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## THE LONGEST SEASON

*A basketball team learns how to rebound*

**T**he basketball hero's girlfriend sits in the stands, Row 11, Seat 9, wearing his class ring on her index finger and his uniform number on the back of her bright red sweatshirt. His mother sits next to the girl, her gaze fixed on the players below as she slowly lifts popcorn to her mouth.

There is an explosion of sound as the pep band begins playing East Carter High School's fight song, and the basketball hero's girlfriend and mother rise side-by-side to clap in time with the music.

This is Lowell Brad Elliott's own cheering section, more than a dozen friends and relatives strong. And that is his team finishing off Morgan County in the opening round of the regional tournament. But look among the players on the floor and you won't see Brad.

The senior point guard died of congestive heart failure in an Ironton, Ohio, locker room after a game Dec. 18. Basketball is just everyone's way of keeping a part of him alive.

In return, a part of Brad has kept East Carter basketball alive, with all its dreams of glory. Always generous, Brad's last gift to those he loved was his greatest:

He gave them one another.

**A**t first it seemed Brad's unexpected death might tear the East Carter Raiders apart and chase their soft-spoken coach into another line of work. Instead, it became a rallying point and a source of improbable strength. The team, which finished 18-12, won a fourth-straight district championship this year and advanced to the finals of the 16th Regional Tournament before losing last night to Greenup County 43-28. It was farther than anyone expected them to go, although that didn't make the loss any easier.

The East Carter locker room was quiet after the game as head coach Charles Baker told the players they had nothing to hang their heads about.

"The way you guys responded all year," Baker told them, "is more valuable than the trophy out there on that floor."

With that, Brad's mother, Rhoda Roark, walked into the locker room and stood by Baker's side, her eyes red.

"I just wanted to thank you all for this year, for Brad," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The locker room, once silent, was filled with the sounds of sniffing.

"You know how I always talk about how tomorrow never comes?" Baker asked the players. "Well, like my sister said, we could easily have laid down and wallowed in our sorrow."

Baker walked off by himself and wiped at his eyes with a handkerchief before continuing.

"I feel like we've accomplished more in life than any other team will ever experience," Baker said. "You guys dealt with the ultimate tragedy."

**T**he 1990-91 Raiders didn't look all that imposing on paper, except for 6-foot-9 center Jackson Julson, a gangly sophomore with a soft shooting touch and a growing collection of letters from recruiters. But there was something here that didn't show up in the statistics, a maturity and togetherness born of coping with Brad's death. Adversity made this a better team than anyone dared imagine.

"We're a much closer team than we was," senior forward Shawn Limings said last week. "Now we're more like brothers.

Senior point guard Barrett Bush said, "After his death, we didn't care if we won another game, as long as we played hard."

The change in the team has been gradual, Baker said. Some players have been affected more than others.

"I've noticed a big change in Shawn Limings," he said. "He's more focused in what he wants to do. He's not as quick to let little things bother him."

Shawn was Brad's best friend. "The worst part is it hurts because you miss him so much," Shawn said. "Just about everything I do reminds me of him. My whole life just about revolved around him."

**M**emories of the last afternoon he spent with Brad make Shawn smile. The day of the Ironton game, Brad left school during seventh-period study hall to get his allergy shot. He and Shawn ended up four-wheeling behind the Western Steer SteakHouse in teammate Adam Harris' Brat.

The mudholes were so deep, the floorboard got wet.

Later, the boys went to Druther's. Brad was laughing and wearing Shawn's plastic glasses with the mustache and big nose as they pulled up to the drive-through window.

They passed the rest of the afternoon at Shawn's house, and it was there that Brad called Miranda Greenhill.

Although Brad loved swimming and deer hunting, Miranda was his "favorite pastime," his mother said. So when it came time to drive back up to school to catch the bus to the game in Ironton, Brad still was on the phone.

Shawn sat in his car outside the house and leaned on the horn. They were going to be late.

"I'll call you when I get home," Brad told Miranda. Then he hung up the phone and was gone.

