

This Issue in Two Sections

READER

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CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

A Key

to the Top

Using
basketball
as a lure,
Athletes
for Better
Education
brings
promising
ghetto kids to
Lake Forest
for a crash
course in
middle-class
values.

By Robert S. Boone

Anthony Brown, better known as "A.B." to his fellows, stands faintly panting at the top of the key, nervously concocting his final dunk. In a few seconds, he intends to charge toward the basket, fly up into the air, execute a 360-degree spin, and then, still far above the ground, ram the ball down through the hoop.

Watching from the stands are about a hundred "Athletes for Better Education." All are from Chicago high schools. All are first stringers on their school basketball teams. Most are black. Most plan to use basketball for getting to and through college. Most carry a dream to become NBA stars, and most have shown ability in the classroom. It is a hot afternoon in the Lake Forest College gymnasium, but no one seems distracted by the heat, not when fellow camper "A.B." is about to do a "360" in a "two-shot dunk-off" against Mickey Johnson, star forward of the Chicago Bulls.

Along with the young athletes, others in the gym follow the dunking contest with interest. Next to the grandstand are eight coaches, eight teachers, and four group leaders. All wear "AFBE" shirts with the logo of books held up by a basketball and a football. The four directors of the camp also stand in the crowd. One of them is 6'6" Chick Sherrer, a former teammate of Bill Bradley's at Princeton, recent English department chairman at Lake Forest Academy, now president of Athletes for Better Education and consequently emcee of the dunk-off. Another director is Father Standrod Carmichael, a mildly profane, gray-bearded Protestant priest from the south side who handles the business end of AFBE. Standing nearby is Richard Ware. During the school year Richard acts as a student advocate. At the AFBE summer camp he is in charge of the dormitory at night, among other things. Finally, there is Bob Love, former Bulls superstar. Without "Butter" Love, everyone agrees, this camp would never have evolved from a good idea into a functioning reality, one that Love plans to take to Seattle next year and that Sherrer hopes will spread throughout the country.

As A.B.'s moment approaches, a mood of good-humored fascination covers the gym. There are catcalls and shouts from some, silent, concentrated stares from others. One teacher whispers to another, "This has been going on for centuries. It's like the hunters after lunch with no game, showing off their skills to each other just for the fun of it."

And then A.B. descends. Somewhere between the foul line and the basket he takes off, lifting himself up and even with the rim as his outstretched arms begin to spin along with the rest of his body. So far he is on schedule, but at the very moment when he is to slam the ball through the basket, it suddenly sneaks through his sweaty fingers and bounds harmlessly across the gym. Genuine anger coats his face as he touches down, but only until hooting and shouting bring him to laughter. Soon after, Mickey Johnson executes a tame but successful dunk of his own to capture the contest.

Had the leaders intended, they could not have staged a better event for the first day of AFBE camp—an experienced older man has won out over a younger, more impetuous one.

Afternoon camp business can now resume; a lecture from a guest coach, two hours of drilling and basketball instruction, a brief free period, mounds of food at the Lake Forest College cafeteria, study time, group discussions, and finally, before bed, more basketball games. The next morning: up at seven, a big breakfast, classes until 11:30, more grub, a lecture from a guest coach at the gym, and more fundamentals.

Athletic camps are common. Baseball, golf, tennis, swimming, soccer, hockey, football, and even surfing can be found represented in summer retreats all across the country. Many are run by professional athletes like Joe Namath, Ted Williams, and Oscar Robertson. Some, like a swimming camp in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, offer such exotic extras as "periodic stroke analysis," while a basketball camp in the Poconos promises that campers will "sleep, eat, and dream basketball." What sets AFBE apart from other athletic camps is that here the athletic and the academic are truly blended, not simply flaunted in the brochures. Here, in fact, basketball is the hook on a long line that reels promising kids in from the dark, unpredictable waters of ghetto life to land them on the solid ground of American middle-class values.

When these young people stepped out of their parents' cars into the green and wealthy suburbs, they were stepping into a giant, two-week-long advertising campaign for middle-class thinking. Be responsible. Be punctual. Think about your appearance. No combs in the hair. Go to class. Get good grades. Pay the price. Don't let drugs and alcohol eliminate you from the race.

No shuckin' and jivin'. Above all: *Use basketball. Don't let it use you!* Make no mistake about it, AFBE is a serious outfit bent on helping boys whom Sherrer describes as having "one leg up on the power structure." (To Carmichael they are "super studs," while the brochure calls them "scholar-athletes.") The real story of this camp experience is the variety of ways in which the message is sent to the campers, for they are engulfed in persuasion from the moment they arrive.

