

BEANO

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Last night, there was pandemonium at the Student Center in East Brunswick, NJ, where a crowd of rabid basketball fans gathered to watch the March Madness NCAA game (men) between their amazing Rutgers Scarlet Knights and Villanova Wildcats. At the final buzzer, a three-pointer unleashed by the star Beano, like a Hail Mary, sailed to seal the outcome. The score: Rutgers 107, Villanova 105, meaning a trip to the Sweet 16!

This was a long time coming for the fans who have weathered a long dry spell. Beano's arrival on this campus felt like a giant breath of fresh air from the time he set foot in the gym last fall. He was heavily recruited but settled for Rutgers "because it was close enough to home and my older brother attended the school," he was quick to remind anyone. That alone earned him some granny points and endeared him forever to the students who had grown accustomed to local talents searching for greener pastures at far-away colleges. He came to the campus with a reputation of a phenom from the playgrounds of his native East Orange, where he had helped carry his high school team to the state championship his senior year.

By dint of his body size and style of play, people considered him as the second coming of Magic Johnson. Lo and behold, it just so happened he was his childhood idol. Beano infused a sense of bravado into the team, and quickly, the tag of *the Fab 5* became their calling card. They stood out among the large student body as the starters of the basketball team. You might as well call them demigods as they got their way around, and their demeanor looked the part. They walked with a well-deserved swagger, for they had succeeded where it mattered most: they were on a winning streak in a sports-crazed environment. They had put together a Cinderella season because no one had expected them to achieve such accomplishment or reach such height at the beginning of the season, at least not this soon. Some fans make that rabid-would naturally take exception to the statement for, as they chant during games, "This is a team of destiny, and ain't no telling how far it can go!"

The Fab 5 was a happy-go-lucky lot; an initial assembly of a motley crew turned into a plum harvest of just jolly good fellas in synch. Many of them had funny nicknames. The shooting guard, Nate, went by *Luggage* due to his tendency to get called for traveling with the ball. Marvin the center, a muscled tower, was also known as *Magilla*, a pun on Magilla gorilla in the cartoons. John, the small forward, is nicknamed *Cheetah* due to his speed.

However, the one character who retained the soul of the team in all manners was Karl, the point guard. Everybody called him *Beano*, a composite name or portmanteau because he craved jellybeans and Oreo cookies. As the man who controlled the team's tempo, he set the tone, changing the emphasis each game or even during a game from one quarter to the next. Hence, he would emulate *showtime* à la Magic, when the score carried a large enough margin. On a whim, he would exhort his teammates to carry on like the *Phi Slamma Jamma* of the University of Houston lore and run a clinic on the art of jamming the ball through the hoop. This type of showmanship would drive the fans wild and amplify the buzz around campus about this maverick team and its star point guard. Success on the court translated to attendance records and booming ticket sales to dazzled but ever-so-fickle fans.

Like his sports idol, Beano had an infectious smile and shared or imitated many of Magic's traits. From the get-go, he was an extrovert whose lips were constantly moving because he had an opinion about everything and liked to direct traffic on and off court. The best part was not only his mastery of fundamentals but his work ethic. "He is the epitome of the gym rat," says his coach. Scouting reports had invariably extolled his physical attributes but commonly had described him

as “a lithe specimen ensconced into a 6 feet 8 inches frame.” His versatility in playing several spots spoke volumes about his attractiveness. He possesses the all-American skills of good free-throw shooting, excels at passing, and has a good midrange scoring ability. For good measure, and this is a fact not commonly telegraphed, he is a mechanical engineering major. “I like the idea of designing stuff and or seeing what makes them tick,” he confided to me in a brief interview, if 25 minutes can be classified as that, but being a loquacious dude, time seems to pass by quickly with him. Beano likes to make his mark during and after the game. This last one was typical.

During the postgame interview, Beano went through the routine of answering questions about the flow of the game, his decision of heaving this Hail Mary, his taking the game over, and so on. In his now characteristic manner, he answered with his upbeat mode, making sure as a true helmsman that he gives credit to his teammates, “I am absolutely not a one-man show. Good players surround me,” he emphatically beamed. It’s noteworthy that such a talented star is humble, which carries many good implications. Just as importantly, the interview also revealed another aspect of his persona that comes as a package deal. He relishes commenting about any hot social issue. There was a recent school shooting that left several students wounded and a few of them dead. He went into a soliloquy, I refused to call it a rant, “I am not sure why there is a debate about gun control. Why would the average Joe Blow need to have access to military-grade weapons? The answer to this question is obvious to all except those with a vested interest in selling them and those who feel that free access to any weapon supersedes everything else, irrespective of the potential harm they can cause to others. Think of it this way: if folks had the same absolute right to drive as they please, then there wouldn’t be traffic rules.” On the subject of voting for an upcoming presidential election, this is his advice to the many undecided young lads, especially those of a dark complexion, “We have paid too heavy a price, blood spilled and lives lost, for the right to vote not to exercise it. I hate to listen to the argument that ‘My vote won’t count.’ Every vote counts. It’s a civic duty, *like a must* [], to go to the polls and make a selection. Being woke is not a bad idea. Let’s keep it alive.” As if this were not enough, as an afterthought, he shared this personal revelation at the end of the interview when most of the reporters had left, “I understand what it feels like to be rejected, and that’s the reason I like to pay attention to others’ feelings. When I was little, I was the butt of jokes because I stuttered. I struggled at first to overcome it.” Well, that’s deep if you ask me.

This young man wears his heart on his sleeve and is not afraid to tell it like it is from his perspective. One shouldn’t be surprised by his stands once one becomes familiar with his background.

Beano grew up in a family of five siblings. From his maternal grandfather onward, each generation included fine athletes in baseball, track and field, basketball, or football. His older brother, who is now in medical school, was a varsity player for Rutgers. His mother was a renowned tennis player. Rumors have it she received lessons from no less than Althea Gibson, the first African American to win a championship at Wimbledon. Beano’s family has lived in the same neighborhood as Gibson in East Orange for eons. Henry Murphy, aka Beano, is a youngster who seems to have his head on his shoulder and patterns himself after another athlete from a previous generation who garnered many rings during his pro career and built a financial empire upon his retirement. We can only wish him well in his endeavors. From this corner, we hope injuries or other extra-scholastic distractions will not short-circuit such a promising career.

“Reaching the Sweet 16 status is a milestone for us. Everything else is a gravy.” This was the first banner erected at the Student Center. This one soon replaced it, “Ain’t no stopping us now! We are a team of destiny!!!” Welcome to the world of fickle fans with outsize hopes, ready to

forgive in case of victory, and always prepared to boo when losses accumulate. Such is the reality of rabid fandom.