

I recall from my earliest days a time I stood studying the concrete in front of my father's feet, calculating a way to the basketball hoop that hovered in our back yard. Time and again, I had thrown my body toward the hoop and let loose the ball, but my hopes dwindled as my father blocked countless shots and others fell off the rim without success. My father's skills outmatched mine, and his body overshadowed my nine-year-old self; he backed me under the hoop again. He put up another successful hook shot, and cut one more thread of my optimism for victory.

"Your ball," my father announced, bouncing the ball to me at the top of the key. I took hold of the ball and charged hard to the right. I flung the ball high. The attempt was futile and it clattered from the backboard. The unwelcome sound of failure entered my ears and sank to my stomach, then welled up to my eyes. Frustration leaked out through my tears, and my cheeks burned with embarrassment.

With a stern tone, my father called out, "What? Do you want me to take it easy on you?"

My response to this question changed my life. Everything in me desired to win. Logically, asking for the easier path would accommodate my goal. Taking the shortcut would lessen my emotional strain, my exerted energy, and would give me a taste of the success I sought. Yet I knew that the prize would be hollow. The authenticity would be absent unless I could meet the challenge as it stood. I couldn't fully comprehend the implications my answer had. This moment, this adamant exclamation, established my character. My father's challenge, his unrelenting competitiveness, pulled out of me a strong and determined answer. In the months and years to follow, I sharpened my skills, rose to the challenge, and beat my father. When future adversity came, my answer stood strong. Throughout the offseason, I push myself daily to prepare for my role on the football team. I chose to be challenged with difficult courses in school and became the top ranked student in my class.

Now nearly twice the age I was when I belted out my answer, I cannot help but to strive for greatness. Mediocrity does not satisfy me, because I know excellence is attainable with the proper effort. I have learned how to better control my frustration with defeat because I have experienced first-hand the learning that can come out of it. Failing to beat my father in pick-up basketball games was not ultimately about scoring more or less points. Those games, that day, that answer, they were about rising up from defeat and deciding to strive to beat the challenge.

With a stern tone, my father called out, "What? Do you want me to take it easy on you?"

Ripping the ball out of the air, I exclaimed, "No! I just want to get better so I can beat you."