

Lying Low in Louisville

by Duff Watkins '77

"REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED cold," said someone who obviously played a lot of basketball. Revenge would not be necessary, however, if Spills (aka Dr. **Robert Spiller '77**), who usually says about three words a week, hadn't calmly insisted that day in the dorm two decades ago that he could beat me in 10 straight games of one-on-one in basketball.

So next day, after lunch (and ensuring he'd quaffed a couple quarts of milk) I drag him over to the gym and administer a sound basketball thrashing in double overtime. He then strings together some lucky shots ('lay-ups,' they're called) and squeaks out victories in the next eight consecutive games. Now I'm mad.

Suddenly it's 21 years later and like that crazy dude in Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," I'm biding my time. I discover that Bob's laying low, working as an orthodontist in Louisville. So I e-mail Tooth Boy and toss down the cybergauntlet: basketball, your driveway, me and you, man to man, mano a mano, next week, when I'm in the U.S. on business. He accepts.

I show up at his dental practice confidently carrying my 200 pounds of low-achieving-bodybuilder mass marred only by the gray streaks in my hair that make me look like a skunk. Bobby appears, tan, lean, and toned, just like when he participated on Centre's inter-collegiate football, basketball, and swim teams. He grasps a psychological edge by cleaning my teeth for free ("Haven't you cleaned these choppers since college?").

We arrive at the outdoor hoop in his sun-drenched driveway that afternoon. We strip

down to our shorts and prepare for battle as his wife and children observe from inside air-conditioned comfort. All those hours in the weight room are about to pay off. My game plan is simple: pound it inside and pound him, too, if he gets in the way.

Trouble is, it's 106 F. My skin tingles from the rays as if I'm in the presence of plutonium. It's so hot the blue jays carry umbrellas to keep the sun off their heads. The asphalt melts my shoe soles. Am I inhaling air or napalm?

The game begins as planned. With power I seize a commanding lead. Did I mention the heat? After four baskets I'm huffing and puffing like Secretariat in the backstretch. Bob complains, "Hey leave some oxygen for me!" For the next 90 minutes he resorts to his sissy outside jump shot and narrowly wins the game. And the next three as well. Over dinner that night he quietly confides that his resting pulse is 48. Mine resembles a phone number. Now I'm really mad.

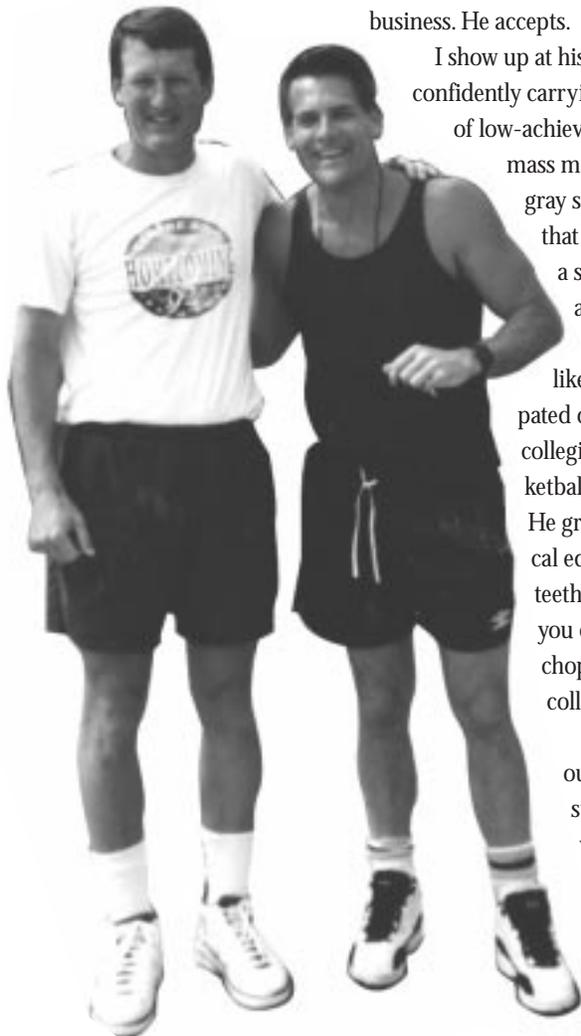
Two weeks later he and his family are vacationing in coastal N.C., where I happen to be visiting my mother. I phone and issue another challenge: high noon, UNC-Wilmington's outdoor courts, you and me, one on one, etc. His wife and kids deposit him on time and depart to shop. Good, I think. Women and children ought not to witness this.

If possible, it's even hotter than before. My socks are soaked with sweat before we start. It's high tide inside my shoes. Bob declines to perspire until midway through the first game. But then it's too late. I've got a lead. He shoots furiously and accurately to force an overtime. Bob is crimson with exertion. I feel like formaldehyde flows through my veins. But I sink the winning shot and claim my first victory over him in 21 years. Revenge as a warm dish doesn't taste too bad either. He wins the next two games handily. Big deal.

The point is, your Centre experience lasts a lifetime. How else could a friendship interrupted by 16,000 kilometers and two decades be restitched so seamlessly?

Besides, somebody had to teach Big Mouth a lesson in humility. I'm glad it was me.

Duff Watkins '77 plays basketball weekly and earnestly looks forward to a rematch on his home court in Sydney, where he's lived for 20 years. He is president of an executive search firm (research@speednet.com.au), president of the Yale Club in Sydney, and a national governor of the American Chamber of Commerce in Australia.



Bob Spiller '77 (left) and Duff Watkins '77 ready to do battle