



**Classroom Guide for  
STRONG TO THE HOOP**  
by John Coy  
illustrated by Leslie Jean-Bart

**Reading Level**

\*Reading Level: Grade 2

Interest Level: Grades 1–4

(Reading levels based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 2.5/.5

Lexile™ Measure: 420AD

Scholastic Reading Counts® level: 3.20

**Themes:**

Self-Esteem, Self-Confidence, Siblings, Sports, Competition/Teamwork, African American Interest

**Synopsis**

Ten-year-old James loves to play basketball, and when he gets a chance to join a four-on-four basketball game with his older brother and his friends, James knows he has to show the older boys he can keep up with them. Although James gets off to a rocky start, encouragement from his brother Nate and his own determination help him hold his own and prove he is a contender in the scrappy playground game.

**Teacher Tip**

Girls' and women's basketball has become increasingly popular in recent years. You can tap into this interest among girls by using the book *Allie's Basketball Dream* (written by Barbara E. Barber, illustrated by Darryl Ligan, and published by Lee & Low Books) along with your lessons on *Strong to the Hoop*.

**Background**

Playground basketball is a popular form of recreation in many communities, and especially in urban and inner-city areas. In addition to organized competition sponsored by schools, park districts, youth centers, and religious organizations, many youngsters and adults play neighborhood games in parks, alleys, driveways, backyards, and playgrounds. As noted in a *Booklist* review of *Strong To The Hoop*: "Playground basketball is always about a rite of passage: proving yourself able to play at the next level. It's a metaphor for life in the larger world, of course, but it's also an intense, image-rich world of its own."

John Coy, author of *Strong To The Hoop*, is himself a veteran of many pick-up games at his local YMCA. Coy also uses basketball in writing workshops that he

conducts for children. In his class, Coy has students shoot hoops and then write poems about their experiences while playing the game. You can find out more about the author's Basketball and Poetry Writing Workshop at:  
<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-coywksp.mhtml>

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

Before sharing *Strong To The Hoop* with students, you may wish to tap prior knowledge and motivate students with questions such as the following.

1. Do you have a big brother, big sister, or an older friend that you like to do things with? What are some of the things you do?
2. Have you ever imagined yourself as a star at something? What was it? What do you think you would have to do to achieve this stardom?
3. What do you know about basketball? Do you enjoy playing it? Why? Do you like to watch it? Why?
4. Who are some well-known basketball players you know? How do you think these players got where they are today? What do you think it takes to play basketball well?

### Teacher Tip

Although *Strong To The Hoop* takes place in an outdoor playground, basketball is the world's most popular indoor sport. High school, college, and professional seasons are typically during the winter months in North America. Consider using *Strong To The Hoop* and/or *Allie's Basketball Dream* as part of a focus on winter sports.

### Exploring the Book

Write the book title *Strong To The Hoop* on the chalkboard. Talk about what this phrase might mean. Encourage students to suggest what they think the book will be about. Discuss whether it might be fiction or nonfiction.

Display the book cover and ask students to discuss the picture and talk about what the boys are doing. Then ask students what they notice about the cover illustration. Is the picture a drawing, painting, or photograph? Once it is established that the illustration is a photograph, encourage students to look more closely. Is it one photograph or more than one photograph? If students are not familiar with the term "collage," explain what a collage is and ask students how they think the term applies to the cover illustration.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

Ask students to read to find out who the book is about and what that person achieves in the story. Also have students write one or two questions of their own that they think the story might answer.

After students have read the book, ask them to think about these questions: Could this book have been about me? Why or why not?

**Vocabulary**

STRONG TO THE HOOP contains many words that have special meanings in basketball. Write the following words on the chalkboard and ask students to use each in a sentence about basketball.

board	slide	rim	rebound
hoop	court	dribble	shoot
foul	spin	buzzer	basket
guard	pass	drive	block

Next, have students work in pairs to find each word in a dictionary. Ask them to write two sentences using each word, one sentence about basketball and once sentence about another topic. For example:

The ball hit the rim and bounced off.

The rim of the glass had a small chip in it.

**READING AND RESPONDING****Discussion Questions**

Use these and similar questions to help students review the book and sharpen comprehension. Encourage students to refer to passages in the book and parts of the illustrations that support their answers.

