

In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle Study Guide

In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle by Madeleine Blais

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Contents

In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Summary.....	3
Section 1: Chapters 1-2.....	4
Section 2: Chapters 3-4.....	8
Section 3: Chapters 5-7.....	11
Section 4: Chapters 8-9.....	14
Section 5: Chapters 10-11.....	19
Important People.....	22
Objects/Places.....	26
Themes.....	29
Styles.....	33
Quotes.....	35
Topics for Discussion.....	38



Summary

In *These Girls, Hope Is A Muscle*, a nonfiction book by Madeleine Blais, chronicles a year in the lives of a high school basketball team, the Amherst Lady Hurricanes. Beginning at a low point of choking during a regional play-off, the book follows a year of training and changes that led to a resounding win as the team took the state championship.

In order to win, the girls went through a steady stream of small victories throughout the year. These happened on and off the court. On the court, they came into the play-offs almost undefeated. Rigorous training accounted for some of that success. The rest of the victories came from smaller, more personal decisions made by the girls. Teenage years are fraught with anxiety and changing allegiances, as each person is deciding what kind of person they want to be. The two team captains, Jamila Wideman and Jen Pariseau, had been growing apart. One girl, Patri Abad, moved away. Another, Rita Powell, was hounded by a stalker. Kim Warner lost hope and had to be confronted in the middle of the game to get her head back into it. A few of them considered quitting. In each case, these issues were solved by one of the girls reaching out to a team member for support, whether they wanted it or not. The connection they had goes beyond what is usually seen on the court. However, it was these emotional bonds that meshed together into the teamwork that enabled them to win.

The author paints a picture of the area the girls call home, centered around Amherst, Massachusetts. It is a quirky town, nestled between three large universities and beyond that, farmland. The residents are a mixture of intellectuals with little practical knowledge and rural people with worldly experience but little book knowledge. Blais explains these details to describe the background that forged these girls. It is such a unique area that perhaps this is the only kind of place that could create them.

The book shines a spotlight on an underappreciated side of athletics: that of girls sports in high school. While boys' teams have a lot more fans and supporters, girl athletes often have to fight for acceptance. The author purports that, at the time of the Hurricane's story at least, girls basketball was marginalized and seen as inferior. This was also before the time of any professional women's basketball teams, and many of the big colleges did not even have female basketball teams.

The girls didn't have a solid future in the sport, since there were few opportunities outside of high school. This put an undue amount of pressure on them to succeed while they could, because there would not be another chance.



Section 1: Chapters 1-2

Summary

In *These Girls, Hope Is A Muscle* is the story of the Amherst Lady Hurricanes and their rise to state champions. Author Madeleine Blais begins the book with a prologue explaining the challenges that any female basketball team faced. There was a strong element of sexism in the sport, and a lack of respect, money, and popularity that did not affect male teams.

To illustrate this, Blais tells a personal story about one of the female athletes and an interaction with the author's own family. Kristin Marvin, the team's starting center, came to Blais' house to babysit the kids. She took them outside to shoot some hoops. Blais' son was skeptical. He was not expecting a girl to be any good at sports. Indeed, his own mother was not particularly athletic.

Blais then segues into her own formative years here, describing how she never had the inclination – nor the encouragement – to pursue sports. Blais' own first foray into sports came in an unorthodox way. She was assigned an article covering another female journalist's first game for the Red Sox.

Returning to the story of Kristin at the Blais house, the author's children were surprised and impressed by Kristin. Blais' daughter even asked if she could teach her how to play. “Sure. I bet you'll be great,” Kristin told Blais' daughter. “Good enough to beat your brother” (8).

Kristin then came inside and told the family about the girls on the team, and what their prospects were. She admitted that they haven't had a very good year, but next year would be different.

The first chapter opens with a game on March 3, 1992. The Amherst Regional High School Lady Hurricanes played the Blue Devils from Northampton, a nearby town. It was for the play-offs for the regional championships, and it went spectacularly poorly. Four of the girls lost their momentum, and couldn't get into the groove of the game. Meanwhile, Jamila Wideman, the star of the team, tried to be everywhere at once to make up for her teammates' shortcomings. It fit into a pattern of doing really well until losing in the playoffs. This pattern had plagued the team in previous years.

On the ride home, all the players were having dark thoughts. They were doubting themselves, and doubting their teammates. Coach Ron Moyer gave a speech on the bus to close out the season. He asked the girls if they did their personal best. And if not, he asked what they could do over the summer to get better. He compared them to his daughters, which elicited sobs from the girls.



That night, each of the girls had a reckoning. They went through their usual comfort routines – writing in a journal, physical exercise – different for each one, but with the same end result: a determination to be better by the start of next season.

The rest of the chapter catalogs the many curiosities of Amherst. Its centerpoint was the three schools: Amherst College, the University of Massachusetts, and Hampshire College. As a result, the author states, there was a very educated population. With many of the parents being educators, writers, or photographers, they tended to be a very eclectic group, contrasted with the rural farming community around them.

Jen Pariseau and Jamila were named co-captains of the Hurricanes for the upcoming season, but throughout the summer, they spent very little time together. It was the period between their junior and senior years.

The author takes more time describing Jamila's upbringing by her well-off, intellectual parents. She was born premature and weak, but eventually grew strong and mastered any sport she took to. A mixed race child, she never identified with either races. Instead, she just tried to be herself. Coach Moyer referred to the best players on the team as “leaders,” even though newspapers would call Jamila the “star.” This drove a wedge between the players, and even Jamila hated to be called that.

Jen is described as being very independent and fiercely loyal. She had started playing baseball when she was young, and was the only girl on her team. This stopped when she was passed over for the all-star team. Despite being one of the best players, she was passed over, she thought, because she was a girl. She also hated how female athletes were represented in the media. Their appearance was always more important than their strengths.

Jamila and Jen had a shared history of going on family vacations together, as well as suffering through ignorant people who flaunted their wealth and didn't understand people of different races hanging out. But their shared history seemed to be all that held them together as they got older. They just started drifting apart.

Finally, Jamila called Jen. Jamila was out of town with her family, and Jen was home in her room by her wall of strong women. This was a wall with cut-outs from magazines of pictures and quotes from people like Oprah Winfrey and Toni Morrison. Their divide was weighing heavily on their minds. “We have to talk,” Jamila said. “I want things to be better between us next year...” (58-9).

Two hours later, they finally were done talking, only hanging up out of fatigue. They had taken the steps to patching together their relationship.

Analysis

The author questions what part of a girl's adolescence makes so many young girls them lose hope in themselves. Blais poses this question while watching Kristin's confidence



and her own daughter looking up at her. Some girls keep that youthful enthusiasm and strive to succeed, while others fall into themselves and give up hope.

Part of why girls lose hope, the author asserts, is the way American culture demoralizes women who want to achieve strong roles. They are set apart from men and put in their place. Even the name of the team has “Lady” in the title: the Amherst Lady Hurricanes. The team could have easily been called just “The Hurricanes.” The fact that the name has to differentiate from the boys team by mentioning that they are ladies in the title is discriminatory. Additionally, the word “Lady” (versus “women”) connotes a genteel and weak person, not the type of person who is an aggressive athlete. The girls on the team are aware of this as well. When Kristin talks to Blais’ daughter, she says that the little girl will probably grow up to be better at sports than her brother. Another player, Jen, has a wall of strong women. Both of these girls know that a young girl needed a strong role model to look up to.

A predominant theme throughout the book is introduced here: girls’ sports are different than boys’ sports. Many times, the girls teams lack the respect, funds, and popularity that the boys teams get automatically. While boys’ teams get all the coverage in the local sports pages, athletics is a man’s game. Blais confesses to having a lack of sports knowledge. Growing up, it just wasn’t something she was drawn to, nor encouraged in. If she had been born a boy, perhaps her parents would have encouraged it. Even the reporters at the newspaper, and the editors, are generally male. Therefore, anything having to do with women was relegated to women’s departments and deemed inferior.

At the Boston Globe, Blais’ first career job, she was given features to write in what was derogatorily referred to as the “Bras and Girdles” sections. These are frilly pieces written by women, for women. Generally, they were not considered journalism. Indeed, her first time writing about sports wasn’t even writing about sports. The Red Sox had a woman reporter covering their team for the first time. Blais’ first assignment in the sports field was actually reporting on that woman.

