

A Teacher's Guide to *Next*



Discussion Questions

Team Dynamics: *Next* fits into a tradition of sports books: finding the individual star trying to fit in with the framework of a team. This is true of older movies like *Hoosiers* and more recent books like *The Blind Side*. The notion that individual “talent” isn’t enough for success has also been supported by recent books like *Talent is Overrated* by Geoff Colvin, *Bounce* by Matthew Syed, and *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell.

- Readers see immediately that Derrick Bowen is a talented player, but why doesn’t that immediately translate to the Marion East team? How much is about skill, and how much is about attitude?
- How much does this balance between skill and work ethic seem to mirror the journey to success in real life? How does this apply to pursuits other than basketball?
- Hamilton Academy makes an offer to Derrick and his family at just the time when Derrick’s relationships on the team—with Coach Bolden and some of his fellow players—are most frayed. What makes Derrick hesitate?
- Basketball fans and players often argue whether good team camaraderie leads to on-court success, or if it’s the reverse: on-court success leads to good team camaraderie. Which seems to be most true in *Next*?
- Though they’re not part of the team, the friendships of Wes and Uncle Kid seem vital to Derrick—they’re key members of his “off-court team.” How does concerns for those two affect what Derrick does throughout the novel?
- Derrick also has another potential team—Hamilton Academy, where he might transfer. How does that potential team affect how he views his current one? How does his visit to Hamilton Academy affect how he imagines their players?

Discussion Questions

Setting: *Next* follows some clear divides in Indianapolis, namely between the city, located in Marion County, and the Northern suburbs, mostly in Hamilton County. The story plays itself out in cities all over America—wealthier, whiter suburbs compared to poorer city centers with more minorities. In fact, according to the U.S. Census, Hamilton County is 88.9% white and only 3.9% African American, and has a median household income just below \$85,000. Marion County, meanwhile is 67% white and 27.4% African American, with a median household income of \$42,600. And these disparities would surely be more stark in neighborhood's like Derrick's. These divisions are replicated all over America. Recent articles like “Segregation Now” in *The Atlantic* and books like *The Resegregation of Suburban Schools* make this clear.

- In a sentence or two, describe how the city of Indianapolis plays a role in *Next*. How is Derrick aware of differences within the city? How does his view of those differences change during the novel?
- Aside from on-court challenges, Derrick's biggest crisis is deciding whether or not to transfer from Marion East, in the center of the city, to Hamilton Academy, in the wealthier suburbs. How do Derrick's feelings about his city and the outlying areas complicate this decision?
- Of course, there are opportunities in Hamilton County for people other than Derrick. How does the income inequality between the two areas—Hamilton County and Marion County—shape what happens in the book?
- Much of the book is also set in Derrick's home. What about Derrick's home life shapes how he acts outside of the home—at school, on the court, etc.?
- Part of playing basketball in Indiana is understanding the rich basketball tradition, since Indiana is a basketball-crazy state. How does that element of Indiana affect Derrick? Does it make things more exciting for him? Does it sometimes make his challenges more frustrating?

Discussion Questions

Expectations versus Reality

- What does Derrick expect out of his freshman season? When does he realize that the reality of it might be different?
- How do Derrick's expectations about Jasmine and how she'll respond to him differ from how things work with her in reality?
- Derrick also has some expectations about what life must be like at Hamilton Academy, and what the players must be like? How accurate are those expectations? What does he learn about the place and those players?
- Derrick gets understandably frustrated at times when his expectations about things don't materialize. What or who keeps him grounded in those situations?

Other Themes

- From the moment Derrick begins his first high school practice, the pressure on basketball is raised. To what degree does this make it more a "business" even if he's still an amateur? To what degree does this diminish the joy of the game for him? To what degree does it simply force him to grow up?
- Derrick is sometimes torn between resenting the control of adults—coaches, parents, Uncle Kid, etc.—and desiring more guidance. To what degree, during the course of the book, does he take more control over his own life?
- Coach Bolden asks each member of the team to "give something" of themselves. While he means that strictly in a basketball sense, what are other ways in which Derrick learns to "give something" of himself in the novel?

Literary Elements and Devices

- ***Characterization***—Derrick isn't perfect, but to what degree do you still find him likeable? Is there ever a point at which you don't like him?
- ***Turning Points***—What are the novel's turning points? Where does it shift plot-wise? Emotionally?
- ***Foreshadowing***—Foreshadowing hints at events that occur later in the story, especially in the climax. Give an example of foreshadowing in *Next*.
- ***Conflict***—Other than the on-court challenges, what conflicts does Derrick face? Do they ever seem to reflect what's happening on the court? If so, how and when?

Classroom Activities

English

- Examine the tensions of race and class in *Next*. To what extent does Derrick identify himself in these ways? In what ways is that identification challenged throughout the novel?
- Have someone in class play “Derrick” and have that student respond to interview questions formed by the rest of the class. You could do the same with other characters—Derrick’s teammates or family, for instance.
- Consider *Next* as a “realist” novel. To what degree does it seem “realist” instead of romantic? To what degree is that realism driven by the events of the book? To what degree is it driven by Derrick’s voice?
- Analyze *Next* as a coming-of-age novel. What makes it a coming-of-age novel? What classic coming-of-age elements does it exhibit and what does it lack?

Classroom Activities

Social Studies or Civics

- *Next* deals with race and income inequality in the Indianapolis area. How does what's described in *Next* seem similar or dissimilar to your city and state?
- Create a “travel brochure” for Indianapolis, based on how it's represented in *Next*. Think about what types of things from your brochure might go into an actual travel guide, and what types of things you might put in yours that the city wouldn't typically advertise.
- In *Next*, Derrick has parents that insist on his getting a good education, rather than letting him be “just a basketball player”—but do sports play too large a role in our society? Can it actually hurt some young students more than it helps? Can an over-emphasis on sports even hinder non-athletes?

Classroom Activities

Creative Writing

- Since this is all told from Derrick's point of view, we only get his version of events. Re-write a chapter from someone else's—perhaps Nick's or Jasmine's or even Vasco's—point of view.
- Imagine different decisions or outcomes in this book. Write a chapter in which Derrick decides to transfer to Hamilton Academy and has to tell his friend Wes. Or write a chapter in which Derrick's parents demand—one way or another—how he decides about his transfer. Or write a chapter in which, instead of sharing time, Derrick takes over completely for Nick as the team's point guard.
- Take a chapter or a section from this book and tell it in a different “form.” How might this become a poem? A television episode? A song?
- A lot of the language in this book uses basketball lingo. Sometimes it's things that players say to each other during the course of the game, and other times it's simply descriptions of basketball action. Think about a facet of your life in which you use specific language—words and slang that would only be understood by people who share that same activity and interest—and write a story that makes heavy use of that language. Or write a poem that uses some of that language in every line.

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- And look for the next installation in the series, *SLUMP*, in late 2014.