

DAVID THOMPSON urges kids to stay in school and avoid drugs and alcohol during a Jr. Hornets clinic last week at South Brunswick High School. STAFF PHOTOS BY DOUG RUTTER

Basketball Great Thompson Has Positive Message For Kids

BY DOUG RUTTER

Jonathan Jackson says his favorite basketball player is Shaquille O'Neal, the 7-foot-2, 300-pound behemoth of the Orlando Magic.

But the first-grader at Southport Primary School didn't seem disappointed when former NBA great David Thompson showed up at South Brunswick High last Wednesday to conduct a clinic.

Jackson participated in a one-on-one drill with Thompson and then waited after the clinic with about 100 other boys and girls to get the autograph of the man who brought a national championship to N.C. State University in 1974.

"I got my hat signed," the 6-year-old Jackson beamed as he emerged from the crowd circling the basketball legend.

The crowd included a large contingent of parents, some of whom seemed happier than their kids to meet Thompson.

While the younger generation relates to Charles Barkley, Larry Johnson and the aforementioned Shaq, many parents remember what Thompson accomplished in college and the pros.

In his three seasons at State, Thompson led the Wolfpack to a record of 79-7. He holds 10 individual scoring records at the school, including most career points (2,309) and highest career scoring average (26.8 per game).

The top draft pick in both the ABA and NBA in 1975, Thompson averaged 24.1 points per game in seven seasons with the Denver Nuggets and was a three-time NBA All-Star.

But Thompson didn't talk about his statistics or basketball skills last week at South Brunswick as much as he talked about life.

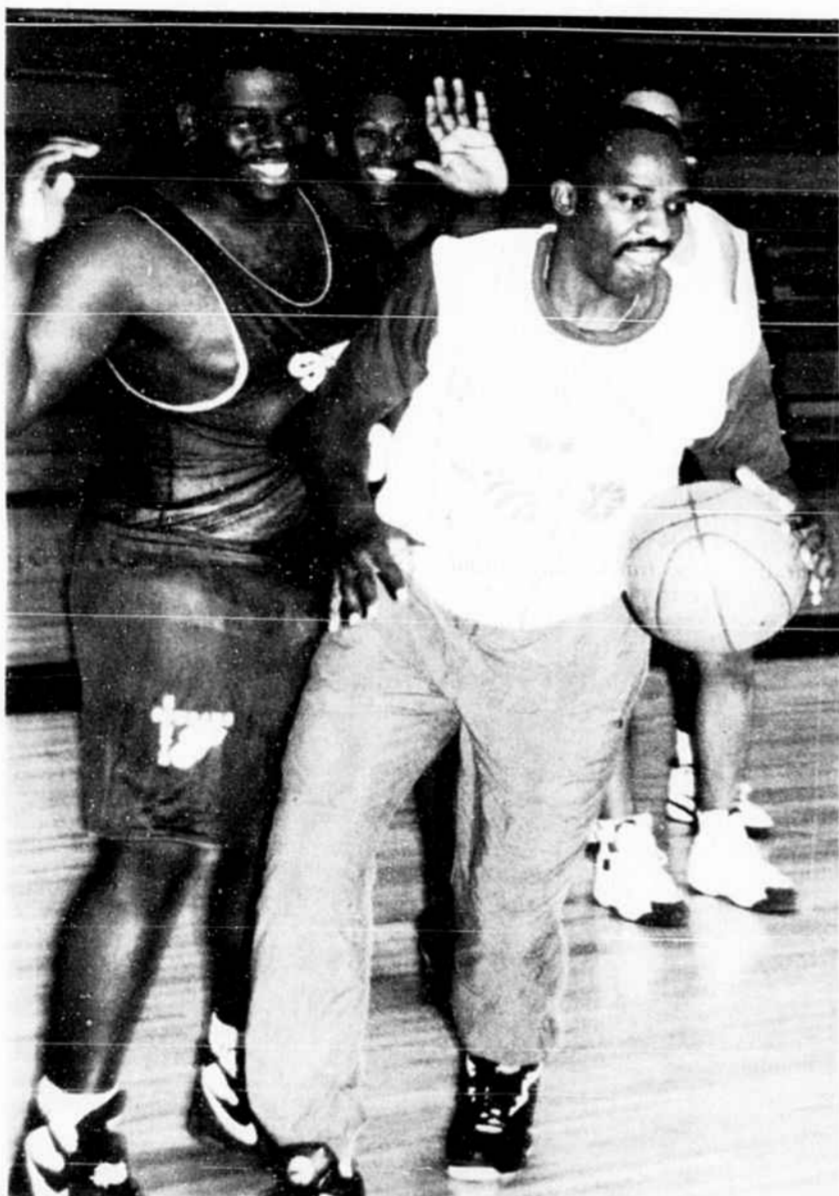
Once the highest-paid professional athlete in the world, Thompson visited Brunswick County to urge kids to stay in school, set goals and stay away from alcohol and drugs.

