

COURAGE

"PUTTING IT ON THE LINE"

FROM, BILL BRADLEY
VALUES OF THE
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WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN and a freshman in high school, I already stood 6 feet 3 and weighed 165 pounds. Despite my size, I didn't go out for the football team; it was basketball I loved. The high school coach, who coached both sports but preferred football, suspected I was afraid of getting hurt. After I made the varsity basketball team that year, he decided to test my courage. During Christmas break, before the drills of official practice began, he arranged a boxing match between me and a visiting alumnus, an all-American college football player who was two inches taller and some fifty pounds heavier than I was. I took a pounding, but because I didn't back down I think I proved something to the coach.

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Courage in sports means, in the simplest terms, giving 100 percent for your team. In basketball, if there's a loose ball, you dive for it; forget that the floor is hardwood. If you go for a rebound and get elbowed in the face, make sure that next time you go back even harder. If you're playing tough defense and the man you're guarding takes you into a screen set by a burly forward, fight over the screen. If you set a screen and a big forward is about to run into you with all the force of a linebacker, take the hit. Every time I see Patrick Ewing take the charge by placing his body in front of a 6-foot-9 240-pound forward going full speed for the basket, I want to hug him in admiration.

It's worth emphasizing that courage is not the same thing as fearlessness. It means accepting and then overcoming fear—fear of injury, of failing, of looking bad, of relinquishing excuses.

In December of my rookie year, I was playing guard against Boston, but I was too slow, particularly on defense. We were applying a full-court press. I picked up my man with the ball at the inbounds baseline. Moving my feet like a water spider gliding over the water's surface, I tried to pressure him toward the sidelines. Just past the center court line, Wayne Embry, a towering 260-pound backup center, set a blindside screen. I crashed into him and slumped to the floor as if I'd run into a brick wall. At that moment, courage meant shaking off the hurt and embarrassment and finding my man again. (If you're slow, sometimes courage is your last resource!)

Occasionally during my ten years in the league, I would be so badly injured that I couldn't play for a couple of games. I'd sit in street clothes on the bench, watching giants run like gazelles and jump like ballet dancers. I'd see—and hear—the bruising contact when one player boxed out another for rebounds; I'd watch all the

defensive hacking and clawing, the tough fouls on a drive. Each time I'd have the same reaction: I play out there?

You can see the most visceral kind of courage in basketball when sick or injured players stay in the game for the good of the team. When a reporter asked the English runner David Moorcroft why he had never dropped out of a race even in the worst of circumstances, he replied, "I think that once you do, you've given yourself an option for the future." There isn't a great basketball player who hasn't played with a muscle pull, a sprained knee or ankle, a sore back, contusions, a cold, the flu, or an upset stomach. Later in the hotel room, when the chills get you, you wonder whether you were crazy, but in the locker room before the game that's one question you don't ask yourself.

In that seventh game of the 1970 finals against Los Angeles the pain in Willis Reed's leg was so bad that he could hardly walk. In 1997, Michael Jordan was running a fever of 102 in the fifth game of the finals against the Utah Jazz, but he played anyway. He wasn't afraid of looking bad because of a below-par performance. He wasn't afraid of permanent damage to his health. And he wasn't willing to hold himself back. Calling upon some inner reserve of strength, he gave it everything he had: 38 points, 7 rebounds, and 5 assists.

Larry Bird's last seasons in the NBA are a classic example of this kind of courage. After nine years of wear and tear, his back was giving him a lot of trouble. Each time he left the locker room, Bird moved as if he were disabled, but when he got to the hardwood, out there before the crowd, something happened to him. "It was as if he'd been given a new back," former Celtics CEO Dave Gavitt told me at a Hall of Fame induction ceremony. "He didn't seem to realize he was in pain until the competition was

behind him." When Bird finished the 1991-92 season, the prognosis was grim; his body had finally worn out. His contract contained a two-year option for \$4.5 million a year, which would automatically take effect on August 15 if he didn't notify the club of his retirement. On August 12, Bird went to see Gavitt and announced that he was going to retire. Gavitt, aware of the August 15 deadline and of all the years of dedicated service Larry had given the Celtics, asked him whether he wanted a few more days to think it over. "I know what day this is," Bird replied. "If I'm not going to play and know I can't play, I'm not going to take the money. I'm not going to take one cent I don't earn."

Sometimes the motivation to play while you're in pain is not simply victory but an urge to prove yourself to your peers. During my second season in the NBA, I was a guard and still not performing up to my expectations. In January, Cazzie Russell, a Knicks starting forward, broke his ankle, and Red Holzman had me take his place. It was my big chance. A few days later, we flew into San Diego for a game. I began feeling ill shortly after we arrived at the motel, and by the time I reached the locker room I was nauseated. When the game began, I was still sick, and after a few times up and down the floor, I went over to the bench during a time-out and vomited into a bucket. We were shorthanded that night, and I was determined not to come out of the game. Several times during free throws, I held the basket pole and dry-heaved. I kept telling myself, "Put it out of your mind. Keep playing." The other players were laughing, but I have no doubt that every one of them understood what was going on in my head.

SHOOTING INVOLVES its own kind of subtle courage. When all the money is on the line, a brave player wants the ball.

He is willing to stare defeat down. His confidence builds with the pressure. The standing joke on many teams is about the scorer who wants the ball for three quarters but can't be found at crunch time. Technically his shooting is perfect, but his fear of failure is too great.

If you're a shooter and you start missing, you have to keep taking your open shots. This is no small thing. Missing makes some players nervous. They begin to hesitate, consciously or subconsciously. Taking another shot is a torture instead of an opportunity, so they stop shooting altogether. The great player is willing to keep trying.

For most of my years with the Knicks, all five starters would take the shot. When one of us missed, the others never complained, never blamed. We were a team. We understood this, but sometimes the crowd didn't. In 1971, in the seventh game of the Eastern playoff against Baltimore, the score was Baltimore 93, New York 91, with about ten seconds left on the clock. On a broken play for Walt Frazier, I got the ball with four seconds to go and only the baseline open. I took two dribbles and then the shot, but Wes Unseld, the Baltimore center, got a piece of it, and the ball hit the side of the backboard, ending our dreams of a second straight championship. To this day (most recently on a 1998 visit to the floor of the American Stock Exchange), perfect strangers ask me, "Why'd you miss that shot back in '71 against Baltimore?"

The foul line is the place where a player is most exposed. You're there all alone. No one is guarding you. There are no excuses. The only thing that defeats you is pressure and a lack of courage. In 1968, in a game against Boston, I was fouled during the last minute and a half, with the Knicks 1 point ahead. If I hit both foul shots, we'd probably win; if I missed, we could lose. This was one of the few games early in my career when the coach

had put me in at crunch time. I wasn't a starter, and in that game I was shooting 1 for 10 from the field. Needless to say, I felt the tension rising. As I went to the line, the ref compounded it by handing me the ball and saying, "Now we'll see what you're made of." Despite the warm words, I sank both shots.

