

# THE LAST SHOT

*At Abraham Lincoln High School, black kids play basketball for love, a college scholarship, and—if they can beat the odds—a way out*

BY DARCY FREY

**R**ussell Thomas places his right sneaker one inch behind the three-point line, considers the basket with a level gaze, cocks his wrist to shoot, then suddenly looks around. Has he spotted me, watching from the corner of the playground? No, something else is up: he is lifting his nose to the wind like a spaniel, he is gauging air currents. He waits until the wind settles, bits of trash feathering lightly to the ground. Then he sends a twenty-five-foot jump shot arcing through the soft summer twilight. It drops without a sound through the dead center of the bare iron rim. So does the next one. So does the one after that. Alone in the gathering dusk, Russell works the perimeter against imaginary defenders, unspooling jump shots from all points. Few sights on Brooklyn playgrounds stir the hearts and

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minds of the coaches and scouts who recruit young men for college basketball teams quite like Russell's jumper; they have followed its graceful trajectory ever since he made varsity at Abraham Lincoln High School, in Coney Island, two years ago. But the shot is merely the final gesture, the public flourish of a private regimen that brings Russell to this court day and night. Avoiding pickup games, he gets down to work: an hour of three-point shooting, then wind sprints up the fourteen flights in his project stairwell, then back to the court, where (much to his friends' amusement) he shoots one-handers ten feet from the basket while sitting in a chair.

At this hour Russell usually has the court to himself; most of the other players won't come out until after dark, when the thick humid air begins to stir with night breezes and the court lights come on. But this evening is turning out to be a fine one—cool and foggy. The low, slanting sun sheds a feeble pink light over the silvery Atlantic a block away, and milky sheets of fog roll

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off the ocean and drift in tatters along the project walkways. The air smells of sewage and salt-water. At the far end of the court, where someone has torn a hole in the chicken-wire fence, other players climb through and begin warming up.

Like most of New York's impoverished and predominantly black neighborhoods, Coney Island does not exactly shower its youth with opportunity. In the early 1960s, urban renewal came to Coney Island in the form of a vast tract of housing

projects, packed so densely along a twenty-block stretch that a new skyline rose suddenly behind the boardwalk and amusement park. The experiment of public housing, which has isolated the nation's urban poor from the hearts of their cities, may have failed here in even more spectacular fashion because of Coney Island's utter remoteness. In this neighborhood, on a peninsula at the southern tip of Brooklyn, there are almost no stores, no

trees, no police; just block after block of gray cement projects—hulking, prison-like, and jutting straight into the sea.

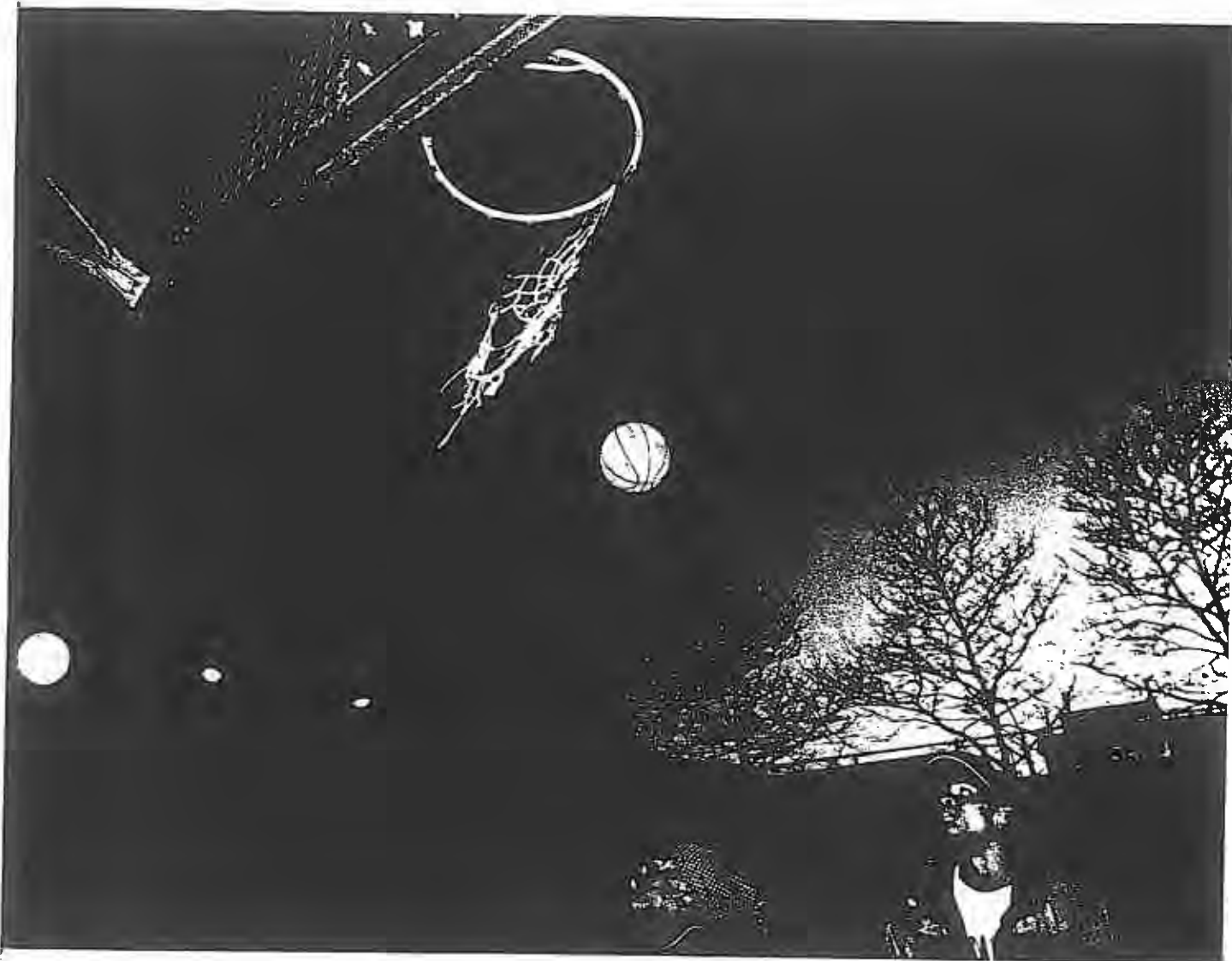
Most summer nights an amorphous unease settles over Coney Island as apartments become too stifling to bear and the streets fall prey to the gangs and drug dealers. Options are limited: to the south is the stiff gray meringue of the Atlantic; to the north, more than ten miles away, are the Statue of Liberty and the glass-and-steel spires of Manhattan's financial district. Officially, Coney Island is considered a part of the endless phantasmagoria that is New York City. But on nights like these, as the dealers set up their drug marts in the streets and alleyways, and the sounds of sirens and gunfire keep pace with the darkening sky, it feels like the end of the world.

Yet even in Coney Island there are some uses to which a young man's talent, ambition, and desire to stay out of harm's way may be put: there is basketball. Hidden behind the projects are dozens of courts, and every night they fill with restless teenagers, there to remain for hours until exhaustion or the hoodlums take over. The high-school dropouts and the aging players who never made it to college usually show up for a

physical game at a barren strip of courts by the water known as Chop Chop Land, where bruises and minutes played are accrued at a one-to-one ratio. The younger kids congregate for rowdy games at Run-and-Gun Land. The court there is short and the rims are low, so everyone can dunk, and the only pass ever made is the one inbounding the ball. At Run-and-Gun, players stay on the move for another reason: the court sits just below one of the most dreaded projects, where Coney Island's worst hoodlums sometimes pass a summer evening "getting hectic," as they say—tossing batteries and beer bottles onto the court from apartment windows fifteen stories above.

The neighborhood's best players—the ones, like Russell, with aspirations—practice a disciplined, team-driven style of basketball at this court by the O'Dwyer projects, which has been dubbed the Garden after the New York Knicks' arena. In a neighborhood ravaged by the commerce of drugs, the Garden offers a tenuous sanctuary. A few years ago, community activists petitioned the housing authority to install night lights. And the players themselves resurfaced the court and put up regulation-height rims that snap back after a player dunks. Russell may be the only kid at the Garden who practices his defensive footwork while holding a ten-pound brick in each hand, but no one here treats the game as child's play. Even the hoodlums decline to vandalize the Garden, because in Coney Island the possibility of transcendence through basketball is an article of faith.

**M**ost evenings this summer I have come to the Garden to watch Russell and his friends play ball. The notion that basketball can liberate dedicated players like these from the grinding daily privations of the ghetto has become a cherished parable, advanced by television sportscasters, college basketball publicists, and sneaker companies proselytizing the work ethic and \$120 high-tops. And that parable is conveyed directly to the players at the Garden by the dozens of college coaches who arrive in Coney Island each year with assurances that even if a National Basketball Association contract isn't in the cards, a player's talent and tenacity will at least reward him with a free college education, a decent job, and a one-way ticket out of the neighborhood. But how does this process actually unfold? And what forces stand in its way? How often is bas-



ketball's promise of a better life redeemed? It was questions like these that drew me to this court, between Mermaid and Surf avenues.

