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SPORTS



SUN-TIMES SPECIAL REPORT **CENTER OF THE STORM**

Orr's Dannie Smith (right) watches from the bench during his team's one-point loss at Curie on Feb. 15.
ASHLEE REZIN/
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Watching their friends get gunned down takes an emotional toll on the Orr High School hoops team **PART 2 OF 5 BY RICK TELANDER, PAGES 70-71**

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SPECIAL REPORT



SECOND OF FIVE PARTS BY RICK TELANDER



Orr coach Lou Adams talks to his players during a timeout in a home game against Westinghouse on Jan. 11. Adams teaches basketball skills as well as survival skills in a dangerous environment. | ASHLEE REZIN/SUN-TIMES

ORR SITS IN THE CENTER OF THE STORM

*"Well, my first friend went down/
When I was seventeen years old."
— "Born in Chicago" by Nick
Gravenites*

Orr power forward/center Dannie Smith takes a pass, looks and smoothly dishes an assist to teammate Tyron Mosley in this first game of the season against a tough Miller Grove High School team from Atlanta.

There are 24 teams in the two-day Chicago Elite Classic at the UIC Pavilion, with Chicago-area schools such as Curie, Joliet West, Simeon, Young, North Lawndale and others

A SEASON UNDER THE GUN



pitted against teams from as far away as Florida and Washington, D.C.

Orr was ranked 25th in preseason state polls, and one big reason is the skill set of Smith, a 6-5 junior transfer from Lincoln Park. Though he's not the fastest or highest-jumping athlete on the floor, Smith has an unselfishness, court awareness and deft touch that make him a threat at both ends of the

floor, and thus a favorite of coach Lou Adams.

A fervid screamer at times during games, Adams never screams at Smith. The youth was 17 when his two best friends — twins Edward and Edwin Bryant — were shot to death in a drive-by a month ago in the 1300 block of North Hudson near low-rise projects at the edge of Old Town. The Bryant twins also were 17.

"All those boys know each other," Adams had explained to me. "Dannie couldn't practice for a while, just couldn't do it. I can't really tell you how it is for these kids. I talk to them all the time about the dangers of the



Alex Flute cheers during a game at Curie on Feb. 15. | ASHLEE REZIN/SUN-TIMES

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city. Every day. It's not about basketball — I'm in a whole different world.

"I started [coaching] down in Englewood, and one time I took my entire team to church. We were different religions, but it was something we needed to do. Just the stress."

Indeed, at times the pressure for city ballplayers can get so extreme — as it can for too many Chicago public school students — that their closest parallels as citizens are to soldiers who have been traumatized in combat.

Former Education Secretary Arne Duncan, now back in Chicago doing charitable work, recently asked kids in a classroom to hold up their hands if they knew one person who had been shot. How many knew two people? Ten?

"Then I asked who knew 20 people who had been shot," Duncan says. "Half the kids' hands went up."

To say this is tragic and nearly beyond belief in a country supposedly at peace is to state the obvious. To reckon the psychological damage done to those in the combat zones — such as around Orr on the West Side — is to delve into the unknown, to what can only be pointed at, not quantified.

"The mental-health part of this is huge," says Duncan, who also visits young inmates in Chicago jails. "So many kids need counseling. One kid said to me, 'We had a house full of guns when I was growing up. I wish we'd had toys.' Hurt people hurt people."

Smith is quiet on and off the court. He will help Orr to a tough 64-61 win on the third day of December, at the tail end of an unimaginably violent year in Chicago — 4,331 shot, 780 dead. Smith almost always seems to have his brain on a kind of disciplined lockdown, perhaps to keep the ugliness he has already seen at bay.

"That is just the way I play," he says. "It's what I do to help lead us. Calm, under control, that's how I live my life."

His twin friends who were killed had no gang ties, though others the pair was with did. But that's no shock because it's hard to live anywhere in a rough part of Chicago — athlete or non-athlete — without brushing up against the vague parameters of gangdom. Indeed, a modern "gang" might consist of the guys you grew up with in grammar school, or just a handful of



ABOVE: Players from Orr and Marshall say a prayer for Marshall assistant coach Shawn Harrington, who was shot in January 2014.

