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Here's that piece from Grantland I mentioned:

http://www.grantland.com/story/_/id/9302161/elgin-baylor-nba-championship-ring-auction

Grantland

May 30, 2013 12:00 AM ET

An Unfamiliar Ring

By Dave McKenna

What was once Elgin Baylor's could soon be yours.

Julien's Auctions, a Beverly Hills consigner that converts celebrity detritus into cash, is now accepting online bids on more than 350 lots from all eras of the humble Hall of Famer's career. Among the whatnot up for grabs: A [quartet of trophies](#) from his days at Spingarn High in Washington, D.C., including a 1954 "outstanding basketball player" award, which is expected to bring in up to \$700; a [belt buckle from the College of Idaho](#), where Baylor played before transferring to Seattle University (\$400); a plaque for being named to the [1958 Converse All-American squad](#) after his last season of college ball (\$4,000); the [1959 NBA All-Star Game MVP trophy](#) (\$30,000); a very [1970s bathrobe that Jerry West purchased for Baylor](#) from the L.A. department store Bullock's Westwood (\$700); and a [1997 lithograph of the NBA's 50 Greatest Players](#), signed by 49 of the all-timers, with only the deceased Pete Maravich's autograph missing (\$40,000).

But the most valuable item, according to Julien's baubleheads, is [Lot no. 247](#): A size 12 NBA championship ring from 1972, made of 14k gold, accessorized with a 0.7-carat diamond and engraved "E.Baylor/Los Angeles Lakers," which the auctioneer estimates will sell for as much as \$60,000.

Which brings us to today's, um, \$60,000 question: Elgin Baylor has an NBA championship ring?

But ... but ... but ... Baylor's always been cast as The Guy Without a Ring! Each spring, come NBA playoff time, Baylor gets mentioned at or near the top of every list of the greatest players to never win the big one, alongside Karl Malone, Charles Barkley, Patrick Ewing, and occasionally Allen Iverson.

For all his greatestness, or because of his greatestness, this one gap in Baylor's résumé also happens to be the single most-cited attribute of his ball-playing dossier: Even his [official bio on the NBA's website](#) accentuates Baylor's unaccessorized fingers: "Baylor had ended an illustrious 14-year career without a championship ring," it reads.

Full disclosure: I'm an Elgin Baylor obsessive. I've written [dozens of articles](#) about him over the years, all fawning as hell and sincere. I've also sent letters as a private citizen to D.C. mayor Vince Gray and to Ted Leonsis, owner of the Washington Wizards, begging them to get a street or playground or SOMETHING named for Baylor, who I'd rate as both the most important and most underappreciated athlete to ever come out of the city. (One sign of his local underappreciation: Baylor, now 78, wasn't inducted to the D.C. Sports Hall of Fame until about a month ago. The Hall's been around since 1980, and through the years more than 90 folks from the local sporting landscape were invited to join the club before organizers got around to naming Baylor. He sent a grandson, Yannick Monthe, to the ceremony at Nationals Park. "When I heard about that, I did have to ask: Why now?" Baylor said when I asked him about the decades-late exercise.)

I thought I knew everything there was to know about Baylor. Like, how ahead of his time he was. He changed the game by playing above the rim,¹ and being the first player to dunk with flair, which is why [Sports Illustrated said in 1966](#), as he was coming back from yet another awful knee injury, that when Baylor was healthy "he probably was the best all-round player in the sport's history." He still holds the schoolboy hoops scoring record in D.C., having put in 63 points for Spingarn in one night in 1954, and he carried Seattle University to the NCAA championship game in 1958, thereby making colleges recognize that black kids from Baylor's hometown were worth recruiting. He exceeded all the expectations heaped upon a first-overall draft pick by being named the NBA Rookie of the Year and MVP of the All-Star Game and, again single-handedly, saving the Lakers franchise by leading his team to the 1959 NBA Finals. At just 6-foot-5, he averaged 19.8 rebounds a game in the 1960-61 season, to go with a 34.8 PPG scoring average. And he still holds the record for points in a single game in an NBA championship series (61), which he set in the 1962 Finals. He remains the only player in NBA history to score 30 or more points in every game of a seven-game championship series, also from the 1962 Finals. Baylor's Lakers lost that series by falling in overtime of Game 7 to Boston — one of Baylor's seven Finals losses to the Celtics. Three of those series losses came in Game 7s by three points or fewer.

I knew all that.

I didn't know Baylor had a ring.

Until Julien's Auctions announced its Baylor sale in February, anyway.

Baylor put his 8,000-plus-square-foot Beverly Crest manse on the market for \$4.25 million late last year; the [Los Angeles Times reported](#) that he and his wife were looking to move to a smaller place. At around the same time, Julien's staffers heard through a Baylor associate that the former player was thinking about getting rid of nearly all the trinkets he'd collected over the past six decades as a sportsman of stature, and approached him.

