



# TEAM REBELZ

WE WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE HERE.

*Sandy Bain & Drake Eastburn*

# PRELUDE

## WE WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE HERE

We weren't supposed to be here.

I mean, yeah, we're supposed to be in this tournament. Don't get me wrong. We earned it. We're good. We work our butts off. And we've been ballin' forever.

But here? On this court? In this national championship game? Playing against some of the top recruits for schools like Virginia Tech, Duke, and Gonzaga?

And, if I make this shot,

I mean,

...*deep breath, in,*

...*and out.*

...*Bounce, bounce.*

*Up, and*

...*swish.*

Sorry, had to do *my thing*.

*After* this ball goes in,

...WE will be the champions.

This is insane.

Seriously, this is legit insane.

There must be 200 college coaches watching us right now.

And those are just the D1's.

Who am I kidding?

They're not watching

us.

Right now...

They're watching

me.

# CHAPTER 1

## OUR TEAM

United Select. That's the name on our jerseys.

You see those guys over there on the bench?

Those are my brothers. They're my family, my teammates. All, just sitting there. Watching me.

I got fouled, after we tied the game, at the buzzer.

So, now, the score's even. And, I'm at the line.

All alone. Ready to make the shot.

With no time, left on the clock.

And *if* I, ...I mean, ...*when* I, sink this free throw, we'll be the champions, numero uno!

So, check out my team. Number 40, that's RJ. He's the one that looks like a 12-year-old farm boy, but taller. Nicest guy you'll ever meet. Always smiling. Super polite. Everyone loves RJ.

And next to him, number 11. That's Pretty-boy Jacob. Best hair out of anyone at this tournament, no lie. I mean, look at that flow. He's been playing his butt off the whole game, and not one strand out of place. Jacob's one of our guards, he sometimes runs point. I know he's not that tall, but he's strong. And fast.

Luke's number 5. One of those All-American kind of guys. Not only did he make our club team, which is really hard to do.

But, besides basketball, he also plays varsity baseball and football at his school. And starts, on all three teams. His parents are a little intense, if you know what I mean. But, he's great.

The tall carrot-head over there? That's Logan, number 32. He never smiles in pictures. Until, ...about a month ago.

I think that 'not smiling in pictures thing' all started, when he was ten.

In his fifth-grade team picture, he's standing in the back row, in the middle. The next tallest kid on the team, only came up to his shoulder. I know, cuz, well, uh, ...I was that kid.

I'm not kidding. Imagine being almost six feet tall and 10 years old? And he was big! Like huge, not just tall! Bigger than our coach!

Back then, some of the kids started calling him, the Ginger Giant. Not cool. Kids don't want to be different. Especially, when you're ten.

And then there's Josh and Jalen.

Josh is the taller one. Of course, he's number one. Number one on his jersey. Number one with the ladies. He's the one who looks like he should be in a magazine. I even heard that college girls sometimes hit on him. I mean, he does look like he's 22. He's got the hair, the muscles, the walk. And, man, ...can he ball.

Yeah, if we're being honest, ...we all want to be Josh. Sometimes we joke that we wish he was a dick. It'd make it easier to not

like him. Cuz, who wants to like a guy who's *that perfect*? But, actually, he's one of the nicest guys around. He even runs off the court real quick during warmups before a game. Just to help his grandma find a seat on the bleachers. Like, seriously, he's that perfect.

And then, Jalen, number 27. We call him 'J'. He's the Josh-wannabe. The cockiest, and shortest, guy on the team. He barely comes up to the shoulders of most of the guys we play. But dang, he has moves.

He's unreal. Sometimes I think his shortness is his secret weapon. He can move through and around the bigs like they're standing still. And he breaks ankles, at every game. Not literally. Guys just fall. He's insane. And his hops!

Plus, his social media is frickin' hilarious. You'd think he was a fashion model, who gets all the ladies, ...if you didn't know him. But in his pictures, the girls are always leaning down to try and look shorter. Jalen thinks that makes him look taller. Not!

And, did I mention, ...he never shuts up?

He gets Coach G. so mad sometimes. Always runnin' his mouth. But, when Coach starts yelling at him, J gives him these big puppy dog eyes. It's so funny. Coach tries really hard to keep his mad face on. But, he just can't. And, Coach G either starts cracking up. Or, just rolls his eyes, and walks away.

Oh, speaking of Coach G, that's him, over there. The big, old guy. He's pretty much of a legend, at least, where we're from. Old school, ...but my dad says he's the best. He always coaches the top team in our age group.

And, it's really hard to get on his team. Every year, guys you think will make his team, don't always. And guys you think won't make the team, ...sometimes do.

Whatever, I'm just glad I did. Coach G's the GOAT, that's for sure.

And the younger coach standing over there, that's Coach Flowers. He's actually really cool, and funnier than crap.

Yeah, he's the reason we're here. In this game, I mean. There's no way Coach G. would've let us do any of that mental training stuff, if Coach Flowers hadn't talked him into it. We all know he's the one that got Coach G to let us do it, even though he's not saying.

Oh, yeah, and me. I'm Sam. Number 23. I've got two sisters and a brother, I'm the youngest. Those are my parents over there. They're at all my games. Except, sometimes, if my brother has a game, they'll split up, so one of them can watch his game.

Yeah, my family's great, and seriously, I'm so blessed to have them. Everybody in our family played a sport in college. Dad played football, mom swam. My older sisters, they both played volleyball. And my brother's still in college, ...he plays lacrosse.

The story about me, is, that when I was two years old, I was getting my checkup. And, I guess the doc told my parents I was going to be pretty tall. Taller than my dad, even.

So, on the way home from the doctor's, my parents stopped at the store, and bought me a basketball. It must be true. Cuz, in almost every picture of me, from then on, I had a ball in my hands.

We're definitely a sports family. Super competitive. We all love sports. And, we're tight.

Tight, just like those guys on the bench. Honestly, my team, they're my 24/7 family.

