



W A T N

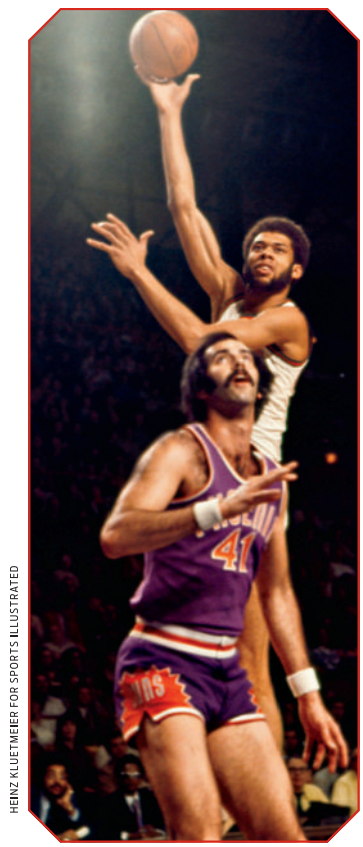
W A L K N E A L



He was the second choice in the 1969 NBA draft—a very distant second choice, behind Lew Alcindor. Walk would never be an All-Star or lift a team to a title, but he followed the signs (and his dogs) on a path back to where his career began

By MICHAEL FARBER

Photograph by ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



HEINZ KLUETMEIER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

On March 19, 1969, from the modest offices of the one-year-old Phoenix Suns, general manager Jerry Colangelo joined a conference call with NBA commissioner Walter Kennedy (in New York City) and spoke the most fateful word of his basketball career: “Heads.”

Colangelo had been waiting 10 months to say that. A G.M. at only 29, he was incapable of seeing a dark cloud in the Valley of the Sun. He felt in his bones that his franchise, after its maiden season, would select 7' 2" Lew Alcindor, the revolutionary center from UCLA, who he believed would lead Phoenix into a decade of dominance. In the 1968 expansion draft Colangelo had targeted young guards who could dance around an Alcindor maypole: Dick Van Arsdale from the Knicks, Gail Goodrich from the Lakers, Dick Snyder from the Hawks. When the Suns lived down to expectations in '68–69 and finished 16–66, last in the West, they qualified, with East doormat Milwaukee (27–55), for a coin flip that would determine which division basement dweller would get the No. 1 pick. Colangelo petitioned the NBA for his Suns to be allowed to make the call. He even asked the commissioner to flip a '64 John F. Kennedy half-dollar, which he considered lucky. A poll in *The Arizona Republic* favored heads—51.2%, if Colangelo recalls correctly—and he heeded the will of the people.

“Tails.” Colangelo was shocked when he heard the call over the speakerphone. He had meticulously constructed a blueprint

THE NEAL DEAL
Wheelchair-bound for the last 26 years, Walk, a center with three teams over eight seasons, never did escape the towering shadow of Abdul-Jabbar.



for glory, and fate had flipped him off. He hopped in his car and drove aimlessly for hours, imagining a future that would never be.

To Colangelo, the second-best player in the draft was a guard from Kansas, Jo Jo White, but the Suns needed a center. Nineteen days later, with the No. 2 pick, Colangelo took 6' 10" Neal Walk of Florida.

"I have no idea where that coin is," says the 73-year-old Colangelo. "And I'm not interested."

Unlike that Kennedy half-dollar, Walk has not slipped into the sofa cushion of history. He sits at a table in a Phoenix hotel restaurant, wearing a black Ben Hogan-style cap, three chains around his neck and a shirt the color of a blood orange. Actually, Walk sits *beside* the table; he has been in a wheelchair for almost 26 years, leaving his legs rail thin from atrophy, and it does not fit under tables. He asks the waitress if the pastrami is lean. (He did not eat meat for eight years in the 1970s; he was a different guy then.) Walk washes down the pastrami with Jose Cuervo gold—for medicinal purposes. The tequila combats the horrific spasms in his legs. He has also been receiving Botox injections in his calves, quads and thighs.

Walk is classified as an incomplete paraplegic. This might be the only incomplete thing about him.

Neal Walk's story begins with a pair of purple platform shoes.

