

## Notes from, The Art of a Beautiful Game

What players like Paul, Bryant and Ginobili have in common is that they see pressure not as most of us do—Oh, crap, I better perform— but as an opportunity.

“A lot of players just want to look cool; they don’t want to get their hands dirty.”

“Rather than just getting into a guy’s upper body, you have to get low into his legs because then he can’t really jump.” Brand, the 76ers forward, is notoriously

(With Brand, opposing coaches talk about the importance of “hitting first.”)

It’s a team-building tactic Nash will find invaluable in the years to come, as the egos get bigger and the stakes higher. A decade later, playing on a Phoenix Suns squad stacked with players not lacking in self-regard—in particular power forward Amar’e Stoudemire, who chooses the jersey number “1” and gives himself the nickname STAT (for Standing Tall and Talented)—Nash volunteers himself for blame whenever he feels the team is in danger of fraying. “I’d be in the middle of talking to the team,” says Mike D’Antoni, who coached the Suns from 2003 to ’08, “and he’d come into the locker room and say, ‘Hey, guys, I screwed this one up; I wasn’t sharp tonight. It’s on me. Let’s do it next time.’” D’Antoni pauses. “Do you know how much easier that makes your job when you’re the coach?”

“If I just run and put it straight off the glass, [the defender] can beat me in pretty easily,” explains Nash. “But if I dictate when the race starts and stops, I have a chance to beat him.”

Furthermore, because Nash has slowed down the play, he doesn't have to commit to going to the basket, which keeps his passing angles open and, at the same time, makes it harder for a help-side defender to take a charge.

he never developed the overinflated sense of self-worth of so many U.S. prep stars.

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Day after day this happens, and what is interesting—besides the fact that a future MVP point guard was a frustrated ball handler as a college freshman—is how Nash responds, at least externally. Rather than acting embarrassed or seeming to lose confidence, it's as if Nash has stumbled upon some fascinating discovery. Interesting, he's taking the ball from me! After practice he pulls Woolery aside and interrogates him, curious as to how, exactly, he is stealing the ball so easily. "I think he actually liked it," says Woolery. "He'd want to work on it, and I could feel him getting better. It wasn't like, 'You ripped me, so I'm not going to dribble.' It was more like, 'You're going to have to rip me every day, every time, and I'm going to keep coming. And eventually I'm going to figure it out.'"

It is one of dozens Nash will dispense on this night. In fact, he does more high-fiving than just about any other NBA player, though it's not your traditional high five, thrust in celebration, but more of a five-digit pat on the back, a raised hand in acknowledgment. It says, I see you or Nice play or, more often, We'll get them next time, a recurring connection between point guard and teammate that is both verbal and physical.

The renowned business author Peter Drucker once wrote an essay titled, "What Makes an Effective Executive." Based on six decades of studying corporate leaders, he found the successful ones were all over the map in terms of personality. But they almost uniformly followed eight practices: They asked, "What needs to be done?"; developed action plans; asked, "What's right for the enterprise?"; took responsibility for decisions; took responsibility for communicating; focused on opportunities rather than problems; ran productive meetings; and thought and said We rather than I.

"Don't be insulted by the simplicity of what we're doing." His point is to focus not on what we're doing but how we're doing it.

When I asked him about learning to jump stop, for example, LeBron's answer was extensive (10 sentences), specific (he cited a coach he'd had as a kid), emotional (it was "frustrating at first") and accompanied by enthusiastic gestures. Here is how it ended: "It was hard for me to go, Whoooosh!" he said, pantomiming hurtling through the air, "and then—choo!—come to a stop. Once I got it, it really helped, because then I knew I could alter the pace of a defender. It put some control into my game."

Glory belongs to the act of being constant to something greater than yourself, to a cause, to your principles, to the people on whom you rely, and who rely on you in return. No misfortune, no injury, no humiliation can destroy it.