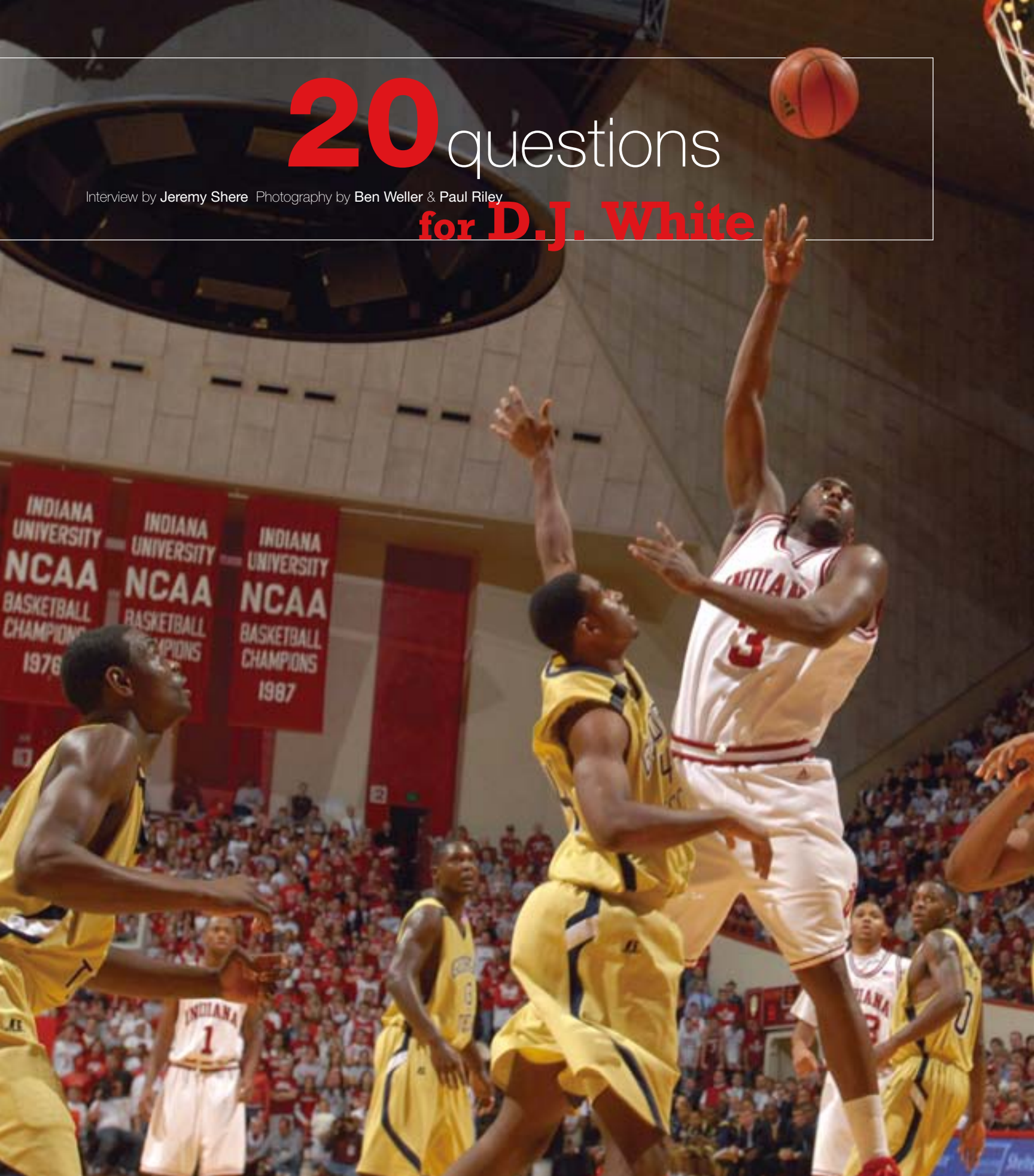


20 questions

Interview by Jeremy Shere Photography by Ben Weller & Paul Riley

for D.J. White





Taking His Place in Hoosier History

IU men's basketball has had its share of great big men—Kent Benson, Alan Henderson, Jared Jeffries, and many more. Now, after his stellar senior year, we can officially add D.J. White to that list. Throughout a tumultuous season, White was a rock in the middle. His steady and often spectacular play anchored the Hoosiers, leading the team to a 25-8 record and a spot in the NCAA Tournament. Averaging 17.4 points and 10.3 rebounds per game, White was voted Big Ten Player of the Year, named first team All-Big Ten, voted second-team All American, and has now emerged as a top NBA prospect.

