Introduction

In the film *Annie Hall*, the character played by Woody Allen is bored at a New York cocktail party of haughty intellectuals. He jokes dismissively that the journals *Commentary* and *Dissent* have merged to form *Dysentery*, then sneaks off to a bedroom to watch a Knicks game on TV. When his disapproving wife comes in, she wonders why he is drawn to a "bunch of pituitary cases running around in their underwear."

"Because they understand the physical," he replies. "These intellectuals are proof that you can be brilliant and have absolutely no idea what's going on around you."

Time and again over the past decade, I have felt like Woody Allen in that room – and not just because I too wear glasses and tend toward hypochondria. No, I relate to the Allen character because I have spent much of the past decade writing about sports in America and have consistently been struck by how sequestered the subculture is from the rest of American life, as though our games exist in a vacuum, separate and apart from the culture at large. In fact, I contend – and the following pieces prove – that sports can be a lens through which to see the country more clearly, if only we look closely.

While we are a country obsessed by the drama of sports, too often it is presented to us as little more than the American male soap opera, complete with its cartoonish heroes and villains. The result is a narrative offered up by the intelligentsia that posits our sports addiction – now a multibillion-dollar industry – as a mere diversion from truly important cultural matters. After all, inside American newspaper newsrooms, the Sports Desk is commonly called the paper's "toy department." Similarly, brilliant thinkers such as the renowned linguist Noam Chomsky suggest that sports is a part of the "indoctrination system . . . a way of building up irrational attitudes of submission to authority." No doubt Chomsky was among those from whom Woody was seeking refuge in the Knicks.

Today, the cultural elite goes even further, inundating us with hand-wringing about how deleterious our games have become. In the pages of *The Nation,* the normally clear-headed Katha Pollitt writes that "sports pervert education, draining dollars from academic programs and fostering anti-intellectualism. . . . For both fans and players, sports are about creating a world from which women are absent." In his book *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education,* respected Indiana University professor Murray Sperber goes so far as to suggest that collegiate sports' million-dollar TV contracts, leading to footage of war-painted, often drunken students whooping it up in the stands, actually imperil the state of higher education.

As Woody implied, when the subject is sports, these otherwise seminal thinkers just don't get it. This book is my rebuttal to them, a defense of sports on progressive grounds. For it has been my experience that, when it comes to the hot-button sociopolitical issues of our time, the sports subculture has been and continues to be ahead of the culture at

large. It's actually been the breeding ground for progressivism, a laboratory for egalitarianism. I know this because I've seen it and written about it. And I know this because I've lived it.

It is, quite literally, the first memory of my life. I think I was six years old when I first saw him, this so-called draft dodger who so ignited the passion of others. It was 1969 and I was watching *The Dick Cavett Show* with my dad, a patriotic cold war Democrat, and my brother, a sixteen-year-old who, in two years' time, would grow his hair long – let his "freak flag fly," as Crosby, Stills and Nash would sing that very year – and join the burgeoning counterculture. My father is a World War II Coast Guard veteran, though an ironic one who likes to joke that he protected the shores of Seattle, where he was stationed, from Japanese attack; but as the show began, even he grumbled, VFW-style, about Cavett's guest, this draft dodger. Who was he not to serve? Who was he to question America?

A half hour later, though, something had changed. The guest forcefully and poetically repeated the arguments he'd been making on college campuses across the nation; I don't recall specifically what he said, but no doubt it was the full litany I've since read about, statements like "I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong" and "I will die before I sell out my people for the white man's money." Suddenly, the Vietnam War was being posited for what it was: the sending off of poor black boys to kill and be killed by other dark-skinned boys, all at the behest of a privileged white elite. Slowly, softly, as though to himself, my father started muttering, "He's right, he's right," over and over again. There sat my brother and I, wide-eyed, witnessing Muhammad Ali alter our dad's worldview.

