A SENSE OF WHERE YOU AREN’T: BASKETBALL BIRTHRIGHT AT BOSTON ENGLISH HIGH AND FATHERHOOD IN URBAN HOOP CULTURE

A thesis presented

by

Justin A. Rice

to
The School of Journalism

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Observing the varsity boys basketball team at Boston English High—the nation’s oldest public high school—on a near-daily basis, the author examines the role fatherhood plays in urban basketball culture. While societal stereotypes suggest growing up in a two-parent home fosters stability, many fathers in black communities push basketball on their children too hard. And while stereotypes suggest every college and NBA player was raised by a single mom, many coaches actually look for players who have traits most likely obtained in a two-parent home.

The narrative of English High’s 2005-06 season focuses on two players on opposite ends of the parenthood spectrum. Calvin Davis, a junior shooting guard, grew up without a father and struggles to find a viable alternative to replace the role basketball plays in his life. Mike Marsh—a senior small forward displaced by Hurricane Katrina—struggles to handle his overbearing father who insists he can earn a Division 1 college basketball scholarship even when Mike is willing to settle on smaller schools.

While it’s impossible to definitively determine if developing players with fathers have an advantage over those raised without dads, or vice versa, looking at these hypothetical questions through the milieu of English High helps untangle complicated conceptions shrouding urban hoop culture and its relationship to fatherhood.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the only way I can begin to show gratitude to the varsity basketball coach at Boston English High, Barry Robinson, for providing me full access to his team. I was just a grad student off the street and neither he nor I could have possibly imagined the long road we were stepping on to back in 2005. But I am grateful to Coach Rob, as he is affectionately known, for allowing me to take the journey. The candor of Coach Rob his daughter, Chiquisha, Calvin Davis, Michael Marsh, Tahsean Kirkland, Miles Hinton and many other players is the backbone of this project.

This thesis also could never have been completed without help from Georgette Travis, who works in English High’s office. She was an invaluable resource when it came to accessing yearbooks, academic statistics and the whereabouts of players after graduation. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge her macaroni and cheese as the best I’ve ever eaten. Former English High football coach, Keith Parker, was also a valuable resource as a historical reference. Professor Silvia Dominguez’s early insight and encouragement when this project began as an assignment for her sociology class was crucial. She was also a member of my thesis committee along with Professor James Ross, whose early pep talks and edits down the stretch were clutch. My former undergraduate professor, William McWhirter, was on call at even the darkest hours. My thesis advisor, Laurel Leff, stuck with me through five long years and several red pens. When she signed on she told me it would take longer than I expected and she didn’t turn me away when I finally mustered the courage to pull the project off the shelf.
I owe a great deal to my good friend Anthony Dutra for kicking me in the butt last winter—which I’m not exactly sure why it was more influential than the millions of mini interventions staged by my parents and wife through the years. My wife was my girlfriend when this project started and has tolerated boxes of notes filling our closet and enough of my emotional highs and lows to write her own Master’s thesis. This project would also not be possible without my parents supporting my journalism habit since the eighth grade.

My wife and parents were patient editors, sounding boards and pillars of support. I love you and I owe you all Abe and Louies.

Justin A. Rice
December 2010
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“A great basketball player, almost by definition, is someone who has grown up in a constricted world, not for lack of vision or ambition but for lack of money; his environment has been limited to home, gym, and playground, and it has forced upon him, as a developing basketball player, the discipline of having nothing else to do.”

- John McPhee, A Sense of Where You Are

CHAPTER I: TRYOUTS

ROUGHLY 30 basketball players are gathered in a room that doubles as a weight room and health classroom at the nation’s first public high school, Boston English High. The walls are covered with posters featuring the food pyramid and other healthful hints. A blue poster with the Boston Globe logo on it that says “Go Dogs” is leftover from the team’s run to the state title game in 2000. Tables and chairs are set up in the front of the room while dated workout equipment is in back. Yellow foam padding protrudes through ripped vinyl on a bench press and the seatbacks of a leg press and leg curl machine. A weight rack has no weights. A butterfly press is missing the pin to its weight stack. The stair-stepper does not step. A mount for a speed bag has no punching bag.

The equipment’s dire condition is not surprising considering Boston Public School’s athletic budget has not increased in more than two years despite the fact that the country’s oldest school system was named the nation’s best large district by Forbes Magazine in 2002.¹ Boston Public Schools spend less on high school athletics than its neighbors, Cambridge and Somerville, as well as similarly-sized cities such as San Francisco and Atlanta.² Meanwhile, the city’s professional sporting teams are enjoying a renaissance. The New England Patriots won three Super Bowls from 2001 to 2005 and the Boston Red Sox won the 2004 World Series to break the

¹ The Best Education in the Biggest Cities, Forbes. 2002.
Curse of the Bambino, the team’s 86 year championship drought that begun when the Sox sold Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees in 1918.

In the midst of the district’s sorry state of athletics, English High’s varsity basketball coach poses a question to the mostly black players sitting in the school’s dilapidated weight room on November 29, 2005: “How many of you all love your mothers?”

Every hand rises as Coach Barry Robinson, known as Coach Rob, stands in front of the large dry erase board on which he has scrawled “Tryout” across the glossy white surface. “You probably all love your mothers, I’d say fathers…” Coach Rob trails off before unabashedly editing his original thought: “How many of you only have mothers?”

“I have a stepfather,” starting senior point guard Tahsean Kirkland (nicknamed TK) mutters defiantly under his breath while sitting sideways in his chair with his eyes locked on the floor so he can’t see several sheepishly-raised hands.

“That’s about 80 percent of you,” Coach Rob says in his thick Jamaican accent, hardly counting the hands before concluding a tangent during his opening remarks on the second official day of the season. “This is tryout week. From here on out everything in life is a tryout.”

A more scientific survey of BPS students was taken by Harvard University in 2004 and found that 34 percent of BPS students live with a single mother and BPS’ black students are 18 percent more likely than others to live without a father.3 Given the seemingly endless number of college and pro players who have used basketball as a vehicle to pull themselves out of similar circumstances, it seems plausible to assume the basketball players sitting before Coach Rob on

3 Statistics from Harvard School of Public Health’s Report of the 2004 Boston Youth Survey found that over half (52 percent) of youth sampled lived either in two-parent households (32 percent) or their parents shared joint custody (20 percent). Nearly one-fifth of students (19 percent) of students said they live in more than one household.
November 5, 2005 hold tight to fantasies about playing in the National Basketball Association. But the basketball aspirations of the English players are much more realistic, even if they don’t fully grasp the fact that players growing up without a father have a harder time playing college or professional basketball because they have to help their mothers with chores, childcare and rent. The burdens of living in the inner-city without a father leave far less time to practice basketball than players with two parents have. At the same time, the fathers in the inner-city who do play a role in their son’s basketball upbringings often have an unhealthy fixation on a sport that in the last 25 years has been used to create a caricature of black machismo. These fathers usually push their boys too hard—posting their son’s highlights on YouTube and constantly bragging to scouts and coaches. The dichotomy between fatherless players and players with overbearing fathers begs the question: Do players with fathers have an advantage over those raised without dads, or vice versa? And given how many urban black players actually make it to the NBA, is basketball more helpful or harmful to the black community at large?

One of the only players without his hand raised during Coach Rob’s survey, Michael Marsh, is also one of the players with an overbearing father. The senior small forward with tree-trunk thighs, large hands and a six-pack abdomen is compact for his muscular 6-foot-5-inch frame—a stark contrast to the un-athletic pudgy kid of his childhood. Mike’s father, Donny Marsh, molded his son into a player. A former Division 2 player at Daemen College in Amherst, N.Y., Donny brought Mike along to practices for the Amateur Athletic Union team he coached.  

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5 The Amateur Athletic Union, or AAU, is one of the largest, non-profit, volunteer, sports organizations in the United States. AAU teams comprised of high school all-stars travel across the country to play in showcase tournaments that allow college coaches to recruit a bunch of players at once rather than going to individual high
Under his father’s tutelage, Mike progressed quickly and eventually played for an elite basketball prep school in Mississippi before being displaced by Hurricane Katrina and landing on Coach Rob’s doorstep a few weeks ago. Mike is no doubt English High’s best prospect this year to play college basketball. Donny insists his son can obtain college basketball’s Holy Grail (a Division 1 scholarship) and, when asked, Donny estimates Mike has a 90 to 99 percent chance of playing collegiately compared with players raised by single moms. “Without a father he would have a 60 percent chance,” Donny says. “It’s a big difference, about a 30 to 35 percent drop off to me for a player without a father figure.” In reality only about three percent of all high school basketball players will eventually earn a college scholarship. An engaging and levelheaded 19-year-old with a decent GPA, Mike is willing to settle on potential Division 2 or Division 3 offers but doesn’t know how to tell his father how he really feels.

Calvin Davis, on the other hand, has his arm up during Coach Rob’s poll. Calvin might fit the stereotype of urban black kids growing up fatherless but he debunks the myth about them being blindly bent on playing in the NBA despite the fact that two percent of all college players will play in the NBA. The scrappy, sharp-shooting junior guard—who goes by Cal—has done his share of hoop dreaming, imagining himself as a hometown hero at Boston College before being drafted by the Boston Celtics. Early AAU success and a scholarship to a suburban prep school reinforced his notion that he had a special destiny. But after flunking out of prep school and transferring to English to repeat his freshman year, Cal took a part-time job to help support school games. However convenient this may be for all involved, the scene has turned into a meat market with talent scouts and shoe companies also recruiting players.


7 Ibid.
his family, leaving less time to hone his hoop skills. Without a father figure to keep him on track, Cal abandoned his rigorous basketball regiment after one year at English. “Division 1 players have to commit themselves,” Cal says. “They’re in the gym nonstop, probably till school opens. They’re in there till when school closes. And that’s how it was my freshman year. I would always come in early, do what I had to do.”

Meanwhile, several of Cal’s former AAU teammates were being heavily recruited by top-tier college basketball programs.

“I’m pretty sure they had people push them, you know what I mean,” Cal says. “I’m pretty sure they had different people in their life, in the gym with them to retrieve the ball when they were shooting, to give them motivation, I’m sure they did do things on their own. They did work on their own but I’m sure they had that guidance in their life, like ‘alright Jim, alright Will, it’s time to get in the gym, it’s Saturday,’ you know what I’m saying; ’cause I’m pretty sure they was tired just like me—they didn’t want to get out of bed.”

Recently adopting a more realistic view of his chances to play elite basketball, Cal is desperately seeking an alternative to basketball even though the sport has kept him in school and off the streets. Despite being undersized at 5-4, 157 pounds, Cal has a swagger and gun-slinging jump shot to match his nickname, The Caly Kid. The 18-year-old cherishes his spot in English’s starting lineup but knows time spent on the court could be time spent improving his grades, working or honing a trade—prompting his urge to quit a sport that seems to be branded on his DNA. If he still played for a prep school, was taller and had a father, Cal suspects, some college would take a chance on him. If his grades were closer to mediocre, he’d be on firmer ground, too. And while he certainly keeps up with his teammates’ daily chatter, often leading the banter
about how good of a *balla* he is, deep down, Cal knows his teammates and friends are more likely to hold him down than propel him forward—he’s just not quite sure how to change his prospects with anything besides his jump shot.

Cal and Mike’s experiences on opposite ends of the urban basketball spectrum—Cal drowning without a father and Mike treading troubled waters with an overbearing one—doesn’t help answer the question of whether developing players with dads have an advantage over those who do not have dads. But looking at these hypothetical questions from the ground up—through the lenses of Cal, Mike and the milieu of English High—helps untangle complicated and intertwined conceptions and misconceptions shrouding urban hoop culture’s relationship with fatherhood.

The simple fact that these questions are hardly ever considered at English High leaves the players at a loss when it comes to understanding the role basketball plays in their lives. Without a roadmap to help avoid pitfalls, Cal and Mike have no recourse when they come up against the negative aspects of urban basketball. They are conflicted and confused; one day Cal talks about quitting the team and finding a viable replacement to his hoop dream and the next he is smitten by the fantasy of winning a basketball scholarship. One day Mike is aligned with his father’s dream that he will play Division 1 ball and the next he’s willing to consider more obtainable options.

Before continuing Cal and Mike’s narratives it is important to unpack four theories I developed about urban hoop culture while spending the 2005-06 season observing English High’s varsity basketball team on a near-daily basis, including participating in the team’s backbreaking preseason conditioning sessions. The logic of these theories is entirely too tidy.
But their general nature, along with the occasional logical leap, is counterbalanced by the reality that nothing is neat about Mike and Cal’s English High episodes.

1. Urban black players subscribe to a Darwinian-like notion that the hardest working players will win basketball scholarships regardless of outside influences such as street violence or part-time jobs. This phenomenon was born out of John McPhee’s idea that impoverished players have “the discipline of having nothing else to do” but practice basketball. McPhee’s theory, however, is at odds with the perils of modern urban squalor. McPhee says urban players in the 1960s were motivated by their lack of wealth while privileged players were hindered by money. But today’s poor players can’t compete with privileged players who can afford camps and personal trainers.

2. The healthiest way for urban black kids to navigate the college recruiting process is to have a support system, ideally one that includes a player’s father and mother.

3. Although the prevailing stereotype is that fatherless blacks see basketball as their ticket out of the inner-city, most players at urban schools have more realistic basketball aspirations than popular assumptions allow.

4. Despite these tempered aspirations, urban black players are still entrenched in a basketball culture that values fly sneakers and dazzling dunks over fundamentally sound play. They have a difficult time recognizing the culture’s negative aspects. They believe basketball is a birthright. And they brandish a

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basketball bravado that is actually a coping mechanism to mask insecurities that result from the realization that they don’t have a viable backup plan to playing basketball. This birthright and bravado, however, is totally disjointed from McPhee’s idea that poor players are motivated to do nothing but practice basketball because they are poor. This bravado also helps explain how a player can simultaneously internalize the long odds of playing NBA basketball and still boast about their skills, claiming they will play college ball even though they don’t do the necessary work on or off the court to obtain such goals.

**Theory No. 1: The McPhee model**

Coaches, parents and athletes buy into the rhetoric that the hardest working players, regardless of their social station or other outside forces, can pull themselves up and out of the ghetto by their sneaker laces. Many believe basketball is the only ticket out. This belief, however, simply reinforces myths as old as Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches novels of the late 1800s. Players understand they aren’t likely to reach the NBA but they think nothing can stop a player from obtaining a college scholarship but themselves. He can “make it” as long as he can avoid the pitfalls of drugs, violence or poor academics. Anyone can become a basketball monk, such as Bill Bradley. A love letter to college basketball, *A Sense of Where You Are* by John McPhee chronicles Bill Bradley’s playing days at Princeton before he went on to a Rhodes Scholarship, the New York Knicks, the U.S. Senate and a presidential campaign. McPhee’s book was also called a “blueprint of superlative basketball” for its meticulous documentation of Bradley’s equally meticulous personal training regimen. Growing up in suburban St. Louis, Bradley was an all-state player who received 75 scholarship offers. McPhee says developing
players of Bradley’s social class rarely have the discipline to drown out an untold number of extracurricular activities at their disposal. Sequestering oneself in a gymnasium, repeatedly dribbling and shooting a basketball, was typically a practice only observed by poor players motivated to use basketball as a vehicle to improve their social and fiscal standing.

Bill Bradley is what college students nowadays call a superstar, and the thing that distinguishes him from other such paragons is not so much that he has happened into the Ivy League as that he is a superstar at all. For one thing he has overcome the disadvantage of wealth. A great basketball player, almost by definition, is someone who has grown up in a constricted world, not for lack of vision or ambition but for lack of money; his environment has been limited to home, gym, and playground, and it has forced upon him, as a developing basketball player, the discipline of having nothing else to do.9

It is true that elite college basketball players make their way not merely by working hard in practice (where the emphasis is usually on team play instead of individual fundamentals), but by having the discipline to hone their own jump shot, dribbling and defense through individual drills methodically practiced on their own time. But it is increasingly and incredibly difficult for urban players to achieve this kind of isolation. Although black players widely believe “making it” hinges on following McPhee’s model, this rhetoric hardly accounts for the realities of the urban black community. Players get jobs to support their families, they have to babysit for younger siblings and they often don’t have two parents to help foster the environment most likely to put them in position to excel at school and basketball. They also fall prey to a consumer culture that emphasizes flashy gear and flashy moves over fundamental skills.

Nevertheless, many coaches use the prospect of playing in college to entice players to work harder, constantly dangling college scholarships in front of their players like a carrot. There is nothing wrong with encouraging players to aim high. But without properly managed

9 Ibid.
expectations, players receiving conflicted messages from coaches and shoe marketers are left with a muddled meaning of the role basketball plays in their lives. Players with no academic standing to fall back on are most likely to be filled with false hopes.

In McPhee’s time a lack of money might have restricted a player to “home, gym and playground,” but today a lack of money, a quick-fix culture and a surplus of violence prevent players from spending free time in the gym. In today’s basketball culture the best way for a developing basketball player to isolate himself to the point where he has “nothing else to do” but play basketball is to be nudged by a parent and other role models with his best interest in mind; ideally, a boy’s biological father and mother.

**Theory No. 2: Basketball moms, basketball dads and basketball recruiting**

COMING OFF a miserable 0-12 season, second-year Eastern Michigan football coach Ron English was asked about his recruiting class during the Mid American Conference media day in July 2010.

We wanted guys that had a father in their background because if you don't, the hard part is, some guy like me coming in and corrects you. … A guy that's raised by his mom—and please don't take me wrong—but the reality is, you have to teach that guy how to be taught by a man. That's part of it.¹⁰

A black man raised by his grandmother, English eventually apologized for these remarks after he was ripped by columnists for selling single moms short. Other columnists defended English, noting it’s not so “progressive” to say children from broken homes have behavior issues.¹¹

The demographic Coach English and Division 1 basketball coaches recruit from includes scores of teens raised by single mothers. In the last 30 years, tons of data show these teens are less adjusted than teens from homes with married parents. They have a greater risk of suicide,

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violence, criminal behavior, educational failure, drug and alcohol abuse and teenage pregnancy. Furthermore, children from fatherless homes are often used as political footballs by groups such as the conservative Heritage Foundation, which funds studies that show, for example, that single-parented children are 4.6 times more likely to commit suicide, 10.8 times more likely to commit rape and 73 times more likely to be killed. Fatherless children have a poverty rate of 64.1 percent compared to those who are in two-parent families (8.4 percent rate). The majority of those children are black. Roughly 70 percent of blacks are born out of wedlock and 60 percent are raised in fatherless households. Inversely, children whose fathers help them with homework and eat meals with them do significantly better in school than those whose fathers do not.

Furthermore, German biologists conducted a study in which they deprived small rodents naturally reared by two parents contact with their fathers. The rodents raised by their mothers alone exhibited brain damage and more aggressive and impulsive behavior than those raised by both parents. Scientists warned about extrapolating these results to human populations with much more extensive social environments than animals. The researchers said it’s impossible to know if the rodent’s “bad outcomes” are caused by or just associated with single parenthood.

Also, a controversial 2009 report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and

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13 Patrick F. Fagan and Kirk A. Johnson, Marriage: The Safest Place for Women and Children, The Heritage Foundation, April 2002. The study also found fatherless children to be 6.6 times more likely to get pregnant, 24.3 times more likely to run away, 15.3 times more likely to have behavioral disorders, 6.6 times more likely to drop out of school, 15.3 times more likely to be imprisoned as a teen and 33 times more likely to be abused.
Development found that students from single-parent households only did minimally worse on standardized tests than children in a two-parent home. A Cornell University study, however, shows that single parenthood is less of a negative factor on children’s behavior than the mother’s education, ability level, income and home environment.

But most people are not aware of these studies. They only know what they experience first or second hand, what they read and what they see on television and in the movies. Polls consistently show Americans believe two-parent households are superior to single-parented ones. So it’s reasonable to assume most coaches believe this too. In fact, all but one Division 1 college in Michigan sends questionnaires to recruits asking, among other things, if players come from two-parented households. This is hardly a new practice. In the mid-1980s the San Francisco 49ers hired sociologist Harry Edwards to determine if players were suited to play for the famed Bill Walsh. Edwards developed a “character test” for potential draftees that became the foundation for similar questioners in the NFL and other professional leagues. Edwards told *Sports Illustrated*:

> We simply have to know what [a prospect’s] family is about, what they’re doing, what they potentially have set him up for. We simply have to have some idea about that, because when you draft a kid, you don’t just draft that kid. You draft his whole family. When a young player arrives in the pros, he doesn’t leave the culture that he grew up with at the locker room door.

The fact that athletes with “character flaws” are avoided at all debunks stereotypes that coaches recruit “dumb jocks” regardless of their grades or character and don’t care if the player is only in school to pursue athletics.

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20 *Sports Illustrated*, April, 2008.
Teams seek players who aren’t tagged a social liability because a lot is at stake financially. Drafted players receive millions in signing bonuses before they ever set foot on the court. Likewise, colleges hand high school kids thousands of dollars worth of scholarships. And in an era where fans, boosters and alumni expect nothing less than a national championship effort each season, coaches are constantly fighting for their jobs and remain one scandal removed from being fired. This pressure makes teams and schools scrutinize the character of players off the court as much as they evaluate their prowess on it.

With high volumes of recruits being evaluated simultaneously, even the most socially progressive coaches and scouts rely on metrics too often based on biases against fatherless players. Applying such a broad stroke makes it easy to spread the perception that fatherless players are harder to coach because a man never taught them how to be a man—a notion only one step removed from saying fatherless players aren’t reared as well as their two-parented counterparts. Studies do show children from broken homes are “less cooperative”\(^\text{21}\) but instead of using the data to help these children, society labels them. And coaches preoccupied with keeping their jobs are less likely to question these labels or take chances on fatherless players. Furthermore, coaches don’t want to be babysitters if they can avoid it. “Sadly, a lot of coaches are used to being ad hoc fathers and, privately, many of them will tell you that they can tell which players have a father in their life versus those who don’t,” ESPN’s Jemele Hill wrote in a column about the Ron English flap.\(^\text{22}\) Coaches prefer “coachable” players smart enough to run complicated offenses and remain eligible. They like “coachable” players with “high basketball


\(^{22}\) ESPN.com, Aug. 18, 2010.
IQs.” But these are racially loaded expressions because many coaches assume the best way to become “coachable” and to develop a “high basketball IQ” is to be parented by two people. But the fact is the majority of single moms are black.

Scores of fatherless players still go on to college and the NBA so there must be scores of single moms who are doing something right. But, undoubtedly, many of those players are troubled as is evident by the legal follies of Michael Vick and Allen Iverson. At the same time, basketball prospects with two parents are not immune to the societal ills their single-parented counterparts face. Overbearing fathers present stresses that cause their children to burnout on basketball.

The dynamic between a player raised by a single mom and a player reared by an overbearing father is poignantly illuminated by two former Michigan State blue chip recruits—one growing up with an overpowering dad (Marcus Taylor) and the other (Zach Randolph) raised by a single mother. Living in MSU’s backyard and groomed by his father, Marcus was marked from an early age as the next Magic Johnson, who also hails from Lansing, Mich. and was a Spartan before starring for the Los Angeles Lakers. Meanwhile, Zach’s father went to prison for robbery when Zach was in grade school. A male teacher became his mentor but the Marion, Ind. native still found himself in juvenile detention twice and on house arrest once. He was convicted of battery and of selling a stolen gun, which got him suspended from his high school team.23 James Taylor said his son Marcus was sheltered from such turmoil.

Marcus is covered, he had a mom and dad around him … There are a lot of kids who don’t have that dad to protect them. A guy who has been around the game a long time, who knows what to expect.

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Knows people in the business … There are a lot of people without, they have so little and they get offered anything and they’ll take it. So, it’s tough. That’s the problem I don’t like. It can be ruthless.²⁴

Many charged James with being overbearing, spending hours drilling his son instead of allowing Marcus to be a kid. There is, however, something to be said for the fact that James didn’t allow Marcus to play in the meat market that is AAU basketball. James argued that Marcus got all the competition he needed by playing pickup games with Michigan State, which he started doing as an eighth grader.

Marcus did, however, attend the prestigious Nike All-American Camp, where he was the No. 1-ranked player and met Zach Randolph. It was said the two made a pact to attend the same college. It was also rumored that MSU coach Tom Izzo did not want to take a chance on the troublemaking Randolph even though he was named Indiana’s Mr. Basketball. Ultimately Izzo took the package. The duo led the Spartans to the 2001 Final Four as freshmen before Zach bolted for the NBA and played for a Portland Trail Blazers team known as the “Jail Blazers.” Zach bounced around the league, finding trouble at every stop. In Portland alone, he faced both civil and criminal charges, including lying to investigators after his brother shot three men outside a nightclub.²⁵ He also punched a teammate in the eye and frequented strip clubs. “He’s made mistakes,” Izzo admits. “But I’ll tell you this: I’d like to coach him again. If I got an NBA job, I’d like to coach him.”²⁶

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²⁵ Police dropped the charges after witnesses said Randolph tried to restrain his brother, who was sentenced to three years in prison.
Marcus entered the NBA draft after his sophomore season, many say to move away from his father. Minnesota picked him but relegated him to the NBA Development League. Marcus played in leagues across the United States and Europe but has yet to break into the NBA. His basketball career has still gone farther than most so it is hard to say he would have been better off without a father riding him so hard. The same can be said for Zach, who despite his troubles is on solid financial ground thanks to basketball.

Based on Marcus’s and Zach’s stories alone, it is difficult to state definitively that a two-parent home is more likely to produce an NBA player. But that notion misses the point. The point is two-parent homes are more likely to provide a stable environment that will produce a more adjusted athlete, one who will be a better role model for children, and a more productive citizen after basketball, regardless of whether he plays in the NCAA or NBA. The fact is two-parented homes are healthier. Several studies connect obesity in children to a lack of physical activity spurred by fathers; and children from disrupted families are 20 percent less likely to attend college than children from two-parent families.

Players from two-parent homes also have a better chance of being recruited. The cost of exposing children to scouts has grown at an alarming and unhealthy clip and more and more poor players are excluded from the process. Of the one in five Boston families headed by a single mother, 57 percent have incomes less than $25,000 compared to 10 percent of two-parented

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homes earning less than $25,000.\(^{29}\) Parents hire private coaches and pay outrageous fees for travel teams that crisscross the country to play in special “showcase” tournaments that have become one-stop-shopping trips for recruiters. Only top talents such as Randolph and Taylor are invited to the Nike All-American Camp for free. When one English High player without a father received a scholarship to a prestigious regional camp, a lack of transportation prevented him from attending.