(left) One perfect moment in the IU career of D.J. White. Photo by Paul Riley (above) Photo by Ben Weller

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Of Eric Gordon (right), White says, "We're going to have a lifelong friendship." Photo by Paul Riley

But anyone who followed IU basketball over the past four years knows that White's importance went beyond statistics and awards. At a time when many of the best college players leave for the pros after one or two years, White stayed to work on his game, mentor younger players, and earn a degree in general studies with minors in criminal justice and African-American studies. This year, during the Kelvin Sampson debacle, White's presence on the team was especially important. His exemplary work ethic, passion, and leadership carried a team that, toward the end of the season, had every excuse to quit.

Now, his college career behind him, White is looking forward to making his mark in the NBA. Moving on, though, doesn't mean that White will leave IU and Bloomington behind. He spoke with *Bloom* writer Jeremy Shere about his legacy and "the four best years" of his life.

BLOOM: As you head to the NBA, I'm wondering which players in the pros did you most admire when you were growing up?

WHITE: Michael Jordan, of course, but the person I really admired the most is Kevin Garnett and I still do to this day. Just his passion for the game. I think I learned just watching him.

BLOOM: You could soon be playing against or maybe even alongside Kevin Garnett. Is that a scary thought?

WHITE: No, it's not scary. I'm over the fact that "Hey, I'm standing next to such-and-such." But, it's an honor, I think, to play with those guys, especially Kevin Garnett and Shaquille O'Neal. Standing next to them, that'd be an honor.

BLOOM: So many top NBA prospects stay in college for one or two years and then go pro. Why did you decide to stay for your senior year, and what do you think you learned this year that's going to help you in the NBA?

WHITE: I thought it was the best situation for me. Last year I thought about turning pro, but after looking at the pros and cons I thought it was better for me to stay and finish out my senior year. We had a good team coming back, and I thought it was a team that could have gone far, potentially Final Four, you know, but that didn't happen. But I still think staying was a positive. And as far as "what have I learned," I've just been through a lot of adversity. I still think that what I did every day, I gave my all. So, that's one thing I learned, that no matter what's going on around you, just give your all.

BLOOM: What parts of your game did you work on this year?

WHITE: I expanded my range a little bit on my jump shot. I rebounded the ball better, which I felt I was capable of doing. And that's basically it. I just played strong. I think I was a better leader this year for my team. There were three returning players from last season, so a lot of

White (center) wants to be remembered as “somebody who gave his all every time.”
Photo by Paul Riley



Coach Sampson, when he first came here, I won't say we butted heads, but it took a while for us to be on the same page. You know, we did, and that's why right now I talk to him all the time. He texts me all the time, I text him.

guys looked up to me, and I think I did a pretty decent job of leading by example.

BLOOM: In four years at IU you played for three coaches—Mike Davis, Kelvin Sampson, and Dan Dakich. What was your relationship like with each of them?

WHITE: Coach Davis—he and I had a good relationship. That's really the big reason why I came here, was because of him. I just liked his offensive style. And Coach Sampson, when he first came here, I won't say we butted heads, but it took a while for us to be on the same page. You know, we did, and that's why right now I talk to him all the time. He texts me all the time, I text him. We talk, I go out and see his wife, even when he's not in town. We've been real tight over the last couple of years. And Coach Dakich, I respect him very much. He'll be the first to tell you, I told him I respect him, and under the circumstances I think he came in and did a good job. We didn't finish like we wanted

to, obviously, but I respect Coach Dakich for what he did.

BLOOM: This past season included a lot of unexpected drama involving Coach Sampson and NCAA violations. What was it like to deal with that as a player? What was it like in the locker room?

WHITE: It was difficult at times. Not in the locker room, the locker room was like a relief for us. Outside, walking to class, people were always asking me what's going on, especially before Coach Sampson left. Watching [ESPN] Sports Center at night, all you see is your coach's picture, they're talking about your program. So it was really a relief to come here [Assembly Hall] and play.

BLOOM: And just focus on basketball.

WHITE: Focus on basketball. I've been through the situation before, where it was the same thing with Coach Davis going on, it

was a relief just to come here and play. His job was in question for two years, it always was something. Was he going to stay? Was he going to leave? It was just a relief just to get away from people asking me questions, wanting to know what's going on, media reports.