"For me, all my dreams came true," said the North Carolina native. "If it can happen for me it can happen for everybody here. You just have to make the right choices."

Thompson, still in excellent basketball shape for a 40-year-old, has made a lot of good choices in his life.

However, he also made some bad ones during his college and pro career when he abused alcohol and drugs. He later spent four months in prison for an assault—something he did under the influence of drugs.

"That's where drugs and alcohol took me. It took me from the top all the way to the bottom," he said. "My advice to you guys is never try it because you never know where



DAVID THOMPSON went one-on-one with a few members of the South Brunswick boys' basketball team prior to last week's clinic. At left is Charles Blue.

it's going to lead."

A two-time college player of the year, Thompson says he has been clean and sober for six years. "You guys don't have to go through what I did. You can learn from my mistakes."

Thompson now works for the Charlotte Hornets organization, traveling around the Carolinas talking to kids about "scoring on and off the court."

"It's very important that you set goals because that will make you strive to be the best you can be," he said.

As a youngster, it was Thompson's goal to play college basketball

and be able to jump higher than anyone else.

Due to hard work and sacrifice, he started dunking in the eighth grade when he stood just 5 feet, 8 inches tall. As a college freshman, Thompson set a world record with a vertical leap of 42 inches.

"He was the Air before Air Jordan," Jim Wilson, director of youth operations for the Hornets, told the crowd. "For you little guys, he was my Michael Jordan when I was growing up."

In addition to Thompson's talk, the free clinic included a ball-handling demonstration by Carl Clayton, who was a high school team-

