



# NELSON

CONTINUED

test to an amnesiac). He shoots fouls in a manner designed to turn a high school coach into cardiac shock, balancing the ball in the cup of his right hand, pushing it toward the basket like a shotputter. But a computer does not measure the capacity of a basketball player to steady a team that is losing its offensive poise, or to provide a basket when neither the fast break nor the pattern offense is working. A computer does not measure the brains that can put a six-foot-six forward into the pivot against Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and actually contain him for an entire game. A computer does not measure the capacity of a player to bend the rules—with a cagey hand on a shirt or a wrist—that can drive an opponent to distraction (one of the less explosive members of the New York Knickerbockers has told newsmen that Nelson is one opponent he would like to fight).

But there is one pertinent fact that a computer wouldn't dare miss: The fact that Don Nelson is the best shooter on the Boston Celtics. Five times he has led the Celtics in shooting from the floor. He is steady, unspectacular, and deadly from the floor, throwing up 15-foot one-handers with a flick of the wrist and a quick release. It isn't fancy, it isn't breathtaking, but a lot of shots go in the basket. When Willis Reed ran into a Boston reporter before the start of the Knick-Celtic Eastern final in 1974 he asked, "How's Nelson?" Why? asked the reporter. "Because he's one of the very best shooters in the league," Willis replied. "I'd just as soon not see him in the playoffs." (In the playoffs that year, Nelson hit 11.4 points per game, playing less than half of the time, and shot an even .500.) Coach Tommy Heinsohn says of Nelson's shooting, "A guy can be right on him, and he will sense the moment when his man

will react. All he needs is half an inch to get his shot off, because he has such economy of motion. He is a finger and body shooter. There is no arm in his shot at all. The body gives him direction—twenty-five feet with a flick of the wrist." In the 1974-75 season, the wrist flicked better than ever; Nelson averaged 14 points during the season, and his .539 field percentage set an all-time Celtic record. At the time, Don Nelson was almost 35 years old.

It is easy to underestimate Don Nelson on the court; indeed, the basketball world is littered with the bleaching bones of rookies who saw Don Nelson's slow gait and assumed the 13-year NBA veteran

was ready for a merciful dose of youthful energy. "He takes those young leapers and makes their strength work against them," Heinsohn says. Nelson's head and shoulder fakes have brought him endless trips to the free-throw line. It is also easy to underestimate Nelson off the court. He is a pleasant-faced, blond-haired man with the placid features of a corn-fed Iowa lad, and more than one observer has been fooled into painting him as some modern, urbanized version of a Grant Wood painting. In fact, Nelson is smarter and more complicated than a first impression suggests.

He is, first of all, blunt about his limits.

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SHULTON

# NELSON

CONTINUED

"The sixth man is generally a better player than the fifth man. Paul Silas is certainly a better player than I am; there's no way you can get around that. He's not as good a shooter, but he's a better rebounder, a better passer, a better defensive player. Paul had the starting job, and he gave it up because I'm at the age now where I have trouble getting off the bench. And the fact that Silas gave it up clearly prolonged my career. There aren't very many teams that have guys who would do that." Nelson's head and shoulder fakes are, in his own eyes, as much a product of what he can no longer do as what he does well. "I used to have a real quick first step to the hoop," he says. "I don't have that anymore, so I use more fakes to get to the hoop now. A veteran must

adjust his game. You can't get away with the same things year after year no matter if you're as quick as you once were or not."

When Nelson broke Tom Sanders' "ironman" record, by playing in 465 straight games despite a chronically painful Achilles tendon, he said simply, "I'm from the old school. I believe you're paid and should be on the job. I have a certain role on this club, and if I'm not here then it hurts the overall function."

