

# An Olympian's Oral History

DON BARKSDALE

*1948 Olympic Games – London  
– Basketball –  
Gold Medal*

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Published by the  
LA84 Foundation  
2141 W. Adams Boulevard  
Los Angeles, CA 90018  
[www.LA84org](http://www.LA84org)

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## **DON BARKSDALE**

Today is Sunday, December 15, 1991. This is Dr. Margaret Costa interviewing Don Barksdale, Olympic gold medalist in the 1948 London Olympic Games, in basketball.

**Q: Tell me about your childhood.**

A: I was born in 1923, in Oakland, California, on West and MacArthur and when I was about two years of age, my mother and father moved to Ashby Avenue in Berkeley where I attended King Elementary School and then Burbank Junior High School.

Next, my folks moved to Dorr Street in Berkeley and I attended Berkeley High School. Berkeley High School is located on Grove Street in Berkeley about a half mile from the University of California campus. Berkeley High School was an integrated school with about 2,000 students. Of the 2,000 students there were probably 300 blacks in 1938, '39 and '40. I competed in track and field and football. In addition, I went out for basketball three years in a row and never made the team. Comically, they used to cut us alphabetically and my name being "Barksdale," I probably was the first or second one cut each year. Many, many years later the school brought me back and gave me a letter and a blanket commemorating my basketball achievements. They were proud of the fact that I was an Olympian from the school and the coach, Jack Edy, was castigated quite often for the fact that he didn't allow blacks to play on his team often.

**Q: I want to know about your family. How many children were there? Were your parents athletes?**

A: My folks were both from Mississippi — one was from Durant and the other from Lexington — and neither one of them were athletes.

I think my mother possibly might have been an athlete because she was 5'9" and weighed 125 or 126 pounds. My dad started working very early at 19 or 20 and never quit until he was about 65. I had a brother and unfortunately my brother was killed in an accident when I was 10 and he was 12. We were playing on our porch and he jumped off the porch and a branch hit him and he was hurt falling down. He died because of a broken neck. It broke everybody's heart. His name was Billy.

His death occurred on Easter Sunday and about six years later, my mother had a little daughter, named Pam. I was 20 years older than Pam and she is doing beautifully as a schoolteacher now in Vallejo, with two boys who are both good athletes at ages 13 and 15.

We lived about four blocks from a playground — San Pablo Park playground — where I along with hundreds of other youngsters in Berkeley received a first chance to play sports. There was a guy who ran the playground named Dutch Rehnquist, who had a great interest in all of the kids. He successfully developed championship teams from this playground. Neighborhood kids that frequented San Pablo Park and all of us almost lived there. Many of them went on to become baseball players, basketball players, football players, in high school, college and even in pro sports.

Many more would have entered pro sports if they had not been closed to black athletes at the time. At San Pablo Park we used to have many black athletes who would have made major league baseball teams, pro football and basketball. Colleges were not even too open to blacks at that time. Athletes such as Billy Martin, Ray Lamanno, the Haney brothers, Johnny Allen came out of Berkeley. In addition, the former mayor of Oakland, Mayor Lionel Wilson was a baseball player at San Pablo Park. Mel Reid went on to fame with USF and a couple of other guys went to St. Mary's and San Jose State. All in all we all had peers that we looked up to and who came out of San Pablo playground. We have had three or four reunions of the San Pablo Park guys which, at one, 175 guys showed up at Stanley's Restaurant where we honored Dutch Rehnquist. Another time we honored Johnny Allen and Ray Lamanno.

There is still a closeness among San Pablo Park guys as we still get together about every two years at a restaurant in Berkeley. Even though I didn't play high school basketball, I lived every day for playing basketball at San Pablo Park. I think the transformation from a little kid trying to play basketball to becoming a good basketball player, happened right there at that park. I never will forget that when we first started playing, the guys would choose up sides and another kid and myself were the last two ever picked. He was a musician named Johnny Otis who is very famous now in the rhythm and blues field.

