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Introduction Why She Plays

One Friday night in July 2005, I walked out of the tunnel and onto the floor of Madison Square Garden moments before the New York Liberty basketball team did the same. I was aware of the lights behind me flipping on to illuminate the way for the players and the television cameras. I saw the electrical wires crisscrossing down the tunnel and underneath the hardwood floor. Only steps ahead of the team, I watched the fans look beyond me to the players they had paid to see. There was fanfare. There was noise, but it was not for me and it never will be. I am like a ghost forever hovering at the edges of the tunnel, riding the shadows of the players, trying to grasp the ball as it slips just out of reach of my fingertips.

Over 99 percent of all basketball players never have the oppor-

tunity to play professionally, and I am one of the majority. Nevertheless, since my father bought me my first basketball at the age of six, I dreamed of being a superstar. Twenty-eight years later, not much has changed. Some nights when sleep eludes me, I hear the sold-out arena chant my name, "Bak-er, Bak-er." The voices collectively urge me toward that sacred place of glory I still vividly envision.

Sadly the reality is that a sold-out arena will never chant my name. An Olympic gold medal will never be gently placed over my bowed head. Not every one of us is chosen for Olympic glory. Legions of quiet superstars play because we want to. We work against the odds of height or build or natural ability because we want to better ourselves, because we have a profound love of a game. We have, each one of us, those moments to treasure after practice in the empty gym. Those hours after dark in the playgrounds and backyards across America are ours and ours alone.

I might never be a professional basketball player, but the court will forever be my home. Basketball is in my blood. It's in my heart. I play because I love the sound of a leather ball slipping elusively through a chain net. I love the cracks in a black-top court where the weeds poke through. I love the sound sneakers make on a shiny indoor court. I love the competition and the camaraderie. That's why I play. Why do you?

My father gave me my first basketball and hoop in the summer of 1980 when I was six years old. I recall the orange basketball nestled among countless stuffed animals on my bed, waiting, pleading for me to pick it up and make it a part of me. I was born an only child in rural Connecticut, but when I saw that ball, I found my twin, my parallel soul. It was instantaneous, a connection so powerful that to this day, I marvel at its intensity and longevity.

It didn't take me long to get hooked. I watched basketball on television well past my bedtime. I slept with the ball, walked around the neighborhood with the ball, did everything with that ball. Early on, my tutors were Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, and Julius Erving. It was absolute enchantment to watch Dr. J

hit a swinging, graceful jump hook on television, but it was pure bliss to practice hook shots and fadeaway jumpers in my driveway until well past dark. I believed then with every fiber of my being that I was meant to play basketball—nothing more and nothing less.

I vividly recall watching the 1984 NBA Finals with my mom and dad in our family room on a big black Naugahyde couch. My beloved Boston Celtics, the blue-collar team made up of Larry Bird, Robert Parish, Danny Ainge, Dennis Johnson, and Kevin McHale against the Hollywood glitter of the Los Angeles Lakers, led by Magic Johnson, along with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, James Worthy, Byron Scott, and the rough Kurt Rambis. It was patience versus running, East versus West, tradition versus glamour. It was a brutal series, one that caused Lakers' head coach Pat Riley to lose his legendary cool more than once. The games began late, and I was up until well past midnight clutching a pillow to my face as the action on the court became too intense.

The '84 Celtics weren't physically imposing or flashy. They were smart and relentless, and Larry Bird epitomized this persona. The skinny red head from French Lick, Indiana, did things with a basketball that made the hair on my arms stand on end. He wasn't a vocal leader, but he led his team by example, and they followed. Hell, I followed, and I was only an eleven-year-old girl. Larry Bird led that team not with an outspoken demeanor but with his play. He let his game do the talking. His teammates, and I, listened well.

For a girl in the early 1980s, it just wasn't that simple. While there were plenty of winter basketball leagues and summer basketball camps, they were for boys, not girls. I played on boys basketball teams with Lions Club in Haddam, Connecticut. Because I was one of the best players in the league, the other boys didn't make much of the fact that I played. I recall only one other girl who played with me. We were never on the same team, but I remember she was good. She was tall and wore long, colorful ribbons attached to her barrettes.

