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# The Coach Who Exploded

By JONATHAN MAHLER

Mike Rice is coaching again. Or rather, he's running after-school clinics for third-to-sixth graders at a vast, four-court indoor basketball facility in Neptune, N.J., where he also works out local high-school players on Friday afternoons and coaches his son's high-school team in a fall recreational league.

Considering where Rice was a year ago — preparing for his third season as head coach at Rutgers University with a guaranteed salary of \$700,000 — it is quite a step down. Of course, considering where Rice was seven months ago — a figure of national disgrace who was fired for mistreating his players — it's a little hard to believe he's coaching at all. "It helps when your best friend owns the place," Rice said.

We were watching his son's team, Red Bank Regional High School, warm up before a recent game against the inauspiciously named Brick Township High. Red Bank looked like your average suburban high-school team, with the exception of one kid. When I asked Rice about him, he said: "The big man is terrible. Just watch."

The instant the game got under way, Rice started pacing manically up and down the floor, yelling nonstop, his raspy voice echoing across the gym. He hollered at his team after every trip down the court, invariably singling out players both for doing something right ("Are you kidding me?" he said, when one of them squeezed between two defenders and laid the ball in off the glass. "You've got ballerina feet!") or wrong ("Ben, you're fighting for time! You get in the game and the first thing you do is give up an *and-1*?").

Rice wasn't berating anyone, and he definitely wasn't abusing anyone. Yet if you'd been watching him that night, you might very well have thought, That guy is nuts.

He was right, though: The big man had a long way to go. After he made one halfhearted attempt to stop a much smaller opponent from driving to the basket, Rice did a sideline demonstration for him: "This is a lion," he said, proceeding to roar loudly and menacingly raise both arms above his head. Then Rice lowered his arms limply by his side. "This is a wimp *Meow*. Be a lion!"

The big surprise of the night was Rice's son, Mike III, a skinny sophomore gua



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a couple of 3-pointers, a reverse layup and a teardrop shot off the dribble in the lane.

Rice and I had talked about his son's game a few times, and Rice did not always sound optimistic. "I've got to get him more into academics," he told me once, after receiving a text message from his wife informing him that Mike III had just been benched after going 0 for 3 in an A.A.U. game.

Mike III has no shortage of ability and an excess of basketball intelligence, and Rice personally works him out in their driveway regularly. But he has a tendency to overthink things, which can be deadly for an athlete. It also makes him very different from his father, and his father's father. As Rice put it: "Rices generally go in headfirst and then think later."

**Mike Rice** was introduced to America last April when ESPN aired footage of him screaming at and demeaning his players, yanking them by their jerseys, shoving them, kicking them; throwing balls at their heads and groins; taunting them with homophobic slurs. Within 24 hours, millions of people had watched it, and Rice had been denounced by everyone from LeBron James to Gov. Chris Christie. He was soon fired and disappeared from the public eye as abruptly as he entered it.

I first met Rice at the gym in Neptune on a hot, humid night about two months after all this happened. His daughter's under-12 A.A.U. team, which Rice also coaches on a volunteer basis, had just annihilated an opponent, 47-11. The other team could barely keep possession of the ball, never mind get off a decent shot. I introduced myself to Rice and told him that I felt a little sorry for their opponents. "I don't," he said. "Tell them to work harder."

After the game, Rice invited me back to his house in nearby Little Silver, N.J. Rice is frenetic on the sidelines of a basketball court, but his resting state is pretty wired to begin with, his voice often rising to a half-yell even in casual conversation. "Have a beer, for Christ's sake!" he shouted at me after I initially declined.

His wife, Kerry, offered to go out and get some dinner for us but couldn't find her car key. After some searching around, Rice produced it from his pocket. "Sorry, Pookie Bear," he said.

For the next two hours, we sat at a table on his deck, swatting mosquitoes, drinking beer and eating Italian takeout. His kids were inside, watching the N.B.A. playoffs, and Kerry eventually came out and joined us.

