

LEAVING HIS MARK

Amile Jefferson ends his Friends' Central career as a caring friend, a diligent student, and, of course, one of the greatest basketball players the School has ever seen.

BY JASON POLYKOFF '02

I still remember it like it was yesterday. It was spring, and I was a second-year math teacher sitting in my cramped office in the basement of the Middle School, when in walks Mike Michnowicz. Mike, an 8th grader at the time, was perhaps the tallest student in the Middle School standing about six-foot one-inch tall.

"Coach Polykoff, I have a visitor who plays basketball," Mike said.

"Well, bring him in and introduce him to me," I responded.

I was not prepared for who was about to walk into my tiny office. Ducking under the doorway was this tall, skinny, long-armed 8th grade visitor. He had about two or three inches on Mike.

"Hi Coach, my name is Amile Jefferson," this visitor said. He was polite, well spoken, and wore a big smile. I instantly liked him. However, I couldn't help but notice the boyish face on his six-foot-four-inch frame and thought to myself, "Wow, he's going to keep growing!"

"So, are you any good?" I asked semi-facetiously. "I'm okay, I have a lot to work on," he said. I thought to myself, "He's either very modest, or he can't play a lick."

"Well, I hope you decide to come to Friends' Central, and perhaps you could play for us one day," I told him.



Standing out, fitting in ... Amile Jefferson (second from left) walks with senior classmates (from left) Spencer Reiter, Cynthia Valdez, Jeffrey Horowitz, and Daniel Stern.

Well, after four years and four consecutive Pennsylvania Independent School State championships, two Friends Schools League championships, a two-time Pennsylvania AA Player of the Year selection, a three-time Pennsylvania First-Team All-State selection, a two-time *Philadelphia Inquirer* Southeastern Pennsylvania Boys' Basketball Player of the Year award, a two-time ESPN/Gatorade Pennsylvania Boys' Basketball Player of the





Seniors Hannah Albertine and Amile Jefferson listen to an Upper School assembly.

Year award, a McDonald's All-American selection, over 1,500 career points, 800 career rebounds, and 180 career blocks, I found out ... he was just being modest.

Amile comes from a humble background. He applied to Friends' Central as a 6th grade student hoping to attend in the fall of his 7th grade year. However, Friends' Central decided he was not yet academically ready. His math was great, but his writing and reading comprehension needed work. Disappointed, but determined, his family enrolled him at Penn Alexander School in West Philadelphia so that he could work on his reading and writing skills.

Penn Alexander wasn't your normal middle school. Amile had only 40 kids in his class, and there was no basketball team. That didn't bother Amile, though; his concern was strengthening his reading and writing. Amile utilized his time at Penn Alexander to become a stronger student, and after reapplying to Friends' Central in the fall of his 8th grade year, he was admitted for high school.

Contrary to popular belief, Amile was never "recruited" to play basketball at Friends' Central. In fact, I had no idea who he was when he walked into my office that morning. His family never used the "basketball card" when applying to Friends' Central. If he was going to be accepted, it was going to be because he was academically strong enough, not because he could put a ball in a basket.

It didn't take long for me to realize Amile could play. The fall of his freshman year we would hold weekly workouts for players interested in basketball who weren't playing a fall sport. We would have as many as 12 players in the gym working on their skills and playing pickup games. Included in the workouts was future McDonald's All-American nominee and newly transferred student, Travis Robinson '10.

Travis, a junior at the time, was an athletic, six-foot five-inch, wing guard who would eventually receive a full athletic scholarship to attend Boston University. Travis had quickly established himself as one of the most dominant players in the gym — often slicing through defenders with ease before dippy-doing for a layup or dunking over anyone near him. Everyone at the workout knew who Travis was even before he transferred to Friends' Central, and they seemed intimidated.

Everyone that is, except for Amile. As I sat there watching from the sidelines, I'll never forget when Travis received a pass at half court and appeared to have a wide open path to the basket for one of his patented rim-rocking dunks. Amile, his opponent at the time, was under his own basket and was determined not to let Travis score uncontested. With an all-out sprint Amile hustled down the court after Travis who was preparing to jump towards the hoop. As Travis neared the rim for what he thought would be an open shot, Amile's long and lanky



Amile Jefferson brings the crowd to its feet with a thunderous dunk on Spirit Night.

body hurled itself towards Travis as his arm reached up and swatted the ball, pinning it against the backboard. All at once the baby-faced freshman's voiced echoed throughout the gym, "GET THAT SHOT OUTTA HERE!" I turned to my assistant coach who was sitting next to me at the time and said, "He's going to be special."

The thing most people recognize very quickly about Amile is that while he is a fierce competitor on the court, he is a sweet, polite, mild-mannered young man off the court. The same person who will scratch, claw, and grab in order to win a drill at practice will be the first one to invite a Middle School student to shoot with him after practice. While Amile was determined to not allow Travis to make that open dunk and would have done anything to make sure of it, it should be no surprise that Travis became one of Amile's closest friends on the team that season. He understands the difference between being a competitor on the court, and having strong moral character off of it.

Tom MacFarlane, Amile's senior-year literature teacher, recognizes Amile's charismatic personality as well. "As impressive as he is on the basketball court, as an exceptional leader and teammate, Amile is loved and admired in this community above all for everything else he brings to us—his integrity, his sense of humor, his curiosity, his smile, his perspective, and his generosity," MacFarlane says. "I cannot say enough about Amile and what a tremendous role model and leader he has become in our School."

I remember a specific moment from Amile's freshman year that spoke highly to his character. Amile had been playing well and was supposed to make his first start of his high school career against Valley Forge Military Academy. The player who usually started in front of him was a senior who had been playing poorly and was chosen to come off the bench that game. Needless to say this senior was not happy about his demotion and appeared discouraged during pregame warm-ups. Amile, recognizing his teammate's frustration, approached me before the game. He explained that his teammate's mental well-being was more important than him starting, and asked if he could come off the bench so that his teammate could start instead.

I looked at him funny and asked, "Are you sure?"

With all the confidence and maturity of a senior, the young freshman replied, "Yeah coach, it doesn't bother me."

Perhaps most surprising to those who know Amile Jefferson as a terrific basketball player is the fact that



On Senior Night (from left): Assistant Coach John Timms, Head Coach Jason Polykoff '02, Amile's father, Malcolm Musgrove, Amile Jefferson, Amile's mother, Quetta Jefferson, Assistant Coach Kenneth Jackson, and Assistant Coach Scott Scarlotta.

he is a terrific student as well. The competitiveness that Amile exudes on the court also translates to the classroom. Refusing to be thought of as simply a "dumb jock," Amile has become a hardworking, insightful, and resourceful student.

Says Michael Crauderueff, Amile's Spanish II teacher, "From day one, I knew there was something special about him. He was focused, curious, and energetic during our class activities. Indeed, he was always prepared in advance to engage with the material and other students in the classroom. He put forth a total effort, working hard to improve his skills, and he was willing to share those skills with those around him. I was impressed with Amile's respectful attitude for the material, his classmates, and me."

As Amile's coach for the past four years, I will certainly miss his basketball ability, but I will also miss his leadership, intensity, and work ethic. While Amile will be sorely missed, I can't help but think about that future college coach sitting at his desk as Amile, now a freshman in college, walks through the door to say hello. While he may know a thing or two about Amile "the basketball player," he will have no idea about the type of young man he is about to coach. He'll find out soon enough. qw

Jason Polykoff '02 is a Middle School math teacher, Co-Director of Sports Information, and Head Varsity Boys' Basketball Coach at Friends' Central.