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## YOUR VOICE

# The redemption of a shoplifting middle school benchwarmer

By David McGrath

At the end of every October, I grow anxious. Irritated.

The reason, I tell everybody, is that it will take a month of restless sleep before I acclimate to the time change.

But an underlying cause, I suspect, is the memory of a bit of trouble that happened around the end of daylight saving time in 1962 after I made the cut for St. Bernadette's eighth grade basketball team in Evergreen Park.

I wasn't much of a player. Surely, I was strong and dogged, from playing in the yard with my brothers, and I did all right on defense. But I could not dribble, shoot, rebound or pass, and I was neither tall nor particularly fast. My pal Jack said I made the team only because coach Walsh knew my father, who was a "big shot" as a village trustee. Everybody else in the locker room laughed when he said it, including me. But after a couple of months of never playing and being strictly relegated to the practice team or "reserves," I thought maybe he was on to something.

Practice was every Tuesday and Thursday night at Evergreen Park's Southeast Elementary gym, when I'd work up a sweat and feel like part of the team.

The last Tuesday in October, after the clocks were moved back, we ran out of daylight by the time practice ended. The good players, including my pal Tom who was the starting guard, were picked up by their parents. But TJ, Jack and I, the "core" of the reserves, packed our duffel bags and headed home in the dark.

TJ's older brother had been a 6-foot-4 eighth grade basketball legend at St. Bernadette. TJ had all that to live up to, but he was only an inch taller than me and confined to the reserves.

But he was blessed with a different kind of talent: He could talk like Maynard G. Krebs on "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis" TV series, or Amos, the old farmer on "The Real McCoys," or just about anybody we knew. And though shorter than his brother, he had long arms that swung out when he



David McGrath, front row, second from left, with the St. Bernadette eighth grade basketball team. His friend Jack is in the front row at far right, and coach Walsh is in the back row at far left. McGrath's friend TJ is absent. Editor's note: The photo contains some damage.

**DAVID MCGRATH**

walked, so that with his flat-top haircut and grin, he resembled the comic book character Jughead, only with muscles.

All the way home, TJ imitated the coach yelling at the players and cursing at the reserves, which gave me and Jack cramps in our sides from laughing.

"For cripes sake, the game is basketball, not air ball, McGrath," said TJ, in coach Walsh's booming voice, and Jack held his stomach as he dropped to his knees on the parkway.

Maybe you had to be there to find it funny or else just realize that this was a raucous, rolling release after being foils for the starters and having the coach yell at us to stay frozen in our zones so the varsity could practice set plays.

Halfway home, TJ wanted to stop at the Jerazol drugstore for a bottle of 7UP. Jack and I covered our mouths to keep from

laughing as TJ proceeded to talk to the old pharmacist in his Amos McCoy voice. It was disrespectful, but the old guy didn't have a clue.

After TJ got his soda, and we'd gone a block down the street, Jack opened his duffel to show off the ice cream bars he had snatched from the freezer while TJ was flummoxing the old man.

Just as proudly, I whipped out an Oh Henry! and two Payday candy bars I had slid from the rack into my coat pocket.

We howled about it all the way home, about not getting caught like the sorry criminals on "Dragnet" or "Hawaii Five-O."

The next morning, I felt sick from guilt for what we had done, and I resolved to never do it again.

But the following Thursday, something about our intoxicating laughter, our unity as the shunned reserves and our escape

with our loot into the cold and darkness all superseded the risks, the Ten Commandments and the rules of conduct posted for athletes. Rules left back at the gym with the coach and his hollering and parents picking up their varsity players each night.

Being outcasts, as long as you were not alone, felt powerful. A strange feeling, fiercer than love.

It was weeks before anyone caught on; the drugstore must have called school. The coach convened an unusual meeting at practice, calling for any player who knew about the shoplifting at Jerazol to step forward.

TJ raised his hand: "Coach, are they giving a reward for catching these varmints?"

Jack erupted, stifling his laugh with a coughing spell, and coach ordered him into the hall to get a drink of water. I was able to hold my breath until TJ shut up and the coach got back to lecturing us about good athletes being good Catholics. I avoided looking at TJ's face, but then the word "varmints" rang in my head, and I, too, had to be excused to the water fountain.

Bernadette's won two tournaments that year and lost a close one to Holy Redeemer. I rode the bench, cheering on Tom who led the scoring.

With no more practices and no three musketeers, I felt worse about our secret and went to confession. Father O'Brien administered penance but said I also had to make restitution, a word I had to look up. And for five or six days, until Jerazol was fully restituted, I bicycled over there, pretending to browse, until I could slide a quarter or two onto the counter when no one was looking.

I don't know if it restored Jerazol's bottom line. But I had to hand it to Father O'Brien for knowing how to stop a life of crime, while inspiring an attempt at another, as a writer.

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