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The Inside Game Race, Power and Politics in the NBA

Wayne Embry

Mary Schmitt Boyer

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THE INSIDE GAME

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THE INSIDE GAME

*Race, Power, and Politics
in the NBA*

*By Wayne Embry
With Mary Schmitt Boyer*



The University of Akron Press
Akron Ohio

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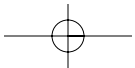
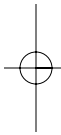
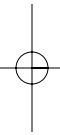
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Dedication

For my wife Terri, my children Debbie, Jill, Wayne Jr. and my granddaughter, Little Terri. Thank you for your support. For my parents, Anna and Floyd, and my sister Ruth Ann. For Grandpa Embry and the pioneers who preceeded me.—WRE

For Mollie, who taught me how to tell a good story,
and for Gene, who provided the happy ending—MSB



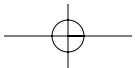
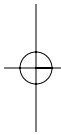
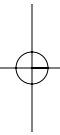
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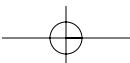
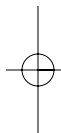
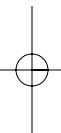
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Finally, to the attentive staffs of Johnny's and the Union Club in Cleveland, who nourished us, body and soul, and provided us with a place to work.



FOREWORD

I look at the young, handsome face of a Mr. Wayne Embry. It is on a 1961–62 basketball card I bought at The Locker Room. This card shop is on the island of Martha’s Vineyard. And the Vineyard is where Wayne and I see each other at our summer homes.

His hair on the card has waves with a part on the side. I guess that was “fly” back in the day. Turning the \$25 card over, it lists his vitals: Center—Cincinnati Royals—6’8”—240—Miami of Ohio—Born in Springfield, Ohio, and “a rough, tough rebounder who last season developed into a stickout scorer.” Yes, all of that is true, but thank God for autobiographies like this. You cannot put a human being’s complete story on the back of a card. Of course, you can always get the stats. That is how we judge and evaluate the players. As they say, “The numbers never lie.” But it has to be more than that. Numbers alone cannot tell the sojourn of a man-child born in a time in the United States of America when a big black man, or shall we say a big black “Negro,” was not expected or allowed to rise, to rise up to his human potential in this democratic society.

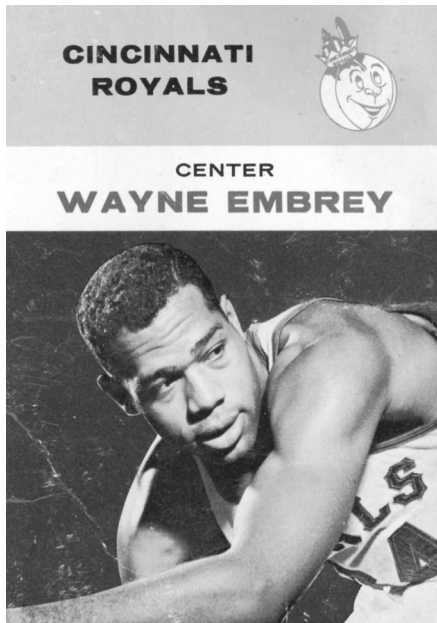
In this great American story, we witness how Wayne Embry rose up. I may sound corny, but I have come to the belief that black men were of a different stock back then. I often ask him how he views today’s black athletes and, like another of my heroes, Jim Brown, they both speak of disgust.

But let us always recognize the great ones who put down the foundation under hardships we can only imagine in our worst collected “American Nightmares.” Let us not sleep on their triumphs, their setbacks and disappointments, and the lives that they lived, but rather how they overcame these hurdles.

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Wayne Embry gives us, shares with us, his unique perspective, not just into sports but how it all works. And if you are ever so lucky to meet the Big Fella, maybe at a game, airport, or in Martha's Vineyard, maybe he will have time to lecture you on how The Big "O," Oscar Robertson, is the greatest baller of ALL-TIME and not MJ. Wayne says my main man Michael Jordan is answer Number 2.

Spike Lee
Brooklyn, N.Y.
9/3/03



Wayne Embry's first basketball card
(Courtesy of Embry family)

PREFACE

I wanted to write an important book; important in the sense that people would come to better understand human relationships, what paths people take along the way, and what motivates people to act the way they do.

