Old School Loses a Teacher:  
A Recollection of Fred Zacharias

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Long before becoming Fred Zacharias’s dean at the University of San Diego School of Law, I was his faculty colleague and frequent companion in pick-up basketball games at the campus gym. Others will write of Fred’s accomplishments as a scholar and teacher. Let me say a word about Fred on the basketball court.

Neither Fred nor I could pass for an athlete in the Pittsburgh airport. But we had both grown up playing our share of basketball. Fred was an old-school basketball player for the same reason as the rest of us short (by basketball standards), low-flying (by any standard) guys—necessity. And he was good at it. He understood how to set a screen, how to get rebounding position, how to find an open teammate, how to make a pest of himself on defense. He knew when to pass up the long shot to try to get closer to the basket, and how, through a series of maneuvers, an open twenty-footer could become an easy layup.

I cannot recall Fred’s opinion of the three-point shot—an innovation that arrived, along with the designated hitter, during our playing “careers,” and that traditionalists of our time viewed with some skepticism. Fred was not old school in the sense of resisting all change. He would have understood that the three-pointer helped reduce congestion near the basket and made room for the spectacular dunks that he and I could emulate only with coffee and a doughnut. But I suspect that Fred also felt that something was lost when the three-point rule entered the game—that the sport perhaps had conceded too much to an impatient

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generation that had insufficient appreciation of the subtle beauty and teamwork of the old game.

In some ways, Fred was old school off the court as well. He was devoted to his family. He got up before the sun to prepare for classes that he had taught dozens of times before. And his scholarship showed the same patient and incremental style that he displayed on a basketball court. Academics are not immune to the impatience or grandiosity that leads to ill-advised three-pointers. Indeed, academics may succumb more readily, as they not only hoist the shot but also proclaim its success. Fred’s work was incremental and patient, closing in on the basket even if in the end someone else would score the points. Fred regarded the other scholars in his field as his teammates and took as much satisfaction in setting them up to solve a problem as in solving the problem himself.

The last time I played basketball was with Fred. My knees and back had become increasingly troublesome, and I had noted that retirement communities were built around golf courses rather than basketball courts, and probably for a reason. So I had “retired” from the sport. But to support the law school’s Women’s Law Caucus, Fred had offered for auction a three-on-three, faculty-against-student game. He needed faculty teammates to help him make good on his offer.

As usual in these events, the winning bidders were a tall, athletic group seeking revenge for the Socratic method. To their surprise—because they probably had not seen a pick-and-roll before—we screened ourselves to victory. We limped for weeks afterwards, but we knew it was worth it.