

Watch Connie Hawkins hustle on the basketball court. It isn't the Dave Cowens dive-under-the-press-table-for-a-loose-ball hustle; on this late winter morning in Los Angeles, as the Lakers stagger toward the end of the most disastrous season in their history, Connie Hawkins isn't even dressed for the 10 a.m. practice. He is disabled, nursing a severely torn ligament in his right hand. Still, Hawkins is ready to offer a superb demonstration of a basketball hustle. He strides onto the court wear-

ing a blue warm-up suit, a yellow button reading "Be Kind to Animals: Don't Eat Them," and a sleepy-eyed expression half-hidden behind his prominent cheekbones and muttonchop whiskers. He suggests to Kermit Washington, the Lakers' second-year back-up center, that they shoot fouls for \$10.

"Hey, man," Kermit says, "I don't wanna bet."

Hawkins pursues; his voice drops into the soft, silky register of a New York street-corner salesman offering a Rolex watch for \$9 to a visitor just off the bus from Moline.

"O.K., O.K.," Kermit agrees, and steps to the foul line, where he hits his first four free throws.

"I'm in trouble now," Hawkins says, just loud enough to break Washington's concentration. "I'm in serious trouble."

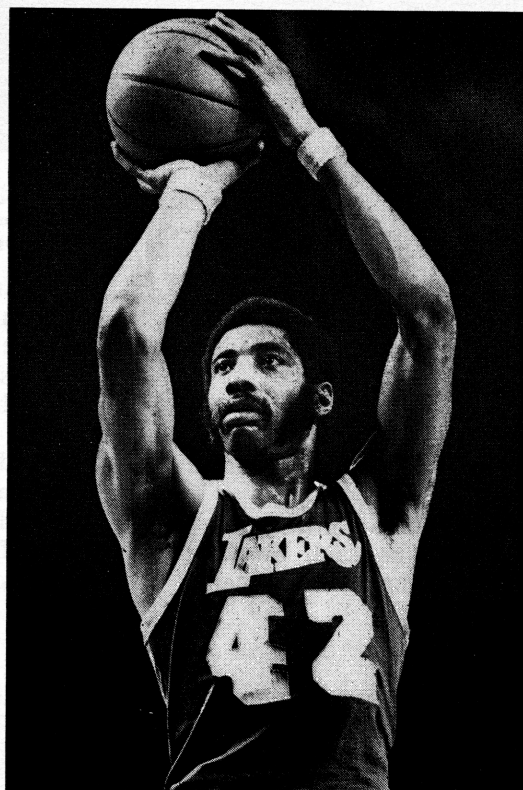
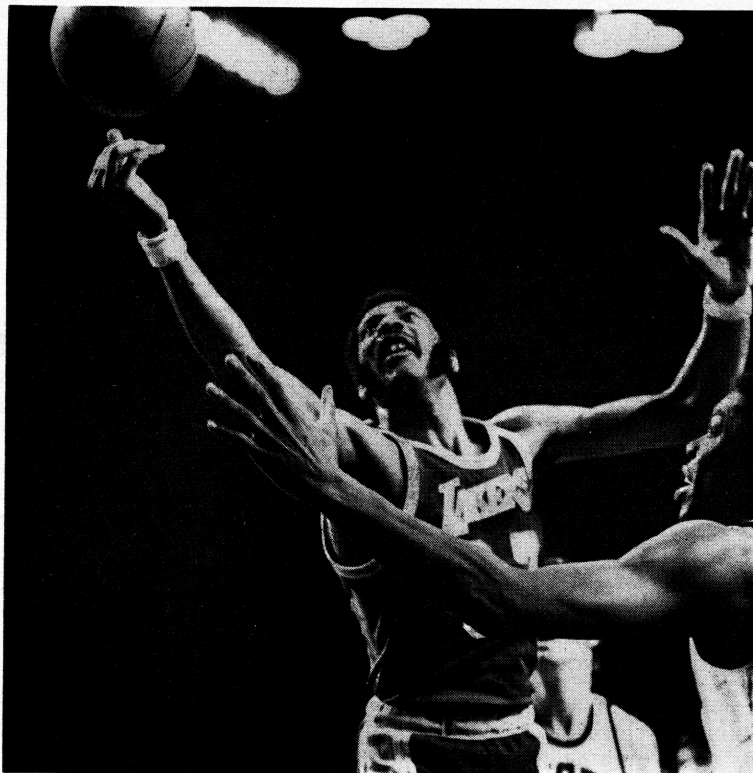
"Shut up," Kermit says.

