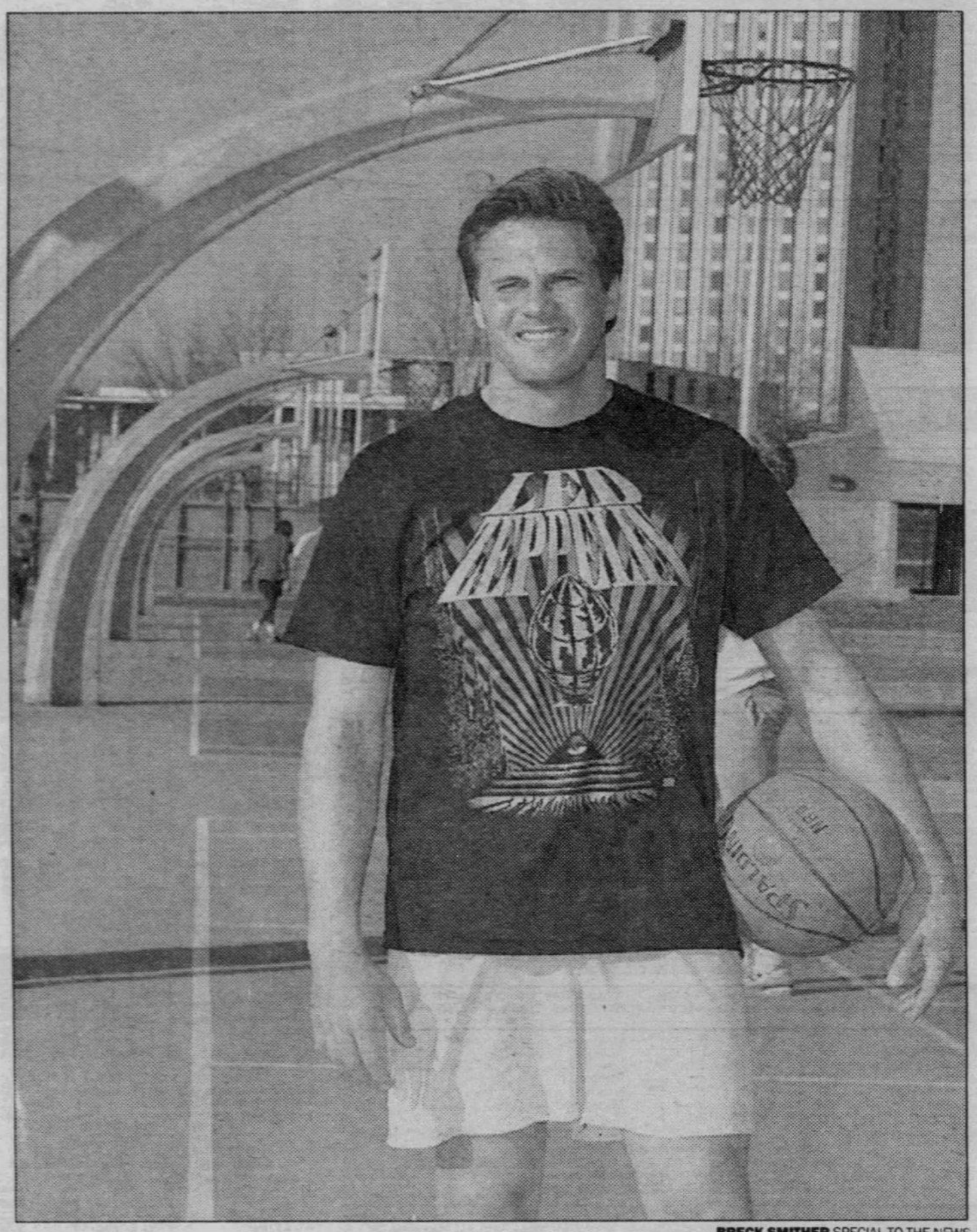
BILLY RIESER: LEGEND & MYTH



BRECK SMITHER SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

IT'S ALL THESE years later, and Stan Dinner's in a lousy mood. The streets are already awash in snow, which means there aren't going to be many customers tonight. Also, the cook called in sick. So Stan's got to be the fryman, too. He fires up a Parliament and squints through the dim light of the bar, *his* bar, a joint on Fifth Street and Second Avenue called the Sportspage.

"Did I recruit you?"

"Nah. That was a friend of mine."

All these years later, and the white guys look alike to Stan.



Sixteen years later, the tales of E. Harlem's Billy Rieser are still fresh.

"You wanna talk, we gotta do it downstairs," he says, "in the kitchen."

All these years later and the memory has become a quest. The memory has been fermented and enhanced. It was what, 1978? Must have been around then because all the white guys were yelling "disco sucks" and the brothers were listening to "One Nation Under a Groove" on BLS, and Ben Franklin High, on 116th and the FDR, had a mighty squad.

Ben Franklin had a kid named Billy Rieser. He came to school in a uniform — the basis of the memory itself — ratty bell-bottom jeans, a black short-brimmed fedora, walking stick, and always, that Led Zeppelin concert T-shirt. Billy Rieser had a game like physical graffiti. He could jump out of the gym.

Now Stan Dinner, once the coach of all those badass Franklin teams, curses under his breath. The air is hot and heavy with the scent of fry grease. "You know what it was they called him, don't you?"