**Q: I want to focus on high school. When you were trying to get on the basketball team, were there certain positions that were ascribed to black players?**

A: No. There were no positions ascribed to them, in fact there were no positions. It was seldom that black players were allowed to play on the team. My friend [Emerson] Chapman played forward and I went out three years in a row and I did not make the team. Usually I was cut at the first or second practice session. The first year I understood it completely because I was only 5'7" or 5'8". The second year I had grown about 8 inches and I was a little clumsy but I could still play well. But the third year that I was cut, I never should have been cut. I should have made the team pretty easy. They didn't have positions that you played particularly, it was according to your height. There were other schools that were using black players.

As the years went by we developed a team at San Pablo Park that played up at the University of California in the preliminary game against Marin Junior College and we actually beat them. That is where I obtained my scholarship. My career probably would

have ended at Berkeley High school, as there was not much to offer in track and field and I was a lousy football player.

I think my career would have ended there had we not played up at the University of Cal. The coach of Marin Junior College, Dutch Klimer saw Emerson Chapman and me play and checked to find out what kind of kids we were. We had not been besieged by offers, so we ended up going to Marin Junior College where I got lucky, blossomed and we won the Northern California championships where I averaged about 18 to 20 points a game. Marin Junior College was in a league where there were eight schools, including Modesto Junior College, Stockton Junior College and Sacramento JC. There were some pretty great athletes in those junior colleges because that probably as far as the black athletes could get at that particular time and the competition was great. I think they kind of went out of their way to make you feel at home and comfortable. My years at Marin Junior College were very pleasurable and we won the championship both years. My friend Em Chapman and I were inseparable. We were buddies together and we played together and we still play golf together right now. At that point, UCLA started showing a lot of interest in recruiting me.

Going back to high school, although I was a lousy football player but I did play and I never will forget one Friday afternoon, we were playing at the same time UCLA was playing Cal at Berkeley. They were staying at the Durant Hotel and I was given the opportunity to meet Kenny Washington and Jackie Robinson. I was enthralled and so unbelievably happy to meet my idols who I had read about. As a consequence, I decided right then and there that if I ever had the chance, I was going to go to UCLA. So then when I was at Marin Junior College and UCLA started talking possibilities, the answer was definitely, "Yes I was interested." I finished playing, my eligibility at Marin Junior College in January of 1943, we were in a war at that time with Japan and UCLA wanted me to come down and join the team right away, during half season. I went and enrolled in UCLA January 18 and played eight games including a game against USC in which we beat them.

More exciting for me was that I scored 24 points making front-page headlines in the L.A. Times, Mirror and Herald Express. As a result, I became immediately well known in Los Angeles.

Unfortunately, after playing eight games the season was over and the Army beckoned me. I stayed from '43 to '45, two-and-a-half years. Luckily enough I went to Camp Lee, Virginia. At Camp Lee, Virginia I competed in track and field mostly, as there was no basketball team at Camp Lee. We competed on an inter-camp basis. I was a high jumper, a broad jumper — they call it the long jump now — and the hop, step and jump, which is now called the triple jump. I was pretty fortunate.

We had a five man track team made up of a kid named Frank Davis out of New York U., who ran the mile, Barney Ewell out of Philadelphia, who ran the 100 and 220, and a guy named Blakemore.

We went to the Penn Relays and we came in fourth in the whole country with five track athletes. I think Barney won the 100 and 220. I won the high jump and the broad jump, and the hop, step and jump. I was a sergeant and taught non-commissioned officers at Camp Lee, Virginia. That is why I stayed at Camp Lee for two years. I was then given a chance to get into special services and to come to Camp Wilmington in California where they were forming a basketball team for which I was facing the possibility of playing and coaching. A Captain Harring started writing to the Pentagon to try and obtain a transfer for me. Thurgood Marshall intervened and actually helped me get a transfer into special services. We played basketball there and had the best team in the nation that year, winning 37 games, lost one. During that year I was the leading scorer in the country so this is the year before I went back to UCLA. I finally exited the Army, went back to UCLA in '46-'47 when we won the Pacific Coast title. Later we were beaten in the NCAA finals, the furthest that UCLA had ever gone. That year, 1947, I was fortunate enough to be named the first black All-American in the United States. As it was such a great honor for me and was verified by Ebony Magazine and True Magazine. Although other players had honorable mentions, I was the first black player to make the All-American team legitimately. Some of my teammates on that '47 team, such as Alex Groza, Ralph Beard and Bob Kurland, also went on to great heights in basketball.

