

MY LITTLE TOWN

Though some twenty-five years ago, the memories that I have of upstate New York still have such piercing intensity...

I began high school in 1968, the year of the student riots and strikes in Paris, France, yet, in my isolation, those events, and the rest of the super-mythical Sixties, were as if occurring in another universe. My hometown was a small, depressed rural town. Most of my classmates were the sons and daughters of hard-working, struggling-not-to-go-under, farming families. Many had been further reduced to “weekenders” with the Eisenhower-era *social engineering* arrival of an IBM *think tank*.; the Great Corporate Father had acquiesced to the wish to escape into some kind of pastoral fantasy of *city folk* like my foster-family. So not only had these new, mostly urban arrivals doubled the size of the town—greatly changing its cultural makeup—but too, many of the original population of a couple thousand had found work in the accompanying chipboard manufacturing plant.

The hubbub beginning of my tenth grade I decided—having shot up to 6’2”—that I was going to play basketball for our school team. I wheedled out of my folks a hoop and net from the mail-order catalog of Sears & Roebuck, my annual fall clothing lifeline as well, and, out of the various pieces of scrap lumber haven fallen about our once-functional farm, mounted the hoop on a backboard and raised it onto a wooden platform. In the middle of the hayfield that, after the summer cuttings by neighboring farmers, doubled as my archery range.

Given the fall chill the ball of course would not bounce. The act of shooting, too, was made difficult when the frosts caused moisture to glaze up the ball. My practice time was the steadily diminishing light remaining after my hour-plus ride home on the Football players team bus; after zig-zagging through the district’s dilapidated farms—most acrid with ammonia from chicken manure—our driver Mr. Whalen would hand crank the door open, bid me, the last one, a *good night* and head back to the bus garage...

When the oak’s brilliant red and gold plumage had faded into darkness for my ride home Basketball season had arrived. Our coach was the inimitable Mr. Murphy—not the drinking kind of Irish but an ex-Marine drill sergeant and *here to tell you all about it*.

Our first practice Mr. Murphy—failure to address him as *Mister* got you ten wind sprints right away—held a basketball in his hands and said, “Gentlemen, this is the ball. Take a good long look, as you men won’t be seeing another for two weeks.” No smile broke his face, no sardonic grin, just straightforward imparting of *the news*.

After all these years, I’m one of the few proud ones who was able to say, *At least I didn’t puke my guts*...We did nothing but conditioning exercises for two-and-one-half hours, with

pathetically short wind breaks, during which absolutely nothing but breathing hard and harsh was allowed, as the theory was that water would bloat us and make us sick.

Most of those trying out for the team dropped, as the locals had a habit of saying, *like flies on manure*. Primary culprit was the dreaded wind sprints, *gentlemen!...toes touch the foul line, turn back to the baseline, toes touch the mid court line, turn back to the baseline, toes touch the over-and-back line, turn back to the baseline, toes touch the opposite foul line, turn back to the baseline, toes touch the three-feet line, turn back to the baseline, toes touch the far baseline, turn back and finish baseline...last one in the group runs with the next...*

Or if you missed a line with your toes—or if Mr. Murphy thought you needed an *attitude correction*—*you're up again son...Now!*

So engrained were the protocols of the drill routine into my consciousness that just three years later, when I tried out for the State University of New York at Buffalo team as a freshman (all teams together) I had a coach tell us, the first day, to run *the weave* and everybody but me, with practiced ease, lined up to run the drill...

I'd already felt a bit intimidated, as most of the kids were from New York City—a tight clique that already knew and had played against each; furthermore, my flat, neutral accent gave me away as a despised *upstater* (said like *hinterlands*).

As my turn among the 100 or so assembled approached, my brain went on standby; I asked, “Coach, how exactly do you want me to run?”

Immediate raucous laughter broke through the ranks.

Coach said, “The weave, son. You never did this drill in High School?”