He peers through the orange beam of the heat lamp, his gaze narrowing as he waits to answer his own question.

"White Jesus."

Stan rests his Parliament in a scorched plastic ashtray. "That's true," he says. "That's a true story."

He Could Play

The way Stan explains it, Billy Rieser came out of that last vestige of Italian East Harlem. His dad had split, and his mother raised the family in a tenement right there on 114th and First. "I saw him in the eighth grade. We had a manager on the team, Anthony. Anthony used to bring Billy around. I didn't think nothing of 'im. Billy wasn't nothing but a scrawny little kid."

"Swiss burger medium," yells the waitress.

"Then he became a player," says Stan, sliding another ball of meat across the grill. "Boy, Billy could play. But I'll tell you, you really wanna know about Billy, you gotta speak to Millstein."

"Who's Millstein?"

"A guy."

The waitress calls in another order and Stan begins to prepare Caesar salad, cracking an egg yolk into a steel bowl, adding a generous sprinkling of sharp Italian cheese. His hands are shiny with olive oil as he holds them up to the light. "Look at this," he says. "Don't look like I was ever a coach, huh?"

Working the mixture into a dressing, Stan recalls a moment, an epiphany really, when it became clear Billy Rieser had a special game.

"I need one buffalo wings," calls the waitress.

Stan makes like he doesn't hear her and looks up from the Caesar salad, adjusting the focus in his mind's eye. "I remember it like yesterday," he says. "The Harlem Classic. Now it's a Christmas tournament, but back then it kicked off the season at Thanksgiving. We're playing Taft, and back then ya gotta understand, Taft was the (best). It's Billy's first game, and no one can figure out what this white kid is doing up here at City College. Billy takes the ball right off the tip. There's a big kid in front of him, Curtis something, big kid ended up playing for Marquette. They called him Cornbread. Billy goes up . . . and up . . . and up. Boom. Dunks right over Cornbread. Two-handed dunk. The place goes nuts. The kids couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe a white guy could jump like that. Everybody come out on the floor. They hadda stop the game for 20 minutes."

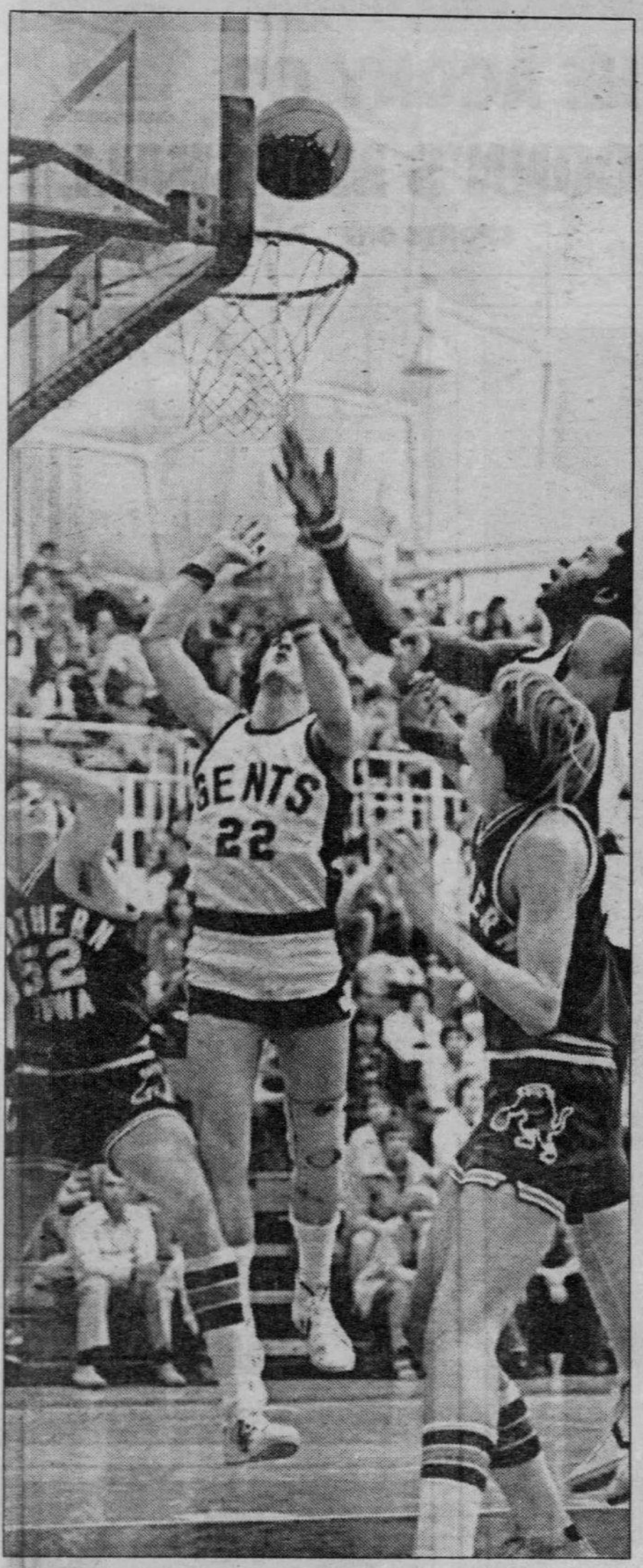
The waitress calls for a steak with french fries.

