

My Dad the Shooter

Written by James W. Strickland MD



*My Dad, James
DeMotte Strickland 1929.*

Basketball is my game. I come by that naturally, being from Indiana and being my father's child.

You see, my dad could really shoot a basketball. He developed this skill in the early 1920's, in Owensville, Indiana, a small southern Indiana town with a population of about 650.

My granddad was a good old-time country doctor who was often called

away to tend to the sick, make horse and buggy house calls or deliver babies. So as Dad was growing up, he had a lot of time to himself. He spent it shooting baskets in his back-yard.

Everybody knew my granddad simply as "Doc." Doc had built Dad a basketball goal in their back-yard. It had a wooden backboard with a black metal rim, a ragged grey net and a stout, rusted metal pipe holding it at the proper height to the family garage.

Dad's practice routine started by monotonously dribbling a worn leather ball out to a variety of positions well away from the basket, where he would shoot a stationary two-handed, underhanded shot. He would follow the ball to the basket, retrieve it and shoot again. He'd repeat this sequence time after time until my grandmother would call him in or it became too dark or the weather too inclement for him to continue. Dad's private shooting practices were a year-round ritual. Occasionally, other boys would join him, but for the most part, it was a repetitive, monotonous, lonely self discipline.

The ritualized, self-shooting practice that Dad carried out almost daily, evolved into an absolutely text book basketball shooting ability. Some years later one national sports publication would describe his well-honed shot as the classic two-handed set shot.

Dad was a big guy, especially big for that time. Yet though his hands were fairly large, he could barely palm the large, laced leather basketballs they used back then. The essential component of his shooting style was the way he positioned his hands on the ball.

Dad would place the fingers of his hands on each side of the ball, and his thumbs were directed straight up towards the top of the ball. His fingers were extended forward and his wrists were cocked downward which lowered the ball slightly. To shoot, he would drop his arms until the ball was at his waist and then add a little additional downward cock of his wrists until his fingers pointed almost straight down. He would then bring his arms up and un-cock his wrists until the combination of motions would bring his hands forward and upward in unison as he released the ball. This combined rolling movement resulted in a tremendous amount of backspin on the departing ball and a trajectory and direction that was extremely accurate. Dad could hit that shot with deadly accuracy whether he was five or thirty feet from the basket. He made his free throws almost automatically, and, long after he retired from active basketball competition, he could stand at any free-throw line, anywhere and almost effortlessly, hit shot after shot.

Now, to put my Dad's ability in perspective, it is important to understand that one-handed shooting and jump shots gradually evolved in the early to mid-1950s. In fact, they didn't become popular and refined until shortly after I played high school ball back in the early fifties. And to put that in perspective, I played against Oscar Robertson, who later would become famous as one of the first great one-hand shooters. Incidentally, Robertson played college basketball for the University of Cincinnati, where he led the nation in scoring three times and was twice college player of the year. He went on to become one of the all-time great professional players averaging a triple-double for his career. He is now in the Hall of Fame and revered by many as the best basketball player ever.

By 1960 or so, the underhanded, two-handed set shot of Dad's day had given way to the two-handed push shot, then to the one-handed push shot, then to the one-handed jump shot and, finally, to the many creative methods for achieving specu-



lar “slam dunks”.

But back when basketball players shot rotational, underhanded, two-handed shots, my dad—the shooter—was the best. He perfected a shot with tremendous backspin — more than most players today can achieve with their one-handed shots.

That great shooting ability carried him a long way. In 1929, he was selected as Indiana University’s second All-American player by *College Humor Magazine*. And I know my whole life has been influenced by the intensity, the devotion, the persistence, that he put into developing his shooting skill.

After college, Dad went to New York City. He played for five years at what was then the Mecca of U.S. Amateur Sports — The New York Athletic Club. And he taught and coached underprivileged boys. To supplement his meager income during those depression times he played professional basketball in upstate New York under the fictitious name Strickelvitich so that he wouldn’t lose his amateur standing. At least that is what he always told me.

He’d married by then, and in 1935, when Mother announced that I was on the way, they decided they should return home to Indianapolis to settle down and raise a family.

Except for a brief stint playing for an Indianapolis professional basketball team, the Kautskys, in the early 1940s, Dad would not play organized basketball again, but that shot, that glorious shot of his, became famous in every neighborhood where my family lived during the next twenty or so years. And it came in mighty handy at the 1948 Indiana State Fair.

I was 12 years old then and convinced that my Dad was the best basketball shooter in the world. A friend’s family had taken me to the State Fair, where we saw several basketball shooting concessions. One in particular caught my eye. It had four rows of prizes ranging from cheap trinkets on the lowest row to stuffed toys on the second and third rows. And there, all alone on the top row, was a brand-new Hutch leather basketball — lace strings and all! For twenty-five cents, participants got three shots, and if you hit all three you could elect to quit and take a cheap prize from the lowest row or you could decide to shoot three more free shots so you could try and move to the second row of prizes with the same options: pick a better prize from that row, or try and make an additional three shots and move up the rows. Should you continue to make all your shots, you could stop at each three-shot increment and take that row’s prizes or keep shooting towards the 12 straight successful shots required to reach the top row and claim the Hutch ball.

