

# ONE-ON-ONE

ABOUT THE SIZE OF A TOILET-PAPER ROLL, THE WHITE CARDBOARD tube—a thick, green fuse taped along its length—felt a little heavier than a baseball. Printed on the side in army font was “Hand Grenade Simulator,” above the warning “Do Not Ignite Within 15 Feet of Anything Flammable.” On a warm summer night in 1969, at one in the morning on the sleepy, half-deserted campus in Pullman, Washington, I pulled the fuse cap and threw what my friend Jane called a “big firecracker” off the roof of the Sigma Nu house into an alley. I watched over the edge like Kilroy, with Jane at my side and our friend Duncan, who had been assigned to look after his empty fraternity house all summer, himself the only ROTC English-summer-school graduate, student-deferred cadet at Washington State University with a beard and shoulder-length red hair covering his ears.

If I had thought about it beforehand, a fifteen-foot radius means a thirty-foot flash, but the tube and its sizzle had already plopped onto the gravel. Then exploded. Filled every sense, ears boxed and ringing, breath blown out, a slap in the face, my eyes pitted with orange and red, two bright circles I saw everywhere I

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looked. The echo of bludgeoned air rolled down the campus hill into Pullman. No toy did that to your heart.

We hid for an hour or so, watching a police cruiser circle the block, washing its searchlight across the empty fraternities and sororities. Frightened and exhilarated, I tried to see, through the red circles fading in my retinas, if we had blown out the windows in the sorority house next door. Then at 2:30, having learned nothing, we tried the flare. I removed the cap with its firing pin from the top of the tube, placed it on the bottom where the primer shell was, held the tube pointed up and out, slapped the cap with my hand, and fired the flare, which rocketed high over the Victorian house of the university president. There in green light lay his tidy backyard: swings, a goldfish pond, and manicured evergreens. Beyond his iron fence, a small park and run-down neighborhood of old houses. Hung beneath its parachute, the burning phosphorus fell for a long time, eerie and surreal, casting more shadow than light, giving fear enough time to show itself, I imagined, before the dark filled in.

Where Jane got these things I didn't know, but she had given them to me—not to symbolize our relationship, as I probably thought once, but because they scared her. They meant Vietnam to her. She had seen what such things lead to. Kind, affectionate, and dutiful to her friends, Jane had gathered me in as her new friend that summer, me the ex-basketball star at loose ends, lost between my playing past and what I might do for a living in the future. We had known each other at a distance as undergraduates at Washington State University, but then we lost contact when I went abroad to play, briefly, for a washing-machine factory in Bologna, Italy, and then for the Gillette All-Stars, a touring team made up of American players suspended in the great hardwood purgatory between college basketball and the NBA. It was temporary work, I realize now, but having focused so intently on basketball all those years, I couldn't

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see clearly where I had been, and certainly not where I was going. That is, until I was momentarily blinded that summer in Pullman, and Jane helped me to see.

On the roof she said, “John Nebel told me the white tube was like a big firecracker. He’s back from Vietnam. In the hospital, you know, at Madigan in Tacoma.”

“I didn’t know,” I said, too surprised and ashamed just then to explain I hadn’t even known he was in Vietnam. He had been a teammate for two years, the first year in 1964 on our undefeated freshman basketball team at WSU, and the next year when we both played for the varsity.

“I think he’d like to see you,” she said.

John starred at Mercer Island High School near Seattle when I was playing for Wilson High School in Tacoma. As classmates the next year at WSU, we both flunked the Royal Canadian Air Force physical fitness exam to become the only two scholarship-holding basketball players assigned to remedial freshman PE. Read out loud and mispronounced, our names were among the twelve singled out of sixty in line in baggy shorts and acceptable PE T-shirts to report to the conditioning room because we had been found “unfit.” Maybe three pull-ups didn’t pass, but John and I protested injustice or a coaching conspiracy for weeks, while twelve odd body shapes sailed nowhere in rowing machines or lifted dumbbells or ran the daily laps around the perimeter of the gym, in the middle of which forty-eight examples of military fitness whacked at badminton birdies. There is nothing like mutual humiliation to promote teamwork, and John and I were good teammates for those two years. But by his junior year he had quit the team, and we drifted apart, he to his studies and the Army ROTC, and I almost single-mindedly to basketball.

