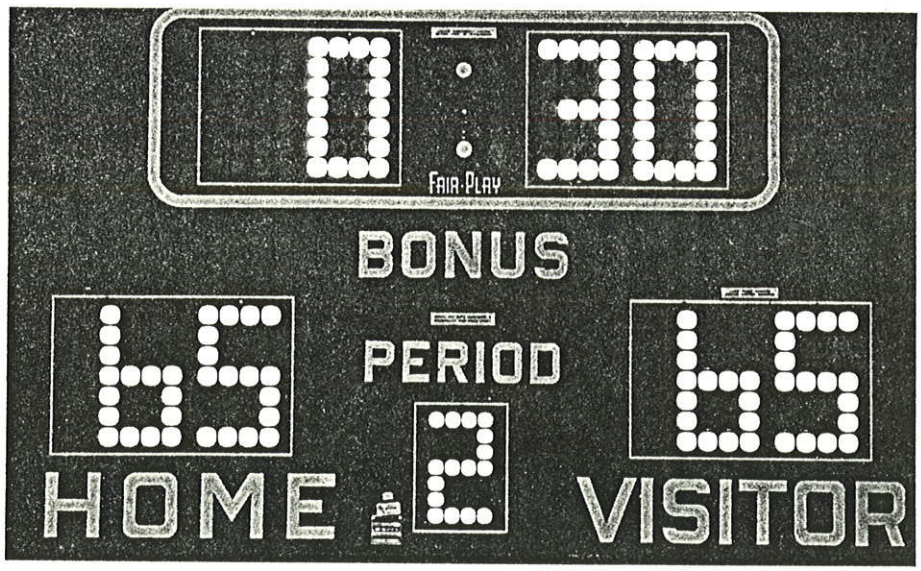
'ALSO PLAYS.'

To go 1–24, you have to be bad *and* unlucky

By Karl Lindholm '67

Nick and I were the only players over 40 at the Alumni Basketball Game in 1985, but we were legitimate because we're both still playing in adult leagues. I got three hoops, though none from farther out than 10 feet — I missed all my long jumpers. I know all baskets are worth two points, but not to the ego. Nick went for the collar: He's the only guy I know whose shot hasn't improved with time and practice. He did create havoc as he always has and reassured these younger players that the aging process, inevitable as it is, needn't dim one's enthusiasm.



The other players in the game were tall and fast and good, reflecting what has happened to Middlebury basketball since Nick and I played. Things were bad when we were there in the Sixties. Horrendous, in fact. Our record for my three varsity years (1964–67) was 10 wins and 57 losses. Over the entire decade, Middlebury's record was 32–173, with 10 of those wins coming in one year, 1969.

When I read that St. John's is 24–1, or even that Connecticut College is 15–6, I think automatically of those anonymous teams whose records are the reverse. I certainly know how their players feel. I sometimes have thought that we weren't as devastatingly bad as our awful record signified, just especially unlucky. I've since resolved that issue. We were bad. And unlucky.

Winning teams learn how to win. Losing teams are practiced at losing and often fail heartbreakingly in the game's final seconds. In my senior year, we won only one game and lost 24. A number of those losses were in excruciatingly close games. Our only victory was against Brandeis, whom we beat by 16 points. Brandeis was coached then by K.C. Jones, whose career has taken an upward turn since that landmark game.

Bad luck comes to good teams unnoticed; they absorb it, overcome it with their talent and confidence. Bad luck is a terminal disease for bad teams. For us, bad luck was at times truly tragic. We practiced a whole year with a guy who had transferred from Rutgers, a very good player. Before preseason practice the following year, he was paralyzed in an automobile accident. Likewise, we played a whole season of games with a big crude sophomore named Freshman whose improvement over that time was stunning. The next year, he broke his back in the first practice.

I was always the fifth, sixth, or seventh man on these teams and my game principally featured diving after loose balls. At 6'1", my role was swingman, which meant in my case that I was too slow to play guard and too small to play forward. I also helped the coach with his basketball newsletter.

The brother of one of our team members played for Trinity, Conn., College and sent along their scouting report of our team. It described our offense and defense and went into individual player's abilities and tendencies. The notation next to my name read: "Also plays."

Nick, on the other hand, was a pretty good player, fiercely aggressive at 5'7", always provoking the wrath of opponents and fans. My wife wearies of my "Nick stories" — his knocking out Norwich's big center in a fight, his getting hit by a dead chicken thrown from the stands at Wesleyan (a response to his obscene gesture), his inventing the tactic of drawing the offensive foul as a consistent defensive ploy, and on and on. Having now actually met him, she disputes his mythical status, but he truly was something.

My roommate, Gary, was the last man on the team and seldom played. The year we were 1–24, we had the poorest record in the NCAA. Gary therefore claimed that he was *officially* the worst basketball player in America.

We really tried so very hard. We cried after losses, banged lockers, and rededicated ourselves to greater effort — and continued to lose. And lose and lose. We endured jokes about our ineffectiveness.

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Losing doesn't build character; losing and winning builds character. Continual losing makes one discouraged and inconfident and debilitatingly tentative in his play.

Our coach, Gerry Alaimo, always provided us with a winning game strategy. We practiced and practiced last-second situations, but our open shot always seemed to bounce off the rim, or our sterling defense forced a bad shot that miraculously went in, and we went home, losers again.

Coach Alaimo knew our limitations and convinced us that we had to "work harder" than our opponents, and we did. We ran until our tongues hung out. No team was better conditioned. Unfortunately, we were a basketball team and not a track team.

We learned the game, both the fundamentals and the broad strategy. The coach was careful to teach us the pieces of the puzzle, important for me as I found myself coaching in high schools just a few years later. We knew the game; we just couldn't play it.

