Interview History

Interviewer:  Juliana Nykolaiszyn
Transcriber:  Jill Minahan
Editors:  Tanya Finchum, Juliana Nykolaiszyn, Latasha Wilson

The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The purpose of O-STATE Stories Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories revolving around Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (OAMC) and Oklahoma State University (OSU).

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on October 5, 2006.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Robert A. Kurland is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on April 7, 2008.
Robert A. Kurland was born December 23, 1924 in St. Louis, Missouri. He graduated from high school in Jennings, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, and then headed to Oklahoma A&M.

Towering above all other basketball players, Kurland was among the first 7-foot basketball players. He attended Oklahoma A&M and played for Coach Henry Iba from the 1942-43 season through the 1945-46 season. With Kurland on their team, Oklahoma A&M became the first team to win two consecutive NCAA championships, in 1945 and 1946. His 58 points against St. Louis in 1946 remains a school record.

As a senior, the Helms Athletic Foundation named Kurland college player of the year after he led the nation in scoring with 643 points in 33 games for an average 19.5 points per game. He scored 1,669 points during his four-year career under Coach Iba. Due to his ability to reach above the rim and deflect the ball to prevent the other team from scoring, the NCAA banned defensive goal tending in 1945.

Upon graduation, he went to work for Phillips Petroleum Company, playing for its AAU basketball team, the 66 Oilers. In the six seasons he played in AAU, the 66 Oilers won three national championships and compiled a 369-26 record. Kurland was named an AAU All-American six times and finished his career with 4,092 career points.

Kurland was the first player to play for two gold medal Olympic basketball teams, in 1948 and 1952. In 1961 he was inducted to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

After retiring as a basketball player after the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, he became an executive for Phillips Petroleum Company, where he stayed for 39 years, retiring in 1985.

Kurland is married to Barbara Ross Kurland. They have four children.
My name is Juliana Nykolaiszyn and today is April 7, 2008. I am in Sanibel, Florida interviewing Mr. Robert A. Kurland, better known as Bob Kurland, and it’s a pleasure to be here today and we thank you for making time to see us.

Well, you’re welcome, and we’re glad to see you.

All right. Well, Mr. Kurland, this is for a project at the OSU Library called “O-STATE Stories” and we’d like to begin today by learning a little more about you, where you’re from originally—could you start with that please?

Well, my mother was from Indiana and my dad was from St. Louis, Missouri and, as a result, I was born in St. Louis in 1924. We lived in the city of St. Louis or the suburbs until I left to go to college in 1942. Jennings High School was where I went to high school, which was just on the city limits of the city of St. Louis. It was a relatively small school but a very good one in terms of academic discipline, not for the super-intelligent, but for the kids that were made up of what America was in those days. There were immigrant families, mixed families of different national origins, and they all worked well together and I think we got a pretty good high school education for the standards in those days.

I eventually, of course, went to Oklahoma A&M in 1942 and finished there in 1946, and then went to work for Phillips Petroleum Company. So in between those changes, I did a lot of things, most of them as they related to the schools that were associated with athletics in one way or another. Over the years I was very fortunate to be involved in some interesting situations that brought a great deal of satisfaction in terms of a sense of accomplishment and actually was involved in some aspects of the game of basketball that changed the game in its history and its make-up and the way it’s played. It’s an interesting story in itself.
Nykolaiszyn: Now you mentioned that you were involved in some of the development of basketball’s game changes. Could you go into detail please?

Kurland: Well, if you want to be here for four hours, we can go all the way back to Naismith and the founding of the game of basketball in the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts. It was invented mostly to keep energetic young men out of trouble during the winter months in the cold climates, and the original rules were very simple and straightforward. They’re still mostly applied today, except that the game has changed radically with the changes in equipment and travel and additions to the rules or changes which made it a better game for the benefit of the fans. It’s a very competitive sport and really didn’t come into its own in this country, or the world for that matter, until the soldiers spread it around the world in World War II. That’s where basketball really had an opportunity to be known throughout the world because the soldiers could play basketball nearly anywhere—in the alley or in the street or in a gym—and it was a game that people liked. They still like it.

Regarding the changes that have come about, we were directly involved at Oklahoma A&M with the goal-tending rules and also had something to do with influencing the 30-second rule, which is the rule that says that you have to shoot the ball in 30 seconds. The guy who really led that charge in terms of my involvement in being involved in the goal-tending rules and the other things is Henry Iba, who was a remarkable coach in terms of being before his time, in terms of being able to interpret the various aspects of the game. He loved the game so much that he did not take advantage of the circumstance because of my height and size or the other kids that came along. He went along with the idea of changing the rules of the game to make it a better game for the participants and the fans.

So in all of this time, I got involved and we won the NCAA national championship in 1945 and ’46—the first team to do that. I went to the Olympics twice, once in London and once in Helsinki, and over the years was involved in some aspects of the game having to do with the, and you’re going to hear more about this in the next few years, “dunk shot” whatever that is and why it is as it is today. Those are long stories that I don’t know if we’ve got that much time.

Nykolaiszyn: Well, tell me how you first met Mr. Iba.

Kurland: Well, my high school coach was a man named Walter Rulon who went to Maryville Teachers College immediately after the time that Henry Iba was the coach there, before Mr. Iba left Maryville to come to Oklahoma State and the University of Colorado. Mr. Iba’s reputation as a man, and his character, his moral character, his leadership ability, his image as a
leader of young men was outstanding. Mr. Rulon never really met Mr. Iba, but he wrote him a letter and asked if he would be interested in my coming down to Stillwater for spring tryouts which Mr. Iba had, and it was Mr. Rulon who influenced me to give favorable consideration to Mr. Iba’s interest in me.

