

## The Perfect Game

By A.C. Hall

Holstead, Montana was once a thriving lumber town. The nearby mill kept most of the citizens employed and it made Holstead an important part of the Montana economy. But nothing lasts forever and trees can only grow back so fast. Eventually the mill closed down and so did about half the town.

Most of the people who stayed took jobs in the silver mine in the town of Hysham, about a forty five minute drive down the interstate. The mine had been in operation for a long time though, and before long it shut down too.

I had just turned six years old, but I remember my father coming home early from the mine that day. Mom was surprised because really, no one ever comes home early from a shift in the mines. Things went from bad to worse when he delivered the news. Not just for my family, but for the whole town. Those people who could afford to moved away in a hurry, leaving the rest of us behind in what was beginning to resemble a ghost town. The few thousand people who stayed did the best they could to get by. They worked part time, odd jobs, whatever could put a bit of food on the table. All the while a cloud hung over Holstead.

It was a small community where everybody knew everybody else, and everybody knew that, given the choice, everybody else would leave the town in a heartbeat if they could. There was none of that small town charm that you hear so much about in the cinema. No tight knit community, no pleasantries exchanged in passing, nothing at all. When the election term for the mayor, who had moved away years before, ran out, the people didn't even bother to hold another election. A few thousand strangers, all prisoners in a small town, lived right next to one another and never so much as exchanged a hello.

That was thirty years ago, but before I tell you about what Holstead is like today, I want to back up and tell you about something that happened in my senior year of high school.

It was twelve years after the mine had closed and I was just a few months away from graduating. I was among the group of kids who were the first generation to grow up in the new, poverty stricken Holstead, and it showed in myself and my classmates. We took teen angst to levels most kids didn't. We didn't rebel, didn't party and quite frankly, we didn't do much anything at all. We'd inherited our parents newest and most overpowering of qualities; their apathy. On this particular day, however, we were all gathered together with a common purpose.

Once a year Holstead High School would meet Hysham High School for a basketball game. It had been a long standing tradition and for some reason it carried on even after the closing of the mine. Some of my classmates said they kept it going so we all had at least one thing to look forward to every year. I figured they had just never cared enough to cancel the thing. Truthfully we would've preferred to play a game of football, but neither of our high schools had enough able bodied students to make up a complete team. So basketball it was.

Hysham High was the only school with a working bus and we were the only of the schools with a working scoreboard in our gym, so the game was held at Holstead each year. We were in the locker room listening to Coach Wynn give us one of his patented motivational pre-game speeches. The Coach was the only person I knew of in Holstead that seemed to have any passion left, but try as he might he never got it to rub off on us. The eight of us sat there listening to him, half bored and half just not caring at all.

After the speech we went out to the gym and sat on our bench, waiting for the team from Hysham to show up. People from Holstead and Hysham were shuffling in and beginning to fill the stands. Why everyone bothered to show up every single year was beyond me. I remember looking at a lot of them, just studying their faces as they came wandering in. No one spoke to one another, not even husbands and wives. The only noise came from a small group of children who were playing at the top of the stands. I felt sorry for them as I watched them, knowing that they had no idea just how sad and boring of a life was in store for them. A few of my teammates

watched the kids too and from the look in their eyes, they were thinking the same thing I was.

The Hysham team showed up and the game got underway. The place was packed, just like it was every year, but stayed silent. No one on the floor that night had much interest in basketball and truthfully none of us had much talent at the game either. The ref was an older man from Hysham who didn't even own a copy of a basketball rulebook and also appeared to be quite intoxicated, so what we lacked in skill we made up for in stifling, physical defense. Elbows were thrown, people were tripped and players were shoved. It was four minutes through the first quarter before anyone even took a shot. A tall kid from Hysham had jumped over my foot when I tried to trip him and quickly launched the ball towards the goal. As it went through, putting the score at Hysham 2, Us 0, I remember one of my teammates groaning and saying "It's over."

After that first basket a classmate of mine, Matt Sheldon, hit the tall Hysham player with a stiff elbow to the face. The rest of the first quarter was one step away from an all out brawl as we exchanged vicious fouls with the other team. The ref even blew the whistle a few times, giving four foul shots to us and six to Hysham. Everyone hit their foul shots, making the score at the end of the first quarter Hysham 8, Us 4.

The second quarter was a bit more exciting and even I got in on the action. I attempted and made four three pointers, which was amazing since I usually missed no matter how close or far I was. There was even a bit of a buzz in the crowd anytime a player actually broke through the stiff defenses and rolled in a bucket. As the buzzer sounded for halftime we found ourselves down 36 to 23. Despite some bruises and a few bloody noses, we were actually in pretty good spirits as we headed into the locker room.

Coach Wynn was beaming and bouncing from foot to foot, calling it the greatest first half performance he had ever seen. I remember not really paying much attention when he said "We made every shot we attempted." Even when Calvin, a nerdy boy from our team who had spent the whole first half on the bench added, "Hysham made one hundred percent of their shots

too, coach” I didn’t pay it much mind. All I knew was that, for the first time in as long as I could remember, I was having fun.

We all listened intently to Coach Wynn’s halftime speech, which I later learned was lifted word for word from the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*, and when the time came we actually ran back out into the gym. The Hysham players were as fired up as we were and as the whistle blew the game really got underway. What little knowledge we had of basketball was put to use. Crossover dribbles were attempted, behind the back passes were thrown and amazingly, all of our shots continued to go in.

