



PAPER COUGAR

GEORGE PLIMPTON'S 1966 BOOK, *PAPER LION*, IS A CLASSIC WORK OF EMBEDDED JOURNALISM. WE TOOK THAT CONCEPT AND MADE ONE WRITER'S HOOP DREAMS A REALITY – SORT OF.

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When I was a teenager, I always dreamed of making it into the girls' locker room. Somehow, I didn't picture it being anything like this. In the dream I wasn't wearing a women's basketball uniform and I most certainly wasn't getting yelled at for playing poor transition defense.

Evidently, reality is nowhere near as sexy as fantasy. But I can't complain. After all, I was actually invited to be in here and as of right this second, I am an honorary member of the College of Charleston women's basketball team.

Needless to say, this entire situation is a bit surreal. I mean, if you had told me that as a 33-year-old newspaper columnist I would have the opportunity to play basketball for coaching legend Nancy Wilson and alongside standout guards Tonia Gerty and Jade Hughes, I would have said, "Who?"

But then again, I'm an idiot. However, that's not the point. The point is: Never in a million years would I have guessed I'd actually be playing on a women's college basketball team - much less, getting paid to write about it. But after a few phone calls by the magazine's editor to various members of the athletics department, the wheels were set in motion. I would get two practices and one game with Coach Wilson and her 13-woman roster. A three-day behind-the-scenes pass to be "one of the gals."

According to my oh-so-hilarious friends, it actually wouldn't be that much of a stretch.

HOOP, THERE IT ISN'T

It's 10 minutes past 2 and the turkey sandwich I had for lunch isn't sitting too well. After all, it's been 14 years since I've played competitive basketball and now all of a sudden I'm supposed to dribble down the court at the Carolina First Arena and shoot a pull-up jumper from 15 feet in front of a bunch of college girls? As I take the ball and head toward the basket, I imagine the following thoughts are probably going through their minds:

*What is this guy doing here?
Where did he come from?
Why is he disrupting our practice?
Who plays basketball in jean shorts?*

Of course I don't disappoint - spectacularly missing the rim by a good five feet. Coach Wilson gestures for me to come over to her.

"Stand here by me for a little bit," she says. "We'll save you for the scrimmage." Which really means: "Let's get you off the court before you hurt someone."

But sure enough, when scrimmage time comes, Wilson actually does put me in and I spend the next hour running up and down the court with the ladies. Miraculously, the only thing I end up hurting during that time is my pride. But if there's an upside to my 60 minutes of total humiliation, it's that I can sense the women might be warming up to me, as evidenced by this exchange:

PLAYER: "Hey, Magic, nice pass on that last fast break. It was right to me."
ME: "Thanks."
PLAYER: "You know we're on different teams, right?"



Or not.

Practice ends with all of us running suicides up and down the court. As I cross the baseline finishing my last one, senior team captain Sarah Moya claps her hands in encouragement and shouts, “Way to go, Bryce!”

Later that night, as I’m getting ready for bed, two things pop into my head:

Maybe, just maybe, the girls are starting to come around. Wait, did she call me *Bruce*?

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

In the grand scheme of things, most college students have it pretty good. No job, no kids, and – with the exception of the occasional test or paper – no real responsibilities. Student-athletes, on the other hand, juggle schoolwork with a back-breaking schedule of practices, workouts and games. During the basketball season, the girls will be on the road more than 30 days. Individually, they will miss upward of 10 classes during the semester, if not more.

All that time on the road means one thing: When they’re not working on their jump shot, they’re working on their homework. Which is usually in the bus or the hotel room.

And as if that wasn’t enough, female student-athletes have another hurdle to deal with: poor fan attendance.

“I counted 31 people at our last home game,” Moya tells me.

“Yeah, and half of them were our friends,” junior guard Indya Mudd adds.

Discouraging fact: Ask anybody on the streets of Charleston who coaches the men’s basketball team and they’ll tick off the answer quicker than Kobe Bryant can make a layup. Ask them to name one starter for the Lady Cougars and they’re likely to say, “Wait, there’s a women’s team?”

But a brand-new arena – and more importantly, one of the most talented teams Wilson has coached in her 27-plus years in the college game – means things are likely to change.

“Winning will do amazing things for attendance,” she says.

ROLE REVERSAL

Day two of practice is more of the same. Mainly: Me trying not to get in the way. But this is nearly impossible when I’m asked to help run some mock plays against the ladies. Thanks to some good scouting by coaches Wilson, Kaye Waldrep, Temple Elmore and Josh Keys, we know that tomorrow’s opponent, Western Carolina, will probably run a handful of specific plays. Practicing how to react to them will make us better when they happen in the actual game.

Ironically, in most of these mock plays, I represent Western Carolina’s best player. As I continue to miss shot after shot and turn the ball over, I have a thought: Maybe she’ll assume the role of me tomorrow.

