

CHAPTER 4

Academic Divide

Old School, New School, No School

This uniquely urban American tale begins on an outdoor basketball court filled with cracks in the pavement, rust on the rim, and kids with dreams. One of the boys is faster, stronger, and slicker with the ball than the others. He stands out, and because basketball is a big status symbol in his poor and troubled neighborhood where there are precious few other options for kids, everyone notices him.

As he gets older, he gets better. His dribble is tight, his hands are quick, his shot is sure. Once he reaches junior high, the whispers begin. People say he's going places. They say basketball will make him rich and famous some day. He's gonna be on TV! He hears, he listens, he believes. He locks himself into the game, plays it almost 24-7, and pushes everything else aside. His grades are average and his study habits nonexistent, but other than an occasional scolding from the coach and the guidance counselor, nobody really holds it against him. By this time, everybody's too much in love with his potential in basketball to take issue—including his family.

He's now a senior in high school. He signs his first autograph. His mother, who raised him alone, is approached

by street hustlers claiming to represent agents. They're already scouting him for NBA potential. The newspapers are now writing gushing stories about her son, raising his profile, swelling his head, increasing his hopes. He has another terrific season, and the letters from colleges are starting to give the mailman a hernia. Head coaches from top 20 college basketball programs are sprinkled in the bleachers, sending a buzz through the gym. Heads turn, voices gush: "Do you see Coach So-and-So from State U.? He's sitting right over there."

He graduates, but in all honesty, he never tackled complicated courses in high school and was never benched because of grades. Somehow, he gets pushed through the commencement line anyway, to a rousing ovation. He is voted Most Likely to Succeed by his awe-struck classmates. The teachers, the ones who ignored his academic struggles because they didn't want to hold him back and cause problems, line up for pictures. Everyone smiles.

He gets into State U., partly because the coach, who's under pressure to win and keep his job and shoe contract, did some minor arm-twisting to get the administration to admit the kid, with the promise that every effort will be made to boost his grades. "If you bar this kid," the coach argues, "you'll put him on the street, and society will lose another black teenager. That's racist." The kid is admitted, with strings attached. He is assigned regular visits to the "academic counselor," which are quite common in athletic departments around the country. He spends most of his time around other jocks instead of meshing with the student body.

He stays away from the majors that are considered academically rigorous. He takes just the required number of credits and receives the bare minimum grades required to stay eligible. His classroom attendance is also the barest minimum. He has no real interest in school, no desire to rise early and walk across campus to class, no motivation to do anything more than what's necessary to suit up and play ball. Speaking of basketball, he discovers, to his surprise, that he's no longer the best player

on his team. He's not even in the starting lineup every game. Actually, he's somewhat of a disappointment at the college level. His senior year is a blur and passes quickly. The last game he plays for the university is also the last game he plays for any team. His eligibility is up. Basketball is over.

And so is his college experience. He flunks out, packs up, moves on. He's back home, in the old neighborhood, this time without much hope or a future. His name carries no special cache anymore, not like before. He's only a fuzzy memory to those who knew him four years earlier. Anyway, there's a new kid now. Somebody else is a star at the high school, hearing the cheers, getting the mail, signing the autographs. Somebody else is preparing to go through the system. Meanwhile, he's suddenly an adult who's short on cash and has no training to compete in a competitive, high-tech world. He prepares to go through a string of menial jobs. He swears he had it and lost it, but in reality, he never really had it. He never had a chance. He only had a brief, shining moment as a high school basketball star, a fleeting memory that will serve as the high point of his entire life.

His disturbing story is not rare among those athletes from urban America who don't treat academics with the same intensity as they do basketball or football. We saw it in Maurice Clarett, the former Ohio State star who ran into trouble with the law, left after his freshman year of college, and then had no academic cushion when his chances to play professionally went poof. Same, too, for Brien Taylor; he was the highly touted 1991 first round pick of the New York Yankees who blew out his throwing arm in a fight, never pitched a single inning for the organization, never went to college, and began drifting from one menial job to another. And Korleone Young, who foolishly declared for the NBA draft straight out of a Wichita high school in 1989 and played a total of three games; he was sentenced to spending the rest of his youth bouncing from one bush league to the next, mainly overseas. And those are just the semivisible names; a

Souled Out?

vast majority of black athletes like them, or worse off, are complete unknowns.

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