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Michael and the Whiz Kids

*A Story of Basketball,
Race, and Suburbia
in the 1960s*

JOHN CHRISTGAU

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln & London

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Michael and the Whiz Kids

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The Whiz Kids

They sit in one section of the collapsible bleachers that has been pulled out of the gym wall. Nearly twenty of them, all of them tiny, some of them with their dangled feet hardly reaching down to the next row. They are all candidates in 1968 for the “C” basketball team for small players at Crestmoor High in San Bruno, California.

I stand on the gym floor immediately in front of them. I carry a small clump of rolled papers in one hand. When I speak I wield the rolled papers as if they were a blackboard pointer. I wear glasses with heavy frames, white gym shorts, Converse tennis shoes, and a dark-blue jacket with a gold “Coach” stitched on the chest.

“Okay. Listen up,” I say. “Fifth period ends at 2:00. We’ll practice from 2:00 to 3:30. Only an hour and a half. That means you’ll have to run down here to the locker room. There’ll be no time to fool around in the I beams playing cootchie with your honey.”

They all smile at the idea that one of their teachers knows perfectly well what goes on in the I beams.

“I expect you to change quickly,” I say, “and be on the floor in five minutes. You’ll have a few minutes to shoot around, get loose. Drills start at 2:15 sharp.”

I wait to let them appreciate the precision of my practices.

A bell rings somewhere, signaling the end of sixth period and the school day. Their attention turns to the two small doors of the gym, outside which students hurry to the bus circle. Some of the players squirm, ready to bolt the bleachers.

I tap my paper baton in the air. "You won't hear bells ringing when we practice. But you'll hear my whistle." With my other hand I pull the whistle from my jacket pocket and hold it up. It is a huge, copper-colored whistle with a mouthpiece so big it hardly fits in my mouth. I clamp it between my teeth and blow it once. Then I remove it from my teeth. "This whistle is called the Acme Thunderer. Because it sounds more like thunder than a whistle. My father used this whistle in New Guinea during World War II. When he blew it you could hear it in Australia."

They laugh. I put the historic whistle back in my jacket pocket.

"Okay. Some of you played for me last year. Or the year before that. You've gotten very good. That's why you're here."

I smile.

"A few of you can shoot the lights out."

I give no indication of which ones I think that is.

"But the first thing we do at practice is defensive drills. When your attention is at its peak. We go for fifteen minutes, until 2:30."

My defensive drills are infamous. Everybody crouches and shuffles, sliding left and right, back and forth, back and forth, then oblique. I point with one hand at each blast of my Acme Thunderer to indicate changes of direction. After five minutes thighs began to burn. They stumble, fall, struggle back to their feet, and try to keep going. They all know the drills and dread the fifteen minutes of exhaustion.

"Okay," I say, "now practice gets interesting."

I pause to let them wonder how.

*“How many of you have ever heard of the Whiz Kids?”
I ask.*

Not one of them raises his hand. Their faces reflect not the fascination I had expected, but puzzlement. What do these so-called Whiz Kids have to do with them? What do they have to do with basketball?

I realize that I have lost them completely. I flash the clump of rolled papers. “Listen up!” I shout, in an effort to quiet them and regain their attention. “Some of you sitting there are hardly five feet tall. I am six two, about half a foot taller than most of you. I am Gulliver. You are the Lilliputs.”

They are as puzzled over my reference to Lilliputs as they were over the talk of Whiz Kids.

“You would know who the Lilliputs were,” I say, “if I had had you in my English classes.”

I have had some of them in my English classes, but they still don’t understand what Jonathan Swift and his book Gulliver’s Travels has to do with them.

In desperation I return to the subject of the Whiz Kids.

“Let me explain who the Whiz Kids were. They were five players from the University of Illinois. They dominated the Big Ten in basketball for two years in the early forties. They were the best team in the country. Nobody could beat them. The Whiz Kids used quickness to hammer better teams. They could run like deer. They just got the ball and ran. They scored a lot. Sometimes as many as 90 points a game. They were way ahead of their time. Watching them fly up and down the court, a sportswriter said, ‘Gee whiz, look at those kids go.’ That’s how they got their name. The Whiz Kids.”