"White men *can* jump," he says. "I know. I *seen* it. We hadda stretch Billy to list him at 6-4, but he jumped center."

The kitchen is anarchy now. A steamy hiss from the broiler. A hot bubbling murmur from the fryer. The sound of heavy plates against stainless steel. Stan's putting out french fries and fish platters, burgers and buffalo wings, his body working on autopilot as his mind works through the remembrance.

A Favor For Fat Tony

"Let's see," he says, "that year we had the Valencia brothers, Raymond and Fran-





HELAYNE SEIDMAN

TIMES CHANGE: In the '70s, Ben Franklin High School's Billy Rieser stood out on the court, as his former coach, Stan Dinner, (above) can attest. Today, even in his trademark Led Zeppelin shirt (far left), Rieser blends right in on the courts of Kentucky.

kie. We had Mookie Valentine. Our point guard was Duck Jackson. We even had another white kid — Matty C."

Stan takes a large knife and cuts a slab three fingers wide off a side of beef. "Tell you how that happened. You know where Franklin was, right? Around the corner from the Palma Boys Social Club. So I'd go up the block for donations, you know — uniforms, sneakers ... whatever. Anyway, one day I'm in the place, and the head guy, he says to me, 'Stanley, I got a kid wants to play for you.'

"So I tell him, I say, 'Fat Tony, what do you know about basketball?' And Fat Tony says, 'I don't know s— about basketball. I'm asking you a favor.'

Matty C. made the squad.

"Hey, if Fat Tony asks you a favor ... Besides, Matty was all right. Real good shooter. Couldn't do anything else, though. Millstein loved him. You really gotta speak to Millstein."

ABRUPT ENDING

It was a splendid season, the one that ended so abruptly off the Utopia Parkway. "We're up at St. John's and Billy gets hurt in the first quarter. The kid was always getting hurt, but he was a warrior. 'I'm OK,' he keeps saying. 'I'm OK.' OK my ass. Halftime, we stick him in a whirlpool and his foot gets so big we can barely get his shoes back on. He goes back in the game. But I could see, it's hurting him so bad there's tears in his eyes. I hadda take him out. His ankle was broke. We lost that day. I think that was the semifinals, but you gotta ask Millstein. Millstein, he loved Billy. He remembers everything."

Even the little things: box scores, dunks, timeouts, Led Zeppelin.

"Yeah, like that. Billy was a Led Zeppelin freak. That was his No. 1 thing. Him and Anthony, hey, used to drive me crazy with that music. Noise, that's what it was. Yeah, Billy and Anthony, they were inseparable, now they don't even speak no more. Least that's what I heard."

All these years later, Stan is asked what else he's heard.

"Billy don't play baskets no more. Never even picks up a ball."

Now the waitress examines the orders under the heat lamp. A slight surly pout spreads across her mouth. "This one's supposed to be a *cheese*burger, Stan."

"Yeah," he says. "Sure."

Stan Dinner corrects the order and plucks his Parliament from the ashtray. He drags hard on the butt before announcing Billy Rieser's fate.

"You'd never believe it," he says. "The kid lives in Kentucky."

Stan lets that one sink in for a moment. "Lives in Kentucky and plays golf," he says, letting go of the smoke. "Golf ... Heard Billy makes a mean set of clubs."

The waitress calls for an order of chicken fingers, and Stan stamps out his butt in the ashtray. "C'mon," he says, leaving the meat sizzling on the grill, leading the way to a cramped office. Stan Dinner punches in a number, hands off the receiver, then disappears.

"Hello?"

"Who's this?"

"I used to work with Stan. ... Heard you were asking about Billy."

"Who *is* this?"

"Who ya think?"

Millstein. And to prove it, he recites the particulars of Billy's famous dunk over Cornbread. "The greatest dunk I ever seen," he says. "Going up, Cornbread's got the angle, then they're neck and neck, and Billy ... it's like he never comes down. He throws it so hard on the guy. Now you got a mob scene, maybe 80, 90 people. I'd say it took 10 to 12 minutes to clear the court. That was the first game of Billy's senior year. Stan always says it was his junior year. Stan was a hell of a coach, should still be, if you ask me. But sometimes Stan forgets."

Millstein forgets nothing. "I remember back in '76, when Billy first started with us, he took it to Al King at Fort Hamilton. The next day, the phone's ringing off the hook. Guys are asking: 'Who's the white kid? Where'd you get him?'

"Billy was one tough bitch. He had a nice little Rudy T. jumper off the glass. He was the best shot blocker I ever seen for someone his size. And he was the *hardest* dunker."

THE MEMORIES REMAIN

Millstein pauses. "I loved that kid," he says. "I was there to hold his hand. But what is it you wanna know? I can tell you everything."

And he does. Almost.

There was the time Billy elbowed the kid from Jackson in the Elmcor, laid that big sucker out. The time he outrebounded Sid Green.

"You want me to tell you about that?" asks Millstein. "Or how about when he got Dick Barnett on the playground, when he pinned him and reversed him? Or the time we were playing Brandeis with Teddy Campbell? It's a close game, but Billy's pissed he's not getting the ball. Billy takes me aside and says, 'Watch what's gonna happen now.' Next thing I know, Billy goes the length of the court and slams. The whole place comes down. Brandeis dies after that. And then, another time, we're playing Hughes with Stevie Burtt and Kevin Williams. We're waiting in the lobby for the elevator. Billy's got his cane and his Led Zeppelin shirt. Now word gets out like: He's arrived. Kids start *touching* him. Like he was God. I swear that's no bull. That's a true story."