It was the first time that Rice had spoken to a reporter since delivering a brief statement of apology from his doorstep the day he was fired, a strategic decision that was not easy for him to accept. "Everything I've ever done is fight, scratch and claw," he told me, "and now I have to sit

back and take it, listen to people say I was abusing my players? I was an idiot, but I never abused anybody.”

From the beginning, Rice was clear he wasn’t going to make any excuses for his behavior, and he didn’t. But when your life has been reduced to a few minutes on YouTube and you’ve been living under a self-imposed gag order for two months, it’s impossible to not want to explain yourself. “When you look at those moments, they’re ugly moments, there’s no way of describing them any way else,” he said, adding, “Once every 20 practices doesn’t make it that way every day.”

It’s true that what the American public saw was a fraction of the hundreds of hours of practices Rice conducted over the course of his first two seasons at Rutgers. It’s also true that the video was made by a spurned ex-assistant who would end up filing a wrongful-termination suit against Rutgers. This was a video intended to destroy Rice, and in some respects, it did. The question is to what extent — and what kind of man will emerge now.

Going into the evening, I was expecting a cautious, scripted conversation. What I got instead was my first glimpse of a man who’s not really capable of guarded moments and whose carefully managed rollout could be managed only so carefully.

Over the course of the next few months, I would spend many hours with Rice and gradually get the feeling that he wasn’t just agreeing to each of my requests for more time because I was writing “the profile,” a key component of every shamed celebrity’s blueprint for rehabilitation. My sense was that Rice genuinely wanted to figure out how he ended up in this position, or at least to help someone else figure it out. “It will be interesting to read how you piece this damn thing together,” Rice told me during our last conversation a few weeks ago.

**Rice, who is 44**, was raised in a working-class suburb of Pittsburgh, where his father was the head basketball coach at Duquesne University.

The elder Rice was an honorable-mention All-American in college, a 6-foot-3, 195-pound guard. (“Let’s just say he wasn’t the cleanest player,” Rice says.) He grew up playing pickup in Detroit — his own father, Rice’s grandfather, worked at a Ford factory and played semipro baseball — and he wanted to replicate that experience for his son, to instill in him the values of the street-baller. “He was a white kid playing in the middle of Detroit,” Rice says of his father. “He wanted me to play the way he learned.”

Rice’s father refused to buy him a hoop, forcing him instead to ride his bike to a schoolyard and find some competition when he wanted to play basketball. By the time Rice was in middle school, his father was taking him along to adult pickup games. “These were some of the

meanest, nastiest places in all of Pittsburgh,” Rice says. “That’s how I grew up, and how I was taught to play basketball, and how I was taught to handle myself.”

In one conversation, Rice described his father as “the most competitive human being on the face of the earth.”

“More competitive than you?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Rice said. “I’m calm compared with him. He’s renowned.”

There’s some evidence to support this claim. In 1994, Mike Rice Sr. was ejected from a Portland Trail Blazers game — as a broadcaster, a first for the N.B.A. (Now 74, he still works as a color commentator for the Blazers.) Rice Sr. once threw his tennis racket after losing a match to one of his daughters. On the other hand, it was Rice who knocked out one of his father’s teeth during a pickup game with his groomsmen on the day before his wedding.

When Rice wasn’t playing basketball, he was watching it. Over the summers, while his mother took his two older sisters to tennis tournaments across the country — both became nationally ranked juniors — Rice tagged along with his father on his recruiting trips. During the school year, he spent most afternoons at his father’s practices.

By age 12, Rice was barking directions at his father’s players. “He’d be in their ear, saying they have to work on their jump shot or challenging them to a game of one on one,” Rice Sr. says. “I’d run him off. I’d say, ‘I’m not letting you come if you’re going to be a distraction.’ But he was always there.” After practice, Rice Sr. sometimes found his son taped to the training table or stuck in the locker-room wastebasket, his hands and feet bound with athletic tape.

