

How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court into a Place of Higher Learning and You at the Podium

MATT DE LA PEÑA

It's finally summer.

Go ahead, take a deep breath. You're free.

All year long your moms has been on you like glue about algebra worksheets and science fair projects and the knee-high stack of books Mrs. Baker assigned for English class. And you did what you had to do. Two As and four Bs.

Truth is, you're actually pretty smart.

School comes easy.

You told Baker in that end-of-the-year five-page paper what was up with Esperanza's dreams and the symbolism of the Mango Street house, and you pulled down a 96 percent—second-highest grade in the class. But even as you typed out that essay, you had an indoor-outdoor in your lap. Between sentences you daydreamed finger rolls over outstretched hands.

See, here's what all the hard-core homework pushers don't get.

For people like you, ball is more than just ball.

It's a way out.

A path to those tree-lined lives they always show on TV.

You've crunched the numbers and read the tea leaves. Fact is, you'll *never* hit the books as hard as Boy Genius Jeremiah Villa. Sylvia Diaz, either. Even your boy Francisco, from down the hall. There are folks in this world who live to mark up a fat World History textbook with an arsenal of colored highlighters.

You're not one of them.

You spend too much time on back-alley ball-handling drills to compete.

Nah, the game of basketball is *your* best chance.

The Fate of Your Hoop Development

For the past three years you've spent every free minute balling at an outdoor court down the street from your building. After school. After games. Weekends. You name it.

Most nights you're still out there putting up shots, alone, when the sun falls

behind the ocean and the automatic park lights come flickering on, spilling that strange yellow half-light across the cracked concrete.

Ball is like anything else.

Put in enough hours, your game's gonna blast off.

Your jumper's now pure out to twenty-five feet, give or take. You've developed a little floater in the lane that leaves slow-footed big men flailing. But it's your handle that sets you apart. Your quicks. The way you can get into the paint at will and finish with either hand.

This past season you scored more points than any other eighth grader in the county.

You were second in assists.

So what.

It ain't good enough, and you know it.

Not if you want to be even *more* dominant next year, in high school.

That's why your ears perk up when you overhear a couple newcomers talking about Muni Gym in Balboa Park. When you overhear the dude with love handles sitting on the stairs say to his boy, "It's the best run in the entire city, B. I put that on everything."

"You ranked 'em out?" the other guy asks.

"Nah, I used to ball there all the time before I tweaked my back. If you can hang with them big boys at Muni...shoot, you can hang with just about anybody."

Shelf the extra jumpers that night.

Proceed instead to the local library and look up Muni Gym online. Type the address into Google Earth and you'll discover it's right next to the Air and Space Museum your moms took you and your sis to back in the day. And the Air and Space Museum, if your calculations are correct, isn't but five miles from your pop's job at the factory.

Wander into your cramped living room after dinner that night. Work up the guts to describe for your old man the importance of competing against the best. You've outgrown your local run. It's time to put a foot in the deep end. So what if he doesn't even know the rules of the game, if all he does is sit there silently inside the TV, working a toothpick in his teeth.

"So, what do you think, Pop?"

"About what?"

"Would it be cool if I went with you to work every morning? So I could play some ball down there?"

He'll look at you suspiciously, then turn back to his cop show and his toothpick.

You'll take this as a no and assume the fate of the most important summer of your hoop development now rests in the hands of the county bus system.

But you'll be wrong.

A few minutes later he'll mumble, "Better have your skinny butt out by the car by five, I'll tell you that. Or else I'm leaving without you."

He won't even look up when he tells you this.

Doesn't matter.

Your heart will race with excitement.

You'll tear into the room you share with your sis and lay your hoop gear out on the chair by your bed like some kind of giddy schoolgirl—which is pretty much how you'll feel.

STOP

There's Only Today

Know that when your alarm starts blaring at four-thirty the next morning, you're going to have no idea where you are or what's happening. It'll still be dark outside. Your sis will be snoring. When reality finally settles in, the lazy part of your brain will try and sweet-talk you back to sleep: *Maybe we could, you know, skip the Muni trip today...go ball at the park instead....There's always tomorrow.*

Reach into your own skull and smack this part of your brain upside the head.

35 Highlighters

If you let it, this part of your brain will hold you back from every dream you will ever have. Trust me.

Crawl out of bed, reminding yourself that your old man gets up like this every single day for work. Rain or shine. In sickness and in health.

