

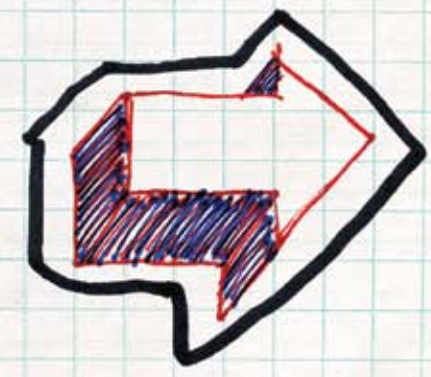


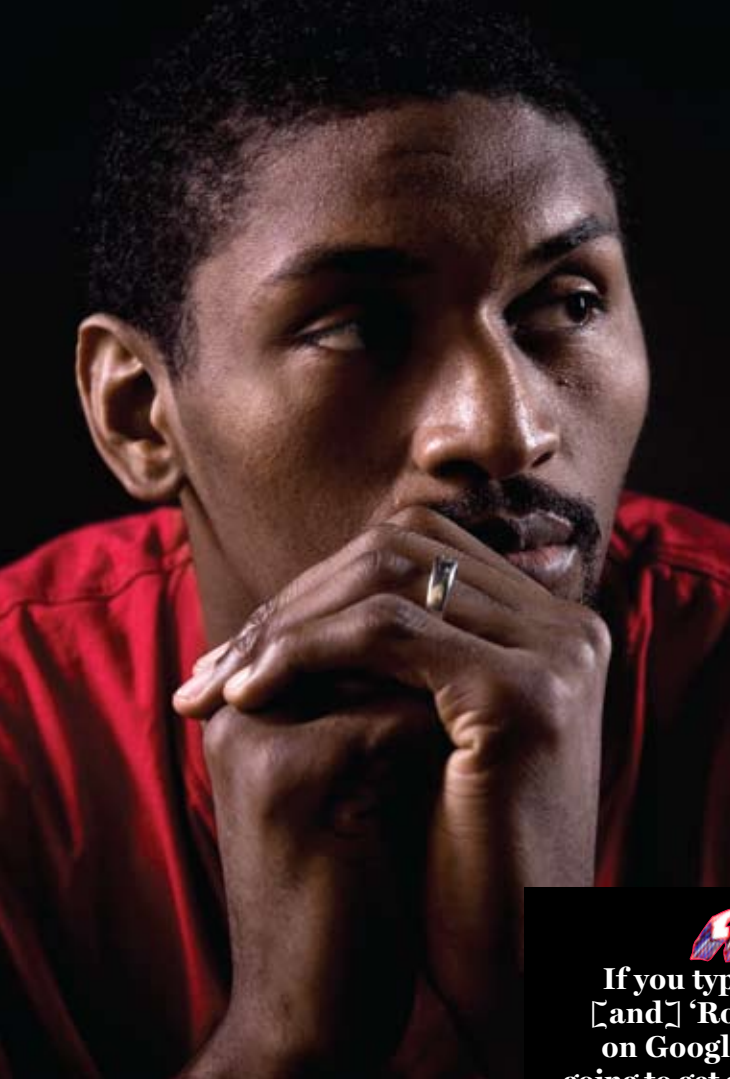
# THE EDUCATION OF RON ARTEST

OFF-COURT, RON ARTEST WAS A BEAST IN GRAMMAR SCHOOL. BUT IF YOU WENT TO CLASS WITH DIRTY UNDERWEAR AND PURPLE JEANS, YOU MIGHT HAVE ANGER ISSUES TOO. REUNITED WITH ONE OF HIS SCHOOLMATES, THE HOUSTON ROCKET TALKS CALMLY ABOUT HIS EARLY TERROR ATTACKS

STORY THOMAS GOLIANOPOULOS PHOTOGRAPHY JACK THOMPSON

**Ron Artest loved recess as a kid.** At his elementary school, P.S. 122, after lunch students would either fill the auditorium to watch movies or empty into the yard behind the cafeteria and run wild. It depended on the weather. But rain or shine, the youngster known as Ron-Ron was happy. When indoors, he was entertained by *DTV: Pop & Rock*, which was a VHS compilation of Disney cartoons set to songs from the 1950s. (His favorite was Sheb Wooley's "The Purple People Eater.") He preferred, however, playing handball or punchball in the massive schoolyard. And that was where I broke up a fight between Ron and a friend of mine in the fourth grade.





If you type 'crazy' [and] 'Ron Artest' on Google, you're going to get a lot of hits.

Kosta<sup>1</sup> was a tough, stocky Greek kid with serious pluck, but this was a mismatch. Ron had him beat on height, reach and sheer aggression. "Ron was bothering my cousin and I went to defend her," Kosta says today. "Then he punched me." Basically, Ron hit Kosta and Kosta hit the floor. "Ron dropped him like a sack of potatoes," remembers John Castellano, a witness to the scrap. Afterward, Ron stood tall, breathing heavy, emphasizing his exhale. His lower jaw jutted out and his arms were extended, balled into fists. I stepped between him and Kosta, who was still slumped against a fence. "Thomas," Ron seethed. "You don't understand. You don't understand."

