

# **Superstar Coach**

## CHAPTER I

# *The Players*

All the other kids had gone home already. It was just Jimmy and the basket. He could imagine all the moves the pros make and then try to copy them. He could practice his left-handed dribble, his jump shots, and even try to dunk. He was all by himself and Jimmy liked it this way best. Sometimes Jimmy would stay two or three hours after everyone else had left. He loved the game of basketball and knew that through hard work and dedicated practice, he could one day make the NBA. He had convinced himself of that.

It was not just the game of basketball that kept Jimmy there after everyone else had left. It was also the fact that he had no one to go home to. His mother worked the late shift at the hospital and his father had died when he was only a little boy. Except for caddying part-time at the country club golf course, all Jimmy did was play basketball and go to school. He had to go to school to play on the high school team - so he went, but he didn't really like it.

Jimmy finished this night with jumping drills. He would jump and hang onto the rim in a variety of ways. One leg, one hand. One leg, two hands. Two legs, one hand and so forth and so on. Also, every night he would try to dunk the ball, although he had never actually succeeded. "One day,"

he thought to himself, "I'm going to slam just like Sleepy Phillips." After these final drills, Jimmy started his twenty minute walk through the dark and lonely streets of St. Louis, back to his small house on South 22nd Street.

Jimmy never really liked just hanging out like some of the guys he would see while walking home. "Too boring," he thought. "Thank God for basketball," Jimmy had said to himself more than a few times.

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As Harold Phillips was hanging up his telephone, he thought about how crazy his life had become. Harold had just finished speaking with Gus Williams, his hometown buddy. Gus had called to set up a golf game for Saturday morning and had made a point of reminding Harold that it had been ten months since they had last played together. Harold was remembering the days when he and Gus used to play every weekend. "Shoot," he thought to himself, "I need to make more time for the things I really enjoy." He quickly put this thought out of his mind though, just as he had thousands of times before.

Harold Phillips' life had become extremely busy the last few years. Some people wanted him for one thing, others for something else. It had gotten to the point where he had no time for his family or himself, but these last few years were only the crest of a wave that had been building for quite some time. Ever since he had walked onto the University of St. Louis' basketball floor to play his first college game, Harold Phillips had ceased living a normal life. Those who saw that first game knew right away that the tall and slender,

yet powerful young man possessed athletic ability of the greatest degree, although no one could have predicted the stature he had attained by the end of his playing days.

Sports writers dubbed him “the greatest player of all time.” Corporations lined up to have him sponsor their products. Harold Phillips became an international superstar, achieving all the riches and fame that went with this status.

Harold never used to dream about fame and fortune while growing up, but he did spend many hours dreaming about playing basketball. As a boy he had idolized Julius Erving, just like everybody else. He spent one whole summer working in the meat packing plant just to earn enough money to buy Converse sneakers, just like Dr. J’s. Harold would try to emulate Dr. J’s fluid leaping ability which always resulted in pretty drives down the lane and ended with the patented “tomahawk jam,” although, until he was older, Harold just laid the ball in.

“Sleepy,” that’s what all the guys back in the neighborhood called Harold, was different from all the other kids that idolized Julius Erving. Sleepy had set his mind on becoming just as good as him, but a funny thing happened. He became better. Sleepy’s career read like a childhood storybook. St. Louis High School City Championship, Missouri High School State Championship, two NCAA championships, seven NBA championships and three Olympic gold medals. Sleepy had retired two years ago, leaving behind only memories for school-yard kids to dream about.

The dreams were easy, but reality was much tougher to control. Sleepy’s life was one most people envied, but they didn’t know the whole story. The cameras, autograph seekers,

commercials and all the other trappings of fame had put a drain on his time and energy. His life had become a constant publicity tour. Everywhere he went he was mobbed by fans. Even though all the people were kind and generous with their admiration, Sleepy yearned for privacy. He wished for the kind of normal life he had lived as a young boy in St. Louis. It had gotten so bad lately that he couldn't walk outside without bodyguards.

It was tough on Sleepy, but it was even tougher on his family. He knew that his wife and two daughters would be better off without all the attention. It seemed he had lost control of his life, but Harold "Sleepy" Phillips had made up his mind - starting Saturday morning on the golf course he was going to regain control.

