

Bill and Johnny

by Max Millard, 2013, A Toastmaster's speech

Back in 1952, two of the finest high school athletes in the San Francisco Bay Area were Bill and Johnny. Bill grew up in a housing project in West Oakland and attended McClymonds High School. He was 6 feet 9 inches tall. Johnny grew up on 32nd Avenue in San Francisco's Richmond district and attended Roosevelt Middle School, then George Washington High School. He was 5 foot 7.

They were both on their school basketball team, and both were outstanding runners on their school track team — Bill in the quarter mile and Johnny in the hurdles. But where they really excelled was in the high jump. They were the two best high school high jumpers in California. Bill held the state record, and Johnny wasn't far behind. They met at a track meet and became instant friends. They respected each other's talents, and there was no jealousy between them.

In 1954, Johnny finally beat Bill's record with a jump of 6 feet 5½ inches — more than 10 inches above his own head. Then they went on to college, Bill to the University of San Francisco and Johnny to San Francisco State, where he planned to become a teacher. They continued their friendly rivalry on a collegiate level. Bill had an old Buick, and he and his girlfriend and Johnny would jump in and drive all over California to attend track meets together.

In 1956 Bill jumped 6 feet 9 inches — his own height — which ranked him among the best high jumpers in the world. He and Johnny were both invited to take part in the 1956 Olympic trials. Here's where their story diverges.

Bill accepted the invitation, made the team, and came back from Australia with a gold medal around his neck. Then he returned to USF, graduated, and immediately began a brilliant career. Johnny skipped the Olympic trials, dropped out of college, and never again took part in competitive athletics.

With only this information, you might conclude that Bill was an achiever and Johnny was a loser. But you'd be only half right. Yes, Bill was a winner. But he didn't win his gold medal in running or jumping. He won it as a member of the U.S. Olympic basketball team. At USF, he was the centerpiece of a team that won 60 consecutive games and two national championships.

Then he joined the Boston Celtics. He was named an NBA all star 12 times and the Most Valuable Player five times. He led the Celtics to 11 championships — almost twice as many as Michael Jordan. For his last three years on the team, he was the Celtics' player/coach, becoming the first African American ever to coach a major sport. Later he coached the Seattle SuperSonics and the Sacramento Kings. In 2009 the Most Valuable Award for the NBA Finals was renamed the Bill Russell Award.

What about Johnny? Like Bill, he had another big talent apart from the track: singing. He dropped out of college to become a professional singer, and he skipped the Olympic trials because at the same time he got an offer to go to New York City and record his first album.

Johnny Mathis went on to sell more records than any solo artist of the 20th century except for Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra. His hits include "Misty," "Chances Are," and Christmas classics like "The Little Drummer Boy." His Greatest Hits album is in the Guinness Book of World Records for being on the Billboard chart for 490 consecutive weeks — almost 10 years. He had a top 40 hit in seven different decades. He's been invited to the White House to sing for three different presidents, and he has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Today, at the age of 87, he's still performing.

Bill Russell died on July 31, 2022 at age 88. Apart from his basketball career, he was the coauthor of four books, including "Go Up for Glory" and "Russell Rules: 11 Lessons on Leadership from the 20th Century's Greatest Winner." In 2011 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama.

Bill and Johnny remained friends until the end. In 2013 Johnny went to Boston to sing at the dedication of a life size statue of Bill in City Hall Plaza.

For decades, Johnny has been living in a mansion in the Hollywood Hills. In a 2013 interview for the San Francisco Chronicle, he was asked: "When is the last time you've come back here and just driven around?"

Johnny said: "I do quite a lot when I come back to sing. The last few times I've been singing with the San Francisco Symphony, I try to get here a day early, and that's when I sort of drive around and have a look, and see if the same places are there. And of course they aren't. But those are still the places in my heart that I treasure."