



"It's the round thing with the net on it."
— various generations of Sapones

Ten Seconds in Oracle Arena by Dan Sapone

So, on this particular afternoon, I'm sitting on my usual barstool at *The Flying Pig Bistro* in The Mission District of San Francisco, sipping a Sonoma County Zinfandel with my BLT (delicious on fresh Focaccia), when a guy walks into The Pig, strides up to the bar, looks up at the big TV screens and says loudly to nobody in particular, "OK, so it's baseball season, right? What've we got here — Giants fans? A's fans? What?"

Like the others on the bar stools, I turned to look — at first annoyed that someone had so loudly interrupted our conversation, but then ... I recognized him ...



Believe it or not, the last time I saw this guy was here at *The Pig* during last Fall's World Series. At that time, we came to an agreement on a "Who Cares" assessment of the World Series — for three reasons: 1) My Giants weren't in it; 2) the (hated) Dodgers were representing the National League in the Series; and 3) The Red Sox represented the American League. (I grew up associating The Red Sox with "The Curse of the Bambino," which forever labeled them as the stupidest organization in history because they traded Babe Ruth to The Yankees in 1920.) So, I could easily have rooted *against* either team but, there was nobody to root *for* in that World Series. Hence: "Who cares?"

So, while I appreciated this guy from last Fall — I wanted to tell him (before he sat down at the bar and got comfortable) "Look, I know it's baseball season and all, but LOOK, with the Giants in last place and the Warriors in the Western Conference Finals, it is definitely BASKETBALL season today at this bar. *Capiché?*"

OK, you'd be right to observe that such an outburst would have been rude and I had never started a bar fight before; but before I could open my mouth another guy beat me to it and blurted, "Baseball didn't used to be boring but today, it is, don't you think? And, not only because the Giants are in last place right now. The big story is that the Warriors are about to thrash the Portland Trailblazers in a few minutes, so THAT'S what today is about."

All of us at the bar held our collective breath waiting for this guy's reaction. After a moment of reflection, he discreetly declared, "Of course, you're right. Today is about the Warriors." Then he changed the subject. "So, I hear you've got some beer on tap here, eh? And what's good to eat here — besides the Portland Trailblazers, of course?" The collective exhale at the bar signified that this guy was gonna be OK; so I offered him the barstool next to me and he took his place. Game on. From behind the bar, William — one of the proprietors — answered his question, "The whole menu's worth a try — we've got a great chef. The French Dip is juicy, the Reuben is popular, and the BLT is my Dad's current favorite."

"Your Dad?" Will pointed at me and I greeted the new guy warmly, as did Karl and James on adjacent bar stools. He introduced himself as Russel.

"Welcome. Around here they call me PapaDan, This is Karl. This is James. Behind the bar we've got Ben and Will — they own the place and they've got the best selection of local craft beer in The Mission District. And don't worry, we're not expecting any Portland fans here today." (I said this quietly and pretended to look over my shoulder).

My son Ben, one of the proprietors, instructed me quietly that we don't want to piss off any customers who happen to be from up north. "They are good customers; they'll buy plenty of beer — even if it's just to drown their sorrows. OK?" I nodded my head in agreement. His brother Will, the other proprietor, chimed in, "The game starts in a few minutes, so what'll you have? Can I pour you a KBS stout?" Will always seems to know the right thing to say.

We agreed to keep our voices down on sensitive subjects and we ordered another round. I accepted another glass of Zin; Karl and James each had another Fieldwork IPA. The "new guy" turned out to have a refined taste in local craft beers — when he ordered an Altamont Maui Wauai IPA — a number of heads turned in admiration and nodded approval.

Russel started again, "So, you guys are all Warrior fans, eh?"

I explained, "Yes, I grew up right here in the Bay Area watching the Warriors since back in the early sixties. So, they're like family. So, Russel, are you from around here?"

"Well, no. I .. uh ... " he took a deep slug of his IPA and announced, "I grew up in Portland."

Each of us suddenly took an intense interest in the drink in front of us. To break the silence, Ben showed up and delivered Russel's BLT. His bartender's wisdom dictated that he change the subject again. "So, you grew up in a place famous for both beer and wine. Heck, we've got some wine from your Willamette Valley right here. Have you got a favorite?"

"Sure, uh ... " He noticed the bottle in front of me and dutifully reported, "The Zin is excellent."

So, the new guy settled onto a bar stool, raised his glass, and declared: "Now that all of that foolishness is over, it's now officially basketball season. Pour me another one of these, will you, barkeep? And I'm thikin' PapaDan is gonna need another glass of that Zin pretty soon, dontchathink?" I liked this guy. He turned out to be a knowledgeable basketball fan — an admirable quality — who appreciated the exuberant style that the Warriors offered. With Steph Curry and his buddies warming up on the screen in front of us, and his Portland Blazers warming up across the court, we found we had a number of things in common.



We agreed on three fundamental things:

Thing One That Warrior basketball was fun.

— When Steph Curry hit one of his “downtown” three-pointers, he would dance across mid-court waving his arms, not so much to call attention to himself, but to say “Look at US, all of us. We know how to have a good time out here!” Warrior fans took his jubilation to be inclusive — “We’re all having fun, aren’t we?” He was right; and those of us sitting at these bar stools were part of his “We”; especially in the comfortable atmosphere of The Flying Pig. The Warriors were proud of their unselfish approach to the game. When Steph gets in his ‘zone’ and can’t miss, other players get him the ball and get out of his way. When Klay Thompson threatens to break an all-time NBA record for three-pointers in a single game, they make sure he is the target of their typical passing barrage beyond the three-point stripe. And when the rest of team gets into a cold snap, they cheer Kevin Durant when he takes the ball himself the length of the court and dominates the game at both ends. They’re here for each other and that attitude rubs off on the fans in the arena and at the other end of the TV screen. Warrior basketball is about “us.”

