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NBA pioneers stood tall on racial issues

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**RICHARD
LAPCHICK**

As the NBA season opened, two men who helped found the league were in the news.

Red Auerbach, who was involved in every NBA season until his death at the age of 89 in October, has helped shaped all of the different eras of the league's history. The other was my father, Joe Lapchick, who was a rival coach of the New York Knicks from 1946 through 1956. "Lapchick: The Life of a Legendary Player and Coach in the Glory Days of Basketball" was written by one of his former players, Gus Alfieri. The

biography was published 36 years after my father's passing. My dad had also played professionally for 20 years, mainly with the Original Celtics, and coached St. John's University for another 20 years.

I went to Auerbach's wake in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 20, 36 years after Red had attended my father's wake. Together, they had achieved enormous social good and justice with their stands on the issue of race in sport that helped break the NBA's color barrier.

Both were at the helm of their teams when the Knicks signed Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton from the Harlem Globetrotters and Celtics drafted Chuck Cooper from Duquesne University. Together with Earl Lloyd, in October 1950, they became the first three African-American players in the history of the NBA. Ironically, the Celtics name, then as the "Original Celtics," helped smash the racial strictures against blacks and whites playing together in the 1920s and '30s. The NBA is now nearly 80 percent African-American. It is hard to imagine that in the '20s and '30s there were no integrated teams.

The Original Celtics wanted to change that and developed a rivalry with the Renaissance Five, the great all-black team playing out of the Renaissance Casino Ball Room in Harlem in New York City. The Celtics and Rens were so good that no white team could beat the Celtics and no black team could beat the Rens. But they played each other even for several decades. In those games the teams tried to challenge stereotypes and the hatred that crossed our land.



Joe Lapchick (left) and Tarzan Cooper challenged stereotypes in their rivalry.

The Celtics were schooled in the effects of segregation as they went back to the best hotels in town after the game while watching their friends board the luxury bus that their owner, Bobby Douglas, had purchased. He knew his team would not be accommodated at those same hotels. The Celtics would go to whatever restaurant they wanted to while the Rens brought food on the bus because they knew that they would not be served in the same restaurants.

On two occasions the Rens and Celtics left town together. As the Rens pulled into a gas station in their bus, the Celtics watched the owner of the gas station emerge with a rifle to chase away this

group of African-American players because he was not about to serve gas from his lily white pumps to them.

My father and his opposing center, Tarzan Cooper, both now in the Hall of Fame along with their teams, did not shake hands before each game. Instead they embraced each other. They wanted fans in those arenas to know that for the Celtics and the Rens it was not just about a Hall of Fame basketball game but a statement of their vision of what America could become.

Auerbach continued that Celtic tradition not only by drafting Cooper in 1950 but by signing Bill Russell as the first black head coach in 1966. Before he finished with the Celtics, Auerbach had been responsible for hiring K.C. Jones and "Satch" Sanders as coaches. The Celtics had three black coaches before the NFL hired its first black coach in 1989.

Wayne Embry, one of Auerbach's players, became pro sport's first African-American general manager (Milwaukee Bucks, 1971) and later team president (Cleveland Cavaliers, 1994). The Boston Celtics established an incredible winning tradition with 16 NBA championships in the modern day, while the Original Celtics dominated basketball in the '20s and '30s when they won so many championships that the league broke up the team.

Both teams paved the way for integrated sport in America to the point that now we barely notice when an African-American head coach is hired or fired in the NBA. It was not easy when my father and Auerbach broke color barriers in their days with the Original and later Boston Celtics.

I salute both of these giants as Red Auerbach was laid to rest in Virginia and we remembered my father in Gus Alfieri's new book.

Richard E. Lapchick is the chair of the DeVos Sport Business Management Graduate Program and director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida.