


3-16-1993

The Transformation of Basketball: Some History

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Public History at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Sport and Society by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Transformation of Basketball: Some History" (1993). *On Sport and Society*. 373. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/373>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

MARCH 16, 1993

With the NCAA tournament paying its first visit to Orlando, it's striking to reflect on how much basketball has changed over the past half-century. I was reminded of this twice in the last two months with the death of Henry Iba and Don Barksdale.

Hank Iba won two national championships while coaching basketball at Oklahoma State for forty-one years. His 763 victories make him the third winningest coach at the collegiate level, but he may be remembered best for one of his losses. Iba was the coach of the 1972 Olympic team that lost to the Russians, 51-50, in the most controversial basketball game in the history of the sport.

Iba was most notable as a practitioner of slowdown basketball in the era before the shot-clock. His teams played fierce defense and hot the ball sparingly. He was a sideline screamer and was always in total control of his players.

He called his offense "the horse and buggy," and his defense "the swinging gate." But he was in many ways the creator of the modern game. The motion offense played by Indiana and Duke was created by Iba, as was the man-t-man defense with zone principles. He trained twenty-five men who went on to head coaching positions.

Don Barksdale died of cancer at age 69 less than two weeks ago. Although Barksdale's name is not as well-known as that of Iba, he is a symbol of the changes in the game. Barksdale played his college basketball at UCLA, and was member of the 1946 Olympic team.

He is best known as the first black player to play in an NBA All-Star Game, January 13, 1953. He was only the third black player to enter the league when he joined the Baltimore Bullets in 1951. He played two years with Baltimore and two with the Celtics averaging 11 points and eight rebounds over his 262 game career.

The game of Henry Iba has in many ways changed, and the changes in the game have much to do with the trend that was starting when Don Barksdale became an NBA All-Star. As with all American sport, so to with basket, the early fifties was the beginning of

the transformation of the style of play, which came with the slow and uneasy acceptance of the African American in sport.

These stylistic changes can be seen in many sports including baseball where speed and power were combined in one player to transform the game. Where it had been a speed game prior to Babe Ruth and a power game after Ruth, it was both a speed and power game after Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays and Hank Aaron.

In basketball the stylistic changes were considerably more pronounced and they changed the esthetic of the game. In his recent book, *Elevating the Game*, Nelson George writes about this transformation as being cultural in its derivation. Basketball is a vehicle of cultural expression for Black males and it has ties to what is distinctly African in their heritage, a characteristic called *Negritude* by the African poet and philosopher, Leopold Senghor.

Fifty years ago in the game of Henry Iba the idea of a slam dunk, hang time, or a no look pass, were foreign. When first introduced into the game they were demeaned as playground ball and hot dogging. White basketball was disciplined and patterned, and white coaches were not about to change that style.

The first dramatic evidence of change that I remember seeing came in the person of Elgin Baylor. In his rookie year in Minneapolis Baylor took a weak Laker team and transformed it with his shooting and passing ability, and his moves. Baylor defied gravity, as he seemed to hang suspended in the air for much longer than anyone else. He had speed and grace to match his tremendous skills, and watching Baylor you could literally see the game heading to a new level.

Then in the mid-Sixties a second major event took place which contributed dramatically to the changing game. In the 1966 NCAA Championship game the all-black Texas Western Miners defeated the all-white Kentucky Wildcats. I can remember listening to that game on radio, hearing Caywood Ledford's voice, and knowing that basketball, and maybe America, had changed some that night. The contrasting styles of the teams, matched the contrasting colors, and it not be long before the most segregated colleges were recruiting African American players.

By the early seventies basketball was a Black game, and was a place where black cultural expression had transformed style. The slam dunk, the game above the rim, hand time, as well as the

trash talking, all expressed characteristics of the African American culture.

Basketball, says Nelson George, is a game of style and the African American style is expressed within the game, just as that style is expressed in jazz. Improvisation and flare lead not to hot-dogging but to larger and more complex harmonizing, seen in the passing and orchestration of Magic Johnson, the stylized play of Michael Jordan, or and grace and beauty of a Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Basketball is no longer Henry Iba's game or Don Barksdale's game. It is no longer a white game nor a black game. It is a game that has been transformed as the culture has been transformed. In many ways basketball has become the most American of all our games.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

Copyright 1993 by Richard C. Crepeau