

HHH #01111

Interviewee: Worrell, Bill

Interview: October 11th, 2016

1 of 15

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Bill Worrell Interview

Interviewee: Bill Worrell

Interview Date: October 11, 2016

Place: University of Houston, Alumni Building

Interviewer: Nathan Fannon

Transcriber: Nathan Fannon

Keywords: Houston, University of Houston, Cougars, Rockets, Fox Sports Southwest, Root Sports, Broadcast, Color Commentator, Basketball, Houston Rockets, Houston Comets, Hakeem Olajuwon, Elvin Hayes, James Harden, Toyota Center, The Summit, Compaq Center, Houston Astros, Bill Worrell, Clyde Drexler, Championship, National Basketball Association, Women's National Basketball Association, Los Angeles Lakers, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Shaquille O'Neal, UCLA, San Antonio, Ralph O'Connor, Billy Goldberg, Mickey Hurskowitz, Levitt Hill,

Abstract:

On October 11, 2016, Nathan Fannon interviewed Bill Worrell to discuss his career in broadcast and professional basketball in Houston. Worrell speaks about his beginnings at the University of Houston, and current involvement with the university, his early broadcasting days with KPRC, and eventually commentating professional baseball and basketball for the Astros and Rockets. After competing with the University of Houston to gain fans in the city, Worrell points to Elvin Hayes as the prospect that brought interest to the Houston Rockets after they moved from San Diego in the 1960s. He also recounts the excitement of the first season in Houston, advancing to the NBA Finals after clinching playoff contention on the final day of the season. Also, the Worrell discussed the Rockets mobility as the team had no one designated arena, playing in Hofheinz Pavilion, Astro Arena, as well as in Waco and San Antonio. The success of the Rockets in the late 1980s to mid-1990s raking in two back-to-back championships, and the Houston Comets winning four championships beginning with the inaugural season of the WNBA, rank among some of the greatest achievements of long-time owner Leslie Alexander. He mentions the often-overlooked likelihood that the Rockets could have been contenders for the NBA Championship during the Yao Ming-Tracy McGrady era and how injury thwarted Alexander's efforts. Worrell closes the interview with an optimistic outlook on the state of the Rockets as they look to the future with James Harden and a cast of new characters.

NF: This is Nathan Fannon interviewing Bill Worrell here at the University of Houston, on October 11th 2016. Mr. Worrell, Thank you for being here.

BW: Mhm.

NF: Where were you born?

BW: I was born in Houston.

NF: And did you grow up here?

BW: Yes, I did. Yeah, I went to school here.

NF: I saw that you played Baseball for the University of Houston. What was that experience like.

BW: It was a great experience. I came here on a partial scholarship and in my final year the Cougars went to the College World Series. It was extra special, I think in 1967. It was a lot of fun, we had some great experiences. We didn't play as many games as they do now, but we had some great teams under Levitt Hill, who was the baseball coach.

NF: Do you still maintain contact with the UH baseball team?

BW: Yeah, a lot of the guys that were on that team will kick it around. We all have different reunions when the baseball team plays now. I think our current coach here at the University of Houston has done a great job of getting the alumni together once or twice a year to celebrate those memories. You know you become a better player the older you get because people can't remember that far back, so it's kind of fun to brag about yourself.

NF: Many people know you as the voice of the [Houston] Rockets, have you done broadcasting for other teams?

BW: I went to work for Channel 2 back in 1970 which is the NBC affiliate KPRC. I was on the radio for several years and moved to the TV side around 1972 I went on the air for television in

the news department working for the legendary Ray Miller doing news. I moved into sports in 1976 and became the sports director at Channel 2 worked there for four years and started doing the Houston Rockets in 1980. In 1983 I also started doing the Houston Astros so I was double teaming between the Rockets and Astros, and I had left Channel 2 by that time. We formed a new network called home sports entertainment, was a new cable network, it was the first venture of its kind on a regional scale, ESPN had just started two years prior to HSE. So what we did was were signed deals with the teams, the Houston Astros and the Houston Rockets to do their games, their home games and eventually their away games. So we were really the first regional sports channel to do that outside of ESPN who was really more national.

NF: When you're not calling ball games during the off season what are some things you like to do.

BW: I like to play golf. I'm not very good at it but I figured out it's something you can do forever. You can't play the sports that we really loved to play when we were kids. Golf keeps me busy, I have a lot of different charities that I participate in so that keeps me busy also, and the Univ. of Houston keeps me busy I do a lot of stuff like these interviews here today, I have several departments in the Radio/TV wing also in the athletic board and athletic council that I participate in.

NF: Let's move onto basketball... How did Houston come to have an NBA franchise?

