

TAKING SHOTS

TALL TALES, BIZARRE BATTLES,
AND THE INCREDIBLE TRUTH
ABOUT THE NBA

KEITH GLASS

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FOREWORD

THIS GLASS IS ALWAYS HALF FULL

I have known Keith Glass for most of my life and almost all of his. His older brother, Brent, and I were good friends from the third grade on and remain good friends today. For a few years there in elementary school—before their dad got rich and the family moved to a fancy house—I would go over to Brent’s house nearly every day to shoot baskets in their driveway or to collaborate with Brent on some homework assignment.

Keith was there, and, having no brothers of my own, I watched him with some amusement—and from a distance. Keith also accompanied Brent to the summer camp my aunt and uncle owned, Camp Keeyumah in Orson, Pennsylvania. It was there that Keith first met Larry Brown, when Larry was Brent’s (and my) counselor. Keith grew to be Larry’s assistant, his confidante and, later, a prominent NBA agent. The agent business is what Keith has written this book about, and there are plenty of stories that connect Keith to famous and infamous basketball players, at home and overseas.

But when I knew Keith, he was just Brent’s little brother. And for all those years of watching him in the neighborhood, in school, and at camp, if I was asked to use one word to describe Keith, the word would be “holler.”

Keith was a holler guy. He was the guy on the basketball court who

called out plays for the offense and cautioned his teammates about what the defense was doing. He was the loud guy in the infield who pumped up his own pitcher and chirped at the opposing batter. He was not always the best player, but he was always the loudest and most enthusiastic player. Keith was the “coach on the field” that coaches always talk about. He loved the games. He studied the games. He knew the games—and he saw the games as they unfolded. He was ahead of the curve. He didn’t need instant replay to tell him what happened. He got it all the first time.

And, of course, he was incredibly competitive. I hear this is common for a little brother. I wouldn’t know. But I could see in Keith something different, and maybe angrier, than in Brent. Brent liked to win. Keith *had* to win. I can recall summers at camp when Keith would have terrible scabs and scrapes on his elbows and knees from diving on a concrete court to capture a loose ball. He dove on that concrete the first day at camp, the last day, and every day in between. Truthfully, I thought he was nuts. I mean, come on, this was concrete he’s diving on. But he knew that the only way he could possibly stick on a good team would be by outworking the more gifted players. Keith could appreciate that other players might be better than him. But nobody was going to play harder than him.

Looking back, I see now that Keith was a natural leader of a team. He led by being loud, being enthusiastic, and being dedicated. I can’t imagine Keith is any good at any of the individual sports, like tennis or golf. He was born to be on a team, where he could summon the energy to lift up everybody.

As I said, I saw Keith regularly when we were kids. I was somewhat startled to learn that when he was in college, he was part of a folk-singing trio, Keith, Karen, and Mike. I found this out because “Mike” was my cousin. Mike was quite talented as a singer and musician, and I remember asking him somewhat skeptically, “Keith *sings*? Keith *Glass*? He has a voice? I’d have bet he sounds like a frog.”

Mike said, “He sings quite well.”

And I thought, “Really? What does he sing about—zone defense?”

I was so taken by the thought that Keith could actually sing that I

asked the three of them, Karen, Keith, and Mike, to perform at my wedding. Mike and Karen did. Keith hopped off at the last minute to play in a pickup basketball tournament.

In my twenties, I became a sportswriter, and from time to time, I'd see Keith's name in the papers because of his connection to Larry Brown and other basketball clients. I always asked Brent about him, and occasionally—usually at a basketball game where Larry was coaching—I'd see Keith in the stands, and we'd chat. I was certainly aware of his career, as he was aware of mine. And it was always great to bump into him.

