

# What Happened to Superman? How Dwight Howard Lost His Way and Is Trying to Get It Back



**Dwight Howard is looking to recapture his Orlando magic—and to share the hard lessons he has learned after losing his way.**

LEE JENKINS - SEPTEMBER 19, 2017

Dwight Howard peers out the living-room window of his condominium on the 25th floor of an apartment building in uptown Atlanta and points south: beyond Buckhead, past the skyline, to a neighborhood by Hartsfield-Jackson airport's westernmost runways that he can't see. Every couple months he drives there, to College Park, and idles on Godby Road, in front of the lot where his childhood home used to sit, before it burned down. He thinks about his first hoop, set on the dirt in the backyard, and all the boys from the surrounding apartments who came over to play because there was no other court around. He was only eight, and they were teenagers, but it was his basket so they had to follow his rules. "No cussing!" little Dwight Howard pleaded, stomping his \$10 Pro Wings from Payless, and the big kids grudgingly agreed.

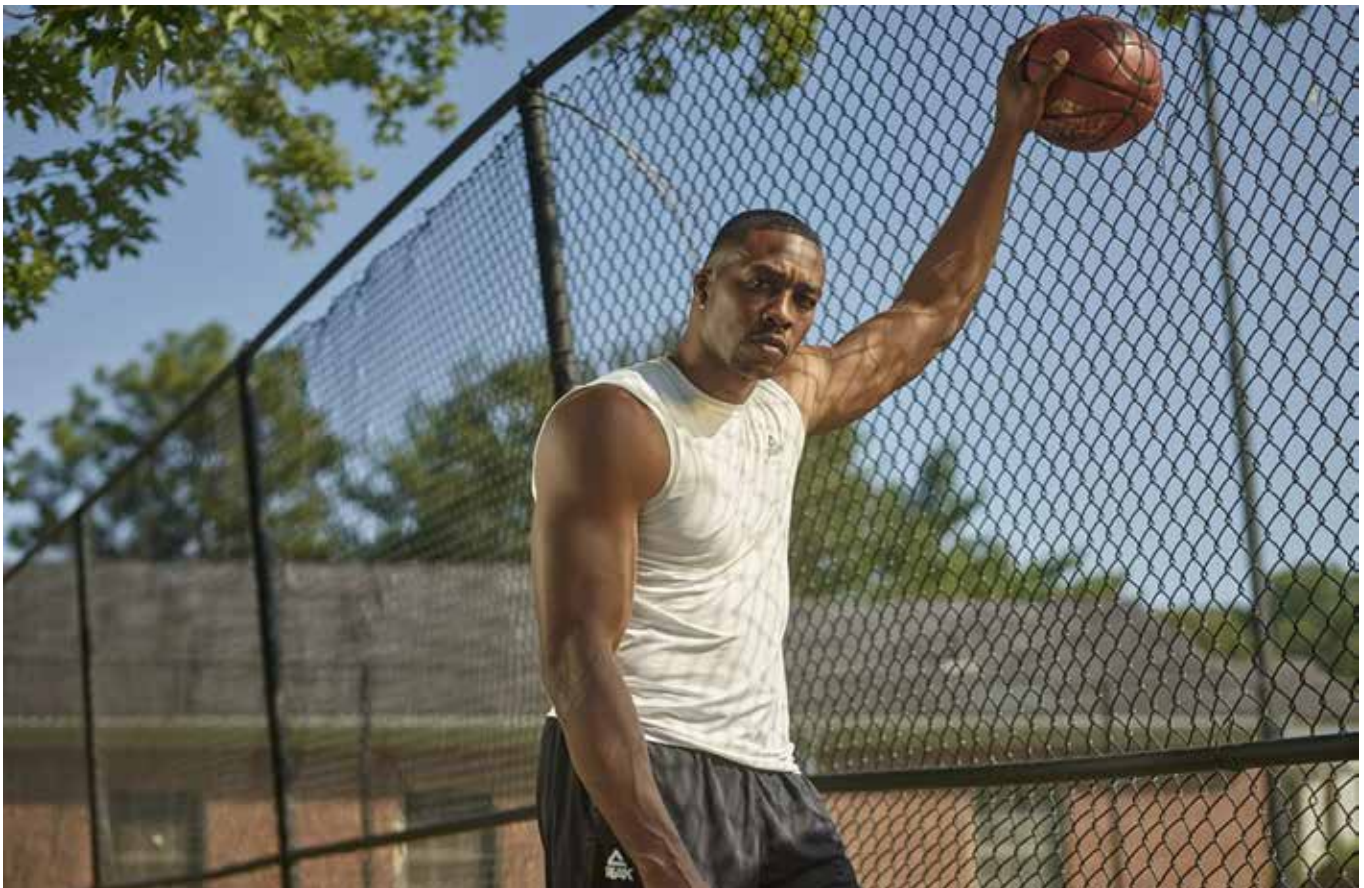
He slept under a wooden cross and a framed copy of the Ten Commandments. He prayed twice a day, once before school and once before bed. He went to Bible study on Tuesday, teen ministry on Friday and church on Sunday, at Fellowship of Faith in East Point, where he started a youth program called Top Flight Security so he and his friends could usher congregants to their pews. His parents sent him to Southwest Atlanta Christian Academy, a private school with 16 students in his grade, all the boys outfitted in matching maroon ties and sweater vests. When he sought post defenders his own size, he joined a firemen's league at Atlanta Christian College, and he told everybody that he'd someday persuade the NBA to superimpose a cross over its silhouetted logo.