There's nothing we wouldn't do for each other.

Nothing.

Yeah.

The team and I,  
we did some things.

Things,  
we never thought we'd do.

And, now,  
we've got some secrets.

Secrets,  
...we're never going to tell.

# CHAPTER 2

## TEAM INVICTUS

I still can't believe this is real.

Every single one of us on our team, stepped up big time, to get to this game. I mean, this is our sixth game in five days. And we had to beat each team we played, to make it to the championship. And those teams we played... they're really, really good.

Now, I'm not saying we're not! Coach G's teams have always been the best in our state, for sure. But none have ever gotten this far at Nationals. Not even close.

The thing is, though, this isn't like a Cinderella story in the movies. You know, where the poor, little underdog team beats the rich and powerful team, the team that never loses.

I know underdog teams can win one, or maybe even two, of those kinds of games. They use their willpower and grit. They push through, with everything they've got. And then, ...they win.

After that, like, in the movies. The hot girl, you know, the one you thought didn't know you existed, rushes down from the stands. And she runs into the arms of the team hero. The hero, who made the winning shot. And then...

Sorry, ...my bad.

Like I was saying. Underdogs can maybe win one, or maybe even two of those kinds of games. But to win five, in four days? And now we're going to win number six? Against this team? No, that takes something more.

Our mental coach is always telling us, and telling our parents, “Willpower and grit only take you so far. And then you run out of steam. A lot of MMA fighters, and almost all Olympians, use mental training techniques. And there’s not many athletes tougher and more determined than they are. So...”

And, thank God we did learn some of those mental things.

Like I said, to be on this court right now, we had to beat five really good teams. Some of the best teams in the country, loaded with top recruits.

And right now, there’s one team on this court that everyone expected to be here.

And our team, ...is not that team.

To be honest, the team everyone expected to be in this game, the team we’re playing, is stacked.

Some of the clubs take the best recruits from their state, plus a few from states next to them, and they put ‘em all together on a team. Like the team we’re playing now.

It’s basically a showcase travel team. They hardly ever practice together. They just get on a plane and show up at the next tournament.

But, I know a few of the guys, and they’re cool. When you go to enough camps and play on travel teams from the time you’re in second grade, you get to know a lot of players.

And, these guys work. 24/7. Seriously, ballin’ is their whole life.

It’s kind of like, by putting these top-recruits together on a couple of teams, it makes it easier for the big-school coaches to watch them ball-out.

Because, that's who we're playing, a Dream Team of ballers.

Oh, yeah, and their team's name, is ...*Team Invictus*.

A couple of minutes ago, we were down by 3 with 24 seconds left. And we had the ball.

Coach G. called a time out.

Coach Flowers had this goofy grin on his face, so we knew something good was coming.

He said, "Hey guys, do you know what our opponent's name means, what Invictus means? It's Latin for 'unconquerable' or 'undefeated.'

So, how 'bout we go out there, and make Team Invictus, have to change their name?"

Jalen yelled, "Name change, on 3! 1, 2, 3!"

"Name change!" we all shouted, as we ran back on the court.

Down by 3 with 24 seconds left. And we have the ball.

Jalen inbounds to Josh. Then Josh gets it back to Jalen at the top of the key. Jalen does a crossover between his legs. He crosses it over again. Then Jalen drives to the left elbow, pulls up, and kicks it out.

It was supposed to go to Luke, but Invictus got some hands on it. The ball is loose. Everyone's on the ground. Scrambling to get the ball. 8.3 seconds left.

Somehow, the ball ends up in my hands.

I dribble towards the top of key, and kick it out to Luke.

The defense collapses on him. Luke passes back to me.

I'm deep, but I know there's no time left.

Without thinking, and 0.3 seconds on the clock, I shoot the ball, ...and get fouled on the shot.

As I'm falling back, it feels like time's slowing down. Seriously, like everything's in slow motion.

I hear the buzzer.

There's no time left on the clock.

I'm laying on the court, watching the ball. Still in the air.

It feels like déjà vu.

The ball I released towards the hoop, my ball, ...I swear, it looks like it's slowly being sucked, into, a black hole.

Sucked, into, ...the basket.

Going...

Going...

In.

I nailed it!

The game is tied!

Now,

we have a chance

to win the game

on a single

free throw.

My

free throw.

## CHAPTER 3

### COLLEGE COACHES

Did I mention how many college coaches were watching us?

Watching me?

I mean, most of them, didn't come to watch our team.

The players on Team Invictus have so many offers out, it's crazy. Which means, most of these coaches came to watch them.

That used to make no sense to me. If a school already offered a player, why do they keep coming to their games?

We had a college coach do a talk at our club once. He explained that coaches did that for a few reasons. He said, that by coming to lots of their recruits' games, they'd see how the recruits played in different scenarios.

"We don't worry about mistakes, or if our recruit's having a bad game. We know that happens. No one's perfect." he told us.

"But what we do care about, is their intensity, and their effort. And there's no excuse to not play with passion, and work hard, every single game.

"We're also watching their sportsmanship, and how they interact with their coaches and teammates. Are they hustling, all the time? Are they respectful to the refs? When on the bench, are they cheering their team on? Or are they having a pity party?

"And, to be honest, we also watch their parents," he said. "We're asking these recruits to be part of our team, our family,

for four years. So, we want to make sure that both the players, and their parents, are good additions to our team.

“Coaching’s hard enough. We don’t want to deal with bad attitudes from our players and high-maintenance parents. No player’s worth that, no matter how good they are.”

He also said that by attending lots of games, it helps strengthen their relationship with the recruits and families. Always having those familiar faces at the games.

Plus, it shows the coaches’ commitment and support to the athlete, “We’re here for you Johnny, we love you the most, so please sign with us!” he said, half-joking.

And, then he told us, “And, yes, in case you’re wondering, there’s always a chance we’ll find a new recruit while we’re there. And, even if you’re not the right fit for us, we all know lots of other coaches. And some of those coaches might still be looking for recruits.

