

Film Review: **Hoop Dreams**

Important

Folks: There are links in this reading to two separate videos that you must also watch.

SECTION ONE

Hoop Dreams

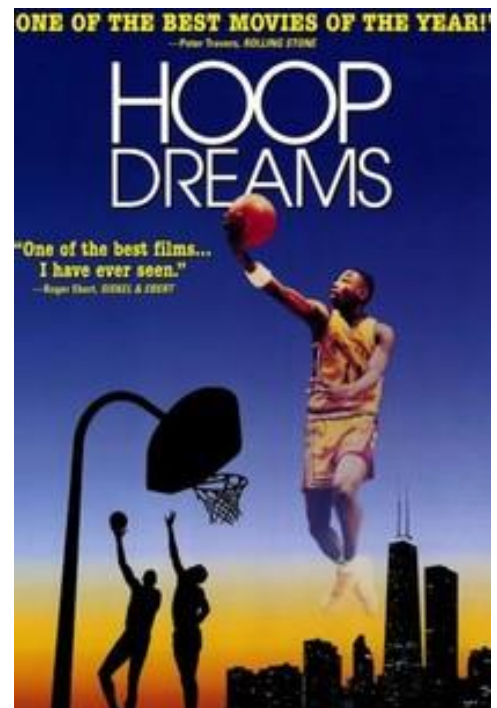
By [Roger Ebert](#) SOURCE: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hoop-dreams-1994>

A film like "Hoop Dreams" is what the movies are for. It takes us, shakes us, and make us think in new ways about the world around us. It gives us the impression of having touched life itself.

"Hoop Dreams" is, on one level, a documentary about two African-American kids named William Gates and Arthur Agee, from Chicago's inner city, who are gifted basketball players and dream of someday starring in the NBA. On another level, it is about much larger subjects: about ambition, competition, race and class in our society. About our value structures. And about the daily lives of people like the Agee and Gates families, who are usually invisible in the mass media, but have a determination and resiliency that is a cause for hope.

The movie spans six years in the lives of William and Arthur, starting when they are in the eighth grade, and continuing through the first year of college. It was intended originally to be a 30-minute short, but as the filmmakers followed their two subjects, they realized this was a much larger, and longer story. And so we are allowed to watch the subjects grow up during the movie, and this palpable sense of the passage of time is like walking for a time in their shoes.

They're spotted during playground games by a scout for St. Joseph's High School in west suburban Westchester, a basketball powerhouse. Attending classes there will mean a long daily commute to a school with few other black faces, but there's never an instant when

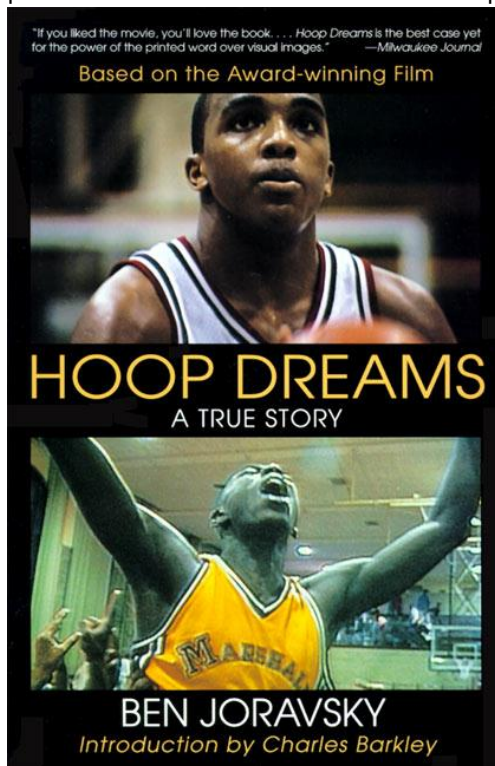


William or Arthur, or their families, doubt the wisdom of this opportunity: St. Joseph's, we hear time and again, is the school where another inner-city kid, Isiah Thomas, started his climb to NBA stardom.

One image from the film: Gates, who lives in the Cabrini Green project, and Agee, who lives on Chicago's South Side, get up before dawn on cold winter days to begin their daily 90-minute commute to Westchester. The street lights reflect off the hard winter ice, and we realize what a long road - what plain hard work - is involved in trying to get to the top of the professional sports pyramid. Other high school students may go to "career counselors," who steer them into likely professions. Arthur and William are working harder, perhaps, than anyone else in their school - for jobs which, we are told, they have only a .00005 percent chance of winning.

