



My Drift

Title: Bill Walton

Written by: Jerry D. Petersen

Date: 15 Apr 2017

Article Number: 255-2017-11

John Wooden (The Wizard of Westwood) tells a story about how he handled a rebellious player named Bill Walton insistent upon breaking his rules on personal appearance. Walton told me I didn't have the right to make him get a haircut and to shave off his full beard. I said, "No, I don't, Bill. I just have the right to determine who is going to play — and we're going to miss you." Walton got a haircut and shave that same day.



Bill Walton tells of another problem he caused for Coach Wooden. One of the saddest days for Coach Wooden was the day he came down and had to bail me out of jail after I got arrested in the anti-Vietnam protest. He said, "Bill, I know you feel very strongly about this, but I just don't think that you getting arrested and taking part in this demonstration is what it's all about."

"Coach Wooden has a heart, brain and soul that have enabled him to inspire others to reach levels of success and peace of mind that they might never have dreamed possible on their own."



"When I left UCLA in 1974 and became the highest-paid player in the history of team sports at that time, the quality of my life went down. That's how special it was to have played for John Wooden and UCLA."

—Bill Walton '74, UCLA Magazine (March 2007)

Bill Walton gives lessons on life and John Wooden in speech at Berkeley. When prompted with a question about his favorite piece of advice he ever received from his college coach, Walton launched into a minutes-long monologue that included a complete recitation from memory of Wooden's famous "Pyramid of Success."

"He was a kind, loving, selfless, happy person who derived his joy and happiness from seeing others succeed," Walton said. "John Wooden was right about everything. We just didn't know it at the time."

The talk took a profound and sad turn as Walton discussed his struggles with suicide after undergoing 36 orthopedic surgeries on his feet and spine. He recounted three years he spent on his back, writhing in pain and unable to move. "My life was over," Walton said. "I had nothing. If I had a gun, I would've used it."

Walton framed basketball as a metaphor for life, "Life is easy when you're hot, when your jumpers are going down, but what happens when the ball bounces out, because something bad will happen to all of you". "Don't let the cleanliness of theory get in

the way of the messiness of reality,” Walton said. “You never know how the game of life is going to play out.”

The above quotes tell us a lot about Bill Walton’s character. Now, let’s take a closer look at his career and life.

Bill Walton BIO

Full Name: William Theodore Walton

Born: 11/5/52 in La Mesa, Calif.

High School: Helix (La Mesa, Calif.)

College: UCLA and Stanford Law School

Drafted by: Portland Trail Blazers, 1974

Transactions: Signed with San Diego Clippers (5/13/79); Traded to Boston (9/6/85)

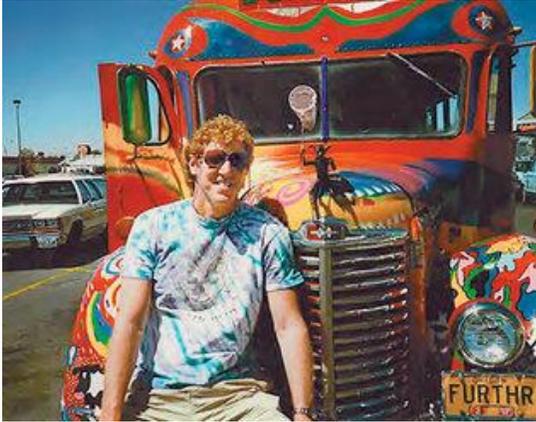
Height: 6-11; **Weight:** 235 lbs.

Honors: Elected to Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame (1993); NBA champion (1977, '86); NBA Finals MVP (1977); NBA MVP (1978); All-NBA First Team (1978); All-NBA Second Team (1977); NBA All-Defensive Team (1977, '78); NBA All-Star (1977, '78); Sixth Man Award (1986); One of 50 Greatest Players in NBA History (1996).

Before the injuries hampered his professional career, Bill Walton dominated college basketball. From 1972-74, Bill Walton led UCLA to an 86-4 record and two national titles. At UCLA in the early '70s, the 6-foot-11, 235-pound center was the linchpin of the Bruins winning an NCAA record 88 consecutive games. Walton didn't just play basketball; he understood the soul of the game.

