

## Interview with Adonal Foyle

Homegrown hero - meet the basketball star who's making a difference. When NBA star Adonal Foyle hit the big time in the States, it would have been easy for him to forget his humble beginnings in Canouan. Instead he has poured time, money and energy into a charitable organisation that is changing the lives of the kids back home. This is his &ndash; and their &ndash; story&hellip;

Adonal Foyle&rsquo;s life reads like a movie script: impoverished Third World child of an absentee father is &lsquo;adopted&rsquo; by philanthropic college professors and moves to the USA, becomes a hugely successful professional basketballer before launching a charity to help children in his homeland. It&rsquo;s a cliché that fact is stranger than fiction, and Foyle&rsquo;s story really would be hard to believe were it not true. For someone born on the tiny island of Canouan in 1975, the comforts which have resulted from his hard work and endeavour (Foyle&rsquo;s career earnings are estimated at over \$US52 million) were a distant prospect.

&ldquo;There was no electricity, no indoor plumbing. The toilet was outside. Most of what you ate you grew. We planted corn, peas, melon, pumpkins and peanuts. Our light came from candles and kerosene lamps but you know what, it was great. I didn&rsquo;t know any different. I always felt like we were ridiculously rich,&rdquo; he says as he releases a characteristic booming laugh.

Foyle&rsquo;s father, Hycinth, left when he was seven and his mom, Patricia, became the family breadwinner. She travelled to neighbouring Union Island to find work to support her four children and Foyle moved in with his grandmother, Faith Baptiste, and her sister.

&ldquo;I thought we lived a very blessed life. At times we didn&rsquo;t have a lot to eat, but my grandmother would miraculously rustle up these feasts and feed the whole neighbourhood. She was incredible.&rdquo;

Foyle says life in Mannie Village, (population 20 with three houses and a church) was happy and carefree.

&ldquo;I remember going fishing from the rocks on Saturdays, and whatever we caught we came back home and cooked. I remember the walk to school, two miles from one end of the island to the other. We did that four times a day; in the morning, a return trip for lunch, (and that sun was no joke at noontime, I&rsquo;m telling you), then home at night.

&ldquo;The not-so-pleasant things were the beatings I got. Some I deserved, some I didn&rsquo;t,&rdquo; he laughs. &ldquo;I was always very inquisitive and this was sometimes interpreted as answering back so then it was like, shut up, bam bam,&rdquo; he chuckles, motioning quickly back and forth with the palm of his hand.

You would expect someone who has spent 12 years in the world&rsquo;s premier basketball league to have been a gifted sportsman growing up, but not so says Foyle.

&ldquo;Oh lord, I was a horrendous athlete, I was so bad kids used to make fun of me. My body was so big and uncoordinated. Cricket was laughable, with all this body curled over a little bat, by the time I uncoiled and the ball came it was too late. I tried being a football goalkeeper, but when they started kicking balls at my head I thought &lsquo;forget that!&rsquo;&rdquo;

At 15, Foyle passed his school leaving examination on Canouan and went to join his mum on Union Island, where he attended Union Island secondary school. There he was persuaded to take up basketball, and the teenager's life changed forever. He joined St Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) champions Valley Nets, and shortly afterwards attended an OECS (Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States) Club Championship Tournament in Dominica. It was there that he met two basketball-mad American college professors, Jay and Joan Mandle. The Mandles were working in the Caribbean's basketball leagues and tournaments at the time, teaching rules, training referees and refereeing and scoring games, and immediately spotted the potential in Foyle's gangly frame.

"We were playing and I'm getting killed," says the now 6ft 10ins, 270lb centre. "But Jay and Joan must've seen something because they came up afterwards and asked if I'd ever thought about using basketball to get an education and create a future for myself."

From that initial conversation a momentum gathered which quickly progressed to the point where the possibility of Foyle moving to the States was being discussed.

"It was crazy, because within two weeks of meeting, they were back in St Vincent talking to my mom, talking to the Ministry of Education, seeing what was possible. I don't think they even really knew what they were doing or why, but they invited me to come up to the States anyway.

