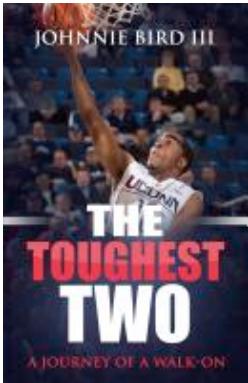


JOHNNIE BIRD III

THE TOUGHEST TWO

A JOURNEY OF A WALK-ON



Johnnie Bird had been a popular athlete at Central High. At the University of Connecticut, however, would he be able to play for the UCONN Huskies under legendary Coach Jim Calhoun? The Toughest Two is the story of Bird's triumphs and struggles as a walk-on trying to gain recognition in one of the toughest and most successful basketball programs in the nation.

The Toughest Two

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Johnnie Bird III

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Prologue

There were two minutes left in the game, which was a blowout. The opposing team was down and not likely to make a comeback with the score 97-46. UConn was therefore going to post another win, and the crowd was into it. As a walk-on player, I sat on the bench, watching my teammates—scholarship players—move up and down the court as the University of Connecticut moved to certain victory.

When a win is assured, remaining minutes in a basketball game are normally called “garbage time.” It’s a simple matter of running out the clock. In most programs, scholarship players are taken out, giving the walk-ons—players who have made the team through a tryout rather than through recruitment—a chance to see a little playing time on the hardwood. This wasn’t the custom of legendary coach Jim Calhoun, however. In the case of UConn basketball, Coach Calhoun wasn’t big on garbage time. He took care of the scholarship players who consistently got him into the win column, and it was easy to see why. It was 2008, and he’d already won two National Championships. He was a virtual celebrity who’d built the UConn program and brought the team to national prominence. Walk-on players like myself were mostly there for cheering—window-dressing for the bench.

But my name was called to go into the game that day, and I jumped up and ran onto the court. Garbage time was better than no time at all, and I hadn’t scored a single point since making the team back in 2005. I could literally count on my fingers the number of games I’d played in, and games played was secondary to scoring points. No points, no glory. I’d endured three years of blood, sweat, and tears under the strict regime of Coach Calhoun, but I hadn’t been able to sink a single shot. Maybe this time would be different.

I was sent in with a scholarship player, a freshman who, like myself, hadn't seen a lot of action. We stood, took off our warm-ups, and made our way down the bench, our teammates slapping our hands because they knew it was our time to shine. I had to keep myself from smiling as I passed the coaching staff, my stone face conveying that I was supposed to be on the court, that I belonged there. I walked by Calhoun, who nodded. I nodded back, as if to say that I was going in to play hard even though it was garbage time. I got to the scorer's table and took a knee, waiting for the next dead ball so I could go in. The ball went out of bounds off the other team, and the horn sounded, signaling to the ref that substitutions were going to be made. I stood, tucked in my jersey, and slapped the hands of players leaving the game. The crowd stood and cheered for them—a job well done—and also because they were going to see some new faces that didn't get into the lineup as much.

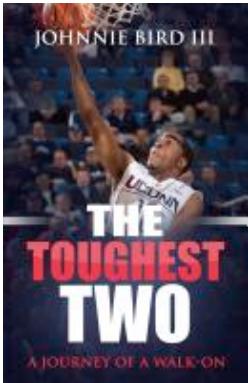
The ball was in-bounded and found its way to me in the corner. As usual, if I were going to do anything, I'd have to do it quickly. I took a shot, a wide-open jumper. It was an air ball, the consequence of sitting on the bench almost the entire season. If I were to get another chance to score, I'd have to get much closer to the hoop.

More seconds ticked off the clock, and still no points.

But I wasn't giving up as long as a single second remained. On defense, I deflected the ball to the freshman. He pulled it in and pivoted as I broke quickly and sprinted to the other goal, calling "Look up!" Dribbling down the court, he heard me and passed the ball. I watched it sail through the air and into my hands, determined to drive to the basket even if I had to power through a hundred defenders. As a senior walk-on, I didn't know how many more games I'd get to play, if any, on such a really good team. The ball was in my court in more ways than one, and I needed to make something happen.

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My body was operating on pure adrenaline as the fans and noise faded into the background. I was hyper-focused, and nothing counted except seeing the ball drop through the net. I drove forward to score for the Huskies—and for myself. My defender tried to block me, but he couldn't get position, so I went in for the layup. I was two feet off the gym floor, my body flying upwards just inches from the basket. I collided with the defender, and we both fell against the stanchion. Had I made the basket? I wasn't sure since time slowed down and became suddenly fluid. In my mind's eye, a tunnel had opened. I was looking, not at the court, but at the rocky road that had led me to this moment in my college career.



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