

INSIDE

**NCAA SPECIAL:
FALLBALL A to Z**

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**MIKE
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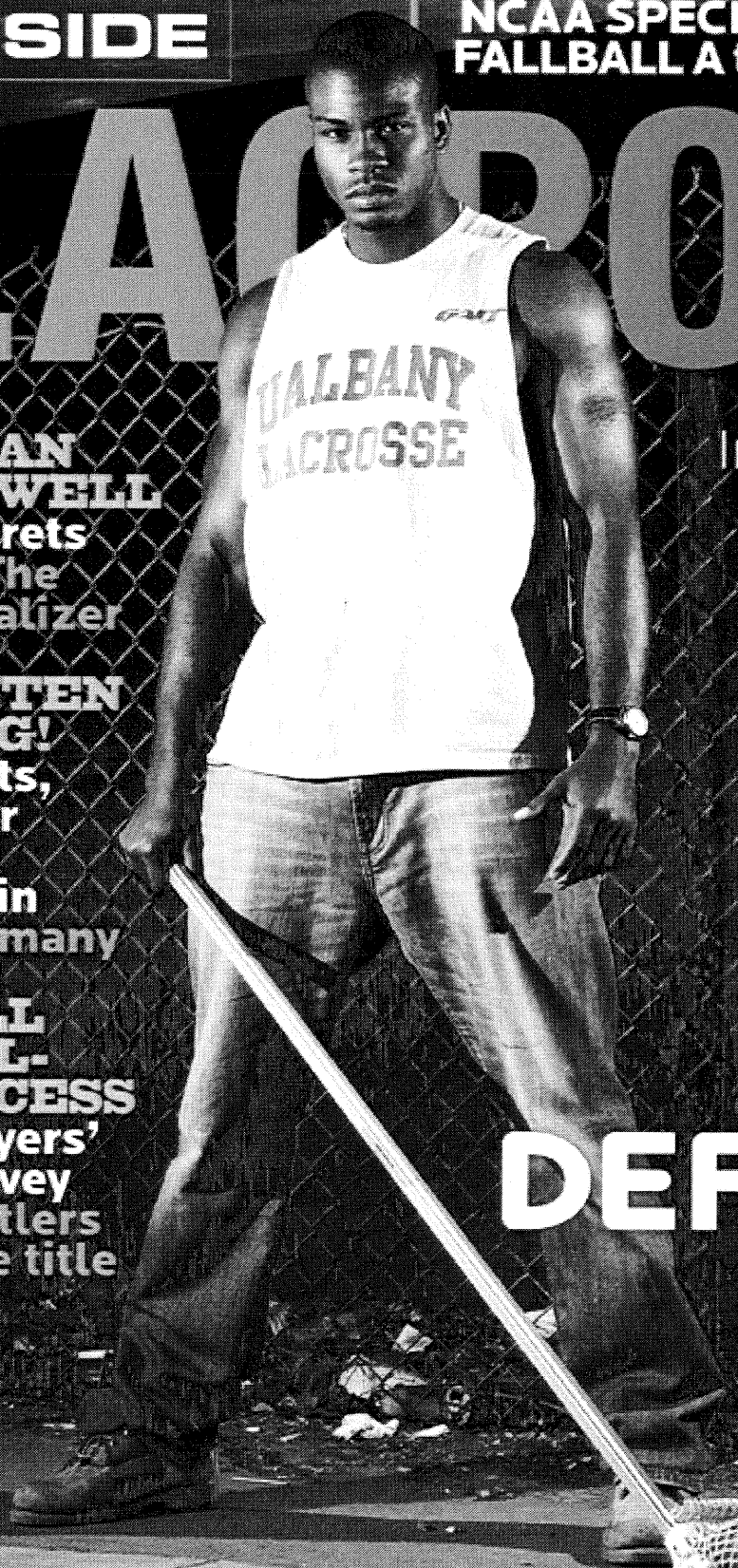
now has a chance
to become
the game's

**NEXT
GREAT
DEFENDER**

+

UPDATES

ZACK GREER
WILL YEATMAN
ADAM GHITELMAN



RIGHT DIRECTION

DRUGS.
ASSAULT.
BURGLARY.

