

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: William F. (Bill) Russell
Interview Date: May 13, 2013
Location: Mr. Russell's home in Seattle, WA
Interviewer: Taylor Branch
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 03:07:25

Taylor Branch: Alright.

John Bishop: We are rolling.

Taylor Branch: It is Monday, May 13, 2013. We are in the home of William F. Russell, here before me—

William F. Russell: Esquire.

TB: Esquire. Doing an interview for the National Museum of African American History and Culture. My name is Taylor Branch. Bill Russell. The videographer is John Bishop, assisted by Noah Bishop. And from the museum we have Elaine Nichols and we have Mr. Russell's longtime assistant and friend Anita Dias. And we are here to record an interview for posterity and this museum about Mr. Russell's life and views and this is the most formal part of this interview and we hope to just sort of have a good time talking about the career of a legendary figure in American sports and American life.

WR: Did you say posterior?

TB: Post—[laughing]. Alright, so we're off to a roaring start. Well let me ask you the first question. Where do you remember getting the extraordinary laugh which is one of the first things that people ask me about when they say, when they find out that I know you, is, "Where did his laugh come from?"

WR: My mother. She told me never to hold back on anything. If I have to sneeze, sneeze. If you have to laugh, laugh. Don't hold it back. She said it's good for your health.

TB: Well, that's good. You followed that advice. When we were working years ago—Bill and I have a history of doing a book together about his life—we talked an awful lot about your mother. She died long before then; I never met her. But I did know your father, Mr. Charlie. And it seemed to me in discussing and getting to know you that an awful lot of your character comes from those family people. I think the most memorable line you ever spoke to me was that you thought your character was formed by the fact that you never had a doubt that both of your parents loved you. Is that correct?

WR: That's the first thing that I can remember as a person. You know, you are a baby and then the world opens up to you. Well, I always had the confidence that my mother and father loved me. And what they taught me was that if they loved me I must be OK. So if other people encounter me, and they have a problem with me, my father said, then that's their little red wagon. And so I never worked to be liked because that would be hypocritical to them, if I were to do things to make somebody like me. Most important.

TB: A little background: you grew up in Louisiana, born in 1934 in Monroe, Louisiana, the second son of Katie and Mr. Charlie Russell. The other figure we talked about a lot was your

grandfather, well, both your grandfathers but primarily Grandfather Russell whom you called The Old Man.

WR: Yes. He was extraordinary. One time in Louisiana the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan had this black guy out in the woods, and beat him. You could hear him screaming and crying for mercy at least a mile away. So my grandfather heard that, went and got his shotgun and loaded it up with birdseed and shot into the crowd about half a dozen times. And it dispersed the crowd. And he never went to see if the guy ... he just left. And he used to tell me old Doc Something or other was picking out birdseed for a week. [Laughs] And [5:00] when my father was born my grandfather realized that in that part of Louisiana there was no school for the black children So he decided, he talked to some other guys, and they got together their money and they went to the lumber yard and bought some lumber. And they bargained and negotiated and paid for the lumber, and when they got the wagons and the mules to take the lumber to the site, they were going to build a schoolhouse.

So when they got back to the lumber yard to pick up the lumber, the guy said, "So what you boys going do with all this lumber?" Well, one of them in the crowd says, "Well, we gonna build a schoolhouse for the kids." He said, "Well they don't need to know how to read to pick cotton. In fact, I'm not going to let you do a thing like that. I'm not going to sell you the lumber." So my grandfather says, "OK, let me get my money back." He said, "No, I'm not going to do that either. There is no agreement a white man has to respect with you black boys." So my grandfather said, "Let me get this straight. You're not going to give us the lumber and you're not going to give us our money back. Well, the third opinion- option is I'll have to kill you." He went to get his shotgun.

So the guy in the lumber yard says, “Well, you know, you guys can have that lumber.” [Laughs] And so they built the schoolhouse and they got together fifty-three dollars to hire a teacher for a year to teach at this school they’d just built. And that’s the kind of stuff where he said, “Bill, be sure you don’t take nothing from nobody.” [7:22] My grandfather never went to school one single day. My father went to sixth grade then he dropped out. I did four years at the University of San Francisco and my youngest child, my daughter, graduated from Harvard Law School. So it’s the evolution of my family from my grandfather to my kids, from no school to Harvard Law School.

TB: At the time you were born in 1934, your mother already, although your father had practically no schooling and your grandfather had none, she admired, she valued education so much she named you, your middle name is Felton, after the president of, I think Southern University at the time. Is that right?

WR: Yes. His name was Felton Clark. And so she gave me Felton to set me on a path that I respected by going to college. In fact, my mother died of kidney failure. And she was in the hospital sick and she knew she was dying. So she called my father and said, “I want you to promise me something: that you will send my boys to college.” And my father said, he promised. So when she died we took her to Louisiana to be buried and while I was there, she had five sisters and they were debating who was going to take me, who was going to take my brother. And he says, “That debate is no matter. I’m gone take them back to California and raise them myself.”

They says, “No man can raise kids!” He says, “I promised their mother I would try.” So he sold his business and went to work in a foundry for less a week than he’d been making a day.

TB: And the reason he did that is he wanted the time at home.

WR: Yes, he had to be home every night. He said, “You can’t let kids raise themselves.” And I understood that, and I appreciated that. I loved him. It was like his seventy-fifth birthday and I said, “You know I love you.” [10:00] And he says, “Well, I love you, too.” That was the first time he’d ever said that. But I knew it.

TB: I think you said at one time that when he took you and your brother back to Oakland—you went back on the train, right—from your mother’s funeral. This is in 1946. You’re twelve. It’s very, very unusual that a single father, a widower would raise these two boys. I think you said he talked to you the whole way back about how you were going to live without your mother.

WR: Yes. He said, “You have a tremendous loss, but you’ve got to live the way she wanted you to live. And she wanted you to be educated. And I don’t know much about it, but I’ll help you whenever I can.”

TB: And you’re going to cook and clean, and ...

WR: Well, we had a setup where the week I cooked, my brother washed the dishes. And then the next week, he’d cook and I’d wash the dishes. There was no gourmet cooks in that house. [Laughter]

TB: I think I remember even earlier at one point you said that down in Louisiana Mr. Charlie come home from work sometimes and the whole family would go out to play and he would carry all of you?

WR: He was a big, strong guy, OK? 6’3”, 220 pounds. And we had this huge field with tall grass right in front of the house. And we’d go play hide and seek in the tall grass. To get to our starting points, he’d put my brother on one arm, me on the other arm, and my mother on his back, and run full speed across that field. And I thought he was such a superman.

TB: I remember.

WR: When I was playing for the Celtics, and I was up in the country, in the Catskills and Red Auerbach and I were talking and one of the waiters came up and said, “You hear what happened to Wilt (Chamberlain)?” I said, “No. A car wreck or something?” He used to drive fast. And he said, “No, he just signed a contract for \$100,000 a year.” That’s the first time any NBA player had reached that plateau. In fact, I think Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio, and I think Willie Mays were the only pro athletes making \$100,000. So I says to Red, “I know what I want.” And he says, “What’s that?” I says, “One hundred thousand, and one dollar.” Because I had just won the MVP in this league.

So he said, “OK.” So I go back to my room, I call my father and I says, “Dad, you won’t believe this. They’re gonna pay me \$100,000 a year to do this. Tell you the reason I called you is to tell you you don’t have to work anymore. I make enough that I can take care of you the rest of the way.” He says, “I don’t want your damn money. I got my own money.” I says, “But that job you’ve got’s terrible.” He was working in a foundry. He says, “Listen. I give these people thirty-five of the best years of my life. Now, I’m a give them a few of the bad ones.” [Laughter]

TB: That sounds like Mr. Charlie. I’d like to back up just a little bit to when you left Monroe, Louisiana because as I understand it at any rate your family was part of what we now understand as the Great Migration, or at least the World War II migration. A friend of mine wrote a book about it: Isabella Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

WR: I met that lady.

TB: She’s a wonderful writer. Anyway, he left before your mother’s funeral, he left Louisiana and migrated first to Detroit and then to [15:00] Oakland. Can you tell us exactly how that happened and why it happened?

WR: Well, he first was working at a bread factory and asked for a raise. And the boss said, "Well, I can't give you a raise, Charlie. If I give you a raise you'll be making as much as some of the white fellows and I can't pay one of you boys as much as I pay the white guys." And he used the n-word to my father, just like it was nothing. So my father was at home that night, he was talking out loud, he said, "You know, I'm going to have to leave here because if I stay here who will raise my kids?" And they said, "Well, you can raise them." He said, "No, if I stay here either I will kill one of them or one of them will kill me. And either way there will be nobody to raise my kids." So he started working on going to Detroit and the Ford Motor Company was hiring anybody that showed up.

TB: This is during World War II?

WR: Yes. So he made arrangements to go to Detroit. Well, Saturday at noontime was payday at the factory. And he says to the boss, "This is my last day." "What do you mean?" "I'm not coming back. This is it." This is after he got the check. [Laughs] The guy says, "Charlie, if you're worried about that raise, I tell you what. You just log in two more hours and that'll be the work. You don't have to do the work. Just log in." And my father said, "No. This is it." See, the guy thought he was upset about the raise. But he was upset about the boss saying the n-word to him to his face.

TB: And that wasn't the only incident like that he had had.

WR: Right. That type of stuff happened all the time.

TB: I remember you told one about a gas station once where the guy just pumped other people's gas and left him sitting there.

WR: Well my father thought he was being totally disrespected, all the time. So when he told the guy he was leaving, it was noontime. At six o'clock the same day, he got a train to Little

Rock, headed for Detroit. That was Saturday. Monday morning, this guy shows up at the house looking for him. He was from the draft board, and he was come to tell my father that if he didn't come back to work he was going to be drafted into the Army. But he was not eligible because he had a wife and two kids. And they wasn't drafting those guys. But they didn't care about that. So I think my father only went back when we went to my mother's funeral. [Pause in recording]

TB: Alright, Bill, let's pick up again with the move out of Louisiana. Your father decided he couldn't stay there. This is right at the beginning of World War II and he moved first to Detroit and then from there to Oakland and he sent for the family from Oakland, is that right? How does that occur?

WR: Right. Well, if you've ever been to Detroit in the wintertime ... [Laughs] He said it was killing him. It was too cold. So he moved to Oakland, California and went to work in a shipyard. He worked in shipyards until the war was over, and then they closed the shipyards. They stopped everything. So he had an idea. He bought himself a truck and started going out to the valley, which was forty-five or an hour away, and started talking to the farmers about getting fruit pickers. And he made quite a business out of it. And so, from the time I was, after we went back from my mother's funeral until I got to college, I [20:00] always bought my school clothes picking fruit. I was so proud of how much money I could make. It wasn't any money, but it was the money what I could make. And so then I enrolled in the university.

You know what's really funny about that? When I was in Louisiana, my mother kept me away from white people as much as she could. And she kept white people away from me because she said, "You don't know what they'll do." And so when I first went to California I went to school with some white kids, but by the time I got to high school it was an all-black school, except for the faculty. And then I went to university and there were nine black kids on the

campus, of the whole student body. And so I'm back into that, and you might say cultural shock.