"Just do it, right?" I glance to my left and there is Corey Johnson, smiling mischievously, eyes alight. He nods toward the court—players stretching out, taking lay-ups—and it does, in fact, resemble a sneaker commercial. "Work hard, play hard, buy yourself a pair of Nikes, young man," Corey intones. Corey is a deft mimic and he does a superb white TV announcer. "They get you where you want to go, which is out of the ghet-to!" He laughs, we shake hands, and he takes up an observation post by my side.

Corey is Russell's best friend and one of Lin-

coln High's other star seniors. He, too, expects to play college ball. But he specializes in ironic detachment and normally shows up courtside with his Walkman merely to watch for girls beneath his handsome, hooded eyes. Tonight he is wearing a fresh white T-shirt, expertly ripped along the back and sleeves to reveal glimpses of his sculpted physique; denim shorts that reach to his knees; and a pair of orange sneakers that go splendidly with his lid—a tan baseball cap with orange piping, which he wears with the bill pointing skyward. From his headphones come the sounds of Color Me Badd, and Corey sings along: *I—wanna—sex—you—up . . .* He loops his fingers around the chicken-wire fence and

says, "I tell you, Coney Island is like a disease. Of the mind. It makes you lazy. You relax too much. 'Cause all you ever see is other guys relaxing."

Although a pickup game has begun at the basket nearest us, Russell still commands the other. As the last light drains from the sky, he finishes with three-pointers and moves on to baby hooks: fifteen with the left hand, fifteen with the right; miss one and start all over again. Corey smiles at his friend's hair-shirt discipline. Russell, it is hoped, will play next year in the Big East, one of the nation's top college conferences, in which Seton Hall, St. John's, Georgetown, Syracuse, and others compete. Russell is six feet three, 180 pounds, with a shaved head and a small goatee that seems to mean business. Last spring the Lincoln team, with Russell leading the way, won the New York City public-school championship in a rout at Madison Square Garden that was broadcast citywide on cable TV. But one can never predict what may happen to Russell, because, as Corey observes, "Russell is Russell." I can guess what this means: Russell lives in one of the neighborhood's toughest projects, and misfortune often seems to shadow him. Last year a fight between Russell and his girlfriend turned violent. Terrified that his college scholarship had just been replaced by a stiff prison term, Russell climbed to the top of one of Coney Island's highest buildings. It took almost half an hour of reasoned talk by his high-school coach and members of the Sixtieth Precinct to bring him back from the edge.\*

Russell may be tightly wound, but no Coney Island player can avoid for long the agonizing pressures that might bring a teenager with his whole life ahead of him to the edge of a roof. Basketball newsletters and scouting reports are constantly scrutinizing the players, and practically every day some coach shows up—appraising, coaxing, negotiating, and, as often as not, making promises he never keeps. Getting that scholarship offer is every player's dream—in anticipation, no one steps outside in Coney Island without a Syracuse cap or a St. John's sweat-shirt. But in reality only a handful of the neighborhood's players have ever made it to such top four-year programs; most have been turned back by one obstacle or another in high school. Oth-

*\*Some New York City newspapers withheld Russell's name when reporting this incident. In keeping with the practice of withholding the names of minors involved in suicide threats or attempts, Harper's Magazine has changed Russell's name and the name of his mother in this article. No other names have been altered.*

ers who have enrolled in college never saw their dream to completion. The list is grim: there was Eric "Spoon" Marbury, who played for the University of Georgia but never graduated, and ended up back in Coney Island working construction; his younger brother Norman "Jou-Jou" Marbury, who lost his scholarship to highly ranked Tennessee because of academic problems in high school; and now David "Chocolate" Harris, a talented player who never even graduated from high school. He dropped out of Lincoln after his freshman year and became a small-time drug dealer. Earlier this summer police found him in an abandoned lot, his hood pulled over his head and a bullet through his skull. He was seventeen. Some of the players warming up at the Garden have written on the tongues of their sneakers, CHOCOLATE: R.I.P.

**T**he orange court lights have come on now, displacing the encroaching darkness. Two players on either end of the court climb the fence and sit atop the backboards, hanging nets—a sign that a serious game is about to begin. Suddenly a ferocious grinding noise fills the air. It gets louder and louder, and then a teenage kid riding a Big Wheel careers onto the court. He darts through the playground crowd, leaving a wake of pissed-off players, then hops off his ride and watches it slam into the fence. "Ah, yes, Stephon Marbury," Corey says dryly, "future of the neighborhood."

Stephon—Eric and Norman Marbury's kid brother—is barely fourteen, has yet to begin high school, but already his recruiting has begun. At least one college coach is known to have sent him fawning letters in violation of National Collegiate Athletic Association rules; street agents, paid under the table by colleges to bring top players to their programs, have begun cultivating Stephon; and practically every high-school coach in the city is heaping him with free gear—sneakers, caps, bags—in an attempt to lure him to his school. At first glance, Stephon doesn't look like the future of anything: he's diminutive, barely five feet nine, with the rounded forehead and delicate features of an infant. He sports a stylish razor cut and a pierced ear, and the huge gold stud seems to tilt his tiny bald head off its axis. Caught somewhere between puberty and superstardom, he walks around with his sneakers untied, the ends of his belt drooping suggestively from his pants, and half a Snickers bar extruding from his mouth.

With Stephon here, Corey wanders onto the court. Russell, too, is persuaded to give up his solo regimen. Basketball, it is commonly said, is a game of pure instinct, but the five-on-five contest that begins here is something else. Corey and Stephon are cousins, and Russell is as good as family—the three of them have played together since they were in grade school. They seem to move as if the spontaneous, magical geometry of the game had all been rehearsed in advance. Stephon, the smallest by far, is doing tricks with the ball as though it were dangling from his hand by a string, then gunning it to his older teammates with a series of virtuoso no-look passes: behind-the-back passes, sidarm passes, shovel passes. Corey is lulling defenders with his sleepy eyes, then exploding to the basket, where he casually tosses the ball through the hoop. Russell is sinking twenty-footers as if they were six-inch putts.

The game has just begun when a crowd starts to form: sidelined players, three deep, waiting their turn. A prostitute trolling for clients. A drunk yelling maniacally, "I played with Jordan, played with Jabbar. They ain't shit. And neither are you!" A buffed-out guy in a silk suit and alligator shoes arrives, swigging from a bottle of Courvoisier. An agent? A scout? The crowd gives him elbow room. A couple of teenage mothers with strollers come by; they get less elbow room.

Basketball is so inextricably woven into the fabric of Coney Island life that almost everyone here can recite a complete oral history of the neighborhood's players. People remember the exact scores of summer tournament games played at this court ten years ago, or describe in rapturous detail the perfect arc that Carlton "Silk" Owens put on his jumper before he was shot in the elbow in 1982. Dog-eared copies of a ten-year-old University of Georgia catalogue with a picture of Spoon Marbury playing with future NBA great Dominique Wilkins get passed around like samizdat.

Russell, Corey, and Stephon are the natural heirs to this vaunted tradition. But this is a complicated business: given the failures that have preceded them, the new crew is watched by the neighborhood with a certain skittishness, a growing reluctance to care too deeply. Yet Coney Island offers its residents little else on which to hang their pride. So the proceedings here take on a desperate, exalted quality, and by unspoken agreement the misfortunes of bygone players are talked up to either a lack of will or plain bad luck—both of which make possible the contin-

uance of hope. Silk didn't go pro, it is said, "because that was the year they cut the college draft from three rounds to two." Another player, the explanation goes, had that pro game, went to the hoop both ways, "but he was done in by a shyster agent."

Still, the suspicion lingers that something larger and less comprehensible may be at work. Ten years ago, the Long Island City projects in Queens produced New York's best players, but the drug industry and the collapse of that neighborhood into violence, broken families, and ever-greater poverty put an end to its dynasty. In recent years the torch has passed to Coney Island, which struggles to avoid a similar fate.

It's past midnight now, and the ambient glow of Manhattan's remote skyscrapers has turned the sky a metallic blue. Standing courtside, we can see only the darkened outlines of the projects, looming in every direction, and the shirtless players streaking back and forth, drenched in a pool of orange light. For Russell, Corey, and Stephon, the hard labor of winning their scholar-

ships lies ahead; for now this game is enough. Corey, sprinting downcourt, calls out, "Homeboy! Homeboy!" Standing under his own basket, Stephon lets fly with a long, improbable pass that Corey somehow manages to catch and dunk in one balletic leap. The game is stopped on account of pandemonium: players and spectators are screaming and staggering around the court—knees buckling, heads held in astonishment. Even Mr. Courvoisier loses his cool. Stephon laughs and points to the rim, still shuddering fearfully from its run-in with Corey's fists. "Yo, cuz," he yells. "Make it bleed!" Then he raises his arms jubilantly and dances a little jig, rendered momentarily insane by the sheer giddy pleasure of playing this game to perfection.

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SEPTEMBER

**A**braham Lincoln High School is a massive yellow-brick building of ornate stonework and steel-gated windows a few blocks north of the

boardwalk. As Coney Island has deteriorated, so has Lincoln High, though the school itself sits about a mile from the projects at the end of Ocean Parkway, a stately, tree-lined boulevard. Across the parkway are Brighton Beach and several other Jewish neighborhoods, but the kids from those areas are usually sent elsewhere for their education, as Lincoln has become, little by little, a ghetto school for the projects.