“No sir,” I blurted. “Our coach was long on windsprints and conditioning.”

With a slightly incredulous look on his face, he then told me, “Pass, cut outside and around; receive inside, take a dribble, turn and hit the cutter, continue, and, if you're in the position, take the lay-up. Got it?”

I said *Yes* and, managing to calm myself, ran the drill. Towards the end of the court I could see that I'd be doing the lay-up so I mentally readied for a show-off dunk (my growth had continued to 6'4", 185 pounds with weight training).

Then, with a look in his eyes that I'll never forget—an icy-blue spiraling of sorts—a beefy, crew-cut, football player deliberately stumbled into me with a forearm shiver. So, just as I'd begun focusing on my redeeming slam-dunk, I was instead knocked asprawl to the shiny wood...

I was used to this kind of hostility. My senior year in High School I'd gone from looking, in my yearbook picture, like the president of the Young Republican's Club to having (perhaps) become

the Fifth *Beatle*—stodgy, black-framed glasses replaced by cool new wireframes, my short *Princeton* haircut grown out as long wavy hair...Though white and straight, I was thus tagged in my rural area as *Spearchucker*--some players even took to hitting me with some harsh elbows and chuckling, *Hungawa*, which they mispronounced as Swahili for *gotcha* ; when my *long-haired hip-pii freak* friends and I went to the few clubs playing “our music,” we were often in danger of being jumped by the greaser gangs—always nearby, mulling around the fast-food joints looking for some female *hawg* banging.

So, that tryout day, I picked myself up off the floor and stayed cool. Nobody said anything.

Upon arriving to the next day’s practice, my gut tightening, I checked the cut list. My name wasn’t there...

I threw myself into the workouts, recovering my poise, shining on defense when I picked clean a couple of the hotshots...At week’s end, the Coach and an assistant motioned me over after practice.

Where’d you go to High School, son? the Coach asked, telling me, too, that he’d never heard of a Coach that didn’t run the weave. I told him the school was tiny, “Class C,” but that we’d been a powerhouse in the State Sectionals. He chuckled and told me that I was the best natural defender he’d ever seen, and *that’s something you just can’t teach, you either have it or you don’t*...I was to report for special weight raining session to an assistant and start eating *10,000 calories a day, son...*

Riding a bus, a big yellow “Blue Bird” school bus, on our way to *Cincinnati*, a tiny little town the farthest distance from my little high school in our athletic conference, almost to *Syracuse*. Scrunched into the dark green seat, smelling of new car—bus #50, brand new, the biggest in our fleet, even equipped (the only one) with a cassette tape deck...My knees pebbling from the protuberated metal seat back directly before me as I awaited my music...(Mr. Whalen, our driver, had said he’d play the cassette I’d brought as soon as we got rolling; our new coach, Mr. Ryder, had said we could listen to music as long as we won...)

Then the plaintive flute and lamenting voices of “Simon and Garfunkel,”...I’d rather be a sparrow than a snail...Yes I would.... If I only could...I surely would...”

As I quietly sang along, lying low in the seat, a teammate popped his head over the seat in front of me. “Tom, you are singing. Is this the tape you said you were going to bring?” Joey, our good-natured off-guard, my best ally on the team.

“Yeah,” I said, made self-conscious. Joey and I usually played one-on-one to warm up before practice; he was the only teammate who’d still play me, as I always won and the others grumbled about my taking everything too seriously.

I mumbled something to him about the singing loosening me up for the game; his broad-faced easy grin only grew wider...

“La-dee-dah” crashed the sounds of the new song’s chorus, as the duo sang of a “boxer in the clearing all alone...la-dee-dah-da-dah-da-da-la-dee-da-da-dah...”

