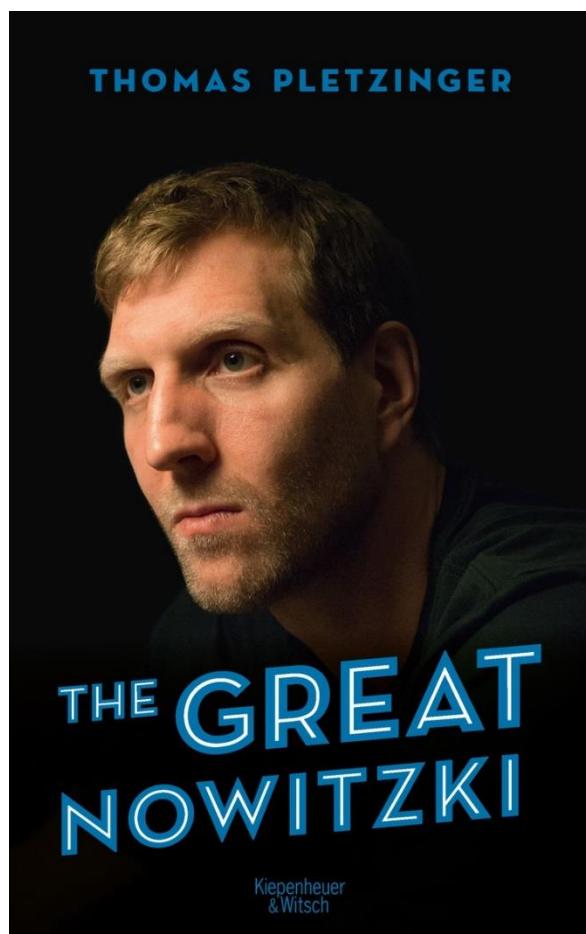


# The Great Nowitzki

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Biography  
500 pages  
Publication date: August 2019

World rights with Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG  
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## That's Game

**August 2017**

Dirk Nowitzki is standing in the sports center in Randersacker, a suburb of Würzburg, in the late summer of 2017, and he is wringing his soaking wet T-shirt out. The linoleum floor of the multipurpose hall is blue-grey like the rainy sky outside and it's 59 degrees, the opposite of a Texan summer. He is leaving tomorrow, heading back to America, back for the start of his 20th season with the Dallas Mavericks. Having just turned 39, everyone expects this year to be Nowitzki's final year as a professional athlete, and he probably even expects it himself. He fishes a new shirt out of his bag. During these summer workouts, he always works his way through three or four shirts and drinks a couple of liters of water. His next shirt reads “*That's Game*” in dark green. Quitting time. Game over. Time to go home.

*That's game.*

His 30,000th point is a distant memory. An eternity has passed, the length of an entire long summer lies between. The Mavericks missed out on the playoffs and Dirk's season was over in April. He only sporadically watched the playoffs and finals on TV after Malaika and Max were in bed in the evening. The day the Golden State Warriors became champions Dirk had already been in the gym, grinding, for quite awhile.

And this morning, he's already been at it for two hours. Strength training, sprints, explosive drills. His old friend Simon Wagner sprints with him, keeps Dirk's time, hounds him through the plastic cones, pushes him. One more, one

more, come on! Simon is short and fit and also plays basketball. The two of them play tennis together as well, both on TG Würzburg's squad, and Dirk was Simon's best man. They've known each other for an eternity.

Geschwindner enters the gym. We nod. It's a change of shifts, now comes the ball. Wagner and I stand on the sidelines and watch Dirk and Holger begin with their work. Dirk's muscles must be warmed up by now but he stumbles across the court like he's been retired for ages. Wagner watches and smiles. "He's three kilo overweight," he says. "Every kilo is killing his knees." Dirk has been eating like a hunter-gatherer for a few weeks again. The paleo diet is his new thing to get back into game shape in the off-season. No processed foods, no cultivated cereals, no flour, just nuts and meat. Wagner says his mom, Helgus, is even baking nut bread for him. Dirk and Wagner used to go out for beers but now they race one another in the summer.

Holger and Dirk slowly go through their rituals. Wagner is gone and I'm sitting on the gym floor, writing along. *An audience of one.* I've seen the same things happen in the same sequence for years: shots from close to the basket, from mid-range, from behind the three-point line to the right and to the left, pirouettes, sidesteps from the free-throw line, shots in motion, shots while squatting, squats and rolls, free throws with the left hand and the right. The mood is different today, full of jokes but also melancholic, perhaps because he's going to Dallas tomorrow. Jessica has already left with the kids. Dirk moans and groans, and gasps and curses. Geschwindner doubles over from Dirk's moaning and groaning. "Careful," Nowitzki says. "You'll see what it's like when you're as

old as me.” Then they do what they’ve always done – or at least that’s how it seems to me.

At the start of things, they talk. Dirk tells Holger about England, about the stop he and Jessica made in London on their way to Würzburg. Her brothers are professional soccer players – Martin is in the Premier League with Swansea and Marcus plays on the left wing for Derby County – and they hadn’t seen one another for a while. In England, Dirk isn’t recognized as quickly as he is in the basketball nations of the world. The English don’t ask for autographs and he was able to go to the soccer match like everyone else. And like everyone else, he walked right out of the stadium with the crowd after a match on Anfield Road in Liverpool. No one addressed him. He was just a *tall bloke*. That’s it.

Jessica and Dirk also used this opportunity to visit the British artist Damien Hirst with their kids. Jessica had been in contact with him for years. “You know him,” Dirk shouts across the gym. “Hirst? The guy with the shark in aspic?”

“Formaldehyde,” Geschwindner says.

“Comes from the Bible or something,” Dirk says.

“The Golden Calf.”

“I never learned Latin.”

Hirst’s house was wild, he says as he catches the ball, puts it on the floor, tak tadamm, bends his knees, goes up, shoots and hits it. The entrance was bizarre and he only realized after a couple of seconds that Hirst must have purchased an entire graveyard. Tak tadamm. The whole floor was made out of

marble and granite and quartz gravestones lying flat on the ground. They must have been standing on hundreds of names and thousands of dates from previous centuries, as well as on countless inscriptions in Latin and family mottos polished up neatly.

“Freak,” Dirk says, hitting another three.

While there, Malaika wanted to hold one of Hirst’s famous diamond skulls in her hands. The thing was insanely expensive, the most expensive artwork in the world. Afterwards, she made a couple of paintings with Hirst, *Spin Paintings*, by splattering red and blue and yellow and green on canvases that were rotating. *Tak tadamm*. One more three pointer, then three free throws with the right hand, then three with the left, then everything once more from the top. “Hirst,” Dirks says between shots. “Looks like I have to talk myself into it today.”

A few days ago, Dirk saw another photo of his 30,000th point. He’s constantly being asked about it and now he wants to go through the whole thing again. Geschwindner says Dirk had looked up way too early. He had followed the ball, its trajectory.

“It was a terrible shot,” Dirk says.

*Tak tadamm.*

*Swish.*

“True,” Geschwindner says. “You went up too early and it was too flat and too long.”

*Tak tadamm.*

*Bonk.*

“Still went in.”

*Swish.*

“This isn’t just for fun you know.”

*Tak tadamm.*

*Swish.*

“You might be inclined to think: he scored 30,000 points, by now it’s all just routine. But it has to be established each and every day.”

Over the last few years, I’ve watched every part of their workout dozens of times. I’ve watched them in summer and winter, in Dallas and Rattelsdorf, Ljubljana and elsewhere. They always follow the same pattern: their initial talking is followed by pure action. The two of them trail off – sentences become words, words give way to gestures and numbers and shots.

“Watch out now,” Dirk says. “Twenty in a row.”

“Twenty-three,” Geschwindner says.

They break down Dirk’s shot into its individual parts, then twist and turn each and every one. I’m not able to recognize the differences but the two of them are speaking in nuances and intricacies. “I can only concentrate on one thing at a time,” Dirk says and Holger laughs louder than expected.

Nowitzki counts the made baskets, Geschwindner the misses, *makes and misses*, and they never sort the shots into groups of ten. They do this so that the Western way of thinking in decimals – the mental categorization in increments

of ten, in percentage points and odds, in victory and failure, in either or – is already eliminated during practice. They do this so that he never begins to make mathematical calculations during a game situation, so that it never turns into a potential mental weakness. “The number of times the eleventh shot is a miss is disproportionately high,” Geschwindner has explained to me. “Because you’re either pleased or displeased with what you’ve achieved instead of focusing on the mechanics.”

The quantification and evaluation that spectators and journalists passionately engage in so as to better appreciate the sport should not play a role in Dirk’s game. Especially when it matters. Those who do not anticipate failure do not fail and those who do not fail can keep playing forever. Dirk and Holger have been training the unusual thinking of this elite athlete since 1994. The goal of this training is to take the next shot as if it were the only one that mattered. What happened before and what could come later are irrelevant. “You want to make the next shot,” Geschwindner says. “Just the next one.”

The meditative effect that this choreography has on me is something I feel every time. It is extremely fascinating to watch someone completely absorbed in what they are doing. Someone who really *masters* one thing, who moves in strict patterns and, at the same time, is completely free. Someone who is *present* in the moment.

On this summer day in August 2017, at 11:41 of all things, that is, at exactly 41 minutes past eleven, Dirk Nowitzki shoots a one-legged off-balance three. The ball sails through the air in an almost perfect arc, bounces off the

front of the rim then over the backboard. It thumps three or four times in the backboard’s frame and remains stuck above our heads. We stare at the ball. Nowitzki, Geschwindner, me. Panting, Dirk comes over to the baseline and takes the cap off his water bottle.

“That’s it,” he says between sips. “That might have been the last session.”

Excuse me? I briefly freeze. Ever since I’ve known him, Dirk Nowitzki has cracked jokes about his age, his creaky bones, his fading mobility, speed and flexibility. For years, he has groaned and moaned as I’ve watched him work out in the summer in Warsaw and Randersacker and Rattelsdorf. He always says this is his last workout then keeps going. But could it be true this time? Is this in fact the last workout of the summer? And maybe even the last one with Holger Geschwindner in the gym they’ve spent so many summers in, the gym where so many ideas were born? The flight back to America has already been booked and Dirk’s T-shirt says “That’s Game.”

Dirk Nowitzki’s career could have been over a long time ago but every season that was supposedly his last season was followed by the next last one. He has always refused to comply with the typical expectations of an athlete’s biography, as well as with the well-meaning advice, the reflex that he ‘must be in a lot of pain,’ the imperative folk wisdom to quit while you’re ahead. It’s already been six years since the Maverick’s championship. That team was broken up long ago and the Mavs have never made it past the first round of the playoffs since. The game has evolved; it’s faster, more focused on offense. He’s slower

now but he still kept playing. And so, should he decide at this very instant to stop, it would be sensational.

“The last workout,” I ask. “Seriously? The last one?”

Dirk spits on the floor then rubs it into the ground with his sneaker. The soles of his shoes squeak on the linoleum and we watch Geschwindner poke the ball out of the frame. Dirk grins. Kitsch isn’t his thing. “Just kidding,” he says, chucking the water bottle into the corner. Geschwindner throws the ball towards us and Dirk carries on like he never said a word.

