

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

By Mike Ridley

We came in together as the three scholarship freshmen, the potential saving grace and future of the Michigan State basketball program in 1970. Unaware of the dream world we were living and playing in, we dug our trenches and battled through our freshman year with a less than stellar record. As freshmen we were allowed three sanctioned games with other division one schools; Notre Dame, Illinois and Michigan. The rest of our schedule was comprised of community colleges, division two and three schools and campus fraternities. Tyronne Lewis and Mike Robinson were thoroughbred all-staters from Ferndale and Detroit Northeastern, respectively. I was a little known suburbanite whose resume ended with "might develop into something."

We all had this ethereal vision of a future that included plenty of playing time, all-conference accolades and a shot at the big show, the NBA. It is the same dream every athlete, no matter how unrealistic, has at least once in his life. By the end of our freshman season, Mike Rob was averaging over thirty points per game, Ty was scoring about twenty-two a game and I was averaging about as much time on the bench as I was on the floor. I was way behind the learning curve. By our sophomore year, Mike, at a mere 5'10", was pegged as the "special" player. He was an athlete who could score from anywhere on the court. His one handed jump shot was like radar. This was before the three point line and his shots regularly went up from far outside that perimeter. As his sophomore season ended he had won the Big Ten scoring title with an average of almost twenty-five points per game.

Ty was a sixth man, coming off the bench to play both forward and guard. At 6'2" he was bigger and stronger than most guards back then and faster than most forwards. In one memorable televised game, just before the first half ended, Ty stole the ball from his man and dribbled down the court, a defender cutting the angle between Ty and the basket. He could've forced a short jumper or even taken it to the hoop, possibly drawing a foul but he elected to take it to the deep left corner, casually elevating to about three feet then lofted a twenty-two footer just as the horn sounded. Swish. Ty never stopped jogging as he ran right back down the floor toward the locker room grinning like the Cheshire Cat as the crowd applauded wildly.

I had my one shot to make it later that season, at an away game against Purdue. The outcome still in question, our coach, the venerable Gus Ganakas, called me in from oblivion at the end of the bench.

"Go in and get something started," he barked.

Either my spark plugs were fouled or the coil was wet, or maybe it was just bad gas ... but the ignition wouldn't work, the engine wouldn't turn over and we went down miserably, my one chance to shine still parked in the garage.

My basketball travails ended a few years later after transferring to Northern Michigan University. After our sophomore season Ty went home to help his ailing father and after a short stint at a small college in Wisconsin, returned to Ferndale, married his high school sweetheart and started a family. Much like me he became a basketball vagabond, playing city leagues during the week and traveling to tournaments around the state on the weekends.

Mike Rob led the Big Ten in scoring again his junior year and in his senior year came in second behind Michigan's Campy Russell by one/one thousandth of a point. When his career ended he had been all-Big Ten three consecutive years and all-American his senior year. He was drafted by the Cleveland Cavaliers but was the last man cut. He went on to play two years with the Athletes in Action; a Christian based team that boasted several ex-NBA players. In the thirty plus years since graduation, hampered only once by a severe knee injury, he had never really stopped playing.

Like any dedicated athlete going one on one with Father Time, Ty beat his body up tearing Achilles tendons and twisting knees along the way until he finally cut back on his activities a few years ago.

Although I had seen Mike a few times over the years, I had resolved to see Ty again and perhaps have a small reunion over coffee or better yet, a basketball game. It had been almost thirty-three years and when I told my wife of my plan to reunite she said in her most sympathetic and understanding voice, "you're not gonna start blubbing are you?"

"No," I replied in my most objective and clinical voice, "I've been in contact and had seen both Mike and Ty but they had not seen each other. I'm the third wheel in this reunion."

It was a cool, early spring morning and Mike Rob and I were engaged in a three-on-three game with some other friends when the door to the gym opened. Ty walked in and stood just inside the doorway, nodding and grinning like he had just dropped a thirty-footer at the buzzer. Mike Rob looked up and froze, his gaze resting in surprise on his old team mate. The gym went silent as all eyes turned to the two all-staters from three decades ago. They were both legends and the old hoopsters witnessing the reunion knew the specifics.

Mike threw the ball to me and walked toward Ty as he, in turn, walked across the gym floor toward Mike. Their smiles grew as they approached each other and suddenly I saw two young super heroes embrace and thirty years of what might have been melted. Ty reached over and grabbed me pulling me into the circle and we all hugged like we had just won the biggest game of our lives. As the other guys resumed shooting we talked a few minutes, anxious to connect all the dots.

But the talk was not of memories, or what might have been. It was about kids and grand kids and health. It wasn't about who we were but who we are. We had lived, worked and played through a tumultuous time and a river of blood, sweat and tears had flowed under the bridge. So we stood there, firmly focused on what was really important, not looking over our shoulders but happy to still be playing basketball, happy that we had reconnected, and in spite of what turns life had taken, happy to be happy.

Did I start blubbering? Not quite, but I don't think too many eyes were dry.