

## Sports Column: The Generation Issue

By Henry Hargitai

Bill Russell was many things. He was *dominant*, winning five MVP awards throughout his 13-year career with the Celtics. He was *resilient*, staring adversity in the face as he played through the civil rights movement. He was also *unparalleled*, winning eleven NBA championships, more than any other player in league history.

Despite his illustrious career, however, there is one more thing the career of Bill Russell is: misunderstood.

While time moves forward, so has the evolution of man, modern medicine, and the development of the NBA. When fans and journalists argue about the NBA greats, one key speculation has to do with how athletes would fare in other generations. And upon closer examination of Russell's physical attributes, his opposition and the coverage of his famed career, we may wonder how a player like Bill Russell may do in today's NBA game.

When the Celtics drafted the 6'10" Russell in 1956, he became one of only four players in the league standing at his height or higher. In an era where the NBA had only eight teams, his overwhelming size gave every team issues under the basket. Today, however, the average NBA small forward stands at 6'7", and the average center at 6'11". Today, Russell would find himself undersized at center, but not skilled enough to play the traditional small forward position. He's what we call a "tweener," someone who's stuck in between positions due to differences in size and skill.

But of course, height isn't everything.

There's this wonderful tool we call statistics that help us determine how individual players stack up against each other. And in the case for Russell being one of the NBA greats, most refer to his eleven championships and his five MVP awards. There's certainly no arguing those, however, another key component that fans often revered Russell for was his outstanding ability to block shots.

Russell's shot-blocking ability was described as "strategic," as reporters who watched him noted that he would often block shots in specifically-planned directions so his team could run out on the fast break, something unheard of today. It was rumored that Russell once blocked an astonishing *twenty-eight* shots in one game. But before you move on to the next sentence, focus on one keyword: *rumored*.

In fact, nobody is even sure how many blocks Bill Russell actually had, given "blocks" weren't an officially recorded stat until 1973 when Russell was out of the league. That said, it's tough to know actually how good Russell was at blocking shots, given we have no measurable evidence of this skill. It was also rumored that I had 36 steals and 104 rebounds last time I laced them up at the YMCA. Should we believe that, too?

One stat that was definitely recorded, however, were points. And even in that category, Russell was shockingly inefficient. Despite being the tallest and most athletic player in nearly every game he played, Russell never managed to average more than 20 points per game. Additionally, Russell only shot better than 60% from the free throw line *twice* in his career and never shot better than 50% from the field. His field goal percentage is extraordinarily shocking, given most of his shots were coming from less than fifteen feet from the basket.

Now of course, there was less emphasis on outside shooting back then than there is today, so it's hard to knock Russell for his inability to hit the outside shot. But even then, there were forwards and centers who could let it fly, which gives me hope that there were in fact players of that '50s and '60s who may have a better shot at playing in today's NBA game than Russell would.

Take, for example, Dolph Schayes, a center for the Syracuse Nats (now the Philadelphia '76ers). Schayes was nicknamed "The Corn Beef King of Long Island," a name coined from his day job as the manager of corn beef distribution company in the tri-state area. On the court, however, he was best known for his outside shot which was high-arcing and tough to stop with his 6'7" frame. Schayes described his game by saying, "Even though I was really tall, I never played inside because in the three-on-three game, it was frowned upon. We just played the pure game of pass, cut, pick-and-roll, spread the floor. It was a game of motion." Despite not having half the skill-set that Russell had, Schayes mentions hallmarks of today's NBA game that don't exactly show up in Russell's arsenal.

But it isn't just his words that make me think he'd be a better fit in today's NBA game. Schayes, in only 30 more career games than Russell, had him beat in points, points per game, free throw percentage and All-NBA Team selections. Granted they were different players, as Schayes was a pure scorer and Russell a better all-around player, it's key to remember that did all of this while at the same time managing the distribution of a staple in New York sandwiches. You may think this doesn't matter. But ask any New Yorker how hard it would be to not punch the first person you see after eating a soggy, improperly salted corn beef sandwich on his or her lunch break.

Head to head, however, I must acknowledge Russell's dominance over Dolph Schayes. In 1960, Russell once pulled down an outrageous 51 rebounds against Schayes, who modestly collected a mere 13, in addition to being held to a dismal 5/18 shooting. But what could you expect? All day, Schayes was busy scheduling shipments and making sure the beef was properly salted to go along with some sauerkraut and russian dressing. Trying to box out Bill Russell after a long day of managing a food distribution business was simply too much to handle.

So where does that leave us? Sure, Russell was dominate for his time, but numbers suggest he could have been more efficient. Yes, he won eleven championships, but the majority of his opponents were in the midst of the biggest insurance sale of his life prior to matching up against him. Journalists praised his shot blocking ability, yet nobody is quite sure exactly how many he had. His career has about as many question marks as it does championships.

At the end of the day, perhaps the best we can do is speculate about how Russell may do in today's NBA game.

We can imagine a hypothetical game '7' of the NBA finals, where Bill Russell has the ball with ten seconds to go. Maybe he goes right, maybe left. Perhaps a spin move to clear space, followed by a pump fake. And with three seconds to go, Russell lets a shot fly over LeBron James, only for the heavens to decide its outcome.

While that's happening, the rest of us can watch, wonder and argue until all is said and done.

And then maybe, if we can agree to, share a corn beef sandwich prepared by the corn beef king himself.

