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June 5, 2003

Hooked: The Legend of Demetrius 'Hook' Mitchell

Lee Hubbard

The great play of Jason Kidd with the New Jersey Nets will be front and center when the NBA playoffs go into full drive with the finals. During the season, the former Oakland prep standout could be seen throwing dimes, making clutch shots, and leading the Nets fast break like it was the 1980's showtime Los Angeles Lakers.

Kidd, along with Gary Payton of the Milwaukee Bucks did the bay area proud with there playoff play, which brought back memories of Oakland's Mosswood Park and the golden era of playground basketball in Oakland, where Kidd and Payton ruled the day. But while they shine now, there was one player, who according to them, was not only on par with them, but soared above them and the rim.

That player, Demetrius "Hook" Mitchell, did not make it to the NBA. Instead of dunking the ball over Tim Duncan, he is sitting in a prison cell on a robbery conviction, wondering what could have been. Mitchell is now the subject of a documentary "Hooked" which takes an in-depth look at his untapped talent and the forces of the streets that suffocated his ability.

"Hook was the most gifted jumper that I have ever saw," recalls Jason Green, a High School Basketball recruiting analyst, who played playground ball with Mitchell. "I saw him jump over a car once and dunk a ball."

"Hooked" the documentary will be making its West Coast premiere at the San Francisco Black Film Festival, which is taking place at various venues in San Francisco from June 11-15.

"Hooked is an amazing documentary, and it is an interesting and compelling story," said Ave Montague, the director of the San Francisco Black Film Festival. "Hook was a product of his environment. Both of his parents were in jail, and he was raised by his grandmother, who lived in the mean streets of west Oakland. He did not have any guidance or role models, but he had a lot of talent, which ultimately ended up being wasted."

Michael Skolnik, the director of Hooked, decided to make the documentary on Mitchell, while working on filming another documentary dealing with basketball in the prison system.

"Hook was the first person we met, and he began to talk about basketball and all of the people who played with him and he knew," said Skolnik.

He did not know anything about "Hook" the playground legend, when he met Mitchell. in fact, he thought he was telling jailhouse stories about playing on the same high school basketball team with Antonio Davis, playing with Gary Payton and dunking the ball over people, teams, and cars.

At 5 foot 9, Mitchell does not look like an over imposing basketball player. But after Skolnik saw him play in a pick up game in the prison, he realized Mitchell was for real.

"His jumping ability was unreal," said Skolnik. "I saw him jump over ten people and dunk a basketball."

As Skolnik began to talk to Mitchell about his life and his missteps, he thought that Mitchell had a story that needed to be told.

"On the human side of things, his story touched my heart," said Skolnik. "You realize that he made a lot of bad decisions in his life."

On December 27, 1999 Mitchell was arrested for armed robbery, after he was caught trying to rob a Blockbuster Video. Mitchell agreed to a plea bargain, forgoing trial, and he was sentenced to a reduced term of five years. Most of his problems stemmed from drug use, which was something that started with Mitchell before he was a teenager, according to Skolnik.

"This guy had a serious drug problem since he was teen years old. But no one cared about the drugs. They only seemed to care about Hook, the basketball player."

Playing for McClymonds High School on the same high school team with Antonio Davis, Mitchell was a dunking point guard who would bring the house down with his play.

"Gary Payton, Brian Shaw, and Jason Kidd all said that Hook was better than them," said Skolnik. "Bay area sport agent Bill Duffy, said that he had never seen a power point guard prospect like Mitchell."

Green said that Mitchell was a tremendous athlete, who had over a 50-inch vertical leap, but he



Hook Mitchell's story comes to the big screen

was a player who never really took the time to work on his game.

"Besides the jumping ability, Hook had a nice jumper and good handles, but I don't think that he really ever developed his game to the degree that he could have."

Mitchell also lacked the discipline, focus and mentors to keep him on track in the classroom. He would miss several weeks of school, and one year when he decided to go to school, he had six periods of PE. He was also a victim to the street culture of West Oakland, which ultimately ruined him. At games, local area drug dealers would give him a gram of cocaine for every dunk he made, which furthered his drug habit.

"He would do a gram of cocaine at halftime of games," said Skolnik. "When he was playing, he covered up his addiction, but now after all of these years, he has come to grips with his addiction."

The documentary uses the commentary of Mitchell's childhood friends such as NBA stars Jason Kidd, Brian Shaw, Gary Payton, Antonio Davis and basketball observers who give insight into Mitchell. The film also uses footage from Mitchell's days as a playground legend at Oakland's Mosswood Park, to footage of him playing basketball in the penitentiary.

One of the lessons both Mitchell and Skolnik want to deliver in this film is the message of redemption. Mitchell is set to get out of jail in 2004 and Skolnik says that he wants to set up a program, "Project Straight Path," to help guide and give direction to inner city youth in Oakland.

"At this point in Hook's life, he is a hopeful figure," said Skolnik. "If he can come back from what he has been through, then anyone can come back from the trials and tribulations that they face in life."

"Hooked" will be screened Sunday, June 15, 2003, at 5:30 p.m. at the BRAVA Theater Center, 2789 24th Street. For tickets, go to www.ticketweb.com or call 1-866-468-3399.

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