

Great candidates unable to become NBA coaches

By Huel Washington
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Ever since organization of professional basketball in this country around 1947, thousands of athletes have had outstanding performances which have led to selections on teams of the quarter century and half century.

Along with their stellar careers, some players used the same occasions in uniform to acquire skills needed, they thought, to become coaches, even head coaches.

Some were chosen head coaches, like Bill Russell, who is included among the 50 greatest players in National Basketball Association history. He was chosen by head coach Red Auerbach in 1966 to be the first African-American head coach in the league's brief existence.

As a player-coach during the 1966-1967 season, Russell, who led the Boston Celtics to 10 NBA titles in 11 years, proved to the world that an African-American head coach could also take a professional team to a world title.

Giving up playing the next two campaigns, Russell, who many call the greatest center the league has ever seen, then took the Celtics to the playoffs in the next two years. He left Boston to coach the Seattle SuperSonics for four years and later the Sacramento Kings.

Russell's success at the helm of various teams probably was the example for his college and Celtics teammate K.C. Jones, who was an assistant coach with Los Angeles Lakers, Milwaukee, Boston, Detroit and Seattle.

As professional basketball increased over the years from the original eight teams to the current 30, there have been enough African-American head coaches in the NBA so that basketball has definitely been considered the leader in the struggle for racial equality in this country in the field of coaching.

Mysteriously, there have been exclusions from the head coaching ranks in the NBA that have been rather confusing to people who are scrutinizing the coaching changes that occur year after year. For instance, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, formerly Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor, compares with Michael Jordan, as one of the greatest players to ever lace up a basketball shoe.

A journalistic major at the University of California at Los Angeles, the 57-year-old



SPORTS PACE

By Huel Washington

Abdul-Jabbar played 20 years in the NBA and was chosen on 18 all-star teams while he was with Milwaukee and the Lakers and was a member of league championship teams six times. He set the scoring record with 38,387 points.

After establishing numerous league records, Abdul-Jabbar decided to be an assistant coach for the Los Angeles Clippers in 2000. Then he became a head coach in the United States Basketball League (USBL) in Oklahoma, taking his team to the league championship. One season, Abdul-Jabbar even used his coaching skills to coach Native American youths on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in Arizona.

He is the author of five books: "Giants Steps," "Kareem," "Black Profiles in Courage," "A Season on the Reservation" and "Brothers in Arms."

Last year, when Isiah Thomas became general manager of the Knicks, he made Abdul-Jabbar a member of the administrative staff. But for some reason, when there are coaching changes in the NBA, none of the teams have given Abdul-Jabbar the front seat on the bench and the reason is mystifying to many.

A few years ago, the Golden State Warriors had Bob Lanier on the bench as an assistant coach. The 56-year-old St. Bonaventure graduate replaced Don Nelson as the head coach of the team from Feb. 13, 1995 to the season's end. His team won 14 games and was sixth in the division.

Lanier had a brilliant, all-star career with Detroit and Milwaukee, scoring more than 19,000 points. He is currently a special assistant to the commissioner, leading the NBA's "Team Up" program that deals with underprivileged youngsters. Is he too old for consideration for a head coaches job?

For several seasons, sitting next to Pat Riley on the

Miami Heat bench, carrying a clipboard, was Bob McAdoo, one of the outstanding shooters in the NBA. He spent 13 years in the league as a player with Buffalo, New York, Detroit, Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

A five-time all-star, the 53-year-old McAdoo even played in Italy from 1986 to 1993. He was a member of the Los Angeles Lakers teams that won the league championship in 1982 and 1985.

One of the players on the 1985 Lakers team was Byron Scott, who has coached the New Jersey Nets. He was fired and hired recently by New Orleans.

The exclusion from head coaching jobs in the NBA hasn't always been racial as witnessed by the constant omission of Rick Barry to the head-coaching ranks.

Barry came into the league from the University of Miami, playing for Bruce Hale, his father-in-law. Barry was the collegiate leading scorer when he graduated in 1965. He had a stellar career with Golden State before joining the fledgling American Basketball Association along with Hale. He returned to the Warriors and led a young team to the NBA title in 1975 under African-American head coach Alvin A. Attles.

Barry reached 60 this year and was also voted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame and was one of the 50 greatest players in NBA history in 1996.

He is also the father of four young men, Jon, Drew and Brent who are currently playing on teams in the NBA. His oldest son, Scooter, was a member of an NCAA championship team at Kansas. Scooter played overseas after college. The elder Barry was a seven-time all-star. He has coached Fort Wayne in the Continental Basketball League (CBL) and New Jersey and Florida in the USBL for five years. He is now a radio broadcaster in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Another former players, who has some pretty good credentials for assuming a head coaching job in the NBA is Reggie Theus, 47, a youngster from Inglewood, Calif., who honed his playing skills at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Theus was drafted as a junior by the Chicago Bulls and played 13 years in the league with stops in Kansas City, which became Sacramento, Atlanta, Orlando and New Jersey. He even played in Italy in 1991-1992. Besides being a broadcaster for the Turner Broadcasting Co., Theus has tried his hand at being a head coach in the Summer Leagues at various locations and is looking for a NBA head-coaching job.

For sure, being a head coach of a professional basketball team is not an easy

chore. Some of those who have assumed the leadership of teams in the NBA don't have the background or experience of those mentioned in this column. Why they haven't been given a chance to show their expertise at the head of a team is quite a mystery.

There may be others besides Abdul-Jabbar, Lanier, McAdoo and Barry who have been slighted or passed over. Are there some things in their personalities that were not suitable for a head-coaching job?

Abdul-Jabbar is a Muslim. Barry was hot tempered

and hated losing like Pete Rose. Nobody likes losing. What is wrong with McAdoo? Was Lanier even considered for a head-coaching job after replacing Nelson?

This is not to put a knock on the Van Gundy's, Jeff and Stan, but were their backgrounds and coaching skills better than some of those who have been shunned? The answer is a qualitative "No."

The aforementioned NBA greats, if they applied for head-coaching jobs, in our estimation, should have been given a chance just like Larry Bird and Magic Johnson.

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