

## Take It to the Limit

Mike Pemberton

**"B**ULLSHIT, BULLSHIT, BULLSHIT," the Hilltoppers' student section chanted.

"No way that was a charge, Jack," Jenkins shouted as he jerked Jack up from the floor. "Keep takin' it to the hole."

"BULLSHIT, BULLSHIT, BULLSHIT," the students yelled as the referee signaled with his hands four and four, Jack's uniform number, to the scorer's table.

It was midway through the fourth quarter of the suspended boy's first game back, the rematch against the Black Hills Miners, and Jack's dunk over J. J. "Davy" Crockett would have given St. Jude their first lead of the game. Instead, they remained one point back and Jack picked up his fourth foul.

"BULLSHIT, BULLSHIT, BULLSHIT."

The St. Jude crowd, stinging from the treatment of their boys at Black Hills, had been rowdy at the start, screaming like banshees during a tight first half. They hushed when Black Hills opened up a thirteen point lead in the third, but revved up when St. Jude closed the gap in the fourth. Coach Collins took full advantage of the experience gained by Tompkins, McElroy, and Pitman during the suspension, and rotated eleven players in and out of the game. By the time the fourth quarter rolled around, the five starters—Gudy, Brewster, Connolly, Jenkins, and Jack—had fresh legs and Collins played them. Like a prizefighter saving a reserve of energy for the final round, Collins left his best moves for last and unleashed them along with the two-two-one full-court press at the beginning of the fourth quarter. The Miners, not as deep as St. Jude, felt the squeeze, turning the ball over and allowing the Hilltoppers back into the game.

As he ran up court after the foul, Jack glanced to the sidelines and saw the Black Hills' coach, Stan "The General" Patton, striding in front of the visitors' bench, forever in his white shirt and black and red striped tie, hands clapping, grinning face a contorted scarlet, violet neck veins bulging. Patton was thrilled with the call, Jack thought, because it might stem the Topper tide and keep the Miners from being intimidated by the raging response from the St. Jude faithful.

"Let 'em holler, Crockett," Patton shouted. "That was a helluva play, boy. Way to sacrifice yourself. Good hustle, good goddamn hustle. Now let's get two."

Jack passed the half court line and the scorer's table and looked to the Hilltoppers' bench, expecting to see Collins shouting similar encouragement. Instead, Collins stood with his hands on his hips, back to the court, staring into the howling student section, while Scooter shouted at the ref.

"You owe us one," Scooter yelled, hoping to plant a seed for the next close call. "No way Crockett had position. No way."

"BULLSHIT, BULLSHIT, BULLSHIT," echoed off the Wreck's walls.

Collins turned, marched to the scorer's table, and snatched the PA announcer's microphone.

"Not here, not here," Collins said into the mic, looking toward the student section.

The "bullshit" chant slowed, but did not stop.

"I said, not here," Collins shouted and pointed at the students. "Not at St. Jude. We're better than that."

The chant faded, then died, leaving a muffled murmur that rolled like an ocean swell around the Wreck. Collins handed the mic back to the announcer, signaled for timeout and strode toward the bench.

As he did so, the subdued swell transformed into a growing wave of cheers and a building crescendo of applause. The students began another chant.

"We are HILLTOPPERS ... we are HILLTOPPERS ... we ARE HILLTOPPERS ... WE ARE HILLTOPPERS ..." The noise ricocheted off the cinder block walls as the entire crowd joined in.

Patton stared at Collins like a father caught in a lie by his son. The blood drained from his face, grin turning to a glare, as he stopped marching and called his players to the bench.

"What the hell does he mean 'we're better'?" Jack heard Patton yell at the Miners' team physician, Dr. Keck. "Uppity ..."

"C'mon, Stan," Keck said, grabbing Patton by the arm and turning him to the bench.

Collins either did not hear Patton or chose to ignore him. He unbuttoned the top button of his blue Brooks Brothers suit jacket and knelt on one knee

in front of the St. Jude bench, head down. The five starters sat facing him, drinking water and wiping off sweat with white cotton towels.

Collins waved away the clipboard Scooter offered.

"You want to sub for Jack?" Lane asked. "That was his fourth and we've got three-plus minutes to play."