He learned about competition early, beginning at Blessed Sacrament Elementary School in La Mesa, a suburb of San Diego. A shy and nervous seventh grader who stuttered, Walton was in no hurry to leave the restroom before the tip-off of a local Catholic league championship game. His coach, Rocky Graciano, took note of the promising player's trepidation and told him, "Bill, you've got to learn to love these moments because this is what sports is all about, playing for the championship. You're going to play in a lot of these championship games before you're through and you have to look forward to each one as if it's the greatest opportunity and the greatest moment of your life."

Walton never forgot the message. He won two high school championships (1969 and 1970), two NCAA crowns at UCLA (1972 and 1973) and two NBA titles (with the 1977 Portland Trail Blazers and 1986 with the Boston Celtics).



The once shy Walton became a ferocious, outspoken and controversial player and person. He got over the stuttering problem and immersed himself in basketball and living life. A fan of the Grateful Dead, Walton was known for joining fringe causes. He was arrested while he was a junior at UCLA during an anti-Vietnam War rally. Walton was just as intense about the physical and mental games of basketball.

UCLA coach John Wooden described Walton as "intelligent" and "inquisitive." In the forward of Walton's book, "Nothing but Net," Wooden wrote, "As a player, Bill was one of the greatest who ever performed at his position at every level of competition -- high school, college and professional. There are many true students of the sport who consider him to be the very finest when all aspects of the games are taken into consideration."

Walton was born on Nov. 5, 1952 in La Mesa. He grew up in a middle-class home where his parents didn't own a television until the mid-sixties. His father Ted was more interested in music and literature than in sports. Still, his dad never discouraged him from playing basketball.

In his senior year at Helix High School, Walton averaged 29 points and 25 rebounds in leading the team to a 33-0 season and its second straight championship. Almost every major college was offering him a scholarship. Walton greatly respected Wooden and chose UCLA. Under the wizard's guidance, Walton won three Player of the Year awards at UCLA.

Walton became the consummate center - rebounding, passing, blocking shots and scoring. Not only was he a three-time first-team All-American, he also was the Division I Player of the Year each season (1972-74). UCLA went 30-0 in both of Walton's first two seasons. He scored 24 points and grabbed 20 rebounds as the Bruins defeated Florida State 81-76 in the 1972 NCAA championship game.

A year later, Walton put on perhaps the greatest display in an NCAA tournament game as he made 21-of-22 field-goal attempts in scoring a Final Four record 44 points in an 87-66 rout of Memphis State.

UCLA's winning streak reached 88 before it was snapped at Notre Dame 71-70 on Jan. 19, 1974. Counting back to high school, Walton's teams had won 129 consecutive games.



His collegiate career didn't end on a high, however. Seeking to win its eighth consecutive NCAA championship, UCLA lost to North Carolina State and David Thompson, 80-77, in double overtime in the Final Four.

The Walton Gang went 86-4 in three years, with the big redhead scoring 1,767 points (20.3 average), grabbing 1,370 rebounds (breaking Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's school record with his 15.7 average) and also being the second most accurate shooter in UCLA history with a .651 field-goal percentage.

After graduating with honors, Walton was made the first pick in the 1974 draft by the Portland Trail Blazers. But he never fulfilled the greatness he showed in college because of injuries. While he was sidelined for only three of 90 UCLA games, he missed more contests (680) than he played (488) during his NBA career. Only once in 14 years did he play more than 70 regular-season games.

As a rookie in 1974-75, an injury-prone Walton was limited to 35 games and averaged just 12.8 points. The next season, Walton played 51 games; he averaged 16.1 points and 13.4 rebounds though the Trail Blazers finished last in the Pacific Division.