[Laughs]

But I had a pretty good career and I was self-taught, how to play. And the reason I say that is I got cut from the junior varsity in eleventh grade. So when I was absorbing it, the varsity coach, who had been my homeroom teacher in junior high school, says to me, "I'm glad you got cut." "Why are you glad?" He says, "Because today, you can come out for the varsity." I says, "I just got cut from junior varsity." He says, "I'm not the junior varsity coach. I'm the varsity coach." So I'm on the varsity. And he says, I want you to wait after practice, first practice. I says, "What do you—?" He says, "Let's go," and got in his car and drove us to the boys' club.

[Sneezes] And then he took two dollars out of his pocket and bought me a year's membership and said, "After practice here, I want you to go to the boys' club and play basketball every day." And so that's what I did, and that's where I learned to play. And so I had the good fortune of not being influenced by a coach. [Laughs] Could you hold up for a second?

Firstly, all the cliché things that a college basketball player does, I didn't do any of them. So they figured I couldn't play. So during my whole freshman year they considered that a waste of a scholarship and so my sophomore year they did not renew my scholarship but the coach, I guess feeling guilty, he went to the dean of the College of Business Administration and found an unused scholarship. So I played my sophomore year on an academic scholarship. And so my career, my sophomore year there were a couple things that made an entry. Four of the top six players on the varsity my sophomore year told the coach that they did not appreciate him making them have to play with black guys. Now, he never told me that until I had retired from the Celtics. I knew I didn't get along with these guys and I knew how things happen, and I just said that's a part of life.

And my first varsity game set the tone [25:00] of my relationship with the coach. We were playing Cal-Berkeley and their center was a pre-season All-American. The game starts and the first five shots he took, I blocked. And nobody in the building had ever seen anything like that. So they called timeout to discuss it, what it was I was doing, because they didn't know what I was doing. So again in our huddle, my coach says, "You can't play defense like that." "What? I just stuffed it five times in a row." "That's not the way you play defense." So he showed me on the sidelines there how he wanted me to play defense. So I go back out and I try it, and the guy shoots layups three times in a row. I said, "This does not make sense." So I went back to playing the way I knew how. He was really insulted by that. He was trying to help me and I was hard-headed and stubborn, and didn't know what I was doing, and he was trying to help me figure out what I was doing, and I rejected it. So he never liked me as a player from then on.

TB: Are we talking about the beginning of your basketball career at the University of San Francisco, '52 to '56.

WR: Right.

TB: Basketball was taught differently then. I mean, some of the things that people now wouldn't be familiar with was that you weren't supposed to leave your feet.

WR: Yeah, no good defensive player ever leaves his feet. Well, basically what I was doing in retrospect was bringing the vertical game to a game that had been horizontal. And this was, we get a new element. See in high jump, which I had participated in in track and field, I can jump over my head. Well, in basketball in the gym, we should do an exercise where we take chalk and put it on your finger, and run and jump as high, and put a chalk mark. Well, I can put a chalk mark thirteen feet above the court. Which is the height of the top of the backboard. And that was going to waste.

So for three years this coach did not like me. But I made up my mind that I was going to see how good I could be. So I really worked at developing the game. Part of my game was logistics. So I learned how to cover great distances in a short period of time. So I developed how to play. Well, he never agreed with that, although my junior, senior year we won fifty-five straight games. Which is not bad. It was a record at the time. And we also won back-to-back Final Fours. And I set a record that still stands today, in 2013. I had twenty-seven rebounds in the championship game, and that's still a record. And I had fifty rebounds in the two games, the semi-finals and finals, which is still a record.

But my coach, who was kind of a purist, "this is the way the game is supposed to be played," and I wasn't doing that.

TB: Some of this, you once said that even before you got to the University of San Francisco that a lot of your skills in basketball came from mental games, that you did, from drawing. You had drawn out of the library, imagining [30:00] things in art on a trip into the Northwest?

WR: At that time I had the ability to use my imagination. And so I went on this trip with these really first-class basketball players, and I watched them do everything. And I watched the total person: footwork, head fakes, whatever. Dribbling, the whole thing. And the next day at like a shoot-around I would try to do that. And so as I told one of the guys in Oakland. He said, "What about San Francisco?" And I said, "Well, the best way to explain it is, I was already where I was going to be when I got there." You know.

Have I told you about when we first moved to the projects? And my mother was getting the apartment together, and I was sitting on the steps staying out of the way. And these five guys ran by, and one of them slapped me as they went by. Well, I was nine years old, and I did what

nine year-olds are supposed to do: I went and told my mother. And she said, "What!?" She grabbed the keys to the house and she grabbed me, and we went all through the projects looking for those five guys. And she said, "Are these the guys?" And I said, "Yes, ma'am." I didn't know what she was going to do. I thought she was going to take care of it. But the way she took care of it was, "OK, you're going to fight every one of them, one at a time."

"Thanks, mom." [Laughs] So I go into five fights and I lose three and win two. And so we're going back to our place and I'm crying and she says, "Don't cry. You did what you supposed to do. It doesn't matter that you won or lost. It matters that you stood up for yourself. And that's what you must always do: stand up for yourself." And so that day changed my whole attitude. She says, "I don't want you to ever, ever pick a fight. But always finish the fight that you're in." And so that's the kind of stuff I got from my mother. My father, the roles were almost reversed. She taught me to be a tough fighter, and he told me to be philosophical.

TB: Well, he was philosophical.

WR: Yes, he was. You know Greg Taylor? I'll tell you how my father was. He would never take anything from you. I was making a lot of money. He would never take anything. He just, his attitude was: "I got my own money; I don't need yours." So for his birthday one year, I went to a local automobile dealer and bought a car. And told the salesman, "I want you to take this car and deliver it to this address. And don't say anything. Man comes to the door, hand him the keys, say, 'That's your car,' and leave. No explanation." So I called him up, I said, "Did you get your car?" He said, "Yes. I just can't believe anybody would do something that nice for me." I said, well, uh, okay. So a week later he calls me up, I say, "How're you doing?" He says, "I ought to kick your ass."

"What? What'd I do?"

“I just got my first speeding ticket.” [Laughs]

TB: At San Francisco, I think you once said 1956 was a pretty amazing year in sports. That’s your senior year and you were not only in the NCAA Final Four for the second year in a row winning it but you also went to the Olympics and then straight into the NBA.

WR: Right. Well, we won the Final Four.

TB: Who did you beat? Do you remember?

WR: We beat Iowa. [35:00] Nice bunch of men, too. When you play against guys, and those guys at Iowa were a first-class bunch of guys. In fact for years I kept up with them, long after we played against each other. In fact my counterpart Bill Logan, who was the center, was the head of Iowa Bankers’ Association. A few years later I went to speak at one of their conventions. But anyway, I was on the Olympic team and in the gold medal game, we beat the Soviet Union by thirty-five points. We were kind of mean guys. In the tournament, we played a team from Thailand, OK? Their center was 5’10”. And so you would say, “Well, these guys are no competition, let’s just walk through it. Let’s find out how bad we can beat these guys. We were going to try to beat them by one hundred points. I only think we got maybe to eighty-five. [Laughs] But I had a lot of fun.

So, after the Olympics, I went home, got married, and then went to Boston. I had not talked to the Celtics before that. I was really an amateur, and I got there and we had an idea what it was going to be. It took about half an hour to work it out. And so in just thirteen months, the Final Four, the Olympic gold, and my rookie year we won the NBA. So we were the college championship, the world amateur championship, and the professional championship in thirteen months. And that’s a pretty good run.

TB: Is it true that when you went to Boston that Walter Brown, the owner of the Celtics and Red Auerbach and Bill Sharman, they met you at the airport?

WR: I think Red was on the road. But Bill Sharman ... no, it was all three of them, you're right: Red, Walter Brown, Bill Sharman. Now, Walter Brown was one of the most marvelous people I've ever encountered.

TB: The owner of the Celtics.

WR: Yes. See, there were things that the Celtics did that I don't think are common knowledge. The first black player drafted in the NBA was a guy named Chuck Cooper from New Canaan. Celtics drafted him, and at the draft one of the other owners said to Walter Brown, "You know he's colored." And Walter Brown said, "I don't care if he's polka dot. That's who we're drafting."

Ok. Fast forward. The Celtics were the first NBA team to start five black guys. It was an accident. And I'll show you how the Celtics were. We had been doing it for over a week and didn't know it until we read about it in the paper. Tommy Heinsohn was one of the forwards and he got injured and so his substitute went in and filled in until Heinsohn got back and so we had five black guys start. And like I said, we didn't know about it until we read about it in the paper. Of course these was the five, these were the guys in our rotation, you know? So now you've got the first black guy signed, the first five black guys started. We had a guy named Sam Jones from North Carolina College, one of the quote traditional Negro colleges. Well, we drafted Sam in the first round. [40:00] That was the first time in any sport when a guy from one of the Negro colleges was drafted in the first round. You see, the difference is, if you draft in the first round, you're on the team. You have to play your way off. If you're drafted in the second round, you've

got to make the team. And so your compensation is different. So Sam was our first pick. He turned out to be a great, great pick. And then the Celtics were the first team to hire a black coach.

TB: You.

WR: Yeah. And the way that happened was Auerbach says to me, "I'm retiring, but I'll have to pick the next coach. I will not hire anybody that you do not approve of one hundred percent. So," he says, "what we're going to do is you make a list and I'll make a list. You'll have five guys that'll be ok with you and I'll have five guys who'll be ok with me. And whoever is on both lists, that's who will get the job." Well, there was nobody on both lists. And so Red says, "Well, I'm going to hire this one guy." I said, "Red, if you hire him, I will retire with you." He said, "What's the matter? Don't you think he'll make a good coach?" I said, "He'd make a [41:55], I don't even want to be in the same room with him. So he said, "Well, what am I going to do." Well, going back he had offered me the job first. And I said, "Red, I watched the stuff you went through. No. Way." And so he said, "Well, what am I going to do?" And I said, "Ok, I'll take it." I said, "Here's the deal, though, Red. I'll take the job if it doesn't work you will know after a half, by the All-Star Game. If we agree it's not working, you can hire anybody you want and I guarantee to give them one hundred percent cooperation. But we never got to that.

TB: So that was the deal. This was 1966, right. You're the first black, not only a coach but a player-coach. Had there been other player-coaches in the NBA?

WR: I don't know.

TB: And no assistant coaches. People today must be shocked. I don't know how many assistant coaches there are.

WR: Well, Red says, "Do you want an assistant?" I said no. He said, "Why not?" I said, "Ok, Red. Give me one of your assistants." Well, Red had never had an assistant, ok? So I asked

him, “Why didn’t you have an assistant?” He said, “That’s another guy you have to coach.”

[Laughs] And the atmosphere in Boston would have been detrimental to the situation, I thought, if I had an assistant coach, because half a season into it, they’d say, “Well, they’ve got that other coach and Russell’s just a figurehead,” no matter what. Well, if I was going to be the coach, I was going to be the coach, ok? And so that’s [44:07].

