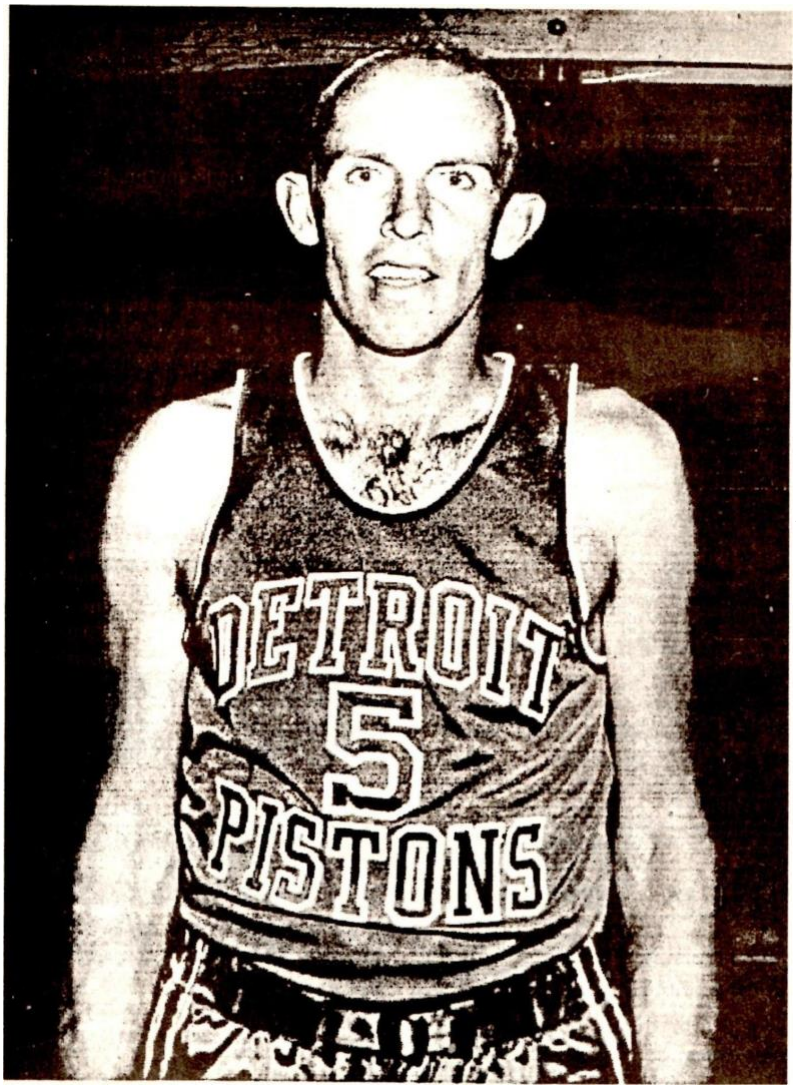


George Yardley: the NBA' S Original "Bird"

The Ft. Wayne-Detroit Pistons franchise has had many great players in its history, but the first was 1957-58 NBA scoring leader George Yardley, the first player in league history to top 2,000 points in one season.

by Jim Sargent

During the 1957-58 season, George Yardley, a high-leaping, high-scor ing 6-foot-5 forward who wore No. 12 for the Detroit Pistons, topped the National Basketball Association in scoring with an average of 27.8 points.

Yardley poured in 2,001 points, breaking the NBA's old mark of 1,932 set in 195152 by the Lakers' big center, George Mikan.

Yardley broke the record during the Pistons' first year in the Motor City. The franchise, owned by Fred Zollner, had been based in Fort Wayne, Ind., since beginning play as the Zollner Pistons in the old National Basketball League in 1941.

Yardley was a standout performer for six of his seven years in the NBA. Scoring 9,063 points in 472 games, he averaged 19.2 points and 8.9 rebounds in seven seasons. A consistent performer. the "Bird" hit for 20.3 points and grabbed 9.9 rebounds during seven years in the playoffs.

Even though he became the first NBA player to score 2,000 points, and although he scored 9,996 points in regular and postseason games combined, today Yardley's name is hardly familiar to basketball fans.

