

In this excerpt from Night Hoops, Nick Abbott, a star player on his high school basketball team, faces a difficult challenge. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

from **Night Hoops**
by Carl Deuker

1 AT THE NEXT PRACTICE O’LEARY MOVED TRENT AND me to the first team, and the up-tempo style that suited us was back, too.

2 There is nothing I like more than creating in the open court, and Trent had become a dream finisher. I fed him the ball again and again. Everything was working for him: the drives, the jumper, even the three-pointer.

3 At the end of practice, O’Leary had me wait on the court until all the guys were in the locker room. “That was solid, Nick. Real solid,” he said. “I like the way you and Trent play. You have a feel for each other, and that’s something you can’t coach.”

4 “We’ve been practicing together,” I explained. “I know where and when he likes the ball.”

5 “Yeah? Well, that’s good. That’s real good. Only don’t forget about Luke and Darren. Those guys can score, too, and they get itchy when they’re not getting their shots.”

6 “Trent was hot today,” I said, defending myself. “So I got him the ball. I’ll get them the ball when they’re hot.”

7 He nodded. “Fair enough. Find the hot hand and feed it—you do that and you’ll be starting at point guard for the next three years. Guaranteed. Now go shower up.”

. . .

8 The victory over Roosevelt was just the beginning. Against Woodinville Trent had ten rebounds and twenty-two points, while I added eight points and dished out eight assists. The Juanita Rebels were next. Again Trent had a double double—twenty-four points and eleven rebounds. I handed out nine assists, seven of them to him. After that we avenged our earlier loss to the Eastlake Wolves, then beat the two dogs of our league, Redmond and Lake Washington. Our overall record was a mediocre 8–6, but in the league we were 8–3, and we still had two games left against first-place Garfield.

9 You put together a winning streak like that, and the locker room should be a wild place. Guys singing, towels snapping, water splashing everywhere. But the energy in our locker room wasn’t that much greater than when we’d been losing. Sure, guys congratulated each other, said “Good game” and all that. But they dressed quickly and left in little groups of two and three.

10 On the day of our first game against Garfield, I was sitting alone eating a grilled cheese sandwich and soup in the cafeteria. Luke spotted me and came over. “You mind if I sit here?”

11 “No problem,” I said, glad for the company.

12 We talked about the food, the game coming up, school. I wanted to relax, have it be the way it was early in the year, but there was a tightness to his jaw that made me uncomfortable. He had something to say, something I wasn’t going to like. He finished off his milk shake and put the cup down on the table. “We can’t keep winning this way, you know.”

13 “What do you mean?” I asked, even though I knew.

14 He tipped the empty cup back and forth. “Come on, Nick. The other coaches aren’t stupid. They read the papers, check the box scores, scout the games. It’s Trent and you, and the rest of us just run up and down the court. That works against lousy teams, but a great team like Garfield will shut one or both of you down, and that’ll be that.”

15 “It hasn’t happened yet,” I said.

16 “It will. We’re not a real team, Nick.”

17 His words hung there for a moment, like a ball hanging on the rim. I swallowed. “Okay. If you get open, I’ll get you the ball. The same thing with Darren, with everybody.”

18 Luke stuck his hand out across the table. I reached out and shook it. Then he left.

19 I finished my lunch alone. The tomato soup was watery, the milk was warm, and the grilled cheese looked and tasted like yellow rubber. It was the best-tasting lunch I’d had in weeks.