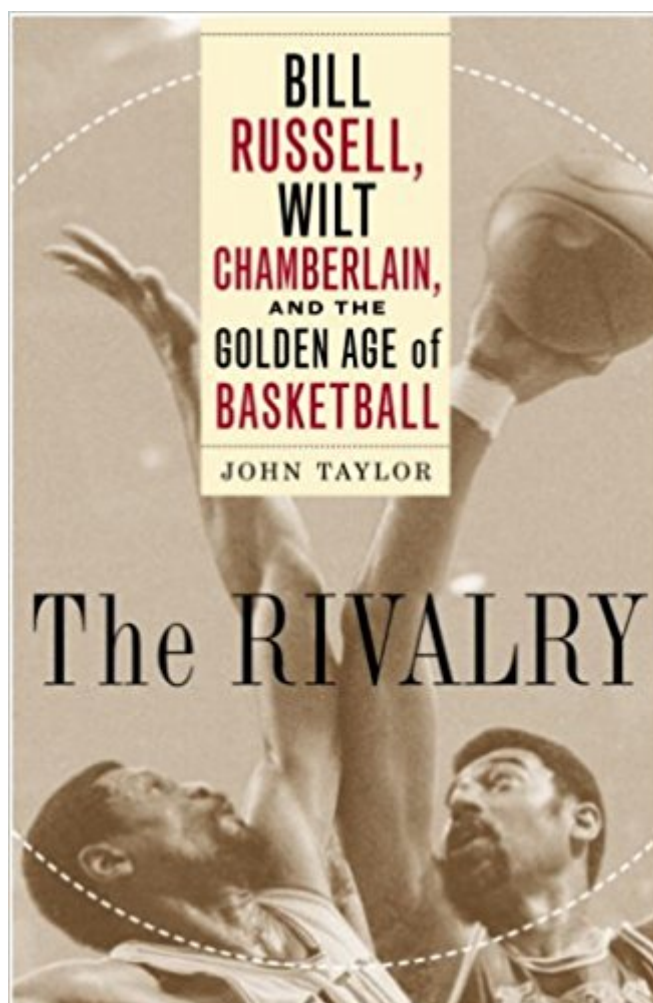


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# The Rivalry: Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, And The Golden Age Of Basketball



## Synopsis

A BRILLIANTLY WRITTEN ACCOUNT OF THE NBA'S GLORY DAYS, AND THE RIVALRY THAT DOMINATED THE ERA

In the mid-1950s, the NBA was a mere barnstorming circuit, with outposts in such cities as Rochester, New York, and Fort Wayne, Indiana. Most of the best players were white; the set shot and layup were the sport's chief offensive weapons. But by the 1970s, the league ruled America's biggest media markets; contests attracted capacity crowds and national prime-time television audiences. The game was played "above the rim" and the most marketable of its high-flying stars were black. The credit for this remarkable transformation largely goes to two giants: Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain. In *The Rivalry*, award-winning journalist John Taylor projects the stories of Russell, Chamberlain, and other stars from the NBA's golden age onto a backdrop of racial tensions and cultural change. Taylor's electrifying account of two complex men as well as of a game and a country at a crossroads is an epic narrative of sports in America during the 1960s. It's hard to imagine two characters better suited to leading roles in the NBA saga: Chamberlain was cast as the athletically gifted yet mercurial titan, while Russell played the role of the stalwart centerpiece of the Boston Celtics dynasty. Taylor delves beneath these stereotypes, detailing how the two opposed and complemented each other and how they revolutionized the way the game was played and perceived by fans. Competing with and against such heroes as Jerry West, Tom Heinsohn, Bob Cousy, John Havlicek, and Elgin Baylor, and playing for the two greatest coaches of the era, Alex Hannum and the fiery Red Auerbach, Chamberlain and Russell propelled the NBA into the spotlight. But their off-court visibility and success do say nothing of their candor or also inflamed passions along America's racial and generational fault lines. In many ways, Russell and Chamberlain helped make the NBA and, to some extent, America what they are today. Filled with dramatic conflicts and some of the great moments in sports history, and building to a thrilling climax the 1969 final series, the last showdown between Russell and Chamberlain.

