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Law and basketball



(Left to right) Richard Devine, and Bruce Meckler, both from Meckler Bulger Tilson Marick & Pearson.



Lawyers play the game

By Ted McClelland

One of the longest-running pick-up basketball games in Chicago takes place three days a week, at noon, in the West Loop Athletic Club, a tony Randolph Street gym.

You won't see the best players in town there, but you will see some of the biggest names. Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan played there before he was drafted by the White House to be education secretary. So did county board member Forrest Claypool, and David Axelrod, President Obama's campaign strategist and fellow hoops junkie. It may not be the most high-flying game in town — try to imagine the shambling Axelrod throwing down a dunk — but it is the most high-powered.

The game goes back to the 1980s, when two assistant state's attorneys decided they wanted a little lunchtime basketball to break up the stress of trying criminals. Bruce R. Meckler, now a partner at Meckler Bulger Tilson Marick & Pearson, and Richard A. Devine, who later became state's attorney himself and now practices at Meckler Bulger, got a game together at the old Illinois Athletic Club.

"Dick and I started this game 25 years ago," Meckler said. "It was lots of lawyers, business people, judges, some politicians. Now we've got people from all walks of life. We've got a couple pastors, bankers, a Chicago fireman. We've got guys who played Division I basketball at Southern Illinois and Miami of Ohio."

On a recent Friday afternoon, the players running up and down the court were even more diverse than the cast of the old TV basketball drama "The White Shadow." All races, heights, ages and points per game averages were represented on the court. The games

went to 22, two points at a time, and everyone was matched up against a guy who wouldn't embarrass him.

Early in the game, Meckler, 54, had a ball stolen from him, but he made up for it later with a basket reminiscent of Michael Jordan's Last Shot. The entire gym burst into a hand-slapping celebration when the ball swished through the net.

"Yeah!" Meckler shouted. "I was due for one."

"I think that made Bruce's week," a fellow player said.

Nothing could top that flourish, so Meckler sat on the bench, where he talked about how lawyering and basketball go together.

"I was in court all morning," he said. "This is absolute 100 percent stress reduction. The physicality, the arguments. You see arguments all the time."

(None of them migrate from the basketball court to a higher court, as on the "L.A. Law" episode in which basketball-playing lawyers threatened to sue one another over an alleged foul.)

There's a saying that "Basketball is Life. The Rest Is Just Details." Is basketball a metaphor for the law, too? Meckler sees parallels.

"The competitiveness, the fire," he said. "When you do what I do for a living, you fight. You litigate. That's all we do."

"There's also the discipline of playing, the teamwork. Every large case I've handled, you work as a team. Basketball is like that."

At 1 p.m., Dick Devine walked onto the court. As a basketball player, he's not quite as intimidating as he was when he showed up at 26th and California. He's 5-foot-8, pigeon-toed and

white-haired. But Devine, 66, has been into the game since he was a kid in Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood, shooting baskets in alleys. In high school, he played on Loyola Academy's lightweight team, and he's lost none of his hustle. The ex-prosecutor strapped on a headband and a pair of goggles and scurried up and down the court to warm up. When he got into the game, Devine proved to have a smooth outside shot.

"It's good for you physically," he said during a break. "It gets all the junk out of your brain. You forget about prosecution and the press, everything except basketball. When you come back to work, maybe you were throwing things in the morning, but now you're a little more relaxed."

Thanks in large part to Obama, an avid baller who has practiced in Chicago and has filled his administration with hoops-playing cronies, basketball is the new power game.

Before leaving town, Obama was a regular at the East Bank Club. Besides Axelrod and Duncan, he played with Assistant Education Secretary Peter Cunningham.

"He's made it kind of an 'in' thing," Devine said about Obama. "For years, you had to go and golf with people. All my golfing friends were kidding me about basketball."

Meckler will never forget the sight of Axelrod trying to put aside the presidential campaign by playing a game of basketball.

Axelrod kept two BlackBerryes and a headset on the sidelines, and used them all whenever he took a break from the action. (Even now, you can tell you're at a lawyers' game because the courtside table is piled with cell phones.)



There's only one downside to Obama's love of basketball, Meckler said. By taking so many guys to Washington, he almost broke up the lunchtime basketball game.

The glory years

When Dennis M. McGuire was running for circuit court judge, he got an endorsement from his old college basketball coach.

"Put Dennis on the bench," said DePaul's Ray Meyer. "I did."

