

Worlds Apart

We live in a country with a cultural divide that is clear and evident. Forums such as sport and art have long been used as a way to bridge the gap, yet it is still present. It is a topic that most would like to avoid, but must be considered if we are to change the established norms. “Our Boys” and “The Last Shot” allow the reader a look into two very contrasting social situations. The Smith Center Redmen hail from western Kansas while the focal characters of “The Last Shot” come from Coney Island in Brooklyn. These areas differ greatly not only in location, but also demographics, motivational aspects, and frame of mind. Through my study of these books, I have chosen to examine and contrast the economical factors at play in each setting, the support systems for the players, and what is at stake for these groups of young men. I will then consider the aspect of race and how it differentiates and pertains to the circumstances at hand.

Economics and Culture

Smith Center Kansas is the backdrop for “Our Boys” and offers insight as to why the Redmen function like they do. Located in the middle of the Dust Bowl, the town clings to its farming heritage with a fervor that cannot be denied. While population numbers have dipped considerably over the decades due to new farming technologies eliminating the need for human labor, many have their roots, as well as their wheat, planted firmly in western Kansas (Drape, 2010). Like most farming communities the town of Smith Center is essentially economically depressed, boasting low per capita income numbers on an annual basis. Despite all that is wrong financially with the town, the Redmen and football offer an escape for the town. Citizens of

Smith Center actively follow their boys and have developed a strong emotional tie to them, if not a family tie. “For Smith Center citizens, "being there" for the young men in the community really is a joy and a responsibility” (Altschuler, 2009, para 7). Roger Barta, coach of the team, has built an extremely successful program, but truly believes that his job is to cultivate and grow young men, stating, “None of this is really about football What I hope we’re doing is sending kids into life who know that everyday means something” (Drape, 2010, pg 1). Coaches spend the majority of their time teaching players the way things ought to be done in lessons that can be carried past the field of play and take precedence in their lives. These players get a taste of the real world before most. Because of the economic situation, many of the players work physically demanding summer jobs in order to save for college or make ends meet. A senior on the team, Marshall McCall, spent his summer working as an assistant plumber and digging graves to save for college (Drape, 2010). Marshall, like many of his teammates, will play his last game at the end of his senior season. While he has aspirations of playing football in college, he also has realistic views of his football potential. He takes the proper steps to provide for his future based on his situation. This is lends to the culture of Smith Center. These young men are aware of their situation and have taken the steps they feel are necessary to improve themselves and their situation.

The culture and economics of Coney Island also lends itself to why the primary actors in the book act in the way that they do, much like they do in Smith Center. This neighborhood constitutes the southern tip of Brooklyn and exhibits one of the most dangerous groupings in America. Jobs have left the area and opened the door to gang violence and a growing drug trade. “The community's isolation and its distance from year-round jobs have fostered among residents a culture of idleness that nurtures the drug trade” (Williams, 1988, para 13). Low-income

housing abounds in the area and acts as a war zone. Young men and women with direction plan to leave the area by any means necessary. The vehicle that “The Last Shot” focuses on is basketball. As in many cities, the best basketball is played on outdoor courts surrounded by several onlookers. The thing that differentiates Coney Island is, once again, the gang violence. People play until, “exhaustion or the hoodlums take over” (Frey, 1994, pg 4). Legitimate fear is present and self-preservation becomes the highest priority. However, even gang members refrain from including or harming those with the most noticeable potential because “in Coney Island the possibility of transcendence through basketball, in this case an athletic scholarship to a four year Division I college, is an article of faith” (Frey, 1994, pg 5). Many young men believe that basketball is their ticket out of this volatile environment, be it through a professional career or by getting an education with their athletic prowess footing the bill. This prospect affords them hope at a better life, but also a great deal of anxiety when those dreams seem to fade (Frey, 1994). Players seem to focus all their efforts on the court and avoid anything that takes time away from their improvement on the court, often at the expense of their academics. One of the main characters in the narrative, Corey Johnson, plans to make it out of his neighborhood with his prowess on the court, yet barely has the grades to remain eligible on the Lincoln High School squad, (Frey, 1994). To attain their goals, these players are working against odds that include “exploitative recruiters, the NCAA's self-serving fiats and, most dauntingly, required scores on college entrance exams—a rule, Frey argues, that discriminates against many of the most needy” (Lemonick, 1995, para 3). Coaches use every circumstance that plays in their favor as an advantage and in this circumstance; they use the player’s economic setting. They promise these players that they can help them make a life for themselves, but abandon them at the first sign of trouble.

