

REC LEAGUE

Three years ago I volunteered to coach the fourth-grade boys in our local basketball league. I did so for the usual reason men coach, because none of the other fathers would do it, even though I begged and pleaded, but they all backed away slowly, their mouths crammed with creative excuses, so I coached, so to speak, that first year, and then again the next year because none of the fathers would do it, and again last year because, heck, I had always been the coach for as long as anyone could remember, and to stay sane I kept notes about certain misadventures, like the time I started practice by making the boys run laps and then got into an interesting discussion with a dad about grilling fish and forgot about the boys until one of them threw up after running thirty laps, or the many times my players were so excited they shot at the wrong basket, or the time my point guard used such foul and reprehensible language to the referee that we had to call two time-outs in a row we were laughing so hard, or the time a crow hopped into the gym and everybody freaked out, or the time a player on another team put his cell phone in his jock and when a pass hit him amidst his phone rang, or the kid we had one year who could just *not* get the idea of dribbling the ball down pat and ran with it everywhere his arm out like a running back fending off defenders, or the game we played one time that was as close to perfect as I think I will ever see on this holy earth, my boys sprinting and actually playing defense and hitting the boards in such creative exuberant fashion that I leaned back in my rickety folding chair in the echoing gym and wanted to cry for reasons that remain murky to me.

There were other reasons to cry; boys with moms who lived in one house and dads who lived in another, boys who didn't see much of their moms and dads, boys without moms or dads, boys who were so clearly happy and safe at practice and games because maybe they weren't very happy or safe in the world beyond basketball, and the game and its trappings were sweet refugees for them; we take family life and communal warmth for granted way more than we should, and one thing coaching gave me was a greater respect for the tendrils of community, the neighborliness of a town, the way people quietly help each other out, the way it really does take a village to raise a kid right.

But mostly coaching was hilarious and poignant. I saw some boys grow more than a foot taller. I spent hundreds of hours with them in all the grade school gyms there are in my town. I met *a lot* of excellent janitors. I made boys run and laugh, which are good things to do. They made me listen to their horrendous thumping music, which isn't as bad as I thought it would be. We talked about politics and books and girls and burgers, all riveting subjects. They brought me back to the sinuous quicksilver geometry of basketball, the most American of games, with its energy and violence and grace and joy and competitive drive, its swing and rhythm and zest.

They gave me one last gift, those boys, near the end of my last season, when a kid got the ball, a gentle sweet kid who never played the game before in his life, and he was so excited to have the ball! and a clear lane to the basket! that he ran delightedly to the wrong basket and scored! Everyone cheered and shook his hand and he blushed and the game flew on ancient and relentless; but I sat there shivering with joy.

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Brian Doyle, Editor

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