Twitter Thread by michaelharriot



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Aight. Here’s my favorite 2 stories about Bill Russell.

Both stories reveal how much of a humble human being he is. And one blows my mind because it dismantles what we think about the evolution of sports.

A thread:

> Where is the thread? Love when you give us your take on these players. The KC Jones piece was outstanding. Had no idea.
>
> — Bweasey (@Bweasey) December 27, 2020

The first is, that there is an assumption that today’s athletes are faster, stronger, etc. which is is based on ZERO evidence.

For instance, Wilt Chamberlain benched 465 lbs at 59 years old. Arnold Schwarzenegger says he benched 500 lbs on the set of Conan the Destroyer

Most basketball experts say Wilt has the highest vertical leap in NBA history. A few others argue that Michael Jordan did.

I think they’re both wrong.

Why?

Well let me tell you a story:

In 1956 Bill Russell was selected for the US Olympic basketball team

During this time, pros weren’t allowed in the Olympics, so the International Olympic Committee tried to say that he was ineligible since he had already signed with the Celtics, even though he hadn’t played yet

Luckily, Russell prevailed and led the team to the gold medal as the captain.

But if they would have stopped Russell from playing for the US basketball team, he would have STILL been in the Olympics.

How?

Because Bill Russell was one of the greatest high jumpers I. The world.

Remember, he had won two NCAA basketball championships in 1955 & 1956 but, when he was a winning, USF didn't even have a track team. When they got it back, Russell asked the track coach if he could come out "for some fun."

He said that basketball had worn out his legs but he'd "learned about high jumping" and would compete in meets on one condition:

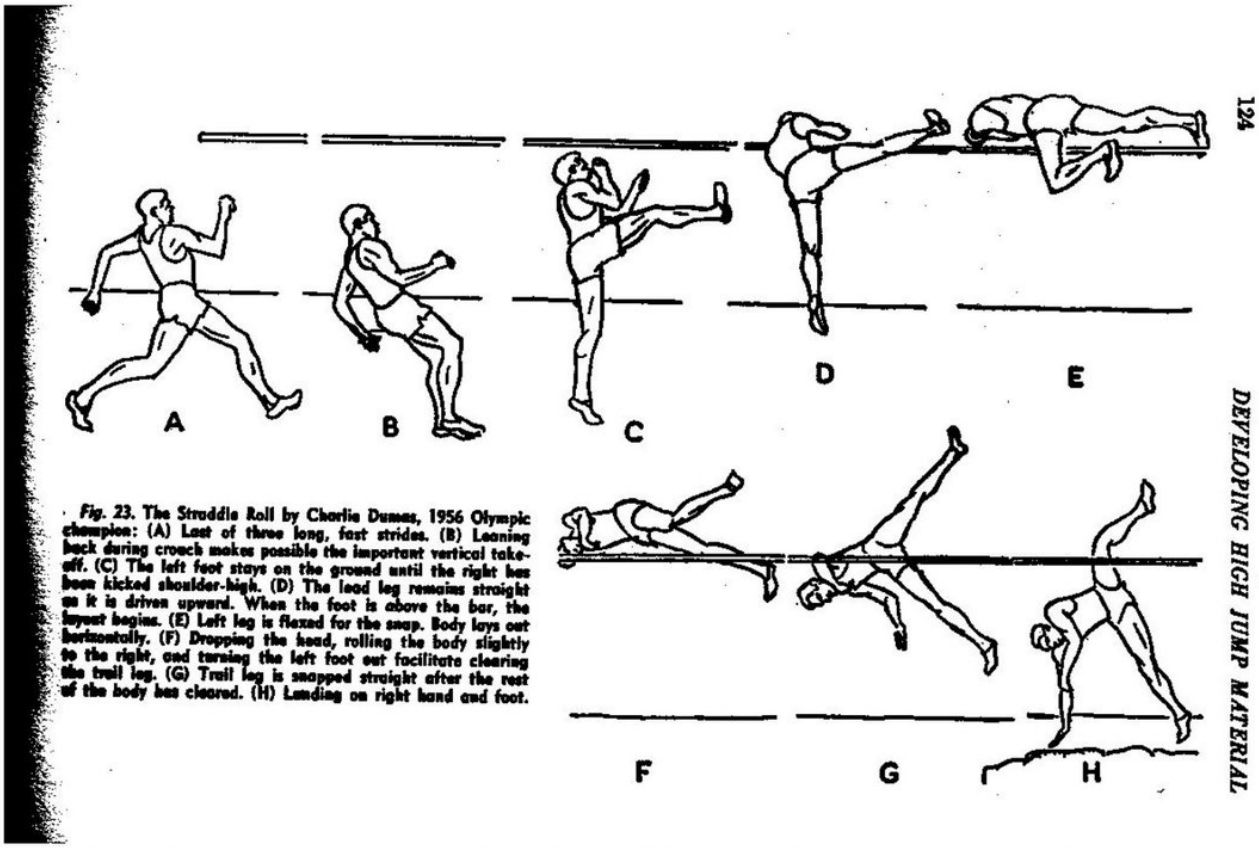
He didn't have to come to practice.

So at the first track meet, Russell goes out to compete at his first track meet in years against some of the best in the world.

At the time, high-jumpers didn't have those big air cushions for people to land on. They actually had sand pits just like the long jump.

