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A Leap of Faith

On a summer day in 1958, an eight-year-old boy named Julius took a nasty spill on a patch of broken glass on the asphalt courts in Campbell Park, the playground adjacent to the Park Lake Apartment complex on Beech Avenue in Hempstead, Long Island, where Julius lived with his mother, Callie, his older sister, Alfreda (Alex), and his younger brother, Marvin.

Callie Mae Erving, a deeply religious woman, prayed for the quick healing of young Julius's torn-up knee, which was bleeding profusely as he hobbled up the steps to his third-floor apartment.

How much more could Callie take? Five years earlier, her husband, Julius Winfield Erving, had abandoned the family, leaving Callie to raise three children on a welfare check and the money she made cleaning houses. Nevertheless, Callie, who was heavily involved at the South Hempstead Baptist Church, kept the faith.

She took Julius to see a doctor, who stitched the bloody wound but announced that the young boy would be limping around town for a while. The doctor's prognosis did not prevent Julius from returning to his favorite court, however, where he practiced shooting from sunrise until sundown. Callie, watching her son hone his skills through a window of their apartment, cried at the sight of her young "June"—short for Junior—dragging one leg behind the other as he made his way around the court.

Showing signs of a hoops IQ that would one day put him in a basketball class by himself, Julius found a way to limit the pain while strengthening his bum knee. With each trip up and down the stairs of his building, he would take two, three, sometimes four steps at a time; each leap minimized the painful steps while greasing the springs in a pair of bony legs that would catapult Julius Winfield Erving II from poverty and relative obscurity to fame, fortune, and a place in history as one of the greatest athletes of the twentieth century, a superstar whose gravity-defying theatrics would have puzzled Isaac Newton.

"He is that rarity," Dave Anderson, the Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist of the *New York Times* once wrote of Erving, "a showman who is not a showboat."

Dominique Wilkins, one of the most extraordinary dunkers in the history of basketball, idolized Erving as a child and as a contemporary.

"I think that Julius will go down in history as the most exciting player who has ever stepped on a basketball court," Wilkins said. "He's the one guy that all of us wanted to be like when we were growing up. He set the benchmark really, really high for all the great players who followed, most notably Michael Jordan."

Erving, the first player to glamorize the slam dunk, is now the NBA's professor emeritus of suspended animation. If he were given frequent flyer miles for every one of his majestic

flights to the hoop, he could travel around the world, free of charge, for eternity.

"As a longtime broadcaster and basketball fan," said Marv Albert, "I can tell you that Julius is one of the most extraordinary players I have ever seen. Back when Julius was with the Nets, I was a television news sportscaster, and when we did the six and eleven o'clock broadcasts, we always wanted to put some Dr. J footage on the air, so we would go to his play-off games for live shots or to his practices, because we knew he would always do something spectacular that was worthy of being part of the highlights. I cannot recall a time when we sent a camera crew out and they came back disappointed."

Growing up in Honolulu, President Barack Obama played basketball at Punahou High School in the late 1970s, and he idolized Julius Erving, whose poster he once had tacked on his bedroom wall.

"My favorite player when I was a kid was Dr. J," Obama said in a 2008 ESPN interview. "He had those old Nets shorts with the socks up to here [pointing to his shin]. Those Converse Dr. J's, that was the outfit then."

Obama was once asked whether he would rather be president of the United States or Julius Erving in his prime.

"The Doctor," Obama immediately replied. "I think any kid growing up, if you got a chance to throw down the ball from the free throw line, that's better than just about anything."

I totally get it. After all, it is a whole lot easier to become the next president than it is to become the next Julius Erving. With all due respect to Doctors Zhivago, Livingstone, Spock, Seuss, Dolittle, Frankenstein, McCoy, Welby, and Ruth, the most famous Doctor of them all, in my mind, is Dr. J.

"Julius is among a group of players from the 1960s and the 1970s who epitomized style and cool," said Bob Costas, once a play-by-play broadcaster for the ABA's Spirits of St. Louis.

"While he was colorful and dynamic, there was never any sense that he was trying to be an exhibitionist. Out there on the court, he was a stylist, not an exhibitionist, and that's a distinction lost on the modern athlete. This guy was so much cooler than 95 percent of the athletes playing today, it's a joke. He played the game with such style, such flair, but he never did it in a way that showed up an opponent, or to show off in front of a crowd. There was nothing about his spectacular game that lent itself to any of the nonsense that goes on in sports today."

