

On Jimmy Rayl
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Jimmy Rayl came to mind yesterday. I have no idea what prompted it, though I have been giving a lot of time to thinking about my earlier years and what they meant. This Jimmy Rayl reminiscence goes way back to the early '60s when I was in college, at the University of Minnesota. Rayl was a star basketball player for Indiana University's basketball team, the Hoosiers their nickname. Rayl looked like the homophone for his name. He was thin as a rail—around 155 pounds on his 6'2" frame.

At the time, I was hanging around with a group of guys who also went to the U of M. Characteristic of me in those years, my place in the group was in the back and over on the side, tailing along, going along with whatever the group's central core, particularly a guy named Clark, came up with.

Sports was big to the group, or more accurately, sport fandom; as far as I know, none of us participated in sports beyond the intramural touch football team Clark organized. I was a marginalized, excluded, player--nobody cared whether I was there, I didn't suit up for the games--on the university baseball team, so that doesn't count. I was completely out of place on the baseball team.

Clark designated me to be the quarterback on the touch football team, quarterback being the most central, visible, position, but after a few plays he realized his mistake and told me to play receiver. The receiver lines up over on the side and runs down the field and catches passes from the quarterback. I was fine with the position switch because I knew even if for a time Clark didn't that I'm not cut out to be focal in anything.

Clark was friends with a guy named Jim—I won't use last names here--who was a substitute on the U of M's basketball team, the Gophers. Jim wasn't much of a scorer--I just now looked it up, he averaged a little over two points a game—but according to Clark,

he was a really good defensive player. Clark said Jim was going to guard Jimmy Rayl at the Hoosiers-Gophers game coming up in Williams arena on the Minnesota campus. Rayl was averaging a lofty 30 points a game, and Jim was going to shut him down. I lead the league in suggestibility at the time, and because Clark and the other “centrals” in the group were convinced that Jim was going to get it done, that meant I was convinced of it too. The sport page of the local newspaper confirmed that Jim had been elevated to starting status and designated to guard Rayl.

This was a enormous deal to me. I mean, Jimmy Rayl was this huge sport star, and sports stars were big-time special in my eyes. Writers, poets, artists, philosophers, political figures—they were nobody. My classes and the grades I was getting in them—nothing. What I was doing with my life and was going to do with it—of no importance. But Jimmy Rayl, someone I had never seen much less met, how he did playing with a ball, that truly mattered, and whether Jim could hold him down when he was playing with a ball, that really counted, yes indeed it did.

There I was at Williams arena--on January 27th, 1962, I looked it up—sitting anonymously among thousands of others waiting with eager anticipation for the big Indiana-Minnesota game to start—us versus them, even though the Gopher players didn't know I was alive. I could have been late or stayed home, so what.

The game begins. Here comes Jimmy Rayl dribbling down the floor toward the Gopher's basket, and there, crouched and staring at him intently and ready to put the clamps on him—it was a certainty in my mind--was our man Jim.

Long story short, Indiana won the game and Jimmy Rayl scored 56 points, which remains to this day the Indiana University single-game scoring record.

What ever happened to Jimmy Rayl? I asked myself. I googled him to find out. There were a lot of recent articles on him, because he died on January 20th of this year, 2019. My gosh, Jimmy Rayl is dead. And he was 77 years old. Jimmy Rayl was bearing in on 80 years old, really. In one of the articles, his son was quoted as

saying his father had suffered a stroke in 2011 and had undergone open heart surgery that year. He had fallen into increasingly bad health the past year, his kidneys failing, and had spent time in a rehabilitation facility.

A feature article on him written a couple of years ago included a current picture—it's in the introductory blurb to this thought, along with one from the old days. That overweight old man is Jimmy Rayl?? He looks so ordinary. In the article, Jimmy talked about his bitter feelings toward the Indiana coach and his unsuccessful professional basketball career and being released at 27 and how lost he felt. He spent the rest of his life working as a copier supplies salesman.

What do I make of this re-encounter with Jimmy Rayl? I've spent a lot of time this past day thinking about what I was like back then and what I've become and, frankly, I'm damn proud of myself. I'll leave it at that.