And it was very interesting that Red’s last year as a coach he got thrown out of twenty-two games, including the All Star Game. And so as the captain I had to take the rest of the game, so I went in with some experience about how to do it. And as a captain, we used to play gin rummy at night after games because neither one of us could sleep after games, and we’d talk about coaching philosophy and what he wanted to do was set up a [45:00] system, make sure that everybody knows it, then get the hell out the way. And that was the way he coached. And that’s the way he got a team together. Because I trusted him completely, and he’d used to do some things I’d asked him about. For example, I played for Boston for thirteen seasons. And during those thirteen seasons we only made one trade. We picked some guys up after they retired, and we’d give them another year, but he never said to anybody, “The way you played there, you got to play different here. I got you here because of the way you played there, so I don’t want you to change. That’s the way I want you to change. And so guys did not have to, quote, play for the Celtics. They did not have to learn a new way to play. He got you there because of where you were before you got here. And he had a place for you in that system.

TB: Why did he get thrown out of so many games? Why did Red Auerbach get thrown out of so many games? Did it serve a purpose or was it just his personality?

WR: A combination. He was never a coach on the sidelines who said, “What the heck.” He says, “I can’t get my team to fight for me if I won’t fight for them.” In fact my first game, the

referee called goaltending, which was not goaltending. Red went nuts. He cussed and yelled and screamed and stomped until the referee called a technical on him. And, but, they were careful after that when they called goaltending. That was his purpose. And after the game I said, “Red, you’re the first coach since high school that looked out for me.” He says, “I can’t expect my players to fight for me if I won’t fight for them. That’s the way I coach. It wasn’t you.” Thanks, Red! [Laughs]

TB: Can you talk a little bit, you played on storied Celtics teams, you won eleven championships in thirteen years. Just a little bit of personality sketches of the various players on the team, like Sam Jones and what they were like?

WR: Well, I’ll tell you. First of all, more important to me than winning eleven championships: we won eight in a row. That was difficult. Of course you’ve got to do the same things without repeating yourself, which takes some planning. I played with some guys that ... we had a family. I liked all the guys except for two, and they will never know who they were. At least two, I was ambivalent about, you know? Bill Sharman: the most thoughtful player I have ever played with. He did everything by the numbers and would fight at the drop of a hat and [49:14]. I think Sharman led the league in fights.

Cousy could not fight, ok? So one of the things that Red did, it was very interesting. We would play Syracuse (Syracuse Nationals) and those guards used to beat up Cousy. They’d beat him up. Ok, that’s a foul. “Well, we’re gone still beat him up.” So Red got so incensed about that that one night he says, “Ok”—we had a guy Jungle Jim Loscutoff, he’d been lifting [50:00] weights and all that. He says, “Loscy, listen, I want you to watch, and the first guy hits Cousy, I want you to turn around and knock the hell out of Dolph Schayes.” Schayes was their best player and he played forward. So over here this guy hits Cousy, whack! And Schayes is saying, “What

the hell is going on? [Laughs] Why'd you hit me?" In fact the next time we played there, all the fans had cardboard hatchets that said, Loscutoff the Hatchet Man. But what they hadn't noticed was every time the guy hit Cousy, that was a cue for Loscutoff to hit Schayes. And so they figured out that maybe we shouldn't be beating up on Cousy. And so Red always had a purpose for everything he did.

TB: Cousy was the star of the Celtics when you arrived. How did the two of you get along?

WR: Yes. Perfect. There was never any negative exchange between the two of us. In fact, I took the attitude, and I don't know if it was proper, but Cousy's not a star on defense, ok?

[Laughs]

TB: Gentle!

WR: But I never complained to him or to anybody. I looked at the situation and I talked to Cousy about it. And I says, "Well, when this guy comes up and you're guarding him, make him go left if he's right-handed and as soon as he gets past you, run to the center. And I want him to maybe throw a bounce pass to the center because he can't throw it over the top because I won't let him. So now Cousy [52:32] intercept a lot of passes because they tried to throw a bounce pass and he was in the lane. And so I used to lead the league—way, way lead—in blocked shots. Well a great majority of them were on Cousy's man.

And we turned that, and then he and I would talk and one day he says to me, "You know, on the rebounds and blocked shots, you come on the ball, you're looking for me. When the shot's taken, I'll run over to this spot over here, halfway between the free throw line and half court on the left side. And so we're on the road, I'm looking for the green (road uniform). And out of the corner of my eye. I didn't have to turn around and look. I could catch the ball, catch the rebound

and just change direction. He would take two dribbles and he'd have a layup. And so I felt, see my whole thing was, I found out that in order to get any recognition I would have to change my complexion. [Laughs] And so what I decided to do, and that was in college also, was try to win every game so when my career is over and they're saying, well so-and-so is better, and he's better, and he's better ... in fact, my second year in the league, the players, in those days we had to vote for the MVP. You could not vote for your own team but you could vote for anybody you wanted. Well, I was overwhelming MVP. It wasn't even close. The writers or the media, whatever you call them, picked me second team all-league. So I think I'm still the only guy ever to be MVP and be second team all-league. And so I wasn't going to let that bother me.

Of course my [55:00] emphasis was on winning in the team game.

TB: Cousy never referred to Red Auerbach as Red, is that right? He had eccentricities.

WR: Yeah, what did he call him?

TB: Arnold?

WR: Arnold! Yes. Well you know they had straight out of college a shaky relationship that evolved into a good relationship. When Cousy was a senior at Holy Cross, Red had, when he came to his pick he did not pick Cousy because Red's theory about winning was put a team together that could play against the best team, and the rest of it would take care of itself. Which is solid, I think. Well, the dominant player was a guy named George Mikan, incidentally one of the great guys who ever played in the NBA. The other kid was a big guy from Bowling Green, who could match Mikan physically, and he had some skills, so Red drafted him. And I asked Red what happened. He says, well—the press in Boston tried to crucify Red because they said how stupid he was not to draft Cousy when everybody knew he was the best player in the world. So Red said, “Well I swear I wanted, that's the way I think I should do it.” Well the guy says,

“We’re going to run you out of town. You insulted all of us. And besides that, you’re a Jew and we don’t like Jews, either.” [Laughs]

So I asked Red, “How do you handle that?” He says, “I’ll just outlive the bastard.”

TB: So he had some of Mr. Charlie’s, of your mother’s advice: that’s their little red wagon.

WR: Oh, yes. See, Red knew what he was doing. I don’t know if most people know this. Red used to practice with us. He was a decent shooter. We had a game, we’d play 21 and he’d be out there with us all the time. He played college ball. In fact, my first tournament in college was the All College Tournament in Oklahoma City (now the Oklahoma City All-College Classic). Very interesting. The coach of Wichita, who was ... There were eight teams, and we were seeded eighth and Wichita was seeded one. So what they do to you if you’re seeded eighth, they throw you to the wolves and you have to play the top-seed team the first game. It’s like a warm-up for them. Ok. So, the coach says he’s never heard of USF. He thought it was San Francisco State. Well, we got ready for the tournament they found out it was USF. So he sent his brother out to scout us.

Well, he picked the last game we lost in college to scout us. UCLA at Westwood. So he says, “Guys, I don’t know a thing about these guys”—this is just before the game—“I don’t know a thing about these guys but my brother scouted them and he’s going to give you a quick rundown.” So the brother says, “Well, guys I don’t know how to tell you this but these guys cannot play a lick. In fact, most of the good high school teams in the state of Kansas can beat these guys. They’ve got two guards—we changed it, one of the guards since the last game that we lost. He said, “The two guards, they can’t put the ball in the ocean.” But one of those guards was a guy named Casey Jones, who was a fair player. He said, “They got this tall colored kid

who plays center. He does not do anything and they never pass him the ball.” In their system I had never [59:59]. [1:00:00] “All he does is he stands around, and he jumps a lot. Sometimes for no reason. He just stands there jumping. [Laughs] Don’t worry about it. Let’s go out, and just run them out of the gym, and then the subs can play the rest of the game. I don’t think the coach can play you starters over fifteen minutes.”

So, the game starts. Three minutes into the game they call time out. The score is twenty-five to three. First of all, Case and Perry, full court press, they couldn’t get the ball over half court. And when they got it over half court, they threw up a shot I’d block it, they’d shoot layups. And so it was a disaster for them. Halftime we were thirty points ahead. And then the next game we played Oklahoma City University and we only beat them by nineteen. And so the championship game we played George Washington. That’s where Red went to college. His coach was still coaching. Start of the second half, we outscored them twenty-two to one. After the game, Red’s old college coach called Red up at midnight. “Hey, Red. I just saw something. I just saw the player that’s the one you want to get for the Celtics. Now, he’s a junior. So you got two years to figure out how to get him for your team. “And so that’s when Red started work on getting me to Boston.

TB: It’s amazing to me. You’re talking about games nearly sixty years ago. You’d think any athlete at the level you played remembers these, they’re still vivid to you.

WR: Well, I’ll tell you what. My late wife was always trying to do something for me. And so she, I bought her—both of us got computers, same time. And she had her computer and I had my computer. And so in learning the computer, she started going to eBay and seeing if there was anything on there. So one day she says, she says, “I got something for you.” “What’s that?” “It’s the basketball game, University of San Francisco, 1955. And I think you were in college

then, playing for the University of San Francisco. So we have a video of it, a tape. So we sat down and turned it on, and I said, “Oh, that’s Oregon State. That’s them.” She said, “How’d you know?” I said, “I just saw that introduction.” And I told her, truthfully, every play before it happened for the whole game. And she said, “Now, how did you remember that? That was forty or fifty years ago.” I says, “There was a time before I tried to consciously stop doing it, I remembered every play of every game I ever played.” I did that for scouting purposes, so that if I play this guy again I know exactly what he done. Because my defense was not reaction; it was action. You come up to me, Taylor, and you’re a player, and you know the shot you want, I know. I’m going to make you take the shot that I want to take. And then I play that.

TB: That’s a remarkable way your brain works, though. The only thing I know that’s comparable to it is friends of mine who can remember the lyrics of every music, you know, because that’s an emotional tie. Their head is stuffed with lyrics from music from their childhood. That you can remember the plays from a long career like that is—

WR: I’ve tried constantly to forget most of it. [1:05:00] I remember plays that I did in high school. The game that I got the scholarship from. We were playing Oakland High, at Oakland High. And I had one, three, and five leading scorers in the conference on my team. So there was not much left over. So we had a close game in the first half. I scored the last three baskets of the first half, so we went into the second half up by one point. We got down to the last few minutes and I scored the last four baskets for my team and we won by one point. You know, I remember every one of those plays. And there were also plays getting offensive rebounds. But it was mostly for scouting, for me, because I was never going to be reactive. The first time you might do a move, and “Hey, ok. Don’t do it again.” [Laughs]

TB: And McClymonds, just for historical purposes, McClymonds, your high school, you were there the same time Frank Robinson, the baseball player was. Did you know him?

