

# PRAISE FOR

## ***THIS WAS NEVER ABOUT BASKETBALL***

“A modern-day youth basketball journey that brings the history of the game to life while blending the experiences of growing up. Basketball is the sport that extends beyond societal barriers and allows for interaction among the people, including Zeke, Lawrence, the coaches, Dr. Naismith, and even the Entity!”

HOWARD FISHER

Head Coach

Youth Men’s Basketball Team for Team USA

“You needn’t be a basketball expert to be captivated by *This Was Never About Basketball*. The novel is a charming and magical tale of enduring friendship, unlikely heroes, and finding the courage to do the right thing. This essential book has lessons and heroes that will stick with you for years to come. Leener has created a classic, a slam-dunk!”

ETHAN KLEIN

h3h3productions

“Created from a magical recipe that includes one part Sci-Fi, two parts basketball, and three parts friendship and adventure, *This Was Never About Basketball* adds up to a delightful page-turner that’s all heart. Mr. Leener writes with a love for basketball equaled only by his love for spinning a deliciously good yarn. You will fall in love with the characters you’ll meet, and you’ll love even more the crazy places they’ll take you!”

BOB DICKSON

Associate Professor of Communication &

Communication Department Chair

The Master’s University

“A fun story with a few twists. It touches on family, friendship, the great game of basketball, and a bit of the supernatural. A wild ride and read!”

**BOB DAVIS**  
Hall of Fame Radio Broadcaster  
University of Kansas Basketball

“I was impressed with the character development of *This Was Never About Basketball*. Many of the characters reminded me of players I have coached over the years. The book captures the emotions of the young basketball player in all of us and is an insightful look at the journey many players find themselves on as they grapple towards their future. The book is thought-provoking and inspiring—a treat for the true basketball fan.”

**GREG HERRICK**  
Head Women’s Basketball Coach  
College of the Canyons

“I read the book, *This Was Never About Basketball*, because it was recommended by a friend who thought I might enjoy it. Knowing it was intended for an audience of teens and even pre-teens, I took a look, partially out of curiosity. I was pleasantly surprised. It was an interesting read, with a lot of humor and surprises. It was, in a way, a mystery novel with an interesting, twisting plot. Perhaps more importantly, it was well written and kept the attention of this 85-year-old. I recommend it to pre-teens, teens, and their dads, as well.”

**CHUCK YOUNG**  
Chancellor Emeritus  
UCLA

“An exhilarating tale of adventure, excitement, friendship, and redemption, set against the backdrop of the game we all love. Leener does a magnificent job telling a modern coming-of-age story chock full of the types of real-world issues and circumstances facing today’s youth. Joining Zeke and his crew on this thrilling adventure will deepen any young person’s love and understanding of the game of basketball, while also providing more seasoned readers with a renewed appreciation for the sport and the role it played in their childhood.”

JESSE MUÑOZ

Director of Public Relations & Sports Information  
College of the Canyons

“Our actions, or in other words, our choices, have consequences, both good and bad. I love how Leener shows the struggle between both. He uses the lessons learned in the game of basketball and applies them to the game of life—teamwork, problem solving, and leadership.”

GARETT TUJAGUE

Offensive Line Coach  
University of Virginia Football

“The book brings a unique approach to the dilemmas that scholastic athletes often face. Zeke Archer in his own way finds that solution while entertaining the reader.”

GUS ALFIERI

Author of *Lapchick: The Life of a Legendary Player  
and Coach in the Glory Days of Basketball*  
and *The Heart of a Champion*

“Tee it up and let the big dog eat! If you like sports and the human experience, you will love this book!”

CHUCK LYON

Athletic Director & Dean of Physical Education,  
Kinesiology and Athletics, College of the Canyons

“The book was amazing in every single way. There was so much detail in every page that I couldn’t put it down. I love how the author built up the suspense to the point where I had to start biting my nails. This is definitely a book every kid should read because they could learn a few life lessons. This book is definitely the best book I’ve ever read, and I’d definitely like to see a sequel for the book or even just another book from this author.”

HAILEY STAR DOWTHWAITE

Avid reader and youth basketball player  
Los Angeles

“*This Was Never About Basketball* is fabulous! I couldn’t put it down and have never finished a book so quickly. My husband started it yesterday, and I’m sure he will love it as well. I look forward to seeing it in the movies.”

