

An Insider's Guide to the **Sixers**...

Can these spoiled rich kids win it all?

BY SAMANTHA STEVENSON

Lloyd Free: In Brownsville, basketball was a ticket out — and "The Prince of Mid-Air" took it.

More reporter's notes: "The carpeted locker room is its usual postgame quiet. Lloyd Free, dressed in a three-piece black suit, is standing in the middle with Joseph Jeffries-El, his business manager, who is a regular guest in the locker room. Jeffries-El (the players call him "Joe-El") looks like one of Al Capone's main men reincarnated, but is in fact a sheik (minister) in his Islamic sect. He comes down from New York for every game. He and Free hold frequent, lengthy discussions in the hallway that have almost a father-son connotation. Free wears a gold chain around his neck with links shaped to spell "WORLD." There is a small diamond on the "O." Free seems just a kid. Nice smile."

When you watch Lloyd Free ache to dazzle you on the court, remember that he began on the playgrounds of Brownsville, in Brooklyn. "In Brownsville," says Jeffries-El, "if you could play basketball, you could survive. Basketball was a free ticket out." And Lloyd Free took it.

By the time he was 14, he was already pushing up on the reputations of Fly Williams, Greg Jackson, and Phil Sellers — all Brownsville boys who made it to the pros. Free earned his "All World" nickname from his 360-degree, turnaround-in-the-air-and-dunk-it shot. His spectacular leaping ability (he's only 6-2, small for a pro player) earned him his second nickname, "Prince of Mid-Air." His leaps are truly awesome, and enable him to back down bigger guards. Only Denver's David Thompson can challenge



Lloyd Free



Joseph Jeffries-El

Photos by Richard M. Titley

Free in a contest to see who can touch the sky. Free is a good jump shooter from 20 feet out, and claims the 40 feet isn't that tough for him, though that's a matter of some debate. Shue has confidence in Free's shooting ability, and along with McGinnis and Erving, Free is one of the trio designated for a crucial last-minute shot.

But, for most of the season, he got a bad rap from his teammates for taking too many shots, and ignoring opportunities to get the ball inside to Erving and McGinnis. During the team's final trip to the West Coast in February, Free took an unbelievable 19 shots during one loss to Los Angeles; making only 6 of them. Deep Basket said of him shortly thereafter, "Freebie (yet another of Free's nicknames) isn't even on the court offensively. He's off on some Playground-in-the-Sky." Mrs. Erving was presumably speaking of him when she said in her dispatch to The New York Times: "Those other guys shoot that ball like crazy."

Lloyd got that hint, though his first response was not necessarily a constructive one. He demanded to be traded, and press reports of that demand were an important part of Bad Sunday. But by a week later, Free had changed his attitude. "I felt bad about what I said," he told this reporter. "At the time I said that out of frustration. You know, when you're a young player, you have a tendency to go off. You want to make up after it's over. With the playoffs, this is money. It's not just for yourself. I'm ready to go 100 percent."

Free's turnabout came after Shue's "Cover-up or pay-up" speech, and appears to have been one of the meeting's principal positive results.

Late in the season, Free was a changed player, out of his Playground-in-the-Sky, and into the Real Game. The danger of a relapse exists, however. Get worried if Free starts launching long jumpers when Erving or McGinnis is loose underneath. On the other hand, don't worry when he takes his shots in pre-planned one-on-one situations. He can be as dangerous as Dr. J or McGinnis.