



Red Auerbach introduced Celtic newcomer Don Chaney, right, to Bill Russell in April, 1966. Russell's condemnation of Boston as a racist city may have had some effect on younger players who make their off-season homes elsewhere. (Globe file photo)

Black athletes discuss Boston

• BLACKS

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Sanders has never entertained the illusion that he, as a pro athlete, was somehow different than any other black in Boston. From the beginning he wasn't allowed this conceit.

"When I came to Boston the only place I knew was the Back Bay area, so I wanted to get an apartment there. That was like impossible. I don't know how many times I talked to people about an apartment and when I went to see them, suddenly they were taken. I tried the Lenox Hotel. Impossible. So I lived in Roxbury."

"Russell had a ball laughing at me." Privilege! He applied for a bank loan once to start a franchise business under a federal minority lending program. Sanders wanted to locate the business near Neponset. The bank wanted him to locate it in Roxbury. "I wanted to make it work," said Sanders. "They wanted to guarantee its failure."

Sanders has been turned away from nightclubs in the Kenmore Square area, and rather than announce his identity to gain entrance, has gone elsewhere.

"A friend of mine asked me why I don't tell them who I am," says Sanders, laughing. "Who am I? I'm just a guy who wants to spend a few bucks at a watering hole."

On one occasion being a Celtic did benefit Sanders, quite by accident.

"I drove up to a real estate office—in Hyde Park or Jamaica Plain. I can't remember which with my wife and there were four or five dudes out there who decided they were going to kick my ass. My thought was My time has come, face the music! I went to get my wife back into the car."

"That's when one of those dudes sees my (Celtics) license plate. All of a sudden it's, 'We're sorry, Sam, we didn't know it was you.'"

But for every one of these incidents, there has been another when Sanders wasn't recognized, when he felt he was denied attentive service in shops or restaurants because he was black.

"My experience is basically the same as any black man," says Sanders. "Any athlete who doesn't see this is kidding himself. If you don't ride up to a limousine or have a million bucks taped to your forehead, you're going to be treated the same way."

"The club and the businesses if you're trying to sell something, judge solely on the color of skin. Until they find out you're Jim Brown or somebody and then it's 'Welcome. But up to this point you're just another black.'"

And being black, to Sanders, means that no matter how well you're doing, in the eyes of most Americans, you're still just a black guy that should be abused, or not allowed to step out of line."

Though Sanders sketches a grim outline of Boston's racial climate, adding details particularly critical of the media, his viewpoint isn't unshared. He has found Boston a good area for his family, both in Roxbury and Newton.

In his Roxbury neighborhood, mostly black by the time he left, Sanders found a "community of interest and lifestyle" much the same as he had known in Harlem. He was close to the Blue Hill Avenue street of the late 1960s, yet he says crime in Roxbury is overframed by the white population, thanks largely to the media. "It's no worse than a lot of neighborhoods in Boston," says Sanders.

He moved to Newton at his wife Karen's urging, for the advantage of property appreciation and good public schools. His daughter Simone could attend. Sanders has found a community in Newton, too, based on lawn, taxes and the fight to keep out high-rise construction.

There are about 400 black families in Newton, but no others on his street. This doesn't bother Sanders. Neither does a "third-hand" rumor that elements in Newton are opposing black property buyers. "I suppose the only real barrier is money," he says. Sanders betrays no concern about being accepted by his neighbors.

"At home you're basically dealing with privacy anyway," says Sanders. "I have friends all over the city. I respect everybody's lifestyle, but I didn't worry about getting invited to every party on the street."

The beauty of Newton, Sanders feels, is that a nearby MBTA stop gives his daughter access to the city. "I want her to be exposed to as much as possible," says Sanders.

The move from Roxbury to Newton was only a few miles by the odometer but light years on the socio-economic scale. Sanders resists bitterly to any suggestion that he has abandoned the black community. "Why is it when white people move to a better place they're achieving something, and when blacks do it they're abandoning?" asks Sanders. "You don't abandon something if you stay involved."