When the Oklahoma State, then it was Oklahoma A&M, basketball team came to St. Louis in 1942, the spring of ’42, they had a dinner at a place called Ruggeri’s, which was in south St. Louis, and it was an afternoon dinner. I took the bus, went down there and I went into the room and here was the Oklahoma A&M basketball team and Mr. Iba all in suits, or coats and ties and gentlemen—and made a great impression on me. Also the biggest impression I guess was the steak that they had, and I thought it was going to be a heck of a deal if I got associated with them.

But anyway, we went to Stillwater from St. Louis on a bus, a kid from Webster Groves and myself. Mr. Iba, in those days, had a three-day workout tryout, and he worked us pretty hard as high school kids. At the end of that time, he invited me into his office and he said, “I’ve never seen a young man like you before.” He said, “I don’t know whether you can play college basketball or not but if you’ll come to Oklahoma A&M—and you’ll stay eligible and you study and you do the job which will be assigned to you,” he said, “I’ll give you a scholarship at Oklahoma A&M.” And that’s all I needed because it was a time that the war had come on and other schools had dropped their scholastic activities, or their athletic activities, and Oklahoma State was a good, or well-known, school for engineering, and I thought at the time I wanted to be a civil engineer.

So Mr. Iba, Oklahoma A&M’s educational standards, and his basketball team’s reputation were all things that I needed, and particularly the job to help me get through school because my father made it very simple that he wanted me to go to college. We were sitting on the front stoop one day and he said, “Bob, I want you to go to college.” I was delighted. No one in our family had ever been to college at any level, and many of them had never finished high school. I was just tickled to death that he was thinking on those lines because this was in the middle of the Depression in 1939 or ’40. I couldn’t figure out, now where’s he going to get the money to send me to college? And he turned to me and he said, “And if you don’t go, you’re going to start paying room and board when you finish high school.” That was my incentive (Laughs) to find a way to get to college, and athletics was the tool to get it done.

So we went to Stillwater, and from that time on it was hard work. A great deal of effort was required, but it was an enjoyable time and a successful period in my life in terms of satisfaction of participating in
sports because I dearly loved to compete. I loved to play the game of basketball. Between Mr. Iba and myself and the help of some other folks in terms of developing skills and techniques for a big man I improved. I was a big kid, not very muscular, but big, tall, lanky and rather unique looking. People came to the first game that we had, a demonstration game, in Stillwater when I was a freshman. The gym, or the Gallagher Hall, was pretty well full. They came to see this seven-foot guy that was supposed to be some kind of phenomenon. I remember falling down three or four times and the crowd just laughed, but we kind of got the last laugh when I was a senior.

Nykolaiszyn  
*I would say so. Well, you mentioned that you had your eyes set on engineering. Did you stick with that path?*

Kurland  
No, I found out that when I had four tough courses—descriptive geometry, a second course in algebra, college chemistry, and English or literature, I’ve forgotten which or how they classify it—but when I loaded that up and then we would practice from seven o’clock until 9:30 every night, I found out that I wasn’t as smart as I thought I was. So I changed to the School of Education and really enjoyed the choice of courses that we had in terms of interest in things. I had a chance to look at things in terms of history, in terms of economics, in terms of natural sciences, but I really didn’t want to be a teacher, not a classroom teacher.

As I developed into a better player in my senior year, the world started to change in terms of what might be done in terms of using basketball as an entree into a career, as I did, by joining Phillips Petroleum Company with their basketball program or going into professional sports. But what most people don’t realize is that the war was over in 1945, or practically over, and then professional sports were just beginning to change because of transportation, of stadiums, but mostly because of TVs. People can sit on their fannies in their living room and vicariously participate in sports. America does just that and that’s where the money came in from advertising and the world changed. What you have today is a result of technological changes in terms of communication, and that affected sports because of the money involved and all the things all put together—but that’s another four-hour story.

Nykolaiszyn  
*Absolutely. Well, do you remember where some of your classes were held, some of the buildings?*

Kurland  
Well, I remember the old Chemistry building that was over—gee, probably where the Student Union is today, I guess. I remember that it didn’t have any sidewalks or ways to get to it other than to walk across what was lawn in the summertime or in the spring and in the wintertime
it was a pretty muddy place. The campus was certainly not like it is today in terms of buildings that were being utilized. They were still using Old Central. I was trying to recollect where the library was. I think it may have been in Old Central for all practical purposes. Oh, Morrill Hall was the School of Education and the new Engineering Buildings were referred to, but the campus was entirely different than it is today. It was a different institution, but I don’t think the kids are any better today than they were in those days.

Nykolaiszyn  How was Gallagher Hall set up?

Kurland

Gallagher Hall was, of course, built as an agricultural exposition facility, and the state put in—I’ve forgotten how many million dollars, but a lot of money in those days. And its purpose was kind of a sub-rosa thing, I guess, because they intended all the time to use it as an athletic facility and not so much as a demonstration hall for agricultural purposes. It fit into the college basic program as far as the agricultural sciences was concerned and the state legislature allocated the money, so they built it and it was named after Ed Gallagher who was a wrestling coach. In more recent years, they added Mr. Iba’s name to it as the outstanding basketball coach.

