

POPE'S RESURRECTION

By Alejandro Danois

AT 6-9, SETON HALL JUNIOR FORWARD HERB POPE HAS THE SIZE, VERSATILITY AND SCORING ABILITY THAT INVARIABLY BRING TO MIND A YOUNG CARMELO ANTHONY. POPE CAN SNAG ALLEY-OOPS FROM UP HIGH AND PUT IN WORK ON THE BLOCKS WITH SPIN MOVES AND DROP-STEPS. NOT ONLY CAN HE START THE FAST BREAK WITH HIS REBOUNDS AND SHOT-BLOCKING, BUT HE'LL ALSO PUSH THE BALL AND DISTRIBUTE IT. HE'LL EVEN KNOCK DOWN A FEW THREES OR HIT YOU WITH A PULL-UP OF THE BOUNCE.

Yet, despite his do-it-all repertoire, the prevailing opinion of Herb is that, though talented on the court, he's not worth the risk off it. The tantalizingly gifted forward from the rugged Western Pennsylvania former steel town of Aliquippa seems to attract trouble wherever he goes.

But this season, he's out to prove that he's risen above his reputation and the almost unbelievable circumstances of his formative years—including surviving multiple gunshot wounds—to claim his status as one of college basketball's best players.

Some point to Herb's well-chronicled history of fisticuffs as a youngster, a middle school expulsion for banging a kid in the head with a cafeteria tray, or the time he reportedly exchanged blows with an AAU assistant coach at a 2006 tournament in Florida.

"Herb had some quick anger issues, he had a temper problem and he liked to fight when he was younger," says Doug Biega, Pope's former middle school English teacher.

Then, there was the 2007 DUI, the time he dropped a runner-up trophy to the floor after his high school team lost the state championship, or the fact that he attended eight different schools from the third grade on.

Yet others hearken back to that fateful night when someone tried to murder Herb Pope as proof that he's a lost cause. One

reader comment posted in response to an August 2008 article about Pope possibly transferring to Seton Hall on the NJ.com website said:

"People, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, get shot FOUR TIMES because they're involved in something shady."

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On March 31, 2007 at 2:30 a.m., Pope was sitting in a car passenger seat, ready to return home from a house party in Aliquippa. With the windows down, he was enjoying the warm air of the early spring evening, joking around with three teenage girls sitting in the backseat. In a few hours, he was scheduled to fly to Chicago and play in the Roundball Classic high school all-star game.

An argument ensued when the car's driver allegedly refused to give a ride to an angry partygoer.

"I thought they were getting ready to fight," says Pope. "Then, the guy walks over to my side of the car and coldcocks me. I got out and knocked him out cold."

Pope then felt someone grabbing at him, turned 180 degrees, and found himself staring into the barrel of a gun. Bullets pierced his abdomen and barely missed a kidney. Raising his arms to

shooting a highly recruited
got in a fight outside a party.