MICHAEL BANKS' life was
careening toward oblivion.
It took jail,
and eventually lacrosse,
to save the **ALBANY DEFENSEMAN**

BY DAMIAN ANDRE
PHOTOS BY JOHN F.



Lacrosse's next great defenseman is hungry.

It's 1 p.m. on a May Friday, and Albany's Michael Banks hasn't had anything to eat yet. He stands at Marinello's Deli counter in his hometown of Norwalk, Conn., wearing jeans, a T-shirt under an unzipped Albany Lacrosse warmup jacket and a baseball cap that says "SuperFly" with a pair of aviator sunglasses resting on the brim. He orders an orange juice and two bacon, egg and cheese breakfast sandwiches.

"They're my favorite," he says, flashing his trademark grin. "I could eat them every day."

Banks devours both before heading to watch his old high school team practice for the state playoffs; he's only home for a few days before returning to Albany for summer classes.

It's been two weeks since the Great Danes lost to UMBC in the America East Championship, the final game of Banks' freshman season where he made the conference all-rookie team — and an even bigger impression on college lacrosse.

Albany coach Scott Marr says the 6-3, 205-pound Banks could be a first-team All-America by his junior year, maybe even next spring.

Others feel the same. In his college debut last season, Banks caught the eye of Johns Hopkins coach Dave Pietramala, widely regarded as the best defenseman ever.

"He carried himself with great confidence," says Pietramala. "He's a physical specimen. He's big, strong, athletic. He runs well. He checks hard. He plays the game with some emotion, some physicality. I really liked that about him."

"[I'd] expect [he'd] have an opportunity to compete to be an All-American during his career at Albany. And a very good one at that."

Former Albany assistant John Svec immediately knew he'd found a good one the first time he saw Banks two years ago, on a hot day at Maryland's Top 205 camp. Svec was looking for a defenseman. Banks was looking to get noticed, purposely wearing an Under Armour shirt too small for his muscular frame.

Svec watched Banks scrimmage against some of the country's finest high school talent. He saw his speed, strength and footwork and his passion and intensity.

Svec didn't know everything about Banks. He didn't know Banks used to sell crack. He didn't know Banks once robbed a house. He didn't know Banks was an aspiring member of the Bloods. He didn't know Banks spent four and a half months behind bars.

He didn't know Michael Banks' story.

"I THOUGHT, 'I'M EITHER GONNA BE SIX FEET UNDER, BACK IN JAIL OR PARALYZED FROM A BULLET WOUND.'"

NORWALK'S BEEN CALLED THE HOLE IN THE DOUGHNUT, a blue-collar city surrounded by some of the wealthiest areas in not only southwestern Connecticut but also the entire country. Banks grew up in SoNo, or South Norwalk, a neighborhood rife with gangs, drugs and high crime rates.

Banks is the third of Billy and Marlene Banks' four boys. His dad worked different jobs — mostly in retail and construction — and his mom was active in the city's Macedonia Church, singing in the choir four times a week (often with Michael and his brothers in tow).

He says he was brought up with morals; he learned right from wrong. He has good memories of his early childhood.

"We were a family," he says. "We had some money.

We used to live in this condo down in South Norwalk where the backyard was the ocean. We used to take this little boat out and go fishing."

But life changed. His parents started fighting with each other. He'd come home at night to find his mother crying. His father would be gone for days. Days became weeks. Weeks became months. His parents eventually separated.

"He fell into the drug life," Banks says of his father. "That took him away."

Michael — fueled by a growing hatred of his father and influenced by older friends and one of his older brothers — turned to the streets. He hung out late into the night, drinking and smoking pot.

"There's peer pressure on the streets," says Michael Hickman, one of Banks' childhood friends. "You don't get involved in the street life because it's cool; sometimes you don't have a choice. If you're out on the streets you're vulnerable."

Banks became involved with the Bloods, a gang with roots in Los Angeles and branches throughout the Northeast. He started selling marijuana, eventually graduating to crack.

His clientele was mostly the SoNo "fiends." He made a couple hundred dollars a week. Banks was well aware of what the drugs were doing to his neighborhood but kept dealing anyway.

