

Bob Kurland

Oklahoma's own "7-footer" Olympic medalist was one of the first ball players to dunk.

Chapter 1 – 1:22

Introduction

Announcer: While he was billed as a 7-foot basketball player, Robert Allen "Bob" Kurland admits to being only six-feet, eleven inches tall. Linked to Oklahoma State University basketball and famed coach Henry Iba, Bob led the Cowboys to consecutive NCAA titles in 1945 and 1946. His ability to block shots above the rim led the NCAA to institute its goal-tending rule in 1945. Bob was also one of the first players to dunk the basketball. Bob Kurland won two Olympic gold medals in 1948 and 1952 and was honored by being chosen to carry the U.S. flag in the 1952 opening ceremonies in Helsinki. He turned down the St. Louis Bombers when they drafted him in 1947. Because the NBA was in its early stages, it could not provide a secure and comfortable lifestyle for him, so he chose to work for Phillips Petroleum and play for the Phillips 66ers in the Amateur Athletic Union. He was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame as well as the Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame. Bob Kurland died September 29, 2013. He was 88. You are able to listen to Bob Kurland tell his story because of the generous donations made by foundations and individuals who believe in our mission to preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 8:00

'6' at 13 years old

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is January 27th, 2011. Bob, will you state your full name please?

Bob Kurland: My name is Robery Allen Kurland.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age?

BK: December 23rd, 1924. I am 86 years old.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

BK: Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

JE: Tell us where you were born.

BK: Saint Louis, Missouri.

JE: Tell us your mother's maiden name.

BK: Her maiden name was Adele Benken.

JE: Where was she born and where did she grow up?

BK: Well, I don't know how she grew up but she was born in Franklin, Indiana.

JE: What was your father's name?

BK: Albert John Kurland.

JE: Where was he born and where did he grow up?

BK: He was born in Saint Louis, Missouri.

JE: What was their extraction?

BK: My father was half German and half Polish. The Polish side of the family immigrated to southern Illinois in about 1865 or 1875. They were agricultural people. They had a coal mine and a dairy and they had a pretty good-sized family with I think around 6 children, but when the family broke up, some of them went to Chicago and some of them went to Saint Louis. My father's father got into the saloon business. I hate to admit this because it was a shortcoming of my father I think, but he was raised in a saloon. On the other hand, the Speaker of the House of Representatives today was raised in a saloon and sweeping the same floor my dad did, so I guess they come up in the world.

JE: What did your father do as an adult?

BK: He quit school at 13 years of age, which was a mistake. He was afflicted with infantile paralysis when he was a very young boy about three or four years old. He had one shriveled calf muscle in his right leg. Therefore he didn't participate in things that required continuous physical effort, but he was a strong man and a brave guy to take on the task of raising three kids in the Depression of the 1930s. He never wilted under the heat. He was the bravest man I ever knew.

JE: What was his profession?

BK: He did everything. He started out making chewing tobacco in a factory in Saint Louis. Then he went to work for the Famous-Barr Company as a furniture refinisher, repairing furniture that was damaged in shipments and so forth. He was pretty good at refinishing fine furniture. Later he drifted into the management of large apartments because he understood electricity and mechanics and was a bright man and very inventive in many of the solutions that he had to come up with during the Depression when things were pretty rough and money was short.

JE: Did you have brothers or sister?

BK: I had two sisters, both of them younger than I. Mary Ellen and then Delores as the third child. Mary Ellen lives in Champaign, Illinois today and Delores lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

JE: Because of your height, let's talk about your parents' height and your sisters. Were they of average height?

BK: Oh no. Both of the girls were six feet tall. Both of them were nice looking. Both of them were married and one of them was divorced. The other married a fine guy who worked for Standard Oil. Both of them are still alive. Their health is starting to fail but they've had pretty good lives.

JE: What about your mother and father and their height?

BK: There's a picture of my dad right there (motioning) and you can see that he was probably 6 feet one. My mother was five feet nine.

JE: So that's considered average. Did you trace way back when where this height would have come from?

BK: From good whisky probably.

JE: (Chuckle)

BK: No, I didn't. Height is a peculiar thing and we discovered a lot of things about the glands and so forth and where height comes from. It's an interesting study of human behavior and nature because today the richest people in the world it seems are athletes that get paid more money than you and I can shake a stick at.

JE: What was the name of the elementary school you attended?

BK: I started out at Ames Kindergarten when I was four years old.

JE: In Saint Louis?

BK: Yes.

JE: At what age did you begin to show that you were taller?

BK: Gosh, I was 6'6" by the time I was 13.

JE: So even in elementary school you were taller?

BK: I think so although there are some pictures around here that would testify that until I was five or six years old I was the same height as average kids. But, all of a sudden you get a surprise. It was a real challenge for my mother and dad who recognized the fact that I was different. I didn't recognize that I was different and becoming more different. Although I think I had a good childhood, there was some pressure that we don't seem to have today because I think in today's world people are accepted for what they are and what they do and accomplish. We've come a long way in understanding differences.

JE: So when you were 13 or so in junior high school, you were 6'6"—ow much did you weigh?

BK: 145 pounds.

JE: As a 13 year old and being 6'6", were you wishing you weren't that tall?

BK: Oh yes. I like ambiguity and I was conspicuous. I had to put up with curiosity. People have a right to curiosity but they don't need to be difficult or hard on the person that's subject to their review. Personal anonymity is a very important thing. You have to get out of the crowd every once in a while to maintain your sanity in this world and constant scrutiny is a little bit difficult particularly for an impressionable teenager.

JE: Were there days that you wished you didn't have to go out in public?

BK: Yes, except what I enjoyed in public. My skills in sports became a little more settled down and the fact that I satisfied curiosity and changed the attitude of a lot of my teammates and schoolmates particularly which I enjoyed. I had a great high school career at a small school. High school was different in those days. I think there is too much to teach today. But we had good teachers and the school was well disciplined and I had a good school life.

JE: When did you first start playing basketball?

BK: When I was 13 in junior high school. A man named O.A. Wilson who was an English teacher from over in Illinois came to teach English at Jennings High School where we were going to school. The kids in the ninth grade didn't have a team to play on. So he got some help from the principal and the superintendent of the schools and we got enough money to get some uniforms together and we had a basketball team. We weren't worth a darn. One afternoon we played the kids in the Jewish high school and they just beat the tar out of us. The next week we went over and played the Catholic kids at their school and they beat the tar out of us. We thought we needed to get closer to God and become better basketball players. We eventually, in my high school career, we went to the state tournament a couple of years. It was a good experience and I learned a lot about competition and work.

JE: Do you remember your highest scoring game in your high school years, your personal points?

BK: I never exceeded 17 points.

JE: In high school, how tall had you grown?

BK: By the time I was a senior I was 6'9".

JE: Were you able to move and be as agile as you wanted to be?

BK: That came later with a lot of hard work.

JE: So it was difficult?