Or not. With Walk you can start anywhere. "I'm nonlinear," he says. One memory ambles off to meet another; he quotes some Bob Dylan and then doubles back to Connie Hawkins or Pete Maravich. At 64, Walk is in his

anecdotal. He spins these tales in a rumbling bass, faintly reminiscent of a *This is CNN* James Earl Jones, but with more honeyed notes. "People connect to his voice as much as to what he has to say," says Kurt Feazel, his roommate at Florida.

Walk's saga is verse, *The Love Song of N. Eugene Walk*: Phil Jackson reading aloud from the Scriptures by the side of the road on a Sioux reservation in South Dakota as he and Walk pause during a cross-country drive; a postconcert chat with Dylan in a Hartford coffee shop; underage beers in college with Pistol Pete in Gainesville; art patron Peggy Guggenheim in a vaporetto in Venice. *In the room the players come and go/Talking of Jerry Colangelo.*

No, no, no. The medium is wrong. Art—that's it. Walk's life is not poetry as much as art (although he has dabbled in both). He is an ink-and-crayon, 21st-century version of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. . . . O.K., maybe not. But there is a Bosch-like duality: saints and sinners, beauty and hideousness, heads and tails.

About those the purple platform shoes. . . .

On Jan. 11, 1972, Walk scored a career-high 42 at Milwaukee in a one-point win, a performance that Bucks forward Curtis Perry, Walk's friend, describes as "talent meeting the moment, a harmonic convergence." Walk is humble. In the recounting, he quickly notes that Alcindor, by then Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, didn't eat all 42, that Toby Kimball and others had pieces of it.

The showing was exceptional but hardly extraordinary. Walk averaged 15.7 points and 8.2 rebounds that campaign. The following year he improved to 20.2 and 12.4. That season, at least in raw numbers, was bet-



SUNS SPLASH
At his peak, in 1972-73, Walk was a 20-point scorer with a range of low-post moves who more than held his own against Wilt Chamberlain.

ter than the best of Hall of Fame center Robert Parish, who had 19.9 points and 10.8 rebounds in 1981-82.

"Neal came as advertised," says Colangelo. "He had post moves, a hook shot. He was a smart player who could pass and had a little touch. He had to wear the booby-prize tag hung on him by media and fans, but he was a pretty good center. You don't put up 20 and 12 if you aren't."

Ten players in Walk's draft played more NBA games than he did. Only five—Abdul-Jabbar, Bob Dandridge, White, Fred Carter and Lucius Allen—had

a higher scoring average than Walk's 12.6. True, he took Phoenix to the playoffs only once, but he was not Darko Milicic.

"I didn't flip the coin. I didn't call heads or tails," says Walk. "I was good enough to play against the best—Kareem, Wilt, Bob Lanier—so in a way that makes me one of the best, I guess. If Jo Jo or Loosh [Allen] or anyone else had gone Number 2, maybe people would have seen my career in a different way."

Right, the shoes. . . .

So Walk luxuriated in the 42. He talked to Phoenix radio. And Milwaukee radio. By the time he strolled out to the team bus that night, he realized that Joe Proski, the Suns' trainer, had already sent the bus back to the hotel. Milwaukee Arena was a

15-minute walk from the Pfister Hotel on a good night. This was not a good night.

When Walk left the arena, there were flurries. Five minutes later, the snow was falling harder. Walk's feet were barking. He was a bit of a dandy—in sixth grade, back in Miami Beach, where he grew up, Walk had favored iridescent pants—but on this night he found a bench, hauled his sneakers out of his gym bag, put them on and, lefthanded, over his shoulder, tossed his purple platform shoes into the Milwaukee River. *Walk! From downtown!*

Walk often says that a man should listen to the universe, but on this night he listened to his size 16s. "I was 6' 10"," he says now. "What did I need with platform shoes?" When he returned to Phoenix, he cleared his closet of every pair he owned and committed to a simpler life. There is symbolism in a pair of waterlogged purple shoes, no? Or an omen.

Walk believed in signs. He soon came to believe in vegetarianism and what was lazily labeled a hippie lifestyle. And while the former might have been a healthy choice—he quickly trimmed off 30 pounds and played at a svelte 220—it was a dubious career move for a post-up center. Walk is nonlinear, but you can easily graph his linear decline as an NBA force: 20.2 points per game to 16.8 in 1973-74 to 7.2 in '74-75. This should be codified as Walk's Law: Heightened consciousness is directly proportional to contracting numbers.