One Friday evening, in a back room at Fellowship of Faith, the pastor called Howard in front of the teen ministry. "Your purpose," the pastor intoned, "is to use basketball as a platform for God's glory." That was the plan. When the Magic drafted Howard with the No. 1 pick in 2004, he was an 18-year-old virgin, regaling teammates about the time God spoke to him in the bathroom. Steve Francis and Tony Battie invited their pious rookie to a club once, and never again, for fear they'd corrupt him. "That's it," Battie said. "We're not letting you go out anymore." At Howard's first All-Star weekend, in 2005, players in the Denver hotel elevator compared party invitations. "We know you aren't about to do nothin'," one jeered, "except read your Bible." Howard wished he'd never talked publicly about the cross on the logo.

Ridiculed and isolated, he dispensed his anger in the Magic weight room, building and chiseling muscles that evoked his comic-book heroes. He lived with high school buddies from Atlanta and spent nights at Orlando multiplexes, howling at his beloved cartoons. A portrait emerged for public consumption of a 6'11" manchild quoting Finding Nemo while pouring king-sized bags of Skittles into his mouth. But there was always more to Dwight Howard than the grinning Pixar image projected to the masses. "I came from a little box," he says, "where everyone wanted to protect me from the big world I was about to enter. But when I finally got into that world and took a look around, I wanted to experience all of it."

Thirteen NBA seasons have passed, and Howard is trying to remember his old pastor's name. "What is it?" he says, slapping his side. But the name matters less than the edict, issued on that Friday evening long ago in the back room at Fellowship of Faith. Has he done what he intended? Has he used basketball as a platform for God's glory? He falls silent for a few seconds. "Yes," he replies, "and no."

In 2008, Dwight Howard had more endorsement deals than LeBron James. He appeared in seven nationally televised commercials. He disproved the long-held notion that big men beyond Shaq can't move product. A year later he racked up 3.1 million All-Star votes, still the most ever. In piggybacking the Magic to the '09 Finals, Howard led the NBA in blocks and rebounds and was fourth in field goal percentage. He was the best defensive player in the league and one of the most efficient scorers. When general managers responded to a 2009 NBA.com poll about which player they would sign to start a franchise, they picked James first, Howard second.



Today, Superman is 31, on the back end of what was supposed to be his prime. Never married, he has five children by five women. He has lost millions of dollars to friends and family. He has at times been estranged from his parents and spurned by his costars. His endorsement portfolio, once brimming with Gatorade and Vitamin Water, McDonald's and Adidas, Kia and T-Mobile, is down to a sneaker deal with the Chinese sportswear company Peak. He checked in last winter with 151,000 All-Star votes—11,000 fewer than Ersan Ilyasova. Next week Howard will go to training camp with the Hornets, his fifth team in seven seasons, who acquired him over the summer for backups Miles Plumlee and Marco Belinelli.

