

CRAZY BASKETBALL

A Life In and Out of Bounds

CHARLEY ROSEN

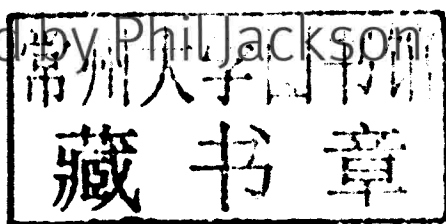
Foreword by **PHIL JACKSON**

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CHARLEY ROSEN

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Crazy Basketball

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Foreword

PHIL JACKSON

There is a lot of craziness in *Crazy Basketball*. I guess knowing Charley Rosen I'm not surprised at the erratic element of coaching and living on the edge of basketball for fifty-five years that he would give us this edition of his love-hate relationship with the sport that he has defined so sardonically as his life's work. I've been a part of this world of his almost since the beginning, having started Charley out on his professional coaching career. He was a coach in junior high and then in college before I met him, but the best of his "crazy" has been defined inside this work.

"Basketball isn't just a metaphor for life—it's more important than that!" is engraved on a plaque in my office that was a gift from a fan. I credit that statement directly to Charley. We put in thousands of miles journeying to and fro in basketball business, mostly me in the driver's seat and Charley navigating or "conversating." In traffic waiting to turn left, a truck coming through the intersection was a "moving pick," and on it goes with life experiences served in basketball terms. We had one laugh after another over the years working together, writing a couple of books, coaching in the CBA, and doing basketball camps at Omega Institute. After the Bulls won their first championship in 1991, Charley predicted that I would win five championships in Chicago. When my stint in Chicago ended I moved back to

bounds gathered as stats. The numbers made all the difference to those players. We used to say that most of the players in that league were talented enough physically. They might have to play a position larger than they would in the NBA, but usually they lacked a dimension in their game to make it. Rosen adroitly points out these features as the myriad of players flash before us with their strengths and weaknesses. There is some pain in watching these players strive and fail in accomplishing their goal.

There is an old story about Zen enlightenment. One day the Master announced that a young monk had reached an advanced state of enlightenment. The news caused some stir. Some of the monks went to see the young monk. "We heard you are enlightened. Is that true?" they asked.

"It is," he replied.

"And how do you feel?"

"As ordinary as ever," said the monk.

Somehow one gets this feeling reading *Crazy Basketball* and how the CBA affected Charley's life. Charley has become enlightened about basketball, but he's still as ordinary as ever. However, as he leaves coaching and resumes his writing career, his love for the game becomes real when he writes or talks about it. The feelings of playing come through the pages: the "knowing" of that physical pleasure of setting a pick, or planting a well-placed elbow, or hitting a timely jumper; and the frustration of dealing with the impediments that make the game tainted are gone. The monk has been born again.

Introduction

For many decades, I have been guided on and off the court by my own personal mantra: *Life is a metaphor for basketball.*

For me, this brief statement signifies the understanding that basketball reveals virtually every aspect of the human condition:

- From passion to indolence
- From discipline to chaos
- From saintly unselfishness to the worst kind of self-absorption
- From joy to despair
- From a loving sense of community to virulent hatred of both teammates and opponents
- From grace under pressure to abject cowardice
- From decisive shots made and missed, to decisive shots not taken
- From the birth of a new consciousness to literal, physical death

In other words, it reflects everything except sex and taxes—which do happen in basketball but only off-court.

And it all happens within clearly delineated boundaries and universally understood rules—so unlike the vague and ever-changing conditions that govern our “civilian” lives.

Therefore my immediate goal in the following pages is to abandon all metaphors and get down to the reality of The Game. This, then, is strictly a basketball autobiography, in which other aspects of my life—such as marriages (3), divorces (2), graduate degrees (1), children (2), grandchildren (4), and stepchildren (2)—will be ignored unless they are directly relevant to my fervid pursuit of the bouncing ball.

