

Russell Moves

Every man draws a line inside himself, according to Charlie Russell. A black man in the Jim Crow South needed that line. From childhood he absorbed cruel lessons about the potency of white power, the futility of black ambition, the hovering menace of violence, the intricate codes of racial behavior. A man survived by acquiescing to the system. But a man's soul survived by defending his dignity. When pushed too far, a man pushed back.¹

Charlie's father Jake once drew his line while sharecropping in the northeastern Louisiana delta. After one harvest, Jake told his landlord that he would not farm the next year. "Nigger," said the boss, "don't tell me what you ain't gonna do. I'll *make* you do it." That proclamation captured the essence of Jim Crow: the white man claimed dominion over not only the black man's labor but also his spirit. According to racial etiquette, the black worker backed down. Jake knew this code. To survive, he deferred to whites and limited his own aspirations. But this time, he pushed back. "Sir," he answered, "you and who else?" That defiance enraged the white man. After a scuffle, Jake scared the landlord off his own property. Jake then packed his children into his truck, deposited them at a friend's home, and returned home for the inevitable reprisal. When the Ku Klux Klan arrived, he delivered a volley of shotgun shells, scattering the whites away, intimidating his intimidators.

Charlie drew his own line while working construction. His white boss had just slapped, berated, and humiliated a black mule-team driver. Charlie started laughing. He proclaimed that in the same circumstance, he would run or fight, but never just suffer a beating. Like his father, he challenged one white man and an entire system of white power. The boss needed to save face. He promised to next whip Charlie. "Naaaaw, Mr. George," drawled Charlie. "I don't think so." Their faces neared,

their stares locked. Finally, the white man huffed away. Passing down the story, Charlie explained that he could lose a fight or get fired. He could not, however, let his boss assume absolute control. “What good would it do to let him beat me bloody to make me make my own living?” He repeated that last part, bellowing with confident fury: “*to make me make my own living!*”²

William Felton Russell grew up hearing these stories, delighting in the embellishments, the back-and-forth clarifications, the laughter, and the pride. He learned their lessons. He spent a lifetime drawing these same lines, articulating his own manhood. His journey transcended the South. It coursed along the path of black migration, pushing him north and west, into schools and onto basketball courts that opened new possibilities. But it began on February 12, 1934, in West Monroe, Louisiana. Russell’s childhood textured his future principles. In the interstices of racial limitations, he learned the values that framed his later ideology. He also built a powerful sense of self-pride—sharpened by these lessons about manhood, and bathed in the memories of a mother’s love.

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In the 1930s West Monroe straddled Louisiana’s past and future. The rich delta soil of the outlying regions nourished cotton fields, grim poverty, and racial tyranny. Just across the Ouachita River lay Monroe, the trade center of northeastern Louisiana. Since the 1916 discovery there of natural gas, Monroe had attracted thousands of migrants to work its petroleum refineries, lumber mills, and service jobs. Tax revenues funded paved roads, streetlights, and schools. Downtown Monroe had its heyday during Bill Russell’s childhood; department stores and hotels lined the blocks from Fourth Street to South Grand. By the standards of northern Louisiana, anyway, Monroe was a beacon of progress.³

Less congested than its sister city, West Monroe had a small black population, including the Russells, who lived in a four-block quarter called Trenton. West Monroe had relatively peaceful race relations, yet the surrounding farm and mill regions bore threats of overt racial hatred. In the preceding decades, Ouachita Parish had suffered a quantity of lynchings comparable to any county in the South. Such attacks ebbed by the 1930s, although in 1938, in nearby Ruston, a mob lynched a nineteen-year-old black man accused of murdering a white man and beating his girlfriend. The throng attacked its victim, hanged him from an oak tree, and pumped bullets into his corpse for ten minutes. The sheriff drove away upon hearing the shots. Before the body came down, thousands visited the scene, foraging for such souvenirs as a shotgun shell or a bloody oak leaf.⁴

Blacks in Monroe evaded the rope and torch, but they possessed little power. Color bars restricted them from skilled jobs as electricians, machinists, or printers. Poll taxes and intimidation prevented them from voting. In 1936, a candidate for city office promised to hire exclusively white labor for skilled work. Only the

local NAACP president Charles H. Myers agitated with uncompromising resolve. Despite struggling for members and funds, he forged the state's most active branch, challenging police brutality, discrimination by railroad unions, and unjust imprisonment of black citizens. But most of Monroe's black elite of doctors, funeral directors, and restaurateurs acquiesced to segregation. Russell later criticized this leadership class. "They did what the white community wanted," he said in 1963. He lamented the constant pleas for blacks to stay patient, to stay in their place.⁵

