

## CHAPTER 1

# **Generational- Cultural Differences**

## ***Seeking Common Ground***

Most people admire him professionally and like him personally. Those who know him best speak highly of him. Twenty-plus years of honorable service to the National Basketball Association as a player and coach will do that for a man's reputation. It almost guarantees the opinions of Maurice Cheeks will reek of respect. "Professional" is a word commonly used to describe him, and so is "quiet." Billy Cunningham, who coached Cheeks with the Philadelphia 76ers, had a habit of calling him "smart," the ultimate compliment for a point guard, the position of leadership that Cheeks played. Then there's the word "classy." Over the years, Cheeks heard that one a lot, too.

And early one afternoon, he heard something else: the N-word.

Obviously, Cheeks was surprised. That was a new one. But just when he thought his ears had deceived him, he heard it again, according to those who witnessed the scene. That was the kind of angry talk that belonged in the 1920s from someone wearing a white hood, but this incident happened in 2005, and the offender was wearing a do-rag. He was Darius Miles, who, like Cheeks, is black.

The day after a loss to the Dallas Mavericks was not one to remember for the Portland Trail Blazers. Cheeks, the head coach, had seen enough from his dysfunctional team. He wasn't the only one with a beef. Miles was irritated after being yanked in and out of games by Cheeks, and he was fed up, too. They had a testy relationship, which isn't uncommon between players and coaches in professional sports. But this one erupted into an ugly, frothy mess after Cheeks angrily singled out Miles while the team watched film in a meeting. That's when Miles used specific words, none of which were "professional" or "quiet" or "smart" or "classy" or any of the usual descriptions directed toward a man with 20-plus years of honorable service to the NBA.

If the shouting from Miles toward Cheeks was alarming, the aftermath was most interesting. When details of their confrontation were leaked and became public, the media didn't know what to do with them. Had Miles been a white player and angrily dropped N-bombs on his black head coach, the national reaction would have been understandably volcanic. Newspapers and magazines and talk radio and Internet sites would have barbecued Miles over an open flame of strong opinions. His reputation would have been destroyed. His family members would have drawn the window curtains in shame, crawled under beds, and changed their home telephone number, if not their last name. That makes sense. Given the racist origin of the word, a white player would receive his comeuppance for daring to use it.

But because Miles was black, the watchdog media performed a collective shrug, sensing the public was okay with blacks calling each other *that word*. The morning newspapers did mention that Miles "repeatedly used a racial epithet" but mostly left it at that. The local NAACP chapter did not picket or demand an apology. Jesse Jackson did not order a march on Portland, Oregon. Miles' black teammates did not whip his ass or demand his immediate removal from the team, as they certainly

would've done had he been white. They brushed the incident aside and remained quite friendly with him.

And the Trail Blazers organization suspended Miles for only two games without pay while pleading with him to behave in a more civil manner. The only person outraged was Cheeks.

“Years ago, you would never think about talking to someone like that,” Cheeks said later, when he confirmed the altercation with Miles. “I don’t think anything would trigger that kind of response. But it’s different now, you know. It’s different.”

The difference certainly wasn’t evident on the surface between the two men. They were born on opposite ends of Illinois but essentially in the same world. Cheeks came from the hard side of Chicago, Miles from East St. Louis, a town sucker-punched for decades by corruption and



Sam Forencich/NBAE via Getty Images

The wisdom of Maurice Cheeks did not rub off in generous doses to Darius Miles during their days with the Portland Trail Blazers.

drugs and so strapped for funds that it once had to surrender City Hall to settle a lawsuit. As city kids often do, Cheeks and Miles gravitated to the basketball courts to escape the constant knocks of the hard life. They quickly developed a passion for the game and began dribbling their way to a velvet-rope lifestyle that neither could fathom as children. They beat the incredible odds and reached the NBA and by chance ended up in the same locker room—Miles as a player and Cheeks now as a coach.