In such a high stakes game, McPhee’s idealized isolation is more important than ever to achieve, especially in the age of the specialized athlete practicing one sport year round. High school coaches often put players in positions they would never play in college out of necessity. A 6-foot-4-inch player at English is a forward simply because of his size. But in college he would play guard, putting the onus on the player to follow the McPhee model and develop guard skills on his own.

One fatherless black player trying to follow McPhee’s model is Alonzo Trier. The 13-year-old phenom started a seven-day-a-week practice routine when he was nine. Each day he shoots more than 450 shots before attending a session with a private coach and then another practice with his AAU team. The 5-foot-5-inch, 110-pounder with his own clothing line lives near Seattle in subsidized housing with his mother, a nurse who works the early shift so she can come home to rebound for her son. But even a single mother who can work her life around her son’s basketball schedule can’t fend off AAU coaches and street agents trying to “broker

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\(^{29}\) The study from the Boston Foundation’s Boston Indicators Project also found 20 percent of two-parented families to earn $150,000 or more.
scholarships, share in endorsement deals or just remain part of the entourage if a player strikes NBA gold.”  

But these days so few fathers are around that the debate about players being better off with or without fathers is almost moot. More important than a father is a good support system. This point is illuminated by the dichotomy between the first two players (Brandon Jennings and Jeremy Tyler) to skirt the NBA age-limit, which forces high school players to wait a season before entering the NBA Draft. In 2008 Brandon became the first U.S. player to go straight from high school to a European pro league because he didn’t want to play one season of NCAA basketball. While playing in Rome, Brandon lived with his mother, Alice Knox, and stepbrother, “If Brandon would have been over there by himself,” said Knox, who raised her children by herself in Compton. “He wouldn’t have been able to make it.” As a member of the Milwaukee Bucks in 2009, Brandon, became the youngest NBA player to score more than 50 points in a single game.

While Jennings burst onto the scene with the Bucks, Jeremy struggled horribly in the Israeli pro league. The 18-year-old skipped his senior season of high school in San Diego to play for Maccabi Haifa, whose coach said the youngster didn’t even grasp basic concepts such as rotating on defense and boxing out. In turn, Jeremy questioned his coach’s knowledge of the game and coaching method. Jeremy initially lived in Israel alone. Eventually his agent came to

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31 In 2006 the NBA inserted an age limit of 19-years-old that forced players to be at least one year removed from high school before playing in the pros. The move resulted in many players eating up a scholarship at their college for one season before jumping to the NBA. In exchange for killing the age limit, the players' association has proposed incentivizing players to stay in school, perhaps by basing salaries for rookies on how long a player has stayed in school.
32 USA Today, Nov. 23, 2009.
live with him. Then Jeremy’s MTV reality television-star girlfriend, Erin Wright—the daughter of the late rapper Easy-E—moved in along with her mother and a documentary film crew. While his girlfriend’s mother said she gave Jeremy structure and discipline, Jeremy’s father accused her of milking his son like a “cash cow.”

“I feel like the person I felt was so dear to me and I loved the most is someone that I can’t trust,” Jeremy said of his father. “For him to say that it really breaks my heart.”

Theory No. 3: A sense of where you aren’t

FORMER NBA super-star Charles Barkley, infamous for declaring “I am not a role model,” once appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated shirtless and shackled next to the quote, “Every black kid in the country thinks the only way he can be successful is through athletics.”

Barkley’s statement reinforces a study conducted by the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University that found 66 percent of black teenagers in urban centers believe they can earn a living playing pro sports. The study also found that only 1-in-50,000 high school athletes, black or white, fatherless or not, will play pro sports. In 2008 the NCAA estimated that .03 percent of high school athletes will eventually be drafted by an NBA team. For every Kobe Bryant who jumps straight to the NBA from high school, there are countless wannabes left...

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36 Estimated Probability of Competing in Athletics Beyond the High School Interscholastic Level (Indianapolis: National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2008): Less than one in 35, or approximately 3.1 percent of high school senior boys playing interscholastic basketball will go on to play men's basketball at a NCAA member institution. About one in 75, or approximately 1.2 percent of NCAA male senior basketball players will get drafted by a National Basketball Association (NBA) team. Three in 10,000, or approximately 0.03 percent of high school senior boys playing interscholastic basketball will eventually be drafted by an NBA team.
behind. “On the whole I don’t think athletics are good for black kids, I really don’t,” Barkley wrote in his first book, *I May Be Wrong But I Doubt It.*

In *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race,* John Hoberman argues that society has an unhealthy fixation with black athletes. Holding up athletic achievement as the most dominant accomplishment in the African American community perpetuates the myth that the male Negro is merely a physical and primitive creature. And while there’s a notion of black athletic heroism inspiring racial healing, Hoberman says this in fact is a myth since so few black youths go on to make a living playing sports. Therefore, he says, black community leaders should not promote sports as a means to better their communities and solve their problems. He points to the Reverend Jesse Jackson’s claim that sport has the ability to “change the despair in our communities into hope, replace low esteem with confidence and rebuild a true sense of community that transcends neighborhood and racial boundaries.”

Hoberman is amazed that Jackson fails to understand that similar sentiments have not produced results. “The recycling of noble rhetoric is, in fact, a constant byproduct of the black sports fixation precisely because it has produced so little permanent value for most Americans,” Hoberman writes.

It’s true that black Division 1 college basketball players had a graduation rate of 58 percent in 2009 while black males not playing a college sport had a graduation rate of 38 percent. But the graduation rate of black basketball players pales compared to the 80 percent of white

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38 John Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (Boston 1997).
39 Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes,* p. 10.
hoopsters who graduated in 2009.\textsuperscript{40} Hoberman says the suggestion that sports be de-emphasized in the black communities is seldom made:

both because it is politically incorrect and because cultural habit seems to legitimate itself. ‘How do you end some of the traditions that have become dysfunctional for the black male, like the idea that he has to behave in certain unacceptable ways to be ‘cool’ or ‘hip’?’ asks Alvin Poussaint, especially when ‘in every other way but sex and physical brawn, the black male is impotent institutionally in our society.’\textsuperscript{41}

Hoberman say the one group of blacks that should understand this dilemma, black intellectuals, is also fixated with sport, prompting sports sociologist Harry Edwards, to compare \textit{Darwin’s Athletes} to Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s infamous book \textit{The Bell Curve}. Calling the book “Hoberman’s Hoax,” Edwards says given their lack of opportunities, black youth’s pursuit of sport is “natural” and shows their “intelligence.”\textsuperscript{42} But Hoberman maintains black leaders do not see a problem with basketball being so closely tied to their cultural identity. Rather than trying to dismantle the stereotype that athletics is the “best thing blacks have going,” these leaders try to capitalize on their sporting prowess. Charles S. Farrell, the national director of the Rainbow Coalition for Fairness in Athletics said, “Athletics is to the black community what technology is to the Japanese and what oil is to the Arabs. We’re allowing that commodity to be exploited.”\textsuperscript{43}

Given the fact that Barkley and Hoberman are so convincing in their argument that basketball pumps urban black kids full of false NBA hopes, and given the self-reported statistics in Sport in Society’s poll on athletic aspirations, how is it possible that almost nobody on the

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Keeping Score When It Counts: Graduation Rates and Academic Progress Rates (APR) for 2009 NCAA Men’s Division 1 Basketball Tournament Teams} (Orlando, Fla.: The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports, 2009)

\textsuperscript{41} Hoberman, \textit{Darwin’s Athletes}, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{42} Harry Edwards. quoted in Mike Fisher, \textit{Fort Worth Star-Telegram}, April 14, 1997.

\textsuperscript{43} Hoberman, \textit{Darwin’s Athletes}, p. 9.
English High basketball team—when asked seriously—claims to be NBA bound? The answer is that players are just as aware of Barkley’s and Hoberman’s sentiment as anyone else, if not more. Players’ expectations are tempered by previous generations of players from their neighborhood who never made it to the NBA. In the eight years between the 1997 Sport in Society study and the 2005-06 English High basketball season, the notion of just how hard it is to “go pro” or “make it” became widely understood both outside and inside the inner-city. It’s practically cliché to say a black kid “Wants to be like Mike” or is “hoop dreaming”—the latter term coined by the 1994 documentary Hoop Dreams. In fact, Hoop Dreams was more responsible for putting these ideas into the public consciousness than anything else. Chronicling two highly recruited players from Chicago, the movie has educated thousands about the odds against making the NBA and the devastating affect false basketball hopes have on those who fall short of their dreams.  

Whether they have seen the movie or not, the players at English identify with the themes in Hoop Dreams. They all seem to know a Division 1 prospect who flamed out in a self destructive crash or sputtering whimper. In fact, the players who do not make it have become as much a part of urban basketball lore as the legends who did. If players entering the ninth grade don’t have a sense of where they are in the basketball hierarchy, they will by the time they leave high school. It’s not long before they make or miss the varsity and it’s not long before they make or miss the starting lineup. Kids gauge their ability during the course of even the most

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44 After the movie was released, the Chrysler Hoop Dreams Challenge Youth Evaluation commissioned Sport in Society to use the movie to develop a curriculum for urban school children and to take a survey of the youngsters thoughts before and after watching the movie. The pre-program survey found that 39 percent of the sample said they planned to play pro sports. That number dropped to 28 percent in the post-program survey. After watching the movie, only five percent of the students picked “sports first—schoolwork second” on the survey compared to 11 percent who chose sports first on the pre-program survey. Also, seven percent more students chose “schoolwork first—sports second” after watching the film than they did on the pre-program survey.
unorganized game. They know who can and who can’t play, who will or won’t make it to the next level and deep in their hearts, they all have a sense of where they aren’t. The black academic Robin D.G. Kelley notes “While it is true that some boys and young men see basketball as a quick (though never easy) means to success and riches, it is ludicrous to believe that everyone on the court shares the same aspirations.”Kelley says basketball can still be enjoyed among friends bantering about how nice their game is while verbally trashing each other. On many courts, talking a good game is better than playing one. Young black kids understand the odds against making it even if their rhetoric doesn’t suggest it. Just because they continue to boast about how far their skills will take them, most kids have given up on NBA fantasies. Not even TK, English High’s brash and cocky starting point guard who insists he has what it takes to play in college, sees the NBA as a guarantee. “As long as it gets me into college so I can make money, you know what I’m saying,” TK says. “I don’t want to be no average money maker. I want to be somebody who makes a lot of money. So even if I don’t go to the NBA I could have a little something.”

Theory No. 4: Basketball birthright and bravado

PRESIDENT OBAMA played three seasons of high school basketball at the prestigious Punahou High School in Hawaii. In addition to being described as Barack O’Ball a and the subject of several YouTube mixtapes during his historic run to the presidency, Obama has admitted on several occasions that he allowed basketball to interfere with his academic performance. “I had bought into a set of false assumptions about what it means to be black,” Obama has said. Even

45 Robin D.G. Kelley. Yo ’Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban American (Boston 1997). p. 53
the future president, while attending one of the best schools in the country, was seduced and
spellbound by a sport that has become synonymous with blackness in this country. In his first
memoir Obama writes:

I was living out a caricature of black male adolescence, itself a caricature of swaggering American
manhood. Yet at a time when boys aren’t supposed to want to follow their fathers’ tired footsteps, when
the imperatives of harvest or work in the factory aren’t supposed to dictate identity, so that how to live is
bought off the rack or found in magazines, the principal difference between me and most of the man-
boys around me—the surfers, the football players, the would-be-rock-and-roll guitarists—resided in the
limited number of options at my disposal. Each of us chose a costume, armor against uncertainty. At least
on the basketball court I could find a community of sorts, with an inner life all its own. It was there that I
made my closest white friends, on a turf where blackness couldn’t be a disadvantage.46

Unlike Obama, urban blacks don’t have the support system offered at Punahou to help shed this
“caricature” and face insecurities and vulnerabilities. Hoberman even says this “caricature” has
been perpetuated through the generations to the point that “Many black children grow up
assuming that they were simply born with athletic ability, and some coaches encourage them in
this belief. Some black boys are told by black coaches that they have no future if they do not
develop their athletic talent.”47 Some traits of this “caricature” include believing it is un-cool to
study, favoring flashy dunks and dribbling over teamwork and fundamental play, and, ironically,
being bent on earning a basketball scholarship at the expense of academics.

How did basketball become something so closely associated with a caricature that
embodies toughness and blackness itself? How did urban basketball become a refuge for
insecure black kids; a milieu where, as Obama says, their “blackness couldn’t be a
disadvantage.” And how did we get to a point that the players embodying this “caricature” are
rewarded with admission to institutions of higher learning to act out this “caricature” on a

47 Hoberman, Darwin’s Athletes, p. 5.
national stage? And what are the roots of the stereotypes about black players being more interested in flashy play than sound fundamentals?

The answers to these questions trace back to the beginning of the 20th century when Edwin Bancroft Henderson first envisioned basketball as a means of fostering social and economic mobility for his race. Henderson thought this could be achieved by black players earning scholarships to the nation’s northern and mostly white universities. He told black basketball players to “sacrifice some local college pride” to play for the likes of Amherst, Michigan, Illinois, Penn and Harvard. “The battle may be harder,” Henderson wrote, “but the glory will be the larger for the individual and the race.” Henderson learned the game while attending Harvard and became the nation’s first black physical education teacher. He taught basketball to the black community in his native Washington D.C., where athletic opportunities for black youth were sparse. In 1907 there was only one park in the city’s largest black neighborhood for 26,000 school children to share. Gym class at black schools mostly consisted of “visiting white teachers marching the boys into a hallway once a week for fifteen minutes of toe-touching and arm waving” and interscholastic sports programs were so neglected black students had to pay to play. By 1910 Bancroft helped form and fund an interscholastic basketball league with 1,000 players on 40 teams. He also founded and starred on a wildly successful Negro semipro team that spread the sport to New York. Bancroft envisioned basketball as the “great racial equalizer.” He not only saw it as a way to debunk stereotypes

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49 Ibid, p. 15.
about blacks, but he also saw it as a new arena for blacks to excel in, one in which they could avoid the discrimination they faced in politics and business.\footnote{Ibid, p. 13.}

While Henderson laid the groundwork for blacks earning basketball scholarships, blacks’ own brand of basketball didn’t truly take hold until the Harlem Globetrotters stormed onto the hoop scene in the late 1920s. Most white coaches looked down at the Globetrotters’ comic relief as showboating, even though the original Globetrotters played serious basketball for the majority of games and never clowned until the lead was secure. But when former Globetrotter Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton became the first black player to sign an NBA contract in 1950, his coach, Joe Lapchick, worried Clifton’s behind-the-back passes and fancy dribbling would reinforce negative stereotypes about blacks. Lapchick—the New York Knicks’ coach and father of eventual Sport in Society founder Dr. Richard Lapchick—told Clifton to tone down his game.\footnote{Ron Thomas, They Cleared the Lane (Lincoln, Neb. and London 2001), p. 106.}

In 1967 that flashy brand of ball found a home in the American Basketball Association, which launched the legend of Julius Irving. Better known as Dr. J, Irving’s high-flying dunks paved the way for Michael Jordan and a sneaker culture in which kids pay hundreds of dollars for high-top basketball shoes and players receive millions in endorsement deals with companies such as Nike. Before merging with the more mainstream NBA in 1976, the ABA represented the epitome of black soul and 1970s funk; players brandished giant afros and scantily-clad cheerleaders donned white knee-high boots.

But while the NBA was already dominated by black superstars and on its way to becoming the league we know today with roughly 80 percent black players, college basketball
remained a game dominated by whites. Even after an all black Texas Western team famously upset Kentucky in the 1966 NCAA Championship game, the majority of teams featured white stars on their roster. In the 1980s, however, Georgetown University coach John Thompson became the first black college coach to win a major collegiate championship with mostly black teams. To that point street ball had been a counter culture in New York City and other urban centers for years but it never bled into college basketball until Thompson embraced the menacing image and physical play of his 1980s teams that became known as “Twelve Angry Black Men” and “Black America’s Team.” It’s unclear how much Thompson played on race to motivate his players but the media definitely bought into the stereotypes of the day about the hungry, poor black player. The Hoya’s 1981-82 team was led by Cambridge, Mass. native and future Hall of Famer Patrick Ewing, who play epitomized the Hoya’s urban style. The 7-foot center became one of the first college players to start and star as a freshman. He led the Hoyas to the championship game three times in four years, including one national championship his junior year.

With their aggressive style of play, the rough and tumble Hoyas became a beacon for the urban black teens, who favored puffy Starter jackets with Georgetown’s bulldog logo. They emulated Ewing by wearing T-shirts under their jerseys. After Nike designed the Hoya’s shoes, kids started spending millions on basketball sneakers and apparel.52

As infatuated as blacks were with basketball and teams like the Hoyas, the images these teams portrayed threatened white America and reinforced a notion that every black college

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basketball player is a ghetto kid from a single parent home who gets a “full-ride” scholarship regardless of his grades. Sensitive to this emerging stereotype, the NCAA made it harder for poor black kids to get into school in the wake of the Hoya’s championship era. They implemented a series of “propositions” designed to restrict the enrollment of athletes by putting more emphasis on college boards, exams many educators already believed to be biased against blacks.\footnote{Ibid.}

By the time the University of Michigan’s Fab Five burst onto the scene in the early 1990s—sporting black socks, shaved heads and sagging shorts fashioned after prisoners in beltless pants—college basketball was entirely intertwined with urban culture. The game founded by Dr. James Naismith in rural Springfield, Mass. and favored by farm boys everywhere, was being marketed in the mainstream media as something entirely black.\footnote{Ibid.}

But the Michigan basketball program was eventually sanctioned by the NCAA after it was revealed that players were paid to attend the school. College campuses across the country have experienced similar scandals as top high school players are lured to schools with cars, money and girls, pouring kerosene on the stereotype that black athletes are “ringers” only admitted to the school to play basketball. An increasing number of high profile players were also charged with rape and other violent crimes, further solidifying basketball’s relationship with so-called thug life.

Nobody did more to advance this image in basketball than Allen Iverson, with his tattoos, rap album and gangsta sensibilities ushering in a new era of both hip-hop and basketball. In the

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
mid 1990s, Georgetown recruited the small and scrappy point guard. Before he ever stepped foot on campus, he was jailed for his role in a bowling alley brawl. The conviction was later overturned but Iverson’s thug image was already cemented. Bolting to the NBA after his sophomore season, Iverson’s most notorious scandal came after a fight with his wife ended with him kicking her out of the house even though she was naked.  

All the while the popularity of basketball, college basketball in particular, grew exponentially. CBS’s most recent contract to broadcast the NCAA Tournament was worth $6.1 billion. As it became clear that basketball was big business, Nike, Adidas and Reebok expanded efforts to find the next Michael Jordan, sometimes recruiting prepubescent players with the lure of a million-dollar shoe contract. The shoe companies pumped millions into basketball at the street level and established camps for elite players. They pay AAU coaches as much as $100,000 a year to associate players with their company and another $50,000 for equipment and shoes. Nike’s Grassroots Program sponsors high school teams and AAU teams, outfitting them with free jerseys and sneakers in an attempt to build brand loyalty. Talent scouts approach kids on playgrounds and at summer tournaments so they can funnel players to AAU teams, shoe companies, prep schools and colleges. Given their fixation on hoops, poor kids without fathers are especially easy prey for these scouts who hope to hook players before they make it to the NBA.

High school coaches have no defense against sports marketers and ad wizards who glamorize the fame, money and girls that come along with the lifestyle of pro and college

55 Ibid.
athletes. In the eyes of young players, the NBA is more about style than substance, flash over fundamentals, diluting the quality of play among youngsters trying to imitate what they see on TV without first building a foundation of fundamentals. Already lacking resources and support, coaches these days find it hard to use basketball as a hook to teach children about teamwork, self-esteem, discipline and personal responsibility.

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Regardless of whether a player has a father or not, players are likely to indoctrinate their own children with a misguided love for the game. Even Obama’s father gave him an orange basketball just before leaving forever. Cal, the English High junior struggling to figure out the role basketball plays in his life, might realize that basketball is holding him down but he is still compelled, almost obligated, to be a father-figure to his younger brother and pass the ball. Most players, however, will never realize how heavy the rock really is. “My father was nice at basketball,” TK, English’s brash starting point guard, says. “They say that’s where I get it from, the love of the game, from my father, ’cause he played too. … He had scholarship offers and everything but he had my sister so he dropped out of high school and he never went back. So he gave basketball up. But when I was born, he seen what he had in me, so he just put basketball into me.”
CHAPTER II: HISTORY OF BOSTON BASKETBALL AND COACH ROB

Every morning, blurry-eyed students from across the city travel to Jamaica Plain and shuffle into Boston English High School’s seventh location. Instead of featuring the metal detectors that so often set the tone for inner-city schools\(^58\), the lobby pays homage to the school’s illustrious history as the first public high school in the nation. Sculptures, photos and murals peer down at the students on their way to class along with a war memorial for fallen alumni, trophy cases and photographs from previous classes and sporting teams. A painting of the school’s first Headmaster, George B. Emerson (1821-1823), hangs above the silver elevator. A bronze statue of a woman holding a tablet reading “Be Clean, Be Courteous, Be Square” has her hand on a schoolboy’s shoulder. Carved into its green marble pedestal is the phrase, “THE AIM OF EVERY SCHOOLBOY IS TO BECOME A MAN OF HONOR AND ACHIEVEMENT.” Another statue of a soldier with a wounded boy says, “SERVICE TO MANKIND IS HONOR AND ACIEVEMENT.” A white marble sculpture of a man and woman shielding a baby was donated by Henry P. Kidder in 1880. Kidder, of the securities firm Peabody-Kidder, was friends with the best-known English High alumni of all: J.P. Morgan.

Amid the opulent relics, a small black and white photograph of the 1946-47 basketball team appears on the wall next to the elevator. Framed by thin black wood with gold trim and thick blue matting, the photo features a ceiling lamp peaking into the top of the shot like a sound boom ducking into a shot of a budget film. In the middle of the back row, a shiny black face with coarse hair brushed back reveals a slight widow’s peak belonging to Robert Griffin, whose

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\(^58\) English High did not have metal detectors in 2005 but they did as of the 2010 school year.
slopping shoulders make his neck look long, not because he’s slouching but because they are weighed down by his long dangling arms. Griffin stands almost a full head above the five white boys flanking him on either side and the No. 17 on Griffin’s jersey is unobstructed by the boy sitting directly in front of him with a basketball in his lap. Two boys over from the boy with the ball is another black boy named Alfred E. Jordan. Jordan’s classic Chuck Taylor All-Star sneakers are tied tight and the No. 5 on his chest is stitched just below white letters reading “English.” Jordan’s shoulders are broad and his biceps well defined. He sits with perfect posture and clenched fists resting on each knee.

Griffin and Jordan are the first two blacks to appear in the annual team yearbook photo and are probably the first two blacks to play basketball at English. The photo of English’s 1946-47 varsity squad was taken just two years after the city’s interscholastic basketball league returned from a 35-year suspension, which was sparked by the on-court death of a player.

Dr. James Naismith invented basketball in Springfield, Mass., 90 miles west of Boston, in 1891. In 1902 in Lowell, Mass., 34 miles north of Boston, Harry Haskell Lew became the first black professional basketball player in the nation. Two years later, physical education teacher Edwin Henderson learned how to play basketball at Harvard University before founding an interscholastic basketball league for blacks in his native Washington D.C.

In 1950, three years after the 1946-47 team photo was taken, the Boston Celtics broke the NBA’s color line by drafting Chuck Cooper. The Celtics—who eventually signed the sport’s first true black superstar Bill Russell—hung a record 16 NBA Championship banners from the rafters of one of basketball’s most famous arenas, the Boston Garden. (Another banner from 2008 joins the previous 16 in the Garden’s successor, TD Garden.) Although the sport’s two major racial
barriers were broken in the birthplace of basketball, the birthplace of public education is perceived as a notoriously racist city. Despite being the nation’s first capital city to elect a black man to its legislature in 1889, Boston is home to the last franchise in Major League Baseball to sign a black player. And enduring images of one of the country’s most violent school busing crises in the 1970s have permanently stained the city’s reputation.

NAISMITH WAS a Canadian physical education instructor trying to develop an indoor sport for his students at the YMCA Training School in Springfield, Mass. to play during the cold northeastern winters. Naismith drew on a game he played outside his one-room school house during his childhood in Ramsay Township near Almonte, Ontario. Players tried to knock a “duck” off the top of a large rock by tossing another rock at it. His new game featured 13 rules, a soccer ball, two peach baskets and a relatively small court. Players earned three points for scoring a basket from the floor and one point for a basket scored from the foul line. Basketball, which challenged Dr. Naismith’s students’ hand-eye coordination as well as their physical prowess, spread across Massachusetts and the region thanks to the YMCA network. In the two years after Naismith invented basketball, the sport was introduced to colleges and also became popular among militias.

The game quickly became a favorite in Boston too.59 On July 8, 1892, the Boston Globe featured an article headlined: “Student Conference: Religious Addresses and Discussion and Basket Ball.” The paper’s coverage of the Hyde Park YMCA’s 15-1 victory against the Chelsea YMCA said the game resembles football. “The same kind and size of ball is used, but the goals

59 The Boston Globe, Jan. 25, 1895.
there are wire cylindrical baskets, which are suspended about 10 feet above the floor. … The object is to keep all the excitement of football without any of the rough features.” Women also got into the act. That summer, the Globe wrote of “The Pretty College Girls” playing basketball but noted there was, “No pushing, tripping, tackling or other such fun allowed.”

Blacks played basketball too. The nation’s first black professional basketball player, Harry Haskell Lew was born in Lowell, Mass. the same year the game was invented. Lew’s father served as a delegate at the Equal Rights Convention of 1891 in Boston. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court established the “separate but equal” doctrine upholding racial segregation. Lew, who was nicknamed Bucky, joined Lowell’s Pawtucketville Athletic Club of the New England Basketball League in 1902.60 The grandson of a free black who fought in the Revolutionary War and played fife in the battle of Bunker Hill, Lew was also a talented musician who played violin solo at the Lowell High School graduation. But basketball was Bucky’s forte. One teammate called him the best double dribbler he had ever seen at a time when dribbling the ball with two hands at once was not only legal but a coveted skill. Bucky played tenacious defense and was always assigned to guard the best offensive player. But Lew only saw playing time on the Pawtucketville squad after a series of injuries to his white teammates. When one teammate suffered an injury during a game against Marlborough, the coach opted to use four players instead of putting Lew in the game. The crowd booed, the coach buckled and put Lew in the game, probably because he was tired of the local newspapers incessant calls to play the “little negro from around the corner.” Despite the support from his home crowd, Lew endured racial slurs on the court. “The fans got real mad and almost started a riot, screaming to let me play,”

Lew said years later, recalling his first game. “That did it. I went in there and you know…all those things you read about Jackie Robinson, the abuse, the name-calling, extra effort to put him down…they’re all true. I got the same treatment and even worse…I took the bumps, the elbows in the gut, knees here and everything else that went with it. But I gave it right back. It was rough but worth it. Once they knew I could take it, I had it made.”