I graduated in December of '47 from UCLA. At that time, there were no opportunities in professional sports as the NBA had an unwritten law against admitting blacks. Although Jackie Robinson had broken the color line in baseball that year, basketball would still not accept blacks. Fortunately there were AAU basketball teams which were just about as big as the pros. In fact the AAU was bigger than the NBA at that time. The NBA only had eight or nine teams while the AAU teams were spread out all over the country. Such teams were the Denver Nuggets and the L.A. 20th Century-Fox team, the Golden State team, the Oakland Bittners, in San Francisco Stewart Chevrolet and Borlo AC, an Italian athletic club. AAU basketball was huge.

The originator of the Oakland Bittners contacted me and I gladly accepted. The first year, they had an All-American AAU team, beating the Phillips Oilers and gaining national recognition. By 1948 and the Summer Olympic Games, the Oakland Bittners team, the Phillips Oilers had won AAU titles, the University of Kentucky under Adolph Rupp won the NCAA. Five players from each one of those teams were picked for the Olympic team and then there were two at-large AAU players and two at-large college players. I was lucky enough to be one of the two at-large AAU players through the hard work of a guy named Fred Major and some other people. I made the Olympic team. I had to join the Phillips 66 team in Brownsville, Oklahoma. It was a little rough because there was extreme prejudice, extreme segregation. There were white and colored water fountains, different hotels and different travel arrangements. It was unbelievably ridiculous but it was the way things were in the South at that time. The ball players were all pretty good. One or two of them gave me a bad time but the majority were very supportive. The longer we were together the closer we became. To raise money for

the Olympic trip, we went to Kentucky and played against the University of Kentucky basketball team. We had some very, very good games with very big crowds and integrated Kentucky and Oklahoma for the first time in history. I was the first black to play among the white men. I am still in contact with some of the players that were on the '48 Olympic team. I started out with a very stormy relationship with Adolph Rupp.

When we came back on the [S.S.] America, which is the ship that transported all the athletes in '48, he made it his business to wait for me at the gangplank when we embarked at New York. In addition he told me that it was a pleasure coaching me in his first experience working with a black player. More importantly, he suggested that if he could find a black player for the University of Kentucky he would. He broke the SEC color line about six years later. Adolph Rupp and Bud Browning from the Phillips' Oilers were co-coaches of the '48 Olympic team. I actually played under Adolph Rupp for three months. Although it was a stormy relationship, he was a hell of a coach who knew his business. We used to call him silver tongue because he had such a way of talking the players into anything he wanted us to do. One very funny thing happened. I can tell you about it if you want. We played an exhibition at the University of Kentucky. It was the University of Kentucky playing against Bartlesville and I was a member of the Bartlesville team at that time.

Bartlesville, Oklahoma was the team location. They put a basketball court on the outdoor field and there were about 12,000 to 15,000 people there. To make a long story short, an incident happened the night before the game. I was staying with a black family and somebody called up and said, "If this guy is out there playing tomorrow night, he is going to get shot." It was a threat you know, and the people I was staying with were scared to death.

They put me on the phone and the guy said, "I'd advise you not to go out on that court tomorrow night. If you do you are going to get shot, bang." I told a few people about the fool. I also said, "I am not going to worry about it." We played the game. They used to make the black people sit in the end zone and then everybody else sat around. I am out on the court and we are playing and in the first half with three minutes to go before the half. The team took a time out. The trainer came out and had a little tray with a bottle of water and a bucket and some little cups and a towel.

