

The Buzzer Beater

Lane Walker

LOCAL LEGENDS

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The Buzzer Beater by Lane Walker

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*This book is dedicated to
all the basketball coaches
who have given their time
and shared their love of the game
with their players.*

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The Buzzer Beater

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Prologue

The noise in the gym echoed as loud cheers and catchy basketball chants filled the air.

“O-A-K, O-A-K, O-A-K...Ain’t nobody beating Oak today!” roared the cheerleaders.

I hate that cheer almost as much as I hate Oak Tech Middle School.

Everything had come down to winning this basketball game.

As the closing seconds ticked off the clock in the fourth quarter, I had the ball in my hand. I was exactly where I was supposed to be; it was up to me to win the game. I hesitated before using a strong right-hand dribble toward the three-point line.

I wanted to win this game, the last one of the season, more than any other game I have ever played. This game was for a huge trophy and the Detroit Middle School City Championship.

The score was tied at 44 with only 6 seconds remaining on the clock.

We are so close to making history; Frontier Middle School hadn't beaten Oak Tech in the last three years!

Everything went silent in the team huddle. I could see Coach's lips moving, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. This was the loudest I had ever heard any gym.

I knew one thing; the ball was going to be in my hands. I was going to be the one to win the game.

The official came to our huddle and yelled, "Second horn, let's go."

I looked around and noticed the frenzied crowd standing to their feet. No one was sitting in the gym.

Our point guard Zeke took the ball out of bounds and passed it into our big man Alvin.

Even though we were only in the eighth grade,

Alvin already stood 6'2" and was a dominant post player.

The only one between me and basketball history was Oak Tech's star player, Cedric Ortiz.

This wasn't the first time Cedric stood in my way.

I am determined to win this showdown.

I started to dribble to my right and quickly crossed the ball over to my left hand. Cedric wasn't fooled with the crossover and stuck with me. His hands were all over me, anticipating my next move. He was going to guard the basket at all costs. In no way was he going to let me into the lane for the game-winning shot.

Good thing I have other plans.

I knew he would force me to dribble with my left hand—my weak hand. I was fast with my right but much slower with my left. That left hand was one of my only weaknesses on the court.

What he didn't know is that I had spent all summer in the gym working on strengthening my left hand.

I was ready when he crouched down in a defensive position and angled me toward the left side of the lane.

He wasn't ready for what happened next.

I saw fear in his eyes when I switched to my left with confidence.

I took two dribbles and pulled up for a short jump shot. Cedric stuck tight and rose with me as I used my legs to push off the hardwood court to get high on my jump shot.

His long arms and stingy defense was all that stood in my way of sending the Oak Tech Pirates home with their first loss in three years.

This was it! *This is my moment.*

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My name is T.D. Lake. With a name like T.D., most people think that I would be a football player, but I'm not.

I love basketball.

I am obsessed with everything about the game of basketball. Ever since I was old enough to hold a basketball, I have had one in my hands. My parents have pictures of me in my crib holding a small orange basketball. I used to take that ball with me everywhere I went.

Our love for basketball is a family thing. My parents love the game and are former players. My dad was a high school basketball star in a small Indiana town. He played basketball at a Division III

college in Michigan where he met my mom. She was also there on a basketball scholarship.

After graduation, they moved back to my mom's hometown of Detroit, Michigan. Dad accepted a job as a P.E. teacher, and Mom taught high school math.

For those who don't know, Detroit is a city full of basketball legends and lore. In fact, the city of Detroit put basketball on the map. Decades of ballers have flowed through the city, making Detroit the epicenter of basketball.

I took great pride in growing up and playing basketball in Detroit. Ball players from Detroit were highly skilled and tough, both mentally and physically. A long list of A-list ballers from Detroit play professional all around the world.

Detroit was basketball.

I was going to be the next big name baller out of Detroit!

We had a family of five. My twin sisters, Tamika and Trinity, were nine years old and in the third grade. They were spunky and full of life. They were

already playing basketball, and I could see that they were going to be something special.

They were feisty and aggressive—just the kind of players Detroit produces.

I was an eighth grader and about to start my final year of basketball at Frontier Middle School before moving on to one of Detroit's famous public schools. The Detroit Public School or PSL basketball league is one of the best conferences in the nation.

Teams were loaded with Division 1, 2 and 3 talents. If you played in the PSL, you had to be ready to play every night. There were no easy games or bad teams.

