

FRED BOWEN SERIES
SPORTS STORY

OFF THE RIM

FRED BOWEN





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Summary: Unhappy with his inability to score for his middle school basketball team, Chris takes lessons from his friend Greta's mother, who played in high school, and develops a good sense of teamwork. Includes a brief history of basketball.

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ONE

Three...two...one..." Chris Skallerup could hear the countdown as he went up for his jump shot.

The instant the ball left his hand, Chris knew the shot was off. The basketball smacked against the back of the rim and spun away.

"Halftime!" laughed Greta "Gretzky" Pemberton, the star of the middle school girls' team, as she stood in the bright sun on the basketball court at Green Street Park.

"You're as bad as me," said Jason Chun, Chris's teammate on the middle school boys' team.

"That shot was a brick," Greta teased. "You've got no jumper."

“I know. That’s why I’m at the end of the bench with Jason,” Chris said.

“Let me try,” Greta said, grabbing the ball and dribbling it between her legs.

“Okay,” Chris said. “Jason and I will count you down.”

As the boys started the count, Greta whipped a dribble behind her back, her blond ponytail flying.

“Three...two...”

At the count of “one,” she flipped up a soft jumper. The ball sailed in a perfect arc to the basket. *Swish*. Nothing but net.

“Game.” Greta beamed. “You want to try, Jason? Chris and I can count you down.”

Jason shook his head. “Nah, let’s play something else.”

“How about me against you two guys,” Greta suggested as she sank another shot.

“Those aren’t fair teams,” Chris said.

“For who?” Greta asked.

“How about some kind of shooting game, like Horse or something?” Jason asked.

Chris shook his head as another one of his shots bounced off the rim. “I stink at shooting. Mingo can shoot better than me,” Chris

said, looking over at Greta's black Labrador lying on the grass happily gnawing a tattered tennis ball.

"I don't know," said Jason. "It looks like Mingo would rather eat a ball than shoot it."

"Come on, guys, let's play a game," insisted Greta.

"All right, all right," said Chris. "But not Horse. Jason and I can't do all of those fancy shots you do."

"Okay. How about Around the World?" Greta suggested.

"I don't know. I haven't played that game in a long time," Jason said.

"It's easy," Greta said. "It'll all come back to you. You just take a shot from six different places on the court, starting underneath the basket. Then you go to the left corner, left wing, foul line, right wing, and finally to the right corner."

"How far out?" Chris asked.

"Fifteen to eighteen feet," Greta said. "If you make your shot, you go on to the next shot. If you miss, you can either stay at your spot or take a second shot. If you hit the second shot, you move on."

“And what if you miss your second shot? You’ve gotta go all the way back to the beginning?” Chris asked.

“Yeah,” said Jason, remembering. “And the first player who goes all the way around and back again gets ‘around the world’ and wins, right?”

“Right.” Greta passed Jason the ball. “Why don’t you start?”

Jason hit his first three shots, but his shot from the foul line fell short.

“You gonna chance it?” Greta asked, passing him the ball.

Jason eyed the rim and then passed the ball to Chris. “Nah,” he decided. “I’ll stick.”

Chris spun his first shot in from under the basket and headed for the left corner. Standing about fifteen feet from the basket, Chris bounced the ball once, studied the rim, and took a shot. The ball glanced off the back rim and landed in Greta’s hands.

“Are you gonna chance it or are you gonna stick?” she asked, getting ready to toss him the ball.

Chris held out his hands. “I’ll chance it,” he said. Then he took a deep breath, dipped,

and pushed the ball up and away. It was headed straight for the basket but banged off the front rim and onto the blacktop. “Man, I’m the worst,” he said, stomping his foot on the court.

“Shake it off,” said Greta as she reached out and caught the ball on the bounce. “My turn.” Her first shot from underneath the basket fell through the net. Then she grabbed the ball, dribbled to the left corner, whirled around, and sent a perfect jump shot spinning to the hoop. *Swish.*

Greta was unstoppable. She moved quickly around the court, sinking shot after shot.

“Hey, Gretzky,” Chris said. “How about a rule that your shots don’t count if they touch the rim?”

Greta laughed. “And yours count only if they do?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” said Chris, smiling. “At least I’d have a chance of winning.”

Greta took another shot and it fell easily through the net. Chris’s smile melted. *Doesn’t she even know how to miss?* he wondered.

At last, Greta stood deep in the left corner

of the court and lofted her final shot at the basket. She stared wide-eyed as the ball nudged the front rim, bounced off the back, and rattled out.

Jason got the rebound, dribbled to the foul line, and got ready to shoot. "It's about time you gave us a chance," he said.

"Give me the ball," Greta demanded, still standing in the corner.

"You're not going to chance it, are you?" Chris asked in disbelief. "You've only got one shot left."

"Give me the ball," Greta said to him impatiently.

