

## **Luke Awtrey's Harvest**

It was a star studded event for a small town high school coach. Some of the most famous names in professional basketball sat at tables all around, so much so that Luke and Rachel Awtrey were just amazed. This was, without question, a once in a lifetime experience and the simple couple from Midland, Texas were determined to soak it all in.

They'd done their best to not look as star-struck as they were. The salary of the math teacher and coach of 22 years of the Midland High Bulldogs would never allow for them to stay for a weekend at New York's Waldorf Astoria. Sure, Luke had always promised Rachel that he would take her to the big city someday but his high school sweetheart never believed it (and actually didn't need it).

Yes sir, this was a far cry from the road trips to Lubbock and San Angelo. Even the hype that surrounded the annual big game with arch-rival Odessa couldn't compare with what they were seeing that night. NBA greats, both past and present, were all around them. Not in a million years did they ever dream that he'd be sitting at a table eating with the likes of Lenny Wilkins, Bob Lanier, and Larry Bird. Across the room were all the dignitaries of the sport- Julius Erving, David Robinson, Kevin McHale, Pat Riley, Clyde Drexler, Magic Johnson... all major components of the multi-billion dollar industry that made up the NBA, both past and present.

Of course the future of the NBA was well represented too- Kevin Durant, LeBron, Kyrie Irving and others. Luke and Rachel were, of course, most proud of one of those up and coming young stars, Reggie Matthews.

Reggie sat, dressed immaculately, up at the center table on the stage. That table represented enough power and wealth and marketing to fund a medium size national economy. Looking across that table were some of the most familiar faces in professional sports- the Commissioner, Tyson Chandler (Defensive Player of the Year), LeBron James (MVP and scoring leader, again!), "Comeback Player of the Year" Derrick Rose, and Midland's own Reggie Matthews.

Reggie was going to receive two awards on that magical evening, "NBA Man of the Year" for his wonderful work in establishing multiple domestic violence shelters all over the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex and "Rookie of the Year" for his scintillating play for the Mavericks during his first season. As Luke and Rachel waited for Bob Costas to announce the two wonderful presentations to their own Reggie the quiet couple from west Texas could not have been more proud. Truly this boy had taken every good lesson they'd ever sought to instill in him and, somehow, he had not only blossomed into a magnificent athlete but also into a marvelous human being. It was a long, long journey from the dusty, windy plains of the Permian Basin.

As the evening wore on Luke found himself drifting back to the days when young Reggie was a skinny sophomore, desperately trying to escape his horrible background by means of shooting a basketball into a hoop at one end of the Bulldog's gym. Little could anyone have known on that mid-July day that the boy that Luke Awtrey was tempted to chase from the gym would go on to major stardom in a sport that, to many, had become a powerhouse industry that was truly bigger than life. Yes, it was a long journey from that hot gym eight years before...

"Hey son, how'd you get in here?"

"Uh, I'm sorry, sir. I found a door open over there and I was kind of hoping that nobody would mind me coming in to shoot a few hoops..."

"Well," said the veteran coach, "you're really not supposed to be in here but at least you had enough sense to take off your street shoes."

"Yes sir, Mr. Coach, I wouldn't scratch up your floor for nothin'!"

“I believe that, son.” Luke looked at the scrawny kid with the faded shorts and feared what the answer to his next question would be. “Say, why didn’t you put on some gym shoes? It’s hard to get a good feel for the game in your bare feet.”

“I ain’t got none, sir.”

Luke wasn’t at all surprised. Still there seemed to be something about the boy that spoke of a gentle, innate goodness and sincerity. Though it was obvious that life had not dealt this kid the fullest of hands something good had blossomed and Luke felt drawn to invest a little attention in a boy who probably had known very little in his 13 years. The coach turned to go to his office, gave Rachel a quick call to tell her that he was going to be about an hour late, and then came back out onto the floor to begin to teach the very basics of real basketball to young Mr. Matthews.

When their first session was over it was obvious that this boy was an absolute sponge for good mentoring. Luke offered to give the boy a lift home and though the lad deferred and said it wasn’t at all necessary the coach insisted and so the two of them hopped into the old station wagon for the two mile drive to the south, just on the edge of town, out to the old “oil village”.

