

AS SEEN IN



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firstperson

Slammer dunk

His friends are at the top of one of America's most lucrative sports but Demetrius "Hook" Mitchell ended up behind bars

YEAH, THEY CALL ME HOOK MITCHELL

The name I was born with was Demetrius. Now my name is Waliy Allain-Ruhim. I grew up in West Oakland — the last exit before you get to San Francisco. I knew my mother — she was in my life periodically. She was in and out of jail on drugs offences for more than half her life; she's still there today.

I didn't meet my father till I was 16 years old. He's doing good now but at that time he was in and out of jail. He was in a federal prison for 30 years on a murder charge. Before I was even born, he was in prison.

I call my grandmother "mami" because she's the one who raised me. She worked a graveyard shift, midnight till eight in the mornings, to provide for me and my nine cousins — one girl and eight boys. I was the youngest. She provided for me more financially than anything. By the time I got home from school she was getting ready to go back to work.

I started playing basketball when I was about nine. It's been a privilege — God blessed me to perform basketball at the highest levels. I was like a wonderkid. Growing up in Oakland, outside of San Francisco, I knew Gary Payton, Jason Kidd, Antonio Davis, Greg Foster... all of them now play for the NBA (National Basketball Association).

I felt I could have gone to the NBA out of high school. That's how much talent, God bless, I had. I was playing against the pros coming out of high school, scoring 19 points a game. By the time I was 14, people were giving me drugs and money for the phenomenal feats I used to perform on court. I'd get a gram of coke for every slam dunk — for a 360° flip and dunk, I'd get extra money. For jumping over someone sitting on a chair and dunking, I'd get more. I've dunked over cars, people — the first person I dunked over was Jason Kidd (the New Jersey Nets' star defence player).

The drugs started when I was 10. One of my closest friends had started smoking weed when he was six. Where I was brought up, they were selling drugs 20ft away from my door. It was like a status thing; you didn't do nothing if you didn't smoke drugs. By the time I got to high school, it was all over. I was living on the streets, slaying whoever. I didn't have a solidified family structure or a strong father figure to keep me in line.

I'd never been to prison for more than six months before the robbery. Why did I do it? Oh, man, I'd rather be in jail and not get myself into any more trouble. It was the money — the amount of money that was in that place, it was close to \$10,000. I wasn't



"Hook" Mitchell is serving a four-year sentence for armed robbery in California. Gary Payton, Seattle point guard and a childhood friend, once described him as "probably the best player never to make it to the NBA"

working at the time and things were pretty hard. It was supposed to have been an easy job.

It was the worst thing I have ever done. When I was sentenced, I was thinking my life was over. I've done a lot of soul searching since — speaking to God, reflecting on my past. It's enabled me to see things more clearly. I keep the dictionary and the Koran with me at all times. That thing Islam means a lot to me — I pray to God to give me fortitude. All the goodness that comes from me is from God. And all the evil and the bad things come from me.

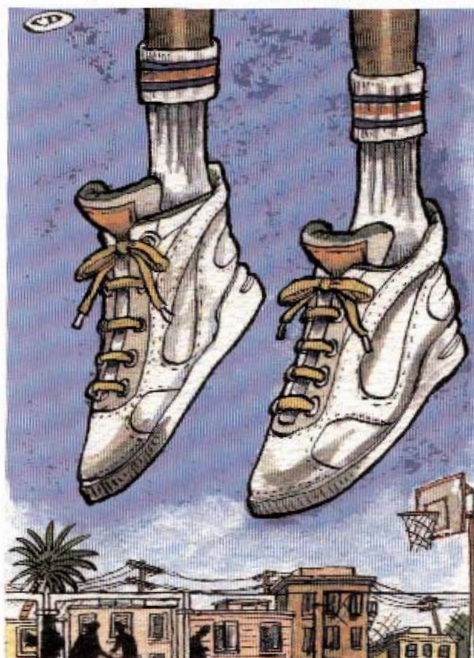
When I get out, I want to start a programme to help keep youth on the straight path. I'm very excited that I'm taking all the energy that I placed in basketball over 25 years and placing it in the betterment of myself, my family and my community. I feel I can be very productive in society. I was anti-social for so long; it's like I've done a disservice

to everybody. It's going to be a long process to regain people's trust. They'll wonder when the old me is going to come back. I don't really know what to say — there ain't nothing to talk about really. Words are insignificant; they don't hold no weight right now.

I do have a bit of resentment about the way I conducted myself early on. I try not to point the finger at different elements in my life, being raised the way I was. I often think about what I could have been. Jason Kidd, a guy that looked up to me, just played in the NBA Finals. I look back and I think about what could have been. One thing about the past, you can't change it. You have to deal with everything accordingly and thrust forward. ■

As told to Naomi Mapstone

"Hooked: The Legend of Demetrius 'Hook' Mitchell" (Fader) recently was best documentary at the San Francisco Black Film Festival



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