The Women’s National Basketball Association didn’t even form until after this book was published, so for these girls, high school sports is likely the end of their athletic career. There could be college ball, but there is no career in women’s sports to aim for. They won’t be making any money doing what they love. This follows through with another theme that shows up in various times throughout the book: There is a last time for everything. This feeling that their high school years, and their athletic hopes, are coming to a close weighs down on them significantly. It compounds the pressure to succeed, because for the older team members, there won’t be another chance.

The town of Amherst, and their rivalry with Northampton, set the scene for this first chapter. At the time of this story, Amherst is a college town surrounded by farms. It’s residents are overly intellectual, and the author pokes fun at them for it. For example, parents shout “Deft!” at a game, expressing how dextrous a particular player is (38). Common bumper stickers read “Question Authority” and “Nuclear Arms Are Not For Hugging” (30). The people in Amherst are considered soft, and by extension, so are its



athletes. This is a town that prides itself in discourse, not conflict, so the athletes are assumed not to have the competitive streak needed to win.

The author goes through a lot of pages describing the oddities of Amherst and its surrounding towns. Part of this is simply describing a setting. But further than that, she is trying to explain how unique Amherst is. Perhaps that is why it created these girls that won the championship.

This chapter also sows the seeds of some discontent within the team. Teenage allegiances come and go. It is impossible to have a group of people without any kind of conflict. There are bruised egos that might need to be massaged in order for the team to play as a cohesive unit. The author takes time with Jen and Jamila for a number of reasons. They are two of the strongest players, and two of the strongest personalities. The author uses their relationship as a way to represent the cohesion of the entire team. As co-captains, they are the best and the brightest of the team.

If a team can have two, then Jen and Jamila are the hearts of the team. Everyone on the court looks up to them. They are role models, on and off the court. When playing, the rest of the team does well if they are doing well. In school, they are the most visible members of the team. They are ambassadors. They speak to kids, telling them what basketball means to them. They both have natural leadership ability, even if they aren't readily aware of it. Jamila and Jen know everyone in the school, if not the town, it seems to the other girls. Part of this is age. Jamila and Jen are two of the seniors on the team. There are several freshmen who have enough talent to be in the starting line-up. So, these freshmen naturally look up to these older seniors.

Despite being role models, there is an inclusion in the team. Jen and Jamila, the captains of the team, didn't lord over the others. There isn't a separation between them and the others. They are all equals outside of the game.

It is imperative for the future of the team that these two friends get close again. It takes more than drive and talent. In a team sport, it takes trust, the author asserts. This bond has to be knit back together. The friendship between these two girls represents the bond of the entire team.

However, it isn't clear if the future of the team is the main reason for Jen and Jamila rekindling their friendship. From a reader's perspective, their friendship is definitely part of the narrative of the story. From their perspective, they are probably more worried about their friendship than what would happen on the court.

Vocabulary

rangy, apartheid, tonic, parochial, lug, arabesques, euphoria, accolade, latency, loquacious, hardscrabble, primordial, euphony, lilt, erring, castigated, infinitesimal, cachet, idiosyncratic

Section 2: Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3 opens with a montage of sorts, of what the reader might experience passing through Amherst. One girl practicing hoops. Another running up and down stairs. They were all working hard on getting better for the upcoming season.

Then, the book takes a few pages with each of the other girls. It focuses on Rita Powell, one of the youngest girls on the team. It curates her love of basketball, and her admiration of the senior players on the team, Jamila and Jen. There was a rigorous basketball camp Rita wanted to attend. It had everything she had hoped that would kick her game into high gear over the summer. The main problem was that it cost \$395. She worked several small jobs to save up the money to pay for it, and that's how she spent her summer. During her camp, she wanted to be just like her idols, particularly Jen, on and off the court. She wanted to be just as social and friendly as those girls.

The chapter switches to Lucia Maraniss. She was working hard to recruit an old friend back to the team: Patri Abad. She had since moved to Chicago. She used her creative skills to craft a very personal letter imploring her to pursue the dreams they had spoken of when she lived there. The longing in her letter was almost palpable.

The focus then shifts to Kim Warner, who felt personally responsible for the losing game that ended last season. Kim had been raised by her mother. When her father came to visit, after four years of not seeing the family, he didn't even know which child was which. She went out late at night and practiced hoops. But instead of just practicing her solo game, she was going through the paces of where each of her teammates would be, and what they would be doing.

Meanwhile, Kathleen Poe was worrying about her senior year. Senior year, she thought, was the "Last Time for this, Last Time for that" (76). There was a heavy responsibility to make it all count and make it all great. This was a lot of pressure on what should have been a fun time. She ran to blow off steam and to strengthen her body. She felt humiliated by the loss to Hamp. As she said at halftime "The only people who believe that we can win this game are in this locker room right now." It was a matter of pride that they needed to play as well as they knew they could.

Chapter 4 picks up as school started. After a summer of regret spurring them on, the girls returned to school and back into their routines. The town was turning its control over to college students, and the high schoolers had academics and relationships in mind. Kristin picked a premed program at Holy Cross. Jamila announced her choice to attend Stanford during a press conference.

Coach Moyer was taking this time to line up his team, and to see how to use each girl's strengths to the benefit of the team.



Kristin was worried about how to keep up her spirit in the game. When the game went south, so did her attitude. How, she wondered, could her emotional energy match her physical energy? Moyer placed her as his starting center, using her physicality to intimidate the enemy and set the tone for the rest of the game. She agreed to this move, and promised, like the rest of the girls, total dedication.

Analysis

Patri is described as having moved to Chicago, rather than living in Amherst, “where she belonged” (67). This ties in to the recurring theme of how location defines you. Chicago is a world away for a teenager. Amherst is a place that is unlike any other. Patri was born and raised there, and for all intents and purposes, she belongs there. At least, that's what the rest of the girls seem to think.

Additionally, Patri's loss means that the team is less than a whole. Kathleen is feeling it more than anyone else, but the loss of one close friend creates a hole in the team. It also shows more about the theme that friendship is a bond that's stronger than anything – even this team. To a teenager, friends are everything.

The wounds that the girls are nursing after their loss to Hamp are more than metaphorical. They are physical, as well. There is a kind of reverse symbolism here. The reader is aware of the emotional scar before the physical pain is revealed. Kim Warner lies after the game that she isn't hurt. However, her injuries are more than something physical to recover from, they are ways to remember the pain of failure. She actually wants that pain. She wants to feel that remorse so that it will push her forward. As the injuries fade, some of the sting of the loss fades with it. But not all of it. The drive to get better stays with her.

The gymnasium is a second home to these girls. It's a place of safety and security. It is a clean, well-lit place. And in Kim's case, she can even predict where in the court her colleagues will be. The way Kim practices shows more about her personality. Going to a court alone, most girls might have just practiced shooting. She, instead, goes through strategies in her head. That idea of concentrating on where every teammate is going to be and what they are doing informs the reader about how in tune she is emotionally with the rest of the team.

A description of Amherst college explains how much they are doing with so little. This could be a metaphor for the players, in that they are rising above whatever they had to overcome to get this far. Some of the students, like Jamila, deal with being defined by one or the other race. Some of the girls have no money, and their houses are falling apart. For some of them, their families are falling apart.

The drive to succeed is put in the perspective of how many more times they'll have to prove themselves. For some of the younger girls, if they didn't win the last season, or if they don't win the upcoming season, they still have another year or two to get it right. But for the seniors, like Kathleen, Jen, or Jamila, there is only one last chance to get the



win and prove to themselves, and the world, that they are the great athletes that they know they were. Senior year is the last time for a lot of things. If they lose this year, there will be no other chance.

It is significant that while some of the seniors on the team have their college picks made, Jamila is the one who gets a press conference. As if she is signing for the WNBA, her choice is of interest to local news media. Here is one exception to the rule that girls' sports aren't as important as boys' sports. Jamila gets a ton of media coverage regarding her choice. She is treated the same as any boy choosing his college as well. The town owns her, and she represents the town, and the residents want her to succeed. They want her to be the hometown girl made good. However, on a boys' team, perhaps more than one boy would get a press conference.

