

News

Russell Was a Champion of Activism Before Winning NBA Titles

By KYLE HIGHTOWER
AP Sports Writer

BOSTON (AP) — Bill Russell never had to find his voice as an activist. He didn't know any other way but to speak his mind.

It's what made the winningest athlete in team sports one of the greatest champions of activism. His belief in equality and the stances he took helped create a pathway that athletes today continue to walk in.

Len Elmore, who played 10 seasons in the NBA and is a senior lecturer at Columbia University where he's taught on athlete activism and social justice in sports, called Russell's social contributions "immortal."

"He showed many of us in the game how to be," Elmore said.

Before Russell, who died Sunday at age 88, developed the skills that would make him an 11-time NBA champion with the Boston Celtics, two-time Hall of Famer and an Olympic gold medalist, he had a front row view of the racial indignities endured by his parents as he grew up in segregated Monroe, Louisiana.

In a time when Jim Crow laws in the South existed to silence the views of Black people, he was groomed to be an unapologetic thinker.

"I have never worked to be well-liked or well-loved, but only to be respected," Russell wrote in his 1966 book "Go Up For Glory." "I believe I can contribute something far more important than mere basketball."

That conviction was

rooted in what he observed as a child in the late 1930s and early 1940s in Louisiana, where his father, Charles, worked at a paper bag company.

Russell was with him at a gas station one day when the attendant ignored them as he talked to a white man and then proceeded to provide service to other cars that had arrived after them.

Charles was about to drive off when the attendant pulled a gun and said, "Don't you try that, boy, unless you want to get shot," Russell recalled in his book.

His father responded by grabbing a tire iron and chasing the man away.

Decades before Colin Kaepernick's national anthem demonstrations to raise awareness about police brutality, or the



Bill Russell grins at announcement that he had been named coach of the Boston Celtics basketball team, April 18, 1966. The NBA great Bill Russell has died at age 88. His family said on social media that Russell died on Sunday, July 31, 2022. Russell anchored a Boston Celtics dynasty that won 11 titles in 13 years. (AP Photo, File)

collective sports world advocating for justice following the 2020 death of George Floyd and

others, Russell used his platform to hasten civil rights.

It's why when Russell later faced his own forms of discrimination decades later, he didn't hesitate to challenge the status quo.

One of the first examples was 1961 when the Celtics were in Lexington, Kentucky for an exhibition game.

The team was in their hotel when teammates Sam Jones asked Satch Sanders to go to the lobby to get some food. They were refused service.

Later they were met by Russell and K.C. Jones. After Sam told them what had happened, Russell suggested none of the Black players should participate in the game and informed Celtics coach Red Auerbach.

The game would be called off after two more players from the St. Louis Hawks joined the protest.

When former President Barack Obama presented Russell with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011, he called it an example of how he "stood up for rights and dignity of all men."

Russell didn't just risk sully his reputation, he put his life at risk in the wake of the 1963 assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi. Just days after Evers was slain, Russell reached out to the leader's brother, Charles Evers. He wanted to inquire about what he could do to help.

Charles Evers asked him if he'd be willing to visit the state and stage its first integrated basketball camp. It was a huge ask considering the very real peril Russell would be putting himself in by visiting a city riddled with members of the Ku

Klux Klan. Still, Russell accepted the invitation. "I didn't want to go to Mississippi. I was like anyone else. I was afraid I might get killed," Russell would later write. "My wife asked me not to go. Some friends said the same thing. A man must do what he thinks is right. I called Eastern Airlines and ordered my ticket."

Despite coming off his third MVP award and fifth NBA title, Russell said "without hesitation" he'd have left the Celtics that season if his continued presence in Mississippi or anywhere else could have advanced civil rights push.

"If my popularity depends on a thing like this, I don't give a damn," he said at the time.

A star of Russell's stature to show a willingness to put his convictions ahead of his athletic career put him in a small group during that time like Muhammad Ali, Lew Alcindor (now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and Jim Brown.

And it was Russell, Alcindor and Brown sitting beside Ali in Cleveland in 1967 when the boxer announced he was refusing induction into the U.S. military to fight in the Vietnam War.

Current Celtics star Jaylen Brown, one of several young NBA players who have used their own platforms to raise awareness and engage in social justice protests, said it was Russell who first taught him "it is OK to be more than just a basketball player."

It echoed what Russell wrote in 1966 about how he wished to be remembered.

"In the end, I live with the hopes that when I die it will be inscribed for me: Bill Russell. He was a man."

Nichols

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89.

Her son Kyle Johnson said Nichols died Saturday in Silver City, New Mexico.

"Last night, my mother, Nichelle Nichols, succumbed to natural causes and passed away. Her light however, like the ancient galaxies now being seen for the first time, will remain for us and future generations to enjoy, learn from, and draw inspiration," Johnson wrote on her official Facebook page Sunday.

"Hers was a life well lived and as such a model for us all."

Her role in the 1966-69 series earned Nichols a lifelong position of honor with the series' rabid fans, known as Trekkers and Trekkies. It also earned her accolades for breaking stereotypes that had limited Black women to acting roles as servants and included an interracial onscreen kiss with co-star William Shatner that was unheard of at the time.

