



SPECIAL
FEATURE

"THE
SEASON
STARTS
TOMORROW"

BY KATIE McCABE

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He drove them, he infuriated them, he turned their basketball season into one of the most grueling, overwhelming and confrontational experiences in their young lives.

But because of this remarkable man, by the time the last buzzer had sounded for their last game, the boys of St. Jude High had learned a

lot about themselves—and a little about basketball as well.

HIS NOSE PRESSED against the window, Terrence Thomas squinted into the late-afternoon sunlight and scanned the traffic whizzing past St. Jude High School. He tensed as yet another car slowed at the traffic light out front, sure this was the one bringing the coach he and his teammates had been awaiting for hours—or months, or years, depending on how you counted.

“Hey y’all,” he said. “Check this out.”

On his left, six-foot-three-inch Damon Childrey crouched lower, while the other seniors, Darin Irwin and Amir Green, jostled to get a

look at the sleek white van easing across traffic. It slowed at the stone pillars and glided into the circular driveway, its green-tinted windows glinting in the sunshine.

“It’s headin’ for the gym,” said Terrence’s friend Horace Lewis. “Maybe it’s him, Tee.”

“Maybe it ain’t,” Terrence shot back.

“Maybe y’all don’t know *who* it is!” someone else snorted.

At that, the group lapsed into silence. How often they had talked, in the blistering heat of the Alabama summer, of the season that was upon them, of the state championship they’d dreamed about since the five of them had first shot hoops

together—Terrence and Horace and their older buddies, Damon and Darin and Amir.

On those endless, sultry evenings, they sat in the dark on Terrence’s front stoop and talked basketball. Their old coach had been just fine, their 14-12 record passable. But with a new coach, ‘93 could—*would*—be the season the St. Jude Pirates finally made liars of the tall Montgomery public-school guys who laughed at the “little Catholic boys.”

In July and August, it was all so easy to believe. But now it was October—October 15 to be exact, with varsity tryouts scheduled for 5 p.m.—and still no word on a new coach. The boys had gathered in the school foyer the moment the dismissal bell rang, and were hunched at the window, trying to make out the driver as the van slowed to a stop by the gym. The four letters on the license plate came into view. “W-A-L-T,” they read.

No one moved, their eyes fixed on the driver’s door. But it remained closed. Instead, the passenger side flew open. A man’s head and shoulders appeared, and a blue-carpeted ramp flipped out. Then they saw it.

“*The guy is in a wheelchair,*” someone whispered. “Our new basketball coach is in a wheelchair.”

“No, he’s not,” Terrence protested. “‘Cause that’s not the coach!”

“Who else’d be pullin’ up to the gym at five o’clock? That’s him.”

“You’re lying,” Terrence fired back. “I’m goin’ to ask Mrs. Perry.” He shot into the main office. The others

followed and met principal Geraldine Perry coming out, smiling. They relaxed a little when they saw her. *Surely*, they thought, *Mrs. Perry had more sense than to hire a coach who couldn’t walk.* She was such a huge basketball fan she went to away games even their mothers missed.

“It’s not true, is it?” Terrence asked. “About that guy in the wheelchair bein’ our new coach?”

“It certainly is,” she told them.

The boys stood staring at her. Why would she do something to embarrass the Pirates all over the city?

“His name is Mr. Walt Kennedy, and you all are lucky to have someone like him to learn from. Let’s go welcome him,” she said, setting off down the hallway.

The man who’d just arrived, she explained as the boys loped along beside her in stunned silence, had been a college basketball legend—at *her* college, Florida A&M. After that he was a Harlem Globetrotter, then the coach of superstar high-school teams in Washington, D.C. And yes, she said, he did have a disability—multiple sclerosis had put him in a wheelchair a few years ago. “Which of course has nothing to do with anything,” Mrs. Perry finished, throwing open the double doors that led outside to the gym.

Walter Kennedy was handsome, and gray-bearded, and big. Everything about him seemed oversized—the broad, muscled shoulders and neck, the long legs and enormous feet of an exceptionally tall man. Rapidly he rolled along the length

of the van, pressing buttons, sliding the doors into place.

The boys hung back, and then, seeing Kennedy reach for the rope to hoist up the ramp, they moved forward, relieved to have something to do to fill the awkward silence.

Damon was the first to find his voice. "Need a hand, sir?" he asked.

Kennedy paused, and Damon shifted uncertainly as he felt the new coach's serious brown eyes rest on him. When Kennedy spoke, his voice was not unfriendly, but something in his tone—something iron, Damon thought—made the boys step back.

"No, son," Kennedy said. "I can handle it."

