

Hoops: Escape or Illusion? A Review Essay

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John Edgar Wideman, in his work *Hoop Roots*, articulates the need he had for basketball in the poverty-stricken neighborhood where he grew up when he tells the reader that:

Growing up, I needed basketball because my family was poor and colored, hemmed in by material circumstances none of us knew how to control, and if I wanted more, a larger, different portion than other poor colored folks in Homewood, I had to single myself out. (6)

Wideman does, indeed, go on to parlay skill and talent on the basketball court into a college education that led to his becoming a prominent writer, lecturer, and University of Massachusetts professor.

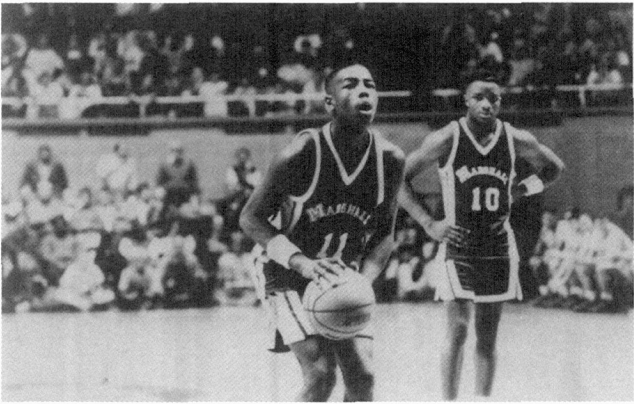
But is there too great an emphasis on using sport as a means to escape the poverty and crime that characterizes many urban African-American neighborhoods? Many leaders of the African-American community have decried the mindset that says that the only hope African-Americans have at access to success is through sport. Arthur Ashe, tennis great, often urged his admirers to spend as much time in the library as they did on practicing their sport. He believed that education was the key to African-American success. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writing in the August 1, 2004 issue of the *New York Times* recalled his father as saying, “If our people studied calculus like we studied basketball... we’d be running M.I.T.”(A11). Harry Edwards, famed sports sociologist and widely recognized expert on race and sport, has often spoken out about what he has called the “disproportionately high emphasis on sports achievement” (qtd. in Leonard).

Yet, Dr. Edwards has also come to the conclusion that this traditional overemphasis on sports may eventually come to benefit the African-American community. He believes that this interest in sport may be the only means that the African-American community has of engaging its young people in positive activity, activity that may eventually lead to greater social mobility.

Perhaps the film that best captures the heart of this controversy is *Hoop Dreams*. Escape or illusion? Perhaps a little of

both. In *Hoop Dreams*, a documentary that chronicles a span of five years in the lives of William Gates and Arthur Agee, two African American youths from the projects of Chicago, the director Steve James captures the essence of this dream and its ramifications. Both Gates and Agee are likeable, talented young men who share similar circumstances and hoop dreams. Both men hope to use basketball as their way to success, dreaming of playing in the NBA.

The film begins with an obvious allusion to the dream that Gates and Agee share. A rhythmic chant of “hoop dreams” plays as the camera shows first the “El” and then the crowded courts of a housing project, followed by a shot of people walking into Chicago Stadium where the NBA All Star game is being held. Michael Jordan is shown stealing the ball and then streaking down court for a monster dunk as thousands of fans yell and cheer. Interestingly, the camera chooses to focus on the well-heeled, well-dressed white fans before following the El into Chicago’s Cabrini Green housing project and the home of William Gates. Gates and his mother are watching the game on television, reveling in Jordan’s artistry. Next, we are shown Gates dunking the ball a la Michael Jordan before seeing him earnestly saying, “I wanna play in the NBA like any body else would



Arthur Agee in *Hoop Dreams*, directed by Steve James. A Fine Line Features release.

Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

wanta be. That's my dream. That's what I think about all the time. Playin' in the NBA."

Soon, we are in the West Garfield Park neighborhood, in the home of Arthur Agee, who is watching his idol, Isaiah Thomas, play the same game. He tells us that when he goes to the NBA, the first thing he will do is "go see [his] mama and buy her a house." Later, Bo Agee, Arthur's dad, tells us, "I don't even think about it, if he don't make it 'cuz I am so focused in on him making it. I just know he will make it."



William Gates in *Hoop Dreams*, directed by Steve A. James. A Fine Line Features release.

The film then follows both boys over the next four years as they try to attain that dream. *Hoop Dreams* is interesting in that the boys experience and must deal with many of the issues that surround race and sport.

One of those issues is the idea that African American students are exploited for their talent. Although both boys are recruited to play their high school basketball careers at St. Joseph's High School, a predominantly white, private school, Arthur Agee does not develop as quickly as William Gates and so when his family is unable to pay their share of his rising tuition costs, he is forced to leave the school. That tuition is tied to talent is made clear when Pingatore finds Gates a sponsor to help him receive the money he needs to cover expenses. In fact, William's mother does not have to contribute to his schooling at all, as the housing project where they live has an educational fund that helps with William's expenses. When the tuition increase is not covered by the fund, Brother Edmund DuPrais arranges for William to receive money from a sponsor.

