Crime and Punishment

BY GARY SMITH

After high school hoops star Richie Parker was convicted of sexual abuse, succession of people tried to salvage—or savage—his basketball career, and, one by one, they were scarred by the experience.

ONE

HERE IS a man. Barely a man; he just ran out of adolescence. He stands alone, 2,000 miles from home, beside a swimming pool, in a stucco-walled apartment complex, city built on an American desert.

Jon Hall chancellor Thomas R. Peterson buckled under to intense pressure from media and alumni yesterday when he denied admission to star basketball recruit and admitted sex felon Richie Parker.

—NEW YORK POST Jan. 24, 1995

It's too hot to run. But he must run. He strips to his trunks. He steps into the pool. His body leans forward.

The University of Utah ceased its recruiting of former Manhattan Center basketball star Richie Parker in light of a barrage of media criticism and pressure from university president regarding Parker's sexual abuse conviction.

—NEW YORK NEWSDAY
May 6, 1995
His hands ball up. His left elbow draws back, pushing against the wall. Slowly his foot begins to rise from the floor of the pool.

George Washington University officials informed high school basketball star Richie Parker yesterday they "regrettably" would stop recruiting him and blame "unbalanced publicity" for a wave of criticism that hit the school for pursuing the youth, who had pleaded guilty to a sexual assault.

—THE WASHINGTON POST
June 30, 1983

His foot gradually descends to the bottom of the pool. His other foot begins to push off. His shoulders tighten. The water pushes back.

Richie Parker will never wear a UTEP basketball uniform. UTEP has bowed of its recruitment of the controversial basketball player, athletic director Jerry Thompson announced Friday.

—EL PASO HERALD-POST
Feb. 24, 1983

His knee slowly lifts again. His arms silently pump.

USC on Wednesday terminated its recruitment of former New York City America point guard Richie Parker, a convicted sex offender. The decision came after ... two days of sometimes heated exchanges among athletic department personnel.

—ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER
March 29, 1983

He climbs out finally and pants for air, in the desert that once was the bottom of an ocean.

TWO
HERE IS a periodic table. It's the one you would see near the blackboard in any high school chemistry class, a listing of the 109 elements according to atomic number. Why is it being inflicted on you here, in a sports magazine? Patience. Remember, this is a story about higher education.

Near the lower lefthand corner of the chart is an element named Gold. Among its own—the metals surrounding it in the chart, such as sodium
odium—cesium is a quiet, unassuming element. But because it has just one
on its outer shell, one electron aching to leap to any atom that is
a full outer shell of electrons, cesium is a bomb in a suitcase when it
its neighborhood. On contact with oxygen, cesium will cause an ex-
. Introduce it to chlorine, fluorine, iodine or bromine and look out!
 everywhere it goes, trying to rid itself of the baggage of that one ele-
another eruption occurs, and only those who understand what cannot be
make any sense of it at all.

ELLIE

E is an assistant principal. She works at Manhattan Center, the East
em high school Richie Parker once attended. Teenagers deposit their
er jackets in Ellen Scheinbach’s closet in the morning for safekeeping,
to her at lunchtime for oatmeal cookies and advice. The phone’s con-
ring, teachers are always poking in their heads. “A lunatic asylum!”
ells her office, ambling about with her spectacles dangling from a neck-
. But now there’s silence, and it’s Richie’s mother, Rosita, shuffling on her
knees, clutching her envelope of articles clipped from the New York Post
and the Daily News, extending them toward the assistant principal and ask-
er to explain.

ellen Scheinbach is an authority figure, one of the few Rosita knows. Sure-
 she can explain how all this could result from that one day in this build-
ing, in January 1994, when Rosita’s 6’5” son, a junior then—a well-liked boy
own for his silence, his gentle nature and his skill on a basketball court—
as walking through these halls, having gone to the nurse’s office with a
ained ankle and having found the nurse not there, was returning to class
hen he paused . . . and turned. And headed toward the bottom of a stair-
well in the back of the school, where he and a schoolmate, Leslie Francis,
n compelled a 16-year-old freshman girl to perform oral sex on them. And
ow 15 minutes later, the girl came running up the stairwell, sobbing, and
soon thereafter Richie and the other boy were being led away in handcuffs. And
how from that moment on, virtually everywhere Richie would turn to rid him-
self of the baggage of those 15 minutes, another explosion would occur. How
areers would be smashed, men fired, dreams destroyed. How some rela-
tionships would splinter and others almost spontaneously be fused. How se-
trets would burst from hidden places, and rage and fear would tremble in
the air behind her lean, quiet son. The assistant principal can explain all this
to Rosita, can’t she?

Ellen throws up her arms. The incongruity of it all still confounds her. Richie
Parker? Richie didn’t drink. Richie didn’t curse. Richie didn’t get into argu-
ments or fights; he had never even gotten detention. She knew lots of kids who would play peek-a-boo with a toddler in the bleachers for a few minutes, but Richie was the only one she knew who would do it for an hour. The only time she had ever seen him exert his will—to force any issue—was on a basketball court, and even then he did it so softly, so smoothly, that she would be startled to learn at the end of a game that he had scored 35 points. He would be rated one of America's top 50 high school seniors in 1995, a notch or two below Georgia Tech signee Stephon Marbury in New York's schoolboy hierarchy.

Two investigations—one conducted by a George Washington University lawyer and another by the lawyer of the stairwell victim, not to mention the searchlight sweep of Richie's life by the media—failed to turn up a single thread that would indicate that those 15 minutes in the stairwell were part of a larger pattern. Richie himself had insisted on his innocence at first, but eventually he pleaded guilty when the charges were lowered from first-degree sodomy to first-degree sexual abuse in January 1995. His sentence was five years of probation. So now Rosita's standing on the other side of Ellen's desk, holding a half-dozen full-back-page pictures of her son under screaming SANTONI headlines, asking her what the world has come to that one rotten 17-year-old could take on such monstrous proportions and why Seton Hall has just reneged on its promise of a scholarship for Richie as long as he didn't get a prison sentence . . . and it's only the beginning, because now the great American morality play is ready to hit the road, with actors and actresses all across the land raring to perform their roles, eager to savage or save the teenager from 110th Street in Manhattan—often knowing nothing more of him than his name. Ellen keeps shaking her head and blinking. Sports, having somehow become the medium through which Americans derive their strongest sense of community, has become the stage where all the great moral issues have to be played out, often rough and ugly, right alongside the games.