In a February 1993 "On Pro Basketball" column in the *New York Times*, Harvey Araton, writing about Erving as he prepared for Hall of Fame enshrinement, wrote the following: "Those who know Erving well always said family came first [for him], be it the nuclear kind, the team he happened to be playing for, or the league his team was playing in. It was all just part of the game plan to seek out a troubled player or take a rookie home for Christmas, but it worked better way back when. In these dizzying days of global expansion and gargantuan endorsement contracts, of one-man corporations like Shaquille O'Neal rolling off the collegiate assembly line, it is almost impossible to imagine a superstar with the scope, the off-court grace, of Julius Erving."

Despite all the accolades and all the bows, the man who became known as Dr. J, an American icon whose soaring sojourns to the basket revolutionized the way the game was played around the world, suffered his share of bumps and heavy emotional bruises along the way. The tiny scar on the Hempstead hoop prodigy's bloody knee has long since disappeared, but much larger scars have never healed.

Julius and Archie at "the Garden"

It's hard to believe that it all started at the now-defunct Prospect School in Hempstead, a fugitive from the wrecking ball, where

a couple of kindergarten students and best friends named Julius Erving and Archie Rogers were introduced to the game of basketball.

On the tired walls of the school's tiny gymnasium—which served as a coal bin in the early 1900s—hangs a dusty clock that ran out of ticks years ago and a faded sign that reads Maximum Occupancy Not to Exceed 150 Persons. Beneath a thirteen-foot ceiling are two baskets, each of them eight feet in height, and two deflated basketballs that remain frozen in time, one on each side of the court.

"My first dunk was at Prospect," Erving said. "By the time I was in ninth grade I was dunking on the regular baskets. I never had any trouble jumping. When I was six to seven years old, I was jumping out of swings in the playground. The roll, the parachute, all of it. We had a game called Geronimo. You'd jump, yell 'Geronimo,' float, and land. Then you'd look back at the next guy and say, 'Match that!' "

Erving's first court, terribly small even by elementary school standards, is not quite the length of a normal-sized half-court, and the distance between the top of each backboard and the gymnasium's roof is less than two feet. This is why Erving and Rogers and all the other young basketball players at Prospect had no choice but to develop the art of line-drive shooting.

"As soon as a kid trying out for one of my teams took a line-drive shot at the basket, I said 'Lemme guess, you went to Prospect, didn't you?'" said Don Ryan, who ran a Biddy Basketball team for eleven- and twelve-year-old boys that would eventually include Erving and Rogers. "It wasn't exactly a great place to learn how to shoot."

Nevertheless, to a couple of young boys dreaming a hoop dream, it was basketball heaven—and beyond.

"That little basketball court at Prospect was our Madison Square Garden," said Rogers, now fifty-eight, who works as

a laborer for the Village of Hempstead. "Julius and I played a lot of basketball in that gym, and we learned a lot about life in that school."

Basketball Salvation

On a February morning in 1962, there was a series of knocks on the front door of the Salvation Army Center in Hempstead. The door was answered by Ryan, then a nineteen-year-old student at Adelphi University who had played basketball for the Hempstead Travelers of the Police Boys Club and was now running a Biddy Basketball team.

"I open the door and there are these two young kids on their bikes, one of whom introduces himself to me as Archie Rogers, and the other as Julius Erving," recalled Ryan, now sixty-five, who still lives in Hempstead and still coaches a boys' Biddy team there for the Salvation Army.

"They asked if they could join the program," Ryan said. "I put them on the court, and it wasn't long before I realized they were two of the best players on my team."

The two young boys soon joined a roster that included some of the finest talent New York had ever known. Ryan's team already featured a trio of terrific guards, including a slick and savvy ball handler named Al Williams and a pair of sharpshooters named Terry Conroy and Tommy Brethel.

Williams, now fifty-eight and an attendance teacher at Hempstead High School, still regales students there with tales of his old teammate and the glory days when he, Erving, and Rogers, and the rest of the Salvation Army team were at the top of the basketball heap.

"I think we had a smorgasbord of talented players on that team," said Williams, who went on to average 14 points and

10 assists per game at Niagara University. He is now a member of the school's Hall of Fame.

