A close-up portrait of Ed O'Bannon, a Black man with a full beard and a shaved head, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a white t-shirt. The background is a clear blue sky.

*"The [title] became ...
an expectation for me.
I had to leave
my mark.*

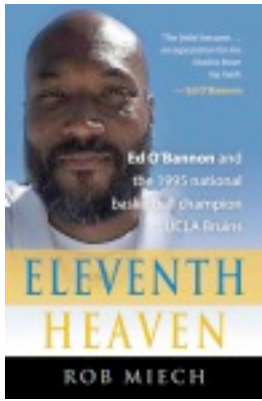
— **Ed O'Bannon**

Ed O'Bannon and
the 1995 national
basketball champion
UCLA Bruins

ELEVENTH

HEAVEN

ROB MIECH



Ed O'Bannon hoped to help UNLV establish a basketball dynasty. Instead, twists of fate plopped him at UCLA, where he added to the country's most prestigious college basketball program. His fortitude and mettle were supremely tested, cementing his legacy as a pillar of the Bruins. This is the definitive account of the UCLA juggernaut, the dynamic 1994-95 season, and what transpired for the principle figures in the ensuing 20 years.

Eleventh Heaven

by Rob Miech

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*Ed O'Bannon and the 1995 national basketball champion
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First Edition

Eleventh Heaven

For Sally

Chapter One

AT NINETY-FOUR feet long, fifty feet wide, it is the final resting place for buckets of sweat, sprinkles of tears, globules of oil, and beads of blood—the claret droplets are unmistakable—from Alcindor, Allen, Bibby, Johnson, Walton, Wicks, Wilkes, et al, some of the game’s luminaries. The center is occupied by a big powder blue donut. Four gold block letters curl around both halves of the circle. A thick band of powder blue outlines the four thousand seven hundred square feet of maple wood that gets resurfaced, with a fresh coat of goeey lacquer and intense polish, every September. It is the most acclaimed timber in college basketball history.

It is the UCLA basketball court on whose southern sideline every Bruin aligns himself soon after the first official practice of the season begins on October 15, 1994. Seventeens. The drill those players most loathe. Someone has screwed up, missed a cut, clanked a jumper when a bank shot had been in order, flubbed a bounce pass, or botched a basic assignment that the plebes will come to perfect in their sleep. The shrill from the shiny silver whistle coach Jim Harrick angrily blurts between his clenched teeth echoes off Pauley Pavilion’s twenty-nine-year-old concrete walls. He points to the sideline, at the floor. Many of his charges know what’s coming without him even saying the word. Four freshmen are confused. Seventeens.

They must haul ass to the other sideline, back to this one, down to that one, then back ... they must touch seventeen

sidelines within sixty seconds; almost three football fields. Covering a hundred yards in twenty seconds, three times in a row, might not sound like an Olympian feat for an elite Division-I athlete. Chop it all up, however, into seventeen pieces, and toss it into a hoops practice at any given moment, and watch some of the nation's most fit young men grimace, grind, growl, and grunt. Harrick might have devised the diabolical drill himself, but he also believes he could have lifted it from one of former Los Angeles Lakers coach Pat Riley's practices ten years ago, when Harrick coached Pepperdine University and visited Riley's runs often, for pointers, at the Fabulous Forum.

The Bruins don't make it. If one doesn't, none do. They will run it, over and over, until all of them complete it within sixty seconds. They fray. Some vector off and bellow at the ten blue national championship banners that hang from Pauley's rafters. Some of the young bucks bend, hands on hips, eyes closed ... *Why ... did I ... come ... here?* Cameron Dollar, the sophomore point guard from Atlanta whose facial features, deadpan expressions, and contagious laughter resemble the archcomedian Chris Rock, would deplore seventeens so much he would murmur, just loud enough for Harrick to hear, *Just like plantation days; Run, nigger. Run!* Kevin Dempsey, a bit player, just acts as if he's touching that far line. He crouches and reaches, fingertips purposefully falling six or eight inches shy, for an edge. He heads the other way, but Harrick's vigilant lieutenants always catch him. They have to do it again. They need nearly half an hour to execute this arduous exercise. Harrick strolls, as if he's on holiday in the South of France. To punish was rarely the point, Harrick says. It's about conditioning, being in peak shape, for each other, for the program, to leave opponents gasping in UCLA's wake.