A malaise has set in at Lincoln, as it has at so many inner-city public schools. Students regularly walk in and out of class, sleep at their desks, throw projectiles through doorways at friends in the hall. In the teachers' cafeteria, conversation often reverts to pension plans and whether the 2,500 Lincoln kids are as bad as last year or worse. The first day I dropped by, there was much com-



motion because the locker of a student was found to contain a handgun. On my second visit, the weapon in question was a six-inch knife. After one student was sent to the hospital with a neck wound requiring forty stitches, even some of the most peaceable kids began carrying X-Acto knives for protection.

Spectators at games in the New York Public School Athletic League (PSAL) are often frisked at the door by guards with metal detectors. Still,

incidents occur. In the middle of the 1982 semifinals, between Alexander Hamilton and Ben Franklin, an off-duty security guard chased a knife-wielding fan directly onto the court and put a gun to his head while the crowd and players ran screaming for the exits. And then there is that ritual of basketball in the urban public schools: the pregame *passaggiata* of the neighborhood's drug dealers. During warm-ups in certain gyms, the steel doors will swing open and slowly, conspicuously, daring the security guards to stop them, the dealers will make their entrance, signaling to friends in the bleachers while strolling around the court draped in leather, fur, and several pounds of gold.

Into this chaos walk the college coaches—pin-striped and paisley-tied, bearing four-color photos of sold-out college arenas and statistics on how many games their teams play on national television. Usually they precede their visits by dropping the players brief notes, like the one from a Fordham coach to a Lincoln player describing how one of the college's basketball stars became rich beyond his wildest dreams. "This could be you someday," the coach wrote. "See how Fordham can change your life?" The coach signed off with the salutation, "Health, Happiness\$, and Hundred\$."

**M**ost of the coaches are leery of Corey right now; he spends too much time with girls and, despite his intelligence, his grades are among the worst on the team. Stephon is, as far as the NCAA rules are concerned, off-limits for the next three years. So they come to see Russell. In the first week of school, Wichita State, St. Bonaventure, and the University of

Delaware have paid him visits. After school today he sits down with Rod Baker, the head coach at the University of California at Irvine.

"My apologies for not coming to see you before, but the fact is one of our players just dropped out and suddenly we need another guard." Coach Baker is a trim, handsome black man wearing a natty blue suit, tasseled loafers, and a gleaming gold NCAA ring. "And the first person we thought of was Russell Thomas. I'm not bull-

shitting you. Frankly, I think you're an impact player, a franchise player. Five years from now, I wouldn't be surprised if people were saying, 'Remember when Russell Thomas came in and changed the fortunes of Cal-Irvine?' " Baker runs a finger down each side of his well-groomed mustache. Russell smiles uncertainly.

"Now let me tell you about California. Ever been there?" Russell shakes his head. "Well, you're gonna think you died and went to heaven. I'm serious. What is it today—seventy degrees? Nice and sunny? In California this is a shitty day in December. That's the God's truth. And the other thing about going to school on the West Coast . . ." Baker looks down, allows himself a moment to collect his thoughts, then looks up at Russell. "Everybody's got certain things they want to get away from in their past." How on earth does Baker know about Russell's incident on the roof? "In California, Russell, you can get away from that, from all the stuff that brings you down in Coney Island. At Cal-Irvine you can be whoever you really want to be."

After Coach Baker leaves, Russell and I walk out to the football field behind the school, a lovely, tree-lined expanse of green in an otherwise barren urban setting. It's one of those crystalline September afternoons, with fall in the air but the sun pulsing down on the aluminum bleachers where we sit with the last warmth of summer. (Weather like this may ruin a Californian's day, but in Brooklyn this is as good as it gets.) "I was impressed with Coach Baker. I felt he was definitely leveling with me," Russell declares. "But I'm going to wait and see. Hear what they all have to say. Then decide. Try not to be pressured. Just take it one day at a time." Russell's initial comments after a recruiting session often mimic the solemn coach-speak to which he is subjected every day. So many people—high-school and college coaches and free-lance street agents—want a piece of Russell and try to influence where he will sign that it often takes him a while to locate his own thoughts. "They say it's the second-biggest decision I gotta make in my life—after I pick my wife." He looks around the field, swarting imaginary flies. "But I'm doing good, I'm handling it." He locates some gum on the bottom rung of the bleachers, picks it free, rolls it between two fingers, and flips it onto the grass. "It's normal to be confused, right?" Now the elastic of his right sock receives his complete attention as he performs a series of micro-adjustments to get the folds just right. "That's only human, isn't it?"

He takes one more look around and, finding nothing else to distract him, falls silent.

The recruiting circus has been a fact of life for Russell and his friends ever since they were in junior high. Directly across the street from Lincoln sits William Grady Tech—another powerhouse PSAL team—and the two schools compete zealously for the pool of talent coming out of the Coney Island projects. Lincoln players often refer to Grady as "the best team money can buy." Grady players claim that Lincoln tries to lure them away with sneakers and promises to "pass them along" in their classes. Coaches at both schools deny such allegations, but it is a fact that thirteen-year-old Coney Island athletes are encouraged to shop for high schools the way the seniors pick colleges—according to which school will give them the most playing time, the best chance to win a city title, and the exposure to get recruited to the next level.

The pressure of playing basketball in Coney Island affects Russell in mysterious ways. One time last year he snuck out the back door of the locker room to avoid a postgame team meeting, leaving everyone wondering whether he was angry at himself for his performance or angry at his teammates for not passing him the ball. Probably both. This year, knowing how much is at stake, Russell has struggled to change. He does this in small ways. Over the summer he told me he was planning a new image for himself. I waited to see what he meant. The first day of school he arrived wearing penny loafers, just like the coaches. The next day, building from the bottom up, he had added pleated pants. Then suspenders. A paisley tie. Finally he topped off the look with a pair of non-prescription wire-rimmed glasses—"because they make you look educated. You know, the professor look."

But today Russell seems agitated in the old way, restless with an emotion he can't identify. "You know, I used to say that I couldn't wait to be a senior," he says. "But I got to worry about classes, the season, recruiting, the SATs. That's a lot of pressure." According to NCAA rules, students who want to play sports at a four-year, Division I school,

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those with the nation's top athletic programs, must enter college having maintained at least a 70 average in high school and having received a combined score of 700 on the math and verbal sections of the SATs—the last an insurmountable obstacle to many black players with poor educations and little experience taking standardized tests. Failing that, a player must earn a two-year

degree at a junior college before moving on to a four-year school. Many Division I coaches, however, refuse to recruit junior-college players, considering them damaged goods. So players who don't go directly to a four-year school often never get to play top college ball or earn their bachelor's degrees.

The first time Russell took the SATs, he received a combined score somewhere in the mid-500s. (You receive 400 points for signing your name.) This year he gave up his lunch period to study, and lately

he's been carrying around a set of vocabulary flash cards, which he pulls out whenever there isn't a basketball in his hands. By dint of tremendous effort, Russell had also brought his average up to 78—the highest on the team. These are extraordinary developments for someone whose schooling over the years has been so bad that he had never, until recently, finished a book or learned the fundamentals of multiplication, even as he was being called upon to answer reading-comprehension and algebra questions on the SATs. "I used to think there were smart people and dumb people, but that's not true," Russell says forcefully. "Everybody's got the same brain. They say a human mind can know a thousand words—it's like a little computer! But you got to practice." He pauses. "But how come it's always the guys who don't study who get their 700s? Seems like the guys who work hard always get screwed. But oh, well."

**F**rom across the football field, the chants and cries of cheerleading practice travel toward us with perfect clarity. Russell shades his eyes with his hands and watches a tumble of cartwheels.

"It's nice out here, isn't it? All the trees and everything? Out where I live there's nothing but total corruption and evilness, drugs and stolen cars. All my friends be getting arrested, shot at . . ." It is not too much to say that basketball saved Russell. In junior high he was trouble, sometimes leaving home for long stretches to hang out on the streets with his friends. But he was spotted playing ball in the parks by one of Lincoln's unofficial recruiters, who persuaded him to enroll. In high school he gained confidence and won the hearts of teachers who admired his efforts while growing increasingly appalled by what he had never been taught. Now after school, while certain of his classmates walk over to Brighton Beach to hold up pensioners at gunpoint, Russell goes straight home, takes his vitamins, does his push-ups, and combs through college-recruiting brochures until bedtime. His dream is not to become a pro, he tells me, but "to graduate college, start me a nice little family, and get me a nice little job as a registered nurse."

Russell has begun throwing his things into his gym bag: books, towel, basketball. Something still bothers him, though, and he keeps going back to it, like a tongue to a broken tooth. "You know, I look at all these players, like Silk and Jou-Jou. They're way better than me, and look what happened to them: Jou-Jou lost his scholarship, Silk never graduated. This recruiting business, man, it's scary. But Coach Baker—for some reason he made me feel secure, like he'll take good care of me, like I'm part of the family." Russell, so effusive about other matters, almost never mentions his own family. All I know is that his father moved away when Russell was young, leaving his mother to raise him and his two younger sisters. I can't help wondering if it isn't doubly hard for Russell to resist all the high-powered coaches who recruit him because he has lived most of his life without a father.

