

No one cheers when Sammy Drummer goes to the boards

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By Sam Heys

MUNCIE, Ind. - Sammy Drummer hopes he's never asked to sweep the basketball court. Having to clean the backboards with Windex is embarrassing enough.

"Sometimes before a game we have to go over and wipe down the backboard," he says. "That brings back old memories. I say, 'Why am I up here?'"

Drummer played basketball for three colleges and now is cleaning for one.

Five years ago, Drummer was one of Georgia Tech's finest players ever. Now he is 28 and a janitor at Ball State University in his hometown of Muncie, Ind., earning \$13,228 a year. He wears a ring of 40 keys on a belt loop and worn-out leather Converse basketball shoes on his feet.

"I sit back now and I think about the way things turned out, and at times tears just pop into my eyes," he says. "It's a funny feeling."

Drummer's story is that of a college athlete who didn't get his degree, didn't make it in the pros as he dreamed he would and has little to show for the four years he spent in college except a scrapbook of memories.

"He was used. They just used him until they were done with him," says Drummer's high school coach, Myron Dickerson, of Drummer's college years. "It's ironic that Ball State wanted Sam as bad as anybody and now he's back over there. He's made the circle."

His case is not an isolated one. "The circumstances are typical almost to being a composite of what happens on the average, to black athletes in particular, and to white athletes to some extent," says Dr. Harry Edwards, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley who testified this summer before a Senate subcommittee investigating the academic integrity of college athletics.

A study by the National Collegiate Athletic Association released this summer revealed that only about half of the athletes who entered major universities on athletic scholarships in 1977 graduated within six years. The study included 6,804 athletes at 206 participating institutions in the NCAA's Division I, which includes the majority of America's largest colleges.

"What this means," says Edwards, "is that these Division I schools are running plantations and the kids are not getting educated. As long as there is an endless supply of 20th century gladiators being created in the black communities of this country by parents who are blindly orienting their children to become athletes, why should these schools be concerned about what happens to any particular black athlete?"

Dr. Doug Conner, executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, believes some athletes have not graduated because they "major in eligibility." "One of the problems has been that athletes could go to college and could just take courses to keep themselves eligible but not necessarily work toward any kind of degree," he says.

Drummer majored in industrial management at Georgia Tech and needed approximately two more years of academic work to graduate when his athletic eligibility expired in 1979.

He was admitted to Tech from DeKalb Community College in 1977 despite having no algebra in high school or college and scoring only 500 total on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, with 400 being the minimum and 1600 the maximum.

"He is certainly not typical of the ones (athletes) we get," says Dr. Joseph Pettit, Georgia Tech president. "We've got a different coach now and a different athletic director. I'm not saying we might not take a Sammy Drummer, but we are certainly putting education way out front. Our overall policy is to try to get students who can get through. He was really not a very good prospect academically from the start. I think our standards are somewhat higher now.

"I think a young fellow like that takes his chances. We certainly have to tell him that maybe only 1 percent ever get into the pros. I think that's really terribly unfortunate. A student with those kind of scores comes with a disadvantage."

Drummer was behind in school before he ever started. Growing up along the dirt roads of Bolivar County in the Delta country of northwest Mississippi, Drummer didn't enter school until he was 10. Because of his age, he was placed in the third grade.

After his first school year, his mother moved the family to Muncie. "I didn't want to raise my children in the South like I was raised," says Elizabeth Drummer, who had supported her family by chopping and picking cotton. "I knew if I stayed down there, they'd have to do the same thing. I wasn't about to let them work in no field."

Drummer was placed in the fifth grade in Muncie, perhaps because he was two years older than most fourth-graders. He therefore missed three of the first four grades of school.

Basketball became Drummer's life in Indiana, as he no longer had to be satisfied with shooting a balled-up rag at a five-gallon can as he had in Mississippi.

He could dunk a basketball in the seventh grade, and when he injured his knee in the ninth grade and was placed in a hip-to-ankle cast, he still practiced shooting, even in the snow. He would often play until 3 or 4 a.m. on the court next to the public housing project where he lived with his mother, three sisters and brother.

