

AAU Basketball: A Necessary Evil?

By

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Abstract: Too many young basketball players are forced to go through the current Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball system to get the attention needed to continue through the ranks in hopes of accomplishing their dream of playing professionally. How can young basketball players avoid AAU altogether or go through the AAU system without being taken advantage of by adults involved? For this study, I am going to interview my teammates on the Los Angeles Lakers about their AAU experiences. How do current National Basketball Association (NBA) players view the AAU system they went through? What would they change about the current AAU system?

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Introduction

I am an African American. I have tattoos all over my body. I am from an impoverished neighborhood (inner city) in the middle of Memphis, Tennessee. My mother is a single mother. Why do I provide background information on myself? I do so because of stereotypes associated with having these characteristics. I am automatically categorized as a heathen, a social misfit, a thug, or an African American athlete. We all (African-American Athletes) are considered the same and portrayed in the same light. We are considered rugged and untrustworthy, but are loved only for our benefit to athletics. I am stereotyped on my appearance. How about a guy like Richard Sherman? He has been deemed as a reckless buffoon in the media. From the media's perspective the masses formulate their opinion about public figures. Sherman speaks his mind. He is considered cocky and egotistical because he is willing to be outspoken about his abilities on the field. He chooses not to take the silent-and-perform route. He talks noise and will step in front of a camera and let it be known he is the greatest at his position of our time. He does not have any tattoos and he is still stereotyped. Why? What is so ironic about the assumptions made about him and me due to our various characteristics is that we are the exact opposite kind of person that people stereotype us to be. As I said earlier, we are considered heathens who are immature and irrational. On the contrary, I graduated from college in three years. I graduated college with a 3.0 GPA, and gained many honors such as being admitted to the First-Team Academic All- American club. Sherman graduated from one of the most prestigious universities in the country with a 4.0 GPA before he entered the draft and became a professional athlete.

Once again looking at my background, and the background of a lot of other African American athletes, provides a vulnerability to people looking to use us in order to achieve their personal goals of success. Due to our weak structure of economic means we are susceptible to people who prey on our abilities. There are coaches, sponsors, parents, and others who use athletes in order to climb up the ladder. There are many examples of such things taking place. There is one example of this that took place at our university with star player Ben McLemore. Just a few years back there was a huge uproar about his Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) coach accepting extra benefits from agents while McLemore was in college. This is against National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules, so McLemore got in trouble and lost his eligibility. Due to his superb season, luckily, he was already a candidate for the NBA draft, so he did not need to return to college. From his AAU days, McLemore's AAU coach recognized how talented he was, and when college rolled around he continued to remain a family friend so he could reap the benefits of coaching a potential NBA All-Star. The AAU coach asked for money, and the family refused to comply. At this point, he voiced his wrong doings to the media in order to gain attention. His efforts failed because McLemore was proven innocent, and the AAU coach through investigation was found guilty of going about his own agenda behind McLemore's back. This reminds me of the book I read about Demetrius Walker. I will use George Dohrmann's book as a starting point for discussing AAU, then I will look at other articles associated with AAU, and finally relate Dohrmann's book to the interviews I conducted.

Chapter 1: AAU Background

The story of Demetrius Walker and Joe Keller is not a rare one. It is a significant story because at the time when it was happening many people did not know of this occurring much. This story is one that I can relate to because in some ways I was like Demetrius, and I know people that are and were in the exact same situation. AAU basketball is a major business for the people involved with it. The average Joe AAU coach can get to say they coached the next best player. Also sneaker companies can get to plant a seed in the next superstar's head to wear their apparel and to exploit their talents in front of major college coaches and NBA personnel.

I think most AAU coaches get into coaching youth basketball to help young kids reach their dreams of someday playing in the NBA, but what happens to the AAU coach when this guy is making millions? By this time the young basketball phenom has many people on his coattail wanting things from him. The many people playing groupie include former coaches and supporters who change when money gets involved. That's when youth basketball starts to get a bit sketchy and when guys like Joe Keller appear.

Keller was an AAU coach in the Southern California area who had a plan on how he would get in good with the big dogs of the AAU circuit and also consult with the sneaker companies. He did so by using his talented young players. This plan started with Demetrius Walker, a ten-year-old kid with potential to be a great player. This was a gold mine to help Keller get the riches and recognition he knows can come with befriending a young athlete. Walker's mother worked two jobs and his father was not around. Walker has a situation similar to a large majority of the African American youth playing AAU.

Keller took this young kid's vulnerability as a way to gain trust and make him feel comfortable.

As time passed Walker and Keller's relationship got stronger. Demetrius was becoming the prospect Keller thought he would be. Around this time colleges were calling, which is good, but not 6th-grade Walker's main focus. Also the sneaker companies and the big dogs in the AAU circuit all wanted a part of what Keller had going on.

