

News



Les Payne

A scholar-athlete still scoring points

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The scholar in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar used to struggle to find its game. Unlike his love for basketball, this passion seemed unrequited. The resulting conflict didn't help defenders challenging the 7-foot-2 star who scored more points than any other player in the history of the National Basketball Association.

Had he not played basketball, Kareem said, he would have been a history teacher. The elite athlete with an intellect is as rare as the elite novelist with a skyhook. Nature occasionally endows one with both gifts, forcing a choice. Within former Knick Bill Bradley there seemed to have been a struggle between the All-American basketball star and the Oxford don. Even during Bradley's days on the court, the scholar often won out over the conflicted jock. Bradley went on to become a U.S. senator and presidential candidate.

On a grander scale, this Black History Month, one might ponder the life of singer-actor-activist Paul Robeson. The athletic impulse in the young Rutgers Phi Beta Kappa was as sturdy as the scholarly one housed in his 6-foot-3, 210-pound All-American football frame. Robeson reportedly went off to college hungry only to play football; yet he never allowed his grade average to fall below 95 - graduating as valedictorian heading for Columbia University Law School.

With Kareem, his remarkable coordination as a 6-foot-8 Catholic high school freshman, known then as Lew Alcindor, made basketball not an option but a given. Choosing between athletics and scholarship was a luxury the devoted only child could not afford in a society pressurized by commerce, competition and, in his case, racism. He was recruited to UCLA by Jackie Robinson, the first black to play in the major leagues, and by Ralph Bunche, the first African-American Nobel laureate and the first such U.S. diplomat at the United Nations.

More than any other leader on a team sport, Kareem immunized his players against losing. In 184 games in high school and at UCLA, Kareem's team lost only eight times - an astounding 95.7 percent winning rate. His championship play during 20 years in the NBA is legend.

Through all his athletic achievements, Kareem burned with a fire from a fuel that confounded his peers and the sporting press. "He was something more than a basketball player," Sports Illustrated.com wrote typically, "a thoughtful and articulate (when he chose to speak) man whose exterior hid a complex individual who never seemed comfortable with his celebrity. And doesn't to this day."

Like most African-American achievers of a certain age whose fuel confounded white Americans, Kareem was influenced as a young man by Malcolm X. In his book, "Kareem," he wrote: "[Malcolm X's] death hit hard because I knew he was talking about black pride, about black self-help and lifting ourselves up. I liked his attitude of non-subservience." Malcolm's autobiography impressed 19-year-

old Kareem more than any book he'd read, "turning me around totally. I started to look at things differently, instead of accepting the mainstream viewpoint."

Kareem's latest viewpoint is titled "On the Shoulders of Giants," and he brought it home to Hue-Man Bookstore in Harlem the other night. The book traces the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s through the art and lives of the men and women who made it happen. The icons are here, W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston; so, too, are the lesser-known, but deserving, such as sociologist Charles S. Johnson and Harlem basketball team owner "Smiling" Bob Douglas.

For the bookstore crowd, Kareem read a passage setting the civil rights record straight on Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong. [CORRECTION: Jazzman Louis Armstrong withdrew from a U.S. State Department tour of the Soviet Union in 1957 to protest the failure of federal troops to protect black students desegregating an Arkansas school. Because of an editing error, the reason he did not participate was misstated in last Sunday's Les Payne column. 2/11/07 Pg. A29 NS; A27 C] The legendary jazzman, called by some an unreconstructed Uncle Tom, spoke out in 1957 against the failure of federal troops to protect black students desegregating Little Rock (Ark.) Central High School, and for this he was dropped from a tour of the Soviet Union on behalf of the State Department.

"Louis' courage in standing up to President Eisenhower despite the consequences taught me something about the responsibility that someone in the public eye has to use their celebrity to make the world better."

Lesson learned, Kareem still uses his celebrity to make things better.