

BASKETBALL STANDARD
A personal basketball odyssey.
by Christopher D. Seifert

“By the way,” says my mother a whole two states away, “your father’s going to tear down the basketball hoop in front of the house. He says he wants to widen the driveway.”

I pause, loosening my grip on the telephone receiver. My mom keeps talking in a faraway buzz – about her job as a middle school librarian or my brother’s new car – but I’m no longer listening. Instead, I’m thinking about that old basketball standard 1,000 miles from here on a forlorn little driveway in front of a forgettable, off-white house.

It’s silly, I know, but still I can’t believe my parents would ever think to dismantle *my* hoop. That pole is quite possibly the best investment I ever made. The summer before I began junior high, my little brother and I pooled our paper route earnings to buy it. We’d been looking in the newspaper ads for weeks, trying to find a hoop that met both our liking and our somewhat limited price range.

One shiny summer day, we gave the money to our dad, and shortly thereafter, dad was digging the hole and pouring the concrete and driving himself crazy trying to get that pole to stand up straight.

When it finally did, the hoop was a marvelous sight. Its slick, black surface jugged up from the ground like one of those monoliths from “2001: A Space Odyssey.”

Atop the pole sat a half-moon backboard with a bright orange rim. A soft, white net rested below, shimmying in the breeze.

When I first looked up at that hoop, I remember thinking just how very tall it was. Ten feet. It seemed a mile then.

I stood at the end of the driveway – at the seam between one slab of concrete and the next. The rim was straight ahead; I eyed the backboard’s paper-thin profile. To my right, the driveway melded into the front lawn and sloped upward. On that hill, a young ash tree swayed ever so slightly. I crouched, felt the ball’s rubbery surface against my soft palm. Gracelessly, I heaved the ball toward the rim and then shook my head in disgust. I had to watch, though I knew the outcome. The orange sphere sailed awkwardly and met the side of the rim with a hollow thud.

My basketball career began in sixth grade – a whole year before my brother and I purchased the hoop. I’m not quite sure why I decided to play the game, actually. The sport was foreign to me, but somehow I was caught up in my classmates’ enthusiasm. I found myself filling out the entry form one day, hardly thinking what I was doing. My mom wrote me a check, and just like that I was off to discover the yet-unexplored world of hoop dreams.

My coach was a loud-mouthed, red-faced man who roamed the court with terrifying ferocity. Looking back, it seems Coach Tracy thought he was coaching the Chicago Bulls and not the Springfield Sixth Graders. He hated to lose, and we certainly did our fair share of it.

The screeching sounds of sneakers echoed inside the walls of that brick building each Saturday. Coach’s disgusted roar reverberated across the gym too, as chilly frost fogged tall widows.

In the end, I think I was the one who frustrated Coach Tracy most that season. I was just about the tallest kid in the league, so when I walked into the Springfield Community Building on that first day of practice, the coach probably thought I was a superstar in the making.

In reality, I was awful – all legs and spectacularly uncoordinated.

Two-thirds of the way through the season, Coach Tracy reached his breaking point, I guess. One practice, he decided it was time to teach me the correct mechanics of shooting a basketball.

“Balance the ball atop your right hand like so,” he said with uncharacteristic patience. “Use your left hand to aim. Now, raise your right arm like an elevator and flick your wrist.”

The motion was terribly awkward – probably because I’m actually left-handed and didn’t have the presence of mind to tell the coach then – but I spent weeks afterward practicing it with a tiny Nerf ball until it came naturally.

In all, I scored four points that sixth-grade season.

With the arrival of the basketball pole, however, came a renewed determination. Even then, I’m sure I recognized my own naiveté, but a small part of me sincerely believed I could be a genuine ballplayer one day.

I conjured images of my hometown hoops heroes – Eric Piatkowski, Bruce Chubick, Jaron Boone – as I stood at the end of the driveway and did just as Coach Tracy had taught me. Mostly, I played by myself because my brother, who had initially helped fund the hoop, stubbornly decided he had no interest in joining me.