The sneaker companies would love to see Walker in their gear and Keller loved this because he was the spokesperson for this cash cow. One of the big dogs from Reebok wanted to sign Keller. This provided Keller's teams the opportunity to wear Reebok, and he would use that to continue to get young prospects in Reebok gear and camps. When that plan failed, Keller said "Sonny won't work with me but somebody is going to put their logo on this kid."¹ As time went by and Walker went to high school, Keller received a job with Adidas under the circumstance that Walker would wear their brand when he became a star. Walker was not as tall as everybody thought he would be and became an average player with all the up-and-coming prospects. Keller was now running Adidas top 100 Phenom camps and had that contract so his dream was fulfilled.²

This story is sad when you think about it because this innocent kid is left with his hopes and dreams gone because he put his trust in a man before he was old enough to even understand the business side of the game he loved to play. Walker ended up at

¹ George Dohrmann, *Play Their Hearts Out: A Coach, His Star Recruit, and the Youth Basketball Machine*. (New York: Ballantine), 2010, 143.

² *Ibid.*, 145.

Arizona State and was not the player everyone thought he would be, but on the other hand Keller ended up fulfilling his intentions.

Demetrius Walker's story is indicative of sports and race in America. Sports are something that regardless of race, everyone has in common. For example, every sports team in America has black and white supporters. It really creates discussion about race when a black athlete like Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Tommy Smith, John Carlos, Allen Iverson and Richard Sherman do something positive or negative. To explain further, I'll turn to David Zirin who wrote *What's My Name Fool!? Sports and Resistance in the United States*.

Zirin writes that some fans have given up on sports, meaning that "sports are little more than a brutal reflection of the savage inequalities that stream through our world."³ Worse, many sports reporters and editors are pawns for the teams and leagues they're supposed to cover, failing to question the abuses, starting with talented high school players, and telling us to "grow up" and "just deal with it" while, as Zirin writes, ". . . eating free press box sushi while the rest of us are paying \$9.00 for a hotdog."⁴ Sports allow us to have a broader discussion of race in American society because sports are the great topic discussion in most offices throughout the country, at most dinner tables and the most widely read section of the newspaper.

Another book I have read for this thesis is William Rhoden's book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*. Rhoden takes a look at many different black professional athletes and their situation in their sport as far as how they are treated, how they are paid, and the

³ Dave Zirin, *What's My Name Fool!? Sports and Resistance in the United States*. (Chicago, Haymarket, 2005), 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

politics behind their sport. He argues that black athletes have always been slaves it is just that in modern days what used to be the plantation is now known as major league sports.⁵

The process begins early when a coach or something of that sort starts buying a kid shoes or dinner here and there or even giving him money. Rhoden calls this the “conveyor belt”. Rhoden discusses the 1992 freshman class at the University of Michigan, better known as the “fab five”. These five freshmen were from the inner city and were black. The kids opened the eyes of a lot of people when they came to school and made Michigan a national championship contender two years in a row. They also made the university millions and millions of dollars off their merchandising and ticket sale. These same kids were eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches while they were watching their jersey and their sneakers make money for the university. The university was basically endorsing the athletes and making money off their performances and names. Once the scandal broke about a booster of some sort helping kids out, the university was embarrassed.⁶ Not at the fact that these players helped make that University a lot of money but that they would actually take money was an embarrassment to the program.

Michigan is just one example; there are more current examples like the NBA and NFL lockouts. Owners wanted to pay the athletes, the people that sell the tickets, the people whose names are on the back of the jerseys, the people who are the faces of the franchises less money and take more. These professional athletes are for the most part paid a lot of money and receive a lot of perks and benefits, not for as much money as the

⁵ William Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. (New York: Crown, 2006), 50-57.

⁶ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, 182.

leagues and owners bring in that's nothing. This is all on top of the fact that these athletes are liable to trades and buy outs, to basically be bought and sold at any time no matter what contracts say. This is obviously why Rhoden would want players to rebel and stand up but unlike the 60s and 70s when it was ok to fight for those rights, professional athletes have a lot more to lose. These athletes and their names are brands and to fight against the higher power would only be bad for business.

Rhoden is a good place to start when it comes to looking at race in sports. However, I think I should back up to an earlier time to look at where race in sports really began to take shape. According to Douglas Harmann's essay *Rethinking the Relationships Between Sport and Race in American Culture: Golden Ghettos and Contested Terrain*,

*The notion that sport is a positive and progressive racial force has a long history in American culture. Leaders of the sporting establishment have trumpeted such claims at least since the spectacular athletic accomplishments of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens in the 1930s, and the basic empirical-intellectual foundations for the argument were laid in 1939 with the publication of Edwin Bancroft Henderson's (1949) seminal study, *The Negro in Sport*. But the ideology probably reached its high point in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the fall of the color-line in professional baseball, that self-proclaimed American pastime.⁷*

Harmann then explains that the dynamics of race and sports.

The complex and often contradictory racial dynamics of sport must be informed by an understanding of the power, prominence, and deep structuring significance of race in America. They must be situated, in other words, in the context of a racialized culture. This is part of what gives sport its paradoxical, golden ghetto-like quality: for all of its problems, sport offers opportunities and possibilities for racial resistance and change that stand out in comparison with other institutional realms.⁸

⁷ Douglas Harmann, "Rethinking the Relationships Between Sport and Race in American Culture: Golden Ghettos and Contested Terrain." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17.3 (2000): 232.

