

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN: THE
 MEDIATED LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF LEN
 BIAS

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This dissertation considers the role of sports journalists, politicians, activists, and other mythmakers in constructing the posthumous legacy of Len Bias, a black college basketball star who died of a cocaine overdose two days after being selected second overall by the Boston Celtics in the 1986 National Basketball Association Draft.

Guided by previous research on myth, collective memory, and the intersection of sports media and race, I analysis Bias as a cultural text that reveals both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic views of black masculinity, crime, drugs, and sports.

Journalists lauded Bias during his career at the University of Maryland for being an exemplary scholar-athlete, and the antithesis of the wayward black athlete and black drug-dealer that increasingly appeared in the media during the mid-1980s. After his death, however, journalists, university presidents, sports administrators, and politicians used Bias' death, erroneously linked to crack cocaine, to call for anti-drug reforms in American sport aimed at black athletes and tougher legislative measures to

combat the threat of crack, a cheap form of powder cocaine that originated in poor, black inner-city communities. During this anti-crack frenzy, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which established harsh penalties for drug offenders found with crack cocaine. After the initial frenzy dissipated, Bias' death still shaped discussions about the criminal justice system and sports. Bias was blamed for the decline of the Boston Celtics and Maryland basketball program. Professional sports leagues and college teams changed the way they screened potential draftees and monitored current players. Reporters, columnists, and politicians also frequently invoked Bias as a cautionary tale, a symbol of the dangers of drug use and poor decision-making. The creators of these dominant narratives justified the increased surveillance of black athletes and young black men in general, signaling an ongoing crisis of black men in America. On the other hand, activists, sports journalists, and fans of Bias have used counter-narratives to both signal the damage done to black men due to the politicization of Bias' death and to reposition Bias as a sports hero.

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LEN BIAS

by

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Dedication

To Lizzie Hudson, my first fan.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation represents the culmination of a long journey. That journey began for me as an undergraduate at Rice University. As a part of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, I was encouraged by provost Roland Smith to pursue a doctorate degree. While completing my master's degree at UC Berkeley, my program director Derek Van Rhennan also encouraged me to pursue a doctorate degree and suggested I tackle the issue of media stereotyping and the African American male athlete. Thank you to both Dr. Smith and Dr. Van Rheenen for their early encouragement and belief in my intellectual abilities.

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Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	v
Introduction	1
Methodology	7
Research Questions	9
Literature Review	10
Trauma, death, and journalism	10
Collective memory	13
Journalism as a site of memory	14
Collective memory, sports journalism, and race	16
Collective memory and reputations	17
Race and Mediated Afterlife	20
Myth	20
News and myth	21
Sports and Myth	23
Race, Media, and the Rise of Reagan	26
Media Coverage of War on Drugs	27
College Athletics, Race, and the Media	29
Race and the NBA	32
Chapter Summaries	34
Chapter 1: A Budding (Black) Star In Reagan’s America	46
The Rise of the Televised Black Athlete	49
Prop 48 And the Crisis of the Black Student-Athlete	53
Len Bias and The Myth of the Black College Basketball Player	59
Race, Drugs, and the Media	64
Len Bias, Race, Drugs, and the NBA	67
Chapter 2: The Death of Len Bias and the Escalating War on Drugs	77
To an Athlete Dying Young	81
Searching for the Real Len Bias	82
Bad Company	85
Not Making the Grade	87
Role Models Wanted	89
Sounding the Alarm	90
Becoming the Other	93
The Death of Don Rogers and the Growing Crisis in American Sports	95
The Crisis of the Black (Criminal) Student-Athlete	100
Bias vs. the Exemplary Athlete: Soft Bodies vs. Hard Bodies	105
Gearing Up for A War On Drugs	112
Chapter 3: The Ghost and the Curse: The Mythologization of Len Bias within Sports Media	130
The Ghost of Len Bias: Len Bias and the Decline of the University of Maryland	133

The Curse of Len Bias: Len Bias and the Decline of The Boston Celtics.....	139
Bias and the ongoing crisis of the black male athlete.....	144
The Next Jordan: Len Bias as Cautionary Tale	149
Len Bias as Folk Hero	151
Defining A Legacy: Len Bias Enters The Maryland Athletics Hall of Fame.....	153
Chapter 4: The Symbolism of Len Bias in the Long War on Drugs.....	168
Pushing Back on the War Against Drugs	172
Lonise Bias, the Reagan Administration, and the Creation of A Drug War Martyr.....	173
Len Bias, Rico Marshall, and the Growing Urban Drug Crisis.....	175
Election Year Drug Fury (Again).....	178
Saving Black Children in the Midst of Crisis.....	182
The Other Urban Crisis: Rising Black Incarceration Rates.....	188
Converging Crises: Trying to Save Black Youth from Death and Jail.....	189
Sports, the Black Athlete, and the Urban Crisis	195
Lonise Bias and the Continuing Fight Against Drugs and the Urban Crisis	198
Bias as a symbol of the failed War on Drugs	200
Conclusion: Len Bias in the Age of “Black Lives Matter” and the Opioid Epidemic	211
Bibliography	217

Introduction

On the night of June 17th, 1986, Len Bias seemed poised to become the National Basketball Association's next superstar. That evening, Bias was selected second overall in the annual NBA draft by the defending champion Boston Celtics. At that time, the record-setting Bias was the most accomplished player in Maryland basketball history. A versatile forward known for his explosive athleticism and muscular physique, Bias transformed himself from a lightly-recruited high school player into one of the top players in college basketball.¹ In 1984 he led the Terrapins to their first ACC tournament championship, he twice led the Atlantic Coast Conference in scoring and in 1986 he was named ACC Athlete of the Year.²

Bias's exploits on the court made him a superstar off the court, especially in the Washington D.C. metro area. In fact, Bias, born and raised in Prince George's County, had become a symbol of pride for the mostly-black residents of the suburban county.³ As an incoming Celtic, Bias was to play alongside future white Hall of Famers such as Larry Bird, Kevin McHale and Bill Walton and was viewed as a key component to the Celtics repeating as champions in 1987. If Bias reached his full potential, he would be a superstar in a bi-racial league which, because of the rise of such marketable stars as Bird, Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, had recently overcome years of sagging television ratings.

However, Bias would never get the opportunity to play a single game for the Celtics. The day after the draft, Bias and his father James flew to Boston to be introduced as an official member of the Boston Celtics. While in Boston, Bias also signed a lucrative endorsement deal with the apparel company Reebok. After a long

day of meetings, Bias and his father returned to their Landover, Maryland home around 11 pm. After briefly celebrating with family members, Bias returned to the University of Maryland's College Park campus to celebrate with friends. While details of that fateful night remain muddled thirty years after his death, this much is known: Bias, some college teammates, and friend Brian Tribble snorted a large quantity of cocaine. Bias collapsed a little after 6 a.m. on the morning of the 19th. He was pronounced dead at 8:50 a.m. at Leland Memorial Hospital in Riverdale, Maryland. He was 22 years old. ⁴

This dissertation will consider the intersection of race, myth, memory and appropriation in the media's coverage of student-athlete Len Bias as a student at the University of Maryland, College Park, and in his afterlife as a cautionary tale deployed by journalists and policymakers on many sides of multiple issues.

Historian Richard Ian Kimball noted that the death of young athletes resonates within American society because "unlike other celebrities, their physical gifts seem to transcend the imperative of the grave."⁵ The death of the seemingly immortal young athlete is especially traumatic as it reminds Americans of their own mortality.⁶ In the effort to make sense of these tragic losses, "various groups including friends, families, and corporations seek to define the legacy of the athlete by constructing historical narratives centered on the concerns of the interested party. The myths and stories that emerge help survivors create meaning after tragic events."⁷ These mythmakers take advantage of the blank slate left by the young, dead athlete, and offer narratives which aggrandize the achievements of the deceased: "Temporally unshackled, dead athletes live in an ever-present timelessness, circumscribed only by the limits of our

imaginations. Our minds can compose fitting, if imaginative, futures for our fallen heroes."⁸ Using a variety of media, the efforts of these mythmakers help affix certain athletes into the nation's collective memory. According to Kimball, the battle over an athlete's collective memory is ongoing, with a variety of actors fighting to shape the dead athlete's legacy.⁹

Race has played a central role in the struggle to give meaning to Len Bias's life and death. Over the last three decades, mythmakers such as his mother Lonise Bias, the University of Maryland, the NBA, sports columnists, filmmakers, members of Congress, and the federal government have all grappled to not only define Len Bias's legacy, but shape the public discourse around the issue of race within sports and the War on Drugs.

When telling stories about sports, media have always drawn on memories and stereotypes — both are cultural constructions which serve the purpose of promoting societal values. Mythologist Peter Williams argues sporting archetypes shift to reflect the values of a given time period and culture.¹⁰ As a cultural construction, memory is never static; this dissertation will report how the "memory" of Bias does prove to be quite fluid in application over time.¹¹ This dissertation also draws on the work of other media scholars, including as S. Elizabeth Bird and Mihai Coman, and follows their guidance in adopting a processual approach to myth analysis; this dissertation will focus on the political and cultural climate in which myths about Bias were created.¹²

The news of Bias's drug use transformed his story from that of a senseless tragedy to a mediated morality play. This drama, which played out in the pages of the

newspapers and magazines across the country, drew attention to both the nation's growing problem with drugs and the growing corruption plaguing major American college athletics.¹³ This dissertation will build upon the work of scholar Jack Lule, who argues that myths are "essential social narratives" which "express a society's prevailing ideals, ideologies, values, and beliefs."¹⁴ According to Lule, sports provide "fine raw material" for myth creation thanks to their reliance on "drama and conflict."¹⁵ As Bias's story illustrates, when media relate dramatic stories, particularly those that take on the characteristics of morality tales, they become particularly strong breeding grounds for the formation of myths.

Sports provide society with heroes that embody society's best qualities as well as mythical characters and archetypes that embody society's fears.¹⁶ Sports journalism, in its turn, creates and promotes athletes and their almost superhuman — heroic — actions.¹⁷ This dissertation will show that media's mythical construction of Bias after his death often helped to reinforce stereotypes, both heroic and otherwise, about African American men. While sporting heroes are celebrated for their good works both in and out of competition, athletes' transgressions that counter the hero myth are dealt with harsh criticism by the press and other societal institutions.¹⁸ Media narratives after Bias's death would transform Bias, previously represented as an African American male at the prime of his athletic career, into an anti-hero. In life, Bias had been called "a veritable ballerina on the court," a six feet, eight-inch blend of powerful athleticism and a smooth jump shot.¹⁹ Bias had also been known for his "squeaky clean" personality and his closeness to his "tight-knit, religious family."²⁰ Bias had been framed as "wholesome;" in the words of journalist Dan Baum, Bias

“was a welcome antidote to the slouchy, cap-on-sideways, rap-booming, crack-dealing black man who was becoming daily television fare.”²¹ Bias was also an antidote to black athletes who increasingly became the face of academic and drug scandals in college and professional sports.

In death, Bias became, in the media’s account, considerably less-than-perfect. This dissertation will build upon the work of media researchers Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell, who noted that the Reagan administration amplified its anti-drug rhetoric through referencing Bias’s death as a case study of why the War on Drugs was needed — often making that case on major network news shows, often referencing Bias’s death.²² Such rhetoric sanctioned a political spectacle that necessitated the incarceration of scores of black men deemed deviant by society.²³ Baum similarly observed that Bias’s death was appropriated by supporters of the administration’s War on Drugs, used to help fuel the bipartisan Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 targeted largely at black offenders.²⁴ These supporters, which included his mother Lonise Bias, have continued to use Bias as a cautionary tale aimed primarily at young black men in the decades since his death. At the same time, activists have embraced Len Bias as a symbol for the War on Drug’s consequences, namely the large number of African American men incarcerated through policy enacted after the panic over Bias’s death.

In their turn, sports journalists transformed Bias into the scapegoat for the downturns in both the Maryland Terrapins program and Boston Celtics franchise.²⁵ The sports media narratives transformed Bias into a symbol of black deviance and wasted athletic potential, comparing him to other “fallen” black athlete, including

Magic Johnson, whose own career ended after his infection with HIV due to his reckless sexual behavior.²⁶ Sports leagues and journalists also used the cautionary tale of Bias's death to police the off-the-court actions of black male athletes. However, in recent years, Len Bias has been embraced as something of a folk hero, especially among young fans born after the Bias morality play. Through new media such as YouTube, younger generations of sports fans can watch Bias compete against NBA Hall of Famers such as David Robinson and Michael Jordan at his athletic peak. The University of Maryland has also — almost three decades after his death — honored Bias on a number of occasions, most notably inducting him into the school's athletic hall of fame in 2014.

The differing views of Bias's legacy on the War on Drugs and as a sports figure underscore the fluidity of narratives within collective memory. For sports historian Daniel Nathan, "collective memory is a cultural construction, an elaborate network of narratives and texts... that represents or explains the past."²⁷ Like myth, collective memory often reflects the hegemonic retellings of historical events. As theorist Maurice Halbwachs has argued, collective memory reshapes retellings of the past to match "with the predominant thoughts of the society."²⁸ However, as noted earlier, both memory and myth are malleable and change over time. This dissertation will follow the guidance of scholars such as historian John Bodnar, who has noted that while "official" memory is constructed and sanctioned by political elites, "public" memory is additionally shaped by diverse sets of voices representing different communities. The struggle over public memory forces our understanding of the past to shift over time.²⁹ This dissertation examines how shifts in narratives about

Bias have reflected changes in public memory, including those related to sports, race, as well as drugs and criminality.

Methodology

To best understand the public discourse surrounding Len Bias's career and death, this dissertation will follow the methodological path of sports scholars Mary McDonald and Susan Birrell, who advocated for a close reading of sports, sporting events, and celebrities that "resemble the rigorous analyses of those who read more traditional literary texts."³⁰ McDonald and Birrell argued that mediated sports celebrities and high-profile incidents involving these celebrities could be read as texts through which both dominant narratives and counter-narratives are constructed.³¹ According to McDonald and Birrell, a closing reading of a sporting text could reveal the various ways power is packaged and deployed through sports spectacles within a particular moment time in history: "we advocate focusing on a particular incident or celebrity as the site for exploring the complex interrelated and fluid character of power relations as they are constituted along the axis of ability, class, gender, and nationality. Each cultural incident offers a unique site for understanding specific articulations of power."³²

The methodology of critically reading sport is particularly useful for this dissertation, which seeks to understand how dominant narratives of Len Bias were constructed, sanctioned, and challenged within public discourse over time. There is a focus in this methodology not on discovering the absolute historical truth but rather determining who has the power to shape dominant narratives.³³ Through the close reading of the sporting celebrity text, scholars can highlight how narratives produced

by powerful mythmakers such as sports journalists are deployed as historical truth.³⁴ Within this framework, “what were once regarded as individuals, celebrities, or even heroes become repositories for political narratives, and our task as cultural critics is not to search for the facts of their lives but to search for the ways in which those ‘facts’ are constructed, framed, foregrounded, obscured, and forgotten.”³⁵ For McDonald and Birrell, discovering how narratives shift over time and change based on location and/or audience was a critical component of this method: “What is of most interest to us is the movement of narratives beyond their apparent time and place of origin – expanding, converting, multiplying, and contradicting as they encounter and are taken up by new audiences/subjects who are characterized by different cultural locations.”³⁶

The methodology of reading sports critically is inherently political. McDonald and Birrell believe “narratives matter because they do ideological work which has material consequences.”³⁷ This dissertation shows that the dominant narratives produced in the aftermath of Len Bias’s death were used to promote and carry out a war against crack cocaine and a war to clean up American sports, both of which targeted black men as the main antagonists. To counter these narratives, Birrell and McDonald push for both highlighting and producing counter-narratives that “are infused with resistant political possibilities.”³⁸ The counter-narratives surrounding Bias, on the other hand, help to push back against the policing of black men and separate Len Bias the sporting hero from the myth of Len Bias created in the aftermath of his death. According to McDonald and Birrell, such work makes “visible the complex, historically specific, matrices of social inequalities that surround us.”³⁹

In an effort to gauge both the narratives and counter-narratives surrounding Bias's life and afterlife, this dissertation analyzed a wide range of media texts. While the project focused primarily on newspaper and magazine articles, it also utilized texts such as documentaries and biographies about Len Bias, radio transcripts, political speeches, podcasts, YouTube videos. Symbols of Bias around the University of Maryland campus were particularly fruitful areas to discover and analyze counter-narratives that challenged dominant retellings of the Bias story.

Research Questions

This study will seek to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What was Len Bias's public image as a college player? How did his public image reflect both the rise of celebrity culture in sports during the 1980s and anxieties about black men during the period?

Q2: How did narratives about Bias shift after his death? What institutions and actors helped facilitate this shift? How did these narratives reflect hegemonic views of black masculinity, crime, drugs, deviancy, sports (college and professional)?

Q3: How did counter-narratives challenge dominant recollections of Bias? Who produces these counter-narratives?

Literature Review

Sports media history has been an under-researched area of media history.⁴⁰ As sports historian Jessica Schultz noted in her study of collective memory, race, and football in the state of Iowa, “a cogent and substantial body of scholarship on sport and collective memory remains to be established,” while works on the subject often “atheoretically or uncritically use the concept of memory, often times as a metaphor for any personal or group-based reconstruction of the past”.⁴¹ Yet, sports, and in particular sports journalism, is a particularly ripe field for collective memory research. University of Iowa professors Stephen Wieting and Judy Polumbaum, for example, have linked the “vivid storytelling” of sports in ancient cultures to 21st century North America, as “sports pages of modern newspapers, beyond recounting the facts of contests, embody sports events in telling narratives, often with persuasive lessons for readers.”⁴² Wieting and Polumbaum also noted that “sports stories in mass-circulation magazines” have the same function, “generally with more explicit intent.”⁴³ Communication scholar Michael Serazio similarly has labeled the sports section, “with its routinely mythic invocations and tireless recordkeeping,” as a “fertile sub-site” for collective memory research.⁴⁴

Besides collective memory, this literature review will also summarize key works on media and sports within the fields of myth and race.

Trauma, death, and journalism

This dissertation will make a contribution to our understanding of journalism, and particularly sports journalism, in constructing our collective remembering of traumatic events, represented in this dissertation by the death of a notable black athlete who appeared to be destined for success.

Memory scholar Carolyn Kitch noted that national media coverage after the 9/11 terrorist attacks acted as a three-stage public funeral which ultimately reaffirmed American values and paved the way for national recovery.⁴⁵ Numerous studies have also shown that the news media has relied on familiar narratives, such as the hero archetype, in an effort to help readers mourn and recover from traumatic events.⁴⁶ Michael Serazio demonstrates the role of the sporting press in constructing narrative following a traumatic event. The success of the National Football League's New Orleans Saints post-Hurricane Katrina, as well as the team's return to their stadium which was partially destroyed in the storm, was described almost universally by the media as a symbol of the city's recovery.⁴⁷ By relying on this narrative, the media largely ignored the continuing problems within the city.⁴⁸ As Serazio notes, "Sportscasters and sports journalists are in the business of spinning myth — perhaps more so than any section of news, they have free reign to assign outsized significance to the regularly scheduled, mundane goings-on of sport. Indeed, the ennui that accompanies the predictable routines of sport perhaps makes an outsized storyline all the more enticing."⁴⁹

The dissertation will also look at sports journalism's coverage of death, particularly unexpected death caused by an athlete's own actions. According to journalism professors Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume, journalism about death plays a critical role in society. Because such stories "are based on fact — on real people who died in real circumstances and real people who mourn them," Kitch and Hume contended, "they seem to have an authenticity and transparency, an evident 'truth,' even as they perform ritual processes of tribute and commemoration. They also create

a sense of intimacy and inclusion, allowing a broader audience to mourn along with the central characters, even to feel that they are somehow a part of private ceremony.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, in the obituaries of celebrities, death stories act as a "public reassessment" for prominent people and ideals they represented.⁵¹ According to Kitch, journalists act as both mourners and guides during celebrity death stories, creating a public funeral for fans.⁵² Certain celebrities become symbols of their generation, and afford journalists the opportunity to talk both about the American past and the public’s collective future.⁵³

For untimely celebrity deaths, the media often blame the demise on a villain: either something abstract (fame, drugs, etc.) or a person; often that person is the celebrity him or herself.⁵⁴ Attribution of the cause of death can reveal a lot about media motives as well as how a community views a celebrity such as Bias. Narratives surrounding professional wrestler Chris Benoit’s killing of his wife and son and subsequent suicide largely placed the blame on Benoit’s alleged steroid usage.⁵⁵ This narrative was ultimately debunked by evidence Benoit had no steroids in his system and his mental difficulties might have been caused by wrestling-induced brain damage, but the story gained resonance through journalists who sought to blame Benoit for his actions, rather than the sport of wrestling.⁵⁶ Though the 1975 death of American distance runner Steve Prefontaine at age 24 was blamed on his drunk driving, his drinking was not the focus of media coverage; in fact, this aspect of his death was omitted from narratives by the 1990s.⁵⁷ Instead, the focus of coverage was on the effect Prefontaine’s death would have on American distance running.⁵⁸ Prefontaine had previously been constructed as a working-class hero, honest to his

humble roots; in death, he was lauded for his authenticity, toughness, and embrace of amateurism.⁵⁹

Collective memory

Since the 1980s, there has been increased academic interest on the subject of collective memory.⁶⁰ These studies principally build upon the work of early 20th century French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs, who noted social memory utilizes "collective frameworks" which help retell historical events, bringing them into accord with the predominant thoughts of the society.⁶¹ Societal institutions such as the media have an important role in the dissemination of memory. Media sociologist and historian Michael Schudson argued that by its very nature memory is a social phenomenon, effectively denouncing the notion that individual memory exists.⁶² Schudson's assertions have been echoed by sociologist Barry Schwartz, who contended that individuals mostly learn about the past through "social institutions" — which helps to "infuse the past with moral meaning."⁶³ Though the deployment of memory is often shaped by hegemonic forces within a particular culture, memory is often contested and shifts over time.

This dissertation will assess how narratives about Bias have shifted over the three decades since his death. Media scholar Barbie Zelizer shows that as a constructed entity, collective memory is highly unstable and political, particularly as the past is remade "into material with contemporary resonance."⁶⁴ Schudson also points to the instability of constructed memory, which becomes a distorted retelling of the past.⁶⁵ As memory scholar Nicole Maurantonio summarized, "memory is a communicative process that occurs in terrain that is simultaneously contested and

negotiated. Memory is political.”⁶⁶ This dissertation will trace how the narratives about Bias illuminate political struggles over his memory.

Memory is circulated through society via a variety of material forms, including mediated narratives. According to Schudson, memory is “distributed across social institutions and cultural artifacts.”⁶⁷ Memory also exists in “collective created monuments and markers” which are “dedicated memory forms” designed to teach society about the past.⁶⁸ Schwartz has suggested that memory is circulated through society through a litany of activities, such as oral storytelling, written documents, physical monuments and memorials, anniversaries, and holiday celebrations.⁶⁹ Similarly, Barbie Zelizer has noted that the materiality of memory allows memory to become collective and “collected, shared, contested, or neutralized.”⁷⁰ The observations of the aforementioned scholars have echoed the work of French scholar Pierre Nora, who theorized that society has increasingly spent more time with *Lieux de Memoire*, or artificially constructed sites of memory, then actually with representations of history.⁷¹ As individuals spend less time with authentic history, Nora has argued, “modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image.”⁷²

Journalism as a site of memory

This dissertation will analyze journalism as a site of memory where narratives about Bias are created, shared, and challenged. Scholars have only recently begun to explore the role of journalism in constructing public memory.⁷³ Nora’s work focused on different sites of memory such as holiday celebrations and street names but he did not tackle journalism’s role in shaping public memory.⁷⁴ Zelizer noted, “many of the

key theorists of collective memory...did not include journalism in their surveys of what matters in the work of memory.”⁷⁵ In arguing for the exploration of journalism’s use of collective memory, political communication scholar Jill Edy suggested “the media are unique in their ability to reach huge communities simultaneously” and had more power to shape memory than other commemorative outlets such as museums.⁷⁶ She also noted that unlike fictional media, “the documentary style of journalists’ work gives them a unique authority in telling the story of the past.”⁷⁷ Barbie Zeilzer’s examination of the press and its coverage of the Kennedy Assassination and its legacy showed how journalists gave themselves the authority to construct the narrative about the assassination and its aftermath.⁷⁸ Often, journalists use this authority to promote the role of journalism in shaping past events.⁷⁹

Previous research by journalism scholars underscores the critical role journalists play in reconstructing historical events and relating them to present circumstances. Understanding how journalists use memory is key to understanding how a persona such as Bias is transformed into a figure for political usage. Theorists Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang have noted that the news media use the past to “to delimit an era, as a yardstick, for analogies, and for the shorthand explanations or lessons it can provide.”⁸⁰ Lang and Lang also have argued that journalism has an important role in educating younger generations about events before their own births.⁸¹ Edy has contended that journalists often invoke the past to commemorate past events, provide historical analogies, and provided historical context, using history “as a tool to analyze and dramatize without much concern for its construction and maintenance.”⁸² Similarly, in his study of non- commemorative journalism,

Michael Schudson has argued that journalists use the past to highlight the rarity and significance of a story and provide context to current events.⁸³ In examining the under-studied memory functions of magazines, Carolyn Kitch has argued that while journalism is not considered part of public history, journalists do act as influential architects of our past.⁸⁴ According to media scholars Motti Neiger, Eyal Zandberg, and Oren Meyers, journalists also perform an important political function, operationalizing the past for present and future political usage. In covering the past for commemorative reasons, as a teaching tool, or as a tool to measure modern progress, journalists keep historic events in the public imagination, and thus available for use as a political tool.⁸⁵

Collective memory, sports journalism, and race

This dissertation will further consider how collective memory about Bias reflects societal views on race. Previous research on sport and memory has suggested that media often obscure the role of race within sporting narratives about African American athletes. Jessica Schultz discovered that popular recollections of violent incidents involving black players in Iowa promote the idea that the state was much more racially progressive than it actually was in reality, obscuring lingering racial issues within the state.⁸⁶ These findings echo those of historian David McMahon who discovered that non-fiction books about the University of Iowa's athletic history have often only focused on the positive, on-the-field exploits of black athletes, allowing the school and journalists to celebrate the school's seemingly progressive racial attitude and ignoring racial barriers often faced by black athletes both on and off the playing field.⁸⁷

Past research also shows that sports journalists use the past to negatively frame the actions of current athletes of color. Comparisons to historic celebrated and vilified athletes continue to plague the modern black athlete. On one hand, rhetorician Abraham Khan has noted that the modern black athlete is often attacked as being apolitical and selfish through comparisons with a class of activist-athletes from the 1960s and 1970s such as Muhammad Ali and Arthur Ashe.⁸⁸ On the other hand, successful Caribbean-Canadian athletes such as 1996 Olympic 100-meter sprint Gold Medalist Donovan Bailey received heavy scrutiny over potential drug use simply because the athletes were the same race as disgraced Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson.⁸⁹ Preliminary research for this dissertation shows that Bias has been transformed into a symbol of wasted black athlete potential, and is deployed often as an archetype within stories about other black athletes whose careers ended due to self-destructive behavior.

Collective memory and reputations

In grappling with the various constructions of Len Bias within American collective memory, this dissertation will also examine the fluidity of Bias's evolving reputation.

Sociologist Gary Alan Fine has written in his work *Difficult Reputations* that our mass-mediated culture has transformed our understanding of public figures.⁹⁰ The media introduce the American public to celebrities and other public figures that they deem newsworthy.⁹¹ "Subsequent media coverage," according to Fine, "results in these individuals becoming the focus of interactions among strangers: strangers to them and often strangers to each other. We feel that we have the right to judge these

public figures, even though we are not familiar with them personally.”⁹² Furthermore, Fine has argued, the American public often utilizes the celebrities and their reputations as a vehicle to discuss of a host of often disparate issues. During the O.J. Simpson trial, as Fine has noted, Americans used Simpson’s reputation as a vehicle to “discuss race, spousal abuse, police misconduct, legal strategy, biochemical evidence, and other topics far removed from the game of football”⁹³

Fine has argued that understanding the construction of historic reputations is key in understanding the political workings of a society.⁹⁴ Reputations — which are ‘constructions,’ sometimes by the celebrity him or herself, and other times by external actors, such as the media — are used to teach lessons, with heroic figures upheld as models for society, and figures with difficult reputations deployed as “cautionary tales.”⁹⁵ The use of reputations to teach lessons will particularly be important in understanding the Bias narrative, which has often been deployed as a cautionary tale during the War on Drugs.

This dissertation study also draws on Fine’s observation that history is often taught through the biographies of individuals, with certain figures coming to represent a particular time period or being used as a synecdoche for a public issue.⁹⁶ As one of the more famous drug casualties during the 1980s, Bias was taken by both media and government as a stand-in of sorts to represent the War on Drugs, although Fine has acknowledged that that reputations shift over time, asserting, for example, that “as the social world evolves, so does the cultural object. Reputations provide an impetus for change, and change in turn influences the construction of reputation.”⁹⁷

Richard Ian Kimball's book is a part of a series of communication studies have suggested that media have a major impact on how society remembers an individual. Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang's study of artistic reputation found that artists who became famous posthumously did so because their reputation was continuously circulated through society thanks to reputational entrepreneurs—people who wish to shape the memory of historical figures, how those figures are placed in archives, and how they are adopted by younger generations.⁹⁸ In the sports world, the reputation of Ty Cobb was influenced heavily by sportswriters who viewed the player favorably; however, as these memory protectors died, Cobb was more likely to be portrayed as an anti-hero due to a controversial book and a feature film which portrayed him as a villain.⁹⁹ Communication scholar Eric Rothenbuhler's analysis of the posthumous remembrances of blues musician Robert Johnson further underscored the power of mediated memory. Johnson died in obscurity, and yet today has become a mythical popular culture figure due to the highly-circulated retelling of his life.¹⁰⁰ The powerful mythical arc of his life, with emphasis on Johnson's untimely death and supposed deal with the devil, have captivated audiences and transformed Johnson into a "character of the media."¹⁰¹ Rothenbuhler argued, "the myth has influenced how we hear his music as much as how we hear the music has given cause to the myth."¹⁰² This dissertation will analyze how Bias too has become a "character of the media," a symbol deployed by journalists, politicians, and others for different purposes over the three decades since his death.

Race and Mediated Afterlife

This dissertation demonstrates the central role of race in the posthumous usages of the black athlete, as exemplified by Len Bias. Reviewers of Richard Ian Kimball's study on the afterlives of athletes observed that while the study provides a useful framework to analyze the mythmaking of young, dead athletes, Kimball did not adequately discuss the role of race in these recollections; all but one of the athletes discussed by Kimball was white.¹⁰³ Historian Cat Ariail argued race and other markers dictate how the myths of athletes are constructed, deployed, reproduced, and received: "the choices of myth makers and, importantly, the resonance of their myths, rely on and reproduce embedded ideologies of race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality."¹⁰⁴ She pointed to Len Bias as "a powerful entry through which to interrogate constructions of black American athletic death."¹⁰⁵ This dissertation answers this call to analyze Bias and ultimately demonstrates that the narratives constructed about Bias after his death revealed ongoing cultural anxieties about black masculinity.

