BREAKING THE NBA COLOR BARRIER

By RON THOMAS
San Francisco Chronicle

The moment was not a media event. In no way did it rival the hubbub surrounding the entry of Jackie Robinson into major league baseball 3½ years earlier.

Which made perfectly good sense. Robinson, after all, was breaking a longstanding color barrier when he broke in with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Becoming the first black to play modern big-league ball, Robinson was the object of intense scrutiny by sportswriters, fans and peers. His every step was watched and chronicled.

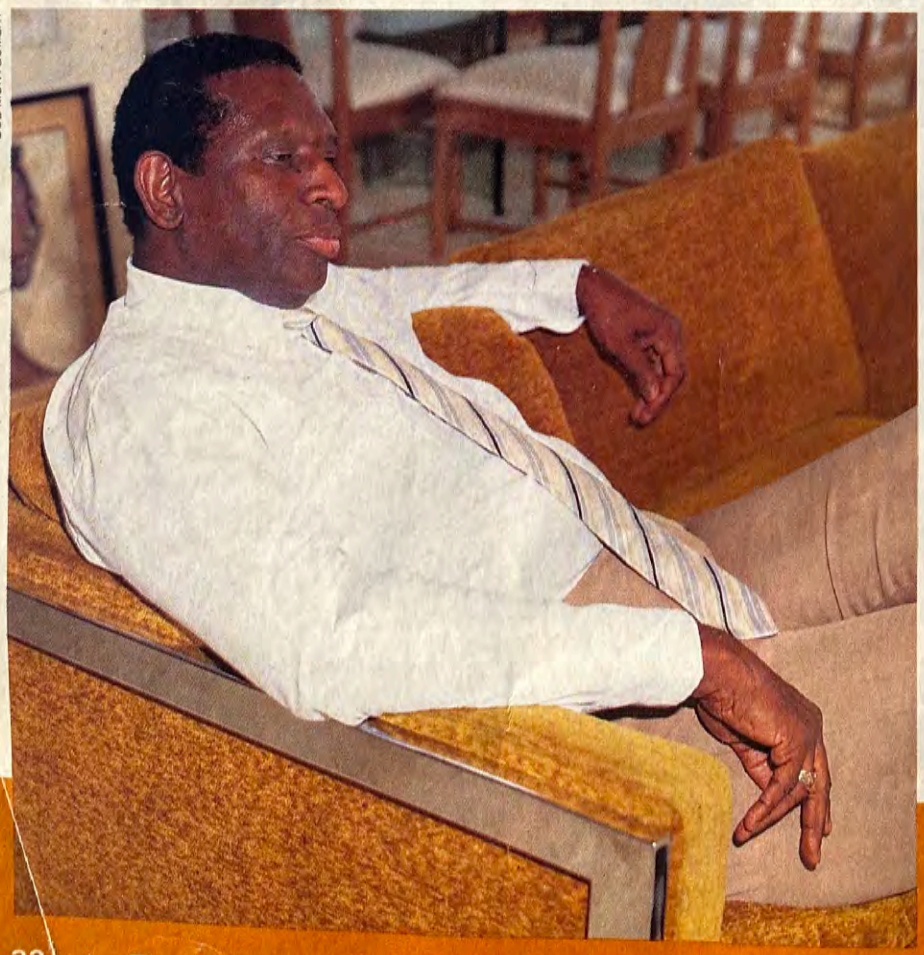
Earl Lloyd's debut in the National Basketball Association created no such fuss. Sure, he was the first black to appear in an NBA game. But blacks had played—even coached—in the professional National Basketball League, which arrived on the sporting scene in 1937-38 and weathered 12 seasons before merging with the forerunner of the NBA, the three-season-old Basketball Association of America, in 1949-50. The BAA had been all-white and the amalgamated league, the NBA, had no blacks in '49-50.

In some quarters, four seasons of all-white play hardly constituted an impenetrable barrier. Unless, perhaps, you happened to be black. And, considering the sociological tenor of the times and the domination that blacks eventually would attain in pro basketball, the breakthrough achieved by Lloyd—and others—obviously is more than a mere footnote to NBA history.

Pro basketball was making major strides as the NBA prepared for its 1950-51 season. With more franchises in major markets (like New York) and George Mikan and the Minneapolis Lakers providing some true marquee appeal, the pro game in general and the NBA in particular were clearly gaining popularity. While black players had toiled in relative obscurity in the NBL (whose outposts included such cities as Oshkosh, Wis.), they toiled not at all in the NBA. Until, that is, the night of October 31, 1950.