A similar situation occurred during a Sunday game in the 1997 NBA finals between Utah and Chicago. Utah Jazz forward Karl Malone—nicknamed the Mailman, because he always seems to deliver in the clutch—missed two free throws with seconds to go in the game. Utah lost. Much was made of Scottie Pippen's words to Malone before his shots: "Hey, Karl, the mailman don't deliver on Sunday." But the real story was what happened afterward. Many players would have offered some excuse for the misses—maybe even blaming it on Pippen's attempt at psyching. Not Malone. He took full responsibility. He missed, next time he'd do better. Another kind of courage.



THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES when basketball players have shown a courage that many working people can understand. In the early years of the NBA, the players had no benefits and were paid poorly. But a small group of the players decided to form a union to get themselves out of third-rate hotels on the road and, more important, establish a pension system and health coverage. The owners ignored them until the 1964 All-Star Game, when the players refused to play until the owners recognized the union. The owners threatened to fire them, but the players stood firm: No recognition of the union, no All-Star game. In the locker room, these All-Stars were well aware that they were acting on behalf of every other professional basketball player. The owners relented, and the All-Star game took place that night. It was a fa-

miliar story, one that had already been played out in many industries in America. For me, it reinforces the idea that with a little courage, even if you wield little power individually, you can make great things happen when you join forces.

IN BASKETBALL, just facing the crowd sometimes takes courage. The crowd intimidates and wears you down. It is unforgiving. It can inflict personal pain, as it did to me in my rookie year. The fans in New York expected nothing less than immediate stardom from me, and when it didn't happen they became hostile. After the first ten or so games, people would start booing whenever my name was mentioned. A few of the unrulier fans would throw things at me as I left the floor. On the street, strangers frequently greeted me with ridicule. Every night that I went into the arena was a night of potential embarrassment before the home crowd. It was as if I'd been put in the ring with the heavyweight champion and couldn't get away. But by the end of the year, I had gained confidence by the sheer act of persevering.

By contrast, I found it easy to steel myself against the derision of crowds away from home. Most are merciless toward the opposing team. The air is filled with boos and catcalls. To the crowd, the opposing players are the enemy. Their humanity is denied; in the early years of the league, black players had to face a constant barrage of racist epithets. Some players get angry at the fans who sit right behind the visitors' bench in many arenas and shout obscenities or make loud and uncomplimentary remarks about a player's ability, or his looks, or his family pedigree. Some players get rattled when the crowd stands and waves behind the backboard in an attempt to distract them. For most, though, this kind of audience hostility toward the visiting team is nothing new. It

brings back memories of high school games and summer leagues, when the slightest disagreement with a call might precipitate a fight or at least a lot of sounding off, and the audience occasionally became menacing. Once you've been through those adolescent wars, the away-from-home crowds in the pros can seem like a piece of cake.

LEADERSHIP

BRINGING OUT THE BEST

LEADERSHIP MEANS getting people to think, believe, see, and do what they might not have without you. It means possessing the vision to set the right goal and the decisiveness to pursue it single-mindedly. It means being aware of the fears and anxieties felt by those you lead even as you urge them to overcome those fears. It can appear in a speech before hundreds of people or in a dialogue with one other person—or simply by example.

To the Bulls' Phil Jackson, the key leadership function for a coach in the pros is getting the players to commit to something bigger than themselves. In the simplest sense, winning is the purpose of playing, but to achieve that end a coach frequently has to create a context larger than the

immediate game. At each level I played, the desire to win was a reflection of a deeper desire: In my small-town high school, the motivation was to beat the big city schools; in college, the challenge was for a group of athletes who were primarily students to beat the best in the NCAA; in the pros, the larger purpose was to show that a team without a dominant star could win the NBA title. Pete Carril's idea of leadership was to ask his players to give a little more than they thought they were capable of giving and by so doing achieve a bit more than they were capable of achieving. That's why Princeton on occasion became a giant killer.

A wise coach doesn't do all the talking. Sometimes, with the right group, he'll let the team members put pressure on players who are problem children. In 1994, the Bulls, without Michael Jordan, were playing the Knicks for the Eastern Conference semifinals. In the last seconds of a close game three, Jackson called the game-deciding play, with Toni Kukoc rather than Scottie Pippen as the shooter. An angered Pippen took himself out of the game. Kukoc hit the shot and the Bulls won, but Pippen's highly visible act of insubordination posed an immediate challenge for Jackson. Phil declined to come down hard on Pippen in his postgame interview. In the locker room, however, he closed the door, announced that he thought the team had something to say to Pippen, and then left the room. Bill Cartwright, a quintessential team player who was in the final year of his career, was so upset that he was close to tears as he asked Pippen how he could have let the team down after all they had sacrificed for as a group throughout the year. Other players chimed in along similar lines. Pippen, man enough to see his error, apologized on the spot, and in the next game he was back contributing to the Bulls' performance. If Phil himself had con-

fronted Scottie, the result might not have been as positive; by harnessing the team to do his work, he was more effective.

Coaches who seek the media limelight risk irritating their star players, and the results can be counterproductive: Pouting stars rarely win big games. Coaches who use the media to criticize their players also often live to regret it. Red Holzman was a master in dealing with the press. For him, the only thing that counted was what happened on the floor: He knew that as far as the public was concerned, if the team won, he was a success; if it lost, he was a failure. This insight, combined with his natural modesty and fierce desire to win, produced a postgame demeanor that was, well, unnewsworthy. He never criticized a player. He spoke in truisms that nevertheless underlined his basic principles: All his players were talented; defense was the key; teamwork paid off; only victory was acceptable. Period, end of interview. Red confined his criticism of our play to the locker room, where it belonged.

Above all, the coach who exercises leadership communicates clearly to the players what they have to do. It's not unlike military training: A commando operation succeeds because each person has a particular assignment and knows what it is in precise detail. The same is true of basketball, but many coaches either burden their players with an overly complicated offense or they don't suggest any structure to the offense at all. You can be a freewheeling practice coach, like Princeton's Van Breda Kolff, or a structured practice coach, like Hank Iba, but in each case you have to make sure that every player knows what you want. If you have prepared well enough, events in the game can't rattle you. I love to see a team that's ready when the opponent tries a full-court press. That readiness comes only with hours of practice in which each player

knows where to go and what to do in order to break the opponent's press. Picking it apart with precision passes and cuts often leads to easy baskets. It takes only a few such responses before the team that's doing the pressing retreats from further embarrassment.

Another example of leadership through preparation is getting your team ready for the last-second shot. In the 1998 NCAA tournament, Valparaiso trailed the University of Mississippi by 2 and had the ball out of bounds at the opposite end of the floor. Valparaiso's Jamie Sykes threw a long pass to teammate Bill Jenkins at the top of the key. Jenkins leaped, caught the ball in midair, and seemingly without pausing to look, flicked it to his left—to Bryce Drew, who shot behind the 3-point line and made the basket, giving Valparaiso the victory. Afterward, both coach and players made the point that the team had rehearsed that particular play all season but had never had a chance to use it until the most important game of the year.

