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Fall 12-16-2019

Becoming His Own Boss

Reginald A. Blake Jr.

Cuny Graduate School of Journalism

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Deon McLaughlin is a 16-year-old from Brooklyn whose life revolves that orange ball, but how it's changing his life remains a lingering question as he finishes his high school career at Brooklyn College Academy in Flatbush.

The 6' 5" guard is a standout in PSAL's 'B' Division, where the Bobcats are 5–1 and looking to improve upon their quarterfinal appearance in last year's playoffs. On the court, McLaughlin is always in control, the unmistakable leader calling out plays and making sure everything on offense and defense runs through him. The senior is one of the better players in the borough if not the city, averaging 27.3 points, 11.0 rebounds and 4.8 assists per game.

Off the court, however, things have been a little less certain.

McLaughlin has the talent to compete against the city's 'AA' and 'A' division players—he does so in elite summer tournaments that also attract potential NBA talent—but his mother, Simone Moore, had pushed him to attend Brooklyn College Academy because of its rigorous academic program. McLaughlin was an honor roll student in middle school, but at BCA he's struggled to strike the right balance between books and that orange ball.

Wake up at 6 a.m. Eat breakfast. Put on clothes. Leave home by 7. Class at 8 sharp. School until 2:30 p.m. Practice at 6. Leave the gym by 9. Get home by 10. Eat Dinner. Shower. Sleep. Rinse and repeat. This has been McLaughlin's schedule for four years, and it's been a lot to handle for a student who is taking college classes in addition to his required high school courses.

As a freshman in 2016, McLaughlin had an overall C average but failed English. It was the first class he'd ever failed, and his mother threatened to take basketball away after two days of giving him the silent treatment.

"I didn't want to be that parent to cut off his dreams," Moore says, "but I made sure he understood the importance of balancing his schoolwork with his sports."

Athletics have always been seen as way out of the 'hood for African-Americans from low-income families. It's a theme in classic black movies such as Like Mike, Coach Carter, Above the Rim, and He Got Game, and it exposes kids to the idea that sports are the best and most efficient way to change your circumstances.

But very few have the same ability as Lakers forward Anthony Davis, who is 6' 10" and 254 pounds with a 90-inch wingspan and a 35.5-inch vertical leap. Kids might be able to relate to his rough upbringing (Davis grew up on the South Side of Chicago), but very few will grow the eight inches that Davis did in an 18-month span in high school to become the top college prospect in the country.

So why are sports seen as the primary source of escape? For starters: last year, 70% of NFL players and 75% of NBA players were black. But what ever happened to books? Why isn't education more of a focus?

In 2018, the nation's high school graduation rate was at an all-time high, with 84% of students getting their diplomas on time. African-American students, however, continued to fall short in the classroom. The graduation rate for black students was 76.4%—which might not seem terrible, until you compare it to white and Asian students whose graduation rates were four to six points above the national average.

And after high school? According to the Center for American Progress, nearly 60% of African-American students enrolled in college (at any level) are required to take non-credit remedial classes in college (compared to 35% of white students and 25% of Asian students.) When it comes to college graduation rates, only 42% of black students are earning four-year degrees.

McLaughlin understands that the odds aren't in his favor. He hopes to major in business and play basketball at either Morgan State in Maryland or Norfolk State University in Virginia—but he's not sure if he'll get a scholarship to those Division I programs, have to walk-on, or even delay his plans by doing a postgrad year. "My grades aren't all that," he says, "but along with my athletic ability, it should be good enough to get into a four-year school."

His mentor, Kyle Walker, agrees. An assistant coach at Brooklyn College Academy since 2014, Walker believes that McLaughlin will be able to go to college for free if he can keep his life balanced and his game sharp. "He has all the tools to be a really strong low D-1, high D-2 player," says Walker, a fellow BCA grad who played college ball at Plymouth State in New Hampshire. "He's quick, explosive, good IQ, good kid, quick learner, natural leader—he just has to maintain his motor and the scholarships will start coming in."

McLaughlin is learning this lesson from Javon Webb, a former BCA point guard who didn't play college ball. A product of Red Hook East houses, Webb, now 22, understands the difficulty of maintaining excellence academically and athletically. He attributes many teens like him choosing ball over books to a lack of good schools. "I was lucky, I was able to get accepted into an early college high school," he says. "But most of us go to our zone school and if you live in the 'hood, that school is definitely going to be trash."

When it comes to college readiness in New York City, August Martin, Boys and Girls, DeWitt Clinton and Clara Barton rank among the worst high schools. Those schools, no surprise, are in predominantly black and in poor neighborhoods.

"The school system is designed for us to fail, the schools we go to are understaffed, don't receive any funding, they're worn down, the teachers don't want to be there, how can one learn in that environment?" says Webb, who works at a youth afterschool program in Red Hook. "It's like the moment you're born black and brown you're immediately behind. We don't go to the best schools, we don't have money to afford tutors or receive the best books, but what we have is height and athleticism and we use that to our advantage."

Black scholars have shown that books can change your life the same way that an orange ball changed things for Anthony Davis. Ta-Nehisi Coates, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison and

Benjamin Carson are just a few examples of the many black people who have made it “out” through academics. But for Khody Wright, 21, another former high school basketball player from Brooklyn, their example makes no difference.

“They’ve shown that it can be done, but we all know it can be done—the likelihood however is just really low,” says Wright, a communications major at Iona College who grew up in East Flatbush and played hoops at Bedford Academy. “Why is it ball over books you ask? Access. It’s all about access. How many libraries you see around here? [The one library in East Flatbush has been closed for more than a year due to renovations.] Now how many parks and basketball courts? There’s your answer: There are four basketball courts within my complex, what you think we gonna do? Travel half an hour to read some books or shoot some hoops?”

