

William Schonely (1929–2023)

By Kerry Eggers

Bill Schonely wasn't just the longest tenured broadcaster in the history of the Portland Trail Blazers, he was also among the most beloved figures in the history of the National Basketball Association franchise. When Schonely was inducted into the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame in 2002, Bill Walton, a center for the Blazers from 1974 to 1979, told the Vancouver *Columbian*: "Bill Schonely is the most important figure in the history of Oregon sports, with all due respect to Phil Knight and Maurice Lucas. Bill Schonely is the man who convinced people that sports are worthwhile." The Schonzy, as he was known, worked for the Blazers from the team's inception in 1970 until his retirement in 2022.

William Schonely was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania, on June 1, 1929. He developed a stutter as a child, but worked to overcome it by singing and reading out loud. He enlisted in the U.S. Marines in 1948 and was stationed in Guam, where he got his start in broadcasting with Armed Forces Radio. He met and married Barbara Jean White there, in about 1950; their oldest son was born in 1951. Schonely then spent fifteen months at Quantico, Virginia, before his release from service obligations in 1952.

Schonely began his broadcasting career in Louisiana. His duties at station WAFB in Baton Rouge included radio play-by-play for the Seattle Totems of the Western Hockey League and the Seattle Angels of the Pacific Coast League. He and his family moved to Seattle in 1955. By 1969, he was sharing radio play-by-play with veteran Jimmy Dudley for the expansion Seattle Pilots of the American League.

In 1970, Harry Glickman, the general manager of the Portland Trailblazers, hired Schonely as an announcer, the organization's sixth employee. During his early years with the team, he helped promote the expansion franchise, whose popularity surged when the Blazers, led by Walton, won the NBA championship in 1977.

As the Blazer's play-by-play voice through 1998, Schonely called 2,252 games on radio or television. He missed only twenty-eight games, twenty-six of them in the 1982–1983 season when he had heart bypass surgery following a heart attack; otherwise, he was behind a microphone for every game through the team's first twenty-eight seasons. His signature phrase, "Rip City," became synonymous not with just the Blazers but also the city of Portland. Fans also parroted other Schonely phrases, including "lickety brindle up the middle," "climb the golden ladder," "crossing the equator," "bingo bango bongo," and "you've got to make your free throws."

Schonely divided his time between Oregon and Hawaii, based on his broadcasting schedule. He and Barbara had three more children, and the family owned a sporting goods store in Kaunakakai, Moloka'i. Barbara took over the business when they divorced in the late 1980s. Schonely was relieved of his play-by-play duties in 1998 and moved into a role fulfilling lesser responsibilities. The lack of explanation for the change confused fans, and many expressed anger toward the front office. Schonely eventually left the team in 2000 to call play-by-play for the Pacific Coast League's Portland Beavers, but the Blazers hired him back in 2003 as a goodwill ambassador and broadcaster emeritus. He took on voiceover broadcast duties, along with appearances at public events and before games with fans and sponsors, a role he filled until he retired at the end of the 2021–2022 season. He was the last of the original crew of employees hired more than a half-century earlier.

Schonely earned many honors, including the Curt Gowdy Media Award presented during the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame induction ceremonies in 2012. He was a three-time winner of the Oregon Sportscaster of the Year Award and is in the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame and both the Oregon and Washington Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame. The Oregon Association of Broadcasters honored him in 1998 by establishing an annual college scholarship in his name for aspiring sportscasters and sportswriters.

Through his career, Schonely emceed banquets, golf tournaments, and other events for charitable organizations. He was particularly devoted to the Providence Child Center for medically fragile children in northeast Portland. He was on the board of the Providence Child Center Foundation for

more than twenty years and helped raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for what became known as “Bill’s Kids.”

Bill Schonely died at age ninety-three on January 21, 2023. “We have lost one of a kind,” broadcaster Paul Linnman said during the memorial service. “There will never be another ‘Schonz,’ a true American original.” His wife Dorothy “Dottie” Schonely, who he had married in 1991, died a month later.

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