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Impressions:

## **Houston's camp goes further**

### **Ex-Knick sponsors tournament to bring dads and sons closer**

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Today at Riverbank State Park, just west of Harlem, dozens of fathers will join their sons for a two-on-two basketball tournament, and the proudest man on the court will be the one who fathered the idea.

"This camp is more than just basketball," Allan Houston said the other day. "This is about strengthening the special bond between fathers and their kids. These days, society says it's normal for a father to be absent from his child's life. Well, it shouldn't be normal. We want to restore families. We want the father to take back his rightful role."

This is the fourth year for the camp and tournament sponsored by Houston, the former Knick, and it's more necessary now than ever before. Given the increased number of trappings these days, how many young men would've made better choices had they had responsible fathers in their lives?

Taking it one step further: How many young black men who became professional athletes would have avoided trouble if a responsible father had provided the foundation that these players lacked from the get-go?

Would we have a star quarterback pleading guilty to torturing dogs? Or a star defensive back causing a deadly riot in a Las Vegas strip club? Or a number of athletes committing various behavioral abuses that jeopardized their careers or ruined their reputations?

"I don't think so," Houston said.

Houston was one of the lucky ones. Wade Houston was more than his son's basketball coach at Tennessee. Wade Houston did not leave his children or his wife. Wade Houston

owned up to his responsibilities as a man and a mentor, and his children, all college graduates, have led exemplary lives. The most famous is Allan, an All-Star player and human being.

"The relationship with my father is why I started this camp," Houston said. "The lessons I've learned from him are so valuable. He set such a good example that I thought we should hold a camp. We had so much to share to others."

As we rail against athletes who made poor choices, let's not lose sight of the root of the problem. Let's not shovel all the blame in one direction. A good many troublesome athletes didn't have a solid foundation, didn't have a strong adult male at home, didn't have moral- and character-building guidance at the start, well before they became stars.

As we clobber Michael Vick, and rightly so, for his choice of entertainment, what sentence should be handed to those who put him on the wrong track?

"A responsible father gives you a frame of reference," Houston said. "You have someone who holds you accountable. You have someone who sets guidelines for you. A lot of guys who come through sports need to learn how to be a professional, how to behave, how to respond, how to make right choices. We all have a choice in what we do. How we make those choices comes from someone who had an influence in our lives."

Tiger Woods, for example, would never stoop to dogfighting. Why? Because Earl Woods instilled character in Tiger from the start.

If Tiger is to receive a pat on the back for being a responsible human being, what share of credit should go to his parents? Without Earl teaching his son how to conduct himself in golf, perhaps the most proper of all sports, we could be dealing with a crisis. Can you imagine the greatest sportsman on the planet being an insufferable idiot?

It's hilarious to hear how a big contract and fame somehow is supposed to quicken the maturity rate of athletes and transform them into model citizens. It doesn't work that way. Either he has the foundation or he doesn't, and no amount of money or status can change that.

"Everyone who doesn't have a father isn't going to be tainted for life," Houston said, "but you need someone to hold you responsible. When you don't have that person, then your leash is going to be longer. Every young man is going to test boundaries; nobody's perfect. What I hear from those who had responsible father figures is that they could only take that leash so far, because they could hear his voice saying 'stop' and 'this is not right.' If you don't have that, then it's easier to go further in the wrong direction."

Being a famous athlete, Houston said, only makes it tougher.

"Once you get to the point where you have the money, it's so much harder to trust people and to listen to someone tell you what you need to hear," he said. "That's why it's so

important to get that at an early age, from someone you trust and respect."

While Vick and others are awaiting or accepting their sorry fate, a number of fathers are working to make sure their sons don't join that line. They will gather today for a bonding session that's disguised as a father-son basketball tournament, and the man who created it will get a flush of satisfaction.

"We had a ninth-grader write us and say he and his dad, after playing in our camp, are talking now," Houston said. "Another father broke down crying, asking us how he could do a better job. It makes the whole thing worthwhile."

As a father of three, with another due in October, Houston has a challenge ahead of him. And he knows why.

"My father," he said, "raised the bar for me."