

# Two Paths to Greatness: Elvin Hayes and

*By Katherine Lopez*

The City of Houston had a humble beginning as the Allen brothers, two entrepreneurs willing to pedal land, began selling plots near the Texas coast that many considered worthless in 1836. Although it initially struggled, bountiful opportunities—such as the building of the Port of Houston, the explosion of the space industry, and the liberal concentration of natural oil and gas reserves—presented individuals with the potential for personal and financial advancement and soon Houston was transformed from a small frontier town into a thriving metropolis.

While these well-recognized factors undoubtedly sparked a massive upsurge in the city's population, another more low-key factor quietly drew in new faces and underpinned its foundation. Sports programs, both on the amateur and professional levels, have enticed athletes to the area with the promise of athletic glory since the late 19th century. The Red Stockings, a minor league baseball team, settled in Houston in 1888 and although the team folded quickly after its inception, the athletic tradition it established did not. From that point forward, Houston has supported a continuous stream of athletic franchises ranging from baseball's Colt .45's and Astros to the American Basketball Association's Houston Mavericks and National Basketball Association's Houston Rockets, to the National Football League's Houston Oilers and their successor, the Texans. In addition to professional athletics, the two major Houston universities, the University of Houston and Rice University, have fielded teams since 1946 and 1914 respectively. Through these various programs, professional and amateur athletes alike have flocked to Houston to pursue dreams

of athletic glory and personal fulfillment.

These individuals, although numerically small in comparison to the overall number of immigrants entering the city, have disproportionately contributed to Houston's growth for they became publicized representations of the success to be acquired within the city. While numerous transplanted athletes have graced the courts and fields over the last century and history could highlight several of them who transformed into proponents of Houston, two individuals in particular jump out from the masses. Elvin Hayes, a native of Louisiana, and Hakeem Olajuwon, a native of Nigeria, both traveled to the city in pursuit of basketball stardom. Although born over twenty years apart, these two men, first at the University of Houston and later in the NBA, embraced the city which welcomed them and their athleticism and, throughout the past decades, have brought positive

attention to it. These are their stories.

Elvin Hayes was born in the small Louisiana town of Rayville in 1945. It, like most other Jim Crow cities of the time, presented few opportunities for its non-white residents and little hope of escape. Despite that, Hayes was determined to find a "better life out there beyond Rayville and north Louisiana" and would "find some kind of vehicle" to take him away.<sup>1</sup> His journey out began when, in the eighth grade, Hayes picked up a basketball and began developing the skills that would lift him out of Louisiana and out of obscurity.

Although he was not cognizant of the fact that "basketball was going to be the vehicle," Hayes physically applied himself and soon was blazing trails during his high school years.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, he drew the attention of segregated colleges across the nation. While Louisiana's star had his choice of universities, Hayes ultimately decided, primarily because of the promise of an excellent education close to home, to become one of the first two black athletes to integrate the University of Houston basketball program under the direction of Guy V. Lewis.<sup>3</sup> His decision was buttressed by his mother's positive opinion of the program. Hayes believed the Houston coaches most effectively persuaded his mother, recalling, "Coach Harvey Pate [the assistant to Coach Lewis] didn't recruit the players. He recruited your parents or your mother and he recruited my mother and my mother said 'you're going out there with Coach Pate' and that was it. When your mother tells you something, that's what you're going to do. It really wasn't up to me."<sup>4</sup> In obeying his mother's instructions, Hayes instantaneously realized "basketball was to be [his] savior as well as [his] ticket out of Rayville."<sup>5</sup> This was the moment he had been waiting for and sensed his life would quickly change.

*Don Chaney (right) and Elvin Hayes (left) were the first African-American athletes to play basketball for the University of Houston. Their coach, Guy V. Lewis, actively recruited them and helped create an environment in which they could prosper.*



**All photographs courtesy University of Houston Athletic Department.**

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# Hakeem Olajuwon Come to Houston

Immediately following his high school graduation in 1963, Hayes set out for his new home of Houston. His initial reactions to the city were less than positive. His small town upbringing left him feeling vulnerable in such an expansive city. "It was a very scary place because I had never seen anything this big or been around this many people in one place at one time. So, for a kid coming from an AA school, it was just a massive, very scary experience for me."<sup>6</sup>

