

FRED BOWEN SERIES
SPORTS STORY

ON THE LINE

FRED BOWEN





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Photos of Rick Barry and Dave Gambee reprinted with permission of The National Basketball Hall of Fame.

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Summary: Worried that his inability to make free throws is making his junior high basketball team lose games, Marcus learns an unconventional underhand shooting method from a friendly custodian but is not sure he wants to use it. Includes a history chapter discussing great basketball players who have used the underhand toss.

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ONE

Marcus Devay leaped above the tangle of players stretching high for the rebound and snapped down the basketball. In one smooth motion, he took a quick dribble and sent a fadeaway jump shot toward the basket. The ball angled off the glass backboard and dropped cleanly through the net.

Marcus's teammates cheered as Marcus and the other Forestville Middle School Cardinals raced downcourt to play defense.

"All right, Marcus."

"Smooth move."

"You're the man, Marcus."

A satisfied smile creased Marcus's face as he got into position on defense. "Hands up,"

he called to his teammates as he waved his hands above his head. “Tough D.”

A Bradley Hills guard tossed a long, off-center shot toward the basket. Marcus moved in for the rebound, jumped, and snagged the ball. He wrapped both hands around it, then zipped a bullet pass to his teammate Daniel Grady and dashed upcourt.

Daniel dribbled up the middle of the court, weaving his way past several players. At the last instant, he flipped a high pass to Marcus, who was sprinting toward the basket. Marcus took one final step and jumped. He caught the ball and, as he floated to the basket, laid a soft shot up and in. The basket stretched Forestville’s lead to 50–44.

“Time out! Time out!” the Bradley Hills coach shouted from the sidelines.

The Forestville Cardinals were full of cheers and high fives as they gathered at the bench.

“Okay, cut the celebrations,” Coach Lerner said. “We’re only up by six points, and there are almost three minutes to go.

Plenty of time left. We've got to keep playing good defense and keep rebounding."

Coach Lerner looked around the circle of seventh- and eighth-grade boys. Then he stared straight at Marcus, the tallest of the group. "Let's try to get the ball in to Marcus. And Marcus, you've got to take it up strong. They may try to foul you."

Marcus nodded silently. *I hope I don't have to take any foul shots*, he thought. *I hate taking foul shots.*

"And remember," Coach Lerner continued, "we need good..."

"DEE-fense!" the team yelled. The players ran onto the court ready to play.

But Bradley Hills quickly cut the lead to four when its star forward got lucky with a desperate jump shot that bounced off the backboard, onto the rim, and through the net.

Marcus jogged upcourt, set up near the right side of the basket, and held up his left hand, signaling for the ball. Carl LaRue, a Forestville guard, saw that Marcus was open and fired a pass to him. Marcus tried

to dribble around a Bradley Hills defender to the basket, but the defender gave him a swift shove. Marcus managed to balance on one foot long enough to send an awkward scoop shot to the hoop.

Phweeet! The referee's whistle shrieked as Marcus tumbled to the floor and the ball headed for the basket. It teetered on the rim for a few seconds, but fell off to the side. Marcus slammed his fist against the floor in frustration.

"Foul on blue, number 12," the referee called.

The referee signaled that Marcus would get two shots.

As Marcus slowly prepared to take his foul shots, all the game's action froze. Players stood motionless in their positions along the lane. The referee was still. The crowd was quiet. And all eyes were on Marcus.

Marcus spun the ball in his hands and bounced it low and hard three times. Each bounce made a loud *thump* on the gym floor. *Come on, you can do it*, Marcus thought to himself as he stared at the rim. *It's an easy shot, you've got to make it.* Then he took a

deep breath, brought the ball up high, and flicked it toward the basket with a snap of his wrist. The ball clanged off the back of the rim, onto the floor, and back to Marcus. He pounded the ball against the floor with a short, angry bounce and then tossed it to the referee.

“Second shot,” the referee said, holding up the ball. “Don’t move until the ball touches the rim.”

This time Marcus’s shot was way short. It barely grazed the front edge of the rim. Marcus shut his eyes and hung his head for a brief moment before turning around and racing downcourt. *Still up by four*, Marcus thought as he ran. *We’ve gotta hang on.*

The Bradley Hills team worked the ball around the Forestville zone defense. A Bradley Hills forward slashed to the basket.

Tulane Hayes, a Forestville forward, reached in for the ball but grabbed the Bradley Hills shooter’s arm.

Phweeet! “Foul,” the referee called, pointing to Tulane. “Two shots, blue.”

The Bradley Hills player calmly stepped to the line and sank both free throws. The

lead melted to two points, 50–48, with thirty seconds to go.

Daniel Grady and Carl LaRue, the Forestville guards, played a desperate game of keep-away as the seconds ticked off the clock. Marcus moved out to take a pass.

