



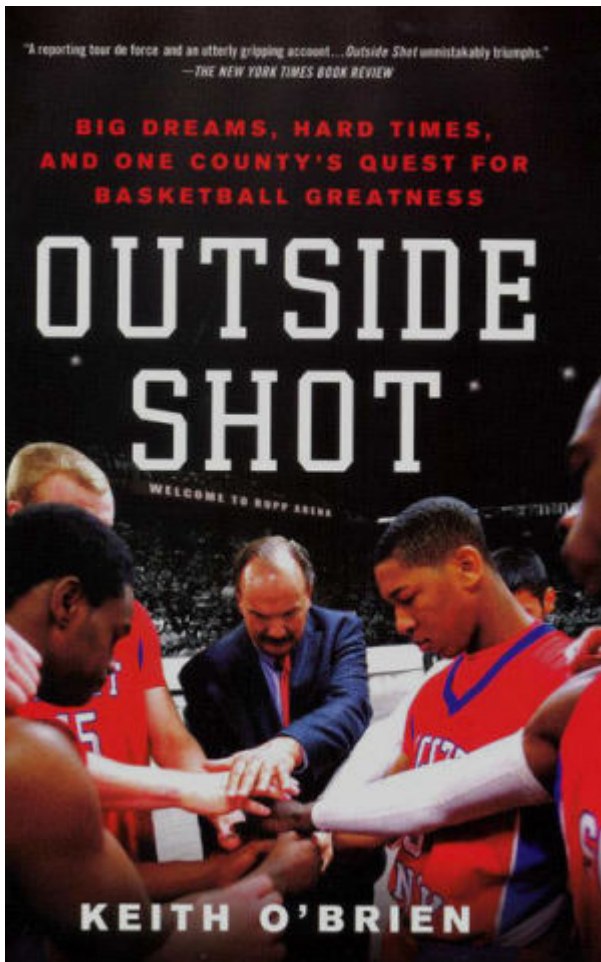
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DAILY NEWS

'Outside Shot' a slam dunk

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"Outside Shot: Big Dreams, Hard Times, and One County's Quest for Basketball Greatness" by Keith O'Brien. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2014. 309 pages, \$15.99 (paperback).



“Ge’Lawn Guyn didn’t cry in the locker room after the Ballard loss like so many other boys,” Keith O’Brien notes near the end of “Outside Shot: Big Dreams, Hard Times, and One County’s Quest for Basketball Greatness,” his best-selling book about high school basketball in Kentucky. “He just sat stone-faced with a towel draped over his shoulders. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t hurting. At a fast-food restaurant after the game, while the other boys queued up for burgers and fries, Ge’Lawn took a seat near the window. He was in no mood to eat.”

As is characteristic of most books in this genre – “Friday Night Lights” by Buzz Bissinger comes to mind – “Outside Shot” is a bittersweet tale filled with all the passion we normally associate with high school athletics. After all, these are our sons and daughters we are talking about. The book is constructed in three parts and basically follows the trajectory of the Scott County team through the 2009-10 basketball season. Central to the narrative is the role of Billy Hicks, the legendary coach who has been simultaneously praised and scorned for his leadership practices. While emphasizing discipline, hard work and ethics, he was also accused of improperly recruiting transfers into his program in order to gain a competitive edge.

Although the coach typically receives the lion’s share of the credit when a team does well – and conversely, the majority of the blame when a team performs poorly – it is the story of the players and the effect one extraordinary season had on their lives that I found most interesting. Many readers will recognize Dakotah Euton, Guyn, Chad Jackson and Will Schu. But if you think you really know these players, think again. Once you read “Outside Shot,” you may find yourself challenging any preconceived notions you may have held about who they are, what they accomplished and how their legacy was shaped by forces outside their control.

It’s the humanity of the characters who populate O’Brien’s book that I found truly endearing. The author goes to great lengths to provide a comprehensive portrait of his subjects in a way that many

writers seem hard-pressed to provide. Witness the following from “Prisoner of the Hype Machine,” the fourth chapter: “Dakotah and his parents often prayed together and attended church in a large, contemporary building atop a hill on Route 25 not far from the county line. Dakotah had felt it (the Holy Ghost) at a young age. At 10, he was baptized in the muddy waters of the Ohio River, standing in a white T-shirt next to his father, not far from their home at the time near Ashland, 130 miles east of Scott County.”

But, as O’Brien explains in the next paragraph, basketball has a way of bringing out both the best as well as the worst in almost everyone – especially in Kentucky: “Clay Euton, in normal, everyday life, would sooner hit himself in the face with a hammer than utter an obscenity. But on the basketball court he forgot himself. Clay shattered clipboards in anger, argued with referees, made his players cry, got tossed from games, and on at least one occasion even physically grappled with a fellow coach on his own bench.”

As was the case with “The Graves County Boys” by Marianne Walker, I found myself totally enthralled by O’Brien’s prose. Both authors transport us to another era. O’Brien is writing about events that took place only a few years ago, but I was struck by the similarities. Obviously, a lot has changed since the early 1950s, when Walker’s drama ignited the entire state. At the same time, however, there are some constants when it comes to how seriously we take basketball in Kentucky. The setting may have changed dramatically, but the essence of what happened during the 2009-10 season – and its effect on those involved – remains essentially the same in most respects.

See if you can relate to this excerpt from the 12th chapter, “How Stupid Do We Look?” Here, O’Brien is describing the atmosphere surrounding a pivotal game leading up to the state championship: “They say in Scott County that traffic stopped, that cars sat through entire green lights, and that no one laid a hand on their horns. They say that everyone not at the game was listening, leaning into their radios, ears cocked and waiting, pregnant with dreams that the shot might fall, that they might win, and Catholic might lose, while at Rupp Arena the fans stood up on their feet, in silence, in awe.”

O’Brien is a journalist in residence at the University of New Orleans and has written for the New York Times Magazine, the Boston Globe and the Oxford American. He is a recipient of the Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism and has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. While researching the book, the author moved his family to Scott County so he could get a better sense of the culture and community that form the backdrop for the book. His dedication to his craft obviously paid off. “Outside Shot” is extensively documented, with 22 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the 14 chapters that form the main text. More relevant is his literary style, which lends itself readily to this brand of storytelling.

Perhaps David Maraniss, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “When Pride Still Mattered,” says it best: “Keith O’Brien takes us inside the world of Kentucky high school basketball – the joy, devotion, pressure and obsession of a coach and his players.” Even if your interest in basketball is only seasonal, my sense is that you won’t be able to put this book down once you start reading it. “Outside Shot” has my highest recommendation.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*