



IN THE NEWS

March 17, 2003: Article in Sports Illustrated by a parent discussing his experiences in our program.

"Jagr owed more than \$500,000 to an Internet gambling company." —CAPITAL LOSSES, PAGE 20

Scorecard

Edited by Kostya Kennedy and Mark Bechtel

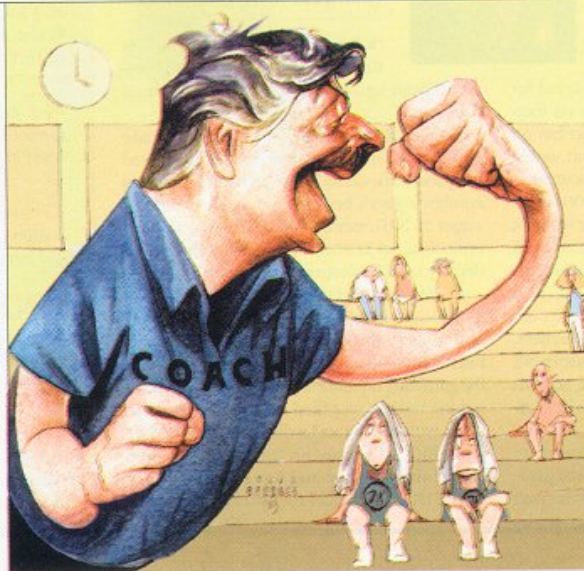
My Own March Madness

In this season of instant elimination, a youth basketball coach reflects on why the game is more than worth the effort and the pain

It was barely March and our Big Dance was already over. Eight straight wins, a budding league powerhouse, and there we were: one and done, knocked out in the first round of our own little NCAA tournament. "Way it goes," said one of the team dads, as if watching us get beaten by the jerky Orange Crush, whom we'd creamed by 20 in the regular season, was one more thing to cross off the parental to-do list. Way it goes, my behind. Try telling that to my 12-year-old, edge-of-manhood Blue Storm crew. They were sitting in a corner with towels over their heads. At least no one was crying. A few years ago, when they were nine, we lost in the play-offs and the bawling echoed throughout our section of Brooklyn.

Now, in a ritual that will be repeated by 63 somewhat more polished teams in the next few weeks, there was nothing left to do but put our hands together one last time, and after so many full-throated shouts of "defense!" and "hard work!" break with a final, still defiant "Blue Storm!"

From Connie Hawkins to Billy Cunningham (the Kangaroo Kid), and the King brothers (Bernard and Albert), Brooklyn will always have great players, potential Final Four stars. But if there are any budding Jordans (born here, in '63) currently in our 78th Precinct Youth Council league, their game is well hidden.



We have some nice drivers and dishers and bounders and shooters, but in the 78th, if your parents pay the \$140 and you bring your uniform to the games, you make the team. Even the most hopeless nonathlete is assured two eight-minute quarters of playing time. This makes for a somewhat erratic team concept, but still, we play hard; we're *into* it.

After five years of picking up kids from school for practice, cleaning pizza rinds and Gatorade bottles from my car, spending hours on Internet coaching sites trying to grok

the matchup zone and screaming "Box out, WILL YA!" I am not yet breathing down Mike Krzyzewski's neck. Like most of my players, I won't be going to the next level. It has been a career of ups and downs, with regrettable moments, like the time I went off at the ref, got a T, which was converted, and we lost by a point. To apologize to saddened 10-year-olds, promising to never, ever do that again, is to know true humility.

Mostly, however, it is a gift. Blue Storm players have included Darwin, Pierre, Dakota, Seth, Sam, Se-

bastian, Skylar, Miles, Omari, Luke, Ryan, Kevin, Tarique, Julio, three Aris, half a dozen Mikes, and my son, Billy. Most were well-loved, some a pain. But all improved, at least a little. Given the chance to play, kids get better. What you hope they understand is that this isn't just one more slice of fleeting, negotiable video game "reality." You want them to know that when we come together as a team, as a Blue Storm team, we enter a realm where every steal, defensive stop and put-back is somehow important, a pure thing. It is a place where things matter, a special zone of 12-year-old truth.

Beyond the joyful surprise of seeing them actually reverse the ball for once, it's hard to say what's in it for me without lapsing into maudlin sportspeak. Except a few weeks ago I heard someone yelling as I walked down the street. I didn't think much of it; I had a million things on my mind. One of my players, Medhi, came running up. "Didn't you hear me calling?" he said, out of breath. "I kept saying, 'Coach! Coach!' " He wanted to know when the game was that week. I told him and asked if he was ready to play. "Yeah!" he shouted. —Mark Jacobson

Jacobson's book *12,000 Miles in the Nick of Time*, about traveling with his family, is due out this summer.