Now they let the ball do the work. Dirk puts the ball on the ground, his body forms around it, and the swing of the ball intertwines with the power of the body, *tak tadamm*. When the body and ball spring upwards together – just like we’ve seen thousands of times in Hagen and Dallas, Rattelsdorf and New York, Beijing and Los Angeles – they call it “slipping under” and “loading,” *tak tadamm*.

Then, some details: Dirk should “feel the last two fingers on the ball,” the *fingertips*, he should spread the index and middle finger really far apart, he should keep his eyes really open, really high, really *tak*, really *tadamm*, with his eyes on the basket and not on the ball. Not on its clean and clear and perfectly calculated and delineated curve of 47 degrees that is higher than all the others, a perfect arc, with no errors, it has been said, eyes always on the goal – and not on the stars up above. He doesn’t make 23 out of 23. I keep a tally sheet (I’m only a spectator): once it’s 21, three times it’s 20. And seven times it’s 19 out of 23.

Countless coaches, players and teammates have watched Dirk and Holger work out over the past two decades and some have ventured that the secret must lie in the training itself. If you were to copy Dirk’s exercises, the idea goes, then you could be like him. “But it’s not about the repetition,” Geschwindner explained to me. “It’s about the tiny variations within this repetition.” The two of them call it “checkup routines,” which are more concerned with rhythm, intonation and intuition than with the shot itself. The focus of these routines is on the minute details in the execution and these details can only be perceived after you have repeated these fadeaways and free throws and threes, thousands of times, if not millions. The finest nuances of a keystroke, the run of a drummer, the saxophone’s solo.

*“B-ball is jazz.”*

Holger Geschwindner often talks about art and music when he articulates his ideas about basketball. But if you talk to Dirk about these nuances, he shakes his head and grins. He thinks it’s “a bit exaggerated,” even if he understands the approach. It seems as if this mental aspect isn’t important enough for him to talk about. “Knucklehead,” he says to Geschwindner now. “Knucklehead.” That’s how the two of them talk. And that’s how you talk when you both know one another so well. That’s what you say when everything has already been said.

When they’re done shooting, the men do pushups on their fingertips and Geschwindner stands up. The ball is in the corner of the gym. Dirk lets himself be bent and flexed on the sidelines while Geschwindner handles the giant body as if he were a lumberjack, heaving the long legs towards Dirk’s head, again and

again. Nowitzki lies on his back and groans. Then, rolled over, with his face down on the dusty ground, Dirk's back is cracked by Geschwindner, vertebrae after vertebrae, from the lower back to the top and then back again. Thumbs are bored into the muscles to the left and right of the spinal column, the vertebrae are manipulated, one after another. Everything in its right place.

"When you're as old as me you can stretch all you want," Dirk groans.  
"But then you have to start all over tomorrow."

"And if you don't," Geschwindner says, "the show is over in no time at all."

When Nowitzki gradually picks himself up from the floor, a lot of time has passed since Geschwindner disappeared to hit the showers. Nowitzki is incredibly flexible for someone our age. He can put his hands flat on the ground while standing, and his head reaches his knees without difficulty. A half pigeon? The Adho Mukha Svanasana? All of it is easy. Even if he is three kilos overweight. And even if he's almost no longer in his thirties. He slowly picks up his shirts from the ground, retrieves the ball, then surveys the empty gym.

*That's Game.* He's been here for more than four hours and he's been coming here for more than 20 years. Outside, the sky clears. Dirk eyes the baskets, the wooden backboards and the spots of sunlight on the linoleum a little longer than necessary. Dirk Nowitzki, I write, looks tired.

“Man,” Dirk Nowitzki says as he looks right through me. He looks like he is saying goodbye. He looks like he has decided this very second that he will never come back again.

[...]

## Old Man Game

*Sacramento, February 2018*

An NBA season extends from autumn to early summer. It's a long series of 82 games, with one played every two or three days, and the better teams may even exceed 100 when the playoffs are included. Half of these games are played away from home; the teams are practically always on the road. An NBA player's world consists of 29 arenas, 29 hotels, 28 airports, one bed at home, and a summer residence between seasons. But even when a player is at home in his own bed, his suitcases are always packed – a team never stays in one place for more than a week. NBA players are nomads but they are nomads who see very little of the world they travel through.

All these places resemble one another. Players look down at the cities, the street grids and river bends while the plane is landing, then ride with the city skylines on the other side of the bus' window on access roads. The players eat in banquet hall after identical banquet hall and sleep in a hotel that belongs to the same chain as the one before. They forget their room numbers, wander through hotel floors and stare into space in elevators. The players sign jerseys in the lobby, drive to the arenas, and come back again. The names of the places begin to blur together: George Bush International, Staples Center, American Airlines Arena (Miami), American Airlines Center (Dallas). Sometimes, the players go out to eat in the backrooms and hidden niches of restaurants. And sometimes, the players go out to clubs and drink Hennessey and Coke behind velvet ropes. In their single rooms, the players gaze out the windows and admire how the sun

is setting or rising. They call home and they sleep – until room service rings. Nowitzki has been doing this for 20 years; he is familiar with the feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world, the melancholy.

The sun rises in Sacramento. I'm here too early. The Mavericks don't land until the afternoon and I have a whole day to do as I please. The distance from the hotel to the river and then to Discovery Park from there doesn't seem that far. I put on my running shoes and get moving. On the day of away games, I usually run in a large arc towards the foreign arena in order to get an impression of the city we just arrived in, to get some sense of where I am at all. In Houston, I run towards the Toyota Center and around Minute Maid Park where the Astros play, then along the Buffalo Bayou and through Sabine Park. I run into the residential areas of Piedmont Park in Atlanta and all the way down to Philips Arena, over the highway bridges and through the dangerous neighborhoods. I run for miles across enormous parking lots surrounding the football stadium and Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis. I run past the shacks and garages behind the Chesapeake Energy Arena in Oklahoma City and through the crowded streets around Madison Square Garden in Midtown Manhattan as well as in the blowing snow at Barclays Center in Brooklyn. I run on the banks of rivers, along access roads, between garages and warehouses, through parking lots, past all the various loading ramps.

And so, today is Sacramento. Sitting on the banks of the Sacramento and American rivers, the somewhat large and somewhat charming capital of California was once home to the writer Joan Didion as well as to the filmmaker

Greta Gerwig. Home to the middle-class as well as to the uprooted, it is also the home of the Sacramento Kings, the only professional sports team in the city. With no football or baseball teams in the capital, basketball is very important here. I run by two outdoors courts but no one is playing – it's too early in the morning. I run past the mirrored government buildings with raucous ravens on their roofs and giant palm trees standing out like paper cuttings against the sky. Wherever I run, there are homeless people on every corner. During the crisis of American psychiatry in the 1970s, countless clinics closed and individual practices were supposed to take on the patients. But ever since the system collapsed, people in need have been forced to live on the streets.

It is warm in California and the laws are lenient. I pass one tent after another along the banks of the American River as well as shopping carts and bicycle carcasses. Plastic bags flatter in the trees less than a mile away from the gold-painted bridge in Gerwig's film *Lady Bird* and the Old Sacramento that Didion depicted in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Everyone knows that America is a land of contradictions but the contrast becomes more pronounced in the West, and the spick-and-span Golden 1 Center of the Sacramento Kings sits for all intents and purposes smack dab in the middle of this conflict.

I take a turn and return to Downtown Sacramento then run around the arena. When the Mavericks fly in from Dallas at noon today, they will look down at the rivers and fields and forest and farmland. Then they will land and sleep and eat before walking to shootaround through the tunnel connecting the hotel and the arena. After that, we have a meeting. Nowitzki is now in the middle of

the season that many believe will be his last. After returning to Dallas in the autumn, he was in excellent physical and mental condition from his work in Randersacker but the Mavs only won one of their first seven games, and now they've only tallied 16 wins to 36 losses. The season is a flop but the arenas are full and Nowitzki is met with respect in places where bitter rivalry had once dominated. Despite all the losses and the difficulty of reaching the playoffs, the spirits on the team are high and I want to accompany Dirk on this annual road trip on the West Coast.

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Dirk Nowitzki is walking through Downtown Sacramento with his hood pulled over his face the evening before the game against the Kings. Although we have texted on and off, we haven't seen each other since the workout in Randersacker half a year ago, and Dirk looks thinner now, more tired. He smiles but you can tell immediately that his mood could be better. Derek Earls and Dwayne Bishop, Dirk's security staff for years, walk in front and behind him while Geschwindner saunters at his side.

As we walk to Morton's Steakhouse, Downtown Sacramento is completely deserted but Dirk is suddenly recognized after a couple of feet. Someone screams “Nowitzki!” from the other side of the street and we act as if nothing has happened. Nevertheless, Earls and Bishop pick up the pace. If we kept up this leisurely pace, we might never reach the restaurant this evening. We lower our heads, the crowd is approaching. “Let's go,” Earls says. There are suddenly five people in Dallas jerseys on the next corner and ten on the one after that.

"Dirk!" they scream. "I love you, man!" When we reach Morton's Steakhouse, a horde of fans is already waiting with their felt-tip pens, their photos and jerseys and scrapbooks outstretched. Dirk nods, scribbles his name, smiles. You cannot hide seven feet, and hoopers recognize their idols even when they're hidden by hoodies.

For dinner, Dirk orders his usual: salad, grilled chicken with capers and steamed vegetables. Water please. Sauce on the side. Thank you. Nearly every warm meal Dirk eats during the season looks like this. Red meat and carbohydrates are avoided and alcohol and processed foods are forbidden. His 20 years of experience as a professional athlete equal 20 years of experience with his body; Dirk started the season with a body fat percentage of 12 percent and towards the end it will be only ten. His awareness of his body is such that he can even feel a glass of lemonade the next day in his bones.

Bishop selects the wine this evening, a California Pinot Noir. The sommelier comes especially to our table to open the bottle. "Excellent choice," he says and has the best glasses brought to our table but Dirk raises his hand. No wine for me, thank you.

When the food is served, Bishop leans his telephone against the water bottle on the table. The next bottle of wine arrives and we raise our glasses in honor of Vince Carter, the oldest player in the league, a former Maverick, who now plays for the Kings. We then raise our glasses in honor of Peja Stojaković, always fresh, always dressed so smartly, who won a title with the Mavericks and is now managing the Kings.

The guys joke around and shoot the breeze. Two of the Mavericks' next three opponents, the Sacramento Kings and the Golden State Warriors, are playing against one another on the screen in front of us as well as in the arena less than two blocks away from Morton's. We're huddled around the phone as if it were a campfire, four men who have the entire menu of Morton's Steakhouse memorized as well as their wine list, naturally, and me. While Geschwindner and Dirk's security staff wheel out their old stories, Dirk grows more and more quiet. He's watching the game with increased concentration and in the middle of the fourth quarter, he turns on the sound, the score's 86:89, it's close. Suddenly, the only thing being talked about is basketball, which is what all of this is really about, it's why we're here at this table. When the game shifts and definitively turns in the Warriors' favor, coffee is ordered at Morton's. Then we disappear through the kitchen without being noticed. Tomorrow is game day, tipoff is at eight. For Dirk this means going to bed early. As we walk through the kitchen into the night, the cooks are standing in a row along the stoves, saluting us with their spoons and knives on their shoulders.

