



Michael and the Whiz Kids: A Story of Basketball, Race, and Suburbia in the 1960s

John Christgau

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Imagine a boy, five feet tall and one hundred pounds, who wants to play high school basketball. Now imagine that he was blind until the age of six and that he's the first black student to attend his suburban school. And there you have Michael Thompson in 1965 in San Bruno, California. He played at the school where a young English teacher was coaching "lightweight basketball," a competition for smaller players that has since disappeared. The team that Coach John Christgau put together came to be called the Whiz Kids for the way they rocketed up and down the court, led by Michael and invariably winning.

Michael and the Whiz Kids tells the story of the team's 1968 championship season. It is a tale of cliffhanger games and players as outsized in character as they are short in stature, from the wild-haired, bespectacled "Professor" to the well-traveled Latvian dubbed "Suitcase" to the quiet and tenacious "Salt," as in "of the earth." But it is also a tale of the time—of counterculture, suburbia, integration, and racial brawls erupting on the court. In Christgau's deft telling, it is an absorbing, often comic story of coming of age, for coach and Whiz Kids alike.

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