Rice idealizes his childhood, and his old-school basketball upbringing. “My father taught me the greatest game in the history of the world and the passion you have to have for it,” he says. When I asked him if having such a hypercompetitive father might have had something to do with his behavior at Rutgers, he bristled. “Am I going to blame my father? No. That was on me. He also taught me right from wrong.”

As a player, Rice did the best he could with his size and ability, earning a scholarship to Fordham University in 1987. By then, though, he had long since committed to following his father’s career path. “Unfortunately, he had his mother’s speed, so we ruled out the N.B.A. early on,” his father says. “His life was going to be coaching.”

**In early August**, I was on a flight to Chicago with Rice when a woman sitting on the other side of him asked him what he did. It was her second attempt to engage him, having asked a few minutes earlier if he was a professional tennis player. (Rice was in his usual sports attire:

synthetic striped polo, shorts and sneakers.)

“I’m a college-basketball coach,” Rice replied.

He turned back to me. “That’s always a tough one to answer. *Uh, I’m sort of between jobs right now.*”

We resumed our conversation, but the woman, whose interest in Rice was evident, soon asked him where he coached.

Rice paused. “Do you follow college basketball?”

“Not really,” she said.

“Remember that coach who was fired from Rutgers? That’s me.”

“Shut up!”

Rice nodded. I asked if she recognized him now that she knew who he was.

“I just remember hearing the story over and over,” she said. “Did you see the ‘[Saturday Night Live](#)’ skit?” A few days after the video of Rice first aired, he was the subject of an ‘SNL’ parody in which Melissa McCarthy played a psycho basketball coach.

“No, I still haven’t seen it,” Rice answered. “Everyone in my family has.”

“Oh, my God,” the woman said. “You have to watch it. It’s hysterical!” She proceeded to recap the skit, in which McCarthy does everything from making her team serve her a meal at center court — “Where’s the *bread*?” — to throwing a toaster at a player.

The woman asked if I was his lawyer, and when he told her I was a writer following him around, she asked why he waited so long to tell his side of his story. Rice said he didn’t want to sound as if he were making excuses, because what he did was wrong.

“Did you not know that?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “But you want to win. You’ll do anything if you think it will help you win.”

“So what have you been doing?”

“I’ve been doing a lot of basketball camps.”

“Do you show up with a toaster?” She told him again that he had to watch the “SNL” skit. It was

on YouTube; it was hilarious.

“I promise I’ll eventually get to it.”

**Rice began working** as an assistant coach at Fordham the day after he graduated from college in 1991. He spent the better part of the next 16 years bouncing between assistant jobs: Marquette, Niagara, Chicago State, Saint Joseph’s, the University of Pittsburgh. In 2007, at age 38, he was named head coach of Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh, at a starting salary of \$100,000, \$80,000 less than he made at Pitt.

The Robert Morris team Rice inherited had just finished tied for fourth in its conference, but Rice thought he could get much more out of his players, especially because they were one of the league’s worst defensive teams. He pushed his players to work harder and play more physically. “You had to give 100 percent at all times,” says the captain of Rice’s first Colonials team, Tony Lee, now a corrections officer in Massachusetts. “He demanded that from his players.”

On the court, Rice refused to accept that his players might have limitations. Off the court, he seemed to understand that they were kids. At Robert Morris and at Rutgers, he assigned all of his players a “life coach,” an assistant coach who made sure they attended classes and did their homework on time. At both schools, the team’s cumulative grade-point average rose considerably on Rice’s watch.

Rice’s Robert Morris players talk about the team ethos he built; during practice, no fallen player was allowed to get up off the floor until a few teammates had hustled over to help him. Rice basically shaped the team in his own image. “My players would rip your throat off,” Rice told me. “We were an aggressive, intense team with an aggressive, intense coach. We believed in togetherness and toughness. We were old-school.”