ENGLISH HIGH fielded its first basketball team nine years after the sport was founded and four years before the start of the Boston Interscholastic Basket-Ball League. At a basketball tournament at the Mechanic’s building in Boston, English was one of 35 teams, including Yale, Dartmouth and Boston College in the college division. English High, nicknamed the Blue & Blue, beat Brookline High 10-7. English also beat the freshman squad at Tufts 22-15 in February of 1901, even though the Tufts team outweighed them considerably. The Globe said, “the schoolboys were quick and played a good all-round game.” The next year English beat a team called Olympia A.C. 49-3. “The Olympia A.C. was very loose while on the other hand E.H.S. played a fast game,” the Globe reported.

Despite the success of Boston high school basketball teams, the birthplace of public education was slow to adopt the sport as an interscholastic activity, which was odd given the district’s storied history in football. The first football game between the nation’s first public school, Boston Latin School (founded in 1635), and the nation’s first public high school, English High (founded in 1821), was played in 1887. To this day, the English-Latin game is the longest

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61 The Boston Globe, Nov. 4, 1904.
continuing high school football rivalry in the nation. But the district’s interscholastic basketball league didn’t start until 14 years after the sport was founded.

Naturally, the new basketball league was seen as an opportunity to wage the English-Latin football rivalry on a different front. The two schools were housed on opposite sides of one building on Montgomery Street in the city’s South End neighborhood. But each had its own band-box of a gymnasium and therefore they each hosted one of two English-Latin basketball games played each season. English won the first game, 12-9. The overtime victory was a relief to the supporters of the Blue & Blue frustrated by that year’s 5-5 football tie against Latin. The Globe said the contest was “One of the fastest games ever played in the city…The wearers of the Blue & Blue had to work hard for their victory, which they owe to Ayer, their star center who threw a basket from the center of the floor when the score was tied during the last minute of play.”

Boston’s interscholastic basketball league was popular among football players because it gave them another physical activity during the off-season. The boys played the new sport as rough as the old one, only without pads and helmets. A few days after English claimed the Greater Boston football championship, the Globe ran a large preview of the 1906 basketball season with the headline reading: “SCHOOLS DEVELOPING SOME FAST QUINTETS: Basket Ball Promises to Claim More Attention Than Ever in Boston.” But the league only lasted 14 years. School administrators, upset by an increasing number of fouls called in games, dissolved the basketball league shortly after a player died during a game in 1911.62 Two days

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62 While the player’s death was virtually unreported at the time, school and city officials argued decades later the incident shouldn’t prevent the sport from being reinstated.
after teams were told they could complete the season, a record 74 fouls were called in a game. One player alone shot 18 free-try goals in that contest as East Boston beat Latin School, 26-12.63 The Globe launched a campaign to reinstitute the league, running a headline the day after the league was canceled reading “THESE BE DAYS OF VEXATION AND WOE IN THE WORLD OF SCHOOL SPORTS” followed up by a series of stories making the case for the league’s return. But a riot during a game between alumni from Revere and South Boston High on Jan. 25 hurt the cause. Students also were also irate when the Jan. 20 English-Latin game was canceled the morning of the game.

English continued to play intramural basketball for four more years.64 Ultimately, the school quit the sport entirely the same year Dr. Naismith himself said basketball was the second most popular sport in the country behind the national pastime, baseball. Naismith claimed 5,773 teams and 150,000 players played his sport, including 40,000 college and high school students.65

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During English’s 35-year hiatus from basketball, the city’s athletic clubs and professional teams continued to play throughout New England. Black teams such as the Boston Gladiators and Boston Tigers would travel as far as New York and Washington D.C. In 1925, the American Basketball League (ABL) became the first national pro league. Boston’s team, the Whirlwinds, featured the city’s first black stars, Flash Crotty and Snappy O’Connell.66

63 The Boston Globe, Jan. 13, 1911.
65 The Boston Globe, March 31, 1914.
A year after basketball was reinstated in Boston Public Schools in 1945 two black players (Robert Griffin and Alfred Jordan) were likely the school’s first two black basketball players. They were two of 10 blacks in the class of 1948, which had 502 students. Griffin, who moved from Jacksonville, Fla. to Cunard Street in Roxbury as a junior, captained the 1946-1947 English High basketball team to a 9-6 record. After starting with losses to Dorchester and Roxbury Memorial, the team went on a 3-2 run before winning six of its last nine games. But the team lost the most important game of the season, 25-23, to Boston Latin. That year the English football team, which Griffin also played on, was more successful against Latin, collecting a 19-0 victory.

The following year English had better luck against Latin on the hardwood with the addition of another black basketball player named John D. O’Bryant, who went on to be the first appointed black vice president at Northeastern University and the namesake of a high school in the district dedicated to math and science.

Big letters over the basketball team’s photo in the 1947-48 year book read: “WINNERS OVER A BRILLIANT PURPLE”—a reference to the Blue & Blue’s 46-27 win against Latin that capped English’s 10-5 season. The page next to the team photo reads, “Do you Remember when…Bobby Griffin bumped his head on the backboard and split it (the backboard that is)?” Griffin, Jordan and O’Bryant cleared the lane for Gastred Rily who averaged 10 points per game in English’s first ever “in-town,” or city, championship the following season.

Griffin went on to play at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., where his senior year in 1954, marked the school’s first official basketball season. Brandeis closed the season with 14

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67 English High School. (1947). *Yearbook*. Boston: Author. Griffin and Jordan are pictured in the team photo on page 88 of the yearbook. The previous year’s team photo, which was also the first year of basketball since the sport was banned, does not have any black players in the picture.
straight wins, a streak that still stands as a school record and, more impressively, included victories against Miami University and three major local schools: Boston College, Boston University and Northeastern University.68

Griffin’s senior year in college also was the same year English High’s first legitimate blue chip basketball star, Robert MacGillivray, emerged. The tall white center broke every scoring record and led an undefeated team to a city championship before losing to Brockton, 48-46, in the third round of the famous Tech Tourney at the Boston Garden. The yearbook staff wrote, “Doubtless, the brilliant playing of Bob MacGillivray will not be forgotten. He is considered by most of us to be the greatest basketball player that English has ever had, or perhaps will have for years to come.”69 MacGillivray eventually led North Carolina State to a No. 1-ranking and a conference title in his senior year in college. But there were no shortage of good players at English in the decades to come. Winning four state championships in seven years, English had some of the best teams in the state’s history during the late 1960s and mid 1970s.

Basketball also was being embraced in Boston’s schoolyards in the early 1950s and eventually developed a reputation that drew street teams from up and down the Eastern Seaboard to play in one of the nation’s premier summer tournaments. The Boston Shootout was first won by and dominated by the Boston Six. Players such as Vinnie French and eventual Kentucky State star Francis Jefferson honed their skills at the Lewis School playground, the Roxbury Boys Club, Tobin Gym and the parks of Cambridge. French and Jefferson schooled younger guys such as

Roxbury Memorial High’s Manny Texeira, Hewie Joyner and Boston Tech’s Eddie Gates.

Joyner went on to star at Delaware State while Gates played for a Boston University team that lost in the NCAA Elite Eight to a West Virginia team led by Jerry West, the future Los Angeles Lakers star whose silhouette would be made famous as the NBA logo. Gates, along with his BU teammates Ed Washington and Jack Leaman, ultimately played with the legendary Connie Hawkins in the American Basketball League.⁷⁰

Many black players from Boston also headed south to play for Winston-Salem State, where Boston English’s own Gene Walcott attended the school’s Teachers College. Walcott, the future Minister Louis Farrakhan, used his charisma to persuade players from Boston such as Clarence “Jeep” Jones and Roscoe Baker that Winston-Salem was the place to be and the place to play ball.⁷¹

By that time the Boston Celtics had established themselves as the premier team in the NBA. They won eight consecutive championships from 1959 to 1966, the longest consecutive title string in the history of North American professional athletics. Founded in 1946, the Celtics broke the NBA’s color line by drafting Chuck Cooper before the 1950-51 season, nine years before Boston’s beloved Red Sox became the last team in Major League Baseball to integrate their roster 12 years after Jackie Robinson broke MLB’s color line. Led by their first year coach, the late and legendary Arnold Jacob “Red” Auerbach, the Celtics were in last place when they drafted Chuck Cooper, a second-team All-America from Duquesne University. Auerbach, the Jewish coach from the Brooklyn, also was the first NBA coach to start five blacks. He later ⁷⁰ Bijan C. Bayne, *The Boston-Bay State Banner*, “Back in the day when hoops was king,” May 11, 2006. ⁷¹ Ibid.
became the first general manager to hire a black coach in Bill Russell. The five-time MVP was not only one of the premier centers in league history but also one of its greatest social activists. When Russell stepped down as player-coach in 1969, two more black coaches, Satch Sanders and K.C. Jones, succeeded him.

By the 1980s, when Larry Bird led the Celtics to another three championships, there was no doubt Boston was a basketball Mecca for blacks and whites alike. But when English High’s basketball coach, Barry Robinson, or Coach Rob, moved to Boston in 1979 to teach in Boston Public Schools, his friends warned him the city had a reputation as one of the most racist in the country. The city’s basketball status also lost its luster after the Celtics went 22 years without an NBA title. They did not win another until 2008, Barry Robinson’s 14th season as Boston English High’s head basketball coach.

BORN IN 1960, Barrington L. Robinson grew up in Kingston, Jamaica in a neighborhood called Jonestown. He was one of five boys in his poor household which had little food to go around. But even though they boiled buckets of water to drink, showered only when it rained and wore tattered shoes to school, they still learned the King’s English. One of his fondest memories of his father was of helping him with paperwork on Sunday nights. A radio broadcaster for RJR, Barrington’s father was known around town as Willy Boo. His scooter made a distinct vroom that they dreaded hearing come around the corner because it usually signaled the physical abuse his brothers and mother were about to take. Willy Boo abandoned the family when Barry was about eight-years-old, moving to the Bahamas before settling in Miami, where he died in 1979.
In the absence of a father, Barrington’s brothers taught him how to play sports. They played soccer in the school yard and streets, using a pint-sized orange juice carton for a ball and book bags or rocks to mark their goals. His track career began informally with a race organized for and by his brothers. The oldest brother told Barrington to catch one of their other brothers and he did. Barrington earned a track/soccer scholarship to a prep school that specialized in athletics, where he learned the importance of proper preparation from his coach, Carl Bradshaw. One day before a big national race, the coach rolled up Barrington’s sweats moments before the 400-meter dash and touched his pupil’s ice cold left foot. Coach Bradshaw knew the 10-year-old hadn’t taken a proper warm up and correctly predicted Barrington’s defeat in the race.

Two years later, Barrington’s mother, who nursed the elderly at a poor house, immigrated to Florida to find work as a live-in nanny. She planned to send for her children eventually. Her oldest son, Melviton, followed shortly thereafter and finally settled in Camden, N.J. In the meantime, the children left behind lived virtually unsupervised on the Island for about two years. Despite excelling in track and never missing a day of school, Barrington struggled academically and joined two rival gangs who weren’t aware of his allegiance to the other gang. Barrington ran around the Island looking for girls and trouble with his friend Desmond McKenzie, who went on to become Kingston’s mayor. Barrington’s fast life soon caught up to him. He recalls having a gun held to his head at a party one time and getting jumped by about 20 boys another time. Police finally broke up the fight and took Barrington into custody. The next day, Melviton arrived to spring his brother from jail and take him to the United States, but not before dragging his younger brother to the barber. Barrington climbed into the chair with a cracked and bloodied
skull. “He was hanging with the wrong crowd I guess,” Melviton said of his brother’s adolescence in Jamaica. “I stayed on him more in Camden.”

While attending Camden High, Barry managed to stay off some of the country’s most dangerous streets and away from gangs by watching sports and excelling at track despite the fact that many star athletes around him fell prey to the streets. He was no straight-A student but found the academics much easier than in Jamaica. The 12-year-old skipped the ninth grade and often corrected his English teacher’s grammar. “I was basically teaching the class,” he remembered. “I was struggling [in Jamaica] trying to make D’s. We had 13 classes each marking period. Up here I was making A’s, B’s and C’s. I felt like I’m a smart dude up here.”

When it came to basketball, however, Barry only watched pickup games at school and the park in Morgan Village near the local middle school. Even with his street-soccer background, Barry was too afraid to play such a foreign game. He marveled at the players’ grace and talent. He learned the rules by listening to television announcers calling the games of the 76ers, who played across the river from Camden in Philadelphia. He was mesmerized by the team’s star, Dr. J (Julius Erving) and World B. Free (Lloyd B. Free). Barry practiced their moves. For the first time, he realized the beauty of the improvised game being played under control and at the highest level. He attended most of Camden High’s varsity basketball games to watch a team coached by his future mentor, Clarence Turner, who collected more than 700 victories, including seven state championships, as he turned Camden’s program into the most famous in South New Jersey.

Playing basketball in gym class increased Barry’s confidence. Thanks to track, he could outrun and out-jump people on the court, but his footwork was a problem, despite his soccer
skills. He didn’t know what foot to jump off for a layup. His knuckles were bruised from missing so many passes and when he did catch the ball he didn’t know what to do with it. Barry decided to focus on rebounding and defense but he guarded his man too aggressively and was called for more than his share of fouls. Besides being ridiculed for his lack of skills, his “nasty, flat Jamaican accent” was the butt of numerous jokes. His classmates shouted “Hey Barry-mon.” “The more they laughed, the more you backed down and cocooned,” he recalled. “There were girls around too, which made it worse. Needless to say, I didn’t get no girls in my basketball endeavors. Girls like guys who play basketball. That’s why so many guys play.”

The summer after his sophomore year, he finally joined the Morgan Village streetball games when they needed an extra man. There weren’t a lot of spectators, no girls, and the guys knew his limitations. For the first time, he was able to learn on the court, even though the art of shooting escaped him. He also learned the dramatics of the playground game, a theater where everyone plays a part and where talking a good game can trump playing a good one. “Two different disciplines,” Coach Rob says of streetball and high school ball. “One is more offensive, immediate entertainment, immediate gratification. High school ball is delayed gratification. [Streetballers] do things a regular high school player won’t think about doing. In a system you have a role, in streetball you create, define your own role. [In high school] a coach defines your role. They’re both great in their own right, both are fantastic. I love both.”

But at that point in his life, track was still his first love. Basketball was just an activity he did, not because he thought he could play in the NBA, but because it was a personal challenge. His 4x100-meter relay team’s record stood for decades in New Jersey. His 200 meter time of 21.4 seconds and 100-meter time of 9.5 seconds earned him All Scholastic honors, a state
championship and college scholarship offers. In 1975, he turned down a soccer scholarship at Rutgers University to run track in Tallahassee, Fla. at the Agricultural and Mechanical University, commonly known as FAMU. As a freshman, he played one pickup basketball game on campus before the track coach entered the gym and said that any of his runners caught playing basketball would have their scholarships stripped. The coach was known for promptly sending athletes to the train station with their bags. Barry didn’t go near a basketball for the rest of his tenure in Tallahassee. “I didn’t want to come back to Camden with nothing, hang out on the street corner, no skills, education. Hey, I’m staying in school. I refuse to come back with nothing.”

Initially, he struggled on the track, unable to break his high school time of 49 seconds in the 400-meter dash. Only after reading a book called the Psychology of Winning did he find success. “The mind is meant to prepare the body,” he remembered. “Got to point I was doing my homework in my mind. If I had a track meet on Saturday I ran on Wednesday in my mind, situations coming in front of me. You don’t panic if guys pass you.”

During his senior year in college, he impressed a recruiter from the Boston Public Schools during a job fair. The recruiter eventually offered him a $1,000 moving stipend and a post teaching physical education at the Carter Middle School stating in the fall of 1979. Friends warned him Boston was a racist city but Barry was lured by the $10,000 salary, double what districts in Florida, Louisiana and Georgia offered. “Right away I went to the map to find where Boston was. The furthest I had been was New York. I didn’t know where Boston was. Lots of people knew I got a job up there and they were like ‘Man you don’t want to go up there. It’s cold, and it’s too far and South Boston [is racist] and all of this.’ I didn’t know the history about
Boston and what was going on. I just knew I wanted to get close to New Jersey and Boston was the closest place, closer than Florida.

In Boston, he also joined a professional track club that competed in arenas such as New York City’s Madison Square Garden and he set a goal of running in the Olympic trials for Jamaica. He also finally picked up a basketball for the first time since his freshman year in college. Weekend pickup games near Jim Rice Field were an outlet from work and track but he never could have imagined that basketball would dominate the rest of his life in Boston. “I was getting better. My confidence was rising, skying for rebounds, taking the ball to the hole. Like [there was] no such thing as time when I played; bring a bottle of orange juice and play all day until you lost. You might as well go home if you lose ’cause you’ll wait all day to get back on the court.”

Barry’s high school sweetheart, Christina, also moved to Boston with him. She was pregnant with their daughter, Chiquisha. But soon after giving birth, Christina moved out with the baby. He eventually took his daughter back in 1982 because Christina had a drug problem. But by that time he was living in a dorm at Harvard University while working on his Master’s in Education. Children weren’t allowed to live in the dorm so Barry and Chiquisha left home early each morning and snuck back into their room late at night. Barry raised her like a roommate and talked to her like an adult, making being poor seem like the “greatest thing” to Chiquisha. They lived on Frosted Flakes. He convinced her buying clothing from discount stores was cool because they got so much more for their money.

“Come on Quish, you don’t like toys,” he would say.

“I don’t?”
“No. You like books!”

He took his daughter to track practice and split submarine sandwiches with her for dinner. During evenings spent in the Harvard library, Barry’s school books and Chiquisha’s coloring books were illuminated by a green-shaded banker’s lamp. Chiquisha, who eventually graduated from Boston College Law School and works as a Public Defender in Washington D.C., keeps a banker’s lamp in her apartment these days to remind her of that difficult but wonderful time in her life. They had fun, lots of it. One New Year’s Eve, while watching the ball drop in Times Square on TV, they jumped on the bed until it broke.

But Barry’s schedule became too demanding. He quit the Harvard program to become a physical education teacher at English High. He also ran the athletic programs at the Dorchester House and the Roxbury Boys and Girls Club. As she got older, Chiquisha felt badly that her father dropped out of school because he couldn’t afford to take care of her. “I knew Harvard was the best school in the world,” she says. “I always felt really guilty he didn’t graduate. As a child, you don’t realize it was an opportunity for a young black male.”

They moved to Nashua, New Hampshire because rent was cheaper. Barry gave up on his dreams of running in the Olympics when the commute to Boston became too much to handle. The tipping point came one night in October of 1986 when Barry fell asleep at the wheel on Route 3 and destroyed his brown Volvo 240 after it flipped twice. “My dad’s my life,” Chiquisha says, recalling the moment when the director of the Boy’s and Girl’s Club pulled her out of her after-school program to tell her the news and take her to Lowell Memorial hospital, where her father lay unconscious. “There were tubes all up in him.” Because he was wearing his seatbelt and driving a safe car, Barry only suffered a dislocated elbow.
Although he no longer had his own track career, he still considered basketball an afterthought. For a time, he even served as the head coach for the University of Massachusetts Boston track team. Coach Rob did not realize how powerful a tool basketball was to reach students until he took a job running afterschool programs at the Dorchester House and the Boys and Girls Club to make extra money. Through basketball, the children could be persuaded to study and try other sports such as swimming and golf.

Coach Rob was still shocked by the level of selfishness displayed by the youngsters on the court. Playing soccer on the streets of Kingston as a youngster taught Coach Rob the importance of moving without the ball, or the idea of putting one’s self in a better position to receive a pass and score. It was a survival skill in soccer because dribbling with your feet is much more difficult than dribbling a basketball with your hands. It is easier to hold onto a basketball when a pack of wild children approach. Young basketball players can get away with indulging their first instinct to tuck the ball away while hoping defenders disband. The children could not comprehend the idea that being double or triple-teamed meant a teammate was open and that constant passing is the best way to break down a defense.

Coach Rob decided to educate himself in the fundamentals of basketball and started reading about great coaches and watching instructional videos. He still knew there was more to the equation than fundamentals. “Vince Lombardi said something that stuck with me,” Coach Rob says. “He says: ‘A coach can know all the Xs and Os in the world but you know what? He’s not a coach until he can motivate a child, and an athlete.’ You know, that’s where I’m coming from. Am I the greatest Xs and Os guy in the world? No. I’m not a doctor at it. But I can get into
your brain, rearrange your brain and bring it out the way it’s supposed to be because I’ve been there.”

He coached a successful traveling squad made up of 12- and 13-year-olds. Playing tournaments in New York, Washington D.C. and South Carolina, the rag-tag group won their share of games. But Coach Rob knew that the more important thing was that basketball provided a safe haven from the streets. Sometimes Coach Rob hosted sleepovers in the gym so the youngsters could play basketball all night.

Starting in 1991, Coach Rob coached girls’ basketball at Nobles and Greenough, a private suburban school. His daughter attended the school while he worked there. She could have stayed if he had taken a full-time job there, an especially tempting offer given the fact that unlike his players in the city schools, these girls did homework during road trips on charter buses furnished with bathrooms. Ultimately, he decided his heart is in the city and he took the junior varsity boys’ job at English High. Long-time varsity coach Jerry Howland promised Coach Rob he would hand over the varsity program to him after one season. “My calling was back in the city,” Coach Rob says. “[Nobles and Greenough] was fine, I loved it, but that was too comfortable for me. I have to be back here in the city.”
CHAPTER III: PRESEASON

ENGLISH’S VARSITY roster is practically set by the time tryouts start the first week of December, the first official week of the regular season. English hosts a fall league and plays in a tournament at Basketball City, a rooftop complex in downtown Boston with courts under a tennis bubble. These preseason games determine who will play varsity and who will play jayvee. It also becomes clear during these contests just how much Mike Marsh, the transplanted forward with the overbearing father, improves English’s team from last year, a disappointing 8-12 season.

Mike suits the Bulldog’s run-and-gun style well and anchors the squad’s high-energy press.

This domination is on display during a Thursday evening early in November when the Bulldogs are playing another Boston Public School called New Mission. Only ten seconds click off the scoreboard mounted on a wall directly crosscourt from the stands when TK, the starting senior point guard, scores the opening basket, forcing the opposing coach to call timeout. Walking back to the metal bench in front of the orange bleachers, TK declares, “game just started and games over!”

A blue railing running the court’s length separates pullout bleachers from four more rows of wooden stands, giving the gymnasium a lopsided pit design that puts players on display like gladiators. A big “E” is painted in the blue circle at center court along with “Est. 1821.” The school is the first public secondary school in the nation, although it hasn’t always been located in its current neighborhood, Jamaica Plain. The court is surrounded by three brick walls just feet from the sideline, leaving just enough room for “ENGLISH” to be painted across both baselines in big blue block letters. There’s an even smaller margin between the wall with the black
scoreboard and the sideline. Banners documenting the school’s athletic achievements are draped on the wall, with boys’ basketball banners taking up the most space. One banner lists the years of 14 League Championships (most recently 2000 and 2001) and another has the years of seven City of Boston Championships. There are so many South Sectional titles that they spill onto a second banner. The two state championships (1974 and 1975) are on another banner but, surprisingly, nothing commemorates the memorable Eastern Mass championship teams that took the title at the old Boston Garden. At the time, the Eastern and Western Mass champs did not face off for the state title.

A buzzer signals the end of New Mission’s timeout, which was not nearly enough time for its coach to draft a play strong enough to break English’s full-court press. TK, along with Errin Coren—the team’s other returning senior star—steal several inbound passes in a row, leaving themselves uncontested layups that frazzle New Mission. Errin pounds his chests and roars after each basket he scores as English takes a 16-1 lead five minutes into the game. When New Mission does manage to inbound the ball, its point guard is trapped in the corner, met by a flurry of waving arms. The sound of encroaching sneakers is all it seems to take to jar the ball loose. When New Mission players do poise themselves long enough to launch a pass, Mike’s eyes widen as the ball lofts towards half court. Already inching away from his assigned man, Mike snatches the Hail Marry out of midair as swiftly as a pelican scooping a fish. With a clear path to the basket, he takes flight for a rim-rattling dunk.

The 15-point lead is a large enough cushion for Coach Rob to play his bench, a trend as English goes on to win the pre-season league title, giving the team high hopes for the regular season. In the huddle after beating New Mission, 53-39, Coach Rob tells the team to meet in the
gym at 9 a.m. on Saturday morning. After practice, they will take the subway to Basketball City, which is located downtown near the Boston Celtics new arena. “I got one Division 1 coach coming here on Saturday so have a good workout. He’s coming to look at one of you. He might see one, but he might see two he likes so spread the word.” There was little doubt Mike was the “one” being scouted. Mike is English High’s first legitimate Division 1 basketball prospect since the team lost in the 2000 state championship game.

For Mike, this season and this school year will be the one he has always dreamed of, complete with a girlfriend who is crazy about him and teammates, friends and a coach he can trust. He’s getting good grades and from the moment he arrived at the school he was treated like royalty. Everyone was eager to meet the new booming personality with the body of a grown man who survived Hurricane Katrina after it struck the tiny town in Mississippi where he attended a small private Christian school.

“Mentally, it was a good move for me,” Mike says of coming to Boston from Mississippi. “I was getting a little too stressed out over all the things that was happening around me. Coming up here was a good release.”

IF GOD created the heavens and the Earth in the beginning, it seemed to Mike that God had half a mind to destroy his own grand design on Aug. 27, 2005 in the most apocalyptic fashion possible. The heavens collided with the Earth and crashed down on the entire Gulf Coast. It did not look as if Mike’s school, Genesis One Christian Academy, in Mendenhall, Mississippi would be spared.
Mike heard howling winds and wailing car alarms across the rural community 40-miles southeast of Jackson, where more than a quarter of the population lives below the poverty level. Outside the fallout shelter down the street from Mike’s now demolished dormitory, there were thumps, crashes and cries. The deadly category-five hurricane with winds upwards of 175 miles per hour uprooted trees and tossed cars and parts of buildings into the sky. Debris hurled through slanted rain and crushed anything in its path.