When Jane asked me the next day if I would like to see John in the hospital, I said yes, though I was immediately anxious, even

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frightened. She mentioned how he had been close to a howitzer-shell booby trap, how devastating the shrapnel. My ears still hurt from the explosion the night before, but I couldn't imagine what he had come back from and how badly he had been injured. Why was I afraid? I had no idea what to expect or what he might expect of me. I had made little effort to keep in touch with John, and given even less credence to the war. What would my wandering through Europe mean to him, or the two years he had missed playing at WSU? Would he want to hear about my playing against Lew Alcindor, the loss and frustration, how our old coach explained the matchup by saying McKean's "the one who played against Alcindor. That's why I said Alcindor must have been 7'6", because McKean would stand by him and Alcindor's arm would be on McKean's shoulder." Did the lopsided contest have anything to do with John's experiences? Was it guilt I was feeling?

As Jane and I traveled across Washington State, three hundred miles from Pullman to Tacoma's Madigan Hospital, I took with me the image of John Nebel sprinting full court in a game we played against Montana in Missoula: A defensive rebound falls my way, I turn, and there's John just past the ten-second line on his way down court. I throw a football pass, leading him, and he catches it over his shoulder, dribbles once, and lays it in.

My concept of the Vietnam War was and still is ambiguous, burlesque, and carnival-like in the extreme. Neither *dulce* nor *decorum*, the language and images I have collected for the war clash—a Buddhist monk's self-immolation on a Saigon street on the same stage in my mind as the graduate art student in Pullman who, hating the war, painted himself in indelible ink, Adam's apple to shaved toes, as Captain America. His art friends helped, great graphic illustrators that they were, and detailed him down to the shoelaces and stitches. He covered his true identity with a three-piece suit,

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got a buzz haircut and a briefcase, and reported to his Army physical. Word has it he disappeared behind the door marked “psychological exam.” Or a friend from high school who showed me the huge scar next to his right shoulder blade and, laughing as if such bravado were commonplace, said someone shot him as he ran as fast as he could out of the jungle. Or the stories circulated about a high school classmate who had volunteered for the infantry, shipped out, and soon after he arrived in Vietnam, jumped over a log and onto a land mine. For us he was simply no longer there, his name fading as if we knew his story better than we had known him—how despite warnings not to, his father had opened the sealed casket to see what was left of his son.

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FOR ME, ARMY BUSINESS ON CAMPUS WAS A LONG WAY OFF. I would watch from the top row of seats in the empty football stadium—running the steps was a mandatory preseason basketball conditioner—as the miniature ROTC cadets marched in the fields next to Bohler Gym, all that order barking and square corners, the creases and spit-polished shoes bobbing and turning in unison. At home in the summer of 1965, I found the Army fifteen miles south of Tacoma at Fort Lewis, an immense training center and jumping-off spot for Vietnam. I would roll up to the gate, talk my way past the guards, basketball and gear on the front seat. Then I would stand around in the base gym until the soldiers invited me to play in their pickup games. It seemed like a fair trade-off. I was a good freshman college player who could shoot, and they were strong and enthusiastic. It was the physical game I was after, and the soldiers played hard, ragged basketball. They were serious and granted authority to skill—a good move, a fadeaway jumper that found only net. “Good shot,” they would say. “What else can you do?” Despite the charley

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horses and bloody knees, the squint of a bruised eye, this was what I wanted to hear, that I had stood up and endured, that I could play the game.

But Fort Lewis was too neatly oppressive, all that olive drab, those painted rocks, the shiny recruits in clean uniforms marching down the roads, the other less polished soldiers I remembered seeing, alone or in pairs, sunburned and taciturn, watching from the edges as if they had something incredible pressing on their minds. There was static in the air, and boredom at the same time, if that is possible. Somebody knew something and wasn't talking. I remember after one pickup game, when I felt strong and cocky from scoring over twenty points, a black sergeant asked me how old I was, fifteen? Something was being tested. I wasn't sure what the stakes were, but I knew the game was serious. Even when I returned to school, there was the Vietnam War in all its contradictions: the protests on campus, the magazines with their galleries of dead, friends leaving for Canada or Brazil, others leaving for Vietnam. Some came back unable to sleep, loving guns and solitude.

