

The Body Politic by Theodore Weesner

Five-five and one-twelve, thirteen years old, out of an obscure elementary school, a complete unknown, Glen Whalen walks into the boys' locker room to spin the dial of his combination lock. Emerson Junior High. It's a school with a double gym with a whiskey-colored floor upon which street shoes are never allowed.

The occasion: seventh-grade basketball tryouts.

Glen removes items from his gym bag and places them on the bench. Two pairs of white wool socks, white high-top sneakers, gym shorts, T-shirt, jock. All but the T-shirt are new. He has to remove staple and paper label from a pair of socks, the jock from the box. The new sneakers, a once-a-year event, promise speed, new squeak-grips on the polished wooden floor, sudden turns, spring. This pair, he has told himself, he'll keep strictly for indoor use, a promise he made to himself in sixth grade too, only to break it during sunny February thaw to the more immediate promise of running outdoors with seeming lightning speed.

The gym bag is new too, his first, navy blue with brown leather handles, a spontaneous gift from his father as they shopped on Saturday. Except for the sneakers, P. F. Flyers, and the jock, a Bike—a slight necessity, but his first and thus no slight event after all—the items are free of racing stripes and product names, as apparently uncomplicated as other forces at work in the era in which this otherwise unnoticed chapter in sports history is quietly unfolding.

Glen and his father, Red Whalen—the two live alone together in an apartment on Buick Street, in the obscure elementary school district, just up the hill from Buick Plant Three where Red works the second shift—picked out the items at Hubbard's Hardware & Sporting Goods Store downtown. Glen's list from school did not include a gym bag, and he imagined carrying everything in a paper bag, much as his father always had a bottle in a paper bag nearby, in glove compartment, trunk, under the driver's seat. But his father had already tipped one of those bags a few times by midday Saturday, the last sizeable snort as they parked in the alley behind Hubbard's, and there were the gym bags on a shelf before them.

"How you going to carry all that gear?"

Glen, looking in the same direction, did not say.

"Let's do it right," his father said. "Fight them to the end."

On land, in the air, on the sea." There was that reddish glow in his cheeks, the film over his eyes, his Mona Lisa grin.

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Blue is the wrong color, though, Glen realizes when a string of five boys—tall, renowned Ray Peaks among them—enters the locker room, each carrying a Kelly green gym bag. The school colors are green and white, Glen knows, alas, in this moment, even as he knew it all along. Green and white, fight fight! "Shoot!" he says aloud.

"Belly high . . . without a rubber, one of the five boys sings out as they turn into a nearby aisle.

Glen's plain white T-shirt also identifies him as an outsider. It's true that other white T-shirts are present in the gathering of twenty-five or thirty, but each is worn by a boy who handles a basketball with his elbows out, or one who cannot get his feet, in concert with his hands, to comprehend the concept of steps. Then two more boys wearing white T-shirts wlk in, but the two—they have to be twins—are blubbery with jell rolls around their middles, with near-breasts, and each wears knee guards, elbow guards, and wire cages over glasses. Otherwise most of the boys wear Kelly green basketball jerseys, although no such item was included on the mimeographed list. One boy wears a flowered bathing suit that he had outgrown perhaps a year earlier.

Coach Bass walks into the gym carrying a new ball, blowing his whistle, shouting at them to return the balls to the ball bin, to *never* take a ball from that bin unless he says to! Appearing then, making a jogging entrance from the tunnel onto the glossy floor, are the boys of the green gym bags. The five, Glen notices, wear uniform gray sweatshirts—over green sleeveless jerseys, it will turn out—above white gym shorts and, laced in a military staircase braid into their white sneakers, matching green shoelaces. They are the ones, everything about them seems to say, who know the score, who already have it made at Emerson Junior High.

Coach Bass, ball under his arm tweets his whistle, tells them to sit down. He paces to and fro before them, shifts the new ball hand to hand as he talks. He introduces the locker room man, "Slim" who stands at the tunnel entrance watching. The best players and hardest workers will make the traveling squad of ten, he tells them. That's the way it is. This isn't elementary school anymore and that is the black-and-blue reality of competitive sports. A list will be posted on the bulletin board outside his office after practice on Friday. BUT, he adds, raising a finger. That's not all. Any boy—any one of them who has the desire. Who is willing to do the work. Can continue to attend

practices. AND—from among THOSE boys TWO alternates will be selected to dress for each home game.

Glen sits watching and wondering. Two alternates for each home game. It means everyone has a chance. Sort of. But does the Coach mean the *same two*, or two *new* ones each time? There are so many students here in junior high—hundreds more than in the small brick elementary school he attended last year. Building and grounds cover acres. And any number of ninth-grade boys actually have mustaches, are over six feet tall. And some of the girls—wow!

The Coach blows his whistle again. He snaps, “On your feet!” and they jump, almost as one, as if the process of selection is related to how quickly one can get upright. All but Ray Peaks, Glen notices. Ray Peaks—his arms appear to reach his knees—pushes up from one hand and is the last to stand. Still he is the first to receive a pass, as the Coach snaps the new ball to him and tells him to lead a line along the wall of folding doors.

Glen follows into the line and performs as instructed. He joins rows of five, back-pedals, sidesteps side to side, starts and stops. However anxious he feels, he does not have the problems of any number of boys who move left when they should move right, cross their feet when they should sidestep, stop when they should start. He dribbles in and around strategically placed folding chairs. He exchanges passes along a line of others and takes his place at the other end. He follows through one line to shoot a lay-up, and another to rebound and pass off. He begins to perspire, to breathe more deeply, to relax a little, and begins to observe the others in their turns as he waits in lines. And, like others, he glances to the Coach now and then, to see if he can see whatever it is the man is taking in.

