

APRIL 2010

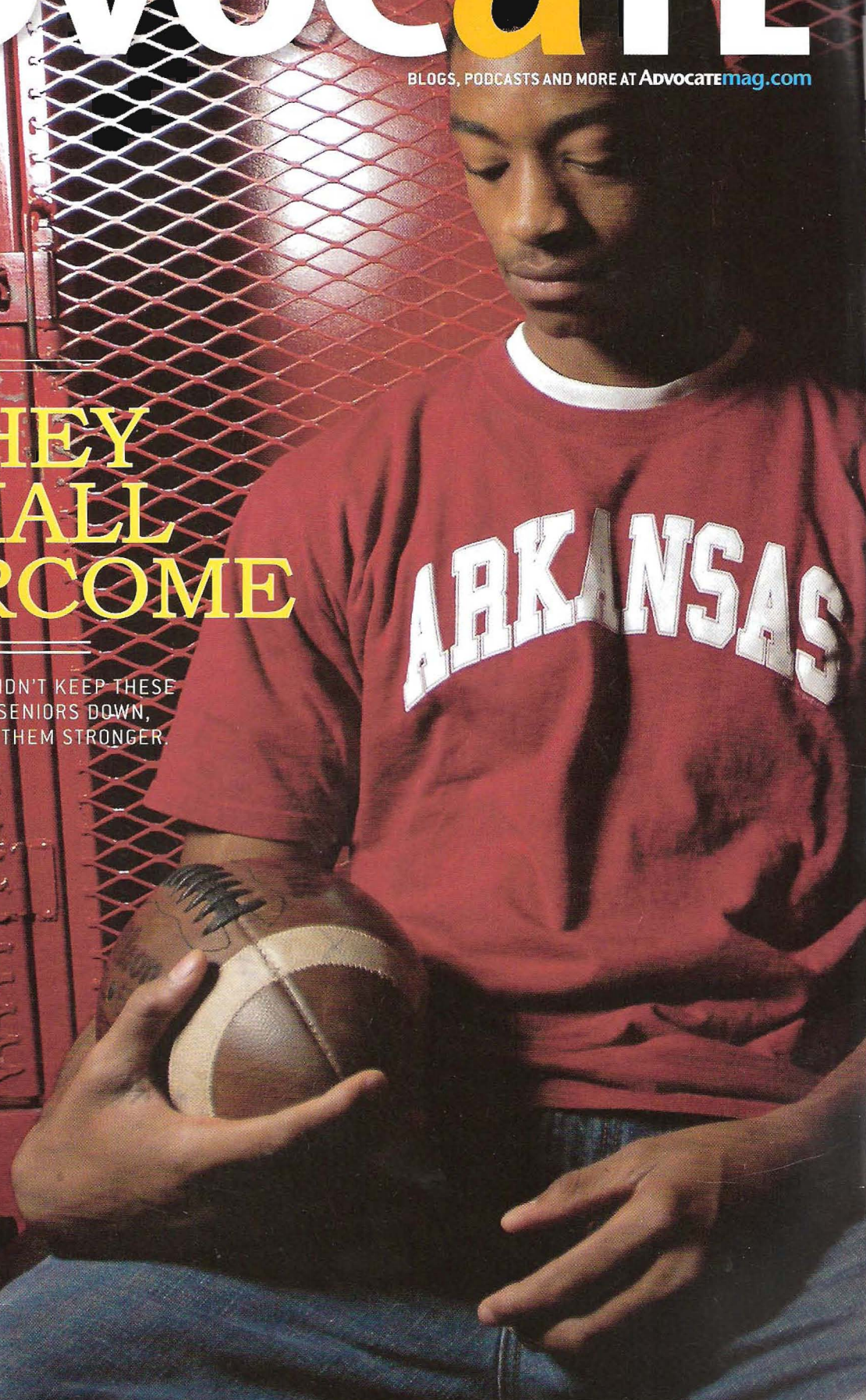
Advocate

LIVING LOCAL IN LAKE HIGHLAND

BLOGS, PODCASTS AND MORE AT AdvocateMag.com

THEY SHALL OVERCOME

TOUGH TIMES DIDN'T KEEP THESE
HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS DOWN,
BUT ONLY MADE THEM STRONGER.



