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The Raw Intensity of New York's Elite Youth Basketball

By **Graham Rayman**

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Sam Horine



The Riverside Hawks do their thing in a March game.

Sam Horine



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Mark Jerome, executive director of the Riverside Hawks, coaching in a recent practice.

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Some
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court.

Toward me. In the middle of the game, with kids running past him, and he doesn't seem to care.

It's the Showstoppers basketball tournament at 152nd and Adam Clayton Powell. Late one August. The championship game in the 11-and-under bracket. Two months earlier, I had sort of stumbled into coaching for the Riverside Hawks, a storied program that operates out of Riverside Church, and this is my first championship game. I am, admittedly, inexperienced. Green. Nervous.

And now a dad is coming at me across the court.

This is no standard Little League game, or your typical rec league or YMCA game, where kids play for "fun." Here, winning matters.

This is elite-level youth basketball, an ever-more sophisticated world, where extremely talented grade-school players face high intensity and high pressure from ambitious parents and coaches, where curious customs and rules exist, where there is no "mercy" rule, where parents think nothing of jumping their kids from team to team, where personal trainers earn \$100

an hour to train kids in the step-back and the cross-over, where bloggers track them as if they were already high-school phenoms.

At its best, it's a world where talented kids get to meet others from around the city, where they learn how to play the game, and where they learn how to win and lose. In the more moneyed programs, players get to travel, and some teams go around the country competing in tournaments.



It is a different kind of March Madness—a sprawling, complex subculture on a national scale. And to see the importance attached to it, all you had to do was be at the court that day, where about 100 people clustered along a towering chain-link fence ringing the court to watch a bunch of fifth-graders play a game.

Only, you wouldn't have been there, because you weren't invited. Unadvertised, the tournaments invite only parents and coaches. This is serious business, and the public isn't informed.

I was there only because I have a son who has played for Riverside for three years, and because I became a volunteer coach and donated money to the program. And so, hopelessly conflicted as I am, I will try to offer a rare peek inside.

Come to your own conclusions about whether the kids benefit or not. Either way, it's a reality, played out every weekend across the country in hundreds of tournaments each year, culminating every summer in the Amateur Athletic Union national championships for kids from second grade through high school.

At that August game, we're playing on a court tucked between a row of brick walk-ups and an auto-parts shop. The city had built a 20-foot chain-link fence around it, and the space is tight, claustrophobic—more so for the crowd that packs in along one side of the court and leans in to peer through the fence. It's hot and bright. The emcee booms rap tunes through a loud, scratchy boombox and shouts to the crowd. The boys warm up in layup lines. The referee is late.

It's common in this world of all-star teams for children to come from different places around the city: On that team, I had kids from Brooklyn, the Bronx, Harlem, the Upper East Side, the Upper West Side, and the Lower East Side. I had rich kids and poor kids, white kids, black kids, Hispanic kids, and Asian kids. I had kids who never would have met people of other ethnic and economic backgrounds if not for basketball.

Only seven or eight kids have shown up at practices over the summer, but for this championship game, every kid on the roster is here. I have 14 kids for a 24-minute game. I know there is no way I'm going to get meaningful playing time for all of them—I don't even have jerseys for all of them.

And then there's our opponent. We're playing the Kips Bay Boys & Girls Club, a Bronx program that has produced a long list of fine basketball players and is a second home for city kids who live along White Plains Road.

Kips Bay is good. They have two fine guards and a good big man. It's going to be tough for us to beat them, even if I only play our best kids. I want to play everyone, but I already know that's going to be unlikely.

The referee finally arrives, and the game tips off. If you are envisioning a bunch of kids randomly chasing the ball, like little kids on a soccer field, you're wrong. In fact, even at this age, the game is surprisingly sophisticated and the level of play surprisingly good.

Each team has multiple offensive and defensive sets. I start in a full-court man-to-man press. The Kips Bay coach deploys a 3-2 full-court zone press. I counter with a press break. He falls back in a half-court zone. I call the high-low zone offense.