"Everybody played off everyone else's talents, and Julius just fit in perfectly. Julius was longer and taller than the rest of us, and the one thing I can say is that he always had the ability to jump. I recognized that the first few minutes he stepped onto the court with us. But he wasn't really a true standout at that point; he wasn't that explosive—that happened much later for him, at the college level. That's where he really blossomed, and I attribute that to practicing hard, being confident, and being well coached.

"Even at a young age, he was quiet and resourceful. He was the type of player who was always willing to give more than he got out on the court. He was excellent, but he was always humble, and I think teammates and opponents respected that about him. I also think that what made him so great was his dedication to the game. He always practiced and practiced and practiced. In fact, we used to call him 'the Man of a Thousand Dunks,' because he had just about every one of them known to man. And I remember that we used to call him 'Junior,' not 'Julius,' and he never really minded; he was all right with it."

Julius was sent to Ryan by a man named Andy Haggerty, an employee of the New York City Parks and Recreation Department who coached Ryan and the Hempstead Travelers. Haggerty, who also lived in the Park Lake Apartments, had often stopped to watch young Julius play at Campbell Park. Sensing that the five-foot six-inch, 115-pound Erving, then twelve, had the kind of game that might blossom on hardwood, Haggerty approached Erving and told him about Ryan's Salvation Army team. "Go see Don," were the last three words Haggerty said to Erving that day.

Ryan, now a trustee of the Village of Hempstead—"I'm Hempstead born and Hempstead bred, and when I die I'll be Hempstead dead" was one of his campaign slogans in 2007—quickly began to see why Haggerty had taken such an interest in Erving.

"Julius was a very unselfish player who could jump out of the gym," Ryan said. "He had good strong hands, and he was coachable beyond belief. And the one thing I can say about Julius is that he got better and better every day on the court."

In the summer of 1964, Ryan answered an ad in the *Long Island Press* placed by a man named Cecil Watkins, who was running the Ray Felix Tournament on 99th Street and 25th Avenue in East Elmhurst, Queens. The tournament, named after the former Baltimore Bullet and New York Knick who hailed from Queens and died in 1991, was an open competition that featured talented players from the city's five boroughs in various age divisions.

Ryan called Watkins and asked if he could bring a team of fourteen-year-olds to the tournament, which featured more than a hundred teams.

"Are you sure you want to bring a team from Long Island to New York City?" Watkins asked incredulously. "We have a lot of outstanding players in this tournament."

Ryan told Watkins that he had a kid named Julius "who could really jump."

"We have a lot of kids here in New York who could really jump," Watkins shot back.

"Well, not like this kid," said Ryan, adding that he had an outstanding guard named Al Williams who "has a string on the ball."

Watkins told Ryan, "Look, we have a lot of kids in New York who can handle the ball."

Ryan persisted, however, and Watkins relented. Julius Erving and Company were headed for Big City asphalt.

"We didn't know anything about Julius," said Watkins, now seventy-five and the director of New York's National Pro-Am basketball tournament.

"We always had this running joke that Long Island kids could not compete with City kids in basketball, but Don kept saying that he had these kids, especially this one kid named Julius, who would make believers out of us. Well, needless to say, Julius introduced himself to New York City that day. They [the Long Island team] beat a team of New York City kids in the Midgets Division pretty bad. Julius was jumping out of the park, and the crowd was oohing and aahing, but Julius was never out of control.

"In fact, for a young kid, he showed a lot of finesse that day. For weeks after that game, people kept coming over to me and asking, 'Who was that kid?' Everyone knew that he was going to be a hell of a player. After the game, Don came over to me, smiling from ear to ear and saying, 'Hey, Cecil, what do you think about my boys from Long Island now?' "

Watkins worked as a coach and a referee for decades, so he has seen thousands of young players on basketball courts over the years. Of all the young New York hoopsters that Watkins has ever seen, Erving is in his top five. The other four (in no particular order) are Tiny Archibald, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Connie Hawkins, and Roger Brown.

"I'll put that starting five against anybody's all-time starting five, from anywhere in the country, from any era," Watkins said. "Julius and those guys are players who come along once in a lifetime."

While they were young basketball studs at Hempstead Junior High School, Erving, Rogers, and Williams became the nucleus of one of the Salvation Army's greatest teams, which finished with a record of 33–1 when they were twelve-year-olds.

"In grade school, sometimes the only recourse you had was to shoot line drives," Erving once said. "The Salvation Army

was a newer facility, and I got a chance to bank it better and with a lot of backspin and reverse English."