Nelson is also possessed of a clear understanding of an athlete's fragility. He is a compulsive worker in the off-season. He is a local advertising representative for a basketball publication; he runs a camp; and for several years he has been a highly successful promoter of exhibition basketball games. By carefully picking cities where professional teams do not play, Nelson has managed to draw remarkable attendance figures for pre-season games. In the fall of 1974, the first match-up between Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and

Bill Walton drew a gate of \$70,000 in Dayton, Ohio; and Nelson spent 32 straight days in Dayton to assure the success of the Milwaukee-Portland matchup. Speaking before the end of the 1975 season, he commented about his summer, "There won't be a free moment." And when I asked him why he pushed himself so hard, he said without emotion, "In my own mind, I only have a certain number of years where I can make what I call easy money. I have to work harder than Havlicek for it, but it's still easy money."

Nelson shares with many Celtics a competitive drive that takes its toll on his peace of mind. He rejects completely the kind of mental "psyching" process that Bob Cousy used to go through, working up a hatred of his current opponents—"I think that's all bull,"—but the calm facade is very misleading.

"I don't show my emotions, but I have plenty of them," he said the night before a critical game against the Washington Bullets in the 1975 playoffs. "I don't sleep very good

at night; I was up most of last night. When I did sleep, I was sweating so much I was soaking wet. The bed smelled terrible. The sheets, everything was soaked. I guess people think I don't have emotions because I don't show many emotions on the court or anywhere, but I'm up real tight. When the ball goes up, that tightness goes away."

If he has learned to key himself up for big games, it may be because Nelson has never lived without a sense of pressure. He was raised on a mid-west farm where a lack of money was a given, and where he learned basketball under conditions that might give even a ghetto playground player second thoughts.

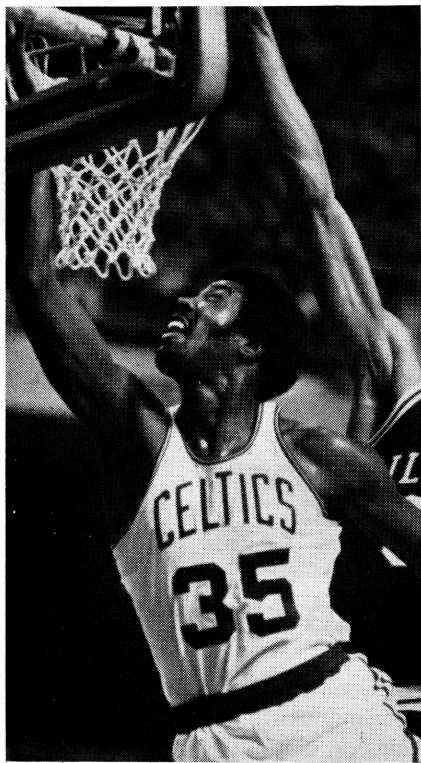
"My dad had rigged a basket up in the yard, which was covered with chicken droppings. If I missed a shot, the ball would roll all over the place and just get filthy." It appears to be as good a technique as any for instilling in a player the importance of putting the ball in the basket. At Rock Island High School in Illinois, he and his teammates were treated to a stark display of competitive spirit.

"Our coach thought we were dogging it," Nelson recalls, "and one day he just locked us in the gym and had us beat the hell out of each other. I don't know if that was it, but I think we started to win more games after that." Even when he was breaking all the scoring records in Iowa, the prospect of turning pro never really entered his mind. "I didn't think I was good enough." Then came the year with the Chicago Zephyrs, the two frustrating years with Los Angeles (in 1965 he watched the Celtics demolish his Laker team in five games), and the telephone call from Red Auerbach that resulted in what Bostonians like to call "the best thousand-dollar investment in sports history."

Of his benefactor Auerbach, Nelson says, "He's gotta be my buddy no matter what he does to me, because he gave me the chance. I knew how good he was supposed to be and when I got here, my value of him went up even more.

"It wasn't so much his technical knowledge of the game. In fact, the first year I was here, a team used a zone against us, and Red did not know what to do against a zone. He called over John (Havlicek) or Siggie (Larry Siegfried) at half-time, and they put something on the board to beat it. It took a pretty big man to admit he didn't know how to beat it.

