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INTRODUCTION

I was twelve years old when my father took me to see my first college basketball game—the University of San Francisco against whom I can't remember. But I do remember that it was during the 1949–50 season, the year after the Dons won the NIT, then the biggest college tournament in the country. Don Lofgran, Rene Herrerias, Ross Guidice. What a night.

If I saw another college game in the next five or six years, I can't remember it. But I do recall seeing the 1955 and 1956 Dons play during the years they won the NCAA tournament. As a youngster I just appreciated good basketball. I wasn't able to recognize the historic and cultural significance of the excitement on the court. Perhaps it has taken me fifty years to gain that perspective, but I've never forgotten the game Bill Russell and K. C. Jones brought to the hardwoods in those years. They changed basketball in terms of race, rules, strategy, and even popularity.

Fifty-one years later while watching the grainy, black-and-white highlight films of games I saw as a teenager, I recalled how different the game was back then. It was slower and much less

physical. Over the years officials have allowed players to become more aggressive. Basketball is no longer a noncontact sport.

In the 1950s you didn't see palming of the ball, pushing and shoving, or high levels of turnovers. Nor did you see tattoos, headbands, T-shirts under jerseys, or baggie pants. "We weren't trash-talkers and in-your-face the way a lot of players are today," said Mike Farmer, a forward on the 1956 championship team. What you did see were set shots when players' feet rarely left the floor. The same was true on the defensive end, where teams took defense to mean a chance to rest up for their offensive. And then there were those underhand free throws.

With the USF Dons several things stood out. Gene Brown's skills rivaled those of Michael Jordan with his twisting jump shots. Bill Russell jumped higher above the rim than anyone I had ever seen. K. C. Jones was inside his opponent's jersey on defense. Opponents rarely got off set shots against the tenacious Dons' defense. Only once in the highlight films did I see an opponent make a set shot, and that was Bernie Simpson of Cal, who drilled one from at least thirty feet away, far beyond today's pro three-point line.

The game in the mid-1950s had more finesse—almost like slow-motion ballet—compared with what we see today. Athletes are more athletic and much bigger now, there's no doubt about that. And coaches play a much greater role during a game as well. USF coach Phil Woolpert just let his team play. No plays were called out from the bench, and there were no special plays for Bill Russell. Coaches didn't call repeated time-outs to tell the team what to do. Money and television have changed the game. During a game in the 1956–57 season, Cal's Pete Newell and UCLA's John Wooden entered into a psychological battle to see who would call the first time-out. Wooden gave in first, calling a time-out with four minutes left in the game. That time-out gave Cal a psychological lift that enabled the Bears to pull ahead and

win. Today television demands a break every four minutes for commercials; coaches often hold out for those commercial time-outs to avoid using one of their own. At times teams resume play after a commercial time-out, run up and down the court a couple of times, and then abruptly stop playing again when the coach calls a time-out. Where's the rhythm? Where's the momentum? Whatever happened to just letting the players play?

The word "revolution" is tossed around far too loosely in the world of sports. Revolutions come in stages and don't happen very often. The USF years did indeed constitute a revolution—and in my mind one of the most significant—although I'm sure to provoke arguments with that statement. In winning the championships in 1955 and '56, the Dons also set a record for the most consecutive victories with fifty-five—extending it to sixty the following year—a record the Dons held until the fabulous UCLA teams from 1971 to '74 won eighty-eight in a row.

CBS basketball analyst Billy Packer in his 1989 book *College Basketball's 25 Greatest Teams* listed the Dons as no. 4, behind UCLA's Alcindor/Kareem Abdul-Jabbar teams from 1966–69 as no. 1. Despite the passage of nineteen years since Packer wrote his book, it is unlikely any team would now have moved above the no. 4 spot in his rankings.

Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach once questioned the rankings though. He doubted whether Abdul-Jabbar's team should have been ranked higher than Russell's Dons. "I don't know," he said, "I like Kareem. . . . He's a hell of a guy. . . . But Bill (Russell) came out with the greatest statement of all. The media once asked him, 'Well, how do you think you'd do against Kareem?' Russell said, 'You've got the question wrong. The question is, how do you think Kareem would do against me?' And that's right."