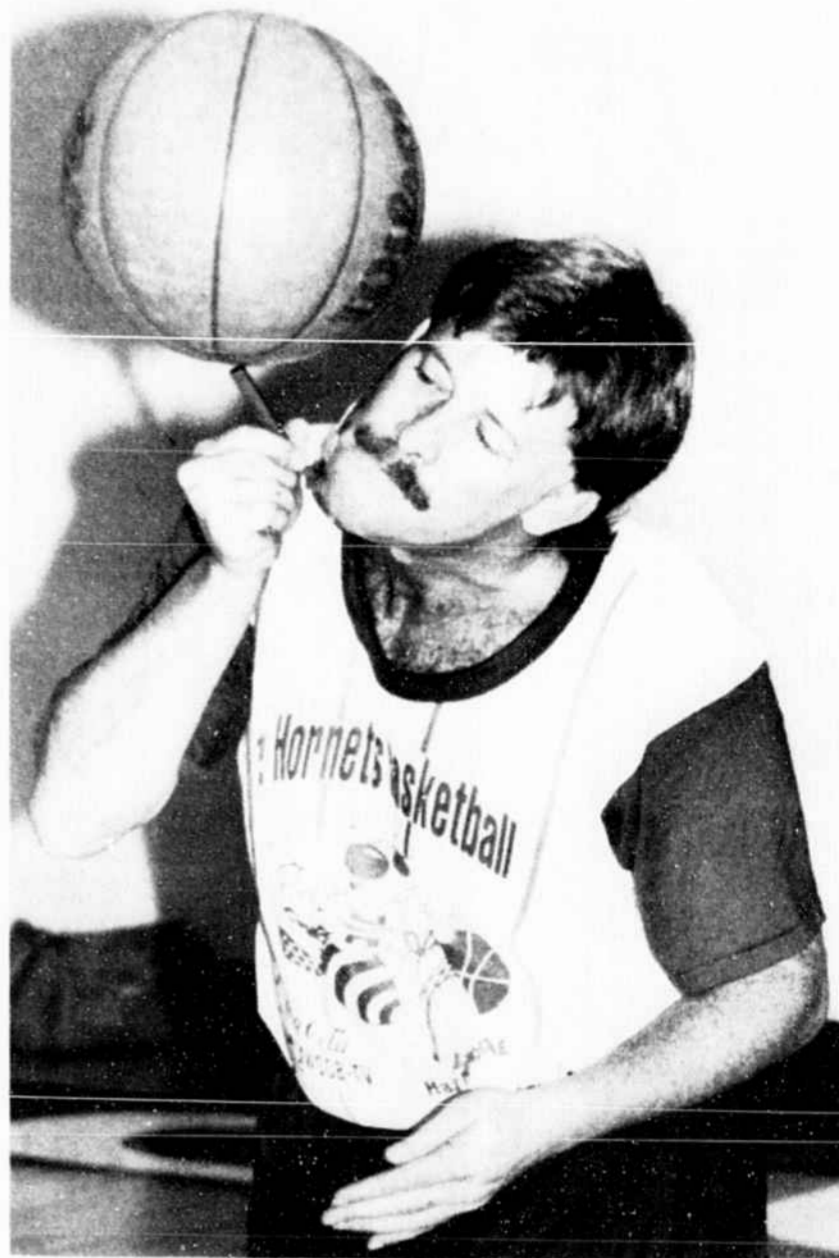
mate of Thompson at Shelby Crest.

Thompson and Clayton showed the kids several drills they can practice at home to improve their skills.

Clayton was in the Guinness Book of World Records for spinning a ball on his finger for 4 hours, 12 minutes and 6 seconds.

At last week's clinic, kids marveled when Clayton spun a ball on the end of a pen while he wrote his name and again on the end of a razor while he shaved. Clayton concluded his demonstration by simultaneously spinning balls on both feet, his head and both hands.

The clinic was sponsored by the Jr. Hornets, a program that was expanded this year to incorporate the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department youth basketball league.



CLOSE SHAVE! Ball-handling wizard Carl Clayton, a high school teammate of Thompson at Shelby, shaves while spinning a basketball on the end of a razor.

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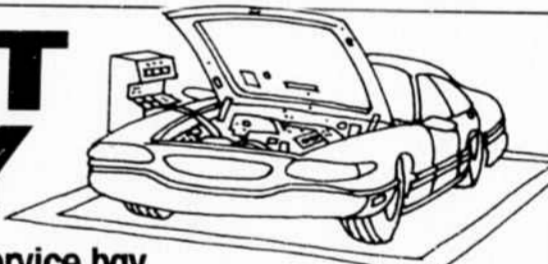
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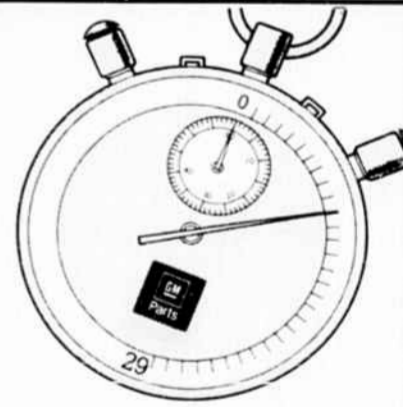
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