Tactics are not everything; sometimes a coach needs to provide personal leadership. In 1982, Georgetown played the University of North Carolina for the NCAA championship. It was a matchup featuring two of the NCAA's greatest players that year: Georgetown's Patrick Ewing and North Carolina's James Worthy. It was also a matchup of two great coaches: Dean Smith of North Carolina and John Thompson of Georgetown. The game was hard fought and came down to the last seconds. North Carolina went ahead by 1 with eighteen seconds to go on a jump shot by a freshman named Michael Jordan. Georgetown took possession of the ball with plenty of time to make the winning basket. Then—inexplicably, in one of those very human moments on the court—Fred Brown, a Georgetown guard, mistook James Worthy for a teammate and threw a pass directly into Worthy's hands.

Georgetown's dream of a championship disappeared. The team was devastated. The fans were in shock. All eyes were on Brown. He had committed a blunder that would be with him for the rest of his life. Thompson understood this, and putting aside his disappointment he wrapped the young player in a bear hug, whispering reassurance in his ear. It was one of the most moving gestures I have ever witnessed on a basketball court. It spoke volumes about Thompson's relationship to his players, about his most fundamental values, about his excellence as a leader. Billy Packer, the great CBS basketball broadcaster and former star at Wake Forest, recalls seeing a player—Robert "Tractor" Traylor of the University of Michigan—provide similar extraordinary leadership late in the 1997–98 season, when teammate Robbie Reid, a guard who had transferred to Michigan from Brigham Young that year, missed the last-second shot against Michigan State in a Big Ten conference game. The failure seemed emblematic of Reid's year at Michigan up to that point: He had been a disappointment. Instead of disparaging him, Traylor, all 300 pounds of him, put his arms around his dejected teammate and offered the right words of encouragement. Reid went on to play exceptionally well in the remaining games, and together with Traylor, he powered Michigan to victory in the first Big Ten postseason tournament.

Watching the NCAA Final Four games in 1998, I felt that while the country's best players might not be on the floor, the players that "fit together best" (as Red Auerbach puts it) were there; in other words, the country's best teams were on the floor. Time and time again, you saw the leadership rotating, like the lead goose flying in a V formation. In Stanford's semifinal overtime game against the University of Kentucky, a different player responded at each critical moment. In the last minutes three players—Arthur Lee, Peter Sauer, and Ryan Mendez—hit

3-point shots, two others got important rebounds, and everyone on coach Mike Montgomery's team played great defense. Stanford lost, but each player had truly done his best. Kentucky played Utah in the final, and it was the same story: Different players on both teams sparked their team's momentum at different times in the game. At one point, Kentucky's Heshimu Evans entered as a substitute and went straight to the point of the V, contributing significantly to Kentucky's eventual victory. Once you've seen such broad-based leadership in basketball, you can better appreciate the value of giving a cross-section of people in any organization the opportunity to assume responsibility. You learn that within each of us is the ability to excel, even, or perhaps especially, in times of crisis.

There are also players who lead during a game simply by virtue of their self-confidence. Dean Smith has remarked that often the player who provides the emotional leadership is not necessarily the team's best player but the one who is held in the greatest respect by the team. When the best player is also the most respected, such as Isiah Thomas, Larry Bird, or the incomparable Michael Jordan, a different dynamic takes over. The best player can then lead by example, contributing more than anyone else to the effort and at the same time spurring teammates to outdo themselves. Oscar Robertson, one of the all-time great NBA stars, once told me that the mark of a truly excellent player is that he makes the worst player on his team into a good one.

SPORTS ARE AN IMPORTANT part of many people's lives, both as pursuit and as pastime. They can influence people in subtle ways, helping shape their ideas about how life works and about what is acceptable behavior. When professional baseball

and basketball decided on racial desegregation in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it had a far-reaching impact on society. Once the taboo of separateness was challenged on the fields of millions of Americans' dreams, children began to ask their parents questions and adults increasingly found the old ways indefensible. What had seemed impossible began to change. If desegregation worked in sports, why shouldn't it work in the rest of American life? The heroes in this racial drama are well known: Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Bill Veeck of the Cleveland Indians, Ned Irish of the New York Knicks—all of them executives who saw the future; Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton—black players who lived the experience and in so doing exposed the hollowness and falseness of racial stereotypes.

What is not so well known are the conflicts that had to be resolved among the players. When Rickey announced that Jackie Robinson was joining the Dodgers, tension quickly rose in the clubhouse, a place that cherishes conformity and rarely rewards dissent. A wholesale defection from Rickey's dream seemed to be in the making: Several players drew up a petition stating their refusal to play with Robinson. Many of the players signed it; a significant exception was Pee Wee Reese, the team's shortstop and captain. Reese, a white Kentuckian, would later make a point of putting his arm around Robinson's shoulder when fans heckled him for being who he was. Reese's splendid act of leadership made a powerful statement, with repercussions across the nation as well as within his team.

A much subtler revolution began in 1972 with the passage of Title IX, which required high schools and colleges to provide women with access to athletic facilities equal to those for men. By 1997–98, women's basketball reached a new level of public acceptance. The NCAA champion Tennessee Lady Vols averaged

attendance of over 14,000 at all their home games. At Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, a town of fewer than 150,000 people, the average game attendance was nearly 8,000. Through the 1980s, women players such as Carol Blazejowski, Nancy Lieberman, Cheryl Miller, Teresa Edwards, and Ann Meyers showed that they were world-class athletes, but after college there were few places they could continue to play. Then, in 1997, the women's professional leagues took off. The WNBA and ABL games attracted a wide attendance; both leagues were televised. Players such as Rebecca Lobo, Lisa Leslie, and Cynthia Cooper became media stars. Advertisers began using the better players in commercials for shoes, cars, and credit cards. WNBA player Jamila Wideman was even featured on the Nike website. It had been a long, hard battle, and women basketball players were finally accorded recognition and respect.

Many different kinds of leadership brought women's basketball to its current place. There were the small colleges, such as Immaculata, Old Dominion, and Louisiana Tech, which made early and significant commitments to women's basketball. There were the coaches—Pat Summitt of Tennessee, Theresa Greutz of Illinois, Tara VanDerveer of Stanford, Geno Auriemma of Connecticut, and countless others—who loved the game and believed that the values it taught were gender-blind and that the excitement the women's game could generate was at least as great as that created by the men. There were the high school and college athletic directors who embraced Title IX as an opportunity and opened up gym space, practice fields, and weight rooms. There is even a place in the story for NBA commissioner David Stern, who decided to put the league's marketing muscle behind the WNBA. But among the most effective were those mothers and fathers across America who saw the common sense of open-

ing sports to women and wanted their daughters to have the same chances as their sons to experience the game.

