

Net Gains

Scarlet Knight three-point ace Jerome Coleman—once on the road to ruin—has turned his life around. *By Bill Glavin*

When Jerome Coleman (RC'03) wasn't proving himself on the rough and tumble basketball courts or at the Salvation Army recreation center in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, he spent most of his early teen years playing video games or riding his bike around the neighborhood. For him, sitting in a classroom wasn't much of an option. "I was afraid of school; maybe it was because I didn't have any male role models to show me that education was cool," he speculates. "I finally realized that if I didn't drag my sorry ass to school, I'd end up just like the crack heads and con artists that I saw every day."

With his father in jail and his mother scrambling to make ends meet, Coleman and his three siblings lived with his father's parents in Brownsville's Van Dyke Houses. "I don't know where I'd be without my grandmother," says Coleman. On his left arm, a tattoo in her name, Evelyn, pays tribute to her. "She's the sweetest thing on earth, but also tough as nails."

Lashanda Harris, a family friend who is two years older than Coleman and remains one of his closest friends, was constantly in his ear about school.

JEROME COLEMAN, WHO LEARNED TO SHOOT ON THE PLAYGROUND, CELEBRATES ONE OF THE 99 THREE-POINT SHOTS HE MADE LAST SEASON WHILE BREAKING THE SCARLET KNIGHTS RECORD OF 82 SET IN 2000-01 BY TODD BILLET.

"Most people who live here think the projects are all there is to life," says Harris, now a teacher. "But I used to tell Jerome that living here doesn't mean that we have to settle for less."

Ever since Coleman finally got the message, there's been no stopping him—both on and off the court. The Scarlet Knights men's basketball team, in shambles in 2000-01 and a preseason pick to finish near the bottom of the Big East Conference in 2001-02, finished 18-13 overall and 8-8 in the conference—its most successful season in years. At home, the Knights were a nearly invincible 15-2. In upsets over nationally ranked Connecticut, Miami, and Syracuse, Coleman helped make the difference in the final minutes. Throughout the season, the 6' 2", 190-pound guard displayed uncanny range from behind the arc, the skill that he had acquired in the projects as a teenager.

"If you lost in the projects, you might sit for hours," remembers Coleman. "I was only 5' 8" in my early teens, so I was lucky to get picked. High school ball was more organized, but the competition was better on the playgrounds because it was mostly dominated by men. It helped me because I kept moving further away from the basket to get my shot off. That's how I developed range."

By the time Coleman figured out that education was his only ticket out of Brownsville, a scholastic basketball career at Robeson High School—a member of one of the most competitive public-school hoop leagues in New York City—had seemingly passed him by. Jerome was clearly talented, but it's hard to make the team if you don't come up through the ranks," says former Robeson standout Mike Sherrod, two years behind Coleman in high school and now his Scarlet Knights backcourt partner and Rutgers roommate.

School wasn't as hard as Coleman had imagined; earth science was even fun. Coleman had created such a buzz in gym class and in school-yard hoops that, as a senior, the coach invited him to try out for the team. When he made the team, he had even more incentive to hit the books. His one and only scholastic season ended in heartbreak when Robeson lost the Public Schools Athletic League

Class A semifinal game to Grady High School on a half-court fling at the buzzer, but the disappointment dissipated somewhat when junior college coaches began showing interest in him. After seeing Coleman play at a camp, Bill Lewitt of Cecil Community College invited him to visit their campus in North East, Maryland. His pitch: Hard work plus experience could equal a Division I scholarship in two years.

Since Coleman's scholarship to Cecil only included tuition, he still had to find the money to pay for housing and expenses. His grandmother, a retired nurse, used her savings to help. "I think she felt that it would be good for me to get away from some of the negative influences in the neighborhood," he says. Harris says that Coleman's grandmother's instincts were right, adding, "Of the people J.J. used to hang with, he's the only one doing anything with his life."