Education opened one path to marketable skills, critical-thinking abilities, and slipping the fetters of Jim Crow. But after World War One, local whites burned down the original black schoolhouse in West Monroe. Charlie Russell went to school in a church, funded by parents who paid a teacher one dollar a week. During the Depression, Governor Huey Long discoursed about educating Louisiana blacks, but parish school boards hoarded state funds for white schools. Bill attended school in a ramshackle barn propped up by poles.⁶

The Russell family nevertheless implanted values of self-improvement, upward mobility, and independence. Neither middle-class hoity-toities nor dirt-shack poor—just "average-type people," according to one cousin—they earned the esteem of Monroe's black community. The Old Man, as Bill called his grandfather, was something of a community patriarch. Choosing jobs that preserved his independence, he worked as a farmhand, drayman, and trader. Mister Charlie, as Bill called his father, worked at the Brown Paper Mill Company. This large, imposing, gregarious man commanded respect. He built Bill's sense of dignity. He said that it was fine to dig ditches, so long as you became the best ditchdigger in Louisiana. Bill had role models in his father, grandfather, and also his brother Chuck, who was two years older.⁷

But no one shaped Bill's early life more than his mother, Katie Russell. "When I think about my mother for any reason," he recalled, "what first jumps to mind are memories of her telling me that she loved me more than anyone in the world." She doted on him, washed him in affection. She also told him that some people would always hate him for his black skin. Her integrity complemented her warmth—once, when Charlie got too drunk and rowdy, she bashed him with an iron pipe. Bill felt safe around her. Katie Russell embodied the resistance of black women in the Jim Crow South: women who endured the double prejudice of race and gender, who worked and raised children, who envisioned a better life for their families. Katie insisted that Mister Charlie open college funds when the boys were still babies. Charlie and Katie also resisted the custom of large families, so they could properly feed and educate their two sons.⁸

Bill's world further encompassed the extended kin networks that marked black life in the South. His Grandpa King drifted in and out of Monroe. This quirky, perhaps insane man prone to supernatural visions fathered five daughters besides Katie, including Kammie, the family's secret lesbian transvestite. Charlie's brother Bob

had an enduring effect on Bill. Convinced that a tall left-handed pitcher would attract the attention of the Negro Leagues, he insisted that his nephew develop his left hand. As the story went, if Bill fell asleep holding a turkey drumstick in his right hand, Uncle Bob switched it into his left hand. Bill never knew if he was a natural lefty. His baseball career stalled out, but in the decades to come, he blocked countless shots with that left hand.⁹

In family gatherings, after dinner, Bill heard countless folk tales about slavery, about ghosts and spirits called “haints,” about the heroic resistance of The Old Man and Mister Charlie, about the foibles of white folks, about the lynching in Ruston. Sundays belonged to God, to two versions of Sunday school and two church services, to thudding lectures with fire-and-brimstone bluster. In August, his extended family gathered for weeklong revivals. “About the only thing that was fun for us kids was the huge amount of food,” recalled a cousin. “We just ate and ate the whole week.”¹⁰

Kids like Bill had time, however, for playing in the fields and fishing. Bill was a happy child, prone to making jokes and mischief. Once, as a superstitious, ghost-obsessed neighbor couple walked home at night, Bill and his brother surprised them. The boys dressed in sheets and made spooky sounds. To their delight, the neighbors panicked and sprinted away—the wife jiggling with fat, the husband speed-hobbling on a wooden leg.¹¹

Too young to internalize all the racial patterns of behavior, Bill nonetheless shaped an understanding of American society. He had no white friends or acquaintances. In Monroe, he heard taunts and slurs from white children. One time, he and Chuck lobbed pebbles at each other—until one struck a passing car, driven by a white man. The outraged adult chased them along the back roads. He called Bill a “nigger” and threatened to hang him. “I ran off, half angry, half laughing,” Bill recalled. “Much later in life, I can laugh more.” He understood how black people accommodated white power, but bitterness infiltrated his recollections.¹²

Two emblematic instances illustrated the agony of the South. One Saturday afternoon, Bill found his mother at home sobbing. She had gone into downtown Monroe dressed in a new suit modeled after a riding habit, with a trim coat and pants. A policeman chided her for dressing like a white woman, and he ordered her home. The sight of his crying mother shook Bill. He, too, broke into sobs.