It didn't stop there. He and his boys went on missions, mostly at night but sometimes during the day. They targeted random people — black, white, rich or poor — assaulting and robbing them. They did it to prove their status in the gang.

He had little ambition or focus during his first year of high school; he did, however, show some promise on the football field. He played defensive end and tight end on the freshman team, eventually earning a bump to junior varsity.

AT THE START OF HIS SOPHOMORE YEAR, his life took a drastic turn. Over the span of a week, he committed three separate crimes. He was first arrested for bringing a knife to school. He spent the night in a juvenile detention center in nearby Bridgeport and earned a two-week school suspension.

Then, he says, for no good reason, he started shooting a friend's air rifle out the window of his mom's house. He accidentally hit a passerby, nearly puncturing one

of the man's ribs. Later that night, the cops came to Banks' home, confiscated the gun and arrested him. He was sent to the same detention center.

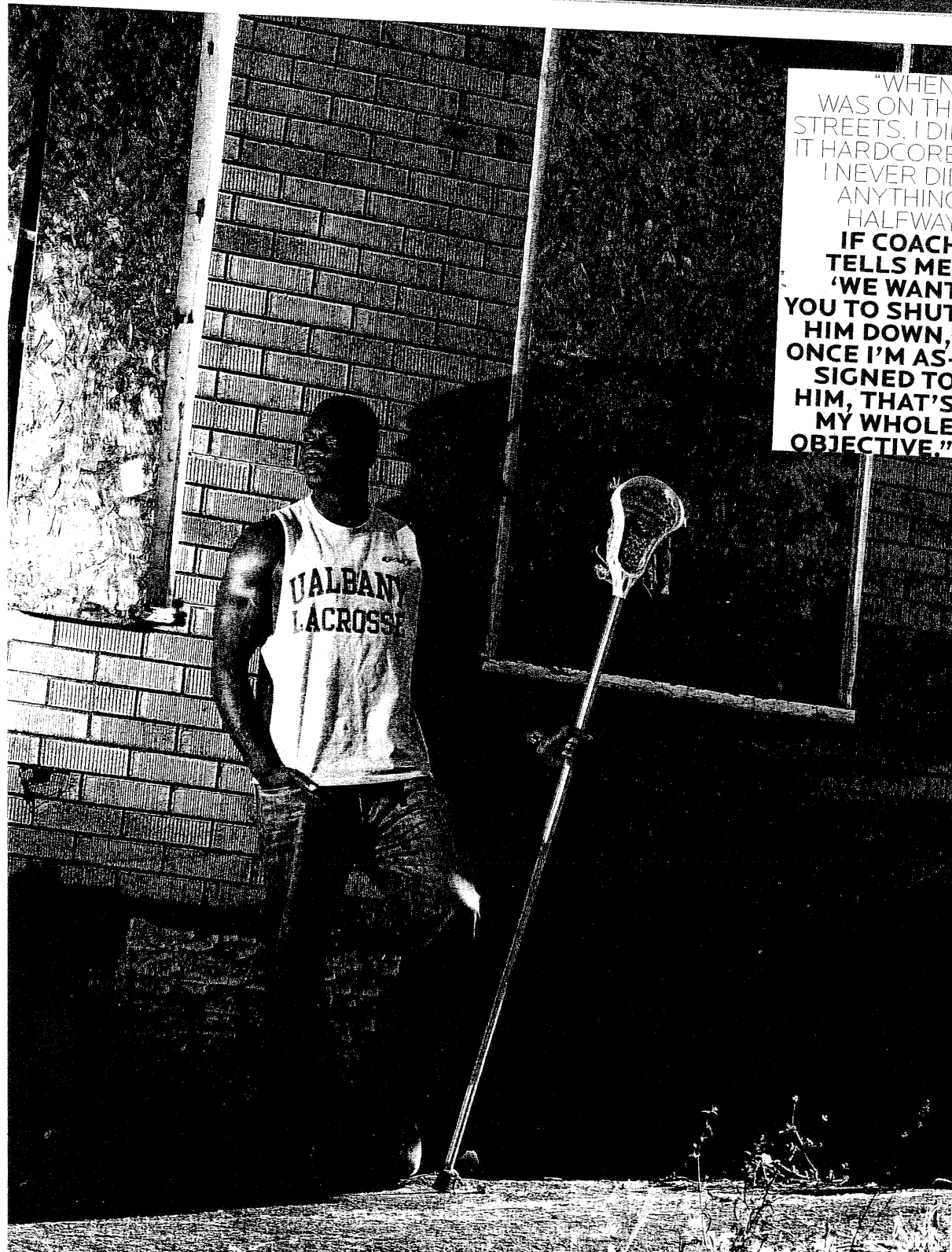
Banks was released two days later; he sat on his porch getting high that night. He started thinking about his situation, becoming increasingly frustrated.