"Yardley may have been the best athlete in the league in the middle 1950s," Hall of Fame forward Tom Gola told Terry Pluto, whose excellent book, Tall Tales (1992), described the players and the league during the pre- 1970 era. "He was 6-foot-6 and could run and jump all day long."

One of the best jump shooters of the mid1950s, at a time when three-fourths of the players preferred set shots, Yardley's achievements have been obscured by more prolific scorers.

For example, Bob Pettit scored 2,105 points the next year, while averaging 29.2 a game. But in 1961-62, Wilt "The stilt" Chamberlain shattered Pettit's record with 4.029 points - a remarkable average of 50.4 per game.

Still, during the NBA's first 10 years, 1949 to 1959, Yardley proved himself one of the league's best players, in effect, the Larry Bird of the decade. Yardley, however, has not been selected to the Basketball Hall of Fame.

Born Nov. 23, 1928, in Hollywood, calif., George Harry Yardley Ill grew up in a well-to-do achievement-oriented family.

His family put up a backboard when George was

7 or 8 years old, and the slender youth began shooting the ball.

Young George was a classic late bloomer. Not tall for his age, he never made the school team in elementary or junior high.

He was still too small and too slow to make the varsity at Newport Beach High, so he played in recreation leagues.

Six feet tall and weighing about 140 pounds at graduation, Yardley, a bright and serious student, chose to attend Stanford University and study mechanical engineering. As a sophomore in 1947-48, he became the 12th or 13th man on Stanford's varsity. scoring 52 points in 18 games. But he started as a junior and averaged 12.3 points.

Yardley came into his own as a senior. He led the Cardinal in scoring with 423 points, averaging 16.9 points per game. He was an honorable mention All-American.

Yardley also received his nickname. the "Bird," at Stanford, but it had nothing to do with basketball. Later, his teammates and opponents assumed the name came from Yardley's great jumping ability he could soar like a bird with a vertical leap of two-and-a-half feet. Instead, as a freshman pledging a fraternity in 1946, Yardley, then 17, was younger than most frosh - many of whom were World War Il veterans. So he got stuck with the dirty jobs. He roomed with an ex-soldier who pointed out that in the Army, guys who did the dog work were called "yardbirds."

Yardley was dubbed "Yardbird." But as nicknames are often short, he became "Bird." So much for soaring!

Yardley graduated with his class in 1950, but he decided to stay at Stanford to complete a master's degree in business. The Korean War, which began in June 1950, encouraged him to further his studies. Yardley played AAU basketball for the national championship Stewart Chevrolet team. and he was voted MVP in the AAU. He had long inspired to make the 1952 Olympic team. but his hand was broken in his final AAU game, which blocked him from the Olympics.

"I played my first year of AAU," Yardley said, "and I went into the service for two years. I played for a Navy team. We were at Los Alamedos Naval Air Station, which is in the Los Angeles area. We won the all-service championship in quite a few sports."

The Pistons had drafted him in 1951, and after his Navy hitch, Yardley decided to turn pro. But Fort Wayne only offered $6,000, which Yardley spurned. After all, he had a college degree, and he didn't want to move east just to play basketball. Threatening to stay in California to work and play AAU ball, Yardley won a first-year contract for $9,500, more than double the NBA average in 1953, plus, he received a $1,500 bonus. By 1958, he was earning $30,000, a very good NBA salary for that decade.

Yardley, however, did not make it as a regular in his rookie season, although he did play more in the season's second half.

"Larry Foust, a big 6-10 center," Yardley recalled, "was our top player at the time. The starters at forward were Mel Hutchins and Jack Molinas (both 6-6), who got a reputation as the 'fixer.' We also had Fred Schaus, a 6-5 forward, and Monk Meineke (6-7). So I was the fifth forward.