BK: Oh yes it was. If you want to have some fun one day—go lie in bed for a week and then get up and try and maintain your balance. You can't do it. You have to work to get back in shape and test every muscle in your body in order to be efficient.

Chapter 3 – 3:55**War Years**

John Erling: You graduated from high school in 1942. When you were a junior in high school we had December 7, 1941 and I was wondering if during those war years in 1941 and 1942 and 1943, if you remembered rationing?

Bob Kurland: You are talking about growing up problems—kid problems were solved by walking. Grown up problems were when you needed tires and gasoline and you had stamps and tire coupons. It was a difficult time for the American public but dad did very well. We were already in a difficult situation. I think it's a fact that the manufacturing functions required to win a war with an Army was something that changed America around. Prior to that, I was still at home—it was the 1930s. It was difficult. The real war was WPA and PWA during the 1930s when the Depression was terribly difficult and strenuous. I am very fearful that we are drifting into a situation not dissimilar from what it was back in the 1930s.

JE: Do you remember hearing President Roosevelt on the radio?

BK: Oh yes. He was a great orator and gave people what I think our president is trying to do... but I think he has got more difficult problems than what Roosevelt had.

JE: By the way, your appetite, was it huge or bigger than everyone else's? Or was it just an average appetite?

BK: My three sisters and I were very healthy children. Dad worked hard and mother worked hard too. There was very little left on the table for scraps.

JE: So you were big eaters?

BK: I think so.

JE: So you graduate from high school and then did you go on to college?

BK: I wanted to go to college. No one in our entire family with the exception of those family members that drifted away to Chicago or to Salt Lake City—those people eventually we found out that there were some people went to dental school. A couple of them became dentists and a few others got into professions that were a little higher level in terms of reward and effort than my dad did, although as I said before I think he was a pretty brave guy with what he had to work with. I recognized that you needed an education to make any progress. The problem was however, in my case and in a modern family, if your father is a professional person by training, you have something to lean on and if you listen maybe you can learn a few things about how to use that. But there was nobody in our family that had a higher education and didn't appreciate what it meant as far as developing the skills that were necessary in carpet work for instance or professional skills of any kind.

JE: Did you deem it important yourself that you got an education? Or?

BK: Yes. I wanted to be a civil engineer. I was a better than average student but certainly not a genius, but that was my objective. It became obvious that I might be solicited by a college under normal times, but I wanted to be a civil engineer and I was catering and looking toward schools that had good engineering programs. Saint Louis University did and Washington University was a god medical school. I think I could have been a pretty good doctor, but both of those schools were soliciting kids for basketballs teams. But what happened was, you've got to remember, I was 6'10" at the time probably, and at 6'6" you don't have to go into the Army. So that wasn't my problem. My problem was finding a university that had not shut down its athletic program in order to get a scholarship because we sure as hell didn't have any money. (Chuckle)

Chapter 4 – 7:00

Henry Iba

John Erling: How did you meet a gentleman by the name of Henry Iba?

Bob Kurland: Henry Iba was of course my second father for all practical purposes. He coached at Maryville Teachers' College out in western Missouri before he went to Colorado. Immediately after he left Maryville Teachers' College, a man named Walter Rulon was a freshman there. Mr. Iba had already acquired a reputation of being an excellent basketball coach. In fact, he had brothers and they were notorious for being winners in sports. Rulon and I became warm friends and we worked hard together. He wrote Mr. Iba and asked whether or not I could have the opportunity to go down to Stillwater to a try out that Iba had every year. Iba wrote back and said, "Yes, sure." So they got a ticket for me and I went down to Stillwater, Oklahoma because it was one of the schools that still had an engineering program plus a basketball program. Mr. Iba had gone to Maryville Teachers College to Colorado University and I think to Capitol Hill High School in Oklahoma City. He gained a reputation in the basketball world as a result of him being in the finals for the high school championships back in those days in Chicago. But in any event, Iba said, "Sure, send him on down for a three-day tryout."

JE: That was in 1942?

BK: Yes.

JE: Tell us about your first meeting with him.

BK: (Chuckle) Well, the first thing he did was line us all up and tell us who he was. He was going to be the coach and the man with the nuggets. Anyhow, we worked out for three days.

JE: Isn't that when he told you how you were to address him?

BK: No, that comes later. Later on when I finally enrolled in school at Stillwater, he became serious in his direction and you didn't mess with serious.

JE: So you had to call him Mr. Iba?

BK: Oh yes. The first day we had formal practice we all lined up against the wall. There were maybe 45 or 40 of us. There were a lot of guys that thought that they were going to play basketball for Henry Iba, but they didn't realize who he was. So he came out in a sweat suit and long warm-up pants. He said, "My name is Henry P. Iba. You can call me Coach or you can call me Mr. Iba, but you can't call me anything else until you graduate from this university. That's what you are here for so don't fool around. We are here for serious business. In three weeks there won't be 15 of you left to play basketball at this university. Now, if you want to come back tomorrow, you are welcome, but that's the rules." And those were the rules.

JE: So the next day did half of them not show up?

BK: No, half of them did not show up.

JE: Was he a very intimidating person?

BK: No, he was a very fair person. You felt very safe with him. You felt that if you had a problem and you had the need for his counsel, you got it and you got it fairly and you got it straightforward. He was sincere in his respect for you and if you wanted to be that kind of individual who had to recognize what work was all about, you and Mr. Iba got along just great.

JE: He lines all of you up and you were actually 6'10" or 6'11" at that time?

BK: That's right. I probably weighed about 180 pounds.

JE: How did he talk to you? I mean did he think it was a wonderful things and he had a winner with you because you were 6'11"? Can you address that?

BK: That was interesting. At the end of the tryouts he called the individuals who were still left and he told them whether they had potential or whether they did not. I remember going into his office and sitting on the couch. He said, "Bob, I don't know whether you can play college basketball or not, but if you want to work on it and follow the rules and give me everything that you've got to work with, I'll help you get through college." I said, "That sounds like a good deal to me." He and I became warm friends and had good success.

JE: Did he work specifically with you then?

BK: We had a couple of guys that were graduate assistant coaches that were throwing the ball back and forth, correcting foot speeds and this type of thing, but he did occasionally. There were several occasions when we were trying to develop individual skills and he and shot just a post shot, which is a shot in the game where you've got your back to the basket

and you turn with either hand and you shoot the ball. Well, I was tall enough that I could shoot it up over the top of most people. One afternoon we shot between 200-300 shots finally he got it into my head what the hell I was supposed to be doing.

JE: Just you and Coach Iba?

BK: Yes. It was 6pm before we got out of the gymnasium that afternoon. He had spies all over town. If we had girlfriends he knew about it. If anybody was sneaking some green beer during the war years, why he even knew about that. The experience that we had with him going to New York on the train was great. We saw *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* and all of the good shows every year. We would go twice a year probably to New York City and we were in tall cotton.

JE: So you went that first year in 1942?

