

The Russell Model

Melbourne 1956 and Bill Russell's New Basketball Standard

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The 1956 United States Olympic team propelled the sport of basketball forward with its high-scoring and fast-breaking style. In Bill Russell, with his stunning combination of size, speed, timing, and creativity, the team provided a new international model for a basketball player. The Russell model increased the attractiveness of the sport's action and led to a long-standing trend to cultivate more versatile big men. In Melbourne, fans flocked to the basketball venue to catch a glimpse of the United States team's star center. His ability to block shots without fouling and to run the fast break garnered repeat ovations from the crowd. The adoring fans especially loved Russell's slam-dunks, or as it was described by Alison Danzig of the New York Times, "his stuffing the ball down the basket as he jumped up and pushed it in."¹ As an indication of Russell's effect in Melbourne, in 1958 the Soviets showed up for a basketball tour of the United States with a revamped roster full of more versatile and speedier six feet seven to six feet ten players, to compliment their plodding center from the Melbourne Games, the seven feet four Ivan Krumminch. Just as he had changed basketball at the college level, so at the Melbourne Olympics Russell changed it internationally.



Within a year of the 1952 Helsinki Games, the political climate had changed in both the United States and the Soviet Union. In America, the hysteria of McCarthyism had slowed, while in the Soviet Union the death of Stalin ushered in less belligerent leaders. That same year, 1953, a convention took place in Geneva between the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, all possessors of a hydrogen bomb, a weapon that produced a mood that helped shift the young Cold War into a phase of "peaceful coexistence." The shift worked to increase the significance of less belligerent cultural spheres in the Cold War's ideological conflict. As historian William J. Baker put it, among the acceptable alternatives to war "competitive sports loomed large."²

With the playing fields open terrain for Cold War competition, countries set their sights on the next Olympiad slated for November 1956 in Melbourne, Australia. For both the United States and the Soviet Union, basketball was a

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central piece of their Melbourne plans. In 1954, President Eisenhower proposed a script for a televised proclamation declaring the First Annual National Olympics Day, intended to prepare the United States for Melbourne. His proclamation read, "The world will again see that in sports, as in education, in economics, in politics, in every realm of life, regimentation runs a poor second to free enterprise."³ A year later, President Eisenhower invited basketball-wonder Bill Russell to the Oval office for a meeting on physical fitness. Ironically, Russell had to wait three days to pick up the invitation mailed to him by Ike, because he first needed to scrounge the \$1.50 in gas money and the \$0.50 needed to cross the Bay Bridge. Eventually, he managed to get the invitation and decided to attend. The physical fitness meeting was attended by other leading athletes as well, such as Willie Mays and Bob Cousy. Russell counted as the only college amateur present. Though Russell asserts that the President never directly asked him anything about the Olympics at the meeting, most saw his inclusion as an indication of Eisenhower's hope that Russell would choose to participate in the Games. Surely Ike recognized Russell's potential impact as an amateur in Melbourne.⁴

And sure enough, once Russell made it to Melbourne he dazzled the crowds with his revolutionary play. Describing him as a "phenomenon entirely new to the Southern Hemisphere," *Sports Illustrated* counted Russell among a select few Olympians in Melbourne who "made an indelible mark on public awareness."⁵ In the process, he provided the world with a new physical model for how the big man played basketball. This more versatile, athletic model contributed to basketball's rise in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the Soviet Union, as in the United States, preparations for Melbourne were put in motion soon after Helsinki. The ushering in of new Soviet leadership enhanced the country's already energetic sports movement, eventually leading to the creation of the Spartakiad of the Peoples of the U.S.S.R., a massive sporting spectacular held in Moscow. The Spartakiad served as a kind of "internal Olympics." During this time, however, basketball and soccer did not receive as much attention as other sports at the festival because their regular seasons were given more importance.⁶ Nonetheless, daily crowds at the 1956 Spartakiad in Lenin Stadium, a mammoth edifice on the banks of the Moscow River, totaled more than one hundred thousand.⁷ The huge crowds indicated that the Soviet Union's post-World War II strategy to engage the West in international sporting events had heightened national interest in sports. As historian Robert Edelman notes, in the post-war Soviet Union, "the audience for all sports expanded."⁸

On the basketball court after the Helsinki Games the Soviet Union continued its success, especially at the European championships. For instance, in front of partisan throngs at the 1953 European championship, held in Moscow's Dinamo stadium, the Soviet squad, again comprised mainly of Baltic players, beat the competition in convincing fashion. Every session of the eleven-day 1953 European Championship drew crowds of 30,000, and the Soviet Union's

1953 European championship solidified its status as Europe's preeminent basketball power.⁹

Not satisfied, Soviet sports officials continued their work hunting down unusually tall humans. It was not an easy task. The All-Union Sports Ministry became discouraged when the efforts did not produce immediate results. In fact, the dearth of tall basketball talent prompted the Sports Ministry to take the rather unusual step of launching an official investigation to discover why Russia was "ravaged with retarded growth." Theories abounded. One claimed that size was proportional to the pace of daily life, and since westerners ran around all day in a capitalist rat race they were taller.¹⁰ If this were true, the socialist Soviet government would have faced quite a conundrum balancing its sporting interests with its economic system. Alas, more respected scientists argued that westerners' well-balanced diets, pure drinking water, and immunity to infectious diseases contributed to their size.

Undaunted by their lack of progress, the Soviets kept looking and eventually their efforts paid off. Before the Melbourne Games, the Sports Ministry managed to procure two veritable giants. First, there was Vrais Akhtaev, an astonishing seven feet seven, 350-pound powerhouse who arrived on the Soviet basketball scene a couple of years after Helsinki. (The *Washington Post* put his dimensions at seven feet six and a half inches and 404 pounds) Soviet basketball had never seen a player anywhere near this size. Before Akhtaev signed with Alma-Ata of the Russian professional league, the league's tallest player stood just under six feet five. Opposing teams went to ridiculous lengths to combat Akhtaev's height, including stacking a player on another's shoulders in a "pyramid" scheme. Others simply sent in lackeys to steal Akhtaev's shoes and uniform before the game. Unfazed, Akhtaev would come out in street clothes and play anyway.¹¹

Akhtaev began his athletic career as a shot-putter, throwing a respectable forty-one feet, but tired of the monotony of slinging the shot around. Next he tried his hand at volleyball, only to be discouraged by fears that he would hurt his opponents with his ferocious kills. Soviet officials then persuaded him to turn to basketball, where he still towered over everybody, only just a little less so. Soon stories regarding Akhtaev started to reach the United States, especially after he exploded at Moscow's Spartakiad for forty-seven points against a Turkmenian squad. In that game the *Washington Post* reported that a couple of Turkmenian players ran into Akhtaev, only he remained unmoved, while they "bounced off, gave him a terrified look, and retreated."¹²

The Turkmenians may have been surprised, but many Soviets were already well-aware of Akhtaev's ferocious on-court reputation. Frustrated by players elbowing him, hitting him in the legs, and jostling him, he was known to pick a player up and hold him against the backboard until he apologized. When word of the discovery of the Soviet Union's other basketball giant, Ivan Krum-

minch – his last name is commonly spelled this way, but could also be translated as Ian Krumyn – reached Ahktaev, he is said to have exclaimed, “I’ll teach that bastard to go and play basketball.” But in truth, Ahktaev was a sensitive fellow, self-conscious of his freakish size. He carried a picture of a nearly nine feet tall Englishman in his wallet as a kind of reminder that he was not alone and penned long letters to his diminutive mother, who lived in a remote mountain village.¹³

Ahktaev did not end up contributing as significantly to Soviet basketball, despite his declaration, as the other giant, the seven feet four inch, 360-pound Krumminch, who was discovered in Latvia where his family dwelled in the forests. A lumberjack by trade, Krumminch did not play his first game of basketball until he reached twenty-four years of age. Despite the late start, he caught on quickly and skyrocketed through the Soviet basketball ranks. He went on to earn the nickname “Breadwinner” for his stellar play over the course of fifteen years as an anchor of the Soviet National Team.¹⁴

Really, these two were not the Soviet Union’s only giants. Both Stasis Stonkus and Arkady Bochkarev also measured nearly seven feet tall. As the Melbourne Games approached, United States head coach Gerald Tucker told the press that he had friends behind the Iron Curtain sending him clippings on Soviet big men. Incredulous, he said, “I noticed that in some stories he was 7 feet 2 inches tall. Then he was 7’3” and finally 7’6 ½”. I said to myself: ‘Good Lord, this must be a growing boy.’ It turned out that they were different men although the names sound all alike over there.”¹⁵ Reports such as this only added to the aura surrounding the budding Cold War basketball rivalry.