Lou Carnesecca wanted Billy for St. John's, wanted him in the worst way. But Billy was hard-headed, said Millstein, and thought he might be too small. Billy signed with Centenary, down in Louisiana.

And tore up his knee.

He wasn't White Jesus anymore. Just Billy Rieser.

Then there was another school. "But that didn't work out, neither," says Millstein. "You know how it goes: kid from the city goes too far from home ... Just one of those things."

Just another white boy from Harlem who ends up playing golf in Kentucky.

"I taught him how to play," says Millstein. "I used to take him over to the driving range by Marine Park."

It's been a long time. Millstein hasn't heard from the Valencia brothers in years. Or Matty C. "Matty could play," he says. "But Stan said he had white man's disease." A while back, he heard Duck Johnson died over a dollar bet in a card game.

"Who'd a thought," he says, "that everything would turn out like it did? You know, for such a tough kid, he'd bitch about everything. Complain, complain. So one time I say, 'Billy, remember these days 'cause you're never gonna have it like this again.' "

Millstein misses a beat on the other end of the line. "Who'd a thought what I said would come to pass?"

Up in the bar, the bar that used to be his father's diner, Stan adjusts the dial for the satellite dish. Stan wants a ballgame. The customers want Olympic skating. "These two broads," as he puts it. The customer's always right.

"Millstein wouldn't pull your chain," he says. "Those were good days. I was young. Billy was young. Everybody liked him ... even with that stupid Led Zeppelin shirt. I told him he could've played at St. John's. I told him, 'Billy, you can play anywhere.' "

But it's too late for that. It's all these years later. Fat Tony Salerno died in prison, in the sixth year of a 100-year sentence for racketeering. Word on the street had Duck Johnson dying of a bad bet. Ben Franklin was bolted shut in 1982. The Board of Ed cited poor attendance. Millstein now teaches gym at Washington Irving. And Stan Dinner's in the bar business.

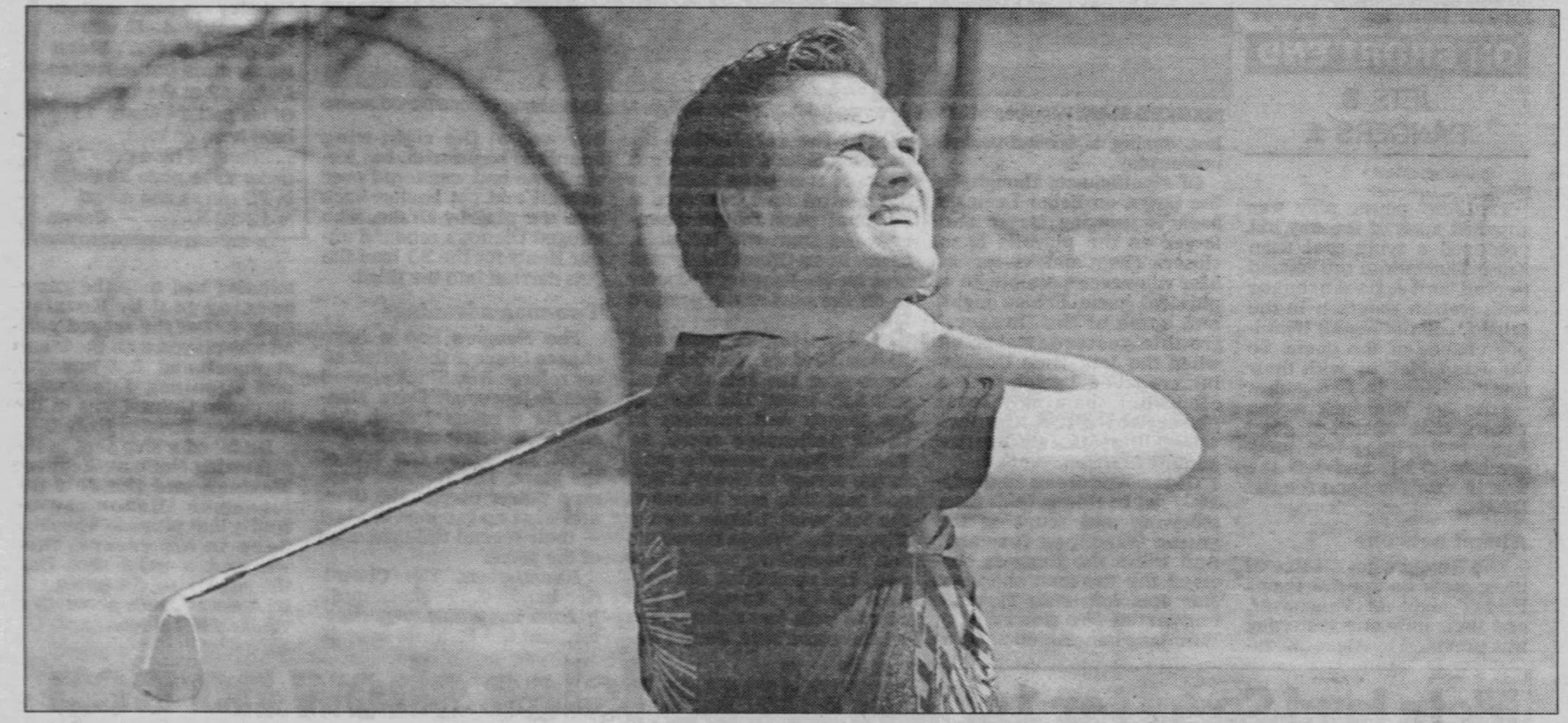
The city is covered in snow, its fierce sounds muffled under a wet, white blanket. Billy Rieser is out there, somewhere, in a strange place, more bluegrass than blacktop, playing the whitest game of all, but living as an occasional remembrance of physical graffiti, the recollection wistfully recalled: awesome, improbable, a blasphemous comedy, White Jesus in the Zeppelin shirt.

