

The Spirit of Basketball: By James Corrigan



A long while back, I read *The Book of Basketball* by Bill Simmons. Within this mammoth masterpiece are anecdotes, rankings, profiles, what-ifs, and much much more. What the book is really centered around though is what Simmons refers to as the “secret” of basketball. This secret is portrayed as the key used to unlock basketball greatness, used by those such as Michael Jordan, Bill Russell, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, and LeBron James to reach the

pinnacle of the sporting world. The secret of basketball was revealed to be the following: It's not about basketball.

As I have journeyed through the various levels of the sport over the years, from small high school gyms that hold fewer than a thousand people, to the Rose Hill gym, all the way to Madison Square Garden itself to cover the New York Knicks, that secret has stuck with me. At its core, basketball is the simplest of games. There are five players a side, and one ball, with the goal being to put the ball in the hoop more times than the other team without running with it. For the most part, that's basically it. However through this simplicity, we find a window into ourselves. While those who play the game see their physical ability tested, they also see their mental and emotional capacity tested as well. Similar to the original *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* animated show, we almost get a literal x-ray inside the players to see what they are made of. For basketball is a microcosm of life. Throughout the course of a game or season, there are highs and lows, adversity, pain, euphoria, and the need to rise above one's self and step up for the greater good. In basketball, as in life, one must sacrifice his or her own personal accolades in order for the greater unit to succeed. Twelve players on a roster must all be in synch with a common goal, and a coach must teach his or her side the fundamentals not only of the game, but of life itself, with the message being that no one is greater than the greater good. Only through those requirements can glory truly be gained on the hardwood.

Somewhere along the line however, this became lost in the shuffle. There are several reasons for why this is. Our media today does not reward or glorify the attributes of winning basketball. Instead, we see the glamorizing of individual aspects of the game, as well as the emphasizing of statistics which, while impressive on paper, do not reveal the true story of a particular player. Much of this is not the fault of the glorified stars of the game. While our TV and phone screens are often filled with images of Stephen Curry draining a thirty foot shot or crossing an unfortunate defender out of his shoes, rarely do we see or hear about his tremendous work ethic, his incredibly close bond with his teammates and coaches, or his willingness to rely on his teammates for the overall good of the team. Curry did not learn how to play the game from a basketball AAU factory or from a college program in it only for the almighty dollar. Rather, he was groomed at a tiny college near Charlotte, North Carolina, for a coach in Bob

McKillop who is unmatched in teaching the true fundamentals of the game. Curry learned the true meaning of teamwork and comradery at Davidson, and those attributes are on display nightly for Golden State.

This background is rarely seen however due to the impatience and lust for luster that our society currently embodies. Much of that stems from how our hoop heroes are developed. Players today do not learn the game from teachers of fundamentals, but from the fundamentally corrupt. The AAU brand of basketball centers around “getting mine” and looking good doing it. The circuits of spring and summer ball have morphed into glorified all star games, where a jumbled mix of players compete not against a common foe, but rather amongst themselves for more attention from the viewing public. This attitude has seeped into the fabric of the high school and college game, where players need not be bothered with dealing with adversity or sacrificing for the greater good. Rather than do any of that, players now jump from school to school with the intent of finding the easiest possible path to success. It is a roadmap that almost certainly leads to failure every time, yet it is practiced today more than the Abrahamic religions.

In my travels as a broadcaster, I had the opportunity of calling the Union County high school basketball final at Kean University in Union Township, NJ. This game is the most anticipated date on the hoops calendar every year, with the winner of the game almost guaranteeing itself a spot in that year’s Tournament of Champions. It is the pinnacle of basketball in New Jersey, and the nation for that matter, as some of the all time prep greats have laced them up in this game. I could not have been more excited to bring this game live to what turned out to be a record streaming audience. However, the action on the floor perturbed me. The game was between the number one team in New Jersey, Roselle Catholic, who this past weekend won the NJ Tournament of Champions as the state’s top team. Their opponent was The Patrick School, which in its previous life as St. Patrick was one of only five schools in the nation to produce an NBA #1 and #2 overall pick in Kyrie Irving and Michael Kidd Gilchrist. With a McDonalds All American leading the way for RC and a litany of superstars for both sides, this was supposed to be an epic clash for local supremacy. But while the quality of play was superb, I found myself thinking that I was at an AAU showcase. Despite the high stakes of the game, little emotion was showed throughout by either side. The energy of the game was lacking despite a

sold out crowd, and when it was over, you could hardly tell who won or lost by looking at the teams. It was a display of basketball talent, but it lacked everything that makes the game special. I came away from that clash with a shattered sense of hope that the spirit of the game could still be found.

So I looked. I looked everywhere I could to try and rekindle the fire that is the game I love. And in various different places, I was successful. From walking passed a sobbing Providence band on the Garden floor after a classic Big East final, to the images of coach Dan Hurley as his Rhody Rams were ousted from March Madness this past weekend, I could see that hope was not lost after all. The time I spent with Fordham women's head coach Stephanie Gaitley and her team was particularly uplifting, for it showed me that even in this me first era of the game, there are still those who teach the fundamentals of life along with basketball. But there is one example in particular of the spirit of the game being displayed that I must share.

In an old wooden high school gym in Edison, New Jersey, in a place in Bishop Ahr High School where one is not likely to find athletic greatness, a white knight was born. His name is Alex Santiago, and as a point guard for his Trojans side, he put together a season that, while outwardly not as remarkable as some division one bound counterparts over the years, had far more of a lasting effect on those who witnessed it. Despite losing his head coach before the season to a serious car accident, as well as his star center early on, Santiago carried his team to one of its best seasons in many years. What stood out, however, was his passion for the game and the relentlessness in which he played it. He took not a single play off, and dominated on both ends of the floor. He deferred to his teammates throughout games, for he knew that without them his team could not survive, but he was there for the big moments to step up. All this while standing at maybe 5'11 on a good day and with zero college offers of note. Every game was his Super Bowl, and I could not get enough. In his final game, which was a massive playoff game, he fractured his ankle going to the basket. Seeing him down on the floor was a harrowing sight, for I could only imagine the emotional anguish going through him at that moment. His team was trailing by a significant margin when this occurred, and as he hobbled off the floor, I knew that his journey of brilliance as a Trojan was over.

Except that several minutes later, with the game out of hand, he returned to the floor. The surprise was palpable throughout the gym that day. We were all ready to witness something special, which we did, but not in the way we wanted. He was not the same player when he returned. He was missing shots and was unable to make the plays for his teammates that he normally made. But yet he stayed on the floor, fighting with all he had to finish his season and career on a high note. When it was over, the Bishop Ahr Trojans had lost a lopsided affair on the scoreboard, but Alex Santiago had won the respect of everyone who saw him play that day. To say that performance was inspiring is the understatement of the year.

Yes there are flaws in our game. Yes there is a prevalent culture of selfishness that goes against everything basketball stands for. Yes there is a media that glamorizes the wrong parts of basketball and focuses on its more shallow aspects. And yes, there is a player development system in place which plays in to the indulgences of superstardom. But for every moment of doubt, there is a ray of light that shines on to the hardwood. For every All American who goes through the motions, there is a kid with no chance of playing at the next level giving everything he has in a losing cause because he feels he owes it to himself and his brothers in arms. And for every moment of disillusionment, there is a moment where I realize that the spirit of basketball is alive and well after all. And that is worth more than the price of any ticket.