

With its spiralling TV deals, nine-figure salaries and trophy-buying oligarchs, the Premier League is a bastion of cut-throat capitalism. America's basketball league, on the other hand, is an island of socialism in a sea of free market meritocracy, embodied by the NBA Draft. *FHM* follows one young basketball prodigy as he bids to go pro...

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TALL ORDER: RAKEEM CHRISTMAS DREAMED OF BEING AN ASTRONAUT, BUT 6FT 9IN MEN DON'T FIT INSIDE SPACESHIPS

he uncomfortable silence in Rakeem Christmas's hotel room is broken by the buzz of hair clippers attacking his high-top fade. The college basketball prodigy frowns into his black iPhone 6 while a portly barber in a

flat cap shaves lines into his head.

The atmosphere is tense. Rakeem's aunt, girlfriend, uncle and his agent mill nervously about without a word; they know better than to disturb Rakeem during the most important haircut of his life.

He doesn't talk; he just swipes the tiny iPhone in his giant hand with the intensity of a confused caveman trying to read his own palm. If only the device could let him see forward to the following evening. For tomorrow night, the 23-year-old from the tiny Caribbean island of St Croix will learn if he is to become a millionaire. It is the night when the moneymen of America's 30 professional basketball teams gather at Brooklyn's Barclays Center to pick the best young college hopefuls they want to sign for the season ahead. Those who make it will get a chance to live the life of every American schoolboy's dreams: roaring crowds, unimaginable wealth, women, cars and a place on court beside their heroes. Those who don't will probably wind up playing in Europe or China, or not at all. This is where it starts. It is also where it can end. Tomorrow night is the NBA Draft. And Rakeem Christmas is on the list.

When the buzzing stops, Rakeem unfolds out of his seat into 6ft 9in of tattoos and brawn. "I'm back!" he says

in a deep East Coast drawl. He turns to *FHM* and grins. "I've got a swaggy mentality – I gotta look fly all the time," he tells us. "Especially for tomorrow – the biggest day of my life."

"If only your momma could see you now," says Amira, who is both Rakeem's aunt and manager.

"She can," Rakeem replies. "She's looking down right now."

Rakeem doesn't remember his mother. Landra 'Jenny' Hamid was only 28 when she died of the auto-immune disease lupus. Rakeem was five. "During her funeral, I don't think I was crying or anything," he tells us. "I was just there not knowing what was happening. I really don't remember anything at all."

Rakeem stayed with his grandmother on St Croix in the Virgin Islands until he was 13, before she took him to Philadelphia to live with Amira, then a 22-year-old graduate of



HIGH HOOPS: AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, RAKEEM WAS A PROLIFIC POWER FORWARD



THE FLY LIFE: RAKEEM'S AUNT AND MANAGER AMIRA BROUGHT HIM UP AFTER HIS MOTHER DIED



“How many people have the opportunity to do the thing they love the most for millions of dollars?”



Drexel University. She shepherded him through high school, applying the same focus to his studies as she knew his mother would have done.

"He is my everything," Amira tells us. "My son, my nephew, my brother, my best friend. I always told him, 'If you want to be a physicist or an astronaut, I'll Google it and, within a month, I'll know everything I need to get you there.'"

But adolescents of 6ft 9in don't fit inside spaceships, so he chose basketball instead, developing a reputation as a prolific power forward.

By the time he was 18, US colleges were trampling each other to sign him. He chose Syracuse University in New York, where he majored in communications and rhetorical studies. He also dominated the college team's basketball court, which brings him here, to the NBA Draft – arguably the biggest media circus in world sport.

Socialist dreams

Sports in America are not like sports in Europe, and not just because we like to kick stuff while they prefer to throw it. No, operationally speaking, European football is more 'American' than basketball. And basketball is more 'European' than football.

Hear us out: in Europe, with its long history of socialist values, the sporting arena is a snake pit of unbridled, shit-or-get-off-the-toilet capitalism: clubs that win the league gain more revenue, buy the best players, pay the highest wages, and then win the league again.