He comes out and he is holding the tray up and Cab Renick reached the bottle and took a swig and put it back and spit in the bucket. The next guy picked up this bottle and took a swig and spit in the bucket. Now there are 12,000 to 15,000 white and about 1,000 blacks. I am the next man so here I am and I said, "Oh shit, what do I do?" I grabbed the bottle and took a swig and spit in the bucket just like everybody. In the mean time when I picked up the bottle the whole audience got quiet. Twelve thousand people shut up and the black people must have thought, "Oh here it comes." I said, "Oh my god." I hand the bottle to Shorty Carpenter and thought, "What's he going to do with it? If he turns down the bottle... ." He took it and held it was one half a second and took a drink and all of a sudden it broke the whole tension. Had he not drank after me, I do

not know how things would have proceeded. I have never forgotten him and I have said it a few times, "Thank god he was 6'7" and weighed 250." Nobody would mess with him anyway. He has never really realized what a great service he performed on that occasion. I was so happy that it happened. I remember that after the game that the black people present told me that they were just so scared for me. After that occurrence they were so happy that it had worked out the way it did, you know. It is a little thing, but a big thing. It was very important.

**Q: When you went to UCLA how many black players were on the team?**

A: In my first year, I think there was really only one black player on the team.

**Q: At UCLA, did it appear that black players played certain positions?**

A: No, I was 6-foot-6 and our coach was Mr. Wilbur Johns as I just missed Wooden by a year and a half. Wilbur Johns was one of the nicest gentlemen I have ever met in my life. I was 6'6" and I played center so there was no particular position for blacks. I had run into a kid named Dave Minor in the Army whom I talked him into coming to UCLA with me. Dave played guard and then there were a couple of other black players on the JV team.

**Q: Were you the first black player in any sport?**

A: No. Jackie Robinson had played before and they had Woody Strode, Jackie Robinson, Kenny Washington and Tom Bradley.

**Q: Were there any in basketball?**

A: Jackie Robinson played everything. Jackie was a legend and we always heard stories about things he did that were unbelievable.

I remember when Ducky Drake, the coach down there of the track team, was telling me that ... , "Jackie was playing baseball over at the tournament, and he was in a league game and during the seventh inning stretch, he ran over and broad jumped, and won the broad jump in his baseball uniform." The two fields were adjacent to each other and he came over in his baseball outfit and made one attempt and won the broad jump for UCLA that day in that meet. He then went back and finished his baseball game. These are things that you'd read and hear about, which are hard to believe, but are true.

**Q: When you traveled with UCLA was there any difficulty with accommodations?**

A: Well, when we went to New York on one trip and played at Madison Square Garden, we didn't win the game but I was lucky enough to be picked the outstanding player for that year at that tournament. I never will forget I played against Dolph Schayes who later on was a big star in the NBA.

**Q: What tournament was that?**

A: It wasn't a tournament. It was a doubleheader against NYU. It was a doubleheader. Playing in Madison Square Garden was fantastic, the dream of every ball player. UCLA was extremely careful about where they went. They had learned the hard way with Jackie and Kenny where not to go and to stay away from the South if there is a black player on the team. They would not book colleges who had any type of segregation of their athletes.

**Q: Tell me about the campus at UCLA.**

A: When I was down there, it was a small little village called Westwood Village and it was a gorgeous campus.

**Q: Was it called California South or Berkeley South?**

A: Yes, Cal was the big school and UCLA was out in the country.

The gymnasium was right on the highway. You could stand in front on the gymnasium and look up and you could see the Bel Air Hotel.

Across the street were eight or nine little stores with a park. I ran into Jimmy Stewart, sauntering by and I said, "Aren't you Jimmy Stewart?" He said, "Yeah," and we talked for five or ten minutes. Another time when I was standing in front of the gym, Bob Waterfield the football player and his friend Mickey Rooney drove up and jumped out of the car. He was trying to catch up with Waterfield. The lady in the car was Ava Gardner and she was beautiful. I never will forget that she had a 1946 black convertible Ford and she drove off toward the Bel Air Hotel. I sat there and watched that car disappear and I looked and I saw Mickey Rooney running to the gym trying to catch Bob Waterfield.