RIGHT: Marshall's Tim Triplett breaks down at the game. A year later, Triplett would be gunned down.

WORSOM ROBINSON PHOTOS/FOR THE SUN-TIMES



young men on your block. And this can be in a neighborhood where you have to walk through three or four of these gang turfs just to get from the bus stop to home.

As any veteran Chicago street cop can tell you, the arrest and imprisonment of so many old bosses of supergangs such as the Gangster Disciples and Latin Kings have left the gang hierarchy in disarray, with the structured outfits replaced by dozens, if not hundreds, of smaller, barely coherent gangs that might consist of little more than teenage pals selling dope on the corner, but with guns accessible — which makes all the difference.

Indeed, the easy access to illegal guns — plus the constant payback for somebody new getting shot — is half the tragedy in Chicago.

Coupled with post-traumatic stress syndrome, still-developing brains, lack of impulse control, lack of leadership, crumbling

families and, above all, a belief that the world has nothing to offer a young, impoverished black male other than hopelessness or early death, the plenitude of firepower makes for chaos.

A number of West Side and South Side ballplayers or their relatives have been shot and/or killed in recent years. The old "free pass" athletes used to get from neighborhood shooters seems to have vanished.

"That all changed when [former Simeon star] Benji Wilson was killed," says Duncan, a 6-5 former star high school and college hooper, who still plays when he can. Wilson, who was 17, was shot near Simeon in 1984, and his jersey, No. 25, was worn in tribute by Chicago native Derrick Rose at Simeon and now with the New York Knicks.

Mycheal Henry, an Orr star who played at Illinois and DePaul and finished last year as a Big East All-Academic team member, lost his brother DJ when the 15-year-old honor student was shot and killed near Orr by an 18-year-old he didn't know who was firing into a crowd.

Three years ago, about the time Orr senior All-City forward Tyquone Greer and former Orr player Deshawn King were shot randomly at a party and Marshall assistant coach and

ONLINE MAP

- See a map of shootings around Orr High School at chicago.suntimes.com.
- Plus, read Day I: At Orr, basketball — and the bleeding of a U.S. city.

former star Shawn Harrington was shot and paralyzed near Orr while driving his daughter to school, something like critical mass was achieved.

At a home game against Marshall in late January 2014, only a few hours after Harrington had been shot, a skirmish broke out in the stands. A furious, emotionally fried Adams waded in to stop it. Players on both teams began to break down from the invisible pressure, with Marshall star Tim Triplett openly weeping in despair. Players spontaneously met at the center circle, with Adams leading them in prayer. The players linked arms and bowed their heads in an attempt to deal with a world spinning into anarchy.

"I'll keep this short and simple," Adams had said earlier. "This madness has to stop."

But it didn't.

For instance, a year later, young Triplett would be gunned down. And so on.

Through the end of November 2016, the month preceding this game, the Harrison police district — which includes the area around Orr as well as West Garfield Park and North Lawndale — had more shootings and murders than anywhere in Chicago, including the notorious Englewood police district on the South Side. And this in a city in which murders have increased drastically since even last year — from 450 to 780.

For now, the boys on the Orr basketball team are undefeated and very lucky. They have a sport to carry them. They are the blessed. They have a purpose and a goal — to win every game they can.

High scorer Alex Flute (17 points), a calm senior guard who made five of 10 three-pointers, acknowledges that this is Saturday, night is coming, and everybody needs to be careful.

"Stuff happens. Always be in by 10:30," he says.

Dannie Smith will be careful. No question. He thinks for a moment about the school he attended before transferring to Orr, Lincoln Park, located in a far more gentrified, more civil area nearer the lake.

"The kids aren't as focused here as there," he says wistfully. "It's real quiet at Lincoln Park."

Coming Thursday: Day 3. First there's gunfire, then there's tipoff.



Teammates hug Tyquone Greer after a victory against Fenwick in 2014.

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"I can't really tell you how it is for these kids. I talk to them all the time about the dangers of the city. Every day. It's not about basketball — I'm in a whole different world."

Lou Adams, Orr High School coach, on the toll violence takes on his players