



Chapter 7
PETE

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WIZ FROM PITTSBURGH THAT SAVED NEPTUNE

ONE Saturday morning in September 1980, a twenty-three-year-old called Pete Strickland stood in arrivals in Shannon Airport, checking his watch, waiting. And waiting. Where were these people? Who were these people?

On the phone they'd seemed genuine. He'd first spoken to them back in spring. Wayne Williams, his old teammate from the University of Pittsburgh, had called, inviting him to play in an all-star game as part of some small-town festival in Pennsylvania. A few of the other guys from college were going to be there and so were a couple of fellas from Europe on the look out for some players; if he was going to be in the area he should tag along. Pete was in the area; his home in Rockwell, Maryland, was only a couple of hours' drive away. In his senior year in Pitt his father had died so he'd moved back home, teaching in a local school while looking after his mother and little sister, but as she'd be finishing high school soon, it was time to move on again. He played the game and afterwards got talking to a Dan Byrne from Blue Demons in Ireland. They'd signed Wayne but another club in Cork, called Neptune, were looking for players too. So after a couple of calls with some guys called Liam McGinn and Niall O'Riordan, here he was. The question was where were they?

"If you could just pay for your own flight over, Pete, and we'll reimburse you," they'd assured him.

"Nice going, guys," Strickland grinned to himself. "You got me."

If anyone had been conned when it came to Americans that September though, it had been Neptune themselves. The club had just cut a player called Gerry Byrne, although to call Gerry a player was being very generous to him. Cathal O'Flaherty first sensed something was askew when he had brought Gerry up to the court in the new school. It wasn't so much that he was barely 5'10" when the club had been told he was going to be 6'2". It was when Cathal was shooting down at one end and heard an American accent from the other. "My God, you've got some great moves!" Cathal turned round. His brother Aidan and Gerry were the only people there. Aidan was flatfooted, totally left-handed and barely fifteen. *Aidan* had some great moves?! Later on Gerry and the team's other white American, Gary Gardiner, fell in with Tom O'Sullivan and Paul Fitzgerald for a game of two-on-two. The two young fellas were sixteen and destroyed the two pros.

Turned out Gerry was more of a photographer than a basketballer. What he really wanted to do in Ireland was travel the country and if he got really lucky, try and get embedded with the IRA and take some snaps of them. Basketball seemed a way of paying his way around the country, especially since they knew nothing about basketball in Ireland, right? They knew enough about it to recognise during a pre-season tournament in Wales that Gerry's first game as a starter would be his last. "For the rest of the weekend," says Pat Lucey, "he was our tenth man and official team photographer. He had a great few days with us. Then on the Monday the lads waved goodbye to him in Shannon."

The following Saturday Liam McGinn and Niall O'Riordan were back at the airport to finally collect Pete Strickland. Apologies were offered for keeping him waiting but none at all for immediately whisking him off to Tralee for the Ted Keane preseason tournament; jet lag or no jet lag, Pete was expected to play.

It became very obvious very soon that he could play. He could handle the ball like Hendrix could handle a guitar. In time they would learn he could even play Hendrix with a ball. When he'd go around coaching in the schools on the city's northside, he'd ask the kids to name a song and then he'd pound out its beats with a basketball in either hand.

And what a man to give a pass. Francis O'Sullivan, an eighteen-year-old rookie back then, cannot recall seeing an assist before or since to equal the chest pass Pete snapped the full length of the court for a Dave Cody layup that day in Tralee; no wonder the guy had been the all-time assists leader in the history of Pittsburgh. If anything the Neptune crowd felt he passed too much. After his first game, a four-point defeat to league champions Killarney, the club's elders went into conclave and when it broke, they had something to say.

"Pete, you're an American."

"I know."

"We need you to score more."

Pete smiled. In the States his job had been to get everyone involved but if it had to be different here that wasn't going to be a problem.

Pete actually didn't end up Neptune's leading scorer that year. One of the Americans young Paul Fitzgerald embarrassed up in the new school went on to average twenty-two points and become

such a legitimate force down the centre, that Francis O’Sullivan still jokes Gary Gardiner was the only American to come to Ireland that went home a better player. And the reason was Pete. He made them all better. With two Americans when most teams in the division had none, Neptune were always going to cruise to that year’s Division Two championship and Top Four titles. But when they look back on that season, the fact they went the whole campaign unbeaten, averaging 109 points a game, seems almost superfluous. “I only have vague memories of the games,” says Francis O’Sullivan. “All I remember are the training sessions and the techniques and skills Pete brought in. And the fun we had. No one who was there that year will forget it.”

BREAK

PETE STRICKLAND had never trained a team before. He had coached in Morgan Wootten’s summer camp alright and the likes of fellow DeMatha Catholic High School old boy and NBA star Sidney Lowe in the summer leagues in Georgetown and DC. But as for taking a training session, or a team for a season, Neptune was his first time his name had gone alongside those two words all chalkboard junkies crave – head coach.