## CHAPTER II

*The Meeting*

Golf was the only sport that never came easily to Sleepy. It frustrated him greatly that he could not dictate where the small ball would go. He was a natural at all other sports, but at golf, no way. His best score ever was 79, but he usually scored in the high 80's. Sleepy figured this was not nearly good enough for the man many considered the greatest athlete in America.

Today, however, he was playing just for fun. Sleepy had been looking forward to this Saturday morning ever since his old buddy, Gus, had called at the beginning of the week. Sleepy could not believe that it had been ten months since he and Gus had last played.

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Every Saturday morning Jimmy made it a point to be the first caddy to the golf course. This way he got the first group of golfers in the morning, enabling him to be on the basketball court by noon. Tony Mendez, his boss, assigned caddies to the golfers. He liked Jimmy's attitude, so he always obliged Jimmy and assigned him to the first group.

"Jimmy," Tony said with a big smile when he saw his young employee, "big surprise for you today, buddy."

“What’s the surprise?” Jimmy asked as he parked his bike in the caddie’s garage.

“You’ll see. Now go ahead with the first group. They’re waiting at the first tee.”

Tony was still smiling from ear to ear as Jimmy walked towards the first tee. As Jimmy approached the golfers, he stopped dead in his tracks. Jimmy stared at the two men in front of him.

“You’re Sleepy Phillips,” he said to Sleepy.

“Yes I am, kid. Who are you?”

Jimmy didn’t answer, he just stared. Sleepy Phillips was Jimmy’s idol. He used to watch him play on television all the time. Even though Sleepy had retired two years ago, Jimmy still considered him the greatest.

“Jimmy, Jimmy,” Tony yelled. “Wake up and carry the man’s bag. He’s waiting.” Both Sleepy and Gus Williams began to laugh out loud.

“Are you okay?” Sleepy asked as he patted Jimmy on the shoulder.

“Yes sir. I’m sorry. I’m just a little surprised.”

“No problem,” Sleepy replied gently.

“Tony, if you don’t mind, I’ll carry both bags,” Jimmy said questioningly as he quickly regained his senses, along with the strength in his legs.

“I sort of figured you would say that. Go ahead, they’re all yours,” Tony answered.

“This here is my good friend, Gus Williams,” Sleepy said to Jimmy as he patted Gus on the back.

“How are you doing, sir? My name is Jimmy Feen.”

“Nice to meet you, Jimmy,” Gus greeted him.

“Okay, let’s play some golf,” Sleepy said.

Sleepy was about to tee off on the first hole when he told Jimmy to get him the 2-iron instead of the driver. Sleepy couldn’t hit his driver on the first hole and he knew it. Jimmy retrieved the new club and ran it over to Sleepy.

“Here’s your two iron, sir.”

Sleepy took a long fluid swing, accelerating through the ball and drove it on a straight path down the middle of the fairway. It went like this for Sleepy all day. Everything he hit was perfect. Jimmy ran after every divot, had every ball cleaned and every club ready. He was doing a great job and Sleepy was noticing.

“Hey, kid, you’re doing a fine job. You might be the reason I’m shooting so well. Keep working this hard and you’re going to make a lot of money someday.”

“Hopefully, I can play basketball just like you,” Jimmy replied. By the time Sleepy and Gus reached the tee box for the 17<sup>th</sup> hole, they were tired. Even though Sleepy was a well-conditioned athlete, it had been a while since he had last played golf. The 17<sup>th</sup> hole was a 159-yard par three. Sleepy had a 7-iron in his hands and was getting ready to swing.

Jimmy had noticed Sleepy getting more and more tired throughout the morning, and without thinking, he blurted out, “Mr. Phillips, I think you might want to use a six iron.”

Gus laughed and joked with Sleepy. “The kid is telling you how to play now. I’ll bet he has a better swing than you do.” Gus was kidding, but he also wanted to beat Sleepy at golf this morning and the two good friends were not above needling each other.



Sleepy laughed out loud. “Yeah, yeah, next the kid will be telling me how to shoot foul shots.” Jimmy chuckled inside. He remembered that Sleepy’s only weakness on the basketball court was foul shooting.

Sleepy addressed the ball, the 7-iron still in his hands. After a few shakes and wiggles, he put a smooth, effortless swing into the ball. However, just as Jimmy had noticed, Sleepy didn’t follow through completely, a sure giveaway of fatigue. The ball fell into a sand trap about ten yards short of the green. After Gus had hit onto the green, Sleepy walked to his ball. Jimmy followed closely behind.

“You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?” Sleepy said jokingly to Jimmy as they walked to the ball.