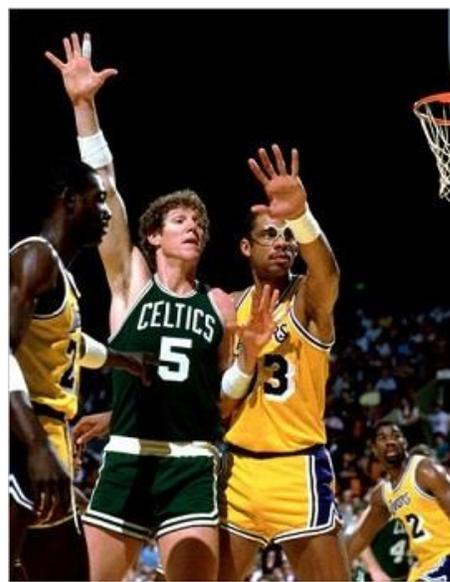


He made his mark during Portland's 1976-77 championship season, when he played in 65 games and won the NBA's MVP award. Walton led Portland past Dr. J and the 76ers in the 1977 NBA Finals. He averaged 18.6 points and led the NBA in rebounding (14.4) and blocked shots (3.25). After the Trail Blazers, who finished second to the Lakers in the Pacific Division in the regular season, swept Los Angeles in the Western Conference finals, it rallied from a 2-0 deficit to win the NBA Finals in six games over the Philadelphia 76ers. Walton was voted the Finals MVP.

In 1978, Walton was named All-NBA First Team for the only time after averaging career-highs in points (18.9) and assists (5.0). He also averaged 13.2 rebounds and 2.5 blocks. But injuries hit him again and he played in just 58 games. After a 50-10 start, the Trail Blazers finished 58-24 and didn't even reach the Western Conference finals. Walton missed the entire 1978-79 season because of a foot injury. He wanted out of Portland. He was so dissatisfied with the quality of medical care he received from the Trail Blazers' medical staff that he filed a malpractice suit.

On May 13, 1979, Walton, a free agent, signed a \$7-million, seven-year contract with his hometown team, the San Diego Clippers. After just playing 14 games in 1979-80, he missed the next two seasons because of injuries to his feet.

Walton passed the time by attending Stanford Law School. When he returned to the NBA in 1982, the Clippers gingerly played the center, who appeared in only 33 games. By the end of the 1984-85 season, the Clippers' first in Los Angeles, Walton was embarrassed by his stats: 10.1 points and nine rebounds, though he did play in 67 games.



On Sept. 6, 1985, Walton was traded to the Celtics, where he would back up center Robert Parrish. He made it through 80 regular-season games (averaging 7.6 points and 6.8 rebounds in 19.3 minutes a game) and won the NBA's sixth man award. Playing 16 of 18 playoff games, he helped Boston win the championship.



Walton with Danny Ainge (left) and Larry Bird (right)

But Walton suffered stress fractures in his foot the following season, and played in only 10 games. After spending the entire 1987-88 regular season recovering from major surgery on his right foot, he tried to return to practice, but the pain was too great. Walton called it quits.

For his career, Walton averaged 13.3 points and 10.5 rebounds. His field-goal percentage was .521 and his foul-shooting percentage was .660. In February 1990, almost three years after Walton had played his last NBA game, he was contemplating a comeback - until his most devastating injury took hold. He got up and couldn't walk. His foot and ankle were so badly damaged that they were partially dislocated and the disintegrating bones were grinding together.

All his accomplishments seemed like nothing compared with the devastation of undergoing an ankle fusion. Walton found that getting off the court didn't mean getting out of basketball. Since the early nineties Walton, who had gotten over his stuttering problem, has expressed his views as a television basketball analyst. "Among the nicest and most satisfying rewards of my new career as a broadcaster," he said, "is that I get to work and I don't get hurt physically."



Personal Life

Bill Walton Recalls 'the Most Perfect Childhood Ever'

Long before he was a star at UCLA or an icon of the NBA, Bill Walton was Billy Walton, a redheaded ember of energy flying around La Mesa on his bicycle.

"Incredible memories of growing up in the '50s and '60s," he told La Mesa Patch. "It's such a time ... such a golden era. I did not grow up with a silver spoon, but I did grow up in a golden dream. The dream of being part of something really special. So much hope, so much belief that there was always a better tomorrow."

He was one of four children of Ted and Gloria Walton—Bruce, Bill, Andy and Cathy—who lived in a hillside home on Colorado Avenue just below Lake Murray. It was a house filled with books, music and constant, lively conversation. There was no TV in the house.

For Billy, the days were an endless stream of adventures as he rode his bike or skateboard, hiked in wide-open spaces, explored the city's parks and discovered the world of sports.

He calls it "the most perfect childhood ever." He remembers his good friends, his teachers, his coaches, his teammates and his introduction to basketball.

"It was what you dream for as a parent—now that I'm a parent, I know this—in that you want your children to believe that everything is good," he says. "And that was the life we had when I was growing up. And it wasn't until I left La Mesa, it wasn't

until I left John Wooden and UCLA that I realized that life is not like that. The world is not like that."

