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Both players wrestled for the rebound. Each gripped it with two hands, trying to rip it away from the other, when the referee blew the whistle. *Twieeeet!* Although the play was over, the boys kept grappling for control of the ball. The referee blew his whistle again. *Twieeeet. Twieeeet!* He blew it two, three, four more times as he raced over to separate the boys locked in combat. Finally, Nigel let go of the ball and pushed it into the number five on the chest of his opponent.

Nigel stormed to the bench where Coach Shabaka was waiting. The boy left holding the ball lost his balance and fell to the floor.

“Nigel, you know better. On this team, we don’t do that,” said Coach Shabaka as Nigel plopped down and slammed his fist on the bench.

“But, Coach —” Nigel pleaded.

“But nothing. That’s how you get kicked out of the game. On the Power, we don’t fight, you understand?”

“But, Coach Shabaka, he started it.”

Half-Court Trap

“Ya, Coach, they started it,” a few of the other boys chimed in, walking off the court toward the bench.

“I don’t care who started it. Boys, it ends now,” said their coach. “I’ve taught you guys to be tough, to play tough. But it doesn’t mean you fight.”

Nigel shuffled his feet in anger. His eyes were glossy with rage. “But, Coach, he called me fat!”

“Who called you fat?” asked Coach Shabaka.

Nigel jumped to his feet, pointing in the direction of the opponent’s bench.

“Number 5. He been calling me ‘fat-boy baller’ all game!” Nigel said.

“Ya, Coach, the Tigers have been calling us names,” said Asim. He was bent over, trying to catch his breath. “They . . . they say that we suck. That we should be playing in the girls’ league.”

“Really?! Girls’ league? I’m sure the girls from my daughter’s team could tear all you apart on the court,” said Coach Shabaka.

“They talk a lot of trash, Coach, and Number 5 goes to my school,” said Sundeeep from the bench. “He’s always getting in fights.”

“Okay, boys, I get it,” said Coach Shabaka. “I’ll have a talk with their coach. In the meantime, I need you to stay focused on the game. This is summer league playoffs. There’s no next week if we don’t win today. So don’t let these boys get under your skin. We’re down eleven points. We can get that back. Let’s finish



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the quarter strong. Let's pull out this win and play in the championship."

The boys huddled closer together as Coach Shabaka gave further instruction.

"Nigel, you and Kash run that pick and roll again. Everyone else spread the floor. Rebound when the shot goes up. Make sure you are sliding your feet on defence. Keep your hands up, ready to poke that ball out when they show it. We got this, guys. We got this! Hands in. Power on three. One, two, three!"

The boys extended their hands to the middle of the huddle, stacking one on top of the other and hollered as loud as they could. "POWER!"

Kash and Nigel did just as Coach Shabaka told them. Nigel was patient, crossing the ball left to right like a hypnotist as Number 5 guarded him. A slight head nod signalled Kash to run up and stand against Number 5's left shoulder, preventing him from following Nigel. Number 5 crashed into Kash's chest, freeing Nigel to dribble to his right and score easily. Nigel gave Number 5 a look that said, *Ya, you can't guard me* while running backward, getting ready to play defence. The Power were down nine points now, with five minutes left in the game.

Number 11 brought the ball up the court for the Tigers, waiting for his teammates to get in place. They spread the court as Number 5 cut through the middle of the defence to receive the pass. Nigel tried to follow,





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but was a step behind. Number 5 had an open layup when Kash flew in from behind, blocking the shot off the backboard. The ball ricocheted to half court. Nigel chased after it and quickly scooped up the pumpkin. He scored easily on a breakaway. The Power were down by seven points. They continued to play with discipline, and were able to cut the score to three with just two minutes left on the clock.

Feeling extra confident, the Power forced the Tigers to throw up a difficult shot that clanked off the side of the rim. Asim grabbed the rebound and ran the ball up the court, looking for an easy score. However, the Tigers got back on time.

The Power set up their offence, every player getting in place. Nigel set a pick for Asim and rolled toward the basket, his hand up, looking for the pass. Nigel caught the pass near the baseline and two players ran toward him. Nigel was trapped. He had to shoot a difficult shot from behind the backboard or get rid of the ball before the Tigers surrounded him. Then Nigel noticed Asim wide open under the basket. He bounced a pass under Number 5's hand to Asim for an uncontested score. The Power were down one with less than a minute on the clock.

The Power set up a full-court press, guarding the Tigers' players on both sides of the court as the Tigers tried to inbound the ball. The referee began his count, as Number 5 searched for a teammate to catch the





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inbound pass. One-two-three-four the referee counted on his hand with fingers high in the air. If he counted to five, it would result in a turnover and it would be the Power's ball. Number 5 quickly vaulted a pass forward to his Number 11, who was cutting down the sideline. Number 11 fumbled the pass, and struggled to get control of the ball and dribble at the same time.

Coach Shabaka was yelling at the Power players, "Foul him. Foul him!" Nigel charged in and stole the ball with only nine seconds left on the clock. Nigel knew he was going to win the game for the Power. He dribbled as fast as he could through and around Tiger defenders, as if they were pylons in practice. Only one defender stood between him and the game-winning layup. Number 5 stood in his defensive stance, waiting for Nigel to drive.

I'll show him who's fat, Nigel thought as he got closer to the basket. *He wants to mess with me! I'm gonna mess him up and win the game at the same time.* All his self-talk caused Nigel to become confused. He couldn't decide whether to lay the ball up or take a jumpshot for the win. The confusion stunted his jump. He had no lift. He ended up floating something between a shot and a layup. He watched the ball as it left his hands, and hoped that it would drop through the net.

Nigel's indecision prompted Number 5 to swoop in and gobble up the shot with one hand. *Blaaap!*



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He slapped the ball back into Nigel's face. Nigel fell to the ground. Number 5 stood above him, wagging his index finger, saying, "Not today. No, no sir. Not today, fat-boy baller."

Nigel watched Number 5 turn to his teammates, laughing. "Can you believe Chubs over here? If he dropped a few pounds, he might be able to jump a little higher next time. Somebody get this guy a stretcher, cuz he too heavy to even pick himself up."