In the fall of 1966, the Army drew very close to me—too close. WSU had been in session only a few weeks, and the basketball team had begun its conditioning programs and first practices when I got my draft papers in the mail. The salutation really said "Greetings," and the body of the letter ordered me to report to Spokane in early December for a physical. This can't be right, I thought, for all the self-serving reasons, and I went to the Selective Service office on campus and discovered that the "satisfactory student progress" computer card I had filled out during fall registration had been rejected, its information never sent to the draft board in Tacoma to verify that I was, indeed, a student. I had written the wrong figures in the little box marked "draft number." What a petty detail, I thought, and even though the campus office sent off a correctly

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filled-in form, I still visited the draft board in Tacoma a week later to make sure. An elderly lady behind the counter two steep flights up at 915½ Pacific Avenue in Tacoma asked if she could help. I laid the summons paper on the counter and explained—not so well, I might add—that I was supposed to be in Ohio to play basketball against Ohio State in December, and in January we were playing UCLA and Lew Alcindor, whom she must have heard of, and alas, I didn't have time to take this physical. She broke her poignant silence by thumping shut a large leather-spined book into which she had, undoubtedly, recorded my name. I have seen her likeness recently in Grant Wood's painting *Daughters of the Revolution*. White hair severely pulled back, a sweater buttoned up but having no effect on the chill in her expression, and wire glasses through which she sees through me, perfectly.

"There are boys in Vietnam who haven't got time to be there either," she said—words I can still hear—and then she asked to see my draft card and my Notice of Classification card. Rummaging through my wallet, I could find neither. She led me, still rummaging, to a table behind her counter and set before me a sheet of paper that listed the years in jail I faced and the dollar amount in fines imposed for not carrying these two cards on my person.

Aware of the gravity by now, I found the cards, though no more words to explain myself. I shrugged my shoulders, an old response to the humiliations of grade school—this chair as stiff-backed as those outside the principal's office, where more than once I came to attention, owned up, and paid my dues. When another woman, middle-aged, approached with a file and asked me if I was McKean, I almost raised my hand. "Yes," I said, and stood. She explained that they had finally received my student-progress information, then hesitated and asked, "By the way, Clayton, how tall are you?"

"Six foot ten," I hedged.

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“Well,” she said with a shrug, “you’re not regulation. You can thumb your nose at us if you like. And if we bother you again, have your physician send us a note as to your height.”

My trial took ten minutes. Weightless all the way down the stairs, blessed by the extraordinary, I was untouchable. No one else had ever called me by my middle name, and her doing so seemed the gavel stroke on my liberation from the conventional, from draft papers and roll calls and basic training, from the category of the common soldier. My only uniform would serve basketball. She had freed me, I thought at the time, from the specter of Vietnam. Odd man out, abnormal, and beyond reach were defined by the Army as simply “nonregulation” and therefore without existence. How ironic and dark and comic and nebulous that seemed to me in 1966.

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I WANTED TO EXPLAIN TO JOHN NEBEL THAT THE ONLY THING clear to me at that time was that we would play UCLA in Pullman on January 7. The defining moment was less than three months away, and the thought of it was like a set of blinders. He would understand that we had a good-enough team, although eccentric and a bit of a throwback. Every player came from somewhere in the state of Washington. We had two miniature guards, Lenny Allen at five foot nine and Ray Stein at five foot eleven, known in Pullman as the “Dynamic Duo,” who had their own fan club and buttons. Our forwards were built like tight ends, Randy Stoll at six foot seven and 235, Ted Wierman at six foot eight and 240, and Bud Norris—who really did play tight end—at six foot four and 235, and whose credentials included knocking Cazzie Russell unconscious in our game against Michigan in the Far West Classic Basketball Tournament in Portland, Oregon. Despite Bud’s downfield defense, Russell’s

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layup was good, and he managed to score thirty more points after he regained his senses.

I was the center at six foot nine, and “scrawny,” to quote coach Marv Harshman. In some ways, we were the perfect example of a “balanced” basketball team. Fast and slow at the same time, we ran patterns that would release our two little guards down the court, the ball never touching the ground. Some teams we simply overwhelmed by our good block-and-tackle technique, others by the speed of our guards. As disciplined as an army squad, we ran well-drilled patterns and waited for our opportunities. In appearance we were the perfect WSU team—a group of stable, conservative young men who could have been plowing the good deep soil of eastern Washington instead of playing ball.