Ellen had tried to protect Richie from that. She had tried to smuggle him off when the media surrounded her school. She sat beside him at games when she could no longer play, to shield him from the media's popping cameras and questions. She went to Seton Hall and told administrators that she would trust Richie with her daughter, if she had one. But it was hopeless. In the same way that cesium needs to rid itself of that one dangling electron on the outer shell, Richie needed to take his sin to a university, to one of America's "pure" places, and have it absolved so he could find his way to the promised land, the NBA. In the same way that fluorine longs for that extra electron to complete itself, the universities and their coaches were drawn to the basketball player who could enhance their profile, increase their alumni contributions, and TV revenues. And the mutual attraction would keep causing explosions.
Holding Richie and yet another university far apart, and Rosita would keep turning to Ellen, her eyes filling with tears. Hasn't her son, she would ask, done everything demanded of him?

Yes, Rosita, yes, he fulfilled the requirements of the criminal justice system and the out-of-court settlement of the victim's civil lawsuit. He had met monthly with his probation officer, met regularly with a counselor, made both private and a public apology to the victim, an acknowledgment that regardless of the details of the incident, he had done something profoundly wrong in that stairwell. He had promised to speak out against sexual abuse and to make financial restitution to the victim with a percentage of any money he might generate one day in the NBA. He had earned A's and B's at Manhattan Outreach Center, the school he was sent to in the wake of the court ruling, met NCAA qualifications on his fourth try with an SAT score of 830 and enrolled at Mesa (Ariz.) Community College, which refused to let him play ball but allowed him to be a student. And, yes, both the victim and her lawyer had requested that the country's media and universities let him move on. He's rare among people who've committed a sexual offense," says Michael Feldman of Jacoby & Meyers, the victim's attorney. "He admitted that he did something wrong and committed to help the victim. How does it assist women to refuse him an opportunity now?"

"We believe Richie is truly sorry," the girl's father had told the Daily News. "We're religious people who believe in redemption. We don't believe in third chances. We do believe in second chances."

So how can Ellen explain to the 49-year-old woman with the envelope full of news clippings that the second chance, the fresh start, the comeback, the stuff of magazine covers and made-for-television movies, the mother's milk that immigrant America was nursed on and cannot—to its everlasting credit and eternal confusion—seem to wean itself from, has been denied to her son?

"What can I do?" Ellen cries. "I can't get the reporter from the New York Post fired. I can't speak to women's groups who are saying he shouldn't have the right to go to college and play basketball. What is a women's group, anyway? I know plenty of women, but what's a women's group? I can't call [Georgetown coach] John Thompson and tell him to give Richie a chance—you think he's going to listen to some little old Jewish lady? So I'm just left with this horrible frustration. It's like trying to comfort the survivor of a plane wreck when Rosita comes here. There's nothing I can do.

"He was 17 when this happened. For 15 minutes of rotten judgment, he's been crucified! These women's groups are talking about O.J. Simpson and Mike Tyson, and they're using Richie's name. When teachers here heard what he was accused of, they said, 'Are you kidding?' This is a kid who always tried
to fade into the background, who wouldn’t push back if you pushed him, but
when he wanted something, he’d just stand there and wait till you asked
for it. He’s a brain lesion. This kid is not a threat.

“If he were white, would this story have been written this way? But no,
fit the perfect stereotype. He has no money, and he’s a black male teenager
they could have a field day. What do people want—for him to fail, so he’s
on a street corner? Are they saying you can never redeem yourself? If he wanted
to be a doctor instead of a basketball player, would they say, ‘You can’t
biochemistry class?’ Basketball is his talent, and while he’s on probation he’s
entitled to play that the same way he’d be entitled to be a musician or an
artist. Everyone thinks the NCAA is so macho. I’ve never seen so many white
men in my life.”

Once, just once in the 2½ years of watching everything around Richie
goes, pieces, has Ellen feared that he might go to pieces too. She had never
him cry, never heard him blame anyone else, never sensed a chip on his shoul-
der. But when it was clear that the board of education was about to suspend
him from Manhattan Center in the middle of his senior season and that he
media swirl was sucking down his teammates too, he came to her office with
his mother and read his letter of resignation from the team. When he fin-
ished, he finally broke down and clutched his mother. “If not for you,” he
sobbed to her, “I don’t think I could make it.”

In the end, Ellen decides, perhaps there isn’t much she can do to help Rosi-
ta, but there’s something Rosita has done to help her. “I’ve learned a lot from
her,” says Ellen. “I’ve learned that no matter how frustrated and upset you
get, you just keep turning to your kid and saying, ‘I love you, and no matter
what happens, there’s one place for you that’s safe.’ When my son has a prob-
lem now I just try to hug him and say, ‘Whatever decision you make I’ll stand
by you.’ Because it works. I’ve seen it work. It saved Richie Parker.”

FOUR
HERE IS a copy editor on the sports desk of a major city newspaper. She
smart, and she’s funny, and if an office push-up contest or footrace suddenly
breaks out, hopefully after deadline, she’s the one you want to put your move
on. Of course, because she’s a woman, the sensitive stories go to Jill Agostini
Not that it’s ever actually stated in a sports department that men are bereft in
those areas. It’s just sort of understood.

So she gets the Richie Parker stories to polish for Newsday. And as she
scanning the words on her computer screen in early 1995, she begins to feel something tightening inside her. It's the old uneasiness, the one she dreads, the one she has no time for here, now, as the clock hands dig toward deadline; the one she might try to run into the ground tomorrow when she's doing her five miles, or scrub away in the quiet of her Long Island apartment, or stow away and convert to fuel someday, something to help flog herself through an extra hour of work when she has to prove her worth to some sexist idiot who dismisses her as a token woman in a man's world, a newspaper sports desk. but not now. Not here. No way.

