

Chapter 1: Moment of Clarity

"I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars / They criticized me for it, yet they all yell 'holla.'" — Jay-Z

I didn't show up to that game as a coach.
I showed up as a dad.

But everything about me still coached.
My posture.
My presence.
My silence.

It all said something—
even if I didn't.

And what it said was clear:
This matters more than breath.

Cole sat next to me.
Jersey pulled. Knees twitching.
Said his stomach hurt.

I told him it might be nerves.
Told him to breathe.
Told him he'd be fine.

He wasn't.
His shoulders curled.
His breaths skipped.
His face pale.

Nine years old.
And already
he couldn't breathe.
Over a game.

The coach had hyped them.
Said they were better.
Said they had to win.

Cole believed him.
Not because he said it well—
but because he said it first.
And because I didn't say anything different.

That's the part I can't forgive myself for.

He couldn't breathe
because I taught him winning

was oxygen.

Not in words.
In posture.
In silence.
In what I didn't stop.

And it wasn't just him.
Same game—
I'm in it with a parent.

Sideline back-and-forth
about a rule.
A rule I know cold.

I say something.
He says something.
I come back—tight in the chest,
a little louder.

Not loud.
Not belligerent.
But loud enough to lose the plot.

Because while my son
was unraveling next to me,
I was arguing
in a 9-year-old rec game
like it was the playoffs.

Like there was a scout in the stands.
Like pride was on the line.
Like I had something to prove
to a man I didn't even know.

I had become
what I swore I wouldn't:

Not just a dad.
Not just a coach.
But a part of the problem.

The kind that
praises control,
sells poise,
but never checks for breath.

The ride home was quiet.
Not sad.
Not scolding.
Reflective.

That silence
was the sound of a mirror breaking.

And I didn't try to tape it back together.
Didn't fill the car with lessons
or silver linings.
I just sat with it.

The lie I'd modeled.
The image I'd passed down.

A coach
preaching freedom
while performing pressure.

A father
saying "play free"
while modeling control
in every breath he held in.

That was my moment of clarity.
Not a decision.
A fracture.

The kind you don't notice right away.
You just know something's off.
That your balance is gone.
That what used to feel whole
now feels dangerous to stand on.

So I studied.
Not drills.
Not plays.

Learning.
Unlearning.

I became a ghost in my own film room.
Watching myself on the sideline—
every cue, every correction,
every flinch of disapproval
masquerading as leadership.

Late nights.

YouTube spirals.
Podcasts.

British guys.
Canadian dudes.
Talking motor learning like it was Miles Davis.

It didn't feel like theory.
It felt like truth I forgot.
Like someone describing a house
I used to live in
before I knew how to name the rooms.

Ecological dynamics.
Constraints-led approach.
Perception-action coupling.

They weren't teaching me to coach.
They were reminding me
how we learn.

I saw it everywhere.

In how we played in the '90s—
blacktops, not clinics.
Curiosity, not correction.
Chaos, not control.

In how Max used to move
through the world
before the hospital rooms.

Before appointments turned time
into task.
Before "good boy"
replaced "what did you feel?"

In how Cole
lit up when I backed off.
When I let the moment breathe
instead of instructing it into submission.

Max Potential wasn't born from branding.
It came from breath.
Or more honestly—
the lack of it.

It came from realizing
I was teaching my sons

to equate love with performance.
Approval with posture.
Care with correction.
And calling it parenting.
Calling it coaching.

That's when it all clicked.

The missed shots weren't the problem.
The drills weren't the answer.
The problem was me.

My silence.
My presence.
My breath—
held too long.

Now?

I still coach.
I still train.
I still teach.

But I sit different.
I watch different.
I breathe.

Because I know
what silence costs.
And what presence protects.

I've watched joy collapse
under the weight of my expectations.
Watched posture become pressure.
Watched kids turn into shadows
of what they think you want.

I'm not here for applause.
Not trying to go viral.
I'm trying to last.

Because I remember
what it feels like
to not be able to give your kid
his breath back.

There is a particular kind of silence

a father carries
when he's failed to protect the one thing
he didn't know he was supposed to.

And now I carry that silence like scripture.

Not to shame myself.
But to remember the weight of that moment
every time I'm tempted to speak
when I should stay still.

Because I've lived on the other side of breathlessness.
Not metaphor.
Not mindset.
Real.

A few days before Max passed,
I took him to the hospital
for what we thought would be a routine transfusion.
We packed light.
We thought we'd be home by dinner.
We didn't come home.