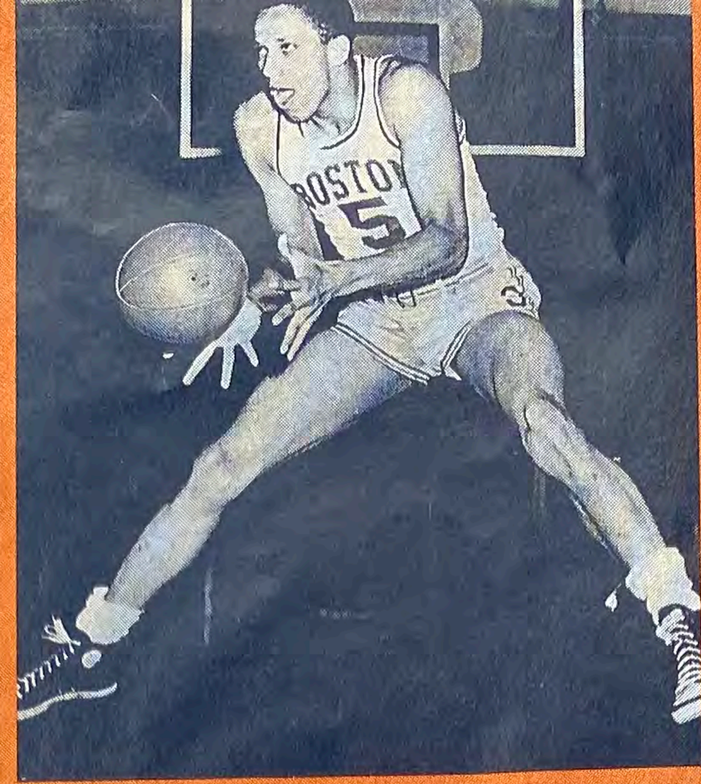
On that Halloween evening 40 years ago, Lloyd, a 22-year-old rookie forward, played for the Washington Capitols in the opening game of the NBA season at Rochester, N.Y. The newcomer appeared in only six more games in the 1950-51 season

BOB MONTGOMERY

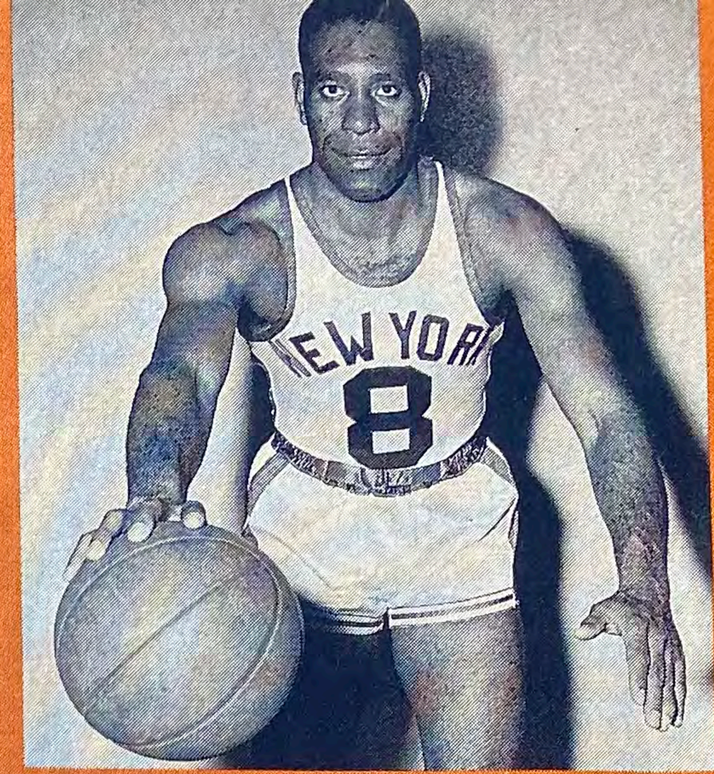


On Halloween night, 1950, with the Washington Capitols, Lloyd became the first black to play in the NBA.

Earl Lloyd



Chuck Cooper



Nat (Sweetwater) Clifton

It's easy to forget there was a time when the now 75 percent black league was 100 percent white

before being drafted into the Army. The Capitols themselves played only 34 more games before disbanding in January.

Lloyd pulled down a game-leading 10 rebounds against Rochester and had five assists, which tied for the game high. He finished with six points.

The next night, Chuck Cooper, the first black ever drafted by an NBA team, made his debut with the Boston Celtics. Three days later, Nat (Sweetwater) Clifton made his initial appearance with the New York Knicks, and in midseason Hank DeZonie played a handful of games for the Tri-Cities Blackhawks.

Together, they integrated the NBA.

Three more black players entered the league in 1951-52: Don Barksdale and Davage (David) Minor with the Baltimore Bullets and Bob Wilson with the Milwaukee Hawks.

