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The Fading of Giants:

How the mysterious disappearance of basketball's big man has made him more vital than ever before

By Kevin Fixler

On a Saturday morning in October at a small, strip mall fitness club in Sonoma, Calif., former NBA center Clifford Ray sits on a metal bleacher watching a hodgepodge of mostly over-the-hill baby boomers labor up and down a basketball court. The group of males has shelled out a couple thousand bucks of disposable income each to take a weekend's worth of instruction at Hall of Famer Rick Barry's annual fantasy camp in Northern California wine country.

An NBA assistant coach several times over, the 62-year-old Ray is considered one of the foremost authorities on developing young "big men"—a term used to describe players at the center and sometimes power forward positions. Just a few of the elite players he has worked with closely include Dwight Howard, Kevin Garnett and Kendrick Perkins. In past years, he also ran a big man camp with Hall of Fame center Robert Parish. Since being let go by the Boston Celtics before the start of the 2010 season, Ray has had plenty of time to instruct at camps and clinics around the country, where the play isn't exactly professional.

"Give it to the big fella'," rumbles Ray's deep voice from the bench as his team goes on the offensive. "Work it!"

Like most of the men who played the center position before him, as well as all of those who have played it since, Ray is big. When seated, his physique appears folded up onto itself, always protruding. When he stands, his size 20 adidas propel him as he performs a Transformer-like conversion into a 6'9" giant. And then, of course, there's the dolphin story. Once during Ray's playing days, the owner of nearby Marine World summoned him on an emergency call. He requested Ray reach his arm down a show dolphin's throat to pull a bolt from its stomach.

Ray's long face, covered by a thick beard, is pointed toward the action on the court, and the dusting of white atop the short curly black hair on his head clashes with his rich, dark skin. The lone diamond in his gold 1975 World Championship ring shimmers in the court's artificial light.

The ball ends up in the hands of the center on Ray's side, one of the older participants in the outfit of 18, a gray, goggle-adorned heap of height and sweatbands. The man suddenly takes to the air and, to the surprise of most in attendance, sinks a jump-shot from a spot on the court known as the elbow.

"Way to go, big daddy!" bellows Ray, followed by, "We gotta' get that pick-and-roll going."

For much of the league's history, dating back to its formation in 1946, the NBA has been

dominated by players at the center position. Legendary big men like Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar—the latter two Ray's peers and the former his idol—were nearly unstoppable: players with the height and reach to block shots, capture rebounds and score nearly at will. Since then, contemporary names like Tim Duncan, Shaquille O'Neal and Yao Ming have taken their place. Lately though, these impact centers have all but vanished. Duncan is at the tail end of a distinguished career, and O'Neal and Yao retired last year. Today, only two players—the Orlando Magic's Dwight Howard and Los Angeles Lakers Andrew Bynum—are widely viewed as conventional bigs among the league's 30 teams. And the numbers are not improving.

Still, many, including Ray, have gone as far as to say a team cannot win it all without this pivotal piece to the championship puzzle. So where have all the centers gone? In a game fundamentally built on height, it seems the tallest player is effectively being phased out.

Basketball has always been a game played from the inside-out—from the hoop outwards. A regulation NBA court is 94 feet long and 50 feet wide, but it is within the narrow painted lane, known as the key, where games are won or lost. It is the space where centers traditionally dominate, as scorers on one end of the court and protectors on the other.

"An effective center should have the ability to deny the opposition any easy points in the paint," says Abdul-Jabbar, a six-time champion and most valuable player, the league's all-time leading scorer, and arguably the best to ever play the position. "Offensively a great center will have an arsenal of shots that make him impossible for one man to guard."

