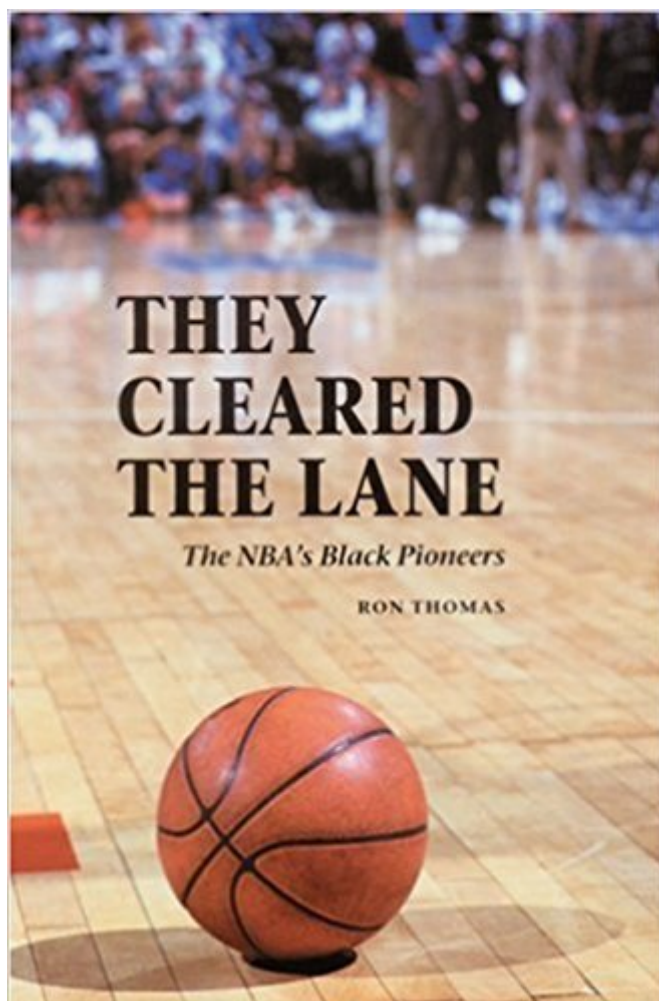


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# They Cleared The Lane: The NBA's Black Pioneers



## Synopsis

Today, black players compose more than eighty percent of the National Basketball Association's rosters, providing a strong and valued contribution to professional basketball. In the first half of the twentieth century, however, pro basketball was tainted by racism, as gifted African Americans were denied the opportunity to display their talents. Through in-depth interviews with players, their families, coaches, teammates, and league officials, Ron Thomas tells the largely untold story of what basketball was really like for the first black NBA players, including recent Hall of Fame inductee Earl Lloyd, early superstars such as Maurice Stokes and Bill Russell, and the league's first black coaches. *They Cleared the Lane* is both informative and entertaining, full of anecdotes and little-known history. Not all the stories have happy endings, but this unfortunate truth only emphasizes how much we have gained from the accomplishments of these pioneer athletes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Thomas's is probably one of the two or three best books about professional basketball ever read by this reviewer. The compelling narrative will hold every reader's interest. Although the current National Basketball Association (NBA) is over 80 percent black, African Americans did not enter the league until 1950. Yet even the most dedicated NBA fan would be hard-pressed to identify such pioneers as Harold Hunter (the first black player to sign an NBA contract), Earl Lloyd (the first black to play in an NBA game), and Chuck Cooper (the first to be drafted by an NBA team). The book describes their trials and triumphs and then more briefly traces the rise of the black athlete as a

force in the league. It was not easy, as there were official and unofficial "quotas," and local harassment could make traveling with the teams a real ordeal. This book is important not just for basketball fans but for those who want to understand the role played by African Americans in the development of the NBA and big-time sports today. Highly recommended. William Scheeren, Hempfield Area H.S. Lib., Greensburg, PA Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

The current racial mix of the NBA is about 90 percent black and 10 percent white. Blacks hold a large percentage of the coaching positions, and there are black general managers and part owners. No one thinks much about it anymore, but that wasn't always the case. Thomas, a San Francisco Chronicle sportswriter, presents an overview of the NBA's first black players, the social and racial barriers they encountered, and the gradual progress they made. Among those profiled are Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, Chuck Cooper, and Don Barksdale, the league's first black All-Star. Though the earliest black players were primarily rebounding and defensive specialists, it wasn't long before the first generations of superstars arrived: Russell, Chamberlain, Robertson, and Baylor. Most long-term NBA fans are aware of the NBA's role at the forefront of sports integration, but Thomas places a very human face on it and points out that there were sacrifices made and risks taken to bring the league to its current position as the world's top professional sports attraction. Wes Lukowsky Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Informative and enlightening

I HIGHLY RECOMMEND THIS BOOK. I LEARNED ABOUT THE EARLY BLACK PLAYERS AND WHAT THEY WENT THRU. VERY INFORMATIVE. THE PRICE CANT BE BEAT.

