

## H.O.R.S.E Champion of the Universe

It was after basketball practice. I was on the junior varsity in junior high school. I have the same name as my father, so I was like Joseph Heller's character...I was Junior, Junior, Jr.. Guess what my nickname was.

I considered myself the H.O.R.S.E champion of the universe. H.O.R.S.E is a simple game. The person who wins the coin toss gets to choose the first shot. The others have to make the same shots only if the chooser makes his shot first. Otherwise the turn passes to the next player who can attempt any shot he wishes. If he makes it, all other players have to make it too. Each miss gets a letter. Last one out wins. Any stupid shot counts. "Through the window, off the stone guy.....nothing but net" counts in H.O.R.S.E.. In fact the dumber the shot the better. Adds luster to the winner.

Though short I could play. I could hit from the perimeter. I could shoot 90% at the free throw line. I could hook with either hand in close. My hands were small so I really couldn't be called a "point guard." While I could shoot the eyes out of the basket from anywhere within 25 feet, I couldn't jump much and ball handling was a precarious adventure. My coach would ridicule me unmercifully if he saw me trying to execute a cross dribble in practice. "Kid, Pinocchio had softer hands than you. Do that in a game and you will sit so far down the bench that termites couldn't locate you!"

But I could shoot. There was an annual "Hunch" contest. Anyone could enter, so I did. The games were played during lunch period. Students would eat in the gym in the bleachers and watch the action. I won every game I played, some close, some by a pretty big score, and always because I was a free shooting machine. After all the eliminations, I found myself confronted against the starting center of the varsity basketball team, "Stretch Peterson," with the whole student body watching. The final elimination game featured me at a puny 5'2" against a 6'4" junior high freak of nature with arms like snakes. Guess who the money was on.

In Hunch, the coin toss winner takes it in-bounds from half court and attempts to make a basket, closely guarded by his single foe. If he makes it, he shoots free throws until he misses, then the ball is up for grabs by both players. Two points for a basket, one for a free throw as in normal basketball. First player to reach 21 wins and you must win by at least two points.

Here's what happened.

I won the coin toss, so I got to take it out. "Stretch" stayed back about ten feet knowing that I had hands of stone and probably couldn't get around him by dribbling. I was in perfect agreement with this hypothesis. So I in-bounded the ball, dribbled to my right until I was just outside the key and launched a shot that barely cleared his outstretched anacondas and...mirabile dictu... it went in. Two points for me. He was pissed, but certain of the inevitable outcome. The entire crowd was laughing its ass off because of the physical mismatch.

But I wasn't laughing. I squared up, bounced the ball once, bent my knees and swished it. Same for the second, and third. As each one went in, the crowd got noisier and began to chant "Junior, Junior, Junior," between shots. Stretch was not happy when I sank 19 consecutive free throws. Bingo.

That was probably lucky, but it got me some immediate although short lived attention from some very pretty girls and an underserved reputation for being a giant killer ...but trust me, in H.O.R.S.E., I was God. So on this day after practice, Gonzulva, Suldidi, my best friends, and I played a grudge match of H.O.R.S.E. The gym was empty except for us.

Gonzulva was swarthy, almost squat in appearance, dark black and bushy hair, likewise his eyebrows. It made him look like a brooder, and armed with a great smile, the girls were all over him. I envied his short jumper and how he could get in position for an offensive rebound even though he was also short. Like me, he was an indifferent student, but seemed to charm good grades out of the female teachers.

Suldidi, on the hand, was very white, tall and graceful, with sandy hair that was completely untamable and lots of freckles. He was the best student in school. His science projects were legendary. His study of cranial bones from information he was able to obtain from the Smithsonian Institution did not find a new correlation between bone ratios and intelligence in pre-Homo Sapiens species, but the approach caused much interest in the scientific community of California for its originality.

Girls. I didn't have any girlfriends because I was short and shy. Suldidi didn't have any because he was a geek and too tall. Gonzulva....well, I knew what girls would let you do in junior high, and I would have killed to do any one of them, but I was pretty sure he did a lot more than that. Gonzulva was a girl

genius. We all knew it, but he never bragged, never talked, never once divulged the details of a conquest. I think he knew that if the word got out that he talked about it to his guy friends, the girl game would be over. Basketball was his other game.

So, in spite of our differences, we were inseparable. We played H.O.R.S.E whenever we could wherever we could. I was the reigning champion of the universe by a very slim margin. We chose this afternoon for the playoff for the world series of stupid shots.

Toss of coin. I was first. I started at the right corner, squared up and launched a perfect set shot. Swish. Suldidi was next. Off the backboard. Gonzulva rattled the rim, but it went in. "H" for Suldidi. He tried again. This time it just slid off the glass, bounced several times and went in. A few students came in the gym and watched.

After an hour we were all tied with H.O.R.S.. One more miss and the galactic champion would be crowned. We had all made left handed hooks from the foul line. From behind the glass, Gonzulva tossed it over the top and the hoops gods made it go in. The small group of onlookers clapped.

I did a turnaround jumper from the side to keep in the hunt. A loud cheer came from the bleacher seats. By now a fairly large crowd had come into the gym. Apparently the word had gotten out. It was still my turn.

I walked away from the basket towards the other end of the court followed by my adversaries, all of us grim with resolve.

Every H.O.R.S.E player practices the "all time stupid shot." Mine was this: bounce the ball as hard as you can once and have it go in from half court. I made it about one in fifty. I knew this was a long shot...a little roundball humor here...bounced it once, twice, got a running start from behind the half court line, then slammed it down on the floor about ten feet away and.....my God, it went up high enough and.....went in. The whole school seemed to be there like in the Hunch contest. The applause erupted. Though tough rivals, Gonzulva and Suldidi were no match for "the shot." I took a victory lap around the gym pumping my fists in the air in jubilation. Once again, H.O.R.S.E champion of the universe! The crowd roared approval. King now and forever.

"JUN-IOR, JUN-IOR, JUN-IOR!!!"

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While I actually won the Hunch contest in front of the student body, there was no crowd, no onlookers that day of the great H.O.R.S.E. shootout. The gym was empty except for me and the basketball.

I never thought much about what my imaginary friends looked like when I was a boy. But they were very cool names. I don't even remember how I came up with them. I now wonder where they came from. Haiti? Catalan? Guiana? Senegal? The Ukraine?

I don't know. Was Gonzulva swarthy? Was Suldidi tall?

Ever so often, when alone in a gym, and a basketball close by, there is one hell of a H.O.R.S.E contest going on between the three of us. I am still champion of the universe.