BK: Yes, we went to New York and we played in the New York Invitational Tournament. We got beat by DePauw University. They had a guy that was a pretty good basketball player named George Mikan.

JE: George Mikan was as notable as you were because he also stood 6'10" or perhaps 6'11".

BK: That's' right.

JE: He weighed 245 pounds. They said he moved awkwardly because of his frame and he wore thick glasses because he was nearsighted.

BK: He became pretty proficient.

JE: That became the first time then that—

BK: Wait a minute, we lost in the tournament and we had to play the University of Kentucky. We lost that game to them because one of the senators from Kentucky had one of our player's military leave cancelled. Floyd Burdette was a Captain in the Air Force and was also enrolled at OSU and was on the OSU basketball team. What I think that Happy Chandler did was that he wired the commander where Floyd Burdette was in charge of something, I don't know, but Floyd taught me a great deal about playing the game of basketball as an individual big man, because although Floyd said he was 6'6" he was really about 6'7" I guess. So when Floyd had to go back, that week to the extent that we didn't have the power on our side that we needed and so we got beat. The next year we went back when I was a junior and there was nobody to go back to the basketball team except me. We went and we won the National Championship with one returning player, me.

JE: Wow.

Chapter 5 – 5:10**George Mikan**

John Erling: Let me take you back. When you played DePauw then, that was the first time that you and George Mikan faced each other? That must have been a big, big deal?

Bob Kurland: Oh yes. Why on the front of Madison Square Garden, our pictures were up there. We were the biggest stuff in town. We packed the house in.

JE: Do you remember the points you scored and the ones he scored?

BK: I could look it up in my book back here but No, I can't remember what that one was. I don't remember any of the points, but in the succeeding games, they were pretty close basketball games.

JE: That game when you and Mikan played the first time, did you say you won that game or you lost it?

BK: We lost it. There's an old joke about our publicity director was along on the train. Mr. Iba and the other coaches and the players were over here (motioning). He always had a shot of bourbon particularly when he was upset. So Otis said to Mr. Iba, "Do you want a drink?" Mr. Iba said, "I sure as hell do." Otis goes and gets the drink and comes back and says, "Here you go Henry." Then he said, "Henry, you've got to cheer up. Look how many people you made happy by losing to DePauw." Mr. Iba said, "We've got to quit going around the country making people happy." (Laughter)

JE: But we should say as you had a good coach in Henry Iba, George Mikan met a young, 28-year-old rookie DePauw basketball coach by the name of Ray Meyer.

BK: Yes. He had many of the same personal characteristics in terms of being a man that you could take lessons from in what life was all about.

JE: It's interesting because you and George Mikan were born in the same year, 1924 and you both grew up to be the size you are. We'll come back to him in a little bit here, but in the final game of that year, 1942, Coach Iba just put you under the goal?

BK: It was the final scheduled game. You go in a tournament but you don't know if you're going to get to play or not, particularly if you get beat during the first game. But the last game, I was goaltending, which caused the rules to be changed in the game. We went from Stillwater down to Norman and they beat us. Mr. Iba was quite upset about that because we had just one week to get in shape to play them in Stillwater. Well, as a freshman I averaged about 5 points a game. But I only got to play about 5 minutes out of the game too, so it wasn't a real chance. Here I was this strange looking bird and we went to Norman and they beat us because they thought they had shiny pants or some damn thing—I don't know. Mr. Iba said, "I've got an idea. I'll get under the basket and knock

all of these shots down. Part of my regimen was that I had to jump between 20 and 30 minutes after every practice to strengthen my legs. But by the time the season was over I could put that much (from his elbow up) up above the basket and knock down the shots. So they put me here (motioning) and put two guys over here and two guys over here, and in a couple of evenings, we worked out some situations—the advantage that you gained by being able to catch the ball before it went into the basket and then throw it out to a guy on the side. We capitalized on that. So we became a pretty good offensive group, in addition to causing some people to collapse mentally. It's a mental thing. In sports, if you have to hesitate or think about the reaction that you must apply in order to get out of a situation, you are going to get beat. You can't do that. It must be automatic. When you see a guy with his hand up like this (motioning) and you are trying to shoot over it, you force him into a non-practice habit and you are going to beat him 90 percent of the time. It's psychological. Most sports you develop the same physical strength your competition has, but if you don't have to think about it, you can beat him. It's that simple.

JE: Well, with you under the goal, you beat OU 40-28.

BK: That's right. Then the rules committee next year went through conversations about whether or not goal tending should be outlawed. They closed out the season and they went through the next season goaltending. I myself recognized that it was poison for the game. The fans didn't like it. It wasn't a true test of physical effort or performance, so the rules committee changed it. George Mikan and I—they didn't follow the procedure that we did at Stillwater where we made it a part of our heritage. But George could goal tend—no doubt about that.

Chapter 6 – 4:11

Rule Changes

John Erling: Let me come back to Phog Allen again because he called you a name.

Bob Kurland: Oh yeah, glandular goon. He would get his opposition out of a practice habit by the same type of snotty ridicule that he was giving me. We didn't play him for a couple of years. When we finally did play him up in Lawrence, Mr. Iba wouldn't let me finish the game and we finished the game with four people.

JE: Why didn't he let you finish playing?

BK: Because we thought we got (inaudible) by the referees and by the fans—the whole attitude. Phog Allen just needed a lesson. And we got beat.

JE: So you played with just four people?

BK: Oh yeah, because he wouldn't let me play.

JE: Henry Iba wouldn't let you play?

BK: No, because my skills hadn't developed to the point where there was going to be nothing but embarrassment.

JE: Couldn't he have somebody else take your place?

BK: We didn't have any more guys on the bench.

JE: (Chuckle)

BK: But when we got them in the national tournament playoffs in Kansas City, we whipped their butt. I thought I was going to die before that happened. Phog Allen and I became good friends when we were on the Olympic team in 1952 in Helsinki. Phog Allen is a talented man.

JE: Then when you were at a game at a game at Oklahoma University, Coach Bruce Drake had a player take warm-up shots on stilts to embarrass you?

BK: Yes.

JE: Tell us about that.

BK: Drake had a guy, a football player...I've forgotten his name, but he was a good football player. He was 6'6" or so. They made him a couple of basketball shoes and painted them. The shoes added another 10 inches to him. So we went down to Norman to play and they trot out this guy. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye and I knew he was a phony. In the first place he wasn't on the roster. And in the second place, he looked pretty awkward on those boots. Anyway we went back into the locker room and Mr. Iba had watched the same practice that I did. He said, "Now Bob, go out there tonight and knock down three shots. Just three. No more. Let's play with what we got." I went out there and I knocked down three shots and from then on we had them. We gotcha. Because every time they shot the ball my hand was in their face. They just couldn't shoot. They couldn't hit the basket.

JE: So the no-blocked-shot rule hadn't been in effect yet?

BK: No.

JE: In that game you defeated OU by the big score of 14 to 11.

