

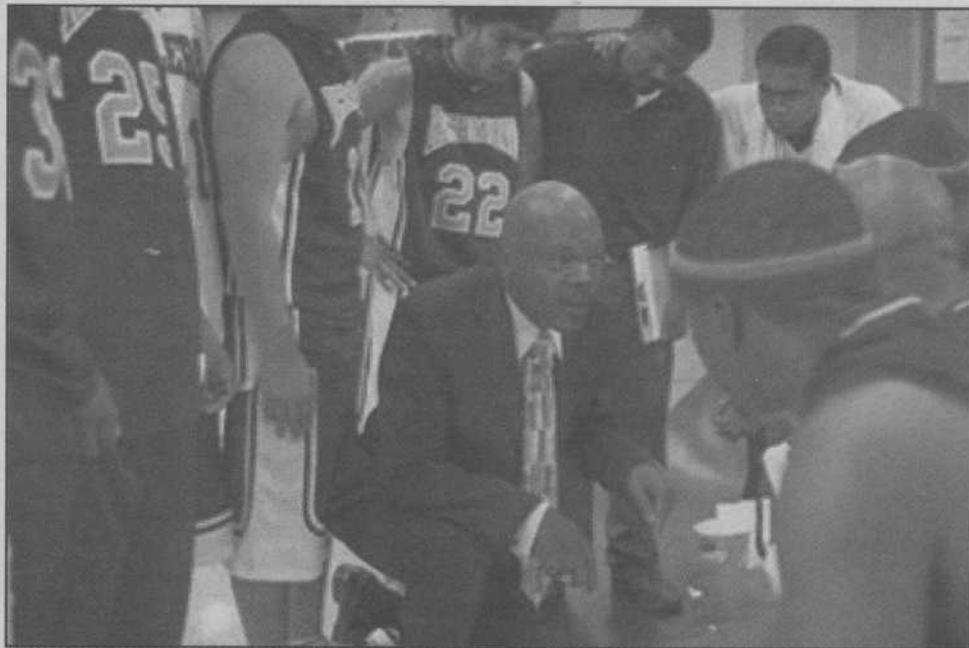
Samuel L. Jackson shines in true tale of tough love

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

In the fall of 1998, Ken Carter, a distinguished alumnus of Richmond High located in an impoverished, working-class community north of San Francisco, agreed to coach his alma mater's struggling basketball team. Carter, a successful businessman who had set several school scoring records back in the Seventies, took the position with the aim of instilling his players with the drive to achieve excellence both on the court and in the classroom.

Well aware of the dire prospects after graduation for the average athlete who focused on sports at the expense of academics, he had each of his players sign a contract in which they promised to have perfect attendance, to hand in all of their homework assignments and to maintain at least a 2.3 grade point average. And to prove his commitment to excellence, he even allowed his own son to transfer to inner-city Richmond from a private school.

Everything went well initially, with the team going undefeated and enjoying a 13-0 record deep into the season.



Samuel L. Jackson plays a hard-driving coach and doting father figure in "Coach Carter."

But then, the Coach received mid-term progress reports from teachers indicating that most of his kids were receiving failing grades. So, he made the difficult decision to padlock the gym and to substitute books for balls in order to undo the delinquency immediately.

This development so outraged the players, their parents and the rest of the local community that the ensuing call for Carter's head received national attention.

The tensions surrounding

this series of events serves as the basis for the surprisingly uplifting "Coach Carter," perhaps best described as a cross between "Lean on Me" (1989) and "Hoosiers" (1986), as it borrows heavily from both the "Blackboard Jungle" and "Overcoming the Odds" genres. Samuel L. Jackson, who seemed to be sleepwalking through a lot of his recent roles, at least found the fire needed to portray the charismatic title character, here, very convincingly.