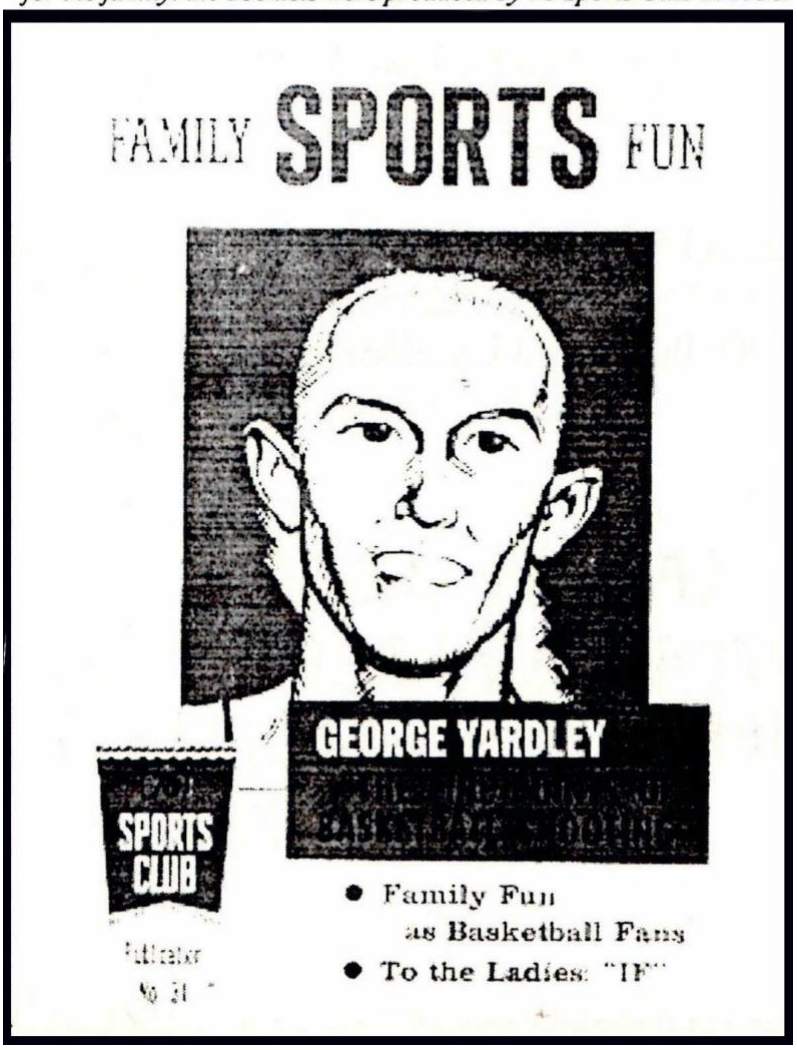
"What happened was that Schaus was traded, Molinas was forced to leave basketball because of a point-fixing scandal, and Meineke, who was rookie of the year the previous year, was hurt. So I played more minutes late in the season."

Yardley, usually listed as 6-5 and 195 pounds, had a good rookie year. He played in 63 of the team's 72 regular-season games, averaging 9 points and 6.5 rebounds.

Fort Wayne finished third in the four-team Western Division (the NBA had nine teams) with a record of 40-32. But in the confusing round-robin of three-team divisional playoffs in 1954, the Pistons lost four straight games, two each to Rochester and Minneapolis. The Lakers then outlasted Syracuse in seven games, winning another championship in George Mikan's final year.

In 1954-55, when the 24-second clock revolutionized the NBA, Fred Zollner hired a new coach, former official Charley Eckman, who had never coached in his life. Despite Eckman's inexperience, the talented Pistons had their best leading the West with a 43-29 mark. With the shot clock forcing a faster game, Fort Wayne and Syracuse rose to the top in the Western and Eastern Divisions, respectively, in the eight-team league (Baltimore disbanded Nov. 27, 1954). Both finished with 43-29 records.

This is one of a series of booklets designed to make sports more fun for the family. the booklets were produced by 76 Sports Club in 1958.



Fort Wayne had no set plays. Instead, the talented Pistons freelanced, while Eckman tossed in humor. But more important, the coach started Yardley. Eckman told Pluto that he was proud of playing Yardley.

