Elgin Baylor: The hero and the race card

by Larry_Elder

Dear Elgin Baylor,

I heard about your lawsuit against your last employer â€” whom you accuse of racism.

I was a child who watched in awe and admiration when you starred with my hometown basketball team, the Los Angeles Lakers. You finished your first pro year with the then-Minneapolis Lakers fourth in the league in scoring, third in rebounding and eighth in assists, also scoring 55 points in a single game â€” then the third-highest in the history of the league. You played in the All-Star game that season, sharing the Most Valuable Player award. You easily took the NBA's Rookie of the Year award.

Averaging 27.4 points and 13.5 rebounds per game in your 14-year pro career, you helped lead the Lakers to the NBA finals eight times and played in 11 NBA All-Star games â€” all while carrying yourself, on and off the court, with class and dignity. At one time, you had the record for the most points scored in a game, 71. And you also held the record for most points in a playoff game, 61. (See YouTube: "NBA 1962 Finals Game 5 â€” Elgin Baylor 61 Points.")

Years after your pro career, in 1986, you became general manager of the Los Angeles Clippers, under the ownership of the parsimonious Donald Sterling. Your team floundered under your 22-year tenure, as your owner refused or was unwilling to spend the money to attract and keep the kind of talent that wins championships. The Sports Illustrated cover of April 27, 2000, proclaimed the Clippers "The Worst Franchise in Sports History" and declared that "the Man Responsible" was the owner â€” and your employer â€” Donald Sterling.

Yet you showed up every year, and every preseason you predicted good things this time, this season, for the Clippers. Then, as if on cue, the team crashed and burned. The following year, you would repeat this ritual of hope and success for the upcoming season â€” almost always followed by failure.

Sterling officially replaced you as GM last October. You filed suit, calling him a racist.

Mr. Baylor, you know something about racism. When you grew up in the '30s and '40s in Washington, D.C., blacks couldn't use the public playgrounds. When you traveled with the Lakers for an exhibition game during your first preseason, a Charleston, W.Va., hotel denied you service. You took a stand. Even after the team moved to another hotel, you boycotted the scheduled game. "I'm a human being," you said at the time. "I'm not an animal put in a cage and let out for the show." Your act of defiance, along with those of some other black players, spurred the NBA to officially denounce segregation and adopt policies to protect its players.

Your lawsuit, filed by an attorney formerly with Johnnie Cochran's law firm, accuses Sterling of offering, in 1988, a lowball contract to black, then-NBA player Danny Manning. Sterling allegedly said, "I'm offering a lot of money for a poor black kid." Your complaint also claimed that NBA commissioner David Stern, present in the room, heard the comment. When Stern denied being present, your attorney amended the complaint â€” calling the allegation of Stern's presence "a typographical error." Not a good start.

Your legal team also alleges that Sterling, who made his money in real estate, refuses to lease apartments to blacks and Hispanics. Sterling settled a 2003 lawsuit and currently faces another accusing him of just that. If true, this, of course, violates the law and does, indeed, make a statement about Sterling. But true or false, how does this explain the fact that you worked for him for 22 years?

Your lawsuit also asserts that "the Caucasian head coach was given a four-year, $22-million contract" but your own salary had "been frozen at a comparatively paltry $350,000 since 2003." Yet year after year, you showed up, cashed the checks, and failed to exercise your option â€” quitting.

And your former boss, in recent years, appeared to change his modus operandi. Sterling actually paid players â€” not just white players â€” serious money. Sterling retained black ballplayer Elton Brand by agreeing to pay $82 million over six years. This season, Sterling brought in Baron Davis, a black veteran player, with a five-year, $65 million deal.

Accusing an employer of racism â€” especially one for whom you worked for more than two decades â€” is serious business.

At 74 years of age, after surviving and thriving through real racism, you deserve to cherish your success as one of basketball's greatest players. You could even take some comfort in your record as the longest-serving general manager in the NBA â€” even if under these strange circumstances.

You have the right to file a lawsuit. You have the right to tarnish the image and respect that you earned and enjoy from fans like me. But is it worth it? I respectfully request that you reconsider the value and purpose of pursuing this lawsuit â€” for it simply diminishes you.

Don't do that to you â€” or us.

With respect and admiration,

Larry Elder

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