

THE MASHER

[DRAFT]\_\_

We hoped that Don Horowitz would join our first-year teaching faculty. From his credentials and our interviews with him in the late fall or early winter of the 1970-71 planning year, we had learned something of his acumen as a lawyer and legal thinker, as well as his breadth of interests in the social sciences and humanities. He appeared to understand what it was we were planning to do and why we were doing it. I was impressed by his devotion to literature and especially to poetry. Indeed, he had come out to the Pacific Northwest by train, not just because he didn't like to fly but also because the trip would give him time to do a lot of reading. So we were all disappointed when he informed us that he would be moving to Western Washington but not joining us. He would be taking a legal position in Seattle, but he wished to remain a friend of Evergreen and to do what he could to help us.

Evidence of this friendship came in February, 1971, when Don called us to ask if he could bring down for preliminary interviews an acquaintance who might turn out to be a strong candidate for a teaching position in the first-year faculty. That candidate, strong indeed, was Tom Meschery, known to the NBA as "The Masher." \_

Tom Meschery, the starting power forward for the Seattle SuperSonics, was one of the leading Big Men of the time in the National Basketball Association. He stands 6-foot-6 and weighed in at 215 pounds through most of his professional playing time, 1962-71. He had been born in Manchuria, China of Russian immigrant parents, who had fled through Siberia to escape the oppression of the Stalin era. After the end of World War II, the family made it to San Francisco, where Tom graduated from St. Mary's College, having played basketball well enough to be named a College All-American. He was a first-round draft-choice of the Philadelphia Warriors and moved west with the team when it became the Golden State Warriors. His Warrior jersey, No. 14, was the first to be retired by the franchise.

After six seasons with the Warriors, Tom was picked up in the expansion draft by the newly formed Seattle SuperSonics. He worked with player-coach Lenny Wilkens for the first four seasons of the new team. Now he was getting ready to retire. His career averages ran to 12.9 points and 8.6 rebounds a game, but he was primarily known for being a defensive enforcer, protecting his teammates, avenging slights to them, and meting out justice to opponents who dared to come inside on him. The Masher.

His teammates knew another side of him, calling him "the Renaissance man" and "very cerebral, a very liberal thinker." And Tom had just published in 1970 his first volume of poetry, *Over the Rim*, which Don Horowitz lent to me. I recall especially a powerful line of a poem on Bill Russell, "Have you ever seen an eagle with a beard?" and the imagery of a poem about professional basketball players trying to sleep in alien and cramped hotel bedrooms on the road, including the illusion of hanging from the ceilings like so many oversized bats. While playing for the Sonics, he had also attended whenever he could the poetry class of Mark

Strand, then a visiting professor at the University of Washington. In addition to this post-graduate study and practice of poetry, Tom brought with him the experience of much undergraduate study of French language and literature, as well as the remarkable linguistic competence which had enabled him, born into Russian and surrounded by Chinese and the Japanese occupiers of Manchuria, to learn English well enough to flourish as a student of literature and then write his own poetry. And through, no doubt, the promotional efforts of Don Horowitz, he was interested, after his forthcoming retirement, in the possibility of teaching at Evergreen.

We were greatly interested in him. It struck my colleagues and me that it would be quite in keeping with the innovative spirit of Evergreen to hire one of the toughest Big Men of the NBA to teach poetry and French. Talk about shattering stereotypes! His first interviews with us also demonstrated that he would contribute life-long habits of humanistic and ethical thoughtfulness to our interdisciplinary mix, and we were ready to offer him a position by March [?], the date on which he was to be honored at a game designated as “Tom Meschery Night.”

At a Provost-and-Deans meeting that Saturday morning, I had no trouble in persuading my colleagues that now would be the appropriate time to offer him a contract. They suggested that I call him with the news on that special day. When I called in the early afternoon, he was taking a nap. His wife said she would relay the message and have him call when he was up. When he did so, he said that the time was one of such activity and confusion for him that he would not give us a firm answer yet. He also said something to the effect that: his team and fans would probably be giving him gifts and accolades in the evening, but nothing that he would receive on this day would honor him more than the offer we were making to him.