"He became the first player to score 2,000 points in a season," Eckman commented for Tall Tales, "and he was such a skinny, chalkywhite bastard that you thought he was dying from malnutrition."

Led by Yardley, who scored 17.3 points a game with 42 percent shooting, and Foust, who averaged 17 points, the Pistons sported a fast, balanced attack. Hutchins (12 points), guard Max Zaslofsky (11.2points), guard Andy Phillip (9.6 points) and reserve guard Frankie Brian (9.7 points) all made solid contributions, while, Foust, Yardley

and Hutchins each averaged at least nine re-bounds per game. In the playoffs, Fort Wayne, after knocking out Minneapolis in four games, finally lost the championship to Syracuse in seven contests. Each team won all the games on their home court, even though the Pistons played in Indianapolis, not in the friendly confines of Fort Wayne Memorial Coliseum.

The Nationals took the title contest, 9291 , at Syracuse's cramped Onondaga County Arena. Guard George King sank a free throw to give the Nats the final margin. Seconds later, he double teamed guard Andy Phillip, and stole the ball to seal the win.

"In 1954-55, I played my first full season," Yardley recollected, "and we got into the playoffs, and we lost the final game by only one point.

"We had an excellent team that year at Fort Wayne. Larry Foust led in scoring, and I was second. We might have been a little weak at guard. We had Frank Brian, Fred Scolari and Max Zaslofsky, but all three were near the end of their careers.

"In the seventh game of the finals, we lost to Syracuse by one point, 92-91. At one time in the first half we were up by 17, and we led all through the second half, and then King stole the ball and that was the game. Dolph Schayes, whom I later played with at Syracuse, hit 28 to lead all scorers."

The next year, with virtually the same lineup, Fort Wayne again paced the Western Division - but with a mark of 37-35. The Lakers, the St. Louis Hawks (having moved from Milwaukee) and the Rochester Royals all played sub-.500 basketball. Still, the Philadelphia Warriors became the class of the NBA with a 45-27 ledger, followed by Boston at 39-33.

Yardley again topped the Piston scorers at 17.4 points, Foust averaged 16.2 and Hutchins scored 12 points, while reserve Bob Houbregs, a 6-8 forward/center, averaged 111.1, and rookie guard Chuck Noble tallied 9.5 points.

In the playoffs the Pistons dropped Pettit and the Hawks, three games to two. But the Paul Arizin-led Warriors, having beaten Syracuse in five, blasted Fort Wayne, four games to one, and won the championship. Pettit led all scorers during the regular season with a 25.7 average, netting 1 ,849 points, followed by Arizin, who scored at a 24.2 clip and totaled 1,741 points.

George Yardley is shown at left during his days at Stanford.

But in the playoffs, Arizin, a great jump shooter and later a Hall of Famer, hit for 28.9 points a game, plus the Warrior starting five averaged no less than 12 points. Against such firepower, the Pistons did not have enough scoring.

Speaking about Arizin recently, Yardley observed, "He played the best game I ever witnessed against us in the 1955-56 playoffs. Mel Hutchins, the best individual defensive player in the game, had a sensational game, blocking numerous shots taken by Arizin. Paul always got the ball back from the indignity and seemed to score every time he was embarrassed."

In 1956-57, the Pistons tied for first in the West, although the three top teams - Fort Wayne, St. Louis and Minneapolis - all finished with record of 34-38. Yardley again topped the club, averaging 21.5 points on 41 percent shooting, followed by Hutchins and Foust, both averaging 12.4. New guard Gene Shue hit 10.9 and Houbregs tallied 11.2 points.

Yardley also averaged 10.5 rebounds, which ranked ninth in the league. but 6-10 rookie center Bill Russell, joining the Celtics after playing in the Olympics, led the NBA, averaging 19.6 boards in 48 games.

The Pistons bowed out of the playoffs with two tough losses to the Lakers, 131-127 at Minneapolis, and 110-108 at Fort Wayne. Yardley led all scorers, pumping in 57 points in two games. but Minneapolis, behind bulky forward Clyde Lovellette (24.2 scoring) and guard "Slick" Leonard (21.4 average), outlasted Fort Wayne.

