

Dr. Charles W. Eliot, of the "Five Foot Shelf of Classics"

I walk up to the chain-link fence and try to make my presence known.

"Hey Jo-Jo," I yell. Epstein is trying to upfake Hairston, but the big man doesn't bite and swats the shot away like one of Nabokov's *Lepidoptera*. Eliot scoops the ball up and, in a calculated display of Bernoulli's Principle, elevates high above the rim at the other end of the court. Phi Slamma Jamma.



Phi Slamma Jamma

"That's 21," Hairston says with a wag of his finger at Epstein, meaning the game's over. "Three times seven, baby." Rather than letting it go, he continues with the trash talk. "You ever noticed the *leitmotif* of numerology in 'The Magic Mountain'?"

"Yeah, yeah," Epstein says dismissively. "Castorp spends seven years at the *Berghof* in room 34, whose digits add up to seven, and his parents die when he's seven. Joachim keeps a thermometer in his mouth for seven minutes and dies at seven o'clock. The first five letters of Settembrini's name mean 'seven' in Italian. Tell me something I don't know, punk."



Thomas Mann: "I'm picking Princeton to go all the way!"

I love Epstein. You want to have the ball in the hands of a kid like him when you're down by two with ten seconds left.

"You forgot that the Walpurgis Night scene happens after seven months," Hairston says, not giving any ground in this high-brow version of "the dozens." "And 'Castorp' and 'Joachim' both have seven letters . . ."

"Shut up!" Jo-Jo screams, finally snapping in the face of Hairston's logorrhea. He rushes the bigger man and starts to swing at him.



"Hey, hey," I yell as I run onto the court and separate the two. These kids have so little to live for that human life comes as cheap as a midnight screening of a Busby Berkeley musical at a student film society.



Busby Berkeley

“You stupid philistines,” I say to them after they’ve calmed down a bit. “You have no idea what your lives will be like if you can just get out of the ‘hood. You could be driving Volvos, eating Tuscan cuisine, getting MacArthur ‘genius’ grants!”

The two combatants stare down at their shoes for a moment, then extend their hands warily to each other. They shake tentatively, and I open up my bag of tricks.

“Look what I got for you,” I say as I pull out *The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe* and hand it to Jo-Jo. “I know you got that Elizabethan Jones.”



Christopher Marlowe, wearing Timberwolves road warm-up jacket.

His eyes light up like Catherine wheels. “Jeez,” he says. “Thanks, man.”

“What you got for me, coach?” Eliot asks.

“Take a look at this,” I say as I hand him a brown hardback. It’s a slightly used volume 9 from the Harvard Classics, the one with Pliny the Younger’s *Letters* in it.

“Oh, wow,” he says. “We’ve been missing this for, like years.”

"I found it in the Porcellian Club," I say. "They were using it as a doorstep."

"What a bunch of losers," he says as he walks off, his nose deep in Cicero's "On Old Age."

"And you, my man," I say to Hairston. "You ready for this?"

"Hit me."

I hand him a DVD of Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*. I know he's been talking to Yale and Stanford, but something tells me he's mine now.



"Man-this is incredible," Jamaal says, visibly moved. "You know the dream scene?"

"Does Heinz know pickles?" I ask rhetorically. This is a kid who was reading Aristotle's *Rhetoric* when he was a five-foot CYO All-Star, so he catches my drift, and gives me a big hug like we just won our first NCAA championship. Which we're going to.

"You're the greatest," he says.

"You got that right," I say, giving him the sly smile that has produced top ten recruiting classes three years running, according to the Hoopscout.com and *The American Scholar*. It's time to close the sale, so I put my arm around him and draw him apart from the others.

"You know, uh, national letter of intent day is coming up soon," I say. "Isn't it about time you took care of things?"

He hangs his head and hesitates before speaking. "You know, my momma went to Yale," he says a little sheepishly.

“So? My momma went to Miss Finch's Finishing School. Don't mean I gotta go there.”

“She says it's up to me, but—well—you know how it is.”

I can't believe it. After plying this kid with Harvard sweatshirts, Hewlett Packard graphing calculators and opera tickets for three years—he's gonna shaft me.

“Well, she says it's up to you. Where do *you* want to go?”

“You know, I've always liked the West Coast style of play,” he says. Uh-oh. He's been smoking Stanford weed. “An up-tempo transition game. ‘Showtime.’ Raymond Chandler, John Steinbeck . . .”



Raymond Chandler

“Jamaal, you got it all wrong. A big man like you needs to be on the East Coast. You're a grinder, not a gazelle.”

“Yeah, but I'm tired of being pushed around on the low block. I'm black and blue after every game.”

Sounds like a case of Magic Johnson envy. This will take every ounce of phony-baloney sincerity I've got. How do you deflate a kid's foolish dream without crushing his spirit?

“Listen, kid. Lemme tell you about another East Coast guy who tried the West Coast thing. You ever hear of Scott Fitzgerald?”



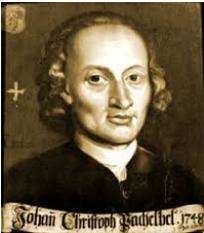
Scott Fitzgerald

“Princeton, right?”

“On the nose. After Bill Bradley, the most prolific scorer in school history. Was a copywriter in New York, then hit it big with ‘This Side of Paradise.’ MGM calls and he starts cranking out screenplays that never get produced. He ends up bitter, mocking himself as a Hollywood hack in ‘The Pat Hobby Stories.’”

“Gee,” Hairston says, a little deflated. I can see I’ve got him thinking. “Maybe you’re right. Stanford is a long way from home.”

Jamaal rubs his chin, and I can tell he’s about to say “yes” when I hear an obnoxious car horn blow the opening bars of Pachelbel’s *Canon*. It’s my worst nightmare—Jerry “Playground” Jarman, Yale’s “Director of Scouting.” He pulls up in his Saab 9-X BioHybrid, and suddenly the players have something on their minds besides hoops.



Pachelbel: Never seen in same room with Steve Nash—coincidence?

“Get a load of that ride,” Epstein says.
“Talk about reducing CO2 emissions, baby!” Eliot chimes
in.

“Hey, dawgs,” Jarman says as he gets out. “What up?”
I’ve got to move quickly if I want to keep Hairston.
“Jamaal, I’ve got a pen . . .”

But it’s too late. Jarman has caught the kids’ eyes with
some major bling—Margaret Mead silver and diamond pendants,
straight outta “Coming of Age in Samoa.”

“You maggot,” I snarl at my rival.

“Hey,” he says as he hands out financial aid forms. “I
don’t make the rules—I just play the game.”

*Available in Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection
“The Veritas About Harvard.”*