Even though Jamila doesn't want to be a star, the rest of the town wants her to be a star. People in the media like a good story, and it is easier to tell a story about one person rather than a team of people. Unfortunately, this doesn't help with her relationship with Jen and the other girls. Although they are giving their status as best friends a second chance, this is probably more trying for Jen than she admits to the author. Jamila does thank the rest of the team, including her "best friend, Jen," for making her look good.

Vocabulary

ameliorating, croon, unmemorable, injunction, expunge, minuscule, melange, discordant, violated, dissecting, fallowness, endorphin, discernible, idiosyncratic, clientele, provident, discretionary



Section 3: Chapters 5-7

Summary

Chapter 5 is very short and explains the beginning of the recruitment process. Word was out among the girls that Coach Moyer planned to run a tight ship, and that there would be very physically demanding drills throughout the season. More girls showed up than just the main ones in this book. There were a lot of fresh faces. He warned them that he needed team-builders, not team-busters. He didn't need players who were looking for fame and were competitive with each other. Jamila was going to be point guard for the sixth year in a row. Jen said jokingly that she wanted to be "a shooting guard and a scoring forward and the water girl."

In Chapter 6, other girls were also added to the team: The two Emilys, nicknamed Gumby and Jonesbones to keep it clear. Emily Jones' father was a doctor. Emily Shore was flexible.

The author took some time with Emily Shore and her family. Her father, the scientist, and her mother, a New Age therapist, came at problems from different directions, but the reason for their actions – taking care of their daughter – took precedence. When she was in sixth grade, Emily had suffered from a stomach ailment that defied diagnosis for so long that she could have died from malnourishment or a complication thereof. After an excruciating surgery that lasted more than seven hours, she came out physically weak but spiritually strong. An avid basketball player before, she wanted even more to get fit again to be able to play again.

The other Emily, Jonesbones, had a solid family, well known throughout the town.

Moyer picked his starters: Jamila, Jen, Kathleen, Kristin and Gumby.

Another player was picked up: Sophie King, whose parents met in the Peace Corps in Tibet. She had been a ballet dancer until she was cut for being too tall. She also had an unfortunate event when a car crushed her leg and gangrene set in.

Jade Sharpe was picked for her promise. Starting as a seventh grader, she joined the team just for fun, but it turned out it was something she was made for. Her parents were a nurse and a jazz musician.

Jan Klenowski was also put on the team, but she had to get more game experience by playing junior varsity for the first half of the year.

Rita Powell was placed on the team as well.

Meanwhile, Patri Abad's family had moved back to Amherst. She tried out and made the team.



The coach put the girls on a steady and unrelenting series of practices. The girls were able to give back sass as much as the coach dished it out. They knew all of his old jokes, and could finish them after he started them. He learned that his team could score within nine seconds of the other team scoring. So he developed plans and plays for what the players should do to maximize this.

The coach was having trouble with Kathleen Poe, the third strongest player on the court. She was hungry enough for the win, but not mean enough. She was too good-natured, too polite a player. In a dramatic announcement, the coach told her that Kathleen had to stay home. In her place, a new player would join. He invented the name “Skippy,” and handed her back the ball. Skippy became Kathleen's alter ego, an evil twin she could act as and be tough on the court.

Chapter 7 described the early parts of the season. Even though it was just November, students were already looking forward to the end of the year. While everyone was wondering what kind of designer gown to wear to prom, the basketball players were thinking of the end of the season.

Jen decided to attend Dartmouth. She made her decision later than her peers.

Rita was troubled, however. Her usual cheer was hard to bring about. Jen tried to cross the distance Rita was making between herself and the others, but to no avail. All Jen could do was tell her that she was there for her. Finally, she opened up. There was a boy who was harassing her. First, there were just phone calls. Then, he brought a rose to school and anonymously put it on her desk. The phone calls got more personal, asking why she wasn't at practice one day, suggesting that he'd been stalking her. He was obsessed with her. It escalated until he threatened to bring a gun to school and kill her in retribution. Jen urged Rita to report him to the dean of students. Rita agreed to let Jen ask the dean to speak to Rita.

Jamila introduced a new team slogan, “Hoop Phi.” It was borrowed from a college basketball team. There was something uniting about the phrase, as she shouted the first part, and the rest would answer. Coach Moyer had tried to create his own slogan for the team, but it didn't gel, and Jamila's took hold instead.

Analysis

In these chapters, the author shows how emotions sometimes influence the physical aspects of the game. In the case of Kathleen Poe, her attitude is nice, in the wrong way. The team needs her to be tougher, bolder, in order to stop the progression of enemies. Rita's struggle with a stalker impacts her playing, and everything else in her life. She isn't her usual jovial self. Everyone knows something is bothering her. It takes Jen sitting her down and creating that bridge before she is able to open up.

It is worrisome that Rita is concerned about fighting back, and hurting this boy's feelings, despite the fact that he doesn't care about her feelings. In her way, she is too nice as well. She is second-guessing herself. She is thinking that she is blowing it out of



proportion, and that this boy is all talk. She does tell him to stop, and tells him how upset he is making her. However, when nothing changed, she should have gone to the authorities right away. Perhaps it is easier to make that decision as a reader, as opposed to Rita who is living it. Also, it might be easier for a reader to make that judgment 20 years later, after seeing reports of what could happen with stalkers in the news.

The fact that Jamila's slogan takes off but Coach Moyer's doesn't is significant because it shows that the girls have ownership of the team. It isn't just the coach telling the girls what to do. They have power in this as well. In various points during the book, the girls give the pep speeches to the rest of the team. Part of this could be that as a man, Coach Moyer isn't allowed in the locker room. Additionally, her slogan of "Hoop Phi" is easier to remember than his slogan involving a flag and a fist. One person only had to shout "Hoop" for the others to shout "Phi!" It is like a morale-boosting game of Marco Polo. His needed to be explained for anyone to understand it. Hers couldn't be explained, but had to be felt, and they could understand it instinctively.

They make the slogan their own, just like they had to make their team their own. The older girls serve as role models for the team. They are older, more experienced, and often more talented than the younger students. When they are on top, it is words from one of the team elders that keeps them on top. When they are down, it is words from one of the seniors that brings them back up. There is true leadership on the team, and the younger girls really look up to them.

Vocabulary

creosote, laconic, coltish, hierarchy, chancellor, provost, scrimmage, betterment, miscreant, prominence, disarranged, feigned, transients, layup, heyday, bailywick, heft, prowess, disjointed, smithy, upheaval, deprivation, rift, facade, scanty, truncating, expletive, inveigle, insinuated, renunciation



Section 4: Chapters 8-9

Summary

The Hurricanes have their first game of the season, against West Springfield. They were expecting to win and they did. Kathleen, Kristin, and the two Emilys meshed well together to create a safe area for the two high scorers – Jen and Jamila – to run up the points.

The local newspaper predicted Northampton to win the year, with Amherst coming in third or fourth. This invigorated the girls and made them work harder.

During a game two days before Christmas, the team was playing strangely. Whenever possible, they'd pass the ball over to Jen so she could score. It was an unusual offense, but everyone knew what they were doing. It was all so that Jen could score her 1,000th point. The crowd went wild and someone in a fluffy pink gorilla suit came out with balloons and flowers.

As much as Jen was feeling the heat of the game flushed through her, Kristin was not. She felt she was just going through the motions. "I don't feel it," she told Jamila. Jamila talked her into going to the gym at Umass, to just play and talk. Kristin realized that this was a kind of therapy. Jamila would go to that gym all the time with her dad when she was having a bad day. And so now, Jamila was paying it forward and bringing her friend there to make her feel better. As they played one-on-one, they got into the heat of it, and it woke something up in Kristin. They challenged two guys who were playing there, and left them scratching their heads at the fierceness of these two girls.

As the season continued, they were up against Northampton again. The game was brutal, and the wounds from last season were still raw. Jamila, Jen and Beth all racked up four fouls. They won it, in a tightly wound game with scores of fans on either side.

They weren't so lucky against Agawam, another top tier team in the region, predicted to come in second in the season. They lost 52-50. It was their first loss of the season. They were now 16-1, and Agawam was 15-2.