•••

Tomorrow: One on one with "White Jesus"

BILLY RIESER:

STAIRWAY FROM HEAVEN



LEXINGTON, Ky. — Out of place and out of time, across two decades, Billy Rieser appears in khakis and loafers, a polo shirt and PGA windbreaker. It's as if he'd been outfitted at the pro shop and the Gap. The long hair from years ago is now neatly trimmed, parted and gelled into a state of polite conformity. Billy Rieser remains as he ever was, a stranger in a strange land, except now he looks too much like everyone else.

MARK KRIEGEL



A long way from home for Harlem legend.

And not at all like who he was — the funkiest white boy in Harlem, the kid from the top floor of a tenement on 114th between Pleasant and First, the kid who'd come around the way with the black Led Zeppelin shirt, with the special game, the kid whose idols were Jimmy Page and Julius Erving. To his boys on the block, the ones who hung out in front of the candy store, he was "Billy NBA." But the brothers took to calling him White Jesus. His religion was dunking.

"I had a gift from God," he says. "I don't know why. But it wasn't something you could learn in Harlem."

Billy Rieser puts his Lincoln Continental into gear and begins to drive over highways flanked by bluegrass hills and horse farms. "Haven't been back in a while," he says. His voice is without accent, as neat and parsed as his hair. "Last person I saw was Kathy. One day she's Kathy Narducci from the neighborhood, the next she's DeNiro's wife in that movie, 'A Bronx Tale.' Last week, I saw her on television. That show, 'Law and Order?' She played a Lorena Bobbitt. She cut off her husband's ... you know."

He pushes a cassette into the tape deck. "Dazed and Confused" by Zeppelin. Remembrance requires its own theme music.

"I was in the movie," he says.

"The what?"

"The movie ... 'The Song Remains the Same.' I was at the show they made into the movie. I had 12th-row seats at the Garden. Watch the movie real close and you can see a skinny kid with long hair and an orange shirt. That's me. At least I think it is."

Billy keeps driving. It's been a long time since he rock 'n' rolled.

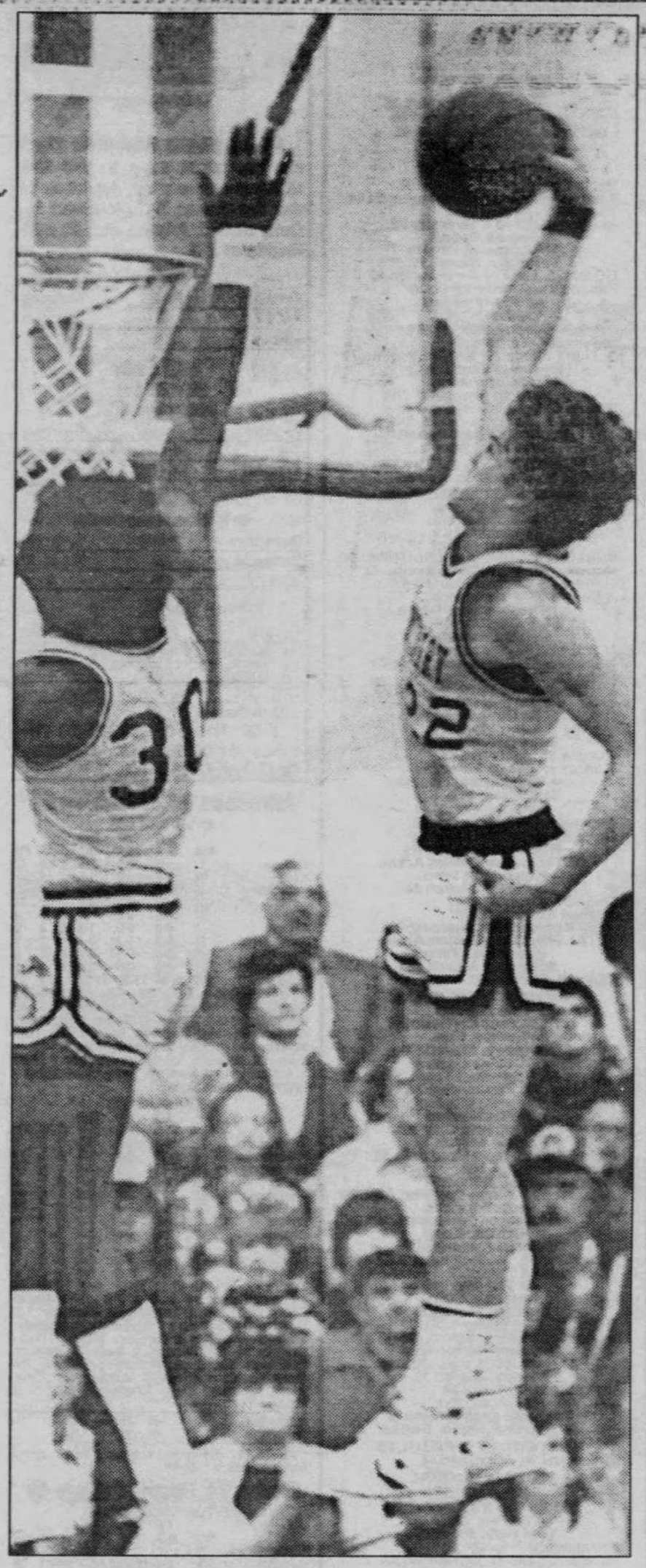
White Jesus wears Foot Joys. He plants his feet on the soft, green carpet and takes his best shot. The little white ball is oblivious to the fierce wind, landing about 300 yards from the tee. "I love this game," he says, getting into the cart. "It's all in your head."

