

The weave

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When I was a boy the first organized basketball team on which you could play was not a team sponsored by a city parks and recreation league, or a team hosted by a for-profit entity, or a team hand-picked by men who wanted to sell players to powerful high school programs. No: it was our parish's Catholic Youth Organization team, with its golden jerseys trimmed in liturgical green, and its cheerful gang of coaching dads, and its two practices a week, Wednesday nights in one old echoing dusty wooden gymnasium where the floors were so dusty that you could—no kidding—slide easily from the free throw line to the basket, leaving furrows of dust in your wake, and Saturday mornings in a newer gleaming shining burnished wooden gymnasium, where the floors were so meticulously clean and sticky with polish that you would occasionally topple over as your sneakers took root and sent tendrils deep into the strata of the wax.

You had to be in fifth grade before you could try out for the team, and the fifth-grade team had been coached since the Council of Trent by Mr. Torrens, whose idea of offense was the weave, by which the three shortest players among the five on the floor passed to each other for a long while to no effect, way out beyond the foul line, while the defense rested and read beach books, and the two remaining players on offense caught up on the later work of St. Thomas Aquinas. Our entire first few practices were spent on the weave, until we began to realize slowly that Mr. Torrens did not actually know any other plays, or care much about what we did on the floor, as long as we occasionally ran the weave smartly for him, which we did about once every five minutes, just to perk him up, and because he was the nicest man, always shouting encouragement, though he was not great at names, and called us all Bud.

He was the most courteous cheerful man, though, and he was so immediately and patently happy when we ran the weave that sometimes if we were up a few points we would just run the weave for a while on general principle; I don't think the many thousands of fathers who have coached CYO teams in their parishes since the CYO was invented in 1930 have ever properly been thanked, and I am proud to note here that the members of the St. John Vianney fifth-grade basketball team did their part to thank our coach for his patient service, which was, of course, unremunerated, except in opportunities to see the weave executed beautifully by kids who had practiced the utterly useless maneuver a thousand times, and knew it all too well.

Usually an essay about a basketball team would proceed right here to talk about victories and losses, and dramatic plays, and entertaining exchanges with referees, and the time one of the dads lost his temper and used such foul and vituperative language to a referee that after the game we huddled and wrote down what he said so that later we could ask our older brothers what it meant, but now I just want to stay with the furrowed dust in the old gym for a moment; and with the parents huddled companionably in the corners of the gym, since there were no chairs or stands or benches for them; and the little brothers and sisters trying hilariously to shoot baskets at halftime, as the referee grins and shoos them off the floor; and the poor dad assigned to be scorekeeper, who is always falling behind and having to ask who scored last, and the poor dad assigned to be timekeeper, who accidentally blew the horn at the wrong time every single game; and the way when we were up by a few points, a rare and lovely event, we would go into the weave without sign or signal, and then glance over at Mr. Torrens, who would slowly sit up straight as he realized what was happening; and his dawning smile, his open genuine heartfelt glee, was a sight I will always remember, a sight I will always relish and savor and

enjoy.