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Former professional basketball player Anthony Mason Jr. is using his many mistakes to prepare inner city youth for a prosperous future.

Anthony Mason Jr. says the most important thing he learned in sports was that it's always about the next play. That way of thinking was drilled into his head at an early age, as a tall, athletic individual destined to play professional basketball.

Now, after an entire life of playing basketball -- from high school to college at St. John's University to reaching the National Basketball Association -- Mason Jr. is taking the skills he learned on the court and utilizing them to empower inner city kids. In fact, it's more than sharing his skills. Mason Jr. is sharing his struggles so that children can learn from his mistakes and be prepared for the real world.

The son of an NBA superstar

Some may think it is easy being the child of an NBA player. That was certainly not the case for Mason Jr., whose father Anthony Mason played 13 years in the NBA, with his most notable service from 1991-1996 as a member of the New York Knicks.

"I lived with my mom during the years that my father played in the league, but I always had access to my dad," said Mason Jr. "When I was able to visit, I was able to see many things I wouldn't see back home in Memphis, Tennessee. I always tell people I had the best of both worlds growing up, because I saw the light and dark in things."

"My pops had access to the world," added Mason Jr. "Then I'm coming back to high school in Memphis, Tennessee, growing up kind of rough. My mom was a substitute teacher and worked at Walgreens. I've seen it from that standpoint too."

People often think that the children of professional athletes grow up living a privileged life. That was certainly not the case for Mason Jr., who had to cope with a variety of failures from an early age. Life experience helped shape Mason Jr. become the man he is today.

"I've been dealing with death," said Mason Jr. "Friends got shot. My little brother got shot. My father just passed. My grandmother just passed."

The most important thing that Mason Jr. has learned from these life experiences, which he shares with inner city youth, is that you always need to move forward and stay positive. It is a similar theory to always thinking about the next play.

"There wasn't really a lot of time to cope with problems," explained Mason Jr. "I've always had a mentality of pushing forward."

A more positive learning lesson for Mason Jr. is that "your network is your net worth," which he says he lives by as an entrepreneur. In fact he credits that line for our chance meeting in New York this past weekend.

Mason Jr. is keen on learning from his mistakes

Mason Jr. was signed to the Miami Heat, but played much of his career overseas. He recalls the struggle to make it to the top ranks of professional basketball and recounts the many mistakes he made on his journey -- mistakes he hopes to teach children so they do not fall for the same pitfalls.

In one story, Mason Jr. reminisces about a time when elite NBA Developmental League players were off to play in a tournament. The coaches told the players to take their time and go at their own speed. Mason Jr. took this as an opportunity to rest up and come to meetings late on a regular basis.

"I didn't put anything extra in," said Mason Jr. "The coaches are taking notes on it, but I didn't really think of it at the time. When it comes around to trimming down the roster, even though I'm killing it in practice, I get cut. Many of the guys who made it have NBA contracts right now."

Mason Jr.'s take away that he teaches kids: You have to know it's you and not them that makes a mistake.

From a passion for playing ball to a proclivity for helping others

Mason Jr. credits his time playing for the Miami Heat as providing clarity for what he really wanted to do after basketball. Miami is where he learned about professionalism, being on time and being able to take care of himself.

"A lot of what I learned was through mistakes . . . that's how I know I'm the right person to help better our youth," said Mason Jr. "The way I'm coming at it is that I've been through it, and that I know I shouldn't make those mistakes again, which I can tell you about so you won't make those mistakes."

When Mason Jr.'s father passed away last year, Mason Jr. started to think about what he wanted to do with his time and decided to dedicate himself to being an advocate in the community. Now Mason Jr. is focusing on his **Family on Three** Organization. It is a youth enrichment program to teach them life skills through sport and provides exposure to professions that kids don't see in the inner cities.

"I do this to prepare kids for their next step in college," said Mason Jr., who recently held a fundraiser to benefit inner city children with former Knicks great John Starks. "This year we've been resume building, talking about credit, and being a professional."

The next big planning process has already begun. Mason Jr. is working on an event this summer called Kicks for Confidence, a kickball charity game at a Minor League Basketball park in New York. ■