

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

by Gary Smith and Kenneth Jarecke

© COPYRIGHT 1991 Time, Inc.

I have not told you half that happened when I was young. I can think back and tell you much more of war and horse stealing. But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere.

-- PLENTY COUPS

Chief of the Crows, 1930

SINGING. DID YOU HEAR IT? There was singing in the land once more that day. How could you not call the Crows a still-mighty tribe if you saw them on the move that afternoon? How could your heart not leave the ground if you were one of those Indian boys leading them across the Valley of the Big Horn?

It was March 24, 1983, a day of thin clouds and pale sun in southern Montana. A bus slowed as it reached the crest of a hill, and from there, for the first time, the boys inside it could see everything. Fender to fender stretched the caravan of cars behind them, seven miles, eight -- they had made the asphalt go away! Through the sage and the buffalo grass they swept, over buttes and boulder-filled gullies, as in the long-ago days when their scouts had spotted buffalo and their village had packed up its lodge poles and tepee skins, lashed them to the dogs and migrated in pursuit of the herd.

But what they pursued now was a high school basketball team, 12 teenagers on their way to Billings to play in a state tournament. The boys stared through their windows at the caravan. There was bone quiet in the bus. It was as if, all at once, the boys had sensed the size of this moment . . . and what awaited each of them once this moment was done.

In one seat, his nose pressed to the window, was one of Hardin High's starting guards, Everette Walks, a boy with unnaturally large hands who had never known his father. In a few weeks he would drop out of school, then cirrhosis would begin to lay waste his mother. He would wind up pushing a mop at 2 a.m. in a restaurant on the Crow reservation.

In another seat sat one of the forwards, an astounding leaper named Miles Fighter. He too had grown up with no father, and recently his mother had died of cirrhosis. In just

a few years, he would be unemployed and drinking heavily.

Not far away sat the other starting guard, Jo Jo Pretty Paint, a brilliant long-range shooter, a dedicated kid -- just a few minutes before a game at Miles City, his coach had found him alone, crouched, shuffling, covering an invisible opponent in the locker room shower. In two years Pretty Paint would go out drinking one evening, get into a car and careen over an embankment. He would go to his grave with a photograph of himself in his uniform, clutching a basketball.

Hunched nearby, all knees and elbows and shoulders, was Darren Big Medicine, the easygoing center. Sixteen months after Pretty Paint's death, he would leave a party after a night of drinking, fall asleep as he sped along a reservation road, drive into a ditch and die.

And then there was Takes Enemy. . . .

Weeping. Did you hear it? There was weeping in the land that day. Sobs for those missing from that glorious caravan, those decaying in the reservation dust, for Dale Spotted and Star Not Afraid and Darrell Hill and Tim Falls Down, Crow stars of the past dead of cirrhosis and suicide and knife-stabbing and a liquor-fogged car wreck. Sobs for the slow deaths occurring every night a mile from Jonathan Takes Enemy's high school, where an entire squad of jump shooters and dunkers and power forwards from the past could be found huddling against the chill and sprawled upon the sidewalks outside the bars on the south side of Hardin. Jonathan's predecessors. Jonathan's path-beaters. "Good Lord!" cries Mickey Kern, the computer-science teacher and former basketball scorekeeper at Hardin High. "How many have we lost? How many?"

But Takes Enemy -- he would be the one who escaped, wouldn't he? That was what the white coaches and teachers and administrators at his school kept telling him. His mind was sharp, his skill immense; the destiny of all those others needn't be his. Brigham Young wanted him. Oregon State and Arizona State had sent letters. O.J. Simpson would shake his hand in New York City and present him with a crystal cup for being named Montana's Outstanding Athlete of 1984. He was 6 ft. 2 in., he could twirl 360 degrees in the air and dunk the ball, he could shoot from distance. He loved to take a rebound with one hand and bring it to his other palm with a resounding slap, make a right-angle cut on the dribble at a velocity that

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

ripped the court wide open, then thread it with a blind running pass, an orange blur straight from the unconscious. "Watching him play," says Janine Pease-Windy Boy, the president of Little Big Horn College, the junior college on the Crow reservation, "was like watching clean water flow across rocks."

Young Indian boys formed trails behind him, wearing big buttons with his picture on their little chests. They ran onto the court and formed a corridor for him and his teammates to trot through during pregame introductions, they touched his hands and arms, they pretended to be him. The coaches had to lock the gym doors to start practice. Girls lifted their pens to the bathroom walls: "I was with Jonathan Takes Enemy last night," they wrote. "I'm going to have Jonathan Takes Enemy's baby." He was a junior in high school. Already he was the father of two. Already he drank too much. Already his sister Sharolyn was dead of cirrhosis. Sometimes he walked alone in the night, shaking and sobbing. He was the newest hero of the tribe that loved basketball too much.

Takes Enemy felt the bus wheels rolling beneath him. The sun arced through the Montana sky. The circle was the symbol of never-ending life to the Crows -- they saw it revealed in the shape and movement of the sun and moon, in the path of the eagle, in the contours of their tepees and the whorl of their dances. As long as the people kept faith with the circle, they believed, their tribe would endure. Jonathan settled back in his seat. Sometimes it seemed as if his life were handcuffed to a wheel, fated to take him up . . . and over . . . and down. . . .

