

Learning to Lead  
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Greg finished lacing up his shoes, then rubbed the palms of his hands up his socks. He picked up the basketball lying next to him, stood up, and tested each shoe on the gym floor.

Satisfied with the fit, he spun the basketball on his finger as he walked toward the basket. Fifteen feet away, he dribbled twice, faked out an imaginary opponent, and then let loose a jumper which swished through the net cords.

Greg smiled with satisfaction. He loved basketball, and he was good at it. Last year, he was the only junior starter on the championship team and he'd been second highest scorer. Now as a senior, he had hopes of being named Most Valuable and perhaps League Player of the Year. But the smile quickly faded as he jogged to retrieve the ball. Not much chance of that the way things were going. This team was young. Though there were three other returning seniors, none of them had seen much playing time last year. The remainder of the team were juniors up from a rather pathetic junior varsity team.

Coach Leonard had singled him out before the start of the season and impressed upon him the importance of his leadership. To take charge and help bring this young team along.

Well, he'd tried. Practice had been going for two weeks now and besides always being first on the floor for practice, he had fought for every rebound and driven or shot every chance he had. Defensively, he'd tried to cover even more than his area. He was all over the court. But it didn't seem to be making much difference. In fact, it had only brought a reprimand from the coach. "Pass more," he instructed. "Take care of your man. Keep your position." It irritated Greg to even think about it now. What did the guy want? He tells me to be a leader and then he tells me not to do anything.

He took aim at the basket and shot. The ball careened off the side of the rim and Greg walked after it. He was frustrated, and when he was frustrated, his whole game suffered.

The other guys were just now coming into the gym, joking around, grabbing balls, and shooting. Greg didn't say anything to them and they returned his silence. For the past two weeks he had dressed quickly and come to the gym early. He had foregone their locker room revelry to show them how seriously he took the game, but they had taken little notice. How can a guy lead if they won't follow? he wondered.

The shrill blast of a whistle destroyed his thoughts.

"Everybody over here!" yelled Coach Leonard.

Greg tucked the ball under his arm and trotted to where the others were huddling.

"Listen up," Coach Leonard began sharply. "We have our first practice game next Tuesday, and frankly, I don't think we're ready." He paused and looked directly at each player. "We lack teamwork," he continued still drilling individuals with his stare, "and proper leadership." His eyes rested on Greg. Greg shifted his weight.

Come on, he thought. What do you want?

"We're going to start practice with an intra-squad scrimmage. Moebes, Harris, Cook, Montgomery, Rhoades—you're gold, and . . ."

Greg reversed his practice jersey and jogged out to position himself on the court not waiting for the others. Alright, he vowed to himself, if he wants leadership, he'll get it.

For fifteen minutes Greg dominated play but still his team couldn't get on track. They missed easy shots, threw the ball away, and were disorganized on defense. Greg's frustration

became visible. Finally, Coach blew the whistle and the same frustration was written on his face. Greg nodded in agreement. Now he knows how I feel, he thought.

“Harris! Take a seat for a while. Jenkins! Go to gold. Sykes! Blue.”

Greg jogged to the bench, glad for the breather. He leaned back and watch the others, but what he saw was not pleasing. Slowly they were getting their rhythm, playing as a team, and looking much better than when he was out there. Greg glanced at Coach Leonard and realized that he had made the same discovery. Greg sulked on the sideline until it came time to drill, and then continued to dwell on this unsettling revelation. After practice, he showered and quickly left, glad for the weekend. He needed some distance to relax, but he couldn't keep his mind off basketball.

Saturday, he shot baskets, honing his skills. Sunday, as he sat in Sunday school class, he tried to put a finger on the intangible problem of the team. He didn't hear a word of the lesson and afterward walked subconsciously into the sanctuary to find his parents for church. He was still lost in his own thoughts when the minister's words broke his concentration.

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them,” he quoted. “It is not so among you, but whosoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whosoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave: just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life . . .”

Greg sat stunned. That's not true, he reasoned. Thousands of people followed Christ, never leaving Him alone. His disciples hung on every word. They counted on Him. He was a leader!

But as he listened intently to the sermon, he realized that Christ was a servant. He served the people he came to lead: from washing their feet, to feeding and healing them, to dying for them.

Monday afternoon as he walked to the gym, he was filled with nervous anticipation. He took a deep breath, swallowed his pride and entered. The other guys were already changing and exchanging good-natured ribbing. They didn't try to include Greg; he hadn't expected they would. He dressed quickly and went to the gym, but this time he didn't start shooting. Instead he waited next to the ball bag. Soon the others came in.

“Here you go, Jim!” he yelled and tossed Jim a ball. Caught totally by surprise, Jim almost let the ball smack him in the face but managed to get his hands up.

“Don!” Greg yelled and tossed another one.

“Thanks,” Don mumbled and looked at him strangely. Greg tried not to notice. He continued tossing balls and singling out individual players. Coach Leonard soon arrived wearing the same weary look he had left with on Friday. After an hour of drilling, Coach called for a fifteen minute scrimmage.

“Moebes, Rhoades, Cook, Montgomery . . .” he paused as his eyes surveyed the squad before resting on Greg. Greg held his breath and kept his eyes on the ground, praying hard.

“Harris!” he barked. “You guys go gold.”

Greg let out a sigh. “Thank you, Lord,” he whispered. The others were already on the floor and Greg hustled to take his position. The ball was tossed and the tip went to Greg. He had a clear lane to the basket but saw that Jim had already broken down court. He passed to him. It caught Jim completely by surprise, but he still laid it up for two points.

“Nice shot,” Greg commented.

“Thanks,” Jim replied and looked at him strangely.

Greg pretended not to notice and hustled down court to set up on defense. For ten minutes he set up plays, faked shots and passed off, congratulated and encouraged, while his teammates played in stunned silence. Finally, however, they accepted Greg's new role, loosened up and enjoyed themselves. The change was radically noticeable. Confidence began to surface and the five gold players began to work with uncanny synchronized precision. Coach Leonard let the scrimmage run the entire hour only stopping to address minor problems.

When he blew his whistle to end practice, the smile on his face matched the obvious joy of the players. A couple of the guys slapped Greg on the back, and he returned the gesture before heading toward the locker room.

"Hey Harris!"

Greg stopped and noticed Coach Leonard motioning him over. He jogged back. Coach Leonard was rubbing his face and studying the ground. He sucked in his lower lip and looked up at Greg.

"What happened out there, Harris?" he questioned, watching Greg closely.

Greg became suddenly concerned. "Was everything OK, Coach? I mean, did I do anything wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong? No," Coach Leonard replied. "I'd say you did everything right. I just wanted to know why. Why the sudden change?"

Greg breathed a sigh of relief, smiled, and shook his head. "Let's just say I'm learning to lead, Coach," he replied. And then he turned and headed for the showers.