

Chapter 40

WALI ABDUL MALIK (ED POWELL)

A Truly Interesting Person

During his high school sophomore year, Wali had to overcome the devastating experience of losing both parents to cancer over a three-month period. Wali refused to feel sorry for himself and was determined not to let this tragedy ruin his life.

Wali was an outstanding high school football player and a good student. Although his parents never went to college, they emphasized the importance of education. Wali realized there was more to life than football. Football was a vehicle to get a college education and a means to develop a quality of life that was better than his parents'. Wali graduated from USC in 1977 with a degree in telecommunications. Subsequently, Wali also received his master's and law degrees.

Wali was raised a Christian. However, in 1980, he converted to the Muslim faith and adopted his present name.

Wali is fortunate that his adult life has been devoid of crisis. He has spent more than twenty years with Baxter International and is in its salesperson Hall of Fame. He is happily married to his wife, Sheila, whom he met at USC, for more than thirty-one years. He has a close relationship with his four grown children, who have college degrees. Unlike many of his former teammates, Wali feels lucky he has no lingering football injuries.

Wali did not play organized football until the ninth grade.

Throughout his high school football career, Wali played middle linebacker on defense and fullback on offense. Wali spent his freshman year at John F. Kennedy High School in Richmond, California. At the start

of his sophomore year, Wali's father was transferred to San Luis Obispo, California, where Wali attended San Luis Obispo High School. That year, Wali led the team, his team, to a CIF Division 2A football championship and was voted the team's best back.

During his sophomore year, tragedy struck Wali and his family. In November 1968, his father died from cancer. Three months later, Wali's mother also died from cancer. These events devastated Wali, and it took him several years to recover. During this period, athletics remained an important part of his life. He realized that sports could be his salvation and enable him to attend college.

Following his mother's funeral in February 1969, Wali moved back to Richmond and again enrolled at John F. Kennedy High School. For the next two and one-half years, he lived with his older brothers and sisters. During this period, he received financial support from his brothers and sisters, and he also had part-time jobs.

His brothers and sisters, who were proud of him, tried their best to fill the void left by the loss of both parents. However, it was not the same.

Most of all, Wali missed not talking to his parents about his football successes at USC, playing in three Rose Bowls and receiving his undergraduate degree. Later in life, he missed not sharing with them having children and getting his master's in management and his law degrees.

Wali continued to excel in football. In both his junior and senior years, Wali made first-team all-league and all-county at middle linebacker and at running back. After his senior year, Wali played in the Helms All-Star Game, which pitted the best football players from California against the best players from Hawaii. The game was played in Hawaii. Later that summer, Wali played in an all-star game held at the Oakland Coliseum.

Wali also played baseball and wrestled. In baseball, he played third base. Wali was an excellent fielder, but only an average hitter. Wali wrestled and, as a freshman, was the league champion for the 191-pound weight class.

Several schools—including California, USC, and Utah State—recruited Wali. Wali had no desire to attend California because he frequently partied there while in high school. He was afraid there would be a number of distractions that would take away from his efforts to focus on his studies and football.

Marv Goux, Lynn Swann, and Sam Cunningham recruited Wali. On his second visit to USC, Sam took Wali to meet O. J. Simpson at his

house. Like Wali, O. J. grew up in a ghetto area of Northern California (San Francisco). O. J. was one of Wali's heroes and somebody he could relate to. Furthermore, O. J.'s money, home, and clothes impressed Wali. Wali naively told O. J. he planned to attend Utah State because he had a good friend who played football there, and he would be a running back. A startled O. J. remarked, "You must be nuts if you want to attend Utah State." O. J.'s passion for USC helped convince Wali he should enroll there.

When Wali attended USC, scholarships were renewed each year. Wali was on scholarship for all four years. During his freshman year, Wali lived in a dorm where he was provided with three meals each day. Following his freshman year, he lived off campus and was given a monthly stipend of \$180, which covered his living expenses, including apartment rent and food. Wali shared an apartment with two other teammates. They pooled their money to pay for food and rent.

In the summer, Wali returned to Northern California and worked for Saroni Sugar and Rice Company, which was owned by a USC alumnus. Part of Wali's earnings would cover his living expenses during the school year. Wali also earned money by selling his football tickets.