At Cecil, Lewitt instilled some much-needed

Box Scores

BASEBALL

In June, junior pitcher Bob Brownlie was the first Rutgers player since 1963 to be drafted in the first round of the major league draft since Jeff Torborg (SEd'63)—now the manager of the Florida Marlins—was drafted as a catcher by the Dodgers. Brownlie, selected 21st overall by the Cubs, was joined in the draft by junior outfielder Val Majewski, a former walk-on taken in the third round by the Orioles; junior pitcher Jason Bergmann, selected in the 11th round by the Expos; and junior shortstop Tim Sweeney, picked in the 20th round, also by the Expos.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

The skills that Linda Miles (RCA '11) used as a feisty player for the Scarlet Knights helped her become a World Wrestling Entertainment's Tough Enough 2 champion. Miles was selected to take part in the professional wrestling competition, which aired last spring as a weekly reality-based television show on MTV.

MEN'S BASKETBALL

Throughout Rashod Kent's career as a member of the Scarlet Knights, fans often wondered what

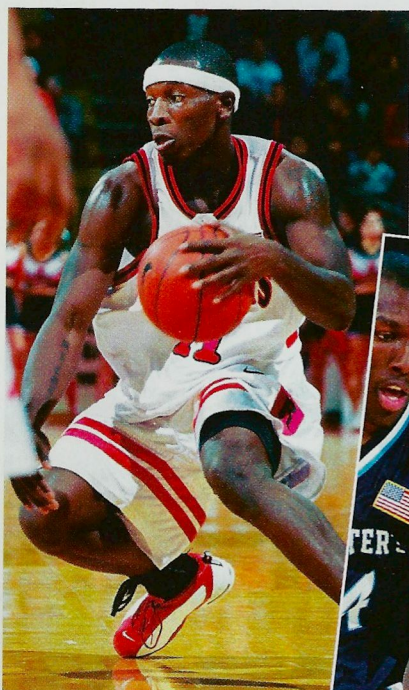
would happen if the 6' 6", 275-pound forward ever applied his considerable girth and athleticism to football. Apparently, professional football scouts were wondering the same thing. The Houston Texans, an NFL expansion franchise, signed Kent to a free-agent contract.

SOCCER

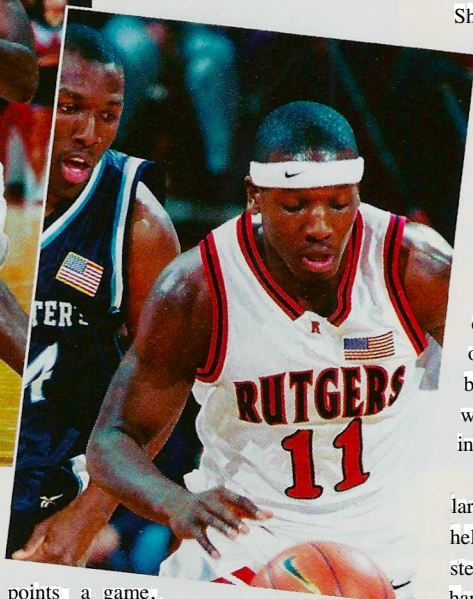
Chad Zimecki (CCAS'04) is having an outstanding career for the Scarlet Raptor team at Rutgers-Camden. Last season's team MVP was named to the All-Metro Region Second Team, anchoring a defense that helped the team into the conference's tournament for the second straight season.

VOLLEYBALL

Rutgers-Newark's women's volleyball team is favored to win its conference championship, thanks in part to Domini Lanzone (NCAS'03) and Robin Pearce (NCAS'04). Lanzone—the campus's female Athlete of the Year last year—ranks as one of the top attackers in the nation. Pearce is an all-around standout who helped raise the Scarlet Raiders to within one game of a league title in 2001.



COLEMAN'S COACHES AGREE THAT FOR THE 6' 2" SENIOR SHOOTING GUARD TO REACH HIS DREAM OF PLAYING IN THE NBA SOMEDAY, HE HAS TO BECOME MORE OF A PLAYMAKER.



discipline into Coleman's game.

He averaged 23.5 points a game, helped the team finish 48-12 over two years, and is Cecil's second leading all-time scorer. Jerome wasn't an aid to take the big shot and, more often than not, he made it," says Lewitt. "In practice, he was recalcitrant at times, but he also absorbed advice like a sponge." Off the court, Coleman rarely missed class and got the grades to earn a degree and transfer. Says Lewitt, "I had a good feeling about Jerome's future."

