



*The Search For  
The Ark of the Covenant*

*Another Sports Thriller*

*By Jim Plautz*

*Featuring Marquette University Basketball*

Phenom - Let's Play Basketball

By James Plautz

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## Novels by Jim Plautz



**PHENOM – Let’s Play Basketball** - Too good to be true, a mid-year transfer student leads his high school basketball team to the State Championship and along the way helps others become better students and young adults. Matthew Wilson’s past finally catches up with him when the Russian Mafia seeks retribution for past transgressions. This is a feel-good love story and suspense novel structured around a basketball theme. At graduation, students, faculty and the President of the U.S. make a vow; “If you ever need me, I’ll be there for you.”



**PHENOM – Search for the Ark of the Covenant** – Matthew Wilson leads Marquette University to four successive NCAA championships and then forms a globe-trotter team to travel the world and play all star teams from China, Africa, South America and Europe. But basketball for Matthew’s quest to find the Ark of the Covenant, an event heralded by Muslims and Christians as a precursor to the second coming of the Lord. Matthew’s former high school classmates are asked to renew a vow made ten years ago (see PHENOM - Let’s Play Basketball); “If you ever need me, I’ll be there for you.”



**OUT OF BOUNDS** - Drug smuggling and corporate finance structured around a 36-hole club championship golf tournament. A Miami-based drug cartel is pitted against Swiss financiers for control of a new resort and casino in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. The match-play tournament stakes are ‘winner-takes-all’.



**DOUBLE FAULT at ROLAND GARROS** - Four junior tennis players destined to meet at the French Open Tennis Championship get caught up in Basque terrorist plans to destroy the newly rebuilt Roland Garros Tennis Stadium; a story of love, jealousy and revenge.



**The Agents (Coming Soon)!** - “I regret to inform you that you that your petition to purchase the New York Yankees has been denied. A majority of owners have decided that your ownership group fails to meet the high standards that major league baseball has established for admission into this closed fraternity.”

“Screw you, you sanctimonious windbag, and screw the rest of you that voted no. Your fraternity is nothing but a sham. This isn’t over by a longshot.” Malcolm Linebaum stormed out of the conference room and initiated a five-year plan to bring baseball to its knees.

## Characters

- **Mathew Wilson:** ‘Phenom’
- **Jim Simpson:** Coach; President- Simpson Construction
- **Father Sean McGinnis:** Roman Catholic priest
- **Amar Rashad:** ‘The Mahdi’
- **Ken Reed:** Simpson’s right-hand man
- **Chris Lewis Reed:** Former DEA; married to Ken
- **Marco:** Construction Manager in Ethiopia and Babylon
- **Hugues de Payens:** Founder, Knights Templar, 1118 AD
- **James Bruce:** Scottish traveler, writer and Freemason
- **Oleg Ivanov:** Russian Mafia
- **Falashas:** Black Jews of Ethiopia
- **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad:** Iran President; the Antichrist
- **Moses;** Built ‘Ark of the Covenant’; Mt. Sinai, 1480 BC
- **Marquette Basketball Players:** Hall of Fame members

# Let's Play Basketball

## Prologue

Father McGinnis and I settled quietly into our first-class seats and prepared for the nine hour transatlantic flight from Cairo to New York's LaGuardia Airport where we would connect to St. Louis' Lambert field. Rosann had called an hour earlier - Matthew remained in critical condition. We could only pray. There was nothing else we could do. The stewardess brought us wine shortly after takeoff and I closed my eyes and reflected back on the events that changed my life and brought about this crisis.

It had been ten years since Matthew Wilson and his father Ray walked into my tiny coach's office. I smiled inwardly remembering how his father had asked if Matthew could try out for the team. I learned quickly that Matthew was an exceptional basketball player, possibly the best player there ever was, but I had no inkling that this young man would have such a dramatic impact on my life and the others he touched while a student at Shorewood High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He made all of us better people. Now he needed our help.

Just six days ago Matthew walked down the steps of the Temple Mount after he was mysteriously released from imprisonment by Iran President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, described by many as the Antichrist. Later I learned that his release had been orchestrated by his adversary, the Muslim basketball sensation they called The Mahdi. Two days earlier these two stars had faced each other in a basketball game labeled as a clash of East vs. West, Muslim vs. Christianity and various other metaphors. It was the basketball game of the century.

Looking back, I should have told Matthew about our discovery in that small island cave on Lake Tana, Ethiopia – we had found the Ark of the Covenant. What should we do with this symbol that is a

fundamental to the beliefs of Jews, Christians and Muslims? The Ark is referred to in both the Bible and Koran and whoever can harness its power will likely control the world.

**1320 BC** - The defending soldiers high atop the walls of Jericho observed a strange procession that first morning of the siege. No armies rushed the ramparts. In the distance they could hear the sound of the shofar, the ram's horn trumpet of battle.

And then they came, marching in order. First, an armed guard in ranks. Then priest s, blowing the shofar, then four priest s carrying on gilded poles over their shoulders a box draped in blue (Numbers 4:5-6). And after the priest s a rear guard marched. And after the rear guard, the entire Israelite army, 600,000 strong (6:3), marched in stillness. The dust billowed from under a million feet, but their voices were still. The procession seemed endless, like it would go on forever. They circled the city once, and then returned to their camp, the sound of shofars finally dying in the distance, and the muffled sound of the marching army finally stilled.

The next morning the same strange procession occurred again. And the same thing occurred each morning for six mornings in a row. For those who knew what the Ark represented -- the throne of God -- it all made sense. Here is the procession of the King, guarded front and rear by soldiers, preceded by his ministers, and followed by his people, as they tour the city that would soon be theirs.

To watch 600,000 troops (Numbers 1:45-46) march around the city each day must have increased their sense of impending doom. 'When will they attack?' must have been their constant question.

The final day the Israelites got up at daybreak and marched not once but seven times around the city, seven being the number in the Bible to signify wholeness and completeness. At the final trumpet blast held long, the people shouted, and 'when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed' (6:20).

*Joshua fit the battle of Jericho*

*Jericho, Jericho*

*Joshua fit the battle of Jericho*

*And the walls came tumbling down*

**626 BC** - Josiah said unto the Levites that taught all Israel, which were holy unto the Lord, “Put the Holy Ark in the house that Solomon, the son of David, King of Israel, did build; it shall not be a burden upon your shoulders.” This was the final Biblical reference to the Ark of the Covenant. Its location remains a mystery.

**Today** - The Freemasons had been searching for the Ark of the Covenant since 1104 AD when Hugh de Payens, founder of the Knights Templar, first visited the Holy Land. The search was over.

“Grand Master, I have news for you.”

“Is he still alive?”

“The last we heard was that he is in critical condition and might only have hours to live. The explosion caused severe internal injuries.”

“Do we know who did this? “

“It could have been the Muslims, or the Palestinians, or several other groups. It might have been the Orthodox Jews for all we know. The Ark will be a powerful tool for whoever finds it.”

“That assumes they can find a way to harness its power. The Bible claims there is only one person that has this power.”

“Yes, I thought he might be the One.”

“Is it safe?”

“Yes, for the time being. The Americans are planning to enter the cave tomorrow. I don’t know what they’ll do once they find it.”

“Our troops must be ready to move it to a safe place if Matthew Wilson should die. We can’t let the others take it. The world is not ready to find the Ark of the Covenant.”

“Will we take the Ark back to Axum?”

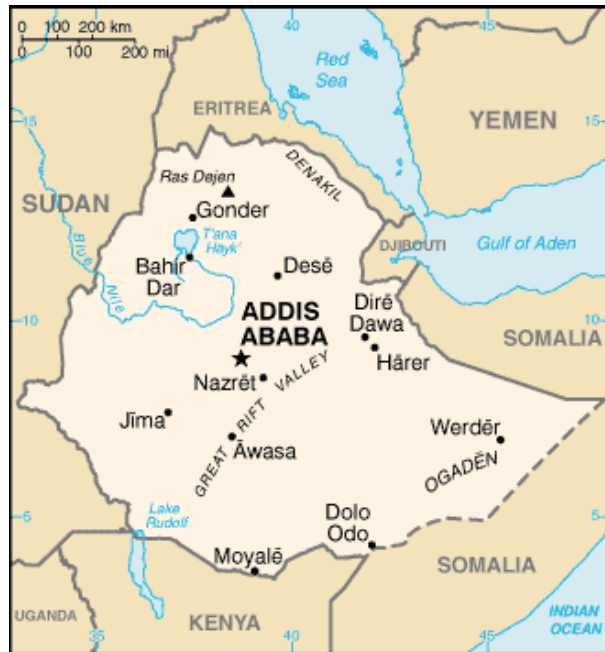
“No, we must find a safer place. But, if he lives, it will be returned to its rightful home, The Temple Mount.”



# *Phenom*

## **BOOK TWO**

### **Search for the Ark of the Covenant**



**Ethiopia**

## Chapter 1

### Marquette University

Al McGuire blew his whistle and the scrimmage began.

It was the first day of practice and Matthew Wilson lined up at forward with four other freshmen. They faced a veteran varsity team that returned four starters from a team that went 22-7 the previous year and advanced to the finals of the year-ending NIT. It was only the third time in Marquette's long history that they had been to a post-season tournament. This year the Golden Eagles were picked to finish fifth in the 14-team Big East Conference. Marquette basketball was on its way up.

The freshmen lineup was undersized with their tallest player only 6'8". The forwards were small; Matthew at 6'5" and another 6'4" scholarship player. The guards were both under six feet. Coach McGuire was using the freshmen as cannon fodder for his experienced varsity team. He also wanted to see how the new kid would stand up to the beating he would surely receive. "Let's see how he plays when he's down by 30."

Hank Raymonds warned McGuire not to be so sure. "I'm telling you, Al, this kid can play."

"Hank, I've seen a lot of kids that were stars in high school where they beat up on smaller players, but don't have it when they played kids that are bigger and stronger. Let's see how well he shoots with a hand in his face."

"\$20 says the freshmen team wins," Hank challenged. He knew that despite the fact that Wilson played high school ball in the same city, McGuire had never seen him play. Al was too busy 'doing his thing'.

"You're on," McGuire said quickly, already thinking about the antique he would buy with his winnings.

Two hours later Raymonds pocketed the \$20, thanks largely to 26 points, 22 rebounds and 15 assists by Matthew Wilson. "He's better than I thought," McGuire admitted. "He sure can pass. We just might just run the table this year."

Hank Raymonds and Al McGuire made a great team. McGuire was a great recruiter and a great game-day coach, but he wasn't much of a practice coach. Throughout the season he often left his assistant Hank Raymonds in charge of practice while he hopped on his motorcycle and rode the back roads of Wisconsin looking for bargains at old antique shops. McGuire was probably the person that Thoreau had in mind when spoke of people marching to the beat of their own drummer. He most assuredly would have been labeled a hippy in another time, but he was born 20 years too soon. McGuire hopped on his Harley to go antique hunting or whatever. Raymonds took over practices and Marquette never missed a beat.

"That's him," the 19 year old co-ed whispered to her girlfriend. That's Matthew Wilson."

"It can't be," her friend countered, "he doesn't look that special. My boyfriend is better looking."

"Shhh, he's coming this way."

"Good morning girls. Can help me? I'm trying to find Emory Hall."

"You're Matthew Wilson," Tina blurted out. "I recognize you from your pictures in the newspaper."

"And you're Tina Albright, I recognize you from the yearbook. You're a philosophy major, and you must be your friend Betty Fagen, majoring in undecided," he said with a smile. It's a pleasure to meet you girls. I hope we can be good friends."

Tina and Betty stared at Matthew in awe, before Tina finally found her tongue. "Do you know everyone's name?"

"No, just the people in the yearbook or with pictures on the school website. I started with the good looking co-eds," he said smoothly.

The girls knew the last part was just a corny line, but they didn't feel offended or that he was making a move on them. His smile and demeanor softened the words. They just felt proud that Matthew had remembered their names and proud that he thought they were good looking.

"Emory Hall?" Matthew repeated with a broad smile.

Tina pointed at a building across the street.

"Thanks girls, I'm sure we'll see each other soon." Matthew hurried to his first class at Marquette University.

The two friends watched him leave, both deep in their own thoughts. Tina was thinking that *this was one, special guy. Those Russian Terrorists never had a chance.*”

Betty was stubbornly thinking that her boyfriend was more handsome, but realized how insignificant this was. “*Matthew Wilson was a man’s man.*”

Everyone on campus knew of Matthew Wilson, with the possible exception of a few out of state transfers or freshmen. Marquette was a basketball school and Matthew was the most heralded recruit to ever choose Marquette. He was also a Milwaukee native, or at least an adopted native, transferring to Shorewood High School for his final semester, and leading them to the Wisconsin State Championship.

His off the court achievements and positive impact on the Milwaukee community were even more newsworthy. His ‘We Kick Ass’ campaign was an inspiration for high school students throughout the country. Revenues from the movie and memorabilia exceeded one hundred million dollars and used to fund youth programs and many charities. The President of the United States was a personal friend and only two months ago addressed the United Nations.

“Matthew’s role in rescuing the 1,400 students and faculty from the Russian terrorists was never fully disclosed, but the public had seen enough courtesy of a live television feed provided by the terrorists. Millions of viewers so Matthew stare down the terrorist leader and use his leadership skills to attack and disarm eleven, heavily armed Chechnya militants. His charisma was there for all to see as all 1,400 hostages walked out of the school unharmed.

It was September 5, the first day of school and Matthew Wilson hurried to his first class, Philosophy of Religion. How fitting for a Jesuit School. The bell rang as he hurriedly took a seat in the back row of the 300 seat lecture hall. He was too late. Father Fitzgerald, or Father Fritz as he liked to be called, spotted him. Father Fitz decided to have some fun.

“Students, it appears we have a celerity is this class,” the Professor announced. “No one else but a celerity would be late for his first class.” 300 pairs of eyes turned and looked at Matthew

Wilson. A few started to applaud, but were silenced by Father Fitzgerald's frown.

"Since you have everyone's attention, maybe you would like to teach this class?" Father Fitz inquired.

"No sir," Matthew replied. "What do I know about Aristotle, Descartes and other great religious philosophers?"

"Ah, Rene Descartes, who many claim is the Father of Modern Philosophy. You have heard of him?"

"Yes sir, at least I believe that I have," Matthew replied coyly, not falling into the Professor's trap.

"Yes, indeed; Mr. Descartes was fond of saying that the only thing you truly can be sure of is that you exist. What was he able to deduce from this?"

Matthew had studied Descartes and spent many hours arguing with Father McGinnis about the implications this French philosopher had upon today's religions. "Many things, Professor, including empirical proof that a benevolent God does exist. His 'Casual Adequacy Principle' is a wonderful example of deductive reasoning."

