

Bill Russell, basketball's first black superstar, 11-time champion, and opponent of racial injustice, dies at age 88

Alan Gilman
3 August 2022

Bill Russell, who revolutionized professional basketball with his defensive skills and unparalleled teamwork, while being an outspoken critic of racial injustice both in his sport and in American society as a whole, died Sunday at the age of 88.

Under his leadership, the Boston Celtics won an unprecedented 11 National Basketball Association (NBA) championships in 13 seasons from 1956 to 1969, the most dominant record in any US professional sport. Russell won five NBA awards for Most Valuable Player, was an All-Star 12 times, and elected to the Hall of Fame.

Before joining the Celtics and beginning his professional career, Russell led the University of San Francisco (USF) to two consecutive national collegiate championships, and then the US Olympic team to the gold medal in the 1956 Melbourne Games. He and his USF and Celtics teammate K. C. Jones had the rare distinction of having played on teams that won National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Olympic and NBA titles in a span of only 13 months.

Before Russell, centers had been taught to play flatfooted and not leave their feet when defending their opponents. Russell transformed the center position by using his tremendous athletic gifts and mobility to block shots, force errant shots and rebound. By focusing on defense in a game that had been built on scoring, Russell became a dominating presence on the court.

Former teammate Tommy Heinsohn told the *Boston Herald* in 1999 that Russell “could absolutely control a game defensively ... His defensive genius was something completely foreign to the NBA.”

Celtics coach and president Red Auerbach put it succinctly: “Russell single-handedly revolutionized this game simply because he made defense so important.”

His efforts made all his teammates better, and what

teammates! The 1962-63 Celtics championship team included not only K. C. Jones, his former teammate from USF, but Sam Jones, Bob Cousy, Bill Sharman, John Havlicek, Clyde Lovellette, Frank Ramsey and Satch Sanders. All have since been elected to the Hall of Fame.

In 1966, when Auerbach retired as coach, he named Russell as a player-coach, making him the first black coach in the NBA. During Russell's three years as the player-coach for the Celtics, Boston won two championships. After Russell retired as a player, he later coached the Seattle Supersonics and the Sacramento Kings.

Aside from his abundance of championships, what set Russell apart from other star athletes of his time was his willingness, at the height of his career, to speak publicly about issues that centered on racism, civil rights, and the fight for equality.

Russell was born in 1934 in West Monroe, Louisiana and as young a child witnessed his parents being subjected to the cruelties and indignities that were commonplace at the time in the Jim Crow South.

At the age of eight, his family moved to Oakland, California and as a youth Russell soon learned that blacks were not welcomed in certain parts of Oakland. “I couldn't even go downtown,” Russell recalled, “The cops would chase the black kids away.”

In college, Russell's USF team was the first college team to start three black players. Russell and his black teammates often became targets of racist jeers, particularly on the road, and in one incident were denied admittance to any hotels in Oklahoma City.

Decades later, Russell explained that these experiences hardened him against abuse of all kinds, saying: “I never permitted myself to be a victim.” This was not just endurance, however. These experiences made Russell an

outspoken critic of injustice.

As early as 1958, Russell said the NBA had an unwritten quota system that effectively held back black players, noting that no team at the time had more than three.

During a Southern swing of exhibition games by the Celtics in 1961, Russell led a boycott by black players for a game in Lexington, Kentucky after they had been turned away by the hotel where the rest of the team would be staying. This became the first NBA boycott over inequality.

Russell was also an early participant in the civil rights movement that was gaining momentum by the mid-1960s. He went to Mississippi in 1961 to lend support to the Freedom Riders protesting segregation and participated in the March on Washington for civil rights in 1963, where he witnessed Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

Russell also conducted integrated basketball clinics in Jackson, Mississippi, after the 1963 assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Russell had been asked by Evers' brother, Charles, if he was willing to go to Jackson, Mississippi, and be a coach for the first interracial basketball camp for kids. Jackson was heavily segregated at the time, and despite death threats, Russell agreed. Years later, he said, "It was just something I felt I had to do."

Despite being Boston's greatest player, Russell faced continual harassment in that city, in large part because of his political activism and his race. On one occasion, the Russell family's home was vandalized, his trophies smashed, his bed and walls smeared with excrement, and racial epithets were sprayed on the walls.

In a letter to the *New York Times* in 1987, Russell's daughter Karen detailed this incident and others. "Every time the Celtics went out on the road, vandals would come and tip over our garbage cans," Karen wrote. "My father went to the police station to complain. The police told him that raccoons were responsible, so he asked where he could apply for a gun permit. The raccoons never came back."

"We received threatening letters, and my parents notified the Federal Bureau of Investigation. What I find most telling about this episode is that years later, after Congress had passed the Freedom of Information Act, my father requested his FBI file and found that he was repeatedly referred to therein as 'an arrogant Negro who won't sign autographs for white children'."

In 1966, at the height of his career, Russell described

how he felt about the city of Boston, the city where he was winning championship after championship. "A poisoned atmosphere hangs over this city. It is an atmosphere of hatred, mistrust and ignorance," he replied.

Russell was also a vocal critic of the Vietnam War and spoke out on behalf of Muhammad Ali when the celebrated boxer refused to be drafted into the military.

In 2017, Russell wore his Presidential Medal of Freedom medal, which he had received from Barack Obama in 2011, in a photo posted of himself taking a knee. Russell explained that he was making a statement about social injustice in support of Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who knelt during the national anthem before NFL games in a demonstration against police brutality and racial injustice.

Russell, who retired in 1969, became in 1975 the first black player to be inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame. He would not, however, attend his induction ceremony.

Some 44 years later in 2019, however, Russell did accept his Hall of Fame ring in a private ceremony. Russell explained that he did not deserve to be the first black player inducted. "I felt others before me should have that honor," he wrote in a tweet on November 15, 2019. His tweet specifically mentioned Chuck Cooper, who in 1950 was the first African American player drafted by the NBA but who was not inducted to the Hall of Fame until 2019.

Jerry West, the Hall of Fame Los Angeles Laker who was one of Russell's most intense rivals, having lost numerous championship contests to him, told the *Los Angeles Times* upon learning of his death, that this was "one of our darker days. He was one of those unique people who come along as a difference maker when a difference maker is needed.... In every generation people make a difference not only with their play, but also with their persona. Bill Russell and Jackie Robinson were in that same class."



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