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Choke Artists

An audio documentary produced by Matt Beagle
UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism
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Abstract

In 1997, a violent altercation took place at the practice facility of the Golden State Warriors in Oakland. Star Player Latrell Sprewell choked head coach PJ Carlesimo and threatened to kill him in front of the entire team. Sprewell was cut from the team and given the harshest penalty in NBA history for a non drug-related offense. This story looks back to examine events leading up to the incident and to look back at the racially charged media coverage surrounding the event from 20 years down the road. Told by one of the reporters who broke the story and a former teammate.

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Adonal Foyle, Former player for the Golden State Warriors

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Script

Bruno Mars

It's early evening outside Oracle Arena in Oakland, home of the Golden State Warriors. Thousands of fans in yellow T-shirts are dancing and streaming into the stadium

Wooooo!!! Warrrrrrrrriors!

They're psyched. The Warriors are in the Playoffs, people are saying they're a lock for the Championship. They've been so good these past few years, some are calling them one of the greatest basketball teams ever. But here's what fans really love:

Oh my God they Play with such joy, they're just having fun

It's like they're all kids playing a game still

They hi five one another, they always encourage each other

It's all chemistry Man

They Have so much chemistry

They're a great example for the kids

They're not just a winning team, they're a family. There've been countless articles about the team's affinity for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, their habit of chasing each other around the court after dramatic wins, dousing

each other with tiny cups of water. It feels like all this success will last forever, you might think, this is the way its always been. But 20 years ago, the Warriors hit rock bottom.

In 1997, a violent altercation at a team practice between star player Latrell Sprewell, and Head Coach PJ Carlesimo made national headlines overnight.

Here's a portion of Sprewell's testimony on the incident:

When he threw me out of practice, I just lost it"...He said that he had gotten to the point where he could not take it anymore. He grabbed Carlesimo around the neck with his arms fully extended.....While his hands were on Carlesimo's neck, Grievant said "I'll kill you" and the Head coach said "do it."

Few beats of music

This is the story of one of the most controversial moments in NBA history that went far beyond basketball. It sparked a national discussion on race and violence and revealed the fears and prejudice laying just beneath the surface of the sports world. Here's how it happened, and how it could happen again.

DS: I'm David Steele....and I was the Warriors Beat writer for the San Francisco Chronicle....

When Steele got assigned to cover the Warriors in 96, they were desperately trying to become a winning team again. They'd gone from making the playoffs to having two losing seasons in a row. The front office and the fans saw coach, Rick Adelman, as part of the problem

DS: Rick Adelman's reputation was as a very nice guy a players coach....they had gotten a reputation of a team that could be pushed around and could get away with a lot of stuff with Adelman

The Warriors fired Adelman, and started looking for a new coach

DS: When they turned up one day and said PJ Carlesimo is the new coachwe were all like, what?

PJ Carlesimo was a college coaching legend. He was young, energetic and aggressive but there were doubts about his ability in the pro's, some of his former players said he constantly yelled and cursed..that he was borderline verbally abusive:

DS: but he somehow had convinced them that he was going to be the guy that was going to whip them into shape

The Warriors were banking on their new coach, and a new attitude...and they built a marketing campaign around that.

DS: It was called no more mr nice guy, There were billboards, there was a song that went along with it, that included the other players, singing Kumbaya with the wrong lyrics, and then it would be the whole record scratch thing and then,

No More, Mr. Nice Guy! No More Mr Clean!

DS: They were pushing that really hard you know there's a new sheriff in town.....The fans were eating it up! the fans wanted to see a winner again

Carlesimo was all in on "No More Mr nice guy." He appeared in billboards, wearing dark shades and a leather jacket, his arms crossed, glaring into the camera.

DS: So it was like nobody's gonna push us around and certainly, nobody's going to push our coach around that was the mindset

Another new face joining the team that season was top draft pick, 20 year old Rookie Adonal Foyle. The funny thing about Foyle, originally from the Caribbean, he may as well be named, Mr. Nice Guy:

coming out what I knew is that the team was in flux, in terms of there were significant changes, PJ Carlesimo was the new coach..... His style in basketball was very rough

Carlesimo imposed fines on players for being late to practice and would yell and curse. But Foyle says he was also nice, funny, good with the media, he just wanted things done the right way, his way.