Somewhere behind him on the highway, his first cousin would soon be getting off his job on the reservation's road crew and joining the exodus to the ball game in Billings -- the legendary Crow player, some people said; the best player, period, in Montana high school history, said others; the one who ignited his tribe's passion for high school basketball back in the 1950s and seemed to start this dark cycle of great players arising and vanishing: Larry Pretty Weasel. The one whose drinking helped drive him out of Rocky Mountain College in Billings and back to the reservation in 1958, just a few days before the NAIA's weekly bulletin arrived proclaiming him the best field-goal percentage shooter in the country.

Horns honked in the caravan behind Takes Enemy, passengers waved. In the long-ago days before white men had brought their horses or guns or cars or liquor, his people had chased buffalo in this same direction, across these same valleys, stampeding them over cliffs near the land where Billings would one day arise. This same creature whose skull the Crows would mount on a pole

and make the centerpiece of their religious Sun Dance . . . they would drive over the edge of the cliff and then scramble down to devour.

The bus ascended another hill. Takes Enemy looked back at his people one more time.

One winter night in 1989, the custodian at Lodge Grass High on the Crow reservation forgot to flick off a switch. When the team bus pulled into the parking lot after a road game nearly four hours away, the lights above six of the 17 outdoor baskets that surround the school were still burning. It was 2 a.m. It was snowing. Two games of five-on-five were being played.

Somehow, in the mindless way that rivers sculpt valleys and shame shapes history, the Montana Indians' purest howl against a hundred years of repression and pain had become . . . high school basketball. Yes, the Crows' 8,300 people were racked by alcoholism and poverty, 75% of them were unemployed, the attrition rate for those who went to college was 95%, and their homeland, through cheating, broken treaties and sellouts, had dwindled from the 38.8 million acres guaranteed them by the U.S. government in 1851 to the present-day 1.1 million -- however, just let them lace on sneakers and lay their hands on a basketball. Though Indians constituted but 7% of Montana's population, their schools would win 10 Class A, B and C state high school basketball titles between 1980 and '90.

To the north and northwest of the Crow reservation lay the reservations of the Blackfeet, Sioux, Flathead, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, Chippewa, Cree, Salish, Kootenai and Pen D'Oreilles; to the east lay the Cheyenne. These tribes too loved to run and shoot and jump. At tournament time in Montana, Indian teams were known to streak onto the floor for layup drills in war headdress, their fans to shake arenas with chants and war cries and pounding drums as their boys raced up and down the floor at speeds few white teams could sustain. Old women wrapped in blankets were known to pound the bleachers in unison with their canes, to lose their cool and swing the canes at the calves of enemy players; a few, back in the 1940s, even jabbed opponents with hat pins as the boys ran up the sidelines.

Their children spent their days shooting at crooked rims and rotting wooden backboards. Their young men drove for days to reach Indian tournaments all across America and came home to strut the dusty streets in the sheeny jackets they had won there.

Of all the perplexing games that the white man had brought with him -- frantic races for diplomas and dollar

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

bills and development -- here was the one that the lean, quick men on the reservations could instinctively play. Here was a way to bring pride back to their hollow chests and vacant eyes, some physical means, at last, for poor and undereducated men to regain the status they once had gained through hunting and battle. Crow men had never taken up the craftwork, weaving or metallurgy that males in other tribes had. They were warriors, meat eaters, nomads whose prestige and self-esteem had come almost entirely from fulfilling an intricate set of requirements -- called "counting coup" -- while capturing enemy horses or waging battle. A man could count coup by touching an enemy, by seizing a bow or a gun in a hand-to-hand encounter, by capturing a horse in a hostile camp or by being the pipe carrier (which signified leadership) on a successful raid. Only by counting coup, some say, could a man marry before the age of 25; only by counting coup in all four categories could he become a chief. Children were named after the exploits of warriors; men starved themselves for days and slept alone in the mountains to invite dreams that would guide them on raids; a woman attained honor by the number of scalps and the war booty captured by her man, tokens of which she brandished when she danced.

And then the white men hunted the buffalo nearly to extinction and banned intertribal warfare. "It castrated the Crow male," says Ben Pease, a tribal elder who played basketball for Hardin High in the 1940s. "It created a vacuum. During World War I we still weren't citizens, so our men couldn't gain prestige from that war. People began living off the war deeds of their ancestors, depending on them for their status. Some Crows fought in World War II, and for a while these men, especially those who came back with wounds or proof of bravery, became our leaders, and our ceremonies often revolved around them. But time passed, and there weren't enough wars or war heroes; there was a void that needed to be filled. In the late '50s Larry Pretty Weasel emerged at Hardin High, and our basketball players began to be noticed in the newspapers. That continued through the '60s and '70s; more and more of our children began to play. Something had to take war's place, some way had to be found to count coups. It was basketball."

Old Crow rituals had warm blood and fresh drama again. Some players tucked tiny medicine bundles -- little pouches that might contain tobacco seeds or small pieces of bone or feather -- inside their socks or tied them to their jerseys, the way warriors once had tied them to their braids before entering battle. Some burned cedar and prayed before big games. The same drum cadence and honor songs used 200 years ago to celebrate the seizing of a dozen horses or the killing of three Sioux now

reverberated through gymnasiums and community halls at the capture of a basketball trophy.

"For us, a victory in a high school basketball game is a victory over everyday misery and poverty and racism," says Dale Old Horn, who heads the department of Crow studies and social sciences at Little Big Horn College. "But it's not a real victory. It doesn't decrease bigotry. It doesn't lessen alcoholism. It doesn't remove one Indian from the welfare rolls or return a single acre of our land. It gives us pseudo pride. It hasn't led us on to greater things."

