

The Program: Basketball and Books- The 2006 Simon Gratz Boys Basketball Team

By: Christopher Malo

It wasn't the buzzer sounding at the end of the fourth quarter in the 2006 Philadelphia Public League championship that signaled the game had concluded. It was over at the first tip-off that started the game.

The Simon Gratz Bulldogs came out of the gate firing, going up 14 to 4 over the Communications Technology Phoenix. At halftime Gratz was ahead by 9 points, and began the second half scoring the first 12 points. The final score was Simon Gratz 62, Communications Technology 36. Gratz set three records for a championship game which have not been broken. Biggest point differential (26 points), lowest amount of points allowed (36), and best field goal percentage, having only missed 8 shots all game.

It was the culmination of an already successful season, having gone 24 and 5, with no league losses or any losses at home. The team had demonstrated their success on the court, but in a city where less than half of those who graduated from high school went on to college in 2011, the real test was yet to come.

In the six plus years since that historic night, they would also come to exemplify what was possible, though the same hard work they put in during their high school years, off the basketball court. While one's personal characteristics certainly bear some measure of effect on an individual's trajectory, the story of the the 2006 Simon Gratz boys basketball team highlights the possibilities of nurture over nature. They didn't simply play basketball, they didn't just go to Simon Gratz High School, but they had an opportunity to learn from a system which varsity coach Leonard Poole dubbed, "The Program."

Sitting in Love Park on a sunny spring morning, 23-year old Sean Gilbert is dressed in blue jeans, a white T-shirt and sneakers. He is quiet, but polite. Customers who see him at the Bottom of the Sea seafood restaurant on Lancaster Avenue where he works may not know Gilbert was a part of the last public, non-charter school, to win the city's public league basketball championship. He is reserved, until he takes out the two championship rings he won playing the forward position at Gratz, and begins speaking about his experience there.

Gilbert grew up in West Philadelphia, one block from where the infamous Lex Street murders took place. Raised by his mother and the second oldest of four brothers, summers were spent on the basketball courts and horse stables in his neighborhood to stay out of the trouble that was never too far away.

"My tenth grade year was one of the best years of my life," Gilbert says referring to the year he transferred in from University City High School, finally breaking into a smile. That first year at Gratz he won the first of his two league championships there.

"I wish I could go back. It wasn't just about basketball. It was about school. School was fun. The worst part of school was basketball practice! Three o'clock? We got to go to practice," explains Gilbert. "Basketball was supposed to be fun. But it was like a job. We had to do it. We were qualified to do it."

The job-like mentality was part of a program that was first developed by legendary Simon Gratz basketball coach Bill Ellerbee. When Coach Ellerbee left Gratz to coach at Temple University, junior varsity coach Poole became the new varsity coach, refining what Ellerbee had begun.

Responsibility and accountability were expected. Each player had to sign in every day in Coach Poole's office. Excuses were not tolerated. It wasn't uncommon to see players racing through the streets, cutting in line to get through the metal detectors, and running down the hall to sign in. If you were late, you could expect a call from Coach Poole. And then he would come get you.

This becomes even more significant when the numbers released for the 2010 school year showed that the 73% daily attendance rate of students at Gratz was the lowest of any school in the district.

Poole also did away with the traditional basketball season. A season lasted for 46 weeks out of the year. This did not only include the practices, conditioning, and tournaments, but also meant you still had to sign in daily, and maintain your grades, all under the watchful eyes of Poole and his staff.

If you played for the basketball team, it was the only sport you played. This went for the entire roster, not just the top eight players. They received the same expectations from Poole, and in return also expected the same attention and structure.

“Poole kept us out of trouble,” Gilbert notes. “He told my mom she didn't have to worry about my grades or me getting in trouble any more because he got me. My mom brings it up all the time. She never had to hear about me causing trouble in school because Poole was always on us.”

But attendance and punctuality was not the only place emphasis was placed. Academics were given priority. Over everything.

“The goal every year was graduation, college, championship. That's how we lived at Gratz,” says Poole. “Second place was a bad year. To lose a championship was a bad year. But even when we lost a championship, Monday you better be in school.”

“Gratz is a tremendous school, as far as academics” points out Gilbert. “People say it is a ball school, but no. We had to do work.”

As not only coach of the basketball team, but also as athletic director, Coach Poole was aware that he also needed his own team to win.

There was a time when the education field was a profession for people who wanted to give back, but there has been a shift towards people who were seeking consistency career-wise and wanted job security. It has now become more of a job and less of a career.

