

OBSERVER SPORTS

Bill Walton and the other NBA white hopes

by Robert Eller

Bill Walton played basketball the other night in a competitive atmosphere for the first time since the 1980-81 season. Yes, Walton, who was an All-American at UCLA and an often-injured superstar in the NBA, joined a group of UCLA alumni to play former players from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

What's more, Walton played well enough to lead a number of writers to think that he may be contemplating a comeback attempt. In 34 minutes of action, Walton, who led the Portland Trail Blazers to the NBA title in '76-'77, scored 24 points, grabbed 21 rebounds and added three assists, two steals and five blocked shots. Despite the fact that UNLV had no player in the game over 6-5, many observers are excited by Walton's play.

After all, the 6-11 center had played less than 25 minutes of basketball since he last injured his left foot on Sept. 26, 1980.

Walton, you will remember, left the Trail Blazers some years back and sued them because he alleged that he was allowed to play after the team knew he had a foot injury. Later, he was sent to the San Diego Clippers, signing a multi-million dollar contract. Walton, who gets his pay whether he plays or not, has yet to give the Clippers a game.

Whether he is able to play up to par or not, the return of Walton to the San Diego team would certainly boost attendance, something the sagging franchise needs almost as badly or maybe even worse than it needs wins.

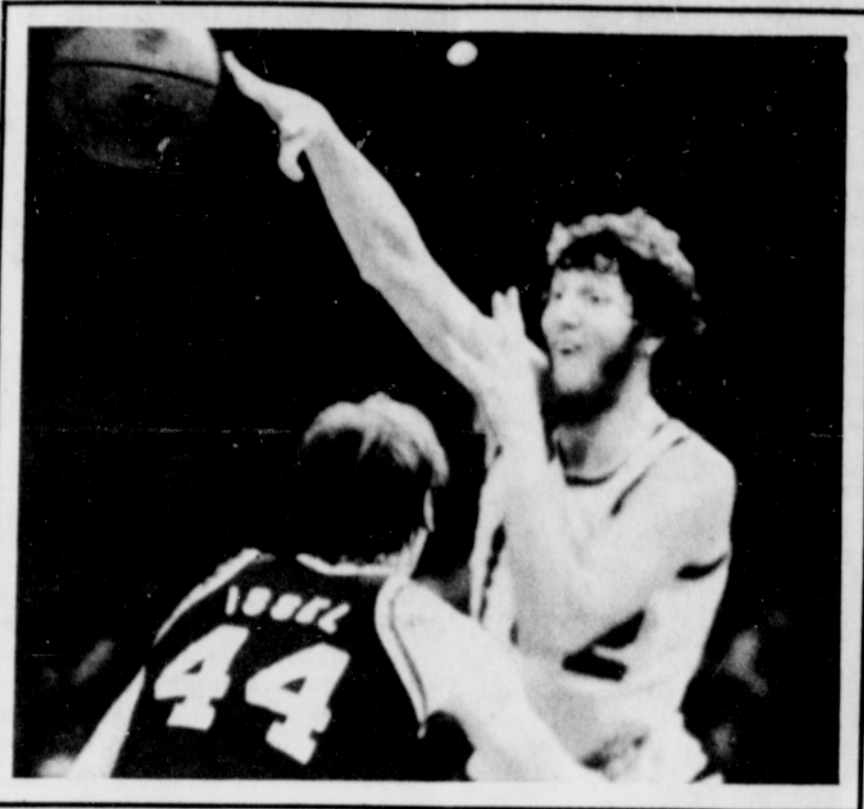
Walton is not the only former star center who has hinted that he might be interested in returning to the NBA wars. Dave Cowens, who retired from the Boston Celtics a few years ago, is also talking of returning to the league. Cowens would also give any team he decides to join an immediate lift at the box office if not on the court.

The question is now if those two return, will Wilt Chamberlain get the urge to grace the NBA floors again?

The return of Walton and/or Cowens would give the NBA something it sorely needs, a couple of big-name white players. Right now, Larry Bird is about the only big-name white player in the league. And all the top NBA centers, save Jack Sikma, are black. And just as the Pittsburgh Pirates' chief scout lamented this season when talking about the Pirates, white fans are a little reluctant to come out and watch a team dominated by black players.

