



# **THE FRIENDS OF FORKNER AND FOURTEENTH STREETS**

A Brooklyn Dodger and a Harlem Globetrotter

**NORMAN JONES**

**F**orkner Street in Anderson, Indiana, and Elizabeth Avenue in Saint Louis, Missouri, are separated by about 250 miles. In spite of the distance between them, they have similar histories, as both neighborhoods were fortunate enough to be home to two young men who grew to become legendary sports figures. Elizabeth Avenue can boast of nurturing baseball's Yogi Berra and Joe Garagiola, who lived across the street from each other and were lifelong friends.

The neighborhood of Forkner and Fourteenth Streets in Anderson is known today for being the place where Carl Erskine and Johnny "Jumpin' Johnny" Wilson grew up only a few houses from each other. They, too, became lifelong friends and had legendary careers in baseball and basketball. The only difference in these famous relationships is that Berra and Garagiola were white and Erskine is white and Wilson is black.

Erskine, in an interview with this author, recalled that he and Wilson first met on an outdoor basketball court when he asked Wilson, "Do you want to play?" From that moment on they walked to school and played grade-school and high-school basketball together. "We shared the same table many times at both houses," Erskine noted. They bonded through sports. Racism was a menace in central

Indiana at the time, but the boys found their own way to deal with it. Many restaurants would not serve African Americans, so Erskine and Wilson walked out together. They sat together in the balcony of movie theaters because blacks were not welcomed on the main floor. The local Young Men's Christian Association swimming pool was off limits to blacks, so Erskine swam with Johnny at the pool reserved for "colored" people.

Carl Daniel Erskine was born on December 13, 1926, in Anderson. His father, Matt, got him started playing baseball by buying a book on pitching and using it to teach his son. Carl played ball on sandlots and American Legion playing fields and became good enough to play all four years on the varsity at Anderson High School, where he drew interest from the Brooklyn Dodgers. He graduated in 1945,

was drafted into the U.S. Navy, and was stationed at the Boston Navy Yard. He was able to pitch for a semipro team on Sundays and worked out with the Boston Braves. Only nineteen at

the time, he impressed the Braves enough that they wanted to sign him.

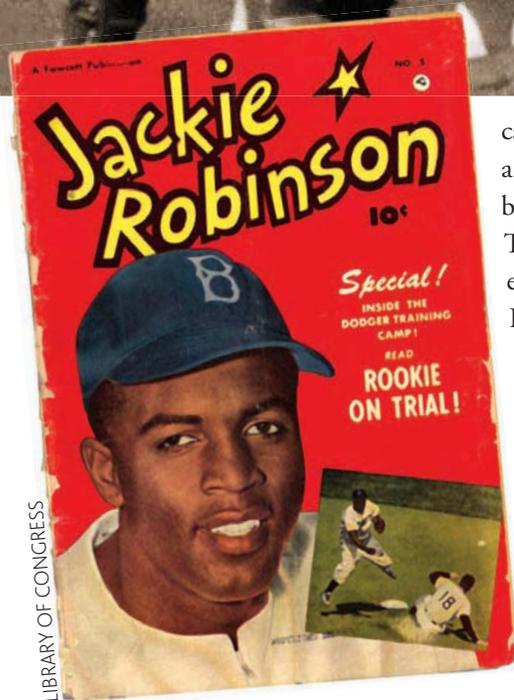
Erskine was discharged in 1946 and a bidding war ensued for his pitching skills. He remained loyal to the Dodgers and took less money from them than four other teams were offering. He paid his baseball dues in the minors from 1946 to 1950. He married Betty Palmer on October 5, 1947, and by 1960 they were raising four children.

In his first year in professional baseball he went 3–3 for the Dodgers minor league club in Danville, Illinois. In 1947 at Danville he won nineteen games while losing nine, had 2.34 earned run average, struck out 191 batters, and pitched a league best 233 innings. He won two games in the playoffs and was establishing himself as a pitcher on the move. He recalled an incident in spring training of 1948, when he was assigned to pitch against the Dodgers big-league club at the Fort Worth Cats minor-league ballpark. He managed to pitch well for about three innings. After the game, Jackie Robinson, who had broken the color barrier in baseball and had become rookie of the year the season before, asked to talk to him. Robinson encouraged Erskine by telling him, "Hey young man, I just wanted you to know that I faced you twice today and you won't be long for this league. You are going to be with us real soon." In his book, *What I Learned from Jackie Robinson*, Erskine wrote about the conversation and said, "I was stunned. My mouth was so open my lower lip could have touched the ground."