“No, sir,” Jimmy replied seriously. “I just noticed that you were getting a little tired at the end of your swing.”

“Do you have any advice on how to get out of this sand trap?” Sleepy asked skeptically.

“Well, I have seen a few people putt it out. It’s one of the toughest traps on the course.” Sleepy scoffed a bit. He had never seen anyone use a putter out of any sand trap before. Sleepy told Jimmy to hand him the sand wedge. After a few practice swings Sleepy hit the ball, but it fell well short of the hole. He muttered something under his breath.

Sleepy then told Jimmy to hand him the putter and another ball. Sleepy dropped the ball into the trap and hit it with the putter. Gus watched in amusement as the ball rolled over the top of the sand trap, onto the green and finally came to rest six inches from the hole. This was how Jimmy had seen it done before.

Gus burst into laughter. “This kid should be playing and you should be carrying his clubs,” he chided his buddy.

After finishing the 17th hole, the two old friends were tied. They decided to bet on the last hole. Loser would buy the sodas in the clubhouse. As Gus was teeing his ball up, Jimmy had an idea. He knew he needed to act fast.

“Excuse me, do you mind if I get into this bet?” Jimmy asked, breaking Gus’ concentration.

Both men were surprised by this. Sleepy was a little angry and after a few moments he replied, “Jimmy, you can bet, but if you lose you have to give all the money you make today to another caddy.” Sleepy figured he might as well teach this kid a lesson.

Jimmy figured his tip would be around seventy-five dollars, taking into account that Sleepy was a rich man and would probably tip well.

“I’ll take the bet,” Jimmy answered, deciding the risk was well worth the possible pay off, “but if I beat you, you have to come say hello to my basketball team before our game Monday night.” Gus was laughing so hard he nearly knocked over his golf bag.

“You’re something else, kid,” Sleepy laughed. “Let’s do it.” Gus teed off first and drove his ball about 275 yards down the right-hand side of the fairway.

“You’re next,” Sleepy said to Jimmy.

Jimmy had been loosening up off to the side. He motioned to Sleepy that he was going to use Sleepy’s driver. Sleepy nodded his approval. After taking the club, Jimmy realized it was a little too long for him, so he made the proper adjustments.

“Keep your head down,” he told himself. Jimmy took two practice swings and then swung at the ball, hitting it solidly. The ball took off on a low, straight trajectory. It finally settled 250 yards down the center of the fairway. Both men were impressed.

“Good shot,” they said in unison.

Sleepy teed off last and hit the ball about five yards further than Jimmy. As they approached their golf balls, Sleepy used a technique he had used on opponents many times before. He tried to unnerve Jimmy.

“Now don’t get nervous,” Sleepy prodded him. “This is where the real players prove themselves.”

Jimmy just smiled. He knew his own abilities and that this shot was just a smooth 5-iron. Again, Jimmy patiently took his two practice swings and then hit the ball. It traveled beautifully towards the hole, rising high above the fairway and then dropping lazily to the green. It spun slightly backwards and stopped ten feet away from the hole.

Sleepy swung next. He also hit a good shot, but the ball came to rest about fifteen feet away from the hole. Gus also hit to the green leaving himself a thirty-foot putt. Because he was furthest away, Gus putted first. He made a nice putt leaving only a tap-in for his par four.

Sleepy putted next and when he missed the first putt and made the second, he also tallied a four. Sleepy continued his psych job as he walked off the green.

“Well, kid, if you don’t make this, we tie and nobody wins,” he said. Jimmy didn’t even hear Sleepy’s attempt to bait him. He knew that if he made this putt, everybody on his basketball team would faint when they saw Sleepy Phillips

walk into the locker room. As Jimmy approached his ball to putt, he whispered so that Gus and Sleepy couldn't hear him. "God, I promise I'll stop swearing if I can just make this one putt," Jimmy prayed.

By this time, Gus was rooting for Jimmy. He just laughed as Sleepy tried to psych Jimmy out. Jimmy took his two practice swings and then confidently swung his putter at the ball. The ball rolled straight at the hole and then at the last minute broke suddenly to the left. The ball hit the edge of the hole, spun completely around and then finally dropped in for a birdie three. Jimmy had won the bet. He pumped his fist with excitement.

"Good shot, kid," Sleepy said with a sarcastic tone, suddenly realizing that he was going to have to live up to his side of the bet.