Just a couple of years ago, we both attended a camp reunion. And toward the end of it, Keith organized a mass softball game. Mass softball was a tradition at Keeyumah. At some point during the summer, all the kids gathered at the main softball diamond, where they were evenly split into two teams of about seventy-five people each. All seventy-five players batted for one team, and all seventy-five played the field for the other. People were wall-to-wall, so it was hard to get a hit. A special large and very soft ball was used, so no gloves were needed. First one full team got up, then the other. It was a one-inning game. And though there were seventy-five people on each side, usually neither team would score more than twelve to fifteen runs because, again, it was hard to get a hit with so many fielders.

Anyway, Keith organized the game and, of course, named himself captain of the team that was in the field first and came to bat last. Normally, you'd stack your team so the best hitters would all come up at the end, big bat after big bat. Keith stacked his lineup just that way at the reunion—though guys who had big bats in their teens now mostly just had big guts in their fifties.

I was watching from the sideline. I had no intention of playing. I hadn't picked up a baseball bat in over thirty years, and I was quite sure that if I did, I would strike out, make a total fool of myself, and embarrass my entire family.

With about three batters left and his team down by two runs, Keith hollered for me to come up and hit. I demurred, saying, "I'm just here to watch."

“Come on up and hit, Tony; we need you,” Keith said.

“I can’t hit,” I said.

“Sure you can,” Keith said, dragging me to the plate and putting a bat in my hands.

“No, I can’t,” I said. “Trust me.”

And I proceeded to whiff mightily at the first pitch. It came in so slow I could count the stitches on the ball. And I missed it by at least four feet. I was mortified. Worse, I was sweating puddles.

Keith called time and approached me. He put his arm around my neck. And this is exactly what he said to me: “No problem, Tony, just hit it like we worked on in practice.”

And I cracked up because of course we hadn’t practiced at all.

We hadn’t practiced in close to forty years.

I hit the next pitch hard on a line to right, and it fell cleanly for a single, driving in one run and putting the winning run on first for the big hitters. Then I immediately took myself out for a pinch runner, and I hugged Keith on my way off the field.

This is why Keith was the captain. This is why Keith was the coach. This is why Keith was the leader. He knew exactly what to say to me to calm me down in my time of stress. He knew exactly how to get the best out of me and out of hundreds, maybe thousands, of people over the years.

Just like we practiced, huh?

Oh, Keith’s team won the game. But you already figured that out, didn’t you?

—TONY KORNHEISER

INTRODUCTION

PAGING DR. NAISMITH

What Have We Done to Your Game?

Basketball used to be a helluva game. It's not anymore, and that in large part prompted me to write this book. I know it's just basketball. I know that it's only a game. I also know that for me neither of those previous two sentences are true.

To me, basketball has always meant more. As a child, the game was my constant companion. As an adult, it has become my profession. It has supported my family in ways I could never have dreamed.

It is important to understand this because the tone of much of what follows may seem negative or unappreciative, instead of grateful. It is the exact opposite. I care deeply about the game, and for many years, I have grown to hate what has happened to it. Having come to the conclusion that I will no longer just take the money and run, I have decided to fight back the only way I can. I'll take the money and write a book, so here goes. The NBA is too powerful. Players make too much money. Teams charge too much money. The league sells too many products. Many coaches and administrators seem to have all the answers, and yet the game itself has become a selfish, tedious, and colossal bore.

This was not the plan.

The game's inventor, Dr. James Naismith, created basketball to instill a sense of responsibility in his students. He sought to have the players rely

on themselves and one another. In fact, in 1910, the rules committee governing basketball, of which Dr. Naismith was a member, outlawed coaching entirely during games, and it wasn't until 1949 that coaches were actually allowed to speak during time-outs. The purpose was to teach the qualities mentioned above way before any spotlight shone on an individual player, since the lessons he was attempting to teach were meant for life, not just for basketball.

While Dr. Naismith's intentions were part of the rules of the game he created, the NBA's current gurus and nonvisionaries have turned the game on its head. The people who run the NBA are not evil. They have built an almost unreal marketing machine. They are responsible for generating untold amounts of money, not only for themselves but also for players, coaches, and agents like me. Along the way they have somehow lost the game itself. When the people who buy the tickets, buy ads, and pay ridiculous amounts of money for TV rights wake up and realize what they are really buying, the seemingly endless supply of cash is going to erode.