For the record, however, here's a list of my civilian employment:

- Summer camp counselor
- Parking lot attendant
- Survey interviewer for the New York City Department of Health
- Nautilus instructor
- Junior high school English teacher
- College English teacher
- Freelance journalist for dozens of magazines, from *Rolling Stone* to *Men's Journal*, from *Sport* to *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*

My initial contact with a backboard and a rim took place when I was nine years old and had been sent away to a summer camp for troubled youths in Pittsfield, New Hampshire. Most of my problems grew out of my anger at being so big and so clumsy and, therefore, readily exposed to ridicule. In addition, I felt both anger and guilt because my father wasn't a "real" father.

That first backboard was nailed to one of the telephone poles that lined a dirt road bisecting the campgrounds. In the absence of any kind of balls, I would often amuse my-

self by trying to throw stones through and at the hoop: pebbles and baseball-sized missiles from long range, as well as large rocks that I had to shot-put toward the rim in approximations of lay-ups.

Nobody seemed to notice, or perhaps it was believed that my rock shooting had some beneficial effect in dissipating my anger.

By the end of the summer, my shooting percentage was about 20 percent, the backboard was reduced to splinters, the rim was scarred and bent, and the pole was seriously gouged.

Maybe that excuses the occasional brick I subsequently launched over the course of the next fifty-five years.

Crazy Basketball

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Portrait of the Hooper as a Young Man

During the late 1940s, the only sports played on Fulton Avenue in the West Bronx were baseball, punchball, stickball, two-hand touch football, off-the-bench, -stoop, -curb, or -wall, and kick-the-can, as well as tie-a-little-kid-to-a-tree-and-leave-him-there. Because the nearest basketball court was way over on the other side of Crotona Park, the neighborhood version featured a small pink rubber ball (a Spaldean), and the lower metal square of a vertical fire escape ladder, which served as the goal. Dribbling was difficult, toughness was all, and everybody could dunk.

All through my childhood, my father was acutely ill—his tubercular left lung had been surgically removed back in 1937 in a primitive attempt to prevent the disease from spreading. He couldn't take ten steps without having to halt and catch his breath in small, gasping doses, and he spent most of his time in bed within easy reach of a gray torpedo of oxygen, forever repeating his anguished lament, "God, what have I done to deserve this?"

Naturally, I felt an overpowering sorrow for his affliction. But I was so very young, and also plagued by a confusing

jumble of fear, pity, anger, and shame, so I took every opportunity to get away from the apartment, and I played every sport with a fierce energy that often outpaced my meager skills.

I first started to take basketball seriously when I was thirteen. In the Bronx, the ethnic makeup of neighborhoods changed dramatically every mile or so, and during one of my long, brooding, solitary walks, I became intrigued and then lured by the sound of a bouncing ball.

That's how I came upon a "steady run" in the wintertime locker room of a public swimming pool in a "Negro" neighborhood not far from Fulton Avenue. It was a full-court game played between portable baskets on a cold stone floor. I wandered in out of sheer curiosity, and I was instantly welcomed. "Lace 'em up, big fella. You got next with me."

The game was presided over by Bill, rumored to have been a Harlem Globetrotter in his distant youth. It was a ferocious and honorable game in which the shooter was the only person who'd ever dare admit to being fouled, and all the other players rebounded as if they were wolves and the ball was a lamb chop.

I loved the company of those joyful warriors who played with such aggression and passion. Smelling of booze on Sunday mornings. Laughing away everybody's mistakes. "Keep on shooting, Mister Charley," Bill would urge me. "You throw enough shit against the wall, some of it's bound to stick." But at the time I couldn't master the fine art of shooting a basketball—it seemed to squirt out of my hands like a huge watermelon seed. "Young Mister Charley," Bill would exclaim with a laugh, "even if you was standing on the beach, I don't believe you could piss in the ocean." Yet Bill con-

tinued to encourage me (“big as you are and bigger as you gonna be . . .”) to persevere.

Which I did.

So, a belated thanks to Bill and the joyful company of weekend hoopers who taught me that it’s equally as important to play well as it is to learn from one’s mistakes.

Thanks for the run, guys.

My first formal game was in a ninth-grade tournament at Junior High School No. 44, where my class (of intellectually gifted students) was trounced by class 9-14, a low-IQ team of unruly young men who’d been left back several times and who shaved every day. My main memories of playing in the cold, windy schoolyard were of wearing my long pants with my shirttails flapping, of getting razzed for being so clumsy as to stumble over a foul line, and later getting beaten by my father for tearing my pants.