Not long after, in the spring of 1942, Charlie and his two sons waited at a gas station while the white attendant gabbed with a friend. When a white customer arrived, the attendant pumped the man’s gas and then resumed his conversation. Bursting with frustration, Charlie started his car. The attendant, brandishing a rifle, raged at the insult: “Boy, don’t you *ever* do what you just started to do!” He sputtered a stream of cuss-laden invective, emasculating Charlie in front of his children—until Charlie emerged from the car carrying a tire iron. Caught between shock and fear, the attendant ran away.¹³

Pushed out by Jim Crow, pulled away by the promise of jobs and better schools, the Russells soon participated in the Great Migration. The massive demographic shift of black people from the rural South to the urban North had begun during World War One. Bill remembered visitors home to Louisiana, sporting new cars and tales of urban freedoms. At the time, however, more than three-fourths of blacks still lived in the South. The onset of World War Two spurred new demands for labor in the industrial North and West. In the next thirty years, five million black people left the South. In 1942, Charlie rode alone to Detroit, where he made war equipment at the Ford Motor Plant. He despised the Michigan weather, however, and caught a life-threatening cold. So he moved west to Oakland, California, and worked at the Moore Dry Dock shipyards before sending for his family.

In 1943 Katie, Chuck, and Bill boarded a train themselves. Confined to the rear, they carried wrapped-up fried chicken for the ride through Little Rock, since the dining cars refused service to blacks. When they reached St. Louis they moved forward. Once out of the South, they could sit wherever they wanted.¹⁴

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The Russells settled in West Oakland, along with tens of thousands of other migrants. "It was like a parade," said one resident, remembering the scene at the Southern Pacific's Sixteenth Street station. "You just couldn't believe that many people would come in, and some didn't even have any luggage, they would come with boxes, with three or four children with no place to stay." During the war years, Oakland's African American population tripled.¹⁵

They came for jobs. The Southern Pacific railroad yards and the Oakland Inner Harbor needed longshoremen, Pullman porters, cooks, freight loaders, redcaps, waiters, and truck drivers. Working-class families packed into blocks dense with turn-of-the-century cottages and bungalows. The West Oakland flatlands also featured small factories and commercial districts of restaurants, bars, laundries, groceries, and barbershops catering to the black influx. The Great Migration had created vibrant urban spaces that illustrated the range of African American life, mixing professionals with the poor, respectable women's clubs with randy gentlemen's clubs, hot jazz with heavenly gospel, Saturday night sin with Sunday morning salvation.¹⁶

But the surge of southern migrants—both black and white—brought Jim Crow to the East Bay. "The Negro newcomer," complained a 1944 editorial in the *Oakland Observer*, "does not concede that the white man has the right to be alone with his kind." A recent confrontation between black workers and white policemen stirred anxieties about the "what might be called socially-liberated or uninhibited Negroes . . . butting into white civilization instead of keeping in the perfectly ordered and convenient Negro civilization of Oakland." The editorial warned that more violence loomed.¹⁷

West Oakland whites fled a previously comfortable, middle-class neighborhood. Shipyards, loading docks, and factories restricted blacks from skilled or administrative work. Many unions and local employers excluded blacks. Downtown hotels and restaurants brandished signs proclaiming “We Refuse Service to Negroes.” Discrimination by residents and real estate agents prevented blacks from spreading beyond West and North Oakland, so blacks packed into overcrowded homes and apartments, even as rents remained high. The Russells first lived in an eight-room house shared by eight families, with another family in the garage. Pigs, sheep, and chickens roamed the backyard.¹⁸

Charlie Russell insisted that they were broke, not poor. That little axiom rejected the fatalistic mind-set inflicted by poverty, and it reflected Charlie’s resolve to provide for his family. Both he and Katie worked in the shipyards, one during days and the other nights. The Oakland City Housing Authority had put him on a waiting list. Every day for four months, Charlie stopped at the city office to ask about his application status. Thanks to Charlie’s perseverance, the Russells moved into a project near the intersection of Tenth and Union Streets, despite the wartime housing crunch. The public housing implied a rising status—the project was racially integrated, though whites and blacks occupied separate sections.¹⁹

Katie Russell remained the anchor in Bill’s life. Once, a neighborhood boy slapped Bill across the mouth, harassing the new kid on the block. Katie rushed outside, grabbed her son, and chased down the bully. She made Bill fight him. Bill then challenged another boy who had insulted him during the first fight. Katie insisted that Bill learn self-respect. She further required that he think for himself. He now attended Cole Elementary School, a real school with real desks in a real building. Each class had its own teacher, and the curriculum pushed students beyond rote learning. Bill absorbed his mother’s passion for education. Katie asked about his lessons, answered his questions, and took him to the library. “Every morning I felt I was going out to slay a big dragon for her,” he remembered, “and I’d come home from school to tell her how it hadn’t stood a chance, just like we’d figured.”²⁰