Further contributing to the Cold War sporting rivalry was East Germany’s participation in the Melbourne Games. Turned away in 1952, East Germany’s sports-machine went into high-gear after learning that it could participate in the Melbourne festivities. *Sports Illustrated* reported that the East Germans went further than the Nazis had for their sports program, pouring in \$60 million a year and not allowing any private clubs to participate. Functionaries for the Communist party told coaches and other personnel to explain to their athletes “the role and character of the national People’s Army of the German Democratic Republic” in leading “an energetic fight against the speculators and the attempts by western agents to buy top athletes.” Emphasis was placed on the importance of “winning over athletes for the aim of our workers’ and peasants’ state.” This ideological pressure was intended to encourage athletes to perform well at international meets. Poor results met harsh criticism and often led to questions regarding one’s commitment to the East German ideology.¹⁶ Clearly, in Melbourne the ideological stakes were high.

As the Soviets collared big men in the lead up to Melbourne, in the United States debates over amateurism continued to take place and the college game continued to improve, though the AAU remained strong. As for the amateur-

ism debate, in the months following the 1952 Olympics, debate resurfaced in America questioning the legitimacy of United States amateurs from the AAU/NIBL. R.G. Lynch, sports editor of the *Milwaukee Journal*, astutely pointed out the irony of Avery Brundage's admonishment of "foreign violators of the amateur's code" in Helsinki. He noted that after Helsinki Brundage had penned a letter that specifically pointed out that Argentina's Olympic basketball team had accepted "prizes of considerable value" after a win. Lynch criticized Brundage for singling out the Argentineans, arguing that before Brundage tries to "clean up the world" he should "look at what is going on in his own backyard."¹⁷

Lynch wondered what type of compensation Brundage thought the NIBL offered players, considering they were turning down professional offers that included \$15,000 signing bonuses choosing instead to play in the NIBL. He declared that "the exploitation of industrial basketball for advertising and sales promotion is a black eye for amateur sports, and the manner in which a hasty coat of whitewash was applied to industrial players just before the Olympic tournament is a scandal." Lynch also noted that the "special investigators" investigating the industrial players "almost gagged" on items in their own report, namely that the Phillips Petroleum Company refused to reveal the salaries it paid its players and that the Phillips players spent sixty-three days away from their job during the year, despite an AAU limit of twenty-one days. Lynch lampooned the Phillips company's "impossible" explanation that it thought the rule meant no more than twenty days per trip, not only because Lynch thought the excuse made little sense but also because the chairman of the AAU basketball committee, Louis G. Wilke, worked as a Phillips executive and therefore should obviously know the rules. After looking at the Phillips team's 1952-53 schedule Lynch determined that they still apparently "misunderstood" the rule because their players were slated to miss a minimum of fifty-four days. He asked his readers, "Does Mr. Brundage think this is amateur industrial basketball? Or exploitation of a supposedly amateur game to advertise and promote the sale of gasoline?"¹⁸

Avery Brundage responded to Lynch with a letter thanking him for his efforts to improve the NIBL. Brundage also touted his own labors to combat amateur abuses writing, "I have been fighting the same battle for thirty years. I think it can safely be said that if it was not for the efforts of those of us who believe that amateur sport must be kept clean, pure and honest that conditions would be far worse than they are today." However, Brundage then curiously asserted that he could not agree with Lynch's claim that "a basketball player who accepts a permanent job is being paid more than he would receive as a professional player."¹⁹ He concluded by stating that the AAU was "trying to solve this problem and I hope it will do so soon."²⁰

Brundage's claim that the AAU was working to solve amateur abuses seems particularly implausible, however, when you consider that four years after this

flare-up the *Wall Street Journal* carried a rather candid article about the Chicago-based Denver Truckers of the NIBL, which showed that little had been done to change the AAU's practices, let alone hide them. The title alone of the *Wall Street Journal* piece, "A Truck Line Tries Basketball to Draw Executive Trainees," suggested as much. The article reported that the Denver trucking company had lured ten former collegiate basketball players to their company by "giving them a chance to supplement their earnings through basketball." Company President George J. Kolowich told the *Wall Street Journal* that the chartering of a DC-3 plane and a budget of nearly \$100,000 for the team was worth it, given the team's ability to advertise the company and to recruit employees. Players could make up to \$1200 dollars per year in extra hours spent on basketball as part of their incentive package, which was no small matter considering the average professional "hardly could hope to pull down much more than \$6,000 a year."²¹ The setup reflected the corporate subsidization of "amateur" players in America, which was not entirely unlike the state subsidization many Americans and media men decried on the part of the Soviets.

Murray Olderman, a sportswriter for the *Detroit News*, picked up on the amateurism issue in March 1953. He noted that in 1948 Don Barksdale was paid \$600 a month by the AAU's Oakland Bittners and "set up an ice cream business, beer distributorship, and disc jockey show." Olderman said that Barksdale turned down a \$20,000 offer from a New York pro team to capitalize on these opportunities afforded him as an amateur. As a further example of the AAU's borderline behavior, Olderman claimed that the owner of Philadelphia's professional basketball club, Eddie Gottlieb, had 1952 Olympic high jump champion and basketball star Walt Davis, from Texas A&M, "in the bag" until AAU officials topped his offer. Gottlieb maintained that, after hearing overtures from the AAU, Davis came back and said he wanted "\$19,000 for two years and \$500 for a fur coat for his wife." Davis ended up in the AAU's NIBL. Olderman pointed out that a short time later the "new oil man" Davis and the Phillips Oilers' Bob Kurland were nominated for the prestigious Sullivan Award, given annually to the person, or people, most responsible for the advancement of amateur sport.²²

Obviously there were some inconsistencies with the United States' amateur system. But, ironically, this professional nature of the AAU's NIBL contributed to the direction basketball took internationally. Because the NIBL teams functioned virtually as professional outfits, they needed to meet the consumers' demands. And those demands continually pushed the game in a faster, more open-court direction. In turn, FIBA, virtually a commercial outfit as well, adopted similar rules. And so this commercial thrust, along with innovative players like Russell, helped forge the modern characteristics of the sport.

Amateur issues aside, some positive developments were taking place on the United States basketball front in the years between Helsinki and Melbourne. Most importantly, the shackles holding back African Americans in sports were

loosening; and just in time. The Supreme Court's landmark 1954 *Brown versus Board of Education* decision, aimed at ending segregation in the classroom, reflected that changing racial climate. The following year Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. In basketball, African Americans built on the sport's two landmarks of 1950. That year the City College of New York became the first team to win the national collegiate basketball championship with a black player on its roster and Earl Lloyd became the first black player in the NBA. As the fifties progressed, more and more black players earned college scholarships and an increasing number earned their living on the hardwood after school.

Things did not change overnight, however. In fact, the *Wall Street Journal* noted that the South initially felt "nettled" by the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision. Their reaction was to increase segregation by curbing what had been a relatively lax attitude regarding white southern teams traveling north to play teams with blacks.²³ But within a few years of this initial hyper-reaction important firsts took place throughout the South in sport, many of them spearheaded by basketball. For instance, in 1958 at a collegiate basketball tournament in Charlotte, North Carolina, Guy Rodgers, an All-American from Temple, and two of his teammates became the first African Americans to stay at the ritzy hotel the Temple team lodged in for the event. The players also dined in a restaurant usually off limits to blacks, and during the games black fans could be seen cheering alongside whites. The *Wall Street Journal* described the tournament as the "splashiest non-segregated contest Charlotte has seen." And that it "points up a subsidence of racial tensions in at least one area of life in the South- sports."²⁴ There was still plenty of progress to be made, but times were changing.

