

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.

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.

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.

That
was my moment of clarity.

And I've been breathing ever since.

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.

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.

No parents watching.
No trophies.
Just joy.

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

AAU jersey?
Reversible.
Hanging off my shoulders like a borrowed cape.
Warmups? No chance.

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.
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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

I didn't fall out of love with her.
I was coached out of it.
Structured out of it.
Systemed out of it.

The game didn't leave me.
She got married to the industry.
And I'm still grieving the girl I met.

Now
too many kids
are being asked to perform
where they were once allowed to play.

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 sync with the version of myself
that was doing it.

The louder I got,
the less I heard.

I was still showing up.
Still early to the gym.
Still late to leave.
Still scribbling in notebooks
with plays I hadn’t tested
but believed might work
if the players just bought in.

Still building practice plans
like blueprints for control.
Still explaining footwork
like it was scripture.
Still mistaking repetition
for revelation.

Still drilling.
Still correcting.
Still performing clarity
instead of becoming clear.

It cracked slowly —
the way ice does under foot
right before it gives.

A moment here.
A glimpse there.
Tiny fractures
until one morning
I woke up
and couldn’t feel my own voice
in the gym anymore.

It started with a question I couldn’t shake.

“Why are they doing that?”

Why are they shooting
before they're balanced?

Why are they spinning into traffic
like there's no one else on the court?

Why do their shoulders sag
when the ball doesn't come their way?

It wasn't laziness.
Wasn't ego.
Wasn't disobedience.

It was survival.

It was protection.

It was the body adapting
to a world that didn't make sense.

That's when it hit me:

Perception drives action.

Not what I say.
Not what I diagram.
Not what they memorize.

How they see the floor
is how they move through it.

I stopped correcting for execution.
Started observing for cues.

I watched the subtle things—
The glance over the shoulder
before a pass.

The shuffle of feet
that gave away fear.

The pause after a miss
where breath disappeared.

I stopped watching for compliance.
Started listening for confusion.

Started feeling for rhythm.

That's when I knew
I had been coaching the wrong thing.

Not the skill,
but the symptom.

The breakthrough didn't come on the court.
It came on my couch.
Midnight.
Laptop open.
Podcast playing.
A voice I didn't know said a phrase
I didn't understand yet:

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

I paused.
Rewound.
Listened again.

Then again.

And again.

Until the words started forming images.

Cole on the wing,
waiting for a pass that never came.

Max, back in the day,
figuring out his next move
by watching what the other kids did first.

Players aren't just doing things.
They're interpreting everything.

They're not resisting.
They're responding.

To fear.
To pressure.
To cues I never realized I was giving.

I started asking new questions.

Not "how do I fix them?"
But "what have I created around them?"

What am I rewarding?
What am I ignoring?

What patterns have I built
without realizing they were scripts?

That's when I rewired everything.

I threw away the perfect plan.
Ditched the clean progression.
Scrapped the block drills
with predictable outcomes
and unquestioned authority.

I started building sessions
that looked like life.

Messy.
Reactive.
Rhythmic.
Uncontrolled—but not chaotic.

The first one bombed.

Kids looked lost.
Parents looked worried.
I looked like a guy
who'd forgotten how to coach.

But something told me to hold.
To wait.

Like rain hitting cold pavement,
you don't see the effect right away.
But the ground is changing underneath you.

And then it happened.

One of the youngest players—quiet,
didn't talk much—
saw an opening that wasn't there
a second before.

He faked, stepped, spun,
laid it in without thinking.

Nobody had taught him that move.
It wasn't in the playbook.
It came from feel.
From attunement.
From permission.

He smiled.
The kind of smile you don't see in structured drills.
The kind that says,
"I found that."
Not "I was told that."
Not "I executed it."
But "I discovered it."

That was the moment I knew
I wasn't coaching plays anymore.
I was coaching perception.

Not "read and react."
Feel and respond.
Trust and try.
Miss and repeat—
without shame.

It changed everything.

I stopped yelling.
Stopped interrupting.
Started watching with curiosity
instead of critique.

Started seeing the gym as a living thing.
Breathing.
Changing.
Teaching us
if we let it.

Some of my peers called it soft.

Said I was letting players off the hook.
Said they'd never be ready for varsity.
Said this wouldn't fly in real games.

But the kids?

They got better.

Not cleaner.
Better.

More grounded.
More self-aware.
More creative.

They failed more often—
and recovered faster.

Because they weren't afraid
of failing in front of me anymore.

They trusted the space.
And when a player trusts the space,
everything becomes a rep.

I remember one moment in particular.
It wasn't dramatic.
Wasn't loud.

It was a game.

Close score.
Time running down.