Jimmy and Sleepy talked in the clubhouse afterward. Jimmy gave Sleepy the name of his high school and the time the game started.

"You have to be there an hour early or our coach won't let you in," Jimmy warned him.

Sleepy smiled and assured Jimmy he would be there. He then took a hundred dollar bill out of his wallet and handed it to Jimmy. "Start a bank account kid, you're going to need it."

"I already have one," Jimmy said with a confident smile.

"I'm not surprised," Sleepy muttered. Sleepy then made his way to his car. He signed a few autographs along the way and then quickly ducked into the driver's seat of his Mercedes. Gus was sitting in the passenger's seat, still laughing as the two old friends drove away.

## CHAPTER III

*A Call To Coaching*

Memories of his old high school days came rushing back to Sleepy as he drove into the parking lot of George Washington Carver High School. Carver High was located in downtown St. Louis.

Sleepy noticed the atmosphere of high school basketball had not changed much since he had played. There were a few kids running around outside of the gym. Cheerleaders were practicing their jumps in the courtyard out front and an elderly woman was setting up a table at which to collect the two dollar admission. She never even noticed as Sleepy laid his money on the table and walked past her into the gym.

Sleepy figured Jimmy played on the freshman team since there were hardly any people around. A few school kids walked into the gym behind Sleepy. When they saw who was standing in front of them, they pointed and whispered.

“Yes, you’re right. I am Sleepy Phillips,” Sleepy wanted to scream at them, but he didn’t. “Hopefully, I can get out of here before too many people show up,” Sleepy thought to himself.

Sleepy saw the door marked “Home Team” in the corner of the gym. As he walked inside, Sleepy prepared himself for autographs and awestruck kids, but instead he walked

into silence. This was odd. Most locker rooms he had been in were filled with good natured jokes and music. There was none of this here, just silence. As Sleepy ventured inside the locker room, he saw nine young men huddled around a chalkboard with a look of confusion settling over the whole group. Sleepy saw Jimmy standing off to the side.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Sleepy said in a loud voice. Jimmy quickly turned around and, as he saw his hero standing in the doorway, he broke into a big smile. He walked over to Sleepy. At the same time all the other kids turned and looked. Their eyes opened wide and they stared.

“I knew you’d show up,” a relieved Jimmy said. None of his teammates had believed his golfing story. “This here is Sleepy Phillips!” he proclaimed proudly to everyone. At once, all the kids came and tried to shake his hand. Sleepy obliged and shook them all. After a few minutes of this unabashed admiration, the youngsters settled down.

“Well, what time does the game start?” Sleepy asked. As if on cue, all the boys became sullen and quiet again. Many of them walked back to their seats and sat down. Sleepy was confused. “What’s going on?” he asked Jimmy.

“Our coach is in the hospital. They think he had a heart attack. Now we don’t have a coach,” Jimmy answered.

“What about the assistant coaches?” Sleepy asked.

“Don’t have any,” a small kid in the back replied.

“We were just trying to decide who would start,” Jimmy stated. “This is our first game, but we figured we could coach ourselves until the varsity coach gets here.”

Sleepy felt horrible for these young men. Their first game as high school freshman and they had no coach. He

looked around the room and saw these young, bewildered faces. Before he had entirely thought the situation through, Sleepy let his emotions get the best of him.

“I have a better idea,” Sleepy said. “I’ll coach you until the varsity coach arrives.”

The boys voiced their approval unanimously. Instinctively, Sleepy took charge.

“First of all, everyone out on the floor. Split into two lines under your own basket and do some lay-ups. No outside shots, only lay-ups!” Sleepy instructed them. The young men let out a cheer of enthusiasm and ran onto the floor. Jimmy was the last one out.

“Thanks a lot Mr. Phillips. I know this wasn’t part of the bet,” Jimmy said as he ran out the door.

“Don’t worry about it, kid. Focus on the game,” Sleepy said assuredly as he patted Jimmy on the back. Jimmy ran out with the rest of the team, leaving Sleepy alone in an old, dirty, high school locker room. “What have I gotten myself into?” he laughed to himself. Sleepy breathed a long sigh, took a drink from the rusty water fountain and then headed out to yet another basketball floor.

There was no burst of energy as he opened the door. The bleachers had, at most, fifty people in them. There was no band and the cheerleaders weren’t even paying attention. Sleepy walked onto the floor and began to watch his new team do their drills. The visitor’s locker room door opened and the opposing team came out while Sleepy was in the middle of the court. When they saw him standing there, they all stopped and stared. The opposing coach made his way out the door, pushing and shoving his players ahead.