I lived there for three years, and we, as athletes with scholarships, had to work an hour a day in order to earn that—we were paid—the money was transferred—or the value of the money was transferred—for food and shelter actually. I lived in the Gallagher Hall with two other fellas in the building that faces the football field and that room is now gone, but we lived there for three years. It was very convenient for me because I could practice and get off the floor in ten minutes and be at my desk. I didn’t waste time going down to Swim’s or the drugstore and wasting time, so it was a great thing for me. But my job also included locking every door and window in that big building every night. During the war when the soldiers and the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services] and the sailors were having their little trysts in the upper floors of the Gallagher Hall, it was my job to run them out, so I interrupted a lot of romances by being the custodian, so to speak, in Gallagher Hall.

But it was a great thing for me because it caused me not to waste time, which I would have done I know, as others did, in terms of being tired after practice and wasting another hour before you get back to the books. That was really a help and a boon to me, but we didn’t have all the facilities for the football players in those days because we had the only bathroom with a tub in it where they could come over and treat their legs in the hot water. I had the football players during football season in my room along with my roommates every afternoon, which was kind of a pain in the neck, but we put up with it.
So it was pretty common back then for all the athletes to work?

Oh, yes. Yes, ma’am. Those who were on scholarship—now there were those who were trying and were on their own who had a tougher nut to crack as far as that was concerned, but we had an existence in those days that was certainly different because they didn’t have the facilities that they have today for the athletes. They were much more Spartan and a little less glamorous than (Laughs) what I think they have today. Kids are treated pretty well as athletes, if they can cut the mustard.

So you’re going to school and you’re working—did you have any free time to hang out on campus or off campus?

Well, in off-season you did, but during the basketball season, we really—practice started at seven o’clock and it was over at 9:30. By the time you got to the gym—had dinner and got to the gym, you really didn’t have much time during the season. In the off-season, yeah, you had some free time which you could do things with. We had one, two, maybe three theaters—or at least two theaters in the city of Stillwater. One up on the corner where the—it was—I’ve forgotten the name of it, but it was right across from the firehouse, and that was one of the movies. And during the war, the soldiers and the WAVES would be around that and around the theater downtown in lines that were three blocks long waiting to get in to see the movies.

Stillwater was not a great place for service people to come to because they had limited facilities for recreation and they would sneak down to a place called the Rock Castle, which was a little dance hall, and I suspect there was a little “mountain dew” going under the table (Laughs) for purposes of enjoyment. I never got down to the Rock Castle for three reasons—one, I never had any money, two, I never had a girlfriend, and three, I never had a suit to go in, so I found my activities sitting on the mailbox across from the theater up on the corner by the firehouse. That’s where I spent a lot of time.

Now you mentioned you practiced quite a bit.

Oh, yes, oh, yes.

Was it five days a week?

Generally speaking, it was five days a week, yeah, but as the season came on, we’d squeeze in a Saturday or maybe a Sunday afternoon. And during the holidays, I never came home in four years for Christmas or Thanksgiving or New Year’s. We practiced three times a day when we were in town in that period of time.
Nykolaiszyn: Now how would you travel to road games?

Kurland: Well, if the games were in Oklahoma City or down at Norman or even as far as Kansas City, we could go by car. But you’ve got to remember gasoline was rationed in those days. You had to have an “A,” “B” or “C” sticker—I’ve forgotten which now—in order to get the fuel to go. I mean it was relatively cheap as opposed to what it is today, but it was scarce. And then when we went to New York or Chicago or other places, we would travel by train—go over to Perry, Oklahoma, get on the train, and many is the time we were on trains that were moving troops and we’d have to stand in line on the train for an hour waiting to get something to eat with the soldiers. But going by airplane was out of the question because the general public just didn’t do that, and particularly a basketball team with no money.

Nykolaiszyn: What were home games like? Were there a lot of students that attended?

Kurland: Well, there were after we started to be an interesting team, yeah. My sophomore and junior/senior year were well attended. The fact of the matter is when I was a junior and senior, and particularly when I was a senior and we had gained some notoriety as a team and I had as an individual, the place would pack. It would be packed—absolutely packed—and people would start to fill up the Field House as soon as they would open the doors, and they would do that sometimes at five o’clock in the evening to get a seat because it was “hully-gully” for the seats for the students. And my job was to sweep the floor before every game and before every practice—every game and every practice—and so their favorite All-American was out there with two mops sweeping the floor with the fans in the stands. I doubt seriously that most of the “prima donnas” would do that today. They would be reluctant to take on that assignment, but that was part of my job.


Kurland: That’s right.

Nykolaiszyn: What was that like for you?

Kurland: Well, we had been to New York when I was a freshman and a sophomore and played in the New York Invitational Tournament. Those early years in ’42, ’43, ’44, the tournament in New York City, the National Invitational Tournament, held precedent over the NCAA, which was really only organized in about 1939. So New York was a central location for basketball. And we went to New York when I was a sophomore, and I think we got fourth place in that tournament. Gee, we didn’t have the best team in the world, and it was made up of people
who had already graduated from college, military people, and guys that hadn’t played much basketball. We didn’t get waxed, but we got beaten, but the trip to New York was nothing strange to us in the succeeding years.

In 1945, we had a different team. Actually I was the only guy that returned to school for the 1945 team. Every other player on it was a new addition but we welded it pretty well. We had an outstanding group of guys. You wouldn’t even look at them, I guess, in terms of initial examination as to whether or not they had any potential as basketball players, but God, they were tough guys—not mean, but just mentally and physically just tough, and welded into a great team. They were truly teammates that believed in one another.