**I**t was raining when the team climbed off the bus at Ironton. The weather matched the team's mood. In the weeks preceding the Ironton game, Brad had not felt like joking much when it came to basketball. "Momma," he had said a week ago, "I think I'll just quit. I'm not helping the team."

Roark had comforted her son. "The whole team is in a slump right now," she had said. "It's not just you, it's everybody."

Brad, a starter in all seven games before Ironton, saved his best game for his last. He scored 11 points despite sitting out most of the first half in foul trouble. But it was not enough to prevent another loss.

Brad seemed angry as the team returned to the locker room, sophomore Scott Thomas said.

"The Jayvee could have played better than us," Brad told Shawn as they took their seats to wait for the coach.

As Coach Baker stood at the chalkboard, Brad sat with a towel on his head, muttering in disgust, "cussin' himself," Scott said.

Only a few saw what happened next. Most of the players had their heads down or their eyes fixed on the coach, so they only heard a chair scoot.

Over beside Shawn, Brad had started to stand up, then toppled forward onto the floor.

Just a few minutes earlier he had hit two three-pointers.

"Get a doctor," Baker yelled just before ordering all the players out of the locker room. Outside, East Carter assistant coaches reassured Brad's teammates. It might just be a seizure, they said. Barrett felt better. Nobody told him Brad's face was blue.

Barrett rode the bus back to Grayson. When they got to East Carter, assistant coach Hager Easterling used the phone in Baker's office off the gym to call the hospital. Barrett waited beside Easterling.

Easterling hung up and told Barrett that Brad was dead.

In the darkness of East Carter's locker room, just across the hall from where Barrett and Easterling stood in shock, Brad's home uniform and his Charles Barkley trading card hung secure in his locker.

The trading card is still there, but Brad's uniform is framed now, and hanging on a wall in the gym, facing the front door.

That, and the trophy case that holds Brad's Air Nikes and water bottle, are why his mother uses the back door.

Brad's death stunned Grayson. He had no medical problems except asthma, which he took medication to control, and allergies, for which he got regular treatments. The suddenness of his death made it hard

to believe. "It's just been so hard for everybody to realize that Brad's gone, you know," Roark says.

When the Raiders finally summoned the courage to return to the practice floor after sitting idle for almost two weeks after Brad's death, Shawn had to confront his loss.

"Practice was really rough," Shawn said. "We did layup drills, and it was like you wasn't even there doing it."

But the most wrenching moment came when Baker directed the players to start stretching exercises.

As the players began to pair up as usual, Shawn realized he no longer had a partner for the drills.

"Just for a second, I looked around the gym looking for Brad like I always do," he said. "And it was just, like, you could have hit me with a two-by-four."

Standing there in the middle of the court, Shawn clutched the front of his practice jersey, trying in vain to pull it up to his face as he began to cry.

"Me and Brad, I guess, there was nobody else, I don't think, more like me," Shawn said. "We were just like brothers."

In the first game after Brad's death, Shawn said, "I caught myself so many times that game looking for him on the floor," Shawn said.

"It's the little things . . . that hurt you worse."

It has been hard on Brad's replacement in the starting lineup, too.

"We were losing there for a minute, and they (students) was all talking about how if I'm in there, we might be better," sophomore Scott Thomas said. "Then Brad died, and we lost a

couple games there real quick, and they said, 'Well, if Brad was back, we'd be winning again.'

"I guess the kids just didn't know how hard it was to replace somebody like that."

**N**ewcomers to East Carter basketball games would think nothing was amiss. At a glance, only the small, red "20" each player wears at the top left of his jersey gives anything away. They like it that way. Everything is as Brad left it.

"We want his memory to stay alive," said Baker, a likeable, soft-spoken man. "That's why we've got the scholarship fund."

More than \$13,000 has been raised to establish a college scholarship for East Carter students in Brad's memory. The outpouring has been tremendous -- an indication of the deep emotional effect Brad's death had on Grayson, an Eastern Kentucky town of 3,500.

But helping establish the scholarship fund is far from the only thing Baker has done to keep Brad's memory alive.

