

The Education of Josh Sommovilla:
How a Year On the Sidelines Transformed an Afterthought Into a Champion
By
The Comptroller



I awaken as the plane banks right. Opening my eyes, I see my window fill with soft clouds as we begin our descent. I stretch my legs. Yawn. Sip at the now cold coffee I ordered before I fell asleep. In a moment we are level, the clouds disperse and the earth spreads out below me.

From this charmed height, the great yet troubled city of St. Louis looks calm. Peaceful. Serene. Ships lie at rest on the docks. A few birds glide from shore to shore. The first rays of dawn shine from the eastern horizon, bounce off the Mississippi River and reflect into my eyes.



Some have likened the famed Arch as an apt metaphor for
The Player Pool – all roads now pass through St. Louis.

I blink.

"Your tray table, sir."

The voice is distant. As hazy as my thoughts. I turn to see the flight attendant staring at me. The look on her face tells me instantly that she's had to repeat herself. She's irritated. Feeling guilty, I comply with an apologetic nod.

When I look back out the window I try to regain that sense of tranquility from only a moment before. But it has passed. I take a deep breath and, finding no relief, feel my own pulse. It is racing.

Only I know why.

The air is bitterly cold when I step out of the airport. A cutting wind doesn't help. I am reminded that Midwest winters are not for the faint of heart. That the south has likely softened me in ways that I cannot even fully comprehend. I hail the nearest cab and delight in the warmth I find in its back seat.

I hope for a quiet ride and for a few minutes I get it. Then our silence is broken.

"So," the cab driver says to me in that open, friendly way that only cab drivers have mastered. "What brings you to St. Louis?"

I look up. He is looking at me in the rearview mirror, a slight smile on his face. I know what he is hoping for. A fun answer. A good story. Something to pass the time and put a good face on otherwise gloomy day. I hesitate. But not because the question is a surprise. It is a question I have asked myself all morning. All week before this. Perhaps, if I am honest, ever since April of 2017.

Why am I here?

The answer is not so simple as either my driver or myself would like. Yes, I am here as a reporter. As a colleague. As a fan. But I am also a rival. A beaten man coming to grips with his own shortcomings. Most of all, as a pilgrim in search of a greater truth.

But my driver will understand none of this. Nor do I expect him to.



Never before achieved, never since replicated, in 2010 Josh simultaneously Held Championship Titles in intramural basketball, softball, kickball and the Player Pool – what has since been dubbed “The Sommo-Slam” (photograph 2010, copyright Ben Liechty)

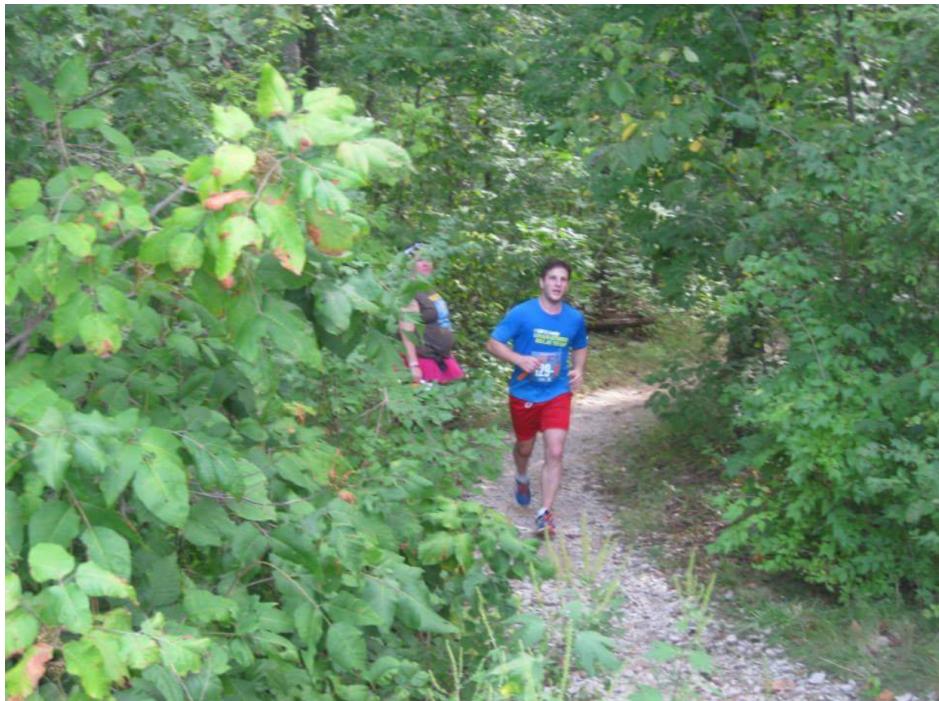
After a moment I sigh and return his smile, answering as truthfully as I can:

"To see an old friend."