Myth

Scholars have given different meanings to the term myth. Myths, as defined by Lule, are "archetypical stories" which have pedagogical functions within society.¹⁰⁶ Campbell argued myth has an important role in sustaining society, stating "it has always been the prime functions of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those constant human fantasies to tend to tie it back."¹⁰⁷ Another mythologist, Mircea Eliade, defined myth as the retelling of events that have happened since the dawn of man. These stories are retold for contemporary audiences: "myths describe the various and sometimes

dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the 'supernatural') into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today. Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being."¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, Eliade has argued myth "the foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities," and further noted that an additional function of myth is that it helps to sustain social order.¹⁰⁹ Joseph Campbell stated that mythology has four functions: "the mystical function" which underscores the mystery inherent in our universe, "a cosmological dimension" which blurs together science with this sense of mystery, a "sociological function" which promotes and affirms "a certain social order" and finally "the pedagogical function" which teaches humanity how to handle life circumstances.¹¹⁰

News and myth

Research of myth and news has usually traced the development of archetypes, or master stories, through newspapers and other media text. Jack Lule has argued that daily news coverage is the primary vehicle of myth in contemporary society.¹¹¹ In his 2001 book, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*, Lule highlighted the seven master myths present in news stories: "The Victim," "The Scapegoat," "The Hero," "The Good Mother," "The Trickster," "The Other World," and "The Flood."¹¹² Robert Gutsche and Erica Salkin argue that Lule's work can be used "as a foundation for deeper exploration of archetypes, their characteristics, and cultural roles."¹¹³

However, other scholars interested in myth have critiqued Lule's assertion that stories reflect an *individual* archetype. S. Elizabeth Bird called for research to look at news narratives as products of their time. For Bird, "the weakness of this 'universalist' approach" championed by Lule "is that it pays scant attention to the differences in time and place that produce particular cultural moments and narratives, rooting in particular histories."¹¹⁴ Echoing Bird, myth scholar Mihai Coman has also attacked Lule's universalist analysis, noting that many of the stories Lule chose for analysis could have multiple archetypal meanings.¹¹⁵ Coman argued that journalists often act as bricoleurs "who ceaselessly build and rebuild the symbolic edifice of cultural representations, using narrative patterns, figures, values, and codes available in their cultural environment."¹¹⁶ Indeed, recent work on myth has reflected Coman's argument by demonstrating that journalists often create new myths or combine master myths during their coverage of stories.¹¹⁷

To accurately study myth in its cultural context, Coman has called for a more processual approach which focuses on how journalists produce myth within our reality.¹¹⁸ Coman has contended that narratives are not stable; they shift constantly.¹¹⁹ Therefore, Coman has suggested that scholars look at myth as a "process of constructing a text" instead of myth as a "constructed text."¹²⁰ This kind of "process" is particularly noticeable in moments of crisis such as the Bias tragedy, where journalists have the double duty of both describing events and maintaining societal norms.¹²¹ Using existing texts from within the culture, journalists explain traumatic events not by falling to traditional stories, but creating and a new discourse unique to a situation.¹²²

Sports and Myth

This dissertation will consider the role of sports journalism in constructing and maintaining myths. Lule applied the hero archetype to track coverage following baseball star Mark McGwire's chase to become the all-time single-season home run leader in 1998. Lule noted that athletes have come to be used vehicles to promote societal values.¹²³ The *New York Times* coverage of McGwire's chase illustrated the degree to which the paper's coverage mimicked the myth of the Hero.¹²⁴ The previous standard of 61 home runs, set by Roger Maris in 1961, was presented as the ultimate prize.¹²⁵ Next, the media tracked the trials McGwire faced on his quest, including accusations of drug usage.¹²⁶ But McGwire pushed past these trials, and articles often emphasized both his work ethic and his physical power, both aspirational social values.¹²⁷ Finally, there was the celebration of McGwire's record-breaking home run, the end of his quest.¹²⁸ Lule finds that the *New York Times* promoted and upheld the values of white, masculinity hegemony in their coverage of McGwire, media attention evident — and problematic — considering Sammy Sosa, who chased the same record during 1998 but did not receive the same amount of attention from the *Times*.¹²⁹

That McGwire was given the hero treatment at the expense of a black Latino baseball player underscored the role of race in the news mythology that produces sporting heroes. Rhetorician Michael Butterworth, for example, exposed the racial framing of McGwire and Sosa during the 1998 home run race, concluding “As the

season progressed, the image became complete: McGwire as the archetypal American hero, his racial identity never mentioned, the fact of his whiteness taken for granted; and Sosa as the grateful, darkskinned buddy just happy to be along for the ride.”¹³⁰ Butterworth’s study on Tim Tebow and construction of his heroic leadership ability by the media underscores that Tebow’s whiteness helped establish himself as a leader, especially given the historic whiteness of the quarterback position.¹³¹ As Butterworth argues, “White normativity figures prominently in coverage of Tebow not because he is described in terms of race, but because of the historic associations that have been made in sports media about race, leadership, and “character,” especially when attributed to quarterbacks.”¹³² In his analysis of baseball superstar Nolan Ryan, communication scholar Nick Trujillo demonstrated how the media constructed the pitcher “as an archetypal male athletic hero” by emphasizing his athleticism, his success in his profession, his role as the head of his family, his off-season work as a rancher, and his heterosexuality.¹³³ Blacks are allowed to be sporting heroes as well if they conform to the standards of white culture. Tiger Woods, for example, became a household name after becoming the first black golfer to win the Masters. His win came to symbolize true racial progress in sport, and his popularity centered on his non-threatening personality — a personality presumed to be “acceptable” for white audiences.¹³⁴

Race becomes especially amplified during scandals which see the fall of the once-great sports hero. In writing about the Bias tragedy, for example, Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell observed that since sports has traditionally been a conservative domain reflective of traditional values, sports scandals create “an ideological rupture”

where society reexamines itself and the affected institution.¹³⁵ This rupture can be seen in the rise and fall of black-Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson. Johnson became a Canadian national hero after winning the 100-meter dash at the 1988 Summer Olympics, especially with national unease about the defection of national hockey hero Wayne Gretzky to its more powerful neighbor the United States.¹³⁶ Johnson, however, would later become a national villain after he tested positive for steroids, a denouement that further exacerbated national tensions.¹³⁷ After the steroid testing results became public, media coverage of Johnson emphasized his blackness and his Jamaican roots.¹³⁸

Such cases illuminate the before-and-after arc of coverage of Len Bias's death, making clearer how that event became an iconic American telling of his story. Reeves and Campbell argue that television coverage of Bias's death attempted to restore social order to the world of sports, attacking the problem of drugs and sports and academic corruption within intercollegiate athletics.¹³⁹ According to David Rowe, "an implied contract is drawn up between sports star and fan, the terms of which require consistency of person and persona."¹⁴⁰ Scandal, Rowe has argued, occurs when this contract is breached, which happens frequently in our mass-mediated society.¹⁴¹ Jack Lule has agreed. Given sports' important standing in American society and the role sports play in constructing societal heroes, he has noted fallen sports stars are particularly susceptible to harsh blowback, concluding that "as part of its social role, myth vilifies those who diverge too much from the social charter. Myth stigmatizes and ostracizes evildoers. It demeans and degrades. It depicts a kind of public denunciation of those who offend the charter."¹⁴² In the case

of Bias, the fallen star would be blamed for the declining fortunes of both the Maryland Terrapins and Boston Celtics.

Race, Media, and the Rise of Reagan

Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argued that the conservative revolution ushered in by the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan as president was a backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.¹⁴³ New Right rhetoric rejected explicit racist language but instead relied on coded language or “phrases and symbols which refer indirectly to racial themes” that “rearticulated” racial issues for moderate, suburban white audiences.¹⁴⁴ During the 1980s, images of successful middle-class blacks such as Bias circulated next to images of black poverty and violence. The presence of black athletes, entertainers, and journalists within popular culture represented the rise of the black professional and the black middle class. As sociologist Herman Gray argued, images of successful blacks such as Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey, and Bill Cosby “played their part to confirm the notion that America was racially open.”¹⁴⁵ These images were contrasted with the images of the black underclass, the black poor left behind in crumbling post-industrial urban centers. As violence rose across urban areas during the 1980s, news coverage portrayed black neighborhoods as war zones in need of heightened policing and government surveillance.¹⁴⁶ During this time, the image of violent black criminals became a constant feature on both popular entertainment programming and television news.¹⁴⁷

Gray noted that mediated images of the black criminal played an important political role for Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party. Negative images of blacks

“were central to the consolidation of a conservative cultural and political hegemonic bloc” during the 1980s.¹⁴⁸ Conservative rhetoric blamed the plight of poor blacks in the inner city on their deviant behavior, not long-term systemic racism. The embrace of successful blacks fueled white resentment against the underserving urban poor; it allowed conservatives to avoid claims of racism, but also justified steep cuts in public funding for inner cities.¹⁴⁹

Media Coverage of War on Drugs

According to sociologists Craig Reinerman and Harry Levine, the crack epidemic was the latest in a series of drug crises throughout American history targeting groups deemed deviant by political elite.¹⁵⁰ They traced the nation’s first cocaine scare at the turn of the 20th century to fears of the drug’s spread to the working class. Journalists helped fuel the crisis with stories that “linked drug use with blacks, prostitutes, criminals, and transient workers groups such as “blacks, prostitutes, criminals, and transient workers.”¹⁵¹ Similarly, Reagan’s War on Drugs gained traction during the rise of the crack cocaine trade in America’s inner cities. Crack was a cheap, smokable form of powder cocaine, a potent drug that was believed to hook every user at first smoke and was said to spread like an “epidemic” or “plague.”¹⁵² Crack first appeared in black and Hispanic areas of Los Angeles, Miami, and New York in 1984 and 1985. The smoked product produced a brief but intense period of intoxication for a lower cost and, as Reinerman and Levin noted, “this inexpensive and dramatic ‘high’ was much better suited to the finances and interest in immediate escape of the inner-city poor than the more subtle and expensive effects of powder cocaine.”¹⁵³ Reinerman and Levine labeled this new form of

cocaine “a marketing innovation” for drug entrepreneurs.¹⁵⁴ Due to concentrated unemployment in urban environments, drug kingpins were able to hire large numbers of African American and Hispanic men to sell packaged crack on street corners. As the latest “demon drug,” crack would be blamed for the continuous decline of black and Hispanic inner cities.¹⁵⁵ However, the racialized hysteria surrounding the drug helped to inflate the drug's true potency, as crack usage was never as widespread outside of inner-city neighborhoods as suggested by mainstream media sources and politicians.¹⁵⁶

According to journalist Dan Baum, the Reagan Administration wanted to “shift the blame for social problems away from inequality, racism, injustice, and the like and place it on the immoral acts of bad individuals.”¹⁵⁷ By 1984, the administration used First Lady Nancy Reagan to promote its “Just Say No” campaign. As Baum explained, the campaign was part of the Reagan administration’s plan to stifle any debate about drug policy. Baum argued the campaign “reduced the debate to a single word. Don’t talk about why people are using drugs, the slogan said...Don’t talk about the difference between drug use and drug abuse. Don’t talk at all. Just say no.”¹⁵⁸ According to Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell, American television news coverage was complicit in both promoting the Reagan Administration’s view of cocaine usage “as a moral disease or a criminal pathology” and in sanctioning the era’s criminalization and surveillance of black men during the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, cultural studies scholar Steve Macek argued that the news media gave right-wing proponents of the War on Drugs a national platform that amplified

their views while also producing stories “fixated on underclass deviance and misbehavior.”¹⁶⁰

Journalist Natalie Hopkinson’s analysis of the *Washington Afro-American* and *Washington Post* also demonstrated that both a prominent black newspaper and traditional mainstream newspaper acted to criminalize and stigmatize underclass African Americans in their coverage of the War on Drugs.¹⁶¹ Both the *Afro-American* and the *Post* took a hardline editorial approach against drugs, she observed, and ramped up their coverage of Reagan’s War on Drugs after Bias’s death, using the Maryland basketball star as a symbol of the culpability of black men in the War on Drugs.¹⁶²

Bias’s death and the resulting scandal was particularly crucial in the mediated spectacle of the War on Drugs. Scandals or “kernel events,” particularly those involving celebrities, lent the social drama to the public policy that became the War on Drugs (kernel events are events that help to extend a particular mediated narrative).¹⁶³ Reeves and Campbell identified Bias’s death as the top kernel event of the 1980s, noting that media framed Bias as “the chief transgressor of the cocaine narrative during the Reagan era.”¹⁶⁴

College Athletics, Race, and the Media

This dissertation has taken into consideration the fact that previous research on the media treatment of black male college athletes suggests that race frame most of the mediated discourses on those athletes; and indeed, this dissertation did find that race was central to the mediated discourses about Bias — just as race framed the War on Drugs. Often, black athletes are positioned as the problems plaguing college sports

and college campuses. Sport sociologist Billy Hawkins has argued that the media, with their focus on the academic failure of the black student-athlete, helped to perpetuate the stereotype of the dumb black athlete, while under-covering root causes for the underperformance of the black student-athlete in the classroom.¹⁶⁵ According to activist and sociologist Richard Lapchick, a mostly-white sports media has made the black student-athlete the face of academic struggles and sexual misconduct on college campuses, in the process ignoring evidence that these issues are symptomatic of problems within broader American culture.¹⁶⁶ In her study of the 1988 NCAA Tournament telecast, media scholar Pamela Wonsek also has demonstrated how black athletes became symbols of the ills of college sports; the majority of players in a series of public-service announcements about drug abuse and low graduation rates were black, leading Wonsek to state that such PSAs "can contribute to an overall image that blacks cause the problem" to a largely white audience.¹⁶⁷ Even when black male student-athletes are not the primary focus of a particular story, they can be framed as deviant. David Leonard has argued, for instance, that both journalists and internet commentators reacting to the 2006 Duke lacrosse scandal, where three white Duke lacrosse players were accused of raping a black exotic dancer, frequently juxtaposed the Duke players, presumed innocent of the charges, to the stereotypical, criminal black-student athlete who were deemed the real problem within college athletics.¹⁶⁸

Scholars have suggested that media attacks against black student-athletes reflect societal needs to police and control black athletes. The University of Maryland used Bias's death, according to historian Theresa Runstedtler, to justify tougher

academic standards and other reforms aimed at the black athlete.¹⁶⁹ According to King and Springwood, "administrators, coaches, and media commentators" have often taken "paternalistic tones" in describing college and high school African American male athletes who leave or avoid college to go pro.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, there has been condescension in discussions of the expressive African American athlete who flaunts traditional sportsmanship rules.¹⁷¹ Media coverage of college sports often position the working-class African American college basketball player as troubled, selfish, and the product of a deficient black culture, in juxtaposition to a heroic (often white) coach who will guide the athlete and instill discipline in him.¹⁷² This dichotomous relationship, with its implicit narrative of paternalism and racism, has been a popular media drama as black athletes have increasingly populated major college basketball programs. Wonsek notes that "the sporting event itself was dominated by black players, these images were mitigated and undercut by the overwhelming predominance of white images, some of which represent individuals in positions of authority."¹⁷³

Though media outlets in the post-Civil Rights movement era have largely avoided overtly racist coverage of black athletes, Richard Lapchick has observed that the trope of the black, criminalized student-athlete is an example of color-blind racism.¹⁷⁴ Others have made stronger claims: both former *New York Times* sport columnist William Rhoden and sport sociologist Billy Hawkins have gone so far as to compare the predicament of the modern black male athlete to that of a plantation.¹⁷⁵ Rhoden has argued that since the full integration of athletes of color into college athletics, black student-athletes have become prized commodities for colleges, while

at the same time colleges have scrutinized and policed black student-athlete behavior on and off the field.¹⁷⁶

Race and the NBA

Finally, this dissertation will examine how coverage of Len Bias, who was the Celtics' top prospect in 1986, drew on the racialized discourse surrounding the NBA during the 1980s. In discussing the ascension of Michael Jordan to prominence in American popular culture during the 1980s, physical cultural studies scholar David Andrews noted that the New Right often used the success of black celebrities such as Jordan to attack the black underclass, who were framed as the undeserving poor who lacked a sufficient work ethic to be successful.¹⁷⁷ Jordan became an oft-cited “antidote to the moral panic that had enveloped the NBA.”¹⁷⁸ By the late 1970s, the NBA was on the verge of collapse, as the public perception of the league was that it was too black, populated by lazy, selfish players who partook in copious amounts of cocaine.¹⁷⁹ But by the 1980s, the league had begun to rely on nationally marketable black stars such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson to bring fans back to the sport.¹⁸⁰ The NBA benefited from a more exciting game, accentuated by a black style of play.¹⁸¹ The league was able to use this style of play together with the tension inherent in the traditional game, to dramatize its biggest rivalry: Johnson's Los Angeles Lakers versus the white Larry Bird's Boston Celtics.¹⁸² As C.L. Cole and Andrews note, “The Johnson-Los Angeles Lakers and Bird-Boston Celtics relationship was narrativized through what were articulated as coordinates of rivalry (personality / style / team / coast) that were steeped in the mobilization of distinct racial identities. Moreover, the representation of Bird and Johnson as highly

competitive, enthusiastic, and unselfish was established over and against the rank and file of the NBA who were characterized as freestyling and egocentric.”¹⁸³ In using the Bird-Magic rivalry to promote its brand, and using Jordan and Johnson as the faces of the league, the NBA packaged a form of safe blackness palpable to white audiences after years of viewing the league’s blackness as a liability.¹⁸⁴

Johnson’s and Jordan’s racial identities were fluidly understood during this period. Through Jordan’s many commercial endorsements, he had been transformed into what Andrews labeled “a living, breathing, and dunking vindication of the mythological American meritocracy.”¹⁸⁵ Johnson was also transformed into a sporting hero who could both serve as a role model, particularly for African American youth, and be respectable enough to endorse products desired by Americans across races.¹⁸⁶ As argued by Cole and Andrews, both Jordan and Johnson were stripped of their blackness within mediated depictions: “the production of the black superstar requires the denial of racism and is the requisite figure in a narrative that suggests that race matters only when there is trouble and/ or perceived threat.”¹⁸⁷

However, after scandals touched both Johnson and Jordan, they were re-linked to archetypes of blackness. A gambling scandal tarnished Jordan’s reputation in 1993, as he was linked to the “deviant lifestyle” that was normalized in coverage of the mostly black NBA.¹⁸⁸ Coverage of Magic Johnson’s announcement that he was HIV positive also centered on the deviant black body, and problematized the non-threatening image Johnson and his handlers had cultivated before the announcement.¹⁸⁹ In the aftermath of Johnson’s announcement, journalists linked the star to Len Bias, seeing both as symbols of lost black athletic productivity.¹⁹⁰ As sport

sociologists C.L Cole and David Andrews noted, the discourse surrounding the Bias-Johnson tragedies underscored the fact that black players were now viewed as (valuable) commodities for the National Basketball Association and its sponsors: “The narrative of "loss" directs our imagination to the level of the economic: it is a narration of economic expansion, the productive body, and consumer society through which America's progress is imagined. Johnson was revered for the role he had played in making the NBA as we know it, for the possibilities created through his exportable image, and for his position in securing the popularity of the NBA both nationally and internationally”¹⁹¹ Cole and Andrews also argued that the Bias-Johnson linkage helped to tie together the twin evils of AIDS and drugs to the black community, further problematizing blackness: “The Bias-Johnson dynamic locates both as African American athletes whose lives end (in the case of Johnson this presumes the fatalism of AIDS) through excess and contagion, both signify the weak-willed subject embedded in the logic of addiction.”¹⁹² Bias’s story is thus used as a metaphor to underscore “the cultural logic of race”: that African American athletes are valuable commodities in contemporary sport, but are also inclined to criminal and irresponsible activity off the playing field.¹⁹³

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation will have four major chapters.

The first chapter examines coverage of Bias’s career at the University of Maryland and sports journalism’s role in transforming Bias from a lightly-recruited high school star into the next potential NBA superstar. This rise is contextualized within the cultural politics of the 1980s. As a clean-cut African American superstar,

Bias was an antidote to both the deviant black student-athlete blamed for a rising number of scandals in college sports and the black street criminal that increasingly appeared on television news shows and within political discourse.

The second chapter considers the journalistic deployment of Bias as a rallying cry for anti-drug legislation and drug reform in sports. The chapter also considers the political usage of Bias during the debates for the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986.

The third chapter focuses on the mythologization of Len Bias within sports media. Throughout the 1990s, journalists tied the decline of the Maryland Terrapins' basketball program and the Boston Celtics franchise to Bias's death. These myths were used to justify academic reform in college sports and the monitoring of prospects coming into the NBA. In recent years, debates over Bias's legacy as a basketball player have centered on various attempts to honor him within public discourse.

The final chapter focuses on the use of Len Bias as a political symbol in the War on Drugs. Through his mother, the federal government, and other actors, Bias has been repeatedly deployed as an anti-drug cautionary tale. However, activists have also used Bias to highlight the growing prison population, and in particular, the high number of black men imprisoned, due to legislation passed after Bias's death.

The conclusion considers the political usages of Len Bias in recent years, during the era of Black Lives Matter and the growing opioid epidemic.

¹ Liam Farrell, "Our Bias: An Honor Aims to Heal a Painful Past," *Terp*, last modified October 3, 2014, <http://terp.umd.edu/our-bias/#.VTv4Q5MsPcY>

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- ⁴ Keith Harriston and Sally Jenkins, "Maryland Basketball Star Len Bias Is Dead at 22," *Post* (Washington, D.C), Jun. 20, 1986
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- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.
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- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.
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- ¹⁰ Peter Williams, *The Sports Immortals: Deifying the American Athlete* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 34, 45-46.
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- ¹³ Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and The Reagan Legacy*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 139.
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- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.
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- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Reeves and Campbell, *Cracked Coverage*, 138.

²³ Ibid, 3, 15.

²⁴ Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors*, 225.

²⁵ Ferrell, "Our Bias."

²⁶ See Ferrell and Reeves and Campbell; C.L. Cole and David L. Andrews, "Look--Its NBA ShowTime!": Visions of race in the popular imaginary," in *Cultural Studies: A research volume (Vol. 1)*, ed. Norman Denzin; C. Richard King and Charles F. Springwood, *Beyond The Cheers: Race As Spectacle In College Sport*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); Cheryl L. Cole and Harry Denny III, "Visualizing Deviance in Post-Reagan America: Magic Johnson, AIDS, and the Promiscuous World of Professional Sport," *Critical Sociology*, 20, no. 3(1994).

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²⁹ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 14.

³⁰ Mary McDonald and Susan Birrell, "Reading Sports Critically: A Methodology for Interrogating Power," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16, no. 4 (1999): 283, 290.

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³⁴ Ibid, 292.

³⁵ Ibid,

³⁶ Ibid., 293.

³⁷ Ibid., 295.

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Chapter 1: A Budding (Black) Star In Reagan's America

During the 1985-1986 college basketball season, senior forward Len Bias emerged as the face of Maryland men's basketball program. *Sports Illustrated's* preview of Maryland's season pictured a Bias in a high-end Georgetown shoe store. He sat at his ease, smiling in a blue suit and open-necked shirt showing a gold chain, casually tossing up a designer black leather loafer. The caption read: "An un-Biased opinion: it would take many men to fill Len's shoes."¹

The sports world and Maryland celebrated Bias at seemingly every opportunity. The university's sports information department placed a photo of a slam-dunking Bias on the cover of the team's yearly media guide. The inside cover highlighted Bias' successful junior season, during which he set a single-season school scoring record, was named Player of the Year in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and was named an All-American. The next page featured color pictures of Bias at a celebration for *Playboy* magazine's All-American team. His player profile listed him as "All-American Len Bias."² A popular poster on the Maryland campus showed Bias in full gold uniform at half-court of Cole Field House, the Terrapins' home arena. In the life-sized photo, a smirking Bias stood in front of the field house's scoreboard, which was illuminated to say: "I'm Bias, Maryland No. 1." As biographer C. Fraser Smith noted, "his likeness was suddenly on walls in dormitory rooms across the College Park campus, up there with Madonna, Sting, James Dean, and the Beatles."³

Len Bias became a collegiate basketball star during a transformative period in American sports and culture. The worlds of sports and entertainment started to merge

during the 1980s, offering athletes more avenues to media exposure, lucrative contracts, and product endorsements.⁴ These changes even transformed amateur athletics. The rise of ESPN, the first 24-hour cable network devoted to sports, helped to fuel the popularity of college basketball and the annual NCAA basketball tournament. With his ever-present smile, great leaping ability, and commitment to graduating from the University of Maryland, Bias became a national star — and a symbol of everything right with college basketball.

By the 1986 NBA Draft, being a clean-cut black basketball player such as Len Bias could lead to a lucrative future, thanks to Chicago Bulls star Michael Jordan. In 1985, struggling shoe company Nike revolutionized sports marketing by tapping Jordan; the young, black basketball player to become the face of their company. Sports companies had traditionally focused advertising campaigns on athletes who played individual sports such as tennis; they also avoided black athletes, believing they would not appeal to white suburban audiences.⁵ However, Nike saw Jordan as a chance to reach inner city black teenagers and move the company away from its focus on fitness and jogging. Jordan's charm, personality and spectacular athleticism made him the perfect spokesman for Nike in the flashy media environment ushered in by ESPN. Through Nike's "Air Jordan" brand, Jordan became the ideal athlete-hero of the Reagan era, argued journalist Michael Weinreb in his 2010 book *Bigger Than The Game*: "There was something nonthreatening about Jordan, about that smile, about his fantastical leaping ability, and it did not take much of a spark in this age of twenty-four-hour sports networks, amid the rise of a generation that was far too young recall the struggles of the civil-rights movement, for his appeal to bridge the

chasm between the inner city and suburbs.”⁶ Jordan’s popularity with white suburbia and the black inner-city did more than just sell shoes for Nike; it also created a path to superstardom for clean-cut black college basketball prospects such as Bias.

The rise to stardom of black basketball players such as Jordan and Bias underscored how sports became an important site for the transmission of a New Right ideology. The high salary and endorsement contracts that Jordan had and that awaited Len Bias supported conservative arguments that the American Dream was open to anyone who worked hard enough.⁷ In fact, news stories did contrast successful black athletes with the narratives of troubled young black men, either in sports or on the street corners of the inner city. Sociologist C.L. Cole observed that during the 1980s, “Black urban masculinity was visualized...through a fundamental distinction between the athlete...and the criminal.”⁸ Media coverage transformed the accounts of both successful black basketball players and wayward black men into “an apparently endless supply of morality and cautionary tales” that taught the importance of “self-improvement, self-reliance, self-determination, and ‘choice’ to young black men.”⁹

During his collegiate career in the mid-1980s, Bias became a part of this network of narratives about black men. He became “the nation’s model for healthy young black manhood” during a period of rising inner-city crime and growing concern about the black student-athlete.¹⁰ As a star college athlete who appeared to be committed to academics and was a good citizen off the court, Bias stood in contrast to other black college basketball players blamed for the academic and behavioral scandals plaguing the sport. He also stood in contrast to the black drug dealers and gang members blamed for the growing rise of crack cocaine. By the time

the 1986 NBA Draft commenced on June 17, 1986, Bias was on his way to becoming the next transcendent NBA star and the next black celebrity in Reagan's America.

The Rise of the Televised Black Athlete

By the 1985-1986 academic year, Bias's senior year, he was a star in a growing and increasingly lucrative television property: college basketball. The turning point for the sport and its rise in national popularity began with the 1979 NCAA basketball championship game, a battle between future NBA superstars Ervin "Magic" Johnson of Michigan State and Larry Bird of Indiana State.¹¹ Media coverage throughout the 1978-79 season had contrasted Johnson, a black player from Lansing, Michigan, with Bird, a white player from the small town of French Lick, Indiana.¹² Their meeting in the final game captured the country's attention and attracted the largest audience to ever watch a college basketball game on television.¹³ After the tournament, interest in college basketball skyrocketed and the sport eventually "challenge[d] football for the number-one place in college athletics."¹⁴ After the 1979 tournament, fledgling cable sports network ESPN signed a contract with the NCAA to show early-round tournament games. More importantly, ESPN began to televise regular-season contests throughout the season. The cable network's coverage of college basketball "increased the fan base for college teams from local and regional following to national ones."¹⁵ With a growing national audience, college basketball's premier event increased in value. In 1981, CBS agreed to a three-year, \$48 million deal with the NCAA to telecast the tournament, a 60 percent increase from the NCAA's previous contract with longtime broadcast partner NBC.¹⁶ Two

years later, the value of the tournament doubled, as CBS agreed to pay \$96 million for tourney games.¹⁷ The tournament, which grew to 64 teams in 1985, had become one of the most anticipated events on the American sports calendar.¹⁸

Universities increasingly relied upon African American players to fuel the growing college sport enterprise of the mid-1980s. In 1966, the year Texas Western became the first team to start five African Americans in an NCAA tournament championship game, only 16 percent of all male college basketball players were black. Less than two decades later, African Americans made up half of all male college basketball players.¹⁹ At many big-time programs, teams were virtually all black. Twenty years after the University of Maryland welcomed its first black student-athlete, eleven out of the thirteen players on the 1985-1986 men's basketball team were African American.²⁰

The influx of black basketball players at Division I universities was tied to the changing economic system of college sports. According to sport sociologist Othello Harris, African American participation in college basketball grew in tandem with the increasingly valuable basketball television contracts. After the full integration of the sport in the 1970s, black players made up the vast majority of National Player of the Year and All-American Team recipients. By the 1980s, white players were a rarity on All-American collegiate teams, as blacks “dominated nearly every statistical category in college basketball.”²¹

Central to the rise of college basketball on television was the athleticism of black players. According to sport historian Ronald Smith, the “wide variety of improvisational play and individual excellence” displayed by many African American

athletes helped to transform the sport into a made-for-television spectacle that attracted ticket buyers and television viewers.²² In writing about the history of the black athlete, former *New York Times* journalist William Rhoden noted that since the integration of American sports, “the prime raw resource in the sports industry has been black muscle.”²³ The pursuit of television dollars and victories forced universities that once rejected black athletes to chase after them in an “arms race,” further bringing college away from its amateur roots.²⁴

Critics argued that the rise of television money in major college basketball and football helped to transform college athletics into a professionalized institution. According to American Studies scholar Murray Sperber, “big-time athletic departments became franchises in College Sports Inc., a huge commercial entertainment enterprise with operating methods and objectives frequently opposed to the educational missions of the host universities” during the 1980s.²⁵ In the idealized world of the NCAA and its proponents, even today student-athletes are considered to be amateurs who devote themselves equally to their sport and their studies and the role of coaches is to win games but to also help student-athletes build character.²⁶ Yet even in the mid-1980s, the reality of big-time college sports was far different than this ideal. Already in the Reagan era, there were large financial incentives for colleges to win at any cost. The right recruit could bring championships and financial rewards to his coach and school.²⁷ In order to add money to the athletic department's coffers, major college basketball and football teams needed to make bowl games and tournament appearances. To reach the postseason, coaches needed to recruit top high school prospects. As a consequence, schools no longer looked to recruit scholar-

athletes. Instead, they recruited football and men's basketball players who triumphed in athletic competition — and many of those struggled in the classroom.²⁸ Major college football and basketball teams became entrenched as farm systems for the National Football League and the National Basketball Association, attracting athletes who were only in college to pursue dreams of professional sports stardom.²⁹

The balance between academics and athletic success was especially skewed at the University of Maryland. With the Maryland legislature refusing to give any state funds to the Maryland athletic department, Maryland's football and men's basketball teams were forced to support the entire athletic department.³⁰ As a consequence, Maryland coaches recruited top high school players such as Len Bias to win ACC championships and NCAA Tournament bids, but no one expected that these athletes would make an intellectual contribution to the campus. As author C. Fraser Smith argued in his biography of Bias, the need for athletic programs to generate external sources of revenue “created a fundamental problem in big-time college sports: it inevitably put power or the appearance of power in the hands of people whose objectives were not necessarily academic.”³¹ Athletic donors expected coaches to get top talent, typically understood to be young black men, even if that talent could not perform in classrooms.³² By the mid-1980s, Maryland head coach Lefty Driesell, a once-vaunted recruiter, had lost top recruits to schools such as the University of North Carolina and Syracuse that had recently built fancy new arenas. After a dispute with Baltimore high school coach Bob Wade, Driesell failed to even attract to the state's public university players from the state's top basketball high schools. As a result, Driesell resorted to recruiting some players with problematic academic backgrounds.

In 1983, Driesell signed Keith Gaitlin and Terry Long, two players with a combined SAT score of 1150. Both Gaitlin and Long helped the Terps win Driesell's only ACC tournament championship in 1984, but they also struggled academically at Maryland.³³

Driesell's success only bred the expectation of future success. Despite the continued excellence of Len Bias on the court, the Terps struggled early in the 1985-1986 season. One concern: Driesell had no blue-chip recruits on the horizon to replace Bias, and Driesell's woes became a frequent subject of scrutiny in both the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post*.³⁴ *Baltimore Sun* columnist Michael Olesker even went as far as to suggest that Driesell had lost the ability to still coach effectively and the energy to recruit top talent.³⁵ The media's focus on Driesell's win-loss record and recruiting struggles underscored a reality about big-time college basketball by the mid-1980s: coach Driesell's primary concerns were to win games and find the next Len Bias, not to educate or babysit his existing players — players who included Len Bias.

Prop 48 And the Crisis of the Black Student-Athlete

In his assessment of college sports, C. Fraser Smith maintained that the pressure for college athletic programs such as Maryland to “compete in the marketplace” for revenue “helped to create an environment in which scandal was almost inevitable.”³⁶ The growth of college sports as a commercial enterprise amplified the growing educational catastrophe happening on many college campuses across the nation. Already in 1980, a *Sports Illustrated* cover story by John

Underwood painted the picture that a corrupt college athletic system was sullyng the reputation of American higher education. The process started even before student-athletes arrived on college campuses, *Sports Illustrated* detailed. First, the high school transcripts of recruits were commonly falsified. Then, once athletes enrolled at universities, the schools cared little about their academic performance³⁷.

