“My Impact Will Be Everlasting”: Wilt Chamberlain in History and Memory

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How should we remember Wilt Chamberlain? At first glance he seems almost a cartoon giant, a man of dazzling dimensions and magnified mythology. Perhaps no one else in human history has possessed his concoction of size, strength, and grace. He also had a physicality, a presence that compelled outsized reactions: dropped jaws, bilious resentment, sexual fantasies. And he conjures up mind-boggling numbers, figures that shine
through the haze of his legend and inspire continued incredulity. **One hundred points? Twenty thousand women?**

Should we remember Chamberlain for those 100 points, scored in one game in March of 1962, and for what those points represent? He laid an assault upon his sport, an assault of both style and statistics. Even before his first collegiate game in December of 1956, the *Saturday Evening Post* had asked, “Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?” To many basketball fans, he threatened the game’s very nature. His physical gifts might render the basket too short, the lane too narrow, the court too small. After joining the National Basketball Association in 1959, he did not just break records. He annihilated them. The 100-point game singularly embodies his dominance, but during the 1961-1962 season he averaged over fifty points, twenty-five rebounds, and forty-eight minutes a game. In 1967-1968 he led the league in assists—no center had ever approached that feat before. By his retirement in 1974, he had shattered virtually every scoring record. If basketball can be boiled down to individual statistical achievement then Wilt Chamberlain surely reigns supreme.¹

Maybe we should remember Chamberlain for the 20,000 women—more specifically, for his 1991 claim that he had bedded 20,000 women, an average of 1.2 sexual conquests per day since turning fifteen. Even those who care little about sports remember him based on this declaration. This legacy speaks to how Chamberlain transcended basketball. He engendered fascination. In his sporting heyday, he appeared on televised game shows and talk shows, became a recording artist, commanded a small business empire, and generally kept his name in the newspaper. He was the Babe Ruth of basketball, his sport’s first celebrity.²

As that impossible boast of 20,000 women indicates, we should also remember that this public phenomenon had private idiosyncrasies. In the 1960s and early 1970s, to follow professional basketball was to analyze Chamberlain’s psyche. Sports magazines ran profiles looking for “The Real Wilt Chamberlain.” For all his greatness, Chamberlain oozed insecurity. His height separated him from the masses. His talent prompted unrealistic expectations of consistent athletic dominance. His fame forged a massive ego. His individual brilliance destroyed the team concept. His rivalry with Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics led to his image as a villain. And his failures to win championships, his frustrations against Russell’s Celtics, and his ill-advised self-justifications crafted his most hated perception: loser.³

Five recent books tackle Chamberlain’s legacy: a traditional biography, a portrait of his 100-point game, a narrative of his rivalry with Russell, and chronicles of his two championship seasons. None ignore his flaws, though each attempts to like him. All amplify our understanding of one of the most compelling personalities in the history of American sports. But only with varying success do these books, all written by journalists, answer questions about Chamberlain’s meaning to American culture. How did he help the NBA become a viable major sports institution? How did he shape basketball’s emerging association with blackness? What were the political implications of the Chamberlain icon in the era of the civil rights movement?

In other words: How should a historian remember Wilt Chamberlain?
Wilt, by Robert Cherry, earns its billing as “the definitive Wilt Chamberlain biography.” It covers every stage of Chamberlain’s life, with substantial attention paid to his post-basketball years, and it includes every requisite milestone and controversy. Although he does not provide source documentation, Cherry has mined the relevant archival collections at the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas and the Urban Archives at Temple University. He has also interviewed over 150 of Chamberlain’s friends and associates, and these oral histories provide rich detail. Yet the book assumes the tone of its interviewees: generous with praise for the recently deceased subject, amusedly tolerant of his ego, uncritical of his myriad contradictions. Cherry, too, rarely steps back and analyzes his subject’s cultural or political importance. He instead provides an intimate and sympathetic portrait of Chamberlain, acknowledging his frustrating character but constantly working to smooth it over.4

To be sure, fully understanding Chamberlain would exasperate any biographer. Dolph Schayes, the star forward of the Syracuse Nationals, claimed that his ambition was to walk down the street and be recognized as the greatest basketball player in the world. “Well, that’s not mine,” said Wilt Chamberlain in 1960. “My ambition is to walk down the street and have nobody pay attention to me.” That assertion smacked of absurdity—in the next breath he admitted that he reveled in his celebrity. But it spoke to the pressures of constant recognition that had saddled him since childhood.