The Russells scraped, but their emphasis on hard work and education suggested a future security. When the war ended in 1945, Charlie lost his job in the shipyards. The postwar demobilization devastated industrial centers such as Oakland, slicing black workers the deepest. By 1950, Bay Area blacks suffered 20 percent unemployment, twice the rate of whites. Charlie survived with ingenuity. He bought a surplus army truck, and every morning at dawn, he waited at the corner of Eighth and Center Streets. Then he ferried crops and fruit pickers to the surrounding farm country. He soon operated a healthy business with a small fleet of trucks.²¹

Then, in the fall of 1946, Katie Russell died. Charlie Russell had come home from the hospital, woken his children in the darkness, and simply told them, “Your mother died tonight.” She had been hospitalized for two weeks with a mysterious

flu-like sickness, and then her kidneys failed. Her death surprised her doctors. “We’ll all have to stick together now,” said Charlie.²²

Bill was twelve years old. For months afterward he dreamed of his mother hugging him, rocking him awake in the morning, telling him that she would never leave. During the funeral back in Louisiana, he refused to look at her corpse. He could not accept her absence. No instance in Bill Russell’s life molded him more his mother’s death. She had implanted him with his sense of self and a sense of security. Even as an adult, he sought to protect himself from the pain of personal loss.²³

After the funeral, Katie’s sisters debated the fate of her sons. In the African American tradition, kin networks provided necessary safety nets. During slavery, fathers often lived apart from their families, and masters constantly sold away family members. Webs of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents thus assumed necessary child-rearing roles. These practices lasted after emancipation. Black people often relied on extended families for support through the ravages of Jim Crow, the struggles of poverty, and the upheavals of the Great Migration. When Katie died, her husband could have returned to Oakland while her sisters reared their boys.²⁴

Mister Charlie bucked tradition. He had promised Katie that their children would attend college—a more likely prospect outside Louisiana. So they returned to Oakland, and Charlie ran a unique all-male household. “We gonna live like *people*,” he announced. Bill and his brother cooked, cleaned, and even signed each other’s report cards. Charlie relinquished his trucking business, which required long hours away from home. He took a job with regular hours, pouring molten iron in a foundry. Although handsome and virile, he remained single until his boys matured. He accepted responsibility for his family, stood as a beacon of integrity, and shaped his own destiny. He demonstrated the meaning of manhood.²⁵

But Bill’s own confidence crumpled. Once a sociable jokester, he withdrew into solitary melancholy. “I was held back by serious doubts that I could ever become anything without my mother,” he remembered. His peers exploited his dwindling self-assurance. They mocked his awkward efforts at sports, driving him to tears. He even struggled in class, almost failing the eighth grade at Hoover Junior High School. As a split-year student, which meant that he started a new grade every January, he felt like an outsider. His older brother excelled at athletics and attended Oakland Tech, a prestigious and mostly white school. Bill idolized his brother, who would later play basketball for Santa Rosa Junior College and serve in the Korean War.²⁶

Upon entering McClymonds High School, Bill could not fill Chuck’s shoes. He once overheard a coach grumble, “Why is it that Tech gets all the good ones and McClymonds gets all the stiffs on these brother combinations?” Awkward and skinny, Bill stood only 5’10”. He loved football and tried to play defensive end, but he got cut. He then got cut from varsity basketball. A lack of rhythm doomed his at-

tempt to play clarinet in the band. When he ran for sergeant-at-arms in the student government, he finished last. He instead served as the McClymonds Warriors' mascot, donning an Indian costume to rally the crowd at football games. On the totem pole of teenage status, he laid low.²⁷

Over time, Bill drew inspiration from his father. Mister Charlie arrived home from the foundry to spin tales, boom with laughter, and play whist, dominoes, and Monopoly with his boys. He provided for food and education. He insisted that their family would survive. "Gradually," Bill recalled, "I became sure he'd never crack." Despite their collective tragedy, however, Charlie refused to mollycoddle his sons. He inculcated values of hard work and personal responsibility. Bill could not drive, for instance, until he could afford his own car, gasoline, and insurance. Despite their frequent clashes, Bill gained strength from this cooperative, all-male environment, foreshadowing his experience in basketball.²⁸

Bill nevertheless remained a classic introvert. He spent most afternoons at the Oakland Public Library. He pored through art collections, absorbing the tiniest details of masterpieces by Da Vinci or Michelangelo. He also loved history, though his psyche jarred upon reading one passage that claimed American slaves possessed better living standards than blacks in "primitive" Africa. "I was repulsed by the idea that life could be better without freedom," he recalled. "To me, being a slave meant you had to buckle under." Russell understood that identity hinged upon history, and this claim seemed like a personal attack.