THE
Measure
OF
Success

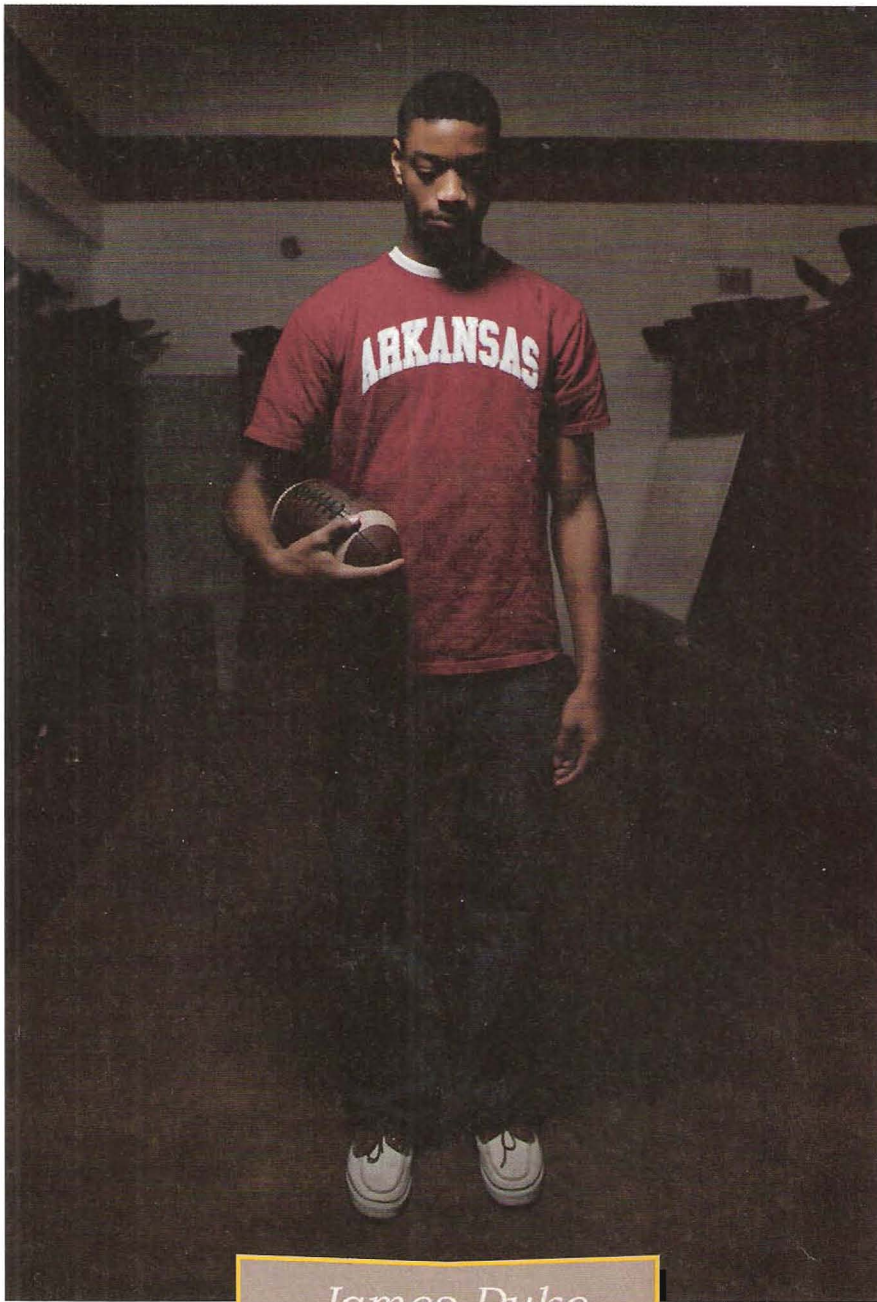
BY CHRISTINA HUGHES BABB
PORTRAITS BY CAN TÜRKYILMAZ

*"Success is to be measured
not so much by the position
that one has reached in life
as by the obstacles
which he has overcome."*

So said Booker T. Washington, who was born a slave and died an orator, author and educator.

If his words are true, then these high school seniors already have achieved more success than many of us will ever realize. Despite the obstacles in their way, they have pressed forward.

Walking across the stage at graduation will not be the finish line. For these neighborhood students, it will only be the beginning.



James Duke

James Duke is nervous. The problem? Two universities have offered him an athletic scholarship, and he has to choose one of them.

Today.

Not a terrible problem to have, especially when you consider the young football player's roots — if not for sports and the generosity of others, he wouldn't have this decision to make, he says.

By the time he was in fifth-grade, Duke says, he was headed down a destructive path. He had no male role model, no stability and no good reason to stay out of trouble, he says.

"I was young. We were constantly

moving from school to school. My dad was in jail the first 13 years of my life. I was always getting in trouble, stealing and always in the principal's office," he says.

Around that time, Duke wound up living at Family Gateway. It was during his stay at the homeless shelter that he found a reason turn his life around.

On Wednesdays, while living in the shelter and later in transitional apartments funded by Gateway, the 12-year-old participated in Rainbow Days programs for at-risk children.

"We did arts and crafts — I made stuff for my mom — and we got to play basketball. I think that's where my sports

career sort of took off."

He joined a basketball team, and though he shortly had to move again, a seed had been planted.

"Sports changed my life," he says.

Duke's mom, Tonya Smith, worked hard to get an apartment in Lake Highlands because she wanted her son to attend Lake Highlands High School, he says. He made friends and joined the football team during his year at the Freshman Center, but soon financial problems claimed the family's home.

That's when another Lake Highlands family stepped in.

While coaching his son's eighth-grade baseball team, Mark Dann met Duke.

"My son [Jason Dann] and James both went to Merriman Park [Elementary]. James just walked on the field one day and asked to play," Dann recalls.

The boys formed a friendship and played freshman football together. When it became apparent Duke had to leave the district because of his impending move, Mark and his wife, Ginger, offered to let him live with them.

"His mom agreed — he lived with us during the week and visited her on weekends," Dann says. "We had a sort of guardianship agreement that would allow him to continue school at Lake Highlands.

"We felt James had a lot of potential — he hung around with the right crowd, he worked hard, and he was just a good kid. We didn't want him to lose that. And we didn't want to lose him on the football team, either."

Before his junior year, Duke's mom found another place to live in Lake Highlands. The Danns bought some furniture for the apartment, and they continue to pay for Duke's cell phone and gym membership, Duke says.

He moved back home, but that has its share of tribulation. It's not easy to study in the crowded apartment, Duke says. Duke, his mom, his 19-year-old brother, and his sister and her 1- and 2-year-old children all live there.

"It's kind of tough, but you learn to block it out," Duke says.

Despite the noise, Duke is glad to have his family around. His mom "just about cried", he says, when she learned about the scholarship.

In the end, he chose a full scholarship to Harding University in Arkansas.