Your uncles, too.

Respect them for this.

Strive to be like them.

During the entire thirty-minute drive south, your old man will say two sentences to you, max. Don't take it personally. Answer his question about the gym location and how you heard about it. Buckle your seat belt when he gives you one of his patented dirty looks. Before you even hit the freeway on-ramp you'll be done talking, but that's okay. Shift your focus to other details of the drive. The radio news show he turns on. The smell of his steaming-hot black coffee. The scattered cars along the dark freeway, and the subtle tick of his turn signal whenever he changes lanes. By the end of summer, these seemingly insignificant details will be ingrained in your brain.

When he parks along the street near his factory, it'll still be a full three hours before Muni Gym opens. "Better have your skinny butt back here by quarter to four," he'll say, snatching his lunch pail out of the backseat. "It's a long walk home, I'll tell you that."

After he disappears around the bend, turn your attention to the ancient Volkswagen Bug. You'll wonder how the heck you're supposed to sleep inside such a tiny car, but after a little trial and error you'll find a way. It will involve folding your six-foot-one frame into a kind of human pretzel. Half of you will be in the backseat, while the other half is curled up into the front passenger seat, your bag strategically lodged into the center console to keep the hand brake from digging into your ribs.

By day three, this next-level yoga position will feel perfectly natural.

But let's get something straight from the jump. This Muni Gym summer isn't going to be some kind of continuous loop of "One Shining Moment." There'll be low points, too. On *and* off the court. Trust me.

A few weeks in, a meaty-faced cop will knock on the windshield with the butt of his nightstick. He'll look at you through aviator sunglasses, his right hand resting on a holstered handgun.

Try not to panic.

His suspicions will be based on two simple facts:

1. This is the first time during his rounds he's ever stumbled across a kid sleeping at a ninety-degree angle inside a VW Bug.
2. Your skin is brown.
 - 2a. (His skin will be brown, too—maybe even *browner*—but don't spend too much time worrying yourself about this. There's a complex psychology behind this phenomenon, one you're not yet ready to wrap your head around.)

At the end of your respectful explanation, the cop will slowly remove his hand from his gun. He'll grab hold of your left elbow instead and steer you toward the front office of the factory. Your pop will be summoned, embarrassingly, over the loudspeaker. Two minutes later he'll emerge from the back looking wildly stressed. This is not because you've done anything wrong. It's because he has his own history with cops. Stuff that happened long before you were born. Stuff nobody ever talks about.

After the cop explains the situation, your pop will put on an uncomfortable smile and vouch for you. He'll say you're a good kid, that you're just down here to play some ball at a gym in Balboa Park. He'll shake hands with the cop enthusiastically, thanking him for his service and apologizing for any trouble you may have caused.

Soon as the cop leaves, though, your pops will transform back into himself. "Don't worry about that power-happy pendejo," he'll say, rubbing your shoulder. "You didn't do nothing wrong."

"I was just sleeping."

"Mexicans are allowed to sleep, too." He'll look you straight in the eyes, nodding. And in this moment, you'll feel closer to your old man than ever before.

Fortunately, that's the only morning you'll be woken up by a nightstick. Every other morning it'll be the alarm on your phone, and you'll be free to climb out of the Bug at your leisure. Stretch your stiff arms and legs. Breathe in the warm Hillcrest air and remove your rock from your bag. It's time to get a move on.

It won't take but three days to know all the shortcuts to Muni.

Dribble through the middle school playground where summer camp kids play double Dutch and hopscotch and dodgeball. Dribble in and out of sleeping cars in the massive San Diego Zoo parking lot. Dribble through crowds of camera-toting tourists shuffling toward the front gates of the zoo. Dribble past the various hot dog stands, the ice cream truck with the two flat tires, the leather-faced man selling ras-

pas who looks like your late abuelito. By the end of the summer these vendors will all recognize you and wave.

It will take a little more than an hour for you to arrive at the large, dilapidated building with two locked green doors. Butterflies will dance inside your chest. That first time and every time following. Even years from now. And that's how it *should* be.

Because you can sense it...

Here is where you will learn the world.

Sentenced to the Bleachers

While you wait for gym manager Jimmy to arrive by bicycle with his massive ring of rattling keys, listen to the grown men around you. To the uninitiated they are uneducated. They're poor. Black. Crass. Shifty. Steely-eyed. A reason to cross the street.