Support Systems

Small towns throughout Kansas have always had a different aura surround them on game night and Smith Center is no different. People swell with Redmen pride and live and die for their boys. They are invested in them and follow closely. The "Bladder Fills Club" at the Second Cup Cafe talked about Redmen football in the mornings and at night. Cafe owner Lynn Pickel and her all-woman staff followed and fed the players and seemed to know, before anyone else, who was injured and who was in Coach Barta's doghouse (Drape, 2010). These people eat, breath, and sleep Redmen football and very much want these boys to succeed both on and off the field. Coach Barta emphasizes this point when encouraging his kids to seek out help when they needed. The coaches take steps to show that they truly care for the athletes and their well-being. Coach Barta was known to say this often with statements like "I want all you guys to know that I love each and everyone of you, and my heart would break if anything happened to one of you" (Drape, 2010, pg 112). This love and sense of community stems from the team and spreads through the entire community. The closing scene in the narrative paints a picture of family as generations of fathers and sons; generations of Redmen come together to celebrate their victory. Redmen football is part of their heritage just as much as any other trait passed from prior generations. The community bills this team as the boys' destiny and they do whatever they can to help them on their road. "Little boys grow up wanting to be Redmen, and Redmen grow up to be champions" (Drape, 2010, pg 166).

The community profiled in the "Last Shot" offers a stark contrast to that of Smith Center. Rather than the community pushing the young men in the way that they should go, Coney Island offers them stumbling blocks that could trap them in a place that they do not want to be. The drugs trade and gangs have an allure to those without guidance as they give a sense of purpose

and a source of income, but this lifestyle will either trap them or kill them. Their hope for the future as well as a priority system that aligns with their goals is their ticket to move past these snares. One of the player's mothers speaks to this situation saying "most of his friends are wasting their lives. You've got to have a strong and powerful will not to go in that direction" (Frey, 1994, pg 210). Because of the nature of the neighborhood and the crime that goes on there, young men must always be on their guard. As they seek to make it in a different world, they must adapt to every social circle that they are thrust in. "In the world of high school basketball, which brings black inner-city kids into contact with mainstream white society for the very first time, there are so many conflicting expectations about how players will or should behave" (Frey, 1994, pg 35). This includes a situation where one of the players was approached and berated by a policeman seemingly for no other reason than being a young black man. This compares unfavorably to the current unrest in Ferguson. With almost everyone making a contribution to a more volatile environment that is not ideal for fostering dreams and growth. Lincoln High, the school that the main characters attend, has committed eight security guards to patrol the hallways and, if necessary, make arrests (Frey, 1994). The danger of the street has entered the school. With that left academic standards. At the time the book was written, schools were losing funding quickly and college ready students were getting harder and harder to come by. Midst all of this is an incredible basketball team that boasts several college prospects. While every situation around them has set them up for failure, the best players have the potential to rise above their current circumstances and be more than a Coney Island statistic. While they are afforded this opportunity, one would think that these athletes would support each other and revel in one another's success, but this is not the case. As Tchaka Shipp, a senior on the team, starts to rise among the recruiting ranks, he starts to hear about it in the locker room. Rather than build

him up, other players openly question if he has what it takes to make it in big time college basketball (Frey, 1994). Had it been anyone else, he may have been able to shake it off, but coming from teammates, brothers it had to have an effect. I believe that this speaks to the gravity of their situation and what is at stake. Everyone wants to make it out, but some may be left behind.

What is at Stake?

While the Redmen have an incredible support system that cares deeply about them, they also have a lot of pressure on them to perform. The book carries us through a season that, if everything goes as planned, will culminate in their fifth straight undefeated state championship. While this is unheard of anywhere else, it has become the expectation for these young men to continue this daunting legacy. When speaking of it, coaches make it seem like a birthright saying “we play this game today because you live in Smith Center, Kansas, in a community that loves you and watches over you. Each one of you was born to be Redmen” (Drape, 2010, pg 244). It is extremely reassuring to have people that love and care for you rooting you along, but must be nerve wracking to know that getting this far was an expectation of theirs. If you had not met that expectation, how would they respond? They go on to say that the games in November, meaning that state playoffs, will be what they remember (Drape, 2010). Not the camaraderie of their teammates and brothers, but how they played in one specific game. This singular focus on winning does not play well with the coaches’ goal of developing these players for life. To add to this pressure, several Redmen have the goal of playing in college as follow their academic pursuits. Speaking from personal experience, it is not an easy thing to get noticed by recruiters in small Kansas towns. None of these players are likely to earn a full scholarship playing football, so they must shift some of their focus on how they are planning to pay for their

education. Like I stated earlier, some players are forced to work strenuous jobs while they train and play for Smith Center. While these activities are meant to build character, they also create a lot of stress for those involved.

