

## Driven Scholar

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*Athlete Paid a Price to Meet Demands - Part 2 of 6*

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The Ivy League backdrop for Bill Bradley's renown, and his chapel deacon's deportment off the court, were beguiling images that obscured the intensity of his drive. There was nothing humble or polite about Bradley's will to win.

By his own account and scores of others, he allowed himself scant satisfaction in victory, brooded painfully in defeat and did not scruple much – within, or mostly within, the rules – about finding advantage. Meeting his own expectations, and grappling with still higher ones spawned by success, channeled Bradley into an impossibly demanding role as godly scholar-athlete. Playing it brought accomplishments and acclaim, but it took a toll that Bradley would not understand for years.

Bradley was so far superior to his teammates in freshman basketball that his coach, Eddie Donovan, chose lineups by saying, "You, you, you, you and Bradley." On the four occasions when the team lost a game, roommate and teammate Bill Kingston said, "he would be despondent for a long time." Donovan recalled how Bradley approached him in the front seat after their first loss, as the bus trekked home, complaining that his teammates were " 'all back there laughing and enjoying themselves. We lost the game!' I told him, 'They're trying to forget it.' He just couldn't understand."

Nothing, including friendship, slowed Bradley's charge. Tom Haley, his childhood pal and sidekick, once had a point of pride in his superior tennis game. Bradley went off and drilled until he perfected a booming serve. "All of a sudden I couldn't return him anymore," Haley said, "and I thought, 'Why is he doing this? Why does he have to win at everything?' " When coach Arvel Popp back home in Crystal City, Mo., ordered Bradley into the boxing ring with his good friend, David McFarland, Bradley punched McFarland unconscious. In a pickup game of basketball, he elbowed another friend, John Schwent, so hard that Schwent carried a pea-size knot in his lip for most of the next 20 years. "He was rough, and he liked the roughness," Schwent said.

Bradley looked down on players who lacked "killer instinct," the only weakness he ascribed to his childhood hero, Wilt Chamberlain. He dismissed any accomplishment short of triumph, weeping bitterly when his tiny high school placed second to the state's largest basketball factory in the 1961 Missouri championship. When in his junior year Princeton was one of the final 16 teams in the NCAA tournament, a distinction beyond sensible ambition in the Ivy League, teammate Rick Wright said, "I was just happy to be there. It was pretty amazing. He just wanted to do better."

Always, he channeled anger into strength. In the next year's Eastern finals, he watched in quiet outrage as top-ranked Providence defeated rival St. Joseph's in the next-to-last round – and proceeded to cut down the nets in the traditional championship celebration. "It was declaring victory in the Eastern regional before we even played the game!" said Bradley's teammate, Gary Walters. Then Providence player Dexter Westbrook was quoted as saying, "Bradley is overrated." The next day, March 13, 1965, Princeton trampled Providence, 109-69. Bradley's 41 points exceeded the margin of victory by one.

Princeton made it to the NCAA semifinals that year. Bradley set an all-time record for points in a tournament game – surpassing Oscar Robertson's 56 by a bucket – and was named most valuable player. But

Princeton lost to Michigan, finishing third. When the team returned to campus on March 22, Bradley was crestfallen. He climbed atop the team bus to reproach a cheering crowd. “Last Sunday we all stood up on this same bus and did some pretty big talking,” Bradley said, according to the next day’s *Daily Princetonian*. “We didn’t produce.”

In pursuit of the winning edge, Bradley enjoyed infuriating opponents for tactical effect. Schwent, a high school teammate, recalled Bradley’s habit of yanking the hair on opposing players’ legs. “They’d get so mad, and he’d laugh,” he said. The laugh, in turn, would provoke a foul.

Bradley also devised a humiliating trick play with his friend Haley, whose job as guard included tossing the in-bound pass. “The ref would give me the ball, so the [rules say the] ball’s in play,” Haley said. “Then he’d say, ‘Wait, Tom, let me bring in the ball,’ and he’d start walking toward me. They’d back off him, and he’d get two free points. One team we pulled that on twice.”

In summer pickup games with rookies from the National Basketball Association’s St. Louis Hawks, Bradley learned pro moves forbidden under collegiate rules – and taught himself how to pull them when referees weren’t looking. An admiring teammate, Al Kaemmerlen, said Bradley used his empty hand for leverage to spin around a defender while driving the ball, “which they absolutely didn’t allow in college.”

