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8.22.2007

Where You From

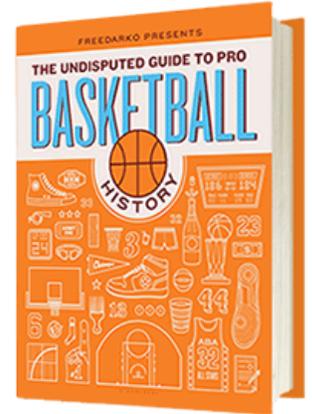


Welcome back to the FreeDarko Guest Lectures series. Today, your guide will be Jake of [Bread City Basketball](#) and the dearly-departed [Grass Casket](#).

Jason and I were playing ball at the courts in Dean Park. This was back in ninety-seven, ninety-eight, when I was buying uptowns on layaway with a ten dollar allowance and subway tokens from off my parents' dresser, and Jason was rocking them big-ass prescription sport-goggles on some Horace Grant shit. Three-thirty on any given school day and the courts would be already filled up, so you had to get there quick. Dean Park had four hoops, but there were always mad heads waiting on the fences. Not that everyone was trying to play, it was just the place to be. There were days when you'd sit there for four or five hours without shooting a single basket, and not even notice. But this wasn't one of those days. Jason and I were going one on one.

Let me take you back like an Indian giver I was setting up the play like my name was Doc Rivers.

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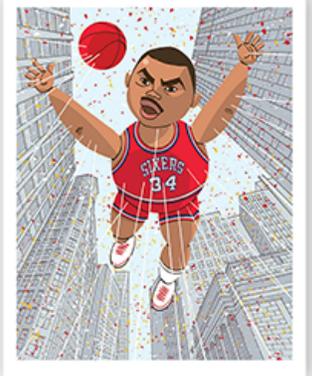


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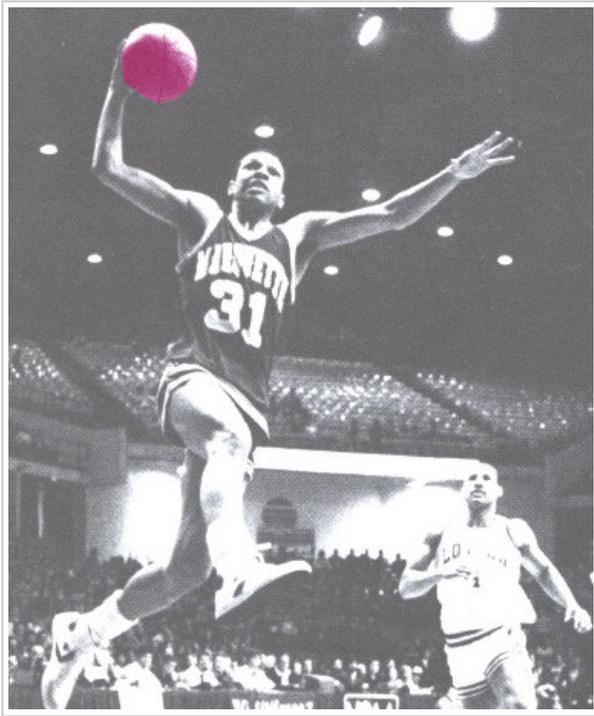
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THE STORE



PRINTS FROM THE BOOKS



I put my shoulder down, juke left, then pulled up for the college three anyway. Swish.

"Too nice!" I said.

"Damn, you play some pussy basketball," Jason said.

"I'd rather be a pussy and win."

"You would, Park Slope pussy."

"Man, check me the ball," I told him.

It was funny, because even though I was considered to be from out the neighborhood, I only lived eight blocks away, by the Grand Army Plaza 2 stop. That was always the first thing kids wanted to know: Where you from? Eight blocks made a difference. Eight blocks was a different city. Prospect Park was the Atlantic Ocean, the other side was Europe, and Brooklyn was The Planet. That's what people used to call it. I don't know whether they still do, but I wouldn't be surprised. Jason checked me the ball, and right away I put up another three. Swish.

"It's raining buckets now," I said. "It's a thunderstorm now," I said.

Then our game got interrupted. No matter what time you were on the courts, it could be one in the morning, there were always about a hundred little ankle biters trying to get in on your game. The crazy thing was, even though they were all like four feet something, some of them were actually kind of nice, I mean, they could play. But still, most people didn't really want to ball with an eleven year old no matter how nice they were, especially when they called fouls every two seconds, like Mateo did.

