

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Not the NBA Finals

Jerry Kavanagh · Tuesday, June 14th, 2016

“Are you in the NBA?” asked wide-eyed third grader Tim. I had just put my official National Basketball Association satchel down on the desk at the start of the morning’s class.

Not anymore, I said, as straight-faced as I could manage.

“Wow! What team were you on? Can you dunk? Do you know LeBron? Are you friends with Kobe and Steph?” These were some of the questions excitedly fired at me by Tim and his classmates, a few of whom are allowed to stay up past their regular school-week bedtimes to watch at least the beginning of the NBA Finals on television.

As a member of the working press for over three decades, including many years as editor of several basketball magazines, I would receive a brand-new carryall, courtesy of the league’s publicity department, at the start of each NBA season. The league logo is prominently stitched on the outside; inside were media guides for the league as well as for all of its member franchises. I used to take the bag to work every day, using it to hold my house and car keys, newspaper and books, sunglasses, notebook, pen, and other items. As a substitute teacher, I continue to use the bag.

Tim, an ardent sports fan, had spotted the logo. Now, he and his classmates were excited at the thought of being in the presence of a professional athlete. After all, how many substitute teachers moonlight as NBA players! (The answer is none.) A footnote here: I am five feet ten inches tall and so far removed from my basketball-playing prime (as modest as it was) that I am eligible for social security.

What I love most about working with the children is their innocence: their wonder at and belief in the blissful serendipity that could affect their everyday routine at any given moment. On this day, they did not see an unathletic-looking, average-size, senior male citizen taking the place of their regular teacher. Instead, they willingly suspended their disbelief that an NBA player would spend his day teaching in elementary school before jetting off at night to compete against LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, Stephen Curry, and other superstars.

Before I knew it, a queue had formed, single file, in front of my desk. All of the children were lined up, Post-it and pen in hand, politely waiting their turn for my autograph.

What have I done, I thought, envisioning a summons to the principal’s office—and perhaps my first detention in more than 40 years—for discipline once my scam went public, as surely it would. At the same time, I could not help feeling perversely curious over what I imagined would be a topic in the children’s homes that night. “Guess what, mom and dad? Today we had an NBA player as a sub!”

As the children approached me for my autograph, I realized I had carried the joke too far to back down now. So, pen in hand, I cheerfully signed all of the proffered Post-its.

“I better not see these on eBay later today,” I kiddingly told the class. “This signature could be worth a lot of money someday.”

When a few of the children got back in line, I announced, "That's it. No more autographs!" Wait, did I really just say that? I thought, cognizant of the surrealism of the statement.

Jenny didn't move, so I reminded her that I had already given her my autograph and that she needed to return to her seat.

"No, this one is not for me," she explained. "It's for my dad."

And while I tried to process that, she added, "His name is Mike. Could you sign it for him?"

I obliged. "Dear Mike," I wrote. "Best regards, Mr. K."

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