

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

BILL RUSSELL

athlete, coach, activist

“Concentration and mental toughness are the margins of victory.”

Page | 1



Background Information

Born: February 12, 1934 in Monroe, Louisiana

Bill Russell grew up in poverty and constantly faced racism throughout his life. Russell attended the University of San Francisco from 1953-1956. Russell was then the 2nd overall pick in the first round of the National Basketball Association (NBA) 1956 Draft.

Russell's Resistance

Growing up, Russell dealt with hardships of poverty and racism, and these discriminatory sentiments followed him throughout his professional basketball career in Boston. Boston had a reputation of having white-dominated sports' rosters, and, unfortunately, Russell's impressive athleticism struggled to alter the hearts of the city's fans.¹ He was frustrated by the racist reactions he received on and off the court and decided to use the hatred as fuel for his involvements as a Civil Rights leader.

Russell admired how Jackie Robinson used his fame to heighten his activism, so Russell began to spread messages advocated for desegregation and equal opportunity nationwide. For example, Russell began boycotting games and events where he and his African American teammates were welcomed with racial slurs and segregated from their fellow players. Additionally, he supported Muhammad Ali's refusal to fight in the Vietnam War along with other public figures. Russell's high-profile name increased attention to the demands and actions of the Civil Rights Movement.²

Achievements

Russell created an extremely impressive athletic resume, filled with NCAA titles, MVP awards, and Olympic Gold Medals. In 1966, he became the first African American head coach of an NBA team, the Boston Celtics. In 2013, 44 years after he had retired from the NBA, a statue was erected in his honor at Boston City Hall Plaza.³ In 2011, he received the Medal of Freedom, the highest honor a citizen can receive, from President Barack Obama. Obama wanted to recognize Russell not solely for his achievements on the court and historical advancements in the NBA, but for being an important advocate of civil rights and equality.

¹ Levy, M. (2015). Bill Russell: Civil Rights Leader and Champion. Sconnie Sports Talk. Retrieved from <https://sconniesportstalk.com/2015/10/29/bill-russell-civil-rights/>

² Merlino, D. (2011). Bill Russell, Civil Rights Hero and Inventor of Airborne Basketball. Boston Celtics. Retrieved from <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/682589-bill-russell-civil-rights-hero-and-inventor-of-airborne-basketball>

³ The White House Office of the Press Secretary. (2010). President Obama Names Presidential Medal of Freedom Recipients.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/17/president-obama-names-presidential-medal-freedom-recipients>