There has never been any question of Sanders' involvement, or of his social commitment. He has gone beyond the nominal recreation center appearance many black athletes make, serving on the board of directors of the Roxbury Boys Club, fund-raising for several organizations.

Presently Sanders is a member of The Group, a private social club of prominent blacks (though open to whites), counting among its members deputy mayor Dep Jones and Superior Court Judge Rudy Farrow. "Our goal is to bridge the communication gap between the so-called 'downtown' community and the black community," says Sanders. "We hope to widen communication between the people in the Boston area."

The anger and indignity Bill Russell felt are both present in varying degrees in Sanders, but while Russell never renounced his feelings and left, Sanders has adopted a pragmatism that enables him to stay.

"Boston is like any other city in America," he concludes. "People somehow got locked into thinking it's nasty. Boston has been spotlighted, and they've helped the spotlight considerably, obviously by the school issue. But the problem is national."

Like Satish Sanders, Leon Gray has moved from the city to the suburbs, giving up his Hyde Park apartment for a \$300,000 house he had built in Westwood. Unlike Sanders, however, Gray is a bachelor and did not move at the urging of a wife or for the sake of better schools.

For Gray, 27, the Patriots' two-time all-pro offensive tackle, the house in Westwood is the symbol of his decision to seek a future in the area. After each of his first five years with the Patriots, Gray returned to his native Mississippi for classes at Jackson State, and spent time with his family in Memphis. This summer he supervised the completion of the house, carefully choosing fixtures that would enhance the resale value, and made the move.

"I have maybe two or three years left at my peak as a football player," says Gray. "After that it's tough and go. I'm thinking about what I can do after I'm through playing. I'm going to find out in the next couple of years if this is the place I should live, or think about going to some other place."

"Off the field," says Gray, "it's obvious that I'm not as marketable as I am on it. The only things I've got here have been through contacts I've made myself. I've been trying. That's why I'm not going to develop any attitude about this area until I try living here."

"It's sort of sad, I think, that a lot of blacks that play team athletics are articulate and bright and don't have opportunities. I think it's just a matter of people willing to take a chance. It's almost like a quarterback and a coach, a father-son relationship. There's going to be mistakes, but the person on the sideline has got to be willing to let you make those while you're learning."

The move to Westwood brings with it certain anxieties, because it is a white suburb. Gray had become accustomed to integrated Hyde Park, despite having had his apartment robbed and having had rocks thrown at his car on the way to the grocery store. Those things are part of city life.

"The problem is," says Gray, "if you want to live in a nice area, there isn't a nice middle class black suburban area. You have to go out and live where it's predominantly white."

"They look at you two ways then. The whites accept you because you're a big shot football player. And you alternate yourself from blacks because they say 'he's a big shot now, too good to live where we live.'"

Because they play in Foxboro, most of the black Patriots, like Gray, choose to live in southern, predominantly white suburbs. Inevitably, Gray feels, this has led to a sense of isolation from the black community, and is an underlying reason why many of the black Patriots give time to city youth organizations, such as the Roxbury Boys Club, and Lenox Park Community Development. This and the encouragement they get from Patriots owner Bill Sullivan, who has a good reputation in the black community.

Nobody gives more spare time than Gray, who has a lot of it to give. One of his teammates, Tony McGee, gets involved on the job with the Boston Parks and Recreation Dept.

"The location of the stadium and the price of the ticket make it difficult for a lot of blacks to see our games," says Gray. "I can understand that why a lot of players and myself are involved with black kids. If we can't get them to the games, at least we can go run a pickup game for them and talk to them."

In an effort to get more black fans into Schaefer Stadium, Gray had a clause written into his last contract calling for the Patriots to distribute approximately 1800 tickets for exhibition games to disadvantaged youth.