One part of coaching is pushing players to do things they don’t necessarily think they can do. Another part is showing them how to lose. Not in the simple, good-sport way, but in how to take a loss and make something of it. Yet losing invariably set off feelings in Rice that he seemed constitutionally unable to process and that drove him outside the pages of the conventional coaching manual. “It was pathetic the way we defended and represented Robert Morris University,” Rice said after one game. “It was an embarrassment.” Rice was angry, and he wanted his players to get angry too, even to feel shame. “It’s a hard paradox to explain or understand,” says Andy Toole, one of his assistant coaches at Robert Morris. “He cares about you so much and he wants so much to win, he’s willing to maybe go into a gray area with you to motivate you.”

Still, the former Robert Morris players I spoke with said they were shocked by the Rutgers video. “Every coach yells — but throwing balls, kicking balls at players, the physical contact?” Lee said. “We had never seen that.”

There are some obvious reasons that Rice might have been able to exert more self-control at Robert Morris. For starters, it’s not a big-time basketball school; he was under less scrutiny there. Also, his Robert Morris team was well suited to his coaching style. The players were gritty kids at a commuter college outside Pittsburgh, not N.B.A. prospects with a lot of other options. “Where were they going to go?” Rice says. “They were already at Robert Morris.”

Rice might not have crossed the line at Robert Morris, but he also wasn’t a completely different person there from the one he would become at Rutgers. When you think about it, all of the words people use to describe him at Robert Morris — “passionate,” “emotional,” “intense” — are not that far from “out of control.” We tend to treat competitive sports, often justifiably, as a vehicle for all sorts of noble principles. But they are also, maybe more fundamentally, a realm in which men can behave like emotionally stunted rage machines. Anyone who watches college hoops is familiar with the sight of a coach in a suit and tie, neck veins bulging, screaming his head off. This may have something to do with the nature of the sport itself. Because basketball is so free-flowing, there’s room for only so much strategy. A coach’s ability to motivate his players — to somehow will them to play over their heads — is paramount. In this context, the raging coach seems perfectly normal. Out of context, you would be inclined to conclude the individual in question is seriously disturbed.

Maybe the biggest difference between Mike Rice at Robert Morris and Mike Rice at Rutgers is that at Robert Morris, his teams won. The Colonials ended Rice’s first season in first place in their conference. In his second season, Robert Morris made it to the N.C.A.A. tournament for the first time in 17 years. They returned to the tournament the next year — Rice’s last at Robert Morris — and nearly upset Villanova, a No. 2 seed.

Rice was developing a reputation for his success, but also for his temper. Against Villanova, a few of his players had to physically restrain him after a series of foul calls. Not long after, there was speculation in the media that Rice’s courtside demeanor had prevented him from being considered for the head-coaching job at Seton Hall. According to another story, even the staff pickup games at Robert Morris had to be discontinued because Rice was taking them too seriously.

On some level, Rice knew that his behavior was a problem. “The 1,500 people who came to the games at Robert Morris, I’d put on a good show for them,” he told me. “If the game was boring, they could just watch me. I would watch myself and think, Jeez, I’ve got to calm down.”

In these fleeting moments Rice was capable of seeing himself as thousands, and eventually millions, of people would see him. And yet he couldn't, or wouldn't, get far enough outside himself long enough to recognize the need to change.

**Rice says he** stopped using the word “faggot” during his second season at Rutgers, when one of his assistant coaches pulled him aside to remind him that a student at the school had recently jumped off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate filmed him kissing another man. (I heard about this from Rice himself, who also told me that the assistant said to him, “Are you crazy?”) But his homophobic slurs are still part of his lowlight reel, and he has to answer for them.

Toward that end, Rice has volunteered his services to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. “You know how much courage it takes for a kid to come out in high school?” Rice asked me after his first meeting with a group of gay high-school students in New Jersey.

