

OVER TIME

MY LIFE AS A SPORTSWRITER

FRANK DEFORD

As Told to Frank Deford



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IN WHICH I FIRST ENCOUNTER FASTER GUNS

High schools are our commonest common denominator. Good Lord, they even all smell the same, that stale institutional odor that can be disturbed only by another ringing bell. The children fall out into the corridors, moving with a special rhythm, at a pace they will never again employ in life. Nothing else in the human experience resembles the break between classes.

“When All the World Was Young, Lad,”
Sports Illustrated, 1977

Besides prefaces counting their pages in Roman numerals, the other thing about books that always confounds me is that we authors go on and on, tediously, with acknowledgments (see page 353), but we usually make a mystery of our dedication. So, here is who this book is dedicated to: my high school adviser and my high school basketball coach.

You see, since much of this book is about writing and sports, it is especially appropriate to dedicate it to them.

Jerry Downs not only was my adviser but he taught me English, and (although I could’ve done without the Thomas Hardy) he showed me how to appreciate great writing—Shakespeare in particular, of course—and he wonderfully encouraged my own writing and helped me improve it without ever being pedantic. He also directed me in school plays (struggling mightily with me when I was in my James

Dean period), where I believe I learned to appreciate actors more than athletes. He was everything good that a high school teacher should be, and he was a wonderful influence on me, but, of course I was a teenager then and therefore I didn't let him know that I thought that.

Nemo Robinson—square name: John—was my varsity basketball coach. I had no idea, until forty years later, that he had been a certified hero at the Battle of the Bulge. That was revealed to me only when the History Channel devoted a whole program to a re-creation of his incredible courage, for which he was awarded the Bronze Star with valor. In deep snow, out in the open, Lieutenant Robinson led an assault on an entrenched, well-fortified German position, then crawled back and forth under the enemy machine-gun fire to rescue several of his wounded men, dragging them to safety—even as he suffered a hernia for these extraordinary exertions.

But what did I know when Nemo coached me? If I'd actually known what he'd so bravely achieved against the Germans I would've been too nervous around a truly courageous man like that. Luckily, I just knew Nemo as Coach Robinson, who put up with me.

Because I'm tall, people naturally assume I played basketball. Every tall guy gets that. When people meet Abraham Lincoln in heaven, I'm sure they start off asking him where he played hoops. Unfortunately, I'm not much of an athlete. I have terrible hand-eye coordination. It's so bad that, when operating a computer, for some unknown reason, I hold the mouse backward. Apparently, I alone in the world have this mysterious vertical dyslexia.

Incredibly, though, I could shoot a basketball, and when I was in my senior year at Gilman School, playing for Nemo, and the jump shot was coming into vogue, I just sort of magically started making jump shots. I'd put on a little weight, too, from taking the Charles Atlas course, which cost \$30 (an awful lot of money at the time). Mr. Atlas called his secret regimen "Dynamic Tension." You sent away for it through the ads on the back of comic books, where there were panels showing how the erstwhile skinny Charles himself had put on

muscle and, thereupon, at the beach, beat up a bully who had kicked sand in his face.

Ideally, you did the exercises naked before a mirror; this gave them more of a hush-hush, even lurid, aspect. When I got my driver's license at sixteen, it listed me at 6 feet 2½ inches, 127 pounds, so I was a wraith. With the help of Charles Atlas, by the time I was a senior I was up to a hefty 150, and I'd grown a couple more inches, too, so I was finally able to muscle up jump shots.

It was all quite amazing; *overnight* I got off the bench and became a star. It absolutely confounded Nemo that I came out of nowhere. But me—I knew, secretly, my success was a fluke. As a precursor to so much in my life, I was just in the right spot. We had a very good center named Tommy Garrett, who was 6 feet 7 inches, so he had to play the opponent's big man, and by far the best athlete on our team was the point guard, Alan Yarbrow, who would bring the ball up court, do all the hard work, then pass me the ball so I could launch my beautiful new jump shot over the poor little shorter guy guarding me.

