polices. They collectively dressed in BLM shirts and kneeled during the national anthem before each game during the 2020 NBA playoffs<sup>3</sup>. To some extent, it was another form of civil disobedience against racial injustice similar to those of MLK and Bill Russell in the 1960s. Whether it is the integration of races in the NBA, or the protest for BLM, NBA became a prominent activist of racial equality in the world, demonstrating a continuation in its effort fighting against unjust laws and social norms with black colored

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<sup>1</sup> Goudsouzian. “Bill Russell”. 72.

<sup>2</sup> John Compton. “What Percentage of NBA Players Are Black?” Sportsmanist, accessed May 26, 2022. URL: <https://sportsmanist.com/what-percentage-of-nba-players-are-black>

<sup>3</sup> Ally Mauch. “LeBron James, Fellow NBA Players Kneel for National Anthem in BLM Shirts as Season Returns”. People, July 31, 2020. [Page #], accessed May 26, 2022. URL: <https://people.com/sports/lebron-james-fellow-nba-players-kneel-for-national-anthem-in-black-lives-matter-shirts>

people. The nature of this league with one of the world's largest percentages of black employees has brought this organization to the center of the Civil Rights Movement since its creation, and this trend will remain in the future.

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