No Indian has ever played in the NBA. Only one, Don Wetzel of the Blackfeet, ever came off a Montana reservation to play for an NCAA Division I team (the University of Montana, 1967-71). Trophy cases in the lobbies of Indian schools throughout the state are filled with gleaming silver . . . and with black-bordered dedications to the dead. This is not just the Crows' tragedy. Two months after graduating from Browning High on the Blackfeet reservation in 1987, 6 ft. 3 in. All-Stater Gary Cross Guns packed his car to go to a junior college in Kansas. One last night out was all he wanted. The next morning his sister went for a horseback ride. She found her brother's car and his body in Cut Bank Creek.

Wetzel, who once coached basketball at Browning and is now superintendent of schools in Harlem, Mont., could bear it no longer. In the three years since Cross Guns's death, he has traveled 14,000 miles and talked to 12,000 kids, "trying," he says, "to make people see how scary this whole situation has become."

Every now and then, a lesser player left the Crow reservation and quietly, with no scholarship or fanfare, got his degree. But as best as anyone can figure, since 1970 only one prominent Crow player, Luke Spotted Bear, has received a college scholarship and graduated (from Mary College in Bismarck, N.Dak.) -- and Spotted Bear often felt that his people held this against him. "Some of them say I'm too good for them now," he says. "If possible, they don't want to be around me."

College recruiters stopped coming to the reservation, opportunities disappeared. Sean Fritzler, who averaged 29.8 points a game as a senior in 1989, shot 68% from the field and was valedictorian of his class at Plenty Coups High School, did not receive a letter of interest from a single university.

"Well, I tried to work with Indians," says Herb Klindt, coach at Rocky Mountain College for 37 years. "I tried to keep them in college. But I got to a point where I just threw up my hands in disgust and gave up, and most of the other

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

coaches did too."

The game that was a highway into mainstream America for black men . . . was a cul-de-sac for red ones. Something happened to their heroes when the drum beats died, when the war whoops faded, when the faces in the audience were not like theirs. Something in the Crows' love for basketball was toxic.

And along came a boy who was asked to change all that. Along came a nice, shy kid -- Jonathan Takes Enemy.

His people understood his significance. They sent him off to do battle with all the spiritual might they could muster. Before big games a medicine man would receive a cigarette from the Takes Enemy family, take it outside their house just in front of the Little Big Horn River in the town of Crow Agency, light it and pray to the Great Spirit for Jonathan.

Once, the medicine man wafted cedar smoke and an eagle feather over the gold chain that Takes Enemy carried with him to games for good luck. He warned Takes Enemy not to shake his opponents' hands before a game, so they could not drain away his power. All these steps were meant to protect Jonathan from harm, but he couldn't quite trust them. How could he escape the reservation and take up the solitary quest for success in the white world if he let himself think in the old way? How could he escape the dark fate of Spotted and Not Afraid and Falls Down if he believed that a man's destiny hung upon a puff of smoke in the wind?

When members of the tribe invited players on Jonathan's team to join them in sweat baths before the division and state tournaments, in order to purify their bodies and spirits in the ritual way their ancestors had before battle, Jonathan had refused; it was simply too hot in the sweat lodge. Jonathan's coach at Hardin, George Pfeifer -- in his first year of coaching Indians and curious about their rituals -- consented to do it. On a 20 degrees day on the banks of the Little Big Horn, a powdery snow falling from the sky, the short, stout white man followed the example of eight Crow men and stripped off his clothes. "Go in, Brother George," directed one of them. Brother George got on his knees and crawled behind them into a low, dome-shaped shelter made of bent willows and covered by blankets. Inside, it was so dark that Brother George could not see the hand he held up in front of his face.

Someone poured a dipper of water over sandstones that had been heated in a bonfire for hours. Steam erupted from the rocks, hissed up and filled the sweat lodge with heat more intense than any sauna's. Sitting cheek to

cheek, the men put a switch in Brother George's hand, expecting him to beat himself upon the back and legs to make it even hotter. In the darkness, he heard the others thwacking themselves, groaning and praying for his team in the Crow tongue. He gave up all pretense, flopped onto the floor and cupped his hands around his mouth to find a gulp of cooler air.

A half hour passed like this. A couple of dozen more dippers of water were poured onto the scalded rocks. At last the sweat-soaked men crawled out into the frigid daylight and promptly leapt into the icy river. Brother George's legs refused. He stood there, trembling with cold, about to be sick for three days.

"You're not going to dive in the river, Brother George?" one cried.

"No way."

"That's all right, Brother George. No goddam magic in that."

But here was the difference: In a few weeks Pfeifer would laugh and tell anecdotes about the day that he left his world and entered another. Jonathan could not. Sometimes he felt the suspicious eyes of whites upon him, felt his tongue turn to stone, his English jumble, when he tried to express to them his feelings. He had but to utter that name to white ears -- Takes Enemy -- to feel his own ears begin to turn red.

All day and night as he grew up, the television had been on in his home, floating images into his head of white men who drove long cars and lived in wide houses, of Indians who were slow-witted and savage and usually, by the movie's end, dead. One day, when he was in junior high, he saw a movie about Custer's Last Stand. He couldn't help himself; in his stomach he felt thrilled when the Indians rolled over the hills and slaughtered every white man. It bewildered him, a few years later, to learn that it was the Sioux and Cheyenne who had slain Custer's troops -- that several Crow scouts had ridden with Custer. Everything was muddy, nothing ran clean. It was whites who made him speak English most of the day when he entered first grade, rather than the Crow language he had grown up speaking; whites who hung a dead coyote from the outside mirror of Plenty Coups High School's team bus; whites who sang "One little, two little, three little Indians" at his brothers when they played away games in high school. And yet it was Hardin's white athletic director and assistant principal, Kim Anderson, who sometimes drove far out of his way to make sure Jonathan made it to school in the morning; white teachers who offered him

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

encouragement and hope when he passed them in the halls.