The great leaders in basketball have never been afraid of change and they have led from the strength of their own convictions. And, above all, they have brought out the best in the people they lead.

RED HOLTZMAN

NO EXCUSES — NONE

THE FIRST DAY OF practice always tells the story about which players have taken physical conditioning seriously in the off-season. In basketball, if you can't run, you can't play. If you haven't been running for two months before the first practice, you haven't fulfilled your responsibility to the team. Red Holzman's rule was that the Knicks were all adults, that we knew we made our living with our bodies, and that if we couldn't keep them in condition we were hurting not just ourselves but the team. He also said, by way of threatening afterthought, "And then don't expect to get playing time." It was up to each of us to stay in condition. Occasionally someone would report to training camp out of shape. Our response would be like

that of sharks going after a piece of bloody meat. We would run over, around, and past the laggard until he got the message.

Players who want to last in the NBA must take serious care of themselves. Karl Malone wants to play well past the age when most players retire, so he works out year-round. He lifts weights, runs on the StairMaster, stretches nearly every day. Dennis Rodman is another player who prides himself on his physical shape. When he runs down the floor with his knees kicking high, as if he were a sprinter, he is flaunting his conditioning. The store of energy from a well-honed body also shows in his persistence as a rebounder.

While some young athletes think of themselves as invincible, even immortal, and consequently abuse their bodies with drugs or alcohol, most professional players recognize the gift of time they've been given. Walt Frazier's public image included mink coats, wide-brimmed hats, luxurious cars, beautiful women. The image was a more or less accurate picture of his public lifestyle, but no one on the Knicks was in better condition. Walt, too, worked out year-round. He was a health food advocate before it was cool to be one. He always got plenty of rest. His pride—amounting to a kind of obsession with looking good and a determination never to be embarrassed on the court—and his desire to perform at levels that few had ever reached required that his body function like a well-oiled machine.

By the time most players reach the pros, they've shot a basketball a million times. To stay there they know they have to shoot a million more. Chris Mullin of the Pacers, with two assistants feeding him balls, regularly takes an incredible one thousand shots in a normal one-hour practice. In 1984, Larry Bird was the league MVP and the leader of the world-champion Boston Celtics. Shortly after the celebrations ended, he went home to

French Lick, Indiana. All summer he lifted weights in the morning and for hours every afternoon went to a gym, often alone, and shot baskets. Magic Johnson once said of Larry Bird, "To most players, basketball is a job. To Larry, it was life." One could say the same thing about Magic—or Rick Barry or Jerry West, Nate Archibald or George Gervin, Dave Cowens or George Mikan.

Hubie Brown became an assistant coach for the Milwaukee Bucks in 1972. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was the team's center. Brown, eager to show the coaching staff how conscientious he was, arrived at practice on the first day of training camp one and a half hours before it was scheduled to begin. To his astonishment, Kareem, the league MVP for the previous two seasons, was already on the floor practicing, shooting skyhook after skyhook, perfecting his graceful release, grooving his rhythm—look at the basket, step left, cradle the ball, right leg up, swing the right arm high, release, follow through—putting in the time as if he were a sophomore in high school. To Kareem, this effort at skill development was just part of being a champion. An aspect of his daily routine involved shooting the hook with a rebounding ring inside the rim, thereby shrinking the space available for a successful shot. When he removed the ring after the thirty-day training period, he said that he felt as if he were shooting the ball into the ocean.

It seems elementary, but abiding by the team rules is another responsibility. Kids who grow up in a chaotic environment often have little sense of time, so arriving at practice at a scheduled hour becomes a major task. The coach who gets across the importance of punctuality introduces order into many a young life. On Red Holzman's teams, there were few rules, but they were rigid. His attitude was "No excuses—none!" If you weren't on the bus at the designated time, it left without you. If you didn't make the

plane, you paid your own way. If you were late for practice, even two minutes late, you were fined. The result was that most of us turned up early. Even if you were late because of circumstances clearly beyond your control, you got no sympathy or credit. "Sure, Bill, I know your mother's cousin called with an emergency that your mother's nephew couldn't take care of," Holzman used to say, "and it rained on the highway and made it slick, after the earthquake damaged the bridge, but still you're fined." He smiled and I paid up.

* * *

CONDITIONING, skill development, and following the rules are readily understandable to most players. A player's responsibilities to the team are more subtle. No player can be a scorer, dribbler, rebounder, and passer to the degree that he or she chooses. The coach has to be clear about your role, but only you can then fill it. You have to fit your talents into the game plan.

Frequently, for the benefit of the team, you have to sacrifice what you would like to do on the court. Scoring 12 points a game and playing your role on a winning team is better than scoring 20 points a game on a losing team. For you to get those 20 points would require a change in team balance and make victory less likely.

In college, I did what I wanted on the court, following my creative impulses to score and generate team movement. In the pros, I had to adjust to playing a defined role. My job was to hit the open shot, move without the ball, push it up the court quickly, pass to the open man, keep my man from getting rebounds, constantly overplay him on defense, and help out if a teammate lost his own man.

Satch Sanders understood that his role on the Boston Celtics

of the 1960s was to play tough defense and help rebound, not score. Bob Gross on the 1977 NBA champion Portland Trail Blazers knew that his role was to move without the ball in order to create lanes for passes from Bill Walton to him; to make passes to the guards and lobs to Walton; to set screens against the opposing team's forwards and guards in order to free up his teammates Maurice Lucas or Lionel Hollins. Jeff Hornacek of the Utah Jazz plays a similar role, throwing his body in front of forwards to draw the charge, screening away to free up a teammate, moving to the open spot for the shot. Probably neither Sanders nor Gross nor Hornacek will ever make the Hall of Fame, but all three assumed responsibility for their roles and were thus absolutely essential to their teams' victories.

Each player contributes to the team's off-court chemistry, too, and the results are vital to success. Every team has its subtle personality balance, its mixture of humor and jealousy, its pecking order and center of gravity. On the Knicks, Willis Reed was the boss, the captain. He was the protector during the games and the leader in practice. Everyone acknowledged this. DeBusschere was the other pillar of strength. The rest of us operated within the structure Willis and Dave established. There was a balance of talents and personalities. Dick Barnett was the droll observer of life, able to cut players or celebrities in the news down to size. Earl Monroe provided the ballast that came from a quiet dignity and a willingness to listen to a teammate's problems. Jerry Lucas, using his prodigious memory, kept score in the yearlong poker game on the road, tabulating who owed what to whom at a particular moment in the year and making sure that money never came between teammates. My off-court role sometimes involved taking aside a white rookie with a residue of resentment for black players and telling him that that's not how we did things on the Knicks.

People on a meshed team will help each other personally. They don't necessarily share their innermost thoughts, but when one man is down psychologically, another picks him up. A group of self-absorbed soloists, on the other hand, never ceases its internal competition.