The coach worried that this year would be a repeat of previous years: making it to the top and then blowing it. Instead, the loss to Agawam was a wake-up call. The following practice, the players were ruthlessly competing, with a conviction he hadn't noticed before.

Rita wound up going to the police about her stalker, and then to court. Nothing else was said about the matter, so it could be assumed that the proper legal proceedings took place.



Chapter 9 began in February. Amherst was shuttered by cold, but united in its support of the girls' basketball team. There even needed to be police presence at the games because it was standing room only.

Jen Pariseau spoke to a group of younger kids about what it was like to be a Hurricane. It was these little speeches, where kids would look up to her, that made her feel strong. Two little kids published a newspaper, and did a profile on her. She started getting fan mail from children.

Meanwhile, Jamila Wideman was giving her own pep talk – to her own team. She felt the need to address the swarm of media around her, and credited the other girls for making her look good. She spoke about the team's slogan: “A number of the reporters asked me to explain Hoop Phi. I simply could not. There is no explanation, at least not one that can be put into words. Hoop Phi is the thing that people search for in their lives. It is the thing that we have found to which we belong, contribute and love” (175-6).

At the last home game of the season, Lucia sang the national anthem, and the team rallied behind her for it. They won, and Jamila's father took them out to lunch to celebrate. During the meal, he said “This is as good as it gets” (183).

The pressure was coming back, though. The rematch was looming on the horizon. They had to play Hamp at Hamp's gym. Amherst was going into the duel 18-1. Hamp was 17-2. Hamp had lost to Amherst earlier, and both had lost to Agawam. The media was playing the game as the penultimate competition in the area, giving it tons of ink and airtime.

The stands were packed with people trash talking the athletes. This ended quickly when Jen blocked a three-point shot by jumping into the air and batting the ball out of the air. The ball landed in the sixth row of the stands, directly at the Hamp boys who were taunting them.

At one point, Kim Warner missed an open shot, and retreated from the basket with her head down. Jen and Jamila instinctively drew close to her. “Keep your head up!” (197) They shouted at her. They couldn't let their friend and teammate sink like everyone had at the game that opened this book. They forced her head back in the game and she turned around and made the next basket.

At the end, the score was 72-53; the Hurricanes won. Coach Moyer would also go on to credit Jamila's ability to be the center of attention, and then pass to someone else to get the point. Also, Jen, their best defender, was always covering their weakest player, which allowed her plenty of time to be everywhere at once.

The author veers off into the history of basketball here, explaining just how difficult female athletes historically have had it. For example, there used to be rules where girls couldn't play during the first three days of their period, and female coaches had to enforce this policy.



Meanwhile, back to the narrative, Patri was on the verge of quitting. She wasn't being put in as often, and she was resentful. Additionally, her family never really fit in. Being Hispanic, no one would rent a home to them in this town. Their aunt could pretend to mimic a white person's voice over the phone, and that was the only way realtors would talk to them.

Analysis

Other people's perceptions impact the way the athletes play. When teammates see their friends and family in the stands, it strengthens them. When they see nothing but enemies slinging insults, it wears them down. Sometimes, they have to react to this. For example, Jen feels she has to put an end to some trash talking by smashing a ball at some boys. The article predicting a Northampton win shows this pretty clearly, but it has an opposite effect. Coach Moyer is the one who shows the girls the article predicting their loss. It incenses them and they rally together, fighting to prove the newspaper wrong. He knew it would have that effect on them.

When a parent is in the bleachers, the player wants to show off for them. However, Patri and the coach run into conflict when he doesn't let her leave the bench, even though her whole family is there. It is a postseason game, so it really doesn't matter for their record. It matters for Patri, though. She wants to play and can't figure out why she's not being put in. The coach tells her she was late for school that day, and it would set a bad example to put her in. Also, he felt she had been goofing off at practices. In retaliation, she tells her friends she's quitting. Kathleen Poe, one of the players and her best friend, talks her into changing her mind. She winds up back in the next game. Patri is often described as the member of the team that most of the other members had a soft spot for. Her position on the court could have been filled by another player. However, her position in the net of friends could not have been filled by anyone else. The team is stronger because of the individuals, and their heart, not their talent.

Fame can be a powerful force. It can inspire or it can tear apart. Just a year ago, Jen was feeling jealous of Jamila for winning her 1,000th point. Now, Jen is in the same situation, basking in the spotlight as well. As a result, she resents how she felt and acted back then, now that the friendship between the two of them is patched up. The fact that the entire team pattern their game just to help Jen reach 1,000 shows how close they really are. They don't mind taking the back seat for another player to take the spotlight. It's like what Moyer told the girls at the beginning of the season: he wanted team builders, not team busters. This isn't just a group of girls fighting for points; this is a team.

Role models Jamila and Jen, sometimes interchangeably, are the team's leaders and rock stars in town. When a child asks for an autograph, Jen says that it makes her feel better than actually winning a game. Jamila uses her fame to put out positive vibes. Whenever reporters ask for sound bites, she instead delivers inspirational speeches.



Being a role model or leader doesn't mean being happy all the time, though. When Kim loses her shot and starts to lose hope, Jen and Jamila get in her face over it. They confront her on the court – in front of everyone - before she slips any further. They don't want a repeat of last year: coming this far and then failing. Instead, they are rough with her, snapping her into shape. They know that if one of them starts to lose hope, it will spread to the others. Therefore, tough love is needed sometimes.

One of the saddest statements is “This is as good as it gets.” It is a bittersweet sentence spoken by Jamila's father. Although it is likely meant to be a reassuring statement, a judgment that the girls are doing everything right, there are sad notes to it as well. Blais must realize this, because she ends a section of a chapter with this statement. For several of them, this is senior year. This is the last time that they will be playing together. Even when Jamila gives her pep talk, she laments that none of the schools she looked at has the same team as the Hurricanes. That feeling is shared by the players and the friends around the table. Further, college basketball is often the end of the line for these women. There isn't a huge organization for them. There is the National Basketball Association for men, but the WNBA wouldn't be founded until 1996.

Continuing this theme, the discussion on the history of women's basketball shows a clear divide in how the game grew. It had become a distinct creation. Unfortunately, the differences made people look down on the women's version of the game. For example, the women had a smaller ball. One of the parents stated how there was a rule that players could only dribble three times when she grew up playing. That led to a different strategy. Instead of a more physical game, there was much more passing and faking out others.

Coach Moyer's wife, Betsy, gives a speech to contemporaries about the importance of Title IX, which tried to enforce equality between men and women's sports, among other programs. A quote from her speech follows:

“Through basketball, women can learn what it is like to make a commitment to themselves as well as a team, they can experience pushing themselves to the limit physically as well as mentally. As women move on into professional life, they have had some experience being a team player, being comfortable playing a role, and they will know they can be a leader without being a star. Women who play basketball have more self-confidence and self-esteem, and they know there is more than just their physical appearance. But for the most part the media is not giving recognition to women's accomplishments. Young women can't read about their sports role models or learn what might be available for them. How can they aspire to something they have no information about?”

This quote is presented in its entirety because it sums up a great deal about how different girls sports are from boys. The girls only have themselves to look up to, because there were no television stations in the early 1990s playing women's basketball games. It was seen as a different sport, even. It can be compared to how Blais had to write for the “bras and girdles section” of her newspaper. Even though Title IX was



passed in 1972, it continues to be an important fight decades later. Indeed, there are still amendments being made presently.

Despite Amherst's forward thinking mentality, full of artists, writers, teachers, and thinkers, racism still persisted. The challenges of the Abad family are different than that of the rest of the team. Being Hispanic, the people in Amherst tend to look down on them. Although Amherst is almost aggressively trying to be a Norman Rockwell painting and liberal in views, people of different races were still kept in their place. It is important to note that most of the people in Rockwell's paintings are white.

Vocabulary

abstemious, quietude, garrulity, repartee



Section 5: Chapters 10-11

Summary

In the build-up to the Western Mass Regional Finals, the girls' celebrity status was even more elevated. People were stopping them for autographs and giving them free drinks at restaurants. Jen's elementary school had "Jen Pariseau Day."

The players were deep in thought. This would be the game that, in other years, they would choke on. They were up against Hamp again. More than 4,000 people were in the stands. Kristin gave a pregame speech. Coach Moyer would let them give their own speeches, and it was usually Jen or Jamila doing it. But this time, it was Kristin urging them not to let that night be another almost. It could be the last time they played together, and it had to be the best. They wound up winning 63-41.

