Thanks to Kareem and His Unbroken Line

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Abstract
[Excerpt] 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.!

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By LANCE COMPA

FOR those of us who are Donald Trump’s age, there is a special pleasure in seeing Abdul-Jabbar, class of ’69, one of our own, 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 windowed out in college and move on to other things. But I stayed a fan, kept playing pickup ball, and now, although I can still turn out 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 30s. 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.!

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 1960s. 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 Joneses on television at the same time.

Abdul-Jabbar is the only N.B.A. player who’s been on the cover of Time magazine as a high school senior. Abdul-Jabbar was a part of deliberate strength and bulk. This kid Alcindor was 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 leaped and shot like a skinny six-foot­-er.

When we were seniors in high school I met him. I was visiting my future wife, Rosevelt, in New York City. I had spent the better part of the night with 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 a girl who’d be taller than Wilt Chamberlain. The big guy enveloped my dad and me. We had a championship Bullets team. It’s only seen Kareem on television, sometimes in Sunday games — and always at playoff time.

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

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

Class: A couple of years ago. He’s talking to a lot of people. He’s the guy we all grew up wanting to be.

The N.B.A.’s newest sensation is Michael Jordan. He is 2 years old and 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 aerobics for 16 seasons. But bald Kareem, class of ’69, one of our own, is still a star in Michael Jordan’s game.

“One 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 16, that a molecule of mine is still caught on Kareem’s fingertip, helping guide the sky hook home.