

The Six Things I Learned From Basketball

Commissioner Julie Brill
On the Occasion of Being Inducted Into the
Columbia High School Hall of Fame
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Good morning, and thank you to the Hall of Fame committee, the student council, and the teachers and staff for inviting me here to speak today and for this honor.

I also have to thank the coaches who took a chance on me and let me walk on as a starter after not even playing high school ball... the teammates who have had my back from day one...and, of course my family: my two beautiful boys , my wonderful husband, and my mom ... You've always been there for me ...

Ok, I know – we are not in Springfield, Mass. This is not the basketball hall of fame. But indulge my fantasy for a moment. I've been a basketball fan since I had a locker over in the C-Wing. And now I live in New England, work in DC, and root for the Miami Heat – surely that deserves some sort of recognition, at least for bravery.

I admit, I am tempted to pull out some hackneyed basketball clichés for this speech:

“There is no ‘i’ in ‘team.’”

“You miss 100% of the shots you don't take.”

“When you can't buy a basket, remember to share the sugar and shoot from downtown.”

But I'll spare you a tortured attempt to explain my career trajectory in these terms—because, as sad as I am to say it, my jump shot just isn't what it used to be.

I am instead, as David mentioned, a commissioner on the Federal Trade Commission. You may not have heard of us, but we are a bipartisan agency of the federal government charged with taking care of consumers – which means taking care of everyone, because everyone goes to stores to buy food, clothes, or Miami Heat memorabilia; surfs the web for deals or fun or to learn; or downloads Angry Birds. At the FTC, we make sure businesses don't get together to raise prices unfairly; that scammers don't trick people into buying phony products or services; and that your privacy and identity are respected when you go online or use a mobile device.

Before I came to the FTC, I worked in state law enforcement focusing on much the same thing. Sounds dead serious, but the truth is, it is a lot of fun helping consumers who can't help themselves.

I could talk all day about our cases: how we made Mark Zuckerberg apologize publicly for Facebook's cavalier approach to protecting consumers' privacy; or how we got \$100 million for homeowners who were charged huge fees by Countrywide, a Bank of America subsidiary – like \$250 to mow a lawn – after it foreclosed on their houses; or how we got \$40 million for consumers who bought Skechers “shape up” sneakers, which were supposed to help you “love your butt”, but didn't quite “shape up”.

But truth be told, some of you may be more interested in how you, like me, can go from your seat in the Columbia High School auditorium to a presidential appointment in Washington DC. I didn't land a presidential appointment because I worked on Wall Street or at a large corporate law firm. I didn't get to Washington because of political connections, or because I gave a lot of money to campaigns.

No, I got there following six rules that I learned from...basketball.

Rule Number 1: Don't be afraid to be the only one in the room wearing a Dwayne Wade jersey. Or a Miami Heat cap for that matter.

Commit to your passion – even if it isn't what everyone else is doing – even if it won't, according to College Confidential, get you into Harvard – even if it mortifies your parents – actually, maybe especially if it mortifies your parents! In high school, I threw myself into the school musicals, the Parnassian Society, the Columbian, and cheering for our Cougars, none of which won me a seat at the cool lunch table. But acting skills came in handy when I was part of the team that brought down big tobacco. And writing a well-constructed sentence is useful when I have to testify before Congress. Commit to the things you love without trying to figure out how they might relate to the rest of your life. It is impossible to predict what you will need down the road, and besides, you'll have more fun.

Rule Number 2: Be Jeremy Lin.

Lin's coach once called him “the weakest guy on the team”. So what do you do if you graduate from Harvard with a degree in economics and a spotty college hoops career? Naturally, you put yourself up for the NBA draft, where an Ivy-League player has not been picked since 1995. And when you are not drafted, you go to summer league try-outs, play in the D Leagues, get recruited and traded a couple of times without seeing court time, eventually start for the New York Knicks, lead a winning streak, and spark a worldwide phenomenon known as Linsanity.

In other words, do the unexpected once in a while.

Sometimes you don't know when doing something different will open a new door to your future. When I was marching on the treadmill toward a law degree at New York University, I made the unconventional decision to go to Mexico to learn Spanish and help Guatemalan refugees. I returned with a renewed commitment to public service and a focus that lasted the rest of my life. Sometimes you have to get off the marked path in order to find your way.

Rule Number 3: Don't get a big tattoo of Kobe Bryant...at least not where anyone can see it.

Your online activity is like one, big tattoo. What you put on Facebook may still be there in thirty years. Be as aware of your online reputation as you are of your reputation here in these halls. Don't hurt your chances for your dream college or that great job because you forgot that everything in the online world is written in indelible ink.

Rule Number 4: It's not about winning; it's how you play the game.

Actually, that is not true; it is about winning. Seriously, who wouldn't choose winning over losing? But how do you win life? Not by racking up the most dollars or logging the most hours in the office. You win – we all do – when you use your talents, passions, and skills to help others.

Look around you and you'll discover problems that need fixing. Whether it is finding a cure for cancer, or connecting kids in Africa to learning centers in the US, or helping an elder down the street, focus on helping others. You will be much more likely to do well by doing good.

Rule Number 5: Work hard, practice, and keep yourself in shape; when the coach calls you off the bench, you want to be ready to play.

For me, the call was from the President. For you, it could be from your family, your school, your community, or maybe even your country. Make yourself the best person you can be, and you will be prepared to answer that call.

Rule Number 6 – and this is the most important one: Be like LeBron. Love your mom, and let her know it. Thanks for coming today, Mom.

And thanks to all of you for your attention, and thank you once again for this honor.