

Men's College Basketball

Walton's World always entertains on air

By JOHN MARSHALL
Associated Press

The spectacular, magnificent world of Bill Walton spins a tie-dyed swirl of knowledge, calculated hyperbole, educational tangents, eccentricity, props and name drops, loyalty, intellectual curiosity, the Grateful Dead, bingo and, of course, basketball.

"I am the luckiest guy in the world," Walton says.

14:07, first half.
(Pac-12 tournament quarterfinals, Arizona State vs. Oregon State.)

Walton to play-by-play man Ted Robinson: Have you ever been to the Dutch Corner on the Alpe d'Huez?

Robinson: No-hooo (the o rising into a laugh). I'm guessing it's not in The Netherlands.

Walton: Oh, no. It's in the Alpe d'Huez, one of turns in the Tour de France on the big climb. They're all dressed in orange and it's fantastic.

Robinson: Oh, OK. That's a foul on Eubanks for Oregon State.

A Walton-called basketball game is like performance art, viewers left buzzing and maybe a little confused when it's over.

Basketball, the game Walton loves so dearly, serves as the muse for the psychedelic galaxy spinning in his scholarly mind.

He certainly knows the game. The big redhead grabbed the dynastic torch from Lew Alcindor at UCLA in the 1970s and was named one of the NBA's 50 greatest players despite a litany of injuries.

He also was one of the quirkiest professional athletes in any sport, a hippie spirit in tie-dyed shirts attending Grateful Dead concerts, throwing up peace signs and rebelling against the mainstream.

He hasn't really changed since those days, either. The man has a teepee in his backyard.

With a combination of basketball knowledge, supreme intellect — he went to Stanford Law School while injured during his NBA days — eclectic taste and anti-establishment outspokenness, Walton is one of the most unique and polarizing analysts in any sport.

"There's no announcer neutrality with Bill," Robinson says. "You either love Bill or you don't like Bill. If you're interested in the standard basketball broadcast, Bill's not going to be your cup of tea. If you're interested in something



In this March 11, 2016 photo, analyst Bill Walton, left, speaks with play-by-play announcer Ted Robinson before a Pac-12 conference tournament game in Las Vegas. A Walton-called basketball game is like performance art, viewers left buzzing and maybe a little confused when it's over.

AP Photo/John Locher

that's different — and it can be very different — that's Bill."

13:29, first half.
Walton: "Big G (Oregon State's Gligorije Rakocevic) from Montenegro. That's one of the five countries of the former Yugoslavia. You been there yet?"

Robinson: "No."

Walton: "Oh, beautiful, beautiful. Robinson: "Oh, I have to go."

Walton: "Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Slovenia. Are those the five?"

Robinson: "Yes."

Walton: "I love geography. I love the Conference of Champions. GPII!"

Robinson: "I just love to see (Gary) Payton. Caught that in a rhythm."

Cursed with a debilitating stutterer when he was younger, Walton seemed about as likely a TV analyst as Jerry Garcia becoming president.

Now once Walton starts talking, he often doesn't stop.

With a Cosellian flair for hyperbole, he'll declare a bad pass "One of the five worst passes in the history of Western Civilization!" or call Arizona "The Thorean standard of the Pac-12 Conference."

Nothing is ever just good, it's spectacular, fabulous or magnificent.

Several times a game he takes viewers on tangential rides through topics he finds interesting — and

usually have nothing to do with the game.

Walton has brought back air from a Grateful Dead show to open during a broadcast. He rubbed "special dirt" from Temecula on his arms and face, wore a rowing singlet while announcing and played a Cal band member's glockenspiel on air.

Viewers, fellow announcers and producers never know where Walton is going, so everyone is always on their toes and holding on for the ride.

"You've always got to be listening," says play-by-play man Dave Pasch, who has perfected the art of the deadpan whenever Walton happens. "Not that you wouldn't normally with your analyst, but even more so with Bill you've got to have your antenna up constantly because he may say something you have to address in some way, shape or form."

8:36, second half
Walton: Cheikh N'diaye, the 7-footer from Senegal. What an international flavor this conference of champions has. And everybody coming together in Las Vegas. The seventh-busiest airport in the world. And that doesn't include the private planes coming in.

Robinson: Nice lob ... and that's a good job by Jacobsen in there. Let two defenders fly by.

Donning a tie-dyed shirt instead of a suit and tie, Walton sifts through stacks of papers in the minutes before tipoff, writing notes in the few spaces

not covered in blue ink.

The writing seems like something pulled from a preschool classroom.

"I'm not sure they're in English," Pasch says with a laugh.

But these notes, sometimes stacked 25 pages deep, are the lifeblood of a Walton broadcast, filled with details about players, coaches, the conference, the arena, random facts, celebrity birthdays that he can announce on air.

On game days, Walton spends the morning with the teams, often wandering onto the court during shootarounds to talk with a player or a coach — a big no-no to any announcer not named Bill Walton.

He has a natural curiosity about people — just ask the people he works with — and enjoys telling their stories to the world, sometimes for the first time.

"He talks to the players. He works as hard as any analyst I've been around in terms of gathering information from players," Pasch says. "He knows players' parents' names, he knows their backgrounds, their stories and loves telling them."

2:47, second half.
Walton: The story of Max Hooper of Oakland University. Last year, they played at Arizona in one of those money games for a team that needs to travel like Oakland University to get some exposure. So Max Hooper, he's got a dad — we all have dads — Chip Hooper, who's a legend in the music industry. Chip has been

fighting some very serious health issues while Max has been chasing his dream of playing at Oakland University. So I know Chip from a lifetime of music, instrumental in the music business. Max, on senior day, he hasn't seen his dad in a long time because he's dying of cancer. Tom Gores, owner of the Detroit Pistons, flies Chip Hooper to their final game from California, Northern California, Monterrey, the Big Sur Area. Max has a big game, player of the game, and he runs up the stands and his dad is lying there in a hospital gurney in the arena, and the tears and the sadness. To see Gary Payton here, to see all the dads here, Bud Collins, it all rolls together. Thank you Chip Hooper for everything, thank you Bud Collins.

Robinson: Well, there's a huge swing for Arizona State.

Since recovering from debilitating back pain in the late 2000s, Walton has lived his life at an appreciative slant, filling his lungs with the joy that comes from a second chance.

It comes across during his broadcasts in a hurricane of enthusiasm for basketball and all the things he loves most.

And Walton hits on the same themes so often it spawned a game for viewers following along at home, Bill Walton Bingo, which has its own bingo card generator, has squares with all the Walton usuals: The Conference of Champions (the Pac-12), obscure marijuana or science references, his dog Cortez, his bike Bob Dylan, The Grateful Dead, John Wooden.

Everything else is fresh. Walton refuses to rehearse with his play-by-play man and usually doesn't even want to have conversations with them before a game.

If his fellow announcer doesn't know what's coming, it adds to the spontaneity of the broadcast — like the time Walton told Pasch he had been milked before.

"That's the biggest I've taken away from Bill is that I have to be on," Robinson says. "I don't know where Bill's going and that's a good thing. I have to be ready for music, economy, geography, populations — it's been amazing how wide the breadth of his interest is."

This is Bill Walton's world. It's specular, fabulous and magnificent.

Walton's autobiography, *Back from the Dead*, was released by Simon and Schuster on Tuesday.

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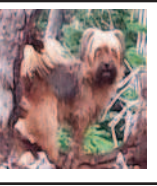
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