

ON THE BALL

BY MATT MCMILLEN

*NBA star
Carmelo Anthony
is tenacious on and
off the court, scoring
points for his team
and the youth who
follow in his
footsteps*

Photography by Wesley Mann/August

YOU WOULDN'T KNOW IT

by watching him play, but basketball was not Carmelo "Melo" Anthony's first love. "That was baseball," says the 29-year-old star player with the New York Knicks. "But whatever season it was, that's what sport I played. I didn't have a real love for any one sport."

Then he grew up. Way up. In the summer between his sophomore and junior years of high school, Anthony added 5 inches to his frame to reach 6 feet 7 inches. "That's when I really fell in love with basketball."

No doubt his height helped him dominate on the courts, but he had always been a supremely able player. From the time he was a child, if he had a basketball in his hands, he could put it in the basket. "It was always something that I just knew how to do," says Anthony. "I was always able to score points."

That ability, coupled with a resolve born of his upbringing, has brought Anthony a long way.

HOOP DREAMS

Anthony was born in 1984 in New York City, in Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood, which, four years later, *Life* magazine described as "a community ruled by crack." His Puerto Rican father, Carmelo Iriarte, died of liver cancer when Anthony was 2. It was a tough beginning for the future superstar, and circumstances would only get harder.

When he was 8, Anthony and his mother, Mary Anthony, moved to one of Baltimore's toughest neighborhoods, the blighted, drug-ravaged landscape portrayed in HBO's *The Wire*. There, he surrounded himself with a tight circle of friends, and they hung together like a protective shield. Instead of getting caught up in the drugs and violence that marred their community, they earned money by scraping

grime off the windshields of passing cars. They played sports together. They held each other up, Anthony says.

"We'd all push each other. We'd get each other in the morning, walk to school, walk to practice, like a little breakfast club," he recalls. "I didn't have anyone to show me which steps to walk, which way to go. I didn't have that in my neighborhood. But I had my peers, and we pushed each other, we motivated each other."

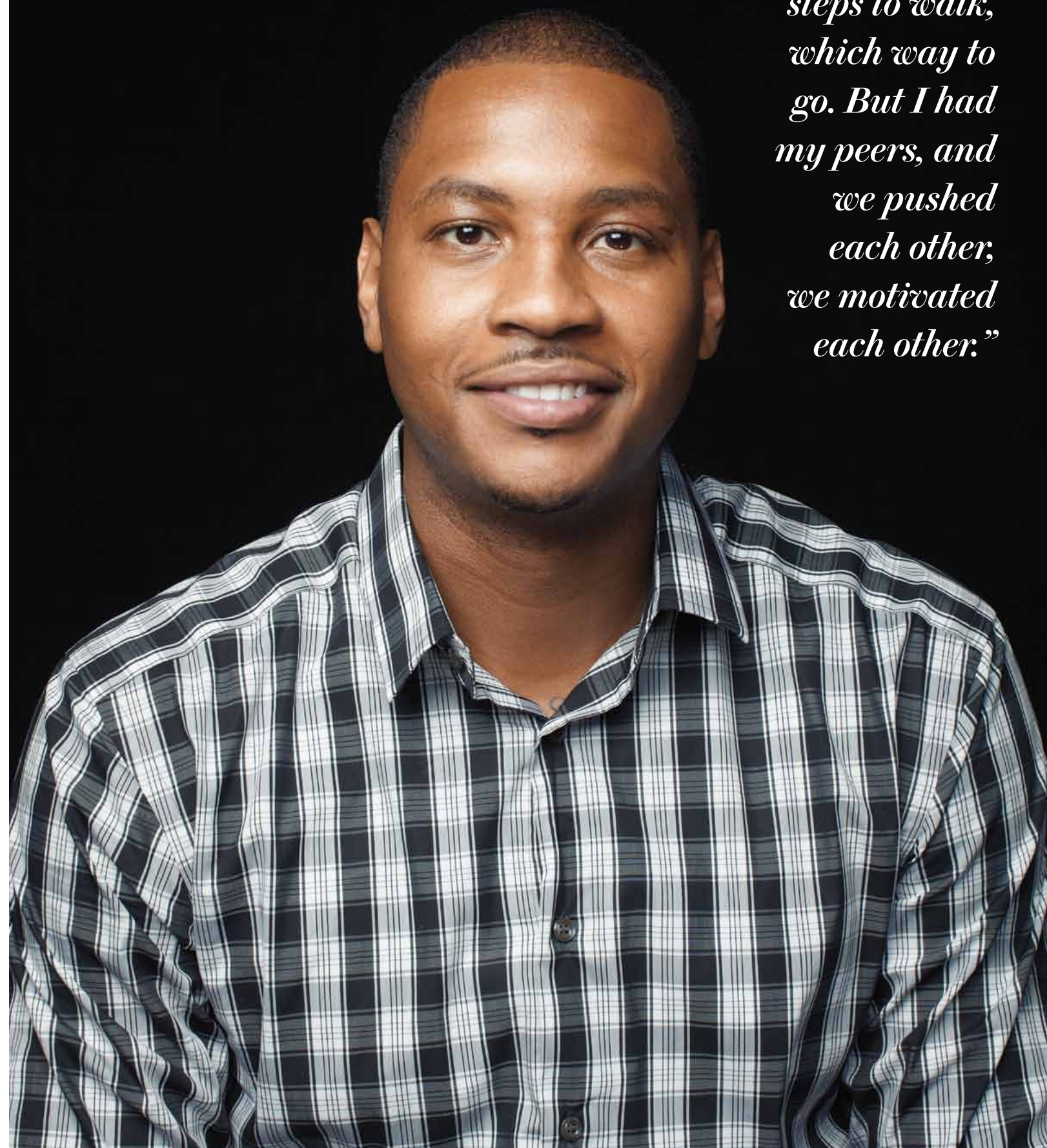
When they weren't out trying to make a few bucks, they spent afternoons and weekends on the basketball courts at the Robert C. Marshall Recreation Center. The facility was a haven for Anthony, an escape from the streets. Then, when he was 13, the rec center closed. It was a bitter setback, Anthony says, but one that taught him a valuable lesson. "You have to survive on your own, and believe it or not, that closing kind of changed my nature. When they closed it down, I had to ask myself, 'What's next?'"