Today, with six black head coaches in the NBA, 75 percent of its players black and the league featuring such stars as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson and Charles Barkley, it's easy to forget that there was a time when the NBA was 100 percent white.

"It's really funny," said Lloyd, now an administrator for Detroit's Board of Education. "I was walking through the airport one day and here come the Indiana Pacers, all these young black kids. I just spoke to them—'How you doing?'—and they don't have any idea (who Lloyd is.)

"The black players today are very removed from that, and you've got to know your roots. Any player playing in this league today ought to know who opened that door for them."

Yet Lloyd didn't grasp his own historical significance at the time.

"You're so young and you're so green, you're concerned about playing," he said. "As I look back on it now, I can appreciate it more than I could then."

It should be pointed out that in 1950 blacks often endured separate—and inferior—public accommodations and education in the United States. In many cities—especially in the South—blacks could not vote and often were victims of unprovoked violence.

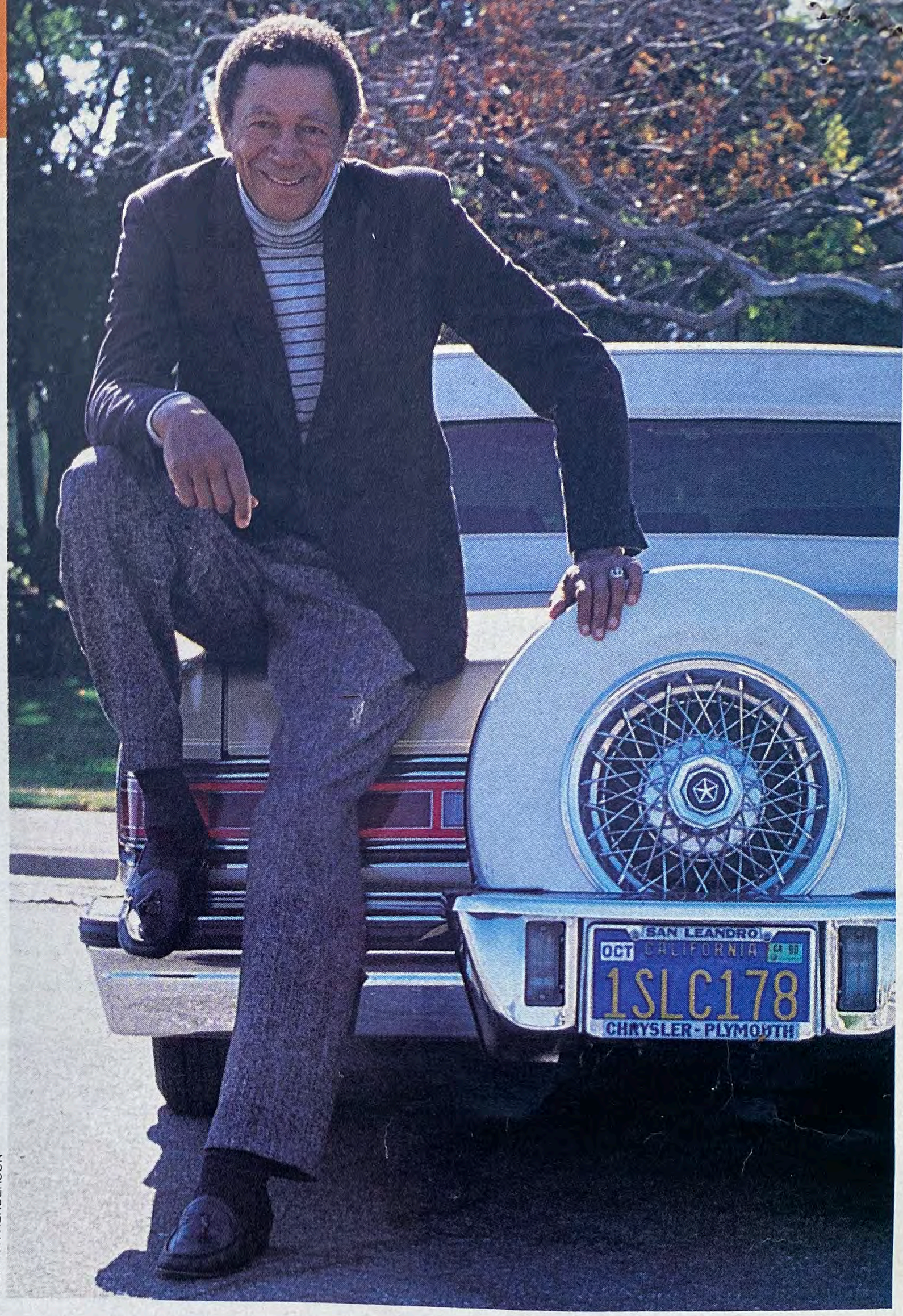
When the first black players entered the NBA, the league was dipping into largely untapped territory. But financial, media and competitive pressures forced

Continued

RON VESELY

Shortly after Lloyd's debut, Clifton, a former Harlem Globetrotter, made his initial appearance with the New York Knicks.

