



COACH'S FAVORITES

As the bus rolled along the freeway, many of the players were on their phones. Learie was no exception. But unlike his teammates, he was the only one communicating with someone that had confronted Coach Dunn in a negative manner that day.

“You’ve been pretty quiet all night. You okay?” Brandon asked Learie, his fellow co-captain.

“Just been texting with my dad.”

“I saw him and Coach talking in the hallway after the game. Your dad looked kind of mad. What was that all about?”

“Yeah, I guess he got on coach pretty hard and will be talking to him tomorrow sometime. He is going to find out why I’m not playing much. Coach has just had it out for me all year. I just need a chance but I’m not sure he’s going to give me any.”

“What was the deal tonight? I thought you were going in but then you didn’t.”

“That wasn’t right, man. Coach wanted me to go in and then he told me to go sit back down. Obviously, I ended up not playing even though the game was a blowout. I was the only one not to play. That was embarrassing.”

“That stinks. Sorry. Did he say why he changed his mind?”

“He never said a word after the game to me. It’s been like that all year. He never gives me a chance. He definitely plays favorites and it’s obvious that I’m not one of his favorites.”

“I know the season’s been tough for you, but do you really think Coach plays favorites?”

“It’s obvious. Of course, he does.”

“I’ve got the solution,” said Brandon, as if a lightbulb had appeared above his head.

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“Become one of his favorites. Boom! Problem solved. Next,” Brandon remarked with a smile.

“Not quite that simple.”

“Why not?”

“Because Coach is set in his ways. It’s obvious that he already has his favorites.”

“Then how do you explain a couple of weeks ago when he played Scott and he ended up getting like a million rebounds and knocked down a bunch of jumpers? He’s even ended up playing quite a bit since then despite being a freshman.”

“Right but Scott hit those shots. He got a chance.”

“You don’t remember when you had a chance around the same time?” asked Brandon.

“I guess, I do. But Coach didn’t let me play my game.”

“Your game? What are you saying? You got off a bunch of shots and were cold as ice. It was like a community service activity. We could’ve gathered up all your bricks and built a house for some needy family. I don’t remember the last time you got extra shots in or stayed after practice. If your game is to shoot, then you weren’t putting yourself in a very good position to make anything.”

“Whatever,” Learie said dismissively.

“Not whatever. Scott was ready for his opportunity because he worked on his game every day after practice even though he wasn’t

seeing much action. He still stayed sharp. He gained confidence but maybe, more importantly, Coach also gained confidence in him. Scott wasn't playing much before but now he plays a decent amount. Even when he isn't hitting, he still has Coach's trust because Coach sees how hard he's working."

"Yeah, he's lucky to be one of Coach's favorites now."

"You're right. He's one of Coach's favorites now but that's because he did what coach wanted," Brandon stated.

"Coach always talks about hustling and getting loose balls, but I think that's just talk."

"What do you mean? It seems genuine to me."

"I dove for that loose ball a few weeks ago. That should have shown Coach that I'm serious. He talks a big game, but I didn't get rewarded. In fact, he barely acknowledged me diving for that loose ball. I've also come early to practice a couple of times and he still didn't give me a chance."

"But that's not the right way to look at things. A couple of times isn't enough to earn his trust. You have to do things over and over again until he knows you're serious. It'll also start to become a habit. I saw a post on social media that I thought of when you mentioned loose balls. It said, 'Bad players remember the good things they do but good players remember the times that they messed up.'"

"That's one of those things that sounds good, but it doesn't matter. Coach is still going to be against me. Remember that time we both missed practice and you didn't get in trouble, but I did?"

"How could I forget? We were coming back from Christmas break for the first practice and we were riding together. I did actually get in trouble, but just not as much as you. Remember that I had to run some sprints before I could practice?"

"We both had to run, but unlike you, I also got suspended for a game. That wasn't fair," complained Learie

“I don’t know about that. Don’t you remember when we got to the gym and practice was just getting over? The very first thing out of your mouth was ‘my parents didn’t wake me up’. No apologies. No nothing but blaming your parents. What are you, 12 years old? Set your own alarm clock.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t whine and cry for forgiveness like you did,” said Learie mimicking a baby.

“I didn’t whine quite like that,” corrected Brandon. “I just apologized for missing practice. I truly was sorry for that. I was also sorry that it hurt the team’s preparation because someone else had to run my spots in practice.”

“You were just sorry that it made you look bad.”

“Well, that might be true, also. Nobody ever wants to look bad, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t sorry.”

“I’ve wondered something about that day. Why didn’t you say it was my fault? I was your ride after all,” wondered Learie.

“That might be true, but I made the choice to ride with you. I could have called you sooner when I saw that you weren’t at my house on time. But the bottom line is it really didn’t matter why I missed practice. I missed practice and that wasn’t what I was supposed to do.”

“Isn’t that noble?” said Learie sarcastically.

