

CLYDE DREXLER with KERRY EGGERS



CLYDE ^{THE} GLIDE

My Life in Basketball

FOREWORD BY **JIM NANTZ**

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To my beautiful wife, Gaynell, who gave me three wonderful children: Austin, Elise and Adam. To my oldest daughter, Erica, whose smile can light up a room.

To my mother, Eunice, who brought me into this world and taught me right from wrong; my brother, James, whose love for basketball helped to inspire my passion for the game; my sisters, Debra, Denise, Virginia and Lynn, whose support and encouragement throughout the years have lifted me.

To the young men and women who aspire to participate in the great game invented by Dr. Naismith that we call basketball.

To Kerry Eggers, a great journalist, for his diligent work on this book. He put in many hours researching my life and career. His genuine interest in the subject shines through in these pages. Together, we made this a successful venture.

To the people in the military who fight with courage and conviction to keep this nation free.

And to the men and women in the clergy, who contribute to the spiritual well-being of our beloved country.

—Clyde Drexler

To my high school coaches, Chuck Solberg, Fred Sutherland and Glen Kinney, who taught me the right way. And to youth coaches Bill Wallin, Mike Wantland and Jason Wells, who went the extra mile to help my sons grow as athletes and as human beings.

—Kerry Eggers

The Blazers rebuilt their franchise around Drexler, who began to bloom, like the brilliant roses that city is known for, into one of the game's truly great guards.

From time to time, our paths would cross. Clyde would come over from the layup line and we would arrange to get together after a game to catch up and reminisce about our old days in Houston. He would always ask about my folks, and I would get the latest on his wonderful mom, Eunice, who still helps run the family's barbecue restaurant.

Eventually, Clyde returned to Houston, where he and Hakeem helped bring home an NBA championship. By this time, the whole world had already been enthralled by this man of rare athletic and personal grace. Clyde could float through the paint at will. His movement appeared as effortless as Jerry Rice running a slant pass into the end zone or Tiger Woods crushing a 300-yard tee shot.

It was that grace, along with his myriad other divinely ordained physical skills, which would eventually lead him to basketball's ultimate acknowledgement and would bring us together again, in a sense to complete the circle of our relationship.

Glide. Verb (intr.): 4. Music. To blend one tone into the next.

Fast-forward to Monday morning, April 5, 2004 (21 years and one day after N.C. State's crushing upset over Houston).

I was standing at the podium in front of a crowded ballroom in the Marriott Riverview Center in San Antonio, some 190 miles from Houston. I had been given the honor of introducing the seven new inductees for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, but I was not told in advance which of the finalists had been voted in.

VIII

I knew that my old college buddy, Clyde Drexler, had a chance for that rarest of honors — to be selected for induction in his first year of eligibility. Silently, I hoped that his name would appear on the list as I thought about the symmetry of our professional careers.

It seemed like just yesterday that I was an eager young announcer, leaning into the public address microphone at Hofheinz Pavilion to give the Cougars' starting lineups on opening night of the 1981 season: "At forward, a freshman from Sterling High School, number 22, Clyde 'The Glide' Drexler!" (Of course, I milked the word "glide" for as long as I could.)

My brief reverie was interrupted when I was handed the script. Dutifully, I read the officially worded introductions for the first six newly elected members of the Hall of Fame Class of 2004. Then I turned to the last page, and there he was! With a thrill in my heart that my voice could not possibly hide, I read the following:

"He burst onto the national basketball scene as an All-America star of one of the most electric college teams of its era. At the University of Houston, he led his team to two Final Four appearances and remains the only player in school history to tally 1,000 points, 900 rebounds, and 300 steals. His NBA career with the Portland Trail Blazers and Houston Rockets included nine All-Star appearances, three NBA Finals appearances and an NBA championship. He was named to the NBA's 50 Greatest Players team and won gold as a member of the Dream Team in the 1992 Olympics. Upon his retirement in 1998, he was one of only three NBA players to collect 20,000 points, 6,000 rebounds, and 6,000 assists and still holds the Blazers' career scoring, rebounding and steals records. Elected to the Hall of Fame as a player, Clyde Drexler!"