We know all about the dream. We watch [Michael Jordan](#) and Isiah Thomas and the others on television, and we understand why any kid with talent would hope to be out on the same courts someday. But "Hoop Dreams" is not simply about basketball. It is about the texture and reality of daily existence in a big American city. And as the film follows Agee and Gates through high school and into their first year of college, we understand all of the human dimensions behind the easy media images of life in the "ghetto."

We learn, for example, of how their extended families pull together to help give kids a chance. How if one family member is going through a period of trouble (Arthur's father is fighting a drug problem), others seem to rise to periods of strength. How if some family members are



unemployed, or if the lights get turned off, there is also somehow an uncle with a big back yard, just right for a family celebration. We see how the strong black church structure provides support and encouragement - how it is rooted in reality, accepts people as they are, and believes in redemption.

And how some people never give up. Arthur's mother asks the filmmakers, "Do you ever ask yourself how I get by on \$268 a month and keep this house and feed these children? Do you ever ask yourself that question?" Yes, frankly, we do. But another question is how she finds such determination and hope that by the end of the film, miraculously, she has completed her education as a nursing assistant.

"Hoop Dreams" contains more actual information about life as it is lived in poor black city neighborhoods than any other film I have ever seen.

Because we see where William and Arthur come from, we understand how deeply they hope to transcend - to use their gifts to become pro athletes. We follow their steps along the path that will lead, they hope, from grade school to the NBA.

The people at St. Joseph's High School are not pleased with the way they appear in the film, and have filed suit, saying among other things that they were told the film would be a non-profit project to be aired on PBS, not a commercial venture. The filmmakers respond that they, too, thought it would - that the amazing response which has found it a theatrical release is a surprise to them. The movie simply turned out to be a masterpiece, and its intended non-commercial slot was not big enough to hold it. The St. Joseph suit reveals understandable sensitivity, because not all of the St. Joseph people come out looking like heroes.

It is as clear as night and day that the only reason Arthur Agee and William Gates are offered scholarships to St. Joseph's in the first place is because they are gifted basketball players. They are hired as athletes as surely as if they were free agents in pro ball; suburban high schools do not often send scouts to the inner city to find future scientists or teachers.

Both sets of parents are required to pay a small part of the tuition costs. When Gates' family cannot pay, a member of the booster club pays for him - because he seems destined to be a high school all-American. Arthur at first does not seem as talented. And when he has to drop out of the school because his parents have both lost their jobs, there is no sponsor for him. Instead, there's a telling scene where the school refuses to release his transcripts until the parents have paid their share of his tuition.

The morality here is clear: St. Joseph's wanted Arthur, recruited him, and would have found tuition funds for him if he had played up to expectations.

When he did not, the school held the boy's future as hostage for a debt his parents clearly would never have contracted if the school's recruiters had not come scouting grade school playgrounds for the boy. No wonder St. Joseph's feels uncomfortable. Its behavior seems like something out of Dickens. The name Scrooge comes to mind.

Gene Pingatore, the coach at St. Joseph's, is a party to the suit (which actually finds a way to plug the Isiah Thomas connection). He feels he's seen in an unattractive light. I thought he came across fairly well. Like all coaches, he believes athletics are a great deal more important than they really are, and there is a moment when he leaves a decision to Gates that Gates is clearly not well-prepared to make. But it isn't Pingatore but the whole system that is brought into question: What does it say about the values involved, when the pro sports machine reaches right down to eighth-grade playgrounds?

"America to Me"

Another documentary film
from the people who brought
you *Hoop Dreams*

Folks: watch trailer, here:

<http://kartemquin.com/films/america-to-me/video>

But the film is not only, or mostly, about such issues. It is about the ebb and flow of life over several years, as the careers of the two boys go through changes so amazing that, if this were fiction, we would say it was unbelievable. The filmmakers ([Steve James](#), Frederick Marx and [Peter Gilbert](#)) shot miles of film, 250 hours in all, and that means they were there for several of the dramatic turning-points in the lives of the two young men. For both, there are reversals of fortune - life seems bleak, and then is redeemed by hope and sometimes even triumph. I was caught up in their destinies as I rarely am in a fiction thriller, because real life can be a cliff-hanger, too.