Sometimes he would bicycle up the steep incline to the Custer Battlefield, a mile and a half from his home, to sit alone near the markers that showed where each of the white men had fallen, and to stare off into the distance. From here the world stretched out and waited for him to touch it; from here he could see land and a life beyond the reservation. In the daydream he often had here, it would be he who was walking from the wide house to the long car, he waving a cheery goodbye to his wife and kids, he driving off down the well paved road to the well paid job, he acting out the cliched American dream he saw on the TV screen. What choice had he? There no longer existed an Indian success cliché to dream of.

An hour or two later he would fly back down the hillside from the battlefield, barely needing to touch his pedals, determined to make the dream come true. It was only when the long hill ran out, when he labored back into his town, that the heaviness returned to his legs.

One evening a few months after his senior season, in which he averaged 28 points a game and shattered a Montana record by scoring 123 points in three state tournament games, his mother, Dorothy, held a "giveaway" in his honor. She was suffering from diabetes, which in a few years would force the amputation of her right leg below the knee and lash her to a kidney dialysis machine three days each week, yet she was determined to thank God and her tribe for the greatness of her son. Jonathan, her seventh surviving child (two had died shortly after birth), had been born with a crooked face and a too-large nose, and so in her hospital bed Dorothy had lifted the infant above her eyes and turned all her fears for him over to God. "Here, Lord," she whispered, "raise him up, he's all yours." The Lord's day-care center turned out to be a basketball court; from the age of three, all Jonathan did was dribble and shoot. On dry, frigid days he would play for so long that the ball would chafe away his skin, and he would come home at dusk with bloody fingers for his mother to bandage. Dorothy's eyes still shone when she stared at the Mother's Day card he had drawn in crayon for her in second grade: three yellow flowers in a blue vase, a snowcapped mountain beneath the sun -- and a man slam-dunking a basketball. And just look how the boy had turned out, with a face straight and well proportioned, a body long and strong, a name that the wind had carried across the Big Horn and Wolf mountains, had whispered into the ears of the Cheyenne and Sioux, even laid upon the tongues of the pale skins. If only the boy's eyes would leave his shoes. If only the boy would stop stumbling home at 4 a.m. with the same stink on his breath as her

husband, Lacey. . . .

In the giveaway ceremony, Jonathan's exploits were to be celebrated in the same manner in which Crows once commemorated a successful raid. Besides all the cousins and uncles and aunts and nephews and nieces who gathered, Jonathan's other "family," his clan, was there. (There are 10 clans in the Crow tribe, some consisting of as many as a thousand members; at birth one automatically becomes a member of the same clan as one's mother.) First Jonathan was to dance in a circle as singers sang his honor song, then he was to stand to the side as an "announcer" gave an account of his deeds, and finally he was to give away packages that consisted of four gifts to his clan uncles and aunts. It is a lovely ritual, one in which the hero, in a reversal of the white man's custom, showers his community with gifts in gratitude for the support and prayers that enabled him to succeed. Jonathan's family, just barely getting by on his father's meager salary as a custodian in the reservation hospital, couldn't possibly afford all these gifts, but in keeping with tradition his relatives had contributed so that the giveaway could take place.

Jonathan dreaded the stares that would be drawn to him if he wore the ritual Indian clothing, but he couldn't bear to disappoint his people. Slowly he pulled on the ribbon shirt, the buckskin vest, the colorful beaded armband and the war bonnet. They felt so odd upon him; he felt like no warrior at all. The first horse he had ever ridden had flung him from its back; the first bullet he had ever fired at an animal had slain a dirt clod far from its target. One of his great-great-grandfathers, known simply as Fly, had been a powerful warrior, a possessor of six wives. Another, Red Bear, had been a medicine man so potent that he simply had to fill his peace pipe and hold it toward the sun and all the tobacco in it would burn. Their home had been the river-fed valleys and shimmering plains, their roof the sky, their walls the snow-topped mountains a week's walk away. Jonathan? His home was a cramped three-bedroom box in which as many as 15 siblings and cousins often vied for sleeping space, sometimes on the floor beneath the kitchen table or even in the driveway, in the backseat of a car. Jonathan's bed, until he was seven, was a mattress jammed between the beds of his mom and dad.

With his family and his clan trailing behind him, he lowered his eyes and led them into the Little Big Horn College building for the giveaway. Rather than tokens of scalps or war booty captured from the enemy, Dorothy wore a huge orange shawl with large black letters stitched upon it that listed his coups: JONATHAN TAKES ENEMY, STATE CLASS A MVP, ALL-STATE 1ST TEAM, ALL-CONFERENCE 1984, CONVERSE BASKETBALL

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

ALL-AMERICA HONORABLE MENTION, HERTZ AWARD, ATHLETE OF THE YEAR. Beneath were sewn four white stars; four is the Crows' sacred number. Jonathan was supposed to lead the assembly in a dance, but his feet could not quite bring themselves to do it. Almost imperceptibly he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, leading everyone around the room again and again in a plodding circle as the big drum pounded and the 11 singers in the center lifted their voices to his glory -- and reminded him of his obligation to those around him.

