# Chapter 7: Stakes Is High

“Yo, people go through pain and still don’t gain.” — De La Soul

Reps on reps. Tournaments every weekend. Trainers promising results. Drills that look clean but produce confusion. Highlights at 11. Recovery sessions by 12.  
  
And for what?  
  
This isn’t development.  
  
This is dopamine.  
  
This is a machine.  
  
Kids burning out at ten. Quitting at thirteen. Depressed by fifteen. But hey—at least they were ranked once.  
  
I’ve seen it.  
  
I’ve coached the kids the system used up. The ones who got famous off a 360 dunk in seventh grade. The ones with scholarship buzz before they could drive. The ones who fell apart under the weight of it all.  
  
They gave everything. Joy. Time. Identity.  
  
And what did they gain?  
  
Pain, performed as progress.  
  
The system applauds it.  
  
You play through injury? Warrior.  
  
You cry and still compete? Tough.  
  
You give up everything to chase exposure? Committed.  
  
But pain without purpose is just harm.  
  
People go through pain and still don’t gain.  
  
That’s the cost.  
  
And the most dangerous part? The people fueling this machine aren’t villains. They’re scared.  
  
Parents, trying to help. Coaches, trying to compete. Trainers, trying to stay booked. Everyone trapped in the same scarcity lie: “If we don’t do more, someone else will.”  
  
I used to believe it too.  
  
I chased wins. I entered suspect tournaments. I told myself the ends justified the means. That I was giving kids a shot.  
  
But I wasn’t.  
  
I was giving the system more fuel.  
  
I watched a kid cry mid-game once. Shoulders heaving. Breath stuck in his chest. No one moved. Not a coach. Not a ref. Not even his parent.  
  
We called it a “teachable moment.”  
  
I call it betrayal.  
  
Another time, a kid left a toxic team and told his mom, “Basketball is fun again.” He was eleven.  
  
How does a child already need to be rescued from joy?  
  
And still, we keep going.  
  
Because the system works—for adults.  
  
It builds brands. Makes money. Creates clout.  
  
But it doesn’t build kids.  
  
So no—I’m not trying to fix it.  
  
You don’t fix this from within.  
  
You opt out.  
  
You build new.  
  
That’s why Max Potential exists.  
  
Not to tweak the model. To replace it.  
  
To create an ecosystem where development means more than drills.  
  
Where autonomy, joy, problem-solving, and play are non-negotiables.  
  
Where kids can fail and smile in the same rep.  
  
Because the real stakes here?  
  
They’re not scholarships.  
  
They’re not rankings.  
  
They’re identity.  
  
They’re joy.  
  
They’re the quiet erosion of self-worth, rep by rep, when a kid starts to believe they’re only valuable when they perform.  
  
We are teaching them that love is earned.  
  
That rest is weakness.  
  
That pressure is preparation.  
  
That to be seen is more important than to become.  
  
And we’re doing it with smiles on our faces.  
  
Parents aren’t the enemy. They’re scared.  
  
Coaches aren’t evil. They’re trapped.  
  
But fear doesn’t justify harm.  
  
So this isn’t a call-out. It’s a call-up.  
  
Let’s be better.  
  
Or stop pretending we care.  
  
Because too many kids are hurting.  
  
And the silence of adults?  
  
That’s complicity.  
  
I’m not here to save the industry.  
  
I’m here to save the kids it forgot.  
  
This chapter?  
  
This is the line in the sand.  
  
Let’s choose better. Or move out of the way.  
  
Because the stakes?  
  
They’ve never been higher.