"It was a difficult decision for my mom more than me, because I had always wanted more and this felt like it. There were plenty of tears; my mom was bawling, I was bawling, it was a mess, but she eventually said okay."

The decision proved to be the easy part for the youngster, who was now confronted with all the USA had to offer.

"Canouan to Philadelphia was beyond culture shock, it was absolutely insane and totally frightening," says 34-year-old Foyle.

"On Canouan I had a donkey called Country. He was my mode of transportation. So the first time I was stuck in a traffic jam it blew my mind. It was like 10 miles of cars. I just peeked out the window awestruck. I never knew there were so many cars in the world, let alone in one place.

"My first ride in an elevator I was so nervous I might shake it and make it fall that I held my breath all the way to the 5th floor. These people were staring at me turning purple, wondering what was happening, and when the doors opened I just burst out panting," he roars with laughter.

"And the first time it snowed, I called my mom straight away and said: 'They're trying to freeze me to death!'"

Academically, Foyle was also ill prepared.

"It was a nightmare, the most difficult thing I've ever done. My vocabulary just wasn't good enough.

I remember reading my first book and literally having to look up every other word in the dictionary.

This was where having two college professors as surrogate parents paid dividends.

“Jay and I started doing flashcards, and we were learning about 10 new words a day. We had five shoeboxes crammed full of these damn flashcards, thousands of words.

“It was relentless; if I had to write a paper for school then I wrote one for them as well, there was no break. I tried to tell them that in the Caribbean Sunday was a day of rest but they just laughed at me.

“I was playing catch up with basketball as well, learning the proper techniques of passing, shooting, dribbling. It was like going back to basics — such a steep learning curve.”

The pressure naturally gave way to the occasional outburst.

“It wasn’t easy and I rebelled, cried, said I wanted to go home, had stand up shouting matches with Jay. I used to call him the little bully. You know he’s small and I would be right up in his face having a meltdown, going crazy, and he would just keep calmly talking, telling me how it was going to be.”

Jay Mandle recalls the time with a wry smile.

“We bumped heads a few times,” says the W. Bradford Wiley Professor of Economics at Colgate University. “In fact, right from the start we were not at all sure how we were going to handle this new responsibility. I remember going into my Department Chair’s office and telling him, ‘I’ve just ruined my life!’”

Mandle plays down the extraordinary gesture he and his wife made by taking in the young Foyle.

“Adonal is very special. He has consciousness and there was always a sense that he had enormous potential. We were just well-positioned to let that come out. We’re teachers but we’ve never had another student like him, he’s truly remarkable.”

Foyle’s industry paid off, and within a year he was one of the top players in the country. He led Hamilton Central School’s Emerald Knights to the State Championships in 1994, and was subsequently deluged with university offers. He chose Colgate, also in Hamilton, New York, and performed so well for them, leaving as the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) all-time leader in blocked shots with 492, that he propelled himself onto the radar of the nation’s professional teams.

An NBA (National Basketball Association) first-draft pick, he was selected by San Francisco’s Golden State Warriors, where he was to spend the next 10 years of his life.

Foyle moved to Orlando Magic in 2007 and he recently signed up with them for another year. As he enters the autumn of his playing career, Foyle says it's strange to look at the lifestyle he has now and compare it to what he grew up with.

"I have an apartment in Florida but my summer home is in California. It's a beautiful place, there's a pool, five or six bedrooms and it's secluded on the hillside. Every time I get up I am just in awe that I, this Canouan boy, am living this lifestyle. I have to pinch myself."

Foyle, as in so many other facets of his life, is not the stereotypical basketballer when it comes to luxuries such as cars.

"I have one car, a Lincoln Navigator," he says. "My feeling is that after you've had a donkey for so many years the allure of a car is just not the same. I can only drive one at a time so why would I need six or seven?"

Foyle derives his pleasure from the arts and recalls his first time at the theatre.

"It was *The King and I* and it wasn't a very sophisticated production, but I just thought wow, a whole history of life in two hours. It really intrigued me, it was like reading a book, but somebody else was doing the reading for you. The performing arts represent the best of what we have to offer to society."