The Hall of Fame had asked me not to deviate from its carefully crafted protocol. Believe me, it isn't easy for someone who

makes a living out of ad-libbing introductions to stick to the copy. I came within two words of playing it straight. But I couldn't help myself. When I came to the words "Clyde Drexler," I just had to interject "The Glide." (Rumor has it that you can still hear that phrase echoing around the ballroom walls.)

Those words prompted a thunderous ovation, and Clyde Drexler, beaming proudly, emerged from the back of the room and walked up the center aisle. He cut through a sea of assembled basketball royalty and a phalanx of media as seamlessly as he used to drive the lane. Clyde accepted his symbolic Hall of Fame jersey, turned, and came over to the podium to give me a hug.

So now you know how this remarkable basketball journey ends. But on the pages that follow, Clyde will take you along for a wonderful ride from Houston to Portland and back and then on to Springfield, Massachusetts. Enshrined as one of the game's immortals, there are many lessons for basketball and for life that we can all learn from his days as, well, a mere mortal.

No matter how high Clyde could fly, what always impressed me more about him was the fact that he is one of the most grounded athletes I have ever been privileged to call my friend. Now every reader can also get a chance to see the other facets of this warm-hearted superstar. And I think you will agree that there is no single way to define "The Glide," a truly special person whose nickname does more than rhyme; it captures the unique essence of Clyde Drexler.

(Jim Nantz has been with CBS Sports for nearly 20 years and is recognized as one of sportscasting's biggest names. His credits include anchoring coverage of the Super Bowl, Final Four, the Masters and other major events. He was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame as recipient of the Curt Gowdy Media Award in 2002.)

INTRODUCTION

BY KERRY EGGERS

THIS HAS BEEN A PROJECT in the works for more than a decade.

In 1992, the year Clyde Drexler went from being just another great player to an international phenomenon, I was a beat writer with *The Oregonian* covering the Portland Trail Blazers. At the end of the summer, after Clyde's glorious run with the Dream Team in Barcelona, I asked if he would be interested in working on an autobiography together.

"Not until after I retire," he said.

I figured he was making a mistake. He had just finished a year in which he had led the Blazers to the NBA Finals, served as runner-up to Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan as Most Valuable Player of the All-Star Game and the NBA regular season, respectively, and been one of the 12 members of the original Dream Team that won gold in the '92 Olympic Games. He was the most popular athlete in Oregon history at the height of his career, revered for his wholesome lifestyle and accommodating demeanor with fans as much as for his sensational play. Honestly, he could have run for public office and blown away the competition. And his story certainly would have been an easy sell in Houston, his hometown and site of the successes of basketball's most memorable fraternity, Phi Slama Jama.

Clyde said there would be more to tell when his career was completed. Yeah, I thought, but people are more interested now than they will be in the future. Ten years down the road, who knows?

Now I can say it: I sold Clyde the Glide short.

His story is even better now than it would have been then.

From Portland, he moved on to Houston, where he teamed with college frat brother Hakeem Olajuwon to lead the Rockets to the NBA championship. After his retirement as a player, he spent two years coaching at his alma mater, trying to bring the Houston Cougars back to their glory days as one of college basketball's storied programs.

There was inclusion among the NBA's 50 Greatest Players on the league's 50th anniversary in 1997, a fitting tribute to one of the game's most elegant stars. But the coup de grace came in April 2004, when he earned first-ballot selection to the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame.

You were right, Clyde. There was much more to tell.

Through the nine months we worked on this book, the biggest challenge was to get Clyde to speak his mind on many of the controversial subjects that have been integral to his career and his life. Reporters who have interviewed Drexler grow accustomed to what commonly became known as "Clydespeak" — politically correct statements often averting the truth. There was nothing sinister about Clyde's motives in all of this; he simply didn't want to offend anyone. It is central to his nature. He is a kind, caring person, and if Charles Barkley is outrageous, Clyde Drexler is polite, careful and controlled.

My concerns were alleviated as we spoke and worked on copy throughout the process. For the first time, Clyde is giving the public a no-holds-barred look at his inner thoughts. There is plenty of educated opinion here for the reader to digest.

I spoke with more than 60 family members, friends, former coaches and teammates of Clyde. Their reverence for the man shone through, but the central theme was that despite his success, he has remained the same person. That sounds cliché, but in this

case, it is the truth.

