

USF Basketball

1956-1957: A Near Threepeat

by Bernie Schneider '59

After Bill Russell, K.C. Jones, Hal Perry, Warren Baxter, and Bill Bush graduated, only the most die-hard USF fans would have dreamed of a third straight NCAA Championship. But Coach Woolpert had three exceptional starters back – Mike Farmer, Eugene Brown, and Carl Boldt – in addition to his dedicated assistant Ross Giudice. Furthermore, in the interim USF had pulled off a recruiting coup, landing 6'9" center Arthur Day and his teammate Al Dunbar, a highly touted guard, from Hannibal Junior College in Kansas. Speculation has it that Arthur Day may have come to San Francisco to get as far away as possible from the University of Kansas, where Wilt Chamberlain would be making his collegiate varsity debut, but destiny would bring the two players together.

As the season started, the Dons extended their record-setting 55-game winning streak. **Number 56** was a 63-34 thrashing of Chico State, with Gene Brown picking up where he left off in the 1956 NCAA tournament by scoring 18 points. As an aside, no longer could the Peru College (Nebraska) Bobcats claim that they owned the longest collegiate winning streak at 55 (set in the 1920s).

Number 57 came at Cal. Both teams more than doubled their point totals of the record-breaking “stall” game of the year before, as USF won 70-56. The Cal game, however, cost USF heavily. In the last few moments of the game, Gene Brown, while again leading the Dons’ attack with 20 points, broke his hand. The team doctor’s prognosis for his recovery was an optimistic one – no longer than a month – but without Gene the winning streak seemed doomed.

In the next game, while Brown watched from the bench, Dave Lillevand, a slick ball-handling guard in the tradition of great USF “watch-charm” guards of the past, picked up the scoring with 16 points, and USF easily defeated SF State, 82-54, for **number 58**.

A few nights later, however, the Seattle Chieftains came into town with a then-virtually-unknown player by the name of Elgin Baylor. Baylor, of course, after a fantastic career with the Lakers is now renowned as one of the greatest players of all time. Amazingly, on this December night in 1956, USF raced off to a 13-0 lead, and the formidable Baylor managed just two baskets in the first half over the close guarding of Mike Farmer. Foul trouble, however, put Farmer on the bench for a good part of the second half. During this stretch, Baylor awed the Kezar crowd and the media while forging a comeback that gave the Chieftains a 44-41 lead with seven minutes to play. Dick Friendlich of the *Chronicle* enthused, “One of the greatest shotmakers ever to show at Kezar, a six foot six inch, 225 pound center named Elgin Baylor was the main reason for the Chieftains’ surge with twisting layups and long jump shots.”

When Phil Woolpert re-inserted Mike Farmer into the game, Farmer, perhaps the very best defensive forward in USF history, once again limited Baylor’s production. With Carl Boldt scoring inside and out, USF emerged with win **number 59**, a hard-fought 57-50 victory. Farmer slammed through a dunk as the buzzer sounded, and the Don rooters carried the 6’8” forward off the floor. In the USF campus newspaper, the *SF Foghorn*, student reporter Ed Griffin described the final shot as follows: “With ten seconds left, Farmer slipped loose for a court-long pass from Dunbar and punctuated ‘number 59’ with a smashing ‘stuff’ shot to add an exclamation point to the latest sentence in the Win-Streak story.” Baylor had 24 points to show for his first game in San Francisco. Later that season he would score 51 on February 26, 1957 against the University of Portland. A month later he was named to the 1957 All-American team along with Wilt Chamberlain.



Carl Boldt tipping vs. Seattle U.

With a 4-0 record, USF took to the road, returning for the second consecutive year to the Chicago Invitational. Besides USF, this four-team tournament included Loyola of Chicago, Santa Clara, and the U.S. Olympic Team, which two weeks earlier had won the Olympic gold medal in Australia by thumping the Soviet Union, 89-55. Their appearance in this tournament gave the American public a final opportunity to see this amateur “dream team” of AAU all-stars and college All-Americans, including Bill Russell and K.C. Jones, before the players would disperse, turning pro or returning home.