Thanks to his no-nonsense parents, Wright still got into college. But that wasn’t the case for many of his childhood friends: “Not everyone has the same home situation as myself and the circumstances in which some of us are raised, ball is or at least it appears to be the only way out.”

Studies have shown that children from households in which parents have obtained at least one bachelor’s degree tend to perform at a higher academic level than children whose parents do not hold such a degree. According to the Center for American Progress, 46% of white children have a parent who has obtained a bachelor’s degree, while only 27% of black children can say the same thing.

The son of Nigerian immigrants, John Saibu is a 22-year-old former football player who grew up in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn and is now pursuing master’s in criminal justice at the University at Albany. “My parents made sure I was always taken care of right, but the thing is, they’ve always worked with their hands,” he says. “My parents never graduated high school. Now don’t get me wrong: they pushed me to be great academically just like any other African family, but they couldn’t help me with my homework beyond eighth grade and that made high school extremely difficult ... to be honest, if I could hoop a little, I don’t think I would’ve found ways to make it work academically—I did it out of necessity.”

Neither McLaughlin’s mom nor dad attended college, but his mom always stressed the importance of academics while raising him as a single parent. When he failed English at BCA in 2016, he quickly realized that the work he did in middle school wasn’t going to cut it anymore. “I’m not even gonna lie, I’m a bit of a procrastinator but my work always got done,” he says. “Freshman year was a bit of a reality check though.”

The balance that he’d once had between academics and athletics was now heavily tilting to one side, much to the disappointment of his mother who had worried about her son making the varsity team as a freshman.

“We sat down and had a discussion, I told him academics must always come first,” she says. “Dealing with the increased workload and practices, I knew that managing his time would be key.”

“Once it became real to me that not playing was a possibility,” McLaughlin says, “I had to make some changes.”

Making time to do homework at night instead of doing it on the city bus during his hour-long morning commute, McLaughlin’s grades steadily increased from the low-70s to the low-80s. When he realized his future wasn’t in basketball— “I had played in enough tournaments to know I was good, but I wasn’t NBA-level good”—he began to exercise more balance between academics and athletics. It wasn’t a one-way street anymore. Athletics and perhaps a scholarship, he reasoned, were still his best path toward getting accepted at a four-year college that would set himself up for the rest of his life. But he also had to back it up in the classroom—now and in the future.

Tarik Phillip, a former guard at Brooklyn College Academy and a recent graduate of West Virginia, knows better than most exactly what McLaughlin is going through. Now 26, Phillip admits to not putting in his best effort as a student.

“I just wanted to play ball man,” he says. “I used to get people to do my homework, used to cheat on tests, all that shit man, basketball was the only thing that kept me sane.”

As a sophomore in 2009, Phillip led BCA to a PSAL ‘B’ Division championship. Two years later, with Division I colleges such as St. John’s and Seton Hall showing interest, Phillip was forced to miss his senior season because his grades didn’t meet the school’s standards. “We thought we had a good chance of winning our second chip, but Ms. T don’t care about that,” says Jamal Jones, one of Phillip’s former teammates.

Ms. T is Shernell Thomas-Daley, the current principal of Brooklyn College Academy who at the time was the assistant principal and in charge of discipline. After Phillip missed multiple classes and failed English, she banned him from playing. “Nah, I’m not going to lie, I learned from that time and yes it was my fault,” he says. “But I’m still pretty bitter about that. We could’ve done something special.”

And yet, he says, “That was the first time I realized books and ball was married man. For too long I had put books down on the side and it took losing all I ever did to help me realize I gotta do both. I wasn’t ever going to be great at schoolwork, but my effort had to increase so that I could be able to do what I love.”

When no four-year school offered him a scholarship, Phillip did a postgrad year at Queen City Prep in Charlotte, N.C. Averaging 26 points and seven rebounds per game, he caught the eye of Frank Martin, the coach at South Carolina. After joining the Gamecocks in 2012, his priorities still weren’t in order. “I’d like to forget about the South Carolina experience,” says Phillip, who did not qualify academically and was ruled ineligible (he and his parents appealed the ruling but were denied by the NCAA).

Phillip then landed at Independence Community College in Kansas. Once there, reality set in. “I almost gave up on ball and started to really focus in the classroom,” he says. “I have to make a living, right?”

Unlike Phillip, McLaughlin had that epiphany much sooner. Now midway through his senior season, his goals in the classroom extend beyond his high school career. “I’ve always wanted to be my own boss, so studying business feels like a natural transition for me,” he says. “

Phillip finally found himself in Independence, and his path turned into a country road that took him to West Virginia in 2014. Coach Bob Huggins’s program has a specific style of play, one that doesn’t attract the nation’s best recruits but still needs fast, twitchy guards who play with an abundance of energy and an in-your-face aggressiveness. “When a school like West Virginia comes knocking and a coach like Bob Huggins looks you in the eye and says you can help, you don’t pass that up,” Phillip says.

Phillip spent three years in Morgantown, finally putting his academic struggles behind him and winning the Big 12 Sixth Man of the year as a senior in 2017. He graduated with a B.A. in multi-disciplinary studies and is currently playing overseas in Turkey for the Tofas Spor Kulubu.

McLaughlin has never met Phillip, but the story about his academic shortcomings was passed down as a cautionary tale. “Ms. T has told me about him and similarities she’s sees,” McLaughlin says. “She made sure to tell me not to make the same mistakes as him.” Widely considered to be the best player at BCA since Phillip, McLaughlin understands that he put himself in a hole academically, but he believes he can completely turn his grades around at the next level—even if that means using athletics to get there.

“I got off to a slow start with my grades and I may have to go prep out of school,” McLaughlin says, “but I’m going to make sure I get my college degree.”