Shelton´s Give-and-Go

When he walked the ball up the court and turned his back to the basket around the freethrow line, good things were going to happen. I always headed out on the wing instead of down low where I normally played. He always saw it, and delivered the ball to me. I passed it right back and headed for the hoop. A step-and-a-half from the basket, the ball always came to my hands, almost softly between the waist and the chest. A fourth grader could make the layup, and I was almost always that good. It was Shelton´s give-and-go.

Everybody saw it. Shelton running the offense in the high post—a thing of beauty, the essence of the game, give-and-go. When it was working well he would hook it over his head into the perfect stop. If we played indoors, he might bounce pass it behind his bac. It still came to my hands perfectly. We would all whoop at his show. Just too much.

He was our Magic Johnson, the 6-foot-8 all-everything Los Angles Laker who carried a huge smile, looked like a power forward and had the point guard touch.

We didn´t get to play on the same team much. In our oldman´s lunch games we were big guys. He was about 5-10 and could move, a good rebounder. I was 6-1, usually a center. Even with a three-inch advantage, he could always post me up. Close to the hoop, his back to it, he would back into me, bump my chest, take a half-step away, and turn around falling away with a shot he didn´t usually miss. I knew it was coming and still couldn´t get a hand on the ball. My only chance was to reach over him before he could fade. Usually, it required a foul. We called our own on ourselves. I once called three on myself in a row trying to stop his shot. I think he missed his shot on the fourth go around.

We were on odd group, lots of lawyers, a couple Jewish guys, two Italians, a Greek, a Pilipino, a couple of Chinese guys, a Columbian, a German once in a while, another black guy from work, Mormons later on, and Mary, the best rebounding off-guard we ever had. The Mormons got us into their indoor gym some weeks, and the games got faster and smoother. Before that we played on asphalt high school courts outside until we got kicked off.

Shelton handed out nicknames. Victor Woo was VW and later Vee dub. Zack Mastrionokis was Doctor Z. He had a swooping move to the hoop that was lovely to see.

There a quarterback who played for Grambling, the premier black sports university. He had a great outside shot that took forever to unwind. If he got the ball, it never came back and was a hoop or a rebound. A Jewish lawyer did the same thing, but his shot was this awkward mashup launched from the neck-chest. We let him miss it, and his teammates got used to keeping it from him. But eventually the damn thing started going in. We put Mary on him.

Keith worked with us and was a real greyhound, long strides and very fast once he got going. He was tall and could jump better than any of us. I often had to guard him. He loved to run the whole court and lay it up. Often, I saw where he was headed and got there first. He would look up mid-stride, be surprised and plow into my chest at full speed. He called every collision a foul on him. I didn´t mind sliding on indoor wood floors and managed to stay mostly on my feet outdoors.

Keith did me a big favor once. There was this slopping lawyer who didn´t know where he ended and others began. He fouled everybody and never called one on himself. Nobody liked guarding him. At the end of a game, a bad one for me, he plowed full speed into my back when I got the ball. I turned around, threw the ball at him and put him in a headlock. Keith, who was guarding me, saw everything. He threw himself on top of the pile of me and lawyer and just stuck out his arms and legs. It was enough, perfect in fact. We all got up. Nobody hurt. I thanked Keith for doing just the right thing even though I still hated the lawyer.

Back at the office this nothing incident was big gossip. These were the days of OJ and Rodney King. The ballplayers didn´t talk much about it, to me anyway. B ut it took some bit of everyday courage to navigate being black at work, even in airy fairy Marin County, home the New Age, Crystals, acid, Peace, Love, Freedom and everyday extreme wealth.

Shelton had basketball skills. What separated him for everyone else was his understanding of the game, love of the play, ball movement, cooperation, elegance. He often carried the Magic smile, almost always on the court. But one day in the locker room something was bothering him. “What?” I asked.

“Women.”

“What about them?”

“I met one last weekend. We talked. We danced. She was good looking. I thought she liked me.”

“And?”

“I am asking her if she wants to go home, and she starts talking about money. You know. How much.”

“Oh fuck.”

“I know. You just don,t know these days.”

There was one thing I never forgot about Shelton. It happened suddenly, unconsciously and affected me more than I could have imagined.

We couldn´t get enough people for a game every day. I went out to read on one of these days, and these three high school guys on bikes start yelling shit at me like I am a homeless guy or something. A am maybe 50 with a beard and long hair. They wouldn´t shut up. I threw stones at them. Yeah, I know, real mature.

It didn´t matter. These were suburban white boys in the richest county in California—assholes. So, I drive them away with stones, walk to the shopping mall´s covered parking lot and watch. They are still cruising around looking for it, for me. OK. I chase the biggest one down while he is turning his little bike around. “Hey, I´m calling the cops,” he whines. I just didn´t want them to not pay a little something. I should have stomped in the spokes of the little bike. I know. I know. Not wise.

Anyway, weeks later we have a game on the high school courts. When it ends, we file out to the cars. I am the last one to leave when something very heavy like a junkyard dog hits the chain-link fence around the court. It shakes and rattles. There are screams, shouts. It is the bicycle punks from the mall. Two of them are halfway up the 12-foot fence yelling and shaking the thing. It is a freakout. They don´t really want to fight. Just rattle the cage, but I´m not expecting it.

I´m trying to figure out if this is going to be a big fight or what. Barely sensing something just behind me, I make a half turn. It´s Shelton. He´s got my back. I´m not used to it. This is wonderful. The asshole punks fade from thought. Some kind of glow replaces them.

I´m sure he didn´t think about it, but later I did. A black guy mixing it up the suburban brats. Who knows where that could lead.

Shelton died in his sleep a few years later, apnea. It shocked everyone. Such a presence. So young. Shelton´s give-and-go.