

THE PASSAGE OF TOM McMILLAN

by James Reston, Jr.

Like the continuation of some gruesome Pavlovian test, the metallic buzzer sounds loudly, and the crowd responds appropriately. In their electric blue and red stretch suits, looking like jungle butterflies, the star dancers flit back under the basket, rustling their pompons. The hot nuts rock music plays on, while the gray-haired, bespectacled, middle-aged Down's syndrome fan continues to twist and shout. The drummer in his joker hat beats out a shrill, percussive report . . . BULL-LETS! . . . BULL-LETS!, as the bench boy runs out to wipe the sweat off the top of the key one more time.

The players amble back onto the floor diffidently. Overhead, the scoreboard has the 76ers ahead by two points, and the huge telescreen replays the last slam dunk by that animal of the opposition, Charles Barkley, replete with the grunts and the scowls and the other effects that go into the show. The crowd squeals and giggles appreciatively at Barkley's ferocity. It is in such contrast to the gentleness of their Sudanese prince, 7'7" Manute Bol. Barkley's bulk and Bol's little boy's body, perched high upon spindly stilts, are opposites on some rarefied spectrum. Bol moves slowly out onto the court, like some outsized cartoon character in Macy's Fifth Avenue parade, and as he does, the Bullets' mascot, a dachshund named Tiny Too, scampers by the prince's stick legs, chasing a rubber ball. On the dog's leather skirt are two round stickers that read "McMillan for Congress." To Bol, it is a harbinger. The prince has four fouls, and his replacement will be the Democratic candidate for the Fourth Congressional

District of Maryland.

"What the Fourth District needs is a congressman who can stuff it!" It is one of Tom McMillan's standard lines on the stump between games, but it is a joke that cuts two ways. For McMillan, in his eleventh season in the NBA and at the advanced age of 33, can only just barely slam-dunk it, and the real joke among his teammates to the coach is, "call an alley-loop for McMillan."

On the bench, awaiting his shot, the candidate looks sallow, downright unhealthy. This is his last regular season game (the playoffs are yet to come, a brutal series the Bullets will lose three games to two, and in which McMillan plays scantily) and there is to be a farewell ceremony at half time. His media adviser, Sara Eisner, wants her candidate to get a tan when the season is over, even if he has to accomplish it at the tanning studio in a Glen Burnie shopping center. She also wants him to loosen up on camera. "I can't do anything about the guy's personality," she says a bit forlornly in an aside, as the frenzy rolls over her in waves.

McMillan's right hand hurts. Two weeks before, against the Atlanta Hawks, he had chipped a knuckle, undoubtedly in one of those wild, exaggerated flails of his long arms. He is like a huge, wooden puppet out there, joints connected with dowels, appendages doing the most surprising, dangerous things. Everyone in the league hates to play against him. His elbows have the reputation of being the sharpest in the league. He puts no foreign objects in his elbow pads, things like jacks or marbles, as some NBA players are suspected of doing. The elbows themselves are the foreign objects. He's not a dirty player, just awkward and aggressive and fond of contact, and just as he's not afraid to take the clutch shot, so he's not afraid to take his punishment. A month before he had broken Bill Walton's (It is an attitude that will help him in a political brawl.)

nose (the 13th nosebreak in 11 seasons for Walton) under the basket. A broken knuckle? He smiles. Not as bad as a broken nose, unless it's on your shooting hand.

The only problem is, he has to shake voters' hands with his left hand. That's okay too. Bob Dole does all right, and there's something a little thrilling for the potential voter to shake the candidate's left hand, to feel the right one come gently over top of it, to hear the brief apology for his scruffy cast, because he broke the knuckle a few weeks ago in a brief scuffle with Tree Rollins. The voter nods as if to say, "That's okay. I understand."

Bol sits down, quite a display of orbital mechanics in itself, and McMillan goes in. This night, the sellout crowd is warm. They cheer. It is not always this way. At the overtime victory over the Celtics on March 8, when McMillan entered the game a fan turned to his neighbor to whisper, "I'd vote for him just to get him out of the NBA." The story does not amuse McMillan, but pro basketball fans are like that. You pay good money to watch these monsters beat one another up. You're entitled to your money's worth. But tonight is McMillan's last night, time to be gracious, and they cheer.