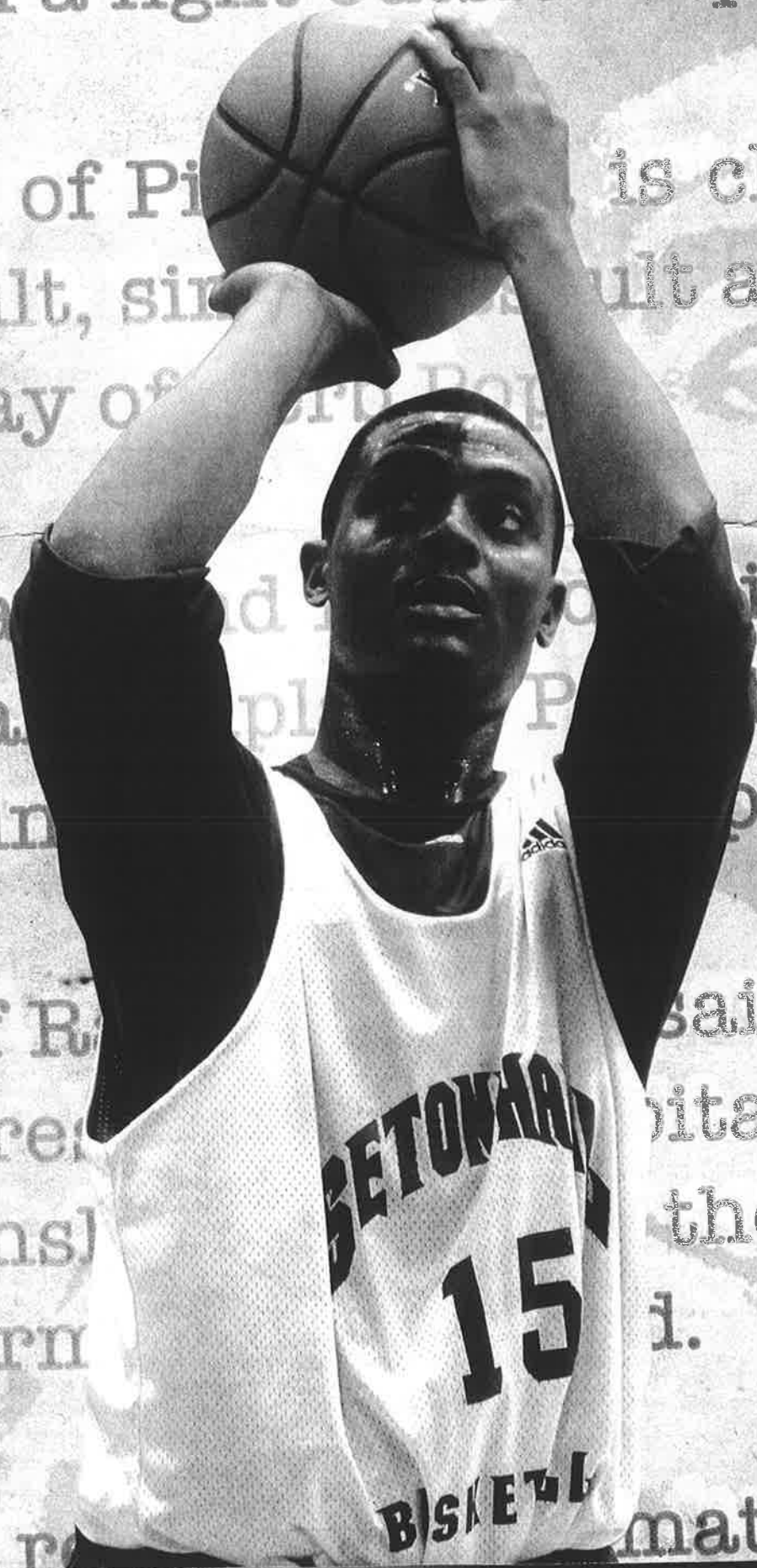
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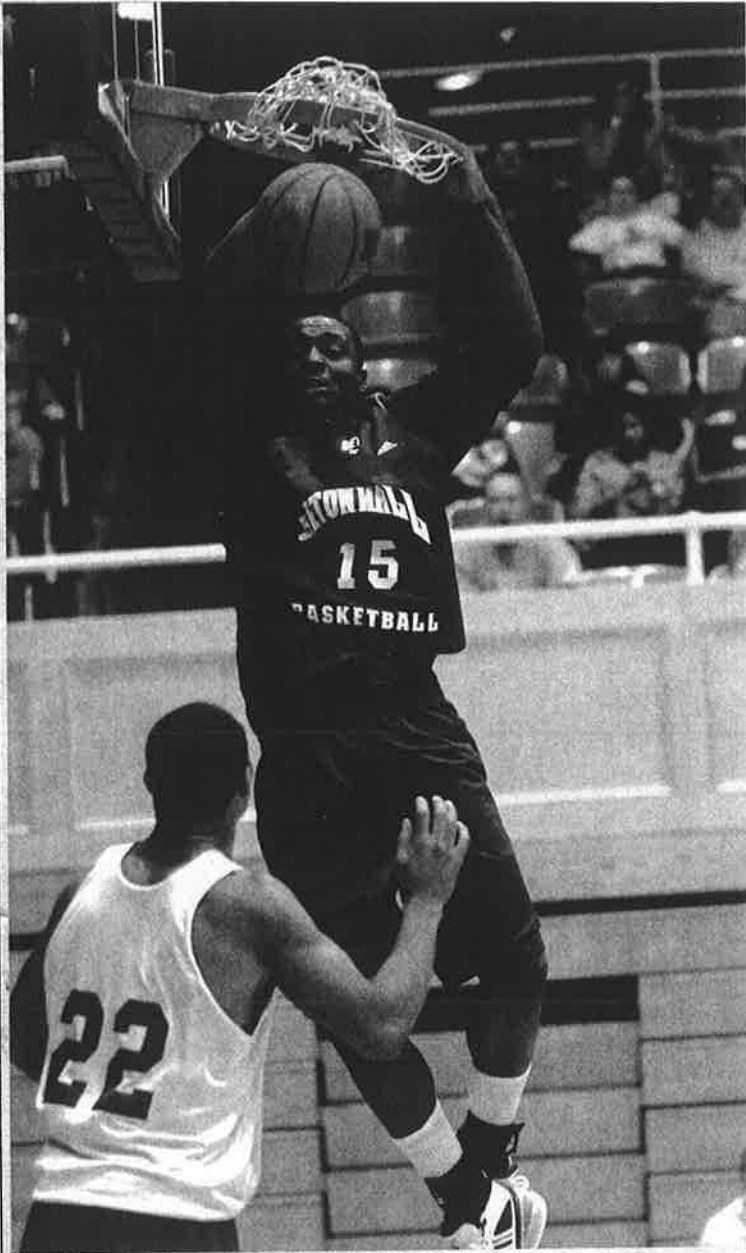
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shield his face, his left forearm absorbed a bullet intended for his head. Fleeing into some adjacent woods, he was shot again in the leg.

