



Mr Versatility

DELME HERRIMAN

with Kirstie Herriman

An adoption, an ambition:
cheeky moves and memories
from a basketball journeyman.

FOREWORD BY **ALLAN HOUSTON**

Mr. Versatility

An Adoption, An Ambition:
Cheeky moves and memories from a basketball journeyman

By Delme Herriman (with Kirstie Herriman)

For
Ray 'Ozzie' Osborne.
For everything.

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Foreword

When our Assistant Coach, Dean Lockwood, brought a light-skinned teenager into the University of Tennessee Basketball Office as part of the kid's introduction to the world of American basketball, I had no idea it would seal the beginning of a life-long friendship.

When Delme Herriman introduced himself to me and my father (UT Head Coach Wade Houston) the first thing that struck me was that he was definitely not from here. From his clothing to his shoes, his haircut and the look in his eyes, he was surely away from home. I soon found that the surface differences quickly changed into similarities in our personalities as I got to know him better.

Within days I had given Delme his first American haircut; he was sceptical about its success and smart enough to realise it wasn't the best he could have got, even if it was free. We found an immediate similarity in our appreciation of life's simple laughs and it was amazing to me how Del became like family right away.

When Delme secured a Full Ride Scholarship to Wright State University I was extremely excited for him. Always a hard worker, Del maintained a humility that I knew would allow him to have success in whatever he decided to do. With his size and athletic ability I knew that Del would add value to any team he'd play on. For his size he was a great ball-handler and was a great partner for me to go against in my workouts as he defended me tough and we challenged one another to make the most of the opportunity.

Delme and I would spend a lot of time in our younger days talking about the psychology of basketball, about our mutual need to be assertive on court so that our laid-back personalities weren't misinterpreted as a willingness to back down. Delme showed great character in his career and took every challenge that faced him head on.

I believe God blesses us with a few friends who are truly like family. When I got drafted by the Detroit Pistons, Del was part of a select group of friends I deliberately surrounded myself with; grateful to have people around me I knew I could trust. There are some friends who are there regardless of what might separate you in terms of time or distance. My man Delme is exactly that.

Allan Houston

(Former 2-Time NBA All Star & Olympic Gold Medallist)

Asst. President of Basketball Operations

New York Knicks

A Shot

We ended up with the last possession of the game. The crowd, 8,500 strong, were seething every ounce of their energy, channelling electricity, onto the court. Every basket had sent them through the roof and now we stood, five young men, proud underdogs, poised to claim the biggest scalp in our college's history. The last possession and it was ours. Xavier 70, Wright State Raiders 69 and just two small issues standing between us and Wright State history, national recognition, the greatest night of all our lives: only 1.1 seconds left in the game, and the fact that the ball was on the sideline, at the opposite end of the court, with 93' still to travel.

Coach called a last-second 'Hail Mary' play we'd practised only once, prophetically called 'Home Run'. No problem, except the plan had been that when the play started I was supposed to be stood on the free-throw line. What the Hell, this was it, one chance only. Jon Ramey was told to launch the bomb. The plan meant that I was supposed to leap into the air, over the defenders, catch the ball, turn around, and shoot the winning shot. 1.1 seconds. He threw. I leapt. Caught, back to the basket. Turned in the air. Feet touching court after an 180° pirouette. Shot. Then the buzzer. The end of the game. Buckets! It was in. Xavier 70, Wright State 71.

The world exploded. I did a crazy tuck jump into the air, another 180° spin, and sprinted off down the court like some lunatic with my teammates in pursuit. It was pandemonium. The crowd screaming and shouting and above it all the commentator yelling

'This kid's from England! This must be better than scoring the winning goal at Wembley!'

Fans rushed the court and mayhem ruled. Somewhere Coach had sunk to his knees bowing his head: in prayer, in relief, in disbelief. We'd done it. Achieved the impossible. Dotted about were Xavier players; sick, like lost mourners at a funeral, hardly able to believe their fate, that the mighty

them had fallen to the merely us.

My teammates were going crazy; Jason Smith had leapt onto the scorers' table, the wildness of his dancing throwing long limbs every which-a-way. Truly, the greatest feeling of my life. And somewhere in that heaving crowd, amidst all those loony Americans, going crazy with joy, all the way from Cheshire, England, sat my mum. By now already on her feet and being dragged onto the court by my classmate Tiffany, overjoyed but fighting every English ounce of herself that told her British people do not invade courts, it's just not proper. I was only conscious through my ecstasy of a fiery joy that she was here to share the experience, and an empty sadness that my dad, Ozzie, the other person who'd worked to make this entire outlandish dream possible, wasn't. The magnitude of what we'd just done was only beginning to sink in. We had beaten a top 25 ranked team, and enabled our NCAA run to continue.