Packer is expert enough about basketball to avoid having used the word "revolution." But consider what he did say: USF's

“defensive machine . . . ultimately changed the face of basketball.” Eddie Einhorn, founder and chairman of the TBS Television Network, who was responsible in the early 1960s for the increased popularity of college basketball on television, recalled that the first final four (it wasn’t capitalized until 1978) he saw was when USF walloped Iowa for its second NCAA championship. He praised USF, “which I still think is the most dominating team I’ve ever seen in the NCAA finals.”

This is the story of a relatively ignored chapter in basketball’s evolution, told through the chronology of two championship basketball seasons at a small Jesuit university that was relatively unknown outside the West Coast. This is a story worth hearing.

ONE

Russell's Coming of Age

“I saw that head of his appear above the multitudes.”
—Hal DeJulio, who recruited Bill Russell

During the summer of 1953, Phil Woolpert, thirty-eight-year-old basketball coach at the University of San Francisco, traveled to Lawrence, Kansas, to learn about the pressure defense the Kansas Jayhawks had used to win the national championship in 1952. Kansas played a man-to-man defense that cut off the passing lanes and made it difficult to move the ball down court.

Dean Smith, who later rose to fame as the coach of the North Carolina Tar Heels, was a substitute player on that team, one of eleven lettermen. “This was unheard of at the time,” Smith said, “really the first instance of man pressure as we now know it.”

Woolpert wanted to get firsthand knowledge of the press from Kansas coach Phog Allen's astute assistant coach, Dick Harp. He told Harp, “I have a guy named Bill Russell coming in, and he's going to be a great shot blocker.”

Bill Russell was six feet two inches tall and weighed 128 pounds when he walked into the McClymonds High School gym during his sophomore year in Oakland, California. He looked like a scarecrow, with long skinny legs sticking out from the bottom of his shorts, and long arms and hands dangling below his shorts. “I was so skinny I had to keep moving in the shower to get wet,” he would say. He tried out for the varsity basketball team at a school he once called “one of those integrated-segregated schools,” which was 90 percent black.

Russell had hoped to go to Oakland Technical High School like his brother, Charlie, but he wasn't a particularly good student. School officials told him to enroll at McClymonds High School, in Oakland's flatlands, or so one story goes. Another said Russell found himself in the shadow of his brother, a talented athlete, and wanted to go to a different high school so he would not be compared to Charlie. Russell never clarified the story in any of his three biographies. But if he did try to escape his brother's shadow, it didn't work. The McClymonds coach showed no patience with the gangly and awkward Russell. One day he heard the varsity coach, a man who he only identified as Fitzpatrick, say in front of the whole team the day the coach had cut him, “Why is it that if there are two brothers in school, we always get the bum?” It left him shaken and nearly broken.

He tried out for the football team and the cheerleading squad but failed in those endeavors, too. A widely reproduced picture shows him wearing an Indian headdress and clothing to depict the McClymonds mascot, the Warrior. One day as a sixteen-year-old walking in the school halls he decided he was okay with who he was. He could see no reason to believe there was anything wrong with him. This realization turned Russell's life around. From that day on, whenever he felt hostility from someone, he assumed it to be that person's problem rather than his. He turned his cowering look into a glowering one. “My father always told

me that the most important thing is what you think of yourself,” Russell said almost sixty years later. “He had an expression about there being all these little red wagons that get pulled around and that it’s got nothing to do with me.”

His athletic fortunes began to change then, too. He met George Powles, McClymonds’s white baseball and basketball coach, and “For the first time in my life I came in contact with a white person who brought things down front, who talked to us realistically,” Russell recalled. Russell would say over and over again through the years, “I have never met a finer person. I owe so much to him it’s impossible to express. This is a compassionate man, honest in the truest sense of the word.”