When Wilt Chamberlain joined Los Angeles in 1968, Elgin Baylor was the verbal leader off court. He was the one who awarded the nicknames and made the jokes on the bus. Wilt's arrival presented him with a challenge, because Wilt sought preeminence in repartee as well as in basketball statistics. In situations that should have been funny, Wilt and Elgin ended up arguing. No general manager can determine off-court personality roles. They just happen.

In 1982 Moses Malone, an established pro of the first order, joined the Philadelphia 76ers. He had been the NBA MVP two times. The press speculated that with his addition to the team, the brilliant Philadelphia forward Julius Erving might win his first championship. The big "if" was whether the new team would mesh.

Dr. J had been there before. In 1977, the 76ers had had a very good chance to win the NBA title, but their team dynamics collapsed around them in the finals against the Portland Trail Blazers. When Dr. J wanted to pass, no one moved to the open spot to receive it. When Dr. J moved without the ball, no one hit him with a pass at a place where he had room to "operate." The Sixers played as if they were in parallel worlds, equidistant from one another, guaranteed never to touch. I felt that the core of the problem was an apparent conflict between forward George McGinnis and Dr. J. A prolific scorer himself, McGinnis seemed to want equal billing. This off-court problem became an on-court one. Now I wondered whether the addition of Moses Malone

would be a replay of that situation. But to the relief of coach Billy Cunningham and general manager Pat Williams, Malone asserted at the opening press conference that the Sixers were Dr. J's team and that he was there to help the forward win his first title. He proceeded to do just that, unselfishly playing his heart out the entire season, rebounding relentlessly, and adding the missing ingredient to a good Philadelphia team that became a championship Philadelphia team.

THE PART OF PERSONAL responsibility that's least appreciated is mental preparation. Every player has a different approach. For some, the pregame ritual consists of shooting the same number of minutes the day of the game, eating the same meal, listening to the same music, phoning the same group of people. Others switch themselves on only an hour or so before tipoff, able quickly to concentrate as they tape their ankles, put on their uniform, and do some stretching exercises.

Part of the purpose of the concentration is to get your mind to push your body to its highest possible performance. Bill Russell used to work himself up so much that he would vomit before nearly every game. For high school and college players, there is no excuse for not being "up for the game." They play a limited number of times a year, and the years of competition are finite. In the pros, where you can play over a hundred contests a year, it's more difficult to be up for each one of them. Injuries intervene, fatigue deadens anticipation, opponent quality varies. The essential requirement for victory is that there always be a teammate to pick up the slack. On great teams, someone always steps up. That way, the team continues to win. When you lose because you haven't made the mental effort, you have no one to blame but yourself.

RESILIENCE

"MEETING WITH TRIUMPH AND DISASTER"

BASKETBALL IS A LABORATORY for learning how to handle adversity, which comes in many forms—obvious ones, like injury or defeat, and less tangible ones, like the crowd's contempt or the lengthening of an opponent's lead. Adversity offers a richness of experience all its own, and even victory has pitfalls. Rudyard Kipling told us to "meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same." Unfortunately most of us can't do that. We allow defeat to crush us, or we exult unrealistically in victory.

For me, learning to cope with defeat was not easy. From the time I was in high school, I used to turn a basketball loss over and over in my mind, asking myself what I and others could have done

differently. Often I replayed the game so relentlessly that it would interfere with my sleep. The loss hung for days, like a fog: Other people offered analyses, the coach had his interpretations and injunctions, but it took days of practice and the prospect of another game to get a defeat fully behind me.

That pattern continued until my second year in the NBA. I had just made the Knicks starting team as a forward, and we had lost a close one in Philadelphia on a bad pass I made when the Sixers were applying a full-court press. After the game, I was dejected. Back at the hotel, Dave DeBusschere, an experienced pro who had joined the team two months earlier and was my new roommate, put me straight: "You can't go through a season like this. There are too many games. Sure, you blew it tonight, but when it's over, it's over. Let it go. Otherwise you won't be ready to play tomorrow night." That piece of advice helped change my whole attitude. Even a good pro team is going to lose twenty games a year. I realized that the more you carry the bad past around with you in the present, the less likely it is that the future will improve.

Victory is the more subtle impostor. When you begin to expect it as a continuum instead of seeing it as a reward that has to be fought for, you're in trouble. Julius Erving once said that sustaining focus after a failure isn't a problem—indeed, it might even sharpen your alertness because you'd be intent on making up for the mistake. It's after you've pulled off a great play that focus is difficult, because there's "a strong temptation to dwell on what you just did." By the time you finish congratulating yourself, your opponent has scored three baskets.

The ultimate danger of being victorious is losing sight of how you got there. Only a few teams in the NBA have repeated as champions. As Bill Russell puts it: "It's easier to become Number

One than it is to stay Number One." Somewhere along the line, most teams fail to prepare themselves for the season following a championship. The fault can be mental, as in the lessening of the desire to win, or physical, as in reporting to training camp overweight or undertrained. Occasionally jealousy among players about who got what rewards out of the last year's championship can eat away at team unity.

Bouncing back from both victory and defeat requires a reservoir of self-knowledge. Making adjustments in your playing style is sometimes wise, but altering what you believe about the game in order to break a skid will never work. Nearly every day Phil Jackson puts on the chalkboard a clearly defined set of offensive principles: Provide proper spacing, penetrate the defense, ensure player and ball movement with a purpose, provide strong rebounding position and good defensive balance on all shots, and so on. A set of principles allows a coach's criticism to be less personal and each player's performance to be measured against the team mission. If your game is guided that way, it's easier to be consistent. Otherwise, you're just reacting—to helpful friends or critical sportswriters, all with their own ideas about how you won or what went wrong. While it's a good idea to take praise in the press with a grain of salt, it's also wise to listen to the criticism and determine whether or not it's merited. If it's not, treat it just like the praise.

There's also a need for such a thing as resilience within a game. In most contests, there are good and bad moments; the flow is inevitable. Yet some players, and some teams, can't seem to come back from a bad break. When a team makes a few dumb plays or gets a few bad calls, its play often deteriorates. Teammates will glare at each other; occasionally, hostile words will pass between them. By the fourth quarter, they're starting to

prepare their postgame excuses. Defeat is inevitable. When things go bad for such teams, no one steps in to change the momentum, and then they get even worse.

There is no greater tonic for team morale than a come-from-behind victory; it's the core of team resilience. In 1972, the Knicks fell 19 points behind Milwaukee in a game with six minutes to go, yet we won. When our team hit a few shots while holding the Bucks scoreless, the crowd in Madison Square Garden began to rumble. After a few steals were converted into baskets, the margin dropped to 8 points, and the rumble turned into a roar. By the time we trailed by only 2 points, the roar was deafening. By the end of the game, which we won, people were shouting, "I believe! I believe!" convinced that we could overcome any obstacle, surmount any lead.

