

FOLLOW THE BOUNCING BALL

*If a basketball falls in a gymnasium,
and no one is there to hear it, does
it still make a sound?*

To say that Renovo was a gung-ho basketball town would be a gross understatement. I'd put a '50s- and '60s-vintage Renovo up against any town in Indiana for its love of basketball.

For example, whenever there was an away game, a miles-long caravan of cars, jam-packed with rabid Renovo fans, would snake along the valleys of the Appalachian highlands en route to the opponent's gym. And if it was a *big* away game, it is not a stretch to suggest that one could have exploded a bomb in Renovo and no one would have been the wiser. For all practical purposes, it was deserted.

As one might expect, given Renovo's obsession with basketball, almost every young boy in town had a fire in the belly to play, and the YMCA gymnasium——by all accounts, the most hallowed hardwood around——is where the fire got stoked and fanned.

Town lore had it that if one walked into the YMCA gym at *any* time——at midday or in the wee hours of the morning, in sweltering summertime or in the dead of winter——and bounced a basketball, one could get a pickup game in a matter of minutes. Like the smoke signals of American Indians on the Great Plains and the drumbeat of African tribesmen on the Serengeti, a bouncing basketball in the YMCA gym would resonate in the collective psyche of the town's hoops junkies, and soon——in twos and threes——they would drift in and start to choose up sides. These would be the true players——the *playahs*, if you will.

And play we did——weekday evenings until 10 o'clock (mind you, many times this was after we had already practiced basketball at school in the afternoon) and all day on Saturday. On days when the YMCA gym was closed (yes, even Christmas Day), we tried to wheedle or finagle the keys out of the front-desk clerk. Failing that, we broke in.

The YMCA gym was a special place to play in more ways than one. Owing to its small size, its barnlike roof with open rafters, and its concrete walls that demarcated the out-of-bounds under both baskets and on one side of the court, the YMCA gym lent itself to myriad trick shots during shootarounds and games of H-O-R-S-E. Players would shoot the ball off the walls, through the rafters from midcourt, from the locker-room stairway, from the top row of the bleachers, and from behind the backboards. One was limited only by his capacity for creativity. And those who were not averse to risk (and who presumably came from families that had paid-up medical insurance) would run up the side of the wall under the basket to practice dunking.

This hazardous ballet would often be set to music that emanated from the underground locker room, where an all-male choir that sang a cappella seemed to be in residence. The excellent acoustics in the locker room prompted more than one impromptu doo-wop audition or complete in-concert performance of the latest musical playing at the Rialto Theater. I distinctly recall participating in a killer rendition of "Some Enchanted Evening" during *South Pacific's* run at the Rialto (Rossano Brazzi ate his heart out, I'm sure).

After we chose up sides, in lieu of uniforms, one team would play with their shirts on (they were called, appropriately enough, the "shirts") and the other, with their shirts off (the "skins"). The oldsters at the gym, who were fond of reminding us how tough they had it in days gone by, would tell a tale of winter weather so frigid, and a YMCA gym so cold, that instead of playing "shirts" vs. "skins," they had to play "shirts" vs. "coats." We youngsters, although a tad wet behind the ears, never really believed that story.

The games themselves told us all we needed to know about one another. Amid the sneaker squeaks, we found out who was honest, who held up under pressure, who played hard even when his team had fallen behind, and who was willing to play a specific role for the good of his team.

Images that linger: Niggio Pizzino mock-threatening to hit Ruth Poorman, the front-desk clerk at the Y, with his sneaker unless she coughed up the keys to the gym; hard-nosed southpaw Bucky Price slashing unimpeded down the lane as defenders shied away from him because none of them wanted to get hit in the face with one of his errant blind passes; Duane Batschelet draining no-arc jumper after no-arc jumper despite head-faking so violently that he made himself dizzy; Ron Markert's competitive fire and textbook style; Bob Heintz scoring from his favorite spot along the baseline; players imitating their favorite NBA stars; players feigning spastic conditions whenever strangers entered the gym (all the better to con them into a game); and the omnipresent shooters with their rainbows and string music—*shwip! shwick!*—nothin' but net, baby.

The most memorable pickup games were the Saturday-afternoon full-court marathons. On Saturdays, the college guys were back in town, the adults were off work, and we played nonstop for hours, running substitutes in on the fly so deftly that, had he been there, Red Auerbach would have turned Celtic-green with envy. These were—to borrow the words of Dennis Trudell—the games of a thousand frozen moments, tensions, and struggles.

The ground rules were simple: (1) if you fouled someone, you were honor-bound to call a foul on yourself; (2) if the floor was freshly waxed, you were allowed to drag your pivot foot (or slide, for that matter); and (3) the first team to tally 100 baskets (200 points) won, but—and this is crucial—you had to win by a least *two* baskets. Not that complicated, right?

There was just one teensy catch: There was no limit to the number of fouls a player could accumulate (i.e., no one could ever foul out). Now, that was not a problem when one team was leading by a large margin and had the game well in hand because, in that

situation, their opponents usually went quietly. But whenever the game was hotly contested and the score happened to reach "deuce" (say, 98-all or 99-all), the fact that players could foul with impunity became a *huge* problem. The game quickly devolved into a scene straight out of "American Gladiators"—with every player assuming the role of bloodthirsty warrior, every player having pride but no shame.

I will dispense with a description of the ensuing carnage—it was not a pretty sight—and simply say that it was very difficult to get a shot off, let alone make a basket. We combatants already had a whole afternoon's worth of sweat invested in the game, and now, with the scent of victory wafting into our flared nostrils, we were not about to let the Championship of the Free World slip through our fingers. So if a player even *thought* about touching the ball, he got hammered.

Eventually, someone would toss in a no-look, over-the-shoulder touch-shot or a falling-out-of-bounds 35-footer to win, and we'd all shake hands and go home for supper.