Father Fitz was smart enough to put a reign on this boy before he summarized the entire syllabus. "Mr. Wilson, I have heard a lot of good things about you, and I must say that it appears that what I heard is true. I look forward to an interesting semester. Students, help me welcome Matthew Wilson to Marquette." Professor Fitz led the applause which soon became a standing ovation.

Matthew stood and joined the applause, letting everyone know that he was proud to be a member of this great University. He smiled inwardly as he gave thanks for his ability to quickly scan books with almost total recall. He had spent an hour Sunday evening reading up on Descartes and a couple more hours looking at photos. Would Tina and Betty have been impressed if they knew that's how long it took to memorize the names and faces in last year's Marquette yearbook?

## Chapter 2

### Back to Business

Jim Simpson tried to establish control of the meeting. Two weeks earlier he had attended Shorewood High School's graduation ceremony and watched Matthew Wilson and his teammates graduate. It marked the official end to Wilson's tenure as Coach of the Wisconsin State Basketball Champions. The five-month ride with these kids was an unforgettable experience, but all good things eventually come to an end – only the fond memories persist. It was time to get back to work.

“Come on kids, let's get started,” I pleaded. “We need to be out of here in 45 minutes,” I announced, realizing there was no way we would make that deadline. There was a lot of business to cover and I needed to catch up on what was going on in my company. I looked around and realized how lucky I was to have friends and business associates that could be trusted. It reminded me of the old adage; ‘There they go, and I must catch up, for I am their leader.’

Simpson Construction, LLC had its first weekly Monday morning staff meeting in several months, at least the first one that I attended. There were ten of us and it seemed like nine of them were still talking five minutes after our scheduled start time. Some things never changed.

“Sally, start us off, tell us about the equipment leasing business.” The format of the meeting was simple. Each of the four department managers would give a brief summary of their business concentrating on financial highlights, new business and projections before opening up the floor for questions. Problems were normally discussed with me in advance, but today was the exception. This was my first day back in the office.

“Welcome back, Jim. It's nice to get right down to business. For the last ten months we have been forced to listen to Ken tell stories for 45 minutes before we got started.” I smiled as the room

erupted in denials from Ken and agreement from the other managers. I knew there was a semblance of truth in Sally's dig, but that was part of who he is. You had to put up with a little BS once in a while, but it was worth it. Ken was my best friend and one of the smartest men I knew. I've seen him do diabolical Sudoku puzzles or the Sunday New York Times crossword puzzle in minutes. He also possessed a sometimes irritating penchant for spouting trivia on just about any subject you could think of. But I also knew I could trust him to bring problems to me that needed my attention. He did this only four times while I was in Milwaukee, one time being when Sally was having difficulty with her equipment leasing business. I remembered Ken's call.

"Jim, I see from the internet that you're kicking some butt up there," Ken started obliquely, obviously alluding to the 'kick-ass' theme that had spread to high schools throughout the country.

"Who is this speaking?" I asked playing along with his game; "President Bush?"

"No, this is someone much more important, and someone with a problem that only you can handle," Ken answered, letting me know this wasn't a social call. "Is this a good time?"

"Continue, you have my undivided attention."

"Well, Sally's isn't doing as well on her own as we thought she would and I think she might want back into our company." I was shocked. She had not said anything to me in the few times we had talked although I realized it had been several weeks since our last conversation. It had been only two years since I offered to let Sally spin off the leasing business and form her own company. She had been doing all the work anyway and I felt guilty for taking most of the profits. Sally Parkinson was my first hire when I came to Florida 15 years ago and started my equipment leasing business. She started as my assistant and gradually grew to a point where she basically ran the business while I concentrated on commercial mortgage and project financing. I wanted her to succeed.

"What's the problem? The leasing business was netting over \$2M a month when we spun it off."

"Talk to her, Jim. I have a few ideas, but I think you should hear it from her."



“I’ll call her tonight. Maybe she just misses our Monday staff meetings?” I joked.

“That might be closer to the truth than you think,” Ken responded before saying good night.

Ken was right on target. I called Sally minutes later and we talked for almost an hour before Sally got to the heart of her problem. “Jim, I just miss you guys and the support we gave each other. It’s not as much fun when you are making all the decisions alone.”

Two of Sally’s key people had gone off on their own, taking some good clients with them. She had also made a few decisions that backfired and one of her major sources of funding had changed their name to CIT Vendor Financing. They were now competing for the same business, but with lower lease rates. She needed the bank relationships that our mortgage financing business enjoyed.

“Jim, I’d like to come back. Do you have room for an old friend?”

I realized how tough it must be for Sally to ask, but she should have known that I would never turn her down. I didn’t hesitate.

“Sally, let’s go back to the way it was. Your leasing group keeps 50% of the profits from the leasing business and 10% of the profit from the other departments. Is that fair?”

“It’s more than fair Jim, especially since Roger and Marco are probably making 10 times what I’m making in leasing. Will they agree to that?”

“You were with me at the beginning, Sally, and besides, they don’t have a choice. I’m sure they will be happy to have you back. It won’t be long and you will be back on top.” That was three months ago and we were proven right.

“Gentlemen,” Sally continued, “I’m happy to say that the equipment leasing business is looking good. Thanks to Roger’s help, we have three new capital sources that allow us to compete with the big boys for major deals. I am revising my annual forecast upward by 45% in revenues which translates to a 30% increase in net profit.”

“Why the squeeze on margins?” Ken interrupted. “Are we talking mix or lower lease rates?”

“Some of both, Ken. We’re bidding a couple big, low margin deals including a high-speed internet access system for all Marriott

hotels. It's a \$6M dollar deal, but we needed to keep our margins low because we were competing against CIT and GE Capital."

"What's the other reason, Sally?" I asked, picking up on her statement that this was only some of the reason.

Sally smiled thinly. "I'm going after market share and trying to win back the clients my former friends took with them when they quit. So far we have gotten seven of Andy's clients back, including his brother-in-law who owns that trucking fleet. I'm going after Ray next. They don't have the client base to withstand these losses for long."

"Will you take them back if they beg and say pretty-please?" We knew the answer, but Ken wanted to hear it from Sally.

"If they ask real nice, I can always use another clerk."

The wrath of some women has no limits. I made a note to talk with Sally later about considering the possibility that bringing these guys back might benefit the business; after all, they had been good employees for several years before going off on their own. It never hurts to keep an open mind.

"Okay, Roger, your turn. How's the commercial mortgage business looking?"

"I'm going to keep this real short and simple, Jim, unless Ken has a lot of questions." He knew the word 'simple' would get a reaction from Ken and he wasn't disappointed.

"Just try not to use any big words," Ken retorted. "Keeping it simple should be easy."

"Boys, that's enough." Nothing changes, I mused. "Roger!"

"Revenues are up, net margins are up and we expect to exceed our forecasted net profit by 18% this year. We have 15 deals in our backlog and expect to close \$28M this month. Questions?"

"How many deals are we closing?" I asked trying to get an idea of the average size.

"Six," Roger answered, looking at Ken.

"\$4,666,667, rounded off to the nearest dollar," Ken replied on queue.

"I'm happy to see your math skills haven't deteriorated," I thought. It used to be more fun when people used a calculator check his answers, but nobody bothered anymore. He was never wrong.

"Okay, Marco, Your turn, but keep it short; we are running short of time and there are a few other things we still need to

cover.” Marco Noah was the backbone of both our domestic and international construction business. After some initial problems, he was also one of my most trusted employees. I could count on him to let me know if there were problems or something that needed my attention. It was a good day when we had hired Marco away from the French construction giant, Bouygues.

“Short, I can do. We have nine domestic jobs in progress and only the Chicago convention center is behind schedule. The project is getting caught up in zoning issues and politics. It seems like a couple of aldermen are not getting their fair share. It might not hurt if we placed a call to the mayor.”

I made a note to get together with Marco after the meeting and get up to speed on the details before I called Mayor Daley. “Okay, what’s going on across the water?”

“Six projects, and all are going well. We should be getting a sign-off on the Madrid Tennis Arena sometime next month.”

“Excellent, does that mean they will release the hold-back?”

“Yep, the entire \$45 million.”

“How does new business look?”

“We have proposals on four small projects, but nothing imminent. We could use a little work,” Marco concluded. His segue was perfect.

“Ken, speaking of new business, why don’t you tell us about Ethiopia?” I smiled as I saw the shocked expressions on everyone’s face.

“Ethiopia,” Sally repeated. “What are we going to build, sand castles? Ethiopia is nothing but a big desert.”

“Ah, *contrar - contrar*,” Ken smiled with delight at the opportunity to educate the uninformed. “Let me tell you about the real Ethiopia.”

I had heard his dissertation and stepped in before Ken got rolling. “Ken, let’s save the history lesson for another day, I have a conference call at noon. Just tell us about the project.”

Ken was obviously disappointed, but got in one parting shot. “Ignorance is bliss,” he chided before starting. “We have been hired to build a four star tourist resort on Lake Tana, just a few miles from the city of Gondar. Questions?” This was Ken’s way of pouting.

“You might mention the dam and give us just a little background information,” I suggested. “Oh yeah, the dam; I’m sure everyone already knows that Lake Tana is an inland lake located in the Simeon Mountains and is the source of the Nile River, you know the one that dribbles down through Egypt, Sudan and the Middle East before emptying into the Mediterranean.”

“You’re kidding me,” Roger exclaimed. “Egypt would never allow anyone to block the Nile, especially a backward country such as Ethiopia. That’s their lifeline.”

Ken smiled; he had everyone’s attention again. “I didn’t say it was an easy project, did I? There are obviously a few political concerns,” he said as an understatement. “And by the way, Ethiopia has been a cultural center for the region for over 3,000 years, dating back to when ...”

“Ken, we don’t have time. Tell them a little about the resort.”

“Where should I begin?”

“How about mentioning why Ethiopia and the Lake Tana area is an ideal location for a resort.” Ken had his opportunity to lecture.

“Okay, but I’m sure that everyone already knows that the Ark of the Covenant is kept in Axum, Ethiopia and was hidden at the Monastery of Daga Stephanos on an island in Lake Tana for several hundred years after it was taken from Solomon’s Temple.” I smiled to myself at Ken’s ability to memorize trivia, but he got the reaction he wanted.

“Ethiopia! How did the Ark ever get to Ethiopia,” Roger asked. “That must be 500 miles from Jerusalem.”

“Just a four month boat ride up the Nile,” Ken interjected, “with possibly a 200 year layover in a monastery on Elephantine Island in Egypt.”

“But why Ethiopia?”

In the interest in brevity I decided to take charge. “Needless to say, this can be a long and interesting discussion. All we need to understand now is that the combination of lakes, the Ark rumors and moderate temperatures make this an ideal tourist destination. You will be surprised to see that the plateau region has plenty of rainfall even though much of the country is desert. I’m sure Ken will provide you with more information if you buy him lunch.”

“How did we get a job in Ethiopia?” one of the project managers persisted. “I don’t recall us getting a request for proposal or submitting any bid.”

“There was no bid, Frank. This was a sole source award courtesy of a State Department contact Matthew Wilson made when he was in D.C. testifying before Congress about his We Kick Ass program.”

“How do we get paid?” Rosann asked. “Is this a fixed fee contract?”

“No, it’s a cost plus contract, but I would estimate our profits will be in the \$45M range.”

“Wow, how much did we give Matthew for the referral?”

“Nothing, Frank, although I offered. His exact words were, “Coach, I don’t take money from friends, but maybe someday you will be in position to help me out.”

“We also volunteered to donate 10% of gross revenue to local charities,” Ken added.

“Okay, one more item on the agenda before we get back to work. Due to the amount of work we are doing overseas, I have hired a vice president of security. She will be responsible for establishing physical security on project sites, vetting subcontractors and whatever else we can think of.”

“Anyone we know?” Marco inquired.

“Some of you that have been with me for a while know her well; she was my third employee after my secretary Gloria, and Sally.”

“You’re kidding,” Ken said with his mouth agape.

“Chris Lewis?” Sally said, unable to hold back her laughter.

“For those of you that don’t know, Chris Lewis Reed is a Harvard MBA, is fluent in French and Spanish, and has ten years experience with the DEA and CIA. She worked on the Mexico City casino job which is what got us started in the international construction business. She’s well qualified.”

“But she married Ken,” Sally managed to say while continuing to laugh. “Doesn’t that say something about her judgment?”

“It certainly does,” Ken gloated. “You forget it was moi that ran through a hail of bullets to save her life in Mexico.”

That wasn’t quite the way I remembered it, but there was a kernel of truth in Ken’s recollection.

“Okay, back to work everybody.”



## **Chapter 3**

### **Freshman Year**

### **1961 Ohio State Buckeyes**

Dean "The Dream" Meminger, the silky smooth floor leader for Marquette, was the most valuable player of the 1970 NIT Championship as Marquette beat St. John's University in the finals 65-53. It was a satisfying victory for coach Al McGuire who starred at St. John's for four years and captained the 1951 team that posted a 26-5 mark and finished third in the NIT. The championship rewarded McGuire for his decision to snub the NCAA tournament because of their decision to place the 8<sup>th</sup> ranked Golden Eagles in the Midwest Region in Dallas rather than the Mideast Region in Dayton, Ohio, which was closer to home and would be easier for Marquette fans to attend. The NCAA got the last word the following year, passing a rule that barred teams from playing NCAA teams if they refused an "invitation" to their yearend tournament; crude, but effective. The 1970 NIT Championship began an era of 'seashells and balloons' and Milwaukee's love affair with Al McGuire that culminated with an NCAA Championship in 1977, beating Dean Smith's North Carolina team in the finals. That was the last game that Al McGuire coached, choosing to go out on top as a winner and ride his motorcycle into the sunset searching for antiques and listening to the beat of his own drum.

*Author's Note: This chapter, and the other chapters about basketball, are mostly fiction. Most of the names and names are correct, but the times and places have been changed. Marquette rosters are jumbled so that every member of Marquette's Basketball Hall of Fame could be included. The games are fictitious. Most were played in a time when palming the ball, and taking two steps without dribbling, were traveling violations.*

Marquette was loaded. In addition to Matthew Wilson at shooting guard, the team featured Terry Rand, a smooth 6'11" senior who last year averaged 18 points and 10 rebounds. Maurice Lucas was at power forward, a 6'10" junior out of New York, dubbed the 'aircraft carrier' by McGuire because of his ability to carry a team. The point guard, Butch Lee, was a senior with three years' experience. Lee almost single handedly led the Puerto Rico national team to an upset of the US Olympic team the previous summer, scoring 39 points in a one point loss. The small forward was George Thompson, a 6'5", 230 pound jumping jack from New York City who played like he was 6'10". Never much of an outside shooter, Thompson brought his inner city game to Marquette and dominated much taller players.