With much greater satisfaction, he happened upon Richard Halliburton's *Complete Book of Marvels*, a swashbuckling account of one man's world travels. A chapter described Henri Christophe's Citadel in Haiti, the first free black country in the Western Hemisphere. Russell grew fascinated with Christophe, who rose from slave to general to iron-fisted emperor. Despite Christophe's bloodthirsty despotism, Russell considered him a hero. "He was just the opposite of a slave: *he would not be one*," remembered Russell. "His life brought home to me for the first time that being black was not just a limiting feeling."²⁹

Russell learned to question assumptions, to look beyond the surface. After seeing *King Kong* with his friends, he wondered why the giant ape lusted after a white woman. He resented the fear, greed, and racism that underlay such a fantasy. In his daily life, Russell experienced a more tangible bias, the kind that threatened a young man's self-worth. As whites abandoned West Oakland, his neighborhood seemed invisible to outsiders, a ghetto. When he went to downtown Oakland, police chased him and called him "nigger."³⁰

McClymonds High School exacerbated this bleakness. Technically, the school was racially integrated. In 1938, the school had 684 white students and 272 minorities, including 115 blacks. By the late 1940s, it had 797 black students, with only 50 whites and a handful of Mexicans, Chinese, Filipinos, and Puerto Ricans. Most of the teachers, Russell believed, deflated student ambition. His counselor tried

enrolling him in shop courses, and she ignored his questions about college. Despite his intelligence, he possessed few prospects.³¹

The shroud of clumsy alienation weighed heavy. His pathetic efforts to woo girls flopped. One girl brought her boyfriend on their “date.” When he asked out another girl, she grimaced, “What would I want to talk to *you* for?” But by his junior year, Russell had undergone an epiphany—an actual, physical, quasi-religious experience. He once claimed that it occurred while waking up, and another time while walking down the hall at McClymonds. In any case, he remembered feeling a warm surge of self-pride. No longer would he internalize the scorn of teachers, coaches, policemen, or classmates. No longer would he consider himself ungainly or cringing. His upbringing had laid the foundation for this attitude, but his emotions crystallized in this one moment. “From that day on,” he believed, “whenever I’ve felt hostility from someone, I’ve assumed it was their problem rather than mine.”³²

Russell still needed a means of self-expression, and he ultimately found it in basketball. But that discovery never occurred during high school. He played the sport, but without distinction, and only by the good graces of a stern, thickset, buzz-cut white man named George Powles. With a knack for fostering children’s self-esteem, Powles coached sandlot and semipro baseball teams, supervised youth leagues, and invited gaggles of kids to raid his wife’s refrigerator. He coached an astounding number of future professional athletes, including baseball major leaguers Vada Pinson, Billy Martin, and Joe Morgan, professional football players Ollie Matson and John Brodie, and Bobby Woods of the Harlem Magicians. Powles also coached three extraordinary barrier-breakers: Frank Robinson, the first black manager in the Major Leagues; Curt Flood, who challenged baseball’s reserve clause; and Bill Russell.³³

Powles had been Russell’s junior high homeroom instructor, and he transferred to McClymonds when Russell was in tenth grade. Despite no basketball experience, Powles coached the junior varsity. He found a place for Russell on the end of the bench. The sixteenth player on a squad of fifteen, Russell shared a uniform with the second-worst player. “We want Russell!” fans would chant at the end of blow-outs, only to hoot and jeer at his awkward efforts.³⁴

Yet Powles recognized something in Russell—maybe potential, maybe desperation. He mentored the benchwarmer, insisting that Russell would improve. Powles urged team members to challenge Russell in practice, stirring Russell’s competitive juices. Powles even lent him two dollars to join the Boys Club and play pickup games. Russell remained so awkward that senior members of the Boys Club excluded him. The 6’2” high schooler thus endured the humiliation of playing with younger children.³⁵

Powles got promoted to varsity coach before Russell’s junior year. He knew little about basketball fundamentals or strategy, so he coached a fast, free-flowing style that exploited his players’ creativity and athleticism. The players appreciated his

trust, care, and honesty about the racial politics of sport. “You’ve got an all-Negro team here,” he told them. “If another team has a fight, it will be called a melee. If you get into a fight, it’s a riot.” The players learned not only self-discipline, but also that black athletes lived by higher standards. Their on-court actions had off-court implications.³⁶

Meanwhile, Powles kept an eye on his pet project. Russell had sprouted four inches in one year, and though his height later paid dividends, it now made him even clumsier. Powles encouraged Russell to believe in himself. He also lent an unorthodox coaching tip, suggesting that Russell improve his coordination by playing table tennis. The new jayvee coach cut him, but Powles had him practice with the varsity team. That promotion validated the sensitive young man. “The very fact that I made the high-school squad changed my whole outlook on life,” he reflected. Joining a team delivered a sense of belonging.³⁷