What happened to Dwight Howard is a question that confounds much of the NBA, himself included. “All of a sudden,” he says, “I went from the good guy to the devil.” He has devoted an inordinate amount of reflection to the subject, reexamining that righteous 18-year-old who left East Point only to endure a punishing cycle of temptation and shame. “You won’t understand,” he warns. “You won’t get it.” But he’ll try to explain anyway, because God and basketball gave him the platform, and because there’s always another overgrown prodigy who could use a 6'11" caution sign. “What I’ve been through,” Howard says, “I don’t want anybody else to go through.”

Tony Battie, it turns out, could not keep him locked away forever. “I’d been so sheltered for so long, once I got out of my house, I was ready to try anything,” Howard recalls. “It’s like, ‘I’ve heard so much about these clubs, these strip clubs, let’s try ’em out. Let’s party like these older guys.’” The booze didn’t do it for him, but the attention did. “You’re young, you’re on TV, and all these beautiful women are coming up to you. There’s no comparison, but at the time, I felt like a kid who has never had candy in his whole life and suddenly is given all the candy he could ever want. If you’re still just a kid—which is what I was—you’re like, ‘Give me more.’ It became an issue.”

His first child, Braylon Howard, was born in 2007. “I was ashamed because I’d talked so much about being a Christian, professed my faith to the whole world, and here I was with a baby out of wedlock,” Howard says. “My parents judged me. A lot of people judged me. I felt like I shouldn’t even be out in public because everyone looked at me as a hypocrite.” The church, forever his haven, brought more anxiety than solace. He would take girlfriends to Sunday services and listen for whispers. Why is he here? Why is he bringing her here? The boy who started Top Flight was gone, left to adopt a far different identity. “I felt like I didn’t need my relationship with God anymore,” Howard says, “and that caused a lot of pain.”

Few could detect the beginning of his spiral. After all, he was averaging 20 and 14, his head hovering near the top of the square as he spiked his ferocious dunks back down to earth. Orlando was a contender and Howard was a superhero, assorted supporting characters hanging from his cape. “People who were living with me, people who were working with me, took advantage of the situation,” he says. “I played a part. I gave those people a crutch. But they saw opportunities to take more.” Howard spent extravagantly and claims certain associates billed him even more extravagantly, six-figure sums for limousine services and seven for private

jets. “They knew, ‘Dwight’s distracted, he’s not paying attention, we can finesse these numbers.’ I’m thinking, ‘How can this happen? How can these people—in some cases flesh and blood—steal from me when I’ve already given them everything they need?’ ”

For a long time he was too reckless to notice. In a span of six years he had four more children: Jayde, Layla, David and Dwight III, accompanied by battles over custody and child support. “My life got so complicated,” Howard says. “And one thing I’ve learned is that eventually, what you do off the court will affect what you do on the court.”

Howard played for a franchise that featured him in a city that loved him, but he wanted more. “Movies and this and that,” says Aaron Goodwin, his first agent, who recounts early conversations with Howard about acting aspirations that could be fulfilled more easily in Los Angeles and New York City. “I told him, ‘Slow down, Deebo. You’re 6’11”. You’re not a movie star. The only person you can play is yourself or a [Wookiee]. Don’t let your ego get out of control.’ ” Goodwin’s partner and twin brother, Eric, helped Howard land cameos in Valentine’s Day and Just Wright. But Howard left the agency in 2011, and a year later he arrived in Hollywood.

Nowadays, headliners force their way out of small markets every summer, but back then such power plays were not as common. In December 2011, shortly after the NBA lockout ended, Howard requested a trade from Orlando to Brooklyn; after eight months the Magic shipped him to L.A., a merciful end to a long-running saga that damaged everyone involved. Howard and the Magic provided the ultimate blueprint for how not to handle a superstar departure, flip-flopping over exit strategies in public view. Details of the so-called Dwightmare are ancient history, but Howard can’t stop reliving them. “In a lot of ways,” he says, “I feel like I never recovered.”

Desperate to regain the goodwill he squandered, Howard started for the Lakers on opening night even though he was rehabbing from back surgery. Ten weeks later, he tore the labrum in his right shoulder and sat out only three games to heal before reinjuring it. Much is made of the rift between Howard and Kobe Bryant, but the more noxious feud was unfolding between Howard’s body and mind.

