



Hoop Dreams Discussion Guide

Director: Steve James

Year: 1994

Time: 170 min

You might know this director from:

Life Itself (2014)

Head Games (2012)

The Interrupters (2011)

At the Death House Door (2008)

Reel Paradise (2005)

Stevie (2002)

Prefontaine (1997)

FILM SUMMARY

Dreams serve varying purposes in our existence. Some are fanciful, some fill us with hope, some push us onwards in our darker days, and some offer a vision of escape in an otherwise desperate, dead-end situation. HOOP DREAMS is a chronicle of the power of sports to fuel dreams and generate possibility in the great struggle of life.

Over the course of five years, director Steve James trails William Gates and Arthur Agee, two inner-city African American young men from the time they are “found” as grammar school kids on their neighborhood basketball courts until they bound towards uncertain college doors. Well-acquainted with the hardships of growing up poor and black in America, William and Arthur – like many young men before and since – envision their basketball skills as their ticket out of the life they were born into. Their dream is singular: to play for the NBA.

They are not alone in dreaming this dream. A whole host of characters in their lives hops on board for the ride, as they dribble, pass, shoot, score, and are defeated in their journey to a privileged suburban high school, shiny eyed with promises of scholarships and endless prospects. Mothers, fathers, brothers, girlfriends, teachers, and friends turn to Arthur and William to provide them with part of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

But as Arthur displays less-than-optimal skills on the court and equally shoddy academic prowess, the true face of the system is revealed. Despite William’s academic failings, his excellence on the court means money is found to keep him on, while Arthur is pushed back to free-for-all public schooling. Both boys traverse different paths to similar ends, while battling tragedies and unforeseeable upsets along the way.

HOOP DREAMS plays up shoot-and-score evidence that the dream is alive, but fierce is life’s competition.

FILM THEMES

On life's court, equal opportunity is elusive, making the sport's court a breeding ground of hopes, dreams, and exit doors. However, once talent is exposed, just who is pursuing whose dream is put to the test.

WHOSE DREAM IS IT ANYHOW?

The NBA, brimming with wealth and promise, offers a rare chance to those desperate for a way out. Ideal dream material for young men living amidst drugs, poverty, shootings, and empty kitchen cupboards. But the dream is not a private affair. Everyone who comes into contact with these young men reaches for a piece of the promise, as if a contract with the NBA would be a conquest for the father who never made it, the brother who dead-ended his career, the teacher who breeds pros. One man's lost dream is found in another's, confusing the motives of the original dreamer. In the words of William's mother, "Everybody's throwing their dreams into you, but you've got to throw your own dreams into yourself."

ENTERING A WORLD OF PRIVILEGE

The American system is unfortunately wrought with economic and racial inequality- life in a dilapidated ghetto offers nowhere near the possibilities for a healthy, free, potent life in suburbia. Rather than improving conditions for the general inner-city public, a selected few are shipped out to the burbs and trained on the basis of the potential they display to make money for their privileged benefactors. When we see two children struggling to balance and stand with a foot in each world it becomes impossible to deny the lack of equality and opportunity when pursuing their dreams.

MONEY = OPPORTUNITY

When it comes to the American dream, success comes at a price everything comes with a dollar sign. HOOP DREAMS exposes the truth that these boys were not bussed to suburban schools in order to offer them a superior education or to help their families live better lives. They were brought in to succeed, to make money for the school, to validate the careers of school officials, and when they do not keep their end of the deal, it's out the door.

SPORTS VS. ACADEMICS

Many argue that the secret to a long and productive life lies in academics. Yet educational pursuits do not offer the same fast track to wealth, fame, and escape that a well-honed talent bestows. No one cheers for the biology nerd, while the pro-athlete basks in glory wherever he goes. Yet, when athletes are recruited to schools with high academic expectations, learning and athletics become intrinsic to one another. The two go head to head when recruits are trained and encouraged according for their sporting abilities, and the result is that a high S.A.T. score and top marks on a math test become nothing to whole-heartedly, honestly strive for - only something to pass on the way to the ball.