Besides New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina took most of her fury out on Gulfport, Mississippi, where she first came ashore. Gulfport absorbed so much of Katrina’s power that the sixth-strongest Atlantic hurricane in history and the third-strongest land-falling U.S. storm was considerably weakened by the time it traveled 100 miles inland to Mendenhall. It might not have been the end of days, but there was no doubt in Mike’s mind it was an act of God. “It was the most devastating thing that’s ever happened to me,” Mike recalled after transferring to English High. “Just washed away everything I had and everything I was beginning to start.”

Mike was born in the Bronx in 1987 and lived next to a crack house for the first six years of his life. His parents, Donny and Angela, wanted to get Mike out of the city so they moved in with Donny’s parents in Buffalo, N.Y. Angela commuted to the city to finish her Bachelor’s in accounting at New York University and worked for Citibank. Donny worked as an electrician at hotels and didn’t always live with the family but was always around. Nevertheless, Donny’s father, a Vietnam veteran, was the main man in Mike’s life.

Mike’s grandfather was his anchor, even though he was hardly in Donny’s life as a kid. Donny taught himself how to play basketball while his father was in Vietnam. He got a basketball scholarship to Daemen College in Amherst, N.Y. but dropped out his junior year.
when Mike was born. Donny later played in a semipro league and was determined to be a bigger
part of Mike’s life than his father was in his, even after he and Angela split up around the time
Mike and his brother moved with him from New York City to Buffalo. “I wanted to set a
different tone,” Donny says. “Even if I’m not in the house, even if me and your mother are not
together, I’ll still be in your life, live in the city you live in, even if I take a lesser job [I’ll] be
there for you. That long distance stuff doesn’t work.” While Angela supported Mike and his
brother financially, Mike’s dad was “hands on” and showed Mike the “trials and tribulations” of
life, especially when it came to basketball. Donny took Mike to more basketball camps than
either could count. With the help of a high protein diet, he transformed Mike from a pudgy 5-
foot-3-inch, 150-pound, uncoordinated seventh grader—who Donny says couldn’t “catch a
football or kick a dodge ball”—into a chiseled basketball player. Those close to the family
thought Donny was too hard on his son when it came to basketball and put too much pressure on
him to play and practice the game. Donny says it was the other way around, citing the fact that
he pulled Mike from his eighth grade team for three weeks when his grades dipped. “What
happened is they took basketball too serious, I was overbearing with academics,” Donny says.
“A lot of coaches, all they care about is showing up for basketball.”

After only two years under his father’s tutelage, Mike was good enough to make a travel
team that played as far away as Italy. Eventually he made varsity as a sophomore at his high
school in Buffalo. But he was struggling in other areas of his life, especially school. Between
basketball practices, working six hours a day at Wegman’s grocery store and looking out for his
younger brother, John, Mike’s grades suffered. His mom had increasing financial trouble and his
brother was getting in trouble at school. On top of that, his grandfather died at the end of the school year. “The world struck me,” Mike says of the tumultuous year.

Around the same time, a so-called street agent saw Mike in an AAU game and told him that for $1,000 he could get Mike into a prep school in Mississippi. “I didn’t really get into the details, sometimes it’s good not to know a lot,” says Donny, who also says he listened to the street agent’s pitch but didn’t pay a dime. Donny says he used his own connections as an AAU coach to get Mike into Genesis I and returned the favor by plugging the Mendenhall School at prestigious camps. He also insists that his goals for his son are realistic. “Everyone thinks I’m thinking pros,” Donny says. “If he goes to Duke and plays a little bit, their alumni will hook him up with an $80,000 job, he don’t got anything to worry about. My thing is I’m not just looking at the basketball aspect, I’m looking at what the alumni can do; can they produce?”

Mike moved to Mendenhall when he was 16 to play basketball for the small Christian prep school. His mom and John moved in with his aunt in a nearby town in Alabama. About 40 other elite high school basketball players attended the school that had recently added grades nine through 13 to its elementary and middle schools; the post-senior year made it a haven for players hoping to improve their grade point averages and standardized test scores so they could play in college.

Despite its reputation as a “diploma mill”—a school only in existence to make players eligible for Division 1 basketball—the school prided itself on its discipline. The players rose at 7 a.m., attended night bible study and Sunday church and were in bed by 10 p.m. Cell phones, earrings and jewelry weren’t permitted. “My grades went up big time, my focus was on school; my focus was on basketball; that’s all there was,” Mike says. “There was no in between.”
There were only four teachers. Mike was able to get individual attention in the classroom and he enjoyed the lack of interruptions, “ruckus and back talk” he found so distracting in Buffalo’s public schools. But the schoolwork was much easier than a public school and Mike’s GPA improved from the 2.0 he carried in Buffalo to a 3.0. “I was kind of shocked just because the work was real easy for my son, just put it that way,” Donny says.

The school played a national schedule of basketball games that allowed college recruiters to see teams full of prospects all at once instead of sifting through traditional high schools. Primarily playing in tournaments against other prep schools from around the country, the varsity carried a respectable record in the 2004-05 season and recruiters took notice. Mike saw schools from the Southeastern Conference, Big Ten and Big 12 visiting his teammates. The school ultimately would have as many as 10 players poised to sign a basketball scholarship by the 2006 spring signing period.72

Mike made $6.25 an hour doing odd jobs around the school. He liked that the staff kept him on task but thought it odd that the facilities were in such poor shape for the amount of money the school cost. He said they never hired the extra teachers they promised.

Mike put up with it because he liked the basketball program, even though he did not make varsity. After his arrival, the school brought in topflight talent who took his spot. He started on the jayvee squad and his individual game blossomed. “His basketball skill was at a high seven and they took it to a 10,” Donny says.

With only four hours of class a day, there was plenty of time for Mike to work on his own

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game and to hit the weights, either by himself or with an assistant coach. Unlike English High, the school had resources and several coaches to make sure Mike could garner the skills to be a guard at the college level. His six-foot, less than 200-pound frame was only big enough to play forward at the high school level. Mike practiced two hours a day on his own, about 14 hours a week, in the gym and on the driveway at his aunt’s house in Alabama, where his brother was living. He worked on his guard skills, especially on dribbling with his left hand and coming off screens to shoot. The range on his jump shot increased considerably as his growth spurt hit. He grew almost five inches. “I had nothing to do but do school and practice my ball so I just went outside in the driveway and started dribbling non-stop; practicing moves I watched on TV. I would practice, sometimes with my little brother trying to take the ball away from me. I was mainly trying to remember all the stuff coaches told me; what the guys on TV do. Make sure my feet looked right, had my hands right, the way their facial expressions were—I practiced everything.”

This routine, the kind McPhee writes about in *A Sense of Where you Are*, was paying off. Mississippi State, Ole Miss, Alabama, Houston and Virginia were all interested in him, Mike says. “My life, it’s different,” Mike says. “A lot of people don’t understand why I do the things I do and put up with the things I put up with…I don’t think a lot of people would go from school to school giving up friends, making friends, losing friends and overall just not having fun.”

A day and a half before the storm hit, Mike and the 25 other players who bunked in the dorms headed to the shelter with Daryl Thigpen, the school president. They used the fallout shelter down the street while the rest of the school’s basketball players sought shelter in the old church that housed their school. Packing only what he could carry, Mike stuffed eight pairs of
pants and eight shirts in his bag, enough for two weeks. He left behind his Playstation II and all his other “flashy possessions” such as sneakers, jerseys and rap albums—trivial materials that did not seem so important to Mike anymore.

The shelter lost power and Mike was disconnected from the outside world, except for a radio. “It was all scary,” he says. “Not having light, period, is scary for a day. Weeks on the other hand is something different!”

Folks in the shelter mostly talked about whether the water was contaminated, how long they’d be there and why the Federal Emergency Management Agency was taking so long to react; why wasn’t this avoided in the first place? “People should’ve been prompted and prepared way—days, months, weeks—ahead of time,” Mike says.

Mike slept on the shelter’s floor with nothing between him and the concrete but sheets and pillows. The school scraped together chicken and rice for its students but the food didn’t last long. There was no electricity or showers. Body odor filled the hot and humid Mississippi summer. “If you wanted to take a shower you had to go outside and swim,” Mike says. “That was ’bout the closest you were gonna get to clean. Everybody was on top of each other smelling.”

Mike, who felt he was to blame for moving to the South with his brother, finally got in touch with his family in Alabama. “My brother was terrified. I never want to put my little brother through something like that ever again,” Mike says. “I kind of feel responsible for putting that on top of his shoulders. … I still kind of feel guilty, that’s just personally me. I try to look after and take care of everybody. It’s kind of my role and kind of my job.”
Hurricane Katrina left the old church that housed Mike’s school flooded and in desperate need of repair. Mike finally left the shelter after two weeks, caught a flight out of Jackson, Miss. and never returned to Genesis One Christian Academy.

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After Katrina, Mike and his family contacted a family friend named Chris Parker, a 25-year-old English High alum who coaches the school’s jayvee team along with Coach Lester. With school already underway, Mike needed a place to play and live. Everything seemed to fall into place for both parties. The only problem was Coach Rob had not housed one of his own players since he moved to Brockton five years ago, partially because he now lived outside the BPS district and partially because he had been burned before by getting too close to his players. But Chris—who works as a bar bouncer by night and lives with a friend in Roxbury—could not offer a stable environment for an 18-year-old and Mike had no place else to stay. It also was more convenient for Mike to move into Coach Rob’s home because Coach could drive him to school every day. Chris’ Roxbury apartment was listed as Mike’s official residence.

Mike arrived in Boston on Sept. 10, 2005 with only shorts and summer clothes. Even though he was self conscious about being seen as a charity case, a hurricane victim, he didn’t mind when his new classmates asked about Katrina. “People would just show me mad love when I came out here. It just took me over how everyone opened up their arms for me. They just embraced me. There’s nothing I can say that can describe the first couple weeks in that school.”

Still, it’s hard being away from his family—who moved back to Buffalo—especially his brother John.
“I think about my family basically every day. I don’t know how I don’t just go to school and break down. Somehow I just maintain the focus and know that somehow school and basketball will maybe lead me somewhere I can make it and take us all out of this.”

As the preseason closes, Mike feels he is in a much better place in Boston. All he needs is a waiver from the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association to play in regular-season games for English, a fact that Coach Rob has not told his team. “I don’t want to stress them out,” Coach Rob says. “If he doesn’t get it, he doesn’t get it.”

ORLANDO VANDROSS watches Boston English’s morning practice from the first row of orange bleachers in the English High gym. He has a cleanly shaven head and is wearing khakis and a black long-sleeve T-shirt with BU embroidered on the left breast. The team stretches and executes a series of fast break drills before splitting into guards and “bigs” (forwards and centers) to do more drills on opposite ends of the court. Coach Rob chats with Orlando, an assistant coach at Boston University in charge of recruiting, who is there to scout Mike before the team heads downtown for the tournament at Basketball City, the six-court facility near TD Banknorth Garden. Even though Vandross leaves when practice ends around 11:20 a.m. without talking to Mike at length, the thought of playing Division 1 ball here in Boston gives Mike extra energy. Mike is the only one not getting ready to walk to a nearby subway station—pulling jeans or sweats over their baggy shorts—to take the Orange Line train to the tournament. Mike enjoys a few more slam dunks before eventually replacing his practice jersey with an oversized throwback Wilt Chamberlain jersey long enough to double as a knee-length dress.
“Stop showing off,” someone says, foreshadowing the tension between Mike and his teammates that will tarnish their season.

“Your momma!” Mike responds, taking flight for another reverse dunk.

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English hasn’t sent a player to a Division 1 basketball team since it sent three players to D-1 teams in 2000. In the subsequent five years, English had a combined record of 60-56, a stark contrast to the impressive 78-17 record Coach Rob compiled from 1997 to 2001. Mike is the first Division 1-caliber recruit Coach Rob has handled since English lost in the state championship game in 2000. Coach Rob stopped actively recruiting top talent when an escalation in youth violence led him to change his philosophy on basketball’s role in the community. Rather than focusing on getting players who could win a state title, Coach Rob started using basketball as a means to keep the players he already had off the streets.

Unlike the days when he maintained top-ranked teams in the late 1990s and early part of the new decade, Coach Rob no longer used his own rent money to pay entry fees and travel expenses for tournaments and piling players into a black Volvo 740 while incurring $11,000 in car repairs. Coach Rob no longer let his best players live with him if their home life was too hard to handle. It was a good way to limit their world to basketball and school but it also meant keeping tabs on them at all time. He no longer put as much effort into making sure his players attended class or were eligible to play. He no longer held SAT prep courses for his players, advised them through the college recruiting process or reached out to as many college coaches to recruit his players. And he no longer fished for the city’s best middle school players each year, the kind of talent that often comes with big egos.
“Right now is probably the best group of kids I have, collectively, since I’ve been here. And I’ve had talented kids, I’ve had a team that three kids went to Division 1. Okay, so I’ve had talented teams. But collectively, these kids know me, know what I’m all about. And I can bring it to them hard and it won’t bounce off of them, they’ll absorb it. And the reason for that is they’re listening to one person only. There’s nobody out there pulling these kids, telling them how great they are and confusing them.”

When he landed blue-chip talent, he had to vie for their ears as well, competing with an array of nefarious characters on the streets who try to cash in on athletes’ clout and street credibility. He fended off street agents who try to broker scholarships for players and drug dealers who used top high school players to push product. Getting between dealers and players is dangerous for any coach considering how much money is at stake. “I’m not dodging bullets for these kids anymore,” Coach Rob says. “Times have changed in Boston. I would look them in the eye and tell them they had a choice to make. There was a time when an athlete was untouchable. My attitude’s different [now]. I didn’t realize how dumb, stupid I was being, it was dangerous.

“There was a time in my life when my philosophy was that I was greater than the streets. What I’m putting in front of these kids is better than anything the streets can offer. It got to the point where the streets became more powerful than me.”

One of Coach Rob’s best and most troubled players was Dewayne “Chubby” Cox, who was arrested by an undercover police officer for selling marijuana near the school the morning after English lost in the 1999 state semifinals. “It was like sticking a pin in a balloon and letting all the air out,” Coach Rob recalled in The Boston Herald. “I was disappointed after all the hard
work I put into this kid.” When English’s headmaster asked Coach Rob what they should do, the coach replied, “We gotta save this kid.”

Chubby was considered the top player coming out of Boston’s middle schools in 1997. But Coach Rob sidelined the 6-foot-1-inch point guard for his first year and a half due to poor grades. Chubby got his act together by his junior year and led English to its first city league championship since 1981. He scored 24 points to help his No. 13-ranked team upset perennial power Brockton High in a 1999 state quarterfinal, one game before his arrest. The next season, Coach Rob made sure Cox stayed out of trouble, going as far as picking him up every morning to make sure he made it to school. “He’s a coach that really cares about you,” Cox said in the *Herald*. “If you’re one of his players, he makes sure you’re taken care of right. He comes to our classes. He’ll sit in our classes and make sure we’re doing our work.” *The Sporting News* even covered Cox’s story in a guest piece written by Sport and Society’s founder, Dr. Richard Lapchick: “Although you never can be certain of the outcome when drugs are involved,” Lapchick wrote, “this story seems headed toward a good ending…”

English eventually lost by two points to St. John’s of Shrewsbury in the final 40 seconds of the 2000 state championship and Coach Rob told the *Herald* he would make sure Cox’s success continued. “When he’s away at college, I’m still going to be his mentor, because I want to see him get that degree. He’s got to get that degree. I just don’t want him to come back and let the streets eat him up.” The headmaster’s faith in Coach Rob to handle Chubby’s case humbled

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the coach but it still didn’t turn out well. Chubby made Salem State’s basketball team but dropped out of school after two seasons and rarely visits his old coach.

The off-court problems at English didn’t stop with Cox’s departure. The next season two star players, Jason Smith and Michael McGhee, were arrested for allegedly robbing a 54-year-old man. One of the players allegedly grabbed the man by the throat at 8:50 p.m. on a Dorchester street and said, “If you scream, I’ll kill you,” before fleeing with the victim’s wallet, which contained $59 and a few debit and credit cards. “All we can do now is pray for them,” Coach Rob said in the Globe the week after the incident. His team was 10-1 at the time.77

Besides these incidents, Coach Rob was getting sick of holding his players’ hands, especially checking in with the teachers of upperclassmen who should be able to keep themselves on track. Over the years he was living in Roxbury, Coach Rob let about four players live with him. But Coach Rob stopped letting players stay with him once he moved to Brockton. Worst of all, Coach Rob began to question his own intentions; whose interest was he serving by playing the roles of parent, coach and guidance counselor? “One person trying to do it all, I can’t do it. If I beat the bush, am I doing it so they will pass so they can play?”

Coach Rob never admitted how much all this ate at him but his oldest daughter, Chiquisha Robinson, knows better. Spending her childhood vying for bathroom time with her dad’s live-in players, the 26-year-old now works as a public defender in Washington D.C. Bouncing ideas off one another and trading war stories from the frontlines, Coach Rob and Chiquisha are each other’s biggest confidants. They struggle with the socioeconomic shortcomings of her clients, his players and issues stemming from fatherless children. They

wrestle with how to avoid becoming attached to any one player or client. They practice triage, moving to the next player or client as soon as they determine the current case is lost, not only for the sake of their own sanity but for the greater good as well. Their memories are short and feelings hard. “Success is measured in a lot of different ways,” Chiquisha says. “And if a kid has a shitty home life and lack of focus and basketball is the only thing that feels good and gives him a bit of education and keeps him off the street for five minutes, then [my dad’s] doing right by him. And that’s what he needs. The mom has to give the kid incentives too.

“You can’t get down on your own people. [Society shortcomings don’t] excuse their behavior, but it explains it. You have to meet people where they are, you can’t meet them at the finish line. My philosophy in my job is client centered. Give them what they need, not what you think is best.”

Chiquisha still says it’s hard for her father not to take his player’s failures personally. In recent years he’s become jaded, she says, and will only reach out to players if it doesn’t disadvantage his 4- and 15-year-old daughters, whom he raises virtually alone. “It hurts him when the players he helps don’t amount to anything,” Chiquisha says. “He’s not romantic about expecting anything in return anymore. His girls are his priority. He’s quick to cut it off.”

WHILE WAITING for the Orange Line train to take them to their tournament at Basketball City, some players sit on the back of a wooden bench next to a white passenger wearing headphones and pretending not to notice TK hovering over him.
“You’re gonna scare him,” someone says as TK, the team’s starting point guard, takes a seat opposite Parris Massey, the 6-foot-3-inch freshman whose size-14 shoes straddled the strip of wood connecting back-to-back benches.

“Damn, look at his shoe, it’s hanging off,” TK says, measuring the team-issued sneaker against the area between the benches.

“He’s got the same size shoe as his age,” Cal, the junior shooting guard struggling with the role basketball plays in his life, says to everyone’s amusement.

Across the outbound Orange Line tracks, a Reebok advertisement features a picture of Philadelphia 76ers guard Allen Iverson with Old English lettering reading, “I Am What I am,” a reference to a line from Ralph Ellison’s classic novel *Invisible Man*: “I yam what I yam.” Later in the season when Cal is explaining why English’s fundamentally unsound basketball skills are directly correlated to the team being from the city, he says: “We are what we are.”

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Growing up in a poor black neighborhood like Roxbury, Cal was lucky to get a firsthand glimpse of what money can do for a basketball program and how the sport is played in the suburbs when he attended a prep school in Belmont, Mass. for a year. In middle school, Cal was the only kid on the team who couldn’t afford the gym bag and sneaker fees for his AAU team. One day the coach, Gordon Thompson, a wealthy owner of a medical supply company, pulled Cal aside after practice and asked why he wasn’t paying the dues each player had to pay to participate on the team. The coach drove Cal home, the 13-year-old’s first ride in a Mercedes-Benz, and wrote his mother a check for $1,000 to help pay rent. “That was kind of a sad moment,” Cal recalls. “He drove me home, he sat down and talked to my mom. I didn’t want to tell him my mom didn’t
have enough money…and at first she didn’t want to take it. And I don’t know, that’s like the only person that ever got really close to my family as a coach.”

One summer, Gordon gave the team landscaping jobs in the suburbs and they even worked on the lawn of Celtics guard Dana Barros’ Milton home, which is next to Coach Thompson’s. Barros let Cal and his teammates attend his camp for free and he brought them to a few games as his guests. It was the first time Cal was exposed to such riches. There couldn’t have been a bigger thrill for a kid growing up dreaming of becoming a scrappy point guard for the Celtics, just like Barros. For the first time Cal was exposed to the NBA up close. “[Gordon’s] house was right there and Dana Barros’ house was like right there,” Cal says, jabbing the table with his finger to point out the proximity. “And he had a big ol’ gate that led down this long hill that led down to both of their houses.”

Cal only played for the AAU team sporadically his freshman year. His junior high grades were good enough to earn a scholarship at the Belmont Hill School, a prestigious suburban prep school with outstanding athletics. He boarded a bus each morning at 6:30 a.m. and traveled 45-minutes to the sprawling college-style campus. One of the only black kids in his class, Cal played both football and basketball. He couldn’t believe the support system in place for the athletes. Even though his Belmont teammates treated him like a brother, helping him with homework, inviting him to sleepovers and offering a type of camaraderie he was not accustomed to, it wasn’t enough support. Cal couldn’t keep pace with the rigorous curriculum that included Latin. Students from Cal’s background often need an even better education than their suburban counterparts to get ahead, which Belmont Hill provided. But its academic rigor left Cal feeling humiliated when everyone in class seemed to understand the subject at hand. He flunked out and
transferred to English, where he had to repeat his freshman year in 2003. And because he failed at Belmont, and will turn 19 at the end of this season, Cal needs a waiver from the MIAA to play next year, his senior season, the same one Mike needs to play his senior season at English.

At English, Cal kept tabs on his old AAU pals who were winning state titles and well on their way to becoming high school stars at powerhouses such as Charlestown High and Newton North, before going on to become Division 1 players at schools such as Connecticut and Iowa State. Most notably, Anthony Gurley led Newton North to a 2006 state championship before playing at Wake Forrest. Gurley ultimately transferred to the University of Massachusetts to finish his college career.

Like these players, Cal also maintained a rigorous schedule after he transferred to English, working out before and after school by himself. But once he started working part-time (first for the Harvard School of Public Health and later for the Museum of Fine Arts), he could no longer find time or energy to practice on his own. “I just started to slack off I guess,” he says. “Started to look at my mom and try to help her in her struggle. Honestly, if you want to be a Division 1 player, I don’t think you would be doing the things I’m doing right now, I don’t think you could.

“It’s a challenge to even try to squeeze my homework in. I’m doing it. There’s no complaints, I’m really tired but I’m doing it.”

The fact that he received offer letters from Emmanuel College and Virginia Union University made coming to terms with what he calls his new “reality” even harder. A few weeks before the start of the season, Cal started reconciling his basketball dreams and basketball reality for the first time. He realized he’s better off putting time and energy spent on basketball into
getting good grades or finding a trade. Plus, Cal convinced himself he will not get the waiver he needs to play his senior year. But this realization, what Cal calls “coming to reality,” wasn’t easy. He had a hard time sleeping and was depressed for a couple days. “Knowing you had the dream of doing something and just knowing that it’s really not gonna work just shuts down everything,” Cal says. “I’m [probably] not going to be playing my senior year, that kind of hurt me. Even though I still had to come to reality and know it was better … that I have something to do if I don’t get the waiver.” He focused on ways to be successful outside of basketball and started to feel better after a few days. He told himself “just because I’m not playing my senior year, life still goes on. I can’t just shut myself down.”

Cal reveals his struggles in a paper for his English class dated November 19, 2005, closing the paper with a hypothetical letter to his teammates:

Dear English Basketball Organization,

Sorry team for making it seem like I’m quitting on you but I’m really not. I see it like this; there is a whole lot of life after basketball. Also I’m not in the top 50th in my class, which is the class of 2007, for the country to play Division 1. So I have to now stop hoping, dreaming, and wishing because I believe that was just a fantasy I was living. Now that I’m older and I realized that I need to stop fantasizing, before reality hits me in a way I didn’t want it to come. I just have to move on to plan B, which is living life in the real world. Which means I’m going to college and majoring in business administration and minoring in criminal justice. This is a move that I have to make. If you don’t understand it, it will come to you.

Your teammate, brother, and friend,

The Caly Kid

AS THE Orange Line train rumbles down the track, Parris, the lanky freshman, picks his shoe up from the bench as his teammates continue to clown and race into the inbound car that will take them to their tournament downtown. Leading the banter before they board the train, Cal’s
playfulness subsides during the 14-stop ride as he tries his best to annotate a short story for English class. About 20 minutes later, the team arrives at North Station and ascends to street level, where they are greeted by a massive slab of windowless concrete across the street. “Ah man, the Garden,” Parris says with wide-eyes affixed to the new yellow sign in the upper right corner of the wall that reads: TD Banknorth Garden.

The team arrives at Basketball City about 40 minutes before their first game against Northampton on Court No. 4. English has to play without Errin, the senior forward, and a senior center nicknamed Shaq, because they are taking the SATs. TK was supposed to take the exam but did not wake up in time. Nevertheless, English takes a 23-18 lead at halftime. A tightly contested second half brings the game to a 37-37 tie with two minutes left when an English player everyone calls Boobs steals the ball at half court and scores an uncontested layup. The Ghana native has been playing well off the bench lately but unfortunately is a weapon English won’t have for the regular season. That morning, his mother informed Coach Rob that their family was returning to Africa for the rest of the school year. Despite Boobs’ inspired play, English still can’t stop Northampton’s best shooter. The white kid wearing a No. 32 jersey, who has been left unmarked all game, starts heating up in the game’s final moments. He hits a three pointer from the right corner to give Northampton a 42-39 edge. Cal then cuts into that lead with 30 seconds left by splitting a pair of free throws. English scores again, going ahead 43-41 before regaining possession of the ball. The game seems to be locked in English’s favor when TK is called for five seconds in the backcourt. Eight seconds are left in the game, just enough time for No. 32 to sink another 3-pointer from the corner that also sinks the boys from Boston, 44-43.
Coming out of the hand-shake line, Cal and Mike bicker all the way to the huddle. Coach Rob says it wasn’t one player’s fault, rather a “series of things.” English didn’t play proper man-to-man defense and the “press sucked.” The finger pointing, Coach says, “shows us how far back we are.”

Everyone else starts dressing in the corner of the gym as Weymouth High forms a layup line to warm up for its game on the court English just vacated.

“You niggas like losing, you niggas like losing!” Cal repeatedly shouts as Weymouth’s astonished team watches the drama. “Another ‘L’ in the papers for English High, another ‘L’ in the papers for English High!”

“Shut up,” TK says, rolling his eyes and sucking his teeth.

Cal taunts TK and TK lunges towards Cal.