Russell's new girlfriend, Terry, comes into view across the field. She waves to us and starts walking toward the bleachers. "Now that girl is smart!" Russell exclaims. "She got an 88 average!" A cloud has just shifted in Russell's mood and the sun has reappeared. "She got a nice family too. They even got their own house. One of these days I'm going to marry that girl." Russell started seeing Terry not long after the incident with his previous girlfriend. All of Russell's friends were thrilled to see him involved with someone so pretty and levelheaded; Terry's friends thought she was crazy. But she stuck by Russell and re-

cently he announced to his teammates that he would wear a small blue ribbon—Terry's favorite color—on his uniform this season. This, too, was part of the new Russell.

Terry is still a good fifty yards away. Russell puts his hand on my arm confidentially. "You know what happened to me last year, with that business on the roof?" This is the first time he's mentioned it to me. "I really thought my career was shattered. But you know, I see now it was good for me. I been through certain things other teenagers haven't. I learnt that part of success is failure, having hard times smack you in the face, having to go without having." Still gripping my arm, Russell looks me in the eye and says, "I'm gonna get my 700 and go Division I. Trust me. You know why? I've come too far, worked too hard already."

This is what this whole basketball business is about, isn't it? By playing ball and playing by the rules, a kid like Russell is saved from the streets—saved too from that unshakable belief in his own insignificance—and set on a path that could change his life. Terry is almost upon us now. Russell licks his fingertips and cleans a smudge off the top of his loafer. Then he takes a precautionary whiff of each armpit and, finding the results tolerable, shakes my hand and runs off to meet his girl.

"C

OCTOBER

ome on, Russell—we're jetting!" Stephon places his hand against the back of Russell's bald head and flicks it hard to make the skin sting.

"Damn, Stephon, stop sweating me! Can't you see I'm talking to my girl?" When Russell gets upset, his voice jumps to a higher register. "Can't you see I'm talking to my girl?" Stephon mimics. Russell tries to ignore him. He whispers something in Terry's ear, gives her a kiss, then slings his book bag over his shoulder and marches toward the locker room. The last class bell has rung, disgorging hundreds of students into the Lincoln corridors. Stephon lingers in the crowd and leans in close to Terry. "You know, when Russell goes to college, I'm next in line."

Terry is almost as tall as Stephon, and for an instant I think she's going to hit him. But she says, "You got some mouth," and walks away.

Stephon does not suffer from the usual array of adolescent insecurities, but why should he? As a freshman, he arrived at Lincoln already a

legend, and his performance later today, during the season's first official practice, will do nothing to lower his profile. Hopes for this year's team are running so high that everyone gathers in the gym to see for himself: students, teachers, other coaches, and a reporter for *Newsday* who will cover the team all season.

And the players do not disappoint. All of them have improved since I saw them in August. Russell, once a stationary jump shooter, is shooting off the dribble, driving with authority to the hoop. For years, Russell had gotten a rap for "playing white"—taking a lay-up when he could have dunked. "No one thinks I can dunk 'cause I never dunked in public," he told me over the summer. "But between you and me, I dunk in the park all the time—when no one's looking." I was tempted to ask if this was a riddle (is a dunk really a dunk if no one is around to see it?), but Russell wasn't smiling. "I'm going to dunk this year. Trust me." And he does. At practice, Russell drives the lane and goes straight over Corey for an emphatic jam. The whole place erupts—guys are chanting his name, yelling, "He flushed it good!" Russell, ignoring the cheers, walks over to me and grips my shoulder. "See, it's all part of the plan," he says. "Just like the shoes." Now what the hell does *that* mean?

As for Corey, he seems to have added an extra cylinder for the coming season. At six feet one, Corey is so fast he doesn't even bother to fake; he just wastes his man on the first step and springs into the air as if coming off a trampoline. "Do the 360!" someone yells from the bleachers and Corey obliges, performing a gyrating dunk. "Statue of Liberty!" comes the next request, and Corey takes off near the foul line, soars toward the basket, and then—legs split, arm extended, ball held high like a torch—throws down a thunderous, backboard-rattling jam. Corey knows how to work a crowd, sometimes too well. Last year, in one of the season's crucial games, Corey was all alone under the basket, tried a fancy lay-up, and blew it. The coaches rose to their feet, howling in rage. Corey jogged downcourt shrugging, palms turned toward the ceiling. "Relax, guys," he said, nonchalance itself. "It's just *basketball*."

And then there is Stephon. He is making his debut as a high-school player today, but he takes the court as he always does—ever confident, leaning forward onto the balls of his feet in happy anticipation, arms jangling at his sides. "Mission day," he announces with a clap. "Time to get busy." Within moments he is making

quick work of his competition, stunning the crowded, noisy gym into a reverential silence. Here he is, out by the three-point line. He does a stutter step to freeze the defense, then drives the lane. En route, he encounters the team's six-foot-seven center in midair, so he changes direction, shifts the ball from right hand to left, and sinks a reverse lay-up. I hear one of the coaches mutter, "Holy shi—," not even finishing the thought because here Stephon is again, off to the left. He drives, sees too many bodies in the paint, and pulls up for a jumper. He is way out of position, his lithe body still floating toward the basket, so he calculates his velocity, takes a little something off the ball, and banks it gently off the glass.

"Jesus, this kid's the real thing! Do you realize Stephon could keep us in TV tournaments for the next four years?" Bobby Hartstein, head coach of

the Lincoln team, sounds overjoyed—and vastly relieved. Lincoln has had great players before, but never a virtual child prodigy like Stephon. All summer long, Coach Hartstein held his breath as other schools tried to lure his incoming star with promises of a starting position and a guaranteed supply of his favorite sneakers. One Brooklyn coach presented Stephon with a new uniform and treated him and his father to a series of extravagant

dinners. A coach in the Bronx was rumored to have offered cash up front. But Lincoln had the edge. Stephon's three older brothers—Eric, Donnie, and Norman—had all starred at the school. And to close the sale, Hartstein made Stephon an extraordinary offer: the forty-two-year-old coach promised the fourteen-year-old player that he'd turn down any college coaching offer to personally shepherd Stephon through high school.

**A**fter practice the players all tumble down the school's front steps. Stephon walks up to me and says, "Take me to Mickey D's. I'm hungry. I could eat three Big Macs. You got any

cash?" I've already agreed to drive Russell and Corey home, so I tell Stephon to hop in. "This is your ride?" Stephon stares slack-jawed at my ten-year-old Toyota. "When I get to college, I'm gonna get me a white Nissan Sentra—that shit is milk!"

"Just get in the damn car," Russell says. In the last few weeks, some schools that had recruited Russell aggressively in September have backed off, and Russell is taking it hard. No sooner had Russell made up his mind to sign with Cal-Irvine than Coach Baker called to say they were no longer interested—the guard they thought was leaving decided to come back. Meanwhile, other schools seem convinced that Russell won't ever pass his SATs. (Coaches somehow learn of Russell's test scores before he's even had time to show them to his mother.) With every school that courts and then abandons him, Russell goes through the full cycle of infatuation, falling in love, rejection, and recuperation; each time he survives with a little less of the spirit to forge on with the school year. Stephon wants the front seat of my car, but Russell says gruffly, "Six foot three gets the front. Five foot nine goes in back." Corey wisely stays out of it. He puts his Walkman on, pops the hatch, and climbs in the far back, draping his legs over the bumper.

Autumn is arriving quickly this year. For weeks now the sky has been a study in gray, and the trees along Ocean Parkway are already bare. On the drive to McDonald's we splash through piles of fallen leaves. "If you crash and I get injured, Coach is gonna kill you," Stephon advises me. Then he announces, to no one in particular, "When I go to college, I'm going to Syracuse or Georgia Tech."

"How come?" I ask.

"Because at Syracuse you play in front of 32,820 people every home game—it's crazy-loud in there," he says, meaning the Syracuse Carrier Dome. "And because Georgia Tech knows how to treat its point guards." Stephon is no doubt thinking of Kenny Anderson—the player he is most often compared with—who left Georgia Tech after his sophomore year to sign a five-season, \$14.5 million contract with the NBA's New Jersey Nets. Anderson's salary is a figure Stephon knows as precisely as the seating capacity of the Carrier Dome.

Driving along, we pass beneath the elevated tracks over Stillwell Avenue, where four of New York City's subway lines come to an end. The Coney Island peninsula begins here; beyond the

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tracks are the projects. Few store owners will risk doing business out there, and the McDonald's near Stillwell is the last outpost of junk food before the streets plunge into the shadow of the high rises. We order our food to go and pile back into my car. Stephon, hungrily consuming his first burger, wedges himself between the two front seats in order to speak directly into his friend's ear. "So, Russell. What are they offering you?" Russell snatches his head away and stares out the window. "You mean you're just gonna sign?" Stephon goes on. "And then when you get to campus and see all them players driving those nice white Nissan Sentras, what are you gonna say to yourself? 'Oh well, I guess they got them from their mothers'?"

We ride along in hostile silence. As we drive down Mermaid Avenue toward the projects, the trees, shops, and pedestrians become scarcer, block by block. During the urban-renewal years, the city knocked down storefronts all along this stretch, but it abandoned much of its commercial-redevelopment plan after moving tenants into the projects. Now the only signs of life along some blocks are the drunks leaning against the plywood of boarded-up buildings and the mangy dogs scavenging vacant lots.

