



This Religion column is a regular feature written for the Gallup Independent by Gallup area residents, representing different faith communities, who share their ideas about bringing a spiritual perspective into our daily lives and community issues. For information about contributing a guest column, contact Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola at The Independent: (505) 863-6811 ext. 218 or lizreligion01@yahoo.com.

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Basketball Lessons

The smell is in the air—no this is not Christmas we're smelling. It is the sweat of the high school gym. It is basketball season, and in McKinley County and on the rez, this is serious business.

Allow me some early season perspective, some balance, some words of comfort.

Nearly four decades ago, I had the privilege of being cut from the high school basketball team. Although it didn't feel very good at the time, I have since thanked the coach. Ability to play good basketball was not among my gifts, and I needed to face that reality.

It took some time for me to acknowledge that. Like any normal teen-ager, I had delusions of stardom—swishing 25 footers and sweeping down rebounds. Just two years earlier, I was on the starting five and thought I had some future.

But the coach did the right thing. And I had to understand that my self-worth was not dependent on whether I could play basketball. Because I was created in the image of God, my self-image ought first to be rooted in being His precious child. I would need to unwrap other gifts that He had given me.

Within the last month, dozens of kids around the community likewise had that the experience of getting cut. Some cried, some were angry, some feel cheated. There were parents who likely confronted the coach and maybe even accuse him or her of being a racist—which usually contributes to their kids carrying chip on their shoulder for decades.

But I want to encourage those who had this privilege of being cut. The hurt will go away, and you are learning some of the good lessons of life.

That leaves us with a couple groups of kids who will have to wait to experience this privilege. The day will come when they, too, reach the end of their athletic road.

Of those who make the team, some are going to have the privilege of riding the bench. You will not play much, even though you desperately want to. You will get to go to practice, run lines, wear a uniform and warm-up.

You will also learn some crucial lessons of about life. You want more playing time, but the coach will rarely call you over. You will learn patience and preparation, in case a



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teammate gets injured or in foul trouble. You are the one making the team better by competing and hustling in practice. The starters will be better for it, and so will you.

What a privilege to learn the lessons that only a benchwarmer can learn!

That leaves a final group—the kids that have to play! Think of it—fragile teen-agers on public display with hundreds, maybe thousands of noisy fan(atic)s looking on, some of them cursing if a player makes a mistake. You will have to walk the streets or go to grandma's house and run the risk of some old crab or relative wanting to talk about Friday's game. What a drag!

There is even a greater risk: thinking that your self-worth is measured by how good you are on the basketball court. That means if you had a bad game, you're not worth much, and if you had a good game, you're cool.

Worse yet, your parents' self-image may be determined by how well you play. What pressure!

I used to think it tragic when parents didn't come to see their kids play. Now I am concerned when parents never miss seeing their kids play. By chasing all over the state to watch a ballgame, we are communicating that this is awfully important stuff.

Have I overstated my case? A bit perhaps!

But let's all remember that these kids are children of God, and that basketball is a wonderful game to help their learning process. And our kids will be better for it!

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