Thing Two: The conversation settled on another topic of agreement: NBA officials are terrible ... Some of them demonstrate that “they don’t know the game.” I chimed in with my usual preposterous theory: “I think there’s a corporate conspiracy in the NBA to create ‘artificial parity.’ You know, they want the league to look like a collection of equals. They hate it when a team comes long and wins three championships in four years and they REALLY hate it when a playoff series doesn’t last seven games. It costs the league advertising money; so they try to make the Warriors lose.” Heads nodded all around. So, without evidence, we Warrior fans have a built-in excuse when things go wrong. There are probably other reasons that the Warriors typically shoot half as many free throws as their opponents, but we were generally happy with this explanation.

Thing Three: We agreed that The Portland Trailblazers had gotten this far by relying on fundamentals, more so than the Houston Rockets. Karl: “I’m glad we disposed of the damn Rockets. They were a bunch of bullies and fakers. I was getting tired of all that ‘flopping and whining’ and the refs were falling for it. In the end, they only got one out of five and they were lucky to get that one.” Heads nodded all around. Finally, somebody had to ask, “So, is this going to be a sweep or what? Do you think these Blazers can win a game? Heck, their best player, Damian Lillard, grew up in Oakland. So, ... ”

Fortunately, Will ended what sounded like the start of an argument: “Look they’re tipping off.” So, the game proceeded without any barfights. And, it turned out that both teams focused on defense. The Warriors kept the ball away from Lillard and the Blazers found a way to avoid the Warriors screens and didn’t give Curry many wide-open threes. With Durant out, the Warrior bench got significant minutes and scoring was spread among nine different players. Neither Thompson nor Curry were able to dominate. As the fourth quarter wound down, Curry had 19, Thompson had 17, Lillard had 15, Curry and Thompson stayed out of foul trouble, and nobody got a technical. When Steve Kerr called timeout with ten seconds left, the Blazers led 94-92.

The Final Ten Seconds

The shot clock is off; the game clock reads:



10:0 — Draymond Green receives the inbound pass in front of the Warrior bench.

9.0 — Steph Curry receives the ball at the top of the circle from Draymond. Looney sets a screen for Steph, who immediately puts the ball on the floor, forcing the Blazers to switch as Steph starts his dribble left and forward — leaving Lillard alone one-on-one with Curry for the first time tonight. The Oracle crowd is on its feet, they've seen this move before and they know what's coming.

8.0 — Lillard takes a step back, arms wide, feet in a low stance. Steph continues to dribble, takes a step back with a head fake — causing Lillard to draw his feet closer together, preparing to jump to contest a long three-pointer.

7.0 — Steph crosses the dribble to his left and immediately crosses again, right and forward.

6.0 — The other four Warriors spread wide left and right, drawing four defenders closer to each of them. None of the Blazers wants his man to be the one to receive the pass breaking to the rim for the winning bucket.

5.0 — Steph, now isolated with Lillard, takes one behind-the-back dribble to his left, leaving Lillard slightly off balance, momentarily leaning the wrong way. As Lillard recovers to his left, one more dribble to his right gives Curry the space he wants for the shot, but his dribble, initiated with his taped left hand, is a bit too wide right, costing him an additional 0.4 seconds to regain control. The Oracle crowd makes sounds that are a mixture of groans and cheers — again, they've seen this before.

3.6 — Two more dribbles forward and to his right gives Steph the space he hopes will leave him free for the jump shot that would win the game.

2.0 — Curry leaves his feet straight up, as does Lillard extending his right arm as high as it will stretch to contest the shot. Lillard has a few inches of height on Curry, so he has reason to hope his fingers may deflect the shot. Curry's flawless follow through rolls the ball along the length of his fingers and the ball spins backwards, clearing Lillard's fingers by a fraction of an inch, as Curry returns to his feet and watches the path of the ball to its inevitable meeting with the rim (that is, "the round thing with the net on it," as my granddaughter Quinn calls it).

1.0 — The ball travels in its usual perfect arc to its height midway to the basket.

0.0 — On its way down, the horn sounds, ending the game, one way or another. The shot left his hand before the horn, so it will count if it splashes. The crowd, of course, has seen two possible outcomes from scenes like this many times; so, they can't be sure if it will splash or clank. They had to wait and see. So, they wait.

OK. And, that's where we leave them. I promised to give you ten seconds at Oracle Arena0, and so I did. As with all basketball games, reading the story, or even hearing the outcome, is not sufficient. You have to see it, feel it, and be there with other people who are feeling it, don't you? There are so many moving parts and not all of them are physical and not all of them are on the basketball court. Some of those moving parts are on bar stools in *The Flying Pig*, or in other places where basketball fans gather with their favorite libations. Maybe that's one of the reasons basketball is superior to other sports, as it certainly is.

As we can imagine, after the outcome was dissected and summarized, Russel, PapaDan, Karl, James, and, behind the bar, Ben and Will, said their goodbyes, nodded their respect, and exchanged "see you next time"s. Cash was placed on the bar and each basketball fan made their way to a car, a BART train, or a taxi, and the night was complete. Meanwhile, the Warriors were on another bumpy road to another championship. Of that, most of us can be certain, mostly. But the road has to pass through some uncertain terrain, even if we think we know where it's going to end up. I can assure you — my team will continue to be a winner ... as will yours.