

The Washington Post

Manute Bol, former Washington Bullet and one of NBA's tallest players, dies at 47 Advertisement

By Matt Schudel
Sunday, June 20, 2010; C07

Manute Bol, who became a basketball sensation in the 1980s as a skeletally thin shot-blocking giant with the Washington Bullets and other professional teams, and who devoted his post-basketball life to improving the lot of his fellow natives of Sudan, [died June 19](#) at the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville. He was 47.

His cousin George Bol said Mr. Bol had internal bleeding and other complications from Stevens-Johnson syndrome, a rare skin disease that he contracted from a medication he received in Africa.

Mr. Bol, one of the two tallest players in NBA history, was also one of its most exotic and endearing -- and surely the only one to have killed a lion with a spear. His unusual journey to basketball stardom began in southern Sudan, where he was a cattle-herding member of the Dinka tribe and never touched a basketball until his late teens. After catching the eye of an American coach working in Sudan, Mr. Bol made his way to the United States without knowing a word of English.

When the Bullets drafted him in the second round in 1985, he was measured at 7 feet 6¾ inches in his bare feet -- usually rounded up to 7-7 -- and he weighed a mere 190 pounds. Mr. Bol had limited basketball skills, but with a fingertip-to-fingertip wingspan of 8 feet 6 inches, he proved to be unusually adept at one aspect of the game: blocking opponents' shots. Standing flat-footed, he could extend his hand above the rim of the basket 10 feet off the floor.

The Bullets put Mr. Bol on a regimen of weightlifting and pizza, adding 17 pounds to his frame before he made his NBA debut in October 1985. In his rookie season, despite playing about 25 minutes a game, he led the league with 397 blocked shots, still the second-highest total in NBA annals.

Don Nelson, who later coached Mr. Bol with the Golden State Warriors, said simply, "He's the most amazing shot blocker I've ever seen."

His exceptional height and shot-blocking talent made Mr. Bol an instant phenomenon, but fans and players were also drawn to him because of his sunny personality. Attendance shot up in NBA cities whenever the Bullets (renamed the Washington Wizards in 1997) came to town. Mr. Bol routinely called sports fans "friends."

"He's so proud, almost noble," then-Bullets General Manager Bob Ferry said in 1987. "He's completely at ease with himself, which is hard to believe when you consider . . . well, he's 7-foot-7."

Some people feared that Mr. Bol's stick-thin frame would never stand up to the physical demands of pro basketball, but he proved surprisingly resilient. When an opposing center for the Chicago Bulls tested his mettle by throwing a punch, Mr. Bol flattened him with a single blow, prompting a bench-clearing brawl.

"When I play, I try to make friends, with my team and the other," a nonplused Mr. Bol said. "If I wanted to look for a fight, I'll go to Libya and join the Marines."

Killing a lion

In 1987, when the Bullets signed 5-foot-3 Muggsy Bogues, they had the shortest and tallest players in NBA history on the team at the same time. Mr. Bol was traded to Golden State before the 1988-89 season, when he again led the league in blocked shots.

At Golden State, Mr. Bol developed an awkward but crowd-pleasing three-point shot that occasionally found its long-distance mark. He later played with the Philadelphia 76ers and Miami Heat before briefly returning to Washington in 1994 to tutor the Bullets' new big man, Gheorghe Muresan, from Romania. Muresan may have been a centimeter or two taller, but both were listed at 7-7.

Mr. Bol appeared in his final NBA game in 1994 and ended his career with 2,086 blocked shots and 1,599 points -- the only player with more blocks than points scored.

Although he didn't speak a word of English until he was 20, he managed to master the NBA art of trash-talking.

"Don't you have cable?" he would say after blocking an opponent's shot. "Didn't the other guys tell you? Nobody dunks on Manute

B-O-L!"

There is no precise record of Manute Bol's birth, but he said he was born near the village of Tularei, Sudan, on Oct. 16, 1962. He descended from tribal chieftains, and one of his grandfathers was said to be taller than 7 feet.

Once, while herding cattle in his youth, Mr. Bol saw a lion lurking nearby and killed it with a well-aimed spear.

He twice ran away from home to avoid ritual scarification of his head and the removal of six lower teeth, but he eventually submitted to the gruesome procedures to please his father. In the United States, he wore false teeth.

He could speak several languages, including Arabic, but he could not read or write any of them before moving to Khartoum in his late teens to play basketball. His unusual height and ethnic background made him the target of repeated slurs. He developed a reputation as a fierce fighter, often using a tree limb as a weapon.

A U.S. college coach conducting clinics in Khartoum recommended that Mr. Bol sharpen his game in the United States, but the experiment was fraught with missteps. He was drafted by the NBA's San Diego Clippers in 1983, only to be declared ineligible. When he tried to enroll at Cleveland State University, the school was sanctioned for giving him illegal financial support.

In 1984, he ended up at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut, where he gained national notice for his remarkable ability to block shots and grab rebounds. He left college after one year and played with a summer-league pro team in Rhode Island before being drafted by the Bullets.

Exile and refugee

Throughout his career, Mr. Bol remained devoted to his homeland and its customs. When he proposed to his Dinka wife, Atong, he gave her family 80 cows as a gift.

He sometimes protested outside the Sudanese Embassy in Washington to draw attention to the protracted civil war in Sudan, which pitted the Muslim elite of the north against the Christian and animist southern peoples, including Mr. Bol's Dinka tribe. The troubles later spread to the region of Darfur in western Sudan.

"You know, a lot of people feel sorry for him, because he's so tall and awkward," Charles Barkley, a former 76ers teammate, once said. "But I'll tell you this -- if everyone in the world was a Manute Bol, it's a world I'd want to live in."

Mr. Bol's highest salary in the NBA was \$1.5 million. When he returned to Sudan in 1998, he supported a large extended family and had other homes in Egypt and the United States. He donated an estimated \$3.5 million to a Dinka-led rebel group, lost money in business deals and was forced to sell his houses and furniture. His wife divorced him and moved to New Jersey with their four children.

By 2001, he was almost destitute. He sometimes appeared in embarrassing promotional stunts, such as celebrity boxing matches, to raise funds for his homeland.

"I don't work for money," he said in 2006. "I work to save people. I can always make more money, but you can't bring back those that are gone."

In Sudan, where plural marriage is not uncommon, Mr. Bol married two younger women and had five more children. After a political dispute with his one-time supporters, he became a virtual exile in his own country.

In 2002, Mr. Bol was admitted to the United States as a religious refugee and moved to West Hartford, Conn., where his rent was paid by a Catholic charity. Two years later, he was critically injured in a taxi accident near Hartford in which his driver was killed. Mr. Bol recovered from a coma and broken neck, then settled in Olathe, Kan., where he had lived for the past few years.

He suffered other maladies, including joint pain that limited his mobility, and was hospitalized in May with kidney failure after Stevens-Johnson syndrome left him unable to eat for 11 days.

Yet even amid setbacks, Mr. Bol never lost his optimism or his gratitude toward a game that had taken him so far in the world.

"I had a good time with the American people," he told Sports Illustrated in 2001. "I hope they remember me as a good guy who played hard. I wasn't Michael Jordan, but I was somebody called Manute Bol."