"Ah," he says back with a deep nod. "It is good to see old friends."

I want to be that passenger who laughs and says something in return. Something wise and meaningful and vaguely sentimental about the passage of time, the pains of growing old, the vagaries of friendship. He wants me to be that too.

But I don't have it in me. My heart is beating too fast. My breathing is too quick. There are too many thoughts racing through my head. So I do the only thing I can: I look away. And as the St. Louis Arch comes into view I gaze upon it for only the briefest of moments before I close my eyes and pretend to sleep.



Josh turned to training for half marathons to help him recover from the media backlash of his abysmal 2011 and 2012 Player Pools.

At first glance, the surgical resident's lounge at Barnes-Jewish Hospital is not the place you might expect to find a three time World Champion of anything. It is unfairly cramped, made smaller by a mess of rolling chairs that have failed to be tucked back into their slots in front of a row of dusty, outdated computers. The room is messy. As I wait, I count four granola bar wrappers and two half empty Gatorades on the floor alone. As I shift in my seat on the couch, my palms crunch on a series of spilled Doritos. Over all of this there is a lingering smell. Part antiseptic. Part stale

coffee. Part body odor. It is far from pleasant but no one seems to mind. Or even notice.

I am beginning to doubt myself all over again for making this journey, counting the innumerable reasons why it is a mistake and have even started looking to book an earlier return flight when the door suddenly swings open and the man I have been waiting for appears.



Even as a young athlete, his coaches saw something special in Josh (far left, second row seated)

It has been twelve years since I first met Josh in the late summer of 2006. And as I see him now entering the lounge with such energy, I am reminded of the first memory I have of him: Bounding down the steps of the Foerderer Pavilion auditorium on his way to his seat in the front row. For a moment he does not know I am here and I take a pleasure in watching him – as if for the first time all over again.

He wears clean, standard issue dark green scrubs over top of which is a long white coat that is neither of those things. Its edges are stained a light brown. Persistent ink stains of a variety of colors pock-mark the front and sides. The stitching of his nametag is frayed and barely legible. His shoes – once a dark and polished black – are now a deep red, the accumulation of a countless number of patients' spattered blood. A surgical cap tied tightly around his head is set at a jaunty angle, suggesting a man who loves his job in spite of so many reasons not to.

After a minute, a colleague alerts him to my presence and we greet the way I knew we would. Comfortably. Familiarly. I have not seen him in many years and yet it feels like no time has passed at all. It brings to mind the best of Josh's traits:

What you see is what you get.

There is no affectation. No pretense. No sense that he is trying to be one thing to his co-residents and another to his old friends. There is only Josh.

And that, I think to myself with a sigh of relief, is all I need to remember to remove all the doubts I had about being here and coming face to face with the greatest Player Pool Champion of all time.



Seen here off the Amalfi Coast, Josh celebrated his 2017 championship with a two month pleasure cruise through Europe's capitals.

It is a grueling long and busy day that lies ahead, which is to say that it is a very normal day in the life of Josh Sommovilla. And that is precisely why I am here. To observe. To study. To learn. After a few moments of exchanging pleasantries, I recede back into the shadows of the room, a student again as I shadow Dr. Sommovilla throughout his day.



At Hammerstone's in St. Louis, Josh is just another face in the crowd –
Known simply as the guy in the corner who yells during NBA games

To watch Josh in action is to see a man proficient in all aspects of his craft. In early morning sign-out he is attentive and studious, taking notes on a folded, printed out list of his in hospital patients. With younger residents he is patient and understanding, letting them talk and allowing them the space to carve their own path while interjecting a teaching comment when appropriate. With medical students he is warm and inviting, taking the time to explain to them things in language that even I can understand.

