

People:

Oscar Robertson, Ohio's Own

By Lynn Wasnak

Mention the name Oscar Robertson and sports-minded Ohioans will immediately picture an alert, energetic young man who put basketballs where they belonged—into the hoop—time and time again from the late 1950s through the early 1970s.

Robertson was an All-American pick three years in a row at the University of Cincinnati. Next he was co-captain of the 1960 U.S. Olympic basketball team, which won a gold medal. This achievement was followed by 14 years as a star player with the Cincinnati Royals and the Milwaukee Bucks National Basketball Assn. teams.

Today Robertson's body is slightly heavier and his hair shows a barely perceptible touch of gray. But the energy and competitive spirit that powered his basketball career still exists—channeled into business.

Since retiring from pro basketball, Robertson has been involved in general contracting and real estate development. He also owns a piece of a trucking company. But his dominant business interest is Orchem Inc., Cincinnati, a specialty chemical company he founded.

Despite years of fame, Robertson is not flamboyant or eager to brag about his accomplishments. "I'm a private person," he says. "I don't think flaunting yourself in the business world or telling people 'Hey, I'm here!' gets the job done at all. I think you have to perform. Like anything in the world, you have to perform."

With two facilities in Cincinnati and one in Oklahoma, Orchem is the nation's largest minority-owned chemical manufacturing company. It formulates and blends a host of cleaning and sanitizing products used by food and beverage processors, institutional food service operations, fast-food chains and others.

Orchem trains client personnel in proper use of products and develops profit-enhancing programs designed specifically for each customer's unique set of problems and needs. It also represents major chemical manufacturers of commodity chemicals to customers in private industry. Orchem services big names such as Frito-Lay Inc., Oscar Mayer & Co., Kraft Inc., Pizza Hut Inc., Burger King Corp., and Pepsico Franchise Services Inc. During the past two years, sales have increased \$10 million. Orchem recently acquired an Indianapolis chemical company, and more acquisitions are planned.

Unfortunately, with the prime exception of Kroger Co., Cincinnati, and a few others that have been excellent customers, Orchem has received very little business from Ohio-based corporations.

“Ohio is a tough state to penetrate,” he says, despite intense efforts by Robertson and his staff to demonstrate their products and programs. The closed doors in his home state frustrate him. Considering the location of Orchem’s customer base, which is largely south and west, “five or ten years from now we’ll really have to question why we’re still in Ohio.”

He doesn’t think Ohio has done what it should to promote and encourage minority businesses. He blames the scarcity of black politicians. There are virtually no set-aside programs, federal support has all but disappeared, and the Small Business Administration efforts are marred, he thinks, by the difficulty of qualifying for programs.

Private industry could help if it chose to, he says. “No minority company is going to make it unless a major company says ‘We can give you X-amount of business.’ You’ve got to have a customer you can rely on, and then build on that.”

Far sighted corporations such as Frito-Lay have committed millions of dollars to encourage development of minority suppliers “They know that in the next ten years the population trends are going to change, and they want to be in the position to say, ‘This is what we did when we didn’t have to do it,’” Robertson states.

But in Ohio, “There’s a lot of talk by chairmen and presidents of companies about what they’re doing and what they hope to do [in using minority suppliers]. But when it comes down to it, they have a very poor record,” he adds.

Few people are able to gather the resources needed to start a company, and even fewer of those people are black. “I know the pitfalls, and the pitfalls are not ten feet deep. These pitfalls are 100 feet deep. So deep they never want you to get out of them. The [minority business owners] who over come that are the greatest business men going,” Robertson claims.

He’s set a 15 percent annual growth target for the next few years, and will probably attain most of it by acquiring compatible companies. After years of developing personal contacts, the capital is ready and waiting. Financing isn’t likely to be local. “You have to go to New York,” says Robertson. “The people there are movers. They have vision.”

His own vision includes working toward a better future for black youth. “I think I’m here in order to give other black kids an opportunity.”

Robertson says when he tries to recruit young black engineering students, college placement officers “look at you like you’re crazy.” Qualified black students and graduates are hard to find. “If there aren’t any jobs available for these kids, they’re not going to go to the colleges,” he explains.

He’s also concerned about training for the non-college student. “Counselors can help an A student, but what about the kid with a couple C’s and one or two D’s. Help this kid get someplace in life. Tell him how he can borrow money to go to school!”

In addition to his own efforts working directly with young people, he has tried to solicit help from other companies to set up training programs or educational bonuses that would help black youth become more employable.

“If corporate America doesn’t get in tune with what’s going on, how are they going to make money? Who’s going to run the machines and computers for them? Who’s going to do all the technical things...repair those machines when they break?”

“I don’t think our society is geared to have total employment. I don’t think we can save everybody. But with black people being such a large segment, it’s not even close. Look at television, or corporate situations. You’ll see a lot of young black women. You don’t see young black men. The older you get, you look at it and wonder, “How did it ever get to this point?””

In his spare time, Robertson still plays basketball. But most days he’s playing ball with corporate America. It’s a very tough game, but he’s determined to win. Keeping his private deals private is fine with him, for now. “That’s the way I like to exist,” says Robertson. “When we hit \$100 million, they’ll know us then.”