But it wasn't just Ali back then who was teaching the post–Ozzie and Harriet nuclear family a new thing or two about America and values. Sports was an integral part of the changes being wrought by the power of pop culture; in music, Marvin Gaye, Sly Stone, and Bob Dylan had moved well past the penning of Top 40 ditties and morphed into social commentators. The same transformation was afoot in sports. As in music, sports provided an avenue for a new and different segment of society to burst into our consciousness and share a sense of what life was like from their side. John Carlos and Tommie Smith's defiant Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics broke through the myopia of sports, as did Bill Russell's rejection of the sportswriter-fueled demand to be a "role model"—a thinly veiled repeat of the "credit to his race" label the white media had once placed on heavyweight champ Joe Louis. Similar was Joe Namath's embrace of sexual hedonism, which carried with it an implicit refutation of football's militaristic machismo—only Broadway Joe would don a pair of pantyhose for a TV commercial.

Of course, at the time the mainstream media failed to see the larger cultural role these athletes played; after all, it was that bastion of supposed liberal values, the *New York Times,* that insisted on referring to Ali as "Cassius Clay" for years after he dropped what he referred to as his "slave name." Indeed, Ali's moral legacy wasn't celebrated by the media until the mid-nineties, when, not coincidentally, he had already lost the power of speech and thus the ability to offend. The minute he became "safe" to the same press that had bashed him, he became heroic.

But as a six-year-old, I saw that my dad knew heroism when he saw it, no matter what the editorials said. And I know now that Ali wasn't an exception—that the twentieth century was, and the new millennium will continue to be, replete with

examples of groundbreaking social lessons culled from our fields of play.

Take the issue of race, for example. As Ken Burns's documentary *Baseball* amply illustrates, the civil rights movement didn't start with *Brown* v. *Board of Ed.*; it actually began seven years earlier, when Jackie Robinson broke the sport's color line. Fifty-odd years later, the sports industry – primarily boxing, baseball, football, and especially basketball – is the most integrated sector of society, with the possible exception of the armed services. In fact, it's achieved a level of color-blindness the rest of the culture still aspires to. Kids receive an unambiguous message from sports: if you have the talent and work your ass off, you can make it to the NBA. While the odds are overwhelmingly against such success, discrimination, by and large, is not standing in the way. "One of the things I've enjoyed most about sports is that it brings the races together," basketball star Charles Barkley once told me. "In the locker room, we're all the same. It's all about merit."

And the triumph of color-blindness in sports has not diluted its celebration of multiculturalism. Many in the academy, for example, make passionate arguments for the legitimacy of black English in the classroom. Yet they seem unaware that it's a settled issue in sports: the dialect is accepted, even celebrated. "I can speak both ways," says NBA bad boy Derrick Coleman, who makes $9 million a year. "I can be in business meetings and be comfortable. But I choose to talk like I talked when I was comin' up with my homeys, even when I'm on TV. Because I ain't gonna forget where I came from." In other words, the patterns of speech that predominantly white sportswriters "clean up" from Coleman and others for their next-day stories are actually purposeful *and* political.

Today, such "race men" have become our foremost symbols of capitalism. Is there, after all, a labor union in the United States stronger than baseball's? During the 1998 NBA lockout (misreported, over and over again, as a "strike"), the owners jeopardized the season in pursuit of givebacks that would protect them from their own bad business decisions. It fell to Michael Jordan to make the case for the free market: "The owners paid these athletes what they felt they were worth," he argued. Those who can't afford to satisfy the market they themselves created, he maintained, ought to make way for owners who can. At a time when labor unions have fallen into widespread disfavor, athletes like Jordan have achieved rarefied status; they are working-class capitalists, performing as laborers – we see them toil every night – at the same time that they demand equity, or in sports' parlance "revenue sharing," with the owners.

The case for progressivism in sports is harder to make when it comes to gender, but there are encouraging signs for those of us who, as fans, recoil every time a headline heralds that another athlete has committed a sexual transgression. There is, for instance, the upsurge in popularity for women's sports, as evidenced by the U.S. women's soccer team triumph, the WNBA, the historic success of women's tennis (thanks to the revolutionary Williams sisters), and a few recent appearances of female placekickers on collegiate football teams.