Two decades later, I'm recapitulating the story to Artest at the Café, a restaurant in the downtown Houston Hilton Americas. He laughs. In fact, he giggles a lot. "I definitely probably did that," he says. "That sounds like one of my suspensions. When we were there, I got suspended every year. Every year."

Before Ron Artest was winning the 1997 city championship at LaSalle Academy, before he led St. John's to within a game of the 1999 Final Four, before he was not selected by the New York Knicks in that year's NBA draft, before he was named 2004 Defensive Player of the Year, before he jumped into the stands and attacked a fan, before he was suspended 73 games for jumping into the stands and attacking a fan, Ron Artest was an angry kid. He fought with Kosta. He fought with Edgar, a snaggletooth, chubby kid he eventually befriended. He smacked a teacher for ending recess. He was intimidating—the flattop made him even taller. He was a frequent guest in the assistant principal's office. He was a living, breathing version of the Gooch.

"Not good," says his old guidance counselor when reached. That's all he's willing to offer before hanging up. It's a slapdash dismissal. And not so different from how people still think of Artest today.

**Is Ron Artest crazy?** Is he an enigmatic flake like Manny Ramirez? You know, a quirky savant who applies for a job at Circuit City to score an employee discount, wears four different pairs of sneakers in an All-Star Game in hopes of scoring an endorsement deal<sup>2</sup>, confuses white-cap mushrooms with giant snake eggs<sup>3</sup>? Or is he a dangerous, ticking time bomb like Mike Tyson? If you asked me in first grade, I would have leaned to the latter. That's when I saw him manhandle two kindergarteners, shove them into a bathroom and slam the door shut. He was enjoying himself; his laugh was more like a cackle, not a giggle. Besides that and the Kosta incident, we didn't interact much since we were never in the same class. He does say, "We probably played punchball a couple of times [at recess]," since we are the same age.

Artest was one of the approximately 10 percent of students bused into Astoria's P.S. 122 from the neighboring Queensbridge Houses. In reality, Astoria and QB were worlds apart. Astoria was a working class-immigrant haven. Queensbridge is the country's largest housing project. It is claustrophobic and dangerous and was especially so during Artest's formative years in the 1980s. "He was a bright kid but just had a lot stacked against him," says Kathy Weinman, Artest's fourth-grade teacher. "He had anger-management issues as a child, and he grew up to become an adult with anger-management issues. But that's because he came from difficult circumstances."

"He was a tough kid but a nice kid. I took a liking to him," says Dr. Terry Tchaconos, P.S. 122's former assistant principal. "He had a very bad temper, though. We had a lot of discussions, and after those talks, he was able to get control of himself."

From an even earlier age, Artest had trouble controlling that temper. His father, Ron Artest Sr., remembers a family outing at River Park in Queensbridge when Ron was 7. Fed up with his 12-year-old cousin's agitating, Artest floored him with a left hook. "Perfectly timed," says Artest Sr. He made Ron Jr. do 40 pushups as punishment.

Artest doesn't think he was a bully—he just got into many fights—but admits to his rage problems. "My temper was really, really bad," he says. "I got ticked off by every little thing. If I came to school bummy, I'd be heated. Maybe my underwear wasn't washed. Maybe my moms couldn't wash my underwear, so I'm already pissed off for the whole day. Or if my clothes weren't ready and I had to wear something that I don't want to wear. I remember I had to come to school in purple pants, purple jeans. I was pissed."

Home was tough as well. His parents fought; it was often physical. And they divorced when Artest was 13. "Ron took it hard," says his brother, Daniel Artest, 26. "That's another reason he had so much aggression in him."

"Any time a family breaks up and a kid loves the mother and the father, it's going to affect him," Artest Sr. agrees. "You want everybody to be together, but sometimes things don't work out." Luckily, Artest had basketball, which he picked up at 8 years old. He and his father would often play one-on-one full court into the early morning. It was Queensbridge's version of *He Got Game*. "I would push him around," Artest Sr. says. "I would shove him and he would keep playing. So if I pushed him around, the kids his age wouldn't be able to do it." The strategy worked.

In eighth grade, Artest dominated the L.A. Gear-sponsored Junior Knicks League at his local YMCA, but his temper overshadowed it. He averaged nearly a technical foul per game—noncalls really pissed him off—which cost him a spot in the league's All-Star Game. "Ron-Ron was the highest scorer on the team but wasn't picked because of his attitude," says his former JKL teammate Wynter Galindez. "The commissioner didn't think he had good sportsmanship. Coaches told him, 'Your attitude isn't what we want here.'" At 13, Artest tried dealing with his problems, attending anger-management group therapy.

