



# Profile: Bill Callaham

*Prolific trial lawyer made a bold jump from the defense side – and never looked back*

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

There are many things about Bill Callaham that scream “Renaissance man,” and yet he is the epitome of the traditional blood-sweat-and-tears trial lawyer.

Over a 40-year career, Callaham has tried more than 150 cases to verdict, subscribing to an old-fashioned, work-your-tail-off philosophy. But for the first half of his career, he applied that steady and fearless work ethic *against* the plaintiffs’ bar – and with resounding success – as an insurance defense attorney.

Suffice it to say, it’s not uncommon for civil trial attorneys to switch sides – nor is it easy. But to make such a conversion usually requires some sort of transition period – picking up a plaintiffs’ case here and there while scaling back on the defense side of the practice. Not so for Callaham.

“For me, one day I was doing 100 percent defense work, and the next day I was doing 100 percent plaintiffs’ work,” said Callaham, currently a senior partner with Wilcoxon Callaham of Sacramento. “There was no transition or easing into it – it was literally overnight. But it was the best move I ever made.

“I told people who asked, if I tried a case on the defense side and I got a great result and saved an insurance company a million dollars or something, I’d get a pat on the back,” Callaham continued. “But somebody, maybe someone who was legitimately injured, walked away with nothing because I did such a great job – maybe even in a case that I didn’t deserve to win. On the plaintiffs’ side, when you get a great result for somebody, you change their life forever, and it just gives you a better feeling inside to do that.

“You don’t get a warm, cozy feeling inside for saving an insurance company a



Callaham

bunch of money.”

To make it even more intriguing, Callaham joined a plaintiffs’ firm that had been one of his biggest adversaries – Dreyer Babich – and while

the move itself was swift, Callaham said he had been pondering the decision for some time. “They had talked to me about switching over, and I thought about it for a while,” he said. “We probably talked it over for about a year or two, and I finally said ‘it’s time’, and we made the switch. And I’ve never looked back.”

## Starting anew

Indeed, Callaham found plaintiffs’ work far more rewarding, an opportunity with each case to have a profound effect on a person’s life and well-being. For 17 years, he helped Dreyer Babich grow into one of the largest plaintiffs’ firms in Northern California, achieving numerous multimillion-dollar verdicts and settlements in areas including medical malpractice, product liability, catastrophic injury and wrongful death. He continues to do so in his present capacity with partner Daniel Wilcoxon.

Along the way, Callaham has become quite the decorated trial specialist. He’s been a member of ABOTA since 1984, having served as the Sacramento chapter president and as the national president for a year in 2008. He’s also a member of three of the most exclusive trial lawyer organizations in existence: the American College of Trial Lawyers, the International Academy of Trial Lawyers and the International Society of Barristers.

Not bad for someone who essentially had to start anew halfway through his career.

“I’ve been doing this for about 40 years now, and I learn something every time I try a case,” Callaham said. “I always try to do better. I do a fair amount of teaching to young trial lawyers, but I learn things from them all the time. Everything I do I’m looking to improve – jury selection, addressing a jury, opening or closing, examining witnesses – everything. When you get to the point where you think you’ve got it all figured out, it’s time to retire.”

## Careers reborn

Law was not even on Callaham’s radar as he grew up in San Diego. He earned his undergraduate degree at nearby San Diego State University in mechanical engineering and took a job as an engineer for an aircraft company based in South Florida, regretting the decision almost immediately. He didn’t like anything about Florida: didn’t like the job; didn’t like being an engineer. Soon, he was looking for a way to get back to California.

A friend in Florida suggested he go to law school.

“I had no idea why that would be a good idea. I didn’t know any lawyers; nobody in my family had ever been a lawyer. But I started thinking about it,” Callaham recalled. “I thought I’d give it a try. So I took the law school admissions test and applied to every law school in California because all I wanted to do was get back to California. I got accepted at McGeorge in Sacramento, moved back and started law school – and never looked back.”