"Nope, we'll keep him in," Collins said, lifting his head. "Need his offense."

Collins' brown eyes roved from Jenkins to Gudy to Brewster to Connolly to Jack.

Collins looked at the five boys and pointed to his head, then thumped his chest with his fist.

"That's what it comes down to," Collins shouted. "Keep up the full court pressure. Run the offense. Trust yourself and your teammates. Remember the 'Law of the Jungle.' Now let's win this thing. I'm sick and tired of losing to Patton and the damn Miners."

Collins stood and extended a steady right hand forward. The five starters covered it in turn along with Scooter and Lane. The boys standing behind and around Collins closed in tight.

"We are," the team shouted in unison with the surging crowd, "HILLTOPPERS ... WE ARE HILLTOPPERS ... WE ARE HILLTOPPERS."

Because of the foul, the Miners had to take the ball the length of the court, allowing the Toppers to set up their press. To make it more difficult, the Black Hills' basket was on the half court side, away from their bench, making it impossible for the players to hear Patton.

"Jack, Gudy, Brew," Collins shouted as the huddle broke, "because of Jack's fouls he's going to play safety on the press. Brew, you take Gudy's spot at right middle. Gudy, you go to left middle. All right, let's go!"

In the Toppers' two-two-one zone press, the two guards, Jenkins and Connolly, played up front—right front, left front—and attempted either to trap the offensive player who took the inbound pass into either corner or force him to dribble up the sideline. If they succeeded, they tried to deny the long pass by waving their arms and avoiding a foul call. If the ball handler could not find a teammate for the pass, he would be called for a five count for holding the ball too long.

If the offensive player broke through the front trap, it should be down the sideline not the middle of the court, to limit maneuvering and passing angles. At this point, the right middle and left middle defenders—Gudy and Jack—stepped up and tried to trap the ball at the corner formed by the mid-court line and the sideline, forcing a five count or the ten count limit the offense was given to advance the ball past half court. As for the safety, Brewster, he would advance no further forward than half court, keeping an eye on the fifth player and stopping the ball handler from throwing a long

ball past him. The safety roamed a certain degree, but his primary duty was to keep anyone from getting behind him.

Jack played the left middle defender because of his quickness, leaping ability, timing, and good hands. Several times a game, Jack intercepted a pass tossed from the front trap and swooped to the hoop for a basket or passed to an open teammate for a lay up. It was on such a play he picked up his fourth foul. Jack leapt high, snatched an errant pass, and drove to the hole. But Crockett, as swift as Jack, slipped in front of him and picked up the charging foul, forcing Collins to adjust the boys' places in the press to protect Jack.

Due to the suspensions of the four former Rams, the Toppers rotated among the various positions in the press. Brewster moved to right middle when the slower, less athletic Tompkins played, Gudy shifted between right and left middle and safety, and Connolly from front and middle positions. The coaches continued the switches when Jack, Jimmy, P. K., and Bobby returned. Other than Tompkins at safety and P. K. and Jenkins at guard, the Toppers used the slew of interchangeable players to maximum flexibility.

But even with the changes, because of his athleticism, Jack played left middle. As he walked to the backcourt to shadow the Miners' big man, Jack reminded himself not to be too aggressive. He was the safety now, the last line of defense.

After Keck hauled Patton to the huddle, the crusty coach used the timeout to remind the Miners to cut hard, dribble fast, and pass crisp in order to break the Toppers' press. And not take it to the goal unless they had a clean breakaway.

"This ain't the NBA," Patton shouted. "No shot clock. So be patient. Get a good shot or make 'em foul. We have a one-point lead. We're in the bonus. Foul puts you at the line. Remember, as long as we have the lead, the pressure's on them to get the ball back and to score."

Thanks to the timeout and Patton's coaching, the Miners broke the Toppers' press with three quick passes and Crockett crossed half court with Gudy trailing a step behind. Jack dropped back, keeping Crockett and the Miners' center, Kurt Svenson, in front of him until the rest of the Toppers hustled back on defense and picked up their man.

Then the cat and mouse game began.