We had one fella, who was an outstanding athlete, named Cecil Hankins who saved our bacon in the national tournament. The rest of us played reasonably well, but Cecil kind of held us together when we needed him. So we won that year. We beat New York University and the next year, we went back and we had been down the road before and had been through the experience and the pressure that is on you. We weren’t exposed as the kids are today to all the pressure that comes from the news media because Mr. Iba wouldn’t permit it. The only person that talked to the media was Mr. Iba. None of us were allowed to talk to the newspaper people because you can make stupid mistakes, being young, about a lot of things.

As a result, we were well-directed in terms of our activities and we knew what our limits were and what we were gonna do and how we were gonna play, what we were gonna run. That’s where you learn the lesson that I think is terribly important. You run what you practiced. It’s like people who are trying to sell you stocks today or investments, they’ll tell you, “Get a strategy, stick with it, don’t deviate, hang with it, but learn how to run your particular strategy.” Well, we were—after the ’45 season and a tough season in ’46, we knew what we were doing and we knew how to play the game. As a result, we beat North Carolina State, not easily, but enough to win the tournament for the second time, which was the first time it had ever been done.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What was the reception like back on campus?*

**Kurland** Well, not much. We came back and we got off the train over at Perry and the cars met us, brought us back to the campus. We all went back to our dormitories or wherever we were, and somebody about a week later said, “Gee, we won the national championship again. We’d better have a little get-together.” So we went over to the theater, which has since been remodeled. I guess a couple of hundred kids may have come over and
the girls got up and somebody said, “Rah, rah, rah. We won the championship. Rah, rah, rah,” and we all went home. It wasn’t any big deal.

Nykolaiszyn (Laughs) That’s interesting. Now outside of basketball, you ran track.

Kurland Well…

Nykolaiszyn Kind of?

Kurland Kind of. (Laughter) I was never a runner, but when I was in high school, I wound up on one rainy afternoon and I won the state championship as a high-jumper in the Class B schools. It’s because I had the muddy approach to the bar, and because I couldn’t buy track shoes because my feet were too big, they wouldn’t make them in those days, so I had a pair of baseball shoes. As a result of my being able to get traction in that muddy field with those baseball shoes, I made it maybe an inch or two above the other guys over the bar and wound up with a State-B class championship, which was kind of unique. But I was never a great track man but I enjoyed it. It was a good thing to kind of let off steam in the spring.

Nykolaiszyn Now on a whole, what was it like for you as a player to be guided and coached by Mr. Iba?

Kurland Well, Mr. Iba was the same age as my father. He was thirty-seven, as I recall, when I went to school, and so was my dad. And Mr. Iba impressed me as someone whose leadership could be accepted without question. He was a difficult coach in terms of getting us to accomplish what he wanted to get accomplished, but we had great respect for him and great confidence in his leadership. It wasn’t that he was a genius in developing things, but he would think things through. His forte was really defensive basketball rather than offensive basketball.

Probably, I learned more about the business of playing the position that I played as center from a man named Floyd Burdette, who was a captain in the Air Force and was one of those people that played in 1943-44. Burdette was about 6-foot-5 or 6, and probably had to stoop down just a little bit because anybody over 6-foot-6 couldn’t get in the military in World War II. And Floyd taught me more about playing the post position than Mr. Iba did, but then Mr. Iba would see things that caused me to work on different shots. Between Floyd Burdette and Mr. Iba’s examination of what a big man could do, we got pretty good at the type of offense that we ran. But, it required the support and the unification of the other four guys on the team the way we played in order to make it successful. That was the thing that I come back to—we ran the plays, we
ran the plays, we ran the plays—we never got excited—we ran the plays.

_Nykolaiszyn_  
_Did other teams get excited?_

_Kurland_  
_Oh, well, we presented somewhat of a challenge to them I would say. (Laughter)_

_Nykolaiszyn_  
_Now do you stay in touch with any of your former teammates?_

_Kurland_  
_Yes, I call Mr. Aubrey who was on that basketball team, and he was my first roommate when I went to college. He was the coach in Stillwater at Oklahoma State for a number of years. He still lives in Stillwater. I talk to Weldon Kern and J. L. Parks, who were also on that team, and many of the others are dead. They’re gone. They’ve disappeared, as have many of the other teams that were—fellas that were on the Olympic teams. I don’t like to look at those kind of pictures._

_Nykolaiszyn_  
_Now outside of basketball, you stayed pretty busy on campus. You were student council president…_

_Kurland_  
_Well…_

_Nykolaiszyn_  
_…twice?_

_Kurland_  
_…yes, yes._

_Nykolaiszyn_  
_How did that come about?_

_Kurland_  
_I don’t really know, but I think that there were—as I recall, there was some semblance of an “independent party.” I was not a fraternity man. After I was a senior and we had won the national championship two years and other things to go with that, the fraternity group were interested in having some “rah, rah” boys off of the athletic teams in their fraternities. So they came over and solicited us, but I ran as an independent, not as a fraternity guy. I guess there was a fraternity group and then the independents, the kids that were not in the fraternities or sororities, that really represented the two groups on the campus._

_I think mostly because of the fact that you’d get your name in the _O’Collegian_ a little bit more than somebody else that you wound up during the selection process on the council. I guess nobody else wanted the job as president and I got elected, but we played a little politics. My sister was on there my senior year and then Weldon Kern, who was one of my teammates, was married and he needed the job so I think as secretary, we paid him $25 a month to kind of help him along. So a little politics was involved._
But the great thing about that time was that the soldiers had come back, and their interest was not in small things. They were interested in their education. They were glad to be alive. They were glad to be back with their girlfriends and getting married and starting their families. They were interested in looking to the future, and they knew that education was very necessary. So the big things that the student council got into were nothing, and probably we sponsored or sanctioned two dances over in the old gym a year—two dances a year, and that was probably the extent of our involvement. Politics was pretty simple in those days. We didn’t have all the causes and reasons that kids are raising hell and wasting time that we have today.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Well, what was Homecoming like back then?*