Leading this persuasion parade is the *direct pitch*. The first day at Lake Forest, the boys encountered the logo of books and balls. The same day, at their first formal meeting, they were told of the "Three A's: Academics, athletics, and attitude." At the same meeting, Bob MacBride, head coach at Kenwood High School and an instructor for AFBE, stood up and stated some facts. "Did you know that 87 percent of the boys who leave Chicago to play basketball don't make it? They flunk out or they quit or they get kicked out. Why? A lot of reasons. Some didn't think they needed to go to class. Others forgot to pass. Some even wore..."—and his attention is now directed to the back of the auditorium—"...hats in the building." Everyone turns to watch a black youth hurriedly remove a large hat from his head.

All the speakers that day and the days following joined MacBride in holding up the grim specter of a boy with some talent leaving Chicago to play basketball in college, flunking out two years later, and winding up at age 22 with nothing but vanishing talents and dreams. No education. No goals. No future. NOTHING! "You'd better plan for something that doesn't include basketball," the boys hear daily, "because only a handful of you are going to make it. Don't find yourself in a world where no one needs you." Required reading at the camp is a four-part series about black athletes. One article suggests that the recent increase in black suicide can be correlated with shattered sports dreams.

The direct pitch has its purest expression after lunch, when guest coaches speak to the boys. The coach may be Johnny Orr of Michigan, assistant coach Jim Roseboro of Iowa, or one of many others, but they are all truly inspirational. For one day they are preachers and teachers, not salesmen for their schools. None captures the youngsters more thoroughly than Gene Smithson, head coach of Illinois State. Smithson, whose

nickname in college was "Radar Gene with the built-in screen," is General Patton, Woody Hayes, John Wayne, and Billy Graham all rolled into a 6'2" head coach who, on his day at camp, wore red, white, and blue pants. His delivery is impeccable, at times booming and at times whispering. Pauses. Lines of poetry. He too, he informs the boys, grew up in the ghetto. Other kids laughed at him, but these snickers, "turned me on." He excelled in school and on the court, becoming a college basketball player talented enough to be drafted by the pros and later a college coach successful enough to take a team to the semifinals of the National Invitational Tournament.

From this man came a set of maxims to remember: "Dreams are only good if you work your asses off to get them."

"Don't let street people drag you down to their level."

"Give yourself every chance you have to be the very best that you can become."

"I insist, I REQUIRE, that every time a player of mine steps out onto the court, that he plays all the way from one end to the other. NEVER QUIT. Gentlemen, there's no other way."

"Plan ahead, so later in life you can get up in the morning and do what you want to do, not what someone else wants you to do."

Radar Gene leaves with a poem that ends, "... and the one who wins is the man who thinks he can." Finally, "Good success, gentlemen. I never wish anyone 'good luck' because luck is something you have to make for yourself."

Smithson then underscores his speech by trotting out some players from Illinois State and running them through excruciating movement drills. One particularly seizes the spectators. The coach stands facing a vertical line of players who run six feet to their left and touch the floor with their hands and then six feet to the right and touch again. Back and forth. Back and forth. Up and down. Up and down. Faster and faster until Smithson blows his whistle, whereupon they stand erect and run in place like flamenco dancers.

While Bob Love's presence in camp is less forceful than that of the guest coaches, he too can push. At an all-camp meeting during the first week, he made three boys stand up to apologize to the group. One had talked back to a coach. Another had fallen asleep in class, while a third had loafed during a game. This was not excessive humiliation, but enough to show the campers that the resident leaders had it in them to use this tactic, too. Perhaps one reason that the campers accepted this so easily

goes back to the selection process, which sought boys who were willing to be taught. Another favorite slogan at the camp is "Coachability is educability."

The message from Radar Gene and the other guest coaches is echoed by the teachers and camp coaches, although in a more muted and subtle way. Theirs is the *instructional message*, a complement to the direct pitch. Every morning before the boys ever get a chance to touch a basketball, they must sit in a classroom in College Hall and work on a reading and writing program designed by Bob Cahill and Herb Hrebic of Quigley South High School. Although two weeks is a short time in which to teach language skills, the teachers and camp directors point to the course's popularity with the students and to the 0.7-point improvement in grade averages that last year's campers achieved when they went back to their schools.

The composition phase of the course, called "Write Like Hell!", was designed specifically for AFBE. The first page, a review of sentence types, has these examples:

"Bob Love dunked."

"While driving to the basket, Chauncery Checker tripped and split his lip."

"Coach Brown jumped up because he disagreed with the ref's call."

Every so often, the example might come from another area of the boys' lives. "My dog crapped in the sneakers."

Basically, this phase of the course teaches students how to take a simple sentence and "manipulate" it into more complicated ones through combining, rearranging, subtracting, and expanding. The students pass through specialized drills until they are ready for the first paper, "How to Shoot a Free Throw." This involves listing at least fifteen steps involved in the activity and then building these into a paragraph.