Wali knew from the time he entered USC that he planned to graduate. His scholarship allowed him to take as many courses as he wanted. Before the start of his sophomore year, Wali happened, by chance, to pass the student counselor's office that he did not know existed. Wali met with a counselor who advised him that if he planned to graduate, he should select his courses to go along with the required core courses. Wali observed that players who had no intention to graduate typically allowed the athletic department to select their courses.

In 1972, Wali was a backup weak side and strong side linebacker. He also played on USC's kickoff team. Wali was the wedge buster. He would submarine the opponent's blockers.

That year, he started against Washington State in place of injured linebacker James Sims. Wali intercepted a pass, faked out one of his opponents, and ran 22 yards for a touchdown. Wali explains, "I finally got to show off my moves."

USC's victory over Ohio State in the 1973 Rose Bowl meant more to Wali than any game he played. The Rose Bowl was like a pageant. The weather was ideal—sunny, warm, and no clouds. The game was on center stage for the world. The defensive players rode on one bus to the game, and the offensive players rode on the other bus. He recalls that

O. J. and Al Cowlings rode on his bus. The game concluded an undefeated season, and he received a fair amount of playing time.

The nadir of Wali's career at USC came in 1973, when he quit the team over the lack of playing time and his dislike for defensive coach Don Lindsay, who had been raised in the South. The African Americans on the team were not fond of Don and did not trust him.

The night before a game, the team was viewing a John Wayne movie. During the course of the film, the *n* word was used, and Coach Lindsay was the only person in the room who laughed aloud.

A couple of weeks later, Wali did not start and played only sparingly. After the game, he went to Coach Lindsay and asked him why he was pulled. Instead of giving Wali an answer, Coach Lindsay told Wali to speak with John McKay.

The following day (Sunday), Wali spoke with Coach McKay. McKay told Wali he wanted to give a player who had recovered from an injury some playing time. Coach McKay told Wali he would start the following week. Wali, who was still upset with Coach Lindsay, told McKay he was quitting the team. Coach McKay advised him not to, but it was his decision.

During his absence, Wali had contact with several teammates who urged him to return. Wali missed not being around his teammates. After three games, Wali went to Coach McKay and Coach Goux and told them he was ready to return to the team, and they agreed to take him back. Wali looks back on the incident and realizes he was impatient and immature. Wali played and contributed to the team's success.

In 1974, Wali started every game as a linebacker and was voted first-team all-Pac-8 at outside linebacker. His best games that year were played against UCLA and Notre Dame. In the UCLA game, Wali was credited with several tackles. In USC's come-from-behind victory over the Irish, Wali recalls running interference for Charles Phillips, who intercepted a pass and returned it for a touchdown. During the play, Wali caught a glimpse of Notre Dame coach Ara Parseghian, who looked as white as a ghost.

The 1975 Rose Bowl game against Ohio State was Wali's last game as a Trojan. Although USC won the game, Wali was sad that his career was over.

Wali considers his years at USC as the best years of his life. He played on two national championship teams and appeared in three Rose Bowl games. Wali also met his future wife. He made a lot of good friends and met people from all over the world.

Following the 1974 season, Wali, much to his disappointment, was not drafted. He feels that it stemmed from having left the team during the 1973 season, and his linebacker coach at USC disliked him. Wali signed a free agent contract with the Kansas City Chiefs. He believes that he did not make the final roster because new Chief coach Paul Wiggins was under pressure to win. Wiggins wanted to use only veterans and high-draft picks and was not inclined to use free agent rookies.

After he was cut by Kansas City, Wali turned down a tryout with the Denver Broncos. A couple of teams in the Canadian Football League also showed some interest in him. Wali decided he had no burning desire to play professional football, so he returned to USC to complete his undergraduate work in telecommunications.

While Wali was completing his undergraduate studies, he got a part-time job coaching football at Los Angeles City College. He attended classes in the morning and coached in the afternoon. Wali received his degree in telecommunications in 1977.

Except for a brief period, Wali has spent his business career working for large corporations. Wali believes that his years as a football player prepared him well for the corporate world. He learned to compete, and he learned the importance of being thoroughly prepared. Football also taught Wali the importance of working together as a team and to be persistent.