The term “life or death” situation rings true on the streets of Coney Island. The neighborhood that boasts crime rates far above that of the average and unemployment rates approaching thirteen percent does not offer a lot of opportunities to succeed for young black men, (Pomorski, 2014). Those who work must leave their homes in the projects, walk or drive through gang territory, and go to their jobs in better parts of Brooklyn or even other boroughs. It is no small task to get out of Coney Island, but this is exactly what all these young athletes have set about doing. Each of these players has worked as hard as possible to afford themselves the opportunity to leave. However, their situation seems to get darker and darker at every turn. They deal with recruiters contacting them at all times of the day and breaking committing violations to do so, face academic struggles as money leaves the schools, and still have to navigate through drugs and gang violence to get home every night, (Frey, 1994). Tension mounts among the players as they play poorly or fail a test because they have always viewed basketball as their ticket out of Coney Island. When they find out that their skill on the court is not the only determinant for their future success, the nature of their circumstances becomes more evident. They live in a dire situation where the narrow path leads to success and the road of least resistance leads to death. It seems like a lot of weight to put on the shoulders of teens playing a game, but it is their reality.

Comparisons

On the surface, these situations do not have a lot in common, but after a closer observation, one can find some glaring similarities that lend to the cultures and circumstances

laid out for these young men. Both stories take place amidst trying economic situations. Money has left their areas and shortchanged them in one way or another. These boys all have aspirations that include higher education, but they differ in the way that they seek it. “Our Boys” never discusses whether their players are qualified academically to attend a university, but does question whether they have the size or skill to play their sport at the next level. On the other hand, the boys from Coney Island have noted skills that should afford them the opportunity to pursue a career in their sport if that is what they decide to do, but their academic pursuits are highlighted in a negative way. They each struggle to perform in the classroom and only one of them attains test scores high enough to compete at the Division I level. Both sets of young men have large amounts of pressure forced on them by their circumstances, coaches, and teammates. The Redmen of Smith Center rise to the occasion and reach their goal of winning a state championship while the young men of Coney Island falter at times under the pressure, calling out teammates in rage or jealousy. It is worth noting the different ways in which these boys were socialized, specifically from the standpoint of race.

Race in Sport

“The issue of race and sport in the United States is somewhat baffling in that many persons would rather it not be addressed at all even though sport has been intricately intertwined with racial issues in the United States throughout the Twentieth Century” (Race and Sport, 1999). While race is a difficult thing to talk about at times, it is perhaps the biggest factor at play when comparing these situations. Without explicitly stating it, most people would have known by the setting for each book what race the characters were. That is the first of many problems. While both cities face a dire economic situation, they differ in reasons why. People have flocked away from the open space of Smith Center to find jobs while housing projects have attracted

low-income families to the dangerous Coney Island (Frey, 1994). At Lincoln High in Coney Island more money is spent to provide security for the halls than put into college preparatory courses. The educators of the school system have done it a disservice by allowing standards to drop just because of the economics of the situation. Frey addresses the “white flight” that has happened in the inner city and how those families leaving the area have crippled it in more ways than one, but I believe a larger portion of that burden should be placed on the schools. Minority students are just as capable as white students, but at Lincoln High School they do not receive the proper funding or attention. Money has flooded out of the arenas that need it the most. Finally, the most notable racial gap for me exists in the evaluation of these players. The white players of the Smith Center Redmen are praised for their hard work and effort. They win because they do things the right way, while the focal characters of the “Last Shot” are athletic specimens that have power and strength. The way that the general public talks about athletes must change. Too often the public struggles to recognize the athleticism of a white athlete or the intelligence and instincts of an African American one. A listener should not be able to tell the race of an athlete through your use of syntax. We saw this with Aaron Craft, former point guard at Ohio State. While a top tier defender in what is one of the best conferences in college basketball, Craft was praised more for his intelligence than his agility and quickness to stay in front of his man (Howard, 2013). These books represent a litany of things, but when comparing them, the forums of race and economics became most clear.

Conclusions

Both of these books offer great insight into several sociocultural factors at play on a daily basis in America. Following these young men through their struggles and triumphs was a trip that anyone with a desire to learn about any number of circumstances that deviate from the norm.

These young men face pressures that many of us could never imagine before they ever take the field of play. They strive to represent something bigger than themselves in areas that many have forgotten and left for greener pastures. Issues of race become evident in how these young men are able to deal with their circumstances. We, as a society, are failing if we do not recognize these struggles and try to make a change. You cannot take an area like Coney Island and make it safe, but you can offer avenues to better navigate the danger. You can contribute to schools to make them a stepping-stone to bigger and better things rather than the end of the line for a student who is unprepared. Smith Center, for the most part, offers a playbook for this change. If people around the area can care for students and contribute to their success by teaching them values rather than belittling success and devaluing education, perhaps they can change from within.

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