From 1948 through 1950, Erskine split time between the minors and majors. After a successful start in one season in Fort Worth of the Texas League, he was

*Longtime friends Carl Erskine and Johnny Wilson share the podium at the Johnny Wilson Awards luncheon in which Erskine appeared as a guest speaker in Anderson, Indiana.*





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called up to the majors. His first appearance in a Dodger uniform was in Pittsburgh against the Pirates in a relief role. The Dodgers were behind 5–3 when he entered the game in the seventh inning. He managed to get the legendary Ralph Kiner out and the Dodgers came from behind and won 7–6, giving Erskine his first major-league win. After the game

he vividly recalls Robinson stopping by his locker, patting him on the back, and saying, “What did I tell you. I told you that you couldn’t miss.”

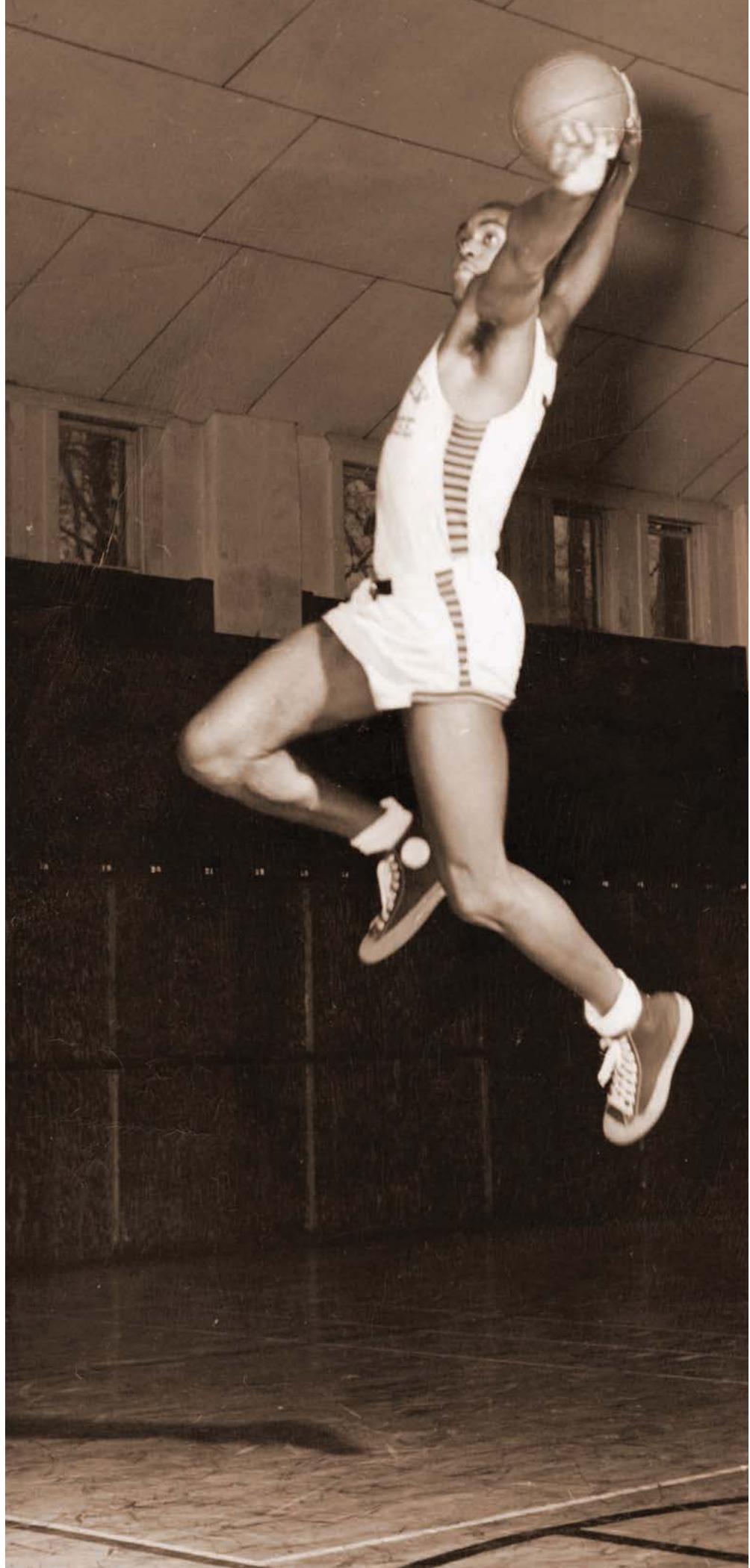
On August 5, 1948, Erskine made his first starting assignment as a Dodger and on his first pitch he pulled a muscle in his shoulder that plagued him for the rest of his career. However, he showed great