⁸ Harmann, "Rethinking the Relationships Between Sport and Race in American Culture: Golden Ghettos and Contested Terrain," 234.

This can also be seen throughout all types of sports in the U.S.

Having paid attention to race in sport since I enrolled at KU, Harmann's next comment is relevant to me on a daily basis.

Sport itself occupies an important and even privileged place in American culture insofar as racial identities, inequalities, and ideologies and concerned. Eitzen (1999) notes that African Americans, while representing only 12% of the population, comprise 80% of the players in professional basketball, 67% in football, and 18% in baseball. The extraordinary and highly visible success of African American athletes is just one of the reasons why it is necessary to begin from this assumption.⁹

The NCAA basketball tournament is another place where the overrepresentation of blacks can be seen.

In his book, *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, Gerald Early does a good job of showing how quickly black athletes can go from hero to villain. I can relate to this experience a little bit because when I came to KU I had many tattoos and people did not know that before I arrived on campus. There was a huge rave about how great an asset I would be to the team, but when we took team pictures stereotypes began to surface. There was an awareness of my Memphis background and appearance. This transition only took a few months to transpire; from the time I arrived on campus to the point when team photos came out. Sports and what they mean is completely shaped by their appearance. At no time of the year is that ever as apparent as in the NCAA basketball tournament sold to us as all that is pure and hopeful about athletics, and compared to the NBA, which gets described as being selfish. The best example from the text is that of Carmelo Anthony, in public eyes one of this year's great

⁹ Ibid., 236.

NBA villains but who was America's gentleman several years ago for leading Syracuse to its first NCAA title as a baby-faced freshman.

Early helps us to remember that sport's culture is a popular culture, and as important to American culture as music, film, literature, or any other form. The book's mood is Early's take on three episodes in which sport and politics in public view: Jackie Robinson's 1949 testimony on Paul Robeson before the House Un-American Activities Committee; Curt Flood's legal challenge to Major League Baseball's reserve clause after being traded against his will in 1969; and Rush Limbaugh's claim on ESPN in 2003 that Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb had his shortcomings obscured by a general desire amongst sports media members to see an African American succeed in a position traditionally dominated by whites.¹⁰

Early's writing of these stories isn't the first time someone has written about the issue, but his position seems to be both fair and insightful. The most impactful portion of the book, for me, is the case of the Limbaugh-McNabb disorder. Early is careful to point out that some of the attacks on Limbaugh's remarks by liberal pundits actually served to illustrate Limbaugh's point. He also takes stock of Limbaugh's defenders, and offers a thought experiment to put the whole episode in perspective:

“What if Limbaugh were to say about a noted black doctor or scientist or, heaven forbid, a black public intellectual or scholar, such as, say, Cornel West or Henry Louis Gates, that he has the reputation he has because whites have created that reputation for political reasons, because we as a society need public examples of brainy black people or

¹⁰ Gerald Early, *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 97-99.

black people who can reasonably pass as brainy?”¹¹ Placing the comment in a different setting one might view it a bit differently. And this has been said about certain black intellectuals. Indeed, historically, it has been said about blacks in every place that blacks have appeared where they were not expected.

I came away wanting to know more about how the media and the American society view black athletes. At this point in my career, I am entering the realm of athlete that Early talks about in the book. I am a professional athlete who is respected for graduating college in three years then pursuing my Master’s Degree in my fourth year, but that can change at the snap of a finger due to my tattoos and city origin of Memphis, Tennessee.

In my personal opinion, the most interesting portion of *The New Plantation* is where Hawkins provides a detailed explanation of “the capital that predominately white institutions’ athletic departments accumulate due to the athletic performances of black athletes.”¹² It is here that he gives an economic analogy of the plantation system and intercollegiate athletics. After providing an overview of the economics behind the American slavery system from the 1790s to 1860, Hawkins transitions into an exploration of the new plantation model in intercollegiate athletics. He begins his examination by making the strong assertion that within the current new plantation model of intercollegiate athletics, the NCAA and its member institutions not only profit off the labor of athletes in general, and black athletes specifically, they also profit off their images. Hawkins uses multiple tables and an array of statistics in an attempt to support

¹¹ Ibid., 160-161.

¹² Billy Joe Hawkins, *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 12.

his assertion. One area of statistics he focuses on to provide an example of how the new plantation exploitation functions is the sales of media rights that generate revenue for predominately white institutions. For instance, Hawkins points out that over “the next fifteen years, ESPN will pay the SEC \$2.25 billion for the conference’s TV rights that was not taken by CBS’s fifteen-year, fifty-five million dollar per year contract.”¹³ As if to preempt the readers who will argue that this exploitation applies to all athletes and not just Black athletes, Hawkins then provides this statistics: Black athletes comprised 46.9% of NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision teams and 58.9% of Division I basketball teams. One of Hawkins’ best examples to support his position is when he does an analysis of the racial demographics of players playing for teams participating in the 2008 Bowl Championship Series (BCS), a composition of games that paid out \$170 million to the ten teams or their respective conferences. He found that 51% of the athletes participating in the BCS were Black, 38% were White, 3% were Hispanic, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% were classified as other.¹⁴

Looking at basketball in particular, I turn to an article by Jeff Greenfield.