As opportunities through sport increased for African Americans, a young Russell, an unheralded African American basketball player from San Francisco, worked to take advantage. As a freshman during the 1952-53 college basketball season Russell honed his skills day after day in a small gym near the campus of the University of San Francisco, the only school to have offered him a scholarship.²⁵ Burning with an intense drive that has stayed with him his entire life, Russell soon revolutionized the game. His style called for versatility and speed and kept the United States ahead of the international basketball curve at the Melbourne Olympics in the process.

Russell stands among the greatest to ever play the game. In his younger days, however, few recognized his potential greatness. As a high school player with pogo-stick legs, an awkward body, and a small frame, Russell did not make the varsity until his senior year. His brother, a star football player, received more press in high school. Even after a productive senior season Russell managed to attract little attention from major college coaches. Though nearly seven feet tall and ambidextrous, he was dismissed for lacking an offensive game and for not possessing the necessary build. Finally, Phil Woolpert, head coach of the

University of San Francisco Dons, having watched Russell in an all-star game after his senior season, decided to take a chance on the homegrown string-bean. It paid off. In one of the most remarkable turnarounds in NCAA history Russell led the small Dominican school to back-to-back national championships in 1955 and 1956.

With hindsight, Woolpert's decision to sign Russell seems quite sensible. But when he did it, Woolpert was not only taking a chance on an overlooked player, he was ignoring the racial status quo. Unfortunately, his contribution to integration has largely been overlooked. A prison counselor before coaching the Dons, Woolpert had an uncanny eye for talent and a willingness to sign black players that many of his colleagues did not share. He not only discovered the great Bill Russell, but also signed an overlooked K.C. Jones that year. Both played on the 1956 United States Olympic basketball team and are now members of the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame. And Russell and Jones were not the only African American Dons. While much attention is given to the 1966 Texas Western team for winning the first national championship with an all-black starting five, in 1956 Woolpert routinely put five African Americans on the floor at the same time.²⁶

Even for the progressive Bay Area, the Dons were ahead of their time. During their first championship season with Russell and Jones, in 1954-55, California, Stanford, and Santa Clara sported all-white rosters. And the Dons felt the pangs of racism that season when, at a tournament in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Woolpert's white players were assigned rooms in a hotel, while the black players were delegated to the dorms. In a show of solidarity the entire team stayed in the dorms. When the players went out on the floor to practice, spectators tossed coins at them. Russell said the coin-tossing did not offend him. In fact, he collected the money and put it in his pocket.²⁷ Fittingly, the Russell-led Dons still managed to win all three of their games there.²⁸

Hal Perry, a guard on that team, summed up Woolpert's courage saying, "He deserved as much interest and respect as any coach . . . He went through hell. Very few people knew it. As far as they knew, he was a coach and that was it." According to Perry, Coach Woolpert confided in him that there were people within the university who wanted him fired, but, given Woolpert's success, they could not justify it. Woolpert received hate mail and opposing coaches called him names like "Saperstein," which was supposed to be a decisive reference to the native Chicagoan, the Jewish Abe Saperstein, who started the Harlem Globetrotters.²⁹

Still, Woolpert and Russell did not always get along. Stylistically, Woolpert preferred more traditional methods than Russell and Jones commonly employed. In fact, the players and assistant Ross Giudice warrant much credit for developing the Dons' vaunted full-court press, anchored by Russell. "Coach taught us how to play defense, but we took it a step further with our creativity," Jones explained. As for their trademark fast-break, Russell told *Sports Illustrated* in

2006, “He [Woolpert] believed about the fast break like Woody Hayes thought about the forward pass – that three things could happen, but two of them were bad.” Surprisingly, Russell claims the Dons never even practiced the fast break, “But, of course, we used it from the start of every game.” In large part, the differences between Russell and Woolpert stemmed from their backgrounds. For instance, when Russell leaped into the air to block shots, the older-school Woolpert would say, according to Russell, “But that’s not the way it’s supposed to be done. A defensive man is not supposed to leave the ground.” Woolpert did not fully understand that Russell was changing the rules. Even though Russell and Woolpert did not always agree on methods, nevertheless Russell recently said, “I always knew he was a good and decent man.”³⁰

It was because all NCAA freshmen were ineligible for the varsity that Russell spent his first year at the University of San Francisco in relative obscurity fine-tuning his skills in St. Ignatius High School’s little gym, where the Dons practiced. There he increased his astonishing leaping ability, mastered his timing on blocked shots, and became more comfortable in his gangly body. By the time he was a junior Russell’s defensive wizardry, his ability to outlet passes to teammates seemingly anywhere on the court, and his consummate team play brought national acclaim. People marveled at his ability to run the court like a guard. He so dominated the glass that the collegiate lane was soon widened to twelve feet. And his ability to grab a shot at nearly any point in its arc baffled referees who struggled to apply the new goal-tending guidelines.

As early as 1955 fans looked eagerly towards the prospect of Russell leading the United States team at the next Olympiad. There was a problem however. The Games were not scheduled to take place until November 1956, during Australia’s summer, rather than during the customary northern hemisphere’s summer months. Therefore people worried that Russell, not wanting to cut into his first professional season, would not suit up for the Olympic team. This possibility of losing Russell to the professional ranks before having the opportunity to showcase him to the world at the Olympics seems to have motivated President Eisenhower to invite the young wizard to the White House in the summer of 1955. By that time the President was already worried about the fitness of United States youth. Earlier that summer, in response to the increasing rejection rates of American youth for military service, he called the fitness situation “very serious.”³¹ And in Melbourne, Russell could serve as a beacon of physical fitness and athletic superiority both at home and abroad.

In an article about Ike’s sports meeting, *Time* noted that Russell was the only collegian present. *Time* also reported that Russell promised Ike he would remain an amateur until after the Games, though, as mentioned earlier, Russell denies any direct conversation about the Olympics with Ike. Following the meeting, speculation grew that Russell might even try to combine his ability to high jump six feet seven and run the 440 in 49.6 seconds to train for the 440 hurdles in

Melbourne, as well. Russell told *Time*, “I’d have an advantage over the other boys. They have to jump over the hurdles. All I have to do is walk over them.”³² As it turned out, after the Dons won their second NCAA title in 1956 offers poured in for Russell from the professional ranks. The Globetrotters’ Saperstein told the papers he planned to offer Russell \$50,000, which caused concern for those hoping to see Russell in Melbourne – in *Go Up For Glory* Russell claims that in reality Saperstein offered \$17,000 and did not treat him with much respect.³³ Regardless, Russell indeed waited to turn pro until after the Olympics even though it meant notably less in earnings for him during his first professional season.

Ironically, though Russell, as well as K.C. Jones and Carl Cain, was willing to serve in Melbourne as a virtual ambassador for the American way of life and at the same time sacrifice some of his professional salary, racial injustice intruded on his life and the lives of his fellow African Americans before, during, and after the Games. As noted, some racial inroads had occurred, but still, these three African Americans played on the United States team at a time when Jim Crow laws maintained systematic segregation in the South and de facto segregation plagued the North. In his autobiography *Second Wind*, Russell recalled that as a youth “the cops in Oakland stopped me on the streets all the time, grilled me and routinely called me “nigger.”³⁴ And at McClymonds High School he struggled with the low-expectations, despair, and lack of funding found in many inner-city schools, until one day he had an epiphany assuring himself that he was alright.

Even with the epiphany, racial slights continued to plague Russell. On the drive back West after his 1955 meeting with Ike in the White House, Russell and his family drove through the South and he was directly confronted with the harsh realities of race relations there. And as late as 1962, after leading the Celtics to five of the last six NBA titles, he visited some old friends and family in Monroe, Louisiana, sporting a brand new Lincoln convertible. Along the way he and his two sons were turned away at restaurant after restaurant. Not able to find a decent hotel to sleep in either, he and his boys ended up putting the top up on the Lincoln and sleeping by the side of the road.³⁵

Even in 1966, his first year as player and coach of the Boston Celtics, when a Madison Avenue firm offered Russell a spot in an ad for Johnson & Johnson it was tinged with racism. The ad executive told Russell, “You know, the advertising industry has been backward in bringing blacks into the field... Its been a long time coming, I know, but we want to get some blacks into advertising.” The problem occurred when the told Russell they could pay him only “scale.” When Russell questioned the rationale of paying him the same as any model out of school, the executive told him “Look, we’re going out on a limb, and we need some black stars to help us. Don’t you want to be the first black American featured in a national ad?” Russell told them, “I refuse to pay again for what you said was your backwardness,” and declined the offer.³⁶ Nonetheless, in a rather short period of time, because of the attractive style of players such as Russell,

corporate America realized the ability of African Americans to lend a hip element to their products. This, combined with the demand from players such as Russell that they receive fair treatment, enabled African Americans to figure prominently among the highest paid endorsers in the world by the 1980s.

