BILL “SUPERFOOT” WALLACE

HOW HE BECAME THE WORLD’S GREATEST KICKER FOR 50 YEARS!

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BILL WALLACE

BY FLOYD BURK
For half a century, Bill “Superfoot” Wallace has walked the earth bearing the nickname “best kicker in America.” At times, he’s even been called the world’s greatest kicker. With a claim to fame of that magnitude, he’s used to living in the public eye, and plenty of people know plenty of facts about his career. However, in a recent interview, I discovered that there’s still a bunch of little-known episodes that provide insight into his martial lifestyle.

For example, did you know that Wallace earned a black belt in shorin-ryu karate twice? That he learned all the traditional kata and even competed in kata competition? That despite having no real film training, he worked in the movie biz for 35 years? That he dominated point fighting before retiring as the undefeated full-contact karate champion with 23 victories?

If you’re hungry for more info about the senior statesman of the martial arts, read on.
**Wrestling, Then Judo**

Wallace, who was raised in Lafayette, Indiana, began his martial arts career in 1963 as a judo player. “I was a wrestler in high school, and when I joined the Air Force, I found that they didn’t have a wrestling team where I was stationed in Michigan,” he says. “I was bored out of my mind, so I went to the men’s gym to find something to do and saw people playing basketball, lifting weights and doing other stuff. What caught my attention were these guys in white suits in this matted room, so I went in and watched what they were doing. I thought, This is neat.”

A black belt walked over and asked if he could help the visitor. “I said I just got stationed there and was wondering what they were doing,” Wallace says. “He said: ‘We’re practicing judo. Do you want to train with us?’”

Wallace confessed that he’d never done judo but that he had wrestled in school. “He said, ‘So, you like to wrestle — I’ll wrestle you.’”

The judoka removed his gi top, and the two rolled for a few minutes. “Then he said, ‘Very good — now put this little white coat on,’” Wallace says. “He proceeded to throw me all over the place, bam bam bam. I got lots of air time, too. I said: ‘This is great! Where do I sign up?’ So began my career in martial arts.”

The next year, Wallace attended his first tournament, the Air Force Judo Championships in Barksdale, Louisiana. He didn’t win, but he earned significant recognition. “The sensei said, ‘Since you’re 150 pounds, you’ve been picked as our middleweight’ — even though I was a white belt. I must have been chosen because I could grapple. I knew how to get the armbar and choke, and I could hold people down. We won the Air Force team championship. Winning felt good. What also felt good was making it to the finals, although I lost to a black belt. Since I’d done so well, after the tournament, I was promoted from white belt to san kyū (brown belt). That was my first promotion. Soon after, I was promoted to ni kyū (middle brown belt).”

The Air Force then sent Wallace to an isolated base in King Salmon, Alaska. He promptly sought a judo club but found none. A few months later, a sergeant who happened to hold a fourth-degree black belt in judo showed up, and the two worked out together. A quick study, Wallace refined his naga no kata (throwing form) and katami no kata (grappling form). He eventually earned his i kyū (advanced brown belt) from the noncommissioned officer.

Unbeknownst to the man who would become Superfoot, his career in judo was about to come to an unfortunate end.

**Switch to Karate**

Wallace’s next station was Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, where he continued his training. “Unfortunately, that’s where I tore up my knee during judo practice, which messed up my judo career,” he says. “All the throws, sweeps and grappling of randori just couldn’t be done with a bum knee.”

“After the accident, they put me in this big cast that went from my right foot to my upper leg. I couldn’t do any judo but I could walk, so I walked into sensei Eizo Shimabuku’s shorin-ryu karate dojo in Naha. Sensei said, ‘Don’t kick with your right leg, but I want you to kick twice as much with your left.’

“And that’s what I did. Before long, my left foot had a mind of its own. I’d say, ‘Kick,’ and the leg would say, ‘I already did.’ There was no thinking about it — the kicks became natural.”
Black Belt Times Two

When he had the cast removed, his right leg still felt bad, so he continued with the same training regimen. He made shodan (first degree) in nine months. “It seems fast, but I trained really hard,” he says. “At a base like that, a person either goes and gets drunk every night or has a ball working out.”

A year later, Wallace was sent to Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino, California, where he found the Shorin School of Karate. He was allowed to wear a brown belt instead of the white one most newcomers received. “A few months after arriving, there was a karate tournament in Santa Ana, California,” he says. “I’d never seen a karate tournament before. I took second place. The guy that took first beat me 2-1 in overtime, and right after our match, he got promoted to black belt.”

“I kept training, and then there was a tournament in Las Vegas called the Chuck Norris Nationals. I took third place — this was early spring 1967. In June 1967, I was once again promoted to shodan.”

Off to College

Wallace left the Air Force later that month, then drove back to Lafayette, packed his bags and headed to Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, to earn a degree in exercise physiology. One day while he was working out in the gym, an administrator asked him to start a karate course. Back then, there were few karate schools in the nation, so Wallace agreed.