According to Greenfield’s article *The Black and White Truth about Basketball*,

The dominance of black athletes over professional basketball is beyond dispute. Two thirds of the players are black, and the number would be greater were it not for the continuing practice of picking white bench warmers for the sake of balance. The Most Valuable Player award of the National Basketball Association has gone to blacks for twenty-three of the last twenty-five years. The NBA was the first pro sports league of any stature to hire a black coach (Bill Russell of the Celtics) and the first black general manager (Wayne Embry of the Bucks). What discrimination remains – lack of opportunity for lucrative benefits such as speaking

¹³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴ Ibid., 99.

*engagements and product endorsements -- has more to do with society than basketball.*¹⁵

This is relevant to me because basketball is the most visible of all sports when looking at race, especially with my experience.

This dominance reflects a natural inheritance; basketball is a pastime of the urban poor. The current generation of black athletes are heirs to a tradition half a century old: in a neighborhood without money for bats, gloves, hockey sticks, tennis rackets, or shoulder pads, basketball is accessible. "Once it was the game of the Irish and Italian Catholics in Rockaway and the Jews on Fordham Road in the Bronx," writes David Wolf in his brilliant book, Foul! "It was recreation, status, and a way out." But now the ethnic names are changed; instead of Red Holzmans, Red Auerbachs, and McGuire brothers, there are Julius Ervings and Darryl Dawkins and Kareem Abdul-Jabbars. And professional Basketball is a sport with a national television contract and million-dollar salaries.

The sport of basketball has been both a blessing and a curse for the black community. While only a small percentage of black athletes 'make it' by making large salaries, they are usually pulled from their community only to not return.¹⁶ It is almost as if they are spring boarded into the upper class, and are forced to leave their community. Very rarely do you see an NBA player move back to their poorer neighborhood and reinvest in that community and become a leader for that community. This would be nice. But it is difficult because when you have money in a predominately poor community, you are expected to provide more to your community and if you do not, then you can be ostracized for having money. It is a reverse logic, but it is the truth.

The last area of influence on race and sport in America is the entertainment portion. This has overtaken the political or cultural relevance in the black community. Instead of using their national prominence as a stage to make a difference, a lot of black

¹⁵ Jeff Greenfield, "The Black and White truth about basketball." Signifyin (g), Sanctifyin', and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture (1999): 373.

¹⁶ Ibid., 374.

athletes are being stereotyped as entertainers who are missing the opportunity to speak of injustices and change needed in America. Writes Shaun Powell's book "Souled Out?", "From Pakistan to Punxsutawney and Kenya to Kalamazoo, the image of Ali verbally stomping on a beaten Liston brings a flush feeling of admiration and adulation from those who take just a quick, casual glance; no need to stare too long. People are drawn by the strength and the emotion and sheer overall impact of the photo, and Ali has drawn raves for projecting "courage" and "power" and "conquest."¹⁷ This is a great place to start when looking at black athletes who used their notoriety as a platform for black issues in America. Powell continues:

Nobody, at least to my knowledge, accused Ali of being "unsportsmanlike."¹⁸ After taunting Liston, Ali still refused to return to his corner. He never did, actually, next, he began dancing around the ring, arms held high. His legs moved swiftly, with a slight touch of rhythm and a total cockiness about them. Later in his career, Ali would refine the technique and make it instrumental part of his in-fight strategy and overall ring showmanship. It became the "Ali Shuffle." Before Liston rose from the canvas, the fight was over and phenomenon was born. Or, more accurately, it was popularized. Before long, trash talking and showboating were an accepted part of sports, much like uniforms and sweat.¹⁹

There is a misconception and a turn of events that took place and black athletes began to stop using their fame to promote and advance political and social issues affecting the black community. Powell highlights this when he wrote: "We were watching a football game in the hotel lobby back in 1997 on Thanksgiving Day," recalled Thomas Hauser, Ali's biographer.

One of the players on the Lions scored and started dancing. And then Muhammad turned to me and said, "I started that," He loves the fact that

¹⁷ Shaun Powell, *Souled Out?: How Blacks Are Winning and Losing in Sports*. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2008), 164.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

he started it. These flamboyant displays are often passed off as innocent forms of expression and a way to get the crowd excited, which is strange because touchdowns and big plays usually generate excitement by themselves. Plus, you wonder why black players in the past were never compelled to behave like this. Yet they were created out of the demand for them in today's society. That's the only reason these acts begin to multiply and become common. When black athletes first did thing, the white audience applauded and laughed and begged for more. It was a mutual cooperation on both sides, and everybody ignored the obvious racial messages being sent and the stereotypes they formed. Depending on the performer, the white audience, which comprises the vast majority of fans in football stadiums, looked forward to the touchdown celebrations more than the touchdowns themselves. Basically, white people liked certain black athletes to shuck, and these black athletes in turn were anxious to jive.²⁰

Sports in America have always been an opportunity for Americans to discuss race. Just like it is the responsibility of black athletes to use their fame and notoriety to talk about the tough issues of race, it is also the responsibility of American citizens to use the discussion of sports as an opportunity to discuss race. Criticizing the media when they use racist terms to describe black athletes is also needed. I feel that the articles in this paper and the books we have read are a must for Americans to grasp a further understanding of where we are racially speaking as Americans. The greatest gift we can give future generations is the ability to discuss race. Education is something that we must continue to strive for and promote tolerance and understanding.

