

# The Black and White Truth About Basketball

by Jeff Greenfield

*A skin-deep theory of style*

The dominance of black athletes over professional basketball is beyond dispute. Two thirds of the players are black, and the number would be greater were it not for the continuing practice of picking white bench warmers for the sake of balance. The Most Valuable Player award of the National Basketball Association has gone to blacks for sixteen of the last twenty years, and in the newer American Basketball Association, blacks have won it all but once in the league's eight years. In the 1974-75 season, four of the top five All-Stars and seven of the top ten were black. The N.B.A. was the first pro sports league of any stature to hire a black coach (Bill Russell of the Celtics) and the first black general manager (Wayne Embry of the Bucks). What discrimination remains—lack of opportunity for lucrative benefits such as speaking engagements and product endorsements—has more to do with society than with basketball.

This dominance reflects a natural inheritance; basketball is a pastime of the urban poor. The current generation of black athletes are heirs to a tradition half a century old: in a neighborhood without the money for bats, gloves, hockey sticks, tennis rackets, or shoulder pads, basketball is accessible. "Once it was the game of the Irish and Italian Catholics in Rockaway and the Jews on Fordham Road in the Bronx," writes David Wolf in his brilliant book, *Foul!*. "It was recreation, status, and a way out." But now the ethnic names are changed; instead of Red Holzmans, Red Auerbachs, and McGuire brothers, there are Earl Monroes and Connie Hawkins and Nate Archibalds. And professional basketball is a sport with a national television contract and million-dollar salaries.

But the mark on basketball of today's players can be measured by more than money or visibility. It is a question of style. For there is a clear difference between "black" and "white" styles of play that is as clear as the difference between 155th Street at Eighth Avenue and Crystal City, Missouri. Most simply (remembering we are talking about culture, not chromosomes), "black" basketball is the use of superb athletic skill to adapt to the limits of space imposed by the game. "White" ball is the pulverization of that space by sheer intensity.

It takes a conscious effort to realize how constricted the space is on a basketball court. Place a regulation court (ninety-four by fifty feet) on a football field, and it will reach from the back of the end zone to the twenty-one-yard line; its width will cover less than a third of the field. On a baseball diamond, a basketball court will reach from home plate to just beyond first base. Compared to its principal indoor rival, ice hockey, basketball covers about one fourth the playing area. And during the normal flow of the game, most of the action takes place on about the third of the court nearest the basket. It is in this dollhouse space that ten men, each of them half a foot taller than the

average man, come together to battle each other.

There is, thus, no room; basketball is a struggle for the edge: the half step with which to cut around the defender for a lay-up, the half second of freedom with which to release a jump shot, the instant a head turns allowing a pass to a teammate breaking for the basket. It is an arena for the subtlest of skills: the head fake, the shoulder fake, the shift of body weight to the right and the sudden cut to the left. Deception is crucial to success; and to young men who have learned early and painfully that life is a battle for survival, basketball is one of the few games in which the weapon of deception is a legitimate rule and not the source of trouble.

If there is, then, the need to compete in a crowd, to battle for the edge, then the surest strategy is to develop the *unexpected*; to develop a shot that is simply and fundamentally different from the usual methods of putting the ball in the basket. Drive to the hoop, but go under it and come up the other side; hold the ball at waist level and shoot from there instead of bringing the ball up to eye level; leap into the air and fall away from the basket instead of toward it. All these tactics take maximum advantage of the crowding on a court; they also stamp uniqueness on young men who may feel it nowhere else.

"For many young men in the slums," David Wolf writes, "the school yard is the only place they can feel true pride in what they do, where they can move free of inhibitions and where they can, by being spectacular, rise for the moment against the drabness and anonymity of their lives. Thus, when a player develops extraordinary 'school yard' moves and shots... [they] become his measure as a man."

So the moves that begin as tactics for scoring soon become calling cards. You don't just lay the ball in for an uncontested basket; you take the ball in both hands, leap as high as you can, and slam the ball through the hoop. When you jump in the air, fake a shot, bring the ball back to your body, and throw up a shot, all without coming back down, you have proven your worth in uncontested fashion.

