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NOTHING

THE VICTOR PAGE STORY



Georgetown
University

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All or Nothing
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ALL OR NOTHING! THE VICTOR PAGE STORY

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“Hoya Saxa”! Hoya Saxa”! They shouted from Healy Hall on the Georgetown University campus. They screamed it out on M Street where Georgetown’s main nightlife and historic shopping district, had become so filled with basketball fans, that cars were stalled. Many of them were simply parked and abandoned right there on the street. Bar owners and restaurateurs opened the upstairs windows of their red brick townhouses – buildings over 200 years old – and patrons hollered like drunken sailors. Shouting could be heard as a call-and-response cheer, echoing down the winding Potomac River with fervor so pitched and even terrifying that it sent bystanders huddling into doorways to escape being trampled by the joyous crowd. “Hoya!” came the basso cry of hundreds of revelers from one side of M Street. “Saxa!” called the other side in return. “HOYA! SAXA! HOYA! SAXA!”

That was the night Georgetown defeated The University of North Carolina, thus earning an improbable and historic return trip to the Final Four, its first in over 20 years. The celebrants were not just students; the streets soon filled with old-school fans from the community. Alumni wanted to be a part of this. Some from the local folk whose only connection to the rich catholic school on the hill was its men’s basketball team. Even the drug boys whose elusive presence had dogged the most famous Georgetown players for years— rushed back that night, where some of them hadn’t bothered coming during the lean years for the Georgetown program.

The Tarheels had been the odds maker’s pick to advance to the Final Four and compete for the NC Double A Title. Instead, it was the Hoyas who would advance to the big dance. Georgetown’s all American junior forward Jeff Green, an eventual first round NBA pick, sank the Tarheels with a last-second Mother Mary miracle bank shot that sent the entire Nation’s Capitol into frenzy. Georgetown basketball had been resurrected as the clock ran out ending someone else’s dream. And Coach John Thompson, III — or “JT 3” – while still very young and inexperienced— had proven to be more than adequate replacement for his father, the legendary Hall of Fame Coach, John Thompson Junior.

Big John, the father, had been the one to transform a Georgetown program that produced only three wins one season, into a team of national prominence. “Hoyas Paranoia” became the battle cry as they sought to crush opponents-leaving their bodies bruised- and spirits broken.

Back in 1984 John Thompson became the first African American ever to win the national collegiate title. The first to coach the US Olympic team; but also the first to lose the Olympic Gold. With his prized center Patrick Ewing an NBA All Star and a lock for the hall of fame, the school advanced to three Final Four appearances and would have won two more titles had Villanova not played “The Perfect Game” and Freddy Brown not thrown that errant pass to North Carolina’s James Worthy.

On, the same night that JT 3 and his new Hoyas were climbing back to basketball prominence, a former Georgetown star player by the name of Victor Page watched the game from a distant stage—in a downtown DC bar. He no longer looked the part, but Page had been a big story in his own right. The fourth highest scoring average in Hoya history, the third most points in a season behind Allan Iverson and Reggie Williams. He was on the Big East All-Rookie Team and he was Outstanding Player in the Big East tournament. When he left Georgetown, Victor Page was headed toward the NBA with a “can’t miss” label attached to his jersey.

But Victor Page’s pro career was eventually blown apart like a tank hit by an IED in downtown Bagdad! Neither he nor Big John, nor the Georgetown administration saw it coming. Or did they? Until now, no writer has been able to get Page or Thompson or the Georgetown family to talk about it.

There he was! Victor Page or what is left of him- fixated on the flat screen HD picture as Big John, all six feet ten inches and three hundred pounds of him, reached out with his 747 wingspan to embrace his son and successor for the North Carolina win. An emotional Thompson would later explain to reporters “He might be the coach; but that’s still my child out there.” He might have also added, “. . . and this is still The House That Big John Built!”

Victor Page longed for one of those hugs about now. With all the celebrations going on in Georgetown, why wasn’t the former star -who brought John a lot of wins- with them tonight?

Check the team programs from years past. You’ll see the name and stats for Victor Page. The first time was in his freshman year when he teamed with Allan Iverson to form one of the most lethal backcourts in college ball. Victor broke AI’s freshman scoring record.

All of Georgetown’s basketball players who stayed the full four years earned the prestigious Georgetown college degree. Iverson was the first star player to leave early, after his sophomore year – He would go on to make millions of dollars as the number one player selected in the NBA draft. There would be millions more from shoe endorsements.

Victor Page, number 44, was more than ready to fill Iverson’s shoes at Georgetown. Victor immediately became the man!