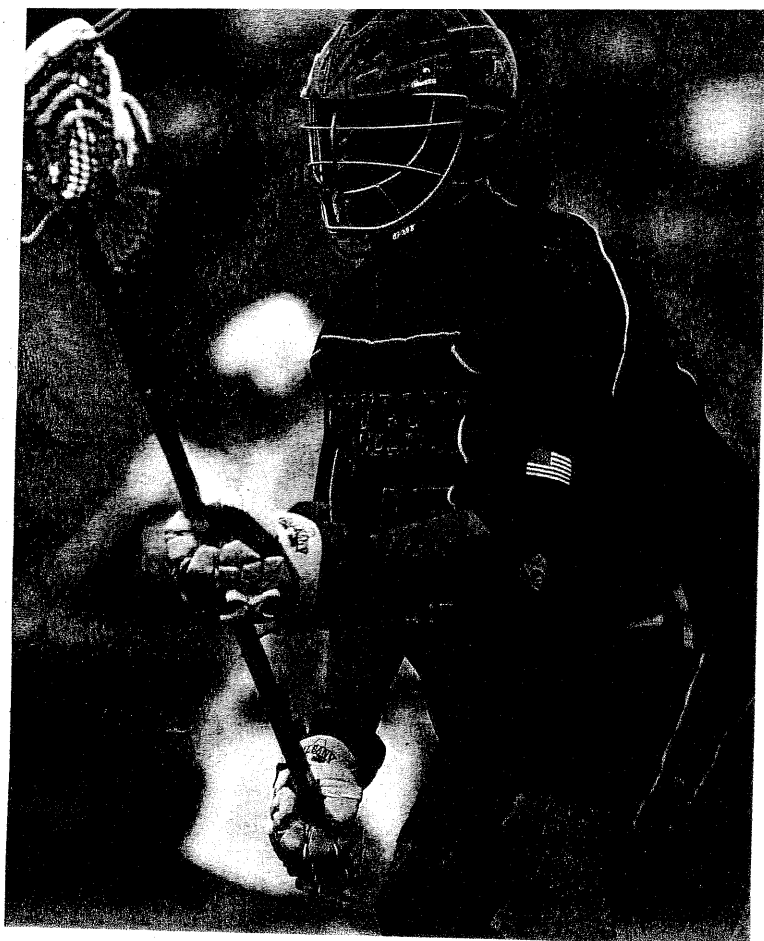
"I'm thinking, 'I ain't got nothing in life,'" Banks says. He wanted to have stuff like the rich people who lived in the big houses on the outskirts of the city.

The next day, all by himself with a duffel bag in hand, he broke into a house in an affluent suburb, taking mostly antiques he could later pawn. When he left the house, the cops were waiting for him.

Banks was arrested and charged with first-degree burglary; it was his third strike. He was headed upstate

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A Banks took over a starting role as a freshman in the Danes' defense after one game in '08; his breakout performance came in a dominating effort against Princeton.

to the John R. Manson Youth Institute (MYI), a high-security facility for male offenders. He was only 15.

HE VIVIDLY REMEMBERS THE RIDE FROM THE JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER in Bridgeport to MYI in Cheshire, 25 miles outside the state capital of Hartford.

"They put me in a transportation car," Banks says. "They shackled my ankles and put me in handcuffs. And the seat in the back was plastic. They didn't take the highway from Bridgeport to Cheshire; they took the back roads. It was about a two-and-a-half hour drive. It was the most uncomfortable drive ever. I was sliding back and forth in the plastic seat."

