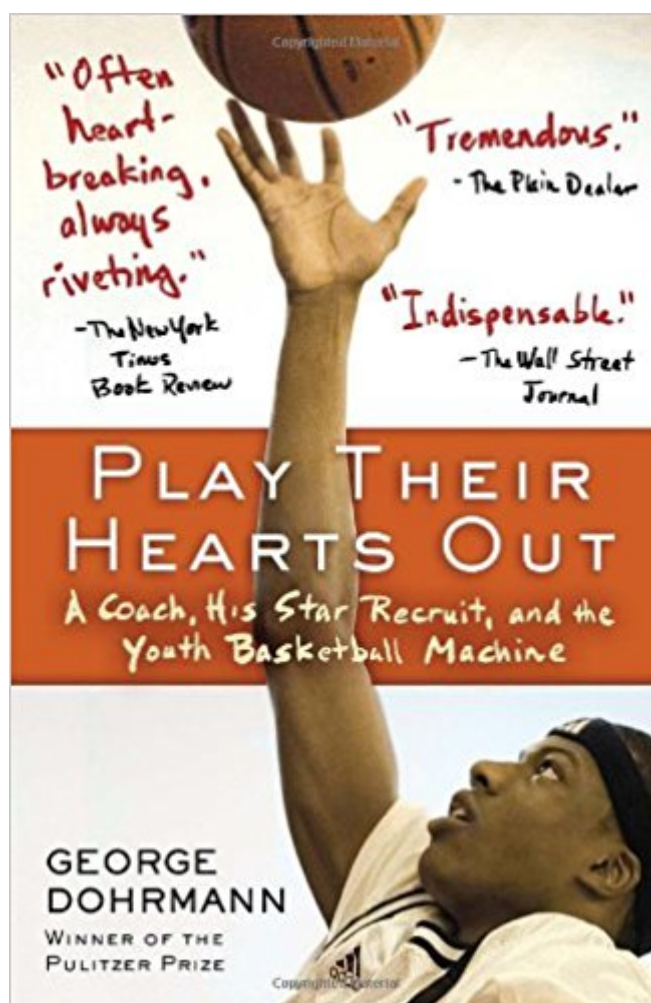


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# Play Their Hearts Out: A Coach, His Star Recruit, And The Youth Basketball Machine



## Synopsis

Winner of the PEN/ESPN Award for Literary Sportswriting Winner of the Award for Excellence in the Coverage of Youth Sports • Eight years of unfettered access and a keen sense of a story's deepest truths allow Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist George Dohrmann to take readers inside the machine that produces America's basketball stars. *Play Their Hearts Out* reveals a cutthroat world where boys as young as eight or nine are subjected to a dizzying torrent of scrutiny and exploitation. At the book's heart are the personal stories of two compelling figures: Joe Keller, an ambitious coach with a master plan to find and promote the next LeBron, and Demetrius Walker, a fatherless latchkey kid who falls under Keller's sway and struggles to live up to unrealistic expectations. Complete with a new "where-are-they-now" Epilogue by the author, this thoroughly compelling narrative exposes the gritty reality that lies beneath so many dreams of fame and glory. • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST SPORTS BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE LOS ANGELES TIMES • THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR • KIRKUS REVIEWS • Look for the exclusive conversation between George Dohrmann and bestselling author Seth Davis in the back of the book.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, October 2010: Each year, millions of grammar school athletes swarm fields and courts armed with little more than an infectious love for their games. These endeavors represent the purity of sport, as kids are allowed to be kids and compete outside the demands of lucrative contracts and extensive media coverage. Yet sadly, as George Dohrmann's *Play Their*

Hearts Out demonstrates, such a paradise is fading fast in today's corporate sports world.

Dohrmann provides a first-hand account of the rise of a nine-year-old basketball phenom and the grassroots programs that both helped and hindered his dreams of superstardom. To call this story a cautionary tale is to sell it short, as *Play Their Hearts Out* is an unflinching look at the increasing need for hype in youth athletics. Fans of the brilliant *Hoop Dreams* documentary are advised to add this book to their cart immediately, as Dohrmann's masterful ability to remove himself from the plotline achieves an honesty that leaves any and all judgments to the reader. --Dave Callanan