In late July, the organization invited Rice to a daylong professional-development seminar in Chicago. The objective was to help educators make gyms and locker rooms more inclusive. It started with the usual around-the-room introductions, only with a twist: Participants were asked to give their names, their occupations and their P.G.P.'s

“Who can tell me what a P.G.P. is?” asked the leader, Jenny Betz, a peppy 30-something in a necktie, blue button-down, navy trousers and oxford shoes.

A man in a backward baseball cap raised his hand to answer: “Your *preferred gender pronoun*. What you like to be called.”

“Exactly,” Betz said, kicking things off with her own P.G.P.'s: “‘She,’ ‘her,’ ‘hers’ or any combination of them will feel comfortable to me.”

I had assumed that the rest of the participants would be lower-profile versions of Rice: coaches doing penance for gay slurs. As the introductions got under way, though, it became clear that the group was self-selected. They were almost all gay coaches and P.E. teachers from the area.

It was soon Rice's turn: “My name is Mike Rice. I am currently unemployed, but I worked as a basketball coach for 22 years. ‘He,’ ‘him’ or ‘his.’ ”

Over the course of the day, Rice and the rest of the participants watched videos about the experience of gay students in school sports, ran through hypothetical situations and learned some catchphrases to help make them stronger advocates for gay students: *If you see something, say something. If it's mean, intervene. Grab a teachable moment.*



The scene bordered on comical: Mike Rice, last seen by much of America calling his players “faggots,” sitting in the largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community center in the Midwest, talking about how to prevent the perpetuation of gay stereotypes. But Rice dived right into the various exercises.

At one point, Betz asked people to break into small groups and talk about a teacher or coach who made a strong impression on them. Rice told the story of his high-school coach’s sending him to the locker room in tears during the early minutes of an important game for yelling at his teammates to stop shooting and give him the ball.

“What the hell are you doing?” his coach asked, pulling Rice off the floor.

“What the hell are *you* doing?” Rice replied.

“That’s it,” the coach said. “You’re done.”

“It was the most embarrassing moment of my life,” Rice said. “Until this happened.”

Later, Betz requested two volunteers for some role-playing: What do you do when a colleague says something intolerant and offensive? “Who wants to be the P.E. teacher?” she asked.

Rice gamely raised his hand and went up to the front of the room with his female partner, a coach from a middle school in DeKalb, Ill., who was supposed to ad-lib a response to his scripted lines.

“That kid has such a mouth on him,” Rice read awkwardly. “He thinks he is so funny. Well, I shut him up today. I called him a little homo, and that cracked everyone up and shut him up. It’s the first day we’ve had some peace in that class since the unit started.”

His pretend colleague responded instantly: “How is that in any way appropriate?”

**“What I want** at Rutgers is a coach who is going to be intense, hard-working and emotional and who is going to care every single second,” the Rutgers athletic director, Tim Perneti, said at Rice’s introductory news conference in May 2010. “At the same time,” Perneti added, “I think we have a guy who understands . . . where the line is.”

It would be too much to suggest that anyone could have known at that point that Rice didn’t really understand where the line was. But it’s easy to see that Rice and Rutgers were a bad fit from the start. This was one of the worst teams in one of the toughest basketball conferences in the country. Rebuilding the program was going to take time. Even if Rutgers improved significantly, it was not going to win a lot of games. What the team needed was not a coach

single-mindedly obsessed with winning but one who knew how to lose.

The season before Rice arrived, Rutgers finished 14th out of 16 in the Big East, and then three players left the team, including the top scorer. He tried to make a virtue of their underdog status, hanging a punching bag in the locker room covered with laminated newspaper clippings about how bad Rutgers was going to be.