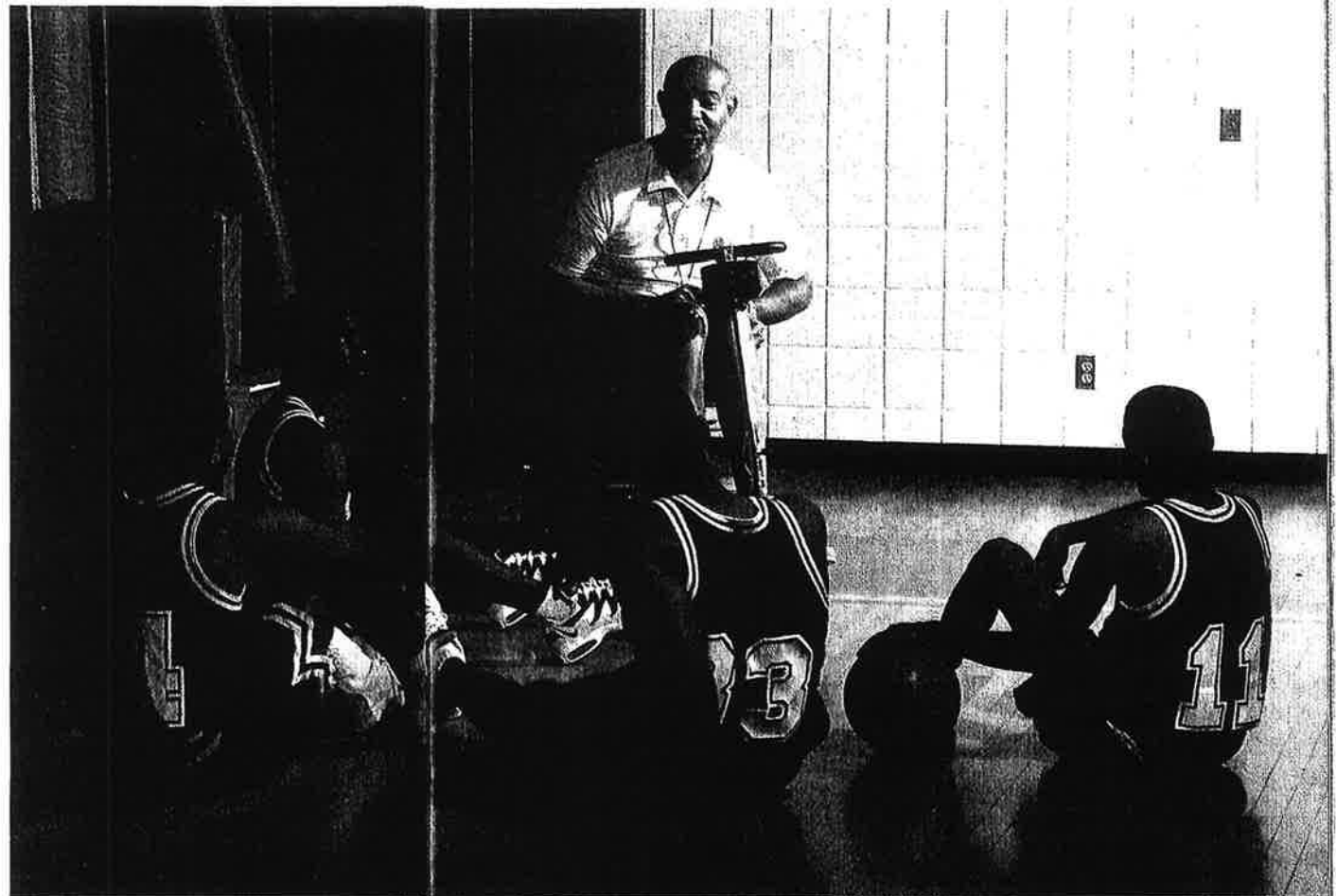
Nobody's Friend

IN THE GYM, they fell into line without a word, studying Kennedy as he buzzed in his chair around the court, calling the boys to order in a deep, steady voice that echoed off the walls.

He was cool and all business, Terrence thought. And quiet. Terrence looked sideways at Horace and Amir. They were looking straight ahead, waiting, as he was, for this no-nonsense man who had introduced himself as "Coach Kennedy" to say something besides his name—something that would tell them what he was all about.

Instead, there was the sound of the whistle, followed by curt, clear directions for running scrimmages. Then layup, ball-handling and running drills followed. All that long evening, and the next, and the next, the boys tried to read this man.

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Each Kennedy was a mystery to the boys. He wanted them to win, but that was not his only goal.

As they filed in the following Monday, his varsity picks, taped to the gym door, told them something about what lay behind the coach's silent scrutiny during the tryouts. The real superstars were listed, of course—Darin, the stocky, agile shooter who had more or less carried the team in previous seasons; Damon, with his height and golden hands; Terrence and Horace,

who'd started on varsity as underclassmen. But other varsity veterans who hadn't bothered to hustle for the new coach found they'd lost their spots to junior varsity, or JV, players who had—even five-foot-four-inch Amir, who'd just about given up making the team because of his height.

Kennedy waited for the disappointed few to file out, then began

speaking. "The first thing I want to say to you all is that I didn't come here just to do a little bit better than last season." Boys who'd been whispering, discussing the cuts, stopped talking. "I came here to win it all. We're going to Birmingham."

Terrence's cheeks burned. *Birmingham. State finals.* He and the other guys had talked about these goals all

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summer long. But a *coach*—even one who'd been a Globetrotter—coming out with a statement that brazen on the first day of practice, before he'd even seen them play? How on earth, Terrence wondered, was he going to do this? Show them Globetrotter moves? From a wheelchair?

"Things are going to be a lot different with me in charge," Kennedy continued, buzzing back and forth in front of the bleachers, meeting each boy's eyes for a moment or two. "The first thing is, I hold team meetings before each practice." Murmurs of annoyance rippled through the row of boys sitting on the bleachers.

"Report to the cafeteria, not the gym. And be on time," Kennedy continued, his low voice cutting through the grumbling. "Players who are not on time will be suspended. So will players who fail to come fully dressed in uniform."

From the far end of the line came a muffled exclamation of disgust. Kennedy stopped short. "I hear y'all makin' those noises," he said. "You might as well know right now, I run things my way. I'm here to do a job. I'm not here to be anybody's friend."

Terrence didn't have to look at his buddies to know they were thinking the same thing he was: who'd *want* to be friends with this guy? Compared to their old coach's easy-going style, Kennedy's intensity grated on them. None of the new regimen made sense to them: the team meetings, the rules, the endless drills. He started that afternoon and kept hammering into them day in, day out.

"Again! Till you get it right!" came the voice from the far side of the gym as a dozen pairs of sneakers squeaked to a halt. "Y'all think the coach isn't watchin'?" Kennedy taunted them. "Coach sees everything!"

That was the worst of it. He did. The wheelchair didn't slow him down a bit; in fact, it seemed to give him an edge. He rolled the length of the gym, driving home the pitfalls of zone defense—guarding areas of the court instead of individual opponents in a man-to-man defense. He pounced on every ragged drive, every missed rebound, every sloppy pass.

Players like Darin and Damon, who'd been untouchable in the old regime, took their lickings right along with everyone else. When Kennedy slapped them with extra drills, they bit their lips, knowing that if they didn't want to warm the bench in the season opener, they'd better keep their mouths shut. Every night from five o'clock to seven, they followed Kennedy's commands, training their eyes on the floor lest he see their fury.

"Practice ain't no fun anymore," Amir told Terrence and Horace one night as they trudged home, sweating and shivering in the autumn darkness. The two juniors looked at each other, wondering what to say to Amir, who had been working his heart out for the coach. They had another shot next year. But for Amir and the other seniors, this was it.

"It's different all right," Terrence snorted. "He wears us down so bad with drills we fall apart in scrim-

mage. Then he rips us up. Seems like he's just waiting to tear us apart."

Horace kicked at the gravel and let out a sigh. The coach had made him team captain, so naturally the other guys thought he knew something about Kennedy they didn't. The truth was he had no more idea what was going on than they did.

