

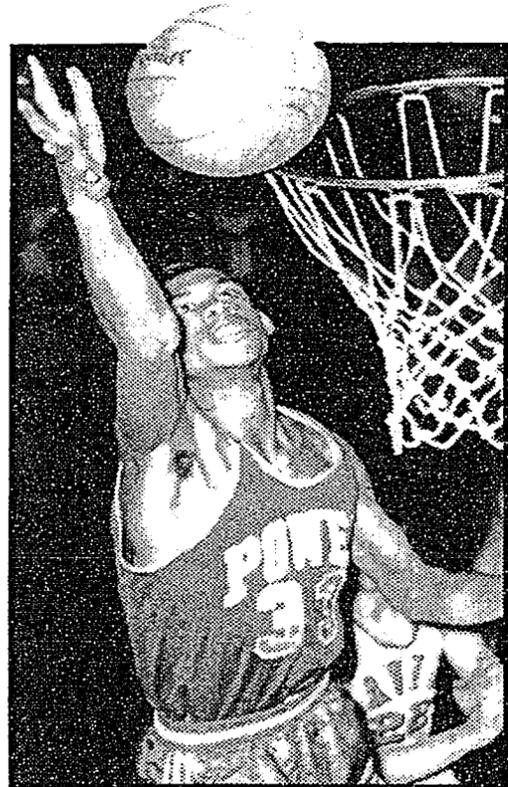
VIEWS OF SPORT

Thanks to Kareem and His Unbroken Line

By LANCE COMPA

FOR those of us who are Donald Trump's age, there is a special pleasure in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's 16th season in the National Basketball Association. Scoring, rebounding, passing off, Kareem is leading the Los Angeles Lakers to another division championship and playoff appearance. There's nothing new about that. More important now is the unbroken line to our youth that Kareem represents. I was upset when the Rochester Royals left my hometown, but get this: A guy my age is still starring in the N.B.A.!

Abdul-Jabbar is the only N.B.A. player who finished college before 1970. That means a lot to the tens of thousands of us who were high school jocks in the early 1960's. I can name the starters and recount the comeback of the Loyola of Chicago team that shocked Paul Hogue and Cincinnati for the N.C.A.A. championship in 1963. I recall necking with a girlfriend on Sunday afternoons, guarding my celibacy by watching Bill Russell and the Joneses on television at the same time.



The New York Times

School: As Lew Alcindor, going for tip-in at Power Memorial.

Abdul-Jabbar, class of '69, one of our own, is still a star in Michael Jordan's game.

I was a 5-foot-8-inch playmaking guard for McQuaid Jesuit High School, the diocesan championship team in Rochester in 1964 and 1965. Like most high school athletes, I got winnowed out in college and moved on to other things. But I stayed a fan, kept playing pickup ball, and now, although I can still turn an occasional nice move like a driving, double-pump, hand-switching layup, I mostly settle for perimeter jump shots. It is clear why professionals have had it in their late 30's: the idea is still there, but the legs fail to answer. And yet, there's Kareem, a guy my age, still turning it on in the N.B.A..

It's not just a matter of age. Kareem and I are part of the genuine 60's generation: high school from 1961 to 1965, college from 1965 to 1969. He and a handful of others went on to careers as pro athletes. The rest of us went on to the great, anonymous middle class, content to quietly build families and working lives.

We are the front cohort of the post-World War II baby boom. Pretenders like Gary Hart and Jerry Rubin are going to have to get out of the way. The Yuppie twits and Reaganite clones of the 70's generation are going to have to wait. We're first in line for a broad, generational movement into positions of institutional power. But hey, what's the rush while one of our own is still astride the old game?

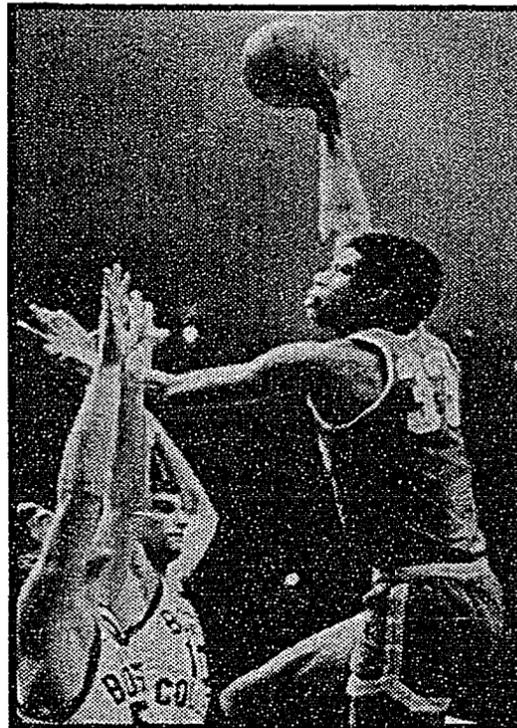
It must have been late in my sophomore year of high school — I was just brought up to the varsity for spot duty on steals and assists — when we picked up talk of a seven-foot sophomore in New York City named Lew Alcindor. Word of mouth made legends then among high school ballplayers, and the word was out about the big fellow in New York who'd be taller than Wilt Chamberlain. Maybe a year later I finally saw a grainy, black-and-white film clip from a Power Memorial game. Alcindor's height was the first thing that hit me, until he started moving.

At that time Wilt was the seven-foot standard. Nicknamed "the Stilt," he seemed stilt-

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ed, a little musclebound. It was really more his build and his gait; Chamberlain was a great athlete. His dominant image, then, was one of deliberate strength and bulk. This kid Alcindor loped and shot like a skinny six-footer.