Still, feminist thinkers such as Pollitt point to the O. J. Simpson case – not to mention countless other incidents in the world of sports where the woman is "other" – and argue that sports fuels a machismo that can lead to misogyny. A valid concern, no doubt, but one that finds fault with a subculture for simply reflecting ills that already corrode the cul-

ture at large. Besides, while many women complain about how emotionally closed men are, the men who play sports exhibit more emotion and tactile displays of affection toward one another than do other men in general. The sweet pregame kisses between Magic Johnson and Isiah Thomas when their respective teams met in the NBA Finals made for titillating TV but also served a point: the stereotype of the macho Neanderthal no longer applies to the modern-day athlete. If sports fans were as at ease relating to their mates as athletes are relating to one another, sports wouldn't be about, as Pollitt and others maintain, an "us-versus-them" gender dichotomy.

Today I am thirty-eight, and after a lifetime as a passionate sports fan, I have not, as Chomsky would suggest, sequestered myself from the real world by escaping into *Monday Night Football*. Instead, sports' daily narrative has helped me find my way in that real world, constantly provoking me to examine what I think and believe. Throughout my lifetime as an armchair athlete, the way I've looked at the world has been informed by a steady stream of cultural antiheroes who just happened to run and jump for a living while wearing numbers on the backs of their shirts. If Ali was one of my first memories, Namath was perhaps my second, this wobbly-kneed, long-haired member of the counterculture who could throw the tightest spiral yet known to man. Not coincidentally, he was my brother Paul's idol; I remember how Paul, at sixteen, would mimic Broadway Joe's stoop-shouldered walk, and how I would try to do the same. Now I know that Paul was reacting to Namath's revolutionary presence in the same way a previous generation of teens had reacted to James Dean; here was the embodiment of cool.

As I got older, sports continued to connect me to the world, even as a body of literature came to suggest that its commercialization was a harbinger of dire social consequences. In the last few years alone have appeared John Feinstein's *The Last Amateurs,* which celebrates the nonscholarship college basketball of nearly all-white schools such as Colgate and Lafayette as somehow embodying the true essence of sports, and Mike Lupica's rant *Mad as Hell: How Sports Got Away from the Fans—and How We Can Get It Back,* which, by implication, idealizes the pre–free agency days when "pro" athletes couldn't earn enough for a year-round salary and the owners profited from their extreme labors.

The latest example of the trend is the aforementioned *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education,* by Murray Sperber. Sperber, long hailed as the voice of opposition to then Indiana University coach Bob Knight, argues that universities use sports to keep their students happy and drunkenly distracted—the educational mission of the university be damned. He quotes one student who defines his college education as a "four-year party—one long tailgater—with an $18,000 cover charge."

Absent from Sperber's fulminations is any sense of the integral role that "big-time" college football and basketball play in the undergraduate experience. I know this firsthand. I spent many a drunken night at the Syracuse Carrier Dome in the early to mid-eighties, cheering on the Orangemen—along with a similarly enthused audience that was easily the most multicultural gathering on campus. In the stands, blacks and whites hugged and high-fived, just as on the court. Moreover, these games linked us to the surrounding community; the barriers between the privileged college students and "the townies" broke down, as evidenced on the

call-in sports talk shows, where guys from factories argued with students over whether the coach ought to have called a time-out when he did.

Sperber would have had me experience none of this valuable education. He has helped form the Drake Group, a consortium of academics intent on returning to the low-key style of intercollegiate competition now practiced in the Ivy League and at Division III schools such as Emory University and Hamilton College in central New York State, where, instead of athletic scholarships, a system of need-based financial aid – as for any student – is in place. Thus, Sperber runs the risk of undermining advances he championed in *Onward to Victory,* his book about Notre Dame football, where he illustrates how, through football, blacks first began to integrate the academy. Now, by pandering to an academic mindset still blinded by "dumb jock" stereotypes, he's at the forefront of a nostalgia for the good old days – days that left out everyone but White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Indeed, sports links the American male one to another in ways we rarely give voice to. We bemoan our athletes' bad behavior – and there is often plenty to bemoan: kids born out of wedlock, drug busts, even murder in one recent highly publicized case. We turn their transgressions into our object lessons, fashioning cautionary tales (Mike Tyson, Darryl Strawberry) or redemption stories (Jennifer Capriati). The intimate relationship we have to these modern-day fables links us all. We saw a youthful Charles Barkley deal with the ugly and raw reality of having spit on a little girl, and then we saw him grow over the years into a spokesman for family values. We saw Darryl Strawberry rise and fall time and again, valiantly dusting himself off after each near-knockout blow from a sickness called drug addiction. Many shunned him; I found