But central to higher education's catastrophes was the attention black athletes had received while they were in the K-12 educational system. It was becoming all-too clear: black athletes were woefully unprepared for the rigors of college coursework. Underwood interviewed several black educators who called for tougher standards for college student-athlete admission. Sociologist Harry Edwards passionately warned about the failure to act on this issue:

It is coming down to a crisis of the '80s for the black athlete. The situation is worse than sorry, it borders on criminal. You are talking about 60% of these 20th-century gladiators not graduating, ending up skill-less and with a sense of failure—as if they had the chance and blew it. You are talking about functional illiteracy. Reading and writing are the stock of higher education, and many of these athletes simply do not have them. When a person on the edge of illiteracy enters an academic community he is doubly alienated because he's completely without tools.³⁸

Edwards and other black educators attacked the NCAA's low admission standards. Historian Ronald Smith concluded that a combination of lower admission standards aimed to increase black higher-education enrollment in colleges after the Civil Rights movement, the lowering of academic standards by the NCAA, the use of special admits in bringing in athletically talented but academically challenged black athletes, and the rise of televised college sports created a toxic environment. It all “led to a crisis of academic integrity in universities across America.”³⁹

The NCAA only required that student-athletes sign up for 12 hours of classes every semester. Many conferences required student-athletes to pass 24 hours of classes during an academic year, but the math behind that requirement was fuzzy at best. Some conferences such as the Big Ten had a minimum grade point average for competition, while other conferences such as the Southwest Conference and the Pac-10 did not track grade averages. Progress toward a degree was not a factor in determining a student-athlete's eligibility. Many athletes took a series of non-rigorous courses such as such as "Safety with Hand Power Tools," "Dance," and "Basketball Philosophy" without any connection to a serious degree-granting program just to maintain their 12 hours. Even with those workarounds, some student-athletes needed additional help in their classes. By late 1979, several schools were under investigation by the NCAA for enrolling athletes in fraudulent junior college courses after those athletes failed courses at their home universities. After exhausting their eligibility, many student-athletes left school without degrees and struggled to find meaningful employment. As Underwood noted, it was difficult to determine how many athletes were not graduating, due to federal privacy laws that restricted access to university graduation rates.⁴⁰

The 1980 *Sports Illustrated* report exposed a system that took limited responsibility for the academic well-being of recruited athletes. To be eligible to play an NCAA sport, freshmen only needed a high school diploma and a high school 2.0-grade point average. Ironically, this rule was itself a less strenuous version of the 1.6 Rule abolished by the NCAA in 1973. The earlier rule required schools to admit only those prospective student-athletes who were capable of maintaining a C- average. The

NCAA dropped the rule because many schools expressed dismay because of the rule's reliance on standardized testing, which was thought to put minority students at a disadvantage.⁴¹

The impact of the revised rule, however, meant that universities such as Maryland exploited the lower standards to keep athletes who struggled with academics eligible. Maryland's athletic department prodded its academically low achieving athletes into majoring in General Studies, an interdisciplinary major originally designed to allow high-performing, pro-active students the opportunity to design their own independent major. The athletic department discovered that the major's flexible scheduling allowed basketball players to enroll in easy classes after they struggled with more traditional majors. But athletes who managed to graduate in General Studies typically left the university with a transcript of disparate classes that did not lead to a coherent degree path.⁴²

Yet many on Maryland's basketball team still struggled academically, even after enrolling in easy courses. During the 1986 spring semester, the team overall recorded a grade point average of 1.82. A UMD vice chancellor calculated that an athlete could maintain a 0.43 GPA and still stay eligible to participate in their sport. Even players who had been dismissed for their poor academics could be readmitted quickly without losing playing time.⁴³

The crisis over educational standards in college sports largely centered on the plight of the black male athlete and his struggles in the classroom. As Underwood's report for *Sports Illustrated* exposed, college coaches recruited high school athletes with the promise of success in professional sports, yet many left school without a path

to the pros or meaningful education.⁴⁴ Kevin Ross, who had play four years of basketball at Creighton University, drew national attention to the crisis with his admission that he was functionally illiterate. Ross, who left Creighton in 1982 without a degree, had been admitted to the school despite the fact that he scored a 9 out of a possible 36 points on the ACT entrance exam. The school initially rejected Ross, but he was later given a special exemption to attend. To remain eligible after a bad first semester, Ross was enrolled in classes such as the “Theory of Basketball,” “Squad Participation,” and “Introduction to Ceramics.”⁴⁵ After leaving Creighton following an injury-plagued career, Ross enrolled at a Chicago elementary school once he realized he could not read past a second-grade level. David Pickle, writing for the NCAA-published *Champion* magazine, argued Ross’ revelation was a wake-up call for college athletics and American higher education as a whole.⁴⁶ CBS covered Ross' story in its 1983 CBS Reports documentary "The Basketball Machine," which reported on the growing commercialization of the sport. Ending the hour-long documentary, Ross's story was presented as an example of college basketball's misplaced priorities: the low graduation rates, the push to keep players eligible at all costs, and the overemphasis on winning, not education. In the documentary, the CBS film showed Ross in class at Westside Preparatory School, a Chicago grammar school. The sight of the 6’ 9” Ross surrounded by a class of seventh-grade students was jarring, yet it dramatized how far college sports had fallen from its mission to educate its participants.⁴⁷

Amidst growing concern over the academic performance of college athletes, the NCAA passed Proposition 48 in 1983. Prop 48 stipulated that beginning with the

1986-1987 academic year, incoming student-athletes needed to attain a 2.0-grade point average in 11 core high school classes, while also scoring over a 700 on the SAT. Athletes who did not meet these standards would be held out of athletic competition during their freshman year. The debate over the proposed rule at the 1983 NCAA Convention centered on race. Presidents of historically black universities argued against the ruling on three counts: that the measure would negatively impact black student-athletes, standardized tests were culturally biased, and that HBCU presidents were left out of the process for designing the measure.⁴⁸ Famed Penn State football coach Joe Paterno, by contrast, fiercely defended the proposed position:

This isn't a race problem. For fifteen years we've had a race problem. We've raped a generation and a half of young, black athletes. We've taken kids and sold them on bouncing a ball, and running a football, and being able to do certain things athletically was going to be an end in itself. "We can't afford to do that to another generation. We can't afford to have kids coming into our institutions not being prepared to take advantages of what the great educational institutions in this country can do for them."⁴⁹

Newspapers debated the merits of Proposition 48 and its impact on African American athletes. For some black commentators, the rule was a step in the right direction. Barry Cooper of the *Orlando Sentinel* viewed the rule as a necessary evil for black students. Though many African American football and basketball players would be ruled ineligible through Proposition 48, Cooper argued that black athletes would work harder in their high school classrooms.⁵⁰ Columnist A.S. Doc Young of the black newspaper *Los Angeles Sentinel* believed opponents of the rule were underestimating the intellectual capacity of black athletes and listed numerous athletes, such as Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley and famed actor Paul Robeson, who were able to successfully blend academics and athletics. Young also used the

example of former Wake Forest basketball player Larry Harrison, who was 40 credits from graduation and worked a series of blue-collar jobs to make ends meet. Harrison blamed his academic failures on a lack of motivation. For Young, an athlete's work ethic could overcome any socioeconomic or racial barrier to success.⁵¹

Other black commentators saw Proposition 48 as a distraction from real reform. Columnist Carl Rowan argued Proposition 48 would not only bar student-athletes from competition, but would do little to end corruption in college sports. By rejecting a proposition that set a minimum grade point average for eligibility, Rowan believed NCAA schools were still watering down undergraduate education. According to Rowan, "The colleges chose to leave the eligibility standard at completion of a certain number of credit hours – which leaves the door open to all kinds of corner-cutting and fancy games with 'nothing' courses to keep prize pieces of beef on the gridiron and basketball court. The scandals will continue."⁵²

Len Bias and The Myth of the Black College Basketball Player

During the 1980s, news reports of scandals became commonplace within college athletics as schools repeatedly stepped over ethical boundaries to secure top talent. As education historian John R. Thelin noted, college sports scandals that were once relegated to the sports section of the newspaper became front-page stories.⁵³ As these scandals often revolved around black student-athletes, they helped to solidify the public image of the black student-athlete as illiterate and/or criminal. Former University of Georgia professor Jan Kemp was awarded \$2.5 million by a federal court after suing the school for her 1983 termination after complaining about special treatment given to football players.⁵⁴ Famously, the school's defense lawyer argued:

"We may not make a university student out of him, but if we can teach him to read and write, maybe he can work at the post office rather than as a garbage man when he gets through with his athletic career." A transcript released during the trial revealed a black administrator admitting the exploitation of black athletes, stating "there is no real sound academic reason for their being here other than to be utilized to produce income. They are used as a kind of raw material in the production of some goods to be sold...and they get nothing in return..."⁵⁵ The Georgia scandal exposed a program where it seemed acceptable that players were close to illiteracy. Another scandal, this one related to point shaving at Tulane University, revolved around a black player, John "Hot Rod" Williams, who had been admitted to the elite Southern private college despite having an SAT score of 470 and being unable to comprehend the test's instructions.⁵⁶ In response to the scandal, Tulane president Eamon Kelly took the drastic step of dropping the university's sponsorship of the sport.⁵⁷ A third scandal, this one at the storied basketball program at the University of San Francisco, featured a black player, star guard Quintin Dailey, who pled guilty to aggravated assault after being arrested for attempting to sexually assault a fellow student. An investigation by the university had additionally revealed Dailey had received illegal cash payments from a booster. That program too was shuttered.⁵⁸

These images of out-of-control or illiterate black athlete circulated alongside images of exceptional black athletes. *Los Angeles Sentinel* columnist A.S. Doc Young contrasted "Hot Rod" Williams and his Tulane teammates with the "classy" players from Georgetown who were lauded for their sportsmanship after losing the 1985 championship game. Young praised Georgetown coach John Thompson for

producing “student-athletes, not merely athletic stars,” and argued that Williams and his Tulane teammates had no business enrolling at the school.⁵⁹ Similarly, the next year, *New York Times* columnist Dave Anderson wrote while at the 1986 Final Four that although Duke University's basketball team lost the championship game to Louisville, "Duke won the admiration of anyone who understands that a college is an educational institution, not just another sports franchise" because it produced players who could speak articulately at the tournament's press conference. During the press conference, all five Duke starters, including three black players, praised the school's blending of academics and high-level athletics. In their embrace of academics, Anderson noted: "it was apparent that these five players were not representing Renegade State, where slam-dunking is considered a major." The well-spoken Duke players were compared to players from the 1984 Georgetown team who were "virtually incoherent" in post-game television interviews.⁶⁰

At the end of the 1985-86 basketball season, *Washington Post* writer Michael Wilbon referenced the Georgia scandal in praising a group of senior black basketball players close to getting their degree, saying "these six could compose the all-Jan Kemp team. None is a remedial reader." The players were portrayed as ideal student-athletes. Another player highlighted by Wilbon was Maryland guard Jeff Baxter, depicted as a serious student who despite almost transferring due to a lack of playing time, stayed at Maryland because academics were more important than basketball. Wilbon said Baxter was a public relations major currently on the job market, a focused young man who had learned from his mistakes after being suspended mid-season due to a curfew violation. Wilbon mentioned that Baxter was a frugal 21-year

old reluctant to buy a new car for his graduation due to cost.⁶¹ When compared with the illiterate players at Georgia or the point-shavers at Tulane, Baxter was the ideal student-athlete.

Reporters also portrayed Baxter's teammate Len Bias as meeting the ideal for a student-athlete, an athletic hero perfectly scripted to change the scandalous world of college basketball. Though a sure-fire NBA prospect during his junior season, Bias told *Baltimore Sun* writer Bill Free that he wanted to return for his senior season to get his degree. In analyzing Bias' work ethic, Free noted that Bias "enjoys doing things the hard way – he earns them." The *Sun* portrayed Bias as the kid who was willing to work for his first car, a talented artist who wanted to become an interior designer or commercial artist, and, according to Maryland athletic academic advisor Larry Roper, "a very bright student" who relished his time on the College Park campus. Though Bias himself admitted that he mostly received Bs and Cs due to his time on the road for basketball, he was quoted as wanting to return his senior year to improve his grade point average and get As in his art classes.⁶² News outlets frequently described Bias as surly and immature, but writers were also quick to point out that Bias had matured considerably while in at Maryland.⁶³ A *Washington Post* feature by reporter Sally Jenkins noted Bias' passion for fashion, his sense of humor, and his strong desire to graduate.⁶⁴ Don Markus of the *Baltimore Sun* revealed that Bias was a born-again Christian who spent time listening to gospel music and praying.⁶⁵ Even at his lowest moment, a 1986 episode where he was suspended alongside Baxter and another teammate for missing curfew, Bias was still compared favorably to other black athletes. In a column applauding Lefty Driesell for

disciplining Bias and his teammates, *Baltimore Sun* columnist Mike Littwin acknowledged the star had not broken any laws. According to Littwin, "These three didn't do anything terrible. They didn't say, steal a stereo [as had Chris Washburn, a North Carolina State star who was kicked off his team for stealing a stereo from a dorm⁶⁶], they weren't brought in by police. No coed filed a complaint. . . . they simply stayed out late, the same as you and I might have done in a similar circumstance."⁶⁷ Even when Bias made mistakes, reporters portrayed him as a college student still maturing, still prone to minor discretions — not as a criminal or illiterate black athlete threatening the reputation of college sports.

The celebration of black players such as Bias and Baxter helped to validate a sport plagued by constant scandal. The mostly glowing portrayals of Bias and Baxter obscured the ills of college basketball, including glaring academic issues at the University of Maryland. A good high school student, Baxter planned to become an accountant. However, Baxter would, under the guidance of Maryland's athletic department, be placed in the General Studies major along with many of his other teammates. Baxter's transcript was a mismatch of classes meant to keep Baxter eligible, but not providing any clear degree path or vocational direction.⁶⁸ Baxter eventually returned to school to finish his degree, but only after working for Federal Express after leaving school in the aftermath of Bias's death.⁶⁹ Though Bias talked frequently about his desire to graduate with a degree from the University of Maryland, and spoke of the importance of getting a degree at a time when the black athlete was the face of academic failure on many college campuses, his actions during the spring semester of his senior year suggested otherwise. In his final semester at

Maryland, Bias dropped out or failed every class he enrolled in, dropping his GPA to a 1.9. More importantly, Bias was still 21 hours away from graduation at the time of his death. While it was true that Bias was never arrested, he ultimately became yet another black athlete who failed to graduate from college, a victim of the same system which made him a star.

By the mid-80s, the sanctity of college basketball had become an issue of national concern. While universities were holding up a façade of articulate, well-behaved black players such as Len Bias to demonstrate that their athletes embraced the classic model of the student-athlete, news stories of black basketball players such as Kevin Ross, Quintin Dailey, and John “Hot Rod” Williams showed the reality that college basketball had become a sport where the pursuit of winning and television revenue outweighed the education of black athletes. Dailey and Williams also inaugurated a new stereotype — the black criminal-athlete.

Race, Drugs, and the Media

In the spring of 1986, news accounts lauded the “All-American” Bias. “Squeaky clean, surrounded by a tight-knit, religious family, and sporting a smiley, frank attitude, Bias was a welcome antidote to the slouchy, cap-on-sideways, rap-booming, crack-dealing black man who was becoming daily television fare,” wrote journalist Dan Baum.⁷⁰ Bias’s reputation carried over into the print coverage of the growing crack epidemic. Much of the coverage of crack reflected the growing anxieties of white elites about the drug’s spread to white suburbia and white urban neighborhoods. A June 16, 1986, *Newsweek* cover story, “Crack and Crime,” painted a bleak picture of an out of control epidemic. Police struggled to contain inner-city

warzones marked by crack houses, trigger-happy black and brown gang members, and drug dealers who utilized guerrilla tactics to keep law enforcement running in circles. Readers were warned “there are ominous signs that crack and rock dealers are expanding well beyond the inner city.”⁷¹ *Newsweek* introduced its readers to Art, a lawyer who lost his suburban San Francisco house and his family after picking up a \$1,000 a week crack habit.⁷² That same month, the *New York Times* alerted readers to the presence of crack cocaine on suburban Long Island. In response to the first Long Island murder linked to crack, one police officer lamented “it was only a matter of time until it came out here and it will only be a matter of time until it happens again.”⁷³ Some New Yorkers felt under siege from the influx of crack dealing in their neighborhoods. In a *New York Times* op-ed, two residents of Greenwich Village complained about the around-the-clock drug markets in around Washington Square Park, a gathering place in the neighborhood. Fed up with empty crack vials on their street and the exposure of their young sons to drug dealers, the residents petitioned for new city ordinances that would ban dealers from the neighborhoods they were arrested in.⁷⁴

In the pages of black newspapers, the black middle class also expressed fear of the growing crack epidemic. Like mainstream papers, black newspapers also depicted black drug dealers and crack as threats to social order. These papers emphasized the terrible violence crack brought to black neighborhoods. One sensationalized *New York Amsterdam News* cover story reported on a 16-year-old boy who killed his mother while high on crack; it was suspected the boy got the crack through his church or Christian school.⁷⁵ The *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported on the

sad tale of an 11-year-old drug dealer who was killed in a crack house by a 16-year-old co-dealer. Writers applauded efforts by black residents to take back their neighborhoods. In an extreme case, report Sheldon McCormick of the *Sentinel* showed approval for vigilante justice. McCormick retold the story of 71-year-old Murphy Pierson, a Los Angeles resident who chased off two drug dealers from his lawn with his shotgun. Though Pierson was later shot by police officers for pointing his gun in their direction after the incident, McCormick still praised him for stepping up to the gang members. As McCormick reasoned, “victims of murder, robbery, rape, aggravated assault and other felonies are increasing in the Black community as if in a battle zone of sports. The line must be drawn for these thugs and dope dealers of death and destruction.”⁷⁶

The call for heightened punishment for drug possession was widespread within the news media by the spring of 1986 and mirrored the Reagan Administration's aim for the War on Drugs. Before 1985, network news shows depicted cocaine as “an elite, white, suburban, ‘recreational’ drug.”⁷⁷ A drug once exclusively linked to wealth, journalists now warned that the drug was a growing problem for Middle America. Within this frame, the problem of cocaine addiction was treated as a public health issue, with stories focusing on the rehabilitation of cocaine abusers through therapy.⁷⁸

With the emergence of crack cocaine, this coverage shifted. Television networks begin regularly covering the crack crisis in May 1986, less than a month before that year's NBA draft.⁷⁹ As the crack crisis deepened, network news journalists framed crack users as violent threats to the social order.⁸⁰ News outlets

themselves perceived the threat so grave that they became involved in the policing of the crack threat, argued Reeves and Campbell. The networks, for example, frequently showed both surveillance video of crack crimes and footage of police raids. Such images reinforced to the viewing public that crack users posed a danger to society — and juxtaposed that assessment with the (at time implicit) notion, that users of powder cocaine were not a danger. Previous coverage of cocaine use had stressed the importance of drug treatment programs and education to overcome addiction; by the mid-1980s, coverage mostly supported police intervention to curtail the society-wide dangers posed by crack and crack users.⁸¹ Ultimately, these reports emphasized the threat crack and crack users posed to white suburbia:

After May 1986 the spread of cocaine was no longer primarily constructed as a cautionary tale of rot at the top or of middling individuals making bad choices. Instead, cocaine pollution animated siege narratives in which a color-coded mob of dehumanized inner-city criminals threatened the suburbs, small towns, schools, families, status, and authority of (white) Middle America.⁸²

Len Bias, Race, Drugs, and the NBA

By the 1986 NBA Draft, clean-cut black stars such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson had helped the league grow more popular and gain a foothold in white suburbia. However, even with the ascension of stars such as Jordan and Johnson, the stereotype that all black players used drugs persisted. The struggles of numerous NBA players with cocaine and other drugs went public on sports pages across the country during the mid-1980s. By 1983, the league and National Basketball Players Association agreed to a far-reaching plan to ban any player for life after a series of failed drug tests.⁸³ Though the policy was the strictest drug plan in place in American

professional sports, concerns remained. By 1986, several players, including Quintin Dailey, had relapsed after receiving treatment through the league. Walter Davis, the face of the Phoenix Suns franchise, entered drug treatment. After failing three drug tests, both Larry Drew of the Utah Jazz and New Jersey Nets star Michael Ray Richardson became the first two players permanently banned from the league for drug use.⁸⁴ Commentary about Drew and Richardson was harsh. Chico Renfroe of the *Atlanta Daily World*, a former Negro League Baseball player, lamented the sorry state of the black athlete as embodied by Drew and Richardson. "The Black professional athlete has had the good fortune of being a part of what this country stands for, opportunities to rise from the bottom and make it to the top," said Renfroe.

"Professional athletes can earn more money in one day than an ordinary working man makes in a year, yet players like John Drew and Michael Ray Richardson are willing to blow it all on drugs."⁸⁵ An editorial by the *New York Times* castigated Richardson, making him an example of the declining social standing of the American athlete. Pointing to Richardson's inability to stay clean, the *Times* argued, "perhaps it's good that kids no longer find so many heroes among athletes. Their random worship might easily select someone like Michael Ray Richardson of the New Jersey Nets."⁸⁶

News reports linking athletes to substance abuse and drug usage had become commonplace by 1986. After a surprising run to Super Bowl XX, the National Football League's New England Patriots shocked the league by becoming the first team in the league to adopt voluntary drug testing after several members admitted to having drug problems.⁸⁷ The previous year, National Hockey League star Pelle Lindbergh died after crashing his car while driving drunk. Major league baseball

suffered an embarrassing blow when an employee of the Pittsburgh Pirates was arrested and tried on drug trafficking charges. The subsequent trial forced some of the biggest names in the sport, such as New York Mets star Keith Hernandez, to testify under oath about their drug usage.⁸⁸ These and other substance abuse scandals threatened to topple an industry committed to making athlete-heroes. By the 1980s, sports had become big business. Thanks to an influx of revenue from television companies, athletes were receiving larger salaries.⁸⁹ But because of the scandals off the field, both fans and media pundits increasingly viewed athletes as pampered, immature man-children unworthy of being heroes and role models. As one public relations executive bemoaned, "Sports is not sports anymore. I'd advise the officials to get back to basics, to bring up the memories of the heroes of the past and try to build up new ones."⁹⁰

For the NBA, these problems were viewed through the prism of race. White suburban fans were embracing black superstars such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson. And as a clean-cut, born-again Christian without any major public transgressions, Len Bias seemed to be a perfect un-and-coming candidate who could help professional sports move away from the drug scandals of the mid-1980s. But, in the (white) public imagination, the league was a black league with black players, and that observation alone carried its own problems. *Chicago Tribune* writer Bob Sakamoto framed the problem in racial terms and linked the league to the problems of the urban core:

It comes as no surprise that basketball, the game of the playgrounds, and drugs, the bane of the streets, are often linked in an unsavory association. □

In the inner cities, creative young talents nickname themselves ‘Doctor’ and ‘Magic’ and perform aerial ballet while burned-out pushers and junkies wait in the streets for asphalt dreams to crumble into hard-core despair.

From this subculture has evolved pro basketball's greatest stars, and right along with it, the game's greatest fear. Everyone connected with the National Basketball Association, from an owner like Jerry Reinsdorf to a superstar like Larry Bird, and all the coaches and general managers in between are concerned about a white powder that could leave an indelible stain on their game.⁹¹

Even though Sakamoto's article did not explicitly mention race, race was the obvious subtext: the racialized logic of the league framed the article. Gary Bettman, the legal counsel for the NBA and the man in charge of the sport's drug program, had asked why the league drew so much scrutiny for drug abuse when drug use was widespread throughout society. In the article, Sakamoto replied, "the answer is that Bird, Julius Erving, Earvin Johnson, Kareem Abdul- Jabbar, Michael Jordan, Isiah Thomas and other players are role models, looked up to and emulated by millions of young fans."⁹² Save for Bird, all the other players listed were black. More than any other professional sports league, the NBA needed its black players to be role models and appeal to young fans both in the inner city as well as in suburbia. And Michael Jordan, for example, had gone on record about his responsibility as a role model and as an ambassador for the league: "I am conscious of my image. I am a respectable young man. I don't drink, I don't do drugs or any of that stuff and carry on till all hours of the night. I realize I have a certain responsibility. It's not easy at times because you have to watch yourself. But I wouldn't want it any other way."⁹³

Coverage before and after the 1986 NBA draft argued that Len Bias would be the league's next big superstar and ambassador. After the Celtics drafted Bias, Bob Maisel proclaimed the young star would help the Celtics defend their championship

during his rookie season. “Unless I’ve been watching the wrong player at Maryland for the last four years, Bias will make the Boston Celtics a better team from the first day he puts on that green uniform,” Maisel argued.⁹⁴ In his immediate post-draft analysis, the *Boston Globe*’s Bob Ryan celebrated the Bias pick, lauding Bias’ eagerness to learn from the Celtic veterans and take a role off the bench; Bias had the maturity and work ethic to help the team win right away.⁹⁵ A column written by the *Washington Post*’s Thomas Boswell after Bias’ dominant performance against top-ranked North Carolina in a 1986 game, summed up Bias’ potential as a pro and the reactions of most commentators: “Welcome to the world of Julius Erving, Larry Bird, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson and almost nobody else. The NBA shouldn’t draft this guy. It should hire armed guards to protect him until he can start filling arenas.” To Boswell and just about everyone else, Bias was the NBA’s next star attraction, a player capable of drawing crowds to every arena he played.⁹⁶ C. Fraser Smith said Bias “was the latest in basketball’s series of Horatio Alger stories: A black kid of modest means who works hard and makes millions in the NBA.”⁹⁷ By the morning of June 19, 1986, money, fame, endorsements, and perhaps a few championships with the Celtics all seemed likely in Bias’ future.

¹ Ivan Maisel, “Maryland,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 30, 1985, 76.

² University of Maryland Sports Information Department, “1985-1986 University of Maryland Men’s Basketball Media Guide (College Park, MD: University of Maryland Athletics), 1-3, 12.

³ C. Fraser Smith, *Lenny, Lefty, and the Chancellor: The Len Bias Tragedy and the Search for Reform in Big-Time College Basketball* (Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 1992), 102.

⁴ Weinreb, *Bigger Than The Game*, viii-ix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

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- ⁶ Ibid., 42.
- ⁷ Gray, *Watching Race*, 39.
- ⁸ Cole and King, “Representing Black Masculinity and Urban Possibilities”, 52.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid; Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors*, 225.
- ¹¹ J.A. Adande, “A Magic (and Bird) Moment,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 23, 1999; Ronald Smith, *Play-by-Play : Radio, Television, and Big-time College Sport* (Baltimore and London. : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 186; Murray Sperber, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education* (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 2000), 36.
- ¹² Sperber, *Beer and Circus*, 36.
- ¹³ Adande, “A Magic (and Bird) Moment,” Mar. 23, 1999.
- ¹⁴ Smith, *Play-by-Play*, 186.
- ¹⁵ Sperber, *Beer and Circus*, 36.
- ¹⁶ Gordon S. White, Jr., “N.C.A.A. Title Basketball Sold To CBS For \$48 Million,” *New York Times*, Mar. 5, 1981.
- ¹⁷ “\$96 Million for Basketball,” *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 1983.
- ¹⁸ Sperber, *Beer and Circus*, 36.
- ¹⁹ Forrest J. Berghorn, Norman R. Yetman, and William E. Hanna, “Racial Participation and Integration in Men’s and Women’s Intercollegiate Basketball: Continuity and Change, 1958-1985,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5, vol. 2 (1988): 110.
- ²⁰ University of Maryland Sports Information Department, “ 1985-1986 University of Maryland Men’s Basketball Media Guide”, 9.
- ²¹ Othello Harris, “African American Predominance in Sport,” in *Racism in College Athletics: The African American Athlete’s Experience*, ed. Dana Brooks and Ronald Althouse (Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, 2000), 43.
- ²² Smith, *Play-by-Play*, 183.
- ²³ William C. Rhoden, *\$40 Million Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 174.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 175.
- ²⁵ Sperber, *Beer and Circus*, 33.
- ²⁶ Richard L. Harp and Joseph B. McCullough, “The Myth of the College Basketball Coach,” *Journal of American Culture* 4, no. 3 (1981): 56; Peter A. French, *Ethics and College Sports: Ethics, Sports, and the University* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 32.

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- ²⁷ Rhoden, *\$40 Million Slaves*, 174
- ²⁸ Smith, *Lenny, Lefty, and the Chancellor*, 173.
- ²⁹ Ronald Smith, *Pay For Play: A History of Big-Time College Athletic Reform* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, Il: University of Illinois Press), 154; John Underwood, "The Writing Is On The Wall," *Sports Illustrated*, May 19, 1980, 41; King and Springwood, *Beyond the Cheers*, 103.
- ³⁰ Smith, *Lenny, Lefty, and the Chancellor*, 173.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 154.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 154-178.
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Chapter 2: The Death of Len Bias and the Escalating War on Drugs

The cocaine overdose of Len Bias on June 19, 1986 sent shockwaves through the sports world and beyond. His death even had an effect on lawmakers in Congress. On the day of Bias' death, Congressmen Steny Hoyer and Brian Donnelly eulogized Bias on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. Hoyer, a Democrat representing Prince George's County, home to both Bias and the University of Maryland, honored the local hero. Hoyer called Bias "one of the finest youths of promise from my county," a player who "carried the team on his broad shoulders" and "may well have been the best player in the history of the university."²⁹¹ Hoyer remembered Bias as a leader and role model:

As an alumna of the university, and an avid basketball fan, I came to know Len Bias. We all loved to watch Len play because of his great skill and style. And, as with everyone who knew him, I was impressed not only with athletic ability, but with his dedication, his leadership, and his good nature.

We are not always aware of what it takes to be the best at one's chosen profession. Many who have the talent to succeed do not. Success takes more than raw talent, it takes hard work, drive and dedication. Len Bias had all these qualities, they set him apart from so many other young men.

Everyone in Prince Georges County was so proud of Len's achievements. One of our own had reached the pinnacle.²⁹²

After reading the poem "To an Athlete Dying Young," Hoyer ended his time on the House floor by saying: "We will remember Len Bias, a youth of great promise, great achievement, and great character. Our hearts and our prayers are with his family and his many, many friends."²⁹³

Congressman Hoyer's tribute was followed by a tribute to Bias from Congressman Brian Donnelly of Massachusetts, a Democrat representing greater Boston. Speaking on behalf of Celtics fans, Donnelly offered condolences to Bias's family and also praised Bias for being a great role model:

Two days ago, Len Bias became a Boston Celtic and an adopted member of the city of Boston.

I would like to extend to the Bias family on behalf of millions of Celtics fans in Massachusetts our sincere condolences over this incredible tragedy. He was an exemplary young man who spent many of his summers in Massachusetts. A man with gifted athletic ability, but as important as that, more important than that, a very fine young man.

We extend our deepest sympathies to the family and his friends and his fans. We hope that the tradition of decency and the legacy of integrity that he leaves behind him will be remembered by all of us.²⁹⁴

That image of Bias as an all-American hero constructed by Hoyer and Donnelly on the floor of the House differed from the image of Bias by *Sports Illustrated* writer Jack McCallum in his June 30th cover story for the nation's top sports publication. The difference was that by the time McDallum wrote his piece, the news had broken that Bias heart attack had been cocaine-induced. The title of the *Sports Illustrated* story, "The Cruellest Thing Ever," was taken from a quote from Celtics star Larry Bird. Bird — and the magazine — emphasized the shock and sadness widespread in the NBA over both Bias's death and the circumstances of his demise. The opening spread of the *Sports Illustrated* article provided a stark contrast: a picture of a smiling Bias on draft day appeared above an image of Bias's body being transported on a stretcher to a coroner's van.²⁹⁵ In the article's lead, McCallum underscored Bias's glee in joining the Boston Celtics. "There wasn't a happier young athlete in America than Len Bias on the afternoon

of June 17,” McCallum began, as he talked about Bias’s lifelong desire to play for Boston. The team too was excited at landing a prospect who McCallum noted “had the talent and even the temperament...to become the perfect Celtic.²⁹⁶” McCallum then contrasted the image of a joyful Bias with the news that Bias death was caused by drugs:

About 40 hours later, Bias, 22, was dead of cardiorespiratory arrest brought on by the use of cocaine, according to information related by the state medical examiner to SI on Monday. The heart of the man described by former Duke forward Mark Alarie as "the best athlete I've ever seen, and that includes Michael Jordan," had failed him. So, evidently, had Bias's good judgment, for he had been known as someone who avoided drugs. How to explain the unspeakable irony of a young man dying with his greatest dreams freshly tucked away in his pocket? "It's the cruelest thing I've ever heard," said Bird from his home in French Lick, Ind.²⁹⁷

In trying to make sense of Bias’s death, McCallum painted a picture of a young athlete who seemingly had two personalities. There was the figure of the All-American Len Bias, an amazing athlete who was a born-again Christian, a talented artist, and a role model for young blacks in Washington D.C.²⁹⁸ But there was also another Len Bias, described McCallum, “a complex man-child who struggled with his notoriety,” who often threw elbows and taunts at opponents.²⁹⁹ McCallum also mentioned more damning information and rumors about Bias that surfaced in the week after his death: that Bias had flunked out of school the previous semester, that he might have visited an open-air Washington D.C. drug market the night of his death, and, most critically, that he might have dabbled in crack cocaine, as he noted, a cheap form of the drug which circulated around black neighborhoods.³⁰⁰

Journalists transformed Bias into a racialized symbol of drugs, illiteracy, and misplaced moral values who represented the problems of American sport.³⁰¹

According to historian Theresa Runstedtler, Len Bias “was the epitome of the American Dream, a story of racial uplift through intercollegiate athletics” during his playing career.³⁰² Before his death, Bias was on track to becoming a young, black basketball superstar who would have been a household name in white suburban America. Instead, through his death, Bias became yet another black criminal figure that posed a threat to sports and white suburbia. Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell noted that Bias became the ultimate cautionary tale, a figure that had represented both the promise of American society and the ills of the inner city.³⁰³

Media commentators pivoted on what they had said about Bias before he died. After his death he became the perfect symbol for the escalating crises in American sport and American society and the need for a War on Drugs. As Runstedtler observed, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, with its focus on punitive punishment crack cocaine dealers and users, reflected in part the anti-crack hysteria found in mainstream news outlets as well as in black print publications.³⁰⁴

In their study of major network news reports during the War on Drugs, Reeves and Campbell noted that journalists transformed the Bias scandal into a social drama that became the key reference that solidified public support for a War on Drugs and necessitated calls for reform in collegiate and professional sports.³⁰⁵ Congressional leaders too co-opted Bias’s tragic legacy to push through legislation aimed at satisfying the public’s desire to halt the use and sale of cocaine. In his study of the rhetoric used during the War on Drugs, researcher William N. Elwood argued that the media and politicians transformed Bias into a martyr for the anti-drug crusade. Elwood noted that Bias was a perfect symbol for the War on Drugs: a young, black male who excelled in

athletics and did not conform at all to the stereotype of the out-of-control black gang member. Through his death, Bias demonstrated that drugs threatened to spread throughout all levels of American society, threatening even “safe” neighborhoods and the middle class. Bias also helped to racialize the issue of drugs without relying on the imagery of the black criminal: “although his persona does not conform to the stereotype of urban minority drug addict, his race preserves the stigma of Otherness, not white, that is attached to “the drug problem.”³⁰⁶

To an Athlete Dying Young

News of Len Bias’ death transcended the world of sports and made front-page headlines around the country. The day he died, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a UPI wire story on its front page titled “Celtics Draftee Len Bias Dies of Heart Attack” with a subtitle mentioning Bias recently passed a physical and a photo of Bias on draft day.³⁰⁷ The article noted that Bias had passed a test for Marfan’s Syndrome, a genetic disorder that led to heart trouble and caused the sudden death of two other Maryland basketball players in the past decade, but the story did not speculate on drug use.³⁰⁸ The news of Bias’s death came as such a shock that the *Times* omitted pulling an article in the same section titled “Why Celtics are Biased about Bias,” a sports story which summarized the Celtics’ expectations for the young star.³⁰⁹

The day after Bias died, journalists covered the public reaction to the news. In an article titled “They Went to Cole To Light a Candle,” Tony Kornheiser of the *Washington Post* told of sitting in Cole Field House as University of Maryland students flocked to the arena to pay tribute to their hero: “They were pilgrims, and this was a shrine. They had come because a brother in arms was shockingly and too quickly gone.