The Mandles introduced him to the arts and you sense that the incredible life experiences which they have been so instrumental in giving him are part of what now drives Foyle on with the project that has become his focus, the Kerosene Lamp Foundation.

"My mom will forever be my hero, for the way she provided for us, but Jay and Joan have been amazing. I have been so blessed by two people who have given so much and all they ask for in return is that I pass on what I've learned to someone else. How extraordinary is that?"

The idea for the foundation evolved from Foyle's return trips to Canouan each summer from the USA, when he saw how much the children enjoyed learning the basketball drills which had become second nature to him.

"I was like, 'wow, this is important. How can I do this on a more permanent basis?' So I started throwing a few ideas around with an old college friend, Shiyana Valentine, who is now KLF Executive Director."

The name is derived from the lamps which were lit at night on Canouan, and which Foyle used to guide him home as well as to study by.

The first basketball camp was held in Canouan in 2003, with the non-profit foundation being formed in 2005, and has since spread to incorporate the whole of St Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG), with plans to cover other Caribbean islands in the future.

The foundation has grown to the point where it brings in 15 volunteer staff from the USA, including many top NBA players and coaches, for the biannual camps. This year's stars include Foyle, New Jersey Nets guard Courtney Lee, retired NBA legend Bo Outlaw, Boston Celtics Assistant Coach Clifford Ray, and Roy Byrd formerly of the Harlem Globetrotters.

Five camps are held over the course of two weeks, strategically located so that every child in SVG has the opportunity to attend.

The camp ZiNG is invited to attend is at Keartons Hard Court, halfway up the ruggedly mountainous western coast of St Vincent, in the village of Barrouillae. The court is surrounded by verdant hillsides with ramshackle homes tumbling down their slopes.

Hundreds of children, aged 7-17, pour into the area, bussed in from villages along the coastal road, and receive their free t-shirts prior to the start. Over US\$50,000 of kit was shipped down for this year's event, including 2000 books and 5000 Crocs shoes to give away. The foundation has also refurbished the courts hosting the camps as part of its commitment to leaving a lasting legacy.

The day's focus is resoundingly educational as well as sporting, with Foyle driving home the importance of learning at every opportunity and prizes given out for those achieving recent academic success. Throughout the course of the day subjects such as HIV/AIDS awareness, healthy eating and literacy feature strongly but always with the emphasis remaining on fun.

Byrd, formerly of the Harlem Globetrotters, is camp cheerleader; charismatic and genuinely funny &ndash; the kids feed off his enthusiasm. He is the warm-up act and gets the children fired up before they are split into age groups.

Families stand on the sidelines or sit in the bleachers, sheltering from the sun (and rain!) beneath broad umbrellas, cheering the kids on as they move between the different coaching stations: rebounding, shooting, passing, dribbling, as well as food and nutrition.

Frequent deluges of rain don't dampen the spirits of the 370 youngsters who attend over the morning and afternoon sessions. It's often raucous and confusing, as children of all shapes and sizes, many barefooted, move between the stations, but what is clear is that they're all having a total blast.

"One of the things I tell the people coming down is that you won't be good at this if you're inflexible or shy. You have to go with the flow and just dive in," says Foyle.

Foyle is a very likeable man; easy to get along with, compassionate, genial and honest. It is a character that endears him to others.

"I'm more of a leader, but I will follow Adonal to the end of the earth," says Byrd.

As with the other stars attending the camps, Byrd's time is given freely.

“I’ve been coming since 2003, I’m here every time and I love it. The first time I came Adonal told me I wouldn’t be paid, I said I didn’t want to get paid I just wanted to enjoy the experience. Heck, I’d sleep on the beach if I had to.

“Coming back and seeing some of those same kids, how they’ve grown, matured and developed, that’s what I do it for.

“We don’t just concentrate on sports, but through sports we capture the kids’ attention and teach them the importance of education. We want you to be a good player on the court but we want you to be an awesome player off the court.”

And Byrd says there’s great potential here.

