

Change of Colors: 50th Anniversary of the NBA's Integration

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Fifty years ago I wondered what was wrong with my father since so many people seemed angry with him. My earliest memory as a child was looking outside my bedroom window and seeing my father hanging in effigy. For years, I answered the upstairs phone extension without him knowing as he took anonymous "nigger-lover" calls downstairs.

What I did not understand 50 years ago was that as coach of the New York Knicks, my father, Joe Lapchick had signed Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton from the Harlem Globetrotters to play for the Knicks. The Celtics' Red Auerbach had drafted Chuck Cooper from Duquesne and Earl Lloyd was signed by Syracuse. They were to collectively become the NBA first black players.

October 31, 1950 was the day the color barrier fell in the NBA. The NBA will justifiably celebrate these men. However, just as we belatedly celebrate the lives of Negro League players, it will in part be righting a wrong. People who look like me wrote a history which too often ignored a rich and long list of contributions of African-Americans to the history and culture of our nation. While it was an easier road for them than it was for Jackie Robinson in Major League Baseball, it was not easy to get there.

I am proud that my father, who would be 100 years old if he was alive today (he died in 1970), played a major role in integrating what would become the most integrated sport in the world. There were no integrated pro basketball teams when my Dad played for the Original Celtics. Those Celtics became the first white pro team to play an all-black team. The rivalry between the Celtics and the New York Rens became legendary and both teams were eventually inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame. Just as no white team could beat the Celtics, no black team could beat the Rens. But they surely could play against each other in a topsy-turvy series that would exchange victories over decades.

My father watched and saw the effects of society's segregation. He saw the Rens leave town each night on their team bus because they could not get hotel rooms. The Celtics could eat in the best restaurants in town while the Rens usually packed their food for the bus ride because few restaurants in town would serve them. The bus was their home and restaurant but my Dad witnessed gas stations where the proprietor met the Rens with a rifle to move them away from his lily-white pumps.

Joe Lapchick witnessed fan hostility directed at the Rens. There were actually race riots that broke out in several games where both teams had to be escorted out of the arenas by police because white fans were not ready to watch blacks and whites act as equals. My father would embrace -- not shake hands with -- but embrace Tarzan Cooper before each game to show the crowd where the Celtics stood. The Celtics dealt with promoters ready to cheat the Rens out of their share of the game money. When my father learned that the checks for the Rens were bouncing higher than basketballs, the Celtics insisted that the promoters paid the Rens in cash even when that meant the Celtics got the check. They were confident a check made out to the Celtics would clear and it almost always did.

My father regularly saw these things and was appalled by them but years went by before he understood racism's personal toll on men he considered his friends on the Rens. Born to Czechoslovakian immigrant parents, he knew nothing about blacks except that his friends told him to fear that blacks would take away jobs from whites. Then the Rens came into his life and his eyes were opened. But for years, they were only opened part of the way.

Bob Douglas was the creator and main force behind the Rens. My Dad came to really appreciate who he was and the leadership he gave to the game of basketball. He often asked him out for a drink but was always told, "Not tonight, Joe."

Finally, Joe Lapchick asked Bobby Douglas why he never wanted to join him for drink. My father knew that there were bars that would not serve blacks and he certainly would not have gone to one of them. But Douglas stunned my father when he finally said he did not want to be in a bar where he would be served but where he would be rendered numb by the icy stares of unwelcoming white patrons. They talked for hours that night. My father left deeply embarrassed with the recognition that he knew nothing personal about Bob or the Rens until that conversation.

Shocked and disappointed in himself, he knew that night that he had subconsciously ignored the impact of racism on people he cared for, his friends. That discussion changed his life. When my father recalled it to Bob 20 years later, Douglas did not even remember it. Douglas had other conversations with whites who acted surprised and concerned but then walked away back into the comfort of their white world.

But now the two were at the owners meeting of the Basketball Association of America, the NBA's predecessor, in Philadelphia. The year was 1947 and my father, as coach of the Knicks, was making the case for the admission of the Rens as a team to the all-white league. When the owners rejected the Rens, my father was so frustrated that he told Bobby he was going to resign. Douglas, who had faced enough rejections before that day, insisted the my father stay with the Knicks where he might get another chance to break the color barrier. Douglas told my Dad that he always liked him but he never really knew him before that day. He always assumed that whites would protect other whites. "I knew you were different, Joe, but today, for the first time in my life, I know there are whites who would risk everything for blacks."

Neither man ever forgot that conversation. That chance came when my Dad signed Clifton before the 1950 season. Therein came the image on the tree and the hate calls. My father died in 1970. There was a media frenzy surrounding the death of a beloved man. The funeral home had long lines for the two days of the wake. There were speakers set up outside St. Denis Church in Yonkers for the overflow crowd there for the mass which was telecast live by one New York station.

Lots of people were at the cemetery. At each place, I saw several older black men. At the cemetery, I went up to them. As one of them took me in his arms, he said, "I'm Bob Douglas, an old friend of your dad. These are members of the Rens."

Bob Douglas taught my Dad about race and racism. My Dad helped teach me and told me to fight racism as much as I could. I have been lucky enough to be called "the racial conscience of sport." Whenever I am, I think of Bob Douglas, the Rens, the Celtics and my Dad.

I know that on October 31, Bob Douglas and my Dad will be smiling down on the ceremonies commemorating the integration of the game they loved. This NBA celebration is one wonderful 100th birthday present for Joe Lapchick. Happy birthday, Dad. I love you.

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