



AP Photo/Getty Images

Resize Font: A⁻ A⁺

Wilt vs. Elgin: When Their World Was the Playground

Two legends in the summer of '57

By [Dave McKenna](#) on May 11, 2012

- [PRINT](#)

In the summer of 1957, Wilt Chamberlain came to Washington, D.C., on the promise he'd get to play Elgin Baylor on the playground.

And they played. Over several weeks, Chamberlain, a Philadelphia kid and the first 7-footer who mattered, scrimmaged Baylor on his home blacktop, just as the local phenom was introducing playground flair to the hoops realm. Chamberlain would return to D.C. a year later for an encore of their pickup games, shortly after which both he and Baylor would turn pro and put up numbers that will be drooled over for as long as the game is played — 61,798 points, 41,024 rebounds, and 24 NBA All-Star Game appearances between them.

But, before any of that, there was this streetball series for the ages.

Chamberlain and Baylor went at it in five-on-five encounters on various D.C. playgrounds around town. The city's top young black ballplayers played alongside the headliners, making for an ungodly

assemblage of future NBA first-round picks, NCAA tournament MVPs, and Hall of Famers. Flash mobs created entirely via analog social media appeared wherever Chamberlain and Baylor played.

"It was people hanging on the fences, on the rooftops, everybody there to watch Elgin and Wilt," says Ernie Dunston, who in 1957 was a sophomore at Spingarn High School, and who would later follow fellow Spingarn alum Baylor to Seattle University.

No newspapers reported on these Eisenhower-era faceoffs. No movies or photos of the action are known to exist, and, obviously, no box scores of their pickup games were ever kept.

Chamberlain's dead, and Baylor, at 77, is as careless a caretaker of his legend as he's ever been. What should be a fantastical chapter of basketball lore has never gotten any attention from anybody other than the now sixty- and seventysomethings who had a hand in it. And, if left up to Baylor, the games would remain in obscurity.

"Me and Wilt just both happened to be on the same court," says Baylor, when asked to describe his vintage runs with Chamberlain. "It was just basketball."

Bah. To the rest of D.C.'s Greatest Basketball Generation and anybody else who cares about hoop history, saying Chamberlain and Baylor sharing a playground in 1957 was "just basketball" is like saying the Last Supper was "just matzo."

Those who watched or played in these clashes of young titans recall a feast of dunks, shot blocks, hang time, and even trash talk that was way ahead of its time.

They've come to realize they were part of something ... big.

"At that age, I didn't know what I was seeing," says Dave Bing, now the mayor of Detroit and a member of the Basketball Hall of Fame, who was just a 13-year-old dreamer when Chamberlain and Baylor held court near his boyhood home in D.C. "Hell, I'd never seen anything as tall as Wilt. But now, to have those guys come down to your playground at that time, and with us just clutching the fence surrounding it and watching them play, well, it's just amazing."

Chamberlain pulled into D.C. over Memorial Day weekend in 1957 behind the wheel of a red-and-white Oldsmobile convertible with the top down.

Chamberlain had just gotten the flashy car, at the finish of his sophomore year at Kansas and his first as a varsity basketball player — the NCAA didn't let Division I freshmen play at the time.

He'd already been a phenomenon inside and outside his hometown for a while. He picked up basketball in junior high and honed it on the courts of the Haddington Recreation Center in West Philadelphia. "Of course I remember the first time I saw him," says Cecil Mosenson, 82, Chamberlain's coach at Overbrook High in Philly, which he attended from 1951 to 1955. "I'd never seen anything like him. But nobody had ever seen anything like him."

He once scored 90 points in a game at Overbrook, and averaged 44 points a game for his high school career. A 1955 article in the *Sporting News* said Chamberlain also "high jumped 6 feet, 6 inches, ran the 440 in 49.0 seconds and the 880 in 1:58.3, put the shot 53 feet, 4 inches, [and] broad jumped 22 feet." He would have leapt right into pro ball if the NBA bylaws didn't forbid players so young. A 1957 article in *Life* magazine titled "What It Took to Get Wilt" said KU used an "army" of recruiters and hinted that it took "under the table" cash to land Chamberlain, who according to the report was "sought by a hundred campuses."

He exceeded expectations immediately, setting KU records for points (52) and rebounds (31) in his very first college game against Northwestern. Chamberlain averaged 29.6 points and 18.9 rebounds per game for the year.

But Chamberlain's season ended with a 54-53 KU loss in triple overtime to undefeated North Carolina in the championship game of the 1957 NCAA tournament, often called the greatest college basketball game of all time. Chamberlain was named Most Outstanding Player of the tournament despite the second-place finish. But he was still peeved about the racist taunts from white fans at the Midwest regional held in Dallas, including serenades of "Bye Bye Blackbird," and bugged by the triple-teaming and gamesmanship that North Carolina threw at him in the finals. UNC coach Frank McGuire (who would be Chamberlain's coach five years later when he scored 100 points in a game for the Philadelphia Warriors against the New York Knicks) sent out his smallest player, 5-foot-11 Tommy Kearns, to face the 7-foot Chamberlain for the opening jump ball.

So talk in the weeks following the NCAA tournament was that Chamberlain would be abandoning college. A report in the *Washington Afro-American* on May 7, 1957, said Chamberlain would be turning pro within weeks, and quoted Harlem Globetrotters owner Abe Saperstein from Paris saying he was willing to pay the young superstar "much more" than the rumored \$15,000 a year it would take to get him out of Lawrence.

