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BILL GARRETT
OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY



EVERYBODY'S ALL-AMERICAN BILL GARRETT

RACHEL GRAHAM CODY



Indiana University basketball star Bill Garrett goes in for a layup during a February 27, 1950, game with Big Ten rival Illinois. IU won the game 80-66, to finish the year with a 17-5 record. INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



Bill Garrett was unflappable. The only African American in the Big Ten during his entire college career, he handled opponents' hard elbows, teammates' cold shoulders, referees' missed calls, opposing fans' slurs and attacks, and every other kind of slight without breaking stride. Lanky and easygoing, he cracked jokes before big games and slept easily. The most stress he usually showed was a rub of his close-cropped head. But a cheering crowd threw him.

It was the last game of his college career. His team, the Indiana University Hoosiers, was ahead, and his coach, Emmett R. "Branch" McCracken, had a tradition. Every season, near the end of the final home game, if the score was not too close, McCracken took his seniors out of the game one by one for a curtain call. On the evening of March 5, 1951, as IU was headed to victory over Wisconsin, the gesture had special meaning. The undersized team, nicknamed the Hurryin' Hoosiers for the fast-paced, up-and-down-

the-court game they played, had done better than anyone had expected. And Garrett, the team's center, was at the heart of that effort.

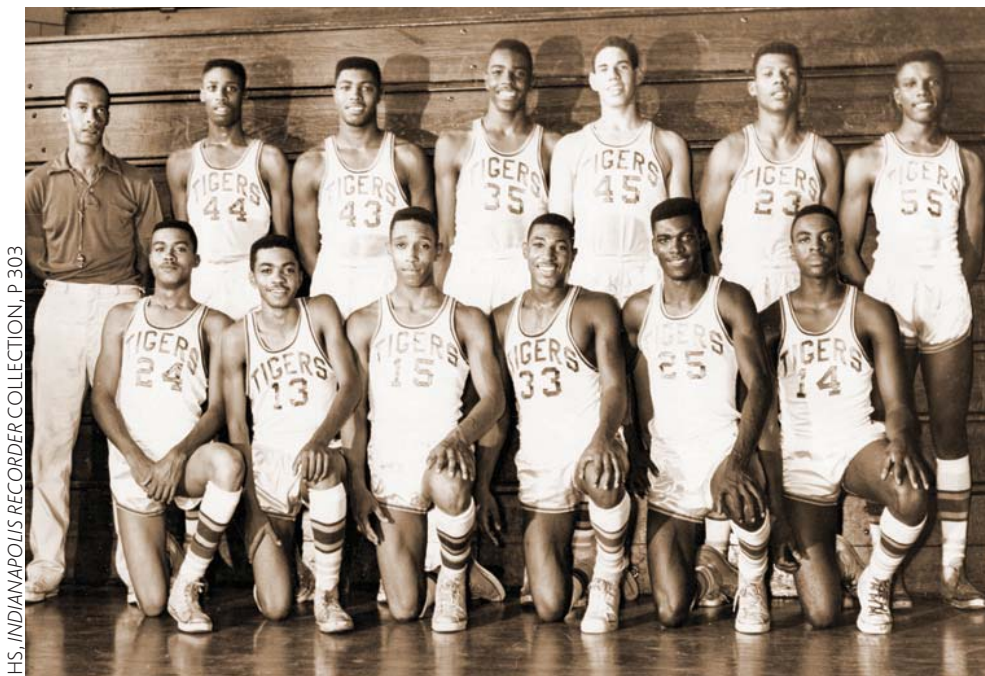
The crowd of 10,000 cheered for each senior as he left the game. With two minutes to go and the clock stopped for a free throw, McCracken waved in his reserve center, and the field house exploded. Garrett had taken only a few steps before everyone in the arena was on their feet clapping, yelling, and stomping their feet in praise.

The adoring crowd threw him. Garrett stepped down from the court to the bench, and the outpouring went on. Unsure what to do next, he stepped back up onto the edge of the floor, looked at his coach and his shoes, and still it went on. Finally the rest of the team embraced him, the referees blew their whistles, and the spell was broken. The crowd had cheered for almost two minutes.

