

Professional Basketball: Living the High Life?

It was 2004. With only 16 seconds left in our game against Real Madrid the coach finally noticed me. I was 19 at the time and more than a little nervous . . .

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So I took a deep breath, peeled off my sweatshirt and ran onto the court. Someone passes me the ball near the sidelines. A fake, and I

dribble towards the hoop. But the Real Madrid center crashes into me. Mama mia, how that hurt! A personal foul. Two free throws. They both go in. Whew! I relax as the buzzer sounds. The game's over. I glance up at the scoreboard. What a beating they've given us! But if my grandfather Enrique, who used to drive me to my games, could see me now, how happy he would be....

Well at least my first game as a guard on the CB de Granada team is over. But I still don't know if my dream of playing in the first division will become a reality. I tell myself "Be careful, don't let this go to your head." I gather up my gear and get onto the bus. The people passing by look up at us as though we were important. They seem to be saying: "Look at those tall guys.... they must be living the high life!"

But no. Our life is not all that remarkable. We are brought back to reality when we try to get our legs comfortable on the bus. My problem is small compared with the team center, who at six foot eleven has to scrunch his legs between the seats. The truth is that, at six foot three, I don't stand out among my teammates.

On the bus some foolish thoughts start running through my head: "You've just played against Real Madrid, and now all the girls will adore you and you'll be famous." So I turn my thoughts back to that game when I was just starting out as a basketball player.

I remember it quite well. There was a lot of tension in the stands. Parents were yelling, children running around and the coach shouting on the sideline. I was on the bench, watching a boy who seemed to be

playing defense without much intensity. Losing my temper, I shouted out, annoyed at his laziness: “But you’re useless out there!” In the stands, a girl jumped up: “What do you mean useless? That boy isn’t bad at all. Have you really been watching?” Surprised, I couldn’t think of anything to say to her. Since I’ve never liked arguments. I sank down on the bench while my face turned red.

A number of games went by. At the age of 14, I was named the outstanding player in Granada and I went to collect the prize. I was very nervous... and very happy. As were my parents. As I came down from the stage, that same girl appeared again. “Well, well, And you’re the one they gave the prize to? Oh, well...” Two things were clear: that I was turning red again, and that that girl . . . had character.

It turned out that Julia (the name of that strong and decisive girl) also played basketball (in fact, better than I did). Over time we got to know one another quite well, due to our shared interests, and in the end I fell in love and we were engaged. Meanwhile, my life was becoming quite hectic. I made a trip throughout the U.S.A. Back in Spain, I decided to start studying business, combining this with many hours of training and traveling to different cities. My coach advised me: "Calm down Gonzalo. Take your time. Practice once a day and go to your classes. This is a long road and you've just begun it."

At that point in time, I thought crises in sports were something personal, that one had to be strong alone... But Julia's mother taught me a lot when she became sick and died of cancer: we live for others, both in suffering and in joy. We aren't born or die alone.

I kept asking myself “How is it possible for my fiancée’s mother to accept the suffering each day brings her with such joy.” I couldn’t understand it. In her sickness, Julia’s mother lived the “God of little things.” It was there in her smile, her welcoming presence. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s easy and hard to put into words....

Eventually I came to realize that it was the Christian spirit of Opus Dei that she reflected. For me, God was only present at Sunday Mass and in the big moments of my life: when the ball went into the basket, when we won the game.... And there, in that home, with my bedridden future mother-in-law, I discovered that, even if you are tall and strong, God is with you because you are a small and needy child.

So now, I too am in Opus Dei, and I am trying to carry out my coach’s

advice in little things, and in others as important as getting to daily Mass or having married, a month ago, that girl with character.

I'm now 24, and no longer have tattoos on my arms, but my sneakers have printed on them the words "All for you." It was there even before I got married. I use it to explain to my teammates that we are playing another game with much higher stakes: the championship of eternal Life.

In the end I know that life has its ups and downs...but we have a God who became man for us 2000 years ago, and who I now try to stay close to, while continuing to enjoy traveling with the team on the bus, listening to music, celebrating victories.... And oh! Since I've been in the Work, whenever I'm on the court, I look for a guardian angel sitting in the stands, with his legs crossed and holding a

banner saying: “Still enjoying the game, and enjoying Life. Your grandfather, Enrique... who is with God.”

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