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The legacy of Jimmy Walker and Jalen Rose

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Editor's note: The "Big Picture" series will run periodically at ESPN.com, featuring in-depth stories about NBA personalities and league-wide issues.

As the service ends, and as the many who've come to remember two-time NBA All-Star Jimmy Walker exit the Kansas City funeral home, Jalen Rose remains seated, his head partially bowed, his emotions visibly scrambled.

He is closest to the podium, where a steady stream of family and friends -- representing Walker's 63 years of life -- sang his father's praises moments before.

Rhode Island native Gail Silva, representing Walker's glorious Providence years, spoke glowingly of the college career that made "Walk" the top pick in the 1967 NBA draft. "In Providence today, you mention you knew Jimmy Walker," Silva says, "and you'd be loved, because there he is still an icon."

NBA Hall of Famer Dave Bing, representing Walker's early professional career, spoke fondly of the rookie he took in as a roommate 40 years ago in Detroit. "I'm 22, Jimmy's 21 and we feel like we have the NBA's best backcourt," Bing recalls. "We played together, lived together and enjoyed each other as friends and as teammates. A great guy to be around; Jimmy had a big heart."

Darryl Mays, representing Walker's years in Kansas City where his NBA career concluded and where he eventually settled, spoke vividly of being taken under the wing by an NBA star as an 11-year-old. "He'd sit me on the bench of [Kansas City] Kings games, and take me into the locker room," Mays told the mourners. "How the friendship was forged, I'll never know. But Jimmy was a true mentor to me."

Rose, had he stood to speak, would have represented Walker's athletic gene. Had he addressed the crowd, Rose could have bragged about how for a long time the two were the top father/son scoring duo in NCAA Division I history, or boasted about how they are the only father and son tandem to each score over 10,000 points in their NBA careers.

Rose, however, sat silent.

His bewildered state is for good reason. Unlike the nearly 100 people gathered, Rose never knew Walker. Never even met him.

So this funeral on this July afternoon represents the first time Rose and Walker have shared the same room. Yet even now in Walker's death, Rose is unable to set eyes on the



Jimmy Walker averaged more than 16 points per game over his nine NBA seasons.

man who gave him life. Walker, his body ravaged by lung cancer, has been cremated. Rose is able to look only at a photograph of Walker perched next to an urn. Later, at a gathering of Walker's family and friends, Rose is asked about his earlier moment of silent reflection.

"I was hurt, saddened, and selfishly disappointed that we never got a chance to meet," says Rose, who then lowers his head and closes his eyes. "You want to know something? We were supposed to meet this month, we were supposed to meet this month."

A whistle stops play during an early evening game at Detroit's famous St. Cecilia's gym, and an animated Rose leaps to his feet. Rose, a summer-league coach, gently rests his hands on the shoulders of one his players and offers words of encouragement. Dott Wilson, who for decades has been involved with the summer league, looks on and smiles. "Just like Jimmy Walker," says Wilson. "It's amazing how neither [Jimmy nor Jalen] hesitated to reach out to the youngsters."

After his team loses, Rose leads the squad downstairs for a postgame pep talk. As the team disbands, Rose opens a side door, which opens to a darkened, cluttered office. "This is the place where I really learned who I was," he says.

He learned this particular lesson 22 years ago from the late Sam Washington, who was the director of St. Cecilia. Tired of Rose's constant goofing off in a sixth-grade class, Washington led him to the basement office. Clicking off the lights, he fed a reel into a projector and played highlights of Walker -- a solidly built shooting guard who reminded many of Oscar Robertson -- on the wall.

"That's your father," he told Rose, who sat mesmerized by the footage. "You have the same potential to be very special."

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Rose had long heard whispers about his biological father being a ballplayer, but was clueless until that moment about the extent of Walker's success. That's because his mother, Jeanne, rarely spoke about the man who abandoned her after she became pregnant in 1972.

"What was there to say?" says Jeanne, who met Walker at a popular West Detroit nightspot and didn't realize he was married at the time. "A year after Jalen was born, I told Jimmy, 'If you don't give me a dime, at least be a father to your son.' He couldn't even do that."

And that caught most who knew Walker by surprise.

In Detroit, kids were drawn to Walker's magnetic personality, and the All-Star guard welcomed them. He was in that first wave of NBA players who became a fixture at St. Cecilia and the nearby YMCA, offering fatherly advice and even tickets to Cobo Hall to many of the kids who played at the gym.

"Jimmy was the one guy who stayed in the community," Bing says. "He had a great connection with the local kids."

A great connection with all except for Rose, who was born in January 1973, months after Walker's trade to Houston. While Walker enjoyed healthy earnings befitting a top-round pick and an All-Star, Jeanne struggled raising four kids as a single mom on a Chrysler keypunch clerk's salary.