“You gonna hit me? You gonna hit me, go ahead, hit me!” Cal screams as he is restrained by a jayvee coach while yelling, “When [TK] says ‘team’ he really means ‘me.’ Score your 34-points per game, go ahead, get your 34 points per game. I’m out of here; see if you can do it…I got grades to make!”

Eventually cooling off, Cal returns for the final two games of the day. Errin and Shaq also arrive in time to play in wins against Lincoln Sudbury’s B team and Plymouth High of New Hampshire. Dining at the Burger King across from the Garden afterward, English returns to a jovial spirit Coach Rob knows can only be sustained with wins. But winning means putting players such as Mike and Errin in positions they are not big enough to play in college, depriving them of valuable experience they need in the backcourt to play at the next level. “What comes
first, the player or the team?” Coach asks. “I’m trying to win for the team. You see what happens when you don’t win.”

More chaos erupts about a month later when English hosts Lowell High for a scrimmage and Cal is almost baited into a fight. In the first half, he bangs his head on the court after being upended by a player who then gets in Cal’s face, yelling: “Let’s go, let’s go.” The benches clear and the offending opponent is restrained while Cal, still splayed on the floor, is left unchecked. Slowly rising like a dazed dinosaur, Cal suddenly lunges towards his foe only to land in Coach Rob’s arms. “Listen to me, listen to me!” Coach Rob shouts, shaking Cal and pinning him against the gym wall.

“Get the fuck off me!” Cal retorts, contorting to break free from Coach Ron’s embrace. “Get the fuck off me!”

Coach Rob motions to the ref to call the game, tells the teams to shake hands and hit the showers. Before English can do that, they have to listen to Coach Rob’s lecture. “The papers aren’t going to say ‘Calvin Davis rioted, they’re going to say hooligans at English rioted … There was a time when the Lowells of the world didn’t want to come in here. I worked too damn hard for you to ruin that.”

Turning to basketball for a moment, Coach compliments Cal for his point guard play, before adding, “I don’t know what’s wrong with you? I don’t know if you need to go to the psychologist and get some medicine. You can’t be doing that.”
CHAPTER IV: THE SEASON

IT’S ALMOST time for his chemistry class to begin, the last class of the day, and both Coach Rob’s lunch and his student aide have not arrived. He is sitting on a swiveling chair in his office in front of his laptop at a small computer desk. It’s the first day of December and the last day of basketball tryouts, 16 days before the season starts with a home game against Snowden International.

Before this year, Coach Rob only taught physical education and health. But when the school asked him to add chemistry because it had a shortage of science teachers, he took a crash chemistry class during the summer. “I didn’t like no science in high school,” he told me. “[I’m] just doing it to get shit over. I told the kids first day, ‘When I was in high school, it was not my favorite class. [I] did just enough to stay eligible [for track].’ I told them ‘this is how we’re going to do this: Work hard.’”

A stack of six textbooks titled “Chemistry Concepts and Applications” is piled on a VCR sitting on a large cluttered desk behind him. The desk is decorated with family and team photos. When asked, Coach can dig out the plaque commemorating the 1999-2000 Eastern Mass Championship team from underneath a mound of papers. The walls are decorated with enlarged newspaper clippings from that season, including a Boston Globe piece headlined “English Finds Winning Style” with a photo featuring an English player in mid air pumping his fist. A couch against one wall is piled so high with books, mail and videotapes that there’s hardly room to sit. The white brick walls have a blue border painted near the ceiling with little white Nike swooshes intermittently dotting it. Hanging in front of the door is a print of a little black boy tucked into
bed, a basketball under his arm like a Teddy bear. Above the boy’s head is a bubble illustrating his dream: playing professional basketball. “I figured, let me bring it in and put it right where my door is open,” Coach says of the picture. “I don’t think too many kids look at it. They lost the art of dreaming, thinking big.” Standing below the picture is the silver fire extinguisher that usually props the door open so Coach Rob needs to get up to answer a knock at the door.

“Where have you been?” he asks his aide.

“Oh, oh, I got lunch,” she says, back peddling.

“I got problems,” he says, apparently forgiving her tardiness.


Another knock on the door produces the deliveryman from the pizza joint across the street.

“You’re a winner,” Coach says, paying for his Greek salad and chicken wings.

Mike returns from the bathroom a bit later and Coach hands him a paper he edited. Since his arrival, Mike has been inseparable from Coach Rob. They travel to and from school together and share a mutual respect. Coach Rob offers Mike some salad.

“Yes coach.”

“You’re supposed to say no.”

“I say ‘Yes Coach’ to everything, I’m buying anything you’re selling,” Mike says.

After a brief search for a fork, Coach Rob serves salad into Mike’s cupped palms. Halfway through lunch, Coach Rob asks his aide for the time.

“12:27,” she says.

“Ahh, I gotta go.”
“What would you do without me coach?”

Coach Rob stashes his salad underneath his chair and the trio carries stacks of chemistry books to the elevator. Exiting at the fourth floor, they walk down a narrow and crowded locker-lined corridor to a room with “442” written in green marker on the door. Twenty students are waiting around black slate-topped lab tables set up in a U-shape. All the black girls sit near the door. A group of Latino boys huddles in the far corner. There are no white or Asian students.

With more than 40 languages spoken in its halls, English High is one of the most multicultural schools in the country. Of the 1,190-member student body, 573 students are Hispanic, 540 black, 54 white, 20 Asian and three Native American.78

English is also called “Pregnant High” because it offers students maternity leave and has one of two daycare centers in the district.79 The children of faculty, staff and students nap and play behind a window in the school’s lobby that features a sign reading “Don’t bang.” A survey of 112 students taken at English during the 2004-05 school year found that 56 percent had had intercourse. Seven percent reported they had either been or gotten someone pregnant.80

The State Board of Education marked the school as “underperforming” under the federal No Child Left Behind Act for the fourth straight year in 2006. This status is partially due to low scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a standardized test students are required to pass to graduate. This year 47 percent of sophomores at the school failed to show sufficient proficiency on the language arts section and 73 percent were not proficient in

78 Faculty and student population statistics were provided by English High’s headmaster’s assistant Georgette Travis.
math. The low scores are partially explained by the fact that 20 percent of the student population is classified ESL, or English as a Second Language, and enrolled in English immersion classes. Recent legislation decreased the amount of instruction time (from three years to one) ESL students are allotted before their MCAS scores count against the school’s performance under No Child Left Behind. Despite low MCAS scores, English’s attendance rate was up six percent from last school year and 74 percent of the class of 2005 moved on to some kind of post-secondary education. Still, there’s no doubt the school is failing as a learning institution, as evident from Coach Rob’s chemistry class.

After the bell, Coach starts his lesson, which doesn’t stop anyone else from chatting or sleeping. At one point one female student tells another that Coach Rob knows someone in admissions at Northeastern University and the girl immediately interrupts Coach Rob.

“Get me a meeting,” she demands.

“It doesn’t work that way. Fill out an application and send it off.”

At the end of the hour she is talking to her boyfriend on speakerphone loud enough for everyone to hear.


Coach gets the phone and says in a mocking voice, “Yo T what up?”

“Who the hell is this, don’t be talkin’ shit to my girl.”

Coach tells him it’s her teacher and she’ll be out of class in a bit.

“Only in a black public school,” Mike says, rolling his eyes.

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82 Statistics reported by the headmaster at the English High School Association of Boston Annual Meeting held on May 10, 2006.
When the bell rings, Mike is helping Coach carry the stack of chemistry books back downstairs when he runs into TK, who is complaining that annotating stories for English class is middle school work.

“Then it should be an easy grade,” Mike says, slapping TK on the backside with a book.

Mike’s guidance counselor is in the elevator going downstairs with them. Coach Rob asks her if Mike filed the information she needs to fill out paperwork so he can get NCAA approval for a college scholarship. The counselor says she still needs the school codes from his previous school.

“You could’ve gotten it, instead you were going to the bathroom,” says Coach, referring to how Mike spent his time in his office before chemistry class.

“I was working, I’m sorry if it grosses anybody out but I was working in there,” Mike says before being cut off by the guidance counselor, “Alright already.”

Mike heads to the basketball team’s pre-practice study hall, which goes unsupervised for more than an hour because Coach Rob is meeting two female students in his office to coach them on their singing, even though he has no musical training beyond a love of rhythm & blues. The school doesn’t have a music program so Coach Rob agreed to help them before and after school.

One girl starts singing Roberta Flack’s *Killing Me Softly* while Coach retrieves his lunch from underneath his chair, tucks his chin to his chest and shuts his eyelids.

“Stop, stop,” he eventually says, unhappy with her rendition. “I think personally you’re trying to sabotage me … both of you take the rest of the week off, come in real … I’ll have two songs for you both. Come in ready Monday. … Get out of my office until you can do it. This is crazy, it’s been 20 minutes and you haven’t completed the song.”
The girl sits down in front of the laptop and puts her head in her hands while the second girl stands and delivers.

*Killing me softly with his song*

*Telling my whole life with his words*
*Killing me softly, with his song, with his song,*
*Telling my whole life with his words, killing me softly*

Holding his arm high above his head with his hand craned, Coach raises it and lowers his arm with the tempo while humming along.

Whoooo-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah…
La-la-la-la, la-la, la, Whoa-oh-oh, La-ahhh-ah-ah, Whoa-oh-oh, La-aah-ah-ah, Laaaah….

*Strumming my pain with his fingers*
*Yes he was singing my life with his words*
*Killing me softly with his song*
*Killing me softly with his song*
*Telling my whole life with his words*
*Killing me softly, with his song…*

“Better, better, I felt that.”

Around 3:30 p.m. Coach Rob finally joins study hall to hear Mike yelling at everyone to do their homework.

“What’s the problem?” he shouts.

“The freshmen aren’t doing their homework,” TK says.

“You sure that’s what’s going on?” Coach Rob asks.

Cal arrived at study hall an hour earlier, about 25 minutes late, wearing a white shirt, black and white tie, gray pinstriped slacks, black dress shoes and a black nylon Du-Rag. Cal will also miss practice entirely today because he is attending an NAACP forum for business leaders.
Cal was late to study hall today, as he is three days a week, because he picked up his brother, Tyerone, from the first grade at the Lee School in Dorchester and dropped his mom off at her job at the Emergency Department at Children’s Hospital. When Cal gets home from practice on those days, sometimes as late as 7:30 p.m., he eats dinner, does homework or studies for the SATs before picking his mom up from work at 2 a.m. When he feels himself nodding off, Cal jumps in the shower for a jolt. Only once did he fell asleep and fail to pick up his mom. She forgave him. Cal’s mom doesn’t force him to get her. But he doesn’t want her to pay a $100 monthly fee to park at the hospital’s garage. Coach Rob is okay with Cal being tardy but doesn’t realize Cal gets to bed so late on those days. “It’s a challenge to even try to squeeze my homework in,” Cal says. “I’m doing it. There’s no complaints. I’m really tired but I’m doing it.”

As grueling as this schedule might be, it keeps Cal off the streets. It leaves him no time to find trouble, which is abundant on Boston’s streets. Both 2005 and 2006 saw 10-year highs in the city’s murder rate. The combined 152 murders marked a wave of violence residents had not seen since the Boston Miracle, a nationally heralded collaboration between police, clergy and community members that quelled violence in early 1990s. The effort relied heavily on the kinds of afterschool programs cut during George W. Bush’s administration. If not for Coach Rob’s tight grip on his players, many would join gangs or hang out on the streets. During the first day of basketball tryouts a few days earlier, a former English High student, Carl Searcy, became Boston’s 65th homicide victim of the year. Lying on a Roxbury sidewalk on the evening of Nov. 28 with a bullet in his chest, Carl called out for his mother. His death marked the city’s highest homicide rate since 2001. The soft-spoken 17-year-old was reported to be an English High junior, even though the headmaster told me he had been kicked out of school a long time before his
death. Newspapers wrote that Carl “lived to play basketball” even though he never played for the school team and none of the players on the team said they were friends with him.

Carl’s death came hours after a shootout near the John Winthrop Elementary School in Dorchester sent children running for cover. “I’m angry, we are redoubling our efforts,” Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino said two days later while announcing he was reinstating the city’s gun buyback program. From June 12, 2006 to July 14, 2006 police collected 1,000 firearms in exchange for a $200 Target gift card for each weapon. That did not include the gun that would kill Jahmol Norfleet on the one-year anniversary of Carl’s death. Jahmol led H-Block, rival of the Heath Street gang, with which Carl was believed to be associated. Before his death, Jahmol was instrumental in reaching a truce between the two gangs. Those efforts fell apart after Jahmol’s murder, undoing the progress made during months of secret negotiations brokered by local clergy. The peace efforts ultimately carried on without Jahmol and culminated in a summit at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum on July 26, 2006.

Things might have been different for Jahmol and Carl had Coach Rob or someone like him guided him in the right direction. After all, Carl showed promise in basketball, winning several trophies in a city summer league. If Carl played for Coach Rob, he would have been at study hall and practice during the hours most dangerous for urban students. “What I have to offer increases the chances for their ticket, the way out,” Coach Rob says before conceding that the rest is up to the player himself. “I can’t take you home. I can’t put you in bed.”

By the time practice adjourns around 6 or 6:30 p.m., the players all have long rides home on public transit. When they get home they only have enough energy to shower, eat and hit the sack—often leaving no time for the homework or SAT prep that was not completed during study hall. The English High players might be sheltered from the streets, but they are by no means put into an environment that fosters academic excellence, no matter how much talk there is among players and coaches about the importance of grades. The fact is that unless tutors—not just Coach Rob—supervise study hall, the players will never be productive during that time.

For Cal, the issue is not so much to stay off the streets or get his school work done, it is balancing basketball with figuring out what he is going to do with his life now that he realizes basketball is not going to be his golden ticket. Cal’s always hatching different money making schemes, from buying stocks to investing in real estate—grand plans that come at the expense of basketball at a time when his teammates can’t imagine any endeavor more important than basketball.

Shortly after Cal arrived at study hall, a couple players ask why he’s dressed up. Cal says he has a business meeting with someone about opening a hair salon.

“I’m trying to get this business off the ground, in all honesty, if I get this business off the ground when I’m in college, I’ll quit college.” Cal says with elbows planted on the table while he’s wiggling his fingers. “Every girl needs their fingernails done.”

“A business meeting, that’s corny,” TK says, sucking his teeth and rolling his eyes.

TK has no reliable backup plan to basketball so the idea that Cal is trying to find one is threatening. The only way TK knows how to cope is to put down Cal. When the jayvee is
dismissed from study hall, the varsity players move to the front of the room for an X’s and O’s strategy session.

“All right coach,” Cal says as his peers scoff when he gets up to leave for the NAACP summit.

“Like chemistry,” Coach Rob says after Cal leaves. “Chemistry’s all about what you put in the mix.”

“Calvin ain’t adding up!” TK says gleefully, skipping across the front of the room to his seat.

“I can’t worry about that,” Coach Rob says. “We love the kid, he’ll come around—ain’t never seen a round peg put in a square hole.”

Coach Rob knew Cal had to miss practice today and told him it was fine but he’d have to sit out the next scrimmage. Nobody knew Cal was going to the NAACP summit. Cal never tells anyone he ended up meeting a man who wants to open a Popeye’s Chicken franchise in Boston. Cal said the man offered to help him get his real estate license over the summer.

“Are they gonna be with me five years from now?” Cal later says of TK and his teammates when asked to recall the scene. “Are they gonna be in the same predicament as me five years from now? I gotta go do what I gotta do. I met a really great guy that same night. So honestly, to me, I think I shined. ’Cause I could’ve easily stayed there and have did nothing…never known what opportunities I had next in life.”
ENGLISH’S OPPONENT in its season opener is the perennial powder-puff of the city’s South Division which has not beaten the Bulldogs in a decade. Even the school’s name, Snowden International, sounds soft.

“I did all my talking a couple nights ago,” Coach Rob says before briefly reviewing the game plan: Start in a half court trap called “zero” and switch to a “two-three” with two men on top of the defense and two men on the bottom. All seven of Snowden’s players are in layup lines on the court while English waits in the wings for Errin—the senior small forward who went for a haircut after school and has not returned. Errin’s teammates, lined up at the far door in the hallway behind the gym, cheer when they see Errin finally run into the locker room at the opposite end of the hall about eight minutes before the scheduled tip-off. Without a proper warm up, Errin’s mind is “racing 50 miles per hour, when I should be thinking at 10 or 15 miles per hour.”

The team claps again when Mike walks in wearing street clothes. His waiver to play is still pending. “Mike, we’re gonna feed off you until you can feed yourself,” says senior swingman Miles Hinton, whose father played for English High in the late 1970s.

At 4:26 p.m., English finally runs out onto the court to blaring rap music.

“Yeah Calvin, looking fine,” Cal’s mom, the only parent in the stands, hollers while holding a camcorder. Although Cal is wrestling with whether he thinks he can get a scholarship, he has not shared these thoughts with his mom and has asked her to record every home game just in case he wants to send his highlights to college coaches.

“He’s been waiting so long,” Cal’s mom says. “He’s wanted to [start] on a team for so long but was always too short. Imagine the broken hearts I had to mend. Finally, he made it.”
After warm-ups, the teams head to their respective benches for the announcement of the starting lineups. Cal runs over to Snowden’s head coach to shake hands as a student announces, “At guard! Junior! Number 10! Calvin Davis!”

“This is it baby,” Coach Rob says as Errin steadies himself for the opening tap, 27 minutes after leaving his barber’s chair. Errin easily reaches for the ball before his opponent but zealously slaps it over TK’s head. The ball bounces once in the middle of the lane and again on the large letters spelling out “English” across the baseline before hitting the wall. “Errin ain’t here man,” Coach Rob mutters after Snowden takes a 2-0 lead and Errin commits a silly foul, his first of five before fouling out of the game. He finishes with a mere six points and six rebounds. Luckily, Cal did come to play. He opens and closes the half with 3-pointers, sinking the first two within the opening two-minutes to give English a 6-2 lead. Then, with time expiring in the first half, TK finds Cal coiled in the corner. Catching the ball with his legs slightly bent, weight on his toes and torso leaning slightly forward, Cal pauses in this pouncing position long enough to allow a defender to leap past. He springs high into the air (despite his height, or perhaps because of his height, Cal seems to have a 36-inch vertical leap), gently guiding the basketball with his left hand and softly spinning it off the fingertips of his right, returning to the floor just in time to watch the ball beat the buzzer. Running down court, Cal yanks out his plastic yellow mouth guard and pumps his fist. But the shot only gave English a 32-28 lead, prompting Coach Rob to tell his troops at halftime, “Thank God it’s Snowden.”

In the second half the crowd continues to hang on Cal’s every shot. But his hot hand cools as he finishes the game five-of-13 from the three-point line, scoring all but three of the team’s 3-pointers. At one point, he misses three consecutive 3-pointers as Snowden hits its own
3-pointer to cut the score to 56-50 with 16:75 to play in the game. English’s frustration mounts. They are called for traveling again and again and begin to feel like they are running from an avalanche; there’s nothing they can do to stop from being crushed. With 1:01 left on the clock Snowden finally eclipses English on the scoreboard for the first time of the afternoon with consecutive layups and holds onto the lead for good. The 61-59 loss pushes English’s season toward the brink, a cliff they will walk the rest of the season but one which would have likely been avoided if Mike could play. “I wanted to play so bad,” Mike says, pining in the locker room after the game. “I hate watching basketball, especially when I know I could’ve helped the team,”

The few positive words Coach Rob shares with the team afterwards are directed towards Cal and his 19-point, five assist and three-steal performance. The remaining words, while negative, are delivered calmly. They are doled out evenly among the players, with the exception of Errin, who takes the brunt of the blame for being tardy. Coach Rob’s voice only rises once. Basketball players know there’s an inverse correlation between the level of shouting and their coach’s anger level. A lack of hollering after a loss usually means rage is brewing inside. Tonight Coach Rob is so mad his voice even draws to a whisper: “We ain’t that good,” he says. “Keep it on the low, we ain’t that good, Calvin.”

CUPPING THE ball against the inside of his forearm, Mike pins the ball on his hip in mid air before winding his arm in a butterfly motion, over his head to forcefully stuff the ball through the rim. Mike is engaging in a personal dunk contest before the 11th game of the season against Hyde Park on Jan. 27—a cathartic act that seems designed to show his teammates what they are
missing as a result of his continued absence. Unbeknownst to his peers, Mike’s waiver to play this season was declined, sending him into a two-week funk.

High school athletes in Massachusetts can’t participate in more than four years of varsity competition without petitioning the MIAA for a waiver claiming extenuating circumstances. Any appearance in a regular-season varsity contest shaves away a players’ eligibility.88 Mike failed to tell Coach Rob he played some varsity basketball as an eighth grader in Buffalo. “Basically that was me not realizing I had played a lot of basketball,” Mike says after the season. “They weren’t gonna let me through, it was unfair for me to be at that school with varsity experience since eighth grade. I understand the reasoning. In my mind I think I should’ve got it.” Coach Rob admits he should have checked Mike’s records like he had with previous transfer students. “We looked real stupid,” Coach says later. “The headmaster looked real stupid. All the MIAA did was make one phone call.”

Without the waiver, Mike wonders whether the colleges recruiting him before Hurricane Katrina are still interested and whether coming to Boston was a mistake. He withdraws from his teammates even though he still practices with them. The few occasions that Coach Rob invites college coaches to watch Mike practice inflames the rest of the team because Coach Rob is not reaching out to recruiters on their behalf.

Mike is frustrated by his dependency on Coach Rob for transportation to and from school. At first, it’s not a problem as Mike works out with Coach Rob in the mornings before school and leaves with Coach after practice around 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. As the weeks pass, however, Mike takes a part-time job at the Shaw’s Supermarket in Brockton and stops regularly attending

practices. Eventually he stops playing competitive basketball altogether and his whereabouts are often unknown to Coach Rob. Mike stays out late, uncharacteristic behavior because Mike understands how much Coach Rob sacrifices by allowing him to board practically for free. Before his waiver was declined, Mike didn’t mind doing chores around the house. Now he becomes careless about picking up after himself. As much as he loves the Robinsons, he’s sick of babysitting Coach Rob’s four-year-old daughter, Lexie, on short notice or with no notice at all. Usually an outgoing, playful and helpful teammate, Mike becomes bitter. Instead of picking people up, Mike joins his peers in trash talking that becomes venomous. “I don’t know what happened, he just went bad,” Parris, the freshman center, says. “When he didn’t get the waiver, he was heated.”

The hardest part for Mike is watching the “so-called ballers” on English’s varsity underperform on the court, squandering prime years of hoop. They don’t respect the game. They don’t play it the right way or deserve to play it at all. They just reinforcing stereotypes about ghetto black kids, “That’s what [society] wants, ’cause you’re big and black,” Mike says. Mike is especially envious of Parris, who is young enough to do something about his lot in life. But Mike says Parris will probably waste his talent “like the rest of them.”

Seven days earlier English lost to perennial bottom-feeder New Mission, the team Mike helped demolish four months ago in pre-season ball. “New Mission!” Mike says after that game. “I can’t even speak. I feel like walking with my head down.”

With five loses and five wins, English is in third place in the South Division heading into the Jan. 27 home game against Hyde Park when Errin confronts Mike, telling him to stop dunking so the team can warm up for the game.
“Leave me the fuck alone,” Mike, whose frustration is already near boiling, retorts before Errin throws Mike’s ball across the gym. Mike adds “Don’t get in my face. I’ll seriously fuck you up.”

RESTING HIS CHIN in his thumbs and flanking his nose with his pointer fingers, Errin sulks in the locker room after the Hyde Park game the same way he did while wearing street clothes on the bench during the game. After Coach Rob suspended Errin from the game, Mike didn’t bother to stick around for the 82-65 English win. Even without Errin’s 20.3 points per game and 8.8 rebounds, the team managed its widest margin of victory of the season. TK put in a spectacular 30-point performance. Cal contributed another 14 points and seven assists while junior forward William Waiters snagged eight rebounds, six on the offensive end of the court. The Bulldog’s bench outscored Hyde Park’s bench 17-2.

English even fell behind by 10 points in the early going as Hyde Park shot 58.1 percent from the field and took a 42-37 lead into the locker room at intermission. But English’s defense improved tremendously in the second half, nearly cutting Hyde Park’s shooting percentage in half while improving its own by 11.5 percent. All this is encouraging for a struggling team, no doubt. But Coach Rob is still livid about the pre-game altercation between Errin and Mike.

“Next time that happens before a game I’ll tell the refs we forfeit the game,” Coach Rob says, turning his back to Errin and flailing his arms overhead. “Let me ask you something: ‘Is Mike on this basketball team?’ You’re so stupid fighting with someone who’s not even on this team. He wasn’t thinking about you.”
Coach Rob is known for candidly addressing any issue and for not judging his players—a style that makes players either love or hate him. “Whether you respect the man depends on if you’re willing to face the truth,” Mike once said.

Still, Coach Rob is in rare form tonight, addressing the realities facing fatherless black boys in a way that some might argue has no place in high school sports. He starts by challenging his team to a fistfight in the shower (“I might get beat up but I’m gonna fuck someone up, I’m taking someone out with me. I’d grab him by the balls”) before rattling off statistics about the rate of incarcerated black men and prisoners getting raped. “There’s 12 of you here. If I followed you around for the next 10 or 20 years, four of you are gonna be on welfare, one or two of you are gonna be in jail, one of you is gonna be dead and one of you is gonna be a millionaire. That’s the reality of it … Do your research. There are more jails than schools in this country. Why do you think they want you to be a man at 18? So they can put your ass in jail.”

Coach Rob isn’t too far off. Of the 18 million black men in America, 840,000 of them are imprisoned, and the chance that the English High players will add to that number has nearly tripled in the last 30 years. Several scholarly studies show that the condition of poor, young black men is much worse than it was 10 years ago, even though the economy was strong for much of that time. More black men earn a high school diploma in prison each year than graduate from college, even though the number of black men in college has quadrupled since the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The chance that Parris and the rest of Coach Rob’s freshmen will finish high school is even worse. Statistics show that fewer than half of black boys will graduate four years after their freshman year. They are more likely to be held back, assigned to special education classes, do poorly on standardized tests or get suspended. Of the black boys who manage to clear all
those hurdles, three-quarters of them will be unemployed or in jail by the time they reach their twenties. The grimmest statistic still is that black men between the ages of 14 and 24 are six times more likely to be murdered than white men the same age.\textsuperscript{89}

“Errin, go out and get shot, go get shot in the head,” Coach says, pointing his hand to his head in the shape of a gun. “We’ll bury you. Some of these guys will be your pallbearers, but the next day, we’ve got a game to play.”