Having honed their shooting skills on a real court, the Hempstead trio led their seventh-grade squad against West Islip High School's junior varsity basketball team in a scrimmage game that reached every basketball fan on Long Island. The game wasn't ever close; Erving and Company dominated their ninth- and tenth-grade competition.

"I was a pretty accurate shooter; Julius was an unbelievable leaper, rebounder, and outright scorer; and Al had a wicked handle," said Rogers, who recalled scoring 15 points that day; Williams scored 17, and Julius finished with a game-high 21. "Those kids from West Islip were pretty amazed," Rogers said. "I think that's where it all started, especially for Julius. That's when people really started paying attention to him."

Coach Ollie Mills at Hempstead High School figured he would inherit the terrific trio, all of whom were eligible to try out for Mills's freshman team as soon as they became eighth graders. However, in 1964, in the summer before Julius entered eighth grade, Callie Erving met a man and moved her family into his house on Pleasant Avenue in Roosevelt. Just like that, Ollie Mills and Hempstead basketball were on the outside looking in, and Roosevelt High School, where the varsity coach was a man named Ray Wilson, opened its doors to a basketball prodigy who was on his way to becoming the most exciting player on the planet.

Julius at Roosevelt and the Legend of Joe Blocker

One day, during Erving's first year at Roosevelt High School, Earl Mosley, the junior varsity coach, called NBA referee Lee Jones over to the gym to meet an energetic, fourteen-year-old

slamming sensation with long arms and a short Afro hairstyle who was not yet being called the Doctor. That nickname would come a little later, when Erving called a bright buddy at Roosevelt "Professor," and his buddy quickly responded: "And you are the Doctor."

"You have to see this kid play," Mosley told Jones. "I think he's got some real potential."

Jones, who is now retired, got his start officiating basketball games at Rucker Park in New York, a hallowed hoop haven in West Harlem, where the Entertainer's Basketball Classic now takes place. Rucker Park brings together professional and college players in their off-season who compete for bragging rights along with scores of woulda-made-it, coulda-made-it, shoulda-made-it players who earned most of their fame playing on hot summer nights behind chain-link fences throughout New York.

Jones had grown up in Roosevelt, and for a fifty-cent toll that took him over the Triborough Bridge, he got to see, up close and very personal, basketball behemoths like Connie Hawkins and Cal Ramsey work their magic on the fabled strip of asphalt across the street from Willie Mays's former address—the old Polo Grounds, where project buildings now cover the same earth that the Say Hey Kid once covered for the New York Giants. However, Jones had not seen Julius Erving until he shook hands with him that day in the Roosevelt gym.

"He was a nice kid, not that tall yet," Jones said. "At the time, he was considered a very good player, not a great one—there's a difference. In fact, he did not even make the All–Long Island team as a high school senior."

While Jones was traveling to New York to see some of the best basketball the city had to offer, Erving was in the neighborhood, polishing his skills before family and friends and leaving them oohing and aahing by taking off for the basket with the

same graceful force displayed by the jets soaring off the runway at nearby Kennedy Airport.

"In those years, we'd invite guys from Hempstead or Lawrence or Freeport over to play full court," Erving once said. "The young ladies would come out, [as well as] parents [and] other kids. They'd react to things you did on the court. If you got up 10 or 12 points, you'd want to do more than just win the game. Like if I was coming down on a fast break and there were two defenders back, I'd take the challenge. I'd try to beat both defenders. I'd fake one guy, then try to spin or jump and pump past the other guy. I'd challenge 'em both. I'd do some trickery with the ball and try to score at the same time.

"That's the part of the game I really loved as a kid, that challenge of daring to be great. If you rise to the challenge and are successful, it gives your confidence a definite reinforcement. If you succeed, it's a feeling of accomplishment. If you fail, you don't feel bad about it, [because] you haven't really lost anything. But if you don't try at all, it's as if you tried and failed. So you've eliminated trying for that good feeling."

Erving kept rising, higher and higher, to every occasion and every challenge, putting an eye-opening exclamation point—one of his patented slams—behind many of his towering assaults on the rusted rims scattered around Long Island.

"Dunking is a power game, a way of expressing dominance," Erving once told *Black Sports The Magazine*. "It makes your opponent uptight and can shatter his confidence. My style is an expression of me as an artist. If I develop an aspect of my game to the point where I can do certain things, why not do them? I would relate it directly to other professions like music and writing. Different people have different styles of expression. Shakespeare had a way with words so that they could be poetic . . . they just do it, that's them. The way I play the game, that's me."

