

# PENTHOUSE

THE MAGAZINE OF SEX, POLITICS, AND PROTEST

DECEMBER 2004

## FAST FORWARD

### DOCUMENTARY

The dead-end tale of "Hook" Mitchell, who outplayed future NBA stars but became a tragic casualty of the streets, is a fascinating object lesson.

"He was better than me," says NBA All-Star Gary Payton of the L.A. Lakers. "He was better than Jason [Kidd], he was better than Antonio [Davis], he was better than everybody." Who is this paragon who outplayed the crème de la crème of the pro-basketball roster? "Hook" Mitchell, champion of innumerable slam-dunk contests, a man who effortlessly performed 360-degree rotations in the air over a car on his way to the basket. As spelled out in the sobering documentary *Hook: The Legend of "Hook" Mitchell*, his is not a household name today because he became a casualty of the mean streets of West Oakland.

Payton came from the same neighborhood of projects, poverty, and despair. But Payton had parents at home who insisted he toe the line. Mitchell had nothing but the streets, and he wound up in the California penal system. "They were pushing drugs ten or 20 feet from my front door," Mitchell recalls of his chaotic childhood. "When I was six years old, I was still sucking on the bottle, and I was smoking pot by age ten." But, in the language of the playground, he "had hops," an awesome vertical leap. He blasted local playground players Kidd, Payton, and Davis off the court.

But drugs proved too strong a lure. Narcotics kingpins sponsored Hook, giving him a gram of coke every time he dunked the ball during high school. In 1999 he held up an Oakland Blockbuster video store with a water gun, and police nailed him almost immediately. The dead-end nature of Hook's existence influences the documentary (directed by Michael Skolnik and William O'Neill), which often bumps against the limited circumstances of prison life. Yes, the result is an object lesson, but the real take-away from the film is the grainy archival footage of Hook in his prime, soaring over the obstacles, a human being who was somehow able to fly.—G.R.



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