

Hey, does the name Ulysses Lee Bridgeman, Jr. ring a bell with you? Probably not. Well, how about what people commonly called him, “Junior” Bridgeman...his being called out as a “junior” because he shared his dad’s name? Still, even with that, you probably haven’t heard of Junior Bridgeman and, even if you know the name, you may not remember why!

But you might remember Junior Bridgeman if you’ve been following the NBA pro basketball league for quite a while...or if you’ve lived in Louisville, Kentucky. That’s because Bridgeman was one of those people with what you might call *mid-level fame*, you know, not so many people knew him even though he was on the national stage for a couple of turns.

Here’s a pinnacle to start with: at the time of his death in March 2025, Junior Bridgeman was one of only four NBA pro basketball players reckoned by *Forbes* magazine to have become a billionaire. The other three billionaires are pretty much household names in America: LeBron James, Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan. The difference between those three and Bridgeman, of course, was that Junior Bridgeman was never a basketball *superstar*. And the extreme fame and accompanying earning powers of the other three highly competent players make Bridgeman kind of recede in glamour, right? But, still, *a billionaire!*

Even more impressive, in 2016, *Forbes* named Bridgeman as the fourth-highest-earning *retired* athlete from *any sport worldwide*—after world-renowned soccer star David Beckham...and legendary golfer Arnold Palmer...then basketball great Michael Jordan again. It’s a repeat: three world-famous athletes parlayed their fame, gifting, and hard work into billionaire status. *And we find Junior in a very elite four!*

So what did Bridgeman do after retiring from a strong but fairly obscure pro basketball career to finish with great wealth? Did he win the lottery? ...Inherit family money? ...Start a tech company? ...Invest millions that he earned playing basketball? No, Bridgeman took a much more inspirational path—inspirational and very aspirational in nature. That’s where a person aspires to do something and expects to perspire a whole lot to get there—and then does exactly that.

Here’s a sketch of the back story. Bridgeman was one of four kids with a dad who worked in a steel mill and moonlighted doing cleaning jobs to support his family. Turns out, Junior was athletic. Winning a state championship in basketball in high school, he went to the University of Louisville on scholarship, and then Louisville went to the famous “Final Four” of top teams in college basketball. Then Bridgeman was drafted into the NBA by the Los Angeles Lakers, then traded to the Milwaukee Bucks. Then he forged a 12-year career in the NBA from 1975 to 1987 as what’s called in basketball circles a great “sixth man.”

So, what’s a “sixth man” in basketball? That’s a special designation, not just a numerical slot. It’s the extremely valuable person on a team that is just behind the five starting players playing at the beginning of the game—the so-called *starters*. Of course, the players perceived as best are usually the five starters. But the structure of the game is that there will be key substitutes that really matter in the game, those who come into the game to perform in a role that’s crucial—yeah, right alongside the team’s superstars.

While Bridgeman never won the annual award for being the very best sixth man in NBA in any particular year, he was highly appreciated by savvy insiders. He played ten seasons for the Milwaukee Bucks and is one of the team’s all-time leading scorers. His ultimate honor? The Bucks retired Junior’s jersey.

What a great story of competence and playing a crucial role appreciated by all! But he was no Michael Jordan who pulled in many, many millions in pay and endorsements. Still, Junior was one of the elite 500-600 players in the world at any given time, entertaining crowds with great skill.

But after their retirement in their 20s and 30s, relatively few pro athletes in America are prepared for their next steps. A good number lose any significant money they might have accumulated. Some find ways to meaningfully coach or teach. But as we have seen, very, very few become billionaires, especially someone like Junior Bridgeman whose fame upon retirement was insufficient to leverage into big money like Arnold Palmer and Michael Jordan did.

So, what happened? Well, Bridgeman was paying attention while he had served as President of the NBA Players Association. That's where he helped negotiate with owners on behalf of players. And he astutely noticed that, during breaks, players would talk about basketball while owners would talk about business!

