

Rafter Heaven

A Short History of the Boston Celtics Banners

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The Boston Celtics banners that hang in the TD Garden are among the most famous symbols of sports excellence in the world. As of March 2022 there are 20 of them: 17 “world championship” banners and 3 that carry retired numbers of Celtics legends. But the design of these banners have evolved over the past sixty years, and the current collection is just twenty years old.

The tradition of the banners began in 1957, when the Celtics won their first NBA championship at the old Boston Garden. The banners were, and continue to be, made by the New England Flag and Banner Company of Watertown, Massachusetts¹ using a simple design: the words “BOSTON CELTICS” on two separate lines, originally placed such that the two words were the same width, a small circular “NBA” logo² in the center, followed by three lines which state “YEAR WORLD CHAMPIONS”. The banners are printed on both sides so they can be viewed equally well from either side of the arena. All of the text, along with a wide border along all four edges, appears in the same shade of green, and the background is white. Originally, the Celtics also hung divisional championship banners; on the divisional flags the colors were reversed (white text and borders on a green background) and the words “EASTERN DIV.” (including the period) were used in place of “WORLD.” Initially, each divisional banner was hung next to the corresponding world championship flag,³ but by the mid-1960’s they were hung in a separate row, still in chronological order, in parallel with the world championship banners.⁴

On the morning of October 26, 1963, the Boston Garden rafters were already well stocked with celebratory laundry: the Celtics had won six consecutive Eastern Division titles from 1957 through 1962, and went on to win the NBA championship in each of those years except for 1958 (the NBA included just eight teams in those days, separated into two four-team divisions). But that evening, *four* new banners would be raised: 1963 division and NBA title flags, plus a pair in honor of Bob Cousy and Ed Macauley. Cousy had retired the previous Spring; Macauley had been traded to St. Louis in 1956 as part of the deal to land Bill Russell, then played with the Hawks until the 1958-59 season when he became a player-coach. Now, Cousy’s 14 and Macauley’s 22 would fly above the Garden on green-trimmed white banners equal in size to the title flags, their numbers printed in green using a typeface similar to their jerseys but not exact – the “1” on the Cousy flag had a square serif instead of an angled one, and the “2”’s on Macauley’s banner were gracefully curved instead of simple block numbers.⁵ A year later, after the sudden passing of Celtics owner and founder Walter Brown, a third retired number (1) joined them, placed next to Cousy’s banner (which was flanked on the other side by Macauley’s).⁶

In 1965, when it was time to retire Frank Ramsey’s 23, the Celtics apparently changed their minds about using one banner per retired number. The team replaced the Cousy and Macauley banners with a single eight-paneled banner, with the panels arranged in four rows of two columns, each trimmed neatly in green. The first row was used for 22 and 14 (employing the same typeface as before), and Ramsey’s 23 was placed below Macauley’s 22. Walter Brown’s “1” banner remained unchanged.

Over the next seven years, the banner of player numbers filled up as an era of Celtics stars ended their careers. Most of the ceremonies took place prior to the Celtics home opener of the second season following the player’s retirement, but there were some notable exceptions.

Bill Sharman had left Boston in 1961 after being selected in the expansion draft that was designed to stock the new Chicago Packers franchise. Sharman refused to go to Chicago and signed on with the Los Angeles Jets of the new American Basketball League as a player/coach. Walter Brown then threatened legal action, and NBA Commissioner Maurice Podoloff withheld Sharman's 1961 playoff bonus, to try to stop Sharman from playing again. Brown and Podoloff then relented,⁷ but the incident soured the relationship between Sharman and the team; despite a superlative 10-year career in Boston, the Celtics had handed out his #21 to Gary Phillips at the start of the 1961-62 season, and three other players used the number over the next four seasons (Jack Foley, John McCarthy, and Ron Bonham) before it was finally retired in 1966.