But over the course of the summer you will soak up everything around you. And you will hear the brilliance. The poetry. The philosophy. The verbal dance of on-court banter. They will laugh harder and more often than anyone you've ever known. And you will laugh, too. Especially a few weeks into the summer, when they turn their wrath on you.

They'll begin by calling you Mexico (even though your Spanish is suspect at best). They will ask why you're inside a gym, and not crouched in a field somewhere, picking strawberries. Or kicking around a soccer ball. They will tell you you're too young to ball with them. Too skinny. Too light in the pocket. Too soft.

Come back in three years, they'll say.

Or maybe ten.

You will laugh your way through all of this, sensing that their digs are some warped version of acceptance.

A week in, a guy everyone calls Mr. Unleaded (because he's the night manager of a nearby gas station) will tear into you about your long, skinny, "no-muscle-having" arms, and without blinking you'll fire back a dig about the ghetto Superman tat sketched into his right forearm, and "Why would you knowingly walk into a gym full of Kryptonite?" Everyone loitering outside the gym that morning, waiting for Jimmy, will roar in laughter and stomp their feet and bump fists, and to your surprise it'll be Mr. Unleaded who laughs hardest of all.

But as much as you'll begin to blend in off the court, on the court it will be a completely different story.

That first day you won't get into a single game.

Not *one*.

You'll follow everyone inside the dark gym, set down your stuff in the bleachers like they do, hit the court with everyone for a handful of warm-up jumpers, but when it comes time to select squads, you'll find yourself on the outside looking in.

When you try to call next, they'll ignore you.

You'll ask the overweight knee-braced dude if you can run with *his* squad. He's still three games away, but you got all day. He'll nod and say in a deep smoker voice, "You down, young buck. I got you." But an hour later, when his team is finally set to take the court, he'll drop you for a balding big man.

At first this basketball blackballing will tear you up inside. You know you can hang. Your jumper is as pure as anyone's in the gym (except maybe this guy they call Dante, who never misses). Sure, these dudes are bigger and stronger and more aggressive, but at the very least you could be a dependable distributor. You know where to put a lob on the fast break so your big man can mash it down with a guttural growl.

You plead with the guys standing on the sidelines. "You gotta let me play, man. I can ball. I swear." But these outbursts of self-promotion will fall on deaf ears. All you'll do that first day is hoist a few jumpers between games, then retreat back to the bleachers to watch.

The next day it'll be the same thing.

The day after that.

Those first two weeks you'll participate in a grand total of one run—if you can even count the end-of-the-day, three-on-three debacle you spend guarding a homeless man wearing soleless Timberlands.

One afternoon it'll hit you especially hard on the long walk back to the car.

You'll keep quiet on the drive home, then retreat to an overturned bucket in the alley behind your building, where you'll have a serious heart-to-heart with yourself. Sure, it's the best pickup you've ever seen, but they don't even let you play. They're prejudiced against Mexicans. Or soon-to-be ninth graders. Or both. Why wake up before the crack of dawn, sleep folded up in a VW Bug, just to sit in the bleachers all day?

Nah, man, this won't work.

You're a baller, not a spectator.

At least at the court down the street you can work up a sweat.

On your way into your room that night, you'll break the news to your old man. "Just so you know, Pop, I'm not driving down with you anymore. Thanks for taking me all those times."

He'll look up from his beer with a frown. "What happened?"

You're a pretty tough kid. Nothing much gets to you. But for some reason his question will put a lump in your throat. "It's just...I don't even know why, but they won't let me play."

Secretly you'll be hoping for a little piece of fatherly advice here, but you won't get it. He'll chuckle instead and turn back to his beer.

You won't set your alarm that night. You'll sink into bed, excited by the thought of sleeping in. Relieved to be downshifting back into the old routine.

But something odd will happen.

The next morning your body will instinctively wake up at four-thirty. You'll sit up, rubbing your eyes, confused. Your hands will unconsciously reach into the dirty clothes for your hoop gear, and your feet, against executive orders, will carry you out to the car a few minutes before five.

When your old man sees you standing there, he'll chuckle again.

But he won't say anything.

Notice the use of dialogue

Don't Just Sit There Like a Punk

It won't be until week four that you finally get into a meaningful game.