At the school we were to play awaited my old Boy Scout summer camp friend Jeff. For both of us, the month that we’d spend along the shores of Cayuga Lake as young boys was just the escape we needed. Both of our families qualified as what is now called “dysfunctional,” but in those days that wasn’t considered “the norm,” like now; most adults we encountered—never talking about one’s homefront difficulties—truly wished to see one succeed. Just as at my first winter campout, when, a mere lad of eleven, I went out with my patrol into a 13-degree-below-zero snowfall and returned after the weekend—guided by our kindly Scoutmaster Mr. Sibley in such manhood matters as building a pine branch lean-to—I’d gush Neat!

Camp was the same way—shale creek-beds, long ago cut by glaciers, to explore, the archery rang., waterfront and sailboats. Thick green Army “surplus” tents, treated with moisture repellent that smelled strangely when warmed by the sun, that were erected on wooden platforms equipped with four metal-tubed bunks—the kind one always had to check to see if a prankster had set the ends hanging on platform edge for a bang of a surprise...All kinds of “merit badges” to earn that were actually a lot of fun...

I was one of the youngest in our state to earn the highest rank—Eagle Scout. I never missed a Monday night meeting; held in the basement of the large, made beautiful with stained glass windows, Presbyterian Church, it was where I attended Sunday School as well. We were in transition, from bubbling kids rushing to the nearby Italian Deli for Cream sodas and licorice to more measured young adults. Community Service was not only a required merit badge but too a quality now expected of us...

As such I became the Flower Power Patrol Leader for my local troop—despite the adult leaders’ trepidation at the choice of name—then the Owl Patrol Leader for the 13th World Jamboree, an international gathering in Japan, where we camped for a month, at the base of Fujijama...

At our game, on the sidelines, pregame, I managed to talk a bit with Jeff. We mostly joked about how we almost became the first Boy Scouts “86’ed” from a World Jamboree—you see, we were both 16 and a wee bit rambunctious, so one night we scaled the Tokyo Olympic compound’s fence—after tossing over bags with out “civilian gear”—and went exploring in the night districts; at 6’3" we were a good foot above the crowds milling about us...The few places we wandered into had no difficulty with serving us beer; fascinated local prostitutes fed us sake as well... Soon we were walking about miles away from our compound...Some curious locals—down one of those very clean residential streets (there was no litter in Tokyo anywhere)—ventured “Hello” to us, and, trading bits and pieces of language back and forth, we managed to talk well into the morning...Our new hosts even called a cab for us and pre-paid the driver—with a wagging admonition to him not to cheat us...

Upon our return, however, not more than fifty feet after rescaling the fence, two security guards nailed us. Our absence had been noticed during bed-checks, we were hauled off to a high-level interrogation...

*C*ourtside, that night in Cincinnati, the memory—as well as the flush of glee at how neither of us “cracked” in our separate interrogations—brought such laughter that each of our Coaches frowned our way, each motioning for us to rejoin the team warm-ups...

During the game I exploded into action. By halftime I had 18 points, most of our production and pretty good given the slow pace of our games—patterned offense, deliberate play.

In the locker room our Coach was upset—despite our double-digit lead—and was holding forth like a country preacher “You all think you’ve got this game won; well I’ve got news for you: only one man is playing with intensity and carrying the load for the rest of you and that’s Tom.”

His words surprised me as much as they did Joey, sitting next to me on the uncomfortably narrow wooden benches. I was known as the team rebel and shunned for my aloofness...Because I’d refused to close crop my long, wavy “hip-pie freak” hair—in those days we even had to wear suits and ties to away games—I was demoted from starter to having to enter the game, 2nd and 4th quarters, and save their butts...I would sit a good six feet or so down from the others at the very end of the bench...Coach would get furious with, after saying, “Noonan, get in there,” he’d have to shout it down the bench at me...Of course the locals would laugh, upsetting him more...

In fact later that season I would quit the team, allegedly over my refusal to cut my hair—but in reality over what I felt was shabby treatment for the team’s best producer. My specialty was those all important “boards” or “rebounds” of missed shots; when we were allowed to open things up, my snagging and whipping out the outlet pass often meant an easy bucket on the other end...