For years, that was the formula for success. At one point, in fact, centers were so dominant that the NBA twice changed the rules of the game in an attempt to level the playing field between those teams that possessed one of these customary lynchpins, and those that did not. Hoping to offset the supremacy of the Minneapolis Lakers George Mikan, the league doubled the width of the key—from 6 to 12 feet—in 1951, and then increased it again to 16 feet in 1964 to counteract then-San Francisco Warriors big man Wilt Chamberlain. A team that can consistently score and defend within this region of the court is almost always a playoff contender. By widening the space, pushing players a further distance from the basket and lowering their shooting percentage, the NBA tried to make it more difficult for these men in the middle to do either so effortlessly.

Other rule changes, in particular those that sped up the game, also worked against centers. The first came in 1955 with the inception of the 24-second shot clock. With it, players were forced to lumber up and down the court more often, which took an even larger physical toll on the game's biggest bodies.

At just 29, the 6'10" Mikan hung it up the season before the shot clock era, after winning his fifth title. A year and a half later, the man nicknamed "Mr. Basketball" unretired halfway through the 1956 season, to try and help his old team after a subpar start. But

Mikan would soon find even he was in over his head. In his book "24 Seconds to Shoot," sportswriter Leonard Koppett wrote that Mikan "simply wasn't equipped for the 24-second game. The widened foul line he could handle; the constant running he could not." After a first-round playoff loss, Mikan left the game as a player for good.

More rules effectively devaluing the big man were around the corner and the role of the center has been changing ever since. When the NBA introduced the 3-point shot in 1979, teams began to put an emphasis on developing the perimeter shooter, who tended to be a shorter, more agile player. Oddly enough, it was Mikan, the original dominant big man, who was one of the 3-point shot's biggest backers, helping it go mainstream as the first commissioner of the rival American Basketball Association (ABA). Twelve years later—three years after the two leagues merged—the NBA adopted what Mikan had called "the home run" of basketball because "it brought fans out of their seats."

The change also, for the first time, forced centers to play defense out away from the basket. Before then, they were used to controlling the game by blocking shots and grabbing an abundance of rebounds.

Chamberlain and Russell each averaged nearly 23 rebounds a game for their careers. Today, the leading rebounder is Howard, who has pulled down exactly 13 per game for his seven-year career. Blocks were not a statistic kept until the 1973-74 season, after both Chamberlain and Russell retired, but surely both would have been at or above the league's leaders this year. Howard, one of the top rejection artists, has averaged two a game as a pro.

More than just putting up points, a traditional center employs the low-post technique—a physically demanding, back to the basket set of offensive and defensive fundamentals. The low post—an imaginary region on both sides of the key—is the most important area of the court, and also the space that a team's center must control. Basically, he acts as his team's last line of defense, while also doing a lot of the unpleasant work that few of today's superstars are willing to perform. It entails highly desired, lowly recognized duties, everything from setting screens and posting up on offense, to jamming up the painted lane around the hoop, and turning away shots in the defensive zone.

"It's not a fun position," says Howard, the No. 1 overall pick in 2004. "It's a very tough position. It's one that a lot of people don't really want to play, because of how physical and tough it is. You have to be the tough guy on the court."

As the strength and height of the rest of the positions has shot up, the job has become increasingly difficult. "It used to be that just being 6'10" and big was enough," says *Sports Illustrated's* Chris Ballard, author of "The Art of a Beautiful Game." "Now you have small forwards who are 6'8", and everyone's rocked, so just strength won't do it anymore. Everyone's jacked, everyone can jump."

Locating guys willing and able to accept the position has become more and more difficult. "There's just not a lot of big guys in this league," says retired player Nate

McMillan, who drafted Greg Oden to be his franchise center, but ultimately failed in his attempt to find an effective big man in seven years coaching the Portland Trail Blazers. "You just don't have the Shaquilles, and the Howards, and the Bynums coming through. We're looking for them. You want them, just where are they?"

Such large bodies have also shown themselves to be particularly prone to injury.

Oden is a case in point. At 7', 285 pounds, the Blazers made him the first overall pick in 2007. Over the next five seasons, he spent more time sidelined by knee injuries than on the court for what was projected to be an all-star career. Since entering the NBA, Oden has played a total of one regular season's worth of games. After five knee surgeries—two on his right and three on his left—the Blazers cut him this past March.