After taking the position as head coach, his first move was to reach out to Deborah Singleton. Friends since the age of 10, they had grown up together in the same neighborhood and both attended Gratz. It is with good reason that the happily married Coach Poole refers to Singleton as his “second wife.”

Singleton came on board as the athletic sports counselor. With an already existing caseload of over 400 students, her role would primarily be to make sure the players were meeting their academic responsibilities. Poole gave her full autonomy and authority over everyone. Including himself.

If a teacher approached Singleton about a player's grades, she had the authority to, and would, pull a player from a practice to make sure he would get the tutoring or attention he needed. Before he was allowed to return to practice.

When the team went on trips to play tournaments, Singleton traveled with the team, sacrificing holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's to help them stay on track. On a five hour bus ride, the first two hours were devoted to homework. She would have packets prepared for each player to make sure that they were not missing anything or falling behind.

“It ran very deep into a professional and personal commitment. It was way beyond the requirement. You had to have a vested interest or you couldn't do it,” explains Singleton. “We never considered ourselves as 9 to 5. Never. Because we cared too much about the kids. Not about the job.

“But the reward was even deeper than that. Just the involvement kind of saved some lives. I knew some things that frightened me. But how are we going to get around this because we don't want to get consumed by this.”

Putting the emphasis on academics before athletics, in action and not simply giving it lip service, propelled the kids to maintain their attendance and grades. Nothing below a C was tolerated. It worked.

“People always want to focus on academics. But you got your academics via the backdoor. But however you get it, get it,” stresses Singleton. “It made a difference for not only the kids on the team, but the other children wanted to emulate because kids thrive on structure. And this was structure.”

From Gratz, Gilbert did one year at Salem Community College and North Hampton Community College. His current plan is to attend Cheyney University to complete his degree.

Karl Howard also went to North Hampton Community College. Brandon Combs graduated and went on to Manor College. George Melton Jr. and Raheem Sanders went to Community College of Philadelphia. Malik Alvin to the University of Texas at El Paso. Jeremy Herbert attended Lincoln University. Maybe one or two from the '06 team did not go on to higher education.

“We come home at 8 o'clock every night and you were so tired the only thing you could do was homework if you had homework, take a shower, go to sleep, and be ready for tomorrow,” remembers Gilbert. “That's how our life was. Basketball and books. Basketball and books.”

Singleton was not the only person in the supporting cast. Coach Keith was an assistant coach. And police officer. When the kids seemed to be drifting in that direction, Coach Keith was able to intervene as a coach, before anything escalated to him having to resort to his professional career. The school nurse played a pivotal role, visiting the practices nearly every day to look in on the players health. There were many teachers that went the extra effort to tutor the players. Ms. Mack, Ms. Armstrong. Assistant coaches Eddie Hurt and Coach Heds names came up frequently by the former players.

All played significant roles both on and off the court. But clearly none had the impact that Coach Poole did.

“We developed a close knit, family atmosphere,” he explains. “Whatever they didn't get at home, be it not living with a father or a mother or mother and father, you got from us. They could talk to (Ms. Singleton), because they knew if it came from me, it was trouble. The kids migrated to her. There was nothing they couldn't tell her. I think that's how we got to them academically. They knew someone cared. That's all it takes a lot of times. We tried to put that in place, to develop the academic world for them, combined with their athletic ability, and that's why we had a lot of success.”

“He was our father in school. Poole wasn't just a coach, he was like a father. When one of my peoples died, Coach Poole really tried to suck all the information out of me,” remembers Gilbert. “I was trying to tell him I was cool, but he sat there and looked me in the eye and made sure I was alright. That's the type of coach he was. He was like a father to us. And when you have something doing that for you, the least you can do is give them your all. We gave him 100%. We believed in what he did, and we came out successful. Real successful.”

If one measures success by graduating high school and continuing on to college, the numbers for Simon Gratz are fairly dim. In 2010, the last year before Gratz was taken over by Mastery and became a charter school, the School District of Philadelphia reported that Gratz had a 45% 4-year graduation rate, with a 20% college-going rate. Only one year later, the district's Office of Accountability reported that the city-wide percentage of those who matriculated to college the following fall after graduating high school was 41.9%.

According to these statistics, the Gratz team is an anomaly. None more clearer than 22-year old Ishmayiyl McFadden. A junior forward on the 2006 championship team and hailing from the Overbrook section in West Philadelphia, McFadden graduated 9th in his class and was a member of the National Honor Society.