McGuire played at DePaul University from 1977 to 1981. Those were the Blue Demons' glory years. At times, they were ranked No. 1 in the nation. In 1979, they went to the Final Four, losing to Indiana State.

What does McGuire remember about that game?

"I had a good seat!" he laughed.

McGuire was a star forward at Holy Cross High School in River Grove. In his senior year, he was the MVP of Meyer's basketball camp. That won him a basketball scholarship to DePaul, the dream of every Catholic League player of that era.

When McGuire arrived at DePaul, though, he found himself stuck on the bench behind Mark Aguirre and Terry Cummings, who went

on to long careers in the NBA. In four years, McGuire started one game. He got to play against Western Michigan when Aguirre missed the bus to Kalamazoo. As a result, he developed no illusions about a pro career.

"The writing was on the wall," he said. "I was talented. These guys were gifted. It was pretty clear to me I'd have to do something else."

A few months after graduation, McGuire found himself in Reykjavik as the player/coach of the University of Iceland. In Iceland, he was a superstar. The Icelandic basketball players were tall but undisciplined and unschooled in fundamentals. McGuire racked up 20 or 30 points a game as he led his team to victories over rival clubs.

"It was like a paid vacation, but there really wasn't much to do," McGuire said.

When he returned to Chicago, after just one season, McGuire was still trying to figure out life after basketball.

Some of his friends were going to law school, so he enrolled, too. After graduation from DePaul University College of Law, he clerked in the state's attorney's office. That was his day job. After work, McGuire was a basketball bum, playing in pick-up leagues almost every night of the week. The 6-foot-6 ex-college player was

in demand all over town: at Margate Park, Broadway Armory, Warren Park. When he played on a team sponsored by River Shannon, a Lincoln Park tavern, "there were a number of teams that stopped playing against us because we had a bunch of ex-college players."

McGuire's basketball skills landed him a role in a Chevrolet commercial starring Michael Jordan. The producers couldn't find any actors tall enough to play against the Bulls guard, so they recruited real basketball players. At the West Side playground where the ad was filmed, McGuire got into a game of Make It and Take It with Jordan: A player who makes a basket can keep shooting.

"I scored three times, and Jordan was guarding me," he said. "I was mouthing off. I said, 'He's okay, but Aguirre's better. You saw I scored.' After that, he smoked me."

After the shoot, Jordan told McGuire he would have played better in Air Jordans instead of Adidas and gave him a pair.

"I think I used them to mow the lawn," McGuire said.

McGuire's basketball days ended in the late 1990s, when he tore his anterior cruciate ligament and his medial collateral ligament while playing in a Lawyers' League game. He considers the injuries a lucky break.

Basketball was consuming his life. When he was forced to give up the game, McGuire began putting more energy into his legal career. In 2002, he ran for circuit court judge and won. In the world of Chicago politics, which is dominated by Catholic high school graduates, his membership on that great Blue Demons squad proved to be an advantage.

"Playing at DePaul at that time really opened a lot of doors for me," he said. "When I was running for judge, meeting a lot of politicians, a lot of people remembered me."

While McGuire went from basketball to a successful legal career, some of his old teammates went in the opposite direction. Teddy Grubbs pleaded guilty to a sex offense. Skip Dillard also got into trouble with the law. In fact, McGuire was once scheduled to hear a case in which Dillard was accused of defaulting on a note. The judge was forced to recuse himself.

Still got game

Mark E. McNabola never grew as tall as Dennis McGuire or had as much success in basketball, but the durable, 5-foot-9 point guard is still playing. A partner at Cogan & McNabola, he just got an invitation to join an over-50 league.

McNabola grew up around DePaul basketball. His father, Bill, played on the 1945 NIT championship squad and later served as team doctor.

On Saturday nights, the entire family would go to Mass at the college chapel, followed by dinner at White Castle and a Blue Demons game.

At Loyola Academy, McNabola played on a team that went to the Final Four of the state high school basketball tournament. But he wasn't big enough or quick enough to play on the DePaul team of the late 1970s.

"I thought I was going to be a walk-on at DePaul," he said. "That was the year they went to the Final Four. I was the last guy cut, and it was probably, in retrospect, the best thing that happened to me, because I'd never been cut from a team.

"It sort of puts you down to size. I wouldn't have wanted to have been the last guy on the bench anyway."

McNabola transferred to Northern Arizona, but after a year of riding the bench behind the coach's son, he came home to DePaul and stayed for law school.