His oxygen kept dropping.
They put a mask on him—
but try keeping a mask on a three-year-old.
He kept pushing it away.
He didn't understand why we were making it harder to breathe.

So I sat with him.
For hours.
For days.
Trying to help him breathe.

Holding the mask.
Whispering calm.
Offering breath
in all the ways I knew how—
except the one way he really needed:
for me to take it for him.

And I couldn't.

So when I say
I know what silence costs,
it's not theory.
It's memory.

When I say
this matters more than breath—
I mean that literally.

I'm here
so the next kid
can breathe.

So their chest doesn't tighten
in the layup line.
So their joy doesn't collapse
under the scoreboard.
So their worth isn't measured
in win percentages
or a coach's tone.

I didn't show up to that game as a coach.
I showed up as a dad.

But if I'm honest?

I didn't really show up at all.
Not fully.
Not how it mattered.
Not in the way that could've
changed the weather in Cole's lungs.

Now?

Now I breathe first.
Then I speak.
If I speak at all.

Because presence
without pressure
is a language too.

And I want my sons
to be fluent in it

Chapter 2: I Used to Love H.E.R.

"I met this girl when I was ten years old / And what I loved most, she had so much soul." — Common

I met her in the street.
Not a driveway.
Not a gym.
A street.

A crate nailed to a telephone pole,
leaning like it had been watching us for years.
The backboard, non-existent.
The rim?
Bent coat hanger energy.
But to us,
it was everything.

We shot till the wood gave.
Till the ball lost air.
Till sunset made the asphalt glow.

No cones.
No coaches.
Just noise.
Just rhythm.
Just soul.

We didn't know what we were doing.
And that's why we learned.

We were six.
Seven.
Maybe eight.

We played like we were writing songs.
Verses on every dribble.
Hooks on every cut.
We didn't run plays.
We chased echoes.

No one kept score.
But everybody remembered buckets.
And if the game ended in an argument,
that just meant we cared.

Later, Count Basie Park felt like the Garden.
We'd bike down, pick up games with kids three years older.
Earn our stripes.
Wait our turn.
Wait long.
And if you got picked early, you didn't celebrate.

You just knew that now you had to prove why.

No parents watching.
No trophies.
Just joy.

That's when I met her.
And what I loved most—
she had so much soul.

Not strategy.
Not structure.
Not scouts.
Just soul.

AAU jersey?
Reversible.
Hanging off my shoulders like a borrowed cape.
Warmups? No chance.
We showed up in mismatched socks,
half-laced sneakers,
and eyes that still glowed.

No compression.
No sponsors.
No politics.
Just cotton.
Just tension.
Just us.

I remember listening to the plays
chalked out in an elementary school hallway.
The marker squeaking against cinderblock.
Legs twitching.
Hearts loud.
That was real.

But even then—
the shift had started.

Sneakers got louder.
Logos got cleaner.
And soul started to fade.

Not all at once.
But gradually.

We went from asking who had next
to asking what team you were on.
From picking squads on the spot
to being sorted before you even arrived.
From rhythm
to résumé.

Exposure crept in.
So did pressure.
So did polish.

Freshman year?
I was six-seven.
Long. Awkward. Raw.
Didn't make varsity.
Didn't make JV.
Started on the freshman team.
Earned it.

Sophomore year?
Came back two inches taller.
New coach.
Got the start.

Looking back,
I probably didn't deserve it.
But height got me in the door.
Not hunger.
Not readiness.
Structure rewards surface.
Not soul.

And that's the thing about the system—
it doesn't ask who you are.
It asks what you measure.

Then came the AAU tournament.
Six games.
Three days.
Championship right after the semifinal.
No break.
They had a bye.
They had three future NBA players.

By halftime,
I was done.
Coach came down,
half-joking,
asked if I was ready to go back in.
He already knew.
I'd never say no.
Even if my legs were gone.
Even if my chest was tight.
Even if my body was screaming.

I started to rise.
He smiled—
"No, no. You're done."
I laid back down.
And for the first time all weekend,
I exhaled.

It wasn't quitting.
It was relief.
And something about that scared me.
Not because he got it wrong.
But because maybe—
he got it right for the wrong reasons.
Maybe it wasn't about me.
Maybe it was about the optics.
The perception of care.
The performance of doing the right thing.

That's what the system trains you for.
To be seen doing the right thing.
Even if it's not real.

There was no speech.
No lesson.
Just that moment.
Heavy.
Still.

Looking back,
I wish someone had asked me
if I was still having fun.
But no one did.
Not my coaches.
Not my teammates.
Not my father.
He wasn't around for those conversations.
Wasn't around, period.