Only 160 pounds, Russell struggled with overwhelming gawkiness. But he possessed great speed, practiced with enthusiasm, and kept growing. “I was afraid to get up in the morning because I would be taller than I was when I went to sleep,” he joked. He bought a suit in September and outgrew it by January. By senior year he reached 6’5” and started at center, concentrating on rebounds and defense. Unschooled in fundamentals, he shot the ball with his palm instead of his fingertips, a bad habit that he never shook. But Powles had inspired a drive for self-improvement. “Russell always was a battler,” recalled Pinson. “If there was some kind of a play giving him trouble, he’d spend hours on the court practicing until he had it down.”³⁸

His career scoring high—only fourteen points—came in January 1952 against rival Oakland High School. It was Russell’s last game. Along with forty-seven others at McClymonds, he began and ended the school year in January. He graduated in the middle of basketball season, just as the team entered the heart of its league schedule. McClymonds captured the city championship without him. At the end of the season, the erstwhile center qualified for none of the first, second, or third all-star teams in the Oakland Athletic League. Upon graduating high school, he had every reason to believe that he had played his last organized basketball game.³⁹

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“The American boy or man,” opined one basketball manual of the 1940s, “does not adapt himself easily or cheerfully to a formal program designed for physical development. He prefers to express himself freely, without domination, and is most interested when his physical needs can be satisfied by recreation or competition.” Bill Russell first played basketball in the West Oakland projects. On playgrounds, at the Boys Club, and in school gymnasiums, he participated in a sport undergoing constant evolution since its 1891 birth. Basketball experienced an acutely American metamorphosis. Driven “by recreation or competition,” individuals continually refigured the sport to fit their visions.⁴⁰

James Naismith invented basketball to suit his practical and moral purposes. An instructor at the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts, he sought an indoor sport for the winter months, something more appealing than monotonous calisthenics and gymnastics. But he also sought to inculcate the values of Progressive reformers: moral character, social order, individual sacrifice for collective ends, and vigorous physicality fused with Protestant spirituality—a “muscular Christianity.” So he composed a game that rewarded self-control and cooperation. He drafted thirteen rules that promoted passing (no running with the ball), health (no holding, no pushing, no tripping), and order (point penalties for fouls). To encourage movement, he placed goals at the long ends of the court. To reduce roughness, he raised the goals high, nailing peach baskets to the overhanging balcony. “Basketball was thus made in the office,” Naismith later wrote, “and was a direct adaptation of certain means to accomplish certain ends.”⁴¹

Players, coaches, entrepreneurs, and fans immediately propelled the game beyond Naismith’s objectives. None of the original rules considered dribbling, but players freed themselves from defenders by rolling, batting, and bouncing the ball. Scoring increased as players obsessed over shooting. Naismith had designed basketball for amateur recreation, but universities soon established squads of hired guns with spurious connections to academia. In northern industrial cities, rowdy fans watched professional teams engage in brutal clashes—until the 1920s, wire cages encased the court (hence the nickname “cagers” for basketball players). A host of professional leagues rose and fell over the first half of the twentieth century. Basketball also spread nationwide through YMCAs, schools, clubs, churches, settlement houses, and other urban institutions. By 1941, 95 percent of high schools had basketball programs.⁴²

The ingenuity of players and coaches generated a faster, more appealing spectacle. The earliest teams assigned a few defensive-minded players to hang back on offense, so most games were rugged, sloggish affairs. In different regions, in different ways, basketball grew more democratic. On the East Coast, teams played a “give and go” style associated with professionals: quick passes, screens, fakes, and cuts toward the basket. In the Midwest and the South, players often tried long passes for easy layups, but in the half-court they pounded the ball inside. West Coast basketball featured more up-and-down action.⁴³

In the 1930s, rules changes adjusted to the new pace. Instead of a jump ball at center court after each basket, teams had ten seconds to cross half-court, further speeding the game. Players also began using a “one-hand push shot” instead of a two-hand set shot. In December 1936, Stanford University played Long Island University (LIU) at the Mecca of college basketball, Madison Square Garden. Hank Luisetti introduced New York to a one-hand runner that prefigured the jump shot. East Coast fans gaped as Stanford, led by Luisetti’s offensive creativity, snapped LIU’s forty-one-game winning streak. The much-ballyhooed match indicated that

regional styles were cross-fertilizing. Players throughout the country soon introduced their own versions of the jump shot. When Bill Russell first stepped onto a court, he played a game in stylistic flux, a game full of individual innovators, regional traditions, and an emerging national network.⁴⁴