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It was announced on game day that the Kings' arena was sold out but a lot of seats are empty in the arena. Not even season ticket holders attend every game and the meeting between these two teams is meaningless for the outcome of the season. The show the Kings put on is professional, the oversized Sacramento cowbell is rung and a couple of fans have even brought their traditional cowbells, *ding dong*, but everything feels somewhat staged, somewhat

plastinated. The playoffs are virtually unreachable for both teams and the score of tonight's game is totally irrelevant, pure entertainment, at best a treat for connoisseurs and nostalgic people.

The American writer Thomas Beller once wrote about the beauty of the *Old Man Game* for *The New Yorker*. Contrary to what the name implies, Beller's interest is not in aging men per se but rather in the way some special players think and play, a remarkable skill set that doesn't immediately pop out to the observer because the players are not vertically spectacular. Such players do not jump and sprint faster than the competition but use disguise and deception to create advantages on the court for a fraction of seconds that only they can perceive. Such players can throw their opponents for mental and physical loops. They can read the game and they are always standing exactly where the game needs them to be. This style of play correlates with the age of players because you either need experience, tranquility or composure – or, as the case may be, extraordinary talent.

In his article, Beller raves about André Miller's intelligence, about Kyrie Irving's horizontal dribbling, as well as about Tim Duncan's inconspicuous dominance, the subversive game of the Argentine Manu Ginobili, and about players who know what's going to happen. He doesn't rave about those who jump fast and high but about those who wait until the opponent has landed, those who know that it will then be too late to stop them.

A game like the one in Sacramento today is a banquet for people like Beller and me. Three of the most important progenitors of the Old Man Game

are playing against one another: for Sacramento there’s Vince Carter and Zach Randolph, and for Dallas there’s Dirk Nowitzki. This season, Vince Carter, born in 1977, is the oldest player in the entire league. Now in his mid-forties, he has morphed from being the incredibly high-flying “half man, half amazing” into a player with laser-like vision. For a few years of his career, Carter had matured like a wine in Dallas with Dirk and their families spent time with one another. Tonight, the two of them are as thick as thieves, happy to be out on the court again together.

Also playing for Sacramento is Zach Randolph, who has had an Old Man Game since his college days. Built like an armoire from the previous century, he is well wrought, sturdy. With hands like Goliath and feet as nimble as David, he looks like a bear but dances like Travolta – his footwork is some of the best in the league, and with his pivot he can dance any number of younger and more athletic opponents to the brink of insanity.

What is noticeable about these three old men is that they are no longer the quickest or the strongest but they still have more than enough of both to play in the best league in the world.

When people like Beller and I sit courtside to watch these players we recognize ourselves in them. We can’t jump anymore either. And we’re also getting slower year-by-year but, we maintain, our understanding of the game is our strength – to be honest, it’s the only one left. “Old Man Game is fascinating,” Beller writes, “in part, because it reflects the NBA’s version of the American anxiety about aging and death.” Dirk was able to live off his special

physical capabilities, his athletic talent, for many years, but now he is one of those players who has adapted his game to his changing body, those players who have effectively delayed time's passing for a few more years.

And speaking of time passing: there's this image from 2011: The Mavericks have just become champions and Dirk is sitting in the first row of the team plane next to Peja Stojaković. Dirk is wearing Ian Mahinmi's black horn-rimmed glasses and he looks relieved. But if you look closely, you can also see the traces of hardship on his face and the splint on the middle finger of his left hand. In this image, Stojaković is looking at the camera in disbelief. It's almost like he still couldn't compute what had happened. Two of the greatest Europeans in NBA history then grin like two adolescent petty thieves. Sitting between them, on the plane's carpet, is the trophy.

Dallas acquired Stojaković after he was released by the Toronto Raptors at the beginning of the championship season. Stojaković had been struggling with back problems for a long time but was able to get into shape just in time to finish off the Los Angeles Lakers in the fourth game of the second round of the playoffs, where he shot a perfect percentage from behind the line. Six of six for three.

I've wanted to talk to Stojaković ever since I started writing about Dirk. I want to talk to him because they're from the same basketball generation, have experienced very similar phases of losing and winning, and Dirk and the Mavericks would have probably never won the

championship without Stojaković. I want to talk to him because Dirk knows this and often repeats it. And also because they shared the greatest moment of their careers, the two greatest Europeans in league history.

As it so happens, the Assistant General Manager of the Sacramento Kings is as impeccably dressed as in the guys’ description of him last night in the steak house. Confidently stylish and meticulous, he is assuredly someone who masters every knot as well as every business maneuver; neither the half Windsor nor cap space sleights of hand are unknown to him. There’s a hint of respectable cologne in his game day office in the arena and on the wall behind Stojaković is a picture from the best years of basketball that this basketball crazy city has ever experienced; it’s the famous *Sports Illustrated* cover of the 2002 Kings: Chris Webber, Doug Christie, Vlade Divac, Jason Williams and Stojaković are all posing and the caption reads, “Sacramento Kings: Basketball the way it oughta be.” We don’t have a lot of time. Below us, the music is already booming in the arena. Stojaković pushes a chair in my direction, sits behind the table and looks me right in the eyes.

A year older than Dirk, Peja Stojaković played in his first game in the NBA on the same day as Nowitzki, February 5, 1999. But whereas Stojaković arrived to the NBA with considerable professional experience on the teams Red Star Belgrade and PAOK Thessaloniki, Dirk had only played 18 games in the German Bundesliga. Nevertheless, both were overwhelmed by the experience of the NBA and only scored two points

each in their first games. During his playing days, Stojaković was perhaps the greatest non-American shooter in the world and won the three-point competition at the All-Star Weekend twice. Dirk only won it once, something Stojaković makes jokes about when the conversation turns to Dirk. In fact, Stojaković won everything there is to win during his time with the national team of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Under coach Svetislav Pešić, he won the European Cup and the World Cup – something Dirk was never able to achieve because of his origins. He just couldn't do it. Germany will never win the World Cup in basketball. Over the span of their careers, they played against one another countless times on the international stage and later in the NBA. Stojaković, whose number 16 jersey is hanging in the rafters of Sacramento, guesses that he and Dirk must have played against one another six or seven times a season. That would be more than a hundred games – and a hundred games is a ton.

Over the years, the two of them have been compared over and over: who's the better shooter? Who's weaker? And later: who was the greatest European to ever play in the NBA? Arvidas Sabonis came to the league too late, Dražen Petrović died too early. Did Vlade Divac simply smoke too much? Maybe with his four championships it's Tony Parker? Pau Gasol? Toni Kukoč? Peja or Dirk?

These constant comparisons in addition to their age and origins have made their careers inextricably interwoven. And although they had respected

one another as opponents, they were only able to play together in the last year of Peja's nineteen-year-long professional career, the year they became champions. Now that his back has ended his career, Stojaković, an old man by NBA standards, is sitting across from me in a tailor-made suit. Dirk, in contrast, is still wearing his jersey below in the arena.

We're sitting here talking about PAOK Thessaloniki's insanely hot gym as well as about the Ischeland gym in Hagen, which he happened to play in, and about Coach Pešić and his son Marko. The clock reads 20 minutes to game time and I realize there isn't much time left. I didn't come here to talk to him about his career, I explain, I'm interested in his first memory of Dirk, his impression of him. You would think a request like this would offend him. I was always scared at first that I would upset the person sitting across from me during these conversations by asking about Dirk and not about their own legacy. But the opposite is almost always the case: like many other important athletes, Stojaković almost seems to be relieved that another interview doesn't have to be dialed in where he spends half an hour detailing his own mythology, the one he constantly tells: the official biography of his life. As Stojaković starts to talk about Dirk, his posture changes, as does the look in his eyes. He leans back, crosses one leg over the other and lets his hair down.

He begins. The first time he really took notice of Dirk was in 1999, the year they both came to the league after the lockout. As two Europeans facing similar difficulties adjusting to America and the

perplexing inner workings of the NBA, they often spoke in their early years. These conversations were often about playing time and adjusting to the American game, and he only realized what was special about Dirk much later. “His approach to life is very different from us Balkans,” he says and laughs. He laughs about the stereotypical comparison: German reliability, clock-like precision vs. Serbian summers filled with grilled fish, Slivovitz and unfiltered cigarettes on the Adriatic coast. “Dirk always had enough discipline to control himself off the court. Eating right, doing yoga. Dirk’s a good example of how to be a *real* professional.”

There’s an interruption. Jason Williams enters the office without knocking. Paying no heed to me at all, the former point guard exchanges a couple of jabs with his small forward. They joke about who looks like what and who weighs how much now, and they both laugh their heads off. Like Dirk, Williams was selected in the 1998 draft and like him, Williams is an NBA champion, which he won in 2006 with Miami, against Dirk. The title page from their glory days is on the wall behind Williams and Stojaković but then Williams disappears as fast as he entered. Ballers are ballers for life. As he watches Williams head towards the arena, Stojaković says, “white chocolate.” All those no-look passes, those ankle breakers and floaters – then Peja turns back to my Dictaphone.

It becomes clear to me when he continues talking that there is warmth in his voice even if the words sound rehearsed. He says that the favorite tired

phrases of Americans at the beginning of his career were “be patient” and “work hard” and that neither he nor Dirk wanted to hear them while they were fighting for minutes and respect. Their paths were quite similar, their tasks and difficulties too. But each of them was able to come to terms with their new roles and their new country after the first year. Stojaković then outlines the big games they played against one another. His eyes glisten, the importance lingers. They had often guarded one another. “Dirk is a very special player,” he says. “After Larry Bird, there was no one that tall that could shoot so well. But now everyone’s trying it – because of Dirk.”

But that’s not the end of the story.

Dirk kept to himself at first, then he was mostly silent on the court but friendly and approachable off it, and for the longest of times Stojaković didn’t really understand how Dirk could do so well for so many years. “Being an athlete is very tiring. Your mind gets tired because you do the same things over and over.” After almost two decades of playing basketball at the highest possible level, Stojaković knows what he’s talking about when he talks about monotony and fatigue. “You need to reposition and recharge yourself repeatedly.”

It was only when he came to Dallas that he realized it was Holger Geschwindner who kept Dirk on the right track. And yet, “the right track” is not a straight line. There is no clearly defined and restricted path. It’s full of loops and detours and alternatives. “As a young person, it’s easy to forget that there’s more to life than sports,” Stojaković says.

"Things that make your life richer. And Holger never let Dirk forget these things. He gave him books, music, whatever."

The clock is ticking, the game is approaching, and Stojaković is talking about the year they won the championship. He is talking about the unbelievable shooters the Mavericks had at the time: Jet, Kidd, Barea, Dirk, himself. He depicts the image of Dirk that's burned in his head: Dirk holding three fingers up in the air after making a three while the arena goes to pieces, cheering. He's holding up the thumb, index and middle fingers: "that's how you can tell someone is European," Stojaković says. Americans indicate a three with different fingers. He's stretching his arm into the office air and telling story after story – the thing on the plane, the championship parade, Dirk's European Cup Finals in Belgrade in 2005. The Kings' General Manager, Vlade Divac, another pioneer of the internationalization of American basketball, walks by in the corridor and bangs on the office window. "Game's starting!" he roars. "Let's go!"