Outstanding man

Look all around you

Nothing lasts forever

Look all around you

Share your talent and knowledge

Share what? All he had to divvy up, it sometimes seemed, were self-doubt and pain. One day in ninth grade, at the end of basketball practice, his family had come to the school and told him that his sister had died at the age of 24, after years of hard drinking. He turned to the wall and broke down. Just a few weeks later his girlfriend told him she was pregnant. Terrified, he dropped out of school for the rest of the year, hid from his teachers on the streets, sometimes even hid from his own family -- and reached for the same poison as his sister had.

He knew the danger he was wooing. The night he learned he had made the varsity, a rare honor for a freshman, he and a few friends went out in a pickup truck to drink beer. A tribal police car pulled up to the truck. Alcohol was banned on the reservation, but Crow policemen sometimes looked the other way. "Go home," this cop ordered the teenagers, but the kid at the wheel panicked, jammed the accelerator and roared away. Suddenly, Takes Enemy, a boy who was afraid even on a sled, found himself hurtling down a curving country road at 100 mph, four police cars with flashing lights and howling sirens just behind him. One came screaming up beside the truck, trying to slip by and box the teenagers in. Instead of letting it pass, Jonathan's friend lurched into the other lane to cut the car off. The pickup truck skidded off the road, toppled onto its roof and into a ditch. Takes Enemy limped out, somehow with just a badly bruised hip.

He vowed not to drink again. He remembered how uneasy he had been as a child, awakening on the mattress between his parents' beds to see the silhouette of his father stagger into the room. Even in an alcoholic haze, his

father was a gentle man, but, still, that silhouette was not Dad -- it was a stranger. Then, too, there was what alcohol had done to his cousin the legend, Pretty Weasel. So many fans thronged gymnasiums to watch Pretty Weasel play for Hardin High that his team had to crawl through windows to get to its locker room. He could shoot jump shots with either hand, fake so deftly that he put defenders on their pants and, at 5 ft. 10 in., outjump players a half-foot taller. It was almost, an opponent would muse years later, "as if you were playing against a kind of enchanted person." Pretty Weasel's younger brother Lamonte got drunk and died in a car accident. Then Pretty Weasel partied his way out of a four-year college scholarship and onto a reservation road crew.

But Jonathan couldn't keep his vow. He felt as if he were locked up in a tiny room inside his body, and it was only when he was playing basketball or drinking that he could break out of it. The first time he was drunk had been in seventh grade at Crow Fair, the week-long celebration every August when the field on the edge of his town became the tepee capital of the world. Hundreds of tepees were erected, and Indians from far away came to dance and drink and sing with his people deep into the night. Jonathan slipped the bootlegger \$4 for a half-pint of whiskey, poured it down -- and out poured the talking, laughing Jonathan he had always yearned to be. His mother came and found him at the fair at 3 a.m. Dorothy, a sweet, passive woman dedicated to the Pentecostal Church, began yelling that he would end up just like his father . . . but that was all. In many homes across the reservation . . . that was all.

His sophomore year he moved in with his girlfriend and her parents, to help her bring up their baby daughter. Four months after his girlfriend delivered, she had news for him. She was pregnant again. His whole life seemed hopeless, his daydream of escaping snuffed out. Was it his fault? No matter how hard Jonathan thought about it, he could never be sure. So many things had happened to his people that were beyond their control, it had become almost impossible to identify those that were not. He watched three brothers go to college and quickly drop out. He watched all three of them take turns with the bottle.

There were no movie theaters or bowling alleys or malls on the reservation. When it became too dark to see the rim on the courts behind the elementary school, Jonathan and his friends would drive up and down the main street of Crow Agency -- from JR's Smokehouse to the irrigation supply yard and back again -- seeing the same people, the same mange-eaten dogs and rust-eaten cars, until the monotony numbed them. Then someone would say, "Let's go drinking." It was a ritual that had become a display of

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

solidarity and shared values among his tribe, so much so that to say no was to mark oneself as an alien. None of the teenagers had enough money to buy liquor, but all of them had Indian wealth -- relatives. Uncles and aunts, cousins and grandparents are as close to most Crows as parents and siblings are to a white child; a boy can walk into five or six houses without knocking, open the refrigerator without asking, eat without cleaning up the crumbs. Jonathan and his friends would each ask a relative or two for a buck, and all of the sharing and family closeness in which the Crows pride themselves would boomerang. Each kid would come up with three or four dollars to pitch into the pot, and off they'd go to the liquor stores that waited for them half a hiccup past the reservation borders. It wouldn't take long to see someone they knew who was of drinking age -- the boys were related by blood or clan, it seemed, to everyone. They whisked their beer or whiskey back onto the reservation, where the statutes against juveniles drinking were less severe, and began gulping it as if they were racing to see who could sledgehammer reality quickest, who could forget his life first.

Jonathan's absences from school mounted. That was how he responded to trouble. He disappeared. His parents wanted him to get an education, but to make the house quiet for two hours each night and insist that he study, to pull him out of his bed when the school bus was rolling up the road -- no, they couldn't quite do that. Each of them had dropped out after the ninth grade, but there was more to it than that. Almost every Crow parent had a close relative who had been forcibly taken from his home by white government agents in the early 1900s and sent off to a faraway boarding school, where his hair was shorn, his Indian clothes and name were taken away, and he was beaten for speaking his own language. How many Indians could chase an education without feeling an old pang in their bones?