Even if they hadn't known him, he had touched them, and in that way that sudden death confuses us and promotes us to grieve for ourselves as much as the departed, they didn't know what else to do but come here, to his stage, to his special place."³¹⁰ Bob Ryan of the *Boston Globe* reported that Bias' death hit the Boston Celtics hard as "he already had been adopted as a Celtic."³¹¹ The *Boston Globe's* Nell Singelais compared Bias' death to the 1955 sudden death of beloved Boston Red Sox star Harry Agganis.³¹² The *Baltimore Sun's* Bill Free interviewed Bias' former teammates. Adrian Branch, a former Maryland star, suggested that society had lost a role model: "I think Lenny was on his way to being an American hero like Martin Luther King and Babe Ruth. I know he was never too proud to stoop and talk to the little children, the sick, the afflicted, or anybody."³¹³

Searching for the Real Len Bias

The growing suspicion that Bias's fatal heart attack was cocaine-related challenged Brach's portrayal of Bias as an All-American hero. The night of Bias's death, local television station WDVM in Washington D.C. began to report that pre-autopsy test results suggested that Bias had cocaine in his system.³¹⁴ On WRC-TV's 11 pm news program, anchor Dave Marash led the telecast with: "Tonight, Prince George's County Police are suggesting it might not have been just a heart attack that killed University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias earlier today."³¹⁵ With footage of county coroner's employees placing Bias's corpse, covered in white cloth, into a van, co-anchor Jim Vance told viewers that Bias's death was being ruled suspicious by investigators, as they believed cocaine might have caused the star's death. A reporter stationed at a local police station revealed the beginnings of a criminal investigation into the matter.³¹⁶ On June 20th, front-page stories in the *Baltimore Sun*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and

Boston Globe all mentioned that cocaine could have been a cause of Bias's death.³¹⁷ Sally Jenkins, a *Washington Post* sports reporter who extensively covered the Bias scandal, observed that the revelation that Bias might have done drugs turned the story of his death into a search for what killed him: "We had it in the very first story....we just didn't know anything about why. Was it a first-time deal? Did he have a heart problem? At that point, people just didn't feel you were dead of cocaine use.... could cocaine really kill a six-foot-eight, two-hundred-pound guy?"³¹⁸ Writers used Bias's death to explore cocaine and its deadly effect, explaining to readers that cocaine could have killed Bias, but that the star also could have had an underlying heart problem.³¹⁹

Even after the news of Bias's possible drug use broke, some news organizations still eulogized Bias as a hero. A *Baltimore Sun* editorial mourned Bias's untimely demise and celebrated the fallen star as a student-athlete. The editorial labeled Bias's death "the ultimate tragedy," a particular cruel twist of fate considering he died less than 48 hours after the NBA Draft: "one day after signing a rich contract to play with the champion Boston Celtics a lean, superbly healthy and fit 22-year-old athlete drops dead — as though of a heart attack, that grim scourge of the elderly, the overweight and the sedentary."³²⁰

The editorial celebrated Bias's legacy, calling him "a golden boy" who wrote poetry and was "a young gentleman as well as a standout on the court."³²¹ In the *Washington Post*, a front-page article titled "Landover Loses 'The Man': Neighborhood Tries to Grasp Athlete's Death" discussed the impact Bias's early death had on his Landover community. The article appeared below a picture showing medical examiner staffers removing Bias's body from Leland Memorial Hospital, as a high school

classmate of Bias looked on. Stunned Landover residents tried to process Bias's death. A former coach of Bias lamented: "I can't see why we would lose someone like this, someone so important to us."³²² A neighbor described Bias as "an All-American kid" with close ties to his parents.³²³ Writers Ed Bruske and Patrice Gaines-Carter portrayed as Bias as a community-oriented young man who still stopped by his old high school on occasion and who faithfully attended his childhood church. They also compared Bias to famed boxing champ Sugar Ray Leonard, also a native of Prince George's County. A spokesperson for Prince George's school district summed up the pain felt by many black residents in the area: "There was someone for our own community who was destined for glory, and he was on the brink of attaining what few people ever achieve. And suddenly he's dead."³²⁴

The next day, a *Washington Post* editorial portrayed Bias as "the quintessential local boy makes good."³²⁵ It emphasized his work ethic and his journey from lower-middle class Landover to collegiate stardom. It praised him for being an athlete on track to graduate, a born-again Christian who was "a spiritual leader of his team," and as "a good kid and gentlemen" whose worst college mistake was once skipping curfew.³²⁶ The editorial referenced athletes such as "Hot Rod" Williams, Kevin Ross, and Quintin Dailey, though not explicitly named, as the out-of-control student-athletes ruining college sports. On the other hand, the *Post* presented Bias as an antidote to the criminalized student-athlete.³²⁷

As the media coverage over Bias's death intensified, more unflattering details about Bias's personal life came to light. In a *Boston Globe* article titled "Out of Context: Might exuberance have led Bias astray?" reporter John Powers painted a complex picture

of Bias.³²⁸ On the one hand, Bias “was the oldest child of a God-fearing middle-class family” who “had managed to avoid the snares that can trap a gifted basketball player from a major college program near a big city.”³²⁹ Quotes from head coach Lefty Driesell, the campus police chief, and athletic director Dick Dull defended Bias as a good kid and committed Christian who made a one-time mistake with cocaine. But Bias’s high school coach, Bob Wagner, acknowledged Bias could easily give into peer pressure: “Whatever Leonard decided to do, he’d be the best at it. If you put him with a bunch of bums, he’d be the best bum. Put him in with good people, and he’d be the best there, too. That’s why we tried to put good people around him.” Powers then pointed out Bias had been seen “with a questionable campus outsider” the night of his death — an outsider who drove a Mercedes and seemed to be familiar with drug areas in NE Washington D.C.³³⁰ This outsider was Brian Tribble, a friend of Bias’s who supposedly accompanied the star to a Washington D.C. neighborhood known for drug trafficking the night of his death. As Power concluded, “the Leonard Bias people say they knew was not a cocaine user. But for one night, circumstances indicate he might have been.”³³¹

Bad Company

In tying Bias to Brian Tribble, journalists linked Bias to the inner-city drug trade in Washington D.C. The link to Tribble tarnished Bias’s squeaky-clean image. Biographer Lewis Cole noted this rapid change in how Bias was evaluated: “As more information comes out, Leonard’s public image change[d] dramatically: a superstar on Wednesday; tragic victim on Thursday; dumb innocent on Friday; frequenter of a D.C. ‘drug bazar,’ and dealer’s best friend on Saturday.”³³² According to Cole, Tribble was the perfect foil for the morality play that was the Len Bias death scandal. Tribble was the

mysterious drug dealer who destroyed his friend's chance at NBA stardom.³³³ Reports surfaced that Tribble was a person of interest in the case, along with Bias's teammates Terry Long and David Gregg. One report on WRC-TV in Washington, D.C. displayed athletic department photos of Long and Gregg, but could only show "a black shadowy silhouette" in place of Tribble.³³⁴ A *Washington Post* article described Tribble as "a college dropout" whose basketball career ended after a motorcycle accident.³³⁵ Tribble and Bias were shown to have "a relationship based on an attraction to each other's talents and possessions:" Bias was impressed by Tribble's silver Mercedes, while the ex-basketball player Tribble wanted to hang around a bonafide superstar athlete.³³⁶ The Mercedes, as well as Tribble's luxury apartment near campus, and frequent trips to a nightclub in inner city D.C., became symbols of Tribble's supposed life as a drug dealer.³³⁷ Journalists framed Tribble as a hanger-on, a person who a Bias relative said was unfamiliar to anyone in the family, but a close enough friend with Bias that they frequented a nightclub together.³³⁸ As Bias biographer Lewis Cole noted, Tribble became "a phantom figure of evil from urban life," a character who would take the brunt of the blame for Bias's death.³³⁹

While Tribble emerged as the villain in the Bias scandal, Bias's reputation did not emerge unscathed. Bias too came to represent the black criminal student-athlete. As Theresa Runstedtler emphasized, Bias's perceived ties to Tribble and the drug trade turned him into "a racialized threat of contamination" that threatened to facilitate the possible spread of cocaine into college campuses.³⁴⁰ This new image of Bias came to focus through the news that Prince George's County State's Attorney Arthur Marshall was launching a grand jury investigation not only into Len Bias's death but also drug use

within Maryland's athletic department and the campus as a whole.³⁴¹ The *Baltimore Sun* applauded news of the grand jury investigation; it hoped the probe would force the university and its chancellor John Slaughter to take tough measures to ensure a safe and drug-free College Park campus.³⁴² In short order, Bias had come to represent — along with other Maryland athletes such as Gregg and Long — the drug threat encroaching on campuses and suburban white spaces.

Not Making the Grade

Bias's death prompted reporters to investigate Maryland's athletic department. As *Baltimore Sun* writer Mark Hyman observed in a 1989 book about the scandal, journalists shifted from searching for clues into Bias's death to investigating the institutions that shaped Bias's life.³⁴³ Locked into a fierce battle for local readership and political clout, reporters from the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun* competed for scoops exposing problems at the University Maryland.³⁴⁴ These newspapers reported that the University of Maryland was failing to properly educate its student-athletes. Bias and the mostly-black men's basketball team became not just the local symbol for these struggles but the national one as well.

A front-page *Washington Post* story on June 25th highlighted the abysmal academic performances of Maryland student-athletes. Five out of the 12 players on Maryland's basketball team had flunked out of school during the 1985-86 academic year, including Len Bias. Ten percent of student-athletes flunked out each semester, but were often allowed back to the university without missing games. The basketball team's cumulative GPA hovered under a 2.0.³⁴⁵ Other damning reports followed. The *Baltimore Sun* found that only a third of the team's basketball players graduated.³⁴⁶ Another *Sun*

report discovered that while the average SAT score for University of Maryland students was 1008, the average score of basketball players was 670. Half of the basketball team had not chosen a major, including those players who were juniors and seniors.³⁴⁷ Amid the controversy, athletic academic counselor Wendy Whittemore resigned from the athletic department after clashing with Lefty Driesell over the importance of academics.³⁴⁸

News of the academic struggles of Bias and other players at the University of Maryland brought increased scrutiny to the school, the Maryland athletic department, and the institution of major college sports. The “basic education” of student-athletes, particularly black student-athletes, became the focus of this outcry; education was seen as a deterrent for drug usage.³⁴⁹ Maryland coach Lefty Driesell and the Maryland athletic department fielded criticism for not caring about the education of players. The *Washington Post* questioned rather Driesell and other Maryland staffers had done their best to help student-athletes “develop a capacity to make the right choices.”³⁵⁰ The *Baltimore Sun* chastised the athletic department for scheduling road games that took players away from the classroom.³⁵¹ Driesell’s main crime became not educating his black players. Across these stories, reporters linked Bias’ failure to make good decisions to the prior bad acts of other black Maryland players such as Adrian Branch, Steve Rivers, and John Lucas, who all had a history of drug use.³⁵² According to Reeves and Campbell, journalists framed Driesell as symbol “for the failure of white patriarchy” to properly educate his players.³⁵³

In promoting education through sport, commentators rarely challenged a college sports system that relied on black athletic talent but failed to offer meaningful degrees or

fairly compensate athletes for what was in essence their labor. The onus of reform was placed on individual actors, such as Driesell, rather than on a wholesale change of the amateur system.³⁵⁴ The *Washington Post* wrote that “athletics contribute a great deal to the life and prestige of a university,” but stressed the need for a balance between sports and education.³⁵⁵ The *Baltimore Sun* argued that colleges would do a disservice to black student-athletes if they left them without an education and in essence condemned them to a life back in those same ghettos and contended that college athletics offered solace for black athletes from violent neighborhoods.³⁵⁶ And the *Sun* editorial board observed that a college sport program that “takes youths away from such places, offers them civilizing support in return for their providing excellent, wholesome entertainment on court or field, serves a noble purpose even if it does not produce candidates for the learned professions.”³⁵⁷ Similarly, the *New York Times* argued that “semi-pro college teams ought to pay their players and let those who want to study pursue a compatible academic schedule.” But it did not advocate for totally abandoning the amateur system.³⁵⁸ Instead, the *Times* merely called for student-athletes to have the opportunity for both academic and athletic pursuits.³⁵⁹

Role Models Wanted

Sports writers and columnists used the growing Bias scandal to signal problems with the tendency to create heroes out of athletes. Months removed from writing his glowing column deeming Bias ready for NBA stardom, *Washington Post* columnist Thomas Boswell penned a column attacking the hero-making process within sports. He blamed the death of a squeaky-clean athlete like Bias on a system that coddled athletes and characterized superficial public acts of goodness as heroism: “Too often, athletes are

given an adult's body, an adult's desires and a child's morals. Instead of moderation, they learn the binge mentality of abstinence in season, then party-hearty. Just don't get caught or embarrass us.”³⁶⁰ Stanley Robinson of the black-owned *Los Angeles Sentinel* suggested young athletes in the 1980s such as Bias did not have strong role models to guide them and mold them into pillars of their community.³⁶¹ Howard Means of the *Orlando Sentinel* thought Bias’s death was a symptomatic of a corrupt college sports system that constantly produced athletic heroes who were unable to cope with real-life responsibilities:

As always, this whole business of "college athletics" would be grimly laughable, laughable if it didn't so often hand young men a golden key to life -- Bias was staring down the barrel of a million dollars a year -- without giving them the tools to cope with any form of adult life, much less the exalted realm they are about to enter.

Shed a tear for Bias; however, he died, he deserves it. He was a wonderful basketball player. But weep, too, for the system that has spawned a hundred Biases.

It's an infinitely long way up to the pedestals college athletics builds for its heroes. Some day we adorers should ask -- seriously ask -- why so many of the heroes fall off the pedestals, with such horrible results.³⁶²

Sounding the Alarm

In the weeks following Bias’s death, commentators began referencing Bias as an anti-drug symbol even beyond the arena of sports. In their June 21st editorial on Bias, the *Washington Post* hoped Bias’s story would become a lesson for both young fans of Bias and their mentors: “If it develops that drugs killed Len Bias, we hope that the warning reaches all of the youths who admired and emulated him and all of the adults who influence the lives of those like him.”³⁶³ The *Baltimore Sun*’s Mike Littwin saw Bias’s

death as a wake-up call for American society. To Littwin, it did not matter that Len Bias was the great, All-American hero who friends and family considered to be “a caring person.” It did not matter that a Prince Georges’ county official had openly speculated that “drug use seemed inconsistent with Bias’s upbringing and lifestyle.” For Littwin, Bias was a reminder “that drug use has transcended upbringings and lifestyles. Drug use is everywhere in our society.”³⁶⁴ Journalists felt an obligation to warn the public about the growing crisis of drugs in American society. Ernest B. Furgurson, the Washington Bureau Chief for the *Baltimore Sun*, defended the saturated coverage of Bias, suggesting that the overkill could save lives. Furgurson believed Bias’s story could be effective as a cautionary tale: “If Len Bias’s death provokes enough overkill – enough emotion and publicity to save nameless, talentless, futureless boys from dying – the world will be better off than if he had gone on to be the most fabulous star in basketball history.”³⁶⁵

The warnings came to focus on crack cocaine after one local television station in Washington D.C reported that Bias smoked crack before his death, and then the Sports Illustrated cover story repeated the rumor.³⁶⁶ Columnist Sydney Schanberg of *Newsday* wanted Bias’s death to resonate with young readers, especially with the rise of crack cocaine: “Will the publicity frighten kids away from ‘The White Lady’? Maybe only until the fuss dies down. Which is why we can't write enough stories about this powder that destroys - and about its distilled, hardened version known as crack that is purer and even more lethal.”³⁶⁷ Schanberg viewed cocaine as a national emergency, with the drug spreading to neighborhoods of every class. Schanberg particularly worried about crack cocaine, because it was so easy to make and sell: “For all the talk about heightened law enforcement, dealers in crack are this city's fastest growing population group - for they

know that in selling cocaine in this chunk form, they can carry small amounts, make big money and face shorter prison sentences than for selling the powder because the penalties are based on drug weights.³⁶⁸

On June 24, Maryland medical examiner John E. Smialek confirmed that Bias died of a cocaine overdose. According to Smialek, Bias “was a very healthy individual” who did not have an underlying heart condition and took a pure, “dealer-level quality” form of the drug.³⁶⁹ Smialek went on to suggest that his office had found no evidence that Bias had previously used drugs, and said he was a first-time drug user. While Smialek believed had Bias snorted cocaine, a toxicologist for the Maryland’s medical examiner’s office said crack usage by Bias could not be ruled out.³⁷⁰ Confusion over the autopsy results lingered over the next month, and false information became part of the narrative about Bias’ death.³⁷¹ Roughly a week after his initial announcement, Smialek revealed that tests on Bias’ heart revealed damage consistent with previous cocaine usage.³⁷² Later in July, an assistant medical examiner announced that Bias died from smoking freebase, a solid form of cocaine much like crack.³⁷³ In response to that announcement, Smialek re-asserted that there was no evidence of freebase in Bias’s system.³⁷⁴

With the official report that Bias died of a drug overdose, he became the ultimate symbol of cocaine’s deadliness. “Don’t Ignore Bias’s Warning,” screamed a headline in Florida’s *Sun Sentinel*.³⁷⁵ “A Homicidal Drug,” exclaimed the *Boston Globe*.³⁷⁶ “Cocaine Killed Len Bias, and It Can Kill You as Well,” warned the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.³⁷⁷ Editorials called for local action. The *Baltimore Sun* used Bias’s death to address a growing drug problem among the state’s teenagers: “It is up to the authorities to determine how Len Bias obtained the drug which killed him. It is up to all the people of

Maryland to learn how to stop drugs from finding their way into the hands of the state's young people, and to prevent the spread of a deadly intoxication to new young victims."³⁷⁸

The myth that Bias died after the first time using crack — a notion early supported by information from the medical's examiner — became an important narrative in the national political push for a War on Drugs.³⁷⁹ The simplified narrative of Bias's death highlighted the threat of drugs to suburban audiences, as argued by Theresa Runstedtler: "If cocaine could kill Bias, a young, elite intercollegiate athlete, after just one night of celebration, then cocaine could kill anyone."³⁸⁰ According to Michael Weinreb, the news, later corrected, that Bias's fatal heart attack stemmed from crack use played a vital role in feeding the growing mass hysteria over crack cocaine usage.³⁸¹

Bias's death became the reason for a renewed, spirited fight in the pages of the press against drugs and drug dealers. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* thought Bias's death offered the young a tragic lesson — "your first sniff can very well be your last" — and applauded Arthur Marshall's efforts to seek manslaughter charges for the supplier of Bias's fatal dose.³⁸² *The Hutchinson (Kansas) News* not only wanted Bias's supplier to be punished, but pushed for an all-out war on drugs. The paper called for military intervention to stop the flow of drugs into the country, more arrests of drug dealers at home, more treatment centers, and a change to the societal acceptance of drugs.³⁸³

Becoming the Other

News of Bias's cocaine use transformed Bias into a racialized symbol of deviancy; such an about-face highlighted the fluidity of racial constructions of African American male athletes.. While certain black athletes such as Michael Jordan and Magic

Johnson have typically been referenced as race-neutral symbols of the American Dream, noted cultural scholars David Andrews and C.L. Cole, even Jordan and Johnson could become symbols of black deviancy during times of scandal.³⁸⁴ That is what happened in the case of Bias. Lewis Cole observed that believed Bias's drug usage caused him to be viewed within the media as "hypocritical, a liar, and trickster".³⁸⁵ Bias became a the target of derision for a number of commentators: Raymond Coffey of the *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, argued that the University of Maryland's decision to retire Bias's jersey number was foolish: "they didn't retire his jersey when he twice won player of the year honors in the Atlantic Coast Conference. They waited until he was a dead coke snorter whose fate brought into question their own stewardship. Len Bias should be no one's hero. The only enduring example he set for anyone was a horrifying bad one."³⁸⁶ Clarence Page of the *Chicago Tribune*, called Bias and other drug users, "losers." He also linked Bias to "the modern athlete" as typified by NBA players such as Michael Ray Richardson, Quintin Dailey, John Drew, Walter Davis, and John Lucas; all of whom were black players either in rehab or suspended by the league for drug usage.³⁸⁷ In Page's mind, Bias belonged to this group of black athletes that symbolized the decaying morals of professional sports.

Just as Bias came to symbolize the deviant black athlete, Brian Tribble became the symbol of the black drug dealer. Even he castigated Bias for being a "deep pocketed dummy," *Washington Post* columnist Courtland Milloy also painted a picture of the unscrupulous drug dealer out to entrap professional athletes into a cycle of drug dependency:

The people in the drug business thought Len Bias was stupid. In a world where dope dealers send women with ounces of cocaine to party with the stars and

where it is standard operating procedure to give an athlete his first hit -- let him get a taste for the stuff and then start selling it at higher and higher prices -- Bias was just another chump waiting for his pockets to be picked.³⁸⁸

Newspaper columnist Jimmy Breslin used the imagery of the black drug dealer as a source of concern in a man-on-the street interview with a crack addict after Bias's death. Breslin was disturbed by how deeply entrenched crack seemed to be in a black Queens neighborhood, by how cheap the drug was, by the violence attached to the drug trade, and by fact that Bias's death could not persuade the addict to quit. As Breslin pointed out, it would be hard to root out crack from the inner city, especially black crack kingpins employed so many people and "the crack dealers seemed to be the only large, successful, black-owned-and-operated business on the boulevard."³⁸⁹ While not directly referencing Tribble, black columnist Carl T. Rowan believed Bias fell victim to a worsening drug culture ran by relentless and predatory drug dealers. Rowan noted that while formerly confined to black neighborhoods, these dealers were beginning to infiltrate professional and suburban spaces. To Rowan, Bias's death alerted the nation to the rising power of drug dealers. "Every time they 'get' one, a lot more dies than a Lenny Bias," said Rowan.³⁹⁰ "The heart of a great nation becomes sicker and sicker. The ongoing tragedy is that we can't make the students and other potential victims understand what is at stake: and no one has been able to blunt the onslaught of the traffickers."³⁹¹

The Death of Don Rogers and the Growing Crisis in American Sports

As the press searched for answers to understand why Len Bias ingested cocaine, a second young African American athlete in peak physical condition suddenly dropped dead. On June 27th, professional football player Don Rogers, an All-Pro defensive back for the Cleveland Browns, succumbed to a heart attack in his hometown of Sacramento,

California. The 23-year old Rogers died on the same day he was due to marry his college girlfriend. Though there was no initial sign of drug usage, there were concerns that Rogers died from an overdose like Bias. According to Rogers' teammate Bob Golic, "everybody's going to think about the Len Bias thing."³⁹² Rogers' neighbor, Cleveland Indians baseball star Otis Nixon, did not know the fallen star to be a drug user and suggested that if Rogers did die of an overdose, "it was a first time drug thing, like Lenny Bias."³⁹³ Even before autopsy results were revealed, *Los Angeles Times* sports editor Bill Dwyre feared the worst. Dwyre argued that problem of sports and drugs had reached an epidemic level, justifying the rumors and whispers around Rogers' death. Dwyre lamented the damage drug-addled athletes were doing to American sports: "Drugs are making a mess of sports. They are taking all the fun out of it. The dealers who give the stuff to the athletes and the athletes who take it are turning an American character builder into an American character flaw. The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat are becoming the joy of not caring."³⁹⁴ The next day, Dwyre's concerns turned out to be justified, as a pathologist from Sacramento's coroner's office announced that Rogers' cause of death had likely been a drug overdose.³⁹⁵

According to Reeves and Campbell, Rogers' death, so close to Bias's overdose, triggered action; anti-drug efforts in sports escalated. The deaths of Bias and Rogers "precipitated a sense of escalating chaos, a sense that the nonsense had, indeed, gotten out of hand and measures needed to be taken to restore order and normalcy—and control by the power bloc."³⁹⁶ Print coverage tied Bias and Rogers together, twin casualties in an intensifying and — to date, seemingly futile — War on Drugs. "Drug Deaths: A Killer Stalks the Locker Room," said the *U.S. News and World Report*.³⁹⁷ "A Killer Drug

Strikes Again,” *Sport Illustrated* exclaimed in its article about Rogers’ death.³⁹⁸ The lead of the *Sports Illustrated* story by Armen Keteyian and Bruce Selcraig underscored the growing crisis:

After both deaths, the same first response came from family, teammates, coaches and close friends: "No, it could never be drugs. He didn't take drugs, wouldn't take drugs, never took drugs. Never, never...."

After both deaths, nearly the same second response came from people who never knew either man, medical examiners a continent apart: "Cocaine poisoning, cocaine in a lethal dose...."

And after both deaths, the next response that came from just about everybody else was also the same—shock, anger, grief, a sense of resignation. Cocaine had put another talented and young athlete in his grave.³⁹⁹

Tony Elliott, a former NFL star turned addiction specialist who was once suspended from the league due to his own cocaine habit, sensed a crisis brewing within American sport. Referencing Bias and Rogers, Elliott feared that “the ultimate tragedy of their deaths will be if we, as athletes and as a society, treat their deaths as isolated incidents. With millions of high school athletes abusing chemicals and alcohol, we are facing a monster near victory.”⁴⁰⁰

Print journalists and columnists used the deaths of Rogers and Bias to call for change with American professional sports. The *Los Angeles Times* editorial board called for mandatory drug testing in professional sports, castigating player unions for preventing such testing in the past:

If nothing else, enlightened self-interest should now lead the labor unions that represent professional athletes to rethink their position on mandatory drug-testing. Some have tried to use it as a bargaining chip in contract talks with management, but the problem is too serious for such cavalier treatment. Unless the unions voluntarily do more to prevent drug abuse by athletes, as the professional tennis players' association does, they may find mandatory drug-testing imposed on them.⁴⁰¹

In a *New York Times* op-ed, Armand Nicholi, Jr., a team doctor for the NFL's New England Patriots, also called for mandatory drug testing. Nicholi believed the death of Bias and Rogers underscored both the problem of drugs in professional sports as well as a growing problem of drugs in American society. According to Nicholi, wealthy professional athletes with plenty of leisure time between seasons were perfect targets for predatory drug dealers. He suggested a comprehensive drug program for the NFL that included mandatory random drug testing, education, drug treatment programs, and penalties for those who relapsed or refused to take part in the program. Nicholi suggested that opposition to drug testing on the grounds of civil liberty was secondary to the curtailing the growing drug epidemic: "we now confront a national emergency — an epidemic that is life-threatening and contagious in the sense that social contagion is no less devastating to its effect on human life. During such epidemics, we have Federal and state public health laws that override individual rights for the protection of society."⁴⁰²

Sports Illustrated writer Rick Reilly highlighted the growing crisis in drugs and sports in the magazine's July 14th issue. On the first page of the article, a program from Len Bias' funeral was shown alongside Don Rogers' death certificate and a collage of headlines stamped "Cocaine" in red letters — headlines about the Pittsburgh drug crisis, the NBA's banishment of Michael Ray Richardson and the admission from baseball star Steve Howe that he snorted cocaine during games. Echoing the National Institute on Drug Abuse's (NIDA) advertising campaign against cocaine use, Reilly starkly warned: "you want to learn a lesson, learn this: The Big Lie is over. Sports can't bury its head in the sand anymore; there are too many bodies buried there. Good young men are stacking up, and we're stumbling over them."⁴⁰³ Reilly painted an ominous picture of an

escalating crisis. Los Angeles Raiders owner Al Davis suggested "we're close to genocide of our young people."⁴⁰⁴ With stats from the NIDA, Reilly pointed out that 5 to 6 million Americans regularly used cocaine, with 45 metric tons of cocaine consumed a year.

Reilly urged sports leagues and colleges to get aggressive. He recommended that sports programs keep a closer eye on their top athletes, and athletes needed protection from street culture and the black drug dealer. Reilly tied Bias's and Rogers' deaths to "some dubious acquaintances" such as Brian Tribble.⁴⁰⁵ Such connections could be severed, according to Reilly, but teams needed to bring in psychologists and counselors to handle the pressures of big-time athletics and to help the athletes avoid negative peer pressure.⁴⁰⁶ Reilly also suggested a life-skills education track for college athlete. In teaching athletes citizenship skills, Reilly thought the drug problem could be solved:

make every collegiate freshman take Real Life 101. Give him the first year off from sports to find out where the library is and then teach him how to write a check, conduct an interview, use the right fork, fend off dealers, and like himself. Insist on progress toward a degree. Abolish athletic dorms that keep him isolated and typecast and targeted.⁴⁰⁷

Finally, Reilly called for a drug testing program with punitive punishments: "Testing should be tied to rehabilitation programs, but it should also have teeth. If a college kid fails a test once, for instance, his season is over—not his scholarship, his season—and into rehab he goes. If one member of a team fails a test at a championship event, the team's season is over. That might get a few coaches' attention."⁴⁰⁸

Reilly's article reinforced the idea that athletes, and particularly black athletes, were valuable commodities to their owners or schools. To protect their investment, owners needed to place athletes under constant surveillance. The *New York Times* supported NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle's plan to institute mandatory drug testing. The

editorial board reasoned that in a business that constantly monitored players anyways, “drug testing is but another management prerogative, a reasonable means of protecting the employee’s health and the employer’s property.”⁴⁰⁹ The *Times* noted the deaths of Bias and Rogers as the loss of value for their owners.⁴¹⁰ In Boston, *Globe* columnist Bob Ryan framed Bias’s death as a blow to the Celtics’ future. He suggested the Celtics did have reason to seek compensation from the league. Ryan’s rationale was simple: Bias was supposed to be a dominant force in the league for years to come. In Ryan’s words, he was “he was going to bring something new to a world championship team,” a future star who possessed “a combination of speed and power at the forward position that the Celtics currently do not have.”⁴¹¹ Ryan interviewed Celtics player Rick Carlisle, who called Bias “a combination of the shooting touch of Alex English, along with the toughness of a Calvin Natt and the athletic ability of a (Michael) Jordan.”⁴¹² After highlighting Bias’s potential to be a star, Ryan asked his readers “I feel cheated; how about you?”⁴¹³ To Ryan and the Celtics fans who called the *Boston Globe*, Bias was property, a star athlete whose main purpose was to be productive on the basketball court and win games for the home team.

The Crisis of the Black (Criminal) Student-Athlete

Bias’s death signaled a crisis within college and professional athletics, but also more broadly, within the American universities. In late June 1986, the University of Maryland commissioned two task forces: one to examine the athletic department and the other to examine drug abuse on the Maryland campus. Both reports singled out athletes in the predominately black sports of men’s basketball and football as being, the men who, in Theresa Runstedler’s words, “threatened to contaminate the supposed amateurism of

college sports and the moral and academic standards of predominately white institutions.”⁴¹⁴ The university released the two reports in the fall of 1986, just as the reputation of the university was taking a further hit from the grand jury investigation into Bias’s death. The criminal probe produced a stream of rumors and innuendo involving widespread drug usage and possible point shaving by Maryland’s basketball team — some of those rumors ended up on the front pages of the *Washington Post* and *Baltimore Sun*.⁴¹⁵ Two of Bias’s Maryland teammates, Terry Long and David Gregg, were charged with cocaine possession and obstruction of justice in July 1986.⁴¹⁶ During the summer of 1986, stories about Bias and Maryland circulated alongside another scandal involving drugs, college sports and black athletes, this time at the University of Virginia. Three football players, including 1985 Atlantic Coast Conference player of the year Barry Word, were indicted as part of a drug trafficking ring in Charlottesville, Virginia.⁴¹⁷ The UVA scandal became yet another instance that reinforced the notion that the behavior of black athletes undermined college athletics and universities at large.⁴¹⁸

Politicians and college administrators used the Len Bias story to address drug use on American campuses. In a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, Secretary of Education William Bennett argued that Bias’s death underscored the need for American colleges and universities to move swiftly to eradicate drugs from their campus: “This summer our college presidents should send every student a letter saying that they will not tolerate drugs on campus — period.”⁴¹⁹ He applauded the tough policies of Anne Arundel County School District in Maryland. The district suspended students caught with drugs, and expelled students for being caught a second time; students were automatically expelled if caught dealing drugs.⁴²⁰

On many college campuses, athletes became a focus of testing. Citing Bias's death and academic struggles at the University of Maryland, Boston University President John Silber argued that other colleges and universities should follow his institution's lead and implement strict drug testing policy for athletes as part of their wider mission to educate them.⁴²¹ The University of Maryland implemented a plan for student-athletes that required routine random testing for drugs, and better supervision of athletes while taking the test.⁴²² The NCAA implemented testing at all championship events, with executive director Walter Byers citing Bias's death as a catalyst for the reform.⁴²³

Colleges and universities across the country, adopted testing and other anti-drug measures for their general student body. University of Rochester President Dennis O'Brien rejected the law-and-order leanings of Bennett, but called for colleges and universities to use Bias's death to educate students about the dangers of drugs. According to O'Brien, "universities should make clear their moral objection to drugs and they should not tolerate dealing and destructive usage on campus."⁴²⁴ Other university presidents adopted Bennett's hardline approach. An AP article at the start of the 1986-87 academic year showed Bias's death was a catalyst for a host of anti-drug programs and punishments on college campuses. Ohio Wesleyan University banned drug paraphernalia and threatened expulsion for drug usage. Newberry College forwarded all drug cases to the police, rather than to college's disciplinary review board. In a letter to students, the president of Westminster College told students that because of Bias's death, anyone refusing drug treatment would be expelled.⁴²⁵

The scandals involving Bias and other black student-athletes helped to fuel the belief that the presence of black athletes on college campuses tainted higher education.

Commentators and the general public began to question if certain athletes even belonged on college campuses to begin with. A *Baltimore Sun* poll showed a majority of respondents thought it was important for the University of Maryland to have a high-ranking basketball team. However, the poll also found that 81 percent believed basketball players should not be allowed into the institution with significantly lower test scores and grades, as had been the case before Bias's death. One respondent said "I don't think you should lower standards and bring in stupid people so teams can be good;" this response was featured as a pull quote in the article.⁴²⁶ Legendary sports television host Howard Cosell argued in the *Sun Sentinel* that Bias's death was symptomatic of a college sports system completely antithetical to the education mission of the American university. Cosell believed athletes like Bias did not need to be on college campuses in the first place:

To permit one unqualified student to enter the portals of higher learning is to make a sham of that college or university -- indeed, of all colleges and universities -- and is an insult to those students who have worked and studied to obtain admission based on their academic records. And it is all too clear that at Maryland, and elsewhere, the majority of the athletes granted admission do not deserve it.

And once the athletes are admitted, once that kind of permissiveness is allowed, every other kind of permissiveness follows, including drug abuse. It invades and infects the whole university.⁴²⁷

Such animosity began to seep into the public discourse surrounding the black athlete. While jokes about dumb and entitled jocks have long existed, such jokes took on a racial undertone. Bias became the subject of a series of "sick jokes" making light of the circumstances surrounding his death, according to folklorist Simon Bronner.⁴²⁸ These jokes circulated alongside other jokes that made fun of the intellectual capabilities and

alleged criminal behavior of black athletes. After a series of scandals at the University of Oklahoma, a photocopied list circulated which supposedly had a list of that year's incoming recruits. This recruiting list relied heavily on racial stereotypes: "Cletis Quentis Jenkins, running back. Set state scoring record out of Melrose High School, Charlotte, NC. Also led the state in burglaries. But has only six convictions. He's been clocked in the 40 at 4.2 seconds with a 25" TV under his arm."⁴²⁹ Such jokes underscored the fact that black athletes were not widely accepted at their institutions and were often blamed for the academic and social problems plaguing American universities.