Rice also came up with a motto — a philosophy, really — to help guide practices: “Comfortable in Chaos.” The concept was borrowed from the Navy SEALs, whose training assumes that the game plan has been scrapped and that they are in trouble. As Rice saw it, going up against teams like Georgetown and Syracuse was the basketball equivalent of a combat mission gone awry. He wanted practices to be more demanding — more hellish — than the games themselves. “Get ready for the chaos,” he’d say as his players stretched out and warmed up.

Rice says he can now see that he took the idea way too far. “A good coach leads his team to water,” he told me, borrowing a metaphor he picked up in anger-management counseling. “A great coach leads them to water and makes them thirsty. I led them to water, put their heads in until I was satisfied with how much they drank.”

It’s a reality of coaching that no matter what you do, your team is not going to get better every day. During our conversations, Rice talked a lot about the ticking clock, how he felt as if he had only so much time to turn Rutgers around if he wanted to keep his job. I don’t doubt that Rice felt a powerful urgency to win at Rutgers. But the pressure was only a catalyst. It was also who he was and what he did for a living that made his behavior at Rutgers seem inevitable.

“It’s easy to say now, but when I was in it every day, I wanted to grab someone and just go, ‘We can do this, we’re going to show everybody,’ ” Rice told me. “Because that’s who I am, and that’s what I do.”

**By some measures**, Rice’s first season at Rutgers was a success. The team was projected to finish dead last in the Big East. Instead, Rutgers finished 12th, with an overall record of 15-17. As proud as he is of his Robert Morris teams, Rice considers this his greatest achievement as a coach.

His second season promised to be even better. He landed five highly rated prospects, a remarkable feat for such a weak program. Of course, five highly rated prospects also meant a lot of freshmen, all of whom had to get used to playing against bigger, stronger competition, not to mention college life. The team proved inconsistent. It showed flashes of potential, upsetting some top schools, but would then turn around and lose to schools it was expected to beat. It finished the season 14-18.

When you cut through all the mythology of the college coach as molder of young athletes, what you will find is basically a group of extremely competitive people whose livelihoods — not to mention self-images — are tied to the performance of a group of adolescent kids. This doesn't mean that coaches don't care about their players; it's just the reality of the job. "What did you think about when you were 17 to 22 years old?" Rice says, referring to some of the challenges of coaching college players. "You were out of your mind. The last thing you'd think about was jumping to the ball and making a play for your teammate and boxing out every time. You're thinking: Where's the party going on? Who's hanging out with who that night?"

In this sense, anyway, coaching really isn't so different from parenting. You want your kids to do better, to be better, and it can drive you crazy to watch them repeat mistakes or even just underachieve. The trick is to be able to drive down your own demons, to contain your frustration and, more generally, to balance anger and disappointment with love and encouragement. This is what good parents and great coaches do. And it's what Rice couldn't do at Rutgers. Here's another way to look at it: College coaches often talk about saving kids from themselves; Mike Rice's problem was that he couldn't save himself — or his kids — from Mike Rice.

I've heard Rice call his behavior any number of things — "idiotic," "thoughtless," "stupid." As Rice puts it: "There's not a lot of thought that went into why you would throw a ball at somebody's feet as hard as you could. Is that going to make him rebound better? Probably not. I don't know what will, but that won't." Even as Rice acknowledges that he was wrong, he says his players understood he was just trying to motivate them. "Did any of them blink?" he asked me once. "If they were mad at me, they would have knocked the hell out of me. They're 6-9, 270 pounds."

After the video went viral, a number of Rice's players at Rutgers came to his defense on TV and in newspapers. "We always said we want to be pushed to that point where we get better," Tyree Graham, who was on the Rutgers team for Rice's first two seasons there, told me. "That's what he did."

It's not surprising that players would rally around their coach when they saw him being publicly pilloried. But not all of them agreed with what Rice was doing. The fact that Rice's players didn't fight back doesn't mean that his conduct wasn't abusive. What college athlete is going to knock the hell out of his coach? And to whom could Rice's players complain? The athletic director who hired him? The assistant coaches who were loyal to him and stood silently by while he bullied the players, or even participated in similar behavior themselves?

