

Ursa Major - The Big Dipper

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As one's seniority increases in this august organization, not only does that indicate that you are getting older and more feeble, but also that, despite your advancing years, you still have to come up with a subject for another paper, preferably an original one. I have always done papers on subjects that I already knew a little something about. Not only does that make preparation a little easier, but it helps during the rebuttal session. I have always admired those that tackle complicated subjects driven by their pure intellectual desire to both expand their own knowledge, and that of others. So, with that in mind and considering I've already given papers relating to sports, hunting, and medical topics, which pretty much covers my limited base of knowledge, I strongly considered researching an area of which I was totally bereft of any prior knowledge.

I have always been a stargazer. Camping out under the stars is a great joy to me, but I have never made an effort to actually identify the different constellations much less purchase a telescope or even a book to help me find them. I wouldn't know Orion the Hunter from Felix the Cat. So, naturally I thought that something in the field of astronomy would be challenging and an interesting subject for all. That being said, the title of tonight's paper is Ursa Major - The Big Dipper.

Wilton Norman Chamberlain was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on August 21, 1936. Throughout his life and illustrious career, he was blessed with a number of nicknames: "Wilt the Stilt" which he abhorred, "Chairman of the Boards", and his personal favorite "The Big Dipper" because he always had to dip his head before entering a room.

Wilt was born into a family of nine children. As a child, he was quite frail, nearly dying of pneumonia. His mother, Olivia, was a housekeeper, frequently working in upper class Jewish households and stood 5' 8" tall. His father, William, was a janitor and 5' 9" tall. He lived in a lower middle class family with two brothers and 6 sisters. The only other sibling who was tall was his older brother, Wilbert, who grew to be 6' 5".

Chamberlin was, as you would expect, an unusually tall child. At age 10, he measured 6' 6" and when he entered Overbrook High School in Philadelphia he stood 6' 11". In his younger years, he had no interest in basketball; in fact, he thought it was a "game for sissies". He was, however, an avid track athlete: high jumping 6' 6", running the 440 in 49 seconds, the 880 in 158.3, broad jumping 22 feet and throwing the shotput more than 53 feet. During his teen years, he did eventually turn to basketball as basketball was King in Philadelphia.

He entered high school a very humble, reserved, young man. As a child, he was very selfconscious about his height, but as he matured and his magnificent body developed, these attitudes changed. As his fame grew, so did his confidence and he became quite cocky and sure of himself. For example, as an adult, Wilt always carried between \$5,000 and \$10,000 in cash in his pocket. When asked once about this, he said "Who is going to try and rob me?"

As a player for the Overbrook Panthers in high school, Wilt averaged 31 points/game in his first season. In his second season, he continued his prolific scoring, scoring a school record 71 points in one game. During his senior campaign, he once scored 74, 78, and 90 points in consecutive games. After 3 years, Chamberlain logged a 56-3 record at Overbrook, won two city championships and broke the school scoring record with 2252 points, averaging 37.4 points/game.

Early in its history, the National Basketball Association had both a regular and a territorial draft, the latter allowing the team to draft a college player from its own geographical area in exchange for a first round draft pick. The league was struggling then, and the logic was that local college stars would attract fans and alumni to the games. The draft radius extended 50 miles from the city in which the professional team played.

With Wilt due to graduate high school, Eddie Gottlieb, owner of the Philadelphia Warriors, lobbied to change the territorial draft to include high school players. He did indeed prevail. Gottlieb then became the first owner to invoke the territorial draft to secure the rights to a high school player, drafting Wilt four years in advance of the 1959 draft. Red Auerbach, then coach of the Boston Celtics pushed hard to try to get Wilt to attend a New England college with no success. Had he attended a college within fifty miles of an NBA team, the Warriors would have lost their rights to Wilt in the 1959 draft.

No athlete before, and not many since, has been pursued by colleges as was Wilt Chamberlain. His high school coach was offered numerous coaching positions if he could deliver Wilt. Other colleges told him they would send him to medical school or dental school. UCLA promised to make him a movie star and the University of Pennsylvania even offered him diamonds if he would attend there.

Ultimately, it was the legendary Forest "Phog" Allen, coach of the University of Kansas Jayhawks, who came to Philly in 1955, met Wilt and sat down with his mother and schmoozed her. She loved him. The main draw apparently was Allen, already a coaching legend. The Warrior's owner, Gottlieb was also thought to push the choice and there was about \$4,000 worth of incentives from "two or three godfathers" at Kansas, Wilt later told reporters.