But UCLA presented a problem, to understate the issue. They were New York players via L.A. Neither our coaches nor our players could conceive of the dimensions of UCLA’s game, or duplicate them with a practice team. Extraordinary measures were needed. The coaches taped a three-foot board to forward Dick Jacob’s arm, and he swatted away our layups and jump shots until we were all gun-shy. I remember tennis rackets, too. At Alcindor’s post position, Dick Watters stood on a fourteen-inch stool and held the ball out of everyone’s reach. All this made for good copy, the *Tacoma News Tribune* running pictures and an article under the caption “WSU Becomes Stool Pigeon For Big Lew.” In the photo, I look like the smallest kid in a neighborhood pickup game, standing on tiptoes and peeking up at the boosted Watters, who is calling for the ball once more. It is the same look I have in the photos of the real game. The article quotes Harshman as saying, “Many of the kids on our team haven’t seen Alcindor and can’t imagine how much area he covers, how agile he is, and how much damage he can do.” Then he

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explains that the difficulty in playing against Alcindor is the “psychological effect he creates, particularly in the shooting department.”

We couldn’t leap as high, nor run as fast for as long, and the psychological effect encompassed far more than shooting. Conventional advice to a team is to play their own game, that players are skilled in what they practice over and over, but Lew Alcindor—the whole UCLA team, for that matter—forced us to play a new game, to operate in dimensions we weren’t familiar with and many times couldn’t reach. We couldn’t practice what we couldn’t imagine, and the slapstick of tennis rackets and stools helped only a little.

Despite what Harshman said, many of us had seen Lew Alcindor play in Los Angeles the year before, when the UCLA freshman team played in a preliminary game. We knew who we were facing, but not quite what to expect, and that became a preoccupation. I allowed him far too much space in my own head, thinking of him for weeks during study evenings in WSU’s Holland Library. I remember my hands sweating, but nothing that I may have read. I thought of him during my pregame dressing superstitions: left ankle taped first, then right; left shoe tied first, then right—and during the two-flight climb up the darkened stairway, past the chlorine smell of the pool, past the crowd and the cigarette smoke in the lobby, and then our pushing through the open double doors into the glare and noise, the crowd on its feet and the band starting up.

Though it cannot compare with John’s long journey into the jungle, my anticipation of the game still comes back with power—the preparation and brooding in the quiet basement of Bohler Gym, the diagrams on the blackboard, the potential fakes and moves, the choreography, the imagined shots going up and in. Then the game in the mind melts into the game at hand, as thought and action coincide beneath the bright lights.

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That evening, I carried Lew Alcindor up the stairs with me. During the warm-up drills, I tried to keep my mind on my own business—the game was twenty minutes away, and the people in the crowd, some of whom had waited for days for seats in Bohler Gym, oohed and aahed in disbelief, slapped their collective foreheads, and whistled between their teeth—but curiosity got the best of me. I still see over my shoulder the powder blue of the UCLA team at their end of the court and Lew Alcindor in line for layups. At his turn, he dribbles twice and rises up in the most elementary move in basketball—leaping off the left foot, right knee up, right hand reaching—and pins the basketball against the backboard six inches above the shooting square, over twelve feet up. And lets go. Then and now, a ballet master would compliment his “elevation” and a poet admire the wonderful sense of understatement, the ball dropping through the net as Alcindor jogs to the end of the rebounding line.

I shouldn't have been watching. There was no time for analogies; describing the game and playing it require two different states of mind. Appointed to guard Lew Alcindor—or sacrificed, depending on your point of view—I needed to warm up. Play, don't watch; watching is too slow, always half a step behind. But the awe and fear and simple admiration turned my head.

We had a strategy, though, and it almost worked. We thought we could force UCLA out of its game plan with our defense, and with the help of the noisy crowd stuffed into our cracker-box gym, five thousand fans in four thousand seats. My assignment was simple: I had to occupy Alcindor's favored spot before he could get there. Pregame films showed us that he liked to set up along the right side of the key about halfway toward the foul line; after we lost possession or scored, I ran hard to get back first. When he came down and turned and tried to back his way into position, I would push and block to keep him out. Or I would push and release and step in

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front, always trying to upset his timing and change his game. Sometimes it worked; he wasn't as strong as I thought he would be. Other times I would try to time the pass, playing the passing lane, defending against the forward, who might raise the ball over his head, look at Alcindor, and then pass. Those were easy to pick off.

