



THE FIRST LEGEND

LONG BEFORE IT WAS COMMON FOR BASKETBALL PLAYERS TO BE KNOWN WORLDWIDE OR MICHAEL JORDAN HAD MADE HIS MARK IN WILMINGTON, NC, MEADOWLARK LEMON USED HIS PLATFORM AS THE HARLEM GLOBETROTTER'S "CROWN PRINCE OF BASKETBALL" TO REACH FANS OF ALL AGES AND RACES.

BY BRANDON SMITH

The man walks into the Wilmington Hilton lobby wearing navy blue warmups. On the jacket: "The Harlem All-Stars." He passes a small table covered with magazines and papers and approaches another, where a journalist from a basketball magazine sits. The journalist is in his early 20s and thinks the man is looking at him like, Who is this kid that's about to interview me? But that's not what the man says. Instead he stretches out his huge right hand, smiles a huge smile and says, "Hey there, son, Meadowlark Lemon."

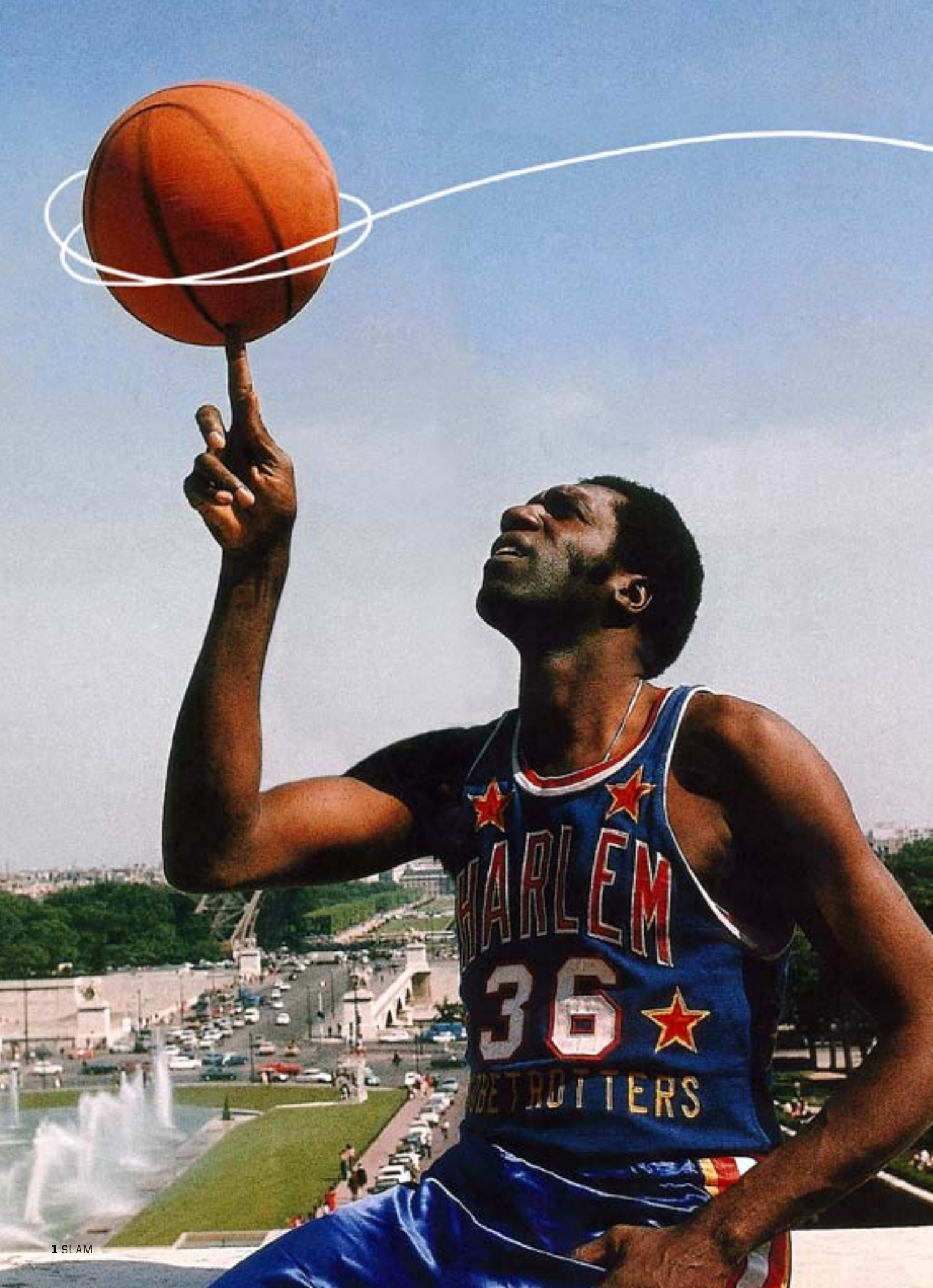
The kid laughs and says, "Yeah, I know, it's incredible to meet you." Every couple of years, he comes back here, to Wilmington, NC. Last night he played basketball downtown at Cape Fear Community College's Schwartz Center. It was packed and a little musty and Lemon

