I PLEAD IGNORANCE

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(1) Many accomplished athletes have had meager beginnings, and I am no exception. Grade school phys-ed somehow failed to trigger any of my hidden coordination. All nine fielders, including the pitcher, always took ten giant steps forward when I tood a batting stance. When picking teams for kickball, my friends chose me last, that is, if I hadn't cleverly designated myself as official cheerleader. And every day I spent my fifteen-minute recess twirling two jump ropes in circles while two normal ten-year-olds weaved skillfully between them. Nothing, however, confirmed my belief that I would never be a Wheaties box candidate more than my memorable command performance on the Randall School sixth grade girls' basketball team.

(2) With my track record, I can't explain why I was fascinated with basketball. Nevertheless, with the encouragement of both my friends and my overly-zealous father, I tried out and made the team. I had never felt so accomplished in my life.

(3) Coach put me on the "A" squad; we were to play just the first half. Apparently, he believed in giving every scrawny, long-armed girl equal time to demonstrate her finesse. I was a stand-out player, but only because I towered a good seven inches over my opponents. I enjoyed playing my half and then cheering my cohorts on as we won victory after victory. We played hard and fair and, as a result, were contenders for the city championship.

(4) When we arrived at Whiterock Elementary School for our game of games, our troop experienced a mild culture shock.
The school was located in what our textbooks had called the "inner city," and our opponents were Hispanic children--quite a shock for white, middle-class ten-year-olds. We shared our amazement as we dressed, performed our warm-ups, and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner," accompanied by a small mariachi band. And then the game began.

(5) I mechanically tipped the ball to our star forward, who easily made the first basket. After racing to the opposite end of the court to form the defensive line, I turned and watched our opponents maneuver the ball down the court. To say that I was scared would have been an understatement. They were almost as wide as I was tall and had fiery brown eyes that seemed to penetrate my bony existence. I thought they resembled small tanks with little beam lights, slowly progressing down the endless court, ready to devastate anything in sight, including our team. Finally, they made a feeble shot and missed. The crowd roared, and I knew that for the next twenty-one minutes we five were definitely their arch enemies. We battled fiercely for the duration, our good shooting counteracting their rather physical defense. Needless to say, I was relieved when the half-time buzzer interrupted our feud. The score was 22-21, their lead.

(6) My relief, however, was temporary. Eight minutes into the last quarter our "B" string center had been kicked once too hard and had to be escorted off the court. After drilling me on how close the score was, Coach threw me into the game. Immediately, I got the ball, raced to the basket, and, finding myself free of defense, executed a perfect lay-up.

(7) Only it went through the wrong team's hoop.

(8) The gymnasium grew silent for the first time that afternoon. The referee, who desperately tried to explain the implications of my sinful deed, was looking at one stunned
child. No one had told me that the teams switch baskets at half-time. After the other team broke into hysterics, I did what any rational ten-year-old would have done: I cried.

(9) Five minutes later, Coach tore me from the bench and put me back into the game with only a minute left. I hated that man. Regardless, I either went deaf when I held the ball or I was just a slow learner. Either way, I didn't hear the crowd screaming at me to go the other way before I threw the ball.

(10) Once again, my expert shot swished through the wrong team's hoop.

(11) I was glad Dad wasn't there--he would have disowned me. My former friends had reason to be upset, for we lost the game 40-39. Having nothing better to do, I continued crying as the trophy was handed to the laughing girls with the fiery brown eyes.

(12) When I suggested not going back to school for a few months, Mom explained that everyone would probably have forgotten about "it" by tomorrow. Dad told me that even Jabbar did "that" once. And my best friend promised that the team would quit talking about "it" by next season. My brother, however, said "it" was the stupidest thing that he had ever heard. I had to agree with him.