There was no extra money in it. The club were stuck. Joe Aherne had taken the team for those preseason tournaments and a couple of league games, enough time for Strickland to conclude nearly thirty years later that Joe possessed “one of the finest basketball brains you’ll find, either side of the Atlantic”. The thing was the ladies national league team that he had nurtured the previous few years had kicked up, wanting exclusive rights to that brain and Joe and the club relented. Pete was up for the challenge of succeeding him, so long as Cathal O’Flaherty helped him out as bench coach. Coaching had been something he was always going to get into at some point. He also happened to have spent four years being coached every day by a man widely regarded as the greatest teacher and coach in the history of American team sport.

You might have had John Wooden down as that. In the space of twelve years he would guide UCLA to ten NCAA national championships, seven of them on the trot. Yet Wooden said of Morgan Wootten of DeMatha Catholic High School, “I know of no finer coach at any level – high school, college or pro. I stand in awe of him.”

In Wootten, Wooden saw a kindred spirit. Technically and tactically, he was a basketball genius, writing a series of text books which won rave reviews from other gurus like Bobby Knight, Rick Pitino, Dean Smith and Mike Krzyzewski. But that did not explain why he is the first and only high school coach to make the basketball Hall of Fame; or why he won four national championships (consider the number of high schools in America, then consider that Wootten’s school had fewer

than a thousand pupils) and produced more Olympians, NBA players and NCAA coaches than any other high school coach in history.

What Wooden loved about Wootten was that he got it. The secret to winning so much in basketball was to appreciate there was so much more to life than winning and basketball. Wootten lived by a set of principles: the Big Five he called them.

1. Be the kind of coach you would want your son or daughter to play for.
2. Provide a wholesome environment in which young people can develop socially and spiritually.
3. Never lose sight of the fact that basketball is a game and should be fun.
4. Since the game is such a teacher of life, help prepare your players for the many decisions that will affect the quality of their lives.
5. Do all you can to make your players' experience as rewarding as possible; this, not winning, is the bottom line.

He had all kinds of ways of living and spreading that gospel. He would hand players a poem or a quote from Yeats or Shakespeare, or one that he came up with himself. To Wootten words were weapons; used wisely and they could conquer a world but used flippantly and they could shatter one. "What you say to your players," he once wrote, "can determine how good their dinner will taste and how well they sleep that night. An incidental cutting remark which you forgot as soon as you said it can be a source of pain longer than you may ever know."

That didn't mean molycoddling them. There were three things he was convinced every player yearned – guidance, people to express an interest in them, but above all, discipline. Adrian Dantley, a six-time NBA All Star, was once suspended from the team for a week for not obeying one of Wootten's assistants. Everything done at and by DeMatha smacked of discipline. In the way they conducted themselves; in their purposefulness on offence, their aggression on defence; in handling bad calls from officials; in remaining unaffected whether they were fifteen up or down.

Pete Strickland would bring all those things to Neptune but he was only a disciple of Wootten's, not a clone. "Always be yourself," Wootten had told his players in DeMatha. "Remember the saying, 'I am me and I want to be the best me that I can be.'"

That, Pete Strickland perfected.

BREAK

ONE morning that autumn Strickland was walking down an off-street in the city centre of Cork when he got the smell of bread. He followed it into the little bakery across the road and informed the man behind the counter that he'd love if he could bake for him. The man shook his head. He couldn't afford to take anyone else on, especially a novice.

"I said nothing about money," smiled Pete.

The man looked him up and down, then shrugged his shoulders. "Fine," he growled. "Tomorrow morning, half-five."

Tim the Baker never expected Pete Strickland to show up that morning. But he did. And the next. By the end of the week Tim's view of the Yank had altered – instead of some kind of drifter, he was obviously some kind of zealot – but his suspicion of his new assistant remained. Maybe Tim was just being paranoid, being a northern Protestant in the Catholic south, but what would possess a stranger to start work at 5.30am every morning without taking a penny? It could only be one thing.

This Yank knew Tim was partial to the odd spliff.

This Yank was working for someone like the CIA.

Tim would soon come to appreciate that this Yank didn't work for any agency or even for money. Pete Strickland just wanted to bake for its own sake, because an experience like that would be "kinda neat". He was an early riser who felt there was no better way to pass a few hours than to bake with his new friend from Belfast without having to say a word, listening to Tim's old neighbour Van Morrison at full blast, before heading off at ten to coach the local kids.

As much as Pete came to love making food, one night a week he would abstain from eating any. He had a girlfriend back home and every Thursday would fast in her honour. Because every Thursday she was doing the same in his, because if he could live all those months away from her he could easily live one day a week without food; because though they were continents apart, they still shared a pact, a love.

Another time he ventured just off Cork's commercial boulevard, the South Mall, to the small theatre, Father Matthew Hall, to audition for a play. Zigger Zagger might have been about English soccer hooliganism and he was American but he had majored in speech and theatre at Pitt. Naturally, he landed a part as the producers tweaked the script to accommodate the character of a charismatic American preacher man. The show ran for weeks. The audience, including some virgin theatre-goers from Neptune, lapped it up, and Pete loved it too.

Every day, every eventuality, was a blessing to Pete Strickland. He could see that the northside was in the grip of a basketball fever and just walking the streets, from school to school, through Shandon and Knocknaheeny, spreading the word and the condition was the honour of a lifetime. Their warmth, enthusiasm, sincerity, innocence; he'll never forget it. One time the head nun of a new girls' school phoned him up to coach the kids. So himself and Gary Gardiner show up in reception, they meet and greet the head nun and Pete asks for directions to the school gym.