With Al Dunbar and Carl Boldt leading the way with 14 points each, the Dons picked up win **number 60** by defeating Loyola 67-48. In the nightcap, the Olympic Team defeated Santa Clara 97-57.

The next night, the Olympic team was too much for the young Dons, as Bill Russell and K.C. Jones dominated their former teammates 83-52. Ironically, the first team to defeat USF after 60 consecutive wins featured the two players most responsible for the streak. Technically, the collegiate record wasn't broken because the game was considered an exhibition, but USF had been shaken badly.

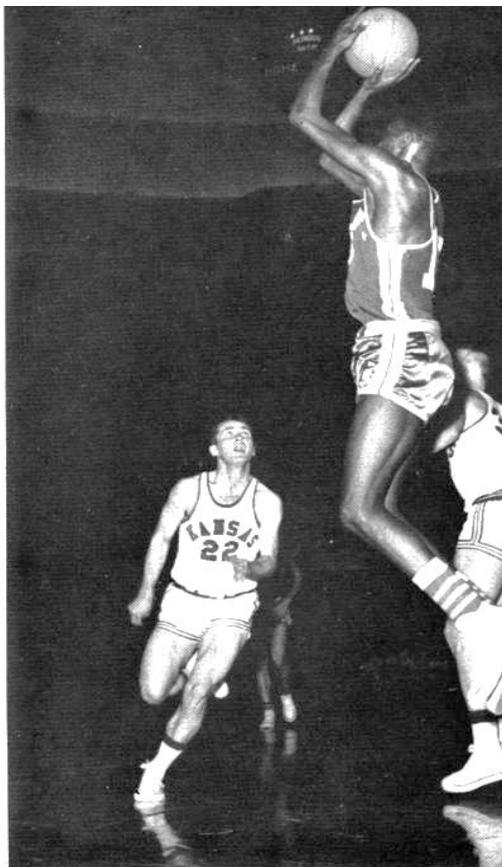
Playing against the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana two nights later, and still without Gene Brown, the Dons lost to an outstanding team, the Big Ten favorite, in the packed, steamy, Illini field house. The win streak was now officially over. Many years later, Dave Lillevand recalled, “There was some letdown after we lost to the Olympic Team, even though the loss didn't count against the win streak.” Dave added, “Illinois had three future NBA/ABA players in their lineup – George BonSalle, Don Ohl, and Roger Taylor. They, and their rabid fans, were ready for us.” One oddity regarding the streak – it began on December 17, 1954 and ended on December 17, 1956.

Other losses followed: to Western Kentucky, Oregon State, and USC. By the time conference play started, this team seemingly had forgotten how to win. Although Gene Brown had returned (playing with a cast), Phil Woolpert and the Dons had new problems to overcome. Mike Farmer had to leave the Oregon State game because of a recurring bronchial infection. Then Arthur Day and Carl Boldt collided in practice the day before the CBA opener against San Jose State, and each player needed stitches to close the cuts. With all the Dons' health problems, the California Basketball Association, for the first time in years, seemed a wide-open race.

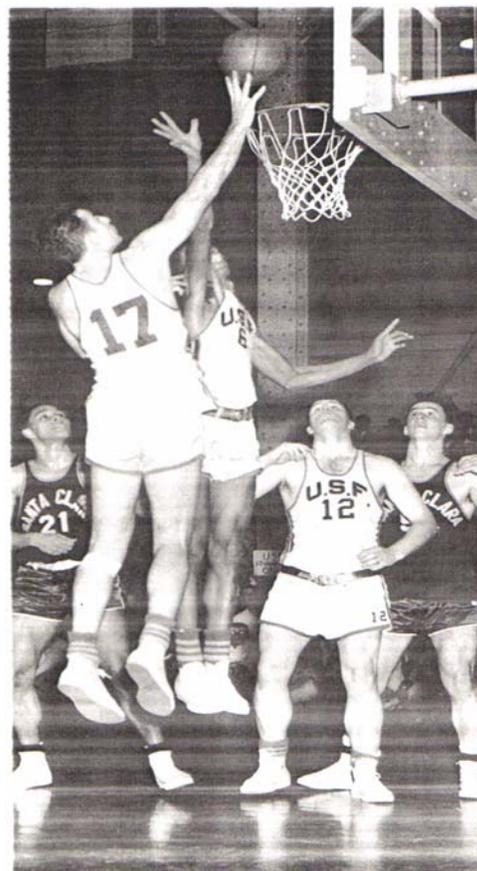
Incredibly, the injured and sick came through against San Jose State. Brown had 15 points, Farmer 14, and Boldt 12 as USF won the opener at Kezar 66-51. Dick Friendlich reported in the *Chronicle*, "When Farmer hit a baseline jumper and sophomore guard Dave Lillevand stole the ball and drove for a layup, the score went to 46-29 and school was out."