Big East scoring leader and League Player of the year! The Hoyas printed program described Victor Page as an “excellent outside shooter with the flexibility to play several positions. (He is) a fierce competitor with the ability to create his own scoring opportunities. (Page) excels in the transition game.

Coach Thompson was prepared when Page confided that he would eventually follow Iverson’s lead and leave Georgetown for the NBA. He thanked the famous coach for the opportunity. He continues to consider Thompson a father figure and Page says Georgetown University fulfilled its part of the deal. But can the same be said for Victor Page?

Now Victor Page sat in the bar, tossing down one more complimentary drink and he insisting out loud to no one in particular that “VP can still get it done!” The other patrons aren’t convinced. Time and injuries can be cruel to proud pro athletes, robbing them of

their God given skills- that separate them from the rest of the world- just when they need those physical weapons most.

The bar noises droned on. Someone shouted, “Get Victor another brew.”

Page was now 32, and almost ten years removed from his college playing days. The playgrounds and rec centers are far more kind to living legends. You can play there as long as you can walk and talk a big game!

Page still boasted about one day reeling in that elusive big contract, a multimillion dollar shoe endorsement; maybe even enough money to buy a vacation home in Cabo San Lucas, attracting more women than any one man deserved. Hell! 32 was nothing! He was the same age as Allan Iverson, one of the fastest and most talented guards in the NBA and headed to another All Star game appearance for the Denver Nuggets. “Still got AI’s cell number in my T mobile “Fab Five” says Page.

“Hoya Saxa”! “Hoya Saxa.” Ten years after he left Georgetown and Victor Page still didn’t know what those two words, *Hoya Saxa*, meant. (They are Latin for “What Rocks.”) and while the other bar patrons cheered the final score like the amateurs they were, Victor – a.k.a. VP or Video Page – expertly diagramed plays on a cocktail napkin, beating the announcers out loud to point out defensive and offensive schemes, and dismissing the referees for missing a moving screen or a cheap foul on the opposing players. He knew the game inside out. He’d been playing since he could walk.

Also at the downtown bar at 17th and Eye was Lonnie Harrell, a former Hoya player; and Anwan Glover, who played Slim Charles on HBO’s “The Wire” when he wasn’t a lead rapper with a local Go-Go band. Randy Gill, a.k.a. “White Chocolate,” the winner of the Magic Johnson MTV reality show “Who’s Got Game” was also there. Like Victor all of them had or were experiencing some success, here and there, with plans for so much more.

CBS carried the game, but it eventually switched to its local affiliate, WUSA Channel 9, which was about to go live from Georgetown. Back on campus, students grew louder and began crowding as the camera mast atop the microwave truck lifted itself toward the night sky to capture great crowd shots. A second camera and lights were placed on the sidewalk, creating an eerie and overly bright cocoon of light for the reporter to conduct his interviews. Victor watched from afar, and remembered to his bar mates how his classmates at Georgetown were just as excited ten years ago when he scored the winning shots with time rapidly running out.

Reality set in-The group tried not to look; but they could sense Page was adjusting that ugly black patch that covered the socket where his right eye should have been. You couldn’t miss or ignore it. made him look menacing, angry, like a pirate! All that was missing was the peg leg and maybe a parrot.

Few people, even among his dwindling circle of friends, knew the real story behind how he lost that eye. Most were afraid to ask and Victor never volunteered an explanation. It had nothing to do with basketball or did it? There were of course rumors.

It turns out that Page’s eye had been destroyed by a gunshot. It was no accident, either! Someone had tried to kill him! But why?

Wearing the patch meant he couldn't even afford a false eye. That would be difficult, given that he had no job, no health insurance, not even a fixed address. He didn't own a car, yet he refused to board the subway or a bus; probably knew people would be staring at him. So someone had to pick Victor up all the time. He wasn't even certain how he got to the bar that night or how he would get back home...

If he had his own transportation; maybe he would have been in Georgetown or on campus to participate in the street party that followed the school's biggest win in years.

Page reminded himself that night that John Thompson, Jr. and Georgetown University had given him the kind of opportunity that most kids facing his incredible odds would die for. Page had been given the key. All he had to do was walk through the door. So what happened?

"I do regret having spent the night with that other player's wife in Chicago", explained Page; and there were other incidents that caused John Thompson and Georgetown to perhaps regret having taken a chance on Victor Page.

Some argue that the kids from DC's streets had no place at Georgetown University in the first place. That Victor Page was lethal from the start! Others argue that Page was the kind of project that the Jesuit school was meant to take on!