him heroic in his battle against what he's conceded holds him powerless. Regardless of where you come down on Strawberry, grant me this: We ask our athletes to succeed or fail in the most public of ways at the most tender of ages, and they reveal character throughout the process, both good and bad. That, in part, is why we tune in; we don't know for sure what we would have revealed about ourselves under similar scrutiny in our early twenties. (I'm afraid that if an arena full of fans crowded into my office to watch me write, they'd come away with many complaints about what kind of person I am.)

While sports has linked me to other races and classes, it has especially connected me to two men in particular: my father and brother. To this day, we still spend hours talking sports, but just as when we watched Ali on *Dick Cavett* over thirty years ago, we're really talking about so much more. When we bemoan players jumping from team to team, we're really talking about fidelity, and when we opine on Allen Iverson's gangsta-rap CD controversy, we're revealing more about us and our predispositions on race and class than any political vote ever could.

Five years ago, the three of us went to a Phillies game. The Phils' Jim Eisenreich hit a grand slam and we all rose to cheer, then Paul whipped out a cell phone and began frantically dialing before screaming into the phone, "Eisenreich hit a grand slam! Eisenreich hit a grand slam!"

It turns out that for the last twenty-odd years, Paul has called his best friend from college, Mark, at big moments from live sporting events. Once, Mark's wife answered the phone and looked at him quizzically. "It's someone screaming, 'The ball's lost in the ivy,'" she said.

"Oh," Mark replied, matter-of-factly. "Paul must be at Wrigley Field."

I was reminded of Paul and Mark after spending some time with Ed Rendell, former mayor of Philadelphia and one-time chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Today, Rendell is known as a sports fanatic; he's hosted a TV football show and calls sports talk shows while on official government business. But even when he first ran for public office, Rendell understood something about sports and the American male. He understood that, viewed dispassionately, these games are silly; as comedian Jerry Seinfeld has observed, the players aren't even from the cities they represent. "So you're rooting for a shirt," he says. "You're cheering for laundry." Rendell knows, however, that the facts of the games are secondary. He knows that we use sports as a proxy for so much more; that's what Paul and Mark have been doing for twenty-odd years, and that's what Paul, my dad, and I have been doing since we shared those visions of Ali and Namath on a black-and-white RCA years ago.

"I remember when I first got into politics, when I ran against the incumbent for D.A.," says Rendell. "No one knew who I was. I would go to one neighborhood tavern after another and just talk sports to a group of guys. And then let them know I was running for something. I won, I think, because I was a sports guy, because I got it, and I got it because sports was always the one thing my son Jesse and I share most easily. You know, there's no generation gap. One of my all-time great sports memories was watching Penn play Michigan. It was Jerome Allen's sophomore year, must have been 1992–93. Jesse was twelve, and I had about five of my friends over to watch the game. And I remember watching Jesse interact with my friends as they all talked about the game, and I remember saying to myself, 'He now knows enough about sports to interact with adults.' I remember

watching him in that room and I can't tell you how proud I was."

What follows is a travelogue of my journey in sports, culled from a decade of magazine writing. Here is Magic Johnson, hiring black people in inner-city neighborhoods; here is Latrell Sprewell, defiantly positing himself as the embodiment of the American Dream; here is Mike Schmidt, plagued by the media's corrosive cult of celebrity, and here is aging pugilist Randall "Tex" Cobb, finding wisdom and God and peace on the receiving end of yet another blow to the nose. In these and countless other cases, I remain resolute that there is much to learn from those who seem only to do physical things for our mindless entertainment.

