

## Chapter 5 Excerpt

America in 1956 was prosperous, smug, and very, very white. The suburbs were white. The fronts of buses were white. Pop stars were white. Sports heroes were white. Even the National Basketball Association was white. Adlai Stevenson, the standard-bearer of the Democratic Party, explained that he was in favor of “gradual” integration and lectured the North to end its own segregation before criticizing the South. President Eisenhower proposed the establishment of a commission to study alleged civil rights violations. Senator Jack Kennedy warned that segregation in the North was sanctioned not by law but by a silent understanding. Led by General Secretary Ralph Bunche, the United Nations denounced “bigoted” whites for seeking to “smear” supporters of Negro rights as communists.

But beneath the placid white surface, America was roiling with change. On the streets of the South, a remarkable 27-year-old Baptist minister with the unforgettable and propitious name of Martin Luther King was just beginning a career that would transform his nation and enshrine him as one of history’s seminal figures. But unlike his namesake, the German leader of the Reformation who angrily denounced the sale of papal indulgences and was excommunicated by the church, the young black American, in emulation of the martyred Indian nationalist leader Gandhi, began his crusade by urging passive resistance and love.

On the basketball courts, another young black man was launching another revolution that would also help to transform America and the world’s view of black ability and potential. Martin Luther King’s civil rights revolution would, of course, smooth the way, particularly off the court, for Bill Russell and the other great pioneering black athletes. Without King, America would, unquestionably, be a very different and far lesser place. So, too, basketball would be unrecognizably different, and far less exciting, without the changes initiated by Russell and the other great black athletes who followed.

Before Russell, the NBA was white, slow, and earthbound. The first black players—Chuck Cooper, Sweetwater Clifton, and Earl Lloyd—had been signed in 1950. But before Russell, blacks were mere role players assigned to play defense, rebound, and set picks. In baseball, blacks were already stars. Hank Aaron won the batting title in the National League and Don Newcombe won twenty-seven games and the MVP title in the National League. When Russell arrived, the Mikan era had been over for a few years, but the style of play he pioneered had lingered. George Mikan was the game’s first dominant big man and the hottest basketball property of his time. He led the Minneapolis Lakers to five NBA titles in six seasons, from 1949 through 1954, and established the foundation of the NBA.

The 6-10 Mikan was sturdily built and his game was based on power, not speed or agility. His favorite move was to plant himself in the low post and use the hook shot to score from close in. Russell’s game was custom-designed to destroy the careers of that kind of center, to render them obsolete. What he did to Neil Johnston of the Philadelphia Warriors was a perfect example of that lethal talent. Johnston had led the NBA in scoring for three straight seasons and was only 26 years old when Russell entered the league. His favorite shot was a sidearm hook that had been considered virtually unblockable until he met Russell, who effortlessly and repeatedly blocked it when they first met during Russell’s rookie year. Johnston continued to play well against other teams, but against the Celtics he was virtually useless. His abject and repeated failures against Russell were too much for Johnston’s psyche, and within two years he was out of the league, his confidence destroyed.

White-dominated basketball was horizontal; Russell made it vertical. In 1956 basketball was still slow,

plodding, and predictable. The two-handed and one-hand set shots were still major offensive weapons. Many guards and forwards had not mastered the art of the jump shot, and centers relied on hook shots and inside power moves. Russell's phenomenal leaping ability and unparalleled quickness changed all that. Shot blocking was a rare event before he arrived. He made it a fundamental part of his game.

But it was not just centers whose games he disrupted. His tremendous rebounding and outlet passing unleashed the Celtic fast break, and a whole new type of game was born. Never before and never again would a rookie have such a profound impact on an established sports league. Russell's rookie season marked the beginning of sports' greatest dynasty, a reign that would produce eleven championships in thirteen years. More importantly, Russell began the transformation of the NBA into what it is today, the world's premier showcase for the unique and extraordinary talents of black athletes of West African origin.