The oil village was a notorious cluster of cheap, depression-era housing which was thrown up very quickly to accommodate the rig workers who flooded the Permian Basin during the early stages of Texas petroleum development. After the initial wave of oil workers came through the housing sat basically empty for years until the space became necessary with the return of soldiers from the war. It didn’t take long for the soldiers to upgrade, though, and soon the village became the abode of transients and immigrants and migrants and people who just couldn’t afford housing anywhere else. That is how Reggie’s grandmother lived and how she raised her five grandkids.

By the time the school term started young Reggie was a fixture around the gym, but Luke was pleased to see that the boy had more than a basketball under his arm. It became a familiar site at Midland High to see “that Matthews kid” dribbling the ball across campus (always with his left hand. Reggie was naturally right handed but he believed it when the coach admonished him that he was going to have to become more proficient with his off hand if he was ever going to become something). It was encouraging to also see a serious stack of textbooks perpetually tucked under the right arm while the left was dribbling away.

And Reggie was a good student, not brilliant mind you, but certainly capable. Luke had him in Algebra and though the boy didn't have one soul at home who could help him with the various rules and equations, he did his best and was just as willing to stay after school to get help with a new Algebraic principle as he was to work on his fall away jump shot. His notebook may have been worn and tattered but Reggie was more concerned with rewarding Grandma Truman's sacrifices and faith in him than with image. There just was no way that this boy was going to let something like having to wear used sneakers stop him from fulfilling his dreams. If he had to shop at closeout stores or thrift shops to get a jacket for the biting February winds that howled across the west Texas plains it did not seem to bother this good boy.

As Luke got to know the boy he came to discover the terrible trauma that gave Reggie such a considerable drive to outgrow his background. (That very same momentous incident certainly provided the foundation for the young man's near-obsession with providing locations of safety from domestic violence.) How could watching your mother being stabbed 17 times somewhere between the bedroom and the front porch by her latest live-in boyfriend not etch deeply into a formative eight year old soul? Years later it would be very clear to some why a fabulously wealthy young athlete would donate over 60% of his salary to this cause. This sensitivity and lack of parental image drew Luke and Rachel to the boy even more than they usually were to other students and members of the team.

At first Luke and Rachel were concerned that, for a number of reasons, that it might not be healthy for them to "semi-adopt" Reggie. Not the least of the reasons were their concerns for what might seem to be favoritism if they expended an inordinate amount of energy and time in one student. But, since Luke and Rachel had the long held reputation around Midland for being like second parents for many students (whether they played basketball or not), and since Reggie was, at least initially, the fourth man off the bench, they felt that few people would really make claims of favoritism if they went a bit more out of their way for him than others.

Of course Reggie did not remain as a "mop up" man for the garbage time of a game long before decided. His intense desire to excel in basketball drove the young man to shoot one thousand free throws a day, rain or shine. Everyone in Midland soon grew used to seeing the increasingly finely honed physique of a developing young athlete, jogging up and down Midkiff Boulevard, dribbling a basketball as he went. There

wasn't a skills drill that Reggie wouldn't run and re-run until he could fulfill it to perfection. Very few coaches ever have the joy of mentoring anyone with such a single-minded eye for success.

Years later, sitting at a table of honor at the annual NBA awards banquet, Luke would reflect upon that first team that Reggie played with. Certainly there were a couple of guys on that team who had greater native physical skills...

Antonio Esparza could jump through the ceiling but he never was one who showed that he was willing to pay the price of self-discipline required to make him truly great. Granted, against west Texas high school competition Antonio could make it on his raw abilities alone. That certainly changed when he tried to transfer the same work ethic to Louisiana State. Once at LSU Antonio found that every scholarship player had been the star on his own high school team and many of them were much more willing to work at their skills than he was. By the time he was a junior it was evident that Antonio didn't have the drive to perfect his skills or to make much of an effort academically so the athletic director informed him that his scholarship was being offered to another student who seemed more intent on paying the price for the privilege.