On rounds and in the pre-operative holding area, I see another side of Josh. The warm and caring physician who takes time to talk to his patients. I smile as he sits next to an old woman and holds her hand. I laugh as he jokes with another patient – a middle aged man also from the east coast – about the best Philly cheese steaks. I am moved nearly to tears as he holds a family meeting to discuss the goals of care in a critically ill young woman.

In the operating room, I see the Josh I once saw on the basketball court. Laughing. Joking. Planning and executing. Recruiting an OR team the way he once brought together the Sweepers out of thin air all those many years ago. On the basketball court, Josh's trademark was his ability to play inside and out, defense and offense, coach as well as be coached.

It is the same for him in surgery. He is as adept at laparoscopy as he is at open repairs. As familiar with cutting edge technologies like the Robot as he is with the

scalpel. As comfortable in a tense operating room as he is in the physicians' lounge, talking shop with illustrious colleagues.

At the end of a long day operating, he could easily delegate to younger residents the things on his list that still need to be done. No one would fault him for it or even blink an eye. And yet just after he dropped his last patient off in the recovery room, Josh did not so much as even stop to grab water before tossing his white coat around his shoulders and heading back to the floor to round for a second time that day.

An hour and a half later, even I (who have done nothing all day) find myself falling asleep in the lounge when Josh enters again with the same energy that he began the day. Only this time he is in street clothes. Jeans and a purple polo with white stripes. His hair is combed and his tennis shoes are clean.

"Come on," he says. "Let's get a beer."

We sit at the end of a dimly lit bar. In the old days, this place was filled with smoke, gun fighting and gambling. A few women of ill repute kept their offices at the top of a rickety stairs. It is a historic bar that dates back (if the wooden sign behind the bar is to be believed) to the year 1803 – the year that Thomas Jefferson acquired the region in the Louisiana Purchase. It is a bar that suits Josh – rugged. American. Stripped of all pretenses. As real as the earth itself on which it stands.



Real America's greatest hits album entitled "Ripped From Stem to Stern" is set to hit stores later this month.

As we sip our way through our first round we catch up in the way that friends do. The years have been kind to Josh. He has the same youthful, boyish look. His eyes still sparkle as if mischief of some kind is only around the corner. He is trim and in good shape. Only on a deeper, closer inspection do signs of age present themselves. An extra wrinkle on his forehead. Specks of gray in his otherwise thick, dark beard. And – less noticeably – a vertical scar that runs from the base of his thumb to his forearm – on his shooting hand. Two years ago, the man who once played more intramural basketball than anyone in his class, underwent surgery for severe tendinitis. Though his wound has healed and he has made a full recovery, he has not played basketball since. Even for Josh, as a surgeon, his hands are more important for something else.



A replica of this iconic image now hangs in Josh's high school gym.

Though a Philadelphian at heart, St. Louis is a home of sorts to Josh now. He has been in this city now for eight years, a number that still astonishes him when said out loud.

"If you told me eight years ago that I would still be in residency in 2018," he says, "I would have told you that you were crazy." He pauses before adding with a smile: "But I might not have told you I would have three Player Pool Championships by then either."

When I ask him if he regrets the length of his training (three years of basic science research sandwiched into what was already a long residency), he waves it off. Maybe because there is still so much left to come. This summer, Josh will be moving to Madison, WI where he will undertake a palliative medicine fellowship followed by a second fellowship in colorectal surgery. All told, it will not be until the summer of 2020 – ten years after graduation from medical school – when he can call himself an attending.

The strain is apparent. But don't try to tell Josh it isn't worth it.

"Everyone else has finished training and is living the good life off the fat of the land," he says. "And they're getting complacent. Me? I'm only getting hungrier."

Complacent is a word that will never be associated with Josh Sommovilla. It is a word that went out of his vocabulary completely in the spring of 2007.

A spring he won't soon forget.

Josh does not remember where he was or what he was doing when he first heard about the inaugural Player Pool. And despite rumors and media reports to the contrary, he denies ever being angry at Dave Goldberg for being selected over him.

"I have tremendous respect for Dave Goldberg. Tremendous respect," he says. "He was a good friend of mine. And a Sweeper at the time. Any report that says I was upset is wrong."

But he admits the snub changed him.

"I knew then that I would never be taken seriously," he says, conceding that his constant bashing of the NCAA and his touting of the superiority of the NBA likely contributed to him not being selected in the first place.