The following season the Pistons made several personnel changes, and Zollner moved the franchise to Detroit, where they shared Olympia Stadium with the Red Wings. The Pistons slipped one game to a 33-39 record, which tied them with the transplanted Cincinnati Royals. The Hawks, with forwards Pettit and Cliff Hagan having fine years, led the West at 41-31.

Detroit's high note came with Yardley's super season: he led the league with a 27.8 average, scoring 2,001 points on 41 percent shooting, and he led his team with a rebound average of 10.7.

Playmaking guard Dick McGuire, acquired from the Knicks, ranked second to Bob Cousy in assists with 454, a 6.6 average, and many of McGuire's feeds went to the "Bird."

Most of Detroit's remaining scoring came from three players: Gene Shue, who averaged 15.6; forward Harry Gallatin at 14.9; and 7-foot center Walter Dukes at 11.2. McGuire also chipped in at an 8.1 clip. But the top reserves, including 6-6 forward Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, Houbregs, Noble and guard Billy Kenville, averaged between seven-eight points each.

For most of the season Yardley was unstoppable. He peaked with a 52-point performance against Syracuse on Feb. 4, 1958, and he hit 48 against the Nats two weeks later. The "Bird" also netted 51 against Boston on Jan. 15, while being guarded by Russell. Furthermore, Yardley blitzed St.Louis for 48 and 44 points, and he burned Minneapolis for 49, 44, 43 and 41-point nights.

Recounting the 1957-58 season, the witty Yardley remains modest about leading the NBA. "That was my best scoring year," he observed, "but we didn't have as many guys who could shoot well that season, so you didn't have to share the ball as much.

"We also had Dick McGuire, who was a great playmaker. I consider him a better playmaker than Bob Cousy. McGuire wasn't as flashy as Cousy. For example, he didn't pass the ball behind his back. But he was a fantastic player, and he was responsible for my scoring so many points. He was a wonderful guy, a great playmaker, really the best. "

Yardley also downplayed his 2,001-point achievement: "Pettit was a little behind methe year I scored the 2,000, and he broke his arm near the end of the season, so I was lucky. Had he continued playing and not broken his arm, he might have been the first one to score 2,000. But as it worked out, I broke 2,000 first."

Frank Ramsey, Boston's great sixth man who shot his way into the Hall of Fame, told Pluto about Yardley's shooting: "George had a turnaround jumper - he took it right in your face. He just jumped over you and shot like the guys do today."

Asked in 1994 about his shooting ability, Yardley replied, "I was one of the best jumpers in the league, and I could move my body to one side or the other when I was shooting and still control my shot, which helped me shoot over other players.

"I did use the backboard a lot. I think you can shoot the ball harder and with more accuracy by using the backboard, because your distance doesn't have to be exact, since you can put it off the board and it will bounce into the basket. I didn't bank it on

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1963	200	$200.00	$240.00	$325.00	$390.00
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straight-on shots or from the baseline, but I usually hit the board on shots anywhere between the baseline and out front."

While he shot well in 1957-58, the next year Yardley pressured himself too hard to repeat as the league's top scorer. Instead, he fell short. Also, he suffered physical ail ments, including hypoglycemia and asthma. Todav. he concedes those illnesses were at least partly psychosomatic.

But at the time Yardley kept trying to play over any physical problems, because that's what a top professional athlete had to do in his era.

For 1958-59, Yardley averaged 19.8 points over 61 games, missing Il games after breaking his left (non-shooting) hand. He suffered the injury in a scramble under the basket during the second quarter of an overtime loss in Boston on Jan. 25, 1959. Yardley was summoned to Zollner's box, before going to the dressing room for medical treatment.

Yardley still remembers what Zollner told him, "You're through as far as I'm concerned. I never want to see you again." Yardley, who had never liked Detroit as well as Fort Wayne, agreed. On Feb. 5, he demanded to be traded, saying he would quit basketball otherwise.