“I lost confidence in who I am as a player,” he recalls. “I’d hear people say, ‘You should play more like Shaq,’ so I tried to bully guys. But that didn’t work because I’m not as big as Shaq. Then I’d hear people say, ‘You smile too much, you should be

more like Kobe,' so I tried to put on a mean face and play mad. But I wound up getting all these stupid techs and flagrant fouls." He even threw on a headband and kneepads, like Wilt Chamberlain, masquerading as any great Laker except Dwight Howard. He grew anxious enough that he occasionally called friends at halftime and asked what they thought of his performance.

He was still productive in his only season in L.A., averaging 17.1 points with 12.4 rebounds, and more so the following year in Houston, where he signed as a free agent in the summer of 2013. But the NBA was changing, asking its big men to play in space, and Howard remained stuck in 2009. He wanted to handle the ball and put it up, as he did with the firefighters at Atlanta Christian, but he noticed the disapproving glances whenever he wandered outside the lane and let fly. While his oversized peers extended their range, he retreated to his outdated role, setting mechanical screens and waiting for post feeds that increasingly didn't come. "Slowly," Howard says, "I let the game turn me into a robot."

It's no surprise he clashed with Bryant, whose persona is famously confrontational, but in Houston he also engaged in a cold war with the mild-mannered James Harden. "James is not the kind of guy who is going to say, 'Yo, man, you got a problem?' and I'm not either," Howard says. "When I don't like what's going on, I tend to shut down, put my headphones on and ignore everything. I don't talk about things. That happened to me in L.A. It happened to me again in Houston. I should have communicated better." One Rockets official called a meeting with Howard and Harden that felt more like an intervention. Harden voiced what he wanted from Howard, namely stronger screens and tougher rim protection, but Howard didn't express much in response. The freeze deepened.

Howard does not have many friends in the league—"I'm kind of the loner"—and he became a convenient target. In one game, Bryant called his former teammate "soft as a motherf-----," and in another, Kevin Durant called him worse. It wasn't just fans and media who made him out to be a diva and a slacker, as if a slacker gets those mountainous shoulders. "Some players will tell you they don't care what other people think," Howard says. "They're lying. We all care."

At a low point with the Rockets, after the 2014–15 season, he considered retiring. The jolly giant who supposedly had too much fun on the floor was miserable. "The joy," Howard says, "was sucked out of it." But what would retirement accomplish? He had to change his life regardless of his occupation. So he did what his teenage self would have done. He saw a pastor.

Calvin Simmons has ministered to hundreds of professional athletes in the past decade, including Adrian Peterson, so he is familiar with dramatic falls from grace. “Dwight had gone from the darling of the NBA to the black sheep,” Simmons says. “He realized he had done some things wrong and needed to change, but at the beginning he just wanted to share.”

Howard started seeing Simmons for three hours a day, three to four days a week, in Houston and on the road. “We talked a lot about the difference between physical attraction and authentic love,” Simmons recalls. “When Dwight first got to Orlando, he was looking at teammates who were 28, with a wife and two kids, going off to dinner. That’s what he desired, an authentic relationship with a real girlfriend. But when you’re raised in the faith and you fall into something, there can be a tendency to feel like you’re not worthy of coming out of it. You can go into a dark hole and stay there. He got to a point where he thought, ‘I like sex and I don’t believe the heart really exists, because that’s not what anybody is reaching for.’ So he went through this process where he enjoyed something detrimental to him. Some of our best conversations were about why you put yourself in position to be devalued.”



Howard filled notebook paper with names—from Bryant to Harden, Skip Bayless to Stephen A. Smith—and used the pages to wallpaper a room in his house, so he'd remember to pray for adversaries and allies alike, a healthy substitute for blame. "I saw him cleanse everything," Simmons says, "and cut away the clutter around him, from a business manager to a security guard to all these financial people." The sweep included his parents, whom he didn't call for nearly two years. "That was hard," Howard sighs. "It's really hard to tell your parents, 'I can't do this anymore. I have to back away from you.' They didn't understand. They were very upset. But I wanted a genuine relationship with them that didn't have anything to do with money or judgment."