The moment was one of deep poignancy and cathartic emotion. Many who were there remembered it for the rest of their lives. Garrett was the best player Indiana had ever had, and this was his last college game. But there was more to it than just athletic skill. The crowd sensed something special about Garrett's presence among the players on the floor, and they cheered harder and longer because of it. But what exactly "it" was, and what it took for Garrett to get to that point, many in the overwhelmingly white audience would never know.

Anyone looking for a civil-rights breakthrough in the postwar years probably was not looking at Indiana. The state was historically hostile to both African Americans and change. In the nineteenth century Indiana had tried to ban blacks from immigrating to the state, and barred them from voting, serving in the state militia, attending public schools, and testifying against whites in court. The Ku Klux Klan had controlled the state in the 1920s. Ten years later, Indiana was the site of a double lynching, the last north of the Mason-Dixon line. And through the 1940s a patchwork of legal and habitual segregation and discrimination blanketed the state.

But Indiana had four things that existed together nowhere else: a deep basketball tradition, the influential leader of the largest black Young Men's Christian Association in the world who was pushing



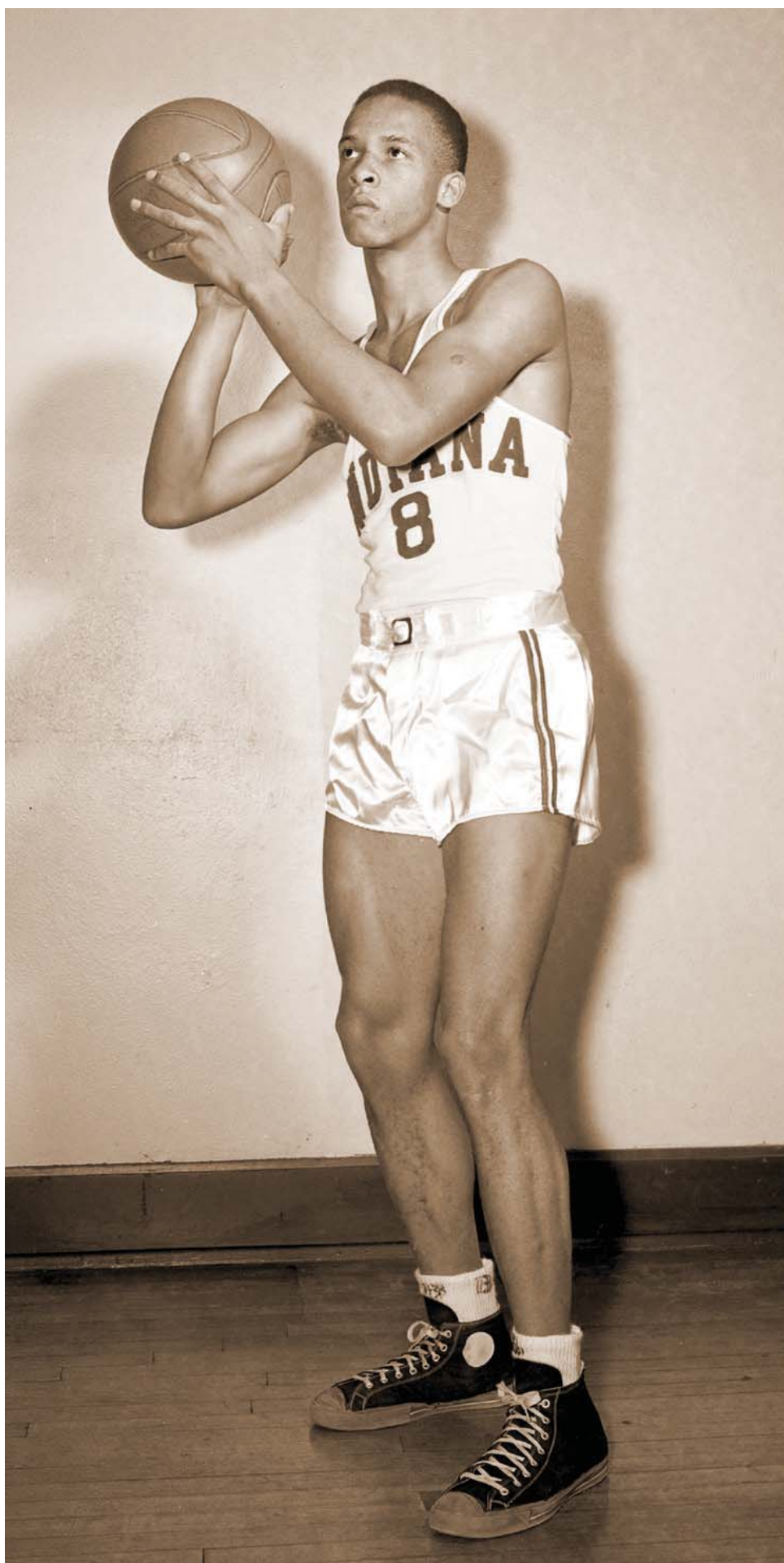
Above: Garrett (standing, back row, left) coached the 1959 Crispus Attucks Tigers to the Indiana high school basketball championship, smashing Kokomo in the title game 92–54. *Opposite:* A 1948 IU publicity photograph of Garrett.