On Feb. 13, 1959. he was traded to Syracuse for swingman Ed Conlin. Wearing a light arm cast, Yardley played the remaining 11 regular-season games for the Nats.

Minus Yardley, the Pistons dropped out of the playoffs with two losses to Minneapolis. But the "Bird" helped Syracuse defeat New York in two games. Then, with Schayes averaging 28.2 and Yardley scoring 25.1, Syracuse battled the eventual champion Celtics to the limit before losing the seventh game at Boston Garden, 130125.

Yardley enjoyed playing for Syracuse, because the Nats had a better team than the Pistons. "In 1959 at Syracuse, we went seven games with the Celtics. We had a chance with a layup, the guy choked, and they came back and scored, and won it.

"I recall that we led by quite a bit in that seventh game, and we easily could have won that game. That was the best team I ever played on, no question about it.

"The next season, 1959-60, Wilt Chamberlain came into the league, and we didn't match up well against him. He was tough for us to play against. Bill Russell could match up with Chamberlain, but we couldn't. We had John Kerr at center, and he didn't match up well against Chamberlain. Kerr wasn't as big as he needed to be to stop Wilt.

"We had a real good team at Syracuse, with Dolph, Hal Greer and Larry Costello at guards. Bob Hopkins was a real good defensive forward, a real nice guy. We had Al Bianchi, too, so we had real good depth. " We almost beat Boston in 1959, but we didn't."

Yardley played one more year with Syracuse and decided to retire. In 1959-60, he enjoyed a very good season, averaging 20.2 points on 45 percent shooting, while grabbing 7.9 boards a game. Schayes led the Nats in scoring, hitting for 22.5 per game, and in rebounding, averaging 12.8 caroms.

"That was my best scoring year (1957-58), but we didn't have as many guys who could shoot well that season, so you didn't have to share the ball as much."

- George Yardley

The consistent double-figure scorers included Kerr (14.7), Costello (14.0), Greer (13.2) and reserve guard Dick Barnett (12.4). Also, Kerr helped clear the boards with 12.2 rebounds per game, and Costello recorded a team-high 449 assists, an average of 6.3.

Syracuse, however, lost in the first round of playoffs to Philadelphia, two games to one. Playing at the Philadelphia Convention Hall, the Warriors bombed the Nats in the third contest, 132-112. Yardley suffered through his worst post-season ever. He shot 38 percent, low for him, and averaged only 13.3 points.

Except for the playoffs, Yardley believes 1959-60 was his best season. "I thought I was still playing better all the time. I think I had my best year in my last year.

"We had a better team and I didn't get to shoot as much, and I played the defensive forward. So I had to play all the tough guys, and I scored about 20 points a game, which I still think was my best season.

"The only reason I quit after the 1959-60 season is that I had promised my wife I would retire before the kids started school. Otherwise, we would have them starting school in California, pull them out and bring them to Syracuse, and pull them out in the spring and go back to California to school." The former star is proud of his family, which meant more to him than another year or two in the NBA. "Diana and I have four children: the oldest daughter is Marilyn, the twin boys in the middle are Robert and Richard, and the youngest daughter is Anne." Also, Yardley worked in the off-season as an engineer, and he bought an engineering firm in early 1960. "I started my business, the George Yardley Co., for three months of my last year. I took over the company Jan. 1, 1960. I played for three-and-one-half months with Syracuse, then retired.

"We represent people who manufacture a product, and we sell it to oil companies, or refineries, or nuclear plants, or whatever. We line up the manufacturer and the buyer, and we engineer the system before we sell it. All of our salesmen are engineers, and they have to have a good engineering background in order to apply the products. My bachelor's degree is in mechanical engineering, and my master's is in business."

In other words, because of his personal priorities, Yardley walked away from the game he loved.

Who were the best players he played against?

"The best player was Bill Russell," Yardley indicated. "The second best was Bob Pettit. The third would have been Elgin Baylor. After that, there is a drop-off.

"I could play with most of those guys. I could jump well; I didn't pass the ball very well. Maybe I could have passed more, but I didn't want to, because," he recalled, with a laugh, "they paid more for shooters.