"It was more like recess," he says. "We went to the park, played soccer, ate popcorn and everybody talked. It was all the baddest kids in the neighborhood. It helped me because we were all talking about our problems—why we got mad so fast." Like his fourth-grade teacher, Artest chalks it up to being a product of his environment. "I guess it's what you grow up around. When you're in the hood, you're in survival mode, so anything that seems like a threat, you are immediately going to make sure to protect yourself, whether it's cursing somebody out or fighting."

Artest says he isn't seeing a therapist regularly but has a doctor on call, who he began seeing while on the Indiana Pacers. "I would be like, 'I need to talk to you. Can you come to Boston? I have a big game tomorrow.' If I wasn't feeling right, she would come and we would talk. I haven't called her in a while because [now] I'm able to snap out of something in a split second. Before, if I missed a shot or got a technical foul

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed.

<sup>2</sup> "That was cool. That is something I would do again. That was classic."

<sup>3</sup> "I thought they were giant snake eggs. I was going crazy. I called my publicist and said, 'I got big snakes in my backyard.'" His publicist's father is a well-known biologist. "I took a picture with my iPhone and sent it to him. He said, 'Those are not snake eggs.'"

# RON ARTEST

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or got into it with my coach or another teammate, it would take me a couple of minutes to recover. Now I [realize] that's part of the game.

"But there are still things that people can't get away with. You still can't go overboard with Ron Artest. You can almost go overboard, but you can't go *overboard*."

"What's considered overboard?" I ask.

"Like, playing too dirty, um, throwing objects..."

**"I ain't grow up to let somebody** throw something at me," he says. "I ain't grow up to really think about consequences." Artest plays with the brim of his Batman baseball cap. He's a fan. This summer he saw *The Dark Knight* in the theater five times—twice by himself. He is at the Café sipping tea and talking about the "Malice at the Palace," the November 19, 2004, fight that resulted in Artest being suspended without pay for the 2004–05 season. (He still maintains, "I didn't do anything wrong.") He was previously discussing his relationship with new teammate Yao Ming but went off on a tangent and landed at (what is so far) the defining moment of his career. He holds a dazed look when talking about the incident and its fallout. Maybe because he knows that no matter how many championships he wins, no matter how much he gives to charity, it's something he might never escape.

"If you type 'crazy' [and] 'Ron Artest' on Google, you're going to get a lot of hits," he says. (You get 87,800, to be exact.) "That's how it is with everything. I read all the gossip papers—if it's not interesting, I'm not reading it. Sometimes

I don't want to hear about someone giving to charity. I want to read *People* and *Us Weekly* to see who got nose jobs. I'm understanding of my situation." But is anyone else?

He definitely has a problem understanding social mores, but during our lunch, he is polite as hell, a little goofy, honest and completely human. He chokes up when talking about his youngest child, Diamond, who was born with one kidney, which was operated on last year after a cancerous tumor was discovered. He talks passionately of his charity work in Honduras and Kenya for Feed the Children and his own nonprofit, Xcel University, which identifies issues facing high-risk students.

Then again, there is the domestic-violence arrest on March 5, 2007; police reports state he slapped and shoved his wife, Kimsha. "Only people from the ghetto can understand that incident," he says. "No, that's not true. Any married couple that has problems can understand what happened. When you push or hit a female and, in some cases, curse and scream, you are going to jail. It wasn't something I was proud of."

Artest was consequently suspended by the NBA for seven games. It might also be why commissioner David Stern still keeps tabs on him. "He calls me every now and then," Artest admits. "He calls me at least once a year. Sometimes he doesn't even talk about basketball. It's like, 'How are you doing? Are you OK?' I respect that. It's cool. After everything I been through with him, the least he can do is give me a call. And he does." Stern and, of course, Artest would rather focus on the court.

After a whirlwind summer where he flirted with becoming a free agent, Artest decided to play out the last year of his six-year, \$42 million contract. Then, on August 14, he was traded. "When my man told me, I was like, 'I'm going to L.A.,'" Artest says. "He goes, 'Nope, you're going to Houston.' I had no complaints." He'll join Yao Ming and Tracy McGrady—two superstars yet to advance past the first round of the playoffs—in hopes of winning a championship.

"I got a lot of proving to do."

**Artest believes he's** on the right track. He thinks his temper is finally under control. He also sees himself maturing in other ways, becoming worldlier even if it affects his earning potential. "I be turning down money because I don't want to do something I'm not comfortable with," he says. "Like, if I could make a million dollars promoting fried chicken or promoting a nonhybrid car, I can't do it. Or soda. I can't promote soda because I don't do that. Whereas before, I would do a commercial for Hennessy. I kind of think more now."

The lunch is winding down. We're now off basketball and P.S. 122 and chatting about everything from the early funding of Saddam Hussein to the presidential election.

"Last night, I watched the Iranian president [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad] on *Larry King [Live]*," he says. "He said, 'Whatever [McCain and Obama] say now is just campaign stuff. When they are in office, that's when you judge them, by their actions. That's true... It was a good interview. I don't know if he's as crazy as everyone says he is.'"