

*Wilt was 7-1.
Or was he?
Kareem's 7-2.
Or is he?
The NBA could
stand some truth
in packaging.*

AL DOMENICO IS THE PHILADELPHIA 76er trainer. Every year he measures players in their shoes and socks. "It gives them the benefit of the doubt," Domenico explains. "They play the game with their shoes on. What's the point of measuring them in their bare feet?"

As it turns out, not even this shoe-inflated figure is the one you read on your program. Take the case of Darryl Dawkins. No one takes Dawkins' program height of 6-11½ seriously, not assistant coach Jack McMahon ("A lucky 6-10"), not coach Billy Cunningham ("6-9½"), nor even Dawkins.

"I'm not really 6-11½," the center admitted as Domenico taped his ankles before a game. "Sometimes I wish I were. But I'd rather be listed the height I am, 6-10."

Would you like to confirm that, Darryl? He shook his head no and looked glum.

How did your listing get so inflated, Darryl? He shook his head once more. "The measuring scale might have been off?" he finally suggested.

"Or I might have been measured with my shoes on." As he said this, Dawkins shot a meaningful look at Domenico. "Us being human," he concluded, "we *do* make mistakes."

"Mistakes" is actually the least likely explanation for all the sleight-of-height that goes on in the NBA. Closer to the truth is the fact that height is one of the most fudged of statistics, along with age, salary and income tax. Studies have shown that Americans, men and women alike, exaggerate their height upward by an average of one inch, perhaps not without justification. Tall people, surveys show, are paid more—up to \$250 an inch per year. So, inflating one's height puts money in the pocket. This is especially



KOREN

TALL STORIES

By Ralph Keyes

true of professional basketball players. Centers get paid more than forwards and forwards more than guards. So college coaches traditionally have been boosters when listing their players' heights, not only to psych the opposition but to give them an edge in the draft.

When it comes to confirming heights, NBA scouts have to be devious or downright rude. New Jersey's Foots Walker recalls how interested scouts were constantly sidling up to him during the NAIA tournament trying to figure if he was 6-1 as listed. (He's not.)

Next best strategy is the eyeball esti-

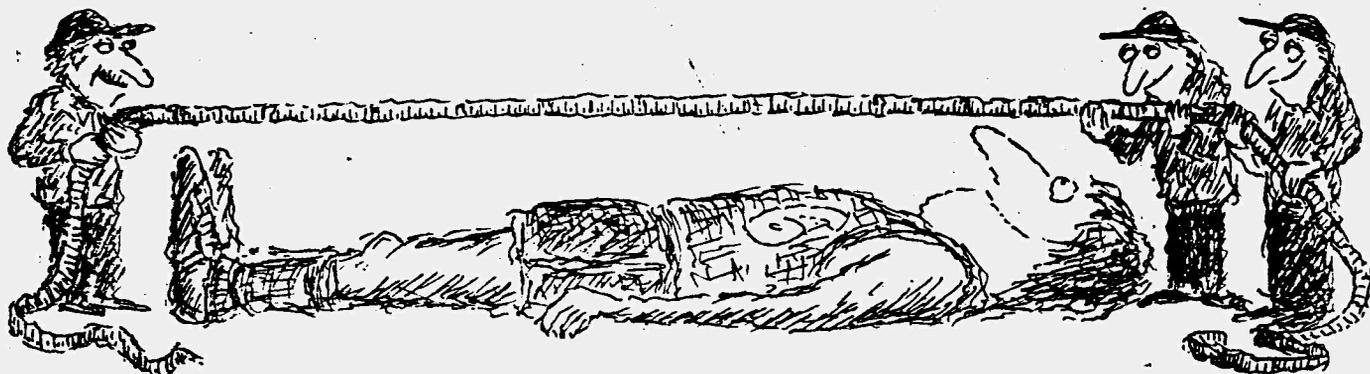
mate, pro personnel agree. one's shot gets blocked by a guard who's 5-11½, everyone's happier all around if this guard is listed at 6-2. Better not to have it known how tall he really is. Asked why he gave himself an extra two inches, Golden State's Lloyd Free answered, "Doesn't everyone?"