Many of his friends and teammates took the opportunity to deliver some verbal jabs. Clyde never flinched, never asked to have the anecdote removed or altered. He took it in good fun and with the affection that it was intended, and he seemed to thoroughly enjoy it all.

Thanks to all who agreed to be interviewed. Special thanks to those who provided assistance via statistical and personal background, including John Simmons, Chuck Charnquist, Mike Hanson and Rich Austin of the Portland Trail Blazers, Rick Poulter of the University of Houston and Matt Rochinski of the Houston Rockets. A tip of the laptop to Fran Blinebury, the outstanding *Houston Chronicle* sports columnist, for information gleaned from his 1995 book, *Believe It! Again!*, which chronicled the Rockets' second of back-to-back NBA titles. And to Peter Knobler for background information provided from his 1996 autobiography with Hakeem Olajuwon, *Living the Dream*.

I am deeply indebted to Clyde's mother, Eunice Drexler Scott, for the extra effort she made to help with this book. Eunice, those scrapbooks and old photos provided historical perspective we wouldn't have had otherwise. Thank you.

Thanks to the good people at Sports Publishing L.L.C., in particular Doug Hoepker and Mike Pearson, whose patience as we cleared the hurdles laid before us is greatly appreciated.

Thanks to my bosses and cohorts at the *Portland Tribune*, Dwight Jaynes and Steve Brandon, who were understanding as I worked to meet the book's press deadline and stayed away from the office even a little more than usual.

Thanks to Gaynell Drexler for sharing her insights, and to her three wonderful children for letting their husband and father spend a little more time away from home working on the book.

And thanks to Clyde, who made this project fun, challeng-

ing and nostalgic all in one. We shared many a chuckle in the hours we spent together reminiscing about all those good times in your life. I appreciate your trust, and I hope I earned your respect. You have mine.

CONTENTS

Forewordvi

Introductionxi

CHAPTER 1

A Champion at Last1

CHAPTER 2

Growing Up9

CHAPTER 3

A Sterling Start35

CHAPTER 4

Becoming a Cougar53

CHAPTER 5

Crashing the Final Four67

CHAPTER 6

Phi Slama Jama79

CHAPTER 7

Hello, City of Roses107

CHAPTER 8

Growing Pains115

CHAPTER 9

Start Me Up143

CHAPTER 10	
Coming Into My Own	159
CHAPTER 11	
Marriage, and the Right Coach	173
CHAPTER 12	
NBA Finals, Here We Come	199
CHAPTER 13	
What Could Have Been	237
CHAPTER 14	
Close Again, But No Cigar	257
CHAPTER 15	
End of an Era	293
CHAPTER 16	
Happy Valentine's Day	315
CHAPTER 17	
Realizing My Dream	355
CHAPTER 18	
Coach Drexler	369
CHAPTER 19	
Crashing the Hall of Fame	379
CHAPTER 20	
Reflections on a Blessed Life	391

CHAPTER 1

A CHAMPION AT LAST

For so much of my life — since I was eight or nine or so — I had dreamed of winning an NBA championship. Since I grew up in Houston, the Rockets were my team. So part of the dream was being a member of the Rockets as we won an NBA title.

And there I was. A member of the Rockets. Living out my dream.

The calendar read June 13, 1995. We were so close. After winning Game 3 by a score of 106-103, we were ahead 3-0 in the NBA Championship Series against the Orlando Magic. Now one game separated me from the chance to experience the realization of the ultimate goal of my career.

Game 3 was a pivotal game for us. We thought if we got them down 3-0, no way would they come back to win the series. We exhausted every available source of energy in Game 3. The Magic played well, and we were very fortunate to win. After win-

ning that game and looking at the possibility of a sweep, we were all really eager to get it over with.

It was that time of year when you aren't thinking about what hurts; it is quicker to list the body parts that don't hurt. I had two sprained fingers, one on each hand. I had crooks in my neck that were restricting movement and costing me sleep. I would wake up and couldn't move my head a certain way until I turned my body. During the Finals, our trainer, Ray Melchiorre, had me on this machine to stretch out three or four hours a day. I had no problems with my right knee, thank God. But my right shoulder was hurting. It was hard even to shoot in normal rhythm. And I was dead tired. The mental exhaustion — of trying to stay on top, giving yourself an edge, trying to continue to motivate yourself and your teammates — was overwhelming. We had been playing since October. It was mid-June. Believe me, it is a great thrill, but it is also a trying time. Everyone else is on vacation. You are ready to go on vacation, but you have a little more work to do.