Many filmgoers are reluctant to see documentaries, for reasons I've never understood; the good ones are frequently more absorbing and entertaining than fiction. "Hoop Dreams," however, is not only a documentary. It is also poetry and prose, muckraking and expose, journalism and polemic. It is one of the great moviegoing experiences of my lifetime.

SECTION TWO

Battered Dreams of Glory

By [David Ansen](#) SOURCE: <https://www.newsweek.com/battered-dreams-glory-189682>

NOT TOO MANY FILMMAKERS ARE Determined enough, or crazy enough, to devote seven years of their lives to the making of a movie. A movie that has no stars, no script, and was made on a budget that would barely cover the catering costs on "True Lies." Indeed, the odds against Hoop Dreams ever seeing the light of day were overwhelming, for it is a documentary, and the term itself carries such a commercial stigma that only a few are lucky enough to get a theatrical release.

But "Hoop Dreams" has more than good luck on its side: it's one of the richest movie experiences of the year, a spellbinding American epic that holds you firmly in its grip for nearly three hours. Chicago film-makers Steve James, Frederick Marx and Peter Gilbert, spent four and a half years following two inner-city kids with dreams of NBA glory, William Gates and Arthur Agee, basketball prodigies whose hopes of escaping the hazards of the ghetto rest on their hardwood performance. With an intimacy that never seems intrusive, "Hoop Dreams" tracks them through high school up to the brink of college. We watch two boys turn into young men before our eyes. And we see a portrait of inner-city struggle and survival shorn of the sound-bite cliches of TV and the sensationalist reductionism of Hollywood 'hood fields. "Hoop Dreams" has all the suspense of a soap opera, but without the manipulation. It lets us draw our own conclusions, never forcing the

story to fit a preordained agenda, never making easy generalizations out of the lives it examines with such clear-eyed generosity.

At 14, Gates and Agee are given financial aid to attend St. Joseph's, a suburban Catholic high school that prides itself for producing superstar Isiah Thomas. The quiet Gates, who lives in the Cabrini Green project and enters school at a fifth-grade academic level, is the blue-chip prospect, in whom coach Gene Pingatore sees a ghm-met of the Thomas magic. Agee is the gangly speedster, a diamond in the rough. He has to make a three-hour round trip to St. Joseph's, where there are more white faces than he's ever seen. By sophomore year, Gates is on the honor roll, and Agee, whose father has been laid off, is forced to transfer to all-black Marshall High School.

You think you can see which way fate's arrows are pointing, but life isn't so predictable. One kid is felled by a knee injury, and has to undergo surgery. We're startled to learn that, in his junior year, Gates becomes a father.

Agee's father deserts his family, and we see him on a playground where Arthur is shooting hoops, a stumbling figure scoring drugs. We get a haunting view of Gates's older brother, Curtis. A former basketball whiz

deemed "uncoachable," he invests all his blasted NBA fantasies in his younger brother. There are heartbreaking, exhilarating ups and downs—a family plunged into darkness when their electricity is cut off; the pride of Arthur's mother when she graduates from a nurse's assistant's course; the nail-biting state championships.

The movie captures the meat-market frenzy of the basketball camps, where college recruiters come to salivate over the hot prospects, and the hard-sell pressure they put on the boys. A friend succumbs to the temptation of drug dealing and gets caught. The



Arthur G. Agee, 45. (Cook County Sheriff's office)

'Hoop Dreams' movie subject charged with battery of woman

By William Lee / December 16, 2017

A West Side man chronicled as a basketball prep star in the Oscar-nominated documentary "Hoop Dreams" has been [charged with attacking a woman](#) in west suburban Forest Park.

Arthur G. Agee, 45, is accused of punching a woman Nov. 19 in the area of Brown Avenue and Randolph Street in the west suburb, according to the Cook County state's attorney's office. The attack left the victim with three fractured ribs, prosecutors said.

Agee, of the 200 block of North Leamington Avenue, was charged with aggravated battery, and made an appearance Saturday at the Leighton Criminal Court Building.

Judge Michael Clancy ordered Agee held on \$30,000 bail, meaning he must post \$3,000 to be released from Cook County Jail. Agee also was ordered to have no contact with the victim and to surrender any firearm owner's identification and firearms he may own.