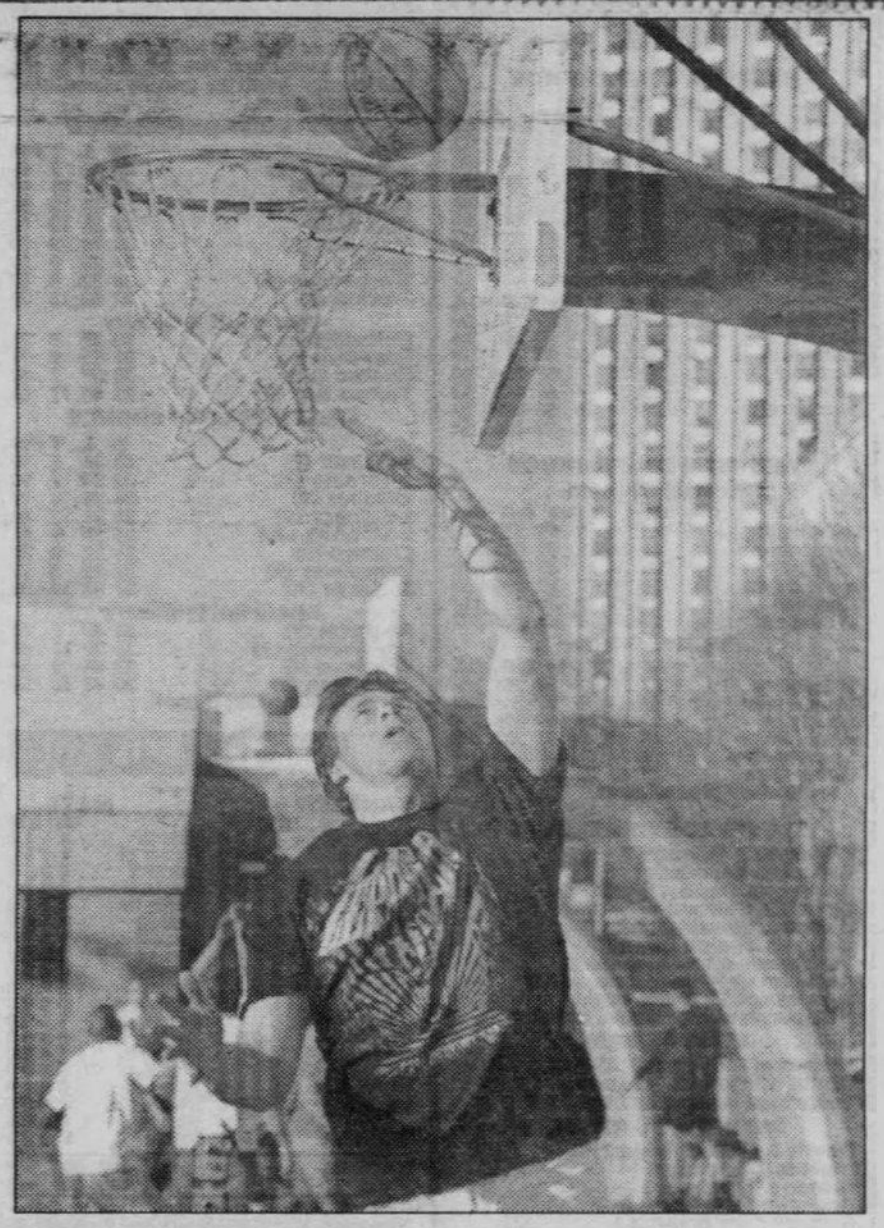
Billy Rieser zips the through the Connemara public course, talking, remembering, his accent returning slowly as he quarrels with the present. The University of Kentucky, which is everything here, has a tall skinny white kid named Gimel Martinez. "He couldn't get *next* in my neighborhood," says Billy. "Couldn't get a game at Jefferson Park, much less the projects."

'A DIFFERENT WORLD'

The projects. Billy Rieser remembers running with Herman the Helicopter and Joe Hammond as he putts on a high green that overlooks a horse farm. "My boys from the block, the ones who used to call me Billy NBA, they wouldn't go to the projects with me. They couldn't ... if you know what I mean. I was in a different world from them, a different world from anyone, really."