Of course, despite the prejudice, the United States also offered Russell remarkable opportunity, and not just for an African American but for anybody. In 1966, he became not merely the lone African American head coach in the NBA, but also was the only player/coach of any race in the history of the league. And, though Russell points out racial slights, he has also recognized over his career that things rapidly changed. For instance, when he first joined the Celtics in 1957 he was the only black player, “and [he] was excluded from almost everything except practice and the games.” But he recalled that by the late 1970s he was the General Manager and Coach of the Seattle SuperSonics, a team with only two white players, “and they [the two white players] were excluded from almost everything but practice and games.”³⁷ If not for the ability of sports to function as a meritocracy, such a dramatic shift seems unlikely.

As an Olympian, Russell had issues with his treatment, but he attributed the issues more to the way the AAU-laden United States Olympic Basketball Committee was run rather than as a result of racial prejudice. For instance, once the Olympic team was chosen, Russell asserts that the Olympic Committee reminded the players not to make any statements that might “be embarrassing to the United States... Then they proceed to place us in situation after situation where we were segregated or embarrassed.” On their exhibition tour, he thought Olympic officials and assorted folk enjoyed finer suites, extra travel expenses, and cultural exchanges more so than the players. And he did not appreciate Brundage’s declaration, just before the team left for its flight from Los Angeles to Melbourne, that Russell “should guarantee he will continue as an amateur or he shouldn’t compete in the Olympics.” The comments led Russell to reply, “I’m more of an amateur than anybody on the Committee... You’ll have to kick me out. I won’t quit.” So Russell had to stand his ground as an amateur and deal with racial injustice in America in order to represent the United States at the Olympic Games, in addition to already having agreed to a \$6,000 pay cut from Red Auerbach’s Celtics, on a pro-rated \$22,500 contract.³⁸

In addition to uncertainties about Russell’s participation in the buildup to Melbourne, the fact that the Olympics were slated for November caused further concerns about the makeup of the United States Olympic basketball team. If the basketball committee went with the old system of selecting a number of players from the 1956 NCAA national championship team’s roster, in this case the San Francisco Dons, the players would have been forced to travel to Melbourne, Australia, right in the middle of their academic year and the middle of their basketball season – and without Russell and Jones. Thankfully, the committee chose to form a collegiate all-star team, rather than sending representatives

from a single team, avoiding this potential problem. An additional advantage to the collegiate all-star system was that a larger number of the nation's elite players could represent the United States in the Olympics. The policy worked so well that collegiate all-stars became a staple component of U.S. basketball for the next thirty-two years.

This collegiate all-star team still needed to face AAU and Armed Forces representatives at the trials to determine who would make the Olympic squad. The basketball committee organized the Olympic trials to consist of a four-team round-robin tournament during the first week of April in Kansas City's Municipal Auditorium. The event attracted the nation's top teams leading *The Washington Post* to describe it as "what may well be the greatest basketball tournament in history."³⁹ The collegiate all-star squad was comprised of fourteen players, with their selection based upon the votes tallied by members of the National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC) for the *Collier's* year-end all-American basketball team.⁴⁰ The college all-stars were joined in Kansas City by the AAU's Buchan Bakers and Phillips 66ers, along with a team comprised of all-stars from the Armed Forces. The United States Basketball Committee planned to pick players from all four squads, with extra weight given to the champion and runner-up. Continuing to build on the success of the previous two United States Olympic basketball trials, the tournament attracted huge crowds and generated substantial cash for the USOC.

However, not everyone thought the trials were run fairly, Russell among them. Russell had little respect for the way the AAU operated. And he described the Olympic Basketball Committee, stacked with feuding members of the AAU and NCAA, as partaking in "the greatest bit of sugar-'n-spice-in-the-mouth-and-bourbon-in-the-belly-carney-type-conning since Barnum and Bailey." He wrote that the AAU's Vickers Petroleum team offered him \$500 to play in the trials, but instead he chose to play for the NCAA team for \$2 a day. He feels strongly that during the action the referees favored the AAU squads in an effort to strengthen its representation on the Olympic team, and, he asserts, "they succeeded."⁴¹

Still, the tournament's setup provided for a larger number of players from different teams and leagues to represent the United States than in the past, its popularity attracted huge numbers of fans, and it attracted corporate sponsors in more visible ways. Advertisements in the 1956 Olympic qualifying tournament's official program show corporate America's efforts to capitalize on the event's popularity. For example, Converse ran an ad for its legendary "Chuck Taylor" All Star Basketball Shoes, which featured a "traction molded outsole and pivot button" for "non-skid traction and longer service." The shoes, manufactured in the United States by the Converse Rubber Company, were the latest model in Converse's forty years in the shoe business.⁴² The advertisement reflected a rapidly growing industry.

At the same time, Spalding was offering an imitation Converse basketball shoe that featured a “special Spalding cushioned sport arch and heel” and “large size non-rusting telescope eyelets.”⁴³ In magazines such as *The Amateur Athlete* United States pro-Keds ran advertisements featuring the “United States Royal” basketball shoe, with its patented “Powerlift” technology. These “United States Royal” shoe advertisements contained endorsements from the likes of basketball stalwart George Mikan, dubbed “The Mr. Basketball,” along with a number of prominent coaches.⁴⁴ Taken together, the advertisements serve as indicators of the basketball shoe’s growing import and reflect a shoe industry on its way to becoming a multi-billion dollar business led by transnational corporations spending hundreds of millions of dollars to innovate and market their basketball sneakers at events like the Olympic basketball trials.

Though the basketball shoe was not yet packed with the cultural currency it soon gained, there were other indications pointing to its potential. In the 1950s, with time for sports and leisure increasing, James Dean sported “Jack Purcell’s,” another Converse shoe, in *Rebel Without a Cause*, at a time when school fashion mores were lessening. This helped the sneaker’s popularity to surge. The curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, Jonathon Wolford, argues that at this time “the sneaker was an integral part of the first distinctly marketed youth fashion and cultural movement in American history.”⁴⁵ He may have overreached, but not by much, and the United States Olympic team, clad in “Chuck Taylors,” played a role in this process. Not just with Americans either; for instance, in Melbourne the *New York Times*’ Alison Danzig noted how much the Soviet players, undoubtedly attracted by the American style of play and the quality of their shoes, highly valued the “Chuck Taylors” offered to them by the United States team as a gift.⁴⁶

On the court at the trials, in the opening round of action Bill Russell powered the Collegiate All-Stars to a win over the AAU champion Buchan Bakers from Seattle. In the other game, meanwhile, the Armed Forces pulled off a 78-77 upset over AAU runner-up Phillips.

With both of their teams losing on day one, it looked as if the AAU’s reign as Olympic qualifying tournament champion was coming to an end. Not ready to surrender its supremacy, however, Phillips rebounded with two straight victories, including a four-point win over the College All-Stars. In the win over the collegians, Phillips’ Chuck Darling, formerly of the University of Iowa, tallied twenty-one points to Russell’s nineteen.⁴⁷ On account of a complicated tie-breaker, the win made Phillips the champion of the trials, giving the AAU its fourth straight Olympic qualifying tournament championship – in other words every Olympic qualifying tournament up to that point. The Phillips loss was the first time in sixty games that Russell found himself on the losing end.⁴⁸ In fact, Russell went on from there to win the Olympic gold and, as a rookie with the Celtics, the NBA title, meaning in nineteen months he won an NCAA title,

Olympic gold, and NBA title, a feat that remains unmatched. His loss at the trials and the subsequent convoluted tie-breaker that gave Phillips the technical trials championship was the only tournament he failed to win over that remarkable nineteen-month period.