Once the ideal college athlete, Bias came to represent the black athlete ruining college sports. Bias became synonymous with both drug usage among athletes and poor performances in the classroom. Legendary UCLA coach John Wooden, namesake for an award given to the best college basketball player in the country, even revealed to *Los Angeles Times* columnist Scott Ostler that he added a provision requiring the award's nominees to carry a 2.0 grade point average in response to Bias's struggles in the classroom.⁴³⁰ No longer celebrated as a collegiate hero, Bias was now negatively compared to other black athletes deemed exemplary in the media. George Vecesy of the *New York Times* wrote a glowing feature on two black athletes from the Naval Academy: football star Napoleon McCallum and basketball star David Robinson. Both McCallum and Robinson were praised for being well-rounded young men who represented the best of their school and college sports. Vecesy gushed, "it is refreshing to watch and meet bright, polite and contemporary young athletes like McCallum and Robinson."⁴³¹ To Vecesy, the Navy duo stood out as major college basketball and football were "out of control, inhabited by people who have little or nothing to do with higher education."⁴³²

Vecesy recalled the Bias tragedy, the point shaving scandal at Tulane, and recruiting scandals at Georgia and Florida to illustrate the ills of major college sports.⁴³³

Bias vs. the Exemplary Athlete: Soft Bodies vs. Hard Bodies

Throughout the summer of 1986, commentators attacked Bias for his failure as a role model for youth. Black commentators were particularly harsh; there were a number of “tough love” columns directed toward Bias in black newspapers after his death.⁴³⁴ A number of black commentators were particularly harsh. The *Atlanta Daily World* implied that Bias lived a “Wasted Life” and lamented Bias’ wasted opportunity to be become a positive role model for young fans.⁴³⁵ In fact, the paper believed Bias had a moral obligation to be a drug-free example to a black community suffering from the ravages of the cocaine epidemic. “Drugs may not be as rampant in the amateur sports as some claim, but they are a major problem in professional sports,” the editorial said.⁴³⁶ “Bias had a chance to set an example for members of his race (among which the problem is extreme) and others also.”⁴³⁷ Howie Evans of the *New York Amsterdam News* similarly hammered Bias for setting a poor example for children. According to Evans, Bias could only blame himself: “Len Bias was not a babe in the woods. He knew the deal. He knew the risks involved. Len Bias went in the tank. He took a chance. A chance on not getting caught. He took a gamble on the most precious gift the Lord can grant. The gift of life. Seemingly almost as casual as a two dollar bettor at the track.”⁴³⁸ In response to his brother Jay calling him a hero and the Rev. Jesse Jackson using Bias to attack an supposedly exploitative sports system, Evans called into question whether Bias was truly a hero worth emulating: “But in life and in death, is Len Bias really a hero? Is Len Bias

the hero you would want your son to be? Not for one minute do I believe Len Bias was a hero. How could I want my son to follow in the steps of Len?”⁴³⁹

At the heart of these criticisms of Bias was the belief that athletes needed to play their role in the fight against drugs by living a drug-free lifestyle. This fight was used to justify calls to implement mandatory drug testing within professional sports. New England Patriots doctor Armand Nicholi, Jr. ended his call for drug testing in the NFL with this message:

The adulation of the professional athlete in our society is for him both an asset and a liability. It makes his livelihood possible, but it imposes added responsibility to be a model worth of emulation — especially to the youth of the nation. Many hope that Commissioner [Pete] Rozelle, as he maps out his new drug program, will fulfill his responsibility in helping the players fulfill theirs.⁴⁴⁰

The *New York Times* similarly believed athletes had an obligation to act as role models for children. According to the *Times*, “athletes who directly endorse cereals and sneakers can indirectly, but just as powerfully, endorse attitudes toward drug use.”⁴⁴¹

Throughout the summer of 1986, newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* highlighted the work of exemplary athletes who had devoted their spare time to the fight against drugs. In a feature on Los Angeles Rams running back Eric Dickerson titled “Dickerson’s Message Is Very Clear: Ram Star Goes the Extra Yard in the Fight Against Drugs,” he seemed to echo Reagan-era rhetoric about drug usage in sports. After lamenting the deaths of Bias and Rogers, Dickerson noted that black athletes generally come from poor backgrounds and were susceptible to peer pressure: “We get some money and we get pulled in by what I call the wrong crowd. Somebody says, ‘Just try it once.’ And before long you’re hooked.”⁴⁴² The article later highlighted Dickerson’s role as a NFL spokesperson for the Reagan “Just Say NO” campaign and his “Dickerson’s

Rangers” youth group where youngsters pledged to be drug-free in exchange for free Rams tickets.⁴⁴³ Dickerson wanted to fight perception of the black athlete with his involvement in the anti-drug crusade: “I look at myself as being a role model for kids, and I don’t want kids to think that all athletes are drug users.”⁴⁴⁴ The *Times* also applauded the work of Marques Johnson, a Los Angeles Clipper player who had been known for his struggles with drugs. *Times* writer Chris Baker summed up Johnson’s transformation from another NBA drug miscreant to an anti-drug crusader: “Meet the new Marques Kevin Johnson, age 30. Anti-drug preacher. Born-again Christian. Family man with three kids. Little League coach.”⁴⁴⁵ Baker noted that unlike other athletes, Johnson was speaking to youth groups pro-bono, and wanted to reach out due to his own experiences with drugs. Baker also noted the timeliness of Johnson’s message coming so close to the deaths of Bias and Rogers. Johnson wanted to be the strong masculine example he lacked growing up: “I wish there would have been that anti-drug message 15 years ago when I was growing up. Then it seemed like was OK to smoke marijuana or use cocaine. But drugs have caused a lot of people a lot of harm.”⁴⁴⁶

The *Los Angeles Times*’ Scott Ostler rejected the idea that professional athletes needed mandatory drug testing, reasoning that drug testing did not save Len Bias or Don Rogers. However, Ostler argued athletes could still provide guidance through their actions, with admirable athletes providing good examples and athletes such as Bias, Rogers, and Micheal Ray Richardson demonstrating the negative, and at times fatal, consequences of drugs:

As for the impressionable youth of America, looking up to pro athletes, I'd tell them to keep looking. This is real life. The athletes you admire are not perfect. Some of them take drugs, even some real nice guys and gals. By taking drugs, some of them ruin their careers and their lives, and a few of them even die young

of overdose. And all of them were sure they could handle drugs. Most started drugs as a lark, innocent fun.

But keep looking, kids. Some of your heroes, while not perfect, choose not to take drugs. Look at them, too. Check 'em out. Whatever problems they have, they don't wind up in gutters or rehab houses or morgues. Some of them even seem to enjoy life for more than 10-minute stretches of time.

Take your choice, kids. Do you want to grow up to be a Walter Payton, or a Don Rogers? Do you want to grow up to be a Magic Johnson, or a Micheal Ray Richardson?⁴⁴⁷

A *Cleveland Call and Post* editorial lumped together Bias, Rogers, Richardson, and Houston Rockets guard John Lucas as examples of black basketball players who had failed as role models for black children. According to the *Post*, their failure necessitated a celebration of “those athletes who are attempting to provide reinforcement to positive lifestyles.”⁴⁴⁸ The editorial honored the efforts of Herb Williams, who had set up a basketball camp that also taught young athletes to stay away from drugs and to prepare for a career outside of basketball; the camp also featured Magic Johnson and Isaiah Thomas. The *Post* felt Williams’ message had particularly resonance within the black community, as athletes struggled with drug abuse and illiteracy once their playing days were over. Athletes such as Williams, Johnson, and Thomas provided a critical lesson that there was more to life than basketball, a stark contrast to athletes such as Bias who were consumed by the “cruel dream” that was professional sports for many young black men.⁴⁴⁹

The Bias tragedy and the search for role models resonated within a black community trying to save its young men from death and destruction. Commentators called for reevaluation of the black community’s commitment to sports. Too many black men, these commentators argued, focused their attention on succeeding in sports instead

of on academic or social development. Columnist Ethel Payne thought that the early demise of Bias and Rogers should lead the black community to re-emphasis academic success: “If there’s a lesson to be learned from the wasted lives of Lenny Bias and Don Rogers, it is that we need to concentrate on producing some slam dunk wizards in mathematics, science, medicine, law, and diplomacy.”⁴⁵⁰ Payne’s call for a renewed focus on academics echoed that of National Urban League president John Jacobs, who argued the media’s promotion of black athletes created the myth that sports are the only way out of the inner city: “If the same promotion was given to successful black lawyers and chemists and space scientists, our kids would have the kind of role models that would encourage them to be more serious about school and career choices.”⁴⁵¹

Such concerns were often linked in news stories to the continued struggles of the black underclass. Preston Greene of the *Christian Science Monitor* noted for instance, that Bias’s poor academic performance reflected a black community that had lost its way. He assailed historically black colleges and university presidents who protested Prop 48, accusing them of accepting low academic standards for athletes. Greene also noted black athletes were forced to be role models for inner-city black children whose role models were “the gang members, drug pushers, pimps, and prostitutes.”⁴⁵² Greene continued to invoke the plight of the black underclass, suggesting higher standards would be beneficial for a community where young children received their first basketball before receiving their first book and where teen pregnancy and illiteracy were at epidemic levels.⁴⁵³

The need for positive athletic role models, especially in inner city neighborhoods, was dramatized on the CBS News special “48 Hours on Crack Street.” Before a segment on sports, titled “Heroes,” host Dan Rather interviewed several people at an anti-drug

rally in a working-class black neighborhood in Queens. Concerned local residents, all black, talked about how destructive crack was to their neighborhood. One middle-aged man, a veteran, spoke about eradicating drugs and drug dealers from the neighborhood: “We’re going to wage a war against drugs.”⁴⁵⁴ Another man, suggesting that the American dream was dead in the neighborhood, pointed out that the children of the neighborhood looked to successful drug dealers as role models. The special then transitioned to “Heroes,” hosted by black journalist Ed Bradley. During the segment, Bradley asked an assembled group of Little League basketball players how news of drug abuse among athletes affected them. One boy suggested this news make him more likely to emulate his idols: “It does. That’s just going to make us believe that drugs will help you.”⁴⁵⁵ When asked to explain why by Bradley, the boy continued: “Your favorite athlete takes it and you see how good he does on television, and you figure ‘well, if I would take drugs, maybe that will work for me.’”⁴⁵⁶ In a reference to Bias, a girl in the group mentioned, “same thing like the basketball player, he was taking drugs and then he died, right?”⁴⁵⁷ Bradley then asked the group if they thought Bias had regularly used cocaine; many of the children answered yes⁴⁵⁸. As the segment dramatized, impressionable youth looked up to athletes like Bias. Drug use in sports sent the message to young children that it was okay for them to do it. The segment hinted to a growing war for the hearts and minds of American children.

Sports commentators indeed used Bias’s death to call for a fight against drugs that started with tackling the problem of drug usage among American youth. High school sports writer Pat O’Malley of the *Baltimore Sun*, called for efforts to curb drug and alcohol abuse among local high school athletes. Though Anne Arundel County already

had strict drug policies, O'Malley wanted to go further. He suggested that county schools have mandatory drug education courses for each year of high school and random drug testing for athletes. O'Malley wanted to do whatever it took in "preventing another Len Bias or Don Rogers tragedy" and worried that "young aspiring athletes are starting to accept drugs and alcohol as part of preparation for becoming a star."⁴⁵⁹

While eschewing drug testing at the professional level, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Scott Ostler also called for drug testing as athletes rose into the professional ranks: "Let's drug-test kids in junior high, in high school, even college, where they are young and impressionable and naive and need protection. By the time they are pros they should be making their own decisions."⁴⁶⁰ In the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Barry Cooper lamented the losses of the two young black athletes, Bias and Rogers. As he talked about other black athletes who recently struggled with drugs, a devastated Cooper asked "where will the madness end?"⁴⁶¹ To attack the problem, Cooper called for an all-out attack on drugs that echoed the feelings of many in the country:

The time is now to return to old-fashioned values, to hammer home the real truth to our youngsters about drug abuse, particularly cocaine. The stuff kills, and more youngsters will die unless strong measures are taken. The drug testing plans announced by schools like Florida A&M and Delaware State are a step in the right direction. Forget about invasion of privacy. We're trying to save some lives.⁴⁶²

Cooper advocated for drug testing in high schools, citing ruthless drug dealers who "are as likely to slip a \$5 package of crack cocaine to a 12-year-old girl as they are to a wealthy lawyer."⁴⁶³ In pushing for both education and drug testing, Cooper acknowledged the tough but necessary fight ahead: "The war against drugs must be every bit as intense as a military conflict. Maybe then we can stop the boys from dying."⁴⁶⁴

Gearing Up for A War On Drugs

As Congressional Democrats and Republicans prepared for the 1986 midterm elections, members of both parties used Bias to sound the alarm on the growing drug problem and to call for tough, anti-drug legislation. Their usages of Bias were often riddled with the same errors first reported by journalists. Democratic congressman Robert Garcia linked Bias and Don Rogers' deaths to crack and the rising crack epidemic: "never before has a drug so popular been so harmful to those who use it, and to society at large. Crack has been associated with extreme lung damage, seizures, strokes, heart attacks, and death. This point was so vividly illustrated by the recent cocaine related deaths of star athletes Len Bias and Don Rogers."⁴⁶⁵ Republican Senator Paula Hawkins repeated the myth that Bias did not have a history of extensive drug usage in her reaction to a survey which showed a large number of American students felt occasional usage of cocaine was okay:

The majority of young people -- the survey observes -- acknowledge that heavy cocaine use is dangerous. But only a third of the survey group thinks that there is danger from occasional or experimental use. That is a frightening discovery. If the deaths of Len Bias and Don Rogers have any meaning it is that you do not have to be a heavy user of cocaine to be killed by it. Both of these young athletes, in prime physical condition, died without an extensive history of cocaine use.⁴⁶⁶

Republican Congressman Jack Kemp of New York used Bias and Rogers as examples of how cocaine had spread to every segment of American society: "the vicious reach of drugs grasps every segment of society: the rich, the poor, the unemployed, the cream and the dregs, star athletes, well-known entertainers, neighbors, juveniles, public officials, friends, and loved ones. No city in America -- large or small, rural or suburban -- is safe from the ravages of substance abuse."⁴⁶⁷ Kemp warned about an "epidemic" he felt was "as dangerous as the plagues of the Middle Ages."⁴⁶⁸ To combat this threat, Kemp called

for a full-out assault on drugs across all facets of American society. He especially stressed the need for tough punishment for drug dealers: “Stiff sentences should be imposed on those dealing in cocaine, ‘crack,’ and ‘rock.’ Fines and sentences should be Draconian for dealers who use children in drug trafficking.”⁴⁶⁹

The public agreed with Kemp, as polls during the summer of 1986 showed Americans supported harsh punishments for drug offenses, even those offenses that were minor. A CBS News/*New York Times* poll from August 1986 discovered that 42 percent of Americans wanted crack and cocaine dealers to be jailed for more than a year for a first-time offense. Another 22 percent supported a sentence of a year in jail, and 1 percent even supported the death penalty.⁴⁷⁰ The same poll found that 68 percent of Americans supported building more prisons to house dealers caught selling drugs on a first offense, even if they had to pay \$100 extra on their taxes.⁴⁷¹ Drug users also drew the ire of the American public. A poll from Gallup and *Newsweek* discovered that 93 percent of Americans wanted the possession of a small amount of cocaine or crack to be treated as a criminal offense.⁴⁷²

Coverage of drug abuse and crack cocaine intensified in the aftermath of Bias’s death; in July, the three major network television channels together ran 74 stories about drugs.⁴⁷³ The CBS News program “48 Hours on Crack Street” typified the sensationalized coverage of the crack cocaine problem in America. Airing on September 2nd, 1986, the two-hour program covered the growing national hysteria over crack cocaine, the crack-related chaos of New York City, and the threat the drug posed to the suburbs. Writing in *TV Guide*, a research group from New York University noted that the program combined “*Miami Vice* style ‘viewability’ — vivid color, power dialogue,

dramatic sound track” with “charts and statistical data” that highlighted the deepening problem of crack cocaine.⁴⁷⁴ While not an explicit call for a War on Drugs, “48 Hours on Crack Street” did portray a county under siege. The program was the most watched television news documentary in the previous five years, reaching 15 million viewers.

Not to be outdone, three nights after the CBS program aired, NBC showed a news documentary about the nation’s struggle with drugs.⁴⁷⁵ *Time* and *Newsweek* too devoted significant space to the drug problem; in 1986, each publications ran five cover stories about crack and the drug crisis.⁴⁷⁶ One *Time* story argued a War on Drugs “was urgent and necessary” to save American society from itself.⁴⁷⁷ The cover story in the same September 15, 1986, issue argued that the public’s desire for drugs must be halted for the country to move forward. Invoking the image of the black drug dealer, it retold the story of Oakland drug dealer Felix Mitchell, who was recently murdered in prison. The story described Mitchell’s funeral as an impressive affair:

In Oakland two weeks ago, many were shocked when the body of a notorious local drug lord, Felix Mitchell, was carried by a gold-and-black hearse, drawn by two bay horses, followed by a long line of Rolls-Royces and luxury cars. Inside the Baptist church where Mitchell lay in his bronze coffin with glittering rings on his fingers, a sound track played Sade's pop hit, Smooth Operator. Mitchell, 32, had been stabbed to death in Leavenworth penitentiary while serving a life sentence for drug-trafficking conspiracy. But in the faces of young people who lined the funeral route were expressions of awe.⁴⁷⁸

To counter the lure of drug culture, *Time* argued that all Americans had a duty to fight the acceptance of drugs:

A true change can come only if Americans are willing to say clearly -- to their workmates and schoolmates, to their neighbors and friends, to their communities and to themselves -- that drug use is not acceptable. If that is, in fact, one result of the current frenzy over what has been a recurring crisis for successive generations of Americans, then even all the hype and excess may in retrospect be worthwhile.⁴⁷⁹

The black press also sought to mobilize its readers for a long fight against drugs. Dr. Milton A. Reid, publisher of the *Norfolk Guide and Journal*, believed drug users such as Bias were often pressured by peers to seek fulfillment and an enhanced “level of reality” with drugs; Reid lamented that Bias and others often found out too late that drugs actually can destroy lives.⁴⁸⁰ Reid called alcohol and drug abuse “diseases” and challenged readers to get involved and show “tough love” to loved ones struggling with addiction.⁴⁸¹ According to Reid, enabling drug users only did further harm to the black community. “Tough love means confrontation with this invading evil, and every opportunity you get you must say NO to COKE,” Reid said.⁴⁸²

Similarly, the October 1986 issue of *Ebony Magazine* featured an article titled “How To Deal With The Cocaine Scourge,” which summarized the effect of drugs on the black community and provided a how-to guide to tackle the problem. A quote from Congressman Charles Rangel, a black Democrat representing inner-city neighborhoods in New York City, preceded the article; Rangel warned that “cocaine is invading our towns and permeating our neighborhoods with the speed of an uncontrolled forest fire.”⁴⁸³ He called for cooperation between state governments and the federal government to improve drug education programs for the young.⁴⁸⁴ The article highlighted efforts by community organizations to drive out drug dealers from their neighborhoods. According to the article, Bias’s demise “seemed to bring a collective cry of ‘Enough’! from a frustrated public, and served as a catalyst for a noticeable shift of the national attitude toward cocaine.”⁴⁸⁵ *Ebony* painted a picture of a rapidly deteriorating drug problem, with cocaine and other illegal substances ending up in the “tiny hands of elementary school children”

and inner city residents falling prey to highly addictive crack.⁴⁸⁶ Pictures showed black celebrities affected by drugs. Comedian Richard Pryor, who famously burned himself trying to cook freebase cocaine, told readers “never try cocaine because you never know what it'll lead to. It's very easy to get involved with, but it's extremely hard to get out of it.”⁴⁸⁷ The article ended by repeating the phone numbers for the National Institute on Drug Abuse's hotlines, It also included a list of five steps that it said could end the nation's drug problems: “better protection of U.S. borders,” “mobilizing community organizations to patrol neighborhoods,” “strengthening law enforcement,” “educating youth and adults about the dangers of cocaine,” and “drug testing.”⁴⁸⁸

Political figures took their case for a War on Drugs to the public through newspaper op-eds. Bias' death was frequently evoked as a sign that the problem of drugs was spreading and affecting all sections of society. Congressman Peter W. Rodino, chair of the House Judiciary Committee, issued “A Call to Arms on Drugs.”⁴⁸⁹ He argued that the deaths of Bias and Rogers demonstrated that drugs were not just a “street problem,” but a problem that affected “students, professionals, gifted athletes, and our nation's future.”⁴⁹⁰ Congressman Augustus Hawkins, a black Democrat from Los Angeles, believed the death of Bias and Rogers were “tragic reminders of the dark side of substance abuse in our society.”⁴⁹¹ Hawkins hoped their deaths would serve as a warning for youth to avoid using drugs, and he called for a mobilization of state and local governments to fight drug trafficking and drug abuse. Calling up the image of the black drug dealer, Hawkins linked drugs to the decline of inner-city neighborhoods and noted that “drug infestation” was “destabilizing communities and increasing criminal activity.”⁴⁹² He also called for grassroots community efforts “to come together to protest

the drug dealers and pushers that poison their communities.”⁴⁹³ Democratic Senator Joseph Biden believed that the deaths of Len Bias and Don Rogers showed the true dangers of cocaine usage: “I don’t believe that either Len Bias or Don Rogers understood the risk involved in cocaine. But the fact is that both sacrificed their lives to a drug that each of them, at least for the moment, felt was both safe and socially acceptable.”⁴⁹⁴ Biden believed the primary battleground of the War on Drugs was within the home, and challenged citizens to teach their children about the dangers of drug usage.⁴⁹⁵ Most notably, First Lady Nancy Reagan used a *Washington Post* op-ed to argue that each American had a moral obligation to personally speak out against drug usage. According to Reagan, “by accepting drug use, you are accepting a practice that is destroying life — lives like that of Len Bias and of countless kids next door.”⁴⁹⁶ Though “it’s too late to save Len Bias,” Reagan argued that his young fans could be saved through widespread outspokenness against drug use.⁴⁹⁷

Sports and the Bias tragedy became key rhetorical tools for President Ronald Reagan’s own push against drugs. Speaking to the National Conference on Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention in August 1986, Reagan mentioned both Bias and Rogers as two examples of the thousands of people losing their lives to drugs on a yearly basis. Echoing the words of the First Lady, Reagan called for all Americans to join “as one family” and get involved in the drug fight.⁴⁹⁸ The president argued that athletes had a particularly important role to play in that crusade: “I hope that every athlete will reflect on the impressions he or she gives as a role model to young, adoring fans. All those in the sports world should understand what a great force for good they can be.”⁴⁹⁹ President Reagan contrasted the modern athlete with the athlete during his time as sports announcer. During

his era in the business, Reagan said athletes would not endorse beer or cigarettes and avoided drugs because they took their job as role models seriously.⁵⁰⁰

Reagan returned to the subject of sports in his September 14th nationally televised speech on his anti-drug plan. With the First Lady by his side, Reagan called for a full mobilization against drugs from every segment of society. The President had a special message for athletes: “On the athletic fields: You men and women are among the most beloved citizens of our country. A child's eyes fill with your heroic achievements. Few of us can give youngsters something as special and strong to look up to as you. Please don't let them down.”⁵⁰¹ The legislation Reagan purposed, the Drug Free America Act of 1986, was an effort to distill the lessons of the deaths of both Bias and Brian Tribble into federal law. As part of a larger plan to strengthen punishment for drug trafficking offenses, the report calling for the legislation asked for mandatory sentencing for anyone involved in a large-scale drug trafficking operation that led to a death. The report acknowledged that Bias' death provoked the proposed measure. Though not mentioned, Tribble was also an inspiration for the mandatory sentencing law; Tribble himself was indicted on charges he provided Bias with the fatal dose of cocaine.⁵⁰²

On October 27, 1986, Ronald Reagan signed into law the Anti-Drug Abuse Act. The act increased penalties and set mandatory minimums for a range of drug crimes, while also increasing federal funding for drug enforcement. Lyle Denniston of the *Baltimore Sun* noted that the act was “perhaps the most far-reaching criminal law” ever passed by Congress and at the cost of at least \$1.7 billion “one of the most expensive federal spending bills ever adopted to deal with a single national issue.”⁵⁰³ Reagan praised the act for sending a message that the country was getting tough on the drug

issue: “Today marks a major victory in our crusade against drugs -- a victory for safer neighborhoods, a victory for the protection of the American family. The American people want their government to get tough and to go on the offensive. And that's exactly what we intend, with more ferocity than ever before.”⁵⁰⁴

Though Len Bias was not mentioned in Reagan’s speech that day, his presence was felt at both the East Room signing ceremony and within the bill itself. Professional athletes and school children active in the fight against drugs joined the crowd at the East Room ceremony.⁵⁰⁵ The crusade against drugs following Bias’s death emphasized the need for professional athletes to stand in as role models for America’s youth. In his remarks at the signing ceremony, President Reagan stated his belief that the act was vital to protect the nation’s future: “Our goal in this crusade is nothing less than a drug-free generation. America's young people deserve our best effort to make that dream come true.”⁵⁰⁶

President Reagan stressed that the goal of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act was to rehabilitate drug users, not punish them: “We must be intolerant of drugs not because we want to punish drug users, but because we care about them and want to help them. This legislation is not intended as a means of filling our jails with drug users. What we must do as a society is identify those who use drugs, reach out to them, help them quit, and give them the support they need to live right.”⁵⁰⁷

Despite President Reagan’s positive rhetoric, the act itself essentially codified the crack hysteria after Bias’s death. The new laws aimed at both harshly punishing crack dealers and criminalizing crack possession; Congress had approved giving drug dealers a minimum mandatory sentence of 20 years in prison if involved in a crime resulting in

someone's death.⁵⁰⁸ The act also established a mandatory minimum sentence of five years, with a maximum of 40 years, for drug offenses involving high levels of certain drugs. And offenders found with five grams of crack cocaine could face the same harsh penalties as someone convicted of possessing five hundred grams of powder cocaine.⁵⁰⁹ This 100:1 ratio underscored how the racialized fears of crack cocaine that intensified after Len Bias' death shaped public policy. With broad bi-partisan and cross-racial support — and with arguably good intentions — in 1986, in part because of the death of Len Bias, the White House and Congress signed into law policies that would further decimate black and poor communities.

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Chapter 3: The Ghost and the Curse: The Mythologization of Len Bias within Sports Media

At the beginning of his 2011 book *Born Ready: The Mixed Legacy of Len Bias*, writer Dave Ungrady listed a number of athletes who died young and were honored through a range of public monuments and memorials.¹ A track meet is named for Steve Prefontaine, a distance runner killed in a car accident in 1975; fans still regularly leave tributes at the site of his death.² A highway, bridge, road race, and foundation is named for Pat Tillman, who left a lucrative professional football career to join the Army, only to be killed in Afghanistan in 2004. An athletic facility is named for Reggie Lewis, a Boston Celtics player who died from a heart condition in 1993; the Celtics also retired his number.³

Ungrady contrasted the honors given these athletes with tributes made to Len Bias. Though Bias had been the greatest basketball player in the history of the University of Maryland, there were no buildings or athletic events named in his honor. Bias was even left out of the school's athletics Hall of Fame for close to three decades. The nature of Bias's death undid his athletic legacy. As Ungrady noted, Bias left "a legacy perhaps more complicated and compelling than any athlete before him."⁴

Ungrady tallied up the damage said to have been caused by Bias's death: the decline of the Boston Celtics and Maryland Terrapins, the misguided War on Drugs, and the altered lives of his family and friends. "Why knows how many lives have been ruined?"⁵ Yet, Ungrady also reasoned that Bias's death saved lives: his tragedy served as a grim but effective reminder of the dangers of cocaine usage.⁶

As Ungrady, a Maryland alum, argued: “How can you honor a young man whose youthful indiscretion placed the University of Maryland, the school that helped make him a star, into a tailspin that lasted for almost a decade?”⁷ In the decades following his death, many fans and journalists blamed Bias for the decline of the once-storied men's basketball program. In discussions of Maryland basketball, sportswriters often bemoaned the presence of the "ghost of Len Bias," a mythical figure who cast a pall over the Terrapin basketball program, the Maryland athletic department, and the University of Maryland as a whole.⁸

Like Maryland basketball, the Boston Celtics struggled for decades after Bias' death. These troubles were often attributed to Bias. The “Curse of Len Bias” helped sportswriters describe a series of calamitous events that turned the Boston Celtics from one of the best teams in North American sports history to one of the worst franchises in the NBA.⁹

As the tragic myths reproduced via variety of media throughout the years, these narratives about Bias became entrenched in the historiography of basketball. On the surface, the narratives merely helped to explain why the Celtics and Maryland Terrapins struggled for decades after Bias's death and to underscore the dangers of drugs. On examination, however, these narratives explain more than just why the two teams lost games. They were simplistic crutches used by journalists, athletic administrators, team owners, coaches and fans to explain what was going wrong with professional basketball and college sports, and they located the black male athlete as the cause of all the ills. At its base, the Bias-as-the-Cause myth is a product of the ongoing crisis over educating and policing of the black male student-athlete. Bias is upheld as an example of the damage

unruly black athletes can cause to a college program. Within media narratives linking Bias to the Maryland program, journalists paid closer attention to the graduation rates and academic performance of Maryland players and called for higher academic standards for student-athletes. These reports rarely critiqued the system of big-time college basketball, instead focusing on the actions of individual players and coaches. Similarly, the Bias-Celtics myth is a product of the ongoing crisis of the black NBA player. Here, Bias' absence from the Celtics demonstrated how the loss of black athletic productivity through deviant behavior could negatively impact an NBA franchise. Media narratives about Bias, Celtics and the NBA supported league-wide efforts to do better background checks on draft picks; this is especially true with oft-repeated narrative linking Bias with other members of the 1986 NBA draft class who struggled with drugs. The popularity of these narratives during the 1990s and early 2000s coincided with the rise in high school players joining the league without a college background and growing concerns about the direction of the league post-Michael Jordan.

Due to the fluid nature of both memory and myth, these narratives about Bias have been reproduced and challenged within a variety of media texts. Sportswriters, fans, politicians, and institutions such as the University of Maryland have all — intentionally and otherwise — shaped Bias's reputation over the three decades since his death. Though deployed as a symbol of ruin, despair, and lost potential, others have appropriated his athletic legacy and transformed into something of a folk hero. Through YouTube clips and video games, a new generation of basketball fans can both see the “real” Bias back, and even remix NBA history, imaging a future where Bias flourished alongside Jordan and the other superstars of his generation.

Still, efforts by more established institutions to honor Bias have often been rebuffed or disputed. His eventual induction into the Maryland Hall of Fame in 2014 spurred debate on whether Bias was worthy of such an honor. The controversy over his induction demonstrated that 28 years after his death, Bias's legacy is contested; different groups are competing to define how he is remembered: a sports hero or as a tragic failure.

The Ghost of Len Bias: Len Bias and the Decline of the University of Maryland

By the fall of 1986, Len Bias had become the face of the growing crisis at the University of Maryland. In the November 10th, 1986 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, writers Craig Neff and Bruce Selcraig wrote about how the University of Maryland confronted “One Shock Wave After Another” since Bias's death: reports of rampant drug use and academic problems among its men's basketball players, a criminal probe that targeted head coach Lefty Driesell and two of Bias's teammates, and the subsequent resignations of Driesell and athletic director Dick Dull. Neff and Selcraig located the cause of this cascade of problems on the school's acceptance of black athletes such as Bias who struggled in the classroom.¹⁰ They argued that such athletes had not only threatened the reputation of the athletic department but the university as a whole. According to a source within Maryland's athletic department, Driesell's recruiting of black players with low SAT scores created a powder keg that exploded with Bias's death: “You could see this coming. He kept going lower and lower on the graph. I remember a few years back some of us were sitting around saying, 'This is his worst group yet.' You could see that it was going to blow up in his face.”¹¹ Neff and Selcraig also argued that the department's athletic academic counselors did the athletes no favors by steering them to easy courses and that Maryland chancellor John Slaughter erred by intervening to allow academically

suspect players into the school. To rectify the issue, Neff and Selcraig called for higher admissions standards for athletes, and a better support system to ensure athletes succeeded academically on campus.¹²

Calamities continued to strike the Maryland athletic department and the Maryland basketball team during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Charged with cleaning up the scandal-ridden program, Driesell's replacement Bob Wade was forced to resign in 1989 after violating numerous NCAA recruiting rules.¹³ On March 4th, 1990, the NCAA banned Maryland basketball from postseason play for two seasons, barred the Terrapins from television for one season, and took a number of basketball scholarships. The NCAA also forced the athletic department to return the revenue received from Maryland's 1988 NCAA tournament appearance.¹⁴ New basketball coach Gary Williams further embarrassed the program and school during the 1989-90 season after being accused himself of breaking NCAA regulations; after the season, Williams was arrested for a DUI.¹⁵ The turmoil within the basketball program trickled down to the rest of the athletic department. Faced with a widening budget deficit exacerbated by the NCAA penalties, athletic director Lew Perkins announced in May of 1990 that the Maryland athletic department needed to cut scholarships and curtail funding to a number of sports programs on the College Park campus.¹⁶

Media coverage routinely linked the turmoil at College Park to Bias's death. A July 15,th 1990 *Washington Post* report by Susan Schmidt and Howard Schneider pointed to Bias's death as the key event that triggered the fiscal issues for Maryland's athletic department. Schmidt and Schneider argued that the school's tarnished image, as well as the tougher academic standards for athletes put in place after Bias's death, hurt recruiting

and led to worsening teams in the revenue sports of basketball and football. Support from the ticket-buying public and big-money boosters also began to dry up as Maryland teams performed poorly.¹⁷ Curtis Eichelberger of the *Los Angeles Times* noted the dramatic impact Bias's death had on the Maryland athletic department:

Before Bias' death, Maryland was considered one of the top athletic programs in the country, producing nationally competitive teams and showcasing such athletic talents as Boomer Esiason, Buck Williams, Adrian Branch, John Lucas, Renaldo Nehemiah and Ferrell Edmunds.