Game 4 was the most difficult game of my career. In everybody's mind, the series was over and the Rockets were champions. It was like sitting over a three-foot putt to close out a match. It was close enough that everybody thought it was in, but it was not in until the ball plunked into the hole. It was not over until we had that fourth win in our hands.

On the night before a game — any game, but especially one this important — I can't afford to have distractions. I have to isolate myself. People have always respected my privacy. I didn't do a lot the night before Game 4. I just had a quiet dinner at home with my wife, Gaynell, and our three kids, watched a little TV, talked to a couple of friends and family on the phone and went to bed about 11:30.

But I didn't get much sleep. Too many things were racing through my mind. I was dead tired, but I had all these thoughts

about what had happened and what could happen and what we had to do to win Game 4. We wanted to close the Magic out as soon as possible.

I never eat breakfast, or at least a real breakfast. I grabbed a banana and a glass of grapefruit juice, as I often do, and headed out the door bound for our shootaround at 10 a.m. I jumped into my white four-door Mercedes S500 for the 10-minute drive to The Summit, where the Rockets played in those days.

During the shootaround, our coach, Rudy Tomjanovich, didn't say a whole lot. He talked about not letting the Magic get a win to take over momentum in the series. We didn't want to let them start thinking they had the chance to come back in the series. Mentally the series was over, but if they could eke out a game on our home court, then go back to their place again for Game 5 ... you just never know. And they were a good young team. Shaquille O'Neal was dominant. Penny Hardaway was All-NBA. Nick Anderson, Horace Grant, Dennis Scott ... that was quite a starting five. We went over a few things during the shootaround and headed our separate ways.

I headed out for an early lunch at Drexler's Barbecue, our family restaurant that is located in downtown Houston, not far from what was then known as The Summit. Since I don't eat another meal until after a game, I wanted to put something in my stomach at lunch that was going to last. I had my specialty — the barbecued beef sandwich, potato salad and baked beans.

It was already pretty lively at the restaurant. We had a regular customer base of sports fans, and everybody was into the play-offs. A lot of my buddies were there, talking about the game. "Tonight's the night," everybody was saying. I could feel the excitement in the air. It was a little extra motivation. But mostly, I was thinking I better hurry up and eat, so I could go home and get my rest. My mom, Eunice, was there. She came over and said,

“Clyde, you get home and get off your feet.” A mom’s job is never done.

My game-day routine includes a nap. It is part of my mental preparation. It seems like I spend half my life taking a nap in preparation for the next game. I got to sleep about 12:30 and napped until about 3:30. I actually slept pretty well. My wife, Gaynell, always made sure the kids were quiet. I was fidgety, but I got to sleep. I rarely have trouble napping. I have a quiet, dark bedroom, but I could sleep in a room flooded with light if necessary. I could nap in an airfield. I am an All-World napper. During the season, I was always so tired, I needed it.

After my nap, I got up and took a shower. Then I had a little snack — some nuts for protein along with some fruit and fruit juice. Then it was back in the car to return to The Summit.

A lot of things went through my mind on the drive that day. My brother, James, and I had always talked about being in the situation I was about to be in. When I was on the schoolyard or in the gym, shooting baskets as a kid, I would put myself into that spot — an NBA championship game on the line. I used to pretend I was Julius Erving, the hero of my youth. Dr. J was the epitome of class. I loved the way he played, how smooth he was, how he seemed to fly when he went up for a dunk or a driving layup. I wanted to be like him. I wanted to be a world champion.

As I drove down the tunnel toward the team parking lot at The Summit, a huge crowd gathered to greet all of the Rockets. There were fans screaming and yelling and rooting us on. Euphoria was in the air. People had their brooms out. “Let’s sweep the Magic,” they were yelling. I was hoping the Orlando players didn’t see that. That placed even more pressure on us. If we didn’t win, those fans would have to put those brooms away. We wanted to send them home happy.

I was one of the last players to get to the locker room. Before I get dressed for a game, I read a book. Usually, I am reading until