When we were seniors in high school I met him. I was visiting my future college roommate, Frank McLaughlin, a star guard at Fordham Prep and later captain of Fordham's 1969 N.I.T. team. Frank and I went from his Bronx home base to The New York Post for him to be photographed with the 1965 all-city basketball team. He introduced me to



The New York Times

College: An early version of his shot during tenure at U.C.L.A.

Alcindor there. The big guy enveloped my hand in a shake, we talked shop for a few minutes, and that was that. Since then, I've only seen Kareem on television, sometimes in Sunday games — and always at playoff time.

I haven't been particularly a Lakers fan. I was in New York and New England in the early 70's for great Knicks and Celtics teams. In the late 70's I moved to Washington, where we had a championship Bullets team. It's only lately that I have begun to realize what Abdul-Jabbar is accomplishing.

Many shooting stars younger than Kareem

have flashed in the N.B.A. during basketball's past 16 years — Charlie Scott, Spencer Haywood, Rick Mount, Dave Cowens, Marvin Barnes, Pete Maravich, Bill Walton, David Thompson and others. But Kareem has been the North Star, pulling rebounds, posting down low, drop-passing an assist, turning for the great sky hook, always leading his team to the playoffs.

I always thought the sky hook was misnamed. To me a hook shot implies a sweeping arc, like Cliff Hagan's specialty (if that name means nothing, you're missing my point). Kareem's move is straight up with a slight lean, like a long, narrow rectangle transforming itself into a tilted parallelogram poised on one point. Then, a gentle detent as the shot is released.

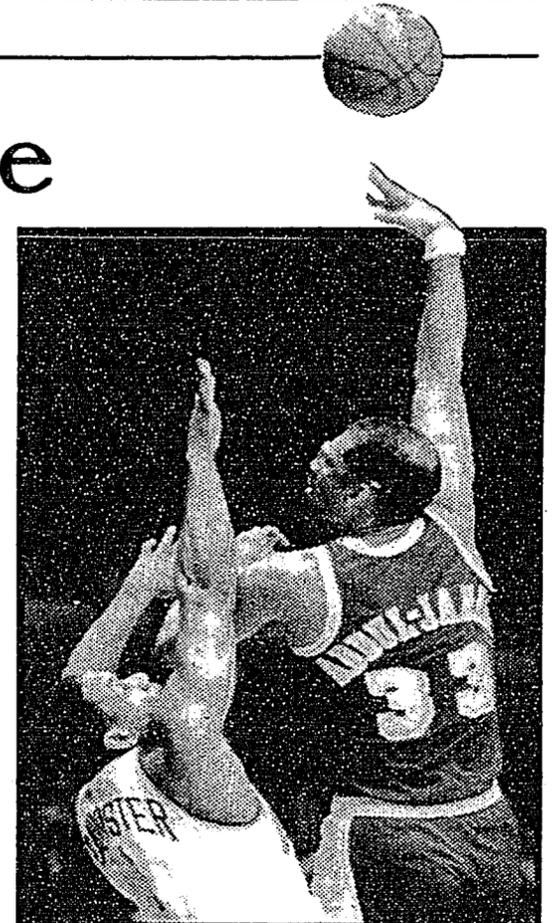
It is as skilled a shot as Julius Erving's looping, under-the-basket reverse layups. It's sweeter than the slam dunks of all the "human highlight films." Kareem's sky hook is a craftsman's shot, the fruit of genius and experience. As much as sheer physical conditioning, this foul-proof move has helped Kareem survive 16 years among the N.B.A.'s musclemen.

At this point in our contemporaries' lives — at least, those of us who prefer a good pickup basketball game to an hour on the squash court — such a joining of excellence and survival is the most attractive part of Kareem's game. In our late 30's we reach the top of our own crafts in the working world — writing briefs, analyzing balance sheets, drafting policies, presenting proposals, managing operations and the like. We still need some years of seasoning for judgment, but we've learned to get to the heart of a problem and skip the unnecessary. That is the essence of Kareem's game now.

As for many of us, Kareem's success did not come trouble-free, even with his natural advantages. He didn't complain when he was drafted by lowly Milwaukee in 1969. He could have forced a move to Los Angeles or New York to give the N.B.A. a media boost. Instead, he went to Milwaukee and led them to a championship in two years. (He did move to Los Angeles later, of course, in a concession to economic reality that we all make at some point.)

Kareem has played through broken noses and poked eyes (he has to use goggles now, like a hockey goalie). He has suffered personal woes — a failed marriage, lives lost in a bizarre shooting incident in a Muslim community home he owned; his possessions destroyed in a mysterious fire.

He has been shoved around by bulkier centers, with the fouling overlooked by referees who figure, rightly, that Kareem can take care of himself when push comes to position for a shot or a rebound. He has a mortal court



The New York Times

Pros: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and his classic sky hook.

personality, too, none of Magic Johnson's bubbly innocence or Moses Malone's impassiveness. Kareem grimaces at bad breaks, yells at refs for bad calls, jaws at Dr. J and Larry Bird.

Despite his consistent stardom, Kareem's N.B.A. teams have won only three championships. He can never equal Bill Russell's 12 championship seasons. But Kareem's teams have always been at or near the top. That's good enough for us who have learned that we can't win them all.

The N.B.A.'s newest sensation is Michael Jordan of Chicago. He was only 2 when Kareem and I got out of high school. Will Jordan still be at the top of his game in the year 2000, as Kareem has accomplished? I doubt he can sustain those aerobatics for 16 seasons. But bald Kareem, class of '69, one of our own, is still a star in Michael Jordan's game.

"Check out the moves, watch the shot — no way these guys are over the hill," says Kareem in his autobiography, speaking of a pickup game with his old high school buddies a couple of years ago. He's talking to a lot of us. Even though I know better, I like to think, remembering that handshake when we were 18, that a molecule of mine is still caught on Kareem's fingertip, helping guide the sky hook home.