In the next game against Santa Clara at the San Jose Auditorium, USF wasn't so fortunate. The Dons fell behind the Broncos by eleven points with six minutes to go. A frantic comeback brought USF within two points with a minute to play, but Santa Clara held on and delivered the Dons their first league loss in three years, 51-47. In addition to losing the game, the Dons lost the services of forward Carl Boldt when Phil Woolpert dismissed Boldt from the team for undisclosed reasons, and a few days later Mike Farmer was hospitalized for bronchitis.

The Dons, however, pulled together and launched a winning streak. Fresno State fell, 68-56, then Pepperdine 78-67, Loyola 66-56, College of the Pacific 67-51, and St. Mary's 70-60. During this modest streak, some old stars asserted themselves and some new stars emerged. Gene Brown, now playing without a cast or bandages, had 18 points against Fresno State to get the Dons rolling again and another 18 against St. Mary's, when both teams were deadlocked for the league lead. Mike Farmer, now recovered, was a steady double-figure scorer and rebounder, and he had a game-high 20 points against St. Mary's.



Gene Brown and his patented jump shot



Surrounding the basket with Art Day and Bill Mallen, Mike Farmer tips for two

But the big story was the emergence of Arthur Day into a Bill Russell-like center in more than size and uniform number. Too often, wearing # 6 had been a painful reminder of the legend who had preceded him. Very tentative and only mildly productive throughout the preseason (16 points against Seattle was his best), Day erupted with a series of double-figure games, scoring 21 points against Fresno State, 27 against Pepperdine, 13 against Loyola and COP, and 18 against St. Mary's.

In addition to Day, solid role players emerged. In most games, Al Dunbar and Dave Lillevand alternated at guard, and three bruising front-line players, Mike Preaseau, Bill Mallen, and Charlie Russell (Bill's older brother) split time at forward.

The stage was set for the rematch with traditional rival Santa Clara. Each team had a 5-1 record, and pre-game excitement ran high at both schools. Infiltrating the Santa Clara campus, USF rooters had stolen the Little-Big-Game bell, awarded to the winner of the Santa Clara-St. Mary's football game, a prize comparable to the axe for the Big Game between Cal and Stanford. Bronco rooters in retaliation had slipped onto the Hilltop campus and swiped USF's 1949 NIT trophy from the Dons' trophy case.

Consequently, the cheering sections of the two predominantly male schools arrived at the game with chips on their shoulders and adrenaline pumping with the kind of intensity usually found at Kezar only on the basketball court or in the boxing ring during Golden Gloves competition. USF administrators had to call for a police presence from nearby Park Station. As the would-be brawlers settled down, the game began. Having dealt the Dons their only conference defeat in three years in their previous meeting, the Broncos had high hopes. The Dons, however, led by seven points at the half, 28-21, opened it up to 50-36 behind the come-through performances of Gene Brown (16 points), Mike Farmer (14 points), and Art Day (14 points), and USF exacted its revenge, 58-47, before 6,000 awe-struck fans.

The Santa Clara game propelled the Dons into a conference lead they would not surrender. With hard-nosed man-for-man defense (a trade-mark of Phil Woolpert's teams) and rugged rebounding at both ends of the court, the Dons won five of their remaining six games to capture the CBA championship with a record of 12-2. The University of San Francisco was once again heading to the NCAA FarWest Regional in Corvallis, Oregon.

