

NYT. Editorial Observer: Broken Hoop Dreams for the Basketball Players of Coney Island  
February 1, 2004 by BRENT STAPLES

The myth of upward mobility through basketball is a cancer on the black inner city. The cliché about basketball offering a "ticket out of the ghetto" - through college scholarships and professional contracts - traps black boys into framing their lives around the sport while abandoning studies that would actually prepare them for reachable careers.

The probability that one of the half-million high schoolers playing ball this year will land a professional contract is less than that of being struck by lightning. The quest for the chimerical pro contract now begins as early as junior high school, when impoverished children and their parents swallow the illusion whole. Fourteen-year-olds are herded off to high-intensity summer camps where unscrupulous recruiters whisper to them about fame and fortune. In the basketball Mecca that is New York, eighth graders shop for high schools that will overlook illiteracy and failing grades while dangling the chance to play on a championship team.

This was a common route to college until the National Collegiate Athletic Association changed the admission requirements for freshman athletes, beginning in 1986. During the early 1990's, around the time that Coney Island's Abraham Lincoln High School won the city basketball championship, young athletes who wished to compete as college freshmen had to score at least a 700 on the SAT. Seven hundred was about 200 points below the national average for all college-bound students - it proved little more than that the students were proficient in English. But even this meager score was often a bridge too far for poor students from dismal inner city schools. Players who fell short were viewed as damaged goods by the big-college sports programs. Known as academic "casualties," the young men were dumped into the junior college basketball circuit, where they exhausted eligibility, seldom got degrees and ended up back on the streets whence they came.

This syndrome is endemic to the housing projects of Coney Island, where the religion of redemption through basketball thrives nonetheless. The main basketball court in the Coney Island projects is tellingly called "The Garden" after Madison Square Garden, the home of the New York Knicks. The prized court has been windswept and iced over lately, but the local boys are champing at the bit for summer, when spectators will gather three deep around The Garden to size up the newest neighborhood phenoms. Amid the roar of the summer crowds, scouts will delude the new generation of stars into believing that they can become rich and famous by pouring their lives into the game.

This year, the scouts will conjure up Stephon Marbury, a Coney Island playground icon, as bait. Mr. Marbury was the patron saint of Coney Island basketball long before he was traded to the New York Knicks last month under a contract that will pay him more than \$100 million. The sight of him making the social scene in New York decked out in diamonds and reeking of money is likely to have a disastrous effect on local boys who desperately need to be pointed toward achievable careers.

Teachers and community leaders should tamp down the hoop dream hysteria by reminding local boys of the tragedies that befell those whom the lightning of good fortune failed to strike, including those who played with Mr. Marbury on the Lincoln High teams of the early 90's.

The Lincoln High team came to national prominence with the 1994 best-selling book "The Last Shot," by the New York writer Darcy Frey. An updated version, due out in March, provides an unvarnished view of what happens to young men in Coney Island who focus obsessively on basketball, while frittering away their lives. The academic hope of that team was a tall, talented player named Tchaka Shipp, who was the first player in memory to meet college entry requirements in his junior year. Mr. Shipp was misled and ill-used by his coaches, then injured in a car accident. When Mr. Frey caught up with him recently, he was struggling to support his family as a building maintenance worker.

Two other teammates failed to achieve the humble score of 700 on the SAT's and were hurled into the junior college basketball meat market. One former player became homeless and is said to have committed suicide by stepping in front of a train. In a letter written not long before his death, the player said that he had been miserable playing basketball and suggested that he had continued only because the

neighborhood worshiped the game. "The pressure of living up to people's expectations of going to the pros was unbearable," he wrote. "When I stopped playing basketball, I found myself excluded by others."

When I caught up with another Lincoln High School player, Corey Johnson, at a Coney Island pizza parlor two weeks ago, he was jobless and on the verge of being evicted. He grew wistful as he spoke of his failure to graduate from college and recalled the neighborhood pressures that kept him on the Lincoln High team when he wanted to quit. "Basketball derailed me," he said. "When I was young, I was ashamed to tell people I wanted to be a writer. After all, nobody else here does that." He now sees that coaches who pretended to love him were interested only in his ability to put a ball through a hoop. If he could relive those years, Mr. Johnson would ditch the sport, work on his academic skills and develop his writing.

The story of basketball in Coney Island is a story of exploitation and tragedy. The religion of the game admits of no such reality. Whosoever debunks this religion with the truth can expect to be scorned and shouted down as a heretic.

**Why do so many young African American men want to be like Mike (or Kobe)?**

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|----------------|---|
| <b>1</b>       | <b>Michael Jordan or Kobe Bryant (only one at a time)</b> |
| <b>30</b>      | <b>Jason Kidd, Stephon Marbury and the NBA elite</b>      |
| <b>300</b>     | <b>NBA players</b>  |
| <b>2,000</b>   | <b>Minor league basketball players</b>                    |
| <b>14,000</b>  | <b>College basketball players</b>                         |
| <b>500,000</b> | <b>High school basketball players</b>                     |

**2 out of every 100,000 African American men will play pro-ball. That is .002%.**