

Lagniappe

The author's vow to continue playing pickup basketball until he's 50 has been tested by arthroscopic knee surgery and a doctor's suggestion to stop playing. Our author promptly sought a second opinion.

Hanging on to his sneakers

By Jack Styczynski

The rain came in buckets and everyone scattered. For all the other hoopers at the Rye Rec outdoor courts, that meant jumping in their cars and heading home. For me, a committed bicyclist, it meant waiting out the deluge in a nearby port-a-potty – my best and most pungent option with the park's clubhouse closed for renovations.

Once the storm passed and I emerged from olfactory purgatory, my bike was missing. I scoured the park, to no avail. Could someone really have leveraged a downpour to pilfer a 20-year-old bicycle? Adding insult to my nostrils' injury? When I informed police, they were similarly perplexed.

As it turned out, Bobby, a park attendant who patrolled the linksless grounds with a 2 iron, had put the bike in the closed clubhouse and headed home himself. I went back to retrieve it the next day.

To discover somebody had swiped my basketball.

That's just one of the many memories I have from playing pickup ball for nearly two decades at Rye Rec. Why am I still hoopin' at age 47 when almost all of my contemporaries have mothballed their sneakers? Because I long ago promised myself to keep going until I was at least 50. And because I still can, no problem.

Not to suggest I'm any kind of legend. I have a reputation for being fast and tireless, but that's about it. My shot was once pretty good, but is now no better than average.

Basically, I hold my spot on the court as a "garbage man," using my speed to score easy buckets and frustrate kids not used to seeing actual defense. I'm rarely the best player in a game, rarely the worst. The overall record of my teams is probably around .500.

You might say my real victory is outlasting the hundreds of guys from the previous generation that I've played with over the years, but it's a bittersweet win since I do miss them. The overwhelming majority, I don't even know their last names, because that's just the way it is in pickup ball. The ones I do know are often higher-profile folks.

Earl Johnson, who played college ball at Rutgers and Iona, was a regular for several years in Rye. Earl

would grab my shorts to keep me from jumping out on the fast break. Rashamel Jones, who won a national championship at UConn, would occasionally come by (and dominate). Rod Thorn's son played there. More recently, Mike D'Antoni's son appeared, with the coach himself watching.

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I miss the unrenowned guys most, though. Pete and I would play full-court one-on-one after everyone else was done just to prove what iron men we were. Claudio and I would whip out a ferocious two-man press when we played together, essentially unheard of in pickup ball. It didn't always work, but the day we used it to come back and win a game from a seemingly hopeless deficit lives on in my mind, euphorically.

The list continues. Big John, Fireman Joe, Hook Shot Ed, Lacrosse Mike, Ant, Beef, Charlie, Conrad, Dave, Eric, Fred, Hart, Hawk, Hick, Jerome, Jimmy, Leon, Marc, Pat, Phil, Porky, Ray, Robbie, Rohan, Sharone, Steve, Stu, T-Cal, Todd, Tommy, Ty, Wayne, Will ...

Or what about Al? Al shot the ball approximately once per blue moon, but somehow became the de facto commissioner of our group, picking teams and arranging games. The first time I played with Al, our team lost, and he took the opportunity to give me some tips afterward. I took the opportunity to tell him what he could do with himself.

We remain friends to this day, and

I do know his last name. He took a head count of our crew after 9/11, and fortunately, determined it was still fully intact. God bless him.

Nobody tops Kevin, however. Kevin was the first person I met at Rye Rec and the one who told me when to come to get in the best games. We still have

an ongoing one-on-one battle that has weathered 100-degree heat, impending thunderstorms and almost everything else summer has to offer. That is, when we weren't taking advantage of a balmy winter day. Kevin definitely leads our series, but I win enough to keep him from getting bored, for sure. When his sweet shot is on, it is I who gets bored, not to mention flustered. Virtually unstoppable. I'm almost glad he doesn't play full-court anymore.

For me, playing full-court has always been where it's at, because my non-stop running is best suited to that. "They can't run with us" is my favorite trash talk boast.

Truthfully, I have a body built more for middle-distance running than basketball – and might have had greater success in that sport – but I was never interested. I just want to hoop, as much as possible for as

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My goal of making it to 50 was most seriously threatened when I was 36. For many years, my right knee would buckle and I knew there was loose stuff floating around inside, but then it would settle into a benign spot and I'd be good to go. In August of 2002, the settling stopped and the knee would just not unbuckle. I had arthroscopic surgery that fall to clean it out, and the doctor told me I'd be better off quitting if I didn't want to risk early osteoarthritis.

He might as well have told me I had six months to live.

I rehabbed from the operation with noted sports recovery therapist Abby Sims—wife of sportscaster Dave Sims—and former Dallas Cowboys safety Monty Hunter. I didn't tell them what the doctor said. They worked me out as if there was no question I'd be returning to the court. My motto was, "Can't quit now."

There are 2-year-olds out there whose backsides I have to kick when they're 16."

Except I didn't use the word "backsides."

After a winter of cold-sweat dreams about playing ball again, I went back to the doctor. I told him I felt great, which was the truth. Summer was coming and the guys at Rye Rec didn't even know why my 2002 season had been cut short. The doc gave me his blessing to resume, as long as I kept the weight off so that the knee wouldn't undergo any greater stress. At age 21, I reached my adult weight of 147 pounds. At the time of my surgery, I weighed 147. Today, 147.