This liquid grace is an integral part of "black" ball, almost exclusively the province of the playground player. Some white stars like Richie Guerin, Bob Cousy, and Billy Cunningham have it: the body control, the moves to the basket, the free-ranging mobility. They also have the surface ease that is integral to the "black" style; an incorporation of the ethic of mean streets—to "make it" is not just to have wealth, but to have it without strain. Whatever the muscles and organs are doing, the face of the "black" star almost never shows it. Bob McAdoo of the Buffalo Braves can drive to the basket with two men on him, pull up, turn around, and hit a basket without the least flicker of emotion. The Knicks' Walt Frazier, flamboyant in dress, cars, and companions, displays nothing but a quickly raised fist after scoring a particularly important basket. (Interestingly, the black coaches in the N.B.A. exhibit far less emotion on the bench than their white counterparts; Washington's K. C. Jones and Seattle's Bill Russell are statue-like compared with Tommy Heinsohn, Jack Ramsay, or Dick Motta.)

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If there is a single trait that characterizes "black" ball it is leaping agility. Bob Cousy, ex-Celtic great and former pro coach, says that "when coaches get together, one is sure to say, 'I've got the one black kid in the country who can't jump.' When coaches see a white boy who can jump or who moves with extraordinary quickness, they say, 'He should have been born black, he's that good.'"

Don Nelson of the Celtics recalls that in 1970, Dave Cowens, then a relatively unknown Florida State graduate, prepared for his rookie season by playing in the Rucker League, an outdoor Harlem competition that pits pros against playground stars and college kids. So ferocious was Cowens' leaping power, Nelson says, that "when the summer was over, everyone wanted to know who the white son of a bitch was who could jump so high." That's another way to overcome a crowd around the basket—just go over it.

Speed, mobility, quickness, acceleration, "the moves"—all of these are catchphrases that surround the "black" playground style of play. So does the most racially tinged of attributes, "rhythm." Yet rhythm is what the black stars themselves talk about; feeling the flow of the game, finding the tempo of the dribble, the step, the shot. It is an instinctive quality, one that has led to difficulty between systematic coaches and free-form players. "Cats from the street have their own rhythm when they play," said college dropout Bill Spivey, onetime New York high-school star. "It's not a matter of somebody setting you up and you shooting. You *feel* the shot. When a coach holds you back, you lose the feel and it isn't fun anymore."

Connie Hawkins, the legendary Brooklyn playground star, said of Laker coach Bill Sharman's methodical style of teaching, "He's systematic to the point where it begins to be a little too much. It's such an action-reaction type of game that when you have to do everything the same way, I think you lose something."

There is another kind of basketball that has grown up in America. It is not played on asphalt playgrounds with a crowd of kids competing for the court; it is played on macadam driveways by one boy with a ball and a backboard nailed over the garage; it is played in Midwestern gyms and on Southern dirt courts. It is a mechanical, precise development of skills (when Don Nelson was an Iowa farm boy, his incentive to

make his shots was that an errant rebound would land in the middle of chicken droppings), without frills, without flow, but with effectiveness. It is "white" basketball: jagged, sweaty, stumbling, intense. A "black" player overcomes an obstacle with finesse and body control; a "white" player reacts by outrunning or overpowering the obstacle.

By this definition, the Boston Celtics and the Chicago Bulls are classically "white" teams. The Celtics almost never use a player with dazzling moves; that would probably make Red Auerbach swallow his cigar. Instead, the Celtics wear you down with execution, with constant running, with the same play run again and again. The rebound triggers the fast break, with everyone racing downcourt; the ball goes to John Havlicek, who pulls up and takes the jump shot, or who fakes the shot and passes off to the man following, the "trailer," who has the momentum to go inside for a relatively easy shot.

The Bulls wear you down with punishing intensity, hustling, and defensive tactics which are either aggressive or illegal, depending on what side you're on. The Bulls—particularly Jerry Sloan and Norm Van Lier (one white, one black for the quota-minded)—seem to reject the concept of an out-of-bounds line. They are as likely to be found under the press table or wrapped around the ushers as on the court.

Perhaps the most classically "white" position is that of the quick forward, one without great moves to the basket, without highly developed shots, without the height and mobility for rebounding effectiveness. What does he do? He runs. He runs from the opening jump to the last horn. He runs up and down the court, from base line to base line, back and forth under the basket, looking for the opening, for the pass, for the chance to take a quick step and the high-percentage shot. To watch Boston's Don Nelson, a player without speed or moves, is to wonder what this thirty-five-year-old is doing in the N.B.A.—until you see him swing free and throw up a shot that, without demanding any apparent skill, somehow goes in the basket more frequently than the shots of any of his teammates. And to watch his teammate John Havlicek, also thirty-five, is to see "white" ball at its best.

