

**Dementia is the worst; so do something about it**

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## Gallery: MikeMadness 2017



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on July 19, 2017 at 8:30 AM, updated July 19, 2017 at 7:14 PM

It started as "Old Man Hoops." Which was a lie.

It was really just a few guys whose bodies had begun to feel the passage of time, but whose heads held on to youth. To the simple chaos of the gyms and locker rooms where they grew up.

They were doctors and lawyers. Laborers and salesmen and journalists and retailers and researchers and all that. But on Saturday mornings they gathered to play basketball.

Just like they did as boys.

Old Man Hoops.

That's how it started, back in 2013. They've played basketball every Saturday since, minus the occasional Christmas or catastrophe. It's the kind of group that'll email 30 times on a Friday to see who's in and who's out. It's made of mouths that will argue for hours about the perfect nickname for a point guard who - in his day job - is a renowned infectious disease specialist.

Should he be Dr. James "Virus" Willig, or simply "The Virus?"

The Virus. Clearly.

I was not among the founders of this league. That honor would go to a New Yorker named Paul Blutter and to WBHM's Dan Carsen. It goes to a Frenchman called The Bull, and a few others.

I came along in time, and brought friends from work like Mike Oliver and David Magee. I brought my son, Ramsey, and Raph Shepard, the guy who is going to marry my daughter - unless he makes the mistake of trying to bring that weak stuff into the paint again.

But somehow this game became more than sport. More than old guys trying to relive youth, more than recreation or mental health days or competition. When Magee got breast cancer, the group bought jerseys and made donations to cancer research. Then last fall, Mike Oliver was diagnosed with a little-known degenerative brain disease called Lewy Body Dementia.

### **PREVIOUS: The bad news: I don't have Parkinson's**

We knew little about Lewy Body, even if it is the second-leading cause of dementia. But we learned.

It's like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's combined. It acts fast, stealing memories and lives. They said it was going to take our friend.

All I knew was the guy with the deteriorating brain is still the one I trust to edit my stories. He's the one who can still take most of us off the dribble, and he still hits three-pointers a third of the time.

All any of us knew was that Mike loves basketball, and Old Man Hoops. And Old Man Hoops loves Mike.

And it is not alone.

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Last weekend, Old Man Hoops, in cooperation with a bunch of people who love Mike and hate his disease, held a 3-on-3 basketball tournament for Lewy Body research.

**PREVIOUS: Stop this disease before it kills my game.**

It was everything Mike could ask. There was blood and sweat and Mike's own no-look passes. And there was violence.

One guy broke his nose and a couple of 6-foot-7 dudes almost came to blows. It was diffused when my 4-foot-10 wife - needed or not - ran onto the court to step between them.

Which was a sight.

UAB donated its rec center - which was great. UAB also came up with a team that soon would be known as the MonStars. A group of giants with no remaining Division 1 eligibility. They beat us old guys like Ray Watts planned it himself.

Even Alabama Power formed a team. I was sure they found the toughest guys at the company and told them to Bill Laimbeer me. But alas, they turned out to be nice guys who were, um, *always on*.

In the end 14 teams played 73 games and raised almost \$15,000 for the Lewy Body Dementia Association. It raised awareness, and money, and that's good. What's seems most important right now is that it made memories.

Of Mike and for Mike. Of this game and this cause and so many friendships.

Of Old Man Hoops.

Thank you.

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