I have seen this coming for a long time. I have been the guy tilting at the windmills of the NBA for twenty-three years. I have had issues with the league itself, the players, the players' union, the fans, all the way down to my fellow agents. What follows in these pages will attempt to show how we got to this point. I'm not a great philosopher. I'm not an investigative journalist. I am a storyteller. I will not preach. I would rather make you think about something after I get you to laugh. I'm going to tell my stories and then leave it to you to figure out if there is a meaning. (I can't do all the work.)

P. T. Barnum is a man I greatly admire. While most of us think of him only as the creator of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, he was much more than that. He actually didn't begin his circus until he turned sixty. He had held political office as well. He was a two-term Connecticut state legislator, first elected in 1865. Barnum later served as the mayor of Bridgeport. Barnum's philosophy of life is evident in this quote delivered in the Connecticut State House during the debate over the ratification of

the Thirteenth Amendment—freeing the slaves and giving them the right to vote: “A human soul is not to be trifled with. It may inhabit the body of a Chinaman, a Turk, an Arab, or a Hotentot—it is still an immortal spirit!”

Barnum was one of the greatest salesmen ever; he could sell you anything. He could have been a great agent or even better, the commissioner of the NBA. This is not meant in an insulting way. In fact, when naming him as one of the most important people of the millennium, *LIFE* magazine called him, “the patron saint of promoters.”

In the 1840s, he took over Scudder’s American Museum in New York City. One of his exhibits was the “SIX-FOOT MAN-EATING CHICKEN.” Barnum advertised for months, teasing the public, building anticipation. When the exhibit opened, the line to see the phenomenon was around the block. When you finally got in, you found a six-foot tall man sitting in a chair, eating chicken. People laughed. They laughed at themselves and at Barnum. They were snookered, and they enjoyed the joke. It cost them ten cents a ticket. For a family of four, forty cents. Or about eight bucks today, adjusted for inflation.

There are subtle but critical distinctions between what P. T. Barnum affectionately referred to as a “humbug” and an out-and-out fraud. He sometimes flitted dangerously close to that line. He was, however, not the caretaker of a professional sports league. He was in the entertainment business, pure and simple, and he never cheated his customers. Even those who got snookered had to admit they had a good time. Even those who were “humbugged” knew that it was worth the money they had paid to get in the door. And if they were incensed, they could get their money back.

To go to an NBA basketball game today, a family of four gets the honor of the following: They park for ten dollars. The tickets cost around \$400. If they didn’t get hot dogs at Costco on the way to the game, they can purchase them for \$4.50 each. If they then want something to drink. . . . You get the point.

Now on to the game itself. Even though they have already bought the

tickets, paid for parking, food, and drinks, the selling continues. They are bombarded with commercials before, during, and after every game. They need to buy T-shirts, large foam index fingers, sweatshirts, shorts, and future season ticket plans, and so on. The introductions only continue the bombardment. After the obligatory introducing of the opposing team, the lights are shut off, fireworks begin, and the noise level from the public address system almost convinces the fans in the arena that now is the time for the excitement. This goes on for what seems like an eternity. When the smoke finally clears and the crowd is blasted with some more commercials, the game actually begins. It is at this point the family gets treated by and large to seventy-three post ups—isolations on the right low block. This is then followed up by the ever exciting fifty-two isolations on the left low block. In 91 percent of these isolation plays, the players perform the incredibly selfish act of finding any way possible to shoot.