Dressed in a camouflage vest, the 6-foot-2 Agee quickly scanned the court gallery for faces, but said nothing before walking quietly to the court lockup. He was scheduled to appear in a courtroom in Maywood on Tuesday...

stakes in this movie couldn't be higher. When Mrs. Agee celebrates her son's birthday, her gratitude is not for his accomplishment on the court, but that he's managed to live to 18. This is a portrait of inner-city America as complex, moving and surprising as any film has given us.

When James and Marx--later joined by cinematographer Gilbert--conceived of this project, in 1987, they thought it would be a 80-minute film about the culture of inner-city playground basketball. With \$2,500 in grants and the producing help of Kartemquin Films, they began to look for their subjects. The first week of shooting they met Agee and Gates, and quickly realized that their plans had to be drastically revised: these were kids they had to follow, wherever it led.

It led them eventually to shoot 250 hours of film, almost every game and major event in the boys'



lives. The project struggled through the first three years on only \$2,500. (Later they got \$70,000 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and a \$250,000 MacArthur Foundation grant.) Everyone had a second job. Marriages were strained, debts accumulated and the filmmakers grew more and more attached to their subjects. Peter Gilbert's wife, Dru, recalls: "What really got to me was when things were not going well with the families. Peter would come home adding misery to the pile. But then our problems would look minuscule in comparison to theirs."

"There were times when it was difficult to separate the roles of filmmaker/observer and extended family friend," admits Steve James. When the Agees' power was shut off, the filmmakers pulled some money together to restore it. It was the one moment when they clearly stepped beyond their roles as documentarians. "We weren't just going to exploit their pain and

suffering. They say that to be a great documentary film-maker you have to be cutthroat and not get involved. But if that's what it takes, then we don't want to be great documentary filmmakers."

"Hoop Dreams" had its triumphant premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the audience award and found a distributor, Fine Line Features. It was the first documentary ever chosen for closing night at the New York Film Festival. (And recently St. Joseph's and coach Pingalore brought a lawsuit against the film, claiming it depicts the school "in a false and untrue light.") It's even generating spinoffs: there's a book and possibly a fictionalized TV movie; an album, single and video of Ben Sidran's fine jazz and rap score are in the works, and hats and T shirts will be sold to benefit inner-city programs.

The bitter irony is that William Gates and Arthur Agee have not been able to share in the glory. Because they are college players, the NCAA has forbidden them from sharing in the proceeds or talking about the movie: their comments would be considered commercial endorsements. "We are in an appeal process to get them to let us compensate the families for their involvement," says James. So far, the NCAA is holding firm. "Do they want to play basketball or do they want to be movie stars?" says the NCAA's Mike Racy. "Under our rules they can't do both." The NCAA, which ought to have better things to worry about, has an odd idea of what a movie star is. But "Hoop Dreams" has shown us that the rules of the game are stacked against kids like Gates and Agee. Even better, it shows us how they fight back, with the inside moves of hope.

SECTION THREE

Hoop Dreams: Where Are the Main Figures Now?

By Gabriel Baumgaertner 18 Feb 2015

SOURCE: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2015/feb/18/hoop-dreams-where-are-the-main-figures-now>

Twenty years after the landmark documentary was cruelly snubbed at the Oscars, we take a look at where the principals are today.

In 1986, filmmakers Steve James, Frederick Marx and Peter Gilbert set out to film a 30-minute PBS documentary on playground basketball as a window into Chicago's street culture. Some 300 hours of footage and three years of editing later, [Hoop Dreams](#) emerged overnight as a landmark documentary. Roger Ebert labeled it the best film of the 1990s (ahead of Pulp Fiction, Goodfellas

and Fargo), and its exclusion from the Best Documentary category at the 1995 Academy Awards led to a restructuring of how the category was evaluated.