To understand a guy like Victor Page – someone who persistently snatches defeat from the jaws of victory as he undoes his own success in almost clinical fashion – it helps to know where he came from, 2625 Birney Place in Southeast DC: Barry Farm.

It's only a ten minute drive from the U-S Capitol. You can see the Washington monument across the river, just beyond the expressway and bridge.

There are slums in DC, and then there was Barry Farm, a notorious public housing project in Southeast in the 1980,90s and early 2000's. The Farm was the worst of the worst. Some say it's the oldest African-American neighborhood in Washington, dating back to when it was purchased as a settlement for freed slaves. The streets of the Barry Farm area are so stark that they almost resemble the slums of Rio de Janeiro. When a kid from a place like Barry Farm makes good, he's supposed to bring the whole family with him. He's supposed to succeed for everyone, support everyone, to be their ticket out.

Is that too much to put on the shoulders of one kid? Usually. It's hard to say why so many talented young African-American men blast themselves out of the slums only to engage in self-destructive behavior and end up right back there again, but perhaps this unrelenting pressure to save everyone is part of it. Certainly his family had needs far beyond what any young man – no matter how gifted, how famous, or how rich – could meet.

Victor barely knew his father. The only things that Victor Page, Sr. ever gave his son were his name and his DNA the good and the bad! Victor Senior never lived with his son. Instead he spent long stretches at the District's Lorton Reformatory, where behind the barbed wire and guard towers he developed into a phenomenal baseball player. On the streets of Barry Farm and Southeast Washington Victor Senior was just as renowned as a junkie — a drug addict who eventually died in an abandoned public housing unit of an overdose not far from where his child and mother were living. Victor Junior remembers he was in the first grade when he got the news that his Daddy, the man who called him

Champ, was dead.

Instead of a father, Page remembers his mother's boyfriend who went by the nickname "Football." No one ever said Football's real name, and Page didn't really care. "I guess he was pretty good on the field in high school scored a lot of touchdowns," said Victor. Page's most vivid memory of Football was from childhood. He woke one night to the sound of his mother's screams and moans. He thought Football was assaulting her, which would have pretty much been in character. Page was just a kid, but he already had the beginnings of the physical prowess that would make him a star, and that now came into play and made him brave. He crept to the kitchen and grabbed a knife. Then he rushed into his mother's bedroom. Football was on top of his mom. Her screams grew louder. Page plunged the knife blade into the mattress all around Football, yelling and trying to get him off of his mom. Much to Page's shock, however, his mother now screamed at *him*: "Victor! Get your little ass out of here before I tear it up!" It turns out the couple was simply having rough, loud sex, though Victor was too young to know it.

Page's mother, Laverne Anderson Page was a drug addict, hooked on heroin. She died of AIDS just days before Page signed with Georgetown. The exhilaration of signing with a famous team would have been stressful enough for anybody, but to lose her, and in such a complicated way, and to have such mixed feelings about who she was and how he was raised, well, it was hard on him.

As in so many homes where parents become drug addicts, it was Page's maternal grandmother, Dorothy Dews, who became the center of the family. She saw what Barry Farm was doing to her daughter and her grandchildren. and she was instrumental in moving the family out of there and over to Oxon Hill, Maryland, as part of the black exodus out of Southeast DC with its killings and grinding poverty. Oxon Hill absorbed so many fleeing District of Columbia Ward 8 residents that it became known unofficially as the "9th Ward."

As a youngster Victor Page knew nothing about the rest of DC especially the city's northwest quadrant DC where Georgetown University is located high on a hill overlooking the Potomac River. It wasn't that far. A measly fifteen-minute drive from Barry farm. Any GPS would direct you to I-295 past the Washington and Lincoln monuments. From Rock Creek Parkway, on the right, you would pass the Kennedy Center and the Watergate Hotel.

But people from Barry Farm never had the need or curiosity to discover Georgetown's campus, which by the way had once been guided by an African American president, a former slave, Patrick Healey.

DC native and sports icon John Thompson made Georgetown matter to the black masses in DC. John had been a high school star on an undefeated Carroll High school basketball team. After that he was an All American star at Providence College and then backup center to hall of famer Bill Russell on those winning Boston Celtic teams.

John Thompson once told me he couldn't get another college coaching job despite incredible success coaching Saint Anthony High's basketball teams to glory.

Using his contacts in DC hoops, Thompson recruited the best city ballers; among the first were Craig Shelton and John Duren from Dunbar high.

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