I wanted this book to appeal to more than just sports fans, and I tried to capture more than just my career as a player. I wanted to talk about my childhood, and its uniqueness insofar as I was the only black student in an all-white environment. I wanted to talk about ideas that were universal in nature—the good and the bad in people, as well as the disappointments we encounter in those we call our friends. I did this by exposing breakdowns in loyalty, which we have all experienced in life, as well as breaches in trust.

I realized that the sports world was no different from the rest of the world, which is constantly growing and changing. I wanted to talk about how those social changes influenced the game of basketball and human relationships in general. In fact, with more than five decades in the National Basketball Association as a player and executive, I learned that each decade was unique in shaping the lives of people and their behavior. I also tried to use my unique experiences to talk about management and leadership—how to be successful through strong character and values, and how to overcome adversity. I talked about how sports now distorts the values of people, which is the opposite of what I experienced when I began my career in basketball.

I have been asked more than once what it was that first drew me to the game of basketball; what motivated me to become the player I ultimately became. I would have to initially point to my childhood, when I developed the drive to play the game. Most of this was because of my

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feelings of rejection at a very young age. Perhaps this was an offshoot of being black and poor. We never had the best of clothes and, because of my rapid growth, I grew out of the ones I had in a short time. I wore my shoes until they literally fell off my feet. The size of my feet, a size that kept up with my age until I was seventeen, brought even more attention to me. In the seventh grade, I was driven to play basketball on a team because I was seeking a way to gain acceptance. I loved all sports. I was no different from a lot of kids. But it was basketball that stole my heart. I can still remember shooting a ball of rolled-up socks at a clothes hanger and dreaming of making the winning shot in a championship game.

Yet, just making the team was not enough for me. I wanted to be the best. I was driven to be the best on the team because that was the way to be accepted beyond the black community. I was driven to be the best in the classroom because I wanted to be accepted intellectually. No matter how much I was loved and accepted by my family and my church, there always were places I could not go, places I could not feel comfortable. I wanted to eat in the same restaurants as my classmates. I wanted to go to a movie theater and not sit in the balcony. I wanted to retain my dignity. I wanted to belong. I wanted to break down racial barriers.

I believe the message of this book is important to all people. Sports competition provides discipline, teamwork, and values that remain an integral part of one's social and intellectual development. Reading my book will offer insight into my ingredients for success—preparation through education, practice, hard work, and dedication; perseverance through developing mental toughness; perception of opportunities and obstacles that are presented; pride in achievement; persistence in never giving up your dream and passion for that which you seek to accomplish. Even now, five years after my induction into the Basketball Hall of Fame and my subsequent firing, my passion for the game burns as bright as ever.

I miss playing the Inside Game.

INTRODUCTION

I walked to the podium in what should have been the proudest moment of my career, and I was a total wreck.

Here I was, about to be inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame, the crowning achievement for any athlete, a moment of confirmation, and I was never less sure of myself.

I looked out into the audience and saw so many of my friends and family members, my wife, Terri, my children, my father, Floyd, my colleagues. Their faces were beaming, sharing my joy at a moment I never dreamed would come.

I had served as a trustee for the Hall of Fame since 1974, but it never occurred to me that I would be enshrined. Even once I knew I had been nominated, I looked at the other candidates and told myself I would never be among them.

I loved every minute I spent in basketball. It taught me valuable lessons in pride, preparation, perseverance, persistence, and perception, which became my five keys to success. From the time I was a young boy, it had been my passion.

Throughout my career as a player and later as a general manager and president, I always put the game first. I made all my decisions on what was best for the sport.

Now, I was being honored for those decisions and for my contributions to the game. It was an incredible feeling of accomplishment.

And yet, as I stood at the podium and looked out into the sea of expectant faces, one thought kept running through my mind: If I am all that, why did I get fired?

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So much had happened before I approached that podium. The past four seasons had been the worst in my NBA career, which spanned forty years as a player or executive.

I was in the midst of the lowest point late one morning in early June 1999, when my assistant, Karen Stewart, burst through the door reading a fax.

“You’ve been nominated for the Basketball Hall of Fame,” she said, handing me the sheet of paper.

“Aren’t you excited?”

I guess I was more shocked than excited at that point. Because I was a trustee of the Hall of Fame, I got to see the list of nominees before it was released to the media. As I looked over the other candidates, all of whom were deserving, I did not like my chances of actually being elected. Nonetheless, it was a thrill to be included.

“Yes, I’m excited to just be nominated,” I told Karen.