To everyone's surprise, at the end of the spring semester, Chamberlain announced he'd be returning to Kansas. At about this same time, Chamberlain started driving around campus in a stylish set of wheels. The Olds convertible would eventually play an infamous role in KU athletics history. But for now, it was just a nice car and a way home for summer break.

"That Oldsmobile was beautiful," says Dave Harris, a fraternity brother and friend of Chamberlain's at Kansas.

Harris, 75, grew up in D.C. and was a revered athlete back home. He'd been a football star at all-black Cardozo High School, and had gotten attention for being on the receiving end of the first integrated touchdown pass in the history of D.C. high school football. That came at Griffith Stadium on December 5, 1954, in the waning minutes of a game matching an all-star team made up of players from the city's all-white or all-black public high schools against the all-white powerhouse squad from St. John's College High School, a private prep. Along with its historical significance, Harris's touchdown catch, on a pass thrown by quarterback Danny Droze of all-white Anacostia High, gave the integrated squad a 12-7 upset win over the previously undefeated Johnnies.

Harris earned a football scholarship to Kansas, and met Chamberlain during their freshman year in Carruth-O'Leary Hall, a dorm where a lot of Jayhawks athletes resided. They also lived together as sophomores in the Kappa Alpha Si house. Harris made the trip to Kansas City to cheer on his frat brother during the KU-UNC title matchup, and saw the emotional funk the loss put Chamberlain in. After his last exam for the spring semester, Chamberlain told Harris he didn't want to leave his fancy car on campus over the summer, so he'd be driving back to Philly and could use a companion.

Harris went along for the ride.

We all now take the Interstate Highway System for granted, but the ribbon cutting to open up the very first stretch of federal pavement, a section of I-70 in Kansas, had been held in November 1956. With the new thoroughfare, Chamberlain and Harris planned on making the 1,115-mile trip to D.C. straight through. But funny noises started coming from under the hood just outside Indianapolis, on the weekend the town was hosting the Indy 500.

"So we coasted into this gas station in Indianapolis, and Wilt gets out of the car," recalls Harris, now 75 and living in D.C. "A guy comes out of the garage and says, 'Goddamn! Wilt the stilt!' And he's yelling at people in the shop, 'Get Wilt's car right up on the rack!' And they fixed it right there, something with the carburetor, and the guy says, 'Wilt, this is on us! Keep on going!' I said, 'Wilt, they know you everywhere you go!' Wilt hated being called 'Wilt the Stilt.' Hated it. But he liked being taken care of like that."

When they got back on the road, and started talking about their plans for the summer, Chamberlain confessed he had some downtime. Harris suggested Chamberlain stay a few weeks in D.C. at his family's home. And he made Chamberlain an offer he knew his buddy couldn't refuse.

"I said, 'You know, Elgin Baylor's going to be around,'" Harris says.

Wilt didn't know Baylor personally. Baylor now recalls only meeting Chamberlain once before their playground matchup, at a brief gathering of top college players in New York put together by *Look* magazine for the March 24, 1957, broadcast of *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

But Chamberlain, like all serious ballplayers, knew a lot about Baylor by then. Baylor had just finished his redshirt sophomore season playing for Seattle University, and was the only player in the country to put up better overall numbers than Chamberlain. Baylor finished fourth in the NCAA scoring race, with 29.7 points per game to Wilt's 29.6. And Baylor led the nation in rebounding percentage, regarded as a major basketball stat at the time, hauling in .235 of the total rebounds taken by both teams in all his games; Chamberlain's .227 was good for fourth place.

Baylor's college season, like Chamberlain's, ended with March sadness. Seattle, which was viewed to be as much a one-man gang as Kansas, was ranked fifth in the country at the end of the regular season, but bypassed the NCAA tournament to accept a bid from the then-esteemed National Invitation Tournament. In the days leading up to the New York-based event, Baylor got more coverage from the mainstream press than he'd ever gotten. Bob Feerick, coach of Santa Clara, told the *New York Daily News* that Baylor was "absolutely the greatest, the best I've ever seen."

"I've seen Chamberlain and [Columbia All-American Chet] Forte and [West Virginia All-American Rod] Hundley and most of the other hot shots," Feerick said in the NIT preview piece. "Wrap 'em all up in one, and I'll still take Baylor."

But despite being the top seed in the NIT and getting a first-round bye, the Chieftains got blown out in their first game by St. Bonaventure.

Harris, being a football guy, only knew Baylor by reputation. But, especially after the NIT loss, he had a hunch where Baylor could be found: On the courts at Kelly Miller Junior High in Northeast D.C., which at the time was the hottest spot for basketball players in the city.

"I told Wilt we could set up some games," Harris says.

Wilt agreed to stay. Baylor was the draw. Chamberlain wouldn't go home to Philadelphia until two weeks later, Harris says. He came back to D.C. after a few days at home and spent "about 10 more days" as Harris's guest, playing Baylor on the playgrounds day after day.

To that point in basketball history, there were only two cities with pickup basketball scenes with any reputation: Philadelphia, which stocked the historically robust Fab Five college programs, and New York, which produced talent for colleges across the country — all five starters on the North Carolina team that had just beat Kansas came off New York's courts.

Chamberlain's decision to forego Philly and Haddington Rec Center to spend so much of his break lacing up his Converse high-tops on D.C. playgrounds was a huge stamp of approval for the ball being played in the nation's capital. And for Baylor.