As the minutes ticked by and the scores began to rise, something else amazing happened. The tall player from Hysham was guarding one of our players, his long arms held high and his long legs spread wide, fully blocking our player’s path to the basket. Instead of passing the ball, our player, in a move he told me afterwards he picked up from watching an old comedy routine, bounced the ball between the Hysham players legs. He quickly scrambled around him, caught the ball and jumped up to take a shot. One of the Hysham players leaped up and collided with him in mid air, but as they both fell hard to the floor the ball went in. And for the first time, people clapped. Not many of them, and they didn’t clap particularly loudly, but the sound of it was so foreign and unexpected that we all stopped playing. We stood for a moment and stared out at the crowd, the players turning into the spectators as we watched stoic faced adults putting their hands together.

The ref, who seemed less drunk than he had at the start of the game, blew his whistle and got us all back into action. As the last seconds of the third quarter ticked away we all huddled up by our bench. Many of us were laughing, something that hardly ever happened, as we recounted some of the more miraculous shots that had been made that quarter. Calvin, who was now keeping a stat sheet on a piece of notebook paper, said that both we and the team from Hysham had still hit one hundred percent of our shots. I thought about it and realized that he was right, that I couldn’t remember a single shot missing the basket.

At the start of the fourth and final quarter the score was Hysham 69, Holstead 60. Even though it had been full of people all night, for the first time the gym felt alive as we took the ball down the court to start the fourth quarter. Calvin, who was actually playing for the first time ever, drained a long three point shot, which earned him a round of applause from the crowd. Gone was the stifling, physical defense of the first half. Both teams were racing up the court, attempting and making shots from all over. The crowd was cheering louder now and the players were laughing even more as the ball continued to go through the hoop. We had even taken to congratulating the Hysham players when they'd make a particularly difficult shot. The score was climbing higher and higher, looking more like the score of a professional all star game than that of a high school match.

Coach Wynn called a time out and instructed us on some defensive schemes. With just a few minutes left and down 114 to 100, we needed to make up points fast. Since both teams were still making a remarkable one hundred percent of their shots, the only way we were going to make a comeback was to stop Hysham from shooting.

We headed back out and were pleasantly surprised as Coach Wynn's defense held up. We got steal after steal, and continued to drain our shots. Hysham called a time out with just one minute remaining and the score now standing at Hysham 120, Holstead 113. As we got some last minute advice from our coach I noticed for the first time that everyone in the crowd was on their feet. To this day I can't quite define what sort of expression it was they all had on their faces. Amazement? Or awe, maybe? Whatever it was, I knew right then and there that something special was happening. And from looking out there, I could tell that they all knew it too.

The whistle blew and we got back out on the court. Calvin zoomed down the court and got a quick 3 pointer, making the score 120 to 116. Hysham passed the ball in but Calvin dove in front of the pass and intercepted the ball. As he fell towards the out of bounds line, Calvin tossed up a prayer of a three point shot. Cheers from both sides of the stands rang out as it miraculously went into the basket. The score was 120 to 119. We were down by one point.

There were 26 seconds left and it was Hysham's ball. They passed it in to their tall player, who deftly avoided our defenders as he made his way down the court. He knew he just had to keep the ball away from us and run out the clock and Hysham would win the game. As the seconds ticked away we swarmed him, cutting off any chance of passing the ball he might've had. Finally he tossed the ball up, scoring a two point bucket and putting the score at Hysham 122, Holstead 119.

There were only three seconds left on the clock. Calvin passed the ball in to me and I dribbled it once, thinking to myself just how amazing this night had been. I'm not even sure when it occurred to me to shoot the ball. One moment I was looking up at the scoreboard, watching the 3 seconds click down to 2 seconds, the next moment I'm launching the ball towards our goal at the far end of the court. It's 84 feet from one end of a high school basketball court to the other and as I watched the ball fly all that way I remember having only one thought in my head the whole time.

It's going to go in.

Every eye in the place watched as the ball sailed perfectly through the hoop, just as the buzzer sounded to signal the end of the game. The gym erupted in a cheer so loud it shook the walls. The stands cleared and every person there rushed onto the court. As there was no clear hero of the game everyone just embraced everyone else, tossing random members of each team up onto their shoulders. People laughed, people sobbed, people danced. I heard one lady crying out that it was a miracle and I remember thinking that if that was a miracle then it was pretty low on the scale of miracles. But as I looked around I began to think that maybe she was right. Enemies talked, families talked, new friendships were made, and old friendships were renewed. As someone hoisted me onto their shoulders I went from crying to laughing and back again. It was like a lifetime of repressed emotions pouring out of me, pouring out of our entire town. We didn't even bother playing an overtime period. The game just ended in that perfect, 122 to 122 tie.

So, eighteen years after that perfect game and thirty years since the closing of the mine, what's Holstead like today? Well, we're still poor. Work's

hard to come by and some weeks there's not much food on the dinner table. People who manage to scrape together enough money still leave, but for those of us who are left here, things aren't as sad as they once were. Hysham still buses in once a year for the annual basketball game. We fill the arena and cheer our hearts out like we're watching the greatest professional basketball players on earth. Of course we're not, and most times the games are atrocious, but that doesn't matter much.

There's never been another perfect game. No more miracles on the basketball court, or anywhere else in Holstead for that matter. But as two players collide with one another and fall over, and myself and the packed stands all burst into joyous good natured laughter, I realize that it doesn't matter. We may've only ever had the one miracle, but it was the only one we needed.