BW: I think you have to go back to 1968, January the 20th when the Cougars played UCLA at the Astrodome and Elvin Hayes had a phenomenal game against Lou Alcindor who later became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. UCLA was undefeated the Cougars were undefeated they were the number 1 and 2 teams in the nation. Houston beat UCLE 70-68 Houston won the game behind

Elvin Hayes' 39 points. Everybody wanted to see him stay in Houston to continue his professional career but the only professional team in the NBA the only professional team was the Houston Mavericks who played in the ABA. Elvin decided to go with the established league, to the NBA and was drafted by the San Diego Rockets. Elvin went to San Diego where he played for two years, he was rookie of the year in the NBA, played for two years under the Owner, Bob Breitbart had some financial difficulties and a group of men in the Houston area saw an opportunity to buy his franchise and move it to Houston with Elvin being the centerpiece. This is what the people of Houston wanted all along. That's how the Houston Rockets came into being. Ralph O'Connor, Billy Goldberg, Mickey Hurskowitz who was a sports editor and writer for the Houston post at the time was also one of the part owners. So what they did was bought the San Diego Rockets and brought them to Houston. They were a nomad team the first couple of years. They played in the Astrodome, the Astro Arena, Waco, San Antonio. In Fact, the second year they played 14 games in San Antonio, so they played 41 games on the road, and split the home games between Houston and San Antonio, then the Rockets also played in Hofheinz Pavilion on the campus of UH after it was built in the early 70s before the Summit was built where the rockets eventually called home and now Toyota Center. It's quite a history of the Houston Rockets coming to Houston and it revolved around the Houston Cougar Elvin Hayes.

NF: How has the support for the team been from Houstonians over the years?

BW: It was slow at first. Elvin Hayes, Don Cheney, and a great cast Ken Spain, a great bunch of Houston Cougars went to the Final Four a couple of years, so they captured the hearts and minds of the Houston basketball fans. The Rockets were a team without an arena so it was difficult to establish a fan base, until they built the Summit they really didn't have much of a following, and the Cougars were so darn good. Then after Elvin and Don, then came Phi Slamma Jamma, so it was hard for the Rockets to gain a foothold until Moses Malone came to Houston. Then they were able to galvanize the city behind professional sports. I think we owe a debt of gratitude to Ray Patterson, who was the general manager for the Rockets in those early years, of keeping the franchise alive. There were several different owners it passed to try and keep the team going along with Rudy Tomjanovich, Elvin Hayes, Calvin Murphy, Moses Malone, some of those early years those players kept the fans interested. And then when the Rockets went to a couple of championships it solidified. And I think the city really came together behind the rockets and made them one of the major sports franchises in Houston when they won their back to back championships in the early 90's.

NF: What steps has team owner Les Alexander taken to maintain interest in the team throughout its history?

BW: Leslie has done quite a bit. He's very competitive person he hates to lose. When he came here and bought the team, there was an announcement made and it didn't garner a lot of

attention, that the rockets had made a small trade for Mario Elie. He had played overseas in 14 different countries. He sort of came in and that last day and solidified a team that has Kenny Smith, Hakeem Olajuwon, Otis Thorpe, Vernon Maxwell that was the nucleus of the back to back championship team of the Houston Rockets. Leslie was fortunate enough to resign Hakeem to a contract appropriate to his stature in the NBA, and then Hakeem went on to lead us to two championships, he was smart enough to see that Hakeem would be the leader of this team. When he bought the team, believe it or not, some people were in favor of trading Hakeem Olajuwon. So, he resigned Hakeem to a richer contract, named Rudy Tomjanovich as coach, that brought stability to the franchise and they went on and won a couple of back to back championships. He also tried to bring Scottie Pippen, that experiment did not work, Charles Barkley was brought here to bring a championship to Houston. Clyde Drexler was brought here in a trade for Otis Thorpe. Whenever the team has needed to make a move to stay in the spotlight, he has opened up his pocket book. I think that makes him one of the great owners in Houston pro sports history.

NF: When you first started calling games for the Rockets, what was the state of the franchise, and the expectations for the franchise?

BW: The first year I did the Rockets was 1980 and we finished the season at 40-42 and made the playoffs on the final day. And then we went on an incredible run behind Moses Malone and went to the NBA Finals where we lost to Larry Bird who was a rookie that year and the Boston

Celtics. And I thought, this is fun. My first year doing the Houston Rockets, and we barely got into the playoffs, and we went all the way to the NBA finals, this is really gonna be fun. It didn't turn out that way injuries led the Rockets down a different path, they never could get back to the NBA finals. They ended up trading Moses Malone for the number one draft choice which turned out to be Ralph Sampson who came in that first year along with Rodney McCray. The next year the Rockets had the number one draft choice and selected Hakeem Olajuwon, that's when the twin towers came into the NBA. That led them to the finals in 1986 where they met the Boston Celtics again and again they lost in 6 games. It seemed like Boston was always there in the Championship to turn the Rockets back. Then there were injuries, Ralph Sampson got injured after the 1986 season, and the Rockets sort of stumbled around a few years until they were able to put that team around Hakeem Olajuwon in the 1990s.