*The Rivalry* has at its core a philosophical question: Can determination and a team ethos, embodied by the ultimate team player, Bill Russell, trump sheer talent, embodied by Wilt Chamberlain? Gripping, insightful, and utterly compelling, the story of Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain is the stuff of sporting legend. Written with a reporter's unerring command of events and a storyteller's flair, *The Rivalry* will take its place as one of the classic works of sports history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Taylor (The Count and the Confession) offers a vivid account of the fledgling days of the National Basketball Association and the intense competition between two of its biggest early stars: Bill Russell (of the Boston Celtics) and Wilt Chamberlain (of the Philadelphia 76ers). While both players were dominant men who anchored their respective teams, their personalities differed greatly. The quiet, reflective Russell turned a serendipitous showing in front of a scout into a legendary career largely through willpower and hard work, while the outgoing Chamberlain was a much more naturally gifted athlete whose skills drew attention and offers while he was barely a teenager. Taylor highlights this distinction, asking, "[C]ould determination trump talent?" Along with examining the physical and psychological battles between the two, Taylor depicts the NBA's raucous nature in the 1950s and '60s, when fights between players were frequent, and the brash Celtics coach Red Auerbach was routinely pelted with rotten tomatoes, lit cigars and eggs. Looking at everything, from each player's private demons to the racially charged era in which they competed, Taylor's book is by turns an intimate profile and a spirited look at the foundation of modern professional basketball. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**\*Starred Review\*** Few individual rivalries in sports match the legendary mano-a-mano basketball duels between Boston Celtic Bill Russell and the much-traveled Wilt Chamberlain. Russell led his team to 11 championships in 13 seasons, and while Chamberlain's teams won 2 titles, only once was he part of a championship team while Russell was active. Chamberlain became the poster child for individual accomplishment--he scored 100 points in a single game--but Russell, 35 years after

his retirement, still epitomizes the ultimate winner, the teammate for the ages. Taylor, author of *The Count and the Confession* (2002), a New York Times Notable Book of the Year, was initially drawn to the subject because, like much of his work, it dealt with the psychology of conflict. But as he interviewed many of those involved on the periphery of his subject--Russell declined to participate and Chamberlain is dead--he realized he had a potentially larger canvas. The rivalry coincided with--and accelerated--the NBA's metamorphosis from a relatively minor league to the media giant it's become today. It also produced two of the most celebrated black sports superstars in the post-Jackie Robinson era and in that context advanced race relations in America. While placing the rivalry in historical context, Taylor shows that Wilt wanted to win every bit as much as Russell but never quite understood, as Russell did, how to sublimate his ego for the betterment of the team. A serious work of sports history, this volume compares favorably with the best works of John Feinstein and David Halberstam on sports. Wes Lukowsky Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Wilt Chamberlain is statistically the greatest basketball player who ever lived. Bill Russell has eleven rings meaning he won eleven championships in the thirteen years he played. Wilt once averaged 50.4 points in the same season he averaged 25.7 rebounds. Bill Russell never averaged more than 18.9 points per game but was surrounded by so many Hall-of-Famers, it's a wonder they lost at all. Wilt averaged 22.9 REBOUNDS for his career. Russell averaged 22.5 REBOUNDS for his career. In the 2012-3 season, the leading rebounder was Dwight Howard who averaged 12.4 rebounds per game. Wilt never averaged LESS than 18.2 rebounds per game and had ten seasons where he averaged 21.1 or more (with a high of 27.2). Russell never averaged LESS than 18.6 rebounds per game and had ten seasons where he averaged 21.0 or more (with a high of 24.7). When Wilt had good players around him, his teams won championships. More often, Wilt was called on to improve an area of the team that wouldn't normally be touched by a center. For example, in 1967-68, Wilt led the league in assists with 702 assists. The NBA leader in 2012-13 was Greivis Vasquez had 704 assists. The bottom line is that the NBA was dominated from the late 1950's through the early 1970's by these two giants. In the history of the game, only Magic v Bird compares. Head-to-Head Numbers: Wilt and Russell played against each other 142 times in 10 years. Russell's team won 88, Wilt's teams won 54. In those games Wilt averaged 28.7 ppg and 28.7 rpg, Russell averaged 14.5ppg and 23.7rpg. Wilt's high game vs. Russell was 62, and he had six other 50+ point games against Russell. Russell's high game against Wilt was 37, and he had only two other 30+ point games against Wilt. Wilt's record 55 rebound game was against Russell, and he had six other 40+

rebound games vs. Bill Russell only had one 40+ rebound night against Wilt.