"It was more his ability at handling people. He did that better than anybody I've ever known. I've read a lot about Lombardi and they've



Paul Silas is the sixth man for the Celtics, traditionally a key man; he steps in when Don Nelson gets a rest.

got to be cut from the same mold." For his part, Auerbach says that Nelson "makes the most of his God-given talents—more so than any athlete I've ever seen."

It has been an uneven career for Nelson. He was originally picked up as a back-up forward, because Tommy Heinsohn had retired. "If he hadn't left, I never would have got the job." Working as a backup forward to Tom Sanders and Willie Naulls, Nelson was pretty much of

an afterthought. But when Sam Jones and Bill Russell left and the Celtic dynasty collapsed, Nelson found himself, along with John Havlicek and the injured Tom Sanders, as the only links to the years of Celtic greatness. (His only previous distinction had been an off-balance jump shot in the closing second of the seventh game against the Lakers in 1969 to clinch the game for the Celtics. "It was a terrible shot," Nelson says. "It hit the rim, bounced ten feet up in the air, and dropped in.") In the first shocking post-Russell season, with Boston dropping below .500 for the first time in 20 years, Nelson took on a leadership role, playing forward, occasionally playing center ("He's our best pivot man," Heinsohn said, by way of indicating the play of Henry Finkel and Jim "Bad News" Barnes), averaging 15.4 points a game—his career high—and providing an element of stability on a decimated team. And after a 1973 operation to relieve a chronically hurting leg, Nelson proceeded to come into his own at the age of 33; as is true throughout Celtic history, Nelson was not pressured into attempting the jobs he could not do. No one demanded that Nelson fight for rebounds, or lead the break; instead, Nelson's job was to start the game, provide a steady offensive power, and then retire in favor of the speed and muscle of Paul Silas.

The 1975 playoffs, despite their disappointing outcome for the Celtics, offered several examples of the value a player like Don Nelson has to his team. In the last game of the opening round, against the Houston Rockets, the outclassed Rockets were keeping it close early in the second quarter, trailing by two or three points. With three-and-a-half minutes gone, Jo Jo White picked up his third foul, and was taken out of the game. John Havlicek was swung to the backcourt, and Nelson came in the game to team up at the forward position with Silas. Quickly, Nelson scored on a lay-in, by outfoxing his man and slipping uncontested to the basket; he threw up two shots from 17 feet; he cut to

# NELSON

CONTINUED

the baseline and popped in a soft jump shot; he scored on two turn-around jumpers. With the break shut down, with Houston playing over its head, Nelson scored 12 points in the second quarter, 16 in the first half on eight of ten attempts from the floor. And in the second half, he saw almost no action at all.

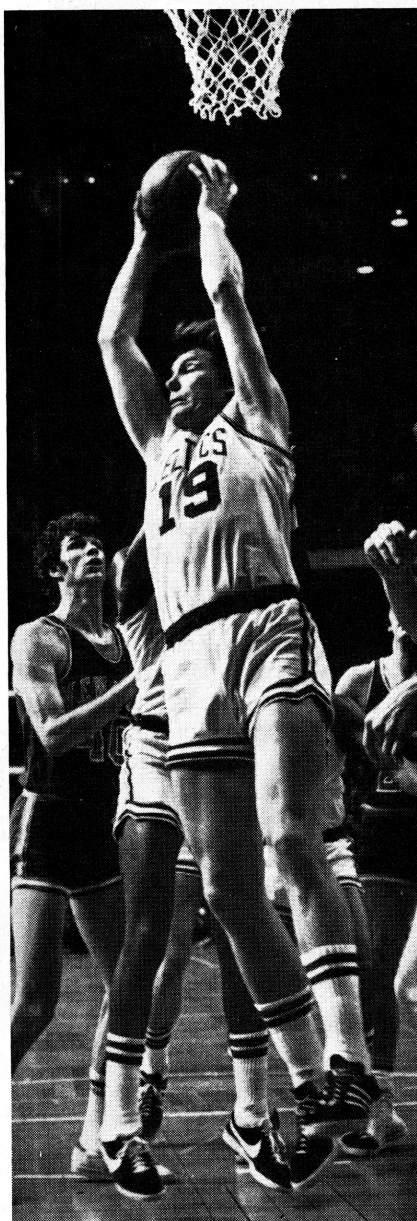
"I needed the boards and the defense," Heinsohn explained after the game, "so I got all my quicker people on the court in the third quarter, and it opened up." Nelson, who enjoyed the rare experience of stuffing the ball late in the game (much to his own amusement), was content with his role; to provide the steady, unspectacular offense until the basic Celtic running game found its rhythm. He must have been gratified, too, to see that Boston's press was at last beginning to recognize his talents. Noting that Nelson had shot 29 for 45 in the opening round, for a 64 percent floor mark, the astute *Globe* basketball writer Bob Ryan commented, "If that's what being old in basketball means, may the Celtics find ten more Don Nelsons."