Chamberlain’s West Philadelphia early years were a nest of neuroses. The boy stood out. He was skinny, ungainly, freakishly tall, and black. Cherry quotes his friend Sonny Hill, who remembered visiting New York City with Chamberlain: “We’re walking down Broadway and white people are walking by and saying, ‘By golly, Martha, look how tall that nigger is.’ Wilt couldn’t hide inside himself. You can’t hide when you’re 6’11” and 15 years old. That left scars on him” (p. 17). He was shy, and he stuttered. But he also developed a compulsion to prove himself by working odd jobs and embracing competition.

Sports transformed Chamberlain. Already gifted at track and field, he reluctantly took up basketball and became a force. In his three seasons at Overbrook High School, the team won fifty-eight games and lost only three, and it was city champion his final two years. He averaged 44.5 points a game his senior year. Life proclaimed him the nation’s best high school player, and Sport ran a long feature entitled, “The High-School Kid Who Could Play Pro Now.” He inspired the first national recruiting campaign in college basketball history, with over 200 schools vying for his services. The Philadelphia Warriors drafted him when he was a high school senior, even though league rules prohibited him from joining the NBA until his class graduated from college. Even as he recognized its burdens, his fame fulfilled him. He controlled his recruiting process with a cool-headed individualism. His ego swelled.6

From 1955 to 1958 Chamberlain attended the University of Kansas, where his tenure embodied the changing landscape of American sports. His choice of Kansas sparked accusations of illegal inducements, an NCAA investigation, and questions about his amateur status. “I feel sorry for the Stilt,” wrote columnist Leonard Lewin. “When he enters the NBA four years from now, he’ll have to take a cut in salary.” His speed and power reshaped the game. Defenders needed to use triple teams and cheap shots. He dunked with regularity,
a first in college basketball. Lawrence businesses, typically de facto segregated, served Chamberlain. A big black Goliath amidst white Lilliputians, he was a campus celebrity and the object of national press attention. But failure, as much as success, defined his time in Kansas. Jayhawk fans expected a national title, even when facing undefeated North Carolina in the 1957 NCAA Final. Kansas lost in triple overtime. The next year, Kansas State took the conference title and NCAA tournament bid. Defying the taboo of leaving college early, Chamberlain skipped his senior year to join the Harlem Globetrotters, an announcement delivered in the pages of the magazine Look, which paid him $10,000. His individualism, style, celebrity, and race seemed signposts of a transition to a more modern ethic in college basketball.7

Chamberlain, like no basketball player before him, understood himself as a commodity. The recruiting battles and constant attention had hardened him, and he grasped his own bargaining power. He cherished his year with the Globetrotters, both for the $65,000 salary and the chance to display his athletic brilliance unfettered by expectations—the Globetrotters always won, after all. Abe Saperstein offered $100,000 for another year. The fledgling NBA so needed Chamberlain, however, that the league’s seven other owners offered to help the Warriors’ Eddie Gottlieb with his salary (Gottlieb declined their help). Chamberlain joined the Warriors in 1959 and became a phenomenon. He averaged 37.6 points and twenty-seven rebounds a game, smashing both single-season records. Gate receipts ballooned wherever he arrived. No individual had ever so dictated the patterns of basketball. He set himself apart: sparring with Coach Neil Johnston, remaining aloof from teammates, bellyaching about mistreatment by NBA defenders and referees, and “retiring” after the season until he won a new contract. He had become the sun around which the NBA revolved.8