In high school Drummer was bused across town to Northside, an upper-middle-class school with a 10 percent black enrollment. In a state where high school basketball is a major event and in a city where rival Central High had won more state championships than any Indiana school, the 6-foot-5 Drummer was possibly Muncie's most famous citizen.

"He was a popular kid. He wasn't a bragger or showoff or troublemaker or anything like that," says Dickerson, his Northside coach. "He'd do anything to play basketball."

To play basketball, Drummer had to remain academically eligible, and that was a struggle.

"School was hard because I was having so much problem with the little stuff, stuff that I should have learned in earlier grades but didn't even know," he says. "If it wasn't for basketball, I wouldn't have gone as far as I did in school. But basketball kind of gave me a boost and made me try hard. I wanted to learn. I really didn't want to be dumb all my life."

When Drummer was in the 11th grade, his English teacher, Barbara Pugh, realized that he didn't know that letters had specific sounds. So she bought a phonics workbook designed for children learning to read and worked with him during her free time. Drummer's reading improved, and by the time he was out of her class, he was reading on a fourth-grade level.

Both teachers and students would work with Drummer individually. "You'd have to sit around after class," he says, "and sort of like take class all over again."

"He'd stay after school and a lot of teachers would be willing to help him. I mean really help him," says Sonny Burks, a Muncie policeman who moonlighted as a security officer at Northside and became a friend and adviser to Drummer.

Asked if Drummer was "socially promoted" through high school, Northside principal Owen Lemna replies, "Sam was a young man who was friendly and had a smile on his face. He got along with people, he was courteous, he was pleasant. You can draw your own conclusions from that."

Needing a 2.0 grade average to receive an NCAA scholarship, Drummer graduated from Northside in 1975 with a 2.13 average of a possible 4.0. He had not received a college-preparatory education, however.

Six of Drummer's 37½ credits were in industrial arts and eight were split among art, typing, physical education, health and driver education. His science was limited to physical science, he had no foreign language and his seven semesters of English were spent in "reading lab," an individualized program for students unable to read at grade level.

Drummer scored only 210 on the verbal half of the SAT college board and 290 on the math half, with 200 being the minimum on each half. But because of his basketball ability, he received scholarship offers from -- depending on the newspaper reports -- more than 200, 300 or 400 colleges. He was ranked among the top five high school basketball players in the U.S.

His recruitment became an ordeal he wanted to run away from, often hiding upstairs when recruiters came to his door. "It was a mess, I mean a mess," says Drummer. "I didn't have no one to sit down and tell me what it was all about. All I knew is I had all these coaches coming in from all directions."

Drummer signed a Big Ten letter-of-intent with Indiana but later changed his mind. "I don't think I could have played ball there," he says, claiming he only signed with Indiana to get other recruiters off his back. "Indiana never mentioned no help books-wise, and I knew I needed help."

Although Indiana did offer tutoring for its athletes, just as most colleges do, Drummer eventually signed a scholarship with Gardner-Webb College, a small Baptist school in Boiling Springs, N.C., although he would change his mind about entering that school also.

Gardner-Webb assistant coach Roger Banks had become a father figure to Drummer, their relationship having started when Drummer was in the ninth grade. Banks, for 15 years one of the

Southeast's most successful recruiters, had first seen Drummer play on a Muncie playground and had befriended him. He became the only person Drummer trusted during his recruitment.

"I thought he (Banks) was really interested in helping me," says Drummer. "I just got so hooked to him, attached to him, I don't know how to say it. I never really met no one like him. He helped me out with lots of things, advice and everything."

"Sammy was like family to us," says Banks, 39, now living in Newland, N.C., and working as regional director of Jim Barfield Inc., an insurance and employee-benefit company.

Drummer would later babysit for Banks' children and be tutored by Banks' wife, and even now Banks often uses the pronoun "we" when talking about Drummer's career.