Hopefully the game is competitive because if it isn't, it can get really ugly. That's when the players have what Marv Albert calls "garbage time." This is an expression used to signify the part of the game that *really* doesn't matter. The effort is not the same. The quality of play is not the same. The price of tickets, however, remains constant—no discounts. Imagine the thrill that Dad gets when it dawns on him that he has just shelled out \$500 to watch garbage time. Barnum would be proud. Or maybe just a bit embarrassed. A family being snookered for forty cents will come again for the next joke even if it's on them. At \$500 per game, people get a bit testy, and the NBA doesn't offer refunds to incensed customers.

But wait. It's not over yet. The next morning after sleeping it off and maybe calming down from the absurdity of the previous evening, the family members get to read the morning paper. They are bombarded once again by the comments of the players and sometimes even the coaches.

We just didn't show up tonight.

The effort wasn't there.

I didn't get enough shots.

I didn't get enough minutes.

I could go on, but you know the drill. All this coming from people who are being paid an average salary of \$3.75 million per year. That is an average. Some are making \$8 million per year, some \$10 million, and some make \$14 million and more.

ONE

FEEDING YOUR FAMILY ON ONLY \$14 MILLION A YEAR

For the 2004–2005 season, Latrell Sprewell was paid \$14 million. When he was confronted with an offer to extend his contract with the Minnesota Timberwolves, his response resonated across the country. He rejected an offer of \$32 million for the next four years, saying, “I’ve got my family to feed.” Yes, a \$6 million a year pay cut is big, no matter how you slice it, but it still left him with \$8 million on the table per season. At the time of this “insult,” it should be noted that Latrell Sprewell was thirty-five years old, which meant that he would be “earning” the last of that money as a thirty-nine-year-old.

What?! How does something like this happen? It’s way too easy to put it all on Sprewell. Call this an aberration if you want, but that is not the case. Latrell Sprewell merely embodies a general sense of entitlement prevalent in the NBA and throughout professional sports. You can look at the sports news on almost any day and find situations and comments that would never have occurred twenty or thirty years ago. These issues are not endemic to any one sport, or race, or nationality. They flow directly from a sudden and unnatural infusion of money into the human body.

During spring training for the 2006 baseball season, Alfonso Soriano of the Washington Nationals baseball team refused to go into a game as the left fielder instead of his normal second-base position. Soriano did this

despite the fact that his manager was Frank Robinson, one the greatest players of his time. His time, however, was not this time. Robinson was (and I assume is still) a very competitive, proud, and, sometimes combative man. I could only wonder, even at his age, what was going through his mind that day. He would probably have liked to take Soriano “out back,” but you can’t do it that way anymore. And by the way, Alfonso Soriano “earned” over \$10 million per year. Left field, my ass.

Back in the NBA, the year 2005 saw a relatively new and unusual development among players and their agents. When the Houston Rockets traded (or thought they had traded) Jim Jackson to New Orleans Oklahoma City Hornets, Jackson refused to report to his new team. In 1970 baseball player Curt Flood had refused to report to his new team when he had been traded. He was taking a stand and challenging baseball tradition. However, this was not a Curt Flood-type incident.

Alonzo Mourning, who had incredibly just signed a five-year contract with the New Jersey Nets worth \$25 million, was traded to the Toronto Raptors for Vince Carter. I say “incredibly” not because of any lack of ability on the part of Mourning, but because he had a kidney transplant only the year before. The Nets’ signing of him was a very strong show of support to say the least and was in part the idea of the Nets star point guard, Jason Kidd. Mourning’s gratitude for this gesture was to refuse to report to Toronto. Mourning wanted to keep the \$25 million, but not in Toronto. He wanted to make his deposits in Miami. So he never went to Toronto. His punishment for this behavior was that he now had to earn his \$25 million with the Miami Heat. There were strong indications that the Nets paid a large part of that salary as part of the conditions of the Toronto trade. As of this printing, Jason Kidd has paid none of that salary.

Jim Jackson avoided the Hornets completely and ended up exactly where he wanted to be, in Phoenix playing for a fifty-plus win team and in the playoffs.

Hey, if the teams and league let players do it, then you have to try. This has actually now become part of my job. If I don’t try to get away with this in the future, my players will find someone who will.