ANNETTE FEIN

the author’s mother-in-law

**THIS WAS  
NEVER ABOUT  
BASKETBALL**

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**CRAIG LEENER**



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*To Zak and Erika  
for their love and encouragement*

*And to Andrea  
for always being in my corner*



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# 1

## Better Step on It

I pushed open the cafeteria doors so hard, they swung back into me and knocked me on my butt.

Great way to start a story, right? But that's exactly how it happened.

Most kids in the cafeteria at Ernest T. McDerney Continuation School didn't notice my less than dignified entrance. The few who witnessed it snickered and went back to their lunches.

Continuation school in California is where they put high school kids who, mostly for disciplinary reasons, are at risk of not graduating. It's like an extended timeout that lasts the rest of your high school days. Not as bad as a life sentence, but some days it felt that way.

I picked myself up off the cafeteria's dusty linoleum floor as the unwelcome marriage of greasy pizza and pungent body spray greeted my nostrils. My destination was the table saved

by Curtis Short and Roland “Stretch” Puckett, my best friends in the world.

Curtis, Stretch, and I used to attend Southland Central High School in Los Angeles. We were seniors and on the basketball team there until we were expelled exactly one month before this story begins. The reason why we were banished involved the game of basketball, and it changed the course of my life.

Basketball is my world. I have a basketball with me everywhere I go. Everything important in my life is connected to the sport. It’s how I learn about the decisions people make and their motivations behind those decisions. If you want to know how a complete stranger would react under pressure, put a basketball in his hands and tell him to run a fast break with the game on the line. Does he pass to a teammate or pull up and shoot? Take it to the rim or bounce the ball off his foot and out of bounds? It’s the ultimate study of the human condition.

Our team at Southland Central had advanced to the city finals before losing to Mid-City Prep. I could deal with losing. Heck, I’d lost a ton of basketball games in my seventeen years. But it was how we lost that has haunted me ever since. My temper got the better of me and I made an awful decision, right there on the basketball court, a place I hold sacred. Just one punch led to a brawl that led to my losing everything I’d worked for my entire life, including a college basketball scholarship to the University of Kansas.

That was February 26, our final day at Southland Central. Curtis and Stretch and I were sentenced to McDerney for the

rest of our senior year. That’s when all the weird things started happening.

“Ezekiel Archer, is there anywhere on earth you go without that stupid basketball?”

That was Rebecca Tuesday. She wasn’t weird, and she was the only person except for my mother and Vice Principal Littwack who called me by my given first name, almost as if she already knew me. The reason why Rebecca had been discarded into McDerney was shrouded in mystery, at least as far as the school’s general population was concerned, but I had overheard her tell one of her girlfriends that she had punched out a football player at her former high school. That meant she and I secretly had something in common.

“Don’t listen to her, Zeke,” Curtis said.

Curtis worshipped surfing the way I cherished basketball. He spent more time in the ocean than out of it. He also had the best jump shot I ever saw. Curtis once told me he’d take a bullet for me, with the qualifier that it had to come from the barrel of a small-caliber handgun and glance off his butt cheek.

“Yeah, can it, Rebecca,” said Stretch, coming to my defense.

Stretch had acquired his nickname because he had surpassed six feet in the seventh grade and had grown steadily ever since, to reach six foot ten by our last year in high school, ensuring that his career choice as an undercover investigator would pose a challenge. Stretch was less enthusiastic about laying his life on the line for me than Curtis was, but I knew I could always count on him.

I set down my basketball on the seat of our table's empty fourth chair, so no one unfamiliar would think about eating lunch with the three of us. It hadn't always been that way, but I'd lost confidence in myself after I'd been expelled.

"Whaddaya got?" Stretch craned his neck as I opened my backpack.

"Kidding, right?" said Rebecca, eavesdropping from a nearby table, where she was gabbing with a bunch of girls. "You guys eat the same thing every day."

"Ignore her, dude, she doesn't know anything," Curtis said.

He was wrong there. Rebecca knew plenty. She was a straight-A student, and she was on top of all the important stuff happening at McDerney. She also did nice things for people, especially those she didn't know. She was tough and cute in a non-basketball way, but we didn't have a lot of time for girls.