"Nobody during Sammy's recruiting process knew of his insecurity academically," says Banks. "Sammy had a lot of pride and he didn't want anybody else to know he had those kind of academic problems. And nobody else that recruited him really cared about those problems. He was too good a player."

When Banks left Gardner-Webb during the summer of '75 and was hired at Austin Peay University -- a small state-supported school in Clarksville, Tenn., that had recently developed a strong basketball program -- Drummer decided he too would go to Austin Peay. Because he had not yet enrolled at Gardner-Webb and because Gardner-Webb belonged to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics and Austin Peay to the NCAA, Drummer was able to receive a scholarship at Austin Peay and play that season.

Drummer planned to major in physical education at Austin Peay and about half the classes he took as a freshman were P.E. courses, according to Banks.

Drummer averaged 16.7 points per game as freshman at Austin Peay, but when the season ended and Banks got a better-paying job at Georgia Tech, Drummer decided he would follow Banks to Atlanta.

Because of NCAA rules, Drummer could not transfer from Austin Peay to Georgia Tech without sitting out a basketball season. So he instead transferred to DeKalb South, where he did not have to miss a season, because it's a junior college and not under NCAA jurisdiction. That season he was named player of the year by the National Junior College Athletic Association, averaging 28.9 points and 13.8 rebounds a game.

To play for a senior college again, according to NCAA rules, Drummer had to graduate from DeKalb South. He totaled the necessary 90 credit hours for graduation by transferring approximately 40 hours from Austin Peay and attending DeKalb South for four quarters. Again, he had his choice of colleges, but he chose Tech to remain close to Banks.

"I told Sammy he would never graduate from Georgia Tech," says Banks, "but once he came out of Tech and into the pros, we'd get him in school somewhere else and he'd get a degree even if it took 10 years."

"Sammy was a weak student for Georgia Tech," says George Slayton, academic adviser to Tech athletes. "He had a good attitude and he went to class well but he was a very, very weak student. I am sure he felt totally out of place, because he wasn't up to the other students in academic ability. His background was very weak, but he tried at least."

Although Drummer was a junior in athletic eligibility when he entered Tech, he was able to transfer only about half his previous credits so, academically, he was the equivalent of a late freshman or early sophomore.

Asked if Drummer was put at a disadvantage by being admitted to Tech, his former coach, Dwane Morrison, says, "We were honest with every youngster that came in, telling them that it was difficult. But we were also honest in telling them the tutoring was available."

While Drummer remembers few courses he took at Tech, Banks remembers him taking some textile courses and Slayton remembers him taking some courses that he did not need as an industrial management major.

"We had to give him some free elective work because he didn't have the background to go into all the required courses he needed," says Slayton. "Sometimes you have to give the athlete things that don't count toward graduation to keep him around and give him a chance to get his feet on the ground."

As a basketball player, Drummer had no such adjustment problems. He was All-Metro Conference as a junior in 1977-78 and, as a senior, led Tech to its best record (17-9) of the 13-year period from 1972-1984. His career scoring average of 22.3 points per game is the second highest in Tech history.

Following his senior season, Drummer dropped out of Tech and awaited the annual spring draft of the National Basketball Association, where the minimum salary in 1979 was \$35,000 per year and the average salary was \$170,000. But instead of being a first-round draft choice, as he was predicted to be before his senior season, Drummer was not selected until the fourth round, by the Houston Rockets. They released him after a summer tryout camp, shattering his only lifetime goal.

"I didn't ever want to come home," he says. "I wanted to go off and melt or something."

Drummer had tryouts later in the summer with the San Antonio Spurs and Kansas City Kings but was cut by them also. Many pro scouts and coaches felt Drummer, at 6-5, was too small to play forward and not a good enough ball-handler to play guard. And wherever he tried to play, he carried the tag of a fourth-round draft pick. If he had been a first-round choice, he would have been virtually assured of making a team.