"Sorry. Meant to tell you we don't have a gym. But we have this all-purpose room."

Pete says no problem and is escorted to the all-purpose room.

"This is great," he says. "I suppose we'll just roll out the baskets and away we go."

"Em, sorry. Forgot to tell you, we have no baskets."

"O-kay. That's not a problem either, Sister. We can get round that. We'll just break the girls up in to two lines here and get a basketball for each one."

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry, Mister Strickland. We thought you were bringing the basketballs."

Gary shot Pete a look of incredulity. Pete winked and whispered to the side. "Follow my lead, partner."

And for the next hour he introduced the girls to the joys of defense. Slides, stance, position. They ate it up. And the next week, when he actually brought some basketballs...! Hallelujah! Another school converted.

Nowhere though was his spell more potent than in Neptune itself. Some of the defensive tips he'd shown those schoolgirls were new to them too. Like how to position yourself to take the charge and draw a foul on the man with the ball ("And ever watch how a baby falls back? Bum first! When you

take a charge, remember a baby. Bum first!”) Like your man-ball position every time the ball was moved. Like the concept and principles of strongside and helpside defence.

At the other end of the floor, he'd sell them on the idea of following through on their shot by telling them to “reach [up] for the peach”. To improve their ball-handling, he introduced them to a series of fun and challenging drills. Like wrapping the ball around your waist in one continuous motion as often as you could in thirty seconds. Or making the figure of eight through your legs, first without bouncing the ball, then by dribbling... “It was the first time,” says Francis O’Sullivan, “that anyone had come in and shown us the idea that you could actually get better at dribbling by handling the basketball every day, or dribbling two balls at the one time. Stuff that you’d do routinely with nine and ten-year-olds now, we’d never seen before Pete.”

Francis idolised Pete, from the way he could handle that ball to his musical taste and passion for Rory Gallagher and rhythm & blues and jazz. O’Sullivan had only joined the club a couple of weeks before Pete. His club had been North Monastery until a dispute with his under-19 coach. When word of that broke, his coach with the under-19 national team, Liam O’Connell, took him down to Killarney. Francis saw it as the perfect apprenticeship; one day his beloved Mon would go national league and he’d be there with them, but gaining some senior ball in the meantime would be good for both him and them. Within weeks he had enough of coming back from Killarney at one in the morning. It was fine for Liam and Mick Butler who weren’t working back then; they didn’t have to get up at six in the morning to work in the family contract cleaning business. McGinn and O’Riordan were straight in. With Neptune there wouldn’t be any of that midweek travel. Francis was with his third club in as many months but in no time Neptune felt like home.

At the end of the season Pete handed Francis a player assessment report, detailing his offensive strengths and weaknesses and defensive strengths and weaknesses to work on over the off-season. Strickland had offered a template which every leading basketball camp in the country would use for generations. To this day it’s still not commonplace in sports like hurling and football. And to this day O’Sullivan still has that sheet of paper. It has Pete’s personality, Wootten’s way and Francis’s game all over it.

‘Francis, offensively the biggest problem you have is tentativeness. When you play instinctively and are forced to play instinctively you’re dynamite. Good competition forces you to make quick decisions with the ball. Against not-so good competition you tend to be indecisive. Similar to a child in an ice cream factory trying to decide whether to eat any of the myriad of flavours present and simply doesn’t make up his mind. Along the same lines you must go to the basket – all the way, more. Your jump shot is picturesque (although you must not fade on it); now work on slashing to the basket and stop double-pumping at the end of your drives...’

They all got that kind of feedback.

“He’d leave you this three-page report on your game,” says Pat Lucey, “wouldn’t say another word, you’d read it and you’d think to yourself, ‘He’s right.’ It would have stuff like ‘Pat, work on covering more ground with each defensive slide. You’re big – use your size. You need to work on your play off the ball. Set screens. When you cut, make them sharp and straight, not rounded, banana-shaped cuts.’ Then you’d go back and discuss it with him and he’d come up with ways for you to work on those weaknesses.”

More importantly, he highlighted their strengths, sang about those strengths. That was something of a culture shock too.

Jim Nugent had never been regarded as anything special in Neptune. Jimmy O’Connell alright had handed him the team captancy when Nugent was nineteen but over the years different coaches would look at Nugent and see a very ordinary player. He was only 5’8” yet wasn’t good enough at handling the ball to play at the guard spot. He hadn’t even played the previous season when the club had finished a dismal sixth in Division Two; Nugent had just married and his father had just died so he had taken the season out. But once he came back and Strickland came in, Pete saw something extraordinary. The hustle, the energy, the drive, the spirit: “The only thing that can slow Jim down,” Pete would say, “is his big heart.” With the right guidance, he could be honed into a guard as well. For years Neptune had this diamond in the rough and it took an outsider to uncover it.

“Pete looked at everyone’s good points,” says Nugent. “He praised my leadership and my defence and it brought me on no end. Because no one would ever have said that before. I don’t know if it was an Irish thing or a Neptune thing but praise was a very hard thing to get. But Pete would be telling you, ‘You’re the rock of this club’s future.’ He’d switch me over to guard someone who had been causing him some trouble and afterwards he’d tell you, ‘That guy was burning me and you stopped him. Well done, thanks.’ To hear that from him, sure your confidence just soared.”