WR: Of course. Frank, in fact, Frank, today, if I wrote to Frank he'd tell me, "You know, I was a better basketball player than you at McClymonds." What's remarkable about Frank—he's a really good guy—and my coach in high school was a wonderful, wonderful guy. He was the only white guy that would let the black kids play on these American Legion teams. And so at one time he had thirteen guys in the major leagues. And Frank was one of them. [1:07:39] And just as important, a guy named Curt Flood. These guys. And I'll tell you the truth. When we were in high school, Frank was a great player. But all we ever heard about was a guy named J.W. Porter. He played for Oakland Tech. Big redheaded guy. And according to the local press J.W. could walk on water without getting his ankles wet. But Frank, you know, he might have been all-city but J.W. was the man.

I'll tell you a story about Frank, if you don't mind. We were in a golf tournament down in San Diego. Seated to my right is Frank Robinson. To my left is Bob Gibson, the Hall of Fame pitcher. So, I strike up a conversation. I said, "Frank, don't you hold the record for the most hits by a pitcher in the major leagues?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Who hit you the most?" [Laughs] So, Bob Gibson was one of the few college guys in the major leagues when he was in the major leagues. He went to Creighton. So, Bob is embarrassed by this. Sincerely embarrassed. So he says to me, "Bill let me tell you. I did not want to say this all this time." Said, "But Frank put his left elbow over the plate so he took away the inside pitch. You couldn't throw inside because he was up over the plate. If you threw an inside pitch, you hit him." He says, "So one day I just decided, I'm just not going to hit him anymore. I'm just not going to do that. [1:10:00] So I threw a pitch to the outside. They never did find that baseball. [Laughs] [1:10:13]"

TB: Was it at USF you also high jumped with Johnny Mathis, the singer?

WR: No, Taylor, you've got it backwards.

TB: He high jumped with you. [Laughter]

WR: No, I'm just kidding. He's been a friend for at least sixty years. And he was a good high jumper. I was in the top five in the world entering my freshman year. And I went to a track meet up at the University of Nevada-Reno. And I set the field record in high jump. It lasted three weeks. Johnny Mathis went up there and broke it. And I never forgave him for that either!

[Laughter] He was a good basketball player. So we had a summer league, and he played in it. So we had an awards dinner, ok? So all the guys in the league were at this dinner and so for entertainment at the dinner, the emcee said, "We are going to have one of our participants sing a song for us." Oh, boy. You know, we didn't know any basketball player who could sing. So he gets up, *a capella*, and sings "Stranger in Paradise." After the song, dead silence. Nobody in the place could believe what we just heard. He was so good and nobody even suspected he could sing. None of us were ever surprised when he went off to this great career.

TB: He has had a great career since. Let's cover just a few of the other Celtics that you played with, to do personality sketches of them. I know you've talked about Sam Jones a little bit but I think I remember you were saying that he could be exasperating because on the one hand he could be a great leader on the other hand, you would tell him to call the plays, he'd say, "I don't call the plays."

WR: Well, we started out with Sam as a rookie. In practice, Sam was as good a player as I've ever seen, ok? The way the Celtics structure was, you didn't get paid until the season started. So all through training camp, all you got was meal money. So I brought Sam home with me and let him stay with me until he started getting paid. So on the way home after practice, I'd

say, "Sam, you can really play." He'd say, "I know." So I says, "Why don't you play like that all the time? You could be first team all-league. You could make a lot of money." He said, "I don't want to do that." I said, "Why not?" He said, "I don't want to have to play like that every night." He said, "That would wear you out as much as playing. The responsibility of playing like that. You know if you don't play well, the team's not doing well." I said, "Ok, Sam, I can live with that." You know? And so Sam could have been, I thought, one of the all-time greats. He was great, I thought, because he was on ten championship teams. He was never an innocent bystander. And at least six times, and I can recall, Sam took the shot that meant the season. And he never hesitated to take the shot, and he [1:15:00] never missed.

A couple of other guys were, like Tom Heinsohn. Everybody thought of him as a big, gruff, hard-nosed guy. Tommy was an artist and a poet. "Heinsohn, a poet?" [Laughs] And one of the all-time good guys, ok? And one of my favorite teammates.

TB: You said Red had to motivate him differently than he had to motivate you. Is that right?

WR: Well, Red would have a system. Part of his strategy was, how many minutes can you play in a row and be effective. So he'd start Heinsohn. At the end of six minutes he'd take him out. No matter how he was playing. And so Heinsohn said that great public statement: "Red, you hold me up to public scorn." [Laughs] And Red says, "Hell with it." I says, "Why do you take him out after six minutes?" "If he's playing good, he's tired. If he's not tired, he's not playing good. So I've got six minutes to get him out of there." [Laughs] So Heinsohn considered Red was using him as a whipping boy. And there was some justification for feeling that way. But Red actually really cared for the players.

TB: What about Ramsey? Frank Ramsey.

WR: We got along from the first moment we met. Because Frank and I, we were only interested, we were both interested in the same thing. Women. And that's the whole thing. Now Red used to, I call it, almost a psych job but Frank was too smart to be psyched out. Frank, when he got there, he had been in the army, and he got there he was playing with us on weekend passes. So he was always coming off the bench. And so next year, Frank is coming off the bench. And Red talks to him, he says, "Now, you should be a starter and I will never refer to you as second team. I will call you my sixth starter, and you will always be my first substitute." Well, that took care of, all of us had egos, and all of us wanted to be starters over whatever. So Frank bought it, so Frank personified the sixth man. In fact they named an award after what Frank started. And I'll never forget one night I got one of my front teeth knocked out. I had never had anything like that happen. I look and it's one of my front teeth in my hand and I don't know what to do, so I says to Frank, "Look at that." And Frank took out his bridge, which was most of his front teeth, and he says, "Here, Russ, look at that." [Laughs]

TB: He was from Kentucky, right?

WR: Yes, and you know what was really funny, it was his coach that said they shouldn't even let these black guys play and the Jews neither. Coming from that atmosphere, Frank and I [1:20:00] never discussed it. We were teammates with this idea we'd both win. And both of us showed the other guy complete and total respect. And I'll never forget after one of our championships, Frank says, "Hey Russ, after the season's over, why don't you come down and spend a week with the guys in Kentucky?" I said, "Frank, you're a good guy. There's no way in hell I am going to spend no week in Kentucky." [Laughs]

TB: How about Havlicek? He took that sixth man role from Ramsey.

WR: Frank showed him how to do it. Havlicek had played in college. He always hit the open man. In pro ball, it's set it up so the best shooter gets the shot. And so, we'd give Havlicek the ball, and nobody would be within ten feet and he'd look for someone to pass to. "Havlicek, shoot the ball." "Ok, ok." So this goes on for a while. So one night he took us up. Shot thirty-eight times. [Laughs] So that shows you the kind of guys we were and what kind of team we had. We get to the trainer to leave the bench early and go to the locker room, and fill a tub with ice so when we came out of the game, after the game, we had to, you know, ice down Havlicek's arm. [Laughs]

TB: Because he had shot so many, ah—

WR: We all had something we did well. And we always tried to put our teammates in the position to do what they did well. So that every play consisted of five guys doing something. And so that when you got an open shot, it was because we all worked to get you the open shot. That was part of our thing. And it's like we almost developed what we called the Celtic Way, which is that the attitude was: be kind to your teammates. Now, what does that sound like in pro ball. Well, what do you mean, I be kind? Well, first of all, what is kindness? Kindness is an act of strength. I can do this, and I will do that. That's strength and kindness, ok? So like Satch (Tom Sanders) was guarding Bill Bradley one night. He was struggling. I mean, Bradley was shooting him out of the gym. He was good at moving without the ball. So I says to Satch, "There's something you ought to know. On the Knickerbocker uniforms, there's a small number in the front and a big number on the back. I know you haven't seen that small number." [Laughs]

[1:24:17]

So the story happened. Bill Bradley told me about it. The same day, Bradley's having a good night. So we line up for free throws, me and [1:24:38] on that side, Satch and Bradley on

the other side. I was a captain. I called time out. I walked across the lane. Now, I hope this language is ok for your tape.

TB: I think it will be alright.

WR: So I walk over [1:25:00] to Satch and Bradley, who told me this story later because I ... I point to Bradley, I says, "Can you guard that motherfucker?" That shocked Bradley. He'd never been called that before. [Laughs] That was the idea. Satch says, "Yeah," so I said, "Guard him, goddammit." And I went back across the lane. And Bill Bradley told the story later, he said he never hit another shot. He said because I had told him off. That was the idea. We used to do all kinds of weird things, to get—

TB: So your comment was aimed at Bradley, not at Satch.

WR: Oh, yeah. I was looking at Satch but it was aimed at Bradley.

TB: I'd like to shift a little bit to talking about race themes. You've talked about them a little bit about growing up, your mom didn't want you around white folks and that when you went to USF for the first time you were in a sea of white folks, and Jesuits to boot. You were on a Jesuit campus at San Francisco. But obviously you've dealt with race your whole life. A lot of the talk that, when we've discussed it has been basically about perspective, about how people see things and what people are not conscious of. If I'm not mistaken, you said that the first time you went to the movies and you saw *King Kong* the movie, you came out of there with a different perspective than anyone else in the theater.

WR: Yeah, I think so. I look at it as a big old gorilla, ok? And he's been taking these sacrifices, obviously for years and years. The first time they put a white woman out there, he fell in love with her. [Laughs] Now I just thought that was alright. [Laughs]

TB: But most people didn't. Most people saw that as the romance of the film. You said that often he'd had sacrifices of African women, that he'd take them and kill them and probably eat them, but the first time he puts a white woman out there he falls in love with his food.

WR: Right! [Laughs]

TB: So it's just how people look at things and what they take for granted. Was it your high school coach who said you can't fight on the court because if black kids fight, it's a riot and if white kids fight, it's a scuffle.

WR: Right. This was the same guy, my high school coach who says, "Let's keep things in perspective. No fighting. It's not because I'm afraid that you're afraid. I don't think that at all. But if we get into three fights, we are a bunch of thugs. No matter how well we play. 'This is those thugs from McClymonds.'" So when guys, when they find out how good you are, there will be guys who try to pick a fight because that's the only way they think they can compete. So when they try to pick a fight, you don't fight. You play harder. And you beat them in the game of basketball.

TB: You have to play harder, because in effect, the race, you have to make up for that.

WR: I know when I was a rookie with the Celtics, nobody in the league had ever seen me play because I played on the west coast. So this guy I'm playing against told me this story years later. He was a center for the Fort Wayne Pistons, this was before they were in Detroit. And we start the game and he'd never seen me play. And the first five shots he took, I blocked. His coach had been a referee, had a real scratchy voice, and you could hear him all over the gym [imitates sound of voice]. And he says, "You got to be shameless to let that rookie embarrass you like that. [1:30:00] Look at him. You're making me look bad. You're embarrassing all of us." Now this guy's listening to this for about five minutes, and he says, "I got to get out of this. Now what am

I going to do? Ok. I know that he will fight. Ok. So I'm going to hit him, we'll get in a fight, we'll both get thrown out of the game for fighting.”

