

Robertson was MJ ... before MJ

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The last time I spoke to Wilt Chamberlain, 13 months before he died on Oct. 12, 1999, out of nowhere he appealed: "Don't ever let people forget how good we were."

Oscar Robertson was one of those unforgettable, too-good-to-be-true players. While his much-saluted triple-double preeminence makes it impossible for contemporary (i.e. largely oblivious regarding NBA history) fans to overlook, the majority, having only witnessed his meticulous wide-ranging efficiency in grainy film snippets, can't comprehend such greatness.

What's more, their captivation with Michael Jordan forbids them from facing the unfathomable reality: There once was a 6-foot-5 guard - the league's first big playmaker - who was as shrewdly competent and uncompromisingly competitive.

In the minds of many, Jordan's six championship rings to Oscar's one abruptly ends all comparisons. The disparity certainly seems to separate the two of a kind. Except for Scottie Pippen, Michael's crowned Jordanares were transposable. Oscar didn't cash in until late in his career when he joined forces with Lew Alcindor/Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Conversely, His Airness didn't have to combat Bill Russell's Celtics, or Wilt's 76ers, or Bob Pettit's Hawks. Meaning the more facts and figures factored into the equation, the more indivisible Jordan and Robertson become.

For example, if you combine Oscar's first five NBA seasons, he averaged a triple-double. The Elias Sports Bureau has done the math - 30.3 points, 10.4 boards and 10.6 assists. He's actually one-tenth of a rebound shy of averaging a triple-double for six seasons.

Additionally, "whomever he defended felt like he was bench pressing a California mortgage," duly notes former Bucks play-by-play connoisseur Eddie Doucette.

This is why numerous antique dealers of league lore - Wayne Embry and Al Attles, to name two - unequivocally identify The Big O as the game's all-time No. 1 passer and perfectionist as well as its supreme being.

As dumb luck would have it, I caught the full fragrance of Oscar's majesty at his first recital at the old Madison Square Garden, 50th Street and Eighth Avenue. It was the 1957-58 season and he was a sophomore at the University of Cincinnati, in town to play Seton Hall. I was a high-school sophomore and had been given a ticket to see four college teams that meant nothing to me; the attraction was the stimulation of being at the Garden and the next day bragging to friends about being there.

Man, was that ever the place to be that night. Gushing points like an open hydrant, this guy I'd never heard of before saturated the stat sheet for 56 points. I had no idea a player could be so flawless in so many facets.

"Oscar was an illusionist in sneakers, so smooth and clever on the floor that it was difficult for the average fan to appreciate how accomplished he was," recalls Doucette, who, just out of college, first saw Robertson with the Cincinnati Royals and later had the opportunity to call the final three seasons of his career in Milwaukee.

"I watched his every move from warm-ups to game's end and never ceased to be amazed at how anyone 6-5 and 225 pounds could slip, unimpeded, through cracks meant only for shafts of light," Doucette marvels still.

"There was no flash, no sizzle, no soaring dunks that would elicit 'oohs' and 'ahs.' Oscar was an economy of effort. You'd never see him work on shots in warm-ups that he wouldn't use in games. Everything was 18 feet and in. He made his way to the hoop like a safecracker hopscotching a laser grid attempting to get to the vault."

Attles' first look at Oscar is indelibly etched in his memory bank. Both were 1960 draftees. Early in their rookie season there was a doubleheader in Syracuse - Celtics vs. Royals and Warriors vs. Nationals. Attles and Philly backcourt partner Guy Rodgers grabbed adjoining seats and focused on the already highly acclaimed Big O.

Almost immediately Oscar did something Attles had never witnessed before. As he came down court on a semi-break, K.C. Jones tried to intercept him, while a trailing Sam Jones tried to head him off at the pass from the opposite side.

Revved up by the recollection, Attles says: "Oscar dribbled by both of 'em. That got K.C. into a heated rush. Oscar quickly stepped in between them and quickly stepped out. Bam! K.C. and Sam banged heads. I'd never seen anything like it.

"I'm not telling you something I heard. I'm telling you something I saw."

Turning to Rodgers, Attles groaned, "We're going to have a big problem with this guy."

Attles' nickname is The Destroyer. Nobody, no matter how big and bad, wanted a piece of the Newark native. Manhandling opponents (teammates, too, when provoked) was the ticket he punched nightly to ride season upon season.

"But I never rattled Oscar. He never blinked at full-court, hands-on pressure," Attles says in awe. "And I never blocked his shot. He was never concerned about his defender. He always looked straight ahead at his teammates."

Robertson's aplomb for getting teammates involved in the first three quarters played into Attles' defensive game plan. He knew Oscar would look to score only four to six points in the first quarter, the same in the second and maybe eight to 10 in the third. If the verdict was in doubt in the fourth quarter, he'd go off for 12 to 18.

"If I was lucky, I'd be in foul trouble long before then," Attles says. There was one time, though, when Attles and Rodgers trapped Oscar near midcourt and stole the ball to preserve a win.

"Listen to me," Attles says, laughing. "Here I am talking about one incident. Once in my whole career I got the best of Oscar."

If his grandkids know better, they won't admit to getting tired hearing that story.

Embry vividly remembers Oscar's outburst of 56 vs. Seton Hall. It was thoroughly expected. At the time Embry was playing for the Royals. For over a year he'd gained first-hand knowledge of Oscar's oppression.

"If you were any kind of a player, UC was the place to scrimmage in the offseason or on off days. Typically, winners would stay on the court," Embry says. "It didn't take long to realize we needed to get our wins early before Oscar showed up."

The leading scorer for the Royals when Robertson arrived on the UC campus was Jack Twyman. Shortly afterward, the future Hall of Famer challenged the unflappable freshman to a little one-on-one.

"Jack'll kill me for giving you this," Embry cackles, "but he hasn't won a game yet. Oscar waxed us all."

Embry and Robertson later became Royals teammates and roomed together. That is when Wayne really found out how driven Oscar was to excel and why he had total command of the game's rudiments.

Oscar would carry a ball with him wherever he went. In fact, nobody but him was allowed to shoot his ball in pre-game warm-ups or practice, ever, honest.

Embry's revelations about Oscar are endless. Each afternoon on the road he'd lie on the hotel bed shooting his ball into the air for a couple of hours, a perfect rotation and follow-through every time.

Flushing out every last impurity from his system was a prime objective. So was staying ahead of arch-rival Jerry West. When Oscar wasn't contending on the court, he was contending off it.

Late one season Embry awoke from his afternoon nap to see Oscar studying the sports pages of the New York Post - in those days the only paper to carry a spread sheet of NBA stats.

"I know what they all think," Oscar said to Embry. "They all think West is going lead the league in scoring. But I've figured out I need to get 48 points against the Knicks to pass him. You had better set me some massive picks tonight, big fella."

In 1970, Embry became Bucks GM, the league's first African American to have that position. His initial trade, instigated by owner Wes Pavalon, was for Oscar, who still dominated his position and controlled court proceedings more than the coach. He told Larry Costello what would work and what would be good for the team.

Costello liked Oscar but was uncomfortable with that arrangement.

"I told Coz to let it go," Embry says. "I told him to let Oscar do what he does best and coach all the other players. I told him to be thankful he can walk into the locker room and see No. 1 in one corner and No. 33 in the other. It should make you feel good you've now got a chance to win it all."