“We help each other out, by recommending players, or suggesting they steer clear of ones with bad attitudes. We’re a tight knit group. So, be smart, play hard and have a good attitude, no matter who’s watching. You never know what could happen.”

I’m guessing, there were over 100 coaches that came to watch the players on Team Invictus.

And then, everyone always wants to know who everyone else is watching. Especially when there’s so many big-time schools there. So, the other coaches start watching us, too. Smaller D1’s, D2’s, D3’s, NAIA’s and JUCO’s.

Plus, it's the end-of-the-day. And, it's the championship game. Also, it's not a blow-out, like the kind of game everyone usually sees Team Invictus playing in. Far from it.

It's funny. I was watching some of the coaches around our court. And, you could tell, a lot of them were asking each other, "Who's that team?" Pointing at us.

The older coaches start scrambling through their tournament books. Younger coaches, scrolling through their phones.

All those coaches, ...trying to find out who we are.

'We're the team that's going to make Team Invictus have to change their name!' I wanted to yell at them.

Them.

Hundreds of coaches

and parents

and players.

All watching.

Me.

# CHAPTER 4

## 'OUR THING'

I'm guessing you might be wondering what's the mental training thing, that I mentioned earlier?

First off, just so you know, it's not, like, hard. Learning this stuff, is actually, really easy.

It's not like regular learning. It's more like, listening to stories. And using your imagination.

Plus, half of the time we do it, we're laying down with our eyes closed, ...talk about awesome!

And then, your mental training coach gives you these tools, or techniques, or whatever you want to call them.

Easy things you can do, ...that really work!

Like, things to help you if you're stressed out. Or you're nervous. Or when you want to focus, but your brain won't let you. Or, little things that just make you play better. You know, things like that.

Plus, there's only one thing you have to memorize. It's a formula. It's super easy. But, it's really important. Here, I'll just tell it to you now:

$$\textit{Performance} = \textit{potential} - \textit{interference}.$$

In other words, it's a formula to figure out how you're going to perform.

You just take the potential that you have, the potential to do whatever it is, you want

to do. Like, say you're in an empty gym, no pressure at all. What's the chance you that you could ace that performance, if you had nothing to bother you or stress you out?

Then, you subtract the interference, or distractions, that you let get in your way.

So, if you let a bunch of noise or people moving around, or the pressures or stress to do whatever, get in your head, and mess with your performance, ...that's the interference YOU LET get in your way.

So, the Performance I need right now, is to sink this shot. And, when I do, we win.

My potential? According to my parents and teachers, ...it's unlimited. I'm guessing you've heard that before?

But, for real, for right now? I practice a lot on free throws, I'm really good at making them. So, my potential of sinking this shot? If, I were in an empty gym, practicing on my own? With nobody watching me? With no pressure? ...My potential's high. Let's say, it's a 9.

Interference? Championship game at the National tournament? Hundreds of the top college coaches, staring at me? Not wanting to let my parents or coaches down. Not wanting to let my team down? Guaranteeing we win this game, and this tournament, all depends on me making this shot?

Yeah.

The distraction, ...the interference, could be huge. *If*, I don't do anything about it.

*If* I don't use one of my tools, the interference, ...it could easily be a 9.

Who am I kidding? It could be a solid 10.

So, I need to make the interference that I let get in my way, a lot smaller. A lot, ...lot smaller.

I can't change how many coaches are watching. Or, that it's a championship game. And, that I guarantee a win if I sink this shot.

But, what I can change,  
...is what I let inside my head.

Luckily, our mental coach gave us a bunch of different tools, or techniques, that we practice, and use. She says that some techniques work better than others for different people. It also depends on what you need, and when you need it.

She suggested we try them all out before the tournament. And, practice each of them, for a few days to find our favorites.

I think our brains just know which ones are best for us, though. At least that's how it was for our team. Because, when you practice them a couple of times, a few of the tools or techniques, will just click. And then those tools, the ones that feel right, become, '*our thing.*'

When we were first learning this stuff, Coach Flowers was always on our butts. During practice and in scrimmages, he'd keep reminding us to practice the mental training stuff.

At first, when we were on the court, he'd tell us again, how to do the different techniques.

After a while, he'd stop explaining it so much. Because, honestly, they're really easy to do. So, most of us didn't need any help.

Later, he asked us which tools worked best for us. What techniques did we like the

most? Then, he put our answers in his phone. So, he'd remember our favorites, *our thing*.

Now, doing *our thing* is a habit for us, so Coach Flowers doesn't have to say much about it.

But, when he does, it's usually just one word. Like, a trigger word. A reminder.

A reminder, to use our tools.

The other day, my little cousin was over, and we were all talking about the mental training.

He was like, "Sam, can you teach me some of those brain things, so I can be as good as you at basketball?" I just laughed. I wish it was that easy!

I had to explain to him that you can't just learn these things, and, then, BAM!, you're a superstar.

I mean, we always work really hard. And, this year, the guys and me, we were even more hardcore with our strength and conditioning. We even paid attention to what we ate, and how much sleep we got. We trained hard, and a lot, ...and, not just during practice, but, on our own time, too. Our skills were solid.

During the April Regional games, we ran our plays close to perfect. We all got along great, no drama. We were never out-coached. We played good ball. I mean, we are the best team in our state, in our age group.

But, when you're playing the kind of teams we did, top teams in the country, you've got to bring you're A-game, to every game.

So, yeah, during Regionals, we played good ball.

But in this tournament, right now,  
...we're playing out of our minds!

And, honestly, there's only one thing  
different between Regionals and this  
tournament.

This time, at Nationals, we had some  
tools to use. Mental tools. "Our thing."

And this time, we've gone further than  
we've ever gone before. So,...

All right. Zero seconds on the clock. Tie  
game. One more shot, I mean, ...one more  
*bounce, bounce, up* and ...*swish*.

But, before I shoot, I need to choose a  
tool.