Even Beth Kuzmeski, who was a mirror of Jamila on Northampton's Blue Devils, was happy for them. She and Jamila hugged after the game. "Last year was our year," Beth told reporters. "This year Jamila was so determined to win it, and I'm happy for her" (227).

In Chapter 11, the girls were getting ready in the coming days for the state finals. Heading to the Centrum, a large arena, for the last game, the girls discussed playing to such a large venue. They were following a concert by Madonna. Rita spoke about how different they were from her: a pop star who became famous for taking her clothes off and being sexy. "I resent the message that if you are sexy, you are powerful" (234).

During the build-up, Jen and Jamila had accidentally created a new ritual. If they passed each other in the halls, instead of a brief "hi" that was exchanged last year, they would approach each other and say deeply "We're not losing" (236). Other students learned to part like the sea when they were in the same hall together.

They were going up against Haverhill, who bested Hamp the previous year. They had won state finals four out of the last five years. They had been so smug that they had preprinted "We're #1" t-shirts and put them on after they won.

Trish Lea, the coach of Amherst's junior varsity, and Moyer's assistant in the postseason, gave some words of wisdom on how to fight Haverhill. They were big, tough brutes who didn't pull punches. They had a few key plays, and she knew how to stop them.

All the tension, all the build-up, melted away as the game finally started. A key play was described: Jamila stole the ball, passed it to Jen without even looking at her, who then passed it to Kathleen who scored without any opposition. At halftime, they were leading 51-6, an unprecedented lead for what was supposed to be two relatively equal teams. During halftime, in the locker room, the coach had nothing to say. Everything had gone right. Jen gave her own speech, telling everyone to finish the game with class. They



won, and the final score wound up being 74-36. Emily Shore had been injured during the game, taking an elbow to the face, which made her tooth poke through her cheek.

Moyer had already picked the leaders of next year's team: the two Emilys. Kathleen wished the bus would take them back to the school and they could all sleep in the gym that night. The athletes did not want to let the night go. They knew that this was their last night together. They even lounged around, not wanting to leave the Centrum. Coach Moyer said "There will be more basketball" (259-260).

At the time, they did not know what this meant. But as the epilogue showed, each player went on to pursue academic, personal, and athletic goals. Even if they weren't playing as Hurricanes anymore, they were still exercising that muscle. They were still striving for achievement.

Analysis

The final game is a bit anticlimactic. The reason for this is that the main struggle – forging a bond between team members – has already been successfully accomplished. The author shows several times throughout the book that the team is more than just a bunch of talented girls playing together. She proves that it is about the emotional connection they create. Jen and Jamila patching up their friendship in Chapter 2 set the tone for the rest of the relationships. Lucia pens a heartfelt note urging Patri to come "home" from Chicago, and back to where she belongs. Jen reaches out to Rita, and gets through her defenses, to have her open up about her stalker. When Kristin says she doesn't feel the fire anymore, Jamila takes her to the gym to work it out. When Kim hangs her head after missing a shot in a key game, Jen and Jamila get in her face and refuse to let her give up. After all these small scale challenges, the win for the regional championships is almost a sure thing.

If this was a fictional movie, there would have been a villain team to be the antithesis to the hero team. They would have been a nasty team, cheating, and trying to sabotage Amherst's bus. Despite the build-up of Northampton being the big, bad, boss battle that had to be overcome, the final match between them is relatively bloodless (except for a tooth through the cheek). It is even a bit congenial, as Beth congratulates Jamila on her team's win. They even hug after their final game together. The author may be making the point of how this one difference in the way males and females handle rivalry.

Even though the last game isn't a huge struggle, it is the last game, and the feeling of "last" is something that hangs over much of the book. It becomes extremely important in this last chapter. This impending feeling of "last" creeps in during Kristin's speech before they face Hamp. If they are to lose, it will be the last game they ever play together. For some of them, it might be the last game of basketball they ever play. There really wasn't much of a future in the sport. For Beth Kuzmeski, and her teammates on the Blue Devils, their high school career ended that night. It is unknown if any of the Northampton team rose to greatness in their post-high school game.



After winning the championship, Kathleen wishes that the bus would take them to the Amherst gym, their surrogate home, so they could sleep there that night. This is where they felt the most comfortable, and where they felt they most belonging.

Despite the fact that girls sports are different than boys sports, these girls manage to become the pride of the town. They have a police escort on their way through Amherst, on the way to the Centrum and when they return. It is a nice gift by the community. It shows support in these young athletes. Not a lot of towns would show their support in the same way. These weren't just any girls team, however. They have worked harder than any others and achieved more than any others.

When Coach Moyer said "There will be more basketball," no one believes him. Perhaps they are young and don't realize that this is only part of their lives. Perhaps they are right, and nothing will be as good as those few years. There is, however, definitely more basketball for Coach Moyer, who has already picked his starting line-up for the following year.

Vocabulary

salubrious, abstruse, talismanic, preened, fusillade, trepidation, enunciated, wan, calisthenics, imperviousness, beauteous, festooned, reticence, indelicate



Important People

Jamila Wideman

Jamila is listed by many independent sources as one of the best point guards in the nation. She knows that she's overshadowing some of the other players, particularly her good friend Jen Pariseau. However, she feels a burden that the rest of them don't know: She feels like the success or failure of the team is on her exclusively.

A mixed race girl, she doesn't identify with either group. Her father John is a novelist, a winner of two PEN/Faulkner awards, who speaks at prestigious events, and has met people like Nelson Mandela. Her mother, Judy, is a lawyer.

Jamila makes the point of reaching out to Jen to end the rivalry, whether it is real or invented by onlookers. As she later says in Chapter 7: "There was a clear understanding that from that point on we were working together. I didn't need her to be me. I needed her to be herself" (136).

Jen Pariseau

Jen Pariseau is sympathetic to fellow players, especially the younger ones. She lives in Pelham, next door to Amherst.

There's a duality between her and Jamila. They are very close friends, but growing apart. There's some resentment in that Jamila is the star player and can do no wrong, while Jen is constantly hounded by the coach to improve.

She insists that all girls can be goddesses, no matter how big or small. Her teammates, and the little girls that she looks over are all nicknamed "goddess of ____" with the blank filled in with whatever they are good at. She's the goddess of the three-point shot, and her nickname is Cloudy.

Raised by her father, who supervises the reservoirs and water supply for Amherst, and was a basketball player as well, she became very independent very early.

She is supportive of others, and tends to spew short, catchy philosophies to guide others. She works at a camp to help younger girls play sports, and is very supportive: helping them get better, laughing at their jokes, letting them look up to her, but being fans of them as well.

Coach Ron Moyer

Coach Ron Moyer is more than the school's coach. He is also a social studies teacher and guidance counselor. He has thick graying brown hair that flops over his head, bluish



gray eyes, and spindly legs that brings him up to 6 feet, 3 inches tall. He's prone to bad jokes and expects others to laugh at them.

He had a bit of a checkered past when he would get into trouble in his adolescence. A coach had become fatherly to him, however, and steered him in the right direction.

He grew up with a single mother who was overwhelmed with four kids. She made money by renting out rooms to strangers. He didn't have a room of his own, but a section of the basement roped off with curtains, because the bedrooms in the house were rented out. His mother had been hospitalized for a series of disorders, some of which were just hypochondria. His mother's parenting style is affectionately referred to as hands-off. In other words, his mother didn't really know what he was up to unless he got caught. Basketball became a lifeline for him. He was drawn to the structure, the camaraderie, the order of having to be somewhere on a regular basis, and having a group of people care about and depend on him. He excelled in the sport, and went to college. In a psychology course, reading about all of the disorders was like reading a family history, and he became fascinated. He eventually attained a Master's degree in counseling.

His daughter was friends with Jen growing up, and the Moyers and Pariseaus are friendly.

Kristin Marvin

Kristin Marvin, the Hurricanes' starting center, is introduced to the reader as a babysitter for Blais' children. She had helped her father build some of the houses in the area, including Blais'. Her mind is always on basketball. She carries a confidence when she talks about the upcoming season. She's described as being very physical, of filling up the room when she walks in. Part of this is her height; part of this is her confidence; part of this is her athletic way of moving. This physicality gives her nicknames like "Bad News," or "Brute."