BK: I don't know whether it was that game or the next game, but they took a man named Sinclair. He was the head of the rose committee for the NCAA, which was the governing body for sports. They nailed this chair up to the backboard, or held it up there somehow and he sat up there and looked down.

JE: A rose committee person sat above the basket?

BK: That's right and he would look down to see if I was actually committing a foul by having my hand inside the cone of the basket. Now, they had decided all that in the previous year. It was in the Saturday Evening Post and so forth. So, it was cut the mustard time—so you either had to get in or get out, and so that's when they passed the rule and changed the game.

Later, when I was a senior, the rules were such that you didn't have to shoot the ball like you do today with the 35-second rule. You could dribble all night if you wanted to, and that's when they passed the 35-second rule and changed the rules again. OU came up and sat on the ball with the idea that they could get the score down to 10-9 or 11-12 or something like that and somebody would make a mistake and cause you to lose the ball and lose the game.

JE: 14-11. Did you as a ball player enjoy that kind of game?

BK: I will tell you why. I think that year I was very close to being the scoring leader in the nation. With OU having the ability to sit on the ball, it took away from that particular game maybe 10 points and that was enough for me to be the scoring leader in the United States, and I didn't like that. The next year we beat them pretty bad.

Chapter 7 – 4:50

No Dunking

John Erling: While you were playing, you actually worked for your scholarship?

Bob Kurland: Oh yes. Not manual labor, but I had to sweep the floor in the field house before practice and before every game. I lived in the field house. I could walk out one door and into another and be in my bedroom. I wasn't too far from the bar I will tell you. (Chuckle) Boy it was funny that Gladiator Goon was in a situation where the fans where the fans were in the stands by that time at 5 o'clock. They would yell, "Hey Bob! Hey Bob! I invented a two-headed oil mop. The net result was I swept the floor in half the time that the other guys did and I rather enjoyed it. I got to meet the people at the games and have fun.

JE: It sounds like you were good-natured about it. You could have thought, I'm playing basketball, I don't have to do this—but you did it, so...

BK: Oh, when it was for Mr. Iba, you sure as hell did it.

JE: You led the Aggies to the Final of the NIT—the National Invitational Tournament in 1944? Do you remember when you first dunked the ball?

BK: Well, either I red it, or I imagined it, or it happened, I don't know which, but the first recollection I had where there was any attention paid to the act was in Philadelphia against Temple University, but I can't remember whether it was when I was a sophomore or a junior.

JE: Did you dunk it in practice?

BK: Yeah, I could sure.

JE: Then all of a sudden in the game it just came naturally for you to dunk it I guess?

BK: Well, it might have been, but here again was a situation where dunking the ball—if you could throw the ball into the basket without getting into that circle that projects itself up from the rim of the basket, you were all right, but if you got your hands inside of it, it was a foul and it would cost you a shot. Now, the reason that it was outlawed in the first place, is that guys would throw the ball in there but they would hang on the rim and they would bend it. The rim gets bent and it affects the way the ball bounces on a shot and it's not the same as a rim that's not bent. So when the rim got bent, the janitor had to get a stepladder and go push it back up so we could play some more. Well, that's a bunch of crap. So they passed a rule that said you can't dunk the ball in any fashion, until they developed the spring-loaded rim that knocks itself down and back. Then you could dunk the ball and you didn't have to have the janitor and the ladder. (Chuckle) There was an evolution over time that made sense. People like to see that ball get dunked. They thought it was big stuff. My God today, what they can do it marvelous.

JE: They widened the lane to the basket from six feet to 12 feet.

BK: Yes. That was another improvement I thought too.

JE: Were some of these changes because of you?

BK: It was probably partially my effort, but I can think of probably eight to 10 guys my height who could do the same thing I could, but I don't think they worked quite as hard as I did.

JE: There weren't many—I mean there were some who were tall, but you were easily the tallest person.

BK: Oh not necessarily. There was a guy named George (inaudible) who I think was my size. Then there were several guys who were 7'4", but they never developed the skills and the stamina to last under difficult circumstances.

JE: In the NCAA Championships in 1945 and 1946, you scored 22 points in a 49-45 win over New York University in 1945 in the championship.

BK: That's right.

JE: Was that a hard-fought game?

BK: It was a well-played game—let's put it that way. But we had them outmanned. Their center was a man named Dolph Schayes who was my dear friend. He was just 17 years old and had just got out of high school. I never will forget somebody said to him, "well, what was it like to play against this guy?" Dolph was a Jewish guy and a nice man. He said, "He's so big! He's so big!" (Chuckle)

JE: Then you scored 23 points in a 43-40 victory over North Carolina in the 1946 title game.

BK: Yes.

JE: Do you have any thoughts about that game that you might still remember?

BK: North Carolina had a good basketball team. They had some guys that had been in the service. Bones McKinney was their center. He started on a campaign to get me nervous

about the game. He was 25 years old. He told these newspaper reporters, “Well, he can’t play very well.” (Talking about Bob) Well, he didn’t play very well. (Chuckle) Somebody asked me after the game how it was to play against Bones McKinney and I said, “He made a lot of noise talking.” (Laughter)

Chapter 8 – 5:35

No Pro

John Erling: And then after winning the NCAA title in 1946, Oklahoma A&M played NIT Champion DePaul in a Red Cross benefit game.

Bob Kurland: That’s right and we raised \$50,000.

JE: Wow. And that game was splayed where?

BK: It was played in Madison Square Garden on 8th Avenue.

JE: And you were again opposed by George Mikan?

BK: That’s right.

JE: Tell us about that game. You won that 52–44.

BK: I fouled out, which was embarrassing. The game started out and George and I, we each had three fouls. As I recall, there may have been just four fouls allowed before you got tossed out of the game. The second half started and George got his fourth or fifth foul, I’ve forgotten which, then all I had to do was stay out of trouble. So as a result, rather than having to play an aggressive offensive game, I backed off and rebounded and let my other guys cut the mustard.

JE: Did you and George talk a little bit or?

BK: George and I were not intimate friends, but over the years we became good friends and I was sorry that he had to go the way that he did—diabetes is a tough deal.

JE: He died, and in fact he had to have one of his legs amputated.

BK: That’s right.

JE: You were named All-American three years in a row? In 1946 you won the Helms Foundation Award as the nation’s most outstanding player.

BK: Yes.

JE: You got lots of national attention in magazines and newspapers—it wasn’t just in Oklahoma—the nation knew about you.

BK: Yes they did. The (inaudible) was mine because George Mikan and I probably had offers—you’ve got to remember that there was no TV. There was no cross the nation communication where sportswriters were written up in New York and then published

in San Francisco. There were no big arenas and there weren't that many investors who would put money into untested sports without some kind of guarantee of success, when they could go start a new business or fill some void and make money. So people came to George and me and others in the basketball world at the time and said, "Here's our deal." George Mikan and I were probably the two hardest solicited players in the country at the time. I think George got between \$15,000 and \$17,000 from the Chicago Gears. But somebody told me one time that after the season was over when George had played for the Chicago Gears, George had to sue them to get the money.