"Forget trying to figure him out, y'all," he said finally. "Season starts in another week. We got so much talent on this team, we're gonna tear 'em up, coach or no coach. What difference does it make what he says, long as we win?"

Show Time

OPENING NIGHT of the season. They were pumped to get their hands on the ball and wow the crowd that had turned out to see them whip Loachapoka.

In the hallway, Kennedy fired a volley of last-minute instructions. "Stay on your man, ya' hear, just stay on your man till the very end," he intoned, ticking off the pitfalls of zone defense for what seemed to Terrence like the dozenth time. He tuned out Kennedy's voice as he huddled with his teammates and piled his hand atop theirs.

"What TIME is it?" Terrence yelled. "IT'S ... SHOW TIME!" they yelled back, charging onto the court.

The whistle blew, and the anger, the exhaustion, the frustration of the last four weeks dissolved in the roar of the crowd, and there was only motion, and grace, and speed.

The ball was in Terrence's hands

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and he scanned the court, picking his path, dodging and weaving, untouchable on his way to the basket. Again and again he penetrated and scored.

He was hot, and so were his teammates—Darin was making long three-point baskets from the outside; Amir turned into a spitfire on the court; Horace was yelling instructions and sinking baskets. All of them eased into zone defense when they tired of man-to-man; but they eased past Loachapoka too.

When the final buzzer sounded, they fell on one another hooting and hollering. They'd won, 61-48, and they'd done it *their way*.

The next Monday, as they strolled down the hall to practice, Horace told the others, "It's paying off, all that time we spent playin' together in the summertime."

"All our *lives*, man," laughed Darin, remembering the grade-school teams they'd started on years ago. "Coach has gotta see the chemistry."

"Yeah, and stop tryin' to mess with it," Terrence said, not bothering to lower his voice as he turned the corner toward the cafeteria. "I mean, we *punished* those guys ..."

When he saw Kennedy, he broke off. The coach was waiting quietly, wearing an expression Terrence couldn't quite read. Not disgusted, exactly. Just unimpressed. Kennedy waited until the last backpack had thudded to the floor and then he began talking.

"The season," he said, "starts tomorrow."

The boys sank onto the cafeteria benches, bewildered. This man talked

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in riddles. *Tomorrow?* They'd just crushed Lochapoka, and he wanted to say they hadn't even begun yet?

"*Tomorrow*, you all are going to start playing like a well-disciplined ball team. I don't want raggedy ballplayers. I want tough ballplayers, and that means one thing—tough defense. I saw Horace putting you all in zone when you got tired."

Terrence stared straight ahead, following the minute hand of the cafeteria clock as it marked the next 20 minutes. As Kennedy droned on, Terrence ignored him. In a few days there'd be the sound of another whistle, the beginning of the magic once again, the time when nothing mattered but the joy of playing, and with any luck at all, they'd have another victory.

On the Outside Looking In

TERRENCE MIGHT HAVE been able to ignore Kennedy forever if the coach hadn't had the gall—after several big victories—to call an extra practice on a Saturday.

Arriving at the gym that morning, Terrence was annoyed—not enough to skip practice altogether but enough to take his time getting there. On a weekend, surely, even a fanatic like Kennedy wouldn't be clock-watching.

A teammate met him at the gym door. "You're in big trouble, Tee," he whispered. "Coach just got on my case for being a couple of minutes late, and he's been asking every few minutes, 'Where's Terrence?'"

"Okay, I'm here now, man," Terrence answered impatiently. *So Coach was waiting for me*, he thought. He'd

been waiting too—waiting for Kennedy to say something about how he blasted into the season opener by putting 14 points on the board—something like 'Good game' or even 'Not bad.' No matter how hard he hustled, though, there was nothing but criticism. His cheeks burning, he dribbled his way down court to where the coach was buzzing back and forth between two lines of players.

For once, Kennedy didn't have to blow his whistle to halt practice. All he did was swing his wheelchair around to face Terrence, and the dribbling stopped.

"Team, what time did I say practice started?"

"Nine o'clock," they answered in unison.

Kennedy slowly extended his left arm straight out so that the face of his big wristwatch was at Terrence's eye level.

"Terrence, what time is it now?"

Terrence felt his teammates' eyes on him and he shrugged. "You're the one with the watch," he told the coach. "You tell me."

The other boys laughed uneasily. Kennedy's voice didn't change, but his face did. "Out," he said. Terrence stood stock-still, looking at him. "Get your things and go home."

Terrence surprised himself, his answer came so quickly.

"No," he told Kennedy. Once he spoke, he found he couldn't stop. "I got up this morning and I came all the way up here. I'm not going home ..."

But Kennedy had already turned

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away. "Come on, team," he said to the other players. "Let's move to the other side of the gym."

For a moment, no one even breathed. The boys gazed in silence at their friend as he walked over to the bleachers and sat, and at Coach Kennedy.

Damon studied the coach's face, now calm and businesslike. There was not a trace of the look that had flashed across it a moment ago. But Damon couldn't forget it. What he'd seen was anger, deep anger, and it frightened him.

Slowly, Damon moved across the gym, and the others moved with him. They began passing and shooting, but their minds were on Terrence—out for good, they figured, unless he apologized.

Horace, who never lost his cool, kept muddling the drills; Darin, always quiet, grew even quieter. And Amir kept sneaking glances at Terrence sitting, chin in hands, his eyes following the players. Up until this year, Amir had warmed the bench himself. He knew there was nothing worse than having to sit and watch other people doing the thing you loved best. But Terrence shouldn't have talked the way he did to the coach; Amir knew that. They all did.

And it was getting plainer by the minute to Terrence. When nearly two hours had passed, he was still on the outside, looking in. He'd known it was wrong as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Now he had to find a way to apologize to Kennedy before he lost his chance to play basketball for good.

Kennedy's whistle blew to end practice and Terrence stood up. He began walking, then running, after the coach, who was whizzing toward the athletic office to lock up.

"Coach," he said, his heart pounding. Kennedy kept moving.

"Coach," he called out, "I'd like to talk to you for a minute." Kennedy stopped and looked around, his face impassive. Terrence's mouth went dry.

"I want to apologize, Coach," he said, struggling. "I'm sorry about the way I talked."

There. At least it was out. Whatever the coach said to him now, he knew he had it coming.