Rebecca was right about our meal choices. Mom always packed American cheese on egg bread, plus carrots cut into squared-off spears for me. Curtis liked cream cheese and sliced pickles on white bread, no crust. Stretch favored PB&J.

The sound of activity erupting from a far corner of the cafeteria caught our attention. It came from Lawrence's table. This was a regular occurrence at lunch.

Lawrence was autistic and almost never spoke. He had his own table in the cafeteria because no one wanted to sit with him. My older brother, Wade, taught me to look after people who need help, so I'd taken Lawrence under my wing when I first met him, because it was the right thing to do. I'd even walked him home one day just the week before when

some kids were bullying him after school. It reminded me of how Wade used to have my back whenever older kids picked on me.

Lawrence was a fourteen-year-old junior, so I figured he must have skipped a few grades prior to McDerney. I was intrigued by his interesting habits and his style, like wearing a pocket protector with seven freshly sharpened and beveled No. 2 pencils in it, for example. He also arrived daily at the cafeteria carrying a metal travel case containing a bowl and a spoon, a thermos of hot water, and the kind of foil-wrapped food brick you'd put into your backpack prior to boarding the Space Shuttle. This made Lawrence a target for thugs and bullies, meaning nearly the whole student body, especially McDerney's very own cement-head, Brock Decker. Brock was the sum total of the worst parts of all the campus felons you never wanted to meet, bound together by arrogance, faulty judgment, and an expensive haircut.

Brock was shouting at Lawrence now. I sprang to my feet, but Curtis blocked my path. "Bro, I've seen that look on your face before," Curtis said, referring to the very moment before I punched out someone at the city finals. I moved Curtis aside and arrived at Lawrence's table just as Brock was preparing to separate Lawrence from his lunch. His lips trembled, but he never looked up.

"Leave the kid alone," I said.

"Yeah, Brock, stop it right now." Rebecca was close behind me.

"Gee, Zeke. Now you need a girl to fight your battles for you," Brock said.

Brock knew firsthand that I didn't need anyone's help in the battle-fighting department because he was playing for Mid-City Prep in the finals when I was bounced from Southland Central.

"I'm tired of the stupid nerd bringing in that sad excuse for food," Brock said. "If he does it again, I'm gonna beat him over the head with it."

A nerd? No question about it. But stupid, Lawrence wasn't. I knew because he was in our first-period math class, where we witnessed his mystical relationship with numbers all the time.

I took a step toward Brock.

"Hold it right there, E-ze-ki-el." Vice Principal Littwack opted for the four-syllable version of my name. "You're supposed to have a reputation around here as a leader. Is this how you're choosing to lead?"

I was captain of my team at Southland Central, but I wasn't aware that anything positive I did there had followed me all the way to McDerney.

"And you, Mr. Decker. I thought you'd know better by now. Stand down, private."

Brock mumbled choice obscenities under his breath and headed back to his table to receive high fives from his knuckleheaded henchmen.

"Lawrence, you okay?" I asked.

No response and no eye contact either.

I thought it might help if I dispensed some big-brother-type advice. "Maybe if you brought a normal lunch to school like everyone else, jerks like Decker might leave you alone."

Still nothing. I shrugged it off and turned back toward my

table. Brock shot me a tough-guy look as I walked past him, but I shrugged that off too.

“C’mon, let’s go shoot around,” I said to the guys back at the table.

As we headed to the rear exit, Lawrence handed me a folded-up piece of paper. I opened it. His handwriting was measured and precise, the letters carefully formed and slanted to the right. I read the note to myself:

*Better hurry.*

“What is it?” I asked.

Lawrence pulled a pencil from the seven in his pocket protector and wrote me another note. He tore it from his pad of paper, folded it in half, and held it out:

*Freeze-dried chili mac 'n' beef. Dehydration process, preserves perishable food, makes it convenient for transport.*

“No, not that. You said something about hurrying up.”

Lawrence repeated the process, and things went from weird to weirder:

*Better step on it. They're planning to take the game away.*

“Who is? What game?” I now had a clearer understanding of why people thought Lawrence was odd.

