

For Fathers And Sons, Love and Basketball

Ex-NBA Star's Camp Focuses on Family

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BREWSTER, N.Y. -- As sneakers screeched and coaches barked across three full-size indoor courts, one of dozens of careening basketballs plunked Nikkei Supreme, 6, square on the forehead, sending him to the sideline in tears.

His father, Infinite Supreme, checked Nikkei's head for bruises and his glasses for cracks; finding none, he told his son to suck it up. "You want the other boys to see you cry?" he asked in hushed tones. "Big boys don't cry for things like that."

A hug and pat on the butt later, the duo headed back into the scrum of fathers and sons shooting baskets, diving on the floor and sweating profusely as part of the "Father Knows Best" basketball retreat sponsored by former New York Knicks star Allan Houston.



Here, professional players and coaches share the court with weekend warriors and their sons, teaching them the proper jump-shooting technique, strategies for playing defense and the importance of eating right and staying fit.

But at this three-day retreat, basketball is only the lure. Equal parts church revival, basketball camp and therapy session, the event is all about relationships: fathers with sons, mentors with mentees, individuals with Jesus Christ.

Houston, a two-time NBA all-star who retired last October after nagging knee injuries ended his 12-year career, founded it three years ago as a way to strengthen the bond between fathers and sons, which is a particular problem among African American children, half of whom are raised by single mothers. The all-expenses-paid event includes frank discussions about sex, drugs and alcohol -- offering an alternative to the popular image of some athletes, particularly NBA players, as immature millionaires and irresponsible fathers.

"Being a good father is much more than just being present in your kid's life," Houston, a father of three, told participants last week. "The way we treat people in the fast-food line, the way they see us treating our wives. That's the man he's going to become."

Houston, 35, has always been a coach's son, tagging along with his father, Wade Houston, at high school and college practices. The elder Houston was an assistant under Denny Crum at the University of Louisville and later head coach at the University of Tennessee.

Wade Houston wasn't easy on his son. He'd taunt him, trip him, foul him, anything to impede young Allan's way to the basket. When the son quit in disgust, the father would drag him back for more

punishment. Still, when the time came for college, the high school all-American chose to follow his father there, becoming the Volunteers' all-time leading scorer.

In the NBA, first with Detroit, and later with the Knicks, Houston was known as a silky shooter with a soft voice. His teammates called him Easy Al because he never seemed to get flustered on the court. Off the court, Houston said the toughest part was staying away from the vices, including the women who pursue NBA players.

Houston credits good friends he met in the NBA and his father, who led by example. The key to their relationship -- and their message for all fathers, coaches and mentors of young men -- is the importance of being there no matter how often a child fails.

"If you don't have unconditional love, you will write young people off," said Wade Houston, now a businessman in Louisville. "You say, 'If you don't do this or if you do that again, that's it.' It's hard for me to write them off. You have to keep pounding away because you never know when the light bulb is going to come on. They have to understand you're not going to leave them."

The 60 pairs of fathers and sons as well as mentors and mentees were mostly from New York's five boroughs, though some traveled to the event from farther afield. Supreme, 38, for instance, is a manager for Verizon who grew up in the District and now lives in Laurel. His son, Nikkei, lives in New York.

The Cutinos, Robert Sr. and Robert Jr., live in the Bronx. They already spend lots of time together, the dad coaching his 13-year-old's basketball team.

But with a wife and two other children, his job at a law firm and his mentoring work at his nonprofit mentoring program, the elder Cutino said it's tough to get it all together.

"Sometimes you get so caught up in your life, you don't get to spend time individually with your kid like this," said Robert Cutino Sr., who fully embraces the challenge from the Houstons to reach out to more than just your own children.

"The streets are just devouring our young men," he said. "You can't replace their fathers but you can show them it's not the end of the world that their father is not there."

The entire retreat, including hotels, meals and giveaways, costs in excess of \$100,000, which Allan Houston pays out of his own pocket. His goal next year is to expand to other cities.

Houston said that while the event is faith-based, he does not promote religion. For him, it's all about building a relationship with God, something he says everyone can relate to.

During one of the learning sessions last weekend, a father broke down in tears and publicly asked his son, "Is there anything I don't do, or that you need?" Others gathered around him to pray and comfort them. There were a few nervous titters as one youth pastor, Blake Wilson of Houston, talked about the biblical view of sex. Sons leaned over to fathers to ask difficult questions.

The physical exertion of the retreat also took its toll on some of the fathers, who were trying to keep up with energetic sons. After one gym session, one young man told his father, "Come on old man, you still got it."