

A Weekly Ritual, a Lifetime of Camaraderie

By BILL GLOVIN

IF I had a dollar for every time I was told someone my age shouldn't be playing basketball anymore, I'd probably have enough cash to buy a court-side seat to a New Jersey Nets game.

At age 54, I'm the first one to admit that I'm not what I used to be on the court (not that I was all that much to begin with). Still, for a balding, chicken-legged, sports underachiever like myself, knowing that my two weekly games of hoops are ahead of me puts a little bounce in my step.

Where else can a Baby Boomer turn an hour of serious exercise into fun and — on that rare occasion — still bask in the glory of a game-winning shot?

For most of the 10 to 15 regulars who meet, basketball is a convenient and much-needed counterbalance to our sedentary jobs. Once play begins, all the day-to-day stuff that too often consumes us disappears. I play in two full-court games every week. The first is a lunchtime game for faculty and staff on the New Brunswick campus of Rutgers University, where I work; the other an over-40 game on Tuesday nights in an elementary school gym in the suburbs. In both games, a wide variety of cultures and professions are represented.

Whether you mow grass or cure cancer is irrelevant; game and character trump everything else. At the same time, you can tell a lot about a person by the way he conducts himself on the court. We are all constantly evaluating one another's strengths, weaknesses, experience and effort.

Last names are rarely used and nicknames common, especially if you're a Michael or a John. Let's see. There's Bald John, Old John and regular John; Mikes include Young Mike, Old Mike and Big Mike. But there is also Speedy, Dr. Jeff, HK, Stork and Pookie. Speedy isn't as quick as HK, but he came to the game first. Once a nickname sticks, there's no going back.

Players are always drifting in and out of both games. New opportunities, caring for sick parents, and injuries are most often the cause. Almost everyone invariably suffers some kind of malady: jammed fingers, sprained ankles, shoulder separations — you name it.

Eighteen years ago, at age 36, my own athletic mortality stared me in the face when I tore the anterior cruciate ligament in my left knee. I opted for the difficult surgery and spent a good 15 months in rehab. I was recently on the disabled list for two months when a teammate got pushed while driving to the basket and rolled into my knee. Luckily, an orthopedist determined it was only a sprain and recommended a knee brace and pre- and postgame Advil — the aging hoopster's best friends.

In the last six months, Mark the Geology Professor had his

nose broken by an overzealous elbow; Young Mike took a dive and cut his forearm; and even Super Sam, an associate professor of molecular biology and biochemistry who never slows down, limped off the court with what appeared to be a strained Achilles. Still, hope springs eternal for the aging hoopster and, more often than not, the player comes back.

Every regular hoops game, I've come to learn, has its share of characters. In my lunchtime college game, no one has a bigger personality than Larry from Admissions. Larry learned the game on the playgrounds of Newark and, in high school, started for St. Benedict's Prep (one of the top hoops programs in the country). Larry always brings his own brand of cockiness and trash talk to the party, an attitude that a soft, suburban player like myself rarely gets to enjoy. The Tuesday night game features Jeff the Chiropractor, a grumpy jokester who has a great shot but is terribly out of shape. Dr. Jeff, as we call him, is always whining about his nagging injuries and the fact that he needs to lose weight. He makes us laugh. If anyone needs a chiropractor, it's him.

A once-a-year ritual is an informal reunion hoops game each winter with my college buddies in

Washington. It always includes a former classmate, the newly elected Senator Mark R. Warner of Virginia, a lifelong basketball junkie with pointy, lethal elbows. As we hit our mid-50s and the number of us who are willing to run full court dwindles, we're encouraging the distinguished senator — whom we call Warnie — to invite a fellow basketball enthusiast, President Obama, to join us.

Holding court with colleagues, friends and strangers.

Having not yet had the pleasure of a presidential no-look pass, I can safely say that the player in all my games that I most admire is Old Mike, a rail thin, goateed, 72-year-old psychologist from the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. His "Basketball Is Life" T-shirt says it all. Leave Old Mike unguarded on the outside and he'll burn you; his smooth left-handed hook shot has ended many a contest. He's also the last person you want to shoot against if your team loses and you have to make a foul shot

to earn your way into the next game. Mike has probably missed only a handful of free throws since the 1960s.

The wide gap in ages among players occasionally causes problems. When Wally, a 57-year-old dean with gimpy knees, recently collided with Jeremy, a 32-year-old computer services staffer, everyone held his breath. Jeremy uses the boundless energy he keeps bottled up on work days to cover me with a rabid intensity. Poor Wally looked as if a New York taxi had hit him.

My lunchtime game gives me little time for conversation, and rarely have I gotten to know someone beyond the pleasantries and locker room banter. I realized last fall, however, that sometimes anonymity falls away when, after playing alongside Old John on a Thursday, I opened the newspaper on Saturday and came across an obituary that said John Kalafat, a 63-year-old Rutgers psychologist, had died of a heart attack on Friday.

I knew John only as a gentle soul with a clunky knee brace and a fierce determination to play for as long as he could. There was no photo with the obit, but I knew it was him when his wife was quoted as saying that one of his favorite things in the world was his lunchtime hoops game.



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