As was typical of Marquette basketball teams under McGuire, the pre-season schedule was full of cupcakes, teams that allowed Marquette to rack up victories which got them into the year-end NCAA tournament. Their first real test was in the sixth game when they played the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and lost 72-69. Matthew was in foul trouble throughout the game and finished with only 13 points. Butch Lee had seven turnovers and was an anemic three for 14 from the field.

Marquette finished the pre-season eight and one and entered the Big East schedule with high hopes. The opening game against a mediocre Providence team proved to be a cakewalk as they got off to a fast start and won by 18. They followed this with victories against West Virginia, Seton Hall and Notre Dame before running up against a tough Louisville team in Freedom Hall. They lost by seven points as they were unable to handle the Louisville press and athleticism under the basket. Matthew had 28 points, but got little help on the front line as Terry Rand and Maurice Lucas fouled out with a total of only 13 points and 8 rebounds between them.

Big East favorite, the #3 ranked Georgetown Hoyas, came to Milwaukee the following week. It was the Golden Eagles first big test. They were more than up to it as they easily beat the Hoyas 74-58, playing smothering defense highlighted by full court press for the entire game. Butch Lee dominated the Hoya guards and finished with 26 points and eight assists. Matthew only had seven points but contributed six steals and 17 rebounds. George Thompson, only

6'5", had his way inside against the taller Hoyas players and finished with 19 points and 15 rebounds. Marquette was 22 and three as they entered the Big East tournament which they won handily; beating South Florida, Seton Hall and Pittsburgh in the finals.

Marquette was ranked #4 in the national polls and awarded a #1 seed in the Eastern region. Al McGuire would have preferred to play in Chicago, the home of the Midwest region, where Marquette fans could pack the arena and show their support. However, unlike 1970 when he pulled his team out of the NCAA and instead won the NIT Invitational tournament, he acquiesced and accepted the invitation to play in New York. Besides, it was good for recruiting New York players.

The Golden Eagles won their first two games easily and advanced to the round of 16 at New York's Madison Square Garden where they faced the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. The Running Rebels came out hot, hitting their first seven shots, and quickly took a 17-6 lead before Marquette slowly crept back. Butch Lee got in immediate foul trouble against the fast UNLV guards and was replaced by a promising freshman, Dean Meminger. Like Thompson, Meminger was a product of the New York City playgrounds where he shattered several of Lou Alcindor's high school scoring records. Despite being only 6'1, Meminger could sky, and today he showed the national television audience why he was such a prized recruit. Meminger finished the game with 23 points and 10 rebounds and led the Golden Eagles to a 12 point victory. Matthew contributed 18 points and 14 rebounds. Terry Rand led all scorers with 23 points.

In the round of eight, the Golden Eagles were matched against Big East rival Louisville who had beaten them earlier in the year. This time Marquette jumped off to a quick start and easily beat the Cardinals, 81-66, exacting revenge for their early season loss. The Marquette was in the Final Four.

Their first game in the Final Four was against UCLA, the No. 1 seed from the West. Unlike recent UCLA teams that were dominated by the All-American centers Lou Alcindor and Bill Walton, this team featured two power forwards - David Meyers and Curtis Rowe. McGuire knew that Terry Rand and Maurice Lucas needed to have big game if the Golden Eagles were to compete.



Marquette jumped off to a quick start and Matthew completely shut down Curtis Rowe who was held to 11 points. His running mate, David Myers, the consensus all-American and future #1 draft pick of the Milwaukee Bucks, had 26 points and 16 rebounds but it was not enough as Marquette prevailed, 86-82. Terry Rand had a game-high 28 points and Lucas contributed 17 points and 17 rebounds.

Marquette advanced to the finals where they were matched against possibly the greatest collection of college basketball players ever put together, the Ohio State Buckeyes, led by three-time All-American Jerry Lucas. In addition to Lucas, Ohio State featured four other starters that would go on to play pro basketball; John Havlicek, a member of the NBA Hall of Fame, Mel Nowell, Joel Roberts and Larry Siegfried. The sixth man for the Buckeyes was Bob Knight, future coach of the Indiana Hoosiers.

John Havlicek wasn't much of a scorer in college but was already a great defensive player. He set his mind to shutting down Matthew Wilson. He succeeded for the first 35 minutes and his team led by seven points. At that point, Matthew had four fouls and six points on 3 of 12 shooting as Havlicek had a hand in his face on every shot attempt. The Golden Eagles stayed close as George Thompson, Terry Rand and Butch Lee each had 15-18 points after three quarters. Rand fouled out with seven minutes to go and it was time for Matthew to step. He did. Matthew scored Marquette's next 12 points starting his spree with a rebound basket off a miss by Thompson. He then hit two outside jump shots, stole the ball from Siegfried and drove in for an uncontested layup. He finished his scoring spree with a running hook shot over the outstretched arms of Havlicek and the Golden Eagles were up by three points. This lead quickly dissipated as Lucas hit a short hook shot and then followed up a missed shot by Roberts with a rebound basket. Ohio State was up by one with only eight seconds to go.

The team huddled around Al McGuire who had a deserved reputation as one of the best game day coaches of all time. McGuire gave directions for the final play. It was typical of McGuire not to go to his shooting star, but go with the person he felt would perform in this situation, which in this instance was freshman Dean Meminger. Only 6'1", Meminger scored most of his points underneath the basket and to this point had been stifled by Lucas

and Havlicek. That didn't stop McGuire from calling his number for the final play.

“Matthew, get the ball to Dean at the top of the circle. Maurice and Terry will set a double screen at the free throw line and draw their men away from the basket. Dean, fake left and drive hard right and you should have an easy layup. Questions?”

The play worked to perfection although not as originally planned. Meminger found a clear path to the basket and went up for the winning shot, only to find his path blocked by Havlicek who switched off his man to help out. ‘Hondo’ leapt high to block the layup attempt but at the last moment Meminger double clutched, turned in the air and found Matthew alone in the corner with a perfect pass. The buzzer went off as the ball swished through the basket. The Marquette Golden Eagles were National Champions.

## **Chapter 4 - Ethiopia Lake Tana**

The search for the Ark of the Covenant began in Ethiopia. Ken, Marco and I flew Ethiopian Airlines from Zurich and arrived in Ethiopia's capitol city of Addis Ababa late afternoon. From 20,000 feet, the city of five million people looked like most European cities with new skyscrapers and roads signaling the progress and revitalization effort that was underway. It wasn't until we landed that we saw this was mostly a mirage. As we made our way to our hotel, it was evident that living conditions and the economy left much to be desired.

My brief research on Ethiopia made me realize how little I knew about this fascinating country and how wrong my perceptions had been. Asked to describe Ethiopia in one sentence, I would have answered; “a war-torn country inhabited by a bunch of Arabs living in a big desert with no food.” That was all that I read about in Western newspapers and media accounts. I wasn't proud of my ignorance, but that's what it was.

Instead, I was surprised to learn that my preconceptions did little to justify the diverse and tradition-rich culture of a country credited with being the ‘origin of mankind’ with archeological evidence of civilization dating back 3,200 years. Yes, there still are periodic famines in the plains bordering Somalia on the East and Sudan on the West that are mostly inhabited by Muslim Arabs who constitute 45% of Ethiopia’s 70M population. But there is also a high central plateau inhabited primarily by Catholics that runs through the center of the country with average elevations of 6,000’ to 10,000’ and moderate temperatures ranging between 40F to 80F. The Simien Mountains reach elevations exceeding 15,000 feet, just prior to plunging into the Great Rift Valley that dissects the plateau. This is where Addis Ababa and Lake Tana are located.

My guidebook told me that Ethiopia is now a Federal republic divided into nine regions. Their last emperor of the Solomonic Dynasty, Haile Selassie I, was overthrown in the 1974 revolution. He was placed under house arrest and later found strangled to death in the palace basement. What caught my eye was his claim to have the Divine Right to govern based upon his royal blood. He was the 225<sup>th</sup> direct descendant from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem. Even the most radical revolutionaries that overthrew his dynasty and later murdered the last emperor in the Solomonic line accepted this claim as fact.

“Wow,” did you know this?” I asked Ken, showing him the guidebook. “I thought the Queen of Sheba was a myth.”

“Maybe she is,” Ken said with that twinkle in his eye that told me I wasn’t going to get a direct answer. “Some claim that the Queen of Sheba was real, but wasn’t Ethiopian. Still others say she is real, but question how and why she ever went to Jerusalem.”

“What do you think?” I asked, pressing the point.

“There is a plethora of historical evidence of a Jewish-Ethiopian connection. It’s likely that Menelik brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, recalling that evening a year ago in Father Sean’s church. “Is that why Rosann asked us to look for the Ark while I we are here?”

“Yep, it might even be at Lake Tana. Most people think the Ark is 300 miles from here in a church in Axum, but some believe

it was moved into hiding just before the rebels took control of the city. Lake Tana is one of the places it might have been taken to.”

“Why Lake Tana?”

“Because this is where many historians believe that the Ark was kept for several hundred years before it was taken to Axum.”

“I thought you said Menelik took it to Axum,” I said perplexed.

“No I didn’t; I just said that’s one of the stories. The Ark might be there now, but Menelik couldn’t have taken it there. The Ark disappeared around 640 BC, but archaeological evidence proves that Axum wasn’t founded until three hundred years later.”

“So, are the stories about Menelik being the son of Solomon and Sheba true?” I persevered, knowing that I was becoming hopelessly confused.

“Probably; most Ethiopian Jews today are descendants of Menelik’s bodyguards. The exception is the Falashas that settled around Lake Tana long before King Solomon’s time. Are you aware that the Falashas are indigenous to this area and are known as the Black Jews of Ethiopia?” Ken added with a grin.

“Enough,” I said. “Ken, let’s go get a drink. I have a headache.”

“Sorry, Jim, but it’s a dry country, no pun intended.”

The next morning we collected our travel papers from local officials and headed 310 kilometers northwest to Bahar Dar, a small village on the Southern tip of Lake Tana, headquarters for our project. I had spent a long evening researching some of the points that Ken raised the previous day, knowing that Ken was seldom wrong about the miscellaneous facts he spewed from the depths of his complex mind. I was not disappointed. Everything Ken said checked out.

The correlation between the lost Ark of the Covenant and Ethiopia was indeed real and the theory that the Ark was once brought to Lake Tana was a distinct possibility in the minds of many respected scholars. Graham Hancock, in his book *The Sign and The Seal*, posits that the Ark was stored on one of Lake Tana’s many islands and protected by the Black Jews of Ethiopia who trace their history back to 1500 BC. The strong Jewish presence in Ethiopia also answers the question; why take the Ark to Ethiopia? The obvious answer is; because this is where it would be safe from

marauding conquerors that captured Jerusalem and looted Solomon's Temple many times starting in the sixth century BC when the Babylonians ousted the Jews from Jerusalem in 587 BC.

As we approached Bahar Dar I noticed signs pointing to the city of Gondar, an area noted to be the cultural center of the Falashas, or Black Jews. I still had many questions in my mind about the Ark. What better place to start than in this region? I vowed to dig deeper into this mystery if time allowed. However, getting our resort project going came first and took most of my time over the next two months.

Marco divided the project into five components with the resort construction as the focal point. The four other tasks were designed to improve the infrastructure to support the new resort. This included roads, public utilities and housing to support the construction crews.

First, we needed to identify why tourists would come to the Lake Tana area. We huddled with local leaders from Gondar and surrounding communities and compiled a list of tourist attractions. I was amazed at the plethora of attractions that Lake Tana offers. The clear, fresh water lake already supports a major commercial fishing industry as more than 1,400 tons of fish are taken from Bahar Dar annually, but the lake also had the potential for sport fishing, swimming, water skiing and canoe rides using the papyrus-reed boats that are native to this region. Marco planned to import tons of sand from the Somalia desert to build a two-mile long, fifty yard deep, white sand beach surrounding a 200 foot fishing pier and 80 slip marina.

The 37 small islands dotting Lake Tana contain countless tourist attractions for anyone interested in the rich history of this region. There are active monasteries or churches on 19 of the 37 islands, many resting on earlier religious sites tracing back almost four thousand years. Tana Qieqos Island contains a rock where the Virgin Mary rested on her journey back to Egypt. Tana Kirkos Island is where Graham Hancock believes the Ark rested for 800 years before being taken to Axum. Frumentius, who introduced Christianity to Ethiopia, is buried on Tana Cherqos; Daga Island is the resting site of St. Stephanos and five emperors that can trace

their lineage to King Solomon; Dek Island contains the tombs of several emperors in the Solomonic line.

“The possibility for one-day tours and excursions is unlimited,” Marco gushed. “Both Jews and Christians will want to investigate their origins.”

“Not to mention that archeologists have discovered human bones and fossils dating back more than 3,000 years,” Ken added. “This area has plenty to offer if we market it correctly.”

Adamu, our Ethiopian project manager had another suggestion. “Why not set up a ferry service to Georgina and other lakeside villages surrounding the lake? Every small village has its own story.”

“Good idea, Adamu. What about Ark-related activities?” I continued. “How can we take advantage of the stories that the Ark might have been kept here for hundreds of years?”

Adamu thought for a few moments before answering. “Gondar is only 300 kilometers away and is one of the last remaining areas where the Falashas still practice their religion the old way. They are famous for their Timket Festival which uses Tabots to represent the tablets containing the 10 commandments.”

I must have had a perplexed look on my face as I tried to see the correlation, before Ken came to my aid. “According to the Bible, the tablets containing the 10 commandments were the sole contents of the Ark of the Covenant. The fact that Tabots are a fundamental part of the Falasha ceremony lends credence to their claim that the Ark might have been brought to Ethiopia. Why else would the Black Jews have ever started this practice? It ties into the traditions of the Ark’s journey nicely.”

“Is there any way we could set up a tour to retrace the journey?”

“It’s possible, but it would take too long. The original journey must have taken more than two months to sail up the Nile, assuming they didn’t stop in Egypt for a couple hundred years.” Ken replied with his trademark ‘I know something you don’t smile.

“How about two or three day tours to Axum?” Adamu suggested. “Their Timket festival reportedly features the real Ark.”

“Great idea. Are there any other tourist attractions that we haven’t discussed?” I asked, trying to speed up the meeting.

Adamu had another suggestion. “Tis Abay is just 30 kilometers south and the home of the Blue Nile Falls where Lake Tana discharges its water into the Blue Nile. In Ethiopia we call it Tis Issat, which means ‘Water that Smokes’. It has a sheer drop of 45 feet and is one of the largest waterfalls in the world. The hike is beautiful and the area is famous for Burke watching. Kids can swim under the falls if they avoid the hippos.”

“I’ll pass,” I replied.

“You’re from Florida,” Ken observed. “Hippos are nothing more than manatees, just a little bigger.”

“Size matters,” I responded, drawing groans from Marco and Ken.

