



## True Legend

By Mike Lupica

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**#1 New York Times bestseller Mike Lupica makes his return to the basketball court!**

There's a reason teammates call him "True." Because for basketball phenom Drew Robinson, there is nothing more true than his talent on the court. It's the kind that comes along once in a generation and is loaded with perks--and with problems. Before long, True buys in to his own hype, much to the chagrin of his mother, who wants to keep her boy's head grounded--and suddenly trouble has a way of finding him. That is, until a washed-up former playground legend steps back onto the court and takes True under his wing.

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## True Legend By Mike Lupica Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #41830 in Books
- Published on: 2013-05-21
- Released on: 2013-05-21
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x .81" w x 5.50" l, .70 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 320 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

##### **Praise for *True Legend*:**

\*\*\*"The perfect trifecta of deep knowledge and portrayal of the history and culture of basketball, keen insight into the obstacle course of motivations and temptations facing a talented young man, and perfect-pitch sports writing. . . Lupica is the greatest sportswriter for middle-grade readers, and this book, *True Legend*, is a reminder of his dominance."\*\*\* —VOYA, starred review

"Lupica scores another winner with this cautionary tale. . . . Loaded with action-packed, suspenseful basketball sequences, crisp dialogue, sharply drawn characters, and keen insight into contemporary basketball culture in America, Drew's story illuminates the realities and choices facing gifted young athletes." —*School Library Journal*

"Written in a fluid mix of slightly distant exposition and terse dialogue, the tale features plenty of suspenseful, expertly depicted hoops action along with choices both wrong and, ultimately, right made in the face of glittering temptations." —*Booklist*

#### — Awards

##### About the Author

Mike Lupica lives in New Canaan, Connecticut, and is the host of *The Mike Lupica Show* on ESPN Radio.

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#### One

It started with him thinking he'd seen a ghost.

A basketball ghost.

A ghost in a gray hooded sweatshirt, no writing on the front or back, one that seemed way too warm even for a Southern California night, and almost two sizes too big for his long, skinny body. The guy was six three or six four, easy.

He was wearing baggy blue jeans, the carpenter kind with pockets, faded nearly to white. They seemed to hang on him, too, like they were about to fall down around his ankles.

He had old Air Jordans on him, old-school classics, high-top red-and-blacks.

Drew Robinson recognized the shoes right away because he always did. Nobody knew old-time basketball kicks better than he did. He knew these shoes because he'd just bought a pair for himself off Classickicks.com, where he went for sneaks out of the past you couldn't find anywhere else.

The ghost also had a beat-up Lakers cap pulled down low over his eyes, so Drew couldn't get a good look at his face. But he could see just enough to tell he was a light-skinned brother—not as light as me, Drew thought—out here on the half-court that nobody ever used at Morrison Park, not during the day, certainly not

at night, not when there was a lighted full court for you to use at Morrison. This one here was lit only by the moon, up high in the sky tonight.

Usually Drew Robinson—known as True Robinson by now to everybody who followed basketball—didn’t see anybody using either of Morrison’s courts when he arrived after midnight. Whether the courts were lighted up or not.

There was nothing fancy about this park. If you were a good player looking for a game, you went to Shoup Park over in Woodland Hills. Drew just liked the full court at Morrison, liked being able to walk the couple of blocks here from home, knowing he could work out in peace, work on his game, without everybody watching every move he made.

Watching him the way they had been for a while now, even before he and his mom moved out to Southern California, from the time back in New York, when they’d first started calling him the best point-guard prospect since—pick a name—Chris Paul or Derrick Rose or John Wall. All the new ones that had come along since they used to say Jason Kidd was the best pure point to ever come along.

Even Stephen Curry, one of Drew’s favorites, who came out of Davidson as a shooter and then showed the NBA the way he could pass the ball.

LeBron Junior, some people even called Drew that, not because of the way he played or looked—he was half a foot shorter than the real LeBron—but because he’d made that kind of name for himself before he was even a junior in high school.

Truth was, he played more like Steph Curry, and looked like him even more.