After crawling down a steep embankment, a passing motorist stopped and drove Pope to a local hospital. Due to the severity of his wounds, he was airlifted to Pittsburgh where a team of specialists operated on him for eight hours. His arm came close to being amputated, his left wrist later required a separate reconstructive surgery, and large portions of his stomach and intestines were removed. Two of the bullets could not be extracted.

A few days after he almost died, Pope was being scolded by nurses for dribbling medicine balls and walking up and down stairs to keep his fitness up. Thirteen days later, he walked out of the hospital, some 39 pounds lighter.

Throughout his life, his parents walked through a revolving door of addiction, crime and incarceration. Hunger pains were a constant companion for him and his five siblings. They often depended on the generosity of friends, neighbors and extended family for meals. Often dropped off to live with various relatives, he was eventually placed in foster care a few months shy of his eighth birthday.

"I was in an office with my two sisters and they were trying to ship us around to different places," said Pope.

He adamantly insisted that his sisters remain together. On his very first day of being placed in a group home, some older boys tried to test him. After the smoke cleared from the ensuing brawl, young Herb was still on his feet, tight fists and swollen knuckles at the ready.

"Foster care is a messed up place," says Pope, his voice trailing off into the pensive silence of a painful past.

At one home, he found solace on a nearby basketball court. He quickly became adept at snaring rebounds and swatting away shots, elements of the game that require heart, pure will and aggression. Upon entering the eighth grade, he stood 6-5 and was holding his own against seasoned older players.

"I scored the last two baskets in an adult league championship game on drop-step, turnaround dunks and I'd never done that before," recalls Pope.

An uncle of an AAU teammate helped steer him toward prep powerhouse Montrose Christian in Rockville, Maryland. Thinking he was going on a temporary visit, he was unaware that all of his belongings were packed in the car trunk.

"They told me, 'Just stay for a couple of days and if you don't like it, we'll come back and get you,'" says Pope. "I called but nobody ever came back, so I stayed there for my entire freshman year."

In his first scrimmage, he rang up 42 points, 12 rebounds and 12 blocks. But with established, D-I level players who'd already paid their dues in the program, Pope saw scant minutes.

While playing for the D.C. Assault AAU program during the summer after his freshman year, he returned to Western Pennsylvania for a tournament. In a clandestine operation, he defected from Montrose Christian like a baseball prospect fleeing Cuba.

"As soon as I got back to the Pittsburgh area, I knew I was never going back to Maryland," says Pope. "I missed my family and felt like I'd be better off at home, helping out my brothers and sisters."

Living with his aunt and uncle, he blossomed into one of the nation's top recruits in the class of 2007 during his stellar, three-year career at Aliquippa High School.