On his rapidly developing game as a youth, Erving once told *Esquire*, "I've never felt particularly unique. Even within the context of basketball, I honestly never imagined myself as anything special. I remember back home, when I first started playing, at nine, ten, I had a two-hand shot. Then by twelve-and-a-half, thirteen, I had a one-hand shot. Always went to the basket, that was my way, that pattern was set by then.

"Back then, before I was physically able, I felt these different things within me, certain moves, ways to dunk. I realized all I had to do was be patient and they would come. So I wasn't particularly surprised when they did, they were part of me for so long. I didn't find anything particularly special about them. It wasn't that I didn't think I was a good player, I just assumed everyone could do these things if they tried."

Long before Erving began his high school career at Roosevelt, he was playing ball at Campbell Park, his home court, on the green cement courts at Roosevelt Park, and on any other playground. Basketball provided not just an arena for showcasing his ever developing talents but also a temporary escape from a life of poverty and of never again seeing his father, who was killed in an automobile accident when Erving was just eleven years old.

"I never really had a father," Erving told *Esquire*, "but then the possibility that I ever would was removed."

Julius Erving still had a mother, though, and she was loving, hardworking, and dedicated. Callie Mae was one of fourteen children and was born under the sign of Taurus. Erving once said of his mother, "She's a great lady. She has been a profound influence in my life. Born in meager surroundings in rural South Carolina, she and my dad migrated to New York, where I was born, my brother was born, [and] my sister was born. I view her as a very, very strong-willed person, who understood her values very early in life, learned her lessons about dealing

with people, and made her family her priority. The influence on her family, because it was such a priority for her, was clearly felt by all of us.

"She had to work very hard. As a matter of fact, she used to teach school when she was in South Carolina, but she wasn't qualified to teach in New York, and she did whatever she had to do. She did domestic work, she went through the training to become a hairdresser, and she rented a booth in a salon and supported her family as best she could. She always gave us great doses of love and made us feel special about the little material things that she could give us, to help us to understand the merit system.

"If you came home with a good report card, As and Bs, then maybe there was a pair of tennis shoes that went along with that. I remember one instance in elementary school. She knew that I liked white grapes, and she bought me a pound of white grapes, and these were all mine and it was just so special. It was in response to having a good report card, and something simple like that meant a lot to me. I guess it was the gesture on her part that was behind it that still carries through today, in terms of thinking that way. I think I started learning lessons about being a good person long before I ever knew what basketball was. And that starts in the home, it starts with the parental influence."

In addition to Callie Mae, there were always the parks and always basketball.

"When there was a fight at home, or I was uptight, I would go down to the park and play, sometimes just by myself," Erving said. "And when I was through, I would be feeling good again. I could come back and deal with the situation. Being a typical Pisces, I might have experienced mood shifts, but I don't remember any depression, or needing to do anything, or to have someone bring me out of being depressed."

Sometimes Erving would go to Campbell Park just to watch a street-ball phenomenon named Joe Blocker hold court there.

Blocker, one of the most legendary athletes that Hempstead High School ever produced, is sixty-six now and back where he started. A football, basketball, baseball, and track and field star in the mid to late 1950s, Blocker—who was voted Hempstead's "Athlete of the Millennium"—spent a lot of his free time carving his legend into the deep cracks of school yards around Long Island.

Although Blocker played college football as a running back at West Texas State University and went on to play professionally with the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League in 1967 and 1968, he is best known for having defended playground honor at Hempstead, where Erving first honed his skills, and in Roosevelt Park—now called the Reverend Arthur Mackey Park—where a wooden sign was hung on November 2, 1973, that says, "This court is dedicated to Doctor Julius Erving."

Most weekend mornings before Erving got out of bed, and most nights long after Erving had rested his head on his pillow, Blocker was somewhere within bike-riding distance at a local park, blocking shots or flushing fools with vicious two-handed dunks.

One of Blocker's favorite playgrounds was Campbell Park, where legend has it that he once sent a rising NBA star named Robert Parish running from the park with a bruised ego. A pair of Brooklynites and future pros named Connie Hawkins and Roger Brown, arguably the best high school players ever to come out of New York City, had their share of difficult days in Blocker's outdoor office as well.