This was Detroit, where grinding and hard work was part of everyday life.

My dad can still hoop for an old guy. He used to play in different men's leagues around the city. I remember watching him and dreaming about the day I would have the ball in my hand and hearing the crowd's chanting my name.

To me, basketball was so much more than just a

game. I couldn't get enough of it. I felt that everything was right in the world when I had a basketball in my hand.

At my school, basketball was a big deal. My two best friends, Zeke Mata and Alvin Ways, were hoop junkies as well. We had played ball together since we were seven years old.

Zeke was a short, quick point guard. He loves to push the ball up the floor and is great at playing his position. His other love is video games.

When he isn't playing basketball, he is glued to his video gaming system.

Alvin is built more like a football player. He is a great athlete and plays middle linebacker on the football team. His muscle comes in handy on the court. His 6'2" height also helps our team. He is our best post player and blocks a lot of shots.

We have a good team. Last year in seventh grade, our record was 10-2.

We beat everyone easily—by more than 15 points per game. Our only two losses came at the hand of Oak Tech by a combined three points.

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The Oak Tech Pirates were our crosstown rivals and a thorn in Frontier's side.

Oak Tech was only about 15 minutes from Frontier. Many of the players knew each other and even hung out in the same spots around the city. Running into Oak Tech players at the mall or the local arcade wasn't uncommon. However, players from Frontier and Oak Tech seldom got along.

There was bad blood between both schools. We weren't just rivals; we were *enemies*. We hadn't beat their team for the past three years.

We knew it, but worse...they knew it.

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Oak Tech was also one of the top junior high schools in the state, both academically and athletically. They were undefeated every year and always seemed to send players to the biggest and best high schools in Michigan.

People around town would frequently say, “If anyone ever wants to be an elite basketball player, he should transfer to Oak Tech.”

They were one of the few schools that had money to have honors band programs, afterschool STEM classes and college prep classes. Their athletics program boasted the newest and best equipment and uniforms.

Many of my friends were jealous, but I wasn't.

I was from Detroit; I wanted to earn everything I got.

Many students would leave their elementary school and transfer to Oak Tech for middle school. That school and its extracurricular activities was like a magnet, pulling all the good players off their blocks to one school.

I hated the idea.

How can someone just up and leave friends of a lifetime?

When I was in the fifth grade, countless people would ask me if I planned on transferring to Oak Tech to play basketball. *I have more pride in myself and my friends.*

No way was I going to leave my boys to join the cocky Oak Tech Pirates. Unfortunately, not everyone felt that way.

Bobby Simmons or “B,” as we called him, had been one of my best friends since the second grade. Our crew—Zeke, Alvin, Bobby and I—were nearly inseparable. But all that would change one June day.

Our seventh grade year had just finished, and the four of us were all excited about a summer of video games, chilling together and most importantly, basketball. We had hatched a perfect plan on how we were going to play so much basketball it would be easy to beat Oak Tech.

Our plan was to meet every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at Chandler Park, which was located right in the middle of our neighborhood. We had about a 15- to 20-minute walk to meet there. Chandler Park was well-known, and the courts were constantly packed with ball players aggressively competing in games. If a kid wanted to play ball in Detroit, he would show up during the summer at Chandler Park.

I will never forget the day my heart was broken.

It was the second week of summer vacation and a Tuesday morning.

I woke up and got out of bed. I walked over to my desk to grab my cell phone to text the guys about hooping.

Within minutes, Zeke and Alvin replied, con-

firming they would meet me at Chandler Park, but I heard nothing from Bobby.

I sent him a follow-up text, “Yo, B, hooping in an hour?”

Nothing—no reply or ringtone sounded.

I took a shower and grabbed some cereal. After about an hour, I decided to call Bobby.

The phone rang three times without anyone’s answering, so I left him a short and sweet voicemail. “Bobby, meet us down at Chandler today around 1:00 p.m. We need to shake up those Tech boys.”

My next phone call was to Alvin.

“I see you are ready to ball. I can’t get ahold of B?” I said.

There was a long pause.

“Have you talked to Zeke yet?” Alvin asked nervously.

“Not yet, he is next on my list. I tried calling Bobby, but he didn’t answer; I just got his voicemail.”

“You better call Zeke,” Alvin said in a hushed, sheepish tone.

I said goodbye and hung up the phone. *Something's not right.* I could tell that Alvin knew something he wasn't telling me.

I thumbed through my contact list on my cell phone and found Zeke.

