

Sweaty Hands and Red Balls

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Before I was seventeen, I never considered myself a winner. The word loser always followed me like a shadow. In the sports I participated in, like baseball, all I ever received were “thanks for trying” trophies. I never had one that said CHAMPION. For one night, I was a champion on a carpet court in front of screaming teenagers.

I remember sitting in my friend’s red Oldsmobile. We were parked on a country road in Delaware County, northeast of Indy. I held a flyer calling out the best dodgeball players the county’s high schools had to offer. Delaware County is home to seven high schools. While I only attended one, yearly county tournaments for school events were a big deal, always bringing the biggest crowd and selling out the gymnasium. Muncie South, Muncie Central, Burris, Wes-Del, Wapahani, Delta, Yorktown, Daleville. The school I belonged to was Wapahani. I asked my friend, Selvey, if he wanted to do it. I’m not sure what compelled me to want to do this. Selvey and I were seventeen and not the most in shape or most limber of people. Also, we are at the bottom of the clique chain; would we even know enough people to join us?

Our first stop was at a kid named Evan’s house. I only knew Evan through the grapevine of others, like Selvey. I attempted to persuade him to join our team and our cause. What I didn’t realize was he was a hippie. Or what I imagined a hippie to be. He replied, “I don’t do sporting events for men to watch,” or whatever the hell that meant. Selvey and I accepted our loss and proceeded to leave when his sister stopped us. I don’t remember how old she was. She gave us a long speech on how she was listening and wanted to join, a speech that I missed because my teenage self just couldn’t stop thinking about how attractive she was. Sarah was her name.

I’ve never considered myself a lucky kid. But on this day, my luck changed. As we were leaving, Evan’s cousin was pulling up. Another kid from my school was just a grade below me. His name was Austin, and this kid couldn’t stop smiling at the excitement of joining our team.

We arrived at the venue, a church surrounded by cornfields with a gymnasium attached to the side of it. The gym court was carpeted, with a running oval overlooking the court. There were bleachers set up on the backside of the court. We checked in with the lady wearing a lanyard. We told her of our lack of two players, for which she found volunteers—Matt and Julie. Eight teams represented four schools. We were the second team formed from Wapahani, and the other group was the jocks of our school, the baseball and basketball players joining forces for one purpose, to win.

The rules were simple, hit another player or catch a ball to eliminate the opposing team. For added intensity, there was a backboard rule; any time a team hit the backboard, the eliminated players could come back in. The bracket was

set on a giant dry-erase board, the national anthem was sung, and game time.

We were up first. Matt and Julie assured us they had our backs and wanted to win. The silver bleachers filled as our teams stood across from each other. The balls being used were small red foam with a plastic covering. They flew accurately for about ten feet but were unreliable after that. The ref blew the whistle, and we rushed forward to the balls sitting on the centerline. Within seconds, balls were flying, and team members were dropping but at a slower rate than the other team. Behind all that grinning, Austin was a talented player, followed by the blonde stranger, Matt, who joined our team. With their prowess, we won the first game. Our teamwork in the first game wasn't bad. Callouts on what other players should do were floating around us. Sometimes it got hard to hear with crowd noise.

Our sister team won easily, followed by an all-senior team and another team full of guys with cut-off sleeves. The sleeveless team was going to be our next opponent after a small intermission. The intermission consisted of a pastor; it was a church event, sharing some stories about Jesus, then a snack break of juice and cookies. Not sure why us being teenagers, there were juice boxes.

The next game was on—us versus the sleeveless kids. These kids were more vocal than the previous team. There was no strategy amongst themselves, and they were all shit talk. On wild throws, they retorted with, “You suck, you sissy.” A whistle blew, and it was go time. This team was better than the previous team, as their accuracy was on point. Selvey and Evan's sister, the less agile of our squad, were eliminated first. I managed to get an accurate throw to take out one of their players but was taken out by a two-on-one. Again it was down to Austin and Matt. The two of them against the remaining four. Even if the backboard got hit, my team was looking tired. Selvey breathed deeply, and Sarah had sweat rolling down her exhausted red face. And Julie, who volunteered to join, looked at her as if she was somewhere else.

Matt was hit in the shoulder, leaving just Austin, still grinning. I don't know how he did it. Four guys were throwing what seemed like twenty balls at him. He hurled that red dot into the backboard on the other side, allowing us to come back in. The sleeveless team drilled the backboard behind us out of fear or just plain dumb. It was back to six on six. Matt wiped out three with a second wind, with Sarah getting one and myself clearing out the remaining two.

Our sister team was up. This all-senior team was larger than them. Their teamwork was centered on great callouts and who should have a ball. Our sister team's game plan was to just throw the ball. There was no teamwork in throwing together. It was whoever got a ball that threw it. With this strategy, they were quickly defeated before they could hit the backboard.

Watching the match, the adrenaline crept in. I remember just thinking about playing in a dodgeball championship match, which made my hands shake, and I was sweating. This was the first time I would be in a sporting championship battle. I felt like, at this point, I was tired of participation. The senior team trotted

to the bench we were sitting at and wished us good luck. I could see on their faces how defeated they were.

Either the gym became hot, or the adrenaline pulsed, and sweat soaked my clothes. I was becoming worried if I could throw a ball. The two teams lined up; the full senior team, I gathered, was from a school just north of our school. To this day, I wonder if those seniors were as nervous as I was. Were my other teammates' hands sweating? The whistle blew, and we charged. They charged. I imagined this is what a medieval fight would have looked like, with two lines opposing catapults hurling rocks.

It was even at first, if we lost one, obviously Selvey, we got one of theirs to counter. This jab-for-jab went on until there were two left on both teams, with the grinning Austin and Julie on ours. I was hit trying to catch a ball, something that's hard to do when they are that small. The seniors hit the backboard first, Austin drilling the backboard seconds later. I can remember the crowd roaring as both sides were filled to full.

The seniors must have learned of our secret weapon; they aimed for the grin and got it—their pitch-perfect callouts pointing who needed balls to get the job done. Luckily the blonde took out two before he was gone, followed by Selvey. The sister traded with one, followed by the brunette. That left a two-versus-one situation for me. I by no means was a flexible kid, with a six-foot build and two left feet. It felt like a puppeteer was pulling my limbs by strings when I dodged two shots and threw an accurate shot to eliminate one.

I remember freaking out. Time was almost like it was still. The last remaining player was wearing a multi-shade green shirt with the word TIGERS across the chest. Was it respect or luck? He didn't throw it when I was reaching for a ball. We stared at each other, and I didn't want to make the first move; I was as good as gone if I missed. He made the first move and threw. I remember that ball being accurate and fast, but somehow I dodged it. I sucked my gut in and curved my back, the ball whizzing by. He had no choice but to step forward to grab another ball. I threw mine. Taking no time to aim, I threw it. The ball flew, descending quickly until it hit him on his exposed shin and bounced off.

The gym erupted in cheers, and the court was filled with bodies. I was high-fiving kids I didn't even know. The moderator of the tournament gathered my team in the middle of the crowd. We were awarded a hundred-dollar check for winning, which didn't split six ways evenly, so I don't know why it was a hundred. Also, there was no trophy or plaque. Why have a tournament if you are not going to hand out a trophy?