That belief has remarkable power. Combined with trust in your teammates, it can have a dramatic psychological effect on your opponents. It becomes a part of your team's reputation. Once that happens, no opposing team ever feels safe, no matter how great a lead it has. More important, your team knows it will be in every game until the very end.

* * *

COMEBACK STORIES, examples of tenacity under pressure, provide a model for beating the odds. They become part of the collective imagination, and they are drawn on in countless situations by people in all walks of life. The stories tell us never to give up—that failure can turn to success, that misfortune can be overcome, that the human spirit is indomitable, and that all of us are stronger working with one another than we are working alone.

In basketball, there is no misfortune greater than injury. A player's career can end with one twist of the knee or ankle. In few

other activities is such finality so closely wedded to such physical virtuosity. While most injuries are temporary, the healing process isn't complete until the player returns to the game. When you are injured, your first thought is "How soon can I play again?"—followed by fear that the answer is "Never."

The very thought that injury can end a career focuses your energy in a peculiar way. When you're recuperating, life looks different. It did for me in 1961, in the summer after my senior year in high school. I had broken my foot in a baseball game, and as I sat with it in a cast I contemplated a world without basketball. Where would I go to college if there was to be no more basketball? A few weeks after I posed that question to myself, I decided not to go to Duke, where I had accepted an athletic scholarship, but to enroll instead at Princeton, where I had none. If I hadn't injured my foot, I might never have made the switch.

Amy Cook is the daughter of a friend of mine. Her father was a high school track coach, whose teams had won six state championships. His greatest satisfaction, however, came from seeing his daughter grow up to be a great 100-meter high hurdler. In her sophomore year in high school, she had the fastest recorded time in the state of Missouri and won second place in the state championship. Then, in the winter of her junior year, she tore her anterior cruciate ligament during the district basketball finals. She had surgery and reconstruction of the knee joint. The doctors said that it was uncertain if she would ever run again. The cast stayed on for eight weeks and then she began the rehabilitation—the weight clinic, the stretches, the jogging—hoping to get ready for her senior year season. Her parents accompanied her every morning to her 6:30 workouts. She returned to competition in March of her senior year, but she didn't do well. Sometimes she couldn't even finish a race because of the pain. She barely qualified for the

state championships—and as she and her father drove to Jefferson City for the state meet, they knew they had both done everything they possibly could to prepare her for the event. When the runners took their mark, Amy's father was close to tears, afraid that his daughter would be crushed by a poor performance. The gun went off and Amy jumped out ahead, holding the lead to the finish.

Amy Cook was the state champion. She had reached deep into herself and found the confidence and drive that enabled her to win. It was partly physical—she had done everything she could to get ready. It was partly mental—she had prepared herself to risk everything in order to win. But it was her resilience that put her over the top.

* * *

A PART OF BEING resilient is understanding that there are some things in life that can never be gotten over, no matter how many games are under your belt. I felt sad on many levels on November 7, 1991, when Magic Johnson reported to the world that he was infected with HIV. I mourned the loss to the game. Yet Magic's terrible misfortune reminds us that each of us harbors self-destructive impulses and urges, along with all the qualities we're proudest of. By standing up in public and telling young people, "Don't make the mistakes I made," Magic shed some light on a part of our human nature that is too often hidden. For that gift from him, we must be grateful.

It may be that by accepting the limits to resilience we can celebrate it, using it when we can and cherishing it while it lasts. I've made it through more than a few tough moments in my life by drawing on the resources of my basketball years. Resilience is what allows us to struggle hard and long with tragedy or loss or

misfortune or change and still manage to dig deep and find our second wind. It is a kind of toughness. Each life blow no longer shatters us like a hammer hitting brick; rather, it makes us stronger. It tempers us, like a hammer hitting metal. Imagine the comfort in knowing that by never giving up, by accepting the bad breaks and going on, you will have lived life to the fullest, and maybe will have lived it a little longer. Such peace of mind is often reward enough.

IMAGINATION

DREAMING UP THE GAME

THE INNOVATORS IN BASKETBALL

came upon their ideas through trial and error, by playing the game. Hank Luisetti of Stanford was the first player to shoot with one hand; before that, all basketball shots except the layup and the hook were two-handed. Joe Fulks of the Philadelphia Warriors concluded that he could get the edge on his opponent if he jumped and shot the ball from the top of his leap, and the jump shot was born. In the 1950s, Bob Cousy began passing the ball behind his back. He was considered a hot dog by traditionalists, but like most innovators he persisted because he believed in his idea—besides, the crowds loved it. Gradually, coaches saw that the efficiency and deceptiveness of the move paid off in

easier baskets for teammates. About that time, Elgin Baylor entered the pro ranks. Baylor's tremendous leaping ability allowed him to combine the jump shot and layup; he was the first player who seemed to hang in air, defying gravity. Julius Erving and Michael Jordan are his direct descendants. Even kids with no leaping ability (myself included—the joke on the Knicks was that my peak leap equaled the thickness of a Sunday New York Times) tried to imitate Elgin as he moved around the basket, altering his shot by changing the ball from hand to hand and using the rim on layups to block his defender's attempt to reach the ball.

Innovation took place mainly on offense until Bill Russell and K. C. Jones arrived on the scene in the mid-fifties. As teammates on consecutive national championship teams at the University of San Francisco, and then on the Celtics championship teams, they changed the meaning of defense in basketball. Before them, it was like counterpunching in boxing: The offense would make a move and the defense would respond to it. Russell and Jones forced the offense to react. "K. C. thought differently," Russell wrote in his book, *Second Wind*:

"He was always figuring ways he could make the opponent take the shot he wanted him to take when he wanted him to take it, from the place he wanted the man to shoot. Often during games, he would pretend to stumble into my man while letting the player he was guarding have a free drive to the basket with the ball, knowing that I could block the shot and take the ball away. Or, he'd let a man have an outside shot from just beyond the perimeter of his effectiveness and, instead of harassing the player, would take off down the court, figuring that I'd get the rebound and throw him a long pass for an easy basket."

Russell in particular was a master of invention. Having concluded that horizontal lines defined the game better than vertical

ones (notwithstanding the fact that more and more players were jumping higher), he was always conscious of the angle at which he did anything on the court. If he had to block a shot from behind on a man streaking for a breakaway layup, he would take a step to the left so that he could come from behind at an angle that would allow his left arm to block the shot and his body to land to the shooter's right, thereby avoiding the collision that would have earned him a foul. If he was attempting to block a jump shot, he tried to do it during the first foot of the ball's arc, which meant that his body had to be close to the shooter's body in the air; and he used a vertical leap with outstretched arms because that created fewer fouls than a leap forward, which would have carried his body into the shooter. He also knew that while a blocked shot pleases the crowd, it is only half the story; the other half is giving your team control of the ball. So when he blocked a shot, his aim was to bat the ball not into the crowd or against the backboard but to a teammate so that the fast break could begin.