BREAK

PETE was not infallible.

In the final weeks of that magical 1980-1981 season, the club hosted the first ever Neptune international tournament. Again the club was thinking big. The two most exciting new teams in England and Scotland, Solent Stars and Murray Metals were secured for the weekend, with the

mercurial Alton Byrd of Crystal Palace guesting with the Scots. But as tournament director Mick Finn and the rest of his committee sat around the table, they knew the lineup needed something more. An American team. Pete thought out loud and said he could arrange that. Heads turned. He could?! “Sure,” said Pete. “They might never have played together but I’ll get a team.”

So he called Mike Brey, his old buddy from DeMatha. Mike would later serve as an assistant to Mike Krzyzewski at Duke, helping the Blue Devils to their first two NCAA national championships, before taking on the head coaching job at Notre Dame and becoming the first coach in Big East history to have a team go two seasons undefeated at home. Back then though he was sitting out the year. Ireland sounded great and he’d be able to round up a couple of other guys too.

A few weeks later a disparate group of twentysomethings board a plane in JFK, their only thing in common that they’re all friends of either Pete Strickland or Mike Brey. As far as the Cork public know, the Maryland All Stars are a real team, and according to the tournament programme, a really good one. They might be the only team in that programme without a group photo, Mike’s dad might just have bought them the shabbiest, cheapest gear that’ll be on display all weekend, but the Cork public doesn’t know that. What it knows is that they’re all Americans, and as the tournament programme says, “They’ve got to be favourites, they’ve got to be favourites.”

Pete’s there when they come through the gate in Shannon. The first guy he sees is Bill Ruback. Bill has been selling rental cars since graduating from Niagara. On the phone he’s told Pete he’s been keeping in shape. “Jumping rope every night.” Pete takes one look at him in Shannon. “Jesus Christ.” Bill hasn’t been jumping rope every night.

The next day the team are on a float in the Patrick’s Day parade, shooting hoops on the back of a lorry. The lorry suddenly halts. Paul DeVito, who Morgan Wootten rates as one of the best shooters he’s ever seen, goes crashing into a barrier and spends the rest of the week propping up the bar in Jury’s. The Maryland All Stars are down to eight, including Bill Ruback.

Come tournament time they shade it over an Irish selection. Murray crush them. Their game against Blue Demons will decide who’ll take the runners-up spot and make the semi-finals. With four seconds to go the All Stars are up by one when there’s a jump ball called on the Maryland foul line. Contesting it are Bill Ruback and Andy Houlihan. Andy is not renowned for his hops and is ceding three inches to Bill. But Bill barely gets off the floor and Andy wins the tip. It falls to John Cooney at the top of the key. Swish. Buzzer! Demons 71 Maryland 70.

Pete wishes the ground could swallow him. *“They’ve got to be favourites, they’ve got to be favourites.”* He avoids Niall O’Riordan and Liam McGinn all night. The embarrassment!

And then the next day over 1,600 people cram into the Parochial Hall to see Demons take on Solent in the semi-final. Another two thousand come back that night for the final to see Murray and Solent play a classic that goes into double overtime. Irish basketball has never seen crowds like it. Solent and Boroughmuir and Soleuvre from Luxemburg go home and tell anyone who’ll listen that the Neptune is one of the best tournaments in Europe. Mike Brey and the guys go back to the States and rib Bill Ruback for the rest of their lives about his and their week propping up the bar in Cork. Byrd writes a personal letter to Niall O’Riordan to congratulate the club on hosting the perfect weekend.

All because the Maryland All Stars were beaten.

That was Pete Strickland that year. Even when he got it wrong he got it right.

BREAK

A FEW weeks later Pete followed his friends across the Atlantic but only before a raucous send off. The night before his departure, a party was thrown in his apartment on Patrick’s Hill. It lasted into the wee hours by which time Ger Leahy and Cathal O’Flaherty must have been chucked into the bath a good five times. The high jinks continued all morning. About an hour before Pete was to be collected by the McGinns and O’Riordans, a group of them headed down the street to get something to eat. Pete bought a chocolate cake, shoved it right into Cathal’s face and then ran off giggling.

O’Flaherty would have his revenge. When he got back to the flat, he spotted a pair of Strickland’s underpants on the floor. Some of the chocolate cake was still about the place too. Mmm ... Next thing, the door buzzes. Rose McGinn and Rita O’Riordan are outside. “Nearly ready,” Pete declares on the speaker. “Come on up.” So they come up the stairs, the door of Pete’s apartment is ajar, but no sooner do they set foot in the place then they’re running down the stairs, shrieking. What would you do if you were met by the sight of Pete Strickland’s y-fronts dangling from a hanger, with great big skid marks running across them?

The McGinns and O’Riordans still thought enough of Pete to drive him to Shannon. O’Flaherty hopped onto the back of Paddy Maher’s motorbike and saw him off as well. It was all smiles, no tears. They all knew Pete was coming back next season. In September they’d all see him again.

Two of them saw Pete again a good bit earlier. That summer Liam McGinn and Niall O’Riordan spent two weeks travelling the United States, with Pete as their own personal tour guide.

