

Hopelessly Devoted to Sports

Imagine attending a private school where everyone looks like you, comes from a similar background, and is afforded an endless supply of opportunities. Imagine sitting in class with all of your school supplies getting lectured by one of the best teachers in the state. You are able to sit in class comfortably because your mom or dad dropped you off in the morning and even sent you along with a sack lunch equipped with an after-school snack to get you through the second half of your day where you will meet your private tennis instructor for two hours before you head home for the day. Sounds like a dream, doesn't it? This life would be a dream for the athletes in Coney Island, New York and Smith Center, Kansas, however, their reality is unique and one they can only tell. These athlete's dreams were much different than what I had you imagine. Over the next ten pages I am going to challenge you to take a walk in their shoes, experience their trials and tribulations, and imagine being part of something much bigger than yourself.

First I want to take you on a journey to Smith Center, Kansas also known as the center of the contingent United States. The center of the US does not come with any frills or fancy night life, in fact, Smith County is what you might consider the middle of nowhere. In 1990 the city was booming with over 2,000 residents but in 2010 approximately only 1,600 residents still reside amongst the desolate farmland. It is in Smith County where children grow up on farms with daily chores and responsibilities, hold back from going to college so they can take over the family business, and high school football is prime entertainment. In fact, the town of Smith Center rallies around the football team year after year as generations of family members go

through Coach Roger Barta's legendary system. Morse Boucher, a regional produce manager at Boogart's, knows first-hand what the football program means to the city of Smith Center. "I've seen businesses come and go around here, but the one thing we've always been able to count on in our boys. It's more than just winning; they come out here with a work ethic and a sense of caring for each other" (Drape, 2009, p. 58).

Smith Center Football is unlike any other team in Kansas. The Redman compete in division 2A, the second smallest division in Kansas, and although they compete amongst some of the smallest schools in Kansas, they sure do pack a big punch. The Redman boast a winning record with numerous state championships and a presence that is feared by their opponents. Coach Barta and his staff have become family and it is not rare for athletes to return to the program and coach themselves. Like I said, football is where kids learn what family is all about. It is an honor to be a part of this football team and to be coached by former players who are now role models.

The coaching staff is truly the heart and soul of this team. They know how to get their players to buy in, how to earn their trust, and how to develop a knack for hard work and dedication. During training camp Coach Barta laid out rules for the athletes to follow such as showering to avoid Staph infection and drinking enough water to avoid dehydration, but he also touched on the importance of safety. "Now you guys know that being out here, you are taking on an assumption of risk," he said. "This is a rough game, you guys listen to the coaches in here and really try to use the proper technique, you're going to be OK" (Drape, 2009, p. 31). Coach Barta truly cared about his players and their well-being and made sure his players knew of the inherent dangers of playing such an aggressive sport.

With that being said, Smith Center players took a pledge every year to avoid drinking, smoking, and drugs and this year in particular the team made a pledge to limit their time with girls (Drape, 2009, p. 36-37). Truthfully, it wasn't hard to stay away from illegal substances as there was only one liquor store and one bar in the entire town and as previously stated, everyone knows who you are. The team was committed to each other and the tradition of winning. It is not every day you come across a team as selfless as these young men who continuously stay out of trouble for the sake of their teammates and community.

Although Coach Barta and his staff cared about winning football games and making sure their players were committed to the team, they cared more about their player's personal lives and lives after football. Every coach wants to see their players chase their dreams and passions and Coach Barta was no exception. The only problem with Smith Center is that few people ever left. Justin Nixon came from a long family chain and not one of them had ever left Smith Center. "I'm not sure he's ever been to Hays," Coach Barta said (Drape, 2009, p. 42). Justin was not alone in his lack of aspirations to leave Smith Center. Joe Osburn's only aspiration was to become a meat-packer. There were no such dreams of becoming wealthy businessmen, becoming a lawyer or police officer, or even playing in college. In fact, most Redman players wanted to graduate high school so they could help contribute to their family businesses. That is what Smith Center was all about.

Family was a staple in the town of Smith Center. Families were centered around values such as "raising children takes love, patience, and hard work, and that being surrounded by a community committed to those values makes the job a whole lot easier" (Drape, 2009, p. 68). In fact, the community was so close that every time a siren went off they knew someone they loved was in grave danger. It would be much different than if they were to live in New York City

where the chances of them knowing someone a block away was slim. Each person who lived in the county was family and equally as important as the next person or generation.

Not only did the community rally to raise the children of Smith Center, but they also rallied around the football team because they were family too. After every home game the men in town circled up in the locker room, clasping hands with the person next to them and when they circled up on the field the women were part of the chain as well (Drape, 2009, p. 95-96). Over 400 people rallied around this team after home games and not a single person would rather be elsewhere. These young men were “our boys.”