"I could probably rebound as well as any of the forwards, and I certainly felt I could shoot as well. None of the forwards played any defense, so it didn't make any difference whether you could or not. I was certainly better than Elgin Baylor at defense, and probably as good as Bob Pettit. Mel Hutchins was the best defensive forward, and I played with him, so I didn't have to guard the top offensive forward.

"When I was traded to Syracuse, I had to be the defensive forward, because I was a better defensive player than Dolph.

"You know, you can always do it. Defense is just putting your mind to doing it. But you don't get paid for playing defense."

I remember Yardley very well, because he was one of my favorite players during m

senior year in 1957-58. I wore Yardley's No. 12 while playing forward/center in the Flint YMCA Church League, where I led the scorers with an average of 18.7 points. But at 6-0 and 165 pounds, I was glad I didn't have to go one-on-one with the likes of Yardley!

To me, it seemed like Yardley, averaging more than 27 points that year, had such great athletic ability, so many good moves, and so many different shots, that he would be one of the NBA's greats.

What does Yardley think about not being in the Hall of Fame?

"As I tell anyone who will listen," Yardley replied, with a smile, "I get much more publicity and sympathy and attention by not being in the Hall of Fame, than if I was in it. But it won't change my lifestyle if I get in it, so it doesn't bother me. It probably bothers the family more than it bothers me.

"One of the reasons that I am not too disappointed is because it is a political thing. You do have to apply. You do have to get a bunch of people to write letters for you. To me, it is proselyting the whole process by the way they handle it."

In any event, Yardley's record should make him an obvious candidate for Springfield:

- Guard Earl Lloyd, one of the Led the NBA in 1957-58 with 27.8 average, scoring 2,001 points
- Career scoring average of 19.8 points over seven years
- Career rebounding average of 8.9 rebounds over seven years
- Lifetime playoff averages of 20.3 points and 9.9 rebounds
- Selected all-league twice, first team-1958, second team-1959

Guard Earl Lloyd, one of the first black players in the NBA, remembers Yardley not as a slam-dunk type, but as a good athlete who had a lot of moves.

In Pluto's **Tall Tales**, Lloyd observed about Yardley: "He's one of those great players who was completely forgotten about once Wilt, (Jerry) West, Oscar (Robertson) and all those superstars came into the game -but he played their style."

Commenting about Yardley in a recent interview, Arizin stated, "Unquestionably, George deserves to be in the Hall of FameFame. I would certainly endorse him if he gets nominated. "

The former hardcourt hero receives fan mail at the George Yardley Co., 17260 Newhope Road, Fountain Valley, Cal.

George Yardley appeared on few basketball cards. He's shown here on his 1957-58 Topps card (left), and his 1981 TCMA card.

92708. He gets about one letter a week, often with a basketball card for him to sign, usually the 1981 TCMA #25, or the 195758 Topps #2. He enjoys hearing from fans. Yardley is generous with his time and his recollections. Basketball enthusiasts who would like to learn more about his career should read Pluto's **Tall Tales**, which has several Yardley quotes, and Charles Salzberg's **From Set Shot to Slam Dunk** (1987), which contains an interesting interview with Yardley.

How is the current NBA different from the 1950s?

"The major difference," Yardley replied, "is in the physical prowess of the players Today, the players are much more gifted.

"Magic Johnson was the same height and weight as George Mikan. Mikan was just a big galoot. He just used brute strength to accomplish what he wanted to do. He sets and couldn't dribble the ball. large collections.

"Mikan lined up in the middle of the lane. He would get a pass, use his left elbow to get the defender out of the way, and shoot it in with his right hand.

"I consider Magic Johnson the best player ever in the NBA. Mikan was-a dinosaur, and Johnson was a greyhound of the same size and weight.

"We ran the fast break at Fort Wayne Detroit, even though St. Louis and Boston probably ran it better. But once the 24-second shot clock came in, you had to fast break."

In fact, after talking to George Yardley, who regularly plays tennis and golf, you get the feeling that when the ball comes off the boards, the "Bird," who turned 66 last November, is still ready to run!

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