

SPORTS BOARD

SPORTS, GAMING, HORSERACING

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SPORTLIGHT

By R.L. Greene

LOS ANGELES—When he entered the room, his 7-foot-3 frame dominated. It was the first meeting with the press for the rookie center then known as Lew Alcindor Jr. and now known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

It was Milwaukee, 1969, and Kareem was making his debut as a professional player after leading UCLA to seemingly annual NCAA basketball titles. At UCLA, he had been sheltered from the press, much as he had been at Power Memorial High School in New York City. Now, he was finally available to a long-awaiting media.

During the questioning, an older writer from one of Milwaukee's two daily newspapers noted that Kareem's father played the trombone. "Does he play tradition, Dixieland jazz or more modern jazz?" the writer asked Kareem.

"My father is a graduate of the Conservatory of Music and plays with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra," Kareem replied dryly.

The newspaperman didn't ask any more questions. Kareem glanced quickly at the only Black writer in the room and a smile flickered across his face.

After playing several years for the Milwaukee Bucks, helping to lead them to the NBA title in 1971, Kareem demanded to be traded to either New York or Los Angeles. It was the Lakers who obtained his services, and he has since led them to several NBA titles.

Now, nearing the end of his long career, Kareem and the Lakers are again in the NBA finals, this time against the upstart Detroit Pistons rather than the Lakers' usual foe, the Boston Celtics. But it's not the same Kareem.

Oh, he owns all of the NBA scoring records, both for regular-season and post-season play. But this year the center has rarely been the focus of his team's offense. Kareem finished the regular season as the Lakers' fourth-leading scorer.

He spends almost as much time on the bench as he does on the court, and he

never has been a dominant force on the backboards, even when he was in his prime.

This year he was not selected to either the first- or second-team in the voting for the NBA All-Star team on which he was at one time a permanent fixture. Named the first-team center was Akeem Olajuwon of the Houston Rockets, while Patrick Ewing of the New York Knicks was the choice for the second team.

The Kareem Abdul-Jabbar era is over, even if he still is a starter for the Lakers.

"Early in my professional career when I cut myself off from people" was the worst time of his life, Kareem has acknowledged. Now, he says, the one thing he would change about himself would be to "give strangers more of a chance to know me. I cut them off pretty quickly."

Even though he was a "loner" with the Milwaukee Bucks and later in his early years with the Lakers, Kareem gave his fans a plethora of beautiful moments, most of them concerning his patented right-hand "sky hook," that deadly shot that lit up scoreboards with regularity around the league. It was, and still is, an unstoppable shot. The only problem now is that he isn't as accurate as he once was.

Kareem's regular-season scoring average dropped three points a game this year from the year before. And his streak of 787 consecutive games in which he scored in double figures was broken on Dec. 4. After that, he was limited to single-digit scoring with some regularity.

Lakers coach Pat Riley became so concerned about Kareem's lack of scoring that the center was instructed not to take the ball out of bounds after opponents' baskets.

"Sometimes in our films Kareem's not even in the frame (at the offensive end)," Riley said. "We want him turning and getting upcourt right away."



AARON AT BAT

Windups and Motions

When the talk turns to great pitchers, the qualities most often discussed are speed and control. And, no doubt about it, throwing hard and control are major assets for a pitcher. But there are other abilities pitchers can develop that make them better players and help them win ballgames.

One of the aspects of pitching fans rarely discuss is the motion or windup. Pitchers can drive hitters crazy with their motion. My old teammate Warren Spahn said one time that hitting is timing, and pitching is messing up that timing. Spahny should know. He was an expert at throwing batters offstride. He and Juan Marichal had the high kick. The batter looks up watching for the ball, and all he can see is the pitcher's foot stuck in his face.

Stu Miller was a good relief pitcher for the Cardinals, the Giants and the Orioles. Every now and then you'll hear his name mentioned when people talk about the wind at Candlestick Park in San Francisco. Stu wasn't a big guy, and in an All-Star game once the wind actually blew him off the mound. What I remember best about Stu is his herky jerky motion. You would think he was going to throw a fastball and instead he would throw one of those balloon pitches up there.

When people ask me which pitcher gave me the most trouble, they expect me to say Bob Gibson, Tom Seaver or one of the other great ones I've faced through the years. But the man who was toughest on me was Curt Simmons, who pitched many years for Philadelphia and St. Louis. He had been in the big leagues for several seasons by the time I came along, and he just did some things I had never seen before.

Pitchers usually go from the chest with the glove to up over their head. But instead of going up, Simmons went down by his legs and that threw me off. I just couldn't follow him. He had me all screwed up. Although I hit a few home runs off him, I should have been a lot more successful since he was a left-handed pitcher.

One funny thing happened to me in a game against Simmons. I say it was funny. I didn't think it was funny back then. We were in the old ballpark in Philadelphia and I hit a Simmons pitch to right field and it went out of the park. A home run, right? Wrong. I was called out. The umpire said I had stepped toward the pitcher, out of the batter's box, before hitting the ball. That meant I was out.

We had quite a rhubarb afterwards. My manager, Fred Haney, was thrown out of the game. But the decision stood, and I was out.

So when I say I never had much luck against Curt Simmons, I mean it. Even when I hit a home run I was called out. **ll**

Hank Aaron is the top home run hitter of all time with 755 homers. A member of baseball's Hall of Fame, Hank is vice president of the Atlanta Braves.

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