Don Barksdale was the first black U.S. Olympic basketball player as well as the first black to play in an NBA All-Star Game.



THEARON HENDERSON

the league to begin drafting and signing black players at the outset of the 1950s.

Media pressure was being exerted in large part by sportswriters at black newspapers, such as Sam Lacy of the Baltimore Afro-American.

"The fact that the baseball experiment (with Robinson) had proved successful . . . was the basis for some of my writings," Lacy said. "I used that as sort of a lever—that baseball had undertaken it, and it was time for basketball."

Leonard Koppett, who covered the New York Knicks for the New York Times in the 1940s and '50s, said Robinson's success proved that black and white teammates could get along. The popularity of basketball's Harlem Globetrotters showed that white sports fans would attend events that included—and even featured—black players. Not only would whites attend, but they also would exhibit reasonable deportment toward the participants. Considering that fans sat within an elbow's reach of the players in the arenas of that era, the absence of any major fan-player flareups was no small achievement.

Concerns about acts of rowdyism sound ludicrous today, but 40 years ago, such worries were prevalent among team owners, players and society.

Beyond the evidence that pro-basketball integration would work in terms of human compatibility, there also were financial reasons for the racial breakthrough. The Celtics had posted a 22-46 record in 1949-50 and Owner Walter Brown already was heavily in debt. Boston desperately needed an infusion of talent before the 1950-51 season, which would be Red Auerbach's first as the Celtics' coach.

The Capitols' franchise was struggling, too, and the front office viewed the addition of a black player as a means to boost attendance in Washington, which had a large black population.

With some owners, such as Brown and New York's Ned Irish, social enlightenment also was a factor.

"Irish and Walter Brown both felt the time was right, and both had a fairly progressive attitude, relative to the times, toward integration," said sports sociologist Richard Lapchick, whose father Joe coached the Knicks from the late '40s to the early '50s. "Also, the coaches were pushing hard—Auerbach and my father."

Despite those pressures to integrate, Boston journalist George Sullivan wrote that many owners still were shocked on April 25, 1950, when Brown opened the second round of the NBA draft by announcing: "Boston takes Charles Cooper of Duquesne."

At the closed-door meeting in Chicago, there was long silence. Then one owner said, "Walter, don't you know he's a colored boy?"

Brown shot back: "I don't give a damn if he's striped or plaid or polka dot. Boston takes Charles Cooper of Duquesne!"

In the ninth round, the Capitols chose Lloyd out of West Virginia State.

"They could have picked me on the 45th round," Lloyd said. "It wouldn't have made any difference. Nobody else was going to pick me."

The Capitols were confident that they had invested wisely in Lloyd, a 6-foot-6 forward from Alexandria, Va., which is just outside Washington. Lloyd obviously had local appeal. Plus, the Caps had scouted Lloyd and Harold Hunter, a guard from North Carolina College, in a black colleges tournament, and both had played well in a pre-draft tryout held at Washington's Uline Arena.

John McLendon, Hunter's college coach, vividly recalls preparing the two players for that tryout.

"We went up to Howard University and got the gym," McLendon said. "We ran a little two-man stuff just to get the ball in their hands for about a half-hour.

"We started driving down to Uline and on the way down the hill, Earl said, 'Wait a minute. I don't know how to switch.' "

McLendon knew that Lloyd's college coach, Mark Cardwell, hadn't let his players switch on defense because he wanted them to fight through picks.

"As soon as Earl said it, I started looking for a playground," McLendon said. "I turned off Georgia Avenue and the first street happened to be a dead-end street."

All three men got out of the car and a passer-by joined them as a fourth player. Then they worked out, two on two, for about 10 minutes so Lloyd could feel somewhat comfortable at the tryout.

The rest is history.

"I can't recall all the details (of the tryout)," said Lloyd, who went on to play eight full seasons in the NBA and later coached the Detroit Pistons, "because I was probably scared to death."

NOREN TROTMAN

Hank DeZonie's five-game NBA career "was a miserable experience" due to the segregation of black players.

Lloyd spent the bulk of his NBA career with the Syracuse Nationals, for whom he averaged a career-high 10.2 points in 1954-55. Overall, Lloyd scored 8.4 points per game in 560 pro contests.

Syracuse teammate Dolph Schayes called Lloyd a "cop on the beat" player.