Something that I could not help but notice lacking when I watched—from the stands, as a spectator—our team lose in the state sectionals to a team we’d beaten when I was still playing earlier in the season. Enraged, our Coach punched Joey in the locker room after the loss—yelling at him, “I don’t want to see you ever hanging out with that traitor out there again!”

And what I did not know at that time were two developments of major import. Just up the road from where we were playing was Syracuse University—with a new Head coach, Jim Boeheim, who’d been hired from a junior college close to my little town. The other matter was that my real parents—a matter unknown to me then—were sitting in the stands, right next to Coach-to-be Boeheim...

That night, all that mattered to me—what I remember still—is that sheer immediacy that just seems to go on and on... Just like the when I ran those most-difficult-to-master 120-yard High Hurdles for Varsity Track season. That following spring, after a half-dozen races in which I’d lost concentration and broken stride, I finally ran a perfect race. My body, made awkward by growing leaps and bounds, had finally seemed to settle, for a while, into place. We were at our arch-rival Spencer Van-Etten, and, before my race, were behind. My three strides over the ten yards between hurdles had never before found such degree and order as I glided over each black-

and-white striped barrier; I was bereft of time, space, distance—even sound. My time, 15.6 seconds, was a school record—still not beaten—though some grumbled that it was “Wind-aided” and therefore didn’t count.

The first of many times since I’ve found some kind of grace, that state of just *being*. On the court, not only becoming beyond an opponent’s anticipation but too alive with this panoramic awareness expanding and sharpening details with astoundingly subtle clarity. No end, no beginning...

Every once in a while some guttural roar from the crowd or screech of sneakers making a sudden halt. Other than those interruptions, one long smooth flow. Hands *arched around the ball with fingertips as points of light guiding the shot... all net...*

Those hoop drills that our Coach had us do, over and over again in practice, came to life that night. One in particular—where you had to drive to the hoop, from one sideline first, then the other, and, at about eight feet from the hoop, take off, twist to the right around one stationary teammate, then twist to the left around the other positioned teammate...finishing with a full extension of the ball hand to gently make the hoop...

Driving through the lane that game, threading the defenders, seemed effortless. As a *big man* I was not expected to shoot the ball—especially in our patterned offense, where the other low post man and myself would cut to the high post/ shooting guard area on either side only for the sake of making a pass to the cutter down the middle. But the other team had started out collapsing and leaving me open, so I’d taken the shot, as we’d been instructed, to draw out the defenders and free the lane. When they came out on me I spontaneously went into the drive...That sudden half-step quicker, no matter who defended...

So at half-time that night I’d been very surprised not to be criticized by Coach Ryder. He had a habit of calling “time-out” during our games for the express purpose of hitting a *numbskull* over the head with a clipboard for being a *hot dog*. Joey was his favorite target—the clipboard often breaking, causing him to reach for a court-side stack of about a dozen reserves he always brought.

When we took the court again, after our warm-up shots, I readied myself to win the jump ball tap. I never lost, our Assistant Coach had taught me to start really low in a cat’s crouch before springing, then reaching to flick the ball at the last moment to one of my guards I’d sense behind me.

The crowd booed me as I entered the tap circle. I was used to this treatment, as well; for holding a rival star to just two buckets the whole game an opposing coach, quoted in our local paper, termed me, *The Animal*. He swore, in print, that they kept me in a cage all pre-game week and fed me raw meat.

On offense I was confronted with a “box-and-one.” One defender was assigned to me, man-to-man, wherever I went, while the rest played a rectangular zone. I was playing “team ball,” making my passes in our set plays disguised and crisp...

Yet, at one point, my teammates not hitting, our point guard dribbled down towards the baseline corner where I was posted for the play we were supposed to run, and swung a half-pivot for screening my defender, tossed me the ball and implored me to *shoot!*...One of my only two buckets that half.

