

Fathers, Sons, and Basketball

In 1980, the NBA entered the Magic and Bird era. Or the Bird and Magic era, depending on which coast your loyalties resided. But regardless of who you rooted for, you felt a part of something significant. Something unprecedented. Something that would take the league to new heights. I was 12 years old.

Like many sons of demanding fathers, I often had little to say to a man who I feared, though greatly respected. There existed nothing but uncommon ground, with droughts in communication that seemed vast and desert-like. Until 1980. Until the arrival of Bird and Magic, Magic and Bird.

I had already been playing organized basketball for three years, beginning in the fourth grade. My best friend's father coached the 6th-grade boys' team, and he saw something special in us. A love of the game coupled with natural talent, perhaps unusual in nine-year-olds.

Coach Johnson was tough but fair. He was a mentor, a teacher, a coach that schooled us both on and off the court. He spoke. We listened. And somehow every life lesson meandered back to the game I was falling in love with.

For the next several years I lived only for basketball. I consumed it while awake and dreamed about it while sleeping. Wherever I went, my basketball came along. We were never apart.

If I was walking, I was dribbling. If I wasn't, I was spinning the ball on my fingertips. In the evenings, I practiced my shooting stroke lying on my back in bed. My basketball was the last thing I saw before falling asleep. And the first thing I reached for upon waking.

Growing up in Northern Illinois meant that you were a Bears fan. It also meant that you had an obligation to hate both the Packers and the Vikings. Football was king, and in a city devoid of princes. Sure there were other sports teams. But

except for those lovable losers over at Wrigley Field, none had the following or the admiration of the Chicago Bears.

Several years later, with the drafting of a skinny kid out of North Carolina, the sports landscape would begin to shift. But in the late 1970s, few cared, or even noticed, that Chicago had a professional basketball team. The Ray Meyer coached DePaul Blue Demons were my team of choice. The college game, not the NBA, the first to lure me (and my basketball) from the playground to the television set.

Then in 1980, with the Los Angeles Lakers drafting of Magic Johnson, and the Boston Celtics getting Larry Bird (oddly through the draft the year before), the NBA began drawing fans in record numbers. Myself included. My father, too.

I grew up in a house with two strict parents. There was no talking back or even the faintest hint of disrespect. All the food on your dinner plate got eaten, even if it took hours to achieve. And bedtime was early and not up for discussion. At least until mid-April.

Rules that existed during the regular season were rules easily broken once the playoffs began. While my mother and sister went about their regular routines, my father and I watched playoff basketball on the screened-in porch attached to the back of our house. A second-hand TV on wheels, fresh popcorn, the twinkle of lightning bugs and the sounds of crickets.

And conversation. There was much to discuss.

The Celtics always played first. My father loved Larry Legend. I thought the Celtics were boring. I playfully, though respectfully, routed against them. My father took it well. The Showtime Lakers came on later. That was my team, the style of play I loved.

My father and I cheered, for or against, and talked to each other like men. Like we were equals. Like we were friends. The glow from that little TV provided a stark contrast to the darkness on the other side of the screens. And somehow, as the night grew longer, and as those around us went off to bed, it seemed as though

time slowed a little. As if time itself knew how treasured each passing minute was to that little kid.

As the playoffs progressed, the weather thankfully got warmer, the sun stayed in the sky a little longer, and the collision course that was Bird and Magic, Magic and Bird, grew nearer. Of course, they didn't meet in the finals every year, but enough to make it memorable. Enough to always make it possible.

But for me, the games were always secondary. As was staying up late and enjoying a freedom seldom afforded to me as a child. For me, the playoffs, if only for a few short years, meant connecting with a man I knew so little about. A man I still rarely get the chance to know well.

Magic and Bird, Bird and Magic, allowed me to see glimpses of the man, beyond parent, in a way I never did before. It gave us something to talk about. Something to share that felt entirely ours.

It provided us the common ground I always hoped for.