Another former Trail Blazer center—also drafted No. 1 overall, in 1974—Bill Walton suffered chronic foot problems during his career. After earning the league and finals MVP awards in his team's 1977 championship season, Walton broke a bone in his left foot in 1978. The repeated ankle injuries that followed collaborated to rob him of a good chunk of his career. He would return to play a supporting role with the Boston Celtics 1986 title team, even garnering the Sixth Man of the Year Award that season, but the damage had already been done. He eventually retired after 13 years in the league, playing in only 44 percent of his teams' regular season games—still the record for most games missed in a career.

More recently, the 7'6" Yao Ming fell victim to similar, longstanding foot and ankle injuries. They included bone breaks, infections and fractures. After regular attempts to remedy his acute issues through rest and surgical operations, he left the game before the start of this season.

Following 10 professional seasons, Clifford Ray retired from the NBA in 1981 with latent injuries of his own. He has neuropathy, or nerve damage, in his feet and also had both knees replaced in 2010.

"A lot of big guys have problems with their feet," says Ray. "I mean, think about it, you're 240, 250 pounds. Something is gonna go wrong."

If center has become a more difficult position, it has also become a less popular one.

"Who do kids emulate?" asks all-time great Jerry West, inspiration for the NBA's logo. "They don't emulate big players. They emulate smaller people who can dribble the ball through a damn Coke bottle. Those are the things that excite kids."

The rise of bigs who score from the perimeter—a style foreign to most traditional centers that is often associated with the Europeans who began flooding the league in the 1980s—is also frequently pointed to as a source of less post play.

Ballard believes it's that there has been a dearth of relatable centers in the last decade, with skills that can be duplicated by their fans. He says there is no modern-day skyhook—Abdul-Jabbar's signature shot—which is still something commonly seen on pickup courts by people of all sizes. This has resulted in fewer emerging players aspiring to mirror careers of the past generation's low-post tacticians.

"Shaq was cool," Ballard says of the 7'1", 300-plus pound behemoth, "but he was so unfathomable. Who could play like Shaq? There's no skill set to mimic. It was being huge. Duncan wasn't cool at all. [He was] fundamental. Nothing he did was flashy."

While suiting up in front of his locker room stall for a January game in Oakland against Ray's old team, the Golden State Warriors, the Orlando Magic's 6'11" Dwight Howard said he relates.

"Nobody really talks about center," said Howard, a three-time Defensive Player of the Year. "Center isn't a flashy position, but it's the centerpiece for the team. Most people don't understand it because all they care about is one thing, and that's points. Scoring doesn't get you titles. Scoring doesn't get you nothing but scoring titles, or, you know, you look good on SportsCenter."

Howard would go out and have a monster night, securing 23 rebounds and tying his career-high of 45 points as he guided his team to victory. He also broke a 50-year-old mark held by Chamberlain for the most free throw attempts in a game. Reporters were all too happy to make the Chamberlain comparison after the game, which was fair. His performance was a classic example of how decisive a center can still be in the league today. But Howard admits that center was not even his first choice of positions.

"I always wanted to be a point guard," he says, "but then I started to grow, so I played center once I got to the league. I didn't have the opportunity to watch TV, or see any other centers. I had a Magic Johnson VHS, and I watched that everyday. I went to guard camps. I knew who Wilt Chamberlain was, but that's because of a toy that I had."

This kind of story is not uncommon. As Hall of Famer Patrick Ewing puts it, "Everybody wants to be like Michael Jordan."

Ewing, one of the top centers of his generation and the first pick in 1985 by the New York Knicks, says he wanted to be like 6'6" guard Julius "Dr. J." Erving, but then fell back on the example set by the big men that preceded him, Russell and Chamberlain. Today, because of the flash and glamour associated with the other four positions, Ewing concedes that a number of players who possess the size and abilities to be centers choose not to play the position. They simply play another spot on the court, accelerating the surge in height at the other positions.