When he finally arrived, all he saw was acres of barbed wire. It looked like the prisons he'd seen on TV — only this was real. Then he heard a "pop" as the gate opened.

It was then, Banks says, that he began the process of turning his life around.

He had to.

"I thought, I'm either gonna be six feet under, back in jail or paralyzed from a bullet wound," he says.

After entering the facility, Banks was stripped, searched and issued an orange jumpsuit. He was in 23-hour lockdown for the first week. His first cellmate was in for attempted murder.

"It was a reality check," says Banks. "I was able to sit there for the first time in my life, just be confined, and bring all my thoughts together. I didn't have the distraction of selling drugs or getting high or getting drunk or getting influenced by my boys. I was just in a cell, me and these brick walls. That was the best place for me at that time. I started to look at life in a broader view."

His church's longtime pastor, DeWitt Stevens Jr., wrote to him. He sent him verses from the Bible. Banks read them, absorbed them. He remembers the powerful message of Hebrews 11: "Now faith is the substance

of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

A spark flashed inside him, and he became determined to reverse his current direction.

"Once he got there I think his mind started reflecting on his upbringing," says Stevens Jr. "He was raised in the church. He was not a bad kid. He just got in with the wrong crowd."

About a month and a half into his incarceration, his attorney negotiated a reduced sentence of four and a half months and five years' probation. (His probation ended on Aug. 25, his 20th birthday.)

AFTER BANKS WAS RELEASED FROM MYI, he was ordered to attend Norwalk's Alternative Incarceration Center, a rehab facility that teaches life skills. The terms of his release required him to go to an alternative high school after a few months, where he received special 1-on-1 attention with his schoolwork.

It was around this time that his mother and younger brother Caleb moved to Florida. She wanted to be

closer to Michael's grandmother; plus she couldn't keep up with the rent. Banks

"MIKE CAN BE AS GOOD AS ANYBODY I'VE SEEN."
—FORMER ALBANY ASSISTANT JOHN SVEC

moved in with his godfather, Angelo Wilkes.

"He pretty much had no structure in his life when he came to me," says Wilkes. "I was getting a rebellious 16-year-old. I immediately set a curfew. I reinforced what he was already taught by his mother and father when his family was intact. I kind of played the bad guy."

"Initially it was rough. He was used to making his own decisions — the wrong decisions. But once he had some structure all of his gifts and talents started to blossom."

Banks really started blossoming after he re-enrolled at Brien McMahon High in the fall of 2004. He credits two people there with helping him turn his life around: guidance counselor Dawn Leeds and lacrosse coach Mike Epstein.

"A gigantic ball of potential," Leeds says of the first time she met Banks. "You could see it just waiting to spring out."

Banks' grades were so bad that he basically had to start from scratch. Leeds crafted a schedule so he was on a track to graduate; Banks in turn committed himself. He developed better work habits, learning how to budget his time. His grades slowly improved. He started making Bs and Cs.

Enter Epstein. He knew a little about Banks' past, but he also knew Banks was the school's most gifted athlete. After some cajoling, Epstein convinced Banks to come to lacrosse practice.

"He was a train wreck with the stick," says Epstein.

Through hard work and determination, Banks improved each day. He was still raw, but Epstein saw potential — and enough ability to play him in a couple of varsity games as a sophomore defenseman.

"Not too many guys have the strength to cover you inside and the speed to cover you outside," Epstein says.

Two years later, that rare combo, along with a growing passion for the game, made him a high school All-America.



FOLLOWING THE TOP 205 CAMP IN THE SUMMER OF '06, ALBANY WENT AFTER BANKS HARD, as did Drexel, Denver, Stony Brook and St. John's. Marr and his assistants found out about Banks' past early in the recruiting process — Banks brought everything up himself.

When Banks made his first official campus visit later that year, Marr greeted him with a big hug, quickly recognizing a genuine kid who'd had some hard times. He knew he was worth the risk.

"Everybody in life goes through difficulties," says Marr. "But what a turnaround; you couldn't talk to anybody about him without them making you feel that he's a great human being."