She begins to sense it here and there between the lines—the implication that Parker is being treated unfairly—and her uneasiness starts to turn to quiet anger. She doesn't sleep much that night, doesn't feel like eating the next day. Another Parker story comes her way a few evenings later, then there's an afternoon drive to work listening to radio talk-show callers chew the issue to death, some of them actually sticking up for the kid, and her quiet anger curls into a rage that no one knows, no one sees.

The writers like Jill. She's not one of those editors who must tinker with a story to justify their existence. One Newsday reporter writes an article that comes right out and says Parker is a good kid who made a mistake and deserves a second chance, and he calls Jill as she's editing it, cheerfully asking her how she likes his piece. There's silence on the phone. And then it erupts from her, something she has never even been able to tell her family.

"I've been raped," says Jill. "I don't agree with you."

"Oh, I didn't . . . Jill, I'm sorry," he says.

She feels like a jerk for making the reporter feel like a jerk, but it's too late now, the anger's out on the table, and it's not finished. Mistake? How can anyone call it that? Leaving your headlights on or forgetting your keys, that's a mistake—not humiliating a woman the way Jill had been nearly nine years earlier, at age 22, by a man on a boat on Queechy Lake in upstate New York. She goes into her boss's office, seething at a society where a man like Mike Tyson can walk out of jail a few years after raping a woman and be greeted by a thunderous roar and a paycheck worth millions of dollars, and TV commentators can blather on about all that Tyson has been through, as if the perpetrator was the victim and the real victim was yesterday's oatmeal. "I want to write a column," she tells her boss. "People need to know what it's like for the victim. I was raped."

His jaw drops. Well . . . uh . . . sure, Jill, but . . .

She barely sleeps that night. Her husband, Michael, says that if she's sure she wants to do this, he's behind her. She's sure. She sits on the couch the next day with a red pen, a blue pen and a notepad. The red ink is for her
pain—the italicized sections interspersed in the column that recount that night on the lake where she swam as a little girl: "I wanted to throw up every time I smelled the mixture of Grand Marnier and tobacco smoke on his breath as he held me down..."
The blue ink is for Richie Parker: "How often do you think Parker will think about this incident once he's on a college basketball court? For the victim, not a day will go by without that memory... Parker's punishment should last until his victim is able to walk alone up the street or through a parking lot, or down a dimly lit hallway and feel safe. Until the nightmares cease. Until a day goes by and she doesn't think about the horrible things these boys made her do. But it won't."

What are you doing? a voice inside her asks when she has finished writing. To her, this is not an act of courage, as some would take it. To her, this is Jill Agostino publicly admitting her most private pain just on the chance that it will make some men begin to comprehend how it feels to be violated, how it can enter a woman's life forever, how it can make her hold her breath when a stranger steps into an empty elevator with her, make her want to run when a man rolls down his car window and asks her for directions, make her stare into a mirror some days and hate her body because somehow it betrayed her.

She can't surrender to the urge to crumple up the notepad paper, because she does, the man in the boat wins again, and she can't let him keep winning. He has won too many times, at night when she sits up rigid in bed from nightmares she can never quite recollect—only raw terror and the faint echo of all the world's laughter. He won every time she bought another size 8 blouse for a size 4 body, every time she froze when a colleague she didn't know well threw an arm around her shoulder, every time she couldn't sleep and had to caffeinate and will herself through the next day so that no one, except perhaps her husband, would ever dream that she was anything but the sharp competitive woman that the world always sees.

Now comes the next agony. She can't let her family find out in a newspaper story. She must call her mother and father and brother and sister and tell them about the rape and why she buried it. She must listen to her mother and feel guilty for not protecting her daughter from something she couldn't possibly have protected her from. A few days later the story appears. Several hundred and fifty thousand readers learn Jill's secret, and countless thousands more—including old boyfriends, old co-workers, old roommates—come across it in the newspapers across the country that run the story. Some of her colleagues are moved to tears by her column. Some confess to her their own buried stories of rape.

The eddies never seem to end. Radio talk shows call her to be a guest and ask her about her rape, and she has to keep reliving the worst moment of her life.
The victim's lawyer calls to compliment her story and asks her if she would testify in his client's civil lawsuit against Parker. When that's settled out of court, he asks if she'd consider doing that in another lawsuit in which the jury seems to feel the long ripple of a rape, and she says yes, because how can she refuse to help someone who has endured what she has or allow so many people to keep insinuating that it's the violated woman who is to blame? SPORTS ILLUSTRATED calls a year later and asks to interview her, and she has to worry now that will affect the way her colleagues at her new workplace, The New York Times, will look at her, worry that this is who she is now to people, this is who she is. Each new episode will mean another week of barely eating, barely sleeping, a few more nightmares and 10 or 15 extra miles of running, but she can't back down. She has never met Richie Parker and no doubt never will, but Jill Agostino is paying for his crime, oh, yes, she's paying.

FIVE

Here is an assistant coach from the University of Utah. Once Donny Daniels, too, was a black teenager from a crowded city who lived to play basketball. And so even though he is the 40-year-old father of three, including two daughters, on this spring day in 1995, he is walking into his past when he walks into the Parkers' apartment. He finds Richie just as quiet and respectful as all his sources vowed. He sits in the living room with the 108 basketball trophies that take Rosita hours to dust. He looks into the kitchen where she cooks pots and pans full of baked chicken, ziti, collard greens, banana pudding and sweet-potato pies on Sundays and has half the neighborhood into her house, just like it used to be when she was growing up in North Carolina. He gazes around the home where Rosita and Richie's ever-so-quiet father, Richard, and Richie's two older sisters, Monica and Tanya, who have both attended college, eat and tease each other and laugh.

Donny talks to Rosita, who for years telephoned after Richie to make sure he had gone where he said he was going, who tried to seal her son from all the bad choices blowing around outside the window. No, Donny can't see her running a half-dozen times to the emergency room with high blood pressure at each twist her son's story takes; can't see her bent in half with chest pains six months after Richie's arrest, paramedics rushing through that front door and clamping an oxygen mask over her mouth, driving an IV needle into her arm, pushing a nitroglycerine pill under her tongue, trying to stave off the heart attack or stroke that's on the verge of occurring as her son watches, even more scared than he was on that long night when he lay awake smelling urine in a New York City jail. He can't see her lying in the hospital, realizing that if she doesn't stop letting the newspaper stories affect her so deeply,
they're going to kill her. But listening to the mother and the son, he can feel it.

