

FRED BOWEN
SPORTS STORY

FULL COURT FEVER

FRED BOWEN





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Summary: With help from a new student and inspiration from an old magazine article, the players on Michael's seventh-grade basketball team hope to overcome their shortness and win their game against the eighth graders. Includes facts about the UCLA Bruins and their use of the full-court press.

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ONE

Michael Mancino could hear the game as he approached the park next to the school. He heard the ball pounding the pavement and sneakers scraping against the blacktop. He heard voices rising into the sunlit winter sky and the distant clanging of a loose metal rim.

After Michael turned the corner of the tan brick school building, he stood for a moment with his basketball on his hip and studied the court in front of him.

He saw Kelvin Wells, Conor Kilgore, and Charlie Rosenthal, three of his teammates from the Falcons seventh-grade basketball team, shooting baskets. Their breath and voices sent small puffs of white mist into the chilled December air.

Suddenly the ball bounced wildly off the court. Charlie jogged after it, looked up, and saw Michael standing at the side of the school.

“Hey, Michael’s here!” he shouted. “Now we’ve got enough for a game of two-on-two.”

Michael trotted onto the court, took a few quick dribbles with his basketball, and attempted a long shot. Air ball.

“How about Michael and me against you two?” Conor suggested, ignoring Michael’s shot.

Kelvin and Charlie eyed each other in silence. “I don’t know,” Kelvin said slowly.

“Come on,” Conor said, sounding annoyed. “We’re all about the same size. Let’s just play.”

“Hey, let me have a couple of shots, will ya?” Michael said, grabbing the boys’ basketball and dribbling around the court. “You guys are all warmed up.”

But Conor was ready to play. “Well, hurry up,” he said impatiently.

“Game to seven. We’ll switch teams after each game,” Kelvin said.

“All right,” Conor agreed.

“I’ll shoot to see who gets the ball first,” said Kelvin, placing his feet at the foul line. He bounced the ball three times and eyed the rim.

“Hey, can we play?” a voice sounded from the other end of the court. The four friends turned and squinted into the setting sun. There, standing like a tall picket fence, were four eighth graders: Jake McClure, James Becker, Jerome Dobson, and Johnny Palotta. The four boys walked closer, their long shadows stretching black across the court.

“Uh-oh,” Charlie whispered to Michael. “It’s ‘The Four Js’: Jake, James—”

“Jerome and Johnny,” Michael chimed in, finishing the lineup.

“We’re just starting a game,” Kelvin said to the newcomers, and he turned to look back at the basket.

“Come on, let’s play four-on-four,” James Becker said, dribbling closer to Kelvin and his teammates.

The seventh-grade Falcons looked at each other, agreeing in silence.

“Okay, what are the teams?” Conor asked.

“Us four against you four,” James said with a wide smile.

“No way!” Michael blurted out. “You guys are all eighth graders.”

“Yeah,” Kelvin agreed. “You’re all older and taller than we are. You’ll kill us.”

“Come on, you guys are just a year behind us,” Jerome Dobson said, flipping an easy jump shot at the basket.

“All right,” Michael said. “The four eighth graders against the four seventh graders. But Kelvin shoots to see who gets the ball first.”

Kelvin set his feet once again across the foul line. He bounced the ball three times and took a deep breath, then dipped his legs slightly and sent the ball spinning toward the basket. *Swish*. Nothing but net.

Jake McClure grabbed the bouncing ball and tossed it to Michael. “Your ball,” he said. “Game to eleven by ones. I’m covering Michael.”

The boys darted into action. Michael

snapped a quick pass to Kelvin, who passed to Conor for the shot. *Swish.*

“1–0,” Michael said happily. “Winners out, right? If a team scores a basket they keep the ball, right?”

“Winners out,” Jake agreed.

Michael passed to Charlie in the corner. Charlie faked a shot, then dribbled underneath the basket and spun a shot against the backboard and through the net.

“All right. 2–0!”

“My man, Charlie!”

Then Kelvin made a long jump shot and the score was 3–0. “Are we playing 7–0 is a shutout?” Kelvin asked with a grin.

Jerome Dobson bounced Kelvin the ball. “You’re a long way from a shutout, wise guy. Just play ball.”

Kelvin’s next jumper bounced off the rim, and James Becker got the rebound. “Let’s go to work,” he cried.

The older boys did just that. Using crisp passes and their greater height, the eighth graders worked the ball close to the basket for easy scores. In no time, the younger

Falcons' lead had vanished and the eighth graders were ahead.

"What's the count?" Michael asked, catching his breath.

"6-3, us," Johnny Palotta replied.

"Come on, let's get some rebounds," Conor pleaded.

Michael darted out and intercepted the ball, whirled quickly, and flipped a pass to Charlie. Charlie swished a short jumper. 6-4.

But that was the last basket Michael and his friends could score. The eighth graders scored five straight baskets. James Becker muscled up over Charlie, sending Charlie's glasses flying as he scored the final basket.

"Game," James said as the ball fell through the net. "Do you guys want to play another?"

"No, thanks," Charlie said, leaning over to pick up his glasses.