**Kurland**  
I don’t even remember Homecoming. I don’t think I ever attended Homecoming. I was a parade marshal some years later for a Homecoming parade. It was fun to ride in a convertible and have a cowboy hat, but I don’t think I was (Laughs) much on Homecoming.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Do you remember any campus traditions or even traditions within athletics?*

**Kurland**  
Oh, not really. I remember some things that with girls I shouldn’t talk about.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Were you ever thrown in Theta Pond?*

**Kurland**  
Nope.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Oh, my goodness. You avoided getting thrown in Theta Pond?*

**Kurland**  
Yes. That’s one thing that, when I finally joined a fraternity, I made it clear that I didn’t need any type of corporal punishment nor did I want to get paddled nor was anybody invited to address my physical being.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Pretty important as an athlete.*

**Kurland**  
Yeah.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Well, what were some popular places on campus students would gather?*

**Kurland**  
Well, I mentioned the—I can’t remember the name of the drugstore, malt shop or whatever it was up there by the theater. Then the other place was at Swim’s there. It was right across from Eskimo Joe’s as you go up. As you walked up toward Gallagher Hall, it was on the right side and it was a place where you could get a bowl of chili for 15 cents and a
malt for 20 cents or 15 cents, and we could get breakfast in there for 15 cents, so it was one hang-out. And it had a dance floor that was about—oh, about as big as this area there—and the kids would come in there and, particularly the soldiers and the WAVES. They had a jukebox and that was where they danced or they went down on the weekend to the Rock Castle, but there weren’t that many hang-outs. The bars over there that—I went back to the campus one year and there was a whole street of bars and full of beer joints. We never had any of that stuff. We were too busy, and it was a busy time for people who were just thankful to be alive.

Nykolaiszyn: Well, is there a place on campus that is special to you, that brings back special memories?

Kurland: Well, the building—Gallagher Hall itself. Of course they’ve revised the building completely and the room that I slept in for years was gone. But I did have one token that I got from Gallagher Hall. The first year I was there, they recognized the fact that my feet spread out over the end of the bed, this iron bed with a chicken-wire spring in it. So Mr. Iba prevailed on the prison down at McAlester to build me a 7-1/2-foot single bed made out of solid oak, and I had that for three years. When I graduated from school, Mr. Iba says, “You can have your bed.” That’s the only thing I ever got from Oklahoma State except for an education and all the other things that went with it. So I borrowed a teammate’s car, put the bed on top of the car, on top of the mattress, and drove out of Stillwater. I had $25 in my pocket that I got from my dad and went to work for Phillips Petroleum Company. That’s the way I left town.

Nykolaiszyn: Do you still have the bed?


Nykolaiszyn: Now you did join Phillips Petroleum...

Kurland: That’s right.

Nykolaiszyn: Did you entertain any offers of playing professionally?

Kurland: Well, there were two guys at the time that were the outstanding players from the standpoint of notoriety. George Mikan was one of them and I was the other one. George and I had offers to come into some pro teams for maybe $15,000-$17,000, which was no small amount of money in 1946. On the other hand, I was born in a situation that was rather difficult during the Depression and what I wanted was a job, stability, opportunity, and a company that had some semblance of promise in the future. Now Phillips Petroleum Company had a basketball team that
traveled around the United States and was used for public relations purposes, and you understand that the idea of big arenas did not exist. The arenas didn’t exist, but there were companies like Phillips, 20th Century Fox, Allen Bradley Company, Goodyear Tire Rubber Company, a bank in Denver, all of whom had a basketball team that was sanctioned by the AAU, which controlled basketball in those years in the United States. They were used for the purpose of spreading goodwill in the name of the company that they were advertising.

Now, I looked at Phillips and there were two guys—two or three people who had gone to work for Phillips from Oklahoma A&M—a fella named Harry Easter and another one named Cab Renick, who was a fine basketball player, an Indian boy—who had gone to work for Phillips, and they would come over and talk to me. “Why don’t you think about Phillips?” So as time went by and the offers from cigar companies, meat-packing companies—came in and they never talked in solid terms about the exact amount of money or any warranty. If you tear up a knee, are you gonna get your money—were they solvent, this and that and so forth.

I finally made up my mind that I didn’t want all that pressure to have to re-sell myself and what I really wanted, recognizing—and this was very important—I knew what my personal skills and abilities were in terms of the game of basketball. The way I played the game, somebody had to throw me the ball. Now you’re going into a real bear’s den in terms of going into professional sports where everybody wants to toot his own horn and get the light to shine on him. If nobody throws me the ball, what happens? I’m not very effective. Now, Phillips Petroleum Company—it wasn’t that they had a basketball team that went around the country getting beaten, but their purpose was not so much to win the games but to spread the good name of Phillips Petroleum Company. It was a safer place to go to Phillips Petroleum Company and I also had friends within the company that assured me that Phillips’ future in the fertilizer business and the chemical business and the plastic business—and they had gotten into aviation fuels as a result of the work that they did in the war—was a good solid company that had a lot of opportunity associated with it.