Chamberlain also injected himself into the public consciousness for his off-court exploits, stimulating public attention unlike any basketball player in history. His rookie year, he recorded a rhythm and blues single called “By the River.” Soon he appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show and What’s My Line?. He purchased harness racing horses, including a champion named Rivaltime. The media admired his financial wherewithal, and his investments included Smalls Paradise, the old and celebrated Harlem club. He drew attention for his luxury cars and copious speeding violations. He bragged about his erudition and ear for foreign languages. Professional football and soccer teams bid for his services, and he often touted his prowess at track and field. He even considered boxing against heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali. They met on Howard Cosell’s Wide World of Sports, where they trash-talked and baited each other. Clearly, Chamberlain’s fame surpassed the confines of professional basketball.9

Yet his star rose over the clouds of a “bush league.” In the early 1960s, only one team joined the NBA despite constant plans for expansion. The league had no national television contract for two years. Screaming coaches, incompetent referees, and brawling players sullied the league’s reputation. Dynamic black stars such as Oscar Robertson and Elgin Baylor were emerging, but the novelty of Chamberlain was wearing off. The NBA grew slowly.10

In depicting Chamberlain’s famous 100-point game, Gary Pomerantz’s Wilt, 1962 captures both his subject’s incandescent allure and the intimate, ramshackle milieu in
which the great feat occurred. The game took place on March 2, 1962, against the New York Knicks, before only a few thousand fans in Hershey, Pennsylvania, in a dimly lit arena with soft rims. Pomerantz recreates the game with lyrical language, telling detail, and narrative drive. He intersperses portraits of such key supporting players as Gottlieb, the Jewish impresario scraping out survival, even sending “home” games to outposts like Hershey; Frank McGuire, the showy and fast-talking coach who tailored a style maximizing Chamberlain’s offensive output; Paul Arizin and Tom Gola, institutions of Philadelphia basketball who became bygone relics in Chamberlain’s shadow; Tom Meschery and Joe Ruklick, the white liberals who made tenuous connections to their imperious black teammate; Richie Guerin, the old-school Knicks shooter who fought everything represented by Chamberlain’s quest for 100 points; and Kerry Ryman, the eighth-grade kid who snuck into Hershey Sports Arena on the auspicious night and who, after growing up and becoming a crane operator, claimed to have run off with the game ball—a saga that adds to the mystery of this legend-clouded night.

*Wilt, 1962* is most compelling in its vivid, if fleeting, tableaus of Chamberlain himself. Rather than systematically explaining Chamberlain, Pomerantz understands him in particular glimpses of light. Chamberlain holds court amidst celebrities and colorful characters at Big Wilt’s Smalls Paradise. He expresses both genuine hurt and remarkable patience when Meschery, fearful of a backlash, breaks a double date with Chamberlain and two white women. And there is the game. Chamberlain runs the floor, scores on dunks, sets up on the low post for finger rolls and fall-away jumpers. He even hits his free throws, typically his Achilles heel. Quarter by quarter, the game increasingly fixates on Chamberlain’s individual quest for 100 points. In this mission Pomerantz sees a psychic revenge, one rooted in the expectations heaped upon Chamberlain. His response derives from his blackness:

> A tradition runs deep in black culture and athletics to respond to the challenge of humiliation with just this kind of gorgeous, awe-inspiring overkill as proof of value in a world that would devalue black life and performance: Willie Mays’s basket catch in baseball, an unnecessary and showy display of virtuosity; the young Cassius Clay’s big-mouthed showmanship in boxing; Malcolm X’s overheated rhetoric on street corners in Harlem; James Baldwin’s snaking, furious sentences. The Dipper’s climb to one hundred had those same qualities: a gorgeous, showy, overheated, snaking, furious display of overkill and virtuosity (pp. 158-159).

The story crescendos with the final seconds of the fourth quarter when Chamberlain reaches the milestone and the crowd joyfully floods the court. Yet afterward, a sense of anticlimax sifts in. The New York press barely noticed the achievement. The feat’s visual commemoration is a photograph taken in the locker room of Chamberlain sheepishly holding up a piece of paper with “100” scribbled on it.

