

## Rural versus City High School Sports

New York City is home to over 8 million people. Smith Center, Kansas has a population of less than 2000. Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn itself plays host to over 2000 students drawing mainly from the Coney Island neighborhood. Abraham Lincoln High, or Lincoln as more commonly referred to, and Smith Center High do share something in common though. They both have a tradition of athletic excellence. The Smith Center Redmen a small school football powerhouse have won 8 state championships and at one point held the nations longest winning streak at 79 games. Lincoln High and Coney Island are a breeding ground for basketball talent regularly turning out college recruits and even several NBA players (Stephon Marbury, Sebastian Telfair, Lance Stephenson). While the size difference between the two schools and cities are obvious the demographics of the student are as well. Smith City according to city-data.com is 97.3% White. In fact one running back the Redmen went up against was described as “both the rare African American and the rare big time college prospect in western Kansas”(Drape, 2009, pg. 109). This area has very little if any diversity. Lincoln High on the other hand is a “ghetto school for the projects”(Frey, 1994, pg. 13) made up of a majority of African-American students.

Another similarity these two schools and areas can claim is that they both have a book written about their athletic teams and neighborhood/town. “Our Boys: A Perfect Season on the Plains with the Smith Center Redmen” written by Joe Drape and “The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams” written by Darcy Frey have a similar structure. Both authors choose to immerse themselves in the culture of the two environments by following the daily activities of

both teams players and coaches. Both books span the course of one season for each team (including preseason), and provide an afterword section to update the statuses of individuals in the story.

Reading these books simultaneously provides for a stark contrast between life in the projects of a big city versus rural middle America. For example a player on the Redmen isn't likely to say, "Out there all you gotta do is *look* at someone wrong and they want to shoot you"(Frey, 1994, 202) like one of the Lincoln players said when referring to Coney Island. One of the Lincoln players was even shot in the hand during the course of the book(Frey, 1994). This wasn't an isolated incident either. A former teammate who had dropped out of school was found dead after being shot in the head. The only injuries in *Our Boys* occur during competition not neighborhood violence. To go along with that point the college recruiters going to Smith Center don't have to fear walking into a home for recruiting visits, like those recruiting players from Coney Island who "walking up drug-infested stairwells yelling, as some have been known to do, 'coach! I'm a coach! Don't hurt me!'"(Frey, 1994, pg. 30). Dropping any players from these two schools into the other would be a shock to see how the other one lives.

What wouldn't be a shock to either athletes would be how much their parents care for them. While the Redmen's home life is much more likely to feature a two parent home than the players from Lincoln, there is no denying both groups parents have a fierce desire to see them succeed. This extends not only to the parents but to the players support systems as well. The Redmen's parents, and entire town for that matter, are always there to cheer them on at both home and away games. One father "put six hundred miles on his pickup this week going to ball games"(Drape, 2009, pg.166). Driving to and from games is not all they do though. The mother of Smith Center organize pre and post game meals for both away and home games:

“road games they would make a sack lunches for the players to eat on the bus and provide mini pizzas from Pizza Hut for the ride home. For home games they would prepare a lasagna dinner, complete with garlic bread and salad, which they would serve after school let out”(Drape, 2009, pg. 64).

This kind of effort takes both time and money from all the families but no one complains because they love their boys and want to be there for them in anyway they can. Another show of support that is unlike anything I’ve personally I ever heard of is what they call ‘circle up’. The circle up happens after every game win or loss. After home games this takes place in the locker room with the players and any other men from the town(grandfathers, fathers, former players, fathers of former players)(Drape, 2009). They would form a circle around Coach Barta and “crossing their arms in front of them to clasp the hands of those next to them”(Drape, 2009, pg. 96), this tradition included any women as well during away games and takes place on the field. In my own opinion this is a show off solidarity, one that shows the players how much support they have. It is also a symbol that once you are a part of the Redmen program you always part of it. This must be a comforting feeling to the players especially.

While the Redmen family is strong, supportive, and will always welcome you back, being welcomed back to Coney Island is rarely a good thing. In most case that mean you didn’t make it out of the neighborhood that’s most profitable employment plan is drugs since “it’s the only fully employed industry around”(Frey, 1994, pg. 226). Luckily there are some good influences within Coney Island to try and help the players stay on a positive path. These are their parents, Lincoln Basketball Coach Bobby Harstien, and Mr. Lou. All this influences know the difficult path of making it out of the neighborhood and they desperately what the players to make it out. Coach Harstien, who all recruiting mail is sent too, uses this leverage to try and keep his players

in good academic standing. He will “lock them away until the players, by getting good report cards and test scores, earn the right to look at them”(Frey, 1994, pg.26). He knows that without the grades the players will never have a shot at a college scholarship to a four-year school. He holds that carrot out for them until they have proven they can handle it. Players themselves even see the benefit in this as one player said, “No Coach, don’t give it to me!...I’ll stop working hard in class”(Frey, 1994, pg.26). This type of influence is more important than anything he can do on the court, as an education to future success.