sports as a wedge for broader integration, a state university president determined to integrate his campus and possessed of the political skills to do so, and Garrett, the ideal person for his role and time.

Almost exactly four years before that night at IU, in the spring of 1947, Garrett had been the best high school basketball player in Indiana. He had led his integrated high school team to the state championship, set a new tournament scoring record, and been named Mr. Basketball, the best high school player in the state. Wearing number one, he led the Indiana high school All-Star team to victory over their Kentucky peers. And he was a good student and great kid, “the classiest individual ever to appear on an Indiana high school floor,” wrote one sports editor.

It should have been a no brainer for him to go to IU. The flagship school in the state that was more identified with basketball than any other in the country, IU had limped through a mediocre season and was in desperate need of a boost. But neither its coach, McCracken, nor a single other big-time college coach recruited Garrett.

In the years after World War II, college basketball in America was as segregated as the country’s swimming pools, churches, and neighborhoods. A few African Americans, mostly around New York and Los Angeles, had played basketball for major universities, but they were the exception that proved the rule. Southern universities were completely segregated. And across the middle of the country basketball coaches in the Big Ten, the most important and influential athletic conference, adhered to an unwritten agreement barring black players from their teams. Year after year, the states of the Big Ten produced outstanding black high school basketball players, and year after year, Big Ten basketball coaches failed to recruit them. As long as the Big Ten



INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



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IU coach Branch McCracken instructs his 1948 squad, including Garrett, kneeling, second from right. McCracken coached at IU for twenty-three years, winning two National Collegiate Athletic Association championships during his tenure.

gentlemen's agreement held, other coaches and schools could hide behind it. (The conference was called the Big Nine from 1946, when the University of Chicago withdrew, until 1950, when Michigan State joined. For consistency and simplicity, it is the Big Ten in this article.)

The Big Ten's ban on black basketball players was no secret. In 1940 IU's legal counsel wrote a memo to university president Herman B Wells describing "the unwritten rule subscribed to by all schools" in the Big Ten barring African Americans from their basketball teams (and swimming and wrestling, too). African American newspapers around the country wrote about it and advocated for its end. Two days after the triumphant success of Garrett's Shelbyville High School team (with two other black starters) in the 1947 state championship, even the *Hammond Times's*

white sports editor, John Whittaker, in an open letter to the Big Ten commissioner, wrote: "We keep hearing that the Big Ten conference has an 'unwritten agreement' not to use Negroes in basketball. If so, WHY?"

But Whittaker and the *Times* were an anomaly. Mainstream white newspapers and radio broadcasts did not mention the Big Ten's agreement. It was the way things were. Throughout the spring and summer of 1947, the *Indianapolis Star* and other mainstream papers wrote cryptically of Garrett's basketball finesse and lack of college plans, but never connected the dots between them, effectively whitewashing segregation in their midst.