"Hey, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry," Connie apologizes. He breaks up laughing as Washington misses the fifth shot, then hits four out of five himself, mumbling, "Soft touch," and, "Gonna be close."

Now Washington steps to the line again, trying to ignore the soft in-

BY JEFF GREENFIELD **NO LONGER SOARING,**

The Hawk Is Still Aloft



sistent voice of The Hawk.

"Now Kermit," he says, "you gotta make all five of these to put the pressure on me."

Kermit misses the first shot.

"Now, you *know* . . ." Hawkins begins, and starts to cackle. Kermit makes three out of five shots, and Hawkins sinks four. Immediately, he is after Washington to take one shot from the top of the key, for double or nothing.

"I don't wanna bet no more," says Kermit.

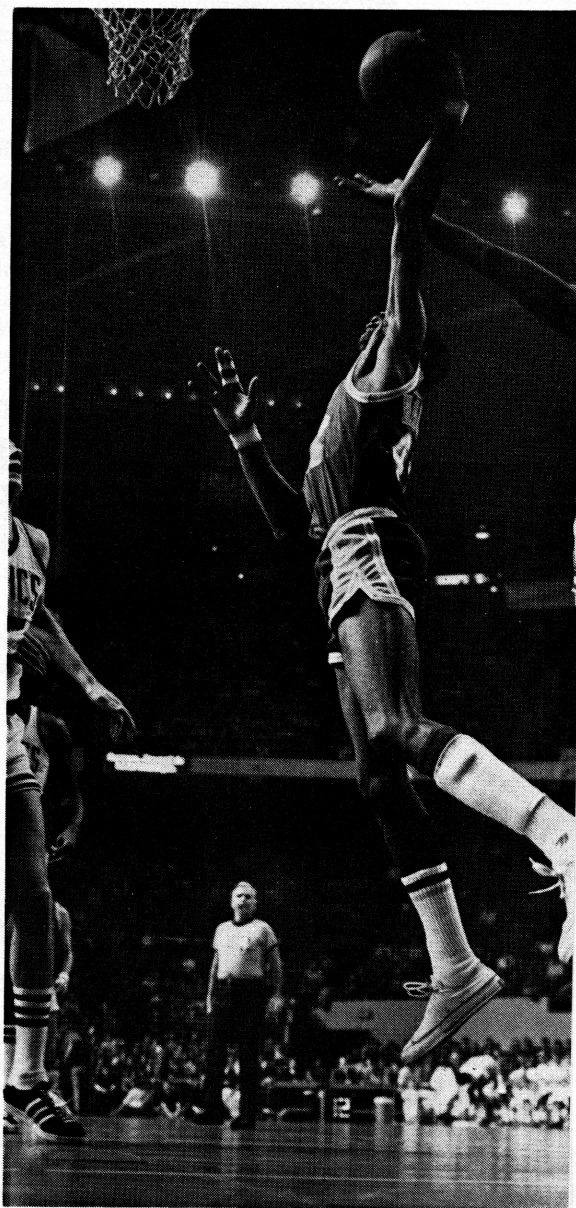
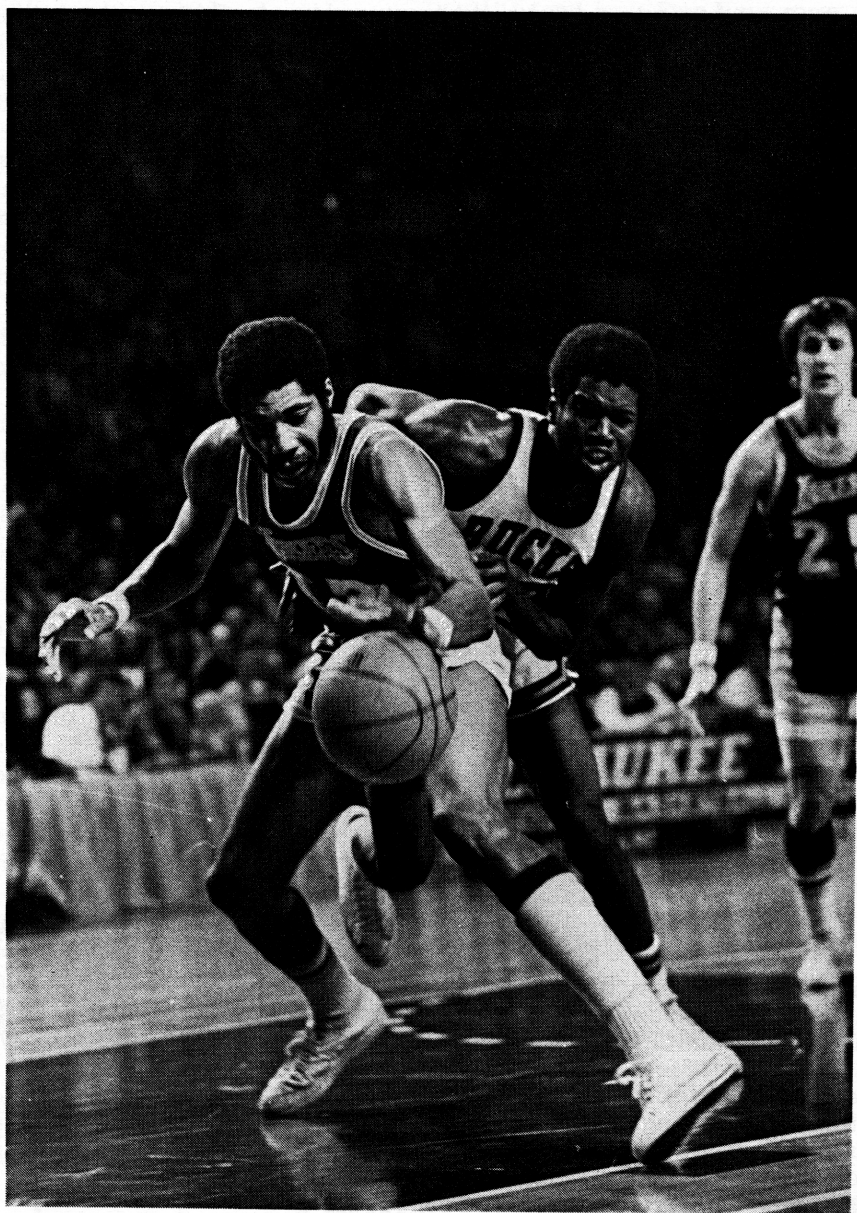
"Hey, Kermit, hey, come here, hey, Kermit," Hawkins moves after