"I'd been a big, bruising guy," Walk says. "Now I was playing a different style of ball. It was like ballet without the music. For me basketball was now about a spiritual adventure."

Walk, then in the midst of a brief, problematic marriage, experimented with LSD; he says he



Would you believe that the player drafted right after Ken Griffey Jr. in 1987 never played a major league game?
By Ryan Hatch

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In the spring of 1987, baseball scouts were giddy over the potential of an 18-year-old centerfielder from Oviedo [Fl.] High. Mark Merchant made grown men swoon. That May the 6' 1", 180-pounder was named Florida's high school player of the year, and in *SI's* June 1 issue Peter Gammons wrote that Merchant was the second-most-talented player in that summer's draft.

Baseball agreed. The Pirates drafted Merchant with the second overall pick, after the Mariners took Ken Griffey Jr.

The Kid, of course, was in the majors 22 months later, became a 13-time All-Star, belted 630 home runs over 22 years and will be inducted into Cooperstown with the class of 2016. Merchant? Not so much. Over 12 minor league seasons with 14 teams, he hit .263 with 103 homers, but he never spent a day in a major league uniform. "Things went how they were supposed to for [Griffey]," Merchant says today. "They didn't for me."

Injuries plagued his career: He hurt his shoulder at the end of a promising first year with the Gulf Coast Pirates [his 33 steals led the rookie league], and he broke his right ankle in '91 playing Double A ball. "I knew I was in trouble that night," Merchant

says of the second injury. "I never played centerfield again."

By 1998, Merchant was out of baseball. He and his wife, Kelly, who had an infant daughter, packed their bags and moved to Colorado. Mark's \$165,000 signing bonus from the Pirates was long gone, and the 30-year-old former

Merchant. "[This woman] told me, 'If he gives you a letter of recommendation, I'll hire you.'"

Leyland did, and she did. Merchant parlayed that work experience into his own business: Today, at 44, he owns a land-appraisal company in southwest Denver. His daughter, Sydney, 15, is one of

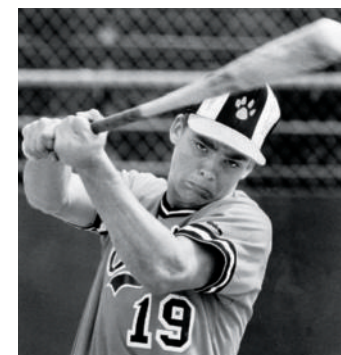
Colorado's top amateur golfers and has attracted interest from D-I schools. And his son, Andrew, 8, is a budding baseball and football player.

Still, what could have been gnaws at Merchant, even if the memories have faded. "It was a tough pill to swallow," he says of his career. Speaking of pills, Merchant insists he never tried steroids.

"I didn't even know how to get the stuff," he says. But if he'd had the chance? "Looking back, knowing the life I have ahead of me and how hard it's going to be to raise a family. . . . If I could have done that, set my family up? Yeah, I would have done it."

Baseball may have let go of him 15 years ago, but Merchant still has his sense of humor. "I drive a 2001 Tundra that I've had for 12 years," he says.

"It's got 290,000 miles on it. I bet Griffey's driving the same thing, huh?" □



THE GUY BEHIND THE GUY
He was speedy and had an arm that scouts drooled over—but in the end, the Oviedo High outfielder never came close to surpassing Griffey.

ballplayer had no college degree. Desperate for a job, Merchant earned his real estate license. Then baseball finally afforded him an opportunity: His résumé was read by a hiring agent who happened to be a Rockies season-ticket holder.

"Jim Leyland [the Pirates' manager in '87] was the Rockies' manager at the time," says



found it “expansive.” He smoked marijuana. He tried cocaine. His name later surfaced in Phoenix grand jury testimony when a dealer said that he had sold coke to Walk 30 times during the 1973–74 season. Walk vehemently disputes that. “I never purchased anything from anybody 30 times,” he says. Walk was never charged.

“He was on his way to a pretty solid career, and all these detours took place,” Colangelo says. “The diet, the drugs, the lifestyle—all combined. The changing culture had an impact on him. He developed some bad habits. We kind of lost him for a while. When he changed his lifestyle, it was like Samson cutting his hair. He lost his strength, his presence. I called him in and told him to straighten out his life or he’d be out of basketball pretty quick.”