On intelligence alone, Takes Enemy had made the honor roll in junior high, but now he fell behind in class and was too ashamed to ask the white teachers for help. He lost his eligibility for the first half-dozen games of both his sophomore and junior seasons, regained it after each Christmas and started dropping in 25 or 30 points with a dozen assists a game, leading his teammates flying up and down the floor. His coaches called it Blur Ball. His people called it Indian Ball. And his brothers, three of whom had also been stars at Hardin High, would whip the crowd to wildness, reaching back into imaginary quivers on their backs, loading their make-believe bows and zinging invisible arrows at the other teams; vibrating their hands over their mouths to make the high, shrill woo-woo battle cry that once froze frontiersmen's hearts; shouting themselves hoarse, making Takes Enemy feel as if he

could simply lift up his legs and let his people's ecstasy wash him up and down the hardwood.

He scored 49 points in a state tournament game his senior year and was named the tournament's MVP. The outside walls of his house literally vanished, swathed in posters of congratulation from his fans. "A great major college prospect," said then BYU coach Ladell Andersen.

Do it, teachers urged him. Do it so they could once more believe in what they were doing, do it so all the Crow children whose eyes were on him could see how it was done. "Just one," they kept saying to him. "If just one great basketball player from here could make the break and succeed, it could change everything. College recruiters would start coming here, other kids would follow your example. You can be the one, Jonathan. You can be the breakthrough."

He was flown to BYU. He stared at the 26,000 white faces strolling across campus. He stood at the top of the basketball arena and looked down, his eyes growing wider and wider, the court growing tinier and farther away. He had never heard of anyone like himself playing in a place like this; he couldn't even fathom it. "He said almost nothing the whole time," recalls Andersen. "I asked him a few questions. He was nodding his head yes when he should have been shaking it no."

The stack of letters from universities grew at his home. Jonathan never replied. His senior year was ending, his sun descending toward the hills. In the long-ago days a Crow hero could go on doing what he did until an arrow or a bullet found him, then let the breeze carry off his soul to the Other Side Camp. But in the 20th century the hero's bullet was high school graduation -- and then he had to go on living. "Where are you going to college?" people asked Jonathan everywhere he went. "He'll be home by Thanksgiving," they told each other. "Like crabs in a bucket, that's how we are," says Dell Fritzler, the coach at Plenty Coups High. "Whoever tries to get out, we yank him back down." Even Jonathan's own Indian name -- bestowed upon him during his senior season after it had come to the medicine man in a dream -- tugged downward at the boy. *liwaaialetasaask*, he was called. Does Not Put Himself Above Others. Go off to college? That would Definitely Put Himself Above Others. No, white people couldn't understand this; Jonathan himself could barely grasp the code: It was O.K. for an Indian to clench his teeth and compete as part of a team, especially an Indian team. But to do it alone, to remove yourself from the dozen people in your living room at midnight and go sit over a chemistry or algebra book -- in many families, that tainted you. "We want our young people to go off and show the

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

world how great a Crow can be," says Fritzier, "but as soon as someone does, as soon as anyone starts trying or studying too hard, a lot of us say, 'Look at him. He's trying to be a white man.' "

Takes Enemy's head spun. There were just too many mixed signals, too many invisible arrows from the audience whizzing by. Like most Crows, he'd been brought up not to make autonomous decisions but to take his cues from his immediate family, his extended family, his clan and his tribe. If they hadn't decided whether to assimilate into the white man's world or to recoil from it -- how could he? And then, his two little children -- he couldn't just walk away from them. The small living room he grew up in, with its 65 photographs of family members on the wall -- a warm, happy place that the people in those pictures would flow into with no invitation, sit around sipping coffee and exchanging the sly puns and double entendres that his people excelled at, talking until there was nothing left to talk about and then talking some more -- he couldn't just leave that behind. "Why?" he remembers wondering. "Why do I have to do it the white man's way to be a success in this world?" Why did all the human wealth he had gathered in his life, all the close friends and relatives, count for nothing when he crossed the reservation borders; why did material wealth seem to be the only gauge? And then his eyes and whys would turn the other way: "Why am I so important to my people? Why do I have to carry the hopes of the Crows?" All he had really wanted to do, ever since taking apart a stereo in the 10th grade and staring in wonder at all the whatchamacallits inside, was to go to a vocational school and learn electronics. But no, the herd was rolling, the people were waving and shouting him on, his legs were pulling him closer and closer to the ledge. He drank to close his eyes to it. One night at a school dance an administrator found out he was drunk. The next day he was ordered to take a chemical-dependency class.

Where were the people in his tribe who had lived through this? Why weren't they at Takes Enemy's door? Myron Falls Down, a prolific scorer for a Crow independent team in the 1970s, heard the rumors and wondered if he should do something. Six years earlier it had come to Falls Down like thunder through a hangover: That the addiction sucking the life from him and his people went beyond the beer they drank at night after playing ball, beyond the pills some ingested and the weed they puffed, beyond the Aqua Velva and Lysol and fingernail-polish remover some of them swilled; that basketball, the way the Crows were using it, had become a drug too. One morning in 1979, at the age of 27, he stood up from the bed where he slept every night with his ball. He went to the two glass-enclosed cases in the living room where his 50 trophies were displayed, and he began throwing them into

cardboard boxes. "What are you doing?" cried his mother. She and Myron's nieces raced to unscrew the little figurines from their wooden bases before he could sweep all of them away. He grabbed the five jackets he had won in tournaments, loaded them and his trophies into his car, drove to the dumpster on the edge of Lodge Grass and heaved them all in. He would never take another drink or drug after that day. He would never play, or go to see, another basketball game -- not even, 10 years later, the junior high school games of his 13-year-old son. "If there was a connection between education and basketball on this reservation, there would be nothing wrong with basketball," says Falls Down, now a tribal health administrator. "But right now there is none. Basketball is an escape from reality for us. But I never did speak to Jonathan. I felt he or his family would have approached me if they wanted to hear my message."