The game is very close, very fast, and very intense. Sneakers shuffle across the asphalt. The referee's whistle screeches. Coaches holler instructions. Parents scream out their own instructions to their kids. The boombox blasts. The emcee assigns each kid a nickname over his microphone.

One of the parents seems to be afflicted with Tourette's. His words spill out at high volume, louder than even the boombox: "Get it! Grab it! Take it! Take it! Attack! Get up on him! Make your layups! Follow through! Pass the ball! Shoot that! Shoot that! Come on now! Get on the floor! All the way, baby! Got him!" At one point, I think the referee is going to stop the game and ask him to quiet down.

The scene is so chaotic that I can't possibly focus on everything that is happening. I have to just make sure the kids know where they are supposed to be on the court. That's not easy. At this age, you tell a kid something, and he's already forgotten it by the time he reaches half-court.

By the end of the second quarter, a quiet migration has begun. Some of the fathers begin making their way around the court toward the bench. In a half-time huddle, I look up and see, above the kids, the heads of five fathers, peering at me intently.

They really want to win this game. It's very important to them, and they look skeptical about my ability to do it. After the huddle breaks up, some of the fathers speak seriously with their kids. This is coaching by committee.

The score remains tight through the third quarter and into the fourth. I still haven't been able to get meaningful playing time for most of our players, but we are still within two baskets, and a couple of my kids are playing way above their level.

Meanwhile, one of the fathers has taken up residence next to me in front of the bench. Unsure of what to do, I let him stay there. This is a mistake, and a more experienced coach would ask him to leave.

But I have a different, even worse problem. Another one of the fathers is seated across the court, seething, because his kid has only played a couple of minutes.

Someone tells me later that he has been bad-mouthing my coaching the whole game, but I am oblivious to this—until he gets up out of his seat and walks over to me, right across the court, as play continues.

"Why aren't you playing my son?" he asks me, angrily. "You need more guards out there. You should put him in."

Totally unprepared for the confrontation, I stare at him like he's from another planet. "Uh, OK," I struggle to say, again letting my inexperience show.

So I put his son in.

The game is decided in the last two minutes. We lose by a basket or two. I tell the kids they've done a good job—they have played well above their level. There is no shame in losing to a good team. Unfortunately, these positives have been lost in the aftermath of the game. A couple of the kids stand at half-court, sobbing uncontrollably. Parents cluster and handicap the loss. I'm angry at myself for losing and for allowing the parents to control me, and I'm angry at my own behavior, at being unprepared for all 14 kids showing up. I tell two dads, in colorful language, that I'm unhappy with them.

The father who told me to play his kid tells me his son will never play for Riverside again. I let him know the feeling is mutual: "I like your son. He's a great kid, but you are done with the program," I say.

Never again, I tell myself as I leave for the train. This was it. I wouldn't coach again. Nothing was worth this kind of aggravation—especially not youth basketball.

I was wrong. Coaching has a draw to it, only because it's great when a kid does something you've taught him to do. A few months later, I returned, and I've been doing it ever since.

In the basement of the stately Riverside Church on the Upper West Side, past the wedding hall and down a narrow hallway crammed with janitorial supplies, there is a claustrophobic little basketball court.

The court is hemmed in by close-set walls on three sides, and is trimmed with a dusty, broken scoreboard and banners of past championships. Despite its modest feel, the court is hallowed ground—a mecca for generations of elite basketball players.

It was here, four decades ago, that the Riverside Hawks—the dominant youth basketball program in the country for many years—was founded. From Nate "Tiny" Archibald through the McCray brothers, Kenny Anderson, and Elton Brand, it was here that 65 NBA players, along with uncounted college ballers and many coaches, honed their game.

At around 6 p.m. on a recent Friday night, the court's cathedral silence is broken by the sounds of the kids from Riverside's powerful 12-and-under team and the rapid-fire cadence of their coach, Mark Jerome, 39.

"On the line," he says, as the boys jog to one end of the court. "OK, three-man weave, continuous. Go twice."

Three of the boys set off on the time-honored drill, passing and moving with purpose. The others wait in line expectantly.