As basketball evolved, it drifted from its original ideological underpinnings. “Games demanding team play are played by the Anglo-Saxon peoples, and by these peoples alone,” declared Luther Gulick, who ran the Springfield YMCA and trained James Naismith. But the new immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries embraced basketball. The Original Celtics, the greatest professional team of the 1920s, contained an ethnic hodgepodge led by the Jewish star Nat Holman. By the 1930s basketball was “the Jewish game.” The South Philadelphia Hebrew Association, known as the SPHAs, captured copious league and tournament championships. Basketball provided a vehicle of assimilation, contradicting stereotypes of Jews as weak intellectuals. Into the early 1950s, Jews still composed a significant percentage of professional basketball players.⁴⁵

African Americans played basketball, too, but the sport did not always occupy a central place in black culture. Basketball was rooted in patterns of city life, and when Naismith invented the sport, blacks were the least urban group in America. The Great Migration quite literally changed basketball’s complexion. Black urban areas became centers of sporting life. Elite clubs steeped in the ideals of Muscular Christianity, such as St. Christopher in New York and Loendi’s Big Five in Pittsburgh, staged games on Friday and Saturday nights, often followed by dances. Black youths could play in YMCAs, athletic clubs, and schools. Washington, DC, established the first black high school athletic association in 1906, and a national black high school tournament began in 1929. Basketball teams at prestigious schools featured African Americans, including Paul Robeson at Princeton and Ralph Bunche at UCLA.⁴⁶

Black basketball became big business, led by two legendary clubs. The Harlem Renaissance Five, better known as the Rens, were a sharp-passing, pivot-oriented, quick-cutting squad. Owned by black entrepreneur Bob Douglas, the “World’s Colored Champions” earned fame by the late 1920s and thrived through the Depression, even winning eighty-eight straight games in 1932–33. They attracted good crowds on long barnstorming tours, especially against their great rivals, the Original Celtics.⁴⁷

By 1940 the Rens had acquired another rival: the Harlem Globetrotters. The Globetrotters combined pivot play with more individualistic flair. On their own Depression-era barnstorming tours, encouraged by white owner Abe Saperstein, they lured customers with “clowning” routines that satisfied black stereotypes as jesters. In the inaugural World Professional Tournament in 1939, the Rens edged the Globetrotters in the semifinals and won the title. The next year, the Globetrotters prevailed. As these squads suggested disparate ethics of black style, they proved equal to the world’s best.⁴⁸

African Americans placed their own cultural stamp on basketball. By 1950, 62 percent of black people lived in cities, and basketball fit the space and temperament of urban life. Especially on outdoor courts, the sport adopted a more experimental flair, with audacious jump shots and flamboyant dribble drives. “It was a learning process on the playground, picking up different things you didn’t learn being coached in the YMCA,” recalled Pop Gates, a black professional of the 1940s. Blacks, like Jews and other ethnic groups, were embracing “the city game.” Russell’s team at McClymonds High School absorbed this exuberant, free-form style, barreling downcourt and launching jump shots. Critics accustomed to set patterns and earthbound offense belittled it as “playground” or “Negro” basketball.⁴⁹

Throughout the nation, black players adopted some version of this sporting ethic. But no one pattern defined “Negro basketball.” As Russell graduated from high school with a fuzzy sense of his own future, a 6’11” teenager named Wilt Chamberlain honed his remarkable combination of size, speed, and power in constant pickup basketball games at the Haddington Recreational Center in West Philadelphia, while also playing at YMCAs, in police leagues, at churches, in summer leagues, and on outdoor courts in Philadelphia and New York. In Indianapolis, Oscar Robertson forged his perfect fundamentals near a housing project, on some dirty clay courts known as the Dust Bowl. In Washington, DC, Elgin Baylor grew up near two parks with well-kept athletic facilities—but he had to play on the street because the parks excluded blacks. Not until attending Phelps Vocational High School did Baylor polish his sweeping, bullishly graceful drives to the basket.⁵⁰

City life launched constant challenges at African Americans: it confined them, it limited their economic possibilities, it stoked their anger. Basketball provided young men with a means of self-expression—a type of freedom. “When I play basketball I’m not doing it simply to score points or to win,” said John Edgar Wideman. He linked his creativity as a writer to his moves on the court, and he placed them both within a larger black artistic tradition: a “need to find the space to express what I am, who I am.” Playgrounds served as havens, little arenas to win attention and status. Men engaged in rituals of bonding, but they proved their distinctiveness in the heat of competition. Basketball lent order amidst anarchy, brotherly fellowship amidst urban anonymity, individual humanity amidst concrete bleakness.⁵¹

Most players discovered their particular style on city courts, with the ball in their hands. But Bill Russell crafted his idiom when he left the city, with the ball in the hands of his opponent.