Logic required that I go up to Seattle to see my first Supersonics game that evening – mainly as a gesture of collegial solidarity, but also because I wanted to see him and his team in action. It started to snow, and by the time the game had gotten well underway, the late, wet snow had piled up heavily enough on the roof of the old Coliseum that water started leaking down onto the floor. Play had to be interrupted frequently so that the towel boys could dash and wipe up the puddles to save the big bodies going at high speed from sliding into injuries. In the end, the Sonics won, and I went down to wait outside the home-team dressing room. (After all, what is the use of a highly symbolic gesture if no one else sees it?) It took quite a while for Tom, who had been kept busy by reporters, to come out. But we did have the chance to say hello and shake hands. On the way home down I-5, I witnessed what can happen to Western Washington drivers on icy roads – and the peril that more prudent drivers may experience from the skidding of less prudent ones. Still, there was, at least for this day, a sense of having done the right things.

Tom called a few days later to accept the offer, and Evergreen sent out a press release. We had expected that there would be some public interest in the fact that the Masher would be working in humanities and arts at this strange new college. Indeed, stories appeared not just in the sports sections but also on some front-pages of news sections in the regional papers. But there was another dimension for which I

was not prepared. Our hiring of Tom Meschery was considered to be a bold political stroke at a time when there was some talk in the legislature about postponing for at least a year the opening of Evergreen to students. We seemed to the writers to be asserting our intention, despite the suspicions and misunderstandings and even attacks which dogged us, to move ahead at full speed.

During the conversations between Tom and me which followed later in March, several points came up. One was the issue of speedball. I asked Tom if he would miss basketball and added that Evergreen would not have a regulation basketball court for at least a few years. He said that he was not concerned about doing any teaching or coaching of basketball, but that he knew we would be having playing fields early on which would be appropriate for speedball. Did I know what it was? Well, yes.

During the spring semesters in two years of physical education courses required at my undergraduate college, we had been taught how to play speedball and allowed to play the game for several weeks – like soccer, but played by hand-dribbling, -passing, and -shooting at a goal or over the goal-line. You didn't have to be particularly tall or muscled-up, and you didn't have to learn the intricacies of soccer footwork. It had been fun. What had not been fun, however, but rather a source of chagrin for me had occurred early in my year of graduate study in Germany. In the informational materials provided by the University of Bonn, there was mention of the availability of a *Handballplatz*. I had been playing a lot of handball in my last two years of college and first two of graduate school. So I packed my gloves and several of the small hard-rubber balls to continue playing during my time at Bonn. In the second week of the fall-winter semester, I had gone over to the Physical Education complex (*Leibesübungsanstalt*) to have a look at the handball courts. When I asked, "Please, where is the *Handballplatz*?" the receptionist pointed out the window to what looked like a soccer field with somewhat smaller frame-and-netting goals at either end. Then it dawned on me that our "speedball" is European *Handball*. At least I hadn't been carrying my gloves and little ball.

Tom continued by outlining a project which would have been worthy indeed for an "alternative" college. He and a number of his NBA colleagues were in the habit of getting together in the off-season to play speedball, for fun and conditioning outdoors. If it would be appropriate as an extracurricular activity for him, he should like to foster the playing of the sport at Evergreen. Perhaps, for the payment or the contribution of room and board, he could get some NBA stars to come here in the summer to play and teach the game. Perhaps some physical-education teachers and coaches in the area would be interested in coming to the campus to learn it so that they could take it back to their own students. Evergreen might make a good name for itself in a useful way. [Sigh ... it would have been well worth doing.]

In our conversations, he also responded to my curiosity about two points relating to his playing of basketball. During the speech-making on "Tom Meschery Night," there had been joking references to the number of fouls called on him during his career. I asked him about the reason for this distinction. He responded that if he

had been faster, he could have gotten around the players he was guarding to front them legally. Since he wasn't that fast, he had to stop them some way or another, and occasionally the referees would be watching. I also said that I had noticed during the game that night that he was continually talking to the opponents he was guarding and asked what he was saying to them. He answered that some of it was what has more recently been called "trash talking," but that for the most part he was chanting, "I'm right on you ... I'm right on you."