Crockett passed the ball to the Miners' point guard, a five-foot seven, one-hundred thirty pound watermelon-seed-slick kid named Freddy "Mercury" Morrissey. Jack did not know if the nickname paid homage to Queen's smooth sounding lead singer or the Miami Dolphins running back, Mercury Morris. Or if "Mercury" is what every fast kid is called by his buddies or by a ground-down veteran sportswriter tired of trying to dub jocks with fresh handles. Regardless, the soot-freckled Freddy "Mercury" Morrissey gave opposing teams fits when the Miners went into their slow-down offense.



When Morrissey got the ball, Crockett and the other three Miners ran to the separate corners of the half court, leaving the point guard inside the half-court circle with Jenkins guarding him.

"Four corners," Collins shouted. "Four-corners offense. Stay with your man. Deny the ball. Force the five second call. Don't foul unless I tell you to. Jack, stay with Svenson. Gudy, take Crockett. Brew, pick up the other forward."

The "four-corners" offense was designed to protect leads at the end of games and score, to move the ball within the square, the players in the corner cutting across the middle to free a man for an easy path to the basket or a backdoor pass for a lay up. It ate up clock, wore down the defense, and resulted in easy baskets or fatigue fouls and trips to the line. It required a strong point guard like Morrissey who could make free throws, but the other players needed to be good ball handlers and shooters as well. Morrissey could not dribble the ball for three plus minutes.

The St. Jude crowd, recognizing the four corners, booed.

"Play ball, Patton," the students yelled. "You gutless wonder."

But Jack knew Patton had made the right decision. The Toppers had momentum, closing the Miners' thirteen point lead to one. Out of timeouts, the only way he could hope to get a measure of control back was to slow down the game. Jack figured Patton, hunched at the far end of the Black Hills' bench, leathery paws cupped around his mouth, shouting instructions his players could not hear, knew the issue could not be forced. The game was one the Miners must survive, not go out and win. Patton reveled in the catcalls as the fans grew restless watching the Toppers chase Morrissey and the other Miners around. Better to hear boos than cheers when the Toppers stole the ball off the press and Jack or Gudy slammed home dunks. The old codger, Jack thought, knew how to win a basketball game.

It surprised Jack that Patton kept Svenson in the game; the Swede's presence made it easier for Jack to play strong defense and still avoid a fifth foul. Svenson could neither dribble nor shoot the ball well on the court because he was six-foot nine, two-hundred-fifty pounds. A man among boys, Svenson took up space on defense, clogged the lane, his bulk forcing high fliers like Jack and Gudy to adjust drives, his shoving and leaning taking a toll on Brewster. But he did not score or rebound well; he was a "basketball player" because Patton said so.

At first, the four corners worked to perfection. Morrissey zipped in and out, back and forth, dribbling, cutting, faking drives to the hole and then reversing himself, a gasping Jenkins focused on keeping the slippery guard from slithering past for an easy lay up. After fifteen to twenty seconds, Morrissey gave up the ball to Crockett or any teammate besides Svenson, who dribbled or passed the ball to one another for five to ten seconds before

returning the ball to Morrissey. A minute fell off the game clock like a raindrop from heaven and the frenzied St. Jude fans howled in frustration.

"Deny the pass," Collins shouted at Gudy, Brewster, and Lane the next time Morrissey had the ball in the middle. "Jack ... Jenkins ... Trap the ball. Trap the ball!"

Patton, hearing Collins, jumped up, put two fingers in his lips with one hand and whistled while he waved the other over his head, like a traffic cop trying to get a renegade driver's attention. But Morrissey, back to the Black Hills' bench, could not see him, and the high-pitched whistle was squelched by the Toppers fans hooting and hollering. The guard dribbled hard to the hoop on the right side of the court where Jack stood in the corner keeping his body between Svenson and the ball. Jenkins denied Morrissey a path to the basket and the little man stopped short of the baseline, spun back to his right and shifted the ball to his left hand, expecting to see Jack with Svenson and squirt between them and Jenkins toward the half court line.

But as Morrissey spun, Jack abandoned Svenson, planted his right foot on the base line and spread his left leg wide. Jenkins closed fast from the other side and within a split second they bottled the slick "Mercury" on the baseline.