played against grown men young enough to be his grandsons.

He still looked good out there. Sure, it's not a few decades ago; he moved slower and wore a brace on his right knee. But he'll tell you that he's not getting old, just old-er. His legs still rippled, muscular. He still knew the ball like it was part of his soul. He still had a small afro, and his socks and shoes were still white. So were his teeth, and that's good, because he still always smiles.

He was still totally Meadowlark.

It was a small gym. The bleachers ran right beside the court. Close to the legend as they'd ever been, fathers—grown men—smiled like giddy children and pointed open-mouthed and gushed to their sons, acting just like those kids would if they saw superstars LeBron James or Kobe Bryant this close.





ing at the sidewalk corner of Bladen and Sixth. “We used to get tied up into hoodlums, man. Oh, man. We’d be hittin’ each other...” And he’s gone, his mind six decades deep, back when he was a scrawny, lanky kid wrestling on the sidewalks. He grew up in that house.

They called this area Brooklyn. It’s a place of dreaming but nothing more, where hope is a vapor in storms of drugs and gambling and homes broken by them. Lemon remembers it being dangerous; there were shootings almost every day. His father, Peanut, a renowned gambler in the area, carried a switchblade in his pocket, held half open with a matchstick. Local legend claimed he could slash your throat before you could blink.

Lemon is in town this time with his Harlem All-Stars to play some Wilmington locals. Game one was against members of the local government. Game two, sailors from the USS Gravelly, a naval ship soon to be commissioned in Wilmington.

But for now, he’s just a guy in a car on his way to see some old friends.

Lemon’s car rolls down a couple blocks to the Community Boys’ Club. Its parking lot is just a circle of gravel no more than 50 feet in diameter, bordered by a fence, Boys’ Club vans and a dumpster. The building is faded red brick, trimmed by equally faded baby blue. It’s been rebuilt since he was a boy, but this is where Meadowlark Lemon found his way.

Lemon exits the car and walks through the double doors into the lobby, hanging a left. He always visits when he’s in town, and if there’s time, he’ll give the kids a free basketball clinic, too.

Smiling—of course—he walks into the office of a large man named Wayne Lofton, the club director. Lofton is behind his desk; sitting in a chair by the door is a skinny man wearing glasses named Earl Jackson Jr. They’re much younger than Lemon, in their 50s. They know him because he knew their fathers, especially Poppa Jack, Earl’s father. They call Earl “Skip”; he is Lemon’s godson. Poppa Jack is the man who taught Lemon his hook shot, which Lemon can still make about 70 percent of the time, and which became, for a time, the most famous shot in the world.

They embrace, exchange jubilant greetings and catch up. Later, Lemon, Skip and Wayne go to dinner with Joe Harris II and William Lockhart at Midtown Seafood Restaurant. They eat big, then go to one of their houses and laugh long into the night.

It means so much to these men, their time with Lemon. Later, the same journalist who interviewed Lemon in the lobby will ask them about the visit. Lofton will say, “Whenever he’s gone, wherever he’s gone, he never lost touch with his friends here. He never forgot where he came from.” Lockhart, who grew up with Lemon at the Boys’ Club, agrees: “A lot of guys have gone off and become known, and they don’t want to be known as from Wilmington. Meadow never denied where he lived or who he grew up with.”