So I went to work for Phillips at a salary that was equivalent to a young graduate engineer and the company, in terms of the opportunities they presented to me, was great. I was involved over the years in different projects that were unique and groundbreaking. For instance, the way you buy your gasoline today—well, there were three of us that were instrumental in starting the whole business of self-service gasoline. I ran a plastics company. I ran a fertilizer company and we developed and promoted using anhydrous ammonia as a fertilizer. I was a general sales
manager for the eastern United States—so all of those things happened to me.

There were other basketball players—among them, Bill Martin, Pete Silas, Paul Endicott—all of whom were Phillips basketball players who were presidents or chairmen of the board, and the reason was, they worked harder than I did. They did. I lived a life. I left my work in the office at six o’clock at night and didn’t bring it home to my family. I had a good family life and I traveled a lot, but it was a rewarding experience. I’d do the same thing over again. Maybe if life—one of the basketball players from Stillwater got $64 million dollars for five years—now, I’d have to think about that. (Laughs) But in those days at that time with what was going on with the potential insolvency of the basketball teams, no big arenas, no TV, it was a dicey thing as to how you went. So I took the safe road and fortunately it turned out to where I think I had a pretty rewarding life.

Nykolaiszyn: And did you work in Oklahoma? Were you based in Oklahoma?

Kurland: Oh, let’s see. We started out in Bartlesville. We went to Denver, to Wichita, Kansas, to Memphis, Tennessee, back to Bartlesville, to Cincinnati, Ohio, to Atlanta, Georgia, back to Bartlesville, and that’s where we wound up the music.

Nykolaiszyn: And what year did you retire?

Kurland: 1985. So I’ve been retired for—gosh, what is that? ’85, that’s twenty, twenty-two, twenty-four years—twenty-four years? Phillips was a fine company—had its problems, but their association with ConocoPhillips today has preserved their company in a manner which fits. I think that they’ve done a marvelous job.

Nykolaiszyn: And did you enjoy playing basketball with them?

Kurland: Oh, yes. Yeah. We went to South America. Of course we traveled all over the United States. We played about 66 to 70 games a year and we played in small towns, big towns. And because of our association with Phillips, and Phillips’ association with AAU [Amateur Athletic Union], we were exposed to the Olympics. Had we not been associated with the AAU, the opportunity to play in the Olympic games wouldn’t have existed. So it all worked out fine.

Nykolaiszyn: Tell me about the Olympics. What was that experience like for you?

Kurland: Well, the 1948 Olympics, the team was made up of those people who had won the AAU—Amateur Athletic Union—basketball championship
and the NCAA championship. University of Kentucky, with Adolph Rupp, had won the NCAA tournament, and Phillips won the AAU portion of it. Then they played a game to see who would be the head coach—Adolph Rupp or a man named Bud Browning. We beat them, much to Mr. Rupp’s chagrin because we chose a black man named Barksdale on our team, and Mr. Rupp wasn’t much of a guy that—well, he’s a fella who never played a black man in his life.

But in any event, we went to London and we went to Wembley Stadium for the opening ceremonies and that was one moment, a couple of moments in the Olympic experience that were memorable to me. We looked down and there were 3,000 athletes that are from here to that other side of that telephone pole or further over there, and the war was over. London was still partly in shambles, and when you flew over in an airplane you could still see bombed-out buildings and craters and so forth. You were sick and tired of the world being in a turmoil—so you looked out there and the music was playing and the people were making speeches and it just—I personally had hoped that the Olympics would somehow bring people from all over the world into a common bond and there would be some contribution toward peace and quiet and cooperation. Well, that was a moving deal.

We went ahead and won the tournament, which wasn’t that difficult that particular year. The Russians, however, came over and they didn’t enter a team, but they brought people with cameras, tape recorders of sorts, and notebooks, and they went to every game and made notes. Well in 1952, they came over with a bunch of guys that were pretty good athletes, but were not polished as far as the game was concerned, and they played a rough-and-tumble game. By this time, politics had entered into it and Mr. Khrushchev and his buddies were broadcasting the idea of world communism and so forth. The Russians lived in a separate compound and we were over here in another one. We played them twice and beat them both times, but it was well-rumored that their purpose in life was to whip the United States for propaganda purposes, and it was our purpose not to let that happen. And as a result, the games were tense but not enjoyable from the standpoint of a basketball contest. It was a political demonstration, so to speak.

The Argentineans and the French for that matter, got very upset during the ’48 deal where they accosted the referee and did him some damage. The Chinese in ’48 had a little Chinese guy that pretended to run through my legs and we had a lot of fun. We stayed at Uxbridge in England, which was the principal base for the British pilots that defended London, and all that history was right there in front of us. We slept in the same beds that these guys had used while fighting the war.
Then when we went to Helsinki in 1952, the ambassador to Finland invited the basketball team out to his country place and—this is an interesting story—and everybody had to take a sauna bath. Do you know what a sauna bath is? A sauna bath is you get in a little cubicle and it’s heated with hot stones actually, and you get in there and you perspire. You’re naked and you beat yourself with birch boughs. Then you’re supposed to go out and jump in the cold water. Well, at the ambassador’s home, the men went into the sauna bath first and they jumped in the lake and came out. Then the ladies went in and they were all in the lake and they’re nude up to their chins in the water, and one of them looked up and right there by—see where the telephone pole is over there—there’s a guy sitting up there in a watch tower with a rifle. This one lady says, “Oh, my goodness.” She said, “There’s a man up there with a gun,” and the hostess said, “Yes,” she says, “that’s a Russian soldier.” And this lady ducked under the water, you know, and the lady said, “Oh, my dear. Don’t be upset. I hardly think you’ll see him at tea.” (Laughter) But we had things like that go on.

