

Pandemic Basketball

I was 81 years old and had only two passions, one of which has seriously diminished. And now this.

Global pandemic, civil unrest, racism, police violence, muscle atrophy, social distancing. It finally got to me. I had to get out of the house. Get the kinks out. Clear the mind. Out - to an outdoor basketball court to preserve my one remaining active passion.

The Ridgecrest Elementary School only one mile away had a pandemic-abandoned outdoor court. It was 9:30 am in late May and the temperature hadn't heated up yet. Nobody would be there. It would be safe.

As I pulled into the school's driveway there were four small yellow plastic cone-shaped barriers easy to move or scoot past, especially with a Smart Car. Perfect place to shoot hoops. Adjacent to the court and behind the basket was a children's playground surrounded by a sturdy eight-foot-tall protective fence with a locked gate. The fence would serve as a backstop to prevent stray basketballs from escaping the court. A shorter, five-foot-tall fence along the downhill side of the court would do the same.

No one was there. It felt like the Rapture had just occurred and I was left behind. It was safe. Perfect.

I limped (meniscus tears in both knees) to the free throw line and began to shoot baskets. Hit two out of ten. Tried another ten, 50 percent this time. When I reached eight of ten, I moved to the three-point line. One curious thing I noticed. On a cement surface the ball bounces extraordinarily high after a missed shot.

Hit two of ten from the three-point line. Then I remembered to arch the ball more. I let fly a very high arching three-point shot that hit the side of the rim causing the ball to careen over where it struck the pavement and bounced up, up, up. I watched helplessly as the ball cleared the eight-foot fence with its locked gate.

"Holy Shit!"

I went over to the chain link fence and looked forlornly at my basketball resting fifty feet away under the children's slide. I checked the locked gate to see if it was really locked or if maybe I could squeeze past somehow. No such luck. I walked around the perimeter of the very sturdy fence. No openings.

A young man, about sixty years old, was walking his dog and saw me looking forlornly at my expensive indoor leather basketball.

"Bummer."

"Yeah."

"What are you going to do?"

"Climb the fence I guess."

"How?"

I told him that I would park my Smart Car next to the fence and climb on top of it. I bragged that the top of my car was built with plexiglass and could support two thousand pounds.

He looked at me kind of funny and walked away.

I parked my fenderless little car next to the fence but couldn't get on top of it where the plexiglass was. I walked out into the woods and found a partially decayed tree trunk that weighed about fifty pounds. I would throw it over the fence to help me climb back after I retrieved the ball. I then realized I could never throw a fifty-pound tree trunk over an eight-foot-tall fence.

Walking back, I noticed that there was a horizontal support steel bar mid-way up the fence. Gingerly stepping onto the reinforcing steel bar with the toes of my tennis shoes, I was able to reach the top of the fence where I swung one leg over. The fence began to shake and the chain link wire with its sharp edges that was folded over the top support steel made it embarrassingly uncomfortable for a delicate part of my anatomy, I sat there straddling the wobbling fence. I also realized that I had never jumped from an eight-foot elevation before even when I was a young man in my seventies. I would surely break a leg, or an ankle or sever that delicate part of my anatomy. I had to get back down. I was able to jump to the plexiglass top of the Smart Car from which I slid to ground zero.

I went back to the fence and again watched my expensive basketball. The sixty-year-old with the dog came back.

“What are you going to do, now?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I guess you can come back when the pandemic is over.”

“Yeah.” I said.

“Or I could go home and get a step ladder. I live across the street.”

“O.K.”

After he left, a kid came by. A kid in his fifties. Surveying the situation, he asked.

“What are you going to do?”

“Wait until the pandemic is over.”

Then he quickly scaled the fence, jumped down to the other side, threw me the ball, scrambled back, and went on his way.

I took my ball and went to the other basket. The one next to the five-foot fence. On my second missed shot the ball cheerfully bounced over the five-foot fence. I sprained my ankle after climbing over the five-foot fence.

I went home and watched Judge Judy re-runs from the safety of my living room.