

SAMPLES

- from the Preface-

This book is an anthem to pickup basketball. What is pickup? My personal definition goes like this.

You show up at any gym with a basketball court, to see if there's a game going on. If there is, and other guys are waiting to get in the next game, you ask if you can join them. If you're lucky enough to be 'picked up,' everyone quickly learns if you got game... No crowd. No huge TV screen for replays. Just players. The court. The game.

And so the ritual continues.

I didn't start playing pickup until I was nearly 30, but it captured me in a way no other sport ever did. I had previously dabbled in baseball, football, tennis, and squash, but was mediocre at them all and played with little passion or joy.

Pickup basketball was utterly different. Once exposed to it, I instantly became an addict – and it has engaged my body, mind, and spirit for more than half my life. If age and fate hadn't interfered, I'd still be at it.

Fast Break records both what pickup ball gave me (a lot)– and what it cost me (also a lot).

- from “My Hardwood History”

At the University of Arizona in Tucson from 1985 until 1991, my wife Judy conducted brain research on a government grant, while I filled my days with paperwork as the Assistant Dean of Social and Behavioral Sciences. But for an hour or so at noon, three days a week, I hit the hardwood and reveled in testosterone joy in a pickup game with a few faculty members and some students.

Now and then Steve Kerr, point guard of the UA Wildcats– later of the Chicago Bulls and coach of the NBA Golden State Warriors– would join us in a game or two. He played at only about half of his ability, but it was still a thrill to be on the court with him, and the fact that he was balling with gym rats like us speaks volumes to what pickup ball is all about.

One day the Cats arrived for practice just as our last game ended, and they agreed to play us, in a game to 21. Get the picture? Rag-tag pickups vs. a team that soon won the NCAA championship, featuring future NBA stars like Kerr and Sean Elliott. But because we were going full-bore and the Cats were just goofing around, we got off to a 10-2 lead. (I scored two of ours.)

Then some idiot talked trash at them, and they began playing for real. They ran off 19 straight. Even worse, *we never scored again*. Every attempt was blocked, swatted, stolen, or an air ball. The Cats had reminded us of who we were – and who they were.

How Many Games?

How many games played – a thousand, two thousand?
How many shots made? And how many shots missed?

Nobody cares. No one keeps track. No one says to you:
Boys, some of you have a shot at NCAA - Division I.

Because you don't – and don't care. You only care about
shutting down your man on D, setting a clean pick,

crashing the boards, releasing in a fast break, hitting
the open shot, or grabbing another rebound – and never

talking trash, and never hanging your head. This is not
just a game, or a sport – it's the Church of Basketball.

Career Day

If you're hot in the warm-up, then you're cold in the game –
that's the rule for you for years –but today you have great touch
in the pre-game and it miraculously carries over into the game.
Need a stop-and-pop from deep two-point range? *No problem.*
How about a sly running half-hook? *Take that, Kareem!*
Or a short, flying finger-roll? *Anytime, boys, anytime.* And this

is called having a 'hot hand' – but it's really a whole-body thing,
almost an out-of-body thing. You seem to see someone with your name
walking on air, kissing the glass, making a sweet behind-the-back pass
to a cutter, like it was nothing. You long for this game, this day, to last
forever, but know that just ain't in the cards. But you had it this once,
the magic. A pat on your back, and someone says: "Career day."

- October 1986

Don't Go to the Gym

Boys rise up in old men, wings begin to sprout
at their backs. The ball turns in the darkening air.

- B. H. Fairchild, "Old Men Playing Basketball"

Will I blow out a knee, or break a bone? Do I dare to
eat a peach, try a running floater, a 180 reverse, chase

down a loose ball? No, No. All risk disablement, years
of being tended like a child, just some careless old fool.

On the other hand, I won two HORSE games yesterday –
for a few hours I was The King again, and life was good.

- November 2024

Ten for Ten

A full-court game is raging one court away and Bart lets fly his patented circus shot – a running one-hander from just past mid-court. When it drops in, a chorus of hoots and groans erupts. But here on my court, I'm only shooting free throws.

I dribble hard once, twice, spin the ball on my palm, grip it tight, breathe in, flex and –

Launch shot #1 –
swish, nothing but net

and launch #2 –
off the glass, drops in

and launch #3 –
rattles the rim but goes in

feeling it, smooth, launch #4 –
swish

bend, dribble, grip it, spin it, launch #5 –
clanks the rim hard, drops in

and launch #6 –
spins on the rim, swirls in

launch #7 – snap wrist, flick fingers –
swish

bend, spin it, focus, launch #8 –
clanks loud, drops in

needs a higher arc, launch #9 –
swish

don't think don't think launch #10 –
swish

Take me now, Jesus.

- December 2024