**Q: Did you have any thoughts of trying out for track?**

A: I competed in track and field [in the high jump].

**Q: What technique did you use? Western Roll?**

A: We used what they called the Western Style. Your hip and everything went over. Later on when the Fosbury Flop was accepted you could add 6 inches on to your height by using it, but my hip would go over it. I could jump maybe 6'2", 6'3" in high school, 6'4" once in a great while. In Marin Junior College I did better and I got up to 6'7" or 6'8", 6'7" probably, but at UCLA that's when I kind of blossomed out. I would broad jump 24 feet or 24 feet 5 inches and high jump 6 feet 7 inches, 6 feet 8 inches and I won the majority of our track meets and I actually won the Fresno Relays. I won the



high jump two years in a row and I was second in the broad jump one year and the hop, step and jump. I was a high-point man at Fresno that year.

Mel Patton was there, which is unbelievable. I never will forget Mel Patton won the 100 and he beat a guy named Lloyd LaBeach in 9.3. It was just one of the greatest 100s I've ever seen. He received a trophy that stood almost 28, 30 inches high. I won high-point honors and my trophy was about 6 inches. The 100 and the mile were the two prestigious trophies and the two prestigious events at the Fresno Relays at that time. If I had not made the basketball team, I was actually going to try out for the decathlon because in about six events I had very good marks. They were very close to [Bob] Mathias, and better in some events. The events that I wasn't very good at were the hurdles, the 1500 meters, the mile and the pole vault. I would have had a chance to make the Olympic team along with Bob. When I made it in basketball, I could not try for track as you could not compete in two of them.

**Q: How long before the ship left to go to London did you make the Olympic team?**

A: I had to join Brownsville and the Phillips team and we traveled about a month before the Olympic Games playing exhibitions to raise money. It was about two-and-a-half or three months before the Olympic Games.

**Q: Were you excited about going overseas?**

A: I had never been out of the states and the Olympic Games that year were in London and we stayed at Uxbridge.

**Q: With whom did you room on the S.S. America?**

A: I guess there were more than two of us in a room. We thought it was a pretty big ship until we docked next to the Queen Mary.

We spent most of our time on deck. We met the rest of the Olympic team and learned about the pitfalls that you would run into in London. There were also movies explaining the Olympic Games, how to treat the people and things to watch out for and things to do. It took us five days to get there, so everybody got to know everybody pretty well. I met Anne Curtis, Juno Stover, Patty Elsener and Vicki Draves. I believe Alice Coachman and other black women track athletes from Tuskegee and Tennessee State were also there. Looking at the photographs, there appears to be only three white women on the track team.

**Q: Did you have somewhere to train there in Uxbridge?**

A: Once we arrived we did not practice, as there were games every day.

**Q: Was it set up so that every team that attended the Games played every other team?**

A: Yes, each team played twelve games and we won all twelve games. We won twelve games and Argentina had 11-1 record having been beaten by us. Chile had a pretty good team. Mexico had a fairly good team. But in 1948 the United States was pretty far ahead of everybody, in size and knowledge. The only close game that we had was against Argentina.

**Q: Were they a tough team?**

A: Once they got ahead of us by 4 or 5 points and then they stalled.

**Q: Was there a basketball venue or were the Games held at Wembley Stadium?**

A: There was a small arena next to Wembley Stadium which was the site for the basketball competition. Basketball was not a big sport in London and to be truthful with you, the team that England put together, could have been beaten by the average girl's high school team in the U.S.

**Q: Tell me about receiving your gold medal.**

A: They presented the gold medals right at Wembley Stadium and at that time the presenters were Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip.

**Q: How did you feel when they were playing the national anthem?**

A: It is a great feeling. You are very proud and actually all of us were standing up there. I do not remember if we were holding hands but we were close enough to where we were in a triangle with our elbows and arms, in order to fit all fourteen of us on the podium. It was an indescribable feeling. Strangely enough, you find yourself looking at the medal maybe two- or three-times a year. You always put it in a safe place. You always find yourself pulling it out and just taking a quick look at it, turning it over and looking at both sides.