Bill Russell successfully delayed the retirement of his number for several years, and then allowed it in 1972 (during a visit to Boston as part of the ABC-TV broadcast team) when Red Auerbach agreed to retire it before the Garden opened, with only his former coach and teammates participating in the ceremony.⁸ Four years later, Don Nelson would be busy on opening night, serving as an assistant coach for the Milwaukee Bucks. By the time the Bucks made their first visit to Boston, "Nellie" had been promoted to head coach of the struggling team, and he personally pulled the rope that raised his number his number to the rafters.⁹

By the time Russell's number resided in the rafters, the Celtics had removed the divisional championship banners (the last photographic evidence I found of them was in 1968, three years after the final division title of the Russell era). Over the years the Celtics have flown other banners alongside the championship and retired number flags. A simple white banner with green trim and the words "BOSTON CELTICS" was on display for several years beginning in the early 1960's; it was later replaced, sometime between 1976 and the early 1980's, with a similar banner that also included a Celtics logo but omitted the green border.¹⁰ In 1963, a banner commemorating the Celtics "purchase of a \$1,000 institutional investment in the Basketball Hall of Fame at Springfield College"¹¹ appeared, featuring the team's name and a basketball emblazoned with the words "Hall of Fame"¹² (the original Hall of Fame building would open in 1968). Banners featuring the names of the Celtics fellow NBA franchises also flew overhead.¹³ Other, more subtle, evolutions occurred: for example, the Walter Brown banner eventually found a more prominent home in between the 1962 and 1963 championship banners.¹⁴

In 1973, the Celtics retired Satch Sanders's 16 and made another change: the Walter Brown "1" banner was taken down and replaced with another eight-paneled banner, containing 1 and 16. (In 2006, the old Walter Brown banner was apparently put up for auction.¹⁵) Either at this time, or at least by 1976 based on the photographic evidence reviewed so far,¹⁶ the original eight-paneled banner containing the numbers of Cousy, Macauley, etc. was replaced. Whether this was the result of a theft (which occurred from time-to-time over the years, necessitating the creation of replica banners¹⁷) or natural age or damage, is unknown. But the difference in the typeface used for the numbers is unmistakable, and matched the "newer" Walter Brown / Satch Sanders banner. The square serifs at both ends of the "2"'s were removed, and the serif on the top of the "1"'s was now angled to more closely resemble how the number appears on Celtics jerseys.¹⁸

The second retired number banner filled up in a less organized manner than its predecessor; on the first flag, the numbers had always been added left-to-right, top-to-bottom. (Just like the championship banners, the retired number banners are printed in the same orientation on both sides, so they appear the same from both ends of the arena.) The second banner retained the top-to-bottom ordering, but added the numbers in a more haphazard way, as the order below suggests:

Boston Celtics retired numbers, listed in chronological order¹⁹

| Name | # | Date |
|----------------|----------|-------------------|
| Bob Cousy | 14 | October 26, 1963 |
| Ed Macauley | 22 | October 26, 1963 |
| Walter Brown | 1 | October 17, 1964 |
| Frank Ramsey | 23 | October 16, 1965 |
| Tom Heinsohn | 15 | October 15, 1966 |
| Bill Sharman | 21 | October 15, 1966 |
| K.C. Jones | 25 | October 23, 1968 |
| Sam Jones | 24 | October 21, 1970 |
| Bill Russell | 6 | March 12, 1972 |
| Satch Sanders | 16 | October 12, 1973 |
| Don Nelson | 19 | December 15, 1976 |
| Jim Loscutoff | LOSCY | April 8, 1977 |
| John Havlicek | 17 | October 13, 1978 |
| Dave Cowens | 18 | February 8, 1981 |
| Jo Jo White | 10 | April 9, 1982 |
| Red Auerbach | 2 | January 4, 1985 |
| Dennis Johnson | 3 | December 13, 1991 |
| Larry Bird | 33 | February 4, 1993 |
| Kevin McHale | 32 | January 30, 1994 |
| Reggie Lewis | 35 | March 22, 1995 |
| Robert Parish | 00 | January 18, 1998 |
| Cedric Maxwell | 31 | December 15, 2003 |
| Paul Pierce | 34 | February 11, 2018 |
| Kevin Garnett | 5 | March 13, 2022 |

Note that 19, “LOSCY,” 17, and 18 were added from *right-to-left* on the second banner, while 10 and 2 were added in the traditional left-to-right order to finish off the frame. In the 1990’s, when a third banner was added to honor the next generation of Celtics legends, the left-to-right ordering was used throughout. However, this banner was initially hung in between the 1986 championship flag and the *first* retired number banner, resulting in the second retired number banner appearing to be hanging out of order.

