

Ben Wallace

From Whitehall, Ala.,
to NBA Champion

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

The 2004 NBA Finals came to a close late on a Tuesday night in mid-June, with the upstart underdogs, the Detroit Pistons triumphant. They handily beat the once all-but-invincible Los Angeles Lakers in five games. A modern-day David and Goliath story, this bunch of misfits, cast-offs and youngsters from the Motor City scratched, clawed and dunked their way to victory.

The Lakers, with their all-star roster featuring Kobe Bryant, Karl Malone and Shaquille O'Neil, were all but handed the title by those who believed no one could keep up with this current version of NBA Showtime. But the Pistons believed in themselves. Calm, cool and collected, the 2004 edition of the "Bad Boys" not only beat L.A., but beat them soundly.



Had it not been for a last-second shot by Bryant in game two, the 2004 NBA finals could have been remembered as the first time a heavily-favored team was swept in a seven-game series in any sport. As it is, we have a five-game humiliation of the Lakers at the hands of Detroit. Leading this team with his intense defense, domineering physical presence, stoic leadership and funky Afro straight out of the 1970s was a man from the tiny community of White Hall, Ala. His name is Ben Wallace.

Wallace's rise to a league star wasn't easy. In fact, it very nearly didn't happen. However, possessing a work ethic developed in the economically depressed, central Alabama farmland and a steely determination to be the best he could be, Wallace has overcome setback after setback into one of Alabama's greatest champions.



Wallace's story begins deep in the heart of Alabama's Black Belt. The second youngest of 11 children, he was born in 1974 in White Hall, a tiny town among the farms and plantations in Lowndes County, about 30 miles west of Montgomery. Wallace's mother, Martha, supported her 11 children by working any type of job she could find.

Family friend and current White Hall Mayor John Jackson says life was difficult for many communities in the Black Belt because of limited resources and opportunities.

"Out here in Lowndes County it's totally rural and cut off from most of the state," says Jackson. "Most of the houses out here didn't have running water until the 1960s, when the state came in and hooked everybody up.

"Most of the people in this area either work in the fields or work as domestics or janitors, that kind of thing," adds Jackson.

A young Ben learned early not only to help out his family but also to earn his own way and save a little money when he could. He worked the fields, did odd jobs and even earned a few bucks styling hair—not a surprising fact given his current towering crown.

Wallace was a gifted athlete as a young man, growing big and strong and excelling in football. Auburn University recruited him out of Central High School as a football player. But Wallace's heart was in basketball, even though it didn't seem, at first, that he was going to get anywhere on the hard court.

Then he used some of the money he had saved styling hair to attend a basketball clinic led by NBA Charles Oakley, then of the New York Knicks

and, himself, an Alabama native.

While there, Wallace accepted a challenge to play one-on-one against Oakley. For the next few minutes, the two went at it — each of them finishing the game with a bloody nose, and with Wallace earning a ton of respect from Oakley. In an interview conducted by the Pistons after game 5 of the finals, Wallace credited that experience with helping shape him into the player he is today.

"Playing against Oak, learning from one of the great players that was playing in the league at the time gave me a lot of confidence in myself and my ability to play basketball," Wallace said. "He never let me quit. He told me to continue to play hard, keep my head up, don't get caught up in the hoopla, continue to improve every year on some part of your game and good things will happen."

Oakley also helped Wallace land a spot on a college roster. Oakley attended Virginia Union University in Richmond and kept in touch with head coach Dave Robbins. Robbins had asked Oakley to be on the lookout for a player with size who could handle the center position.

"I called him up one day and said 'Charles, I need you to find me a big man.' He contacted me later on and said, 'I found you one. He's not that

big, but he sure is a man,” Robbins said.

Wallace played for two years at Virginia Union. He set marks of 114 and 111 blocked shots in his two seasons at VUU and was positioned to be a second-round draft pick in the 1996 NBA draft. Despite the predictions, however, the draft came and went without his name being called, and Wallace wound up as a free agent.

A tryout with Boston was arranged, but after they asked him to play a role he wasn't used to, he was cut. Then Wallace found himself playing Basketball in Italy. Throughout the experience, Robbins said, Wallace maintained his optimism and his determination to one day make it to the NBA.

“He's always been very resilient,” says Robbins. “He's used to disappointments and handles them well. I think deep down he always knew he would have to take a different route to get there.”

Wallace eventually made it back to the states, playing with the Washington Bullets (now Wizards) and the Orlando Magic. In 2000, he was traded to Detroit for Grant Hill in a deal that looked like a gold mine for Orlando. That trade turned out to be the chance Wallace and the Detroit Pistons both were looking for.

Greg Polinsky, an NBA scout for the New Jersey Nets and a former assistant coach at the University of Alabama says Wallace has found a comfortable role that best suits his abilities while spending the time and effort to continuously improve his game. Throughout his long journey, which began when he shot hoops in the dirt in White Hall and took him to Europe and back, has transformed Wallace into one of basketball's principal stars.