If the writing program relies on basketball as a motivator, the reading program uses it in other ways. Here the camp message leaps into the classroom through the carefully selected reading samples:

"Sure the college scouts and coaches are wrong for exploiting the athletes, but many of the athletes are guilty also for letting themselves be used. Most of those who end up with nothing are brothers. That's why I'm glad I went to a black college, Southern University at Baton Rouge, because they generally work harder to help the athletes get an education and learn a skill. They are interested in you as a man and not just an athlete." — Bob Love

"If I proved to be exceptional in

college, I would strive for a professional contract, and ask for as high a wage as I could command, but while I played I would be careful to acquire skills which would enable me to earn a decent living when I had to get out of the pros. And above all I would level with young athletes and try to show them that there are hundreds of jobs which offer a more productive lifetime experience than sports." — James Michener, "Sports in America"

No words from Angela Davis, Huey Newton, or Stokely Carmichael on the pages of the reading text. Not even Martin Luther King Jr. gets a spot. Clearly, the message at AFBE is neither "Do your own thing," nor "Black Power." It's "Get your head together! Succeed!"

The program sends another instructional message through the relationship between the teachers and students. While the classes are always friendly, while no one is ever insulted or belittled, and while the teachers unquestionably enjoy and respect their students, the fact remains that in these classrooms, just as on the court, teacher is boss. All knowledge flows from him into the class

according to the step-by-step process that he and the book have determined. To learn is to pass carefully through a series of prescribed steps. In class, just as in life, one must know and follow the rules carefully. There is no resemblance here to an "open classroom" where teachers and students together decide what is to be learned and in what manner.

Bob Cahill's style of teaching best illustrates this benevolent dictatorship. Carrying an uncanny resemblance to Woody Hayes, he goads, jokes, and urges his boys to do it his way. They all look at the same page at the same time and follow his lead. "I give you the form. You give me the content."

While teachers like Cahill coach in the classroom, the coaches, like Bob MacBride, teach on the court, for here the same instructional message can be heard. For one thing, defensive basketball is emphasized because good defensive basketball requires skills and attitudes needed to be successful *anywhere* in the adult world. A good defensive player must be unselfish. (There is no room on the court for an individual. Radar Gene told the boys.) He must be willing to sacrifice. He can never quit. He must have basic skills and an overall knowledge of the game. He must have tremendous energy and grittiness. Finally, he must understand how other people operate.

"Colleges," Jim Roseboro told the campers, "are looking for a good defensive player who can play offense, not the opposite." The opposite is the hot dog who, after making a flashy shot, trots down the court while the opponents zip by him for an easy lay-up. This is the negative model for living, not just for basketball. Be on guard. DON'T QUIT!

The "halo effect," a third persuasive technique, is what Father Carmichael calls the use of big name players to peddle the camp philosophy. Find out what heroes the boys share. Bring these men to the camp. It's one thing for a teacher or parent to tell you to go to class, but quite another when Bill Robanzine of the Kansas City Kings does. This year the camp was not able to produce the super-stars like Jabbar or Dr. J., although many at the camp expected these two to arrive at any moment. The directors had to rely

The pressure on the campers to think realistically about their future and to act responsibly comes mostly from the outside—from the guest speakers, the instructors, the guest basketball stars, and from the very structure of the camp itself, which requires the campers to meet their commitments. Only one area of the program allows for the boys to influence each other. This occurs nightly during study time, when Sunny Luster and a group of peer counselors work with small groups of campers. The premise holds that the group carries enough good sense to solve most problems if "it is given a chance to do so." Create an honest and trusting atmosphere. Urge students to gripe. Ask the group to struggle with the problem and, according to Sunny, the difficulty is usually removed. "Kids will listen to their peers more closely than they will

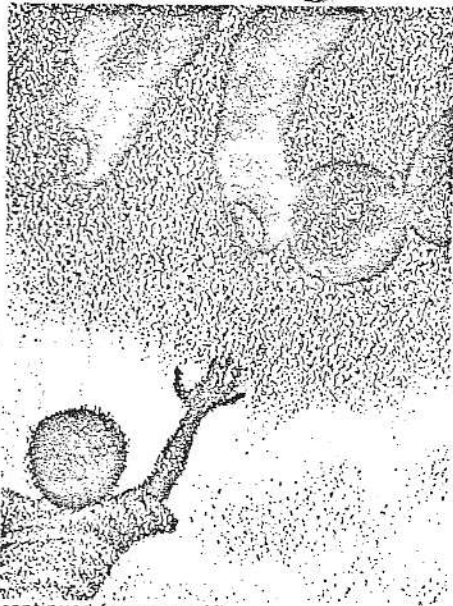
Another boy talked about home. "I'm fine here, but when I go back to the hoods [neighborhoods], I'm going to have problems with drugs again." The boy lives in Cabrini-Green, which, Sunny reminds the group, puts extreme pressures on him. "Most of you other guys from better neighborhoods have no idea." No solution follows, but the group tells the boy he seems strong enough to survive.