Much has happened to Bill Walton since he left Helix for UCLA in 1970. There were NCAA championships, NBA titles with Portland and Boston, his election to the Basketball Hall of Fame and his selection as one of the 50 greatest players of all time. After basketball came a broadcasting career, work on numerous social causes and a battle—now won—with debilitating back pain that almost drained him of his love of life.

But while much has changed, much has stayed the same. His mother still lives in the same house on Colorado Avenue. He still sees childhood friends and classmates. And he still rides his bike through La Mesa—cycling is his passion—just as he did when he was Billy, not yet Bill.

Recently, Walton sat on a deck at his San Diego home, overlooking a canyon next to Balboa Park. The sun was shining, the sky was blue and Walton—a true prophet of positivity—was expounding on what it was like to grow up in La Mesa long before the completion of Interstate 8 or the developments around Lake Murray.

On his parents: "Their world was music, art, literature, singing in the church choir and working in the garden and just tons and tons of books. My mom was the town librarian and my dad had three jobs. He was a social worker by day, an adult educator by night and a music teacher on the weekends."

On how he got around: "I had a bike that my dad bought for me at the police auction for \$5. I was an early skateboard rider, and that was transportation. We could get to the beach on our bikes, we could get all over town on our skateboards and our bikes."

On living near Lake Murray: "When we grew up (on Colorado Avenue), that was the edge of town. Lake Murray was not developed at all, but we could hike up there from our house. It would take five minutes to walk there from our house. And the canyons, and the lake, the rangers would get so mad when we would go swimming in that lake, but it was hot and we wanted to cool off, and we were fast. From the backside of Lake Murray to Cowles Mountain there was nothing. Just all open land and you could just run and play and hike."

On the weather: "The weather was absolutely perfect. La Mesa has the best weather in our entire country. When I moved to UCLA on the west side of Los Angeles I thought it was just freezing, cold and damp and wet all the time. And then when I

moved to Oregon (to play for the Trail Blazers) I was convinced that the sun had burned out and that life as we knew it was coming to an end."

On elementary school and discovering basketball: "I went to Blessed Sacrament on 56th and El Cajon. That's where I found my first coach, Frank "Rocky" Graciano. He taught us everything. We loved that guy. It's such an honor to play for Rocky. He made it so much fun. It was just a joyous celebration of life every day. I started playing for Rocky in 1960. Rocky was the school's volunteer coach at Blessed Sacrament. Every day, every grade, every level, every sport, all year round. Rocky is still there every day. He's as fine a man as I've ever known."

On the day President Kennedy was assassinated: "Rocky came in and told us. We were in the classroom. ... President Kennedy had come by our school in a motorcade [in June of 1963]. We all went out and we all waved to him and he stood up and waved back and not too long after that Rocky came into the classroom and told us that President Kennedy had been shot and killed. ... And things were never the same again."

On basketball when he was young: "The Helix gym was open. It was open to public free play, open all the time. And I found that place very early. Took 10 minutes to ride my bike from our home over to Helix and I just would be there all day long, playing ball. But I played everywhere. I played at La Mesa Dale on the 8-foot baskets. Maryland Avenue School had the 8-foot baskets, too. We'd act like Wilt and Russell and Elgin."

On playing for Helix High: "We had a great team at Helix. The coach was instrumental. Every coach I ever had as a young player—the key ones were Rocky and Gordon Nash (at Helix)—they were all firm disciples of John Wooden. Commitment to the team. The physical fitness. Pressure defense. Full-court press and a relentless offensive attack. That celebration of life in basketball. And it was always so positive, so upbeat. We couldn't wait to get to the gym to play every day."