She lives in nearby Shutesbury, another bohemian area. She considers her parents hippies, and her mother is the daughter of a naval historian and author. Her stepfather is a contractor. The only constant in her house is change. She wants to work in medicine.

Rita Powell

One of the youngest girls on the team, Rita Powell looks up to the leaders on the team. She calls Jen the "most dynamic person I have ever met." She listens carefully to Jen's one-liners. Where Jen might think they are throwaway asides, Rita records them as words of wisdom. Words like "My problems aren't me. I don't let them define me." She is intense, and when she wants something she works hard to get it.

She is hard working, which is probably not surprising in a winning athlete. She has good cheer and a good singing voice.



She deals with a frightening stalker throughout the year chronicled by the book. A boy whose name she doesn't even know starts calling her and leaving her gifts. It starts getting more and more invasive, and his tone becomes threatening. Eventually, police and the courts get involved.

Lucia Maraniss

Lucia writes in her journal about how much she admires Jamila and Jen, and yearns for the camaraderie of the team. She's one of the younger players on the team, and she feels like playing with them is like being called up to the big leagues.

Her mother is a preschool teacher and photographer. Her father is an absentminded professor. Lucia, in turn, is artistic and expressive. She is compared to Mona Lisa in appearance.

Kim Warner

Kim Warner is as determined as her teammates, but tends to be a passive player on the court. She is described as having character and dignity. However, she needs to get a little more dirty in order to succeed in this very physical game.

The youngest in a family of four, she is raised by a mother working two jobs, one as secretary in personnel at the university. She is domestic, bringing in cookies for the team. Everyone thinks that she will be the first to get married, and that she will go to school pretty close to home. She has worked baby sitting jobs from the time she was in 5th grade.

Kathleen Poe

Kathleen Poe is also entering her senior year, and feels the pressure to succeed very heavily.

Having lived in England, she has more of a world view outside of Amherst than her colleagues.

Upbeat and friendly, she is an avid reader and a devout vegetarian. She spends time at Hampshire College, where her father teaches. It is a very liberal school where grades aren't really necessary.

Patri Abad

Patri Abad is a funny girl who is easy-going even though she is energetic. She had moved to Chicago, which made the team feel a profound loss. Her friend Lucia pleads



with her to return. She does, but her family never quite feels at home. The pervasive racism in the area makes it hard for the Hispanic family to feel comfortable.

After her baby brother is born very premature, she is inspired to want to be a pediatrician.

Emily Shore

Emily Shore is nicknamed “Gumby” by the players for her flexibility, and is referred to as “Gumby” by the author to differentiate her from the other Emily. Her father is a scientist and her mother is a New Age therapist.

Her childhood had been marked by a very serious, almost life-threatening illness. After a surgery that lasted longer than seven hours, she was able to come home. Instead of being an invalid, she worked as hard as she could to recuperate. She was going to be the captain of her elementary school's basketball team. This sidelined her. But she didn't let it keep her down. Instead, she worked hard as ever to regain her strength for the following year.

Beth Kuzmeski

Beth Kuzmeski is Jamila's equal on the rival team, the Northampton Blue Devils. The two of them are stars on each team. Often, news reports pit them against each other. At the end of the book, and after their last competition, they hug.



Objects/Places

Amherst

Although several of the girls live in neighboring towns, Amherst is the central location. With many of its residents working at or attending one of the three local colleges: Amherst College, the University of Massachusetts, and Hampshire College, the population of Amherst tends to be well-read and affluent. Students being irresponsible kids make up the majority of the police reports.

It's a very liberal town where Emily Dickinson once lived, and many people still quote her regularly.

As an example of the town's inclusive worldview, there were special tunnels built under a street to facilitate the mating pilgrimage of the spotted salamander. It is not surprising when one of the players became a vegetarian.

One of the more common jobs is therapist. Therapy comes in many forms: psychoanalysts as well as new age mystics.

Northampton

Northampton became the villain of the book. It is a rival team for a few reasons. They are close geographically, and they are close to Amherst in talent. The top teams of any season are usually predicted to be Amherst, Northampton, and Agawam, another nearby town.

Northampton had bested Amherst in the 1992 play-offs. This loss set the stage for the rest of the book, as the team rose to become better. They have an enemy they can picture. Their loss is still on their minds.

The gym

Many of the people in this book feel in one point of their lives that there was a gym they called home. Coach Moyer felt it in high school. He wasn't brought up in Philadelphia, he was brought up on the boards of the gym at his high school. That was home.

The girls, collectively, feel it in their high school gymnasium. This is a place for them to meet with friends almost every day, away from classrooms or boys.

The gym is also a refuge from the pressures of adolescent life. Whether it is Rita's creepy stalker, or parental issues, or just the daily drama of being a teenager, the stress of those things melt away when they are in the gym.



When Kristin is feeling an emptiness, and just going through the motions, Jamila takes her to the gym at Umass, the way her father sometimes does. It is a kind of therapy. They work out their problems over the love of the game, using muscle memory to guide them through the process and get them back to who they really were inside.

The opposing gym

While the home gym is a comforting place for the girls, the gym of the enemy team is a daunting building. There really is a home court advantage. It isn't that a gym varied in physical details from one to another. It is more a comfort factor that the home team has that the away team did not.

The stands are usually packed in the home team's favor. People on the bleachers know every girl's name on their own team, and the away team are just seen as the enemy. They lob insults at the players and try to unnerve them.

The team bus

The team bus is a place for the players to be themselves. At the gym, there are always eyes on them. In the bus, there is no need to perform. They can do whatever needs to be done. If they lost, they can think about their performance, or even cry. If they won, they can be silly, crazy kids.

The locker room

While Coach Moyer is in charge most of the time, when it is just the girls in the locker room, the dynamic is different. Jen and Jamila, the team leaders, are in charge. Instead of Moyer, one of the girls usually gives a speech, or a little pep talk. Through moments like this, the girls are learning to be leaders and inspire others.

Newspapers

Newspaper coverage of the games varies throughout the book. When there isn't a particularly interesting game, the newspaper isn't mentioned. When the Hurricanes are up against an equal match or a rival, then the newspaper not only covers it, but publishes a pre-game prediction.

Newspaper reporters, as well as those from other media, think of the Hurricanes as "Jamila and her team." This is not the truth, and Jamila resents it as much as any of the others.

Finally, even a small newspaper makes it into the book. There is a newsletter produced by children that interviewed Jen.



College

College looms largely in the lives of these girls.

Firstly, their towns are surrounded by three colleges. There is an influx of college students that changes the demeanor of the town when summer changes to fall. Several of the parents work at a college.

They are also all likely to go to college. A few of them, like Jamila, have quite a few colleges interested in having them. College might be the only place that they can continue having an athletic life in organized sports. In a way, it is the extension of their senior year – an attempt to make the good parts last longer.

Wall of Strong Women

Jen Pariseau has a wall of her room decorated with pictures of strong women, and often a quote or two. She clips these pictures and puts them together as inspiration, along with the Nike “Just Do It” ads. Mixed in with these rich and famous women is a poem by Kathleen, a fellow Hurricane. This shows that the girls inspire each other.

Car

Only one of the girls on the team has their own car. This makes it pretty limiting how much they can do outside of school. Additionally, many of the girls complain about how little there is to do around town anyway.

Amherst is a regional school. The girls come from a few different towns. So, unless they get their parents or friends to drive, the only way they see their teammates is during practice or games.



Themes

Friendship is a bond that's larger than anything

Throughout the book, it is these girls' friendships that forges the team. It is a physical game, but Blais explains that the emotional connections between the girls is what lends the team its power. It's a team, but it's a lattice of friendships that makes it special.

After the loss to Hamp, Lucia writes disparagingly about the other team in her diary. She writes: "Northampton is not a team like Amherst. Amherst is a team of unselfish, incredibly talented, team players who love their teammates. Northampton is a bunch of good basketball players put together who do not feel or look like a team" (21). She knows that Amherst is a group of girls who care about each other and mesh well together. It's this mutual love and respect that makes them deserve a win, even if they didn't actually win.