The roots of these types of situations are not a mystery to me. You don't need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure this out. Money is at the core of it all, specifically, too much money. Common sense should tell you that once any person has significant sums of money at his disposal, he doesn't have to do anything. In essence, the league has bankrolled the players into a position of power. Therefore, the league literally has to ask if their employees will acquiesce and play in a particular city. Heaven forbid requesting a player to go all the way out to left field, somewhere they don't want to go or do something they don't want to do. Whereas players of previous eras had to work second jobs to literally "feed their families," that era is long gone, and it is a good thing, too.

Don't get me wrong—today's players deserve to be paid. They work incredibly hard. They work on their games and their conditioning year round now. They are able to do this because, unlike their predecessors, today's players don't have to get second jobs. They have money in the bank. The benefits of this development are obviously better conditioned players and great athletes. These sums of money are not just given to them. It is not the lottery. However, like many other slices of our culture, the salaries given to athletes today are like a pendulum. That pendulum has apparently swung too far, and the salaries bear no resemblance to reality.

Both of my parents were born and raised in Brooklyn. My mother was an avid Brooklyn Dodgers fan. She would tell us that as she walked around her neighborhood, she would see Duke Snider in the candy store, or Jackie Robinson at the supermarket, or Pee Wee Reese at the cleaners. They were quite literally part of the community.

Today, obviously, this is not the case. Professional athletes are cloistered away, surrounded by their families, agents, publicists, business managers, personal assistants, drivers, and, in many cases, people from their past who are just hoping for some kind of title to justify their presence. Which of these people being "fed" by the player do you think is going to tell him about reality?

On March 23, 2006, Alfonso Soriano entered left field after all—the day after his refusal. I will interpret this for you at no extra charge. Some of

the aforementioned enablers around Soriano—his agent, probably the players' union, and Soriano himself—realized that his salary was in jeopardy. The Washington Nationals made it plain that they were going to put him on the suspended list, which would not “enable” him to be paid. This seems logical and simple to me and to most people. However, this is not always the way it works.

Players have been stretching the boundaries of tolerable behavior for years, and management has, for the most part, caved. They caved first on the salaries, and this, in turn, has empowered the players to engage in behaviors and attitudes that no industry, business, or school should tolerate. In the instance of Soriano and the Nationals and in others, management is finally learning to say enough. The Philadelphia Eagles said it in 2005 with regard to Terrell Owens. In that instance, however, it took probably an erroneous arbitration ruling to uphold the Eagles' contentions.

Is it possible to stand up for what appears to the rest of society to be common sense? There should be standards of conduct. I'm not talking ethics and justice. It's about the money. Unfortunately, if Alfonso Soriano was sent home without his \$10 million, that would have been considered unacceptable . . . to him.

As for Sprewell's comments and the reactions that followed, I look at them with a sense of hope. In 2006, Latrell Sprewell was unemployed. His rejection of that \$32 million offer put him and his now ex-agent in a position where the best he can do financially is receive an NBA minimum for the rest of the 2005–2006 season. The fact that the minimum is over \$1 million would ease that pain for most people. But it doesn't mean that we shouldn't have concern for his family.

Let's look at Sprewell's history to understand how this could have happened. He was the twenty-fifth draft pick in 1992—a six foot five inch shooting guard out of the University of Alabama. He had a very good professional career. “Spree” achieved more than most of us thought he would. He made NBA All-Star games and clearly was one of the best players at his position in the league. He had a certain reputation as well. Most of that reputation, however, centered around his temper.

This trait of his brought him to the general public's consciousness on December 1, 1997. During a practice with his team, the Golden State Warriors, Coach P. J. Carlesimo was instructing his team, which coaches do. It's actually in their contract. On this occasion, P. J. was demanding that Sprewell put more on his passes.

