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My NBA All-Star Team of Socially Conscience Players

By Richard Lapchick
UCF Forum columnist
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I have been trying to use the sports platform and the power of sports to address serious social issues during my entire adult life.

The NBA has always led the other leagues on best hiring practices both for people of color and women, and it has been the most progressive with all of its policies and impact on communities. It is not surprising, therefore, that basketball is my favorite sport.

I think the NBA got there partially as a result of the work of former Commissioner David Stern. But I am sure Stern and the league were influenced by pioneering NBA players who were not only stars but who stood up for justice inside and outside sport.

As I approach my 70th birthday, I think this is a good time to name my all-time NBA All-Star Team for Great Players with a Social Conscience, listed in order of their playing days.

- **Bob Cousy** was one of the greatest playmakers in NBA history who did things with the ball that no one else had even imagined. He was part of the reason the Boston Celtics became a dominant team in the 1950s and 1960s. Cousy earned six NBA championship rings and played in 13 straight NBA All-Star Games.

But he was named to this team for his public opposition against racism. He led the Celtics in their support of teammate Chuck Cooper, who was the first African-American in NBA history to be drafted. (Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton had been signed by the Knicks before the draft. Cooper, Clifton and Earl Lloyd, selected later in the draft, were the first three African-Americans to play in the NBA in 1950). Cousy later stood up with and for teammate Bill Russell, who was a frequent target of racism in Boston and elsewhere.

Cousy organized the National Basketball Players Association, which was the first in pro sports. The association helped secure health benefits, pension plans and minimum salaries, none of which existed prior to its existence.

Cousy's on-the-court greatness was enhanced with the arrival of Bill Russell in 1956.

- **Bill Russell** became a five-time NBA MVP, a 12-time All-Star, and was the leader of the Celtics team that captured 11 championships in 13 years. Before joining the Celtics, Russell's University of San Francisco team won two NCAA championships. Russell also won a gold medal in the 1956 Olympics.

Russell was the first African-American player to achieve superstar status in the NBA and became the first African-American coach in any major pro league. His book "Go Up for Glory" was the first book by an athlete to speak frankly about racism in America.

He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama in 2011 for his leadership in the civil rights movement.

- **Wayne Embry** was a center and forward in the NBA from 1958 to 1969, playing for the Cincinnati Royals, Boston Celtics and Milwaukee Bucks. He played in the NBA All-Star game five consecutive seasons and won the NBA Championship with the Celtics in 1968.

Embry became a pioneering executive after he retired as a player. He became the first African-American NBA general manager, managing the Milwaukee Bucks from 1972 to 1979. As the Bucks assistant GM, he helped sign Oscar Robertson and draft the then Lew Alcindor.

He later was the GM for the Cleveland Cavaliers from 1986 to 1999 and Toronto Raptors in 2006. He also became the first African-American to be a team president. His candid book, "The Inside Game: Race, Power and Politics in the NBA," published in 2004, opened wide more discussions on race and sport.

- **Oscar Robertson**, known as "The Big O," was one of basketball's best all-around players of all time. In 1961 he averaged a triple-double (at least 10 points, 10 assists and 10 rebounds in a game) for the entire season. That year he averaged 30.8 points, 12.5 rebounds and 11.4 assists. During his 14-year career with the Cincinnati Royals and Milwaukee Bucks, he became the top-scoring guard of all time. Robertson was

selected to the NBA first team nine consecutive seasons, was selected to the All-Star team for 12 consecutive years, and helped lead the Bucks to the NBA title in 1971. He won the national scoring title three times at the University of Cincinnati as an All-American and College Player of the Year.

Robertson helped secure the future of players as a key part of an anti-trust lawsuit named after him in *Robertson v NBA*. He was the Players Association president at the time. The suit eventually led to major reforms of the NBA's free agency and draft rules. All of this meant higher salaries for all players.

In January 2011, Robertson became part of the class-action lawsuit against the NCAA challenging the organization's use of the images of student-athletes. Throughout his lifetime, Robertson was vocal on racial issues in America.

- **Kareem Abdul-Jabbar** was one of the most dominant players in NBA history. He helped lead his teams to six NBA championships. Abdul-Jabbar scored more points and blocked more shots than anyone in NBA history. He was named NBA MVP six times, NBA Finals MVP two times and was a 19-time All-Star. He dominated college basketball at UCLA where he played for John Wooden. Abdul-Jabbar was drafted by the Milwaukee Bucks in 1969 and played with Milwaukee until 1975, when he requested a trade. Then-GM Wayne Embry accommodated him with a trade to the Lakers, where he finished his brilliant career.

Abdul-Jabbar has been outspoken on racial and religious issues for most of his life. He refused to compete in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City as part of a protest against racism in the United States and South Africa. He spoke out on race in a *Sports Illustrated* cover story when he adopted Islam and changed his name from Lew Alcindor after college. "Giant Steps," his autobiography, addressed racism in his own life and in the United States. He has written numerous books and produced a documentary on the great 1920s-40s all-black team, the New York Rens. He is a columnist for TIME magazine, in which he addresses issues weekly.

The lives of Russell and Cousy have been intertwined with Embry, who played with them on the Celtics. So have the lives of Robertson, Embry and Abdul-Jabbar. All have won NBA championships as players, and Russell won them as a coach. All have been inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame.

All these All-Stars have stood up for justice and not blocked its path while being great players.

They are all heroes on and off the court, which makes them the ultimate NBA All-Star Team for Great Players with a Social Conscience

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