

Chapter 7: Stakes Is High

“Stakes is high / You know them stakes is high / When we talkin’ ’bout the vibe...” — De La Soul

They asked me why we won’t play more games, more tournaments, more tournaments

I told them: “Because it’s not about more games—it’s about more development.”

Not just because I believed it—
but because I’ve seen the difference.
Kids with rhythm move like water.
Kids chasing resumes tighten with every bounce.

They asked why their son didn’t get more shine.
I asked if they’d watched the practice film.

They hadn’t.

And it showed.
In how they spoke about effort like it was aesthetic.
In how they weighed their child’s value
in clicks, not connection.

That’s when I knew—
they weren’t here for growth.

They were here for exposure.

And that’s fine.

But not here.

Because if we’re gonna do this,
if we’re gonna build a system
that lets kids breathe,
then we have to protect the air.

We have to filter out the fumes—
the noise, the pressure,
the transaction hiding as support.

The vibe is sacred.
And sacred things require boundaries.

It took me a while to learn that.
I used to believe I could hold the vibe for everyone.
Absorb it.
Translate it.
Keep smiling through the static.

But you can't protect the vibe
if you don't honor your own.

So I stopped explaining myself.
Started clarifying.

Not defensively.
Deliberately.

This isn't a platform. It's a sacred place.

This isn't for clout.
It's for breath.

This isn't a shortcut.
It's a decision.

A daily one.
A sometimes-lonely one.
But the only one that lets me sleep.

If that's too much—
you can go.

And I'll still wish you well.

But I'm not chasing anyone
who makes me question the soil
I've been planting in.

Because I've lost roots before.
And I won't do that again.

I almost lost a player last spring.

He didn't like being held accountable. Didn't like being asked to listen without posturing.

Didn't like when joy required presence, not performance.

And for a moment, I thought he'd walk. But he didn't. He stayed. And we worked through it.

Because you can't build a culture
and be scared of losing players.

That's not culture.
That's codependence.

And I've lived enough relationships
that looked like culture
but felt like fear.

We didn't write anything on the board. There was no signing. No contract.

But we did talk — about what mattered. About what we wanted to stand for.

Joy. Resilience. Humility.

That was enough. Not formal. But honest.

About a week ago, I had Cole in with me for a training session, and a new player showed up. A lot of the drill work wasn't new to Cole—he'd done it before. We were doing shoulder game, a one-on-one constraint drill I stole from Chris Oliver.

Cole drove to the basket, got cut off, and stopped. Didn't quite know what to do. The rep ended. And instead of stepping in like I normally would, I asked him, "Hey bud, what is it that you can do in that situation?"

He looked up and said, "You can back pivot."

Internally, I lit up. That was the answer I was hoping for. But I didn't know if he'd get there.

A couple of reps later? He got cut off again. This time, he back pivoted, stepped through, and made an incredible move and finish. The new kid guarding him looked at him and said, "Nice move."

And I watched Cole try not to smile. He was proud. He tried to hide it, but it was there.

Maybe it was the shot. Maybe it was the moment. But I was proud of all of it.

Not just the move. Not just the finish. But the joy.

I coached his son last year.
We became friends —
not just on the sidelines,
but in the space behind the sighs.

He started seeing it.
The quiet pull toward joyless structure.
The way his kid, once bright-eyed with a ball,
now walked into gyms
like it was jury duty.

We talked.
I told him to try 3-on-3 for their rec league.
Shrink the space.
Expand the breath.

He did.
And for two weekends,
you could feel the difference.
Kids moving freely.
Parents cheering — not performing.
Laughter echoing off the walls
like it belonged there again.

But a week later?
Back to five-on-five.
Back to control.
Back to the default setting that no one remembered choosing —
but everyone kept selecting.

The kids noticed.
His son noticed.
He noticed.

And once you see it,
you can't unsee it.

Now he's thinking of pulling his son
from basketball altogether.
Maybe even baseball,
a sport they both love.

Because what's the point
if the system keeps dimming the light
you swore you'd protect?

He said,
"Max Potential might be the only place he actually smiles anymore."

And that broke me—
not from pride.
From grief.

Because he shouldn't have to choose
between his kid's spirit
and the sport they both love.

But that's where we are now.
And that's why I keep building.

I don't need revenge.
I need rhythm.

And rhythm takes time.
Takes consistency.
Takes vibe.

It also takes saying no
when yes is easier.

So now,
when a parent asks,
"What's your edge?"

I tell them, honestly, "Things are just starting to turn." Not fully locked in yet. But the echoes are there. The breath is beginning to fill the room. Not perfect. But promising.

But if it is?

Then welcome.

You just found the rare thing.

A gym
where kids smile without flinching.
Where they miss and try again
without apology.

Where they lead from joy,
not fear.

Where failure isn't punished—
it's understood.

This isn't about being different.

It's about being aligned.

Aligned with breath.
With rhythm.
With truth.

Because every gym has a vibe—
but not every gym protects it.

Because the stakes?

They're high.

Higher than offers.
Higher than rankings.
Higher than your favorite coach's philosophy thread.

Every time we let fear run the system,
we lose the kids we claim to be developing.

Every time we make performance the price of belonging,
we betray the reason we started.

So I stopped marketing.
Stopped adjusting.
Stopped trying to make it palatable.

I just built.
And kept building.

And built again after setbacks.
After departures.
After nights I questioned if it was worth it.

It always is.

Now?

The kids echo the right way.

Their breath fills the room.

Their vibe sets the tone.

It's not flawless.

But it's real.

And real holds.

I don't coach out of scarcity anymore.

I coach like we already have everything we need.

Because we do.

If we protect it.

If we honor it.

If we let joy take root
and trust that it's enough.

The stakes are high.

But so is the bar.

And the vibe?

That's non-negotiable.

Not because it's trendy.

But because it's sacred.

And sacred things
don't explain themselves.

They just stand.