University of Pennsylvania coach Jack McCloskey complained to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1965 that Bradley regularly got away with stepping under a defender after faking him into a jump, drawing a two-shot foul. “Looking at the films, it’s almost ridiculous,” McCloskey said. “It should be an offensive foul.” In the pros, *New York* magazine described how the swifter *Houston Rocket* (and *Baltimore Bullet*) Jack Marin spent every game against the Knicks “trying to escape Bradley’s vise-like hold on his shorts.” In an interview 26 years later, Marin had yet to forgive Bradley entirely: “He was one of the dirtiest players I ever played against. He held and pushed and tugged. It was irritating.”

Gary Walters, now Princeton’s athletic director, frowned at Marin’s choice of adjective, preferring “Darwinistic.” “Basketball is a contact sport,” Walters said. “He was never a goody-two-shoes. If Bill had been a pitcher, he would have thrown brushback pitches. That’s the game within the game.”

Willis Reed, who won two NBA titles with Bradley, said he “was always the guy who wanted to do things that got guys pissed off.” In the deciding seventh game against Boston for the Eastern Conference title of 1973, Bradley came out to half-court at the coin toss and stiff-armed Celtic Don Nelson in the chest.

“Bill starts pushing and shoving,” Reed recalled, laughing. “Now Don Nelson is bigger than him, stronger than him, and they’re acting like they have to fight. After the game I said to Bill, ‘What the hell was going on?’ He said, ‘I was just playing games with Nellie, trying to break his concentration a little.’ He did a good job. I actually thought he was getting ready to fight.”

The Knicks won the game. That year, for the second time, they were champions of the world.

## **God and Man at Princeton**

If expectations of Bradley had been high in Crystal City, they defied all reason in college. They also flew in the face of Bradley’s own doubts that he could thrive in Ivy League classrooms.

“I went to Princeton, nearly didn’t make it my freshman year, right?” Bradley said. “I had spring semester grades where I must have been close to failing in two subjects. French and biology, I think. So then I just lived in the library.”

Save to roommates and teammates – and even they did not suspect its depth – Bradley disclosed little sign of his insecurity. He improved as a student each year, but never felt safe from failure. Robert Tignor, who supervised his junior paper and a small discussion group on modern European history, said Bradley hung back in seminars as more confident students took the lead. “He would wait until we were 25 minutes or so in the conversation” and then comment on someone else’s point, Tignor said. “He just didn’t strike you as having that intellectual dexterity.”

All this accompanied a public persona who spent his days bathed in admiration and awe – declared “best in the nation” on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, a model of Christian rectitude by Norman Vincent Peale and a future president so often it became cliché.

Teammate Walters said, “It’s very tough to communicate to you how deified he was.” That Almighty image is endemic in the memories and press clippings of the era. Classmate Larry Lucchino, who owns the San Diego Padres baseball franchise, described it as an “aura...of near-idolatry.”

During Bicker, the equivalent of fraternity rush at Princeton’s upper-class eating clubs, all 15 clubs offered places to Bradley. Tom Singer, the senior who delivered Cottage Club’s bid to the younger man, said, “It was like a god coming into your presence. I was in awe that I met him. He was already so larger than life.”

A religion professor taught a point of philosophy in Bradley’s senior year by posing this question to his class: Is Bill Bradley “a basketball player greater than whom none can be conceived?” (*Answer: No, but strictly on epistemological grounds.*) Princeton fans screamed, “Don’t touch God!” when an opposing player roughed him up on court. The Latin salutation at closing exercises cited “Guilliamum Bradley,” whose uncanny play brought “*lauros antehac a Tigribus numquam expectatas ceperit*” – roughly translated as *honors not hitherto hoped for by the Tigers*. For those rusty on their ancient languages, the university handed out helpful advice on when to applaud.

The Princeton record book today still has Bradley’s name down for most career points (2,503), highest average (30.2), the three highest single-season totals (936, 885 and 662) and all 10 of the top 10 scoring games (from 58 down to 41) in the university’s history.

But the Bradley phenomenon was not strictly athletic. He knew he was under a microscope, and his life withstood the inspection: Sunday school teacher, poster boy for temperance, midnight grind – of necessity – in Firestone Library’s hideaway room 2-8J. Once, teammate Ed Hummer recalled, Bradley woke late for church when electricity failed his alarm clock. That really set him off: “Darn the power company!” Bradley raged.

Bradley’s roommates remember, sometimes ruefully, their days as ad hoc retainers. One day a group of Syracuse fraternity pledges turned up, desperate for Bradley’s autograph. The next day brought a pastor who wanted him for a guest sermon in Philadelphia. Among their other chores, the roommates found themselves writing letters like this one from Kingston to Charles Hueber, an alumnus he knew slightly: “The last few days at Princeton were so hectic that I was unable to attain his signature. ...However, if you will bear with me, you should receive the autographed pictures in the mail within a few weeks.”