I had a great time. And you met people that were marvelous athletes and got to spend a little time with them. You came to appreciate the fact that there are some wonderful, wonderful, wonderful people that are involved in sports and most of those that are on top are pretty good folks.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Now you were the first athlete to win back-to-back...*

**Kurland**  
Yeah, yeah.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*...two gold medals?*

**Kurland**  
Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, sure did. Those things go so fast that it’s too bad. I took a thousand pictures with a little Argus C-3 in those days. After the games were over and in London, we went over to Paris for three days and we did drink a little champagne and a good thing I took the camera. (Laughter)

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*You could blackmail a few teammates, I would think. All right. Now what year were you inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame?*

**Kurland**  
1961, and it was before the present physical facilities for the Basketball Hall of Fame were erected. And between then and now I was president of the Basketball Hall of Fame for several years. The Basketball Hall of Fame was founded mostly by college coaches, but halls of fame and churches are much alike. It’s easy to build this church out of stone and have a building and so forth, but that’s not the principal problem. The principal problem is keeping it going. Where do you get the money and
the support that you need to keep the church going? Well, putting up edifices for people that have achieved some fame in a sport isn’t a very smart thing to do because many of the people that are involved in it have better use for their money than to continue to blow their own horn, you know. So what happened was that the Basketball Hall of Fame as we know it today is now supported by the NBA.

The NBA has gobbled up everything it can related to basketball, and it isn’t that the NBA doesn’t do an excellent job of running the programs that are the proper programs for the Basketball Hall of Fame in terms of selecting people who should, and rightfully, be recognized as contributors to the game, it’s the fact that they’re gonna do it the way the NBA wants to do it rather than the “old guard.” But the coaches who originally founded the Basketball Hall of Fame have all disappeared, men like Mr. Iba or Adolph Rupp for that matter who—in spite of his personal likes and dislikes—was a great basketball coach; Phog Allen from Kansas, Dutch Lonberg from Northwestern University, [Joe] Lapchick from St. John’s, or Harold [Howard] Cann from New York University—all those men were men who dedicated their lives to the sport and the game of basketball. They ran the thing, but they had no way of generating the money necessary to sustain it and to carry on the expenses that are involved in running something like that, and from your personal experience, you know that that’s hard to do.

Well, you can’t be critical of the NBA and yet you don’t like the fact that it is now associated with an organization whose basic purpose is to make money. You would like to have it on a basis of something that is not related to money all the time, but it works out well, and it exists today. If you’ve never seen it, it’s a great tribute to the game and to the people who have participated in the sport from the coaches down to the contributors to the people like good announcers who have spread the gospel for the game. It should be supported from other aspects in the modern world for what the NBA is doing for it. But the game changes just as the rules change. We changed the rules on goal-tending and that type of thing. That’s an interesting story real quick. People say, “Well, why did they change the goal-tending rule?” Are you a golfer?

Nykolaiszyn  
*No, I’m not.*

Kurland  
Okay. Is your husband a golfer?

Nykolaiszyn  
*Yes.*

Kurland  
Okay. Is he a pretty good golfer?

Nykolaiszyn  
*No.*
Okay. If he’s a bad golfer—good golfer or bad golfer—if you’ll give me two chances, called “gotcha’s,” I can whip anybody in the world playing golf. Now, what’s a “gotcha?” A “gotcha” is where the guy stands up on the tee and he’s right on his backswing and about the time he’s right about up to where he’s just about to come back, you take your own club and you jam it up between his legs, and he kind of gets upset. Well, that’s one “gotcha.” Now the second “gotcha,” you stand behind him and he gets back there, and he doesn’t know what’s coming—you’ve got him—a “gotcha” and you don’t have to spend your “gotcha.”

In basketball, when they used to throw the ball up in the air with the idea of it coming down through the basket and you would go get the ball before it got into the cylinder of the basket—the next time he shot the ball, it wasn’t the fact that he didn’t shoot it properly, but we knew if he shot it properly it was gonna be knocked down—he thought. Now, that made the goal-tending a psychological problem for the players. It was not fair because only the very tall or agile people could do it. It’s not a fair rule, it’s not a fair deal, and so it was the best thing in the world to get rid of it and we perfected that. We got to the point where we ran a defense that was built around goal-tending, and we had “gotcha’s” all afternoon (Laughter) or all evening on them. It was a bad rule and so Oklahoma State, or Oklahoma A&M, and Mr. Iba particularly, was one of those who advocated we not allow anybody to touch that ball coming down toward that basket. Now today you still see these guys today, and particularly in pro basketball who are great athletes who can get the ball going up, so that’s fair because the other guys can still do that.

Then the other thing is that we got involved in the “dunk.” When they outlawed the “dunk” they really outlawed it because of guys like Chamberlain. Wilt and Jabar were so agile and big enough that they could throw the ball down. Some said, “Well, that’s not fair.” But in the early days, the “dunk” was outlawed not because it was an unfair advantage, it was because the rims wouldn’t bend when they hit them. So if you threw the ball down and your hand came down on the rim and bent it down, you know what you had to do? You had to go back and get the step ladder with the janitor and bring it back on the court and push the goal back up so you could finish the game. Now they’ve got goals that spring back—so the “dunk” can come back, and that’s what you see with all these guys who are making the crowd happy by doing the “dunk.” The “dunk” is a spectacular thing, but it doesn’t really contribute to the scoring aspect of the game. But we were involved in that kind of thing and it made for interest in the game and got your name spread around the newspapers.