Stojaković grabs his suit jacket off the chair, shouts something in Serbian at Divac, something that can't be quoted. Peja laughs because he knows that every European baller knows these phrases from the playgrounds and gyms of the old continent. He smoothes his tie, nods and holds the door open for me.

"Here we go."

We take the elevator down, the door opens, the crowd divides, Stojaković nods to the right and greets to the left. We enter the arena at

the exact moment the away team is being announced. Below us, Dirk Nowitzki is walking onto the court of Sacramento's brand new Golden 1 Center for his 1,447 game in the greatest league in the world.

When Stojaković starts up again, it becomes clear that he sincerely wants to find the right words for Dirk Nowitzki, his former adversary and current friend. "Dirk Nowitzki is the greatest European to ever play in the NBA," Stojaković says. He shakes my hand like only a baller from the Balkans can – it is both a declaration of love and of war. He turns to go, pauses, grins. "But to this day," he says, as the applause for Dirk and his long career gets louder in the background, "I still think I was the better shooter."

Dirk Nowitzki scores the first five points for the Mavericks, a two, a three. Randolph lets his opponents dance and fly by him, and Carter plays calm and collected. Dirk doesn't shoot often but when he does it's at a high percentage. The Mavericks make a spirited run at the beginning of the fourth quarter and Nowitzki tops it off with an enthusiastic three. 15 points, seven rebounds. Everything is clicking when Dirk is on the court but Coach Carlisle pulls him with 1:27 left in regulation. The substitution seems weird to me. Most of the times, Dirk is only brought in when the Mavericks are leading clearly at the end of the game. As a signal. Carlisle breaks with his usual substitution pattern even though the game is close. The Mavericks still win without Dirk though. 106:99.

## The World According to Nash

*February 4, 2018*

Dirk glides through the lobby of the Ritz Carlton on this day in February to pick up Steve Nash. It's immediately clear that this meeting is between two old friends. All empty phrases are omitted and they quickly relate how their wives, children, bodies and jobs are fairing. There's no need to explain anything; both know what the other is up to. The elevator arrives, we squeeze in, and I realize I'm riding in this elevator with two of the most important players to ever play the game we love, two Hall of Famers. Dirk is in a Nike T-shirt and Mavericks fatigues, and Nash is wearing post-career civilian attire. One of them will run out on the court of the Staples Center tomorrow to play the game that brought them together, and the other will sit with his wife and children at dinner, occasionally sneaking a peak at the TV in the corner to check the score. There are many things that connect them but what separates them is the finish line.

In the years after his controversial departure from Dallas in the summer of 2004, Steve Nash became the conductor of the Phoenix Suns' fast-paced game. He was the brains of coach Mike D'Antoni's legendary "seven seconds or less" teams that featured players like Amar'e Stoudemire and Shawn Marion. At the time, the Suns played the fastest and most spectacular basketball, pioneering a new game philosophy that

has since dominated the league. Like Dirk Nowitzki, Steve Nash revolutionized basketball from its very core.

The Suns reinvented the game in those years by spreading the floor, shooting threes faster and better than anyone else, playing series upon series of pick and rolls, and passing the ball faster and with more creativity. Their offensive attacks lasted seven seconds or less, the ball was always in the hole, even before the opponents had gathered themselves and prepared to play defense. As Bill Simmons wrote on the sports and culture website *Grantland*, “Phoenix built a high-powered Formula One racing car” around Steve Nash. The Suns scored more points than their opponents because they shot the ball more often, and they shot the ball more often because Nash was able to think faster than everyone.

Nash was the mastermind of the best offensive team in the basketball world for nine years. And he has by far played the most 50-40-90 seasons in league history, years where players have a field goal percentage of more than 50% from the court, 40% from three and 90% from the free-throw line. Although his shot was an accurate weapon, at heart he was a playmaker, and, as Bruce Arthur writes in the *Toronto Star*, “he made his teammates sing.”

Nash’s game was the foundation of a creative revolution in the NBA. Players now fillet instead of hacking and the point guards who dominate the league today have Nash to thank. Damian Lillard and Chris

Paul, for instance, are both small, agile point guards who think, direct and dominate the game, *Nash style*, and it is no surprise that Nash occasionally works with Steph Curry, who plays the game in a way that follows Nash’s model. Nash has made the unexpected, the unbelievable, the radical and surprising the new standard in basketball and he was voted the MVP of the league twice in a row in Phoenix – not bad for a skinny, undersized, white point guard from the West Coast of Canada.

As Lee Jenkins writes in *Sports Illustrated* about the legacy of Nash’s career, “when the Heat’s Goran Dragic deploys the up-and-under, that’s Steve Nash. When the Spurs’ Tony Parker runs three pick-and-rolls on the same possession, when the Trail Blazers’ Damian Lillard lets it fly because a foolish defender sneaks under a screen, when the Mavericks’ Rajon Rondo drives inside, circles back, and patiently finds a cutter, that’s also Steve Nash. [...] All these young point guards enjoy freedoms Nash made possible.”

After seven years in Phoenix, Steve Nash went to Los Angeles in the summer of 2012, hoping to make one last run with a new team. His old coach Mike D’Antoni had become the head coach of the Lakers and Nash signed a contract for more than \$30 million. But in his first game with his new team he broke his leg and it only got worse from there. He fought his way back onto the court but his hereditary back problems increasingly worsened from the strain and overload. “I can play quality

basketball once a week," he told Bill Simmons in 2012, "but in the NBA, you need to do that three or four times a week."

Although the nerve problems in his lower back caused cramps and constant pain in his leg muscles, he worked for 18 solid months to return to the court after hurting himself in his first game as a Laker. But the remainder of his contract killed the mood – for the fans at least. In their eyes, Nash was not necessary, he was greedy, even if they were able to recognize that, as a real, living person, you don't simply throw away \$9.7 million a year.

Steve Nash fought long and hard against his impending retirement and he documented this revolt in a highly personal manner. Produced together with his cousin and business partner Ezra Holland, Nash's documentary series *The Finish Line* was an impressive attempt to narrate the weakness of his body and the fatigue of his mind, showing all of the doubts and injections and concerns about life without basketball.

There's a scene in the first episode where Nash is walking to the beach with his dog. Wearing a light green hoodie, he then sits on a wall at the Manhattan Beach promenade and reflects on the effects that this phase of a career has on the psyche of an athlete. He says, "every athlete when they lose their skill, they lose a big part of themselves. The part that they built their life around. That has been a huge part of their purpose, self-esteem, identity. So, when the skill goes, it's like there's been a death." In fact, as he expressed in the interview with Arthur for

the *Toronto Star*, Nash is convinced that an athlete has to die twice: first at the end of his career and then at the end of his life. And at some point Nash’s body made the decision for him: his back could simply no longer withstand the grueling demands of professional sports.

The last of the four episodes in Nash’s documentary series is called “Dinner with Dirk” and it features the two of them sitting down for dinner with the equipment manager Al Whitley. Somewhat timidly, Nash and Nowitzki are musing in front of the cameras about what they could have achieved together. But seriously. About their years together in Dallas as well the years after as opponents, about the end. After a while, Nash asks Dirk for his honest opinion: “what would you do if you were me?” Dirk hesitates because the camera is focused on his face. “That’s a tough question,” he says, smiling nervously. But then he decides to ignore their current context and answer Steve’s question honestly. You can see how distressing the answer is to him. “I’m not sure bro,” he says. “If I’m honest?” – “Yeah,” Nash says. – “You know what you go through,” Dirk says, “all the treatments, in and out, I don’t know if I could do it: all the rehab, knowing it doesn’t really get better and then play one more game and it’s worse again. I don’t know if could do it.”

It’s been three years since then and Steve Nash is still looking for ways and means to talk about the world of sports, the world he lived and thought and worked in for his entire life. *The World According to Nash*. The parallels between today and that episode of Nash’s documentary

series are undeniable – we're even in the same hotel, they met up in the same lobby. The moments that can be related always take place on the days off. In any case, Nash has survived the death of the athlete, he has made the leap into the hereafter, producing films, developing training apps and commentating soccer games for ESPN. Living on the Pacific, he and his family have just welcomed their fourth child to the world. Nash no longer has back pain, he skates, plays soccer and commutes every week to San Francisco to work with Kevin Durant on his ball handling. A couple of months ago, in 2017, he received his first championship ring, as a player development coach for the Golden State Warriors. He keeps tabs on the basketball world he left behind and has his hands full. And now, it is Dirk who is struggling.

Suddenly, these two legends are sitting across from one another in flip-flops and sneakers in Dirk's hotel room. The drawn curtains are decorated in the charming North Korean palette of green, grey, olive, and currant. While Nash's cousin Ezra calibrates the equipment and mikes up both of them, Nash and Nowitzki chat about Premier League soccer – about this one insane run through the middle field and that one sublime shot into the upper left corner. The two of them have known each other for more than 20 years; you can tell they're secure in their friendship.

When the microphones are in place, the banter ceases. Dirk listens to what the series is about. Both of them are absolute professionals in this setting – short briefing, autopilot on, go.

It's just an experiment, Nash says. He's a little nervous. He's only starting this podcast series. "I was always interested in the people who are really good at what they do," he explains. "Is there anything similar about them, are their lives similar, are there patterns that repeat?"

"Just in sports," Dirk asks. "Or in other fields too?"

"At first we'll stick to sports," Nash says. "You're our first guest."

"What an honor!" Dirk says.

They begin their conversation with simple biographical data – parents and childhood, beginnings and inspirations. At first, Dirk speaks in the stanzas we know from him, the standardized sentences and stories we know from listening to him often: ... *listen to the body ... sitting down with Holger and my family* ... He speaks more to the podcast listener than to his buddy Nash but Nash asks about the source of Dirk's competitive spirit as well as about his parents and sister. They talk about tennis and handball and his childhood spent on TG Würzburg's grounds, down on the banks of the river Main. Nash keeps trying to get Dirk to talk about his extraordinary talent and his recipes for success; he is trying to coax him into giving plausible reasons why he has had such a long career but Dirk is hesitant. He is often asked about the secrets to

his success. He never knows what to answer. He isn't even sure if there is a secret.

It's only when the timeline reaches Dirk's first encounter with Holger that the standard interview tone is abandoned. They talk about intuition, fingertip push-ups, the voluntary nature of Holger's training, the extreme degree of individuality in the collaboration between Dirk and Holger. Nash has watched the two of them train and talked to both of them about their work so often that he really seems to understand the special nature of their relationship.

Then the podcast turns into a serious conversation about their love of the game. It is difficult for athletes of this caliber to be able to find the words for the almost metaphysical experience of playing the game at the highest level – this is something that Geschwindner explained to me in the Starbucks on Mockingbird Lane years ago – and both Nash and Nowitzki are struggling to find the appropriate words and images.

I'm sitting on the bed, listening in disbelief. This would be a crazy experience for just about any baller in the world: two of the greatest players of all time are in the same room; three MVP awards, countless stories and trophies. It's like Federer and Nadal, Aretha Franklin and Beyoncé, Letterman and Obama. Ezra and his sound engineers remain motionless. They stare at the control levels on their devices and record the words and phrases. The only noise in the room other than the click of Zielony's camera are the thoughts of these two phenomenal players

making an effort to explain the joy of the game. The rare flashes when they have complete control over what is happening. When they are fully absorbed in the situation and nothing can stop them. When they are totally present and nothing passes them by. When they know what will have happened (the past of the future).