He drove the 1100 miles to Lawrence, Kansas, which at that time was still quite segregated, a fact which had been carefully shielded from Chamberlain during his recruiting trip. He was indeed angered by this and probably would not have stayed in a segregated Lawrence. Nor did he have to.

Wilt was not one to lead a march or demonstration protesting segregation. Whenever Wilt had a problem, he would go to the chancellor of the university and complain and the chancellor would follow through and change things. Wilt would just tell him that if he didn't straighten things out, he was leaving. Reports from fellow African-American students related that Wilt wasn't thinking in terms of all African Americans; he was saying that he was not going to be treated like that. He obviously had a great impact on the desegregation of Lawrence, Kansas, but his interests were more personal than political.

In 1955, freshman could not play varsity college basketball. Chamberlain played for the Jayhawks freshman team and was president of his pledge class of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity. A description of Wilt appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer:

"Remarkably agile, graceful, and swift for his size, he wears No. 13 for luck, size 14 shoes for comfort, tailor-made clothes by necessity. He looks lighter than his 240 pounds, most of which are centered in well-developed chest and wide shoulders. He has unusually long, extremely thin legs. His waist is a mere 31 inches. Flatfooted, he can reach 9' 6" into the air. With a leap, he can easily reach 12' 6" or better. From fingertip to fingertip with arms outstretched, he measures 7' 2"."

Wilt's debut into college basketball was not disappointing. He lead the Kansas University freshmen to an 81-71 victory over the varsity - the first time the freshman had ever beaten the varsity. Wilt scored 42 points, had 29 rebounds and blocked 4 shots. For Jayhawk fans, the only thing standing between them and three national championships was Wilt's freshman year.

Ironically, that same night, Phog Allen turned 70. Allen, like all KU employees, had to face mandatory retirement at age 70, which meant that the great Phog Allen would not coach Wilt after all. His assistant, Dick Harp, became head coach, but Wilt never had a good relationship with Harp. Had Wilt known Allen was never to coach him, he probably would never have attended Kansas.

As a sophomore, his varsity debut was one of the most anticipated in sports. He scored 52 points and grabbed 31 rebounds, shredding the Big Seven and Kansas scoring records and the school rebound record in an 87-69 win over Northwestern. He went on that year to become a first team All-American and led the Jayhawks to the 1956-57 national championship game against North Carolina. In that game, the Tar Heels froze the ball and continually triple teamed Chamberlain, ultimately defeating Kansas in three overtimes. Chamberlain was named most outstanding player of the Final Four, only the second time that a member of a losing team had recieved that honor. He later admitted that this loss was the most painful in his life. Had he won, it might have changed his life because he would not have to go ten years labeled as a loser.

In the Big Dipper's junior year, basketball was a supreme source of frustration for him. He was always subjected to freeze-ball tactics and triple teams and it was just not "fun" basketball. He still averaged 30.1 points/game, but the Jayhawks had only an 18-5 record. Three games were lost when Wilt was out being treated for epididymitis. Kansas finished second in the league. At that time, only conference champions were invited to play in the 23 team NCAA basketball tournament, thus Kansas was denied the opportunity to participate.

Wilt lost the enjoyment for NCAA basketball and decided he needed to make some money. In two seasons at Kansas, he averaged 29.9 points/game and 18.3 rebounds, but he had had enough. He sold the story "Why I am Leaving College" to Look magazine for \$10,000. For perspective, NBA players then earned \$9000 in an entire season. His legacy at Kansas was sound, not only in basketball, but in track and field. He ran the 100 yard dash in 10.9 seconds, threw the shot put 56', triple jumped more than 50' and won the high jump in the Big Eight track and field championships three times.

In 1958, the NBA did not accept players until that player's high school class graduated college, prohibiting him from joining the NBA for a year. So Wilt loaded up his flame-red 1958 Oldsmobile convertible and left Lawrence, Kansas to become a Harlem Globetrotter. Incidentally, that car was later the subject of a NCAA investigation, the result of which, in 1960, was to ban Kansas from participating in the NCAA tournament for two years. The report stated "a known representative of the athletic interest of the University put out \$1564 for the purchase of the year old car" for a player who was never named.

As with most of Wilt's athletic milestones, his signing with the Globetrotters in 1958 was a big deal. He was paid the astronomical sum of \$65,000 to sign - more than 5 times the average NBA salary and more money than anyone had ever dreamed of earning to play professional basketball. He dearly loved his time with the Globetrotters: no records were expected and he enjoyed his teammates. Meadowlark Lemon played center on the team and Wilt was relegated to guard, easily adapting to the Globetrotter style of play. In one of the last interviews of his life, Wilt stated that while others might cite Dr. J or Michael Jordan, he considered Meadowlark Lemon to be the most "sensational, awesome, incredible basketball player" he had ever seen.

