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And a Time to Sit on the Bench

by Mariah Burton Nelson
USA Today, 1998



Support your teammates, especially when you're on the bench. —MBN

There is a time to score and a time to sit on the bench.

When Nykesha Sales sustained a season-ending Achilles rupture last Saturday, it was time for her to sit on the bench. Time to learn what the injury had to teach her about grief, pain, rehabilitation, hope. Time to support her team in a new way.

This would have been difficult for Sales, a senior forward for the University of Connecticut, as it is for all bench-sitters, especially those new to the sidelines. But her second-string teammates could have helped her, sharing what they know after many long hours of not playing the game they love.

This is an essential life lesson: how to cheer enthusiastically for your teammates when, for one reason or another, you are relegated to the periphery.

Instead, leg cast notwithstanding, Sales was allowed to score an uncontested basket in the first minute of Tuesday's Villanova game, thus breaking her school's scoring record. Coach Geno Auriemma had arranged this free throw of sorts with the cooperation of the Villanova coach, at least five administrators, and Kerry Bascomb-Poliquin, the previous record holder.

What got lost in the ensuing debate over whether this contrivance was, as ESPN's national poll put it, a "class act" or a "travesty," was this fact: Sales didn't care about records. Auriemma's plan contradicted her personality and her career. "She could have scored 40 points probably



in every game this season but she didn't because she always puts the team first," said former UConn all-American Rebecca Lobo.

Sales didn't even agree to the scheme until Auriemma "said it was a gift from him to me," she reported. Then she was too gracious to decline.

Auriemma forgot, apparently, that Sales already had a record: of generosity, of self-effacement, of spending long hours in the gym assisting teammates, especially point guard Rita Williams. Plus a record of 2176 career points -- the second-highest ever -- and a gold medal in the World University Games.

Auriemma forgot, too, that life had already given Sales a gift: a view from the sidelines. Suffering an injury, failing to break a scoring record: these things can be painful but they're not necessarily problems that need to be fixed. Wise coaches accept them -- and help players accept them -- as gifts that can lead to maturity and wisdom.

Auriemma's misguided gift simply postponed Sales' next challenge: shouting sincere encouragement from the bench while her teammates enter post-season play without her. Fortunately, because of who Sales is, her performance in this new role will surely be a class act.

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