Tony Luftman scurries to mop the area below veteran forward Ed O'Bannon. Wiping the star's perspiration from the court is one of Luftman's many responsibilities as one of five student managers, or glorified gofers. Such moisture could have

been the culprit in the John R. Wooden Center that fateful October day in 1990, when O'Bannon ripped his left knee apart upon his re-entry from a powerful dunk in a pick-up game. The anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) snapped in half. Residual damage complicated significantly an unusual operation in which an Achilles tendon from a cadaver was used to replace O'Bannon's ACL. The allograft procedure is still considered controversial and radical today.

The injury dramatically alters O'Bannon's goals, his objectives, indeed the course of his life. Adding to college basketball's dynasty, whose crowns are dusty, becomes his obsession. His self-centered dreams of NBA fame and fortune get shelved. He learns about allegiance, dedication, and resolve. His new mission would consume O'Bannon. Since the devastating injury Harrick always ensures that someone—this season it's Luftman—shadows O'Bannon to sop up his sweat, a sagacious stratagem to protect the bellwether of the Bruins.

Luftman, short and thin among fellow eighteen-year-olds, has a dark crop of hair and bushy Groucho Marxian eyebrows. It's eerie how he looks like Harrick at the same age. Luftman crab-scampers, with some extra zip; he's an earnest greenhorn who has only been on the UCLA campus a few weeks. Luftman knows his way around, though, for he had been a Bruins ballboy, huddling with other kids behind each basket and scampering out to mop up moisture at a referee's wave during games. Moreover, Harrick utilized a special admission allowance, usually reserved for athletes, to ensure Luftman's entrance to UCLA. In his managerial interview, for which Cameron Dollar was present in Harrick's office, Luftman predicted that the Bruins would win several titles in the coming years. Harrick turned to Dollar and said, "You hear that Dollar? We're gonna win *mulllll-ti-pulllll champ-yunnnnnn-chips.*"

Harrick refers to the very center of the mid-court circle as the *egg yolk*. He showed Luftman how oil sometimes drips from the center scoreboard near the egg yolk—it does not fall directly on the yolk because the scoreboard does not hover over the exact centerline of the court, one of the pantheon’s quirks. That oil had to be minded. For Harrick, Luftman would take out the trash and do the windows. Luftman would soon regard Ed O’Bannon with the same regal disposition.

Something catches Luftman’s attention in the lull after that first seventeen. Above him, a few feet away, the former national prep player of the year has morphed into a southpaw combination of Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson. Luftman gawks at assistant coach Lorenzo Romar. A man of deep faith and scant words, Romar returns a half-grin to Luftman. Romar slightly nods with his eyes closed. Down the line, to the west end of the arena, players gape at O’Bannon. Mark Gottfried and Steve Lavin, Harrick’s other assistants, stare at O’Bannon.

Nobody wants to run another seventeen. O’Bannon never hesitates. He barely pauses before toeing back to the line. Harrick’s next *Go!* will ignite another torturous series of fifty-foot sprints, back and forth, back and forth. There will be hundreds more before O’Bannon can truly sleep at the end of his fifth-year senior season, his final shot at an NCAA championship that has so dominated his desires and tormented his soul, and eluded him.

He will rage. He will rejoice after only one victory. The burden will be heavy. He shows his fellow teammates that he is ready for anything Harrick will throw at him. Are they? O’Bannon bobs and weaves. He floats. Punches sting thin air. He shuffles his Reeboks. He has tunnel vision, sort of; he catches blurred glimpses of astonished players and coaches. Every potential foe that could possibly confront him over the next six months firmly presents itself in his crosshairs. Left jab. Right jab. Right hook. Left uppercut. The six-foot-eight, twenty-three-year-old bald man

with the Whoppers complexion, narrow face, and high cheekbones, and blue nylon wrap around his left knee—wearing a white UCLA practice jersey and long white shorts—appears ready for the heavyweight match of his life.

Ed O'Bannon shadowboxes.

Luftman widens his eyes. O'Bannon's teammates keep stealing glances at him. They straighten themselves. They shake off their weariness. Moans fade. They toe the line, too. The returnees realize he meant it back in March in Oklahoma City, when he exploded at them during halftime of yet another debacle of an NCAA Tournament showing. His mien is mean.