The last anyone had heard from Antonio he was living somewhere in south Alabama, working as a clerk at a convenience store, and talking of how he was going to see if perhaps he could play in the professional league in Greece.

The point guard that Reggie replaced in the starting line-up was a young man with real physical promise, Kenny McCarty. Originally Luke had thought that there was no way that Reggie would ever beat out Kenny for a starting spot but that changed dramatically when Kenny was arrested with some of his "cousins". No one assumed that Kenny knew of the concealed gun. He was no saint but he probably never would have foreseen the flash of his friend's panic that left a liquor store owner laying in a pool of blood.

Coach Awtrey had often warned Kenny that his crowd was going to be his undoing but Kenny would just stand on the other side of the desk, rocking and swaying and letting the coach know in no uncertain terms that it wasn't any of his business. "Man, you get paid to coach, not to be my big brother! I'll hang with the crew that I choose to and it ain't none of your concern, o.k.? All you gotta do is worry about whether or not I win you games."

Though it really hurt to think of it, Luke assumed that the stint of “six to eleven” outside of Amarillo probably were taking their edge off of Kenny McCarty’s cockiness.

Leon Barnes could have been someone. At 6’7”, 210 pounds when he was only 17 many, many college recruiters came to Midland games to specifically to drool over Leon Barnes. His inside game was a diamond in the rough and even though it was widely known that Leon’s temper got him thrown out of too many games there’ll always be a coach here or there who believes that he can harness a wild mustang.

Sadly, no one really ever got a chance to find out what Leon was capable of at all. Upon his arrival at UNLV the lights and the temptations of LasVegas were more than Leon could take. “The City That Never Sleeps” had more than enough people who chew up and spit out a young man like him. Needless to say, when the NCAA and the FBI concluded the investigation, Leon Barnes’ name was prominent in the scandal. It was only a plea bargain that kept him from a prison sentence of his own when he testified against the gamblers who had provided him with so many favors in return for his part in the point shaving during his freshman year.

Sadly, you can’t turn on those kind of people that easily. It was never proven, but you probably can’t find ten people knowledgeable in LasVegas who believe that the “brake failure” on Leon’s black Camaro convertible was due to a mechanical defect or accident.

Yes, there certainly were players on Reggie’s first Midland team who had much greater promise than the scrawny freshman who snuck into the gym that summer day, but only one of them paid the price for the accolades. There had been scores of Midland Bulldogs along the way who might have known that moment of glory. Any number of them could have gone from Midland, fulfilled a commitment of four years to a university that had committed to them (in spite of the temptation to leave early and turn pro), and worked for the honor of this night as Reggie Matthews had.

And so it was that Luke and Rachel Awtrey looked with pride at one of their own, Their own #26, seated among the elite of professional sports in the Waldorf Astoria. All of the hundreds and hundreds of hours of personal investment and caring had truly born fruit. All of the late night pizza runs and extra hours of study hall with geometry equations, all of the prayers and caring and standing in as the parental figures for the hundreds of kids who had passed through Midland High halls over 25 years now was

being so very publicly rewarded. All of the hopes that they'd placed in so many hundreds of kids became focused in this one special boy with the troubled past. All of their years of dedication now returned so very, very much.

Dozens of kids could have chosen the arduous and demanding path, but it was with incredible tears of pride that a balding, middle age high school coach from west Texas acknowledged the applause of the crowd when superstar, Reggie Matthews said, "I owe so much of this to my grandmother, Lucy Truman (God rest her soul), but most of all I owe this honor to the caring dedication of a good and decent man and his sweet wife. This man made me proud to wear the Bulldog purple and gold and showed me how to take good pride in working hard and caring for others... my high school coach, Luke Awtrey".

*A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed,  
some fell by the wayside; (Kenny McCarty)  
and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it.  
And some fell upon a rock; (Antonio Esparza)  
and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture.  
And some fell among thorns; (Leon Barnes)  
and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it.  
And other fell on good ground, (Reggie Matthews)  
and sprang up,  
and bare fruit a hundredfold.*

*- Luke 8:5-8*