“Moving on, what about the coffee industry? I would think there would be a way to take advantage of Ethiopia’s reputation for coffee production. Are there any coffee plantations tourists could visit?”

Twenty minutes later we were out of ideas, but satisfied that if we built it, the tourists would come.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Sophomore Year - Al McGuire Era**

### **1976 Indiana Hoosiers**

Marquette entered the college basketball season as defending NCAA champions with only one returning starter, Matthew Wilson, and ranked outside the top 20 in pre-season polls. Terry Rand and George Thompson graduated and Maurice Lucas, Dean Meminger and Butch Lee left school a year early to enter the NBA draft. It was time to put Al McGuire’s considerable recruiting skills to good use. His style didn’t appeal to everyone, but McGuire knew his niche.

There were a couple of old adages that defined McGuire's recruiting style. He liked to say, "I couldn't recruit a kid if he had grass in front of his house. That's not my world. My world is a cracked sidewalk."

McGuire claimed he could tell right away if a recruit would accept Marquette by what happened when he entered the house. He knew he had no chance if the recruit's mother invited him to sit in the living room, but if she allowed him into the kitchen and offered him a glass of milk, her boy was coming to Marquette. McGuire was the first Marquette coach to recruit out of the New York area and had a steady stream of talent including George Thompson, Meminger and Ric Cobb.

Redshirt Freshman Glenn 'Doc' Rivers was ready to step into a starter's role and was more than an adequate replacement for Butch Lee at point guard. Earl Tatum, a seldom-used sophomore, would replace George Thompson at power forward. McGuire still needed two recruits. He landed forward Bo Ellis from Chicago, who would go on to be a future All-American. Ellis was 6'9" with a tremendous wingspan that allowed him to play taller than his height.

McGuire had only to look 15 miles to the South to find a new center; Jim Chones a 6'11" freshman from Racine, Wisconsin. Chones would prove to be one of the best big men ever to play at Marquette. McGuire capped off a great recruiting season by finding another big man, Eugene Berce, a junior college player from California. Berce was only 6'9", but weighed 230 pounds and took up space underneath the boards.

The season opened with a tournament in Alaska; the Great Alaskan Shootout. Marquette had played an AAU team and an international team as practice games, but these would not count in the NCAA standings. The Great Alaskan Shootout was their first real test and it would be a good one because 18 of the 24 teams that were invited had been ranked in the top 25 the preceding year. Given the team's youth and inexperience, and the stellar competition, it was not surprising that Marquette lost in the second round and then lost again in the 5<sup>th</sup> place consolation game. The two losses would make it difficult to match the prior year's final record of 27 - 3.



The team started to shape into form as Marquette settled into the easy part of its schedule, interrupted only by a 15 point home win against the University of Wisconsin, the team that beat them in Madison the prior year. It was a good win and gave indications that this team might be better than some people thought. Jim Chones was turning into a dominating center with a smooth fade-away jump shot from ten to fifteen feet.

Matthew took a different approach this year. As a freshman he had been surrounded by good players and content to contribute assists, rebounds and occasional scoring; whatever the team needed. He finished the season averaging a respectable 16 points and 12 rebounds. This year, despite the emergence of Chones, he was asked to provide more offense and was averaging 23 points heading into the tough Big East schedule. They finished the Big East schedule 14 - 2, in second place behind Connecticut. Big wins against Louisville and Georgetown were offset by upsets at Seton Hall and Villanova. Still, second place finish and a #2 seed was a good way to enter the Big East tournament.

The Golden Eagles easily beat Syracuse in the opening round as Matthew scored 31 points, the fifth time this year he had been over 30. Marquette suffered a shocking upset to 7th seeded Rutgers in round two. Possibly overconfident, they came out flat and lost a heartbreaker on a last second desperation shot from center court. The team waited to see how the loss would affect their NCAA seeding. No one was surprised when they were given a #4 seed and banished to the Western Region where the top seeds were UCLA, Stanford and UNLV. Marquette was not expected to make it out of this region.

Matthew took it upon himself to call a team meeting before the first game at the large UCLA pavilion stadium. "Nobody's giving us much of a chance this year, but I disagree. We have a good team. Let's give 100% and see what happens."

Matthew carried the team on his back, scoring 33 and 36 points as the Golden Eagles easily defeated Pepperdine and Oklahoma State to reach the round of 16 where they were matched against UNLV, the No. 3 seed. Jerry Tarkanian's Running Rebels were fast and could shoot, but paid little attention to defense. Predictably, it was a high scoring game. The outcome came down to which team was willing to step up and play defense?

Larry Johnson, destined to be the #1 overall pick in next year's NBA Draft, erupted for 26 in the first half, continually using his 6'7", 250 pound body to get position underneath the basket. At half time, Marquette switched to a man to man defense and Matthew took it upon himself to shut Johnson down. He did, holding Johnson to three points in the second half. Matthew finished with 31 points and Marquette prevailed 103-97.

The regional championship game was set for Saturday evening against the No. 1 seed, UCLA, featuring two-time All-American Gale Goodrich. Rivers put the clamps on Goodrich as Earl Tatum scored 21 points while Bo Ellis had 20 points and 14 rebounds. Chones also played a great game, finishing with a double-double, 12 points and 10 rebounds. Marquette won 89-76 and it was on to New Orleans for their second consecutive Final Four.

The final four was loaded with talent from the Big Ten plus one of the greatest ACC teams, NC State. Marquette was matched against the Michigan Wolverines who had finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Big Ten. The Wolverines were big and talented, featuring center Bill Buntun and three-time All-American Cazzie Russell. Russell didn't disappoint as he scored a game high 46 points for the Wolverines but it was not enough. Matthew had 41 points and 22 rebounds in a dominating display of basketball. Jim Chones had another good game and Bo Ellis contributed 19 points and 12 rebounds. After the win, the players stayed around and watched Indiana easily defeat a North Carolina State Wolfpack team led by 7'4" Tom Burleson and David Thompson. Legend had it that the 6'6" Thompson could touch the top of the backboard from a standing jump. He scored 27, but it was not enough.

Indiana was undefeated and coached by the legendary Bob Knight, the former Ohio State player and Army coach. The Hoosiers sported three All-Americans; Kent Benson, who would be the 1<sup>st</sup> overall pick by the Milwaukee Bucks in next year's NBA draft, Scott May, a high scoring shooting forward and Quinn Buckner, one of the best defensive guards ever to play the game of basketball. Although giving away five inches, Quinn Buckner accepted the assignment of guarding Matthew who took him inside, but was constantly double teamed by Benson. Together, they held Matthew to only 11 points on four for nine shooting, but that was

all Marquette needed. With the Indiana defense packed inside to stop Matthew, 'Doc' Rivers and Bo Ellis erupted for 27 and 24 points respectively and Marquette won their second national championship, 86-81.

Last year Matthew was the hero, making the final shot, while this year the accolades went to his teammates. Matthew could care less. There is no I in TEAM, at least the way Matthew Wilson played basketball.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Father McGinnis - Somalia**

"Jim, you have a visitor," Gail announced as she interrupted our project meeting. Ken and I had arrived yesterday and were getting an update from Marco and his five local project managers.

"Gail, we won't be done here for an hour. Can it wait? Who is it?"

"He says he is an old friend from Milwaukee, Father Sean McGinnis."

"Father Sean, why didn't you tell me?" I said, jumping out of my chair.

"I think she just did," I heard Ken say in the background, but I was already heading for the door. "Guys, let's take a short break."

"Father Sean, what a great surprise," I said as I grasped his arms. "What brings you to Ethiopia?"

"I was in the area and thought I'd stop and visit with an old friend."

"What are you working on?" I asked, realizing that this visit might be more than just a coincidence. "The last I heard you were in Rhodesia."

"Yes, I spent two wonderful years there and we accomplished quite a lot. I've been in Ethiopia for three months working in the Somalia desert area. The people in that region have a hard time making a go of it."

“I haven’t been down there myself, but I have heard some grim stories. It’s pretty dangerous, isn’t it?” I remembered reading stories about famine and uprisings against local government officials. “Don’t most of the people in that area believe they are Somalians?”

“They do, and that’s part of the problem that Ethiopia has, but the bigger problem is that these people are starving and dying of thirst.”

“How can I help?”

“Well, I have a small favor to ask. Can we talk about it at lunch?”

Father Sean and I spent the first half hour catching up on old times including that night at his church when the Ark exploded. “What ever happened with the investigation? Did the police ever find out what caused the explosion? I’ve asked Matthew, but he won’t give me a straight answer.”

“I bet he told you something like ‘it was meant to happen,’” Father Sean replied. “That’s what he tells me.”

“Exactly, but there has to be a reason. What did the three kids who planned the whole thing have to say?”

“Well, they admit that they created the smoke and sound effects, but claim to have no idea why the fire started or how it could have exploded like it did.”

“Did they say why they did it?” I asked.

“Jim, how much do you know about the history and legend surrounding the Ark?”

“I’ve read a fair amount and certainly am aware that local legends say that the Ark might have been hidden on Tana Kirkos before it was shipped to Axum. I suspect this is mostly legend.”

“I wouldn’t dismiss it so fast if I were you. There is evidence to support the theory that the Ark was brought to the Lake Tana area for safekeeping. But, I was asking if you are familiar with some of the legends surrounding how the Ark was created. Specifically, there is a viewpoint that Moses was basically a magician who created the Ark as a means to control his people. All the powers attributed to the Ark were just smoke and mirrors.”

“Wow, how could he have done all those things?”

“Possibly, Moses was trained by the best. He was adopted into the Egyptian royal family as a baby and had access to secrets

passed down from ancient Egypt. The stories about changing his staff into a serpent, and even parting the waters as told in Exodus, are tricks that were told many times in that era and attributed to many others as well as Moses.”

“I had never heard that,” I admitted. “What’s that have to do with the Ark of the Covenant?”

“Well, there weren’t any witnesses on Mt. Sinai when God instructed Moses to build the Ark and supposedly gave Moses the specific dimensions. Critics point out that the dimensions and construction of the Ark, including the pole-rings to carry the Ark, is almost identical to artifacts found in King Tut’s tomb dating several centuries earlier.”

“I’m still not sure what you’re getting at.”

“Well, theologians believe the Ark was a vehicle for God to communicate with man. An alternative theory claim’s the Ark was nothing more than a man-made creation and all the powers attributed to the Ark are nothing more than black magic. Moses created the Ark to rally the Jews, but all the powers, including tumbling the walls of Jericho, can be explained.”

“Is this what you believe?” I was feeling a little bit like a kid asking his parents if there really is a Santa Claus, but already knowing the answer.

“No, of course not,” Father Sean answered firmly. “All I am saying is that is why the high school kids did what they did. In fact, only one of the three doubted the scripture and believed that Moses was nothing more than a good magician. The other two boys went along with it because they thought it would be a good way to debate the topic.”

“Okay, there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with that,” I offered. “Why did you and Matthew get so upset?”

“Let me count the reasons,” Father Sean said softly, changing into his priestly role. “Are you familiar with the First Commandment?”

“Of course; ‘I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me,’” parroting the words I had memorized many years ago.

“Good, now put these into the perspective of putting a false idol on the Ark, particularly the fatted calf, as these kids did. It was blasphemy. Remember, Moses lived in a time when Jews still made

animal sacrifices to appease their idols. When you have time, take a trip to the Falasha village near Gondar. You can see for yourself how important blood sacrifices to idols were in Moses' day."

"I'd love to," I said seriously. "Truthfully, I haven't been able to get that evening out of my head. I would like to learn more about the Ark. Maybe we could take a trip to Gondar?"

Father Sean must have been waiting for an opportunity to ask his favor. "Excellent idea, Jim, I'd be happy to help you when I've finished my work here. Let's talk about sharing a little bit of the Lake Tana water that is so plentiful around here. The Somalians sure could use a little."

"Ah, now we get to the heart of the matter," I said with a smile. "I gather you have some ideas as to how this can be accomplished."

"Yes we do."

"We?"

"Matthew wants to meet with us next week. He already has most of the permits and approvals in place."

"Matthew," I thought to myself, "I should have known."

"Father, tell me what you know about this. I would like to get Ken and Marco to start working on this so we can be ready to go when Matthew gets here."

"Okay, but we need to keep this confidential for awhile. The Egyptians haven't signed off on this yet. As you know, the Nile River is fundamental to their economy."

"Have they been told?"

"I think Matthew would like to have more information about the impact upon water flow before we raise the issue."

"Okay, let's see what the ramifications will be."

Matthew walked into our little conference room and greeted me like a long, lost friend. "Coach, I appreciate your taking the time to see me. I gather this must Marco," he said walking over to shake hands. "Ken, it's good to see you again. Coach has told me a lot of good things about both of you and how much you did for us while he was leading my high school to a State basketball championship."

"We heard a little about you too," Marco replied easily. "Can you really walk on water?" The question provided a perfect segue.

“I hope we have the opportunity to try in Somalia,” Matthew replied, taking advantage of the opportunity to get down to business. “Father Sean tells me you two have come up with some ideas on how we can get this done.”

“We have some ideas,” Marco interrupted, “but I’m not sure the Egyptians will like it. You can’t pay Matthew without robbing Peter.”

Matthew didn’t rise to the challenge, but instead took a conciliatory tone. “Well, we have the best people working on this. If we can’t come up with something that can accommodate everyone, then it can’t be done. Let’s give it our best shot.”

Three days later we had a workable plan, a combination of a new dam and riverbed that would route the water to the lowlands where a 16” diameter pipeline would carry the water to a man made reservoir and eventual distribution. The new dam would be set up below the Blue River Falls and send water to the desert only during the 6-8 month rainy season. The impact on water flow to Egypt would be minimal and transparent because of the water control already established at the Aswan Dam.

The major impact would be on Lake Tana itself, which would fall an estimated two-three meters from its current maximum depth of 15 meters. This in turn would reduce the size of the lake by 10% and expose up to 100 feet of new beach. Existing piers and marinas would need to be extended, but this would have a long-term positive impact upon the tourist economy.

“I can’t speak for everyone,” I commented, “but this seems like a win-win for everyone. Matthew, can you sell this to the Egyptians?”

“I’ll do my best, Coach. Your team certainly did your job well.”


Matthew left soon after for Addis Ababa and a connection to Cairo. Ken told me later that they could now appreciate what I had told them about Matthew. “He never told us what to do, but I always had the feeling that he was a step ahead of us, that he had already thought of it and was just waiting for us to come up with the idea. Do you know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean. I learned that early in my coaching days. He is a true leader.”

“He is also smarter than you, Ken,” Marco added with obvious satisfaction. “I never thought I would be able to say that.”

“Well, you won’t get any argument from me.” Ken said ruefully. “I threw in the towel when he started speaking Ge’ez with those Monks on Tana Kirkos.”