One month after his Globetrotter contract ended, his NBA career began, as he signed with the Philadelphia Warriors. He immediately became the NBA's best paid player earning \$30,000 in his rookie contract. At that time, Bob Cousy of the Boston Celtics was the top earner at \$25,000. Seven years earlier, Goltleib had purchased the entire Warriors franchise for \$25,000.

In his first NBA game, Wilt scored 43 points and grabbed 25 rebounds. It was in his fourth game that he had the first of many great duels with Boston Celtics' center Bill Russell. In that game, Chamberlain outscored Russell with 30 points and had 28 rebounds. Russell only scored 22 points, but grabbed 36 boards. Boston won the game. Wilt and Russell would play each other 13 times that season, their battles being one of the greatest rivalries in NBA history. Much like Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, they became friends in their personal life.

In Chamberlain's first year in the NBA, league attendance jumped by 500,000. In only his 56th game, he set the NBA record for total points in a season and ultimately broke eight NBA records as a rookie. He averaged 37.6 points and 27 rebounds per game; without a doubt, the greatest season ever by a rookie in any professional sport. He was both the Rookie of the Year and the Most Valuable Player. Only one other player ever accomplished that - Wes Unseld.

The Big Dipper shocked Warrior fans after his rookie season by saying he was thinking of retiring. He always loved track and field and was convinced he could break the world decathlon record. After losing to Boston in the Eastern finals, Wilt said "I quit. I'll never play in the NBA again." Ultimately, he was convinced to change his mind, sweetened by a salary raise to \$65,000.

In his second NBA season, his stats improved averaging 38.4 points and 27.2 rebounds/game. Playing against Bill Russell and the Celtics, he set the all-time record for rebounds in a single game, grabbing 55. Again, despite his personal dominance, the Warriors faltered in the playoffs.

It was during his third season that Chamberlain set records that will probably never be threatened. He averaged 50.4 points and 25.7 rebounds/game. He was the first and only player to break the 4000 point barrier in a single season. For perspective, the only other player to break the 3000 point barrier is Michael Jordan in the 1986-87 season. Wilt averaged playing 48.5 minutes/game, more than the 48 minutes in regulation became of overtime games. Of his team's 3890 minutes played, he played 3882. He was ejected from one game with two technicals with 8 minutes to play.

The most memorable accomplishment of that season took place on March 2, 1962 in a game against the New York Knicks in a half-full auditorium in Hershey, Pennsylvania. The game wasn't televised or filmed. There were no New York sportswriters there, and in many ways, the game is shrouded in myth. The Warriors beat the Knicks 169-147. As basketball goes, it was a game for the ages. Before it was over, the Big Dipper had scored 100 points, a feat that will surely never be repeated. When he scored his 100th point, a fourteen-year old boy ran onto the court, shook Chamberlain's hand and ran off with the game ball.

Gottlieb sold the Warrior franchise in 1963 to a group of businessmen in San Francisco for \$850,000, thus moving the team to San Francisco. There, the Warriors ran into financial trouble and Chamberlain was subsequently traded back to Philadelphia to play for the 76ers, where he would play from 1965-68. It was with the 76ers that he finally won his first NBA championship in 1967.

I could continue on a season by season basis with his basketball accomplishments, but time prohibits. Following the 1968 season, Wilt was traded to the Los Angeles Lakers, where owner Jack Kent Cooke gave him an unprecedented contract of \$250,000 after taxes. The previous Laker top earner was some guy named Jerry West who was paid \$100,000 after taxes.

Chamberlain played with the Lakers through 1973, winning his second NBA title in 1972. There were many heated matchups with basketball's new great superstar, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who was 11 years his junior. Wilt had been idolized by Abdul-Jabbar as a teenager, but this deteriorated into an intense mutual loathing, especially after Wilt retired. Chamberlain was critical of Abdul-Jabbar and Kareem, in turn, criticized him for being a Republican and supporting Richard Nixon (both seen by Abdul-Jabbar as a betrayal of Black America) and for living like a playboy. Their relationship was strained, at best, until Wilt's death.

When he became a Laker, Chamberlain built a million-dollar mansion he dubbed "Ursa Major" (the stars of the Big Dipper appear in that constellation) in Bel-Air, California. Like everything else about him, his home was a sight to behold. He lived in it from the time it was built in 1971 until his death.

