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Chamberlain's outsize impact

March 02, 2012 | By Rich Westcott

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Today marks the 50th anniversary of arguably the greatest achievement in sports history, Wilt Chamberlain's 100-point game. Accomplished with the Philadelphia Warriors in a win over the New York Knicks on March 2, 1962, Chamberlain's feat ranks as the highlight of a distinguished career. Paying tribute to it provides an opportunity to consider how he added a whole new dimension to his sport.

Over a career that spanned from 1959 to 1973, Chamberlain was the most dominant basketball player of all time, as well as the greatest athlete of any kind to come from Philadelphia - a city that has produced a huge assortment of all-time greats, including Roy Campanella, Bill Tilden, Tom Gola, and Bernard Hopkins. When he was still playing for Overbrook High School, in 1955, Chamberlain scored 90 points in a 32-minute game against Roxborough. I was there, and it was one of the most incredible sights I've seen.

Chamberlain ranks fourth among professional basketball's all-time scoring leaders, and first in rebounding. He won seven scoring and 11 rebounding titles. He is the only player who ever scored 4,000 points or averaged more than 50 points in a season. He was a four-time Most Valuable Player and a 13-time All-Star.

"Wilt was so good that you had to get the ball to him," Warriors great Paul Arizin once told me.

But records don't tell the full story of the Hall of Famer's contributions to the game. "Dippy," as his fans still refer to him, was a true basketball pioneer whose influence persists to this day.

To begin with, Chamberlain reinvented the game's offense. Before him, basketball players performed mostly away from the basket, and a center's chief weapon was the hook shot. But Chamberlain fashioned a game in which he and other big men were stationed underneath the hoop; dunk shots, tap-ins, and layups were his main offensive weapons.

While such shots were seen occasionally before the arrival of the 7-foot-1½-inch superstar, his style changed the way the game was played for good. Indeed, it was because of Chamberlain, who also honed the art of shot-blocking and who never fouled out of a game, that the lane (the restricted area around the basket) was widened from 12 to 16 feet.

Image 1 of 2 View G



Fans and teammates congratulate Philadelphia Warrior Chamberlain after he scored... (PAUL VATHIS / Associated Press, File)



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Professional basketball had seen only a few players as tall as Chamberlain, and with the exception of George Mikan and a handful of others, most were not very good. Wilt showed what a skillful giant could do. And his productive fadeaway jump shot, a technique rarely used back then, is a regular part of the repertoires of today's players.

The Big Dipper also played an often-overlooked role in the full integration of the NBA. Although Bill Russell, Elgin Baylor, and Maurice Stokes were outstanding African American players before Chamberlain, the NBA was still behind baseball and football. Wilt, who had attracted national attention and become an idol for young black players everywhere, helped to break down the remaining barriers through his incomparable performances.

The year before Chamberlain's rookie season, there was just one African American (Baylor) among the NBA's leading scorers. By 1961-62, five of the league's eight top scorers were black, and it was well on its way to being fully integrated.

In that and many other ways, perhaps more than any other player, Wilt Chamberlain made basketball what it is today.

Rich Westcott is a historian and the author of numerous books on Philadelphia sports, including "The Mogul," about basketball legend Eddie G. He can be reached at rnwestcott@juno.com.

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