

## **The Opening Tip**

(or How I Flew Too Near the Sun and My Wax Wings Fell Off)

by Richard Ault

The moment is frozen in the amber of my mind: I am caught, still hanging, held aloft by the updraft of the crowd's roar, dropping the ball in the basket. In that waking dream, I never come down. To this day, even in my eighties, this is a highlight not just of my high school basketball career but of my life.

In reality, though, from that height, my senior season came down with a crash, and all too often even now when I wake up at two or three in the morning, I still try to figure out why.

My first basketball memory is of shooting baskets on our garage backboard with friends when my mother came out of the backdoor to tell us that President Roosevelt had died. I was nine. The following year as I entered fifth grade, I got into organized ball in the YMCA league. I played other sports too, especially baseball and softball, but basketball was the game about which I was the most passionate and most skilled.

I was the best player and leading scorer on my teams at every level through my junior year of high school when I led our Saginaw Arthur Hill JV team in scoring and set a single-game scoring record against our cross-town rivals, Saginaw High. I had always had success against many of those same players in junior high and it continued into high school.

I began my senior season with high hopes but got off to a bad start. In the opening road game in Lansing, I was lost in some sort of haze and stunk up the place. The second game in Ann Arbor, I played a bit better but made some bad offensive mistakes. At half-time, Coach Fowler singled me out: "Ault, you're killing us on offense." I distinctly remember missing a key free throw near the end of the game. On the way

home on the bus, a teammate who had been on the bench at the time told me that, when I missed, Fowler muttered “No guts.” That comment stays with me to this day.

The third game was finally at home against Saginaw High, my favorite opponent. All of my childhood basketball heroes had played in that rivalry, always the big game of the year. It was hard to believe that it was my turn now, that I would even be on that same floor as my larger than life idols. I had always worked hard and had success as I came up, but I now felt like an imposter.

The opening tip went back to Chummy Weinberg who spotted me breaking toward the basket and hit me with a pass. I was all alone. I took two dribbles and rose into the air. My Chuck Taylor All-Stars game shoes lifted me as if I were floating in slow motion until I rolled the ball off my fingertips into the basket, my frozen-in-amber memory.

In the early going after that shot in that game, I was feeling pretty comfortable and made three quick baskets. I also quickly made two bad passes, got pulled from the game, and never got back in. I started one more game that season and played pretty well for a change, *except* for the fact that I couldn’t find the basket. I missed layups, and free throws that looked like they were going in but just spun out. I don’t remember making a single point.

That was the beginning of the end.

I didn’t start a game or play much from then on. Later in the season, I did get in near the end of the first half of a game in Flint and played well. Coach sent me out to start the second half. However, when the team was clasping hands in the huddle before the horn sounded to begin play, I glanced at the bench and Fowler was staring at me. He grimaced and ordered me back to the bench without another word. I have no idea what he thought he saw— maybe “no guts”—but I didn’t get back in another game for the rest of the season.

The final insult came at playoff time. The travel squad roster was posted for the first game and my name was not on it. I didn’t even get to go on the team bus. Sophomores and juniors made the bus. Guys who had been cut from my junior high team made the bus. I had been playing and practicing from the fourth grade on and even before. Now guys who never even played organized ball before high school made

the bus, one of whom even started the game. Ernie Dijak, who was a great football player but in basketball was only good for pounding me in the back during practice—Ernie Dijak made the bus.

I went to the locker room that night to meet my friends on the team when they returned from their first-round loss. Before they arrived, I removed all my equipment from my locker, tacked my jockstrap to the cork bulletin board, and left a note: “Ault hangs it up.”

So many times since —way too many times for a grown man—in the middle of the night, I go over that whole season and try to figure out what went wrong. I find many things and people to blame. Coach Fowler, who never seemed to believe in me, who said I had “no guts.” Peanuts Murphy, my former JV coach, who publicly complained about my “changed attitude.” Ernie Dijak, the big mean tackle on the football team who always guarded me in half-court practices and pounded my kidneys relentlessly with his fist. I never told anyone, afraid of looking like a cowardly tattler, and scared of what Ernie might do to me. I even wanted to blame Mary, my girlfriend. We were on the verge of going steady and committed as I was to that end, she took up all of my after-practice practice time.

But each time when I get to the end of such a recap, I come to a very mundane conclusion about the problem. After all, I had another steady girlfriend the year before, Dee, who was now in college. In that case, however, I still found time to go to the YMCA most nights after dinner and all day on Saturdays to shoot around with my friend Dick Drinnan, who was the star of the Catholic high school team. Back in junior high, I would come home from daily practice at school and immediately go to my friend Ernie Richmond’s driveway on the corner to shoot by myself while he and his family were inside having dinner. But, in the year in question, I never practiced after practice. The summer leading into that season I had been too busy with girls, a summer job, and baseball, and almost didn’t touch a basketball.

The mundane lesson I learned was that I didn’t work hard enough. I didn’t practice shooting in Ernie Richmond’s driveway between school practice and dinner. I didn’t go to the Y at all.

I just didn’t work hard enough.



*Richard Ault in 8<sup>th</sup> Grade, # 20*

That lesson has motivated me ever since—in my educational life, in my work life, in my family life, and even with my golf addiction back when I was so committed to getting better that whenever I wasn't playing, I was practicing. I play less often now and never practice.

Now I write every day and try to get better each day.

I've wanted to be a writer since I was eight-years-old, even before my first basketball memory. My third-grade teacher, Mrs. Ferguson, praised my story about the hardships of a pioneer family in a wagon train headed west. She told the class it was a "grown-up story," and that was it: I was hooked. I still

have the original in my file cabinet, and I am still writing stories about people taking risks.

Writing, however, was not my career until I retired from many years as a private consultant on organizational change. Before that, I was in public education as a teacher, principal, and college professor.

Now I write every day and wish my words would catch an updraft so that they might not only be uplifted but uplifting. I wish they could rise and soar, but experience, time, and age have taught me to be more realistic. The law of gravity keeps my feet on the ground and my butt in the chair as I try to write better tomorrow than I did today.

The last time **Richard Ault** appeared in *bioStories* was in the Summer/Fall issue of 2017 with an essay about his struggle with cancer, a struggle with a happy ending. However, in October of 2019, his wife of fifty years died of that disease, after which he sold their home in northern Michigan and moved to be near family in the Philadelphia area.



*Richard Ault, Senior Year, # 43*