Josh might have turned away from us after that. He might have moved on to other things. He might have given up. But giving up is not in his DNA. So he did what he'd always done since he was a kid: He worked.

"It was hard, watching that first year from the sidelines," he says. "But I made myself do it because I knew it would make me better. I watched the draft. I watched

practices. I watched the tournament. If there was anything going on with NCAA basketball I knew about it.”



Josh won't let his critics define him – but that doesn't mean he doesn't hear them.

But it wasn't until Bryan's infamous Texas A&M debacle (when he drafted three players from the same, ill-fated team including one player that needed to vomit before each game) that Josh knew where his future lay.

“When I saw that,” he says. “I knew that not only could I challenge for the title. I could *win* the title. And not just one.”

When the invitation to join came the following year, Josh accepted with grace rather than turning his nose up at those who so recently dismissed him. Still, though, expert opinion both within the Player Pool and in the media was that Josh was out of his league.

Josh was not deaf to the doubters.

“I heard them,” he says with perhaps more resignation than he'd like to show. “I know everyone was laughing when I made my first picks.”

At first, the doubters seemed like they had a point. In both his first and second year (2008 and 2009) there were many swings... but many more misses.

"I was young," he says now, looking back on those early Player Pool days. "I was finding myself. Finding my style. Learning the college game really for the first time in my life. If I had to pinpoint which player it was that was a wake-up call it was Chris Allen."

Chris Allen was a role player for a Michigan State team that would make it all the way to the 2009 National Title game. Still relying on the popular strategy of choosing low scoring players on teams more likely to advance, Josh selected Chris Allen with his eighth and final pick in that year's draft. Chris Allen played six games – and scored only a total of 32 points. Including a paltry two, two and three points in the Elite Eight, Final Four and Title Game respectively.

Josh finished dead last with a score of 291 points and could do nothing as Bryan gloated about his victory.

The next year, Josh promised himself, things were going to be different.

Were they ever.

Rolling out his new bold and disruptive drafting style focused on the progeny of former NBA stars, Josh selected Player Pool legend Isaiah Thomas out of the University of Washington and popped champagne with reckless abandon as he brought home the title no one ever thought he would win.

"2010 was a big year for me. Those two titles – four when you include kick ball and softball – built the foundation for the dynasty that was to come."

The second title he refers to is, of course, the Jefferson Intramural Basketball Championship as the team he created and molded in his own image, The Sweepers, shocked the world and won the Intramural Championship.

"I saw first hand what it took to be a Champion," he says. "And I was learning the whole time. Taking notes. You have to be a risk taker to win big. When you're backed into a corner, when you're doubted... that's when the dog inside of you either comes up. Or puts its tail between your legs. That's what the Sweepers taught me."

But even after that first title, the doubters were not fully silenced. Several members of the Player Pool, when speaking to the media off the record, chalked Josh's success up to that most fickle of March mistresses... luck.

Fluke. Accident. Chance. Fortune. Fate. Serendipity.

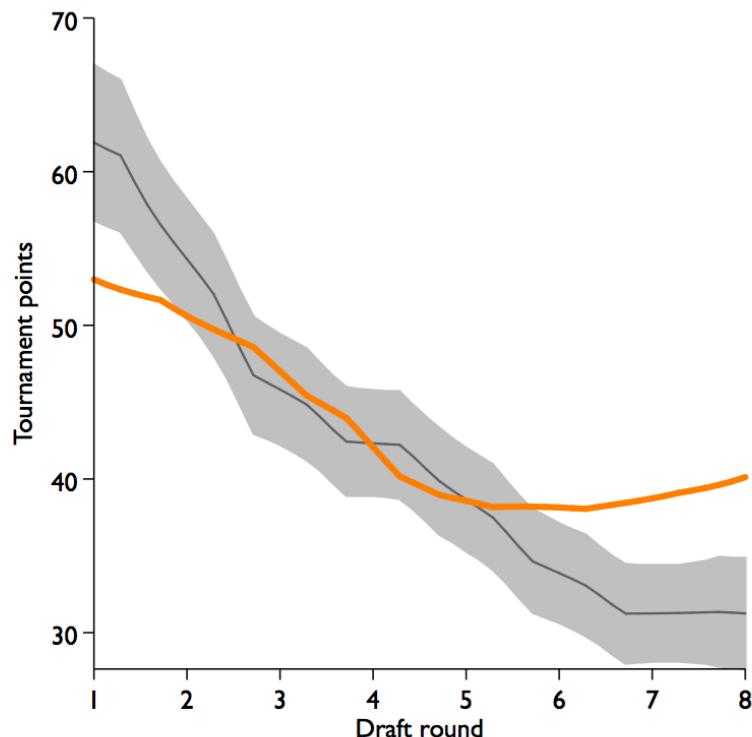
The only words it seemed that weren't used to describe that title were the ones Josh might have hoped:

Genius. Innovator. Disruptor. Bold. Brilliant.

2011 and 2012 only added to the fire of those who thought he could never replicate the magical run of 2010.

Those were dark years, Josh admits now.

"I was an intern," he says, finishing his second beer. "I was away from Philadelphia for the first time in years. I was in St. Louis for the first time in my life. I didn't know where my career was going to take me. I didn't know where life was going to take me."



A graphic depiction of where Josh makes his living –
in late round picks (6-8) he's vastly superior to everyone else (statistics and graphs courtesy of the
labs of Dr. Adam Zahm, PhD Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania)

Did doubts begin to creep in?

"It's only human," he admits. "You try to tune it out. You try to wake up each morning and do your work and trust your process. But when it doesn't show results you can easily become frustrated."

He looked for other outlets. He poured himself into his work. He started to run half marathons. He formed a band, Real America, recording several albums and traversing the country. All in either an effort to find himself or to escape from his troubled past. You be the judge.

In his darkest moments – when he wasn't blaming Duke or Missouri for getting knocked out of the tournament too early – he would look back to his younger years. And to 2007 when he was left out of the Player Pool altogether.

"And I just reminded myself, that's what they all want. They want me to back down and to give up," he says. "I knew then I was going to come back stronger than ever the next year."

The next year was 2013 – and it was a year to remember for the Player Pool.

The University of Michigan entered the 2013 NCAA Tournament on a bit of a slide. Once ranked #1 overall in the country, they had slipped to a four seed and many thought they would get upset in the first round. But with a roster featuring National Player of the Year Trey Burke and a slew of other future NBA draft picks (and sons of former NBA players) including Tim Hardaway Jr. Nik Stauskas. Caris Levert. Mitch McGary, Josh saw a chance to win big.



Kolya (left) and Heidi (right), Josh and Hope's two dogs

He drafted Burke in the second round but it was drafting Little Dog in the 8th round that was the real stroke of genius. Michigan and Little Dog went on to play in the National Title game and he scored a total of 76 points for the tourney – the highest ever at the time for a last round draft pick.

It was the kind of pick that could define a career but Josh didn't settle. He one-upped himself only four years later in 2017 when he selected Trevon Bluiett off the sheet to lead his record third title team.

It's hard to say exactly the cause but even Josh will admit he has changed over time. Is it residency? Is it St. Louis? Is it the championships? Or is it, perhaps, love?

Josh is no longer the wild, reckless hellion of his earlier days. He has settled down and is now married to his wonderful wife Hope. They live together in a house in a quiet, peaceful suburb of St. Louis. He brought to the marriage a Husky named Kolya. She brought a Bichon named Heidi.

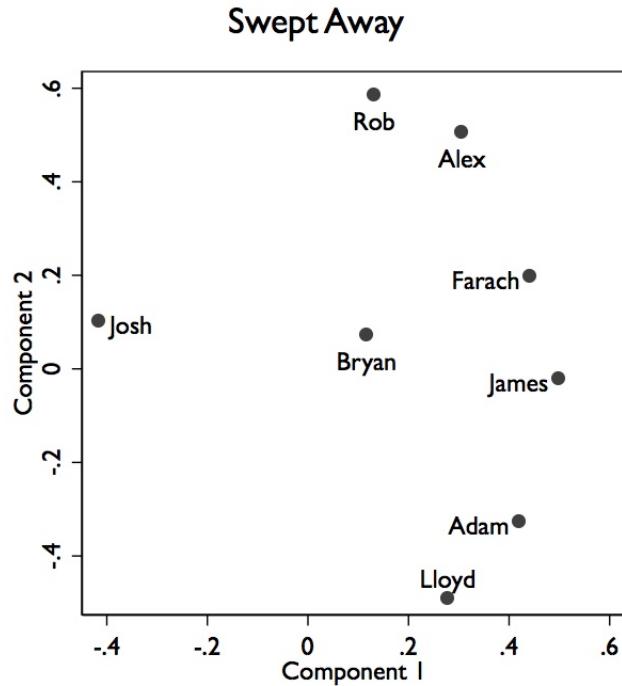


Hope has brought Josh a deep happiness that he admits not even the Player Pool could ever give him.