Not so in America. For a nation so geared towards the capitalist dream, where society's winners get rich and get laid, and losers get left to rot or shot by police, the American sports model is a carefully tailored system

of checks and balances. In the NBA, for example, the richest teams pay heavy taxes to support the minnows; there are salary caps and, with just a single league, no relegation.

Then there's the NBA Draft – the most socialist aspect of all where, rather than be punished for losing, the worst performers of the previous season get the first picks of the upcoming college prodigies.

"It's to help out the smallest teams," Rod Thorn, outgoing president of basketball operations, tells us when we visit NBA HQ in Manhattan. "Basketball's different to other sports in that you only have five players on court at any one time. So one guy makes a huge difference – especially if he's someone like Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal or LeBron James – he could win you the league."

Put simply, the NBA Draft is a bit like the dole – except with up to a 25 per cent chance of becoming a »

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE NBA?

multi-millionaire. But, like the dole, it's also easy to cheat the system. This is called tanking – losing on purpose for a better chance at scoring a superstar for the season ahead.

"Tanking has certainly become more of an issue in recent years," says Thorn. "But it's difficult to tell your fans, 'We're not going to try to win.' That's a tough sell and I like to think it doesn't happen as much as the media would have you believe."

Standing out and looking fly

The world's media are already outside the Westin Times Square Hotel in Manhattan when we arrive for the Annual NBA Pre-Draft Style and Gifting Suite – surely one of the most bizarre pre-season rituals in any sport. In the two days prior to the draft, nearly two dozen members of the NBA draft class make their way to the top floor of the five-star hotel to help themselves to free headphones from Beats by Dre, clothes from Sean John, booze from Hennessy, boxer shorts from Ethika, mobile phones from Samsung, jewellery, trainers and gourmet cheesecake.

"College players aren't allowed to accept any kind of gift, sponsorship or payment of any kind," Amira explains. "But that ends as soon as they join the NBA, and it's open season for sponsors to get them to wear their stuff." In one room, EA Sports scan a 3D image of Rakeem's head for the next *NBA Live* computer game.

How does it feel for the world to suddenly want your signature? "It's pretty cool," he says laconically. "But, y'know, it's a sideshow. This is the greatest sport in the world and I just wanna get on court and show everyone what I've got. Nothing was ever given to me – I've worked hard to be here and I plan to work harder."

Next is the official suit fitting. On the sixth floor, we enter the fitting room to find Chris McCullough, another draft hopeful, strutting around

the room in a burnt-marmalade blazer and cricket-white chinos.

"Looking flyyyyy, G," Rakeem tells him with a fist-bump and a bro-hug (they played together at Syracuse). But it's nothing compared to what Rakeem's selected: a navy suit with an eye-burning floral-pattern jacket.

"The draft is about standing out," Rakeem says. "The world's cameras are on you, so you gotta look fly."

We want to tell him our great aunt has something similar covering her kitchen table in Burnham-on-Sea, but we assume he wouldn't know where that is. And anyway, he's back looking at his phone again.