Throughout basketball's modern history, official heights have always been negotiable. Few of their fellow players believed Willis Reed or Bill Russell were anywhere near their official 6-10. Tom Gola—6-7 as an All-American at La Salle—stunned his fans in 1956 by not even reaching the U.S. Army maximum of 6-6. Uncle Sam, it

him, putting the figure at "7-1½." His girl friend since has said he was 7-5.

But how would she really know? It's hard for a mere mortal to judge height at that level. Looking up so far makes us lose perspective. This is why it's especially easy for taller players to fudge. Who's going to challenge them? One seven-footer says he can tell people he's anything from six-feet to nine-feet.

The human eye in general is a very poor tool for judging height. It's so easily deceived. We can only estimate the size of one object relative to that of another. When you can't be sure of the given size of anything—such as NBA



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Here it helps to be tall. Someone like Washington's 6-8 general manager Bob Ferry or San Diego's 6-6 scout Pete Babcock are human rulers. For this very reason, Clipper coach Paul Silas says he prefers tall assistants. When he was interested in a trade for Atlanta center Sam Pellom, for example, Silas sent Babcock for a look. Babcock returned to say that Pellom was well below his listed 6-9. Pellom stayed in Atlanta.

In the same spirit, INSIDE SPORTS sent its tallest researcher, 6-4 Pete McAlevy, to measure and eyeball a number of NBA players. His perspective came in handy. While trying unsuccessfully to get Atlanta's Charlie Criss up against a ruler, McAlevy noticed that he was looking "6-6" John Drew right in the eye across a crowded locker room. Not quite Heightgate but not exactly accurate either.

Kansas City's Phil Ford, on the other hand, cheerfully admitted he wasn't 6-2 as listed. The Kings' guard thought he might be 6-1½. The tape said 5-11½, and Ford said, "Hey, you got to measure my 'fro.'"

Hair aside, there's an element of common courtesy in awarding yourself an extra couple of inches. If some-

seems, has a better tape measure than La Salle's Christian Brothers.

Not all mis-listing of heights is upward. The best-known case of rounding down is that of Wilt Chamberlain.

As a player, Chamberlain always was adamant about being only 7-½. Few believed him. But he wouldn't be measured. Wilt once was presented with a "life-size" statue just this height. He looked down at it by at least an inch, some people said. Yet when his 1967 champion Philadelphia 76ers gathered for a 13-year reunion, Chamberlain finally agreed to be measured. The tape read a mere 7-½. What gave? Wilt's body, most likely. Sad to say, we all shrink a bit after age 30 because of spinal compression and actual loss of bone. The taller we are, the more there is to lose. In time such shrinkage can rob two or more inches from our peak height. So Wilt probably was over 7-1 at age 23. Two decades later he's getting down to 7-0. Who knows? If Chamberlain lives long enough he could wind up riding in the fifth at Pimlico.

Like Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is assumed to be taller than he's listed (7-2). When Abdul-Jabbar joined Milwaukee, then-Buck coach Larry Costello said his new center was 7-4. Abdul-Jabbar was quick to correct

players—what do you use as a standard?

How about Julius Erving? Erving was one of the players to measure right at list. Not that this made him happy, because Erving claims to be taller than his program height. But being listed on the short side gives him a psychological edge, he admits. On the trainer's scale he measured 6-6½ in sneakers and socks, or 6-6 bare-foot.

So, in the interest of truth-in-packaging, just as Greenwich mean time is used as a standard for setting clocks, why not use an NBA player or two as standards for judging everyone else? Since Philadelphia's 6-6 Erving and San Diego's 6-7 Michael Brooks measure exactly as they're listed and both are around the mean height of all NBA players, why not use these two to establish an Erving Mean Height in the east and a Brooks Mean Height in the west? Then, rather than depend on "listed" heights, we could develop a whole new system of measurement—"Erving + 2, Brooks - 3. . ."

This method of determining height might seem absurd. But what would you call the present system? ■

RALPH KEYES is the author of *The Height of Your Life*.

Illustrations by Edward Koren