Plenty of athletes became stars in Brooklyn, and Wilmington has produced some great names in sports, including Michael Jordan, perhaps the greatest of all. But it started with Lemon. “Meadow became like a hero to us,” Skip says. “Because he was the first real big name that surfaced in this community, as far as kids who left here, gone and made it. He was the watermark, the symbol. He was the first to really break away.”

Young Lemon’s life was fractured from the start, and he spent most of his time seeking something whole. He grew up living with his uncle. He took the train to Harlem in the summers to be with his mom. Later, in a tragic irony, his father was stabbed to death while Lemon was serving in the Army. Even after Lemon made it big with the Globetrotters, he played an average of 325 games a year, taking him away from his family and costing him his first marriage.

“It was hard, man,” he recalls. “You think you know everything, then you find out you know nothing.”

So yeah, Lemon’s life hasn’t always been all smiles. That he somehow worked his way free from Brooklyn and its poverty, and on top of that became a global basketball icon, makes him something like the quintessential American dream, like a character Hollywood would

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create. Which is sort of fitting, actually, because it all started in a movie theater.

When Lemon, who was born in 1932, was 11, he and his friends spent all day every Saturday watching cartoons and movies at the Bijou Theater downtown, the only theater where blacks were allowed, and even then just in the balcony. One day they saw a newsreel story about the Harlem Globetrotters. Lemon was captivated. They sang while they laced their shoes. They moved so elegantly. They seemed so happy. They were all so black. Lemon went sprinting down the aisle, down the steps, through the lobby. Someone yelled for him to stop. He kept running, all the way home, “Sweet Georgia Brown” playing on loop in his head.

His family was too poor for a hoop or even a ball, so Lemon made his own. He cut open an onion sack, dumped it out on the kitchen floor and wrapped it around a clothes hanger that he’d twisted into a circle. He nailed that to a tree. Then he took an empty Carnation Evaporated Milk can out of the trash and stood before the tree. He threw the can at the sack like a baseball. It barely hit the tree. The rest of the day, he spent the first few of what would become thousands upon thousands of hours trying to get better.

One day a couple years later, Poppa Jack noticed Lemon in the Boys’ Club struggling to score in pickup games. Poppa Jack pulled Lemon aside and taught him to square his left hip and shoulder to the

rim and shoot by extending his right arm straight in line. “Learn that shot,” Poppa Jack said, “and nobody can stop you.”

It was throwing the milk can at the tree all over again. It took Lemon two days to make a shot and three months before he was anywhere near good. Then he switched to his left hand.

He practiced 12 hours a day and sometimes even longer than that. On hook shots, yes, but also on dribbling, passing, faking, everything. His friends would ask him, exasperated, how long he was going to stay out. “Long as the sun stays up,” Lemon would reply. “Or maybe longer.”

“But why?” his friends would ask.

“Gotta be the best,” Lemon would say. More specifically, a Globetrotter. Ever since the newsreel, Lemon believed he’d join them one day. “I got that vision,” he told the journalist in the lobby. “I saw that with my soul.”

Lemon became a star at the Club and then later at Williston High, averaging 30 points a game his senior year. “He played way above everybody else,” Lockhart remembers. Lemon landed a tryout with the Globetrotters when they were in Raleigh. He actually went into the game in the third quarter, a tryout in front of 15,000 fans, playing alongside Marques Haynes, the Globetrotters’ marquee star of the time. Lemon scored 12 points, wowed everybody with his speed, signed autographs afterward.

In the interview with the kid from the magazine, Lemon talks about growing up in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Wilmington, about seeing things with your soul, about what he became. He says he never tried to become an icon, an American institution who became more important than the Boston Celtics for a spell.

“I had a dream, and I worked at it,” he says, like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “I didn’t think about being the greatest or having an impact outside the game. It’s like most athletes: I wanted to leave the game better than I found it. That’s all.”

He talks about the future. About how now he wants to leave the world better than he’s found it, and about how he’s trying to show people the one thing he believes is truly the most important to have. It’s not wins or trophies or money or women or endorsements. It’s joy.

It’s something heroic all in a new way. To spread joy, he’s had to really know it, and to learn it. Lemon first had to forgive. Others. Life. Himself. God.