"We didn't ever think of Washington, D.C., basketball up here," says Sonny Hill, a childhood friend of Chamberlain's, and a guy known as "Mr. Basketball" in Philadelphia for being godfather of the city's streetball scene beginning in the 1950s. "Nobody did. It was just us and New York. Then Elgin Baylor came out and we all heard about it. He put D.C. on the map."

A few hours after Harris and Chamberlain hit D.C., the shiny Olds, with its top down, pulled over on 49th Street NE, beneath the fenced-in court on the hill at Kelly Miller playground. Baylor was already there.

Not all of Elgin Baylor's playground memories are good ones.

He once told me that he was barred from using the pool, softball fields, and tennis and basketball courts closest to his boyhood home in Southeast D.C. because he wasn't white.

"The police even put chain locks on the gates around the basketball court so we couldn't get in when the park was closed," Baylor said in a 1999 interview. "The older [black] kids would sneak in at night over the fence and play with whatever light they could get. But most of the time, we just played stickball in the streets."

Race would also impact Baylor's formative years of basketball. His last two years of high school were spent at all-black Spingarn, which opened in 1953 and ended up being the last school built for blacks in D.C.'s segregated school system. Then came the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which held that D.C.'s legally separate but allegedly equal education system was unconstitutional. But that ruling wasn't handed down until the spring of 1954, at the end of Baylor's last year at Spingarn. So his high school squad never played integrated teams, and the major newspapers in town barely covered the black schools. When he broke the city's high school record for points in a single game as a senior, the feat attracted little attention from the mainstream press. (Baylor's 63-point game is still the city standard.)

But at the end of the 1954 season, Sam Lacy, the legendary sportswriter for the *Washington Afro-American*, a newspaper for the black community, helped put together an exhibition game to showcase the undersung hero. Stonewall A.C., an all-black traveling sandlot team Baylor formed with neighborhood kids as a high school freshman, was matched against a squad of white players, called the D.C. Scholastic All-Stars, in what the paper's headlines dubbed a "Mixed Race Battle." The white squad was headed by Jimmy Wexler, a multi-sport star from all-white Western High whose scoring records Baylor had broken. The gym at Terrell Junior High was rented out for the game.

Bill McCaffrey, then a senior at all-white Anacostia High, was tasked with finding white players to play alongside Wexler, who had graduated from Western a year earlier.

"I'd gotten a lot of the best players from the white schools to agree to play because they all wanted to say they played against Elgin Baylor," says McCaffrey, now 77. "But the principals at their schools found out they were playing against blacks and threatened to suspend or expel them. So I had to use mostly guys who were already out of school."

McCaffrey, ignoring his own principal's threats, put himself in the lineup, too. Admission to the Baylor-Wexler tilt was free. A reported 900 spectators got in to watch, and another 500 folks milled around outside.

"When I showed up, the police were there because kids were trying to climb into the gym through the windows," McCaffrey says. "Kids ran up to me asking if they could carry my bags, just so they could get in. Guys were literally hanging off the rafters. Everybody wanted to see Elgin go up against white kids."

Excepting the team McCaffrey had assembled and the cops, everybody was black.

Stonewall A.C. spanked the Scholastic All-Stars by 25 points. Baylor scored 44 points to Wexler's 35, according to the *Afro-American's* score sheet. Wexler died last year. But in a 1999 interview, he told me that for all his sporting accolades — along with being an all-city basketball player, he spent three years in the New York Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers farm systems after high school — playing against Baylor left him feeling athletically fraudulent.

"Here I am guarding Elgin Baylor, one-on-one," Wexler said. "And he showed me basketball at a totally different level — another world, head and shoulders above anything I'd ever seen. He could do everything. He was a scorer. He could jump out of the gym. He reverse-dunked on me! You have to remember: Nobody did that before Elgin Baylor. That's not how basketball was played before him."

Stonewall A.C. business manager John Jones, sensing the market for the high school star in his hometown, also promoted what was billed as an "interracial cage tourney," featuring Baylor and his all-black club facing squads made up of white college ballplayers. The event, which required paid admission, drew a reported 3,000 fans to Turner's Arena at 14th and W streets NW. (That's the venue where pro-wrestling visionary Vincent J. McMahon filmed the syndicated pro wrestling shows for World Wide Wrestling Federation, which was eventually taken over by his son, Vincent K.. McMahon, and morphed into the WWE.) In the featured game, Stonewall A.C. trounced a team led by Maryland's Gene Shue, a senior at the University of Maryland who had just broken all of that school's career scoring. The score was 90-68. Baylor was named MVP.

Shue was months away from being the third overall pick in the 1954 NBA draft. Baylor was months away from getting out of high school.

"I think about that game all the time, and still shake my head," says James "Sleepy" Harrison, who played alongside Baylor with Stonewall A.C. and against him on the playgrounds. "Here you have Shue, an [All-Atlantic Coast Conference player and] college senior, and Elgin's still in high school, but he put him in his hip pocket."

But when it came time for college, Baylor's race trumped his talents and local renown. Whereas the teams from Philly and New York colleges welcomed blacks from their respective towns in the 1950s, all the major universities in D.C. were still years away from integrating when Baylor left high school. George Washington University didn't have its first black basketball player until 1963. Maryland, Shue's school, held off letting blacks play basketball until 1965 (Billy Jones).