him, stepping in front of him, talking earnestly to him. Finally Washington throws up the one shot—and misses. He storms off, exclaiming, "I ain't playing no more."

"Just trying to keep all my New York stuff goin' for me," Hawkins explains an hour later as he sits by a tennis court under an 80-degree Southern California winter sun. "If you get hustled long enough in New York, you either become the hustle-ee or the hustle-or."

Hawkins is a long way from New York now, a continent and half a

lifetime as well. He is also at the far end—perhaps the final end—of a basketball career that began in glory, stopped in mid-flight surrounded by scandal and exile, began again with redemption, and now appears to be ending in ambiguity. Basketball brought Hawkins out of the sinkhole of Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant, the biggest and one of the worst black ghettos in America, to playground legend and schoolyard stardom at Boys' High of Brooklyn. Basketball brought 250 college recruiters after Hawkins, with promises of education, and



SOARING

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ready cash. It also brought Jack Molinas and a \$200 loan, which caught up Connie Hawkins in a major point-shaving scandal. Frightened, barely literate, and confused, Hawkins admitted a non-existent complicity in an attempt to introduce ballplayers to gamblers. He was forced to leave the University of Iowa in his freshman year, barred from the National Basketball Association, and spent eight years on the fringes of the game.

For eight years, the man many called the single most talented player ever to play basketball, plied his trade with the Pittsburgh Rens of the American Basketball League (he was the league's first—and only—MVP), with the Harlem Globetrotters, and as an All-Star and MVP with the Pittsburgh Pipers of the American Basketball Association.

