

INTEGRAL

Life Support: Iroquois boys' basketball coach Mike Stinnett works to build his players' futures as well as their game.

By Garry Gupton

Pale gray clouds scrape against the naked tree branches that finger into the evening sky, their leaves long ago losing the tug-of-war against the wind. The chilling breath of autumn pushed by the approaching fall storm foreshadows the snow and ice that will take its place in the days ahead in Kentucky.

Louisville native **Jermaine Jackson** is a thousand miles and three dozen degrees away from the onset of winter. As he strolls along the surf of Melbourne Beach, Florida, the college freshman feels the gritty wet sand softly wedging itself between his toes.

Jackson's gait is unmistakably that of an athlete. The 6'4" basketball player pauses and turns to see the oversized indentations he pressed into the sandy pathway. The footprints trace every stride he's taken along the beach, but not each step he's taken to realize his dream of playing college basketball.

Jackson was an overweight eighth grader at **Farnsley Middle School** when his still-hidden athletic skill became evident to **Mike Stinnett**. That meeting would become a watershed moment for the budding basketball star and the man who was entering his third year as the **Iroquois High School** boys' basketball coach.

"He was heavy. His conditioning wasn't very good," says Stinnett who has now logged seven seasons with the Raiders. "He was an okay eighth grader. He wasn't a player anybody talked about. But he had a knack for scoring the ball."

"He took the time to see in me what others couldn't see," Jackson recalls from his dormitory room on the campus of **Florida Tech** in Melbourne. "He told me that if I came to Iroquois, it worth be worth it."

Jackson's transition to high school wasn't a smooth one — especially without a dad at home providing a firm hand of guidance. "His first year, he collided with a couple



Above top: Iroquois Head Basketball Coach Mike Stinnett and Keion Goff at practice. **Opposite:** Mike Stinnett in the Iroquois gym. Photos by Logan Riely

Above: Jermaine Jackson in action with Florida Tech. Photo by Bill Simmonds, courtesy Florida Tech Athletics.

of teachers. And those issues happen quite a bit," says Stinnett. "His freshman year, he was hard to reach."

Heading into Jackson's second year at Iroquois, Stinnett had a man-to-man meeting with the rising sophomore and challenged him with a promise. "I told him, if you'll attend every meeting and every conditioning session, you are going to have a great three years. He got his body into shape and bought into what we were doing."

Stinnett said from that moment, Jackson never missed another workout. Since Jackson was already a good student, he was now being transformed in body, mind and spirit.

"What Mike Stinnett did for me is hard to put into words. He was like a father-figure to me," says Jackson. "He made sure I stayed out of trouble."

Stinnett says investing his life into students like Jackson is the reason he's coaching basketball. "I don't find this to be a tough school," says Stinnett,

who coached 15 seasons at **Owensboro High School** before moving to his wife's hometown of Louisville. "The players I work with are the exact kids I want to work with. These kids are hungry to learn. They are hungry to be disciplined. To me, it was a blessing."

Stinnett says one of the most powerful tools he uses to shape the lives of young men like Jackson is weekly hour-long meetings.

"One of the big things we have at Iroquois is an Advisor-Advisee Program on Wednesday. We'll bring in guest speakers. We cover all kinds of academic issues. NCAA clearinghouse. We do book studies like John Maxwell's *17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*," says Stinnett.

"We would have guys to come in and talk to us about how life connects with basketball," says Jackson. "It would be stories about how they used to live and what changed their lives."

Stinnett says his role as a basketball coach is to help transition high school graduates into college or the workforce and to provide a counter-punch to the culture that robs young people of their dreams.

"The environment they come from tries to knock them down even when they are trying to do what's right," says Stinnett.

Jermaine Jackson does it right on the basketball court. He scored 1,873 points in three seasons at Iroquois. Jackson scored 30 points or more a dozen times in his high school career.

When it came time for college, Stinnett played a leading role in that milestone as well. He invited college coaches from all over the country to watch Jackson play. **U-T Martin, Manhattan, Western Kentucky, and Northern Kentucky** all expressed interest in Jackson becoming part of their teams. Florida Tech and Coach **Billy Mims** won out.

"Any coach who would travel 1,500 miles to watch me, I want to play for him," Jackson says of his decision to move so far away from home for college.

Stinnett says Jackson isn't finished moving yet. He says Jackson will one day be a man of accomplishment on and off the court.

"I think he really wants a better life," says Stinnett. "I think he loves his family. I also think he just knows that there is a bigger purpose for him. He wants it. He just decided that he wants it. We had a lot of talks on this."

Jackson has two younger brothers who are following in his footsteps. One is just a few paces behind. Seventeen-year-old **Lafayette Jackson** is a senior point guard and shooting guard for Stinnett's Raiders basketball team this season.

"Whatever actions I make, whatever I do is going to reflect on them," says Jermaine. "My mother is keeping an eye on them, and coach Stinnett is building a relationship with Lafayette."

Stinnett is working to build more than relationships with his players. His goal is to help them build their futures.

Jermaine Jackson continues striding along the shoreline. Seagulls dance in flight above the relentless surf. Rhythmic waves race into the mainland to pile cool splashes of the Atlantic Ocean against his bare legs. Jackson squints through the bright rays of the southern sun. Ahead of him is an endless stretch of freshly groomed virgin sand, waiting for his new footprints.

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