Four dozen letters arrived for Bradley every week, soliciting advice, mementos, endorsements, public appearances, occasionally a more intimate acquaintance. “I’ve never seen anyone handle premature celebrity so well,” said Librarian of Congress James Billington, who was a junior faculty member in the history department where Bradley took his major. Gregory Guroff, then a history graduate student, marveled at the absence of enemies: “Real popular people on campus, there’s at least somewhere out there some set of detractors. With Bradley, I never felt that.”

Not that Bradley was immune to self-interest. John Trubee, who later advised the young Knick on his investment portfolio, recalls that Bradley wanted only one thing – the hamburger concession – when Trubee’s Class of 1954 asked him to be honorary chairman of its reunion party. Near midnight, after much dancing and drinking by the revelers, “Bradley came up to me and said, ‘Mr. Trubee, most of your classmates are so well bombed they don’t know what they’re getting. Do you mind if I take these four-ounce patties and make them into three-ounce patties?’ ...I felt, by God, this guy’s going to be all right. He’s going to be a capitalist.”

As his Knickerbocker teammates would do a few years later, some of his friends at Princeton called him “Mr. President.” Bradley’s reaction was complicated. Sometimes he laughed, sometimes he frowned. “But he also didn’t say, ‘Don’t call me that,’ “ said teammate Rick Wright, who is leading fund-raising efforts in Bradley’s presidential campaign.

### **‘I Can Best Serve Mankind’**

For public consumption and private peace of mind, Bradley was staving off expectations. But he planned for more distant horizons than most people his age.

Going into his senior year at Princeton, Bradley competed for a spot on the 1964 Olympic basketball team. As he stood on the verge of that boyhood dream, Bradley already laid foundations for his next one- -a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford.

And for another after that. Again the same summer, he began to research his senior thesis, due the following spring. The subject was Harry Truman’s 1940 election campaign. For Senate. In Bradley’s home state. Truman’s last stop on his way to the White House.

“I chose this topic in order to become more intimately acquainted with the political structure of Missouri,” Bradley wrote in his preface when he submitted the 150-page paper. “The year 1940 was a year when all elements of the political spectrum were present – principle, law, graft, costly accusations, and a fickle public.”

Before boarding a Sept. 30, 1964, flight to the Olympic village, Bradley dispatched a three-page handwritten letter to Arthur S. Link, the Princeton history professor who would supervise his thesis.

“Dear Prof. Link,” he wrote on the stationery of the Los Angeles Biltmore Hotel. “We leave this evening for Tokyo after a month of practice and conditioning. There is a natural excitement as each member prepares himself for the most rigorous challenge of his athletic life.”

Bradley proceeded to report the progress of his thesis research, which was “growing daily.” He had interviewed Truman’s primary election opponent and ex-Missouri governor Lloyd C. Stark, and still hoped to see the former president. (*He never did.*) The letter served to reassure a professor who did not yet know Bradley well but whom Bradley had just asked to recommend him for a Rhodes.

In Bradley’s application essay, he described his aspirations this way: “I can best serve mankind as a politician.” Link agreed, and wrote the Rhodes committee on Nov. 4, saying he had never taught a student of finer character.

“Academically, Mr. Bradley is, in my opinion, somewhat better than his record would indicate,” Link wrote. “I hasten to add that this record is by no means a poor one. Mr. Bradley now stands twenty- eighth among some 130 seniors now majoring in the Department of History, and I suspect that his record would be better if he had not spent quite so much time in sports....He is not brilliant in the way that a few students

are, but he has plenty of intelligence and is extremely well disciplined and a steady and reliable worker.” Bradley went on to captain the Olympic team, lead the United States to a gold medal, and win the Rhodes. The price he paid was less apparent at the time.

### **‘The Show Must Go On’**

As early as his 15th year, Bradley picked up the high school newspaper one day to find a popular cheerleader a year ahead of him, Penny Pouliezios, declaring her interest in print. “They had a thing in the paper, ‘What would you like for Christmas?’ and I put in there that I wanted the tallest basketball player in the high school,” she recalled. Bradley dated her briefly, but soon told her he was spoken for – by a basketball.

In early manhood Bradley turned more and more inward, particularly in rebuffing would-be girlfriends who approached him as a prize. In his first book, “Life on the Run,” he said celebrity had taught him what beautiful women learn early on, “the unnaturalness of being a sex object.” But there was another factor, too: his father’s dinner table aphorism that “he who travels alone, travels fastest.” Bradley sometimes repeated that line in college. He had a long way yet to travel.