Then, thanks to a team of at-

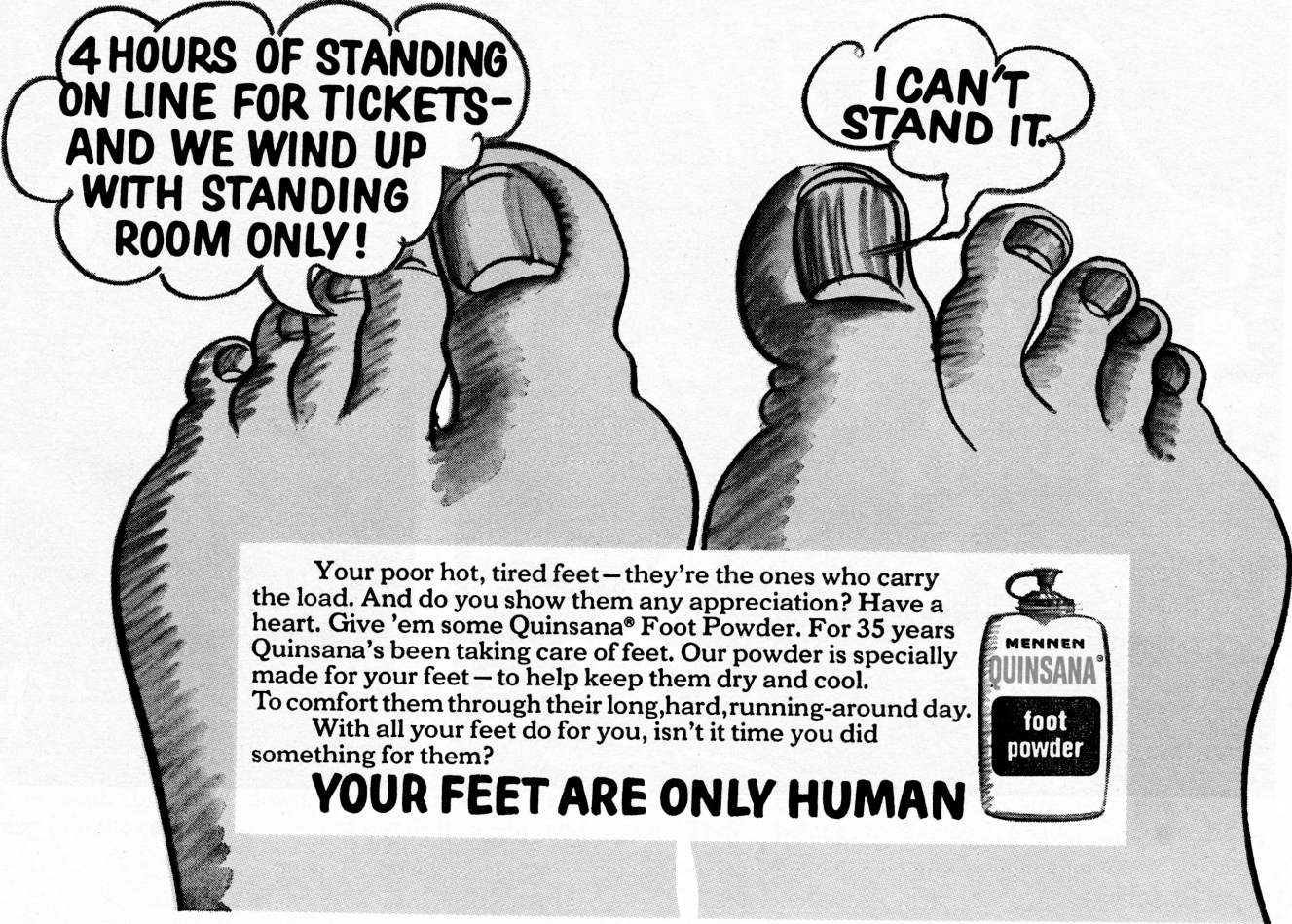
torneys and a sportswriter named David Wolf, came a settlement with the National Basketball Association for Hawkins: A cash award, a \$600,000 annuity for his middle age, and a five-year, \$410,000 contract with the Phoenix Suns. At 27, Hawkins became an NBA rookie—and began to prove that the schoolyard stories were true. In his first season with the Suns, he averaged 24.6 points a game, made the All-NBA team, led Phoenix into the playoffs, and came within one game of defeating the Lakers.