In September 1974, Colangelo traded Walk and a second-round pick to the New Orleans Jazz for three players and a first-rounder that wound up being Adrian Dantley (24.3 career ppg). The center, who had missed just two games in five seasons with the Suns, was about to embark on a phase as an NBA journeyman. Of course the journey was easier considering that on his feet were the Red Wing work boots that he now favors. When the Jazz shipped him to the Knicks after 37 games, he joined apprentice Zen master Phil Jackson. Coach Red Holzman looked at the pair—luxuriant beards, plaid shirts—and dubbed them the Smith Brothers, after the lumberjacks on the cough-drop box. New York released him 11 games into ’76–77. He says he had a chance to sign with the Pistons the following season but decided to play in Italy.

Actually, his dogs made that decision. He was living in a reno-

Pondering retirement in 1982, Walk took a six-pack and sat by the sea wall for six hours, listening to the universe. He called it quits the next day.



SWING TIME

Damage to his spine has limited Walk’s mobility, but he has found free spirits and new life in his second wife, Georgia, and her two-year-old granddaughter, Isabella.

ated barn in Connecticut, ruminating about his future, when he sat against a tree and called his three dogs—a German shepherd named Righteous, a black lab named Deuce and Lodger, a Jack Russell—for a family meeting. “I said, ‘Fellas, Detroit or Venice?’” Walk recalls. “I couldn’t have a show of hands. So I said *Detroit* and got nothing. I said *Venice* and they barked.”

A few weeks after arriving in Italy, Walk was taken into custody when police found hashish at the apartment where he

was staying. “That wasn’t even mine,” he says. “It was a cool experience to go to jail, though. An interesting three days.”

No charges. Jewish by birth, he migrated to Israel the following year, playing three seasons for Hapoel Ramat Gan. Walk says he should have left after two. He eventually knew it was time to go when the Israeli Defense Force sought him out. The way he recalls it, he told a blustery general that he would drive ambulances or fold bandages or entertain the soldiers, but he would not crawl on his belly in the sand with a weapon.

Walk went to training camp with the San Diego Clippers in 1982, but the pounding of basketballs during two-a-days

gave him headaches. “I took a six-pack and sat by the sea wall for six hours, spending time with the universe, listening,” he says. “Then I knew it was time.” The next day he told coach Paul Silas, a former Suns teammate, that he was finished.

Neal Walk is simply not the same man today as he was in his NBA days. Actually, he isn’t even Neal Walk.

This is perhaps a scene in his Bosch painting: Walk had long been in the thrall of Native American culture when, for two or three days in the summer of 1980, he wandered around Sint Eustatius, a Dutch island in the Caribbean, neither eating nor drinking. He was on a vision quest, a search for spiritual guidance and purpose. He was seeking, he says, “the truth of my soul.” He saluted the four directions of the Earth and awaited a sign. Finally, the ocean whispered, “Joshua.” Overhead he saw a pair of hawks circling.

And so the man in the wheelchair worrying a piece of lean pastrami, the man who says he is no longer 6’ 10” but 5’ 5”, is not actually Neal Walk, but Joshua Hawk. He legally changed his name more than three decades ago and, spurred by spirituality, assumed a new identity. See: He’s more like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar than anyone realizes.

“It was like being bar mitzvahed, although you don’t get your cheeks pinched by your grandmother or aunts,” Walk/Hawk says of the transformation. “This was a way to release myself from my singular connection to basketball. I separated me from *me*.” (To his basketball colleagues—and the rest of the world, really—he’s still Walk.)

“The way Neal deals with life is to take part in a spirituality that he invented,” says Michael

Rappaport, a forensic psychologist from Miami who has been one of Walk’s dearest friends since third grade. Rappaport still calls him Neal, and Walk calls Rappaport by his nickname, Mopey. “When he told me about his new name, I said, ‘Do you think God would have given you Myron Goldberg?’”

Neal and Mopey, a sub on Walk’s Miami Beach High team, cadged a key to the gym for a little one-on-one during their 20th reunion. This was 1985. Walk had spent his post-basketball years as a corporate headhunter, a photographer’s assistant, a dry-waller and a chiropractor’s aide. He folded all 82 inches of himself into a New York City kiosk and peddled cosmetics for Discount Dave at five bucks an hour, an experience that he captured in an untitled 1983 poem. (*Let me have Pali-mony Pink, screams a beauty from the back. . .*) Other than some problems with his right foot that surfaced in ’82, the world seemed perfect in its imperfections. But then a high school bench guy was beating a former NBA center to the hoop. “I think you have drop foot,” Mopey said. “Go see a neurologist.”