**Q: To see if it's still real?**

A: Yes. Then you put it away again. Never a year goes by that somebody does not mention the Olympic Games. One way or another, it comes up. Although it was never publicized too much, I was the first black Olympic basketball player too. So I had a number of firsts.

**Q: Did you get much attention in the press?**

A: The large amount of press was prior to the Games, discussing a black man playing in Oklahoma and Kentucky against white players. There was an article in the Parade Magazine. A guy had interviewed me and wrote an article. Some people in Los Angeles picked up on it and they became interested in making a movie, a thing called "Big Don and the Baron," and The Baron naturally was Rupp.

**Q: What did you do after your event was over? Did you go watch the events?**

A: I watched the other events. In fact, all during the time when I wasn't playing I was looking, mostly at track and field and the swimming. Naturally, I was really interested in track and field and I watched everything I could watch. In fact, I was in the dressing room when Mel Patton got second, threw up and was really ill. I watched Barney Ewell as he psyched himself up and Harrison Dillard who had lost the hurdles but he was going to come back and win the 100. We all felt kind of sorry for Mel Patton because he was the best of the sprinters. That day he just could not cut it. I think he came back and won the 200 meters.

**Q: Did you watch any of the decathlon?**

A: I saw the high jump and the broad jump. The only trouble with seeing the decathlon was that it started at 10 a.m. and went until about 11 o'clock at night. So I think I split about 8 o'clock that night.

**Q: How did you settle with the British food?**

A: Not too good. I thought the food was not too exciting at all.

**Q: Did you remember eating some Helms bread that was sent over?**

A: On the boat and in London, there were certain things that were sent over from the United States every day.

**Q: Did you get any of the chocolate that was sent over? It must have been you and Mel Patton, because he had a weakness for chocolate.**

A: It was Hershey wasn't it? I am still a chocolate nut. I go in and buy chunks of chocolate. I am insane about good milk chocolate. To this day, I am still a milk chocolate man.

**Q: Tell us about going to Paris?**

A: When the games ended, everybody was extremely happy and we journeyed to Paris to play some exhibition games. We were going to stay in Paris for possibly two weeks. We stayed in a nice hotel and played a few exhibition games and were able to do anything we felt like doing because the games were over. I remember where Adolph

Rupp earned the name "silver tongue" because we were Perth, Scotland. The mayor invited the team for either a lunch and we were to be honored. Adolph Rupp would give a key to the city of Louisville to the mayors. He had this beautiful smooth speech all prepared.

**Q: How was competition?**

A: Not very good. In fact, we played more exhibition among ourselves. In Paris they had a couple of teams that were pretty good.

**Q: Did you like the French food?**

A: I loved the French food and I loved the French people. I went to a club called Viva de Paris or something and saw some of the greatest dancing I have ever seen. The show stuck in my mind for years. I never will forget one was a tall tree on a stage and this lady started up at the top and she was a snake and she slid all the way down that whole tree and ended up down on the floor. We returned on the [S.S.] America.

**Q: When you returned home what happened?**

A: I stayed in New York for three days. There was a doctor friend by the name of Doc Evans and another friend Ishmael Evans who had both attended the Games. I bet him \$1,000 against a ticket to the Games that I could make the Olympic team. I made it so he had to come over. When we arrived back to New York, Doc asked us to drive his car back to California for him. As a consequence, we stayed in New York for about a week, and then drove his 1946 Lincoln Continental — the first one they made — back to California for him. This was '48 and I wondered what was coming up next. Unfortunately, many of the white guys were given pro offers.