People have criticized AFBE for allowing the peer counseling sessions to be the only occasions when campers are required to express themselves. The camp, the critics say, pushes a philosophy stressing individual responsibility, yet the youngsters are rarely on their own. This is not the only criticism of the overall program. Why is there so little emphasis on black culture and heritage? Must school only be seen as a stepping stone and not something valuable in itself? Isn't there something slightly insidious about using basketball to lure kids into the suburbs for a crash course in middle-class values? By selecting only winners—accomplished basketball players and promising students—is the camp limiting its contribution to city youngsters?

The academic programs also have some questionable aspects. The two-week period is too short, even though it is supplemented by monthly follow-up sessions. The basketball analogies in the book grow tedious. Several youngsters complained that they should have their vocabularies stretched in other ways. Small tutorials, rather than conventional classes, would be more effective. Very little of the youngsters' own experience is involved in the writing program; they are simply taught a method, rarely shown the pleasures of honest expression. The apparent success of last year's program has been questioned by Father Carmichael, who suspects that the attention heaped on the campers, more than the academic program itself, brought about improved grades in regular school.

In the end, the critics must wait, along with the camp directors, to discover what happens to these youngsters. This year several follow-up studies will be conducted, but these results will be less important than finding out five years from now how many of these youngsters have graduated from college and prepared themselves for a world without basketball.

A Key to the Top



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on camp coaches like Billy Lewis of Illinois State and guests like Mickey Johnson, Sonny Parker, and Bill Robanzine. Sherrer, who played on two fine Princeton teams, has earned his halo. Wearing the largest halo is Bob Love himself. While a speech problem prevents him from speaking directly to large groups, his confident presence carries the message just as clearly. Here is a man who at the end of one career has found another. Bob Love has an education, a family, money, and a dream he can realize: he is a man who has used basketball and not been used by it.

to adults. They won't lie to their peers the way they lie to adults." Following the camp philosophy, Sunny directs the boys toward more prudent and realistic behavior. His models are John Havlicek and Jo Jo White of the Boston Celtics, team players both.

These peer counseling sessions often started creakily because few felt like complaining, but the absence of girls was mentioned more than once. "Man," moaned one seventeen-year-old, "I get tired of all these hard legs. I want some soft legs." Others complained about their teams. One boy in Sunny's group was unhappy because his teammates "don't pass. They don't play defense. They don't follow their shots. All they do is shoot." A simple problem with a seemingly simple solution. "Talk to them, man. Call a meeting and let them know what you think." Nods all around. The adult solution, sit them down and talk. Everyone, except the boy with the problem, looks pleased.

Other problems were more prickly. One boy is thinking of leaving. "Camp's all right, but I don't need the school work.... Anyway, I want to play football more than basketball."

"Stick it out, man." A shrug follows.

"Are you quitting because you weren't your coach's first choice? You don't like being second." A vehement denial.

If it turns out that the AFBE experience has helped these boys gain control over their lives, much of the success will have to be credited to the overall happy atmosphere of the place. While

the directors stressed the speeches from the guest coaches, the examples of the instructors, the peer pressure, and the halo effect, this giant helping of persuasion was served up with equal ingredients of good humor. Whether you call it "positive reinforcement" or simple niceness, it was that single quality that made the camp special.

This spirit of pleasantness showed up in the classroom, with Elma Douglas cajoling one of her students to remove his hat and with 5'1" Barbara Glatt posing for a class picture snuggled under the large arm of one of her students. The basketball court, while a serious place indeed, nevertheless was the site of an ad hoc "ugly" contest held on the last day of camp. The same climate could be found on the campus in the evening, when groups of students lounged on the grass while others played a slow-motion game of touch football with an orange.

The overall good humor was alive even in moments of apparent seriousness. One day Sherrer lectured the entire group, relying mostly on well-worn sport and classroom cliches.

"We give you the opportunity."

"You get out of it what you put into it."

"Give 100 percent."

"Free time is wasted time. It's devoted to not doing things. Here we do things."

This is the stuff of locker room walls and student handbooks. But the speaker is a witty, warm, and concerned man, not a tiresome old hack hiding behind someone else's words. Kids recognize this. They enjoy his jokes. They pick up on the irony. They appreciate the way he engages them in the audience. In Sherrer, as well as the other camp directors, they see a man who makes the old cliches come alive, for surely his life has been enriched by following them.

A few weeks before the camp began, Father Carmichael cautioned teachers about "blivets." A blivet, he explained, "is two pounds of manure in a one pound bag." For all the inspirational speeches, cornball cliches and well-worn middle-class success formulas that were delivered at the AFBE camp, blivets, it turns out, were rare at Lake Forest last summer.