One, that'll make ...the interference  
smaller.

And then, ...you know what's next.  
It's gonna be sweet!

The championship,  
dogpile!

Okay,  
I'm gonna sign-off  
for a few minutes.  
It's time for me  
to focus.

# CHAPTER 5

## COLLEGE COACH SKI

United Select is at the line. The game's tied.

0:00 time, is showing on the clock.

United Select, a team not typically on the radar of Power 5 college coaches, is now one free throw away from upsetting Team Invictus, a group of all-star ballers, top recruits at big-schools.

Coach Wrenkowski (Coach Ski) is one of those big-school coaches. He's been at the tournament all week, keeping an eye on his recruits.

Coach Ski is known for his spreadsheet. Always with him, a page of rows and columns he uses to keep updates on the boys.

Some find him old school, using pen and paper. He likes the way the pen feels in his hand, as he meticulously marks the boxes.

He's got all the usual columns to keep stats, but often spends more time on the part of the page he calls "Character."

He watches the player's body language when things don't go the player's way. How does he behave when on the bench? Is he cheering on his teammates, or just sitting there with an attitude? Is he a true team player, or just show-boating?

How does he interact with the coaching staff? Is he respectful? Are his parents in attendance? And if so, how are they behaving?

“Clutch,” the only column he marked with a star, is Coach Ski’s favorite trait to look for.

Sure, these boys are still young. But, how they handle themselves in high-pressure situations, is key.

Over the years, Coach Ski has found this to be his favorite column on his sheet.

When the boys do well in stressful situations, at this age, they also tend to play well in the pressure-cooker world, of college basketball.

*“Clutch performance in sports is the phenomenon of athletes under pressure, usually in the last minutes of a game, to summon strength, concentration and whatever else necessary to succeed, perform well, and perhaps change the outcome of the game.”*

—Wikipedia—

He wasn’t naïve, though.

Coach Ski knew he couldn’t have everything he wanted in each individual player he recruited. It was more like putting together a puzzle. Each player is a piece. Each player has a role.

He likened it to a horse race. You want players who can start things off with a burst of energy, to get your horse in a good position.

You need endurance players, those who can keep your horse moving at the perfect pace.

Muscle can be important. The powerhouse players, who push your horse through the herd. To the front of the pack.

And then, you’ve got your clutch players.

During those crucial moments, when everything's on the line, these are the players you can count on, to finish the job.

Cool as a cucumber. Steady. Composed.

As they're going down the stretch, completely focused, your clutch players calmly move their horse across the finish line, ...for the win.

Making sure Coach Ski always had a few of those players on his roster had been key to winning several championship games for his school.

Not always starters, but almost certainly, these are the young men on the court during the last few minutes of a tight game.

Coach Ski noticed the United Select team a few days ago.

Being the underdog and winning one game, or maybe even two, was one thing. But consistently beating teams you shouldn't beat, game after game, day after day, ...that took more than just heart.

These boys had something special. And it wasn't just one or two superstars on the team, it was all seven of them.

One, in particular, though, caught his eye.

He jotted down the boy's jersey number off to the side of his spreadsheet.

He watched more of United's games. And then, he circled the jersey number written on his sheet.

Later, he wrote the boy's name next to it.

The next game, he watched a bit more. He jotted down a few stats about the boy. And then, earlier this morning, Coach Ski

put a big question mark next to the jersey number written off to the side of his recruit list.

Holding his pen, a silver Cross Century II classic, an anniversary gift from his wife of 30 years, engraved with “Enjoy the Journey,” Coach Ski tapped the boy’s jersey number he’d written on the spreadsheet.

“Damn, I’m good,” he thought to himself, as the boy he “discovered” three days ago was now standing at the free throw line.

Number 23, written off to the side of one of the country’s top college coach’s recruit list, ...was poised to do something huge.

“If this kid makes the shot,” Coach Ski thought to himself, “He’s on my list.”

Logic says, “This is a game, #23 shouldn’t be in, ...and a recruit list, he shouldn’t be on.”

Well, ...logic be damned.

“Swish.” Shot made.

United Select’s  
Coach G.,  
the head coach  
of the team  
that shouldn’t be here,  
will need some extra space  
in the overhead bin  
on tomorrow’s flight.

Because he and his boys,  
...are taking home  
the big trophy!

# CHAPTER 6

## COACH FLOWERS

‘Unconquerable’ no more! I called it!  
Winner, winner, chicken dinner! Oh,  
yeah! Those are MY boys!

Team Invictus needs to change their  
name!

Hey, I’m Coach Flowers!

Guessing Sam told you all about me?

Told you what a great coach I am. That  
everyone loves me. How I always beat the  
boys, at one-on-one. And, of course, ...how  
good looking I am?

Seriously, though. I’m glad you’re here!

You know this puts you in the big  
leagues, right?

You’re not hanging with the sheep, or the  
followers.

You’re taking the bull by the horn,  
...you’re moving up, to the majors!

What I mean is, it’s mostly people like  
you, who learn these mental training  
techniques. Ya, know, people who want to  
be the best, ...not just average.

Just by hearing our story, you’re gonna  
learn some things that’ll push you to the next  
level. And then, when you get there, you can  
use those tools, to stay on top. Just like a lot  
of pros do.

And, FYI, don’t worry about the people  
who call mental training a waste of time.  
They’re usually the wanna-be’s. The ones  
who act like they know it all. But, don’t.

They're either too lazy, or too scared, to step outside the box.

Or maybe, like a lot of parents, they grew up in a different time, and just don't know any better. It's not their fault.

Either way, it's cool that you're paving your own path. It's your future, and you're taking control. So, good job! For real, ...I'm proud of you!

Okay, enough about how great we both are. I've got a funny story to tell you about what happened after we beat Team Invictus!

So, after Sam sunk the shot, everyone ran to the court and jumped on him. It was awesome!

Coach G pulled me off the pile, then we all got up, and took our team pictures. A picture, with our 1st Place Championship trophy, of course!