For Pete, it was the least he could do. In Ireland Liam and Niall had become like family to him. They’d have him over for dinner so often Pete reckons he must have stayed with the McGinns more than he stayed in his own flat. If Niall became like a father to him, Liam was more like a brother. He could have a laugh with him. And he could get deep with him. Sometimes Pete would drop into his office and leave on his desk a poem or quote like Morgan use to leave his players in DeMatha. ‘God gave us people to love and things to use. When we reverse this, tragedy strikes.’ ‘Measure each day by what you give, not by what you get.’ He knew Liam would like those.

For Liam and Niall it was the trip of a lifetime. Pete brought them everywhere – the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, a play on Broadway, JFK’s eternal flame in Washington. One magical weekend in Pennsylvania, they stayed in Amish country, where McGinn woke one morning to the sound and sight of a horse and carriage clopping by, bringing a man with a pointed beard and black hat, and his wife, with her big bonnet and cape, to a market which could have been straight out of the eighteenth century.

For Pete it was a treat too, to see his own country through their wide, innocent eyes. The first night they got in, he educated them on the tipping system. In a restaurant in the States, you left a tip of about fifteen percent for the staff, twenty if their service was really good. It was the same in a bar. One morning they pulled into a gas station on the outskirts of New York on their way to DC. Pete visited the men’s room while Liam and Niall stayed in the car as the gas attendant filled up the tank and on his way back out Pete passed the happiest gas attendant he ever saw, clutching the biggest tip of his life.

BREAK

THAT summer Pete had more to do than just drive Liam and Niall around the country. He was to recruit another American to play alongside him for the upcoming season in the Irish first division. Gary might have come on in leaps and bounds that first year, developing a lovely touch from fifteen feet out, but even Gary knew they’d need a player of another calibre to compete at the next level. A lot of things had Pete excited about the new season – how Liam and Niall had been able to lure Tom Wilkinson back from Demons, the potential of those kids of Noelle Allen’s who’d trained with the seniors last season – but the idea of recruiting another American really wetted his whistle. In the end Pete Strickland selected Danny Harwood of Boston University.

He was not the only coach who rated Danny highly. At Boston University Danny had the distinction of being Rick Pitino's first-ever captain as a head coach. He was 6'6", a lethal outside shooter and like Pete was the kind of player who could pass and get everyone involved. That was the kind of player, the kind of team, Pete wanted. In the second division the team's scoring spread had been so even they had eight different players averaging double figures. While that wasn't going to be quite possible in a higher division, the philosophy was going to be the same. This was going to be a real team playing tenacious, aggressive defence, and a selfless, equal-opportunity offence.

The first quiver in paradise was when Pete saw his buddy Danny getting off the plane at Shannon. His condition wasn't quite as bad as Bill Ruback's six months earlier but it was obvious Danny had enjoyed his summer in Cape Cod. Still, it wasn't anything to get alarmed about. The national league was still another three weeks away so that gave Danny time to get into shape, while the Ted Keane preseason tournament in Tralee that weekend would shake off some of the rust on Danny's game.

Tralee was a disaster. Killarney wiped Neptune. Worse, so did Demons. Once again the Neptune cognoscenti found themselves in a series of huddles in Tralee, mulling over a new American. The verdict was damning. Their new American had a new nickname. Danny Harwood was Danny Deadwood.

What exacerbated the situation was that Demons had premiered two new Americans that weekend. Webster Means, at 6'8", was big, black and, well, mean. And as for Lennie McMillan; quite simply everyone in Tralee hadn't seen anything or anyone quite like him before.

Lennie was barely in the country a week but already in Demons he was a bona fide legend. When a couple of club officials went to collect him in Shannon, it was clear Lennie hadn't taken either geography or history for his major. One of the first things Lennie asked them was how far were they from the Russian border? Poland, Ireland; his old pal from Pittsburgh, Wayne Williams, hadn't been specific.

A few days later Lennie was a guest at a groundbreaking reception. For the first time in the history of the sport in Ireland, a national company with international recognition was sponsoring a team. Showerings, the soft drinks company that operated out of Clonmel, had linked up with Demons, the national league champions, and the side would now play under the brand name, Britvic. After the reception and consuming a couple of drinks that were a bit stronger than Britvic, Lennie found himself hanging out with the team's young new guard, William 'Mono' McCarthy, and clubman

John Coughlan, up in Mono's parents' house in Mount Nebo Avenue. Late in the night Lennie asked if he could crash there. So Mono tells his brother Eamonn to move into Mono's room where the bed is big enough for the two of them and leave Eamonn's lovely warm bed with its electric blanket for the Yank.

Eamonn shuffles into Mono's bed, Mono slips in beside him, while in the next room Lennie pulls Eamonn's sheets and duvet up over his face and falls asleep straight away.

A few hours later Eamonn's up and off to work when his father Timmy raps at his bedroom door. "Eamonn! Are you up? Come on! You'll be late for work!" No answer. The stupid young fella. He's going to sleep in.

So Timmy walks in and his jaw drops and his head spins.

Sticking out under the covers are two black feet. Oh, Jesus Christ, no! He storms out and starts banging Mono's door furiously.

"Mono! Mono! Eamonn's being fucking electrocuted!"

