



Ex-NBAer Grant, actor Fox join forces to battle Parkinson's

By David Aldridge
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Brian Grant, who retired from the NBA in 2006, was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in January. Rocky Widner/NBAE via Getty Images

There's a lot to talk about this week, from the Mavericks' surge to the Hawks' maintaining their rise into the top five, to the Hornets starting over again with two rookies, to the Knicks' not-so-heavy reasoning for passing on Allen Iverson, to continuing misery in the Swamp for the Nets. But we should start, this week, with your Blackberry. Or Droid. Or iPhone. Whatever you've got.

If you're like me, you have not only become addicted to the various apps and features on your PDAs, you have changed how you process and disseminate information because of them. You read newspapers and magazines on them; you check your e-mail on them; you watch movies and streaming videos on them; you text your friends and loved ones on them; you work out with them; you might even still make phone calls on them. You check how your fantasy team is doing on them and you get the latest scores on them and you download and take pictures on them. Basically, you live your life on them.

Michael J. Fox does none of this. He has no cell phone. No Blackberry. Nothing

"My wife thinks I'm a Luddite," Fox said Friday afternoon, in a hotel on the Upper West Side, and if you take more than a moment to think about it, you think, *Of course, he doesn't*. Hands that tremor make an iPhone impenetrable; connections and possibilities lost on a man that can't control the spasms long enough to be able to push the buttons and press the icons.

Brian Grant, who was sitting next to Fox, has this to look forward to.

Grant still has an iPhone. I know because it started chirping just as Fox, the Emmy Award-winning, immensely popular and beloved actor, was in the middle of explaining how his Michael J. Fox Foundation has raised, and distributed, \$150 million since its inception in 2000 for research and for clinical trials looking for a cure for Parkinson's Disease. The neurological disorder attacks the body's

central nervous system, slowly but thoroughly, causing symptomatic tremors in the hands, arms and legs, rigidity throughout the body and impairing the quality of speech. It is a disorder that has no known cure, impacting the famous -- Muhammad Ali, former Attorney General Janet Reno and boxing trainer Freddie Roach all have some version of it -- and the anonymous.

Grant, who played 12 rugged NBA seasons for the Kings, Blazers, Heat, Lakers and Suns, who threw his 250 pounds into nightly battle with power forwards often taller and usually thicker than he, has all that to look forward to. For now, only his hands shake, because he is a relative newcomer to this nightmare, having been diagnosed with "early onset" Parkinson's last January. At 37, it has thrown his life into a tailspin from which he is only now starting to recover.

His friendship with Fox -- perhaps one of the most famous people living with Parkinson's -- has provided Grant with a compass, some sense of direction of what to do with his new life.

They first spoke on the phone, just days after Grant was diagnosed in January. They became fast friends, unlikely brothers in a fraternity. Indeed, Grant was in New York to attend Fox's major fundraising gala, *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Cure Parkinson's*, this past Saturday.

"I was starstruck," Grant recalled of that first conversation. "I'm just going to put it out there. I mean, *Back to the Future*, *Teen Wolf*, everything. As soon as I heard his voice, I was like, wow, that's Michael J. Fox calling. I didn't know what we were going to speak about. I didn't know what it was going to be ..."

"We had a long conversation," Fox interjects.

"A long conversation," Grant says. "But it was a real conversation, just as if we were behind closed doors and we're talking and we're being real with one another. That's the thing that I'm finding out about this young man. He's very real. He's very optimistic. And he gives everyone hope, especially people with Parkinson's. He's given me tremendous hope, especially with not only just dealing with Parkinson's, but dealing with other issues, being able to just pick myself up and realize that, hey, it's just another battle, just like going out on the court and battling Shaq for a night."

"Just life in the paint," Fox says, and damned if you're not thinking the same thing Grant was: *That's Marty McFly over there.*

Today, Fox carries his burden with humor, with detailed knowledge of both the body and the medical system with which he has been dealing for 18 years. Diagnosed in 1991 while at the top of his game, the future star of the hit sitcom *Spin City* hid his ailment for seven years, fearful that if he went public, he'd no longer be able to make people laugh. How could people think he was funny if they knew he was sick? Like Grant, he had made a living with his body. Fox used his body to portray all the emotions of humanity at a level few in his profession reached. And, now, at such a young age, that body began to betray him. So he knew what Grant was going through.