Havlicek stands in dramatic contrast to Julius Erving of the New York Nets. Erving has the (*Continued on page 248*)

## The Stars In Living Black and White

Skin color is a clumsy guide to black and white styles of play. The mobility, leaping ability, and quickness of black players, the hustle, drive, and intensity of white players break down too often. Here, for example, are four teams: black "black" players; white "white" players; black "white" players; and white "black" players. It was prepared with the patient advice and help of Bob Ryan, basketball writer for *The Boston Globe* and *The Sporting News*.

### BLACK "BLACK"

**Julius Erving**, New York Nets **F**  
**Connie Hawkins**,

Los Angeles Lakers **F**

**Bob McAdoo**, Buffalo Braves **C**

**Nate Archibald**,  
K.C.-Omaha Kings **G**

**Earl Monroe**, New York Knicks **G**

### BLACK "WHITE"

**Paul Silas**, Boston Celtics **F**

**Bill Bridges**,

Golden State Warriors **F**

**Nate Thurmond**, Chicago Bulls **C**

**Norm Van Lier**, Chicago Bulls **G**

**Jim McMillian**,  
Buffalo Braves **F-G**

### WHITE "WHITE"

**John Havlicek**, Boston Celtics **F**

**Mike Riordan**,

Washington Bullets **F**

**Sven Nater**, New York Nets **C**

**Jerry Sloan**, Chicago Bulls **G**

**Dave Twardzik**, Virginia Squires **G**

### WHITE "BLACK"

**Rick Barry**,

Golden State Warriors **F**

**Billy Cunningham**,

Philadelphia 76ers **F**

**Dave Cowens**, Boston Celtics **C**

**Pete Maravich**,

New Orleans Jazz **G**

**Paul Westphal**, Phoenix Suns **G**

race driver was required to do, his life would be a bed of roses. But unfortunately there are certain other requirements of equal importance. Primary ones are a knowledge of high finance, the ability to go without sleep for long periods, and as much mechanical ability as possible.

Unless you happen to be filthy rich, the question of finance is a major one, particularly when you are starting out, because the equipment is expensive and there is little chance of any return until you have proved yourself and can get your hands on some prize money and a sponsor. A golden rule of racing is always to use someone else's money if at all possible. But the rewards are definitely there, and Jackie Stewart, who is obliged to live in Switzerland, admits to have been making close to \$1,000,000 a year until his announced retirement recently.

In Europe they have a pleasant custom of paying starting money as well as prize money. This is a guarantee of a certain amount if one starts the race, and the amount is negotiable depending on your past performance, the type of car, your nationality, etc. However, it does tend to bring out the essential deviousness that lurks in the souls of all race drivers. I recall a friend who owned a six-cylinder Maserati in which he broke a piston during a practice period. The race was the next day, and no spare piston was available. So we spent the whole night extracting the broken piston and its connecting rod and performing other surgery. When we fired it up, it sounded a bit funny, running with five pistons, but he got it to the starting line, ran a few slow laps after the flag fell, and then parked it. He collected his "*prime de départ*," as the French so aptly call it, and gave me a percentage, which we had previously agreed upon on a contingency basis.

On another occasion, I can recall buying a partnership in a car in London through a financial arrangement that was so devious and involved that it could certainly have put us away for a while had it been found out. It was all based on the proposition that the car would earn sufficient money during the season to pay off the various debts surrounding it, which, fortunately, it did. I am one of the very few people I know who actually had a Swiss bank account.

As far as being able to go without sleep is concerned, when I arrived at Fred Opert's school, Bertil Roos had just flown in from Hockenheim, Germany, and David McMillan and Rick Brady had just flown in from Seattle after driving a transporter there loaded with three cars and sundry spare engines. The drive had taken fifty-six hours with stops for only food and gas.

From my own experience, I can remember the night I was arrested in Fort Wayne, Indiana, at three a.m. for driving a racing sports car on the street and making a hell of a noise. I left all my money but ten dollars under the seat, told the J.P. that I was a student and driving it for someone else, and he let me off with a five-dollar fine.

I can recall two of us driving a van with a race car on a trailer the 2000 miles from London to Palermo, Sicily, in six days, driving eighteen hours a day. The drive included three interminable days in the mountains and olive groves of Calabria and innumerable stops at welding shops to fix the trailer that started to break up from the bad roads. "*Saldare*" is the word in Italian.

