

Bill Walton, Hall of Fame basketball player and one of the most outspoken athletes of his time, dies at 71

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Former US college and professional basketball player Bill Walton died Monday at the age of 71 after a prolonged battle with colon cancer. One of the finest college players in history, Walton went on to a Hall of Fame career in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

Walton, a product of the radicalized 1960s and 1970s, was also known for his views on social matters.

The 6' 11" (210.82 cm) Walton, born in Southern California in 1952, was a member of the most remarkable college sports dynasty, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) basketball team, under legendary Coach John Wooden. UCLA won 10 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) titles in 12 years, from 1964 to 1975.

In Walton's three seasons with UCLA's varsity team, 1971-1974, he won the College Player of the Year award each year, while leading his team to NCAA championships in 1972 and 1973. UCLA also enjoyed an 88-game winning streak, which only ended during Walton's senior year.

His 13-year NBA career was impeded by chronic injuries. He missed more games over the course of those years because of injuries (680) than he played (468). Physical problems caused him to miss four full seasons and the majority of games during five other seasons.

Walton later revealed he had undergone 38 orthopedic surgeries during and after his career, and the pain he endured at times caused him to consider suicide. It was not until 2006 that a newly developed back surgery technique enabled him to resume a pain-free existence for the first time in 30 years.

Despite these difficulties, Walton was the NBA's

Most Valuable Player in 1978 and won championships in 1977 (Portland Trail Blazers) and again in 1986 (Boston Celtics), and he was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2006.

What also distinguished Walton from other great players, particularly in his college and early NBA career, was his outspokenness, particularly his opposition to the Vietnam War, his embrace of radical politics generally and a non-conformist lifestyle that defied the typical stereotype of the "All-American" athlete.

Walton was born in 1952 and raised in San Diego, California. His mother was a librarian and his father a music teacher and social worker. His parents' interest in art, literature, politics and music led him to become a voracious reader and lover of music and develop an inexhaustible curiosity about the world.

The Vietnam War was at its height during Walton's years at UCLA, and anti-war sentiment raged across college campuses. Though Walton was physically ineligible for the military because of his size, he nevertheless became a strident opponent of the bloody conflict.

During his junior year, Walton made national headlines when he was arrested along with several other UCLA students during an anti-war protest. At a time when college athletes were widely promoted for their conservative images, that the country's best basketball player was arrested for political opposition and had to be bailed out of jail by the great Coach Wooden produced a considerable popular reaction.

"I had no problem with him during the season," Wooden said of Walton's college days. "Off the floor I worried. I worried when he was thrown in jail with the

group that took over the administration building, I worried when he stopped traffic on Wilshire Boulevard, and when he interrupted classes giving his views on the Vietnam War.”

Years later in describing his activism, Walton told author Tom Shanahan that he believed in peaceful protest then and always. “Protesting is what gets things done,” Walton said. “The drive for positive change requires action. The forces of evil don’t just change their ways.”

Despite being vilified in the press for his anti-war stance and later for wearing long hair, having a beard and adopting a “hippie-like” appearance, Walton was the first player chosen in the 1974 NBA draft by the Portland Trail Blazers.

In 1975, a week into his second season with the Trail Blazers, Walton took part in a San Francisco news conference defending his friends Jack and Micki Scott, who at times had lived with him in Portland.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had been pursuing the Scotts in regard to the activities of the Symbionese Liberation Army, responsible for kidnapping heiress Patty Hearst. The Scotts had disavowed any wrongdoing, and Walton asked the world to “stand with us in the rejection of the United States government” while also calling the FBI “the enemy.”

The Trail Blazers were outraged by Walton’s comments, and owner Herman Sarkowsky, team President Larry Weinberg and Executive Vice President Harry Glickman issued an indignant, patriotic statement.

The Portland Trail Blazers deplore Bill Walton’s statement calling for the rejection of the United States Government. The United States is the freest and most democratic nation in the world. ... We believe the National Basketball Association is an example of the opportunities available to people under the system of government, and Walton, more than most, has reaped extraordinary benefits from this system.

At the time, there were only a few prominent athletes,

mostly black, who spoke out against racism, such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell, Arthur Ashe, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and against the Vietnam War, particularly Muhammad Ali. Walton was highly unusual in that he demonstrated outspokenness and defiance during his college years, well before he had established professional stardom for himself and the financial security that goes with it. He was willing to jeopardize such a future for his beliefs.

“Sports encompasses all aspects of life,” Walton told Hal Bock of the Associated Press in 1991. “It’s unfortunate when people use the argument that it is not a platform for politics. ... I believe you can’t stop and put sports in a vacuum. Just because people are involved in a special thing like sports, that doesn’t prevent them from taking a position.”

After Walton retired, he became an Emmy Award-winning sports broadcaster known for his infectious enthusiasm for the game. Remarkably, he had suffered from a pronounced stutter until he was 28! “Then, when I was 28, I learned how to speak. It’s become my greatest accomplishment of my life and everybody else’s biggest nightmare.”



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