“Move it. Move it. What’s the hold up?” he yelled at them, but when he saw Sleepy he also stopped and stared. After about fifteen seconds, the coach came to Sleepy and asked, “Aren’t you Sleepy Phillips?”

“Yes I am,” Sleepy replied. “The regular coach is in the hospital and I’m coaching until the varsity coach arrives. I’ll explain the whole story later.” Sleepy shook the opposing coach’s hand and walked away.

The opposing team went into their lay-up drill, although most of the players still had their eyes on Sleepy. Sleepy walked under the Eagles’ basket and continued watching his team. He felt as if everyone in the gym was looking at him, and he was right.

The Eagles broke into four separate lines at the corners of the half court and started doing a passing drill. They drilled the ball back and forth to each other and then switched lines. After about four minutes, they broke into three even lines and performed the weave drill with the last guy laying the ball in the basket.

Sleepy’s eyes fixed on Jimmy. It was the fluidness of Jimmy’s motion that caught Sleepy’s attention. Jimmy dribbled twice, spun into the lane and then switched the ball from his right to his left hand while doing a reverse lay-up on the other side of the rim. The shot was pretty, but even more impressive was the ease with which it was performed.

Sleepy sized up his team and realized they had a good mix of height and speed. But as Sleepy knew, with no teamwork, there is no team. The horn sounded and players from both teams headed for their respective benches.



Sleepy could hear the whispers. Everyone in the gym was wondering if it was really Harold “Sleepy” Phillips coaching Carver High’s ninth grade squad and if it was, why was he doing it? The kids sat on the bench, their heads turned to Sleepy, looking to him for leadership.

“Who is the captain of this team?” Sleepy asked.

“I am,” Jimmy answered. Sleepy was not surprised.

“Who are the starters?” he asked Jimmy.

“Well, this is the first game, but I think coach was planning on starting me, Kenny, Too Tall, Bull and Jonesy.”

Sleepy realized he only knew the name of one of his players and that was Jimmy. “Okay, you boys get on the floor. Everybody else sit down,” Sleepy ordered. Sleepy huddled the starting five around him, close to the center of the floor. “Fellas, play tough defense. Defense wins games.” Sleepy laughed to himself. Those were the same words his old college coach used to say.

As Sleepy walked back to the bench, he could see that the stands were now filling up and everyone was looking straight at him. Some pointed while others boldly called out to him. Sleepy smiled, waved and then quickly sat down.

As the players on both teams were getting ready for the opening tip, Sleepy sized up his starting five. Kenny looked to be no taller than 5’ 4”, but his hair made him look five inches taller. “Everybody needs an identity,” Sleepy reasoned.

Too Tall was perfectly described by his nickname. He looked to be about 6’ 7”. His glasses were about 3/4” thick and his feet looked to be three sizes too big for his body.

Sleepy figured Bull should have been a wrestler. He was built like a brick wall. About 5’ 9” tall and 180 pounds, Bull

looked older than fifteen. Jonesy was thin, but wiry. A good mix for a small forward.

Finally, Sleepy focused on Jimmy. Jimmy stood about six feet tall with long arms and long legs. However, what struck Sleepy most about Jimmy was something he had noticed at the golf course, his inner confidence. It seemed that most of the other boys were focusing on the opposing players, while Jimmy was rubbing his hands together, deep in thought about what he had to do.

“Hello, Mr. Phillips,” the referee said, breaking Sleepy’s train of thought. “The other coach told us you would explain at halftime why you’re here. That’s good enough for us. Let’s play ball.”

As Too Tall lined up for the jump ball, Sleepy looked around at the small gym and thought about the situation he had gotten himself into. “Might as well make the most of it,” he reasoned.

The opposing center out jumped Too Tall for the ball and tapped it to his forward. The forward turned and rifled a pass to a guard, who was cutting in from the wing. The guard converted the pass into an easy lay-up. A perfect tip play. Bull retrieved the ball and passed it into Kenny. Sleepy nearly broke out laughing as he watched Kenny dribble the ball. He pounded the ball on the floor as if he was trying to knock the air out of it. The defensive man was not guarding him close, but Kenny still switched the ball from hand to hand. It looked like he was trying to impersonate Curley Neal, the old Harlem Globetrotter dribbling wizard.