²⁰ Ibid., 183.

Chapter 2: Interviews

For the interview portion of this research project, I interviewed six professional basketball players from the same NBA team. I asked all six participants to first tell me about their AAU experience. Participant 1 is a white player, who played college basketball in the ACC, and has been in the NBA for three seasons. He was raised in New York. His family was Catholic. They moved from New York to a mostly non-Catholic southern state. His mother was a big advocate of diversifying her school (she was a headmaster of a private school). So his foundation helps explain some of his family's decision to get him in playing AAU. He got involved with D-1 sports, a more premier AAU program, at the request of his high school coach. With D-1 sports, Participant 1 said originally his AAU team was local players. But as Participant 1 and the eventual number one recruit in the nation started to gain national attention, their team started to get guys from all over the U.S., and were travelling all over the U.S. winning tournaments. Participant 1 talked about being a white player in AAU and college and pro. Being a white guy means weakness, in the eyes of many African-American players. He said he had to prove himself constantly. His parents loved how tough AAU basketball made him and his parents liked that he was being around more diverse group of kids.²¹

My experience with playing with white kids is a lot like Participant 1's story. I played with 2 or 3 white kids my whole AAU experience, and on top of that I'm from a city that is predominantly black. And they walked into the gym out to prove themselves because of the exact same situation Participant 1 was in. They were white kids who came from middle-class backgrounds, and we (African-American kids) did not want to allow

²¹ Participant 1, interviewed by Tarik Black in Los Angeles, CA, March 4, 2016.

that. This was our bread and butter and way out. None of the white kids survived with my AAU team, and it wasn't necessarily that we were against them. We just grinded it out and they couldn't keep up so it's highly commendable that Participant 1 survived and prospered. And white kids got made fun of if they play for black teams. It's actually kind of racist.

As Participant 1's AAU team did, my AAU brought on kids from other cities to play with us when we got better as well. That's the business aspect. Coaches want to win. They want their sponsorships to go up. That means the more money the program can get the more wins you get. My AAU team was really good, but once we gained national notoriety we started bringing on kids from other cities. One example for me is, going into my senior season my AAU team (local Memphis guys) had gained national notoriety. We finished top 10 on the AAU circuit the season before so we had a lot of hype going into my senior AAU season. We had 4 players ranked within the top 100 of all players in the country, so we wanted to up the ante our last AAU season. We brought on a kid from Atlanta, GA. He was ranked top 10 in my class. So now our whole starting 5 was ranked in the country, and that brought more notoriety to my team and also opened the door for more sponsorships and money to be funneled into my AAU team. That also isn't fair because we took him from his former program so obviously they lost their prestige because they lost their star player. The issue that arose was that he was used to being a star and now playing amongst other of his caliber was a hard transition for him. He actually ended up dropping in the rankings and did not play well with us. So there is a downfall to that system as well.

Participant 1's story relates to Dohrmann's book because it backs up the same thing that was going on with his team. As soon as a shoe company got involved with the AAU team, they (the shoe company) began dictating which kids played on which teams. Participant 1's team had the number one player in the country on his team, therefore, kids from all over the country were placed on his team by the shoe company. Dohrmann talks about this exact thing in his book. He writes about Keller's landing of a shoe deal with Sonny Vaccaro and Reebok: "That shoe deal, it shows you have credibility," he said. "And the product you get, you can bribe people with. In a way, the product is more important than the money. In this business, with the kids, the product is what matters most."²²

Participant 2 is an African-American player, who was drafted out of high school, and has played in the NBA for eleven years. He started playing as a young kid in Memphis, at a neighborhood team, until it got good and then was sponsored by Nike. He moved to Atlanta and it was similar. His relationship with his coaches was initially good, but then as AAU became big business, his relationships began to fall apart. He talked about how the shoe companies were calling the shots and changing the landscape of the game. He said his neighborhood team was like the bad news bears. But as he got better, the team began to change. He had Nike everything and wasn't allowed to go to Adidas or Reebok camps or games. (This is very limiting to a player.)

Participant 2 said his AAU coach was a father-figure type to him. When he got drafted out of high school, he was told how his money was going to be split, which shoe company he was going to sign with, and it opened his eyes to what some of the AAU

²² Dohrmann, *Play Their Hearts Out: A Coach, His Star Recruit, and the Youth Basketball Machine*.

coaches really wanted. They didn't have his best interest in mind. So he cut all ties with his AAU coaches before he got drafted, which he said was the best decision he's ever made and still to this day does not speak with them. He said it's really hard, to cut those ties. The most profound thing he said during the entire interview was that you probably owe more to your high school coach than your AAU coach, from basketball point of view. Based on his experience, he'd monitor his son's AAU experience, if he had a son. The benefits of AAU was playing against some of the best players in the world. He said he thinks he needed to play AAU to challenge himself against some of the better players. He said he even ran a team a few years ago, and he couldn't control the shoe companies' influence on his own team. They were telling him who could be on his team, where they were going to play, etc. He said he ended up becoming what he set out not to be. So he quit his AAU coaching. He said he'd try to keep it as local as possible, if he could create his own AAU team today.²³