After the trials, the basketball committee chose five players from champion Phillips, including high-scoring forward Robert Jeangerard, shooting guard James Walsh, and Bill Houglan. Houglan had starred at Kansas and played in the 1952 Olympics, making him the second American, after Kurland, to play on two United States Olympic basketball teams.⁴⁹ The committee also selected three players from the college all-stars, Russell, Jones, and Carl Cain from the University of Iowa, all African American, and three from the United States Armed Forces team, Gilbert Ford, William Evans, and the prolific Ron Tomsic formerly of Stanford University. In Tomsic's case, the selection offered quite a reprieve from the mundane duties he carried out in the Air Force as a Public Information Officer stationed in Madison, Wisconsin. It was not easy for him to make it. He said he played over fifty games moving through the Air Force's selection process before eventually making the Olympic team. Throughout his life, he considered finally being told that he had made the squad, in a Kansas City hotel lobby at about three or four o'clock in the morning, "one of the biggest thrills of my life, that and receiving the gold medal."⁵⁰ Dick Boushka from the AAU's Wichita Vickers, who did not even compete at the qualifying tournament, rounded out the team. Along with the masterful Russell, Jeangerard, Tomsic, and K.C. Jones, averaged double figures in Melbourne.

With the qualifying tournament victory, Gerald Tucker, coach of the Phillips 66ers, earned head coaching duties and Bruce Drake of the United States Armed Forces became his assistant.⁵¹ To man the Armed Services team, Drake had taken a one-year leave from his coaching duties at the University of Oklahoma, where he had coached the previous seventeen years. Oddly enough, at Oklahoma in 1943, Gerald Tucker had played for him, and then, after returning from service in World War II, Tucker played for Drake again in 1947. As a player at Oklahoma, Tucker had earned All-America honors.⁵² The long-standing relationship between Tucker and Drake worked well for Melbourne because Tucker had absorbed much of Drake's coaching strategy when he played for him. That coaching philosophy emphasized clever passing within the framework of Drake's legendary ball-control "weaving" offense, known as the "Drake Shuffle."⁵³ The United States Olympic team implemented elements of the weave, but rather than deliberateness, the team integrated extreme speed into the equation, helping the squad set scoring records in Melbourne.

With the U.S. team set and reports of Soviet excellence circulating, anticipation for the Olympic tournament increased. Just weeks before Melbourne's Opening Ceremonies, most pundits tempered their predictions of how the United States basketball team would fare, despite the fact that the team had displayed

its talent with an undefeated ten-game exhibition schedule that had culminated in Indianapolis with a convincing 73-60 win over the Phillips Oilers.⁵⁴ In the pre-Games buildup, *Sports Illustrated* touted the brand of ball played in Russia, France, Brazil, and Uruguay. The magazine argued that the size and shooting ability of Soviet Coach Stepan Spandarin's Soviet Union team put them as the top-contender to unseat the United States. France rated high as well because of its stellar defense and rebounding, and *Sports Illustrated* reported that Brazil and Uruguay caused fits for other teams with their "race-horse style of play," though against the United States they were expected to slow it down. Coach Tucker concurred with *Sports Illustrated's* analysis of the quality of international play: "In the past 20 years the rest of the world has become basketball-conscious to such an extent that the sport now ranks among the favorites of a score of nations."⁵⁵

In addition to recognizing an improved international standard, most assumed the common strategy employed against the United States would be the stall, given that Brazil nearly upset the United States at the 1952 Olympics by slowing the game down and that the Soviet Union had used similar tactics in that year's Olympic final. Coach Tucker said he intended to combat this with "hard, aggressive defense. We will press the opposition and keep pressing." Encouraged by Tucker's aggressiveness, *Sports Illustrated* ultimately predicted that with Russell, whose agility and reflexes "make him perhaps the first true defensive genius the game has known," the "mercurial" guard K.C. Jones, the "high-scoring" Chuck Darling, and the "speedy" Ron Tomsic, the United States would prevail.⁵⁶

It was a smart prediction. Especially considering that the value of speed had increased soon after the Helsinki Games, when FIBA made further rules changes that encouraged even faster play. As in the past, in 1953 FIBA took its cues on the rule changes it implemented largely from the United States, evidenced by the fact that the wording of the new rules conformed closely to that of the 1953 United States amateur rulebook. The most notable rule change FIBA adopted was the implementation of a thirty-second shot clock. The shot clock dramatically sped up play in Melbourne, and the shot clock reflects how commercial considerations in the "amateur" NIBL helped spur the adoption of rules that encouraged faster play for basketball internationally. Adding to the pace in Melbourne, FIBA also left unchanged the dimensions of its larger, twelve-foot wide lane.⁵⁷ FIBA's lane was one of the rare early examples of it leading the way in encouraging faster, more open-court play.⁵⁸

With a faster international tournament thus expected and predictions thus made, the United States team readied for its trip to Australia. In Melbourne they were slated to play in the Exhibition Building, where hammers ended up clattering in the stands hours before the opening tip-off because the building was being outfitted with a state-of-the-art roof that featured an open-air component. Only a few months earlier, the Australians had decided to outfit the building with the roof to better accommodate the demand for tickets. The tight schedule

kept officials from printing basketball press passes for the new venue until moments before the first game. *Sports Illustrated's* Andre Laguerre reported that these were minor annoyances, however, which “evaporated in the warmth of Australian kindness and enthusiasm.”⁵⁹

Also awaiting the United States Olympic Team in Melbourne was a state-of-the-art Olympic Village. During the Games, it was home to the 4,000-plus Olympic athletes, their coaches, and other officials, and was a far-cry from the more modest accommodations of previous Olympiads.⁶⁰ The Chair of the Housing and Catalog Committee, Norman Carlyon, declared that never before had a host-country gone to such lengths as to:

cater for the individual eating habits of over 70 nations with variations for religions, feast days, national celebrations, and training regimens. Results of nearly two years of research into dietetic preferences of 11 groups... were submitted to the various nations for comments.

In addition, the Australians had recruited over one-hundred chefs from around the world to prepare meals in ten modern kitchens for the Village's twenty dining rooms. Carlyon described the Olympic Village as the “world's biggest hotel.”⁶¹ With the help of American chef Herman Rusch, who scoured the countryside for turkeys, the United States team was even able to celebrate Thanksgiving in Australia. The American team also enjoyed pure drinking water in the Olympic Village, which was shipped from the States to Melbourne by Canada Dry, the official beverage provider for the United States Olympic team.

Though the conditions in Melbourne were splendid, political tensions between the United States and Soviet Union heightened just before the Olympics commenced when two important political events took place. First, in late October the Suez Canal crisis erupted. Armed with weapons from Russia, Egypt had moved to seize control of the Suez Canal, used freely until then as a passageway for oil destined for industrial nations in Europe. Israel responded on October 29, 1956, by attacking Egypt. Two days later Great Britain and France intervened to make sure the passageway remained open. Looking to maintain stability, the Soviet Union and United States formed an unlikely union and stepped in to negotiate a cease-fire. The effort proved successful. Egypt, however, angry over the outcome, called for a boycott if the aggressors were not banned from Olympics. When these demands went unanswered, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq boycotted, establishing the boycott as a political weapon in the modern era of the Olympics.⁶²

Another political flare-up caused even more disruption. On October 23, 1956, Hungarians took to the streets protesting their communist government, which emanated from Moscow. Russian tanks moved in to squelch the rebellion. Some Hungarian athletes en route to Melbourne had their ship turned around after hearing word of the rebellion. But by the time they made it back to Eastern

Europe, Russia controlled the port. Denied entrance, they decided to head back to Melbourne and take part in the Games. Other athletes who managed to participate in the rebellion fled to Czechoslovakia where they were torn between trying to get back home, despite the prospect of strong reprisals, and heading on to Melbourne to compete. Most chose to compete in the Games because in Melbourne, an anonymous Hungarian athlete explained to *Sports Illustrated*, they could “tell the world about our wonderful adventure.”⁶³

