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Down but not out in South Central L.A.

By Colleen Kenney
Special to ESPN.com

The graying old guy with the slow, lopsided gait didn't look like much of a challenge to 14-year-old basketball star Cash McCall. Nonetheless, he agreed to play a game of H-O-R-S-E.

McCall had heard that this old guy, this new volunteer at the Watts/Willowbrook Boys and Girls Club in South Central L.A., had played quarterback in the pros long ago. But at 5-foot-10 and slim, he didn't look much bigger than McCall himself.

Kids gathered around to watch. To giggle as McCall dunked. Made smooth jump shots. Made difficult layups look easy. But then the old guy got the ball and started sinking shot after shot with his left hand.

H-O-R-S-E.

"It's not fair," the kid balked.
"You're left-handed."

"No, I'm not," the old guy said. "I'm just not one-dimensional. You've got to learn to shoot and dribble with both hands. You've got to keep meeting challenges -- in basketball, in school, in anything in life."

Four years later, McCall, now 18, is sorting through offers to play basketball in college. Coaches like his left hand. And the old guy? He's still taking on young hotshots in H-O-R-S-E.

Marlin Briscoe was just 23 years old when he became the first black quarterback to start a professional football game. It was just one of many challenges he has



Marlin Briscoe enjoys his works at the Watts/Willowbrook Boys and Girls Club, this time schooling Linell Edwards at chess.

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faced over the years.

Briscoe is now 56 and has parlayed his volunteer work into a full-time job as a fund-raiser and assistant project manager for the Boys and Girls Club. He's helping plan and build a state-of-the-art youth center that's to open this May. He doesn't make much money.

But Briscoe feels it's his responsibility as a former pro athlete to give back, to pass on the lessons he's learned about life -- lessons often learned the hard way.

Briscoe, who has a degree in education, feels he has a lot to teach. About beating the odds. About overcoming stereotypes. About never losing hope.

Lessons the kids from disadvantaged areas like Compton, Watts and Willowbrook can use today.

"Sports is a good way to reach out to these kids," Briscoe said. "In sports, like life, as long as there's still time on the clock, you still have a chance to win. In sports, it's about resiliency."

Playing his other hand

Briscoe was resilient. In 1968, his rookie year, he started seven games at quarterback for the Broncos after Steve Tensi went down with an injury. He threw 14 touchdown passes -- still a franchise record for a rookie. He wowed the media and the fans with his strong arm and scrambling style. He earned his teammates' respect.

But the next year, he wasn't allowed to play quarterback -- or even to compete for the job. He was told that he was too short to play the position. He felt that what they were really saying was that he was too black. It wasn't fair.

But he didn't grow bitter and quit. He just played his other hand.

So he asked for his release from the Broncos, latched on with the Buffalo Bills and became a wide receiver, a position he had never before played. The first season, he became the Bills' offensive MVP. A year later, he led the league in receiving and became an All-Pro.

Briscoe went on to enjoy a nine-year career in the AFL and NFL. He was a big part of the 17-0 Miami Dolphins of 1972, the only NFL team in history to go undefeated. He earned two Super Bowl rings. But the story he likes to tell kids the most is how he broke the color barrier at quarterback and showed other black athletes -- as well as white athletes -- during that turbulent time in the country's struggle with race relations that they could shoot for the stars and make it.

No matter their position in life.

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Marlin Briscoe was more than an accurate passer, he also was a sure-handed receiver with the 17-0 Miami Dolphins.

The Boys and Girls Club is in a tough area of town. Gangs scurry along the streets like cockroaches. There's a vacant lot down the street where winos and drug addicts hang out. A menacing-looking, but harmless motorcycle gang -- the "black Hell's Angels," Briscoe calls them -- holes up in their clubhouse across the street.

There are broken windows and broken homes. Empty lots and empty eyes. Such images give the neighborhood a bad reputation, but Briscoe says he looks closer and sees hope. Parents with the same dreams for their kids as parents in the suburbs. Kids on the verge of choices that could affect the rest of their lives. Like Cash McCall.

"If it wasn't for the club," McCall said, "I'd probably be involved in a gang. I'm blessed to see the age of 18. Some of my friends didn't get to see 18."

"If it wasn't for the club, I'd probably be involved in a gang. I'm blessed to see the age of 18. Some of my friends didn't get to see 18."

— *Cash McCall*

Sure, the streets around the club are mean. But Briscoe has seen far meaner streets. Miles away, near downtown L.A., he used to walk the streets in the

cold of night searching for his next high. For one dark decade after Briscoe retired from football in 1977, an addiction to crack cocaine almost sidelined him for good. It sent him to jail twice. It almost killed him several times, once when a gang of Crips kidnapped him for a weekend because of a drug debt. Soon he was reduced to using his once good name to get money for drugs.

His nickname on the streets was "17-and-0," after that perfect Miami season. "Hey look," the drug dealers would cackle, "here comes '17-and-0.' "

He was shot at. He was robbed. He was lucky to get out.

"The only reason I made it out was because I never gave up hope," said Briscoe, who recently wrote his autobiography with the help of author Bob Schaller. The book, "The First Black Quarterback: Marlin Briscoe's Journey to Break the Color Barrier and Start in the NFL," will be available in stores in March.