He is happy and, some might say, domesticated. He seems calmer than in previous years. More at ease with himself and his litany of successes. And yet poke the bear and you see that the fierce competitor is still there. That he perhaps has never left. That he is lurking inside, waiting for just that moment to come out. If ever there was a moment or a season for that, it is March. The hibernating bear inside of Josh

Sommovilla is about to be unleashed, to come crawling out of its den, hungry to feast on any prey that comes in its path.

"I plan on bringing my fourth title back home to St. Louis," he says. "And my fifth to Madison next year."



"...essentially principal component analysis takes lots of variables (i.e dimensions) (in our case, each year is a variable/dimension) and smashes it into the smallest number of dimensions for easy visualization of differences. As you can see Josh is different from the rest of us..." – Dr. Adam Zahm, PhD in his Nobel Prize winning address to the Internationale Society de Statistica Zurich, Switzerland, Jan 2018.

But his critics, like Josh himself, will not go quietly into the night. They point to advanced stats, which show (they believe) how Josh is profiting off good fortune, not skill. That when you look deeper into the numbers you realize that Josh isn't just average... he may be (take a deep breath) below average.

Take, for example, his average score per year. It ranks only fifth out of eight. And is a mere three points away from ranking seventh out of eight. That's not what Josh likes to hear, especially when his archrival, The Comptroller, who won back-to-back titles in 2015 and 2016, ranks number one on that list, with a significant lead over the nearest competitor.

Josh scoffs at both the specifics and the general idea of these kind of stats, growing irritable and terse for the first time.

"That's bullshit," he says. "Who came up with this garbage? Farach? How many titles has he won?"

Josh laughs so loud several people across the bar look at us. I know what they're thinking. Josh's laugh at its most competitive sounds downright evil. The vicious inner thoughts of a man driven to succeed at all costs. It's a laugh that chills me, too. For I know that this March will be like the last ten that have come before it. A dog fight where only the best man is going to emerge victorious.



Show Josh a chart of advanced stats and this is the look you're likely to get in return.

As we finish our fourth beer, I look up at the wooden clock above the bar. It is late. Time for both of us to leave our thoughts of the past and return to the next day's work ahead. I am not even staying with Josh. He has to be at work in less than eight hours and my flight back home leaves before then. I am to spend the night at an airport hotel, lying on my back, hands behind my head, destined to spend a restless, sleepless night thinking about the road behind me and the road ahead.

As we say our goodbyes, I wonder what Josh will be thinking about tonight. Work? Surgery? Research? His wife? The Player Pool?

I think our night is over. The conversation ended. The record closed. I have turned to look for my own cab when suddenly Josh calls to me.

"2008," he says loudly.

"What about it?" I ask back.

"You asked me what my biggest regret was," he says.

Earlier, I had. And Josh had dodged the answer. Quickly ordering another beer and changing the subject.

"Okay," I say, waiting.

He lets me think about it. But I don't know what it is. Finally he speaks:



The one that got away

"Dell Curry's son."

I nod.

He nods in return.

Then he gets into the cab, shuts the door and, sliding to the seat behind the driver, disappears from view.

I can only smile and shake my head, thinking back to the 2008 draft (Josh's first) when not a single person in the Player Pool thought to select Steph Curry, who would go on to become the highest scoring player in the tournament that year for Davidson.

I realize then that maybe I've gotten it wrong this whole time. Maybe Josh isn't motivated by being snubbed for the inaugural Player Pool. Maybe he's simply haunted by his own mistakes. Endlessly driven to achieve perfection in an event that beats you down time and time again.

But I think we will never know the real answer. No one ever does with Josh. That is his mystery. That is his greatness. And that is what we are charged with competing against for all the years to come.

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