"Hey, man. What up? You ready to play some ball?" I asked.

"I am, but..." hesitated Zeke.

I knew why Alvin had told me to call Zeke. He wanted to tell me something I needed to know. Alvin was shy and reserved, but Zeke, on the other hand, was the louder one of our group.

"But what?"

"Have you talked to Bobby?" Zeke asked.

"No, I called him, but he didn't answer. He hasn't called me back either," I said.

There was another long pause from a different friend.

"I don't know how to tell you this, but Bobby isn't a Soldier anymore. He transferred to Oak Tech; he will be playing in a Pirate uniform next year," Zeke said.

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“What?” I asked, my voice trembling and instantly full of anger.

Bobby had made no phone call, given no warning... *One of my best friends has transferred to our rival school? The four of us have talked about beating Tech since we were in the first grade!*

I had even more reason to despise Oak Tech... and now...Bobby.

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“Meet me at Chandler in 15 minutes and call Alvin. He needs to hear this too!” I said as I slammed down the phone.

I didn’t even give Zeke a chance to respond I hung up so fast. We didn’t have time to waste; summer had already started, and we were already behind schedule.

Now that Bobby was a traitor, we didn’t have the luxury of wasting time. This summer we needed to make sure we worked hard enough to beat the Pirates—even more now that Bobby would be wearing the *wrong* uniform.

Bobby could play ball too. He was one of the best three-point shooters I had ever seen. Last year

in the Oak Tech game, he had hit five 3-pointers in one game.

I had counted on him as a main reason we would beat Oak Tech this year. Now not only was he not on our team; he was on the team of our archrivals. Beating Oak Tech with Bobby on our team would have been hard. With him playing on the opposing side, winning now seemed nearly impossible.

“Mom, I’m heading out to the park. I will be home in a couple of hours,” I said.

“Honey, it’s almost lunchtime. Can’t basketball wait until after you eat?” Mom asked.

“Sorry, Mom, but practice can’t,” I said as I exited out the front door.

I jogged to the garage and jumped on my bike. I often rode my bike and could get to the park in about ten minutes if I was pedaling really hard. The park was a little over two miles away from my house. I figured riding my bike would also be a good way to blow off some steam from the upsetting news I had received.

Plenty of thoughts were racing through my

mind. *Out of all the places on this earth, why would B go to Oak Tech?*

Bobby was always such an honest, humble friend. He was nothing like the kind of guys who played for Oak Tech. I remember how upset he was last year when one of Oak Tech players, Tony Campbell, taunted us after they had won the game. The Pirates danced all over our home court, high-fiving each other—something you just don't do.

They had beaten us for the second time, and this game had been the last one for the year. Before the game, we were all excited and had planned on ending the Pirates' perfect season. But it wasn't meant to happen as Oak Tech cruised to a 58-36 victory. Losing like that on our home floor in front of a big crowd was so embarrassing.

I remember the look on Bobby's face while they were dancing; his face showed pure rage. We lined up to shake the Pirates' hands after the game. Their point guard, Tony, was standing at the end of their line. The customary comment to say to an opposing player after the game is always "Good game"

or at least nod at the player as a sign of mutual respect.

We had showed our respect to the ten teams we had beaten that year. But as the Pirates walked through the line, Tony whispered something to Bobby.

I couldn't tell what he had said, but I knew his comment made Bobby even angrier! Bobby started to push Tony, but his rival was already trotting into the visitors' locker room. Bobby was so mad he went over to our bench and covered his head with a towel. I thought he was crying, but he claimed he wasn't.

This interaction was a picture of life and the game of basketball in the city of Detroit. Losing and learning, finding a way to win was part of living in the city.

"Hey, Bobby," I called. "What did Campbell say to you?"

Bobby looked up at me with a serious look and said, "He told me to go wash his car!"

Bobby's dad is a great guy and a really hard

worker. He owns Simmon's Quick Wash on the corner of Maple and Ross Street.

Tony's dad owns a huge car dealership on the west side of town. He sends a large number of cars to Bobby's dad to wash.

The Oak Tech boys were different; I didn't consider them true Detroiters. Most of them had scads of money, and that resource definitely wasn't the case around the city of Detroit.

Tony Campbell's family had plenty of cash, and everyone knew it. He always wore the best clothes and the newest pair of Air Jordan sneakers. Bobby's family struggled financially to make ends meet while trying to keep the car wash open, so things were different for him.

