

THE TEACH

A Short Story by William Bungeroth



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By

William Bungeroth

“My words itch at your ears till you understand them.”

---Walt Whitman

The crowd, packed tight around the main playground court, watched in anticipation as the magician brought the ball up past half court. He was everything as advertised. A six foot six inch elite athlete that you had to see to believe; he combined leaping ability with raw speed and unparalleled hand eye coordination. Dribbling the ball to his right in the blink of an eye, he unpredictably changed direction, spun to his left down the lane towards the basket with the ball in his right hand. Challenged by the opposing team's center, he adjusted his body in mid air, moving the ball from his right hand to his left before dunking it through the hoop. The inner city crowd gasped before they exploded in delight on a warm summer night. It was the type of play that, through word of mouth, legends are born.

“You can’t guard anybody. They’ll just blow by you. Now watch me and follow. See. Now you do it.”

“This low?”

“No, this low, Tyler. Shift those legs, right leg out, left leg back.” Speaking rapidly, the old man smiled for the first time. He was in his element.

“Switch left, slide...switch right, slide...switch left again, then slide. You want to play on the school team, learn to play D.”

Both sides had stopped playing half court to watch the old man instruct a young student of the game.

“You tell him, Pops,” said the 6’7” all state power forward with the basketball under his arm. “No better teacher, right, Squid?”

“Pop’s the man, you learning from the best, Ty...Let’s go,” as the winner’s out game resumed.

Looking up at the autumn sun, the ultimate playground player, who in his day dominated the summer leagues, said to anyone within earshot, “It’s a great day to be livin and playin’ ball.” He had lost more than a half step in his life’s journey as he slowly stretched and exercised those declining muscles that had carried him from playing to coaching to teaching.

“Hey, Pops, got a minute. I need some help with my jumper,” came the request from a rangy point guard.

“Let me rest, Akeem. Defense is hard work. How’s yours, you still afraid to take a charge?” No matter what he did or whom he talked to, his eyes never wandered far from the players on the court.

“That was in high school, Pops. I take them now.”

“College boy, City College, right, give me 20 minutes and I’ll watch you shoot on the side court. Go over there and warm up. Don’t give me that look, warm up, I’ll be watchin.”

The brief activity had tired him out, so he found a spot on a park bench. From there, he had a clear view of both basketball courts. Willing to help those who ask for it. His teaching philosophy was simple; he only worked with players who wanted to improve their game. Looking through his glasses, he slowly cleaned them, then adjusted his eyewear before shouting out from his seat, “Reggie, take him inside, use your height. You want to start at Central, then dominate the paint. God gave you size, son, use it.”

Two older players, not seeking advice, joined the teacher on the bench. “Looking good, Pop’s, still coaching I see,” said one of them.

“You new to the neighborhood?” Not waiting for their reply. “Two captains of industry graduates. Visiting your mom, I see.” His voice was gravelly and rough like a hand saw cutting through wood. “Spotted her at Chickie’s Grocery. Helped her with her bags. Said you two don’t come around much. Ashamed of where you grew up? Again, not waiting for an answer, he looked back on the court, stood up, and shouted. “Good D, Harris, way to take the ball away. Now work the offense. Patience, patience, patience, find the open man.”

The old man believed that you had an obligation to help others, regardless of how life treated you. His park bench empty again, he sat down, leaned back, and raised his head skyward. Closing his eyes, he smiled, letting the fall sun and wind gently caress his face as his scoreboard clock reached double zero.