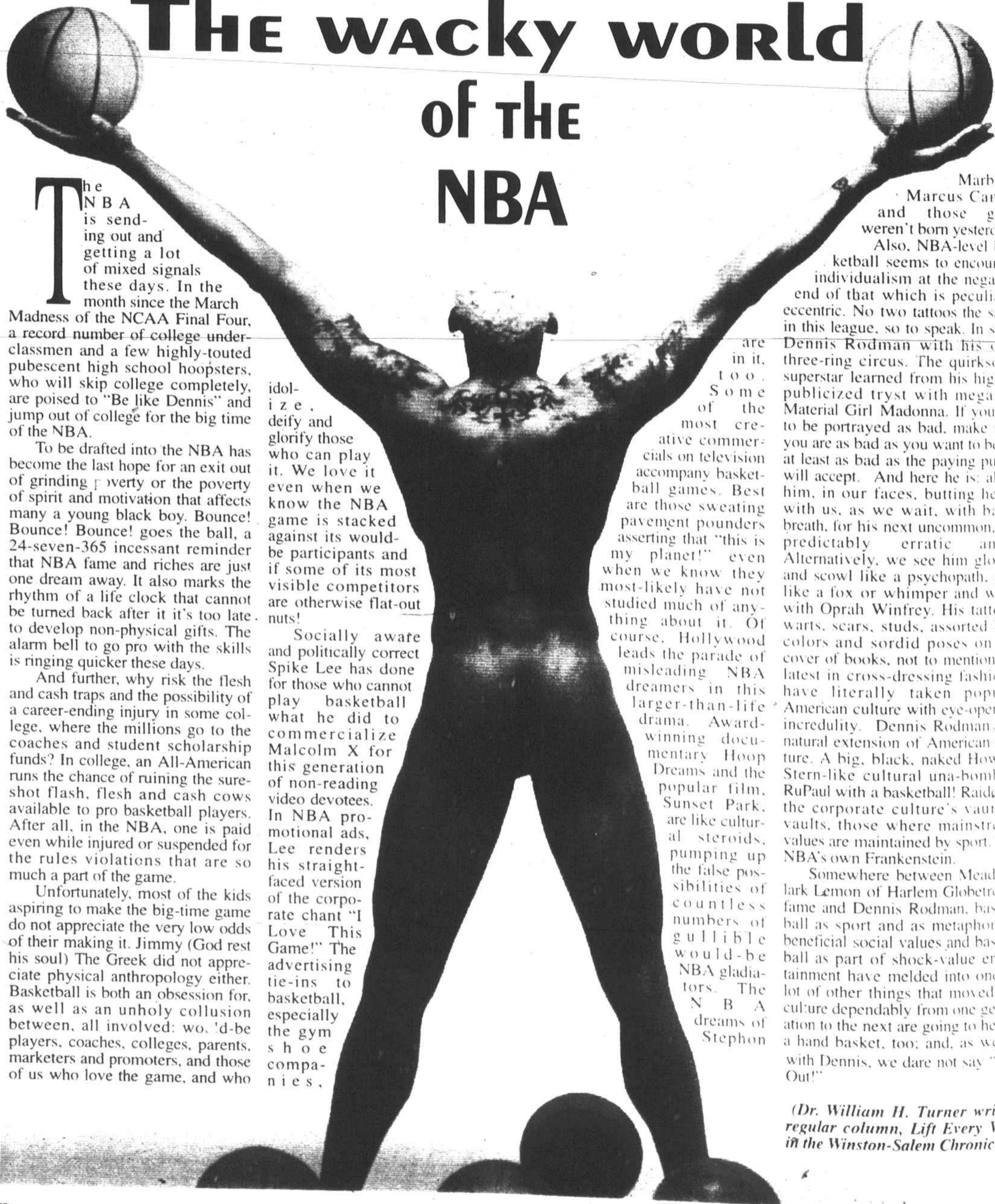


The wacky world of the NBA



The NBA is sending out and getting a lot of mixed signals these days. In the month since the March Madness of the NCAA Final Four, a record number of college underclassmen and a few highly-touted pubescent high school hoopsters, who will skip college completely, are poised to "Be like Dennis" and jump out of college for the big time of the NBA.

To be drafted into the NBA has become the last hope for an exit out of grinding poverty or the poverty of spirit and motivation that affects many a young black boy. Bounce! Bounce! goes the ball, a 24-seven-365 incessant reminder that NBA fame and riches are just one dream away. It also marks the rhythm of a life clock that cannot be turned back after it's too late to develop non-physical gifts. The alarm bell to go pro with the skills is ringing quicker these days.

And further, why risk the flesh and cash traps and the possibility of a career-ending injury in some college, where the millions go to the coaches and student scholarship funds? In college, an All-American runs the chance of ruining the sure-shot flash, flesh and cash cows available to pro basketball players. After all, in the NBA, one is paid even while injured or suspended for the rules violations that are so much a part of the game.

Unfortunately, most of the kids aspiring to make the big-time game do not appreciate the very low odds of their making it. Jimmy (God rest his soul) The Greek did not appreciate physical anthropology either. Basketball is both an obsession for, as well as an unholy collusion between, all involved: would-be players, coaches, colleges, parents, marketers and promoters, and those of us who love the game, and who

idolize, deify and glorify those who can play it. We love it even when we know the NBA game is stacked against its would-be participants and if some of its most visible competitors are otherwise flat-out nuts!

Socially aware and politically correct Spike Lee has done for those who cannot play basketball what he did to commercialize Malcolm X for this generation of non-reading video devotees. In NBA promotional ads, Lee renders his straight-faced version of the corporate chant "I Love This Game!" The advertising tie-ins to basketball, especially the gym shoes companies,

are in it, too. Some of the most creative commercials on television accompany basketball games. Best are those sweating pavement pounders asserting that "this is my planet!" even when we know they most-likely have not studied much of anything about it. Of course, Hollywood leads the parade of misleading NBA dreamers in this larger-than-life drama. Award-winning documentary Hoop Dreams and the popular film, Sunset Park, are like cultural steroids, pumping up the false possibilities of countless numbers of gullible would-be NBA gladiators. The NBA dreams of Stephon

Marbury, Marcus Camby and those guys weren't born yesterday. Also, NBA-level basketball seems to encourage individualism at the negative end of that which is peculiarly eccentric. No two tattoos the same in this league, so to speak. In steps Dennis Rodman with his own three-ring circus. The quirkish superstar learned from his highly-publicized tryst with megastar Material Girl Madonna. If you are to be portrayed as bad, make sure you are as bad as you want to be, or at least as bad as the paying public will accept. And here he is: all of him, in our faces, butting heads with us, as we wait, with bated breath, for his next uncommon, but predictably erratic antic. Alternatively, we see him glower and scowl like a psychopath, grin like a fox or whimper and weep with Oprah Winfrey. His tattoos, warts, scars, studs, assorted hair colors and sordid poses on the cover of books, not to mention the latest in cross-dressing fashions, have literally taken popular American culture with eye-opening incredulity. Dennis Rodman as a natural extension of American culture. A big, black, naked Howard Stern-like cultural una-bomber! RuPaul with a basketball! Raider of the corporate culture's vaulted values are maintained by sport. The NBA's own Frankenstein.

Somewhere between Meadowlark Lemon of Harlem Globetrotter fame and Dennis Rodman, basketball as sport and as metaphor for beneficial social values and basketball as part of shock-value entertainment have melded into one. A lot of other things that moved our culture dependably from one generation to the next are going to hell in a hand basket, too; and, as we do with Dennis, we dare not say "Time Out!"

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