Down in Tralee though, it wasn't the Russian border or electric blankets that had every tongue wagging about Lennie McMillan.

"It was like watching Michael Jordan for the first time," says Cathal O'Flaherty. "We'd never seen a player so complete. He could handle the ball, pass, shoot, rebound, block shots, strip the ball off you, the works. He was the closest thing to an NBA player anyone had seen. People were just in awe of him."

Joe Healy was one of the mesmerised. That had been his first tournament as a senior player. Dave Cody, Willie Long and Junior Ryan had all decided to go out on the high of that unbeaten season in Division Two and leave it – or at least the bench – to young fellas like Healy and Brendan O'Flaherty and Tom O'Sullivan. For all the basketball and confidence they had, watching Lennie McMillan that weekend was a humbling if exhilarating experience for the kids. Although Neptune had been the first team eliminated from the tournament, they'd stayed on with Noelie Allen on the Sunday just to watch Lennie in the final.

"We must have spent most of the journey back trying to figure out how Webster Means got the tournament MVP," says Healy. "Maybe they couldn't tell the difference between two black fellas, I

don't know, because Webster wasn't in the same league as Lennie. There was one passage of play where Lennie won a rebound above the rim, turned to the wing in midair and fired an outlet pass to Mono before he had landed. Now Mono was a speed demon yet by the time he got down the floor who was there to finish the fast break with a dunk? Lennie. He was unbelievable."

Someone else had his eyes opened that weekend. Jackie Solan was living and working in Cork for the new Burgerland franchise for about a year at this stage and had joined the club after meeting Niall O'Riordan through some voluntary work with St Vincent de Paul. He had played in division three in the local league, become the club's public relations officer, sponsored the trophies for that first Neptune international tournament. Now he was about to sponsor the national league team outright. Burgerland International would be going up against Team Britvic. But if there was to be any hope of that there was no way Danny Harwood could be going up against Lennie McMillan.

"You had Demons with these two big blacks that were frightening to look at, and there I was then watching our two white lads going up against them. You know the line 'White Men Can't Jump'? Well, it's a fact. Now Danny could shoot for mommy but who was going to pay in to watch him? How were the papers meant to get excited about him when they could go and write about Lennie? I went to Liam and Niall and I said, 'Lads, it's very simple. I'm not wasting my money on that fella. I want a couple of black fellas that can dunk the bloody thing.'"

There was an inference there that Jackie wouldn't have been sorry to see Pete go either but there was no way Liam and Niall were going to allow that. On Danny though there had been no ambiguity – either Danny walked the plank or Jackie himself was walking. Players and former players were consulted and the verdict was overwhelming. Danny had to go. So that Monday morning McGinn and O'Riordan called Pete in to their office to tell him the news. And Pete told them that if that was the case well then he would have to go too.

It was a matter of honour. Danny had put his life on hold to play for Neptune. There were still a few weeks for him to get in shape for the start of the league. And having been here the previous year Pete knew the league. Neptune would be fine. Danny would be the perfect fit for the team he had in mind. If Danny went, so did Pete's vision for the team. There was no point in staying.

McGinn and O'Riordan were shell-shocked. Jesus, Pete, you can't be serious? At least think some more about it, sleep on it. The next morning Pete came in and said nothing had changed. He could see this was breaking their heart but that Jackie had them by the balls. As much as he respected their dilemma and decision, he had given them his word he'd recruit a player and he'd given Danny his word he'd be that player. What was he without his word? He'd hand them back the month's

advance they had paid them but Danny wouldn't be giving back his, and in a way Pete couldn't blame him either.

Neptune would say goodbye to a lot of Americans through the years. Tim O'Brien can still see Dino Gregory, this 6'7" kid from LA, crying like a baby in his car outside the Metropole Hotel in 1983 after Tim discreetly tipped him off that the committee waiting inside would be letting him go. Billy Kelly still winces at the memory of Bob Stephens, one of the twenty greatest rebounders in the history of NCAA college basketball, breaking down when Billy had to inform him on Christmas week that the club's new American coach was bringing in a new player for him. Billy would also see tears flowing through the fingers of Sam Graham, a 6'9 brickhouse from Jamaica who had won a championship with the club, the night he was told his services were no longer required. A coach, Ozell Wells, couldn't even talk with the lump in his throat when Billy and Mick Noonan gave him the new bad news another Christmas in 2005. No parting though would ever cut up clubmen like the one with Pete.

The Tuesday night after Tralee, the team were shooting around in the Parochial Hall, waiting for Pete and for training to start when Niall O'Riordan called them in. He told them about Jackie, about Danny, about Pete. And then he started crying there and then in front of all of them. Then the players scattered, some of them so they could cry alone.

Cathal O'Flaherty fled for the jacks. A couple of cubicles down, he could hear someone else sobbing too. Pete had been the one person that had recognised that Cathal could play. He had been the bench coach in Division Two but would join in at training and at the end of the season Pete had told him to get ready for the first division; he was as good as any guard in the club. Now that Pete was gone, deep down he knew so was his dream of national league.