NF: Since you have been with the organization, what has been your favorite era of Rockets' basketball?

BW: It was really that first year when we went 40-42 and nobody expected us to do anything and then we went all the way to the NBA Finals. And I don't think it can be any more exciting than that, because no one expected anything from the Rockets. There have been so many moment I remember winning the first fourteen games out of the gate in 1994, that was the season of the first Championship. The Rockets set the NBA Record for the most wins without a loss to start

the season, then went on to get eliminated, that was 93'-94', got eliminated by Seattle. The Rockets went on to get into the NBA Finals against the New York Knicks. That was an exciting time. I'll never forget winning that first championship, getting on those fire trucks, going down the streets of Houston. Almost a million-people lined the streets of Houston and hung out of the buildings with confetti. I'd seen all those old films of the confetti parades, in New York City through the years, but I'd never actually been in one. But to see all of the Houstonians that came out for those championship parades, almost a million-people strong, I'll never forget that.

NF: If you were to make a Mount Rushmore for the Houston Rockets- players, coaches, owners included- who would be on it?

BW: Of course number one in terms of owners, Leslie Alexander because he's been the most successful and longest tenured owner of 21 years and Hakeem Olajuwon. The Rockets have had an embarrassment of riches at center. If you have one Moses Malone in a lifetime, if you have one Hakeem Olajuwon in a lifetime you're lucky. The rockets also had Yao Ming, to have one Yao Ming you'd be lucky. And you'd have to court Ralph Sampson in there too who was one of the greatest players of all time. Then you signed Dwight Howard, you had Dikembe Mutombo in the franchise history, what franchise can say we've had five or six of the greatest centers of all time. But I'd have to put Olajuwon because he brought home the championships he would be front and center on your Mount Rushmore. One of my personal favorites, Clyde Drexler, who

I've worked with and known since he was a little boy coming on campus at the University of Houston. So, I would say Clyde is almost like a son to me. And, I'd have to put Elvin Hayes on it because Elvin Hayes was the reason the Rockets came to Houston.

NF: What team do you consider to be the biggest all-time rival to the Houston Rockets and why?

BW: San Antonio Spurs. The Rockets had to defeat the Spurs both times they went to the Championships in the 80's and they had to beat the Spurs in the 90's, with David Robinson and Tim Duncan and that group to get to the Championship in the 90's. The road to the championship in the 80's and 90's either went through Houston or San Antonio one of the two and who ever won that series usually went to the NBA finals. Dallas has become a good rival over the years, with the battle of the Texas Championship and that's always important to the fans that you win that. And we've had some great battles with the Los Angeles Lakers because when we had our great centers they had Kareem Abdul-Jabbar they had Shaquille O'Neal they've had some great centers too. Along through the early years when we used to play against the Lakers with Jerry West and Magic Johnson. We've had some great battles with the LA Lakers and we had to beat them several times to go to the NBA Finals.

NF: Who do you consider to be the most important draft pick in Rockets' history and why?

BW: I would say Ralph Sampson because he was the first number one who was actually the number one. He was probably also the most decorated college player of all time. He gave the rockets the status of having the number one player in college basketball. And all the sudden made the Rockets a favorite to possibly win a championship. Some people would argue because that was the year ahead of Hakeem Olajuwon. I would say if you wanted to say Hakeem Olajuwon, I certainly wouldn't disagree with you. Those two were the ones who gave the Rockets an identification. The Rockets were then known for the Twin Towers, and I remember Jim Foley, who was head of public relations for the Houston Rockets, took them downtown and put them in a picture net to the skyscrapers and called them the Twin Towers that's how that got started. Those two certainly had a lot to do with the birth of the championship years. I would also add in terms of an importance worldwide and socially, Yao Ming. Believe it or not Richard Nixon was the first President to go into china with Ping Pong diplomacy. It was a closed society. No one had been allowed in China from the free world. So when Yao Ming became the number one draft choice the people of China saw a player become a superstar in another country. It opened up china, when the Houston Rockets played basketball, everything stopped in China when the Rockets played, to watch Yao. They called it Breakfast with Yao the games would come on in china at about 8 o'clock in the morning and everything stopped. We okayed NBA games in China, in Shanghai and Beijing. You see this often in society that sports gives you an

in-road where diplomacy doesn't work, sports sometimes does because it attracts the interest of both people. So I think Yao Ming taking the Rockets in the NBA, now the NBA has an office in Shanghai and has a developmental team in China. Yao Ming is the owner of the Shanghai Sharks. I would say culturally, Yao Ming probably and the Houston Rockets with Yao, did more to open up china than anything else.