BLOOM: What I'd like to do now is call out the names of some of your teammates. In a sentence or two, tell me what comes to mind about them. First, Jordan Crawford.

WHITE: [Laughs] Funny, silly. Not many people know that about him. He's quiet...but once you get to know him, he's a very funny guy. He and I, we really can't be together because we always get laughing, goofing off, you know. So, we have a good time.

BLOOM: Eric Gordon?

WHITE: E.G. is very quiet, until you get to know him. But, he's the guy that—we're going to have a lifelong friendship. We work out together, matter of fact we just finished working out together. We were both trying to lead this team. So that's a bond that we've grown through.

BLOOM: Eric Gordon is going to the NBA, too. Does that bring you even closer together, because you're going through a similar process?

WHITE: I think so, yes, because he understands what I'm working for, and I understand what he's working for right now. So, I think we both can get a feel for that, get a sense of that for each other, and respect each other and what we're trying to accomplish.

BLOOM: Jamarcus Ellis?

WHITE: He's a good guy. I enjoyed playing with him. He was my next-door neighbor, so we got a chance to hang out sometimes and got to know each other.

BLOOM: Lance Stemler?

WHITE: My roommate. He was never there. [Laughs]. Last year I kind of took him under my wing when he came. He really didn't know much. So he and I became close because of that, and we decided to live together this year. You meet a lot of friends in college that you keep in contact with for the rest of your life. So that's another guy who I feel strongly about.

BLOOM: DeAndre Thomas?

WHITE: A hard worker. You know, it's not easy losing 50-plus pounds, what he did. So I respect him for that. This year he kind of took a back seat playing, he backed me up, but at the same time he always stayed positive towards me, never was negative towards me. He helped me out any way he knew, so I respect him and I'll always remember him for that.


BLOOM: Armond Bassett?

WHITE: A hard worker. In the summertime, every day, when I was getting ready for my USA trials, he was in the gym with me working. I'll always remember that about him. When he first came in, I took him under my wing, took him everywhere, he even stayed with me, stayed on my couch.

BLOOM: And Adam Ahlfeld?

WHITE: Best teammate a guy could have. Literally, he would drop anything he was doing for any one of us guys on that team, and anything I ask of him, he does. He's a kind-hearted person, puts others before himself, and that's something you always appreciate.

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White on Senior's Night
with his parents and
interim coach Dan Dakich.
Photo by Paul Riley



BLOOM: It sounds like one of the best parts of your IU basketball career are the friendships you made on the team.

WHITE: It was. I still talk to [former IU player] Robert Vaden, who's probably my best friend, you know, we lived together. And even though he left, we've still got that bond, just from all the things we went through on the court. [Former IU player] Roderick Wilmont is one of my best friends too. He calls me, every big thing that happens with him in his career—he's playing in the [NBA] development league—he calls me and expresses it with me, and I do the same for him. So I grew some close bonds.

BLOOM: Let's backtrack a little bit. Tell me what it was like growing up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

WHITE: I grew up in a close family. I lived right next door to my aunt, right next door to my grandmother. We grew up as a family together, did a lot of things together, so I grew up in a very family-oriented home.

BLOOM: When did you first get into basketball?

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To be named in the same breath as Calbert Cheaney, Damon Bailey, Alan Henderson, Kent Benson, Scott May means a lot...



Photo by Ben Weller

WHITE: I think I started playing basketball around sixth grade. I played for a church league. It was my first time playing basketball, and I kind of started to like it, and it took off from there.

BLOOM: Was it clear early on that you were good at basketball, that this was something you could do?

WHITE: Well, it took a while. In seventh grade I was okay, and I got better. In my eighth grade year I got moved up to the high school. The high school was ninth through twelfth. And I was in eighth grade, and I was playing with the ninth grade team, so that was big for me. I used to have to walk from my middle school after third period and go and practice with the ninth grade team, so that was a big step.

BLOOM: Who were your influences or mentors back in those days?

WHITE: First of all, my parents. They influenced me, they brought me up well, raised me well, to be respectful, and to use manners with other people. And my high-school coach who used to coach in college himself; his name is Dan Fitzpatrick. He was an assistant at the University of Alabama and at Wyoming, and he also coached here my freshman year. So he was probably my mentor growing up and he really still is right now.

BLOOM: Looking back on your four years at IU, what's your fondest memory?

WHITE: Probably beating Wisconsin my junior year. They were like number one or two in the country, and we beat them here at Assembly Hall. And the fans rushed the court. It was a big deal. And obviously making the NCAA tournament, that's a big deal. How many teams are able to do that? I played a key role in two NCAA teams, that was a big thing.