And it's all that feeling that Donny lets out when the New York Post reports a tip and calls him a few days later to ask, "How can Utah consider rewarding a sex felon with a scholarship?" All that feeling from a man who senses that his and his university's integrity is being assaulted. Of course, he has never walked into the victim's house and felt what a heart might feel there. "There are two victims here," he tells the reporter. "He doesn't evaporate into the atmosphere. He's not a piece of dirt. He has feelings and emotions. They both made a mistake; they shouldn't have been there. But everyone was worried about the girl. What about him? ... You don't see her name or picture, but Richie Parker is plastered all over. ... She probably will get a doctorate and marry a successful guy and live in the Hamptons. ... Will he ever be able to forget it? ... Who's hurt more for life?"

Imagine the explosion this quote causes back in Salt Lake City, the ripping apart of molecules. Imagine how rapidly the college president and athletic director must run from that quote, how swiftly Richie's chance to attend Utah vaporizes, how many columns are written citing Richie as the prime example of America's coddling of athletes and Neanderthal treatment of women. Imagine how tightly doors shut to discuss what must be done with Donny.

He is luckier than others will be. He is placed on probation for a year and ordered to attend sensitivity training sessions with a director from the Women Resource Center on campus. He gets a second chance.

A year later, when a writer from SI calls, Donny says he was wrong for saying what he did but wishes to say nothing more, and his boss, coach Rick Majerus, the most affable of men, seals his lips as well. Better to fence off the arena and let the pieces lie where they fell, to be covered by the sediment of time.

SIX

HERE IS a university president. Here is the picture of Teddy Roosevelt on his office wall. Which is which? Who's who? Mustache. Spectacles. Hair combed back. Eyes atwinkle. Robust body. Bent for bold action. Oh, so that's how you tell the two of them apart: Stephen Trachtenberg's the better politician.

He's the man who transformed the University of Hartford and George Washington, the one who gives big-idea speeches and writes ethics essays for books, magazines and newspapers. He knows something about everything. Every chemistry.

Yes, he's going to do it. He's going to give this Parker kid another chance, and he's going to satisfy the alumni and faculty and the women's groups and the
and the talk-show callers, and even the victim. He's going to introduce them to fluorine, and—eureka!—nothing's going to go ka-boom!

why not? He's a master at problem-solving, a genius at persuasion. "He has the tremendous capacity to anticipate a whole variety of outcomes and the implications of those outcomes," says George Washington vice president Bob Mark, "and then calculate how to move an issue toward the most favorable outcome. He's always three steps ahead of you. He's thinking of ideas in his sleep."

When inherited a university with a profound identity crisis, not to mention a 1-27 basketball team, in 1988. In the wake of his brainstorming, applications have nearly doubled, contributions have soared, average SAT scores have rocketed, and the hoops team has become an NCAA tournament fixture. What challenge? Bully! A fray? Fine! He would wade right into it and convince people he was right, the way he did during the student sit-ins at Boston University back in the 1960s as a bearded associate dean, persuading protesters not to risk a violent confrontation with police. He has built up a tall pile of chips at George Washington, and he's willing to ante up for Richie Parker.

Sure, he's eager to help his basketball team, but it's also something else. Sure, he's the son of one hell of a Brooklyn life insurance salesman, but he's also the son of a social activist, a mother who sent him to summer camps with black kids and wanted him to become a doctor who would treat the poor, not to mention the grandson of a Ukrainian Jew who fled to America for a second chance. His record of helping kids out of deep holes is long. At Hartford he gave a scholarship to a young man with an eighth-grade education who had been convicted on drug-dealing and burglary charges. That man, John Richters—who played no sport—went on to graduate summa cum laude and get a Ph.D. in psychology and now works as a program chief at the National Institutes of Health in the study of chronically antisocial children.

A young deer—that's the image that forms in the university president's head when Richie enters his office in May 1995. Barely audible, Richie expresses contrition and an earnest desire to attend George Washington, and he's so hopeful that he buys a school hat and T-shirt. All the questions march through Stephen's head as Richie walks out of his office. Is it a college's job to mete out more punishment than the legal system does? Perhaps not, but isn't it a university president's job to make sure that a parent doesn't send an 18-year-old daughter to live in a dorm room next door to a sex offender? What if it were his daughter? If a sex felon shouldn't get a basketball scholarship, what about an academic scholarship? What about a thief, a mugger, an embezzler? A custodian or a waiter can return to his normal life after the legal system passes judgment, but a gifted basketball player cannot? Pro sports are fine for felons to play, but not college athletics? What kind of message does it send
out when a sex offender gets a scholarship? When you remove the emotion from the question... but maybe you shouldn't remove the emotion from the question. All this confusion, does it signal a society lost in the wilderness... or one finally mature enough to look at questions it has always shut its eyes to? His mind gnaws at the bone, at every last bit of gristle. Beneath it all, he can sense what's going on, the vague feeling people are beginning to have that their love of sports—the sense of escape and belonging that they provide—is doubling back on them like some hidden undertow, pulling them all out to sea. It's not the ripest time for redemption.

But he takes a deep breath and begins constructing a master plan. He sends a university lawyer, a woman, to New York City to compile a massive dossier on Richie. If she finds any smudge, besides the stairwell incident, George Washington can retreat—but he keeps checking with her, and she doesn't. Shrewder still, he decides that he won't decide Richie's fate; he'll leave that to a blue-ribbon committee, one that he structures as if he were a supplicant at a Hindu shrine, bowing to a dozen different gods, to every possible political correctness: seven blacks and eight whites, seven females and eight males, including a professor of law, an assistant chief of police, a minister, a campus chaplain, an academic coordinator, a faculty clinical psychologist, a director of multicultural student services, a superintendent of schools, two judges, two trustees and three students. "A Noah's Ark committee," he calls it. If the menagerie chooses to accept Richie, Stephen will have him redshirted for a year, ease him into campus life, save him from the jackals waiting at enemy arenas. And then, as the frosting on the cake, even before the committee makes its recommendation on Richie, he offers the victim, a valedictorian of her junior high class, a scholarship when she graduates from high school. A university lawyer warns him that one won't look pretty in a tabloid headline, but Stephen is determined. Win-win for everyone, right?

