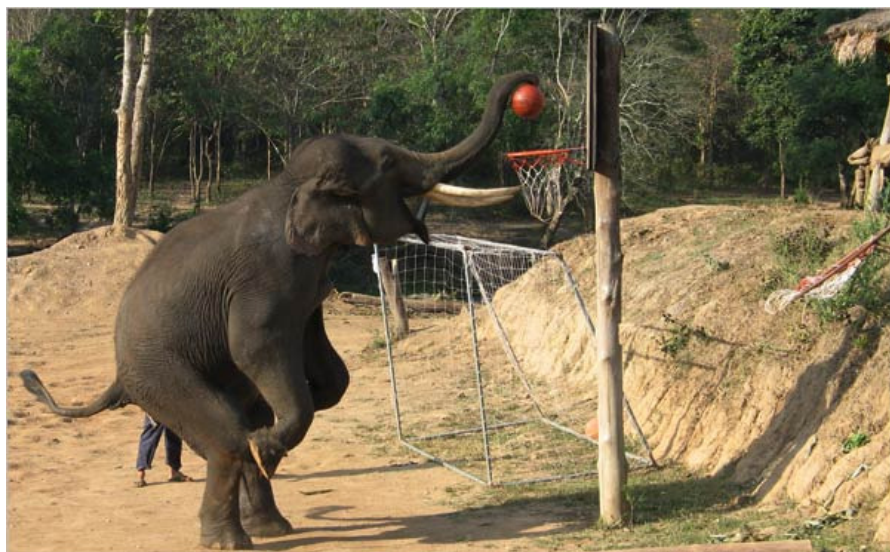


Traveling, and Always Shooting

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Angelina and Noel Andreoni

In Thailand in 2006, Orachi the elephant showed a soft touch to complement a power game in the lane.

By KATIE THOMAS
Published: March 23, 2008

A journey of a thousand miles, the saying goes, begins with a single step.

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Angelina and Noel Andreoni
Angelina and Noel Andreoni have

Noel and Angelina Andreoni wanted theirs to begin with a single swish.

It was May 25, 2001, and the couple were about to embark on a new adventure. Noel had quit his job as a valet parking attendant in Las Vegas; Angelina had given up her gig as a cocktail waitress.

From here on, they had decided, their lives would be governed by three passions: travel, photography and basketball.

But first, Noel wanted to inaugurate the trip with a single perfect shot. In the parking lot of their apartment complex, he aimed a basketball at the hoop, shot it — and missed. No good. The Andreonis returned the ball to the sporting goods store and bought another.

“I had to start on a positive note,” Noel said.

And so it continued. Aim, shoot, miss. New ball. Aim, shoot, miss. New ball. The fifth Spalding ball swished through the net. Their journey had begun.

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incorporated basketball into seven years of world travel.

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Angelina and Noel Andreoni

Whether they're at the Grand Canyon or on Easter Island, the Andreonis never let people finish on a miss.

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Angelina and Noel Andreoni

The Andreonis at Easter Island.

Nearly seven years later, the Andreonis have traveled far beyond that Las Vegas parking lot. And everywhere they go, that ball goes with them. In all, they have visited 28 countries, all 50 states and nearly every Canadian province and territory.

They dribbled in the shadow of Mount Fuji in Japan. They shot hoops with schoolchildren in China. An elephant dunked their ball in Thailand. They have discovered basketball in the most unlikely of places, including on Easter Island in the South Pacific and in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, inside the Arctic Circle.

Their loosely organized project, which they call Shoot the Ball, receives no financial help, aside from a recent sponsorship deal with Spalding. Between trips around the globe, the Andreonis visit schools and universities, mixing motivational speeches with basketball drills. Their Web site, shoottheball.net, features Angelina's photographs of where the ball has been and tracks where it is going.

Noel, the son of a gym teacher, developed his passion for basketball in Moose Jaw, a city of 30,000 in Saskatchewan. Angelina grew up in Calgary in a family with five children.

"Growing up in Canada, I was supposed to play hockey, but I was never good at it," Noel said.

As a teenager, he had a growth spurt and ended up playing basketball, continuing on a team at Medicine Hat College. He wasn't great, but he loved the game. "I sat on the bench pretty much the entire time," Noel said.

Years later, he and his wife ended up in Las Vegas, wondering if there was more to life than working in dead-end service jobs. Angelina loved photography; Noel loved basketball. But Noel said he realized that they probably wouldn't make a living at either.

"But we can still pursue those passions," he said. "We said, 'Let's get back to what we enjoy and do it.' And because we can do it, we've become very good at passing that message on."

That simple, unassuming mission charmed Lynn Luczkowski, a spokeswoman for Spalding, who said the Andreonis distinguished themselves from a parade of self-promoters who seek help from the company. Spalding recently financed their trip to the N.B.A. All-Star Game in New Orleans, and helped them distribute 800 basketballs to children.

"I'm always talking about how they can market themselves," Luczkowski said, "and they just want to be able to travel around the world and not have to lose money."

The couple divide their time among traveling, visiting family and working to pay for their next trip. Noel, 39, and Angelina, 37, are careful to point out that being carefree does not mean they are careless.

"We are very aware that there are people out there who might think we've 'checked out' of life's responsibilities; the case is just the opposite," Angelina wrote in an e-mail message a few days after a telephone interview. "Noel and I have been married 12 years, own a home and are close to our families. We are able to continue this project due to self-discipline and good money management. Every employer we've had would welcome us back."

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The Andreonis are not big on rules, but there is one that they follow religiously. Like that first day in the parking lot, when Noel missed one ball after another, everyone has to make a shot.

“No one leaves on a miss,” Angelina said. “Everyone shoots until they make it.”

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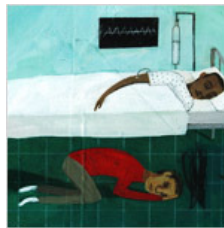
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