*Left: A 1951 comic book featured the story of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in major-league baseball. Above: Erskine is mobbed by his Brooklyn Dodgers teammates (left to right: Roy Campanella, Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, and Jim Gilliam) after pitching a no-hitter against the New York Giants on May 12, 1956. Erskine struck out three hitters and walked only two on the way to his second no-hitter of his career. Opposite: Wilson shows how he earned his nickname on the basketball court.*

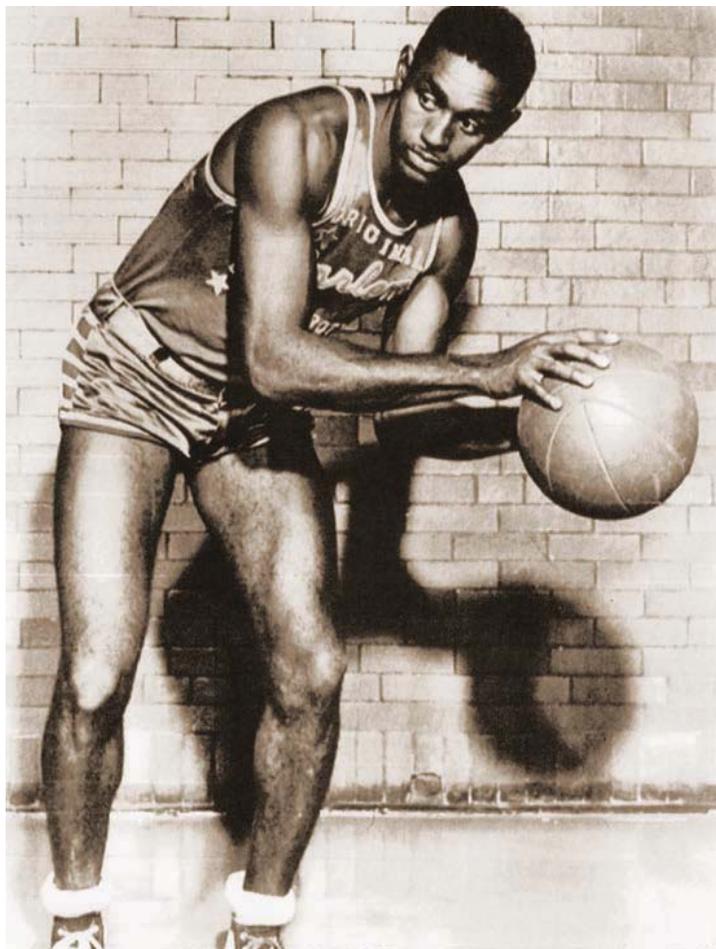
courage and beat the Chicago Cubs 6–4 for his third win of the season. He pitched a complete game later that month to move his record to 5–0, but Erskine ended what was a short major league season for him with a 6–3 record. Arm trouble plagued him during spring training in 1949 and he pitched for the Fort Worth team again to see if he could find a groove. The warm climate seemed to agree with him and his arm improved. He won ten games, was moved up to the Dodgers, and responded with an 8–1 record and the team won the 1949 pennant by one game. The Dodgers had to face the New York Yankees in the World Series. Erskine appeared briefly in the series, pitching a shutout inning in game four and giving up three runs in game five as the Yankees won the series by four games to one.

Disappointed, but not discouraged, Erskine went to spring training with the Dodgers in 1950 aiming to get back to Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. He was optioned to the Brooklyn Triple A team in Montreal. Luckily, his high school coach saw him pitch on television and detected a flaw in his delivery. With aid from a local doctor, he was able to win ten games, but the pain persisted. He finished the 1950 season with the Dodgers, but the team finished second and missed the postseason.