Abdul-Jabbar says that growing up, he wanted to be like Lakers 6'5" Hall of Fame forward Elgin Baylor. But when he grew to be 7'2", he also relied on the model

established by Russell to develop into a preeminent center.

Boston Celtics power forward Kevin Garnett is known around the league as more a perimeter player than force inside the paint. Despite being measured at 6'11³/₄", he is said to have never wanted to be listed at 7' so he would not be relegated to the low post.

Rather than ascending to the role of the center, some see players such as Garnett as shrinking from the responsibilities that come with playing the game's principal position.

"There is a lot expected from a center and that can make certain players avoid the spotlight," says Abdul-Jabbar. "Many players who have the size to be centers try to avoid playing that position in the NBA because of the spotlight that is focused on anyone who is chosen to play center."

This is a potential problem, says West, who owes a good portion of his professional success to the presence of a dominant big man. He won his only title as a player with Wilt, coached Kareem, and as GM of the Lakers signed Shaq. He says a team might be able to win a championship without a quality center in college, but not in the NBA.

"They're vitally important," he argues. "They're kind of the anchor of a franchise. There's always a player of that caliber that may not be a household name, or may not be in basketball's Hall of Fame, but they do the little dirty work things because they're physical and they know their roles. Late in the year, you watch the impact of these bigger guys on the game, getting key rebounds, making a defensive play."

Abdul-Jabbar agrees, "A quality center is key for a championship team. It is much more difficult to win without a center who can at least get the job done defensively."

With the defending Eastern Conference champion Heat as one of the favorites to win the title this postseason, but without a reliable low-post presence, it's a wonder if they would be the first to do it. Often people suggest that Jordan was able to win his six championships without an impact player at the position. Ewing, who was repeatedly kept from fulfilling his career's ultimate achievement by Jordan's Bulls, disagrees.

"Chicago won, but they had centers," he says. "Nobody wants to give [them] credit, but they were all good. The Heat might win it this year, but they don't really have a traditional center, so we'll see."

This general belief in the importance of a center keeps teams constantly in the hunt for players at the position. The shortage of prospects has resulted in an even higher demand, and sometimes led teams to take a risk on unproven bigs like Darko Milicic and Hasheem Thabeet, neither of whom have lived up to their selection so high in the draft.

When a demonstrated talent becomes available, teams clamor to quickly snatch them up. After becoming a free agent in 1996, Shaq signed a then-record seven-year, \$121 million deal with the Lakers. Earlier this season, Orlando entertained offers for a disgruntled

Howard, and the bids flew in. Recognizing Howard as a player every other team in the league would rather build around than play against, the Magic promptly pulled him from the trading block.

"You can draft a great guard, and they won't change your franchise," notes Chris Ballard. "A great center will. There's such a small pool of potential. It's such a big payoff."

Adds West, "Everyone's mantra is if you're going to make a mistake, make a mistake on a big guy."

The wisdom of that gamble is currently being tested out by the Sacramento Kings. In 2010, the team from California's capital spent the fifth overall pick on DeMarcus Cousins, an intriguing but temperamental center from the University of Kentucky. After already selecting 6'11", 250-pound big man Jason Thompson with their first-round pick in 2008, the hope was that the traditional way of building a team—from the center on down—would help revitalize this bottom-feeder of the league for the better part of the last decade.

In early March, Ray was hired as a consultant to tutor Thompson and Cousins on playing center. With the large monitor overhead reading 67 minutes until tip-off against Tim Duncan's San Antonio Spurs and fans just starting to trickle into Power Balance Pavilion, Ray is dressed in a purple polo with a gray T escaping underneath, long athletic shorts to match, and knee-high white socks. He leans his weight behind his forearm and into Thompson's lower back. As another coach passes Thompson the ball, he breaks from Ray's clutch and faces him up. Ray takes a soft swipe at the ball then points Thompson around him for a short jumper.