A few of my offensive moves worked too. When posting up during the first half, I could see in my peripheral vision that Alcindor had his arms down or out to the side, even when I had the ball in deep. My turnaround fadeaway jump shot wasn't working at all, so one time I tried a turnaround shot, jumping up and in quickly. I concentrated on the setup more than I aimed at the basket—elbows in, one hand beneath, the other behind and up on the ball—so that I had the shot positioned right above the top of his forehead. He couldn't get his hands up in time, and I had only to follow through to make my short eight-footer go in. Simple. I surprised him another time when I received the ball near our foul line as our team moved to set up. As the center on our team, I wasn't supposed to be that high in the key, but I turned to face the basket anyway, and there was Alcindor moving quickly from beneath the basket. I could see by the look on his face that he was eager to make a point, to serve me lunch by stuffing the ball back where it came from. All I had to do was fake the shot from there—a little basketball sleight of hand, a one-syllable lie, my head, the ball, and my shoulders all in on it—and up he went. In my imagination I can see his shoes going by, but all I remember is an easy layup after one dribble.

What I don't remember is any of these moves working more than once. Not because they were ineffective or accidental, but because Lew Alcindor was a smart, aware, analytical player, who read his opponents well and adjusted quickly. Although deceptive, a little quicker than he was, and faster to the floor, I was not that complicated a text.

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By some quirk and a little luck, however, we were ahead early in the second half, mostly because Alcindor was in foul trouble. When the ball was thrown to him in the post, he had a tendency to hook me with his left arm and roll into his shot. I couldn't hope to reach the ball, so I held my position. As the game progressed, I moved more resolutely into his path so the hooking might seem even more pronounced. Add a little stagger, I thought, a little reel, and perhaps the official would see a smaller man being bullied by the bigger, more famous guy from L.A. It was a good theory that worked a couple of times.

When Alcindor committed his fourth foul with twelve minutes left in the second half, he was taken out, and the next four-and-a-half minutes were ecstatic, as if all was right with the world. The game now at my level, I shot the ball over their second-string center, rebounded, and tipped one in. No more drought. No more famine. We regained control of ourselves as well as the game, and pulled ahead by one point with nine-and-a-half minutes left. Joy, oh, joy; pass me the ball.

All too soon, Alcindor was back. They slowed the game down to prevent his fouling out and worked through our defense for close shot after close shot. On offense, we became hesitant once again, stricken by second thoughts. For me, one play shows how tenuous my threat was to Alcindor. Given the ball near the foul lane, I turned to find that he had dropped off, leaving me room to shoot. I put a lot of arch on the ball, but he jumped, reached, and just nicked the ball with his fingertips before it reached its peak and fell neatly with a swish through the basket. I had the two points, but felt as though he had made the basket. After that, the rest of my shots seemed like improvisations, each a variation I had never practiced. This is exactly the goal of good defense—don't go for the grand gesture or the dramatic rejection, but simply force the other team into

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unfamiliar territory, where they have no skill, comfort, or confidence. We played well and lost by nine points, the closest we ever came to beating Lew Alcindor's UCLA.

After that first game, we couldn't help feeling frustrated and optimistic at the same time. "What was he like?" my roommates asked. They had waited all night for good seats and found them two rows behind the end line. "Did you hear us yelling at you?" No, I couldn't see them for the bright lights, and couldn't hear them in the incomprehensible roar and din beyond the out-of-bounds lines. Inside those lines, the absorption in the moment was absolute, and only afterward in scenes and tableaux did the event begin to show itself. Perhaps it wasn't until February 17, 1967, when *Life Magazine* featured in its sports section the article "Big Lew Measures His Lonely World," that I understood the dimensions of his game. On page 106 beneath the full-page photograph, the caption reads: "In an out-of-town game against Washington State, Lew springs past State's 6-foot-9-inch center Jim McKean and deftly curls in a basket." My father cut the photo out and kept it in a scrapbook. For years I remembered myself in this photo as being *contained* by Alcindor, a word normally used to describe what a good defender does to an offensive player. I remembered jumping as high as I could, my feet higher off the floor than Alcindor's, my reach far less, my hand slapping at his elbow.