His trepidation was strong enough to drive the young Hayes back home on several occasions. "The first time they brought me over," he recalled, "the next day I was back over in Louisiana and they would come back and get me and I was gone again."<sup>7</sup> After a few such retreats across the Texas border, Hayes' mother sent her oldest son Arthur to Houston alongside his younger brother with the command that Elvin was to remain in Texas for good. Her tactic worked. The younger Hayes eventually acclimated to his new surroundings and realized that "the Houston people offered [him] an education and a watchful eye."<sup>8</sup> With the start of the fall semester, and the return of the rest of the squad including fellow black recruit Don Chaney, Hayes felt comfortable enough to release his brother from his companion duties.<sup>9</sup> Soon, he was in the throws of preparation for the season and fell into a comfortable routine.

While Hayes eventually made the transition to university life, dealing with the city itself still presented a problem. Although the University of Houston welcomed its newest African-American stars, Houston remained a segregated city. The possibility of further discrimination did not deter Hayes, who had grown accustomed to a second-class status in his hometown and believed himself capable of handling any potential problems. He recounted that "[Don Chaney and I] knew what we were getting into, but we had endured racial prejudice before and were confident we could do it again while breaking down some old barriers."<sup>10</sup> Despite his expectation of ill treatment, Hayes was pleasantly surprised by the overall attitude of Houston's white community. "There wasn't anything sticking out so blatant as it was where I just had left . . . it was day

and night and a lot of those things I never saw here."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Hayes found the University willing to support its newest recruits in whatever manner possible. "The school's officials," he remembered, "were always cooperative, much more than you would have expected at that time in a Southern city. I think the University kind of created [an] environment for us to try and make our adjustments."<sup>12</sup>

Yet, Hayes admits that despite the relatively discrimination-free environment at school, he had to overcome the personal prejudices ingrained in him from his youth. "Because I was in a totally black environment, and I'd never been around white people that much, I always kind of shied away from [whites] and stayed in an environment where I was very much comfortable. I think that was one of the biggest things for me to try and adjust to, being in a mixed environment, and I had a lot of problems with that because I brought a lot of baggage with me. A lot of the things and experiences which I'd had in Louisiana, I kind of brought those experiences with me over here . . . and it was something that I really was not that comfortable with."<sup>13</sup> The passing of time and the development of interracial friendships, however, allowed Hayes to shed his preconceived notions of race relations and fully integrate into the program.<sup>14</sup>

With the major issues of prejudice under control and his homesickness diminished, Hayes concentrated on his education and his athletic career. He excelled on the court, earning three All-American honors, two consensus All-American honors, and the 1968 National Player of the Year award. But perhaps more importantly than individual accolades, Hayes catapulted his team, and the city, to national prominence in January of 1968 during the "Game of the Century." On that night, in front of a then record-breaking crowd of 52,693 and before the first ever nationally televised regular season basketball audience, Hayes and his Cougar teammates beat Lew Alcindor, now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and the top ranked UCLA squad.

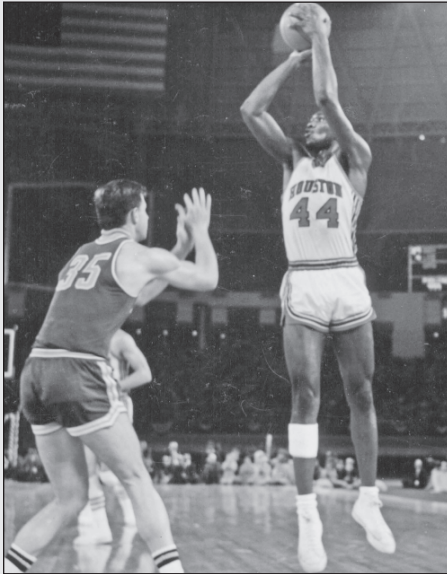
That event sharply focused the nation's attention on the game of basketball and on the city's state-of-the-art Astrodome facility.