Even so, I was recruited to play with my classmates in a local community center league. And whenever we dared to defeat the Jabones, another team of tough guys and trouble-makers, we had to fast-break all the way home.

After long, lonesome sessions in the playground I ultimately developed an awkward, but adequate, corkscrew jumper to complement a hook shot. At the tender age of fifteen I was a senior at Theodore Roosevelt High School, and having grown to six foot six and 210 pounds, I tried out for, and made, the varsity team as a third-string center.

The coach was a math teacher named Howard McManus, who was smart enough to let our All-City guard, Jackie Thompson, run the team. Coach McManus’s only advice

for the rest of us was this: “Bend your knees, boys. Bend your knees.”

It was early in the season and we had just finished routing Grace Dodge Vocational High School in an afternoon home game. I already understood that winning was better than losing, but I was absolutely ecstatic because I had come off the bench to score my first varsity points. Five of them—on a put-back lay-up, an elbow jumper, and a free throw.

FIVE POINTS!

I was so happy that, instead of taking the Third Avenue Elevated train for the four stops from Fordham Road to the 174th Street station, I decided to undertake the two-mile journey by foot. Merrily I skipped through Little Italy and across Tremont Avenue. FIVE POINTS! I aimed to cut about fifteen minutes off my travel time by taking a shortcut through the wide construction site that obliterated 177th through 175th streets in preparation for the Cross-Bronx Expressway.

It was dark and the dug-up landscape was beyond the reach of the bordering streetlights, but my neighborhood buddies and I had easily scampered across the same route during the daylight hours on weekends on our way to the movie theaters on Tremont. And besides, I was floating in my own delirious reverie.

FIVE POINTS!

I literally came back to earth when I tumbled into a freshly dug ditch. Fortunately, the ditch was only four feet deep, and I escaped with only a deep cut just over my left eyebrow. With blood gushing over my face, I managed to transverse the construction site with no further injury, whereupon I ran the ensuing ten blocks to the emergency room at Bronx Hospital.

Turned out that I needed five stitches to close the wound.

In my dazed adolescent mind, the five stitches somehow equated with the five points. And I would gladly have suffered twenty stitches to score TWENTY POINTS!

Alas, those were the only stitches and the only points I amassed for the rest of the season.

Meanwhile my father's condition deteriorated. Every three months or so he'd experience a crisis and be rushed off to the hospital. "This is it," my mother would sob. "This time . . ."

The varsity coach at Hunter (now Lehman) College, a tuition-free institution in the Bronx, was a childhood chum of my uncle Richard, and somehow, despite my inferior high school grades, I was encouraged to matriculate there.

The freshman coach was Tony Russo, who stressed guts and grit and ridiculed me whenever I played "soft." At the time, the pro game was mostly played below the rim and, for big men especially, the emphasis was on belligerence and bone-on-bone confrontations. At every level that's the way coaches coached and the way players wanted to play. A big man's utter ruthlessness was expected to trump a smaller player's skills.

By now I was bigger (six foot eight) and stronger (230 pounds) than any of my opponents, and I overcompensated for my basic shyness and confusion by being mindlessly aggressive. Coach Russo employed some kind of high-post offense that I was spectacularly unsuited for. I averaged 8 points per game with the frosh and went scoreless the night before my father died.

My father was forty-six going on a hundred when he finally succumbed to an attack of something quick and pain-

ful. I accompanied my mother in the ambulance ride, and just before we reached the hospital, Daddy roused himself. I remember that his blue eyes were tightly clenched and staring at a space just above my head. The last words he ever said to me were, “Hi, kid.”

He died that evening, and, just three months short of my sixteenth birthday, I was tortured by conflicting emotions. I loved him as best I could, but like all adolescents, I needed a loving father’s guidance and example so that I’d know how to be a man. I never stopped being afraid of his constant pain and his disfigured body, and I desperately needed to be free of his tragic life.

Everybody said that his death was a blessing, a merciful end to his suffering. Yes, his suffering, my mother’s, and mine, too.

Suddenly I felt free to be a child, and several months later I became the tallest player in the brief history of Hunter College basketball.