The opposing team was in a “2-3 zone defense.” Kenny yelled out the “number two” play. He passed the ball to Jimmy

who was cutting away from the basket on the left side of the floor. Jimmy dribbled to the corner, faked a pass back to Kenny and then bounced a pass into Too Tall, who had set up on the low block. Too Tall dribbled the ball into the lane, where it was quickly stolen by the opposing team's center. The opposing team quickly pushed the ball to the other end of the court.

The attacking guards were quick to spot some indecision on the part of the Eagles' defense and ran a series of baseline picks for their main scorer. While Bull and Jonesy argued who should guard him, the opposing player executed a backdoor cut and scored an easy lay-up.

The entire first quarter proceeded the same way. The opposing team capitalized on Eagles' turnovers and then ran well-designed picks and screens on the offensive end. Sleepy's squad looked confused. The offense looked like a school yard pick-up game with each player receiving a pass and then looking to score all by himself. No one was passing to the open man and there was no picking of the defensive players.

Defensively, their level of effort was excellent, but again, organization was lacking. If two boys were playing man-to-man defense the other three were playing zone. The Eagles were showing little basketball savvy and this was making for a lopsided game.

One thing that did stand out to Sleepy was the determination these youngsters had. Even though they were being beaten badly, they continued to play tough, clawing defense and hustled after every loose ball. The fundamentals were lacking, but the Eagles had talent and good work habits. "These kids just need a little direction," Sleepy thought. At the end of the first quarter, the Eagles trailed 27-11.

Jimmy had scored six points, all on lay-ups. Jonesy scored the other five with outside shots, one being a three-pointer. As the team came to the bench before the second quarter, they looked depressed. Sleepy substituted the four remaining bench players for Too Tall, Jonesy, Kenny and Bull. This left Jimmy to play with the four substitutes.

As the second quarter wore on, the opposing team continued its heady offensive play and used solid defense to continue its domination of the Eagles. The Eagles scored only six more points to fall behind by the score of 47-17.

As the boys headed to the locker room for halftime, Sleepy noticed that the bleachers were beginning to fill up with spectators in anticipation of the varsity game. Shouts of "Sleepy, what are you doing here?" filled the gym. The fans could not believe that the superstar they saw on television was coaching their ninth grade team. As Sleepy walked into the locker room, a man came up and introduced himself as Principal Ferguson.

"Mr. Phillips, I'm very thankful that you helped the kids and the school by coaching our team. I got a call from the hospital and the regular coach is doing fine, although he won't be able to return this season." The entire team let out a sigh of relief upon hearing that their regular coach would be okay. "The varsity coach just arrived and I explained the situation to him." The principal, who was a large man with a large belly, started to laugh. "I should say, I tried to explain the situation, but I really don't even know why you're here."

Before Sleepy could explain, Kenny stood up and told Principal Ferguson the whole story.

“Am I to understand that you’re here because you lost a golf bet to one of our players?” Principal Ferguson asked Sleepy with a laugh.

“Yep,” Sleepy replied with a straight face.

“Okay,” Ferguson said with an amused smile. “Now, as I was saying, we are grateful to you for filling in. The varsity coach is going to coach the second half. Sorry you had to stay longer than you planned, but thanks again.”

“I can’t leave now. We have to come back and win this game. I’d like to stay, if that’s all right with you,” Sleepy said with a determined look.

Principal Ferguson shook Sleepy’s hand and said, “No problem.”

Sleepy looked around at each one of the players. “First of all, thank God that your coach is going to be fine. However, if he knew how you boys were playing, he might not feel so good after all,” he joked. With that, the team began to loosen up.

Sleepy continued, “I’ve decided to stay for the rest of the game and be your coach, but we’ve got to get something straight right now. You have to play as a team, not as a bunch of individuals. This team right here in this locker room has talent. You’re more talented than the team you’re playing, but you’re not playing together. Your hustle is good. All of you play hard, and that’s admirable, but I learned a long time ago that individuals lose, teams win.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Sleepy said as he walked toward the chalkboard. “We’re going to play half-court, man-to-man press defense. This takes a huge amount of determination and communication. If your man beats you to the hoop, somebody has to help by rotating over.”

“On offense we’re going to try two different sets. Against a zone defense, I want you to set up in a triangle offense.” Sleepy pointed at Bull and said, “You will play the post position.” Then he pointed at Jonesy, “You’ll play the top corner and Jimmy will run the baseline.”