Although Smith Center focused on family, team, and learning the value behind sacrifice, the city of Coney Island paints a much different picture. There are approximately 35,000 residents of Coney Island, a significant drop from prior years, with many living at or below poverty level with soaring crime rates and little to no job opportunities. Many families are on welfare and use food stamps and often send their kids to school dressed improperly for the brutal New York winters. Families simply cannot afford to live a life of luxury.

There was a time, of course, when Coney Island inspired among its residents more sanguine remarks—when the neighborhood was home to three world-renowned amusement parks, and its streets were lined with three-story homes, filled to the eaves with Jewish, Irish, and Italian families who proclaimed Coney Island the most welcoming place in America for a newly arrived immigrant—a latter-day Plymouth Rock. Now, however, all but a few scattered rides have been dismantled; most of the cottages and triple-deckers have succumbed to bulldozers of urban renewal; and in their place the city has erected a vast tract of housing projects, home to Coney Island’s newest arrivals—African Americans. (Frey, 1994, p. 3)

Coney Island to its’ residents can be considered several different things. To parents and ancestors it is the only place they have ever known and the place where they were able to put their dreams into reality. It is where they have struggled through hard times but have persevered and raised their children in a bustling economy. It is where family and friends have come and gone and the

only place they have ever known to have a job. To the upcoming generation, Coney Island remains as the one place they have longed to escape from because quite honestly, there isn't much to strive for anymore. "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" (Frey, 1994, p. 3).

Basketball has been an outlet for young men and women since the downfall of Coney Island. The basketball court is a safe zone; it is where "a young man's talent, ambition, and desire to stay out of harm's way may be put" (Frey, 1994, p. 4). Basketball is the one certainty in a young man's life and the one thing they can control themselves. Coney Island has been a hub for college scouts and the young men of Coney Island know this. They know that a full-ride scholarship to play basketball "promises something substantial and long-lasting: that even if an NBA contract isn't in the cards for any of the players, their talent and tenacity on the court will at least reward them with a free college education, a decent job after graduation, and a one-way ticket out of Coney Island" (Frey, 1994, p. 16). Unlike Smith Center, the young men in Coney Island do not have a fall back option if college doesn't work out. They don't have a family business to run or a farm to upkeep, rather they have a family to provide for because there is no money coming in elsewhere.

Basketball to the young men of Coney Island is a life or death situation. It is all they have. It is their make-or-break opportunity and the one thing that can guarantee success. Aspiring college basketball players hone in on their skills at "The Garden," a basketball sanctuary for anyone who is serious about committing their life to basketball. Although it is ravished by drugs and prostitutes in the late hours, it is filled with hard work and sweat throughout the day and into the early evening. This court is filled completely with African Americans who are hungry for a chance to prove themselves in front of top basketball coaches. They attend camps around the

country where coaches discuss the lack of hunger from affluent white players to “compete against black players from the ghetto” (Frey, 1994, p. 67). On other occasions, coaches assume an orphaned child living in a foster home would be extremely “coachable” because he is looking for authority figures. There is a very real possibility that basketball could be the answer to these kids’ dreams and aspirations, unfortunately, if you don’t have a troubled background you may be better off switching to a different sport.

The term “family” in Coney Island takes on a very different meaning than it does in Smith Center. In Smith Center a young boy has 2,000 people to call family, some related but most are not. In Coney Island, you are solely dependent upon yourself. Mom and dad are not going to be there for senior night, if your team has one, they will not be at your games, your coach will more than likely take you and your buddies to camp, and you better hope you are a good enough basketball player to be invited to a Nike camp so you can go home with a new pair of basketball shoes. Even on a team of people, each player is up against the next player as they compete for a chance to play at the next level. Some may say there is no “I” in “team” but the young men of Coney Island know nothing better than to look out for themselves.

Let’s go back to the imagination station where you are sitting in class with your school supplies, able to eat your pre-packed peanut butter sandwich and are on your way to one-on-one practice with your tennis coach. Now let’s strip all of these luxuries away and put you in the position of a Coney Island basketball player. You walked or rode a bus to school, you might have lunch from the McDonalds dollar menu, and after school there will be no snack from mom or one-on-one practice with your private coach but you are hoping gangbangers are only taking up part of the court you would like to use to practice. This is reality for Coney Island residents and a far cry from the private school opportunity you imagined earlier.

Thankfully what I had you do was simply for the purposes of this paper, but unfortunately what you just imagined is reality for thousands of boy and girls of color living in inner cities. Studies show that in comparison to their White counterparts, African American males are socialized by family and the larger community into sports deliberately and intensively by limiting exposure to other hobbies and role models and pushing sports as a possible career path early in life (Smith, 2004). A participant in a qualitative study done by Beamon (2009) on how African American's are socialized into sport said, "I mean it was real important to them (parents). Both of them played sports in college and so you know they understood that that could pay my way through school so of course, sports, they a big thing in my family." Sports are seen as an avenue to wealth, prosperity, and success among the African American community. "The consequences of overemphasizing athletic participation that have been identified in the literature are lower levels of academic achievement, higher expectations for professional sports careers as a means to upward mobility and economic viability, highly salient athletic identities, and lower levels of career maturity" (Smith, 2004). The pressure to be great at sports supersedes the pressure to be academically sound.