“Choices and actions have consequences. Sometimes good and sometimes bad. Regardless, of whose fault it was, I didn’t do what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to be at practice, but I didn’t do that. Sure, I had a good reason for missing practice. My so-called friend was driving me and couldn’t get out of bed without his parents waking him up. Talk about being a baby. But none of that matters. At the end of the day, we’re responsible for controlling what we can control, and I didn’t do that. No reason to try to get out of trouble or pass the buck. I just decided to own up to it and accept the consequences.”

“Accept the consequences? You didn’t have to do much compared to me,” complained Learie again.

“You keep saying that and it might be true that your consequences were worse but remember I accepted responsibility and didn’t give excuses,” Brandon pointed out to Learie. “You were full of excuses and didn’t accept responsibility. Besides, you had missed a couple of other practices right before Christmas break that was probably still on Coach’s mind.”

“Those were to take some tests. Academics first, right?” said Learie.

“Academics first, if appropriate. I know why you were taking those tests. Those were re-tests the professor let you make up because you slept through the regular tests. I guess academics weren’t first when it came to sleep. I also know that you suggested our practice times as when you could take the makeup tests. That way you could get out of practice. I heard you use that academics-first stuff on Coach when you told him you couldn’t be at practice. I don’t think you fooled him, but I guess he wasn’t going to fight you on it.”

“All of this might be true to a degree, but Coach still hasn’t told me why he’s not playing me more or giving me a chance in games,” said Learie.

“Don’t you know what you need to do? You’re not in junior pro anymore. You know what is right and wrong for basketball players to do. Does coach really need to spell it out for you?” asked Brandon.

Learie got defensive and responded very quickly, “He should. He should be letting me know how I can get more playing time! What does he think? Does he think I like sitting on the bench?”

“Have you asked him?” wondered Brandon

“I actually did back in the fall and he just basically ignored me.”

“He did? That’s a little surprising.”

“He said I asked the wrong question. He said he understood everybody wants more playing time but that is a selfish question.

Being consumed with playing time when you're part of a team is selfish. He said that the better question would be to ask how I can improve so that the team can improve. Yeah, that pretty much ended that discussion."

"Actually, that sounds like it could have led to a longer conversation. That could have been the opening you needed to find out more about how a senior co-captain could help the team when he's not playing," suggested Brandon.

"No, it just showed me that he wasn't concerned about my playing time," Learie snapped back.

"You're probably right about that," admitted Brandon. "Coach probably doesn't care who exactly is getting playing time. He's most likely worried about the entire team. He wants the team to be as good as possible. Let me ask you a question."

"Fire away," said Learie.

"When Coach yells at us after a game about turning the ball over too many times, what are you thinking?" asked Brandon.

"I'm wondering why he played those players if they turn the ball over so much."

"What about when we get out-rebounded and he says we're being lazy?" asked Brandon.

"I'm wondering why he didn't put somebody else in the game if he was so upset about the effort."

"How many games do we have in a year?"

"25 or 30," answered Learie.

"How many practices, workouts, and training sessions do we have?"

"Seems like they never end. Hundreds!" exclaimed Learie.

"Right," said Brandon. "Coach is probably more likely to believe what he sees repeatedly in practice than in just one game. If the players he trusts are turning the ball over or not putting forth the

effort, he might give them a little extra leeway because he sees them doing something else in practice.

Speaking of leeway, it seemed to Brandon that Learie wasn't getting upset but instead was allowing him to ask questions, so Brandon continued.

"What do you think would happen if the days following a game when Coach is mad because we got outrebounded, that you dominate the boards or make tons of hustle plays?"

"Coach would probably notice," admitted Learie.

"Exactly and then you'd be on your way to being one of his favorites," said Brandon. "Coach tells us all the time what being one of his favorites looks like. You don't have to guess or listen hard even though he doesn't come right out and say it. When he mentions that the team isn't hustling, he is looking for someone to hustle. If he puts up the free throw stats of everybody in the league or mentions this constantly, then he values good free throw shooters. If he makes a big deal of the academic honor players, then going to class is important. Whatever he talks about the most is what he values. Give that to him. That is how you become his favorite."

"I've seen coaches that it just doesn't matter, though," said Learie

"There are probably coaches like that out there, but typically we're seeing things only from our perspective. Remember, in high school when I was upset with my baseball coach because I was platooning and not batting as high up in the order as I wanted?" asked Brandon.

"I do. Did you ever talk with the coach?"

"I didn't. But my mom came to see him. She told him that I had more hits than so and so player and so she couldn't understand why I wasn't getting more of an opportunity because I was clearly a better hitter. He proceeded to show her how the other kid actually had a way better on-base percentage, fielding percentage, and had more hustle plays. Even though he was going to be out, he still ran out way more fly balls and ground outs than I did. That wasn't even something that I

thought the coach was paying attention to, let alone keeping stats on. He told my mom that I had potential but was too focused on things I couldn't control. Instead of worrying about playing time, or spot in the order, I should be hustling more, taking more fielding practice, and taking more walks instead of swinging at everything. After that conversation, I didn't complain any longer. My mom told me that she was never going to confront a coach again getting only one side of the story."

"Interesting story about your mom. I didn't know that. I guess talking about parents brings us full-circle back to my dad and him confronting Coach Dunn," said Learie.