NEWS DESK

ON THE BASKETBALL COURT WITH ARNE DUNCAN

By Carlo Rotella

January 25, 2010

For President Obama's athletic in-crowd, pickup basketball is the new golf. Arne Duncan, whom I profiled in this week's *New Yorker* (subscribers only), played basketball on the playgrounds of the South Side of Chicago and for his high school team, then at Harvard and on professional teams in Australia—all before he served as C.E.O. of the Chicago public schools and then became Secretary of Education.

Despite the rustiness of my game, which wasn't much to begin with, your intrepid reporter seized the opportunity to get on the court with his subject when I followed Duncan on an official visit to our mutual hometown. (I was in the same class year as Duncan, 1982, at the University of Chicago Lab School.) He squeezed in an hour of pickup basketball at a downtown athletic club between a speech at a school and a visit to the Chicago *Tribune*'s editorial board.

This was a weekday lunchtime game in which Duncan had often played before he moved to Washington. The pace was brisk—an employee of the club ran a clock

to ensure that games did not drag on too long—and the regulars knew each other's habits. The players, ranging in age from thirtyish to fiftyish, included John Rogers, the well-connected financier who graduated from the Lab school a few years ahead of Duncan and has been one of his most important political allies, and James Fleming, who was a playground star on the South Side before middle age and hard knocks slowed him down.

Duncan's team didn't look like much: a crabby beanpole, a runt who could shoot, a thick aggressive guy, and a bespectacled stranger (me). But these unimposing parts coalesced around Duncan into a quietly effective whole. Wearing shorts and a synthetic black long-sleeve T-shirt, he played with relaxed ferocity, combining opportunistic defense with slashing moves to the basket, shrewd passes, and feathery hesitation jumpers. He attended to the finer points of the game with a contagious virtue that had his teammates racing up and down the floor and passing up shots to swing the ball to the open man. We broke the other team and ran them off the floor.

Winners play again. Late in the second game, Duncan threaded the ball to me through a tangle of bodies, then darted between defenders to the basket, his gait becoming ducklike when he forced an unnatural burst of speed. He took my return pass in stride and gently laid it in, completing a pretty little throat-cutting

give-and-go. I felt good about it until the end of the third game, when with a few seconds left on the clock and our team ahead by a basket I tried a similar exchange with Duncan and got too cute with my pass, allowing the other team to steal it and sink the winning three.

I could have just held the ball until the clock expired. I felt as if I'd personally let my teammates down and should make it up to them by doing a better job next time and every time after that. Then I snapped out of it. What kind of poltroon runs out the clock in a pickup game?

The prevailing sentiment in Obama's ballplaying inner circle is that on-court behavior reveals character. But, like the line attributed to the Duke of Wellington about the battle of Waterloo having been won on the playing fields of Eton, this notion doesn't hold up. Generous souls can become monstrous ball hogs on the court, and terrible jerks will set picks, make the extra pass, and otherwise devote themselves to the greater good of the team.

It is more true, however, that the necessary negotiations and improvisations of pickup ball—and especially playground ball—do teach lessons in practical politics. In my article, Duncan describes the period in his teens when he roved the South Side in search of the best competition: "A bunch of places where I played were extraordinarily dangerous. I couldn't fight. There were times when I was really scared, but that's where the best basketball was." So, he said, "I learned to read people's character. I learned to trust certain people completely." In part of our conversation that didn't make it into the story, he went on, "There were people who I literally entrusted with my life, people who would say, 'It's okay to go there, I'll make sure you're all right,' and there were others I had to be very, very careful of, people who wanted to hurt me. I developed a sense, to survive."

Earnest passion and skill weren't always enough to get Duncan onto the court. Getting next in a high-level game on a strange court on the South Side when you're a slow, no-jumping, pigeon-toed white guy—now there's a test of nascent

political chops, especially the ability to cultivate allies. “I never got next myself,” he said. “Never. Somebody always set me up. Some were kids from the neighborhood who made me a little brother and some of them were gang leaders I didn’t know that well. I remember there was a guy named Cabbage. I didn’t even know his real name, just Cabbage.”

Once in the game, Duncan had to carve out a supporting role for himself by passing to teammates, moving without the ball on offense, and playing diligent defense, but he also had to take responsibility for his share of the scoring. “There’d be thirty guys waiting for next game; you need to win,” said Duncan. If his team lost, he probably wouldn’t get on the court again for hours, if at all. “When I was little, I would play whole games and not shoot. But I noticed other players would not want to shoot at 22 or 23”—games were usually played to 24—“so I would take those shots, and it would become my role. You haven’t shot all game, so you’re open” because your defender has pegged you as a non-threat and judges it safe to freelance elsewhere, “and so you take the shot. Then you start doing it more. I learned to thrive on pressure.”

Obviously, the pressure goes up with the stakes, which for the Secretary of Education are as high they get: billions of dollars, millions of citizens’ futures and livelihoods. A game-on-the-line sports metaphor may suggest itself here, but resist it. In trying to deliver on a policy agenda that will reveal its full consequences over years, even decades, Duncan is doing the opposite of putting up a shot that will either go in or rim out. If you want to pursue a more apt basketball analogy, follow the lead of one of Duncan’s heroes: Bill Bradley, the former Princeton star, New York Knick, and senator from New Jersey.

Among the more substantive lessons taught by basketball, especially pickup ball, is the importance of striking a balance between fitting in and asserting oneself. When I talked to Bradley about Duncan, he said, “The interest groups are deeply entrenched, and they’re used to getting their way, but where he will really excel is the ability to mediate and negotiate with all the competing interests. It might cut

against the teachers at one point, the textbook manufacturers at another, or governors, but he can show them it's an emergency and persuade them to coöperate." In his first year as Secretary, Duncan has used the leverage afforded by economic-stimulus money, the states' urgent need, and his relationship to the President to recruit the support of both conservative Republican legislators and heavily Democratic teachers' unions for an ambitious agenda that includes controversial priorities—such as merit pay for teachers, or using charters to turn around chronically underperforming schools. Success may depend in part on cultivating allies, but, says Bradley, it also depends on "having a clear idea of where he wants to go that others have to react to."

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