"You know something, Terrence?" Kennedy said slowly, deliberately. "You're a good ballplayer. A very good ballplayer." He paused, but Terrence was too stunned to say anything. Then Kennedy leaned forward, his face more serious than Terrence had ever seen it. "But the one thing I want you to remember," he added, "is that on my ball team, people respect each other."

With that, he turned his wheelchair, pulled out the keys to his office and began rolling rapidly away.

Hidden Weaknesses

IN THE PARKING LOT, Terrence's teammates were huddled, waiting for him.

"Yeah, yeah, Coach and I had a good talk, we got it straight," he said, assuring his friends that he was still on the team.

They didn't tell Terrence how scared they'd been at the dead-calm way Kennedy had moved them across

the gym floor, silently pulling the team apart.

Here was a man who had his eye on a state championship, and yet he would have booted a top scorer and risked throwing the rest of the team into chaos. It took their breath away. *He* took their breath away, with the price he put on respect.

And yet, they still didn't have his respect, and there seemed to be no way to get it. Every other coach they'd known would have been hollering his lungs out to see the way they were trashing their opponents. Twice they drove the score over 100 while keeping the other teams below 70. They even edged past tough Calhoun High by a single point.

For days after that victory—their fifth with no losses—they were heroes

around school. Mrs. Perry praised the varsity over the intercom; the JV players clustered around them, high-fiving them on their way into practice. Girls who'd never noticed them before were lingering by their lockers wanting to talk basketball.

But Kennedy just told them they couldn't take credit for the talent God gave them. Talent alone, he said over and over, never got anybody through the bad times.

Nobody could quite make out just what made a guy a "real ballplayer" in Kennedy's eyes. "You can't see your weaknesses when you're winning," he warned, as grim-faced as if they had zero wins and five losses, instead of the other way around.

Much as they wanted to, they couldn't shrug that off, not from

someone who watched ballplaying the way Coach Kennedy did. He had a "court vision" he trained on their opponents, and would rattle off details about weaknesses and strengths most coaches wouldn't see.

So when he dissected *them* from that rolling throne of his, it was tough to argue. "I want you boys to tell me," he'd begin quietly, each time they fell out of man-to-man, "how you expect to keep winning when you got no defense?"

"But Coach," Horace tried to tell him once, "we *got* a defense. We're winning games with it."

Kennedy's eyebrows shot up, and Horace stopped. "You know something?" Kennedy sighed, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "You boys are hardheaded. Real hardheaded.

Don't you know that zone is banned in the NBA? *It is not for real ballplayers.* How many times do I have to tell you all: man-to-man is the best defense. A guy gets past you in man-to-man, it's your fault. Nobody else's. There's always gonna be knuckleheads saying zone is easier. Sure it's easier. But that doesn't make it right."

Terrence and Horace glanced at each other, knowing Kennedy would never budge on that one. In his book, guys who didn't carry their own weight in defense weren't just bad ballplayers. They were no-account buck-passers, and he had no use for them.

There was a time when they'd known as clearly as their own names the truths of basketball: that talent really did see a player through; that

great ballplaying came from inside the man, and that winning was all that really counted in the end.

But Kennedy, with his silent messages about respect mattering more than championships, with his tirades and his taunts, his endless drilling and ironclad rules, had managed to shoot the air out of all of it. In a few weeks' time, he'd taken away everything. All they had to hang on to was one another.

Then, in one horrible, humiliating weekend, Coach Kennedy took that away too.

Nothing Left

HE DID IT when it counted most, right in the middle of their big Christmas Tournament, in front of a standing-room-only holiday crowd and a slew of reporters who'd come to see the Pirates grab their division's No. 1 spot.

At first it looked like an ordinary substitution when Coach Kennedy raised his hand in the first game and sent in Sidney Robbins, a player he'd just pulled up from the JV. But when he *started* the second game with Sidney instead of Amir, it was as though he'd hauled off and whacked everybody on the team. It was one thing, they mumbled in the locker room, to substitute one veteran for another; it was downright insulting to send in some rookie. And they ended up losing both games.

They burned as they looked at Sidney sitting in the team meeting the Monday after the double loss. A few players were already so furious

before the second game they hadn't even bothered to warm up as required. They'd just plopped onto the bench, aware of nothing but the boos from the bleachers and the coach's impassive face as the St. Jude crowd yelled, "Put Amir in!"

Now Kennedy had on a blank look as he rolled into the gym. He began calling out the names of the players who'd defied him by sitting out their warm-ups on the bench.

"You four who skipped," he said, "are suspended for two games. Out." Once the door closed behind the four boys, he turned to the smaller group that remained behind. "All right," he said, "let's talk about the other problem."

What a way to refer to the weekend's fiasco, Terrence fumed, replaying in his mind the way they'd collapsed the minute the coach sent in Sidney.

Softly, almost soothingly, Kennedy began speaking about moving on, putting your losses behind you, winning the next one—things, Terrence suddenly realized, that *normal* coaches, coaches with real hearts, said to their teams all the time. Except that Kennedy didn't have a heart. He had a lot of nerve, urging them to move on like men, after he'd sabotaged them.

"Tell me," Kennedy asked, "what do you all think about what happened?"

Until that moment, Terrence hadn't realized how much he had hated—*really hated*—this season, every stinking bit of it, starting with Kennedy's ridiculous boast that they were going to Birmingham, to his monotonous

drills and post-game harangues, and now to booting a third of the team.

Terrence sat speechless and so did everybody else, until at last Amir raised his hand.

"Coach, I really don't think you've been giving me enough credit for what I've done for the team," Amir said, fighting to control the anger in his voice. "I've been on this team from Day One, giving it all I got, and then when it comes to the tournament, you start Sidney instead of me. That's not fair."

Terrence was sure Kennedy would tear into Amir and tell the rest of them they were amateurs for unraveling at the kind of substitution NBA coaches made every day. But as he studied Kennedy's face, he saw that this was going to be different.

"All right," the coach was urging the team, "now we're getting to the meat. Say what's on your mind. Get it out."

It was as though he'd opened a dam. "I don't think it was fair either," Damon said, and then Darin and Horace jumped in. Kennedy kept calling on people, listening, until finally everybody except Terrence had spoken.

"Terrence," Kennedy asked, "what do you have to say?"

Terrence's mind churned. There was so much more tugging at him than the Sidney business, or even the two losses. "I agree with the other guys, Coach," he said finally. "I really don't have anything to add."