Tears and celebrations

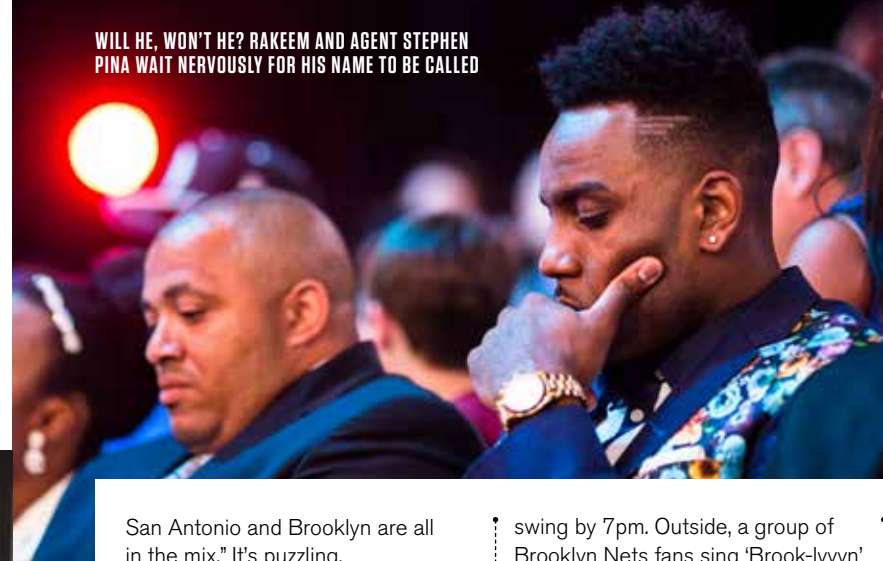
The next day is Draft Day and it's time for Rakeem's final strategy meeting with agent Stephen Pina.

In the hotel room, Pina is running through which teams he thinks are likely to pick Rakeem. "At pick 24 – which is Cleveland – you're one of two players they want," Pina tells his young client. "At 27 – the Lakers – you're one of three. The 76ers just called me and said if they can, they're going to try to grab you. But I also know New Orleans, Dallas, Boston,

"It's Peter Pan syndrome; basketball is a sport where you don't have to fully grow up until you retire"



WILL HE, WON'T HE? RAKEEM AND AGENT STEPHEN PINA WAIT NERVOUSLY FOR HIS NAME TO BE CALLED



San Antonio and Brooklyn are all in the mix." It's puzzling.

Before we head to The Barclays Center, Rakeem's extended family – including his father, aunts, uncles and cousins – have flown in for a Chinese meal in Manhattan.

Even his 63-year-old grandmother, Evelyn, is here to cheer him on. "The last time we were all together was when my daughter died," she tells us. "I took Rakeem everywhere after her death – I had to keep him close to my heart. Even now. I go to every game he plays, shouting and cheering. I get tears in my eyes every time I talk about it."

"All this is for my family," says Rakeem. "Last time I visited St Croix, I didn't like seeing the way they were living; it was like watching a movie. People had outhouses. You had to go to the river to wash your clothes. If I make it tonight, I want to give back to my family, help them out."

The Barclays Center is in full

swing by 7pm. Outside, a group of Brooklyn Nets fans sing 'Brook-lyynn' for 15 minutes between swigs from their 'Thirst Aid' beer hats. This is a sensory overdose of uncut Americana, mainlined through our eyes.

As we enter, two ESPN sportscasters at a lit-up TV coffee table in front of the main stage are saying things like, "Hey, y'know, this guy's got a lot of stuff to his game," and, "Yeah, he has hoops, not hopes." During the many breaks throughout the next seven hours, a breathlessly chipper female host fluffs the crowd with selfie and dancing challenges while a team of cheerleaders throw 'swag' into the crowd. It's as exhausting as it is exhilarating.

First to pick are the Minnesota Timberwolves, because they were hopeless last season. Then the LA Lakers, then the Philadelphia 76ers, then the New York Knicks, and so on.