"One ... two ... three ..." the ref counted, right hand holding a silver whistle in pursed lips, ready to blow, bent left arm swinging from belly button to a right angle, parallel to the floor, away from the hip like an ax blade striking a tree. If he counted to five, the Toppers took possession. Morrissey's eyes searched for an open cutter between Jack and Jenkins' arms and elbows, but Gudy, Connolly, and Brewster stayed on their men, shutting off all hope.

Over in the corner stood the statue-like, blond haired Svenson, arms extended, eyes wide, hands trembling.

"Mercury, Mercury, Mercury," he dry-mouthed, not wanting the ball but compelled by a sense of duty to call for it.

"Four..." the ref roared, left arm slashing.

Morrissey kept his pivot foot in place, ball-faked toward half court then jab-stepped to the baseline, extending his short arms toward the crowd behind the basket and wrapping a short bounce pass around Jack's right leg over to Svenson. The big man bent low, caught the ball, and held it above his head looking, like Morrissey had, for an open man. But Gudy, Connolly, and Brewster had their men covered; Jenkins stayed with Morrissey, and Jack turned and closed fast on Svenson. Jack planted his left leg on the baseline, keeping his body between the center and the basket. Svenson would have to find an open player or dribble the ball up the sideline toward center court, a perilous trip even for an expert dribbler.

"One ... two ..." the ref began again.

Jack thrust his arms to the sky and edged as close to Svenson as he dared without fouling. The Swede's blue eyes bulged, sweat rolled down his flushed face. He could not find an open man, nor call a timeout; he had just one path to freedom.

"Three ..." the ref yelled.

Svenson turned his back to Jack, brought the ball down to his waist, and dribbled with a solid THUMP against the hardwood, shuffling up the sideline, white, size fourteen Converse high tops skimming over the floor wax, eyes on the ball, big body creeping like a man lost in the dark.

THUMP went the ball again and Svenson slid down the line.

The St. Jude fans screamed. The few Black Hills fans in attendance and the entire bench, including Patton, held their collective breath, never having seen the senior center dribble more than a few times in succession during the course of his three year varsity career.

THUMP, THUMP ... Svenson dribbled twice in succession and took a full step forward, his confidence growing.

"Sven!" a sprinting Morrissey shouted, freed from Jenkins by a pick from Crockett.

Svenson, releasing the ball for another dribble, lifted his head and turned a few degrees to see Mercury streak by, arms waving. When Svenson looked up, his huge left foot followed, advancing a few inches.

Svenson lowered both hands to catch the ball as it bounced back up and whip it over to Mercury. But instead of hearing one last reassuring THUMP, Svenson heard a muffled THUD as the leather ball landed on the toe of his sneaker and bounced out of bounds into the hands of a cheering St. Jude student sporting Blues Brother shades, a black fedora, and a too-cool-for-school attitude as he handed the ball to the onrushing ref.

"Toppers' ball," the ref shouted and pointed toward the St. Jude basket.

Svenson clutched his head as he ran down the court. Crockett patted him on the back. Patton kicked the floor. Not so much at Svenson, but at himself for not pulling the big man during the timeout.

"Run the offense," Collins shouted at Jenkins as he took the inbounds pass from Connolly.

Unlike a lot of coaches, Collins did not call timeout to set up a play at the end of a game. He believed this was where good coaching and practice paid dividends, no need to diagram a play and allow the rattled Miners to set up an inbounds defense. The Toppers would either execute their offense as they had been taught or they would not. He could not play the game for them. He would not play the game for them.

"Practices are class; games are tests," he said many times. "And the end of a close game is like a final exam. Let's see how you do when the pressure's on."



Jenkins dribbled the ball toward center court, Mercury Morrissey picking him up as he crossed half court.

Jack and the other boys waited for Connolly to join them, each player taking his position and readying himself for the action to come, hearts revving like the Indy 500 field lining up for the start of the race, waiting for the green flag to drop. Jenkins picked up his dribble at the top of the key and fired a pass to Jack on the right wing. Jack held it strong in triple-threat position, two hands on the ball in shooting position, ready to sink the jumper or pass or dribble penetrate. Crockett was in his face, bouncing, waving his arms, a bundle of nervous energy, determined to block Jack's shot from the wing or drive to the hole.