Banks believes Drummer was hurt by playing at Georgia Tech, where Morrison's deliberate offense did not showcase Drummer's running and jumping ability, only his excellent shooting skills. Banks, who left Tech to become an assistant coach at the University of Georgia before Drummer's senior season, says he made a mistake in "placing" Drummer at Tech.

In the fall of 1979, Drummer got a job with the Harlem Globetrotters. He signed a \$35,000 contract, but in only four months he had gone from basketball stud to basketball clown.

Then in November 1980, during his second season with the Globetrotters' international team, Drummer, along with teammate Rickey Brown, was arrested in Sao Paulo, Brazil, for possession of marijuana and cocaine. Drummer contends that he was "set up" by a group of Brazilians hoping to obtain a payoff from the Globetrotters and that the cocaine and marijuana were planted

in his hotel room. Drummer says he has never used cocaine and only smoked marijuana in college.

Although he was never convicted, Drummer was fired by the Globetrotters and, after spending two months in a Sao Paulo jail, was deported to the U.S.

His future as a pro player, in the U.S. or Europe, was suddenly very dim. "There wasn't any opportunity from there on," says Banks. "There was no way you could explain it (the drug charges)."

Moving in with Banks, Drummer took a construction job in Athens, Ga. "That's something I never figured I'd be doing," he says. Banks did get Drummer a tryout with the Hawks in the summer of 1981 but he was released. Later that year, Banks got Drummer a tryout in Belgium, but he didn't make that team either.

Afterward, Drummer went back to Muncie to live with his girlfriend.

Unable to find steady work in Muncie, Drummer spent a year putting roofs and siding on houses and cutting trees to sell for firewood. He got his job at Ball State (18,000 enrollment) almost two years ago when the supervisor of custodial services, Jim Frazier, made a deal with him. "He said if I played basketball on his (industrial league) team and we won the league, he'd hire me," says Drummer. "We went 13-0."

Drummer's nightly duties include dusting, sweeping, cleaning bathrooms and labs, picking up trash in vending areas and locking up as many as a dozen buildings at the end of his shift. University Gym is one of his buildings.

Driving a van with mop buckets hanging in the back, Drummer gets a call on his beeper when a janitor is needed in his area: A professor has locked his keys in his office, there's a water leak, someone has gotten sick. "You be doing something important," says Drummer, "and some student drops a pop and you have to run over there to clean it up."

Although he smiles as often as ever, Drummer says he is bitter about the way his life has turned out. He says that if he could do it over, he would stay at one school. "Transferring so much," he says, "they (the pros) might have wondered, 'What kind of guy is this?'"

Drummer had looked forward to taking care of his family financially by playing in the NBA but says he doesn't earn enough money even to marry his girlfriend, Rosemary Bailey. She has four children by a previous marriage, a fifth by Drummer and another by Drummer on the way. He has thought about working two jobs, as well as completing his degree at Ball State.

Banks believes Drummer really would like to have a college degree. "I don't think he would have paid the price to sit in class and be humiliated over and over again if he didn't," says Banks.

Drummer hasn't talked with Banks in 1½ years and has lost contact with all his other former college coaches and teammates. He says he hasn't heard from his former agent, Jack Manton of Cumming, since the arrest in Brazil.

Drummer plays basketball once a week in a Muncie industrial league at his old junior high school, plays in pickup games at Ball State on his days off and would like to switch to the morning work shift so he would have more time to play basketball. He is unable to relinquish the dream completely.

"I haven't given up. I love the sport too much to give up just like that," he says. "I sit back and watch and deep inside of me I know I should be out there. I would like to give it one more shot."

It's not a dream Drummer necessarily holds for his children, however. He tells a story about his girlfriend's 9-year-old son, who loves to play basketball. The boy recently brought home a report card with two Fs on it. Drummer was upset: "I told him, 'I'm not that smart, but I'd rather see y'all learn something than be like I am now.' "

In the early-morning hours of Saturday, February 4, 1995, at age 38, Sammy Drummer was shot to death in Muncie, Ind. Police attributed his death to a botched attempt to purchase crack cocaine.