

By Jonathan Sapers

## *If you've always been a hacker, why would you want to be like Mike?*



There are two kinds of people in the world: those who play sports and those who excel at sports. The men I know who belong to the former group keep trying to join the latter group. We're unable to relinquish the fond hope that one day our aging limbs will miraculously become well coordinated.

Take me, for example. I play basketball. I know I stink but I can't stop. I've been bad for years. In grammar school, I actually went the wrong way on the court and took a shot at the wrong basket. (It didn't go in.) In high school, I was the sixth man on a five-man team. If any of the starters had gone down, they would have forfeited the game rather than put me in. In college, I played regular pickup games with an oddball assortment of varsity football and lacrosse players and once broke my right index finger; I think I stepped on it. I'm now nearly 35 years old and play with a group of over-40 lawyers on Thursday nights.

Basketball is the ultimate hacker sport. I can rebound and I can score occasionally, but I am basically a body in the lane, the preferred hacker position. It is possible to have a career in the hacking game. The injuries you get are minor: broken noses, turned ankles, jammed fingers. Real athletes—and some of them do condescend to join us from time to time—always seem to have serious injuries. The two real athletes who play with us have injuries that are whispered about. Something's wrong with their Achilles tendon, or their eye sockets or their calf muscles—something serious, we're not quite sure what.

A hacker can get away with the most outrageous bonehead plays merely because he is conforming to expectations. I seem to have a predilection for behind-the-back buffoonery. I once tried a behind-the-back pass that (surprise!)

ended up in the hands of a kibitzer on the sidelines. Another time I got the ball down the court, jumped up uselessly and executed a nifty behind-the-back pass to no one.

Until recently, I was reconciled, more or less, to being mediocre for life. Then my wife, Cristine, put the two of us on a fast-walking routine, and I started playing tennis every day. Suddenly, my hand-eye coordination got better and my legs got stronger. "I bet this will help your basketball game," said Cristine.

She was right. I began to show flashes of real talent. I acquired a feel for the game I never had before. I made the right moves without thinking about them. I developed a shooter's touch. In one game, I took three consecutive shots from beyond the three-point line and got nothing but net each time. Even before the last one went in, I turned and started running nonchalantly back up court. Hey. Be like Mike.

I'll never forget my best game. That feeling of being in what players call a "zone" started almost immediately. I had the ball to the right of the key with my back to the basket. Long Arms was covering me. I tried a hook shot. I heaved the ball against the backboard rather than arching it, but it went in. Everyone laughed, including me.

I went back on defense and Long Arms tried to take me down low. I blocked his shot. He tried another one and I blocked that one, too. "I didn't think you'd get it," he said.

On offense again, I found myself leading the break, dribbling. I hesitated. When you're over six feet tall in the hack game, you're not supposed to handle the ball. You're supposed to know your place, and your place is down low. I dutifully passed off, maneuvered into the key and scored off a feed. But the next time down, I felt confident. I shot off the dribble without hesitation and

the ball swished in. Someone shouted, "Trash!" It was the ultimate compliment—or at least I thought it was until the end of the game, when Corner Shooter asked me if I'd been to basketball camp over the summer.

The next game started out the same way. I pulled down a rebound and hit a turn-around jumper. A pass came to my man to the right of the key. I dove for it but I didn't get it. Something gave in my left calf. I went down, and when I got up, I couldn't walk. Someone took my place. Corner Shooter brought me some ice. I had never had anyone bring me ice before. "You probably tore it," said Athlete One. I was thrilled. At last, a serious injury.

I was out for two weeks, and during that time all I could do was worry about whether I still had it. For my return, I sported an ace bandage wrapped conspicuously around my calf. Corner Shooter was impressed. "Nice," he said.

Back in my customary place down low, I felt good. Nothing had changed. The basket was mine. Less mobile New Guy edged into my territory. I was going to take him—but I dropped the ball. A moment later, *Bang!* I reverberated off New Guy's pick like a gonged cartoon character. I decided it was time to make my move. I loped down the court like a gazelle and lofted a shot. Air ball. "That was a pass," I joked.

Humbled, I fought for a rebound under the basket and went up for the easy putback. No problem. *Clank!* It banged off the rim.

So I stink again. Actually, I'm kind of relieved. I'm a hacker. Who can argue with destiny? Besides, I discovered early on in my temporary transformation that excellence isn't all it's cracked up to be. There's too much pressure.

Be like Mike? No thanks. I'd rather be like me.