"He (Lloyd) had the dirty work to do," Schayes said. "They called him 'The Cat.' He was very quick, very agile."

While Lloyd unquestionably was the first black to play in the NBA and Cooper undeniably was the first black to be chosen in an NBA draft, considerable confusion reigns over which black was the first to sign an NBA contract. Some say it was Clifton, who went from the Globetrotters to the New York Knicks before the 1950-51 season; others contend it actually was Hunter, who signed with Washington but was cut in the preseason; and there are those who say it was Cooper, claiming he signed immediately after the draft.

No matter. The main thing was that the color barrier was tumbling down.

Later in the 1950-51 season, the Tri-Cities Blackhawks signed DeZonie, who had been with the storied, all-black New York Rens team.

By season's end, Cooper had indeed helped the Celtics turn things around. He averaged 9.3 points per game and was tough on the backboards. A couple other Celtic newcomers—Ed Macauley and Bob Cousy—played even bigger roles as Boston finished nine games over .500.

While Lloyd's season was short-circuited by Uncle Sam, Clifton played creditably for the Knicks and went on to average 10 points a game over eight pro seasons.

The NBA's great experiment had begun. And it proved a success both on and off the court.

Cooper, who wound up playing six NBA seasons and compiling only mediocre statistics, developed a lifelong friendship with Boston star Cousy. The Celtics' ball-handling wizard shared Cooper's love for jazz and sense of fairness.

"Cousy is about as free of the affliction of racism as any white person I've ever known," Cooper once said.

Minor, who averaged 7.6 points as a fancy-passing point guard over two seasons with Baltimore and Milwaukee, and Wilson both became close friends with Mel Hutchins, who starred with the Milwaukee Hawks, and Wilson also remembers Cal Christensen, Don Otten and Kevin O'Shea with affection.

"These were pretty solid guys and I don't think (race) was an issue with them," Wilson said.

And as much as Clifton enjoyed his teammates—he called them "a great bunch of guys"—they probably had even greater fondness for him. His roommate, Dr. Ernie Vandeweghe (father of the Knicks' Kiki Vandeweghe), called Clifton "a gentle giant . . . just a sweet person."

Vince Boryla, another teammate, said he had wonderful memories of Clifton, a Chicago cab driver for the last 30 years.

"A terrible card player," Boryla recalled with a chuckle. "Paid all his bills. A little late sometimes, but paid all his bills."

While things may have gone smoothly within one team, there were occasional confrontations with opponents. Clifton's old teammates still laugh about his one-punch knockout of Boston's Bob Harris. There are different versions of why the fight occurred, but Clifton and Vandeweghe agree that Harris called Sweetwater a "nigger." Then the action started.

"It was like being in the ring during a Joe Louis fight," Vandeweghe said.

Clifton faked a right, then socked Harris with a left cross "and knocked him on his ass," Boryla said. "The whole Boston team ran out and came to a brake. Sweets was there with two fists at his side and there wasn't one (Celtic) that touched Sweets. You never wanted to get Sweets riled up."

Life on the road—particularly Southern exhibition swings but also jaunts to not-so-progressive Northern cities—could be very difficult for black players in those days. Blacks often were banned from white-owned hotels and restaurants.

"It was degrading," Lloyd said.

DeZonie, reflecting on an NBA career that consisted of only five games, said: "It was a miserable experience because all the fun was out of the game. The accommodations, the segregation—I wasn't interested in it."

The black players frequently stayed with black families or at black hotels. Sometimes that worked out: Wilson recalls staying with "very fine families" and meeting Jackie Robinson and Clifton at a