Then, shock of all shocks, tight-wad Coach G. paid for everyone's dinner, at a fancy steakhouse.

Later, I found out it was his wife who told him to do that. I mean, this was the first time any team he'd coached made it this far, or even close to this far. And that was saying a lot, since most of his teams were the best in our state.

And, he's been coaching a long time. I'm not playing, a really long time.

Coach G likes to call himself a "seasoned" coach. Seasoned? How about, old? I mean, he's been coaching for almost 30 years!

His girls crack me up. They always say, "Our dad started coaching basketball, even before there were cell phones!"

Anyway, I admit it. He is a legend. And he does know a lot. Not everything, that's for sure. But a lot.

And, damn, does he love those kids on his teams. He'll never admit it, but he'd do almost anything for them.

So, anyway, after a great dinner, we went back to our rooms, and crashed, hard.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast at the hotel, the guys and I loaded into the van, to head to the airport.

This was our last Summer tournament, and it was finally time, to go home.

We were all in the van. And, Coach G was checking us out of the hotel.

As Coach starts walking towards the van, I hear Mr. Perfect Hair, Jacob, whisper to the guys, "What's with Coach G?"

"What do ya mean?" Logan asked him, while he tried to squeeze his huge body and flaming orange hair, into the van's tiny seat.

"He looks, different," RJ said.

"It must be the fancy shampoo at the hotel," J cracked, having no trouble at all getting his tiny butt in the seat.

"No, it's...something else..." Jacob started to say.

I turned and looked back at the guys. And, all of a sudden, I saw Jacob's eyes get huge.

And then he yelled, "Holy shit!"

"What?" we all asked.

Jacob swallowed, and screeched, in a high-pitched voice, “Coach G. ...shaved off his mustache!”

I’m not that much older than you guys. But, I will admit, I do not have the speed you all have, when it comes to taking and posting pictures on your phones.

My phone started beeping, almost immediately. Social media notifications, from my boys.

Before Coach G even opened the van door, all the kids back in our state, had already seen the headline.

“Coach G. shaved off his mustache!”

Followed by the “surprised” emoji, ...along with pictures of Coach walking to the van.

Trust me. This was going to be much bigger news than us winning the tournament. At least to most of the people back home.

You’ve got to understand. This was not just any old mustache. This was ...Coach G.’s mustache.

His mustache was legendary. A, Tom Selleck, 1970’s style ‘stache, Like Park and Rec’s, Ron Swanson, and the Anchorman’s, Ron Burgundy, wore.

And Coach G had been sporting his beloved crumb catcher, since college.

When he opened the door, he knew. It was, ...game over.

You know that saying, ‘His jaw dropped,’ when someone is surprised? Well, all our jaws, had literally dropped. All our mouths were hanging, ...wide open.

When he saw us, Coach G.'s face started turning bright red. "Hey, I was ready for a change!" he lied.

I could not believe it.

"You did it?" I don't know why I asked him. It was obvious, of course he did it.

"A bet's a bet," Coach G. softly said to me.

"Well, damn," I still couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"You do look younger, ...still fat, but younger," I told him.

"Screw you, Flowers!"

Coach G yelled.

"I could kick your scrawny butt with one arm tied behind my back.

Now, shut up,

and get your

\$1000 cell phone out,

and tell me

how to get

to the airport!"

Gotta love Coach G!

# CHAPTER 7

## THE MAGIC WAND

Everyone always wants to know about the bet.

But, before I give you the lowdown, let me fill in a little background.

Back in the day, not that long ago, I was also one of Coach G's boys.

I ended up getting a full ride college scholarship, playing ball at a great school. And, I loved every minute of it.

My major was psychology, and my minor was athletic coaching.

After I graduated, I decided to get my masters. My college basketball coach said I could be the G.A. (graduate assistant) coach for the team, while I was doing that.

After I got my masters, I really wanted to be make coaching my career. But, I knew I needed more experience, than just my grad year time.

So, I decided to come back home, and start there.

I was offered a head coaching job at my old club, the one I'm at now, for the second level team of 12-year-old boys.

The club director suggested I also help out on another, higher-level team, as an assistant. That way, I could get some good experience under a "mentor" coach, too.

I knew Coach G. was the best coach in the state. He'd be a pain to work under. But, there'd be no one better to learn from.

The problem was, Coach G never had, ...and never wanted, an assistant.

I couldn't believe it when he finally, and, very reluctantly, told me, yes, I could be his assistant.

But, I later found out it wasn't because of my great sales job that he said yes. No, it was because, of his wife.

"You've got two daughters who'd really like to see their father at some of their games. And having Flowers help with scouting and game film and getting practices set up, you'll have extra time to spend with your girls," I found out she told him.

And then she said, "Besides, Mak and Ally are teenagers now. And, if they don't get attention from you, they might go looking for it, from other young men. You know, ...like the boys you coach?"

That did it. Coach G's wife was beautiful, smart, and a master at saying just the right words, to get him to see things her way.

And I'm guessing, that after all the years of coaching hundreds of hormone-raging teenage boys, Coach G would do whatever it took to keep his girls away from the male species, for as long as possible.

Even if it meant giving in. And having his first assistant coach ever. Me.

So, you know how I said I used to play for Coach G?

Well, the truth is, I did make the team, ...but barely.

I was fighting for the last spot on the roster against another point guard. And, honestly, that kid was bigger and faster than me.

Seeing what a fine specimen I am now, I know it's probably hard to believe. But,

during most of high school, as far as the body thing went, ...I was a late bloomer.

But, ...I was definitely smarter than the other point guard.

Plus, coaches said I had great "court awareness." I always seemed to know where my guys would be. And my passing, ...it was dead on.

I guess that's what Coach G wanted, because, somehow, I made the cut.

During practices, I played great.

But, once we started playing in the April regional tournaments, I don't know what happened.