Two days later, I was at the NBA pre-draft camp in Chicago, a round-robin tournament where team executives and scouts get one last look at players expecting to be selected in the upcoming draft. NBA Deputy Commissioner Russ Granik sought me out to inform me that I had been nominated. He, too, was a trustee.

“You certainly are deserving,” Granik told me. “Good luck.”

I shook his hand. “Thanks, Russ, but the whole list is deserving,” I said as we continued to watch the young players.

The news was in the papers the next day, and it was gratifying to receive congratulations from so many of my colleagues. The pre-draft camp is almost like a convention of NBA executives. All the biggest names in the coaching and executive ranks are there, and most of them stopped by to shake my hand.

It was a tremendous boost emotionally, because I was struggling to come to terms with the fact that my career in the NBA was almost over. I was taken aback two years earlier when NBA Commissioner David

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Stern greeted me at the league meetings by saying, "You should think about retiring."

Then, on Memorial Day weekend 1999, Cavaliers owner Gordon Gund told me he was not going to retain Mike Fratello as coach and he was replacing me as general manager with Jim Paxson, whom he had hired as our vice president of basketball operations a year earlier. I was to be relieved of my duties as of July 1, even though I had a year remaining on my contract. No explanation was given. It was a rather ignominious end after thirteen years with the organization, the first nine of which had been enjoyable.

While still trying to cope with that, I got a phone call on June 22 from David Gavitt, president of the Hall of Fame, asking me where I could be reached in the next twenty-four hours. He said he expected a report on the election results from the Honors Committee at any moment. I gave him my home, office, and cell phone numbers, and for the next several hours I sat on pins and needles, although I tried to hide my anxiety.

At eleven o'clock the next morning, Karen appeared in the door to my office.

"There's a Dave Gavitt on the phone for you," she said. "He says he is with the Hall of Fame."

I took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

"Wayne, I want to be the first to congratulate you," he said. "You have been elected to the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame as a contributor to the game of basketball. I can't think of anyone more deserving."

I sat in a stupor for a few seconds before I responded.

Finally, I said, "Thank you, David."

He told me Fred Zollner, Billie Moore, Kevin McHale, and John Thompson also were elected. He told me how the news was going to be released, and he suggested our public relations department arrange a press conference in Cleveland.

When I got myself together, I called my wife and our three kids, my father, and several close friends. The news traveled quickly through our

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offices, and many coworkers came by to offer congratulations. The owners of the Cavaliers were in town for board meetings, but it was not until we met at two o'clock that any of them acknowledged the honor bestowed on me and, by extension, the franchise. Maybe they did not want to interrupt their business, but they did take a lunch break and still no one sought me out.

When we went in for our meeting, Gordon offered his congratulations and shook my hand. A couple of the others congratulated me with little sincerity, while still others stoically stared into space. Finally, team attorney Dick Watson sneered, "Which is a greater achievement? Being elected to the Hall of Fame or being the recipient of the Double Cross Award at Nisi Prius?" That was an honor I had received a couple of weeks earlier from a local organization of lawyers. It had touched a nerve with Gund and Watson, neither of whom had been so honored, although Gund's father had been a previous recipient. After that awards dinner, Watson and I had an uncomfortable exchange, though I never did understand why he was so upset.

I did not know what to say to him then, and I do not now.

Later, Gordon said to legendary coach Pete Newell, a Hall of Famer who was a consultant to the Cavs, "I understand you're responsible for Wayne being elected to the Hall of Fame," insinuating, of course, that I could not have been elected on my own merits without someone on the inside pushing for me.

"No way," Pete told Gordon, explaining that all the committees involved with the election process are anonymous so there can be no lobbying.

We had a press conference the next day, which gave me the opportunity to share my honor and excitement with my coworkers, the media, and others who had been influential in my life. Despite what I was going through with the Cavs, I expressed my gratitude to Gordon. He gave me the opportunity to extend my career and supported me along the way, which enabled me to do my job effectively and without interference. I

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have great admiration and respect for him and will always be grateful for his bringing me to Cleveland.

Now, of course, I faced the monumental task of trying to come up with the right words to say at the October induction ceremony. I always watched the enshrinement ceremonies of each of the halls of fame. I shared the emotion of the inductees as they stood at the podium, fighting back tears of joy and humility, acknowledging those who influenced their lives. Each had a different story about how he got there, but there were common themes: sacrifice, dedication, commitment, and hard work seemed to be the constants. Because I was soon to reach the pinnacle of individual achievement in sport, I watched with special interest as Robin Yount, George Brett, Orlando Cepeda, and the rest of the Class of 1999 was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame a few months before my induction.