Jackson had to exhibit

some of his trademark intensity to hold his own opposite the intimidating, larger-than-life crew Carter inherits from his retiring predecessor. For this picture's super-realistic storyline has the Coach facing physical confrontations from his first day on the job and having to continue to exhibit a certain "in-your-face" machismo to command respect.

Of equal import, however, is the fact that director Thomas Carter ("Save the Last Dance") saw fit to develop

several compelling sub-plots in addition to the overarching "education over basketball" theme. For instance, one player, Kenyon (Rob Brown), must mature quickly when he learns that his girlfriend (Ashanti) is pregnant, while another, Timo (Rick Gonzalez), finds himself attracted to the fast money his drug-dealing cousin is dangling in front of his face if he opts for life on the wrong side of the law.

Because the film presents a fairly-faithful rendering of

actual events, don't expect a sugar-coated, "happily-ever-after" Hollywood finish and you won't be disappointed. That being said, "Coach Carter," nonetheless, is ultimately unusually satisfying, as it transcends typical sports flick fare, given its sobering suggestion that tough times might call for tough love and tough measures.

Excellent (4 stars). Rating: PG-13 for premarital sex, expletives, racial epithets, drug use, mature themes, and underage partying.

Smiley

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but "maintained his policy of not discussing contractual negotiations," said Joel Brokaw, a spokesman for Smiley.

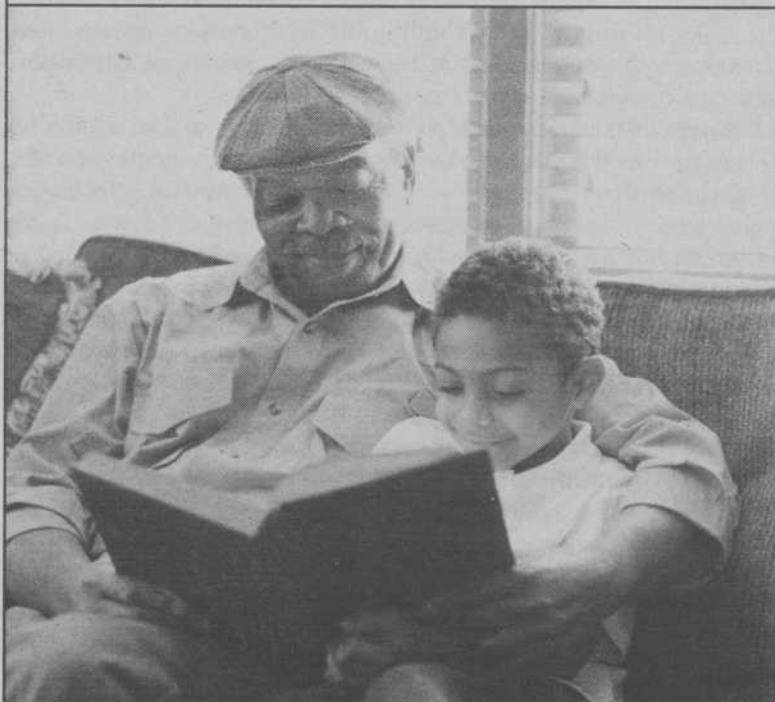
Negotiations were already under way for a series with Ed Gordon, a former Smiley colleague at Black Entertainment Television, when Smiley left, Umansky said.

"News & Notes with Ed Gordon" will debut in late January, and NPR continues to work with the African-American Public Radio Consortium on increasing its minority audience, Umansky said.

But Smiley contends the contrast between public radio and TV is sharp: PBS already has programming that appeals to a varied audience, he said. It's also increasing his role with a Friday night public-affairs show and has put up "seed money" for four 2005 specials (the topics are under discussion). "That's the kind of commitment I'm talking about," he said.

His absence from a daily radio gig may be brief. Smiley said he's weighing offers for a new show that he expects to be heard nationally — and maybe even on public radio stations whose programming decisions are independent of NPR.

That, he said, would be "an interesting twist."



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