He remembers growing up in Brooklyn, and Dad getting stabbed to death, and hurting while riding through the racism-riddled South of the ‘50s and ‘60s. And he chooses to let it go. Dwelling on it would be useless, he says, because it doesn’t leave the world better.

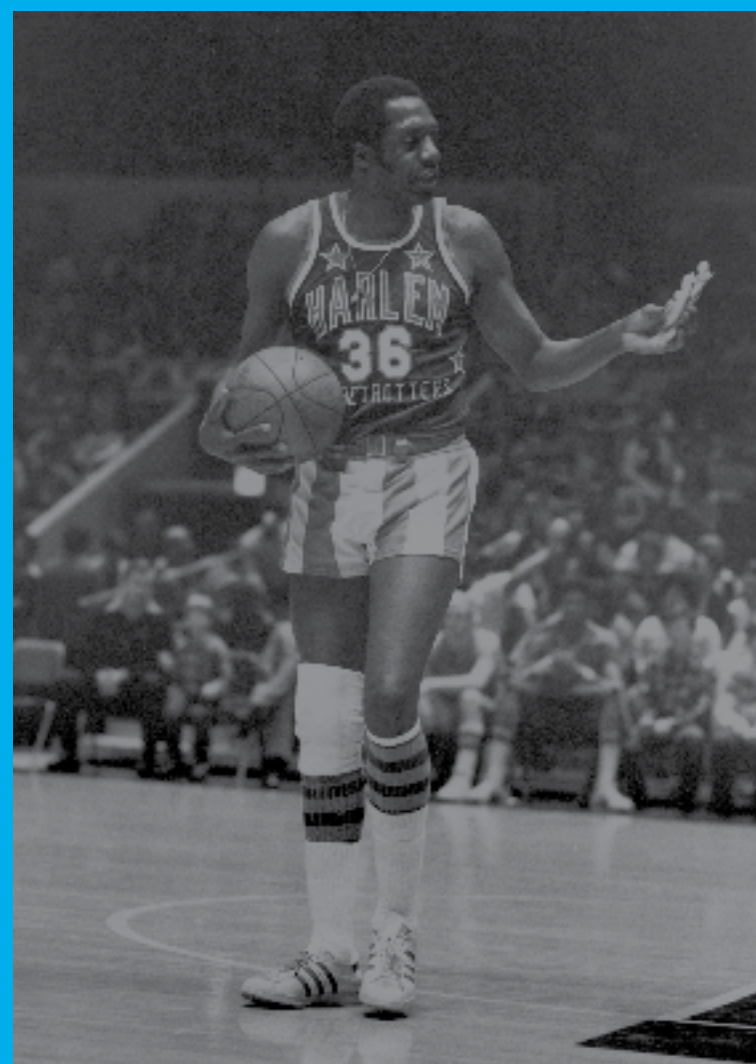
“You can’t think about how to be perfect,” Lemon says. “Just be the best person you can be. That sums it all up.”

Today, he’s an ordained minister with a Doctorate of Divinity. He runs the Meadowlark Lemon Foundation, headquartered in Scottsdale, AZ, where he now lives. It reaches out to everyone from at-risk youth to disadvantaged Native Americans. Profits from Lemon’s All-Stars tours go to area scholarship funds and athletic programs hit by state budget cuts. He’s also written a book, *Trust Your Next Shot: A Guide to a Life of Joy*. If ever a man knew trust, it’s Lemon—the son of a gambler who went all in on the Globetrotters, spending his childhood chucking cans at trees and heaving ridiculous hook shots.

When the interview ends, the journalist and the legend stand and shake hands. The journalist walks toward the doors, Lemon toward the elevators. The legend passes by a little table on his way out, where some half-dozen or so magazines are scattered and disorganized. He stops.

In a moment Lemon will board the elevator and ride it to his floor and then later he will head to the Schwartz, where he will entertain thousands with his smile and a hook shot as timeless as the sea. And win, of course. Then Lemon will fly home.

But first, he picks up the magazines on the table and shuffles them together and then lays them down in a neat pile, and somehow the whole room seems a little better than when he walked in. 🏀



FROM LEFT: JESSE GARRABRANT/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES, AP PHOTO/SUZANNE VLAMIS