Georgetown didn't recruit its first black ballplayer until 1966 (Bernard White).

"Now, schools will look under rocks for black ballplayers," says George "Dee" Williams, a teammate of Baylor's at Spingarn and with Stonewall A.C. "But nobody came to D.C. back then. And we didn't have anywhere around here to go."

So while Chamberlain had his 100 offers by his senior year at Overbrook High, Baylor, despite a 34-points-per-game scoring average at Spingarn and all that fame in the black half of his hometown, was essentially ignored. Though some reports during his senior year said that Indiana wanted him, Baylor told me Virginia Union, a historically black school, was the only serious suitor. But he'd had enough of

segregated schools. A *Washington Post* story in 1954 quoted Ralph Shaughnessy, identified in the piece as "chief scout for Red Auerbach's Celtics," saying that "if [Baylor] isn't going to college, we want him with the Celtics now." (Auerbach told me in 2005 that while he was a huge fan of the young Baylor and that his buddy "Shag" Shaughnessy may have been quoted accurately by the *Washington Post* all those years ago, the Celtics never seriously pursued the young Baylor. "I didn't have time for high school kids," Auerbach said. NBA rules outlawed signing teenagers, anyway.)

So Baylor considered that his playing days might be over after Spingarn.

"I wanted to be a gym teacher," Baylor now says, a career goal he also stated in his Spingarn yearbook. "That's really the only thing I thought about doing, because I enjoyed being in gym class, and looking forward I thought I might like that. I certainly never dreamed of playing pro ball. None of us did. In high school, I didn't think beyond playing high school basketball."

Baylor ended up heading out to the College of Idaho, following Dunbar grad Warren Williams, who got a football scholarship there via a family friend who played for the Harlem Globetrotters and had stopped by the essentially all-white campus in essentially all-white Caldwell, Idaho. Williams found out the basketball coach, Sam Vokes, was also looking for bodies.

"I said, 'I've got a friend who's the best basketball player in the country!'" Williams told me in 2005.

Williams got Vokes to save spots on the hoops roster for Baylor and Gary Mays, a one-armed phenom from Spingarn's rival, Armstrong High. Mays remains legendary among black folks from D.C. of a certain age for shutting down Baylor and leading Armstrong's upset of the undefeated Spingarn team that won the 1954 city championship, and also because he was the best schoolboy baseball player in the city despite the missing wing. (Mays played catcher, and, according to a story in the *Washington Daily News* during his senior year, threw out everybody who attempted to steal a base on him for an entire season.)

With the imported D.C. talent on its roster for the 1954-55 season (plus future San Francisco 49er R.C. Owens), the College of Idaho went 15-0 in the Pacific Northwest Conference, the first time in the NAIA school's history it posted an undefeated league record. In March 1955, *Sports Illustrated* wrote a story about how the College of Idaho had become a "basketball powerhouse" overnight and credited the influx of D.C. talent, particularly Baylor, called "a 6-foot-6-inch schoolboy flash." It was the first mainstream press Baylor ever received.

But the College of Idaho's administration, for reasons that were never made public, fired the coach who'd brought Baylor in and broke up the basketball squad after that one big year. Mays turned down an offer from the Harlem Globetrotters and, with Warren Williams, quit school and went back to D.C. But Baylor, who was courted by a car dealership in the Pacific Northwest that sponsored a powerful AAU squad, accepted an offer from Seattle University. Baylor says that before agreeing to play for the new school, he got the school to agree that he could handpick some guys from back home to join him.

"I told them that to get me to go there, they had to take my friends, too," Baylor says. "I knew the guys back home were good enough, and the coach wouldn't be disappointed."

Seattle accepted Baylor's terms. He invited former Spingarn teammates and longtime Kelly Miller regulars Francis Saunders and Lloyd Murphy, who were a year behind him in school and had just graduated.

"Elgin came to my home one night at the end of summer [of 1955]," recalls Saunders, "and he says, 'Pockets,' which was the nickname he gave me, 'where are you going to school?' I told him I wasn't going anywhere, I would probably join the military. But he says, 'I'm going to Seattle tomorrow. Come with

me. I'll pick you up!' So I walk into the kitchen and say, 'Mom, I'm going to college tomorrow!' She got sad and said she couldn't afford to send me. I told her, 'Don't worry, Elgin's going to take care of it!' And he did! The next day, Elgin came by and picked me up and we drove across country. I went to college, and that never would have happened without Elgin."

Murphy and Baylor's brother, Sal Baylor, were also along for the cross-country car trip.

Baylor had to sit out the 1955-56 basketball season per NCAA transfer rules. Saunders and Murphy sat out with him, because they were freshmen.

All of them got lots of playing time once their eligibility kicked in. John Castellani, who took the head coaching job at Seattle for the 1956-57 season, still marvels at how advanced Baylor's game was.

"Elgin invented hang time. Everybody knows that he was Michael Jordan before Michael Jordan," says Castellani, who at 86 is still practicing law in Milwaukee. "But he did so many things nobody else did, things with the ball, like putting the ball behind his back on a fast break while cutting from his left to his right, and from a guy his size! He was way ahead of his time, and he brought all these things from the playground, things nobody had ever seen. I remember the coach at Portland put a sign up in their locker room: 'If you're going to stand around and watch Elgin play, then pay admission!' That was perfect. I guess I stood around and watched him play, too. And it was a joy."