Sprewell basically informed his coach that he wasn't in the mood for his demands and told him to keep his distance. P. J. didn't. Sprewell threatened to kill Carlesimo and then grabbed his coach by the throat and pulled him to the ground. Witnesses said that Sprewell had his hands on his coach's throat for ten to fifteen seconds before other players could drag him off. It should have ended there, but Sprewell returned some twenty minutes later to continue his assault. He allegedly threw a punch at Carlesimo, which grazed the coach. Sprewell was again dragged out of the practice.

As over-the-top and incredible as this incident appears, there were signs of trouble before and after December 1, 1997. In 1994, Sprewell's daughter Page, who was four at the time, was attacked by one of Sprewell's pit bulls. Her ear was severed in the attack. Sprewell waited until the last possible day before having the dog put down. Sprewell, when questioned about his reaction to the incident, said "Stuff happens."

In 1995, Sprewell was involved in a fight with teammate Jerome Kersey, after which he returned to practice (sound familiar?), with a two-by-four and reportedly then threatened to come back again, with a gun.

In 1998, Latrell Sprewell served three months of house arrest for a reckless driving incident in California. In that incident, he allegedly forced another driver off the road.

Regardless of the details of the choking incident, that was an unheard-of occurrence, even in the NBA. You just don't choke your coach, or so I thought at the time. My initial instinct was that Sprewell would probably never play in the NBA again. I thought that the coaching and NBA community would rally around Carlesimo. I was ten years or so into the business, and now I'm amazed at how naïve I was.

There was rallying. It was around Sprewell! I specifically remember

one of my colleagues/competitors, Arn Tellem, at the press conference with Sprewell. Tellem was Sprewell's agent at the time of the incident. My first thought was, *How do you defend this?* The National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) joined the fray as well. The league had suspended Sprewell for eighty-two games, and his agent and his union were fighting it. That was their job, and they did it well. An arbitrator later reduced the suspension to sixty-eight games.

I thought that the suspension was the least of their problems. When he tried to return the following season, who would sign him? What coach would want to have him? What general manager would want to subject his coach to that potential problem? What owner would want to have that image projected for his franchise? Hey, how about the Knicks?

During Sprewell's suspension, New York Knicks President Dave Checketts and Head Coach Jeff Van Gundy flew to Milwaukee to meet with Sprewell. These are men, by the way, for whom I have a good deal of respect. After spending an afternoon with him, the Knicks decided that he was a terrific guy and signed him. What always struck me as the saddest part of the whole incident was that upon his entrance into his first game at Madison Square Garden, Sprewell received a standing ovation from the 19,500 fans in attendance. An ovation that a local guy named P. J. Carlesimo could only dream of—what a disgrace.

Spree played very well in New York and attacked no one that I'm aware of. In 2000, he was subsequently rewarded with an extension of his contract by the Knicks. The total amount of the extension was for \$62 million for five years, all guaranteed. When you get on the bad side in the NBA, watch out!

In his own feeble attempt at a defense for his attack on Carlesimo, Sprewell told *60 Minutes*, "I wasn't choking P.J. that hard. I mean, he could breathe." With that brilliant defense, I'm surprised in a way that P. J. wasn't suspended for getting his neck in the way of Sprewell's hands.

On October 2, 2002, it was the Knicks' turn. Sprewell reported to training camp with a broken hand. He had not informed the Knicks of the injury. He claimed that he broke it falling on his yacht. New York fined

him \$250,000 for not reporting the injury. Interestingly, they also banned him from using their practice facility. After the *New York Post* suggested that Sprewell may have injured his hand while fighting, Sprewell sued the paper for \$40 million.

