

Action Baby, Action!

FADE IN:

Roll opening credits to the funkalicious sounds of The Isley Brothers' 1975 classic Fight the Power.

EXT. CITY BRIDGE, CINCINNATI - DAY

A beat-up '64 Riviera fights rainy traffic. Other cars make it clear - we're smack in the glorious and gritty 1970s.

INT. BUICK - CONTINUOUS

Driving is CARMEN ROMANO (40s) a white guy with that former athlete look, still fit but creaky now and often pained. Where did the years go? And how in hell did they lead here?

He chews a pen, eyes flicking between the road and the sports betting lines on the newspaper he holds against the wheel.

EXT. CINCINNATI - CONTINUOUS

The Buick crosses the Ohio River into rough and tumble downtown Cincy. The sights worsen until he eventually reaches a big old brick edifice - QUEEN CITY HIGH SCHOOL.

EXT. PARKING LOT, HIGH SCHOOL - CONTINUOUS

Coach gets out and tries to unlock his trunk. Stuck. Again. He lifts his sweet 70s boot and kicks the bumper. It pops open - to a trunk full of basketballs.

End credits. INSERT: Cincinnati, 1975

INT. HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - DAY

The gym is as run-down as the neighborhood. It's filled with desks as students, mostly black, take exams.

Coach breaks the silence backing in through the door while carrying way too many basketballs, that sports page in his teeth. An old black lady TEACHER glares.

TEACHER
Shhhhhhhhhh.

Coach's eyes flash apologetic.

Scanning the room, he finds the mile-wide grin of CHARLIE BARNES (18) a handsome black kid wearing a varsity hoops jacket. Not a mean bone in his body and nothing but trouble. Never met a party he didn't crash.

He's daydreaming - chewing his pencil's eraser and rolling his ever-present basketball around the floor with his feet.

Coach shoots him a 'get serious' look. Charlie straightens up, nods serious, and flashes a cheesy thumbs-up.

Coach reaches a door labeled 'Locker Room' and, fumbling for his keys, his pyramid of basketballs hits the floor.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
Coach Romano! We're taking exams!

He corrals the balls into the locker room and ducks in.

CHARLIE - laughs, then looks around, bored again. His eyes find a girl a few seats behind him. The way she leans on her desk produces enticing cleavage. Charlie's eyes linger.

TEACHER (O.C.) (CONT'D)
Okay students. Ten seconds! Nine...
eight... seven... six...

Charlie checks his exam paper, still nibbling his eraser.

EXAM PAPER - his answer bubbles form a perfect zig-zag pattern down the page. Not a question read.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
Five... four... three...

He bites off the eraser and drops it into his hand.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
Two... one...

He spins in his seat and launches the eraser in a perfect jump shot... that disappears right between those big boobs.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
Time!

Music fades into the squeak of sneakers on hardwood.

INT. GYM - NIGHT

A game is on. Bleachers stuffed with a boisterous crowd.

GAME ACTION: Flash cuts of zip passes, dunks, and deep jumpers - but it's almost all Charlie. He's that good.

COACH - roams the sideline in a frumpy sport coat and wielding his ever-present rolled-up sports page. He barks at the refs, but mostly just watches Charlie like everyone else.

EXT. PARKING LOT, HIGH SCHOOL - NIGHT

A crowd with umbrellas at the gym's entrance, braving the rain to see the show.

A '75 Rolls Royce glides into the lot, stealing attention from the game inside. One enterprising YOUNG HUSTLER (15) armed with a flimsy umbrella, heads for it.

A sharp dressed but kinda greasy white guy emerges. "DIRTY" EARL CAAR (60s) is all energy - talking fast, loud and slick.

YOUNG HUSTLER
Say Jack, that's a baaaad ride.

DIRTY EARL
You got that right.

The hustler covers him with his umbrella.

YOUNG HUSTLER
You lookin' for tickets, my man?

DIRTY EARL
I am, indeed. But I think I'll get mine at the door.

YOUNG HUSTLER
Sold out, Jack.

DIRTY EARL
You gotta be shittin' me!

YOUNG HUSTLER
Ain't no thing. I got you covered.

He pulls out two tickets.

YOUNG HUSTLER (CONT'D)
Fifty bucks.