The most startling part of Coach Rob’s speech is that he relates intimate details of his own hardships growing up without a father in Jamaica that he has never shared with any of his teams. Coach Rob abruptly turns his attention to Miles, the senior swingman whose father played for English in the late 1970s.

“You’re not even man enough to look me in the eye.”

Wrinkles quickly form on Miles’ forehead when his eyes dart to his shoes before he picks his head back up and looks Coach Rob in the eye, refusing to back down, refusing to let Coach Rob’s words fall on deaf ears.

“Don’t look up now,” Coach Rob shouts. “Have you ever asked your father what it was like when he played for English High? If you go on the Internet and do your research, get off NBA.com, you’d find out what it was like to play here in the 60s, 70s and 80s. You’re too busy looking on NBA.com—none of you are going to the NBA! None of you are even Division 1 players, let alone \textit{Division 4}.”

\textsuperscript{89} The statistics in this paragraph are from \textit{The Washington Post’s} series “Being a Black Man,” June 2, 9 and 11, 2006.
Coach Rob’s back is turned to Miles when he says, “Go to the bar with your father. Order a juice. Ask your father what it was like playing for English High.”

“I don’t talk to my father,” Miles interrupts sharply and somehow sheepishly at the same time.

“You’re playing for the same school your father did son. You’re gonna let what happened with your mother get in the way, or something you saw when you were younger. My father walked out on us when I was eight. You need to bury that. You wouldn’t be here without your father; you’re his seed. The last time I saw my father I was 17, a senior in high school. I was in college, I was 21, when he died. And I was glad I saw him. My father left us when I was eight. He used to beat on my mother and when my brother tried to step in he’d fling him across the room.

“Whatever happened between him and her is between them. He’s got his own life to live, that’s on you. How you gonna feel if he dies tomorrow, and you’ll be living with that shit. You need to forgive your father man; that shit’s on you.”

* * *

In 1979 English High came close to ruining Cambridge Rindge and Latin’s unblemished season during a game played at the Boston Garden prior to a Celtics contest. At one point a sophomore named Patrick Ewing—the future Georgetown star and NBA Hall of Famer for the New York Knicks—flew down the court with the only thing standing between him and the basket: English’s 5-foot-9-inch senior captain everyone called Gumsy (he didn’t grow teeth until he was two years old). “I sat there, put my arms up to take an offensive foul and he jumped over my head to jam the ball and missed the jam,” said Gumsy, also known as Ronald Hinton, Miles’ father. “It hit the
back of the rim instead of the front of the rim. Other than that [play], he had a chance to jam and do whatever he wanted.”

English only trailed by one point, 47-46, heading into the fourth quarter that night. Ronald doesn’t recall if three or four of his teammates fouled out down the stretch. What resonated most about that night in the Boston Garden was that running up and down the famed parquet floor felt “like the whole world’s watching you.”

Ronald never told this story to his son Miles and Ronald has hardly attended any of Miles’ games at English High. “I feel bad I didn’t see him play at times,” Ronald says. “I wanted to see him play.” What Miles knows about his father’s playing days came second hand. The English football coach, Keith Parker, was an assistant for Ronald’s team and also helps out Miles’ team. Coach Parker told Miles his father was a defensive specialist who “couldn’t shoot to save his soul but had a way with women.” One of Ronald’s old teammates, a volunteer coach for Coach Rob, told Miles his dad could “jump out of the building.”

Ronald Hinton’s tenure at English High followed the greatest basketball era to date at the storied school. Before the creation of the state tournament, English High was the first Boston team to win the Eastern Massachusetts Tournament, known as the Tech Tourney in 1968. That squad was led by the city’s first famous basketball-playing Bird—Reggie rather than Larry. Bird took the final two shots of the Garden victory that year, first collecting his own rebound and then banking in the game-winner. Filled with 11,076 fans, the Garden had throngs of English supporters known for serenading its players with a chant that ping-ponged from one side of the upper deck to the other: “What’s the word?” prompting the opposite side to respond “Reggie

Despite its Eastern Mass title and place in Boston basketball lore, Parker calls the ’68 team “jinxed.” Bird went on to Princeton and was drafted 55th overall by the Atlanta Hawks in 1972. Owen Wells played for the University of Detroit and 33 games for the Houston Rockets before a long career overseas. But four players were murdered or sent to prison to serve long-term sentences.

Seven years after the dominance of the legendary 1968 team, English won back-to-back state titles during a decade filled with racial tensions in Boston. After a 1974 federal court order mandated the Boston schools bus students from black neighborhoods to white ones and vice versa (an attempt to integrate the schools) there were protests, walkouts and riots at English and across the city. Even before the court order, English’s small but vocal black student population clashed with the predominantly white faculty and administration. Of the 77-member faculty, only three were black. Compounding the conflict was the rapid increase in the school’s black population, which in 1967-68 was 18.5 percent but by 1971 had jumped to 50 percent. The school’s growing black population was a function of the School Committee changing feeder patterns into the city’s high schools. The mostly-black Roxbury neighborhood lacked a high school of its own and so its students were routed to English. English’s 81 percent black freshman class in 1971 was further evidence that the school’s demographics had changed for good.

By Ronald Hinton’s freshman year—the year after English won its last state title in 1976—the basketball team’s complexion already reflected the school’s new racial demographic. It was the height of the city’s busing crises but Ronald, being a mother-fearing black boy, never participated in demonstrations.

Racial tensions started to cool by Ronald’s senior year, the same year Beverly Lockhart, who eventually became Ronald’s sweetheart and Miles’ mother, enrolled at English High as a freshman. That was four years before Miles’ older brother, Ronnie, was born. At the time, Ronald, Sr. worked for a law firm as a clerk and eventually became a cabinetmaker, the job he still has as a 46-year-old. Miles was born in 1987. Basketball bonded father and son. Miles watched his father play on the court across from their home in Mattapan. Sometimes Ronald lifted Miles onto his shoulders so he could shoot. “I wanted to be just like him,” Miles says. “Play just like him [and] be good. Now I’m better than him.”

Miles’ parents fought a lot. “My mom got tired,” Miles says. Beverly arranged for Miles to live with her parents on Hillsborough Road in Mattapan. She and Ronald separated but they never got divorced. Since moving in with his grandparents when he was 9-years-old, Miles has been nothing more than cordial to his father. “I show him a certain amount of respect,” he says. “No matter what I do he’s my father.” Ronald tells it differently: “We’re really close, he’s my youngest son, my baby, real close.”

Miles rarely sees or talks to his father, although Ronald was around long enough to introduce his son to the game. But that seed didn’t grow in Miles like it did in TK. Unlike TK, Miles doesn’t bank on basketball. Miles didn’t show much early promise in the sport, and didn’t become serious about basketball until middle school. For Miles, basketball is a release from what
he has to deal with off the court. Basketball keeps his head on straight. Miles read Slam Magazine religiously in middle school and dreamed of playing in the NBA but he was always realistic about his own chances. School comes easier to Miles than most players on the team. He scored an 1160 on the SATs and carries the highest GPA (2.76) among active players this season.

Deep down, Miles is even proud of his father. Despite what little he knows about his dad’s basketball history, Miles cherishes a photo his mom gave him of his dad playing ball. He keeps it in a box full of memories in his room and whenever he pulls it out he thinks, “I look just like him, he’s 5-9, I’m 5-10.” Miles was not upset that Coach Rob aired his familial history in the locker room. Coach Rob put himself on the line too by telling his own story. “Everyone’s got shoes somebody else can’t fill,” Miles says. “I’ll never be ashamed of the story I come from.”

After getting reamed out in the locker room, Miles changes into his street clothes and walks into the office, where Coach Rob is entering the team’s stellar stats from the Hyde Park victory into his laptop. Extending his hand, Miles looks Coach Rob in the eye, shakes his hand and says goodbye.

A TALL, skinny, middle-aged white man with wire-rim glasses enters the gymnasium at English High just after 7 p.m. on Friday Feb. 3. He is surprised to find the bleachers packed with high schoolers. Four female students sitting at a table at center court, including Coach Rob’s daughter Jazz, are controlling the scoreboard and they have pencils sharpened, ready to score the game in a green logbook designed for the task. The middle-aged man is wearing worn high-top sneakers, tight red shorts and a green jacket over a white T-shirt. He is holding a green gym bag with a
water bottle protruding from the zipper. The man’s friends, also regulars in an exclusive Friday night pickup game that has been played at the English High gymnasium for 30 years, are nowhere to be found. “I guess we don’t have a game tonight,” he says, dumbfounded.

It’s about half hour before English High is to host its second and last primetime game of the season. Because he had not gotten word that the game was off, the man had no reason to believe tonight would differ from any other Friday night in Boston gyms. Most high school gyms across the country host scholastic games on Friday nights. In Indiana and Kentucky, in fact, these weekly winter carnivals are just as steeped in tradition, pageantry and community as its fall football counterpart, a phenomenon known as Friday Night Lights. Even Boston, after a 42-year hiatus, resumed night football games recently. But basketball, basketball is different in Boston.

Ken Still restored night football games immediately upon becoming the Boston Public School’s athletics director in 2003. The former English High basketball player and coach (who also coached Brandeis University) flipped the switch on Boston’s Friday Night Lights for the first time since it was forbidden in 1961 after a riot at White Stadium in Franklin Park injured 20 students and left one boy beaten and bloodied, an ice pick jammed into his gut. Police arrested 18 youths after the exhibition game spilled into the streets of Egleston Square. The previous decades also saw a slew of incidents at afternoon football games in the city, the worst of which was a 1979 shooting at an afternoon game in Charlestown. A Jamaica Plain High School player, Darryl Williams, was paralyzed after he was shot in the neck while standing on the sideline. Despite that history, Mayor Thomas M. Menino supported bringing night football back, saying:

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93 Ibid.
This is about building relationships between different kids from different neighborhoods. Getting them to understand each other, work with each other, play against each other, and become friends with one another…The kids in Boston ought to have the same opportunity to enjoy nighttime football like other kids in the country and in the state. This is the first year doing it, and I want to see how it works. We are going to have a police presence there, but the good kids are going to be there. The kids who are involved in sports are going to be there. I think you’ll have a happy atmosphere there.\footnote{\textit{The Boston Globe}, Sept. 17, 2004.}

To date, night football games played in Boston have gone without incident, prompting BPS basketball coaches to lobby Ken Still for prime-time games of their own.

But Ken Still was still in no hurry to reinstitute night basketball. Basketball draws bigger crowds and resonates in urban communities more than football does. Lacking players proficient in the forward pass, City-league football can lull fans to sleep. Basketball, in contrast, offers non-stop action with more potential to hype up fans. Controlling scattered crowds in a football stadium is easier than corraling a tightly packed gymnasium with the potential to turn into a World Wrestling Federation cage match. So afternoon games seemed like a safer bet, attracting smaller crowds because parents have to work, and keeping students off the streets during the hours most dangerous for urban youth. Besides, BPS basketball has a particularly long legacy of violence.

Shortly after the original schoolboy league—which played afternoon games—started 107 years ago, it was disbanded due to physical play and an on-court death during the 1910-11 season. When basketball was finally reinstated in the 1940s, games continued to be played in the afternoon. Night games remained the norm outside of Boston and in the Tech Tourney, which was later called the Eastern Mass. Tournament. That tournament packed the Boston Garden each March but was eventually banned from the arena for part of the 1970s due to tensions created by
the busing crises. Fans beat up a player from Somerville named Billy Endicott. High school basketball eventually returned to the Garden in the late 1970s and night playoff games are still played in the Celtics’ new building.

Ultimately, Ken Still allowed English High to schedule 7 p.m. tip offs for two league home games on a trial basis this season, even though the English head master said he isn’t prepared for night games from a security standpoint. “I don’t want kids shot, killed at games,” he says. “Ideally, I’d love to have night games.”

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Intensity is in the air on Feb. 3 before English High’s prime-time match with the John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics—a formidable foe the English guys simply call OB. Even Mike, who hasn’t been to a game in weeks, is in the stands for the second and final night game of the season. He’s missed games partly because he’s been working nearly full-time hours at Shaw’s Supermarket. He recently made manager. Waiting for the game to start, Mike makes one more futile attempt to read a Shaw’s training pamphlet, which features a Hasidic Jew picking bananas on the cover, before his attention is diverted from the booklet for good. This is English’s second time hosting a night game this season. Another sizable crowd gathers before the game, thanks to a couple dozen OB supporters, mostly students who made the trip on the subway’s Orange Line.

English’s record is 6-3, including a six-point loss to OB five games into the season on Jan. 11. This is the last meeting between the two teams. To have a shot at the league title, English has to beat OB by at least seven points to take the head-to-head tiebreaker. The O’Bryant

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School, which is named after an English High alum, has an unblemished record this season. The last several seasons they have won 60 straight games in Boston’s South Division, a fact Coach Rob notes in his pregame talk. It’s up to them to “stop the bleeding,” he says. He also tells his players that the ruckus likely to ensue from an English win could jeopardize future night games.

“We’re not gonna be at half court hooting and hollering,” Coach Rob says.

Avoiding a riot is even more important because Coach Rob knows the most common argument for reinstating night games, that it gives parents a chance to attend games, is bogus. Twenty minutes before the tip there still aren’t any English parents in the stands, not even Cal’s mom.

“Cal, I’m looking for the Cal I know,” Coach Rob says, “The Cal that shoots the ball. I’m expecting to see the Cal that hit like 10 threes in the IBL [Intramural Basketball League] tournament last year.

“Remember, your mom was at that game. Is your mom here?”

“Nah,” Cal says quietly, lowering his head between his knees.

“Yeah she is!” Dana, a player injured for the season, says.

Cal lifts his head and lights up, “Oh snap!”

“Good, ’cause she was there at that IBL game,” Coach Rob says.

Dana knew Cal’s mom wasn’t coming. While making his way to the bench just before the opening tip he says, “I just said that so he’d ball.”

In the opening moments, Errin takes a jump shot that prods Mike to urge out loud, “Glass, come on baby”—the type of positive encouragement Mike hasn’t given Errin since their fight before the Hyde Park game.
Errin’s shot goes down without the backboard’s aid, giving English the early 6-2 lead. At one point, Cal is left as the lone defender on an OB fast break. Cal misses the rebound but manages to poke the ball away from the rebounder. TK retrieves it and passes to Errin down court for an easy basket: English 10, OB 4. Cal drains a 3-pointer to take an eight-point lead. That lead is doubled by the 17:13 mark of the half before OB goes on its own scoring spree, hitting a 3-point shot, converting a 3-point-play and taking advantage of a series of English turnovers. But OB still doesn’t take the lead and Cal keeps English afloat. He grabs a long rebound near the top of the key that bounced over TK and rushes down court. An OB defender gives chase and does well to position himself in front of Cal, standing upright with his arms flat to his side. But Cal stutter-steps and dribbles around the man like he is an orange cone and sinks a layup.

With 2:15 left in the first half, English leads 29-16 but only musters three points before intermission to OB’s nine, including a 3-pointer from the right corner with 3.4 seconds left that shifts momentum in OB’s favor despite the fact that English dominates nearly every statistical category: Shooting percentage (52 to 44.4 percent); rebounding (13-7) and points (31-25).

OB opens the new half with a 6-2 run to take its first lead of the game, 36-35. Four minutes later Cal drives hard to the basket and into a pack of defenders. He’s thrown to the ground and lands on his backside underneath the hoop with his legs splayed in front of him and his back to the baseline. Somehow he maintains possession of the ball allowing play to pause for a split-second in anticipation of a whistle that never comes. Cal flips the ball to Errin for an uncontested layup, the first hoop of a 5-0 run that gives the Blue & Blue a 51-45 lead with 7:33 to play.
After four more minutes, an OB guard hits a 3-pointer that sucks the wind out of English’s fans, putting his team up, 61-59. A moment later a junior guard named Darryl steals the ball in transition and passes to Errin, who catches the ball in stride, takes his allotted two steps and lifts for a thundering two-handed dunk. TK’s free throws tie the game at 63 with 1:48 left as a fan yells, “It’s your time TK.” Then Errin steals the ball and finds an open Darryl, who is fouled on his way to the hoop. “I’m lovin’ that move. Rewind that shit,” Mike shouts before Darryl hits both foul shots with 1:33 remaining, evening the game at 65 points apiece.

Cal commits a foul. The foul shots give the visitors a two-point lead. Cal collects an assist on Errin’s game-tying basket with 19.2 to play, but fouls out of the game shortly afterwards. He takes the first seat on the bench and hangs his head, unable to watch as two more OB free throws leave English 10.9 seconds to recover from a two-point deficit.

Charging into what should be English’s final offensive possession of the night, TK dribbles all the way down to the baseline. Realizing he’s out of real estate he backtracks and forces a weakly-thrown pass that deflects off a defender’s leg and rolls across the baseline and out of bounds with a whimper. “Why you try to be the hero?” Coach Rob yells as fans reach for their coats.

“Games not over,” one of the jayvee players shouts. “There’s 2.7 seconds left.”

English sets its press for the final play. Denying the first inbound options, the Bulldogs force OB to send a long pass down court. English junior forward Chris Brown leaps for the ball near half court and guides it with one hand to Will Waiters, who passes across half court to TK, who dribbles twice down the right sideline and launches a long 3-pointer that he has a good feeling about from the moment it leaves his hand. The buzzer sounds with the ball already inside
the twine and headed back to earth. TK is mobbed by his teammates and classmates. When TK emerges from the pile of well wishers with a game-high 31 points in his pocket, it’s 9:15 p.m., well past the time the team’s usual matinees would end. He walks towards a cluster of stunned OB players and shouts “Get the fuck out of my gym.” With tears streaming down his face, Dana hugs TK. English players and fans start taunting OB by chanting “ooh, ah, ooh ah!” and “60 wins”—referring to OB’s now broken league win streak.

A few OB players rush the scorer’s table and accuse Jazz, Coach Rob’s daughter, of starting the clock late on the final play. A scrum breaks out with Coach Rob and police officers in the middle trying break it up. Cal, who collected five points and seven assists, exchanges words with an OB player for a moment before continuing to chant, “oh, ah, oh, ah…” Coach Lester, the JV coach, pulls Cal back, shouting “Stay over there!” Coach Lester corrals the rest of the English players and shoves them toward the gym’s far door and into the back hallway. The team starts creeping towards the OB players as they file into the visitor locker room at the opposite end of the hall. With Cal leading the pack, English pounds the walls and the low ceiling before running into a school police officer, the only thing standing between the elated English team and the dejected OB squad.

“Go Calvin. Now!” the officer shouts before the JV coaches manage to turn the team back. Ultimately, TK is the one to settle his teammates: “Yo, that was one win, one more loss and we’re out [of postseason contention].” The path to the locker room finally clears a few minutes later and it’s Coach Rob’s turn to talk: “I’ll tell you what, you better keep telling yourself you belong. Good job, we’re growing up.” Someone says 15 police cruisers are outside
with officers to escort the team. The players are huddled outside the locker room door, shoulder-to-shoulder in their street clothes.

Lost in all the excitement is the fact that English only won by two points, five points shy of the margin of victory they needed to stay in the hunt for a league title. But in such a disappointing season, one that seemed to have so much promise before it started, the buzzer-beating victory that ended archrival OB’s 60-game win streak is more than a moral victory; it is a lasting memory as marvelous as Gumsy’s Garden game against Patrick Ewing. “I played in state championship games, state finals,” Mike says as everyone waits for the police escort. “I didn’t play and I still enjoyed that game.”

NEW BEDFORD High’s parking lot is packed on a Saturday night. Inside the city gymnasium, glossy programs complete with advertisements that bill tonight’s opponent as a “State Power.” Posters with the home squad’s team photograph and schedule are passed out to fans paying the $4 admissions to see the New Bedford Whalers close out the regular season against English High with a ritual known as Senior Night.

Nineteen rows of bleachers on each sideline of the court are flanked by two large brick walls, one adorned with a banner for Nick Ponte, last season’s Gatorade State Player of the Year. It hangs on the wall with the Whalers’ state championship banners from 1940, 1946, 1961, 1993 and 1994. Three radio stations are set to call the action from courtside tables featuring banners with call letters such as WNBH and WBSM. Crosscourt from a scorer’s table is red padding that reads “Complements of Coca-Cola” and “Welcome to New Bedford. Home of the Whalers.” Carlos, the jayvee player taking stats for English, can’t help but notice the difference between
this table and the wooden table with metal legs that serves the same function back home. “Ours looks like a picnic table,” he says.

At 7 p.m., New Bedford’s seniors lock arms with their parents, including the seniors from the 22-member cheerleading squad and 10 players from the 15-man varsity basketball team. With most of his team academically ineligible, the only reason Coach Rob has 10 players to line up is because he promoted four jayvee players for the last few games of the season. Just before New Bedford’s seniors parade to center court one-by-one as the announcer reads short biographies of each player, including their college plans, Coach Rob tells his team to stretch in a back hallway connected to the gym. They can’t see the festivities but can hear the New Bedford coach tell the crowd how he’s watched his seniors grow from little league to AAU.

“I’m most proud that all 10 of you will continue your education in college,” he says. “May you always have success in whatever you do.”

TK rolls his eyes when he hears his defensive assignment announced: “He’s currently being recruited by several Division 1 schools and whoever gets him will get one of New Bedford’s best. Please welcome him and his mom: No. 31, Brian Rudolph.” Rudolph, the team’s star guard, who TK eventually holds to six points on the night while scoring 23 points himself, is one of the only players to walk out with just his mother.

Coach Rob watches from the edge of the court with his arms folded. He’d love to give his seniors a send off like this if he could. He tells me later that he sent his players to the back hallway where they couldn’t see the ceremony because he didn’t want to take a chance that one of his guys would do something silly before the 83-56 loss.
But Cal did intermittently peek out at the senior ceremony while pacing back and forth from the back hallway and into the gymnasium. It was similar to the Senior Nights he attended at the Belmont Hill School when he went there for one year. “Our parents don’t give two shits, in the suburbs parents have enthusiasm. Maybe we did need to see that,” Cal says. “Every player down their bench is going Division 1 or Division 2, Coach Rob can’t say that. Coach is not right all the time.”

Cal’s eight-point, one rebound, three assist and four steal performance against New Bedford was likely his last for English High.

ENGLISH’S OWN Senior Night was supposed to be a few days before the New Bedford game but a flood in the gym forced the final home game against West Roxbury to be rescheduled for winter vacation on Feb. 21—three days after the New Bedford game.

Compared to New Bedford, English’s Senior Night is unmemorable. The Bulldogs lose 75-50 to Westie, a team they beat on the road the previous month. The loss caps a grim 8-12 season that had an equally ugly home stretch. The New Bedford game concluded a 13-day span in which English lost to three ranked teams in the Boston Globe’s Top 20: second-ranked Boston College High School, sixth-ranked Central Catholic and finally No. 9-ranked New Bedford.

Before that stretch, English missed its final shot at qualifying for the city and state playoffs by losing its rematch against New Mission. The New Mission loss also came just as five English players were deemed academically ineligible when third-quarter report cards were mailed home. The academic fallout left only four of the team’s seniors eligible for the Westie game.
Traditionally on Senior Night, coaches start seniors who usually play off the bench. But because seniors TK and Errin started all season, the final game’s significance was only marked by Miles and Shaq getting to start the game. Just before tip Coach Rob asks Shaq, Miles, TK and Errin if their parents are there. Their eyes dart to the locker room floor, the only answer Coach Rob needs.

“That’s not good.”

Then he reminds them of the words Cal spoke earlier in the season when explaining why the year turned so sour: “We are what we are,” Cal said.

“Even though we are who we are, we can always change that,” Coach Rob told the seniors. “Don’t forget that.”

Cal, who is unlikely to be granted a waiver to play next year because it will be his fifth year of high school, misses the final game of the season against Westie. He called Coach Rob the day before the Westie game and told him he was sick and couldn’t play. It was true that Cal got sick after working a particularly cold nightshift at the museum parking garage without wearing a hat or gloves, but the real truth is that he was scheduled to work every day during the mid-winter break and was afraid to ask for the day off because he thought he’d get fired.

Coach Rob is reluctant to help Cal get the waiver after being burned by Mike. Although Cal assumes Coach Rob will apply for the waiver on his behalf, Coach says Cal and his mother have to initiate the waiver process. But as much as Cal wants to play his senior year and as much as he loves the sport and the team, he isn’t sure it’s the best thing for him. Maybe he’s better off working.
While working at the parking garage the day after the Westie game, Cal is wearing an oversized jacket over his uniform of black slacks and white dress shirt. A black tie peaks out of his v-neck sweater vest and a white do-rag peaks out from underneath a black winter stalking hat. He’s still not wearing gloves. “I probably did miss my last game,” he says. “Life’s next. I can look forward to that.”
CHAPTER V: IBL

WITH THE DISAPPOINTING and dreary winter basketball season complete, the weeks before Coach Rob’s famed Intramural Basketball League—or the IBL—are filled with chatter about which one of the league’s six teams would draft the embattled and embittered Mike Marsh. Mike was more withdrawn than ever since his waiver didn’t come through and he was forced to miss the entire interscholastic season. The IBL is his last chance to reassert himself as the school’s best player. Although Mike wants to prove that the varsity season would have gone differently with his help, he’s also looking to assert his fundamentally sound game over the undisciplined brand of street ball played by his former teammates, who Mike calls “crap players.”

Despite the drama brewing beneath the surface, the IBL is just for fun, a chance for the varsity players to unwind after a long, ego-deflating season. It’s also a showmen’s league where goofing off and embarrassing an opponent trumps talent, fundamentals and even winning—what Coach Rob calls “Street ball in a controlled environment”—a blend between serious and playful basketball. Coach Rob started the IBL shortly after taking over the varsity program in 1993 as a way to find untapped talent. More recently, however, the IBL is a way for Coach Rob to keep as many kids as possible off the streets after school. Just as trouble starts to heat up on the streets every spring, the IBL offers English’s male students an 18-game regular season from April to June, plus an all-star game and playoffs. Players and student coaches hang out after school as late as 8 p.m. to take stats or run the scoreboard even when their team isn’t playing, howling with every dis and dunk. Banter bounces from the crowd to the court and back again. A jovial Coach Rob referees the game with his own brand of justice, doling out $1 fines for swearing, technical
fouls or turning in a poor progress report. All the proceeds benefit the league’s trophy fund. Coach Rob’s animated antics are playfully anticipated and often imitated. When a player driving to the basket is hacked while scoring, Coach Rob awards the extra foul shot by lifting his knee to his waist, pumping his arm. In his “flat-ass Jamaican accent,” Coach Rob shouts “Scooooore it!”