“There’s a kid attending today, aged 14. He’s kinda softly spoken, quiet, but he’s a big kid and he has some skills. There’s potential there you can see it. Adonal was the same way — skinny, tall, hardly played basketball before he was 15. Look what happened when he picked up a ball”

The youngster Byrd is referring to is Consolo Adams. At 14 he’s already 6ft 8ins tall and Foyle, who says he saw a lot of his old self in the youngster, spends 15 minutes with him one-on-one going through some drills.

Adams, attending his first KLF camp, says Foyle is a hero in his homeland and that he had revelled in the opportunity of being coached firsthand by the NBA star.

“He was teaching me how to dunk and how to shoot, using the power of my legs, turning and shooting, that sort of thing. I want to make my skills better and get to the top. I would love to go to the States and do well,” adds the youngster from Barrouillae.

Another focus of the camps is to get girls involved. “I want them to know it’s okay for them to get involved and play hard, you can still be graceful, and beautiful and be an athlete. This opportunity is as much for them as it is for the guys,” says Foyle.

Madousa Pierre, a 17-year-old from Chateaubelair, is one of those Foyle is eager to encourage.

“I had great fun,” she enthuses. “I helped out with the camp this morning and took part this afternoon. I enjoy basketball and football and any opportunity I get I’m playing.”

She says the boys’ attitude to girls playing sport can be discouraging to some, but not her.

“We have a group of seven girls who get together and go and play. When we go to the courts the guys are a bit

funny sometimes about us playing, but we don't take them on. I don't see it as a problem."

During one rain break the opportunity arises to sit down and chat with Boston Celtics Assistant Coach Clifford Ray. Affectionately known as Coach Ray, he is a giant both physically and of the game, being one of the few men to have won the NBA Championship as both player and coach. He is unequivocal in his support of Foyle and his vision.

"I coached him for six or seven years and he has a phenomenal attitude on and off the court. He's really quite a guy; to become a world-class athlete from where he started off, that's quite a story and tells you a lot about the man.

Adonal believes in giving back without asking anything in return, and I know he is very passionate about the foundation and is committed to it. He appreciates the opportunity he was given and he wants to open that door for other kids. You look around here and there's a lot of poverty, so it's about giving the kids a different option, a different future.

"And that doesn't have to mean basketball in the USA. There are professional basketball leagues all over the world now – Australia, Italy, France or Spain for example, and the sport is growing. It's a wonderful vehicle and a great opportunity to make a living."

And Coach Ray says he will be involved as long as he is required.

"To reach out and help these kids is a privilege and I love the people involved. I'm 60 years old and will be retiring in three years time. If the foundation wanted to put something permanent in place down here it wouldn't be anything for me to be a part of that. I will always help out Adonal Foyle whenever I can."

The future of the foundation and where it is heading is one of the issues on the mind of Sabrina Mitchell, KLF's local organiser and Board member.

"The camps are the idea we have currently, but is there something we can do on a more permanent basis, all year-round? This is the discussion we're having because it's something we want to achieve, something concrete and lasting," says Mitchell, who oversees the huge logistical exercise of organising the camps whilst simultaneously running two hotels on Bequia, the Frangipani and the Gingerbread.

"We're hoping to develop a scholarship programme, so that we can track some of the kids we identify at the camps, in terms of their results at school, look out for them in a sense, with the intention of sending them away to school in the US.

"This will give them the chance to make something successful out of their lives because poverty is what is holding them back. They have the brains and the sporting potential and if they have the ambition that is where we would like to come in," adds Mitchell, who has been involved in regional basketball for over 14 years and is Secretary General of the Caribbean Basketball Confederation.

"We reach 1700 kids through the camps, and if we can make a difference to the lives of 10 or 15 then

we've done something good."

All of this will require sponsorship, both public and private, but as Foyle nears the end of his playing days the funds that have been available to him will become more limited.

"I don't know how much longer I'll be playing, and I've been supporting the foundation in full since it's been going. Your lifestyle shifts and you don't have so much disposable income, I won't be an NBA player forever," he says.

"I hope we can find ways of supporting what is an amazing cause and opportunity for the kids. We have to find a way to keep it going."