Do you recall Chernobyl? It all begins to rain down on Stephen Trachtenberg: the New York Post reporter, radioactive telephone calls, faxes and letters, scalding editorials, icy questions from the board of trustees, student petitions and condemnation from the faculty senate. Stephen, the father of George Washington University, is being called immoral, a fool, a calculating liar. Even his wife Francine, in his corner all the way, warns him that he has underestimated what he's up against, that, politically speaking, he has made the wrong call. He's losing sleep. It's usurping his entire day and all of his night. The story moves to The Washington Post's front page—that's trouble. If only he could buy enough time for his plan to incubate, for the score of Richie's last SAT test to arrive and the Noah's Ark committee to see the results of the nearly complete investigation, but no, Stephen looks to one flank, then the other and sec...
remarkable alliance closing in on him. The feminists and conservatives, "the forces of the left and the forces of the right," he says, "coming together like the teeth of a vise." Eight years of working 12-hour days to build George Washington's image is being frittered away, and image is money. And he can't even persuade the public that he's right—the NCAA gag rule preventing school officials from discussing a recruit has stripped him of his greatest gift. Could he even lose his job over this, if the teeth keep closing? Could he?

One by one, those in his inner circle who admire the risk he has taken, or have simply indulged it, urge him to halt, even as his investigator's reports on Richie keep coming in, convincing him more than ever that it's right to go on. Finally it's just Stephen out there, hanging onto Richie by his fingernails as everything around them shakes. At last, he has to let go. Stephen looks at himself in the mirror. It's not Teddy he sees. It's not the man who could persuade almost anyone of anything. "I gave Richie Parker a moment of hope," he says, the light going out of his eyes, "and then I took it away."

SEVEN

Here is the victim. No, here the victim is not. She has never emerged from the shadows of that stairwell. She will not emerge now. Of her you shall only know this: For months after the incident she endured nightmares and telephoned threats from people who blamed her. She is an excellent student, but her grades dipped, and the taunts from schoolmates forced her to transfer from one high school, then another. She undergoes therapy. As she gets ready for her senior year, her family will not even reveal the borough where her current school is located.

She hopes to become a doctor. Her father is a social worker who deals with abused children, her mother a hospital nurse. Six years ago they and their daughter left Ghana and came to America, looking for another chance.

EIGHT

Here is a number. Such a nice, plump number. Say it: 500. Let them scoff at Dave Possinger, let them cringe at his intensity, let them ask him, like wise guys, to total up the traffic lights in the towns where he has coached, but this would be proof he could clutch all the way to the coffin: 500. One more win is all he needs. One more.

And no, this won't be 500 by dint of sheer endurance, a box turtle's milestone. Eighteen years is all it took Dave, an astonishing average of 28 victories a year. He is the best coach you never heard of, a 52-year-old man marooned in the bush country of NAIA and junior college basketball by bad luck and an old whiff of scandal. But it's summer, and the 1995–96 season is just a few months
away, and on opening night his Sullivan County (N.Y.) Community College team will no doubt pulverize Dutchess C.C. as it does every year, and he will join that invisible club: 500.

He has envisioned the moment all summer, even as the man he has just chosen as his assistant coach, Charles Harris, has begun to grow intrigued by the never-ending newspaper accounts of a kid in New York City named Richie Parker. Richie is the last thing on Dave’s mind. Dave has just coached his team to the national junior college Division III championship and is loaded to repeat in 1995–96, and he has no reason to think that Richie will end up with him in the bush country, at a low-level community college. Start making contacts and see what’s out there, especially for the year after this, is all he has asked of Harris, a likable 40-year-old black man who Dave is sure will make a superb recruiter.

Everywhere Dave goes that summer, even on his vacation in the Philippines, he imagines the magical night that is coming: The limousine his girlfriend is renting to take him to the game. The official hoisting of the national-championship banner, his second in four years at the junior college in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y. Former players converging to congratulate him, a capacity crowd rising to recognize him. The plaque, the ringing speeches, the commemorative T-shirts, the late-night dinner for 100 in the Italian restaurant. “It dominated my thoughts every day,” Dave recalls. “Even in places in the Philippines where there was no running water, no electricity, I’d see kids playing basketball and I’d think about 500. It would stand for all the years, all the kids, all the hard work.” It would stand for his nine seasons at a New York NAIA school named St. Thomas Aquinas, where his 295–49 record helped make the program the country’s winningest of the 1980s, on any level—yes, Dean Smith at North Carolina was second to Dave Possinger. It would stand for his four-year run of 133–5 at Sullivan County and ease the pain from the ’89 scandal that forced him out after one year at Western Carolina, his one shot as an NCAA Division I coach, even though it was his assistant, not him, who was cited for minor recruiting violations. Perhaps 500 wouldn’t mean quite so much if he had a wife and children, but no, it’s just him and his basket hound Free Throw, and 500 stands for his life.

A few hours drive south, at a showcase game for unrecruited players, his soon-to-be-named assistant Harris is watching the one obvious jewel on the floor: Richie Parker. It’s crazy, thinks Harris, who remembers inmates from the local prison taking classes from Sullivan County when he was enrolled there in the 1970s. “Everyone has something in their closet they’re not proud of,” Harris says, “and everyone deserves a second chance.” A long shot, but what a couple he could offer the kid the second chance that the four-year colleges wouldn’t.
Harris gets clearance, he says later, from Sullivan County's athletic director, like McGuire, to have Richie apply to the school—not as a scholarship student but as any normal student would. Searching for a way to contact Richie, Harris calls the New York Post reporter. It's like the mouse asking the cat for directions to the cheese.

