

LESSONS

If life is a game, these are the rules.

Spring arrives. Basketball season ends. Things change and people move on. Coaches move on to other sports, athletes change uniforms, and fans follow their favorites into the next season of excitement.

But there will always be some of us who stay behind, refusing—no, unable—to move on. Some of us will stay behind in lonely, dim gymnasiums for one last shot, just one more hour or two. Some of us will stay forever. That's because we sense somewhere deep inside us that being a basketball player is not just what we do—it is who we are. What we understand of ourselves we learned on the court. Not lessons in hook-steps and lay-ups, but lessons in life.

One of the bestselling books of all time is titled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. The book is sweet and thoughtful, and it suggests the fundamental courtesies taught to us when we were five or six could serve us pretty well as adults. For some of us who spent more time with coaches than teachers and more time with basketballs than books, we learned the most lasting and usable lessons in the gym. The fundamental principles of basketball are, essentially, the principles of a decent life.

LESSON ONE: We play on a team. No matter how great our physical and mental gifts, we cannot inbound the ball to ourselves. We cannot initiate even the simplest play without help. Needing someone is not weakness. It is fundamental to basketball, and to life. Five players with dazzling individual skills who do not play as a team will usually lose. Average ballplayers who share, cooperate, and play to one another's strengths, and who work unselfishly, will discover the magic of a total that is greater than the sum of its parts.

LESSON TWO: The best statistic is an assist. Unselfishness is its own reward. Anyone can shoot. Lots of people can hit. Few have the strength of character to resist the urge to help themselves into the spotlight and instead focus it on someone else. The tallest member of the team is the one who bends to help another.

LESSON THREE: Losing is a part of winning. No one likes to lose and no one should be asked to. But there can be no wins unless somebody posts a loss. Losses tell you something about yourself: primarily, how to improve. Avoiding responsibility for one's role in a loss is self-defeating. Blaming others destroys cooperation and lets us avoid the elemental truth that we all need improvement. Accept responsibility and grow.

LESSON FOUR: Games are won at practice. Anyone who holds back his or her best until the pressure is on will lose. Consistency derives from practice, confidence from preparation, instinct from repeti-

tion. In order to be at your best under pressure you must prepare at game speed.

LESSON FIVE: Control the tempo. Knowing when to step up the pressure and when to slow it down is essential in both basketball and life. It is almost always a mistake to increase the tempo of your game when forced into it by the opposition. Answer pressure with calm. Answer panic with level-headedness. Don't be forced to play someone else's game. Play your own with confidence.

LESSON SIX: The best advice sometimes sounds like criticism. No one likes to be singled out for criticism, especially in a crowd. Our reaction is often anger and denial. Usually, it is simply embarrassment. Suffer it and then address the fault. There is little growth until we figure out what we are doing wrong. Sometimes we figure it out for ourselves. More often, someone else has to point it out for us. Either way, use the information to grow.

LESSON SEVEN: Anticipate. Success rests upon your ability to think ahead. Calculating the array of options others may exercise makes you prepared for anything. A person who thinks one, even two, moves or passes ahead will earn many more opportunities than a person to whom everything comes as a surprise.

LESSON EIGHT: Fellowship. We learn that there is more to the game than performance. We allow our hearts to fill with more than pride. We are drawn together by a common idea. We share the extremes of experience and we begin to play interdependent roles in one another's lives. Not everyone will understand and appreciate us. But we will understand and appreciate one another.

LESSON NINE: Time-out. There are times in life and in basketball to stop. No points are given for continuing past the point of exhaustion or effectiveness. Time-outs are no admission of failure. Use them effectively to rest and to analyze your next

moves. The smartest time-outs are those called just before it becomes obvious to everyone else that one is needed.

LESSON TEN: Love. You can't simply like what you are doing and do it to its fullest. You cannot demand of yourself dedication unless you love the object of your dedication. You cannot love something until you have come to respect and appreciate its detail, and until you have sacrificed a part of yourself for it.

Some of us have learned these lessons and some of us still think of ourselves primarily as basketball players. We may have chosen for ourselves the role of a banker, a cook, a lawyer, a plumber, or a journalist, but we wake up mornings and look in the mirror and see a basketball player. We play our lives by the rules of the game, and every day we employ the lessons we learned on the court.

As the gyms empty out, some of us will stay behind. Sure, we'll fish, knock out some fly balls, ride bikes, throw a few spirals, swim, or run a mile or two, but for us, the season never ends. Not until we have dribbled off this mortal coil. No, for us there is only one season. Some people call it basketball. We call it life.