

Pete Maravich

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Foreword

Pete Maravich may have had as big an impact on the game of basketball as any player in modern history. If a chronicle of his unprecedented athletic achievements is what you're looking for, you'll certainly find it within the pages of this book: more than 40 NCAA records (many of which still stand today); an average of 44 points per game at LSU and 24 points per game over his ten years in the NBA; five *Sports Illustrated* covers; and an illustrious collection of awards, records, milestones, and landmarks too numerous to list.

Even today, two decades after his death, the name "Pistol Pete" inspires awe, respect, and admiration from those both inside and outside the world of sports. He was an icon in the days before salary caps, product endorsements, and celebrity shrouded that term in a cloud of crass commercialism. He was the real deal.

Nevertheless, the awards, records, and recognition were not what ultimately defined Pete Maravich. By his own admission, he reached a point in his life where he realized that fame and fortune were ultimately meaningless in the eternal scheme of things. As he would later say, "Money will buy you anything but happiness. It'll pay your fare to every place but heaven." And so, on a rainy night in 1982, he asked Jesus Christ to fill his life and his heart. For the remainder of his days on earth, which ended in 1988, "Pistol Pete's" passion was not basketball or any other earthly pursuit, but his love for God and his desire to share it with others.

And that is where he and I crossed paths for the first time. I did not know Pete well, but we did begin to develop a friendship when, in 1987, I invited him to share his story on our *Focus on the Family* radio program. On January 5, 1988, the day the broadcast was to be recorded, I had the audacity to invite "Pistol Pete" to join me and several of my colleagues for an early morning pickup basketball game at a local church gym. Early morning games of this sort had been a tri-weekly tradition among us for years.

The sports legend was very gracious to accept our invitation and to endeavor not to embarrass the rest of us too severely while we lumbered around the court as only over-the-hill guys can.

I quickly learned that Pete had been suffering from unidentified pain in his right shoulder for many months. If it had been in his left, physicians would have suspected it was his heart. The problem was incorrectly diagnosed as "neuralgia." Aside from playing in the NBA "Legends Game," he had not

been on the basketball court in more than a year. Nevertheless, we had a good time that morning.

Pete moved at about one-third his normal speed, and the rest of us huffed and puffed to keep up. We played for about forty-five minutes and then took a break to get a drink. Pete and I stayed on the court and talked while waiting for the other players to come back. He spoke of his desire to play more recreational basketball after his struggles with shoulder pain were over.

“How do you feel today?” I asked.

“I feel great,” he said.

Those were Pete’s last words. I turned to walk away, and for some reason, looked back in time to see him go down. His face and body hit the boards hard. Still, I thought he was teasing. Pete had a great sense of humor, and I assumed that he was playing off his final comment about feeling good.

I hurried over to where he lay, still expecting to see him get up laughing. But then I saw that he was having a seizure. I held his tongue to keep his air passage open and called for the other guys to come help me. The seizure lasted about twenty seconds, and then Pete stopped breathing. We started CPR immediately, but were never able to get another heartbeat or breath.

Pete died in my arms.

Several of us accompanied the ambulance to the hospital, where we prayerfully watched the emergency room staff try to revive him for another forty-five minutes. But it was no use.

An autopsy revealed a few days later that Pete suffered from a congenital heart malformation and never knew it. That was why his shoulder had been hurting. How he was able to perform such incredible exploits on the basketball court for so many years is a medical mystery. He was destined to drop dead at a fairly young age, and only God knows why it happened during the brief moment when his path crossed mine.

In the world of sports, it’s not about how you start; it’s about how you finish. If you’re a coach, no one will remember your early victories if your team loses the big game at the end of the season. At the same time, legends are made by those who overcome losses and disappointments early to emerge victorious when the championship trophy is up for grabs. Those are the “dream teams” that people remember.

“Pistol Pete’s” life was like that. Without a doubt, his massive, record-smashing contributions to the game of basketball are worthy of the accolades he has received. But his accomplishments and his trophies did not give him satisfaction. Pete found lasting peace and contentment in the saving grace of

God, and I believe he would want to be remembered first and foremost as a passionate follower of Jesus Christ. It's not about how you start; it's about how you finish.

During our basketball game on the morning Pete died, he was wearing a T-shirt that read, "Looking unto Jesus," which is a reference to Hebrews 12:2. That says it all, doesn't it? You'll read a lot about basketball and trophies and fame in this book, and there's no denying the remarkable achievements of one of America's truly great basketball players. However, in the end, I believe the simple message contained on that T-shirt tells you all you need to know about Pete Maravich.

JAMES C. DOBSON, PH.D.

Founder and Chairman of Focus on the Family