Rice says he wanted his players to fight back, to match his intensity. You can see how this might

work as a form of motivation, but you can also see how it could easily backfire. Not all players are going to feel comfortable yelling at their coaches. And isn't it the coach's job to hold himself above and apart from his team, to be the educator, the grown-up?

One mystery of Rice's story is how his behavior went unreported in the media for so long. His practices were open to the public and regularly attended by local journalists. During Rice's first year, Jay Bilas, a college-basketball analyst on ESPN and a former Duke player, watched a Rutgers practice and was so taken aback by "the volume level, the profanity, the challenging of the players," he told me, that he pulled one of Rice's assistants aside to say that someone needed to talk to him. Rutgers's new basketball coach, Eddie Jordan, said over the summer that the school has been working with players who had some "psychological damage" from their time with Rice.

Rice's style might have worked at Robert Morris and with his first team at Rutgers — which he affectionately calls "the leftovers" — but it stopped working during his second season there. Part of the problem was that some of Rice's returning players felt that he was treating the freshmen differently, that they were being spared the worst of Coach Rice's Comfortable-in-Chaos boot camp.

Rice said one of his assistant coaches told him privately that his relentless intensity and negativity were hurting the team, and suggested he lighten up on some players. Another gave him a copy of a book called "The Positive Dog" to underscore the importance of positive feedback.

But Rice didn't listen, at least not until his second season at Rutgers was nearly over. "You're successful and now you keep building and it gets a little more out of control until it becomes a problem," he says. "And my problem became a huge problem, and I never took time out to analyze how I was going about things. Even though people would say things, I'm not hearing it. Because the intensity is what I was, the intensity is what I knew."

**"You're lucky I** have no more anger, buddy!" Rice joked one afternoon in June, swerving his Audi S.U.V. to avoid a car that had just cut in front of him. We were on our way to lunch at a Ruby Tuesday near the Newark Airport. Sitting in the back seat was the man in charge of Rice's emotional and professional rehabilitation, John Lucas.

The John Lucas Athlete's Aftercare Program in Houston, where Rice has spent quite a bit of time since last spring, has become a mandatory stop on the disgraced sports figure's road to redemption. Whether you've been arrested for drunken driving (Rod Strickland) or kicked off your college-football team for smoking pot (Tyrann Mathieu), John Lucas is the man to call.

“First thing I did was say you’re going to have to pay for your treatment,” Lucas said, recalling his initial conversation with Rice last spring. “Nobody is going to believe you’re serious if you don’t pay for it. And I’m not going to do insurance. When he heard the numbers — ”

“Luc don’t do anything cheap,” Rice said.

It’s hard to say what, exactly, Lucas does. He has no professional degree in psychology or social work. With his familiar recovery rhetoric, he’s more A.A. sponsor than therapist. (Rice, he says, has to learn that he’s just another “bozo on the bus.”)

Lucas does, however, have the credibility of a survivor: about 30 years ago, his promising N.B.A. career was derailed by cocaine and alcohol addiction. He also runs a lot of basketball clinics that can serve as halfway houses for a recovering Big East coach who’s trying to get back into the game any way he can, even if that means spending a holiday weekend running layup drills for fifth graders on a volunteer basis.

Between bites of his burger and fries, Lucas prodded Rice toward self-reflection. “When I was at Robert Morris having the time of my life, I wasn’t having the time of my life, because I wanted more,” Rice said. “When I was at Pitt, we went to the Sweet 16 — but I just wanted to get a head-coaching job. I always wanted more — more, more, more. I wanted to win every day. If you didn’t do it, I was going to make you do it. I was going to overwhelm you with intensity, with passion, with motivation.”

At the same time, Lucas also worked on the narrative of Rice’s redemption. “He’s going to have the gift of sensitivity now,” Lucas said.