Pretty Weasel -- where was he? The man named Montana's Outstanding Athlete 27 years before Takes Enemy, the one recruited by the University of Utah, Texas A&M and Seattle University, the cousin caught in this same crossfire eight years before Jonathan was born. Relatives and friends had sat at Takes Enemy's dinner table to spill their guts and offer counsel, but the man who with one look or word might have given Jonathan a glimpse at the ledger, at the remorse and relief in the soul of a man who has walked away from his greatness, had signaled nothing. Pretty Weasel stood in the shadows at basketball games, refused invitations to giveaways, belittled his own legend. "Never saw myself play," he said. "Can't picture myself being able to play with those black boys." Years later, at the age of 51 and no longer a drinker, he would wish that he had gotten his degree, explored the borders of his talent. "But I don't give advice," he says. "I guess I feel more like the whites do. That every man can be as good as he wants to. That every man does it on his own."

Graduation day came. Jonathan still hadn't decided. Barely, just barely, he got his diploma. As the teachers watched him carry it across the stage, Anderson, the assistant principal, turned and said, "I hope we're not looking at the first day of the end of his life."

When the dance is over, sweetheart,

I will take you home in my one-eyed Ford.

That sloppy man with the red-rimmed eyes and the puffy face, taller than the others. . . .

That whiskered man with the slurred speech and the thick belly and the slumped shoulders, standing on the



## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

riverbank near Two Leggins Bridge . . . that's him. That's Jonathan Takes Enemy.

It's 1989. It's 3 a.m. When the bars close in Hardin, Jonathan and his friends often come here to sing and laugh and drink and dance until the sun comes up. At dawn somebody often hits somebody, and somebody's brother or cousin jumps in to help, and there's a whole pile of them in the dirt. And then they go home to sleep. There's no work for most of them to do.

But the sky's still dark, they all still feel good. They're singing "49" songs, native chants interspersed with English lyrics, sad-happy tunes to the beat of a drum. Takes Enemy still can't bring himself to dance or sing, but he's thumping out the drumbeat on a car hood.

"Way-la-hey-ley, way-la-hey-ley . . . ya-hey-oh-way-la-hey. . .," his companions croon. "When the dance is over, sweetheart, I will take you home in my one-eyed Ford."

The dance is over. It ended four years ago, as soon as it began. Six games into Jonathan's freshman season at Sheridan College, the Wyoming school whose scholarship offer he grabbed at the last minute because it was just an hour's drive from home, he quit. It's all still a blur to him: Hiding from everyone when it was time to leave home. Reporting to college two days late and only because Anderson found him and took him there. Being stopped in the yard as he left, asked by his teary-eyed mother, "Are you sure you want to go, Jonathan? They aren't forcing you?" Trying to go from a world where it's disrespectful to look someone in the eye into one where it's disrespectful not to. Sitting alone in his dorm room for days, walking alone to the cafeteria, eating alone. Telling none of the white people about his fear and loneliness. Being guided by no one through the bewildering transition from reservation to white world. Knowing before his first game that something was wrong, because he had done something he could never do the night before a high school game -- sleep. Knowing that the feeling he had had at Hardin -- that he was on a mission, playing for his people -- was gone. Returning to the reservation three straight weekends and not coming back in time for Monday practice. Two weekends later, not coming back at all. Walking away from the No. 1-ranked junior college team in the nation . . . but whose nation, whose?

"Crawled back under the blanket," said the whites. They've seen Indians do it so often that they have a cliché for it. "Every Indian that leaves has a rubber band attached to his back," says Jonathan's brother James. The Crows have seen their people do it so often that they only shrug. In some strange way, by going away to college and then by quitting, too, Takes Enemy has managed to fulfill

everyone's expectations.

Somewhere, perhaps upon the hilltop at Custer Battlefield, his daydream still exists. More and more, he bicycles back there, as if in search of it. After all, he is only 24, he tells himself, his life is just beginning -- or already half over, according to Crow life-expectancy charts.

His pockets are empty. He bums beer money from his dad, who has stayed clean since entering an alcohol rehabilitation program recently. No one will hire Jonathan. No one will buy him drinks at the bars in Hardin the way they did when he was in high school. Sometimes he walks out of the bars and onto the streets, sees a teacher from the school driving by and slinks into the shadows. He's not a bum, he's not. Twice he has been thrown into the reservation jail for drinking, lain on the floor all night in a cell with 30 other drunk men, listened to them moan and retch.

He has gained more than 20 pounds. He still plays ball, lumbering up the floor in Indian tournaments held across the state and the country. After games the team goes drinking -- and sometimes, even right before them. He signs up for courses at the reservation's junior college; some he completes, some he doesn't. He has a new girlfriend, Trudi Big Hair, and two more children, Jonathan and Tashina. The four of them sleep in a small room at his parents' house, and no one ever hints that it's time he moved out. Sometimes in the morning the children jump on him in bed and shout, exploding his hangovers. He drifts back to sleep until noon, goes to a class or two, kills a few hours staring at the TV or picking up his welfare check, plays pickup basketball with his friends until dark . . . and then often starts all over again. Each time he drinks, Trudi etches an X on the calendar. Day by day, Jonathan watches his life get crossed out.

