

*The Origins
of the
Jump Shot*

*Eight Men
Who Shook
the World of
Basketball*

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Kenny and Bud

At six-five, Bud Sailors was the tallest human being most of the folks on the High Plains around tiny Hillsdale, Wyoming, had ever seen. Since his sophomore year in the Hillsdale Consolidated District, with only forty students in the entire school, Bud had been a basketball-court Gulliver. Following Coach Floyd Domine's directions to "hold the ball up high and just shoot," teammates and opponents scrapped and struggled at his feet.

His occasional habit of lowering the ball to his hips where opponents could swat it away from him needed correction, and Coach Domine encouraged Bud to work on the flaw on his own time, over the spring and summer before his senior year.

So it was in May 1934 that Bud approached Domine in the Hillsdale gym. "I would sure like to have a basketball to practice with," he told his coach.

Domine picked up one of the loose basketballs. "Where?"

"We got a hoop we're gonna put up on the windmill."

The wooden windmill of the Sailors 320-acre farm, four miles south of Hillsdale, was visible for miles around. All winter long, Bud had been planning to nail together a backboard and then hang it off the windmill.

"If we can have a ball," Bud explained, "we'll practice there."

"We?"

"Me and Kenny."

Domine nodded. He knew Bud's little brother Kenny well. He was the best of the pack of half-a-dozen sixth and seventh graders

from his throat at the same time he drew an imaginary bow across his forearm. "Go practice in the barn!"

It was no better in the barn, and while Kenny sawed away with flagging interest, Bud decided after two months that he could stand it no longer. He also knew that despite Kenny's faithful daily practices, his little brother's heart wasn't in it.

"Kenny's no violinist," Bud told his mother. She had to agree, and the violin was sold in order to buy Kenny a single-shot, bolt-action .22, which he used to hunt jackrabbits and ground squirrels. His reputation as a deadly shot quickly spread to other farms, and by the spring of 1934, when Bud Sailors was dickering with his coach for a basketball, Kenny Sailors was earning a nickel apiece from farmers for every ground squirrel he picked off foraging along the edges of cornfields.

Once Bud got the basketball from his coach, he and Kenny sawed and then nailed flat boards to two-by-fours laid out on the ground. They fixed a netless hoop to the makeshift backboard, then marked the exact ten-foot height on the wooden windmill columns. Because the old windmill had a slight pyramid shape topped by the mill blades, they had to hang the backboard out using two-by-sixes to get it perpendicular to the ground.

Their first one-on-one games occurred in May 1934 in the fading afternoon light. They were lopsided affairs during which Kenny dribbled with the same keep-away skill he had developed in Hillsdale. The dribble permitted him to control the ball at will until the other pursuing hound dogs jumped him out of frustration in order to get the ball. Still a foot taller than his brother, Bud's strategy was merely to sit back and wait until Kenny's spins and turns had taken him to within range of the basket, when he had to stop and collect himself to shoot.

Actually shooting was part of the game that seemed to Kenny secondary to the performance of dazzling dribble escapes and jack-rabbit dodges. Shooting wasn't something he had concentrated on, and each time he got within range he heaved the ball at the basket

with a crude lunge. But each time, Bud was standing there with his arms outstretched, to slap the ball back in Kenny's face.

"That's a foul, that's a foul!" Kenny would holler.

Bud laughed. "There's no blood, there's no foul."

On offense, Bud was too tall and slow to execute clever fakes or drives around his quick smaller brother, so he backed his way into the basket, pushing Kenny across the dirt, even if he set his feet and tried to hold his ground. Because of the soft surface of pea gravel and sand, Bud had to hammer the ball onto the ground to keep his dribble. When he finally turned to face the basket, he practiced holding the ball high, exactly as his coach had insisted, while Kenny jumped and swiped the air and Bud easily pushed the shot into the basket.

On hot days they would pause for drinks, putting their dry lips to the mouth of the water pipe running ice cold well water into the stock tank just to the east side of the windmill.

"Well," Bud teased while Kenny drank, "it looks like you're not big enough to shoot over me."

When it was Bud's turn to drink, Kenny studied his big brother, who had to scrunch himself down to get his lips to the pipe.

How could these two be brothers? Side by side they looked unrelated, the one tall and deliberate in each of his movements, the other darting and spontaneous. Now and again Bud would call Kenny "little runt." But it was only good-natured teasing that could never undo the kinship of trying to make things easier for their mother. They had that in common, and at least one other similarity. They could both jump. For as long as Bud could remember, his long, wiry legs seemed to have the bounce of leaf springs. But he had had it pounded into his head by his coach Floyd Domine that you never left the floor in basketball, *you never jumped*. Except to snatch a rebound, you kept your feet on the floor and counted on both arms and your shoulders to propel the shot. If that hadn't been a basketball commandment as rigid as what he heard in church, Bud Sailors could have leaped up effortlessly and merely dropped the ball into the basket like a piece of fruit.

Bud never challenged his coach, largely because he could get his

shot off *without* jumping. Then, too, if the pure joy of leaping was the issue, there had always been the sport of track and field where he could exercise his talent. As a junior, he was the best high-school high jumper in Wyoming, and it was a good bet that as a senior he would break the state record.

When Bud finished his drink that warm day in May, he invited Kenny to resume the one-on-one with the challenge, "Let's see if you can get a shot up over me."

Kenny's mother's homily about perseverance was still fresh in his mind. Meanwhile, he had already suffered too many losses, already been knocked down too many times not to get up again, *way up*—exactly the way his brother could high jump. The pause for the drink had given Kenny time to set it in his mind: *I can shoot over him if I can get up in the air.*

Minutes later, Kenny tried the first shot. It came at the end of a long and apparently aimless course of dribbling and circling. Bud stepped back and watched with awe, because his little brother's talent was spectacular. The ball seemed fixed to the rapid flutter of his hand by an invisible rubber band. But Bud also couldn't help but watch with amusement, because it was all useless dazzle. When Kenny finally decided to shoot, Bud was confident he could slap the ball away easily, just as he had always done.

Then Kenny stopped suddenly and jumped. For a moment, Bud stood watching as if he were transfixed by the surprising sight of his brother rising high in the air. Then Bud realized it was not a pointless, acrobatic leap. It was the prelude to a shot! But before he could close and bat the shot away, the ball was sailing over his long arms.

Much later, Bud would laugh deeply and insist that his little brother's first awkward jump shot hadn't reached the backboard, or even hit the windmill. But the minute he shot it, Kenny Sailors watched it sail away, for once free of the leather *swack* of Bud slapping it aside, and his only thought was: *This is a shot I can do something with!*

~~That summer, Bud heard about a job working for forty cents an hour on the railroad. It sounded like a chance to earn cash for the farm,~~