Kennedy's eyes swept the line. Then he started talking about coaches, about how, sometimes, they

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saw things in players that the other players just couldn't see. "I pulled up Sidney from the junior varsity because I think he brings something to the team that no one else has. That's the ability to play real tough, aggressive defense, to agitate the ball-handler. I'm looking for the very best combination of players for this team, and I'm going to keep experimenting until I find it," he said, closing the case on Sidney and Amir the way he closed every case, Terrence thought—on his side of the argument. He'd opened up for a moment, but that moment was over now and the old Kennedy was back.

"I'm the coach. This is my team. I run it the way I see fit. You may not always agree with my decisions, but you're going to have to abide by 'em. You got two choices: you can either suck it up, play hard, fight for your spot—or you can be a quitter. It's my way or the highway. On my team, there's no in between."

Another Knucklehead

NOBODY SAID A WORD to Coach Kennedy, and for the rest of that long, empty New Year's weekend, everybody just went home and kept quiet. When their diminished team came trailing back to school the Tuesday after vacation, they still weren't talking.

"*There's no in between,*" the coach had said of fighting and quitting. But there was. There was a whole gray world in the middle, and they were in it. People walked into the locker room that morning with their uniforms for the away game, avoided

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each other's glances, and banged locker doors shut without a word.

Horace wasn't there. All through first period, and second, and third, Terrence waited, watching the parking lot. Finally, by lunchtime, it was obvious Horace wasn't going to show. He hadn't said anything about being sick the night before, when they'd talked on the phone. That meant that the team captain, the coach's main man, the guy who was sup-



Kennedy and Amir Green, who played his heart out

posed to keep everyone else on track, had skipped school on a game day.

The look that crossed the coach's face when he called Horace's name at game time was one Terrence had never seen before. Kennedy was worried. The look persisted as Kennedy asked about Horace again and again.

"It's like we told you, Coach,"

Terrence said. "He wasn't in school today. He must be sick."

The locker room echoed with the sound of Amir's voice as he led the team in the prayer they said before all their games. And then it was Show Time, and what little was left of the starting lineup trotted out to take on a team they bragged they could trash on their worst day.

With no backup team, this *was* their worst day. Somehow, though,

as they were playing basketball, the little bit of pride they had left welled up inside them, pulling them through until they racked up 74 points to their opponents' 60. That wasn't exactly a "trashing," but it still beat losing, especially with only half a team and no captain.

"What happened, man?" Terrence asked Horace late that

night on the phone. "Coach was asking for you 'bout a hundred times. I think he knew you weren't really sick."

Horace's voice was flat and empty. "Well, I was sick," he said, "sick of playing basketball. I don't care if I play another game this year. I really don't."

"You do too," Terrence said,

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panicking. It was one thing to run off at the mouth himself. It was another to hear a guy like Horace talk about quitting.

"Horace."

"Yeah."

"How long we been playing basketball? How long we been *loving* basketball?"

"I know, Tee, I know. But it's not the same."

"That's what you think *today*. But you're gonna wake up tomorrow wishing you could play. And you won't be able to." Horace didn't say a word, and Terrence knew he'd hit home. "Think about it: life without basketball," he said. "If you don't play for him, you don't play at all. Then he wins."

It was enough to get Horace back to practice. The suspended players also returned but, like everybody else, they felt they were marking time. In the six months since those magical, steamy summer nights on Terrence's front stoop, their championship dream had faded into a blur of drills and endless work and humiliation.

But as they headed into the big Martin Luther King, Jr., Tournament in mid-January, the coach began teasing and coaxing and even praising them. He pulled Amir out during practice for private talks. And he yanked the rest of the guys out of the shadows with some of the same stories that had infuriated them since the day he came.

"Frank," he'd say—or Amir or Terrence, or whoever had thrown the last sloppy pass—"you know who

you remind me of? John Battle." The first time he told the story, the gym went quiet; everybody was so amazed to hear the coach comparing one of them to an NBA player who was a guard for the Cleveland Cavaliers.

"I coached John Battle in Washington, D.C., when he was in high school," he continued, pausing and leaning backward as they digested that incredible piece of information. "When I first got hold of that boy—before I started teaching him things and he started listening—he was just like you. A knucklehead."

They'd gotten used to the knucklehead zing, though it always stung. But now, every once in a while, in the middle of the taunts and the sermons, the coach threw in a story of another knucklehead, a boy from Tuskegee who got a licking for shooting hoops when he should have been working. His name was Walt Kennedy.

"I got the whipping of my life once for bein' lazy, like you boys," he told them, as if getting a licking was the greatest thing that could happen to a kid. "I was always looking for a way to play basketball, even when I was supposed to be doin' something else."

None of them could imagine a time far enough in the past for Coach Kennedy to have been a kid, let alone a kid who was crazy about basketball. But he was.

In fact, a long story about him in their local newspaper had made a big deal about how much he loved the sport, about his 23-year battle with multiple sclerosis, and how he'd

refused to let it drive him from basketball. For ten years after his diagnosis, according to the article, he'd kept right on coaching his McKinley Tech team in Washington, D.C., until finally, in 1980, it seemed there was no way to continue and he retired. But when he returned to his boyhood home in Tuskegee, he grew hungry for coaching, hungry, he explained, to help more players go to college through basketball. In the fall of '91, he took a coaching job at a Tuskegee high school.

And then came a second blow. Getting ready to drive to a game one day, he was hoisting himself into the driver's seat and he fell. In the three hours before someone found him, he had made up his mind to quit coaching for good. But after a few days away from basketball, he knew he couldn't live without it. Disability or no, Kennedy decided to come back, and when he heard of an opening at St. Jude's two years later, he telephoned Mrs. Perry.

Everything about it made sense when they read the newspaper story, and yet, none of it did. The man who called them knuckleheads and pounded on them till their heads ached seemed a different person from the newspaper hero with his quiet quotes about wanting to give something of himself to another group of boys.

But even they had to admit they got a glimpse of that man when they listened to the coach tell about skipping his chores as a boy to shoot hoops. If ever a kid loved basketball, it was the Walt Kennedy in his story.