I deeply coveted that ball, so I couldn’t wait to get Dad to the fair. I’d seen him make more than

twelve shots in a row many, many times, so I never questioned that he could do it.

That night at dinner, I described the situation to Dad, and we struck a deal. I had a little change so, naturally, I would back him, and when he won — not if — the basketball would be mine. The next day, we warmed up for a while on our goal in the backyard, and we headed for the Fair. I brought along a grand total of fifty cents to finance two chances at the basketball concession for my Dad. I realized that there was a remote possibility that he might miss a shot on his first try. It was unthinkable that he might miss twice. So two tries, 50 cents, seemed like a safe amount to finance his well-established shooting proficiency.

At the Fair, I grabbed Dad’s hand and pulled him directly to the basketball concession. Dad looked the game over and immediately recognized many problems that I had totally missed. For instance, the shot was not a routine free-throw. There were two goals, at least twelve feet high, with rims smaller than regulation. The rims were tilted asymmetrically, at different distances from the shooting area, with a net ball return extended to an elevated rail on the shooting platform. That rail was high enough that Dad’s underhand release required him to stand about three feet further back than his normal free-throw shot, which would position him least fourteen feet away from the contorted basket. There were also two basketballs in use at the concession. They were rubber, worn smooth and lop-sided. They were dissimilar in weight and configuration, and the guy who was running the game alternately interchanged the two balls to keep each shooter from becoming familiar with either ball during the course of shooting at the baskets.

As my Dad looked over the situation, he could see that the game was very heavily stacked against him. Before he stepped up to shoot, we watched many other hapless contestants pay their money, miss their shots, complain about the unfair conditions, and leave.

At last, it was Dad’s turn. I proudly reached out and paid the entry fee of twenty-five cents. Then Dad stepped up on the platform. For a short time, he moved the ball around between his large hands, feeling for the best way to hold the warped orbs. Then he began several practice throw motions, without releasing the ball. This convinced him he would have to stand back a little farther to shoot his low-motion shot. He lifted the ball above his head and shrugged his shoulders to remove the tension of the moment. Finally, Dad was ready.

I watched confidently as the familiar rolling motion sent his first shot toward the high, tilted basket. It rattled around the rim and dropped through the



basket aided by strong backspin that Dad's shot produced. The next two shots were perfect, and when he was asked if he wanted to accept a prize from the lowest row or go on, he never hesitated. The next three shots went through without touching the rim. Same decision. Shot seven was perfect. But then, much to my disbelief and horror, he missed shot number eight! Dad turned and looked at me with disappointment, and he murmured, "Sorry, Chum."

"Hey, Pop, don't worry about it. I've got another twenty-five cents.." With that, I gave the proprietor my last quarter, patted my Dad on the back and cheerfully returned to my spot behind the platform. By then, there was quite a crowd gathering to observe Dad's performance. The ball man was delighted. He also seemed quite certain that his expensive top prize was safe.

In retrospect, the crowd's cheering must have added considerably to the formidable pressure on my Dad, but, again, he began his machinery-like shooting motion. Three, six, nine in a row. As Dad reached each new level, I simply nodded to the man that Dad wanted to keep on shooting. Ten, eleven — each shot was perfect. The eleventh basket brought a huge cheer from the gallery, which had become quite large. Then, there was a quiet hush as those in the crowd realized the magnitude of the moment. The twelfth and top row prize winning shot!

The concession man dropped his most lop-sided

ball at Dad's feet in an effort to break his concentration. Dad picked it up without changing expression, looked for the best place to put his hands, took a deep breath and sent his shot on its way.

The only sound was the swish of the ball settling in the center of the net. Then there was a tumultuous cheer. I leaped to the platform to hug my Dad. Of course, we selected the Hutch leather ball as our prize and the concession man conceded that it was the only ball he'd lost all year. Together, Dad and I proudly accepted the basketball from the top row and walked away from the concession. I beamed with pride as we walked down the midway hand in hand with my new ball tucked under my other arm.

I will never forget that experience because beyond being one of those magical moments where your parent is your hero, it was a tribute to the skill and patience that he had repetitiously developed in that lonely backyard so many years before.

I practiced and played with that Hutch ball until I wore it out. Dad's feat was soon forgotten and life went on. In fact it wasn't until Dad was in his 80s and in failing health that that magical day at the fair came back to me. Only then did I truly appreciate the magnitude of his odds-defying performance. Fortunately, I had the chance to share that moment with him and thank him before he died.

From time to time though, as I reflect on the great moments of the past, I re-live that wonderful day at the fair with — "My Dad the Shooter".

