

Destiny's Manchild

✖ I've been writing about Christian athletes for over a decade now, but it wasn't until this past couple of years when I started to understand the precarious nature of my work.

You see, I found out something interesting about these sports stars that perhaps I didn't fully comprehend –they're human.

It's a simple truth, I know. But when you're as big of a sports fan as I am, it's easy to prop these guys up (the Christians and non-Christians alike) on some seriously tall pedestals. They do what the rest of us only dream about; and they get paid big-time money to do so.

There's no telling how many athletes I've been privileged to interview over the years, but there are several that stand out. One in particular is currently in the spotlight thanks to his unexpected presence in the NBA Finals. The series was supposed to be an iconic showdown between the league's two biggest names: the Lakers' Kobe Bryant and the Cavaliers' LeBron James.

Unfortunately for "King" James, Dwight Howard and the Orlando Magic crashed the party. Howard entered the league in 2004 straight out of high school and made an immediate impact. He has since elevated his game to All-Star status and is widely considered one of the game's most dominant defensive players.

In October of 2006, I had the opportunity to spend about 20 minutes on the phone with Howard. The interview was for a *New Man* cover story that was published in March of 2007. Howard already had a strong reputation as a young athlete who was living out his faith in a very public manner. Our conversation

produced comments to back that up.

"I know my calling on my life," Howard said. "I know that the NBA is just a way for me to tell people about God—you know that He is real. My purpose in life, my goal for the NBA is to preach God's word—not just try to beat everybody over the head with a Bible but just being a good example and always conducting myself in a Christian-like manner."

I don't usually name my articles. That's the editor's job. But in this case, I offered up the suggestion "Destiny's Manchild." It was a play on words that emphasized his nickname at the time "Manchild," and the fact that his mother's struggle to have a second child (she suffered seven miscarriages before giving birth to Howard) was an indication of divine purpose for his life.

A few months later, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes asked me to write a four-book series on its behalf. Each book would feature one of the organization's core values. Dwight Howard was an obvious choice for the book titled *Integrity*. Although I was unable to secure a fresh interview, Howard (through his agent) gave me permission to use the pre-existing conversation.

I finished the chapter early December of 2007. It was the first chapter that I completed. About three weeks later, I received an e-mail from the project coordinator. He assumed I had already heard the news, but I had not. Howard had fathered a child with a former Orlando Magic dancer.

Needless to say, my chapter about Howard was scrapped from the book. The ironic thing is that the piece used the analogy of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It was the story of how Joseph was tempted to have sex with a married woman but he resisted and

was then thrown into jail thanks to her false accusations.

This quote from Howard was especially prophetic: "The flesh is one of the weakest things, especially in a man," he told me. "That's the biggest temptation that we all face. The only way for me being a Christian, me being a human, to not follow through with temptation, is to run from it and to stay away from those types of situations."

Even though Howard was barely into his 20's at the time of our conversation, he was already fully aware of what evils were lurking around every corner. In his failure, he simply proved that all of us are capable of making bad decisions.

Before I go any further, please know that I am in no way passing judgement on Howard. Even though he has not yet publicly acknowledged his mistake, there's no way of knowing what is going on in his heart and what steps he has taken towards restoration and how he plans to protect himself from making the same mistake in the future. That's ultimately between him and God and the people closest to him.

Still I can't help but wonder how much more powerful his witness would be right now as the massive spotlight is shining on him. Howard is facing one of the world's biggest sports stars in Kobe Bryant and playing against one of the most recognizable sports franchises in the Los Angeles Lakers. It's difficult not to be somewhat saddened by the fact that he could have been glorifying God through his athletic exploits.

Instead, Howard is, at least in the public eye, just another athlete. He's just another talented young man who sports fans can idolize and fantasize about having his life.

I'm not ready to write off Dwight Howard. Even if I was, it

wouldn't be my place to do so. I'm still holding out hope that he will eventually allow God to bring him back to a place where he can reach people for the sake of Christ.

There are plenty of biblical and modern day examples of that very thing happening. King David and the Apostle Paul are two amazing stories we can point to in God's Word.

More recently we can look to a couple of baseball players like Baltimore's Brian Roberts and New York Yankees' Andy Pettitte who got caught up in the performance enhancing drugs scandal but have come clean and are using their situations as a way to minister to others.

So when you're watching the NBA Finals this year (or even if you don't care one thing about sports), say a prayer for Dwight Howard and other athletes like him who have stumbled and (like the rest of us often do) have succumbed to their humanity.

"Everybody needs to realize that it doesn't matter how old you are or how young you are, you still can be a Christian and live for God," Howard said towards the end of our 2006 conversation. "It's not easy but that's why we have God's Word and He forgives us when we do something we shouldn't be doing."

I'm trusting that Howard has remembered and, more importantly, acted on those words. I'm also praying that he will once again rise up and allow God to use him in a mighty way that goes far beyond lane-clearing rebounds and two-handed power dunks.

His dream of reaching the NBA (it's players, coaches and fans) for Christ can still be a reality. It's a dream that we should all desire to see come true.

Chad Bonham is a freelance author, journalist and television and documentary producer from Broken Arrow, Okla. He has authored several books including a four-book FCA series (Regal Books) and is the coordinating producer on a forthcoming documentary called Choosing Life.