



Connecticut Phenoms

By James A. Johnson ©2018

**This article is dedicated to legendary former UConn Men's Basketball Coach Jim Calhoun the "architect" of the University of Saint Joseph Men's Basketball Team. The men's program is scheduled to start in the fall of 2018.*

"Gentlemen, we are going to relentlessly chase perfection, knowing full well we will not catch it. But, we are going to relentlessly chase it, because in the process we will catch excellence."

Vince Lombardi, Coach NFL Green Bay Packers.

We all knew a star athlete in high school. The one who made the varsity team as a freshman or sophomore and made it look so easy. I am referring to Connecticut's exceptional athlete whose name is mentioned in the locker room at least a decade after graduation. If you haven't guessed it by now I am referring to **Paul "Dutch" Eschholz** (Hartford Public 1922)-RPI, **John Egan** (Hartford Weaver 1957)-Providence College)-Houston Rockets, **Maurice "Wilky" Gilmore** (New Canaan 1958)-Colorado, **Dave Hicks** (Wilbur Cross 1961)-Globetrotters, **Ed Driscoll** (West Hartford-Conard 1960), **Ed Griffin** (Hartford Public-1962), **John Lee** (Hartford-Weaver-1962), **Doug Wardlaw** (Wilbur Cross 1964)-Loyola Univ., **Calvin Murphy** (Norwalk-1966)-Niagara Univ.-Houston Rockets, **Dwight Tolliver** (Hartford Public 1967)-U. of Rhode Island, **Bobby Valentine** (Stamford-Rippowam-1967)-MLB, "**Super John**" **Williamson** (New Haven-Wilbur Cross 1970)-New Mexico State-N. J. Nets, **Walter Luckett** (Bridgeport-Kolbe Cathedral 1972)-Ohio Univ, **Mike Gminski** (Masuk 1976)-Duke-N. J. Nets,

Rick Mahorn (Hartford Weaver 1976)-Hampton Univ-Detroit Pistons, **Wes Matthews, Sr.** (Harding 1977)-Univ. of Wisconsin-Washington Bullets, **Tharon Mayes** (Hillhouse 1986)-Florida State-Phila.76ers, **Vin Baker** (Old Saybrook 1988)-Univ of Htfd.-Milwaukee Bucks, **Scott Burrell** (Hamden-1988)-UConn & Chicago Bulls), **Marcus Camby** (Conard-Hartford Public1993)-Houston Rockets, **Kris Dunn** (New London 2012)-Providence College-Chicago Bulls.

Do they possess a *special gene* or are they simply normal people who overcame their biological limits through sheer force of will or obsessive training? Of course, there are many others but these are the names I remember best in my era. What is the relationship between biological endowments, training and cultural environment? The purpose of this article is to pass the baton to coaches, researchers, sports scientists and geneticist to definitively explain the stardom phenomenon.

Sport is social and cultural institution. Every evening we seat ourselves in front of the television glancing at the headlines in the newspaper and then turn quickly to the sports page. After that, we grab the remote and click on ESPN, ESPN Classics, Xfinity or some other sports channel. We read, discuss, view and even vociferously argue sport in America. Most of us perform our jobs in a perfunctory manner, but when it comes time for sports, our enthusiasm reaches a fervor level. In October, there is the World Series, February the *Super Bowl*, March, the NCAA Tournament, June the NBA Finals and Wimbledon.

Athleticism is it innate, acquired or a little bit of both? The debate is as old as physical competition. In America competition and ranking starts almost at birth. Consider the following phrases:

First in his class;

The fastest boy or girl in the school, district or state; All-City, All-State, All-American.

They call me bullet.

He could fly like Air Jordan.

He defies the laws of gravity.

He or she runs like a deer.

RACE

Are black athletes such as Michael Jordan, Usain Bolt, Jesse Owens, Steph Curry, LeBron James, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali genetically predetermined to dominate basketball, sprinting and boxing? It certainly appears to be so. Or, is it the difference in body type? In general, black basketball players have slightly longer arms and legs than their white teammates. How is it that black basketball players are prodigious jumpers and their white counterparts are just average in the vertical jump test? The difference is so stark that coaches refer to it as “White Man Disease.” They even made a movie about it “*White Men Can’t Jump*” starring Woody Harrelson and Wesley Snipes. This film also illustrates the cultural differences in the style of play. There are many exceptions, for example, John Egan at 5’ 11” could dunk a basketball with two hands. Billy Cunningham 6’ 4 ½” of Erasmus H. S., UNC & the Philadelphia 76ers could jump so high that he was labeled “Kangaroo Kid.” This is before he grew to 6’ 6 ½”.

Keep in mind, the genesis of man is the continent of Africa. For those of you who hardheaded or just plain racist all humankind originates from the so-called dark continent of Africa. All human beings share 99.5 percent of DNA. A mere 0.5 percent of our genetic material shapes the individual differences between us in height, weight and skin color.

The epicenter of street ball is the playground. In New York City, the playground that I am referring to is *Rucker Park* at 155th St. and Frederick Douglas Blvd. Playground basketball on many courts nationwide is confrontational. The conversation from the viewing crowd is about *a killer crossover dribble, high-fives, facials and breakin’ ankles*. Taking the ball to the hoop with flair is a style of play that is cultural. The ability to shake and bake with a great handle going to the hoop. The ability to take your opponent off the dribble, break him down, both physically and psychologically is the personification of playground basketball. The playground is where style is not only king – it is the only thing.