DIRTY EARL
Fifty? Well, I'll be a sonofabitch!
That's a high school game, my
friend. Ain't the Beantown Celtics.

The hustler points to the crowd still trying to get in.

YOUNG HUSTLER
Sold out high school game. That's
Charlie playin' in there.

Dirty Earl pulls out a big wad of bills...

YOUNG HUSTLER (CONT'D)
And I'll even watch yo' ride. No
extra charge.

...and peels off a twenty.

DIRTY EARL
I'll give you twenty.

YOUNG HUSTLER
You that cat from TV. Dirty Earl.

DIRTY EARL
The real deal. Down and dirty.

They swap the bill for the tickets.

DIRTY EARL (CONT'D)
And hey - Jack. Don't fuck with the
Rolls.

Once he heads inside, the kid puts his hands to the window to peer inside - a German Shepherd nearly jumps through the glass, barking viciously. The kid bolts, terrified.

INT. GYM - NIGHT

GAME ACTION: More Charlie, having his way...

CROWD - mostly black faces. Among them is a fragile old black woman, watching proudly. This is NANNA.

DIRTY EARL - squeezed right in among the locals.

CHARLIE - steals the ball and heads toward an easy lay-up...

COACH
All the way! All the way!

...but instead, stops 25 feet away, launches a jumper and turns around before it comes down - raising his arms. SWISH! The crowd roars, but Coach waves Charlie to the sideline.

COACH (CONT'D)
What kinda bullshit is that? You
got an open floor, you take the lay-
up. Quit clownin' out here.

CHARLIE
Coach, I take the lay-up I gots to
run all the ways down and then all
the ways back. I'll get tired, man.

COACH
That's not funny.

Charlie points at CHARLENE, a cute black cheerleader.

CHARLIE
You see Charlene?

COACH

Yeah. So?

CHARLIE

I gotta save me some energy.

Charlie offers a hand to slap five, but Coach shoves him off.

EXT. GYM - NIGHT

As the crowd files out, Coach and Charlie help Nanna into a taxi. It's cold but Charlie still wears just his uniform.

NANNA

Now you get home early, Charlie.

CHARLIE

I will.

NANNA

You got tests to be studyin' on.

CHARLIE

I know.

Charlie gives her a kiss...

NANNA

(to Coach)

You make sure Coach?

COACH

I will.

A Cadillac distracts Coach. Two tough-looking HOODS get out.

NANNA

Gots to look after that boy, Coach.
He get wild he ain't looked after.

Coach squeezes her hand and moves to close the door, rushing.

COACH

I know. We're gonna talk to some of
those college scouts now, Nanna.

CHARLIE

(to the driver)

It's the Arbor Hill Projects.
Building Six, just past the courts.

TAXI DRIVER

Ten bucks.

CHARLIE
 (searching his pockets)
 Don't drop her on the corner, get
 her all the way to the front. And
 watch until she's inside.

Charlie only has five bucks. Coach notices...

NANNA
 Charlie gonna get him some college.

COACH
 He sure is.
 (to Charlie)
 I got it, get inside and shower up.

Charlie heads in. Coach pulls out cash while glancing to the hoods - leaning on the Cadillac and looking right back at him. He nods, then hands the driver a ten and hustles inside.

INT. GYM - CONTINUOUS

A crowd lingers... including some SCOUTS. Their jackets sport big-time affiliations - Indiana, Kentucky, Syracuse, etc.

Coach enters, familiar and friendly.

SYRACUSE SCOUT (GINO)
 Kid can play, Carm. Reminds me of
 another Cincy kid I scouted back in
 the day.

COACH
 Nah. This one can't miss.

INDIANA SCOUT
 Any trouble?

COACH
 Not at all. Sweet, sweet kid.

KENTUCKY SCOUT
 He getting any help with those
 SATs? Scores don't qualify.

COACH
 He'll get there. He's working his
 ass off.

DIRTY EARL (O.C.)
 Carmen "Kid" Romano!

Dirty Earl glides toward them, flashing teeth, hand extended.

DIRTY EARL (CONT'D)
 Dirty Earl, gents. Pardon the interruption, but I just have to introduce myself to Coach here.

He shakes all hands and smoothly passes out business cards.

DIRTY EARL (CONT'D)
 I personally witnessed this bastard drop thirty-five on the Big O himself one snowy night right here in Cincy. Shoulda seen it boys, one for the ages.

