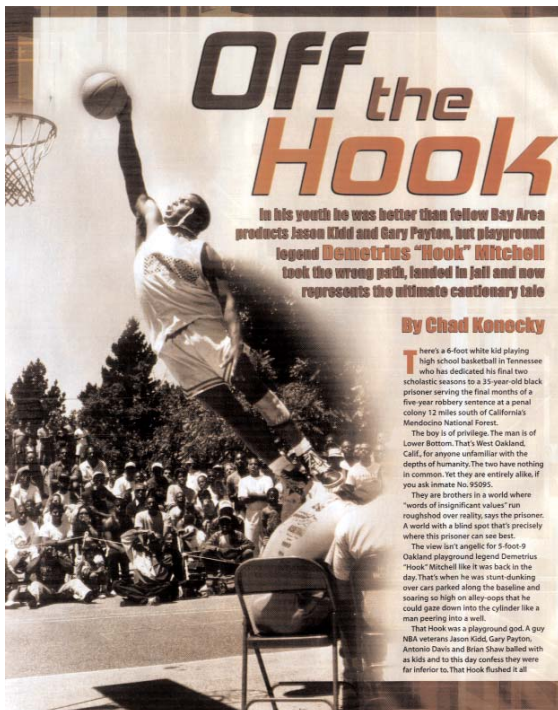


AS SEEN IN



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then and now: A decade ago, the sky was the limit for Hook (opposite page). Now it's in jail.

way. All but the backwash, that is. And from what's left, this Hook promises to manufacture champagne. "I don't call this an incarceration, I call it a correction," says Hook, whose still-shredded 89-pound frame resembles a sawed-off antique Wilkie. "Coming out of here will be like a form of introduction. The person I am is not me now. But words can't prove that. I want to show it by sincere action. I want to be a profound speaker when I go home. I want to express myself so that somebody else doesn't replace me here in my bunk." The promise is what's most important about Hook Mitchell now. It's what's most relevant: at his celebrated 50-inch vertical or his sneaky 3-pointer or the fact that once upon a time in the neighborhood, he represented a prospect so electric that NBA mega-agent Il Duffey calls him "the best power point guard prospect ever."

Hook's basketball prowess and his addiction to the game will surely be his vehicle in the years ahead. But skills diminish. A guy's Hops come hips. This Hook knows the vehicle is at for the showroom now. He knows it's the estate that matters. There are other tales of wasted talent — using ballers with a world of skills who wind off track somehow, some way. For any, like Lenny Cooke (see page 34), it isn't drugs or crime, but rather bad advice is the lure of stardom further undercut by a shortage of fundamentals. There are a million stories like Hook. And Il Duffey is unique.

Hook Mitchell would be a mostly forgotten name — a regional cult figure — if it weren't for gifted 25-year-old New York filmmaker Michael Skolnik and co-director William Neill. Without them, our boy in Tennessee, who penned a letter to Hook in prison last year, wouldn't know Hook Mitchell from Captain Hook. Debuting in May of last year, "Hooked: The Legend of Demetrius 'Hook' Mitchell" is a biographical documentary of Hook's story, shot on location at Konocci Conservation Camp, where Hook is imprisoned. The film studies commentary from childhood peers Ed Payton, Davis and Shaw. It's raw. It is soul-shaking. And it somehow parades the head-shaking shame of Hook's unadmitted hoop talent from the adrenaline of his potential redemption. "It's a film about truth and honesty," says Skolnik, whose movie has already won three



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festival awards for best documentary. "We became inspired by someone who was once that deep in denial and who has now owned their problems and faced them. We want to show everyone Hook is a product of this country, a product of his environment and a part of America. There's a story in every city like Hook Mitchell."

Mad Ups

Hook owns a face for dunking. And he certainly had his dunk face on that day at the Onetta Harris Community Center in Menlo Park a dozen years ago. It was a Bay Area Pro-Am League game. Former NBA guard Rex Walters tossed an alley-oop from halfcourt. Hook threw it down and shattered the backboard.

