

## THE STITH BROTHERS

Sam and Tom Stith were born in rural Virginia. Their father died in a drowning accident when they were infants, and their mother took them to Harlem to be among her friends and relatives. Their mother died shortly thereafter, and their maternal grandmother became responsible for their raising. At the grandmother's death while the boys were still young, their oldest sister Eva fought off the local orphanages, became their caretaker and took care of their upbringing. She did an outstanding job.

As very young men they both developed a proficiency at basketball, to the point that they led a team of youngsters who defeated the Catholic High School champions of New York City, St. Francis Prep., in an exhibition game. The result of that was the St. Francis coach offered them both scholarships to St. Francis, located in Brooklyn. They were the first African Americans to play at St. Francis and while they encountered some unpleasantness from schoolmates their experience being educated by Franciscans was an overall good social and academic success.

Sam was the older of the two by a year, and at six feet two inches he was three inches shorter than Tom. He was a playmaker and adept ball handler, while Tom was the scorer with smooth, graceful, athletic moves on the court that could remind one of the Bolshoi. I recall him at his peak scoring with left handed hook shots that he made look so easy you wondered why everyone didn't do it. Except no one else could. They led St. Francis Prep to successive City Championships.

At about this time I was President of the New York City Chapter of St. Bonaventure alumni. St. Bona had dropped football some eight years before, so whenever we had an alumni social event I invited Eddie Donovan, the St. Bona basketball coach to give a talk about team prospects. At one event he told us that Sam Stith had committed to St. Bonaventure. While he had been actively recruited by many large colleges, Sam's experience with Franciscans was apparently the decisive factor. A year later Eddie told us that Sam's experience at the college was so good he had convinced his brother to enrol as well. There was no question of their intelligence and desire for an education, as well as their talent. There followed three years of historic wins by the St. Bonaventure basketball team, setting records for scoring, and for participating in both the NIT and NCAA basketball tournaments. The Stith brothers' conduct as well, both on and off the court and in the classroom, was exemplary. They were definitely a class act. Eva had done a spectacular job.

There came a time when Sam was a Senior that I received a call at my law office from Eddie Donovan. He told me that Eva had received an eviction notice from her Harlem landlord, and asked me to help. I called Eva and arranged to meet her at the court hearing in Landlord and Tenant Court in Harlem. She lived in an apartment that was subject to the Rent Control Laws and it was apparent that the landlord had violated a number of the strict rules involved under those laws. The result of the hearing was the dismissal of the eviction, and her continuing to live in her apartment at a reduced rent. (I was the only attorney present in that courtroom representing a tenant. The experience had an effect on my future commitment to pro bono work in prisons and small claims court)

At some point in our relationship I invited Sam and Tom to dinner at our home in Rockville Centre. It was a fun, festive occasion for us and our small children, but the most comical part was our arrival home from my office in my commuter car, a VW Beetle. It was a experience to see those two huge bodies unwind from inside that tiny car.

In Tom's senior year, after Sam's graduation, he was selected for his second successive year as an All American, and led St. Bonaventure to an appearance in the NCAA tournament. It was in the two games of that tournament that Tom developed symptoms that ultimately led to a tragic outcome. His scoring had dropped off considerably. He was also losing weight.

At the National Basketball Association draft Tom was picked by the Knickerbockers as their first choice, second overall in the draft. After the results were made known he called me and asked me to represent him in contract negotiations with the Knicks, then led by Ned Irish. I told hm I had no experience in this area, but he was unfazed and insisted. I agreed. The contract was delivered to my office, Tom arrived, we went over it clause by clause. There was nothing objectionable about it from my perspective, nor from Tom's. I recall one of the first paragraphs stated "Player agrees to report to training camp in good physical condition." The contract was for two years and provided for what was a large salary in those pre-TV and marketing days. It was signed and delivered to Madison Square Garden.

At the same time Tom asked me to represent him in the purchase of a newly constructed home in Lakeview, Long Island. It was an upscale black community not far from our home in Rockville Centre. The contract was signed and delivered to the builder with a check for the deposit, ten percent of the purchase price. Tom was engaged, his fiancée was a nurse in Manhattan, and his salary as a high draft choice by the Knicks put him on track to a successful career and a good life.

Within two weeks of the signing of the two contracts Tom was diagnosed with an advanced case of tuberculosis. The cause of his weight loss and declining performance became obvious.

The Knicks', and Ned Irish's, response was immediate. Notwithstanding the terms of the contract requiring him to report in good physical condition they would not only pay him the agreed upon salary, they would undertake and pay for his treatment at a TB sanatorium upstate until his health was restored, when he could return to the team.

Meanwhile, I called the builder of his new home in Lakeview, who was not represented by counsel. As soon as I identified myself he expressed his concern for Tom's welfare and promised to return the ten percent deposit immediately. I hadn't needed to ask for it. He was a Knicks fan, but more important, a very decent human being.

A year passed, and I would periodically receive a note from Tom indicating progress with treatment of the disease. (His roommate at Bonas, Fred Crawford, had also been diagnosed with TB, but it was early and he had not shown symptoms.) Finally, I received a letter that he had been declared cured, and would come to see me at the office. When he arrived I was stunned at

his obesity. The regimen at the time for treatment for TB included total rest. No exercise whatever. He told me he had met with the Knicks coach as well as Ned Irish, the President, and that he had been cleared to begin exercising to get in shape for the coming season, still at least five months away.

The exhibition season was to begin with a game at the Garden against the Boston Celtics. I attended, and welcomed the extended cheers that greeted the announcement of Tom's name as a starter. The entire eighteen thousand fans were aware of his ordeal. The game started and it became almost immediately clear that the disease had effected the course of Tom's career. The damage to his lungs had been so extensive that he had barely enough stamina to run up and down the court two or three times before becoming exhausted. For the rest of that year Tom was mostly on the bench. It was to the credit of the Knicks and Ned Irish that he remained on the roster and was paid. At the end of the season he was notified that he would not be resigned for the next year. Tom played for two years in small towns in small leagues. He suffered an injury in an auto accident that convinced him to seek another career path. He had a successful career with the current owners of the Knicks and Madison Square Garden. Sam, meanwhile, after a short stint with a professional team, joined Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company and enjoyed a successful career in banking.

Tom died in 2010 from cancer and kidney problems. He was survived by a daughter, as well as his wife Gladys, a girl he met while a St .Bonaventure student in Olean, New York . They had been married for over fifty years. Sam retired to Arizona. He and his first wife have also been married for over fifty years and have also successfully raised a family

Sam and Tom had been virtually inseparable their entire lives. Sam is quoted in a newspaper article after Tom's death as having constantly been told by Eva to be a good brother. Going to a party? "Take Tom." Going to a game? "Take Tom." Going anywhere? "Take Tom." Finally, when he was married he told Eva "I'm not taking Tom on my honeymoon."

Good brothers, good men, good fathers and husbands. And fantastic memories of graceful, gifted athletes.