Well, a couple things he did not know. I never fight in the first quarter. We get to the last quarter, now we can talk about it. Now, he just turns around and hits me in the chest—whack!—knocks the breath out of me. I just looked at him. And I didn't say a word, because I used to never talk. What he did not know, was between high school and college, I had worked in a shipyard. San Francisco Naval Shipyard. And we had a lunchtime volleyball competition. And so I learned how to spike the ball. [1:31:34] So, the next time he shot, I spiked it right into his head. That's no foul; that's competition. The next three times he shot, the third time he'd shot enough.

TB: Speaking of race and basketball, I want to transition a little bit after the break to talk about your time in Boston. The Celtics, as you said earlier, were the first team in the NBA to draft a black player. Also in Boston, the Red Sox were the last baseball team to take a black player. Not until twelve years after Jackie Robinson did they get Pumpsie Green. When you were in Boston you were a city, just as its two sports teams were the first and last on that ... How did you learn about race in Boston?

WR: Well, it didn't take that long. Not long after I got there they started having problems with the bussing and all that kind of stuff and they were very negative about it. A couple of sports writers told Heinsohn that they would never vote for me for anything. I'll give you an example. 1969. We had won our second championship in a row. They had the parade on Friday, Friday afternoon. Friday morning, a reporter from the *Boston Herald* walked into Red's office and said, “Are you satisfied with the coaching you had this year?” Red said, “What the hell are you talking about? We just won the championship.” He said, “Yeah, but if you had a better

coach, couldn't you have won more regular season games?" All it was is they did not want Bill Russell or any black guy coaching their Celtics. [1:34:08]

And Red says to me, calls me up after the guy leaves, says, "You believe this?" I said, "Red, it doesn't make any difference. I'm not going to do this stuff anymore anyway." That's how I announced I was retiring, and the reason I never said anything about retiring before: They have a tradition with the Celtics, the guys announced before the regular season, before the season starts, that this was going to be their last year. Well, Sam Jones had announced that this was going to be his last year. There is no way that I was going to ever rain on Sam's parade, and say, "Well, I am going to retire, too." No, no, that's not—you couldn't do that. [1:35:00] Not a player I have such high esteem as Sam Jones. So Red says to me, "Don't tell anybody, because I am going to try to change your mind." Tell you how respectful Red was. He never, ever, mentioned that again. Because when he decided to retire as a coach, I said, "Red, why don't you coach one more year, and I can retire with you." He said, "No, I've had it. This is it." And I never brought that up again. Of course I respected that he was an intelligent, thoughtful man. And if he decided to do that, all I could do is say, "It's been great fun, Red." That's all you could do. And that's the same thing that he said with me, you know? In fact, I'll tell you how the Celtics worked, to me. I called them my Celtics. That's Walter Brown, and me, and Red Auerbach.

In the middle sixties, Walter Brown called me up and says, "I need to talk to you." "Ok. Where do you want to do it?" He says, "When can you get in here." I said, "Well, Walter, I don't have a job. I can come there right now." He says, "I'll wait for you." So I go into Walter Brown's office, and he's sitting in there, with his desk is filled with papers and stuff. He says, "You see these papers?" I said, "Yeah. Not very neat." He says, "Those are the papers of the Boston Celtics. Those are the books for the Boston Celtics. And the reason I am showing them to

you is, I want you to go through them. We don't pay you enough. You know it. I know it. And anybody that's interested knows that we don't pay you enough. But I've always, I've already paid you more than I can afford, because we are losing money. But I want you to know that we know that you are underpaid and we can't afford to pay you more now. But as soon as if we can make enough money so we can, I'll make it up to you." And he says, "Of course, you've never held us up. You could have held us up, but you didn't. And I want to let you know that I appreciate it." As a consequence, when Walter died, my late contract with the Celtics, Red gave me an eight-year no-cut contract at thirty-five. That means I could play for the Celtics if I wanted to until I was forty-three. But in order to collect I did not have to play. I could bring my doctor in and say, "I want to play this year, but my doctor says he doesn't think I can do it." Then they got to pay me for that year.

Now, I only played one year of that contract and then I left. And they said, "Well, why didn't you take the money?" I said, "I could not take money that I did not earn." I got that from my father.

TB: Same reason he didn't want your money. You wanted to earn it.

WR: Yeah. [Laughs]

TB: Alright, let's take a break. That alright?

[recording resumes]

TB: Let's talk some about your philosophical views and also public life outside of sports. We're going to talk more about sports, too. But from very early on it seemed to me that you started thinking about how sports fit into other life. You used to say even that sports was a mixture of art and war and that it was like politics, religion, and the arts. That sports could gather people. When did you start thinking philosophically about the place of sports in life?

WR: [1:40:00] Well, I think it ... when my high school coach told us no fighting, you understand me. You have to be aware. I think the key phrase to me has been: It is far more important to understand than it is to be understood. And so, take things as they come. It's like you walk into this room, and it is. Now, whether it's good or bad is your perception. Right or wrong is your perception. And after you make a judgment, the next question is, what are you going to do about it? Ok, so. Now, if you lose control you will end your life being a bitter, annoyed old man. But if you take control of your life as much as possible, because you understand, then you then have a chance to be happy.

Now, when I was in college I found out that there were not any blacks that were in the top of their field, no matter what sport. You take Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle. If Willie Mays had hit one hundred home runs in a season, Mickey Mantle still would have been the best baseball player. Now, Willie can get annoyed by that or get can go out and say, "Well, next year I have to hit two hundred." You know what I mean. So, my junior year in college—I may have told you about it—we were 28-1. We won the Final Four. I was outstanding player of the Final Four. I was First Team All-America, averaged twenty points and twenty rebounds and they never counted blocked shots until four or five years after retiring from the NBA. Ok? So. First Team All-American. We are going to go to California for a sports banquet, and they pick another center as Player of the Year. Now, I could have been injured. But what I did, for me internally, I dismissed that award as something that I would like. And I really was able to do that. So I had made up my mind that I was going to be the best basketball player I could be. And this team, I have no regard for the coach or the rest of the players. All I thought about was being the best in basketball I could be. Well, I was very good and that made my team win. But I wasn't going to let my self-esteem be tied up by what [1:45:00] others said I was doing.

TB: You said that the Celtics had more fun than any team around. Was that essential to winning or was that an accident?

WR: I think it was essential to winning. Because, it may sound overblown, but we actually looked out for each other and if a guy was having a bad night we would counsel him. Always use humor.

TB: Toughening humor, right? You made fun of each—

WR: Yeah.

TB: You couldn't be thin-skinned and be a Celtic, right?

WR: Right. Well, you know, I know if a guy's having a bad time, and he's hurting our team, how can we help him out? Well, first of all you can help him out physically, and let him know that mentally we were there for him. If he needed help, we'll give it to him. And he should not be ashamed for ask for help. You see, in the macho world men are usually reluctant to ask for help. Well, one night we were playing the Philadelphia Sixers in Boston Garden. And I was doing my very best, and not that well, guarding Wilt Chamberlain. [Laughs] I knew it, he knew it, and everybody in the building knew it. So, I kept hearing this "whop" sound: whop, whop, whop. And what it was, K.C. [Jones] was trying to help me out and every time he went by Wilt, he hit him.

And so I looked back and K.C.'s going "whack!" He's hitting Wilt. I said, "Time out. Time. Out." We go to the bench and Red says, "What's the matter?" I said, "Red, excuse me. K.C., what are you doing?" He says, "What's the matter? You afraid of the big fella?" I said, "You're goddam right I am!" I said, "You go on and hit him, I got to wrestle with that big monster all night!" [Laughs] I said, "It's hard enough. But you're going to get him riled up and

make him impossible.” And so there was K.C., taking a chance of getting into a fight, to help me. Because he could see I needed help. And it went all through the lineup that way.

TB: When you were coming up into pro sports did you have and role models or athletes that you looked up to at all, like Jackie Robinson?

WR: Well, Jackie of course. In basketball a guy named George Mikan.

TB: The center for the Minneapolis Lakers?

WR: Well, you know, when he started playing for DePaul, his folks thought he was going to a seminary to be a priest. And so his father said to him one night, “George, there’s a guy the same name as you playing for DePaul.” [Laughs] And they were all shocked that that was their son that was playing for DePaul.

See, when I was a kid in Oakland, in elementary and junior high school especially, Oakland had a minor league baseball team, the Oakland Acorns. They played in Emeryville. Well, we used to go out there—we couldn’t afford to go in the park—and wait and see if anybody hit a home run and you could take that ball and go and get in. But we found that the worst creatures to ever invade the earth were minor league baseball players. They’d come out the games and they’d see us and they’d call us the n-word, spit tobacco at us. They were that indecent. So my view of professional athletes was not positive at all. [1:50:00]

So I went to an exhibition game. The Lakers were playing. And this guy that used to, he asked if I wanted—he played high school ball with Jim Pollard, who was a big star with the Lakers—he asked if I wanted to go to the locker room. I said, “I don’t want to go there with those people.” And so I said, “I’ll wait out here.” And he goes in there. And so while I was waiting, George Mikan comes out. He sees me and he walks over, “How you doing, big fella?” Well, that was a real joke. Mikan was 6’10”, 280 and I was 6’7”, 100. [Laughs] And he says,

“How you doing, big fella?” He says, “You play center?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Well,” he showed me a couple of moves that he used. He said, “Now, listen. When you get out of college you got to come play for the Lakers.” Now, I couldn’t even make my homeroom team. [Laughs] And college was, I had no scholarships or nothing, so I’d been working in the shipyard to save enough money to go to college. I was going to pay my own way.

So Mikan says, “After you get out of college you got to come play for the Lakers.” And that was, he was the number one guy in basketball and he talked so nice to me. He wasn’t condescending or anything. He just talked to me like I was another ball player.

TB: That’s going back more than fifty, sixty years, something like that. You think race relations would have been horrible back then. And they were; you’ve never been rosy about it. But you’re saying even back in those days there’re always exceptions to the rule. This is a really decent white guy.

WR: Well, you remember I told you his folks thought he was going to be in the seminary. But he was just a good person and I tell you, one of the greatest rewards I had was, after George died they had a private ceremony for his family. And I was invited. Because George and I had been friends. We’d be taping in LA, we did a TV show or something, and George says, “Bill, I want you to do me a big favor. I need a big favor from you. I’ll understand if you say no.” I said, “What is it, George?” He said, “I want to introduce you to my son.” “Are you kidding? That’s a favor?” You know. So, he introduced me to his son and he says to his son, “I want you to meet Bill Russell, the greatest center that ever played basketball.” And I said, “George.” People forget, you know, he won three championships in five years. He was the man in basketball but it wasn’t on television and all that so people didn’t know that. But I was so flattered that this man had been so nice to me.

You know, a lot of people say very, very insensitive things to kids. And I hope that I never do that. You know? Because you can injure kids by not being, just—well, I have this thing that I get along, that the first thing out of your mouth should be your second thought.

TB: Because the first one is the one that might injure a kid?