Agee's dismissal underscores the message that it is athletics that count, leaving the Agees bewildered and angry. Arthur's mom, Sheila, expresses her disappointment and frustration by saying that she had believed that Arthur would receive help and very little was given. At one point she says, "If I had've known all of this was gonna lead to this, Arthur would've never went to

St. Joseph's." She also mentions the pain and anguish the situation has caused Arthur.

Arthur seems resigned and cynical. He tells us that he thought Coach Pingatore would do something to help him out and comments that "I guess he thought, you know, I wasn't gonna be that big of a ball player so why would he waste the money on me stayin' there."

Coach Pingatore's explanation, which is placed in between Sheila and Arthur's comments, seems too pat and superficial—the line had to be drawn somewhere, especially since the school relies on tuition for 90% of its budget. Arthur's new coach, Luther Bedford of Marshall High School, bluntly states:

If he was goin' out there and he was playing like they had predicted him to play, he wouldn't be at Marshall. Economics wouldn't have had anything to do with him not being at St. Joseph. Somebody would have made some kind of arrangement and the kid would've still been there. He's not making it like they thought he was gonna make it on the basketball court, so he's not there, simple as that.

The film does seem to suggest that African American youth are being exploited and that perhaps offering a way out and then backing away from the promise is as bad, if not worse, as doing nothing. And it also seems to suggest that the decisions are arbitrary for there is an irony here: William Gates does become a fine high school player, but he does not reach the heights Coach Pingatore predicted he would and the St. Joseph's Chargers never become state champions during William Gates' four years there. The discarded Arthur Agee leads his Marshall Commandos all the way to the state championship semifinal game his senior year.

Although William Gates is able to find the funds necessary to keep him at St. Joseph's, his story also shows the theme of exploitation. During his junior year, William Gates injures his knee and must have surgery. Because of the surgery, he has to miss most of his junior season. Before the start of St. Joseph's final home game, Coach Pingatore calls William into his office to discuss his knee. Coach asks about the knee and tells William that he can decide to play the rest of the season, such as it is, or wait to play his senior year. Though technically William's decision, even asking him seems to be a means of exploiting his desire to play. William Gates is seventeen years old and he wants to play in the NBA, a combination that makes such a question absurd. Of course William wants to play, and in his obsessive need to win, Coach Pingatore allows him to do so. But in the sectional finals, William is tentative and favors his knee. After St. Joseph's is defeated, several people make it clear that William should have played better; after all, it was his decision to play, so he must have felt there was nothing wrong with the knee. What was William Gates thinking?

Another issue that the film clearly shows is the idea of broken dreams. Images of brokenness abound in the film: the paved playground courts are cracked, windows are broken, and the apartment interiors are unfinished. These images merely reflect the brokenness of the people that populate such areas. In Arthur's family, the home is broken when Bo Agee leaves the family. His inability to find a job and provide for his family leads him into drugs, and eventually jail. In one scene, Bo comes over to where Arthur is playing ball. Arthur shows him some of his new moves and Bo tries to dunk the basketball, but is unable even to get the ball to the goal. Moving away from Arthur, Bo goes to the edge of the playground to buy some crack, as Arthur watches. The scene is a sad comment on dreams. Bo maintains throughout the film that he too could have been a great player, but life did not end up that way; this is why he focuses so much on Arthur's career. Unable to translate hoops talent into an education and unable to find steady employment, Bo drifts into drugs and crime. His only escape will be through Arthur.

Perhaps, though, the theme of broken dreams is most clearly shown through Curtis Gates. Curtis Gates had been a prep star in basketball, good enough, in fact, to win a scholarship to Central Florida. But Curtis did not get along with the coach, and so he dropped out without getting a degree. Now, he lives his dream through William. And Curtis cannot seem to shake his feelings of defeat. He becomes more and more depressed about the fact that he does not have the education or training to get a high paying job. At one point, he admits, "My life ain't got no better since I stopped playing ball...I ain't got nothing. I can't even go out there and get a job making seven dollars an hour, you know." For Curtis Gates, basketball was an illusion, a dream that went unfulfilled.

Bo Agee and Curtis Gates are shown as sharp contrasts to Arthur and William. Bo and Curtis did not seize their opportunities and so have nothing left but dreams. Arthur and William, on the other hand, have a chance to escape from the despair, poverty, and brokenness that surround them. Their opportunities lie in what they do with their talent on the basketball court and the chance for an education that is attached to these opportunities.

Exploitation and broken dreams are a major part of the film *Hoop Dreams*, but in the film, basketball did help bring about positive change. Both William Gates and Arthur Agee were able to get scholarships—William to Marquette University and Arthur to Mineral Area Junior College in Missouri. Despite many obstacles, both William and Arthur have an opportunity, an opportunity that they would not have had without basketball. What they do with this opportunity is up to them. They can squander it away, like Bo and Curtis, or they can use it to gain success.

Hoop Dreams seems to be the embodiment of Dr. Wideman's quote: William Gates and Arthur Agee did seem to need basketball as a means of escape. Basketball afforded both men an opportunity, and without basketball, it seems certain that

opportunity would not have existed. Perhaps there is an over-emphasis in African American communities on sport, but maybe Dr. Edwards is right—without hoop dreams, how would young African Americans continue to hold onto hope? Maybe hoop dreams are really just the American dream—of opportunity.

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