

## Red Auerbach, Basketball Maven

By Alan Dershowitz

Red Auerbach, the legendary coach and general manager of the Boston Celtics, died October 28, 2006, at the age of 89. This article originally appeared in the November 3, 2006 issue of the *Forward*, and is reprinted with permission.

When it came to basketball, Red Auerbach – architect of the Boston Celtics' 16 championship teams – was a maven's maven. He knew more about the game than anyone, and he used his knowledge more effectively than any basketball coach or general manager in history, and led the way in opening up the league to black players and black coaches. He was a fierce competitor who couldn't stand to lose. And when he was the coach he rarely did, winning a record eight consecutive titles starting in the 1958-1959 season.

I knew Red for nearly half a century. I first met him in Washington when I was still a Knicks fan. He became my "rabbi" when I moved to Boston, and he converted me to the Celts. As a season ticket holder since the mid-1960s, I watched him coach championship teams and then I was privileged to sit in the stands, sometimes next to him, for many years thereafter. On the bench he was anything but a mensch, screaming at referees (often to get the next call), upbraiding players who didn't live up to their potential and showing no mercy for his opponents. An autographed picture of Red (with his trademark cigar and his arm around me) reads, "Why did lawyers ruin sports (or try)?"

Red loved to tell stories. Before games I would sometimes bring him a corned beef sandwich and we would sit and shmooze about the good old days. By that he meant the days before agents, sports lawyers and other assorted intruders who in Red's view were ruining the pure sport of basketball. He thought of his players as his kids. "Could you imagine an agent trying to negotiate between a son and a father?" he would ask with all sincerity. Then he would answer. "I always did the best I could for my players. The agents never got them a nickel more. They just took some of what I would have given them anyway for themselves."

He loved to talk about the law. Whenever we would sit together or I would go to a practice with him, he would ask me, "Tell me what's really going on with the von Bulow case" or the O.J. case or the Helmsley case. I would try to change the subject to basketball: "How come Doc Rivers always ends the games with no time-outs left in the last 30 seconds?" "Is it good that kids are coming to the pros straight out of high school?" But Red didn't want to discuss basketball with me. He wanted to discuss law.

Once I got exasperated, and I said: "Red, look. We always discuss the law and never basketball. That's not fair. I'm telling you what I know, but you're not telling me what you know." Red said, "Of course it's fair. I'm a layman, and it's important for you to know what laymen think about the law. After all, you might have to go in front of a jury of people like me. But why should I give a damn what you think about basketball? You're a fan, not an expert." That shut me up, and we continued to talk about the law. Never once did he ask me my opinion about a basketball issue, though on more than one occasion I tried to foist my views on him, only to see him yawn in response.

Red was a law junkie. One time we were at a Celtics-Lakers playoff game in Los Angeles and the arena was loaded with Hollywood celebrities. Red looked past Jack Nicholson and Dyan Cannon, pointing at Judge Wapner of "The People's Court." "Do you know Wapner?" he asked me. I told

him I had met him in a synagogue at which I had spoken. "I love that guy. I could watch him every day. Could you introduce me?" he asked, like a teenager hoping to meet a rock star. I made the introduction, and Red couldn't stop talking about how he had met Judge Wapner.

Red loved Jewish causes. Every year he would host an event sponsored by the B'nai B'rith sports lodge, to which he brought the entire team. The players often grumbled. One of them said to me: "It's part of our job. We have to show up to the coach's Jewish groups." Once, it caused a bit of embarrassment. Red introduced a hayseed rookie from a small town, who started his talk with what he thought was a touch of good-natured humor: "I knew I wasn't going to get paid for this talk, 'cause Red told me it was a Jewish group." There were a few laughs and several gasps from the audience. Red came over to my table and asked me to spend five minutes with the rookie, explaining why the joke was not appropriate. I did, and the rookie – who had not realized that he had said anything wrong – apologized and never said anything like that again. Red saw it as part of his responsibility to teach small-town kids who were becoming big stars the ways of the world.

Red always told me about his trips to Israel and to the Soviet Union, where he conducted basketball clinics. He always hoped that an Israeli would make it to the NBA, perhaps even to the Celtics. He had his eye on a couple of guards, but none of them ever made the cut.

Red grew up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where I was born, and he played guard for Eastern District High School, which my mother attended. He loved to talk about Brooklyn, but his heart was in Boston, although he lived in Washington throughout his career with the Celtics.

I was looking forward to sitting next to him for part of the game on opening night this year – an event he never missed. Last year, he was so hobbled by illness that he couldn't make it to his usual seat a few rows up from the floor. He sat at the scorer's table. When I came over to spend a few minutes with him, he was as tough as ever, complaining about the restriction his doctors had put on him: "No more corned beef." He told me he wanted to live long enough to see one more green banner hanging from the garden.

Red was the best in the world at what he did. He was a regular guy. And off the bench, he was a real mensch.

*Alan Dershowitz is a professor of law at Harvard. His latest book is "Preemption: A Knife That Cuts Both Ways" (W.W. Norton).*