



Famed Flashbacks

BLF embraces, promotes that pioneering spirit

We access the past to mold the present and shape the future

By Fred W. Crans

SCHAUMBURG, IL (February 24, 2025) – Mention the word “pioneers” and a stereotypical image of a woman with children in a Conestoga wagon, led by a man clad in buckskins and carrying a muzzleloader rifle with his faithful dog at his side. Except for the popularized (and infamous) Donner Party, little is immediately and widely known about all the settlers that headed westward to populate the unknown territories without performing serious background research.

That’s just the way it is – folks quietly blazing trails without a thought of being recognized or appreciated for their accomplishments.

It’s sad. It’s shameful. It may even border on criminal – emotionally, legally, mentally and physically.

Shortly before his death, NBA star Wilt Chamberlain said in an interview with Al Trautwig, “Sports is all about marketing the present. They talk about triple-doubles – 10 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists in a game. If somebody does that today, it will be the lead story on Sportscenter. But I’ll tell you this: If Oscar Robertson or Jerry West played a game in which they scored 10 points, got 10 rebounds and had 10 assists, they’d be pissed because they had a bad game.”

Yet when the discussion comes around to “Who is the [NBA] G.O.A.T., neither West, Robertson nor Chamberlain are ever mentioned. What’s noteworthy: Chamberlain had several games where he had *quintuple* doubles, but blocked shots and steals did not become official statistics until after he retired.

Why are these professional giants of the game undervalued? Because they did all their work before the media and media-influenced pop culture caught up to them.

All the people with today’s juice are too young to have seen these guys.

I once got into a heated discussion with the late great Bobby Knight over Michael Jordan. Knight had been speaking at a Becker’s Healthcare meeting in Chicago. During his talk, he had been regaling “His Airness” ad nauseum. By chance, I encountered him on my way to dinner and greeted him with a hearty hello. He asked me to join him. That’s where we had the Jordan talk.

I started off politely by saying, “You’re wrong when you say MJ was the G.O.A.T. He wasn’t.”

Knight gave me that Bobby Knight glare, the piercing, angry look he aimed at opponents, and told me I was wrong.

Very few people are ready to engage in an argument with Robert Montgomery Knight, but I had rehearsed this dialogue since I mentally crafted the script years earlier to use at a time just like this.

“No, you’re wrong,” I shot back. “Jordan got to travel, carry the ball, push off and any time the air direction changed in the gym when he had the ball, they called a foul on someone. Besides that, his playoff record was 1-9 before Scottie Pippen came to the Bulls, and while most people like to say that he and Wilt are the only two players to average over 30 points per game, when you subtract one point for every one of Jordan’s three pointers (there were no three pointers when Chamberlain played), he only averaged 28.8 a game.”

“So who do *you* think was the greatest of all time?” he countered (again with his glare).

“Let me qualify my answer,” I said. “Without a doubt the most measurably disruptive force ever to play the game was Wilt Chamberlain. The rules of the game were changed to contain him. He still holds 65 records today (he once held 92). But the person who had the best all-around skills necessary to play the game of basketball was ... [pausing for dramatic effect] ... Oscar Robertson.”

Once again, Knight shot me “The Look,” only this time it was accompanied by a finger wagging in my face – no, not that finger. “You know, I played ball in college (The Ohio State University) with John Havlicek (Boston Celtic great and Hall-of-Famer), and he told me this: ‘I have played with all the old-time greats and I have watched all those that have come along since, and the greatest basketball player of all-time is...’”

Wait for it ...

“... Oscar Robertson.’ So I’ll take his word for it, but I won’t take yours.”

Fair enough. But what did Knight, Havlicek and I have in common? We all saw the old guys play. We have personal internal data with which to make comparisons.

Today’s “experts” are hampered by their lack of visible, measurable data about those “pioneering” players and, while it’s not their fault, many great players have disappeared into the past without getting the recognition they deserve.

Pioneers represent groundbreakers, path makers, originals lost in time. It’s not unlike the professionals in healthcare supply chain, or as it was called in the past, materials management, purchasing and buying in reverse chronological order.

Before there were records of data we collect today, before there were lightning-fast computers and measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPI) that could be shared in media outlets and at numerous local, regional, state and national conferences every year, how did our industry and professional pioneers showcase and hype their accomplishments? Largely at a special meeting or within the prose of magazines, newspapers and other reference materials cloaked in dust from long-term archiving on shelves.

Like those nameless folks who walked across a continent in search of a better life for their family with just a wagon, a dream and a trusty dog, there were pioneers working in hospitals, manufacturers, distributors, cooperative buying groups/group purchasing organizations, service companies, consultancies, educational institutions and print media outlets who built the foundation and laid the groundwork for what we have today.

Give a kid today a “vintage” telephone (dial or touch-tone), a radio, a manual typewriter, a paper tablet or a green-lined spreadsheet or a television limited to three channels and see how they might react and what they might do.

But the fact is, those were the tools that the healthcare supply chain pioneers had to work with, and because of them, we are what we are and have what we have today.

This year, under the stewardship of Gary Rakes, Bellwether Class of 2021, we at Bellwether League Foundation™ finally are launching a dedicated process to honor those that paved the way for us. BLF’s Bellwether Honoree Pioneer concept was conceived a few years ago and simmered as an essential idea to implement until Rakes volunteered with a passion to bring it to fruition.

Right now a special subcommittee is making more concerted efforts to research the “past” (loosely defined as those pre-managed care years of the Silver, Golden and Gilded Ages explored in the second edition of *Leaders & Luminaries*:

[https://www.bellwetherleague.org/pdf/BellwetherLeague Magazine Booklet 2nd Issue.pdf](https://www.bellwetherleague.org/pdf/BellwetherLeague_Magazine_Booklet_2nd_Issue.pdf)), to identify those who got the ball rolling to honor them as Bellwether Honoree Pioneers within the Healthcare Supply Chain Leadership Hall of Fame.™

Since BLF’s inception, the Hall of Fame has recognized, profiled and inducted a variety of pioneers after arduous research. Those inducted Hall of Famers who left us during the first *eight* decades of the 20th century include Clara Barton, William V.S. Thorne, Guy Clark, George Gossett, Foster McGaw, George Ainsworth, Charles Auslander, Paul Widman, Edwin Crosby, M.D., and Stan Costello. If you extend the timeline to those who passed in the 1990s, you’ll see names like Dean Ammer, Ph.D. (our first inductee), Gordon Friesen, Don Soth, Paul Farrell, Max Goodloe Sr., Irving Mills and Chris Bale.

Depending on your age, experience or attention span, you may not recognize some, many or any of these names. Without BLF, their contributions and stories likely would be harder and more inconvenient to find and share.

Thankfully, that's what we do and have done since BLF's inception in 2007. We recognize that such work is difficult because information about these worthy professionals may be lacking and difficult to locate – even through interviews.

But it's work that needs to be done so that we can keep their accomplishments, achievements and stories alive and relevant to share. We need to enjoy, learn and succeed from their examples, experience and expertise.

We believe they matter as much as this industry, profession and you do.

Fred W. Crans, Bellwether Class of 2020, has more than five decades of healthcare supply chain experience and service in a variety of executive leadership roles that spans military and private-sector communities as well as provider, supplier, group purchasing organization and consultant segments. He currently serves on the Board of Directors of Bellwether League Foundation as Outreach Ambassador and as Healthcare Business Development Executive for St. Onge Co. For more, visit Bellwether League Foundation's web site at <https://www.bellwetherleague.org/>.



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