"Okay, but if you miss, you've got to go all the way back to the beginning," Chris warned as Jason tossed her the ball.

"I'm not gonna miss," she said as she flicked a quick jumper to the hoop. The shot sailed sure and straight. *Swish.*

"Game!" said Greta.

"Oh no," said Chris. "I never even got past the first shot."

"Want to play again?" Greta asked with a superior smile.

“Nah, I’d better get going,” said Chris, picking his jacket up off the ground. “I’m sick of getting beat, anyway.”

“Come on, you can’t win if you don’t play,” Greta reminded Chris. As always, Greta was looking for another game.

“Wrong!” Chris said with a laugh. “I can’t win if I *do* play. This way I’m just cutting my losses.”

“Hey, you can’t go yet—you missed your last shot,” said Greta. “Remember, the last shot you take has got to go in.” And she tossed the ball to Chris.

Chris dropped his jacket and took the pass from Greta.

“Don’t try any long shots. We don’t have all night,” Jason teased.

Chris touched an easy layup off the backboard and through the net. “See you later,” he called as he ran up the hill toward home.

SIX-ON-SIX

THE REAL STORY

Basketball was created as a game for rowdy young men. It was invented in 1891 by James Naismith, who had just taken over an unruly physical education class at a YMCA school in Springfield, Massachusetts. It was December, and Naismith knew the young men would not be satisfied with merely playing leapfrog in the gym through the long winter months. He needed to come up with a new game.

Within days Naismith came up with the perfect indoor game for his wild bunch, and the only equipment he used was a ball and a peach basket nailed to the balcony of the gym. He called the game *basket ball* (two words), and it was very similar to the

version of the game played today (although dribbling was not allowed).

In 1895, Clara Baer, a college physical education teacher in New Orleans, adapted the rules of *basket ball* to make them more “suitable” for women. She gave her game a frilly name—*basquette*—and said it was just right for a “a delicate girl, unaccustomed to exercise.” Baer thought the men’s game was too rough, and she didn’t want the women running full court because she thought it would put too much strain on their hearts! She therefore divided the court into sections to limit players’ movement around the court. A player had to stay in her designated playing area on the court and was not allowed to play into another section. She had to pass the ball to move it out of her playing area.

Baer’s version of basketball developed into the six-on-six game that was played by girls and women for more than 75 years. It was named “six-on-six” because there were six players on each team. Three girls on each team played only offense while the other three played only defense (like Greta’s



1927 Iowa State College students practicing guarding and passing.

mom). No girl could cross the center-court line: offensive players played on one half of the court, and defensive players stayed on the other half. If any girl reached the center line, she had to stop and pass the ball to one of her teammates to get it to the other side of the court.

The girls' game may have started out as a gentler version of the boys', but it eventually became a hard-charging, high-scoring game. Players specialized in either offense or defense. It was easy for offensive players to shoot and score many times because only

three defensive players (who were restricted in their defensive actions) were allowed on the half of the court with the basket.

Six-on-six girls basketball (which was played at some schools until 1993) was more popular in the state of Iowa in the 1960s—where the girls played wild, heart-pounding games—than anywhere else. The Iowa girls' six-on-six state high school basketball tournament was played before packed crowds of up to 15,000 fans every year. The girls' tournament was even more popular than the boys' tournament. In Iowa, it was said that little boys dreamed of playing basketball like their mothers and sisters.

Heywood Hale Broun, a famous sports-writer who covered sports events ranging from the Kentucky Derby to the Super Bowl, claimed that the Iowa girls' six-on-six tournament was the most thrilling sports competition he had ever seen. "It was sport at its best," said Broun. "Full of joy and zest and excitement."

The 1968 girls' championship game was televised in nine states and was the stuff of

legends. Union-Whitten edged Everly in overtime in a 113–107 shoot-out. Denise Long led Union-Whitten with 64 points.



Denise Long, Union-Whitten, launching a jump shot in the 1968 Iowa Girls High School State Tournament

She was later drafted by the San Francisco Warriors, an all-men's NBA team (there were no professional women's teams in 1968), although she never played for them. And Denise Long was not even the championship game's high scorer. Jeanette Olson of Everly poured in 76 points for the losing team.

Iowa girls' basketball was loaded with high-scoring forwards. The all-time national amateur scoring leader (of both women's *and* men's amateur basketball) is Lynne Lorenzen, a six-on-six

star who played for Ventura High School (1983–1987) in Iowa. Lorenzen scored 6,736 points in her years at Ventura and averaged more than 60 points a game.

Today, women don't have to join the NBA to play professional basketball. Women play in their own professional leagues. And the rules are the same as the men's. When we see the stars of women's basketball today—Candace Parker, Seimone Augustus, and Diana Taurasi, to name a few—going full court, it's hard to imagine that anybody ever thought women were too fragile to play “men's” basketball.