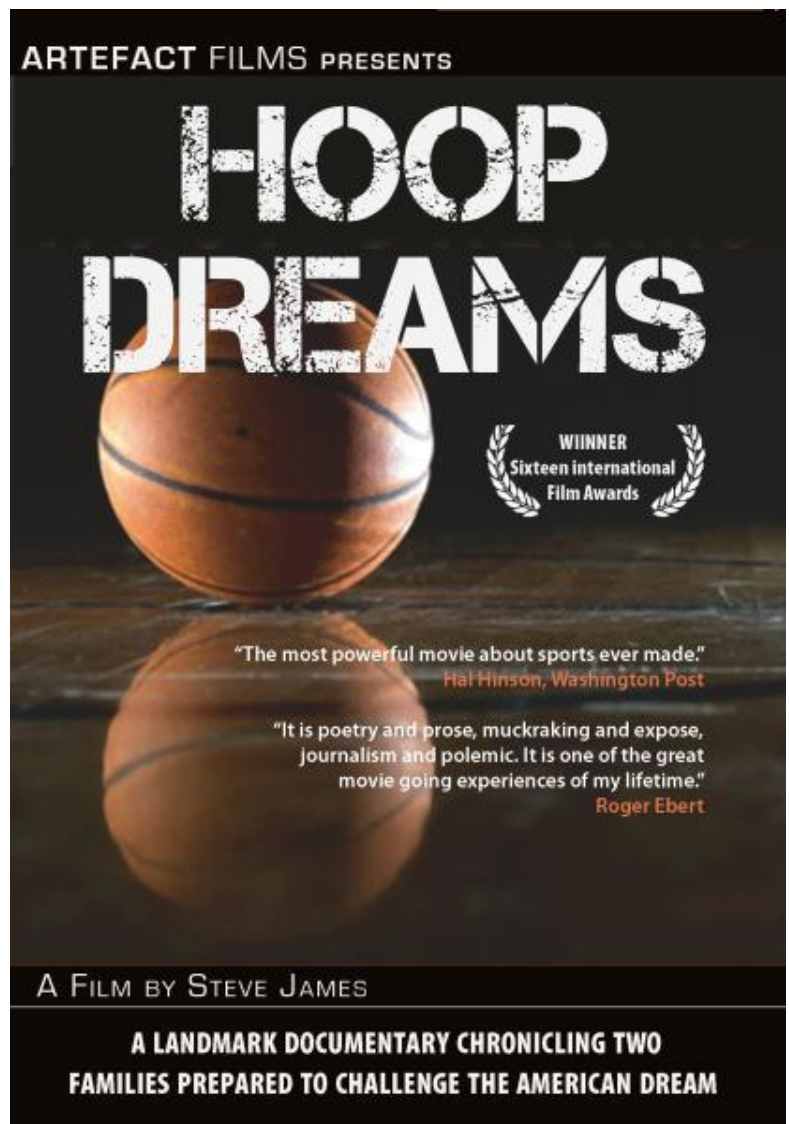
The parallel narratives of Arthur Agee and William Gates, two promising teenage players mired in the urban blight of inner-city Chicago, represented the common American dream of underprivileged youth seeking an escape through basketball. Both began as freshmen at the upscale St Joseph's in Westchester, Illinois, the former high school of NBA Hall of Famer and Chicago folk hero Isiah Thomas. Because of an inability to meet tuition demands (and coach Gene Pingatore's skepticism about his size), Agee would transfer to the public Marshall High School while Gates remained at St Joe's all four years. Neither would win a state title or play in the NBA, but their legacies live on through what's become the essential document on grassroots sports in America.

Twenty years after its infamous Oscar snub – it settled for a Best Editing nod, losing to *Forrest Gump* – *Hoop Dreams* remains one of the most influential American films ever released. Here's what happened to the main players.

Arthur Agee

The spindly, smiley guard who starts the film going one-on-one with Thomas at a St Joe's basketball camp and ends it captaining the underdog Marshall Commandos to the Illinois state tournament semi-finals, Agee would play two years at Mineral Area junior college in Park Hills, Missouri before playing two years at Division I Arkansas State. Agee never made the NBA, but played semi-professionally and briefly dabbled in [Slamball](#). He passed up a tryout with the CBA's Connecticut Pride to take a speaking role in the made-for-television film *Passing Glory* (which James directed), but later admitted that he regretted the decision.

Agee has said in interviews that the film served as both a ["blessing and a curse"](#), but lauds it for helping him move his family out of the West Garfield projects and providing him opportunities after its release. He even started a *Hoop Dreams* clothing line in the mid-2000s with the slogan "Control Your Destiny". Agee now has five children and still lives in the Chicago



area. He started the [Arthur Agee Jr foundation](#) and works as a motivational speaker for inner-city youth.