I pause. I have finally gotten their undivided attention. “I had a chance to see the Whiz Kids play against the University Minnesota when I was just a kid. They were faaaast.” I draw out the word, as if I am describing gunslingers. “You

are all here because you are small. You get beat up by playground bullies. You can't see the screen in movie theaters. Even right now, some of you are so short your feet don't touch the ground."

Several of them kick their legs and laugh.

I continue. "From 2:30 to 3:00 we scrimmage. Full court. Up and down. Without stopping. The only difference between you and the Whiz Kids is that you're smaller than they were. But you're going to go faster than they did." I nod. "They've got the twenty-four-second clock now in pro basketball. Twenty-four seconds to get a shot? That's way too long for me. We'll put up a shot in ten seconds or less. Ten seconds or less!" I put my Acme Thunderer back in my teeth. "You'll run faster and shoot faster than anybody in the history of basketball."

They stare at me in disbelief.

I stare back at them. "Okay. Okay. You are the Crestmoor Falcons. Right?"

They neither nod nor speak.

"What makes a falcon unique?"

None of them knows.

I raise my voice. "A falcon is the fastest creature on the face of the earth."

So?

"That's what you'll be. The fastest basketball team on the face of the earth."

It was hard for any of them to believe my claim that as basketball players they would be distinguished in any way. Crestmoor High School? The school was too new to be bragging that it was an athletic powerhouse.

Nearly every garage in the San Bruno neighborhood had a backboard nailed to it, but the sloped driveways were difficult to negotiate. The only place to experience a real hardwood gym floor was in a recreation center that town

citizens had built. The city's gym rats flocked there on windy nights and rainy weekends for pickup games. But then the Parks Department began charging fifty cents to get into the gym and only those brave enough to figure out how to sneak in found a warm, dry place to play.

From Crestmoor's opening in 1962 the school's athletic teams had struggled. Some blamed the small enrollment or the wind and the fog for all the athletic defeats. Then enrollment hit fifteen hundred but the defeats continued. To minimize the impact of the defeats one of the varsity basketball teams performed as a comic jug band before a packed Little Theater audience. It was, the school paper reported with irony, "an unforgettable performance."

Meanwhile, the mounting basketball losses were also unforgettable. I was hired to teach English and coach basketball when the school opened. It was two years before we won a game. The angry parent of one of the players called me and threatened to shoot me. The first basketball victory came against a school named Lick-Wilmerding. In the smoke-filled teachers' lounge, fellow coaches joked that Lick-Wilmerding was a sexual act, not a school.

In postgame jubilation over the victory, I got up on the school's three-meter diving board and celebrated the victory by diving into the water in my suit. At poolside, my tie dripping like a faucet, I told the sportswriter who covered the landmark victory, "I just hope we haven't peaked too soon."

I began arguing for a school boundary change that would lead to a still-larger student body, taller students, fewer defeats, and no death threats. But other coaches complained that it wasn't the enrollment that led to all the defeats. There was a "negative attitude" among the entire student body. Stop whining, an editorial in the school paper insisted. Play ball! There are enough tall students here already!

But one of them was a six six, unathletic maverick who

walked on campus one morning wearing a stovepipe hat and a swallowtail coat. The administration huddled immediately to try to figure out what to do about the odd behavior. Meanwhile, I asked the maverick if he had ever played basketball. The answer was an abrupt, “No! And I expect to be able to say the same thing when I’m seventy.”

The other big man was a giant Tongan with a flat nose, huge hands, and a perpetual smile. He came into the gym one day and spoke to me in fractured English. “I play ball you?” he asked.

I looked him up and down. Here, finally, was the big man I had been hoping for. “How tall are you?”

“Two meter, maybe.”

I wondered how tall two meters was, in feet and inches. Could this be the first high school seven-footer on the San Francisco Peninsula?

I bounced a ball at him and told him to dribble the length of the floor with his right hand, then return with his left. He smiled and nodded. Then he went down the floor like a backhoe, some long mechanical arm out ahead of him wrenching him along according to the principles of a lever.

When he handed the ball back to me, he said, “Focking ball too soft.”

I wondered if that was because he had punctured it.