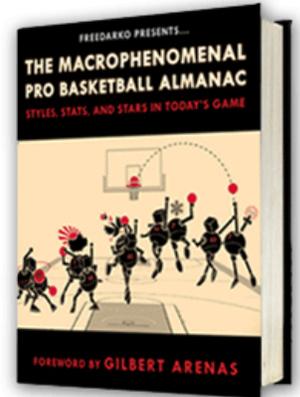
"Hey Jessie," he said, running up and trying to steal the ball.

"Yo what up Mateo?" I said, lifting the ball up over my head with one hand.

Mateo liked me cause I was one of the only kids who'd let him get in a game, or at least take a couple shots. Sometimes on the weekends, when I'd be just shooting around by myself, Mateo would show up and we'd play horse or something. He was always there and he never had a ball. He must've lived around the corner.

"Hey can me and my friend Isaiah play? Two on two. Us two versus you two."

THE ALMANAC



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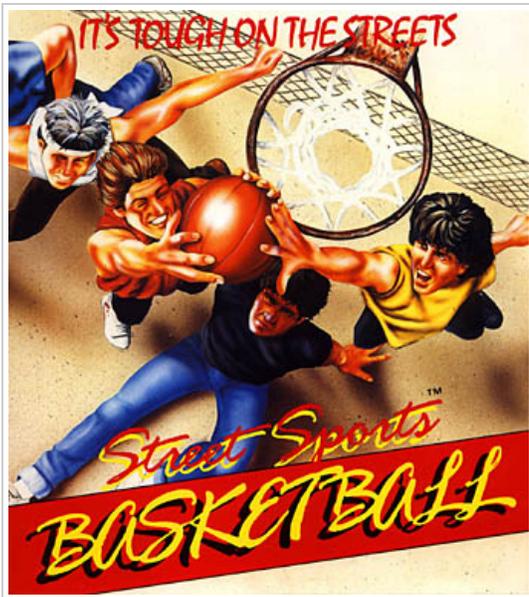
Andy Rooney has some really productive thoughts about publishing. [45 minutes ago](#)

I looked over at Jason. He shook his head no, but I was in a good mood, so I figured, why not?

"Yeah, all right," I said, "just let us finish this game."

Jason walked over to me. "What's the matter with you man? Is he your son or something? I'm not trying to be an after-school counselor."

"Relax," I told him, "it'll be fun."



So Jason and I matched up against them. We both had about two feet on these kids, easy. For the first few minutes, we laid off like we were going to let them keep it close, but then we just started stuffing every shot they took in their face, hard. I think we played the hardest basketball of our lives against these two eleven year olds. It was pretty funny. Even though we were stuffing the ball in their faces and cracking up the whole time, they never stopped trying. Mateo especially. He was the kind of kid who always wanted to be like the older guys and wouldn't have wanted us to go easy on him, anyway. That was a real fun game, though. Mateo kept calling carries and three second violations and all of that bullshit like he always did, and we just kept stuffing the ball right in his face. We were laughing so hard that I thought I was going to hyperventilate, and Jason's sport-goggles fogged up.

I remember that day perfectly, because the next morning, Jason moved out Fort Greene to a house in Canarsie. Paris. I'm not going to try to make the story more dramatic and say that he was my best friend, but he was still one of those people who changed things for me. He was the one who had brought me to those courts in the first place, the one who had me scraping change for uptowns and doing crossovers on my living room couch every night after dinner. He had grown up in Fort Greene, and it was only because I was Jason's friend that everyone at the park was down with me, you know? And I kept playing there, long after Jason had gone, and other kids had come and gone too. And after a while it got to be so that my friends could come around and play without any problem, because people showed love to me just like they had to Jason. You stay in one place long enough, and that's where you from.

Sean Elliot and Reggie Miller had a baby and they named it rock 'n roll. [about 3 hours ago](#)

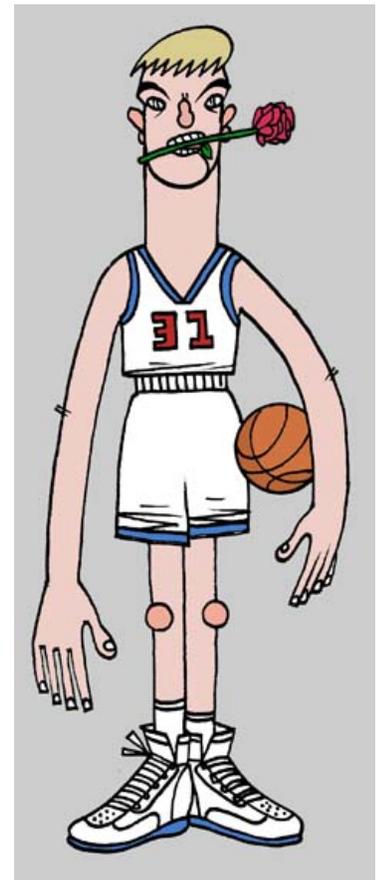
So, any of you been traded yet? I found Anthony Morrow hiding under my couch. Or was that between the cushions? [about 3 hours ago](#)

Note: I was not referring to any subscription in particular. [about 3 hours ago](#)

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Darko's Mood Is Currently:

AMOROUS





Jason's last day in Fort Greene, we hung around shooting hoops until mad late. I can close my eyes and see it right now.