Nash describes the feeling of having a different perception of time in these in-game situations; it’s like all the other players are bogged down and only he can move and think quickly. It’s like he’s invulnerable.

Dirk talks about those moments of absolute self-confidence, those moments when you are totally free of doubt. “I know *what* I should do,” he says, “and I know *that* I’m going to do it. No one can do anything about it. Those are the moments when *I* decide.”

Nash: “it took a couple of months for me to get used to not playing. It wasn’t easy.” Dirk grins. He doesn’t want to talk about the end yet. At least not on record.

“How long’s the podcast now, Nashy,” he asks. Nash laughs. He knows Dirk’s tone of voice when he wants to be polite while also making it clear that it’s time to call it quits.

“An hour and a half,” Ezra says.

“It’s too long, Nashy! No one’s going to want to listen to this!”

That’s a wrap. Nash takes off Nowitzki’s mike, they high five and pull the curtains back. Down below, there’s Los Angeles, acting as if

nothing had happened. There's the Staples Center, a couple of major construction sites and an intimation of the Pacific on the horizon. It's the afternoon now and the recording is in fact too long, 1:38:07. But nobody cares. This wasn't about fitting a format, it was about finding the words for their passion. It was about drawing some kind of conclusion.

"That was a little embarrassing."

"It was fine. Nice work, Steve-O."

"It was only the first one. I still have to find my voice."

"You should do some more."

The two hug like the old friends that they are. Nash next to Nowitzki: wiry, smart, in control of his body, which has increasingly less pain. Nash is free, he can do as he pleases: work one day with Kevin Durant on his shooting then ride his skateboard on the boardwalk the day after. He gets to be a dad every day. And he can, if he wants, drink a beer in the afternoon. But he doesn't play anymore and there's no way to go back to the arenas and to the crucial moments of big games that take place within them. *Cheers mate.* A mixture of melancholy and optimism hangs in the room.

After Nash and his sound engineers say goodbye, we stay in the room awhile. Zielony gathers his cameras. Dirk stands at the window, the arena and the buildings sprawling until the horizon are below his feet. I reminiscence that he's had a number of big games down there and that tomorrow he'll be playing again. Like Nash, he has a family, three

children all in their pre-school years. The happy days after his career are waiting for him. It almost looks like Dirk is considering his own future. It's almost feels like he just made some kind of decision.

[...]

## **Nowitzki**

The game against the Los Angeles Clippers the next evening takes an entirely unexpected course. The whole arena is clad in red, the atmosphere is heated and the Clippers’ main objective is to make it to the playoffs. “Giving up doesn’t count,” Geschwindner said this morning at shootaround. He seemed to be in good spirits, almost optimistic. But then, he often says such phrases when he doesn’t want to say anything.

Dirk will play in his 50,000th minute in the NBA today. His name is legendary but after he takes off his warm-up shirt and the game begins, the hand-sewn letters on his back falsely read “N O W I T K Z I.”

It’s all downhill from there.

The Mavericks aren’t playing all that bad, they are actually leading 96:87 after a gorgeous layup by Dennis Smith Jr. shortly before the game is over. Then it’s 101:81 with 4:42 before the final buzzer. Coach Carlisle takes his veterans out during the next timeout. Dirk sits on the bench and becomes a witness to his team’s collapse.

It might be in this moment that the end is actually beginning.

Los Angeles edges closer and closer, the lead shrinks and melts, the guys fight back frantically and in vain. The Mavericks’ young bucks can’t get anything going; it’s a tug of war, a back and forth, and the experienced Clippers win. They end the game on a 13:0 run. A couple of careless turnovers by Smith, a steal by the Mavs and a rushed layup by

Maxi Kleber. The Clippers take the lead with 24 seconds left and they don't give it up. A gifted win.

Having changed into his tracksuit long ago, Dirk sits stoically at the end of the bench with a towel over his shoulders. Powerless, the older players are forced to watch the collapse of the team. Matthews and Harris stare at the events in silence. Normally, they wouldn't let a game like this slip through their fingers. Normally, they would be on the court. But today they weren't allowed to intervene. They sense that this has to do with something other than winning.

After the game, Dirk gets dressed in the locker room without saying a word. He is slower than the others, often getting treatment from the physiotherapist before showering. The mood is downright awful and no one dares to speak to him. Everyone just slowly circles the huge pile of laundry in the middle of the room, a couple of journalists sneak photos of the mountain. There are codes of conduct here. No one speaks to a naked loser. The present harsh reality has replaced the euphoria of the conversation with Nash. We all saw how the reserves were overwhelmed but that didn't change what happened. Whereas Dirk had told Nash about the big moments of his career yesterday, today is reduced to the routine of defeat. The journalists are milling around, embarrassed. Dirk finally nods. They hold their Dictaphones in his face. He is addressed for starters with the mixed-up letters on his jersey.

"N O W I T K Z I."

Everyone expects some comic relief but Dirk doesn't do us the favor. "I just saw it," he says coolly. "That sums up our season pretty well." – "The young guys need to learn. They need to experience these situations to get better." – "Dirk, was that your last game in Los Angeles?" – "We'll have to wait and see." They never stop, these questions about the end.

As the Mavericks' 767-277 is already long on its way towards San Francisco, we journalists are still sitting in the belly of the arena, sorting out what happened. There are a couple of Germans – Jürgen Schmieder from the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Dean Walle, Zielony – a couple of Texans, and me. There are still a few Bud Light cans in the pressroom's fridge. We won't be following the team until the next morning when we take the cheap airlines' early flights, Virgin and Alaska. In the NBA, games are played with bags already packed and the next one begins after the final buzzer. In less than nine hours, Dirk and the team will be preparing for the matchup against the Golden State Warriors in a rented gymnasium for practice.

The defeat feels unnecessary. It could have been avoided, of that we are certain. The game was lost in such a clumsy manner, very unlike Coach Carlisle's Mavericks. It almost amounted to the failure to provide assistance to someone in need. The coach had seen that reserves were overwhelmed – and yet he did nothing to stop it. Something about the situation rubbed Dirk the wrong way, there's no other explanation for

his frigid mood. He is able to accept a defeat, it’s part of the game, and being a good basketball player also means being able to deal with losing. But not like this.

It is sometimes difficult for Europeans to understand the structure and mentality of American professional leagues. The National Basketball Association is a huge company, the individual teams are franchises and the players are not employees of the individual teams but of the league itself. Unlike in Europe, there is no relegation to a lower division for the worst teams in the league – instead, the teams receive the right to select the best young players in the draft before the next season. The intent here is to keep the league balanced and strong. Every game should be as interesting as any other.

But since there is no relegation, there’s no fear of being moved to a lower league if you lose. The only things at stake are a team’s image and finances. One absurdity of American professional sports is that if a team has no chance of reaching the playoffs, and hence a championship, then the rest of the season is meaningless. Some teams even begin to welcome losses after two thirds of a season. The closer a team lands towards the bottom of the league, the better are their chances to be able to pick the best young players in the draft. Losing becomes a short-term goal to have a better team in the long run, and this is called “tanking.” In principle, it’s a loophole that can be used by anyone who is pragmatic and future-oriented.

This strategy feels wrong to a European with a romanticized idea of sports. It feels wrong to purists, to those who only associate the word "basketball" with what happens on the court. Management and long-term strategies are just as important in American professional basketball as in other leagues but they are more clearly regimented and more visible than in European professional sports. External thought processes that have nothing to do with the game or its rules can sometimes determine how the game is played and who wins, who loses. Which player plays, which player is rested. To the subjective viewer, tanking sometimes feels like economic reflections beating out the spirit of competition – or what is normally understood as competition. The backbone of the game is bent and it sometimes breaks. But it is strictly forbidden, and even subject to financial penalties, for players, coaches and team officials to talk about this strategy. The league wants to sell tickets to these meaningless games, TV contracts need to be fulfilled and beer needs to be sold. After all, who wants to pay a hundred dollars to see a game where both teams are playing to lose or whose best players are sitting on the bench in the crucial moments?

For athletes who deliver their physical and mental peak performance every day, the idea of purposefully losing is totally absurd. These athletes only became NBA players because they have continually evaluated and proven themselves since childhood. They invest in their bodies daily so that they are able to win. They have conditioned their

thinking, developed incredibly toned muscles and created highly specialized conceptual worlds in order to be better than the millions and millions of basketball players around the world. Their lives have been dictated according to this and players want to play “meaningful basketball.” In a few days, Dirk’s teammate Wesley Matthews will say that it is physically impossible for him to play basketball without trying to win.

The journalists in the arena’s catacombs begin to speculate: this strategy is actually foreign to Dallas, at least since Dirk’s team has played solid basketball. (“Maybe he profited from having been in young talent promotion in his first year,” a Texan interjects.) The game tonight was probably the first of its kind in Dallas’ Dirk era. “We’d have to do ten things wrong in a row to lose this game,” one of the journalists grumbles. “And we did eleven.” Schmieder empties his beer, chucks the can across the room and it lands in the trashcan.

“That looked intentional,” he says.

## **San Francisco**

When we land in San Francisco the next day, the sun is above The Bay.

Nowitzki cancels our meeting in St. Regis because he wants to get a couple of extra workouts done and then he has to go to physio. As a consequence, we suddenly have a couple of hours free, a familiar situation at away games where you are waiting for the next bus, the next practice, the next meal.

Scott Tomlin and I spend the afternoon in a bar called Tequila Mockingbird around the corner. A couple of the guys from the journalist retinue are here as well, sitting at the far end of the counter. The city outside is like a film noir set, the beers are called Mirror Pond and Elysian Space Dust, panhandlers and their dogs are just outside; the beginning and the end, heaven and hell, also come into close contact in this Western city.

Scott has seen it all. He's been steering the stories of the Mavericks for nearly fifteen years, his department is the eye of the needle that all journalists need to pass through if they want to get to Dirk. You don't want to mess things up with Scott if you plan to write about Dirk. He and Sarah Melton play good cop, bad cop with us. Scott takes care of the coordination, the introductions, and looks after you. He makes things happen. He can remember an infinite number of first names and knows all the faces they belong to. He has read every story

that's ever been written about Dirk – most of which he leaked to the media himself.

Scott is also a guardian, a gatekeeper, a bearer of secrets. He knows what's allowed to be leaked, what can be told, and he's been through thick and thin with him. Scott is the one who sat in the locker room with Dirk for the entire night after the Miami series in 2006, drinking beer with him, and Scott helped Dirk get through the Crystal Taylor affair. He also brought Dirk back onto the court when Dirk collapsed in the locker room after winning the title in 2011. Having heard every curse, Scott is also discrete. He can immediately sense when the circus is too much for Dirk. He finds clear words to end the litany of questions from us press stooges but no matter what happens, Scott remains friendly. He almost never talks about himself but today he orders another beer and taps his forefinger on the counter.

