

HOUSE RESOLUTION NO. 2023-4621, by Representative Riccelli

1 WHEREAS, Bill Russell was one of the greatest basketball players
2 of all time and was a trailblazer for the National Basketball
3 Association and basketball as a sport; and

4 WHEREAS, At the peak of his Hall of Fame athletic career, Bill
5 Russell was also a leading advocate for civil rights who inspired
6 future generations of NBA players to promote social justice; and

7 WHEREAS, Bill Russell was born February 12, 1934, in Monroe,
8 Louisiana, where his family faced the racism common in the segregated
9 South, and when Bill was eight years old his family moved to Oakland,
10 California; and

11 WHEREAS, Bill Russell accepted a scholarship to play basketball
12 at the University of San Francisco, where he had two other Black
13 players as teammates, and while they were often targets of racial
14 jabs, Russell said he never permitted himself to be a victim; and

15 WHEREAS, While Bill Russell played at USF, the team called the
16 Dons went to two NCAA championships in 1955 and 1956, and he also
17 starred on the gold medal-winning United States basketball team at
18 the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia; and

19 WHEREAS, In one of the most important sports transactions in
20 American history, Bill Russell was the second overall pick in the
21 1956 NBA Draft, being drafted to the St. Louis Hawks then traded to
22 the Boston Celtics; and

1 WHEREAS, From 1956 to 1969, Bill Russell led the Celtics to eight
2 consecutive NBA championships from 1959 to 1966, with his court savvy
3 and defensive skills changing how the game was played; and

4 WHEREAS, The 6-foot-10-inch center earned the nickname "Secretary
5 of Defense," winning the title of NBA's most valuable player five
6 times and being named an All-Star 12 times; and

7 WHEREAS, In 1966 he became the first Black head coach in the NBA,
8 both coaching and playing for the Celtics until 1969; and

9 WHEREAS, Former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley, who as a member of the
10 New York Knicks played against Bill Russell in the 1960s, viewed him
11 as "the smartest player ever to play the game and the epitome of a
12 team leader"; and

13 WHEREAS, In 1972 the NBA retired his number 6 jersey, and it
14 remains the only number to become retired league-wide; and

15 WHEREAS, Bill Russell was hailed in 1996 as one of the NBA's 50
16 greatest players, and in 2009, the trophy for the Most Valuable
17 Player of the NBA Finals was named in his honor; and

18 WHEREAS, Standing alongside his many achievements on the hardwood
19 are his efforts as a civil rights activist; and

20 WHEREAS, In 1963 he took part in the March on Washington for Jobs
21 and Freedom and was front row at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous
22 "I Have a Dream" speech; and

23 WHEREAS, Bill Russell also spent time in Mississippi after civil
24 rights activist Medgar Evers was murdered, and would later create an
25 integrated basketball camp with Evers' brother, Charles, in Jackson,
26 Mississippi; and

27 WHEREAS, Bill Russell was awarded the Presidential Medal of
28 Freedom in 2011 by President Barack Obama, for standing up for the
29 rights and dignity of all; and

30 WHEREAS, Bill Russell's ties to the state of Washington date to
31 1973, when he became the general manager and coach for the Seattle
32 SuperSonics; and

33 WHEREAS, Bill Russell called Mercer Island home from 1973 until
34 his passing on July 31, 2022, having chosen the community because of
35 the quality of its school system;

36 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That the Washington State House
37 of Representatives honor the life and accomplishments of longtime
38 Washington resident Bill Russell both inside and outside the arena,

1 and extend its condolences to his widow Jeannine and his three
2 children.

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