By this time you'll know most of the guys by nickname. And you'll know how they play. At some point your focus will have shifted from wanting to play, to breaking down their various skill sets. There's one guy in particular you'll study.

Dante.

He's six four and thin. In his early thirties maybe. He's the only guy in the gym who's never said a word to you. He walks right by like you don't even exist. But he can seriously play. Not only does he knock down almost every jumper he takes, he hardly ever grazes the rim. He has this sweet little fadeaway in the post, and whenever someone tries to challenge him on the break, they get mashed on, posterized, and guys on the sidelines fall all over each other, laughing and stomping and pointing.

After burying one particular game winner from the wing, two guys draped all over him, he'll turn to you suddenly and bark, "Hey, kid, why you still coming here?"

You pause your dribble, stunned. "Who me?"

"Nobody thinks you're good enough to play here, comprende? Why don't you go on back to the barrio, esé."

Your whole body will freeze up from the shock of his words.

Everyone in the entire gym inching closer, waiting to see what happens next.

Dante strides over and points a finger in your face. "What, are you deaf, kid? I said leave!"

No words form in your brain.

No thoughts.

Dante spins to the rest of the guys. "Someone get this scrub out my face before I do something stupid."

A couple regulars will lead you toward the bleachers, but your legs aren't quite working yet. You're confused almost to the point of paralysis. Because what did you do wrong? Why does he hate you? Your heart thump-thump-thumping inside your chest. Doubt setting in. Maybe he's right. Maybe you really *are* a scrub. Maybe you *shouldn't* be allowed to show up like this every day, uninvited.

Maybe the whole summer has been one big mistake.

You grab your stuff off the bleachers and start toward the door, but for some un-

explainable reason you stop. You turn around. You glare across the court at Dante, mumbling, "I just wanna play."

"What?" Dante shouts back. He picks up a ball and fires it at you, narrowly missing. "Speak up if you got something to say!"

"I wanna play," you repeat, louder this time.

"What?"

"I wanna play!"

A few of the guys start toward you again, wanting to get you out of the gym before you get hurt, but Dante puts a stop to that. "Get away from him! This is between me and the kid!"

The whole gym silent aside from your heartbeat.

Your short, nervous breaths measuring the time.

"Check it out," Dante suddenly announces. "The kid's got my spot this game." Then he turns back to you. "After you get smoked, you walk out them doors and never come back, you hear?"

You stand there studying him for a few extra beats, searching for his angle, trying to decide if it's some kind of trick, if you're still in danger. Before your ruling is in, though, you find yourself being shoved out onto the court.

"You got Dollar Bill," someone is telling you.

It takes a minute to realize what's happening.

They're letting you play.

And if you mess up, it's over.

As fast as your heart was beating when Dante got in your face, it slows back down once the ball is in play. Because this is the one place in the entire world where you're truly alive. Where your brain shuts off and every move is made on instinct.

It only takes two trips up and down before you shake off the cobwebs and slip into the flow. First time the ball gets swung to you out on the wing, you skip past your defender and spin into the lane for a little ten-foot bank shot off the glass.

A few guys on the sideline oohing and aahing.

A few plays later you bury an open twenty-footer, nothing but net, Dante style.

You rip Dollar Bill near half court and race down the floor for a little finger roll over the rim. And as you retreat back down for defense after that one, you can hear the gym erupting.

Now you're buried deep inside the folds of the game.

The outside world slinks off and hides, and all you know are the choreographed movements around you. The dance. The beautiful symphony of squeaking sneaks and grunts and the thud of body meeting body. Each man's heavy breath and his eyes like a portal to his mind.

You bury two more deep jumpers, followed by a game-winning scoop shot in the lane, which results in the other team's big man tripping over his own feet and falling on his face.

The guys on your squad mob you near midcourt.

“That’s right, young buck,” they say.

“That’s how you let fools know,” they say.

A few go on about how they’ve been meaning to pick you up all summer, they just never got a chance, blah, blah, blah.

But just as you’re starting to feel yourself, Dante will be back in your grill. “What, you make a couple jumpers, and now you supposed to be somebody?”

“No, I just—”

“Get off my court, kid.”

“But—”

He’ll grab you by the arm and fling you toward the bleachers, barking to everyone else, “Yo, I got my spot back! Check ball!”

You’ll consider putting up a fight here, but don’t.

Trust me.