WR: Yeah, or even you. [Laughs]

TB: I think one of your sayings was always that you don't believe there's any such thing as other people's kids.

WR: Right, well I was speaking at a school in Fort Worth, Texas. And they were winding down the Vietnam War. I said instead of spending all that money killing peasants, we should take that money [1:55:00] and repair our educational system. Because we haven't paid enough attention to it, and we haven't paid enough money to it. And so after the speech, well one guy comes and says, "Well, listen. Your speech was alright except for one thing. What you're talking about is raising my taxes. Why should I pay taxes to educate other people's kids?" And I said to him: "Two reasons you should pay taxes. One, when you were six and your folks bundled you up and sent you off to school, there was a school for you to go to, and your folks did not build it. It was there. And second, there are no other people's kids in the United States. That's the next generation of Americans and if we don't educate them, we'll lost all the things we think are important. Because if we're not one of the top educated societies we will not be able to compete internationally, and so we have a choice of either building our schools or picking a war. And I don't think picking a war is the best option."

TB: Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with the Civil Rights Movement? I know that because that was during your playing career, it was around for a lot of it. I know once

you went to Mississippi in the summer of 1964 for Charles Ever, the brother of Medgar Evers, the year after he was killed.

WR: Well, you know I was never big on organizations. And the reason for that was, if you say something as part of an organization, you can be dismissed as a mouthpiece for the organization and so they don't have to deal with what you say. When Medgar Evers got shot, we had a memorial service for him in Boston, at the Boston Common, and I sat next to Charlie Evers, his brother. And I don't know what I was thinking, but I told him, "If there's ever anything I can do, here's my home number." And he used it! [Laughs]

So he called me that summer, says, "We've taken a hit, morale-wise, and we're down to the lowest we've been and so we need somebody to give us a boost, to show somebody from outside cares." So I said, "Ok, what do you want me to do." He says, "Well, you know what would be a good idea, right in your field of expertise, why don't you do some clinics, basketball clinics, in Jackson, Mississippi, and in the surrounding towns, invite everybody. Anybody that wants to come, can come to your clinics." I said, "I can do that." So I went down and did clinics and I actually enjoyed myself. Charlie says to me, "You know we're not going to let anything happen to you." I go, "Ok." So I had armed guards. But they were like the Secret Service, you never knew they were around. But they gave me such a high.

TB: That was 1964. This is [2:00:00] Mississippi Freedom Summer. Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, the first three first civil rights workers on the very first night were murdered. It was a frightful place to be going to. And you're not exactly inconspicuous.

WR: Yes. [Laughs] Well, you know, I was invited years later to the McDonald's high school all-star game in Indiana. And so I went there, and I had a good time, and after I spoke they asked me to take a picture with each one of the participants, boys and girls. Boys' team

game and the girls' game. So one of them was, the female high school player of the year was a young girl from Colorado. And so she was, while they were setting the picture up, she says," Mr. Russell, I'd like to say something to you. You said something today in your speech that I will carry with me for the rest of my life." "What?" "You said to us, 'Do not be afraid.'" Because all decisions made out of fear are usually bad decisions. And you're going to a new world from high school to college and then from college into the real world. Do not be afraid, because you're alright. You've got this far. Do not be afraid. Well, I may be not too bright but I cannot recall the last time I was afraid. And the society I live in, every time I could do something I see that as an opportunity.

TB: Could you tell me a little bit about your relationships with other civil rights figures from that period? Did you ever meet Malcolm X or Martin Luther King?

WR: I just briefly knew Malcolm X. I knew Louis Farrakhan. He'd been to my house a few times, because he came out with, before he changed to Ali he was Cassius Clay. And the reason Cassius was coming to my house was, I was a gold medal winner in the '56 Olympics and I always have affection for gold medal winners, because I know what it takes. And I knew, in the March on Washington, I stayed in the same hotel as the Reverend Martin Luther King. So we met in the lobby and had a brief conversation. And I told him I was there for the march. And he invited me to go on stage, where he made the big speech. And I respectfully declined. And the reason I declined was, they had worked for a couple years to put that thing together, and I hadn't done anything. And it would not be right, I didn't think, for me to go on stage and say, "Hey, listen. This is what we've done." And I hadn't done anything. So I sat in the first row, and enjoyed it, but I didn't want to be one of those guys, "Hey, look at me."

TB: Do you know if there is a photograph of you at the March on Washington? Have you seen one?

WR: What? [2:05:00]

TB: Do you know if there's a photograph of you there?

WR: I don't know. I don't think so.

TB: I'd love to see that.

WR: I was just one of the guys, one of the people there to support them.

TB: Do you remember when he was killed. That's during the season in your next-to-last year.

WR: Yeah. Well, we were playing a game the night he got killed, in Philadelphia. They asked both teams, what do you think? Do you think we should call the game off or play? Now, we think it would be a bad thing for the city of Philadelphia if we call the game off and we've got twelve or thirteen thousand people under great stress and really, really annoyed. That's a quiet way of putting it. On the streets. And so we said, what we'll do is we'll play the game and we'll keep these twelve or thirteen thousand people in the game so we don't have riots in the streets of Philadelphia. That's the reason we played that game. Then we didn't play for a week or so. Those were the things we thought about.

TB: Did you know Ali much?

WR: Oh yeah, I knew him when he was a kid, boxing. Always a fan because to reach the top of your field, it takes more than physical ability. You have to know what you're doing to get to the top of your field, no matter what the field because there are things that you have to do to execute what it takes to reach the top of your field. And so Ali was not only a great, great boxer but he was a psychologist and a brave, brave man.

I was in Boston one day and a guy says, “I want you to disavow Muhammad Ali.” “What?” “I want you to put him in his place.” I said, “I’m not going to do a thing like that.” Said, “You won’t disavow him?” I said, “Heck, no.” He says, “Well, I think you ought to do that.” I said, “I don’t care what you think. If I had a choice between you and Ali, you wouldn’t even be in the race. Are you kidding?” So he started calling me Felton X after that. You know, they used to call the Muslims with an X, you know Malcolm X.

TB: When you got drafted, didn’t you organize a group of black—

WR: I didn’t organize. Jim Brown organized.

TB: But you joined it, right, just to support his decision?

WR: You see, the thing is, what you have to think about is, his decision not to go in the army. If you read what it was based on, arbitrarily they decided to change his status, without a hearing or anything. Just, “We’re going to change it.” Well, that’s not right. Now, what category he was in, I’m not sure but they changed it to 1-A. That was going to put you in the army. Well, you can’t do that. You know?

TB: Was that—I’m groping for a way of asking what was the time you felt was most controversial, your most controversial stance.

WR: Who me?

TB: [2:10:00] In your career, when you got the most heat or something for what you felt or believed or said or didn’t say.

WR: Well, it started with, when I got to Boston I had not started to shave. You know, you reach a certain age and you say, ok, now I’ll start to shave. I hadn’t reached that when I got to Boston. So I spent the first three or four months there explaining why I had a beard and why I shouldn’t shave it off, and the more they questioned the more I dug in my heels because going

back to college as a freshman, they had to buy you a pair of shoes. Basketball shoes. And I bought a pair of white ones. And the varsity coach says, "You wear black shoes." I says, "That's the varsity. This is the freshman team." He said, "You should get black shoes, be like the rest of them." I said, "Coach, ain't nothing I can ever do to look like rest of these guys." There were two black guys, there were four black guys on varsity and the junior varsity, on the freshman. So there was no way I was going to look like the rest of those guys.

So one thing I got from my dad was to analyze and come to conclusions from my own perspective. See, I cannot tell you who your heroes should be. And you'd be wrong if you think you can tell me who my heroes should be. Matter of fact, Bill Walton, who is a dear friend and who is I think a really good guy, ok, we were talking about growing up. At the end of the conversation he said to me, "We come from two different worlds." [ironically] "Really?"

[Laughs]

A friend of mine is a young guy named Yao Ming. He's retired now. He used to play for the Houston Rockets. He asked if he could have a conversation with me. I said ok. So he came to my house for dinner, here. And we were talking about his career, and I says, "There's one thing you should be very aware of, and never lose sight of. You are a very tall Chinese man. Embrace it." I says, "Always embrace your mother and father and the culture you grew up in." And I said, "Always be true to who you are and what you are?." And that to me is a positive thing and not a negative thing because you can be Chinese and love the Chinese without hating the American, which some people will try to conclude. You see? You can embrace who you are and what you are and be a positive impact on your life. [recording pauses and resumes]

TB: Ok, we want to resume talking a little bit about your relationship with the city of Boston, and how it changed from the time you were back there playing until [2:15:00] modern days when you've made peace to some degree with certain people there.

WR: That never happened.

TB: Never happened?

WR: See, people thought I was bothered, but I was never bothered. They got my attention about certain things, but I always was able to maintain control. Just like one of the things that annoyed the media there was, they turned their heads, they looked up, and I was gone. I told Red, I'm finished, that I'm not going to do it anymore. He's the only one I told. They were under the misconception that the things that they valued and the things that I valued weren't different. Like I told someone last month: I never, ever need to be validated. I came, I did what I did, and I left. Just like I told those guys on NBA TV. They said, "How come they never pick you as the greatest player who ever played?" I said, "First of all, that's irrelevant and I don't even get into that because nobody can know who the best player was, because there is not an accepted standard that says, this is what a great player does." Now, spectators are the only real experts.

I want to tell you a story if you've got time. I was working for CBS. I remember the game. The Lakers played the Sixers in Philadelphia, and Magic (Johnson) had to play center because Kareem (Abdul-Jabbar) was home with a migraine. And we were in a production meeting and the announcer, who will go unnamed, started to say, "We're going to have to promote it as the sixth game. If the Lakers won, it was over. If the Sixers won, it had to go to a seventh game." So the announcer said, "We're going to have to start promoting the seventh game no later than the end of the first quarter." So the third time he said that, I said, "Why are you saying that?" He said, "Without Kareem the Lakers can't compete, and that game will be over

the first eight minutes.” I said, “The Lakers are going to win the game.” And you know what he said to me? “You do not know what you’re talking about.”

Normally, I’d just let it slide, but that time I didn’t feel like just letting it slide. I said, “Yes, I do.” I said, “I know more about playing basketball than anybody you’ll ever meet.” He says, “Well, how can you say that?” I said, “Well, there are certain criteria you use in the playoffs. First, there’s matchups. You take Magic out of the backcourt and you’re left with Norm Nixon and Michael Cooper up against Andrew Toney and Maurice Cheeks. That’s a wash. Nobody has the advantage.” I said, “The way Jamaal Wilkes is playing, he and the Doc (Julius Erving), that’s a wash. Jim Chones and either Caldwell Jones or Chocolate Thunder (Darryl Dawkins)

[recording pauses and resumes]

TB: [2:20:00] Ok, you said those were a wash.