"I overcame a lot of obstacles in my life," Briscoe said. "But the biggest one by far was getting off of drugs."

Briscoe's NFL fame now helps to bring in money for others. Roy Roberts, executive director of the Watts/Willowbrook Boys and Girls Club, often sends Briscoe out to speak about the club and to meet with people from the agencies that distribute money to community outreach programs.

"It's been frustrating trying to raise money to get this new club built," Briscoe said. "It's difficult for this neighborhood to get funds from agencies while other clubs in more suburban areas have no problems raising funds.

"But the fact that we've overcome the odds, hurdle after hurdle, will make it that much sweeter when the new club opens."

Hall of Fame offensive guard Larry Little, Briscoe's former Dolphins teammate, said he and other friends were shocked to see Briscoe spiral into drugs. He was the

last person Little thought would become an addict, because he was so intelligent.

Once at a reunion of that 17-0 Miami team, Little saw a skinny man across the room. He asked someone who that guy was. Did he play with us?

Little hadn't recognize Briscoe, the best man in his wedding.

Little said he is proud of how Briscoe has fought his way out of his addiction and stayed clean.

"I'm also happy now that he's finally getting the recognition he deserves for being the first black quarterback," Little said. "I was playing for San Diego when he was with Denver. I remember standing there on the sidelines just amazed at what Marlin could do with the football."

Briscoe often asks former teammates, many of whom now work in the front offices and on the sidelines of pro teams, to donate autographed footballs and jerseys from today's stars to auction off at the club's annual charity golf tournament. He has no trouble reaching those old-timers. They gladly donate whatever they can. But it's a different story, he says, when he tries to approach the younger athletes of today.

"I've tried to talk to professional athletes in Los Angeles about the needs of our club," he said. "Well, most of the time they don't call back or we can't get through to them. Now all these young guys make so much money that they have all these agents and all these buffer people. I think a lot of times my messages never get through.

"So for an athlete today to want to be involved in the community, he's going to have to really set the tone himself."

Briscoe says he believes big-time athletes shouldn't be obligated to give back to the communities they came from. But they should want to.

A different kind of high

Briscoe often speaks at elementary schools about his football days, as well as his drug days. He shows the kids videotape of his highlights on the football field. He tells them about being the first black quarterback. And he shares with them his story of how quickly life's fortunes can turn around.

"Usually a kid says, 'You played quarterback? But you're so small,' " Briscoe said. "And I say, 'Don't ever let your size or circumstances in life dictate whether you succeed or fail.'"

"At the end, I make them yell 'I won't do drugs!' as loud as they can five times."

Briscoe used to have money. He used to have a big house with a pool. He used to be able to just

write a check to help out charities like the club. When he was playing for the



Broken windows and broken homes are regular sites throughout South Central L.A., but Marlin Briscoe says he also sees a chance to make a difference.

Dolphins, he started a college scholarship fund for inner-city kids back in Omaha, Neb., his hometown. The "Marlin Briscoe Scholarship Fund" eventually folded after he descended into drugs.

He's been clean since 1989, a day-by-day string of sobriety that now stretches into its 13th year.

"To be back in the position to be able to impact young kids' lives like this gives me a high sense of accomplishment," he said. "It's therapy for me, too."

These days, near the vacant lot or liquor store not far from the Boys and Girls Club, Briscoe often runs into a guy named Dale whom he has known since his drug days. Dale had been "buff," Briscoe says. He had cars. He owned a business. But like Briscoe back then, he was spiraling down. Only Dale never made it back up.

Dale is thin. His money goes to drugs and booze. So Briscoe takes him to breakfast.

"Every once in a while he'll say, 'Remember back in the day?' And he'll mention some of the drug dealers and prostitutes we used to hang out with. I'll tell him, 'Don't even start -- those days are over.' But I always treat him with respect and he appreciates that.

"He's a mess. But so was I. It's sad, because he has the intelligence to get out. But he doesn't seem to want to."

Paying it forward does pay off

McCall says Briscoe is his role model.

Briscoe doesn't just sit in his office all day, McCall explains. Every chance he gets, he's out with the kids, playing basketball or chess or ping pong with them, or helping them with their homework. Telling them that what they do in the classroom is much more important than what they do in sports.

Briscoe has so much energy, McCall says, that he's like a kid in "an old guy's body."

"But what I like most about him is that, being a former NFL player, he could have gotten a job at any other club in the city," McCall said. "He could be working in a club like in Beverly Hills. He could be making a lot more money. But he came straight to the inner-city -- not because he feels sorry for us, but because he wants to see us make it in life.

"Kids like me can look up to him and see what he did with his life, how he broke the color barrier in football, how he overcame drugs, and it teaches us that if you stick it out, you can do almost anything."

Even left-handed.

"Mr. Briscoe kind of embarrassed me that day in front of my friends when I first met him," said McCall, chuckling. "But he really taught me something that day, too."

Colleen Kenney is a staff writer for the Omaha World-Herald and a

contributor to Marlin Briscoe's forthcoming autobiography, "The First Black Quarterback: Marlin Briscoe's Journey to Break the Color Barrier and Start in the NFL."

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