For its lush and thoughtful reconstruction of an event enshrouded in myth, *Wilt, 1962* deserves recognition as one of the finest books ever written about basketball. In its focus on one golden moment, however, the book can neither survey the arc of Chamberlain’s career nor analyze his larger public perception during the 1960s. The ghost of public opinion haunted Chamberlain, despite his talent and celebrity. He failed to deliver an NBA title to the Warriors, either in Philadelphia or after the franchise moved to San
Francisco in 1962. Opposing players harassed him; fans booed and mocked him; coaches and reporters blamed his individual success for shortchanging his team’s goals. Instead of reigning above the slings and arrows, Chamberlain defended himself, often appearing worse for the effort. He complained about the lack of appreciation for his statistical accomplishments. “No one roots for Goliath,” he moaned. The discussions about the superstar center revolved less around his celebrating his greatness and more around his correcting his flaws: “The Master Plan to Change Wilt Chamberlain,” proclaimed one article in 1962; “The Fight to Remodel Wilt Chamberlain,” read another in 1964; “The Startling Change in Wilt Chamberlain,” examined a third in 1967. Yet he never really changed. In harsh light, he seemed a selfish loser.11

Chamberlain looked worst in the shadow of his nemesis, Bill Russell. As a reverse mirror image of Chamberlain, Russell compelled an ever-evolving personal respect for his influence upon team victory. Some inches shorter and many pounds lighter, Russell also lacked Chamberlain’s repertoire of offensive moves. But he had agility, brains, and a fierce competitive ethic. His defense and rebounding earned the appreciation of teammates, and it triggered a style of up-tempo, pressing basketball. Russell deserves the status as the greatest winner in American team sports: two NCAA titles at the University of San Francisco, a gold medal at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, and eleven NBA titles in thirteen seasons with the Boston Celtics. As the sport’s pre-eminent stars—both centers, and both black—Russell and Chamberlain had a long association in the mind of the American sports fan. As John Taylor illustrates in The Rivalry, their conflicting ethics defined the NBA as it expanded into a major commercial endeavor.12

Taylor’s story begins on November 7, 1959, the night of the first Russell-Chamberlain battle at Boston Garden. That game established patterns for their years of struggle: fans and reporters flocked to witness the compelling clash, Chamberlain scored more points, and Russell’s Celtics won. A writer fascinated by the “psychology of conflict,” Taylor sees each man elevated in the other’s presence: “It was as if only now had each of them found an opponent worthy of his own talent, for each appeared to be forcing the other to work harder, to stretch further, to demand more of himself” (p. 9). Russell challenged Chamberlain—sticking a hand in his face, flicking at the ball, and once blocking a shot straight down. Chamberlain had always forced adjustments from others, but now he adjusted with some awkward flat-footed hook shots. In the coming years, Russell kept depending on wiles to contain his opposite number. He stroked Chamberlain’s ego: allowing easy baskets with the game out of hand, striking up a friendship, publicly celebrating him at every opportunity. Every season, it seemed, Chamberlain set records and Russell won championships.

The Rivalry is an absorbing narrative, briskly recounting the biographies of its two protagonists and including engaging sketches of the surrounding owners, coaches, players who helped build the NBA: team owners Gottlieb and Walter Brown, Celtics coach Red Auerbach, beloved Celtics guard Bob Cousy, Los Angeles Lakers stars Elgin Baylor and Jerry West, and many others. It also describes the sweaty, brawling, working-class atmosphere of the early NBA and its subsequent maturation thanks to commercial jet travel
and television. Taylor aptly relates the most thrilling on-court moments, and he describes with vivid detail such incidents as the threatened strike of the 1964 All-Star Game, a signal of the league’s eroding paternalistic labor relations. Still, he keeps his story centered on Russell and Chamberlain, who together inspired their sport’s great public narrative, as well as frequent debate about their relative merits. Taylor captures the sport’s inherent drama, the poetic juxtaposition of its great centers, and the arc of their struggle over time. As a result, *The Rivalry* reads not only as a commendable history of the NBA in the 1960s but one with the verve and tension of a satisfying novel.  