"Come on, guys," James said to his friends. "Maybe we can find a real game up at the high school."

The older players strutted off. “See you boys at the end of the season,” Johnny called back over his shoulder.

“Yeah, good luck in the seventh grade–eighth grade game,” Jerome said.

Michael and his friends milled around the basket, tossing up lazy shots.

“How are your glasses, Charlie?” Michael asked.

Charlie tilted his glasses. “They’re kinda wobbly, but that’s okay,” he said. “Do you guys want to play two-on-two?”

“Nah,” Kelvin said, shaking his head.

“Man, they killed us,” Conor said.

“We had it going for a while,” Charlie said bravely. “We were up 3–0.”

“Yeah, but we lost 11–4,” Michael said flatly.

Kelvin took a shot. “It’s the same old problem,” he said. “We got no big guys, so we get no rebounds.”

“We’re not really small,” Michael said. “We’re just regular.”

Kelvin laughed. “So we get beat regular.”

“We’re fast, and we’re good shooters,”

Michael insisted. “We hardly missed a shot.”

“Yeah,” Kelvin agreed as the boys each started to head for home. “But before you can shoot the ball, you gotta *get* the ball.”

THE UCLA BRUINS THE REAL STORY

Early in the first half of the 1964 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship game, the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Bruins were trailing the Duke Blue Devils. The Bruins coach, John Wooden, could see his team losing control, so he did something he almost never did: He called time out early in the game.

Wooden sat his nervous team down. He told his players not to lose confidence in themselves or the full-court pressing defense. Remember, stay with press and always have two Bruins covering the Blue Devil who has the ball, he told them.

Wooden knew that the press would force the Blue Devils to make bad passes and

speed up the game. The Bruins were the quicker team, so they would have an advantage in a fast-paced game.

Wooden also figured the press would wear the Blue Devils down, and he was right. Within a few minutes, the Bruins had cut the Blue Devils lead to three points, 30–27. Then the Bruins press really got rolling. In the next 2 minutes and 40 seconds, the Bruins scored 16 points and the Blue Devils scored none. The final score of the game was 98–83. The UCLA Bruins and John Wooden had won their first NCAA championship!



Coach John Wooden

It would not be their last. In the twelve seasons from 1964 through 1975, Wooden's UCLA Bruins won an amazing ten NCAA championships. No other college coach or team has ever come close to matching that winning streak.

John Wooden may be the greatest coach in the history of college basketball. He was successful with many different teams and players. Some of his championship teams were led by such legendary big men as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Bill Walton. But Wooden's first NCAA championship team, the team that beat the Duke Blue Devils and were 30–0 for the 1963–64 season, had no big men. In fact, the Bruins did not have a single starter that season who was over 6 feet 5 inches tall. (That's an inch shorter than Kobe Bryant!) But the Bruins made up for their lack of height with speed, hustle, and the full-court zone press, designed by Coach Wooden.

Like lots of coaches, John Wooden first learned about basketball by playing basketball. Wooden was a star in high school who went on to be a three-time all-American at Purdue University from 1930 to 1932. Wooden was such a great player that he is the only person inducted into the National Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts, as both a player *and* a coach.

Wooden first learned about the idea of a full-court defense from his coach at Purdue, Ward “Piggy” Lambert. After leaving Purdue, Wooden played semipro basketball on the weekends to make extra money, but he did not play in a professional basketball league as college stars do today. The National Basketball Association, the NBA, did not start until years later, in 1946. Instead, Wooden coached high school basketball (and taught high school English). His teams’ record over eleven years was outstanding: 218 wins and only 42 losses.

Wooden moved on to coach college basketball, first at Indiana State and then at UCLA. Each of Wooden’s teams used the full-court zone press in certain situations, but never for an entire game. That changed in the 1963–64 season, when Wooden decided to use the full-court press all the time. That season, the Bruins’ full-court press blew away opposing teams. The fast-breaking Bruins went undefeated and won all but seven of their thirty games by ten points or more.

Wooden didn't have any big men that season, but he had players who were perfect for the press. Walt Hazzard and Gail Goodrich were a pair of all-American ball-hawking guards, and Keith Erickson was a quick-thinking forward who played the last line of defense in the press. Erickson had an uncanny sense of when to move up for a steal and when to stay back and guard the basket.

The next season (1964–65), the Bruins were still not big, and they kept the full-court pressure on. Despite a pair of early-season losses, UCLA streaked through the NCAA tournament averaging 100 points a game and defeating the favored and much bigger University of Michigan Wolverines 91–80. In the championship game, Gail Goodrich, the smallest player on the court, led UCLA to victory with 42 points.

Gail Goodrich, Walt Hazzard, and Keith Erickson went on to have long NBA careers, and Gail Goodrich made it into the National Basketball Hall of Fame.



*UCLA Bruins 1963–1964
NCAA championship team*

There were more championships to come after the 1964–65 season. But with their first two championship victories, John Wooden and the UCLA Bruins proved you do not have to *be* big to *play* big. You just need to have good players, a lot of heart, and the willingness to go full-court.