

S. Salit

Keep Playing Basketball

1957, Grand Junction, Colorado. A dusty mining town of 15,000 on the Western slope of Colorado near the Utah border. Not the gritty glass-strewn streets of some big city ghetto, yet it was here that basketball became my salvation.

Starting around the age of 6, I began throwing a Spaldeen against the clapboard siding of our house. For hours. I threw it at different angles to make it harder to catch. Sometimes I imagined I was a major league pitcher or outfielder and practiced and practiced, for hours. It must have seemed like weird OCD behavior, but my parents never brought it up.

When I was 8, my dad put a basketball hoop up over the garage and I quickly switched to basketball. It was a full height hoop and very difficult for an 8 year old to reach. But I practiced and practiced, for hours. I got to be pretty good. Like many basketball greats who rose from the ashes of abject poverty, I found solace in basketball, a safe haven in a hostile world.

Fast forward, Harlem, 1982. A former colleague in the NYC Mayor's Office offered me a job on a SWAT team to 'clean up management deficiencies' at Harlem Hospital. For me, Harlem was a country club. There were sports everywhere. I first went to the paddleball courts across from the hospital at lunch. Met a bunch of regulars who I played with nearly every day. They called me "Whitie", more an accurate appellation than a curse. I often beat them, and they respected my game.

A coworker told me about the Olympic-sized swimming pool at the public bathhouse a block from the hospital. I went swimming there regularly and one night while sitting in the locker room heard basketballs bouncing overhead. I quickly got dressed and dashed upstairs to check it out. A full-length hardwood basketball court with several guys shooting hoops. I joined them and then one announced "We got a game", meaning enough players for a game and a game

began swirling around me. It was Monday night and Monday nights were for the old timers, guys in their 50s. I was 32 at the time, but no matter, they pulled me in. And they coached me, “Stop dribbling, put up the shot”. “Find your spot and put up the shot.” “Stop passing, put up the shot.” It was great. These guys were all genuinely trying to help me. But most of all, they were doing it because they thought I had game.

It was so thrilling that I returned the next night. Tuesdays the ringers showed up, young men in their late teens through 30s. Where I grew up, we played straight-up b-ball. You drove in for a layup, or if someone was in your path you shot from 10 or 15 feet out. Occasionally you might do a hook shot or a turnaround jumper and maybe set a pick for another player. With these guys, nearly every shot was a fake, a double fake or a triple fake. And every move was meant to impress - dribbling or passing behind the back, switching hands or direction in midstream, tomahawk dunks. My game was transformed. It took just one fake, pumping up to shoot the layup, having the defender jump up to block it and then as he descended, lay it in unopposed. Oh wow, was this fun? Had to learn more fakes, trick shots, show-off moves.

My first ‘show-off move’, a natural for me since my hands are so large, was palming the basketball. There is nothing better than walking through Harlem palming a basketball. The street cred from that one small gesture is startling. My next move was fancy dribbling. I learned how to dribble between my legs, forward and backward, without looking at the ball. And dribbling behind my back from left to right hand and vice versa. Dribbling was essential to Harlem b-ball and only took a few weeks for me to master. My final show-off move, but one that took an entire summer of practice, was spinning the ball on one finger. Only the best Harlem players could do this so it was important for me to persevere. Nothing sends a more powerful message than ball spinning.

Once trained by the Tuesday night guys during the winter, I began venturing outside to the playgrounds around the hospital in warmer weather. At times, few guys would be there and I'd get in games of 21 or go one-on-one. One day the only guy there was Snake. Snake was a long, lanky guy who got his court name from his habit of dribbling down low and then uncoiling to his full body height to release his jumper. Snake was a phenomenal player and playground legend. He was also a heroin addict. And on this day, he was high as a kite, stumbling around barely able to walk while nailing 3 pointer after 3 pointer. "Yo Snake, wanna go one-on-one?" I called out. "Yeah, sure", he answered. Snake was in no condition to guard me, but I had no mercy on him. I drove in for an easy layup as he stumbled around. Then I aggressively kept him way out in 3 point territory. Snake struggled to position, his legs buckling, eyes so glazed he appeared blinded. Then launched a 30 footer as he toppled to the concrete. Swish, nothing but net. Pure native talent and instinct somehow unbroken by the drugs coursing through his veins.

One day I was on the court alone. I imagined I was shooting the signature shots of the great players of the day – Bernard King's fadeaway jumper at the baseline, Kareem's skyhook, Dr. J's swinging the ball around his head in one hand as he flew in for a layup. Of course, this was all in my head....or so I thought. I re-enacted these shots over and over again. Then, after doing a fadeaway jumper, I hear a young man standing by the court say, "Bernard King." Whoa, he could really recognize what I was imitating? Then, a skyhook. "Kareem", said the young man. And then, swinging the ball around my head for the layup. "Dr. J", he said. After getting over my astonishment that anyone could tell what I was doing, I started shooting baskets with the young man. His name was "Reds" he said because for parties he always wore his "reds", his red pants and red shirt. Reds and I exchanged phone numbers and met up occasionally to shoot around. We even went to dance clubs a few times where I got to see his "reds". Yes indeed, they were very bright red.

Sometimes after games, we'd all go to the Candlelight Lounge, a favorite watering hole at 133rd St. and Lenox Avenue. The Candlelight Lounge was a little slice of Harlem life. One night a woman walked in and approached a man and woman sitting together at the bar. "What you doing messing with my woman?", she yelled at the man. Then she decked him and dragged the woman out of the bar. Almost nightly, a guy with a shopping cart full of stolen goods would come in to sell them. Another regular would just roll a shopping cart full of oranges out of a nearby supermarket undetected and sell them on the street.

Other times, we'd just sit on a bench and talk. We'd talk about the Knicks, who were very good then, and every play from the previous night's game. I could easily hold my own in these conversations as I watched every Knicks game and knew all the star players in the NBA. But often the talk turned to boxing which I knew little about. I started watching boxing so I could participate in these conversations as well. But sometimes the talk turned to life. People getting stabbed and shot, dying from overdoses, getting arrested for doing nothing or for committing crimes, getting high, getting drunk, not working, being on welfare. I could only listen and mostly not react. Often enough, they passed around reefer. I'd take a hit but not inhale because at that time many folks were smoking weed laced with horse tranquilizer.

So, you might wonder - how did a 30-something middle class white woman so seamlessly drift into the world of Harlem playground basketball? I wondered that myself. One answer is the universal language of basketball. Once into the game, I was just another serious player, the game must go on. But the interactions off the court were something else. Yes, we could talk b-ball, boxing, weed. But why would they let me in and share the intimate details of their lives, many of which were horrifying? I do not know for sure. Perhaps it was the inevitable bond from knowing someone over time. Or perhaps, just perhaps, they knew we all have traumas of our own and so.... keep playing basketball.