A lack of positive role models in career avenues other than sports and music seems to be lacking in the African American community. Beamon and Bell (2006) found that parents of African American athletes were found to place more emphasis on athletics than academics during childhood socialization in comparison to their White counterparts. Additionally, "White parents more actively involved with the direct socialization of education emphasis... White parents and players discussed schoolwork, visited museums, attended parent-teacher conferences and sporting events, discussed sporting performance and sporting events more often than Black players and parents. Black parents and sons perform sport centered socialization activities

together more often than they perform education-centered activities” (Beamon and Bell, 2006). This evidence holds true for the individuals in both books. In Smith Center, Kansas athletes were predominately White and were high achieving athletes and could move on to college studying something other than sports. For the African American individuals living in Coney Island, New York they almost always struggled with their grades and used basketball as a means to overcome this deficit.

In Beamon and Bell’s (2006) study, they found that “while 32% of African Americans have been placed on academic probation, 22.7% of white players have been on academic probation. Also 6% of African American players have been suspended from the university due to academic reasons and none of their white teammates have been suspended.” The lack of consideration for academics in the African American community is evident in the fact that a great number of these individuals are being suspended for not putting enough effort into their studies. This discrepancy could also be explained a different way. Often time’s colleges have the ability to override the academic department in order to get an athlete into the university even if he or she does not have the proper academic qualifications. It is hard to say if that is the case in this situation, however, it is not unheard of.

A great example of this discrepancy comes straight from “The Last Shot” (1994), as author Darcy Frey followed up on the young men twelve years later. Stephon Marbury seems to be the only young man from Coney Island who found success through basketball as he ended up making eight figures as a member of the New York Knicks. Unfortunately things did not pan out for everyone else. Corey underachieved on the SAT by ten points and ended up washing out of a junior college, Tchaka’s basketball career at Seton Hall ended early due to a car accident and as of currently is only making \$8.50 per hour as an electrical engineer, and Darryle had a fantastic

career at a junior college and division two school but ended up homeless and later committed suicide. “The problem for gifted ballplayers like Corey and Darryle and Tchaka, however, was that the game felt like the *only* path. That’s the kind of claustrophobic environment that led Darryle to believe that without a scholarship, his life was effectively over” (Barshad, 2014).

It is a sad reality for the young men of Coney Island but I cannot say reality is ten times better for the athletes in Smith Center, Kansas. Although there was a greater emphasis on education and family played a key role in the development of well-rounded student-athletes, the desire to escape the walls of Smith Center was still there. Opportunities were not abundant in Smith Center unless you planned on taking over or helping on the family farm or local business. Unlike the athletes of Coney Island, the athletes in Smith Center more than likely had an education to fall back on or a family business they could jump into if things didn’t work out.

What I would personally like to know more about is what American’s are doing to help change the reality for these players. At the university level, administrators like to place a big emphasis on “student comes before athlete in student-athlete” but the pressure to win seems to outdo this notion. If there is such an immense amount of pressure for athletes to succeed on the basketball court or the football field, why isn’t there this same pressure to succeed in the classroom? Additionally, if athletes are dropping out and being put on academic probation is there a way that academic coordinators and coaches can step up to make sure this doesn’t happen? The more pressure our society puts on succeeding in sports and putting academics on the back burner the more likely we are to see continuing failure. The reality here is that very few kids will make sports a profession but almost every kid has the ability to have a profession and make smart decisions.

What I had you imagine at the very beginning of this paper is an outlier just like the stories of the individuals from Smith Center and Coney Island, but they are somebody's stories. Each and every one of us faces our own battles, decisions, and circumstances; no one case is the same. No matter if you come from money, live in the middle of nowhere, or are amongst the poorest people in the middle of a city you still have the same decisions to make. You have the decision to wake up in the morning, go to school, earn an education, be kind to your family and friends, and more importantly, you have the ability to set a goal for something attainable. Of course they are extenuating circumstances but the fact of the matter is, if we keep letting our children grow up with an immense pressure to be a pro athlete we will have ultimately failed our children.

“The Last Shot” (1994) and “Our Boys” (2009) are perfect examples of what family, environment, and education can do for a person and how powerful coaches are to athletes. Family gives our children support and the caring environment they so desperately need to succeed. The environment for which our children grow up in becomes pertinent as they try to maneuver throughout the world. We have to ask ourselves whether the environment is safe and whether it is fostering a space where the child can do better. Lastly, how important is an education and is it more important than becoming a professional athlete. These are all questions we need to ask ourselves in the future if we are going to change the reality for these children. We all want to be difference makers but what if the next generation only wants to play sports because that's what we told them is important?

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