

Krieger: Scheuerman's dash full of faith

By Dave Krieger

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The last time I saw Sharm Scheuerman was Aug. 23, a week before he died. He was lying in a hospital bed in the middle of his living room, high above Lower Downtown.

"This is a tough deal," he said. "I don't want to be dramatic, but I don't have much time left."

His cheeks were hollow and he couldn't hold the books I brought him, but he was sharp as ever. We talked Cubs, a mutual weakness, and Nuggets, to whom he once broached an unconventional idea via then-general manager Kiki Vandeweghe.

"I told Kiki what we wanted to do, trying to reach some top pro players to reach others with a message about values," Scheuerman recounted last spring. "And Kiki just looked at me and finally he says, 'You're sure fighting an uphill battle, aren't you?' And I said to him, 'Yeah, we are, but if we don't try, who's trying? Who's really trying to see if we can make a difference?'"

Scheuerman's faith-based Basketball Club International organized camps for inner-city kids across the country. At the last camp before he died, in south Los Angeles in August, NBA players Corey Maggette and Kelenna Azubuike showed up. In hospice care by then, Scheuerman couldn't make it.

Once, he was a celebrated player himself, a member of Iowa's "Fab- ulous Five" that lost the 1956 NCAA men's basketball championship game to Bill Russell and the University of San Francisco.

"We were up 15-4, and then, I like to say, Bill Russell took off his warm-ups. He was just dominant. He didn't block shots up into the third row. He'd just tip 'em to a teammate. He wasn't a showboat."

Scheuerman spent the latter part of his life trying to return such values to the game.

"I love basketball," he told me in April. "I get so upset sometimes with the way basketball's gone. It's become such a me-me type of sport. The guards dribble forever and ever and ever and it's not a team sport. I don't want to be holier than thou, but what we're trying to do is put integrity, character, values and our faith back into basketball at the higher level."

He was the youngest Division I men's basketball coach in history, taking over the Hawkeyes at 24. A younger 24, he liked to point out, than Bobby Knight when he got the Army job. He is the answer to the trivia question, who recruited Brooklyn playground legend Connie Hawkins to Iowa?

"I had the Hawk with us for a little over a semester until he got in that little trouble with the gamblers," he recalled. "It wasn't his fault. He didn't do anything wrong."

He couldn't because he was freshman ineligible. So they used him to make introductions to guys who could play. Back then you were guilty 'til proven innocent. Now, shoot, you can do almost anything and they don't charge you."

He spent the last 25 years of his life in Denver, with Athletes in Action, the global sports ministry, and then BCI, his own brainchild.

"He wanted to encourage professional athletes to grow deeper in their faith and help them to understand what it is to live a life of faith, and how character and integrity fit into that," said his wife, Kathy. "He was driven. He was compelled to do that."

In Colorado, he supported the Rev. Leon Kelly as he organized Open Door Youth Gang Alternatives, a street gang prevention and intervention program, in the late 1980s. Kelly sent a busload of kids from Open Door's after-school program to BCI's last local camp.

"As many eulogies as I do, we used to talk about the fact that people should not have to think, 'Man, what should I say about this guy?' when God sees fit to take us on home," Kelly said last week. "We should be able to live our eulogy every day so that our life speaks for itself. Sharm did that."

Scheuerman blamed himself for the spread of his prostate cancer before it was detected. Get tested, he urged. With the disease in his bones, he finally quit the chemo in December. To the day he died at 76, he insisted sports could be a platform for greater good.

He used to tell kids at his camps that the most important thing on a gravestone is the dash between the birth date and death date.

"Let's talk about the dash for a little bit," he would say. "You don't have much to say about the beginning, much to say about the end, but you've got a heck of a lot to say about what's in that dash of yours."

As I was getting up to leave him for the last time, he offered a wan smile.

"Say a little prayer," he said.

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