For the first time in his life, my friend Zack's nine-year-old son, Zane, was passionate about something: sports. "Other kids are playing Nintendo, and he's *reading*," Zack said. Zane became voracious; he buried himself in a biography of Randy "Big Unit" Johnson before moving on to coach Bill Parcells's latest tome, practically without pause. And then it happened: His teacher forbade him from reading another sports book, presumably in the interest of "rounding out" his interests.

What follows is for Zane, whose passion for this intricate world I still know; and for Woody, alone in that room with his Knicks while the pompous circulate just outside the door. Here's hoping that both say to their de facto adversaries – Zane to his small-minded teacher, Woody to the stuffy intellects – "Shuddup. Siddown. Learn from the game."

1

Spree's World

WHERE WAS Latrell Sprewell? Days, weeks, *months* had passed without a word from him. Throughout the summer, the messages from his team, from companies offering multimillion-dollar endorsements, from the David Letterman show had stacked up on his cell phone voice mail. None were returned. Now it was fall, time for training camp in South Carolina: still no word from Spree. The media, the front-office brass of his team, the Knicks, even his teammates began to freak. Where could he be?

Streaking across the Nevada flats, that's where, nestled comfortably in his custom black CLK 450 Benz. The car was a cocoon that Spree had fashioned – like so many of his cars – in his own image. The tinted windows, the exotic tires (at over $1,500 each), the spectral blue headlights, and the hard-angled tail fused to the back end gave the ride a jarring, in-your-face look, somewhere between a Batmobile and a UFO.

Just as the worry in the Big Apple and the Carolinas reached a fever pitch, a summer squall hit out West. Spree put up the top, slid Biggie Smalls into the car's Eclipse sound system, with its thundering, glow-in-the-dark trunk amps, and – heedless of the storm swirling around him – entered

his own private zone. For the next ten or twelve or eighteen hours – he lost track – Latrell Sprewell flew as if through a dream, Biggie cranked, open road before him, calming landscape whizzing past. He was unconcerned, unhurried, unfettered and – for once – at home in his own skin.

Four months earlier, Sprewell's electric run in 1999's NBA playoffs provided a captivating villain-to-hero narrative of redemption. Two months before that, in a national sneaker commercial, Sprewell had tried to refute his thuggish, coach-choking image by looking into the camera while having his hair braided and saying: "Some people say I'm America's nightmare. I say I'm the American Dream."

After the craziness of the season, when he seemed to symbolize something to just about everybody, he needed the whole summer just to decompress. And now Sprewell, who'd been driving cross-country since high school whenever he needed to blow off steam, was ready, relaxed – even if the folks back east weren't. But Spree didn't feel compelled to soothe anyone. His philosophy, such as it is, has always been this: You can worry, get nervous, stress. But in the end, "it seems like the time goes by anyway."

In person, Latrell Sprewell makes and holds eye contact through droopy lids that seem to foreshadow narcolepsy. We are sitting in a lounge of the White Plains hotel where he keeps a two-bedroom suite during the NBA season, and where he spends most nights playing Sony PlayStation and building state-of-the-art stereo systems. On the court, Sprewell may be frenetic, even hyper; but here, a few feet from the garage where his two Mercedes and two SUVs are housed (eight other cars are either on the West Coast or back in his

native Milwaukee), he is soft-spoken, thoughtful, and seemingly drained of energy.

Yet he is just as elusive as on the court. By the time we hang out, I've been camping out in the hotel lobby for days, receiving his polite regrets after he blows off each agreed-upon meeting. There is no trace of irony when at last he sees me not far from where he's parked one of the Benzes and, with utter insouciance, says, "There you are. I was wondering where you were at."

"So, you must really hate doing this," I say, turning my tape recorder on.

"Oh, man, I hate having to explain myself," he says, his mouth curling into a half-smile. "Why can't my game just do the talking for me?"

Those close to Sprewell often observe that there are at least two of him. There's the one sitting across from me, the oddly detached Spree, the one in the cool Cartier (nonprescription) glasses, whose lack of vocal inflection contrasts with the fiery on-court warrior Knicks fans fell for during the Finals run. This quixotic Sprewell is able to speak with clarity and insight about the Sprewell he prefers to be: Sprewell the metaphor.

