

'The BEST Of The Best'



Joel Sartore/Sower

Hare and son, Freddie

Hare becomes quiet. He paces the floor, fists stuffed in his pockets.

Painfully, he talks about the contract, the final chance he had to play pro ball, the reasons behind the last-ditch attempt at professional greatness.

"I guess in the back of everybody's mind, they want somehow to recapture the past, recapture what was lost or taken away. I think my reason for wanting to play over and over again . . . it's like fighting your innerself, saying I really want to play, I don't want to play. I had the opportunity to do what was taken away, what was undone . . . I had the opportunity to excel. I never reached my peak. They say I was great, tremendous, fabulous. But I never reached my peak, so how much better could I have been if I had?"

Hare won't talk about the specifics of the head-on collision that robbed him of that last chance. The memory of the injuries are painful. He still can't deal with it.

Hare leans back and stares into space, mumbling generalities. His voice sounds hollow, almost impersonal. It fades. He needs nudging.

"My body is just a mass of scars, like I've been through Vietnam," he whispers. That's all he'll say.

The possible permanence of his injuries dominated his thoughts the next six months.

"Nothing is more important than life itself," he says. "I could've cared less whether I ever played ball again. I just wanted to be a whole, a sane individual."

Hare tells about the fear of being blinded and paralyzed for life. He contorts his body to show the physical deformation he faced.

"I haven't yet come to grips as to why I'm still alive," he says. His internal injuries were serious enough, he says, that he should have died. Even after a six-month hospital stay, he says, doctors were concerned about his kidneys failing.

The accident, Hare says, strengthened him spiritually. Although never religious, Hare says, he never would have survived the trauma of his injuries if he had not been emotionally strong.

While lying in the hospital, Hare says, he had time to review the direction of his life. He talks vaguely of not wanting to die because he had too many "loose strings," in Omaha and elsewhere.

One of those loose strings included finding Terrence, the second of Hare's four sons, who was living in Chicago. Hare acknowledges that perhaps he had not been the best father to Terrence and his oldest son, Freddie — a fact Hare hoped to remedy.

But Hare did not return to Omaha for five years. He stayed in Denver to recover and to prepare himself for questions he knew people would ask. He lived off the money he made in Mexico or worked at odd jobs.

When he returned to Omaha in 1976, Hare found himself experiencing exactly what he had hoped to avoid. Fans were immediately curious, he says, asking him questions like why wasn't he playing? How badly injured had he been? Why wasn't he living like a superstar?

"It was as if I was almost in high school or college again. The minute they (fans) found out where I lived, I never had any peace. They still wanted me to be in there playing ball, coaching, doing something."

The media was even worse, Hare says, gesturing with his hands. The Omaha World-Herald would find his address and seek him out. Hare says now he refuses to talk to the press. Reporters are only looking for a story, they're not interested in his feelings, he says. They want to chase him, to get a story on how low he has fallen.

His usual soft voice rises.

"I want empathy, not sympathy."

Hare's voice softens again when he talks about returning to his hometown. Recollections of his childhood in the ghetto border between affection and hate.

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The racial conditions in Omaha and the poverty of the ghetto bothered Hare the most. At Tech High, the blacks and whites segregated themselves. Even the basketball team was subject to racial criticism, Hare says.

One time, Hare says, Coach Neal Mosser showed him some "hate" letters from fans. The fans criticized the coach for favoritism by playing only black team members.

Hare throws his head back, searching for other pieces of his childhood memories.

There are painful memories — like three brothers killed in a housefire before the Hares moved to Omaha in 1950; like the death of his older brother, Frank, who was shot during a gas station robbery in Chicago and eventually died in 1966; like the death of his younger brother, Percy, who was shot and killed by the Omaha police in 1967.

There are happy memories, too. Hare grins as they flood back. But even those memories bring moments of sadness.

Hare's mother, Genetter Hare, was the backbone of a family of 18 children after Hare's father, James, died in 1945. Although the Hares were poor, Mrs. Hare tried to instill in her children a sense of dignity and strength. Her efforts, Hare says, were evident in everything she did.

He recalls with a laugh, how his mother scolded him when she caught him wearing clothes he had stolen. There also was the time she went to a local grocery to buy food when the cupboards were empty and the owner tried to kick her out. Mrs. Hare stood unbudging when a police officer arrived. The officer asked the

owner whether Mrs. Hare paid her bills on time. When the owner admitted that she did, the officer left her alone.

When his mother died of cancer in 1967, Hare says, she did not owe anyone.

"My mother taught me to make the most of what we had," Hare says. "That being poor was a blessing . . . a gift, that you don't have to remain poor all your life. It wasn't intended to be that way. And to never give up."

The family-taught determination led Hare to complete his degree at the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 1979. The degree in general studies has been little help in finding a job. Employers talk to him about his basketball career, Hare says, then tell him he is either overqualified or he lacks experience.

"I chose to stay in my hometown but I cannot find a decent job. When people look at my resume, my credentials, I think they're a little embarrassed. They tell me they don't have anything to accommodate me. I guess they think I'm supposed to be making \$100,000 . . ."

Hare has worked briefly at several jobs the last nine years. He was a gym aide for Kellom Recreation Center, a machinist for Valmont Industries Inc. and Nebraska Engineering Co., a bus driver for the Omaha Public Schools system, a coil wire technician for Western Electric Co. Inc. and a truck driver for Coffey Trash Service.

He presently has a worker's compensation claim pending with Watts Trucking in Omaha for injuries obtained on the job. While the case is pending, Hare is living on Aid to Dependent Children with his 4-year-old son, Freddie, whom Hare is raising. He has not seen Terrence for five years and his third son, Frederico Anaya Olvera, lives with his mother in Mexico. Hare's oldest son, Freddie, 16, was stabbed to death by his girlfriend in 1981.

Hare grows thoughtful, remembering the pain, the guilt he felt when his son died.

"I don't think you could've found a sweeter, a better son," he says. For months, Hare says, he anguished over what he could've done to prevent his son's death.

"I shed no more tears," he says, "because there was absolutely nothing I could have done."

Hare says he is satisfied with his life these days. He smiles often and talks enthusiastically about the future.

Together with the owners of Gunter Harz Sports Inc. in Omaha, Hare will sponsor a basketball training clinic for talented athletes. He would like to start a professional basketball program in Europe for players who don't make the NBA. And he has started writing a book about "the beauty and ugliness" of basketball so other athletes don't fall into the same trap he did.

Eventually, Hare would like to return to Mexico with his son, Freddie, permanently.

"Mexico is home to me," he says softly. "Mexico is like my country . . . the warmth, the people . . ."

The peace. — Gah Y. Huey