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SPORTING

A Life of Anxiety and Basketball

By Steve Friedman
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"Just relax," my freshman high school basketball coach said when I forgot to remove my warm-up jacket. It was the middle of the third quarter, score tied. I nodded and bolted toward the court. He yanked my jersey and reminded me to report to the scorer's table first.

Finally in the game, I snatched a loose ball, launched myself from a clot of befuddled defenders and dribbled the length of the court, where I sank a layup. In the wrong basket.

Thus began my complicated, passionate and instructive love affair with basketball. The following summer, in suburban St. Louis, I stood for hours on a slab of blistered concrete, squinting at a netless hoop. I squared my shoulders, just as I had been taught. I was a dutiful student. I was also chronically anxious, with rashes that flared the week before any exam.

I bent my knees and made sure my forearm was straight as a flagpole. After every shot, I followed through, waving at the basket with labored nonchalance.

From closer than five feet, alone, I was unstoppable. "Unstoppable!" I shouted.

I was 14 years old that summer, and I often narrated my solitary crossover dribbles and pull-up jumpers. The obligatory buzzer beaters and frenzied, adoring crowds, naturally, but also commentary regarding those I was sure had snickered at my ill-advised layup. They were legion.

"They laughed at him," I said, sinking a four-and-a-half-footer. "But the kid just needed to settle down. He needed to stop thinking so much. Now he can't miss. He *cannot* miss. No one's laughing now."

At home, my mother scolded me for dribbling in her living room and rattling the china and for smearing palm prints on our eight-foot-high ceilings. I was working on my vertical explosiveness.

By Labor Day, I was regularly hitting 15-footers. The day before school began, I banked a midrange fadeaway from the left side over the meaty paws of an invisible all-state center.

"He just needed to stop thinking so much!"

Which was a problem once my sophomore season began.

I perspired a lot under the best of circumstances. During a game, on the bench, I dripped and glistened. Inserted into the final few minutes of contests already won or lost — when the stakes were nonexistent to everyone but me — I double-dribbled. I traveled. I gasped.

I developed a nasty neck rash that lasted into the spring.

The legendary basketball coach John Wooden told his U.C.L.A. teams to be quick, but not to hurry. He told them to play like champions, but not to focus on winning. Our coach's wisdom was less patchouli-scented, and every bit as confounding. "This is a critical game for us!" he thundered. "So play loose!"

But how?

"Before you meet the Buddha, chop the wood and carry the water," I read in "Siddhartha," or the "Tao Te Ching," or "The Wisdom of Insecurity," or some other piece of the woo-woo canon I began collecting the summer before my junior year. "And after you meet the Buddha, chop the wood and carry the water."

Which was fine, if you didn't have to worry about spectators, and cheerleaders, and scoreboards and what would happen if you screwed up. I worried about all of it.

Late in my junior season, late in a game, in the meaningless minutes when I was resigned to missing open shots and committing dumb fouls, I received an act of kindness so unexpected and unlikely that it still astounds me. Our point guard was a slender, unsmiling boy famous at school for his disinclination to talk, and his toughness. (He was an undersized safety on the varsity football team, but his tackles could be heard by fans in the top row of the stands.)

Before I trotted onto the court, he laid his right palm softly on my left shoulder. "Just pretend it's practice," he whispered. "You'll be fine."

Pretend it's practice? Play as if there were no one watching, as if the score didn't matter? Why not? Nothing else had worked. I bounced a pass to a cutting teammate. I grabbed a defensive rebound. I hit a jumpshot from the free throw line. Pretend it's practice! Lao Tzu had nothing on our point guard.

I improved — in practice and in games. I threw no-look passes, set cunning backdoor screens. I developed a nifty reverse dribble.

Our coach named me a starter my senior year and I averaged 14 points a game.

In college, I played in noon pickup games at the gym, as well as on an outdoor court at the apartments where graduate students lived. I experimented with a double-pump scoop shot and a nasty jump hook. I was fine.

Off the court, I worried about grades, how I would earn a living as a psychology major who wanted to be a novelist, why I felt like myself with a girl only if I didn't want to date her.

After graduation, I worried about money, bosses, women and the New Madrid Fault (a seismic zone in the Midwest).

To relax, I tried marijuana, then hallucinogens, then beer, then abstinence. I moved from St. Louis to New York City. My rashes — long dormant — returned. I attended emotional-release workshops and visited a psychotherapist. Only one thing reliably delivered relief, and I devoted at least two hours daily to it. By the time I turned 40, opponents who had seen me play denied me open looks, even from 20 feet.

But the rashes lingered. I developed insomnia. I dated and then broke up with a beautiful, kind, patient woman because I suspected that once she got to really know me (we dated for two years), she wouldn't like me.

Then even my refuge became unsafe. I stretched both Achilles' tendons badly enough that I couldn't play — or run — for six months. I broke my nose — twice. Last year, in a city league game, chasing a much younger opponent through a screen, I fell and fractured my right kneecap.

I'll turn 61 in September, and I wonder if I have another comeback in me. Sometimes I think I spend too much time wondering about everything.

I'm standing 15 feet from a hoop on a quiet road next to a dirt path that winds up a wooded hill to a cabin. Napping in a hammock there is the woman I love.

Will she agree to watch the horror movie I downloaded or will she expect me to endure

(again!) a documentary about a poet? Will there be jellyfish in the nearby bay this week, which will mean I can't swim, which might trigger my insomnia? Will my family members and friends die without regret? Will I?

Who knows? Worry about what might come, and you'll lose sight of what's in front of you. You will forget what's important. All you can do is square your shoulders. Bend your knees. Chop the wood.

I jab step right, go left. It's all practice. Stutter-step. I can survive another documentary. Head fake. If I can't swim, I'll run. From the top of the key, I flick a buzzer beater. A casual, regal wave as the ball arcs through the summer sky. It's almost certainly headed for the bottom of the net, but if not, I'll survive. I learned that from basketball. Comeback or not, I'll be fine.

The ball descends. If there were a crowd, and it could roar, it would.

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