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"One day, my daddy asked me to mow the lawn, and I said, 'Sure, I'll get to it.' Then I ran up to the church parking lot to shoot hoops," he told them, laughing. "He came home at lunch, asked me again, and I told him I would. But I didn't. I went to play ball. Well, when he got home that evening, he didn't say a word. He just walked out back to the woods and cut down the biggest switch you ever saw."

By this time Kennedy was laughing so hard he could barely tell the story. "And he gave me a whipping I never forgot! I want to tell you boys something. My daddy was a tough man. He was a tough man!"

Bigger Things on His Mind

INCREDIBLY, after the nightmare of the Christmas Tournament, after having their team torn apart, they were all still playing basketball and winning. Just how they'd made it this far—9-2 heading into the big January tournament—nobody was quite sure. But there was no doubt about how they were going to get the rest of the way: by Kennedy's rules, or not at all.

In those days nobody made it through one hour of practice without feeling the yank of his iron chain. People caught lagging got dragged out front and center with a loud "You want to pout? Go home." He drilled into even the youngest, most inexperienced guys the understanding that the road to state finals wasn't just long. It was hard. Once you made it through your area tournament, you were up

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against some of the toughest teams in Alabama.

For a private-school ballclub like St. Jude's, in the division of the state's smallest schools, that was going to be a big jump. "You ain't even close to tough," Kennedy had told them way back in October. And those autumn practices began to look easy compared to his January routine: push-ups till they dropped; calisthenics to tighten muscles they never knew they had; extra laps for falling out of man-to-man into zone. It would have been completely unbearable except that somehow, so slowly they couldn't say when it happened, they realized it was making a difference.

The fans didn't see it, but everybody on the team could sense the improvement: the extra minute or two or three that they managed to last in man-to-man; the second wind that let them hold down the score against strong teams. It felt good, that rush of power, that bit of breathing room.

It would have felt better, of course, if Coach Kennedy had let them pause to savor it a little. "That's over, that's past you," he told them as they pulled past tall, tough Montgomery County High not just once but twice. "The season starts tomorrow." Tomorrow, he said, they'd all stay in man-to-man through the final quarter. Tomorrow, every guy would hold his own on defense.

"The only way you're gonna go all the way," he repeated until they heard it in their sleep, "is to be your own coach on the court, talkin' to each other play by play. You gotta hone

your defense so airtight nobody can get through. There is only one kind of defense that is airtight. What kind is that, team?"

"Man-to-man, Coach," they answered in chorus.

"What kind?" he'd thunder, cupping a hand against his ear.

"Man-to-man!"

"Again! Louder!"

"Man-to-man!"

There was no escaping the chant, Terrence thought, any more than you could escape Kennedy himself. Kennedy wanted them to play basketball his way: never giving the other guy room to breathe; standing your ground at any price; pounding away like a jackhammer till the opponent finally folded.

They were pushing, all of them. They ran such a tight defense against Alabama Christian that the opponent's coach told the newspapers, "We walked into a buzz saw." When the whistle blew to begin the second match against Calhoun, it was Kennedy's chants setting them in motion, Kennedy's instructions running them through the plays, Kennedy's drills echoing in their heads so clearly they almost forgot how unreadable the coach's expressionless face looked to the people in the stands.

"Doesn't that man *ever* get excited?" Terrence's mother asked him after she watched them rack up a series of wins that put the regional tournament within reach.

Terrence shook his head. "We're going to Birmingham, Mom. Coach can't be fooling around, yelling and

acting crazy. He's got bigger things on his mind."

It would have been nice, every once in a while, to hear Kennedy holler so the fans would know he thought his team did a few things right. And yet, Terrence thought, Kennedy had ways of showing them when they'd pleased him—funny, backhanded little pats the fans couldn't see. And he remembered the first time Kennedy gave him a compliment wrapped in one of his insults. Terrence's head was pounding so hard with exhaustion after a two-hour defense drill he barely heard the coach calling him over.

"Terrence."

"Yes, sir?"

"You had a good practice tonight, didn't you?"

"It sure felt like it to me," he said, flushing with pleasure.

"You're a knucklehead, boy, you know that, don't you?" Kennedy's grin was so big as he spoke that before Terrence knew it, he was grinning back.

"You're a knucklehead," the coach repeated. "But I gotta play you. After a practice like that, I gotta play you."

And in those moments when Kennedy shook his head in awe at a play executed to perfection, his face shining with admiration, they saw the boy he told of in his whipping story, and the man they'd read about in the paper—a man who loved basketball. He loved it so much, the article said, that when he'd come to St. Jude's, he had agreed to coach their team for free.

More Than Heart

KENNEDY never said a word to them about that, and if Mrs. Perry hadn't mentioned it to a local reporter, they would never have known. The money meant nothing to him, the way the paper reported the story; it was the satisfaction he wanted.

That made sense, except that Kennedy taught at a high school near his home in Tuskegee, which meant that every day after work he drove an hour each way to run practice at St. Jude's.

He'd told the boys about the drive one afternoon after he first came, but they hadn't given it another thought. Kennedy never talked about it again.

It was only at those moments in practice when the coach beamed so much his face shone that the boys thought about who he was, where he'd been. Back in the early 1960s, before he started coaching, Kennedy had been one of those players who'd mastered basketball so completely he could dance through it. For three years he'd traveled the world, not just playing, but performing. It seemed far away and long ago to them, all that Globetrotter magic, and yet when they executed a maneuver with grace and speed and precision, for that split second in time, they felt they were part of that.

Those moments didn't come often, but they lasted. You could go a long, long time in the glow of one of those looks, sit through a lot of harangues. And that was what the coach was

doing more and more as January rolled into February and they began their "countdown to Birmingham."

More and more they were asked the question that had shocked them when he first asked it: "What do you think?" Sometimes, it was hard to say what they thought in front of everybody else, to say they lost to Loachapoka the first weekend in

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February because Horace and Terrence had shut out Darin a little, because Damon had fouled too many times, because they'd let a few too many of the opponents' men penetrate the defense.

It was funny, Terrence thought, that a man so bent on taking them to state finals would not be obsessed with winning and losing. When they prayed

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as a team before games, they asked only for good sportsmanship and no injuries. And when they fell to Alabama Christian just a week after they'd beaten them 94-66, Kennedy gathered them in the cafeteria and talked to them for the longest time, telling them what they could learn about themselves when they hit bottom. The mark of a real ballplayer, a real man, he told them quietly, wasn't what he did after a victory. It was how he reacted to defeat.

