



Hare

Joel Sartore/Sower

Fred Lee Hare is part of basketball history. He doesn't like to talk about it. He'd rather people forget.

"I don't want any more fame. I just want to go about my regular life like a normal person," he says softly.

Fred Hare sits relaxed on a worn orange-brown couch in his North Omaha home, his right leg draped over the left. Aimlessly, he shuffles some cigarette ashes with a crushed butt.

He looks tired.

Quietly, Fred Hare talks about his search for peace; about living in seclusion. He tells of changing homes or phone numbers every few months in a quest for anonymity. He has found neither peace, nor anonymity.

"I go to a supermarket, I get stopped . . ." he pauses. ". . . the basketball games, you know."

Hare says now — at 40 — that he was destined for notoriety. It was not what he wanted, he says, but it came nonetheless.

Hare's climb to public view started in the early 1960s when he was touted as the "greatest basketball player to ever come out of Nebraska." He led the Omaha Technical High School basketball team to four state tournaments, and the Class A championship in 1963. As a senior in 1963, he averaged 30 points a game. He was the first black and single-sport athlete to be named the Omaha World-Herald High School Athlete of the Year.

During his four-year career at Tech, the 6-foot-2 guard scored 1,588 points, second only to North High School's Mike McGee who holds the Class A record with 1,596. Basketball fans called him "Fabulous Fred," "The Best of the Best."

McGee went on to a sparkling collegiate and professional career. Hare never made it to the pros. Recruited by many major colleges, Hare settled at the University of Nebraska. It was, by all accounts, a disappointing stay — for Hare, for the coaches, for NU fans.

Hare shows some resentment about his college days. He is more philosophical about the tragic circumstances that snuffed out his professional career, that left him — until recently — driving an Omaha garbage truck.

Hare has consistently refused to discuss these problems publicly . . . until now. Today, in the quiet of his living room, Fred Hare wants to talk, to set the record straight, he says.

It is a long story. Fred Hare has lived an eventful 40 years, packed with tragedy, filled with ups and downs. Hare tells his story hesitantly, sorting things out, puzzling over his own actions sometimes. Occasionally, he guards his privacy, leaving time lags or unanswered questions. But that's the way Fred Hare tells it . . . his story.

Fred Hare talks for 10 hours. He talks of growing up in the ghettos of North Omaha; of playing basketball as a child to escape the hardships; of becoming a high school basketball superstar; of attending Nebraska to play basketball; of quitting the team after three unhappy years at NU.

He talks about his mother ("the greatest inspiring figure" in his life), about former high school basketball coach Neal Mosser ("a

father figure" to him) and about NU basketball coach Joe Cipriano (who had the "greatest impact on my basketball career").

Hare says he left NU because he and Cipriano did not get along. "A lot of people don't know that," he says.

Actually, the dispute was fairly well publicized by local sports writers.

"Fred Hare's status with coach Joe Cipriano's Husker basketball squad continues to stimulate verbal volleys," said a 1965 Omaha World-Herald article. Said a fan in the same story: "There is no doubt in my mind that Fred's shooting has suffered because of his being yanked in and out of the lineup."

Coach Mosser testifies to Hare's scoring potential: "On most

"I guess in the back of everybody's mind, they want somehow to recapture the past, recapture what was lost or taken away . . ."

days, Fred could score 30 points in a game. If he didn't foul out or played the whole game, Fred had the potential to score 40 points per game."

Hare didn't come close to reaching such potential at NU. University sports records credit him with averaging 12.1 points per game during his college career.

Hare says two factors played a role in his relatively low-scoring average: Cipriano refused to play him enough, and the slow-down, set-em-up game plan Cipriano advocated did not suit his explosive style.

But Hare acknowledges that a personal feud between him and Cipriano also affected his play at NU and eventually led to his departure before his senior year.

But, says Hare, he has no animosity toward Cipriano, who died in 1980.

While basketball occupied most of the young player's time at NU, Hare managed to get what he calls "average" grades. He majored in Spanish, a language he knew as a child. The accent is still there in Hare's voice, especially when he talks about Mexico, his "beloved country."

Mexico came later though. After Hare's mother died and he quit the team in 1967; after he worked four years on the Lincoln police force; after he briefly attended the University of Calgary in Canada; after he made several attempts at professional basketball.

Hare's conversation careens off into many directions. He contradicts himself often when talking about pro basketball. He tells of wanting to make it, but not wanting to make it.

The idea of playing pro or college basketball was implanted in his mind by fans, coaches and his mother, he says. The pressure came from "just about everyone."

"I didn't want to ever play competition basketball," he says. "It was a way of life to me. It was a religion. It meant tranquility. It meant peace . . . It meant serenity. I was in my elements. I was in a euphoric state. I never had to worry about grades . . . shortage of money.

"Basketball began on a spiritual sense . . . It was something I did not want to share because I knew the moment I began to share it with others, with people, then the corruption, the jealousy, the deception, the deceit began. It was a private, personal thing to me.

". . . I was suckered, like so many other people, into fortune and fame. They (coaches) build you up and they tear you down if you don't stack up to their expectations."

Hare tried out for the Phoenix Suns in 1969. At the rookie camp, he averaged 25 points a game and led in assists. But the Phoenix coaches didn't want to take a chance on him because he had undergone two knee operations while at NU.

Hare then went to Los Angeles, where he says L.A. Lakers Coach Butch van Breda Kolff told him: "It has never happened that a ballplayer of your quality has been to camp and not get drafted." But van Breda Kolff didn't need guards and suggested Hare try out with the Dallas Chaparrals of the American Basketball Association.

Hare never reported to Dallas.

"I felt disappointed. I said, 'Maybe it's time for me to give up, to give up the sport.'"

Instead Hare joined the Harlem Clowns, after getting cut by the Harlem Globetrotters because he "wasn't funny enough." Hare quit the Clowns after six months.

Hare ended up in Mexico the same year. He attended the University of Americas, where he played semi-pro ball.

Hare says he was happiest playing in Mexico, where the European rules suited his type of play.

Hare smiles. He relishes the memories.

"I was doing all the things in Mexico that I felt I could have been doing, that I should have done when I was at the University of Nebraska and in high school."

He traveled, too. Hare good-naturedly describes himself as a "travelholic." He stayed away from Nebraska for seven years, visiting other states and other countries.

Life was moving fast for Hare in 1971 and he was enjoying every minute of it. He had plenty of money, after earning \$500 to \$600 a game playing in Mexico.

"My life at that time was free. Where I went, I stayed until I got tired . . . I wasn't lost. I was enjoying myself. It was the first time I had nobody, no pressures, no family, no home to come to."

Hare ended up in Denver doing construction work in 1971. At the same time, he had a contract waiting to be signed with the Kansas City Kings. Prospects looked bright for the 26-year-old. Then a car accident changed his life.