I have three copies of that issue now, bought at shopping malls when they host antique dealers in the walkways. The last dealer sold me a copy for ten bucks and raised his eyebrows when I showed him page 106 and said that was me. My memory gives me more credit than I'm due, however, for the picture shows me simply out-jumped, my feet far below Alcindor's. Looking straight up, I have my mouth open, as does much of the crowd, given that the ball in his hand is ten inches above the basket. The antique dealer said that

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anytime I wanted a mint copy to let him know, and I will, for it contains articles and pictures that illustrate not only the dimensions of Lew Alcindor's game but the dimensions of time as well.

In that same issue, there are poems by, and an article about, the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko and his visit to America. There is a dismissive article about the "Other Culture," the one that celebrates "happenings" and performance art, and claims poets as its kings and William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* as its bible, which all seem a little corny now. There is an article about a doctor volunteering to help the villagers in Vietnam, a kind of Tom Dooley, "The 'Bac Si' from Iowa." One of the subtitles in the article reads: "A volunteer M.D. wars on pain in Vietnam."

Elsewhere in this issue, *Life Magazine* fans the smoldering public argument over the war. In the "Presidency" section, Hugh Sidey quotes Lyndon Johnson as saying, "I chase every peace feeler just like my little beagle chases a squirrel." In the book review section, Webster Schott claims that Robert Lowell's *Near the Ocean* consolidates his literary position, that his poems have "documented the U.S. intellectual's painful travel through recent time." Schott quotes Lowell:

*Pity the planet, all joy gone  
from this sweet volcanic cone;  
peace to our children when they fall  
in small war on the heels of small  
war—until the end of time  
to police the earth, a ghost  
orbiting forever lost  
in the monotonous sublime.*

What a contrast those lines give to the comforting images of

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healing and the refrain of “peace” in this issue of *Life*. Lowell suggests that the price of war is simply and horribly the loss of our children until the earth itself is a ghost. The whole era seems clearly revealed in these pages: how the counterculture and the poets understood enough to protest the war; how the public was fed images of healing and the language of peace; and how, finally, Johnson’s predatory simile suggests a more chilling truth, a government strategy to chase down peace and kill it.

When I reread the excerpt from Lowell’s poem, I think of my friend John Nebel walking down a path in Vietnam, on a mission the government called a “police action.” And because I wasn’t there, my frames of reference are from basketball, from what I have read, and from a walk I once took in Costa Rica. Following a path, narrow and dark, overgrown and lush, into a cloud forest, I imagine John walking before me with his pack and an M-16, almost a full court’s length ahead, and when he turns to hear something I say, the sudden light beneath his feet burns the leaves and shines through him, the delayed thump like a fist knocking him to the ground. That year, 1969, we were both twenty-three, but I was still trying to understand my life in terms of a game.

I remember another frigid Wednesday evening in February of 1967, when I sat in Holland Library and couldn’t focus on anything but the coming weekend. On Thursday we would drive, on ice-covered roads in subzero weather, the seventy-eight miles north to Spokane, get on a plane, and fly to Los Angeles. Still wearing our overcoats and boots—stunned by the sun, palm trees, and warm Pacific salt air—we would be driven to the Miramar Hotel in Santa Monica. The stunning had only begun: we were to play USC on Friday night and UCLA on Saturday night.

We beat USC, 86 to 76, but lost to UCLA, 100 to 78—not a surprising margin. Sitting on the bench late in the game with a towel



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draped over my head, I could easily see the source of our catastrophe: Lew Alcindor's domination. Before Pauley Pavilion's sun-tanned crowd, mugged even by UCLA's band, which sat at floor level and bleated raspberries at me every time I ran past, I had become a statistical anomaly. In the March 1968 issue of *Sport* magazine, Coach Harshman is quoted as saying: "My center, Jim McKean, told me after the game, 'Coach, I may go into the record books as the guy who let Alcindor get 61, but you'll be known as the coach who was dumb enough to play him man-to-man.'" I don't remember feeling especially witty then, so maybe John McCallum got it right in his historical survey, *College Basketball U.S.A. Since 1892*, published in 1978, where Harshman's statement is given like this: "I said, 'So tonight we're going to play one-on-one against Alcindor.' Jim McKean, a scrawny 6'8" kid from Tacoma, was my center. I said, 'Jim, you're probably going to go down in history as the guy who held Alcindor to maybe 50 points, and I'll go down as the coach who was dumb enough to match you one-on-one with him.'" I had grown shorter and thinner in the intervening ten years, and would soon fade completely. Between the opening jump and the final buzzer, Lew Alcindor made his point *and* his points, scoring twenty-two in the last four minutes in great sweeping moves to the basket. Sixty-one points. It was magnificent and humiliating. My pride badly wounded, I had fouled out early in the second half.