Russell says, "By the way, Stephon, the NCAA does not allow players to get cars."

"Ha! You think the NCAA gives a fuck about cars?" Stephon, still with his head next to Russell's, gives a shrill little laugh. "Why do you think the best players go where they go? 'Cause

the schools promise to take care of them and their families. They say the magic word: *money*."

It's no secret where Stephon gets his head for business. Last summer, while I was watching Stephon play ball, his father, Donald Marbury, approached me. "You the guy writing about Lincoln?" he asked. "And you haven't even



interviewed Mr. Lincoln himself?" We shook hands, and when I told him how much I wanted to speak to him, a sly smile crossed his creased and handsome face. "Well in that case I expect there will be some gratuities for me and my family." I must have looked surprised because Mr. Marbury snapped angrily, "Oh come on now! If it weren't for me and my boys, Lincoln wouldn't even be worth writing about!"

The Marbury story is a good one, though it may never be written to the father's liking. After star-

ring at Lincoln, Eric went on to play for the University of Georgia, but he failed to graduate before his scholarship ran out and was now back in Coney Island. Donnie, the second son, displayed even greater promise, but he didn't have a 70 average in high school and had to do time at two junior colleges. After two years, he moved on to Texas A&M, where he led the Southwest Conference in scoring. But he too never graduated and was passed over in the college draft; now he's out in Utah, at another college, trying to finish his degree. Then came Norman. If ever Coney Island

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had produced pro material, it was he. The first public-school player in New York ever to be named all-city three years in a row, Norman was a dazzler—fast, strong, with a deadly outside shot and the ability, on drives to the basket, to take on the largest foes. He had his pick of top programs and eventually signed with Tennessee, which had assured him that if he chose their school, he could still attend for free even if he didn't make 700; he would simply have to sit out his freshman season, as the NCAA rules require. But in the summer of 1990, just weeks before he was set to leave for Knoxville, he came up 40 points short of 700 on his final SAT attempt. Tennessee broke its promise and withdrew its offer. Norman, Coney Island's finest product to date, packed his bags for a junior college in Florida. (He now plays for a Salt Lake City junior college.)

For years Donald Marbury had watched his boys fall short. Now he was down to his last—and most talented—son. "You want information, I expect that you will have the money to pay for it," he said to me last summer. I told him that wasn't possible and he shrugged dismissively. "I'm not like all them other Coney Island guys—too stupid to know the value of what they're sitting on." He tapped his brow. "This is a business—ain't nothing but. And if I don't receive satisfaction, I will take my business somewhere else."

Among the coaches who are now recruiting Stephon, it is said, as one did recently, that Donald Marbury "just won't stop dining out on his

son's talent." As for Stephon, the coaches complain that he's a player always looking to "get over," to take advantage of any situation. But how *should* they act? The entire basketball establishment has been trying to buy Stephon for years: summer-league teams pay his way to tournaments around the country (last summer found him in Arizona); street agents take Stephon into the Nets' locker room for chats with the pros; basketball camps give him wardrobes full of free gear; and coaches are constantly laying on hands and giving him awkward little hugs, hoping to win his affection.

And the Marbury family knows only too well, from witnessing the fates of Eric, Donnie, and Norman, how abruptly the coaches will withdraw their largess. So the Marbury policy, as Stephon explains it to Russell in my car, has become quite simple: "If you don't ask, you don't get. Like if I wasn't getting my burn"—his playing time—"here at Lincoln? I'd be up and out with quickness."

**B**y the time I reach the tag end of the peninsula, where Corey, Russell, and Stephon live, everyone has finished his burgers and fries, and I swing by their buildings to drop them off. It's not yet 6:00 P.M., but the drug dealers are already out. Russell spots a kid he used to play with at the Garden loping down the street with a rangy gait and his Georgetown cap on backward. "Look at him. Just doing the same ol' same ol'. Shoot 'em up. Bang bang." Dealers and players make up the principal social groups among young men in Coney Island, although there's cross-pollination, with washed-up players joining the gangs and dealers disrupting games to show off their playground moves. One major difference, however, is that the dealers own white Nissan Sentras whereas players like Stephon just talk about them.

Russell, Corey, and Stephon have never been involved with the gangs, but that leaves them broke most of the time, with few options for making money besides hawking sodas on the boardwalk during the summer. It's hard work, lugging a case of Cokes from the nearest supermarket a mile away, then selling them one by one in the blazing heat. For their trouble, they usually get a summons from the police. Later on those summer evenings, when the athletes start their workouts, the dealers often gather at the

sidelines to jeer. "They ain't doing nothing with their lives, so they don't want you to be doing nothing either," Russell explains. He climbs out of my car with a pile of SAT review books under his arm. "Man, I hate Coney Island. After I get to college, I'm never coming back. Until then, boys"—he gives us a weary salute—"I'm staying inside."

I drive down the block to drop off Stephon and Corey. They live on the fourth and fifth floors of the same building, directly over the Garden. After leaning into the window to slap my hand, Stephon starts walking with that King Marbury stride toward his building. I watch as he swaggers across the deserted playground, trailing his hand along the jungle gym. All the guys drinking their afternoon beers call out to him as he goes by.

I've spent some time in Stephon's building, and it's not the most pleasant place to come home to after a long practice. It's fourteen stories high and the elevator never works. The long halls stink of urine, and the dark stairwells, where the dealers lurk, echo with the low rumble of drug transactions. The apartment doors don't even have numbers on them, though they must have at one time because just outside the Marburys' apartment someone has scrawled violently across the wall, I WANNA FUCK THE GIRL IN 3B CAUSE SHE SUCKS DICK GOOD.

Everyone is hoping that Stephon will keep his head together as his notoriety grows throughout his high-school career and that, more to the point, he or his father won't accept some "gratuity" that raises the interest of the NCAA enforcement division. Given the family's circumstances, however, and the lessons they have learned about how this recruiting game is played, one can hardly blame Stephon and his father for wanting theirs—and wanting it now.

**H**Heading toward Thanksgiving, Lincoln could not have asked for greater success. The team was undefeated, making headlines in all the major New York City dailies, and had received an invitation to play in San Diego in a Christmas tournament of the country's top high-school teams. Lincoln didn't just win its games either; the team routed its opponents by such lopsided scores that opposing coaches often shook their heads and remarked, "Those guys were high-school players?" Russell was scoring at will—in the team's first scrimmage he turned in an outra-

geous 46-point performance, missing only three of twenty-four field-goal attempts, then kept to that pace for the next several games. *The Hoop Scoop*, a recruiting newsletter, ranked him the sixth-best player in New York City, and he earned an honorable mention in the magazine *Street & Smith's* nationwide basketball roundup.

Meanwhile Stephon was getting his burn, and then some. He started the season's first game (fifteen points, twelve assists) and every one thereafter. *New York Newsday*, under a half-page picture of the Lincoln team holding their smiling young point guard in their arms, announced the beginning of "the era of Stephon Marbury." Scouting reports were giving Stephon their top rating, and an assistant from Providence College showed up in Coney Island to watch Stephon practice one day, waving discreetly to the freshman—violating the intent, if not the letter, of NCAA rules designed to protect underclassmen from recruiters. "It's never too early to start showing interest," the coach whispered. Word of Stephon's prowess even reached a TV production company, which contacted Stephon about making a commercial, though when the NCAA informed the Marburys that accepting a fee might violate its rules, his father declined.

Off the court, however, there were some unwelcome developments. Stephon was working hard in his classes, hoping to break the pattern of academic failure set by his brothers, but his teachers were noticing that his book reports rarely included a period or a capital letter—not a good omen for the verbal portion of the SATs. As for Russell, he was scoring well on practice SAT exams, but when test day arrived he would panic and forget all his last-minute cramming, shaking his faith that hard work would eventually win the day. Years of bad schooling are coming back to haunt Russell just when he needs his education the most. Leaving the school building now, he looks exhausted, defeated, like a sullen factory worker at the end of a long shift.

Russell took the SATs yet again last weekend. Terry was planning to treat him to a celebratory dinner after the test. As we walk down the school steps, I ask how his date went. "I dissed her good. You should have seen it. Tell him, Corey." Corey says nothing, so Russell goes on. "She came up to me all nice and sweet, and I said, 'Get out of my sight! Don't bother me no more!'"

I'm stunned by this development. The last time I saw them together, Terry was sitting on Russell's lap in study hall, feeding him a bagel bite

by bite. "What were you fighting about?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just in a bad mood because of the SATs." Russell drapes his arm over my shoulder. "Never let a girl see you sweat. Didn't your mother ever tell you that?" Russell emits a peculiar mirthless laugh. I look at Corey. He shrugs and traces a circle around his temple with his index finger.

The days are getting shorter now. By the time practice is over, the sun has long since dropped into its slot behind the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and the sky at twilight is covered with brooding clouds. Corey's older brother Willie owns a bar-

bershop just off Flatbush Avenue in central Brooklyn, twenty minutes away. After practice Russell, Corey, and Stephon like to hang out there, and I usually give them a lift on my way home. As we drive past the brightly lit bodegas and rice-and-beans joints on Flatbush Avenue, fires rage out of metal drums, circled by hooded men trying to keep warm. Corey looks out the window and says in a high, fragile voice,

"Oh no. I just *hate* it when the Negroes wear those hoods. Scary! Oh! So scary!" Everyone laughs and Corey lifts his own hood over his head. He knows that when he too walks around like that, cops will stop him and pedestrians will turn away from him in fear. "Only in America," he says.