Walk moved back to Phoenix that year, and he listened to Mopey. A neurologist did CAT scans “and dog scans and every which scan,” he says, including a spinal tap. The good news: Walk didn’t have multiple sclerosis. In March 1987 he underwent surgery to remove bone chips in his neck, but a disk was pressing on his spinal cord and doctors found a lump between his shoulder blades. That August he had surgery to remove the nonmalignant tumor on his spine that had been affecting his walking. Before the surgery, he was told the procedure afforded a 66% chance of relieving his problems. “I’m not a gambler,” Walk said, “but I’ll take a risk.”



Success had a funny way of finding the guy picked No. 2 behind Hall of Famer Dale Hawerchuck in 1981
By Dan Greene

D O U G



In February 1992, Doug Smith was staring at the ceiling of a hospital in Klagenfurt, Austria—a metal halo had just been screwed into his skull to stabilize his broken neck—when he made a pact with himself. After playing nine uninspiring seasons for five NHL teams, he was certain he was finished. And so Smith vowed that in the future, when people asked, “Didn’t you used to be a hockey player?” it would be because he had so successfully redefined himself off the ice that his past identity seemed incongruent with his new one.

Now a motivational speaker and the author of two self-help books based on his experiences, Smith, 50, says, “I’m just getting to that point where what I do today is more important than what I used to do.”

It has been an uphill battle in Ottawa, Smith’s hometown, where he first made a name for himself with the junior league 67s before the Kings drafted him, at 18, with the No. 2 pick in 1981. Taken right after the Jets plucked Hawerchuk [518 career goals], Smith had no trouble getting on the ice, playing 80 games in ’81–82. But keeping up with Hawerchuk proved to be another story. Smith struggled with consistency and bounced around the league, clashing



with coaches and teammates. “I had a hard time keeping focus,” he says, “because I didn’t appreciate what I was doing.”

Which brought him to Austria. It was there, playing with VEU Feldkirch, that he crashed headfirst into the boards on a dump-and-chase, breaking bones and tearing ligaments



DIG, DOUG!

As a rookie in 1981, Smith played in 80 games for L.A., scoring 16 goals. It would be the most action he got in any of his nine seasons.

in his neck, and smashing two vertebrae. What’s worse, a risky surgery in Ottawa damaged his spinal cord, leaving Smith paralyzed from the chest down with a slim chance of walking again. But bit by bit, beginning with movement in a big toe, he regained control of his body, until, four months later, he could walk again on his own.

The road back was arduous—within a year of the operation he suffered a morphine addiction and asked his wife, Patti, to help him commit suicide—but it ultimately proved a gift. “It gave me consciousness,” says Smith. As an athlete, he felt his identity had been dictated by expectations; now there was no

one else to control who he was or how he felt—“so I had to grab hold of that.”

Smith began to study business, human neurology and psychology, and in 2003 he cofounded an Ottawa steel-manufacturing company, where he served as president for two years. Along the way, he formed his own systems for professional and personal

success based on the challenges he had overcome, and he drew from those for his writing and for his speeches, of which he gives roughly 100 every year at universities and for FORTUNE 500 companies.

Smith admits that there are times when he wonders what it would have been like to have played in the NHL with the clarity of mind that he has today, but he always comes to the same conclusion: “When I was playing, I was never as happy as I am today. This is who I am.” □



In the recovery room, the surgeon asked if he had feeling in his toes. Barely; just a bit in one toe. Then Walk placed his hands under the blankets.

“What are you doing?” the doctor asked.

“Trying to feel my package.”



WALKING TALL

As a senior in 1969, the future Joshua Hawk led Florida to the NIT—the Gators’ first postseason tournament.

Neal Walk was in the parking lot of the Valley of Sun Jewish Community Center a year after his surgery. It was September—one of those late-summer days in the desert when Lucifer should be doing the Channel 10 weather. Phoenix was all brimstone and damnation, and sweat stains were forming on Walk’s shirt as he folded his wheelchair and went about the grim business of wedging himself into the borrowed Oldsmobile that he was driving.