In April 2001, days before Gary Waters was hired as the new Scarlet Knights coach, guard Todd Billet announced that he was transferring to the University of Virginia. Waters' first priority when he got to The Banks then was to replace the team's leading three-point shooter. He scoured a recruiting service report that rated Marcus Hatten, Derrick Bird, and Coleman as the nation's three most prolific junior college shooting guards. The report called Coleman "an unconscious three-point shooter."

Hatten had already committed to St. John's, so Waters targeted Bird, flying to Michigan on Easter Sunday to visit the prospect's home. "He was leaning towards Auburn, but we still had a shot at him," remembers IITaters. Kevin Heck, Walters' former Kent State assistant who moved to Rutgers with his boss, had recently met Lewitt at a function. The Cecil coach recommended Coleman and pointed out that Sherrod was his former high school teammate, suggesting that

Heck ask his player to attest to Coleman's character.

Heck was dispatched to see Coleman play and, shortly after, Waters—now wondering whether Coleman might be a better fit for his team than Bird-headed to Maryland. He pitched the value of a Rutgers degree and pointed out other advantages: a high-profile conference, proximity to home, and the opportunity to play with Sherrod. "But probably the major factor in getting Jerome to come here was that everyone was starting out on equal footing," says Waters.

Coleman, who had been recruited by several Division I schools, settled on Rutgers, and Waters stopped pursuing Bird. The coach's instincts paid off immediately; his first ever Rutgers recruit won a starting job and led the team in scoring in four of the first five games. In the season's first home game, Rutgers fell behind by one point to Auburn when Coleman caught an in-bounds pass from Sherrod with 1.7 seconds remaining and was fouled. Ironically, the foul had been committed by Derrick Bird. Coleman calmly walked to the foul line and sank both free throws, giving Rutgers a one-point win.

Coleman, whose baggy uniform hides his muscular frame, says that competing against better players helped his game. Besides his range, he has a quick first step, shoots well going to his right or left, and has fast hands. He especially enjoyed helping beat Seton Hall by scoring 27 points at home in a game filled with hard fouls. "They talked a lot of trash, especially Darius Lane, but I've heard it all before on the playground and that stuff always makes me play harder," says Coleman, an administration of justice major. The season ended on a down note when Rutgers fell just short of an NCAA tournament bid and was beaten by Yale at home in the first round of the NIT. "We were way overconfident against Yale; a lesson we'll take into this season. We also need to step things up on the road," says Coleman, who finished the year as the team's leading scorer (16.8 ppg) and all-time single season three-point shooter (99). The player's record he broke was Billet's, whom he had been brought in to replace and whom he may cover when Virginia comes to the RAC this season on December 21.

Get the inside scoop on Scarlet Knights

football from head coach Greg Schiano, whose weekly television show, *Inside Rutgers Football* airs each week on MSG Network, Comcast, and CN8. The 30-minute show, hosted by Bruce Beck, is on MSG on Thursdays at 11:30 p.m. and on Saturdays at 11 a.m. CN8 and Cablevision air the show Fridays at 11 p.m.

scarlet sports

Coleman won't have the luxury of sneaking up on opponents this year. As last season progressed, he became the player other teams knew they had to stop. Following Rutgers' first round loss to Boston College in the Big East Conference tournament, coach Al Skinner said, "Coleman was the focal point for us." Says Waters, "Jerome caught some people by surprise last year; this season things are going to be tougher. He needs to find new ways to contribute, which means finding ways to get open and hit shots from inside the arc, playing better defense, and learning to set up his teammates."

Coleman, 22, hopes to have his grandmother in the stands for at least one game this season; so far she's only seen him play on TV. He also hopes that she will see him play in the National Basketball Association. "If I can continue to improve, I can definitely play on the next level," says Coleman, demonstrating the confidence required to survive in the projects and excel in the Big East. "This is my make-or-break year." His coaches believe he has the shooting range and athleticism but needs to become more of a point guard to have a shot. Says Waters, "It's hard not to root for a kid like that."