Russell also pointed out that over 60 percent of rebounds occur below the rim, which means that positioning is more important than leaping ability. Knowing where a particular player's shot usually bounces allows you to anticipate where to be. Boxing out far enough from the basket increases the area you can reach whenever the ball caroms off the rim. Starting under the basket and backing (or assing) your opponent out toward the foul line can surprise him and create a similar space to gather in a rebound. More than any other player then or since, Russell mastered the game's mental aspects, but other great rebounders—Paul Silas, Dave DeBusschere, Moses Malone, Dennis Rodman, Jayson Williams—also understand the subtlety of the art.

The most dramatic sports innovation I can recall was introduced by the high jumper Dick Fosbury in 1968, when he turned

on his back going over the bar instead of going over stomach down, which was the conventional approach. "I was told over and over again that I would never be successful, that I was not going to be competitive and the technique was simply not going to work," he said to a reporter after winning the gold medal at the Mexico City Olympics. "All I could do was shrug and say, 'We'll just have to see.'" The artist, the scientist in the lab, the technologist with a hunch develop ideas that change the world forever. These sports innovators remind us anew that one person can make a difference—and has, time and time again.

Some players demonstrate a creative imagination in maximizing their modest skills. One of my teammates once said to me half jokingly, "You know, Bill, you're the best player in the NBA—from your wrist to the tip of your fingers." He meant that I had good hands, hands that got to a lot of places quickly. Often you can block an opponent's shot by sticking your hand into the area where he brings the ball up from a dribble for the shot, a move called "stripping him." When the Knicks played a team with a big center, I would often drop off my man and double team the center when he got the ball. More than a few times, while I was still facing the man I was guarding, I would reach back with my swatting hand and knock the ball loose from the center's grip. At a minimum I clogged up the area so that the center had less room to make his move.

Having good hands on offense means that you can catch a pass, make a pass, catch and flick a pass at will. In shooting, good hands help to produce a quick release—the speed with which you move the ball from where you received it to shooting position. Beyond good hands, really great passers have a kind of sixth sense that is spatial and rooted in superb eye-hand coordination and unusual peripheral and depth vision. And really great shooters

plant their feet so that they have balance when they receive the ball. Imagination flows into your game when you devise your own ways of combining quick hands, good eyes, and good feet.

SOMETIMES RULE CHANGES force innovations in the way the game is played. The 3-point rule is an example. By giving an extra point for a successful shot 23 feet 9 inches or more from the basket, the rule turned the game upside down. Before the 1979–80 season, the objective was to get the easiest shot, as close as possible to the basket. There was a maximum of player movement, with a premium on finesse and team coordination. Now you're more likely to see a screen-and-roll on one side of the floor, with six players standing far from the basket on the opposite side of the floor. If you don't get a clear jump shot or a layup off the screen-and-roll, you drive with the ball. If you get nowhere because of a double team, you simply kick it out to a teammate waiting for the ball behind the 3-point line. Too often, strategies are devised to get an open twenty-five-foot shot as much as to get a layup.

The 3-point rule created a whole new market for good spot shooters—players of average overall skills who could hit the open, standing twenty-five-footer with great regularity: Dell Curry of Charlotte, Steve Kerr of the Chicago Bulls, and Dale Ellis of the Seattle SuperSonics are examples. Since many of my shots as a pro were near that range, people have asked me if I wish I had played when the rule was in effect. My answer is no. What you give up in team movement and finesse is not worth what you get from a few extra points beyond the 3-point line.

IMAGINATION CAN ALSO stretch the rules, for basketball is a game of subtle felonies. Referees have a wide latitude in determining whether or not an infraction has taken place. Sometimes they will ignore the rules. For example, you have to dribble the ball with your hand on top or on the side of the ball; if you put your hand under the ball to initiate or continue the dribble, you should be charged with palming or carrying the ball. Now, increasingly in the pros, referees don't call it. They allow players to palm the ball, particularly on the crossover dribble. That change has allowed players with great quickness, such as Stephon Marbury of the Minnesota Timberwolves and Allen Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers, to use the crossover move with great effectiveness.

Players can use their creativity to shape the referee's interpretation or even to avoid his detection. I can remember the excitement I felt when I was exposed to this game within the game. Jerry West told me how to hook my left hand around an opponent's leg to get leverage when I whirled around him. Ed Macauley showed me how to place my foot to the side of my man before I received a pass, so that when I got the ball I would have already beaten him by half a step. Macauley also showed me how to maintain awareness of where my man was on defense when I wasn't looking at him directly: keeping my hands in constant touch with him as if I were reading Braille. I learned by watching Cliff Hagan and Elgin Baylor how to fend off an opponent's attempt to block your shot by using your free hand to protect the ball from his reach.

The writer Frank Deford once noted in an article on Boston Celtics swing man Frank Ramsey that about 20 percent of a team's points in the average game come from free throws. The more you can sucker your opponent into committing fouls, the

more points you can add to your team total. Ramsey was full of tricks. He could draw an offensive foul by placing his hand behind his opponent's back (the hand away from the referee) and pulling him forward so that it would appear that the opponent had intentionally run into him. On defensive rebounds, if his opponent had nudged him under the basket so that he couldn't get to the ball, he would simply fling up his arms and fall forward, looking for all the world like a man who had been pushed. Often the referee agreed. He also perfected the art of getting an opponent to jump to block an anticipated shot and then leaning into him while he's suspended helpless in the air so that he grazes you on his way down and your way up for the shot. That way he doesn't disturb your shot and the referee is likely to call a foul on him. (This was a technique I used to great advantage throughout my college years; in the pros, fewer calls came my way, so I abandoned it.) You see moves like this every day in the college and NBA season—they involve creative deception and challenge the referee's skills as aggressively as those of the opponent. (Michael Jordan's heroic last-second shot in the 1998 NBA finals was aided by the clever use of his left hand to nudge Bryon Russell off balance just before Jordan pulled up and hit the shot.)

Much attention has focused on trash talk in recent years, particularly its ugly and hostile varieties, but using talk to disturb your opponent's concentration has been around a long time. As a high school player, I used to play a foul-shooting game in which it was permissible to do anything to the shooter except touch him or obstruct his vision. The purpose of shouting at him, making jokes at his expense, and insulting him was to get him to break his concentration, and it was good preparation for the pressures of the game itself. The distinction worth drawing is between flagrant talk for show, which the crowd sees, and subtle talk for results,

which it doesn't see. Talk for results takes many forms, but it usually means trying to rattle your opponent. It could be Sam Jones of the Celtics saying to Wilt Chamberlain, after Wilt failed to block a shot, "Too late, baby!" Or it could be Bill Russell looking at me during a foul shot and then at Satch Sanders, who was guarding me, and saying exasperatedly, "Come on, Satch, don't let *him* score!" It could be Michael Jordan saying to a rookie on the opposing team before closing his eyes and making the free throw, "Hey, rook, I bet you can't do this." It could be Larry Bird telling his opponent before the game, in the hallway leading to the court, "I think I'm really feeling good tonight. I think I might go for about fifty." Or Bird, when Michael Jordan in his early years guarded him on a switch, saying, "I got a little one—give me the ball!" Or Bird during one holiday game, scoring on his man and then wishing him a Merry Christmas. Sportswriter Peter DeJonge has written, "What made Bird untouchable was the seamless connection between his dribbling and babbling, as if his tongue were one more incredibly coordinated limb. As he backed his defender down, Bird would matter-of-factly tell him where they were going and what was going to happen when they got there, going on to explain that his being able to do exactly what he wanted, and the defender being helpless to do anything but watch, was the reason for the huge discrepancy in their salaries. In the middle of this combination radio play-by-play and TV color commentary, without any telltale grunt, the ball would be flying toward the basket with the concluding remarks: 'Don't even turn around. It's all net.'"