* * * * *

My whole Junior season at Wright State University had been filled with much anticipation. I'd red-shirted¹ my first year and so this was my fourth year on campus; surely now my chance to shine. But with Vitaly Potapenko newly arrived on campus, things were to take yet another unexpected turn. From Ukraine, Vitaly was a 6'10", 285lb genetic giant with NBA written through his middle like some colossal stick of Russian rock. I had a number of decent games myself throughout the season, but with the chance of real NBA stardom, a coup for the college and its reputation, Coach wanted the whole nation to focus on Vitaly. So our entire season was spent pounding the ball inside to V at every possible chance. Even if there were four defenders on his shoulders, which, more often than not, his reputation meant there were.

It was as if Coach had me in handcuffs: unable to let anyone else shine. In pre-season, we'd had a series of six intra-squad scrimmages and, with the teams evenly matched and our Head Coach watching from the bleachers, I was scoring consistently and averaging 20-points per game.

There was equality to the scrimmages; we'd move the ball around giving everyone an opportunity to show what he could do, to play his game. Then once the season proper began, with the Head Coach back holding the reins, I fell back into being used predominantly as a role player again, in spite of averaging 35-minutes per game.

It was a hard season; we'd struggled to win half of our games, even with our NBA-bound centre, and finished so poorly in the league that we had to 'play' our way into the end of season conference tournament. Fortunately this year it was to be held at our school, surely an advantage, particularly with the obsessive passion of the Raiders' supporters. So the scene was set; Thursday night we'd open our campaign against Cleveland State, both tied in the conference. We'd play one another leaving the winning team the unenviable task of facing Xavier the next night. Xavier, the Goliath. 14-0 in the conference, and ranked 25th in the whole of America. We'd lost to them twice already but they'd been pretty close games, and I'd always stepped-up, trying to get my props against some of the best guards in the NCAA. When we'd met them at our place I'd had 16-points and 7 boards, and 22-points and 8 boards in the Cincinnati game.

We all felt we'd massively under-achieved during the season and going out onto court were painfully aware that a loss against Cleveland State meant one thing; season done. No NCAA Tournament, no more practice, and no way to salvage anything from our disappointing season. Desperation can ignite passion and talent in a way that nothing else can, and so that night Cleveland State got it. We had mad energy. We were possessed. I was all over the court and had one of my nastiest ever dunks. Dribbling the ball on a fast break, only their point guard stood in front of me. What a mistake! I sized him up, dribbling with my left hand, and took off two-footed on the left hand side of the paint. It started unremarkably, by the casual way I'd dribbled the ball down the court, no one in the gym expected me to dunk it. I jumped over him, with my elbow at rim height, and rammed it on him with my left hand! Ooohhh Teddy P, it was Nasty!

Taking care of CSU meant that our destiny was set. We'd get the chance to face Xavier. No.1 seed versus us, now No.8. We were so excited. Our

victory had given everyone a new lease of life. Here we were one step closer to the possibility of going all the way to the Big Dance. Although clear underdogs we had confidence, we had our home crowd, over 8,000 of our fans behind us, and had played them pretty close in our two previous encounters. In addition to this, Wright State (a college which had never enjoyed much national exposure) was to experience a real event in itself, if only for the fact that tonight's game would be broadcast on National TV.

I came out and hit a 3-, then had a tough dribble drive on Pete Sears and after a close first-half I finished with 5-points. The game was close throughout, their other guards Jeff Massey and Michael Hawkins were naughty. Both lightning quick, they caused our guards fits at both ends of the court, leaving me to constantly bring the ball down.

I found it difficult to get involved in the offence during the second-half but our freshman, Antuan Johnson, from Toledo, Ohio, stepped-up big time. With six-minutes remaining the turning point came. With the score pretty much level, maybe there was a chance. And then our world imploded. Vitaly got hit with his 5th and final foul. He was outta there! Total devastation. Our main focus, the pivot of our entire season; gone, forced to watch from the bench. There was no chance of beating mighty Xavier now.