"Make somebody else beat us," Patton hollered.

Jack jab-stepped and head-faked a few times, but Crockett did not bite, covering Jack like Saran Wrap. Brewster and Gudy each flashed off screens, but neither were open or in a good position to do anything with the ball other than pass it back. The idea of slashing past the overeager Crockett passed through Jack's mind, his street ball, man-on-man instincts ready for the challenge. He glanced at the game clock, 1:20 left, too soon. Jack saw Svenson lurking in the lane, threw a ball fake at Crockett, and whipped the ball to Jenkins at the top of the key, who fired it around the horn to Connolly on the opposite wing. Jack raced into the lane and set a pick for Gudy. Jenkins cut toward the hoop on the right as Brewster set a screen.

And with that, the Toppers cranked up the motion offense, the ball not touching the ground as the players flashed and dashed across and up and down the lane. Jack and Gudy popped out on the wings, Connolly and Jenkins rotated through and back up to the point. Brewster crisscrossed the court, setting picks, pivoting, back to the basket, the big man taking the occasional interior pass, looking for a cutter, throwing a fake at Svenson to keep him honest, set him up for the next play, and then firing the ball to the wing or the key.

A low murmur spread across the bleachers. "Ooohs" and "aaahs" leapt from the standing crowd, appreciative of the contradictory notion of the motion offense; its precision and free-flowing grace playing off one another, the ball be-bopping between boys like a pinball with a purpose. The mesmerized fans, like cool-cat-customers in a jazz club, did not cut loose prolonged cheers or screams. Everyone in the gym, including the Black Hills faithful, was in the moment, admiring the cuts, picks, passes, and brief solos of the Toppers. Brewster's work in the lane, Jack's head and shoulder fakes on the wing, Jenkins taking two quick dribbles into the lane, then popping back, testing, poking, prodding, looking for a crack in the Miners' defense. And the Miners countered, lunging, scrambling. Crockett face-up on Jack, Svenson leaning on Brewster, Morrissey scating back and forth with Jenkins. Their defense flexing but not cracking as the crowd admired the



simple beauty of a well played game, the ten boys dancing around the court in an unscripted ballet, the climax yet to be written, unknown and never to be repeated.

Patton paced and shouted.

Scooter chewed his nails and prayed the rosary.

Lane, decked out in a pearl shaded leisure suit and blue wide-collar shirt, perched on the edge of the bench, fingertips tingling, ready to take the last shot. Always the gunner, confident he would drain it, amazed when the ball did not fall, but with a shooter's self-assurance, certain the next one would.

Collins leaned forward on the bench, elbows on knees, game program in his left hand, gold cross stuck to its sweating palm, brown eyes darting as the ball zoomed around the court, fighting the urge to shout, not wanting to interrupt his players' rhythm, break their concentration.

"Let 'em play," he told himself. "Let 'em play."

As the clock ticked down below twenty-five seconds, Jack weaved his way through the lane one more time, taking a pass from Connolly in the right corner. Crockett fought through Brewster's screen, a step late getting to Jack, but managed to stay close enough to stop Jack from firing. Jack glanced at Crockett's eyes.

"He's gassed," Jack thought.

Jack nodded toward the far corner when he tossed the ball back to Connolly on the wing, faked Crockett to the left, and sprinted toward the hoop, crossing out of bounds over the baseline as Brewster slid toward Jack from the lower block and set a crushing screen on the trailing Crockett. As Crockett sprawled on the floor, Svenson tried to reverse course and stay with Jack.

In full stride, Jack peeled around Brewster, sweaty shoulders sliding against one another, white on black, black on white, hopped back in bounds and raced toward the left corner, free of all defenders. Connolly, who held the ball for a beat after Jack's nod, ball-faked his man to buy Jack time, then cleared it with a blur to Jenkins at the top of the key, who zipped it to Gudy on the left wing, who fired a fastball to the corner.

Jack caught the ball with his right hand and jerked to a halt with a rubber-on-wood squeak. He did not hear the crowd or coaches, or think of his mother vanishing for days at a time, father drinking himself to sleep, or worry about what other people thought, had no cares about winning or losing the game. The sound and fury of life, all the bullshit and white noise of life floated in his wake as Jack propelled forward on his singular, simple mission, his soul lost and found in a few seconds.