Jerome knows he has a lot on his plate: 16 teams, 300 kids, and—between coaching, raising money, running the academic programs, and being a boss—a seven-day-a-week work schedule. It's hard to talk to him without his e-mail pinging, his phone buzzing, or someone interrupting. He grew up in Manhattan, born to a white father and a black mother who were active in civil rights causes. He was a high-school star and played some college ball. Four years ago, he was selected to take over the Riverside program, which was in danger of closing for good.

Since then, Jerome's teams—which play aggressive, pressing defense and a flowing, passing offense—have won three AAU national championships. Last summer, a team coached by Tony Hargraves, who was one of the state's top scorers in high school, finished ninth in the 14-and-under division out of 150 teams. Riverside teams have won or placed high in countless local and regional tournaments during that period.

"When it's done right, kids get a chance to play good competition in a positive environment—they learn teamwork, self-esteem, and there's academic training as well," the coach says.

I first met him about three years ago, when I brought my son to try out for the Hawks' fourth-grade team. About five minutes into the tryout, my son threw a pass without much intensity, and Jerome made him pay for it by telling him to do five push-ups. I will never forget how my son looked up at me, his eyes as big as saucers. He had never done a push-up as punishment before.

"The main thing that distinguishes this is that it is competitive ball, as opposed to recreational ball, and winning is an important goal, among many other goals," says Rob Stevens, another father whose son plays for Jerome. "I've seen coaches push kids way over the line, but Mark has an intrinsic sense about pushing as hard as he can without crossing the line, while empathizing with the kids and teaching skills and teamwork. I haven't seen a coach better than Mark."

As practice begins, Jerome confesses to a lingering ache over a loss the previous Sunday in a Queens tourney. His team had been up by six with two minutes to go. Losing bothers him, and he is thinking about the loss far more than he is about the team's championship that same weekend in a different tournament sponsored by NBA player Ron Artest.

He switches the boys from the three-man weave to a continuous series of three-on-three scrimmage. He yells at a kid who is only going at half-speed.

Compared to the years of Riverside's dominance, the big change that exists in elite youth basketball now is that there are many more teams and everyone is playing a lot more, he says. There's a higher skill level at all ages. Even wealthy Manhattanites bring their kids to Riverside to improve their basketball skills.

"Some of the parents don't understand the commitment that it takes to excel at this level," he says. "If you're not playing year-round, you can't keep up. And people don't realize how good you have to be to play at a high level."

Only a select group can really thrive in the world, he says. "I used to think anybody could do it, but I now believe only about 10 percent of kids have the physical ability and the emotional strength to withstand the pressure of playing in some of these intense environments," he says. "I get calls all the time from parents who say their kids are really good—and then they come here, and their jaws drop. You worry that the kid will never pick up a ball again."

He adds that he wants greater loyalty from the parents, and he wishes that, as a class, they would relax. "I wish they would calm down, be patient, and see the big picture," he says. "It's not so much where their kid is right now, but where he will be down the road. . . . You have crazy coaches, and you also have parents who get impatient, who move their kids from team to team. I think that sends the wrong message."

He sees some sloppy play on the court and orders the boys to play Taps—the old game in which a kid throws the ball off the backboard to the next kid, who catches it in mid-air and repeats the move. Only, his version involves a full-court sprint and 100 repetitions. The ball cannot touch the ground. The drill runs for 20 minutes. By the time they get a water break, the boys are exhausted.

Sometimes, Jerome runs a layup drill, in which the kids have to sprint from half-court and make 20 left-handed layups in a row. With each miss, they have to do five push-ups and start over. He believes that this teaches them concentration.

It's a hothouse environment, and no matter where you start, you will improve if you stick with it, Jerome believes. He points to a towering, gawky kid from Harlem who came in never having played basketball. "You look at him," Jerome says. "He's made great strides already."

Jerome also has opinions on some of the rules in youth basketball, which he believes distort its purpose—especially those rules that allow older kids to play in younger divisions. One such rule is the "grade exception," which allows 13-year-olds, for example, to play in a tournament for 12-year-olds, as long as they're in the sixth grade. This—combined with "late birthdays," an exception for kids born between September 1 and December 31—allows a child to be as much as two years older than his teammates.