JE: Why didn't you turn pro?

BK: Because here you are in college—supposedly you are studying some discipline that's going to be your life's work. The education that you get in sports, playing as much basketball as many hours as we did at Oklahoma State, for me who was maybe just a little bit above an average student to study descriptive geometry, four or five hours of chemistry and taking maybe as many as 16 hours with tough subjects, and you would practice three hours a day and you never went home for Christmas or the holidays like New Year's. I recognized when I was sophomore that for me to be an engineer was going to take either more time out of my schedule, which was already short, or it would extend my stay in college, which Coach Iba and I had never discussed and I don't think he would have done it. He may have done it on the basis of me being an assistant coach or something like that, but I needed to put more into my field of study if that was going to be my profession. So what did I wind up with? Not a good education, not a foundation that was solid where you could go trade on, where you could walk in and put a presentation on the table of a recruiter and he would tell the boss, "I've got a smart guy down here that wants to work for us." So it became a dilemma what I was going to do. On the other hand, I was sitting in a state that I liked and I learned to like the people. Phillips Petroleum Company was on the cusp, along with Caterpillar Tractor Company, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, 20th Century Fox, San Francisco, San Diego—there was already a professional or semi-professional basketball league going, supported by corporations that made money. What happened? Some smart guy said if we can get these cities to give us some money we'll build a big basketball court and we'll have a team. That's great, except that what you got was a one-year contract. Bobby ain't the strongest guy in the world...and if he throws a knee out, then what's he got? He's got no education. He's got no money because he blew it on a car. He would be starting from scratch with nothing but a magazine with *Saturday Evening Post*, which ain't worth a damn for somebody that wants to make money. I mean the owners, who is going to invest in a deal like that with a chance of failure? Then television came in, and I didn't it, anymore than I foresaw Google, but

until television came in and you had communication across the country, until you had a better airline system and you could go from place to place, or you had your own airplane, it was a dangerous thing to make a bad decision.

Chapter 9 – 5:05

Frank Phillips

John Erling: But then you were recruited for the Phillips Petroleum Company.

Bob Kurland: Yes.

JE: Tell us about your meeting with the Phillips people, because Phillips had a club team.

BK: There was the National Industrial League, which was just as much of a league as the NBA or anybody else. They were under the auspices of the AAU though. Later, when they changed all of that and the hierarchy of the pros came into play and the industrial firms could see that they were going to have a problem. It cost money to have a basketball team. The other thing was, there was I think a plot on the part of the NBA to pay the sportswriters not to be detrimental to the name of Phillips and these other companies because these other companies weren't guys that just got off the turnip truck, but somehow, they didn't appear in the newspaper or on the sports page—you couldn't find Phillips' name on the sports page anymore. Well, when you can't do that and you can't get people to come to your small arena, or the good players...we still could get some players for AAU ball, but there were fewer and fewer and there were many of them that when they needed the players to start the NBA they took them. They took them away from the AAU people and filled up the gaps. So the whole thing went to hell in a hand basket and then the party was over.

JE: So you were brought to Phillips—tell us about your initial meeting with Phillips.

BK: Oh, okay. They sent the company airplane over to Stillwater, which was 90 miles away from the headquarters of Phillips Petroleum Company. Phillips Petroleum Company had a basketball team that started as a town team playing Ponca City or Tulsa, which was 40 miles away. In a little isolated town like Bartlesville, people like to come to something. They like to see these guys play on a basketball team. Conoco had a team and Henry Levitt in Wichita, Kansas had a team that almost won the national championship. Some of the players went to the Olympics from that team in 1936.

JE: So you flew up to Bartlesville?

BK: Yes, they flew Mr. Iba and me. The coach of the Phillips team was a guy named Bud Browning who graduated from OU. But, we had an appointment to see K.S. Adams, Kenneth Stanley Adams. He was the president of Phillips.

JE: Didn't he go by Boots Adams?

BK: Oh yes. His son is the multimillionaire that owns the football team out of Houston. So we went up to Boots' office and when we walked in, he looked better than you John. His hair was perfect. He had a moustache and a big cigar and a \$500 suit. Anyway, they started around the room and they had Frank Stradley who was the treasurer of the company, Bud Browning and Mr. Iba and myself. We were sitting around and they were telling about the accolades of Mr. Iba and Mr. Kurland and Mr. Browning I guess. The door to Mr. Adams' office opens and in walks a guy in a brown suit, smoking a cigar and he had a cane. He didn't sit down for a little bit...Boots Adams starts in and he said, "Now Mr. Phillips, this is Mr. Henry Iba..." Mr. Phillips interrupts and he says, "Yes, I know Mr. Iba." Mr. Adams says, "And this young man is Bob Kurland." And Mr. Phillips says, "So what?" It didn't mean a damn to him because he was in the oil business. He wasn't in the basketball business. He was happy that we were happy, but he really didn't get his nose in it.

JE: You are talking about Frank Phillips?

BK: Yes, Frank Phillips himself.

JE: Did you meet up with him at any other time?

BK: Oh yes, one time I was in Saint Louis stacking oil in a warehouse. Mr. Phillips took good care of his business because he always had a little notebook and wrote down notes on things he saw and wanted to change. I was out in the warehouse and it was hotter than heck and I was stacking this oil up. As the years went by he got to calling me "Big Boy". So he walked out in the warehouse and there I was with no shirt on, sweating bullets. He said, "Big Boy, what are you doing here?" I said, "I am trying to learn this damn oil business Mr. Phillips." He said, "You picked a poor place to learn it." (Laughter)

JE: Was he an intimidating person?

BK: No, he was not. He was a guy that when he was serious he was dead serious and you had better not fool with him. But he liked to have a good time with the girls. He had a nip or two all the time. He enjoyed life.

JE: And people respected him for what he had done with this company.

BK: They hired Barnum & Bailey to bring their circus to town and for three days every kid in town got to go to the circus and had a dollar to spend. The people in Bartlesville liked him and he was no fool when it came to dealing with people.

JE: Did Frank also come out to your basketball games?

BK: Oh yes.

JE: You worked for Phillips for how many years?

BK: 40 years.

JE: And you played basketball how many years for them?

BK: Six years for their team.

Chapter 10 – 10:40**Olympics**

John Erling: Let's jump to the Olympics. In 1948 and 1952 you played in the Olympics. Let's talk about the 1948 London Summer Games. As a background to this, let me just say that there were still no world championships and with WWII intervening, there had been very little international competition since the 1936 Olympics. Czechoslovakia had won the European 1946 championships. The 1947 European champion had been the Soviet Union, but they didn't participate in the 1948 Olympics, so by default Americans were still considered the heavy favorites. The bulk of the U.S. team came from, and you can help me with this, the University of Kentucky. They had won the NCAA Championship in 1948 and would repeat that in 1949, so then you had players from several club teams?

Bob Kurland: Yes, there was a guy named Vince Boryla and Jackie Robinson.