Meanwhile, under the leadership of former USF coach Pete Newell, the Cal Bears won the Pacific Coast Conference championship on the final weekend of the season. They too were heading for the Far West Regional. As Cal prepared to take on Brigham Young University, the Bears received a surprise punch to the mid-section. The NCAA ruled first-string center Duane Asplund ineligible for the playoffs, applying the same rationale that had cost the Dons the services of K.C. Jones the previous year. That development meant that none other than the lonesome ball handler of the 1956 "big-stall" game, Joe Hagler, would start at center for the Bears against BYU. USF's first round opponent was Idaho State. The Bay Area teams, favored to win, did so easily: USF 66-51 and Cal 86-59.

The stage was set for another big USF-Cal game, with the winner advancing to the Final Four in Kansas City. Although Phil Woolpert and Pete Newell had been teammates at Loyola and would remain life-long friends, some tension had developed between them and the two schools this season when Cal backed out of a second game with USF scheduled for the Cow Palace in January. Adding more fuel to the fire during the week of the regional, Cal Athletic Director Greg Engelhard insinuated that the PCC would have dealt more harshly with K.C. Jones's eligibility than the CBA had done, insisting that Duane Asplund more clearly deserved his added year of eligibility because he had played only a few minutes in two different games in 1954 before injuring his leg, whereas K.C. had played "an entire game" before suffering a ruptured appendix.

With Art Day blocking shots as Bill Russell had done in the three previous years, and with Mike Farmer and Gene Brown scoring at critical times, the Dons enjoyed a five-point lead at the half, 27-22. Day scored early in the second half to increase the lead, but Cal ran off the next eight points and took a one-point lead behind the inspired play of their great duo of forward Larry Friend and guard Earl Robinson. For the remaining seventeen minutes of the game, the lead changed hands nine times, and neither team led by more than a point. Finally, Al Dunbar's two free throws broke a 46-46 tie with under two minutes to play. Art Day, again Bill Russell-like, hovered above Cal guard Al Buch as he drove for the tying basket, and Buch was called for "traveling." The Bears, in desperation, fouled Dunbar again, and Dunbar, as Cal hoped, missed the free throw. With six seconds remaining, Cal had one more chance. Pete Newell went to his bench for Joe Kapp, the great football quarterback for Cal and later the Minnesota Vikings. Kapp's job was to pick out a receiver from his position at the end line and throw a long pass to give Cal a tying shot. The 6'8" Mike Farmer, although hardly the typical defensive back, intercepted Kapp's pass, was fouled as time ran out, and added the extra points for the Dons' 50-46 victory.