He at least had the consolation of getting to say goodbye. Later that night Pete called up to the Hall but by then Cathal was about the only one left, still stuck in the jacks. Soon Pete was bawling in there as well. But, as he explained to Cathal, this was just the way of the world. Irish basketball wanted two black fellas who could dunk the ball and himself and Danny clearly weren't the right colour. Already North Mon had been on to him, wanting him to coach and play for them in their first year in the national league, Tim was offering him a share in the bakery business, but he was ready to move on and start the rest of his life.

The following morning Pete was gone. This time there was no farewell party, no chocolate cake, no daredevil rides on Paddy Maher's motorbike, no sign of Niall or Liam or Rita or Rose. It was just

Danny and himself, one wishing he had never come to this godforsaken country, the other wishing he never had to leave.

BREAK

JACKIE got his wish. Reggie Holmes and Richard Montague were shipped in. Both were black, 6'8" and could slam it down.

Richard was more selective about getting off the ground. He was actually a perimeter player in college with a lovely shooting touch but between his unfamiliarity with playing inside, his passive, gentlemanly manner, and the distraction of having his wife Joanna and a new-born baby over with him, he rarely went beyond being a solid player than the brilliant one he threatened to be.

Reggie played the game just as Jackie wanted it. Whereas Pete and Danny played on the ground, Reggie played in the air. He was the league's most exciting player that season, if not quite its most rounded or effective, and all these years on Jim Nugent wonders just how good he could have been if it hadn't been all so new to everyone.

"Holmes was potentially as good as Ray Smith but back then we didn't know how to look after an athlete like that. Like, I remember going up to his apartment and the paper was falling off the wall. If he had come to us five years later, I'd say he'd have been as good as Smith, if not better."

If Richard and Reggie were liked if not quite loved as Pete was, Pete's successor as team coach invoked antipathy. Paul Fitzpatrick had been an assistant coach at Boston State College and recommended to the club by Dan Doyle and the Irish-American foundation, but the verdict in Neptune was unanimous. As they'd say in the vernacular, the guy was "an absolute looper".

A seventeen year-old Joe Healy spent most of Fitzpatrick's training sessions at the back of the class, laughing.

"The first night he walks in and points to the basketball. 'See this? This is your best friend. Love the basketball!' Next thing he starts rolling around the floor, hugging and kissing the ball. Sully and myself are at the back of the huddle, breaking ourselves, going, 'Who is this fella?'

"He had these catchphrases. 'Bounce the ball' was a big one. He didn't want any chest passes around the perimeter, he felt they were too easy to intercept, so with every pass you had to bounce the ball. 'Bounce the ball! Bounce the ball!' We had Jimmy Barry from Iona playing with us that

year and the guy wrecked poor old Jimmy's head. On offence all Jimmy can hear is 'Bounce the ball! Bounce the ball!' Then on defence, he's hearing, 'Jimmy, can you see the man? Can you see the ball?' Jimmy was a pure street player, had never been taught to play defence in his life. Next thing in training Fitzpatrick hits Jimmy on the side off the head with the ball. 'You can't see the ball, man!'

"One night he pushed it too far. Pat Lucey would have been another old school player, playing zone defence his whole life. So Fitzpatrick is going, 'Can you see the ball, Lucey?! Can you see the man?!' Next thing, bam! Right into the side of the head. 'You can't see the ball, man!' Now, you don't do that to Pat Lucey. So half an hour later we're doing figure-of-eights up the floor, Fitzpatrick is standing out by the sideline close to where the ball is to be received for the first pass, talking to someone, and Lucey spots his chance. Bang! He gets Fitzpatrick perfect! So your man's reeling and Lucey just raises the hand. 'Sorry there, old stock. Are you alright?' It was poetry, boy. 'Hey, you couldn't see the ball, man!'"

For all the eccentricities of their new coach, Pete was ultimately right about the team that year. They did fine. After losing their first three league games, they won their fourth, shocking Demons, 92-91, up in the Hall in the kind of match and atmosphere that the sides would serve up for the entire decade. When Fitzpatrick departed soon after Christmas, John Lucey stepped in to steer the side to safety, and force Killester into a playoff to make the Top Four, which the Dublin side shaded, 61-57.

Something precious had been lost that season though, violated even. A couple of weeks after Pete went back to the States, Francis O'Sullivan went back to The Mon. Neptune could never mean the same to him after how they had treated Pete.

"How could you let Pete Strickland just walk away? Like, here was someone who had everything you would want in a person, one of the few Americans who ever got our psyche. I can't describe to you the credibility Neptune lost as a basketball club at the time. In that one year, every basketball person in the league knew what Pete Strickland was trying to instil in Neptune and Irish basketball. I know it's an incredible thing to say given Neptune went on to win something like seven of the next ten leagues, but I still maintain they made a mistake. Am I right about that? I don't know. Would I still be angry about it? Yes. I would, though I wouldn't be as bitter about it as Danny Harwood. I was at his wedding and Danny still hates Irish people."

