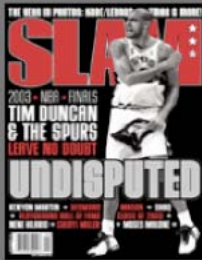


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One More Chance :: Hook Mitchell

One More Chance :: Hook Mitchell

Demetrius "Hook" Mitchell became a legend by leaping over cars in a single bound and dunking on 12-foot rims. Basketball freed him once -- maybe it can do it again.

WORDS :: SCOOP JACKSON

He has a disease. One that is literally -- and very, very slowly -- killing him. He bows and prays, every day. East. Not for a cure, but for forgiveness, strength. He's done things in this life, things that may be beyond forgiveness. He bows again. Silently reciting words of faith. Allah hears them. Moving closer to saving the man's soul. But the disease? He'll die with it.



December 27, 1999. A man fighting for something besides life walks into a Blockbuster in Oakland, California. It's dark, he's darker; not in skin tone, but in character. The woman behind the counter sees him, but doesn't see what's about to happen. The man acts -- understand, acts -- like he has a weapon. He's faking, frontin', seein' how far he can take it. To the woman, shit is real. Gimme the loot, gimme the loot. The man is ready to die.

"Ten years, no parole," was in the judge's mind. The public defender, not having any true idea of who he's defending, whispered softly, advising the

man to cop a plea. Five years. Robbery. The man knew that in his life he had done much worse, escaped harsher penalties, dodged contracted bullets -- literally. He heard the whispers, knew the deal. In order for his life to be saved, to not return to where he came from, to not hear the whispers of crackheads, dealers and demons, all three living within him, he had to pay this crime with time. His options had ended. As one of his "adopted" brothers said, "God was finished giving Hook chances."

Karma takes sprints through his mental every day as Hook -- now Waliy Abdur-Rahim -- kneels to tie his size 13 boot, set for his daily (sometimes twice-a-day) four-mile run. "It was ordained for this to happen," he says, looking at the lime-yellow paint inside his small cell. "It's like sleeping in a swamp and you know you're sleeping in mud, but you can't do anything about it. That's my life. My life has always been a constant struggle to do what's right."

He locks the cell door with a key. Runs his thick, grimy but beautiful hands over his face, and walks out to see sunlight for the first time that day. He looks at the enormous green mountain that is the backdrop to his medium security home. "Yo, Legend." "Sup, Legend?" can faintly be heard as he takes the first step to 20 minutes of (un)freedom. Karma is doing laps inside of him. "I believe that it's been ordained for this to happen to me, sir," he says, with humility unseen in a man who has possibly two years left on his sentence. "I have a chance to be a divine prophet." Then he turns, runs away.

Brian Shaw is sitting in a chair, collecting his thoughts on a story he doesn't necessarily want to tell. He's not one to kick a man who's already down. But he has this story. One that is easier to hear than tell. The camera begins to roll; catching the depth of resistance consistent with each hesitation. But in order to give a complete, unbiased perspective on a man's -- his man's -- life, situation and legacy, Brian has to let it go.



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"We were at this charity basketball game in Sacramento that Kenny Smith, Spud Webb, Manute Bol and Wayman Tisdale were hosting. At halftime of this game they had these local high school kids in a dunk contest. Gary [Payton] and I were telling them, "You gotta let our boy in this contest. He's not in school or anything, but he can do some amazing things. They agreed and told us what time he needed to be there and what routine he needed to follow



"Halftime comes and we have all these NBA guys there, plus about 10,000 in Arco Arena. The announcer starts naming off all of the dunk contests our man has won: 'And now coming on the court from Oakland, 5-9, Demetrius "Hook" Mitchell.' The place gets quiet -- Hook comes walking out, and when he walked out on the court I'm like, 'Oh, shit!' I could see it in his eyes. They were bloodshot red, he was fucked up, he was high. His shorts were raggedy, his t-shirt was raggedy, his shoes -- everyone looks at him, then looks at us, and Kenny Smith is like, 'This is the guy you're talking about?' And I'm like, 'Just watch.' Hook attempted about 14 dunks, he only made one. Finally it got to the point where the announcer said, 'Well, it looks like a bad day for the Hookster.' Hook grabbed the ball, pulled his cap down and walked out. The players started to laugh at me and Gary...

"And I'm sure if you ran into Kenny Smith today, he'd probably say, 'Ah yeah, they brought some bum out there that was supposed to be all this and all that.' But they don't even know...they don't even know."

They don't know how this man called Hook used to jump over cars and dunk. They don't know how he could do 360s over five people bent over in front of a rim. They don't know he was doing that off-the-glass dunk -- the one TMac pulled out at the 2002 ASG -- as a 5-8 10th grader, more than 15 years ago. They don't know how he became a god in the Bay Area by doing Evel Knievel stunts with a ball in his hand. They don't know the claims of fame, the highs and lows, the saga. They don't know of the \$100-per-dunk challenges that used to be put in front of him as a kid, in games against former D1 players twice his age, twice his size, and how that money would keep him off of the streets and alive. They don't know of how once, at a park in Vegas, they had to raise the rim to 13 feet because he tore the 12-foot hoop down. They don't know that this "bum" cultivated Payton, Kidd, Rider, Shaw, Antonio Davis, Greg Foster, Bernard Ward, Drew Gooden and Leon Powe -- even though he was at the same age, or even younger, than most of them. They don't know that when *SLAM* did the Playground Hall of Fame back in 2000, his name read third for a reason. They don't know that Hook Mitchell may be, may be, the best basketball player the state of California has ever given birth to.

Every city has a Hook Mitchell. Somewhere in the depths of each ghetto that has shaped the soul of Black America and the game it embraces is "that one muthafucka," that one baller who could shit on anyone he went up against...and in the end, shitted on himself. That player the four-corner hustlers will tell you, "Jordan couldn't fuck with." And not be lying.



Profanity aside, Hook Mitchell was that mutha'! He was the one who, according to all who witnessed his brilliant brand of basketball, not only should be in the League, but controlling it. Instead, he sits in a jail cell in California trying to out-sprint karma and outrun his past.

"He was by far the best player to come from Oakland," JKidd admits. "He was showtime, the main event everywhere he went."

"Hook, to me, was a role model," Drew Gooden confesses, "of what not to do off the court. But on the court, he was an NBA All-Star."

"He's probably the best player -- not just from Oakland, but anywhere -- to not make it to the NBA." Those words come from Gary Payton.

For the rest of the Hook Mitchell story, pick up SLAM number 71, on newsstands through July 15, 2003.