McGuire says now that if he heard the name Richie Parker, it didn't register. And that he definitely never gave Harris permission—even though Harris had been unofficially approved to go on contract in two months and had already invested countless hours and a few hundred dollars from his own pocket on phone calls and recruiting trips—to present himself to a New York Post reporter as a Sullivan County assistant coach and declare that Sullivan County was “committed to working” with Richie Parker.

You know what happens next. You know about the reporter’s call to the president, asking if he knows that Sullivan County is recruiting a sex felon. You know about the next day’s headlines, the ducking for cover. Richie, of course, will never play at Sullivan County. Harris’s fate will hang in the balance for a few months while the school wrings its hands. In October, after he has spent weeks monitoring the players in study hall and working at practices without pay, hoping for the best, Harris is told he won’t be hired.

Harris, with head-coaching dreams of his own, is crushed. Dave, who feels responsible for Harris, is devastated. There have been other slights from his superiors at Sullivan County, he feels, but to do this to a well-meaning man trying to give a kid a second chance—how can he go on working there and live with himself? But then, how can he walk out on his team two weeks before the season opener and deprive himself of the Holy Grail: 500?

Simple, Dave’s friends tell him. Win the opener, then quit. What a scene it would be, the man of the hour strolling to the microphone, saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. I quit!” But Dave’s conscience won’t let him do it. “If I start something,” he tells his friends, “I have to finish it.”

Five days before the opener, he quits. He can’t sleep. A few days later he smirks and tells a reporter, “Your job is to tell me why I shouldn’t jump off a building.” His team goes on to win the national championship again, without him.

His record hangs there, rolling around the rim—499 wins and 116 losses—but athletic directors look right past him, searching for a younger man. Eight months later he still hasn’t even received an interview. He takes a job as a regional director for National Scouting Report, a service designed to help high school kids get—what else?—college scholarships. “But there’s still a claw in the back of my throat,” he says, “a claw telling me, ‘You are a basketball coach.’ ”

A week after he quits, Dave goes to his dresser drawer. He opens it and
stares at what he purchased in the Philippines a few months earlier, and he makes a decision. Damn the math, they can’t take it from him. It’s there now, glittering in 18-carat gold from a chain around his neck: 500.

NINE

HERE IS the girlfriend of the boy who has pleaded guilty to sexual abuse. She’s tall and lean, a beautiful girl whose demeanor is so composed that everyone always assumes she’s older than she really is, until that day when people are running to her in the hall, telling her to come quickly, something terrible has happened, and Richie’s in the principal’s office talking so helter-skelter that none of it makes sense, and the police are on their way, and she’s nearly in hysterics.

He’s the schoolmate Jaywana Bradley fell in love with in 10th grade, the one who taught her to play basketball so well that by her senior year she will be named by the Daily News as one of the best schoolgirl players in Manhattan. Who knew, perhaps they would go off together to trumpets, the king and queen of Manhattan hoops moving on, hand in hand, to set up court on a college campus . . . until this.

But what, exactly, is this? Jaywana keeps finding herself in bed, crying, wondering. People keep asking her, “You gonna leave Richie?” Some call her a fool if she sticks with him, and a few boys walk right up to her and say, “What you going out with a rapist?”

She can’t quite answer that. Maybe it’s because her mother and father believe in Richie, her dad accompanying the Parkers to court hearings. Maybe it’s just sitting there in the Parker apartment all those evenings, playing spades with the family and watching TV, feeling that relentless presence of Rosita—like a rock, a magnetic rock. Listening to Rosita talk about the past, telling how her father died when she was one, how her mother died of diabetic complications when she was 13, how her twin sister stepped in front of a car and was killed when they were five, leaving Rosita clutching the sleeve of the coat with which she had tried to yank back her twin. Maybe Jaywana, just like Richie, just keeps absorbing Rosita’s relentless message: “Make your life what it’s meant to be, and don’t let anyone or anything stop you.”

Maybe it’s two young people pulling closer and closer together the more that forces try to drive them apart. Maybe she’s a sucker for that playful, silly Richie, the side he only shows close family and friends. And maybe it comes from holding him, wiping away his tears the way she does when George Washington closes the door on him and she ends up getting the big-time basketball scholarship to Massachusetts that was supposed to be his.

He goes off to Mesa, to the junior college that decides not to let him play.
Basketball, and she goes off to UMass, and they don’t see each other for a while. He has time to sort out what’s essential, what he needs, now, sooner than he ever dreamed. When they come home for Christmas, he asks her to come over, calls her to his room and asks her to close her eyes. When she opens them, he’s on his knee, asking her to marry him, and she says yes. And she, when she asks him when, he says, “As soon as we’re done college.”

More and more now, Jaywana finds herself daydreaming of a future. There is no city or people there, just her and Richie in a house surrounded by land and trees as far as the eye can see, a place where no one can touch them. Why the two of them against all odds? She can’t explain. “I don’t know what made me stick through it with him,” she says. “All I know is that nothing anybody can ever say or do can pull me apart from him.”

TEN
HERE IS death. Now, wait a minute—no one is going to be foolish enough to blame Richie Parker’s 15 minutes in the stairwell or the administration of Mesa Community College or even the media for the death of a coach’s father, but every event in life is chained to the next, and how do you ever separate the links?

This was supposed to be the year that Rob Standifer gave his father, Bob, a gift—perhaps the last one—in exchange for the gift his father had given him. All Rob’s life his dad had awakened at 3 a.m. and reported to work three hours early at a construction company, logging 12- to 14-hour shifts. It didn’t matter how badly his dad felt, with his bad back, his diabetes or his weak heart. Work made his father feel good, and his father had a knack of passing that feeling all around. The lesson Rob took into his bones was the old American one: Outwork everyone and you’ll succeed in life.

And it seemed true. As a kid Rob was always the first one on the basketball court as a point of pride, shooting 1,000 shots a day, and sure enough, he found himself playing for the Mesa Community College team that nearly won the junior college title in 1987, finishing third in the national tournament in Hutchinson, Kans. He worked for nothing as a high school assistant and then for next to nothing for five years as an assistant at Mesa, and he was rewarded with the head-coaching job two years ago. He was only 27, but his dream, to coach a major-college team, was no longer quite so far away.

