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Basketball and the Brain: Walt Frazier

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Stylin' and profilin'. Walt Frazier at a Brainwave event (Credit: Michael Palma for the Rubin Museum of Art)

In a lifetime of sports fandom milestones, no one game stands out more than Knicks vs. Lakers in the seventh game of the NBA finals in 1970. As a 14 year-old, I was glued to the radio (no TV coverage in those days for the game) as Marv Albert set the scene: injured center Willis Reed limps onto the court moments before tip-off, hits his first two shots, limps off, and the seemingly overmatched Knicks go on to win the game and their first NBA Championship. The stat line for second-year guard Walt “Clyde” Frazier was 36 points, 19 assists, and 7 rebounds.

“That was my greatest game ever,” Frazier told NYU neuroscientist and Dana Alliance member Paul Glimcher during “[The Basketball Champion](#),” a recent Brainwave discussion at the Rubin Museum of Art. Frazier recalled the looks of surprise on the faces of the Lakers players upon seeing Reed in uniform. “Their body language told me all I needed to know,” said Frazier. “And with the crowd behind us, we felt like we could accomplish anything.”

All these years later, “Clyde the Glide” seemingly drinks from the fountain of youth as his 70th birthday approaches next month. He arrived at the Rubin in typical Clyde fashion, dressed to the nines in a wide-brimmed hat with a beautiful woman on his arm; his Bentley was surely waiting curbside. Helping to keep him youthful and just 10 pounds over his playing weight is yoga; a healthy, non-red meat diet; and intense workouts several times a week.

The mental aspect of what makes champions was the central theme of the discussion. Formative experiences helped shape Frazier as a player and a person. Raised in Cleveland in a single-parent home, he was the oldest of

seven sisters and one brother. In high school he worked at a diner and was the quarterback of the football team. “Leadership and hard work came naturally because of those things,” he said.

Known as one of the greatest defensive players in NBA history, he attributes development in that facet of his game to not having the grades to be eligible to play in games during his junior season at Southern Illinois University. He could still practice, but the coach only allowed him to play defense. “I approached the situation with gusto, studying tendencies of teammates and trying to make practice fun and challenging,” he says. Once he was in the pro ranks and knew he could pick an opponent’s pocket, he would wait until a crucial time in the game to make his move. In other words, his mental approach was just as important as his physical abilities.

Segregation and the idea that African Americans were too often told “no” or “you can’t do that” made him an even more determined individual. Remarkably, the first professional basketball game he ever saw was the first one he played in, something unimaginable in today’s world.

But his world expanded considerably when he came to New York and was surrounded by teammates such as the chess-playing Dick Barnett, the Rhodes Scholar Bill Bradley, and the free-thinking Phil Jackson. The city was also a hotbed of arts, fashion, finance, and diversity. A defensive specialist as a rookie, practice and focus helped turn him into a great offensive player. Later, he applied those traits to broadcasting. “I got my first broadcasting gig (on radio) because I was Walt Frazier, but knew it wasn’t going to last unless I expanded my vocabulary and learned to paint word pictures,” he said.

He did so by becoming a voracious reader of the Arts & Leisure section of the *Sunday New York Times*. He also found that writing helped with retention. He said he spent countless hours on the MSG Network, he is better known for his ‘transition’ instead of ‘fast break’ and ‘swishin’ and dishin’,” he said. Today, as TV analyst for the Knicks and surprisin’,” “used and abused,” “risin’ than he is for his Hall of Fame playing career.

In the Q&A session of the discussion he was able to keep his “ego in check” and play alongside Earl “the Pearl” Monroe, his onetime Washington Bullets nemesis who was traded to the Knicks in 1971. “Earl is the only man I ever dreamed about,” said Frazier, getting a huge laugh from the audience. “Before he came to the Knicks, we had great battles, but it was never personal. When he made a great move, I’d tell him so, and vice versa. All the naysayers said we couldn’t share the ball, and that made both of us even more determined to prove them wrong. And when we won that second championship in 1973, we sure did.”

Managing one’s ego on the court is one thing; managing it off the court is quite another. Frazier said that, based on his two championship rings, he considers himself to be “the greatest Knick ever” and Frazier and Monroe “the greatest backcourt ever.” While most fans would probably agree, one’s legacy is best left to others. But there’s little doubt in my mind that few better integrated their athletic skills with focus, discipline, patience, work ethic, observation, and instinct. Stated simply, Clyde the Glide is one of the smartest players to ever lace up a pair of basketball shoes.

–Bill Glavin

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