And even if he had been,
I'm not sure he would've asked.
Or known how to hear the answer.
The silence was generational.
And I was raised inside it.

Most boys are.
We're handed silence like inheritance.
Taught to grind.
Taught to earn.
Taught to hold it in until it calcifies into identity.
Then told to "just love the game."

But love without language
becomes labor.
And that's what it became.

Maybe that's why I show up so fully now.
Why I coach the way I do.
Why I protect Cole's smile
like it's sacred.

Because joy was never protected for me.
And I'll be damned
if I don't guard it for my sons.

Because I gave Cole the game
like it was a gift.
But the version I handed him
wasn't the girl I met on the block.

It was someone else.
Polished.
Packaged.
Posed.

She didn't smell like asphalt.
She came with onboarding documents.
She didn't sing with rhythm.
She spoke in bullet points.
With pipelines,
positioning,
and tournament itineraries.

She came with systems.
Programs.
Apps.
Seasonal contracts.
Team meals.
Recruiting guides.
Scripted practices.

None of it wrong.
But when soul gets replaced by scheduling—
when bullet points replace breath—
the system stops serving the kids
and starts consuming them.

Too many parents sign up
before they ask the right question—
if they ask a question at all.

Too many coaches are branding kids
before they've even grown into their names.
Too many smiles
are being sacrificed for systems.

I used to love her.
I still do.
But I don't recognize
who she became.

Not yet.

But I'm trying to bring her back.
One breath at a time.

One kid at a time.
One real smile—
the kind you don't coach—
at a time.

Chapter 3: Cold Rain

“Freedom fighters / We're freedom writers like Bob Moses / The chosen, freedom writers like
Voltaire.” — Talib Kweli

I didn't fall out of love with coaching.
I fell out of rhythm with what it was asking of me.

There's a version of this story where I burned out.
But that's not what happened.
I wasn't tired.
I was disconnected.

The drills still looked good on paper.
The practice plans still sounded like purpose.
The cues still landed.
But I couldn't hear anything new.
Not in the gym.
Not in film.
Not in myself.

And I started to wonder—
what if the silence wasn't burnout?
What if the silence was trying to teach me something?

It started in film.

Cole was on the wing.
Ball reversed.
He was open.
Didn't move.

The camera didn't flinch.
But I did.

Because what I saw wasn't hesitation.
It wasn't laziness.
It was... protection.

He didn't trust what would happen next.
Didn't trust the ball would come back.
Didn't trust what speaking up might cost.

He wasn't resisting.

He was responding.

Not to the play.
To the pattern.

I had been coaching execution.
He had been navigating risk.

And I realized—
we weren't even playing the same game.

That moment didn't sit.
It rippled.

I started seeing it everywhere.

Players ducking out of help side a half-second early.
Passing up open looks.
Floating through footwork like they were dodging something.

Not because they didn't know better.
Because the environment didn't feel safe enough to be wrong.

They weren't afraid of mistakes.
They were afraid of the signals that followed them.

And that meant I had built a space
where protection made more sense than presence.

That's when I heard it.

Late night.
Laptop open.
Podcast playing in the dark.

"Behavior emerges from the interaction of constraints—task, environment, and individual."

I paused.

It didn't feel like something I was learning.
It felt like something I'd known.
Like someone describing a house I used to live in
before I had the words to name the rooms.

And then I remembered.

Max was two.

We were at an indoor birthday party for one of Cole's friends.
No sitter that day.
So we brought him along.

He was the youngest in the room by far.
But you couldn't tell him that.

The other kids were running drills, playing little games,
and Max just walked out onto the floor.
Didn't ask.
Didn't wait.
Just watched—then moved.

No instruction.
No orientation.
He learned the game by watching the room.
Every action was a read.
Every read a guess.
And every guess pulled him deeper into the rhythm.

Nobody told him what to do.
He figured it out by standing still long enough to see it.

I didn't know what I was watching back then.
Just thought it was cute.
But now—
I see it.

That was perception-based learning.
That was coupling.
That was presence, long before he had language.

So I tried to change how I coached.

The night before practice,
I spent hours designing a new drill.
I wanted to simulate a specific scenario.
Get them to feel something without explaining it.

I wrote it out.
Tested it in my head.
It looked sharp.
Felt innovative.

We got to practice.
I laid it out.
Explained it clean.

Then we ran it.
And it completely bombed.

No rhythm.
No connection.
No emergence.
Just noise.

My stomach dropped.
My worst fear—
realized.