In 1951, which turned out to be a magical year in baseball history, Erskine pitched the entire season with the Dodgers, winning sixteen games and losing twelve. The Dodgers held an eleven-and-a-half-game lead on August 8, but as baseball fans know, the New York Giants caught them and forced a three-game playoff. In the third game at the Polo Grounds in New York, Bobby Thomson hit one of the most famous walk-off home runs in baseball history, beating the Dodgers 5–4. Erskine has told the story often about how he and Ralph Branca were warming up in the bullpen in the ninth inning when the



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LEFT: COURTESY NORMAN JONES; RIGHT: SPORTS STUDIO PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

*Left: Wilson during his time with the Harlem Globetrotters. Right: Catcher Campanella (left) and Dodgers manager Chuck Dressen (right) hold Erskine aloft in triumph after his victory in game three of the 1953 World Series. The Dodgers beat the New York Yankees in that game by a 3–2 score, but lost the series four games to two.*

call came for one of them to relieve Don Newcombe and face Thomson. The bullpen coach told manager Charlie Dressen that both pitchers were ready, however “Erskine is bouncing his overhand curve.” Hearing that, the manager selected Branca and the rest is history. Through the years Erskine has been asked what his best pitch was and he invariably replies, “The curve ball I bounced in the Polo Grounds bullpen in 1951.”

Looking to get even with the Giants, the Dodgers came back and won the pennant in 1952. During this season Erskine won fourteen games and lost only six, including a no-hitter against the Chicago Cubs. It was almost a perfect game except

for one walk. The Dodgers played the Yankees in the World Series, with Erskine pitching and losing game two. He came back to pitch game five on October 5, which happened to be his fifth wedding anniversary. The Hoosier hurler fell behind the Yankees early, but the Dodgers came back, Erskine got out nineteen Yankees in a row, and his team won in eleven innings. Erskine took his wife out to dinner that evening and they celebrated his first World Series victory, which put the Dodgers up three games to two. The Yankees, however, came back and won the next two games to win the series.

In 1953 Erskine had what is generally regarded as his best year. At age twenty-

six he went 20–6, pitched 246 innings, and was named to the National League All-star team. He had tremendous support from teammates such as Robinson, Duke Snider, Roy Campanella, Gil Hodges, Carl Furillo, and Pee Wee Reese. The Dodgers won 105 games and the NL pennant. In the World Series, Erskine set a series record by striking out fourteen Yankees, winning by a score of 3–2. Unfortunately, the Dodgers lost the series to the AL squad four games to two. In Brooklyn, Carl was well known and was referred to as “Oisk,” Brooklynese for Erskine.

Although Erskine won eighteen games the next season, the Dodgers failed to return to the World Series. In 1955, howev-

er, the Dodgers finally ended the Yankees domination, winning the World Series four games to three. Arm trouble plagued Erskine and he did not pitch much in the series. Johnny Podres shut out the Yankees 2–0 in game seven to preserve the Dodgers first World Series win. The next season saw Erskine hurl another no-hitter, but it was his last solid season, as he went 13–11. The Dodgers lost to the Yankees in the World Series, four games to three.

Erskine won nine games and lost ten during his last three years with the Dodgers. One highlight near the end of his career happened when the team moved to Los Angeles in 1958. He was honored to be the starting and winning pitcher before 80,000 fans in the first major-league game ever played in Los Angeles. He retired in 1959 with a career record of 122–78, two no-hitters, fourteen shutouts, and appearances in eleven World Series games. Erskine was also the first pitcher to hurl a no-hitter on nationwide television.

Erskine was honored to write the foreword for a book about his friend, Wilson (*Jump, Johnny, Jump* by Dick Burdette). Erskine recalled something that happened during his days with the Dodgers, noting, “I was a teammate of Jackie Robinson for nine seasons. Jackie was surprised that I didn’t have a problem with the race issue. I told him that was because of Johnny Wilson. He taught me to be color blind.” Erskine emphasized what he had learned from Wilson by including the following encounter with the Robinson family at Ebbets Field: “Once I came out of the Dodger clubhouse and stopped to talk to Rachel Robinson, Jackie’s wife and their son Jackie Jr. The next day Jackie came to my locker and said he wanted to thank me for what I had done yesterday. . . . I was puzzled. He said he was referring to me stopping in front of all those fans to talk to Rachel. I told him he could congratulate me on a well pitched game, but that

was just a natural thing for me to do.”