“I ran my small karate class for a couple years, then one December, I was invited to go to Indianapolis, where I met a guy named Glen,” Wallace recalls. “We sparred for a few hours and beat the daylights out of each other — it was great. We became friends, and he and I began going to tournaments. The first was a national event in Lexington, Kentucky, in January 1968. There were two black-belt divisions — lightweight and heavyweight — and I fought heavyweight. I won the tournament.”

Life Lesson

His winning ways obviously had begun, but that didn’t mean his journey along the martial path would be easy from now on. “I was really fast, and this helped me win,” Wallace says. “But after that tournament in Kentucky, I began thinking I didn’t have to train hard to win. The next two tournaments I got beat in the first round.

“The problem was I was basically a one-dimensional fighter. My only weapons were the backfist and the side kick. Since I used the same kicking-style side stance that I always have, I couldn’t score with the reverse punch. I didn’t use any combinations and just relied on my speed. It didn’t work [when] I ran into people who knew what to expect and figured out how to keep me from scoring. I learned that even though I was fast and had good flexibility, if someone saw my technique coming, they could get out of the way.

“Fortunately, I was really good at throwing the roundhouse kick and the hook kick — I just wasn’t using them. That’s what started me developing my combinations, many of which I still teach today.”

A Star Is Born

Those combinations were brilliant because what Wallace concocted was exactly the opposite of what most people were doing in the sport. Most fighters’ combos were kicks followed by punches or punches followed by kicks. The techniques looked so different from
each other that it was easy to detect the transition. Wallace, meanwhile, made sure everything looked the same. He'd throw a roundhouse kick disguised as a hook kick or a side kick disguised as a roundhouse. The side kick became his go-to technique for keeping opponents at bay until he could nail them with a roundhouse kick or hook kick.

Wallace, who was still in college, used his spare time to hone those kicks and fine-tune all the combinations. He also developed a backfist that originated from a downward position. His opponents became so preoccupied with not getting kicked that they overlooked the punch.

To continuously up his game, Wallace improved his flexibility and added strength and endurance. He traveled to tournaments and schools to work with all kinds of opponents. In that way, he became almost unbeatable.

**Back to the Mat**

After earning his degree at Ball State, Wallace moved to Tennessee to work on a master’s in kinesiology at Memphis State University. While there, he taught karate and weightlifting, along with judo and wrestling. He even competed in wrestling. What about that old knee injury?

“Teaching judo [by] showing people how to do the throws was easy,” Wallace says. “But I couldn’t plant my feet in such a way that I could do them against an unwilling opponent. The knee just wouldn’t allow me to do that, but I could teach. With wrestling, I could do both because things usually went to the ground where I didn’t have to use my right leg that much. I always wore a knee brace and taped it up real good, but it still hurt like hell.”

**Fame Game**

During the six years Wallace was in college, his point-fighting victories made him a celebrity in his hometown, his university and the martial arts community, but his fame factor blossomed in the early 1970s. “I won a lot in 1971, but it was ‘72, ‘73 and
'74 that I tore things up and won just about everything there was,” he says. “I was a national champion, and according to Black Belt magazine, I was the No. 1 black-belt fighter for three straight years. In 1973 I was Black Belt’s [Karate Player] of the Year. Getting that Hall of Fame honor is what I remember the most.”

That statement, coming from a man who would go on to befriend and train celebrities like Elvis Presley and John Belushi, speaks volumes about his dedication to the martial arts.

In late 1973, Bill Wallace was invited to Indianapolis to open a karate school, and he accepted. Then in May 1974, Joe Lewis called to tell him they were picking people for a full-contact karate team and Wallace was chosen as the middleweight. “I didn’t want to do it,” Wallace says. “I liked the point fighting with the control and everything, but full contact sounded different. I never wanted to hurt anybody, never wanted to prove that I could beat anybody up. To me, competition was just a game. I touch you first, I win. You touch me first, you win.”

Lewis wouldn’t take no for an answer, however, and Wallace finally gave in.

“The very next day, my father set me up to go to Frankfurt, Indiana, to interview for a school-teaching job,” Wallace says. “I went there and they said they wanted me to be the metal-shop teacher. They told me that if I stayed there until the wrestling coach retired, I could take his place and be the head wrestling coach and earn another 600 bucks a year. My dad told me, ‘I really want you to take the job.’ All the way home, I was thinking, I really don’t want to be a schoolteacher.”

The next day, after Wallace had arrived at his dojo, the phone rang. It was Red West, Elvis Presley’s chief of security. West said, “Elvis wants to talk to you.”

“He said, ‘I’m going to open a karate school here in Memphis, and I want you to run it for me,’ Wallace recalls. “He said, ‘I’ll pay you $1,000 a month, move you down here, pay all your expenses and buy you a car.’”

“I said, ‘Hmm,’ and [Elvis] said, ‘OK, how about $1,000 a month after taxes?’