I can relate to Participant 2's story in that when you start from the bottom you have nothing but as you grow they use you more and more. Similar to Participant 1, I started off on a neighborhood team. Well really, I got cut from the school basketball team all throughout middle school, and so when I finally made the team and played in high school nobody knew me. So when my AAU team picked me up they put me on the B team to the main team. So it was the "not good enough" kids in the program. My good friend's father coached us, and we did small venue tournaments. I started to get better and do well so then the main coach called me up to the main team. So they took me from the other team to play with the main team, and once that happened my stock rose. I started to

²³ Participant 2, interviewed by Tarik Black in Los Angeles, CA, March 4, 2016.

get more offers from schools and different shoe companies gained interest. Just like Participant 2, Nike was the shoe company that got to me because I grew up in church with a Nike rep. The interesting thing about my story is that my AAU team was never Nike. It was Reebok and then Adidas, but Nike ended up sponsoring my high school team. The Nike rep I grew up with would constantly try to persuade me to wear Nike shoes even on an Adidas AAU team. Our AAU coach used that to his advantage. We would flip from Reebok and Adidas depending on which one gave more money. And companies would vie for our affiliation and our coach would go for the money so we never solidified a sponsor. We would just take their stuff and money but not agree to a deal with them. This reminded me of Joe Keller, in George Dohrmann's book, *Play Their Hearts Out*, when Joe was working with Sonny Vaccaro, to try to find the most money from either Reebok, Adidas, or Nike. It really didn't matter, the only thing that mattered to Joe was money in his pocket, even if it was at the expense of the players. Participant 2's story parallel's Demetrius Walker's story. The only difference is that Participant 2 was able to navigate the AAU circuit and pursue his NBA dream. He cut ties with those who did not have his best interests in mind. Participant 2 was also a better basketball player than Demetrius. If Demetrius would have been a better player, then maybe, just maybe, he could have cut people out of his life, like Participant 2 did. But that's a lot to ask. I think Participant 2's story is the outlier in this whole AAU scenario. I think there are more players that get treated like Demetrius and fall through the cracks, than there are guys like Participant 2.

Father figure and influence of coaches: For myself, my father figure was my high school coach. He was as genuine as they come. He took care of me and looked after me

as if I were his own. I was very fortunate to have a man with integrity, but also I started out as a nobody in the game. After I gained some notoriety he didn't change on me or ask for anything and to this day hasn't asked me for anything. But I had some AAU teammates who leaned on our coach as a mentor and guide. My AAU coach wasn't the best guy and used us. He made a lot of money off us and misused those guys. He even made money off me in situations that my mom or high school coach weren't involved in. I never trusted him but I had teammates who did and they were led down the wrong paths from him. He still has an AAU team but it's not the dominant program it was anymore, due to the best players in the country still being placed on the high profile, shoe contract teams, like the ones mentioned in Dohrmann's book.

Participant 3's story was the most difficult for me to personally relate to, but still an important story for the AAU experience. Participant 3 is a mixed-race player from Canada, who played college basketball in the West Coast Conference, and has been in the NBA for four seasons. At a very young age, he was being recruited by at a Pac-12 school and was invited to play with guys who were committed to the school that was recruiting him. The U.S. team flew him down from Canada and they played in Vegas and Houston, and he was only 14 years-old then. He said the shoe companies were sending him shoes to play with their respective teams. He said one team from LA would send him Adidas gear just to try to get him to come play with their team. Being Canadian, he said he was the unknown. If he had a son that was a really good player, he'd encourage his son to play in some of the top 100 camps, not necessarily AAU.²⁴

²⁴ Participant 3, interviewed by Tarik Black in Los Angeles, CA, March 4, 2016.

Participant 4 is an African-American player who played college basketball for two universities, and has been in the NBA for two years. I can relate to Participant 4 because I got cut every year in middle school, so I didn't start playing basketball till high school. Nowadays, these kids are traveling city to city playing AAU in 4th or 5th grade before they can even make an official school team. His story relates back to Participant 3's story with him doing elite camps instead of AAU tournaments and that is how he made his way to college. Once you get to college, the playing field evens out some. It provides better odds than the high school scene does to make it to the next level.²⁵ The connection that both Participants 3 and 4 make to this study is that at elite camps or AAU, you have to play against the better talent in your grade for a college to offer you a scholarship. How Participant 3 relates to Dohrmann's book is that shoe companies saw that Participant 3 was a top 100 player, he is 7' tall, and made sure to lure him to different teams with shoes. Participant 3 had his mother keeping track of his AAU progress, so he said he never had to worry about being taken advantage of by the AAU coaches.

Participant 5 is a mixed-race player who played college basketball in the Mountain West Conference, and has played in the NBA for two seasons. His interview was interesting because he only played AAU one summer, got a college scholarship out of it, and then never played again. He said AAU is a necessary evil because his father, a former NBA player, didn't want him playing AAU, but gave in when the scholarship offers were not coming in, like they thought. He said because he is mixed race and his family was wealthy, he has a chip on his shoulder because people think he is soft.²⁶

²⁵ Participant 4, interviewed by Tarik Black in Los Angeles, CA, March 5, 2016.