Howard hoped the overhaul would spawn a renaissance on the court, but the results were no different. In his last season with the Rockets he scored 13.7 points per game, the fewest since he was a rookie. The Hawks still signed him to a three-year contract worth \$70.5 million, a massive bet on a triumphant homecoming. But in Atlanta's five-out offense he averaged only 8.3 field goal attempts despite his 63.3% shooting, best in the Eastern Conference. "I think they had a view of me before I got there," Howard laments. " 'Look at what Dwight did in L.A. and Houston, this must be him.' I see how that kind of thing can happen."

To hear Howard tell it, he has been the victim of more subtle misunderstandings than Larry David. The excruciatingly awkward press conference, when Stan Van Gundy confirmed that Howard was lobbying the Magic front office to fire him, only for an unsuspecting Howard to join Van Gundy and deny what the coach claimed? "That previous summer, the front office asked me about Stan, and I told them I thought he was losing his voice with the team. But they were the ones who said they should start looking for other coaches." . . . The heated exchange in the tunnel at Staples Center with GM Mitch Kupchak, captured on television, after Howard was ejected from his last Lakers game? "I told Mitch, 'Man, we got to do something about these refs!' and everybody assumed I was going off on him." . . . The speeding ticket issued to Howard at 2 a.m., 17 hours before a Hawks elimination game in April, which they lost? "People thought I was at a club or something. I was driving from my house in Suwanee to my condo in Buckhead because it's closer to the arena."

This summer he finally found someone to give him the benefit of the doubt. On June 20, Howard was walking out of L.A. Fitness in Atlanta, swaddled in Hawks sweats, when Michael Jordan called. The voice took Howard back to his last high school game, the 2004 Jordan Brand Classic at Maryland. Through a mouthful of



braces Howard thanked Jordan for lifting the NBA, and Jordan told the earnest phenom he could hoist the league higher. “Why are you so pissed off?” Jordan asked, 13 years later. *I thought that’s what people wanted*, Howard thought. “When you’re pissed, you’re out of control, and you’re not focusing on your shots or your free throws or the right type of defense,” Jordan went on. “Why play pissed when you can play determined?” Jordan, the Hornets’ owner, explained that he was bringing Howard to Charlotte to learn the difference.

This summer Howard bought a 700-acre farm in north Georgia where he relaxes with the cows, hogs, turkeys and deer. He is particularly fond of the donkeys, which keep the coyotes away. To prepare for retirement, Howard has written what he calls his “99-year plan,” in which he hopes to become Farmer Dwight. “My dad grew up in the country, and whenever we drove to my grandma’s house, I was always fascinated by the farms we passed, how neat everything was,” Howard recalls. “I want to go out there, milk the cows, work the field. I’ll be able to tell you what watermelon came from what row.”

He has a garden on his estate in Suwanee where he grows squash, okra, tomatoes, figs, eggplant and cantaloupe. He proudly offers visitors samples of his fresh produce. In July, Howard visited the farm and mulled what crops he wants to plant. He likes what he hears about Moringa, coined the Miracle Tree because of its medicinal properties. “Everything is going to be organic, no pesticides,” Howard says. “We want to be in grocery stores, but I’d also like to organize a program where agriculture students at Georgia and Georgia Tech can come up and study the soil. This will be a place for my kids and their kids but also the community.”

Nineteen years after the SI cover story “*Where’s Daddy?*” athletes remain reluctant to recognize out-of-wedlock children. But Howard is eager to talk about Braylon, who wants a fresh pair of Steph Curry’s Under Armour shoes (“He won’t wear the D Howards”); Jayde, who begs to play with his pet boa constrictors; and Dwight III, who is probably watching *LEGO Batman* for the 51st time. All of his five kids live with their mothers—two in Florida, two in L.A., one in Houston—and share his last name. They FaceTime and text and visit Atlanta every off-season. They drink slushies and watch movies, appropriate since their taste in food and cinema is not much different from their father’s. When they tell him they love him, he turns away, so they can’t see him tear up. “It’s a tough situation, obviously,” Howard says. “I should have been more responsible. I messed up. I sinned. But I won’t look at any of them as a mistake. They’re all a blessing to me.”