"I want Arthur to have a better life than what I had. I don't want him to experience the bad things in life I went through."

Arthur "Bo" Agee

"All those basketball dreams I had: they're gone. All my dreams are in him now. I want him to make it so bad, I don't know what to do."

Curtis Gates

"Basketball is my ticket out of the ghetto."

William Gates

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What are five adjectives you would use to describe HOOP DREAMS? Do you feel the film delivered a potent message?
2. Do you think that the fact that Steve James is a white director impact the film? Was he able to truly capture a reflection of what life was like for two inner-city African American kids?
3. Did you feel more sympathetic or understanding towards one of the two boys, Arthur or William?
4. What challenges did both Arthur and William face? What can these challenges be attributed to?
5. Have you ever had a talent that you dreamed would take you far in life? Have you achieved these goals? If not, how did you experience that disappointment?
6. Should children who excel at sports be forced to devote an equal portion of their time to academic pursuits, or instead be allowed to focus on perfecting their athletic skills?
7. Do you think professional athletes merit the astronomical salaries they are paid?
8. Is your background similar to or diverse from that of William and Arthur? Did you attend private or public school?
9. Is there racial tension in your community? Is there a strong divide between the races, in terms of available opportunities? Do you live in a mixed racial community?
10. Both William and Arthur became fathers before they turned 20. What factors affect the prevalence of teen pregnancy?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Since its release in 1994, HOOP DREAMS has been granted awards from many organizations, including the American Cinema Editors, Chicago Film Critics Association, Directors Guild of America, International Documentary Association, Los Angeles Film Critics Association, MTV, National Board of Review, National Film Preservation Board, Sundance Film Festival, and Prix Italia. The film was also nominated for an Oscar and an Image Award.
- HOOP DREAMS was originally intended to be made into a 30-minute PBS television series shot over the course of 3 weeks. After 5 years of filming, the team had shot 250 hours of footage, which they laboriously edited down to 3 hours.
- During the filming, William Gates kept very quiet about his personal life, and did not tell the filmmakers that he had a baby with his long-time girlfriend Catherine. They did not even know he had a girlfriend until his mother told them he had become a father.
- When the Agee family could not afford to pay their bills and their electricity was switched off, the filmmakers paid to have it turned back on.
- In order to maintain their amateur basketball player status, neither Agee nor Gates were allowed to receive any money from the film's sales until after they had finished college. When Agee received his first check for \$64,000, he gave it to his mother to buy her first house.
- Curtis, William's older brother, was murdered in 2001. Bo, Arthur's father, was murdered in 2004.
- William Gates has four children and works as a church pastor in Texas, where he relocated in order to escape the violence of Chicago in 2012. His eldest son is an excellent basketball player.
- Arthur Agee has four children. He continues to live in Chicago, where he runs the Arthur Agee Jr. Role Model Foundation to assist troubled youth.
- In 2013 there were 45 million African Americans in the U.S., 14% of the 316 million population, with Chicago having the third largest community of African Americans in the nation. During the 1940s, approximately 3,000 African Americans arrived in Chicago daily from the South, seeking better lives and jobs from the abundance on offer. Most moved to the city's south side, which is predominantly black to this day.
- 28% of African Americans were living in poverty in 2013, and 2.9 million were unemployed, constituting 16% of total U.S. unemployment. 80% of African Americans over the age of 25 have a high school diploma, and 19% possess a Bachelor's Degree. 72% of African American children are born to single mothers. The majority of players in the NBA are African American, 78% to be precise, with whites making up only 17% of players. The NBA was founded in 1946, and the first black player was drafted in 1950, followed by the first black coach in 1966.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to see this classic documentary and be effected by its story.
2. **Support** one of [the Arthur Agee Jr. Role Model Foundation's initiatives](#). The organization works to end bullying and to help children find a constructive path to follow in life through education.
3. **Become** a mentor in President Obama's [My Brother's Keeper](#) community, an initiative "to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color and ensure that all young people can reach their full potential."
4. **Learn** more about [Skool of Skills](#) - a Chicago area sports and educational charity.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.