When Banks finally arrived at Albany last fall, he became the first member of his family to set foot on a college campus. He immediately proved that he belonged, especially on the lacrosse field. From fallball through the spring, Banks made an impact not only on his coaches but also his teammates.

"From the first day I met him I liked him," says former Albany defenseman Craig McDonald. "He might cover 1-on-1 better than most players in the country. He's driven, hardworking."

After that first game at Hopkins, Marr inserted

Banks into the starting lineup. His breakout game came March 21 in a 10-2 upset of then-No. 11 Princeton. The stat sheet only shows Banks had one groundball, but he singlehandedly shut down PU's leading scorer Tommy Davis.

"When I was on the streets, I did it hardcore," says Banks. "I never did anything halfway. If Coach tells me, 'We want you to shut him down,' once I'm assigned to him, that's my whole objective."

"My athleticism helps me a lot but I study moves. What his strength is. What his weakness is and [how to] take advantage of [it]."

Says Svec (now at Hobart), "He wants to be great. To come in as a freshman and be an impact player is incredible. His work ethic will allow him to blossom. Mike can be as good as anybody I've seen."

Although Marr doesn't see many weaknesses in Banks' game, he says that the sophomore can improve his stick skills and better understand how to attack offensive players. Marr's not concerned; he knows Banks will put in the work to get better. He already has.

Banks spent two hours each day in the weight room this summer. He also played wallball extensively, even performing groundball drills one day with former Great Danes All-America Merrick Thomson.

"The kid doesn't make excuses," Marr says. "He's not running from his past. He's learned from it. He's always looking forward, and if he makes a mistake he owns up to it. That's how he was able to get from where he was to where he is now."

And where he is now is on the verge of becoming college lacrosse's next great defenseman.



"I DIDN'T HAVE THE DISTRACTION OF SELLING DRUGS OR GETTING HIGH OR DRUNK OR GETTING INFLUENCED BY MY BOYS. I WAS JUST IN A CELL. I STARTED TO LOOK AT LIFE IN A BROADER VIEW."

BANKS HAS RECONCILED WITH HIS FATHER, who now lives in Florida near his mother and youngest brother. His parents are divorced but remain friends. His brother Antoine stayed with the street life that Michael gave up and recently ran into trouble with the law; his oldest brother BJ is a construction worker and a drummer at church.

While Banks' future certainly looks bright, his past is always

present. He doesn't mind answering questions for the most part; he knows it's part of who he is. He speaks to youth groups about his missteps; he hopes his story can keep at least one kid off the streets.

He still keeps in touch with some of the guys he ran with, including Hickman. He doesn't blame them for his past, doesn't resent any of them for not writing or calling while he was locked up.

Long gone is his old street name, "Bookem"; his voice-mail message now says, "You've reached Mr. Banks."

He's not worried about going down the wrong path again. Lacrosse has helped him find his way.

"He found something he loved that wasn't in the streets," says Hickman. "Biggest factor in getting him turned around. That's a beautiful thing for him."

"It's a great story how Michael's turned his life around," says Marr. "A kid going from being incarcerated to getting a college education and playing DI lacrosse."

The best part? His story's still being written. ■

Looking forward to '09. Banks spent two hours a day in the weight room and as much time working the wall.



BANKING ON A BREAKTHROUGH

An Albany sophomore lands on *IL*'s cover because his story is a ray of hope the lacrosse world can't ignore

I first heard about Mike Banks after last year's Johns Hopkins-Albany game. Matt DaSilva of US Lacrosse wrote a postgame piece about Banks, and it was obvious there was a possible cover story behind this intriguing young defenseman.

The Great Danes didn't have the best season in '08, going 8-8 and missing the NCAA Tournament. But Banks was an America East all-rookie honoree on defense, starting every game after that season-opener against the Blue Jays. Not bad for a kid who first picked up lacrosse as a high school sophomore.

So late this spring, *IL* dispatched new freelance writer Damian Andrew (a frequent *Slam Magazine* contributor) to sit down with Banks and figure out his story.

