

# POINT GUARD

**ALSO BY MIKE LUPICA**

*The Only Game*

*The Extra Yard*

A  
**HOME TEAM**  
NOVEL

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# **POINT GUARD**

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**MIKE  
LUPICA**

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*This book is for my mom, Lee Lupica,  
who keeps reminding us how big her heart is*



# ONE

This was how it happened sometimes:

You didn't want to stop, no matter how long you'd been playing.

That was the way Gus Morales felt right now in the gym at Walton Middle School, playing one last game of two-on-two with his best friends in the world.

It was Gus and Teddy Madden against Jack Callahan and Cassie Bennett. Jack and Cassie had won the first game. Gus

and Teddy had won the second. Now the score was 10–10 in the third, game to eleven baskets, you had to win by two.

Gus had been feeling it from the start, making left-handed shots from all over the court even with Jack guarding him most of the time. And Jack Callahan could guard anybody, because Jack was one of those guys who took as much pride in his defense as he did in his offense.

But Jack wasn't the problem right now.

Cassie was.

She was suddenly matching Gus shot for shot, as if they were playing a game of H-O-R-S-E. Jack had carried their offense for much of the first two games, but not only had Cassie gotten hot, Teddy was getting tired chasing her. It was a bad combination for Gus and Teddy's team. No, check that. It was a *terrible* combination. And Jack was taking great pleasure in feeding Cassie the ball. He knew Gus Morales as well as anybody, and he knew that as much as Gus hated losing, he really hated losing to Cassie. In anything.

It was just pickup basketball, friends going against friends. It wasn't the league championship football game Gus and Teddy and the Walton Wildcats had lost the previous Saturday to the Norris Panthers. Jack hadn't been out there with them because he'd hurt his shoulder early in the season and hadn't been cleared to play sports again until today.

But this two-on-two game still felt like a championship after the way they'd been going at each other for an hour. Maybe it was just the championship of this one afternoon, and having the gym to themselves, which always made them feel like they'd won some kind of lottery. Maybe this was just one more occasion when they were playing for the championship of each other.

Everybody on the court wanted to win.

More importantly? Nobody wanted to lose.

Jack had just gotten a put-back after a rare Cassie miss to tie the game. They were playing winners out, which meant they kept the ball if they scored. Jack had it on the left side. Gus backed off, practically daring him to shoot. Usually that was a huge mistake, because when the games counted, you always wanted the ball in Jack Callahan's hands. But Gus could see that Jack was having too much fun being Cassie's assist man down the stretch to think about hoisting one up. It never changed, even as they went from sport to sport and season to season: the only stat that ever mattered to Jack was the final score.

Jack dribbled to his left now, stopped suddenly, then whipped a pass across the court to Cassie, who was to the right of the foul line.

"Teddy," she said as soon as she caught the ball, in a sing-song voice, "I'm coming for you."

“Leave me alone,” Teddy said, giving her some room, hands on his knees and looking officially gassed.

“That is a big old no-can-do,” she said. “It’s you and me, big boy.”

Teddy kept his eyes on Cassie but found enough energy to yell over to Gus and Jack, “Make the bad girl stop.”

He was done, though. They all knew it. He had been trying to keep up with Cassie for three close games, finding out for himself what anyone who’d ever tried to cover Cassie already knew: chasing her was like chasing the wind. She was as fast dribbling the ball as she was without it. And she could shoot. Boy, could this girl shoot.

She could also chirp, the way she had just now, telling Teddy she was coming for him, calling him out one last time today, maybe even about to call her shot.

Gus wasn’t much of a trash-talker. Neither was Jack. Neither was Teddy, as funny as he was. But all of Cassie’s talk was just part of who she was, and they accepted it, mostly because she could back it all up.

She started her dribble with her right hand and took a hard, quick first step, as if she was about to drive past Teddy. But as soon as he bit on the move and backed up even more, Cassie stepped back. She created some very nice space for herself, and put up another set shot that seemed to float all

the way up to the rafters before it finally came down, softly, through the net.

It was 11–10 for her team.

Still their ball.

This time, though, Cassie rushed her shot, trying to end things right here, and missed. Teddy got the rebound, threw the ball out to Gus.

They had a chance to tie.

Maybe it was going to take another hour for somebody to get ahead by two baskets.

Fine by Gus.

Jack came running out and got right up on Gus before Gus started his dribble.

“Gonna be like that, huh?” Gus said.

“Would you want it any other way?”

They both knew the answer. All four of them on the court knew. You couldn't be in this group and not throw everything you had at the other guy.

Or girl.

Gus decided to try a move he'd been practicing in his driveway. He was going to put the ball down with his left hand, as if he was the one who wanted to drive that way. But as soon as he did, he was going to whirl and go to the right. Using his right hand, his off hand, was something else he'd

been working on as he got ready for basketball tryouts this Saturday. Might as well show it off now to the best defender in Walton.

Gus tried to sell Jack on the idea that he was going left again. Jack moved with him, overplaying, trying to cut him off. As soon as he did, Gus planted his right foot, spun around so he was facing the basket at the other end, and put the ball on his right hand, ready to cut to the middle, feeling Jack on his hip, knowing he had a step on him, at least.

As he did, he heard Teddy yell, "Gus!"

Too late.

Cassie had made her move as Gus made his, doubling him from behind, stealing the ball cleanly, turning defense into offense that fast.

She dribbled back out to the top of the key because that was the rule; you had to take it back there after any change of possession. As she did, Teddy pointed to Gus, telling him to take her, as Teddy moved over to guard Jack.

"Been wishing you'd make this switch all day," Cassie said, smiling.

"Didn't you ever hear the one about being careful what you wish for?" Gus said.

Cassie didn't answer. She was looking into his eyes, still smiling. As much as Gus was enjoying the moment, Cassie

was clearly enjoying it more. This was exactly where she wanted to be. This was Cassie, 100 percent.

She dribbled with her right hand, then with her left, then her right again, as if she had the ball on some kind of string. Gus told himself not to watch the ball, to watch *her*, try to get a read on whether she was going to drive or pull back the way she just had on Teddy.

She decided to pass instead, off her last dribble with her right hand, her eyes never leaving Gus's.

Gus took his eyes off Cassie, though, just for a split second. He wanted to see where Jack was, how open he was, decide in another split second if Teddy needed help.

As soon as he did, Cassie broke for the basket, and the ball came right back to her: a perfect give-and-go. Gus scrambled to catch up, but now he was chasing her in vain the way Teddy had, watching as Cassie took Jack's bounce pass in stride and made the layup that won the game for their team.

Cassie stood underneath the basket, hands on hips, staring at Gus and looking like the happiest kid in Walton.

Gus said, "Is this the one where you tell us that girls rule and boys drool?"

"Never," she said. "I find that sort of trash talk *sooooo* uninteresting."

"On what planet?" Gus said.

Cassie laughed. So did he. Even now, he didn't want the day to be over. But it was all right, he told himself. The basketball season was just starting.

Gus Morales just had no way of knowing it wasn't going to be the season he expected.

Not even close.