



MICHAEL CAGE:

Reflections At Half Time

BY RITA GOLDBERG • PHOTOS BY BLEU COTTON

Newport Coast resident Michael Cage may have retired as a pro basketball player eight years ago but in the game life he is only at half time. At age 46 the former baller, whose NBA jersey collection includes Clippers, Supersonics, Cavaliers, 76ers, and Nets, is pursuing his second career as a broadcast commentator for televised basketball games. He is also coaching youths in need of guidance and is even taking a shot at authoring a revealing book about the pains

and triumphs of growing up in a household with alcoholism and some character building lessons about true life.

At 6'9" and a shoulder span broad enough to cast shade over just about anyone in his path, Cage erects a commanding presence. Yet his understated, soft spoken demeanor can quickly put anyone at ease. It is not surprising that the young people he coaches respond to his lessons about life as well as the game.

"Perseverance is the hardest lesson to teach," says Cage whose most valuable lessons were

acquired by trial and error. Some of those trials weren't always pleasant he tells. Cage is the product of a humble background from an Arkansas household led by a hardened man. "My father was a laborer and his life was tough, made tougher by time in the military where he picked up the habit of drinking." For the first time in his life, Cage candidly shares memories of his father showing up intoxicated at his school games. "He would be loud and unsteady. I was a kid trying to keep my on the ball, focused on the game but I saw people laughing at him and I was ashamed."

Cage cites his passion for the ball game as his savior from the temptations that surrounded him. With no counseling available for youths of his background during his childhood, Cage insists basketball kept him away from the drugs, alcohol and crime that lured many of his peers.

"No matter what dysfunction you're going through, sports is a survival outlet," says Cage. Although basketball initially started as Cage's personal escape from the down times of his childhood, it ultimately turned into the catalyst for developing a much longed for relationship with his father.

"When I was young my father never really spoke to me. He spoke at me. That's how it

was. But as I got older, my playing opened the door to communicating with my dad. He'd watch me play and later he would talk to me about some of the plays I made, even asking me about them. That was a big step in our relationship."

Every step of Cage's life led him to where he stands today. "I learned so much from my meager background." Other men would have wobbled in his size 15 shoes but Cage always kept his feet on the ground never straying from the path he chose. Staying grounded is not easy for a pro athlete from a small town, according to Cage.

"I grew up appreciating very simple things," says Cage. "Getting a Tastee Freez ice cream was an event during my childhood. Then suddenly, I am being handed six figure checks on

a weekly basis and exposed to drugs and all sorts of temptations. It was overwhelming because at heart I was still that small town kid."

Cage reached into the recesses of his upbringing to resist succumbing to the decadent activities that often spiral success and fame to a crash landing. He attributes his ability to stay on track to his strong faith, instilled in him as a child. The family attended church every Sunday without exception, according to Cage, who garnered strength from the inspirational sermons. "Hearing those words each week in church enabled me to persevere during tough times. Back then, in the 1960's, the Southern mentality was wrought with racism. There was a lot for a kid like me to deal with. I buckled but I never broke." Cage's faith also provided the





much needed moral compass that kept him on course during his pro-athlete years.

Cage worries about the youths of today. “Many kids today are crying out for help. If you don’t learn how to deal with pressures at a young age, they will overtake you. We grow up in denial about our issues.”

Cage is not one to stand by and merely philosophize about his concerns. He has been actively involved in children’s causes in just about every city he has called home. Often he gets as much out of his volunteerism as he gives. Sometimes he gets more.

“The trade from Los Angeles to Seattle was hard on me,” he shares. “It’s a horrible feeling to be traded.” But Cage did what

he knew would best help him acclimate to his new community. He got involved with a children’s charity—Cystic Fibrosis—which dramatically changed his perspective on life. “There was a terminally ill boy whose only desire in life was to watch me play and then meet me. He was so excited to be at the game. So full of life! I gave him my shoe and he was overjoyed. I remember thinking, ‘I’m living a dream life and I’m not even experiencing it.’ That kid set me straight. I found it hard to cry foul after meeting him.”

Cage acknowledges that life is mainly about perspective. “There’s a lot of good in life and you have to appreciate it.” Cage, of course, has had his fair share of good times. In 1983, while at San Diego State University, he was one of 12 finalists who made the Pan American Olympics, along with Michael Jordan, Sam Perkins, Mark Price, and Wayman Tisdale. “We won the Gold Medal,” tells Cage, who still counts the experience of bringing home the gold among his favorite memories. “I got to room with Michael Jordan,” he adds with the fervor of an ordinary fan.

Cage can relate to his fans because he understands the feeling of admiring an impressive athlete. “I’m a big fan of recently signed Angel player Torii Hunter,” Cage tells. Cage met Hunter at the Arkansas Hall of Fame induction. Cage and Hunter, both Arkansas natives with similar backgrounds, were inducted this year. “It was an honor to be inducted and hearing Torii tell of his life, which mirrored mine in so many ways, made the ceremony even more meaningful.”

Another highlight of Cage’s life was being invited to the White House as a guest of President Bill Clinton. “When I got the call I was sure it was some of my fellow team mates playing a prank on me so I hung up.”

His team manager called to assure him that the invite was for real.

“That was exciting,” says Cage. “Being in the oval office with the President of The United States as his personal guest was good.”

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Cage has learned the value of embracing the good in life. For Cage, that good is now found in the presence of his family which includes his wife Jodi and three children, Alexis, Michael Jr., and Sydney. He speaks devotedly about his wife. “Jodi is responsible for transforming me into the person I am today. She makes the commitment to my family feel natural and right.”

Family and giving back rank high on Cage’s priority list. He has merged his two most important areas of focus. During the last few years he has taken a leadership role in youth sports as a licensed soccer referee and coach of his son Michael’s team, enabling him to reap the dual benefits of mentoring youths while bonding with his own son.

“It’s so important for children to have a strong father figure in their lives,” Cage says, noting that even in affluent communities such as ours, the children can easily fall prey to at-risk behaviors.

“Every child, no matter the background, can succumb to the lure of dangerous behaviors,” believes Cage. “A commitment to sports is one of the best ways to keep our kids on a good path. Against all odds, it worked for me.” **18**