



## **Centerville**

Jeff Rud

Reading Level: 4.5

978-1-4598-1031-0 PB

### **Book Summary**

Jake has dreams of being an NBA star. So when a coach from an elite private school invites him to join the program and play with some of the best basketball players in the country, Jake cannot believe his luck. Although once he arrives, Jake feels more like his luck has run out. No one is there to meet him at the airport. The house he's placed in is a far cry from the dorm rooms in the pamphlet. Even the meals are lacking. The only thing which seems real is the court the team gets to play on. But soon enough, Jake discovers that though his surroundings are real, the team, his place on it and Coach Stone are all far from what he expected.

*Centerville* examines the trust people will put in others when promises are made and how devastating it can be when reality doesn't live up to expectations.

### **Prereading Ideas**

- Elite athletic academies are becoming more prevalent in North America. Find a couple of these schools and look into cost and promises.
- How do we know who to trust? What leads you to trust one person and not another?
- People often hide the fact that everything is not as they believed it would be. Why do we do this? Embarrassment? Hope that everything will get better? Fear of being a "complainer"? Discuss why we keep some things to ourselves when it is potentially dangerous.

## Connecting to the Text

### Character

- Jake believes he is going to a school where he will play with the best basketball players in the country. When he arrives, he discovers that he is not at the same level as a number of the players on the team. This could be seen as a “big fish, small pond” situation. Does Jake seem egotistical? Or is he simply basing his belief in his abilities on the level of competition he has faced in the past?
- Coach Stone is a scam artist. He is selling an idea, but the reality is something totally different. Why would someone do what Coach Stone does in Centerville? What does he have to gain?
- Billy's character is interesting in that his reaction to the discovery of Coach Stone's scam is much more extreme than Jake's. As an assignment, have your students create a backstory for Billy. Why would he be so afraid of his parent's reaction? What has happened before that would lead him to believe he had run out of options? Try writing the scene where he finally convinces his parents to send him to Centerville.

### English

- In novels, there must be some sense of rising action. Rising action is the process where the protagonist's situation slowly becomes more difficult and, possibly, dangerous. In *Centerville*, what is the rising action? Map out three parts of the novel where the situation becomes worse for Jake.
- When rising action is a process in a novel, there will inevitably be a final showdown. Ask your students where the final showdown is between Jake and Coach Stone. Ask how they would deal with the situation and how things came to the point they did.
- One of the first indications that all is not as it seems to be is in chapter 2. When Jake arrives at the airport, he receives a phone call.

*“Jake?” said a hurried voice. “Coach Stone here. Look, there’s been a mix-up with the drivers today. We’re going to have to get you to take the bus out here to Benson.”*

*“Umm, okay,” I said. “How do I do that?”*

*“Look for the ground transportation ticket window,” Coach said. “It’s not far from the luggage-pickup area. Then buy a ticket to Benson Station. I’ll pick you up when you get here. It shouldn’t take long.”*

*Feeling a little relieved, I said, “Okay, thanks, Coach. See you soon.” He had already hung up.*

Ask your students why they think Jake is relieved. What would your students do in the same situation?

### Health

- The boys are given cereal and not much more to eat on a number of occasions. Have your students look into proper nutrition for athletes. Have them investigate their favorite athlete's diets, meals and pre-game routines.

- Jake has some serious difficulties sleeping while he worries about getting into the game, being a part of the team, and confronting Coach Stone. Have your students examine the effects of sleep on learning, athletics and mood. As a bonus, have them study how anxiety can effect sleep habits.

### **Social Studies**

When Billy is first described in chapter 2, he is: *The only kid [Jake] was absolutely certain [he] was better than...the gangly forward from Texas with the bright-red hair and freckles. He was pretty uncoordinated, but at least he was six foot nine.* Then in chapter 4 Billy is unable to handle the workout: *Billy immediately rushed to the big green trash bin near the gym door and threw up in it.* Soon after this Billy is *sitting glumly at the end of the bench. His heavily freckled face looked disengaged* (chapter 7). Billy is seen as being out of his element from the very beginning of the novel. He quickly becomes more and more “disengaged” and “despondent.” He is showing many of the signs of being suicidal. Discuss other signs that someone might be suicidal and what steps friends and relatives should take.

### **Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions**

1. Jake seems very naïve at the beginning of the text and unwilling to openly question the inconsistencies between what Coach Stone sold as Centerville Prep and what the reality is. Have the students discuss how they research topics related to their lives. What sites do they begin with? What sites do they trust? How do they know the information they are getting is correct?
2. Jake is a middling basketball player. He's not the best and not the worst. There is a role for these types of players on every team. Have your students look into the players on their favorite sports teams and examine the steady, always ready to play, non-super star athletes.
3. At the end of chapter 8, Jake is unable to sleep while he's trying to make decisions. *I decided to sleep on it. But it took at least an hour of tossing and turning before I drifted off. So many scenarios were running through my mind—none of them ending in a positive way.* What things might keep your students up at night tossing and turning and worrying? What have they found helps them beat these thoughts and get the sleep they need?
4. The relationship between Jake and the other players is tenuous. They give hints to Jake early on that the school is not totally as advertised. Still, Jake looks for their respect, even while he is consistently on the outside. Have your students discuss what it is that leads us to seek acceptance from others, even those who obviously do not respect us.
5. Coach Stone is a fraud. Have your students ever met someone who lies for their own advancement? If not for their own advancement, then for what reason? What techniques do they use to discern if someone is telling the truth?

## Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I wrote this book first and foremost because I am a long-time high school basketball coach and way, way back, I was a high school basketball player. Back then, I would have appreciated finding any novel centered around the game I love. The subject matter is very familiar to me and it is something I am passionate about.

The specific plot for *Centerville*—about a boy who seeks an opportunity to improve his basketball skills and get noticed by college scouts by transferring to a prep school far away from home—was inspired by stories I hear about regularly as a high school coach. In real life, sometimes such moves work well for students and their families. Other times they don't.

This book has two main themes. First, not everything is always how it seems or is portrayed and it is important for students and their families to make key decisions with their eyes fully open. Second, sometimes in life we are faced with difficult decisions. And when faced with those decisions, it is important to do what is right, not what is most convenient. This book follows Jake Burnett, the main character, as he navigates his way through both these themes.

Jeff Rud

## Resources

The Science of the Perfect Basketball Shot

[www.sciencemag.org/news/2011/08/mathematics-basketball](http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2011/08/mathematics-basketball)

How to tell if someone is lying

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xVx\\_fzJKx0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xVx_fzJKx0)

Suicide, signs and help

[http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/?search=y&getfields=description&q=suicide&site=kh&client=ms\\_p\\_en&output=xml\\_no\\_dtd&gsaRequestId=7457070404200936186&filter=0](http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/?search=y&getfields=description&q=suicide&site=kh&client=ms_p_en&output=xml_no_dtd&gsaRequestId=7457070404200936186&filter=0)

Elite Sports Schools Truths and Lies

[http://espn.go.com/espn/commentary/story/\\_/page/keown-110823/elite-travel-baseball-basketball-teams-make-youth-sports-industrial-complex](http://espn.go.com/espn/commentary/story/_/page/keown-110823/elite-travel-baseball-basketball-teams-make-youth-sports-industrial-complex)

## Author Biography

**Jeff Rud** was a print journalist in western Canada for twenty-eight years, twenty of them as a sports writer. He is currently executive director of communications and strategy in British Columbia's Office of the Representative for Children and Youth. This is Jeff's eleventh book and his third novel in the Orca Sports series. He lives in Victoria, British Columbia, with his wife, Lana, and likes to coach high-school basketball in his spare time.