Taylor’s direct plot-driven style, however, omits open judgment of his main characters. Chamberlain often gets an implicit benefit of the doubt, and sometimes he does not deserve it. His gargantuan ego, combined with his hypersensitivity to slights, exposed his insecurities for public consumption. He legitimately noted that the Celtics depended upon Russell for only rebounding and defense, but he never understood that Russell made his team better, while Chamberlain forced his teammates to adapt to his talents. Chamberlain also argued that Russell played with excellent teammates, but in every stop of Chamberlain’s career, a core of outstanding players surrounded him, and he rarely lifted them to greater heights. Chamberlain highlighted his far-superior statistics, but the sporting world most valued Russell’s leadership of championship teams.

The frustrations of losing twisted Chamberlain into convoluted excuses and bizarre psychology. Despite his remarkable coordination and success in practice, he shot free throws atrociously during games—as if the world needed a reminder that this giant was human, with human flaws. He also questioned sport’s competitive code. “In a way, I like it better when we lose,” he said in 1964. “It’s over, and I can look forward to the next game. If we win, it builds up the tension, and I start worrying about the next game.” If he embraced victory as the ultimate ambition then he had to define himself as a failure.

Chamberlain thus owned an outrageous, disturbing capacity for self-sabotage. In 1965, for example, after a mid-season trade from the San Francisco Warriors to the Philadelphia 76ers, he transformed his new team into a legitimate title contender. During the Eastern Conference finals against the Celtics, Chamberlain penned a two-part series in *Sports Illustrated* called, “My Life in a Bush League.” The articles alienated his teammates, coach, and the league in the midst of a series undecided until the final seconds of the final game. Chamberlain complained about shortsighted owners, about Coach Dolph Schayes, and about the media’s harping on him. “Defeat and victory all smell exactly the same in a pro basketball dressing room after a while,” he wrote. In that series’ seventh game at Boston Garden, the 76ers trailed by one point with five seconds left. Schayes designed an inbounds play for Chet Walker, but John Havlicek tipped the ball away. In the huddle beforehand, Chamberlain had not wanted the ball. He feared shooting two free throws with the game on the line.

Chamberlain would not exorcise the demons of perennial defeat until his championship in 1967, the subject of Wayne Lynch’s *Season of the 76ers*. In 1966 Alex Hannum replaced Dolph Schayes as the Philadelphia coach and molded a group including Chamberlain, Hal Greer, Chet Walker, Luke Jackson, and Billy Cunningham into perhaps the most formidable one-year force in NBA history. After a 68-13 regular season, they conquered an aging Celtics squad (now player-coached by Bill Russell) in the Eastern Division.
finals, four games to one. “Boston is dead! Boston is dead!” chanted the Convention Hall faithful. The Sixers then beat the San Francisco Warriors in the finals, four games to two. Chamberlain had his first championship since high school.

Lynch describes himself in 1966 as “a young, gung-ho fan of the 76ers, and a flat-out passionate hater of the Boston Celtics” (p. 123). Decades later, he writes *Season of the 76ers* from that same enthusiastic perspective, resulting in a book geared to longtime Sixer fans looking to celebrate old triumphs. Readers will be disappointed if they are searching for a broader understanding of basketball’s connection to American culture. The story further suffers from banal month-by-month, and then series-by-series, accounts of the season. Yet Lynch does place Chamberlain at the center of the 76ers’ success in 1966-1967. Hannum bullied, cajoled, and pleaded with his star center to transform his game, to shoot less and pass more, to become the hub for his looping and cutting teammates instead of a one-man scoring machine. For a season, it worked to perfection. Chamberlain’s shot total declined but his shooting percentage surged, and his teammates flourished with more offensive responsibility. Chamberlain deserves credit for sacrificing his individual statistics and reshaping his talents. But his belated epiphany also suggests that had he earlier embraced this style, he would have ranked above Russell in the estimation of the sporting cognoscenti.