The *Washington Afro-American* continued covering Baylor religiously even after he went west. The March 5, 1957, edition of the paper gave three paragraphs to Chamberlain and Kansas's loss to North Carolina in the NCAA championship game. A report about the 42nd and 43rd straight wins of Stonewall A.C., the club team Baylor formed in high school, got twice as much space. Baylor was in town for those Stonewall games and served as coach. At that point in its history, the story said, Stonewall A.C. was 217-15, and had won 19 of the 20 tournaments it competed in. With Baylor out of uniform, Stonewall A.C. was led by Ben Warley, a student at Phelps High School, who scored 20 points in the 42nd-straight win, over Temple Cleaners. A year later, Warley, who played in the playground games during Chamberlain's summer stay in D.C., would have a major role in the scandal that hastened Baylor's jump to the NBA.

Chamberlain made an A-list entrance to his first playground game.

"I'll never forget that car. It was huge," says Harold Bell, then a student at Spingarn who went on to be a pioneer in black sports talk radio in D.C. in the 1970s. "Dave [Harris] was one of my heroes from Cardozo, and him and Wilt drove up, and when Wilt got out, man, I'd never seen anything that tall."

Bell says the crowd at Kelly Miller for the first of the games with Baylor was also memorably massive. "The mood was so festive," he says, "like a big event was taking place."

Chamberlain and Baylor also brought their games to courts at Brown Junior High adjacent to the Spingarn campus in Northeast D.C., Randall Playground in Southeast, and Lincoln Recreation Center in Southwest, the latter two within blocks of where the new Washington Nationals stadium, Nationals Park, now stands. Wherever the sandlot series resumed, the townspeople appeared.

"I'd say 2,000 or 3,000 people were there for some of the games," says Dee Williams.

Three thousand spectators? At a playground?

"Yes! This was big!" says Williams. "People came out to see Wilt and Elgin duel. There were kids, and lots of ballplayers there, too. Everybody."

Among the hordes at Kelly Miller who witnessed Chamberlain and Baylor: Dave Bing, who would later go to Spingarn, become a college All-American, NBA rookie of the year, basketball Hall of Famer, and member of the NBA's 50th Anniversary All-Time Team, named in 1996. (Spingarn was the only high school in the country, public or private, to have two members of the All-Time squad.) Also in attendance was Jerry Chambers, who like Bing grew up blocks away from Kelly Miller and who in 1966 would be named Most Outstanding Player of the NCAA Final Four as a member of the fourth-place Utah squad. Later that same year, Chambers was picked in the first round by the Los Angeles Lakers.

"Whenever Elgin played, there were crowds," says Chambers, now retired and living in Los Angeles. "There wasn't cell phones or Facebook or Twitter. I don't know how that happened. But I guess somebody at the court ran and put dimes in the pay phone, and all the ballplayers would come running."

George Leftwich also spectated. He was a rising sophomore at Archbishop Carroll High School. In January 1959, Leftwich's prep team, which also included future Georgetown coach John Thompson, began a 55-game winning streak throughout a national schedule and remains regarded as one of the top schoolboy squads ever assembled here or anywhere else. He later starred at Villanova, leading the Wildcats to a pair of NCAA tournament wins in 1962 and an NIT title in 1965.

Leftwich never got on the court during Wilt's stay. He now says he was years away from feeling worthy of calling "next."

"One thing about the playgrounds in D.C.: You had to earn your place," says Leftwich. "I wasn't ready to get in with those guys. I was there as a spectator."

Dee Williams also has a colorful recollection of the welcome Chamberlain got from Baylor at his home court.

"Before we played, Wilt went up to Elgin and said, 'I'm going to light you up!'" says Williams. "And Elgin said, 'You must have a book of matches, because that's the only way you're going to light anything here!'"

The games were played by standard D.C. playground rules of the day: Five-on-five, first to 30 points by 2s wins, win by two baskets. No shirts or skins. No refs. Players called their own fouls. Traveling calls were frowned upon, and fine-print infractions — 10-second or three-second violations — were ignored. "You make too many calls, and you're a crybaby," says Dunston. "That's a reputation you didn't want." The "rise and fly" rule was, as always, in place, which was the colloquial term meaning winners stay on the court, losers go to the sidelines and wait. And wait. And wait. "The pressure was incredible at Kelly Miller, any of the playgrounds," says Chambers. "You lose, and you might as well go home, because there was crowds five deep of guys who had next. You were done for the day."

There were exceptions, says Baylor. "Wilt didn't have to wait when he lost," he says. "He'd get picked by whoever had next."

And, according to Baylor, Chamberlain did a whole lot of losing during his weeks in Washington.

"My team won. Always. Every time," says Baylor.

Chamberlain is not around to rebut Baylor's recollections. But nobody's ever accused Baylor of exaggerating his accomplishments. Quite the opposite, in fact. And surviving players back up Baylor's account of what happened on the playground.

"Elgin was the highlight of all those games," says Francis Saunders, one of the rare D.C. ballplayers who will admit to occasionally playing on Chamberlain's teams during the playground summit with Baylor. "He set the place on fire, and there was just no comparison. Wilt could score whenever he wanted. But Elgin was so creative, and, by far, Elgin was the better ballplayer. That sounds a little like I'm beating the drum for Elgin, I know. But that's how I remember it. You had to see it."

Dee Williams's recollections are similarly pro-Baylor. He says D.C. pride played a part in the playground outcomes.