Jack pivoted toward the hoop on his right foot, squaring his shoulders to the basket; legs bent at the knees, body strong from Collins' constant conditioning, and pulled the ball to his chest, left hand resting on its side, right hand in shooting position. Although slow as an overloaded grain truck

going uphill, Svenson took one last labored stride, shot his arms in the air, and lunged toward a jumping Jack.

Jack felt the dimples of the leather ball as it rolled off his fingertips at the height of his leap. He watched the ball arc toward the hoop, back spinning like a satellite in the weightlessness of space, reaching its apex, and then tumbling down toward the welcoming white net, landing with a cuuuuuush.

Jack knew it was good the instant the ball left his hand. Knew it without thinking, like a loved baby knows his mother will comfort him when he cries, instinctual, unspoken, understood.

Jack posed for a split-second, right arm extended. Svenson stumbled past and collapsed in uncoordinated sections, knees, chest, hands, alabaster body smacking the beige floor boards with a shuddering thump, while the other players stared at the ball sliding through the net.

The Wreck exploded.

The St. Jude fans jumped and shouted, the Black Hills faithful groaned.

And with that, like an alarm awaking him from a deep sleep, Jack returned to the world. Conscious now of the crowd, the players, and the scoreboard clock ticking down, the game still on.

"Get the ball, get the ball," Patton shrieked.

"Set up the press," Jenkins yelled.

Morrissey snatched the ball as Svenson and Crockett regained their feet.

The Toppers struggled to get to their defensive positions, no one slapping hands or smiling.

Jack started to the left middle, then remembered he was playing safety, and looked up to see Crockett streaking down the opposite side of the court.

"Get back, Jack, get back," Scooter shouted.

The game clock raced towards ten seconds as the ref started the five count on the inbounds pass. Morrissey slid to the left side of the basket, so his pass would not get blocked by the backboard, set his stubby legs and fired the ball over Connolly like a quarterback passing to a wide receiver.

Crockett caught the ball over his right shoulder at the half court line and dribbled toward the left side of the hoop.

Jack, four steps behind and across the court, took an angle that would intercept Crockett in front of the hoop ... if he beat the fleet Miner to the spot.

But Jack saw Crockett throttle down a notch as he approached the basket, Svenson's turnover fresh in his mind, not wanting to take any chances with the ball careening out of bounds.

Jack sprinted toward the hoop. Hearing the thunder of fast-closing footsteps above the din of the crowd, Crockett glanced over his right shoulder and saw the hard charging Jack. He forced himself to dribble faster, racing past the foul line. Crockett went airborne six feet from the basket, the ball in his left hand, left leg raised, rim between Jack and the ball.

Jack took one last bounding stride and leapt towards the hoop, right arm shooting to the sky. Crockett, who decided in mid-flight to lay the ball off the glass, not certain he could dunk with his weaker left hand, was in front and below Jack. He released the ball with a flick of the wrist below the rim, floating it up toward the glass backboard. Jack soared, right elbow even with the basket and tipped the ball before it brushed the board. The ball bounced off the glass, dinged the rim, and fell to the court. Gudy, following the play, grabbed the ball before it went out of bounds and dribbled back and forth across the court, playing keep-away from lunging Miners as the buzzer sounded.

Collins, Scooter, and Lane slapped hands and patted backs with one another and the boys on the bench. Jack, Gudy, and the rest of the starters hopped, hugged, and high-fived. Crockett and Svenson shook Jack and the other Toppers' hands as did Dr. Keck with Collins. But Patton and his assistants turned their backs and double-timed with the rest of the Miners to the locker room. The St. Jude students, vengeance satisfied, poured onto the court.

As the student body bounced and skipped about like young children playing in the rain, Jack stopped to scan the stands for his family, relieved to see Mary Lou clapping and cheering.

Jack smiled.

A comfortable feeling of satisfaction washed over him, leaving him exhilarated, calmed, and surprised. He waved at his family, whooped, and dove into the throng of screaming kids.