"The Eighth Wonder of the World," which was large enough to handle an incredible number of spectators, demonstrated to all who watched that Houston was indeed an advanced city capable of leading the way into the future of sports. Many in the sports world, including Hayes, still point to that one game as the start of modern basketball. It demonstrated that gathering massive crowds in huge, often multi-purpose, sports stadiums was feasible and highlighted the existence of a national basketball market.<sup>15</sup>

That victory would be the grandest moment of the Hayes-led squads. Despite compiling an 81-12 record and three straight NCAA Tournament appearances over as many seasons, the Cougars never won the NCAA tournament, which had long determined the best collegiate team in the nation. Even so, Hayes' athletic dedication, visible by his 31.1 points/17.2 rebounds per game average, confirmed to sports fans and casual observers alike that Houston and its university were ready to assume a position of prominence and were capable of transforming young individuals into premier athletes ready to take on the world. Because of that, Hayes "fell in love with the school and the city of Houston both" and he never regretted his tenure at UH saying, "I think the best thing that happened to me and the best decision that could have been made for me was made by my mother to get me to go the University of Houston and for me to go there and for me to play there."<sup>16</sup>

Although the end of the 1968 season brought a close to Hayes' career at the University of Houston, it did not end his association with the city itself. Selected as the 1968 first round draft pick by the San Diego Rockets, Hayes set out for his new home. Three years later, due to the selling of the Rockets after the 1971 season, Hayes returned to the city which first made him famous. While he only remained with the Houston franchise for the 1971-1972 season—he was traded to the Washington Bullets—he returned to Houston prior to the start of the 1981-1982 season. Although he had experienced tremendous success in Washington, where he led the Bullets to the 1978 NBA title, Hayes was excited to return to Houston.





*The University of Houston and UCLA met twice during the 1967-68 season and tied the series at one game a piece.*

"I enjoyed San Diego, I enjoyed living in San Diego," he commented, "I enjoyed playing in Washington, and the fans there . . . but I think Houston was always like home because I grew up here and my really important years of growth happened here."<sup>17</sup>

He understood that his playing days were numbered and knew that he had to finish where he began. "You know from my basketball standpoint, from a notoriety standpoint, all the things that catapulted me into the world happened right here. This was like the igniting point, the point where you blast off from . . . I think that sometimes when a rocket comes down you want it to come right back down in the spot where you sent it up."<sup>18</sup>

For the next three seasons, until his retirement following the 1983-1984 season, Hayes contributed as much as possible to the Rockets. Although he never led his Houston teammates to a world title, he nonetheless continued his stellar performances becoming, among other statistical achievements, the first individual to play 50,000 minutes (since outdone only by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Karl Malone). In addition, he rebounded 16,279 loose balls, still the fourth highest, and scored 27,313 points, placing him sixth on the all-time leaders list. Through these accomplishments, Hayes once again brought Houston positive publicity. The Rockets, alongside the city itself, shared the accolades garnered upon one of its most celebrated athletes.

Just as the end of his college career

could not terminate the relationship between Houston and Hayes, neither could retirement. In the over two decades since he walked away from basketball, Hayes has lived and flourished in the Houston area. After forty years in the Houston area, Hayes still possesses a positive perspective of it and sees the tremendous potential available to those who wish to pursue a future within it. "I [feel] like Houston was a good city for me, I enjoyed the city. It [is] a very good city, a very young city, a very growing city."<sup>19</sup> The celebrated basketball star, who earned a place in the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame in 1990 and landed on the list of the fifty greatest players, is still enthralled with his adopted city concluding, "I enjoy living here, I love living here."<sup>20</sup>

Other basketball stars followed in his footsteps to UH and to Houston. Arguably the most famous of these was Hakeem Olajuwon. Originally spelled without the H, Hakeem grew up in the Nigerian capital city of Lagos with his parents and three brothers. Although he initially gravitated toward handball, a new sport to the nation, his 6' 8" frame, which eventually peaked at 7', soon brought him to the attention of basketball coaches at the Muslim Teachers College which he was attending. When the handball competition at the Teacher Training Sports Festival was cancelled, Olajuwon begged coaches to allow him to join the basketball team. They willingly agreed. While the team did not bring home the gold medal, his playing time brought him into the sights of Christopher Pond, an international basketball coach.<sup>21</sup> Pond immediately recognized his talent and understood such skill would open the international doors faster than almost any other avenue.

