

Basketball – A Reflection

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When I asked Rod Janzen what he wanted me to write about, he simply said “basketball.” Since it is a rather broad subject and Rod’s mandate gave me a lot of space, I feel like an undisciplined pony introduced to a vast pasture. And, for someone who is used to writing in short bursts, as in scouting reports or bad poetry (where is Jean Janzen when I need her?) the task was somewhat daunting. A scouting report’s emphasis on “taking away Kyrie Irving’s right hand drive” now must be expanded into something more profound, or at least more interesting.

Hence, I will go back to the beginnings of basketball for me—Conejo Elementary School, third grade, weather-worn wooden backboards, rims with no nets, heaving the ball at the hoop with no discernable technique. And as the ball moved through the rim, to my surprise what followed was joy, satisfaction, a sense of pride, and immediate happiness. Wow, I actually accomplished something! The feeling persisted, shot after shot, as it still does to this day. How can one explain it? Is it the innate giddiness of play? Is it the psychology of a shy farm kid trying to find some confidence in life, some form of acceptance? Is it the fluidity of the act, the kinesthetic “amen” of motion? Who knows, but it felt good. To think I could make a living out of this still boggles my mind.

From this beginning, my basketball experiences became a magic carpet ride, at least when I could detach myself from the work part and truly see the carpet. Working in basketball has allowed me to travel widely, meet interesting people, experience the satisfaction of cross-cultural exchanges, work with marvelously gifted athletes, and develop meaningful friendships throughout the world. In short, the experiences of being a basketball professional, working in this simple context of sport, have been quite amazing.

Basketball at its core is all about people. Regardless of race, socioeconomic status, height, weight, gender, or nationality, the most bizarre groups of people can, when teammates, forget about most everything and forge a bond. Laughter, sharing, and respect are the byproducts. Since it is community-like, players must depend on each other; they must work in concert. The truths found in basketball play are universal. The game is now played in all corners of the world, by all classes of people, on all kinds of surfaces, and in most any political

environment, stable or unstable. I recall several years ago reading the results of the Syrian Basketball League's championship round on the website "Eurobasket." Iran has a national league that includes accomplished players from the United States. Venezuela, currently in turmoil, has one of the best professional leagues in South America. Despite suppressive regimes, instability, and chaos, the game continues to be played.

The thread that binds is the joy embraced by humans as they play the game, a joy that can shred pretense and shed the cloak of racism. Is the effect lasting? Perhaps not always, but it is an opening, a crack in one's personal cosmic egg that "allows the light to shine in," as Leonard Cohen once said. We are, in spite of any theory to the contrary, created equal. This pervasive sense of equality surfaces in the playing of a game—the only thing that matters is who can play well and who puts their heart, soul, and mind into the effort. This form of respect is universal; outstanding performance can lead to a form of awe, as when we view a raptor in flight. Awe, that stepping away from our own predictable, dusty mindsets, to be thrilled by the spectacle before us. What a delight!

The connectedness, in an emotional sense, has its counterpart within the fundamental foundation of the game. Offensively, it is about movement, sharing the ball, cutting, screening, and awareness as to what teammates are doing. The ideal is for the five players on the court to act in concert and for the individual to show his or her skill, while at the same time attempting to "make a teammate better." The Golden State Warriors, my current team, do this quite well. And it may be a relevant axiom we could apply to our neighbors. The Chinese philosophy of the "red thread" suggests that humans, upon encountering one another, form a union symbolized by a red thread, running through each individual and forever connecting. I like that concept, especially as it relates to my favorite part of the game, defense. In defensive basketball, whenever one defender moves, the other four defenders must adjust and thus move in a synchronized manner. The basketball term is "being tied together with a rope." Perhaps the Chinese concept is more complete. It seems to suggest more than physical connectedness. The point of my musing is that the sport of basketball is based on emotional and physical connectedness. It is the lifeblood of successful performance. The stronger the bond, the better the team, either red thread or rope.

The league I work in, the National Basketball Association, has a marvelous history of inclusiveness. The league is comprised of many African-Americans

and a significant number of international players. In addition, a few female referees have blown a whistle during the past twenty years. Multiple opportunities exist for our players after retirement within the league's business structure. Coaching, management, ownership, and broadcasting are possibilities. Not coincidentally, the NBA has modeled itself after the team concept of inclusiveness.

The international dimension is a fascinating aspect of our league, a literal shrinking of the world in the basketball sense. The international personalities have been colorful, bringing an uplifting perspective as well as an individual uniqueness; 18.3 percent of the league is comprised of international players. Many are reminiscent of players from a past era. Their work ethic, candor, and world views have been a blessing to everyone. This aspect of the NBA story has been nurtured by a wonderful woman, Kim Bohuny. She and her gifted staff head up the NBA's international sector. They conduct basketball events throughout the world and mentor international players once they enter the league. She is a seasoned and effective international "diplomat" working in a basketball world. Her "black book" would be the envy of young politicians and her rapport with significant international figures the envy of older ones. She has helped me and many others experience the beauty and complexities of the world, much like the international players have done for us. For example, having a meal with Ognjen Kuzmic, a former Warrior now playing in Spain, as he tells the story of his Bosnian childhood, is sobering. It is a story of sadness, hope, and achievement, the same story many of our American players have lived as well. It is a message we all need to hear.

Red Auerbach, the highly successful coach of the Boston Celtics, said, "The game is simple, don't give up the ball, go get the ball." Michelangelo (this guy did not coach basketball!) noted "the simple becomes the sophisticated." Both insights are relevant to my closing thoughts—it is a simple game yet the environment and nuance has gotten quite sophisticated. NBA players are now part of a fusion between sport and entertainment. Their role as public figures expands. And for followers of the game, on all levels of play, basketball has become a source of joy, identification, emotion, and healing.

I have noticed this phenomenon for the past three years. Our team has connected its followers in much the same manner as our team connects with each other during a game. The poetry of play on court has morphed into a poetry

off court. It is well-constructed verse in which the writer and the reader each fuel the other. It is the human aspect of the sport, observed in the performance and attitude of our players, which fosters this fascinating union. And in some inexplicable way it becomes a healing agent for the elderly, the young, the ill, and perhaps others. I witnessed this in the life of my mother and recently with so many people I have met or I already knew.

As one who has worked in sport my entire life, I have sometimes been critical of the purpose of it all. I see more clearly now that we are a fusion of sport and entertainment, and when compared to those who provide the nuts, bolts, and foundation of our culture, we are a very, very small piece of society. Yet I must conclude this simple game has a greater purpose than I ever imagined.

The end of recess bell at Conejo Elementary rings. I can almost hear the voice of Ms. Brickley, who teaches me so much, as I get off two more shots and walk, with a smile on my face, to the classroom.