I started stressing out that I wasn't good enough for the team. I was freaking whenever there were college coaches watching us. I kept questioning all my decisions, like should I shoot, or drive, or pass? And, half the time, I'd just freeze up.

I'll be honest, it sucked. And, I didn't know what to do.

Plus, it was obvious that Coach G had stopped believing in me, too.

When your coach pulls up another point guard up from the second team to practice with your team, you know he's worried.

I mean, I didn't really blame him. We had less than two months until the National July tournament.

And, honestly, ...I didn't believe in me, either.

I knew, if I didn't get my act together, fast, I was toast.

Plus, of course, everything happens at once, right?

It was the last few weeks of school, so I was stressing over finals.

When I was younger, my doctor said I'd be at least six feet tall, and I still wasn't even close. I'd barely grown an inch all year.

And now, the second-team point guard, was practicing with us. Ready to take my spot.

My parents were, and still are, great. And, I don't know about you. But, when I was a teenager, I just didn't tell them a lot. Especially when everything was such a mess.

And, I felt like this mess, was *all my fault*.

Now I know how stupid that is, since my parents would do anything to help me. Probably, like your parents.

But, thank God, they figured it out on their own.

They asked a family friend of ours, a college volleyball coach, for any ideas he might have that could maybe help me.

The volleyball coach told my parents that some of his players worked with mental trainers. And it really seemed to help them. He suggested, maybe, they try that for me.

“What do you have to lose?” he asked my parents.

And then my parents asked me, the same question.

At that point, I figured I was going to fail all my classes. Never grow another inch. Be lucky to make the third-level team at my club. And my dream of playing ball in college, would always be, ...just a dream.

When my parents suggested mental training, and they asked me, “What have you got to lose?”

I couldn't answer them. Not because I didn't know what to say.

But because, if I'm being honest, ...I just started bawling.

I felt like, I didn't deserve anything good anymore. I wasted all that money my parents spent on sports for me. All the vacations we couldn't go on, because I had practices or games.

I let my parents down. I let my coach down. I let my teachers down. I let myself down. But, what felt the worse, ...I let my teammates down.

I just wasn't tough enough. I wasn't good enough. I was weak. I sucked.

No, I didn't have anything to lose.

Because, ...I'd already lost everything.

My parents just held me. I remember, I tried, but I couldn't stop crying.

And then they said, “We won't tell your coach, but we're going to have you get together with the mental trainers, just one time. And then, it'll be up to you to decide, if you want to see them again.”

My parents got me in right away to meet with a mental training coach, one who worked with a lot of teenage athletes.

The coach asked me a few questions about what I do each week. What I like. What I don't like. He asked about my family. About school. About my friends. My team. My basketball coach.

After that, I remember he was quiet for a minute. He looked me in the eye. Like, ...really looked at me.

And then, he said, “Imagine I’m holding a magic wand. And when I wave this wand, you’ll be able to *have* whatever you want. And *feel*, however you want to feel.”

He pretended to wave the wand, and then said, “Tell me, Mr. Flowers, ...what do you *want*? And how do you want to *feel*?”

I know this might sound really weird. But, I didn’t even stop to think about his question.

My answer just came blurting out of me.

I swear, I didn’t have any control over my mouth.

It felt surreal, almost like I didn’t even say it.

But, I did.

“I want to help my team win games. And I want to feel brave!” I yelled.

I remember, it took me a few seconds to realize, exactly what the words were, that came flying out of my mouth.

And, I was pretty embarrassed.

But, it didn’t seem to bother my mental coach at all.

He said, “You want to help your team win games. And you want to feel brave. Well, that’s easy. I just have two questions for you. And then, we can set up a plan to make this happen.”

“Okay....” I was thinking. “This is weird. Before I walked through this office door, I

just assumed my life was pretty much over. Everything I really wanted, was down the toilet. And now this guy is telling me that it'll be easy, to fix it all?"

I'm pretty sure I just nodded. At that point, I was scared to death to open my mouth again. Lord knows what other crazy words would come out of it.

"It's only two questions. But they're very, very important ones. And it's completely okay, if you answer 'no.' You just have to reach deep down inside yourself, and answer them honestly. Okay?" He asked me.

Again, I nodded, yes.

His words came out slowly, "Okay, here's the first question."

"When we work together, in order to help you feel brave, and help your team win games, ...I need you to tell me if this is something, you really want? Not something, your coach or parents are pushing you to want, but something *you want*, from deep inside your soul?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes," I told him.

"Good. Now, my second question is, will you follow my instructions exactly, during our training?"

Again, I answered, "Yes."  
And, that was it!

The next thing we did was make a plan. Our July tournament was in less than eight weeks, so we had to move fast.

I met with my mental training team at least once a week. Practiced the techniques I learned every day. Listened to audio recordings a few times a week. And every night, I'd fall asleep to special nighttime recordings.

It was weird how fast it worked. But, I honestly, did, start feeling better right away.

Coach G must've noticed, too. Because he had me running point more, ...and our second-team guy, less.

But, even though I was playing a lot better, I'm sure Coach was still worried. I never had a problem before the April tournament during practices. It was during the games that I started freezing up.

I never did tell Coach G. I was working with mental training coaches.

Like I said, Coach G. was known as the best basketball coach in the state, but he was "old school."

And, my parents and I decided it'd be best for me to just show Coach what I could do on the court, instead of talking about it.

Besides, Coach G. was always saying how we had to be tough, and push through everything.

So, I was afraid he'd think I was soft if he found out I was training with, what he'd probably call, ...a 'sports shrink.'

But, you know what? The July tournament went great! Not as great as this tournament with these boys, but I was totally in the zone, and killin' it!

During that tournament was when I started thinking, I might like to be a coach, myself, someday.

I mean, it was cool, because, whenever one of the guys on our team was struggling, I'd sometimes go and talk to him, off to the side.

I'd let him know about a mental training thing I learned to do that helped me feel less stressed, or focus more, or clear my head. You know, stuff like that.

