

liar with the California Institute of Technol-
in Pasadena, and, if so, perhaps you are also
rasting reputations.

ech has few peers. It's regularly ranked as the
ity in the world, and faculty and alumni have
Albert Einstein once mulled his theory of rel-
ot far from where Richard Feynman hit upon
technology. Students who survive the grueling
average starting salary of \$82,000 upon grad-
aid off the bulk of their debt by then anyway,
t places like Google, Microsoft, or Uber, bring-
0 in three months. When the entertainment
epict really smart people, it often puts them
al Genius to *Num3rs* to *The Big Bang Theory* to

ech has few peers too, though for different rea-
team hasn't won a conference game this mil-
ball program was euthanized in 1993. But the
gles are the most infamous. The Beavers once
nativity without winning a game in the Southern
legiate Athletic Conference (SCIAC). They reg-
es that, if they occurred in youth sports, would
el. Occasionally, players did homework on the
nes, because at least that way they were being
a filmmaker followed the team in 2006, in the
c, ongoing losing streak, the resulting documen-
pps, was optioned by Ben Stiller. As a comedy.
en easy to treat the team as a joke, as Rick Reilly
rated nine years ago. (Sample line: "Wouldn't you
a ball would bounce off a pocket protector and
ontext is important, though. Unlike the Ivies or
pponents, Caltech makes no allowance when ad-
Only a handful of students have the grades (3.8
n SAT scores (2230 to 2340) to get in, and only a
happen to be good at basketball.

the matter of time, or the lack of it. Students regu-
t to 10 hours a day, slogging until the gray light
e times last December alone, starting guard An-
rived at practice having gone sleepless for more

than 30 hours. At one point, after he slumped into the campus's
lone minimart to purchase yet another bottle of 5-hour Energy,
the caffeine-laced elixir of truckers and ravers the world over, the
cashier threatened to cut him off. "Dude," Hogue remembers the
man saying. "You really can't keep doing this to your body."

Hogue's classmates couldn't figure him out. Here he was, a
computer engineering major who'd spent his summer working
at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Why not just skip basketball
practice? Why play basketball at all?

And it raises a valid question: why would anyone sacrifice, and
work so hard, when all he is going to do is lose?

Two hundred and sixty-nine.

Oliver Eslinger sat on the worn couch in his apartment in
Somerville, Massachusetts, in the summer of 2008, staring at his
laptop. He pondered the odds of a college team losing that many
conference games in a row.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" his fiancée, Austin, asked.

After six years as an assistant at MIT, Eslinger had been hired
as the new head coach at Caltech. The job only paid 10 months a
year. He'd have to teach PE. And move across the country.

Still, Eslinger was an optimist by nature, fond of saying, "Well, if
you look at it as an *advantage*," when confronted with a problem.
The dirt around his childhood backyard hoop in Broken Arrow,
Oklahoma? An *advantage*; it forced him to keep his dribble low.
The lack of competition in the burbs when his family moved out-
side Albany, New York? An *advantage*; it forced him to venture to
Washington Park, where his real basketball education occurred.
When his father, a petrochemical geologist, lost his job? Well that
sucked, for Eslinger idolizes his father, carries his handwritten
advice notes in his wallet. And yet, still, an *advantage*; the family
learned about resilience.

At D-III Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he
played guard for two seasons, Eslinger was shorter (6'1"), skinnier
(160), and less springy (as in, not-at-all springy) than his team-
mates. His solution: work harder and be smarter. Just as a small
animal puffs itself up to look bigger, he decided to use illusion
to his advantage in sports. He took three giant strides off the line
during suicides to create "competitive separation." After one par-