It was not just basketball. In the postwar years, most of Indiana's hospitals, pools, neighborhoods, cafes and restaurants, movie theaters, recreation centers,

and schools were segregated by law or by custom. While white Hoosiers enjoyed the economic upswing from the war's end, African Americans in Indianapolis endured one of the highest unemployment rates in the country and some of the worst housing conditions. Returning black veterans, barred by redlining and covenant restrictions from buying houses in many neighborhoods and limited by quotas and segregation from attending many regional colleges and universities, could not take full advantage of the GI Bill. At IU in 1947, African American students were barred from most dormitories and campus dining halls, honorary societies and university social events, the barbershop in the Union Building, white fraternities and sororities, and Bloomington restaurants. Several graduate programs maintained unofficial quotas permitting less than a

handful of black students to enter every year. The university's Reserve Officers' Training Corps program, otherwise compulsory for all underclassmen, rejected all black students on a local doctor's blanket diagnosis that every one of them had flat feet. And on a campus of more than 12,000 students, every year the university admitted no more than eighty-four black women—the exact number of off-campus beds available for them.

None of this made it into mainstream newspapers. While the *Star* and others occasionally carried stories about civil rights efforts in the South, except for Whittaker's outburst in the *Times* there was no mention of similar efforts or needs in Indiana. This absence left many white readers oblivious to the depth and pervasiveness of racial discrimination and segregation in their state.

In the aftermath of World War II, African Americans in Indiana and around the country were pressing for more substantial change. They had fought a war for democracy abroad and now wanted it enacted at home. Sports was their Trojan Horse, offering both a public, symbolic victory and an open door through which more could follow. After enduring the Great Depression and the war, Americans finally had leisure time and spending money with which to enjoy games and competitions. The language of athletics—"may the best man win," "the level playing field"—contrasted uncomfortably with racial discrimination and offered a code to advocate for integration. Jackie Robinson had just integrated major-league baseball, the country's most popular professional sport. For many who were watching, college basketball, the country's most popular amateur sport, was next on the list.

Faburn DeFrantz had spent his adult life challenging racism and segregation in Indiana, and by the summer of 1947 he had lost patience with the pace of change at IU. Executive director of Indianapolis's

Senate Avenue YMCA, which he had built into the largest black YMCA in the world, DeFrantz was tall, broad shouldered, confident, and not one to back down. He viewed integrating IU's basketball team as both an important symbolic victory and a wedge for broader integration at the school and around the state. The year before, he had tried with Anderson's Jumpin' Johnny Wilson, who had also led his integrated high school team to the state championship, and failed. DeFrantz had learned from that experience and was determined that this year the outcome would be different.

DeFrantz had watched in the spring of 1947 as Robinson integrated professional baseball to general acclaim. He heard the accolades for Garrett and his integrated team after the state championship, and knew African American newspapers around the country were featuring side-by-side stories about Garrett and Robinson. He also knew Thurgood Marshall, chief litigator at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Legal Defense Fund, had met with IU students about segregation on campus, and that NAACP president Walter White was preparing to visit Bloomington and discuss legal action if there was no meaningful progress in the coming year. DeFrantz, whose combativeness was tempered by personal warmth and charisma, understood those in power wanted to think well of themselves and feared the bad publicity that would come with an NAACP lawsuit.

DeFrantz waited through the spring and early summer of 1947 as Garrett's high school

coach, Frank Barnes, tried to interest college coaches in his star player. Barnes made a point of telling reporters and anyone else who would listen that Garrett was "the best team player a coach could hope for," a star at track and field as well as basketball, and that he did not yet have college plans. He waited while a successful businessman and basketball booster from Garrett's hometown, Nate Kaufman, pressed his old friend, McCracken, to take Garrett. The coach, however, was not ready to be a civil-rights pioneer and brushed him off. Mel Taube, Purdue's head basket-



The longtime executive director of the Senate Avenue Young Men's Christian Association, Faburn DeFrantz retired from his position in 1952. "All I have attempted, all I have accomplished with individuals and in movements has been motivated by the theme, I WANT TO BE FREE," he noted in his unpublished memoir. "With the desire is the knowledge that I cannot be free unless all men are free."