What began to change that evening, as I sat at the far end of the bench, was my view of the game. As firsthand witness to a redefinition of basketball by a great player, I became "regulation" once again, given perspective and my own ordinary mortality back. It sounds like a story by Jack London: sitting on a bench and crying after his final loss, the old boxer thought he had the younger man down for good in the first round, but the kid got up on the count of eight . . .

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The next year, as we traveled to play teams in Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Seattle, I was able to see a larger, more disturbing picture of the time I was playing in. After spending one afternoon before the California game walking up Telegraph Avenue, the new culture everywhere in dress and music, I stood in Sproul Plaza on the Berkeley campus, dressed in my gray slacks and crimson Cougar blazer, as a crowd formed on the steps and a neatly dressed black man spoke, in increasing volume, about burning whitey out of his stores, how blacks should rise up for freedom and power. His name was Stokely Carmichael, and he frightened me—not because of the suggested violence, but because I understood for a moment how the conventional fell short. Frightened for my own loss of ignorance, I knew there were many changes in store. To recall Lowell, there were “small wars” going on even here, with many lives at stake. Even Lew Alcindor was a symbol to be discarded to the past, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar the more appropriate and significant name to take into the future.

When I tried to explain this change later to the poet William Stafford, how the world seemed more complex and issues more urgent than my basketball games, he alluded to Corinthians, saying that perhaps I had put away “childish things.” Visiting John Nebel helped me to sort out and, in some ways, define those basketball years. On the way to Madigan Hospital outside of Tacoma, Jane explained what she knew, how John had been second in line on patrol, how the point man had tripped the howitzer-shell booby trap and died, how John had been devastated by shrapnel, his right leg gone below the knee, his torso full of holes, his jaw broken, his right ear blown out, his larynx cut.

“He can’t hear well and can only whisper, so speak up when you see him. Don’t whisper,” she said as we found our way to Madigan Hospital and parked. She had been there before and knew of a side

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door that opened into a long corridor. We walked for a long time, in dim light and disinfectant smell. In remarkable quiet, we pushed through double doors into a darkened ward, and there behind a screen and beneath a bright light lay John Nebel.

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WHAT COMPLETED MY CHANGE IN VISION WEREN'T THE QUARTER-size scars he showed me, or the splints for the fingers in his left hand, or the half cast on his left foot and the new bandage just below his right knee, though I was stunned and sorry.

"Six five, and only 160 pounds made it back," he said. His leg hurt, I could see, but he explained how he was carried into the helicopter, how soldiers were on top of him, how he was yelling, "My legs, my legs." How he spent hazy time in the hospital in Japan. And pointing to the pictures on the stand beside his bed, his parents' home on Mercer Island, his boat, he explained how he would water-ski again with his girlfriend, how these were the places he had left and was on his way back to. Struck and near tears, I was convinced because he was convinced. "I didn't lose anything I need," he said, asking the nurse, who stopped by, for a jug to pee in. "Things still work where they count."

And it wasn't the shot of morphine the nurse gave him, his leg having been operated on the day before, the gauze seeping, and the pain obvious in his face. Nor was it any conclusion I drew on the way home, Jane silent in the passenger seat, looking at the rain-glazed lights along South Tacoma Avenue. No comparisons worked. I had played a game, the point of which was to contain or be contained. If I had ever thought the language of sports, the metaphors themselves, might serve as a way to understand my friend John's experience, I was wrong. The shrapnel went through him, as if he wasn't there. Perhaps that is the awful point. Basketball gives definition to

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all its players, even those who lose; but war takes definition away—it undefines, erases, reduces even the best of its players to shattered ruin or a scattering of ashes. Even to do poorly in basketball is to be held, and whole.

And finally, it wasn't our saying goodbye and not talking until years later, though I regret we haven't kept in touch. No. What really completed my change in vision is the shame I recall of not remembering what Jane had asked me to do, before she and I stepped into the bright light beside John's bed and I fumbled for his good hand, when he asked in a strained, raspy voice, "How are you?"

"Speak up," she had said.

But I whispered. "Fine. Thanks. I'm fine."