"I swear to God his head was even with the top of the backboard," says Hook's childhood friend, Bernard Ward, the longtime legal guardian of Oakland product and current Cal freshman forward Leon Powe. "People were running around screaming and picking up pieces of the glass as souvenirs. The thing people don't say enough about Hook, though, is that he had an all-around game. He didn't have just the dunks."

It's true. Hook's game was so electric that Slam Jam Youth Basketball Program director Carl Foster recalls it as "half man, three-quarter amazing." Hook was a once-in-a-generation player who suited up for just a single season of high school ball his senior year at McClymonds High in 1986.

His game defined him, but Hook was always more complex than that. He's a guy who calls his love of basketball a disease, but who disrespected it to the point of trading drug dealers' dunk requests for cocaine. At his basketball peak, Hook was a living legend. But he didn't ask to be.

Even now, Hook embodies the reluctant redeemer. To take center stage again — this time as a cautionary tale — seems both a calling and a curse.

"I'll have to be selfish and unselfish at the same time to convey my message," he explains, his speech slipping slightly in the absence of top and bottom front teeth. "The biggest thing I'm attempting to do is recreate

what I had going for me all my life, but separate the fantasy from the reality. Fantasy is what we want. Reality is what we need.

"I took advantage of being naturally gifted," continues Hook, who converted to Islam in prison and adopted the Muslim name Wally Abdur Rahim (though he still answers to Hook). "Now, I have to work for everything. I have to replenish the soil. You can't plant a seed in corrupt soil. I have to swallow my pride and do things on my own terms. God's given me that chance."

Hook didn't have a fair chance the first time. The pressures of the street engulfed him. The temptations lured him. Evils that conspired to send both his parents to prison. Evils that killed the only man he says looked out for him growing up — a neighborhood dealer, Larry Parker, who inexplicably tried to keep Hook off drugs before being murdered in a drug-related shooting. But it was Hook who made the choices. So many wrong choices. Like smoking weed he was offered in the fifth grade and collecting new additions from that moment on. Additions that in 1999 pushed him to tell a clerk at Blockbuster Video that he had a gun (though he didn't), earning him a rap for armed robbery.

"I was chasing that first high ever since it

came," says Hook, who notes that loving family and friends broke their hearts trying to help him. "Chasing something that never comes again. I did that. A choice that took a few years to take me 25 years to get away from. Some people don't have that chance."

The Truth is Ahead

One of Skolnik's everlasting memories about this filmmaking experience is watching 15 kids from East Orange, N.J., file into a room to watch "Hooked" and become utterly engrossed by it.

"Film industry people kept telling me you can't sell this film because kids will never watch a documentary," recalls Skolnik. "Well, they're engaged because we're not hiding from what Hook did and neither is Hook. His story is for society to use, not to take. We all know somebody who had potential and wasted it. Hook has a message to be heard."

Hook is already part of two missions devoted to delivering that message from prison, he's working with MSF Basketball, an Australian non-profit dedicated to providing more basketball opportunities for at-risk kids, as well as designing his own youth-empowerment program, Project Straight Path.

"The hardest part right now is getting letters from people worrying about guys I know I could reach if I was out there," says Hook, who refers to his jail address as "concentration camp" because "concentration is what it's like to do if you've done what it takes to get here."

Until he's eligible for parole later this year, Hook must live in concentration. He must pass his days as a prisoner until the day he can start getting other folks free.

"To be any type of parole, you have to totally lose yourself to the mission, and my mission is on a youth movement," he says. "The message isn't 'I don't care how talented you are in whatever area, if you get away from the fundamentals in life, the bottom will fall out. I'm awake at night knowing I can never go down that road again. I'm giving all my energy into bringing kids out of that oblivion. The proof is behind me. The truth is ahead.'" K