He entered high school, played basketball, and within a few years, he started to take charge of the game. But his transformation went beyond physical growth. He also did a lot of soul searching, and he found his answer.

"When you're a teenager, you go through a phase where you kind of get lost and you don't know what's your next step, what's going to happen to you next," says Anthony. "For me at that point, I looked at my circumstances and I saw something better for my life."

Anthony started to see basketball as a way up and out. Until then, Anthony says, he had coasted on his talent alone.

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He'd watch older players, pick up a few pointers, incorporate them into his game, and score points. But he realized the sport would require much more of him if he wanted to truly master it. "I didn't start taking it seriously until my junior year in high school,"

Anthony says. "But then I started putting the work, the hard work, into it."

The work soon started to pay off. As a junior at Towson Catholic High School, a private school north of Baltimore that has since closed, Anthony averaged 23 points per game and *The Baltimore Sun* named him All Metropolitan Player of the Year for boys' basketball. For his senior year, he left Towson to attend Oak Hill Academy, a Virginia boarding school. There, he helped his team win 32 out of the 33 games they played, including a victory against fellow NBA star LeBron James' high school team. That same year, Anthony was named to the 2002 McDonald's All-American Team.

In 2003, as a freshman at Syracuse University, he led the basketball team to its first NCAA Championship and was named the tournament's most valuable player. That year, the 19-year-old Anthony left college to become the No. 3 NBA draft pick. He signed a \$9 million three-year contract with the Denver Nuggets and an \$18 million contract with Nike. In 2006, he accepted the Nuggets' \$80 million offer to stay five more years, then was traded to the Knicks in 2011.

In his first year in the league, Anthony made the NBA's All-Rookie First Team and averaged 21 points per game. Since then, he's been named to the NBA All-Star Team six times. In 2004, as a member of Team USA, he took home a bronze medal at the Olympic Games. In 2008 and 2012, he and his team won Olympic gold.

KNEE DEEP

Knee injuries account for nearly 20 million doctor visits annually. Athletes run a particularly high risk due to the demands they place on this complex joint, and there are many ways to hurt it. These are among the most common knee injuries.

TENDINITIS is the most frequent complaint, says David McAllister, MD, director of UCLA's sports medicine program. This overuse injury causes inflammation and pain. Treatment usually requires no more than rest, ice packs, and a knee support, such as a neoprene brace. Regular exercise can help protect against tendinitis.

MENISCUS TEARS, often caused by sudden twists, awkward landings, and other missteps, are hard to prevent. These injuries to the cartilage that serves as the knee's shock absorber frequently require surgery to repair, says McAllister. Doctors may prescribe physical therapy in some cases.