Some playground players have to put the ball on the floor with a series of crossover or through the legs dribble before he launches his jump shot. These players would give up his gold chains and three of his girlfriends before he would give up his dribble. This is the personification of playground basketball in which style is king. This fundamental flaw can be seen today and yesterday by some NBA players. If a player receives a pass at a distance that is clearly within his comfort zone and is uncontested, it should be catch and shoot. We all know of a great

playground player, of the past, whose contemporaries whisper: *“if he had only...”* every time his name comes up.

A few years ago, as a NBA Certified Agent I had a client who was essentially a playground player in which an NBA team was very much interested in signing to a contract. This player interrupted my negotiations to inform me that he was holding out for a guaranteed, 10-year and no cut contract. *The last I heard - he was still holding out.* Today basketball and the NBA is truly a worldwide and diversified game. Every 24 seconds 7 Blacks, 1 European and 2 White players jump in the air.

1954 Weaver H. S. State Championship Team



PRACTICE

Did Peyton and Eli Manning inherit Archie's quarterback genes? There is no such thing as quarterback genes. A gene is a unit of heredity that is transferred from a parent to offspring and determines some characteristic of the offspring. There are dominant and recessive genes.

Size, weight, body type, height, physical features, skin color are all inherited, but not skill. You cannot inherit skill but only at best a potentiality to develop an *acquired trait or skill*.

We all know that one must play the game to develop a level of proficiency. It does not take a rocket scientist to know that a boy or girl cannot wake up one morning and automatically become a star athlete. One cannot talk himself or herself into stardom. You simply have to play the game and practice. But, how is it that two boys or girls can practice the same number of hours and play against similar or equal competition, yet there is a noticeable difference in performance? What is the relationship between biological endowments and a competitor's training and environment? A case in point is distance running in Kenya and sprinting in Jamaica evidenced in any modern Olympiad from 1972 to present. In this morass questions abound and answers elude.

Another example is John Egan's quickness in a half court setting driving to the basket with the basketball. Lou Bazzano, former Bulkeley H. S. basketball coach described it best: "***He was like a rocket going to the basket.***" I have first-hand memories of John exploding to the basket on his drive. In the Weaver gym, his momentum carried him all the way under the basket in the area where they kept the floor mats for gymnast. ***Also on Fern St. in West Hartford at Morley School, John would dunk so furiously that sparks flew off the chain-link net.*** He played as though unencumbered by gravity. You cannot teach exceptional jumping ability, speed or quickness. For the average athlete, training with weights and technique adjustment can slightly improve one's speed and quickness. But, not substantially or to the level of world class speed to participate in the Olympics. Therein lies innate gifts that coaches refer to as "***God Given Talent.***"

EGAN & GRIFFIN

On a personal note, back in the day, I played with and against both John Egan and Ed Griffin in the summer. ***Ed Griffin and John Egan were childhood phenoms anointed early by the basketball gods.*** I knew it immediately when I first saw **Ed Griffin** play as a ninth grader in the Goodwill Tournament in Hartford, Connecticut. At that time, it was Bruce Maddox and Ed Griffin in the backcourt racing down the court and pulling up at the foul line with a jumper that barely flickered the netting.

1956 Weaver H. S. State Championship Team



L-R Front Row: Russell Carter, Bob Countryman & John Egan

John Egan the idol of just about every schoolboy in the Greater Hartford Area, including this writer, is in the same category. A great athlete who also played baseball as a youngster. Dennis Sullivan stated to me that John Egan was so fast that he watched him perform an *inside the park home run*. Will Lenny Schoolnick, one of John's childhood friends tell us "we were playing basketball in the summer every day at Keney Park from 9:00 a.m. until dark? I think not! Do not misunderstand me because John Egan practiced and played a plethora of basketball during his development years. The late **Henry "Beans" Brown**, a member of Weaver 1954 &

1955 basketball team expressed to this writer many years ago that John Egan as a freshman was outstanding. John Egan is called “*Space*” by his Weaver teammate Bob Countryman because he could really elevate. Egan was the only freshman selected by Coach Charlie Horvath to travel to Boston with the 1954 Weaver State Champions to play in the New England Tournament at the Boston Garden. John Egan matriculated at Providence College, played 11 years in the NBA and coached the Houston Rockets for 4 years in the mid 1970’s.

Bobby Valentine called “Bobby V” was selected *three consecutive years* by the New Haven Register as an *All-State Football player* at Rippowam H. S. in 1965, 1966 and 1967. He was a Major League Baseball player for 10 years with the L. A. Dodgers, California Angels and Mets. Bobby V also coached the Texas Rangers, New York Mets and Boston Red Sox.

In 2005, Valentine coached Chiba Lotte Marines to a championship in the Japanese Pacific League. *Today Bobby Valentine is the Athletic Director at Sacred Heart University.*

About the Author

James A. Johnson of James A. Johnson, Esq. in Southfield, Michigan is an accomplished attorney. Jim was Captain of West Hartford-Conard H. S. basketball team. Today he is an active member of the Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas and Federal Court Bars. Jim concentrates on Sports & Entertainment Law, serious Personal Injury, Intellectual Property and Insurance Coverage. He can be reached through his website www.JamesAJohnsonEsq.com