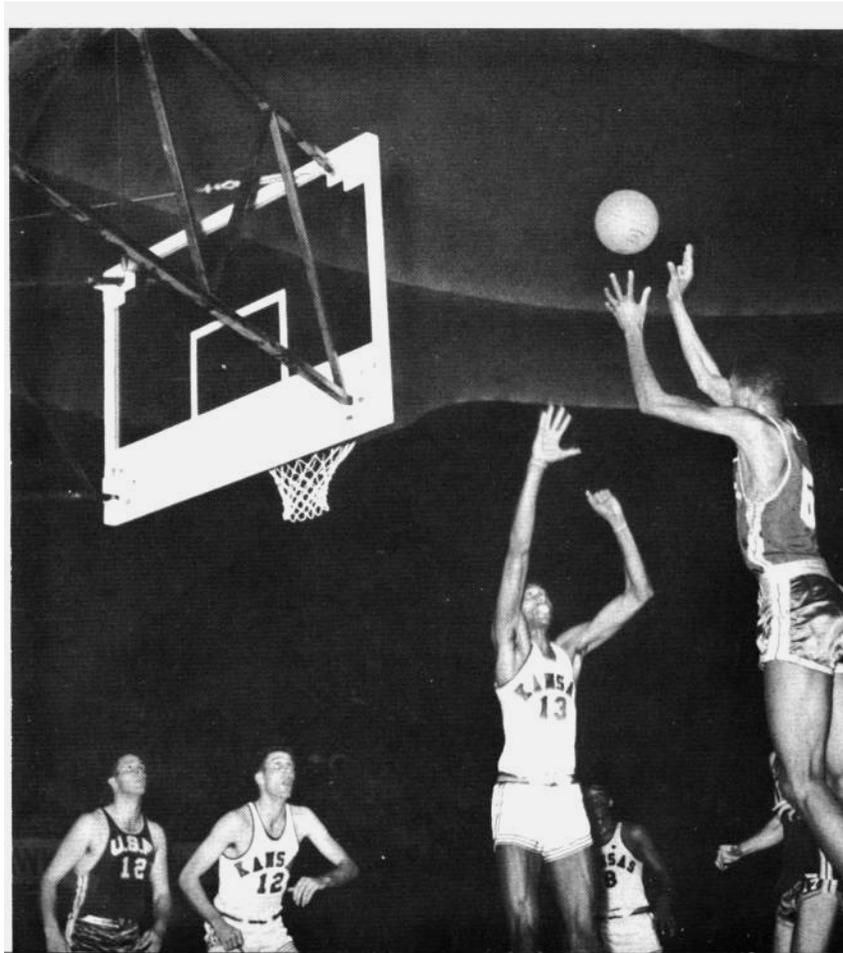
All that mattered was that USF had won another Far West Regional. The Dons were just two wins away from a third consecutive NCAA title. It was good that that was all that mattered, because Cal's Larry Friend, in a halftime vote reminiscent of Hal Lear's choice as MVP over Bill Russell in the '56 final, was named the regional MVP. At least Friend, unlike Lear, had played in the championship game, but in the opinion of Corvallis *Gazette-Times* sportswriter Chris Kowitz, and other sportswriters and fans, USF's Gene Brown, with eighteen points against Idaho State and twenty against Cal, deserved the award.

The Dons may have been defending NCAA Champs, but they were underdogs as they headed off to battle Wilt Chamberlain's Kansas Jayhawks. Before Chamberlain, there had been outstanding big men in the Final Four, notably George Mikan of DePaul in 1943, later named by the Helms Foundation the best player of the first half of the 20th century, nosing out Stanford great Hank Luisetti for the award. Next, there was Bob Kurland, who led Coach Hank Iba's Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State) to consecutive NCAA championships in 1945 and 1946. Then in 1955 and 1956 USF's own Bill Russell. No big man, however, had ever come out of high school with the heralded talent of Wilt Chamberlain. After a year of freshman ball (freshmen were ineligible to play on the varsity in this era), in his very first varsity game, against Northwestern in December of '56, Chamberlain scored 52 points and grabbed 31 rebounds. For anyone unfamiliar with Chamberlain, Dave Lillevand states that he was a much more physical presence than was Bill Russell. The 5'11" Lillevand adds, "When I stood next to Wilt, I was eye level with the vaccination mark on his arm." Not only Dave, but all of Chamberlain's opponents knew he was taller and heavier than he was listed in programs at 7' 215 lbs. Interviewed for a fiftieth anniversary article about the '57 team, Bill Russell's brother Charlie, who presumably knew a big man when he saw him, told *Chronicle* reporter John Crumpacker: "He was like one of those oak trees out there. That guy was big!" For the year, this giant of a man averaged 29.5 points per game for the twice-defeated Jayhawks. Later in the NBA, he would average over 50 points a game for the 1960-61 season and would become renowned for scoring 100 points against the New York Knicks in 1962.

To contain even the young 1957 version of Wilt, the Dons knew they had their work cut out for them. On the other hand, the *Examiner's* Bob Brachman reported that Pete Newell, whose team had lost in December to Kansas, 66-56, thought that "USF, with its powerful board strength and unshakable poise, will make things mighty interesting." Cal's captain, the aforementioned Larry Friend, commented, "USF killed us with defense, and my suspicion is that Kansas will have trouble, too, although that Wilt creates some tremendous problems."