So, new coach, new attitude. But the Warriors were also building their team around a holdover from the old franchise:

"Plucked out of the air by Sprewell.....SPREWELL!"

All-star shooting guard Latrell Sprewell or "Spree."

Three things to know about Sprewell.

One:

AF: He was exceptional! He was so talented...he can shoot, he can slash, he can rebound...

DS: Sprewell was just electrifying.he was explosive, he never backed down, he went right at the rim, he was bold, shooting threes, aggressive on defense, he threw himself around, he was just a lot of fun to watch.

Two.

DS: He was kind of volatile

Writers and teammates say Sprewell could be, emotional and hard edged- a few times he was near the center of drama off the court. He had some fights with teammates. There was a rumor one got particularly vicious:

DS: And Sprewell going after him with a 2x4

Sprewell angered his fans one season after his pet pit bull badly mauled his four year old daughter, and Sprewell said he would not put the dog down.

Three.

Sprewell was cast as team leader, but didn't necessarily want that role.

AF: ...he was one of those people who would come do his job work hard but I never saw him outside of that...he did not want to be a part of the rebuilding process of the organization

(Beat of sound, new thought)

It became clear in training camp, this team wasn't gonna be good

I mean you were thinking, boy maybe things will come together by the time the regular season starts

But it didn't, They started losing, badly.

And something else was going on. There was already tension between Sprewell and Carlesimo.

**DS: There were signs that they were not going to get along, but not like it was going to blow up the way that it did, Sprewell made it really obvious right from the beginning that he was just not a PJ guy
By the time the regular season started, Sprewell stopped talking on the record, because he was just not going to be able to say anything positive. It was a sign that everyone should have picked up on**

They opened up the season dropping their first game, then their second, and their third,then.... nine straight. They weren't just losing, they were getting crushed

AF: It was depressing hahafrom a player's perspective, losing is just terrible....it was clear this was going to be a long year from the onset

Losing was even affecting the sports writers

DS: any beat writer will tell you that it is really hard watching losing over and over again, its just, its draining you're literally in a losing atmosphere everything is so negative

And Losing was DEFINITELY getting to Carlesimo, he doubled down on his aggressive style

DS: When you talk about a coach being a yeller, that's really what it is! Get back get back! push push pass! Not stop noise from the coach...Part of it is that he has a very grating, yelling yell voice on the court and its high pitched it's kind of graty.....

PJ: You need to understand, These drills that look so obvious to you, these drills are practiced everyday in NBA Camps!

Here's Carlessimo in an online basketball training video
THIS IS HIM TALKING TO KIDS!

So it's not too early for you youngsters to start working on these same fundamentals, thank you!

In his testimony, Sprewell said Carlesimo was constantly in his ear, riding him for little things. During a pregame workout, Carlesimo told Spree to be quiet because he was chatting with another player. Spree told Carlesimo, "Get the fuck out of my face". Carlessimo fined him a thousand dollars

During a game against the Lakers, their sixth loss in a row, Carlesimo took Sprewell out of the game for laughing during a timeout. Sprewell sulked on the end of the bench and called his coach, "A fucking joke". Next, he was benched for missing a team flight to Salt Lake City.

Spree wasn't talking to media, but he talked with Steele privately

DS: It was all PJ, he was just really getting on his nerves, trying to tune him out, didn't know how much longer he could take, didn't want to do anything like demand a trade or cause a scene.

Few beats Music

December 1st, 1997....The Warrior's had practice at their facility in downtown Oakland, on the 5th Floor of the Marriott hotel. Carlesimo actually lived in the hotel throughout the season-sleeping just a few floors away from the practice court.

The team was coming off a five game losing streak

DS: You get to practice and all you're talking about is how horrible this is going, you go to practices and generally don't think you're going to get news out of it but some kind of a story

AF: The practice started like any other... we were separated we have like 6 baskets around the gym nothing unusual, I was in the middle of doing a post move when the incident happened.....