We had a play drawn.
But LJ broke it.

Not by mistake—
by feel.

He read the defense.
Cut early.
Caught it clean.
Finished through contact.

We won.

But that wasn't the moment.

The moment was after.

He jogged back to the huddle,
and looked at me
like he was waiting for correction.

And all I said was,
"You felt it."

He nodded.

That was it.

That was the work.

I wasn't coaching plays anymore.
I was coaching presence.

I wasn't chasing outcomes.
I was designing invitations.

Invitations to be fully in it.
To listen with the body.
To trust themselves again.

And it made me wonder:
When did we stop doing that?

When did the game become
about mastering patterns
instead of meeting moments?

When did we start training fear
and calling it discipline?

When did we start designing compliance
and calling it culture?

I think about the players I lost.
Not to transfers.
Not to injury.
To silence.

The ones who faded midseason.
Still showed up,
but you could see it—

Their eyes weren't searching.
Their bodies were mimicking.
They were still playing,
but not from the inside anymore.

Those are the ones
I carry with me.

Because I know now
it wasn't them.

It was the space.
The system.
The silence.

That's what Cold Rain is.

Not a storm.
Not a flood.
Not something that breaks you.

Something that reveals you.
Cleanses you.

Not by force—
by rhythm.

Drip.
Drip.
Drip.

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 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 the world feels tilted,
and your insides don’t match the light
that just slipped out your mouth.

That’s what this chapter is about.

Not pretending.
Not performing.

Choosing.

To be here.
To hold joy
without apology.

To believe that joy is not a replacement for grief—
but a companion.
A co-witness.
A returning.

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.

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.

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 doesn't raise its voice.
The kind that doesn't need an audience.
The kind you feel
in your bones
before you have the language for it.

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 re-entering the room.

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.

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.

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

Not just to build better players.
Not just to rewrite a system.

But to protect a space
where wholeness is welcome.

Where joy is not proof of progress—
it's part of the curriculum.

Where laughter is not a distraction—
it's a signal.
A sign that something living
is still growing.

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 live in a gym
lit by grief.
That it can rise
from floor burns and family loss
and still find a way
to fill the room.

That even after the worst thing happens—
a child can laugh,
and a father can smile,
and no one has to explain why.

Not because the pain is gone.
But because the love
still echoes.

And the echo
is holy.

Chapter 7: Stakes Is High

“Stakes is high / You know them stakes is high / When we talkin’ ’bout the vibe...” — De La Soul

They asked me why we won’t play more games, more tournaments.

I told them:

“Because it’s not about more games—it’s about more development.”

Not just because I believed it—

but because I’ve seen the difference.

Kids with rhythm move like water.

Kids chasing resumes tighten with every bounce.

They asked why their son didn’t get more shine.

I asked if they’d watched the practice film.

They hadn’t.

And it showed.

In how they spoke about effort like it was aesthetic.

In how they weighed their child’s value

in clicks, not connection.

That’s when I knew—

they weren’t here for growth.

They were here for exposure.

And that’s fine.

But not here.

Because if we’re gonna do this,

if we’re gonna build a system

that lets kids breathe,

then we have to protect the air.

We have to filter out the fumes—

the noise, the pressure,

the transaction hiding as support.

The vibe is sacred.
And sacred things require boundaries.

It took me a while to learn that.
I used to believe I could hold the vibe for everyone.
Absorb it.
Translate it.
Keep smiling through the static.

But you can't protect the vibe
if you don't honor your own.

So I stopped explaining myself.
Started clarifying.

Not defensively.
Deliberately.

This isn't a platform.
It's a sacred place.

This isn't for clout.
It's for breath.

This isn't a shortcut.
It's a decision.

A daily one.
A sometimes-lonely one.
But the only one that lets me sleep.

If that's too much—
you can go.

And I'll still wish you well.

But I'm not chasing anyone
who makes me question the soil
I've been planting in.

Because I've lost roots before.
And I won't do that again.

I almost lost a player last spring.

He didn't like being held accountable.
Didn't like being asked
to listen without posturing.

Didn't like when joy required presence,
not performance.

And for a moment, I thought he'd walk.
But he didn't.
He stayed.
And we worked through it.

We didn't write anything on the board.
There was no signing.
No contract.

But we did talk—
about what mattered.
About what we wanted to stand for.

Joy.
Resilience.
Humility.

That was enough.
Not formal.
But honest.

About a week ago, I had Cole in with me for a training session, and a new player showed up. A lot of the drill work wasn't new to Cole—he'd done it before. We were doing shoulder game, a one-on-one constraint drill I stole from Chris Oliver.

Cole drove to the basket, got cut off, and stopped. Didn't quite know what to do. The rep ended. And instead of stepping in like I normally would, I asked him, "Hey bud, what is it that you can do in that situation?"