We didn’t realize it at the time, but it would be almost seven years before we got the permits to lower the water level on Lake Tana. The Egyptians were only part of the problem; wildlife preservation and environmental concerns presented even bigger delays.



## **Chapter 9**

### **Junior Year**

### **1968 UCLA Bruins**

Preseason polls were unanimous – ESPN, Sports Illustrated, Basketball Weekly - all had Marquette ranked #1 and a prohibitive favorite to make it three-in-a row. Marquette had height, experience and most of all they had Matthew Wilson.

Everything changed before the first game was played. Jim Chones and Doc Rivers declared themselves eligible for the NBA draft. Marquette’s chances for a third consecutive national championship hit rock bottom when Al McGuire abruptly retired. Even Dick Vitale was silent about the odds for a three-peat. Nobody had Marquette in their top ten.



The story of why Jim Chones declared for the draft tells us a lot about Al McGuire. Chones was raised in Racine, just 15 miles south of Milwaukee. Money was tight, but his parents always provided the basics for their six children and provided Chones a stable, loving family environment. 1972 was the second year of the American Basketball Association and the ABA needed star power. Chones was in the right place at the right time. The New York Nets offered Chones a ‘take it now or forget about it’ offer. “You have until Friday to decide.”

“Coach, I’m not ready to turn pro.”

“Jim, they are offering you a five million dollar signing bonus; take it.”

“I’m scared, Coach. I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Al McGuire, the son of an Irish immigrant saloon keeper, grew up in New York’s inner city and never feared anything. He played three years in the NBA for the Knicks and was known as a hard-nosed, defensive player that made the most of his limited abilities. “Jim, you are going to take the offer. The money is too good to turn down and next year the ABA might not be around. Take the money and buy your parents a new house.”

“Don’t you want me to play two more years at Marquette?” Chones was already a second team all American and could have become one of the best college centers of all time.

“Jim, I told your mother when I recruited you that I would look out for you and that’s what I’m doing. You don’t owe me or Marquette anything.” To Al McGuire, his players came first. Jim Chones took the Net’s offer, cashed the check and went on to enjoy a nice ABA and NBA career.

McGuire was replaced by Tom Crean, an assistant coach from Michigan State University. Crean had been a prodigy and heir apparent to succeed Tom Izzo before taking the Marquette job. Izzo-coached teams are known for tough, in your face man-to-man defense. This was how Al McGuire’ teams played defense when he wasn’t messing around with gimmick defenses such as the triangle and two or the box and one. It remained to be seen how Crean would mesh with Matthew Wilson.

Marquette would have to depend heavily upon freshmen and sophomores. There was a lot of talent at the guard level but almost

no height. Matthew and Don Kojis, both 6'5", would be the tallest starters. There were plenty of guards competing for the other three spots, including Tony Smith, a 6'3" point guard out of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, who would go on to have an excellent NBA career.

There was one special player that redshirted his freshman year for academic reasons, but during practice had displayed tremendous potential and the ability to dominate a game. His name was Dwayne Wade and he would go on to be one of the greatest Marquette Warrior basketball players of all time. Wade would also earn the MVP award in the NBA with the Miami Heat.

With successive championships under their belt, the Golden Eagles were still considered dangerous despite the loss of Chones, Berce, Tatum and Rivers. This quickly changed as they were upset by Cleveland State in their second game of the season and lost a home game against the University of Wisconsin. They limped into the Big East conference schedule with two losses and quickly absorbed two more losses as Louisville and Seton Hall beat them handily on their home courts. It appeared that Marquette did not have enough rebounding strength or interior defense to compete with the good teams.

The new half-court system that Tom Crean was trying to install was another problem. It might have worked with Chones in the middle, but the Marquette team was too small to do well in a half court offense. They needed to score quickly. Once they got into the half court game their lack of height and offensive rebounding was a decided disadvantage. To his credit, Crean was smart enough to recognize the problem and changed to an up-tempo style. This better suited his player's talents and Marquette became a fun team to watch.

The Golden Eagles played a three guard offense with Kojis and Matthew at the forwards and ran at every opportunity. They pressed full court and their defense became instant offense as they led the league in deflections and outright steals. The first two subs off the bench were also guards making it easy to press full court and turn the game into a helter-skelter affair. It was not unusual for one or two guards to foul out each game, but the substitutes who were brought in never missed a beat. Marquette's backcourt depth proved a deciding factor as opposing teams tired in the final ten minutes.

Once more Matthew adjusted his game and concentrated on rebounding and defense, despite giving up six inches to taller opponents. He didn't complain - they were winning.

Dwayne Wade was a big part of the team's improvement in the second half of the season. His talent and acrobatic skills were unbelievable as he made fantastic shot after fantastic shot. Matthew Wilson, well he was Matthew Wilson. He was averaging 28 points, far above his 19 and a half point average for his first three years. He was playing the best basketball of his life. The Golden Eagles won 13 of the final 14 Big East games to finish in a tie for second behind the Louisville Cardinals.

Marquette entered the Big East tournament as the number two seed and quickly advanced to the finals for a rematch against Louisville. The winner of this game would almost assuredly be given a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament. The tournament was held on the Cardinal's home floor and the partisan crowd erupted in thunderous applause as Louisville scored four points in the final 30 seconds to upset Marquette 77-76. Matthew missed a makeable 22 foot shot at the buzzer. It was one of the few times Matthew missed when the game was on the line. He addressed the players after the game.

"My fault, guys, I blew it – it won't happen again. I need your help in making this a fourth consecutive championship. Most of you are freshmen and sophomores and have two or three more years of eligibility remaining, but this is my last year. The experts say we are too small and too young, but I know this team is as good as any that I've played on. We can win if we all give 100%. Will you help me?"

Some of the younger players were still in awe of Matthew and they appreciated his asking for help. There was no loud chorus of cheers or empty promises, but one by one the players walked up to Matthew and quietly promised their support. Dwayne Wade said it best; "Bro, don't worry about a thing – I've got your back."

Team morale was high as they entered the NCAA tournament. Their first game was against College of Pacific, a small school with a rich academic and athletic history. It was a marvelous game from a fan point of view; both teams pressing full court the entire game. Marquette prevailed as Dwayne Wade erupted for 32 points and

caught the attention of the national media. It was his coming out party and solidified his reputation as an up and coming star.

The second game was against the Oklahoma State Cowboys who played a slow-down, half court game. Big and brawny, they dominated the inside and relied upon offensive rebounds and strength to score points. Surprisingly, Kojis and Matthew Wilson, giving away 3 or 4 inches and 30 pounds to every OSU player, out-rebounded the Cowboys and Marquette advanced to the round of 16, on schedule for another NCAA championship.

The next opponent was the DePaul Blue Demons who featured a 5'9" shooting guard named Howie Karl. Karl had unbelievable range and accuracy with his two handed set shot, a throwback to a shooting style popular in the '50s and '60s. Karl scored 33 points to keep his team in the game, but it wasn't enough as Matthew had 28 and Wade 25 to go along with 22 points and 18 rebounds by Kojis. The Golden Eagles prevailed 79-67.

The regional final match-up was against Michigan State of the Big Ten and featured a matchup of Tom Izzo and former assistant coach Tom Crean – mentor and pupil. The Spartans gave no quarter. They were tall and athletic and featured a 6'8" point guard Earvin "Magic" Johnson who would go on to become one of the greatest players in NBA history. The other guard was Drew Neitzel, a 6'0" sharp shooter that could put up 30 points in a hurry. The Spartans were up by seven points with three minutes to go before Marquette full court press finally wore down the Spartan guards and began generating turnovers. Three steals and eight straight points by Matthew Wilson sealed a tough, 75-72 victory. Magic had 29 points, but got little help from Neitzel who was held to three points on 1-10 shooting. The Golden Eagles advanced to the Final Four for the fourth consecutive year.

Forty thousand cheering fans packed the Houston Astrodome to see if Matthew Wilson and the Marquette Golden Eagles could make it four straight NCAA tournaments and surpass the mighty UCLA Bruins teams as the most dominant in college basketball. It would not be an easy road for the undersized team from Milwaukee. The semi final matchup was against the 'Fab Five' from the University of Michigan, all five of whom would go on to play professional basketball. Now seniors, Chris Weber, Jalen Rose, Juwan Howard, Ray Jackson and Jimmy King had come out

of high school as the best recruiting classes in college basketball, promising to bring four NCAA titles to the Wolverines. This was the Fab Five's 4<sup>th</sup> and final opportunity and their fans were confident that this was their year.

Jalen Rose, at 6'6", had several inches height on the talented, but diminutive, Marquette defenders. Chris Weber and Juwan Howard, both 6'11", could dominate opponents inside. Pundits said Matthew and Kojis were just too small to keep up with these two giants under the board for the entire game, at least that's what the scouting report said. That's why they play the game.

Marquette pressed the entire game and the Warrior guards were tremendous. Oliver Lee and Lloyd Walton came off the bench and played aggressive defense, giving the starters a needed breather. Allie McGuire got hot from outside and hit three consecutive three-point shots in the first half. Tony Smith, Marquette's 4<sup>th</sup> all time leading scorer, contributed two jump shots of his own and played great defense on Jimmy King. Kojis, Marquette's all-time leading rebounder, was a brute force underneath the basket. The Warrior chances diminished when Kojis picked up his third foul with five minutes remaining in the first half with the Golden Eagles trailing by five points. Dwayne Wade was having an off night and was only two for 12 in the first half. Marquette entered the second half trailing by nine points and with Kojis on the bench in foul trouble.

It was Matthew Wilson time and he didn't disappoint. Taking only five shots in the first half and making four, Matthew was 13 out of 14 in the second half and finished with a game high 44 points. Nevertheless, Michigan was ahead 74-73 with 20 seconds to go as Jackson broke the press and got the ball to Weber on the sideline where he was double teamed by Matthew and Wade. Weber turned to the referee and signaled for a time out as his coach covered his face in despair; Michigan was out of timeouts. Weber's ill-advised timeout would cost the Wolverines the game and live on in NCAA lore as one of the all time bonehead decisions in NCAA history.

Matthew calmly made the technical free throw to tie the score and with five seconds to go drove to the basket and went up for a clinching layup. Howard came over to challenge the shot forcing Matthew to dish off to Wade who laid the ball in as the buzzer sounded. Marquette and Matthew Wilson were in the NCAA finals

for the fourth consecutive year. Their opponent was the North Carolina Tar Heels led by senior Sam Perkins, junior James Worthy, and freshman sensation Michael Jordan. Worthy was unstoppable and scored 28 points, but it was Jordan's clutch jump shot from the corner with 15 seconds remaining on the clock that put the Tar Heels in front 62-61

"Crean called time out to set up the final play. Let's change things up. They will be expecting Matthew to take the final shot so we are going to use him as a decoy. Matthew, wait until there are five seconds on the clock and then set a screen for Wade at the top of the key. Dwayne; drive to the basket and take the shot if you're open; if not, look for Lloyd in the corner. Questions?"

Nobody said a word for several seconds, until Wade spoke up. "Coach, Matthew has earned the right to take the final shot," Wade said quietly.

"But he'll be double teamed," Crean argued. "Matthew, do you agree?"

"You're the coach; I'll do whatever you decide."

"Okay, then ...."

"But have I ever let you down?"

Matthew wasn't double teamed; he was triple teamed, but that didn't stop him from elevating above his defenders and launching a 25-foot jump shot that swished through the net as time expired.

Reporters asked Matthew if this was the most satisfying win of the four. "Yes, I believe it was, because this team achieved more with less natural talent than some of the others. The teams we played in the last two nights were great teams and it took a great effort from everyone to win this title."

The Marquette Golden Eagles were three-time NCAA Champions.



St. Mary's of Zion Church, old and new, in the outskirts of Axum, Ethiopia. The church is the purported resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. The new church, built by King Haile Selassie, was built in the 1960s to replace the original church built in AD 372, making it possibly the first Christian church in Africa.



## Chapter 8

### Axum – Home of the Ark

Delays in the Lake Tana resort project were caused in large part by the commercial fishing industry, a giant business in Bahir Dar where more than 1,400 tons of fish are harvested annually. Three species of fish are harvested; African catfish, Nile tilapia and a fish endemic to this region called the *Labeobarbus*. These large food fish breed in the mouths of the three rivers feeding Lake Tana and are particularly vulnerable to the gill nets thrown from the Paparyrus boats used by native fishermen. Environmentalists filed petitions to prevent any construction that might further the possible extinction of this unique *Labeobarbus* species which had dwindled in population by 75% since the fishery was built in 1986. All fishing was banned near the river mouths and on the upstream spawning areas during the August–September peak breeding periods. As a result, it took almost three years to obtain the permits necessary to complete the water front portion of the resort and marina.

Marco delegated day-to-day responsibility to the Ethiopian task managers, but still needed to be on site almost 50% of the time or work would slow to almost a standstill. I tried to free up more time for Marco, but to no avail.

“Marco, can you break free from the Lake Tana project for six months? We could use you on the hydro electric power plant project in Switzerland.”

“Jim, I would love to, but I really can’t break away from here for that long. How about one week a month?”

“No, the client wants someone full time. What’s the problem? Why can’t you delegate? These guys seem pretty sharp.”

“They are sharp, but they just don’t want to be in charge – it’s against their culture to give orders and assume responsibility. I can leave them with specific instructions to get something done and



trust them to get it done, but work will stop as soon as they hit a snag.”

“I understand. You know, there are a lot of people like that back home too. It just seems like such a small hurdle to overcome.”

“Maybe that’s why every ant colony needs a queen?” Marco concluded.

“Okay, queen-bee, I’ll see you next week. Ken and I have meetings in Addis Abba Tuesday and then we’ll come visit for a couple days. Do you need anything from home?”

“Not unless you can bring some excitement with you, but I look forward to the company. It gets pretty boring over here. As you know, the night life here needs a little improvement.”

Ken and I usually visited the project about once a month, mainly to meet with government officials in Addis Abba. The meetings usually lasted only a few hours before we headed to Lake Tana to get an update from Marco. I had high hopes for next week’s meeting because Matthew had told me we were getting close to getting permission from the fishing industry to build on Lake Tana. I was disappointed again.

“Eventually we’ll get the permits, but nobody is in a hurry,” I told Ken as we caught an early Ethiopian Airlines shuttle from Asmara airport to our newly completed private airport on Lake Tana. “At least they agreed to pay us for the delays,”

“Why did you offer to give back the extra money if we received a go-ahead by the end of the year? Ken asked. “That sounded almost like a bribe.”

“I prefer to use the word incentive. Matthew is adamant that we do everything by the book, but I don’t think he would object to a little incentive. Besides, the money would go back to the Ethiopian government, not any official.”

“Do you really believe that?” Marco asked when we told him about our meetings. “They were figuring out ways to funnel the money back to their own pockets before you left the building.”