What’s your favorite basketball moment?
The favorite basketball moment—I mentioned a man named Sam Aubrey who when I came to Stillwater in 1942 was my first roommate. He was one of those juniors who was going off to war and he went to war and he got shot in Sicily, right through the hip. He came back in the spring of 1945, and he came up the walk toward Mr. Iba’s office and I was over there. I hung around there quite a bit because I lived there. And Sam came up—he was married at the time—with his new wife and he was on crutches, and I was standing there watching him come up the walk and he came into Mr. Iba’s office on this spring day in ’45. Mr. Iba says, “Come in my office, boy.” So Sam went in there and he was in there for about, oh, twenty minutes or so. Came out and took his crutches and waved goodbye and went on down the walk. Mr. Iba was standing there and he said, “My, God. That boy wants to come back here and play basketball,” and he’d made him a promise. He said, “I told him that if he came back, he’d have his athletic scholarship.”

So Sam came back and we started basketball practice and we ran exercises where you ran forward, sideways, and moved your feet and so forth, and invariably Sam’s hip would give out and he’d fall down. I was running right alongside of him one day and his leg collapsed and he was lying on the floor and Mr. Iba came over and in his own gruff way says, “Boy,” he says, “are you all right?” Sam’s part Indian—he’s a Yuchi Indian—and he says, “Yes, sir. I’m okay.” We played through the season, and when we were standing on the floor getting the award for the national championship, Sam was the first-string guard. He had more guts than any guy I’ve ever, ever seen, and I suspect that I got more satisfaction out of associating myself with him than anybody else I ever played with. He’s quite a guy.

Absolutely. Well, Oklahoma State is a very interesting school. The students and alumni have such loyalty for this institution. What do you think it is that sparks this loyalty?

I can’t tell you what it is today because I really don’t know, and I don’t know whether or not we’re going in the right direction in terms of this constant emphasis on gaining notoriety through athletics and seeking support, financial support and other kinds of support. I think Mr. Pickens has a right to do what he wants with his own money, but I don’t know that we’re—under today’s circumstance in the country and with the needs of the people, that we wouldn’t be better off finding ways to guarantee that the brightest have every opportunity to go as far as they possibly can. If we don’t have a university that works toward the time when the brightest children and the brightest young men and women that we can find are receiving as much education as they choose to absorb and to go as far as they can go based on their abilities, then we’re making a mistake.
I don’t know whether or not putting money sources in athletics is right or wrong because I don’t understand the workings. I’m told that when they have winning athletic teams, the contributions and support from the alumni is much greater than otherwise. Because I don’t know anything about that, I can’t say I’m right or wrong. But I know one thing—that we make a mistake if we don’t make sure that our students are getting every—our best students now—our best students and not the hangers-on or the kids who are going because their folks want to get them out of the house, but if we don’t take our assets and make better people out of our brightest minds, we’re making a mistake.

Athletics is a great thing and a great unifier in a university, in building spirit and loyalty and financial support eventually, if you have something of which you can maintain a sense of pride in. And I think at Oklahoma State, there is that feeling that there is still a great deal of integrity, a great deal of honesty, of independent thinking and self-reliance that some schools don’t have. They’ve still got it at Oklahoma State. You can see in the people’s eyes as you watch them when you come to a game like that. It’s an interesting place, and my two daughters went to school there—one of them went on and got a MBA degree and the other one has two degrees from Oklahoma State, so it’s treated us fairly and deserves credit.

My two sisters wanted to come to Oklahoma A&M. I requested an appointment with Dr. Bennett. His office called me in a day or so, and I said, “Could you please look into the possibility of getting my sisters’ out-of-state fees waived, because they were both working their way through school?” We didn’t have money. And he says, “Oh, yes, Bob. I think I can handle that.” But that was the only thing I ever asked for—well outside of a great experience and an education of sorts, (laughs) which is my fault for not expanding. Oklahoma A&M was a great place to spend four great years.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Well, do you have any advice for students today?*

**Kurland**  
Utilize your time because that’s the only thing that we’re all given. If you don’t plan to use your time in today’s world and capitalize on that, you’re not going to win the race.

I was fishing with a man up in Canada, a very successful businessman. I said, “Why are you a success?” He answered, “Because I use my time. I use every minute, I plan every minute of my day. This isn’t to say that I don’t have time for relaxation and pleasure but I plan it. I use time.” Americans have got where their hips are too wide.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*(Laughs) Well is there anything you’d like to mention that we haven’t*
No, no, no, I don’t think so. I could go off in a thousand directions and tell you lots of little stories, but I think we’ve covered a lot of ground.

What’s your favorite story from your college days? Do you have that one story you always tell when the family gets together?

Oh, gee. No, I guess, not a favorite story. I met Pete Maravich – you know Pete Maravich? Pete was a great basketball player. He died when he was 42 years old, I think, but he was one of the best I’ve ever seen. He played at LSU. He said, “Oh, Mr. Kurland, it’s a pleasure to know you. You’re a legend.” I said, “Pete, the thing about legends is that that’s exactly what they are. You can believe them if you want to, but you don’t have to. If it makes you feel good to believe the legend, then believe the legend.”

Well, I appreciate you taking time out to meet with me today. It’s been wonderful hearing your stories from back during Oklahoma A&M days.

Oh, yeah. Yeah. There’s a lot that a lady shouldn’t know. (Laughs)

Understandable, understandable.

------- End of interview -------