“It was a real dilemma. It would probably mean the derailment of my school-teaching career, which would certainly disappoint my dad, who always wanted me to follow in his footsteps. I was thinking, I can’t make everybody happy. It’s kind of hard to say no to Elvis. Finally, I said, ‘OK, Mr. Presley, I’ll do it.’ He said, ‘Great, I’ll see you soon.’”

Wallace moved his family back to Memphis and in May 1974 set up a karate school.

“Later in May, our American full-contact karate team went over to Europe to fight in the European Championships,” Wallace says. “I won my match, Joe won his match, and Jeff Smith and Howard Jackson both won their matches. We were undefeated.”

### Into Full Contact

In September 1974 Wallace officially switched from point fighting to professional kickboxing. “We started doing kickboxing, what was called full-contact karate,” he says. “I won my inaugural full-contact match. In 1975 I defended the title at the Battle of Atlanta in front of 10,000 people, the biggest crowd ever at such an event. In 1976 I defended my title five times, and in 1977 I defended my title another five times.”

In 1977 he was inducted into the Black Belt Hall of Fame — for the second time. That year wasn’t all good, however; it also brought the
loss of his friend Elvis, who died in August.

Wallace’s next title defense took place in Monaco. “In 1978 I defended my title in Monte Carlo in front of Princess Grace and Prince Rainier III, knocking out the European champion in the fourth round with a side kick,” he recalls. “Then I had dinner with the prince and princess and also met their kids, Prince Albert II and Princess Stephanie. Monte Carlo was great. While I had a lot of matches, I always stayed in shape. One of my secrets was I didn’t drink, smoke or party, which was the downfall for many other fighters. They always had to get back in shape to fight. I just stayed that way.”

Later in 1978, Wallace was honored as Black Belt’s Man of the Year. Two key reasons for his winning ways were he didn’t change his fighting positioning and he didn’t try to put extra power into his techniques. “Back then, most people were changing their karate stances to front-facing boxing-style stances,” he says. “This made it really difficult for them to throw any of their kicks. This worked to my advantage as I could do all my kicks because I just stayed sideways to protect my knee.

“My disadvantage was I didn’t have any hand techniques with any pop — just the backfist. That’s why I learned how to do the jab and the left hook. The jab helped keep people away, and I could pound with the hook if someone got inside. I also learned to do an uppercut, which I used [in the] clinch. I kept practicing the side, the round and the hook kicks — those never changed at all.”

Wallace claims one of his main strategies was to execute his moves naturally. “I never tried to throw them hard — I just threw them,” he says. “The damage I did to people, the knockouts and whatnot, came from people walking into my techniques. My opponents did it to themselves. They helped me knock them out. Early on, I won with kicks. Later, as I developed some hand and kicking combinations, I began landing some punches, which contributed to me winning my fights.”

**Hello, Hollywood!**


“After a few more movies, I found that I didn’t like it at all. You spend all those months working on something that people watch in an hour and a half. While the money is terrific, there’s a lot of wasted time [spent] doing not much of anything. It’s fun at times — when it’s your turn to do something — but when you’re not the star, you just sit around most of the time. Boring as heck. For a guy like me, it was like being back in King Salmon, Alaska, but without the judo guy to play judo with.”


“That was it: I retired undefeated with 23 straight victories. I did continue to fight exhibitions — I’ve fought dozens of them. I fought Joe Lewis, I even fought Marvin Hagler. Ironically, after I retired, I fought more exhibition matches than I ever fought title fights. Seems like everybody wanted to go to
an exhibition and see a guy kicking.”

**Life After Retirement**

In the early 1980s, Wallace worked on some big-budget movies with John Belushi (*Neighbors* and *Continental Divide*) and did the Blues Brothers Tour with Belushi and Dan Aykroyd. He appeared in some low-budget movies, as well. In 1984 Wallace landed a role in *The Protector*, which starred Jackie Chan.

Afterward, Wallace focused his free time on doing seminars around the United States and Europe. He’d occasionally bag a job doing stunt work or fight choreography. His Los Angeles home base served him well because he was close to the airport, the movie studios and the media. His column in *Black Belt* was a staple of the magazine for years.

In 1999 Wallace relocated to Florida. One of the reasons: The locale promised to provide him with plenty of opportunities to pursue his favorite hobby: golf. Two years later, he signed a deal to represent Century Martial Arts. To keep his name alive, Wallace agreed to Joe Jennings’ request for him to be in a series of training tapes by Panther Productions. They sold well and guaranteed Wallace years of royalty checks. He went on to star in several videos for Century and write four books.

For the past 25 years, Wallace has taught at Karate College, the training camp fellow *Black Belt* Hall of Famer Jerry Beasley holds annually in Radford, Virginia. For the past 15 years, Wallace has fine-tuned the Superfoot System and nurtured the instructors who’ve joined his organization. He continues to travel the world, doing what he loves most, which is teaching the martial arts.

*About the author: Floyd Burk is a San Diego-based 10th-degree black belt with more than 40 years of experience in the arts.*
Books and DVDs by/Featuring Bill Wallace

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