

The Moment The World Stopped

By Greg Hopkins

My sophomore year of high school I had a lot to prove. The beginning of preseason basketball rankings came out, I was ranked 28th in my class and my team was ranked 20th. I told myself I wasn't going to be done there and was striving to be better. I remember going through the first days of tryouts for the team and I wasn't playing my best. At that time, I had it on my mind to prove everyone wrong and be the best. That led me to not performing the best. When tryouts were complete, we had individual meetings with the head coach so he could place you on a team. My hands were sweating, I was shaking, I just wanted to hear good news. Most of the other schools had their roster already and a lot of my friends made varsity. I sat down across from the coach as my hands were still pouring as if I just played a game. "I think it's best you start on JV this year" truthfully that's the only thing I heard from that conversation. He must have noticed my shock and discomfort from the cold blank stare I gave him and my unresponsiveness to his comments. All I asked was if there was going to be a chance to be moved up and he said of course. Leaving that meeting I knew I had to face the reality of my situation as everyone asked me what team I was on, and I saw the reactions of shock, laughter and doubt. That day I promised myself I would come back better, and I was fueled by a lot of anger and frustration.

When the season started it was hard for me to grasp the fact I wasn't on varsity and honestly it hurt me. I didn't want to talk about basketball, I didn't want to be seen at the games, and I especially hated the same old questions on why I'm not on varsity. All that to say this was a great motivator for me, I was working out really hard on my own and the season started, are first 4 games in I went on a tear and played really well it was honestly an amazing feeling and it was like I started to forgive myself and release that self-doubt and the anger and frustration I had on myself. Right before the 5th game of the year our coach called me in and asked if I could help varsity out as they were preparing to play the next team. I went to that practice and looked at everyone like they took my spot and played amazing. After the practice the head coaches brought me in to meet and he asked me to move up to varsity. I was so happy and excited and more prepared. I remember going back and looking at the rankings for players in the state and not seeing my name and I wanted to prove everyone wrong.

When I started practicing and being on the team full time, I learned a ton. All the guys on the team were seniors and have been playing with each other since the 6th grade. This was a huge wake up for me, these guys were really good and made the game look so easy. Our point guard Drake ran the show. He had the ball on a string and always knew where guys were going to be on the floor. our shooter John who wore a man bun and purple shoes and low socks to everything basketball, honestly, he never cared for basketball and would goof off all the time, I genuinely don't think I've ever seen him miss twice. Then we had a clean up man who fixed all mistakes on the court and could guard Connor really well. And lastly our big man Austin he probably spoke 10 words the entire year, but his presence was always felt.

That year was crazy. We worked hard every day and they pushed me to be better every day. Everyday though I would come in practice wanting to be better than them and take one of their spots, that's just the competitor in me. It took me a while to actually build chemistry with the guys because of this. But they all accepted me and pushed me to be better, they would pick

me up whenever I was down, and they let me know they were there for me and had my back. I would play in games but honestly it was hard to get one of those guys to sub. They were that good. Most importantly we kept winning, We were 30-0. We also were the only public school that was ranked nationally, we were 7th. All that was left was a state championship. As the season progressed, the anticipation for the state championship grew stronger. The pressure was immense, but it only fueled our determination. Every practice session became more intense, and every game was a step closer to our ultimate goal. The bond within the team grew stronger as we shared the highs and lows of the season. We celebrated our victories together and learned from our mistakes as a unit. The sense of camaraderie was palpable, and it was clear that we were more than just a team; we were a family.

The day of the state championship finally arrived, and the atmosphere was electric. The entire school rallied behind us, and the support from our community was overwhelming. That whole morning, I could feel the weight of the moment. This was what we had worked so hard for, and now it was time to prove ourselves. Moments before getting on the bus we see everyone in the halls wishing us luck, we see students with school apparel on as they are ready to cheer for us. Then we hear the buzzer sound. That's the moment the world stopped, in school getting ready to leave for our state championship game. The loudspeaker blasted and it was almost like the entire school came to a halt. I heard that school was closing down and any and all activities in the state were shutdown. I looked around at my teammates in confusion as I started to see the tears, hugs, frowns and shock from everyone. After an impressive 30-0 record and a strong bond with the team I've never felt a loss like this before. As we stood there, the reality of the situation began to sink in. The hallway, once filled with the buzz of anticipation, now echoed with the sounds of disappointment. My heart ached not just for myself, but for my senior teammates who had put their hearts and souls into this season. I began to cry myself not for the fact the season is over but more of the fact I didn't truly appreciate the time I had with these guys. From my view I always looked at them like they were in my way or where I wanted to be, and I was caught up in chasing that and trying to get there. I never sat back and appreciated the time I had with these guys, and I won't be able to anymore as these guys are seniors and everything is shutting down.