Vitaly walked the length of the court as the refs were setting up for Xavier to shoot two free-throws. Stood in the line-up awaiting the shots, Rob Welch ran up to me shouting *'Pass me the fucking ball, get ya head out ya ass!'* A spoilt guard who'd played his high school career under the coach-ship of his own father, Welch was two years younger than me, an under-classman and a guy I'd never liked. National T.V. or not, I saw red. I ran back up to him grabbing the neck of his jersey, yelling in his face. I knew I was about to do something completely out of character, but the pressure, the night, whatever it was, I was swole[™]! This guy had it coming, no one talks to me like that on the court without something jumping off, I lost all relevance of the occasion; that my mum was there, that this wasn't me, wasn't how I lived my life or how I played my game, that I was being watched by the entire nation. Then the most unlikely of candidates

stepped-up to diffuse the situation: Antuan. A real streetwise tough guy, he got in between me and Rob so I couldn't swing on him. There wasn't time to think of the consequences of me battering my own teammate in the middle of such an important game, we had a job to do, I'd forgotten, temporarily, but now it was on, and each one of us was even more fired up, even more inspired.

Although he was clearly our best player, we always seemed to hold our own if not play even better when Vitaly was out. His absence made everything less predictable, as though anything was now possible, and as a result, every other guy would somehow step-up. We traded baskets and the game went right down to the wire. They turned the ball over on a crucial possession and I managed to get the deflection, bruising my thumb in the process. It had been a rough game and prior to this I'd taken an elbow to the throat. By the time there was 1.1 seconds remaining on the clock I was pretty banged-up. And then, The Shot. The glory, and Wright State History.

We calmed down a little in the locker room, we had to, there's not enough energy in a human body to maintain that level of excitement, especially after such a tough fight. Coach was ecstatic. But, as coaches always do, reminded us of what remained, the season wasn't over yet, there were the semis, maybe even the final, it was possible now, anything was. There were other games still to be played that night, so after showering I headed back into the Nutter Centre and was immediately spotted by our fans. A standing ovation ensued: 7,000 on their feet. It was one of the most moving experiences of my life. I felt like I'd finally arrived in the Big Time. Finally got my name out there. Little did I know at the time how far the legend of The Shot would travel. By morning it was across the globe. At 8am I took a call from Europe, Bill Edwards, WSU's former star, now playing pro' in Italy, had just seen The Shot on CNN Sports Centre.

The Shot was voted ESPN 'play of the week' and was compared to the Duke Grant Hill to Christian Laetenner shot a few years earlier. A proud moment and something that gave me increased confidence for the remaining games. We managed to knock-off Detroit in the semis, before

falling to Wisconsin Green Bay in the finals. Our exposure continued, the final game was broadcast live on ESPN. Wisconsin Green Bay played outstanding ball that night, and we lost. As sometimes happens, we were simply outplayed by an excellent, well-coached team, who won the automatic bid to the Big Dance.

Basketball can be like this. It can be excitement and glory, tough games, with hard hits and injuries and desperate calls. It can be a crowd of thousands chanting your name and it can be a collective groan as you're fouled out and forced to sit and watch from a position of helplessness. It can be a machine that takes on a life of its own. A truly great team can function as a single entity, working together to combine all their talent into one explosion of victory. But it's also just human. Just individuals. Players who've devoted their lives to sport, who've fought to stand on that court. Some of them born to do it, some of them there having worked and worked and hoped and worked some more. There was a human story behind The Shot; my story.

A month before the game, Jason Smith and I had gone to visit some kids at a hospital in Dayton, where we'd befriended eight-year-old Keith. He loved basketball and was smitten with us visiting him. He was also dying of leukaemia with only months of life remaining. We made follow-up visits to see Keith, and spent 5 hours with him at his birthday party, thrown in his honour by the hospice in which he was cared for. His worsening prognosis meant the party was also a farewell.

In the locker room, just before our much-anticipated clash with Xavier, our pre-game talk had been interrupted by Bob Grant (now Wright State's Head of Athletics) who'd walked in accompanied by Keith. He apologised for the interruption at such a crucial moment but explained that Keith's one last wish was to sit on the bench with his favourite Raiders. Jason and I jumped from our lockers, hugged Keith and lifted him up onto our shoulders. Prior to the game, I'd marker-penned Keith's name onto the side of my boots; I'd already decided that whatever happened I was playing this game for him. He was a true inspiration to me, and The Shot is dedicated to Keith.

MR VERSATILITY

Sometimes we're pushed on the court by knowing that glory might be ours. Sometimes we're pushed simply because we love the game and playing (and winning) is all that we know, all we ever want to know. And sometimes what pushes us is other people. Those who've dedicated their lives to us achieving our dreams. My dad, Ozzie, wasn't there to see his boy's ultimate glory, wasn't there to witness that moment which marked the real beginning of his lad's career. But it literally was only death that could've kept him away.