“Basketball,” Lawrence said. Yes, he actually said the word before writing me yet another note:

*The 7<sup>th</sup> Dimension, an interdimensional energy being. Says it was the force behind the creation of basketball on Earth. Says it has decided to take the game away, and it's your fault. If you're planning to shoot around with your friends, you'd better step on it.*

## 2

# Maybe We'll Get It Right This Time

I spent the rest of the school day speculating about what Lawrence's cryptic messages meant. Like I said, weird stuff started happening around that time at McDerney.

The school bell rang to signal the end of sixth period, and I couldn't wait to get out of there. Ever since I had been shown the door at Southland Central, school had felt like something I had to just survive.

The guys and I got on our bikes and rode down Bird Parkway to the rec center, where we always went after school to play pickup basketball until it got dark and was time to go home.

"Dude, I've got homework to do first," Curtis said as we locked our bikes at the entrance.

"That's a fine idea, Mr. Short."

That was rec center director, Vernon Shields, a real homework-first kind of guy. He had been the director for twenty-five years and always made sure it was a safe place for kids. Mr. Shields knew a whole bunch about arts and crafts, counseling, and nutrition—important stuff the person in charge needed to deal with. Beyond that, there wasn't a question about basketball he couldn't answer. We had heard stories about when Mr. Shields was head coach at nearby Jefferson Community College years earlier and led his team to a state championship.

Mr. Shields went to his office as Curtis set down his backpack in the library and pulled out his biology textbook. Stretch went to the kitchen to scrounge for food. Since he was nearly a foot taller than me, I gave him a pass for being hungry all the time.

I sat on the floor of the rec center's welcome room with my back against the wall and spun my basketball on my right index finger. That was how I coped with stress, by balancing my world, which was quite literally basketball, right there in front of me. My brother, Wade, taught me how to spin a basketball when I was just a kid. When Wade enlisted in the Marine Corps five years ago, I remember watching that ball go around and around until my finger bled.

"If you spin that thing any faster, it's going to take flight," Mr. Shields said. He could always tell when I had a lot on my mind. My world had spun off its axis when I got expelled, and I was unsuccessful in getting it back on track.

"Follow me," Mr. Shields said. "I've got something you might want to see."

When we reached his office door, Mr. Shields cleared space on the bulletin board outside and stuck two pieces of paper up there with thumbtacks. “These arrived in the mail a couple of weeks ago, but I’ve been busy and didn’t open the envelope until this morning. Maybe it will cheer you up.”

I read the top of page one:

*3-on-3 Basketball Tournament*

My stomach churned. I had the feeling my life was about to change course again.

“Do you think you could put a team together before the registration deadline?” Mr. Shields said with a smile.

Curtis and Stretch caught wind of our conversation and joined us at the bulletin board.

“I think so,” was all I could think to say to Mr. Shields as I scanned the rest of the first page. It explained that Jefferson Community College was sponsoring a three-on-three basketball tournament open to local high school seniors. That was great. But then the bad news kicked in. The registration deadline was twenty-four hours away, the team entry fee was one hundred dollars, which we had almost no chance of raising, and the tournament was on Saturday. This coming Saturday.

The top team would move on to compete for the western regional championship a couple of weeks away, in mid-April, at the birthplace of basketball, the University of Kansas.

Wait a second. The University of Kansas? The college that had offered me a basketball scholarship and then taken it

away after the incident at the city finals? The universe was playing a cruel joke on me.

Page two of the flyer contained the tournament’s rules, thirteen in all, covering everything from player eligibility to free-throw shooting distance to sportsmanship.

Rule number five, in particular, was specific and left nothing to chance:

*Good sportsmanship is expected of all players. The team captain shall control himself and his teammates at all times. If anyone on a team shows evident intent to injure a player on the other team, the offending team shall be disqualified from the tournament.*

That last part had a familiar ring to it. I was no stranger to the consequences of violating rule number five, and I’d paid a heavy toll for disregarding it at Southland Central.

Now, out of nowhere, we had the chance for a different outcome. I turned to face Curtis and Stretch and struggled to find the right words. “You guys in? Maybe we’ll get it right this time.”

Curtis looked me squarely in the eye. “Why not, dude?”

Stretch reached down and jabbed me in the chest a couple of times with his boney finger. “I’m in,” he said. “Let’s go get us some hardware.”

And some money for the entry fee, I thought.