"Wilt did his thing, all sorts of dips and dunks and finger rolls," says Williams. "But we were at Kelly Miller, not in Philly, and we weren't going to let Wilt win no games here. We tore him up."

Willie Jones, whose skills and verbosity made him a D.C. playground legend in the 1950s — he's known as the city's original trash talker — is remembered as the most colorful performer in the Baylor and Chamberlain games. In organized ball, Jones played for the first integrated team at American University, where he made first-team small-college All-American and set a record for points in an NCAA Division II tournament game (54) that still stands. He also coached the University of the District of Columbia to an NCAA Division II title in 1982. But, at 75, his proudest basketball accomplishment is clearly inciting Chamberlain to give him a nickname back in 1957. Jones says that out of respect for Wilt, he showed no respect to Wilt.

"I cussed his big ass every other word," says Jones. "He was under the basket, goaltending everything. So I'd go out to the top of the foul line circle, and say, 'Fuck you, big man! Come off that block and I'll kick your ass! Check me! Bring your big ass out here, Big Boy!' That was my aura. I had to do it to Wilt, too. He called me Dirty Mouth. Good people."

Jones says he also dirty-mouthed Baylor, even though he was on the same team. "Nobody could shoot like me, and I was yelling at everybody that they better either pass the ball to Wilt, Elgin, or me," Jones says. "But it was like every shot I'd take, Elgin would be up in the air and catch it and dunk it. I'd be yelling, 'Leave my shot alone, motherfucker! It's going in!'" (Offensive goaltending was allowed at all levels of basketball in 1957. The NBA banned it in 1958. Legend has it the rule was put in place in anticipation of the arrival of Chamberlain, who was a year away from entering the NBA.)

Win or lose, Harris says Chamberlain was a perfect houseguest during his stays in D.C. "Wilt liked to be alone, to just think or read," he says. They did do some typical D.C. sightseeing.

"I showed him the Lincoln Memorial and the museums and Pennsylvania Avenue," says Harris. "We stopped at the White House, and I said, 'Big fella, now you can write a paper when you get back to school.'" (Some 11 years later, Chamberlain escorted Richard Nixon, who occupied the vice presidency during Wilt's '57 trip, through hostile crowds at Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral.)

They got into Wilt's Olds and cruised U Street NW, then the main drag in D.C.'s black business district and hub of the city's nightlife. Harris says Chamberlain told him that he was approached by "hustlers" there who knew why he was in town and offered money to play against a team led by Baylor at Turner's Arena. Chamberlain declined. "Wilt didn't want to play with D.C. guys on his team," says Harris. "He said he'd only do it if they brought down some Philly ballplayers to play with him." The game never came off.

The crew also made a few trips to Simpson's, a restaurant on North Capitol Street NW. Gary Mays worked there. After playing alongside Baylor on the 1954-55 College of Idaho squad, Mays and Warren Williams quit school and went back to D.C. to work at the restaurant, a now-defunct operation that in the late 1950s was a hub of the city's bustling numbers game, an illegal precursor to the government-run

lottery. That line of work kept him too busy during the day to run with Chamberlain and Baylor at the playgrounds, but Mays did his part to welcome Wilt to Washington.

"Wilt asked if I knew any ladies," Mays says.

He arranged a date between Chamberlain and a Spingarn beauty named Izola McGriff.

"Yes, I went out with Wilt a few times when he came here," says the former Ms. McGriff, now Ancar.

And?

"He took me to dinner, and we rode around town, and, yes, he made his intentions clear," she says, laughing. "But I let him know that wasn't happening, and he moved on." Ancar, who recently moved back to the D.C. area after years in Southern California, says she ran into Chamberlain in the 1970s at a party in Los Angeles hosted by Marvin Gaye, another D.C. native and friend from her high school days. "Marvin knew about me going out with Wilt, and asked him if he remembered me," Ancar says. "He told me I looked familiar, but that's it until I told him the story." (Marvin Gaye has a street and a park named after him just a few blocks from the playground at Kelly Miller, where the streetless and parkless Baylor ruled.)

Another local girl, then known as Ruby Saunders, who married Elgin Baylor in 1958 and divorced him in 1975, says she also tried getting a love match for Chamberlain. Alas, there's no evidence Chamberlain maintained the 1.2-conquests-per-day average required for him to attain the 20,000 partners he claimed.

"I set him up with one of my girlfriends," says Ruby Baylor.

And?

"They didn't last past his visit," Ruby says. "Because of Wilt's status, it wouldn't be easy to be his girlfriend. She ended up moving to North Carolina and marrying a doctor, so I guess it worked out all right for her."

Washington is as good as any town at honoring folks who made a mark. Yet there's nothing in the city named after Baylor, whose imprint on the city's sports history was inarguably monumental — no roads or parks or statues or basketball courts or anything (unless you count 1990s pop/R&B crooner Ginuwine, a D.C. native whose real name is Elgin Baylor Lumpkin).

Most of the blame for Baylor's invisibility can be put on Baylor himself. His presence in D.C. has been diminishing since he went to the NBA in late 1958, to the point where most residents likely don't even know he ever lived there. Bing says the lack of recognition for the greatest athlete the city ever produced is sad, but attributes it to Baylor being "aloof" and the distance he kept from his hometown after turning pro. He's had almost no contact with Spingarn or Stonewall teammates for years. Even when the NBA All-Star Game was held downtown in 2001, Baylor, then the general manager of the Los Angeles Clippers, didn't make the trip.

