

Opportuning

Years ago we were running laps at the end of practice. As we started our fifth lap, Coach walked out to center court dribbling the mystical orb, as he always did. He watched for the leaders to approach the end of lap five and then, without a moment's hesitation he would hurl the ball towards the basket behind him. The arc was so perfect in spite of the historical evidence we always believed, this time, he would make it. But the shot would always rim out or careen off the backboard, and our next five laps would begin.

During those next five laps coach would tell us about things to watch out for in the next game, about our well played scrimmage or about a former player who just became a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher. As the leaders approached the end of lap ten he would joke about some of us looking too fresh and maybe needing another ten. Then, without a moment's hesitation he would, again, hurl the ball towards the basket behind him. And we would all stop running to watch because, this time, despite the incredible odds against it, we knew, the shot was going in. Coach would always holler "Why are you guys stopping?" To which came the obligatory unified response, "Because you never miss the same shot twice!" followed by the swish of the lesson learned.

Much to my father's dismay, I stopped playing basketball after seventh grade, finding football more appealing to me than the sport that made my dad a legend. But I never forgot the wisdom of Coach Newsome and his unbelievable string of second-chance-basket-behind-him-midcourt shots.

A few years later, I was playing in a championship football game. We had overcome two horrendous calls made by the clearly biased refs and a much more athletic team of adversaries. With less than two minutes to go, we were in the lead and they were 80 yards from a go ahead score with no timeouts. Forty years have not been able to wipe the memory of the next play from my psyche. They lined up in the formation I had seen so many times on film and the chalk board.

I drew a bead on the halfback that would surely get the ball. But at the snap, I began to move in slow motion. I was perfectly positioned to intercept the lateral bound for my man. Yet, when it came, the ball seemed to pass right through me and end up in the hands of my opponent. I turned to tackle him, but my arms passed through him as though he were a ghost. I watched as each of my teammates tried to stop this illusion from reaching the goal line. But they were all as seemingly powerless as I. With 90 seconds to go, we drove back down field and my best friend inexplicably dropped a perfectly thrown ball in the end zone as time ran out.

Our "fans" blamed him for the loss and he took it very hard. In the locker room after the game, I announced to the team that this loss was my fault not his. If I had just made that interception or that tackle, we wouldn't have needed another touchdown. One by one each of my teammates stepped forward and announced the mistakes that they had made throughout the contest. Soon we were all feeling as miserable as the one who made the last mistake.

Coach Newsome had come in to console his good friends on the football staff. Somebody shouted, "This ain't basketball coach. We don't get a second shot at this." Coach turned and said, "Well, I'm certainly proud that after three and half years of High School, Mr. Chomski knows that he hasn't been playing basketball." Some of us smiled. "Boys, I'm not going to stand here and tell you that losing a game like this shouldn't hurt. And I'm certainly not going to tell you that this wasn't a once in a life time opportunity. It was. Now, I don't know why you weren't allowed to win here tonight. But I will tell you this. Just like the guys that are whooping it up over there in the other locker room. You're going to remember this game for the rest of your life. And because you'll remember what could have been if-you-had-just. When you're next once-in- lifetime-opportunity comes along, and believe me, you'll all see at a lot more of them, you will adjust and put yourself in a better position to emerge victorious. The important thing to remember is missing a shot does not make you a loser."

About the Author

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