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## **Life Coach**

By **BILL BRADLEY**

### **RED AND ME**

#### **My Coach, My Lifelong Friend**

By Bill Russell with Alan Steinberg

If I could pick any player in history to start a franchise in the National Basketball Association, I would pick Bill Russell. He was the smartest player ever to play the game and the epitome of a team leader. But in order for him to fulfill his brilliant potential, he needed a coach flexible enough to learn from him and insightful enough to treat him with respect and candor. In Red Auerbach, Russell found his partner, and over 13 years they won 11 N.B.A. championships. During that time, from incidents on court and off, Russell slowly came to trust Auerbach the man as much as Auerbach the coach or general manager. "Red and Me," which he wrote with Alan Steinberg, is the story of their relationship.

For Russell, the only thing that mattered was winning. That seems obvious, but you'd be surprised how few players know how to make their team win. I once asked the estimable Oscar Robertson what he thought of Michael Jordan, then in his third year in the N.B.A. Oscar said, "He's not great yet."

"Why not?" I asked.

“Because he hasn’t learned how to make the worst player on his team good,” Oscar replied.

Russell knew how to do that from the day he arrived on the Boston Celtics in 1956. He had thought about the game and his role in it so much that it was only a matter of learning his teammates’ strengths and weaknesses before he was capable of elevating their games. It is the rare player who thinks, “How can I help my teammate help the team?” Russell and Auerbach understood that in a winning culture, selflessness is just common sense.

Bill Russell knew his personal power and how to use it. In that sense, he was his father’s son, inspired by the independence, self-confidence and strength he had observed growing up. Russell would say that his father always had “a plan,” meaning he was always a step or two ahead of everyone else. In basketball, Russell demonstrated the same gift and thus reconceptualized the game. Defense had once been an afterthought; Russell saw it as the key to offense and a builder of team morale. Players were told never to leave their feet on defense; with Russell’s advent, jumping to block a shot became an accepted part of the game. Big men were thought to lack mobility; for Russell, finesse and footwork became more important than strength. At his core, Russell knew that he was different from other players — that he was an innovator and that his very identity depended on dominating the game.

Russell is a proud black man, and during the ’50s and ’60s he constantly bumped up against the inability of too many white Americans to see him for the unique personality he was. In 1955, the University of San Francisco was 28-1 and won the N.C.A.A. title. Russell was the team’s star, but the Bay Area sportswriters gave their Player of the Year trophy to Kenny Sears, a good white center from Santa Clara whose team had finished third in the conference. The choice of Sears was an outrageous insult, with racial overtones. Russell’s response was to look ahead. He concluded that awards were “political,” whereas winning was totally under the control of the players and their coach. After that experience, Russell says in “Red and Me,” he became an even more focused team player.

Still, there were moments when he stood up to racism. In the early '60s, he and the other black Celtic players left Lexington, Ky., before an exhibition game because they had been refused service in the restaurant of their hotel. Russell told Red that there was simply no alternative. Auerbach understood the moment; he accompanied his black players to the airport, then went back and played the exhibition game with his white players, who didn't question their teammates' decision.

Russell's raw physical ability was amazing. He could jump and take a quarter off the top of the backboard, which meant that his head was on the level of the rim, 10 feet off the ground. No center has ever moved laterally as well as Russell. When the ball caromed off the rim on the side opposite him, he could get across the lane and snatch the rebound ahead of an opposing player. When he blocked four opponents' shots on one possession, he seemed to be playing against five men simultaneously, which in fact he was. Tom Meschery, an opponent from those pro years (and a sometime poet), called Russell "an eagle with a beard."

But it was Russell's competitiveness — like Michael Jordan's or Larry Bird's — that set him apart from the game's other players. He wanted to win every matchup, every game, every title. He waged psychological warfare, on and off the court. He would ignore an opposing rookie player in a restaurant the night before a game so that the next night the rookie would try too hard to make an indelible impression on Mr. Russell and, in the process, throw himself off his game. After Russell blocked a player's shot, he often simply faked a block the next time, and the same player would rush his shot and miss.

During a playoff game against the Celtics in my sophomore year in the N.B.A., I had hit three shots in a row and the Knicks had narrowed the Celtics' lead. At the lineup for a free throw I was standing next to Satch Sanders, who was guarding me, and across the lane was Russell. He caught my eye and then looked directly at Sanders and said, "Come on, Satch, stop him." In that one act he helped his teammate redouble his effort, and he conveyed to me that he thought there was no question Sanders could stop me. Suddenly I felt less confident or more determined or both. The result: I scored very little the rest of the game.

Auerbach, who died in 2006, directed his own competitive fire principally toward the refs. He never let up on them, figuring that next time they'd remember his complaining and maybe give the Celtics a break. Russell jokes that his best preparation for his later stint as the Celtics' coach was taking over the coaching duties, as team captain, after the countless ejections Auerbach's abrasiveness earned him.

Auerbach had no assistant coach and refused to scout an opponent, believing that if the Celtics executed well, it didn't matter what the other team did. His genius was to relate to each player individually. What worked for one player didn't work for all players. For example, Auerbach didn't require Russell to scrimmage once the season began. The press thought Russell was getting special treatment and imagined that his teammates resented it. But Auerbach's purpose was to keep Russell fresh in a grueling 82-game regular season and possible 19-game playoffs. During practice Russell sat in the stands drinking tea, when he attended at all, and his teammates accepted the arrangement because they knew the intensity of Russell's commitment to winning — an intensity so great it often led him to pregame vomiting.

Russell once said, "Whenever I leave the Celtics locker room, even heaven wouldn't be good enough because anyplace else is a step down." As with the championship Knick teams I played on in the '70s, the bond among players lasts a lifetime. You share with them the memories of being young and on the road in America, playing a game you love, performing before the crowd, and proving yourself to your teammates and yourself. You never forget your teammates' loyalty and how you returned it in full measure, and how that trust and mutual respect allowed you to be a champion.

Bill Russell is a private, complex man, but on the subject of his love of Red Auerbach and his Celtic teammates, he's loud and clear. He might object to my use of the word "love," but deny it though you will, Mr. Russell, that's what sits at the heart of this beautiful book.

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