Since then, the Terrapins have been a case study in ongoing mismanagement that was brought to a head in March when the university was sanctioned by the NCAA for a lack of institutional control over its athletic program.¹⁸

Through the early 1990s, journalists continuously blamed Bias for the falling fortunes of Maryland sports such as track, baseball, and football.¹⁹ The Maryland basketball program continued to struggle as well. By 1993, the Terrapins had gone five years without an NCAA tournament appearance. *New York Times* reporter Barry Jacobs summed up the toll Bias's death took on his former team:

More than seven years have passed since the cocaine-induced death of Len Bias, and still the stigma lingers.

Once, Maryland paid regular visits to the National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament and competed annually for supremacy in the Atlantic Coast Conference. But since Bias's death in 1986, Maryland has shed two coaches, endured an NCAA probation, failed to finish in the top half of the ACC, and made a single post-season appearance. The Terrapins had losing records in 1992 and 1993, their first consecutive losing marks since the late 60's.²⁰

Maryland basketball started to recover during the 1993-1994 season. As the Terrapins inched toward an NCAA tournament bid, some commentators sensed a return to normalcy on the College Park campus. *Baltimore Sun* columnist Michael Olesker noted that basketball, not tragedy, had finally taken center stage at Cole Field House. He

believed a winning Maryland basketball team was crucial in helping the university move beyond the Bias tragedy, and in getting rid of the ghost of Len Bias:

eight years after his death by drug overdose, Bias is a haunting figure whose chains can still be heard clanking around Cole Field House, though the noise seems to be going away.

Time does that. Memory fades. When Bias died, in the midst of his very own legend, the kids now going to class here were still in elementary school. He's a name they heard during a brief national convulsion over athletes and drugs, but the details of his story are beginning to be fuzzy. Soon, if everyone's lucky, Len Bias will become: "Len who?"²¹

During the 1994 NCAA tournament, the Terrapins won two games and finished the season as one of the top 16 teams in the nation. The *Washington Post's* Steve Berkowitz believed the Terrapins' successful tournament run brought healing to a university that had struggled for positive athletic news since June 19th, 1986:

There was a pool of water on the floor of Dressing Room 1 at Kansas Coliseum tonight and it was there for a reason. It had washed over Maryland Coach Gary Williams after his team defeated Massachusetts, 95-87, in the second round of the National Collegiate Athletic Association men's basketball tournament. But, more than that, it seemed to wash away a decade of trouble that seeped through the Maryland athletic department like some infectious disease.²²

The following season, Maryland basketball continued on its path to recovery. By February 1995, the Terrapins were tied for first place in the ACC after defeating the nation's top team, the North Carolina Tar Heels. That victory led *Sports Illustrated's* Jack McCallum to announce that Maryland was "Back From the Depths" and had once again established itself as a top college basketball program:

The delirious on-court celebration that followed the Terps' 86-73 win over North Carolina—Maryland's first victory over a No. 1 team in nine seasons, the last being a Bias-led triumph over the Tar Heels—seemed like nothing less than an exorcism. Few basketball programs have fallen as far and as fast and as ignominiously as Maryland's, and it follows that few have recovered so gracefully.²³

Even with the revival of the basketball program, the ghost of Len Bias continued to linger around the Maryland basketball program. While now a perennial college basketball power, the Terrapins were still looking for a national championship or even an ACC tournament trophy in the late 1990s. More successful programs in the ACC such as Mike Krzyzewski's Duke Blue Devils and Dean Smith's North Carolina Tar Heels continuously overshadowed Gary Williams and his team. The Terrapins routinely failed to make it past the second round of the 64-team NCAA tournament.²⁴ *Washington Post* columnist John Feinstein's 1998 book *A March To Madness: The View From The Floor in the Atlantic Coast Conference*, a behind the scenes view of the 1996-97 ACC season, captured the mounting frustration as Maryland yet again failed to top the two best teams in the conference. After a painful blowout loss to Duke late that season, Williams offered a candid admission that he was jealous of the successes of Duke and North Carolina, and referenced the tortured history of Maryland basketball:

“Players at Duke and North Carolina walk onto the court and they look up at all those banners and retired jerseys and they realize they're part of something special. Their goal during their four years is to win the national championship or come damn close to it. Sometimes, when I get really down, I think our guys just want to get through four years at Maryland without dying of an overdose of cocaine.”²⁵

As Duke and North Carolina continued to win national and ACC championships, throughout the 1990s, Maryland was still dealing with the fallout of the Len Bias. Feinstein lamented “even with all the success Williams had brought to his alma mater, the ghost of Len Bias, eleven years later, still haunted Cole Field House.”²⁶

On April 1, 2002, the University of Maryland men's basketball team won its first national championship ever, defeating the Indiana Hoosiers 64-52 to win the 2002 Final Four. According to newspaper accounts of the win, the Maryland team defeated more

than Indiana that night; they also overcame the lingering presence of Len Bias. In a front-page story about the game in the *Washington Post* the day after the championship, Amy Shipley wrote:

When the buzzer finally sounded, the university's darkest days seemed more than 16 years removed. In 1986, the program reached its most somber depths, depths in which it floundered through the early 1990s. Maryland star Len Bias was found dead in his dormitory room from a cocaine overdose just days after being drafted by the Boston Celtics. His death resulted in the forced resignations of coach Lefty Driesell -- who had led the program to greatness, if not excellence, in the 1970s and early '80s -- and yielded a sweeping investigation of the program in the ensuing years.

As a result, only a year after Williams arrived at Maryland in 1989, returning to the university for which he played in the mid-1960s, the program was hit with a three-year probation and a two-year ban from the NCAA tournament for various recruiting violations under Driesell's successor, Bob Wade.²⁷

Elsewhere, a headline in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* proclaimed "Clouds clear from Bias era: Worst of times in program's history took 16 years to overcome." In the article, Maryland assistant coach Dave Dickerson, a former teammate of Bias, underscored the significance of Maryland's victory: "When the Len Bias tragedy happened, there's no way I thought I'd be here right now. I remember that day like it was yesterday. To erase the stigma the University of Maryland had after the Bias tragedy is one of the biggest accomplishments ever in college basketball."²⁸ The *Los Angeles Times*' Chris Dufresne believed the victory was a reward for Gary Williams, the head coach who came back to save his alma mater.²⁹ Michael Dobie of *Newsday* framed Williams as a conquering hero, the man who finally put the "ghost of Len Bias" to rest: "The rebuilding project taken on by Williams in 1989 is now complete. The ghost of Len Bias has been exorcised, the academic scandals of Lefty Driesell forgotten, the sanctions brought on by Bob Wade put to rest."³⁰

The Curse of Len Bias: Len Bias and the Decline of The Boston Celtics

In Boston, a string of bad luck for the once-dominant Boston Celtics was directly attributed to Len Bias' death. Bias's absence loomed large during the 1986-1987 season. Key bench players Scott Wedman, the player Bias was supposed to replace, and Bill Walton was lost to injuries early in the season. By mid-season, Bob Ryan of the *Boston Globe* began to worry that the Celtics' poor bench would cost the Celtics another championship.³¹ According to Ryan, the Celtics needed Bias' athleticism but instead were stuck with an unproductive bench: "Sure, they would love to have an explosive bench performer such as Ricky Pierce or Darrell Griffith, but they don't. They would have, had Len Bias not chosen the wrong method of celebration. But he did, and they don't. So they go with what they have."³² Without Bias, the Boston Celtics still managed to make the 1987 NBA Finals, but Boston would lose that series to the Los Angeles Lakers. With the loss of their star draft pick and an unreliable bench, the Celtics' starters were forced to play more minutes than expected throughout the season and playoffs.³³ Overworked, the Celtics' starters themselves played through a rash of injuries, and though they fought mightily, the Celtics could not get passed the deeper, healthier Lakers in the final round.³⁴ Worst yet for the Celtics, some observers feared that the aging team would have a difficult time getting younger talent to replace the void left by Bias. In outlining the team's off-season strategy, Bob Ryan lamented "their moves will be limited, pointing up all the more the full catastrophe that was Len Bias' death."³⁵ Ryan interviewed Red Auerbach, who offered a dismal picture of the Celtics' future. Things would have been different for the Celtics, Auerbach argued, if the Celtics had selected another prospect in the 1986 draft, Indiana Pacers star and rookie of the year Chuck Person: "You can go 20 years and not get a second pick in the draft. People thought of it as a loss for this year, but

it was more -- it was a loss for 10 years. Just picture if we had a (Chuck) Person right now . . . he'd be our answer."³⁶

Auerbach's reason for pessimism turned out to be accurate. The rival Detroit Pistons became the dominant team in the NBA's Eastern Conference, making three straight Final appearances from 1988 to 1990. Meanwhile, the Celtics were a team in turmoil. Over the next four seasons, the Celtics faced one crisis after another. Key stars Kevin McHale and Larry Bird went down with serious injuries. The team lost long-time head coach K.C. Jones. A number of draft picks failed to make an impact on the court. The Celtics lost twice in the first round of the playoffs. Even famed announcer Johnny Most took ill.³⁷ As *Boston Globe* columnist Dan Shaughnessy wrote in his book about the history of the Celtics in 1990, "the fall from the heights of 1986 was ongoing. Things hadn't been right since the death of Len Bias."³⁸ As Shaughnessy reasoned, Bias was supposed to be the Celtics' star heading into the decade of the 1990s.³⁹ Instead, the once-proud franchise was declining rapidly. *Boston Globe* reporter Jackie MacMullan called the difficult period the "Curse of Len Bias":

It would be different if the Celtics had recovered from the devastating blow of his cocaine-induced death. Had championship seasons and downtown parades continued, perhaps the sting of the tragedy would not be so piercing still. Yet in truth, the death of Bias was the beginning of a series of blows that has left the Celtics a staggering franchise, a team that has exited in the first round of the playoffs two seasons in a row, a team most NBA experts believe will continue its downward spiral.⁴⁰

Bias's absence was framed as the primary problem for the team. One rival general manager thought Bias's death set the team back 15 years. MacMullan discussed a number of problems that plagued the Celtics: free agency, bad drafting, and an aging core of

players. However, MacMullan noted Bias's death was the first of a series of crises that plagued a team used to overwhelming success⁴¹.

By the summer of 1993, the Celtics were still in a free fall. Franchise cornerstones Larry Bird and Kevin McHale were forced to retire due to injuries. Reggie Lewis, the new Celtics star, dealt with a heart condition that threatened to end his career. The team seemed stuck in mediocrity, not bad enough to qualify for the NBA lottery, but not good enough to win the championships Boston came to expect.⁴² Malcolm Moran of the *New York Times* noted the Celtics' problems were compounded by Bias's absence: "not far from the surface of the collective Celtic memory is the knowledge that Len Bias, whose drug-induced death took place the day after Boston made him their No. 1 selection in the 1986 draft, could have been finishing his seventh season and entering his prime."⁴³

The downward trajectory of the Celtics took a tragic turn a month later when Lewis dropped dead of his heart condition while shooting a basketball doing a light workout. The death of the 27-year old team captain stunned New England and invoked comparisons to Bias's sudden death seven years earlier.⁴⁴ For Bob Ryan, it was one more example of the Celtics' sudden misfortune:

Whatever happened to that Midas Touch?

For 30 years, the Boston Celtics seemed mystically blessed. From the moment Red Auerbach managed to hornswoggle Bill Russell out of the clutches of both St. Louis and Cincinnati to the sounding of the buzzer to signal championship No. 16 on that glorious June Sunday afternoon in 1986, the Boston Celtics were the one American sports franchise that always seemed to do the right thing and always seemed both smarter and luckier than all others.

And now?

Is there some sort of biblical retribution taking place? That's one explanation for what has happened during the last seven years, culminating in the unspeakably

horrible death of 27-year-old Reggie Lewis, dead of cardiac arrest under troubling circumstances.⁴⁵

Ryan listed the ten trades or draft picks that helped the Celtics win 16 championships from the drafting of Hall of Fame center Bill Russell in 1956 to acquisition of Bill Walton during the 1985-1986 season. Ryan then listed the nine moments since 1986, starting with Bias's death and ending with Lewis' death.⁴⁶ At least for Bob Ryan, the "curse of Len Bias" was real.

The curse would continue to linger over the Celtics, at least in the eyes of journalists and even some players. *Sports Illustrated's* Leigh Montville captured the following exchange between Celtic players Xavier McDaniel and Robert Parish during a painful losing streak during the 1993-94 season:

What happened?" Celtic forward Xavier McDaniel asked after the loss to Houston. "When I played for other teams and I'd come in here, the Celtics would be 32-6 and the leprechaun would be running all over the building."

"The leprechaun is dead," Parish said. "Len Bias died and Larry's back hurt and Kevin's body fell apart and Reggie Lewis is dead. The leprechaun has been dead for a long time. What year was it that Len Bias died?"

"He was our first draft choice in 1986," someone said.

"Eight years," Parish said. "The leprechaun has been dead for eight years. That's the way it is. He hasn't been around here for a long time."⁴⁷

The leprechaun represented "the Celtics mystique," an aura of invincibility which historian Raymond Arsenault said left with Bias's death.⁴⁸ As the Celtics struggled to return to the top of the NBA through the 1990s and early 2000s, journalists noted the rapid decline of the team from one of the league's elite to one of the league's worst since Bias's death.⁴⁹ Other journalists contemplated how good the Celtics would have been with a healthy Bias and Lewis on the court.⁵⁰ In 1994, Michael Wilbon argued Bias's

death not only altered the fortunes of the Boston Celtics but the entire landscape of the NBA: “With Bias in the lineup, Bird and McHale would have played fewer minutes, both might be playing today. With Bias in the lineup, there wouldn't have been any Lakers Repeat or Pistons Bad Boys, and Jordan might still be pursuing a second title. You can make yourself crazy playing "What-if" over Len Bias and the Boston Celtics.”⁵¹

Basketball fans throughout New England had to wait 22 years for the next Celtics championship. The Curse of Len Bias officially lifted on June 17, 2008, as the Boston Celtics defeated the Los Angeles Lakers 131-92 to win the fifth and deciding game of the 2008 NBA Finals. Mirroring the coverage of Maryland basketball's championship in 2002, journalists covering the Celtics' triumph considered the victory a win over the team's tortured history that began with Bias's death. Tim O'Sullivan of the *Concord Monitor* compared the past 22 years between Celtics' championships to “some kind of Biblical plague” which began with “the infamous death of Len Bias in 1986.”⁵² Bill Doyle of the *Telegraph & Gazette* reasoned that with Boston's latest triumph, the “ghosts of Len Bias and Reggie Lewis” as well as other misfortunes that tortured the team over the past two decades “no longer haunt the Celtics as much.”⁵³ Writing on the eve of the clinching game, veteran *Boston Globe* columnist Dan Shaughnessy recapped the Celtics' long road to the 2008 NBA Finals. He recounted the euphoria of the 1986 championship and the subsequent drafting of Bias, as “it looked like the Celtics might run out of space for championship flags on the [Boston] Garden's dusty ceiling.”⁵⁴ Shaughnessy pointed to Bias's death as the triggering event of a two-decade decline for the Celtics. He interviewed Celtics' great Bob Cousy, who summed up the feelings of many Bostonians who believed in the Curse of Len Bias: "I agree with people who trace it back to the Bias

thing. From that day on, I can't think of any deal they made, or any draft choice they made that went in their favor. Twenty-two years. Nothing, nothing, nothing. It was just bad karma all around."⁵⁵ He lauded General Manager Danny Ainge and owner Wyc Grousbeck for constructing a championship team a year after winning only 24 wins the previous season. Though Shaughnessy cautioned fans to not take the current championship run for granted, he struck an optimistic tone after hearing Grousbeck's desire to have the Celtics return to their historical dominance that had eluded the team since Bias's death: "Just like in the old days. Before everything changed."⁵⁶

Bias and the ongoing crisis of the black male athlete

The mythologies that linked Len Bias to the decline of the Boston Celtics and the Maryland Terrapins were both rooted in growing concerns over the behavior of the black athlete in professional basketball and major college sports. After Bias's death, both the NCAA and the NBA took steps to address these concerns through rule changes aimed at policing and controlling increasingly lucrative black bodies.⁵⁷ Bias's death sparked a reform movement led by college presidents who wanted to regain control of sports on their campus and avoid the tragedy and scandal that befell the University of Maryland.⁵⁸ In response to this movement and the threat of Congressional intervention in college sports reform, the NCAA adopted a series of academic reforms in 1990, including requiring all member schools to release the graduation rates of their athletes.⁵⁹ Journalists routinely used these graduation rates to monitor the academic performance of student-athletes, primarily athletes in the mostly-black revenue sports of men's basketball and football.⁶⁰ The NBA and its teams also used Bias's death to bring about reforms aimed at policing the black athlete. Other members of the 1986 draft class, including William

Bedford of the Phoenix Suns and Chris Washburn of the Golden State Warriors, also struggled with drugs during the 1986-1987 season. NBA teams used the ill-fated 1986 draft class to justify tough background checks on prospective players. Interviewed before the 1987 draft, Chicago Bulls executive Jerry Krause acknowledged teams were doing the checks to avoid the devastation of picking a player could not be productive due to drugs: "What's happening in the league this year is that teams are spending more time with the potential draft picks, checking out psychological profiles. Nobody wants to have what happened to Boston, Golden State and Phoenix last year. One guy is dead and the other two have serious problems."⁶¹ The following year, teams admitted hiring private security firms to investigate prospects. One investigator boasted about the thorough approach of his company: "We check out what kind of person they are-if they had any discipline problems in high school or college, if they had any trouble with the police, if they're using drugs, even their sex life."⁶² Taken together, the actions of both the NCAA and NBA, as well as the support of these actions within the sports media, reflect longstanding white societal anxieties centered on the perceived deviance of the black body.⁶³

The academic successes and failures of Maryland student-athletes became of great civic concern during the 1990s for both local papers, the *Washington Post* and *Baltimore Sun*. These reports showed an athletic department struggling to balance academic performance and the need to win games. There was a particular concern for black student-athletes, who made up the bulk of both Maryland basketball and football teams. The tracking of student-athlete progress through graduation rates reflected the paternalistic discourse surrounding black student-athletes who participate in major

college athletics.⁶⁴ In 1990, *Washington Post* writers Amy Goldstein and Mark Asher shadowed Evers Burns, a black basketball player who had already been dismissed from the university on one occasion due to poor grades. As Goldstein and Asher noted, while the academic performance of Maryland basketball and football players had improved since Bias's death, both teams still brought in a high number of athletes who did not meet the university's normal admission standards.⁶⁵ On the 10th anniversary of Bias's death, the *Baltimore Sun's* Brad Snyder reported that out of the eight basketball players who had spent four years under Gary Williams, only one had graduated from Maryland. All but one of the players examined was black. Snyder provided a status update for the seven players without degrees, listing their current whereabouts, job prospects, and for some, even the amount of hours needed to complete their degree.⁶⁶ Three days later, a similar report in the *Washington Post* suggested the university had eased some of the academic reforms put in place after Bias's death to become more competitive in basketball and football. The *Washington Post* report tracked the academic histories of two black basketball players, Laron Proft and Terrell Stokes, to demonstrate the challenges faced by student-athletes trying to balance academics and sports. Stokes admitted that he was being so tired from practice that he often skipped class. He also said his main focus on a professional basketball career: "I feel like I have one foot in the NBA already," Stokes said at the end of the article.⁶⁷ To *Baltimore Sun* columnist Michael Olesker, such thinking was indicative of a sporting culture that still had not learned the lessons from Len Bias's death:

A decade ago, as Len Bias' life was ending, we told ourselves lies. We said Bias was an aberration, a singular story. Then the investigations began, and the tales of Maryland basketball players who never went to class, never opened a book, never graduated, never had the discipline to match their athletic talents.

And 10 years later, after promises of redemption, after NCAA sanctions, we learn that graduation rates among basketball players here are still pretty dismal.

On glum anniversaries like this, we wonder how much has changed. No Len Bias is dying with a body full of cocaine this week, but how many kids have written off their future by stepping off the basketball court and immediately losing their way?⁶⁸

In a similar fashion, the cautionary tale of the 1986 NBA Draft class was deployed to address the brewing crisis affecting NBA during the late 1990s and 2000s. Through the 1990s, the sad tale of the 1986 NBA Draft became entrenched as part of league lore.⁶⁹ According to *Sports Illustrated* writer Phil Taylor, only 7 out of the 24 players drafted in the first round of the draft remained in the league by 1996; many of those players no longer in the league faced issues with drugs.⁷⁰ The image of the deviant NBA player lingered into the late 1990s. A 1997 investigation by *New York Times* reporter Selena Roberts estimated 60 to 70 percent of the league had a substance abuse problem, and that the league's lax drug testing policy did little to curtail the rampant use of marijuana.⁷¹ A 1998 *Sports Illustrated* cover story about athletes fathering out-of-wedlock children focused heavily on the misdeeds of NBA stars.⁷² Making matters worse for the league was the growing anxieties over the imminent retirement of league standard-bearer Michael Jordan. Stars poised to take over the league, such as Philadelphia 76ers guard Allen Iverson, represented the antithesis of the league's color-blind approach to marketing. Iverson and other young players, who increasingly left college early or skipped college altogether, embraced hip-hop fashion and style. By the late 1990s, commentators associated hip-hop culture with the moral decline of the league.⁷³

With the uncertain state of the league and its new prospects, journalists used the 1986 draft class as the case that justified pre-draft background checks and the removal of

high school prospects altogether. Writing for the black newspaper *Michigan Chronicle*, Danial C. Williams Jr. railed against high school players selected during the 2001 NBA Draft. He was particularly disturbed that the Washington Wizards and general manager Michael Jordan took a high-school prospect first overall:

Ah yes, the NBA draft has come and gone and now we'll see who knew what. For the first time in league history, a high school player, 6'11" Kwame Brown, was the number one overall pick. I'm really surprised Michael Jordan and the Washington Wizards took a teenager. Blame it on potential all you want, it really makes me wonder about stuff like work ethic and potential.⁷⁴

For Williams, the league had not learned anything from the immature 1986 draft class, and instead was embracing riskier young prospects: "See how much the NBA has learned? Now they've gone almost exclusively with kids. I know youth will be served but this is ridiculous."⁷⁵ In 2002, Harvey Fialkov of the *Sun-Sentinel* noted that in previous drafts, "teams have tossed away millions on immature teenagers from hardscrabble backgrounds who prefer scoring drugs over points."⁷⁶ He then rehashed the sad history of Bias and the other members of the 1986 NBA Draft. He told the story of Isaiah Rider, a 1993 draftee whose career was derailed after a series of drug-related offenses and listed a number of current prospects who had previous run-ins with the law or unstable childhoods.⁷⁷ Fialkov framed drafting of troubled prospects as a risky proposition for teams and noted that the draft picks themselves are treated as commodities by NBA franchises. He reported that the Philadelphia 76ers had invested in a background check for star guard Allen Iverson; as one former team executive suggested, Iverson was worth the risk due to his play on the court and the revenue he had generated for the franchise: "He may not be perfect, but he reinvigorated a dead franchise and was the most important player to the organization since [Julius Erving]. He packs the building and has what I call

the wow quotient."⁷⁸ However, risky prospects such as Bias or Rider who didn't work out were, obviously, a bad investment for teams.

The Next Jordan: Len Bias as Cautionary Tale

Bias's promising college career and tragic death was the subject of the 2009 ESPN documentary *Without Bias*, produced by filmmaker Kirk Fraser. The film is part of ESPN's popular *30 for 30* series, a collection of films about recent sports history. The popularity of the series makes the films particularly important spaces to examine present-day myths about basketball culture and the construction of basketball history: "ESPN's basketball documentaries may well constitute the most important contemporary site in which long-standing assumptions and preoccupations concerning the intersection of basketball play, social and moral values, and race may be raised, reinforced, or challenged," argued cultural scholar Yago Colas.⁷⁹ Though primarily a film that mourned and honored Bias, *Without Bias* was also a cautionary tale that lamented Bias's lost potential and missed opportunity at NBA greatness. It built on the myths that projected that Bias would be the Next Great Celtics Superstar and a rival to Michael Jordan to emphasize the tragedy: that drugs could bring down even a great athlete such as Bias.

The documentary represented Bias as the embodiment of the American Dream lost to failure — someone who had the ticket out of his working-class upbringing but foolishly lost his life and that dream after taking drugs. Like other film narratives about social mobility, race, and basketball, *Without Bias* constructed Bias's college career as "a staging ground to develop and demonstrate one's discipline, talent, and character."⁸⁰ The first half of the film traced Len Bias's transformation into to a college All-American. Viewers learned from Bias's childhood friend Reginald Gaskins that the future star was

cut from his junior high team, yet vowed to make the NBA. *Without Bias* argued that Bias's strong work ethic and determination almost made this dream a reality. "You can just see his whole demeanor change," said teammate Keith Gatlin of Bias after he led Maryland to the 1984 ACC tournament. "He just worked extremely hard after that and started lifting weights in the summer with the football guys, started dedicating his body to . . . becoming a much better player and a pro."⁸¹ *Without Bias* combined archival footage of Bias making spectacular dunks and shooting with perfect form with glowing commentary from coaches, teammates, opponents, and journalists who all emphasized Bias's growing dominance as a player in his years at Maryland.

Without Bias highlighted Bias's potential for superstardom by noting that he had the work ethic, talent, and maturity to flourish in professional basketball and comparing him with Michael Jordan. As film scholar Aaron Baker notes, basketball films since the 1980s often used Jordan as the embodiment of the American Dream.⁸² *Without Bias* showed highlights of Bias battling Jordan during their college careers, with Bias often coming out on top. Discussing the greatness of both Bias and Jordan, ESPN commentator and former *Washington Post* columnist Michael Wilbon relayed a story from Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, who named the duo the two best players he saw ever saw in the Atlantic Coast Conference. Attesting to Bias's on-the-court prowess, Wilbon argued "of course, that sounds like incredible praise, unbelievable praise for them. But for those of us who watched Len Bias play night after night, it wasn't unbelievable. It was very believable."⁸³ Wilbon further linked the pair's approach to the game: "they both played with a rage, controlled rage, almost anger. But it wasn't anger, because if it was anger, then it's sort of destructive. But it wasn't destructive"⁸⁴. In other words, Bias

possessed Jordan's drive, discipline, and self-determination, qualities the film suggested would have served him well in the NBA.

Len Bias as Folk Hero

As part of ESPN.com's tribute to Len Bias on the 20th anniversary of his death, writer Scoop Jackson called Bias the ultimate basketball martyr, a player who had transcended into "something greater than ... Jordan."⁸⁵ Jackson believed Bias transformed from mere mortal to a deity on February 20, 1986, when he made a spectacular steal and dunk during the Terrapins' upset of top-ranked North Carolina. Dubbing the play "the Jesus dunk," Jackson exclaimed:

The dunk was a reverse, you see. And as Bias released his hands from the rim, he extended his arms ... out ... while still in the air ... as if he were on a cross ... as if he were Christ.

While 10 feet above the ground he seemed to float back down to the court, arms still out, palms still open. It was like he descended down to earth from heaven, from above the rim. The second it took for his feet to touch the court seemed more than one second in time. It seemed slower than slow motion, it seemed as if he was letting the world know his destiny, who he was destined to be.⁸⁶

Jackson argued that Bias's death robbed the world of seeing him reach his true potential, which was the greatest basketball player the world had ever seen. To Jackson, Bias "showed us not just how well he could play the game, but how the game was going to be played if he were allowed to live" and was a preview to the explosive game of current superstar LeBron James.⁸⁷ Though the circumstances of Bias's tragic demise still left Jackson in denial, he took solace in the fact that Bias had become a legend still celebrated throughout modern basketball culture:

It validates all that he did while he was here, validates all the work he put in, all the passion he had, and -- regardless of how his life ended -- that he didn't take God's gift of basketball to him for granted.

Because if Len Bias did, God would not have allowed him to impersonate his Son in a basketball game. Which may be the reason He has not allowed anyone to do it since.⁸⁸

The legend of Len Bias that Scoop Jackson discussed is fueled in part by the fallen star's presence within new media. Thanks to the popular video sharing website YouTube, older fans nostalgic about Bias and younger fans who want to learn more about him can watch his Maryland games and user-produced highlight videos. Viewers can watch the entire broadcast of Bias's legendary 1986 performance against top-ranked North Carolina, a highlight of "the Jesus dunk," and Bias's battles against future NBA superstars David Robinson and Michael Jordan."⁸⁹ Through simulations posted by players of the video game series NBA 2K, YouTube even allows viewers to watch Bias as a Celtic, playing alongside Larry Bird and Kevin McHale.⁹⁰ As media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz observed, celebrities are preserved through video and other new media technology, continuing to practice their craft.⁹¹ Through video highlights, Bias is preserved in perpetuity as Maryland's star forward, one of the best basketball talents of his generation.

Through these performances, Bias has gained new, young fans. In 2014, the *Baltimore Sun*'s Don Markus discovered current Terrapins Dez Wells and Ernie Graham had watched highlights on Bias on YouTube; Wells compared Bias to NBA star LeBron James, while Graham gushed Bias could have been the greatest ever. Markus also interviewed Dave Ungrady, who noted young players were familiar with Bias' talent but had never heard about his death. One high school player even called Bias his favorite player.⁹² That player, Karl Anthony-Towns, is now an NBA star for the Minnesota

Timberwolves. Towns acknowledged that he added elements of Bias's game to his own.⁹³ Towns also noted he was drawn to Bias's style of play: "He played with ferocity. ... He was tall, just like me. But he was able to do a lot of things I just want to do in my game."⁹⁴ On the cusp of his own professional career as a rising star the University of Kentucky, Towns acknowledged he used Bias' story to focus on his larger goal of starring in the NBA: "He was also a great lesson. Stay focused on the path. Don't ever detour from it."⁹⁵ That Towns and other young players would embrace Bias, flaws and all, as a hero is significant. Despite the tragic circumstances of his death, young players such as Towns are able to appreciate Bias's performances on the court, unburdened by the stigma attached to Bias's name during the late 1980s.

Defining A Legacy: Len Bias Enters The Maryland Athletics Hall of Fame

The contest over the memory of Len Bias has hindered efforts to honor and memorialize the fallen star. In 2013, Maryland State Senator Victor Ramirez wrote a bill that would have gone toward erecting a statue of Bias at Northwestern High School in Hyattsville, Md., Bias's alma mater. Ramirez, a former fan, had a positive image of the player and thought Bias could inspire a new generation of students:

I grew up with a Len Bias poster in my room. He represented someone who could make it. He was one of us. I think it was a tragedy, but you can't allow that one night to take away from who he was, what he stood for. I think he stood for giving people hope and giving kids who grew up in the neighborhood just like his hope that education, the University of Maryland - that college was possible.⁹⁶

However, Ramirez eventually withdrew the request in front of the legislature after meeting widespread opposition to the plan. Mayor Malinda Miles of nearby Mt. Rainier, Maryland thought Bias was a horrible role model for students to emulate: "to have died of an overdose of drugs, regardless of the reason or circumstances, is not something I

would want my grandchildren to model.”⁹⁷ The controversy gained the attention of the popular sports blog Deadspin. Representing those appalled by Len Bias’s use as an anti-drug cautionary tale, writer Tommy Craggs railed against the paranoia over the statue, connecting it to the paranoia that fueled the War on Drugs in the aftermath of the basketball stars’ death. Craggs argued that the push against the statue demonstrated that Bias’s memory had been finally been co-opted by anti-drug forces that had tied Bias’s reputation to the manner of his death.⁹⁸

The battle to define Bias’s legacy has particularly been fierce at the University of Maryland. In more recent times, Bias has been at least partially embraced as a folk hero on the College Park campus. Even three decades after his death, Maryland students still wear his jersey to basketball games. Amongst the pictures depicting the history of the University of Maryland on the wall of Potomac Pizza across the street from campus is an image of Len Bias shooting over Michael Jordan. Down the road, customers at Main Event barbershop are greeted with a large framed Len Bias jersey placed on a wall at the center of the business. A sandwich shop near campus features the “The #34 Legend” sandwich.⁹⁹ Ambivalence remained about the best way to honor his legacy. At times, there seemed to be an effort to actively forget or downplay Bias’s time on the College Park campus. In the November 1986 *Sports Illustrated* article about the crisis at the university, Craig Neff and Bruce Selcraig noted that the campus bookstore still sold Bias’s jerseys, but that no permanent memorial was in the works to honor Bias through the university.¹⁰⁰ On the eve of the 1985-86 season, Bias had been the featured attraction in the men's basketball media guide. A year later, there was no mention of Bias' death in that season's media guide.¹⁰¹ According to C. Fraser Smith’s book about the Bias tragedy,

the University secretly retired Bias's number within Cole Field House. There was no fanfare, no great ceremony, no repeat of the emotional memorial service held just days after Bias's death.¹⁰²

Most significantly, Len Bias was kept out of the University of Maryland Athletics Hall of Fame until 2014, nearly three decades after his last game. Halls of fame are key sites of memory in the selection and preservation of sports heroes. In their study of college athletics halls of fame, researchers at Ball State University argued hall of fame induction ceremonies have a particularly important role in creating a university's sports heroes, as the "ceremonies convert past accomplishments into immortal status."¹⁰³ Richard Ian Kimball notes halls of fame help "ensure that the exploits of sports heroes transcend time."¹⁰⁴ Sports historian Gerald Redmond says sports halls of fame served a quasi-religious function within sports fandom, allowing fans to connect with their heroes:

Athletes become 'immortal heroes' as they are "enshrined" in a sports hall of fame, when 'devoted admirers' gaze at their 'revered figures' or read plaques 'graven in marble,' before departing 'often very moved' (or even 'teary-eyed') from the many 'hushed rooms, filled with nostalgia.' This is the jargon of the modern churches of sport in the twentieth century.¹⁰⁵

Bias's basketball credentials were unheralded at the University of Maryland. By the time Len Bias played his final game as a Maryland Terrapin in March 1986, he had established himself as the greatest player in school history. In a program that had produced stars such as Gene Shue, John Lucas, Buck Williams, Albert King, Len Elmore, and Tom McMillen, Bias was the only player to have ever have won two ACC player of the year awards.¹⁰⁶ Behind Bias's stellar play, the 1984-85 Terrapins became only the second Maryland basketball team to win the coveted ACC tournament. He excelled while facing top competition such as Michael Jordan and David Robinson, indicating that he was one

of the best basketball players of his generation. At the heart of the controversy over Bias was the requirement that honorees “must have good character and reputation, and not have been a source of embarrassment in any way to the University.”¹⁰⁷ As Don Markus of the *Baltimore Sun* noted, Bias’s induction was held up by “more than a decade of heated debate” over the character issue.¹⁰⁸ In the eyes of at least some Maryland athletic officials and alumni, Bias’s basketball credentials were not worthy enough to be celebrated as a hero through the university.