After an hour and 15 minutes of practice, the coaching staff sends us home with a message: Get a good night’s sleep because tomorrow Western Carolina will come to play. Oh, and because shoot around starts at 8 a.m.

ONE OF THE GIRLS

I’m barely awake as I go in the back door of the Carolina First Arena. The gym, however, is very much alive with the squeak of rubber soles on polished maple hardwood.

As I make my way down to the court, freshman forward Ariel Hatcher stops what she’s doing to call out, “Hey, Bryce!”

This makes me smile.

After all, it’s taken a lot of blood, sweat and air balls over the past two days to get to the point where the ladies finally – hmm, what’s a term that’s better than *despise* but worse than *tolerate*? – put up with my awkward presence. And you know what? It’s a good feeling. In fact, I feel just as much a part of this team as anyone with just one X chromosome possibly can.

Over the next hour or so, we do shooting drills – working hard, but conserving energy. After all, we’ve got a game in four hours and a victory will give the Lady Cougars the most wins they’ve had in a season since moving to Division I nearly 20 years ago.



GAME FACE

The big red digital clock on the wall reads “25:05” until tip-off. Coach Wilson, in her fire-engine red turtleneck and black suit, scribbles furiously on the dry erase board at the front of the locker room. She’s preaching the importance of blocking out.

As she puts the cap on her pen and turns to face all 14 of us, she relays a quote she’s read earlier in the week: “It’s OK to have butterflies in your stomach,” she says. “As long as they fly in formation.”

There’s the slightest beat of silence, everybody processing what’s just been said, followed by some much needed laughter. It’s a small moment of levity in an otherwise high-intensity situation. After all, this is what coaches call a



“measuring-stick game.” The kind that lets them know where their team stands. A win, and the ladies might just be for real. A loss and it’s just that much harder to get up for the next game.

As we exit from the tunnel and run out onto the court, there’s a surprise in store for us: Actual fans in the seats. Sure, it’s not a sellout. Not even close. But it is far and away the largest crowd to watch these ladies play a game for as long as they’ve suited up in the maroon and white.

And that is something to play for.

MY BIG SHOT

It’s getting late in the second half and Coach Wilson still hasn’t put me in. Over the course of 36 minutes I’ve watched eight different women go in the game but she still hasn’t called my number. Frustrated, I decide the reason she won’t put me in is because of that stupid NCAA rule that says a women’s basketball game has to be played by women. Big. Deal. Like anybody would even notice. Seriously. I’m built like a sixth-grade girl and shriek whenever I hear the Jonas Brothers on the radio. What other evidence do you need?

But I bite my tongue as a sobering fact crosses my mind: It’s probably for the best since there’s a good chance this is how things would play out:

ANNOUNCER NO. 1: *“It all comes down to this. The Cougars are down by two with five seconds to go. The in-bounds pass goes*

to Donovan. He pushes the ball up the court, dribbles to his left, spins, fades ... AND NAILS A THREE-POINTER AT THE BUZZER!”

ANNOUNCER NO. 2: *“Just to clarify, he shot that on the wrong basket, right, Jim?”*

ANNOUNCER NO. 1: *“That is correct.”*

So in the end, Coach Wilson probably made the right decision. As a result, guards Tonia Gerty and Jade Hughes – whose names I suspect I’ll never forget again – carry the team to a thrilling 61-56 overtime win.

A few minutes later everybody is back in the locker room hugging and high-fiving one other. It’s a big victory and I can’t help but think I might have brought a little good luck to the ladies.

“We’d like to give the game ball to the real MVP of today’s game, Bryce Donovan,” Coach Wilson doesn’t say. Instead, she says something about being really proud of the ladies and the great effort by the ladies and blah, blah, blah.

Whatever. It was fun while it lasted. Like they say, all good things must come to an end. And just like that, I’m off the team and standing outside the locker room. But it’s probably for the best. After all, I need to start focusing on more important things. Like how I’m going to make the school’s cheerleading squad.

One dream down. One to go. 🍷

– Bryce Donovan is a features reporter and columnist for Charleston’s The Post and Courier. Check out his column and links to his blog at www.charleston.net/bryce.

WHAT I LEARNED AS A LADY COUGAR...

- When you’re down on the court, you’d be surprised how clearly you can hear the people up in the stands. So fans, be careful what you say. And for your information, yes, I am well aware that my legs are, “unbelievably hairy.”
- Women stink just as bad as men when they sweat.
- The majority of set plays the ladies run are named after cities. After five minutes at practice, you aren’t sure if you’re on a basketball court or in an airport terminal.
- ATTENTION GUYS: If you ever want to brag to your friends that you’ve been in the women’s locker room and you need some hard facts to back it up – they have cherry wood lockers in there and a sweet microwave oven.
- Making the arena’s horn go off while Coach Nancy Wilson is talking to the players during practice is just as much fun as you’d think it’d be.