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ball coach, expressed interest in Garrett, but for the most cynical of reasons. When Barnes asked if Taube would play Garrett, Taube replied, “No, but at least I’d know he wouldn’t be playing against me.”

In August 1947, when it was clear soft persuasion had not worked and time was running out on the best chance to break the Big Ten’s ban on black basketball players, DeFrantz met with Wells. DeFrantz viewed Wells as an ally. Integration on the Bloomington campus had long been one of Wells’s top priorities, and he had used stealth and finesse to remove racial restrictions when possible. Wells, however, faced with a reactionary state legislature that controlled funding for the university and a racist president of the board of trustees who adamantly opposed integration, was moving too slowly for DeFrantz. In case Wells missed the point DeFrantz was making, he brought with him two lawyers,

the first African American to earn a varsity letter at the University of Illinois, and his assistant. They were all civil-rights advocates, members of the YMCA, witnesses to the meeting with Wells, and an unspoken threat of potential lawsuits and bad publicity should IU again refuse to integrate its basketball team.

Wells told DeFrantz the choice was McCracken’s and that he would back McCracken if other coaches or university administrators protested against integrating the team. With Wells’s support, McCracken told DeFrantz and his companions that he would let Garrett try out for his team and allow him to play if he qualified.

Garrett arrived at IU without fanfare or publicity, but the quiet did not last long. Within weeks of the start of official basketball practice on November 1, crowds were showing up to watch Garrett practice with the freshman team. (At the time first-year

students were not allowed on the varsity team.) When the season started, thousands of fans turned out to see the freshmen intrasquad curtain-raisers before the varsity team’s home games.

Within a month of school starting, the *Indianapolis Recorder* carried a story describing Garrett as a “homegrown Jackie Robinson” and heralding an end to the Big Ten ban on black basketball players. On New Year’s Day 1948, the paper listed DeFrantz as number one on its annual “Race Relations Honor Roll” for his “unremitting campaign” to end segregation in Big Ten basketball, and Garrett as number three for being the person to do it. A month later the Senate Avenue YMCA presented Wells with its Emblem Club Racial Amity award, and the Indianapolis NAACP branch gave Wells a watch in recognition of his efforts to integrate IU. At the same time, African American news-



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Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in major league baseball in 1947, is mobbed by fans after a visit to the Union Baptist Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in November 1960. “A life is not important,” Robinson noted, “except in the impact it has on other lives.”

papers around the country were carrying stories about Garrett's breaking the Big-Ten's gentlemen's agreement, and people from as far away as Texas were writing to congratulate Wells for integrating college basketball.

One thing remained unchanged—the *Star* and other white newspapers' silence on local issues of civil rights and discrimination. Once Garrett started on the varsity team in the fall of 1948, the paper regularly featured him as a basketball player. But it made no mention of him as a history maker. From 1947 to 1951, the *Star* did not mention the existence of a Big Ten ban on African American basketball players, or that Garrett broke it.

Garrett became the best basketball player IU had ever had. He set new scoring and rebounding records for the school, and became a fan favorite. In his senior year, his teammates voted him most valuable player, Big Ten coaches and national sportswriters voted him onto the All Big Ten first team, and he was named a consensus All-American. After officials left Garrett's name off the ballot for the college all-star team, coaches elected him as a write-in.

In his junior year Garrett told a reporter for an African American newspaper in Ohio, that if he had to do it over, he might have chosen an all-black college instead of Indiana. “They all treat me okay,” he said of whites at IU, “but too many of ‘them’ try to treat me like they are doing me a great favor.”

Those other coaches around the country had taken notice of Garrett and followed his career at Indiana. In 1950 Michigan coach Ernie McCoy told the *Recorder*, “I’d love to have a player as good as Bill Garrett.” By Garrett’s senior year (1950–51) two African American players, at Michigan and Michigan State, were playing freshman basketball and getting ready to join their varsity teams as sophomores. The following year, when a one-year

exception (because of the Korean War) permitted freshmen to play on varsity teams, four freshmen—at Michigan, Iowa, Purdue, and Illinois—joined the two sophomores on Big Ten varsity teams.