Powles saw something in Russell and urged him to try out for the junior varsity (JV) basketball team. For one thing, he noticed the awkward boy’s huge hands—hands that would eventually measure ten and a half inches from wrist to fingertip. In addition Russell’s skinny legs had plenty of spring, and he had square shoulders. After his experience with the varsity team, Russell was reluctant to subject himself to yet another tryout. “I dragged my feet, but I came out. I didn’t break any records. I was terrible. But Powles had faith in me as a person and didn’t want to break my spirit.”

Powles, a respected baseball coach, over the years had coached high school players such as hall of famers Frank Robinson and Joe Morgan as well as Curt Flood and Vada Pinson. But Powles knew little about basketball. He only took over the JV team after the principal demanded it. He didn’t particularly like basketball, either, but he did know how to mentor athletes and how to get the best out of them.

On the first day of practice Powles brought the game rule-book with him. “Our very first practice there was no running, no jumping, no shooting,” Russell said. “Just, we were going to learn the rules.” One of the things that came in handy in later

years was what the rulebook didn't say. It said nothing about a player leaving his feet to block a shot. "I had never seen a shot blocked when I was learning basketball," Russell said. "I didn't even know what it was."

Russell didn't even make the JV team, but Powles somehow came up with a sixteenth jersey that Russell would wear every other game, sharing it with a boy named Roland Campbell. "I could run and jump all right, but if there was a basketball within twenty feet of me, I went to pieces." One of his classmates, Frank Robinson, who led McClymonds to a city championship, said Russell "couldn't even put the ball in the basket when he dunked."

Powles put Russell in to play once in awhile when a game was out of reach. Fans would chant, "We want Russell," and he would play his heart out only to receive hoots, laughter, and catcalls from spectators. Russell wanted to quit, but Powles wouldn't hear of it. "[Allowing me to share the sixteenth uniform] was an act of kindness on Powles's part," Russell said. "He used to tell the guys I'd be a pretty good basketball player. But George was the only guy on the planet who thought that," Russell said. "I couldn't even make the homeroom team. He gave us a sense of self-worth that it was okay to be ambitious, okay not to be afraid, and really okay to find out how good you could be."

Powles said he kept Russell on the team because "he had nothing else, nowhere else to go." One of Russell's problems was that he was too easygoing and wouldn't stand up to another player. Then Powles asked one of Russell's teammates, Bobby Woods, to "get on him. Stir him up. Make him aggressive." Russell had difficulty getting angry with anybody. He didn't understand why Woods was all over his back, hacking away at him. "I couldn't get angry at anybody," Russell said. "I couldn't understand [Woods] sometimes because he would get on my back and really hack me. [I was] anything but a killer." Finally, Russell began to get the picture, that Powles had told Woods to foul him and stir him up.

In time Russell turned his embarrassment to anger and finally to determination. "I believe that man saved me from becoming a juvenile delinquent," Russell said. "If I hadn't had basketball, all my energies and frustrations would surely have been carried out in some other direction."

Powles gave Russell two dollars so he could join the Boys Club and play every day. "It was frustrating," Russell said. "Most of the kids wouldn't let me play. I had to play with the little kids, and who wants to play with them when you're six-foot-two?"

Russell also practiced at DeFremery Park in Oakland. "What really attracted me to Bill was his smarts," playground director Bill Patterson said. "He not only had the gift of gab, he liked to investigate. He was inquisitive about everything and anything. He was very outgoing, very outspoken." Russell attended youth workshops at the park that dealt with such topics as narcotics, alcohol, police relations, and race relations. Patterson believed Russell's strong social views grew from his attending those workshops.

Powles once told Russell, who complained that he wasn't as good as the other players, "Son, remember this: If you think the other guy is better than you, he will be." Russell said he never forgot that. Powles also told Russell and his teammates that they had to play clean and be good sports, particularly because they were black and the referees might be laying for them. "We're going to be typed, so play clean. No matter how unfair a call may be, keep your temper. Anyone who gets mad gets pulled out of the game." Then he added quietly, "In order to be good at anything, you have to be a gentleman at it." He also told the boys, "If you play like the rest of the teams, you're going to be called roughnecks, dirty, and worse. If you get into a fight, it's a riot. So we're not going to get into any fights. We're going to play good, clean basketball. You are a Negro team, and the second there's any trouble everyone is going to blame you, whether it's your fault or not. You'll be guilty. The slightest trouble and everybody will claim it was a riot.