"Always remember when the season starts," he began, repeating the sentence they'd hated so much when he'd said it after their first win. But after a loss, it sounded awfully good: "The season starts tomorrow."

In the Middle of Nowhere

TOMORROW. The state finals. For so long, it had been way out in front of them, ten games away, then five. Suddenly tomorrow was today. Up close, it all looked a lot more frightening. What they faced as they began the regional competitions was just what Kennedy had been warning of all along—opponents they knew absolutely nothing about. Worse yet, they'd be playing on the other team's turf.

"We're playing *who*, Coach?"

"Akron."

"Who's Akron?"

"*Where's* Akron?"

Kennedy's brow furrowed as he scanned the list of regional competitors, searching for information on this school, the first of their tournament opponents. "Looks like

it's way over in the western part of the state somewhere," he mumbled, flipping to the map in the playoff booklet. The boys peered over his shoulders, following his finger to a dot in the middle of nowhere.

"Oh, man," Amir said, "that place is practically in *Mississippi*. How we gonna scout 'em, Coach, with the game one day away?"

"We're not. We're gonna spend the next 36 hours gettin' ready the way we always have," Kennedy said, blowing his whistle. Everybody snapped to, running the plays he'd drilled into them for so long, but with their insides churning. When they'd faced tough opponents, they *knew* them. And what they didn't know about them, Coach Kennedy always figured out, somehow.

Now, when they had the most at stake, they had nothing to go on. They could laugh at Akron, saying it was a school in the boonies, but they had to take them seriously. If they lost to them, there would be no Birmingham.

Worse, they knew it was their fault that they were playing in their opponent's gym. They'd ignored Kennedy's warnings before last night's match against Montgomery County, a team they'd beaten easily three times before. "You always gotta be ready with an ax," he'd said, "to kill the mosquito." Unfortunately they'd blown off Montgomery as weak and lost not only the game, but the home-court privilege for the next round.

Now with no time to watch Akron play, all they could do was try to

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memorize Kennedy's litany of "what-ifs": what to do if the other team had a tall man; if they relied heavily on a strong shooter; if they played tight man-to-man; if they switched defense styles.

He was ticking off more possibilities even as they gathered in the afternoon to board the bus to Akron.

Suddenly, Amir walked over to Kennedy. "Coach, what if me and a couple of the other seniors rode with you, to go over some last-minute stuff about the game?"

Kennedy nodded, and Amir grabbed Darin and Damon. "The three of us are ridin' with Coach," he whispered as they followed him, uncertainly, to the white van, where Kennedy was poring over a big map of Alabama.

"I hope you boys got a better idea than I do where we're going," he teased, then burst out laughing at the looks on their faces. Damon and Darin sprawled out in the big carpeted area behind the driver, and Amir settled into the roomy bucket seat up front.

Out onto the old state highway they roared, heading west toward Selma and whatever it was that lay beyond—farms and cotton fields and cow pastures, they guessed. Over the hum of the car radio, Kennedy began talking about team communication. It was more important than ever that they talk each other through the game, until they got the feel of the other team.

"And another thing." He paused, checking the rearview mirror to make sure the assistant coach driving the bus was right behind him as he sailed

down the highway. "You gotta remember that when you're playing in a foreign gym packed with the opponents' fans, you can't let their crowd become a factor. You know what I mean?"

"Sure, Coach," Damon answered, wondering if Kennedy knew that's exactly what they were afraid of. "You're talking about staying on 'em so hard they can't score and their crowd doesn't get in it."

Dusk deepened to twilight, and the talk turned to the starting lineup. Damon and Darin sat up on their knees to make a pitch for using two players they were convinced had won them their toughest games: Terrence and Amir.

Kennedy didn't say much, but he nodded his head, and listened.

Lost

"I WONDER what they're talking about up there," Terrence muttered, peering through the bus window at the four figures in the coach's van.

"Probably strategy about the game," one of the other players answered.

Horace jumped in: "How much you want to bet Coach is laying some of his stories on those guys!"

"I can just hear him," came a voice from the back of the bus, hooting. "Did I ever tell you boys about the time my daddy whipped me?"

"That's not the way it starts," someone protested. "First he tells the part about how much he loved goin' up to the church parking lot to shoot hoops. He's gotta go over that about a million times before he

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gets to the whipping part. Coach loves tellin' that on himself."

"Almost as much as he loves beatin' on us about those guys he coached in D.C.," another voice chimed in. "You know, those hot-shots that were bums till they started listening to him?"

At that, Terrence jumped into the aisle. "Frank," he said, trying to mimic Kennedy's most weary, disgusted tone, "you know who you remind me of with your lazy ways?"

Even before he'd finished, the roar went up: "JOHN BATTLE!"

Back and forth they went about John Battle and the others Kennedy had coached, as the bus turned off the highway and began following the van down a one-lane road. "You think Coach did them the way he does us?" Horace wondered out loud.

"Killed 'em, you mean?" someone asked.

"Made 'em chant the man-to-man, stayed on 'em all the time about lifting weights?"

At first no one noticed the sound of gravel crunching underneath the bus. Startled, they looked up ahead and saw Kennedy signaling them to stop. The assistant coach pulled the bus over, jumped off, ran over to the van, and began gesturing and pointing back in the other direction.

"I cannot believe this," Terrence said, announcing what everybody could see for themselves: "We're lost."

They looked out at the blackness that stretched in all directions, then at their watches. It was past 6:30, less than half an hour to game time.

Nobody said a word as the assistant coach wheeled the bus around and headed back toward the paved road, flying around turns until at last, up ahead, they saw a signpost that said "Akron City Limits."

There was no city, or even a storefront or gas station, but way off to the right was a long line of automobile headlights moving toward what looked like a school.

A moment later, they were screeching up to the gym entrance and racing behind Coach Kennedy into the glare of fluorescent lights.

"I Believe in You"

THERE WAS NO TIME TO WORRY ABOUT the dinner they had missed, no time even to think. There was only the clock ticking toward seven and Kennedy's voice hurrying them along. "Get a move on, fellas. We got things to go over."

They began trotting, then running beside him toward the locker room. Kennedy whizzed past the bleachers, firing off last-minute directions. "I'm gonna make some lineup changes," he said, "gonna talk to you about double-teaming some of their tall men." Suddenly he stopped.