I have yet to hear Corey talk much about colleges, so I ask him where he wants to play. "Oh, I'm thinking about some southern schools: Florida State, North Carolina, maybe Virginia. I hate it when it gets sharp and brisk out like this. My one rule is, I won't go anyplace where I got to wear one of them Eskimo coats." Corey's recruiting hasn't even begun, but he's already established the proper hedonistic frame of mind.

"Still got to pass those SATs," Russell warns.

"I'm not scared," Corey replies. "I do well on tests. Anyway, this should be our year to relax."

"That test is *hard*," says Stephon from the backseat. "I looked at it once and almost fainted. I read somewhere that David Robinson got a 1300. Is that possible?"

"I heard there are players who get other guys

to take the test for them," Russell says. "How do they get away with that? Find someone who looks like them?"

This is not a good sign. One of Russell's friends at Grady, who had scored lower than he on practice tests, suddenly got his 700 and signed with a top program. Some Lincolnites have begun wondering whether Grady players are using stand-ins to take the test.

The NCAA and the college basketball industry have done much soul-searching in recent years over the SAT requirement, as well they should. A combined score of 700 may not seem like a terribly rigorous standard, but given the quality of the Lincoln players' schooling, it's not surprising that they don't know a synonym for *panache* or how to make the most of what they do know; they've never been told, for example, to avoid guessing and answer only the questions they're sure of—the kinds of test-taking tips suburban kids learn on their first day in a Stanley Kaplan review course. Russell's school average, now over 80, says a lot more about his determination to succeed, but that alone will get him nowhere.

**B**usiness is brisk tonight at Willie's shop—either that or a lot of guys are using the place to keep warm. Willie and his partner are cutting with dispatch and still a half dozen guys are hanging out. Willie keeps a basketball in the shop that everyone passes around while watching sitcom reruns on the TV. It's a homey place: taped to the mirrors are photos of the Johnson clan—Corey, Willie, and their six siblings. (The Johnsons are one of the only intact families I know in Coney Island: the father lives at home and all the children out of high school have jobs.) A T-shirt commemorating Lincoln's championship last year is pinned to the wall, next to a painting of Jesus, a bust of Nefertiti, and four portraits of Martin Luther King. Willie has also slapped up an assortment of bumper stickers: MORE HUGGING, LESS MUGGING and TO ALL YOU VIRGINS . . . THANKS FOR NOTHING. Outside, darkness has fallen like a black curtain against the shop window, but inside Willie's it's bright and warm.

Corey, whistling the theme song to *The Andy Griffith Show*, grabs a razor and stands next to Russell, trimming his right sideburn. (When Russell began dressing for success this season, Corey would remain in the locker room to troubleshoot

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in case Russell hit any snags knotting his tie.) Corey asks him what's going on with Terry, and Russell admits he's not really angry at her; he's just worried she'll get distant with him if he shows how much he likes her. "What if she decides she don't want to be with me?" he says unhappily. "I would take that hard."

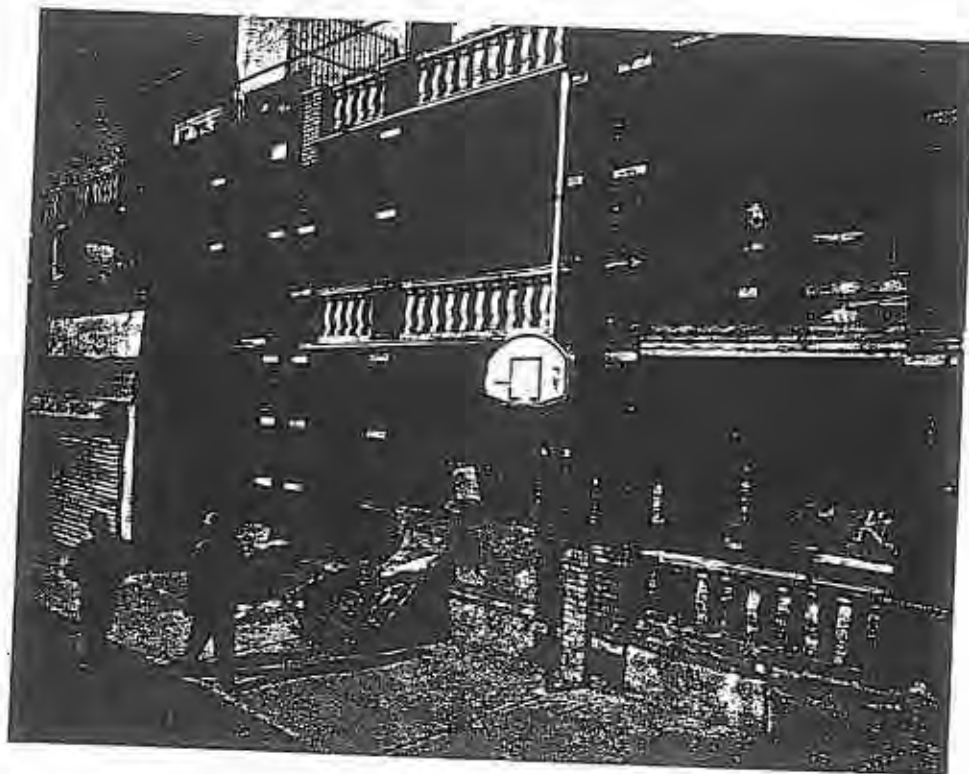
"You just got to tease her a little, is all," Corey says. He moves behind Russell to trim his neck hairs. "Like, instead of kissing her on the lips, kiss her on the nose. Then kiss her on the eyebrow. Give her a kiss on the ear. Before you know it, she'll be beggin' you, 'When you gonna kiss me on the lips?'" Corey laughs and laughs, enjoying his own good advice—he knows it's been thoroughly market-tested. Most Coney Island kids feel utterly lost outside their neighborhood, but Corey goes club-hopping in Manhattan and every time he shows up for a game—no matter where in the city it is—some girl in the bleachers is calling out his name. His shrewdness on a variety of topics—dating, churchgoing, cooking, writing poetry—has earned him the nickname "Future," because, as Russell once explained, "Corey's a future-type guy, crazy-smart, a walking genius. There are no limits to what he can do."

One day in study hall, I watched Corey sitting in the back, bent over his desk, while all around him his classmates wreaked havoc, throwing spitballs and jumping from desk to desk. At the end of the period I asked what he had accomplished and he handed me a poem about life in Coney Island that ended, "A place meant for happiness, sweet love and care—/ Something any human desires to share./ Yet it seems to haunt instead of praise/ The foundation and center of our bitter days."

When I had finished reading, Corey said to me, "I'm going to be a writer—you know, creative writing, poetry, free-associative stuff. I just play ball to take up time." Corey was tremendously prolific, dashing off a new poem for every girl he met. But having successfully merged his twin passions—writing and romance—he never left time for his homework. He did the assignments

he liked, ignored the rest, and, though he never caused trouble in class, had a 66 average and was one failed test away from losing his high-school eligibility. Already Division I coaches had identified him as a gifted player whose grades could be his undoing.

Corey is standing in front of Russell, evening his sideburns. He says, "But whatever you do with Terry, just don't bust inside her. That almost happened to me." Across the room, I hear Willie Johnson snort with disapproval. Willie is cutting Stephon's hair, but mostly he's been keeping a weather eye on his brother. "Corey's smart, but he's stupid too," Willie says to me. "You know what I mean? In junior high, he was a virgin



with a 90 average. Now he's got a 65. You tell me." I laugh, but Willie says, "No, I'm serious, man. I try to talk to him. I say, 'Don't you want to go to college? Don't you know you got to sacrifice for things you want?'" Willie is clipping Stephon's hair with growing agitation, and Stephon has sunk low in his chair, hoping to avoid a scalping. "At home Corey's on the phone all night, talking to girls. I say, 'You got a personal problem? Just tell me.'"

Willie is speaking in code now. What he's

**I****N CONEY ISLAND,**  
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**COLLEGE CAREER**

hinting at is the Johnson family's fear that Corey will get one of his girlfriends pregnant. In Coney Island, girls and the distractions of friends represent such a threat to a college career that the neighborhood's talented athletes are often urged to give up the rights and privileges of adolescence and attend a high school far from home. They will be lonely, but they will stay on the straight and narrow. Corey's older brother Louis took this strategy one step further, going into seclusion at an all-boys school, then spending an

extra year at a prep school that serves as a sort of academic rehab clinic for basketball players. Not coincidentally, he passed his SATs and became the first of the six Johnson boys to make it to a Division I program, the University of Buffalo.