JE: What about Lou Beck?

BK: Lou Beck was a Phillips man.

JE: These were players that were on the Olympic team, Vince Boryla?

BK: Vince Boryla was from Notre Dame.

JE: Gordon Carpenter?

BK: He was a Phillips man.

JE: Alec Rosa?

BK: He was Kentucky senator.

JE: Wallace Jones?

BK: He was a Kentucky man.

JE: Ray Lump?

BK: He was from New York University.

JE: R.C. Pitts?

BK: He was from Arkansas University.

JE: Jesse Renick?

BK: He was from Oklahoma State.

JE: You mentioned Jack Robinson and Kenny Rollins, and that was the make up of the team. In the preliminary rounds, you had a close game narrowly defeating Argentina 59–57.

BK: Yes and there is an interesting story there. There was a guy named Barksdale who was a black man. Don Barksdale was probably as guilty as anybody of opening up the doors for black players in basketball.

JE: He was the first black man to compete in Olympic basketball.

BK: That's right. He was a gentleman in every regard. It was funny when we went over to play an exhibition game...we had to raise our own money in 1948 to go to the Olympics. The basketball team put on individual games. There weren't any guys putting up a million bucks and hauling their fat butts over there on an airplane.

JE: You went over there by ship.

BK: Yes on the U.S.S. American. We were down 12 or 13 points maybe, and Barksdale, well, Browning wasn't going to play him that day. He stuck him in the game and Barksdale must have scored 12 or 14 points by himself and beat Argentina or we would have been a disgrace. It would have been terrible, but it didn't work that way. Browning was the head coach and Bruce Drake was the assistant coach because he was a friend of Browning's. But, the Russians didn't come because they knew we were going to lose...and if we thought we were going to lose we wouldn't have gone either.

JE: That game then, 59-57 with Argentina—did that go right down to the last minute?

BK: Oh yes sir.

JE: Then in the final in 1948 you played France and that was a wipeout 65-21.

BK: Yes.

JE: Then you had a gold medal and you became the first player then to win two gold medals because you went on to play in the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Summer Games.

BK: That's right.

JE: Was there anything memorable other than that about the 1948 Olympics?

BK: The games themselves impressed me, but nobody came. There wasn't much enthusiasm from the crowds to come watch the basketball teams play. One of the things that impressed me the most was when we were in Wembley Stadium and I looked out into the field and there were 3,500 to 5,000 players and participants. We had just gone through the damn war. The bomb craters were still in England. If you flew over there you could still see the holes in the ground. But on that day, the music was wonderful and the crowd was big and enthusiastic and well mannered. Since 1941 we had been through hell in the United States. People had put up with a lot and they were tired. I was dumb enough to believe that you could conquer the world if you just had friends. Friends are hard to come by when there is a different political group in power. We had the Russians and they were starting to fight the Cold War. We had people who were not democratic thinking who sent teams and they were handsome people and great competitors. They wanted to change things so people were happier and more successful. I didn't think it was going to last and it sure hasn't.

JE: Then it's back to work and we come up to 1952 and the Helsinki Summer Games. American dominance was also threatened by the presence of the Soviet Union. We should say that in the 1950s there was this fear of communism.

BK: Oh yeah. We had separate camps and separate sleeping quarters. They had cameras and tape recorders and note pads. They were determined to come back and win the Olympics the next time and they sure as hell tried. (Chuckle)

JE: They compete for the first time in 1952. They had been a pretty good team. They had been European champions in 1947 and 1951, though they did not compete in 1949, when the title was oddly won by Egypt. But your team, made up then of seven players from the NCAA Champions, the University of Kansas?

BK: Right.

JE: And then five players from the Peoria Caterpillar team, which won the final U.S. Trials?

BK: Yes.

JE: And then there were just two players from the Phillips Petroleum team. Let me go through these names and you can comment on them as well. Charles Hogue?

BK: He was a great guy—a football player.

JE: Bill Hoagland?

BK: If there was a man on earth that I loved, he is that. He is a great fellow.

JE: Dean Kelley?

BK: He worked for Caterpillar Tractor Company

JE: Bob Kenney?

BK: He was a banker in Kansas.

JE: Clyde Lovellette.

BK: He was 6'9". He was a good post player and could shoot off the floor pretty well. He was a little boy though in terms of girls and good time and notoriety and all of that. He had promised to come play for Phillips Petroleum Company before he graduated from college. The pros thought they were going to get Lovellette the first year and he fooled them and he didn't go.

JE: He ended up with the Minneapolis Lakers.

BK: Yes and he was a pretty good player by that time. He had reformed and had his ass kicked a couple of times and he found out what it was all about.

JE: And he and George Mikan were on the team at the same time?

BK: That's right.

JE: Wayne Glasgow?

BK: Yes.

JE: Frank McCabe?

BK: Yes. He was the center from the Caterpillar Tractor Company.

JE: Dan Pippen?

BK: Yes, he was from the University of Missouri. The next summer after the games were over he hanged himself.

JE: Howie Williams?

BK: He was from Caterpillar Tractor Company.

JE: Then you had Ron Bontemps?

BK: He was from the Caterpillar Tractor Company.

JE: So the starting five players—do you remember them?

BK: It would have been some of them from Caterpillar Tractor because Warren Womble was the head coach and I doubt seriously that he would have started anybody except his five players.

JE: Yes.

BK: They were the champions so they deserved it.

JE: So you come into the semifinals and you, the United States team play the Soviet Union team and you easily did away with them 86-58.

BK: Yes.

JE: Tell us about that and your role in that game.

BK: The idea was that the Soviets were going to outrun us, and out-strength us and out-rough us, but it wasn't that kind of game because we could play that one. It was the next game that after they lost that they really came loaded for bear and they were going to bust our gut playing physically. It was a rough affair. It was really a rough game.

JE: So in that second game then, the score at halftime was 17-15?

BK: That's right.

JE: It was a stalling game obviously.

BK: Oh yes. They had a big center. He was about 6'7". I never will forget his name, Otar Korkia. He was an unpolished player. Had he been 10 years younger he would have been a great threat, but he had gotten old and they had relied on those older guys to be the tough guys in the physical contact games.

JE: So you guys started knocking each other around?

BK: (Chuckle) Oh yeah, a little bit.

JE: How about fouls?

BK: Well, they couldn't call them all that particular day I'll tell you that. They missed a few.

JE: However in the end you pulled away to win by a score of 36-25?

BK: That's right. It could have gone either way.

JE: Oh really?

BK: Yes, up until the last five minutes anyway.

JE: The 1952 Olympics, that was a big time for you and an emotional time for you. Can you tell us about that?

BK: Oh yeah. They came and asked if I would like to carry the flag at the closing ceremonies. I thought that, as they did in the Wembley Stadium, they carried it inside the stadium and people attended it out of courtesy and credit to the players and enjoyment of the fans.