Spree was traded to the Minnesota Timberwolves in July of 2003. On his return to Madison Square Garden, Spree gave the faithful fans of New York one last display of inappropriate conduct. The background on this one was that the owner of the Knicks, James Dolan, had come out publicly to say that Spree had in essence been banished because the Knicks were interested in the character of their players. Spree took this comment as a personal affront. James Dolan, as he always does, sat on the floor, under the basket almost adjacent to the Knicks' bench. Spree turned the evening into a personal vendetta and attack on Dolan. His language was expletive-laced to say the least. Dolan simply had to take it. I did some work for Lon Kruger, who was the coach of the Atlanta Hawks and is, as of this writing, the head coach at UNLV. On this night, he was an assistant coach with the New York Knicks. Since none of the players intervened in any way on behalf of the man who signed their inflated paychecks, Lon had the temerity to confront Sprewell.

"Hey Spree, knock it off; just play." That is what Lon told me he said. Sounds reasonable to me. The result of that comment served only to have Sprewell shift his vulgarities toward Lon. The rest of the night Lon had to deal with F-this and F-that. I remember the following day reading comments from Isiah Thomas, the Knicks' newly minted GM, about how unacceptable the behavior of his own team was. He was referring to the fact that Lon was the only one to stand up in any way on the owner's behalf.

About a month later, Lon and I had dinner with our wives across the street from the Garden. The Knicks were playing that night. We walked across the street to go to the game. It was about 5:30 p.m. with the tip-off at 7:30 p.m. At 5:45 p.m., Lon emerged from the locker room and asked if we wanted to go out for dessert. He had just been fired.

With this as a history of Latrell Sprewell's dealings with the league, it is a lot easier to understand how a thirty-five-year-old player who had al-

ready received close to \$100 million in income, between his NBA contracts and shoe deals alone, could say and believe that there was more out there. Someone would come to his aid as they always seemed to do. This time there was no Tellem—he had been terminated, and no team was willing to back him up. The only thing that stopped his sense of entitlement was time. His age precluded another team from proving him right again. I am extremely confident in saying that if he was, let's say, even thirty years old, the line of NBA teams waiting to sign him would have been out the door. In today's world, it doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't matter what you say. It doesn't matter how much you insult our intelligence. The bottom line is: If you can play, you get paid. You don't need to look far for verification of that concept. Does Terrell Owens ring a bell?

The list of NBA players alone who have either been arrested, charged, and even convicted of offenses is extensive. Yet it is obvious that as long as a team thinks a player can make a contribution on the floor, they will sign him. The sound of general managers speaking as legal correspondents echo in everyone's ears every season. The tired refrain that the arrested players are only accused and not convicted is more of an excuse to retain them than an ode to the law. There is little regard in the ignoring of these transgressions for the effect on team chemistry and, more important, on the effect that these constant second, third, and fourth chances have on the public and our children. The message is clear. As long as a player can shoot it, or rebound it, or block it, the league will give him another look. It is also obvious that the better players can get away with more.

In the early 1990s, I represented Marlon Maxey of the Minnesota Timberwolves. Marlon was a six-ten power forward and was a rookie in 1992. Marlon got in trouble with the Minnesota police for having a gun in his trunk. He was suspended for this. He was very confused and told me that he didn't understand the suspension. His reasoning was typical of the thought process in the NBA. He informed me that Scottie Pippen had the same thing happen to him, and he wasn't suspended. It was my job to inform him that Scottie Pippen was a better player than him. The public's reaction to the Spree statement about feeding his family was predictable

and widespread. It was treated mainly as a joke, and in fairness to him, was hopefully meant in that vein. However, it also became the ruler for measuring how far the disconnect between the players and the fans who paid to watch them play had grown. When they arrive in the NBA, players don't suddenly appear before our eyes as defined people with defined personalities. Athletes in general, however, have always—for whatever reason—been treated differently. By virtue of their abilities or sheer size, they have been given extra opportunities and myriad chances. They have received grades they didn't deserve, fame and glory that was disproportionate to the results attained, and, in my case and many others, dated women we otherwise never would.

I don't pretend to have known Latrell Sprewell in his formative years, but I did meet up with players and people who illustrate for all of us how this system of extra benefits works during my travels in this business of basketball. These people also demonstrate how this system can destroy our culture, and I don't just mean in the NBA.