William Gates

Dubbed the “next Isiah Thomas” by both his high school head coach and the famous Chicago sports talk program Sportswriters on TV, Gates’ impressive, but ultimately disappointing, high school career led him to Marquette, where he played two seasons before quitting and eventually rejoining the team.

Gates moved back to Chicago and worked a variety of odd jobs before a comeback in 2001. After a broken foot derailed his comeback attempt, Gates committed his life to preaching at a local Chicago church and worked at the Kids’ Club. He has four children and has since moved to San Antonio to escape Chicago’s inner-city violence. His son, William Jr, accepted a basketball scholarship to Furman last year, [but recently announced his intentions to transfer to Houston Baptist](#).

Gene Pingatore

Now in his 45th season in charge of St Joseph’s, the 78-year old Pingatore is (by a wide margin) the leader in wins in Illinois Boys’ [Basketball](#) history. With a crusty demeanor and hot temper, Pingatore is presented as an antagonist throughout the film. Agee insists that the coach refused to help him stay at St Joseph’s because of his concerns that he wasn’t growing quickly enough. He frequently berates his team with expletive-laced rants and appears to pressure Gates to return from a debilitating knee injury before he is healthy. His final appearance in the film is an awkward exchange with Gates, one where the graduating senior claims, “I need to know your number so when you ask me for money, I can turn you down.” Those tensions would simmer down over time. Gates’ son, William Jr, played two years in the St Joseph’s program before transferring to another Chicago school and eventually moving to San Antonio, and Gates has spoken at St Joseph’s annual basketball camp.

Pingatore went on to coach one of the nation’s top prep players, the Boston Celtics’ Evan Turner, and his current team features four potential Division I players – two of whom have signed with Big Ten schools – and a sophomore (Lavon Thomas) who is projected to be one of Illinois’ top high school players by the time he is a senior.

Sheila Agee

Arthur’s mother, Sheila, was an inspiring character. She overcame living on welfare, having her power and water shut off by the city, and a troubled, flighty husband to graduate from a nurse’s academy with the top GPA in her class. [She worked as a private nurse with well to-do families](#) after earning her degree in 1994.

Bo Agee

Arthur's father. Arguably the film's most troubled character, Bo Agee appeared to finally turn a corner toward the end of the film after struggling with a crack cocaine addiction and incidents of domestic violence. was an ordained minister for a local Chicago church, but was [murdered in a robbery attempt in December 2004](#).

Curtis Gates

William's notorious older brother. He was a former high school legend whose lack of coachability led him back to the streets of Chicago and a life spent living vicariously through William. He [was murdered in 2001](#).



Emma Gates

The hopeful, if often forlorn single mother, Ms Gates eventually moved out of the troubled Cabrini-Green projects and has continued her work as a nurse's assistant.

The filmmakers, a few years later: clockwise: Steve James (director); Peter Gilbert (cinematographer); and Frederick Marx (producer)



Luther Bedford

The Marshall head coach with a blunt demeanor but remarkable kindness, Bedford retired as the Marshall boys' head coach in 1999 after 27 years in charge. He also spent 33 years as the Commandos athletic director before [dying in 2006](#) at the age of 69. Bedford provides the film with some of its most illuminating and, at times, disheartening quotes.

He unequivocally accuses St Joseph's and Pingatore of letting Agee go because they didn't think he projected as a top basketball player – the school initially refused to release Agee's transcript to Marshall because of a tuition imbalance – and eviscerates St Joseph's and other Chicago high schools for recruiting around the city. Off-camera, however, Bedford was known for his kindness toward kids deemed unsalvageable. For instance, Bedford would routinely deliver groceries to the Agee family during their long bouts of financial hardship. Indiana director of basketball operations Rob Judson once called Bedford "the most respected coach in Chicago," and helped appoint Bedford to the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association, which Bedford "tirelessly" worked for until his death.

Former Chicago public schools chief and current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan spoke at Bedford's funeral, claiming, "A coach can coach to satisfy his own ego or coach to shape the lives



Frederick Marx, Sheila Agee, Arthur Agee, Steve James, and Peter Gilbert (2014)

of young people. Luther Bedford always did it the right way." Bedford was also close with current Houston Rockets standout Patrick Beverley, whose story was chronicled in the Hoop Dreams sequel, [Hoop Reality](#).

NOTE: Images not in the original.