We were getting along, and I was looking forward to having Tom attend the June retreat which would bring together the planning faculty members and the newly hired first-year teachers who would be joining them. But shortly before that time, Tom called to say that he needed to come down to talk to me about something urgent. When we met, he told me about a conflicting opportunity or duty or even obligation which had arisen. It might mean that he could not join the first-year faculty after all. He had been one of a small group of concerned athletes who had developed and proposed the idea of a Sports Corps, to parallel the Peace Corps. American athletes would spend time in foreign countries to teach people sports which they did not play or played very little but were interested in playing and promoting. The venture would be especially important for sports which would form part of the 1972 Summer Olympic Games. Basketball was now such a sport, and there were countries which wanted to form and to train teams.

Those lobbying for the formation of a Sports Corps had pushed matters to the point that the Congress had authorized its formation. As one of the main movers-and-shakers in the venture, Tom had been asked to spend 1971-72 organizing for the Olympics a national basketball team in Venezuela. He had talked the talk and now felt obligated to walk the walk. He asked if there would be any way that his faculty contract could be deferred for a year so that he could go to Venezuela – where he would also be enlarging his linguistic competence by intensive study and then extensive use of Spanish – and then join us in the fall of 1972. Yes, there was a way. The Provost and Deans had already set a precedent for deferring a contract for a year. Mary Ellen Hillaire, who was to have started teaching at Evergreen in the coming fall, had been offered a fellowship for a year in Washington, D.C. which not only would add to her prestige but also add to her potential usefulness here. I was sure I could persuade my colleagues to make the same arrangement for Tom.

I raised, however, one serious question: Congress might have authorized the formation of the Sports Corps, but had it appropriated the money to make it work? Tom did not know whether the money had been appropriated yet, but he and his fellow concerned athletes had been assured by their D.C. contacts that things were going smoothly. I warned him that he had better find out about the appropriation and do what he could to move the process along, or else he might be left hanging. We-the-academic-administrators made the arrangements to defer Tom's teaching contract, and there matters stood during the summer of 1971.

In early September, Dick Nichols, our public-relations officer working with the media, called to alert me to a serious situation. A sports reporter of the Seattle *Post-*

*Intelligencer* had called him about a wire-service story that Tom Meschery had just accepted the job of coach of the Carolina Cougars in the American Basketball Association. Meschery had been slated, so far as anyone at the *P.-I.* had known, to start teaching at Evergreen. What had happened, and what was the official reaction from Evergreen? Dick had stalled him off to give me fifteen minutes to react, but the reporter would then be calling me. It was my immediate reaction that this move, if the wire-service story was accurate, would void Tom's contract. I called the Provost, David Barry, to confirm my judgment that such a step, taken without any communication or consultation by Tom, would indeed render the contract void. Dave agreed and advised that the answer to the reporter's question should be brief and couched in such terms as, "If this has happened, then ...." The reporter called, I answered, our institutional answer appeared as part of the news story in the *P.-I.* and other papers, and that was that. Beside the disappointment that Tom would not be joining us at all, I was curious indeed about why he had said nothing and allowed the news story to break over our heads. I waited, but no word came.

Several months later, I was at a working luncheon and noticed Don Horowitz at a table nearby. I went up to him, said hello, and asked what on earth had happened with Meschery and why hadn't he called me. Don said, "Charlie, he's scared of you." The *Masher* ... scared of *me*?" Well, perhaps, more accurately, acutely embarrassed. Don said, in effect, that Tom knew that Evergreen and I had done everything we could to accommodate him and that I had given him a warning which he hadn't heeded. We had every right to be confused and irritated, but Tom had also been confused and irritated by the way in which the Sports Corps hadn't worked out.

