

Ex-sports star shares how he saved his life



STEVE BARNABY

The American sports scene is rapidly coming undone. Day after day, the various media chronicle the crumbling empires that once gave hope and inspiration, fulfilled dreams and made handfuls of people wealthy beyond their wildest dreams.

But the fantasy has faded considerably in recent years for fans, players and owners alike. Only the most naive fail to recognize the arrogance, corruption, drugs and greed that are combining to rapidly destroy one national pastime after another.

Being a spectator to the last days of one simple game or another, whether it be played with large or small spheres, wooden sticks or angled iron, wouldn't be so bad. The difficult part is standing by and watching the human toll. We forget that each one of the games we gather around the television to watch throughout the week is played by human beings who, except for some exceptional physical attribute, are just like you and me.

Like us, they have personal lives, temptations, challenges and rewards. But unlike us, they are destroyed by the lifestyle that only professional sports enforces on its specially chosen people.

The recently released autobiography of Spencer Haywood, University of Detroit basketball player and NBA star, graphically lays out the quiet yet desperate tragedies that are often the real stories behind the crumbled tinsel of pro ball.

"The Rise, The Fall, The Recovery" co-written by San Francisco Chronicle columnist Scott Oatler, published by Amistad, is a riveting, brutally honest inside report of an industry devouring itself.

As its title implies, this book is

supposed to be about a person who survived this mess call professional sports and "recovered" to tell about it. Haywood lives in Detroit and is the president of a non-profit foundation to fight drug abuse, educate prisoners and school dropouts. He also is involved in real estate development and broadcasting.

While it would be hard to deny that Haywood survived his ordeal, the essential part of this book is the voyage he takes us on through the fantasy-nightmare of a pro player.

Leaping to the top
A self-proclaimed, down-home Mississippian, Haywood experienced a meteoric rise to stardom, sloughing off a University of Detroit education after one year to join the American Basketball Association (ABA) as the first "hardship" case. Before that, he played ball at Detroit Peshing

High School and was a junior college player who became a leading star of the 1968 U.S. Olympic Basketball team.

He went on to play with the NBA New York Knicks and Los Angeles Lakers and to marry Iman.

But the veneer of success was very thin and Haywood gives it a good scratch to reveal a very unpleasant picture.

"Most colleges, including the University of Detroit, were doing their damndest to see that their basketball players did not get an education in anything more academic than square dancing," he says, commenting on the legal battle on the "hardship clause."

"Athletes were kept in school four years because it was a nice deal for pro and the schools. Likewise, the hardship rule was born not because pro teams felt sorry for my poor mother scrub-

ing floors back in Silver City but because I could tear down backboards and draw fans."

But Haywood isn't out to put all the blame on others. He candidly fesses up to the arrogance that led him to near destruction.

"Is it possible in the space of one year and without committing a major felony, to be downgraded from Great American Hero to greedy, subversive malcontent?"

"It's not only possible, it's easy."

Haywood goes on to tell us: challenging the system, intentionally skipping the Spencer Haywood Day in Belzoni after his Olympic stardom, punching referees, defying coaches and tearing down backboards.

But that was only the beginning. It was drugs, crack cocaine specifically, which brought a marvelous career to a swift halt.

Just listen:
"What am I doing on my hands

and knees on the cold tile floor of my bathroom, in the dead early morning, with the bathroom door doublebolted against my enemies? What am I doing sucking my career away through a glass pipe? Why is my heart pounding and I'm whimpering and my whole body is trembling and shaking as if I'm being shaken by a giant invisible hand?"

For Haywood, cocaine was like sex, winning the lottery and scoring 50 points all at once. That first hit, "the Big Bang," was the carrot that the user never quite catches and only leads to hopelessness.

Cocaine brings him down
He describes his playing years as the cocaine honeymoon for the NBA, during which time 80 percent of the players took the drug.

In short order, the Lakers threw Haywood off the team a week before the Lakers became champ-

ions. His career ruined, his marriage deteriorating, he became progressively worse, until an overdose of Valium brought him to the realization that he was killing himself.

Although Haywood enjoyed the game, he pulls few punches as to its outcome for many of those who participate.

"I played in the Legends Game at the NBA All-Star Game in Miami a couple of years ago. With one or two exceptions, all of my fellow legends were either broke or struggling," he says.

He also takes a few well-directed shots at the agents who, he believes, often misguide players.

For professional sports to survive, it's going to have to care more about the people who take to its playing surfaces and less about television contracts. But if Haywood's story is any example, that has little chance of happening.

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