In a less satisfying way, the play-off losses to the Bullets also showed what Don Nelson can do. In the critical fourth game against Washington at the Bullets' home court, with the Celtics down two games to one, the Boston attack once again appeared weak. Cowens was missing everything, going three for 14 in the first half. The Bullets were conceding the offensive boards, dropping back to shut off the break. Their shooters—Phil Chenier, Elvin Hayes, and Nick Weatherspoon—were on fire (the team shot almost 58 percent from the floor in the first half). The one Celtic keeping Boston from being completely blown off the court was Don Nelson. He had 12 points in the first quarter, 20 by the time the half was over. He shot

nine for 13 from the floor, hitting the simple shots, the 16-foot jump shot, the 15-foot jumper, the 14-foot jumper, the free throws, and four jump shots in the second quarter, none of which were shot from any closer than 17 feet. There was no roar of the crowd as Nelson flew from the foul line and stuffed the ball, no electrifying spurts of energy across the court. Just the flick of the wrist, and then the quick-step backwards, instinctively rubbing his hand on the wrist guard, on which is kept an illegal adhesive to give him better ball control (Other teams call him "Doctor Stickum").

In the second half of the game, after 24 minutes of torrid shooting, Don Nelson did not get one shot off. Instead, Jo Jo White, who

**Ten years ago, the Los Angeles Lakers came to the mistaken conclusion that Nelson didn't belong in pro basketball.**



showed a persistent habit of trying to make up the entire Celtic deficit on his own, and Dave Cowens, trying fruitlessly to overcome his horrible shooting, ran up a total of 55 shots in the game, more than half the Celtic shots. White, while going 14 for 29, missed several key shots in the second half, and Cowens wound up with a seven for 26 night. Nelson wound up angry.

"It doesn't bother me when I'm pulled from a game because we need the running. But when people try to do by themselves the job a team's supposed to do, then there's trouble." Virtually the same thing happened in the sixth game, when Boston was eliminated. Nelson got only seven shots at the basket (of which he made five) while White went seven for 25. In their feverish attempt to establish control of the floor and the pace, Boston had failed to use its most reliable, if least flashy, weapon.

Nelson is now 35 years old, and his years with the Celtics have at last brought him some recognition. He ranks fifth among all NBA play-off performers in floor shooting, and he has assumed the role of old pro which is so much a part of Boston's pattern, bringing along newer players, teaching them the habits that have made the Celtics winners. Despite his tenure, he has no plans for retiring. "I'm looking for two more good years right now." He can recognize the limits to his own material value—when we talked about the American Basketball Association, he told me wryly, "They never called me"—and he can fantasize about another career. (We were listening to a country-rock guitarist, and when I asked Nelson how much of his foul shooting ability he'd give up to play a first-rate guitar, he laughingly said, "All of it.") And by the time he is ready to retire, he can have some assurance that his number will be hanging up in the Boston Garden rafters, with the shirts of the other Celtics who have demonstrated that the intelligent use of the skills you are born with is the best way to turn the team you play for into a winner. ■