On winter days, my fingers ached with cold as the ball landed limply in the snow-driven driveway. Flurries waltzed about me; my pale, deadened hands tingled. Sometimes I played with gloves on, but I found the gloves hindered my shot, so most times I didn’t.

I tried out for the team in seventh-grade. Junior high transformed basketball into an elite, cut-throat club. I failed to make the roster.

On rainy days, merciless droplets battered the pavement. The ball – its grip worn smooth from extended use – spattered moisture onto my clothes with each thunderous dribble. My shriveled fingertips were soaked with grime. After every made shot, the ball sloshed messily into the dirt-turned-mud onto which the hoop was mounted. I delicately retrieved the slimy ball, carried it to the street and washed it clean in the vast reservoirs of rainwater. Then I began the process anew.

I tried out for the eighth-grade team.

“You’ve got some talent, kid,” the coach said disinterestedly. “Keep practicing.”

On summer days, sweat dripped down my dark, scraggly bangs and into my eyes. I tip-toed, writhed, danced along the invisible baseline of that narrow strip of driveway with magical ease. Remarkably, I always ended up 15 feet away from the basket – at the line dividing those two slabs of concrete. Mom called for dinner, but I stayed right there – at the end of the driveway. The clock ticked down in my head, rushing toward the inevitable buzzer as the din of the crowd swelled, then erupted. One last shot.

Ready.

Aim.

Fire.

In the ninth grade, Coach Biernbaum didn't have the heart to cut me. I still remember his giant laugh and perpetually twinkling eyes. He must have known how badly I wanted it.

The first time I put on that red uniform with blue and white trim, I couldn't stop staring at myself in the mirror. Some things simply seem too good to be true; this was one of them. The shorts were too big, but I didn't care. With my unnaturally long limbs and plastic-framed glasses that were too large for my face, I'm sure I looked pretty ridiculous on the court. But it hardly mattered then.

I didn't play much that season, but it was enough. Midway through the season, I caught a pass on the right wing. I was stunned – so much so, I almost let the ball slip out of bounds. I rarely had a pass come my way; I shot even less, but 15 feet from the hoop and uncovered by the opposing defense, I knew exactly what I had to do. Without thinking, I sprang up and flicked the ball forward. The ball soared in a perfect arc and snapped through the net.

As I turned to head back up the court, I couldn't stifle a grin. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I caught Coach Tracy's smile too – somewhere in the crowd.

My basketball career ended a short time after that. School got the better of me, and I knew I'd never be great.

I tried out for the varsity team in the tenth grade.

After a particularly bad practice, Coach Broderick yelled after me from behind his mustache: "It's basketball, son, not calculus."

The other boys snickered on their way to the locker room.

Still, the driveway was my sanctuary. After a hard day – or just when I was feeling lonely – that hoop was my friend. There was something soothing about the ball flying away from my fingertips and up into the sky.

The hoop inevitably aged. The net tore on one side and hung lifelessly. The once-bright backboard faded. The pole rusted. The ash tree in the front yard grew until it almost touched the rim.

But I kept shooting.

When I went away to college, I played on the chain-netted hoop behind my apartment instead. One day, I shot for an hour straight, trying to calm my nerves before asking a girl on a date.

After a long day of classes, I'd shoot the 15-foot "driveway shot" 100 times in a row and tally my percentage. Then, I'd shoot 100 more, trying to beat my score. The exercise was more than therapeutic.

Coach Biernbaum died of cancer while I was away. It was a shock to everyone, I guess. Funny how those things happen. I never thanked him.

My mom's still talking. Now she's saying something about the dog or a book she just read, but I'm not listening.

I'm alone. At the end of the driveway.

My knees bend. My trigger arm coils, then extends – just like an elevator. My toes bounce. My fingers stretch upward and flick forward with a silk-smooth release.

I don't look because I know exactly where that ball is going.

Snap.