The pantry was bare his rookie year, but Mesa went 15–15. Then, doing it his dad’s way—his typical off-season day ran from 7 a.m. to 10 at night—he ran the summer league, organized a computerized scouting system, cultivated his high school coaching contacts, recruited at hours when other coaches relaxed, pushed his players through an exhaustive weightlifting program and then nurtured
them at night with so many phone calls that his friends called him Ma Bell. He was single and on fire. "I could be a maniac," says Rob, "and I was."

The pantry filled fast. Twice in the summer league in 1995 his players whipped a team with four former Arizona State starters on it, and Rob's target was clear. He was going to take his father and his team back to Hutchinson and this time win the whole damn thing.

Richie? He would sure make things easier. Rob had seen him play in the annual summer tournament at Arizona State, which Richie's New York City club team, Riverside Church, traveled to each year. Just like all the other coaches, Rob was struck by the distance between Richie and the world's image of Richie. Just like all the other coaches, he got that same feeling in the pit of his stomach when he saw a talented high school player—if you didn't get him dunking for you, he might soon be dunking on you. Besides, Rob knew Ernie Lorch, the Riverside director, and already had taken a few of Lorch's kids at Mesa. And so Rob, too, was drawn in. Mesa would be Richie's safety net, the faraway junior college where he could go to heal himself and play ball if all the Division I scholarship offers went up in smoke.

And because there was so much smoke, and Richie kept hoping and waiting for the next Division I chance, his decision to go to Mesa occurred at the last minute, just a few days before the start of school last August. And because Richie waited, Rob had to wait, and by the time he found out Richie was coming, there was no chance for cool heads to sit and debate this and perhaps construct a plan. Rob told the story of Richie Parker to three women—his mother, his girlfriend and his girlfriend's mother, and they all agreed with him.

"What Richie did was flat wrong," Rob says, "but are you going to be part of the problem or part of the solution?" And he insists—*are you crazy?*—that of course he notified his superiors, two of them, about Richie and his baggage.

But the Mesa athletic director, Allen Benedict, says he was told nothing of Richie's past, that all he got was a 9 p.m. call from Rob telling him that a great player was coming from New York. The next morning, while Richie was at 30,000 feet heading west across the heart of America, the junior college president was on the phone with Benedict, saying, "Why did a reporter from the *New York Post* just call me... and who is Richie Parker?" And then the National Organization for Women was checking in, and cameras were peering inside the gym for a peek at Richie, and a TV truck was pulling up to Benedict's house. "Whether you do something wrong or not isn't the point sometimes," says Benedict. "It's the perception."

Rob was called in to a meeting less than two weeks before the first practice and forced to quit. Richie called Rob, nearly in tears at what he had wrought.

As for Richie, he could stay, but he couldn't play basketball. College athlet-
ies, Mesa president Larry Christiansen reasoned, are like a driver’s license—a privilege, not a right. What the westward trip and the open spaces had done for so many others, they couldn’t do for Richie Parker.

Richie had to decide, then and there, what was most important in his life. He chose to stay at Mesa, take courses and learn who he was without a basketball. He would work the shot clock at games, like one of those earnest guys in glasses that no one ever notices, and by the end of the year the administrators at Mesa would all say good things about him.

Rob had to tell his father the terrible news. He knew his dad was on the edge of the cliff—doctors had said that if not for the zest that Bob derived from his work, his heart would’ve likely given way three or four years before—so the son tried to shrug and keep his face a blank, so he wouldn’t give his father that nudge. Bob was devastated, but as with all his other pain, he tried to keep it inside. He was bewildered, too. The ethic he had passed on to his only child—outwork everyone and you’ll succeed—had failed, been displaced, it seemed, by a new one: Image is everything.

Rob didn’t eat for three days after that, unless you count the antacid medication. He wouldn’t even show his girlfriend, Danelle Scuzzaro, how badly this hurt. On the fourth day after he was let go, he picked up a diamond ring at the jeweler’s and took Danelle to dinner. Afterward, he dropped to his knee—cesium is the damnedest thing—and asked her to marry him. She said yes, and thank god.

Two weeks later, at 5:15 a.m., he got the call from his mother. His father’s heart had stopped, at the age of 61. It might well have happened then anyway. “What happened to me didn’t kill him,” says Rob, “but it didn’t help.”

There was only one thing to be said for the timing. All the tears Rob had held back after losing his job could finally come out, and they did... again... and again... and again....

ELEVEN

WAIT A moment. What about the reporter from the New York Post—isn’t he here too? Sure, just a moment, he’s still on the telephone. Gosh, look at him, just a kid, wouldn’t even pass for 25. Just started at the Post, covering high school sports, when suddenly—whoa!—he has his teeth into the story of his life, and his incisors are wonderful.

Look at Barry Baum rolling out of bed in his Manhattan apartment and running, literally, to the newsstand at the corner of 79th and Broadway to check if the Daily News has scooped him on the Parker story. That has actually happened before, so Barry knows that sinking feeling. See him getting that 10 a.m. call from his editor, groggily picking up the phone—a medic on
call in a tabloid war. "So what's goin' on with Parker today?" his editor demands. And Barry says, "I'll let you know," then shakes off the cobwebs and begins working the phones, looking for a tip. He loves this part, the detective work. And the most amazing thing keeps occurring. Because there's such an innocent charm about Barry, people want to help him.

Some high school scout or basketball junkie with his ear to the streets keeps slipping him the name of the next university showing interest in Richie, and then Barry plays his role, just as the university administrators and the coaches and the women's groups and the loved ones do. He becomes the Bunsen burner, the heat that agitates the cesium and fluorine molecules into rapid movement, more-violent collision. He leaps to call the university president and the campus women's center to ask that 64-megaton question—"How do you feel about your school recruiting a sex felon?"—and if they say they don't know who Richie Parker is, so they can't comment, he faxes them a pile of his Parker stories, and suddenly they have a comment. And all at once the coach and the athletic director are being called onto the president's carpet, or what's left of it, and then there's a follow-up exclusive story to write when they all abandon Richie, and there's no time to consider all the layers, all the moral nuances, because the editor's on the phone barking, "O.K., hurry, rewrite that for the second edition!"—just like in the movies. And then street vendors are snaking between the cars bottlenecked at the bridges and tunnels leading into the city the next morning, catching drivers' eyes with thick SEX FELON headlines, and every person who contributes his 50 cents confirms the Post editor's instincts and becomes another link in the chain.