Jim Harrick had supplied one of O'Bannon's triggers. During Harrick's first few weeks of practice as UCLA's coach, in the fall of 1988, he had repeatedly blown a fuse at point guard Jerome "Pooh" Richardson, who carried the requisite edge of a Philadelphia native. Biggest hot dog Harrick had ever witnessed. Pooh then broke curfew in Moscow, Idaho, after a one-point victory over Washington State. Harrick made him run a solo seventeen at the next practice. Pooh barked, *That all you got?* Harrick made him run another one. *That all you got?* And another. *That ALL you GOT!* And another. Ran 'em like they were candy, Harrick says, "He was a *stuuuuud.*" Pooh rattled off Jumping Jacks in front of everybody, begging for more. Pooh wanted that to be the best-conditioned team in America. All of Harrick's players have heard that story early in their UCLA careers.

Harrick also finally told Pooh, "Shut your fuckin' mouth! Don't say another word!" Pooh acquiesced. He would play nine solid seasons in the National Basketball Association.

Another scene also empowered O'Bannon. Former UCLA teammates Don MacLean and Mitchell Butler had played the 1993-94 NBA season for the Washington Bullets (now Wizards).

Butler was a rookie. For MacLean, it would be his second professional campaign and, by far, the most productive of his nine pro seasons. In the summer of 1994, Butler had told O'Bannon how MacLean had been so energetic at that preseason camp in the fall of 1993, out-running everybody, never tired, always the first player ready for the next drill. MacLean topped it off by shadowboxing between drills. O'Bannon directly related how MacLean had prepared for and attacked that camp to his subsequent productivity.

"One person is completely ready, so ready he can't wait to get to the next drill," O'Bannon says many years later. "And he's shadowboxing! He's ready. I was like, Hell, yeah! I just thought that was the coolest thing. So when that opportunity came for me ... I wanted to get to that point, to be in such good shape that I could do it. I finished that [first] seventeen. I wasn't breathing hard at all; I was in the best shape of my life. Everything was coming together at that point. I was fired up."

It was a fuck-you-this-doesn't-affect-me type of gesture toward Harrick, says one player. Seeing something like that from your leader, says another, is fuel. You feed off it. "There were some intense practice battles. [O'Bannon] was really driven to win. He wanted to prove we could do it," says Toby Bailey today. "Following a guy like that, you have to suck it up and get back on that line. No excuses."

Long after those pugilistic flashes, O'Bannon pauses. He is not given to hype or hyperbole, flowery lingo or self-promotion, highs or lows in actions or words. His steadiness is his backbone. He says he did not know how much that scene, after that first seventeen, would affect every other Bruin on that court, that ... he catches himself. He did know. It had been premeditated. "I knew it had been done before and knew the impact it had had on the people who were watching. I wanted that."

As the dynamic components of that 1995 championship squad began to ponder how to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of that scintillating season, it seemed probable that those festivities would also likely coincide, in the spring of 2015, with a startling forty-year stretch in which college basketball's most distinguished program has added only one banner—theirs—to Pauley's crossbeams. That it is the lone basketball championship trophy among the eleven in the glass case in Westwood that does not bear the signature of John Wooden further enhances the achievement. It might be the most remarkable of the lot; at least one qualified observer is certain it shines the most.

Many coaches and players regard that first seventeen, at that first practice, as the switch that propelled this version of the Bruins onto an entirely new plane of dedication and seriousness. This court had served as the platform for so much friction and toil—"ups and downs and fights and love, literally tears and blood and teeth knocked out," says Ed O'Bannon—and would continue to do so in the days and practices and weeks and games and months to come. In fact, O'Bannon, in a fit of outrage, would quit the team on this maple wood.

Harrick certainly saw O'Bannon take command of the Bruins at halftime of that shoddy performance against Tulsa the previous March in the NCAAs. The shadowboxing showed another level of purpose for the man who had been one of the most reposeful Bruins. Introverted country boy J.R. Henderson might have been the quietest player Jim Harrick has ever mentored, but Henderson had some sullenness in there, too. Point guard Tyus Edney also bore an unobtrusive manner, which totally belied the forceful way he played. But Harrick witnessed years of turmoil manifest and funnel into O'Bannon at the end of that first seventeen. Tulsa proved he would no longer speak only when spoken to. His ownership was complete. This was fiat. "A coming out for Ed," Harrick says. "He wanted everybody to know,

'I'm the leader! Give us all you got. We want to be in good shape. Nothing you can do will peter our enthusiasm.' "