While Garrett was outwardly calm and collected, his pioneering role was not an easy one. As the only African American player in the Big Ten his entire four years of college, the pressure on him to succeed—at basketball, school, and life in general—was intense. That basketball coaches from other schools started recruiting African American players in Garrett’s junior year meant they watched and waited for almost three years to see whether this experiment in integration would work before moving forward. Had Garrett made one wrong move, they would have had an excuse to stick with segregation. He also endured taunts from opponents and their fans, early hostility from some of his own teammates (who came to embrace him),

and widespread racial discrimination on the road and at home. For the most part, Garrett tuned out the pressure and ignored the many incidents. The most he would usually do was rub his head—a sign, those close to him knew, that something troubled him—and double down.

But these kinds of things had to eat at him. In his junior year Garrett told a reporter for an African American newspaper in Ohio, that if he had to do it over, he



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In 1947 the Indianapolis Recorder praised Garrett for his ability to “sweep through the opposition and turn a stalemated contest into a rout.”

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Two days after the overwhelmingly white audience gave Garrett the long ovation at his last home game, he went with Phil Buck and Gene Ring, two good friends from the basketball team, to Indianapolis. On their way back to Bloomington, they stopped at a diner to get a burger. The diner had a small marquee announcing, “Hurriyin’ Hoosiers Fans Welcome.” The trio had barely settled into a corner booth when the waiter told them he would serve Buck and Ring, who were white, but not Garrett. The three friends got up and walked out without saying a word. In the car, Buck and Ring tried to talk away the incident. The guy was a jerk, they said, and they were not very hungry anyway. Maybe it was the contrast to the ovation a couple of days before and the many accolades that had been coming his way. Maybe it was the final humiliating straw. For whatever reason, this racist incident seemed to both-

er Garrett more than most. He apologized to his friends for not being able to eat, and sat in the back seat, rubbing his head while tears rolled down his cheeks.

A week later, in the second round of the 1951 draft, the Boston Celtics picked Garrett for their team, making him the third African American selected for the National Basketball Association. He graduated from Indiana in June and then married his college sweetheart, Betty Guess. Much later, Garrett said of that time, “I thought then I had it made; I know now I didn’t.”

Two months later, he received a draft notice from the army. With the Korean War in full swing, there was little chance of Garrett getting a deferral, and he served

two years, most of it playing basketball and running recreation leagues at a base in Japan. By the time he was honorably discharged in August 1953, the Celtics had

whether Garrett could make the switch to guard or forward—at six foot, three inches tall he was too small to play center in the NBA—or wanted to accommodate Abe

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released him. At the time, NBA teams had quotas for African American players, and the Celtics already had two on their team. The Celtics may also have questioned

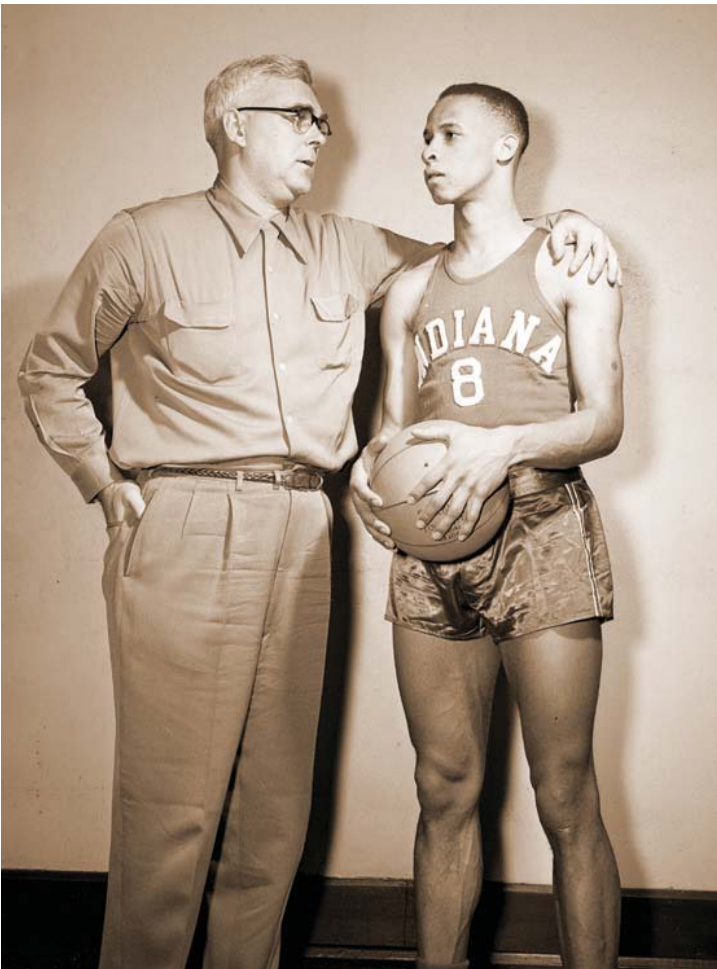
Saperstein, the white owner of the Harlem Globetrotters, who had been scouting Garrett since his college days.

