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A Tip for a Lifetime

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Once Dayton waited for him with swatting tennis racquets, waving brooms and perplexed wonder.

Now the city awaits with an open stage, open arms and some long-appreciated wonderment.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has piqued the interest of folks here for some 44 years.

Back in 1967 — then known as Lew Alcindor — he was the 7-foot-2 center of the powerful UCLA Bruins, the team the Dayton Flyers would meet in the NCAA championship game at Freedom Hall in Louisville, Ky.

Next week — on March 14 and 15 — Abdul-Jabbar will be in Dayton as part of the University of Dayton Diversity Lecture series. With his hall-of-fame basketball career behind him — and a budding film-making career now at the forefront of his myriad interests — Abdul-Jabbar will be in Dayton to talk about his new, well-received documentary “On the Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard Of.”

The Victoria Theater will present the Ohio debut of the film on March 14 at 4 p.m. Then, just across the street at the Schuster Center at 7:30, WDTN-TV anchor Marsha Bonhart will host an “Inside the Actors Studio” conversation with Abdul-Jabbar.

His film is about the Harlem Renaissance Big Five — the Harlem Rens, for short — the barn-storming, all-black New York hoops team that became the first world champions in 1939 and, after long enduring harassing treatment and exclusion because of the players’ race, helped usher in integration to pro basketball.

“They were first-rate athletes and they conducted themselves in ways that made the black community of Harlem — and really all of black America — proud of what they were doing,” Abdul-Jabbar said. “But so much time has passed since the Rens played, their story had kind of faded and been forgotten.”

While Abdul-Jabbar hopes to change some of that with his two-day visit to Dayton, there is a good chance he also may attend part of the inaugural First Four of the NCAA men’s basketball tournament at UD Arena on March 15-16.

It won’t be his first visit to the arena. In 1974, he and his Milwaukee Bucks topped a Portland Trail Blazers team that featured fellow Bruin and NBA rookie Bill Walton in an exhibition game that drew a sold-out crowd.

Although he dominated the younger Walton that night — the matchup drew national attention and a photo of the battling big men made the cover of Sports Illustrated — Abdul-Jabbar said “it’s a rather distant memory ... I really don’t remember much of it.”

It’s a different story when it comes to his 1967 game against UD. He especially remembered Dan Obrovac, who he reached out to before the former UD center’s death last April.

Winning the tip

The Flyers were the Cinderella team of the ’67 tournament, while UCLA — which had won two national crowns in three years and would go on to win seven more in a row — came into the game 29-0.

Although Obrovac would play only five minutes in that title game — the stalwarts of that Flyers team were Donnie May and Bobby Joe Hooper — the sophomore was 6-foot-10 and UD coach Don Donoher was going to have him jump center for the opening tip.

Before the game, UD had prepared for Alcindor by having players Ned Sharpenter and Glinder Torain try to simulate the towering center’s wingspan by holding tennis racquets and brooms above their heads.

Obrovac — who had a poster of Alcindor over his bed at his home back in Canton — once told me how, just moments before the game, he found himself mesmerized by the Bruins big man warming up at the other end of the court:
“I watched him jump up, touch the ball in the upper corner of the backboard and nonchalantly drop it through the rim. Right then I was thinking, ‘Holy (expletive). My (rear end) is grass.’”

But then the most improbable thing happened. In what’s thought to be the only time the UCLA center ever lost an opening tip, Obrovac beat Alcindor off the mid-court launch pad and flicked the ball to the Flyers.

That tip produced the most famous photo in UD basketball history. The image was picked up by Sports Illustrated and it still is exhibited in the concourse at UD Arena.

While Dayton ended up losing the game 79-64 Obrovac had a 15-minutes-of-fame moment that he joked he “milked for a lifetime.”

In a chance meeting at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport once, he said the hoops legend teased him that he happened to be waving to someone in the stands when the ref suddenly threw the ball up.

Abdul-Jabbar chuckled about that the other day when we spoke by phone: “He got up there quickly and I wasn’t paying attention. Like they say, ‘you snooze, you lose.’”

All-time great

While Abdul-Jabbar can be defined in many ways, snoozer is not one of them.

One of the greatest basketball players ever, he scored more points (38,387) than anyone in NBA history, was a 19-time all-star, the league MVP six times and won six NBA titles.

Off the court he has shown a keen interest in everything from music and philanthropy to writing — he’s penned six books — and now filmmaking.

Explaining his all-encompassing curiosity with life, he said:

“"My father was a jazz musician and, growing up in Manhattan, you are exposed to a lot of different things. It’s a big, wonderful world that we inherit and it’s always fascinated me. And so I’ve delved into some of the nooks and crannies to find out as much about it as I can.”

Known for his indefensible sky hook on the court, he has now launched the Skyhook Foundation.

“So many kids have athletic aspirations and they totally forget about their intellectual life,” he said. “The Skyhook Foundation is designed to take some of that enthusiasm and get it to spill over into pursuing higher education. John Wooden, my coach at UCLA, felt that was an absolute essential part of your life, a lot more so than just being a basketball player.”

Abdul-Jabbar’s film is an expansion of the 2007 book on the Rens he co-authored with Raymond Obstfeld.

“I was born in Harlem, but I had never studied about the Rens in depth,” he said. “I knew how bad it was during the Jim Crow restrictions, but when I learned what they had to go through, it was pretty shocking.

“Some people tried all kinds of things to provoke them — sticking them with hat pins, burning them with lit cigarettes — and yet none of that hostility deterred them.”

While the Basketball Association of America and the National Basketball League — both precursors to the NBA — denied them admittance, the Rens still played sometimes eight games a week, won almost every contest and in the process, Abdul-Jabbar said, “they were able to show the world there is something wrong with this situation.”

He thinks everybody from school kids to today’s pro players should know that story:

“The NBA players need to be educated because so many just take it for granted that there has always been this opportunity to play basketball and have this wonderful life.”

Fighting cancer

When Obrovac was battling cancer — it started in the esophagus and later moved to the brain — I chronicled his story in the newspaper and somehow Abdul-Jabbar got a copy of it.

While it was about an old rival, it also struck a chord with him because — unbeknownst to others at the time — he had been diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML) in December 2008.

Once a fatal disease, oral medications now keep CML under control for 80-to-90 percent of patients.
Abdul-Jabbar went public with his diagnosis 16 months ago and said he’s now doing fine — he’s a spokesman for a company that produces cancer medication — but before that he reached out to Obrovac.

“Kareem sent Dan two notes,” said Rosie Miller, Obrovac’s longtime girlfriend. “First came a picture he clipped from the newspaper with a personal message attached to it. Then came one of his personalized postcards with another note.”

“Those messages just made Dan beam. He was so thrilled Kareem took the time for him.”

Miller said Obrovac planned to send a return thank you but last year — when he seemed to be doing better — the former Flyer came down with flu-like symptoms the night after they watched the TV broadcast of the Flyers winning the NIT. He died on April 21 at age 62.

When she heard Abdul-Jabbar was coming to town, Miller bought a ticket to the Schuster Center event. She wants to see and hear the man who made her man smile in some of his toughest hours.

She’s also hoping to find a way to meet Abdul-Jabbar so she can deliver a message from Obrovac and, in a way, from all those old Rens players, too.

“I just want to thank him for being so kind,” she said. “I want to thank him for remembering.”

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