So, you couldn't land on your back like you do now. People were using a technique called the "straddle roll,' and one of the Russell's opponents named "Johnny" had impeccable technique.

Johnny had previously jumped 6'5", and had been competing against Russell since high school



Line drawing from Brother G. Luke, FSC, *Coaching High School Track and Field*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J (Prentice Hall, 1958)

This technique didn't even exist when Russell had last competed.

He beat them.

But he kept telling the officials to raise the bar. After he got to 6'10", everyone at the track meet stopped running and gathered around—not because he was Bill Russell, there was another reason:

No one had ever Jumped 7 feet before.

So the officials said: "wait... if you're gonna break a world record, we need to measure the height instead of using these notches." Again, he had ALREADY WON. Plus, he had a basketball injury, so Russell said "I'm good" and went home

In 2013, when the Celtics unveiled the statue of Bill Russell, Russell asked Bill Withers to write a song honoring his father

Withers agreed but told Russell that he didn't perform anymore so he'd have to find someone to sing it. Russell called his old high jump rival Johnny.

Unfortunately, Johnny never made it in track.

You may have heard of him, though.

Some guy named Johnny Mathis

https://t.co/8ZnOUPyYKv

But later, something made Russell try to go higher.

That something was racism.

Remember, a lot of people were mad because he had just led a majority-black starting five NCAA basketball team to a championship. He was also the first black Tournament Most Outstanding Player

So he got some hate mail warning him not to come to the AAU meet in Fresno, which is funny because NO ONE WANTS TO GO TO FRESNO! The racists (racists never give their name) threatened poison him and said he looked like a goat.

But Russell went. And he was mad.

He had to jump against Charles Dumas, the #1 ranked jumper in the world.

They both tied for 6'9 and a quarter inches and agreed to share the title.

At that point of the season, it was the highest jump in the US.

But there is a story that's not told by the official measurements.

After the official scores were recorded, Russell turns to a ref and says:

“Put it at seven feet”

Bill just wanted to see if one of them could do the impossible.

Dumas tried it and failed three times. He didn’t even come close.

STOP LAUGHING AT CHARLIE! Did I mention that no one had ever done this IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD?

Next it was Bill’s turn.

On the first two tries, he got over, but his knee hit the bar on his way down.

On the third try, he cleared the bar, barely touching it with his ankle. The bar stayed there for a minute, but rolled down.

Bernie looked up from his notes. I saw on his face that look he has when somebody says something especially stupid. “You know Russell better than that.”

“But it says here . . . “

“Forget what it says there. Think. What always happens when you make Russell mad?”

“He destroys you.”

“Well, these idiots have made Russell mad. He is going to Fresno, and he will kick some butt. Relax.”

“I sure hope you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. This is Bill Russell we are talking about.”

And we went off to class together.

Bernie was right, as he usually was. There was no point sending me to Fresno, but Russell went, took on Charles Dumas, the top jumper in the world, and pushed him to 6’9 ¼”. It was the best high jump in the United States up to that point in the season. After both had cleared that height, Dumas wanted to call it a tie, but Russell said, “What the heck. Let’s reach for the sky,” and asked the officials to set the bar at seven feet. I read the newspaper report the next day. Dumas missed badly on all three tries. “Russell,” the story said, “just nicked the bar with his knee on the way down on his first two tries, and he was over on his third try, but ticked the bar with his ankle after his body had passed over.” The bar shuddered, almost stayed up, and then fell into the pit. So much for quitting; so much for looking like a goat.

But here’s the thing:

Bill Russell was a TERRIBLE HIGH JUMPER!

Dude didn’t know how to do the Saddle Roll. He was out there tying the best high jumper in the world with NO TECHNIQUE.

He was literally HURDLING THE BAR



Now of course, just because Russell beat a guy who was ranked number one doesn't necessarily mean anything.

Dumas didn't become a singer but he still got to hang out with Russell at the olympics. Russell didn't invite him, though.

See, after seeing Russell clear seven feet with sheer athletic ability, he knew it was possible.

A few weeks later, at the Olympic trials, Charles Dumas became the first man on earth to jump seven feet.

Dumas would win the would win gold at the olympics with a jump of 6'11"

But my favorite story of Bill Russell is when he finally acknowledged that he was a Hall of Farmer.

Again, I might need to remind you: I don't care who you regard as the "best" nba player. One thing is undisputed:

Bill Russell Russel is the winningest player in the history of North American team sports.

He won 11 NBA championships
2 NCAA titles
And an Olympic gold medal

Bill Russell got his Hall of Fame ring in 2019

Why?

Because Bill Russell refused to call himself a Hall of Farmer for 45 years.

The interesting thing about this, is that he would never say why. And then last year, he just started doing it. He didn't hold a press conference

Last year, he got a phone call informing him that Chuck Cooper had been inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame.

So he started wearing his ring.

Chuck Cooper didn't play with Russell. He only scored 6 points per game. They are not related.

Still, until Cooper wasn't in the Hall of Fame, Russel believed he couldn't be. I don't know if it was respect for Cooper or the belief that he couldn't acknowledge any institution that didn't respect his history.

So, who is Chuck Cooper?

Chuck Cooper was the first Black man drafted into the NBA.

THAT is respect for your ancestors.

That is a man

But, it turns out, those anonymous racists in Fresno were kinda right:

Bill Russell looks like the G.O.A.T. to me.