BLOOM: What about your least fond memory?

WHITE: [Laughs] My freshman year, not making the tournament.

BLOOM: I think it's fair to say that you're one of the best big men ever to play for IU. What does the legacy of IU basketball mean to you?

WHITE: To be named in the same breath as Calbert Cheaney, Damon Bailey, Alan Henderson, Kent Benson, Scott May means a lot...they all either won championships or did something big at this university. I didn't win a championship. I won [Big Ten Freshman of the Year], like some of them, which was important to me. It's a big deal to be part of one of the top five programs, I feel, in the

country. The fans, how they showed me love my four years and appreciated everything I did. That really means a lot.

BLOOM: How do you want to be remembered at IU?

WHITE: As a hard worker. Somebody who gave on the court, somebody who gave his all every time. I feel like I did that. I went through a lot, and through all that, I continued to play. So, I think that's the one thing I want to be remembered for.

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Despite a hand in his face, White scores.
Photo by Paul Riley

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BLOOM: Your final college game was the loss to Arkansas in the first round of this year's NCAA tournament. As the clock was winding down and the game was about to end, what was going through your mind?

WHITE: You start to look back. It really hits you when that clock hits zero. It's like, "Man, it's my last game." So I had a lot of mixed emotions at the time. Through the game, when I saw the game slipping, I thought, "Man, I don't want this to be my last game." Those four years go by quick, they really do. I was thinking about "Wow, really, no more looking at the stands, seeing all the red, candy stripes," things like that. So it really hits you.

BLOOM: You're almost certainly going to be playing in the NBA soon. How does it feel to be on the verge of realizing that dream?

WHITE: To tell you the truth, right now, I mean, I know it's close, but right now I know I haven't accomplished it yet. I've got a good chance of going, so I'm just trying to work as hard as I can to put myself in the best position when it's time to work out for teams and different things like that. But I'm very excited when I do think about it. Of course, a lot of people see you and ask "Hey, are you excited, are you excited?" I mean I'm excited, but at the same time, I know there's still a lot of work to be done. So it's really not that relief, that I've done it yet, because I haven't done it yet. So when June 26 comes [the date of the NBA draft], hopefully my name is called, that's when I'll breathe a sigh of relief, and then I can get back to work because there's still things to accomplish.

BLOOM: What do you think will be the hardest part of the transition from college ball to the pro game?

WHITE: One thing is the schedule. Eighty-two games in the course of four months. This year I think we played thirty-two games, but spread out. You may go from the West Coast to the East Coast back to the Midwest. And just the style of the game, there's a lot of different rules I have to learn. Different things like that. I've got to learn a new role, rather than here, you know, E.G. [Eric Gordon] and I were the main scorers, we played with the ball. I've got to get used to playing without the ball. There's going to be a lot of veterans in front of me, so I think that's another thing I'm going to have to adjust to.

BLOOM: Say I'm an NBA general manager looking at D.J. White as a possible draft pick, what should I know about you as a player and as a person?

WHITE: I think I can come in and contribute. I'm very confident about my game and myself. I can come in there and give somebody a breather for a couple of minutes, or hopefully start. You never know about that. But I can come in, give a good post presence. Like I said, I'm expanding my game, so I think I can stretch defenses. I can rebound the ball, I think I bring energy, I play with a lot of passion, so those are some of the things I think I can bring.

BLOOM: You're hoping to have a long career in the NBA, but what about afterwards? What are your plans beyond basketball?

WHITE: I think I want to try to own my own business, maybe a couple restaurants, maybe come back here to Bloomington and do something. I'll try to use my resources from basketball, and try to give back to my community where I'm from, and here where I spent the four best years of my life.

BLOOM: IU basketball was in the news a lot this year, for good and not-so-good reasons. Is there something that people might not know about the team that you'd like them to know?

WHITE: I think through it all, through everything that happened, even though it might have looked like on the court that we weren't together, we were. I think we're kind of together still, as far as friendship. I think we tried, we just, I don't know, it's just one of those things, we just failed our goal that we set out to accomplish. But that's basically what people might not realize about this team: We never gave up, we kept trying. ✨



Rejoicing at the bench. Of little-used Adam Ahfeld (in red), White says, "Best teammate a guy could have." Photo by Paul Riley

I'll try to use my resources from basketball, and try to give back to my community where I'm from, and here where I spent the four best years of my life.

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