"I didn't know anything about Herb as a player until he returned from Montrose and wound up at Aliquippa, our rival school," says Biega, his former English teacher who is also the head coach at Beaver Falls High School.

The former teacher and student, though now rivals, maintained a friendship. Biega, a resident of Aliquippa, would stop his car when he saw Pope around the neighborhood. The two would drive, talk about life and joke about the number of state championships and fun they would've had if Herb had remained in the Beaver Falls school district.

"When I taught him in middle school, he was just a tall, gangly kid who was very smart and engaging," says Biega. "But when he came back, he had every basketball skill imaginable as a high school sophomore. He was as good as they came. And his most underrated skill was the ability to pass the ball."



But stories of Pope's temper, fighting, and disdain for losing that some called unsportsmanlike dogged him during the college recruiting process.

"He was an emotional guy whose game was a little more mature than he was off the court," says Dave Telep, a national basketball recruiting analyst. "In his heart, Herb wants to do right but he let his emotions get the best of him at times."

"At schools with tough kids like we have in this area, they want to prove how tough they are by taking on the biggest kid," said Biega. "Sometimes, Herb had no choice but to stand up for himself. He brought some things on himself and was far from an

angel, but he was a very bright kid who was definitely not the villain that some claimed him to be."

Throughout high school, Pope maintained a 3.0 grade average.

Pope surprised many when he accepted a scholarship to New Mexico State over the likes of Maryland and Texas.

"Las Cruces, New Mexico, is a beautiful place to start a family and they'd just made the tournament," Pope said, explaining his decision. "The program was on the rise and Reggie Theus, an NBA great, was the coach. All the pieces were in place for me to succeed out there and it felt like home."

But others weren't as enthusiastic or supportive of Pope's bright future.

Some critics used the shooting as evidence of his supposed negative character. Shortly after arriving in New Mexico, the man that attracted him across the country to play his college ball, Reggie Theus, accepted the Sacramento Kings head coaching

job. To make matters worse, Pope had to sit out 19 games due to a high school grade discrepancy that the NCAA eventually ruled in his favor.

The Aggies, who were 9-10, finished 12-4 with Pope injected into the line-up. He averaged a respectable 11.1 points and 6.8 boards. But the physical and psychological effects of the shooting were holding him back.

"I was rusty and scared of contact," said Pope.

In mid-March, that hurdle was cleared when he went airborne for a slam and Nevada's JaVale McGee almost broke his nose.

"Blood was rushing out, but I didn't get hurt," said Pope. "After that, I knew I was going to be OK and just started playing ball again."

Herb finished that game with 18 points and 13 boards, then punctuated his successful return to an elite-level player with a 20-point performance in the WAC championship game against Boise State.

With Theus gone, Pope wanted to come back East and transferred to Seton Hall. While sitting out the '08-09 season due to NCAA transfer requirements, he felt warmly embraced on the South Orange, N.J., campus and was eager to start over again.

"Last year, he gave his all on the practice squad," said Pirates senior forward Robert Mitchell. "Since he's been here, he's been a good teammate, a gym rat who is always encouraging and helping others."

POPE NO LONGER SITS UP IN A COLD SWEAT WITH ARMS FLAILING, RE-LIVING THE SHOOTING AT 2:30 A.M. LIKE HE USED TO.

"I think Herb's going to have a great year and I'm very excited for him," said Seton Hall head coach Bobby Gonzalez. "The things that he brings are extremely rare. He's a 6-9 power forward, a ferocious rebounder who can post up, pass, score and block shots. He attacks the rim like a demon. And he's coming off a sit-out year where he's been able to put all the past stuff

behind him. Herb has a chance to be a special player. He will help us tremendously."

Pope no longer sits up in a cold sweat with arms flailing, re-living the shooting at 2:30 a.m. like he used to. But he still wakes up at that time every night. Now, instead of panicking, he has a brief heart-to-heart with himself before falling back to sleep.

Today, he chooses to look forward.

"March 31, that's Final Four time," said Pope. "Everywhere I've been, I've made it to a championship game and that's my goal, no matter what it takes."

Herb Pope has spent a lifetime trying to keep trouble at bay. Considering his journey, how he's fought to survive, and still managed to come out on the winning end, he's already proven that he's not afraid. The Big East better be.

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