Rakeem is quiet in his tablecloth flower-suit. It could be nerves, but

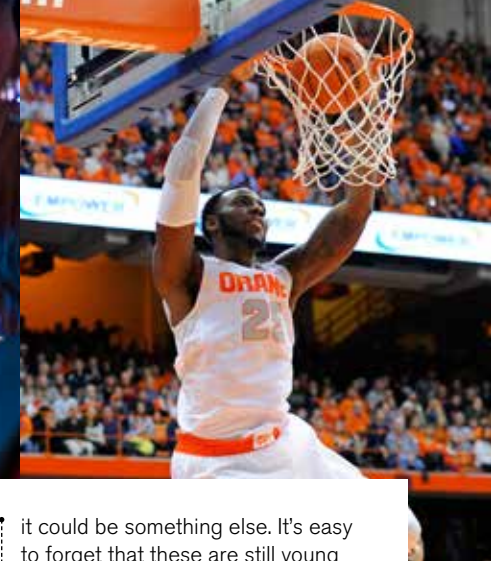
it could be something else. It's easy to forget that these are still young men. It was only for this trip that Rakeem decided to leave his trademark SpongeBob SquarePants backpack at home. "I wear it everywhere, but I thought I should grow up for the Draft," he laughs. "But I love SpongeBob. I still watch him to this day. SpongeBob, Pokémon, the Disney Channel. If it makes me laugh, I'll watch it. I don't care what people say."

At that moment, a draftee walks on stage in a shiny red suit and golden, spike-studded smoking slippers. "Whoever gets me is getting a jewel, y'know what I mean?" he tells the sportscasters with hubris typical of tonight. A second player walks on in red tartan trousers, followed by another in a blue-and-white polka-dot bow tie and gold medallion. If CBeebies did fashion shows, they might look like this.

Minutes later, in the corridor



FULL SWING: INSIDE THE BARCLAYS CENTER



WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE NBA?

THE NBA VS THE ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

REDISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH VS FREE-MARKET MERITOCRACY

NBA: All teams contribute around 50% of their revenue, which is redistributed among smaller teams to keep them financially stable.

EPL: A small circle of the richest teams gobble up the largest slices of TV and sponsorship revenue, oblivious to those underneath.

NO RELEGATION VS RELEGATION DOGFIGHTS

NBA: At the end of a season, the only punishment for coming last is shame. The lowest ranking teams bolster their roster by getting first picks of the best college players.

EPL: Failing to get results can plunge bottom teams into a relegation dogfight, desperate to reap the many lucrative financial incentives of staying in the EPL.

SALARY CAPS VS NINE-FIGURE FEES

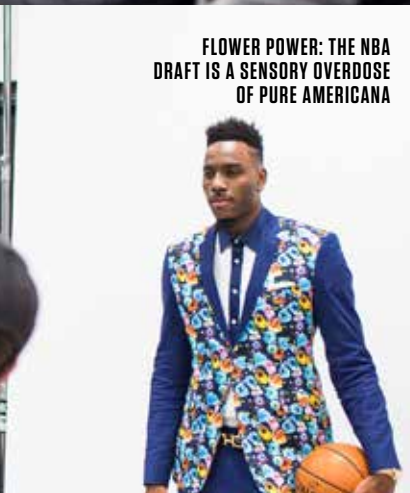
NBA: Players can be traded in exchange for other players, draft picks or a limited amount of cash to maintain competitive balance.

EPL: The teams with the deepest pockets can buy the world's best players for as much cash as they like, freezing out poorer teams.

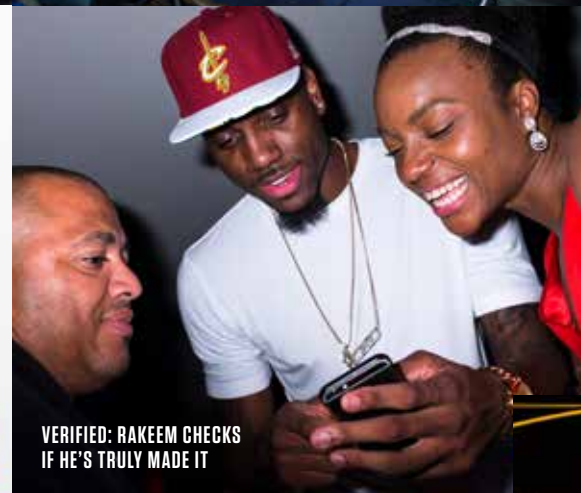
ANYONE CAN WIN VS SAME WINNERS EVERY YEAR

NBA: The NBA is divided into two conferences, Eastern and Western, the top eight of which qualify for play-offs – giving more chance of glory to more teams.