"He only comes back for funerals," says ex-wife Ruby Baylor, who moved back to D.C. from Los Angeles after their divorce.

I asked Baylor years ago why he avoids a place where so many folks revere him.

"I'm just busy, I guess," he told me.

But among many D.C. natives, the reverence still exists.

"Over the years, whenever I hear somebody say, 'So-and-so was the greatest there ever was!' I tell them to shut the fuck up," says Willie Jones when asked how good Baylor was. "Don't try to tell me! I've seen the greatest there ever was. I played with the greatest there ever was."

If the power people ever get around to hanging Baylor's name on something, the court at Kelly Miller would be a fine place to start. More than any other patch of blacktop, this is where the legend of Rabbit, Baylor's nom de playground, really took hold.

"Elgin won't talk about himself, he never would," says Dunston. "But I hope he knows his name was magic there. He was magic."

Baylor now accepts that basketball players from D.C. didn't get any college offers until he took his playground game out West. But, maddeningly humble to this day, he denies there's any correlation between his performance and other athletes from his hometown finally getting a chance.

"I know after I left D.C., colleges started going into the city, and players started going to college, and many of them did quite well," he says. "And, next thing I know, a lot of players from D.C. were playing in the NBA, including a lot of guys from Spingarn. But to give me credit for that? That's not me. God Almighty gave them the ability."

Well, as Lloyd Murphy, a high school and college teammate of Baylor's and a participant in the Summer of Wilt tilts, once told me: "Let me try to put this modestly: Elgin was a god around here."

Castellani says Baylor opened his eyes about the quality of hoops talent in the nation's capital.

"I didn't know anything or hear anything about D.C. ballplayers before I had Elgin," says Castellani. "But, oh, god, was I sold on D.C. talent after him."

How sold was Castellani? Well, on Monday, March 24, 1958, Ernie Dunston, a Spingarn junior, got called out of class and down to the principal's office. He was told that the coach of Seattle University was on the campus and wanted him to work out. The previous Saturday night, Seattle's season had ended with a loss to Kentucky in the NCAA championship game. As with Chamberlain a year earlier, even in a losing effort, Baylor was named Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four. Now, less than 48 hours after that crushing loss, Castellani was on a fishing expedition at Baylor's old high school.

"They told me to get my sneakers on and get down to the gym," Dunston says. "John Castellani came to D.C. straight from the championship game, looking for players."

Dunston went on to play at Seattle alongside John Tresvant, another Spingarn alum. Tresvant was a benchwarmer during Baylor's days at Spingarn, and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force after graduation. Tresvant signed with the school after his military obligation was finished, and set a school record for rebounds (40). He spent nine years playing in the NBA, including a stint alongside Baylor and Chamberlain with the Lakers.

But Castellani, despite bringing a team to the NCAA championship game, was gone by the time Dunston and Tresvant arrived. Shortly after the 1958 season ended, Castellani got caught improperly paying for an airplane ticket for Ben Warley, who'd played with Baylor on the playgrounds for years, including during Chamberlain's 1957 visit.

Castellani, just 29 years old when he took the Seattle job, admits he broke the NCAA's rules all those years ago. But Castellani has come to terms with the zealotry with which he pursued recruits from

Baylor's old stomping grounds. "We would have won at least two NCAA titles had we got [Warley]," he says.

(Warley died in 2002. After the Seattle scandal, Warley ended up playing at Tennessee State and winning two NAIA championships there, then having an eight-year pro career, some of which was spent with the Philadelphia 76ers as Wilt Chamberlain's roommate. Warley's son, Carlin Warley, would break Chamberlain's career high school scoring record for the state of Pennsylvania in the late 1980s.)

Though penalized for not playing by the rules, Castellani clearly recognized where basketball was headed. Chamberlain and Baylor's playground tête-à-têtes, and the Seattle coach's pursuit of Baylor's Kelly Miller mates, came at the cusp of black dominance of college basketball. In March 1957, Tennessee State won the NAIA title for small colleges, becoming the first all-black basketball squad to win a national collegiate championship. The big schools were following suit: Chamberlain was the only non-white player on the 1957 consensus All-American team; just one year later, five of the six consensus All-Americans, including Chamberlain and Baylor, were black.

D.C. provided a lot of the color.

"After Elgin, through my high school and college years, there wasn't another area in the country that produced as many guys who could play — and I'm talking about All-Americans and NBA players — as D.C.," says Bing, who was a consensus All-American at Syracuse before his Hall of Fame NBA career.

The playgrounds prepped him for bigger venues.

Chambers also credits Baylor for kick-starting a boom in Kelly Miller exports to the rest of the basketball world.

"Elgin's the one who got us all to go to college," says Chambers. "He showed us it could be done. Nobody from D.C. had ever gone away [to play college or pro ball], so we all thought you had to be as good as Elgin to get out of town. We wanted to be like him. You cannot say enough about how much Elgin meant to guys in D.C." (After Chambers was named MVP at the NCAA Final Four, played in College Park, Maryland, his coach at Utah, Jack Gardner, was asked by a reporter from the *Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star* if he was sticking around D.C.: "If there's another Chambers here, let me know," he said. "I'll stay a month.")

Baylor went pro after the 1958 season, shortly after announcing his engagement to Ruby Saunders. Though he still had a year of college eligibility left, Baylor was eligible for the NBA draft, since he'd sat out a year after transferring from Idaho.