Years later now, I still have such perfect memory of that moment...You see, I never even got to meet Coach Boeheim—let alone my real parents—the matter tossed away by my foster father, a mean drunk who muttered over the phone to Boeheim something about *the kid's not worth your effort* and forbade him from contacting me—the “rules” in those maybe more ethical days followed very strictly...

The old man had tried the same stunt with my Varsity Track coach in High School. My track Coach, a devout Catholic who believed heavily in the concept that not living up to your potential was a sin against God, had shown up at his place of work, and—not intimidated by all the suits and ties in the old man's engineering department—had picked him up and put him against the wall, saying, *Your kid's got God-given talent and he's going out for my team, understand?*

These matters all gone in the swirl of memory...*would have's* and *could have's* and *should have's* all signifying *nothing* now...

I still play hoop, even at age 43. My right leg aches a bit from the compression plate I still have from a career-ending accident my college freshman summer...

I was riding a motorcycle from my one job as a lifeguard to swing-shift at the IBM circuit-board manufacturing factory—nice humid, late summer richness of a day—when a woman in an old station wagon broadsided me, dead in her sights, at a crossing in a county road...

I woke up, groggy, laying on my back in the middle of a two-lane shimmering country highway--connecting Binghamton and Ithaca in upstate New York...The thought came to me, *What in the world am I doing flat on my back, super-heated tarmac beneath me?* I tried to stand and discovered why: the bones of my lower leg shot raggedly through my once invincible right leg--now spaghetti and hazy remains...I collapsed but, like a wounded animal, dragged myself to the side of the road...

The next time I awoke I was in the hospital. Heavily sedated, I asked the doctor when he visited, *Hey Doc, you gotta get me out of here...Next month is hoop practice at my college and my Coach will kill me if I'm not there...*

A very skilled pro who specialized in the local pro hockey team's orthopedic disasters, he just kind of smiled, in that sad way that catches up to men sooner or later, and said, *Son, I got some news for you...I don't think you're ever going to walk right again...*

Back at Buffalo that fall, hobbled still by crutches, both my College hoop and track Coaches went ballistic when they saw me: *What in the world were you doing on a motorcycle?* My track Coach had taken me on as a pentathlete candidate--and he'd been impressed with my progress on handling the different events...I don't need to tell you how upset my hoop Coach was...

I transferred to Cal my junior year...*As one door closes, another opens*, as my new found Buddhism taught...My leg had recovered, and not only was I playing hoop like a regular gym rat but too I'd taken up martial arts...I had the wingspan of a condor and the speed of a hawk, but, like too many young men, not the maturity to handle it...Maybe a chip on my shoulder, too; at parties, when drunken frat boys would give me a hard time, I'd put both hands lightly behind my head and ask, *Which hand do you want me to hit you with?* The dude and his buds would laugh, he would get all so-called ready and nod, then, in complete amazement to him and his buds, find himself flat on his back on the beer stained floor...Funny party trick, but, after having been lucky in a few scrapes with the law--a huge bar brawl at the old "Horse & Cow" in Vallejo, two ships full of pent-up sailor boys (including my brother-in-law, whom I was visiting) getting in after six months at sea & a bout in North Beach, with a guy who turned out to be the Yale Boxing Club President, got his jaw broken and had the *chuztpah* to try and sue me (both matters over pool games I'd won and, of course, the presence of females)--and, too, sorrowed by the nonsense men put each other through, the wisdom of the Dalai Lama's philosophy of non-violence began, like the Great Eastern Sun, to dawn...

Getting a good run in these days is often difficult. The younger crowd all style themselves after the pro thug ball game—trash-talking, trying to intimidate. Though few have the talent, let alone rep with those necessary referees, to get away with it. Most wonder *What are you doing on the court?*, especially given how I've regrown my hair long, into a *yogin's* ponytail.