Lucia is also pining for her old friend Patri to return. The Abads had moved to Chicago, but the move winds up being short lived. When they return, Patri tries out for the team and makes it. Then, there is much rejoicing because everyone has a soft spot for Patri. She is the missing piece in the quilt that makes up the team. Without it, the hole in the quilt is very obvious.

In another situation, all the players defer their glory to Jen for a night so she could score her 1,000th point. Part of this is professional courtesy. However, it takes friends to do something like this. It also makes Jen feel guilty for being jealous of Jamila when her 1,000th point was reached. Real friends don't feel jealousy like that, she realizes.

Jen and Jamila were growing apart. They needed to mend that again. A long, late-night phone call out of nowhere is the first stitch. They eventually get back into their old, comfortable routine. It gets to the point where, in one of the last games, Jamila is able to pass to Jen without even laying eyes on her. She just knows where she is going to be. That emotional connection resonates on the court.

Location defines you

Whereas in some books, the setting is simply a place, in this book, the setting is an influence on how the characters feel and act. Amherst is a unique town, and its quirks and challenges creates these girls. The author takes a lot of breaks in the narrative to describe what's happening in Amherst. As the seasons change, there is an ebb and flow of college students. People complain about seasonal affective disorder. The newspapers have their set stories for spring, and another routine of stories for fall. Part of this is just Blais dumping her notebook, a journalistic mistake when a writer puts every note into a story. She loves so many of the little details that she feels she can't leave them out. But part of this creates a sense of setting.



These locations defined who the girls grew up to be. Nestled between three large college campuses, and outside of that, family farms, there is a mix of highbrow intelligencia and down-to-Earth folks. The region is full of intelligent, sensitive, and hard working people. Naturally, their daughters grew up to be intelligent, sensitive, and hard-working young women.

Even Patri, who moved to Chicago, is told by Lucia that she didn't belong there. She belongs in Amherst because that was who she is. However, in Amherst, the Abads meet with some racism that some of the other girls probably aren't aware of.

Their high school is regional, which means they bus in kids from several surrounding towns. The region is all very similar, in that it was all a college area, and the people are more or less the same. Still, slight differences in geography and geneology lead to slight differences in each neighborhood.

The flip side of locations defining you, is that sometimes people stereotype you. Since Amherst is such a genteel, scholarly area, the players are expected to be pushovers. Outsiders assume that they'd be more interested in debating literary theory than getting in an opponent's face to steal a ball. In a way, they use that to their advantage, because some foes don't realize what they were up against.

Last times

The girls are under a lot of pressure to bring something meaningful from these "last times" they are experiencing as seniors in high school. For several of the girls, it is their senior year. For them, the senior year means this is the last chance to win the championships. For many of them, high school athletics is really the end. Some of them might pursue the sport at college, but most will not. The demands of studying for a career might edge out the amount of time needed to dedicate oneself to a sport. Since there is no Women's National Basketball Association at the time the book takes place, being a career basketball player is not on anyone's radar. The best they can hope for is a college scholarship. Then, they might have to compete with anonymity again: they would no longer be the champion Hurricanes; they'd just be freshmen all over again. Even the girls who aren't seniors are feeling this window closing. They know that the seniors on their team, who serve as leaders and role models, will be leaving. This is the last year they will be playing with them.

The girls know that there is a limited amount of time for them to do what they want or need to do. That is a lot of stress for a teenager. They feel the need to maximize every single moment because they don't know if things are going to be the same again. It's a bittersweet time, when even things worth rejoicing are cast in sadness because it might be the last time something like that happens. There is an undue anxiety caused by trying to make each moment matter, and wring joy out of these times.



Girls sports must work harder for the same level of respect as boys' sports

Blais points out many times in the book that while a boys' team gets celebrated for its accomplishments, a girls' team has to work even harder for that same level of respect. When a boys' team does well, no one is surprised. It's almost not even a story. When a girls' team does well, everyone is surprised. Even Blais' son is amazed when female athletes did something impressive. This double standard is pervasive throughout the athletic world. What Blais seems to want readers to know is that girls' sports may lack a lot of the fame and support that boys' sports enjoy, but they are not inferior.

Local sports coverage tends to pass the girls by, unless it is a huge game. Jamila has a following, but the sport as a whole is largely ignored. It is only when they are close to the play-offs that significant press is generated.

There was no future in women's basketball when this book was written. The WNBA hadn't formed yet. The best these girls could hope for is to attend a college with a good team.

Some parts of the sport are fundamentally different. The girls' team uses a slightly smaller ball, for example. It also used to be much different. There were rules that cut down on how much dribbling could be done, which made for a significantly different game. And, as was mentioned in the summary, women in the first three days of their period weren't allowed to play.

Blais shows how the emotions in it are different as well. Some of the girls cry when Coach Moyer compares them to his daughters after the big loss to Hamp. Jamila and her rival hug at the end of the game that ended their rivalry. These shows of emotion would not likely have happened on a boys' team.

The girls on the team would probably say that the emotional connections between the players make it a better game than when boys play. These girls bond and care about each other, without the competitiveness and pecking orders that might be present in a boys' team.

Interestingly, Blais might not have been able to sell her book if it had been about a boys' team. If the Amherst boys' basketball team made it to the regional championship, it might have been a non-issue. No one in the publishing world would care.

The Importance of Role Models

A role model is one of the most important jobs a teenager can have. A teen is not quite an adult, but feels like one sometimes. They are not quite a child, but feel like one sometimes, too. They can identify, at least partially, with both age groups. This puts them in a unique position. They can mentor those younger than them because they



have a glimpse of what the big picture is. Young kids look up to them because they're still young enough to know some of the same pop culture, to have the same interests, and to not be an authority figure. And, to a kid, a teenager is intrinsically cool.

Jen and Jamila are the most prominent examples of role models on the team. They become relatively well known among those who follow high school sports. The biggest boosts to their prides are when they are asked to speak to kids. The children really look up to them. This elevates them, in some ways, more than the high they get from playing basketball.

As Jen says, the difference between a role model and a hero is that a role model is someone you can touch. They are present. They are part of your life, and there's a chance that they'll keep showing up in the future. A hero is more like someone on her wall of strong women. Heroes inspire, and have good quotes to remember, but they are distant, untouchable.

Throughout the book, each girl gets chances to shine. Lucia sings the national anthem at their last game, for example. As much as they seek out adults for advice – such as parental talks or having a word with the coach – sometimes advice from a peer is more meaningful. A few kind words from one of the seniors, or if one of the leaders is able to take time to lend an ear – those simple acts resonate strongly with the younger girls. For example, when Jen reached out to Rita about why she was so withdrawn, causing Rita to open up about her stalker. There are a few times when the pep talk is given by a fellow player rather than the coach.

It would be interesting to learn if any of these girls continued in their capacity as role models after the year that was described in the book.



Styles

Structure

The book's structure is fairly straightforward, as it is written by a journalist. It begins at a critical time in the players' lives, when they choke against Northampton. It advances chronologically from there, culminating in the state championship game, which is their goal the entire time.

The prologue serves as an entryway for the reader into the world of girls' sports, and how it's different from boys'. The author takes this time as a way to show her own introduction into this world, through the first girl on the team that she met, Kristin Marvin, to the first sporting event she attended professionally.

Then, the author describes key moments during the summer and basketball season leading up to their fateful final game. Throughout the chapters, the author marks the passage of time by describing what people are doing in the town of Amherst, in order to add some color to the work.

The book concludes with an epilogue that touches on what some of the girls went on to accomplish after the book was written.

Perspective

The book is written from a third person perspective. However, the author has some insights into what many of the people in the book are thinking.

The author is granted unprecedented access to the lives and families of the players and coach. It can be construed that these are either the result of hours of interviews or of being at every major event during the season. Many of the quotes sound like a person being interviewed. For example, when Coach Moyer speaks about what it means to be a coach (which happens in many chapters), it sounds like sound bites given during a newspaper or television interview.

Blais comes at the work from a journalistic background, so there is attention to detail. She is trying to chronicle a period of time. However, in an attempt to move the story along and get the reader to feel for the characters, they are profiled a bit. The reader is given the surface version of much of their lives. The reader does not know, for example, anything about the players' grades, siblings, romantic lives, or friendships outside of the team.

