

Robertson still taking strong opinions to the basket

By Peter Finney
New Orleans Times-Picayune
February 16, 2008

The Big O was still scoring points, not with that graceful jumper that bedeviled defenders for 14 seasons, but with words, from the hip, words from the heart.

A few samples.

"I'd like to see guys [today](#) try to guard Elgin Baylor. They couldn't do it. You couldn't outjump him or hang in the air longer than he did. He was unstoppable."

"If there's one thing I hate, it's the zone defense. As bad as they're playing defense [today](#), all a zone does is leave you with the feeling you don't have to guard anyone."

"You look at TV shows [today](#), you've got people rating the top 10 players, the top 30, on and on. And they haven't seen most of them play. Does that make any sense?"

"You know what makes me laugh? I see a guy taking it to the basket against a 7-footer. I see the 7-footer hit the floor. Charge, says the official. I hear the guy on TV say, 'Boy, what a great defensive move.' I say to myself: 'That's crazy. Why didn't the 7-footer try to block the shot.' "

Yes, Oscar Robertson, basketball's Big O, is full of opinions, the kind you can find in the man's autobiography, a book the Hall of Famer will be signing Sunday at the Barnes & Noble in Harvey.

It's part of an event presented by the National Basketball Retired Players Association, which Robertson co-founded, and by the Louisiana chapter of the National Kidney Foundation, for whom the Big O has served as a national spokesperson since donating a kidney to his daughter, Tia, in 1997.

On the court, the Big O was a first-ballot Hall of Famer, one of the NBA's top 50 players all-time. Off the court, as president of the Players Association, he spearheaded a class-action suit leading to free agency, a move that changed the balance of power in professional sports.

In college, he carried the University of Cincinnati to back-to-back NCAA championships, posting a career scoring record (33.8 points per game) that Pete Maravich later broke. In the NBA, he became the all-time champion of the "triple double," posting a double-digit average in points, rebounds and assists.

And he did it during a challenging era.

"Look, " said Robertson, "I was around when some of the greatest defenders in the history of the game were playing -- Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Nate Thurman, Walt Bellamy. We helped usher in the modern era of basketball. You wouldn't have the game as we know it without us."

There's no mincing of words.

He likes to bring up an observation by Hubie Brown, an assistant coach on the championship team the Big O was part of in Milwaukee.

"When they pick the top 10 players of all time, " said Hubie, "they are always going to pick the same four guards. Oscar Robertson, Michael Jordan, Jerry West and Magic Johnson. Oscar will always be one of the top 10 players to ever play. And then when people say Jordan was the greatest player in the history of the game, well, the guy he has to top was Oscar Robertson."

Whenever the Big O is asked how he would stack up against Jordan, he turns it around.

He asks: How would a Michael Jordan, or any of those playing [today](#), stack up against Oscar Robertson? How would they do against Jerry West or Wilt Chamberlain?

You bring up Jordan with the Big O, and the superlatives roll. But then he's adding names like Scottie Pippen, Horace Grant and Bill Cartwright, cast members who arrived in Chicago to assist Jordan in making the Bulls a dynasty.

He suggests it's the kind of help LeBron James awaits in Cleveland, the kind Robertson got with the championship Bucks.

By that time, the Big O had become the complete virtuoso, out-distancing anyone before and since in packaging points, rebounds and assists. Robertson finished with a mind-boggling 181 triple-doubles. Left in the dust: Magic Johnson (138), Jason Kidd (99), Wilt (78), Larry Bird (59).

The Big O had the one-on-one skills to create space for the jump shot, to drive and dish to the open man. If you're thinking of marketing, he was doing this before TV began recording every twitch for the highlight reels.

"When you see Kobe, " said Robertson, "you see a great offensive player. You also get the sense you see one who learned to play when a TV camera followed his every move." He called Bryant's style, and Jordan's, "the embodiment of flair, cherished by the cereal-box crowd and marketing executives."

"There's nothing wrong with that, " said Robertson.

But, as he puts it, to him, it is sort of like watching a re-run.

"If you watch Michael's patented fall-away jumper, his back-to-the-basket fall-

away, that's Oscar Robertson, " he said. "If you watch Magic Johnson protecting the ball with his body as he runs a half-court offense, then isolating his man on one side of the basket, bulling and backing him down, then spinning off his man, that's Oscar Robertson. I did these things before they were around to watch them."

It's all there. On tape.

In black and white.

Peter Finney can be reached at [\(504\) 826-3405](tel:5048263405).

CORRECTION / CLARIFICATION

Basketball record incorrect: A story in Saturday's sports section inaccurately described the University of Cincinnati's record when Oscar Robertson played there. He led the school to back-to-back NCAA Final Fours. Following Robertson's graduation, Cincinnati won NCAA titles in 1961 and 1962. [\(2/18/2008\)](#)

© 2008, New Orleans Times-Picayune