He looked up and said, "You can back pivot."

Internally, I lit up. That was the answer I was hoping for. But I didn't know if he'd get there.

A couple of reps later? He got cut off again. This time, he back pivoted, stepped through, and made an incredible move and finish. The new kid guarding him looked at him and said, "Nice move."

And I watched Cole try not to smile. He was proud. He tried to hide it, but it was there.

Maybe it was the shot. Maybe it was the moment.
But I was proud of all of it.

Not just the move.
Not just the finish.
But the joy.

I don't need revenge.
I need rhythm.

And rhythm takes time.
Takes consistency.
Takes vibe.

It also takes saying no
when yes is easier.

So now,
when a parent asks,
"What's different about this place?"

I tell them, honestly,
just starting to turn the corner.
Not fully locked in yet.
But the echoes are there.
The breath is beginning to fill the room.
Not perfect.
But promising.

Then welcome.

You might be witnessing something rare—
not finished,
not flawless,
but real.

An environment
where kids are starting to smile without flinching.
Where they miss and try again
without apology.
Where joy isn't a reward.
It's becoming the rhythm.

Where failure isn't punished—
it's understood.

Chapter 8: Re:Definition

“Re:Definition, turnin’ your play into a tragedy / Exhibit level degree on the mic, passionately.”
— Black Star

I’ve seen play turned into tragedy.

Not from loss, but from overstructure.
From systems that look like care but feel like control.
From coaches who script joy out of the game
one clipboard command at a time.

I’ve watched a kid shrink in front of me—
not because he failed,
but because he was never free.

He followed the rules.
Played the role.
Ran the sets.
And still, somehow, became less.

That’s not development.
That’s design gone wrong.

I wasn’t always like this.

Five science classes senior year.
A 1320 SAT.
I was supposed to be an engineer.
Inputs. Outputs. Systems. Feedback loops.

Basketball wasn’t my rebellion.
It was just the better offer.

But I never stopped seeing the game like a system.
Patterns. Data. Design.

So when I stumbled into Ecological Dynamics, into CLA,
it didn’t radicalize me.
It reminded me.

It gave a name to the way we used to play:

- Four on three on blacktops
- Crate hoops nailed to telephone poles
- Uneven numbers, weird bounces, real decisions

We didn’t call it “constraints.”
We just called it basketball.

We didn't need terminology.
We had tension.
We had terrain.
We had to figure it out
with no coach in sight
and no parent in earshot.

Now I teach through constraint.
Not because it's easier—
but because it works.

I ask players questions.
I design problems.
I set parameters and let them adapt.

I don't hand them scripts.
I give them contexts.

And at first?
It's messy.
Kids look confused.
Parents get nervous.
Coaches pull me aside.

"Where's the structure?"

And I tell them:
It's right there.
You just haven't seen it before.

It's in the hesitation before a pass.
In the second read that wasn't on the whiteboard.
In the way a player adjusts without being told.
That's structure.
But it's lived, not listed.

To create an ecosystem
where development means more than drills.
Where autonomy, joy, problem-solving, and play
are non-negotiables.
Where kids can fail and smile in the same rep.

Where struggle isn't seen as regression,
but as rehearsal.

Because the real stakes here?

They're not scholarships.
They're not rankings.

They're identity.

They're joy.

They're the quiet erosion of self-worth,
rep by rep,
when a kid starts to believe
they're only valuable when they perform.

We are teaching them
that love is earned.
That rest is weakness.
That pressure is preparation.
That to be seen
is more important than to become.

And we're doing it with smiles on our faces.

We're calling it coaching.
Calling it mentorship.
Framing it as leadership
when it's really just rebranded performance culture
in a quarter-zip.

Parents aren't the enemy.
They're scared.
Coaches aren't evil.
They're trapped.

But fear doesn't justify harm.

And tradition doesn't excuse trauma.

So this isn't a call-out.
It's a call-up.

Let's be better.
Or stop pretending we care.

Because too many kids are hurting.
And the silence of adults?

That's complicity.

I've seen the results.
Kids who can recite plays
but can't recognize joy.

Players who run every drill perfectly
but crumble the moment rhythm leaves the room.

Leaders in name only—
because they've never been taught how to trust themselves,
only how to follow directions loudly.

We give them titles.
We give them scripts.
But we don't give them space.

So this is the work now:
To protect space.
To protect rhythm.
To protect the possibility
that learning can still feel like love.

I'm not here to save the industry.
I'm here to save the kids it forgot.

This chapter?
This is the line in the sand.

Let's choose better.
Or move out of the way.

Because the stakes?

They've never been higher.