Tone

It is clear in the reading of the book that the author respects her subjects. There aren't any significant negative descriptions of any of them. In some cases, poor traits might be alluded to in a funny way, like a friend giving another friend a gentle ribbing. For example, every time the team was singing, the author jokes about how tone deaf Jen is.

However, there aren't any significant weaknesses. If this was a novel, the main characters would likely have character flaws. However, any issues they might have had are glossed over and held at a distance.

The second chapter, for example, focuses heavily on the strained relationship between Jen and Jamila. Instead of detailing a history of slights between them that led to their friendship starting to dissolve, the author sums it up quickly. "Although they felt emotionally distant from each other, they were cordial, and their team did well" (39). The chapter ends with Jamila calling Jen and stating that they needed to talk. The author transcribes a few sentences from both of them, but doesn't delve too deeply. This is one of the only examples of tension between characters that is represented in the book.

The story is about the team, and their drive to the championships. The drama that could have ensued between them is downplayed or possibly removed.



Quotes

But moms can't do that!"

-- Blais' son (Prologue paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote shows that even the author's own son has his own prejudices about women in sports. It sets the tone for the book that women's sports aren't as well-known or important as men's.

We didn't get the encouragement we give you boys. If you were a girl and you liked sports, you could be a cheerleader."

-- Kacey (Prologue paragraph 18)

Importance: This quote also illustrates how far women's sports have come. There are significant differences from the time these women were younger to now. Of course, there are still changes to come in the 20 years since the book was published.

You girls are ruining our racket."

-- An unnamed male sportswriter (Prologue paragraph 41)

Importance: Whether it is said as a joke or not, it denotes that sports is a boys club, and covering sports for the newspaper is also one.

The difference between a role model and an idol was that a role model was someone you could touch."

-- Jen (chapter 2 paragraph 84)

Importance: Jen is thinking about her purpose as a role model. She has her own heroes, with her wall of strong women, but they are not people she may ever meet. Meanwhile, the girls in town looked up to her and she is more approachable. She is around town instead of off in Hollywood, and she can stop and make time for them if they need her.

All my social friends understand that basketball comes first. The ones who really like to party drop me off at tryouts in November and they say, 'See you in March.'

-- Kristin (chapter 4 paragraph 48)

Importance: This quote shows the determination of Kristin in particular, and the girls in general, have to the sport. They give up a lot in this dedication to basketball. There are a lot of fun things they turn down because they want to be the best.

(getting the kids in shape, thought Coach Moyer, will have more to do with harnessing their spirit than breaking it)"

-- Coach Moyer in narration (chapter 5 paragraph 4)

Importance: This parenthetical narration describes Moyer's thoughts on coaching the



Hurricanes. They have plenty of energy. It is just a matter of focusing it and giving it direction.

Kids have a built-in need to be parented. They take it wherever they can get it, and I accept that role.”

-- Coach Moyer (chapter 5 paragraph 8)

Importance: As the coach says earlier in the book, he compares all the girls to his own daughters. There is a very parental feel between him and the players. Additionally, he tries to make himself available to them if they ever need to talk. If they have a problem, he urges them to talk to him.

Don't be afraid to mess up. Basketball is a game of mistakes. Assume you're going to make some mistakes, and don't start kicking yourself until about the fifth one.

-- Coach Moyer (chapter 6 paragraph 18)

Importance: Athletes berate themselves over mistakes and missed opportunities. The truth is that everything happens so quickly, that there is bound to be some chaos on the court. The important thing is not to let it sink the player, and by extension, the team.

A coach is a teacher, a life teacher. You're often the third-most influential person in the child's life.

-- Coach Conte (chapter 8 paragraph 150)

Importance: The coach of the enemy team, from Agawam, gets along very well with Coach Moyer. Despite being the enemy, they agree on a lot of points, and can practically finish each other's sentences. In this situation, they are talking about the role of a coach as a surrogate parent. They spend a lot of time with the players, and are constantly giving them direction, on and off the court.

Hey, I still lose the ball, I still dribble the ball off my feet. I miss six out of ten shots. Being part of a team is not something you're born with, not something someone can give to you, not something you find under your pillow with a note from the tooth fairy.

-- Jen (chapter 9 paragraph 10)

Importance: Jen is doing her job as a role model to some young students when she says this. She wants to express that mistakes happen, even with expert athletes. There is no such thing as a perfect game. It takes attitude more than anything to get past the mistakes.

A number of the reporters asked me to explain Hoop Phi. I simply could not. There is no explanation, at least not one that can be put into words. Hoop Phi is the thing that people search for in their lives. It is the thing that we have found to which we belong, contribute and love.”

-- Jamila (chapter 9 paragraph 31)

Importance: Jamila gives a speech to her fellow Hurricanes. In her speech, she not



only addresses the attention she is getting, but makes them all a part of it. She defines their slogan by stating that there is no way to define it. It is just something very personal, and perhaps no one but team members can possibly understand it. It is theirs and theirs alone.

This is as good as it gets.

-- John Wideman (chapter 9 paragraph 97)

Importance: What is meant to be an uplifting phrase had a bit of a negative ring to it. Mr. Wideman is simply saying that these girls, this group of friends, gathered around a table celebrating a victory, have it good and that they should recognize that this is a high point to their life. The connotation to this is that it suggests that it might be all downhill from here. Their high school sports record is fantastic, but it will all be coming to an end soon.



Topics for Discussion

The author talks about the girls' parents a lot. What is it about their parents that led to the girls being who they are?

This question urges students to consider what made the players into the people they became. The author gives at least a little information about most of the parents. The students should think about the significance of who the parents are and compare this to who their children have become.

What would the book be like if the Northampton Blue Devils were the primary focus of the book?

This question asks the student to put themselves into the mindset of Hamp. This is a group of kids who were seen as the enemy throughout the book. Surely, the kids at Hamp see themselves as heroes, and the Amherst Hurricanes as the enemy. If the story is reversed, then Hamp's story becomes one of tragedy, where the team fails at the very end.

How did the author gain such a close, personal view of her subjects?

This question asks the student to think critically about how a book like this is written. Blais certainly got the inside information on a lot of personal situations and private events. Students could discuss how this happened. Perhaps the author was a silent observer the entire year. Perhaps she interviewed them all at the end of the year. The students would need to discuss what kind of skills or connections would be needed to write this.

The town of Amherst was described as a very quirky town. What is it about this town that forged these girls personalities as they grew up? Could the same kids have come from a different town?

The setting is a very important part of any story. Amherst is described in very colorful ways. It's clear that it has made an impact on the girls. The readers are being asked to explain how it has impacted them.



Why do the girls have such a devotion to this sport? What is it about basketball that makes it such an important part of their lives?

Throughout the book, the girls' dedication to this sport is evident. Readers should be able to show how important it is in their lives and what an impact it has.

On one hand, Blais asserts that girls' sports are not given the same amount of respect as boys' sports. On the other hand, she shows that at least a few of these athletes are hometown heroes. Contrast these two points. Given the evidence from the book, which do you think is more accurate?

While the author explains frequently that there is a disparity in high school sports, she also clearly shows that these girls are role models. Readers should determine if these two points contradict each other or if they can coexist.

There are a few locations noted in the book where the girls can just be themselves. What are they? Why do they feel they can be more true to themselves in these places rather than other places?

There are several locations noted in the book in which the girls can let their guard down and just be free. One of them is the bus on the way to or from games, where they don't have to be hard. Another is Friendly's, where they can just eat ice cream and talk. The third is the gym, where they don't have time to think; they just act.

How do the girls feel about female celebrities and female athletes in particular?

From the wall of strong women to dissing Madonna, the women have plenty of opinions on the world that puts such a strong emphasis on appearance and sexuality over brains and determination.



Sports is described by the author as being a man's world – only men play and only men are interested in it. How have things changed in the years since this book was published (1995)?

Readers should discuss whether there are more female athletes who are household names, or if there is more media coverage of female athletics.

Senior year was the last chance for a lot of things for these girls. Did that make them work harder? Did that put undo pressure on them? What would have happened if they had fallen short of their goal?

Throughout the book, there are many references to an attitude of “the last times for this, the last times for that.” How much of an impact did that kind of thinking have on their day-to-day lives?