Proof of that was shown only a few weeks ago when the Chicago Bulls traded Artis Gilmore, one of the top five centers in the NBA, to the San Antonio Spurs for Dave Corzine and Mark Olberding. Quite frankly, the Bulls needed a couple of white players, especially after drafting Quinten Dailey and seeing their first-round pick run into trouble even before putting on a Bull uniform. After he made some ill-advised remarks about his alleged rape of a University of San Francisco student nurse, a number of groups were after Dailey's hide.

Some even threatened to boycott



BILL WALTON

the Bulls game this season if Dailey were signed. Chicago signed Dailey anyway, then disposed of Coach Jerry Sloan, replacing him with Paul Westhead, who had trouble in Los Angeles after one year.

The Bulls look to be in real trouble without Gilmore, but it is possible that with two more white players on their rosters, they could finish as poorly as they did last season and still improve attendance figures.

Even though most of the NBA teams aren't willing to admit it, having some white players on the roster is essential. Remember the New York Knicks a couple of seasons ago? They had an all-black roster and soon found themselves being referred to as the "N---erbockers."

The only team in the NBA with a large corps of white players is the

Boston Celtics, and they should be even stronger this year—that is, if they trade Rick Robey. Robey is a decent player and his market value is increased by the fact that he is white, so the Celts should have little trouble getting a fine player in exchange for him.

This writer is sure that the Cleveland Cavs should give a great deal for Robey, if they had it, since their owner has already gone on record as saying that he needed white stars to identify with.

Of course the NBA does have another alternative: they could do as the European basketball leagues and the Canadian football league does, or even as my old high school basketball coach did.

