

Russell, Bill and Branch, Taylor. *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man*. New York: Random House, 1979. Pp. 265.

Bill Russell's second venture into autobiography—his *Go Up For Glory* came out in the 1960s—is a very stimulating and largely successful effort. Written with Taylor Branch, who helped to shape John Dean's *Blind Ambition* and to whom Russell happily gives co-author billing, *Second Wind* should make the gifted and cantankerous Russell a more understandable figure to his many admirers and his detractors too.

The opening chapter, "Family Heroes," is a tender portrait of the family who reared him in rural Louisiana and gave him the love and pride which made him the stubborn individualist of his mature years. Russell's grandfather, the Old Man, was a "free-lance farmer" who carried himself with the dignity of "an oak tree." A white neighbor once threatened to make him do something; the Old Man snapped, "You and who else?" When the family moved to Oakland, California before Russell was a teenager, the Old Man stayed, but the contact remained. They never discussed basketball later on, Russell relates, but the Old Man was concerned with how his grandson was raising his family, whether he understood money, and mostly, "Was I at peace with myself?" Only once in his life did the Old Man fly on a plane; to see a Russell-coached Celtic team play. He was most impressed by the sight of Celtic teammates,

black and white, happily showering together. “The Old Man must have told the story once for each drop of water he’d seen in the shower,” Russell later learned.

Russell’s relationship with his father, the ironically named Mr. Charlie, was more distant, but this proud man, who worked in a foundry in Oakland and wouldn’t accept retirement money from his son once he became rich and famous (“I’ve given this place eighteen years of the best years out of my life, and now I’m gonna give them a few of the bad ones”), gave him strength and a competitive zeal. If you see me in a fight with a bear, Mr. Charlie would say, help the bear.

Russell’s mother died when she was only 32, and Russell barely 12. It took him a long time, Russell reveals, to visit his mother’s grave in Louisiana so much did she mean to him and so much did the pain of her loss hurt. He received from her what he still feels is the greatest and most difficult of gifts, unquestioning love. She also loved education, naming him William Felton Russell after Felton Clark, President of New Orleans’ Southern University. Russell’s fondest possession growing up in Oakland was his public library card, and he tells us that the sting and the disbelief of reading in an American history textbook that the slaves were happier here than in their African homelands never left him. He later made many trips to Africa to disprove that contention.

Only two chapters (less than a third) of *Second Wind*, “Sports” and “Champions”, deal with the athletic world, but they are provocative and insightful. Russell believes that of the four universal activities of cultures, politics, religion, the arts, and sports, only sports seem to bring out the most devoted support, free of duty, from its admirers. He stresses that there is art to sport as well as war, and he wishes that more players, fans and especially coaches would allow more room for the pure joy of competition. He has an interesting theory that neither Joe Namath nor his friend Jim Brown made professional football in the 1960s but rather the presence of the dictatorial coach, Vince Lombardi; who regimented his players terribly but was lionized by them and society because he won. He laments the lack of motivation towards individual excellence and team play in today’s athlete while admitting that the forces of television and the mass culture make the future somewhat bleak. Unfortunately, Russell does not go into detail on his failure with the Seattle Supersonics as coach and general manager in the mid- 1970s except to say that he could not function in a situation where players would not respond to the kind of adult treatment he preferred as a Celtic. Russell’s memories of the Celtics—whom he bluntly distinguishes from the racism and snootiness of the city of Boston, where, Russell says, if Paul Revere were alive he would be shouting, “The niggers are coming, the niggers are coming”—are better than the average sports reminiscences, and his portraits of Red Auerbach and owner Walter Brown are illuminating.

Bill Russell obviously aspires to a higher status than retired basketball great, and *Second Wind* indicates the making of a sharp social critic, perhaps a potential leader in more open times. He tells frankly of the break up of his marriage and his relationships with other women during his days as a professional basketball player, living often and casually on the road. His new wife, an educational psychologist and former Miss U. S. A., is a private person, he relates, but one hopes that his views on marriage will be more refined in the future than “it is very much like the new putter I bought one year (which) took my game to unknown heights.” Golf has become his passion since retirement, yet it is ironic that he returns to the sports metaphor, which he hopes to transcend, to discuss his marriage. Except for this quibble, and the misspelling of Bob Pettit’s name, *Second Wind* can be highly recommended for its moving evocation of the roots and the achievements of that remarkable individual, William Felton Russell.

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