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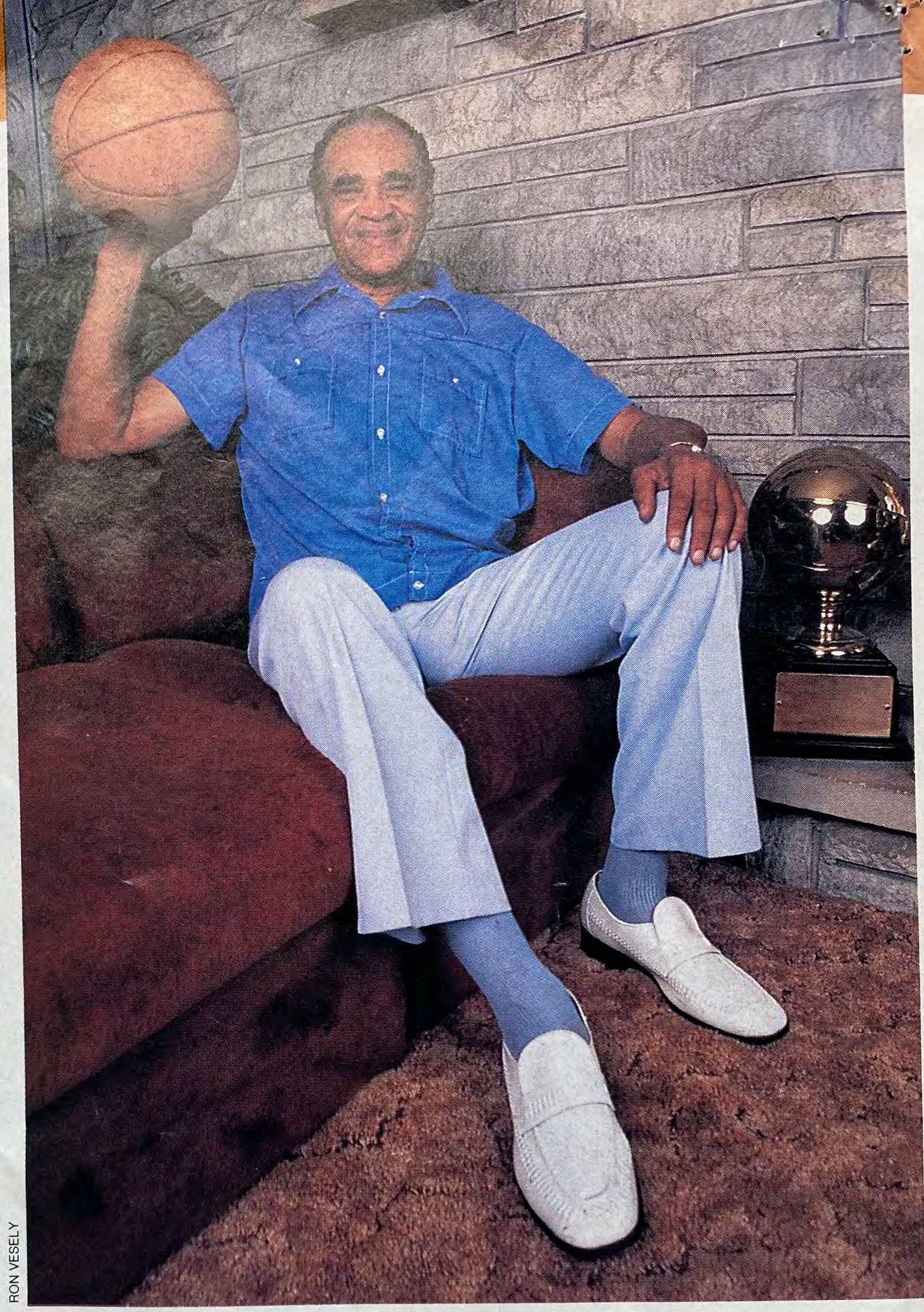


RON VESELY

black Baltimore hotel.

Whatever good occasionally came out of such a separated society was far outweighed by the indignities that went along with it.

Some of the black players' housing was terrible. Lloyd once was stuck in a Paducah, Ky., rooming house in which the closet was a nail hammered into the door. Cooper, then with the St. Louis Hawks, once had to sleep in a reform school in Shreveport, La.

One of the most humiliating incidents occurred in 1952 when Boston played a neutral-site game in Raleigh, N.C.

The Celtics refused to play there until Raleigh lifted a ban against black players. Getting the go-ahead to play was of little consolation to Cooper, who wasn't allowed to stay at the team's hotel. After the game, Cooper decided to take a train home. Cousy insisted on riding with him, and Auerbach and Macauley accompanied them to the train station.

"We all were hungry and thought we could grab a bite at the station's snack counter," Auerbach told Sullivan. "But they wouldn't serve Chuck, so I ordered a mess of sandwiches, and we went out to the platform and desegregated an empty baggage truck."

Cousy became highly embarrassed when he realized the station had separate bathrooms for blacks and whites.

"I didn't know what to say," he recalled. "I didn't want to say anything trivial or light because I was sure Chuck was experiencing emotional trauma. I was just completely embarrassed by the whole thing because I (as a white person) was part of the establishment that did those things."

Those incidents left Cooper with such bitter memories that some of his friends believe the mental anguish hastened his death at age 57 in 1984.

"People say I look pretty good for 50," Cooper told Pittsburgh magazine in 1976. "But all the damage done to me is inside. That's where it hurts."

As Cooper and others tried to cope, they and their brethren had mixed feelings about the league's coaches and team management.

Barksdale had a terrible relationship with Baltimore management, which paid him $20,850 in 1951-52, one of the top salaries in the NBA. The team got off to a slow start and Barksdale, a forward playing out of position as a 6-6, 195-pound center, believes he was unfairly blamed. In addition, he says two of his teammates were jealous of his salary, so management was "looking for a way to mess with me."