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A petty entrepreneur named Brick Swegle organized a tour through the Pacific Northwest with players who graduated high school midyear. His sponsors, the Oakland Jaycees and the Mohawk Athletic Club, insisted that he include someone from

McClymonds. As the school's only graduating "splitter," Russell won a spot. He relished every moment traveling by Greyhound, rolling through Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia, playing games and waiting at bus stations and barely sleeping. He had already awakened to his self-worth. Now, in the winter of 1952, he had his basketball epiphany.⁵²

Though the team had only two blacks, Swegle's all-stars played "Negro basketball." Bill Treu, a white Mormon, dribbled in wheels and weaves, using spin moves to shake defenders. The whole team ran fast breaks and took jump shots. Rival coaches muttered at the undisciplined style, but Swegle's team kept winning. Russell, in particular, benefited from a convivial atmosphere. As the bus wound across mountain roads, he peppered Treu and others with questions. He realized that, just as he could picture the details of a Michelangelo masterpiece, he could replicate his teammates' moves in his mental camera. Then he could apply it on court. This imagination fed his sense of personal possibilities. "It seemed so easy," he recalled. "My first dose of athletic confidence was coming to me when I was eighteen years old."⁵³

On offense, Russell could imitate others. On defense, however, he could innovate. He reached with his left hand, which lined up with most players' shooting hands. So when Russell visualized Treu's spin moves and dribble drives, he envisioned himself as the mirror image, performing a nimble defensive fandango. Employing this visualization in a game, he suffocated opponents with his defense. He also leaped to block shots. Most coaches warned that if you left your feet, opponents could drive past you or draw a foul. But Swegle let his players experiment, and Russell's teammates appreciated his high-flying swats. They called his blocks "Russell Moves."⁵⁴

Russell now found affirmation in basketball. "Hey, you can jump," a teammate remarked. When a pack sprung off the floor for a rebound, Russell hovered an extra second, his chest above others' chins. The feeling exhilarated him. He later tabbed it as a universal impulse, "jumping for joy" in a flash of delight. But it also captured a particular African American aesthetic. Like the "jump blues" played in the same dance halls that hosted the Harlem Rens, it was a vigorous physical demonstration, a pronouncement of individual style, a flamboyant sense of possibility. Russell fused this emotional expression to his process of cerebral deduction.⁵⁵

He returned to Oakland with newfound confidence. "I can play now," he told his father. Mister Charlie had good news in return. Hal DeJulio, a scout for the University of San Francisco (USF), had called asking about him. DeJulio had learned about Russell from Dick Lawless, a USF forward who had faced Russell in a three-on-three pickup game. Lawless marveled at how Russell bounded above the rim, soaring for rebounds and blocked shots. "Everything I tried to put up, he'd slam it down my throat," Lawless remembered.⁵⁶

So DeJulio checked out Russell's last game against Oakland High. He left the

game intrigued: Russell got tangled in his own arms and legs, but he also challenged shots with perfect timing. DeJulio confirmed his instinct with Coach Powles, who lauded Russell's athleticism and intelligence. When Russell returned from the tour, DeJulio called again and praised his performance. "I was trying to interrupt him to say that he hadn't seen anything," Russell recalled. "I wanted to tell him about what had happened to me on the tour, but I didn't even know how to begin." The scout invited him to campus for a workout with USF head coach Phil Woolpert.⁵⁷

Until DeJulio's call, Russell had never heard of the University of San Francisco. Though just across the bay, San Francisco seemed a foreign world, and USF lacked the public profile of UCLA, Cal, or Stanford. On the day of his workout, Russell got lost. After arriving late, he performed drills for Woolpert. "I couldn't believe my eyes," the coach recalled. "He could jump—oh, how he could jump—but he was *so* ungainly." Still, Woolpert noticed the effects of Russell's awakening: a self-possession, an aplomb. Russell took an entrance examination. Woolpert neither promised a scholarship nor dismissed the possibility.⁵⁸

So Russell worked days hauling steel at a shipyard, spent nights in pickup games on the West Oakland courts, and wondered days and nights about this singular opportunity. He had considered enlisting in the army, but when he took a physical he measured just over 6'6"—above the military limit, tall enough to be declared 4-F. He could keep working and enroll at junior college. But to surpass the confines of West Oakland, he believed, "San Francisco was my one chance. The one chance I'd ever get." That prospect had nothing to do with professional sports—it meant a college education, the development of his intellectual skills, and a better job than carrying steel or pouring iron.⁵⁹

When the scholarship offer arrived, it represented an improbable fortune for a role player on his high school team, a potential escape from the West Oakland ghetto, and the continuation of an intellectual and physical journey. Best of all, it fulfilled a promise to Katie Russell. Her son was going to college.