The sportswriters from the other side of the bar get up to leave and they stand next to us for a second. Like me, they followed the team with the scheduled flights. And now they have half a day off as well. Times have changed. In the past, a lot of the reporters travelled with the team plane, there was a whole press section on board, but now every NBA team has its own crew, its own documentary filmmaker, photographer and blogger. These days, only one or two of the news writers are allowed to travel with the team. The Mavericks sell the remaining seats to the upper-class fans whose budgets are limitless. Where the press had

previously been is now space for all-access tickets. The writers pat Scott on the back and ask their questions. He tells them they'll have to wait until tomorrow, during the official times to talk. Scott takes care of these writers and gives them access, keeping them up to date. He's the lord over their stories and they want to buy him a beer but he laughs, turning it down. Two of the sportswriters return to the hotel to write their preliminary reports and the others go to their favorite restaurant at the wharf. “We're getting seafood,” one says. “Like we do every year in SF.”

And speaking of San Francisco. After the sportswriters say goodbye, Scott tells me that he received a very attractive offer from the Warriors – lucrative and working at the highest level with good people as well as enjoying success – but that he will stay with the Mavericks. There's still a job to finish in Dallas. He says he's curious as to what stories will develop in the future and what he will say. He says his job isn't a dream right now but that it isn't a catastrophe either. He knows what we all suspect: that winning games isn't a priority at the moment but he doesn't utter the word “tanking.” He still has command over the authorized vocabulary after the first, second and third beer. He's *always on message.*

Scott knows the business, he's an optimist. He can see into the future. “Just wait,” he says when I come at him with my European skepticism of systems and my romanticization of sports, the “soul of the game,” the spirit of competition, the ethos. I come at him too with

pessimism, kitsch and a clear idea of how the game should be played.

"Just wait and see," he says cryptically, laughing. "Next year will be better."

Scott knows that Dirk's image in the press is above everything that's currently afflicting the team. All the planning, the gambling, the negotiating, the strategic waiting. Dirk knows who he is and how he is perceived – and Scott knows as well. It makes his job easy that Dirk doesn't feel the need to constantly comment on these things, and that he gives honest and plausible answers when asked. Scott can count on Dirk, and he is sure that this isn't true of all superstars. Right now, the team is playing without joy, nerves are shot and speculation about the team's future is mounting. But all that won't hurt the perception of Dirk and his aura, Scott says. The journalists from before were complaining but they would never say a bad word about Dirk.

Scott thinks Dirk could easily take 20 shots a game. He's been badgering him with this idea for days now. "Shoot, Dirty!" he says. People would love it, Scott says. They'd love to see Dirk play for longer stretches and shoot more often but Dirk is uncertain. He doesn't play basketball to benefit himself; he plays to win. He doesn't want any relaxed conditions in the competition, any bonuses for legends. He doesn't want a farewell tour. No special treatment. Last year, Kobe Bryant made his farewell tour and even scored 60 points in his final game. But to get that many points he also had to shoot the ball 50 times.

Such a farewell tour can only benefit the fabric of a team to a limited extent. Dirk sat in front of the TV and watched the game as if spellbound – I make a mental note to ask Dirk about Kobe Bryant. I also want to ask him how he imagines the end of his career. Whether he has some image of it at all. After all, everyone else is thinking about what it will be like. They’re thinking about whether the end is imminent and whether today’s game in Oracle Arena will be his last one there. These are questions we journalists have, questions we receive no answers to. Then Scott polishes off the pint of Elysian Space Dust IPA, carefully places it on the counter and declares for the first time that Dirk will definitely play next season. Dirk’s last game will be in April 2019, he says. He laughs. His career will end in April 2019 – at the earliest.

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The general mood on the team is *comme ci, comme ça*. Marc Cuban will later imply on the radio talk show of the legendary player Julius “Dr. J” Erving that losing “might be the best option” for the team. But he forgot that there are certain linguistic restrictions in the NBA so that games will not appear to be meaningless and the arenas will still be visited. One speaks about “giving the young players the chance to prove themselves” and then the journalists scream, “tanking!” Officially, this phenomenon is kept quiet – and Cuban broke this rule. Later, he will make an apology and receive a horrendous punishment for his convoluted honesty: he will

have to pay more than half a million dollars for calling this strategy by name.

During Dirk's career, the tactical move towards the bottom was never an option. When he came to Dallas 20 years ago, the team played terribly but quickly got better. This was in large part due to Dirk's mentality as well as to Steve Nash and Michael Finley: it was worth giving the young players a chance to prove themselves in their early years, they were good, and none of them were familiar with strategic losses, it was never an option for them. "That's not who I am," Dirk will later say when asked about Cuban's fine. "You need to play the best you can in this league. Always." When a slack attitude sets in, it changes the spirit of the team and the organization. "You need a winning culture," he says. "And if you accept that giving half your energy and losing are somehow OK, then you'll never get that out of your head."

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Dinner at Bob's Steakhouse with Dirk and his friends again. Earls and Bishop, Geschwindner and Nowitzki, Scott and me. We're talking about the Mavericks' current situation. And like every other evening before a game, Dirk orders his usual: salad, steamed vegetables and the catch of the day, sauce on the side, water, please. But then he thinks it over, hesitates and calls the waiter back. "Whatever," he suddenly says. "I'll have the creamed corn. And onion rings for everybody. And the jumbo shrimp cocktail. And a glass of red wine."

Everyone at the table looks awkwardly into their glasses. We don't say a word because we know how Dirk must be feeling right now, what's on his mind: he doesn't want to end his career with this kind of basketball. This isn't his world, he doesn't work like that. Dirk hands the menu back to the waiter. We watch as the sommelier puts a glass down that was quickly brought to him. He fills Dirk's glass, slowly, carefully. Bishop had made the selection today: Pinot Noir. Dirk raises his hand. "Thanks," he says when the glass is half full. "Thank you."

"Cheers!" Earl says.

"Excess!" his colleague Bishop says.

"Screw it!" Dirk says and raises his glass. He grins but it is a grin of defiance. That was the season that could have been his last. We raise our glasses. "Screw it!!"

The next afternoon, Dirk is sitting between the orchids and plates of fruit when I enter his suite, reading with the hotel room art behind him. It is one of those afternoons that drag on and on, a free afternoon before an away game where he has nothing to do and can do nothing. It's an afternoon for room service and for talking on the phone. So, he's sitting up here reading *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck for the book club he has with Harrison Barnes, Maxi Kleber and Dwight Powell. "Our book club," he says, is going to read Ibram X. Kendis' *Stamped from the Beginning*, a history of racism in the US, next. One after another, they propose a book. They all read it then meet on afternoons like this to

discuss the book. "Better than watching TV," he says – even though there's a basketball game playing in the background on mute.

It's rather unusual for NBA players to have a book club. Most of them are in their early to mid 20s and prefer to spend the majority of their free time with Playstation, Fortnite, Twitter and Instagram. Dirk thinks he's too old for all of that, but you have to do something sensible with the downtime. Right now, their club consists of four people: one American, one Canadian and two Germans. They read novels (Steinbeck was Dirk's idea), Barnes is bringing in the political non-fiction, and Kleber comes after that. Books have always played an important role in Nowitzki's adult life and it could very well be that reading has become more important than ever before.

Dirk had someone bring him a medium latte from the Peet's Coffee around the corner. He couldn't go down there himself, even though we're in an away city on a normal business day. Beneath the window of Room 2818 are the parks and large museums of the city, but visiting them would be too time-consuming. Bishop and Earls are busy today and he can't go into the museum without security. There would be no time for Jackson Pollock with all the autographs, there'd be no second for Nan Goldin from all the selfies. So, he's lying on the sofa and reading the last pages of Steinbeck's novel. "There could be some more fireworks at the end," Dirk says, and he sounds like he's talking about the end of his own career. I suddenly remember the afternoon a couple of years ago

when Dirk sat in the dugout during the baseball game and watched the rockets fly. "A lot happens but it's really slow at the end. It's missing something. For my taste at least."

Despite the recent upheavals, Dirk seems to be focused. And besides the half glass of wine, the onion rings and corned cream in Bob's Steakhouse, he has kept working like always. He let go for a second but only a little bit, and this keep-on-keeping-on is the reason why he's here to begin with. Right now, he's drinking water, a protein drink bottle is on the table. He mixes it according to the instructions of the nutrition scientist himself. "Antioxidants, algae and other junk," he says. "It's supposed to help with recovery."

For a couple of minutes we chat about this and that. About California, the game in Los Angeles again, and about Geschwindner who wants to drink an Irish coffee near Fisherman's Wharf out of nostalgia. Then we get down to work. I've brought a couple of Tobias Zielony's books with me, *STORY/NO STORY* and *Jenny Jenny*. Dirk slowly thumbs through them, the photos of prostitutes, gangsters and lost children, the pages of Naples' housing blocks at night, the reservations in Manitoba, the pale sun of Trona. He thumbs through all these lives that are completely different from his own and through all these places he will never set foot in.

At some point we come to my book and its potential title. "*The Great Nowitzki*," he asks. "Seriously?" There's a stack of paper sitting

between us on the table. I read a few pages aloud. Dirk sits and listens about him scoring his 30,000th point. He listens to Holger’s story about Afghanistan, says “never ever,” laughs, and then asks when the book is going to be published. I say, “after your last game.”

Dirk looks at me. He grins. “That could be awhile,” he says. He gets up and walks across the suite as if he’s been sitting for too long. He puts a couple of magazines in order, straightens the orchid and chuckles a pair of socks into a sports bag across the room. Then he sits down again.

“How do you imagine it ending,” I ask but the way I ask was too abrupt, too direct. This question has constantly been circling in my head but I realize after it’s already too late that the way I just formulated it sounded harsher and more impolite than it was meant to be. It sounded like it has nothing to do with me. But Dirk doesn’t hesitate.

“Just play and when the season is over say: ‘Thank you. That’s it. It was a blast. But I’m done. My body’s done. I’ve given everything I can.’ Tim Duncan just sent the Spurs an email. *By the way, Tim Duncan is retiring.* Sure, you could do a little more. Maybe a press conference. But I don’t want people to make a big fuss. ‘Hey, this is your last game in this arena, this is your last game in that arena.’ For the whole year. It’d probably get annoying. I just want to say: ‘That’s it. Career’s over.’”

*That’s Game.*

“Do you have a clear image of your last day?”

"I know it's getting closer. But I don't want to think about it too much. Otherwise the end would always be in your mind and you wouldn't be able to enjoy the present. I still want to keep the end open. I just hope I can play again next year. If I can and next year goes like this one, it's pretty clear that everything will be over at the beginning of April 2019."

"Who will be at your last game?"

"My dad has been trying to find out whether the next year will be my last year for years. He wants to fly in his buddies from Würzburg. He should do it, if that's what he wants. But I don't need it. I don't need any individuals in particular. The people who are close to me have seen enough games. The last game... They don't need to watch me hobble up and down the court one more time."

The doorbell to his suite rings, Tobias has brought more coffee. He puts the cups on the table and unpacks his camera. "Keep talking," he says, then begins to take pictures.

"Kobe Bryant's farewell, for instance, was awesome," Dirk says. "But you can't plan something like that. He scored 60 points in his final game. On national TV, everyone saw it. The Lakers were down in the fourth quarter. They gave him the ball every time. Kobe was so exhausted he could hardly stand up after the timeout. But then he powered through it and scored 60 in the end. And to top it all off, the Lakers won. He made the deciding basket. You can't plan something like

that. Such a career, such an ending. Nuts. I had goose bumps while I watched the game," Dirk says. "That's not something that just happens."