It wasn't until 1983 that an all-girls league began in my hometown. When the girls' league began, she switched over, as did I. We were the only two girls who had been good enough to

hold our own with the boys, so whenever we faced one another, we were both extremely motivated. On those rare occasions we stared one another down at the start of the game in a way that would make Mohammad Ali proud. Barrettes or no barrettes, ribbons or no ribbons, we were primed for battle. I don't recall who outplayed the other in those early games, but I do remember the level of intensity and the fierce competitiveness we both brought to the court. I often wonder what became of her and if basketball is as much a part of her soul as it is mine.

When I was fifteen years old, in my diary I swore with the solemnity of a subpoenaed witness, with a tiny pin prick of blood to mark the spot, that I would never forget the sound of a chain net in the school playground or the way my hands had become molded to the round softness of a leather ball. I promised that I would play basketball forever. I promised all this because I thought I should make it official on the off chance things would change down the road.

That promise, however innocent and well intentioned, marked a turning point in my relationship to the game. By acknowledging my deep connection to the game, I twisted my relationship with it and forced upon it a value better left unmentioned. I imposed myself upon the game without its permission, and ultimately, I burned out. Through high school and college I felt the weight of its burden over its beauty, its struggle more than its solace. I grew to fear my obsession with improving.

When I graduated from college in 1995, I could no longer articulate my love for the game. Instead I was afraid it had swallowed me up, afraid I would never be good at anything else. As a result I ran as far from the game of basketball as I could. I worked on a career in publications management with the same intensity I had once worked on my jump shot. Simply I was determined to succeed without a ball in my hands.

One morning in February of 2005 I woke up to the cold gray sunrise and dressed for work. Before I left for the office, I looked at myself in the full-length mirror. Neatly dressed with dark slacks and a blue silk turtleneck, my blond hair pulled up off my face, I no longer recognized the person staring back at me. I stood, reflected in that mirror, alone—the court and the

backboards were gone. The ball racks, sneakers, and water bottles—gone too. In their place was a briefcase filled with proofs and schedules, a Palm Pilot with names and appointments I could barely keep track of, and a cell phone with five unheard messages. I had allowed myself to walk away from the game I loved. I had misled myself, and the hurt finally hit me. As I inhaled, I felt the air rattle around my hollow insides, and I realized that like the Grinch, my heart had grown three sizes too small.

Determined to make a change, I walked away from a career as a publications director. I walked away from routine and direct deposit, good benefits and stability that would have easily led to a nice house at the end of a cul-de-sac, to find my way back to the game of basketball. I knew it was a leap of faith, but quite simply I wanted to go home.

Home became a pressroom in the underbelly of an arena. Home is listening to starting lineups and transcribing interviews. Home is writing for little or no money about the game I love. I'm not surprised anymore when sports editors tell me that my writing is good but that they can't afford to pay someone only to cover the WNBA.

I learned that the business of basketball is entertainment. I learned how difficult it is for women's sports to compete in the global marketplace. I talked with players at the highest level who struggle to maintain their individuality in a league that treats players as commodities (just as in any professional sports league), as products to be bought and sold in hopes of creating the magic formula that will win a championship.

Sometimes I fear that I've turned cynical about the world of women's basketball. Whenever that feeling becomes overwhelming, I just close my eyes and think back to Teresa Weatherspoon with her fists raised high at the Garden after she hit that amazing fifty-foot buzzer beater on September 4, 1999, in Game 2 of the WNBA finals against Houston. I think back to the high-school team I coach and the joy we experienced when one of my players hit a similar shot in a playoff game just last season.

When the business overwhelms me, I recall that unmistakable gym smell of sweat and hardwood and movement. Before I

know it, I can hear the game again—sneakers squeaking on the hardwood, bodies flying down the court, players calling picks—I can feel the precise choreography and that gossamer-thin connection between players and ball, and then it's all OK, and it's all worth it, lousy paycheck and all.

Acclaimed sports writer Steve Wilstein once said, “Nobody cares how much effort it takes or what you have to do to get the story in, just as long as you do.” While that statement is true, there are still some of us out there who write about the sport not just to turn in a story but also to feel connected once more to the game we love so much.