Debates over the induction continued even after the university's decision to honor Bias became public. These debates were useful in not only tracking differing opinions about Bias but also tracking differing views on who is considered worthy enough to be immortalized in a sports hall of fame. On the National Public Radio show *Tell Me More*, sportswriter Kevin Blackistone and *National Review* writer Neil Minkoff argued Bias and other controversial athletes should be allowed in halls of fame, but that their controversial histories should be part of their narratives within the halls’ exhibits. Law professor Paul Butler and writer Jim Izrael disagreed, arguing Bias was being honored for his merits on the court, and that his death should not be mentioned within the hall itself. Host Michel Martin took the discussion to the next level, asking the panel if an athlete accused of a heinous crime such as rape be allowed in the hall of fame. Butler and Izrael stuck by their position. According to Butler, honorees of a sports hall of fame should be included based on their athletic ability: “the metric should be their athletic skills not their characters as human being. Because, if we do then a whole lot of people are going to come out of the hall of fame.”¹⁰⁹ Blackistone maintained that in telling the full stories of Bias and other troubled athletes, halls of fame could help produce cautionary tales around the great

athletes they honored: “I think it's important to see Len Bias as one of us as well. He's an extraordinary athlete that most of us cannot beat, but he also had a tragic flaw. And I think other people - I think, you know, other people - there are people in halls of fame who have committed criminal acts, and I think that should be a part of it.”¹¹⁰

One prominent college basketball writer, the *Washington Post's* John Feinstein argued that the character stipulation justified keeping Bias out of the Hall of Fame entirely. Feinstein compared Bias to disgraced baseball star Pete Rose, whose gambling transgressions got him banned from the Baseball Hall of Fame:

There's a character clause on the Baseball Hall of Fame ballot, which is why no one should ever vote for Rose or any of those who took steroids and lied about taking them.

There also is a character clause attached to the Maryland Hall of Fame. Apparently the committee decided 28 years was enough time either to look the other way or believe that dying of a cocaine overdose doesn't represent a major character flaw.¹¹¹

Feinstein argued that although Bias had done so much good for Maryland as a player, the fallen star also brought decades of hurt to College Park with his actions. He cited the words of Gary Williams, who himself felt uneasy about the honor, thought that Bias's inclusion could be transformed into a cautionary tale for young fans. Just as Rose hurt baseball's reputation, Feinstein believed Bias had harmed and embarrassed the University of Maryland.¹¹² Feinstein's comments on Bias were met with some pushback. Former *Washington Post* writer Jeff Ermann argued Feinstein's column was “sanctimonious and simplistic” and overlooked the fact that Bias was a college kid who made a mistake, not a criminal like Rose who threatened the integrity of his sport.¹¹³ To Ermann, the 2002 championship helped to rid Maryland of the damage done by Bias: “Had Feinstein

written this column 20 years ago, it would've had more merit. But by now, the remaining Bias baggage is mostly sadness and curiosity — not resentment or controversy. [Gary] Williams willed his way through it all and won a national title, lifting the dark shadow cast by Bias's death."¹¹⁴ Ermann's objections were echoed in a letter to the *Post* by Darryl Hill, the first black football player at the University of Maryland and in the ACC. Hill believed that it was unfair for Feinstein to compare Bias to Rose, and that professional and college Halls of Fame were filled with athletes who suffered through some form of substance abuse. To Hill, it was time for the University of Maryland to do the right thing and honor Bias:

Fifty years ago, the University of Maryland stood by me when I was challenged as the first African American to play sports in the Atlantic Coast Conference. Just as it did then, Maryland did the right thing by putting Bias in its Hall of Fame.

It's time to forgive. Len Bias was one of Maryland's greatest athletes. He paid for his mistake with his life. That's punishment enough.¹¹⁵

The University of Maryland has made additional efforts, beyond its belated induction of Bias into its Hall of Fame, to both acknowledge the his tragedy and move to heal old wounds. On the eve of Bias's induction, *Terp* magazine, the University of Maryland's official publication for alumni, devoted a feature story to his legacy on campus. The cover featured a photo of Bias, his back turned to the camera, soaring over opponents for a rebound. The entire image is faded to black, except for Bias, illuminated as the cover's clear focus. Next to Bias reads the feature's headline "Our Bias," and the teaser "An Honor Aims to Heal a Painful Past." Inside, the feature story by Liam Ferrell told the familiar tale of Bias: his storied career, the excitement of draft day, his stunning death, the equally stunning news of his cocaine usage, and the resulting fallout. But

Farrell’s article also framed the honor as an attempt at healing and the end of a traumatic era at Maryland. Farrell interviewed Kevin Glover, president of the athletic alumni group who made the Hall of Fame selection. Glover expressed his hope that the honor could prompt people to focus on how special Bias was as a player and as a person: “Hopefully it's an opportunity to heal, it's an opportunity to forgive for those that want to blame a young man for a lot of things he wasn't in control of. The part that has been overlooked for many years is celebrating the person that Len Bias was.”¹¹⁶ Farrell also captured the gratitude of Bias’s mother, Lonise Bias, who felt no ill-will toward the university for the long wait, and his teammate, Jeff Baxter, who saw the honor as a “kind of closure” for the ordeal.¹¹⁷ Farrell underscored the fact that since his death, Bias had rarely been associated with something positive, especially on the campus of the University of Maryland. At the end of the article, Farrell observed that a new generation would come to see to Bias differently, as a result of how the university was honoring him:

The most visible memorial to Bias on campus today is above the court of the Xfinity Center, a red banner with white lettering and black numbers that hangs in front of thousands of spectators every year and above the players on the court below.

The plain “Bias 34” gives no indication of a legacy any more fraught than “Elmore 41” or “B. Williams 52.” With just a name and a number, in Maryland colors, he is once again just a player who had enough on-court accomplishments — who did enough good things — to deserve remembrance.¹¹⁸

¹ Dave Ungrady, *Born Ready: The Mixed Legacy of Len Bias* (Self-published: 2011), 13-14.

² Ungrady does not mention that Prefontaine died in a single-car drunk driving accident. See Theresa A. Walton, "Steve Prefontaine: From Rebel with a Cause to Hero with a Swoosh," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 21, no. 1 (2004): 61-83.

³ Lewis is another interesting choice by Ungrady; reports surfaced in 1995 that Lewis' heart condition might have been linked to cocaine usage.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁷ Ungrady, *Born Ready*, 14.

⁸ eg. Mike Littwin, "End of season, but start of new era at Maryland," *Baltimore Sun*, Mar. 21, 1988; Michael Olesker, "At long last, ghosts departing Cole Field House," *Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 25, 1994; Gene Wojciechowski, "'The Beast' Joe Smith Makes Maryland a Final Four Prospect," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 31, 1995.

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Chapter 4: The Symbolism of Len Bias in the Long War on Drugs

As the 20th anniversary of Len Bias's death approached, his mother Lonise Bias was busy spreading her message that her son did not die in vain.

A full-time motivational speaker and anti-drug activist since her son's death, Lonise Bias made several appearances with members of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy and the Drug Enforcement Administration to commemorate the June 19, 2006 anniversary.¹ At a DEA-sponsored candlelight vigil commemorating lives cut short by drug usage, she struck an optimistic tone about the impact her son had after his tragic death: "His death woke the nation up. We got on the ball, and we started a lot of programs, and a lot of things happened to prevent drug use with young people. I believe Len has truly done more in death than he ever could have done in life."² Her comments mirrored those of government officials, who believed Bias remained, two decades after his death, an effective cautionary tale against drugs. The drug czar for President George W. Bush, John Walters, also held that overnight Bias's death had first changed the national attitude towards cocaine usage and then sparked activism against drugs: "The attitude in the country was that doing cocaine was exciting fun. Len Bias's death changed the nation's attitude about drug use. People said, 'This is wrong, this is bad.' It energized parents to do something about it."³ Lonise Bias's crusade against drugs personally touched *Louisville Courier-Journal* sports columnist Jerry Brewer, who called for his readers to mobilize for the ongoing fight against drugs and urban crime: "We have to hound others about the

dangers of drug abuse. We have to be overprotective of youths. We have to stop glorifying the lifestyles of hustlers. We have to stay ahead of the curve. We cannot relent. We must be like Lonise Bias.”⁴

In a June 24, 2006 op-ed column in the *Washington Post*, a different view of Bias’s impact on the War on Drugs emerged. Eric E. Sterling, the counsel to the House Judiciary Committee during the summer of 1986, and Julie Stewart, president of Families Against Mandatory Minimums, argued Bias’s death created a moral panic which resulted in harmful drug legislation that fueled the nation’s mass incarceration problem:

When Len Bias, the basketball star, overdosed on cocaine 20 years ago, Len Bias, the symbol, was born. To many he symbolized the corruption of college athletics — stars whose academic performance is poor, if not irrelevant, but who are essential to bringing in donations and other revenue. To others, he became the object lesson: Cocaine is dangerous, don't do it, you can die. For yet others, Bias symbolizes the danger that arises when a powerful symbol overwhelms careful judgment about what ought to be the law.⁵

Sterling and Stewart directly tied Bias’s death to the frenzied push that led to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. According to the activists, the resulting mandatory minimums overwhelmingly punished lower-level drug dealers, not the major drug traffickers Congress sought to punish. Sterling and Stewart argued the number of federal prisoners skyrocketed thanks to the drug laws implemented after Bias’s death:

Not surprisingly, the federal prison population has exploded. From 1954 to 1976, it fluctuated between 20,000 and 24,000. By 1986 it had grown to 36,000. Today it exceeds 190,000 prisoners, up 527 percent in 20 years. More than half this population is made up of drug offenders, most of whom are serving sentences created in the weeks after Len Bias died.⁶

Sterling and Stewart urged President George W. Bush to repeal mandatory minimums. They referenced the successful repeal of similar drug laws in the early

1970s, voted for by the president's father George H.W. Bush: "With his son in the White House, this would be a good time for history to repeat itself, and for this sad legacy of Len Bias's death to finally end."⁷

Twenty years after his death, Len Bias was still being used to help justify the War on Drugs and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, and evaluate them as successes or failures. The differing uses of Len Bias by his mother and anti-Drug War activists such as Eric Sterling and Julie Stewart highlight how different constituencies were differently appropriating Bias's life and death.

Through her work as a motivational speaker and her ties to government anti-drug efforts, Lonise Bias helped to establish Bias as a martyr for the War on Drugs. With her spirited lectures that emphasize the importance of good decision-making and standing up to peer pressure, Bias ideologically aligned herself with the conservative movement that used her son to mount the initial War on Drugs.⁸ Lonise Bias, the federal government, and other Drug War supporters all used Len Bias's death as a parable to explain how to solve the ongoing crisis of the black inner city, and more specifically, the plight of the urban black male. The "make good choices" rhetoric of Lonise Bias fit into the New Right political perspective that contrasted law-abiding blacks with their deviant neighbors, and in so doing obscured the role of government, economic conditions, red-lining history, and race above all in the creation of impoverished urban areas. The bootstrap, "make good choices" simplified narrative became the argument for the draconian drug laws passed after Bias's death.⁹

On the other ideological end of the drug law spectrum, activists such as Sterling and Stewart argued that Bias's death gave rise to a moral panic and a deeply flawed legislative response. In the estimation of Sterling and Stewart, Len Bias's death was misused to orchestrate drug policy aimed at major drug traffickers, and in a consequence that should have been anticipated, resulted in unfairly punishing hundreds of thousands of lower-level drug offenders. Anti-Drug War activists also used Len Bias to highlight another crisis facing black men, the problem of high incarceration rates tied to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 and other punitive War on Drugs legislation. Activists such as Eric Sterling argued political opportunists who wanted to quickly address the growing national fear over crack cocaine hijacked Bias's death and linked the fallen star to the drug, despite evidence that pointed to Bias overdosing on powder cocaine instead. Sterling and other activists worked to dismantle the mistruths surrounding Bias's death and those about the potency of crack cocaine itself, in order to refocus attention on the problem of mass incarceration of black men exacerbated by anti-crack legislation.

A consequence of this attempted reframing of the Drug Wars has been a reframing of black men in American society. Activists and sympathetic journalists who have chronicled the mass incarceration issue have portrayed young black men as victims of the justice system, rather than as the embodiment of violence and mayhem the War on Drugs characterized them. In challenging the mythology of Len Bias adopted by Lonise Bias, the Reagan Administration and other supporters of the War on Drugs, these activists have offered counter-narratives that have highlighted the

damage that mythology has done to black communities and to generations of young black men.

Pushing Back on the War Against Drugs

While commentators in the media played a critical role in transforming the Bias tragedy into a racialized drug panic, there were always a few journalists who pushed back against the dominant coverage and the usage of Bias as a politicized anti-Drug symbol. In a departure from the pro-War on Drugs coverage in other black publications following Bias's death, for example, Alfreda Madison of the *Washington Informer* suggested that Bias's death was being exploited by members of Congress to appeal to voters of the upcoming 1986 mid-term elections. Analyzing the rush to pass the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, Madison asked: "Is this present concern prompted by the Len Bias incident or did his death provide a new election gimmick which will place other important issues on the back burner?"¹⁰ Foreshadowing the mass incarceration crisis, Madison also questioned the punitive measures championed by Congress: "The House proposed a stronger prison term, but there is already a shortage of prison space. They authorized money for building new prisons, but what will be done with the drug offenders while waiting for completion of the prisons? Money has been authorized, without clear-cut knowledge of the funding source."¹¹ Madison's colleague Lillian Wiggins also argued in 1986 that coverage of Bias trial was racist, believing that many in the press were demonizing University of Maryland basketball players and Brian Tribble.¹² And the following year, New York University researchers pointed to the racial element of the crack frenzy in their scathing review of network television news in *TV Guide*. Edwin Diamond and his team of researchers

argued that the panic around crack cocaine was amplified due to the belief that the drug was spreading to neighborhoods home to “comfortable TV viewers,” or white suburbanites.¹³ They caustically noted that death of Len Bias, who was viewed as the embodiment of the American Dream and someone who did not fit the profile of the inner-city drug user, helped to justify fears about the drug.¹⁴

Lonise Bias, the Reagan Administration, and the Creation of A Drug War Martyr

Back in 1986, following the passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, Bias was taken up by others as their symbol in the ongoing struggle against drugs by additional sectors of American society. Through her work as an anti-drug activist, Bias’s mother, Lonise Bias, sanctioned the use of Bias by the broader anti-drug movement. On an episode of the popular Christian television program *The 700 Club*, Lonise Bias stated her belief that God had let her son — who she believed had only been a one-time user of drugs — die to save the lives of other young people: “God lifted Len up so everyone, especially the young people, would grasp hold of him and just love him. He chose to take him away with the thing that’s killing so many young people, to draw their attention to the drugs, to let it go.”¹⁵ That appearance on *the 700 Club*, began Lonise Bias’s one-woman crusade against drugs; she left her job as an assistant manager at a D.C.-area bank to become a full-time motivational speaker.¹⁶ Throughout the next year, journalists constantly framed her speaking tour in Christian terms — representing it as a “mission” to warn young people about the dangers of drugs and the importance of making good choices.¹⁷ At a national conference on drug use, Bias argued that in order to save the nation’s young people, Americans needed to “educate our children to be individuals and to make the right choices.”¹⁸ Her son’s

death, she said, forced people to say “we’re dealing with a terrible enemy here and we’ve got to get on the ball and take care of it.”¹⁹

in January 1988, President Ronald Reagan referenced Lonise Bias’s crusade in his weekly radio address. Reacting to an annual government survey that showed drug abuse among high school seniors was declining, Reagan argued that the story of Len Bias had helped shake a growing national complacency against drug use that led some to view drug use as “a victimless crime.”

But in communities around America, families, teachers, and young people themselves were finding out that those who said drug use was no big deal, whether they knew it or not, were telling a big lie -- and a dangerous one. Just how dangerous we all saw 2 years ago when a promising athlete, a young man whose future could have been written in headlines and in gold, died of a cocaine overdose. Len Bias never got to play professional basketball. But today his mother says that his death may have been a message from God to America's young people: Stay away from drugs -- all drugs -- all the time.²⁰

Other Reagan Administration officials deployed Bias as a symbol to combat drug usage. In the press conference announcing the drop in high school drug usage, Dr. Otis R. Bowen, Reagan’s Secretary of Health and Human Services lamented: “It is indeed a shame that the deaths of many talented young people took place before the danger of cocaine use was widely believed by our youth.”²¹ Bowen and other officials believed the deaths of Bias and Don Rogers were effective in highlighting the dangers of cocaine usage; in 1987, 48 percent of teens believed there was “great risk” in trying cocaine “once or twice,” a spike from 34 percent the previous year.²² In a March 1988 profile, Drug Enforcement Administration leader Jack Lawn admitted to using Bias’s death to mobilize the shock of Bias’s death into a national campaign against drugs:

Lawn decided to, as he puts it, ‘capitalize on the catastrophe.’ Immediate public reaction had been to lionize Bias, to wonder how such a thing could happen to a “hero” and “role model.” Not without sympathy, Lawn countered by suggesting a different message to the news media. The same tough message that he had gently told his son would become the public's most vivid lesson to date on drug abuse: “Len Bias caused his own demise. We have to make him responsible for taking cocaine, which killed him.”²³

President Reagan also used Bias’s story to mobilize support for a long War on Drugs. During a White House Briefing on Drug Abuse, Reagan called for media executives to help mobilize the American public for an escalating war against drugs. He admitted the drug crisis seemed to be getting worse, but that setbacks such as the rise in “drug-related crimes” and “the destabilization of national governments by traffickers” were not “harbingers of defeat” but rather circumstances that “should strengthen our resolve to stop this insidious evil once and for all.”²⁴ However, he believed setbacks such as the death of Len Bias reminded the American public what was at stake in the long war:

No, America's awakening to its drug problem has not come easily. We remember a nation stunned after the death of Len Bias. The same rude awakening has occurred only recently in the Washington, DC, area and nationally as to the stranglehold of drug criminals on foreign governments. But believe me, with each jolt into reality, we strengthen our offenses and move closer to a drug-free America. Remember, the shock of recognition is not a sign of defeat; it's the beginning of victory.²⁵

Len Bias, Rico Marshall, and the Growing Urban Drug Crisis

Len Bias’s story was not the only one being told. Journalists and commentators used the tragic tale of suburban Washington D.C. teenager Rico Marshall, for example, to demonstrate how far the country really had to go to win the War on Drugs, particularly in black communities.

On February 13, 1988, Marshall, an 18-year old Forestville High School football star, swallowed six rocks of crack cocaine in efforts to avoid arrest after being stopped in a known drug market. He died hours later after falling ill at his parents' Glenarden, Maryland apartment.²⁶ Marshall had a bright future in front of him. As *Baltimore Sun* reporter Stephen M. Hagey lamented, "Rico Leroy Marshall had the world eating out of his hand." In the week prior to his death, Marshall had turned 18, won the school talent show and signed a scholarship offer to play college football at the University of South Carolina.²⁷ Journalists connected the drug-related death of the young athlete from Prince George's County on the cusp of a lifelong goal to the death of Len Bias. A *Baltimore Sun* editorial called Marshall's death "a grisly parallel to the death of University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias."²⁸

An irony in the story appeared when the news broke that Marshall apparently had idolized Bias, a local hero in Prince George's County; he even had a poster of the fallen star on his wall.²⁹ Marshall's admiration of Bias would be picked up by wire services and briefly covered in *Sports Illustrated*.³⁰ Columnists and youth church leaders eventually transformed Marshall's tragic story (complete with his idolizing of Bias) into a cautionary tale, warning young people of the dangers of celebrating the wrong sporting hero.³¹

Newspaper columnists and reporters wrote that Marshall's death was a consequence of the decaying values of young black teenagers and the black community at large. Howard Means of the *Orlando Sentinel* thought the deaths of Marshall and Bias were indicative of a society that valued black athletic success over

academic success. Pointing to the declining number of African American doctoral graduates and the idolizing of black sports stars, Means argued that:

the reality is a signing ceremony for a black halfback while black honor roll students get little or no recognition --from their peers, the black community or the white one. The reality is a decreasing black stake in college and graduate school. The reality is a federal budget that time and again favors guns over textbooks. As ye sow, so shall ye reap.³²

The *Baltimore Sun* thought Marshall's death illustrated that though drug usage was falling amongst American teenagers, poor black teens such as Marshall struggled to stay away from the temptations of their neighborhoods:

Although he grew up among youngsters who had little hope for the future, his athletic gifts provided a different outlook. A star player with a ticket to a good education and unlimited prospects after graduation, Mr. Marshall was unable to resist the call of action on the streets. This flirtation cost him his life. Let's hope the lesson is understood by other young people tempted to follow that horrible example.³³

Stephen M. Hagey of the *Baltimore Sun* linked Marshall's death to the rise of the drug trade in the Washington suburbs, and a pursuit of the material wealth associated with drug dealing. Hagey noted that black teens at the Landover Mall "prowl the halls with sporty gold chains draped around their necks and wads of cash stuffed into their jeans."³⁴ Hagey described a deteriorating situation in urban neighborhoods, where the rates of murders and drug arrests were soaring, and law enforcement was struggling to keep up with the automated weapons favored by drug traffickers. Hagey referenced the growing concern of teachers, politicians, and law enforcement about the values of black teenagers: "A common lament is that the drug scene offers seductive role models for urban youth, especially the poor. The have-it-all philosophy, the big-shot lifestyle, the thrills-these are big enticements for kids of low

expectations and even lower self-esteem.³⁵ Hagey ended his article quoting an editorial from the *Montgomery Journal*, which expressed dismay that the deaths of Rico Marshall and Len Bias had not dented “the lure of easy money and high living” associated with the booming drug trade.³⁶

Election Year Drug Fury (Again)

By 1988, Washington D.C. was a city under siege of drug-related violence.

Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* described the carnage of one particularly grisly murder:

Here's how it happened: Four men ran up to a car at a traffic light and-gangland style-emptied automatic and semiautomatic weapons into it. The driver of the car, aged 23, was killed-shot 10 times-while panicked pedestrians dived for cover. Beirut 1988? Chicago 1933? No sirree. Washington, D.C.- about one week ago.

In the poor areas of the city, young men are killing each other at a record pace-usually over drugs. The city has recorded 46 homicides, 35 drug related, some preceded by torture and many carried out with the urban equivalent of heavy weaponry. In response, the police have been issued 9 mm semiautomatic weapons and shotguns. This is war.³⁷

Washington D.C. was far from the only metropolitan area affected by violence. In New York City, a 22-year-old white police officer named Edward Byrne was killed by black crack dealers while guarding a man who was threatened after talking to the New York Police Department about the drug trade in his neighborhood.³⁸ After his death, the *New York Times* linked Byrne's death to drug trafficking in Latin American countries and called for a new “Monroe Doctrine” to target drug operations in the region:

Drug trafficking, no longer just a regrettable social problem, now threatens national security. North American demand, not foreign supply, drives the drug trade - but an outraged American public also expects President Reagan to do

more than mumble today when he announces what he intends to do against governments that permit or promote the drug trade. It's too late for pieties.³⁹

In another highly publicized case, a 27-year-old Asian woman named Karen Toshima was shot and killed by a black gang member in an affluent area of Los Angeles.⁴⁰ In response, the city's police chief, Daryl Gates, began conducting massive anti-gang sweeps, deploying as many as 1,000 police officers in the black neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles.⁴¹ A cover story in *Newsweek* magazine painted a horrific picture of a country under attack by crack gangs. Black street gangs, no longer content with controlling their neighborhoods, had begun to now spread crack into the Midwest and South. These "ghetto-based drug-trafficking organizations" had formed alliances with drug traffickers from Colombia and other Latin American nations.⁴² As the gangs spread, "urban guerrilla warfare" followed, with local police departments valiantly trying to slow down better-armed and ultra-violent enterprises.⁴³

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, another election-year push against drugs, was written during this growing panic over urban drug trafficking and urban violence. In Congress, politicians linked Bias's death to the carnage initiated by inner-city drug operations. Addressing those who felt drug use was a victimless crime, Republican senator Pete Wilson listed Len Bias and policeman Edward Byrne as victims of the urban drug trade:

Len Bias was a victim of this victimless crime; he and countless others less celebrated, and their parents.

I will tell you who the other victims are, Mr. President. Young street cops who are senselessly murdered, blown away by some idiot strung out on drugs who does not even know what he is doing.

I will tell you who else. Street cops like the young patrolman, 22 years old, gunned down in New York recently, patrolman Edward Byrne, gunned down as he sat in a police car guarding a witness in a drug case; murdered so that that witness could be accessible to the drug traffickers. His father said: “No one is safe anywhere.”⁴⁴

Democrat representative Major Owens also linked Bias and Byrne together as victims of urban drug trafficking:

Mr. Speaker, the escalation of drug trafficking and use in the United States is destroying our communities, homes, and families, and has claimed numerous victims. In New York City on February 26 of this year, 22-year old police officer Edward Byrne was murdered by a gunman as he sat in squad car guarding the home of a Queens resident who had informed authorities of drug trafficking in his neighborhood. In the last 5 years, more than 500 people have died in Upper Manhattan in drug-related violence. Here in Washington, DC, more than half of the homicides during the first 3 months of this year were linked to drugs. Not even public, entertainment, and sports figures are immune to the dangers of drugs; who can forget the tragic death of college basketball star Len Bias 2 years ago, a victim of a cocaine overdose.⁴⁵

However, Democratic representative Chuck Schumer used Bias as a warning of the perils of overreacting on the drug issue. He blasted his colleagues for proposing drug amendments that looked good to the voting public but did little to tackle the root causes of the drug crisis. In calling for “a cogent and comprehensive response to drugs in our society,” Schumer warned against “piecemeal drug legislation born of wild frenzies every couple of years is simply ineffective. We went through a similar paroxysm after the death of Len Bias and what do we have to show for it? A situation that has grown progressively worse.”⁴⁶ To Schumer, “an overdose of panic may be almost as lethal as an overdose of drugs.”⁴⁷

Increasingly, however, the American public wanted more punitive punishment for drug offenders. Sixty-three percent of respondents in an August 1988 *USA Today*

poll said they were more likely to vote for a Presidential candidate who advocated for a multi-billion dollar national and state program that arrested, convicted, and imprisoned those who merely used illegal drugs such as crack and heroin.⁴⁸ In a June 1988 *Washington Post* poll, 87 percent of respondents supported at least a long prison term for drug dealers convicted of selling cocaine; 14 percent of respondents favored a life sentence, while 11 percent of respondents favored the death penalty.⁴⁹ Indeed, the 1988 presidential election campaign of Vice President George H.W. Bush was fueled in part by a fear of racialized crime. The Bush campaign tied his Democratic opponent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, to a black felon named Willie Horton. An infamous ad from the Bush campaign charged that Horton went on a crime spree against white victims when released out on weekend furlough. Horton became the face of black crime in the United States and a sign that the inner city was increasingly out of control.⁵⁰ Vice President Bush bolstered his tough-on-crime credentials by accepting the badge of Edward Byrne from the fallen officer's father. At the ceremony, Bush announced that "It's time for America to take back the streets."⁵¹

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 attempted to do just that. The crusade against crack cocaine started by the death of Len Bias continued. The final version of the bill signed by Ronald Reagan on November 18, 1988, included an amendment added by Republican Representative Clay Shaw that imposed a minimum mandatory sentence of five years for simple possession of crack.⁵² With his amendment, Shaw sought to punish urban drug dealers who carried small amounts of the drug to avoid the penalties in the 1986 drug bill. Speaking in the House, Shaw relayed a story from

a DEA agent about one drug dealer who hid his extra supply of crack in trash cans in an alley. The dealer sold a small amount of crack at a time and then retreated to the alley to get more drugs. Shaw reasoned that tough measures were needed to combat crack and drug traffickers: “Vote for my amendment in order to keep the pressure on the crack dealers victimizing our youngsters. Crack is an extraordinarily dangerous drug so we must take extraordinary steps to combat it. A vote against my amendment will be sending the wrong message to the crack dealers.”⁵³

Saving Black Children in the Midst of Crisis

During the late 1980s, black commentators began to fear that young black men were literally becoming endangered, threatened by their own self-destructive behavior. The situation appeared so dire that in 1988 and 1989, *Ebony* magazine, a publication aimed at the black middle-class, devoted two special issues to the growing urban crisis. Both issues featured an appeal to mobilize readers to fight for black youth. In the 1988 issue, focused on the plight of black children, *Ebony* publisher John H. Johnson warned readers that the crisis facing black youth threatened to set the black race back for centuries to come: “we are losing a whole generation of Black youths. And we are losing them in a new high-tech environment in which the disadvantages of one generation multiply in the next generation and create no-win scenarios that can last until the 21st and 22nd centuries. “

This is a national emergency which sends out a call to every man, woman and child. Black and White:

Save the children!

Save the children from dope, miseducation and poverty.

Save the children from gang warfare and adult abuse.