“Ben's figured out what he brings to the table and he has taken the core and kept developing it until he willed his way into the league. Ben's a bright guy in that he understands what his game is about, but has been willing to work on his game and expand on that core,” Polinsky said. “Other guys don't have a very good grasp on what they are as a player.”

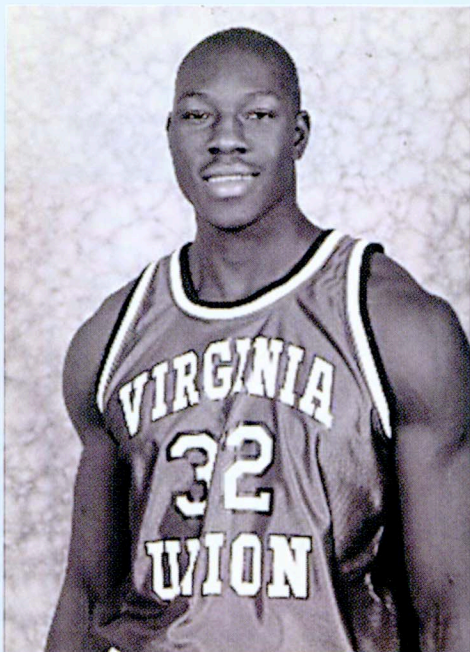


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Over the past three years, Wallace has developed into the NBA's premier defensive star, winning the Defensive Player of the Year Award in 2002 and 2003. He was the first undrafted player to be named a starter on an NBA All-Star roster. In addition, Wallace has emerged as the backbone of a very young, but very talented, Detroit Pistons team that plays a bruising, physical brand of defense.

Frankly, there are times when it's not that fun to watch, with scores barely reaching the 70s. Other times, when the system is firing on all cylinders, the Piston's style is a joy to

watch as those blocked shots and steals turn into fast break opportunities, opportunities that eventually led to an NBA championship.

Wallace, who turns 30 in late summer, is the guy others on the squad look up to. Even though he might bloody a nose or two jostling for position, he doesn't have a reputation as a dirty player. Instead, Wallace exudes dignity and class, the kind of guy who has a slow boiling point but, once there, might only stare at you and say “I'm very disappointed in you.” Even the hot-tempered Rasheed Wallace (no relation) cooled his act once he signed with Detroit in mid-season. Although it hasn't been documented, any reasonable person could assume Ben Wallace had something to do with it.

“You have to be a real psycho to upset him. He is all man,” says Polinsky. “There is no bravado with Ben Wallace. If you get in his way on the court and he knocks you down, you probably should say ‘I'm sorry I got in your way Mr. Wallace, it won't happen again.’”

In the finals, Wallace averaged just under 14 rebounds and 11 points per game en route to his first NBA championship. Game 5 may have been his masterpiece of the finals as Wallace pulled down 22 rebounds, had three steals and lit up the scoreboard for 18 points, several coming from fast break points resulting in dunks reminiscent of Dr. J, World B. Free or other giants from years past.

“I just wanted to come out and be aggressive. I wanted to attack the basket, just had to take my shots when they were available. My teammates did a great job of giving me a couple of easy baskets early into the game,” Wallace says of his performance. “I got comfortable and was able to get

out on the break, get a couple of break points and the rest was history.”

Wallace’s transformation from strictly a defensive specialist to an all-around player is a testament to the hours of work he puts into his game every day during the off-season. He can be found in the gym at Virginia Union for up to six hours a day during the summer, working on his game which, consequently, has helped him develop into a dangerous offensive threat as well as one of the best shot blockers and rebounders in the league.

“He’s started to have a little bit of offense to go with being the best defender in the league. Ben is a hellacious rebounder, and he just does all the things that you talk about in a star player,” says Polinsky. “He very easily could have been the MVP.”

However, what cannot be measured in statistics is Wallace’s significance to the Pistons on defense. At six-feet, nine-inches tall and 225 pounds, Wallace gives up four inches and over 100 pounds to O’Neil, the game’s dominant center. However, Wallace was matched up with O’Neil throughout the finals, playing him one-on-one never letting him take over and dominate the way he often does on other nights in the season. Most teams defend Shaq by double-teaming him, even triple-teaming on occasion. None of those teams, however, had the success Detroit did with Wallace on him alone, which, Polinsky says, is all the proof you need of Wallace’s talent.

“I think the amazing thing is Ben is one of the few guys where the coaching staff has said ‘you guard on him on your own.’ Detroit obviously has a great team defense, but Ben has such a resilience about it that even when Shaq made him look bad a couple of times, his resilience allowed him to stay in there and dominate in the paint,” Polinsky said.



Recently, White Hall celebrated Ben Wallace Day, bringing out friends and family to celebrate their native son’s achievement. Sadly, Wallace’s mother passed away two years ago and wasn’t able to enjoy his achievements.

Despite that loss, Mayor Jackson

says Wallace has held those lessons from his mother close to his heart in his quest for victory.

“Wallace is a clear-cut example of how hard work and determination can take you anywhere you want to go,” Jackson says. “We’re just hoping and praying for a victory tonight.”

His prayers have been answered. **E**

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