I looked like I didn't know what I was doing.
And the truth is—I didn't.

Not that day.

So I said it.

"I messed that one up. We're gonna move on."

And we did.

That night, I sat with it again.
Not for hours—
just two minutes.

That's all it took.

The drill didn't need a rewrite.
It needed space.
I had tried to control too much.
I'd built something that asked for precision
but didn't allow exploration.

The next day, we ran it again.
Same idea.
Looser entry.
More freedom.

It was the best session we'd had.

Because this time,
they weren't performing the drill.
They were solving it.

That's when everything changed.

I stopped coaching the drill.
Started coaching the perception.

Not just: Where's the ball?

But: What are you seeing? What are you feeling? What changed right before the decision?

I watched the pauses.
The glances.
The breath.

I wasn't correcting mistakes.
I was interpreting patterns.
I was learning their language.

The gym started breathing again.

They weren't asking for permission anymore.
They were making sense of space.

And I realized—
coaching wasn't about telling them what to do.
It was about designing a space
where they could feel something worth remembering.

Not "read and react."
Feel and respond.
Miss and adjust—without shame.

That's when I knew what Max had shown me.
And what Cole was living.
And what my players had been whispering
in the language of body, breath, and effort.

They weren't failing.
They were adapting.
To the constraints.
To the system.
To me.

I wasn't burned out.
I was being rewritten.

One breath at a time.
One rep at a time.
One silent, sacred moment at a time.

Now?

I still plan.

Still study.
Still care.

But I don't fill the space out of fear.
I don't cue just to prove I'm present.
I don't speak over the moment
just to remind them I'm in control.

I listen.
I trust.
I wait.

Because I've learned that real learning
doesn't arrive with a whistle.
It arrives like weather.

Slow.
Undeniable.
Cleansing.

Like cold rain.

I'm not a freedom fighter.
Not in the way the lyric means.

But I am a freedom writer now.

With cones.
With film.
With questions.

With sideline silence that says:
"I see you. And I trust you."

I don't coach to control.
I coach to reveal.

And that revelation comes slow.

Drip.
Drip.
Drip.

Like cold rain.

Chapter 4: Thieves in the Night

“Not strong, only aggressive / Not free, we only licensed / Not compassionate, only polite / Not whores, but who’s solicitin’?” — Black Star

They say the system is broken.
It’s not.
It was built like this.
On purpose.

I didn’t want to believe it at first.
I thought maybe it was just misguided.
Too many good people.
Too many good intentions.
It had to be salvageable, right?

But then I sat in on a league meeting.
Watched them talk about rankings
before they mentioned safety.
Watched them debate exposure
before they brought up joy.
And that’s when it clicked.

This wasn’t accidental.
It was engineered.
Every form, every fee, every phrase on the website—
crafted to sell dreams, not build futures.
Designed to maximize control, not capacity.

And we all signed the terms.

They say kids are soft now.
They’re not.
They’re responsive.
To stress.
To surveillance.
To control wrapped in a hoodie that says “grind.”

I’ve seen kids break down
not from the reps—
but from the performance of toughness.
From coaches demanding eye contact
while never offering it back.
From “leadership training”
that looks more like theater
than truth.

I once watched a 12-year-old freeze in the middle of a game
after a turnover.

Not because of the mistake.
But because he didn't know whether to look at his coach,
his parent,
or the scoreboard.
His body didn't fail.
His perception did.

He was too busy scanning for judgment
to remember how to move.

We say we're building character.
But whose definition are we using?
We say "team first."
But punish them
for not being stars.
We say "family."
But bench them
for missing practice
after a funeral.

I heard a coach say
he was trying to "build men."
Then watched him scream in a kid's face
because he forgot a set.
That's not manhood.
That's mimicry.
We're not building character.
We're cosplaying patriarchy.

That's not accountability.
That's branding.

It's control dressed up as culture.
And the kids know.
They always know.

We've replaced play
with programming.
Expression
with exposure.
Development
with deception.

There are teams who run 20 sets
but can't handle pressure.
Players with trainer-perfect form
who can't improvise when the ball skips off the rim.

Because we trained performance,
not presence.

Not strong.
Only aggressive.
Not free.
Only licensed.

And licensing is always conditional.
Conditional on compliance.
Conditional on polish.
Conditional on performance.

I watched a team run the score up
in a 9U game
because “they’ll need this toughness later.”

Later for what?

A career that 98% won’t have?
A scholarship that costs them their joy?
A work ethic they never chose?