*Save them from the apathy and indifference and timidity of their elders.*⁵⁴

The next year, in a special issue about the War on Drugs, Johnson called crack “the biggest crisis we've faced as a people since slavery time” and called on “all citizens to enlist for the duration in a citizens' army to end the reign of crack and cocaine.”⁵⁵ In both issues, Johnson called for increased help for the federal government, but also called for readers to take responsibility for their neighborhoods and to help instill discipline in young blacks.⁵⁶

As Johnson tried to mobilize black middle-class support to save black youth, there was a sense of pessimism among black commentators that the current generation of young blacks lacked the moral strength to move away from violence and drugs. In the mind of black columnists such as Courtland Milloy of the *Washington Post*, the lessons set by Len Bias and other tragic black figures that struggled with drugs and other vices had gone unheard. In a 1989 column, Milloy expressed his fear that AIDS, largely transmitted through heroin needles, would become an epidemic within the black community. He was particularly flabbergasted that young blacks had not learned from the cautionary tales of Bias and Max Robinson, a pioneering black television journalist who died of AIDS the previous year. Instead of changing behaviors, black youth seemed to be embracing deviancy, at enormous cost: “But nothing, not the death of celebrities or the demise of countless, nameless souls, has affected the increasingly self-destructive behavior of black America. And now, it seems certain, time has run out.”⁵⁷

An article in the August 1989 special *Ebony* issue on the War on Drugs struck a similar tone. Journalist D. Michael Cheers shadowed police officer Johnnie Walker as he patrolled the “mean streets” of inner-city Washington D.C.⁵⁸ Walker was

driven to clean up the streets of his hometown in part because he had been a close friend of Len Bias. Though he believed Bias's death demonstrated the danger of drugs, his daily patrol showed him that that lesson had been lost on many black Washingtonians: "Len was like a brother to me. He was family. I can't describe how I felt when I learned of how he died. All I can say is everyone makes mistakes. His mistake was one that others were supposed to learn from. But I don't see a lot of people around here who learned from the decision that Len Bias made."⁵⁹ As Walker observed the steady decline of inner-city Washington D.C., the officer blamed black young men with loose morals and an appetite for material wealth: "Riding around all day one has to wonder where the next generation of Blacks will come from. People using and selling drugs are no good to anyone; they are not productive at all to society. Out here it's all about \$100 tennis shoes, designer sweatsuits, designer jeans and fancy cars to impress the ladies."⁶⁰ The article ended on a particularly bleak note. Walker was disturbed by the fact that jail had become a status symbol for young black men. As he broke up a fight between two women, a boy told the officer that he wanted to go to jail. Walker angrily told the boy to never say that again. As journalist Cheers then summed up the encounter: Walker got "into the patrol car, slam[ed] the door and dr[ove] away, shaken by the enormity of the problem."⁶¹

In the pages of *Sports Illustrated*, too, reporters wrote about white American assumptions that black men were not only a threat within their communities, but were a threat to the sanctity of sports. In 1988, Steve Wulf reported on a high school basketball coach, Greg Vaughn, killed while he worked as a referee for an inner-city playground basketball game. After he made a controversial call, a drug dealer playing

in the game punched Vaughn three times. Vaughn hit his head on the concrete and died days later after lapsing into a coma. To Wulf, the loss of coach Vaughn, who went to playgrounds spreading an anti-drug message, was devastating for a community that needed role models not connected to the drug trade: “Vaughn's death didn't get the kind of headlines that announced the deaths of Len Bias and Don Rogers. But the Vaughn tragedy has an even deeper echo, and not just because he was an innocent victim. On the playgrounds of Queens and Brooklyn, there is a young man he might have saved.”⁶²

Two years later, the magazine devoted its May 14, 1990 cover story to “the frightening outbreak of crimes among poor black kids trying to make their mark by ‘busting fresh,’ or dressing at the height of fashion.”⁶³ The striking cover photo depicted the mugging of a teenager wearing an athletic jacket and holding sneakers over his shoulder. Only the assailant’s hand and gun were visible. The title read: “Your sneakers or your life.” In the article, Rick Telander listed crimes where young black men killed or robbed each other for a pair of sneakers or athletic wear. He noted how sports clothing and logos had come to serve as signs of success for drug dealers, and certain brands signaled one’s gang affiliation. In the inner city environment where young black men were “starving for self-esteem,” Telander believed those men looked to flashy sportswear for status and style — and in so doing subverted the meaning of sports clothing and brands.⁶⁴

Fear of drug-related crime shaped the coverage of the 1990 murder of Jay Bias, Len Bias’s younger brother. While shopping for a ring in a jewelry store at a suburban Washington D.C. mall, Bias was killed after an argument with a man who

thought Bias was flirting with his wife, a clerk at the store.⁶⁵ Due to his famous brother, news of Jay Bias's death was amplified into a major news story and sparked additional discussions about urban violence. An editorial in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* placed the blame for the younger Bias's death on the same drug culture that killed his brother. Though acknowledging that nothing linked Jay Bias to drugs, the editorial criticized Bias for his "obsession with material wealth" as evident by his trip to a jewelry store and for driving in a "flashy, four-wheel drive vehicle" linked to "small-time hustlers." The jewelry and cars, together with the killer's Mercedes and gun, linked Jay Bias to "the murky subculture of drugs and violence that claimed the life of the elder Bias."⁶⁶ The *Evening Sun* editorial board concluded, "it's hard not to believe he isn't just as much a victim of that world's explosive anger and callous indifference to life that killed his illustrious brother."⁶⁷

Michael Wilbon, disturbed that Jay Bias hung out with Brian Tribble and some of Len Bias's old friends, believed the deaths of Len and Jay Bias were emblematic of an inner-city culture "where [the] people they played with in the sandbox grew up to wear beepers and pay for fur coats in cash and drive German sports cars by the time they turned 20. This is the world where many young black men live. And die."⁶⁸ *Baltimore Sun* columnist Mike Littwin also considered the deaths of Len and Jay Bias as part of the larger problem of inner city violence and the ongoing drug crisis. He noted that the dual crisis that struck the Bias family was also affecting thousands of black families across the country: "You wonder if this family is a microcosm of the tragedy of our cities. One son dies of drugs, another of bullets. They die in the same hospital emergency room where others have passed on before

them. They die of the violence that society continues to wreak upon itself. You think of the family, and of a thousand others.”⁶⁹

Commentators on both sides of the ideological spectrum used Jay Bias’s death, as well as the death of Len Bias, to call for a doubling down on the war against drugs and drug-related crimes. Conservative pundit Mona Charen noted that “the ill-fated parents of Len and Jay Bias have been robbed of their two sons by the twin monsters of inner-city life: drugs and casual murder.”⁷⁰ Urban chaos, as symbolized by the deaths of Jay and Len Bias, along with a recent spate of gun violence in Washington D.C., represented to Charen “the greatest scandal we face as a nation.”⁷¹ She was particularly disturbed by what she saw as a lack of leadership from the black community, who seemed silent as black youth kept dying. This silence from black leaders, according to Charen, convinced whites that they needed to do little. Remedies could only be found, Charen, said, with a national conversation about the issue; she stressed too that ultimately black youth needed to learn self-control.⁷² Charen’s call to action echoed a similar call from liberal civil rights leader Jesse Jackson. Jackson also was disturbed by the relative silence about black on black violence by black leadership. He applauded the work of Lonise and father James Bias to combat drugs and gun violence and urged readers to join the efforts to mobilize against the twin issues plaguing the black community: “Surely we can join them to bring an end the plague of guns and drugs before it poisons us all.”⁷³ To avoid tragedies like the deaths of Jay and Len Bias, Jackson urged readers to push to clean up their neighborhoods: “We can take back the streets. People must get tough on crime. Self-control must accompany gun control. Neighborhood patrols must

supplement police patrols. Decent citizens must mobilize to protect the children, and drive the drug peddlers and gun toters off the street.⁷⁴

The Other Urban Crisis: Rising Black Incarceration Rates

Pundits who called for tougher punishments for street crime ignored a growing problem: America's prisons were filling up at an alarming rate. By 1989, prison overcrowding had become a national issue. According to *Star Tribune* writer Steve Berg, the nation's prisons were "operating at 124 percent of capacity," with prisons in Washington D.C. and 41 states overfilled. Berg also passed along disturbing statistics about black prisoners: though only 12 percent of the population, blacks made up 47 percent of those incarcerated, with about 11 percent of black men aged 18 through 26 in prison.⁷⁵ In a 1990 *Washington Post* article, Michael Isikoff and Tracy Thompson tied the booming prison population to a rush towards increasingly punitive drug laws that "rapidly accelerated" after Bias's death and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986.⁷⁶ Isikoff and Thompson interviewed Eric Sterling, a member of the House Judiciary Committee who helped author the bill. Sterling admitted that the 1986 drug bill was a political ploy that did little to help the nation's problem:

The way in which these sentences were arrived at — it was like an auction house. It was this frenzied, panic atmosphere — I'll see your five years and I'll raise you five years. It was the crassest political poker game. Nobody looked and said these sentences are going to have the following effect on the courtrooms around the country, on street corners and on the prisons.⁷⁷

The drug bills of 1986 and 1988 did have a devastating impact on black inner-city communities. Journalists including William Raspberry of *Post* and David Simon of the *Baltimore Sun* began to point out disparities between drug offenders of

different races. Black men, often convicted of offenses related to crack cocaine, faced much longer drug sentences than white drug offenders convicted of crimes related to powder cocaine.⁷⁸ Simon noted that the tough laws against crack tended to affect “street-level addicts oblivious to any legal deterrent” and did little to dent drug usage within black neighborhoods.⁷⁹ According to Raspberry, deindustrialization, declining schools, and a lack of affordable housing all contributed to the growing urban crisis. However, he charged, local and federal officials ignored these root causes and instead passed punitive anti-crime laws that transformed black neighborhoods into “the chief battleground” for the nation’s push against drugs.⁸⁰ In order to tackle the root causes of the urban crisis, Raspberry called for programs that stressed rehabilitation over punishment: “We need to repeal the mandatory sentencing laws, begin treating drug abuse as a health problem rather than a criminal justice problem and get serious about saving black males: not out of sympathy for criminals but out of concern for the social and economic costs of our present approach.”⁸¹

Converging Crises: Trying to Save Black Youth from Death and Jail

As the urban crisis continued into the early 1990s, Len Bias remained a symbol of the nation’s urban crisis — at once, a symbol of black so-called deviancy and of the human potential lost to the streets. In a 1991 column for *Chicago Tribune*, writer Marita Golden, mother to a black teenage boy, used the deaths of Len and Jay Bias to underscore the dangers of growing up black and male in America and to go public with her own fears for her son:

Statistics show that from 1987 to 1990, more than 1,500 people, most of them black males, were killed in Washington, D.C., alone. They also show that homicide is the leading cause of death among black males between 15 and 24.

A friend of mine, a counselor who kept track of such things, told me once that 21 was the most vulnerable age for young men: “Twenty-one. It's like if they can get past 21 they'll make it.” After that, the rates of homicide, suicide and accidental death among young men begin to drop.

She told me this a decade ago. But those statistics are irrelevant. Len Bias was 22. Jay Bias was 20.⁸²

Michael Wilbon also reflected on the urban crisis and the rising death toll of black men as he discussed the death of Boston Celtics star Reggie Lewis from a heart condition. Wilbon praised Lewis for being a charitable figure in the Boston area and drawing the admiration of New Englanders of all walks of life. Lewis' giving spirit made his tragic death “different from all the other 27-year-old men dying in urban wars.”⁸³ Wilbon expressed his frustration with attending yet another funeral of a young black man taken at the prime of his life, a pattern he said began with the death of Len Bias. He lamented that death had become part of the black urban experience, especially with the growing chaos of the black inner city:

I've spent the better part of the past seven years — starting with the death of Len Bias — looking at black men, young ones, in caskets. If it isn't a gunshot wound, it's cocaine, or a car wreck, and if not that, then a contaminated blood transfusion, or idiots in the projects making an annual game of killing the class valedictorian, and if not that, it's the equivalent of walking down the street having a heart attack, which is essentially what happened to Reggie Lewis. People of all ages and races die, I know that. But the numbers of black men dying young (many from killing each other) is slowly killing me. Middle age for us is 25. If you live to see your kids start elementary school you feel like Methuselah. Every reunion in the old 'hood either starts or ends with somebody taking count of who isn't (or is) alive anymore.⁸⁴

Many of the same articles that totted up the deaths of young black men expressed additional angst and frustration over mandatory minimum sentences and the problems they unleashed on black communities. Around the country, blacks, and especially black men were sentenced to long prison sentences for relatively minor crimes that happened to involve crack cocaine.⁸⁵ To critics such as Jesse Jackson, mandatory minimums threatened the stability of the black community. In a 1993 op-ed, Jackson compared the mass incarceration of black men to slavery: “ the entire mandatory minimum mania has become a monster. Reagan-appointed judges, Attorney General Janet Reno and common sense all say to stop this insanity, but cheap-shot politicians keep pandering to fear. And African-Americans get chained again.”⁸⁶ However, the reform of ending minimum sentencing would prove difficult. Jackson himself admitted that the situation in black inner-cities was dire and agreed with conservatives who argued the pathological culture of working-class Blacks bred crime:

Our nation and our neighborhoods stand in need of moral regeneration; our culture is devaluing life itself.

On this I have no disagreement with conservatives. Stealing, killing, robbing, raping, dealing in death - these are absolutely wrong.

Twenty-eight-year-old grandmothers, 15-year-old children joining parents in jail - these make no sense whatsoever.

My daughter cannot walk across the street at night because there have been four killings on my block this year.

Regaining control of our streets is an urgent, clear imperative.⁸⁷

According to a February 7th, 1994 *Time* cover story, Americans “across class and racial lines” viewed crime — especially the “the daily shooting spree in the nation’s inner cities” — as their biggest national concern.⁸⁸ Politicians listened to the public’s fears, and called for more punitive measures, including an omnibus crime bill that included a “three-strikes-you’re-out” rule that would trigger a mandatory life sentencing for anyone convicted of three serious felonies.⁸⁹ And a renewed focus on juvenile violence prompted even black leaders to call for mandatory teen curfews to curtail crime in the inner city.⁹⁰

Debates over the proper role of the criminal justice system in policing and making secure black communities erupted during the passing of 1994 crime bill; both sides used Bias as a political touchstone. A February 1994 *Washington Post* feature by Richard Leiby, for example, discussed the plight of Derrick Curry, a former high school basketball star imprisoned 19 and a half years without the possibility of parole for being a low-level employee of a Washington D.C. drug syndicate. Curry had come from a solid, middle-class family; his father had a doctorate and was a high school principal. Curry played with both Len and Jay Bias and before his 1990 arrest had nurtured his own hopes for a professional basketball career. Leiby connected Curry’s incarceration to the racialized panic over Bias’s death: “Statements entered into the Congressional Record took on a decidedly racial cast — members recited media accounts of ruthless Jamaican, Trinidadian and Bahamian crack kingpins invading America; reports of mostly black and Hispanic crack dealers drawn from “the ghetto’s legion of unemployed teenagers”; warnings that “crack and rock dealers are spreading well beyond the inner city.”⁹¹

According to Leiby, the product of that racially-charged debate, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, as well as the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, targeted casual users and low-level drug runners such as Curry. The punishment doled out to Curry (and other black men), Leiby argued, was heinous for multiple reasons:

It is nearly three times the prison sentence served by most murderers in America.
It is four times the prison sentence served by most kidnapers.
It is five times the prison sentence served by most rapists.
It is 10 times the prison sentence served by those who illegally possess guns.⁹²

As Leiby concluded, “Crack sentencing is a complicated issue, because it is not just a debate about the protocols of criminal justice or the relative evil of narcotics compared to other crimes. It is also about racial inequality, about the stubborn persistence of the specter of Jim Crow injustice in America.”⁹³

Later in that February 1994, a week after Leiby’s article, the *Washington Post* featured a rebuttal column from federal prosecutor Jay Apperson. Apperson argued for mandatory minimums, contending that the threat of lengthy prison sentences forced lower-level drug dealers to turn on their bosses. Apperson took issue with what he thought was Leiby’s oversimplification of Curry’s issues. To make his point, Apperson utilized the image of the villainous black drug dealer that was at the center of the 1986 drug bill debates:

Curry, the article did note, steadfastly refused to cooperate by “ratting on his friends.” Friends? Are these the same kind of “friends” who gave Len Bias the coke that killed him? The same “friends” who supply poison to kids in our neighborhoods? It is not the mandatory minimums that are ruining “an entire generation of young black men,” as the article suggested, it is drug dealers like Curry and their higher-up suppliers. Curry may be content that his suppliers are continuing to work while he protects them and serves their time for them. But I’m not. And neither are most Americans.⁹⁴

Apperson's column made it into the Congressional Record; during Senate debates over the crime bill, Republican Senator Bob Dole had Apperson's column entered into the summary of the debate. Dole praised Apperson's analysis and himself attacked the growing push against mandatory minimums:

I know it's fashionable in some elite circles to knock mandatory minimum sentences for imposing long prison terms on young people, whose immaturity and lack of opportunity may have led them down the path of lawlessness. But, as Mr. Apperson's article points out, the real threat to our young people is not the mandatory minimum, but the vicious drug dealer whose business is to ruin lives and destroy communities.⁹⁵

The 1994 crime bill signed into law by President Bill Clinton on September 13, 1994, provided \$8.8 billion for more police officers, \$9.9 billion to build more prisons, and called for life sentences for offenders convicted of a third violent felony offense, continuing the recent pattern of punitive laws aimed at getting criminals off the streets.⁹⁶ However, the bill did call for the United States Sentencing Commission to examine the issue of mandatory minimums for cocaine possession. The next year, in a report presented to Congress in February 1995, the Sentencing Commission did evaluate the sentencing. It called for an end of the 100 to 1 ratio, acknowledging that small-time crack cocaine dealers were punished more severely than big-time drug dealers who supplied the powder cocaine necessary to produce crack.⁹⁷ The Sentencing Commission concluded that Len Bias's death had been the critical event in the creation of the 100:1 ratio, but that, in a rush to produce a bill, Congress failed to adequately debate the merits and potential problems of the ratio:

The sentencing provisions of the Act were initiated in August 1986, following the July 4th congressional recess during which public concern and media coverage of cocaine peaked as a result of the June 1986 death of NCAA basketball star Len Bias. Apparently because of the heightened concern,

Congress dispensed with much of the typical deliberative legislative process, including committee hearings.⁹⁸

The Sentencing Commission also noted that the media’s coverage in the days and weeks after Bias’s death conflated his use of powder cocaine with crack — and that confusion helped to fuel the public paranoia over crack cocaine.⁹⁹

Despite the Committee’s evaluation and recommendations, both Congress and President Bill Clinton rejected the commission’s arguments.¹⁰⁰ In defending his position, President Clinton pointed to the violence associated with crack cocaine in the inner cities:

We have to send a constant message to our children that drugs are illegal, drugs are dangerous, drugs may cost you your life—and the penalties for dealing drugs are severe. I am not going to let anyone who peddles drugs get the idea that the cost of doing business is going down.

Trafficking in crack, and the violence it fosters, has a devastating impact on communities across America, especially inner-city communities. Tough penalties for crack trafficking are required because of the effect on individuals and families, related gang activity, turf battles, and other violence.¹⁰¹

Sports, the Black Athlete, and the Urban Crisis

Bias’s death had not stopped being used as the cautionary tale, told by policy makers and community leaders, on the consequences for young black men of making the wrong choices in life. Bias’s story — together with those told of other black athletes — gained currency in an era where young black male criminals were labeled “superpredators” and portrayed as soulless criminals who threatened the safety of all Americans.¹⁰² In 1997, Bias was referenced in the rap song “High Expectations” by Common; the song was written from the perspective of a black inner-city high school

basketball star. As *Sports Illustrated* writer Greg Kelly observed, the song underscored that “hoop dreams can be a blessing and a curse for kids looking to escape the inner city.”¹⁰³ Bias was mentioned together with Earl Manigault, a New York City playground legend whose rise to stardom was curtailed due to drugs and academic difficulties, and Ben Wilson, a Chicago high school star shot to death during a fight outside his school in 1984. Narratives about Wilson and Manigault during the late 1990s lamented the loss of the “healthy and productive body” of the “urban African American athlete.”¹⁰⁴

A 1996 HBO film “Rebound: The Legend of Earl (the Goat) Manigault,” tracked the story of the playground legend: from his glory days in high school, where he rivaled Basketball Hall of Famer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, to his struggles with heroin that ended his hopes of a professional basketball career, to his years in jail and his post-prison time as a youth advocate in Harlem. According to *Bergen Record* journalist Bob Dixon, the movie presented “a chillingly different perspective on how quickly the road to the good life can twist and turn;” Dixon thought the movie offered a compelling contrast to the year-long celebration of the NBA’s 50th anniversary.¹⁰⁵ Shoe companies such as Nike, scarred by reports in the early 1990s that linked their products to urban violence, used the narratives of these men to argue that they as a company were part of the solution to urban problems, not the cause of those problems.¹⁰⁶ Nike featured Wilson’s story, for example, in its 1997 television commercial that addressed the issue of violence in Chicago and other inner cities across America. After briefly highlighting Wilson’s career and tragic death, a narrator in the ad implored young black men to “shoot over brothers. Not at them.”¹⁰⁷

Journalists continued to reference Len Bias and his association with Brian Tribble as symbols of the damage done to black athletes who did not separate themselves from their inner-city upbringing or their inner-city friends. A Sophie's Choice of sorts was presented: hang out with your (deviant) friends or retain your athletic career. Cultural scholar Gitanjali Maharaj noted narratives about the black inner city and successful black men linked success with a rejection of "street" values and the deviancy of the inner city.¹⁰⁸ Commentators wondered if troubled athletes such as NFL star Ray Lewis, who was arrested after being at the scene of a double murder, and NBA star Carmelo Anthony, who appeared in a video encouraging Baltimore residents not to snitch on his drug-dealing friends, knew the story of Len Bias and the consequences of associating with the wrong people.¹⁰⁹ In 1997, Michael Wilbon expressed concern for the friends around Allen Iverson, the young NBA star who was recently arrested for gun and marijuana possession as well as speeding. Wilbon, who believed Iverson's "boyz" were a threat to his career, invoked Bias to illustrate what was at stake for Iverson:

We've come a long way since Len Bias's death. Most of us ran out of sympathy long ago for young men who've been blessed with athletic talent and subsequent riches, then self-destruct while blaming everything from ghetto life to the media for their demise.

What was a tragedy in 1986, when Bias died after a night of partying with cocaine, is plain stupid now. If Allen Iverson wants to risk his professional basketball career, tens of millions of dollars, and a chance to uplift his family and friends, so be it. Let's just hope he and his boyz don't hit any innocent children while driving 93 mph or "accidentally" shoot some bystander. If he can't keep certain thug friends at arm's distance, Iverson will reap what he sows.¹¹⁰

Lonise Bias and the Continuing Fight Against Drugs and the Urban Crisis

As Bias's death receded from memory, commentators noted what seemed to be the reality: that Bias's death had acted as a deterrent to drug use. Bias's death was viewed as the ultimate in cautionary tales, a tragedy that actually *had* saved scores of young people from experimenting with cocaine. In 2001, sports sociologist and activist Richard Lapchick called Bias's death "our wake-up call, the most important drug event of the last 20 years. Millions of people suddenly saw that cocaine was not only a recreational drug but a drug with lethal consequences."¹¹¹ In 2006, Michael Wilbon was still talking about Bias's death, labeling it "an overwhelming American Tragedy for those of us of a certain age," likening the impact of the tragedy on his generation to the impact the assassination of John F. Kennedy had on older generations.¹¹²

On the 20th anniversary of Bias's death, ESPN.com writer Bomani Jones called Bias's death the biggest deterrent to drug use of his generation and suggested Bias "might be the most influential athlete of the 20th century" due to the fear of cocaine his death instilled in young Americans.¹¹³ Perhaps anticipating backlash to that statement, Jones noted athletes such as Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, and Muhammad Ali "were reflections of social movements and represent periods of time," but that their impact "didn't directly change the way people behaved."¹¹⁴ To Jones, Bias became significant for changing Americans' views on cocaine: "By dying, Bias did something no public service announcement could accomplish -- his death made cocaine no longer cool."¹¹⁵

The belief that Len Bias saved lives through his death continued to fuel the anti-drug crusade of Lonise Bias. Lonise Bias appeared as a supporter for the federal government's War on Drugs, appearing in a series of events with officials from the administrations of George. W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.¹¹⁶ In 1996, for example, Bias appeared alongside President Bill Clinton at a conference on youth violence and drug abuse. In a stirring speech that received a standing ovation from President Clinton and the crowd of parents, police officers, teachers, students, and other community leaders, Lonise Bias tied the nation's drug and violence problems to a lack of moral values among young adults: "Today, we're trying to answer so many problems without dealing with morals. We're going to have to go back to values to bring change."¹¹⁷ The themes of maintaining moral values, making good decisions, and personal responsibility remained at the heart of Lonise Bias's frequent engagements at anti-violence and anti-drug gatherings aimed at black youth.¹¹⁸

In 2009, for instance, while speaking to a group of middle-school students outside Nashville, Tennessee, Bias stressed the importance of learning from the mistakes of others: "Do you know how many people have died so you won't make the same mistakes? You have a part to play in preserving your own life."¹¹⁹ She stressed the importance of education as a strategy to avoid the lures of street life: "Stop the foolishness! Pay Attention! Your first job is to get a good education. There are a lot of young folks who are all dressed up and going nowhere; wearing \$200 hats on \$2 brains."¹²⁰

Bias as a symbol of the failed War on Drugs

Yet not all accounts in the 1990s and into the new century positioned Bias as a positive influence. As momentum against the War on Drugs continued to grow during the late 1990s and 2000s, more and more commentators linked Len Bias's death and the rising rate of black men in prison, seeing the Bias story not as a force for good, but as a force for racism.

Journalist Dan Baum's critical 1996 history of the federal government's drug policy labeled Bias "the Archduke Ferdinand of the Total War on Drugs."¹²¹ In an overstatement for effect, Baum argued that much as Franz Ferdinand's assassination in 1914 ignited the simmering hostilities that led to World War I, Bias's death intensified the Reagan Administration's responses to the drug and violence in inner cities that had given rise to the War on Drugs. Baum captured the frenzied response on Capitol Hill after Bias's death and the rush by both parties to prove that they were tough on crime.¹²² Though a series of vignettes, Baum placed the war's frontlines in inner city neighborhoods, with young black men the target of federal and local law enforcement efforts to halt the spread of crack.¹²³ By 1999, the disastrous impact Reagan's War on Drugs was having on black communities was becoming apparent to all. An article by Timothy Egan in a *New York Times* article discovered that even as crime declined in the 1990s, black men were still being imprisoned in droves for minor drug offenses. As Egan dryly noted, for every black male enrolled in a California state university, five black men were incarcerated within the California prison system.¹²⁴

And lawyer Eric Sterling, one of the architects of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, had turned against the legislation. He publicized the connection between Bias's

death and the incarceration of a generation of black males in a variety of media outlets probing the impact of the War on Drugs. Sterling became a fixture in films and news reports about the mass incarceration issue, appearing in high-profile interviews on PBS's documentary series *Frontline*, on CBS newsmagazine *60 Minutes*, and in ESPN's documentary *Without Bias*.¹²⁵

Decades after Len Bias's death, Bias had become a useful political tool for organizations committed to ending the War on Drugs and with it the mass incarceration of black men. In 2006, the American Civil Liberties Union marked the 20th anniversary of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 by releasing a report. "Cracks in the System: Twenty Years of the Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Law." The ACLU's report focused on the racial disparities for cocaine convictions put in place by the Act and its adoption of a 100:1 ratio to differentiate between crimes involving powder and crack cocaine.¹²⁶

Bias appeared as a key figure in the report:

The ultimate irony of this anniversary is that Len Bias did not die of a crack overdose, but rather from snorting powder cocaine and alcohol. Both forms of cocaine are dangerous, but the events that ensued after the death of this talented young man created a terrible legacy harming the futures of thousands of other young people.¹²⁷

On the first page, over the report's executive summary, a smiling picture of Bias in his Boston Celtics hat during the NBA Draft appeared.¹²⁸ The report briefly described the rise of crack cocaine in inner-city neighborhoods during the mid-1980s, and how Bias's death, erroneously linked to crack, triggered a political panic.

Three years later, at the same time as Lonise Bias was speaking in Nashville, Tennessee, on the importance of learning from the mistakes of others, ESPN broadcast a documentary on Len Bias. In a *Washington Times* interview before the film's release in 2009, producer Kirk Fraser revealed that Bias's death had had a personal effect on his life; Bias's story served as a warning for him and other young people of his generation to avoid cocaine.¹²⁹

The film was yet another effort to situate Bias's death as an event that had an impact on an entire generation of children and young adults — yet it gave a more nuanced portrait of the man and his legacy. As a former classmate of Bias revealed in the film, Bias's passing forced his fellow students to deal with their own mortality: “It was the innocence that was taken from us. We were not naïve anymore. We weren't in that fantasy world anymore where we didn't feel invincible anymore.”

Washington D.C. radio host Donnie Simpson, too, viewed Bias both as the embodiment of the American Dream, but also an example of how that dream can be extinguished by one bad decision: “I think that Len's life serves as an example to our youth of the heights that you can go to, you know, with hard work and determination, and the lows you can go to for making wrong decisions.”

Without Bias portrayed this generational wake-up call as beneficial, even foreordained. At times *Without Bias* went even further, through interviews with Lonise Bias and others that emphasized the quasi-religious — and political — framing of Bias's death as a martyrdom. Lonise Bias and a number of other interviewees came close to suggesting in the film that Bias's death was meant to happen — that his death was the medium by which drug abuse was to be curbed.

Yet overall, *Without Bias* — and other well-researched documentaries and publications — chipped away at the rumors surrounding Bias’s death — rumors that supported the arguments in favor of the War on Drugs and the mobilization of political support for the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. The Reagan Administration’s “Just Say No” messaging was reliant on the idea that the clean-cut Bias only took cocaine on the night of his fatal overdose. The film suggested otherwise.

Though several friends interviewed in *Without Bias* say they never saw Bias take cocaine, Brian Tribble said he used cocaine with Bias regularly. The film also suggested Tribble, who would be tried and acquitted for Bias’s death, had been an unfair target. Former Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson attacked the morality play surrounding Tribble and Bias, and more broadly, the media’s fascination with constructing safe black role models: “The need for Len Bias accentuates who he was hanging with. The need for black kids to have him as a role model. The need for him to be an example. The need for all those other things accentuated what happened to [Bias].”

Though Tribble ultimately spent time in prison for dealing cocaine in another case, *Without Bias* also implied that after prison he became a productive member of society. The film’s closing credits informed viewers that Tribble was now married, a father of three girls, and both a personal trainer and realtor. As producer Kirk Fraser noted in an interview with *Washingtonian* magazine, Tribble’s appearance in the film challenged the notion that Tribble was “the monster” he was portrayed during the media coverage of Bias’s death.¹³⁰ In doing so, *Without Bias* helped to complicate the dominant recollections of the moral crisis surrounding Bias’s death.

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Conclusion: Len Bias in the Age of “Black Lives Matter” and the Opioid Epidemic

In the last several years, the country has traveled from its first African American president, to presidency of a man who received only five percent of the votes of black Americans. The figure of Len Bias has remained salient throughout.

The administration of President Barack Obama fulfilled a campaign promise: the White House initiated criminal justice reform and worked to ease mandatory minimums. With those initiatives, once again, journalists and policymakers appropriated Bias to make their cases; the case for reform argued, as before, that poor decision-making in 1986 had led to the misguided 100:1 ratio rule and the racialized mass incarceration problem. In 2013, Attorney General Eric Holder received bipartisan support for a plan that allowed federal judges to move away from mandatory minimum sentencing for lower-level drug dealers and others convicted on possessing a limited amount of drugs.¹

To highlight the significance of Holder’s plan, an editorial by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* began by discussing the role of Bias' death in sparking the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986:

On June 19, 1986, a young man named Len Bias died of a cocaine overdose in his dorm room on the campus of the University of Maryland. Because Mr. Bias had been an All-American basketball player who two days earlier had been chosen by the Boston Celtics as the No. 2 overall pick in the National Basketball Association draft, and because Celtics fans were outraged, and because the Democratic House Speaker Tip O’Neill was from Boston, and because Mr. O’Neill needed a tough-on-crime issue for Democrats to run on in the November election, Congress passed with surprising speed and broad bipartisan support House Resolution 5484, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. President Ronald Reagan, no slouch on tough-on-crime laws himself, signed it into law on Oct. 27.²

The rushed act, as the *Post-Dispatch* related, started an unfortunate trend:

“It was the first, but certainly not the last, of the laws passed on the ‘War on Drugs,’ which has proved to be a dreadfully expensive and ineffective approach to the problem. Among the problems with H.R. 5484 was that it imposed mandatory minimum sentences, five or 10 years in federal prison, for possession of certain amounts and types of drugs.”³

The editorial argued that Holder’s bill was “long overdue” and would help the country move away from the bad legislation authored during the War on Drugs, such as the 1986 drug bill written because of Bias’s death.⁴ For the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Holder’s actions helped to undo some of the toxic legacy associated with Len Bias and the misuse of Bias’s death for political gain.

Four years later, during the first years of the Trump administration, Bias was again referenced in yet another conversation about the impact of his death on current public policy. Even with the progress made on reforming the mass incarceration problem, activist Christopher Johnson noted that much remained to be done to truly move away from the legacy of Len Bias and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. Johnson was producer of the 2017 Audible podcast series “100:1: The Crack Legacy,” a look at the War on Drugs’ impact on the black community. In the first episode of the series, Johnson directly tied Len Bias’s death to the 2015 death of Freddie Grey, a 25-year old black man from Baltimore who died from injuries suffered while in police custody.

Johnson repeated the now well-known mantra that Bias’s death had sparked a war on crack that had disastrous consequences for young black men. Johnson argued that the erroneous belief that Bias had died from a crack overdose had ushered in both harsh anti-drug legislation and combative police tactics against mostly black inner-

city communities. Johnson believed Freddie Grey’s death in Baltimore — as well the deaths of other African Americans at the hands of police that sparked protests and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement — were a result of the aggressive policing that had become commonplace within black communities since the mid-1980s. Though three decades had passed, Johnson argued that young black men were still paying the price for the misguided political appropriation of Len Bias’s narrative. As Johnson observed, the overzealous response to the crack epidemic, sparked by Len Bias’s death, was “was like an earthquake in black neighborhoods. We’re still picking through the rubble.”⁵

Today, Bias’s death reverberates too in the current opioid drug epidemic — now understood to be the deadliest drug crisis in United States history.⁶ Unlike the crack epidemic, the opioid epidemic has largely been treated as a public health issue, a consequence, many argue, because at its outset it affected mostly white users.⁷ Still, despite the prevalent public health framing of the crisis, there have been efforts to try to curtail the crisis through the criminal justice system — using a series of laws enacted in the aftermath of Len Bias’s death. Back in the 1980s, at the peak of the drug frenzy immediately after Bias’s death — and in a desperate search to end the growing number of crack and cocaine drug overdoses — state prosecutors around the country promoted a series of laws that sought homicide charges for anyone who provided drugs to a user who overdosed and subsequently died. A few states began to adopt these laws, collectively known as “Len Bias laws.”⁸

But the Len Bias laws were rarely used; today, in the midst of the opioid epidemic, in states such as Oregon and Wisconsin, these laws are viewed by many as

valuable weapons against drug traffickers.⁹ Supporters of the Len Bias laws contend that the threat of prosecution has been helpful in forcing lower-level drug dealers to turn on their bosses.¹⁰ However, observers such as Vann Newkirk of the *Atlantic* have noted the adoption of Len Bias laws could signal a move back toward the punitive laws of past drug wars:

Even if it doesn't stop dealers from their work, it could affect how individual Americans think about drug policy, how juries consider drug cases, and how legislators (not to mention law enforcement) react. In other words, just as activists have begun pushing the pendulum away from the most punitive excesses of the ongoing drug wars, with the right amount of influence government could move Americans toward supporting those punishments again.¹¹

Newkirk linked the rise of Len Bias laws to the “War on Drugs 3.0” initiated by current President Donald Trump. Much like the war against crack in the 1980s, a war against opioids would most likely devastate black and Latino communities, Newkirk feared:

Black and Latino people are already much more likely to be policed, arrested, and sentenced than their white counterparts. Black Americans especially still face criminalization from the last two major iterations of the drug war, two campaigns that never really stopped. It doesn't exactly take a leap in logic to determine who's most likely to get caught up in an anti-opioid dragnet: black and Latino victims and suppliers alike.¹²

What are the lessons? They are about how media and American culture remember, mythologize and appropriate stories to the purposes and politics of the times.

It's been over three decades since the death of Len Bias. Yet he remains a singular American celebrity — because his story, his stories, have been so widely

told, and for so many reasons. He's the basketball phenom who has an afterlife in YouTube videos and as an avatar choice in role-playing video games. He's the still devastating reminder for the University of Maryland and the Boston Celtics of their institutional failings. And he's still the strawman: for the War on Drugs debates and for its lingering impact on the American criminal justice system, for the policing of the scourge of drugs, and, perhaps most devastatingly, for the traumas inflicted on black family life in America's inner cities.

¹ Joseph Tanfani, "Dems, GOP hail new policy: Holder calls for easing harsh drug sentences," *Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Aug. 13, 2013.

² Vagueness wielded as a weapon against the War on Drugs," *Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), Aug 13, 2013.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Christopher Johnson, Episode 1: Autopsy 86-999, *100:1: The Crack Legacy*, podcast audio, July 11, 2017.

⁶ Maya Salam, "The Opioid Epidemic: A Crisis Years in the Making," *New York Times*, last modified Oct. 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/us/opioid-crisis-public-health-emergency.html>.

⁷ German Lopez, "When a drug epidemic's victims are white," *VOX*, last modified April 4, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/4/4/15098746/opioid-heroin-epidemic-race>.

⁸ T.R. Reid, "A New Assault Planned Against Formidable Foe," *Washington Post*, Aug. 10, 1986.

⁹ Lez Zaitz, "Drug cartels in Oregon: 'Len Bias's strategy a potent tool for law enforcement," Oregon Live, last modified June 26, 2003, http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/06/drug_cartels_in_oregon_len_bia.html; Eric Litke, "More states push homicide charges in heroin overdoses," *USA Today* Network, last modified July 25, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/07/25/states-pursue-homicide-charges-in-heroin-overdoses/13115751/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Vann R. Newkirk II, "The People Trump's War on Drugs Will Actually Punish," *The Atlantic*, last modified Mar. 26, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/killing-drug-dealers-opioid-epidemic/555782/>.

¹² Ibid.

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