Drew (True) Robinson and his mom lived here in Agoura Hills, just over the line from Westlake Village, where his school—Oakley Academy—was. Quiet town, at least as far as he was concerned, with this quiet playground in it. He could come here when Morrison had emptied out and remember, every single time, why he’d loved playing ball so much in the first place.

Before it became a ticket to dreams he didn’t even know he had.

A basketball friend of his from New York, from 182nd and Crotona in the Bronx, Shamel Williams, a boy with no parents and no money, barely getting by on his grandma’s welfare check, had told Drew once that the best thing about basketball, the thing he loved about it the most, was that it could even make him forget he was hungry sometimes.

“Playing ball just fills me up in another way,” Shamel said. “You know what I mean?”

Drew had never gone hungry. His mom had always been a professional woman; her last job in New York was working as a secretary at a real-estate company in Forest Hills. There’d always been food on the table.

Still, Drew knew what Shamel was saying to him.

Basketball had always filled him up, too.

Morrison gave him that feeling when he had the place to himself. Only tonight he was sharing the place with this ghost player, the ghost doing things on this bad court that made Drew think he

was in some kind of dream.

Dribbling the ball like a Harlem Globetrotter, like Curly Neal, who Drew had met at Madison Square Garden one time, like the ball was on some kind of string. High dribbles to low, both hands—Drew wasn't even sure at first whether he was righty or lefty—behind his back, through his legs. He was making it look easy, like he wasn't even paying attention, like he could've been doing something else at the same time, checking his phone or texting on it.

Then off the dribble came the spin moves and shots, the guy working the outside, draining shots that would have been three-pointers easy if there had been a three-point line on this old used-up court instead of just potholes and weeds.

And the guy—ghost—hardly ever missed, even though there were these moves he made, ones that started with his back to the basket, moves like a blur that should have made it impossible for him to pick up where the rim was when he came out of them.

Here under the light of the moon.

Unreal, Drew thought.

Because how could it be anything else?

Drew saw all this without being seen himself. He was hidden by a palm tree, his own ball resting on his hip.

He watched the guy walk to the far edge of the concrete, as far away from the basket as he could get, take a deep breath, let it out, then glide toward the hoop, long legs eating up the distance.

Then he was in the air, somehow exploding in slow motion, like it wasn't just the kicks he was wearing, like he was Air Jordan himself, the ball high in his right hand until he threw it down from so far above the rim it was as if he had fallen out of the sky.

Catching the ball with his left on his way down before it even hit the ground.

He wasn't done.

He bounced the ball to himself, high as he could, elevated, caught the ball as he started to come down. Only he didn't throw it down right away. Instead he tucked it into his belly like he was a running back in football, somehow stayed in the air as he went underneath the iron, then reverse-slammed it home.

Ten, Drew thought.

Perfect dag-gone ten.

Who was he?

This ghost who seemed as happy to have Morrison to himself as Drew always did.

Only tonight neither one of them was alone.

And even though Drew knew he should be moving on, getting on with his own business, he couldn't stop watching the show.

Drew thought, I'm watching him do things with a ball that only I'm supposed to do around here.

Not so much the dunking things, even though Drew could definitely throw down with flair when he wanted to. No. It was the shooting, the ballhandling, like the ball was one more part of this guy, same as his arms and legs.

Drew watched now as the guy dribbled away from the basket, like he was on his way into the trees himself. Then he gave one quick look over his shoulder before casually tossing the ball up over his head, a crazy no-look shot that floated through the night and hit nothing but net. Even the forgotten courts at Morrison had nets.

Drew couldn't help himself, couldn't restrain himself any longer.

He started clapping, like he was at some kind of outdoor concert.

"Man," Drew said, laughing, "I got to get some of this."

Then he said, "You want some company?"

Half thinking to himself that if the guy turned around as Drew stepped out from behind the tree, an old hooper like this, he might recognize Drew, might see that the voice calling out to him belonged to True Robinson.

Himself.

The guy didn't turn around.

He just ran.

Didn't want to know who was talking to him, didn't care, just ran and picked up his ball like it was the most valuable possession he had in the world and disappeared into the night.

"Wait!" Drew yelled after him. His voice sounded as loud as thunder.

But just like that, the guy was gone.

As if he'd never been there at all.

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