Olajuwon already understood the magnitude of such an opportunity. Within Nigeria, "[America] was *the* destination, the measure of success, the championship."<sup>22</sup> Yet, Olajuwon's abilities alone could not secure him a trip to America. As the U.S. Embassy would not approve a visa without a verbal commitment from a college, he still needed help from an American collegiate coach willing to offer him a scholarship sight unseen. As with Hayes, University of Houston Coach Guy V. Lewis took the appropriate measures to ensure Olajuwon's visa and his visit to the University.<sup>23</sup> With that promise in hand, the U.S. Embassy approved Olajuwon's request. The airplane

ticket cost the Olajuwon family \$4,500. His mother paid for the ticket from the proceeds of her retail cement business. Within ten days, he was on a plane to the states, scheduled to visit five universities. Luckily for Houston, both the school and the city, Olajuwon would only visit one university on that list.

His first introduction to America came in January of 1981 in New York, where Olajuwon was to meet with coaches from St. John's University. That meeting never transpired because the cold January weather immediately deterred the Nigerian teenager from remaining in the Big Apple. Within four hours, he was on a flight to Houston, where international fame awaited him. Olajuwon took an immediate liking to Houston's warm climate and, whereas others found Houston's heat insufferable, Hakeem felt perfectly acclimated to the tropical temperature and even noted that Houston was more frigid than his native home. "It's colder here than in Lagos," he commented during his first months in Houston, "but not much, [so] I decided to stay here."<sup>24</sup>

Olajuwon also found Houston and the university to be quite pleasant saying that, "the people here are more friendly... [and] I like it over here."<sup>25</sup> He recollected years later that, "moving from Nigeria to Houston was so natural. I went to boarding school in Nigeria [the Muslims Teachers College] so coming to Houston, it was the same kind of campus lifestyle."<sup>26</sup> Coach Lewis, astonished by Olajuwon's skill, offered him a full scholarship and expressed great pleasure with Olajuwon's acceptance. Lewis recalled, "He liked [the University of Houston] so much he decided to just stay and I'm happy he did."<sup>27</sup>

Olajuwon began playing full time during the fall of 1981, following a red shirt season, and quickly became a basketball legend. During his three years at the University of Houston, he, along with other notable teammates such as Clyde "the Glide" Drexler, amassed an impressive 31-3 record in the 1983 season, reached the NCAA Final Four Tournament all three seasons, and played in the Final Four Championship game in two consecutive years. Although "Phi Slamma Jamma" fell just short of the NCAA title each year, Olajuwon was not without a plethora of national awards.<sup>28</sup> He was voted a two-time All American Performer, a 1984 consensus

All American, and was only the third player to ever lead the nation in two or more statistical categories in one season.<sup>29</sup> Olajuwon also received the nickname of “Hakeem the Dream” which would follow him throughout his career. Although Olajuwon did not have an event such as the “Game of the Century,” his continual production once again took Houston to the summit of collegiate basketball and drew the eyes of the nation to the city.

The only question which remained at the conclusion of Olajuwon’s third season was the future of his amateur status. Following the 1983-84 season, Olajuwon had to decide whether to remain with the University for his senior year or enter his name into the NBA draft. The successes the team encountered in the previous years and the personal accolades directed toward Olajuwon made staying for a fourth season tempting. However, another factor carried more weight for the basketball phenomenon—living in Houston.

Olajuwon had grown accustomed to his life in Houston and had to choose either a senior year or a lifelong career in the city which first welcomed him. When the Houston Rockets had a chance to earn the top draft pick, the answer became very clear. “Once I got here,” he recalled, “I didn’t want to leave Houston. That was one of the motivations to come out of school, because the Rockets had a chance in the coin flip.”<sup>30</sup> His comfort level had grown to such a point that a move seemed unthinkable. “Leaving Houston to go to another city or state was a whole new world for me,” he continued. “Here I fit in [and] leaving Houston would be the most difficult thing for me.”<sup>31</sup> Fortunately for Olajuwon, the Rockets did in fact win the coin toss and, like Elvin Hayes, he was selected as the first pick of the 1984 draft, even before greats such as Michael Jordan out of the University of North Carolina.

His career with the Rockets did not disappoint, as he continued to dominate at the position of center and played an incredible 1,177 games over seventeen seasons with the franchise from 1984 through 2001. Olajuwon’s stellar playing abilities thrust Houston into the limelight and during his tenure as Rockets center, the team brought home two NBA titles in 1994 and 1995. The first of those two championships was the first major sports championship for the city of Houston.