This appears to be a thorough, thoughtful examination of the Russell-Chamberlain rivalry and what it did for pro basketball (much as Bird-Magic would do years later), but its sloppiness makes its accuracy on any given anecdote suspect. Given that some of the inaccuracy involves some of the better-known, most easily researched moments -- mistakes that literally jump out for their amateurishness -- I went from initially being fascinated by Taylor's compilation of behind-the-scenes insights to wondering whether I could trust any of it. Here are some examples that came to mind as I read *The Rivalry*:\* Taylor's depiction of one of the most celebrated shots in NBA history, Don Nelson's desperation foul-line set shot that bounced freakishly high off the rim before falling through the net just as the Lakers were making their Game 7 comeback in 1969, is available from many film sources, and yet Taylor gets it all wrong. He says Keith Erickson "blocked a shot" and Nelson "recovered" the ball, when in fact, Erickson clearly reached from behind Havlicek in an attempt to steal the ball and poked it loose. The ball went directly to Nelson's hands some 10 feet away as if it were a pass (yet another freakish twist to the play) -- Nelson didn't "recover" the ball, he had it plop into his open hands like a gift from the basketball gods.\* Taylor correctly depicts Sam Jones' rattling game-winner triple-pick jumper on the "Ohio" play that pulled out Game 4 for the Celtics in the first telling, but later in the book refers to it as having happened in Game 5. Did anyone edit the book or even proof it? This is basic stuff, folks, and if you can't trust the simple things to be accurate, can you trust Taylor's accuracy on the more sophisticated events described in the book?\* For instance, Taylor goes into great detail about the injuries and strategies of both the Celtics and Lakers leading into the 1969 finals, yet leaves out one of the most crucial factors and a pretty well-documented one: Although Havlicek had been the team's famed Sixth Man throughout his career to that point, Russell moved him into the starting lineup for that series because he felt the Celtics needed to get off to faster starts. That, more than anything, may have made the difference in the series because in most of those games the Celtics jumped out to early big leads and put the Lakers in the position of constantly having to play catchup. The psychological implications of this dynamic can't be overstated, as the Lakers (and Wilt, with the exception of 1967) had perpetually lost to the Celtics and to trail early in most of the championship games had to reinforce likely presumptions that once again the Celtics couldn't be beaten. As I say, these are just simple, obvious things that jumped out as I read -- and things any reasonable student of the game should have gotten right. I'd like to think they're just minor dumb oversights, but I can't help but wonder if the rest of the so-called facts in this book are as dubious. The book is a good read -- I just don't trust it.

Old enough to have heard the stories about Chamberlain and Russell, but not old enough to have seen them play firsthand, I thoroughly enjoyed hearing the story retold. Considering the Boston dynasty of the 60s, I had no idea how many series came down to a seventh game, with a few fortunate bounces helping to decide the outcome. Of course, good teams make their own luck - and Russell's Celtics seemed to will their way to victory more often than not. Chamberlain's sense of entitlement, drawing from being a prodigee from a young age, harkens to today's superstars who are coronated before they've accomplished anything. Juxtaposed against Russell's rise from obscurity (he nearly didn't pursue basketball at all), it makes for wonderful rags to riches story. I can't vouch for the book's accuracy (which some of the reviewers have placed in doubt), but I can say it's a very good read and wonderfully cuts the divergent and convergent paths of the two heroes of the era.

Growing up in Philadelphia I lived through the teams and the Wilt versus Russell rivalries. Somewhat painful if you are from Philadelphia but enjoyable nonetheless. Russell had the better players and coach around him, but Wilt was a flawed teammate who did not always play for the team first.

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