And McMillan deserves it, on the merits. He has been playing well recently, and that is good politics. The Bullets have a new coach, Kevin Loughery--Gene Shue had been fired 12 games ago--and Loughery is playing his old veteran more. Against the Atlanta Hawks on April Fool's Day, McMillan scored 21 in only 31 minutes of play, hitting 9 of 15 shots. That is decent for anyone, much less for a gray-haired old man of 33 years. Against the Chicago Bulls on April 11, McMillan hit 8 of 12 from the floor, garnering 17 points.

In fact, Loughery admires McMillan. The coach considers the player a credit to a game tainted by cocaine abuse, considers him the "ultimate pro." To the coach that means McMillan always comes prepared to play, both to practice and to games. But admiration, in this cast of stunning athletes, is not enough to get playing minutes. To Loughery, McMillan is a productive, underrated player, with a great jump shot and a strong defensive game. That very day, the day of official retirement, Loughery told McMillan that he wished the veteran would stay and play another year and forego this silly congressional race. McMillan himself feels physically able to play another year, but has acknowledged to himself that his mind has drifted elsewhere.

McMillan's production in his final game wins votes, and the candidate considers each of these last games a campaign appearance. He hopes that the Bullets will go far in the playoffs, for that will keep him highly visible to the voters. It is not like Jack Kemp's last days as a professional athlete. Before his first election to Congress, in 1970, he too was still an active player, with a no-cut contract, and at election time there were still seven games to play in the Buffalo Bills season. Several days before the vote, Kemp had issued a warning. If you don't elect me, I will come back and play quarterback in those last games. But the quarterback won, barely, and the fans were spared.

This night, nostalgia goes only so far. The Bullets need to win to draw the 76ers in the playoffs rather than the Milwaukee Bucks. The 76ers are thought to be an easier draw, because the perennial favorites are hurting. (soon to become a Bullet after the regular season) Moses Malone, their blockhouse center, has a broken eye socket; Bob MacAdoo, the old scoring champ, has a hyperextended knee; Andrew Toney, their

sharpshooting playmaker, has had surgery on his groin; and even the fabulous Julius Erving had been to the doctor for the flu. This last is a pity, because Dr. J. is supposed to give a little speech for McMillan at the halftime retirement ceremony, but the Doctor had stayed in Philly. Instead, he has sent a check for \$500 to the McMillan for Congress campaign.

The 76ers go with a smaller, quicker lineup, one that, without their stars, has now won six straight. Such a lineup is not the right mix for McMillan to get more than 11 minutes in relief of Bol. Later, after the game, at a fund raiser for McMillan at the Showcase Room in the Capital Centre, Loughery will apologize continuously to the gathering of voters who have come to cheer their candidate. The coach is sorry that at this, McMillan's last game, the old guy had not played more, but the chemistry was not right. Again, the apology is readily accepted, because the Bullets have won by one point, on a shot by Darren Daye at two seconds that had bounced around the rim a few times and then dropped at the buzzer.

Downstairs, in the catacombs of the sports arena, a statuesque blond from a Baltimore TV station sends her card into the Bullets' locker room, hoping to interview McMillan while he is still in uniform. It is a discreet gesture, for the locker room is officially open to the press, and the jocks are already standing around, jockless, performing their customary post-game ritual with the reporters. The tough, female sports reporters have long since established their right to be part of this post-game news gathering, if they so desire, but the blond had tried that once in the Orioles' locker room, and once had been enough.

Inside, McMillan has already showered and ^{he is} anxious to get upstairs for his fund raiser. Wrapped in a terry cloth robe, he is holding forth on the

emotion of the moment, somewhat emotionless. He towers above the mikes and the stubby adoring reporters, and he looks better after a shower. The steam has imparted some color to his sallow cheeks.