Even more damning, Chamberlain’s selfless and winning ways proved an aberration. The satisfaction of victory remained less rewarding than the accumulation of statistics. In 1967-1968 the 76ers cruised to the best regular season record, and they should have been a budding dynasty. But tensions surfaced, as they always did around Chamberlain. For one, he resolved to lead the NBA in assists—no center had ever done that, and he assumed it would reinforce his greatness. So he stopped attacking the basket, favored passes to quick shooters like Walker and Cunningham, and passed up easy shots if a teammate was open. He had managed to make unselfishness selfish. Lynch also provides a revealing tale after interviewing journalist George Kiseda. Chafing at Hannum’s lecture after a loss, Chamberlain interrupted the coach: “I think there are more important things than winning. I think you have to learn how to lose, too” (p. 211). Chamberlain absorbed that self-imposed lesson once again. In the 1968 playoffs, the 76ers wasted a 3-1 series lead against the Celtics. Boston then won another title, the first with Russell as player-coach. The same old story: Russell lifted his team to new heights, Chamberlain faltered when it mattered most.

When Chamberlain engineered his own trade to the Los Angeles Lakers in the summer of 1968, it began the final chapter of his career. Those Lakers embodied the modern NBA. Chamberlain, Jerry West, and Elgin Baylor glittered with star power. Billionaire owner Jack Kent Cooke built the Fabulous Forum, a $16.25 million edifice rimmed by eighty columns, where ushers in togas guided Hollywood stars to wide, cushioned, theater-style courtside seats. The league had long been rough around the edges, but now Chamberlain resided in the NBA’s bastion of swank and glamour.

In 1968-1969, the Lakers powered to a division-best record despite fragile egos and internal rivalries, including Chamberlain’s feud with coach Butch Van Breda Kolff who bemoaned his center’s stubborn adherence to his old offensive patterns. In the NBA finals
they played the Celtics, a collection of resilient veterans who had finished in fourth place in the Eastern Division. They pushed the Lakers to a seventh game at the Forum, where Cooke had arranged a victory celebration including the University of Southern California marching band and balloons released from the rafters. But the Celtics won 108-106, and the balloons stayed on the ceiling. One final time, Chamberlain’s stature shriveled in Russell’s shadow: Chamberlain had spent the last five minutes on the bench after banging his knee, and his coach had refused to re-insert him. Van Breda Kolff soon resigned. Russell retired with eleven championship rings, delivering a parting shot at his old friend and nemesis by claiming Chamberlain “copped out” of their final duel. “Once again the great center couldn’t get along with his coach,” wrote Leonard Lewin. “Once again the coach is gone. Once again the great center lost his duel with the other great center. Once again the great center is branded a loser. What went wrong this time?”

That final clash provides the thrilling climax for Taylor’s *The Rivalry*, but Chamberlain’s frustrations continued after Russell retired. The next season, the Lakers again reached the NBA finals, this time against the New York Knicks. New York center Willis Reed suffered a serious leg injury in the fifth game, and Chamberlain registered forty-five points and twenty-seven rebounds in game six to even the series. But after the game he launched into a bizarre polemic that American culture emphasizes winning too much, and that simply reaching the NBA finals deserved respect—an apparent psychological preparation for yet another failure. In the seventh game, Reed hobbled onto the court to the roars of the Madison Square Garden crowd. The moment energized the Knicks and psyched out the Lakers, especially Chamberlain. New York ran away with the game, and Los Angeles squandered another title opportunity. Substitute Reed for Russell, and same old story.

Before he retired, however, Chamberlain earned some redemption through another championship. As Charley Rosen details in *The Pivotal Season*, the 1971-1972 Los Angeles Lakers went 69-13 in the regular season, had a record-breaking 33-game winning streak, and captured the NBA championship. The hero of Rosen’s story is Bill Sharman, the old Celtics sharpshooter and new Lakers coach. While emphasizing fast-break basketball, Sharman also deciphered how to handle his three superstars. He left the self-driven Jerry West to his own demons. He quietly compelled a broken-down Elgin Baylor to retire, freeing the team to play a faster style. Most important, he convinced Chamberlain to emphasize defense, rebounding, and whipping quick outlet passes to trigger easy baskets, as Bill Russell had long done for the Celtics. Playing Chamberlain’s ego like a virtuoso, Sharman never ordered his center to change. Instead, he solicited Chamberlain’s opinion. After getting the answer he wanted, he exclaimed “Wilt, that’s a great idea!” Time and again, Chamberlain carried out Sharman’s wishes believing that he had devised the strategy himself.