When he choked P. J. Carlesimo, his coach on the Golden State Warriors in late 1997, he instantly supplanted the likes of Mike Tyson and Dennis Rodman as sports' preeminent public enemy. Almost overnight, this three-time all-star who had shunned publicity and endorsements, who had just wanted to play ball and be left alone, became a symbol. To some, he represented the worst fears of white America, the latest and maybe best embodiment of what poet Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) wrote over thirty years ago of boxer

Sonny Liston: "[Liston is] the big black Negro in every white man's hallway, waiting to do him in, deal him under for all the hurts white men, through their arbitrary order, have been able to inflict on the world."

The rhetoric denouncing Sprewell was not subtly coded. "[Sprewell's] appearance has gone full gangster," wrote a San Francisco columnist, ". . . with his braids and wispy sideburns. He's a hard shadowy figure." He instantly stood for how totally skewed professional sports had become, Exhibit A in an indictment of a generation of jocks seen not only as too black but too pampered, too lawless, too greedy. Rush Limbaugh denounced him on the air, and none other than William Bennett portrayed him in the pages of *Commentary* as symbolic of a nation's moral decay.

But then something happened. Traded to the Knicks, the severity of his punishment in the Carlesimo incident reduced by an arbitrator (from a cancellation of his long-term contract to the loss of sixty-eight games and $6.4 million), Sprewell found himself embraced by his new fans – even before his team started winning, even as the sports pages perpetuated the conventional image of him as a thug.

He was still metaphor, but by then a symbol of the sports press's myopia and dwindling influence. The fans had seen the fire of his game, and they'd seen him interviewed – you could almost hear the surprised chorus commenting on how "articulate" he was – and they'd taken in this corn-rowed, trash-talking bad boy because, behind the hip-hop packaging, he embodied hard work and passion.

Rather than reject his metaphoric status, Sprewell launched a personal image counterattack in a national sneaker commercial for the upstart, rebellious company And 1. Positing himself as the embodiment of the American Dream while,

in the background, piercing electric guitar notes mimicked Jimi Hendrix's rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner," Sprewell tried to respin his story from that of dark menace to misunderstood rebel.

Yet, in person, he seems to be neither. Unlike, say, Charles Barkley or Allen Iverson, Sprewell's rebellion is decidedly . . . *passive*. His game is in-your-face, sure; but off court he's laid back, even lethargic, as if his exertions on the court require extreme conservation-of-energy measures off it. Unlike many NBA stars, Sprewell doesn't travel with an entourage or "posse." Those few who know him well often speak of just how detached he is, how he seems to walk through life as if on ether.

Now, thinking back on the controversy surrounding his yearlong banishment from the NBA, Sprewell seems tired. "It was mind-boggling," he recalls, stroking the tail of the corn rows that dangle behind his neck. "It seemed like it came from everywhere, the way that snowball just got bigger and bigger and kept on rolling faster and faster down that hill."

Though he speaks of the judgments that rained down on him as his "vilification," he shows no emotion, as if it all happened to a character in a movie he's watching. When I wonder what it feels like suddenly to be seen in the popular mind as representative of all that has gone wrong in a culture, he just shrugs. "What can you do?" It's no doubt a shrug born of the fatigue that comes with living as a human, walking metaphor. And it also probably has something to do with his deep need to lose himself in the role we've assigned to him. You won't see Sprewell protest his portrayal or use our language to defend himself. Instead, you'll get shoulder shrugs and strange reminders that "the time seems to go by any-

way" when he's a no-show. And it all makes sense, in a way. Detachment, after all, is the beaten kid's sanctuary.

Latrell Sprewell was six when his father, Latoska Fields, left their Milwaukee home, though he still recalls the beatings his father administered to him and his mother, Pamela Sprewell. "I don't want to make it sound like my dad was a total jerk and he beat my mom and us when he came home every day," Sprewell said in 1998. "But there were occasions that I remember abuse was going on that was too excessive."