The firm has gotten far less renown from brokering sales for live athletes than it has for dead celebrities — previous big-ticket items include the dress that a temporary Mrs. Joe DiMaggio, Marilyn Monroe, wore in *River of No Return*, which brought in \$516,600, and one of two jackets Michael Jackson wore in the "Thriller" video (\$1.8 million). "I don't like to focus on morbid things," says Dan Nelles, who runs sports sales for Julien's, "but there is definitely an

added bonus to [being dead] in this business. Strictly from a supply-and-demand situation, that person won't be wearing anything onstage or using or endorsing a product anymore."

Baylor, despite being a jock and having a pulse, took Julien's sales pitch.

"He's not down on his luck at all, nothing like that," Nelles said. "Talking to him, it was obvious he just wasn't a guy who ever got into basketball for the honors, and doesn't use this stuff, doesn't wear it, doesn't look at it. It's not like he has any emotional hate for it, but he's just been paying to store all this, and every time you pay that monthly fee, that means the items are depreciating. So after talking with him we saw what he wanted — a comprehensive spring cleaning, really — and we're here to support him."

Nelles said that Julien's, as it does in preparation for every auction, came up with an estimate of what the seller's total financial windfall would be, but he said that number was only revealed to Baylor and would not be made public. Projected minimum and maximum sale prices are listed alongside every item in Julien's Baylor catalogue, but, just as there's an art to starting bids on eBay and list prices in auto sales, those figures can be set high or low by the seller for strategic reasons and shouldn't necessarily be taken as an actual forecast. Julien's gets a percentage of every item sold at auction from both the seller and the buyer, but Nelles declined to say what those fees are for the Baylor sale.

Baylor confirmed that almost all of his basketball collectibles had been in storage for years, and said that he was never one to keep the trappings of his life's work around the house. Asked if visitors would even be able to tell that Elgin Baylor or an ex-athlete lived there, he answered, "Probably not." And after a question about what mementos he's keeping out of the auction, Baylor can only come up with a trophy he got as a 14-year-old new to organized basketball for being named MVP in a summer league in the Capitol Hill neighborhood.

"I guess somebody there thought I could play," he says. "I guess everybody else in the league must have just started out playing, too. That's the first thing I ever won. I cherish that."

While Baylor admits little attachment to doodads from his NBA career, the folks at Julien's are particularly enamored of that 1972 Lakers championship ring.

"That was the [Los Angeles] Lakers' first championship, and it's the first championship ring [from that series] ever offered at auction," said Nelles. "It's a really historical piece."²

Historians and consigners, alas, celebrate the jewelry more than Baylor does, who wasn't on the playing roster when the Lakers won that title.

Baylor had announced in August 1971 that the forthcoming season would "definitely" be his last as a pro. "It would be great if we could win it all," he said while disclosing his plan to get out of the game.

Baylor's torn Achilles tendon had limited him to just two games in the 1970-71 season, and in previous years he'd had major surgery on both knees, back when doctors usually cut you open only to remove, not repair, poorly functioning parts. (Baylor was down a few ligaments and half a kneecap at the time.)

The Lakers went on to win it all in 1972, just as Baylor hoped — but without him. Just nine games into the regular season, first-year coach Bill Sharman told Baylor that he would be replaced in the starting lineup by second-year forward Jim McMillian. Baylor had never been a sub, and decided to call it a career. "Out of fairness to the fans, to the Lakers, and to myself, I have always wanted to perform on the court up to the level and up to the standards that I have established throughout my career," Baylor said upon retiring. "I do not want to prolong my career at a time when I cannot maintain these standards."

He immediately accepted a job with the Lakers front office, working with the scouting and public relations departments, and Lakers owner Jack Kent Cooke announced that Baylor's jersey no. 22 would be retired.

Beginning with the first game after Baylor's retirement announcement, the Lakers won their next 33 — still the longest winning streak in major pro sports history — then won the NBA title by beating the New York Knicks in five games in the Finals. Baylor was given a ring despite his absence from the playing roster.

Even ignoring whatever front-office contributions he made during that championship season, Baylor's 1972 ring would hardly be the sporting equivalent of Milli Vanilli's Grammy: Baylor had 106 points and 57 rebounds in the nine games he played that year; Juwan Howard totaled 42 points and 47 rebounds for the 2011-12 NBA titlists, the Miami Heat. Howard was immediately hailed not only for no longer being ringless — this was the first championship team he'd been on in 18 years as a pro — but also for ending the ring drought that had long afflicted all members of Michigan's Fab Five. (And, well, Adam Morrison has rings from both his seasons on the Lakers bench.)

When I first called Baylor about the auction, he was the same ego-free guy I've always found him to be. I asked about how often his ringlessness comes up, and he said friends and family let him know whenever they hear it on TV — but it's all good.