Louis was so dedicated to his craft that he would practice his shot under the Garden lights until 4:00 A.M. Everyone wishes Corey were equally single-minded. But Corey's sensibility is too quirky for

that, and therein lies a danger. If Corey lived twenty-five miles north in, say, Scarsdale, he'd play the offbeat writer whose poor grades earn him a four-year sentence at Colgate, to be served while his classmates all go Ivy. But Corey fools around in an arena where there are no safety schools or safety nets. All of which presents a sad bit of irony: inner-city kids are always accused of doing nothing but throwing a ball through a hoop. Then along comes someone like Corey who takes pleasure in a million other things. (When the Lincoln team runs wind sprints on the outdoor track, Corey gladly takes the outside lane so he can run his hands through the canopy of leaves above his head.) In Coney Island, however, you ignore your basketball talent at great risk—athletic scholarships being significantly easier to come by than those for ghetto poets.

**B**y the time Russell and Corey submit themselves to Willie's shears, it's already late, so I agree to drive them home. All three are tired, and we ride along in a rare moment of quiet. Fi-

nally, Russell turns to me and says, "What do you know about Rob Johnson?"

Oh boy.

Johnson is a street agent, a middleman, a flesh peddler. He makes his living getting chummy with high-school players and then brokering them to colleges for a fee—though the coaches who pay it swear they've never heard of him. Lately, Johnson has become entangled in an NCAA investigation, but it hasn't kept him from showing up regularly at the Lincoln gym—a tall black man with an enormous gut, Day-Glo Nikes, and a thick gold chain around his wrist. After practice, he lingers around the players, offering to drive them home or take them to the movies—a particularly appealing figure to broke and fatherless kids like Russell.

"Has Rob offered to be your agent?" I ask. Russell looks out the window and says, "He called me last night. Said he liked the way I played. A lot." I tell Russell he might want to check out Rob's reputation, but Russell says, "It don't matter. I've decided to sign with South Carolina. They really want me." Having announced this unexpected decision, Russell pulls out a paper bag with his customary after-practice snack: a plain bagel and a carton of Tropicana.

"You should visit before you make up your mind," Corey advises. He's stretched luxuriously across the backseat.

"But I already know I want to go there," Russell says between mouthfuls.

"Russell, you've never been outside Coney Island! How the hell are you gonna know? Look!"—Corey lowers his voice and tries to speak in tones of unimpeachable reasonableness—"Russell, say you're going to marry someone. You going to marry the first girl you sleep with? No. Of course not. You're going to look around, see what the other girls can do for you, and then make your decision. Same with colleges. You got to go up there and have a careful look around."

"Nobody can make me take visits if I don't want to."

Corey laughs. "Nobody's gonna make you do anything. But you might as well let them show you a good time. Let them wine you and dine you. When my recruiting starts, I'm going to have me some fun."

Russell, having finished his snack, balls up the paper bag and tosses it out the window with an air of finality: "I don't want to be wined and dined."

As much as he hates Coney Island, Russell

has never lived anywhere else, and he often fears that his dark complexion (Corey and Stephon are lighter-skinned) will get him into trouble outside his home turf. That may explain why he doesn't want to take any visits. But something else is up. Corey notes this and changes strategy. "What's your reason? You got to have a reason."

"I'm not like everybody else," Russell replies.

"Yes," Corey says slowly. "This is true."

"Look, all the best players sign in the fall. Only the scrubs wait until spring."

"I'm not telling you to sign in the spring," Corey says, "I'm just saying you change your mind every day."

"I'm telling *you*, Corey, I'm having a great season. And when those schools that lost interest in me come back in the spring, I'm gonna be, like, 'Too late, *sucka!*' I'm gonna be throwing it all year! Tomahawk jams!" Russell starts thrashing about in the front seat, dunking his orange-juice carton into the ashtray of my car, and now I finally get it—that his decision to dunk in public, like his policy of wearing nice shoes, and now his intention to abruptly sign at a school he's never



seen, is Russell's way of propping up his identity, of seizing some measure of control, now that he has realized how easily exchangeable he is for a player with better test scores. Recruiting may be the most important thing in Russell's life, but to the coaches it's just a yearly ritual.

"Man, you are one *crazy nigger!*" Corey says. "I'm not talking about dunking! I'm talking about whether you should sign at some school you never even seen in your life!"

"Don't matter. It's my decision. And part of growing up is learning to live with your decisions. Even if it turns out to be a nightmare."

"But why?"

"Don't push me, Corey." Russell's voice has begun to rise up the scale.

"But *why?*"

"Because I don't want to talk about it."

"That's not a reason."

"BECAUSE I HATE ALL THIS FUCKING

RECRUITING!" Russell screams. "All right?"

Corey leans back against his seat, defeated. "Okay, well, at least that's a reason."

DECEMBER

**C**oney Island never looks quite so forlorn as it does just before Christmas. The amusement park is shuttered, the boardwalk littered with broken glass and crack vials. The cold weather has swept the streets clean of everyone but the most hardened criminals. At night, Christmas lights blink on and off from the top floors of the projects, but few people are around to enjoy them. No one simply passes through Coney Island on the way to somewhere else.

Tonight, Russell and I walk into the deserted lobby of his building and he says, his eyes cast down by shame, "Welcome to the old ghetto." Russell's building is identical in design to the one in which Corey and Stephon live, just a block away—an X-shaped slab of concrete rising fourteen stories into the air. I have always assumed it was no better or worse than theirs. But Russell assures me that looks are deceiving. By the way

he peers around the elevator door before getting in, I believe him.

Upstairs, his family's apartment is tiny: a living room, kitchenette, and two bedrooms. His mother has one bedroom, Russell and his two younger sisters share the other. It's Russell's room, though: basketball posters cover the walls from top to bottom and trophies crowd the floor.

I notice that Russell is wearing a new ring on his finger and I ask if it's from Terry. He doesn't answer. Instead he says, "Want to see some pictures of Terry and me?" He pulls out a scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings about himself and the Lincoln team. Stuffed in the back are a pile of snapshots. "We been together a long time," he says wistfully. "All those days last summer, picnics, all the stuff we used to do. Maybe someday—way, way off in the future—we'll get married." We're still looking at the photos when Russell hears a key in the front door. He grabs the

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pictures from my hand and shoves them back in the scrapbook, snapping it shut just as his mother walks through the door.

"You come home right after practice?" she asks anxiously. He nods, and she smiles in my direction. "Russell thinks I'm overprotective, but I have to know where he's at. If he's at practice or at Willie's, okay. But just hanging out on the street? No!" She plunks down a bag of groceries on the kitchen

table and lets out a long sigh. The neighborhood's only supermarket is fifteen blocks away. "This is a hard neighborhood, *wicked*, nothing but drugs out there," says Mrs. Thomas. "Most of Russell's friends are just wasting their lives. You've got to have a strong and powerful will not to go in that direction."

Joyce Thomas certainly has that. She is tall and thin like Russell, and moves around her apartment with fierce efficiency. A burst of what sounds like gunfire erupts outside, but Mrs. Thomas doesn't

react. "I always tell Russell, it takes that much"—she spreads two fingers an inch apart—"to get in to trouble, and that much"—now two hands shoulder-width apart—"to get out of it." She looks over to her son, but he has vanished from the room. "So far Russell's okay." She raps twice on her kitchen table. "So far."

I start to say something, but Mrs. Thomas cuts me off. "When Russell messes up, I knock him out. *I do*. I tell him, 'Don't you dog me, boy, I'm all you got!'" She is looking at me forcefully, without blinking. "I don't care how big he is or how much ball he plays, I'll put a ball in his head!"

Russell reappears, this time with his Walkman on and a strange, stricken look on his face. He starts to sing aloud to a slow love song coming from his Walkman—though all we can hear, of course, is Russell's crooning.

Suddenly Mrs. Thomas takes in a breath. Looking at Russell, she says, "Did you do it?" Russell keeps on singing, so Mrs. Thomas picks up his hand and examines the ring. "Terry gave it back to you?"

He slides the headphones around his neck. "I

took it back," he says. His voice is clotted.

"How did it go?"

He can't think of anything to say. Finally he murmurs, "She was real sad."

Mrs. Thomas doesn't stir. The apartment is quiet, except for the refrigerator's hum. Russell has begun to turn inward and the next words he utters seem to reach us from a great distance. "She was crying, hanging onto my leg, saying, 'Don't go, don't go.'"

"Now don't you worry about Terry," Mrs. Thomas says matter-of-factly. "She'll be all right. You just watch out for *yourself*."

"I'm real sad, too," he says quickly, and now I can see him struggling not to cry.

"Don't be. How long were you together—five, six months? That's not so hard to get over." Mrs. Thomas turns briskly toward her groceries and begins to unpack. Russell stands stock-still in the middle of the living room staring at his feet.

She glances over at me. "I explained to Russell, 'You want friends? Fine. But I don't want you attached to *anyone*. You will go to college alone, and so will Terry.'" Russell can't bear to hear his mother's words, so he puts on his Walkman and begins his tone-deaf accompaniment. "A girl like Terry could make him do something stupid. He gets carried away. He's very emotional, you know." She speaks with seeming indifference, though it's not hard to hear what lies beneath it: a desperation to get Russell away from Coney Island that is so great she will take away from him the one most stabilizing influence in his life, at a time when he seems to need it the most. "Russell got a second chance on this planet," she says, referring to Russell's suicide threat, "and *no one* gets that! *No one!*" She stares at me again, this time with such intensity that I have to fight the urge to look away. "He's got a lot of decisions ahead of him. Important decisions. *Business* decisions. Without that scholarship, he's nothing. *Nothing!*" Mrs. Thomas looks to her son to gauge his reaction, but Russell has checked out completely. He's turned his Walkman up to full volume, and he's singing as loud as he can.