Because the NBA was a closed shop for athletes I went back up to the Bittners and played. I think we fully expected that the NBA would open its doors, but they did not. It was a couple of more years before they started talking to black athletes about joining the NBA. I know that Ned Irish of New York Knicks was interested in me. By that time I had formed a beer distributorship and I was making pretty good money and playing. This is in '49 and '50 and the Bittners had gone out of business, but a team called the Blue and Gold Nuggets, which was a beer company, had picked up the sponsorship. I had the distributorship for Blue and Gold Beer in Oakland and started to make pretty good money at it. When they started talking to me about NBA in '50 I was not that interested, because the money they offered was less than I was making. I could have been the first black in the NBA had I listened to Ned Irish. Baltimore finally signed me in '51 at a salary that at that time was huge, \$20,000 a year. It was a \$60,000 contract for three years that was huge money at that time. Football players were making \$7,000 and \$8,000 and less.

Basketball players were getting \$7,000, \$8,000 and \$9,000 and I think at that time in '51 there were only about four players making more than \$20,000. One of them was George Mikan.

**Q: Tell me about your professional experience.**

A: I joined the team in Baltimore. It was not a good team as we finished in last place in 1952. In 1953, the second year, I made the All-Star Team. That was another first. I was the first black to ever play on the NBA All-Star Team. That was a pleasure.

Unfortunately a few things that occurred in Baltimore really upset me and I requested a trade and ended up with the Boston Celtics. So in '53 I went with the Boston Celtics and played in '53, '54 and '55.

**Q: How was the racism in Boston?**

A: A little rough. Coming out of Baltimore, Boston was a dream.

In Baltimore I could not go to the restaurants and eat. I had to eat at hamburger places. I could not stay at the hotel and the racism was a little bit rough. Boston by comparison was pretty good. I want to tell you this. I did not have time to be bulldozed by prejudice in a city because we were playing 70 games in a year. We were either on the road or playing at home.

The only people with whom we really came in contact with were fellow basketball players and a few outsiders. In Boston, I would say that the outside people were extremely hard to meet. Whether it was racism or what it was, they were just set aside. We had a coach name Red Auerbach, who kept your mind on basketball all the time. He was one of the best coaches I have ever played under. When we traveled to a place like St. Louis, there was always a problem. One of the nicest guys to ever play the game was Bob Cousy who welcomed me with open arms and made me feel at home in Boston. Another guy by the name of Johnny Most, a radio announcer also made me welcome. He and another guy named [Eddie] Miller, shared an apartment with me. They were both white and I was black and there was another black kid on the team, Chuck Cooper. We did not have time to think about racism.

**Q: How long were you with the Celtics?**

A: I played two years with Baltimore and two years with the Celtics. Unfortunately, I was 29 or 30 when I turned pro because the NBA had been closed to blacks for so long. I had lost three or four good years that I could have been playing. I do not think I ever reached my potential in pro ball, even though I did make the All-Star Team.

**Q: What did you do after you retired from the NBA?**

A: The reason I retired was that for a couple of years during the time I was playing, I had a disc jockey show where I played music. I was starting to make money as a disc jockey and I was getting a little nervous about flying. We were flying these two engine prop jets and we had experienced a few nervous times up in the air. In '55 I started making pretty good money in radio and decided that I would give up pro ball. I told Walter Brown, who owned the Boston Celtics and Red Auerbach that I knew a good prospect and that I would scout him for the Celtics. The kid's name was Bill Russell. I went to about 15 times to see Bill. I was crazy about him and recommended him highly to the Celtics. They traded the rights to Cliff Hagan and [Ed] Macauley to get the rights to Bill Russell. Walter Brown flew out here and we went to Bill Russell's wedding and sat down and talked to him, his father, and his brother and everybody else. Johnny talked him into going to Boston because the Globetrotters were trying to sign him. Even though Abe Saperstein was a friend, I thought that Bill Russell would be better off in the NBA than playing for a team that was more of a show than basketball. To this day, Bill Russell and I are good friends. That was the beginning of the Celtics great winning streak. I think they won 10 out of 11 championships. I started doing the radio thing, and was very successful in the radio business. I had studied business at UCLA and had learned that real estate was a good investment. The advice was, "Buy property and do not sell it." When I played pro ball I would buy a piece of property every year and it was the smartest move I ever made in my life. Right now I am set for life because I bought property back in '51, '52 and '53 and I still have it. I retired about 12 years ago when I owned a nightclub which I bought in 1960.