The whole conversation felt more than a little contrived, a lunchtime therapy session conducted for my benefit. Rice obviously sought out Lucas because he needed help trying to reclaim his reputation. But it would be unfair, and inaccurate really, to say that Rice isn’t going through something genuine. And if Lucas wasn’t exactly offering searing psychological insights — his basic take was that Rice is no different from any other addict, only his vice is perfection — it was clear why Rice finds it comforting to be around him. Since the video, Rice has been defined, above all, by shame. (The same emotion he was often trying to get his own players to feel.) But Lucas, who during his playing days famously awoke from a bender soaked in his own urine, doesn’t judge.

There’s another thing, too. Part of the allure of the world of competitive sports is that it doesn’t require self-awareness. Your only job is to win. So when athletes and coaches find themselves in Rice’s position, they often don’t know how to talk about what they’re going through. Lucas’s vocabulary may be borrowed from a different recovery movement, but it’s better than nothing.

“I make him talk to me about the fears,” Lucas said.

“What are those fears?” I asked.

“I’m not good enough,” Rice said.

“The fear that he won’t get another job,” Lucas said. “How long is everything going to be, Mike Rice, disgraced ex-Rutgers coach?”

Lucas gestured at Rice, whose eyes were red and swollen with tears. “Look at the pain he’s in right now. He can’t forgive himself. . . . If you can’t see he’s human and genuine, you’re missing it. Here’s somebody that’s truly remorseful, that’s trying to get everything back in a day, and I’m trying to tell him that that’s gone forever. No one is ever going to forgive him. That’s the good thing for Mike Rice. His self-worth will come by who he is now, not by his title.”

**One important distinction** between Mike Rice and your average public figure looking for redemption is that Rice isn’t guilty of some discreet transgression that arguably had little or nothing to do with how he did his job. His transgression *was* how he did his job. This is going to make it more challenging for Rice to get back into basketball. But he is determined to coach again.

After his son’s game against Brick Township, as Rice and I drove to a pizzeria in a nearby strip mall, I asked him if he had any leads on basketball jobs. He was vague but sounded encouraged. He said that he would have to work his way back up, probably starting as a scout for an N.B.A. team, but that he thought he would eventually get another shot.

Over the past several months, Rice told me repeatedly that he was going to emerge from this experience a better man, a better father and a better coach. It was the sort of thing that anyone in his position would say, and I always glossed over it in our conversations. But it’s actually an interesting issue. It’s not, as it might seem on the surface, simply a matter of whether Mike Rice has “learned from his mistakes.” It’s a more universal, even philosophical question: Can we really change who we are?

I was impressed by Rice’s coaching during his son’s game that evening, in particular how focused he was on every little thing his players were doing. This is exactly what most serious athletes want: a passionate coach who’s doing everything he can to make you a better player. But I also wondered how difficult that intensity must be to corral, especially for someone with Rice’s background and makeup. It’s possible that Rice might be a better man and father if he could learn to harness his intensity and get past the need to always have to prove something. But that might not make him a better coach.

A lot of coaches do start their careers unable to calibrate their intensity. They gradually figure out that it doesn't much matter if this approach is successful, to say nothing of appropriate. It's not sustainable. An important part of this process is becoming self-aware, learning how to truly stand outside yourself. Another is absorbing something we were all told as kids: Winning isn't everything. Or maybe it would be more precise in the context of Mike Rice to say that if winning is everything, you're probably going to wind up damaging a lot of people, yourself among them.

"I wish I would have been more thoughtful in how I went about making them forged as a team, making them tougher as a unit," Rice told me. By now, the restaurant had emptied, and our waitress was resetting the tables around us for the next day, making sure we knew that it was time to leave. Rice paused for a moment, before either saying what he knew he was supposed to say or trying on a new identity. "Or maybe just accepting that sometimes you have to accept that you are who you are. Look, we're not very good, but we're going to try every day, and we're going to do the right things."

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