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NBA AT 75: ALLEN IVERSON AND SURVIVAL IN AMERICA

by Alan Chazaro

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Revisiting one of the greatest icons in NBA history — [Allen Iverson](https://www.basketball-reference.com/players/i/iversa01.html?utm_campaign=Linker&utm_source=direct&utm_medium=linker-) (https://www.basketball-reference.com/players/i/iversa01.html?utm_campaign=Linker&utm_source=direct&utm_medium=linker-) — and how he has impacted an understanding of survival in America.

There’s something inexplicably impossible about Allen Iverson, even in 2022 — 12 years after his retirement from basketball.

There’s no fancy crossover here, just a simple fact: Iverson is someone who shouldn’t have achieved what he did. But in the biggest moments, the small guard always somehow succeeded.

Undersized, dismissed, overlooked, misunderstood. A star athlete who was caught up in a draconian U.S. legal system as a youth; a Virginia teen with “red flags” who universities revoked offer letters from because they feared he was “a thug”; constant media negativity throughout his adult life in a complicated career as an NBA superstar.

Yet, I believed in Iverson. And he believed in himself, too. This was, perhaps, his defining characteristic. He was, after all, unbelievably confident, and even arrogant — a global talent who was outrageously justified in his self-conviction. He was the rebel who the institution couldn’t control, and I loved him for that.

For my generation, A.I. is the embodiment of surviving against the forces of institutional and systemic violence. As a Mexican American boy learning about the world, I watched his saga unfold from my single dad’s apartment in California, amazed at his willpower as much as his handles. Iverson was the shortest player on the court, yet dribbled himself to the mountainous peak of a game dominated by literal giants. He was fearlessly outspoken, outhustling a predatory U.S. society that was meant to destroy him, and those like him, but couldn’t. No matter the circumstances, Iverson became the rawest scorer the game has arguably ever seen.

But Iverson was also more than a baller. He was a poet. A philosopher. An alchemist. A magician. He was a politician who spoke to our basketball nation with his body, pushing himself past halfcourt markers then cutting back and hopping off one leg to deliver the most artful 2-pointers from the top of the key.

In his prime, Iverson was known as “The Answer.” Maybe it’s because he unlocked the NBA’s scoring algorithm to become the league’s MVP in the 2000–01 and 2004–05 seasons — an 11x All-Star, Hall of Famer, NBA scoring champ, former No. 1 overall pick, and Rookie of the Year who never took his foot off the accelerator from the time he entered the Association and unlaced his idol, **[Michael Jordan \(https://www.basketball-reference.com/players/j/jordami01.html?utm_campaign=Linker&utm_source=direct&utm_medium=linker-\)](https://www.basketball-reference.com/players/j/jordami01.html?utm_campaign=Linker&utm_source=direct&utm_medium=linker-)**, on prime time television, to the moment he dusted **[Tyronn Lue \(https://www.basketball-reference.com/players/l/luety01.html?utm_campaign=Linker&utm_source=direct&utm_medium=linker-\)](https://www.basketball-reference.com/players/l/luety01.html?utm_campaign=Linker&utm_source=direct&utm_medium=linker-)**’s ankles in the NBA Finals after draining a J, slow-walking over his crumpled defender.

He simply refused to die on the court.



As much as he did anything else, Allen Iverson survived

Survival can mean many things to many people. I remember one hot summer when I traveled on the subway into West Philadelphia and saw crooked avenues, tilted roofs, and faded murals gracing liquor store corners. The way the people moved. The way the community buzzed with contagious energy. It was a kingdom, and the salt of everyone's skin and history swirled and clashed with the noises of the city. Philly, too, is defined by survival and revolutionary independence. It's something I could relate to as the son of Mexican immigrants — how greatness is not a guarantee, but a gamble for many of us in this country.

It's nothing short of a divine basketball miracle, then, that Allen Iverson arrived there as a rookie, circa 1996, for all of us to witness. A baby-afro'd silkster with moves that could undress his opponents and expose their naked secrets in front of packed arenas. Survival. When resources had been withheld from him — and others around him — he learned how to manipulate every ounce of his small frame and transfer that feeling across the hardwood with each spectacular dribble. Survival.

To Allen Iverson, survival meant cradling the orange orb like some sort of heavenly device he could use to communicate with the gods, in order to inspire — or punish — the rest of us mortals who were blessed in watching his nightly resurrection, and insurrection.

Iverson shouldn't have ever been the player he became; but at once, it was the only player he could ever be. A flawed idol. A heroic villain. The path that he was given was limited and shaped by his ability to make the smoothest, most calculated move, then to take the best shot — with limbs and outstretched fingers tangled in his face and abdomen. Iverson's wholeness,

it seems, was carved from the bones of a flawed government that leaves entire communities like his ravaged in the shambles of desperation and historical neglect, where a boy must learn how to ball himself into manhood, and then into an immortal force— and he did. All barely-6-feet and 165 pounds of him.

I love Iverson for that. For what he meant to those of us who weren't supposed to be who we are, but became that anyways. This is an ode to his transcendence, to his impenetrable spirit, to the No. 3 sewn onto a jersey fabric that so many of us rocked — and imagined we could inhabit — when we were barely learning about the unforgiving dynamics of how easily our shot attempts could bounce off iron rims on blacktop schoolyards for a miss.

Iverson's survival is more than his physical achievements — it's a spiritual commitment and a social rebellion that we all got to learn from and put into our own style. And now, as graduates of his basketball seminars, many of us carry him in our work as teachers, construction workers, bartenders, journalists — fans empowered by his beautifully imperfect legacy.

Iverson once said he was the definition of "survival." Or, as his former coach stated, A.I. was "a man who believed in himself so much, you had to believe in him, too." And by believing in his value to out-will and survive, we believed in our own.

I hereby declare A.I. the most iconic athlete of my childhood, a legend worth revisiting and paying homage to, even though he no longer dons Philadelphia's black and red uniform of the early 2000s. He was both "The Answer" and "The Question" (shout out Reebok), a difficult enigma who refused to accept society's status quo, who instead chose to live through his own measurement of greatness. Let us all return to this version of Allen Iverson within ourselves. Let us all hoop — forever — in the name of our survival.

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