All of the banners were replaced when the Fleet Center (now named TD Garden) opened in the fall of 1995. The new editions feature a slightly brighter green color and yet another change to the typefaces as compared with the older models. The number “1” on the retired number banners now contains a curved serif at the top. Oddly, on the new championship banners, the number 1 now contains a square serif at the top, while the old banners contained no serif at all. Also, the word “BOSTON” is now slightly wider than “CELTICS” which provides a bit more visual balance between the top and bottom portions of the banners. When the Celtics new “Healthpoint” training facility opened in Waltham, Massachusetts, in 1999, the last set of banners to hang in the old Garden were installed along the walls that surround the team’s practice basketball court.²⁰ The Celtics have placed a blank banner alongside them in recent years, in an attempt to inspire the current generation of players to capture the team’s next championship.

Notes

The title of this article is taken from Bob Ryan's "Celtics Notebook" notes column in the *Boston Globe* on April 10, 1982, which describes how "Jo Jo [White]'s No. 10 went up to Rafter Heaven..." prior to the previous evening's game at the Garden.

¹ <http://www.newenglandflagandbanner.com>, Shaughnessy, Dan. *Ever Green: The Boston Celtics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990, p36.

² The NBA logo appears in two forms: white letters on a green circle, or green letters on a whitespace inside a circular green outline. Some articles suggest that, at least on the championship banners, this reflects whether the title was won at home or on the road, but this theory does not prove true when compared with the team's playoff results.

³ Sullivan, George. *The Picture History of the Boston Celtics*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981, photograph on page facing title page. (All other references to "Sullivan" below refer to this book unless explicitly noted.)

⁴ With one exception: photographs from the 1968 playoffs show at least one Eastern Division banner hanging at a 90-degree angle at the end of the long rows of banners, forming a U-shaped ring of flags. For an example, see: Ryan, Bob and Dick Raphael. *The Boston Celtics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990, p47.

⁵ Sullivan, p65.

⁶ <http://nesn.com/2013/10/celtics-retire-no-1-for-owner-walter-brown-on-opening-night-in-1964-on-throwback-thursday-video/>

⁷ "Brown Gives Up Sharman Fight," *Boston Globe*, November 9, 1961.

⁸ Sullivan, p92.

⁹ Photo in *Boston Globe*, December 16, 1976. The Bucks lost to the Celtics that night to fall to 4-25 on the season.

¹⁰ The photo of Don Nelson's number retirement shows the old banner (*Boston Globe*, December 16, 1976) while the CBS broadcast of Game 7 of the 1982 Eastern Conference Finals showed the newer model. The author has also seen a photo of the Garden that shows the newer version along with the retired number banners as they appeared before Dave Cowens' number was added in February 1981.

¹¹ Noted in *1963-64 Boston Celtics Yearbook* (pages unnumbered, appears on Bill Russell bio page).

¹² Johnson, Richard A. and Brian Codagnone. *Images of Sports: The Boston Garden*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2002, p78. Other photographs reviewed by the author show the Hall of Fame banner still flying in late 1972 or early 1973, after Russell's number was retired but with the original Walter Brown banner still in place.

¹³ Sullivan, p82 shows the team banners in a photo from the 1969 playoffs but there is no sight of the divisional flags; the team banners are also shown in a much older photograph on the page facing the title page.

¹⁴ Sullivan, p100.

¹⁵ <https://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/2368106> Some of the details in the description of the banner seem questionable.

¹⁶ Sullivan, George. *Dave Cowens: A Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 1977, p41 shows the two retired number banners with the same typeface alongside the 1974 championship banner, but the 1976 flag is not present.

¹⁷ Shaughnessy, p37.

¹⁸ Compare Sullivan, p92 with Ryan and Raphael, *The Boston Celtics*, p118 (or images from Google of the banners in the original Boston Garden).

¹⁹ Many of these dates – prior to those in the 1980s – were listed incorrectly in the *Boston Celtics Media Guide* as of the 2014-15 edition, and as recently as March 14, 2022, one page on the team website was still citing several of those wrong dates. But the dates on the <https://www.bostoncelticshistory.com/retired-numbers/> page now match mine, with the exception of Sam Jones, which they list as March 9, 1969. The dates shown in my table were obtained from articles in contemporary editions of the *Boston Globe* that appeared on the day of and the day after each retirement ceremony. The October 22, 1970 edition of the *Globe* features a photograph of Jones next to the new "24" on the banner. March 9, 1969 was "Sam Jones Day" at the Garden, held to celebrate his impending retirement, not the official retirement of his number.

²⁰ Joe Burris, "Parquet, lavish spa highlight new facility," *Boston Globe*, April 1, 1999. The new banners in the Fleet Center / TD Garden maintained the same variability in the "NBA" logo in the center of the championship banners as the originals.