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The Brian Welty family of Galesburg who recently won a trip to Game 3 of the NBA Finals in Cleveland and lunch with ex-NBA great Bill Walton. From left, Shawna, Noah and Brian.

Weltys get traveling call

Internet contest sends family to Cleveland

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GALESBURG - Brian Welty couldn't believe his luck.

Just one week earlier, the Galesburg resident found out he had won tickets to Game Three of the NBA Finals. Now it was on game day, and Welty was sitting down with his family to eat lunch with NBA legend Bill Walton.

"Eat up you guys," Walton said to the Weltys. "This meal is on David Stern."

Brian forgot he had even entered a contest. Then a FedEx package showed up on his doorstep on June 2. That's when it all came flooding back to him.

After seeing a Win With Walton Sweepstakes contest advertised on NBA.com, Welty decided to enter. He didn't think he'd win, so he filled out some blanks online and forgot about it.

The FedEx package prompted Brian to call the NBA's New York City headquarters and they confirmed that he was the grand prize winner. Brian, his wife Shawna and his son Noah were going to Cleveland to watch the Cavaliers face the San Antonio Spurs.

Noah, a soon-to-be junior at Galesburg High School didn't know how to react to the news. "I was pretty excited. I didn't really believe it at first," he said.

Fortunately, the Welty family already had vacation plans that week to visit Brian's sister in Detroit. The original itinerary also included attending a Tigers baseball game and then a quick trip to Toronto to watch a Blue Jays game. Now they just had to squeeze in a two-day detour to Cleveland for their most unforgettable trip ever.

When the Weltys arrived in downtown Cleveland, they were booked at some swank digs. Their rooms on the concierge level of The Ritz-Carlton were priced at \$529 per night.

Their first celebrity sighting occurred as soon as the family walked through the main lobby doors.

"The first person I run into is NBA commissioner David Stern," Brian said. "We're going up the elevator and he had two secretary-looking women with him going over notes."

Since The Ritz-Carlton was only a short distance from The Q Arena, Brian asked the bellman if the Spurs might be staying at the hotel. "Sir, I'm not allowed to give out that information," the bellman said. "But in two hours, I think you're going to know."

Two hours later, Noah went down to the lobby and could see hordes of cameramen lined up across the street. Then a large bus pulled up in front of the hotel and the first person to emerge was Spurs defensive stopper Bruce Bowen.

"We just jumped on the elevator from the main lobby and I'm standing next to Tim Duncan and Manu Ginobili," Noah said. Even at 6-foot-2, Noah said he felt dwarfed by the 6-foot-11 Duncan.

The elevator stopped at the next lobby on the sixth floor, and the doors opened to reveal the entire Spurs roster. The Weltys even got a glimpse of Tony Parker with famous fiance Eva Longoria. Among the towering giant players, they said the petite Longoria looked even smaller in comparison.

Even with the constant rush of bodies all around, the Weltys managed to get one of the Spurs assistant coaches to take a picture of the family posing with Ginobili, Parker, Francisco Elson and Melvin Ely.

The unending parade of celebrities didn't stop. Later on, Brian was reading a newspaper in the lobby when a stranger approached and asked, "Hey, can I look at your sports page?" Brian recognized the inquiring man as Spurs general manager R.C. Buford, the man who constructed the team and initially begged head coach Gregg Popovich to draft Parker back in 2001.

The excitement of Monday's check-in was just the tip of the iceberg compared to Tuesday's festivities.

Hours before tip-off, a car service picked up the Weltys and drove them to the InterContinental Hotel. As they stepped into the dining area, they came face to face with the man whose name was

attached to the contest - Hall of Fame basketball player Bill Walton.

The foursome sat down for lunch and spent a full two hours in constant conversation. The family was immediately won over by the charismatic former center who won two NCAA championships with UCLA and two NBA titles with the Portland Trail Blazers and Boston Celtics. They gabbed about everything from music to former teammates to his legendary mentor, UCLA coach John Wooden.

"What a great guy," Brian said. "He was very relaxed and comfortable to be around. We talked a lot of basketball. But he talked about music for a long time."

After Walton retired from basketball, he took up playing the piano and spoke at length with Noah about music while also doling out sincere advice about his future.

"He has four sons and he took a real interest in Noah and gave him some real nice advice," Brian said. "It was real positive and not condescending at all. It was like he was his uncle."

Walton connected so well with the Welty clan, he gave Brian his cell phone number and e-mail address. He reminded Noah - a Lakers fan - to contact him when he got home so he could send him some Lakers memorabilia.

The 6-foot-11 Walton also signed a basketball for the family. But his generosity wasn't done. With the meal completed, he asked the question, "You guys want to meet Bill Russell?"

After a resounding yes, Walton guided the trio to a back table in the restaurant. There sat 11-time NBA champion Bill Russell, eating ice cream.

"He was such a great guy," Brian said. "Russell looks at us and said, 'You guys seem like such a great family. Why are you hanging out with Bill Walton?' You could tell Walton and Russell really got along."

Game Time At The Q

The main event was finally here. Cleveland was hosting its first ever NBA Finals game, and Noah said the city was just going nuts in anticipation.

At The Quicken Loans Arena, the Weltys got seats with a great view - 26 rows up and behind the Cleveland basket.

Halftime rolled around after a hotly contested first half that saw the Spurs use a late rally to take a 40-38 lead.

"Part of the contest was we were supposed to meet him at halftime," Brian said. "He was going to introduce us to Greg Oden."

The only bummer the whole trip was this girl from the NBA waited until right at halftime to bring us down instead of a couple minutes before. By the time we got down there, he was gone."

They might have missed their chance at Oden, but they ran into plenty of other famous faces along the way. NFL quarterback Peyton Manning and Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown. Ohio State football coach Jim Tressel. ESPN studio hosts Stuart Scott and Mike Wilbon. The list went on.

The rest of the game lived up to the hype. The Cavs trailed by three in the final seconds when James launched a 3-pointer while apparently being fouled by Bowen. But the ball clanged off the rim, no foul was called, and the Spurs won 75-72.

Looking back on the experience, the Weltys will never forget the two days in Cleveland.

"I'd say it far exceeded my expectations," Noah said. "I didn't expect to stay in the same hotel with the Spurs. Bill Walton was even nicer than I thought he'd be and meeting Bill Russell was cool."

Brian captured the feeling in once simple sentence. "It was a once in a lifetime thing."