"What you get is a six-foot-four, 200-pound kid playing against a five-foot-two kid," he says. "The rules actually encourage parents to hold their kids back. The size difference actually creates a dangerous situation. And how is it fair?"

About halfway through the practice, Jerome talks to the team about the departure of a player to another program. His father, he says, wanted more playing time for the boy and decided, after three years, to switch. This is Jerome's way—rather than leave something unsaid, he addresses it head-on.

"His dad felt he needed a change, and I don't begrudge him that," he tells the kids. "People change teams. It's a part of life. You may not be playing with all the kids here in a couple of years. Life changes, and we have to be prepared for it."

Team-jumping is just another part of the AAU landscape. Parents move their kids for reasons both good and bad. They might dislike a coach. They might want more playing time. They might want more exposure.

But team-jumping "makes kids feel a little more like commodities," Stevens says.

While no one is going to admit that kids can be commodities in this world, sometimes it can seem like that.

Which brings us to another trend in this culture: the boutique team formed by a rich man in part to benefit his own son, but also to win by seeking out other good players.

A local example is Bob Novogratz, a wealthy man who lives downtown with his wife and six kids in a stunning mansion that the couple refurbished, landing them lavish write-ups in interior design and society publications. The home features a basketball court on the roof. Kin to the billionaire owners of a large hedge fund, Novogratz makes his living buying and renovating homes.

One of Novogratz's sons is a talented 12-year-old, who has had the benefit of personal trainers and assistants hired by his dad to help him improve.

The son played at Riverside for two years, starting in early 2006. During that period, Novogratz contributed money to the program, helped with fundraising, and helped pay for team travel. The team was very successful, winning an AAU national championship in 2006.

But in the spring of 2008, Novogratz pulled his son out of the program, and then, a few months later, used his wealth to form his own team, which he dubbed, "The City."

Novogratz also lured several players away from Riverside to his team. That move caused a great deal of consternation among some folks at Riverside.

In the few months since the team's formation, it has won at least one high-level tournament.

Of course, this kind of thing is no longer unusual. The most famous example is the Texas Titans, a Dallas-based team of fifth- and sixth-graders, which was founded by another rich guy named Kenny Troutt.

Troutt's team was featured in a series of newspaper articles, most notably in a piece that described how he flies his grade-schoolers to tournaments in his private jet. While most AAU coaches are volunteers, Troutt pays his coaches handsomely. His head coach is a former college-level coach.

There are layers of ambition in this world. There are teams that only play in their community center. There are teams that compete only in local tournaments. And there are teams that compete regionally and nationally. But most teams are constrained in their ambition by one thing: money.

Troutt's group is one of a handful of teams across the country for whom money is no object in the pursuit of youth-basketball glory.

When I reached out to Novogratz for this story, his coach said Novogratz didn't think the team was ready for media exposure. But Novogratz himself later e-mailed me, responding to questions about the reaction to his team: "I offered no incentives to parents to come over to our team no matter what you think or were told," he wrote. "Coaching [is] all on a volunteer service as for now until May, when our coach will be paid a small salary to run the team and when the kids are only traveling in the New York/New Jersey area and going to Maryland and Virginia by car in the summer. . . . We are having our own tournament and fundraiser in the spring, and all parents are involved, as this is their team."

Novogratz doesn't seem to want to be seen in the same light as Troutt. But the barnstorming model of a wealthy's man team—created so his son can get playing time and exposure—is one of the things that sets the elite youth scene apart.

There's no doubt that high-level youth basketball is a real obsession in New York. So, naturally, it has its own websites.

You can find high-strung parents shouting at each other about their kids in various places on the Internet (the youth basketball forum at the *New Jersey Journal*, nj.com, is particularly Jerry Springer-like), but if there's one site that matches the court action for intensity, it's Mike Melton's Basketball Spotlight (bballspotlight.com).

Melton is a New Jersey teacher who has become both a tournament organizer and a tracker of youth basketball through his site, which he bills as "the home for future phenoms."