Once or twice he has gone to see his old school play. He doesn't go inside. He watches from a half-open door. It's not his court anymore, not his domain. A new hero has arisen, a boy at Lodge Grass High named Elvis Old Bull. Old Bull took his team to state titles in '88 and '89, was named tournament MVP both years, noticed kids beginning to dress and cut their hair like he does, heard himself called a major college prospect. He has a child, but isn't married; he skips school too much; he drinks too much; his eyes are haunted. Sometimes Jonathan feels as if there is something he could tell the boy -- but no, he can't, he can't. Old Bull enters a rehabilitation center just after his junior season. The treatment fails. He misses far too many days of school to remain eligible for his final season, but the people need that third straight title too much, and school administrators can't quite bring

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

themselves to sit him down. "You're going to end up just like Jonathan Takes Enemy," people in the tribe keep telling him. He leads his team to the third state title, wins his third tournament MVP trophy, then simply stops going to school. He watches his classmates graduate through eyes swollen from a car wreck from another night's drinking. And the sun arcs across the Montana sky, and the eagle wheels, and the circle remains unbroken.

Autumn 1990. The sun drops behind the Big Horn Mountains. An orange 1980 Mustang turns onto the highway and bears north across the reservation, toward Billings. There is no caravan behind him. Takes Enemy goes alone.

His face is clean-shaven, his clothes are neat, his cheekbones have bloomed again. He is 25, but he looks like that boy in those high school pictures once more. All summer he has jumped rope, slipping into his backyard to do it at midnight when no one on the reservation could see.

He presses the accelerator. Just a short visit home today; he cannot dally. He needs to get off the reservation by nightfall and back to his apartment in Billings, to Trudi and little Jonathan and Tashina, back to his new life as a student and a basketball player at Rocky Mountain College. Because when the darkness comes and his friends come. . . . "To do this," he says, "I can't be near them. I miss them. But I have to be alone." He hasn't had a drink in months. He hears that Old Bull has made a change too, moving to Bozeman with hopes of fulfilling his high school requirements and getting a shot at college ball.

"It's my decision to go to college this time," Jonathan says. "I finally realized that I was running out of time. It's not that the reservation is a bad place. There are many good people there. But it's just not a place where you can become what you want to become. It's not a place where you can achieve your dreams."

Last spring he convinced Luke Gerber, the coach at Hardin High, that he was serious. Gerber called Jeff Malby, the coach at Rocky Mountain College, and Malby remembered how the clean water had once flowed across the rocks. He offered Takes Enemy a scholarship to the liberal arts college in Billings, with 810 students. So far, it fits Jonathan just right.

He passes the reservation border, glances into his rearview mirror. He knows that some people back there are now calling him an "apple" -- red on the outside, white on the inside. He knows what he is leaving behind, what he is losing. Knows it in the morning when he passes his

new neighbors in Billings and they just barely nod. Knows it when it's midnight and he and Trudi are buried in textbooks, and the apartment is silent. "It's just too quiet here," he'll say. "We're so isolated." And when he lies in bed at night and thinks of his sick mother, he knows it then, too.

His eyes move back to the windshield. Ahead of him, over the rolling hills, across the sage and buffalo grass, he can just make out the soft electric glow of Billings. He's starting to get an idea of what lies this way. He's passing all four of his classes. He's averaging 19.8 points and 4.6 assists for his new team. He's just getting his bearings, but his coaches say that he'll soon establish himself as the best player in Montana and that he's destined to be an NAIA All-America before he's done.

Everything's still so new to him. Paying his own rent each month from the grant money allotted to him by the tribe and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, paying electric bills, buying his own food. Studying until 1 a.m., making sure that Trudi gets off to Eastern Montana College in the morning, that his kids get off to day care and preschool, living in the white man's world, in a hurry, on a schedule.

He wants to go back to the reservation someday and help kids to take the risk, to see both the beauty and the danger of the circle. But he may never live there again. He rolls down his car window. He listens to the air. There is no singing in the land. There is only a quiet, sad-happy song inside a young man's heart.

CAPTION: IN TOWNS LIKE CROW AGENCY, HOOPS ARE PART OF THE LANDSCAPE

CAPTION: TAKES ENEMY FELT BACKED AGAINST A WALL BY THE EXPECTATIONS OF HIS TRIBE AND TEACHERS

CAPTION: AT LODGE GRASS HIGH, PLAYERS AND YOUNG FANS ARE GRIPPED BY BASKETBALL FEVER

CAPTION: COACH GORDON REAL BIRD (LEFT) AND HIS FATHER, PIUS, PRAY TOGETHER IN A SWEAT LODGE

CAPTION: LODGE GRASS HIGH (IN WHITE) IS ONE TEAM TO WHICH THE NAME "INDIANS" TRULY APPLIES

CAPTION: PRETTY WEASEL TURNED HIS BACK ON A COLLEGE BASKETBALL SCHOLARSHIP

CAPTION: HIGH SCHOOL HEROES ARE CHEERED ON

---

## Shadow of a nation: the Crows, once proud warriors, now seek glory - but often find tragedy - in basketball.

BY EVERY GENERATION OF CROWS

CAPTION: NOW SETTLED IN BILLINGS, TAKES ENEMY  
FOCUSES ON SCHOOL AND FAMILY