What matters is you’ll have proven you can play. What matters is every head who saw what you just did will see you differently now. As proof, not thirty seconds later a guy who goes by the name of Slim will wander over and say, “Yo, young buck, I got next. Wanna run with me?”

“For sure.”

Rob will overhear this exchange and bark, “Yo, Slim, I thought you already had five. Who you dropping?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“You just seen this boy’s skills, right? I gotta get me a point guard.”

“But you said I was down, Slim. Don’t play your boy like that....”

In the middle of this debate, a stray jumper will roll out of bounds toward you, and Dante will give chase. He’ll grab the rock and kneel down, not five feet from you, to tie his shoe. “Hey, kid,” he’ll say in a quiet voice.

“Yeah?”

He’ll look up at you, mid-double knot. “You wanna get in games, you don’t just sit there like a punk, right? You stand up and challenge the baddest dude in the gym. Someone like me. Then you do your thing. Understand?”

His intense eyes will be like knives inside your chest. “Yes, sir.”

He’ll stand up and nod, then jog back onto the court, shouting, “Yo, check ball! Let’s go!”

You’ll think this is the beginning of some meaningful mentorship, but it won’t be. In fact, Dante won’t say another word to you the rest of the summer. Not even when you ask him a direct question. But over time you’ll begin to see the power of his silence. And surprisingly, it will remind you of your old man’s silence.

A few months into your ninth-grade season, you’ll actually spot Dante in the stands at one of your games. He’ll be alone, eating popcorn, watching. You’ll be the starting point guard on the varsity squad—which is pretty legit for a freshman. And

you'll be having your best game of the young season. You'll wave as you jog past him at halftime, but he won't wave back. He'll continue eating his popcorn. After the game you'll climb the packed bleachers looking for him, but he'll already be gone.

Your old man will be there, though.

And on the drive back to your apartment that night you'll realize something important. Your old man is always there. And he always has been. And so what if he doesn't say anything about how many points you just scored. How many assists. So what if he turns on his radio news show instead of breaking down the big win.

Maybe words aren't what's important.

44 Highlighters

Maybe words would just steal away your freedom to think for yourself.

What You Did This Summer

Your first class, on your first day of ninth grade, will be English with Mr. Howe.

Shuffle into the room with everyone else. Locate the desk with your name tag and take a seat. After Mr. Howe goes around the room, having everyone introduce themselves, he'll ask the class to pull out a sheet of paper. And he'll give you the first of the seventeen thousand writing prompts he'll assign over the course of the semester.

"This one's easy," he'll say. "All I want you to do is describe one thing you did this summer. And one thing you learned. You have fifteen minutes. Go!"

You'll moan and groan with everyone else, but once you start writing, the summer will come pouring out. You'll write about sleeping in the VW Bug and the cop knocking on the window and all the vendors you passed on the long walk and the way the old gym walls actually creaked on especially hot days and how the second half of the summer you got in all the games and the guys started calling you Mexican Buckets and fighting over who had to guard you. But the time you spent on the actual court, you'll realize, was nowhere near as important as the time you spent in the bleachers. And you'll devote all your remaining time to describing one seemingly insignificant moment.

During your last week at the gym, Slim offered to buy you a hot dog and Coke for lunch. He claimed he was tired of watching you scoop handfuls of generic granola into your mouth every day. "You a growing boy, man. You need a balanced diet. Now let's go get you a hot dog and a Coke."

"No, thanks," you told him.

He looked at you surprised. "You sure? My treat."

"Nah, I'm good," you said. "But thanks."

"All right," he said, shrugging. "I guess you must really like that granola." And then he walked away.

Truth was, you turned him down that day because you knew he didn't have any money. He'd lost his security guard job at the start of summer. His shoes were falling apart and you heard he'd been evicted from his apartment.

Saying no, you thought, was the right thing to do.

But on the car ride home that afternoon, your pop shook his head in disappointment. He turned down his news show for the first time all summer. "When a man with nothing offers to give you something," he said, "you take it." 47 Highlighters - - - - -

"You do?"

"Always."

"Why?"

He glanced at you as he merged onto the freeway. "You just do, all right?"

At the time it didn't make much sense. You saved Slim money. But as you write, you'll begin to see it differently. And you'll end the assignment by saying, "What I learned is that when a man who stays mostly quiet offers advice, you take it." 50 Highlighters -

"You just do, all right?"

"Trust me."