* * *

JERRY LUCAS WAS ANOTHER player who understood this aspect of the game. When an opponent shot a free throw, we

sometimes signaled a play that called for me to fake a move to the far side of the court and instead receive a pass and take an easy jumper behind a Lucas screen. As I began my move to the other side, Jerry would shout angrily, "Get out of here, Bill! Get the hell to the other side! Go!" My man, hearing this, would retreat a couple of steps in anticipation of my move across court, and then I would quickly step behind the screen for an uncontested shot. Or during a game Jerry and I would converse in gibberish, pretending that we understood each other. "Eee yah see motch eee kah!" I would yell. "Puto rass dee yah!" Lucas would reply. The bewildered defender often would retreat a step, his concentration broken as he tried to anticipate more alternatives than were possible. (What were they saying? It must mean something!) While he was thinking, the ball would go through the basket.



SOMETIMES IT'S IMAGINATION that motivates you in the first place. It enables you to dream. At one time or another, every kid who picks up a basketball pictures himself or herself a court star.

The basket in my backyard was put up when I was ten years old. A year later, the wooden poles were replaced by a steel pole and a metal fan-shaped backboard. My parents also laid down a twelve-by-sixteen-foot strip of asphalt and put spotlights on the garage so I could practice after it got dark. I felt like a king, presiding over the Cadillac of backyard courts in our small town. When I was in the fifth and sixth grades, you could find me out there every day after school shooting until dinner. In the winter, I'd wear gloves and a wool hat and two sweatshirts. Occasionally neighborhood kids would join me in a game of H-O-R-S-E. After a while there'd be enough of us to play a half-court game. Be-

cause I was taller than the others, we made it a condition of play that I couldn't shoot any closer than ten feet from the basket. Backyard one-on-one games were where the juices of competition first rose within me. Pride prevented me from calling a foul against my opponent when he pushed me or hacked my arm. Contact led to more contact, but it stopped short of an exchange of blows. Controlling my temper in such circumstances was just one of the lessons I learned in the backyard.

Sometimes my mother would come outdoors to challenge me. Not too long ago, I was looking through an old photo album and came across a picture of her, dark-eyed and beautiful, with her shining brown hair pulled back from her face, sitting with her teammates on the 1927 Herculaneum High School basketball team, of which she and her best friend, "Nooks" Dugan, were the unquestioned stars. Twenty years after her high school triumphs, she still considered herself a player, and she still wanted to win when we played one on one. Once when I was in the seventh grade, she gave me a little push going for the steal, and I pushed her back—whereupon, to my horror, she slipped and cracked her skull on the asphalt. I was petrified, but she got up, just smiled, and called it quits—at least for that day.

I remember the Saturday afternoon in 1958 when the St. Louis Hawks beat the Boston Celtics for the NBA championship. In my mind, I was one of them. I was Bob Pettit shooting the standing jumper, or Cliff Hagan mixing his sweeping hook with reverse layups. Shortly after the game, I went out to the backyard for practice and imagined myself hitting the winning shot. "Four seconds left, three, two—Bradley shoots . . . it's good!"

Nothing unique about that. Thousands of kids all over America, on a winter afternoon at the playground, or out behind the barn, or on the driveway, imagine that they will someday score the

winning basket, maybe even in the pros. They sense they may be a step too slow, but then who knows for sure? "It's dropping today. . . . Only nets. . . . Time after time. . . . One more against the board." *Bong! Swish!* Jumper left . . . *swish!* Jumper right . . . *swish!* Left hook . . . *swish!* "Feel the ball in your hands. . . . Who does know for sure? . . . Just keep practicing. . . . Just keep shooting. . . . Maybe next year, I'll be a little taller. . . ."

Inevitably, in those moments of solitary practice, you imagined the voice of your favorite team's broadcaster. Buddy Blattner covered the St. Louis Hawks, painting vivid word pictures of the game and its players—George "the Bird" Yardley of the Fort Wayne Pistons, Maurice Stokes of Rochester, Sweetwater Clifton of the Knicks, Wilt the Stilt of Philadelphia. Sitting at my desk in my bedroom, I would tune in between, and occasionally during, my various homework assignments. (I sometimes wonder what effect that nonstop crackling play-by-play had on my Latin.) The most famous radio sportscaster of all was Marty Glickman of the New York Knicks, who was also the announcer on the annual Converse All-Star highlights film. More than a few young boys in the fifties fell asleep listening to the transistor under the pillow, lullabied, as the poet Bob Mitchell says, "by the mellifluent tones of the great Marty Glickmanese":

Now it's Braun passing to Dick McGuire,
Now back to Carl at the top of the key for a two-hand pop:
Gooooood! Like Nedick's!
Yes!
Now it's Dolph Schayes getting a pass from Seymour,
He slices to his right, he drives past Gallatin,
He lays it up, it's good and he's fouled!

IMAGINATION LOOKS FORWARD when you're a ten-year-old shooting in the driveway. When you reach an age at which you can no longer play competitively, you start looking back. Basketball, unlike golf or tennis, is only for the young. Unless you don't mind popping an Achilles tendon, you should retire from the game by age forty. A few old high school stars go longer, but most play only in their memories. Life's other tasks take over, and for some, like Rabbit Angstrom in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, there is nothing else in life that has ever quite matched the feeling you had when you were playing the game before the crowd, when you were young and a star. And then you arrive at an age when you relish life in a new and different way. The sense of lost youth is gone—the challenge now is to make the most of the time left to you—and you can more deeply appreciate the role the game has played in your life. It has become more than just memories; it has become almost an essential part of you.

Imagination allows us to escape the predictable. Artists, scientists, poets use the power of imagination every day. For those of us who found it in playing the game, it has shaped our joy in countless ways. It has enriched our experience and allowed us to feel the thrill of fresh creation. It puts us in touch with what most makes us human. Above all, it enables us to see beyond the moment, to transcend our circumstances however dire they appear, and to reply to the common wisdom that says we cannot soar by saying, "Just watch!"