I was overwhelmed by their speeches, and by the flood of congratulatory letters I got from friends—people inside and outside basketball—as well as business associates and fans. The response lifted my spirits. I also found myself flashing back to something my grandfather used to tell me while I was growing up on his farm outside Springfield, Ohio: Always remain humble.

It was not hard to remain humble in this situation, believe me. I could not understand why I was being forced into early retirement at the age of sixty-two. It was hard for me to accept that the NBA no longer needed my contributions, when, just two years earlier, I had been named the league's Executive of the Year for the second time in five seasons. During my thirty-five-year tenure as an executive, I sat on various high-level committees, including the USA Basketball Games Committee that selected the Olympic teams, and I had been a trustee at the Hall of Fame for twenty-five years. I had received many commendations for my contributions to the game, yet induction into the Hall of Fame would be the ultimate recognition for those contributions to basketball and for standing up for what is right in sports.

Athletes grow up dreaming of winning championships and being able

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to contribute to that effort. What youngster has not gone to sleep thinking about making the winning shot as time expires in the title game? But being elected to the Hall of Fame is beyond all that. It puts you into a select class, the most elite echelon of athletes in your sport.

How did I get here? All summer I reflected on my journey. I realized how blessed I was to have caring parents, grandparents, and other family members who taught me what was right and loved me enough to discipline me. I thought how fortunate I was to have friends who supported me, coaches who pushed me to reach my potential, and fans who appreciated me. I thought about Milwaukee Bucks owner Wes Pavalon's bold move to entrust me with his basketball team at a time when no other African Americans were running sports teams. I thought about all the coaches and players I loved, all the hours spent practicing in hot, dingy gyms or on hard, black-topped playgrounds, or even on the dusty ground around the basket we had erected on the edge of the garden back home. I thought about overcoming all of the "isms" and the "ists": Racism, skepticism, criticism, supremacists, egotists, antagonists. I thought of Detroit center Walter Dukes's elbows, Boston Hall of Famer Bill Russell's blocked shots, and Philadelphia giant Wilt Chamberlain's challenges. I thought of the 2 A.M. phone calls from the nocturnal Wes when I worked for the Bucks. I recalled the battles with agents, most of which ended positively. I thought about the threats on my life for just wanting to do what I loved. I thought about the train wreck that nearly ended my life before I had a chance to start my career. I thought how God had blessed me in so many ways, by being by my side at all times and giving me the strength to persevere.

By the time October came, I was ready. The first weekend of the month is Enshrinement Weekend in Springfield, Massachusetts. It is a time when basketball fans, media, family, and friends of the inductees mingle to share war stories. They lie and argue about who was the greatest or joke about who was the cheapest. The atmosphere is surreal as basketball greats from years past, some moving spryly and some barely moving, gather in one spot for one memorable weekend.

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I chose Pete Newell and Al Attles to escort me. I needed as many friends and family members as I could find to keep me propped up through the ceremony. Pete had become a great friend and had helped me learn the ropes of becoming a general manager. Alvan and I had been friends since our playing days, and he tried to keep me loose. At rehearsal he told me there were two things he did not want to see me do—break down during my speech or fall down the steps while returning to my seat afterward.

With that in mind, I made my way to the podium. I thought of Momma, who was looking down from heaven with that loving smile, and of my eighty-six-year-old dad who had made the trip despite the fact he could not get around very well any more. He even endured two



Enshrinement Day at the Basketball Hall of Fame (Courtesy of NBA)

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plane rides—the first of his life. My sister accompanied him and said she could not tell if he was more excited about flying or my enshrinement.

I sincerely expressed my thanks to all the most important people in my life—my family, friends, coaches, teachers, and players. I talked about the game and the preservation of the game as we now know it.

“I never wanted to be a taker from the game,” I said. “I attempted to always give back to my passion—basketball. It has been and always will be my desire to protect the integrity of the game of basketball, and I ask each of you to join me in this pursuit.”

All too soon, my moment in the spotlight was over. Though my voice had cracked, I had not broken down, and I got back to my seat without incident. When all was said and done, the journey from Springfield, Ohio, to Springfield, Massachusetts, had been a successful one. But the trip had taken some strange twists, I can tell you that.