"Freshman year of law school, I'm sittin' in the library, and some guy says, 'Excuse me, I hear you can play point guard,'" he said. "He asked me to join a bunch of guys from the law review that were a couple years older than I was, then we won the Lawyers' League at DePaul, and we won in the next two or three years."

When McNabola hung out his shingle, he began playing in the Chicago Lawyers' League at Angel Guardian, the gym where the Bulls practiced before moving to the Berto Center in Deerfield. The league met every Sunday morning until it folded in the mid-1990s.

"These guys were rough and tough," McNabola said. "I was always looking for free lay-ups, but these guys were hacking."

McNabola also played at the East Bank Club, on a team with Craig Robinson, Obama's brother-in-law. One afternoon, they played against then-state Sen. Obama.

"You can tell that he's a nice guy," McNabola said about Obama. "You can tell a lot about a person's character. He's not an explosive player, someone that's really good. He's above average. A 6-foot-1 guy, unless you're a lightning-fast point guard, you're a dime a dozen. And he went left all the time.

"He does a little rocker step up and down. He doesn't really shoot much, but he's after it. He gets after it."

Obama had a strong mid-range jumper, knew his limitations as a player and "didn't make mistakes."

But knowing Obama's leftist tendencies allowed McNabola to get the better of the future president. When Obama tried to come across the middle, McNabola stole the ball and raced down court. He looked over his shoulder to see Obama was nowhere near him, and went in for a lay-up.

McNabola, who used to play three or four days a week, was recently forced to take a break as a result of a knee injury he suffered while snowboarding. But he still coaches youth basketball for fourth- through eighth-graders.

The North Side Basketball League meets at Amundsen High School. McNabola, whose son is an eighth-grader at the Francis W. Parker School, was inspired to start the league because he thought school basketball programs weren't competitive enough and didn't focus on the fundamentals.

"We teach the kids the right way to play basketball, the right way to be a sportsman, the way to do things with class, and the way to understand that there's a huge parallelism between basketball and other sports and any aspect of life."

Including the law, McNabola believes.

"You get a maturation in practicing law that also comes with basketball," he said.

"You realize that you contribute different things under different circumstances, and it's not just you, it's a team game. Some days, you need to completely lock down a guard defensively, that's where your focus is. Other days you have to shoot the ball, break a press, make free throws. It's a multifaceted game."

Bringing the court to you

The downtown law firm of Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott, which has its offices in the old Criminal Courts building on Hubbard Street, is just as convinced that basketball is a metaphor for law. So convinced that its conference room, The Forum, doubles as a half court. The carpeted floor is marked with a free-throw lane. A 10-foot basket hangs over the room.

When it's time for a game, the office staff clears the floor by breaking down the modular meeting-room furniture.

"The symbolism for it is the constant reminder of teamwork," said partner Jason L. Peltz. "A basketball saying is, 'Guards play guard, forwards play forward.' It's really the same with our trial work. The whole team is critical to achieving success. Everyone has a role, and everyone has to play that role."

Not surprisingly, most visitors want to shoot a few baskets as soon as they walk into the room. But there's only been one dunk in the Bartlit Beck office. It happened when former Fenwick High School star Corey Maggette and his representatives used the office for a meeting. Maggette, who was then playing for the Los Angeles Clippers, threw down.

Staff members sometimes play P-I-G or H-O-R-S-E to decide who'll pay for lunch or shoot baskets to unwind when they're working late on a case.

Bartlit Beck recently took over the second floor, which means no more worries about a downstairs neighbor who didn't like the sound of dribbling on the ceiling.

Case assistant Fred Malone, who played at Leo High School, first came to Bartlit Beck on a temp assignment.

He didn't know the office had a court, but when the receptionist told him, "it made my day."

Bartlit Beck encourages fitness — there's a gym on the sixth floor — and a number of its staffers are former athletes. Peltz played basketball at Cranbrook Academy in Michigan.

Attorney Carrie A. Jablonski was on varsity at Harvard.

Office services manager Dan Crosby starred at Westinghouse High School and Northern Iowa and was head basketball coach at Malcolm X.

Basketball, it seems, is a game for a more active generation of attorneys than the ones who did business on the golf course.

"It seems like basketball is the new golf," Peltz said. "You have it all the way from the president on down.

"You used to think you had to play golf to hang out with the decision makers. It seems like now, the power brokers are getting together over basketball." ■