Billy Rieser was always in a separate place. On the block, he was Billy NBA, the kid who could jump higher than the brothers. In the projects, he was the crazy white boy with a game. On 116th





NEW GAME, NEW 'DO: Billy Rieser, who played like few people his size during his East Harlem days, now blends into most crowds and plays golf more than hoops.

Street, at Ben Franklin High School, he was White Jesus in the Zeppelin shirt. Only here, in Kentucky, does he look like another guy on the golf course. Another guy in Foot Joys giving a discourse on the dunk:

"These kids today?" he frowns, "they slam on breakaways. That's not dunking. I mean, if I was all alone I'd just lay it up. It's only dunking if you do it *on* someone. I lived to throw it on guys. It's all I ever wanted to do. There's only one guy I wouldn't dunk on. He was from the block. His name was Joe Bananas from First Avenue. You didn't dunk it on a guy like Joe Bananas from First Avenue, if you know what I mean."

Billy Rieser draws a driver from his bag and walks to the tee. "I'm not that tall," he says. "Maybe 6-4. I don't have big hands. But I never saw anyone my size get up higher."

The stories, to which there are witnesses, have Billy Rieser getting his entire forearm above the top line in the backboard box. His vertical jump was once measured at 44 inches.

'I Was Invincible'

"That's the truth," he says. "I never picked anything off the top of the backboard, but I can't tell you how many times I hit my head on the rim. I used to study Julius and Connie Hawkins. Watch how they did it to guys. I had a thing I liked to do: bang the ball on the backboard and reverse slam. And also on the alley-oop, I couldn't be seen doing it regular. I had to do it backwards. I had two main dunks, one, cocking it back, like a cradle, and two, the tomahawk. When I was up there, I'd look down on the guy, smile on him. It was almost like I was waiting."

White Jesus rests the little white ball carefully on the tee. He plants his feet and swings. His hand forms a sun brim as he follows the ball into the horizon. Dead solid perfect. But the beat of the ecstasy has changed; the rhythms are antithetical, as different as now from then. The song does not remain the same. "I was invincible," he says. "If you were like me, from Harlem, you had to think you were invincible."

The recollection continues over lunch in a bar-restaurant, in a place like all the others, in a shopping center. Billy Rieser graduated from Ben Franklin, class of '78, first-team all-city. There were two great players in the PSAL that year. One was Sid Green. The other was Billy, the first in coach Stan Dinner's assembly line of big-time players — Gary Springer, Richie Adams, Kenny Hutchinson and Walter Berry. That year, Billy played in the PSAL-Catholic all-star game. He didn't see the ball until the second half. Nate Archibald, coach of the public school squad, told the other stars if they didn't give the white boy the ball, they were coming out of the game. In the third quarter, Billy begins his show — an assortment of dunks and pins, an alley-oop or two. "The Catholic schools had Jimmy Black and that crew," he remembers. "I made 'em look pretty bad that day."

Two girls came from the stands as White Jesus was presented with the MVP trophy. There was Nancy from the block, and Sugar, a Puerto Rican girl from the Lower East Side. Nancy and Sugar were Billy's girls, and they started going at it. "I was just worried about the trophy. I was like: 'Girls, don't bust up the hardware,' " he says. "That night, I went out with David Crosby from Morris. I remember him asking the bartender for a Moet to go. It's kind of funny now, years later. But when you're a kid, you think you're invincible. you got no idea how stupid you really are."

'The Past Is Lost To Me'

Now "Stairway to Heaven" wafts ever so softly over the bar it doesn't sound like Zeppelin. It sounds like Muzak.

"The past is lost to me," Billy says. "That whole scene. There's no record of it. No tape. Nothing to go back on. The only one I speak to about those days is a guy named Millstein. He was an assistant at Franklin. When I talk to him, I get to go back for as long as we can stay on the phone. Even my wife, Carolinne, she doesn't really know who I was. It's something you can't explain. You know in the city parks, how the backboards are? They make a certain sound, right? Well, how do you explain that sound to someone who wasn't there ... if you know what I mean?"

And how do you explain the mishaps of fortune?

St. John's wanted Billy real bad. Looie Carnesecca came over to the house for dinner. He brought a bottle of Asti Spumante. Mrs. Rieser was charmed. So was her son. "Looie put on the heat," he says. "St. John's was the place. St. John's was the move."

The move he never made.

Turned out White Jesus was a lot like all the other city kids with big games and big dreams. "Growing up, I never had much," he says. "My father split when I was 1. My mother had to scrounge; raising three kids in Harlem, that's no day at the beach. I had this idea, like a fantasy, of sending her $100, and I knew that Centenary, down in Louisiana, was paying players. I didn't want to make a killing. I just wanted to be taken care of."

'Get You A Car, Son'

And that's how it started. Centenary's big booster was a Shreveport oil baron who took a quick liking to Billy. "I got down there in August, and it's like the Civil War: Everybody's calling me 'Yankee' and 'son.' It's a hundred-something degrees, and this guy, the head booster, has me over for dinner. He says, 'We gotta get you a job, son.' So I sit around an oil field for a week and walk away with $1,500 in my pocket. Next, he says, 'We gotta get you a car, son.' So me, I pick a Cutlass with a cam engine coming up through the hood, and the oil guy flips out two grand from his wallet to pay. Just like that. The only thing is, I don't have a license. I never *been* in a car before. But the oil guy says it's no problem. We go down to Motor Vehicles, or whatever it's called down there, and a state trooper with mirrored glasses gets in the car. We do the driving test. I run the car right onto the sidewalk. The trooper says, 'Son, you need a lotta practice. Here's your license.' "

The oilman sure took care of Billy. After each game, he'd leave a small stack of bills under the floor mat of the Cutlass. The evening's tally was based on a multiple of Billy's numbers for the evening — points, rebounds, maybe a few dollars extra for a spectacular slam.