Sprewell bounced around throughout adolescence. He lived with his mother in Milwaukee, where, he says, he again received beatings – this time at the hands of his mother's boyfriend. He went to Flint, Michigan, to stay with his father. But in 1986, Fields went to jail for possession of marijuana with intent to distribute. Sprewell lived with his grandparents in Flint before ultimately returning to Milwaukee, where he was a tall, circumspect, even enigmatic kid at Washington High, who didn't play basketball until his senior year, when he earned All-City honors. It led to a two-year stint at a Missouri junior college and then a scholarship to the University of Alabama.

"We weren't the poorest, but we weren't the richest either," Sprewell recalls of his youth. "Put it this way: I've seen poor families and people in hard times and I know what real hard times are. I've basically been on my own. It kind of prepared me for the NBA lifestyle of being on the road. It makes living in a hotel like this not a big deal."

On the eve of the 1999–2000 season, Sprewell inked a five-year, $61.9 million deal with the Knicks; the long-term security prompted a pledge to buy a house in White Plains by season's end. But even then he'll live a solitary, nomadic life-

style, touching down for at least part of the off-season in the house he owns in a Milwaukee suburb. His mother lives there year-round with Sprewell's fiancée, Candace Cabbil, with whom he has three kids. Also living with them is Sprewell's second daughter; he fought for, and won, custody of her after her mother, Sprewell's junior-college girlfriend, had gone to jail. His first daughter, born while he was still in high school, lives nearby, and Sprewell remains close to both her and her mother.

But he's never in one place for too long. It's part of a self-protective streak that goes back to a childhood where he learned that moving targets rarely get hurt. Now that he's rich, he's especially guarded. "I've got a huge family and it's like a lot of them want to try and invade my immediate circle now because of my success," he says. "And I just think, 'Okay, you may be a distant cousin, but don't just come in and act like we're buddy-buddy now. I respect you as family, but I can't say I'll treat you the same as one of my cousins I grew up with.' You have to be on guard. It's sad and you learn a lot about people."

So Sprewell keeps his distance. Those who are abused as kids often adopt masks to shield them from the world – and from their own pain. In Sprewell's case, it's always been the mask of the ultra-cool nonconformist. "As long as he has a fast truck and a leather jacket, he's content," says NBA star Chris Webber, a close friend.

Growing up, Sprewell related to those who sought to stand out from the crowd. "I remember wanting to be Drew Pearson, the Dallas Cowboys' wide receiver," he recalls. "He definitely had the coolest end-zone dance. He'd point his fingers like they were guns and fire them. Even in high school, I always had to be different. I can remember when every-

body bleached their jeans. I'd bleach mine differently and put little rips in them, so even though I was kind of following the trend, I'd do something to make my stuff stand out. It's probably why I was one of the first guys in the league to wear braids. Even now, I don't want my cars, or anything I have, to be like anybody else's."

Sprewell senses that his lone-wolf style helps explain his popular appeal. "A lot of people like that person who doesn't just go by society's rules, so to speak, who finds a way to get their job done and still be able to do the things they want to do, be an individual," he says. "Everybody would love to be able to do our jobs the way we want to do it and not care about how our bosses or anyone thought about it. I mean, if you could do that, you'd do that in a heartbeat, wouldn't you?"

As I realized in that hotel lobby, Sprewell is on Spree time, and those of us who lead regimented lives – when are we not on schedule? – don't know quite what to make of such present-tense living. Waiting for him, I was much like the Knicks when he was AWOL last fall: nervous and pissed. Yet as much as his indifference prompts resentment, it also stirs a kind of muted admiration. At the same time that you resent him for messing with your time, you wish you had the balls to be so carefree, to choke a jerk of a boss, to blow off a bullshit work requirement – and still get paid gobs of money to work your ass off. If "Be Like Mike" is the acceptable norm, there's a deep, dark part of us that wants to be like Spree, because we know that the American Dream is no longer solely about rags to riches. It's still about attainment, yes, but it's also about achievement born of a ballsy, anti-establishment style; Bill Gates, after all, is celebrated as much for his renegade mindset as for the fortune he's amassed.