Besides its solid defense (#2 in the nation) and tenacious rebounding, USF counted on its NCAA experience from the previous two years as an advantage over Kansas. Kansas, however, was no stranger to the NCAA Tournament. The Jayhawks had won the championship in 1952 and had lost to Indiana by only one point in the 1953 title game. But no players remained from those teams. In addition, legendary coach Forrest “Phog” Allen had retired. The word out of Kansas City was that his successor, Dick Harp, was worried because his team’s two losses had been to defensive-minded, ball-control teams similar to USF. In an interview with Will Connolly of the *Chronicle*, Harp said. “I’d rather meet somebody else than those Frisco guys. They really apply defensive pressure. If you don’t take an early lead, they squeeze you to death”

Kansas didn’t take an early lead. The Dons battled Chamberlain fiercely, matching the Jayhawks basket for basket, and at halftime trailed by only four points, 38-34. The second half, unfortunately for the Dons, was a different story. Just as San Franciscans at home in the Bay Area were rocked and shocked that day by an earthquake for the first time in years, the University of San Francisco Dons in Kansas City were rocked and shocked in the second half in a manner they had not experienced in years. The Jayhawks scored the first eight points of the half and continued to blitz the Dons in a manner reminiscent of the way the Dons had blitzed opponents during the preceding championship seasons. Kansas won 80-56 and Chamberlain finished with 32 points. Mike Farmer managed 14 points for the Dons, followed by Preaseau with 12 and Brown with 10. In his return to the Midwest, Arthur Day tallied 9 points over and around the fabled Chamberlain.



Art Day shoots over Wilt Chamberlain

In the other semifinal, the number-one-ranked team in the nation, North Carolina (30-0), struggled to defeat Big Ten champion Michigan State in triple overtime, 74-70. Based on their semifinal performances, Kansas – ranked number two – was now favored for the national title. Before the championship game, however, USF would play Michigan State for third place. The *Examiner's* Bob Brachman wrote, "It will take another supreme effort on the part of the Dons if they are to salvage third place."

The Dons put forth just such an effort. After a first half with nine lead changes, the indomitable ones, Gene Brown and Mike Farmer, took over. In one stretch, Brown scored 13 straight points, and after Michigan State had cut USF's nine-point lead to two, Mike Farmer made six straight free throws. The final score was USF 67, Michigan State 60. It was a satisfying win for all, but particularly for Gene Brown, who was named to the all-tournament team, and for Al Dunbar, who had returned to his hometown to participate in the NCAA Finals.

What USF accomplished this season cannot be underestimated. In May 2000, on the night his number was retired, Mike Farmer said that to him the '56-'57 season was even more satisfying and gratifying than the previous NCAA championship season. One of the accomplishments was stretching the all-time win streak to 60, but when USF's success stalled with injuries and other problems, causing the Dons to lose five of seven games and fall from the national rankings, Phil Woolpert's team persevered. As Farmer said, "We had a lot of injuries on that team, a lot of sickness. And the guys just hung together. I played on a lot of teams over the years, but I most remember this one."

Another accomplishment for the Dons was their battle back to win fourteen of their final sixteen games and finish third in the country. Not only was the win over Michigan State vindicating, but it also served notice that USF, with only one senior – Petaluman Jack King – would definitely be a major contender the following year for the national championship. Those players returning, in addition to the starting five of Farmer, Brown, Day, Preaseau, and Dunbar, included Bill Mallen, Dave Lillevand, Bob Radanovich, Charlie Russell, John Koljian, and Ron Mancasola. In addition, USF would have its own heralded sophomore – Fred LaCour.

In the title game, North Carolina – in another triple overtime – defeated Kansas 54-53, in one of the most memorable NCAA championship games ever played. In fact, in 2006 Adam Lucas, the publisher of *Tar Heel Monthly*, wrote a book about the 1956-57 North Carolina team entitled *The Best Game Ever*.

Lastly, the NCAA championship tournament (now called the Final Four) proved to be the one and only appearance in this event for Kansas star Wilt Chamberlain.



Top Row: Hall of Fame Coach Phil Woolpert, John Koljian, Al Dunbar, Jack King, Bob Radanovich, Dave Lillevand, Bill Mulholland (mgr.). **Seated:** Charlie Russell, Mike Preaseau, Mike Farmer, Carl Boldt, Bill Mallen, Art Day, Gene Brown. Not pictured: Ron Mancasola, Assistant Coach Ross Giudice.

Photos courtesy of the University of San Francisco Archives