

Sometimes

By Jim Turner

Martin Alphonzo "Al" Wood was a student athlete at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill from 1978-1981, when he was awarded a bachelor's degree. Al was an early member of the rapidly growing list of Dean Smith's minority recruits who achieved multiple honors on the court as he amazed the adoring crowds of students and alumni with his basketball skills. After graduating from UNC he continued to play the sport at the professional level for 10 years before beginning his non-playing adult life as a private citizen.

His resume indicates that he shared as much passion for his family and his community as he did for making three-pointers in a basketball game. Al traveled around the country as a motivational speaker, a trainer and team builder, an evangelist, a panel participant, a sports radio and TV spokesperson, a prison minister, and a private consultant. He also served as principal, athletic director, and head basketball coach at Cornelius School of Creative Leadership. He is currently an ordained minister with Morning Star Ministries.

That's one heck of a resume. Yet the thing I remember most clearly about Al, aside from his sweet jump shot, is the dazed, inarticulate statement made by a sad 21-year-old-kid who had just lost a basketball contest to his arch rival, Duke. Al expressed his feelings about the loss saying, "Sometimes it just bes that way."

I have a number of dear friends who cringe at the reference to a member of a collegiate sports team as a "student athlete." That is an oxymoron, they say. Most of my friends who share this point of view are, or were, educators and have endured pressures and encouragements from coaches and alumni who have requested that they offer a little extra kindness to their star athletes. After all, they argue, the student athlete needs to remain academically eligible for game participation. Their athletic abilities earn large amounts of money for the colleges and universities. These dollars can then be spent to grow the athletic kingdoms. I acknowledge and share their concerns and have sour memories of instances as a student at UNC when I felt the athletes in my classes were given an edge. I have a vivid memory of watching one of them, a star basketball recruit, with his open textbook at his feet while taking an exam. There were other classes where the jocks earned a B or higher in a really difficult course with not-so-nice professors teaching in large lecture halls. Was the grade earned? I can only speculate. Having access to a tutor and private, required study groups was helpful, but these assets were not readily available to the average student. Some argue that these perks were necessary because of all the practice time required of the athletes. Their educations are funded because of their physical abilities on the turfs, the hardwood, the pitches, the courts and tracks. Other students, such as this writer, paid for their education with a small teacher's scholarship loan and full-time jobs. I am certain I never got a little extra kindness from a professor because I had worked a six-hour shift the night before a quiz.

But I also believe the majority of students who represent their schools in an athletic endeavor are not "dumb jocks." They are bright students who are seeking to broaden their horizons, expand their knowledge and explore new interests. They don't ask for, or expect, extra kindness for their academic efforts. They study because they want to prepare to be doctors, teachers, lawyers, business leaders and research scientists. Each year hundreds of these students, who also happen to be athletes, are recognized for scholastic achievement. In May of this year at the annual Scholar-Athlete-Awards Luncheon on the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill, Athletic Director Bubba Cunningham recognized 385 individuals for having achieved the academic honor roll. This number represented a record for the second year in a row. Many in this group were cited for having completed multiple consecutive semesters earning a 4.0 GPA.

Some might say I am a hypocrite. I love to attend sporting events, especially those at my alma mater, and cheer others who perform feats that seem to be superhuman. I love to be on the campus on those crisp fall afternoons and to capture my 200th photo of the bell tower rising above Kenan Stadium. I love to

count the empty mini bottles in the men's restrooms and wonder how many of the fans are driving after the game ends. My head tells me that on the playing field these student athletes are placing their futures and their very lives in their hands as they allow their brains to slosh from one side of their craniums to the other. Never mind that, though. Go Heels! I especially relish hearing the roar of young students in the Dean Dome as the pep band strikes up the UNC fight song and the basketball players are introduced to the out-of-control crowd. A large number of us in the crowd are old folks. We're wine-and-cheese retirees who give money to the RAMS Club for the privilege of purchasing seats that don't cause nose bleeds. I love the pageantry of the contests. I love the spectacle of the venue. I love to feel the vibrations from the noise and the music. I love the smell of popcorn and giving and receiving high-fives from people I don't know, as if I were somehow involved in making the scores.

Too often I, and others who attend these events or watch from home, take it all too seriously. We focus on Al's unfortunate choice of words and miss the fact that, in the end, it was just a game. Some days you are the winners, and some days you're not. Some days your talents and efforts fall a bit short. There will be another day and another contest. My hero, Dean Smith, the coach of the UNC men's basketball team for many years, commented once on his view about wins and losses. "If you make every game a life-and-death proposition, you're going to have problems. For one thing, you'll be dead a lot."

One of my favorite, though fictional, baseball stars was "Crash" Davis from the movie "Bull Durham." I recall a scene from this classic movie where Crash, the aging catcher, is giving the rising star pitcher, Nuke, some pointers for responding to questions from the media during interviews. "You need to learn your clichés," Crash tells Nuke. "Write 'em down and learn 'em. First, we gotta play 'em one day at a time." Crash goes on to say, "I'm just happy to be here and hope I can help the ball club." And, last, "I just want to give it my best shot and, the good Lord willing, things will work out all right."

The comedy of the press interactions with both the players and the coaches brings me great joy. To coaches, the game of the day or evening is not just a sports contest. It is an epic battle of opposing giants and the interviewee is holding himself or herself personally responsible for the outcome. Others are more realistic. Another favorite memory is from Jim Valvano, the beloved NC State basketball coach who died from cancer at a young age. He told of his conversation with a referee: "I asked a ref if he could give me a technical foul for thinking bad things about him. He said, 'Of course not.' I said, 'Well, I think you stink.' And he gave me a technical. You can't trust 'em." I really liked this guy except those times when his giant team defeated my giant team. Then he could have called a technical on me.

Puzzle Solutions

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