But Hollywood endings have a way of making a wrong turn in real life. While Hawkins continued to make the All-Star teams, and to average 20 points a game, Phoenix never made the playoffs again. There were injuries, illnesses (real or imagined), feuds (coach Jerry Colangelo yanked Hawkins in the middle of a game in November, 1972, because of "careless play"), and a reputation for indifference. When Hawkins was traded to the Lakers at the start of the 1973-74

season, one Phoenix writer reported, "The Hawk had added muscle control to his reputation—he could stand in the midst of crashing bodies and not move a muscle."

Laker coach Bill Sharman, an intensely hard-working and successful coach said that "Connie has a chance to prove with us if he was a great player or if he wasn't. His final reputation is on the line."

But Sharman was unconsciously giving the game away—by speaking in the *past* tense. Eight years carved out of an athlete's life, eight years between the coming of emotional maturity and the beginning of physical decline, eight years without serious coaching, without the learning of defensive skills and strategy, eight years without a sense of pride and class, left Hawkins with only his instincts and talents. They were good enough to get him on four All-Star teams, good enough to produce comments like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's, "I've never seen anybody better than the Hawk," but they never were honed enough to



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give him a career's worth of opportunity against the best.

Worse, Hawkins came to the Lakers just at the point when this once-mighty franchise was falling apart. At the start of the 1973-74 season, Chamberlain jumped to the ABA; the Lakers made the playoffs, but died in the early rounds. At the start of the 1974-75 season, Jerry West announced his retirement.

"When you lose guys of the calibre of West and Chamberlain, you do not decline, you just fall," Connie said. Last season, for the first time in the 14-year Laker history at L.A., the team did not make the playoffs, finishing with a record for futility exceeded only by the expansion New Orleans Jazz. Sharman, plagued by personal problems (the death of his wife, the death of his father, a \$250,000 judgment against him at the hands of the Utah Stars for breach of contract), was simply unable to devote his full energies to the team. Trades and retirements left the Lakers with a skeleton crew. Hawkins' hopes for establishing himself as a key man on a solid team began to evaporate.

He was on a team with men like Gail Goodrich, who had played with him at Phoenix, and who he had criticized bluntly and repeatedly in David Wolf's book, *Foull*. Moreover, coach Sharman's systematic drilling grated on him.

"He's systematic, very systematic, to the point where it begins to be a little too much," Connie said. "Most of the good coaches in basketball have to have that flexibility. It's such an action-reaction type of game that when you have to do everything the same way, I think you lose something. But you can't argue with his record."

And most of all, to his shock, Connie wasn't playing. He went from a team where he was the shooter, the scorer, the man, to a guard-oriented team where his job was to get the ball to the shooters.

"I went from being the man looked-for, to the man who was looking for others. But that was okay. Last year (1973-74), I played a lot, I contributed to the team, I

was instrumental in helping them make the playoffs. So at the beginning of the season, I had it in mind where I said to myself, 'I have to have a really super year.' I had my mind all psyched up to say, 'You have to prove something, not to the fans, but to yourself.' I had my head together to play basketball.

"Soon as I get to training camp, I'm not playin' that much. Next thing I know, during exhibition season, I'm not playin' that much. Now I'm beginning to wonder what's happening. Now, all of a sudden, right before the season starts, I find I'm not startin'. Then Cazzie Russell got hurt, and I find they're gonna start Pat Riley and have Stan Love come off the bench and play. Now I'm startin' to think they may trade me. A basketball player of my talent, or my used-to-be talent, I should be out there somewhere. If we were winnin', I could sit on the bench all day and not worry about it, but with all the losin' efforts . . . and then I started playin' and messed up my hand. This year has been the most frustrating year I've had since I've been in the league. The season's almost over and I haven't begun to play."

I had come out to Los Angeles expecting to find an unhappy, brooding Hawkins, and clearly he was not happy with the season, nor with what had happened to him. But Hawkins does not suggest a man encumbered by bitterness. He seems instead a man who found some sense of calm after eight years of silent outrage.

He talks easily, with wit and remarkable frankness. In contrast to some athletes, who measure every word with a politician's care, Hawkins just talks about what is on his mind. He has a large capacity for self-deprecation, as when he talks about his discovery of tennis.

"Bein' the egotistical maniac that I am, I said, 'Hey, this is easy.' You get the racket, and you put the ball in your hand, you get out there, and you just start hittin'. My first couple of shots went over the fence, and the rest of 'em hit the net."

He is also determined not to let

his uncertain future prey on his mind.