"There were nights when I couldn't sleep, an adrenaline I had for a long time," says Barry. "I'd lie in bed, realizing I'd come to New York and made an impact on one of the biggest stories of the year."

Hadn't his editor at the Post told him, "We're going to put your name in lights," when he hired Barry in August 1994? Wasn't that music to his ears? Even as a little kid in Brooklyn Heights, he had dreamed of busting back-page stories for the New York tabloids. At 15 he talked his way into becoming the Knicks ball boy by rat-tat-tatting 10 letters to the team trainer, and then he parlayed that job into his own cable-TV show in Manhattan, Courtside with Barry Baum, by convincing the station of the wonderful access to big-name Knicks that a precocious 16-year-old ball boy had. He appeared on the televised dating show Love Connection three times, and when one of his dates sniffed about Barry's making the wrong turn on their evening out, he brought down the house by sniffing back, "Get a load of Miss Rand McNally, never made a wrong turn in her life!"

And then suddenly the kid who grew up calling New York Post and Daily News columnists with kudos and beg-to-differs is being lauded for his own
back-page Post scoops on New York radio talk shows, being asked to appear on the all-sports station, WFAN, and invited to speak at a journalism symposium at Madison Square Garden with a poster board full of his Parker stories. Adrenaline, yes, but anguish, too, stuff you don’t talk about when you’re a guest on WFAN. Because the nasty phone calls to Barry’s desk have begun, people hissing, “Leave Richie Parker alone!”

Then, when he’s a guest on a radio talk show one day, a caller says, “Don’t you see what you’re doing? This is a black kid who comes from nowhere, and you’re a white guy who probably comes from a lot of money.” Barry blinks. “It hits me,” he says. “That’s true. I’ve always had everything, and I’d never even thought of the race factor.” New York City high school coaches, his contacts, start saying, “C’mon, Barry, back off. What are you trying to prove?” Even his own father, Bruce, finally says, “Leave him alone already, Barry,” and that stings.

“That even someone who knew me that well wouldn’t realize that I’m just trying to do my job. . . .” he says. “I mean, don’t give me credit for keeping Richie Parker out of college, but don’t blame me for it either. And the more people tell me to stop reporting a story, the more it means it is a story, right? But I keep wondering about Richie. All that time, I couldn’t talk to him because his lawyer wouldn’t let me, so I couldn’t feel him. Finally they let me. You know, it changes things once you talk to him. Before that he was an object, and it was easy to write, ‘Richie Parker, sex felon,’ because I didn’t know him. He was the predator and the girl was the victim, right? I talked to him at a Rucker League game last August, and he actually smiled at me. A smile is a big thing.

“Look, I’ve never had a problem with Richie playing college basketball. It’s not the colleges’ job to punish him further. He should be allowed to play—but not without students and their parents being notified, maybe by a letter from the university administration. You know, like Megan’s Law, notifying people that a sex felon is in their neighborhood. It’s funny. It’s like I’ve become Megan’s Law for these universities. I’m the one who tells them he’s coming. It was amazing how quickly it played out with Oral Roberts. I reported that the school was interested, the story breaks across the country, the TV reporters arrive on campus—and the school announces it has already pulled out! It was like the fire trucks coming, and there’s no fire, the local residents have already put it out. These universities have no backbone! Every university president I talk to, except for maybe Stephen Trachtenberg, it’s like talking to the same guy. Every one of them says, ‘I can’t believe my coach did this and that isn’t what we stand for and blah-blah-blah. I’m convinced there’s only one college president in the United States: He just keeps changing his name!”

One major-college coach, off the record, asks Barry what will happen if he takes the risk on Richie. What’s Barry supposed to do, lie? He tells the truth,
the coach says thank you and backs off, and—poof!—the chance is gone, the chemical reaction begun and finished before anyone ever even smelled it occurring. And it begins to dawn on Barry: "Somehow, I'm in this story. I'm not just the observer. People are making decisions based on my reporting. There I am, 25 years old and playing the part of deciding if this kid's going to go into college or not, and maybe, if he's good enough, even into the NBA. I have no agenda or angle at all, but he'd probably be playing now if I hadn't called Utah or GW or..."

"So where is the line? I've never been taught that line. I keep wondering, Am I doing the right thing? But I shouldn't have to make that choice. I start compiling a list in my mind of all the people whose lives I've affected, the people who have gotten fired, all the universities. And it tears me apart, because the last thing I want to do is hurt anyone. But I know if I stop reporting and the Daily News gets the story, which you know they will, then my editor will call me and say, 'What's goin' on with Parker? What happened? Where are the words?' and what am I going to say? I can't win. So people blame me. It's like I was the one in the stairwell."

He stares off at the wall, catches his breath. "And it's not over yet," Barry says. "It's not over until I find out where Richie Parker's going."

TWELVE

ONE DAY about a month ago Richie Parker stepped into an airplane in Arizona. The plane rose, and he looked through the window one last time at the desert and flew back across America, with no idea what would happen next. "I've learned I can survive without basketball," he said last month. "I've learned how the real world is and that I'm stronger than I knew I was. There's less fear now. I know myself more. I trust people less, but that doesn't make me sad. Just more aware of things. I can still live a good life." And he said a lot more, but it would be improper to let him do it here, for it might mislead the reader into thinking this was a story about Richie Parker.

This land is vast, and it contains so many kinds of people, and that is its grace. Two weeks ago Gale Stevens Haynes, the 45-year-old provost of the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University—and the black mother of three teenage daughters—offered Richie Parker a basketball scholarship to her Division I school. She didn't pull the offer back when the New York Post reporter found out, and Richie accepted it. When asked why she did it, she said, "Unless there's an island that I don't know about, where we send people forever who have done something wrong, then we have to provide pathways for these people so they can rejoin society. If we don't, it can only explode. It can only explode in all of our faces."