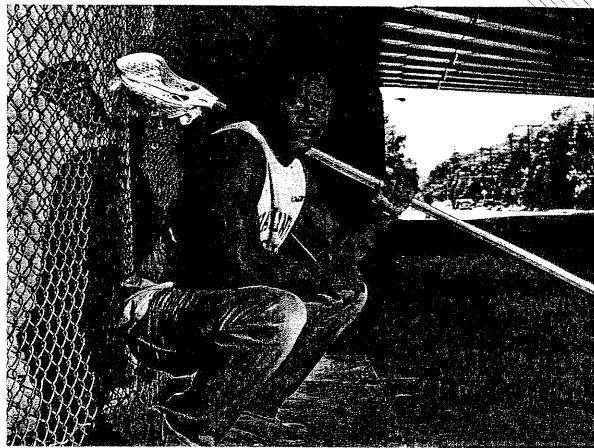
Banks is obviously a unique case in the lacrosse world; not many players come from his background of drugs, violence and crime. He had a difficult home situation, was influenced into gang life by older friends, used and sold drugs, advanced to more violent crime and was eventually nabbed for burglary.

After editing Damian's excellent story, I called Banks to check on a few details — not for lack of trust in the writer but because the facts were pretty serious. Honestly, I was a bit reluctant to make the call; I didn't want Mike to think we were focusing only on his troubled past, even though those were the details I needed to confirm. Plus how do you ask a guy, "...so, you really assaulted some pedestrians, huh?"

Damian had passed along that Mike was a great kid and a great interview, but I didn't expect him to be too fired up about going over his rap sheet with me on the phone. When after about 15 minutes he stopped and asked, "am I talking too much?," it was obvious I was completely wrong.

Mike was incredibly open and candid about the details of what he admitted were stupid things he did as a kid, how scared he was during his four-plus months in a pretty hardcore state youth offender facility and how he got back on track after realizing it was his only op-

MIKE BANKS IS A UNIQUE CASE IN THE LACROSSE WORLD; NOT MANY PLAYERS COME FROM HIS BACKGROUND OF DRUGS, VIOLENCE AND CRIME.



CHECK OUT

Pg. 51 Skip Flanagan's harrowing summer

Pg. 128 Signature Style: Denver middle Joey Murray

tion if he wanted to make it to his 20s.

Glorifying Banks' path is by no means the purpose of this month's cover story. He admits he screwed up. He regrets what he did and the people he hurt. He spends part of his spare time talking to kids about his past in an effort to sway others from going down the same road.

It's a bit of an awkward scenario; it's not like he overcame cancer or is playing through a family tragedy. There are certainly college lacrosse players who spent their childhoods volunteering at soup kitchens and cleaning up highways, not selling drugs and beating people up to prove their worth to a gang.

But what Banks has done in escaping that vortex and turning his life around — and now standing poised to not only earn a college degree but also legitimately have a shot to be one of college lacrosse's top defensemen — is incredibly impressive. And he's a shining example for kids growing up in tough neighborhoods, surrounded by negative influences.

Banks and the Great Danes will enter 2009 in the Top 15, and they'll have some work this fall to transition away from the short but unique Brett Queener era. They're just one of a host of ranked teams facing a raft of question marks this fall.

Following a mass exodus of All-Americans, DI lacrosse should be wide open this spring. Which makes this fall one of the more intriguing in a long time.

When Terry Foy first pitched doing a Fallball A-Z package for this October issue, I thought he was nuts; no way could we come up with something for each letter. In the end, though, it was

the "X" notwithstanding). Check out our most in-depth fallball preview ever on pages 96-115.

Christian Swezey goes deeper into the fallball season with a column on page 46 summing up how different these offseason practices can be across the board. Bottom line — the fact that teams have started videotaping fall practices illustrates the season's dramatic evolution.

I have no clue what's happening in Germany this fall, but thanks to James Schaffer and Mike Wish, we all know what goes on in Berlin in the summer. Thanks to Germany's Ken Galluccio, those two lucky ducks (I had a scheduling conflict or else I definitely would have pulled rank on that one) landed a trip covering June's Berlin Open — Europe's Ocean City Lacrosse Classic, minus the ocean — and came back with some great pictures and even better stories. It's by far the coolest *IL* trip ever (with all due respect to London, Ontario), so we made sure to milk Schaff's camera and of course his stellar writing skills.