From high school he went on to the University of Maryland at Eastern Shore before finally graduating from Philadelphia University in May of 2011 with a degree in Business Management. All while playing basketball and maintaining a 3.2 GPA, reminiscent of his years at Gratz.

“I still had my structure from Gratz, so I just transferred it to college,” McFadden explains. In many ways, his experience at Gratz had prepared him for college life. “Gratz is like a college team with the study

halls and everything. There's just no flying.”

This was not a coincidence. “We would not let our kids slip academically,” states Coach Poole. “That was a big part of the program, and our success level. We could take them anywhere. We knew they knew the rules and we tried to model it specifically after collegiate programs, whether it was division I, II or III, so that when they did graduate and those who were successful enough to go on to college, they would already be set, knowing a system was in place and they would follow the system. And we had a great deal of success with that.”

At Eastern Shore McFadden had a compliance officer and assistant coach continue guiding him. While his transition was smooth, there was no one like Coach Poole roaming the halls, poking his head in classrooms to make sure you were in class. At Gratz, it seemed like the whole school was watching over him. “You want me to tell Coach Poole?” was a question asked to players on several occasions.

“The way Coach Poole talked to you, it wasn't that it made you feel bad, but you'd sit down and think about it. Like the way a father would talk to a son,” remembers McFadden. “He knew how to get his point across, even just talking to you.”

The lessons he learned while at Gratz were not forgotten when he left Gratz. Today he works giving emotional support to four students with behavior and mental health issues at Robert Morris Elementary School. He helps to deescalate any problems, making sure they are OK, or removing them from class if they are causing harm to themselves or others.

“It's a good feeling, helping the kids. When I got there their behavior was bad, but at the end of the year I don't have to take them out of the class that much, and they respond better to adults. I get a good feeling helping kids do that,” he explains.

That proclivity extends outside of work to the next generation of kids he sees on the basketball courts.

“I can give back and help younger people, show them the right road. A lot of people don't have the right team or foundation behind them, telling them the right things. Even in summer league games they tell them ‘You can go to the NBA.’ Its not that easy. They give them false dreams. So when they get to them, they don't tell them the whole thing. They only tell them part of the story,” he explains. “When I was younger, people gave back and helped me out. So why wouldn't I help out and give others the same knowledge that was given to me? I have been through it on a high school team, AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) team and a college level. So why not give someone the same experiences that might help them in the future?”

That spirit is something that Poole believes is critical. And missing.

“Kids do not look or live for tomorrow. They don't have people around them to be a role model to look up to. The incentive is not there. How do you change that? Culture.”

The culture surrounding 17th and York streets where 23-year old Tommy Sykes grew up, and still lives, is a difficult one. The youngest of three brothers and two sisters, the odds of transcending what his neighborhood had in store for him were not in his favor. By the time he would graduate high school, one brother would be in prison for attempted murder and one sister would of passed away from a pill overdose.

In eighth grade Sykes failed all his classes, but because of the No Child Left Behind government initiative, was passed to ninth grade and given an eighth grade roster. He had little interest in things like school or basketball. Instead he was a bully and troublemaker.

“Some players came up as a kid playing basketball. I had never picked up a basketball a day in my life,” Sykes says looking back. “My dad never took me to the park and worked with me. He just gave me money to play for the team, or get the pads to play football. We never had that bond where he would sit down

and work with me. I'd ask my brothers I could go to the park with them and they would say no.”

Eventually a guy in the neighborhood, Curtis Shaw, piqued Sykes interest in basketball. On a whim in his tenth grade year, he decided to try out for the junior varsity team. He was cut. One day after, he snuck up to the fourth floor when the players were running an exercise of seven laps in under seven minutes around the fourth floor of the school. When he outran all of the basketball players he was given another chance to tryout. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Sykes did better this time, and made team as a forward. When he told his family, they didn't believe him because he had never played basketball.

That year his team was undefeated. One day in school Coach Poole pulled Sykes into his office with the varsity team. Poole told him to start signing in every day, and Sykes never asked any questions. That summer began playing with the team in a summer league. Sykes wasn't the best player on the team, but he had energy and heart, coupled with the ability to jump, rebound, and play defense. Encouraged by Poole, the coach told him he wasn't sure why, but there was something about Sykes that he liked, so he decided to keep him for the varsity team.