At last, he breaks away from the regulars inside and makes his way into the hallway, where the blond waits with her cameraman. She drapes him over a stool against the cinderblock walls. The lights go on, and they talk. The usual questions. Will he miss it? How are sports and politics similar, different? How does he feel?

It is a situation about which his political managers are ambivalent. On the one hand, the politician is loose. The blond animates him. A chemistry flows between them, as he leans against the wall, the terry cloth robe open a crack on his gray and black chest hair, and for that moment he is certifiably sexy. Stiffness on camera is a problem for him, especially when he sits in his bland gray office in Crofton, looking strange in his ^(drooping) coat and ^(thin) tie, fielding questions about defense policy. Here, on this special night of farewell, amid the tacky scene of professional basketball, he is human and accessible and comfortable. But is it dignified? His managers worry that he will be seen as a frivolous figure, a single swinger. They prefer to have their candidate seen with middle-aged mothers rather than with tall, beautiful blonds.

"I will miss the adrenalin factor," he is saying. "There's nothing to replace that winning shot in a tight game. Politics is not the same, but it does bring out my competitive spirit. I play to win in anything I do."

He has said it a thousand times, but now he seems to mean it. All this . . . the noise, the girls, the grunts, the physical combat . . . is slipping away, and soon his only opponent will be a feisty 5'7" father of

four with twelve years of experience in the Maryland State Legislature. The Republican PACs have labeled this race a must win, and McMillan's Republican opponent is Bobby Neall. He thinks he can beat this tall drink of water, or this "stringbean," as his campaign refers to McMillan, and he has begun to discover ways gently to make fun of how McMillan "makes his money." At their debates, McMillan leads off by invoking the game he has played the night before, and Neall counters. "Yesterday I was hard at work on the savings and loan bill in Annapolis. Quite frankly, I would much rather have been at a basketball game."

So it comes down to this. You might want to go out and watch Tom McMillan play basketball one afternoon, but if you had a real problem where your congressman could help, would he care? Could he deliver?

The blond puts the question to him. Really, now . . . isn't sports a bit frivolous?

"The great thing about professional basketball for me is that it takes only a couple of hours a day. It has left time for other things. But as this campaign has heated up in the last few months, getting out there and knocking around with these guys is a great way to relieve tension and frustration."

The inevitable national attention has already started to center on this bizarre campaign. The week before ABC Nightly News had closed its show with a four-minute tone poem to Tom McMillan. The television spot was close to a political advertisement for the Rhodes Scholar, pro athlete, who would be a congressman, as if in the celebrity-oriented world of Ronald Reagan this was the right path into national leadership. For this is the political year that Clint Eastwood became mayor; where Fred Grundy, a star

He means the burden of the past. "Democrats are viewed as being the status quo now," he says. "I don't have the past that, say, a Kennedy or a Mondale has. I want to be strengthened by the past, but not burdened by it."

The candidate is pleased by his performance. The breakfast had been "a nice, little hit."

At that moment, flushed with his momentary political success, he briefly displays that vulnerability about which his campaign manager had worried from the beginning. Professional athletes love to be loved. They are used to adoration . . . including a fawning press. But this political game is different. The candidate is young and handsome. He is a celebrity and a millionaire twice over. He is invited to play tennis with stars, to escort beautiful ladies, and to speak at fancy dinners in Washington, where sports and politics mix like salad dressing, and where he can be a big draw. "Mark my words," Jerry Grant, his manager who once handled the moribund presidential campaign of the late Scoop Jackson, had told me once, "Before it's over, this is going to be a dirty campaign. If I were running the opponent's campaign, I would have a photographer follow him. I can hear the histrionic voice of a narrator on a negative advertisement now . . . Congress . . . the deliberative body of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln . . . where the great issues of war and peace are decided . . . and then, the tinkle of glasses at a place like the disco Champions in Georgetown . . . and the giggle of girls in the background."

For now, as we ride down the suburban byway of Anne Arundel County, the candidate is pleased. Perhaps they had not roared their approval the way they did when he hit a clutch shot. But one of their teenage sons had stayed outside in a car throughout the gathering, waiting to get his autograph. The event had gone nicely.