Stay tuned to *InsideLacrosse.com* all month as we hit the big fallball tournaments and get behind the scenes with the top teams as they begin the journey to Foxboro.

Sincerely,

John Jiloty
Vice-President/Editor-in-Chief



KINGS &



QUEENER

With a team full of superstars, Rochester rookie goalie Brett Queener left the biggest impression on the Rattlers' first MLL title

By Geoff Shannon

The Rochester Rattlers' roster is littered with superstars — John Grant Jr., Casey Powell, Brodie Merrill, Joe Walters — so the expectation was, if the franchise wanted to win its first Steinfeld Cup, one of the big names would step up with a highlight performance at the '08 NBZip MLL Championship Weekend in Boston.

No one predicted rookie netminder Brett Queener would be the championship game's shining hero, rocking the 8,431 fans at Harvard Stadium with an explosive, high-intensity second-half showcase that topped Rochester's 16-6 victory over Denver.



"I saw Tom Marechek [pass between his legs] a final four back 1989, so I figured I'd bring it back."
—Brett Queener



It was a Zen-like performance from the former Albany star, who was splitting time with veteran goalie Mike Levin since joining the team as the 48th-overall pick in the '08 Collegiate Draft. There was Queener's halftime warmup, when he pulled a wicked running man to Rhianna's "Umbrella." There were his 10 saves. There were his five half-to full-field clears. There was his soft assist to teammate Jeff Zywicki late in the third. And, for his coupe de grace, there was the eye-popping, between-the-legs pass to Zywicki later in the half.

"I saw Tom Marechek do that in a final four back in 1989, so I figured I'd bring it back," Queener said postgame of his highlight pass.

It was Queener's stage, and he manhandled the spotlight with an intense 30 minutes of action, playing the crowd like the closing act at Bonnaroo.

"I've watched a lot of lacrosse, and that was a special half by a goaltender," says Grant, who scored four goals in the championship. "[Queener] running the ball up and doing that extra stuff, it was exciting for the fans, and it was exciting for us to be a part of."

Queener dominated the highlight reel, but in the grand scheme of the Rattlers' title ambitions, he was the final piece of a methodical building process that started in 2005 when the franchise enticed NLL-legend Grant to return to the MLL.

Grant, who won his second straight MLL MVP this season after posting a league-high 60 points, has been the keystone for the Rattlers' postseason ambitions, both with his individual talent and as the centerpiece of an indoor-hybrid offense,

made famous by the '06 Canadian IFL gold-medal team (six members were on Rochester's '08 roster). Along the way the Rattlers judiciously traded (Merrill from Baltimore in '06, Jordan Hall from Chicago this season), drafted ('06 No. 1 pick Walters, '07 No. 3 pick Alex Smith) and negotiated (Powell's '07 MLL return) their way to this '08 title.

Cohesion has meant everything to the Rattlers. Among the 20-man championship roster, 18 players reside or were born in Ontario or Central or Western New York. Throw in the stability of fifth-year coach B.J. O'Hara, and the Rattlers have been able to build a familiarity that, next to the Barrage, is unparalleled in the MLL.

"Some of the other teams, only half or a quarter of the team plays all year. We have lacrosse sticks in our hand 10 months of the year," Grant says. "I think that, when it comes down to crunch time like this, when you're running on pure emotion, we carry through."

Rochester's veteran leadership — half the players are at least 25 — cannot be discounted either. Established stars like Powell, whose game-winning OT goal against Philadelphia in the semifinals helped exorcise the memory of last year's disappointing playoff loss to the Barrage, have defined Rochester's success.

"There's a lot of great players on our team. But everyone checks their ego as soon as they step on the field," says Zywicki, who scored a game-high six goals in the final.

As Queener proved, however, a little swagger can come in handy.

(Left) As part of his big day, Queener made 10 second-half saves.

(Above) Alex Smith played a vital role in Rochester's success, winning 16-25 face-offs against Denver.

(Top right) Queener cut the highlight move of the day, pulling off a between-the-legs pass.

(Bottom right) Casey Powell scored three goals over the weekend, including the semifinal OT game-winner.