

# As rare as a white Harlem Globetrotter

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If they aren't already eyeing him suspiciously because of the tattoo carved along his hairline, strangers inevitably give Seth Franco funny looks whenever he tells them what he does for a living: "I play for the Harlem Globetrotters."

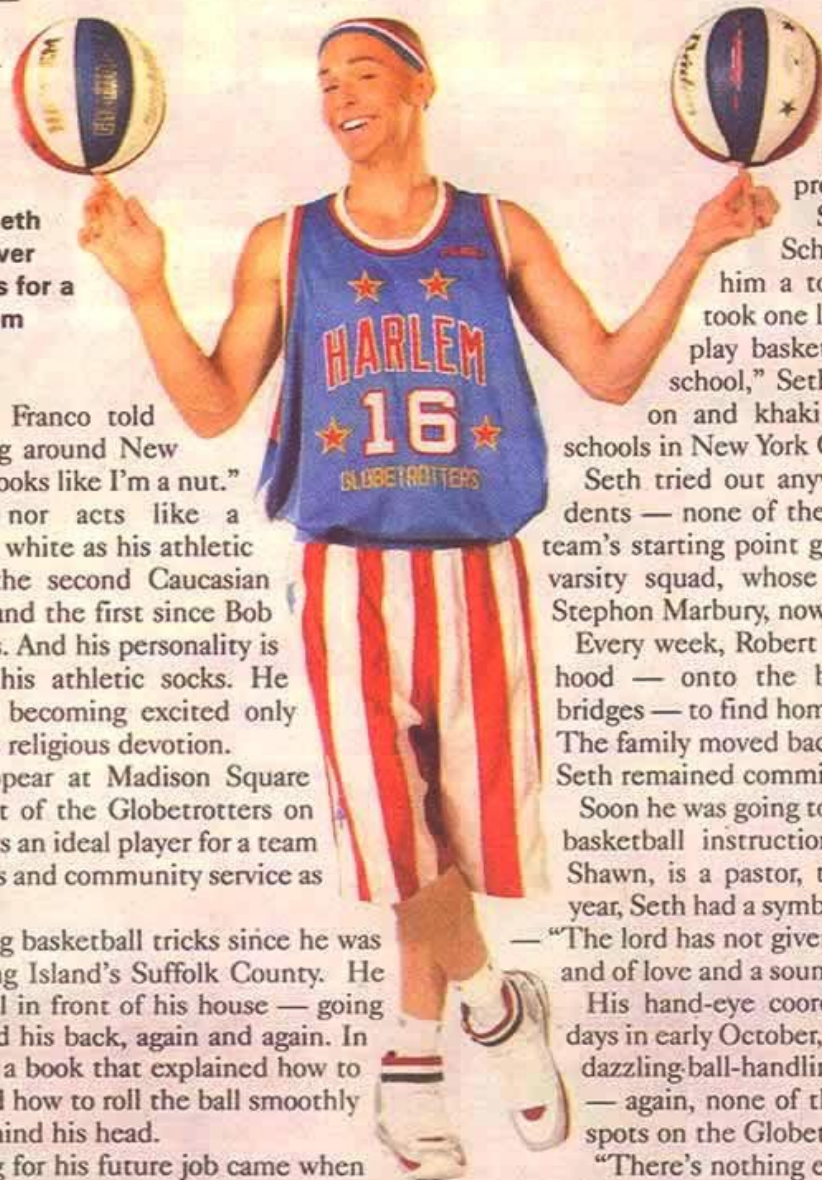
"They can't believe it," Franco told amNewYork while shuttling around New York City last week. "I get looks like I'm a nut."

Franco neither looks nor acts like a Globetrotter. His skin is as white as his athletic socks, making him only the second Caucasian Globetrotter in history — and the first since Bob Karstens in the early 1940's. And his personality is about as flashy as, well, his athletic socks. He speaks in a near whisper, becoming excited only when he's talking about his religious devotion.

But Franco, who will appear at Madison Square Garden along with the rest of the Globetrotters on Friday night, is in many ways an ideal player for a team as dedicated to tricky stunts and community service as it is to basketball.

Franco has been practicing basketball tricks since he was a fifth-grader living in Long Island's Suffolk County. He spent hours dribbling a ball in front of his house — going through his legs and around his back, again and again. In the local library, he dug up a book that explained how to spin a ball on his finger, and how to roll the ball smoothly along his shoulders and behind his head.

But Franco's best training for his future job came when



he was a sophomore in high school. His father, Robert, a pastor, took over a "homeless ministry" in Coney Island and moved his family to the local projects.

Seth enrolled at Lincoln High School, where a school coach gave him a tour before the school year. "He took one look at me and said if I wanted to play basketball, I should go to a different school," Seth recalled. "I had a flannel shirt on and khaki pants in one of the toughest schools in New York City."

Seth tried out anyway, and beat out 90 other students — none of them white — for a spot as the JV team's starting point guard. (He wasn't needed on the varsity squad, whose point guard at the time was Stephon Marbury, now a Knicks superstar.)

Every week, Robert brought Seth into the neighborhood — onto the boardwalk, into tunnels, under bridges — to find homeless people and give them food. The family moved back to Long Island after a year, but Seth remained committed to charity and Christianity.

Soon he was going to the library to read the Bible, not basketball instructional manuals. His older brother Shawn, is a pastor, too, as is their grandfather. Last year, Seth had a symbol representing his favorite psalm — "The lord has not given me a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and a sound mind" — tattooed on his scalp.

His hand-eye coordination is sound, too. Over 10 days in early October, Franco, thanks in large part to his dazzling ball-handling skills, beat out 40 other players — again, none of them white — to win one of four spots on the Globetrotters.

"There's nothing else I'd rather do," he said.

Franco, whose scalp tattoo is masked by his headband in the photo above, will perform with the Globetrotters on Friday at Madison Square Garden.