Garrett had rebuffed Saperstein and the

Trotters in 1951, but when he was out of the army two years later, they were the only ones offering him a contract. Garrett hated the Trotters, considering it show business and not basketball. The schedule was grueling, with three times as many games per year as NBA teams, and the rewards meager. Saperstein paid his players less than half of NBA salaries and made them pay for their own meals on the road and wash their uniforms in hotel sinks because he would not pay for cleaning them. Globetrotters players were among the best in the world and packed stadiums everywhere, but by the early



Garrett takes to the air for a shot during a February 11, 1950, Big Ten game against the University of Minnesota. IU defeated the Golden Gophers 59–39, to improve to a 14–3 record for the year.



Coach McCracken and Garrett, January 1951. "He's an All-American if I've ever seen one," McCracken said of Garrett that year. "He's one of the greatest competitors I've ever coached—at his best when the going is toughest."

1950s they increasingly played exhibitions, not games, and many African Americans considered their jokes and acts demeaning. Shortly before Garrett joined the team, an influential columnist for the *Atlanta Daily World*, wrote, "To me the 'clown princes of basketball' are becoming as much a symbol of bigotry, intolerance, and prejudice as

Their daughters became the first African Americans to compete in open swimming competitions in Indianapolis and became nationally ranked swimmers. Garrett never discussed his own achievements with his children or lectured them about how to handle discrimination. He taught them instead by steady example. He and Betty

the Mason-Dixon line itself." Garrett played less than two years with the Trotters. To friends who saw him during those years, he seemed lonely and unhappy.

After the Trotters, Garrett returned to Indiana, where he became an educator and basketball coach. In 1959 he coached Indianapolis's all-black Crispus Attucks High School to the state championship, making him the only Mr. Basketball to play on and coach a boy's state championship team. He and Betty, also an educator, had four children—Tina, Judith, Laurie, and Billy.

attended every race, and after an official discriminated against the girls at the beginning of a race, Garrett qualified to be a starter at swimming meets. Concerning life and competition, he told his children, "Compete with situations; not people," and "talent is what you do when others are looking at you; character is what you do when no one is looking." He had a sudden heart attack in August 1974, and died a few days later, at the age of forty-five.

The importance of Garrett's playing for IU was not that he donned a Hoosiers' uniform. After all, another African American, Dick Culberson, had played very briefly for the University of Iowa during the 1944–45 season. It was a World War II blip that no one watching, black or white, considered to be the end of the Big Ten gentleman's agreement. Garrett broke the Big Ten's ban on African American basketball players not simply by playing ball, but by being so successful and so good at everything he did. His example was impossible to refute. Garrett did not simply crack the door open for others; he wedged it open so resolutely no one would ever try to close it again. As Wally Choice, Indiana's second African American player said later, "Bill Garrett left such a strong legacy that it could never be reversed."

Rachel Graham Cody is an award-winning writer. Along with her father, Tom Graham, she is the author of Getting Open: The Unknown Story of Bill Garrett and the Integration of College Basketball, published in 2006. •

FOR FURTHER READING

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