He's positioned himself as a kind of soothsayer, featuring kids who he thinks are major talents and posting photos and blurbs about them on his website. Often, those kids are participants in a tournament he has organized.

Some typical Melton rundowns on talented players:

"This point guard has the game and charm that has big-time potential written all over him."

"He can flat-out shoot the pill from the perimeter. He has a smooth stroke and the confidence to let it go from anywhere in the gym. I also like his size and length for a 2 guard."

"He is just a flat-out scorer. He torched every time they faced today with eye-popping treys and twisting finishes at the basket."

Imagine that kind of attention when you're a 10-year-old. In another post, Melton writes about an 11-and-under team he thinks is the best in the New York/New Jersey metro area: "They won the MLK Classic, New Heights Tourney, and the Clash for the Cup. They have the pieces needed to make a serious run at the Nationals and seem to be a team on a mission. Right now, they have a target on their backs and must be ready for all comers."

In an interview, Melton stressed that he does not want to be portrayed as exploiting children, and he says he does not rank players. At the same time, he is walking a very fine line: He's running a business—promoting tournaments sponsored by a company called Hoop Group—and even though he isn't ranking players, he does feature them in a way that feels like the same thing.

Melton sees himself as a reporter covering a beat, only he's doing it with the kind of sophistication

once reserved for high school, college, and professional athletes. "About a year ago, I started covering strictly grammar school, and it's just taken off," he says.

Melton says he got started covering high-school basketball with a site called Metro Hoops, but soon realized that there already were many other people doing the same thing. "I would go cover the games, and I would see stories I was about to write already online," he says.

So, one day, he went to a New Jersey tournament for younger kids, and stumbled upon a niche that wasn't receiving the same attention as the high-schoolers. In January and February, he says, his site received 66,000 hits.

"That's when I knew I needed to go back and cover younger kids' tournaments," he says. "When I took their pictures, I saw how excited they were."

Melton now uses the site to promote not only players, but the tournaments and camps that he helps to organize. And he's not alone. A quick check of YouTube shows many highlight reels of nine- to 11-year-old kids from California to New York.

The Internet provides a forum for all kinds of activities that previously labored in relative obscurity. When I was in college, the only people who could follow my Division III team were the locals, the students, and the small-town newspaper.

Now, there are top 20 rankings for D3 schools, and websites devoted to tracking the wins and losses of schools like Pomona and Wooster and Wisconsin-Platteville.

In search of a little perspective, I called an old friend at *Newsday* who put me in touch with two of the mavens of New York City basketball—Ron Naclerio and Tom Konchalski.

Naclerio is the legendary coach of Cardozo High School in Queens, and Konchalski publishes a highly regarded high-school-basketball scouting report, which is read voraciously by top college coaches.

Naclerio once fielded a Rucker League team that had a backcourt of Stephon Marbury and Rafer Alston, has won city championships at Madison Square Garden, and has coached a range of top college and pro players. Konchalski has been credited with identifying many top players and was once lauded by *New York* magazine as one of the most important people in city sports.

I asked them both whether it was important for young players to play so many games before high school.

"Being ranked at 11 years old doesn't matter," Naclerio answered. "In my experience, the best players in high school weren't always the best coming up. Some kids just aren't ready at that age, and there's plenty of late development."

He added that parents who push their kids in the sport are making a mistake: "It destroys the kid," he said. "A lot of parents are too involved. It makes me wonder, What do they want to be? Coach? Agent? Or parent?"

"Parents all think they know a lot," he said. "I tell them, 'Listen, we all want to go to the Garden. But I've never had a parent come out of the stands and say, 'Hey, my kid's not playing well. Please take him out.' So, I tell them, if you don't like it here, I can help arrange for a transfer. . . . When I was growing up, it was a winter sport. Now, it's 12 months out of the year. They are playing so much, they don't get enough time to really learn if they are doing something right or wrong. If you are playing

that many games, when are you really working on your strengths and weaknesses? The kid finds success going right, and so he just goes right, and never learns to go left—and the cycle propels itself. The key at that age is practice. Practice is where you get better."