Before IBL play commenced, Mike gave his adversaries all the ammunition they needed to label him a crybaby and quitter by walking off the court in frustration during several after-school pickup games. Even though he’s played in the New York state championship and with Division 1 players at Genesis One Christian Academy in Mississippi, Mike is pooled with the newbies and freshmen in the IBL’s annual April draft. “He’s gonna be a rookie,” Coach Rob repeated gleefully one spring afternoon before the draft. “He’s gonna have to stand up there with the rest of them, he’s gonna be a rookie.”

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Mike’s participation in the IBL sets the stage for a classic clash of style versus substance: street ball versus organized basketball. In a basketball context, saying a player has strong fundamentals or is an athlete are racially loaded compliments, along with calling a player coachable or saying he has a high basketball IQ. In the stereotypical debate between fundamentals and flash, whites are known for sound form, intelligence and listening to their coaches while hot-headed blacks are athletic but play out of control. They only care about fancy moves and don’t like to be told what to do. The presumption is also that white men can’t jump and can’t master the art of improvisation associated with street ball.

The real picture is, of course, murkier. It is true that fundamentals of the game have slowly eroded, even at the highest levels of the sport. LeBron James didn’t have a textbook game
when he entered the NBA straight out of high school in 2003. But it is also true that the lowest levels of organized basketball are being played with more sophistication than ever, especially among high schoolers on the summer AAU circuit. Cable television allows coaches at all levels to study increasingly complex college and NBA offenses and defenses that can make a layman’s head spin. It’s true that the majority of black boys fixated on basketball aren’t taught proper fundamentals but many are. And in many instances their intuition for the nonverbal language of basketball is much stronger than their suburban counterparts.

Urban black boys have the same capacity as the suburban boys to learn basketball fundamentals, but it is not fair to judge their basketball intelligence along the same metric. They begin life far behind the socioeconomic starting line, they play basketball among violent and unhealthy distractions and they have educational disadvantages such as learning disabilities. AAU, summer camps and personal coaches are only available to the most talented players or sons of fathers who will stop at nothing to expose their children to basketball’s elite. It’s much more difficult for urban players to scratch beneath the game’s stylistic surface and dig into its intellectual marrow.

Players born into disadvantaged circumstances who are exposed to and embrace the finer points of the game often live with one foot in the world of basketball’s scholarly elites and the other in the world of the unenlightened ballers. They resemble black professionals who rise out of the ghetto and feel like they have to act “white” at work and “black” when they go back to the hood—a duplicity that is as burdensome as it is helpful.

Mike’s experiences at English are an example of chafing that can come from living in both worlds; walking a line between style and substance on English High’s basketball court
forces Mike to tone down elements of his game. “There’s a lot I do they don’t realize,” he says. “I tinker with my shot, I won’t make certain moves on them, even though I know it would be simple. I do things out of character. This is all they got to hold on to, I know that. Let them have their fun—their enjoyment.”

Like modern architecture, characterized by its simplification of form, every move made by a fundamentally sound basketball player is deliberate. Every step, pass, dribble and shot serves a specific function free of ornament. “More or less, a lot of people, when it comes to the entertainment factor, don’t like my style of play,” Mike says. “When it comes to those kids looking for the oohs and ahs, they’re not too receptive to the fact that I’m getting the same amount of points with less work. I’m not too receptive to all that flash work—waste of energy.”

The worst waste of energy is excessive dribbling, a sin usually committed by undisciplined players who are not in control of their bodies. These players run in circles with no destination in mind, dribbling between their legs and around their backs. With their chins tucked to their chests and eyes glued to the floor, they miss the game unfolding in front of them; opportunities to pass to an open man or take an open shot aren’t recognized. “It’s frustrating ’cause they don’t understand the big picture,” Mike says. “Yeah, that fancy stuff looks good but if a college scout was here right now, you know who they’d be pointing toward? They’d be pointing toward the player moving his feet on defense, cutting, passing, screening, boxing out, hitting the open jumper. They’d give me the scholarship over you doing that crazy crossover, throwing up crazy shots—you might hit it but you’re not playing defense. Their mindset isn’t to learn fundamentals. They just want to play pickup basketball.”
It’s not that Mike discounts style points; it’s just that improvised flamboyant flash is much more sensuous when it’s created within the confines of structurally sound play. This type of game depends on synchronization between players. As important as communication is on the floor (calling out picks and shots on defense), fundamental players follow a few basic rules without ever exchanging a word, such as spreading the floor on offense, running the lanes along the sidelines on fast breaks and fighting over the top of picks on defense. A player who thrives on structure and rules finds it hard to compete with players who are all doing their own thing. (On the other hand, players capable of improvising in street ball possess an equally impressive skill set.)

Attempting to play fundamental basketball at English High is difficult for another reason: giving off even a whiff of superiority doesn’t work with players such as TK, who in turn know exactly what buttons to push to frustrate players such as Mike and expose his insecurities. Mike can’t avoid being the arrogant, know-it-all basketball elitist. Once TK picks up on this and begins to chide Mike, Mike feels as if he’s on the defensive, as if he has to justify his philosophy of the game. The more frustrated Mike gets, the tighter he plays and the more susceptible he is to being goaded. “More or less, it’s a pride thing,” Mike says. “No one wants to hear their supposed friends saying ‘you’re weak and a quitter.’ The more and more you hear it, it gets worse and worse. That’s [TK and Errin’s] ammo, they never change what they say and do. That’s how they are, that’s how it goes: can’t take the heat get out of the kitchen. At the same time, when things are going down and you’re feeling vulnerable, people get under your skin.”

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The stress and drama associated with Mike’s previous school, Genesis One Christian Academy in Mississippi, also was eating at him.

In late February, an investigation of so-called basketball mills by The New York Times lead to an NCAA investigation of Genesis One and more than a dozen other unaccredited schools attended by highly regarded basketball players, allegedly to raise their grades to compensate for poor college boards and to catch the attention of Division 1 recruiters. Two years earlier, Genesis One, a kindergarten-to grade 8 school, added a high school and grade 13 to help raise the GPAs of basketball players who had not yet graduated. At least 33 of roughly 40 Genesis One players went on to play college basketball, including Gary Flowers and Verice Cloyd, who signed letters of intent with Oklahoma State, Arkansas and Alabama.96

Flowers and Cloyd waited in limbo while the NCAA placed approximately 5,000 non-traditional schools under tighter review, especially institutions without state oversight or membership in a state athletic association. As an unaccredited school, Genesis One’s curriculum and programs are not reviewed by outside agencies that make sure schools meet national standards. Unaffiliated with either of the organizations that govern high school sports in Mississippi, Genesis One is a member of the National Association of Street Schools. The top administrator overseeing Genesis One since 2001, Rev. Daryl Thigpen, told the Clarion Ledger:

A lot of prep schools are not doing the right thing. When we started this, we immediately went to the NCAA to make sure we were doing the right thing. We’re doing the right thing. We know this is not going to be a witch-hunt. We know we’re going to be fine.97

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97 Information and quotes in this paragraph come from The Clarion Ledger, April 17, 2006.
In March, the NCAA visited Genesis One. That month NCAA president Myles Brand announced rule changes for the coming fall. Brand said players from the prep schools in question “better think twice quickly, because they will be at great risk. There will be no amnesty.”

Even though Mike didn’t attend the school anymore and did not plan to get a degree from it, he worried that his transcripts and his name were tainted by association. But his father, Donny Marsh, was sure they had nothing to worry about. Donny claimed there were no records that Mike ever attended the school because Mike’s high school transcripts from his Buffalo school were never actually sent to Genesis One and Mike’s records in Mississippi were destroyed by the hurricane. “He was never on their books,” Donny says. “Basically I was never worried if they got clearance.” Either way, Mike would feel more at ease once he got his degree from English High in June, the same month the NCAA rules that players could use transcripts from Genesis One and 21 other schools to apply to college, but only for the coming school year. Each school’s status remained subject to further review. The NCAA also said individual athletes might have their transcripts reviewed, which many critics called a cop-out. “The NCAA is giving us validation,” Thigpen told the Clarion Ledger. “It doesn’t do anything but bless us. We’re no longer under scrutiny … But I can understand about continuing to always check you out.”

WHEN DRAFT DAY finally arrives on March 31, the blue team, last season’s worst squad, fails to send a representative to claim their No. 1 pick, allowing the Gold team to move ahead in the draft and select Mike first overall. “I never thought I’d see anything so stupid,” Coach Rob says.

later. The pick didn’t exactly pay off. Mike only ends up playing eight IBL games. Between working at Shaw’s supermarket, skipping games for no good reason and traveling to basketball camps, Mike missed 10 games. Coach Rob said he needed to play nine games to be eligible for the playoffs.

Even though he’ll miss the playoffs, Mike plays well in the first half of the last regular season IBL game. He encourages his teammates and even passes to a flashy football player named Terrence who hasn’t passed to Mike all season.

Mike’s having fun, blowing kisses to girls in the stands when he scores. He’s ignoring TK and another girl provoking him from the sideline.

“Mike, you suck,” she says after he misses a free throw.

“Oh, you don’t have any fans anymore,” TK says.

“We never was his fans,” the female student says.

In the second half, Mike jumps over a teammate standing in his way to score a layup. On the way down, he rolls his left ankle (which Mike says was later diagnosed as a fracture). Despite the pain, Mike takes and makes the free throw awarded to him. But while running back on defense he reevaluates his injury and takes himself out of the game, hobbling to the sideline with more than 10 minutes left on the clock.

“What Mike, you crying again?” TK asks after Mike sits on the bleachers and takes off his sneaker.

“I don’t even wanna hear your shit TK,” Mike says before they exchange expletives.

“That’s why I don’t play with you ballers, you don’t move.”
“Oh listen to that,” Coach says, rolling his eyes and walking down the sideline with his back to Mike. “He doesn’t play with ballers. He’s way up here, he thinks he’s better than you.”

TK doesn’t let up on the trash talk as Mike pulls a pair of white-striped jeans over black Claiborne pajama pants. Mike jaws back, not just with TK, but with Shaq too.

“It ain’t worth it,” Coach Rob says to both parties.

Meanwhile, there’s plenty of trash talking on the court too. A scrappy underclassman who fashions his bravado after TK gets in Terrence’s face. Terrence swings at the boy everyone has taken to calling “the new T-Swagger,” and misses.

“You see that,” someone yells to Coach Rob as Terrence slams and kicks the ball. TK and Mike are about to come to blows.

“That’s the game! Blue wins,” Coach Rob says with about seven minutes left on the clock, the Blue team beating Gold, 41-40.


“I got offers,” Mike retorts, getting in Shaq’s face. “How many offers you got? How many offers you got?”

“I don’t got any,” Shaq says. “I don’t need any; this is what I got: I finished.”

MIKE’S “OFFERS” weren’t exactly firm enough to brag about. Schools that Mike says were interested in him before Hurricane Katrina, (Mississippi State, Ole Miss, Alabama, Houston and Virginia) all backed off a long ago. Insisting that his son could go to one of 20 Division 1 schools, Donny balked when Coach Rob reached out to several small New England schools on
Mike’s behalf, and a prestigious prep school called the Winchendon School. For his part, Mike is torn between two factions concerned about his future. The first consists of Coach Rob, Georgette Travis, the English office administrator who rents an apartment in the upstairs of Coach Rob’s Brockton home, and the school’s headmaster, Jose Duarte. The second consists of Donny and jayvee coaches Chris Parker and Coach Lester. The English High group wants Mike to pick a Division 2 or Division 3 college. The second camp urges Mike to aim higher. “Everybody says why didn’t he take it?” Donny says of Mike’s Division 2 offers. “If I got Division 1 opportunities why not entertain them? He can sign in late August. Since I know how the game works, I know that [you don’t] jump at the first opportunity. I know you can string it out at the end of the summer. If worse come to worse he can go to JUCO [junior college] at the end of the summer. Once you sign, you’re stuck.

“I told him ‘just relax, wait. It’s up to you.’ I let him make the final decision. At the end of the day, I’m not worried. If none of the Division 1’s work out, he can always go Division 2.”

One day Mike agrees with his father, encouraged by the positive reinforcement he got at the Top 100 camp at Boston University. Mike says several Division 1 coaches expressed interest in him. The next day he’s ready to jump at offers from Maine Collegiate Institute or Mount Zion College. Mike has a hard time standing up to his father. At one point during the process, Mike’s guidance counselor told Coach Rob she couldn’t work with Mike anymore because Donny upset any progress she made toward getting Mike into a school. “Truthfully, I probably would’ve settled,” Mike says. “At the same time I wasn’t too sure. I didn’t know which way to go. I sat back and was thinking about it a lot. I was thinking ‘My dad might not know which way I want to go.’ Georgette and them kept pressing the issue; Mr. Duarte, being the headmaster, talking
about age and everything. The shining moment for me is when I got some acclaim playing basketball [from Division 1 coaches]—within time, I could be real good.”

Nothing materialized by June. Donny was already brewing another scheme to take out a $27,000 loan for Mike to attend the prestigious Pendleton School on the campus of IMG Academies in Bradenton, Fla. The 300-acre gated school featuring the famed Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy and David Leadbetter Golf Academy has groomed superstars from Andrei Agassi to Venus and Serena Williams. NBA players Ricky Sanchez, Renaldo Blackman and Erick Dampier also attended the basketball academy. Mike’s mother said her son would take freshman English and history at a nearby university. “It’s all about Mike’s decision,” she says. “I don’t want to put him somewhere he doesn’t want to be. He’s young, he’s gonna make bad decisions. It’s part of growing up. As a parent, I try to guide him the best I can.”

Donny claimed that after a year of prep school Mike would be the best player in the country, better than O.J. Mayo, the nation’s premier teen player who is considered the next LeBron James. “A lot of people didn’t hear about [Mike],” Donny says of college recruiters. “He’s a freakin’ animal. He’s quick as a point guard, strong as a power forward and just as aggressive as a center.” And if Mike falls short of a Division 1 college scholarship, Donny says his younger son, Jonathan, now a 10th grader, is a sure shot. “He’s about four years ahead of Mike when Mike was a sophomore,” Donny says.

MIKE’S RELATIONSHIP with Coach Rob became tenuous that spring. Mike felt marginalized by Coach Rob after the waiver and scholarships didn’t come through and often left the house early and stayed out late without telling Coach where he was going. On the other hand, Coach
Rob says Mike and his family never showed any gratitude for his generosity. “Mike doesn’t know from gratitude, never one time did he thank me,” Coach Rob says before adding, “Mike and I are cool. If he walked in right now I’d say ‘What’s up Mike?’”

One day Coach Rob’s daughter Jazz got in trouble at school. Coach was lecturing her in the car on the way home when he started in on Mike, ultimately suggesting it might be a good idea for Mike to move out of his house. “Stop the car, let me out,” Mike recalled saying. Mike walked back to English High. The headmaster gave him a ride to a friend’s house, where Mike lived for a week before moving in with Chris, the jayvee coach. “There were a lot of mixed feelings,” Mike says. “Things just weren’t going right. He probably felt uncomfortable at the way I was at the time and I felt like I wasn’t getting my just due. What we were working for was not coming true; we needed to go our separate ways. Basketball and school and everything in general seemed like a lot of frustration, both of us was getting stressed out.”
CHAPTER VI: TYERONE DAVIS

ALL BUT one of the seniors associated with the varsity basketball team (Dana, Eddie, Errin, James, Mike, Miles, Shaq and TK) walked across the stage during a ceremony held outside the school on June 13. Wearing a red and black striped polo and khakis with black Nikes, Coach Rob watches 198 capped and gowned students (boys in deep blue, girls in powder blue) file out of the gymnasium after being organized alphabetically into eight rows on the basketball court. Errin Coren, the senior whose fight with Mike Marsh prompted Coach Rob’s graphic speech about the grim statistics facing black boys, looks dignified with a fresh haircut and a suit and tie underneath his robe. Errin has just the right touch of rebellion: a pair of oversized aviator sunglasses.

“Errin’s come a long way,” Coach Rob says as Errin passes.

After his speech, Coach didn’t feel like he got through to Errin or anyone else for that matter. If Coach Rob didn’t get through to Errin, somebody did. The school’s annual magazine appeared a few weeks earlier with a story by Errin called “I Am the Next statistic!” alongside a picture of Errin in his basketball uniform.

Bam! Out of the blue the teacher starts her lesson like this: “Are you a statistic?” This question I had never really thought of before. I see myself as a regular student in high school with a regular life. I play basketball and football, so when my teacher asked me this question, I was somewhat confused. I came to realize that people would consider me one because of who I am, an African American male, living with his mother, with no father in the picture. Statistics say that I won’t make it past high school and I will end up in jail, but I am going to prove them wrong.

Since I was seven, my father has been in and out of jail. I have been living with one of the most important parts of my life missing—a father figure. When my father was first incarcerated, my mother told me that she knew that it was going to be hard to get over the emptiness, but you can use that as a fuel to fire your ambition in school, sports, or whatever you want to do in life. She also told me there are more responsible men in your life that you can look up to, so don’t feel down and out; this is only a minor setback in your overall goal in life.
When I finally realized that my father was not going to be in my life during the critical parts, I had one of two choices, either to follow my father’s footsteps or use what he did as an incentive to be a better man.

So I started to kick every part of my life into higher gear. I started getting better grades in all of my classes so I could show my mother that I can work hard to succeed without some of the things a son should have in his life while growing up. I would help out around the house even more than I usually would. Even though it was hard, I learned to cope without him.

I used my time to watch over my misguided cousin who was dropping down the same violent tube of life as my father and his older brother. His brother has been shot at, hurt other people, and incarcerated as well. It even came to the point where he had to live with my mother, sister and me. That’s why I feel obligated to look after him. That’s why I go and take him with me to different places so I can show him that life not all about violence and disappointments. I show him how doing right things can make life so much easier. Now, he is a freshman in high school. He plays sports for his school and is getting good grades.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened to me if I took the train of life down the wrong track. I realize that my cousin is one of the main reasons why I want to finish high school and graduate from college. When I accomplish that, I will feel that I have motivated him to succeed as well. So if someone asks me if I am a statistic, I now tell him or her yes, but the positive kind.\footnote{English High School. (2005-06). Voice, p. 17. Boston Author.}

“I love you all,” Errin shouts from the top of the staircase leading to the outdoor graduation ceremony, during which he arguably receives the loudest ovation after collecting his diploma.

“Most of these kids won’t come back,” Coach Rob says when Errin’s out of earshot.

“They think if they come back and you ask ‘What are you doing?’ you’ll think they’re a failure. It’s sad. Here, today, they got nowhere to hide. But then again, I can understand, I hardly go back to Camden High unless there’s a basketball tournament.”

Errin does visit at least once during the following school year. Four days before Christmas he attends a 77-60 win against Hyde Park, the third game and first win of a dismal 8-13 season for English. Errin was with Miles—the other subject of Coach Rob’s speech after Errin’s fight with Mike—who is home for the first time since moving to Charlotte, N.C. to attend the historically black college, Johnson C. Smith University. Errin, who previously planned to
play football at Mass Bay Community College, was slated to start classes at Johnson C. Smith the following month.

Three months before Miles headed south his father looks on proudly as five members of the class of ’56 lead the class of 2006 to the track and field next to the school before the younger class crosses a black stage on the infield adorned with a blue banner with powder blue trim that says “The English High School/America’s First Public High School/Established 1821.”

“I feel blessed to see him walk,” Ronald “Gumsy” Hinton later says. “It was incredible. It was very amazing. To graduate from a school and see your…, makes you feel good—makes you feel old.”

Before receiving their diplomas, the Class of 2006, escorted by five members of the Class of 1956, settles into 10 rows of metal folding chairs lining the track. If Mike were there, instead of nursing his injured ankle back in Buffalo, there would be at least one filled chair in what is now an empty back row. The ceremony was set for June 8 but postponed for five days due to an unprecedented amount of rain during the city’s third wettest June on record. The Boston Herald ripped the school for having no indoor backup plan in a story headlined: “Boston English Flunks ABC’s of event planning.” Outraged parents were forced to cancel dinner reservations and tell out-of-town family members to stay home.101 Mike’s mom came up for the graduation, but when it was rescheduled she and her son went back to Buffalo and the school mailed him his diploma. Mike ultimately attended community college in Buffalo that fall but nobody at English High kept in touch with him well enough to know if he was playing basketball there.

101 The Boston Herald, June 8, 2006.
On the rescheduled graduation day, the rain holds off temporarily to produce a clear and breezy 60-degree evening with only a few clouds hanging over the school building. Toward the end of the processional, Coach Rob says “Ain’t nothing like an English graduation on a beautiful summer, spring night.” The colors are presented by school’s Army Jr. R.O.T.C. Color Guard, which includes Coach Rob’s daughter, Jazz, who recently decided to go against her father’s wishes and move to Atlanta to live with her mother.

Shaq wears a gray T-shirt and khakis underneath his gown, along with sneakers. “I’m getting out of here,” Shaq shouts. “It took 13 years, whoa!” Shaq also published a piece in the school magazine, a poem called “Your Fam’s Enough”:

I was stealing from the stores cuz everybody else would thinking in my mind like everybody else could “Excuse me, young man, how ‘bout you take off ya coat hood We got you on camera and know you up to no good.” I was talking trash, yeah. I’m a little gangsta “My boys’ got my back,” not knowing they was wankstas When I got robbed and stabbed over anger My so-called dogs treated me like a Stranger I was a lot older doing the same stuff, Knowing these coincidences couldn’t be all luck When the going gets rough and BS pops up Ya friends ain’t s**t, but your fam’s enough

Two weeks before graduation, Shaq enlisted with an army recruiter visiting English High. But Shaq was just shy of his 18th birthday and his mother exercised her right to un-enlist him. Recalling the incident a few days later, one English High staffer named Sandra McIntosh, asked rhetorically “Why don’t you go into Newton [schools to recruit]? Because they won’t let you.” During the same period, Shaq visited his cousin’s basketball practice at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the coach told him that, with his size, he could play there. Shaq says he got into UMass Boston and is going there before transferring to UMass Dartmouth. The final word on Shaq, however, is that he was going to play basketball at Fisher College in the Beacon Hill section of Boston. “He came around when he was getting playing time,” Coach Rob says later. “He doesn’t come around anymore.”

During the processional, TK shouts, “I’m out this bitch.” It’s unclear where he’s headed. Two months later, while working at Shaw’s in Copley Square, TK declares his intention to attend MassBay Community College for a year before moving on to a Division 1 school. “All that without Barry [Robinson],” he says. TK took the $7.75 per-hour bagboy job at the start of the IBL season and has since been promoted to cashier. He’s wearing baggy jeans and navy blue Adidas with white stripes, a long-sleeved green polo with orange trim and two white T-shirts underneath, one extending all the way to his knees. He has on a green pin below his nametag on his left breast that says “I can help.”

TK started MassBay Community College but quit after a month or so, according to Errin. But according to Georgette, who works in the school’s front office and keeps the best tabs on the players after they leave, TK wasn’t starting MassBay until the fall of 2007. “…It’s always
changing,” Georgette says when asked about TK’s plans in the winter of 2007. Her resigned tone suggests she could be talking about any of the English players. It’s nearly impossible to keep tabs on all the players that come through English or try to determine fact from fiction when they discuss their post-graduation plans.

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The school itself has a reality check when the new school year (2006-07) starts in the fall. In November, the State Board of Education threatens to take over four under performing schools, English included. Under the five-year old federal No Child Left Behind Act, English is declared “chronically underperforming” for the fourth consecutive year based on its repeated failure to meet state benchmarks for test scores and other criteria.

With the state threatening to take control of the school and its curriculum, English has a choice: It can avoid the drastic measure by agreeing to become a Commonwealth Pilot School, converting the 1,250-student school into a smaller college preparatory school by fall 2007 with daily college prep classes. The hard-to-refuse proposal, which requires a two-thirds vote of the English faculty, sets tougher graduation requirements. Teachers and principals will have more flexibility in budgets, schedules and curriculum. The school would be divided into two communities of 400 students, each governed by its own administrator. Once the school goes pilot, the headmaster could decide who would be hired and fired without explanation. The switch also would mean a relaxation in union-negotiated work rules. The school day could be longer and teachers would work longer hours. Teachers would have the option to leave their posts before the changes were implemented. Anyone who chose to stay could be in jeopardy of losing their job. Coach said he is starting a cleaning service on the side to make extra cash but insists he
isn’t concerned about his job. He says the longer school days won’t be a problem for him because he’s already used to working long hours. He’s sure that he always will have a place teaching electives at the school. Coach Rob even says the fact that the pilot school would limit the number of freshman admitted during the next two school years would benefit the basketball program and his own sanity because he would have fewer freshmen to break in. But anything could happen.

It is unclear if the school’s heralded Special Education (SPED) and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs would remain intact. Many faculty members argued that the reason for the pilot school trend’s popularity is that it allows schools to improve performance by transferring special needs students along with their high costs and low test scores. “It doesn’t matter what they tell you,” Coach Rob says. “They will take out the SPED kids and in two years say ‘Look at the scores, we improved them.’”

Interim Superintendent Michael Contompasis addresses this point during a Jan. 10, 2007 hearing about English High during a school committee meeting in Boston Public School’s downtown headquarters on Court Street. He says BPS intends to leave every program in place at the school, including special education. Contompasis expresses concern that personnel would be transferred from the school by means other than “strict seniority” and says negotiations with the state are complex as BPS tries to convince the Board of Education not to turn English into a “traditional pilot school.”

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104 In 2010 a federal investigation determined BPS violated civil rights of thousands of ELS students. The district reached a settlement that called for them to overhaul the program. Slightly more than half of the district’s 8,300 ELS students did not receive appropriate instruction. Boston Globe, Oct. 2, 2010.
“There may be some wiggle room,” Contompasis says of the pilot plan. “We’re always open to discussion.”

After Contompasis’ comments, School Committee Student Representative Jewel E. Cash, Jr. testifies at the hearing. She says English High students think bilingual students, who account for more than two-thirds of the student body, hold them back. Recent legislation changed the amount of classroom instruction the new ELS students can have before their scores are counted in their school’s overall MCAS evaluations. Previously, ESL students had three years before their scores counted in a school’s performance status. Now their scores count after only one year.

Contompasis immediately fires back, “I don’t know how those rumors get started. Well, I do know how they get started; the multilingual and bilingual programs will remain.”