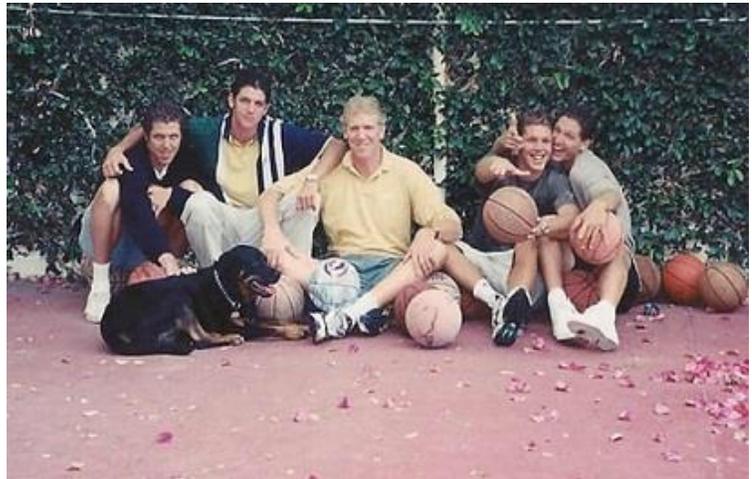
On La Mesa now: It is "perfect - The topography is just fantastic because of all the hills, the canyons, you don't have that incredible denseness that you have with totally flat land. There's no flat land in La Mesa. And what (Mayor) Art Madrid has done with downtown La Mesa now ...the trolley stop, the urban nature of the restaurants, the stores, the antique shops, the car shows, the music festival. They have it all. It's a perfect town."

Family

Walton married Susan “Susie” Guth in 1979. They had four sons: Adam, Nathan, Luke, and Chris. Luke played from 2003 to 2012 for the Los Angeles Lakers, won both the 2009 and 2010 NBA Finals, making Bill and Luke the first father-son pair to have both won multiple NBA championships. Luke was named head coach of the Lakers on April 29, 2016, after two years as an assistant for the Golden State Warriors. Another of Walton's sons, Chris, played for San Diego State. Nate, his middle son, played basketball at Princeton but then entered the corporate world and earned his MBA from Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. (Bill Walton attended Stanford Law School for two years but never graduated.) Nate was on the ballot for the 2003 California Recall Election, receiving 1,697 votes. Walton's other son, Adam, also played NCAA basketball at Louisiana State University.



Susie Guth

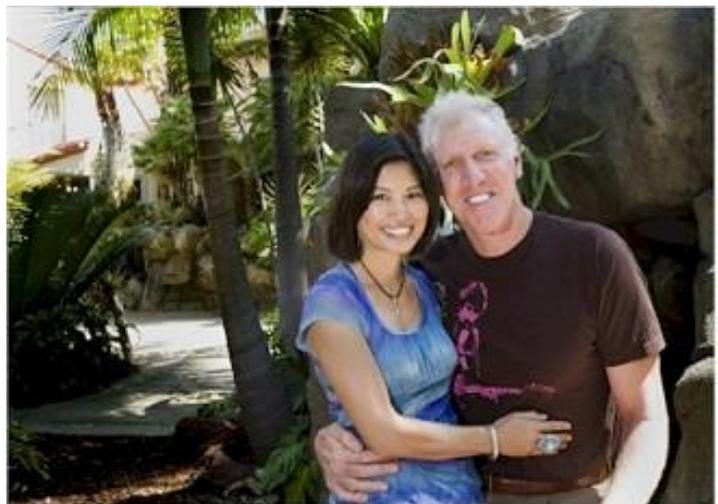


Bill Walton with his Sons and Dog

Walton divorced Susan in 1989.

Walton married Lori Matsuoka in 1990.

Bill and Lori currently live in San Diego.



Lori Matsuoka and Bill at Home

More on Walton's Health Issues

In January 1974, toward the end of those amazing 88-straight wins, he was undercut by a Washington State player and fell hard. He broke two bones in his spine. He missed three games, then returned, but the injury was a precursor to what would follow next for Walton: Plenty of foot surgeries and then, decades later, an injured back that would return after being dormant all those years and nearly push him over the edge.



One day late in 2007, he felt a jolt of pain and could barely move. At the time, Walton was a busy broadcaster, doing college and NBA games, successfully transitioning to a different career in basketball. But that came to a temporary end. Whenever Walton awoke each morning, he'd slowly move to the floor in his bedroom and stay there until the evening, when he'd climb back into bed and do the same thing all over again the next day. Walton even ate his meals on his stomach.

His son Luke would visit and find his father in the same spot each time. "As kids, we've seen him injured a lot, but he was still always moving around, even on crutches, constantly busy and doing stuff," Luke said. "It was sad because he couldn't do any of that with the back. Standing on his feet and even going out of the house wasn't an option. You never want to see anyone in that type of pain, especially your dad, someone you love and look up to. It was a tough time for him and for all of us."