Konchalski, meanwhile, finds the mere fact that people are publicly discussing the relative merits of 10-, 11-, and 12-year-old players to be silly. "Anyone who pays any attention to that obviously hasn't been around the game very long," he says. "To think that someone is the best 11-year-old in the state or in the country is a joke. Even to engage in that type of conversation shows ignorance."

Moreover, he adds, "the endless number of games" prevent kids from working purposefully on their skills or just playing on the playground, siphoning away the creativity that that inspires. "It's become too structured, in terms of too many games and the parents [being] too involved," he says. "When you're at that age, the only reason to play is because you enjoy it. Any other benefit that comes along, that's just gravy."

Also, the hype and recognition that good players receive at a young age, Konchalski says, often actually hinders their development as they grow older. "One of the worst things that can happen to a player is the cancer of early success," he says. "They think they've made it already. They lose their hunger to improve. They become complacent, and they don't get better."

Konchalski also says that some kids are better than others at a young age simply because they are physically more developed—taller, faster, and stronger. "Often, kids who mature early cease to grow, and the only way they will maintain their dominance is to work on their skill set," he says.

The road to the NBA is crowded with people who barely rated notice even in high school: Michael Jordan, the NBA legend, was cut from his high-school team as a sophomore; Bill Russell, the all-time great Celtics center, was cut from his high-school team as a junior.

Konchalski says the NCAA recruiting rules actually encourage the tracking of very young players. For a long time, until the NCAA blocked the practice this year, assistant coaches were working high-level youth camps for middle-school kids in order to get close to future high-school stars. "It's a sad commentary on the recruiting process that the NCAA had to do that," he says.

The bottom line, he says, is, "A parent should let a kid play what he wants to play. It's got to be the child's dream. But kids are being robbed of their childhood. We're such a youth-obsessed culture that it's almost as if the younger they are, the more they're fawned over.

"Being a kid means being able to muddle your way through life," he says. "You should be able to make mistakes. When everything is programmed for kids, that's not healthy because they are not maturing."

On a recent Sunday morning, I'm standing courtside at a Queens tournament chatting with Antoine Lewis Sr., while our sixth-grade sons trap and chase the ball on the floor.

The kids are undefeated and are in the playoffs in the "bidy" division against the Gauchos, a Bronx team, which has been Riverside's chief rival over the decades.

The game is close at first, but the Gauchos' speedy guards repeatedly break the Riverside press and forge an eight-point lead on a series of layups. I'm grateful that it's Mark Jerome—and not me—coaching.

The tournament is known as IS8, simply because it takes place at IS8, a public junior-high school. It's one of the most competitive tournaments in the city and has Nike sponsorship. Most of the city's top

youth teams are here: Riverside, the Gauchos, Long Island Lightning, Team Underrated, the Metro Hawks, Positive Direction, the Next Level.

The organizers of IS8 do a good thing, which is that they don't allow grade exceptions or late birthdays. That means that the kids, generally, are all the same age.

Off the court, the talk turns to Lewis's extraordinary career in basketball—what emerges, in a way, is a cautionary tale about expectations and dreams of NBA stardom.

At age 40, Lewis, of New Rochelle, still carries a good portion of the knotted muscle that helped him become a star player as a youth growing up in Brooklyn. He watches the game with the appraising expression of someone who sees far more than the average fan.

His son steals a pass in a wink and flies down the court for a layup, bouncing high on the last dribble and rising toward the rim to tap the ball off the glass. Lewis nods with a restrained kind of satisfaction.

Lewis still has a youthful smile and a twinkle in his eye, but behind it, you can still sense the intensity that made him the player he was. And for the source of that intensity, you have to go back with Lewis to his days growing up in Crown Heights and attending Grady High School.

As a senior, Lewis tried out and made the team at Riverside. The practices, he recalls, were very intense, and the level of competition was high. "There was a lot of flashiness in the game of guards from Brooklyn, so they worked with me to develop my shot," he says. "I would ride the train two hours just to work on shooting."