“How cynical,” Ken said with a wink.

“Any problems we should talk about while we are here?” I asked, changing the subject?

“Not really, everything is going along pretty smoothly. I’m sorry you wasted your trip, but there is really nothing for me to complain about.”

“Well, Ken and I are going to drive over to Gondar and talk to a Falashas priest; care to join us?”

“Sure, why not. Is there a reason for this?”

“I’ve wanted to do this for two years. I can’t understand how a group of Black Jews ended up in the highlands of Ethiopia, two thousand miles from Israel.”

“Good question.”

The trip to Gondar was fascinating despite the fact that the only remaining Falashas in Ethiopia were women, children and old men. Most of the men had immigrated to Israel to build a home for their families. “Why did the men flee?” we asked a village elder.

“Some left because of the famine, but most left because of religious persecution. Jews and Christians got along for hundreds of years, but this changed in 1974 when militants overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie, putting an end to the Solomonic dynasty. There are less than 10,000 Falashas remaining in Ethiopia.”

We spent six hours with the Falasha priest who described a pre-Talmud Jewish faith based on the Old Testament. They didn’t eat the meat of animals dying of natural causes or any meat slain by a gentile. They worshipped sacred groves of trees and most significantly, still performed blood sacrifice to their lord, a practice that had been outlawed by King David since 600 BC.

“It’s like they have been in an incubator, completely out of touch with current Jewish practices,” Ken remarked.

We toured two churches that were more than a thousand years old, and realized that both churches had an inner chamber called a Holy of Holies, where only high could enter. Each inner chamber contained a Tabot, the centerpiece of their worship.

“All churches in Ethiopia are the same,” the priest replied in response to our questions. “Each church has a Holy of Holies containing a Tabot that represents God’s word. They are just copies, of course. The original Tabot is in Axum.”

“May we see it,” I asked.

“Oh no, only the most senior priest is allowed to see the Tabot. It is brought out only once a year during the Timkat ceremony in January.”

I decided to ask the priest another question that had been bothering me. “There are rumors that your people are direct

descendants of Menelik I, the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Is there any truth to that rumor?”

“Oh yes, our ancestors tell many ancient stories about this time. I’m not sure that the Queen of Sheba was from Ethiopia or Arabia, but the stories are true. It is documented in a 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript called the Kebra Nagast which is sacred to Ethiopian beliefs.”

We were quiet during the ride home, lost in our own thoughts, before Marco broke the silence. “Why the questions about the Queen of Sheba, Jim?”

“Well, I find it interesting that Jews were here at least 1,000 years before Christ, and apparently have a different lineage entirely than the Jews in Eastern Ethiopia. Their skin color is a smooth, bronze color, different than most Africans.”

“I still don’t get it,” Marco asked again. “What’s the point?”

Ken came to my rescue. “Imagine having to flee Jerusalem in 587 BC and needing a new place to hide the Ark of the Covenant. What better place than somewhere where there already is a Jewish community that will guard it. If the Falashas are indeed direct descendants of King Solomon, it makes Ethiopia’s claim that they possess the Ark much more believable.”

“It certainly explains their bronze skin color. What other possible reason is there for a race of bronze-skinned Jews to be in Ethiopia, still practicing a pre-600 BC Jewish faith that allows blood sacrifices. The story about being blood-line descendants of Menelik I makes sense,” I replied, trying to get my own beliefs in order. “It also fits the timeline. The Falashas trace their history back to about 900 BC which coincides with how old Moses’ offspring would have been. Moses died in 925 BC.”

“Not to confuse things,” Ken added with his typical smile, “but many people believe there is also a story about Solomon having a child with the Queen of Sheba’s maid servant who was the real source of the Solomonic empire.”

“For real?” I asked.

“Scouts honor, cross-my-heart,” Ken promised, laughing aloud.

Marco was still confused. “Well, that might explain how they got up here in the highlands, but why do they worship the Tabot and what does that have to do with the Ark?”

“Worshipping a Tabot is also a direct connection to the Ark of the Covenant,” Ken explained. “A Tabot is a small board that represents the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. They worship the word of God, not the Ark.”

We lapsed into silence again until Ken made a suggestion. “Anyone care to fly to Axum next month for the Timkat ceremony January 18 and 19? We might as well see for ourselves.”

“I’m in,” Marcos replied eagerly, apparently caught up in the excitement of the legend that was an intoxicating mixture of myth, religion and science. I knew how he must feel, because the legend of the lost Ark of the Covenant had a hold on me.

“So am I, but one thing still bothers me. The priest claimed that the Ark came here roughly 470 BC, but we know it disappeared from Jerusalem before the 587 BC when Solomon’s Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians.”

“Where was it for 117 years?” Ken added, doing the math.

“In Axum?” Marco answered tentatively.

“Not likely; archeologists say Axum wasn’t built until around 200 BC,” Ken replied. “Assuming the priest is correct about receiving the Ark in 470 BC, there still is a 300 year gap between when it left Israel in 587 BC and arrived in Gondar. Where was it?”

“You’re right, Marco. Graham Hancock postulates in his book, *The Sign and the Seal*, that the Ark was already gone from the Temple when Josiah ascended to the Jewish throne in 640 BC. In 626 BC Jeremiah asked where it was. In 622 BC Josiah asked the Levite Priests to put it back in the house that Solomon built. Hancock believes the Ark was taken sometime during the reign of King Manasseh. If Hancock is correct, the gap is closer to 200 years.”

“I’m impressed,” Ken responded in mock awe, although I knew he was at least a little bit surprised I had pulled these facts out of my memory bank.

“Furthermore, you might be surprised to learn that a Jewish Temple was built on Elephantine Island around 640 BC that was ninety feet long and 30 feet wide, the exact dimensions given in the Bible for Solomon’s Temple,” Ken said, finishing my thought.

“Okay you two, that’s enough. One of you spouting miscellaneous trivia is all I can handle,” Marco interrupted good

naturedly. “But tell me, why on Elephantine Island? That’s in Egypt near the Aswan Dam, isn’t it?”

“That’s the spot,” Ken agreed. “Maybe our new trivia expert can tell us why.”

“Well Ken, since you obviously don’t know, I will enlighten you. I’m sure you both know that in those days the Nile was the natural roadway through Egypt and Sudan. In addition, it is well accepted that a group of Jewish mercenaries in the employ of Egypt had already established a colony on Elephantine Island well before the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Coincidentally, they also practiced an older form of the religion that included animal sacrifices, including the sacrifice of a lamb on the first day of Passover.”

“Didn’t King Josiah outlaw animal sacrifices?” Marco asked.

“Yes, sometime between 640-609 BC, but it’s interesting to note that the practices continued long after, apparently on the authority of the ‘Lord that was dwelling there’.”

“They were referring to the Ark,” Ken said quietly.

The three of us were lost in our own thoughts until Marco broke the silence. “Maybe we’ll find some answers in Axum?”

Axum, dating back centuries before Christ, was the capital of the powerful Axumite Empire until the 10<sup>th</sup> century and was the home of Ethiopian Christianity. It traces its roots to the Queen of Sheba although historians doubt that the city of Axum is that old.

Axum served as a connecting point in the trade route between the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia and has been the heart of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church since King Ezana brought Christianity to the country in the 4th century. A Christian Monk visited the city in 600 AD and wrote the following description; “the four-towered palace of the King of Ethiopia was adorned with brazen figures of a unicorn, as well as the skins of rhinoceros stuffed with chaff.”

We gazed upon the new St. Mary’s of Zion Church in the outskirts of Axum, the purported resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. The new church, built by King Haile Selassie, was built in the 1960s to replace the original church built in AD 372, making it possibly the first Christian church in Africa. “May we see it?” Ken asked, as we entered the chapel.

“Only the Guardian of the Ark of the Covenant is allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and gaze upon the Ark.”

“Then how do we know for sure that the Ark is in there?”

“The guardian swears to it, as did the 33 guardians before him,” our guide replied earnestly, pointing to 33 white robes on display. “The guardian is trained as a youth and devotes his entire life to this task. When he dies, another guardian is appointed. The Ark is only seen once a year, at Timkat, the celebration of the Holy Epiphany which to early Eastern Christians commemorates the baptism of Christ.”

We spent the next fifteen minutes walking around the church looking at artifacts, including two silver trumpets that were purportedly stolen from the second temple during the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Closer inspection indicated they were copies.

“The original trumpets decorate the arch of Titus, commemorating his victory over Jerusalem and his destruction of the temple,” our guide pointed out.

The Timkat ceremony started tomorrow so we spent the afternoon walking around the city and talking with locals. “Maybe it’s a tourist hype, but they are sure consistent in claiming that the real Ark of the Covenant is in St. Mary’s,” Marco concluded.

“That, and the fact that every one of them claims that they would guard it with their lives,” I said in agreement. “I believe, that they believe, the Ark is in that church.”

“Say that again,” Ken needed. “I got lost in the second, I believe.”

We asked our guide what happened to the Ark when the Axum was run over by the rebels in 1990 and the King was overthrown, and earlier when the Muslims overran the country and destroyed almost all the Catholic and Jewish churches. “The rebels would have no reason to worship the Ark, would they?”

“The Ark is moved to other safe places in times of crisis,” our guide responded.

“Was it moved to Gondar before the rebels came?”

“There are many stories that the Ark was taken to Tana Kirkos Island for safety, but that was hundreds of years ago,” he replied vaguely.

I dropped the subject, sensing that I was not going to get a direct answer. We took the short ride to the city of Dongar to see the Queen of Sheba's palace and pleasure bath, passing a field of

roughly 75 erected obelisks of various shapes and sizes, each obelisk with symbolic engravings, erected more than 2,000 years ago. The tallest standing monolith is about 75 feet high, but the largest would have stood 108 feet tall. “Think of the engineering it must have taken to stand those suckers up,” Ken remarked.

“It wouldn’t be hard; all you need is a couple 100-foot cranes,” Marco answered absentmindedly.

Ken looked at me to see if I thought Marco was kidding. I wasn’t sure.

We found the palace and bath to be fairly well preserved, but not nearly old enough to have been a residence of the Queen of Sheba who lived in Solomon’s time. At most, the Axum area’s history traces back to 500 BC, but probably closer to 200 BC. Our guide pointed out that the bath, fed by an underground spring, would play an important role in tomorrow’s Timkat ceremony. “Water, traditionally, is symbolic of cleansing and a new beginning.”

Our biggest surprise came as we walked the grounds and surrounding fields and noticed a number of crosses etched into stones and brickwork. “What are these?” I asked. “Didn’t we see the same cross in the palace foundation?”

“This is the emblem of the Knights Templar,” our guide answered.

“The same Knights Templar that set up headquarters on the Temple Mount?” I said more to myself than to anyone else. “This is more than a coincidence.”

The following day we attended Timkat hoping to catch a glimpse of the true Ark of the Covenant. I was disappointed as the High Priest was escorted out of Saint Mary of Zion church holding a small chest, wrapped in cloth. I couldn’t see it, but was sure this wasn’t the real Ark of the Covenant. One indicator was that the guardian monk stayed in the Holy of Holies, chanting in his slow, rhythmic style, and lighting frankincense to honor the Lord. Would he not carry the Ark himself if it indeed was authentic?

The people didn’t mind as they joyously followed the High Priest in a day-long procession that ended at the Queen of Sheba’s palace. Men and women shamelessly bathed themselves in the Queen’s pleasure bath. We didn’t stay for the second day of Timkat when the Ark is returned to Saint Mary of Zion.

“Well, are you satisfied?” Marco asked as we prepared to board our flight back to Lake Tana.

“Not entirely. It’s hard to believe that the Ark is here and hasn’t been stolen by a half-dozen conquerors over the past two thousand years.”

“Where do you think it is?”

“I’m not sure, but I need to read up on the good Knights Templar. They seem to be popping up everywhere the Ark has been.”



## **Chapter 7**

### **Senior Year**

### **1982 UNC Tar Heels**

The three-time defending NCAA champion Marquette Golden Eagles entered the final year of Matthew’s reign ranked No. 1 in the nation, despite losing four starters from last year’s championship team. They still had Matthew Wilson and Marquette’s version of The Three Amigos; Dominic James, Jerel McNeal and Wesley Mathews. They also had Lazar Hayward, and undersized 6’6” power forward.

Tom Crean bolted for greener pastures despite the wealth of talent. Crean’s replacement was assistant coach Buzz Williams who had virtually no head coaching experience. The jury was out.

It was soon evident that the Three Amigos, and Hayward, would become future stars. Dominic Jones, only 6’1”, was a tremendous athlete and could sky with much bigger players. Mathews was a solid six five, played great defense and showed the maturity you would expect from someone raised in a basketball family. His father, Wes, starred for Wisconsin in the ‘70s and later played in the NBA. The Badger’s were not pleased when the younger Mathews chose Marquette over Wisconsin. Jerel McNeal would go on to become Marquette’s all time leading scorer.

All three played with poise and confidence not usually seen in freshmen, and together with AAU friend Lazar Hayward, played an



unselfish brand of basketball that was beautiful to watch. This style of play fit right in with Matthew Wilson.

Marquette played two exhibition games before departing for the Maui classic in Hawaii where all five starters averaged in double figures. The Golden Eagles won the tournament easily, whipping Duke in the finals 85-63. Matthew Wilson again retreated to a supporting role, content to play defense, rebound and spread the ball to open teammates – willing to do whatever was necessary to win.

Marquette enjoyed a great non-conference season, beating Wisconsin for the second consecutive year, in a hard fought game in Madison where the Badgers seldom lose. The lead switched hands six times in the final two minutes before McNeal hit a 10-foot jumper at the buzzer for a 72-71 victory. The Golden Eagles entered the Big East conference with a perfect 10-0 record and ranked No. 1 in the nation.

Marquette easily won their first four conference games before the injury bug hit. Dominic James broke the fifth metatarsal in his left foot and would require season ending surgery. Travis Diener, a 6'1", highly recruited prospect from Fond du Lac, replaced James in the starting lineup. Diener didn't have James' athletic skills, but he sure could shoot the basketball.

Marquette finished the Big East season with two losses for the second consecutive year; a three-point defeat to highly regarded Louisville Cardinals and a five-point loss to Connecticut.

The Golden Eagles were ranked No. 2 in the country as they headed into the Big East tournament. Hayward and McNeal were playing great basketball and Marquette easily swept through the Big East tournament, beating the Georgetown Hoyas by 12 points in the semi-finals and Connecticut by 14 points in the finals.