Like the one against Northeast Louisiana, a team that featured Calvin Natt and his brother, Kenny. "It was our last home game," says Billy. "I took the ball on the fly off a full-speed run, then two quick steps and a perfect jump. I cocked it and took off right inside the foul line. I never threw it so hard on anyone as I threw it then on Kenny Natt. The perfect dunk. It left a bruise on my wrist. You know it was a nasty one when you break the skin. But this one was *real* nasty. I came down with a scowl, like I wanted to kill someone. Like I said, I was invincible."

Until the next year.

Billy Rieser blew out his knee in a pickup game a week before his sophomore season. "They didn't 'scope you back then. They cut you. The operation was Nov. 3. By Jan. 3, I'm playing in my first game. I couldn't move. I'm no good at all. By the seventh game, I tell the coach, 'My knee's still bad. I gotta go.' He says, 'Fine. Just leave your sneakers.' "

It was Billy Rieser Poster

See **RIESER** Page 29

RIESER

FROM PAGE 27

Night, with fans waving placards of Billy's famous slam on Kenny Natt. Billy left his sneakers at the locker room door. He left Shreveport. All of a sudden, White Jesus was just another hard-luck kid a long way from Harlem.

The next season, he winds up redshirting at Eastern Kentucky. Eastern Kentucky doesn't pay. But what the hell. Billy gets a bartending job. His knee is feeling good again, and the new coach loves him. He meets Carolinne, his future wife. "You know the Hatfields and the McCoys?" he asks. "Carolinne is from the Hatfields. I bring her home for Easter and my uncle gets into a fight with my sister's boyfriend, a real wannabe wiseguy. My mother comes out of the kitchen waving a big knife, screaming: 'Not in my house. Don't ruin my Easter dinner. I make the sign of the cross on youse.' Now Carolinne's under the table. I tell her, 'Honey, welcome to Harlem.'"

Everything was going great until the coach resigned. The assistant isn't crazy about this white boy from Harlem. He wants to play his own guys. No problem, Billy thinks, I'll show him. Then he tears up his ankle. Again and again. By the time he's healthy, he's a senior, and the coach wants to play freshmen. "I'm averaging eight, 10 points in four minutes a game. I slammed on Kevin Duckworth, but I didn't even know who he was. I thought he was just another big slob. It wasn't the same. I was a different player. I'd already lost it in my head. I remember going up to dunk on a guy, should've been easy, but all of a sudden — I don't know why — I stopped and tried to finger roll. The ball went off the rim. Walking back to the bench, I knew I was done, finished. I knew I would never be invincible again."

Billy skipped the next game, the last road trip of the season. He went to a Neil Young concert instead. "There was a riot at the show, guys fighting, throwing chairs. Someone lit a fire. I remember thinking it was all great."

It would be three years before Billy Rieser picked up a basketball again.

"I got a job as a warehouse manager for Peltz Frozen Foods at the Hunts Point Market. A few years go by and a guy named Ziggy gets me to play on Brooklyn USA. Also, I start playing with the KISS All-Stars. KISS got the best runs in the city. I wasn't invincible anymore, but I was having a good time. Even got some pro offers — Venezuela, France. Then bad things start happening all over again. One of my freezer guys gets shot at a game in the projects. My back goes out real bad. So I go to Millstein. I tell him I can't play ball no more, I want to learn golf. Millstein takes me out to the driving range near Coney Island. This is the spring of '87. A year later, I'm breaking 80 on The Black at Bethpage. Now I know what I want to do with my life: golf. I learn how to build clubs. I get a job at a pro shop on Fulton Street. It's called Par 4 the Course. I'm hustling. Japanese guys come in the shop. I'm selling them clubs. I start giving lessons. I got Japanese businessmen calling themselves my disciples. Swear to God, I'm back. Then the golf shop goes bad. The owners start fighting. I leave to hook up with a bunch of guys who want to put a driving range under the FDR Drive. Sounds like a big scorer. But, of course, that falls through, too."

Billy figured it was time to get out. Besides, Carolinne was tired of the grind. So it's back to Kentucky, where Billy turns down two golf jobs for Bingo. In Kentucky, Bingo is big business. "My company builds state-of-the-art Bingo facilities," he says, dropped the New York accent. "We run the show for non-profit groups. I even call the games. You know, 'B-26, N-14, Bingo.'"

He's not White Jesus anymore. He'll never again be invincible. He's 33 years old and looks too much like everyone else. He has his wife. He has a beautiful 7-year-old daughter, Kristen. "Half Hatfield, half Harlem," he says. He has the Lincoln Continental, his Zeppelin tapes and his remembrance.

"No one knows," he says. "No one knows who I was."

The other night, a little old lady with a Bingo purse ambles over to the podium where Billy Rieser is calling the game.

"Son," she says, "you sure do talk funny. What county you from?"

"Harlem," says Billy Rieser. "Harlem County."

VINTAGE GALLO