I’ve seen 4th graders with personal trainers.
Seen parents live-stream practices.
Seen kids fake hustle
just to keep a roster spot.

We’re not preparing kids for the future.
We’re prepping them
for the same trauma
we swallowed
and called resilience.
We baptized them in our baggage
and called it legacy.

Black Star said it clean —
“Get yours first, them other niggas secondary / That type of illing that be filling up the
cemetery...”
And that’s what this system is.
A polished procession
for kids we never asked to be full.
Just hungry.
Just sharp.
Just marketable.

We’re not coaching souls.
We’re inventorying bodies.
And calling it exposure.

We parade them like assets
then post them like losses.

A kid has a bad game,
and the silence is louder than the box score.
A coach doesn't tag him in the recap.
A parent scrolls without comment.
A trainer stops texting.

The message is clear:
You are only as valuable
as your last performance.

All for clout.
All for projection.
All for a version of success
that never measured breath.

You know what's rare?
A kid smiling
while playing hard.
You know what's rare?
A coach who listens
more than he lectures.
You know what's rare?
An environment
where kids fail
and still feel whole.

You can feel it when you walk into those gyms.
The air is different.
The noise isn't as sharp.
The kids aren't playing scared.
They move like they belong.
Like joy isn't a reward —
it's a given.

I used to think I had to protect players
from losing.
Now I protect them
from the way we win.

Because winning has a cost
if you're not careful.
If you don't ask what it's costing.

We say we're building leaders.
But we reward compliance.
We say "make reads."
Then punish them
for not executing our script.
We say "freedom."
Then run plays
that have one outcome.

One false read.
And they're benched.
Not corrected.
Benched.

We're not teaching decision-making.
We're teaching obedience
with a ball in hand.

I've heard coaches say,
"He doesn't listen."
What they mean is:
"He doesn't conform."

I've said it too.

Until I realized
the problem wasn't their ears.
It was our ego.

If a kid disobeys the system
we built wrong,
are they failing—
or refusing to fake it?

Sometimes rebellion is the only honest read.

We make them memorize.
Repeat.
Replicate.

And then wonder
why they can't adapt.
Why they freeze under pressure.
Why they play scared.
Why they don't trust themselves.

We trained them
to wait for approval.

Every look to the bench?
That's a kid asking permission to exist.

That's theft.

We stole their instincts
and called it polish.
We stole their breath
and called it buy-in.
We stole their chaos
and called it culture.

We stole the game
and sold it back
like a license.

And they're still paying.
In joy.
In confidence.
In silence.

But I'm done playing that role.

I'm not here
to sharpen them for a machine
that devours joy
and prints out recruits.

I'm here to build systems
that make breath visible.
That make failure recoverable.
That make pressure feel like information—
not indictment.

Because the real thieves
move quietly.
Not strong.
Only aggressive.
Not free.
Only licensed.

And the license always expires
the second they stop producing.

And I'm not here to watch kids
lose themselves
while chasing praise
from coaches
still chasing ghosts.

I've seen grown men
trying to fix their childhood
through other people's children.
That's not coaching.
That's projection.

I don't need them to be perfect.
I need them to be present.

And presence
doesn't show up on a box score.

But you can feel it
in the way they move.
In the way they listen.
In the way they recover
without flinching.

That's the goal now.
Not production.
But presence.
Not polish.
But possibility.
Not fear-based obedience.
But decision-making
built on breath.

I'm not trying to go viral.

I'm trying to build kids
who know who they are
when the play breaks down.

Because that's when truth shows up—
not in the set,
but in the response.

Chapter 5: HiiiPoWeR

“The sky is falling, the wind is calling / Stand for something or die in the morning.” — Kendrick Lamar

He strolled in late.

Didn't say much at first.

Didn't introduce himself.

Didn't even look like a coach.

Just a guy in sweats,
phone in his pocket,
checking scores
like he was managing a fantasy team
not mentoring kids.

The game started.

He barked some instructions.

Nothing about spacing.
Nothing about reads.

Just outcomes.

“Go get it.”
“Come on, finish that.”
“Dawg him. Be tougher.”

Then back to silence.
Then back to his phone.

The kid he was yelling at—
he couldn't have been more than twelve.

Thin.
Still learning how to move in his body.
Probably nervous.
Definitely outmatched.

Made a mistake.
Didn't rotate.
Didn't fight through.
Didn't live up to some imaginary “dawg” code
that only made sense to grown men
trying to relive something
through middle school bodies.

“Soft!” he shouted.
“Be a dawg or sit down!”

No clipboard.