"One thing I had to learn, not about basketball, but about life in general, was that when you face any kind of situation, it's how you handle the situation, not the situation itself. As far as sitting around brooding about things, that doesn't help anything at all."

He is a convert to health foods and vegetarianism, although he says "to be a real vegetarian you have to eat meat once in a while." His refrigerator in his modern, two-bedroom apartment near the Forum in Inglewood is stocked with organic foods, carrot cake, and natural juices. And he seems fully acclimated, after five years in Phoenix and L.A., to the sun in winter. (His wife and their "three children, two dogs, and nine fish" live in Pittsburgh year round, and Hawkins rejoins them after the basketball season.)

"I'm so used to this, I don't even say, 'I'm goin' home' when I go to New York. I say, 'I'm goin' back East.'" But Hawkins is totally uninvolved with the farther-out lifestyles of Southern California.

"I lived in Hollywood for a while when I first came out here," he says, "and that was weird. I mean, the things goin' down out there were

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THE SPORT QUIZ!

ANSWERS
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8—a. 9—b. 10—b. 11—b. 12—b. 13—a.
14—b. 15—b. 16—c.

SOARING

CONTINUED

weird. You know, I grew up watching kids stick needles in their arms. That whole dope thing, I *do not* need it, to be around it."

Watching Hawkins one afternoon at a public tennis court in the mostly-black Crenshaw neighborhood is to see a man regarded as a friend instead of a celebrity. Our conversation was constantly interrupted by high school kids, tennis players and passers-by.

"Damon," Connie said to one well-wisher, "this is a reporter. Damon is a producer. And I'm a . . . tennis player."

Whether Hawkins continues as a basketball player is, as of this writing, in some doubt. Last season he played out his option year on his original five-year contract. The Laker management is not exactly enamored of Hawkins, a feeling strengthened by the startling fact that the Laker program, which describes its players with customary enthusiasm, openly doubts Connie's future. ("How many moments are left for the Hawk? No one knows; not even The Hawk.") He is a free agent now, and could sign with any team in either league provided someone wants a 33-year-old six-foot-eight forward who once had the most remarkable collection of fakes, jumps, moves, and shots of anyone to play the game of basketball.

But Hawkins does not seem obsessed by the future.

"I haven't really thought about what I'm gonna do after it's over. As long as I can be constructive, I'm gonna be around basketball, until I get to the point where I can't play or can't respect myself."

Right now there is the goal of keeping in shape, and demonstrating once again a capacity for hustle on the court. This time it's a tennis court. Without finesse or subtlety, Hawkins is an awesome figure on the court, not just because of his height or his stream of humor, but because he seems to be possessed

with the spirit of Bobby Riggs.

Against a 16-year-old high school player, Hawkins continuously lobs the ball high into the sun. His rival staggers back, blinded. Connie cuts his serve wickedly; the ball spins away.

"Hey," he says, after winning a particularly cagey point. "We're playin' for five dollars, right?"

Perhaps you can feel sorry for a man who was robbed of his best years, and his chance for superstardom at the highest level of the game. With the possible exception of John Havlicek, who seemed to get better with age, there is no one who could have "proven" his greatness after being kept out of first-rank basketball from the age of 18 to 27.

Perhaps you can feel angry at Hawkins for never proving his full talent after winning exoneration. He concedes his difficulty at maintaining concentration, and even his

friends express exasperation at his hypochondria, his lateness, his occasional mental lapses.

But I came away from Hawkins with a sense of gratification. He will probably never make another All-Star team, but he is not playing in church basements at \$3 a game; he is not in the streets of a ghetto strung out on dope or wine, he is not running numbers or holding up liquor stores, and the odds on that future 20 years ago were all too good.

He has a family, a measure of financial stability, a sense of himself and what he is all about. He seems relatively happy to have come as far as he did, farther than his friends and detractors ever thought he would come. And perhaps that journey took enough determination and hustle to bring a man a full sense of self-worth. In that sense, Connie Hawkins has already proven more than enough. ■

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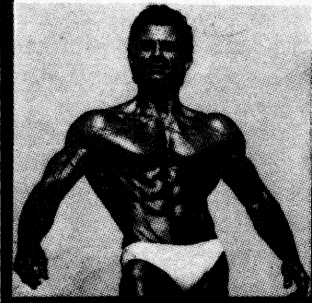
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