TB: Darryl Dawkins and either Caldwell Jones and Jim Chones. There would be a Sixers advantage. I said, “Well, the guy who’s left is completely out of it. He’s got to try to guard Magic. Magic is big and strong enough to guard him, but he can’t even catch up with Magic.” In fact, Magic, I surmised, was one of the top three fastest guys in the league in foot speed. So this guy, Magic’s playing center, he’d never seen Magic, in fact. I said, “Ok, that’s just matchups. This will be the sixth straight game that the Lakers will play this Sixers team. During the way to the sixth team, they’ve made adjustments, made adjustments. They’ve made adjustments so they’re familiar. Now, this is the first game that the Sixers will have played this Lakers team, with Magic at center. As great as Kareem is, you always know where to find him. He’s down on the blocks, either left or right side. Magic, he might be selling popcorn, as far as you know. He could be all over the building.

So now the Sixers are going to have to start making adjustments as they go along, tonight. By the time they make adjustments for this team, it will be late in training camp for next season.” I said, “So, if the Sixers were to play the best game that any team in the history of the franchise had ever played, they would still lose. They do not have a chance.”

TB: Wow. Did you say that on the air, too?

WR: No, I said that in a production meeting. And so, we go in there and exactly what I told him would happen, happened. Jamaal Wilkes got thirty-five points, Magic was uncontrollable, the backcourt was a wash. In fact, a kid named Brad Holland came off the bench and got ten points. And so the Sixers never had a chance. They were a good team. They basically went into the sixth game unarmed. So these are the kinds of things you have to know to win the playoffs, because every game is different if your coach is any good.

TB: Let’s go back to where we were talking a little bit before about your famous autograph policy. You surprised me, I didn’t know this you, by saying that you didn’t have it when you first started with the Celtics but it came about almost by accident a few years later over signing basketballs.

WR: Yes, in 1964. This was when I finally made the decision I’m not going to do that anymore.

TB: And you said it had to do with signing basketballs?

WR: Well, that’s where it started. By that time, I had started to get just a bit cranky, ok? Off the basketball court, nobody could tell me what to do. Ok? I ask Anita to read you the letter if you want to. From that time in ’64, when I told you I stopped, until today, you’d be surprised the people try to figure out a way to make me sign autographs. When I first took the coaching job at Boston, Red asked me to do a couple of TV shows. And so this one guy says, “Well, now that

you're coaching you're going to have to start signing autographs." I said, "No, I'm not."

[2:25:00] "Hasn't Red called you, told you you had to start signing autographs, because you're part of management?" I said, "First of all, Red knew what I was before he offered me the job. I didn't all of a sudden just say now since I'm the coach I'm going to sign autographs." It was my policy for years at the time. I said, "You people keep asking me about that and I'm going to tell you one thing, ok? If I say to you, I'm not going to sign autographs, that's the end of it. There's nobody you can tell, that'll say oh, can you sign autographs." I said, "Almighty God says to me, 'You sign autographs,' I'll say no. Even He cannot make me sign autographs. He can strike me dead. The one thing that God gave us all is a free will. So if I say I'm not going to do it, it's not going to happen."

TB: Didn't you say that some of the Celtics faked your signatures on basketballs, though?

WR: Oh, yeah. Heinsohn, Ramsey, Sam, I think sometimes K.C. They used to have a contest who could do the best Bill Russells.

TB: So there are a lot of counterfeit Russell autographs out there on basketballs.

WR: Oh, yeah. [Laughs]

TB: Well, I can remember in the seventies, being out at restaurants with you, and people would come up right in restaurants and walk right up and ask you to sign an autograph. And my memory is that you would say—usually they would have their kids there—you would say, if you want to sit down and say hello and have a conversation, that's fine, but I'm not going to sign an autograph.

WR: So I said, one of the kids asked me one time about not signing autographs. I said, to me, to you, it's not personal. It's a matter of policy. I said, I don't sign autographs. That goes for everybody, not just you. I have a choice and I make the choice. And so most of the kids

understand it. One of the things I used to always joke about, guy says, “Why don’t you sign autographs? For my kids?” I said, “That’s a bad trade.” [Laughter]

TB: Am I right in remembering that when you were asked about playing for Boston, you said you never played for Boston, you played for the Celtics.

WR: That’s right. I played for the Celtics.

TB: For the team.

WR: After I retired, I moved to L.A. by the way. And I was a season ticket holder for four years for the Los Angeles Lakers. And they had a ceremony for Jerry West and they said would you come. I said of course, I like Jerry a lot. So while I was there they put me in a box next to Jack Kent Cooke, who owned the team. That was an experience. Anyway, a couple days later, I get a call from Jack Kent Cooke. He says, “I’ve been thinking about it, and I made a decision. I’m going to get you to come out of retirement and play for the Lakers.” I said, “You’re paying a guy named Wilt Chamberlain to play for the Lakers. Now, how would he feel being the backup center?” Jack Kent Cooke didn’t think that was funny. [Laughs] So I said, “No, no. I don’t play basketball any more, and if I did, it would only be for the Celtics.” That’s the only time I would play basketball.

TB: Would you talk a little bit about your relationship with the Red Sox over the issue of throwing out the [2:30:00] first ball and your mentoring foundation and how that developed after your retirement, recently?

WR: Well, when I was in the company of the mayor of Boston, he asked me to come to the Democratic National Convention and co-host his reception. And he had these receptions in community centers all around Boston. And so while I was there my agent at the time had set up for me—it was the last series of the year with the Red Sox and the Yankees, and that’s a big deal

in Boston—so he had set up for me to go out and throw out the first pitch. And so he says, “We got to be over at Fenway by eleven.” I said, “I’m not going over to Fenway Park.” He says, “Why not.” I says, “Because I’m not. It’s got nothing to do with the Red Sox.” He says, “Well, I’ve already set it up.” I says, “Well, you have to un-set it, because I’m going to have nothing to do with the Red Sox.” I says, “As far as I’m concerned, the Red Sox can burn in hell for eternity.”

TB: And why was that?

WR: Well, when I was with the Celtics, the guy that owns the Red Sox said he would never have a black player. In fact, they were the last major league team to get a black player. They do not owe or me or any other black person anything. That’s their business and they can run it the way they want to run it. That does not mean I have to associate with them. So I was at a reception and some lady walks up and says she works for the Red Sox. I said, “Ok.” She said, “Well, why don’t you come out and throw the first pitch.” I said, “I’m not having anything to do with the Red Sox.” She said, “Well, the Red Sox have changed. This is different.” I says, “Well, you show me that you have a program to facilitate the change and we’ll talk.” I said, “You’re not going to keep the first policy and get Bill Russell to come out and throw the first pitch and say, ‘See? We’ve changed.’ That’s not going to happen.”

So, fast forward. I have a charity that I’ve been working with for almost twenty years. It’s called Mentoring, and we have so far a very successful program. We started out with the name One to One. One mentor, one mentee. Last year, 2012, we passed eight million volunteers throughout the country. Four million, I’m sorry. Four million volunteers throughout the country that are one-to-one mentoring. But it’s not just black kids. It’s kids. In the Boston chapter, we’ve got a lot of Hispanic kids, lot of Asian kids, lot of black kids, lot of white kids. The only

requirement is that you be a kid. And some adult will spend some time helping you get started. And we have found that the adults that volunteer to be mentors end up profiting more than the kids, because you find out on a very personal basis how you can be helpful.

TB: So you asked the Red Sox to become active?

WR: Well, no, I asked the Red Sox ... they had three or four owners. I said I want one of those owners to go on the board of my charity. Not to say, "We support it." Go on the board. They said, "Don't you want a player?" I said, "No, I don't want a player." It's not that I don't respect the players, but the owners can make policy decisions and the owner's not likely to get traded [2:35:00] away. So the players for the Red Sox, as far as I [2:35:10] are nice, nice bunch of young guys who are prone to be active in the community. I said, but it's not to insult them, that's not the point. I want somebody who can make decisions and policy. So we got one of the owners to go on the board and he's done an absolutely marvelous job. In fact, most of the people in New England think that Mentoring is a Red Sox program. I can live with that. Because that's the biggest voice in New England, is the Red Sox, and they went all out— [phone rings] That's your phone.

John Bishop: We're going.

TB: So the Red Sox stepped up to meet your conditions and support the mentoring foundation.

WR: Yes, what they did was, twice a year at Fenway Park, they have "Step up to the Plate" for Mentoring and on the Green Monster they have a banner that lists the number of people devoted to the mentoring program. And for every Red Sox game, there are four seats set aside for two mentors and two mentees who have been together for three years or more. They are the guests of the Red Sox. And they've encouraged their sponsors and, anyway, they encourage

people who do business with them to start mentoring programs in their companies. So, they've been really super.

TB: So, when did somebody from the Red Sox call you and up and say, "We think we've met your conditions, we've tried to make a change, are you ready to throw out the first ball?"

WR: I did!

TB: How did that go?

WR: I didn't get it over the plate. [Laughter]

TB: Wow. How long ago was that, that you threw out the first pitch?

WR: It was maybe six years ago.

TB: Six years ago. So after they won the World Series, the first one.

WR: Yes, because my late wife and I went back there a couple of times and the Red Sox did something very nice. They started a scholarship for inner-city kids in Boston and named it the Marilyn Nault Russell Scholarship.

TB: Named it for Marilyn.

WR: Yes. That really pleased me a lot, because that was my good friend.

TB: So, then, how long after that was it that the city of Boston, was it the mayor who approached you about the statue?

WR: Yeah. Well, after I got the Medal of Freedom, and Obama said someday there'll be a statue of Bill Russell, and I told him I'd never forgive him for that. Of course when Tom Menino first told me about the statue I said, "You know a statue sounds a lot to me like a tombstone." And he says, "Why do you say that?" And I says, "You know, if you really, truly believe in God, he does not need a marker to find you." So I said, "I would be willing to be buried in an unmarked grave. Because if you really believe in God he doesn't need a marker to

find you. He knows exactly where you are.” And so, but Tom says, “Well”—I says, “And besides that, I don’t need anything like that”—he says, “Well, it’s not so much for you as it is for the city. You’ve made a tremendous amount of difference in community and race relations.” Because my way of thinking [2:40:00] I’ve not got past the place where we are beyond race. Even I ain’t that dumb. [Laughs] But that can be, if you want it to be, a healthy part of community relations. [2:40:24] They found out that when I made decisions, it was based on competence, not on race. And that’s all that anyone could ask of anybody, is that if you are going to make a decision and race becomes part of your decision-making process, what you have to really go to is competence. Like I used to always say. Long ago, somebody asked me what would I think about a gay person playing in the NBA. This was years and years ago. And I said, I have one question: can he play? [pause in recording]

TB: So when is the statue going to be unveiled?

WR: Well, after I conceded they could do it, I pretty much put it on the back burner and so they tell me they’ll give me, Tom says, “If we do this, we’re going to have you make all the key decisions.” And first I looked at five different sites in Boston with the city manager to see where we are going to put it. And we ended up in City Hall Plaza, which is adjacent to the Freedom Trail and near the old statehouse. And we are going to put a little—a little bigger than an alley—it’s going to be like the valley of champions. And so for all the teams that won championships, we have a star lead up to the statue. And they’re going to have some of my pet phrases, like, “There are no such thing as other people’s kids. They’re all the next generation Americans.” And a few things like that.