No huddle.
No teaching.
Just performance.

And the rest of the team?

They didn't laugh.
They didn't nod.
They didn't pile on.

They just froze.

Not in loyalty.
In fear.

Because they knew
he wasn't coaching.

He was searching
for control.

And they didn't want to be next.

I didn't say anything.
Didn't pull him aside.
Didn't start a conversation.

I just walked out.

Not in protest.
In refusal.

It didn't make me feel noble.
It made me feel complicit.

Because I'd coached like that.

Not always.
Not loudly.

But subtly.

Focused on outcomes.
Selling discipline.
Performing care
while suppressing curiosity.

I wasn't a bad coach.
I was a perfect product.

Trained to value winning
more than wondering.
Trained to control
before connecting.

And that day,
in that gym,
watching that man yell
at a child
while checking his phone—

I saw the whole thing
for what it was.

Not broken.
Built.

That was the day
I stopped asking how to be better
in their system.

And started building a new one.

I wrote one sentence that night:

You are not here to prepare kids for systems that harm them.

Everything else followed.

No more “kill spots.”
No more “dawg talk.”
No more barking from the sideline
while pretending it’s about effort.

If a kid misses,
we ask why.

If a kid looks off,
we stay close.

If a kid fails,
we make room.

So they can try again
without carrying shame.

This isn’t rebellion.
This is return.

Return to rhythm.
Return to real leadership.
Return to breath.

Return to building gyms
where presence matters more than posture.

Some coaches didn’t understand.
Some didn’t speak to me after meetings.

But one did.
Quietly.
Privately.

Said,
“You made me think, man.”

That’s it.
That’s all.

And that was enough
to keep going.

Because I know what happens
when men coach from wounds
they never named.

What happens when shame
gets dressed up
as standards.

What happens when fear
puts on a whistle
and calls itself “accountability.”

I’ve been that man.
I’ve been that voice.
I’ve barked those phrases
in a register
meant to command,
not connect.

“Get tough.”
“Be a dog.”
“Don’t be soft.”

What I meant was:

“I’m scared.”
“I don’t know what to do with this moment.”
“I want control.”

But none of that sounds strong.
So I sold posture
and called it poise.

The truth?

I inherited that tone.

Coaches who loved the game,
but coached like they were still trying to earn their father’s respect.
Men who never learned to regulate,

only dominate.
Who demanded eye contact
but never saw us clearly.

And the worst part?
It worked.

At least in the short term.

We won games.
Got tough.
Looked the part.

But we didn't learn how to breathe under pressure.
We learned how to hold our breath
and call it discipline.

That's why I walked out.

Not to perform virtue.
But to break a pattern
I was once proud of.

Because I saw a kid
absorb shame
as if it were a lesson.

And I know what that does to a body.

It tightens the shoulders.
Clenches the jaw.
Hardens the breath.
Until all that's left
is reaction.

Not rhythm.
Not relationship.
Just readiness
to be yelled at again.

You can't teach from that place.

Not really.

You can train.
You can demand.
You can manufacture intensity
through fear.

But you can't build wholeness.

So I walked out.

Because if I stayed,

I would've had to silence something in myself
just to keep the peace.

And I've already paid that cost.
I won't pay it again.

Now?

Now I coach like Kendrick raps.

Urgent.
Specific.
Unapologetically awake.

Because the sky is falling.
The wind is calling.

And I won't be the one
they remember for yelling
when I could've been listening.

I won't be the man
who barked "toughen up"
when a kid just needed
to feel safe enough
to fail.

I'll be the man
who stood in the storm,
arms open.

The man who said:

You're not soft.
You're sensitive.
And that's sacred.

The man who built gyms
where no one had to trade their voice
for playing time.

The man who taught dawg-coded coaches
that breath
is the real toughness.

This isn't about being soft.
It's about being sovereign.

Rooted.
Clear.
Unshakeable not because you yell—
but because your presence
is louder than your voice.

So if they ask me why I left—
I'll tell them:

Because that coach
wasn't the villain.

He was the mirror.

And I chose
to shatter it.

I'm not here
to prep kids for power.

I'm here
to give them theirs back.

That's HiiiPoWeR.
That's breath.
That's me—
still standing.
Still building.
Still believing
there's a better way.

Even if I have to walk out alone
to prove it exists.

Chapter 5: HiiiPoWeR

“The sky is falling, the wind is calling / Stand for something or die in the morning.” — Kendrick Lamar

He strolled in late.

Didn't say much at first.

Didn't introduce himself.

Didn't even look like a coach.