**A** few nights later, Russell, Stephon, Corey, and I are all in my car, making the usual rounds to Willie's. Stephon announces that he's going to get an X shaved into the back of his scalp. Russell is considering a center part like Larry Johnson's, the star of the Charlotte Hornets. As we

approach the barbershop Corey says, "Don't be wasting time, all right?" When I ask why, he tells me a gang from a nearby project has been roaming lately. Last week a woman was hit by a stray bullet right outside the shop, so they all want to get their cuts and be gone.

To me, Coney Island's desolate project walkways and stairwells have always seemed more threatening than the raucous street life here along Flatbush Avenue. And, in fact, the few Lincoln players who live "across town"—Flatbush or Crown Heights or East New York—won't be caught dead in the Coney Island high rises ever since one of them spent the night at Corey's apartment and someone blew up a car right outside his window. But I am given to understand that in the patchwork of highly distinct neighborhoods that make up Brooklyn, a group of black teenagers will always be at risk outside their own turf. Wherever they go, the three are always scanning to see who might be coming up to them. One of their teammates was shot in the hand a few months ago. Another classmate was stabbed at a party recently; he's still in intensive care. "Something's happening, boy, every day, every day," says Russell.

As planned, they're in and out of Willie's in a flash and happy to be heading home in my car. Russell has been unusually quiet all evening. When I ask if something is bothering him, he tells me his mother has forbidden him to speak to me anymore. Apparently, she doesn't think it wise for him to talk to a reporter while his recruiting hangs in the balance. I tell Russell that this story won't appear until he's already off to college, but he says, "You don't understand. My mother's crazy!"

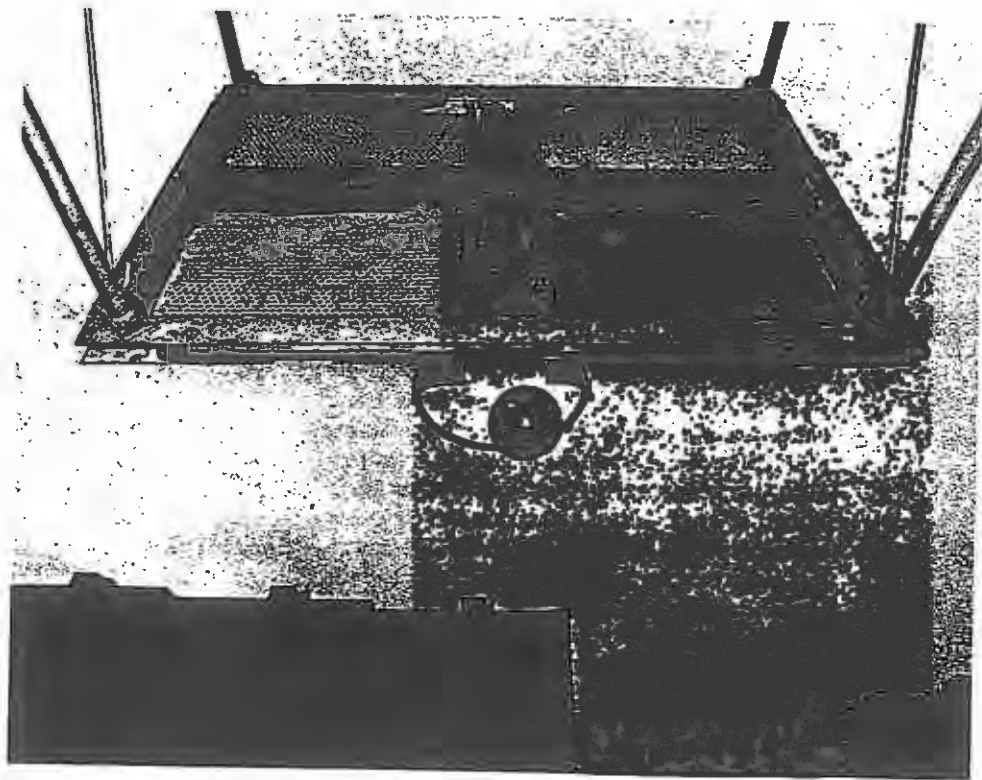
Stephon pipes in with some advice for me. "Just greet her at the door and hit her with a hundred. She'll change her mind." He snickers knowingly. "She's no different than my father. He wants to make sure he gets some loot." Lately, Mr. Marbury has been threatening to keep

Stephon from talking to me unless I cut him a deal.

At first I think Stephon is missing the point—that Mrs. Thomas's suspicion of me and her desperation to get Russell out of Coney Island are entirely different from Mr. Marbury's demand for money. But Corey sees the connection: "Damn," he says, "your parents must have had a hard life."

"Still do," Stephon replies. "Your father got himself a whole plumbing business. My father and Russell's mother got nothing." Stephon looks at me out of the corner of his eye and says, "You're thinking, *What a bunch of niggers, right?*"

The word just hangs in the air. I can't think of



a thing to say. Over the last five months, I realize, I have tried to ignore our racial differences in an attempt at some broader understanding. Stephon's comment may be his way of telling me that understanding *begins* with race. "You got to think like a black man," he goes on, "got to learn how to say, 'Fuck it, fuck everybody, fuck the whole damn thing.' Now *that's* life in the ghetto."

"It's true!" Russell exclaims, his mood improving for the first time all evening. "My moth-

er is a nigger! She's a black woman who does not give a damn."

"Man, I'm tired of all this shit!" Stephon slams his hands down hard on his book bag. "Somebody's got to make it, somebody's got to go all the way. How come this shit only happens to us Coney Island niggers?" He shakes his head wildly and laughs. "My father and Russell's mother—yeah, they're crazy, but it's about time there was a little something for the niggs."

"Something for the niggs!" Russell repeats the line with a hoot. "Yeah, Steph! Time to get outspoken!"

"You got it," Stephon says, and laughs again. Then Corey joins in. And they're all three whooping and slapping their knees—laughing at their parents and also, I imagine, at the absurdity of this whole situation.

Here they are, playing by all the rules: They stay in school—though their own school hardly keeps its end of the bargain. They say no to drugs—though it's the only fully employed industry around. They don't get into trouble with the NCAA—though its rules seem designed to foil them, and the coaches who break the rules go unpunished. They even heed their parents' wishes—and often pay a stiff price.

Of course none of them is perfect: Russell panics about his SATs and the choices he must make, and has trouble owning up to it; Corey won't apply himself and kids himself into thinking it won't matter; Stephon has—what shall we call it?—an attitude that needs some adjustment. But they operate in an environment that forgives none of the inevitable transgressions of adolescence and bestows no second chances.

Which makes this process of playing for a scholarship not the black version of the American dream, as some would suggest, but a cruel parody of it. In the classic parable you begin with nothing and slowly accrue your riches through hard work in a system designed to help those who help themselves. Here you begin with nothing but one narrow, treacherous path and then run a gauntlet of obstacles that merely reminds you of how little you have: recruiters pass themselves off as father figures, standardized tests humiliate you and reveal the wretchedness of your education, the promise of lucrative NBA contracts reminds you of what it feels like to have nothing in this world.

Jou-Jou, Silk, Chocolate, Spoon, Spice, Ice, Goose, Tiny, T, Stretch, Space, Sky: all of them

great Coney Island players, most of them waiting vainly for a second chance, hanging out in the neighborhood, or dead. And here come Russell, Corey, and Stephon in my car, riding down Mermaid Avenue in the bone chill and gloom of this December night, still laughing about "the niggs," hoping for the best, and knowing that in this particular game failure is commonplace, like a shrug, and heartbreak the order of the day.

#### EPILOGUE: WINTER 1993

In the spring of 1992, near the end of his senior year, Russell signed with Philadelphia's Temple University, whose team in recent years has regularly been among the nation's top twenty. But on his final SAT attempt, his score went down and Temple withdrew its scholarship offer. Rob Johnson brokered Russell into a Texas junior college known on the street as a "bandit" school, where his teammates seemed to carry more guns than schoolbooks. Desperately unhappy, Russell transferred after a week to a junior college near Los Angeles. There, this past winter, he was averaging twenty-six points per game and hoping that after two years he would be recruited by a four-year school and earn his degree.

Corey fell short of a 700 on his SATs by ten points. He planned to spend a year at a prep school to brush up on his academics but filed his application for financial aid too late. He went to another junior college in Texas. Away from his girlfriends, Corey earned four B's and two A's in his first semester. He hopes to move on to a four-year school himself.

Stephon is now in his sophomore year. In the summer of 1992, he was among the four youngest players invited to the Nike all-American camp, an all-expenses-paid jamboree in Indianapolis for the 120 top high-school stars in the country. His play, before every Division I coach in the country, looked like a highlight film. Now four inches taller and dunking the ball, he is dominating the PSAL and should have his pick of top programs in his senior year, provided he can score 700 on the SATs and that neither he nor his father violates any recruiting rules.

And at the Garden, some of Coney Island's elders have organized nighttime shooting drills for the neighborhood's schoolchildren—eight years old and up—to prepare them for the road ahead. ■