Even in real relationships, Bradley maintained a distance. Susan Fortney, his high school girlfriend, said she stayed true to him in his freshman year at college. Bradley spent the summer afterward back home in Crystal City and in St. Louis, where he scrimmaged with off-season pros and took a French course to clear himself of academic probation. Fortney, long promoted by Bradley’s mother as a singer – and, most everyone in town says now, as daughter-in-law – had landed a summer job in the chorus of the St. Louis Opera.

“Have you managed to see Chris more than once or twice a week?” Bradley asked Kingston in a July 22, 1962, letter, referring to his roommate’s California girlfriend. “If you have you’re way ahead of me. I’m lucky if I see Susan that often but remember THE SHOW MUST GO ON (*or so they say*). Actually it’s probably best this way because she is enjoying tremendously what she is doing and I hope that I’m making some kind of substantial progress on these ‘so-called’ summer objectives.”

Later at Princeton, Bradley dated a young woman from Wellesley College. Diane Sawyer, already showing the star quality that took her to ABC television, was serious enough about her boyfriend to bring her parents to spend Christmas with the Bradley family in 1966.

Marty Glickman, for years the broadcast voice of the Knicks and Bradley’s future business agent, saw the two of them together on that trip, though he did not know Sawyer at the time. “I visited him in St. Louis. I was there to do a game,” Glickman said. “I met him at the hotel I was staying at, and he says, ‘Just a second, I’ve got to meet this friend of mine,’ and the most beautiful girl I ever saw came down to talk to him.” Bradley was years away from any interest in marriage, and perhaps Sawyer was too. Neither of them today wants to discuss their romance or its demise.

Bradley’s remoteness then, even from love, seemed to friends a corollary of his struggle to maintain some autonomy in an endlessly demanding world. Singer, one of Bradley’s best friends and a psychiatrist in California, said Bradley is “exquisitely tuned to when he’s doing things for other people. He knows a lot about that. He’s acutely aware of the dangers of doing things simply to fulfill other people’s high expectations for him, as opposed to following his real vision.”

Speaking with a magazine called *Police Gazette* in 1968, Bradley replied this way to a question about all the public expectations: “I’m flattered in a way. And I’m burdened. No, burdened is the wrong word. What I mean to say is that it places a great responsibility on me.”

Burdened was closer. That year, his rookie season as a Knick, Bradley was failing. Dick McGuire, his coach, blamed himself for matching Bradley against smaller, more agile guards instead of forwards. “It’s tough playing against guys that are quicker than you,” McGuire said. “They’re in your jock and you can’t get free of them.” Daniel Okimoto, a Princeton roommate and among Bradley’s closest friends, remembers Bradley telling him: “ ‘Basketball is the one thing in my life I could always fall back on and excel at. ...Now a key element of my identity has been shaken and I’ll see how I deal with it.’ “

## **A Sense of What He Lost**

During a road trip in his third season as a Knick, Bradley, by now a valued starter, let down his guard with columnist Robert Lipsyte. The path he had chosen for himself at Princeton, he said, left “no room” for personal development – only study and basketball. “By my junior year I was very aware of my own loss, and those last two years were a matter of playing out my hand,” he said. He felt “channelized by society, perhaps considered a smart athlete, or an athlete with character, but still a particular kind of object instead of a particular human being.”

The next year, on May 17, Bradley flew to St. Louis to honor Missouri high school scholar-athletes at the Sheraton Jefferson Hotel. Bradley, putting it mildly, warned 113 younger versions of himself who had gathered for plaudits in the hotel’s Gold Room that he would “not follow the usual procedure” on such an occasion. “Some of the things I’ll say, I wish had been said to me a few years ago when I was a senior in high school,” he began.

Long and dark, Bradley’s keynote speech silenced the room. He quoted from Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell and gave voice to broad discontent with the social and political ills of the day. Most of all he urged introspection. “The necessary identity crisis that most people go through in late adolescence occurs less often in the life of the scholar-athlete,” he said, “for his milieu gives him a role at age 18, with tempting rewards to play it.”

“As you succeed, more and more people will take sustenance from you, while simultaneously they grow further from you personally,” Bradley told the boys. “America is a vicarious society...Thousands of people who do not know me use my participation on a Sunday afternoon as an excuse for non-action, as a fix to help them escape their own everyday problems, and society’s problems. The toll of providing that experience is beginning to register on me.”

To close his speech, Bradley urged his listeners to ask and answer a question: “Are you being subtly programmed into being a certain kind of person with a narrow range of traditional career alternatives?” “If so,” he advised them, “rebel.”

*Staff researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.*

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