

White, W. (2011). The Philadelphia Clean Machine: A story of basketball and addiction recovery. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com and www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org

The Philadelphia Clean Machine: A Story of Basketball and Addiction Recovery

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“We wanted to stay in shape, and we wanted to stay clean.”

At the 2010 National Rally for Recovery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was acknowledged as “the recovery capital of the world.” That title comes in part from Philadelphia having hosted a stream of national and international visitors seeking to understand and emulate the city’s unique addiction recovery support systems. Philadelphia has distinguished itself through its vibrant and diverse communities of recovery; a powerful local recovery advocacy movement; an increasingly recovery-focused treatment system; its growing network of recovery homes, schools, and industries; and its celebration of recovery through the vehicles of art, music, drama, and sport. The purpose of this paper is to describe a small but important story within this larger recovery-oriented systems transformation process that has unfolded in Philadelphia. This is the story of the Philadelphia Clean Machine—a group of recovering addicts who are using basketball as a catalyst for rebuilding their lives.

I

It started in the mid-1980s as a confluence of need and inspiration. The need was experienced by men who once lived on Philadelphia’s basketball courts before their addictions took them to the streets. They were men whose addictions cut short dreams of college ball and careers in the NBA, but who are now seeking to recapture and relive part of that dream. Some were ex-stars trying to recapture some of their lost glory. All were men struggling in their early recoveries to fill the void of leaving “the life”—men whose earlier efforts to return to the courts as men in recovery

had often brought them into contact with the very negativity they were seeking to escape.

The inspiration came in 1986 when two such men who had started playing basketball after their NA meetings developed the idea of creating a basketball team of recovering addicts. They started playing twice a week at a gym at 22nd and Cecil B. Moore Avenue. At first, some came to play ball and some came to stay clean, but as their members grew in size and commitment, a more formal team was created with the vision of encouraging the development of other teams of recovering addicts who could compete in regular tournaments. In 1989, the Philadelphia Clean Machine was formally created to pursue this vision. Nearly a quarter of a century later, that vision has grown to something its founders could not have imagined.

Today, the Philadelphia Clean Machine is a blend of recovery culture and basketball culture. Since its inception, it has engaged more than 300 men from Philadelphia in intense athletic competition (regular tryouts, practices, and 6-8 road trips for tournaments per year), and it has sparked the development of teams of recovering addicts in 25-30 other cities, mostly in the Northeastern United States. The Philadelphia Clean Machine has participated in tournaments as far north as Vancouver, Canada, and as far south as Atlanta and Decatur, Georgia. Since its inception, the team has been completely self-sufficient financially, with members paying for their uniforms and all costs of travel. In Philadelphia, there are now three 12-man teams who represent the Clean Machine.

II

There are several distinctive features to the Philadelphia Clean Machine and its tournaments. First, all of the players and coaches of the Clean Machine and the teams they play in tournaments are in recovery. Second, basketball exists as the centerpiece of a larger focus on the physical, mental, and spiritual development of the players (e.g., the team now has its own volunteer therapist and volunteer nutritionist). Third, basketball games are nested in a larger rubric of mutual support among team members, recovery support meetings (speaker jams) held at the tournaments, and fundraisers that support other recovery community activities. Fourth, families and members of the larger recovery community are actively involved in supporting the team.

Although being a member of NA or AA is not a requirement for participation in the Clean Machine, most members are actively involved in one or more recovery fellowships. The requirement for Clean Machine

membership is “a willingness to change your life and help the community.” In the early years of the Clean Machine, members had to have 30 days of clean time before they could practice or play in a game, and any member who used could not play until that clean time was re-established. Today, the clean time requirement for playing continues, but a member who has used is more likely to be embraced than abandoned. Such a member is re-engaged by other team members, encouraged to get his recovery re-stabilized, and re-integrated into practices until everyone is comfortable with him returning to active play status.

III

What has the Clean Machine meant to the players? It is about being with kindred spirits who share a commitment to recovery. It is about a second chance and the pure enjoyment of the game. It is about escaping the negativity of one’s environment. It is about being in a safe place where nobody is going to threaten anyone or fight or pull a gun. It is about having a cultural home—a sanctuary that is secure and comfortable. It is about being part of something positive. It is about healing wounded bodies and spirits.

And many of these effects occur off the basketball court. When I asked representatives about the most therapeutic moments within the Clean Machine experience, they did not talk about the basketball games or even the recovery support meetings often held in tandem with the tournaments. They talked about what happens on those long drives to tournaments—the laughing, the crying, the sharing of stories, the sharing of dreams, the unconditional support, and all the things that happened along the way (snow storms, flat tires, police stops, people encounters of all varieties). They talked about what it meant for their sons to travel with them and to grow up in such a positive recovery environment. Today, there are men involved with the Clean Machine with more than 25 years of continuous recovery and more than two decades of involvement in this unique recovery institution.

IV

Addiction is a transformative, all-consuming experience, and many people with severe alcohol and other drug problems have been deeply enmeshed in a culture of addiction—a street culture—with its own distinct language, values, rules, roles, rituals, and relationships. For some, ending

the drug relationship is inseparable from escaping enmeshment in this drug culture. For some, the transition into health requires enmeshment in a culture of recovery that is also transformative and all-consuming. The culture of recovery in the United States is growing beyond encounters of mutual support “in the rooms” to encompass all kinds of recovery support activities. The Philadelphia Clean Machine is an example of such a new recovery support structure organized by and for people in addiction recovery. A day will soon come when communities across the world will contain vibrant recovery cultures through which the recovery experience will be expressed through the vehicles of mutual support, community service, music, art, theatre, comedy, and sport. The city of Philadelphia and groups like the Philadelphia Clean Machine are revealing the healing power of these cultures of recovery.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Anthony W. and Milton M. for their willingness to share the history of the Philadelphia Clean Machine. Support for development of this paper was provided by the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services.