"No electricity, no hot water, no heat -- at times we struggled," Rose, the youngest of Jeanne's kids, says. "We'd wake up in the morning and wash with water we heated on a hot plate. And we'd go to bed at night wearing skull caps, sweat shirts and gloves." Rose's life, in Motown, was a ball of confusion. Some days, his mother's struggles made him bitter. Other days, Rose was determined the man he would never see was the man he'd try to be.

A few weeks after watching the film, Rose tore open a pack of basketball cards, and guess whose image looked up at him? Walker. He slipped the card into his pocket and carried it everywhere he went. In those back-and-forth trash-talking sessions in the schoolyard, Rose's trump card was his Walker card. "That got me a lot of respect," Rose says.

Rose began to create an alter ego to his famous father. Hearing that Walker put on shows with his basketball skills at St. Cecilia, Rose did the same. Knowing that Walker had worn No. 24, Rose flipped the script and selected No. 42.

Looking back, Rose calls those actions "little spiteful things." But the reasons he did them, the drive that carried him to become one of the top high school prospects in the country by his senior season at Southwestern High School, were clear:

"I made a vow that one of the main things I wanted to accomplish in my life is that one day he'd know my name."

It's the 1992 NCAA Tournament. The nation's most intriguing team is Michigan, which features the Fab Five -- all freshman starters, including Jalen Rose. Mission accomplished: Everyone knows his name.

As the team prepares for its first tournament game, Rose says, Detroit Free Press columnist Mitch Albom -- who interviewed Walker for a book on the Fab Five -- hands him an envelope with an Atlanta return address. The name on the envelope: Jimmy Walker."

Easy decision, opening the letter, right?

"Not easy at all," Rose says. "It's the middle of the NCAA Tournament and I'm extremely focused. With a game coming up, I wasn't ready to deal with it. So I decided to wait a day."

A day became two days. Two days turned into two months. Two months turned into years.



The Fab Five caught the attention of the hoops world with their baggy shorts and black socks.

It's not that Rose forgot about the letter: It was with him during his remaining years at Michigan, accompanied him in his rookie season in Denver, and sat in clear view in his desk drawer, right next to his wallet and car keys, when he was traded to Indiana.

Why the wait?

"I wanted to be mature enough when I read it," Rose says. "Whether that letter represented an overhand right by Mike Tyson, or the love of my life, I just wanted to be ready."

In 1997, Rose's second year in Indiana, the Pacers drafted Austin Croshere out of Providence. Croshere had won the school's most valuable player trophy (the Jimmy Walker MVP Award), and his presence became a steady dose of Jimmy Walker tidbits: "You look just like your father. ... You should come visit Providence, everything at the school is named after your father. ... I've got a couple of trophies with your father's name."

In 1999, Croshere handed Rose a piece of paper. On it was Walker's phone number. And, still, Rose waited.

But a year later, while packing for a road trip, Rose grabbed the envelope. And in Miami, on a bus ride to the team hotel, Rose slipped the letter out of a book and -- after eight years -- read it.

"It was his introduction to me, letting me know how proud he was of my accomplishments," Rose says. "He wanted me to know that it was [Albom] tracking him down that made him public. He said in the letter he was proud of the man that I had become."

Rose called Walker, but got Walker's friend instead. The friend linked Rose with Walker's sister. The sister passed Rose's information to Walker and the two exchanged messages until Rose picked up the phone and, after 27 years, nervously uttered the first words he had ever spoken to his father:

"Can I speak to Jimmy?"

Rose told his father that he had no hard feelings, that he was happy with his life, that he knew exactly where the athleticism he was blessed with came from. Walker told his son that he had followed his career, and that he was proud of how he had developed as a player.

"He was super-shocked," Rose says of the call. "But he handled it with poise. And he made a point of telling me he wanted nothing from me."

The two would speak several more times, and ended each conversation promising a face-to-face. But the e-mails became a bit more infrequent. The phone calls, too.

It took 27 years for Jalen and Jimmy to connect. It took less than a year for the two to drift apart.

Throughout Rose's NBA career, he could never escape being Jimmy Walker's son. He'd see Bob Lanier and hear stories about Walker's incredible scoring ability. He'd talk with Jerry West and the conversation invariably turned to the time the two paired in the backcourt during the 1972 All-Star Game.

A couple of years ago while Rose was playing against the Suns, Phoenix coach Mike D'Antoni stood behind him and mumbled under his breath: "Yeah, you remind me of Jimmy when I was his practice dummy." D'Antoni was Walker's teammate in Kansas City.