Just a guy in sweats,
phone in his pocket,
checking scores
like he was managing a fantasy team
not mentoring kids.

The game started.

He barked some instructions.

Nothing about spacing.
Nothing about reads.

Just outcomes.

“Go get it.”
“Come on, finish that.”
“Be tougher.”
“Box out.”

Then back to silence.
Then back to his phone.

The kid he was yelling at—
he couldn't have been more than twelve.

Thin.
Still learning how to move in his body.
Probably nervous.
Definitely outmatched.

Made a mistake.
Didn't rotate.
Didn't fight through.
Didn't live up to some imaginary code
that only made sense to grown men
trying to relive something
through middle school bodies.

“Soft!” he shouted.
“Sit down if you don't want it!”

No clipboard.
No huddle.
No teaching.
Just performance.

And the rest of the team?

They didn't laugh.
They didn't nod.
They didn't pile on.

They just froze.

Not in loyalty.
In fear.

Because they knew
he wasn't coaching.

He was searching
for control.

And they didn't want to be next.

I didn't say anything.
Didn't pull him aside.
Didn't start a conversation.

I just walked out.

Not in protest.
In refusal.

It didn't make me feel noble.
It made me feel complicit.

Because I'd coached like that.

Not with the same words.
But with the same posture.

Focused on outcomes.
Obsessed with winning.
Performing control
instead of teaching process.

I used to bark at players for missed box outs
before asking if they ever felt the timing of a rebound.
I used to pace the sideline like effort could be scared out of them.
I taught toughness by volume.
Not by listening.

Not always.
Not with malice.

But without breath.

And definitely without presence.

I wasn't a bad coach.
I was a perfect product.

Trained to value winning
more than wondering.
Trained to control
before connecting.

And that day,
in that gym,
watching that man yell
at a child
while checking his phone—

I saw the whole thing
for what it was.

Not broken.
Built.

That was the day
I stopped asking how to be better
in their system.

And started building a new one.

I wrote one sentence that night:

You are not here to prepare kids for systems that harm them.

Everything else followed.

No more barking from the sideline
like urgency alone could make a kid better.
No more yelling "finish that"
like their body hadn't just failed them
because the environment failed them first.

No more coaching for the camera.
No more mistaking silence for composure.
No more performative poise.

If a kid misses,
we ask why.

If a kid looks off,
we stay close.

If a kid fails,
we make room.

So they can try again
without carrying shame.

This isn't rebellion.
This is return.

Return to rhythm.
Return to real leadership.
Return to breath.

Return to building gyms
where presence matters more than posture.

Some coaches didn't understand.
Some didn't speak to me after meetings.

But one did.
Quietly.
Privately.

Said,
"You made me think, man."

That's it.
That's all.

And that was enough
to keep going.

Because I know what happens
when men coach from wounds
they never named.

What happens when shame
gets dressed up
as standards.

What happens when fear
puts on a whistle
and calls itself "accountability."

I've been that man.
I've barked those instructions
from the comfort of the lead
like development could be demanded
instead of cultivated.

"Box out."
"Be tough."
"Wake up."

What I meant was:

"I'm scared we're not good enough."
"I'm scared of what this loss will say about me."
"I want control."

But none of that sounds strong.
So I sold performance
and called it poise.

The truth?

I wasn't building players.
I was building outcomes.

And the cost was presence.

The cost was connection.

The cost was breath.

We won games.
Got tough.
Looked the part.

But I didn't feel the pain of losing.
I just moved on.

And the kids learned to do the same.

To play numb.
To chase approval.
To hold their breath.

That's why I walked out.

Not to perform virtue.
But to break a pattern
I had lived in.

Because I saw a kid
absorb shame
as if it were a lesson.

And I know what that does to a body.

It tightens the shoulders.
Clenches the jaw.
Hardens the breath.
Until all that's left
is reaction.

Not rhythm.
Not relationship.
Just readiness
to be yelled at again.

You can't teach from that place.

Not really.

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Because if I stayed,
I would've had to silence something in myself
just to keep the peace.

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when a kid just needed
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who stood in the storm,
arms open.

The man who said:

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You're sensitive.
And that's sacred.

The man who built gyms
where no one had to trade their voice

for playing time.

The man who taught performance-first coaches
that breath
is the real toughness.

This isn't about being soft.
It's about being sovereign.

Rooted.
Clear.
Unshakeable not because you yell—
but because your presence
is louder than your voice.

So if they ask me why I left—
I'll tell them:

Because that coach
wasn't the villain.

He was the mirror.

And I chose
to shatter it.