Before one game, as a show of what a “powerhouse” they were, the towering opponents began dunking during warm-ups. Despite my protests the slam dunks continued until the basket sagged and the backboard finally cracked. It took thirty minutes to hang a new basket. In the game that followed the score was 40–5 at halftime. Before I could figure out what to say to my confused players during a halftime pep talk, the team’s manager piped up, “Did anybody bring anything to read?”

While the basketball losses mounted, Peninsula newspapers

noted that the new school was better known for its outstanding Homemaking Department, which had placed three girls in the California state bake-off contest. If they didn't win at basketball it was because they "couldn't have cake and eat it too." Finally, in one of the few close games a Falcon player had tried to win the game by hurling a Hail Mary buzzer-beater the length of the floor. The ball disappeared somewhere above the lights and never came down.

Then there was the night the Crestmoor Falcons basketball team proudly trotted onto the floor in brand-new blue satin warm-up jackets with "FALCONS" stitched in gold across the back. It wasn't until after the game—another painful loss—that somebody noticed that one of the jackets had misspelled it "FALCOLS."

This was a team with an English teacher who couldn't spell. This was a basketball program that could produce comic jug bands but not a winning team. Now I was predicting a team whose play would be celebrated. All of those sitting in the bleachers listening wanted to believe me. But I had a reputation for rosy predictions. I had once claimed that one of my star varsity players would be in the NBA someday. A Tuesday-night winter recreation league for six-foot-and-under players was as far as the star got.

I had predicted that they would be the fastest basketball team ever. Better and faster than those Whiz Kids. It seemed not just unlikely, it seemed impossible. It wasn't in the bones or I beams of Crestmoor High. Yet there I stood, as cocksure as General Patton, making just that claim.

"Okay," I say, winding down my speech to my presumed champions, "I've got copies here of the exponent chart." I unroll the clump of papers and begin passing out the sheets to several in the front row. "Pass these around. If you don't understand the point system that determines how your age,

your height, and your weight are used to figure your individual exponents, ask me now.”

Nobody speaks. They are all studying the exponent chart.

“Official weigh-ins are in two weeks, before our first league game. Between now and then you can’t do anything about your age or your height. It’s your weight that matters most. Know your target weight. Memorize it. You all need to be below that weight or right on it in two weeks. If you’re over by even a pound, you can’t play.”

I pause a final time.

“Okay. How many think they might be over their target weight?”

One hand goes up. He is conspicuous not just because he is the only black student at Crestmoor High but because he is the most twiggy and raw-boned among the players sitting in the bleachers.

I look at him. “Michael, you’re over your weight?”

“Yes.”

“By how much?”

“A few pounds.”

“Oh, oh!”

After Michael confessed that he might be a “few pounds” overweight I took my Acme Thunderer out of my pocket and looked confused. The player with slinky moves and a deadly shot that would lead the team to the championship—he might not make weight?

Stories of athletes desperately trying to “make weight” were commonplace. Crash diets, starvation, steam baths as hot and dehydrating as Native American sweat lodges, endless exercise, even spitting in school wastebaskets on the day of weigh-ins—they were the practical measures by which athletes hoped to make weight for exponent basketball or wrestling. But I felt they were not healthy.

“Have you been working out?” I asked Michael.

He hung his head, as if he was confessing now to idleness. “A little.”

In fact, that summer he had begun dating one of his Crestmoor classmates. The work of trying to arrange secret liaisons with the girl, whose parents would not have approved of their daughter dating a black classmate, had been a distraction from basketball. On one occasion the girl’s mother had come home from work unexpectedly and he had to hide in the girl’s tiny bedroom closet. It was then that he realized he was claustrophobic. “The walls are closing in on me,” he told himself. “I gotta get out of here.”

He managed to escape detection but the challenge of more and more secret liaisons only continued to distract him from basketball. His confession to me that an idle summer had made him overweight was discouraging.

The best I could hope for was that the sudden resumption of sweat-dripping, exhausting practices would bring Michael into the right condition and weight. I put my Acme Thunderer back in my mouth and delivered one quick blast. “All right. That’s it. I’ll see you all at practice tomorrow. And Michael, start losing that weight *right now*.”