In his writings, Erskine makes it clear that his relationships with Robinson and Wilson helped him assimilate to a deeper level the values his family taught him and the need for compassion and empathy in understanding human relations. He and Betty raised four children; Danny, Gary, Susan, and Jimmy, who was born with Downs syndrome. Early on in Jimmy’s life, Erskine observed that the discrimination against special-needs young people was similar to the discrimination Robinson and Wilson endured. Erskine made certain that Jimmy benefited from special education, the Special Olympics, and other programs, where he finally found acceptance, as Robinson and Wilson had worked so hard to do.

Erskine remained loyal to his Anderson hometown, finding success in insurance and banking and in community affairs. Missing baseball, he returned to coach the Anderson College baseball team, winning four Hoosier College Conference championships. In 1956 he was awarded the National Jaycees Ten Outstanding Young Men of America Award. He also worked diligently for the Special Olympics and was a charter member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. The townspeople in Anderson honored him with a white 1957 Cadillac and a statue of him can be found downtown in front of a building named for him, the Erskine Medical Office Building.

Another Anderson legend, Wilson, was born there on July 7, 1927. Early on it became clear that Wilson was an outstanding athlete, making the sixth-grade basketball team while in the fourth grade. He and Erskine played sports together in their school days and even played (Erskine as a junior and Wilson as a sophomore) in a state final-four high school game at the Indianapolis Coliseum in 1944. Their Anderson team had been ranked number

one most of the year, but lost to Kokomo. Wilson won the state high school high-jump championship. Both boys developed their skills in their chosen sport to advance to professional levels, but due to the prevalence of racism and segregation at the time, Wilson’s path was much more turbulent than Erskine’s.

In 1946 Wilson led his Anderson High School basketball team to the Indiana state championship, becoming the first player to score thirty points in a state final game. He acquired his nickname of Jumpin’ Johnny because he was the only high school player in the state who was dunking the ball. He was named Mr. Basketball and expressed a desire to play college basketball. He proved himself worthy as he took part in the prestigious Indiana-Kentucky High School All-Star game, scoring twenty-seven points in leading Indiana to victory only to be confronted by discrimination. A \$100 wristwatch was awarded to the “Star of Stars” in the game. Those voting on the award gave the watch to a white Kentucky player who scored twenty points in a losing effort. It was Wilson’s nature, however, not to complain. In an interview, he verified for this author that a local sportswriter noticed the discrimination and started a campaign for people to donate money; Wilson eventually received a \$100 watch that he deserved in the first place.

Part of the turbulence Wilson encountered came about because he wanted to attend Indiana University and play for Branch McCracken. That dream was also shattered when coach McCracken made a speech at the Anderson award banquet. He was asked if Wilson would be playing for Indiana and, in a now famous comment, he replied, “I don’t think he could make my team.” His remarks reflected the well-known unwritten policy by the Big Ten Conference to keep out black athletes. It was not until the next year that IU



LEFT: IHS, INDIANAPOLIS RECORDER COLLECTION, P. 303; RIGHT: COURTESY CARL ERSKINE

Left: Wilson poses in his Anderson College basketball warmups. Right: Erskine (second from right, second row) and Wilson (left, first row) during their days as teammates on the Shadeland Elementary School basketball team, 1938–39.

relented and Bill Garrett, Mr. Basketball from Shelbyville’s state champs, became the first African American to play basketball at the university and the first regular black starter on a Big Ten team.

After being rejected by McCracken, Wilson worked as a janitor for a short time, but found that unchallenging. His mother wanted him to get an education, something that could help beat the odds against him in a segregated society. In the fall of 1946 he enrolled at Anderson College. Once Wilson began playing, the interest in the Anderson Ravens basketball team began to intensify, so much so that games were moved from campus to Wilson’s former high school gymnasium. Known as the Wigwam, the facility seated 4,749 fans and every game was sold out

when Wilson played there for Anderson College. In the 1946–47 season the Ravens finished with a 16–9 record and Wilson set a new state college scoring record of 515 points, 20.5 points per game. The Ravens beat Xavier University and came close to beating the University of Dayton and North Carolina State University. One coach stated, “Johnny Wilson is the best college player in the country.”

