



Reflections of a River Rat:

Gyms: my favorite pickup joints

By Jim Holleran

My pickup hoop game is actually two games. You'll find a couple of guys who did time, a guy who made 18 consecutive threes at LeMoyne, a former ref, a guy who thinks he is a ref, a medical marvel, an exterminator, two generations from four families, a bruiser named Fly, a guy whom we think was fathered by Beaver Cleaver, and enough stories and nicknames to fill the Carrier Dome. My urban game meets Saturday mornings at the Rochester Sports Garden and my suburban game gathers weekdays at the Penfield YMCA.

Every pickup game generates a nuanced culture. You've got the personalities of the players, their style of play, the intricacies of the gym and the unwritten rules of conduct. For 13 months of the pandemic, my urban game has resembled the degenerate gamblers in *Guys and Dolls*, looking for a place to hold the oldest, established, permanent floating crap game in New York. I heard hints of a school here or a gym there, but the game has remained closed. Until yesterday. The Rochester Sports Garden reopened and we greeted our old friend with hugs, insults, airballs, turnovers and a 20 percent shooting percentage. If the walls could talk, they'd resemble an Edvard Munch painting -- *The Scream*.

The Saturday game is a passion that dates to 1984 when I shot hoops with a guy at Cobb's Hill Park, then arrived that evening at the Democrat and Chronicle to find him staffing the security desk.

Eric Washington wasn't just a security guard. He became the mayor of our game. He stepped in to put guys in their place when they swore too loudly or wanted to fight, and he dismissed a few troublemakers when our friendly little game resembled a Trump crowd outside the Capitol. When Eric was sidelined by circulation and heart ailments, he was replaced by a new alpha male, aptly nicknamed Wolf. Now the torch has passed to his brother Wayne. His first smartest new business rule -- collect the money before the games.

We began as a newsroom game on Tuesday nights on the tile floor at Blessed Sacrament school with a brief stop at Rochester Christian School. F-bombs were off limits at both places. Then we migrated to the concrete floor of a converted Rochester lumber warehouse. It had been renovated into two short courts, two soccer fields, an open floor for table tennis (don't you dare call it ping-pong; they will correct you) and a batting cage.

At the Garden, you couldn't run through a lay-up or drive baseline because you'd crash into the immovable basket supports on the floor. The courts were about the size of the old Hammond or Edwards gyms. Take your pick. The circles overlapped and you only had room in the corner for a 10-footer.

If the courts were small, there was an abundance of laughs. The only thing older than Larry was the car he drove. He would pull into the parking lot in his Ford LTD from the 1980s that would make Barnaby Jones envious. A pimpmobile. Old Larry, around 60, regularly brought his son, Little Larry, who would smoke some weed so he didn't get too wrapped up in the competitiveness of the games.

One Saturday, Wolf sees a boy about 4 years old toddling around the benches and invitingly says, "Oh, Little Larry, you brought your son."

"Son?" replies Little Larry with an air of disdain. "That isn't my son. That's my brother."

Wolf couldn't warm up any longer. He couldn't stop laughing. The running joke became how all of Old Larry's parts were still working.

Occasionally, two guys would get in a beef. Pretty Ricky was a notorious complainer in his high-pitched voice. He was privately nicknamed Pretty Ricky because every time he drew incidental contact, he called a foul, then complain he was being targeted. Nobody was going to lay a finger on his pretty face. He was a legend in his own mind. Pretty Ricky lost it one day over some hard fouls and challenged Troy, our probation officer. Troy snapped and grabbed him by the neck. When they were separated, Pretty Ricky was still hurling idle threats.

"Don't ever choke me again," he yelled.

Deadpanned Troy, "I just did."

One Saturday two Septembers ago, I was extended on a 3-point attempt when Fly, running across the lane to close me out, tripped. His 160 pounds crashed into my right shin with enough oomph to drive me back 15 feet and knock me over. I limped off the court, thinking the pain would go away. I figured ICE – immobilize, cold and elevate. But 11 days later, my doctor made his call – plateau fracture of the right tibia. About a month later, I returned to the sidelines on crutches with a box of donuts. Fly approached me and asked, "What happened to you?"

"You did! Don't you remember crashing into me?"

"Oh? ... No." Whoa, not even a sorry. Not even "Does it hurt?"

I gave him a donut anyway. Who could be mad? Fly's nickname always reminded me of the Fly Williams who averaged 29 a game at Austin Peay. The students would chant: "The Fly's open; let's go Peay."

We had a lot of guys go through the game. Once we had so many guys showing up that Mayor Washington announced from center court that unless he invited you back, don't bother showing up the next Saturday. The first guys dismissed were ministers from a church. Per Troy's account, they would knock you down with a hard foul, then extend a hand and say, "Jesus loves you." Troy dubbed them the Crips for Christ.

They followed directions better than Raz. He was a trashtalking ballhog. When he hit the floor, nobody helped him up. He was not invited back on Selection Saturday, but showed up the next week. I had to inform him, in front of his woman, that he would not be playing. Dissed in front of his woman – I am sure that assaulted his ego.

We have always had generational combos. First, Wayne brought his brother, Chris (Wolf), who brought his three sons – Little Chris, Quinton and Tyshawn. So Wayne became known as Uncle Wayne. He was called a lot of other names too on the Saturday he hit nine consecutive threes.



