LONG AGO, IN A COUNTRY FAR AWAY, A YOUNG PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER TURNED A RAGTAG HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL SQUAD INTO A NATIONAL TEAM WITH THE DISCIPLINE AND SKILLS TO BEAT A FOREIGN POWER. THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW TOM GOUTTIERRE, WITH ASSISTS FROM BILL BRADLEY AND JOHN WOODEN, BECAME …

THE WIZARD OF KABUL

BY CHRIS BALLARD

Photographs courtesy of Tom Gouttierre
THERE WOULD BE MANY MOMENTS WHEN TOM GOUTTIERRE WOULD WONDER HOW HE, A BAKER’S SON FROM A SMALL TOWN IN OHIO, CAME TO BE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD, IN AFGHANISTAN. BUT NONE QUITE AS UNLIKELY AS THIS.

LOOKING AROUND THE village square that night in 1970, he could make out the snow-dusted peaks of the Hindu Kush, gilded by the moon’s glow. He could see the cluster of dark, bearded men wearing pistol straps, and beyond them the villagers. But most of all he could see the gangly man beside him, the NBA champion who had come here because of a Rudyard Kipling story and was now playing harmonica with every fiber in his 6’5” body. For while men wearing guns in the Hindu Kush had never heard of the New York Knicks, they did know rock ‘n’ roll. So Gouttierre, the daydreamer turned Peace Corps volunteer turned improbable international basketball icon, sang his lungs out. When the two Americans finished “Blue Suede Shoes,” there was a moment of silence. And then cheering. So on they played, till all the stars were out.

In the years that followed, as he watched the country he loved be torn apart, Gouttierre clung to memories such as this, just as those who love basketball in Afghanistan cling to the memory of his time there. Mention “Mr. Tom” and they will talk about the ripple effect of his presence and about the legends he coached during the country’s golden age, before the civil war, the Communist takeover, the Soviet occupation and all that followed, from puppet dictators to mass killings to the Taliban’s rise, the U.S. invasion and the muddle of reconstruction. Some can even recall the whole Forrest Gump-like narrative—can tell you about Gouttierre’s encounters with John Wooden and Hamid Karzai and about that historic game against an international power, after which so much seemed possible for Afghanistan.

In the end, it’s a story about one man’s enduring influence on a country, and its influence on him. About what basketball can achieve, and what it cannot. For while the game is not a savior in troubled places like Afghanistan—no sport is—it is something else: a green tendril sprouting in the rubble, an indicator of a nation’s health. To play requires teamwork and cooperation. It requires tashkeel.

Full story in the July 22, 2013, print issue of Sports Illustrated
Also watch for the full story at sportsillustrated.com

FRONT PHOTO NAMES:
Top row, from left: Sakhi (SS), Fridun (H), Rahim (SS), Khaled (H), Baray (H), Sefat (SS), unknown (SS), Ismael (H), and Shahid (SS).
Bottom row, from left: Coach Tom Gouttierre (H), Azim (H), Khodiequl (SS), and Mir Ahmad (SS).
H = Habibia
SS = Sports School

MR. TOM and his players.
SHUKOOR, his sister, Khairiyah, and Mr. Tom’s wife, Marylu.
HAMID Karzai, future president of Afghanistan, and Mr. Tom.
HABIBIA’s court, newly paved.

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