

Back in Action

Advanced spine surgery returns NBA star Bill Walton and others struggling with back and leg pain to the game of life

by Susan Bloom – for NJ Press Media

On the face of things, NBA Hall of Famer Bill Walton seemed to have it all – recognition as one of the NBA's 50 Greatest Players of all time and, following his retirement from basketball, a promising career as an NBC sports commentator. Behind the scenes, however, Walton was struggling with an agonizing medical condition that threatened to derail him both personally and professionally. Though no stranger to injuries – the 6'11" star athlete, who played for the Portland Trailblazers and Boston Celtics in the 1970s-1980s, underwent the first of 37 orthopedic surgeries at age 14, the year before he was recruited to play for UCLA -- nothing prepared him for the agony of the incapacitating back pain he would suffer up until four years ago. "Until you've experienced spine issues, you have no idea how bad it can be – the frustration, desperation, loneliness, and hopelessness you feel," Walton, 60, said of the debilitating pain and near immobility that often left him confined to a wheelchair and led him to contemplate suicide. "When your spine doesn't work, everything falls apart."

For California resident Walton, who recounted his struggles with degenerative back pain during a seminar for medical professionals and other patients hosted by Ocean Orthopedic Associates at Avenue Restaurant in Long Branch, NJ on July 10th, 2013, the culprit was spinal stenosis, a degenerative narrowing of the spinal canal which results in pinched nerves in the back and can cause crippling pain and impaired functionality. The solution? A breakthrough and minimally-invasive procedure known as XLIF® (eXtreme Lateral Interbody Fusion), developed by San Diego-based medical device company NuVasive, which has allowed Walton and others suffering from chronic back or leg pain to resume a full life and which has been successfully performed by Justin Kubeck, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon at Ocean Orthopedic Associates in Toms River and Old Bridge thousands of times over the past five years.

An Exciting New Procedure

"Years ago," Kubeck said, "if you needed a spinal fusion to fuse bones with a disc, the procedure required complex vascular surgery with large incisions in the front and a lengthy recovery process involving an up to five day hospital stay and rehab for up to a few weeks. However," shared



Bill Walton with **Justin Kubeck, M.D.**, an orthopedic surgeon at Ocean Orthopedic Associates in Toms River and Old Bridge who specializes in the unique XLIF procedure, at a seminar for medical professionals and other patients hosted by Ocean Orthopedic Associates in Long Branch, NJ

Kubeck, who trained in the unique procedure under Walton's west coast-based doctor, Steven Garfin, "the exciting new XLIF procedure developed in the last 5-10 years involves specialized implants and an advanced side-approach technique which is less traumatic to the muscle and tissue, involves a smaller incision, and results in a much speedier recovery."

According to Walton, a devoted husband and father of four and now a patient advocate and spokesperson for NuVasive since his successful XLIF surgery in 2009, there are no words to express how he feels about the opportunity to return to an active lifestyle, which includes his beloved 100-mile bike rides and the ability to counsel others nationwide living with the agony of chronic spinal issues. "I had no idea what life could be like without back pain, but now it's a miracle for me – I have no pain and no medication and there's so much for me to do," Walton shared. "I feel like the luckiest guy in the world to be able to play in the game of life again."

A New Lease

The XLIF procedure has been similarly miraculous for Lanoka Harbor, NJ-based Mark Zieniuk, a 62-year-old lifelong hiker and backpacker who first learned that he had degenerative disc disease and spinal stenosis four years ago, after receiving an MRI for a sports-related injury in 2009. By 2010, "I had lower back, leg, and hamstring pain on my right side as well as occasional bouts of numbness in both legs," the retired librarian shared. "It came on slowly, but by 2011, I was concerned because the pain just continued to get worse. I had to cut back on many activities and was afraid I was going to lose my ability to walk." In fact, during a trip to New York City at the time with son Gregory, Zieniuk recalls struggling through the five-block walk from the car to their destination and having to stop every half-block due to the pain in his back and leg. "With that kind of unbearable pain and limited mobility, you get irritable and frustrated and you wonder, 'is the rest of my life going to be like this?' I was afraid my next stop would be a wheelchair," he said.

In October 2012, Zieniuk consulted with Dr. Kubeck and the following month had the XLIF procedure on three levels, which involved the placement of three spacers in his back between vertebra L2-L5 in his lumbar spine. "I had an overnight hospital stay and the next day I didn't feel any pain other than from the operation itself," Zieniuk said of his post-surgery experience. "Then I walked around the hospital with the physical therapist and was cleared to go home. The pain was gone and I couldn't believe it was possible."



Returned to a full and active life **6 months** following his XLIF surgery in 2012, **Mark Zieniuk** enjoyed a hiking trip to the Adirondacks in the summer of 2013

"I had an overnight hospital stay and the next day I didn't feel any pain other than from the operation itself," Zieniuk said of his post-surgery experience. "Then I walked around the hospital with the physical therapist and was cleared to go home. The pain was gone and I couldn't believe it was possible."



Mark Zieniuk, his wife **Micheline**, and **Bill Walton** celebrated a pain-free life at the Ocean Orthopedics-sponsored seminar in Long Branch, NJ

Since then, "I feel really good," Zieniuk confirmed. After returning to work for the final few months until his retirement this past June, "I walk in the park whenever I can, am back working out at the gym, and even took a trip to the Adirondacks to go hiking." The best part? "After my surgery, my wife and I went back to New York City and took that same trip I'd taken with my son – this time, I walked 5 blocks with no issues and then 35 more," he smiled. "A year ago, that trip would never have been possible for me." And though it's never an easy decision to make, he acknowledged of his surgery, "you get to a point where anything is preferable to the way you're feeling."

Dr. Kubeck and his staff were outstanding and I was blown away by the high-tech procedure, which involved no stitches," he said. "Today, I look forward to continuing to enjoy a pain-free life."

A Pain-Free Life

"People have traditionally been scared to have back surgery, but it's a new day in the field and people don't have to live with chronic back pain as they get older any longer," Kubeck said. "These new options can get people back up again and greatly improve their quality of life in a minimally-disruptive way. Technology and surgical techniques have changed, enabling great outcomes with quicker recoveries," Kubeck concluded. "With a proper evaluation, there's more hope for people dealing with back and leg pain than ever before and people suffering with these conditions should definitely look into their options."

With New Jersey locations in Toms River, Whiting, and Old Bridge, **Ocean Orthopedic Associates** can be reached at (732) 349-8454 or by visiting www.oceanortho.com