In the 1947–48 season Wilson led his team to a 18–5 record and broke his own state scoring record with 565 points for an average of 24.6 points per game, third best in the nation, and was named an All-American. He excelled against top-flight competition, including the University of Cincinnati Bearcats, against whom he scored thirty points. During

his junior year, Wilson broke his arm when an opponent shoved him as he was making a move to score his fiftieth point in the game. He missed some games and the Ravens finished 11–11. He decided to quit school and pursue baseball, a sport he also excelled in and one where the color barrier had already been broken. Wilson learned that the Chicago White Sox would be holding tryouts at Comiskey Park. He had performed well in previous tryouts with the Saint Louis Cardinals and had tried out for the Yankees, but was rejected.

Wilson never heard from the White Sox, but the manager of the Negro League’s Chicago Black American Giants called and wanted him to play for his team. He jumped at the chance since he could make some money and get to



PHOTO BY BILL PALMER, INDIANAPOLIS NEWS, OCTOBER 9, 1953

*Erskine gives tips on gripping a baseball to young admirers at a luncheon held in Anderson, Indiana, in his honor after he lead the National League with twenty wins in 1953. Left to right: Jerry Byard, Jimmie Johnson, Davie Hitchcock, and an unidentified youth and man).*

play in some major-league ballparks. His first game with the American Giants was in Comiskey Park, where he was sent up to pinch hit in the bottom of the tenth inning with the score tied. He promptly got a hit to win the game. At a game in Indianapolis, attended by 7,000 people from Anderson, Wilson had four hits in five at bats. However, his baseball career was short-lived. His skills on the basketball court had been noticed by the Harlem Globetrotters and he did not even have to try out for the team, signing a contract to play in the 1949–50 season. Traveling the country and getting paid to play basketball was something Wilson wanted to try and he looked forward to playing with such stars of the team as Marques Haynes, Goose Tatum, and Sweetwater Clifton.

The Trotters opened the 1949–50 season in Evanston, Illinois. The team's bus rolled through the Midwest, where discrimination was still very much alive. Wilson was often reminded of the days that he and Erskine had to deal with the racism in their hometown. Often the Globetrotters had to stay in second-rate, run-down hotels and struggled to find places to eat. Nevertheless, by playing basketball, Wilson was making his way in the midst of the unsettled racial strife that was roiling across the nation.

One of Wilson's fondest memories of playing for the Globetrotters occurred one night in Marion, Indiana, when his mother came to see him play for the first time. He had become quite adept at drop-kicking the ball into the basket and he

made the sixty-foot shot on that occasion. He made the kick again the next night in Cleveland, but the next night in Sandusky, Ohio, he missed badly and was benched for the next game by owner and coach Abe Saperstein. Wilson was disappointed because he could make an extra \$100 for each made kick.

Wilson had played well enough against college All-Americans in a twenty-one game tour of the country that Saperstein offered him a contract to play with the Globetrotters on an upcoming tour of Europe. Wilson stood up for himself and said he could not take the pay cut Saperstein said he needed from his players, as well as pointing out that he could always make more money playing baseball. The impasse was resolved when, on September

19, 1950, Wilson was inducted into the service. He was stationed most of his time at Fort Custer near Battle Creek, Michigan, where he noted in an interview that “life was good” for him. He directed the base sports program, played a great deal of baseball and basketball, and maintained his conditioning. Wilson returned to

civilian life in Chicago on September 18, 1952, signing to play with the Globetrotters for the 1952–53 season.

After marriage to Norma Weaver from Kokomo, and having three children—Gina, Sherrie, and John Jr.—Wilson, at the age of twenty-five, ended his four-year career with the Globetrotters. He wanted

to find a job that would allow him the time to finish his degree at Anderson College. His reputation in basketball helped him find work in a business in Kokomo, from where he drove the fifty miles to Anderson to complete his degree and earn a teaching certificate. In September 1956 an elementary school in Indianapolis hired



COURTESY ANDERSON HERALD-BULLETIN; JOHN P. CLEARY PHOTOGRAPHER

Left: Wilson and Erskine look over a clay model of a statue honoring Wilson in Ken Ryden’s art studio, January 16, 2014. Clockwise from Top: Erskine and Wilson light the Indiana Bicentennial torch for the start of the torch relay through Madison County, Indiana, on October 14, 2016 (Anderson University president John Pistole holds the torch); the two friends share a laugh at the 2016 Johnny Wilson Awards; Erskine holds up a photo of his days as an elementary school teammate of Wilson’s during a talk to fourth and fifth graders at Anderson’s Tenth Street Elementary School in February 2016; and as Wilson looks on, Erskine admires the three-sport award he received for his multisport contribution during his years at Anderson High School.