Club officials apparently found a way just two months into Barksdale's NBA career when a front-office operative accused him of breaking a curfew that Barksdale says didn't exist, then suspended him for two games. Eventually, the team fined Barksdale $5,000, which was almost 25 percent of his salary. Remember, this was long before the players had a union to protect them.

"I said, 'OK, you've got it, but I'll never play for you again,' " said Barksdale, who in 1948 had become the first black U.S. Olympic basketball player. He completed his Baltimore contract in 1952-53 and, in the process, became the first black to play in an NBA All-Star Game. Baltimore then granted his wish to be traded, dealing him to Boston.

Although the black players had a reasonably good relationship with most of their coaches, they voiced a common complaint: Management wanted them to be mainly defenders and rebounders—not scorers.

"I was always setting up (a play) or cutting off or picking," said Wilson, who averaged 3.7 points as a Milwaukee reserve in 1951-52. "On occasion . . . they'd give you the ball, but that (passing and defending) was your role."

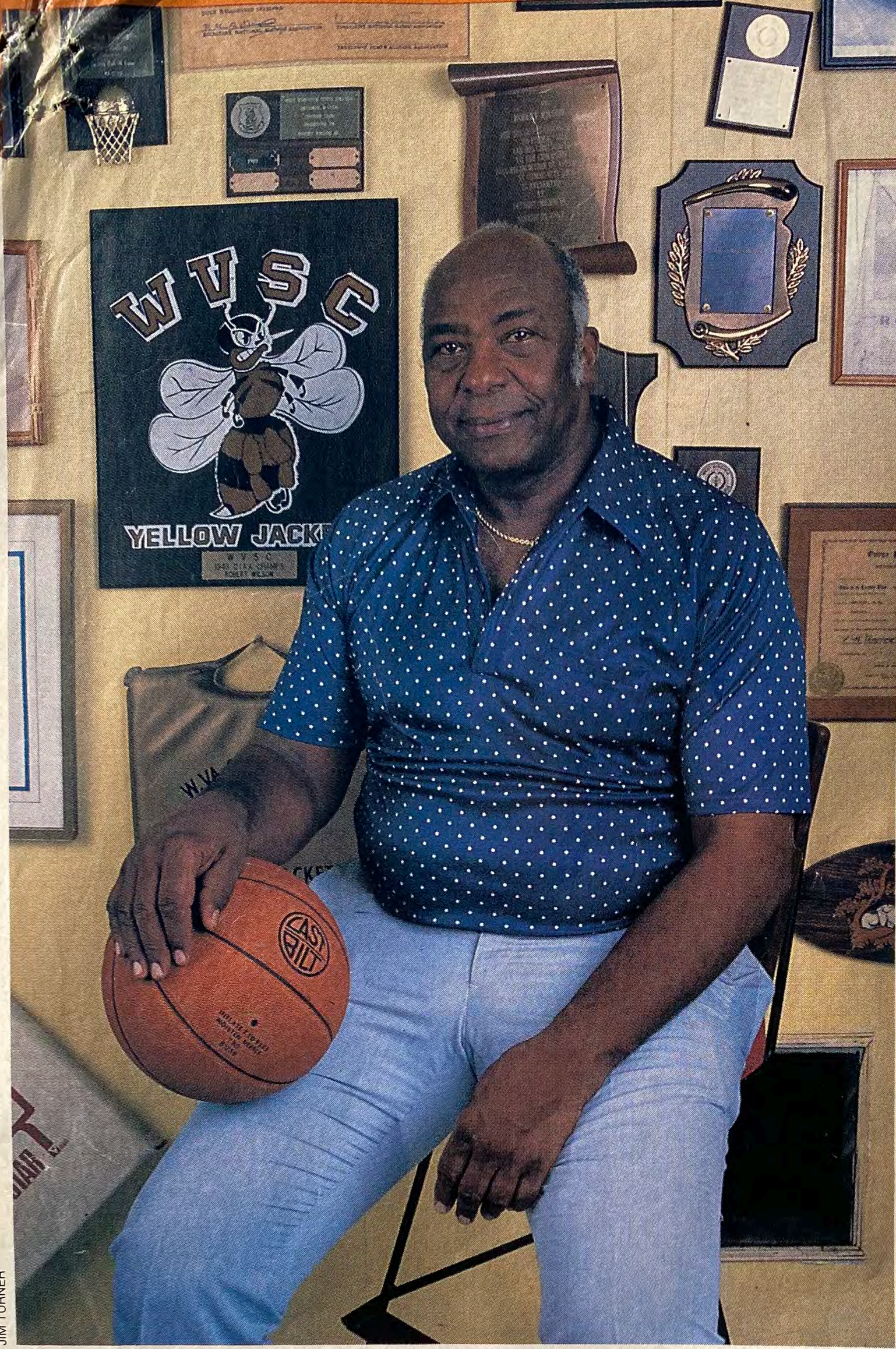
Clifton recalls the same situations.