I can remember doing Paris to Opatija, Yugoslavia, nonstop in forty-eight hours, including one night hopelessly lost in the Dolomites. I recall overhauling a Lotus engine for twenty-four hours straight in a barn in the wilds of Austria with a herd of cows for company. The farmer had a still going in a corner that dripped pear brandy into a bucket, and he told me to help myself anytime. I remember spending a whole night at the Nurburgring in the Eifel Mountains of Germany overhauling a transmission. A German policeman, with whom I shared a bottle of schnapps, was assigned to watch me because the parts had been flown in from England, and his job was to insure that they actually went into the car instead of being sold on the black market.

As far as mechanical aptitude is concerned, the more you have yourself, the less you will have to pay for someone else's. I became an extremely competent mechanic, and, as with almost anything else I know other than the three R's, I taught myself. In fact, having been dragged, ignorant and unashamed, through the classic English educational curriculum of Latin, the Anglican church and the appalling game of cricket—each one more deadly boring than the last—it was a great relief to teach myself, finally, something that was actually interesting, and also a very useful discipline, because I made my living from it for several years.

The whole problem is that a race car is not something that you just put gas, oil and water into through its various orifices and then drive away. You have to get to know it and understand its moods, and for every race it has to be thoroughly prepared mechanically, but it can be relied on to be as temperamental as a racehorse, and the chances of its cooperating with its driver, when the driver needs all the help he can get, are exceedingly slim. Ultimately, it will ruin you financially and even kill you, if given the ghost of a chance, which is perhaps its fascination.

I have loved race cars almost as long as I can remember. When I started there were no Fred Operts to introduce me to the sport, but I didn't need any introduction because I always knew that was what I wanted to do. As soon as the opportunity arose, I got a car, applied for a racing license, which consisted at the time of nothing more than having my blood pressure checked by a doctor and peeing in his bottle (why the condition of my urine should have had any bearing on my ability to drive a race car is beyond me) and went racing.

Looking back on it all, when I

dropped out to go racing I worked harder than I have ever worked before or since, and it was the best ten years of my life. When Grandma left me the money for the Bugatti, she didn't know what she was starting, but despite being the ultimate Victorian, she would probably have approved because she was adventurous in her own way, was hot stuff on the Puritan work ethic, had weathered an unfair number of misfortunes during her eighty-two years, and if she were alive today she would be out there libbing it up.

Personally, I am still quite unrepentant, although my racing days are over, because I'll be fifty come next muck-spreading and I'm well into bifocals. But if I had my druthers, I would be a rich man, I would set up shop in Europe and run my own racing team. No doubt about it. #

## The Black and White Truth About Basketball

(Continued from page 171) capacity to make legends come true; leaping from the foul line and slam-dunking the ball on his way down; going up for a lay-up, pulling the ball to his body and throwing under and up the other side of the rim, defying gravity and probability with moves and jumps. Havlicek looks like the living embodiment of his small-town Ohio background. He brings the ball downcourt, weaving left, then right, looking for the path. He swings the ball to a teammate, cuts behind a pick, takes the pass and releases the shot in a flicker of time. It looks plain, unvarnished. But there are not half a dozen players in the league who can see such possibilities for a free shot, then get that shot off as quickly and efficiently as Havlicek.

To Jim McMillan of Buffalo, a black with "white" attributes, himself a quick forward, "it's a matter of environment. Julius Erving grew up in a different environment from Havlicek—John came from a very small town in Ohio. There everything was done the easy way, the shortest distance between two points. It's nothing fancy, very few times will he go one-on-one; he hits the lay-up, hits the jump shot, makes the free throw, and after the game you look and you say, 'How did he hurt us that much?'"

"White" ball, then, is the basketball of patience and method. "Black" ball is the basketball of electric self-expression. One player has all the time in the world to perfect his skills, the other a need to prove himself. These are slippery categories, because a poor boy who is black can play "white" and a white boy of middle-class parents can play "black." K. C. Jones and Pete Maravich are athletes who seem to defy these categories. And what makes basketball the most intriguing of sports is how these styles do not necessarily clash; how the punishing intensity of "white" players and the dazzling moves of the "blacks" can fit together, a fusion of cultures that seems more and more difficult in the world beyond the out-of-bounds line. #