Rosen also hints at an important shift in the public perception of Chamberlain, a shift that has perhaps dulled the memory of his more exasperating, arrogant image from the 1960s. The Black Power movement, whatever its political failings, had not only forged African-American pride but also infused American popular culture with black style. Chamberlain, once a cool menace, now seemed less threatening to white America. When Baylor retired, Chamberlain even assumed the role of team captain. The once-daunting outlaw had joined the Sports Establishment. Moreover, his main nemesis was no longer Bill
Russell, the proud if outspoken leader of the racially progressive Boston squads. Now it was Lew Alcindor, who had led the Milwaukee Bucks to the 1971 championship and represented a new generation of black anger. Intelligent and aloof, he had converted to Islam and demanded to be recognized as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. “A follower of a bogus religion that preached the violent overthrow of America!” writes Rosen, with tongue-in-cheek hyperbole. “Abdul-Jabbar was an ingrate. He was a discredit to his race. He was the Antichrist!” That made Chamberlain, by comparison, “as awesome as Paul Bunyan, as friendly as the Jolly Green Giant, and as lovable as Baby Huey” (pp. 242-243).19

The Pivotal Season is plagued by the same problems as Lynch’s Season of the 76ers: too many mundane game summaries and perfunctory biographies. Rosen at least aspires to a larger argument that the Lakers sparked the sport’s cultural transformation by mixing modern basketball techniques with Hollywood glitz. He overstates the case: the Celtics had long perfected fast-break basketball, and the Knicks captivated more fans. Even so, Rosen lends clues to the game’s changing texture: the surging influence of African-American stars, the commoditization of athletes, the battles over race and public image. No athlete better foreshadowed these transformations than Chamberlain.

So how should we remember Wilt Chamberlain? All the authors under review have contributed to our understanding of him, and Pomerantz and Taylor have written particularly thoughtful, graceful books. Three interrelated themes deserve further exploration: Chamberlain’s celebrity, his sexuality, and his political implications.

We remember his revolutionary impact upon basketball, but we should appreciate that his icon stretched beyond sport. “My impact will be everlasting,” proclaimed Chamberlain upon his 1974 retirement. In a Sports Illustrated article under his name, he boasted about not only his record-breaking exploits but also his cultural influence. For instance, he had started wearing headbands while playing for the Lakers, and now a headband and wristband fad was sweeping the nation. He elevated basketball by surpassing it, by becoming the sport’s first celebrity.20

Chamberlain existed for public consumption. The sportswriter Arnold Hano once observed how his gestures—even something as small as flipping a warm-up jacket toward the bench—possessed a certain drama. “The theatrical is part of Chamberlain,” he wrote. “He does things with a flourish. He is the most conspicuous athlete in the world, and one of the most conspicuous human beings, and he appears to have come to the decision to make his conspicuousness worth watching.” In Los Angeles, his fame had attained new dimensions. He again almost fought Muhammad Ali. He appeared on The Tonight Show, The Dean Martin Show, and Rowan and Martin’s Laugh In. In December of 1972, he jokingly threatened to shoot someone over a delayed plane, and the FBI arrived to interrogate him. He played competitive volleyball and brought the sport to public light. His extravagant custom-made home in Bel Air inspired countless media features. He even penned a 1973 bestselling memoir, Wilt: Just Like Any Other 7-Foot Black Millionaire Who Lives Next Door.21

That autobiography naturally inspired controversy. In a discussion of his myriad sexual relationships, he claimed to prefer white women because many black women lacked
his refinement. In the burgeoning “black is beautiful” atmosphere of the early 1970s, he struck a painful nerve. A media backlash ensued, and Chamberlain had to apologize in *Ebony*. His talent for mistimed sexual bragadocio continued, of course, with the famous claim of 20,000 women in his 1991 memoir *A View From Above*. It inspired not only disbelief and derision, but also outrage, as NBA superstar Magic Johnson had recently retired after testing HIV-positive. “I felt more pity than sorrow for Wilt as his macho accounting backfired on him,” wrote the tennis legend Arthur Ashe. “This admission (or exaggeration?) will probably haunt him the rest of his life. He did not seem to understand that many people would find his behavior dehumanizing.”