Remember that. You've got an extra burden here. But we can carry it. We'll play with it and win, right?" Russell and his teammates took the advice to heart and stayed out of trouble. "There were times when we were pushed to the brink but, you know, we had a good team," he said. Three years in a row McClymonds won the Keyes Memorial Trophy, an award given to the school that had demonstrated the best sportsmanship.

Powles repeatedly admonished the team to play harder and embarrass the other team with the final score. "And that's what I did, whenever somebody bothered me, I'd just play harder," Russell said.

During high school Russell began shooting up in physical height. At the beginning of his junior year he was six feet five inches tall and weighed 160 pounds. Nonetheless, he was cut from the JV by a new coach. Powles had moved up to coach varsity, which was Russell's good fortune. Although Powles had persuaded him to try out for the varsity team, he sat on the bench through the season and played very little. Russell often wanted to quit, but Powles wouldn't let him. By his senior year, the team's other two centers had graduated so Russell inherited the job. "[Powles] may not have known too much about basketball, but he taught me a lot of other things, how important your heart and your attitude [are]," Russell later said when he was playing for USF.

Now as a starter but certainly not the best player on the team, Russell discovered he was in love with basketball. He read every article about basketball he could get his hands on, a habit he continued in college. "I had stacks and stacks of magazines. I studied what players said, learned about their habits and idiosyncrasies, and I remembered all of them." He pored over photographs of players, particularly ones he thought he might later play against or ones he simply admired, who he believed had something in their game he might be able to use.

Good fortune was about to come Russell's way.

USF freshman forward Dick Lawless had been playing a three-on-three pickup basketball game at a Boys Club in Oakland against Russell during the summer before Russell's last year at McClymonds High. Lawless told USF coach Phil Woolpert and assistant coach Ross Guidice about the "string bean" who, when he jumped, towered over the six-foot-four Lawless. This player had successfully rejected virtually every shot the Oakland All-City player had taken. "I couldn't believe it," Lawless said.

After the game, Lawless asked Russell if he was interested in college. Russell responded that he was, so Lawless told Woolpert that he should keep an eye on him. Woolpert sent one of his scouts, Hal DeJulio, who also had recruited Lawless, to check out Russell. DeJulio, who played on USF's NIT championship team in 1949, attended a game between Oakland High and McClymonds. It was Russell's last game. (Russell played only half of his senior year. As a "splitter" he had started school in midyear when he turned five years old and had then attended "split" school sessions throughout school. Russell graduated in January.)

Russell played the game of his life, scoring 14 points. It was the only game so far in which he scored more than 10 points. What impressed DeJulio was that Russell scored 8 points in a row at the end of the first half and 6 in row at the close of the game as McClymonds won. He particularly liked Russell's sense of timing. Russell had a knack for going after the ball even though he often got tangled up in his own ungainly arms and legs. He saw Russell as a game-winner and liked the way he played defense, jumped, hustled, and ran the floor.

"All the players could jump," DeJulio said, "but Russell excelled at it." DeJulio was mesmerized by the gangly center. He couldn't take his eyes off him the whole game. "I could see great speed, great quickness. He had great timing. He was all over the ball. The tighter the game, the tougher Russell got. I could feel the electricity."

After the game DeJulio went down on the court to talk with George Powles. “You know that kid, that Bill Russell, is a fantastic prospect. If we can teach him, if we can train him, I think we can make him great,” DeJulio said. “Is he as good as I think he is?” Powles responded, “He’s good.” “Is he intelligent?” “Yes, he is.” “Can he make Division I?” “He’s got a long way to go.”

Powles told DeJulio that no college yet wanted Russell. “But I wanted him,” DeJulio said. “I could feel the magnetism of the kid. He was raw—couldn’t shoot—but he was all over the court, tenacious, tough in the clutch. He was *there*.”