"I couldn't do anything people would notice," Clifton said. "So I had to play their type of game—straight, nothing fancy. No backhand passes. It kept me from doing things people might enjoy. My job was to play the toughest guy and get rebounds. . . ."

Wilson took particular delight when those days passed for black players.

"The first black I ever saw shooting was Elgin Baylor," Wilson said, "and I was so pleased."

Baylor, who averaged 31.2 points in his 54-game career at Seattle University, joined the Minneapolis Lakers for the 1958-59 season and proceeded to score 24.9 points per game in his rookie campaign. It was the fourth-best average in the league.



JIM TURNER

Bob Wilson says management wanted blacks to be mainly defenders and rebounders — not scorers.

Baylor, without question, was part of the next era of black players, one in which conditions were somewhat improved but far from ideal.

Zelmo Beaty, an NBA and American Basketball Association center for 12 seasons, said that when he entered the NBA in 1962 some team officials were afraid that if they had too many black starters or black stars, attendance would plummet. To avoid that, he said some coaches would start more black players on the road than at home games.

Wayne Embry, general manager of the Cleveland Cavaliers, played with the Cincinnati Royals, Boston Celtics and Milwaukee Bucks in an 11-year NBA career that ended in 1968-69. He said officials of those teams didn't discourage blacks from scoring (Embry fashioned a 19.8-point average one season). But he also said that black players, himself included, generally felt they were underpaid compared with equally skilled whites. They also believed that the number of black players was limited by an unwritten quota.

What was the maximum allowed per team? "Back then, we thought it was three," Embry said.

Bill Russell thought the quota system could be spelled out in easy-to-understand language.

"The general rule," the longtime Celtics great said, "is you're allowed to play two blacks at home, three on the road and five when you're behind."

Russell is quick to point out that among the two rosters matched in the 1957 NBA Finals—his Celtics and the St. Louis Hawks—only Russell himself was black. The next spring, the St. Louis Hawks became the last all-white team to win the NBA championship.

The racial incidents in the South had lessened in some places by then—but not everywhere.

In 1959, when the Lakers played a neutral-site game in Charleston, W. Va., Baylor refused to play after being told he and two teammates couldn't stay in the team hotel. Baylor said Lakers officials had promised they wouldn't play in such segregated cities after a similar incident had occurred two weeks earlier.

Paducah still was a dreaded spot on the exhibition trail. Unlike the time Lloyd had to stay at a rundown black rooming house there in 1957, Beaty and the entire St. Louis Hawks team stayed at a white-owned hotel in the early 1960s.

Still, black players knew they were unwelcome at many restaurants and business establishments in Paducah. In an effort to avoid incidents, "We didn't go anywhere, not even to the laundry," Beaty said.

By this time, the Boston Celtics were really going places—particularly in the standings. And the racial makeup of the Boston club was not lost on the league's other front offices.

From 1958-59 through 1968-69, Boston won 10 of 11 NBA Finals. Russell, on hand since 1956-57, was joined in that run of success by such fellow black standouts as Sam Jones, K.C. Jones, Tom Sanders, Willie Naulls and Embry.

"What Red (Auerbach) did, basically, was get the best people for the job, period," said Russell, alluding to the fact that the Celtics would play as many as four blacks at a time in those days. "He might have ended up with an all-white team, or an all-black team. . . Is the team any good? That's what it's all about for Red."

Boston, never known as a city of great racial harmony, was colorblind as it took to its championship basketball team. Oh, the power of winning.

With other clubs taking note of the Celtics' success and the civil-rights movement of the mid-to-late '60s also having impact in terms of tearing down many racial barriers, integration of the NBA came steadily after its slow start. As early as 1960-61, the All-NBA team included three blacks—Baylor, Wilt Chamberlain and Oscar Robertson. By 1967-68, four members of the all-league team were black. In each of the last two seasons, the All-NBA team was entirely black.

To be sure, things have changed drastically in the NBA and in society at large for minority groups. It's not the '50s anymore. But the battle still goes on.

"We were high-profile people and felt if we were successful, it would be a great step toward bridging the (racial) gap," said Embry, reflecting on his contributions and those of Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, Sweetwater Clifton and others. "Perhaps it shouldn't have been that way, but we were growing up in a country in which racism was prevalent—and we haven't conquered it yet." ■