And that was the extent of their shared experiences. Their backgrounds were also “different,” as Cheeks mentioned, primarily because of their eras. As a child of the 1970s, Cheeks did not enjoy the same perks of instant fame that some teenage basketball stars do today. His high school basketball games weren’t televised nationally. Dick Vitale, the hyper basketball commentator, did not foam at the mouth at the mention of Cheeks. Small and skinny, he was never given free sneakers or fancy warm-up suits by the shoe companies that constantly stock AAU teams today. All he received was a scholarship to West Texas State, a tumbleweed school in the bushes, and only because a high school teammate, the player West Texas really wanted, asked to bring Cheeks along. Cheeks called home during his freshman year and begged to return to Chicago. His mother told him she would simply drive him right back to Texas. So he stayed, and he prospered, and he earned his degree, making his family proud. He was a second-round draft choice by the Sixers, and his first contract paid him roughly what current NBA stars spend on their monthly cell phone bills. He learned about the NBA world from the lap of Julius Erving, the great and eloquent Dr. J, and stayed clear of controversy or trouble.

“If Billy Cunningham told me to stand on top of that backboard,” said Cheeks, “I’d be on top of that backboard. Or I’d keep jumping until I got there. There’d be no hesitation. Nowadays, you ask them to do that, they

say, ‘Why?’ I was taught to respect coaches and people in authority and to carry myself a certain way.”

Miles was an only child raised by his mother, Ethel, who drove a bus. For a while the family lived near drug dealers. He grew quickly, and by his early teens he was already the most celebrated prep basketball player ever raised in hardscrabble East St. Louis, America’s murder capitol in 1992 though only 50,000 people lived there. He was mentioned in several national magazines. After his junior year in high school, he knew he was on the fast track to the NBA and put his schoolwork second. When he failed to meet the minimum score on his college entrance exam to attend St. John’s University, fans at a rival high school cruelly mocked him by chanting, “S-A-T!” They were quickly drowned out by supporters yelling back, “N-B-A!” Anyway, whether or not he met the grade meant nothing. There would be no leafy college campus or thesis papers or long nights with baggy red eyes spent in the library for Miles—only basketball games played in plush professional arenas filled with adoring and sellout crowds. The Los Angeles Clippers made him the third selection overall in the 2000 NBA draft. At the time he was the highest high school graduate taken in draft history.

Miles was certainly ready physically for the sometimes punishing grind of the NBA schedule. His body was already long and lean, and he could jump in quick, powerful bursts. But he was far from being ready mentally to carry himself like an adult, mainly because he wasn’t one. He was a teenager raised by a mother in the ‘hood. For too many young black men, athletically gifted or not, such an upbringing isn’t a recipe for success in today’s America. In a grown-up world that was new and unfamiliar, Miles was affable and polite and grounded in some ways, but he was immature in others. He was suddenly his own boss. He had a measure of celebrity and money and bling and cheering fans and new friends and few serious worries. On the court, his work ethic and motivation

were questioned. Eventually, the Clippers traded him to Cleveland, which sent him to Portland, where he used a word in his vocabulary to address his coach, a proud black man from a different era.

It's not that Cheeks had never seen a black player cop an attitude in his day. Of course he had. But none with the backing of Madison Avenue, which markets and exploits the most destructive force known to poor black kids: street credibility.

What Cheeks experienced was an up-close and very personal brush with one side of a growing division in black society. One group includes individuals who will reject the notion of conforming to mainstream America and will dress and behave and do whatever they please, regardless of what you and I think or what message it might send. When he was young and reckless and not nearly as wise as he is today, Charles Barkley once boldly announced himself as "a '90s nigger. We do what we want." The other side of the divide embraces a more conventional way of life and distances itself from any behavior or lifestyle that feeds the tired images that lump together an entire race. Incidentally, Barkley, a devoted father and celebrated deep thinker, is now clearly on this side.

With the influx of athletes in professional sports becoming younger each year, the size of the nonconforming group gets bigger. Understand that this has nothing to do with cornrows and tattoos, the street-fashion choice among young black athletes. Please, let's not make too much out of that. To judge people solely on a fashion statement is racial stereotyping at its worst. Those are harmless cosmetic trends that mean nothing, really. What we're talking about is character—about conduct and vision and lifestyle choices.

**Order this book to read more**