His first corporate job after college was with PepsiCo. Wali left after one year and joined Scherer Medical, a medical supply company. One of his jobs was to calculate the salaries of the sales reps. Wali discovered they earned substantially more than he could earn in a staff position. Furthermore, Wali enjoyed talking to people, so he decided to pursue a career in sales. He worked two and one-half years at Scherer and left to join McNeill Pharmaceutical, which had a better commission structure.

Between 1980 and 1988, Wali was a sales rep for McNeill Pharmaceutical, a division of Johnson & Johnson. He sold Tylenol products. While Wali was at McNeill Pharmaceutical, he attended Redlands University at night, and in 1985 received his master of arts degree in management.

Wali was briefly an entrepreneur. In 1981 while employed by McNeill, Wali started International Health Care to distribute medical products. Even though he made some money, Wali folded the company a year later and focused on furthering his career at McNeill.

Wali joined his present employer, Baxter International, in 1988. He is a territory representative, selling medication delivery products. Wali

is in Baxter's salesperson Hall of Fame by demonstrating, over the years, excellence in sales and service. Wali has won three President's Awards and on a number of occasions has been regional salesman of the year. He has won numerous sales contests and other awards.

Wali was raised a Christian by his Baptist minister father. In 1980, he adopted his present name when he converted to Islam. Wali was always religious. He felt there were several inconsistencies about Christianity that nobody could explain. In college, Wali began reading books about different Christian sects. He also borrowed a Koran from the library. After reading about the different faiths, Wali felt Islam was the most rational and pragmatic faith and was more compatible with what he thought as an adult.

He believes that with the Muslim faith, he is more directly in contact with God than when he was a Christian. He also agrees with the philosophy of moderate Muslims of respecting all religions. Although he does not hold an office, Wali is active in the mosque. Wali does not share the beliefs of the radical Muslims because they do not speak for the majority of Muslims throughout the world. Wali frequently speaks to groups to enlighten them on the Muslim faith. He believes that it is important to preserve both American law and Islamic traditions.

Wali, through his studies in law school, has become knowledgeable with both Islamic and American law. He would like to counsel Muslims in the United States who, generally, are not educated or trusting of American law. Many Muslims who live in the United States are afraid of the court system and feel that they have more rights under Islamic law.

Wali attended Western State Law School at night and received his law degree in 2002. Wali decided to attend law school because the law affects everything. Initially, he focused on criminal law. While in law school, Wali worked part-time for the Associate Defenders Office in Orange County, California. His unit represented gang members accused of homicides. The experience of seeing autopsy pictures and reading and hearing gruesome testimony changed Wali's mind about pursuing a career in criminal law.

One of Wali's most memorable experiences in law school took place after 9/11. He was part of a student panel that was represented by people of the Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim faiths. He was not only able to discuss how he felt, but he was also able to clarify his religious beliefs. It was a healing process for Wali and an educational experience for the others of different faiths.

Wali and Sheila have been married for thirty-one years. They met in their freshman year at USC. It was a case of opposites attracting of each. Sheila attended USC on a music scholarship and was a violinist. She had very little interest in sports. Sheila was an only child and was a debutante. In contrast, Wali came from humble beginnings and a large family. Sheila graduated from USC in 1975 with a degree in music. She is an account executive and writes malpractice insurance policies for attorneys.

Wali and Sheila have four grown children—three sons and a daughter—and three grandchildren. All their children have graduated or will graduate from college. Their three sons were outstanding athletes and attended college on full athletic scholarships.

Their son, Sultan, played linebacker and defensive end for USC and was a four-year letterman. He graduated from USC in 2003 with a degree in public administration. He was a freshman all-American.

Family has always been important to Wali and Sheila. They were devoted to their children and now dote on their grandchildren. Wali coached various sports that his children played. It gave him an opportunity to spend time with them. Wali participated with his sons when they were children in martial arts programs. He has a first-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do and hapkido.

Wali's outside interests include playing golf and reading. He is especially interested in reading about the law—particularly legal documents that relate to high-profile court cases. He is a strong admirer of Thurgood Marshall, who was the first black judge on the Supreme Court. He is also a fan of John Grisham, who has written several novels about the legal system.