Several more months later, I saw in a sale-bin of LP's a recording of Cossack songs by a second-string Russian chorus (not Serge Jaroff and the Don Cossacks – one doesn't give these away) and decided to see if I couldn't get a rise out of Meschery. I found his address and sent the LP to him, with a note indicating my sorrow that we would not be working together. Tom responded with, yes, acute embarrassment. The funds for the Sports Corps had never been appropriated. He and Joanne had sold their house and taken an apartment, waiting for news of when and how they should move to Venezuela. He had no job for the next year. What is more, it was becoming the time of year when basketball teams start preparing for the new season. Through high school and college and his professional career, he had been in the seasonal rhythm of getting ready and playing. The Carolina Cougars had called, and he had accepted the job. He hadn't really known what to tell me. I could think only that, if he had told me, maybe we could have worked something out. We weren't all that bad at working things out in those days.

There are at least two more stories I know which can and should be connected with Tom.

(1) The Sonics started miserably in the 1977-78 season. Twenty-two games into that season, they were trailing in their division. Lenny Wilkens was brought in as coach. Tom Meschery, Lenny's friend, wanted to do something to encourage him.

Tom went from Truckee, California, to Reno and placed a bet [\$50?] that the Sonics, despite heavy odds against them [200-1?] would win the NBA championship for the season. He told Lenny about the bet as a gesture of solidarity. Lenny took the Sonics through a remarkable season, upsets in the playoffs, to a seventh and deciding game in which the Sonics lost to the Washington Bullets 105-99. In addition to earning Lenny's gratitude, Tom had come seven points short of receiving an unlikely but considerable pay-off. (In the next season, Lenny took the Sonics to the championship against the Bullets, who won the first game and lost the next four.)

(2) Tom had a hand-voice-mind in another matter touching Evergreen. A few years into our operation [check date of registration], Rick Simonson showed up in my office. Rick had been a towel-boy with the Sonics when Tom had been playing. They had talked about life and about poetry. Tom had told Rick about Evergreen. Rick chose to enroll at Evergreen. He was interested in setting up an internship with the lobbying group Allied Arts of Seattle, the offices of which were located close to the Elliot Bay Book Company, where he had an opportunity for part-time work. I served as faculty sponsor of his first individual-learning contract, in arts management and the fostering of interest in literature. Rick was—and is -- bright, committed, focused.

He went on his chosen path, valuable to his calling and his community. In the October/November 1998 premiere issue of *Book*, David Laskin wrote about "The Elliot Bay Book Company: the Heart of Seattle's Pioneer Square." Laskin said: "If you can catch him as he darts through the cedar-shelved stacks, you'll find Rick Simonson the ideal guide to the kingdom he helped store owner and founder Walter Carr create. Elliot Bay's major buyer and readings coordinator, Simonson has been a behind-the-scenes genie for the past 23 years; also the master of a literary switchboard that extends from Puget Sound to New York and beyond. A man of quick speech, strong opinions and a deeply informed devotion to books. In short, the right man in the right job.... Simonson points out that the store provides a service that book outlets don't, won't and can't: 'Part of what happens here is an exchange of literary energy, ongoing conversations around books. Community is something we cultivate and care about – a tangible and literal community and also the larger book-loving public. We want to have a hand in making books happen' .... it is this store that provides an anchor for the surrounding neighborhood and a magnet for the near and far. In a quarter of a century, it has made itself an indispensable local institution." Rick received an award in [find the date and the wording].

Reflection: Would Rick Simonson have done what he has done without any connection to Evergreen.? Probably. But we don't know. Things happen as they happen. We live in and through contingencies. Stephen Jay Gould keeps pointing out – wisely – that on the larger scale of evolving life any rewinding and starting again of the tape would produce a result quite different from current circumstances. In our much smaller scale we may ask the question, "What difference did this happening or this decision make?" We can't know. For example, if the opening of Evergreen had been postponed, perhaps the Legislature might have had second

thoughts about letting this suspect institution open to students at all (not inconceivable), have bought out the contracts of those early Greeners who had longer-term arrangements, and have turned the Library Building into State-office space – or even a correctional facility (as had been mentioned in the corridors of power). Did the announcement of our having hired Tom Meschery tip the balance during this one of the many crises we have endured? Probably not. But it didn't hurt. Thanks, Tom.

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