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Sports XML

Posted on Thu, May 18, 2006

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Hall of Famer Oscar Robertson sounds off on the NBA

BY ROB PARENT
 Knight Ridder Newspapers

PHILADELPHIA - Larry Brown's buyout? Kobe vs. Shaq? A.I. and Chris Webber merely marking time?

Those incendiary issues might be current-affairs fodder in the basketball world, but they aren't a big deal to Oscar Robertson, the man who for a couple of generations of fans is a popular choice as basketball's greatest all-around player.

Perhaps he isn't the guy to ask about that, though.

"He doesn't really like to talk about the NBA," said Robertson's business partner, Leo Kelly. "He's just so focused on his business now. He's focused on his performance, but not his performances on the floor."

In his heyday, Robertson, 67, could shoot from anywhere - including the lip - with accuracy and acumen. Wednesday he performed on a Convention Center stage, igniting the business seminar set.

He owns a company that makes chemicals for food-processing plants, has his name on a line of retail foods, and since 1998 has been involved with Oscar Robertson Solutions, a document management service company with offices in Marlton, N.J.

"I tell them that being involved in sports, you already know what pressure is," Robertson said. "So you can respond to it."

He had no trouble responding to a question about the case he championed that helped bring NBA players into the 20th century and eventually sent their salaries into the stratosphere.

For the last 10 years of his 14-year Hall of Fame career, Robertson was the president of the National Basketball Players Association. In 1970, the year he was traded from the Cincinnati Royals to the Milwaukee Bucks, Robertson joined 13 other player representatives in challenging the league's reserve clause, the contract standard that bound a player to one team.

The suit delayed a merger of the NBA and ABA until 1976, when a settlement was reached two years after Robertson retired. It opened the door for free agency, but according to the Big O, it closed doors to him.

He'd never be invited to help run an NBA team or work for the league office.

"That changed basketball," said Robertson, who still rings critical of the league's owners. "The NBA wouldn't be where it is today. They wouldn't have to pay the salaries. It might have happened eventually but not in the early '80s like it did. They didn't want Oscar Robertson after that."

Instead, Robertson would make a name for himself in business circles, using his competitive nature, skills he learned along the way, and the fire in his belly born of a childhood in an Indianapolis ghetto and of being black in the America of the '50s and '60s.

At Crispus Attucks High, Robertson's team won consecutive state championships. He was named Indiana's "Mr. Basketball" in 1956.

At the University of Cincinnati, he averaged 33.8 points per game while the Bearcats

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twice went to the Final Four in his three varsity seasons. But Robertson had brushes with racism on the road, including threats from the Ku Klux Klan and refusals by some hotels to allow him to stay with his white teammates.

"His whole thing is he doesn't forgive, but he doesn't forget some of the things he went through," Kelly said. "All he asks is to be put on the track in order to run the race."

Along the way, Robertson will willingly share his opinions on everything and anything.

On the NBA, he said: "They have stars getting into trouble, which hurts the overall effort (of the league). If Kobe gets in trouble or Shaq gets in trouble or LeBron or Iverson get in trouble, they still have a core following, but image-wise ... that hurts."

Of the NBA's dress-code controversy, the dark-suited Big O said: "If I'm paying you six to 10 million dollars a year, and ask you to attend a function ... you should put a tie on. If not, get out of the game."

He characterized the popular notion that Magic Johnson and Larry Bird "saved basketball" in the 1980s as "ludicrous." He said NBA referees specialize in "phantom fouls" and "are getting worse," and called the college game "archaic."



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