Yet Chamberlain should also be recognized as defying that taboo. He exuded charm and magnetism, and by the 1960s he established an underground reputation as a ladies’ man. He dated the beautiful blonde actress Kim Novak while living in San Francisco, though it stayed off the media’s radar screen. By the early 1970s, however, profiles of Chamberlain could include references to his dating habits, including a liaison with an attractive French woman. In 1974 *Esquire* ran an anonymous account by a white woman who, while nineteen years old, had a relationship with Chamberlain. She described his ego and possessiveness, but also his gentle nature and sexual skills. She also noted that many black players in the NBA dated white women. This discussion of sexuality, even as it treaded the ground of racial stereotype, helped crumble the cultural barriers imposed upon black athletes.

Finally, Chamberlain’s stature and reputation bore political implications. In the era of the civil rights movement, two schools of thought guided the politics of sport and race. One existed in the tradition of Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, and Jackie Robinson, who had assumed the responsibilities of projecting positive images to promote interracial good will. The other arose in the late 1960s, in the midst of a proposed black boycott of the 1968 Olympics, substantial media attention to the plight of the black athlete, and the iconic Black Power salute of John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the Mexico City Olympics. This new generation questioned liberal assumptions about black athletic participation, instead arguing that sport just perpetuated patterns of prejudice.

Chamberlain fits neither political category. He believed in American ideals, invested in black communities, and attended Martin Luther King’s funeral. In 1968—partly due to his contrarian nature, partly due to his belief in individualism and economic growth—he sailed against the winds of black political opinion by supporting Richard Nixon for president. As black radicalism emerged in the public eye and African Americans overwhelmingly voted Democratic, Chamberlain promoted the idea of “black capitalism” and supported a Republican. “He’s made his own pile,” criticized Harry Edwards, leader of the Olympic boycott movement. “Now he’s forgetting the ones who haven’t made theirs.”

Yet Chamberlain also possessed an incomparable eminence, especially among younger black athletes. “Wilt seems the embodiment of all their dreams and ambitions,” wrote journalist David Wolf in 1972. “He has reached almost all the goals—and has almost all the possessions—considered important when one grows up poor.” Moreover, Chamberlain was his own man. He may have sabotaged his team with his selfish indulgences and
psychological weaknesses, he may have disintegrated potential dynasties over contract disputes, he may have sparred with coaches simply to satisfy his own ego. But he acted as an individual, as a man who controlled his own destiny. His icon hearkened back to heroes of black folk culture—larger-than-life legends like Stagolee, antisocial and hypermasculine rogues. Chamberlain, like these folk idols, provided vicarious thrills for the downtrodden, young, black male. Wolf suggests a fascinating paradox: “That Chamberlain has become fabulously rich and famous, without giving completely himself to teams, fans, or employers, has a cool ring of ripping off ‘Whitey.”

That fierce, stubborn individuality also speaks to Chamberlain’s broader impact upon professional basketball, race relations, and American culture. His physical gifts and statistical domination placed him before America for public consumption, and he reached a realm of celebrity that was unique among basketball players and black athletes. The repeated anguish of failure—in the 1957 NCAA Final against Kansas, throughout the 1960s against Bill Russell and the Boston Celtics, in 1970 against the New York Knicks—only fashioned a more interesting, complicated, frustrating man. He became impossible to reduce to either political symbol or racial stereotype. “I have done things no man ever will,” he said in 1971. “But people keep expecting me to top myself, and I can’t do that. Nothing I ever do seems to be enough.”

The average American sports enthusiast—even the casual fan—understood that he possessed both colossal ego and crippling insecurity. He was a great man, and he was a loser. He was superhuman, but more importantly, he was human.


9For press clippings of his many exploits, see the Wilt Chamberlain file at the Urban Archives at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. See also “Café Society Rediscovers Harlem,” Ebony, June 1962, pp. 35-36; Louie Robinson, “Big Man, Big Business,” Ebony, August 1964, pp. 57-64.