Shatner tweeted Sunday: "I am so sorry to hear about the passing of Nichelle. She was a beautiful woman & played an admirable character that did so much for redefining social issues both here in the US & throughout the world."

George Takei, who shared the bridge of the USS Enterprise with her as Sulu in the original "Star Trek" series, called her trailblazing and incomparable. "For today, my heart is heavy, my eyes shining like the stars you now rest among, my dearest friend," he tweeted.

Nichols' impact was felt far beyond her immediate co-stars, and many others in the "Star Trek" world also tweeted their condolences.

Celia Rose Gooding, who currently plays Uhura in "Star Trek: Strange New Worlds," tweeted that Nichols "made room for so many of us. She was the reminder that not only can we reach the stars, but our influence is essential to their survival. Forget shaking the table, she built it."

"Star Trek: Voyager" alum Kate Mulgrew tweeted, "Nichelle Nichols was The First. She was a trailblazer who navigated a very challenging trail with grit, grace, and a gorgeous fire we are not likely to see again."

Like other original cast members, Nichols

also appeared in six big-screen spinoffs starting in 1979 with "Star Trek: The Motion Picture" and frequented "Star Trek" fan conventions. She also served for many years as a NASA recruiter, helping bring minorities and women into the astronaut corps.

More recently, she had a recurring role on television's "Heroes," playing the great-aunt of a young boy with mystical powers.

The original "Star Trek" premiered on NBC on Sept. 8, 1966. Its multicultural, multiracial cast was creator Gene Roddenberry's message to viewers that in the far-off future — the 23rd century — human diversity would be fully accepted.

"I think many people took it into their hearts ... that what was being said on TV at that time was a reason to celebrate," Nichols said in 1992 when a "Star Trek" exhibit was on view at the Smithsonian Institution.

She often recalled how Martin Luther King Jr. was a fan of the show and praised her role. She met him at a civil rights gathering in 1967, at a time when she had decided not to return for the show's second season.

"When I told him I was going to miss my co-stars and I was leaving the show, he became very serious and said, 'You cannot do that,'" she told The Tulsa (Okla.) World in a 2008 interview.

"You've changed the face of television forever, and therefore, you've changed the minds of people," she said the civil rights leader told her.

"That foresight Dr. King had was a lightning bolt in my life," Nichols said.

During the show's third season, Nichols' character and Shatner's Capt. James Kirk shared what

was described as the first interracial kiss to be broadcast on a U.S. television series. In the episode, "Plato's Stepchildren," their characters, who always maintained a platonic relationship, were forced into the kiss by aliens who were controlling their actions.

The kiss "suggested that there was a future where these issues were not such a big deal," Eric Deggans, a television critic for National Public Radio, told The Associated Press in 2018. "The characters themselves were not freaking out because a Black woman was kissing a white man ... In this utopian-like future, we solved this issue. We're beyond it. That was a wonderful message to send."

Worried about reaction from Southern television stations, showrunners wanted to film a second take of the scene where the kiss happened off-screen. But Nichols said in her book, "Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories," that she and Shatner deliberately flubbed lines to force the original take to be used.

Despite concerns, the episode aired without blowback. In fact, it got the most "fan mail that Paramount had ever gotten on 'Star Trek' for one episode," Nichols said in a 2010 interview with the Archive of American

Television.

Born Grace Dell Nichols in Robbins, Illinois, Nichols hated being called "Gracie," which everyone insisted on, she said in the 2010 interview. When she was a teen her mother told her she had wanted to name her Michelle, but thought she ought to have alliterative initials like Marilyn Monroe, whom Nichols loved. Hence, "Nichelle."

Nichols first worked professionally as a singer and dancer in Chicago at age 14, moving on to New York nightclubs and working for a time with the Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton bands before coming to Hollywood for her film debut in 1959's "Porgy and Bess," the first of several small film and TV roles that led up to her "Star Trek" stardom.

Nichols was known as being unafraid to stand up to Shatner on the set when others complained that he was stealing scenes and camera time. They later learned she had a strong supporter in the show's creator.

In her 1994 book, "Beyond Uhura," she said she met Roddenberry when she guest starred on his show "The Lieutenant," and the two had an affair a couple of years before "Star Trek" began. The two remained lifelong close friends.

Another fan of Nichols

and the show was future astronaut Mae Jemison, who became the first Black woman in space when she flew aboard the shuttle Endeavour in 1992.

In an AP interview before her flight, Jemison said she watched Nichols on "Star Trek" all the time, adding she loved the show. Jemison eventually got to meet Nichols.

Nichols was a regular at "Star Trek" conventions and events into her 80s, but her schedule became limited starting in 2018 when her son announced that she was suffering from advanced dementia.

Nichols was placed under a court conservatorship in the control of her son Johnson, who said

her mental decline made her unable to manage her affairs or make public appearances.

Some, including Nichols' managers and her friend, film producer and actor Angelique Fawcett, objected to the conservatorship and sought more access to Nichols and to records of Johnson's financial and other moves on her behalf. Her name was at times invoked at courthouse rallies that sought the freeing of Britney Spears from her own conservatorship.

But the court consistently sided with Johnson, and over the objections of Fawcett allowed him to move Nichols to New Mexico, where she lived with him in her final years.

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