The home was built on the highest point of the Santa Monica Mountains, the former site of a World War II anti-aircraft battery. Wilt's house was probably the first "jock palace." The home is nearly 10,000 square feet of a Frank Lloyd Wright design with the underlying grid of the house being an equilateral triangle, as are many structural details. The home was Wilt's sanctuary from the world. He loved to entertain and was an excellent cook, doing it all himself.

On the first floor is his five-sided "playroom." In the center of the room was an eight foot circular bed covered in black rabbit fur surrounded by a purple velvet wedge-shaped sofa. His bedroom, which occupied most of the second floor, is an equilateral triangle, 45' on each side. Two of the walls are glass. His 8 1/2 x 7 1/2 foot bed was covered with the fur from the noses of arctic wolves. At that time, Alaska had a bounty on wolves and Chamberlain bought tens of thousands of the hides. A ten foot triangular, mirrored section of the roof over his bed was retractable. He would open this every night as he was fascinated by the stars.

Wilt's last NBA game was against the Knicks in the 1973 playoffs. The Knicks eliminated the Lakers and ultimately won the championship. In his last NBA game, Chamberlain scored 23 points, gathered 21 rebounds, and played the entire 48 minutes. Only three players have ever averaged 20 points and 20 rebounds in a season - Wilt, Bob Pettit, and Jerry Lucas. Pettit did it once and Lucas twice. Chamberlain did it 10 times.

Just as Wilt announced his departure from college in a magazine article, he used the pages of Sports Illustrated to tell the world that he was retiring from basketball. In the October 7, 1974, issue under a story headlined "My Impact Will Be Everlasting", he said he was tired of the traveling associated with professional basketball and was calling it quits - though not before immodestly reminding the reader that he had changed basketball in many ways - "more than people want to give me credit for."

Chamberlain successfully went into business and entertainment, made money in stocks and real estate, opened a popular Harlem nightclub "Big Wilt's Small Paradise", and invested in broodmares. Volleyball became his new sports passion. He became a board member of the newly founded International Volleyball Association in 1974 and became its president a year later. The leagues' All-Star game was televised solely because he played in it and he was the game MVP. The league folded in 1979, but Chamberlain was named to the Volleyball Hall of Fame, becoming one of few athletes who were enshrined in different sports.

For you movie goers, you may recall he played the villain in a true cinematic blockbuster, "Conan the Destroyer" playing alongside the governor of California. His most remarkable line was "thieves should be hanged."

Even far beyond his playing days, Chamberlain remained a remarkable athlete. In his mid-forties, he humbled young Magic Johnson once in practice. Even in the 80's he flirted with making an NBA comeback. When he was 45, he received an offer from the Cleveland Cavaliers, which he declined. When he was 50, the New Jersey Nets had the same idea and he declined again. He opted, instead, to participate in several marathons.

Wilt Chamberlain was more than just a player of basketball. Where as a teenager, he was shy and insecure, as an adult he was famous for his womanizing. He was a chronic insomniac, staying up all hours of the night. Women were just attracted to him and he was never one to disappoint. In 1991, he wrote his second autobiography, A View From Above. It was in that book that he claimed to have had sex with 20,000 women. He became the target for many jokes and many African-Americans were critical of him for embarrassing black men. Chamberlain declared that he was just doing what was natural. He acknowledged that he never came close to marriage. His own mother said that Wilt would never marry because he was too much in love with himself. He never dated married women, availed himself of prostitutes, and to no one's knowledge did he ever father an illegitimate child. Even in his later years, he would seldom date a lady over 25 years old. A reporter once asked Wilt how he could possibly satisfy that many women? Wilt replied "Who said they were satisfied?"

Wilt Chamberlain is universally regarded as one of the most dominant basketball players ever. He was responsible for several rule changes, including widening the lane, as well as changes to rules regarding inbounding the ball and shooting free throws. His main weakness was free-throw shooting, where he had the second lowest career free-throw percentage in history, behind only Ben Wallace.

In addition to his prowess as a basketball player, he was an excellent cook, an awful actor, smart businessman, volleyball player, track and field aficionado, backgammon player, supporter of women's sports, horse and car enthusiast, world-class ladies man, loving son, brother and uncle, teammate, friend, legend and always a loner.

Chamberlain's health began to fail in 1992. He developed heart problems and died in October of 1999 at age 63. He was found by his gardener in bed in his Bel-Air home, the roof retracted, and alone. Four days later, an earthquake shook southern California, causing people to joke that the Big Dipper must have finally arrived at the Biggest Dipper.