Even then, after graduating from law school, Callaham wasn’t sure what area of the law he would pursue. His first thoughts, because of his engineering background, veered toward patent law.



But the first job he landed out of law school was at an insurance defense firm in Oakland, getting his feet wet on products liability and various other insurance defense cases.

He soon moved back to Sacramento to partner with another insurance defense attorney, helping build a “significant” practice in the state capital. That’s when Callaham started trying cases in earnest – about six to eight trials a year – and decided it was what he really wanted to do. He tried more than 100 cases to verdict over about 18 years on the defense side.

Then came time for the big move.

Callaham said he had grown increasingly disenchanted with the direction insurance defense law had taken. The good relationships he’d had with claims people that knew the business – knew a good case, knew a bad case, knew which ones to settle and which ones to try and trusted their defense counsel – began changing, he said.

“I think it was around the time insurance companies were bringing in outside auditors to audit bills, complaining about their defense attorneys’ charges, trying to control what experts could be hired, which copy services and court reporters could be used and those kinds of things,” Callaham said. “I liked doing things my way and getting the best results for my clients, whom I always considered to be whoever the insured was, not the insurance company itself. And I just didn’t like the trend, didn’t like the way things were going.”

### **The consummate pro**

On the plaintiffs’ side, Callaham soon discovered there was an entirely

different approach he would need to subscribe to when preparing a case for trial. As a defense attorney, he had been able to simply sit back, see how his opponent presented their case and react. Now, the onus is on him.

“I tell people you truly do have to work harder, be more creative and imaginative than on the defense side,” Callaham said. “It’s easier in a lot of ways to be a defense lawyer because you can wait and see what the theories are and just try to pick them apart, shoot them down, be defensive about things. But on the plaintiffs’ side, you have to take a more aggressive approach.”

Callaham, for one, does not shy away from the extra work. He believes preparation is one of his main strengths, along with developing a good rapport with juries. He said it’s important to him to be able to make juries understand difficult concepts without talking down to them, and the way he carries himself usually sets the tone for his case. “I try to be very sincere and credible, as well as civil,” he said. “I think way too many lawyers lose sight of the fact that it’s a profession and that lawyers don’t have the greatest reputations, and oftentimes it’s for very good reason. I always try to be civil and professional toward witnesses and my adversaries and everybody in the courtroom. I pride myself on that.”

### **Time for “crazy”**

When the time comes to unwind, Callaham holds back nothing. In his so-called leisure, he chooses “mostly crazy” things, he said – bungee jumping, skydiving, unicycle riding, to name a few. Most recently, he has taken up, of all things,

bullfighting. And believe it or not, it’s kind of work-related.

ABOTA has its international convention this year in Spain, Callaham explained, and he was presented a challenge of sorts. “This year’s president asked me last year if I wanted to fight a bull when we’re there, and I said, ‘Sure.’ Then I thought getting a little instruction might be a good idea,” Callaham said. “I got online and looked around and found a professional bullfighting school in San Diego and decided to take some lessons. So I did that last month. It was quite an experience.”

To be sure, Callaham has managed to survive and thrive through the most extreme of circumstances, no matter the venue. Which might be a good reason to heed his advice. This is what he has to offer young, aspiring trial attorneys:

“I would encourage them to do anything they could to spend time in the courtroom – spend time watching, spend time working with somebody in trial. Go through the experience of seeing how to prepare, how to work up a case, prepare witnesses and do it all.

“And mainly recognize that it takes an incredible amount of work. You can’t go in and wing it; you can’t go in and figure you’re going to do well because you have good abilities – it takes a lot of time and a lot of hard work. I don’t care how smart you are or what kinds of grades you got in law school, if you’re not willing to work hard and put in the time, you’re not going to reach the top. It just can’t be done.”

*Stephen Ellison is a freelance writer based in San Jose. Contact him at [ssjellison@aol.com](mailto:ssjellison@aol.com).*