²⁶ Participant 5, interviewed by Tarik Black in Los Angeles, CA, March 5, 2016.

Participant 6 is an African-American player who played college basketball in Big East, and has played in the NBA for seventeen seasons. I can relate to Participant 6's experience being a kid from an inner city where athletics seems to be the only way out. There are no other opportunities for all African American kids from projects and impoverished neighborhoods. I had teammates who only had shoes because they played with us. They got to eat sometimes because they were with us. There were really sad situations. He talked about how kids nowadays are not learning the game properly, and how he was taught how to truly play the game. I tie that to the area they were in. There was more passion behind teaching them. When you are raised in those situations basketball just isn't a chosen leisure, but it is your way out and to venture further in life. That puts kids at a disadvantage when navigating the system because they usually don't have anyone in their corner to have their back so they won't be mistreated in the AAU system. They rely on their AAU coaches to mentor and lead them and that is where a lot of the issues arise. Participant 6 also talked about street agents. They become prevalent because the inner city kids are missing parents and proper mentors to help guide them so they rely on street agents to assist and leverage their status as elite athletes. Participant 6 spoke on being loyal to shoe companies, and I think that also stems from his background. These shoe companies do some good in providing inner kids with opportunities to further themselves through athletics. Because of that, these kids feel loyal to these companies. You see Participant 5 and Participant 6 both remain loyal to their respective companies, but once they got to the NBA these companies mistreated them. Why? Because in high school they can use you without directly consulting you on what they are doing. Once you go pro, they must sign contracts with you and pay you directly. They can't go over

your head to your coach, parent, or mentor to influence you. That's when they move on to the next kids.²⁷ Participant 6's story does not relate to Dohrmann's book much, due to the fact that Participant 6 is a bit older and the present day AAU characteristics were not in existence.

My story: I started playing AAU after my freshman year in high school. I was not known on the basketball scene at the time. I had gotten cut from the middle school team every year and had not played but a year of church league when I was little. When I finally made the high school team I rode the bench my whole freshmen year until the last 10-15 games. During those last few games I earned minutes and eventually became a starter. In my glimpse of glory, I gained some interest from a few AAU teams. I ended up trying out for two different teams. I made one team while the other was still trying out. I really wanted to play for the team that was still holding tryouts so I quit the team I had already made and kept trying out for, at the time, Memphis Pump and Run. I ended up making the team, not the main team, but the secondary team. We traveled locally and played in small tournaments. Even if we travelled to the main tournaments with our main team, we would play in the lesser bracket and not the bracket with the "main attraction" teams. I had really good showings regardless and caught the eye of our main team's head coach. He recognized the potential I had despite my low level of notoriety and novice basketball experience, so late in that same summer he called me up to play with the main showcase team. I had really good showings with them as well so I started getting national attention and college offers.

²⁷ Participant 6, interviewed by Tarik Black in Los Angeles, CA, March 5, 2016.

In my sophomore year of high school we won the state championship, so my stock as a basketball player rose even more then. By the end of that year our AAU star players for that team had arisen. There were three premier players and myself. One of them was a year younger than the rest of us. We added a few players that weren't on the team the year before as well. They left their AAU teams to play with us because they felt they had a better chance to up their stock playing with us. We did really well that summer. A current NBA player and I became the standouts on the team and our national ranking rose that summer, and the offers from universities rose dramatically. Some of the guys that left their AAU teams to play with us that year improved their stock as well. We had one guy go to the University of Indiana and another went to the University of Massachusetts. That summer we changed from the Memphis Pump and Run to the Memphis Pacers because my AAU coach had a cousin that played in the NBA for the Indiana Pacers and he sponsored us. So we went with the money. So we went from the Memphis Pump and Run to the Memphis Pacers that summer. This would not be our last switch before my AAU career ended. Also, my freshmen summer we did not have a sponsor. My sophomore summer we were sponsored by Reebok because that is who the NBA player was sponsored by that sponsored us. There was a direct tie and affiliation to a shoe company as well. My stock rose a lot that summer and I became a top 50 player in national ranking, and had most schools calling going into my junior year.

My junior year of high school went well, and we did not win the state championship but we made some good noise. Now heading into AAU we had 4 nationally ranked players on the team, and this is the summer we started adding guys from different states to our team. We picked up the number 8 nationally-ranked player

from Atlanta, GA, that summer. We switched our names and sponsorship this summer as well. We changed our name to the Memphis Magic, an affiliate of the Compton Magic. The Magic organization is nationally known and well respected, and with this switch we also changed shoe companies to Adidas. This sponsorship was such a huge upgrade from our previous situations. With this sponsorship we could only do Adidas or neutral tournaments though. During that summer we had a lot of guys being recruited by every university you can think of, and it was all being funneled through our AAU coach. Most guys on our team came from backgrounds where they did have family members or high school coaches who knew what they were doing. Our AAU coach took advantage of this opportunity. I am not sure if the stories are true, but I've heard many stories of him taking money, jobs, etc. on our behalf because of his ties to us. We did really well that summer and won the big tournament of the summer in Las Vegas. Our college recruiting went through the roof between my teammates and me. Three of us met at my AAU coach's house and had a discussion about going to college together. We all agreed to go to college together at the University of Memphis, our hometown team. Throughout the rest of the summer we all went on college visits to different places and our pact was tempted when two of us were thinking about going to different college programs than our previous arrangement, but in the end the arrangement came to fruition. We stayed together and went to the University of Memphis.

