

# THE LONG ROAD TAKEN MANNING'S JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

BY JOSHUA CASPER

On the basketball court, Suffolk County Community College's Maurice Manning is poetry in motion, but like the words of Robert Frost, when Manning's own "two roads diverged," he took "the road less traveled."

In 1997, Charles Maurice Manning, simply known as Maurice, seemed headed down the road of basketball success. Having just won an unprecedented third straight Final Four MVP and New York State Class D title for Bridgehampton High School, Manning was courted by schools such as Ohio State, Miami and DePaul.

But often, roads have detours. Manning didn't get his high school diploma, and dropped out of school the next year, because there were more pressing concerns. Charles Maurice Manning, Jr. Five years later, working odd jobs to support his child, Maurice's basketball glory seemed a distant memory.

"I was immature, things weren't going where I wanted them to go, and I was content just chilling," reminisces the 6-foot-2 guard.

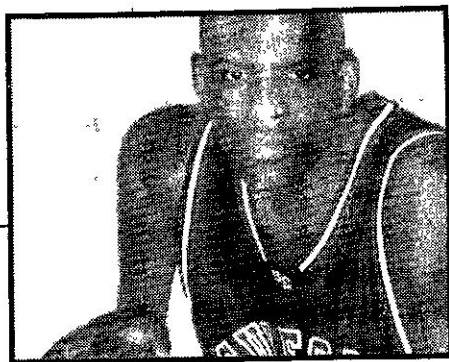
"I don't think I even caught an NBA game during that time. It was tough."

But his best friend and high school teammate, Ronnie White, had taken a different path. White, two years Manning's junior, was playing for Suffolk Community College (SCCC), under head coach Rick Wrase. During White's time at Suffolk, he noticed his friend's hunger for the game had returned.

"I was sitting home thinking—where was my life going from here?" Manning recalls. "I want my son to be proud of me."

White, who graduated from Suffolk last year and is now playing for Southampton College, gave Manning Wrase's phone number, and after the two spoke Manning enrolled at SCC-Selden and joined the basketball team last year. However, Manning's comeback wasn't smooth.

"He hadn't played games for five years. He was 25 pounds overweight, but he wanted it to all happen right away," remembers Wrase, the 2003 NJCAA coach of the year. "I told him Rome wasn't built in a day."



His game, while slow to return to form, helped Suffolk win the 2003 NJCAA title, and Manning was named MVP of the national tournament.

"To me that was bigger than my high school championships—it's definitely an emotional thing. I was crying," says Manning, who is also maintaining a 3.0 GPA.

After a summer that included a strict workout regimen, Manning is averaging 25.7 ppg in 2003-04, fourth in the nation. Next year, he will play for Division II powerhouse Kentucky Wesleyan, winner of seven national championships, on a full scholarship.

"Sometimes I pinch myself," Manning says. "I'm grateful I had a second chance. When people look at me, I want them to respect me as someone who overcame problems, who changed and became a better man...never give up a dream." **1**