The parents also try and steer their children in the right direction by placing strict rules on them. One mother made her son break up with his girlfriend, and makes him come straight home from practice and school (unless he goes to his brothers barber shop). Even though her son did not like or agree with the decision she thinks “a girl could make him do something stupid”(Frey, 1994, pg. 211) and that:

“I’m just praying to go that he goes to college and gets his diploma and gets out of here. I want him to have what I never got. Russell is my only son in this world and I’ll do anything in my power to see that he goes the right way.”(Frey, 1994, pg. 221)

Parents of Coney Island know what kind of life is ahead of their children if they fall short of their goals. Parents want to be part positive part of the important triangle structure that makes up the inner-city athletes lives. This triangle, as defined by sports psychologist and guidance counselors, includes a player’s family, neighborhood, and his schooling (Frey, 1994). The thought process behind this triangle is that a player can overcome one area of his life that is weak, and occasionally two, but overcoming all three makes it nearly impossible for the player to prosper. When youth are put in that situation they are fighting a losing battle, which is unfortunately what we see with most Lincoln players.

Other than the coach and family I thought Mr. Lou and his sidekick Disco were portrayed as having a positive impact on the athletes. They are two members of the community who take it upon themselves to help the neighborhood kids out in the small ways they can. They try and influence the youth not when they are at home and in school, like their parents and coach Harstien, but when they are on the famed outdoor courts of Coney Island. They coach summer teams, run tournaments, try and find sponsors for jerseys and trophies, and provide general guidance wisdom and tips for the wise ones that will listen. The young athletes would do well to listen to them as he offers sound advice:

“But I’ve learned as long you work with them and show you care, they care. They all want to learn the game, go to college, make something of their lives. I tell them, one bad injury can tear up your whole career, but no one can take away your brain.” (Frey, 1994, pg. 108)

It seem as though that the youth of Coney Island do take heed to what Mr. Lou says as they refer to him as “the old man who’s dope”(Frey, 1994, pg. 106), and will listen his advice about ways to improve at the one thing everyone in Coney Island holds sacred, basketball. As evident by all these examples boy the boys of Smith Center and Coney Island have supportive influences in their lives who want nothing but the best for them.

A finally difference between the two environments that stuck out was what they do when they aren’t involved in sports or school. The Redmen had their “clubhouse” which one of the players dad built for them as a spot for the boys together to hangout, play video games, ping pong, watch movies and so on. The Lincoln players had a barbershop owned by one of the player’s older brothers. A big difference between the two is that the Redmen could have hungout anywhere at any house or just on the streets of the town. The author even described it at

the start of the season that it seemed like the boys forced themselves to have a clubhouse and hangout together, and when they would leave each other they would become much more at ease (Drape, 2009). While for the Lincoln players hanging out at the barbershop was a necessity because they had no other options for safety reasons. When they would leave the barbershop they would not feel more at ease but would be put on edge because they were going back to violent neighborhood. It must be a strange feeling to be in one of the busiest cities in the world but to be so trapped.

The sad thing is that as good as people and basketball players as they were portrayed as in the book only one of them reached their potential. When reading the Grantland piece “The Last Shot, 20 Years Later” you learn that only former NBA star Stephon Marbury fulfilled his potential. One of the players profiled in the book talks in the article about people in Coney Island think basketball will be the only way out of the project, “The mentality was so limited, I always wanted for people to feel like they had options”(Barshad, 2014, para. 40). This sounds like both deviance and sport socialization. Deviance because, while basketball can potentially help a persons future, basketball and sport in general should not be the main focus of life. The over-conformity to the idea that sports is the only way to improve your current situation is deviant behavior. It fits into the category of sports socialization because basketball is literally a way of life there. One remark made in the book was that the only thing the city would do for them was put up backboards and rims (Frey, 1994). Being good at basketball could even keep you safe as mentioned in the Grantland piece, “Basketball offered a lot back then — protection, strength, respect. “If he got talent, if he got a chance to make it, don’t mess with him””(Barshad, 2014, para. 36).

The same type of connections can be made with deviance and sport socialization at Smith Center. Football players acting deviant by creating a pack to swear off girls to focus on football (Drape, 2009) is not something a usual high school boy would agree to. In fact in my high school people played football just for the social aspect and talking to girls. It is also deviant when a player like the Redmen's starting linebacker, who wants to play through a concussion, even switches helmets (back to the old less protective one) because he doesn't like the new one. This also relates to our discussion of high school sports and how serious people take them. It is not worth further injury (especially head injuries) to play a high school sport. Smith Center puts so much importance on high school football, that it must seem like life or death to these kids who are too short-sighted to see the bigger picture.

One area of research to me that would be interesting involves players from situation more resembling that of athletes from inner-city neighborhoods like Coney Island. As talked about earlier when players have multiple areas of the "triangle" working against them the odds of succeeding are slim. I think it would be interesting to do a long-term study regarding athletes from under-privileged backgrounds being recruited to attend private schools on scholarships. This situation provides the athletes with opportunities they would of previously never had thanks to their athletic ability. These schools are better equipped and funded to provide the athletes with an education that will be beneficial to them both being admitted to college and hopefully sticking at that college. As seen with several of the players from Lincoln, who because of a lack of quality education throughout their life, they could not achieve high enough test scores to peruse their dreams. To me it would be very interesting to follow multiple cases of inner-city kids recruited to play at private schools throughout their high school and college career to see if

this stable high school environment was able to truly make a impact on their life or if it was more self-serving to the private school that recruited them to star on their sports teams.

Unfortunately, both afterword sections of these books did not bring the type of success you would hope for either set of characters, both athletically and personally. While I believe these two examples of neighborhoods and towns treat their high school sports on the edge of being too serious, I understand why. In their certain situations, middle of nowhere without a lot of other options to keep entertained and in the middle of a urban ghetto with little hope to hold onto, high school sports can be one of the few positives. The hope is though that those people that have the opportunity to make an impact on these young athletes, family, coaches, and teachers, are able to leave a positive mark.



## References

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