By coincidence, that season, 1956–1957, was the first time that the Baltimore high school conference, which had been segregated, allowed in the black schools. Promptly, Dunbar easily won the championship. Its star player was named Joe Pulliam. One day, before school, we were sitting around reading the Baltimore papers, both of which, that day, selected me for second-team all-city. Joe Pulliam was one of the five players on the first team. My friend Bob Reiter said, "You know, Frank, whatta shame. The one year the colored boys come in, they have a good basketball team. Otherwise you would have been first-team all-Baltimore."

I said, "Bob, I really don't think this was like a onetime thing for the colored boys in basketball."

It was one of the few predictions in sport I've ever gotten right. Like most sportswriters and, for that matter, like most other people, very few of us ever predict sports correctly. It isn't even worth the

effort, and you shouldn't pay any attention to what anyone predicts,* but everybody keeps trying and many people take it seriously.

A few years later, when I was covering basketball for *Sports Illustrated*, I obtained, if secondhand, the definition of basketball, from the very lips of the creator himself. This happened when I interviewed the old retired Kansas coach Phog Allen, who had himself been coached as a Jayhawk by Dr. James Naismith—he who had personally invented basketball. Imagine somebody actually inventing a whole sport. You remember the peach baskets.

It was an even more disorienting conversation for such a young man as I, however, because Allen continually referred to Naismith as “Jim,” and to me, this was like talking to someone who had known Edison and kept recalling a chat with “Tom” about working up electricity.

Allen told me Naismith had told him: “Phog, the appeal of basketball is that it is a game easy to play but difficult to master.”

And Phog replied: “You mean just like life, Jim?”

And Naismith agreed. “Yes, anybody can piddle at it, but to master it—yes, just like life.”

So, there I had basketball straight from the horse's mouth. Really, I had been a piddler. Would that I could do better with life.

Nevertheless, because of that one glorious year in high school, I've always known, from personal experience, exactly what it's like for someone to, as they say, *get hot*. I got hot, and even though I understood it was a mirage, I had the time of my life. It taught me how confidence can transform you, even carry you—well, at least for a while. We had a terrific team, and I broke the school scoring records, and one day Nemo told someone that I was the best “game player” he'd ever coached. Not the best player, you understand—I knew I wasn't even the best player on this one team—but his best “game player.” All-time.

*Let alone “guarantees.” It is the stupidest thing in sports journalism that we actually report it when some player “guarantees” that his team will win. Please.

More than fifty years on, I don't believe I've ever had a compliment I prized so much.

However, when I went off to college, the Princeton coach, an old gruff billiard-ball-bald guy named Cappy Cappon, watched me at practice for a while. Cappy was not long on words or diplomacy. I was already writing for the college paper, and Cappy came over to me and said, "You know, DeFord, you write basketball much better than you play it."

Luckily, I already knew this, and Cappy knew I knew it, so it was not wounding. Sure, I'd have loved to be Mr. Hotshot Player. Wouldn't everybody? But I'd had that one freak year, *when I got hot*, and, wow, that was fantastic, and it taught me so much.

I think of all the boys (and girls now, too) who, as I was, are good at a sport at some certain level—maybe even really good—but that's as far as they can go. Sometimes, like me, they're finished after high school. Sometimes in college. Some players are even absolutely drop-dead terrific, all-Americans, but they're a total bust in the pros. Water finds its own level. When I started covering sports, it helped that, because of my own experience as a glorious flash in the pan, I understood how hard it was on the ones who thought they were so good, but found out, no, they were good only up to a point, because there were faster guns out there, beyond. There's always a faster gun.

But I know it's true that so many grown American men are walking around all the rest of their lives, playing those glory days over, still hearing the cheers in their inner ear. A lot of them lie about how good they were, and I think after a while, they come to believe their own lies. Some of them never get it out of their system, no matter how long they live or what they do for a living, because in this country, when you're so damn young and impressionable, it's especially exhilarating, playing for your school, with pretty cheerleaders jumping up and down and fans yelling for you. Young tits and the roar of the crowd—all your life, you might never beat that.

The fuss we make over high school sports is probably the main reason so many men in the United States are forever adolescent. High school sports have replaced The Western as the male American lyric.

Anyway, the point is that I wasn't hurt when Cappy Cappon told me I couldn't play basketball very well, because he didn't say just that; he also implied, in counterpoint, that there was something else I *could* do well: I was able to write.