

Impossible Dream?

Raymond Lewis, the 'Playground Legend' of Long Beach Clings to Hope of Playing Pro Basketball as He Nears



Raymond Lewis practices on playground.

BY DICK WAGNER

LONG BEACH—The self-proclaimed best basketball player in the world is pudgy and pushing 32, but the playgrounds' chain nets still beckon him and he responds, as always, with jump shots as soft as summer kisses.

Raymond Lewis is trying to get in shape.

The roundness that his face and stomach have acquired from too much beer and lying around waiting for ankle injuries to heal irritates him.

"You know what I'm gonna do tonight? I'm gonna run two miles and get all this off," he says after a few one-on-one games in which he showed moves as lustrous as they were a dozen years ago when it seemed the 6-foot-1 guard was a cinch for a long, lucrative career in the National Basketball Assn.

It Never Worked Out

He had expected that it would all be his. The dream house, a Rolls-Royce for him, a Mercedes for his wife, a pool, lots of money in the bank.

But it never worked out that way.

Still, Lewis refuses to believe it never will.

"I'm no quitter," he says. "I know I can fill an arena up."

The anger within him churns and his voice grows louder.

"Give me a chance in the NBA. Even now, the way I am (15 pounds too heavy at 195), I can go out and prove I'm the best."

If the nets ever become resistible, Lewis may attempt getting on with the rest of his life, something he has long postponed.

'It Burns Like Fire'

"Of course I'm going to give up someday, when I feel I can't play and no longer have the desire," he says. "Why the desire pops up every now and then is beyond me. I usually don't want it popping up because I would still like to get my degree and get into other things. But right now it burns like fire in me and there's nothing I can do about it."