Chris Wolf Washington

Corey is the Bronx guy who grew up loving the Knicks and started playing with us 30 years ago when he worked for the sports department during college. He brought his son, Tyler, who proved to be the bane of the shortest guy there, Ronny. "Nobody will give me the damn ball," Ronny seemed to bitch weekly. So he took it on himself to dash end-to-end and throw up 20-foot runners. He was averaging a basket every other week. As a 14-year-old, Tyler gave up high school basketball to hone his golf game, but he could still light up Ronny regularly. Tyler's decision was a smart move; he became the No. 1 player at Roberts Wesleyan College.

We have Mike the Exterminator, whose chest is broad enough to host a buffet. We have Felix, who goes by Holyfield because of his resemblance to the heavyweight fighter. Paycheck is a dominant player. Our only hope is that he goes drinking Friday night and spends timeouts praying over the trash barrel. Shaka can make a twisting runner in the lane, then blow three layups. Me? I'm a triple threat – can't run, can't jump, can't dribble. The only thing I have left is good positional defense and the occasional three.

After two hours of running, we retire to the courtside benches to switch shoes and dissect the morning events. Decorum dictates you walk the row and slap hands before leaving. Some days, guys linger and discuss the issues of the day.

"Man, I can't wait," Corey said. "One week and I'm on vacation."

"I can't wait til Feb. 18," I responded. "Spring break. No school for a week."

"April 1, baby," responded the third guy. "No more probation, no more probation officer."

How do you respond to that?

The only guy that ever did was a slick point guard named Polo, who described how he picked a fight his first days in the joint so inmates wouldn't think he was weak. Basketball with our group was probably a high point of his life. Guys judged him only on whether he passed the rock.

"The neatest part of our eclectic group is that we accept each other for who we are, we try to help each other out and mentor the younger members," Corey said. "We are all imperfect, and cool with it. I dread waking up during the week, but I spring out of bed on Saturdays."

So when Wolf organizes a bowling tourney for Breast Cancer Awareness, we sign up. When Paycheck brings his son, they give him a chance to play through a turnover, even if it is at game point. Or when Tyler has a big amateur event, one of us walks the fairways.

Back in Penfield, my other pickup game embodies an entirely different culture. Call it the corporate game. Before the pandemic, we met at 6 a.m. Monday through Friday. Once 12 guys responded, another e-mail was sent outlining the six matchups. Usually, you guarded a guy who was approximately your height, age or speed. We subbed one matchup every 5 minutes. The last guy to arrive on the court had to sit first with his partner.

You can tell the players without a scorecard. Randy the Turnover King is always 10 minutes late. Plan on sitting first when he is your matchup. We have Mike the swimmer, who competes in national events. His muscles have muscles, and to kid you, he flexes whenever he scores. We tell him he would play better in swim fins. Dan goes about 6-7 and would dominate the paint if he stuck to the low post. But he plays the perimeter to give us a chance. His legend, although I couldn't find it, is that he made 18 consecutive three-point attempts over a few games at LeMoyne. When he gets hot, forget it. You can't stop him. We also have The Slapper, known for high-fivin' every opponent that sticks a jumper in his eye or finishes a good spin move.



The game would not be complete without Fanto. He's 60, he's slow, he can't go left, and his jumpshot is flat. When he misses a layup or turns the ball over, he yells out: "Gee willikers." I haven't heard that since the Leave it To Beaver show. His lack of defensive prowess is what worries us most. He'll reach in three times on a guy attempting to run the slow break. The dribbler won't call anything, but if he shrugs him off, Fanto wants a pushoff. We fear someone will get hurt. We termed his defense Fantocide.

We have two refs – another Randy and myself. Intermittently, we must explain a rule such as the ball passing over the top of the backboard (change of possession). Or picking up your dribble, then retrieving a pass to yourself (travel). If you disagree or don't know the rule, we're accused of incompetence. It's annoying when Mr. Know It All announces that he has played a lot of basketball and

that can't be the rule.

Randy the Ref is the master of the insult. When you stop to tie a shoelace, you hear: “For guys your age, they suggest Velcro.” Or “you couldn’t guard a statue.” He had so many barbs, he recorded them in a Christmas poem.

Right now, everyone is squeezing for Johnny. Four years ago, he turned to catch a pass in the lane and collapsed. He had ruptured the quadriceps muscle in his left thigh. Johnny, we hardly knew ye, but after 10 months of rehabilitation, he returned to the court. He was only back four months when he was dogged by indigestion. After tests, the doctor told Johnny on a Monday he had liver cancer, but that he should return Thursday for a complete diagnosis. Johnny consulted the Internet and thought he had been served a death sentence. That Thursday, he learned the cancer was massed in a corner of his liver. Remove it and let your liver regenerate, the doctor told him. More surgery, 6 more weeks of rehab.

He played through two more minor surgeries to remove cancerous lesions on his liver, but then the cancer erupted again. Now he was going to need a donor. Two weeks ago, he didn’t show for a morning game. He had taken a 3 a.m. call prompting to report for a transplant. The surgery lasted 9 hours. His new daily routine is to walk 3 miles a day and devour a fistful of anti-rejection pills. But we’ll get him back on the court in two months. We need fresh stories.

Jim Holleran, a Morristown native, is a retired teacher and registrar for the Rochester City School District, and former sports editor of the Democrat and Chronicle. Reach him at jimholleran29@gmail.com or view past columns at <https://hollerangetsitwrite.files.wordpress.com>