But here's the core of what happened. As a player, Bridgeman had joined the very successful supply chain of entertainment called the NBA and, through a whole lot of hard work, he personally played his "sixth-man" role in the NBA very well. Though not earning superstar-level pay, he saved his money. And remember, all the pro players in that day earned far less from playing pro sports than they do today.

Nevertheless, by the time of his retirement from the NBA in 1987, Junior had saved \$750,000. That was big money for the son of a steel mill worker who also worked cleaning jobs to feed his family. And Junior used his hard-earned savings to buy ownership into five Wendy's franchises. Yeah, \$750,000 worth.

But here's the key, Bridgeman did more than put his life savings to work—he himself went to work at learning the fast food business, both by attending Wendy's boot-camp training and spending many long hours at his franchises, from making burgers and fries to cleaning bathrooms. Junior reveled in hiring unskilled teenagers and former convicts he would sometimes bail out of jail. He said that it all simply was a people business. The crucial truth is, for decades *Bridgeman invested in both franchises and people*.

Turns out, after about three decades in the restaurant business, Bridgeman owned hundreds of Wendy's restaurants as well as a large number of Chili's, Golden Corrals, Perkins, and a host of other brands. Junior then turned to being a Coke bottler just for the challenge of it, he said, scaling his new venture with Coke to additional states and Canada.

Here's the thing. Junior Bridgeman became a fantastic entrepreneur within key food-based supply chains like Wendy's and Coca-Cola, plugging into those supply chains by performing at NBA-levels of productivity and gains for the very large companies needing highly-reliable supply-chain partners. And in order to do that well, he reached down to complete the supply chain with teenagers who wanted a first chance and convicts who wanted a second chance.

This is a classic story. When countries with free markets allow relationships to operate fluidly in rather complex yet seemingly hidden supply chains, highly-motivated people committed to excellence and hard work like Junior Bridgeman can thrive. Yeah, sometimes all the way to billionaire status!

In the years after the NBA journey, Bridgeman lived in Louisville, Kentucky, where we recall he had helped take the city's namesake University of Louisville to the Final Four in Division I college basketball. Ties forged like that run deep, so Junior was highly involved in nonprofit institutions in the city for years. In fact, Bridgeman died of cardiac arrest while participating in a fundraising luncheon in Louisville. A reported 16,000 people watched his funeral online. Bridgeman was survived by his wife and three hardworking children, each of whom now leads a Bridgeman-owned business. That's an unsurprising legacy of a man like Junior Bridgeman, someone dedicated to making every place that he invested in and labored in better.

When I heard of Junior Bridgeman's passing and found Jon Mooallem's well-written obituary in the *Wall Street Journal* that filled in some facts about the very story I've told today, I dug deeper to find that Junior Bridgeman was indeed a serious Christian in a vibrant church. That's really no surprise at all. You see, serious believers plug in to whatever supply chain role they are appointed to by God in life—in their workplace, their family, their church, their community. Junior Bridgeman fulfilled greatness by plugging in to existing supply chains and exquisitely performing his unique roles to make each supply chain he participated in more successful—from his family...to the NBA...to Wendy's...to his community...to God's Kingdom. Yes, like every serious Christian...an ambassador for Christ and His Kingdom! (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Here's the point. Ranging from Junior Bridgeman to you and me, God's will is that all believers steward their lives well, working intentionally and diligently in all facets of their lives. So we must say this: well done, Mr. Bridgeman. You were very wealthy in more ways than one!

A&A: Application & Action

1. What part of the Junior Bridgeman story outlined in the episode did you find most inspiring? Discuss.
2. Would you aspire to work long, long days at a lowly new vocation that included slinging burgers and cleaning bathrooms after having your jersey retired by an NBA team? Or would you tend to decline such an opportunity, feeling entitled to rest on your previous laurels? Discuss.
3. Think about Junior Bridgeman for a moment or two. What is your key takeaway that you will actually change or enhance in your life? Share.