DS: So we're waiting and waiting, they finally open the doors, we walk in, players were shooting free throws and it was pretty easy to notice that Sprewell was already gone.....and PJ walks over and has coaching shirt, and he's got these great big red marks around his neck!... then somebody wasn't me asked what happened with your neck (laughs) what's going on there, did you cut yourself shaving and he sort of laughed it off and said yeah yeah it was a shave accident but everybody's light went on but we just know, ok that's not normal...

DS:and I remember the owner, and his chief counsel, you NEVER see them in the building, you just don't.... so that set off the alarm bells really really loud, we're thinking ok something happened

.then we got a call from the warriors saying Press conference 9 o'clock tonight and we're like uh oh, something's about to come out, and I made some more calls and I- found out that Sprewell had choked PJ

Adonal Foyle was there, on the court, but didn't get into details of the confrontation. So based on Sprewell and Carlesimo's accounts, and those of 20 other Warriors players and staff who were there that day, here's what happened:

Sprewell was doing a routine passing drill with two other teammates, Carlesimo came over and told Sprewell to make better, or crisper passes, Sprewell said he was, Carlesimo called his name again, Sprewell slammed the ball down and said, "What the fuck do you want me to do?" Carlesimo said, "get the fuck out of here" And that's when Sprewell lost it, and put his hands around Carlesimo neck.

Here's from Carlesimo's testimony:

He said that the Grievant started walking towards him and grabbed him around the throat, choking him and gripping him extremely tight while pushing him backwards. He said that Grievant was screaming and threatening. Carlesimo said that the entire incident lasted seven to ten seconds and that towards the end he began having trouble breathing comfortably "it was difficult to breathe and getting more difficult" Carlesimo and Sprewell both testified that Sprewell said, "I'm going to kill you"

A coach pulled Sprewell off Carlesimo, Sprewell walked to the locker room, still threatening his coach. He took a shower, changed, was gone for 15 to 20 minutes. Meanwhile Carlesimo resumed practice with the rest of the team. Sprewell came back onto the court, rushed his coach again hurling insults and punches at him and connected with his jaw and chest before being separated and leaving the gym. Carlesimo was given a security detail outside his door for a week. Oakland Police were called to the gym to guard it in case Sprewell returned. He never did.

I asked Spree to leave practice, he didn't words escalated to physical contact.....

DS: Then the press conference started...PJ again with the wounds on his neck very clear for every camera to pick up went all over sportscenter that night

Steele filed a story that night.

DS: I was extremely surprised it was as bad as it was, actually getting up and getting hands around the guy's throat really kind of blew me away, and I thought, wow, he really did snap

From that first night, the story appeared in every major news paper across the countr

DS: It just overtook everything, that was happening, that became a national story immediately people were buzzing about it all across the country all over sportscenter, every newspaper

AF: I think the most amazing thing was that everything was just so surreal,

...we probably went from 3 beat writers, that we'll see on a regularly basis to thousands of reporters the day after, how did this happen? where did they come from?

Just the facts had people raptured- rich, black, star athlete with a history of skirmishes chokes white coach with a legacy of verbal abuse

DS: It took on so many dimensions and it took them on like instantaneously and it was like the dominant story in the country, everybody had an opinion about it

....Governor talked about it, there were all these huge think pieces about workplace violence....sociologists were talking about it, became an academic thing

The story forced people to take sides on the question who's fault was it? The superstar athlete, making millions of dollars who attacked his coach? Or the angry, unhinged white coach, coming down hard on black players

Racially charged narratives emerged in the media coverage, especially around Sprewell. Articles called attention to his imposing stature, his hair-braided in corn rows. He was called a "thug" and a "Gangster"

DS: A lot of black people were saying...I can think of 50 instances where there was some incredible fight or brawl, between coaches players and managers that were never described in these terms.....hockey was the

sort of the go to metaphor, where that's literally all they do is fight and it's like one fight happens in NBA and everyone has to go to jail

This is from Neil Rogers' Show, a former Florida radio host now inducted in the National Radio Hall of Fame:

"I'm under a lot of pressure, if I choked my boss, I'd be behind bars!" "you can take a guy out of the ghetto but you can't take the scum out of the bag"

San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown made headlines of his own when said maybe Carlesimo deserved to be choked.