Luftman tingles when he recalls O'Bannon duckin' and jukin' and jabbin' and shufflin'. Mark Gottfried thought, *The warrior*. Lorenzo Romar interpreted O'Bannon's hooking and upper-cutting of all those ghosts from UCLA's glorious days of yore as not-so-subtle messages to his teammates; *Get on my back ... we're about to go on a ride ... I'm about to show you the way*. Romar had played in the NBA, and he had coached three collegiate programs for nearly twenty years through 2014. He slowly licks an orange Creamsicle in the late hours of a steamy Las Vegas summer evening in the glitzy foyer of the Wynn. He smiles. He again shuts his eyes. He sees Ed O'Bannon shadowboxing that October afternoon in 1994. Romar has never witnessed a floor motivator of O'Bannon's magnitude. "He wasn't gonna let anyone get in the way of how he was gonna lead that team."

O'Bannon points to the strenuous off-season conditioning program he had devised and adhered to as the physical catalyst to his sweet science display. He truly wanted to get himself into peak physical condition so, if the situation materialized, he could actually step into a ring, between the ropes and onto canvas, and fight someone. Anyone.

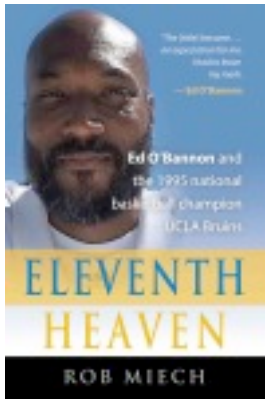
In November 2012, Pauley Pavilion opens after a resplendent \$136-million renovation, more than twenty-seven times the cost of the original concrete, bricks, and mortar. In a fitting tribute, John Wooden's great grandson Tyler Trapani—who would play a total of fourteen minutes in his UCLA career—scored the last basket on the original hallowed grounds on February 26, 2011. Once again, as they did in the 1950s and '60s, the Bruins played home games on the road, at the Sports Arena and Honda Center in Anaheim, during the refurbishment.

Some consider a modern UCLA in script scrawled across the middle of the new wood to be a far less venerable, even sacrilegious, nod to the tradition of the place. A replica of that sublime center-court powder blue circle, with the block letters, now serves as the bottom of the huge scoreboard that hangs from the middle of the ceiling, over the exact center of the new court. Sticklers are further incensed that the seat that commemorates John Wooden is on the *opposite side* of the arena from where he actually sat as a fan. Hallowed? In the arena in which the Bruins were 149-2 when their monumental coaching figure exited the profession, these commemorative attempts ring hollow.

Someone who has bled powder blue for decades sends me a photo of Mickey Mouse ears, when I ask about the script lettering and the Wooden seat, and says, “Absolutely ridiculous. If UCLA [officials] were in charge of renovating the Lincoln Memorial, they would change it to Daniel Day Lewis. I just don’t get it.” The John Wooden statue outside the north doors, though, is dignified—and looks nothing like Lincoln or Lewis.

Half of the center circle from the original floor is encased in glass out on Wooden Way, in an inviting new main entrance. In his final act as a UCLA player in this building, when Jim Harrick pulled him from his last game on that maple wood, after all of those daunting and dreadful seventeens, O’Bannon knelt down and smooched the very center of that egg yolk.

Years later, O’Bannon attends the grand re-opening festivities. Jim Harrick is here, too, but several haughty inhabitants of UCLA’s ivory tower, and maybe a few others, shudder at his presence. *Persona non grata*, says someone who thought he had an idea of what the UCLA hierarchy thought about Harrick, whose exit from Westwood was as tarnished as Wooden’s was celebrated.



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At halftime, O'Bannon and Harrick knot in a bottleneck at the side of the floor, just about where Ed finished that first seventeen in October 1994. Fans high-five O'Bannon as they inch by him. They pat him on his back. *Thanks, Ed!* They want to touch his eminence. That O'Bannon three years earlier became the face of an epic lawsuit against the NCAA should surprise none of them, but they can't possibly fathom the toll that has taken on him or his family. *Thanks, Ed!* O'Bannon and Harrick can't move.

The cheers and hurrahs arrive in waves. The former coach plucks at his former player's left elbow, yanks at his shirt. Ed leans over so his left ear hovers around Harrick's mouth. In his syrupy West Virginia drawl, Harrick whispers, "They have no idea."