The fences are practically empty. The sun is just starting to go under. Turn around three. Swish.

"Starks!" I said.

"Shut up, everybody knows that Starks is a bitch."

"What? Are you kidding me? John Starks is the nicest player on the Knicks, no question."

"Ha, that's funny. The Knicks would be champions right now if he hadn't missed that shot!"

"I'm sick of hearing about that shot. How come nobody remembers that Ewing could've put in the lay up?"

"It doesn't matter. There's no way you can tell me that John Starks is better than Ewing. And what about my man Mason? Anthony Mason would crush Starks one on one. Anthony Mason would lock him up!"

That's the way it was, and the way it's been forever, since kids played stickball and argued about Mickey Mantle or whoever. We were fourteen years old, and the next morning Jason was gone. At the time it seemed crazy for him to leave, but give it seven years and every person who was on the court that day would either be in college, fucked-up, Manhattan money making, or seven years older in the same damn place. But nobody told me back then that things changed like that. Back then, it sure as hell didn't seem like my leg would ever give out, and that I'd be twenty-one years old with a bad knee. But it's true. It happened. Can you believe that? Twenty-one years old, and I can't even ball anymore.

Contact the Masters

Questions, Comments, Concerns and Cash may be directed to:

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I guess that's why I've been getting kind of nostalgic about the courts recently, because this thing with my knee just went down a couple months ago. I'm still real torn up about it too, and the worst part is, I don't even know how it happened, really. One day I woke up, and my knee was shot. That's it. End of story. I knew right away too. I woke up in bed with A, and I knew it. A's my girl. She was still asleep. I lay there and tried to bend my leg. I tried, but I couldn't. After a while I gave up, rolled over, and started kissing on A's neck. She woke up smiling. Man, just thinking about how nice she looks when she's waking up is going to make me lose track of this story completely! Anyways, she opened her eyes, and she saw the look on my face right away.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Something's going on with my knee," I told her. "It doesn't feel right. It feels...wet inside."

"You just need to rest it baby," she told me, and went back to sleep.

Shit, I've been resting it for two months now, and it doesn't get anything but worse every day. I don't even want to say it again, but I'm thinking that my basketball days are over. But that's not the story I'm trying to tell, so let me jump back to 2001.

It was the first time I had ever been to Queens in my life, except for those trips to see the Mets, which I don't count. I was up there to see this girl I'd met the weekend before. She had mentioned that I should come through on this party, so I got the address and took the 7 train all the way up. But from the moment I showed, there were a whole bunch of dudes staring me down. I was with this girl, so I asked her, "What's with your friends?" She told me that she didn't know, but it wasn't a mystery. I mean, here's some kid they never seen before, coming up from Brooklyn and trying to put it on their girl. I was feeling real unwanted, so I told the girl that we should dip out of there and go back to her place. She wasn't having it though. She told me that she had to go to the bathroom, and left. I waited around for a while until I realized what was up. She hadn't "gone to the bathroom," and she wasn't coming back. The girl had dissed me, and there were still those guys with nothing better to do than give me cold looks. I decided that it was time to go home. Sometimes you just gotta take the L, and laugh it off.



So I leave the party, and start walking to the subway, or at least I think that's where I'm walking. I guess I'm not paying attention though, because the next thing I know I'm standing in a damn parking lot by the river. The wind is blowing, and there's nothing for as far as I can see but factories and bad housing. Confused, I try to retrace my steps, but I just end up back at the same exact place. I really don't know how I did that, and to be completely truthful with you, I'm starting to get a little worried. Especially since coming up the block all of the sudden are about ten kids, laughing and throwing bottles. And like I said, I had never even been to Queens before, and these kids are big. Bottom line, I'm not going to lie, is that now I'm shook. Wouldn't you be? It's three in the morning, and I don't know where I'm at or where I'm going. All I can do is put my head up, and try to walk right past them like I don't even notice they're there.

So that's what I did. I thought that I was in the clear too, until I heard somebody shout, "Hey white boy."