And, it was awesome when my teammates would try it, ...and it'd work for them, too.

Later, they'd be smiling. Giving me a thumbs-up.

I don't know, ...I just really liked that feeling. The feeling that I helped my brother. And, now, he's happy. And playing better.

Sometimes, when I was talking to one of my teammates, trying to help him. I'd see Coach G, kind of, glance my way.

He never did ask me  
what I was saying to the guys, though.  
But, he also never told me  
to shut up  
and get back  
on the court  
either.

Which,  
was really weird...  
now that I think  
about it.

# CHAPTER 8

## WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO LOSE?

Now, back to the bet.

So, a couple of months ago, when Coach G and I were getting the guys ready for the April tournaments, we both had a gut feeling, this was going to be *the year*.

Not that either of us said it out loud. Don't want to jinx it.

I mean, it's not like we had a team loaded with big school recruits, like some of the teams do.

But we did have a very solid group of players, definitely, one of the best team's Coach G. had in years.

Plus, most of these boys had been playing together for a while now. They had chemistry. They were athletic. And, they had skills.

But, what I liked the most, and probably Coach G did, too, was, these kids wanted to win so bad, we could all taste it.

These guys put in the extra time, on their own. In the gym. And, on the court. They practiced with the intensity of games. And, they pushed each other to constantly do more.

They'd do whatever it took. Whatever needed to be done, to take their team further than any of Coach G's teams had ever gone before.

And, when we played in some local tournaments before Regionals, we were tight. Smooth. Confident.

Yep, this was going to be our year. We could feel it.

But, unfortunately, the important tournaments in April, didn't go so well.

We went .500 at regionals. Still enough to go to Nationals in July. But, our seeding would pit us against the top teams from the beginning. Pushing us into the consolation bracket. Not a place we were okay with.

I know. We all sounded like Wendy-whiners. I mean, we were playing many of the top teams in the country, in our age bracket.

And we did beat three of them at Regionals, and two of those losses, was only by a few points. Plus, we only got destroyed by one team. And that team ended up winning the tournament, so, ...there's that.

And, it's true. Most coaches and players and parents, would've been very happy with going 3-3 against those top teams.

But, not this group.

These kids knew. Because of the seeding, if they had any chance to come out in the top 50% during the big July tournament, they needed to finish near, or at the top, in April.

But, that didn't happen.

After a few days of downtime, Coach G and me were going to have a formal sit-down and go over the April results. Then, we'd put together a game plan to get ready for Nationals in July.

One of my favorite parts of coaching, is the technical side of the game, and picking up cues from the players.

When I was the grad coach in college, I kind of had a knack of seeing things on game film, or during games. Things that other coaches sometimes missed.

You know, maybe during a game, I'd see a change in someone's body language, or a hesitation. It might've been subtle, but it'd give me a clue that those players were wearing down. Or, they were just out of it.

If these were our guys, we'd need to pull them out. If they were the other team's, we'd figure out ways to take advantage of their weakness.

I also love analyzing game film.

So, once we got back from regionals, I spent every hour I had, going over and over, the film and stats.

I made a report for my meeting with Coach G.

I included things like, who needed to be in the gym shooting more free throws? Who needed to be substituted out, sooner or later? Which combination of players was statistically the best for us, offensively, and defensively? Which defense worked best when confronted by which type of offense, and vice versa?

During our meeting, I went over my research with Coach.

Then I told him, "If we could go back in time and make those changes, and everything else stayed the same. Statistically, I believe we would've come back from the April games seeded 5 or 6 spots higher."

Unfortunately, it was no surprise when I saw the look in Coach G.'s eyes.

Disappointment.

Even seeded 5 or 6 spots higher wouldn't really make a big enough difference. We'd still be seeded in the bottom 50%.

Besides, it wouldn't change anything now. We were going into Nationals ranked in the bottom 50%. There are no do-overs, not this year, at least.

The thing is, we weren't naïve. At Nationals, we knew we could possibly beat half of the teams there. The other half, ...were in a league all their own.

But now, since we were seeded in the lower bottom of the bracket, we'd be playing teams from the upper half, right out of the chute. And, the odds were that those top tier teams, would push us into the loser's bracket after the first or second game. With no real chance, to crawl out.

I laid down my report.

Coach G. took a deep breath, and said, "Well, then, ...let's get to work."

\*\*\*\*\*

Okay. I'm gonna be honest.

The next thing that happened, still freaks me out, just thinking about it.

Do you ever get where you know you need to say something, and you need to say it, ...like, now?

But your lips won't move?

And, your heart's racing so fast, that, you can't even think straight, yet alone, talk?

Well, that's what happened to me.

I knew I had to say something to Coach G. And I had to say it right then, before he got up, off the chair.

But, I was really scared.

At that moment, I didn't feel like the smart, confident and ...very sexy man, that I am today.

No, I felt like the skinny, scared teenage point guard I was, at your age. The one who thought he'd be getting cut from the legendary Coach G's team, about nine years ago.

So, I used one of my things, a technique I learned from my mental trainers.

I took a deep, cleansing breath. Imagined how I wanted to feel. Saw it, felt it, tasted it, even.

And then, as Coach G. started to push back his chair, I turned up my courage dial, and let the words fly out.

"I have an idea to get us in the top 50% for July!" I blurted out.

He sat back down.

And, we talked.

For the first time ever, I shared with Coach G what I went through nine years ago, when I started playing for him.

I told him how I stopped believing in myself. I was stressing over finals. I was mad that I hadn't grown all year. I was weak, and felt like a failure. And, the worse part was, how I was letting my parents and my teachers, ...and especially, my team, down.

I said that I felt like I was in this deep, dark hole. And I couldn't get out.

And then I explained how my parents got advice from a family friend, a college volleyball coach.

I mentioned how the volleyball coach suggested mental training. And then, how the coach asked my parents, "What do you have to lose?"

I told him, my parents told me about the mental training, and then asked me, the same question.

"What do you have to lose?"

