

Basketball is a Great Sport By Curtis Jerry Smothers



Author's note: I wrote this article sometime back, mostly as an exercise in nostalgia. I remember being present at the first pro basketball game played in St. Louis when "Easy Ed" McCauley headed a pretty good St. Louis Hawks team that eventually moved to Atlanta.

A couple of years ago we celebrated my Denver home team Nuggets' NBA championship, the team's first in over 47 years after the ABA and NBA merged into powerhouse teams dominated by talented Black athletes and giant-sized European white players like Nikola Jokić.

Here's a rerun of my article:

A Sport Anyone Can Understand

Basketball is truly a great sport because it combines the benefits of a great spectator's event with an athletic activity that anyone can participate in. It is also an important business that generates and recycles sports dollars.

Basketball remains one of the easiest major sports for a newcomer to understand. Put the ball through the hoop more often than your opponent, and you've grasped the essentials.

Anyone with access to a gym or who can install their own backboard and hoop can play basketball either alone or competing one-on-one or playing the venerable game of "horse."

Moreover, as a social force, it has proved to be an enormous image improver for our Black athletes.

Cheap Seats and Great Memories

I became a basketball fan as a youngster of 12. My first favorite team was the Saint Louis University Billikens, who were a Division One collegiate team and played their home games at Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis, Missouri.

I could only afford the \$1.50 general admission ticket, and from where I sat, the game, as they say, was somewhat of a rumor. (The instant replay and the big electronic screen had not been invented.) From where I sat in the cheap seats the "Bills" white uniforms with players running ant-like kept things more or less straight.

It was after the game, however, that I was allowed to come to floor level and wait for the giant-sized players to come out of the dressing room for cheers and autographs.

College Basketball Then

Back then, as now, there was nothing to equal the excitement, noise and action of a college basketball game. (The exciting and great looking female cheerleaders alone were worth the price of admission.)

Those were the days of the set shot. Long before the slam dunk became the game's signature highlight, there was no shot clock. There were many teams (mostly inferior) who played a slow-down game ("freeze" the ball) or a zone defense that resulted in astonishingly low scores.

When Oklahoma A&M came to town, for example, our Bills had to cope with a maddening zone defense that collapsed inward each time we tried to get the ball inside. (We rarely beat those guys.)

Modern rules, of course, have improved this great game. The three-point shot the shot clock transformed basketball into a faster, higher-scoring game and has taken away the option to "freeze" the ball. College now has a 30-second shot clock, versus the 24-second professional clock.

Bigger Players, Bigger Business

Players today are bigger, too. "Big-time" college programs employ wide-bodied behemoths, many of whom leave before earning a degree, while others never attend college at all.. Shaquille O'Neal completed his degree about ten years into his professional career. Players like Kobe Bryant, on the other hand, have never even attended a college.

Basketball has also been a great sport that has enhanced the image of Black athletes. Back in the days when I was cheering for Saint Louis, we had maybe one African-American player per year on the team.

Basketball and Race

When I first followed college basketball, integrated teams were still relatively uncommon. Before long, however, stars such as Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Oscar Robertson and Elgin Baylor transformed the game forever.

Nowadays, the ranks of college and professional basketball are dominated by Black athletes. (Ironically, most of the white professional players are from Europe.) Today's NBA features generations of accomplished Black athletes who have become business leaders, philanthropists, Olympic champions, and influential role models far beyond basketball.

Most of us will never be more than a spectator in this great sport. On the other hand, some of us may develop an unbeatable game of "horse" in our driveway. For those who love basketball, however, the ballet-like precision of today's college and professional players are what make basketball truly great. (Who does not get a thrill at the sight of the "alley-oop" play as a player glides airborne catching a tossed ball for a dunk shot?)

America's Gift

Basketball is a gift America gave the world. It is instantly understood even by those who have no sports acumen. As a multi-billion-dollar business, it will remain an attraction for college and professional athletes who want a fast-track to the American dream.