No one knows what to make of this force of nature. He slings an arm around Coach like they're old pals.

DIRTY EARL (CONT'D)
 One for the ages tonight too. That boy Charlie can hoop. Sure like to make his acquaintance, Coach. I'm sure all these fellas in their college coats would as well.

THE HOODS - enter and sit on the bleachers. Coach notices.

COACH
 Yeah, I'll get him right out here.

Coach pulls the Syracuse scout aside. This is Gino...

COACH (CONT'D)
 Hey, Gino.

GINO
 You know Dirty Earl?

COACH
 Never seen him before.

GINO
 You seen his commercials though?

COACH
 Sure, but I didn't know he was a real guy.

He glances at the hoods again, then taps Gino with his paper.

COACH (CONT'D)
 Hey, you guys got St. John's next. What do you think?

Gino's a bit disappointed but not surprised.

GINO
 I dunno, Carm.

COACH
Come on, Gino. I'm just asking your opinion.

GINO
Rogan twisted a knee today. If he can't play, well...

COACH
Is he gonna play?

GINO
How 'bout puttin' a word in for us with the kid?

COACH
Yeah, of course. I'd do that anyway.

GINO
Rogan's out.

COACH
Great. Thanks, Gino. I'll get the kid right out here for ya.

Gino subtly indicates the hoods...

GINO
You alright with those guys?

Coach points his paper at the hoods and puts a hand up to buy himself five minutes.

COACH
Them? Oh yeah. Just buddies from the neighborhood. No problem.

Coach rushes off. Gino rejoins the Dirty Earl show...

DIRTY EARL
Any you gents in the market for an automobile? Could all be drivin' yourselves home in style. I'll give ya' the rock bottom, down and dirty deal. That's guaranteed.

Behind him, the hoods stand and head to the locker room.

INT. LOCKER ROOM - NIGHT

The team grooves to the Ohio Players' *Skin Tight* as they get dressed and celebrate their win.

Charlie puffs out smoke and passes a joint to a teammate.

CHARLIE
Oh, mercy. That shit is baaaad.

COACH
(at the door)
Charlie! Hustle up! You got scouts waiting to meet you. And goddammit, put that shit away!

INT. COACH'S OFFICE -

Coach bursts in and dials the phone. He pulls out his wallet and tosses half the cash into his desk - then a bit more.

INT. GYM -

As the hoods, LENNY and TERRY, reach the locker room, Charlie and his teammates come out. Charlie notices them, but then...

DIRTY EARL (O.C.)
Charlie Barnes!

INT. COACH'S OFFICE -

The door flies open - kicked in by the hoods.

COACH
I'm calling Papa right now. Relax fellas, we'll work it out.

Lenny hangs up the phone. Terry slams Coach against the wall.

TERRY
Papa don't wanna be disturbed.

Coach is big, but these guys are total goons.

COACH
Come on, Terry, you know I always pay up.

TERRY
Ain't paid in weeks.

COACH
Eventually, I mean. Papa knows.

Coach pulls bills from his wallet again...

COACH (CONT'D)
Look, here's a start. Two, two-thirty. He'll be happy with that.

Terry pockets it, then slams Coach against the wall again.

TERRY
That ain't the arrangement.

COACH
Come on, Terry. This is stupid.

Lenny rifles the desk and discovers the extra cash.

LENNY
What's this? Petty cash?

COACH
There, another three hundred.

TERRY
Still short.

Terry takes Coach's hand and bends back a finger. Coach GROANS in pain, just as...

CHARLIE (O.C.)
Yo, Coach, you still holdin' my
three hundred?

The hoods look over to Charlie - gripping a baseball bat. A few big teammates behind him also brandish bats. Suddenly, the room is very, very small. Terry lets Coach go.

COACH
Yeah, Charlie. Lenny's got it.

Charlie snatches the bills from Lenny and pockets them.

CHARLIE
Right on, Lenny.
(puts out his palm)
Gimme some skin.

COACH
(cutting him off)
Nah, these guys gotta go.

Coach steps between them all, edging a path for the hoods.

TERRY
Papa ain't gonna like this.

COACH
(to his players)
Thanks guys, but that was no big
deal. I had it under control.

CHARLIE
Sure thing, Coach. No sweat.

Coach ushers them out of his office.