Plenty of fortunate and determined people in life manage to rise to the ceiling, some reach the ceiling, and some go right through the ceiling. And then there is Bill Walton, who stared at the ceiling for three long, harsh, immobile years -- nothing but a ceiling, in all of its flatness and coldness.

Lying on your back or stomach were the positions Walton helplessly assumed when his spine simply refused to support him anymore. His back just up and quit on him. When he wasn't staring at the ceiling, he was on his stomach, eyeballing the floor. One or the other, stretched out and stressed out. It was a cruel twist for a Hall of Famer long known for the worst feet in sports history. By his count, he endured 37 orthopedic surgeries – thirty-damn-seven! -- all those needles and scalpels and crutches and MRIs and empty promises of a cure, and still managed to walk and even resume his basketball career for a short time.

But his back? Surgery No. 38 was the worst, by far. How could it get any worse?

But it did, up until about five years ago (2011). It caused Walton lots of pain and plunged him into a dark place, and it kept him staring at the ceiling or the carpet for endless days, months and years. It also crossed his mind more than once that this position was slowly preparing him for his coffin. "I thought I was going to die," he said the other day. "And if I wasn't going to die naturally, I didn't think I wanted to live anymore, not in that condition. My life was over. It was that bad." "If I had owned a gun, I would have ended it."

And so, what did a man who spent his days and nights horizontally (for 3 years) think about when laying in total isolation in his bedroom?

"Learning how to speak was the greatest accomplishment in my life and your worst nightmare," said Walton, who overcame his severe stutter to become a lively and sometimes controversial broadcaster over two decades. "But the hardest thing I've ever done in my life is trying to get better from my spine failure and collapse."

He tried acupuncture, saw dozens of doctors, sought plenty of medicine, but nothing worked. His wife, Lori, bless her heart, constantly encouraged him, bathed him, cared for him and told him how wonderful life would be again whenever he returned to his feet. When the days turned into months and then years, Walton wasn't so sure. He began to lose hope. "For a while, I had no idea what life was like without back pain," he said.

And then in 2009 he found Dr. Steve Garfin, a specialist based near Walton's home in San Diego. An eight-hour spinal-fusion surgery followed. Two titanium rods and four four-inch bolts were inserted in his back. He couldn't walk to the hospital and couldn't walk out. He stayed hospitalized for a week, and then couldn't move freely for a year after surgery.

"A miracle," is how Walton describes his recovery. One day I woke up pain free and could walk again. I have the chance to do something with my life again, and the rest is up to me. I can put my energies to projects I'm working on, a book that's almost complete and I can return to my broadcasting duties. I'm fully aware of how many people sacrificed for me to have this chance, and so I have a duty and obligation to do something for them and other people who suffer severe back pain."

"I spend hours almost every day, on the phone or Internet, with people who want to kill themselves," he said. "People are ready to commit suicide. I'm deeply affected by their stories about their condition. I know how it just destroys everything in your life."

Some other Interesting Facts and Information

**Nicknames: The Big Redhead
 Mountain Man
 The World's Tallest Deadhead**



Walton is a life-long vegetarian.

Bill was and still is an ultra-liberal outspoken Democrat Hippie. Playing NBA basketball for the Trail Blazers in Portland was a great fit for Walton. Portland is the most liberal city in the USA.



Walton is asked about being a hippie, to which he responded: "I'm still a hippie and proud of it because we were right. We still think that way. I fought Coach Wooden on everything. I fought him on facial hair, hair length, wardrobe, Nixon, Vietnam, the cheerleaders."

Walton and the Grateful Dead

Bill Walton says, “I am the human being that I am today because of the Grateful Dead”. When asked what did you learn from the Grateful Dead? Can you somehow compress that life lesson you’ve picked up from the 859 concerts that you attended in person?



The Grateful Dead

Walton responded, “I learned from them about how to become a champion. I became the basketball player that I was because of the Grateful Dead. I am the human being that I am today because of the Grateful Dead. They’re right there at the top of my teachers. Their inspiration moved me brightly.”

Did you know that Bill Walton is actually 7 feet 2 inches tall but insisted that they list him as 6 feet 11 inches because he didn’t want to be known as a 7 footer.

Well, Bill Walton is a liberal hippie democrat but I have always liked him anyway. I don’t know why! Maybe it’s because he was such a great basketball player.

Bigdrifter44@gmail.com

Bigdrifter.com