I'm not here
to prep kids for power.

I'm here
to give them theirs back.

That's HiiiPoWeR.
That's breath.
That's me—
still standing.
Still building.
Still believing
there's a better way.

Even if I have to walk out alone
to prove it exists.

Chapter 6: Smile

“I often wish that I could save everyone, but I’m a dreamer.”
— Scarface (feat. 2Pac)

The first time I smiled after Max died,
it scared me.

Not because it hurt.

Because it didn’t.

For a second,
the weight lifted.

And I felt light.

And then I felt guilty.

How could I laugh
when he’s not here to?

How could I let go
of the heaviness
I told myself I had to carry
to honor him?

But the truth is—

the heaviness wasn’t the tribute.

The presence was.

And presence
means staying open.
Even when it breaks you.
Even when it makes no sense.
Even when smiling feels
like betrayal.

Even when joy returns
like an echo in an empty house—
soft, haunting,
too familiar to ignore.

That’s what this chapter is about.

Not pretending.

Not performing.

Choosing.

To be here.
To hold joy
without apology.

To remember that joy is not absence of pain.
It's the thread that still connects you
to the living.

I remember the first time I laughed again.

Not a chuckle.
Not a polite smirk.

A real laugh.

Cole had slipped on the gym floor,
went down hard,
then popped up grinning like he meant to do it.

He looked around—
like he wasn't sure if it was okay.

And I didn't say a word.
I just laughed with him.

Held eye contact
long enough for him to know—

You're safe here.

Your joy is safe here.

That moment did more
than any drill I've ever run.

Because joy
isn't a reward.

It's a requirement.

If joy isn't part of the system,
it's not a development model.
It's a slow extraction.

And what's being extracted

isn't just talent.
It's spirit.

Max taught me that.

Not in theory.
In practice.

He once came out of his room
with two different shoes on.

One Jordan.
One Croc.

Said,
"They both feel right."

And then just kept it moving.

That was Max.

Unbothered.
Unshakeable.
Unscripted.

He wasn't unaware of what was happening.
He was just unwilling to let it define him.

That's not denial.
That's clarity.

The kind that lives in the body
before the mind can name it.

The kind that dances
in contradiction
without flinching.

Now I carry that forward.

With Cole.
With my players.
With myself.

When they laugh,
I don't rush to refocus them.

I take a beat.

Because that sound—
that unforced joy—
that's data too.

That's rhythm.
That's restoration.
That's breath making its way back home.

We always talk about safety.

But most programs treat it
like an insurance clause.

"They're safe here...
as long as they don't disrupt practice."

"They're safe here...
as long as they perform."

That's not safety.
That's surveillance.

Real safety means
they can cry.
They can pause.
They can laugh
mid-rep
and not get punished.

Real safety means
they can smile
without calculating the cost.

Without looking over their shoulder
for approval.

Some days,
Cole's body carries something
he doesn't know how to say.

He doesn't throw fits.
He gets quiet.
Withdraws.
Goes internal.

And everything in me
wants to fix it.

Frame it.
Coach it.

But I don't.

I just stay near.

And if I can,
I make him laugh.

Not to change his state.
To remind him
he's allowed to feel all of it—
and still be held.

Max used to do that too.

He could feel the room
without a word.

One time at treatment,
the nurse missed his vein
three times in a row.

Max didn't flinch.
Didn't cry.

But I did—
not visibly,
but inside.

I was holding it in.
Trying to be strong.
Trying to model calm.

And Max just looked at me,
tilted his head,
and smiled.

Like he was the one
holding me up.

That was the moment I knew—
this kid wasn't just brave.
He was rooted.

He wasn't pretending to be okay.
He had made peace with feeling everything
and still choosing joy.

That's the work now.
That's the dream I still carry.

Not a utopia.

A gym.
A household.
A life.

Where grief and joy
can sit side by side
and not compete for breath.

Because grief doesn't need to win.

It just needs to be honored.

And joy doesn't erase anything.
It just proves
you're still here.

I often wish
that I could save everyone.

But I'm a dreamer.

And this
is how I keep dreaming.

By showing up
on the days that ache.

By smiling
when the silence softens.

By protecting the possibility
that joy
can survive this.

That it can sneak in
between reps.
That it can rise
after a loss.
That it can crack the mask
you didn't know you were wearing.

That even after the worst thing happens—
a child can laugh,
and a father can smile,
and neither needs to apologize.

Because the love
is still here.

Because the breath
is still moving.

Because the work
isn't to forget—

It's to remember
and still smile.