"Man, I can't stand those rich boys from Oak Tech," I said.

Bobby just looked up from his seat on the bench with an expression of confidence. I knew what it meant. I knew that day, there was no way we were losing to Oak Tech next year. Bobby, Zeke, Alvin and I had made a pact that this summer would

be filled with hard work as a majority of our time would be spent on the courts at Chandler Park.

We were going to be prepared; we had Oak Tech in our crosshairs.

They may have won the games in seventh grade, but we were going to win the war and claim the eighth grade championship next year.

Six months later, our plan was starting to unravel. Not only did we lose one of our best players, he had joined our archrivals—the ones we were working so hard to beat.

He was going to play with that arrogant Tony and superstar Cedric Ortiz.

His transfer just doesn't make any sense. How can Bobby leave us for Oak Tech?

“Bobby’s gone. He’s a Pirate now. Nothing I can do about that, but I can do something about beating Oak Tech next year,” I told myself as I neared Chandler Park.

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I beat both Zeke and Alvin to the park, which didn't surprise me. I was pedaling so fast I thought my tires were going to fall off. I also knew I would beat them because Alvin was always slow and late. I bet Zeke and his mom went to pick up Alvin but had to wait for him to get all his gear ready to play ball. Alvin just moved at a slower pace; he didn't do anything very fast.

I parked my bike near the same crooked oak tree adjacent to the basketball courts. I went directly to the courts. I spent so much time at the park, nearly everyone knew me. I usually tried to play pickup games with the high schoolers when they would let me.

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Basketball in Detroit is earned; no one will give you anything. Chandler Park was the perfect example of that certainty. Years passed before the older kids would let me play in games. No one felt sorry for the little kid standing on the side of the court. The other players don't just let an outsider join in a game. Those who were lucky enough to play earned the right to play.

If you couldn't hoop, then you would definitely have to sit and watch all night. Some kids—even older kids—could barely find their way into a game. The only time the spectators were invited to play was when the teams were short, and everyone else had gone home for the night. Then maybe... just maybe...they would let you play one game.

I have never been one to watch anything in life.

When I was younger, I spent countless hours at the park, begging them to let me play. Eventually, one night last summer, one of the older guys finally let me play.

That one opportunity was all it took. I hit two shots and showed them all I had game.

From then on, I always got picked up by somebody. Now that Alvin and Zeke rolled with me, they usually got to play with the big boys as well.

I was starting to gain some serious notoriety on the courts. My name was talked about as one of the best middle school basketball players in all of Detroit.

But I didn't start that way.

The courts were pretty much empty except for a couple of kids shooting around. To me, an empty basketball court meant opportunity—a chance to become better.

It was Tuesday, and most of the guys met up to play on Wednesday and Thursday nights. The high schoolers usually played at a high school gym on Monday and Tuesday nights with their high school teams in a summer league.

I was glad no one else was there. I wasn't interested in playing any games today. I wanted to put in my time and do drills and skill work.

I walked over to the free throw line and started practicing without the guys. I always tried to shoot

100 free throws a day—no matter where I was or what I was doing.

My dad had always stressed the importance of consistent free throw shooting. He would say, “True champions know the value of getting to and making free throws.”

After I had shot about 50 free throws, I saw Zeke’s Mom pull in with her red van. Out jumped Zeke, and Alvin stumbled out with a bag full of gear and supplies.

Typical Alvin.

I could tell by the way they approached me that they were confused.

“T.D., what’s going on? What is so important it can’t wait until tomorrow?” Zeke asked. As typical, Zeke did most of the talking while Alvin listened.

“We need to change our whole game plan. We have to come up a new plan to beat Oak Tech. I will not lose to them this year!” I declared sternly.

“Is this about Oak Tech? Or is this about Bobby?” Zeke asked.

“From now on, I don’t want you to mention his

name. He's just another Pirate—no one to me. He is not a friend of mine," I said.

"Don't you think that's kind of harsh? I mean we have been friends since first grade. Does his transfer really matter that much? I know he is playing at Oak Tech, but he's still Bobby," Alvin said.

Both Zeke and I looked at him.

"Don't mention his name," I hissed with a salty stare.

At least one area the three of us could agree on was a strong desire to beat Oak Tech. We were sick of losing to the Oak Tech Pirates every year.

This is going to be the year that the Frontier Soldiers beat the Oak Tech Pirates. I will make Bobby regret ever leaving Frontier...and leaving the three of us.