TB: On the statue?

WR: No, on little plaques all around the—. But Tom did not have me convinced yet. He says, “Ok, we are going to create a legacy foundation to support Mentoring. And so, every year we will have fundraisers around the statue to raise money for Mentoring. And that’s a good way to get real, personal community involvement in the educational system. And when you get that, you see, like I saw a thing on TV the other day, that in terms of literacy and all that kind of stuff, America’s in the second ten. Well, how are you going to maintain a viable part of the future if you don’t educate the next generation. And the only way you can beat that is start a war. You know? And so I don’t think wars are helpful. [Laughs]

TB: You mentioned getting the Medal of Freedom from President Obama. What was that experience like and I understand he said some nice things to you.

WR: I think he's an extraordinarily nice man, first of all, and a good person. But they asked me if that was the highest honor I’ve ever gotten. And I said just second. “Second?” “Yeah.” “*Second?*” “Yeah.” “Well, if that’s second, what was the highest honor?” Well, when he was seventy-five, [2:45:00] my father said to me one day, “I’m very proud of you as my son. I’m also proud that I am your father.” And this is my hero. And you can’t top that, not coming from the hero.

TB: But it was a good second, right?

WR: Oh, yeah. It was a good strong second.

TB: What did he say about your helping him become president?

WR: He just said it was guys like me that made it possible for him to be president. I said, “I don’t see that, but thanks anyway.” I really like him on a personal basis. The first time I met him, we were dedicating the start of the work on the Martin Luther King monument in Washington. And so he looks at me, “I know you. You’re Karen Russell’s dad.” [Laughs] You

know, it's funny. That's the same thing Bill Clinton said to me the first time I met him. It just feels funny being a parent having someone say that about you. I said, "What am I? Chopped liver?"

TB: You also mentioned, speaking of mentors and role models, you were the only basketball pallbearer for Jackie Robinson? How did that come about?

WR: Oh, the only non-teammate.

TB: The only non-Brooklyn Dodger teammate.

WR: Right. Well, when Jackie started with the Dodgers, I was thirteen. And he was the essence of an [2:47:17] who played ball. Not just baseball, football, but ball. Because he was a man that played baseball. And at that time, up until then, there was nobody like that. There were guys who had notoriety, but they were not stand-up guys. So when Jackie died, Rachel Robinson called me and said, "I want you to be a pallbearer at Jackie's funeral." Well, that's right up there with uh, a close number three. Ok? So I said, "Of course. Just tell me when and where." Not a lot of kids from the projects in West Oakland get to be a pallbearer for Jackie Robinson.

And so I said, "Why me?" She said, "You were Jackie's favorite athlete." Well, as far as fans and that kind of stuff, nobody else comes close to that. Jackie was our guy, as a kid. And for her to say he turned around and respected me. And I took the attitude because of that when I thought about, I said, Jackie took us from point A to point B. First black guy in major league sports, baseball. Well, when I got with the Celtics, I did not want to revisit that part A to part B I wanted to go from point B to point C. That's why it was kind of halfway important that I coach. And the guy asked me once, "How important is it that you were the first black coach." I said, "It's not important. First of all, I'm the best person for the job, for this particular job, and I know that. And second, it'll be important when coaches are hired and fired with no reference to race.

[2:50:00] Then it's important." So like now, coaches and managers are fired wholesale, ok? And nowadays, never is there a reference to race.

TB: We should speak just a little bit here toward the end, because we mentioned Jackie as a role model, your relationship with some—we talked about your teammates but you also had some pretty celebrated rivals, that you said, your relations with your adversaries were special because they made you play better. Oscar (Robertson) and Wilt, and Elgin Baylor.

WR: At that time, with the NBA, I was really seriously wished that every player in the NBA could find a position where he could play his best, because then the people who went to NBA games would see the best players in the world play their best. I'd kick their ass if they missed. [Laughs]

TB: In a way, didn't that indirectly lead to part of your feud, I guess is not quite the right word, with Wilt because he didn't play in your last game and you wanted him to make you earn it? Last championship?

WR: I talked to Wilt about that. I looked him in the eye and I said, Wilt, I apologize for the stuff I said. That was just hubris, you know? It was my last game and I knew it and I didn't want anything to make it less pleasant to me. And the reason I said things about him I should not have said was I was speaking to a college group in Iowa, I think and there was a reporter in there mixed in with the kids. I didn't know he was a reporter, ok? And so we're doing this question and answer, and he said, "Well, you never would have won that last championship if Wilt hadn't got hurt." Well, it annoyed me. Course when Wilt left the game we were seventeen points ahead, and I went off on Wilt, and he had nothing to do with it. And so I looked him in the eye and apologized to him and said it was just hubris. Not only that, I was wrong.

TB: But you did want him to be in the game because you got something out of the competition.

WR: Well, also, as long as he was in the game, we were seventeen points ahead!
[Laughs] I didn't want to change that.

TB: You said once in one of your books, here, about Dr. King: [reading] "I had the same reservation about Dr. King that I had about the Vietnam War, which is that the white people in Boston liked him, so I knew something must be wrong." I guess that's a light moment, because there was a time when they were kind of superficial about race relations.

WR: Yeah, well the reason I said that was also in Boston at the time, was the guy named Detroit Red. I think it was Detroit Red. Who later became Malcolm X. And they loved to put them at opposites, you know? And so they'd choose the doctor. Well, I said, "If these people choose him, I'm going to be suspicious." I thought this way: there was a major problem. There was not one "the solution." And those various arms, SNCC, NAACP, [2:55:00] about five or six other organizations fighting the same battles with different approaches. And I thought it was important that they all be able to maintain. Because, see if you get to a place where one organization gets to speak for a whole race, the race is in trouble because they're smart enough to figure out how to beat that. That's like, I had a conversation with Nelson Mandela, and I told him how respectful I was of what he did. One of the things he did not do, he did not disavow violence. He was not going to ever create a civil war but he said that if he says he turns his back on violence, all of his comrades trying to change Apartheid, it would put a target on their back. And so he wouldn't do that. So there were probably a dozen or more groups in South Africa fighting Apartheid, each with their own agenda and their own style of fighting the same problem. And so I've never put down any of those groups trying to change things.

TB: Let me ask you three sum-up questions to end. First of all, looking back on your career and your life do you have any major regrets, things you would have done differently?

WR: I don't know. Philosophically, I was opposed to racism being part of the atmosphere but I did what I thought I could do to help change it, or at least expose it.

TB: Expose it is a good first step.

WR: Yes. You can never help to solve a problem until you recognize it as a problem. So, I don't know. I was not very intellectual. [Laughs] I don't know what there is if I could even change it.

TB: And how do you look at today's NBA, because you're a part of it again—they've got the award named for you, you go to the Finals—compared to your NBA, and do you think the future of the league is still good?

WR: Well you know, I was watching playoffs the other day, and there are a lot of good players. A *lot* of them. Like when I was playing, maybe four guys could shoot three-point shots. Now every team's got four guys who can shoot three-point shots. The game has changed. It's the most evolving of all the games. And so I always say I would never ask a player to play against a ghost, past, present, or future. You know, "How'd he do against so-and-so?" Well, that's a different time. You know, like this guy asked me one time, "How would you have done against Shaq?" I said, "First of all, you've got the question backwards." And I love that kid. I really do. I said, "But you can't compare players of different eras, because for example, for all intents and purposes, I invented the blocked shot, ok? I'd never seen a shot blocked until I started doing it. When Shaq was four or five years old, blocked shots were an integral part of the game. So he starts at five where I started at eighteen. [3:00:00] Well, you can never compare that, you know what I mean.

There are certain standards. For example, when I was playing, there was no such thing as a zone defense allowed. You were not allowed to play zone. Now everybody plays zones. They're variations on them, but they're all zones. And we had contempt for teams that played zones because they had at least one or two guys that couldn't play defense, and so the zone protected them. And now the zone's an integrated part of it and if it's played right, it can be very effective.

TB: So, finally, this interview will become part of the archives of the new National Museum of African History and Culture.

WR: Hey! Taylor! You're going to put me in the archives?

TB: I'm going in there with you!

WR: Who are you? Indiana Jones? [Laughter]

TB: Well, you're going to be looking out to a whole lot of people. Do you have any advice for the young people who are going to come to this museum as to how they should go about framing their choices for their life?

WR: Well, if you're fortunate to find something you do well, approach it professionally. Find out what it's all about, and how can you take what's it's all about and make an improvement from your point of view. And you take things from a novelty to a profession. You know, things that you enjoy doing well. Well, when I was active playing basketball, first let me get this straight. We used to travel before the jet fleets. And if it's foggy, you just stay there. And so you might spend all day in the airport. So we are at the airport one time, I forget where and this guy walks up to me: "You kind of tall!" "A very astute observation." "You a basketball player?" I said no. So about five, six guys come up to me and they ask me the same question: "You a basketball player?" I said no. So Havlicek was there watching this and he said to me,

“How come you say you’re not a basketball player?” I said, “John, that’s what I do. That’s not what I am. I am a man that works at professional basketball.”

See the misnomer is everybody says, “play” when you’ve long since finished playing. The closest we came to playing, was at the Celtics we had a motto: “Play like children without being childish.”

TB: Was that your motto, or Red’s?

WR: It was just in the air around there. We took it. And the way we won all those championships was we knew how to play. Now that sounds odd. Everybody knows how to play. But everybody does not have the total team concept. When I was at my best at the Celtics, I could run all my plays from all five positions. Point guard, shooting guard, small forward, big forward, post. I could run the plays of all those positions. Not, that I wanted to run the plays but if one of my friends was having a problem I could understand it and know how to help. And you know where help comes from and how it comes.

TB: So, finally: have you been back to Monroe any time? We talked about your mother—

WR: No. If I go [3:05:00] there it will be under duress. It’s like this, Taylor. I started my life in Monroe. And the white people in Monroe were really mean to me and my family. Told my grandfather ... I mean, not just, well, but they were actually mean. Like this one time this under-sheriff, or deputy sheriff. My mother very proudly bought her a riding habit, you know the little jacket and the pants with the flare, and the boots. And this sheriff, this under-sheriff, walked up to her and said, “You get off the street with those new outfits on. You can’t dress like no white woman. What’s wrong with you? If I ever see you like that again I’m going to put you into the jail.” Scared her so bad, she probably shook for two or three days. Well, I don’t feel like ... will I go back to my old hometown? No, that does not make sense to me. And so I don’t go to Monroe

unless, see, after my mother died. I took my boys there once and I think that's the only time I've been there.

TB: You said you thought you might go visit her grave sometime. You've never done that?

WR: What's that?

TB: Didn't you say you might go visit her grave sometime?

WR: Yeah. You know what? I would not know how to find it.

TB: Well, she gave you an awful good start.

WR: Yes she did and I really appreciate it. But I just don't get to that part of the country any more.

TB: Alright, I think we're done. Do you guys have any questions? I think we're good, Bill. Thanks a lot.

Recording ends at 3:07:24.7

END OF INTERVIEW