The handwritten roster East Carter turned in for the regional tournament carried Brad's name and number along with everyone else's. Nothing indicated he no longer was alive.

"I'm glad," Roark says, " because I know he would want it to be there.

"I still want him to be a part of the team. Until this year's ended, anyway."

Brad's name remains with those of his teammates on the scoreboard in East Carter's gym, too. "I just can't remove it," Baker says.

Children die more than once. Brad will be lost again when the basketball season ends. And when the prom rolls around. And at graduation. He will go in stages as he misses all the things life still held for him.

Baker knows this. His voice trailed off last week as he talked about the impending last game of the season.

"That last game," he said before the opening round of the regional tournament, "If it's tonight or Friday night or Saturday - whenever it is . . ."

He did not finish the sentence, but the message was clear.

"There will be just like all different kinds of endings to Brad's life," Roark said last week.

"To me, it's not ended yet."

**T**he first game of the 16th Regional Tournament, and Miranda Greenhill is sitting in the bleachers talking to Coach Baker. She's wearing a button that looks like a basketball, and it has Brad's name and number painted on it.

She's also wearing his class ring; a red sweatshirt with his name and number on it; the bracelet he was going to give her for Christmas; and a gold ring with two interlocking hearts that he gave her for her birthday in August.

"I try to come and let them know I'm here, because I would have been here if Brad was here," she says.

"I think it helps them to see a little of Brad's here."

Brad and Miranda, a student at West Carter in Olive Hill, had dated for two years and had talked about getting married. Miranda is convinced they would have. Brad was a man of his word.

He wanted her to go to the University of Kentucky with him.

Roark said going to college was important to Brad, who had been an honors student at East Carter. He wanted to study medicine. "This is what I want to do," he used to tell his mother when they would go pay the bill at his allergist's office.

"I guess I really haven't accepted it yet," Miranda says. "It hits me when I get here that he's not here."

But, she adds: "When the season's over it's going to be hard. I'll lose a lot of contact with the team.

"(Now) it's just like Brad's still here. It's going to be harder when the season's over."

Brad's mother is in the stands, too. It is the first game she has attended since mid-season. The introduction of the starting lineup was hard to watch, and the memories were painful. But she thinks it might be easier here in a foreign gym.

It had gotten so that every time she drove toward East Carter's gym with the intention of attending a game, she would stay in the car and drive around and around, listening to the game on WGOH radio instead.

Seven minutes before the opening round regional tournament game, the team goes into the locker room, and Baker gives them one last talk. Nobody knows just how hard it has been on the coach. He has to force himself to be hard on the players now, to drive them to be their best.

Brad was his nephew, and Baker considered quitting after the boy died. When parents put their children on a bus to go play basketball, "they expect you to bring those kids back," Baker said, "and it's just hard to accept you didn't bring one of them back."

He stayed though. "I just felt an obligation to them... Brad would have wanted us to stick it out."

And now he tells the team: "There's a lot of things you've dealt with more this year than any team ever dealt with."

Shawn is listening with his head cocked slightly to the side, his chin resting on his hand.

"No matter what happens out there on that floor, you've done a tremendous job of turning things around."

Barrett is leaning forward in his chair with his elbows propped on his knees.

Three months ago at the funeral home, Barrett had decided how he would pay tribute to Brad in each game: He would shoot his first free throw right-handed instead of with his left hand, which is the one he uses to do everything else.

Baker had given Barrett his blessing to do it, but as the regional tournament started last week, Barrett was not sure what would happen if he were fouled for the first time late in a close game.

Should he still shoot it right-handed? Baker has told him he should, but Barrett is not sure. He doesn't want to let down his teammates.

Baker finishes talking, and the team runs out onto the floor to tangle with first-round foe Morgan County beneath the bright lights. East Carter does not play well, but the Raiders are ahead 54-46 with 58 seconds left when Barrett is fouled. Before stepping to the free-throw line, he walks to the bench and wipes his face with a red towel.

"Right-handed?" he whispers to Baker.

"Yes, sir," the coach says. □