

Culture



From left: Romeo Travis (Scoot Henderson), Lil Dru Joyce III (Caleb McLaughlin), LeBron James (Marquis "Mookie" Cook), Willie McGee (Avery Serrell Wills Jr.) and Sian Cotton (Khalil Everage) in "Shooting Stars," directed by Chris Robinson (Universal Pictures/Oluwaseye Olusa)



by Elizabeth Hamilton

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Who doesn't know the name LeBron James? Four-time NBA champion. Two-time Olympic gold medalist. The NBA's all-time lead scorer. Many consider LeBron James the greatest basketball player of all time — the only other contender: Michael Jordan (among fans, that debate ensues). There's a reason he's called King James.

On the other hand, few may recognize the names Dru Joyce III, Sian Cotton, Willie McGee or Romeo Travis. But before LeBron James was *the* LeBron James, he was just another kid from the Midwest who loved to shoot hoops with these four, his best friends. In fact, as a 14-year-old soon-to-be high school freshman, LeBron was so committed to playing ball with his friends, he relinquished a spot on his preferred team at the local public school to attend St. Vincent-St. Mary High School, a predominantly white Catholic school in his hometown of Akron, Ohio — where he and his friends were assured spots together on the varsity team.

Now, thanks to director Chris Robinson (best known for his Netflix original "Beats") and producer LeBron James himself, we have the pure delight of watching "[Shooting Stars](#)," a coming-of-age biopic that tells the story of how in 2003 LeBron and his friends became the No. 1 high school basketball team in the U.S. The movie is based on the book of the same name, co-written by LeBron James and Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Buzz Bissinger (author of *Friday Night Lights*). "Shooting Stars" is available to stream on Peacock.

"Shooting Stars" has everything one might want in a great sports movie — made even better because it's all true. In Keith Dambrot, the boys' basketball coach at St. Vincent-St. Mary, we have a crotchety, down-on-his-luck coach who turns out to be a softy. In Dru Joyce II, Dambrot's assistant, we have an inspiring father figure who's less interested in winning games than building character. As Coach Dru says throughout the movie, "It's not how you start the game, it's how you finish." There's the uppity sports journalist from New York City who scoffs at writing about a high schooler — only to find himself humbled by LeBron's performance on the court. And there's the fast-paced drama of the game itself.



Marquis "Mookie" Cook as LeBron James in "Shooting Stars" (Universal Pictures/Oluwaseye Olusa)

Then there are the five friends: teenagers Dru, Sian, Romeo, Willie and LeBron. They call themselves the "FAB 5" after their heroes, the original Fab Five: basketball stars Chris Webber, Jalen Rose, Juwan Howard, Jimmy King and Ray Jackson of the 1991 University of Michigan men's basketball team. Dru (played by Caleb McLaughlin of "Stranger Things") is an especially compelling character who has more pluck than height. Despite his short stature, he proves himself a worthy scorer through pure grit and determination. Willie (played by Avery Serell Wills Jr.) starts out the movie as the best player of the group. By the time he's a senior, LeBron has far surpassed him. In a tender moment, Willie's older brother-turned-guardian reminds him there's more to life than basketball. Willie takes his brother's advice to heart, and with the state championship at stake, makes the tough call to let a more talented teammate play in his stead. Moments like these reveal how high school sports is as much about character as it is about athletics. The court becomes an arena to practice virtues like

patience and self-sacrifice.

As the movie progresses, the plot naturally becomes more and more about LeBron (played by Marquis "Mookie" Cook), who grows ever taller and more impressive on the court. You could say this is a movie about how LeBron James became LeBron James, but that would miss the point. Rather, this is a movie about the importance of friendship, particularly those formative and potentially lifelong friendships cultivated in high school. This is a movie about how often the best friends are more than just friends and more than just teammates — they are a kind of chosen family.

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Throughout middle and high school, LeBron and his friends choose each other again and again. On the court, the five boys play as one — and dominate any rivals. After school, they play basketball in the backyard and basketball video games on the TV. When one of the boys gets into trouble, the rest are right there to help him out. They cover for each other, on the court and in life.

In one sense, it's all very ordinary. But the story suggests something profound. Without his coaches and his friends, LeBron may never have become who he is today. That's the magic of "Shooting Stars," how it reveals the inestimable worth of friendships like these, forged in the crucible of something as ordinary as high school sports.

Of course, no family is complete without sibling rivalry. LeBron's friends tease him when he makes the cover of Sports Illustrated. They're angry when he gets drunk at a party with players from the NBA and costs them a crucial game. Dru in particular envies LeBron. He must wrestle with the reality that one of his best friends will go on to play in the NBA while he will not.

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Likewise, LeBron struggles with the isolation brought about by a level of pressure to perform that none of his friends will ever experience. This is friendship in a vice grip. Emotions run high. Fame and opportunity threaten to destroy their bond. But in the end, these boys refuse to let anything tear them apart. Their friendship, their joy in one another and in the sport, ultimately wins.

We know how this story ends. LeBron becomes LeBron. The other boys go on to have less public, but equally meaningful lives of their own. All high school friendships must come to a kind of end. And yet, it's wonderful to discover that, despite their varying paths, these five remain friends.

Toward the end of the movie, Coach Dru tells the boys, "When you look back at this time in your lives, it won't be about stats, accolades, the X's and O's. It's not about winning the state championship. It will be that person next to you." Most of us will never have a career as impactful as LeBron James'. But we all live in a world that pushes us away from one another, toward isolation, toward ourselves. "Shooting Stars" serves as a reminder to push back. To fight for what really matters at the end of the day — or, we might say, at the end of the game: the people we're given, the people we're called to love.