As a way of protesting Soviet actions in Hungary, Switzerland, Spain, and the Netherlands chose to withdraw from the Olympics. Attempting to discourage further boycotting, IOC President Avery Brundage, who virtually always encouraged nations to participate in the Olympics regardless of the political situation, responded to the crisis in rather predictable fashion, stating, “we are dead against any country using the Games for political purposes, whether right or wrong.”⁶⁴ Tensions reached such a pitch that many athletes, officials, and spectators in Melbourne wondered whether the Games would take place at all. Brundage refused to give in to such suggestions. “If we held up the Games every time the politicians made a mess of things we would never have them,” he declared.⁶⁵

China’s attendance at the Melbourne Olympics also heightened political tensions. In the months leading up to the 1956 Games, a number of Chinese delegations visited Melbourne to determine whether or not to participate. Ultimately, a limited Chinese contingency, which included their men’s basketball team, competed.⁶⁶ They even took up quarters in the Olympic Village, as did, to the surprise of many, the Soviets. There had been reports in the United States that, as in Helsinki, the Soviets planned to live outside the village, this time on warships stationed off the coast of Melbourne. Before the Games, Australian officials denied such reports, and those denials proved accurate.⁶⁷ Still, the Russians were guarded. American basketball Olympian Tomsic remembered that “whenever the Russians went off the Village there was always two or three people with them. There was always someone with them and so they were always intrigued that we could come and go as we pleased.”⁶⁸

In the end, the Olympics were not halted because of these various political issues, but the Cold War was on people’s minds during them. For example, at the Opening Ceremonies, word surfaced that Hungarian athletes planned to sabotage the Soviets’ entry at the Opening Ceremonies by hiding and then emerging with placards reading “murderers.”⁶⁹ This did not happen, but in the Olympic Village, angry Hungarians did rip Communist insignias off of their uniform, and a water polo match between the two nations turned violent.⁷⁰ Developments regarding the Suez crisis took place during the Games also, as the British declared its intention to withdraw forces from the Suez Canal and expressed relief that the United States intended to increase its presence in the area rather than leave a power vacuum potentially filled by the Soviet Union.⁷¹ Clearly the Cold War figured prominently during the Games.

Under this atmosphere, the 1956 Olympic Games opened with over 4,000 athletes from a record sixty-eight nations. Opening day started with persistent rain, wind, and chill, but just in time the skies parted and the Olympics opened under sunshine and seventy-five degree weather.⁷² By all accounts, Australia, a country of sports-lovers, put on a fabulous show as a record crowd of over 100,000 packed into the Melbourne Cricket Grounds to watch.

Even more people could enjoy the festivities on television thanks to the city's three "new television receivers," made operational just over a week before the Olympics. The receivers enabled an estimated 200,000 additional people in Melbourne to view the Opening Ceremonies.⁷³ As the Games wore on, antennas sprouted up all over the city to capture the television signals. *Sports Illustrated* reported that even visiting warships and periscopes on submarines sprung television aerials allowing navy crews to follow "every development of competition while afloat as well as ashore."⁷⁴ This enthusiasm for Olympic television images hinted at the spectacular worldwide attention television would bring to the Games in the ensuing decades.

In the United States there was also widespread interest in securing footage of the Melbourne Olympics. Bob Mathias, one of President Eisenhower's personal representatives at the Games, interviewed American athletes for a series of exclusive films that were distributed within weeks after the Games closed. In addition to Mathias's work, a feature-length color film covering the Olympics was released soon after Melbourne. If Americans did not want to wait until after the Games for footage, they could watch highlights on television in a series of six half-hour installments that aired in the States over the course of the Games' two weeks, the first of which was released only two days after the Olympics opened. To pull it off, the tapes were flown halfway around the world from Melbourne to Hollywood, where workers raced around the clock to edit the highlights.⁷⁵

Other media flourished in Melbourne as well, highlighting the Olympic movement's growing international significance. More than 800 credited reporters covered the Games, making it the biggest press story ever emanating from the Australian mainland. Ninety desks and typewriters with type-faces for five different languages filled the main press room. "Teleprinters" fed results from other venues into the press room, where there were also twelve "duplicating" machines that printed off about 1,200 copies of each result.⁷⁶ The British Broadcasting Corporation led the way for radio coverage. They recruited Australian linguists to deliver eyewitness accounts around the clock to London via short-wave radio for re-broadcast in an astounding forty-four different languages on BBC's worldwide external services.⁷⁷

On the basketball court, of all the opening game performances at the Exhibition Building, the United States squad demonstrated an unsurpassed combination of speed and size, spearheaded by Russell. This enabled them to emerge

in the early going as the consensus favorite. Utilizing the pressure defense planned by Coach Tucker, the United States beat Japan in that opener 98-40. In the meantime though, the Soviet Union, which in practice sessions in front of the news media had impressed mightily, continued to do so with a 97-59 win against Canada. A near-capacity crowd of 3,500 saw the Russians utilize its fast break, nifty cutting, and deft interior passing to score early and often against Canada. To the disappointment of fans, however, seven feet four center Ivan Krumminch, mending a sore foot, did not play.

In other action, Taiwan, officially known at the Games as Formosa, as a result of political issues related to mainland China, utilized its height to beat the Republic of Korea 83-76.⁷⁸ The win marked the first for Nationalist China, whose presence at the Games rankled the Chinese.

Following its win over Japan, the United States handled Thailand 101-29 and then won in record-setting fashion, 121-53, over the Philippines, marking the highest scoring effort by a single team in Olympic history. Overall, the scores of the 1956 Olympic tournament were notably higher than previous Olympiads, especially the United States' near one-hundred-point average. The higher scores reflected the effect of the thirty-second shot clock, in combination with the previous years' rules changes and the increased skill, speed, and overall athleticism of basketball players throughout the world.⁷⁹

In the next phase of the ridiculously complicated pool-play system FIBA utilized for the 1956 Olympic tournament, the United States faced two seemingly tough tests in Bulgaria, which had only one blemish on its record, and then undefeated Brazil. The United States disposed of Bulgaria with relative ease, 85-44. The game stirred up some controversy when referee Charley Sien of Singapore ruled Russell's "tap-in shot" illegal. The term "tap-in shot" was used to describe Russell's tactic of tapping the ball into the goal while it hung just above the rim. Technically FIBA rules allowed this maneuver, though no international referees in Melbourne had likely seen a player work above the rim the way Russell did.⁸⁰ After the game Coach Tucker attempted to persuade officials that Russell was making contact with the ball when it "still is above the rim and releases contact before it touches the hoop." Apparently he was persuasive, because officials judged the maneuver legal for future contests.⁸¹ Following the victory over Bulgaria, the United States notched another convincing win over Brazil, 113-51.

With five straight wins, the United States next faced the Soviet Union. Despite having already endured a close loss to France, the Soviets were still considered the United States' stiffest competition. The game marked the third encounter on the Olympic stage for these Cold War foes and, like the other match-ups, this one attracted huge interest. This time 4,000 fans packed into Melbourne's Exhibition building to watch the action. The atmosphere was at a fever-pitch

even though, technically, both teams had already qualified for the final-four medal-round. The *New York Times* reported that great anticipation filled the air as the crowd waited to see if the Soviets could beat “the United States at a game the Americans invented.”⁸²

Some of the excitement was muted, however, when fans realized that Krumminch, still mending, had not suited up. Nonetheless, the Soviet Union’s other big men helped them stay close in the first half, especially Arkady Bochkarev. He scored twenty points in the game, despite not having even entered a contest in Melbourne beforehand. Bochkarev outshined Stonkus, who prior to the game was the team’s leading scorer.⁸³

Holding onto a 39-32 halftime lead, the United States decided to implement a pressing defense in the second half to open the action and increase the tempo. The strategy paid off as the United States scored forty-six points in the second half, while smothering the Soviets on defense. The game ended in a United States victory, 85-55. Russell led the United States in scoring with twenty points.⁸⁴ Even more noteworthy, his ability to block shots, jumpstart the United States fast break with outlet passes, and run the court allowed the Americans to maximize the effectiveness of their extended defense. Russell’s performance showed how a big man could dominate a game on both ends of the floor, with a degree of speed and agility unforeseen. Emphasizing in particular Russell’s defense, Tomsic summed up Russell’s effect on the team by saying “he changed the whole nature of the game, really.”⁸⁵ The contest showed how, though the Soviets had greatly increased the size of its squad since Helsinki, the United States had upgraded its speed. As a result, the Soviets seemed to plod around the court as Russell and company maneuvered with relative ease.

