ROBERTSON, OSCAR. *The Big O-My Life, My Times, My Game.* Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 2003. Pp. 342. Index. $24.95 hardcover.

Oscar Robertson has been called the greatest player ever because of the all around abilities that he possessed—scoring, passing, defense—but his greatest quality was leadership, the ability to inspire and make his teammates better. Burdened with mediocre squads most of his professional career, he finally was able to secure a NBA championship in 1972 when he combined with Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) to lead the Milwaukee Bucks to their only championship.

Robertson was born in Tennessee, but his family moved to Indianapolis when Oscar was four years old, though he continued to return to Tennessee in summers to work in his great-grandfather's fields. His great-grandfather, Marshall Collier was born in 1838, one hundred years before Oscar, but Oscar revered him as Collier lived to be 115 and was the oldest man in the United States at his death. The Robertson family moved to an area of Indianapolis known as Naptown, which was a ghetto located in a low-lying area of the city. Oscar played on the local courts known as the Dustbowl, which served a great portion of the black neighborhoods and housing projects in the area.

From early on Robertson observed discrimination in housing, recreational facilities, schooling, athletic scholarships and, after winning the Indiana state high school championship, even with parade routes and local recognition. Nothing seemed to escape his eye, the same quality that made him such a great player on the court. Oscar's career at Crispus Attucks High School was preceded by that of his older brother, Bailey (nicknamed "Flap" for his constant talking), whose team made it to the State Finals where they lost to Milan High School, a contest that was integral to the movie, "Hoosiers." Robertson also found the depiction of these events racist in implication and contended that such would not have happened to a white school. The story of Crispus Attucks High and its drive to the two consecutive championships is an inspired one, and Robertson's perspectives are a fine complement to those of Randy Roberts in *But They Can't Beat Us: Oscar Robertson's Crispus Attucks Tigers* (1999).

Robertson was not widely courted for college as today's top players, partly because of the minimum media coverage given but more because of discrimination, once again. The Big Ten in the mid 1950s had only been fully integrated since World War II and, in many programs there was a concern that black players could not play in the "ordered" manner that most white coaches pursued. Bill Russell discusses this same issue in his autobiographies. In 1952 Russell had only one partial scholarship offer, to the University of San Francisco, and he took it. Robertson had more, but he saw them coming with various "strings" attached. When he went to a campus visit to Bloomington, Branch McCracken, the Indiana coach, started the interview by telling Robertson that he (McCracken) hoped that Robertson was not one of those kids who want money to go to school. All Robertson was interested in was playing ball at Indiana. He was a good student with academic ambitions but was first kept waiting for thirty minutes before

Coach McCracken would see him and his high school coach, then insulted him with McCracken's opening remark. He got up, walked out and ended up enrolling at Cincinnati, a school that, he was surprised to discover, had few African Americans on campus, let alone on the basketball team. He was one of "five black athletes, who basically desegregated the school" (p. 75).

Robertson led the freshmen team to a 13-2 record, averaging thirty-three points per game. He made few friends, other than teammates, and ended up becoming friendly with older citizens of the city, often alumni, who remained friends for years afterwards. Their purpose was to show that Cincinnati was not a racist university or city, despite many instances that belied that intention, a number of which occurred with or to Oscar. He thought of leaving but did not, and his basketball feats for the next three years were legendary as he led the nation in scoring each year (35.1 in 1958, 32.6 in 1959 and 33.7 in 1960) and was named the Sporting News Player of the Year each of those years. Robertson describes his play and that of his team (which he led to a 79-9 record in three years, including a Final Four berths in 1959 and 1960) and these descriptions, reflections and insights are a valuable historical resource. Ironically, of course, the University of Cincinnati won the NCAA Tournament the next two years after Robertson's graduation.

Robertson and Jerry West co-captained the 1960 Olympic Team that went undefeated in Rome, despite the unusual way in which the roster was filled, reflecting the powerful struggles between the AAU and the USOC. Robertsons comments on this are certainly worthwhile. Robertson had earlier played on the Pan American squad with West in 1959, and it was the beginning of a long friendship that continues today.

After the Olympics Robertson joined the Cincinnati Royals as a territorial draft pick (he had been selected after his sophomore season), a peculiar "rider" to the regular draft initiated by Eddie Gottlieb of the Philadelphia Warriors in the mid 1950s to ensure that he would obtain Wilt Chamberlain as a hometown Philadelphian. The Royals had been owned by Les Harrison of Rochester who had moved the Royals to Cincinnati in order to have a larger fan base and increase revenues. Harrison remained in Rochester, and the absentee ownership created as many problems as the move to Cincinnati solved. Harrison sold the team in 1958 because of heavy financial losses even though he knew that Robertson's arrival in two years had the potential of turning the franchise around. Robertson chronicles his years in the NBA with insight and controlled anger at the discrimination he viewed as well as disdain for the owners who refused for years to recognize the players' efforts at unionization for better job conditions. There are times when Robertson tries to provide an historical context for the NBA, and these small efforts are often filled with inaccuracies. Nevertheless, when Robertson offers his own personal reflections and insights into important issues like the genesis of the NBA players' union or the differences between players and coaches in his years in Cincinnati, the rewards are great, particularly for basketball scholars. We have too few first-person accounts that accurately describe events in the history of the field. Many biographies are ghosted and sanitized; Robertson's clearly is not. The perspectives of any cogent professional player of the time would be interesting, but Robertson is more than just any player. He is possibly the greatest all-around player to ever perform on a basketball floor,

and having his views and memories of those events is immeasurably valuable. This is a book that should be read by every sport historian interested in basketball, race relations in American society or the "business" of sport.

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