Above a steep, narrow flight of stairs was a sign reading "Men's Lockers" and beneath it an arrow pointing downward. They all stopped, noticing for the first time in five months something about Kennedy they'd completely forgotten: he was in a wheelchair.

"The locker room's in the basement," Terrence breathed, looking

at Horace, who looked at Amir, who didn't know where to look.

"All right," the coach said matter-of-factly. "Y'all go down, suit up, say your prayer. Amir, you lead them. I'll meet you in five minutes under the backboard." And he was off.

"Everything depends on tonight," Horace told the team in the quiet locker room. It was what Kennedy would have said if he were there now.

"Yeah," Amir added, "we didn't come all this way to lose." They prayed once, held hands and talked, prayed again. And then it was time.

Up the stairs they raced, and out into the gym. And then, for one long moment, they stood and looked up at the fans. They had never seen such a crowd at a high-school game. People jammed the bleachers, spilled over

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into the exit areas, jostled for standing room by the stage—all of them taking up the Akron chant as their cheerleaders stomped across the court.

Quietly, under the far backboard, Coach Kennedy sat waiting. His eyes met theirs as they ran toward him across the court, and even before they were all seated, he was talking, picking up right where he'd left off.

"We're gonna go out and play hard, play aggressive, stomp 'em out early," he said. They leaned toward him, trying to block out the noise, listening for advice that was so familiar they could repeat it by heart.

But this time, Coach Kennedy had something else to say, and he said it slowly, quietly. "I believe in you boys. And you've got to believe in yourselves. Go out there like I taught

you, be tough, be unafraid, you hear me? You've come too far to lose it all tonight. I know you're in a foreign gym, you got no fans. But you got yourselves. That's enough. Now go out and play some basketball!"

They jumped to their feet and charged out. Behind them, one last, shouted instruction cut through the din: "And stay in the man-to-man!"

THE WHISTLE BLEW, and instantly Terrence was moving, passing, keeping one eye on Akron's players, another on his teammates. His eyes followed them as they fanned out, and he sensed, rather than saw, each of them studying the opponent just as he was, waiting for an opening.

Suddenly Darin had the ball, took a shot and hit it for three points—once, and then again a few moments later. Boos rippled through the gym. Terrence felt the blood surge in his shoulders and saw his teammates quicken. Darin kept scoring by threes. Damon dived for rebounds. Horace kept going in for layups.

But Akron, with every bit of the same speed and hustle and twice the height, pushed back. At the quarter break they were three points ahead of St. Jude's.

"Keep on 'em," Kennedy urged as they huddled around him. And they did, but already they were flagging. Hunger, at first only a dim sensation, had begun to gnaw at them. Their muscles ached. Then came the sickening realization that Akron wasn't tired yet, or hungry, and they had a gym full of fans driving them.

There was nothing to do but push past the pain, run the plays they knew by heart, and tighten up the defense until at the half, shaking with fatigue, they hung on to a six-point lead.

When the whistle blew to start the third quarter, Kennedy sent in his "coach on the court," Amir, with instructions to "keep talking." And one by one, amid the boos and the taunts, they all found their voices.

"Just get the ball in my hands," Darin called first to Amir, and then to Horace, and then to Terrence, "and I can hit it!" Steadily they took control of the ball, and the game. They fired and hit, fired and hit, further widening their lead.

On the opposite side of the court, the Akron coach sent in a player who within seconds took a shot from so far outside, none of the St. Jude players believed he'd attempted it. It arched high, sailed, hit the basket's edge, and tipped in. The crowd roared, and Damon and Amir looked at each other, then closed in on the new Akron player the moment he started moving. They suffocated the outside scorer into oblivion.

Akron fought its way back into the lead, but for the first time all season, St. Jude's was holding tight in the man-to-man. Pushing back the hunger and waves of dizziness that shot through them, Terrence and Darin and Horace drove themselves hard, edging past Akron by one point, then two. At last, with less than a minute left, Amir hit two baskets to clinch the game, 85-82.

The final buzzer sounded, and



Amir Green, Damon Childrey, Terrence Thomas and Darin Irwin honor the man who taught them so much.

they fell on one another, collapsing in a heap in midcourt, their ears ringing for the first time all night not with the boos of the crowd, but with each other's shouts of victory.

When finally they stood up and looked across the court, there was Kennedy, gazing at them with that half-smile they now knew so well. They walked over, their chests heaving, and gathered around him.

He looked at the circle of players. "Good game," he said solemnly. "Good, hard fighting. You all showed some heart, and some hustle."

Then he put out his hand, and,

one by one, shook each of theirs—Terrence, Horace, Amir, Damon, Darin and the rest.

They knew there'd be more wins, and maybe losses, on the road to Birmingham. They knew there'd be other games to fight through in strange gyms. But for this one moment, the coach looked at them as though they were champions.

"That's what I call playing basketball," he said. "That's what I call courage."

NINE DAYS and three victories after the Akron game, the Pirates headed

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north, to Birmingham. They brought home the second-place trophy from the Alabama State Basketball Finals on March 1, 1994. Today, the young men who played for St. Jude's still remember that season as the highlight of their school careers, relishing every detail of every game on the long road to Birmingham.

But when they think of the coach who brought them there, they do not recall plays, or wins, or losses. What they took from Walt Kennedy had to do with much more than basketball.

"Coach taught me about hard work and discipline more than anything else," says Terrence Thomas, now an Alabama State criminal-justice major with plans for a law career. "I learned from him that no matter how much you might want to, you can't dodge those things. You have to face them straight on."

His teammates echo Terrence's thoughts. They now pursue careers that will take them far from the basketball court. Amir Green is a junior

prelaw student at Auburn University at Montgomery. Horace Lewis, a freshman at Alabama A&M in Huntsville, plans a career in business finance, while Darin Irwin plans to enroll in Alabama State University next semester to study marketing.

Damon Childrey says that in the end what happened in that pivotal season in his life was all about love. "From being with Coach Kennedy, seeing what he had to overcome, just watching the way he approached his job, and us, I saw that if you love something enough, there's nothing that can hold you back."

For two more years, Walt Kennedy shepherded the boys of St. Jude's through basketball to manhood. And with each team he had the same goal. "Everything I know, all that I've learned in my life, from my father, my coaches, is wasted unless I can pass it on to these boys," says Kennedy, now looking for a coaching job closer to home. "That's what it's all about. Passing it on."