Ron Thomas seems to have written a book just for me. I am working on a big paper on integration and this book not only hit the nail on the head, it followed up with great leads to other information. I loved how Thomas covers not only early integration such as Bucky Lew and Abe Saperstein but also the more recent notoriety such as Dr. J, Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan. Racism has times when it is more prevelant than others so I appreciated how the author realized this and didn't act as if racism in basketball died once Bill Russell lead the 1957 Boston Celtics to a NBA championship. This book was very well written, easy to read, and as a researcher, it was a gold mine for other different primary and secondary sources. The notes are to thank for a more organized search as they are organized by topic. Overall, a great read in itself, made even more

important because of research demands. Thomas, Ron. *They cleared the lane: the NBA's Black pioneers*. 1987. Reprint, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

Thomas, Ron. *They cleared the lane: the NBA's Black pioneers*. 1987. Reprint, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. *They Cleared the Lane* by Ron Thomas is a very good book in many ways for multiple topics involving the influence of African Americans because the book spans from the beginning of the first black professional player in Bucky Lew, to recent stars who are making strides in the game today over the course of seventeen chapters. Along with a glossary, index, bibliography, and being published by the University of Nebraska Press, all signs point to the information being accurate and is directed toward use not just for reading but for use with scholarly articles. I say scholarly articles because as a college student many of the chapters especially one through eight were very useful for my research topic in my senior seminar class which is on the integration of the NBA by African Americans. This book was very useful in helping me find many more sources for my topic, and that was beneficial because of how little it can seem there is on a topic not normally written on.

Ron Thomas' *They Cleared the Lane* is a wonderful read about the history of basketball and its racial integration. Most people don't know that the now prominent NBA struggled through several decades before finding firm financial footing. Also hidden in the history of the sport is its early segregation and the challenges faced by the first black players who integrated the league. The stories are engrossing and emotionally charged and reveal a great deal about the changing fabric of American society. The book works well as a supplementary text for the course the Sociology of Sport (where I've used it). It would also serve equally well as a supplementary text for courses in race and ethnicity. It is a must read for those who believe themselves to be students of the NBA. We should all thank Ron Thomas for chronicling this very important history.

Finally a book that talks about black sports, that's not about just baseball. To know what these pioneers had to go through just to make it, makes me very proud to say that I'm black. But, you ask why such a poor rating. Because the author, Ron Thomas, did a very poor job of getting his facts first hand. He states that he got the idea about this book when a lot of these ball players were still alive. But did not have "time" to interview them, so most of his recollections are through magazine or newspaper articles. A lot of these ball players past away before "he could get to them". There are a couple of times in the book where he leaves you hanging trying to figure out what he's trying to say,

for example when he's explaining that "when they got hungry, it didn't make matters easier because they practiced just a few blocks from the Nabisco plant." My question? When they got hungry, then what, did they have to split the dinner, they had no money. What? But nothing was more frustrating then when the old black ball players were explaining to us "that everyone treated us basically ok", Mr. Thomas still tried to paint an "evil" side to the white owners and management. Making it seem like no one was willing to help. I think someone else should have done this book. And could've probably done a better job.

They Cleared The Lane by professional sportswriter Ron Thomas is the amazing story of the people who dared to break the color line in professional basketball. Once, racism dominated this sport in America, but the efforts of the first professional black players and coaches changed all that. Filled with anecdotes, engaging stories, and little-known facts, They Cleared The Lane is informative reading that will appeal to all basketball enthusiasts who want to learn more about the history of this beloved sport. They Cleared The Lane is also highly recommended for Black Studies supplemental reading lists and reference collections.

They Cleared The Lane: The NBA's Black Pioneers by Ron Thomas, is an informative and entertaining account of the early Black players and coaches of the NBA. It is obvious Mr. Thomas has done extensive research through interviews, and media archives to examine and clarify the enormous social and athletic impact of the early Black NBA players. As a true basketball fanatic, I enjoyed the opportunity to read and learn about some important individuals who help to shape and define the NBA.

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