

INTRODUCTION

I'm not one of those people who memorizes statistics or charts power ratings. My office colleagues often turned to me in March to help them fill out their NCAA brackets. They never asked more than once. I am terrible at guessing winners. One year, the office pool was won by the mother of one of my friends, who picked teams based on how “cute” their mascots were. She won every game.

I pick the teams I want to win, not the ones statistics tell me have a better chance. I want these teams to win because the coach has a reputation of staying in touch with his former players, or because I saw one of the team's players help up an opposing player from the floor, or because one

of their guys is leading the country in assists.

I'm an old ballplayer myself, starting point guard for Royerton High, a school in the same county as a perennial state contender. I wasn't bad. Had a nice outside shot and led the team in assists. Still hold a record for most field goals made in a final tournament in the county tourney record books. I wasn't the best guy in the conference. I wasn't even the best guy on my team.

But I was—and remain—a ballplayer, so I am also a romantic, and romantics have no place making a wager of any kind. I am a romantic because I believe that basketball, well played and well coached and, most important, well enjoyed, creates magic, a potion to which each player and coach brings an ingredient. When mixed together, under the proper conditions, something lovely and honorable happens: good, honest basketball. Will a college team be better than most because the point guard, as a nine-year-old, announced his own games as he played them in the driveway and kept shooting until he hit the game-winning shot to the roar of the imagined crowd? Will a coach have a better chance of winning a game because he visited his sixth man's sick mother in the hospital? I like to think so.

I have been a television news reporter and anchor for a very long time, and I have experienced a lot: been to a lot of places, met a lot of people, and covered a lot of notable and historic events. This is not the book most people expected me to write. Most of them thought I would write about the media, or the Middle East, or energy, or the environment, or investigative journalism. My friends and family—those who know me best—knew I would write about basketball first. They knew that because they understood that behind the facade of professional attainments and accolades, I was, and remain, the kids shooting hoops in the driveway while calling his own play-by-play for the radio audience that exists only in his mind.

And, in every game he announced, his team was trailing by one point, and time was winding down, and the ball was in his hands, and he always took the last shot (sometimes over and over again). He never grew bored by the imagined sound of the crowd erupting in cheers when he hit that jump shot at the buzzer to win the game. How many times did his imaginary teammates pick him up on their shoulders and carry him off the court? They did it every time. Whatever success I've had in my life can be traced directly back to those moments. I am a long way from my driveway back

home and the rickety hoop on the side of the garage, but I still want the ball in my hands when any game, of any kind, is on the line.

I wrote these stories over the last twenty-five years, in between reporting, coaching my daughters' basketball teams, playing in Old Timers' games and Senior Leagues, and life on and off court. If you are, or ever were, a basketball player, chances are you'll see yourself in these stories. They were written for you. If you weren't a ballplayer, you might, after reading these stories, look in the mirror and see a team player staring back at you.

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