Wilson to teach and coach. Two years later, he taught and coached the freshman basketball team at Wood High School in Indianapolis and two years after that he moved up and became the first black head basketball coach at any integrated school in Indiana. He later earned a master's degree at Indiana State University.

After eight years at the helm of the Wood High School team, Wilson's life unraveled. Without giving him a good reason, the administration sought a coaching change. He was shocked because he had compiled a 139–59 record. Even more discouraging was the fact his marriage ended in divorce. These setbacks also caused Wilson financial problems, but he again beat the odds and, with the help of a friend, soon became the athletic director and head basketball coach at Malcolm X College in Chicago. In eighteen years at the college Wilson had an impressive 378–135 coaching record and served as a mentor to many young men.

After his tenure at Malcolm X, Wilson, who still enjoyed coaching and helping young people develop, became an assistant coach at Anderson College. Following four years there he assisted at Anderson High School before becoming the oldest active coach in Indiana when he headed up the girls team. In 2002 he continued to coach by assisting his son John Jr., who was the head coach at Loch Haven State in Pennsylvania.

During his career Wilson had the opportunity to appear in the movie about the Globetrotters (*Go Man, Go*), traveled the world, and met famous people such as his idol, Joe DiMaggio, as well as Lena Horne,

Sugar Ray Robinson, Joe Louis, Willie Mays, Xavier Cugat, and Marilyn Monroe. When asked about his favorite memory or thrill, however, he said, "Winning the state championship at Anderson High School and being named Mr. Basketball." Incidentally, when Erskine was asked the same question, he also made a tribute to his high school days, noting, "There might be a difference between a favorite memory and a thrill. It was a big thrill when I received a varsity baseball uniform at age thirteen from coach Archie Chadd. It is a nice memory when I struck out fourteen Yankees in game three of the 1953 World Series."

There is little doubt that a favorite memory shared by both men happened in Pittsburgh. During an interview with the author, Erskine said he knew Wilson listened to games on the radio when he pitched. Erskine recalled a time when both were playing baseball and their teams played on the same day in Pittsburgh. They were able to meet in Schenley Park across from Forbes Field, home of the Pirates. They talked about how far both of them had come. Erskine recalled saying, "Look at us from the old neighborhood."

In his golden years, Wilson has not been forgotten by Hoosiers, especially basketball fans and those who remember him around Anderson. The state honored him with a Sagamore of the Wabash, an award given to those who advance the state's heritage. He was inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, the Anderson University Athletic Hall of Fame, the Anderson High School Hall of Fame, and was named one of Indiana's fifty best

basketball players of all time. Both he and Erskine have been awarded honorary doctorates from Anderson College (today Anderson University). In 2001 Wilson was named the greatest basketball player in Madison County history by the *Anderson Herald-Bulletin*. He was also named the co-greatest athlete in county history: the other was his friend, Erskine.

Just as Anderson did for Erskine, the community also honored Wilson with a statue. The nine-foot sculpture, which cost \$60,000, was placed in front of Anderson High School May 2016. "If one kid can look at that statue and say 'I think I can do that,' that would satisfy me," Wilson said. Inscribed on the statue's base are the words: "Far Reaching Goals." They seem fitting for the oldest living Mr. Basketball in Indiana, but perhaps even more fitting are the words of Erskine, who spoke about his friend at the statue dedication ceremony. About the statue he said, "My hope is that it will mean a lot more than Johnny being a great athlete. What Johnny stands for to me is he beat the odds."

*Norman Jones of Crystal Lake, Illinois, is the author of four books. His article on Butler University's Hinkle Fieldhouse appeared in the spring 2016 issue of Traces. Portions of this article are the result of an interview with Carl Erskine and Johnny Wilson conducted in Anderson on July 15, 2016. The author thanks them for contributing and for verifying information included in the article. Also deserving of thanks for their assistance are Connie McAvoy and Jerry Kublank •*

#### FOR FURTHER READING

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