But anyway, I said yes. Well, the Fins as you'll recall were fighting the Russians in 1937, but the Fins had won the right to have the Olympics in 1940. They started to build a stadium and they had it about half done. When the new stadium was built, the world had changed and there was more population and more people were going to come to the Olympics and they needed a bigger stadium. So they had the ceremony as I recall in part of the old stadium just at sundown. A young lady accompanied me and we walked ahead of a small American delegation as I recall around the track inside. Well, as you walk past the stands, which were very close to the track, there were people dabbing their eyes and crying and so forth. The Fins really tore your heart out in the sense that they had pledged themselves to accomplish this and they did it. It was a peaceful situation and the Russians were there.

JE: But there was a spirit of camaraderie?

BK: Oh yes, oh yes.

JE: Even though countries were upset with each other, these team players—

BK: Those guys were not dummies. They recognized that they were being bamboozled.

JE: Yes.

BK: It really bothered me to think that there were still people that didn't like one another in the world, who were taught to think badly about other people.

JE: You were the oldest participant for the United States—27 years and 204 days.

BK: Yes, that's probably right.

Chapter 11 – 3:35

58 Points – Iba

John Erling: Is there any one game that stands out in your career as being most memorable?

Bob Kurland: Yes.

JE: Which one?

BK: The last game I played in college. It was the climax of a wonderful time. It was against Ed Macauley at Saint Louis University who was a freshman. He was quite good and about 6'8", but not big enough to tackle a guy 7' tall, but he did at Stillwater this night. Mr. Iba for some reason, didn't exactly tell me "don't shoot everything you can get up", but he said "go get 'em" and that was enough for me and I scored 58 points that night. That record at Stillwater as the individual scoring record per game, to the best of my knowledge, I was trying to check on it the other day, stood for 30 years. I was more proud of that particular deal and that particular night...

JE: So Mr. Iba must have been terribly excited for you.

BK: He was because, and I believe this, you don't win with stars, you win a team game with a team. And in college, we had a team. We weren't that close and intimate with one another in terms of families, because several of the guys had children by that time, but as a team there was a lot of selflessness, completely unselfish and we were a great basketball team. We had a sense of humor. Somebody would screw up and we would see the humor in the situation rather than the (opportunity for) criticism. It was just a great time.

JE: But that last game, Mr. Iba allowed you to be the star?

BK: Yes.

JE: When a game wasn't going right and so forth, was his tactic to yell and to scream—what was he like?

BK: He was a man whose voice was well heard in the circle that surrounded him on the basketball court, but he didn't particularly care to have his comments or strategy so to speak reflected onto the stands. So he would chew you ass out, but he would never demean you or make you feel cheap. He would give you a lesson about the mistake that you made when you made it, which was a great help. And he believed that you were doing your best or you wouldn't be out there. There was a relationship there where we knew that he was not trying to ride in on our backs or get a raise as a basketball coach. We knew what his purpose in life was, who he was and how he took care of some of us who needed a little help and guidance or a kick in the butt. Joe Halbert was my roommate. He was about 6'8" maybe. I was in a bad mood and I hit Joe right in the mouth with my elbow and I hit him deliberately. He stopped the practice and said, "What the hell do you think you are doing?" I knew I was in for it and for 10 minutes probably he berated me and put me this far down in the crack in that basketball court floor. Oh my God. You never at got mad at him, because you knew he was right.

JE: So you must have taken a lot of lessons learned from Mr. Iba through the rest of your life.

BK: I think so, yes.

Chapter 12 – 4:18

Not 7 Feet

John Erling: You know, when they billed you and George Mikan as seven footers, were you really seven feet tall?

Bob Kurland: Well, our publicity director invented the idea of Bob Kurland "Foothills Kurland" from the hills of Missouri. I wasn't any closer to the hills of Missouri than I was to the hills of China.

JE: So Otis Wile was the sports information director at OSU?

BK: Yes.

JE: He would kind of create images of the team?

BK: Oh yes.

JE: So did he bill you as a seven-footer?

BK: Oh yes.

JE: But truth be known?

BK: Who knows the truth?

JE: (Laughter) So then he gave you the nickname Bob “Foothills” Kurland?

BK: That’s right.

JE: And as you said, you weren’t ever near the foothills of anything. Mikan wasn’t seven-feet tall either?

BK: No, he was about six feet eleven inches. When I wasn’t this slumped over I was taller than Mikan.

JE: You were named to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 1961. That had to be a special time for you?

BK: It was a special day with a small certificate.

JE: (Chuckle)

BK: It was a little bitty one. Now they have a big kind of thing.

JE: But it’s nice as you reflect on your life and your career to know that you are in the basketball Hall of Fame.

BK: It was no small accomplishment really. There is a new group in Kansas City called the College Hall of Fame. I haven’t figured out how to crack that one yet.

JE: In looking back at what you went through as a tall man, how do you reflect on your life and how you were able to overcome something that you didn’t want? You didn’t want to be a big man because you stood out.

BK: Well, I have been very sick here in the last three months. I’ve thought about the way I ran my life. I enjoyed being around people and being part of a team. When I worked for Phillips, the projects that I worked on and the people I worked with, I did my very best to try and give credit where credit was due and to build them so that he had opportunity for success without my help after so long. That formula worked pretty well except that I didn’t really understand something which I regret, not having a clear understanding and objective and the training to meet a specific target out here (motioning) in your career development. In not only the first stage, but the second and third and fourth stage, if you can get some idea of what you have to do and how to do it and what the tricks of the trade are in terms of dealing with people, motivating people and getting their support—and you are a fool if you think that you don’t need help. I didn’t do that. Fortunately, I

had a few people that took some interest in me and gave me some suggestions. When I first came to Bartlesville, they had a dinner a week or two after I got here. They were having a black-tie deal for some visitors that were coming from Arabia or someplace. They wanted to show me off and I didn't have a suit of clothes. I never had had a suit. Had I been a better planner, I probably could have achieved a better station and could have contributed more to Phillips Petroleum Company. But they could not have given me more opportunities to prove myself than the things that I got mixed up in. I was in some very interesting things that as I look back on them now you begin to understand why Phillips Petroleum Company almost got taken over by Boone Pickens and Carl Icahn. They didn't know where they wanted to go. They had a pot full of money and they weren't using it to the best interest of the stockholders. Had they put that money to work in the right place and managed it properly, Boone Pickens and Icahn wouldn't have had a chance and Phillips would have been down the road a hell of a lot better off than they were. But it's difficult with your own life to decide where you want to go and how you want to do it and who you want to take with you.

JE: Yes.

Chapter 13 – 3:17

Basketball Today

John Erling: Is basketball a better sport today than it was back when you played it?

Bob Kurland: I saw basketball was a game that required perfection in some of the things that you would do. Today it's become a showplace for strong horses (chuckle). I don't like all of the shenanigans that go with it. But I love to see somebody catch it and go down the backside and having a clean shot at the basket. It's a little bit rough for me today.

JE: What is your advice for young athletes in college?