I shared with Coach G. how great the training worked for me. How it was the mental techniques I learned, that helped me turn things around.

And then I asked him, "Remember how you'd sometimes see me off to the side talking with one of the guys who was having a bad day, or a rough week?"

He gave me a typical Coach G answer, "Yeah, weren't you just telling them to toughen up?"

I told him, "Not exactly. Actually, ... I was teaching them some of the things I learned from my mental training coaches, little tricks and things that worked for me.

"I'd tell them, 'Hey, this works for me, maybe you should give it a try?' And, most of the time when they'd try it, they said it worked for them, too!"

Then, I took another deep breath.  
And I said, ...the words.

I said, “Coach, I know this is probably out of your comfort zone, but I really want our boys work with a mental training coach, ...to help get us ready for July.”

Coach G does this thing whenever he’s skeptical, or when he doesn’t really buy into what you’re saying. He raises his left eyebrow.

Like, when one of his players would get caught looking at his phone during practice, and the player would say, “It’s my mom!” And, then, ...there goes Coach G’s eyebrow!

After I gave him my wonderful suggestion, of having the team work with a mental trainer, Coach G’s eyebrow went up. Way up.

“Mental Training coach?” he asked.  
Eyebrow raised.

And, then I asked him, “What do we have to lose?”

Quick backstory.

In college, I did a summer internship at a brokerage house where they taught me some sales techniques.

“After you ask the closing sales question, you shut up and say nothing. The first person to talk, loses,” they told me.

Well, I was trying to *sell* Coach G on mental training for the team.

So, after I asked him, “What do we have to lose?”

...I shut up.

You know that saying,  
'the silence was deafening?'  
Well, that's no lie.  
Coach G. just sat there,  
staring  
into my eyes.  
And I could hear,  
every breath  
he took.  
But, ...he didn't say  
a word.  
He just kept  
glaring at me.

I honestly thought,  
...I was going to puke.

# CHAPTER 9

## COACH G & THE BET

Okay, this is my cue to step in for a minute. While Flowers is reliving his '*I thought I was going to puke*' moment, let me explain something.

I'm Coach G. And, I may not know a whole lot about this mental training stuff. Well, ...I know a lot more now. But I didn't know much when I had my meeting with Flowers.

But, ...I do know a thing or two about trusting my gut.

I trusted my gut when I was a senior in college.

My basketball team was walking out of the gym after practice, and I accidentally bumped into this beautiful girl from the volleyball team.

She yelled at me and said, "Why don't you quit being such a dumb jock, and pay attention to where you're going?"

My gut said, "You need to marry that girl." And, I did. Best decision of my life.

I also trust my gut when I choose players for my teams.

Yeah, I get a lot of flack from parents, saying their kid's better than the kid I chose. But you know what? My teams are solid. And there's never any drama on my team.

The boys I choose have heart. And, not just for themselves, but for each other.

And, I trusted my gut when I chose Flowers to be our point, almost nine years ago.

That skinny little twerp. On paper, there's no way I would've picked him for our team. But, that kid was something special. I felt it in my gut. And, I was right.

I even kept an eye on his college career, I'll admit it. Caught a few games on tv, read the papers. The kid's a born leader. Always rallying his team for the win, ...encouraging them. And, always smiling.

A few years back, I had a wedding to go to, near his college. I bought a ticket to his game, and watched him play. Never told him I was there. Didn't want him acting all weird that I came by, or anything. But, I admit it, I was damn proud of the kid.

Anyway, ...and this is between you and I. But, the summer before Flowers was a senior in high school, I got a call.

A lot of college coaches call me. Ask for my opinion on different boys. They know I'm a straight shooter. So, I guess that's why they call.

It was Flowers' college coach on the phone, ...before he offered him.

He asked me, "Sal, what do you think about Flowers? We're thinking of offering him, but not sure he's got the size we like?"

I was honest and told him, "Jim, you didn't hear this from me, because I don't like to play favorites, but I promise you, Flowers is something special.

"He's smart, got good instincts, ...he'll make your team better.

“When it comes down to it, even with his smaller size, you’ll win a lot more games if you trust Flowers, and put him at point, than you’d win with anyone else.

“That, ...I can promise you.”

And, then, a couple years ago, I ran into Jim at a tournament.

He told me, “Sal, after I hung up the phone with you after asking about Flowers, I called the kid right away. I didn’t want anyone else to grab him. Thank God I did! One of the best players, and team captains, we’d ever had. I definitely owe you one for that kid!”

So, here I was.

Sitting at a table, eyeballing my skinny little point guard... excuse me, I mean, ...my Assistant Coach.

And, I’m feeling like a kid, playing the staring game. Whoever blinks first loses.

That’s when my gut kicked in.

I thought, “I told Jim that Flowers would make his team better if he trusts him, and I was right. What kind of an idiot would I be now, if I don’t take my own advice and trust the kid myself?”

All right. I knew I was going to lose this stupid game of chicken, but come hell or high water, I wasn’t going down without a fight.

“Okay, we’ll give it a try,” I told Flowers. “But only on one condition.”

I saw a bead of sweat starting to drip down Flower’s face. But, believe it or not, he kept his cool.

Then he asked me, “What’s your condition?”

So, I told him, “I’ll do everything you suggest, ...but, ...if we DON’T finish in the top 50% at the July national tournament, ...you’ll get rid of those stupid looking earrings, permanently.”

It’s not that I hated those earrings, ...that much. It was more, that I had to beat him at something. I couldn’t let it end, with him beating me at a grade school staring contest.

I felt pretty good about my challenge. I was going to laugh my butt off when he’d have to pull those earrings out.

And, honestly, I figured we were done talking.

But, I’ll be damned if that little jerk didn’t call, ...and raise me one.

“Fine,” Flowers said,  
“But, ...WHEN  
we do finish  
in the top 50%  
at the July tournament,  
...you’ll shave  
that stupid looking  
mustache off.  
Deal?”

Deal.