Despite the United States’ dominating performance, as the semifinal medal-round was set to begin, questions persisted about who would win the gold, especially since the Americans had not yet encountered the Soviets with a healthy Krumminch. Some argued that the Soviet Union should not have even remained in contention for the gold, because they had suffered the earlier loss to France in addition to their loss to the United States. But a series of convoluted rules involving pool-play records and margin-of-victory tiebreakers made them eligible for the semifinal round. The scenario did not sit well with the United States’ Coach Tucker. He said the Olympic tournament should be “a double elimination affair instead of this silly round-robin kind of thing,” and noted that, though they had just beaten the Soviets handily and the Soviet Union had lost to France, if the Soviets managed to win the following the night and then were to upset the United States, they would win the gold with two losses to the United States’ one.⁸⁶

Regardless, the semifinals featured the United States, Uruguay, France, and the Soviet Union. All of these teams had built strong basketball traditions, and the geographic distance separating them demonstrated basketball’s widespread

popularity. However, the United States soon showed that the rest of the world still had a long way to go. In its opening game of the medal round the Americans betrayed any notion of international balance as naïve with a 101-38 win over Uruguay. Tomsic led the well-rounded attack with eighteen points, while Russell only played for fifteen minutes of the affair. The game marked the fourth time in the Olympic tournament that the United States team surpassed the century mark.⁸⁷ It appeared that the new selection process, combining college all-stars with stars from the AAU and Armed Forces, was demonstrating the extent of America's basketball superiority.

In the other semi-final game the Soviets, playing with a healthy Ivan Krumminch, rebounded from their earlier loss to France with a 56-49 victory. Leading the Soviets with twenty-seven points, which accounted for nearly half of his team's total, Krumminch proved pivotal, signaling his presence to the United States squad in the process.⁸⁸ Russia's victory set up the second straight gold medal contest between the Cold War's two primary foes. And with Krumminch healthy, enthusiasm skyrocketed to even higher levels.

Another capacity crowd and electric atmosphere greeted the players for the contest – already the fourth match-up between the United States and Soviet Union in their relatively young Cold War series. Before the opening tip-off the teams lined up across from each other and exchanged gifts. The Soviets gave the United States team stamps, and the United States squad offered white high-top “Chuck Taylors” in return. The pre-game gift exchange generated little post-game comment in the papers, outside of the *New York Times*' Alison Danzig who did note, almost in passing, that the Soviets “prized the footgear above all else.”⁸⁹ Nearly fifty years after the Games, Tomsic remembered as much, saying, “we'd see them [the Russians] around the village . . . what they really wanted from us was our shoes . . . you know, our basketball shoes because they didn't have the same technology at that time.”⁹⁰ Both comments were simple observations, but serve as early indicators of the ability of American corporations to capitalize on basketball to attract people to basketball-related products. In this case, the American style and the business acumen and technical capabilities of its corporations had combined to attract the Soviet National team to American basketball shoes. In the ensuing decades, basketball's action, improvements in the design of the basketball shoe, and the visibility of the sport's stars continued to enhance the cultural import of the sneaker. In fact, by 1964, Soviet officials placed an order with Converse for forty-six pairs of its famous “Chuck Taylor” high-tops to outfit its National Team.⁹¹

After exchanging the gifts, the starters met at half-court for the tip-off and the game commenced. All told, the argument that the Soviet Union's communist government was a slow-moving bureaucracy that stifled innovation, while the United States' capitalist system rewarded speed and creativity, worked as an apt analogy for what played out on the court. Ivan Krumminch was simply too

slow for Russell. Russell and his mates ran so well that the Soviet giant often found himself on the wrong half of the court while the United States finished plays on the break. The lumbering Krumminch was not the Soviet Union's only problem. Their entire team lacked the speed needed to stay with the United States, enabling the Americans to race to a 56-27 advantage at the half and an eventual 89-55 victory. The final score could have been even more lopsided had the Soviets not implemented slow-down tactics to keep the United States under one-hundred points.

Coach Tucker declared afterwards that the American squad was "the best basketball team I have ever seen."⁹² He voiced dismay over criticism back home that the team encountered inferior competition, asking, "what more do they have to prove? They would be equal to any team in any league anywhere... I don't want to get involved in anything controversial, but they are the best amateur team – the best ever." He was right. The 1956 team faced stiffer competition compared with earlier United States teams and managed to dominate more convincingly. But because their crushing performances came just before widespread television coverage of the Olympics, the 1956 United States Olympic team is often overlooked in debates regarding the best amateur team of all time. That debate usually focuses instead on the 1960 and 1988 United States Olympic squads.⁹³ But, with a still-standing Olympic record 52.1 point average-margin-of-victory, the 1956 United States Olympic team should undoubtedly be considered among the best amateur teams of all time. They certainly are the most underrated.

After the gold medal game a reporter asked Russell, "How was it, Bill?" Russell replied, "Who was it said: 'I came, I saw, I conquered?'"⁹⁴ Russell had conquered. His personality, talent, and skill rubbed off on the United States team's play, contributing greatly to the squad's creativity, athleticism, and teamwork, all of which endeared it to the adoring crowds. In retrospect, the 1956 squad's team chemistry seems palpable, much like the attitude and style emanated by the Russell-infused Boston Celtics, who won eleven of thirteen NBA championships in the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Evidence of this Olympic chemistry continued after the Games when Russell's teammates surprised the big fellow at his wedding, which took place a week after the United States team returned home from Melbourne. All of his Olympic hardwood mates attended the ceremony save Carl Cain, who was still convalescing from a sore back.⁹⁵

Driven by Russell's athleticism and charisma, the 1956 Olympic team contributed to the popularity and direction of basketball worldwide. As noted, in Melbourne fans flocked to the basketball venue to catch a glimpse of the team, especially Russell. His ability to block shots without fouling, to run the fast break, to dominate the boards, and his dunks, garnered repeat ovations from the crowds. Though not considered his strongest asset, even his offensive game

sparkled in Melbourne as he led the team in scoring and shot seventy-eight percent from the free-throw line.

Russell even won over the Soviets, who were not only awed by his play but also seemed to find him likable. Soviet players went out of their way to embrace him after the final game, a sign of great respect. As an indication of the effect of Russell's exploits in Melbourne on the sport, in 1958, the Soviets showed up for a basketball tour of the United States with a revamped roster full of more versatile and speedier six feet seven to six feet ten players, to compliment the plodding Krumminch. The shift to the Russell model started a long-standing international trend, in Europe in particular, that emphasized versatile big men. Just as he had changed the college game in leading the United States to the gold medal at the Olympics Russell provided a new international model for a basketball player.

Endnotes

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- 5 Andre LaGuerre, "World's Eye on Sport," *Sports Illustrated*, 3 December 1956, p. 15.
- 6 Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the U.S.S.R.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 150.
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- 10 Yuri Brokhin, *The Big Red Machine: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Olympic Champions* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 136.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 12 *The Washington Post*, 7 August, 1956.
- 13 Brokhin, *The Big Red Machine*, p. 137.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 15 *The Washington Post*, 25 October, 1956.