The moment Marcus caught the ball, the Bradley Hills coach was off the bench and on his feet.

“Foul him!” he yelled, pointing to Marcus.

A pair of players pounced, slapping Marcus’s arms.

Phweeet!

The Bradley Hills coach clapped as the referee called the foul.

“Number five on the arm,” the referee said. Then, pointing to Marcus, he said, “Number three is shooting two.”

“Time out!” the Bradley Hills coach shouted.

Marcus felt dazed as he walked slowly to the Forestville bench. He hardly listened to Coach Lerner giving instructions to the team. There were twelve seconds left on the clock and Forestville was only up by two points. Marcus looked past the huddle and

stared at the Bradley Hills coach. *He wanted them to foul me*, Marcus thought, *because he thinks I'm going to miss the shots.*

As the teams moved back onto the court, Coach Lerner grabbed Marcus by the arm. "Use your legs and follow through," he reminded Marcus.

Daniel jogged up to his buddy as Marcus made his way to the line. "You're the man, Marcus," he said confidently.

But Marcus barely heard him. All he could hear was the pounding of his heart. It sounded like it was going to pound right through his chest and team jersey. *I've gotta make these shots*, Marcus kept saying to himself as he stepped to the line.

But the moment the first shot left Marcus's hand, it didn't feel right. The ball bounced off the rim and fell to the right.

"Second shot," the referee said as he handed the ball to Marcus. "Ball's live."

By now, Marcus could barely feel his hands and feet. He took a deep breath, puffed up his cheeks, and blew out a burst of air. He looked directly up at the basket and took his shot.

“Short!” he screamed as the ball started to fall. The ball thudded against the front rim, and the Bradley Hills center snatched the rebound.

“Back on defense!” Coach Lerner shouted, waving and motioning wildly from the sidelines. Marcus glanced at the clock as he raced downcourt, wishing the game were over.

The crowd started the final countdown as the Bradley Hills players looked frantically for the last shot. “Ten...nine...eight...”

A Bradley Hills guard dribbled toward the basket and Marcus moved over for the block. At the last moment, the guard fired a pass to a teammate standing past the three-point line.

“Four...three...two...”

The ball was in the air. Marcus stood helpless near the basket. He followed the flight of the ball with his eyes and knew. He knew that the shot was good and the game was lost.

He shut his eyes just before the ball splashed through the net.

FREE THROWS THE REAL STORY

Over the years, the game of basketball has changed. Today's players are bigger, and more of them are girls. They jump higher and run faster. Slam dunks have taken the place of two-handed set shots.

But one part of basketball has not changed: the free throw. The foul line is still fifteen feet from the basket. Nobody guards the shooter. Free throws still can make the difference between winning or losing a game.

Rick Barry was a great player and one of basketball's greatest free-throw shooters. Barry was a twelve-time All Star. In 1996, he was named one of the fifty greatest players ever to play in the NBA (National Basketball



Rick Barry, who made ninety percent of his foul shots, prepares for his famous under-hand free throw.

Association). And Barry is the only player in the history of basketball to have been the top scorer in the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), NBA, and ABA (American Basketball Association, a pro basketball league that existed from 1968 to 1976).

Barry did a lot of his scoring from the free-throw line. During his ten years in the NBA, he was the best free-throw shooter for six years and the second-best free-throw shooter for four years. Barry made 90 percent of his free throws. That means that of every ten shots he took, he only missed one!

But the most amazing thing about Rick Barry is that he shot his free throws

underhand. Barry did not seem to care how he looked when he took his foul shots. He just cared about getting the ball in.

“Players don’t shoot underhand because it’s not a macho thing,” Barry once said. He said that guys should quit worrying about looking macho and just concentrate on getting the ball in the basket.

Another guy who didn’t worry about how he looked on the foul line was Dave Gambee.

He was a rugged, rebounding forward who played for several teams in his ten-year NBA career. He had a weird-looking foul shot: he would bend low, stretch one leg forward, pointing his toe like a ballerina, then toss the ball up underhand in a reverse spin.



Forward Dave Gambee, number 44, drives past San Diego players to the hoop.

And it worked! Gambee sank more than 82 percent of his free throws.

Other players, like Wilt Chamberlain, tried the underhand shot. Chamberlain was one of basketball's all-time greats. He was an unstoppable scorer and an awesome rebounder. But when it came to free throws, he was terrible. Chamberlain tried many different ways of shooting them, including underhand. The underhand shot worked better than most of Chamberlain's other shots. But the seven-foot-three, three-hundred-pound giant didn't like the shot. "I feel silly," Chamberlain said. Chamberlain, it seems, never learned the lesson that Rick Barry and Marcus learned: Sometimes looks aren't as important as getting the job done.