Baylor told the press at the time he was leaving school "for personal reasons." He now says the firing of Castellani and the NCAA penalties inspired his exit.

"I was really upset with the fact that they got rid of the coach. I didn't think it was fair to break up the team after the success we'd had that season," Baylor says.

Chamberlain came back to D.C. for Baylor's wedding in June 1958, and a photo of Baylor lifting his bride high so she could kiss Wilt appeared in the *Washington Post*. The nuptials allowed Chamberlain another chance to take on Baylor on the playgrounds.

"I watched Wilt and Elgin play at Kelly Miller the weekend of the wedding. I think they even played the morning of the wedding," says Chambers. "It was like every ballplayer in town was watching those games."

Baylor says that when he decided to make the jump to the NBA, he was "most excited about being drafted by the Knicks, playing in New York." The Knicks had the third pick in the 1958 NBA draft.

Instead, the Minneapolis Lakers took Baylor with the first overall selection, and gave him a \$20,000 contract as a rookie. He spent his whole playing career with that organization, with the franchise moving to L.A. after Baylor's second year. Management spent the next few decades mining Baylor's old hometown for talent: Baylor was just the first of five D.C. ballplayers chosen by the Lakers in the first round of the NBA draft between 1958 and 1984. (Chambers, Kermit Washington, Kenny Carr, and Spingarn alum Earl Jones were the others.)

That Olds convertible that carried Wilt to D.C. for his series with Baylor eventually helped drive him out of college. An AP story that appeared in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* in May 28, 1958 went over how the car had aroused suspicions of rule-breaking. "I bought a cheap car several years ago and just worked up," Chamberlain said in the story. That tale didn't hold, alas. NCAA executive director Walter Byers put KU basketball on two years' probation. Byers, who was atop the NCAA from 1951 to 1987, wrote in his 1997 memoir, *Unsportsmanlike Conduct*, that his investigation into Chamberlain and KU found that the Olds convertible "had been provided to Wilt without cost" and that the school tried to hide the car by parking it indoors in a booster's garage.

After the 1958 season, Chamberlain was still ineligible for the NBA, because the league only accepted ballplayers whose original college class had graduated. The Harlem Globetrotters, however, had no such edicts preventing college kids from signing. Before KU's punishment took effect, Chamberlain agreed to a \$65,000 deal to play with the barnstorming entertainment troupe. He applied for the NBA draft a year later.

Baylor ran into Wilt throughout their long careers in the NBA. They played with or against each other in nine All-Star games, and were teammates for the four years before Baylor's 1971 retirement. Baylor says that he and Chamberlain only discussed their playground games one time, near the end of his career. Wilt brought up the old days in the locker room.

"It was years after, and Wilt was still mad," says Baylor. "I said my teams always won, and he said that I only won because I also picked the teams. He said I got all the good players, because I was from D.C., and he had to take what was left."

Was Wilt telling it like it was?

"Of course," Baylor says. "Home-court advantage."

Dave McKenna is a writer in Washington, D.C.



Share This

- [FACEBOOK](#)
- [TWITTER](#)
- [E-MAIL](#)
- [PRINT](#)

From: rod_bel@comcast.net
Subject: An asterisk to the Baylor-Wilt story
Date: May 16, 2012 10:27:04 PM PDT
To: jim coshow <the.bender@comcast.net>

~~Jim~~

I forwarded the Baylor-Wilt story to J Michael Kenyon. I sorta knew he would have some addendum (or whatever) from his own memory bank and tireless research efforts. Here's what he replied to me >>>>

+++++

The article left out an interesting Seattle connection regarding Ben Warley, whose airplane ticket was among the reasons cited by the NCAA for putting the Chiefs on the ban in April 1958 and sent Castellani out the door.

Nine years later, ('67) Warley was selected by the SuperSonics in the NBA expansion draft ... but soon after telling Sonic GM Don Richman he was committed to playing in Seattle (he would have been a starter), reneged and was wooed away by the Anaheim Amigos of the American Basketball Association.

An ironic twist, of course, is that the Amigos were coached by Al Brightman, who had played a major role in luring Baylor to Seattle.

The Sonics brought suit against the Anaheim team, trying to prevent Warley from playing, but he spent the last three years of his career in the ABA -- enjoying his best pro year ever in that Amigo season, 1967-68. I dunno whether the Sonics ever got any compensation.

The other thing I remember is that, at the time of the Seattle U probation in 1958, the names of the players (all from D.C. as I recall) Castellani had wooed with all manner of emoluments were not made public, since they were still mostly teen-agers (Warley was the exception; I think he was 21, having knocked around the DC playgrounds since leaving Phelps Vocational).

Consequently, when Warley was drafted by the Sonics -- another irony -- both myself and Gil Lyons, the Times guy covering the Sonics, missed the connection to the SU/Castellani scandal of nine years previous.

--JMK

P.S. -- Oh, and one other thing McKenna didn't quite explain (and which doesn't even show up on the web site where they list DC high school scoring records): When Jimmy Wexler set the DC prep record of 52 points in 1953, he was breaking the mark of 44 points set the previous season by Baylor, when he was a sophomore at Phelps Vocational (Spingarn not yet opened) and playing alongside Warley. Baylor, of course, then scored 63 for Spingarn against his former Phelps mates in 1954 to break Wexler's record and establish the mark which stands to this day.