They had become more than just teammates, they were my brothers, my family, and we had shared so many unforgettable moments together. I remember the long bus rides where we laughed and joked, the intense practices where we pushed each other to our limits, and the games where we fought side by side, never giving up. We had dreamed of this moment, of standing on that state championship stage, holding the trophy high above our heads. And now, that dream was slipping away, leaving behind a hole that seemed impossible to fill. As I hugged my closest teammate John, I felt the weight of our shared disappointment. John seemed to never care about basketball, but he truly cared about his teammates. He became my big brother on the team, he's the one that got me out of my shell and made me actually engage and connect with the guys. There was going to be no more looking over during a drill and seeing John just laying down or taking a nap or whatever random activity he chose to do that day I was going to miss that. Thinking about my future got me so caught up I didn't live in my present. When I drove home, everything felt unreal. It was like I was waiting to be woken up from a dream. I got home and went straight to my bed remembering all the times I had with those guys. The clock hit 7 and that's the time we were supposed to be playing. Instead of us being on tv right now the news channel was on and I was watching the world go to shambles.

I took a break from basketball entirely; I lost my motivation. I would call and talk to my teammates or play video games for hours, anything to pass the time by really. It was a struggle. I

used basketball to get through a lot of my problems, but now it was like even that was a sensitive topic. The coach called us for a team meeting on zoom. It was good to see everyone's face, and all be together like the good old times again. He let us know we will be in the gym at 2 pm next week. It all felt too familiar and almost scared me like he was going to make us practice or something. He let us know he had a surprise for us and informed us to bring our families as well. It had been months since we had all been together, and today was the day we would finally reunite to celebrate our season. The pandemic had kept us apart, but it didn't change the bond we shared or the accomplishments we had achieved together. As I walked into the gym, I was hit with a wave of nostalgia. The familiar squeak on the polished wood floor, the echo of laughter, and the sight of the championship banner, still rolled up, waiting to be unveiled. It brought back memories of the countless hours we had spent practicing, the intense games, it felt good to be back. My teammates started to come in, each one greeted with enthusiastic hugs. It was surreal seeing everyone again after so long. We had all changed in some ways, but the connection was still there, as strong as ever. We shared stories of how we had coped during the pandemic, the challenges we faced, and the new hobbies we had picked up. It was comforting to know that, despite the distance and the time apart, we were still a team.

Our families were there too, filling the bleachers with their supportive presence. They had been our biggest fans, cheering us on from the sidelines, and it felt right that they were here to share this moment with us. The gym was decorated with balloons and banners, a festive atmosphere that contrasted sharply with the isolation we had all experienced over the past couple of months. Coach called us over, and we gathered in a circle, just like old times. He gave a heartfelt speech, reminiscing about our journey and the obstacles we had overcome. He spoke of the dedication, the hard work, and the unbreakable spirit that had defined our season. We listened intently, hanging on to every word, feelings of pride and unity. Then came the moment we had all been waiting for. With a dramatic drum beat from everyone, the banner was let down, revealing the words "Perfect Season" in bold letters. The gym erupted in cheers and applause almost like we just won a game. We stood there, arms around each other, soaking in the moment of our achievement. It was a moment of pure joy, a reward to our perseverance and teamwork. After the ceremony, we spent the rest of the day celebrating. There were games and activities, a photo booth where we took countless pictures, and a buffet filled with our favorite foods. We laughed, reminisced, and made new memories. The sense of normalcy, of being together again despite having a mask on.

As the day drew to a close, we gathered for one last group photo in front of the banner. We stood tall, proud of what we had accomplished and grateful for the journey we had shared. The pandemic had tested us in ways we could never have imagined, but it had also made us stronger, more resilient. That day was more than just a celebration of our perfect season; it was a celebration of our friendship, our determination, and our ability to overcome adversity. It gave me a chance to really sit back and be appreciative of the guys and the situations we have been through. As I left the gym, I felt a renewed sense of hope and optimism. The road ahead was still uncertain, but the banner hanging in the gym was a symbol of what we did together and that could never be taken away. It was a reminder that, even in the darkest of times, we could achieve greatness together.

And so, we parted ways, each of us carrying a piece of that perfect season. I also felt a sense of determination. This wasn't the end of our journey; it was just a detour. I promised myself that I would carry the culture of this team forward, that I would strive to reach the heights we had aimed for, not just for myself, but for every senior who wouldn't get another chance. Our

bond, our memories, and our dreams would live on through our team and every player who wore our school's jersey. And one day, when we will finally reach that state championship, it will be a victory for all of us. I learned a lot from this team. Not taking basketball and the team for granted is something that has truly transformed my perspective. Every practice, every game, and every moment spent with my teammates is an opportunity to grow, learn, and enjoy the sport I love. When I first started playing, it was easy to get caught up in the pressure and the desire to win, but I've come to realize that the journey is just as important as the destination.

Living in the moment and appreciating each experience has helped me build stronger connections with my teammates and coaches. It's about cherishing the camaraderie, the shared struggles, and the victories, no matter how small. Each game is a chance to showcase our hard work and dedication, but it's also a time to have fun and create memories that will last. Enjoying things as they come means celebrating the little wins, whether it's a perfect pass, a well-executed play, or simply the joy of playing the game. By focusing on the present, I've learned to appreciate the process and not just the outcome. This mindset has not only made me a better player but also a more grateful and fulfilled person.