

March 18, 1991----

NEW YORK--- Now this is March madness.

It's a creepy trenchcoat afternoon, and you're devouring Shrimp a la Gram-pa and talking basketball at Grampa's Bella Gente restaurant in Greenwich Village.

You could be doing 1,000 other things.

But no.

You have to hear what Al Lewis has to say about Basketball Hall of Famer John "Honey" Russell and failed playground legends.

Lewis is best known for his role as Grandpa Munster on "The Munsters" television series.

He was also Officer Leo Schnauser on "Car 54, Where Are You?" Before that, he worked burlesque houses, vaudeville and traveling medicine shows.

Lewis is less known as a comedy-club owner, restaurateur and a lecturer about black history in America. He's also one of the nation's premier high school basketball scouts. Hmm.

"I'm the most knowledgeable man of roundball that ever lived," he says. "If you put together the top 20 college coaches - Dean Smith, Don Haskins, John Wooden - they have not seen as many high school games as I have.

"Name somebody I haven't seen. The Big O. Connie Hawkins at Boys' High (in New York City). Bill Walton (Helix High School, San Diego). . ."

Lewis is 81. His voice sounds like a long whistle in a wooden gym. His creased face appears to have met a few Bill Cartwright elbows.

He wears a big, hand-carved bolo tie holder made of shed antler. (Near Jackson Hole, Wyo., Boy Scouts walk through the forest and gather shed antler scraps, which are sent to a sculptor in Oregon.) Lewis collects these bolos.

The ties reflect a process that is endearing to Lewis - the shaping of something small into something great.

Lewis has been scouting high school basketball talent since 1935. He has seen

4,000-5,000 games. He has coached Stacey Augmon and Jud Buechler in Los Angeles high school summer leagues. He played "passionately but poorly" on New York City playgrounds. Back when he was Alexander Meister, Lewis started as a 6-1 forward at Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn.

"I love the challenge of trying to predict what a kid can be three years down the road," Lewis says. "I'm a genius at that. I deal in parables. Say I had eight tigers in one large cage. Seven of them had eaten the day before, but one hadn't eaten in 14 days. From above them, a 100-pound steak rocked in the middle of the cage. The one who hadn't eaten would have that look in his eye, and everyone else would think, 'He'll get that steak.' That's what I look for - the guy who plays hungry, with passion and pride."

Lewis says physical attributes such as soft hands, long arms and upper-body strength are overrated.

"When I go to a game, I rarely sit," he says. "In high school, they allow you to stand underneath the basket. And then I look at the guy in the eye. I can tell you about his desire. That other stuff is bull."

"There are two areas you cannot coach: the head and the heart. That's what each of us brings to life as individuals. I can teach you the mechanics and fundamentals."

Lewis got his bird-dogging break from former Boston Celtics-Seton Hall coach John "Honey" Russell, who died in 1973. Russell was one of basketball's first scoring guards when he played for the Chicago Bruins and the Cleveland Rosenblums.

"He got me started in all this," Lewis says. "He said, 'I see you at all the games. What do you do?' I said I was an entertainer. He asked me to bird-dog for him. He said, 'You'll save us car fare because every place I go, I see you there.' He told me one rule: 'Don't tell me what the guy can do. Tell me what he can't do and who he did it against.' And that's the one thing I've always done."

Because Lewis is not connected with any university, he has more freedom than college recruiters.

One of his favorite haunts is the Maine Central Institute tournament, which features players who weigh in light on the academic scale.

"We call that a holding tank," Lewis says. "Perry Carter, who plays for Ohio State, I bird-dogged him at MCI. The big advantage I have is my face."

"I have an entree as a personality. And as a personality with no connection to any school, I can come (to any game) any time I want. I don't do anything illegal."

"I don't talk to any player about going to any specific school. I don't have a rating system. But I do write things down and make three-by-five cards."

Lewis says 40 to 50 college coaches call him for advice every year. "I know the strengths and weaknesses of their conferences," he says. "You know what a perfect college recruit is? He learns the system the first year. The second year, he can give you seven to 10 minutes a half. The third year, he starts. The fourth year, he starts. That's a productive recruit."

With such a passion for the sport, why didn't Lewis choose basketball as a career?

"Aw, in high school you have to have a teacher's credential," he says, grumbling. "It's all junk. I made a living as a performer. It was easy to balance the two. Any time I played out of town and did a show at night, I'd go to a high school basketball game in the afternoon."

Lewis always has found purity in the high schools that he doesn't see in the pros.

"This is not said in a negative sense, but professional basketball is not basketball," he says.

"It's entertainment. They break every rule in basketball. They travel on 70 percent of the shots. It is basketball within the confines of entertainment. But they are the most accomplished ballet dancers, gymnasts and acrobats."

Lewis peers out at a rainy Bleeker Street. A few blocks away from Grampa's Bella Gente is the Third Street basketball court, one of New York City's more legendary - albeit pristine - playgrounds.

It's where jazz bassist Jaco Pastorius (of Weather Report) played out the last notes of his life, looking for redemption in basketball he couldn't find elsewhere in life.

New York high schools have bred similar low notes - from Lloyd "Swee'Pea" Daniels, who cut his chops at Andrew Jackson High School on the fringe of the Queens, to Pee Wee Kirkland, who escaped from the Bronx to be drafted by the Bulls. Pee Wee wound up doing big time in a federal penitentiary.

"Nobody breaks my heart," Lewis declares.

"I have no heroes. Zero. None. Human beings have clay feet. You know what? The main thing for a player is to worship himself."