“The important thing to remember is to move without the ball. Also, when you drive to the hoop, look for another person to pass to for an easier shot,” Sleepy said, continuing his halftime speech.

“Against the man-to-man defense, I want you,” he pointed at Kenny as he said this, “to handle the ball and to look continuously for screens and picks. The guy picking your man should then roll to the basket. Put your hands up and be ready for the ball,” Sleepy told everyone.

Sleepy was taking charge and it seemed to be working. The players were listening intently and Sleepy could see they were starting to get pumped up. He slowly repeated everything he had just said, but this time he used the chalkboard as a visual reinforcement. After he finished, Sleepy instructed everybody to huddle in a close circle. Sleepy knew that the only way they could win this game was to have their emotions boiling. He began his pep talk.

“Well, what do you want to do? You have two choices. You can play the same as before and hope you win or you can go out there and set your minds on winning. What do you want to do?” The entire team screamed that they wanted to win.

“The only way you’re going to win this game is to play tough defense, look for teammates who have better shots and communicate with each other.” His voice started to grow

louder. “I think you can do it, but you have to commit. Commit to yourselves and to each other that you’re part of a team and that your team wants to win. Are you ready to commit yourselves?” Again, the boys screamed their answer, only this time it was louder. At that moment, a referee came into the locker room to order the Eagles back out to the floor.

“You heard the man. Get out there!” Sleepy roared. The players ran out of the locker room like a team ahead by twenty points rather than one down by thirty. They were jumping up and down and slamming the walls as they left the locker room.

When Sleepy stepped out of the locker room and back into the gymnasium, the crowd erupted in cheers. The stands were now filled and everybody was staring at him. Sleepy hurried to the bench, waved, and then sat down.

The fans behind Sleepy couldn’t believe the best basketball player of all time was sitting right in front of them. They began tapping him on the shoulder to ask for autographs. Many simply asked for an explanation why he was there. Finally, Principal Ferguson came with two security guards and had them sit down in the stands directly behind Sleepy.

“I don’t think anybody is going to bother you now,” Ferguson said to Sleepy.

“Thanks,” Sleepy replied. The horn sounded and the two teams headed back to their benches for last-minute instructions.

“Okay guys,” Sleepy started, “same starting five. Remember, hustle, hustle, hustle! Find the open man and communicate. If you commit to playing as a team, you can come back and win this game. You have the talent.”

The Eagles retained possession from the first half. Bull passed into Kenny who dribbled the ball up the court. Recognizing a zone defense as he reached half court, Kenny called for the triangle offensive which Sleepy had showed them at halftime. Sleepy laughed out loud as he saw his team trying to run an offense that professional teams had difficulty executing.

Kenny passed the ball into Too Tall, who had lined up in the low post. Too Tall passed back to Jimmy, who was positioned in the corner. Jimmy quickly swung the ball around by passing to Bull, who was standing at the top of the key. Jimmy curled around Too Tall, putting his hand up as he broke free from his defensive opponent. Bull saw the opening and rifled a pass to Jimmy underneath the basket. Jimmy jumped, caught the ball in midair, and gracefully laid it into the basket with his left hand. A perfectly executed play which had Sleepy standing and cheering.

Just as Sleepy had instructed at halftime, the Eagles started their defense at half court, trapping and hustling all over the floor. The other team was caught off guard by the tough play and began to get a little wild with their passes. Jimmy, sensing that his man was about to receive a pass, jumped in front of him and stole the ball. He raced the other way for an easy two points.

Sleepy pointed at Junior Hernandez to enter the game in place of Too Tall. As soon as Junior checked in, he stole the ball and hit Bull with a perfect pass under the basket, which Bull easily converted into two points. The Eagles had listened to their substitute coach and were playing inspired, team basketball. They kept up this style of play the entire third



quarter and when the period had ended, they found themselves down by only fourteen points, 55-41.

To the fans in the stands, it was an unbelievable sight. World-famous athlete Sleepy Phillips was sweating through a thousand dollar suit, exhorting their freshman team to “Play hard and play as a team!”

At the end of the third quarter, the boys came to the bench. “Great quarter,” Sleepy congratulated them. “The other team is getting tired and I can definitely feel the momentum switching. I know you can come back and win this game.” To keep the adrenaline pumping, Sleepy had the boys huddle in close to him and he said with a hushed voice, “Boys, if you really want to win this game, you have to put everything else out of your minds. Think basketball only. Lose yourself in the game. Dive for loose balls, hustle on defense,” and then he repeated himself, “lose yourself in the game. Lose yourself in the game.” As play began for the fourth quarter, the Eagles were a group of young men thinking about only one thing, winning this basketball game. Sleepy had inspired them.