Too, since my days playing A City League, kind of a tune-up for semi-pros on circuit and still hungry for the big time, at 6'4" I'd gone from the biggest player on the court to often the smallest...

As one ages, you learn to make up for the decrease in your kinesthetic output with an increase in court sense. When I'd drive, I'd use my body to shield the ball...Get hit once, swivel around, wait for the second hit, lay it in... Though I don't have the time or inclination to explain the matter, I could tell the *youngsta's* how I've beaten such pro players as Michael Cooper—who played with "Los Angeles Lakers." When we played he'd just finished at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. My college sweetheart and I were visiting her sister. While they caught up on old times, I'd wandered off looking for a game. Finding the University's big athletic fieldhouse, I'd walked onto the game court and called *Winners*. The first looks of disbelief were dispelled when

but then my three beat Cooper and his teammates, first game. Second game, him yelling at his teammates not to fuck up, they won. Rubber match, game point, I drove down the lane—with which I'd been scoring, then veered left and faded away, like a Larry Bird baseliner—just out of reach of Cooper's attempted block... Fifteen footer. All *net*.

In the silence he'd angrily said to me, *You ain't from around here, are you, Well this is my court, so don't dome back...*

Too, I've bested players from the local team "Golden State Warriors" in pick-up games—some on the very same court on which we play, right next to the new "Haas Pavilion" built for our Cal team. I miss the old "Harmon Gym," though. For a period of about ten years you could not get a better game anywhere in the Bay Area. Despite the court time being limited to lunch hour on Monday, Wednesday and Friday (sometimes an extra hour) everybody who was anybody would show. The picking of teams was so competitive that often somebody would call *Winners* and, instead of picking up an asking newcomer, would wait and snag *ringers* off the losing team on court. Thus, the joke became—when three or four players mulling around had all the next games locked up—*So where's your team, coming in on the bus from Sacramento or something?*

Games were fought hard—usually the first one lasting a half-hour or more—and any "calls" hotly disputed. One time a guy, nicknamed "Crazy Dave," who could leap for days but had absolutely no touch on his shot, walked off the court in

rage after having his version challenged. After stopping at his 'Stang illegally parked outside--in the handicapped zone, of course-- to pick up his "45," he walked nonchalantly back onto the floor, right up to the guy who'd made the call on him, and put the piece upside his head, asking, *Who right now?*

The very surprised guy—a Cal student—blurting and raising his hands with the others in unison, *You the man, Dave, you the man...*

So, like everybody who's ever played the game, I suppose instead of playing *I could tell ya all about it*. (Crazy Dave met his demise by the same ploy in a playground argument a few years later, by the way). Instead, I just try and get a good run in—making sure that I get the ball at the point guard position, the source of most difficulties in casual games, and demonstrate *How to pass the ball*. Especially in to the big man, a trick of disguise requiring dexterity and quickness; for some reason, most guards in pick-up games assume the big man is "slow" or something and telegraph the pass inside with such woeful obviousness that "my grandmother could steal it," as the court banter goes. And, as even the supertanker pro centers like to show—especially during the All-Star games, there's a point guard inside every big man just waiting for the chance to play...

Of course, when I return to *working the paint*, the big man's turf, I still never get the ball...

But no one can take away or screw up that feeling, standing on the foul line, all alone, just like on the court that day in my High School game...My buddy Joey on one side, the point guard Bobby on the other...Two great teammates (Bob's the High School Principal now) the likes of

whom, like those days, I'll never see again...

A couple of bounces of the ball...*Shake out the looseness in the feet*, set them shoulder width for stability, then, just like our Assistant Coach Hinell used to say—*you gotta make yourself tough*, give yourself a rock-solid foundation. Gathering the ball at your solar plexus, where your breath is centered, make your shot *all one motion*, ball leaving your hands and arcing from the graceful wrist snap—perfectly into the hoop, a sound never forgotten,

swish...