**Q: Where?**

A: In Oakland and I bought a piece of property and made a nightclub out of it in '60. In '63 I bought another one and was very involved. I wanted to bring in name acts to Oakland. I started with Lou Rawls and other big names. This was before all these people were known to the general public. Lou Rawls and I would have an act every week in my club. The acts were Lou Rawls, B.B. King, Ike and Tina Turner, Redd Foxx, Richard Pryor, Jackie Wilson, the Whispers, the Pointer Sisters, Count Basie, Joe Williams, Arthur Prysock. They were all unbelievable acts. They would receive airtime on R&B stations, but the white stations would not play them. As a result, we knew them, but the Caucasians did not know them. These acts were mine for four or five years.

**Q: What was the name of the club?**

A: It was called The Showcase. A guy by the name of Ernie Andrews and Nat King Cole and Billy Eckstine, were all friends. Lou Rawls to this day, comes up for the Waiters Luncheon for me. It is where celebrities wait tables and we raise money for high school sports in the Bay area. B.B. King and Lou Rawls and all these people have come and helped me on this thing and different athletes such as Ollie Matson help me out. Every year he has been with me.

**Q: Tell me about the Celebrities Waiters Luncheon.**

A: In 1983 after I retired, I read where high school kids were having big problems. Twenty percent of the schools in California were charging the kids to play sports. I decided I was going to do something about it. I formed a corporation called Save High School Sports, Inc. and started doing celebrity waiters. It has been a tremendous success. We have raised over \$600,000, for the school programs. It has to be equally distributed between the boys and girls. We are now in our eighth year. People like Willie Mays, Ollie Matson, Bob Sinclair, Joe Perry are all involved with me. I have raised \$100,000 a year and would love to see it go national.

**Q: What do you think of the changes that have been made in the Olympic Charter regarding amateurism?**

A: I think it was inevitable. In Europe the athletes have always been taken care of. I think the pro sports aspects are excellent. Athletics should be pushed because it keeps kids in school and out of trouble.

**Q: Do you think the professional salaries are getting out of line?**

A: I would say yes. The salaries are becoming unrealistic for the average person to understand. However the owners are making large amounts of money and therefore the people who earn it, the athletes, should also be well compensated.

**Q: What do you think of the Dream Team for '92?**

A: It is a dream team, completely a dream team. I would love to attend.

**Q: What advice would you give a young person who may be wanting to be an Olympian?**

A: I would say that if it is the goal for anybody to try to make the Olympics, the amount of work and the amount of dedication and the amount of practice that goes along with it, is tremendous. A person has to be ready to give the proper time to practice. The goal is worth achieving and 99 percent of the kids that try are not going to make it. If they are lucky enough to be that 1 or 2 percent that do make it, they should be thankful for life.

## METHODOLOGY

Dr. Margaret Costa, of California State University, Long Beach, conducted this interview. The interview was recorded on audiocassette and then transcribed. The interview addresses the following major areas:

### Family History

Date/place of birth; occupation of father/mother; siblings; family residence;

### Education

Primary and secondary schools attended; college and post-collegiate education;

### Sport-specific Biographical Data

Subject's introduction to sport – age, event and setting of first formal competition; coaches/trainers/ others who influenced athletic development; chronology of sports achievements; Olympic competition; post-Olympic involvement in sports;

### General Biographical Data

Employment history; marital history; children; communities of residence; retirement;

### General Observations

Reactions and reflections on Olympic experience; modernization of sport; attitudes on and involvement with the Olympic Movement; advice to youth and aspiring athletes.

Interview transcripts were edited and may include additional material based on subsequent conversations and/or subject's own editing.

The opinions and recollections expressed in this oral history are exclusively those of the Olympian interviewed. They do not necessarily reflect the positions, interpretations or policies of the LA84 Foundation.