As you might imagine, that final season, with just one win, had many lowlights. We lost one game to Wesleyan by 60 points, 111–51 (the coaches were feuding). In another game, we attempted to hold the ball against intra-state power St. Michaels, one of the top-ranked small college teams in the country. They scored but 18 points in the first half and we were in the game. They got 71 in the second half.

I was able to lose the Vermont game almost single-handedly. Of course, a win over State U. would have made our season, and we had a five-point lead with less than a minute to go. I managed to wipe out that lead in just four seconds. My man made a basket, I threw a bad inbounds pass, I committed a foul on the ensuing shot — the ball went in, three point play, tie game. We lost by a pair at the buzzer, the coach having mercifully taken me out of the game.

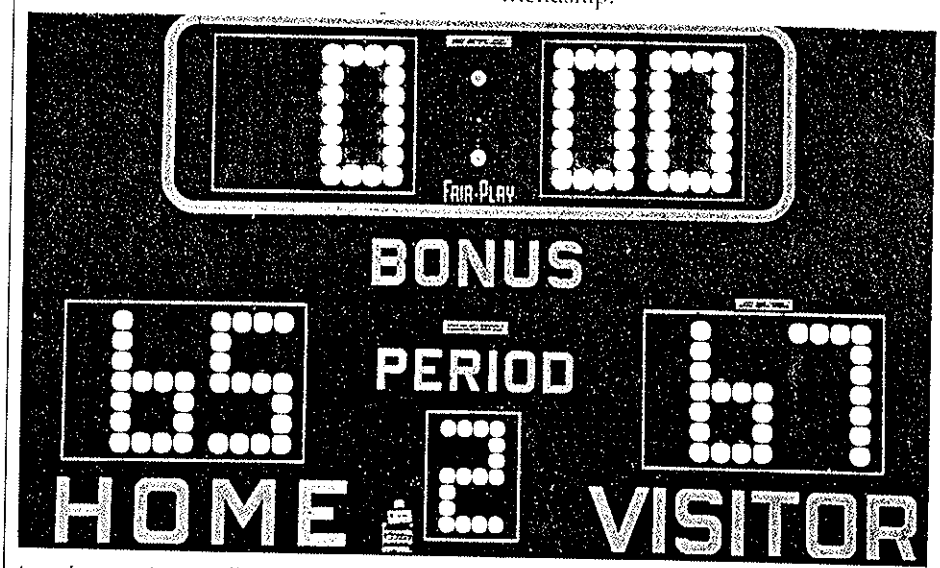
I have often wondered if we weren't naive or even foolish to stay with it, to take our play so seriously. Shouldn't we have simply acknowledged our inabilities, relaxed, fooled around, and played for the hell of it? The outcome would ultimately been no different. 1–24.

As the years recede, a perspective emerges on that miserable last season. Outcome in sports is important and unimportant at the same time. When the score was 65–65 with 30 seconds to play, we were all fully alive, exhilarated by our absorption in the now of the game. Moments later, true, we were disconsolate. But we had in fact lived. The GAME was ours. The play's the thing, and we knew that at some visceral level. The trying hard, the intensity was important to the vitality we felt in our play.

Regardless of the outcome, we were like other teams, good teams with great players, poor cousins certainly but kin nonetheless. We had good times, so much shared experience, so many adventures and stories. I remember vividly the time Nick and I were left behind in Boston and forced to hitch-hike back to Vermont, the coach so despaired of our ever meeting the bus on time.

I remember, too, the great holiday tournament in Montreal when we met interesting girls who showed us the city; I remember finding new ways to separate Roller from his meal money; I remember coffee shops, hotels, explorations of cities and other schools' campuses. I found out on a long bus ride more about Nick, and that his combative shell was necessary armor.

I found out other things about other players on endless bus rides on wintry nights coming back to Vermont, things that cemented the bond and allowed these losers to be a "team." I know that the games, the literal record of this team's experience, all those losses, reflect only a part of the actual life of the team.



Like all teams, real teams, we had wonderful characters — a little of everything, like the platoons in the old war movies. We became good friends. I remember:

"Johnny Low-Card," the world's worst gin player.

"Chas-Chas, The Great Tall Lad," our 6'7" center, whose play would be positively schizophrenic (30 points one night, zero the next).

"The Fox," one of our three peanut starting guards whose Jerry West crewcut and small frame gave him an unmistakeable ferret-like demeanor.

"Clubbo" (short for "Clubfoot" in the democratic cruelty of sports' nicknames), a 6'3" forward with size 15 boats, a mean HORSE player whose locomotive mobility limited his full-court game.

"Willis" Reed, a decent player with a nice shot from the corner, but a non-pareil card player — we knew he was ready when he broke out the green visor.

Nick, or "the Little Rat," a sobriquet bellowed by Bob Brannum, the then Norwich coach (and former Celtic heavy-hitter), in begrudging admiration of Nick's reckless play.

I was "Chip" because of my penchant for reading Chip Hilton sports stories, my impossible struggle to achieve his clichéd perfection, and my obvious disillusionment that I would have to live in a real world of limits and failures.

Players on that team were largely one-dimensional athletes, but they were multi-dimensional individuals. The team, and the intensity of our commitment to one another and the ever so elusive success of victory, was the alembic of our friendship.

After the Alumni Game, Nick and I sat with the other players, ritualistically rehashing the game, getting to know one another, and talking about our lives after Middlebury. I sensed that we all realized, despite differences in age and talent, that we had much in common: a love for the game and the exhilaration of sports; a bond of friendship in sports based on determined effort; and an appreciation for the institution that supported our most spirited play.

The other players didn't know that Nick's and my team was 1–24, nor did they seem to care. □