Throughout our AAU experience, multiple people took advantage of us at different times. Cash was being given, jobs were taken, and other things were exchanged for our interest. From colleges and universities to shoe companies vying for our endorsement, a lot of things happened behind our back. We were young, naïve kids who

did not understand what was happening. We just wanted to play basketball and prove that we were the best. On the other hand, the AAU system used us to boost coaches, shoe interests, and to make the AAU system more dominant over the youth basketball movement.

Chapter 3: Summary & Conclusion

After conducting interviews and after my own assessment, there is a unanimous decision that the AAU machine is a necessary evil. From the economically challenged inner city kid that requires an outlet to the middle class kid with a chip on his or her shoulder, if a kid's aspiration is to succeed in basketball then he/she will have to go through the AAU system. That means warring through a system that lacks integrity, but it is also a consensus that the best way to combat that is having knowledgeable people of integrity in your corner. For most of the interviewees it was a strong family backbone that kept them from being mistreated, and for others it was a strong high school coach who had nothing to gain and supported their players with integrity and honor. I was fortunate enough to be in that situation because I was raised in a single-mother home. My mother worked all day and she has never been a sports mother so she had no clue about how things were to go or what was going on, but I had an awesome high school coach who kept everyone in check and never allowed me to be misused. That is the formula for success through the treacherous AAU money monster and a strong backing and a close eye kept on the kids making their way through the system, making sure they have good people in their corner who handle the kids justly.

Race in sport is a subject that is often ignored. People think that because we are nearing equality, this problem does not need to be examined as thoroughly, which has allowed these problems within the system to continue. It is important to realize the effects that people's athletic and racial identity have on their lives and to try to make sure that these effects are positive. Without more changes in the system, athletes will continue to not graduate and their success in life will continue to be hindered. Major colleges will

continue to be predominately white and black people will continue to be viewed as athletes instead of students. Everything is tied together and if a little progress is made it could have large positive outcomes. Most blacks that want the American Dream have to work ten times harder at it than whites, because most of them are not born with a silver spoon; therefore, they have to attain it themselves. Most blacks are born in low income homes, bad neighborhoods, and schools that do not prepare them for life or any higher education beyond the high school. That is a tough road to travel and a great obstacle to overcome. That's when sports are introduced to kids at a very young age. Most African Americans I grew up with saw their only way of making it out of their neighborhood was through sports. This is when school loses a level of priority in a young man or lady's mind. Most kids spend more time in whatever their sport is than they do school, and this is when they fall behind or stop seeing education as a top priority.

Now when time comes for these same men and women to take the ACT or SAT in order to acquire their eligibility, they are not capable of producing the scores necessary. I have personally known a lot of kids that could have played sports at a major Division One school but never got the chance to because they couldn't get the test scores to get in. I was almost one of those kids, until I made a decision as a sophomore in high school to take my education serious and turn things around in the classroom. At one point, my GPA was less than a 2.0 which would not be good enough. I had to make a decision to prioritize in order to attain the scholarships I was working so hard for. At this point my focus went from basketball being top priority to basketball being motivation to push me to attain my education, so even if I was not a good enough athlete to get a scholarship I could still go to college.

The current AAU system is abysmal. They make a business out of using these kids and their talents. On the other hand, these kids are being entitled and treated as though they are already in the NBA. So you see the integrity of the game diminishing by the moment.

The AAU system has become a necessary evil. Not because it was necessary from day one but because it has grown so much in popularity that it is the main attraction of big college and university coaches and professional sports scouting. Avoiding the AAU circuit and making it to the NBA nowadays requires a miracle. It has become so popular and so necessary that you hear very few stories of players making it without playing but Participant 4 did. To make it, it would take playing for a good high school program that has a long history of success, so college coaches would come to look at you. Or, a player would have to live in an area with lots of talent so that coaches and scouts would want to look at the talent. And it would take a killer college career. If you avoid the AAU system you can avoid most of the drama of kids being taken advantage of, but you also need great parents who are knowledgeable about the system and can handle the recruiting themselves to protect you.

Through the interviews, it seems as though the athletes with strong parental support made it through pretty clean. Those whose parents were strongly involved were not taken advantage of and they navigated the system pretty well. But those who come from backgrounds where their AAU program is their outlet and they lean upon the program for mentoring and support get taken advantage of to the maximum. The changes that should be made to the AAU system is calming it down to a level the kids can enjoy playing during the summer and remove the business aspect of AAU. Since the current

AAU system is not a charitable organization, instead it is a profit making business that preys on the talented, young basketball players. The interests, of some coaches and team managers, is simply to make money, regardless of how much the young players are used and abused.

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