In that sense, pickup basketball has been my ultimate motivation to maintain healthfulness. My first day back on the court after surgery, I killed it, in hoops

parlance. And my knee still feels good, knock on wood. Without my mentioning it, nobody would know I went under the knife.

But the whole experience does remind me of what I don't miss about playing with "older" guys—their braces, wraps, crazy pre-game stretching routines and, topping the list, whining about aches and pains. Keep the weight off, and don't be sedentary the rest of the week, and all that probably goes away. (Down from my soap box.)

Anyway, I now have no choice about my competition. The previous generation is out at Rye Rec; the next generation is in. I had proceeded as if I'd play with

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my contemporaries in perpetuity, but I noticed our summer hoop seasons kept getting shorter and shorter (we once played from April to October, sweeping spring puddles and autumn acorns off the court) until finally they vanished altogether. At that point, I just joined in with the kids, be they half my age or younger. Rumor has it some of the old crew now plays indoors to preserve joint health.

Even I admit concrete courts are tougher on the body than hardwood, but I'll always remain partial to the outdoor game. First and foremost, I find it to be a more spontaneous, free-flowing endeavor. Furthermore, the associated obstacles add charm. Will wind be a factor? Must shots be adjusted to account for bent or tight rims? How long can it sprinkle before play must be stopped? Is depth perception affected by a lack of nets, and if so, is it cool to hang your own twine? Can sneakers hold grip on a surface chalked up by summer campers writing their names and playing tic-tac-toe? Crucial questions, all.

Plus, I'm cheap. Indoor basketball usually requires some sort of membership or entrance fee. It's humbling enough that I'm not paid to play for a living. Now someone wants to charge me for the right? No, sir. The compromise position is to play outside, where no money changes hands.

Thus, my annual hoops calendar is split into two seasons – play when it's warm and watch when it's cold.

When I took up playing with the youngsters, I got a polite awakening. My one-on-one nemesis Kevin has sons their age, so some referred to him in conversation as "Mr. O'Neill." I laughed. Or cried. I'm not sure.

Regardless, as pickup ballers, they have no right to know my last name, so they're forced to call me Jack. Unless they call me "old man," which occasionally happens.

Going against kids, you automatically encounter less defending and more running, which actually works for me. By default, it makes me one of the stingiest defenders on the court.

And I'm definitely more potent of-

fensively in transition, even at 47. So there's plenty of opportunity for wits and giggles.

In one instance last year, the sideline peanut gallery yelled "dunk it!" when I had a breakaway. My response after laying the ball in was, "I'm 46 years old; I'm not gonna dunk it." Left unsaid was that I wouldn't have been slamming it at 26 or 16 either.

Another time one of the kids told me he was a freshman. I joked that I was a sophomore. I contend that while I might not be in school, I am indeed sophomore. But they undoubtedly consider me a senior. As in citizen.

Thankfully, respect for their elders doesn't seem to be an issue. I was tickled to see one of them sporting a Michael Jordan Bulls jersey, realizing a teen would have been a toddler when M.J. himself was donning such.

Conversely, I felt bad for another who spent money on a "Linsanity" Knicks T-shirt. The contrast should teach the kids to wait a bit before deciding on their idols, or at least their attire.

Among them, Kamal is the new de facto commissioner, and a better ballplayer than Al. (Sorry, Al.) I call him "the pied piper," because when he shows up, everybody follows. Kamal thinks I foul too much, but I think he needs another decade or two on the court to learn what true hacking is. What I do is barely a love tap by geriatric standards. No animosity though; he's said he loves my love for the game, and the feeling's mutual.

Conor is another notable member of the new crew, one of the few who doesn't need Kamal to set his schedule. He's a serious baller, the only person I've ever seen come to the park and set up cones to do individual drills when nobody else is around. When Conor's on my team, I often tell him "all 11," facetiously proposing he score all our points.

I've also jested that in the future, he'll be the one commiserating with a cane-carrying version of myself about another hoop generation having disappeared. The youth would do well to follow his lead.

The only other lesson I wish to impart to my young brethren is that when real men hoop, every bucket counts as one point, whether from two feet out or 30. None of this malarkey that shots beyond the 3-point arc are worth two. It's a better game without everyone tempted to dial long distance. If you're concerned it will make games to 11 or 15 too long when somebody's got next, then just play "straight eight," as we did back in the day. I'll stop there before I sound like I'm telling the whippersnappers to get off my lawn.

Fact is, I enjoy playing with them more than I ever expected. I especially appreciate that they're happy to use either of the park's two courts, rather than labeling one "the J.V. court," leaving it dormant or dissed on crowded days in the past. Missed or not, my generation didn't always have the market cornered on intelligence.

Apart from the players, some other things have changed since I first came to Rye Rec. Both courts were upgraded several years ago—the rims are now perfect, the nets all in place. In the clubhouse, Angela has replaced Bobby as park attendant, and maybe because she doesn't wield a golf club, nobody feels obligated to appease her with a bottle of liquor at the end of the summer.

So how much longer will I play?

I can think of only one way to express it.

There are still two-year-olds out there whose backsides I have to kick when they're 16.

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