Junior-high basketball. For home games the panels will be folded away, bleachers will unfold from either side, and the space and glossy floor—the surface is no less than beautiful, precious, an expanse of fixed lacquer upon which to perform—will offer a dimension that is possibly, magical. Ray Peaks, Glen hears in one of the moving lines, could play with the senior team if he wanted.

Glen tries harder, tries to concentrate. However new he is to organized drills and dashes, shouts and whistles, it is becoming increasingly apparent that he is far from the worst. For while the gang of five seems to know all of the moves, any number of others, here and there, now and again, continue to reveal various shortcomings. And—that most promising sign—going in on a bounce pass down the middle, to go UP! and into the Coach where he is

positioned just under the backboard, Glen hears at his back that phrase which shoots him through with sudden hope. “Nice shot there.”

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Friday waits before them as the week moves along, but Glen goes about life and school in his usual ways. He has never *made* anything like a team before, and even as he entertains his degree of hope, he hardly takes on any of the anxieties of expectation. Good things come home when you don’t stand at the door waiting, his father has told him, and Glen gives little thought to what it will mean if he does or does not make the team. He will probably keep trying, he thinks, on the chance of dressing as an alternate.

He begins to eat lunch with Norman Van Slyke, who sits in front of him in homeroom. Glen’s father leaves him a dollar on the kitchen table every morning for lunch and on his own Glen has fallen into a habit of waling three blocks from school to a small corner grocery he spotted sometime previously. Cold weather has yet to arrive, and at the store—Sam Jobe’s Market—he stands inside near a red pop case to eat, or he sits outside in the sun. Lunch is a packaged pie, usually pineapple but sometimes cherry, a Clark bar or two, and from a glass-bowl machine, five or six pennies’ worth of Spanish peanuts to feed into his bottle of Hire’s root beer, which salty beetles, as he thinks of them—perhaps Japanese, which are popular at the time, although he has never seen one—he pops to oblivion between his teeth as he drinks his root beer.

Norman Van Slyke’s looks made Glen smile the first time he saw him in homeroom. Sparse hairs sprout already from the short, thin boy’s upper lip, just under his adhesive-tape-hinged glasses, and his extensive nose projects in the midst of this confusion like an animal reaching its head from a hole in the ground. Norman’s features twitch; the periscope that is his nose seems to look around at times, to glance up and down and to the side.

Glen calls him Rat Nose at once, and the name brings immediate snickers of pleasure from the other boy. In turn, Rat Nose identifies Glen as Weasel, and they take on the names and wear them along the street as easily as old sweatshirts.

After-school practices continue. Each morning, coming out of Civics and turning right, headed for Geometry, Glen discovers that he passes Ray Peaks going the other way. On Thursday morning, the lanky boy utters, “Say,” in passing, and on Friday, when Glen speaks first, says, “Hi,” to the school’s already favous athlete, Ray Peaks winks in a natural and friendly way that reminds Glen of his father’s winks.

Glen also hears or learns in the days passing that the boys of the Kelly green gym bags all attended the elementary school attached to the very end of Emerson Junior High. So it is that they had used the glossy hardwood double gymnasium all those years, stopped by after school to see home games, and, as it also comes out, played together for two years as teammates in a Saturday-morning league. In practices, when teams are identified, and when they scrimmage, the five boys, Ray peaks over the nucleus, move as one.

Glen's basketball experience was different. His elementary school, near Buick Plants Two and Three along a branch of the city river, had neither gymnasium nor coach. A basement classroom served as a gym, under the guidance of the gym teacher, Mrs. Roland. Painted blackish brown, its high windows and ceiling light fixtures caged, the room offered a single netless rim fixed flush to the wall, eight or nine feet from the floor and perhaps eighteen inches from the ceiling. The clearance was enough for either lay-ups or line drives.

No matter, Glen always thought, for in gym class they only played little kid games in circles anyway and only once was basketball ever given a try. Mrs. Roland, whistle around her neck, glasses on a separate lanyard, demonstrated—to introduce that one game—by hoisting the cumbersome ball from her side with both hands, kicking up one ankle as she tossed it at the basket, hitting the *bottom* of the rim. Then she selected teams—which selections for any real sport, indoors or not, were always maddening to Glen, as she chose captains and teams by height rather than ability. And she officiated the year's single basketball game by calling one jump ball after another, the contest lasting three minutes or less, concluding on a score of 2–1.

Tall boys will always be given the breaks, Mrs. Roland seemed to say. And if your last name starts with *W*, your place will always be at the end of the line.

Glen did play outdoors. At least a year earlier, as an eleven-year-old, he paused on a sidewalk beside a cement driveway at the side of a church along Buick Avenue and discovered not Jesus but basketball. The church was First Nazarene and the boys playing under the outdoor hoop were high-school age. Glen stood and watched, and when a loose ball came his way, he snagged it and walked it back several steps to throw it to the boy walking toward him.

“Wanna play, come on,” the boy said.

Glen was too thrilled to be able to say. He did walk toward the action, though, nodding, although he had just a moment ago touched a basketball for the first time in his life. “You’re on my side,” the boy said. “Gives us three on a side.”

Anxious, Glen moved into the area as instructed. The boy who had invited him—who was pointing out the sides, treating him as some actual person had never known himself to be—turned out to be the seventeen-year-old son of the church's minister. Glen had never encountered a generous teenager before, and his wonder was such that he might have been a possible convert to nearly anything, but no such strings were attached. The seventeen-year-old boy was merely that rarest of individuals in Glen's life, a teenager who wasn't mean.