"I was just happy to have a great career," Baylor said. "I never dread that people mention it — the ultimate goal *is* to win a championship."

Baylor seemed very much at peace with how things had turned out.

"I gave it my best," Baylor said. "I did everything I could."

But he called me back later that same night. And this was a different Baylor than I'd ever heard before. He said he'd been thinking about our earlier discussion on the ring and had more to say.

"Whenever I hear somebody say [Baylor never won a ring], I want to ask them: 'Who was my center?'" Baylor said. "Look at all the great centers who've won championships: Hakeem, Shaq, Russell, Chamberlain, Jabbar. Yes, I had a couple seasons with Wilt [Chamberlain], at the tail end. But when we [played the Celtics in the NBA Finals], I had Jim Krebs, Ray Felix, Gene Wiley. Nothing against those guys. Good guys. But we're going against Russell. Nobody ever mentions that I didn't play with a great center. You think if I had one I might have won some championships?"

Before I can come up with an answer, Baylor does it for me: "I believe I would have," he said.

He's got a point about the Lakers' personnel. In the seven NBA Finals series in which Baylor's Lakers faced the Boston Celtics between 1959 and 1969, the opposition had Bill Russell manning the middle every time. The Lakers centers during that time were a veritable *Who's Who of Who's That?* Along with the aforementioned Krebs, Felix, and Wiley, Baylor's centers during the skein of second-place finishes were: Larry Foust, Gary Alcorn, Wayne Yates, Leroy Ellis, Darrall Imhoff, Bill McGill, and Erwin Mueller.

But center wasn't the only position that Baylor now feels was undermanned during his Lakers days.

"To all the ['Baylor-never-got-a-ring!' utterers], I say, 'Who was the starting team when I played, other than Jerry [West] and I?'" he said. "Nobody would know! It's just, 'Hey, this guy didn't win a championship!' Championship teams, well, you can name the players."

And he's not finished with me. Baylor starts recounting the injuries he played through in the second half of his career, all in hopes of getting an NBA title.

"I split my kneecap in half in 1965," he says. "[Lakers physician Dr. Robert] Kerlan told me after that surgery I'd never be the same player again. He was right. I played four or five more years with half a kneecap. There was no rehab back then like now. After my kneecap [was partially removed], I sat on my kitchen counter and did leg lifts. That was all they had for me to do. I took cortisone and another medicine that made me feel awful. I'd belch and blue smoke would come out. Really. I looked at the medicine bottle and it was 'bute.'³ That's what they give horses. Man, I just wanted to play."

Baylor always let his game speak for itself, and it was as surprising to hear him take on his critics as it was to learn he was auctioning off a championship ring. This is a side of Elgin Baylor that — for all of my Baylorphilia and, much like that ring — I never knew existed.

And being the one who brought out Baylor's inner defender after all these years leaves me feeling like the brat in the cockpit in *Airplane!* who recognizes the copilot as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and, after starting off with "I think you're the greatest!" begins listing deficiencies that the brat's father has spotted in the Hall of Famer's game ("you don't really try, except during the playoffs!") until the mild-mannered Abdul-Jabbar boils over.

Yet it was also kind of thrilling to hear Baylor finally hint that he's aware he was a damn fine ballplayer. His refusal to ever publicly lobby for his own legacy is far more responsible for the lack of a street or park named for him back in D.C., and does a lot more to explain why it took until this month for him to get in the local hall of fame, than his alleged lack of a ring.

The Julien's sale will conclude with a live auction on Friday at the company's Beverly Hills headquarters. And then Baylor, as long advertised, really will be ringless.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Elgin invented hang time. Everybody knows that he was Michael Jordan before Michael Jordan," says John Castellani, who took the head coaching job at Seattle for the 1956-57 season, and spoke with me for [another Grantland piece last year](#). "But he did so many things nobody else did, things with the ball, like putting the ball behind his back on a fast break while cutting from his left to his right, and from a guy his size! He was way ahead of his time, and he brought all these things from the playground, things nobody had ever seen. I remember the coach at Portland put a sign up in their locker room: 'If you're going to stand around and watch Elgin play, then pay admission!' That was perfect. I guess I stood around and watched him play, too. And it was a joy."
2. The Minneapolis Lakers won four NBA titles between 1949 to 1954; owner Bob Short moved the franchise to L.A. in 1960, following Baylors second year with the team.
3. "Bute" is short for phenylbutazone, a brutal anti-inflammatory that's been banned from treating humans for decades because of its carcinogenic, liver-wrecking, and chromosomal-altering properties. It's still given to farm animals and racehorses in some circumstances, but federal law now prohibits administering bute to dairy cows, and the veterinary product is sold with a warning label: "Do not use in horses intended for human consumption."