BK: A black lady stopped me one day up in Springfield, Massachusetts. She said, "Have you got a minute?" I said, "Sure." She said, "My son is 16 years old and all he wants to do is play basketball. I know he's got to go to school and he is not going to school. What am I going to do about that?" I said, "Ma'am, I don't know. I had the same problem to some degree with one of the boys that wanted to play football and almost broke his arm when they cut him off the team. I'd have to side with you, but I don't know what to tell you. If I was to tell you to tell him to study, that won't cut it." He's got to be motivated somehow to recognize that with playing basketball the odds of him being successful financially or physically even, are extremely remote.

JE: When you had so much national attention brought to you, *The New York Times* would write about you, and Chicago papers and magazines like LIFE and *Saturday Evening Post*, do you recall national celebrities that would either come to a game or that you had an opportunity to meet?

BK: Tom Harmon is one.

JE: Tom Harmon was a great football player.

BK: Frank Stranahan was another one. He won the U.S. Open for the amateur title. His dad was chairman of the board for Champion Spark Plug Company. There were guys like Jonny Lujack and Roscoe Turner that we would get to shake hands with and visit with. The prettiest girl I ever saw was Maureen O'Hara. Oh my God.

JE: And you met her?

BK: Oh yes. We used to go to 20th Century Fox Studios every time we went to Los Angeles. On our honeymoon, my wife and I were in Moab, Utah and they were making a movie called *Westward the Women* with Robert Taylor. The two girls that were driving the wagon were from Pawhuska, Oklahoma and my wife knew them. They said, "Come on up on the mesa tomorrow. Robert Taylor is going to be there and you will get to meet him." So we stayed overnight and the next day we piled into our little Ford. We go up the hill and everybody was standing around waiting for him. Finally he got there by plane and he came up and he was a little bitty guy. He was busy and rightfully so because that was his work. The girl said to him, "This is Bob Kurland and he is a basketball player." Robert Taylor said, "So what?" (Laughter) So, there are good and great people and good and great pains in the ass. (Laughter)

Chapter 14 – 6:37

Final Thoughts

John Erling: How would you like to be remembered?

Bob Kurland: I don't know really.

JE: The last time we talked, you mentioned something about the fact that you were able to take something that was really a burden to you, your height, and turn it into something good for your life?

BK: That's right.

JE: Because you would never have come to the attention of Phillips Petroleum if it wasn't for your basketball prowess.

BK: Oh sure, that's right.

JE: So you had a long 40-year career with Phillips because of your height.

BK: Once that door was open, I could move around in the company pretty well.

JE: So you did a great job of overcoming something that you wished you didn't have?

BK: That's right. Most of us have got that. I think I got my inspiration for sticktuitiveness for trying to complete a project from my father. I'll tell you the kind of guy he was. He was in his 60s and I went home to Saint Louis. He said, "Come on down to the basement I want to show you something." So we went downstairs to the basement and there were pipes rigged over here (motioning) and water running down a trough here. He says, "I want to show you what I can do with this machine I made. I think it's close to perpetual motion." I didn't know whether he was kidding me, or what the hell he was doing, but he was dead serious about it. But sure enough he could pump a gallon of water in this end and 9/10s of the gallon would come out the other end. It was almost dry with just a little moisture on it. He said, "What do you think of that?" I said, "Dad, I don't think it will sell." He was that kind of guy. He was a pretty good artist. He would just go outside with a piece of paper and start drawing things. He would draw people.

JE: We should mention your wife Barbara who is here in the home. How long have you been married?

BK: It will be 60 years this May 5th.

JE: And how many children do you have?

BK: Four.

JE: None of them grew to be as tall as you though?

BK: Well the boys did, one of them is 6'7" and the other one is 6'5".

JE: Okay.

BK: Let's talk about civic duties.

JE: Okay.

BK: When I was in college I was the president of the Student Senate for two years. They would good years because the war was over and the soldiers all came home and got a girlfriend and had children and went to the dances. I was a good politician because I didn't do a damn thing—I was worse than the government today. (Chuckle) But we did some things in terms of policies and so forth, so that was my first kick at politics. Then Bud Wilkinson called me up and wanted me to be the spokesperson for the northeast corner of the state, but we didn't do well because he got beat.

JE: What kind of a person was Bud Wilkinson?

BK: He was a nice gentleman.

JE: Were you around him much?

BK: Not that much, but he was a patient guy and a good listener and a bright man. I liked Bud Wilkinson. It's funny because when I first came to Stillwater, some guys came up to

me. They were part of some political organization with some crazy name. It was a secret organization. I said, "I don't want anything to do with you guys." (Chuckle) Oh, this is interesting. Think about this now...you are a junior or a senior and you take an ROTC at OSU for four years now. Well, the war starts and sure as heck you are going to be drafted because you've got striped on you and you are now going to be commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. So you go off to war. Now, back in the back row of this brigade or whatever it was, is a big tall guy and he's got a flag on a stick—they call him a guidon bearer. He's also got a uniform on and the sleeves are too short and his pants are short and they are tight and the coat is too tight under the arms. I have a picture of it with an Indian boy named Winston Rose that I lent \$5 to and never saw the \$5 again. But anyway, Winston was a big hit too. He was a basketball player and he had the same kind of suit on. Anyway, time goes by and you come back to school because you are too tall. You can't go in the Army because you are 6'6" and they won't take you. So you go back down to Pop Jones who was the keeper of the uniform and you say, "I've got to have a different uniform." He said, "That's the only one we've got Bob and that's the only one you've got to get." Well, the guidon bearer was very upset. He goes back and what he does is he sets the route step for the company. Now the route step can be that long (motioning) or it can be that long (motioning) depending on what the guidon bearer and the way he wants to have it. Well, I go back and these total sons of bitches are back in the back and they can't keep up with a route step like that without running. (Chuckle) Every time we went on parade or as far as a march was concerned, I worked their butts off by talking those big long steps. (Laughter) Now, all of the guys that were juniors and seniors went to war. The next year they were bringing in a bunch of 4Fs that weren't going to be drafted in the first place, but the law says that as long as ROTC wants to be on a college campus that you had to take them. You had to give them two years of training and military practice. Well, who is going to be the cadet colonel for the battalion over there? This seven-foot guy who is mad as hell at having to go to ROTC anyway, although I did learn more about sex there than any other place! (Chuckle) I wound up as the Cadet Colonel for the whole damn university over there. I put in my political work early in the game.

JE: Yep.

BK: So then time goes by and speaking of the political era, they came to me after I went back to Bartlesville. I was 55 years old or so. They said, "We want you to run for City Commissioner. I said, "Okay." So then I am a city commissioner. We elect the mayor and then we have to have a vice mayor and I was the vice mayor of Bartlesville for six years. (Chuckle). So, I had friends who were kind enough to even appoint me.

JE: I want to thank you Bob for giving us your time.

BK: You are quite welcome.

Chapter 15 – 0:33**Conclusion**

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