I stopped in my tracks and turned around, but didn't say a word. What was I supposed to say? All I could think to do was to take my hands out my pockets.

"Hey Jessie," the same voice said. "Is that you?"

One of these guys knew my name?

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yo Jessie, It's me, Mateo!"

"You know this white boy, Mateo?"

"Jessie's my boy," Mateo said, "we used to ball together all the time back in Fort Greene."

"Mateo," I said, walking over to him. I couldn't believe it. It was the same Mateo as the little eleven-year-old court rat trying to get into everybody's game and calling all that bullshit. "Damn son, I didn't recognize you, you're mad tall! I can't tell you how good it is to see you." It was all true, the part about being happy to see him, and the part about him having grown. He must have been six-foot three, and he had a purple North Face hood up over his face. It didn't matter though, it was Mateo no doubt, and all of the sudden it was like we were back drinking fifty-cent Island Soda and waiting for the high school kids to finish their game.



He laughed, and gave me a hug. "Good to see you too," he said.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"I moved to Hunter's Point like three years ago," Mateo told me, "Vernon Boulevard. You still in Park Slope?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You still can't drive the lane?" he asked.

"Can't drive? Please, all I do is dunk." I told him.

"Let me ask you something else. What the hell are you doing way out here by yourself on the pier?"

"That's what I'm saying," I said, "I'm lost. I've never been to Queens in my life. Before I saw you, I didn't even know I was in Hunter's Point."

"You never been to Queens?" Mateo's friends all started howling. They couldn't believe it. I guess it's not just a Brooklyn thing after all. No matter what borough, wherever you from is the planet. We stood around talking about old times for a minute, but Mateo's crew was getting antsy, so he took me to the subway. Mateo promised to come through the old spot sometime, and I get got out of Queens as quickly as I could.

Now that's a true story and it just goes to show, when you spread love, that love comes back. Here I am one minute, lost in Queens, thinking I'm about to get jumped, and the next minute I'm laughing and being treated like fam. That's my word. It doesn't matter whether you're in Hunter's Point, Park Slope, or five hundred miles away from The Planet, out in the great American Solar System, the love you give comes back. John Starks retires ranked 16th all-time in career three pointers and the Knicks give him a job heading "fan development." You teach a kid to ball and you get somebody to play with. You wake up one morning, and your knee's gone out, and you're lying in bed next to the most beautiful girl that you've ever seen, in your entire life.

THE END



posted by Bethlehem Shoals @ [8/22/2007 08:36:00 PM](#)

[28 comments](#)

28 Comments:

At [8/22/2007 8:59 PM](#), King Criticism said...

Respect.

At [8/22/2007 9:04 PM](#), Bongo said...

Well. That right there is some quality. 21? Shit, I'm about to be 22, thinking about making a move in the writing game, and this kid is killing it. Well played my man, and I'm gonna check out that site. Damn, I'm gonna go back this weekend to the parks I balled at in middle school too.

At [8/22/2007 9:08 PM](#), Pat said...

this is wonderful

At [8/22/2007 9:42 PM](#), Sean said...

Great stuff.

At [8/22/2007 10:04 PM](#), T. said...

wow. reading this made me think back to my junior high reading textbooks* - it has that same sort of excellent short story quality.

*this is a compliment, by the way. My textbooks were filled with excellent, accessible high quality writing. Or at least I tend to think of them that way.

At [8/22/2007 10:41 PM](#), mutoni said...

that was a beautiful story, especially for someone like myself who played in the parks in manhattan and queens in the early-to-mid 90s. respect.

At [8/22/2007 11:03 PM](#), Anonymous said...

amazing job

At [8/22/2007 11:22 PM](#), stopmikelupica said...

Island Cola? F*ck that, Tropical Fantasy was the real fifty cent soda.

"Took the 7 train all the way there" - all the way one stop into Queens!?

It wasn't my knee, but my ankle (a million sprains and a few chipped bones will do that) that forced me to give up b-ball on the courts at 24 years old. I ended up replacing it with v-ball of all things. Five years later I can say I'm better at v-ball than I ever was at b-ball. I guess I'm saying blessing in disguise and all...

And I v-ball once in a while on the beach "all the way in Queens", one stop in.

Love Bread City, keep up the good work.

At [8/22/2007 11:24 PM](#), [stopmikelupica](#) said...

Oh, and since there are lots of The Wire fans here... I'm guessing William Bratton (Police Commish of LA, formerly of NYC) is a fan:
http://www.economist.com/world/na/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9587793

At [8/23/2007 12:16 AM](#), [Seth](#) said...

great read. well done.

