

# Win or lose? Minutes seem like hours

by Wayne Westlake  
Chukchi News and Information Service

## SPORTS

KIANA — I could see our success in the evening's district high school basketball championship game. I envisioned the team's happiness in victory. Yet, with the possibility of losing, I could see dejection in the team's defeat.

All day I could not eat. My stomach swirled like a whirlwind on the frozen Kobuk River. There was no room for food in my stomach. Despite not eating, I walked and roamed the school halls, too energized to sit still for a moment. My head was light and floated with a natural high. At times, I felt dizzy.

I took deep breaths to calm myself. Thinking about what lay ahead, I became anxious. Will we be the district champs? The thought made me edgy. My palms were sweaty and my feet cold. I continued my stroll and returned to the locker room, where I started to pace.

The team was changing into their scarlet-colored uniforms with gold trim. I thought about the relief and joy that would be mine if we were to win the game. On the other hand, shivers ran up and down my spine with the thought of losing.

My confidence mostly stood firm, though, and only on one occasion did I doubt. I also knew that anything could happen. This uneasiness made time move as slowly as an Arctic winter. I wanted the game to start and end so that I could relax.

I followed the team onto the court. The body heat radiating from all the fans, cheering and waving their hands and stomping their feet, made the air in the gym warm and thick, making it hard to breathe. I took a couple of deep breaths.

My mouth dried. I reached down and grabbed a water bottle, squeezing out as much as possible, guzzling to quench my thirst. My heartbeat became more powerful as I anticipated victory. The blood pumped through my body as the horn blew indicating the start of the game. Suddenly, though, my confidence wavered. My hands sweated and my feet chilled

again. My red necktie tightened. This was our one and only chance. Would we blow this opportunity?

On the game's first play, we lost the ball on a bad pass, then lost it again: another bad pass. Several of our shots missed. After a couple minutes into the contest, an 18-foot jump shot rolled around the rim and dropped for our first two points. I started to breathe more easily.

With our team trailing by two points during the first eight minutes, and knowing that we could play better, my confidence stabilized again.

We started to play better and took the lead.

"Alright! Keep hustling!" I said, as we stole the ball and scored on a driving layup.

We scrapped and clawed for every rebound. We shot the ball with good accuracy and built on our lead. With each break, I could see victory in our path. Breathing easier and feeling more relaxed, I eased back in the chair to a more comfortable position and

took another swig of water.

Nevertheless, it wasn't long before the other team found its mark on the basket. Their players also started to dive after the ball to gain possession. Their tenacious man-to-man defense did not allow us to get any uncontested shots. We threw another bad pass and they scored on an 8-foot jump shot. Our one-time 14-point lead narrowed to six.

I sat up. My muscles tightened. I took another swig of water. My stomach swirled again. I loosened my tie and looked at the time clock. A couple of minutes remained in the game. A traveling violation turned the ball over to our opponents. They continued to take advantage of their momentum and scored on a 20-foot jump shot for three points.

"Poise!" I yelled. "Got to have poise!"

I signaled for a time-out. The team came over to the bench, some players with their heads down.

"We are still ahead," I said. "I

have confidence in you and your ability to pull through and win the game."

My hands sweated even more as they took to the court again. Instead of sitting on the chair, I walked down to the end of the bench and back.

Although time was running out, the last minute seemed like an hour. I could sense victory, but I counted down the last seconds out loud. The blood rushed through me with a warming sensation as the horn blew. I jumped and waved my arms and ran onto the court to hug the players. The fans rushed onto the court, shaking hands and slapping high fives with the players.

"Congratulations," they said.

I glowed with pride, soaking in this glorious moment in life.

My body was tired and relaxed, so I sat down, content with what we had accomplished.

*Inupiaq Eskimo Wayne Westlake, who plans to become a certified teacher, wrote this piece in a writing class at Chukchi College, a branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Westlake, a licensed electrician and father of three children, has coached basketball at Kiana High School since 1981 and has led teams to two state championships. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College.*