Gray's concern with youth has taken him into the schools, first during the busing trauma in 1974, later in a program sewing career-related jobs for seniors. His faith in education is deep-seated, tracing back to his youth on a Mississippi farm, when he was taught that books were more important than anything, including football, to improve his condition.

For this reason Gray considers the state of

Boston public schools at major a black problem as unemployment and lack of voter participation. And while this problem doesn't affect Gray directly, nor his teammates, he claims a concern for it. Regardless of the house in Westwood, and the Mercedes Benz he drives, he feels the anguish of the city.

"How can you feel you've made it," says Gray, "when you're the only one out there alone and you're isolated? I think the true strength is when you can go out and make it and you can come back to that group and be an example. That's when you can effect some change."

"The whole thing is, how much can you do? I ask myself that. How much can you do, other than be supportive for the little programs here and there?"

"I know for a fact that I can probably say things that a lot of other blacks in the community could, but simply because I'm Leon Gray the football player, it might stick longer. I think I have the responsibility to realize I have that kind of influence."

There is none of Russell's hard-edged militance and little of Sanders' resigned cynicism in Gray. He says with a quiet pride that he has always spoken comfortably with whites.

"I never did make the color thing a big issue," he says.

But not until Gray has lived in the area year-round will he pass final judgment on it. Not until he finds out if he has a life-after-football here.

"Unless you have roots here," he says, "you don't really know the problems. Living here in the off-season I'll have more time to get involved and find out what the problems are. I'm open-minded. I'm optimistic."

Don Chaney is one of the 66 percent of Boston's black athletes who choose to make off-season homes elsewhere, although Chaney, unlike most, maintains a home here year-round. The 33-year-old Celtics guard was a No. 1 draft choice out of the University of Houston in 1960, and has owned his Melrose home for 10 years, including those three seasons between 1974 and 1977 when he was playing for the ABA St. Louis entry and the Los Angeles Lakers.

In addition to his Melrose home, Chaney owns one in LA and in Houston. Every spring he returns to Houston.

"Coming from the South," says Chaney, married and the father of three, "it's kind of tough for me to really get involved (in Boston) because I really like the South. There's no comparison to me. I find people in the South are much friendlier and closer. I find people on East Coast and in northern cities are more or less alienated. They keep to themselves. I just like the Southern environment. It's hard to explain exactly. The weather is part of it."

A few people will remember Chaney as a participant in a small slice of Southern history. In 1961 he and Elvin Hayes, both Louisiana high school stars, became the first black athletes at the University of Houston. LSU had declined to offer Chaney and Hayes scholarships.

There was something that really made me proud," he recalls. "Right before I was accepted to Houston there was a protest at LSU. Black and white students were protesting, but it was generally black."

"And they had a sign. It said 'Chaney and Hayes—Why Did They Have To Leave The State?' And I think things like this prompted state schools like LSU to get black athletes."

Coming from an all-black high school to being the first black athlete at a virtually all-white Southern university, Chaney recalls feeling "drifted" because he knew I would be confronting a lot of stuff. Being an athlete, he felt, helped win acceptance, and continues to. He says being an athlete has sharpened his awareness of racial feelings.

An athlete is in the public eye," says Chaney. "There are people of all races, so he has to be aware of things. But he's more or less accepted. And since athletes are around different types of people all the time he can deal with them."

The problems are with people who never had a relationship with other races, so they can't really know. When something happens it turns into hate because they don't know. This is how you have the tension in Boston."

Chaney's decision to live in Melrose during the season wasn't based on the racial climate of the area.

I settled down there because that was the place I liked," he said. "From the pro athlete's point of view, those things (race) don't cross your mind, you've been involved with racism for so long... I shop where I want to shop, I live where I want to live. If problems arise, I have to deal with them."

"With me," he says, "dealing with prejudice is an everyday thing. I'm from the South. I know how to deal with it. I've been around."

"It's people living up North who can't deal with it. People who have been deprived."