



# A Legend in Many Forms

## Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Is Recognized for His Contributions to the Entertainment Industry and Society

BY LISA RICHWINE

**D**ECADES before professional football players took a knee during the national anthem, a star college basketball player made a bold move to draw attention to inequality for African-Americans.

UCLA center Lew Alcindor, a black man who would later change his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, boycotted the 1968 men's Olympic basketball team to protest racial injustice in the United States.

One of the sport's first athlete activists, the 7-foot-2-inch-tall history buff went on to shatter records on the court and build a career as a prolific writer and outspoken advocate for social progress.

The Los Angeles Press Club tonight is honoring the NBA superstar, author and activist, now age 70, with its Legend Award, for his contributions to the entertainment industry and to society.

Abdul-Jabbar thrilled millions of fans over 20 seasons in the NBA, launching his trademark

shot, the skyhook, over the outstretched arms of opponents who found it virtually impossible to block.

The league's all-time leading scorer, Abdul-Jabbar won six NBA titles and six regular-season MVP awards. ESPN named him the best center in NBA history.

After picking up basketball as a child in New York City, Alcindor was setting records in high school. His team at Catholic school Power Memorial won 71 consecutive games and a national championship. He attended UCLA and played under Coach John Wooden, who would become a mentor and lifelong friend.



In 1967, Lew Alcindor joined Bill Russell, Jim Brown and other African-American athletes in Cleveland to support Muhammad Ali's refusal to be drafted into the U.S. Army.



At UCLA, his teams won three consecutive NCAA titles from 1967 to 1969.

It was after his junior year that the 21-year-old declined an invitation to try out for the Olympic basketball team. The United States was reeling from racial violence and the assassination of black leaders, and Alcindor felt he could not represent a country that was denying the rights of black people.

A TV interviewer at the time suggested Alcindor should leave the country if he was not happy with it.

"I tried to make the point that true patriotism is about acknowledging problems and, rather

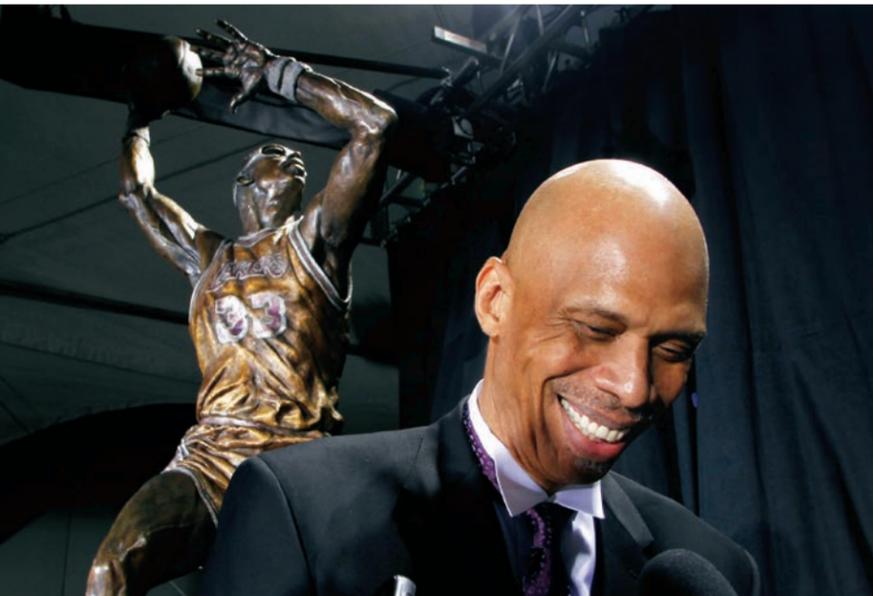
than running away from them, joining together to fix them," the player wrote in his 2017 book *Coach Wooden and Me*.

Taking a stand on social issues was rare for athletes at the time, and the decision made him a target of fierce criticism, racial slurs and even death threats, according to the book.

The Milwaukee Bucks made Alcindor the first overall pick in the draft. He played with the team for six seasons and earned his first NBA championship ring in 1971.

One day after the Bucks won the title, Alcindor announced he was changing his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, a Muslim name mean-

President Barack Obama awarded Abdul-Jabbar with the Presidential Medal of Honor in 2016.



After 14 years with the Lakers, Abdul-Jabbar retired from the NBA in 1989. His statue was unveiled at Staples Center in 2012.

Above right, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appointed Abdul-Jabbar a global Cultural Ambassador for the State Department in 2012 to promote the importance of education among other issues.

Right, a cockpit scene from *Airplane*.



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ing "generous servant of the mighty one" and reflecting his conversion to Islam. That decision also sparked a backlash from some fans.

In 1975, Abdul-Jabbar was traded to the Los Angeles Lakers, where he became a centerpiece of the team's entertaining, fast-paced style and helped create one of basketball's great dynasties with future teammate Magic Johnson.

At this time, he also began wearing goggles to protect his eyes from scratches during games.

The Lakers won five NBA championships with Abdul-Jabbar. They beat their arch-rival Boston Celtics in 1985, taking the final game in Boston Garden. Abdul-Jabbar called it the highlight of his playing career.

Off the court, the reserved Abdul-Jabbar was known as having a frosty relationship with the press and his fans. He tried to avoid reporters and was seen as the opposite of his gregarious teammate Johnson.

Abdul-Jabbar later said he had an introverted nature and felt uncomfortable with the atten-

tired from basketball and turned to one of his passions—writing. He has written more than a dozen books for adults and children including two autobiographies, several celebrations of African-American achievements, a comic book and a novel centered around the older brother of Sherlock Holmes.

Abdul-Jabbar also has penned essays for outlets such as *Time* magazine and *Esquire* on topics ranging from the shootings of black men by police officers to the portrayal of African-Americans in film and television, and he has leveled sharp criticism at President Donald Trump.

He has praised the National Football League players who knelt during the national anthem to protest racial injustice and has defended the rights of athletes to speak about politics and fight the stereotype of the dumb jock.

"Despite the fact that I've been writing about

social issues longer than I played basketball, many of my critics on social media begin their comments with, 'Stick to basketball, Kareem,'" he wrote in his 2016 book, *Writings on the Wall: Searching for a New Equality Beyond Black and White*.

"However, aside from having played basketball a couple decades ago, I am also an American, a father, a businessman, an education advocate, a journalist, a charity organizer, a history buff, a filmmaker, a novelist, a former global Cultural Ambassador for the U.S., a political activist and a Muslim."

Among his charity work, Abdul-Jabbar serves as chairman of the Skyhook Foundation, which aims to inspire children in underserved communities to pursue education in science, technology, engineering and math.

President Barack Obama awarded Abdul-Jabbar the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, in 2016.

"The reason we honor Kareem is more than just a pair of goggles and the skyhook," Obama said at a White House ceremony. "He stood up for his Muslim faith when it wasn't easy and wasn't popular. He's as comfortable sparring with Bruce Lee as he is advocating on Capitol Hill, or writing with extraordinary eloquence on patriotism."

Obama added: "Physically, intellectually, spiritually—Kareem is one-of-a-kind."