"Shot, and stay up there with it," says Ray, holding his own arm in the air with wrist cocked forward to show the proper form. The ball swishes through the net. "Good."

After some free throws, Ray and Thompson stand and chat. Thompson, mouth agape and ball at his hip, is already in game shorts and stares eye-to-eye with his mentor.

"Don't ever feel like you're not involved," Ray says, shuffling to different locations on the court, his arms swinging like pendulums. "You've got to get yourself involved."

Jerry West believes that the shortage in centers has led to another deficit: a lack of coaches able to relay the position.

"I don't say that it's a lost art," says West, "but it's not something that many people can teach, I don't think."

The problem has been exacerbated by younger and younger players entering the NBA, which is one of the reasons Ray says fewer teams now have this essential rim protector.

Little or no time in college has prevented these big men from gaining this specific skill set, while at the same time growing physically, mentally and technically. Since 2006, the league has prevented players right out of high school from becoming available in the draft. Now they must wait a full calendar year whether they play in college or not.

Ray thinks the rule is still not enough to bring players up to the same speed on playing the middle as most of the centers of yesteryear. The lack of capable coaches at the professional level, combined with the other factors hindering the position today, and many of these big men never learn the traditional technique that formerly made them irreplaceable.

"All the young centers need to be developed," says Ray. "Not everybody can teach. That's what people don't get."

"He's been a guy who has worked with all-star caliber players," Thompson says of Ray after the game. "He's a guy who's won a ring on his own back in the day. All I try to do, like a sponge, is absorb the information that he gives me."

The lessons seem to be working. Thompson went for 10 points, six rebounds and two blocks during 31 minutes in the loss to the Spurs—all at or above his averages for the season.

The same could be said of the 21-year-old Cousins. "He's really been helping me out a lot," he says. "On the court to off the court, absolutely everything—all-around game."

The 6'11", 270-pound Cousins is seen as a possible powerhouse at the position, if he can just stay on the court. Since Ray joined the staff, Cousins has had some of the biggest games of his career. He managed a solid performance against San Antonio with 18 points and nine rebounds, but did foul out, adding to his league-leading average of personal fouls per game. He is also tops in the NBA for technical fouls, those dispensed for such things as unsportsmanlike conduct.

"You've got to be thick-skinned if you're going to be a five," says Ray of playing the center position. "If you're going to be a legitimate five and win a championship ... I have to teach you, you can't be selfish, you can't be thin-skinned, you can't be too sensitive. Centers are always going to be the whipping boy. I tell my kids that. You've got to be able to shrug things off and keep working for your team."

Perhaps playing under the critical eye of some of the league's top players, James and Wade, has kept one of Miami's centers from developing into his essential role. Or maybe, as the Heat are certainly hoping to prove, to be the last team standing, they do not need a center at all.

"I don't think they can win," says West. "They've got two of probably the best five players in the league all on one team. They're enormously talented. The way Miami can win is if they create turnovers on defense. Can they do that in the playoffs? I'm not sure."

As for Ray, though the Kings missed out on the postseason for the sixth consecutive year, he remains optimistic that more teams in the NBA will try to cultivate quality centers. With players like Memphis' Marc Gasol, New York's Tyson Chandler and Indiana's Roy Hibbert continuing to play increasing roles for their teams, the demise of the traditional low-post presence may not be as assured as once thought. The near certainty of collegiate player of the year Anthony Davis, another Kentucky Wildcat big man, being drafted No. 1 overall come June means the next generation of talent might grow up wanting to satisfy this crucial capacity.

"There are young guys who want to be great centers," says Ray, "I'm sure, somewhere working on their game. I just hope that another couple of great centers come down the pike so that it will enhance more of the young people to want to be centers. Not to try to avoid playing center, but to want to play the position and really learn the position."