One piece that made this all so polarizing, Sprewell threatened to kill Carlesimo.

DS: I said didn't know if we take that literally, they get emotional, but in the back of my head I thought, yeah, he really did try and kill him

Carlessimo didn't want to press criminal charges, but league commissioner David Stern was grappling with how Sprewell should be punished. There was pressure to make an example, because the NBA had an image problem. Michael Jordan, the family-friendly, global superstar had announced his retirement the same year, and there wasn't an obvious next league leader. Steele says to some fans Sprewell embodied all the negative stereotypes of the NBA

DS: basketball was the sport that is harboring criminals, and thugs and people who don't obey the rules

Stern didn't grapple for long. Just two days after the incident, The NBA gave Sprewell the harshest penalty in league history for a non-drug related offense. A year-long suspension with no pay. Several other players in the league spoke out claiming the penalty was unreasonable. Some even threatened to boycott playing:

DS: There was this universal idea that yeah he stepped over the line, but a lot of people recognized an extreme reaction that seemed out of place

Sounds of Spree's Press Conference

A week after the attack. Sprewell held his own press conference in the ballroom of an Oakland hotel packed with Dozens of reporters from national

outlets. He apologized, accepted the blame and admitted his actions crossed the line. But, it was also a show of strength. Spree was backed by several of his teammates, and flanked by a 9 member legal team including, Johnny Cochran, just two years after he defended O.J.

At the conference, Cochran said the punishment was a rush to judgement, and that nobody had listened to Sprewell's side of the story.

DS: it sent a signal to everybody we're not going to quietly accept whatever they were going to punish him with just for the good of the league

The NBA Player's Association appealed the suspension on behalf of Sprewell. The hearings dragged on for months with Carlesimo and Sprewell giving their testimony along with 20 other teammates and Warriors staff

Eventually, an arbitrator deemed the initial suspension too harsh. Sprewell was barred from the remainder of the season, but he argued that was enough. Here's from the arbitrator's ruling:

"The Grievant acted out of anger and passion, not a premeditated state, and despite some earlier acts of defiance by him with respect to his coach, he has had an honorable career in the NBA.....the experience undergone by the Grievant may well equip him in the future years of his life to be an example of a person who can overcome adversity and be a role model."

In response, commissioner Stern said, "you cannot choke your boss and hold your job unless you play in the N.B.A"

Sprewell did play that next season, for the New York Knicks, where he was welcomed with open arms and then led them to the finals. He had by all accounts a successful NBA career, but retired still in infamy and best known for the incident.

Carlesimo also moved on, the Warriors let him go after another year but he found success coaching other teams. NOW you can watch him call games on T.V.

Adonal Foyle played 13 NBA seasons. But the incident stayed with him. He sees it an important part in the journey of today's winning team.

AF: the Warriors team of today had to go through the wilderness of desperation to find its true soul and its true purpose

The WARRIORS won the championship in 2015 (AUDIO--NEWS CLIP) and may do it again this year.

And after covering the team's lowest point, Steel can barely believe it

DS: I'll never live long enough to see this day, I was absolutely convinced there's no way the Golden State Warriors will ever win an NBA championship, I really believed that

It shows how far the Warriors have come, and how quickly things can unravel. A losing season here, an injury and contract dispute there, a confrontation.....it could all be over, just like that. But the story was also revealing.

It exposed the white America's fears of "black thugs" of rich athletes going over the line, ruining the game we love, of white life being threatened...Sprewell lost it and snapped in a country that was and still is, terrified of black violence-but in a way, he defied it, he came back to the NBA as a leader for two different teams and retired, although still in infamy, a millionaire and beloved player.

DS: I think it was a moment in time that illuminated a lot of things about sports, about society, about perceptions....a lot ended up being talked about that had not ever been talked about so explicitly and I think that brought a lot of things out into the open and I think its the sort of thing that is going to stick with the individuals for a long long time