This summer he took the group to Aspen, Colo., and rented a house for a week. They went hiking, fly fishing and whitewater rafting. They hit the rodeo. Since he couldn't handle the whole brood on his own, he asked his mom to tag along. "I told my parents before last season, 'Whatever happened in my past, we need each other,' " Howard says. " 'We have to stick together, and you have to allow me to be who I am.' " He is still single—"I think he's just now stabilized himself to the point where he can properly assess relationships," Simmons says—married to God and basketball. He often speaks as if he is on a pulpit, lottery picks scattered in the pews: "Find love, but fall in love with yourself first. Don't get guarded, but protect your heart, because it's the most valuable thing. And if Grandma tells you she wants another house because she cooked you all that food, think twice before getting her the house."

Howard is considering suing some of his former associates, but he is not ready to divulge names or make public allegations. He is rehiring Aaron Goodwin, his original agent, because he appreciates Goodwin's blunt honesty in addition to his deft marketing. Goodwin agreed to return after Deebo downsized his unwieldy circle. The revamped crew includes Justin Zormelo, skills coach to John Wall, and Ed Downs, personal trainer for Chris Bosh. The first time Downs dug his hands into Howard's hips, the 265 pounder nearly leaped off the massage table. "He was so tight," Downs says, "so stiff." Anyone who watched Howard over the past five years has seen what Downs felt. The prescription, instead of more 100-pound dumbbell presses, was band work and deep-tissue massage, with flexibility and balance training.

While Downs streamlines Howard's body for the modern era, Zormelo attempts to expand his game. During a summer workout at Norcross High, Zormelo force-feeds Howard inside the three-point line, simulating pocket passes and transition opportunities. Howard takes one hard dribble and surges to the rim, converting lefty floaters and reverse layups. "Come on, Kemba!" Howard chirps. Zormelo stifles a laugh at the mention of Hornets point guard Kemba Walker. Even in the midst of a grueling drill, Howard cannot help but insert comic relief. His jester grin, easily mistaken for a sign of apathy, is actually the opposite. Like Kobe's jutted jaw and Kevin Garnett's primal roar, the grin is the most obvious evidence of his engagement. The trouble comes when the humor goes.

Howard refuses to acknowledge that this season marks his last chance for a revival, but he believes it is his best one. Charlotte's coach is Steve Clifford, the Superman

whisperer who followed Howard from Orlando to Los Angeles as an assistant. When they talk, Howard cannot help but compare Walker with Jameer Nelson, Nic Batum with Hedo Turkoglu, Marvin Williams with Rashard Lewis, Michael Kidd-Gilchrist with Mickaël Piétrus. Howard is forever straining to recapture the Magic. Wherever he goes, fans invariably ask, “Why did you leave Orlando? You had everything you wanted.” He is still searching for a suitable answer.

“I don’t think it has to be any different than it was,” Clifford says. The coach is well aware of basketball’s evolution and Howard’s effort to update his repertoire. If Clifford visited the Buckhead condo, he’d notice a photo of Howard’s first made three-pointer from 2007, a source of pride and motivation (one of five he has converted in 56 career attempts). But Clifford is not asking his center to start firing from 30 feet. He maintains, as Van Gundy did, that Howard can create treys with deep post touches and quick rolls, which force rotations and scramble defenses. “I can’t touch the top of the backboard, but I can damn sure touch right under the top of the backboard,” Howard crows. “Whatever I lost, whatever was taken from me, I want to get it back.”

Who knows whether that’s possible for the Hornets’ oldest player, hauling enough baggage to buckle even the broadest shoulders. After his session at Norcross, Howard steers his top-down Rolls-Royce convertible along Peachtree Industrial Boulevard, and a Cadillac sedan weaves through traffic to catch up, at one point veering off the road. The driver just wants a glimpse of the sculpted specimen who not long ago was the baddest dude in the NBA. But within a couple of blocks the sun disappears behind gunmetal clouds and the sky opens. Howard pulls over and closes the roof on his Rolls. He is hidden behind tinted windows as he turns into his gated estate, where he will eat his squash and pet his snakes and say his prayers, maybe in the room with the Skittles pinball machine.

He will not pray for 20 and 14, for All-Star votes and endorsement deals. He will pray for what he needs. “Confidence,” Superman says, “and peace.”