EPL: Small clubs have no chance of winning the league. The best fans can hope for are a few upsets and the chance to do it all over again, if they can avoid relegation.



FLOWER POWER: THE NBA DRAFT IS A SENSORY OVERDOSE OF PURE AMERICANA



VERIFIED: RAKEEM CHECKS IF HE'S TRULY MADE IT

“The NBA’s system acts as a pressure valve for Americans to let off a little socialist steam”

backstage, we bump into former LA Lakers star and NBA legend Robert Horry. “These guys ain’t even men yet – most of them can’t even buy liquor,” he says. “But this is life-changing. How many people have the opportunity to work only three hours a day doing the thing they love most in the world and make millions of dollars for it? It’s Peter Pan syndrome; it’s a sport where you don’t have to grow up until you retire. I got to be a kid for 20 years. Now I gotta grow up!”

By the 30th pick, Rakeem’s name still hasn’t been called. He and his team are starting to look nervous.

Then, finally, it comes: pick number

36 by the Minnesota Timberwolves. A frantic NBA flunky hands Rakeem a Timberwolves hat and, after more fist-bumps and hugs, he goes on stage, shakes an NBA fat cat’s hand and joins the ESPN table.

Amira is in tears, Evelyn’s waving her arms in the air and Pina’s slumped in his seat talking on his phone. Then, literally as Rakeem gushes to ESPN about how much he loves Minnesota, Pina tells us: “I’ve just had a call; Rakeem’s been traded to the Cleveland Cavaliers.”

“What, in the past 20 seconds?” we ask. “Does he know?”

“Yeah, but the world doesn’t know

and he’s on live TV,” he replies, his eyes filling with tears. “He’ll be getting \$1.7 million over the next two years. I can’t speak right now. It’s too much.” Things move fast in the NBA – since our time with Rakeem, he was traded again to the Indiana Pacers for a reported \$4.4 million over four years.

A fairer system?

In the 23 years since the English Premier League was created, 47 clubs have competed, but only five (10.6%) have ever lifted the trophy. While ours is a system that ruthlessly punishes failure, it also lets time-old rivalries thrive and relegation dogfights mean every team has something to celebrate. The NBA, meanwhile, has seen 30 teams compete in the same period, of which nine (30%) have won. Certainly it is

fairer; anyone can win. But there’s a case to be made that salary caps exist merely to hold down player salaries to benefit the owners and that the ring-fence around the NBA league eliminates the threat of new franchises diluting the earning power of a cabal of very rich men.

Perhaps our respective set-ups are exactly what we both need. The NBA’s system acts as a pressure valve for Americans to let off a little socialist steam before throwing themselves, fully cleansed, back into the capitalist meat grinder. For Europeans it’s the opposite: football is the chance to channel our inner Rupert Murdoch before returning to being good welfarists on Monday.

Rakeem doesn’t care about that. He’s now a millionaire. And he’s dancing in the street, with a bottle of D’Ussé Cognac in his hand, as Drake’s *Know Yourself* blasts out.

It’s 2am and we’ve just arrived at

Jay Z’s 40/40 club in Manhattan. The girl with the clipboard doesn’t even ask who we are: one look at Rakeem and she lifts the VIP velvet rope and ushers us inside.

“Yo, Rakeem,” laughs Pina. “You’re an NBA player now... you’ll never have to pay to enter a club again.”

But Rakeem’s not listening; he’s looking at his phone again. Though this time he’s not frowning, he’s grinning wider than at any time since we met. “Hey y’all, I can’t believe it,” he yells. “I’ve finally made it!”

“What?” we ask. “You’ve been traded to an even bigger team?”

“Nah,” he replies, the greenish glare from his iPhone lighting up his face like Kryptonite. “I’ve just been verified on Twitter.” **FHM**

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NBA BOOGIE: RAKEEM WILL NEVER HAVE TO PAY TO ENTER A CLUB AGAIN