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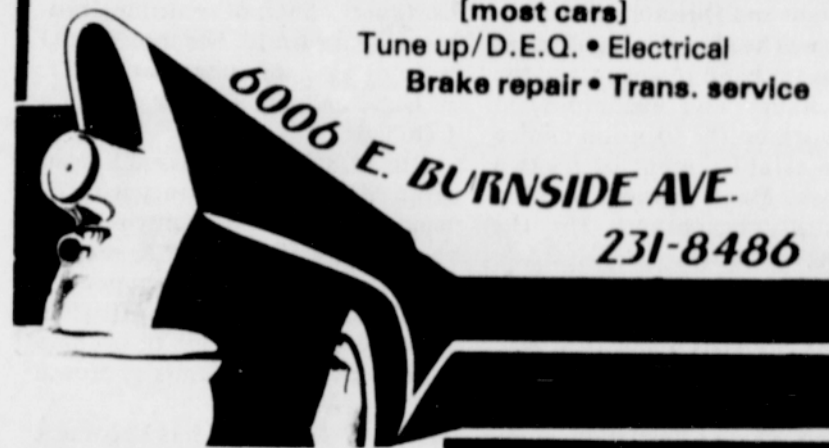
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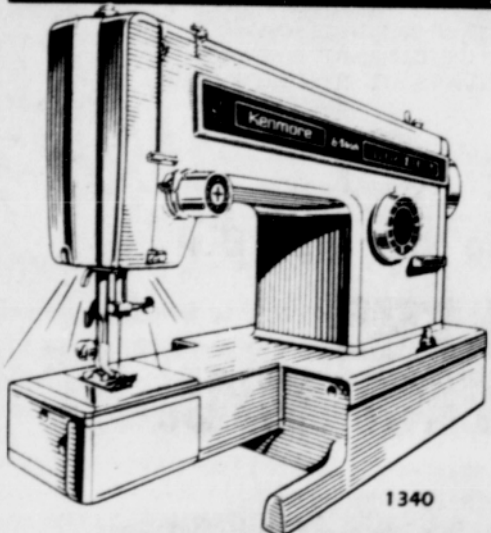
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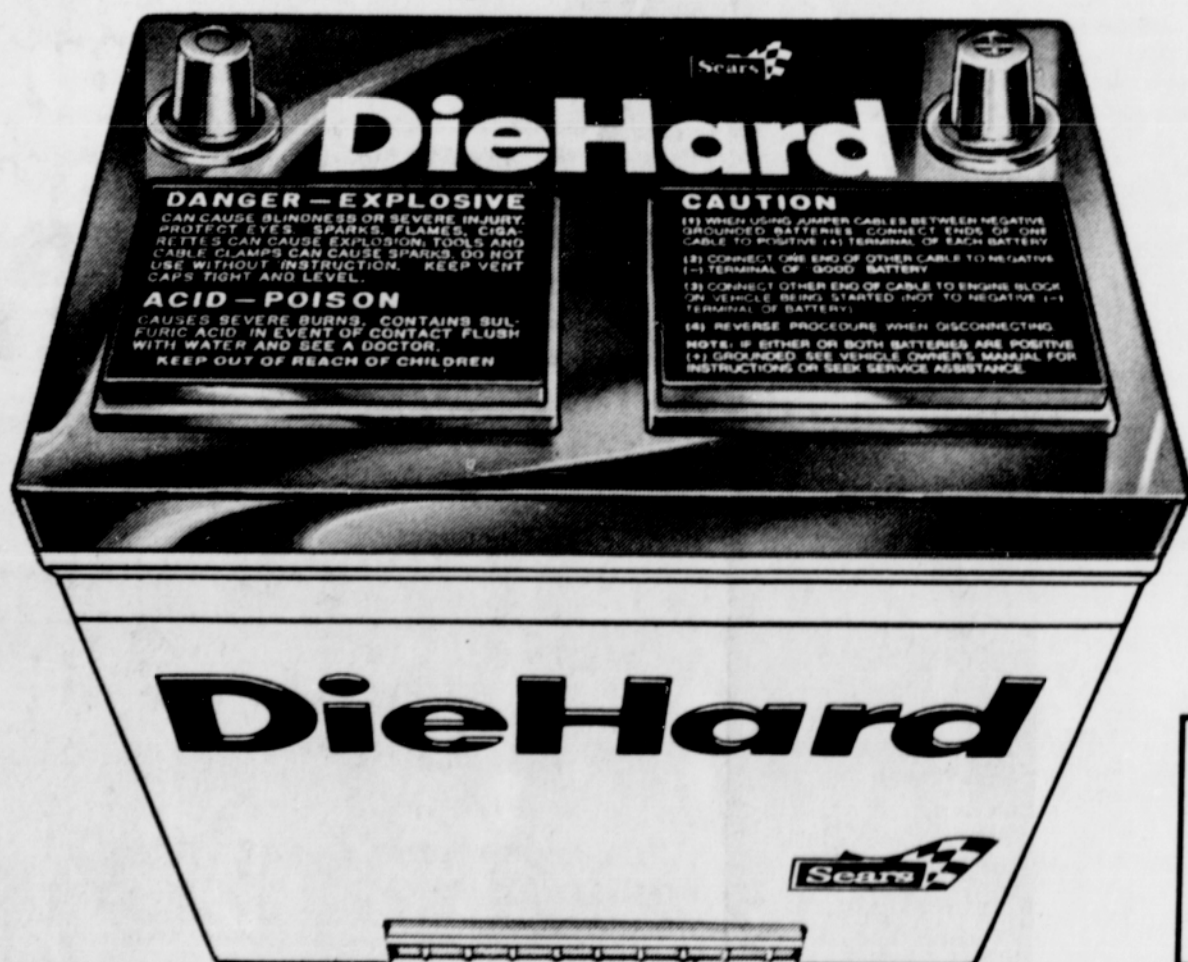
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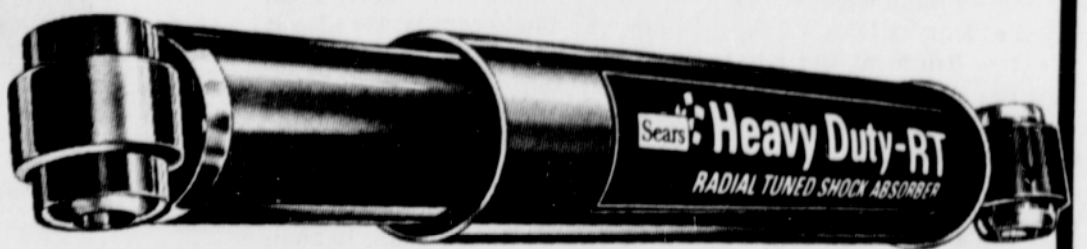
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