His answers still sound unpolished, I think, the exact wording hasn't been set in stone yet. But in the coming weeks and months they will be part of the standard repertoire after every game and at every appearance and press conference: everything will circle around the end but it will mostly be hidden in questions about the season, his teammates, his body. Sometimes, the question will be posed directly. And sometimes the question will even be about him, but mostly it will be about the end of something bigger, something that has accompanied all of us for all these years. Above all else, the questions will be about the person asking the question. Maybe these questions and their implications go too far, I think. Dirk has always tried to remain a normal person, to not become a symbol, a surrogate. And yet, that's exactly what he has become: it's as if we wanted to know from Dirk Nowitzki what our end is going to be like.

"A lot of people imagine how they..." I say and Dirk grins because he guesses where I'm going with this. "It doesn't matter how you imagine the end," he says and gets up. He's had enough talking about these things. "It probably won't happen that way anyway."

Darkness slowly settles over San Francisco, lights blink and flicker in front of the window. We still need to take a couple of pictures. Tobias' camera circles around us, until it is totally dark and the only lights in

the room are from Tobias' flashlight and Dirk's telephone. He looks tired in the twilight. Time is pressing. There's a dinner scheduled tonight, downstairs in the banquet room. One more picture, Tobias says, one more, and Dirk looks past the camera and back into the twilight. In front of his mind's eye is the next team meeting or a treatment with the physiotherapist. Or it's the insolent questions about his present and future, his unspoken answers, all the plans and expectations that he's keeping to himself for the time being. "OK," he says. "One more." His T-shirt says, "Only in Dallas." Tobias keeps shooting and takes the picture for the cover.

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The next evening, the Dallas Mavericks are playing against the best team in the world, the Golden State Warriors. Tobias and I take the BART to the other side of the bay, to the heavy ships and docks in the evening sun. Below the overhead train, one tent city runs into the next. Oakland is the tough sister of San Francisco. We drift over the bridges and gigantic parking lots with the crowd. The arena is sitting in front of us like an old, tired animal.

Oracle Arena is the oldest arena in the whole league, a relic from another era. Ice hockey and basketball have been played here since 1966 and the Warriors have been playing in Oakland since 1972. The Grateful Dead have played almost 70 concerts in this arena and Berkeley is not far away. Nothing about this hall has been made for the present. The

infrastructure is battered, the train station is too small for all the people without cars, the improvised security controls take forever. People drink and shout in the lines, smoke billows from the parking lots where others are barbequing. The giant red lettering from the sponsor of the arena's name, a software giant, seems remarkably out of place on the façade – when the arena was built, home computers didn't even exist. The air is buzzing, there's an old energy here that is rarely found in the modern NBA arenas. Maybe in Indianapolis. Or New York. Or Oklahoma City. The Warriors will only play here for one more year, then they will move to where the tech money is, the big bucks in San Francisco.

As we enter the arena, it becomes clear to us where this energy is coming from. There's a tangible level of optimism hovering in the air. Oracle Arena may be battered but it has history, it has seen big games. The Warriors are playing in a cramped arena that was only ever provisionally renovated but they are the reigning NBA champions and the lack of space creates a frenetic basketball atmosphere. Everything is yellow and blue and you can feel the heat of the fire fountains. The Warriors' flags wave. Everything here seems more real than it does in the other arenas. Everything has an optimistic patina, a jumble of history and anticipation. At least that's how it seems to me as we walk across the parking lot at dusk.

Dirk has had a number of magnificent and devastating moments in Oracle Arena. On February 7, 1999, he scored his first field goal here; it

was his second game in the league. And in 2007, he experienced the lowest of lows when the Mavericks entered the playoffs as the top seed after playing their best season, 67 wins and only 15 losses. Dirk was at the height of his career and the expectations were tremendous. But his old coach Don Nelson, now with the Warriors, knew exactly how the Mavericks could be disrupted. Nelson played with an extremely small lineup, the Warriors swarmed around Dirk like mosquitoes. The Warriors’ slogan for the playoffs that year was “*WE BELIEVE*” and the arena was louder and filled with more yellow than ever. Dallas was eliminated in the sixth game of the series, Dirk only made 2 of 13 shots in 39 minutes of playing, the final score was 86:111. “Sometimes pressure wins,” he says. Having thought that this year would be his year, the cheering that wasn’t for him crashed over him as he left the arena. Everything had been prepared for another run at a championship and suddenly they were standing there empty-handed. It had all been in vain: the summer in Germany, the away games at Minnesota in the winter, the flights and rented-out gyms, the hotel corridors.

On his way to the visiting locker room – and this is one of the iconic moments of his career – Dirk randomly grabbed a huge black trashcan and heaved it with all his might and frenzied fury at the wall. He can no longer remember whether it was a trashcan or a chair, that’s what he says at least, but the hole twelve feet about our heads is still there. The Warriors have covered it with a pane of Plexiglas and years

after the incident Dirk climbed a ladder to sign it. The dented trashcan is still standing next to it, the security staff in front of the visiting locker room tell us.

With their four superstars, Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, Klay Thompson and Draymond Green, the Warriors are unparalleled in the game today, they are its future. The Warriors play basketball the way Holger Geschwindner must have once imagined it: a good coach, a holistic philosophy and outstanding individual talent. Coach Steve Kerr is eloquent, politically engaged, with insight into human nature. He has ideas and he has players who can implement them. His team plays fast, erratic, with flow and tact, coldly calculated: three-point shots and high-percentage shots under the basket, almost no difficult mid-range shots.

I observe Kevin Durant during warm-ups. It's almost like he is dancing. Wrapping the ball around his body like Dirk, a number of the movements look very similar to Geschwindner's training exercises, and Durant's one-legged fadeaway is a perfect copy of Dirk's shot. Durant has never made his fascination with Dirk's game a secret, and now Steve Nash is his personal trainer. This is the heritage of Dirk Nowitzki: other superstars are now copying his signature moves.

The story of the game can be told quickly. The arena is loud and it shows kindness to Dirk. For three quarters, the Mavericks keep pace with the Warriors and there's no sign of giving up or lack of motivation. Everyone is making an effort to play meaningful basketball, the *real*

game. But the Warriors take over in the fourth quarter and clearly win in the end. The difference this year is striking. The Mavericks will miss the playoffs and the Warriors will march right into the Finals and become champions. Nowitzki looks focused, almost angry about everything, he tallies a double-double, 16 points, 11 rebounds. Today he is the best Mavericks player.

As he walks through the arena's catacombs on his way to the visiting locker room after the game, he makes the impression of not attaching much value to the history here. The rest of the team hit the showers long ago but there's a moment full of melancholy as Dirk shuffles off the court and through the south tunnel. Maybe this was his last game in this arena. And perhaps this touches him like it does the spectators. But he walks slowly past a giant playoff banner, the bare ventilation pipes, the cable lines, as well as the outstretched hands and the "Oakland Hole." He walks past the history and the memories he has made in this arena and doesn't even look up as he goes.

The room is like it always is after a loss: silent, heavy, smelly, salty. Socks and clothes fly through the room and Dirk quietly disappears into a back room. Through the doorframe, you can see his feet dangling over the edge of a daybed while his groin that took a beating is stretched. His toes twitch, his pain is visible, his discontent, felt. The journalists look in the other direction. Tobias wants to take

photos but is reprimanded: no photos in the locker room. There are strict rules here.

Just outside, Holger Geschwindner is leaning on a concrete pillar, jotting down his thoughts and figures into a small notebook. "The pressure is gone," he says. He looks grim, pissed. "From now on everything that is said will be meaningless." He keeps writing silently. We look on as the luggage is packed. The Mavericks are heading back to Dallas. The first bus, the second bus, the airport's runway, Utah's Salt Lake at night, the lights on the edge of the Grand Canyon.

The road trip is over.

[...]

## **Shanghai loves you**

*October 2018*

Shanghai in October 2018, another Ritz. Day and night, hundreds of fans are standing at the hotel’s driveway waiting for Dirk. Neatly penned in behind a barrier, everyone, literally everyone, is wearing his jersey, number 41. In the lobby, the younger teammates are shocked when Nowitzki walks the few feet from the hotel entrance to the bus and a deafening shriek breaks out in the crowd as if the Mavericks were the Beatles and it was 1966. “*What a circus!*” he shouts as he signs autographs and the fans climb over one another to somehow get closer to him. The barricades sway with love and the team bus finally leaves, honking. Zielony and I try to stay out of the way. “*What a circus!*” Dirk says at the back of the bus, the ruffian in the last row, but you can tell he appreciates the affection despite the stress of it all. He smiles.

A couple of weeks ago, he turned 40. And a couple of months ago he decided to play another year and to not be concerned with the end the entire time. This summer in the draft, the Mavs made an unexpected move and landed the player they had wanted: Luka Dončić, who is only 19 years old. Dončić is by far the most mature player in the draft and Donnie Nelson and the Mavericks are capitalizing on the American prejudices and resentment against European players – just like they did with Nowitzki 21 years ago. Dončić is seen as being too slow and not athletic enough for the Americans; and even worse: he never played in

college and has too much baby fat. But the Slovenian is everything you could ask for in a modern guard: he can read the game like the best of them, he has *Old Man Game* and extraordinary physical form, good size, excellent control over his body and Balkan core strength. He already has two years of service as the starting point guard for Real Madrid and has won everything in Europe that can be won. He’s smart, charming, *marketable*. You can build a successful team around him. He’ll replace Dirk Nowitzki one day. We know that. And Dirk does too. “Luka can play!” he says.

He has watched Luka Dončić practice and when he talks about the aspects of Luka’s game, he laughs, pounds the table and raises his pointer finger. “His game is that of a 25, 26, 27-year-old. He makes unbelievable passes for being 19. The way he reads the game, how he sees things develop!” Dirk seems honestly excited. I’m surprised. I wonder if there isn’t at least a dash of melancholy or envy for the person who still has his path in front of him. But Nowitzki doesn’t seem to be familiar with that, or, at least, he doesn’t talk about it. Where melancholy should be, is enthusiasm, radiating. Instead of the pain of parting, Dirk seems to be honestly looking forward to playing with the young man. And also for what is awaiting Dončić afterwards. It’s something he’s experienced himself.

Dirk sacrificed the final games of last season to have an operation and then thoroughly prepare for the coming year, for the last death

halloo, for as long as possible. The ankle operation was half a year ago and since then, he has worked to get into shape. He looks thin, more chiseled and angular than usual. He has kept to his strict rules regarding nutrition. Even more so than usual. He did a special fast twice where he consumed less than 800 calories for two sets of five days. In 21 years, he's never weighed as little as he does now; and back then, in his first year in the league, he was a 19-year-old beanpole with a ludicrous metabolism: not a single ounce was on his ribs – and he didn't have a clue as to how you cook pasta.

It's somewhat different with Dončić. He's obviously carrying a few pounds too many, baby fat they call it. But behind the scenes everyone is talking about his weight, how to “manage” it. They could let him learn the hard way: let him play until he realizes that he can withstand the rigors of a long season better with a lighter body. Dirk doesn't want to get involved. “Everyone needs to experience things for themselves,” he said. “When you feel the best. That you can better survive 48 minutes on the court if you weigh a few pounds less.” He doesn't want to be a nutritionist, he says. “Everyone has to find out for themselves.” He only understood how to work with his body after the Miami series in 2006. “I would have liked to have known this earlier. I only made a radical cut at 28. After we lost to Miami, I realized I had to change something. I pressed the reset button and did a proper detox, no more alcohol, no more dessert, no more soft drinks.”