The other coach had also made a few adjustments. Sensing the momentum switch, he instructed his team to stall in order to run time off the clock. Sleepy recognized the play and quickly countered this offensive maneuver by having Kenny and Jonesy deny their men the ball, thus forcing the man with the ball to pass to a forward or center. This full-court pressure resulted in a few steals, but Sleepy knew that time was running out on his team, so he signaled for a timeout.

“We have to start fouling,” Sleepy began. “Try to foul the center, but foul whoever you can, because time is precious. Hopefully, they’ll miss their foul shots.” This plan worked

well as the Eagles either stole the ball or collected the rebounds of missed foul shots for the next three minutes. On offense, Jimmy just flat out took over the game. Because the other team was playing zone defense, Jimmy hung to the outside and hit two 3-pointers. They quickly switched to man-to-man defense in order to guard Jimmy more closely, but Jimmy easily drove by the defenders for easy lay-ups or passes to open teammates. Jimmy was displaying a natural athletic ability for the game that had Sleepy shaking his head in amazement.

The fans watching the game were going crazy. For some reason unknown to them, Sleepy Phillips was coaching their ninth grade team to an amazing comeback. Sleepy wasn't being subdued either. He was walking up and down the sideline, hands waving, encouraging his team to play harder. He too had lost himself in the game.

The Eagles were playing fanatic defense and as the last minute of the game began to tick off the clock, Junior stole the ball from his man and passed to Jimmy, who was breaking for the other basket. In perfect stride, Jimmy caught the ball and then took two long steps before jumping towards the basket. He took off on a long, slow climb to the basket and to the amazement of everybody watching the game, he kept rising until his head was almost even with the rim. Jimmy laid the ball softly into the basket. The Eagles were now down by only one point. The opposing team continued to stall time off the clock. Thirty seconds, twenty-five, twenty, the clock ticked down.

"Foul, foul," Sleepy yelled from the sideline.

Jimmy realized the clock was running down, so he let his man dribble past him. With the quickness that all schoolyard

players have witnessed before, Jimmy then whipped his arm around the back of his man, knocking the ball forward. Kenny happened to be standing in just the right spot and caught the loose ball. Jimmy broke to the half-court line and put his hands up. Kenny saw him the whole way and zipped him a perfect pass.

Just as Jimmy was turning towards the basket, he stole a quick glance at the clock. Five seconds, four seconds it ticked down. Jimmy started dribbling for the basket, but something inside told him he didn't have enough time for a lay-up. Instead, he pulled up for a jump shot just inside the three-point line and as he let the ball go, the buzzer sounded. The ball spun lazily towards the hoop with a high arc. As Jimmy told his friends later, he heard the whole gym go silent. Finally, the ball dropped into the net.

The stands exploded in excitement. The Eagles ran around the court looking for one another to hug, as if they had just won the NCAA Championship game. Fans were exchanging high fives, talking about the best comeback they had ever seen. Sleepy Phillips was left standing silent, by himself. For the first time all night, the eyes were not on him. He looked around the small gym and smiled as he saw the excitement around him.

Sleepy made his way past the cheering fans to the locker room. He waved to the crowd of people, then ducked inside the locker room door. Once inside, he saw nine very happy young men.

"Great game, fellas!" Sleepy said loudly, his emotions still high. "You have a lot of talent here, but you have even more desire and toughness. I'm very impressed by the way

you guys came back. You have a lot to be proud of. I had a great time tonight and I want to thank you all. Now hit the showers. You deserve it.”

“Excuse me, Sleepy,” Jimmy interrupted. “I would, on behalf of all the guys, like to thank you for coaching us. I know you didn’t have to stay, but we appreciate it.” The entire team thanked Sleepy. Sleepy was overwhelmed with emotions for these young men.

“It was my pleasure,” he said before turning to leave. When he opened the gym door there was a crowd of people waiting for him. Sleepy told them politely that he was tired and just wanted to go home. The security guards cleared a path for him through the adoring fans. As he walked through the parking lot and got into his car, he turned to look back. People were still watching him. “What a crazy night,” Sleepy thought as he started his car and headed home.