NF: Even with Yao retired would you consider the following for the Rockets strong in China?

BW: Definitely. Just recently the Rockets played the New Orleans Pelicans in front of a standing room only crowd of about 17,00 in a brand-new arena in China. They cheered like it was a regular season game, it was a preseason game, but both teams played their starts because it was important for them to win. The crowd was much more knowledgeable, they cheered at the appropriate times. When we first went to China they didn't really know too much about basketball, so they just waved pom-poms and had a good time. This time the fans wanted the Rockets to win and could recognize a great play between a bad play.

NF: Of the: Moses Malone era, Hakeem Olajuwon era, Yao Ming/Tracy McGrady era, and James Harden era, which do you consider to be the most successful?

BW: Well, Hakeem won two championships. But, I'll go back to Elvin Hayes. We would not have had a franchise here in Houston when we did without Elvin Hayes. So the importance of

Elvin is what solidified the pro basketball in Houston. Then the Hakeem Olajuwon era is certainly important. Now it's up to James Harden to carve out his own niche, what will it be, this is his team now in Houston. He needs to get to a Championship, he has been to a Western Conference finals but this is his team now.

NF: What do you think about the claims by naysayers that Houston only won two championships because Michael Jordan was not playing?

BW: I think it's ridiculous. Over that two year period the Rockets were 4-2 against Chicago and Jordan played in every one of those regular season games. Vernon Maxwell was one of the better defenders in the NBA and he loved to play against Jordan. I think Hakeem would have dominated inside, and of course Jordan would have been dominant in what he did too. But I really feel like those two years the Houston Rockets were better than Chicago. I don't think I'm being biased in saying that, unless you would talk to a Chicago sports writer. When the Rockets beat the New York Knicks and the next year swept Shaquille O'Neal and Orlando, they beat the two best teams behind them in the NBA so that pretty much settled that.

NF: What are the plusses of each of the arenas where the Rockets have played?

BW: My favorite thing about the Summit was that it was the first major arena in Houston. The Toyota Center is one of the palaces in pro basketball. They do a great job of doing the top shows and basketball games in Toyota Center.

NF: What was the culture like under Rudy Tomjanovich and how does it compare to the culture of other years?

BW: Well, Rudy was a Houston Rocket. I remember Rudy would always say to me, he would see a youngster walking down the street with an Oiler's jersey or a college jersey and he said wouldn't it be nice to see the kids wearing Rockets' gear? That was always his dream. I remember after the second championship seeing all the kids wearing Rockets' jerseys and I said Rudy, I think your dream has come to fruition. Now Mike D'Antoni, who I think is the right man at the right time because he was a former player in the NBA. He was an all-star player in Europe. He has a great concept of offensive basketball and he's a great communicator with his players.

NF: The Houston Comets had an amazing run their first few years. Did that impact interest in the Rockets?

BW: No, the Rockets had already solidified themselves. But of all the things Leslie Alexander is proud of, the Comets are right up there for him. Those four championships were the start of the

WNBA. Sheryl Swoopes just got into the Hall of Fame. That team was as dominant as the Rockets and Les is very proud of them.

NF: Do you think the dissolving of the Comets affected Houston basketball in any way?

BW: No. When that core group of players moved on the Comets kind of lost their identity in Houston and the team was sold and they could not find an audience. But it never did affect the Rockets

NF: What are your expectations for the 2016-2017 Houston Rockets?

BW: I'm not sure. It's hard to tell with the way basketball is today. I don't think the experiment of Dwight and James Harden went the way we would have liked so we allowed Dwight to move on to Atlanta. So the Rockets will get Capela more playing time along with Nene, they added Ryan Anderson he is a great shooter. I think this team will put a lot of points on the board. They have a lot offense and some great shooters. They key will be can the Rockets play enough defense down the stretch and you must be fortunate. To win a championship you have to avoid injuries to your Key personnel. The Rockets would have won two more championships had Yao Ming and Tracy McGrady been able to stay healthy and get on the court at the same time. That's very important when winning championships is you got to have good health.

NF: What has it been like to work with the original Mr. Rocket, Calvin Murphy?

BW: He's on a sugar high 24 hours a day. I don't know when the guy sleeps. I suggested to Leslie to have Calvin do color commentating with me and when he came on board they wanted us to wear blue sports coats. Well, that blue sport coat slowed Calvin down and I asked what's wrong and he said I'm not a blue sport coat kind of a guy. Let me wear what's in my closet and wear these outlandish suits and things will be better. That's what happened. He went home he dressed appropriately, and from that time his personality took off. We had a great relationship for ten years, he's back on now doing pregame and postgame, and I'm glad because he has a wealth of knowledge.