

Beyond The Pale

By Rick Reilly

YOU'VE HEARD of the movie *Glory Road*, right? The inspirational story of the 1966 Texas Western basketball team that won the NCAA title with an unheard-of five black starters?

Well, this is the flip side of that story. I was tipped off about it by *A Million Little Pieces* author James Frey. It's the Wyoming State University basketball team – the only NCAA Division 1 school in the country right now starting with five *white* players.

"To be honest, it's been heel," says WSU's courageous black coach, Marling Streeter, 43. "Some people just aren't ready to see five white guys out there. It triggers something deep inside them."

Wyoming State, located in Casper, is 17-5 overall yet has not cracked the Top 25. They've been heckled, mocked and ridiculed everywhere they've played. They've heard, "Crackers!" and "Damn! Where's my sunglasses?" One sign read ALL WHITE? THAT AIN'T RIGHT!

"I was out there for the opening tip at Fresno State," says starting Ghosts center Chip Lovington III, "and the ref goes, "Son, five white guys isn't a basketball team, it's an insurance firm. It gets old."

It's not like Streeter set out to thumb his nose at the you-need – blacks-to-win culture of college basketball. His team's makeup was born of desperation.

Because Wyoming State hasn't had a winning season in 14 years, and because Casper's black population can be counted on Bart Simpson's fingers, good black players weren't exactly wearing out Streeter's cell number. And then one day, while speaking at the Bemidji (Minn.) Elks Lodge, he looked out the window and noticed a 5' 9" white kid named Schuyler Olson making 20-footers like they were layups.

It took some sweet-talking to get him to come to Casper. Olson's father, Prescott, is the regional sales director for Wonder bread, and Schuyler had his future already mapped out. But when Streeter finally got him to sign with the Ghosts, the coach realized he might be on to something.

He started scouring the country for talented whites – at country clubs, squash courts and Volvo dealerships. He found power forward Chad Melman Jr. at his wife's book club. He persuaded point guard Cheddar Smithson to give up his beloved horseback riding and join the team. The white flight to Casper was on. And did it go over well with the team's previously all-black roster?

"Hell, no!" says backup forward Tayron Wilson. "We were like, 'You've bringing in all *white* guys? On *purpose*?' I kept looking for that *Punk'd* dude to show up!"

The interaction was rough at first. Streeter wanted the team to dress alike on road trips, but the black players refused to tie their sweaters around their necks. "And we told them they can stick their Docksiders!" says sixth man Antoine Davis. One night there were even fisticuffs over a John Tech CD on the team boom box.

On the court it was worse. Streeter exhorted his starters to take the ball hard to the hoop and dunk it, but they'd insist on just laying it in. "It wasn't 'white men can't jump,'" says Wilson, "it was 'white men won't jump!'"

But when Wyoming State lost four of its first five games, a miffed Olsen approached Street and said, "Coach, with all due respect to your expertise, and certainly with an understanding of your desires to grow this program, we feel we're not being allowed to play the style of game that will bring us success."

In other words, they wanted to make a minimum of 10 passes on each possession. Run backdoor plays. And wear very tight, high Larry Bird shorts.

And *-voila!*- the changes worked!

The Ghosts reeled off 11 straight wins. Their games became the place to be for celebrities like Martha Stewart, Clay Ailen and Pat Boone. Then they got cocky, getting blown out at Air Force. "They were at the club all night," Streeter growls. "They Young Republicans club." After some serious stair-running as punishment, they've won five more since. Now they're white-hot. Ghosts cheerleaders even have a new chant;

*Don't need no brothers
To stage a thrill!
We rock your world with
Puuuuure vanilla!*

All in all, it's been an amazing season in Casper. Streeter and his players have learned about prejudice, tolerance and, in the end, the common bond that makes them persevere: hoops.

And whether or not they win the NCAA title as Texas Western did, Streeter says he already feels like a winner. Why?

"I just sold the movie rights!" he says. The working title?
Glory Cul-de-sac.