Amid the upheaval, it’s also unclear whether embattled headmaster Jose Duarte would retain his post. An English High Faculty Senate Survey found 36 percent of teachers feel they are “sometimes or rarely respected by the headmaster.” In a Jan. 24 letter to Contompasis, the teachers claim Duarte creates a “culture of fear” among faculty and deprives special needs students resources and space. Duarte, an active Army reservist, was also tied up in a lawsuit with a substitute teacher, Jeffrey Herman, who also is an anti-war activist. Herman sued the headmaster for placing him on the “do not call list” for substitute teaching jobs at English High. Duarte put Herman on the list after the substitute teacher allegedly circulated petitions against

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105 MCAS bias towards ESL students at English is reported in the media as early as the late 1990s and early 2000s, including in The Boston Globe, May 21, 2000.

the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan during class, arguing that money earmarked for an armed forces recruiting program and Junior Army R.O.T.C. class could be better spent.

For his part, Duarte remains optimistic about his employment. “I’m very excited about what’s happening,” Duarte tells the *Jamaica Plain Gazette*. “A lot of what’s happening is what we wanted to happen for a long time…We’re not only free to do what we believe is right for the students but also, we are being held accountable. It’s great to have freedom, but you have to be able to hold people accountable in order to have success.”

Ultimately 81 percent of the faculty vote in favor of becoming a pilot school. With the final proposal due in April 2006, the new curriculum is rapidly being hammered out in conjunction with Boston University staff. Soon after the Commonwealth Pilot School proposal is accepted by the Department of Education in February, students become disgruntled. On April 3, about 100 of them walk out of class in protest, brandishing signs and chanting “No choice, no voice.”

A few weeks later, English’s dire academic standing becomes crystal clear. Contompasis tells the *The Associated Press*, “I would have closed English, if it wasn’t English.”

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During these vexing days at English High, one small miracle goes mostly unnoticed. Cal receives the waiver he needs to play his senior year of basketball. All of last season, Coach Rob maintained that such a scenario was unlikely. And Cal’s waiver application was indeed denied at the start of the season. But Coach Rob, Cal’s mother and Cal drove nearly an hour to the

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Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association’s headquarters in Franklin to personally appeal the decision, a measure Coach Rob didn’t bother to take for Mike. “He lied to us,” Coach Rob says of Mike. “And in turn we lied to the MIAA.”

Unlike Mike, who never mentioned to Coach Rob that he started playing varsity basketball in the eighth grade, Cal was required to play one sport per semester when he attended Belmont Hill for a year before transferring to English. Therefore, Coach Rob argued that Cal’s time at the prep school shouldn’t count against his eligibility at English. Coach Rob tells the MIAA that, at 5-foot-4-inches, Cal won’t make a significant impact on the team anyway. Suspecting a short deliberation, Coach Rob, Cal and Cal’s mom hang around after they rest Cal’s case. Finally, one of the MIAA officials pulled Coach Rob aside to supply the good news. Cal cried and so did his mom. “It was emotional,” Coach Rob says. “It’s good for the kid, he finished what he started.”

Cal’s attention is still fixed on more realistic goals than playing college basketball, such as graduating, going to college and getting his motorcycle license. Cal also has adjusted his occupational ambitions. On his MySpace page, where Cal generously lists himself at 5-foot-5-inches tall, he says he wants to be a police officer, real estate agent or stockbroker. Featuring a black wallpaper with white polka dots and black Nike Air Force Ones, Cal’s MySpace page lists his biggest fear as “not achieving my goals in life.” Besides the close-up shots of stacks of $20 bills and pictures of himself striking several poses, the page also declares that Cal regrets nothing about his past “because everything happens for a reason.”

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110 Information in this paragraph was taken from Cal’s MySpace page: http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=151050646
CAL HAS become reconciled to his own failed hoop dreams but still holds out hope for his little brother. “I always say, ‘If I don’t make it, my little brother is gonna make it. He’s already half my height.” At the beginning of Cal’s junior year he started bringing his 7-year-old brother, Teyrone, to English High’s pre-season workouts. Standing in front of the orange bleachers along the sideline in the English High gym, Cal and Ty take a water break after a grueling set of wind sprints and defensive drills. Squeezing one of the team’s black water bottles branded with the name of a local hair salon—“Fresh Hair”—Cal says, “I’m gonna try to get him in shape now, it’s never too early.”

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Ty, that’s what Cal calls him, has a different father, a 6-foot-5-inch man who has been somewhat of a father figure to Cal. Unfortunately, he didn’t enter his life early enough to curb his adolescent anger. Cal thinks he wouldn’t be so angry if he had a “father over his head.” That’s how Cal puts it, not that he’s making excuses. Watching other fathers do things for and with their sons was tough for Cal. He’s especially jealous of his cousin Christian who has a father at home. “I already know what the problem is and the situation so I don’t get too mad but it does hurt a little bit,” Cal says. “But then I just try to move on. It makes me really want to be there for [Ty], he doesn’t have to do things on his own like I did.” Still, Cal knows having a dad around doesn’t guarantee anything. “My anger, I can see it triggering in my little brother a little bit too but,” Cal pauses and stutters, “he, he, he does have his little anger problems, but he gets good grades. I just gotta start him off young I guess.”
That means starting Ty’s hoops education early too. Cal believes anyone who works hard enough can earn a Division 1 scholarship, father or no father, but having another parent around to relieve a player of household chores and part-time work makes a big difference. A father can prevent his son from getting caught up in the streets.

Cal says Ty doesn’t understand how college or professional sports work yet but he already loves to play football and basketball, especially basketball. Whenever Ty sees a ball, he wants to shoot. Whenever he sees a pickup game, he wants to play, even if the kids playing are twice his height and age. Cal says he will tell his brother the odds of playing college and pro sports and will always encourage him to have a backup plan. But he will never discourage Ty from chasing his dream. Cal doesn’t want his brother to think he can’t do something just because his older brother says he can’t. If Ty is to come to his own “reality,” he will have to come to it on his own, just like Cal did. Tyerone will have Cal’s guidance along the way but ultimately the biggest decision of all—when to stop and when to forge ahead—will be a burden that can rest only on Ty’s shoulders.

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Before the workout begins, Coach Rob calls a huddle around the blue circle at center court with the big “E” and “Est. 1821” painted in the middle. “Get your feet out of the middle,” the upperclassmen shout at the “young bloods” who line up with their toes inside the sacred circle. Ty, the youngest of all, jumps back along with the freshmen. It’s Cal’s junior year, and he’s finally allowed Ty to tag along.

It’s early November and the football team’s annual finale against Boston Latin at Harvard Stadium is still a few weeks off. It’s a bit after sunset, around 6 p.m., and many of the guys, Cal
included, came straight from the gridiron. But basketball season is not far off either. This is already the second conditioning session of the preseason. Coach Rob reintroduces himself and reminds everyone that this workout is not technically practice. According to MIAA rules, he’s not allowed to coach the team in the off-season. That’s why Coach Lester is running the workout. “So when you go home tonight, freshmen, and talk to your mom, don’t tell her you had practice, tell her you had conditioning. You got that freshmen?” Coach Rob says before adding that the players shouldn’t bother trying out for the team if their grades aren’t in order. “It pisses me off when teachers come to me and tell me what you’re not doing. And what pisses me off even more is that you don’t realize they’re using basketball to control you. Basketball’s like a drug!”

Coach sends everyone outside with Coach Lester for a mile run on the same track on which graduation will be held eight months from now. “Hold up, you niggas are forcing it,” TK shouts, displeased with a few players’ early, ambitious paces. After a series of 400-meter dashes and calisthenics, the workout moves to the gym for more sprints, more precisely the dreaded suicides. Players line up on the baseline before sprinting to every horizontal line on the court (free throw line, half court, far free throw line, far baseline). They sprint to the free throw line, crouch down and touch it and sprint back to the original baseline only to repeat this at each line.

But tonight Coach Lester has something worse in mind than the traditional suicide, ordering players to do 10 pushups at each line. Then, when they are done, they have to immediately do a regular suicide within 38 seconds.

“Man this is boot camp,” one player says.
“This isn’t boot camp, this is something different,” someone else says, noting the sadistic pleasure Coach Lester seems to be taking in the grimaces everyone displays just thinking about the pain to come.

The smallest player on the court doesn’t gripe at all. He doesn’t even look winded. In fact, he looks tranquil, almost happy. Tyerone, whose head is braided just like his brother’s, takes his place among players approximately 10 years his senior. He places the toe of his left sneaker on the baseline as if he was dipping it in a pool to check the temperature and crouches into his best sprinter’s stance. Realizing he’s not quite ready for battle, Ty pulls his T-shirt over his head, turns to toss it against the brick wall a few feet behind the row of runners, and, with his ribs and shoulder blades exposed, falls back in line.

Endit
AFTERWORD

AN ESTIMATED 77.2 percent of the Boston Public School’s Class of 2005 went on to attend a two- or four-year college or some other type of post-secondary education. The Class of 2007 eclipsed that all-time high by slightly more than a half percent.111 But while Boston Public Schools have one of the highest college enrollment rates in the nation, data released in 2008 showed that less than half of its graduates graduate from college within six years.112 This revelation prompted Mayor Thomas Menino to call for a 50 percent increase in the college graduation rate for Boston’s college enrollees from the Class of 2009 and a 100 percent increase from the Class of 2011.

Today, only one senior from English’s 2005-06 varsity basketball team has a college degree. “The first question [people] usually ask these kids is ‘Where do you go to college?’” Coach Rob told me one fall morning during the 2010 school year. “And once a kid says ‘I’m not in college’ the next question is ‘What are you doing? Where are you working?’ I try not to ask those questions if I haven’t seen them in a while. I’m like ‘How you doing?’ That kind of stuff. If they want to come and tell me, that’s on them.”

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111 Statistics published by Boston Public Schools Communication Department on February 25, 2010 and are based on a study conducted by Northeastern University’s Bureau of Labor Market Studies. Also, according to the Cambridge-based Schott State Report on Black Males and Education, 44 percent of black males graduated from BPS in 2005-06 compared to 56 percent of white male students.

112 The report, titled “Getting to the Finish Line: A Seven Year Longitudinal Study of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Class of 2000,” examined the overall high school graduation and enrollment rates of Boston high school graduates at colleges and universities. The study found that students who stayed closer to home, opting to attend a public college instead of a private institution, had a graduation rate of only about 25 percent, though private institutions in the city, like Northeastern University, tended to boast much higher numbers.
After finishing his degree at Johnson C. Smith University, Miles Hinton stayed in Charlotte, N.C. to work as a phone banker for Wells Fargo. “(My) basketball dreams failed but luckily I was gifted in the classroom,” Miles said in an email. “As far as my dad, um, were okay not the best of friends but as I've grown to be a young adult and achieved accomplishments and kinda fell out of the life of basketball I realized that I couldn't hold the grudge. No matter what he's my father and I can never change that I can only use that as an example to be better than he was when my time for the role comes. No he didn't make it to my college graduation but I was fine with it. It didn't bother me any.”

Miles said Errin Coren was about a year from graduating from Johnson C. Smith.

TK is just about the only former English player living in Boston Miles still keeps in touch with. He never went to college and is working odd jobs around the city. “As many bad decisions as he's made or as much as a knucklehead he could be I try to keep him grounded,” Miles said. Coach Rob said TK attends open gym at English regularly to play pickup games. “TK put on a lot of weight, a lot of weight,” Coach says. “He still has some skills but he’s not the same TK.”

Another player Coach Rob sees all the time is Shaq, who played some ball at Fisher College in Boston but never graduated. He works for a Boston University youth athletics program that does work at English High. “He has not changed,” Georgette Travis, who works in the school’s office, says of Shaq’s constant cheerful demeanor. The remaining four seniors from the class of 2006 are working, Coach Rob says, but he does not know where.

Coach Rob gets quiet when the subject turns to Mike Marsh. “I really don’t know what happened to Mike and, the sad thing about it is, myself and a lot of people here did a lot to help Mike and Mike or his family never one time called to say thank you.”
According to Facebook Mike attended Lon Morris College in Jacksonville, Texas, where, according to online records, he averaged 5.6 points per game for the junior college’s basketball team during the 2007-08 season. But Georgette said Mike called her during the fall of 2010 to ask for his transcripts so he could go to community college in New Jersey. She wasn’t sure if he was playing basketball or why he didn’t graduate from the community college in Buffalo he attended right after he graduated from English. “Mike’s whole issue was his family was unstable,” Georgette says. “Obviously something happened if he’s still trying to go to school. His dad had high expectations. What he was thinking, nobody else thought. He wanted the kid to play D-1. [Mike’s] been groomed to think basketball was a cure-all, end-all. He was trying to please so many demons. He was a good player but he was not that good. His grades were good but they were not that good. His dad thought if you can’t play top notch, it’s not worth it. You can’t tell a kid that.”

Calvin Davis graduated a year after Mike and also never went to college. But he did get his certification to be a basketball referee and is working at the Dorchester YMCA. “I’m proud of Calvin,” Coach Rob says. “He’s just working trying to survive right now.”

The season after Cal graduated, the English High basketball program hit rock bottom, suffering its worst record (3-17) in Coach Rob’s tenure as varsity basketball coach. But it quickly rebounded the following season. The team went to the state tournament for the first time since the 2000 team, led by Chubby Cox, lost in the state championship game. The 2009 team was led by Parris Massey, who was a 6-foot-7 freshman on the varsity team during the 2005-06 season.

Cox was arrested for selling drugs the morning after the team lost in the 1999 state semifinals. He went on to lead the team to the 2000 state title game. Three players from that team played Division 1 basketball.
season. During Parris’s senior year, English lost in the first round of the state tournament. Parris was one of only two athletes, and the only basketball player, in the entire district, to earn a Division 1 scholarship. Parris—who plays for Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, where he redshirted his first season and hurt his knee the second season—was also the first Division 1 player at English since the 2000 season. “Parris was probably one of the easiest guys as far as getting a scholarship,” Coach Rob says. “The 2000 team was like trying to take a tooth out with pliers. But I was young at the time. I had energy. I was trying to show them this is what you need to get there. Parris came to me with no baggage, people weren’t hanging onto him. He was uncoordinated and people didn’t know who he was. He didn’t come here with a lot of fanfare.”

IT WAS not a coincidence that the basketball program’s rebound on the court coincided with its success off the court. Five years after English High avoided being taken over by the state by converting into a Commonwealth Pilot School, only a handful of the original teachers were still on staff. “The people that remain know we can do better and we know we were up for the challenge,” he says. “If we were here when we became a Commonwealth Pilot School, then we need to be here to try to fix it.

“We needed an eye opener. We needed to be accountable. Whatever we were doing we were getting there but at a turtle’s pace or a snail’s pace. The scores were going up slightly each year. It was probably a good thing for us to be a pilot school at the time. Going through that experience has allowed us to speed the process up as far as test scores and other scores.”
Headmaster Jose Duarte was reassigned to the Dearborn Middle School before the 2009-10 school year. Superintendent Dr. Carol Johnson hand selected his replacement, Dr. Sito Narcisse, who started his own school in Pittsburgh. “Because (of) our personal emotional love for Jose, we were maybe in the comfort zone,” Coach Rob says. “We didn’t want to see someone new come in because no one really likes change so we were fighting to keep Jose Duarte here ’cause of the wonderful things he’s done for English High while he was here.

“When they mention Dr. Narcisse nobody ever heard of this guy. We knew nothing about this guy. We Googled him, his name probably had more hits those last couple weeks than any other time. We didn’t know anything about Dr. Narcisse at the time, then he came in here and he spoke to us and he said he’s going to meet with each and every one of us individually to get our perspective.”

Coach Rob called Jose a “fixer” and said “they realized now they need a closer, someone who can turbo boost it to another level.”

The new headmaster has injected new life into the school, but English was still designated one of 13 “turnaround schools” targeted for improvement under Superintendent Johnson’s five-year strategic plan unveiled in Nov. 2009. Of the $22 million the district received from the state to add 30 minutes in daily instructional time and increase planning and professional development time for teachers and other staff members, English received $2,830,101.
English’s test scores have increased slightly every year since the school became a Commonwealth Pilot School and later a “turnaround school.” But Superintendent Johnson said the school has a long way to go before meeting the targets set by the state to shed its turnaround status in the next two years. “I’m pleased with the work they are doing,” she says. “I’ve been to some of their faculty retreats and I think there’s a culture for achievement. But they still have work to do. As all our high schools do.”

Coach Rob is now the school’s Athletics Director in addition to his duties teaching health and physical education and coaching the basketball team. In the last few years, his philosophy about coaching basketball and basketball’s role in the inner-city has shifted drastically. Coach Rob used to subscribe to the notion that basketball is a hook to keep kids off the street. He believed poor grades should not prevent a kid from playing and he lamented that Boston Public School’s eligibility threshold for athletes (a 1.67 grade point average, or C-minus average) is higher than the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association’s. Since the MIAA’s eligibility requirement is a D-plus, a BPS player could hypothetically be eligible to play in the MIAA-sanctioned state tournament but not eligible to play in the city league. Some coaches, including Coach Rob and longtime English football coach Keith Parker, who retired last year, argued that Boston’s athletes should not be held to a higher standard because BPS does not have as many resources as suburban districts. One longtime BPS coach told me, “Over the years I’ve

114 English High’s test scores have slightly improved each year since it became a pilot school in 2006 based on its MCAS Composite Performance Index (CPI), which is the state’s method for measuring progress toward proficiency (Federal guidelines require a CPI of 100 by 2014). In 2010 the school’s CPI score for 10th graders was 73.1 in English, 66.7 for math and 59.9 for science. In 2006 the scores were 59.9 in English and 56.8 in math. MCAS did not test science until 2008. In 2008 their CRI for 10th graders in science was 34.5.

115 BPS athletes cannot fail more than two so-called core courses such as math and English and still be eligible to play. According to MIAA standards, players have to pass four core courses.
seen more kids go down the tubes. Most teen crime is committed between three and six [p.m.]. For some kids on the fence, [sports] can save a lot of butts. You can get a lot more control over a kid here than in a classroom. [Holding city athletes to high standards] would be like going into a prison and trying to enforce etiquette.”

But two years after five players failed off English’s 2005-06 team due to poor academics, Coach Rob realized the old bait-and-hook method wasn’t working. When Rene Patten, a teacher at English High, approached him about basketball players struggling in her class, they decided to start an informal academic coaching program for the team. It was similar to the one Coach Rob ran himself during the 1990s and early 2000s that he eventually stopped because it burned him out emotionally and physically. This time, Rene volunteered to run study halls, teach SAT prep classes and chase down players to make sure they attended class. Coach Rob called Rene the team’s “den mother.”

Meanwhile, the Boston Globe was working on a nine-month investigation that ultimately exposed the failings of the district’s athletic department. The resulting seven-part series, titled “Failing Our Athletes,” reported that less than a half percent of BPS’ $832 million budget was spent on athletics during the 2007-08 school year.¹¹⁶ In response, Mayor Menino tapped Suffolk Construction’s Red & Blue Foundation in August 2009 to fund, create and run the Boston Scholar Athlete program. Suffolk, which has landed millions in city contracts and whose chief executive John Fish “donates generously” to Menino’s campaigns,¹¹⁷ paid for new equipment and uniforms. Pledging to provide $1-million annually for the program’s first five years, the

Scholar Athlete program also provided academic coaches for 96 soccer, basketball, baseball and softball players during the 2009-10 school year. The program was expected to reach more than 5,000 athletes by the 2011-12 school year. “I don’t care what foundation, what donations [are used],” Coach Rob says. “The bottom line is it was well needed and it came about. I’m seeing fruit up there.” Despite concerns that the Scholar Athlete program is behind in efforts to raise money to sustain the program beyond its first five years, Fish guaranteed in October 2010 that the program will last “for the next 25, 30, 40 years, until I’m dead.”

The academic coaches, most of them teachers in a school, receive a stipend from the Scholar Athlete program to run study halls for teams and make sure players do their homework. They collect progress reports and make sure athletes remain academically eligible. Rene received a $1,350 stipend with the opportunity for a mid-season bonus for essentially the same work she was already doing with the team for free the previous season. The only difference between last year and this year was that Rene actually had a support system. She was able to get supplies such as granola bars, notebooks and binders. “Before it was just Coach Rob and now I can go to outside resources,” says Rene, who also helped proctor the SATs when her players took them. “It’s good to know you’re being supported and it’s taken seriously.”

The academic program the basketball team installed was so successful, English’s new headmaster, Dr. Narcisse, raised academic standards for athletes at English from a district standard 1.67 GPA to a 2.0. And because English is a pilot school, with autonomy over its own

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118 *Boston Globe*, Oct. 17, 2010. Individual academic coaches for the 2010-11 school year were replaced with resource centers at each school called “Zones.” Each school was assigned one academic coordinator and teams are required to attend study halls in the zone at least twice weekly. Coach Rob told me individual coaches weren’t sustainable economically.

119 *ibid.*
programs, Narcisse didn’t have to consult district administrators. “I’ve been around for 30 years in the education system,” Coach Rob says. “I didn’t know we could even do this.”

Now Coach Rob proudly talks about the possibility of increasing the eligibility requirement for athletes to a 2.2. “Let’s face it, nobody’s coming into the city and looking at these kids,” he says of college basketball recruiters. “If these kids have a chance other than a two-year college, we have to raise the bar because we have the athletes in the city.” Unlike the past, Coach isn’t willing to babysit players. They are expected to get up on time for school without a wake-up call. Basketball is no longer the hook to get kids into school and focused on academics. “We did the athlete thing first and baited them into the academics,” Coach Rob says. “Now it’s basically the academics are first. We don’t have to bait them anymore because it’s all-encompassing, everything is one. Basically what we’re saying to a kid with our GPA requirement is ‘In order for you to play, you have to meet this requirement. However, we will have resources here to meet the requirement.’”

Before the 2010-11 school year, the O’Bryant School raised its eligibility requirements for student athletes to a 2.0 and Superintendent Johnson said she would probably support increasing the standard district wide if the athletics director proposed such a plan. When she was the superintendent in Minneapolis, Johnson raised academic standards for athletes to a 2.0 as well. “People were complaining so I called the men’s basketball coach at the time at the University of Minnesota,” she said. “I said ‘What do you think about this?’ And he said ‘First of all if these kids come to play sports in college they are going to have to meet the NCAA standards and if you fool them into thinking that they’re not [going to have to meet standards]
because they don’t have high standards at their high school … they won’t be able to play college sports anyway.’ In a way you do them a disservice by not having high standards.”

BPS Athletics Director Ken Still told me he wouldn’t fight a mandate to raise eligibility standards district-wide for athletes. But he believes doing so without raising the required grade to pass a class for all students from a D to a C is hypocritical. He doesn’t agree with holding athletes to higher standards than the rest of the student body. He also said raising the GPA at this point would decimate the rosters of many teams, disrupting league play with a multitude of forfeited games. “There’s a Catch 22 to it,” he said.

Besides having the proper academic resources in place, successfully implementing higher academic standards for athletes requires changing the culture among athletes from one in which players don’t want to be called a nerd by their teammates if they study too hard to one in which they encourage each other succeed in the classroom. The former was the case at English High before the change in eligibility requirements. “At first I thought I wasn’t going to make it, I thought it would be too much work,” says Alex DoSouto, who started his senior year at English High with a 1.8 GPA before improving it to a 2.16. “But after [attending] the study halls and staying after school and stuff it was pretty easy.” A team captain, Alex said buying into the new program was the key to fostering positive peer pressure; once he made it clear that he was serious about improving his grades, nobody wanted to be left out. “Most of the freshmen look up to me,” Alex says. “They respect me when I tell them to do something. When I tell them to do school [work] they just do it.”

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120 High school players are required to carry a 2.0 GPA to be eligible to play an NCAA sport.
But despite the fact that only one player on the English team was academically ineligible during the 2009-10 season, Rene remains on the fence about whether raising standards to play is a good thing. Rene, who is pursuing a Ph.D. and is no longer the team’s academic coach, said she knew players who would drop out if they couldn’t play sports, a sentiment corroborated by students. “No, I wouldn’t come back to school ’cause that’s my motivation to come to school every day,” Alex said. “If I can’t play basketball, I will not come to school.”

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Like Cal and Mike before him, Alex needed a waiver to play as a fifth year senior for English. “I put the onus on him,” Coach Rob says. “I said ‘I will put in a waiver for you but you’re going to have to write your story.’” The former dropout and gang member submitted an eight-page essay about how he turned his life around after getting shot in the spring of 2009, steps from where his brother was fatally wounded in 2006.121

After the MIAA granted his waiver, Alex led the Blue & Blue to a 13-7 season in 2009-10 while averaging 15 points per game. English won its first-round state tournament game—a 67-63 victory against Medfield—before falling, 73-67, to Milton in the next round. It was the first state tournament game English had won since Cox led them to the state finals a decade earlier. After the season, Alex, 19, registered for the fall semester at Potomac State College in West Virginia and drove 10 hours to attend orientation. North Carolina A&T, a Division 1 school, expressed interest in Alex too if he could prove himself at Potomac State.

Eventually, Alex’s past life as a gang member caught up with him. Alex couldn’t attend his graduation in June 2008, at which Governor Deval Patrick spoke about overcoming

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adversity, because he was in jail. Eleven days earlier he was convicted of helping three accomplices rob a Chinese immigrant of $50 with a BB gun in February.\textsuperscript{122} The judge said she was “very moved” when four character witnesses, including Dr. Narcisse, testified on Alex’s behalf and pleaded for probation.\textsuperscript{123} “It’s very painful for a lot of us at the school because Alex changed his life, got accepted to college, and didn’t get into any more trouble,” Dr. Narcisse told the Globe. “We’re hoping the judge allows him to go to college, out of Boston, and out of the neighborhoods.”

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In the spring of Alex’s senior year, Coach Rob was selected to coach in the Boston Scholar Athlete program’s City Basketball All-Star Classic. After Rene was honored at halftime for her efforts as English’s academic coach, Coach led the South All-Stars to a dramatic overtime victory over the North squad at Northeastern University. The added resources rejuvenated Coach Rob and, he says, bought him another 5-10 years of coaching. Still, he’s thought more seriously about handing over the program’s reins sooner rather than later since being named Athletics Director of English High in the spring of 2010. “There’s a bigger picture here now that I’m AD of English,” he says. “We got to get more girls’ programs; we got to get girls involved. I get a lot of excitement doing the day-to-day director stuff at English High School.

“If I can find another Barry Robinson—which is basically impossible—to do what I do and make the commitment, if I can, I will groom him.”

\textsuperscript{122} Boston Globe, July 8, 2010.
\textsuperscript{123} Boston Globe, July 10, 2010.
Coach Rob’s successor would be only the seventh head coach in school history since the nation’s oldest public high school resumed interscholastic play in 1945. Coach Rob doesn’t think about his legacy but admits his efforts to set the tone for higher academic achievement for athletes could be it. “I’m the gatekeeper,” he says when asked about his legacy. “Right now it’s my turn. Hopefully someone else will come and have the pride and integrity to continue what I’m doing and what others have done before me.”