Marquette sat back and waited for their expected No. 1 seed. The tournament committee had no choice but to keep them in the Midwest region. The 'Final Four' would be in St. Louis, but the initial two games were at the Milwaukee Arena, providing the Golden Eagles with a tremendous home court advantage. They did not waste this advantage as they easily defeated a shell-shocked Bob Huggin's Cincinnati team in the opening round and won by 38 points. It was the first time the University of Cincinnati had been in the NCAA tournament since Oscar Robinson dominated the

tournament in the late 1960's. The district championship game was against George Mason University out of the Colonial Athletic conference and again Marquette won easily, this time by 22 points. They advanced to the Sweet Sixteen tournament in Chicago.

The opener in Chicago was against a surprise NCAA qualifier, Miami of Ohio, who made the tournament for only the second time. The Cinderella story for the Tartans ended quickly as Marquette cruised, 83-51. Miami didn't have the height or brawn to compete with Marquette's athleticism on the backboards. Hayward and Matthew dominated inside, each scoring 24 points and grabbing 12 rebounds.

The regional final was against a strong Kentucky team, seeded No. 3 in the Midwest Region. The Wildcats had the size and athleticism to neutralize the Marquette big men, but unfortunately for them, they caught Matthew on a hot day. They had no answers as Matthew took the Kentucky big men outside and poured in 37 points to lead Marquette to an easy 83-67 victory. The Golden Eagles were headed to the NCAA Final Four for the third consecutive year.

The NCAA tournament was in St. Louis and the Golden Eagles were matched against Houston who had given the UCLA Bruins their only defeat of the year. The Cougars were led by Elvin Hayes who scored 44 points in their mid-season victory over Lou Alcindor and UCLA to break the Bruins 73 game winning streak. He was unstoppable as he poured in 47 points, but it wasn't enough as he got little help from his teammates. Wesley Mathews, Diener, and McNeal all had over 20 points for Marquette. They won easily despite an off day by Matthew Wilson who was held to 16 points but did not mind at all. Marquette was in the NCAA finals for the fourth consecutive year.

The Golden Eagles opponent was the once-beaten UCLA Bruins coached by John Wooden. Despite Marquette being three-time defending NCAA champions, Las Vegas made UCLA a five point favorite. Led by Lou Alcindor, who might have been the greatest basketball player in college history, the Bruins sported four other players that averaged in double figures; Lucius Allen, Mike Warren, Jr., Linn Shackelford and senior Mike Lynn. It would be a

formidable test for Marquette and pundits agreed that Matthew Wilson needed to have a great game.

Unlike other highly touted games, this game lived up to expectations. Hayward, at 6'6", was no match for the bigger, more talented and experienced UCLA center. Alcindor outscored Hayward 35-6 before Hayward fouled out with two minutes left. The rest of the Golden Eagles took up the slack. Four players scored over 15 points, led by Matthew Wilson with a team high 28 points. The game was tied at 87 points with 30 seconds on the clock. UCLA inbounded the ball from underneath its own basket and attempted an alley-oop pass to Lou Alcindor who at 7'2" leaped high to grab the pass. To his surprise a hand went up with him and deflected the ball to a Marquette teammate. Surprisingly, it wasn't Matthew Wilson, but a substitute by the name of Walter Mangham, one of the greatest leapers in Marquette history. Hard core Marquette fans were not surprised when Mangham out jumped Alcindor on the key play of the game. They had seen him do it many times before.

Doc Rivers brought the ball down court without calling time out and fed to McNeal at the free throw line. His jump shot was on line, but caught the back iron and bounced harmlessly away, causing groans from the Marquette faithful. Players were preparing themselves for overtime until they Matthew leaped from the free throw line, grabbed the ball as its apex, and laid it gently over the rim as time expired.

John Wooden would say later that David Thompson of NC State was the only other player who could have made that play. "I swear his hand was over the top of the backboard," Wooden muttered to himself, shaking his head in amazement. The Marquette Golden Eagles were NCAA champions for the fourth consecutive year.

When asked later how it felt to be a four-time NCAA champion, Matthew thanked his teammates and coach, Buzz Williams, before adding; "I'm proud to have played for Marquette University."

The future is bright for Marquette basketball. Buzz Williams has proven to be a good coach, inspirational motivator and a great recruiter. Now, if he can only recruit a big man.

## Chapter 10

### Babylon Job Award

“Jim, you have a call - a Lynda Suarez, from the White House.”

I rolled over in bed and looked at the clock; 9:30 AM. Not too early, even for a Saturday, unless you throw in the fact that I was experiencing severe jet lag after a red eye flight from Cairo. “Thanks Mary. Tell her it will be just a minute,” I said as I tried to wake up. I needed to splash cold water on my face and get rid of the foul taste in my mouth.

“Ms. Suarez, this is Jim Simpson. What can I do for you?”

“I’m sorry for bothering you at home on a Saturday, but we are operating on a tight time frame. Can you be in Washington Monday to meet with the Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East?”

“Why?” I asked succinctly. After being home only eight hours after two weeks in Africa, I wasn’t in the mood to jump onto a plane again to meet with some politician.

“I don’t have the specifics, but my boss asked me to tell you that the State Department has several fast-track civilian contracts that will be awarded next week. Matthew Wilson suggested we give you the first crack at one of them.”

*Name dropper*, I thought. The mention of Matthew’s name was all it took. “Okay, I can be there by 10:00 AM if there are seats left on US Air. Just tell me where to go.”

“Don’t worry about a commercial flight. We will have a Lear Jet waiting for you at the private hanger at Tampa International. You should be home for dinner. There is plenty of room on the plane if you wish to bring a business associate.”

“Is there anything else I should bring?”

“No, just an open mind,” Suarez replied seriously.

“This has to be a joke,” I said to myself as I dialed Matthew’s cell phone number.

“No joke,” Matthew said without bothering to say hello.

“I’ll see you Monday. Bring your pen.”

With Matthew involved, this was likely to be a major undertaking in some third world country. I considered how Rosann would react to the news of another big overseas contract. We had been looking forward to spending more time together around the house. Pete and Lisa were never home anymore given their tennis careers and Pete’s upcoming wedding to Ambre in June. It’s funny, most people look forward to taking vacations overseas or traveling to Paris or Australia to watch their kids play in a grand slam tennis tournament. We were so lucky that we could do all that, but now we looked forward to spending time together at home, especially Mary. She had several close friends and was active in several clubs and charities to keep her busy and still ranked #6 in the Florida 35 and over tennis rankings. I knew, however, she had been looking for the Ethiopia job to wind down so I could cut back on my travel.

“Breakfast is ready,” Rosann shouted from the kitchen. Intercoms were a waste of money I thought, as I threw on some workout clothes.

“Good morning, dear,” I said, kissing her on the cheek. “Thanks for letting me sleep late.”

“That was your reward for your Oscar performance last night,” Rosann said with a smile.

“I don’t remember having much of a choice,” remembering the sheer negligee she was wearing when I entered the house. “What if it had been the Maytag repair man?”

“Well, then we probably would have the best maintained appliances in the subdivision,” she said with a laugh. “After two weeks alone in the house I wasn’t asking for IDs.”

I might as well get it over with, I thought. “That phone call ....” I started.

“Yes,” Rosann answered, putting the waffles on my plate. She had noticed the hesitancy in my voice. “Where are you off to this time?”

“They want me in Washington Monday to discuss some contracts that the State Department is awarding. Apparently Matthew has something to do with it.” Rosann liked Matthew and usually I got a free pass if I used his name. Not today.

“Oh no, you’re not taking another job in Africa or some God-forsaken place like that. Why should you? We don’t need the money.”

“I haven’t said yes to anything,” I argued. “I just want to see what they have to say. Who knows, maybe they want us to clean the beaches in Malaga.” I was desperate and I knew Rosann wanted to take a vacation to Southern Spain.

“Eat your breakfast. We are in a mixed doubles tournament at the club this afternoon and have an 8:30 tee time tomorrow. We might as well enjoy the weekend.”

Monday, Ken and I boarded the private jet to Washington and enjoyed a continental breakfast on board consisting of coffee, juice and croissants. “How was your weekend, Jim? Play any golf?”

“I played bad tennis Saturday and bad golf on Sunday. I saw so much sand that I thought I was still in Ethiopia. Luckily, I had a good partner Saturday or it would have been a lost weekend.”

“She sure can hit that backhand,” Ken added referring to Mary’s two-handed service return.

“Yeah, she was hot. All I had to do was cover the alley and stay out of her way. How about you? Did you golf this weekend?” I asked knowing that Ken played at least once.

“74 on Saturday and a cool 69 on Sunday that would have been a 65 if I could putt. I bought some new irons and I couldn’t miss. We will have to play some this week.”

“Yeah, right,” I said without enthusiasm, “and I suppose you want a stroke or two?”

“Why not? You’re the ex club champion.”

“That was so long ago that we’re the only two people that remember.” I said, reflecting back on that weekend that I beat Jack with a 12-foot putt on the 36<sup>th</sup> hole. “That sure brings back some memories.”

“Not for me,” Ken mused. “I was in a Mexican hospital fighting for my life.”

“That’s because you got drunk and fell off a balcony,” I chided, knowing full well that Ken had been pushed.

“By the way, Jack says hi. He shot a 71 Saturday, but still lost a little money. He had the nerve to call me a ‘Simpson’.”

I laughed, realizing that Jack still told anyone that would listen that he was sandbagged in that winner-take-all tournament. “Yes,

we should try to play a little if we have time this week; maybe Friday? It would be fun seeing Jack and the guys again.”

“Why don’t we see about playing in the Friday morning men’s game? I’ll get us a 4<sup>th</sup> and enter us as a four-some so we can play together,” Ken added, knowing full well that on Fridays the teams were picked by the lowest handicap golfers, but the golfers chose their own foursomes. “They still play two-best-balls so it’s ideal for players like you that haven’t played much and might hit a couple bad shots.”

“Yes, let’s do it; that will be fun. Hopefully we won’t need to be out of town again,” I said thinking back to my discussions with Rosann.”

“What are we getting ourselves into today?” Ken asked. “Do you know anything more than you told me?”

“Nope, only that Matthew is involved”

“Which means that we will be flying off to some starving, bug-infested nation that can’t pay us anything,” Ken said almost half-joking. “Why can’t Matthew and Father McGinnis devote their energy to saving countries that at least have running water and cable TV?”

I smiled at the absurdity of his statement. “Let’s hear them out, Ken, but I will say this; I’m not in any mood to build roads or office buildings in some third-world country. Rosann would have my ass,” I confided. Ken nodded in understanding.

The rest of the flight we spent reading and lost in our own thoughts.

Matthew kept a low profile, away from the mahogany conference table where Ken and I sat listening as David Rutherford; the Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East described the project. Thirty minutes into the presentation Mr. Rutherford came to the point. “Mr. Simpson, we want Simpson International to take the lead in a multi-national effort to rebuild Babylon and restore this historic city to the greatness and world prominence it once enjoyed.”

I spilled my coffee; literally, I spilled my coffee. Fortunately, this gave me time to absorb what the man had said while everyone scrambled to limit the damage. I noticed Matthew smiling at my

embarrassment. “Matthew, you could have warned me so I didn’t make such a fool of myself,” I complained.

“Please go on, Mr. Rutherford. You now have our complete attention,” I said with a wooden smile.

“I take it this means you have some understanding of the importance of this project to the free world. Baghdad is beyond repair. Its infrastructure is shot and it seems it is irrevocably divided into religious sects. We are proposing to rebuild Babylon and make it the political and financial center of this part of the world.”

“Not to mention the religious capital of this region,” Matthew added. “There is no other city in the world where Shiite and Shia Muslims would live together in peace.”

“I thought Babylon was a biblical city,” Ken said, making a statement more than a question. “If I remember my Bible studies correctly, Babylon is mentioned more than 300 times.”

“That’s right, Mr. Reed, it was the first city built after Genesis and was once the cultural and political center of the world. The historical and biblical significance of Babylon is unrivaled by any other city with the possible exceptions of Rome and Jerusalem,” Rutherford continued. “That’s why we have agreed to help Iraq restore Babylon to its prior glory.”

“Let’s talk a little bit about the details,” I suggested. “How do you plan on accomplishing this goal and how long do you think it will take?”

“This project will take forever,” Rutherford said with a smile, “but we hope to have a framework in place in five years. Restoring the ‘old town’ of Babylon is just a small part of it. We also envision a new, modern city resplendent with office buildings, shopping centers, restaurants, residential communities and so on. Five years from now we hope to have a thriving city and a blueprint for growth.”

“Where does Simpson Construction fit into this plan? We obviously would be there forever if we tried to rebuild Babylon ourselves.”

“There are plenty of governments and private contractors that are eager to get a piece of this. Several countries including France, Germany and Iran would love to undertake the entire project. There is no shortage of manpower or financial resources. The World Bank will provide whatever money we require, within reason of course.”



“You want someone to manage the project and coordinate all of these groups,” I said, starting to get the picture.

“That’s correct, we need a project manager. Matthew said you were the best and that if anyone can do a fast-track project, it was you.” The way he looked at me told me that he thought it was an impossible job to control all these diverse factions.

“Can we take a 15-minute break to talk this over?”

“You’re not really thinking of doing this, are you?” Ken asked in amazement. “Everyone in the room knows it’s an impossible job.”

“This reminds me a little bit of that job we undertook in Mexico City to build the sports arena. It was tough, but we did it and eventually it got us the work to rebuild Roland Garros.”

“You can’t compare a rinky-dink job like that to rebuilding the entire city of Babylon. The problem in Mexico was getting them off their asses to do some work; the problem in Iraq is to stop someone from shooting us in the ass.”

“It won’t be that bad,” I replied unconvincingly.

“Yes it will,” Matthew said as he walked over to our table. “Nobody will want to follow your orders and there are a lot of fanatics that will try to disrupt anything that will get Iraq back on its feet. Don’t underestimate the challenge.”

“You are the one that recommended us,” Ken stated.

“I just told them that if anyone can do it, you could. I’m just not sure anyone can do it.”

“Think of the benefit to the Iraqis and the Western world if this succeeds,” I argued. “A prosperous, democratic Iraq would go a long way to curbing Iran and the radical Muslim movement. I would like to give it a try, with one condition.”

“Which is?” Ken asked.

“We need to control the money. Nobody gets paid unless we approve the invoice.”

“It might work,” Ken agreed; “it will take a lot of accountants, but it might work.”

“Matthew, what do you think?”

“Try it. By the way, ask for a 10% project management fee which includes a 5% donation to my world disaster relief program. The money will feed a lot of hungry children in Africa,” he said

seriously. "I still don't know if you can pull this off, but it's worth a try. I wish you luck."

The 5% fee Matthew requested startled me and I flashed back to my discussions with Chris Lewis and the CIA, but I should have known that Matthew was one step ahead of me. He always was. What I didn't know was that Matthew was 10 steps ahead of us on this one.