ANTERIOR CRUCIATE LIGAMENT (ACL) INJURIES can be disabling and may lead to arthritis down the road, says McAllister. They are often caused by the same type of motion responsible for meniscus tears and are equally difficult to prevent. While mild ACL injuries can heal with the help of muscle-strengthening exercises and a brace for knee protection, many severe cases call for surgery.



BODY KNOWLEDGE

The better Anthony played, the more he understood that the formula for success on the court involved more than just hours of practice. He had to fine-tune his body, make it work for him. Above all, he needed to learn how to be healthy, a skill no one had taught him as a kid.

"When I was younger, it was something that I just didn't get," Anthony recalls. "When I was 18, I didn't yet really understand the fact that you had to lift weights, you had to stay conditioned, you had to eat right. It took me some time to follow that and get that down pat. Once I did, it was just a part of everyday life, it was a routine—you work out, you eat right, you sleep right."

But despite these good health habits, Anthony demands so much of himself physically that the occasional injury is inevitable. This past season, he missed several games due to knee pain. "Even when all I feel is pain, I still want to psych myself up, be naïve, and tell myself it will get better on its own," says Anthony. "I don't want to just sit back and turn my back on my team."

Not surprisingly, knee injuries are common among basketball players, says David McAllister, MD, a professor in

the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and chief of the Sports Medicine Service. "Lots of stress can cause the knee to become inflamed and painful," says McAllister, who is not Anthony's doctor, "but the pain often indicates a relatively benign condition."

More serious injuries, such as those that damage cartilage in the knee, often require surgery to repair. When you do that kind of damage to yourself, play becomes impossible. "You feel it with every step, every jump, every landing," McAllister says.

HOME COURT ADVANTAGE

Off the court, Anthony spends time with his wife, Alani Vazquez Anthony, better known as La La, and their 6-year-old son, Kiyann Carmelo. Both Anthony and his wife, an actor, keep busy schedules, and time together does not always come easily, he says. But as with his game, he does the work that any healthy marriage requires.

"Communication is key, and you have to put a lot of effort into it," says Anthony. "We're both always on the road, always



working, but we always have some form of communication, whether it's FaceTime, Skype or texts, phone calls, emails. That's what keeps us going."

As far as Anthony has come, he has not forgotten his roots. "Melo has always wanted to give back, to give kids a safe place to play and stay active," says Asani Swann, executive director of the Carmelo Anthony Foundation, which was founded in 2005. Six years ago, Anthony committed \$1.5 million to reopen an East Baltimore rec center much like the one he frequented growing up. Renamed the Carmelo Anthony Youth Development Center, it provides educational and nutritional programs, healthy meals, homework assistance, and, of course, basketball.

"It's tremendous that he is giving back and providing hope to these kids, who really look up to him," says James Piper Bond, president and CEO of the Baltimore educational non-profit Living Classrooms, which partnered with the Carmelo



Anthony Foundation to reopen the center. "The kids really benefit from the support that he's agreed to give, and they depend on this center, which serves kids with a real need for a safe place to be after school."

Anthony visits several times a year, especially in the summer, to meet the youngsters, play pick-up games, and show them what they can achieve.

"The most important thing is to let them know that there's such a thing as belief and hope and dreams, that dreams can come true," says Anthony. "I was one of those kids running around the rec center. It was a lot of hard work, but my dreams came true."

Anthony's foundation has also partnered with a foundation started by his former Syracuse University coach to form Courts 4 Kids, which builds and refurbishes neighborhood basketball courts in disadvantaged areas of Syracuse, N.Y., and Puerto Rico. He also has been involved with NBA/WNBA FIT, a program that encourages kids and families to be physically active.

After an amazing decade in the NBA, Anthony—who just secured his first career NBA scoring title in April—shows no signs of slowing down. He predicts he'll play another eight or 10 years before retiring.

He stays busy off the court. In addition to overseeing his foundation, he's produced movies, designed shoes, and guest-starred on the Showtime series *Nurse Jackie* (as a baseball player). "At the end of my basketball career, life will just be starting for me," Anthony says, adding that he may contemplate a return to college. "But right now it's basketball. I love what I

do, and I love the fact that every day I have a chance to get better at something I love to do and have the opportunity to grow. That is important to me, that pushes me, that motivates me."

Reviewed by Michael W. Smith, MD, WebMD Chief Medical Editor