In addition, he was selected as the regular season and the NBA Finals Most Valuable Player in 1994, was a twelve-time All-Star, and a gold medal Olympian. Furthermore, like Hayes, Olajuwon still appears on the all-time statistical leaders list in several categories. He is currently first in total blocks (3,830), sixth in field goals (10,749 made goals), seventh in points scored (26,946 points), and seventh in all-time steals (2,162 stolen balls).

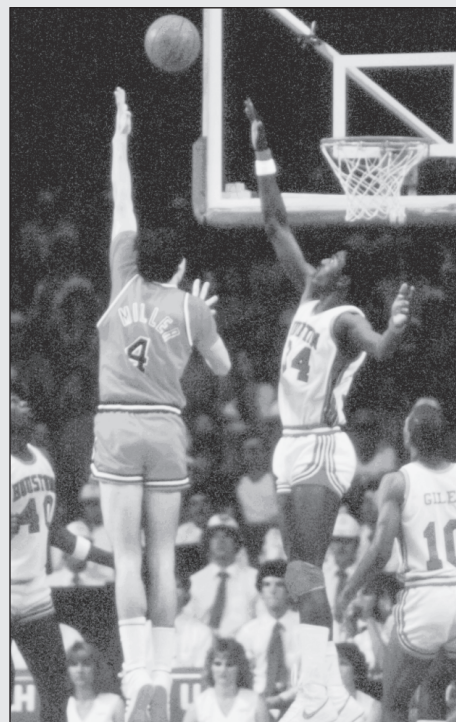
He accomplished so much during his playing tenure that many Houstonians came to view Olajuwon and the city as inseparable. Former Rockets Coach Rudy Tomjanovich explained the relationship saying, “[Olajuwon] is a part of Houston. Just like you see certain sights around here and certain traditions, Hakeem is part of that: the Transco Tower, NASA, Hakeem.”<sup>32</sup> While Olajuwon did not finish his career with the Rockets, as he played his final season with the Toronto Raptors, he will always be remembered as an integral part of Houston. Furthermore, he still remains involved in various parts of the city through his charitable contributions and real estate endeavors, and spends a few months each year in residence.

Olajuwon’s promotion of the city and the benefits it afforded also had a tremendous international impact. Within his native country, the prosperity of Olajuwon’s new home did not escape notice. His parents expressed this view clearly saying, “Before Akeem went [to Houston] we knew practically nothing of the United States. Since Akeem has been there, we are sure it is a land of opportunity, a place to make a profit.”<sup>33</sup> Their belief in the opportunities available convinced them to send Akinola, Afis, and Taju, their other sons, to Houston as well, and other Nigerian athletes were not far behind. Olajuwon only solidified his Houston testimonial when he attained his citizenship in April 1993. He explained his action simply remarking, “Being an American citizen, if you are a good citizen, gives you respect.”<sup>34</sup>

Just as importantly, Olajuwon encouraged the internationalization of the NBA. It is interesting to note the impact Olajuwon’s athletic performances have had on the number of international players drafted into the League. In the thirteen years between 1970 and the drafting of Olajuwon in 1983, NBA teams drafted only six international players. In the two

years following Olajuwon’s draft, however, nine players came from the foreign ranks. That trend has only intensified with each progressive year. In 2005 alone, fourteen international players were drafted.<sup>35</sup> Clearly Olajuwon did not set the trend single-handedly, however, his stellar performances provided a vivid example of the world-wide talent available. Recently, the Rockets took another chance on an international number one draft selection with Chinese-born Yao Ming.<sup>36</sup> Following in Olajuwon’s footsteps, Ming and other transplanted athletes now represent Houston to a watching world, and it does not appear that the trend toward international players will subside any time in the near future.

Elvin Hayes and Hakeem Olajuwon each traveled a different number of miles to arrive in Houston from their hometowns, yet once in the city limits, they each took full advantage of the opportunities for success. They left incredible legacies on basketball history and, in the process, lifted the city of Houston to prominence. Furthermore, they communicated, perhaps more loudly than any other immigrants, that the city would welcome any to partake in all it had to offer. ■



*Olajuwon demonstrates his propensity for defense as he blocks a shot for Phi Slamma Jamma. He remains the NBA’s all time leader in blocked shots.*