- 16 A month before the Melbourne Games, East Germany's primary sports authority, the State Committee for Culture and Sport in the German Democratic Republic, sponsored a sports festival intended to "demonstrate the power, togetherness, and health of East Germany to the World, especially the West." The physical culture program put 25,000 boys and girls through six weeks of training in camp to prepare. The athletes performed a number of feats including orchestrated callisthenic maneuvers, formation of human pyramids, and clambering up steel pipe frames. In addition, 15,000 trained spectators, dressed in immaculate white uniforms and using red, green, and blue cloth squares to spell out political slogans, joined the over 85,000 that filled up Leipzig stadium for the event. Communist leader Walter Ulbricht addressed the crowd during the festivities shouting, "Fight for a peace-loving Germany! Be against militarism!" All of it carried out with a precision and pageantry emphasizing collective rather than individual action. "Achtung! Calling All Peace Lovers," *Sports Illustrated*, 15 October 1956, p. 34.
- 17 *Milwaukee Journal*, 15 December 1952.
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- 19 Letter from Avery Brundage to R.G. Lynch, 20 December 1952 (Avery Brundage Collection, Urbana, Illinois).
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 *Wall Street Journal*, 24 January 1957.
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- 25 Bill Russell, *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 81.
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- 27 Kelli Anderson, "San Francisco Dons: In Their Own Style," *Sports Illustrated*, 3 July 2006, p. 100.
- 28 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 6 February 2005.
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- 31 *The Washington Post*, 12 July 1955.
- 32 "Along Came Bill," *Time*, 2 January 1956, pp. 36-37. With his Dons team slated for a State Department-sponsored tour of Latin America during the track and field trials and his spot on the United States Olympic basketball team secure, Russell decided not to compete in the United States Olympic trials for high jump. He did not want to abandon his collegiate teammates in Latin America or take away an Olympic spot from someone else since he already had one.
- 33 Russell, as told to McSweeney, *Go Up For Glory*, p. 41.
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- 37 Ibid., p. 188.
- 38 Bill Russell, as told to William McSweeney, *Go Up For Glory* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), pp. 46-47.
- 39 *The Washington Post*, 11 March 1956.
- 40 In *Collier's*, Russell was the runaway pick for player of the year. Ibid., 29 February 1956.
- 41 Russell, as told to McSweeney, *Go Up For Glory*, p. 45.
- 42 The qualifying tournament program also included, interestingly enough, an ad from Philip Morris touting its new and improved cigarette, which according to Philip Morris caused “no cigarette hangover ... Only ONE cigarette is recognized by eminent medical authorities as definitely less irritating. That cigarette is PHILIP MORRIS!” “Olympic Team Trials: 1956 Basketball, Kansas City, Mo. April 2-3-4,” *Official Program of the United States Olympic Committee* (Edward J. and Gena G. Hickox Library, Basketball Hall of Fame; Springfield, Massachusetts).
- 43 *Wall Street Journal*, 26 October 1956.
- 44 *The Amateur Athlete* 12 (December 1952), (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida).
- 45 Tom Vanderbilt, *The Sneaker Book: Anatomy of an Industry and an Icon* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 13.
- 46 *New York Times*, 3 December 1956.
- 47 Ibid., 5 April 1956.
- 48 *Chicago Tribune*, 5 April 1956.
- 49 *The Washington Post*, 11 August 1956.
- 50 Ron Tomsic, Interview by Dr. Margaret Costa, unedited oral history, (Amateur Athletic Foundation Sports Library, Los Angeles, California, no specific date given).
- 51 Frank “Bucky” O’Connor was the NCAA’s qualifying team coach. Drake earned coaching duties only after O’Connor, head coach of the University of Iowa Hawkeyes, whose team lost to Woolpert’s Dons in the NCAA final in 1956, declined the assistant post. Both Woolpert and O’Connor would have had to miss a large part of their 1956-’57 collegiate schedule had they agreed to attend the Olympics.
- 52 “Drake Joins Olympic Hoop Squad,” *The Amateur Athlete*, 8 (September 1956), p. 18 (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida).
- 53 *Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame*; <http://www.hoophall.com/hall-offamers/Drake.html>.
- 54 *Chicago Tribune*, 21 October 1956.
- 55 “Olympic Preview,” *Sports Illustrated*, 19 November 1956, p. 87.

- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Willard N. Greim, "International Basketball Meeting," *The Amateur Athlete* 10 (October 1952), p. 19 (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida).
- 58 In addition to these rule changes FIBA offered membership to East and West Germany and to the All China Athletic Federation of the Peoples Republic of China and the Federation of the Republic of China (Taiwan) for the 1956 Melbourne Games in an effort to increase international participation. Greim, "International Basketball Meeting," 19, (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida). In 1957 the NCAA extended its free throw lane to twelve feet.
- 59 Laguerre, "World's Eye On Sport," p. 14.
- 60 "Golden Melbourne," p. 46. The Olympic team traveled to the Games by air. Air travel was still a relatively new phenomenon. Due to re-fueling issues, the United States Olympic delegation's flight itinerary to Melbourne included stops in Hawaii and Fiji. The contingency enjoyed a pleasant stop in Hawaii at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, where athletes relaxed and practiced lightly for a few days. However, after pit-stopping in Fiji, the United States basketball team encountered a scare when an engine blew out en route to Melbourne. The pilot immediately turned the plane around and returned to Fiji. After some mechanical adjustments, the plane took off again and landed safely.
- 61 "Live High at Olympic Village," *The Amateur Athlete* 10 (October 1956), p. 7 (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida).
- 62 Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 269.
- 63 "Hungary's Heroes in Their Hour of Staggering Strain," *Sports Illustrated*, 3 December 1956, p. 23. The Soviets controlled their entrance via the Mediterranean, presumably at Rijeka, in modern-day Croatia.
- 64 Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 270.
- 65 LaGuerre, "World's Eye on Sport," p. 12.
- 66 "Red Chinese Visit," *The Amateur Athlete* 10 (October 1956), p. 6 (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida).
- 67 "Russian Athletes Will Live in Olympic Village," *The Amateur Athlete* 10 (October 1956), p. 6 (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida).
- 68 Tomsic, Interview by Dr. Margaret Costa, unedited oral history.
- 69 LaGuerre, "World's Eye on Sport," p. 14.
- 70 Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 270.
- 71 In addition, midway through the Olympics, in an effort to relieve pressure on Austria, who had taken in thousands of Hungarian refugees, the United States announced plans to expedite the admission process of 20,000 Hungarians. *New York Times*, 1 December 1956.
- 72 *The Washington Post*, 23 November 1956.
- 73 *New York Times*, 23 November 1956.
- 74 "Golden Melbourne," *Sports Illustrated*, 10 December 1956, p. 46.

- 75 “Bob Mathias Narrates Official Olympic Films,” *The Amateur Athlete* 12 (December 1956), p. 18 (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida).
- 76 “800 Reporters to Cover Melbourne Olympics,” *The Amateur Athlete* 11 (November 1956), p. 28 (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida).
- 77 “BBC to Broadcast in 44 Languages,” *The Amateur Athlete* 12 (December 1956), p. 18 (AAU Archives, Orlando, Florida). The massive attention afforded the Games demonstrated the world’s passion for sports. Fittingly, this explosion of interest in Olympic film, television, print, and radio coverage took place in Australia, whose citizens are known for their love of sports. William L. Worden summed up his take on this love affair in *Sports Illustrated*, writing that Australians, a United States Cold War ally, will “buy beer, lend a Yank their tennis rackets, take him crocodile hunting, give him fish, hock the family jewels for an evening on the town, generally act what they are, the world’s most sports-minded people.” William L. Worden, “Australia: Sporting Continent,” *Sports Illustrated*, 5 November 1956, p. 40.
- 78 *New York Times*, 23 November 1956.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 27 November 1956.
- 80 FIBA allows players to touch the ball if it is within the theoretical cylinder so long as the ball is not touching the rim.
- 81 *New York Times*, 28 November 1956.
- 82 *Ibid.*
- 83 *The Washington Post*, 30 November 1956.
- 84 *Ibid.*
- 85 Tomsic, Interview by Dr. Margaret Costa, unedited oral history.
- 86 *The Washington Post*, 30 November 1956.
- 87 *Chicago Tribune*, 1 December 1956.
- 88 *New York Times*, 1 December 1956.
- 89 *Ibid.*, 3 December 1956.
- 90 Tomsic, Interview by Dr. Margaret Costa, unedited oral history.
- 91 *Ibid.*, 11 July 1964.
- 92 *Chicago Tribune*, 2 December 1956.
- 93 In *Sports Illustrated* a special advertising-section article ran on August 29, 1988, entitled “The Bucket Brigade of ’60.” It analyzed whether the 1960 or 1984 United States Olympic squad was the greatest amateur team of all time. The 1956 team received scant mention. Walter Bingham, “The Bucket Brigade of ’60 (Special Advertising Section),” *Sports Illustrated*, 29 August 1988, pp. 71, 73-74.
- 94 *New York Times*, 3 December 1956.
- 95 Hal Perry, Russell’s teammate at San Francisco, stood up as his best man. *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 1956.