Brian Grant made a name for himself in the NBA as a bruising power forward with Sacramento, Portland, Miami, the L.A. Lakers and Phoenix.
Donald Miralle/NBAE via Getty Images

"You know, for all my talk about picking yourself up and moving on and opening new doors and all that stuff, I mean, I sincerely believe that, but I don't discount the fact that, I mean, it's a shocker," Fox says. "Especially someone who's young, an athlete, used to having their body do extraordinary things at a high level. And then you realize you don't have control. Life is geared toward controlling your movements, controlling what you do, having some kind of authority, physical authority, over how you perform."

Grant had been a premier power forward in the late 1990s with the Blazers, earning a mega-contract from Portland for \$86 million in what became a sign-and-trade with the Heat. (Ironically, the championship-level team that Pat Riley built in Miami, with Grant, Anthony Mason and Alonzo Mourning as its physical centerpiece, never got off the ground because of another life-threatening disorder -- Mourning's kidney disease.) Grant moved to center for the Heat and did fine, but injuries ultimately caught up with him, and he was a throw-in piece in the trade that sent Shaquille O'Neal to Miami for Caron Butler and Lamar Odom in 2004.

Grant finished playing in 2006, after one last season in Phoenix, ready to live the high life of retirement back in Miami. But he realized he didn't like the scene as much as he thought, and that his family would be better off back in Portland. He moved everyone back to the Pacific Northwest, and soon, his kids and wife were happily living life. But he wasn't.

"I had Vinny Del Negro tell me that all players go through some form of depression, or letdown, after their career is over," Grant said. "So once I retired, and I got hit with the heavy bout of depression, I just thought it was because I had retired. I thought it was strictly because I retired. But in hindsight, if I look back, I quit exercising, I had quit doing the things that had kept my body so active ... now that I had come to a total stop in my career and had time to think and had time to let things settle down, the depression just sank in."

Athletes believe they are bulletproof, that nothing can rock their world. So Grant did not believe anything was wrong with him -- and did not know that depression is a well-known precursor for the onset of Parkinson's. The disease impacts the part of the brain that produces serotonin, a chemical that has been linked to depression, and attacks the frontal lobe of the brain, which regulates mood.

"I did not want to admit, for eight months, that I was depressed," Grant said. "As much as my wife tried to get me to go see someone, friends tried to get me to see someone. I was in total denial. I was like, 'I can't be depressed.' When I knew, 'Come on, B, you're on that couch eight hours a day. Something's not right.' "

A series of tests conducted over several months finally connected the hand tremors and depression, gave it all a name. Grant is still struggling with the implications, and so is his family.

"I think I'm still in this phase where I realize I actually have it, but at times, I think this is as far as it's going to get, or this is as far as it's going to go," Grant said. "I think I'm beyond the point of wondering if I have it or not. I think I have it. But it's still surreal a little bit. I'm beginning to look at it more as a gift, as all these doors are opening up, being able to meet Michael J. Fox, the Alis, being able to make a difference doing something."

Grant initially was thinking of starting a fundraising foundation. But he quickly realized that Fox was already doing that, and had been for almost a decade. The Fox Foundation tries to fill in the gaps where government and other industry funds fall short, bankrolling experimental or high-risk programs that can't get money elsewhere. (Sort of like what the reclusive billionaire J.R. Hadden did in the book *Contact*.) It's the largest private-funding resource for Parkinson's research in the world, bringing scientists and advisors together to go through 800 grant proposals a year.

Unlike many other foundations, the Fox Foundation doesn't aggregate the money it raises into a giant pool, keeping money to dole out here or there. As soon as the money comes in, it goes right back out, to

whatever research or clinical trial the Foundation deems worthy.

"I'm not a banker," Fox said. "I didn't want to start a bank. I wanted to identify the best research and get the money in the hands of those researchers as fast as possible ... it's very hard for scientists to get grants, to get grant money. It's a very long process. A lot of times, institutions, like the government, can get a grant to prove that the world is round. Because they know it's round, and so they know they're going to get a good result. So they'll happily give you that grant. If you want to prove something a little trickier, it gets more complicated. When it comes to high-risk, that's a niche we wanted to fit. We wanted to fill the niche of people that were going to take chances on new kinds of research, a wide variety of research endeavors."

When Grant came to New York earlier this year to tour the Foundation's headquarters, he decided that instead of starting his own, competing foundation, he would partner with Fox.

"The things that they're doing with their panel of scientists, people who sit on their board ... it was almost overwhelming," Grant says. "It was something you could see had been built over time, and with a lot of careful thinking and thought. That's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a part of something that was already there. Because I really feel if a cure is found, it's going to be through the grants that go through the Foundation. I really believe that. And it gives me hope to work alongside him."

You'll see more from our talk in a companion piece for NBA TV and NBA.com that will run early next month. It was an inspiring afternoon, seeing these two men forthrightly dealing, in public, with something that's so very private.