At [8/23/2007 4:39 AM](#), [discimus ut serviamus](#) said...

all these white folks blogging about hoops in the inner city. hmm..

At [8/23/2007 8:20 AM](#), [Sweat of Ewing](#) said...

It happens, man. Not that Ft. Greene in Brooklyn has the demographic it used to (shit's turning white as Soho), but I play out there once in a while.

At [8/23/2007 9:04 AM](#), [db](#) said...

Maximum respect. To Jake and FD for bringing this shit, what it's all about.

At [8/23/2007 9:27 AM](#), [Anonymous](#) said...

You stay in one place long enough, and that's where you from.

man, this kid is all Park Slope, went to Oberlin, dont believe a word

At [8/23/2007 10:55 AM](#), [MC Welk](#) said...

Re: the term "Indian giver," is it offensive to native Americans or does it refer to the whities who giveth the land, then taketh it back?

At [8/23/2007 10:56 AM](#), [duh](#) said...

that's why it's called a story.

At [8/23/2007 12:01 PM](#), [JCN](#) said...

i grew up in the deep south in a family rural area, but can totally relate to this.

great post. great post.

At [8/23/2007 12:10 PM](#), [Captain Caveman](#) said...

Excellent work, Jake. Great read.

On another note, I'm always bored by how people from New York feel the need to impress their own perspective onto other people's stories about New York -- it's like part of being from New York is being the asshole who one-ups every story by keeping it more real. As if going to Queens for the first time doesn't merit the term "all the way there." As if where the writer went to college had anything to do with the story. Spare me.

At [8/23/2007 12:54 PM](#), [BigRicks](#) said...

kudos Jake, This is a story anyone who played any kind of ball growing up, in the city or in the suburbs, surrounded by chain link fencing our a middle school gym, can relate to. I can remember having the same conversations about that same team. Of course I was the one getting stuffed driving the lane, I was never all that good.

kudos to Ufford for the verbal beatdown as well.

At [8/23/2007 1:47 PM](#), [matt](#) said...

Jake, dude, get your knee checked out. At 21, that shit can be fixed.

At [8/23/2007 1:56 PM](#),  trouc said...

totally in agreement with matt. go see a doctor. knees don't heal themselves

At [8/23/2007 2:49 PM](#),  stopmikelupica said...

Ahem. I pointed out that going one stop into Queens isn't going "all the way there". I felt it was a bit of misrepresentation. Sort of, to explain it in terms a caveman might understand, saying I went to Atlantic Avenue Mall or walked over the Brooklyn Bridge once isn't the same as saying I went all the way to BKNY, is it? Or maybe some of you think so... whatever.

I felt as a fellow NYer (and fan of Bread City who has linked to him before and commented on his site) that I would bust on Jake a bit for that. It was meant in good humor, an inside joke that most NYCer get - we hear it all the time from each other, depending on where in the city you are from.

But I recognize that some of you may not have gotten the humor, so I apologize if I came off as "trying to one-up" Jake's realness. I will now go back to my website and post pics of U-20 girls in swimsuits as penance.

At [8/23/2007 4:41 PM](#),  Andrew MacKenzie said...

That was great.

At [8/23/2007 4:47 PM](#),  Anonymous said...

...and one day, the lion saved the mouse's life for being the only creature brave enough to take the thorn from his paw. We'll be right back, on Tales From the Sarkside.

At [8/23/2007 7:19 PM](#),  iverson fan said...

I had a Mateo. We called him Fat Georgie. But instead of basketball, we included him on the drinking and drugs. Now Georgie goes to clubs and thinks he is Italian. If I am ever about to get my ass kicked at the club, maybe Georgie can save the day and I will have a story like this one to tell.

Anthony Mason handling the ball is one of my favorite things ever in the NBA.

At [8/23/2007 8:36 PM](#),  jon faith said...

Former basketball coach van Breda Kolff dies in Spokane
Former basketball coach van Breda Kolff dies in Spokane

AP story just now on the wire. I remember a story about him in SI in 1985, maybe, when he had left the higher ranks and was coaching at a high school or small college (beer atrophy at work) and he snarked to a slacking forward at halftime, you only have one more rebound than a corpse.

At [8/24/2007 12:25 AM](#),  Anonymous said...

A real New Yorker would say, "Eh, it's a great story, but FUCK YOU!"

At [8/30/2007 12:01 AM](#),  hans q. bungle said...

really good stuff. i'm 38 and last weekend I played on the same NYC courts where I used to go when I was cutting school in 1985. went 3-0 although I almost had a stroke in the heat. helps to be on the team with the good players.

here's to the mateos of the world.

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