Walker's NBA career spanned just nine seasons, ending in 1976 with the Kings. He never emerged as the dominant player he had been in college, where as a senior he averaged more than 30 points per game (before the advent of the 3-point shot).

"I really can't say why it never happened for him," Bing says. "He was so talented that when he left [Detroit], we all assumed he would blow up."

"I never quite understood why he quit because, hey man, there was no one better in the fourth quarter than Jimmy Walker," says Sam Lacey, Walker's teammate on the Kings. "He could still play when he left the game. The only thing I can think of is that for such a long time Jimmy was the man that it became hard for him to be second fiddle [alongside Bing and Nate Archibald]."

His career over, Walker settled in Kansas City, and later spent several years in his hometown of Amherst, Va., and in Atlanta. He moved back to Kansas City in 1994 after his daughter, Jamesa Walker-Thompson, was diagnosed with cancer.

"He always told me to be a fighter," says Jamesa, a cancer survivor. "When he got cancer, he used me as an example. He would look at me and say you didn't go anywhere, so I'm not going anywhere."

In Kansas City, much of Walker's time was devoted to programs that aided youth in that city. His passion outside of work was tennis, and Walker spent much of his free time at the 47th Street courts near his home. "Had he chosen tennis over basketball," says longtime friend Sam Dowdy, "he would have been a star there as well."

Then Walker seemingly vanished. Bing lost contact with him. The retired players' association couldn't locate him. "We had guys from the Kings," says Lacey, who last saw Walker in 1989, "who had no idea he stayed in Kansas City."

At Providence, it took 34 years for the school's biggest star to return to campus, when the Friars honored him as a legend in 2001. After a weekend of reliving memories from a great career, he was gone again.

In 2005, as Ryan Gomes was on the verge of breaking Walker's school scoring record, Providence tried to contact Walker with no success. "It was like this mystery," says Providence assistant athletic director Arthur Parks. "Where is Jimmy Walker?"

That question went through Lacey's mind many times. In late June, Lacey, who lives in Mississippi, traveled to Kansas City for the kickoff of a pro-am league. During a game, a man approached with an urgent message: "You need to see Walk."

Entering Room 317 of the Highland Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, Lacey was ill-prepared for what he saw: Walker was doubled over, motionless, his coat stuck over his head and pants just above his knees. Lacey alerted a nurse, who woke up Walker with a nudge.



Jalen Rose has become thankful for the skills he inherited.

"His eyes lit up, and we chatted for a long time," Lacey says, explaining Walker communicated by spelling out words because he was unable to speak. "I was looking for some fragments of the old Walk I knew, and instead I see a guy who maybe weighs 115 pounds. I'll tell you, when I walked outside I broke down, I just couldn't hold it."

As Lacey got up to leave during a visit on June 27, Walker's face turned solemn and he grabbed a pen to scribble four letters on a piece of paper: D-E-A-D.

"I told him, 'No way, man,' and by the end of the visit we were laughing," Lacey says.

"And when I saw him [on June 29], he was excited. He told me that his family was coming by. And he told me that he was finally going to meet Jalen."

That Rose was Walker's son was widely known. But Dowdy says Walker never discussed Rose until a ride to the tennis courts in early June. "We were in the car, he mentioned that he had spoken to Jalen several times over the years, and then he started crying," Dowdy says. "From there, he spoke about him every other day. There was a real desire to see him."

And everything was in motion for that to happen. Rose, aware of Walker's deteriorating condition, was making plans to visit.

That Friday night, June 29, shortly after Lacey's conversation about Rose, Walker's condition worsened and he was rushed to Truman Medical Center. On the morning of July 2, with his daughter, Naja Walker-Thompson, and her mother, Sandra Thompson, by his side, Jimmy Walker died.

Bing sighs deeply and reflects on Walker and Rose. "Theirs is a legacy that comes very, very seldom," he says. "Jalen told me he wanted to meet Jimmy. Jimmy once told me he wanted to meet Jalen. It's a shame they had to meet like this -- at the end."

But being there at the end was somewhat therapeutic for Rose. Listening to words about his father that were both warm and sincere validated why he wore that Jimmy Walker Pistons throwback jersey on "Rome is Burning" years ago; why he framed those Walker basketball cards fans gave him over the years; and why he quietly idolized a man he could have easily despised.

As he sits back and reflects on the accomplishments of his own career -- one that now hinges on the uncertainties of free agency -- Rose remembers those childhood days when he and other kids would sit on the porch and dream of what they wanted to be.

"Some wanted to be doctors, some wanted to be lawyers," Rose says. "I wanted to be a basketball player, and because of Jimmy, I always knew that I had it in me. He wasn't there, but he inspired me.

"And for that, I'll always be thankful."

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