Colangelo, whose team had been practicing at the Center, spotted him.

“So Jerry taps me on the shoulder, and I’m still a little pissed at him for the way it ended with the Suns,” Walk says. “We exchange greetings, and he tells me to come see him in two weeks.” Colangelo asked Walk for a list of all the things he was capable of doing. Colangelo studied it and said he might as well do these things for the organization. He created a community relations job—“I wanted Neal to have something with dignity,” says Colangelo, who would sell his 20% stake in the team in 2004—and arranged with a local Ford dealership to provide a specially equipped van for Walk, who has been paralyzed postsurgery from the sternum down.

Walk’s job would change—in 1999 he became an assistant photo archivist—but he worked for the organization for almost three decades. He was fired last

October. (In an e-mail, a Suns official wrote that it is team policy not to provide details of any “separation,” but added, “we appreciate all of the contributions he gave our organization both on and off the court.”) Walk says he knew he might be in trouble a month earlier when he met with a human resources representative. “The H.R. lady asks, ‘What are your long-term goals?’” Walk recounts. “I say, ‘Make it home safely tonight and have sex with my wife.’”

That wife, his second, is the former Georgia Killinger, whom he married in 2011. The previous year he had met her at the Terraces, a continuing-care retirement community in Phoenix; she was (and still is) a caregiver, and he was rehabilitating after further neck surgery. Georgia Hawk is fun and feisty, a ringer for Holly Hunter if the actress were more of the small-forward type than a point guard. She rises for work at 4 a.m.

Neal, who does a 40-minute upper-body workout three or four days a week, takes care of the laundry and other household chores. In the afternoon the couple often dote on Georgia’s

two-year-old granddaughter, Isabella, who sometimes stays with them. “He has a condition,” Georgia says of her husband. “But what his condition is—that’s up to him.”

Walk was no six-time NBA MVP like the other center in the fated coin flip, but in 1990 he was honored as wheelchair athlete of the year at the White House. (He played wheelchair basketball on a traveling team for five years.) The Basketball Hall of Fame will never induct him, but the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame did, in 2006. In 1995, Walk received the Gene Autry Courage Award from the Tempe (Ariz.) Sports Authority Foundation. “I didn’t want to accept it,” he says. “For something to be courageous, you need fear. I had no fear. What else could I do? Go in a closet? Dry up? Blow away? If I wanted to find the depth of my own soul, what better way than to be challenged? Am I the way I perceive myself, or am I smoke and bull----?”

“After all the things the guy’s been through, I’ve never heard him bitch once,” says Proski, the trainer who sent the bus to the hotel in Milwaukee on a snowy night more than 40 years ago. “The stuff he puts up with on a daily basis would piss me off dearly, but maybe that free-spirit frame of mind allows him to just keep going.”

Like a Walk story, lunchtime in Phoenix bumps into dinner-time. The sun is low, backlighting the city in a Cuervo golden glow. Time for a second dose. “I might sound like the coolest cat on Earth,” Walk says, “but I’m just trying to be mindful, engaged in the present.”

He sips his tequila, holding on to the day. “The universe speaks. Sometimes in whispers. Sometimes in sonic booms. I’m willing to listen more. Joshua Hawk listens better than Neal Walk ever did.” □

Five Completely Trivial Things We Learned About Neal Walk

1

To celebrate his first NBA contract, Walk went to a Gainesville Arby’s and asked for as many roast-beef sandwiches as the staff could make in an hour. He repaired with the haul (and multiple cases of Busch beer) to his apartment, dubbed Sin City, and threw a party.

2

While he played for the Jazz, fans in the Big Easy heckled him for his new vegetarianism by throwing vegetables on the court. Once, however, a fan tossed an eight-ounce New York strip steak in Walk’s direction.

3

A streak of more than 100 straight starts in Phoenix ended when trainer Joe Proski accidentally locked Walk in the locker room before a game. Walk always sat alone a few minutes before tip-off, often in a bathroom stall, and Proski hadn’t realized the big man was still inside.

4

Walk’s blood type is AB positive, which, he claims, makes him a distant relative of Genghis Khan. Walk says, “I’m proud of my Mongol heritage.”

5

According to his high school friends, he remains a good dancer. At reunions Walk gets female former classmates to sit on his lap and takes them for a spin.