Cathal O'Flaherty has long gotten over what he personally lost out on when Pete left but he often ponders what the club missed out on. If it had to come to that fork in the road again, what would it

do? With Jackie and his patronage, they would win all those leagues and Cups with Americans who could leap out of the gym. But while those Americans would stay in bed, Pete would have been out coaching the Neptune coaches and players of the future. The club never really became a club for coaches. If Pete had stayed it would have. How many banners would that have been worth? Maybe Pete might have stayed only another year but maybe he would have stayed here forever. It was only a matter of time before the national association headhunted him to be a promotional officer for them. He loved Ireland. When Morgan Wootten resisted all those big college offers from the likes of NC State and Duke to stay at DeMatha, he had a stock answer for his friends: "Why mess with happiness?" Why did Neptune mess with happiness? Why did it have to be this big battle between Jackie and Pete for the soul and future of Neptune?

Liam McGinn's conscience often wrestled with the same question. So, one night, he tried to exorcise it by penning a letter to Pete. It was about three years after Pete had gone without any communication between them. By this stage Lennie McMillan had played and won a league with Neptune and conjured up plays that had Liam and Jackie up off their seats. And yet Liam found himself that night writing not so much an explanation as an apology.

"I told him we had done him a serious wrong. I had been too rash. I told him how disappointed I was in myself as a person that I had allowed myself to give in under pressure from our sponsor. I felt I should have been bigger than that. I should have fought to give Danny more time. Because we ended up losing our first three league games anyway. We were never going to win that league and we were never going to get relegated either. And if we had given Danny those few games, then things would have evolved naturally. Either Danny would have shaped up or Pete would have seen himself that he wasn't performing and the decision would have been very easy. But instead it was all this high powered, emotive, impulsive stuff. 'Get rid off him!' I tell you, the whole thing knocked the stuffing out of me, that I'd allowed myself to lose such a close friend over stupid basketball."

BREAK

PETE STRICKLAND continued to excel at being Pete Strickland. After coaching for a season in a Catholic high school in the Bronx in his first year back in the States, he returned to DeMatha to serve as an assistant to Wootten for four years. Then he stepped up to the college level as an assistant at a number of Division One schools, including Old Dominion, where he'd tutor future Neptune stars Ricardo Leonard and Mario Mullen, and then Richard Montague's alma mater of Dayton Ohio University.

In 1998, by which time he and his wife Mary Catherine had their third child, he landed his first head coach job since Neptune by taking over the struggling Coastal Carolina University. Within two years he was the Big South Conference Coach of the Year and had transformed them into the third-best three-point shooting team in the entire country.

By 2005 the Pete effect had worn off and the programme felt it needed a new voice, replacing him with Buzz Peterson, Michael Jordan's old roommate at North Carolina. But Pete was instantly snapped up by his old pal Sidney Lowe to join his staff at Lowe's NC State, where Lowe had won the national championship under the legendary Jim Valvano in 1983. With Duke, North Carolina, Wake Forest and Clemson all in the conference, there isn't a more competitive division in basketball than the ACC but it's there, pitting wits against the likes of Coach K and Roy Williams, that Pete makes his living. On the camp circuit, he is one of the most respected coaches in America, often acting as a director to the esteemed Five Star camp.

Ireland would continue to hold a special place in his heart. For years after leaving Neptune he would coach at the annual summer camp in Dungarvan where he had a massive influence on coaches like Enda Byrt, Roger Kelleher and Danny Fulton and international players like Danny's son, Adrian. When Adrian was nine, he would follow Pete around camp like he was his shadow, hanging on his every word. He brushed his teeth with his left hand because Pete said it would improve his handle with that hand. He'd bounce a ball to school and the shop because Pete said it was a great window to get some ball handling in. What Pete said and did, Adrian did, to the point one evening in Dungarvan he followed Pete and Roger into the men's room, and when they faced up to the urinals, Adrian squeezed in between them.

Roger had to smile at that. In the early eighties himself and Cathal O'Flaherty would have been over to Pete's camps in the Poconos. Before Pete, Roger would have been a decent local club player. After meeting Pete in Dungarvan, Roger decided at twenty-four he was going to be a starter in the national league. Pete had told him with the right attitude and application anything was possible.

"Roger played every game as if it was his last game on earth," says Cathal. "One time in the Poconos the sun was belting down yet Roger was right up his man's ass in the forward court, with his palms up, bum down, knees bent. His man didn't know what the story was. 'What the hell's your problem, man? It's a pickup game, man!'" Maybe, but it was the way Pete would play and that way would transform Roger into an Irish international.

Pete would stay in touch with a lot of the people from his time in Ireland in some form or another. Even now, he'll still pull down one of Tim The Baker's recipes every month or so and bake some bread, often to the sound of Van the Man. It was Pete who recommended Mario to Neptune, and then seven years later, Torey Butler, his small forward at Coastal Carolina, to Pat Price and Blue Demons. Enda Byrt took a sabbatical from teaching to serve as an assistant to Pete at Coastal Carolina. Every summer Pete still meets up with Francis O'Sullivan at some camp.

There was one person though that he never got seeing until one autumn evening in 2005. It had been way, way too long, waiting for the right time, waiting for the right thing to say. So he got into a car with Roger Kelleher, who drove up the Rochestown Road and into the estate beside the hotel. The pair of them got out of the car, rang the doorbell and then Roger stepped back.

Liam McGinn answered the door.

At that Roger said farewell, Pete said hello. "I must have squeezed him to death," says Liam McGinn. "It was one of the most wonderful things to happen to me in years."

And for the rest of that evening they talked and laughed like what they were.

Long-lost brothers.