At first everything went according to plan after the operation. "I felt great," he says. "In great shape. What happened with my foot is a small setback." After the bone spur was removed, the peroneal tendon became inflamed, the new range of movement was too much for his foot. Dirk had an MRI because he was afraid that it might be a fatigue fracture. It wasn't. Only inflammation that is arduous, painful, incalculable. Basketball is out of the question, he won't play in Shanghai, he's just waiting to be healthy. He has to wait but he's here anyway. He pulls the curtains on the bus apart and waves to the crowd. He doesn't look unhappy.

The Mavericks have been sent to China for two preseason games against the Philadelphia 76ers in Shanghai and Shenzhen to make the American professional league more popular in its most important international market. Not that it's necessary – the Chinese love basketball and there's a strictly organized obsession about it, an orchestrated fervor that doesn't even exist in basketball's motherland. There is no mixed applause here. There's a proper escalation; a peculiar mixture of structured rigor and de-regulated commerce. Merchandise and streaming subscriptions sell better in China than anywhere else in the world. The Mavericks came with three planes: several containers full of equipment, the team and its owner, coaches and media, cheerleaders and sponsors – a retinue of more than two hundred people. The Texan

state circus is in town and Dirk is the main attraction. *The Great Nowitzki.*

In the late afternoon he's going through his fitness program on the 53rd floor of the Ritz, overlooking the Yangtze River, dripping and panting on a stepper. After a few bright, blue days, a dense haze has settled over the city. Below us, the river is lethargically flowing by, the lights of the tour boat glimmer. The gym has been closed off for half an hour but a few fans in Nowitzki jerseys are finagling their way in, making it all the way to the door. Most of them have rented a room in the hotel because of him: 3,500 yuan a night to catch a glimpse of Dirk. He has 30 minutes to focus on his cardio program but then it is leaked that he's up here and he has to leave.

In the evening there will be a small tour of the Old City of Shanghai with a minibus. The chaperone, a young guy from Dallas who speaks Mandarin and knows Shanghai for some reason, has arranged a visit to a temple. It was Dirk's idea. He's been harboring the wish to visit a temple ever since the Beijing Olympics, years ago. There was no time back then but on the way from the airport yesterday, he saw a brightly lit temple and remembered this old, postponed desire.

So, we're driving through the jam-packed city center, through the honking and din of rush hour. As we finally get out of the minibus on a side street of Old Shanghai, we go unnoticed, at first. We walk along a narrow lane, through backyards and side streets behind the arched

buildings of the Old City, then we step onto a square. We are surrounded by the evening rush hour traffic, the bikes and mopeds. The first person to recognize Dirk is a teenager in a white T-shirt and then it's a guy in his mid-fifties on a moped, followed by a tour group. In no time at all, there's a group of people surrounding us and surrounding this group of people is a swarm of even more. Everyone is holding out their iPhones and Huaweis towards him. We make our way through the masses, further and further towards the temple, over narrow bridges and through queuing systems, past security guards, souvenir shops and snack bars. It doesn't matter who is there to the crowd; what matters is that it must be someone famous. We are having trouble to keep up with him. The security staff tumbles, urging him to hurry, herding him. Where's the driver? Where's the bus? Who's getting too close to Dirk? Who looks strange? The situation is in danger of escalating but Dirk is quite clearly enjoying it. He's rarely in situations that cannot be governed. We work our way through the crowd towards the gate of the complex but as we arrive it's too late: the temple is closed.

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The buildings flashing on the banks of the Yangtze River can be seen from Dirk's hotel room and one residential tower after another extends beyond visibility. 1.3 billion people live in China and 300 million of them are interested in basketball. Somewhere beyond the horizon is the ocean and Dirk Nowitzki has just showered. His suit for the evening is

hanging in the wardrobe, the air in the room is steamy after ironing. We all had suits tailored here and Dirk's was the first one finished. His toes are stuck in two sickly-green plastic clamps that are supposed to improve the mobility of his foot. We're sitting at the table, Zielony circles around us, the camera is barely audible.

I ask whether he'll ever get used to the interest in his person. "It's not like this everywhere else," he says. Sure, he'll be recognized but the attention here is multiplied a hundred times. "It's weird of course," he says. "But I've been playing for 20 years and the first time I was here was in 2008. The championship helped for sure. My MVP year, then the Finals MVP. When I get out of the bus, they always scream, 'MVP!'" He laughs as if he would never call himself that but now he's repeating the acronym, turning it round and round. "That people almost crush themselves on the barriers in front of the hotel for an autograph is a unique experience as well. It's cool that they respect what I've achieved." MVP. *The Most Valuable Player.*

There's a gala tonight at the Shangri-La Hotel and then a *player's only* dinner at an authentic dumpling restaurant in the mall below, where Dirk will order water before going back to the hotel to try and somehow sleep off the jetlag. Dirk has been doing this for years, he's familiar with time changes and long distances flights, and he has flown around the world an estimated 55 times with all the games away and abroad. He says he has strange sleeping habits. He never shuts his eyes

on the plane because he wouldn't be able to sleep in the hotel room later.

He fights through the tiredness and stays awake until they arrive.

The temple is on his mind. He texts us the next morning to come over immediately. We sneak out of the hotel to see at least a tiny bit of China outside of our packed agenda. We ride through the city in a minibus again, but this time there are only two or three friends with us, Finley and Tomlin, as well as security and the chaperone. It's a new day, a new temple, and this time the guy called ahead. We receive a special tour but we give the guy hell anyway. We leave the tourist quarters on the river and turn onto a courtyard, cordoned off and surrounded by bird song, cedars. *Welcome to Jade Buddha!* Two monks greet Dirk, presents are exchanged, one prayer chain for one Mavericks jersey, then we are led through the empty temple complex.

Dirk stands in front of a shrine with ancient writings, observes the fronds of incense in the courtyard, asks about the calligraphy workshop, listens to the gongs and chanting, passes over the wood of the pews with his hand. The monks explain that they sometimes roll out basketball hoops and play three on three in the courtyard. Dirk can hardly believe it. No one is pushing, no one is screaming his name, an unexpected calm comes over the tour group. The monk speaks English well, he explains the Buddhas, one for a long life, one for peace, and so on. As we stand in front of a huge gong, Nowitzki is told to hit it as hard as he can. He should make a wish. Whatever he wants.

He swings backwards and lets the wood crash against the gong. He laughs, a little boy who is allowed to make noise where noise is forbidden. He swings again and again, and with the last blow he suddenly looks like he is seriously wishing for something.

At the tea ceremony at the end, photographers are present once again and they take pictures of the master of ceremonies who is nervous. They photograph how she warms and rinses her cups and pots. They snap more photos of how she washes the tea with trembling fingers, how Dirk calms her, and how they then drink the tea together from minuscule cups. "Best tea I've ever had!" he will later say. We squeeze between thin paper screens and while we are walking, he is given a year's worth of green tea. In front of the temple, he has to sign a couple of autographs again. We leave as quickly as we came.

As the bus stops at a traffic light, in the honking and shouting of Pudong in the morning, one of the security staff asks Dirk what he wished for. A long life? Happiness? Money? Laughter breaks out in the bus.

"A healthy left foot," Dirk says.

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During the days in Shanghai, Dirk Nowitzki represents the league and the Mavericks, America and Germany. He leads workshops with Chinese children, gives a few interviews and sits on a couple of podiums. He meets the Chinese über-basketball player Yao Ming, who is half a head

taller than him, as well as the African legend Dikembe Mutombo, and he rides an elevator up with Julius “Dr. J” Erving. Dirk holds his own with these legends but there’s nothing in his features that resembles a relic. He isn’t here to be rewarded for what he has already achieved.

On the last evening in Shanghai, Dirk Nowitzki packs his suits, books and sneakers, then takes the second bus to the arena. He looks at the city passing on the other side of the window, all those lights, all those people, and the glowing arena on the river.

“*What a circus!*” he says.

Before the game, he sets up two folding chairs in the corridor in front of the locker room and we sit between mops and cleaning buckets. The preparation for the spectacle is raging all around us. His teammates come by on their way to the locker room, fist bumps and high fives, a few loud insults and jokes. A couple of these guys are half his age or just a little older. Harrison Barnes. Luka Dončić. Dwight Powell. Maxi Kleber. There’s progress, Dirk says, the foot is making progress. It will still take awhile but next season is what matters.

What matters is this world.

Although he won’t play tonight, there’s an eruption when Dirk Nowitzki enters the arena. He’ll be admitted to the sport’s eternal hall of fame someday, everyone here knows that, but tonight’s not the night. As he quietly walks to the center of the court to say a few words of greeting

to the audience, to Shanghai, to the world, the Chinese orchestra sings his song, "M – V – P," they scream. "Most Valuable Player."

The game is bumpy, it's not going smoothly, we're at the beginning of a long season. But the worst years of the Mavericks seem to be in the past. Dirk Nowitzki is sitting between the players and trainers on the bench, focusing on how the game swings back and forth, how it will move in the future. Barnes, Kleber, Powell, Dončić – Nowitzki is part of this movement. Sometimes his face is shown on the giant cube above our heads, *China loves you!*, and he laughs. He doesn't want any farewell presents but in the third quarter someone gives him a guitar, *strum strum strum*, the future is music to his ears.

When the game is over, the circus packs its boxes and suitcases. The busses slowly roll down the parking lot in the yellow light of the lanterns. They're heading towards the airport, towards Shenzhen, America. Dirk hides his face under his hood.

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The record season begins two months later. Dirk Nowitzki's 21st year. The Dallas Mavericks are winning, the problems of the past few years only seem to be a vague memory. At times, the team plays with euphoria and at the beginning of December they're on pace to make the playoffs. Dirk Nowitzki sits in the first row and applauds. He cheers the youngsters and pushes them. Behind the scenes, he keeps working. The inflammation remains stubborn. At the end of November, he finishes his

first real practice with the team in seven months and 26 days. They were long months, love is hard work.

After 254 days, Dirk Nowitzki plays in an away game in Phoenix for six minutes. His first shot is a fadeaway bank shot on December 13, 2018 and he makes it. Three days later, he is subbed in shortly before the end of the first quarter in a home game against the Sacramento Kings. Everyone in the arena stands up and cheers. Nowitzki plucks at his jersey the way he always does when he wants to gather himself. He steps on the court and before his first inbound pass, he touches the ball, once, twice, as if he's making sure that he's really on the court and playing basketball again. On the first offensive play, he immediately receives the ball far behind the three-point line. We've seen this move a thousand times already. He fakes, checks the situation. He sees and knows everything already, he goes slightly into his knees, he shifts his center of gravity, he lets the demons of the last months fly by him. He could shoot but he passes to a teammate in a better position. He doesn't need to prove anything anymore, he's doing it all for the team. High fives with Luka Dončić, father and son, both smiling. Dirk Nowitzki is back. Once again, he's playing.

[END OF SAMPLE]