Photographs from *Play Their Hearts Out*

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Starred Review. Dohrmann, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for *Sports Illustrated*, spent eight years chronicling the struggles and triumphs of a select group of California youths who chased their dream in his wonderful and immaculately reported first book. Dohrmann largely focuses his work on Demetrius Walker, the hoops phenom who seems destined for stardom at a young age, his travel team from California, and the club's complex and bombastic coach, Joe Keller. Dohrmann began reporting on the book back in 2000, when Walker and many of his teammates were only 10 years old, and followed them through to their high school graduation. Along the way, he shows the brutal nature of "grassroots" basketball, in which coaches can view their players as "investments," the power of sneaker companies in youth basketball, and the cutthroat antics of collegiate recruiting. But this is equally a story about relationships and the sad deterioration of many of them, whether it be among teammates, parents and son, or coach and player. It's a brilliant and heart-wrenching journey, and a cautionary tale to any basketball player who thinks the path to the NBA is a slam dunk. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

The book is extremely well-written, edited and thoughtful. I have a son who plays in AAU year-round and is one of those boys who regularly attends the national camps (EBC, John Lucas etc). The book shines a spotlight on why AAU coaches are so motivated to recruit the best talent for their teams and why they'll go to such great lengths to win. There is big money involved from the shoe companies and other sponsors. If you are a parent of an AAU basketball player you absolutely **MUST** read this book. Parents are being deceived by coaches and recruiters all the time. Spend \$15, buy this book and educate yourself. The book is so well-written that even if you are already an expert and can navigate the murky waters of AAU w/out assistance this book is worth the read for the entertainment value alone.

Obviously, well written, story flows well. Only gripe I have is of the lead character/villain Joe Keller (I often wanted to stop reading because he's such a despicable human being, all in it for his own gain). He is borderline trailer-trash exploiting young, talented kids and their poor, single parent families (which he often times admits to when he's being honest, which isn't often). But he does have some good qualities: he's got the desperation and hunger (because when he literally started, he was basically broke) so he worked extremely hard, networked, constantly marketed himself and his product (his star player and team) and achieved goals he wanted to accomplish. Otherwise, he's a s\*\*\*ty, know-little coach/leader (indecisive and just informed enough that makes him dangerous). He constantly berates his players and his erratic substitution patterns during games were a mind-jack(I prefer the f-word) and shows how little he knows and his lack of self control. I have no idea how this low life was able to manipulate not only the kids, but also the parents (some who were well-educated and financially well off). I would rate this book 5 stars if it were fiction, but because the real life main character is such a POS human being, I have to settle for 4 stars.

I am still reading this book. It is an interesting story about the pressures put upon coaches, parents , and especially team members at a very young age. I do think it would be a rather difficult read if you were not familiar with basketball.

AAU ball is a trip I played for a Reebok sponsored team called The TCAA Monroe Bulldogs in Monroe, Louisiana. We got a limited amount of tshirts , shorts and socks etc . Our coach had a different agenda he would sell shoes headbands and everything that he could sell that was Reebok. That was the Summer of 2000. It was a 16u team, we made it to nationals in Detroit. I heard some of this stories from other teams when we stayed in hotels. This was a great book.

Having coached baseball and basketball for 30 years and run a community "feeder" basketball program for 20 years, I see a definite trend in youth sports that is very disturbing and disheartening to observe. What I am referring to is the presence and proliferation of for-profit entities involved as role models and instructors as described in Play Their Hearts Out. To be sure, as one reviewer said, there are a lot of well-intentioned individuals - and even organizations - running youth athletic programs, but the momentum is unmistakable and the ultimate destination of such momentum are organizations like Dohrmann describes which are in it solely for the money. Combining a profit motive with the gullibility of parents and the impressionable tendencies of kids becomes the perfect

formula for exploitation. Let this book be instructive for parents whose children are being wooed by for-profit organizations so that they may choose wisely whom they allow to mentor their children. Paying big money to play in tournaments in Las Vegas and Orlando or even just locally rather than using the more European model of teaching fundamentals is the easy way out for non-profits to give the impression of teaching the game, but it is mostly fluff. It is good to have books like this written to expose the excesses described. I do think Dohrmann was way too long-winded in describing certain background areas such as details on the parents' backgrounds but after a while, one can learn to skip over those areas.

George Dohrmann fairly portrays the world of AAU basketball that many have known to exist but few have had a chance to experience. Each individual story depicted is both gripping, complex and nuanced. The storytelling involved makes you feel and understand the fine line that exists between making it to the big time (the NBA) and being labeled as another youth basketball phenom who didn't have the game to make it all the way. Dohrmann does the book justice by portraying the self-appointed stewards as a cross section of unscrupulous self-serving con men to selfless coaches who want nothing more for the young men to not only achieve success in basketball, but in the game of life. However, all too often the AAU coaches, who do not require basketball credentials or background checks, lose sight of the fact that the more realistic goal for the young players is to obtain a college scholarship in hopes of better their long-term life plans as opposed to striking it rich in the NBA against all odds and sacrificing everything along the way.

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