It took twenty minutes to get a handshake agreement with Rutherford and settle on an 8% management fee, plus expenses. Matthew still insisted on getting his 5%, but three percent of a \$600 million dollar per month expenditure is still a lot of money and would pay for quite a few accountants. It took another three hours to get a status report from the State Department's technical team and to work out the mechanics of how the money would flow. I was pleased to see that a lot of work had already been started. At 3:00 PM we were ready to go home when Matthew informed me of a change in plans.

"Jim, I took the liberty of calling Rosann and asking her if I could borrow you for a couple days. Do you mind?"

"I assume she said yes," I asked. "Where are we going?"

"Have you been to Jerusalem?"

"No, are we leaving this afternoon?"

"Tomorrow morning. Tonight we are attending a small, black tie dinner party at the White House. The President wants to meet you and Mary."

"Mary?" I repeated in surprise.

"Yes, she should be on her way now. I sent the Lear back to pick her up. The President took the liberty of making hotel reservations. Tomorrow, she and Ken will head back home to Tampa on the Lear and we will fly to Jerusalem."

"Why are we going to Jerusalem?"

"To see the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock; you could use a little perspective on what you are getting yourself into."

Matthew and I strolled through the walled city of Jerusalem, past the Armenian Quarter, and past the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which dominated the Christian Quarter. Matthew had been here a year earlier and was my guide.

“We’ll come back later and visit the Chapel of the Invention of the Cross which was dedicated to the Ethiopian community in the 12th Century after the Muslims overran the city. The Ethiopian connection with Jerusalem is really quite remarkable.”

I just nodded as I took in the sights of this historic city. We continued walking along the Street of Chains. To our right was the Jewish Quarter and to the left was the Muslim enclave. Straight ahead were the Temple Mount and the magnificent Al-Aqsa mosque erected by the Caliph Omar in the seventh century AD.

“There it is,” I said to myself thinking of the wars that had been fought over this piece of land, identified in both the Bible and the Koran as the site where Abraham offered up his son in sacrifice.

“This is the 3rd most sacred site in the Islamic world,” Matthew explained. “According to the Koran, Mohammed and Gabriel made the Night Journey to the Throne of God in the 7th century AD.”

“The Muslims built smack dab on the site where Solomon built the Temple as a permanent resting place for the Ark of the Covenant, a centerpiece for the traditional Jewish religion,” I added, showing off the research I had done in preparation for our visit.

“That wasn’t unusual,” Matthew replied. “Muslims often built their Mosques directly over the religious sites of the people they conquered. They did the same thing in Elephantine,” he explained, referring to the location where the Ark was rumored to be hidden before continuing its journey from Solomon’s Temple to Lake Tana.

“If the Ark is ever found, Matthew, do you think there is any chance it would be returned here? The Muslims wouldn’t allow it, would they?”

“It depends upon who finds it. Who knows what they would do with the Ark if the Muslims found it? But if the Jews or Christians find it, there will be a lot of pressure to build a 3rd Temple on this site. Let’s go inside,” Matthew said, putting an end to this line of questioning.

Minutes later we were kneeling next to the Shetiyyah, the foundation stone of the world according to orthodox Jews. The massive stone was about 30 feet in diameter and jutted out above the bedrock of Mount Moriah. Rugged and asymmetrical, it seemed

to emit a presence that made you believe that this indeed could be the foundation stone of civilization.

“Touch it, Jim. Can you feel it?”

I laid my hand on the porous rock and closed my eyes, trying to envision what the rock saw in 955 BC when Solomon, son of David, placed the Ark of the Covenant on this spot. “I wonder if Solomon believed in his heart that this would be the Ark’s final resting place,” I mused.

“Well, if he did,” Matthew commented, “he was a bit of an optimist. It wasn’t 30 years later that an Egyptian king overran the city and according to scripture, looted the treasures of the house. This was the first of many conquerors that overran the city before the Babylonians completely destroyed the Temple in 587 BC.”

“So where did the Ark go, and who took it?” I asked, more perplexed than ever.

“Let’s go downstairs,” Matthew replied, momentarily putting an end to my inquiries.

We descended down a stairway into a hollow beneath the stone that Muslims call the ‘Well of Souls’ where legend says that you can hear the voices of the dead intermingled with sounds of the River of Paradise. Below are the secret passages, now sealed, where many Jews believe the Ark was hidden when the temple was looted. Many Jews believe the Ark is still here, but we might never know for sure. Islam authorities vigorously prohibit excavation below the Dome.

“Do you believe there is a secret hiding place below us?” I asked Matthew. “Could the Ark still be here, hidden beneath the rock where it was originally kept?”

“No, I don’t. Many people have looked since the Ark disappeared? Let’s go next door to the Mosque and you will see what I mean.”

“See those three bays?” Matthew asked as we neared the mosque.

“Magnificent,” I commented. “What type of architecture is that?”

“The Al Asqa Mosque is a fascinating mixture of old and new architecture that tells a story by itself. For example, Mussolini donated the marble columns inside, but the porch bays were designed by the Knights Templar between 1119-1187 AD when

they used the mosque as their headquarters. This is where the Catholic Order was founded,” Matthew added. “Take your shoes off.”

We entered the mosque and saw immediately what Matthew meant by the mixed architecture. It was a blend of many periods and obviously had been added to and renovated since it was built. “Why did the Knights Templar come here?” I asked, as we proceeded downstairs. The stables used 800 years ago by the Knights were well preserved.” My senses could almost detect the odors of the majestic steeds and the sounds of Knights putting on their metal armor preparing for battle.

“Most people agree their prime purpose was to search for the Ark of the Covenant,” Matthew answered. “As you might know, the Knights Templar became a warlike offshoot of the church and finding the Ark would have made them the dominant power in their day. In fact, in later years the church was fearful of the Knights because of the power and money they had amassed. This power was the source of their demise.”

“That’s why you don’t believe the Ark is hidden beneath the Well of Souls, isn’t it. If the Ark was here, they would have found it. But what if they did find it?”

Matthew smiled. “If they found it, what was James Bruce doing in Ethiopia 650 years later, if not looking for the Ark?”

“Wasn’t Bruce a member of the Knights Templar?” I asked in bewilderment. Just as I thought I understood the situation, another angle cropped up. “Who was he?”

“He was a Scottish freemason and claimed to be a distant relative of Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland. Regardless of this claim there is no dispute that James Bruce was one of the most brilliant people of his time and spent many years in Ethiopia searching for the Ark,” Matthew added.

I was now totally confused.

“Let’s get a bite to eat. This afternoon I want to introduce you to a Falashas priest that lived in Gondar.”

“Gondar, Ethiopia; what’s he doing in Jerusalem?”

“Most of the ‘Black Jews’ relocated back in the 1990s because they were being persecuted in Ethiopia. It will do you good to hear their story.”

“What story?”

The story of why the Ark might have been taken to Ethiopia and particularly the Lake Tana region, in the first place.”

“Okay. I’ll bite; why Ethiopia?”

“Because there was a sizeable population of Jews in the Gondar area that they knew would protect the Ark.”

“How did Jews get to Ethiopia 3,000 years ago?” I asked, trying to follow Matthew’s line of thought. “Was this part of the Solomon – Queen of Sheba connection?”

“You’re half right. Solomon was rumored to have fathered another child with the Queen’s maid-servant and this is the origin of the Solomonic dynasty that ruled Ethiopia from 1268 - 1974, when the last emperor, Haile Selassie, was deposed by a military coup.”

“So you believe the Ark is in Ethiopia?”

“Maybe, but I sure don’t believe it’s in Jerusalem,” Matthew answered carefully. “Who knows for sure, maybe it’s in Babylon? Remember, Jim, it was Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, that burned Solomon’s Temple to the ground in 587 BC and evicted the Jews from Jerusalem and relocated the Jews to Babylon.”

“The entire Jewish population?”

“Yes, everyone; and the Jews have not forgotten. There is a passage in the Old Testament that starts and ends like this;”

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept,  
when we remembered Zion.*

*If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the  
roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.*

“When did they come back to Jerusalem?”

“Fifty years later the King of Persia, Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon and freed the Jews. He returned the treasures Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple and allowed them to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC. A year later they started to build the 2nd temple.”

“I gather the Ark wasn’t one of the treasures that were returned,” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“No, in fact, there is evidence that the Ark was not in the Temple when it was looted. The list compiled by the Babylonians of what they took was pretty complete and it didn’t contain any

mention of the Ark. Most historians agree that the Ark had already been moved to another location.”

“So you don’t think the Ark is in Babylon?”

“No, but Babylon is a key to the puzzle for other reasons.”

“Matthew, I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Not now, Jim, but suffice it to say that Babylon was once known as the city of sin. I’m hopeful that the new city will erase the blasphemy that is associated with the old Babylon.”

Years later, when Matthew lay on his bed close to death, I would wish that I had pursued this topic while I had the opportunity. Babylon was indeed an important key to the puzzle, but at that time I did not understand the Biblical implications of rebuilding Babylon.





## Chapter 11

# International Basketball

Basketball is one of few sports with a known birth date. Think about it. Baseball? Football? Soccer? On December 1, 1891, in Springfield, Massachusetts, James Naismith hung two half-bushel peach baskets at opposite ends of a gymnasium and out-lined 13 rules to his students at the International Training School of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), which later became Springfield College. Naismith (1861-1939) was a physical education teacher who was seeking a team sport with limited physical contact but a lot of running, jumping, shooting, and the hand-eye coordination required in handling a ball. The peach baskets he hung as goals gave the sport the name of basketball.

Naismith and his wife were Christians and subscribed to a Christian Missionary magazine from Central America where Naismith saw a feature article about the Aztec ball game called Ollamalitzli and the Mayan game of Ulama. He had also read articles by a New Zealander called Tom Ellison who wrote about ancient Maori ball sports that required a lot of aerial handball skills. He took account of the hole that the round bouncy ball had to go through in the Central American games and the excitement of the traditional Maori game where a round flax ball was passed with speed and dexterity. With his supportive wife he then devised a game suitable for an indoor gymnasium. Winters are cold in Massachusetts.

Basketball was born in the United States, but five of Naismith's original players were Canadians, and the game spread to Canada immediately. It was played in France by 1893; England in 1894; Australia, China, and India between 1895 and 1900; and Japan in 1900. America's game of basketball continued to spread world and today is the second most popular sport in the world. Soccer is king, but American football and baseball lag far behind in both participation and fan base. Basketball is truly an international sport.



Matthew Wilson was drafted #1 by the Washington Bullets, despite his statements that he did not intend to play NBA basketball. I saw Matthew at a fund raiser in New York and asked him why he didn't want to play in the NBA. "It's a great opportunity to keep your name in front in the headlines," I pointed out. "Besides, I would like to see how you match up against the great players."

"Coach, there is so much more that I need to do, that would be impossible to do if I played in the NBA eight months a year. Father McGinnis and I have organized a world-wide disaster relief program that occupies much of my time,"

"But isn't basketball a good way to advertise?" I asked.

"You're right, Coach. It is a perfect way for me to get my message across to millions of people. I realize I couldn't get the press coverage unless I keep playing."

"If that's true, I don't understand why you refuse to play in the NBA?"

"Do you realize how popular basketball is worldwide? Take a look at the FIBA.com website. The NBA is just a small piece of the pie. When is the last time the US won the Olympics games?"

I did a quick look up on my laptop while Matthew waited. I was surprised at what I found. The FIBA is the world governing body for basketball and is formed by five FIBA Zones and 213 National federations of basketball throughout the world. The association was founded in Geneva in 1932, two years after the sport was officially recognized by the International Olympic Committee. Its original name was 'Fédération Internationale de Basketball Amateur'. Eight nations were founding members: Argentina, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, and Switzerland. During the 1936 Summer Olympics held in Berlin, the Federation named James Naismith, the founder of basketball, as its Honorary President. The Federation headquarters moved to Munich in 1956, then returned to Geneva in 2002.

FIBA has organized a FIBA World Championship for men since 1950 and a World Championship for Women since 1953. Both events are now held every four years, alternating with the Olympics. FIBA dropped the distinction between amateur and professional players in 1989, and in 1992, professional players

played for the first time in the Olympic Games. United States' dominance continued until 2002 when a U.S. team made entirely of NBA players finished sixth in the 2002 World Championships. The globalization of basketball was further illustrated by the makeup of the all-tournament teams at the 2002 and 2006 Olympics; only one member of either team was American.

“So how does this fit into your plans?” I asked, still not sure what Matthew had in mind.

“I’m forming an all-star team that will travel around the world. We’ll do clinics for kids, play exhibition games against national teams and maybe raise a little money to address some of the problems in the region.”

“Another Harlem Globetrotters,” I suggested. “All you need is the Washington Generals,” the whipping boys that the globetrotters took along on their tours.

“Don’t minimize what Abe Saperstein and his Globetrotters did for the African American people or for basketball. Their model is a good one, but I’ll let each country provide the competition. I will add a small, political or social agenda, depending upon where we play.”

“Have you thought about how you are going to publicize this tour?” knowing it was a stupid question as soon as I asked. Matthew always thought of everything.

“Did you ever get to know Freddie and his crew in high school?”

“You mean the Freddie that did the lights and sound effects for the pep rallies?”

“Yep; that’s the guy. He also produced the ‘We Kick Ass’ video. The five of them all received degrees from the New York Film Academy and have agreed to help me out. They will be the advance publicity team, produce videos to distribute at clinics, schedule meetings with people I want to meet with, and basically manage my tour.”

“I have to admit that I thought those guys were a little weird, but I’m happy to hear that they are doing well. When do you start?”

“They have been in Rio de Janeiro for two weeks setting things up. Our team is flying to Brazil next week to play a South American all star team captained by Manu Ginobili. I understand President Nestor Kirchner is a huge basketball fan and has agreed to

meet with me to discuss ways we can address Argentina's energy crisis."

"Let me know what I can do to help."

**PHENOM, and the Search for the Ark of the Covenant** - Too good to be true, a mid-year transfer student leads his high school basketball team to the State Championship and along the way helps others become better students and young adults. Ten years later these former classmates are asked to repay their debt when Matthew Wilson is severely injured while searching for the Ark of the Covenant. In the interim, the ancient city of Babylon, the original city of sin, is rebuilt to its former glory despite Biblical prophecies that Babylon will be destroyed.

### Did you know?

- Basketball is the world's second most popular sport, behind soccer.
- The Knights Templar's 900 year search for the Ark is factual.
- The Koran and Bible suggest that the appearance of 'The Mahdi' and the 'Second Coming of the Lord' may be dependent upon finding the Ark of the Covenant.



**Jim Plautz** is a businessman, former basketball player and father of three. Originally from Wisconsin, Jim now makes his home in Tampa, Florida with his wife, Rosann. This is his third novel. "My novels are action thrillers set in a sports environment. My first book ('Out of Bounds') is about golf and my second book ('Double Fault at Roland

Garros') is about tennis. The two Phenom books are about basketball and the search for the Ark of the Covenant."