"Everybody who was anybody came to Campbell Park," Blocker said. "Robert Parish learned the hard way that Long Island guys could play some basketball."

Long Island guys soon learned the hard way that Joe Blocker could play some basketball as good as, or perhaps even better than, any of them.

"I took on all comers, and there were always fifteen to twenty guys waiting to play next," Blocker recalled. "I never wanted to lose, because losing meant sitting for a half an hour until you played again."

Julius and Marvin Erving, three years apart in age and light-years apart in God-given basketball talent, were two of the youngest neighborhood children who would bike to anywhere Blocker was playing.

"I'm older than Julius and Marvin, but I remember them coming to the school yards, especially Campbell, to watch us play," said Blocker, who grew up on Linden Avenue, across from Campbell Park. "They were both very nice, very respectful kids, and both good basketball players. I never once saw them in any kind of trouble."

By the time Julius was a fourteen-year-old freshman at Roosevelt High, he was beginning to steal some of Blocker's thunder.

"From the minute I saw him play, I knew he was going to be good," Blocker said. "But then he started to get real good, and he just seemed to move perfectly and effortlessly out there on the court. He was maybe five feet six inches tall, something like that, but he could jump pretty well for a smaller player, and he had huge hands. I remember him, at that age, holding a basketball like it was a baseball."

Blocker, now a custodian at Hempstead High School who has been slowed down by gout, limped through the hallways and reminisced some more about the new kid on the block.

"I always got along very well with Julius, but some of the other guys were jealous of his talent," Blocker said. "Julius could jump over guys or drive around them whenever he wanted, and he

could shoot, so the older guys tried to bang him around out there, but the physical stuff couldn't rattle him. In fact, it just made him tougher and stronger. He was like this really poised, really cool kid who was just so much smoother than everyone else but never bragged about it and never talked any trash. He just kept playing his game and getting better and better with each passing day. He had the whole nine yards going for him, and he knew it.

"A few years later, the young neighborhood kids were looking up to Julius and going to the parks to watch him play, just as they had done before with me."

Suddenly, a bell rang at Hempstead, and Joe Blocker, weaving slowly through a maze of students with his mop and pail, made his way to an elevator and pressed the down button.

"I'm very proud of the fact that I got a chance to know Julius Erving, and I'm even prouder that Julius did so well for himself, that he became a role model for thousands of kids throughout the years," Blocker said. "Back in the day, nobody gave you nothing. You had to earn what you got, and Julius did just that. Julius is rich now and famous, but until this day he remains well liked and well respected in this area because he is still a down-to-earth guy who always stayed true to his friends.

"My daddy once told me to respect folks, to never think you're better than anybody else or talk about yourself. He always said it's better to let other people do the talking about you. Julius was the same way. He never bragged, despite the fact that he was once the greatest player in the world. People around here still think of me as a legend, but Julius Erving is the true definition of everything a legend should be."

"A Super Nice Guy"

One of the greatest high school basketball games that Jack Wilkinson ever played came at the expense of Julius Erving.

Wilkinson, fifty-eight, played guard for Lynbrook High School during the four years that Erving played for Roosevelt High. Wilkinson's Owls and Erving's Roughriders, division rivals, were members of South Shore Division IV.

"They were a black school, and we were a school filled with mostly white-bread kids," said Wilkinson, now a freelance sportswriter living in Atlanta. "We played them tough at the varsity level, but we never beat them. Julius was a good player at that time, though pretty nondescript, and [there was] nothing to suggest that he would ever become the Doc. He was average size, maybe six-one or six-two, something like that. He wasn't a dirty player, and he never talked s—t. He could dunk, but we always thought that the rims at Roosevelt were a little low. "

On a December day in 1964, the Lynbrook and Roosevelt freshman squads squared off at Lynbrook, and the six-foot Wilkinson, guarded throughout by Erving, rang up 23 points.

"Of course, I wasn't the player that Julius was," Wilkinson said, "but I just happened to be completely on that game."

When it was over, Wilkinson and his teammates were celebrating in their locker room when two players from the opposing team, Erving and Odell Cureton, strolled in to shake hands.

"Here were these two guys we just beat, who were gracious enough to walk into our locker room and shake hands," Wilkinson recalled. "Julius just said to me, 'Nice game, man.' I look back now and I realize how special that moment was. I followed Julius's career all the way through the pros, and every time I read or heard someone say that he was a super nice guy, I knew where they were coming from, because I experienced that firsthand."