“That's why I love this man. Nobody ever in life gave me a chance,” Sykes explains. “He really gave me a chance. And that turned my life all the way around. School, everything. I had to be at school at a certain time. I used to always be late. I didn't care about school. They helped me be at school. When they took me in it was like another family.”

And what followed was not typical, unless you were fortunate to become a part of the Gratz Program under Coach Poole.

“It was a gift. But it was a job too. If you don't go to class, if you don't do what you need to do for practice in basketball, they can get rid of you. I went in with the mindset 'I'm going to work harder than the next man. I am going to stay up late studying. I'm going to do my best at whatever I am doing.' It was always in me, but Gratz brought it out of me,” reminisces Sykes. “I was always the person that I never cared about anything. But Gratz got me to the point where I needed to start caring more about life.”

After graduating from Gratz, Sykes went on to Odessa College in Texas before attending University of Louisiana at Monroe. That transition isn't always seamless for many students, but Sykes was prepared.

“I had a running start. I knew how to take care of myself. I knew what I had to do, or I would be in the same predicament I was in in ninth grade. At Gratz there was Ms. Mack, Ms. Singleton, Ms. Armstrong. They were helping us. They weren't getting paid for that. That was volunteer help to make sure we were alright. Now, if we needed to be tutored we had to go ask. You are grown but you are still a kid.” Sykes explains looking back. “You have your freedom but you don't.”

But succeeding was something that was important and significant for Sykes. He had to forge a path different from those around him and basketball at Gratz was his motivation to do something different.

“My family? I'm the first person to go to college. I'm the first one to graduate from high school. I was just determined to do it. I was determined to make my mom proud. She worked hard so I wanted to make her proud.”

He is only 21 credits away from graduating, and plans on finishing that up over the summer and in the fall.

“Can not teach heart. That's from growing up in the streets of Philly. Especially around my brothers that basically raised me. I never backed down from nobody. I love competition.”

And it paid off for the team as a whole. Not only academically. Each practice began with the 7 in 7 around the 4th floor of the school. Tuesdays meant the team would run from Gratz to Fairmount Park. They didn't even touch a basketball the first month or two of practice. Strictly conditioning. Two miles each practice on the track.

They would play in tournaments, and win, off the strength of their conditioning and having only learned one play from Coach Poole. After the game he would point out that if they could win off one play, imagine if they had a whole set of plays. He talked. They listened.

“He knew exactly what he was talking about” Gilbert remembers. “The fact we were high schools kids, we had to believe in it. And once we got it, we were unstoppable.”

They learned plays. They didn't leave practice until they knew them inside and out. Not only did you learn what you were supposed to be doing, but learned what each position was supposed to know and be doing. They were prepared.

There was a cohesiveness on the team. They liked each other. They bonded. They hung out in the halls after practice to crack jokes and talk. Coach Poole would talk to the team as they got dressed in silence before each game. He wasn't a yeller or screamer to get the players fired up, you could read it all on his face and in his body language. Karl's father, Skip, would DJ, playing Jay-Z and Beanie Sigel during warm-ups. The fans came. They played games. They won games.

“Every time we took the floor, people was ready to try and get a win against us, McFadden remembers. “You could never take any plays off. Even before games they would say ‘We ready for y’all.’ Then soon as the game over, even though we won, they say ‘We coming for you next time.’ You put that Gratz uniform on, its a target. Everyone want it. Its such a prestigious school to go to, everyone coming for us.”

Because of the tournaments that Poole had taken the kids to, they weren't intimidated by the packed Tom Gola Arena at LaSalle University for the city championship game. They were ready.

And when the team stepped on the floor, “We looked in Comm Tech's face and knew they wasn't ready. And we stepped on their throat,” Gilbert remembers with a smile. “Poole really proved that hard work pays off. And we worked so hard.”

“In a way, I felt like I was a big part of that team and that championship,” remembers Sykes. “In the game before the championship I had like 10 points, which helped us to get where we needed. All I could think of was that one chance Poole gave me, so I gave back. I played my heart out. It was like a new life for me. I never felt like that. I never got that much love. The thing about Poole was that he gave me that one chance that I needed.”

“One of the best ever at Gratz High School,” Coach Poole said about the 2006 team. “Which is saying a lot when you had Rasheed Wallace and Aaron McKee. But the best thing was that they were a group of kids that really wanted to play together. These guys banded together, and bonding is the key.

“Rewards were there, but nothing like seeing those kids smile at you and say, ‘Damn, I'm a champion.’ And then you see them graduate and go on to school.”