

Catholics

by Robert Taylor Brewer

The two years I played on the basketball team were like the front and backside of the moon. It happened so long ago I don't know why I'm still thinking about it. Your formative years, I guess, seventh and eighth grade. 13, my seventh grade year, I was still at the orphanage.

Sundays after Mass, Sister Edburga gathered the team in the shower room, we stripped naked in a circle, held hands and said a prayer we'd win our game. A boy no one knew walked alongside her with a box full of jockstraps. She passed out the jockstraps, making sure everyone wore the right size. In the chill, on the cold tile floor, most of us were ashamed, but Audilez Hernandez slipped into his jockstrap, put his hands over his head; spinning left, spinning right like a Friday night fights champ, then fell back into line against the shower wall.

Two men, Frank and Carl, were our coaches. Coach Frank had a red and tan 1958 Ford convertible, Coach Carl a candy apple Buick Electra. We waited for them carrying empty duffel bags, wearing our basketball uniforms underneath our street clothes. The cars arrived near the morning glories and the outside vestibule, we clambered in and sped off to the Broad Street CYO gym in Trenton, bulky and hot.

Coach Frank's girlfriend Silky waited for us outside her house. She had her hair up in a beehive, wore a pink sweater, poodle skirt, black high heels and nylons with that black line down the back. "For when it got cold" she kept a bottle of Imperial whiskey in her purse. Once, she took a sip in the car, gave the bottle to Robin and he passed it around to us in the back seat.

The winter of my eighth grade year we opened the season playing the league champion, Blessed Sacrament. There were some new guys on the team who could leap and the coaches liked our chances. The game was tight, we were happy just to be keeping things close. During time outs, Coach Carl screamed until his face

turned red - he'd never acted like that. After timeout, Robin passed the ball to Tommy Linda and the Red Sea opened for him. He drove the lane, made some kind of scoobey-do move, laid the ball up and it rolled around the rim forever. Then it fell in. An air horn blew at the scorer's table and the game was over.

Our victory sent shock waves through the CYO. No one could believe an orphanage team had knocked off the league champions. And we kept winning. Coach Carl and Coach Frank started taking us out after the games; most of the time, we'd go to the Lawrenceville diner for supper before heading back to the orphanage. Once, we went to a bowling alley, Silky slipped us the Imperial and told us to make sure we brushed our teeth as soon as we got back.

We tore the league up that December. One of our wins came against cellar dweller Saint Anthony's. They had a kid named Rabbit who poked me in the stomach most of the second half. I didn't like their maroon uniforms; couldn't stop thinking about macaroon cookies the whole game. Sometime before Christmas, we played St. Anthony's again, still the cellar dweller. Robin had a miserable game, Tommy's layups rolled out, no one picked up the slack. We looked good, took good shots, but nothing went through the net.

In the parking lot after our first loss, just out of misery, I guess, Billy Dennis played with the switch moving the convertible top up and down on Coach Frank's brand new '58 Ford convertible. He did it so much the car battery wore down. The car wouldn't start and the team pushed Coach Frank's Ford to a service station. Even Silky helped pushing. She pushed next to me, I rubbed up against her elbow, smelling her perfume so that even with the hard work, it all seemed like magic.

Except we didn't go out after, the coaches took us right home. Bernard Loftin, our center, asked them about it.

"Say Coach," he said. "I know how you're upset with us, the car not workin' an all, but we goin out?"

“Don't have money to take you.” Coach Carl said. “Lost my money on the game.”

“Why don't you stay with us tonight.” Bernard said. “We're broke too.”

It was a quiet ride back to the orphanage. Coach Carl put the Giants game on the radio, and almost immediately, Frank Gifford scored from five yards out. In the dim winter, the trees looked scrawny and it was hard to believe any other activity could be going on. We seemed to be going to that city in my geography book. East Berlin. Nobody wanted to go back to St. Michael's. I finished off the last of the Imperial and handed the bottle to Silky.

The cars pulled up past the laundry building, the smokestack, and our gymnasium. It was completely dark by the time Coach Frank and Coach Carl let us out, and we were glad we had our basketball warmup jackets on. The car pushing had made the night different from any other. To make sure there were no hard feelings, Richard Klusarits thanked the coaches and said he admired them for taking us away from the orphanage, out to Trenton every week, working with us, coaching us this way. Coach Carl said don't mention it, but Richard did. He mentioned it. When we were back inside and upstairs in the dormitory and I was almost asleep for the night, Richard Klusarits came over to my bed and told me he couldn't wait to grow up.

