

SPORTS

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My Life As A Sixers Ballgirl

*I rebounded, I mopped,
I threw towels,
I dished off to Iverson.*

BY SARAH JORDAN

What does a writer do when a 6-foot-10-inch, 230-pound professional basketball player is holding your notepad and reading your notes? You let him.

That's what happened during the second half of the Sixers-Grizzlies game two weeks ago when I was a guest ballgirl at the CoreStates Center. Sixer Scott Williams, whom I sat next to by the bench, probably wondered why my scribbles weren't about him or his teammates and instead about how the ballboys had snagged their jobs.

When the Sixers agreed to allow me to be a guest ballgirl, I was signed up to work the Vancouver Grizzlies game. I arranged to speak to the Sixers equipment manager and former ballboy, Allan Lumpkin. His 11-guy crew averages 15 or 16 years, though a few are college seniors. They had won these positions on the strength of application letters submitted in the off season. He prefers that his ballboys — who work 41 home games — be older, having to juggle schoolwork and the demanding hours. "They also tend to get nervous when they're younger," Lumpkin says. "One boy wet himself."

I was fairly certain I wouldn't let Lumpkin down in the bladder-strength department.

I figured Lumpkin's kids would be working these basketball-Jones fantasy jobs gratis. Turns out, the ballboys get a modest remuneration by the Sixers and get tipped by the visiting team, too — not to mention free tickets, gear, pizza before each game, holiday and end-of-year bonuses, and the potential to cultivate way-cool NBA friends.

My final question: Do the players notice the ballboys? "They're very aware," answers Lumpkin, "especially of the guys who work the locker room. They run tickets around for the players, get coffee for the coaches, hot packs for the players. I met Rick Mahorn being a ballboy. He's my best friend today and my son's godfather." I made a mental note to work on some ice breakers before the game.

Game day arrives. After Lumpkin's assistant, Scott Rego, gives me a Sixers T-shirt and cap, he takes me on a quick tour of the locker rooms, ticket office and where the refs hang out. Then it's showtime.



Jordan (center) chats with Sixer Scottie Williams during her stint as a Sixer ballgirl. Her debut set off a Sixer four-game winning streak. Coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not.

Out on the court, the players are shooting around. I take to the court for some rebounding and a ball comes flying my way. I grab it and just as I release it to Mark Davis, I see my all-time favorite Sixer, assistant coach Maurice Cheeks. He's asking for the ball, hands extended, looking at me. There it is. My first blunder. I have denied the ball to the NBA's recently deposed all-time leader in steals. I must get another ball to Mo. Images of me wrestling the ball away from Davis flit briefly through my mind.

Though I'm under the basket with two other ballboys, I'm not getting any lucky bounces. Finally one caroms off another ball and heads toward half court. That's mine. A Grizzlie assistant coach picks it up at his end and throws it to me. Turning around, I see Allen Iverson waiting for me with his hands up and eyes locked on mine. I throw it to him. He dribbles in for a shot. Assist. Jordan.

When the Sixers go in for their meeting, two Grizzlies lumber down to our end of the court. I rebound for former Sixer, Tony Massenburg. We get into a rhythm where I round up his shots as he moves along an arc way out on the perimeter. Unfortunately, my feeble bounce passes have him grabbing the ball at crotch level.

Soon it's time for the ballboy meeting. There's a moment-of-truth quality as the assignments are given out. I will start out working the home basket with two guys, then will move to the bench for the second half. "You'll sit during the game and only go out to wipe down the key during time-outs or at the quarter," I'm told.

During the game, I sit on the right side of the basket with ballboy Wikeem. He shows me when and how to wield the big mop. My first time wiping the key I'm a little overly deliberate, not yet having mastered the jaunty casualness of the regular ballboys. But dammit, when I'm through, there's not a drop of moisture on the key.

From where I'm sitting, I'm having a hard time seeing the action. I peer over Wikeem's shoulder. The Sixers are winning 45 to 41. We watch in silence. As Wikeem and Ron — my other ballboy pal — take turns going out to wipe down the court, or dry a wet spot, I keep my eye on the bench ballboys. They're the elite. They get to run behind the players who go into the game and bring back their warm-ups. They hand out towels, water or Gatorade to the players. I can see the Promised Land. I'm through with this under-the-basket gig. I'm ready for the bench.

Just about then, Clarence Weatherspoon knocks me out of my yearnings with a jam so hard the whole basket rocks. My mop falls down next to me.

When the second half arrives, I head straight to the home bench where I'll be working with Frank and Jason. Our first task is to fold the warm-up jackets of the guys who've gone in to start the second half, making sure the tag at the bottom left is visible. The tag has each player's number written on it so we know who gets which shirt when they come out of the game.

I find a spot next to center Scott Williams. This is when he picks up my notepad. He asks me what I'm writing and we chat briefly. But, I have towels to fold and warm-ups to chase after.

Now, during time-outs, when those poor suckers by the basket are wiping down the key, I'm in the midst of the huddle giving out towels, listening to what the next play will be. Following the time-out, we use the towels to wipe down the coaches' seats that the starters have just vacated. When Derrick Coleman sits down, sweating hard, I hand a towel to him. He snatches it without looking. It looks like he could use another.

Giving Iverson a spell, Aaron McKie and I head out to the scorer's table. I sit at a respectful distance from McKie. We sit there until there's a break in the game and he goes in, but instead of throwing his jacket to me or near me, he throws it to Iverson. Harrumph! But my man Iverson sees me and throws it my way.

With time running out and the game locked up, D.C. starts giving his teammates some business from the bench. He ribs 'Spoon as he guards some hapless Grizzlie. Then Coleman shouts at McKie, "We're gonna beat you up in the locker room if you don't start shooting." McKie still doesn't shoot.

The Sixers win 107 to 89 and begin a four-game winning streak not seen since the 1991-92 season. Post-game, I'm struck by the calm business of basketball taking place around me. Everyone seems to be briskly taking care of duties.

Lumpkin gets me for a peek at the locker room around 10:10 p.m. Jim Jackson, the last one out of the showers, walks by with a little towel wrapped around his waist.

Now that it's over, I don't know how I can go back to the upstairs seats. I've tasted forbidden fruit. But the Sixers know I'm ready to work. Just give me a bunch of towels and my mop. ●