Neil Federer, whose sons both play for Riverside, described those practices this way: "It was like they were training pit bulls. There was a lot of one-on-one full-court stuff, a lot of in-your-face. Nothing was out of bounds, and if you didn't work hard on one play, God forgive you."

There was a shady side to that world, too. Teams, Lewis says, thought nothing of offering cash and other incentives to players for their participation in tournaments. He recalls refusing to play in one tourney because he surmised that the organizers were drug dealers.

It was also not uncommon for most of the kids on Riverside's senior team to earn full scholarships, which is staggering when you realize that most high-school teams never send anyone to Division One.

Lewis once played a tournament with Kenny Anderson, the great point guard, and UNLV star Moses Scurry, against a team with J.R. Reid and Alonzo Mourning.

Lewis traveled with Riverside to Arizona, where he impressed scouts so much that he earned a full scholarship to Kansas.

"A lot of schools recruited me—one of them offered me \$10,000 and a Jeep Cherokee," he says. "My mother told them no."

Lewis would have been on Kansas's 1987 national championship team, but he was forced to sit out a year because he didn't score more than 700 on his SATs. He missed the standard by two points. A public-school kid, Lewis says he was repeatedly passed to the next grade because he was an athlete and teachers were too overwhelmed to really work with kids.

He found himself at Hutchinson Junior College, one of those JUCO powerhouses. The team had six players who would play major Division I ball.

With Lewis, Hutchinson reached the JUCO national championship game, but came out flat against a team from Kankakee, Illinois.

At half-time, the coach stormed into the locker room, shouting, "You guys are playing like shit! You're flushing the season down the toilet!"

With that—and this is one of those infamous coaching moments—the guy dropped his pants and took a dump on the locker room floor. Yes, that's right, Lewis nods. It happened.

"I'd had a lot of intense coaches, so I hardly blinked," Lewis says. "I just thought, 'Oh, he took a dump on the floor.' But the other guys were in shock. We went out in the second half and buried them by 25."

After that period at Hutchinson, Lewis had planned to return to Kansas, but his mother and grandmother were ill and he was needed back home in Brooklyn.

He left the Midwest and came home, enrolling in Farmingdale State College. After a season there, he transferred to Iona College, whose coach had stayed in touch. He played two good years there, and then his thoughts turned toward the pros.

As I speak with Lewis, I am watching my son intently, almost playing the game with him in my mind, but trying not to let it show.

Late in the second half, he takes a pass off a steal and scores a twisting layup in traffic, and I think, *Whoa, he's never done that before.*

On the next play, he misses an assignment, and the other team scores, and I feel that one, too. You live and die on every play.

Lewis began working out with NBA players at Columbia University the summer after he graduated from Iona. He met an agent who pledged that he would help him find a slot in one of the European pro leagues.

Lewis paid the agent to compile promotional material. The agent claimed that he had interest from several overseas leagues.

Then, the agent wouldn't return his calls. Lewis took the subway to Manhattan to see him. When he reached the office, it was empty. The agent had disappeared and taken his money.

"After that, basketball just wasn't the same to me," he says. He walked away from the sport.

He found work as a foster-care caseworker and began a long career of service to people on the margins of society. Today, he works with homeless adults in Westchester County.

When his eldest son began to show interest in basketball, Lewis grudgingly decided to return to the sport. He played in a couple of men's leagues and started coaching.

Lewis developed priorities for his kids: "God, family, work, play." He promised himself he would never push his kid into sports, and he would teach them to pursue school with the same aggressiveness with which they play sports.

"I wasn't going to be that parent, who lived their lives for what they didn't reach when they were young," Lewis says. "They have a better chance than I did. If I had a father in the sport, I might have

gone farther. But I didn't have that guidance."

As the game ends, Riverside has won, holding the Gauchos to a handful of points in the second half. The players shake hands. The coaches cluster with the players. They separate, and everyone ambles out to their cars, where, more than likely, more discussion of the game will commence.

The games are like sandcastles, built and dismantled in an hour or so, and then everyone vanishes. Lewis and his son go to the car. They have another game later that day.

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