1. What does James imagine when he is practicing by himself?
2. How does James get into the game? How does he feel about playing?
3. Why doesn't Marcus want James to play? How does Marcus treat James during the game?
4. How does Nate treat James? What does this tell you about the kind of brother Nate is?
5. Why does Nate say "Go strong to the hoop"?
6. Why does James have a hard time guarding Marcus?
7. How does James act when he falls? Why?
8. How does James win the game for the Skins?
9. Why doesn't James feel tired as they start the second game?
10. Besides winning, what do you think James got out of playing with the older boys?

**Literature Circles\***

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in developing the roles of the circle members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section of this guide to help group members explore the book.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines that describe how characters in the book are feeling.
- The **Illustrator** might draw a picture of an event in the story that is not illustrated in the book.
- The **Connector** might find other books about basketball, such as ALLIE'S BASKETBALL DREAM, and explore how the stories are similar and different.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the pages that the group is discussing.
- The **Investigator** might find out about current professional men and women basketball players who got started playing in pick-up playground games.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started with Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, oral discussion, or drawings.

1. What is the most exciting part of the story? Why do you think so?
2. What is your impression of playground basketball? What kind of person would excel at it? Is it a game you would enjoy? Why do you think so?
3. In your own words, explain what the title of the book, *Strong To The Hoop*, means. How could this phrase apply to other things besides basketball?
4. The author, John Coy, teaches writing workshops in which students shoot hoops and then write poems about the experience. Try writing your own poem about playing basketball or some other sport you enjoy.
5. *Strong To The Hoop* has won numerous awards and honors. What are some things about this story that make it an award-winner? What kind of award would you give it?

### Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities.

1. Have students pretend they are sports writers for a newspaper. Let each interested student write news story about the game in *Strong To The Hoop*, being sure to include some of the basketball terms from the book.

2. Let students read *Allie's Basketball Dream* and then make a chart comparing this book to *Strong To The Hoop*. What do both of the main characters have in common? How are they different? How do the stories differ? How do the illustrations differ? and so on.
3. Have students write some questions they would like to ask the author, John Coy, or the illustrator, Leslie Jean-Bart, during an imaginary radio or television interview.
4. Ask small groups of students to explore how a playground game of four-on-four basketball and a college or professional basketball game are alike and different. Some things they might compare are: number of players on a team, location of games, scoring, rules, how disputes are settled. Encourage each group to use written and graphic representations (charts, posters, graphs, and so on) to present their findings.

### **ELL (ESL) Teaching Strategies**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Use a real basketball court or photographs to help students identify concrete nouns from the book such as ball, basket, rim, shorts, yo-yo, asphalt, shirt, elbow.
2. Read aloud a sentence and have students repeat the sentence after you, pointing to each word as they speak.
3. Assign each English language speaker to a classroom book buddy who is a strong English speaker/reader. As partners read the pages together, have the English speaker teach simple phrases such as: I don't understand. Please repeat that sentence. Speak slowly. I have a question. Thank you. Encourage ELL students to use these phrases to communicate their needs when reading.
4. *Directo al aro*, the Spanish edition of *Strong To The Hoop*, may be used by Spanish-speaking students for parallel reading of the story.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

To help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas, introduce some of the following activities.

#### **Drama**

Students will enjoy acting out some of the basketball terms from the story. You may wish to conduct this activity in the gym or on the playground. Have students work in small groups to dramatize the following:

- Fake a pass.
- Flip a finger roll.
- Block the shot.
- Bounce a pass.
- Shoot to the hoop.
- Drive left.
- Hit a jumper.
- Double team.

**Math**

1. Teach, or have students explain, how a professional basketball game is scored. Compare this to the scoring in another sport students enjoy.
2. Have students collect basketball charts and records from newspapers. Teach a mini-lesson on reading charts. Have students make up and answer questions based on the charts.
3. Have students find out the measurements for a regulation basketball court. Then have them draw to scale a diagram of a court.

**Art**

Have students observe closely the photo collage technique used by illustrator Leslie Jean-Bart to illustrate the book. Then let students create their own photo collages using either real photographs or reproductions cut from newspapers and magazines. You might suggest that students choose a favorite sport or hobby as the subject of their artwork.

**Language Arts**

1. Review what students know about similes, expressions that compare two things using the word “like” or “as.” Then have students tell who or what is being compared in each of the following similes from the story.
  - “I cut through the lane and bump into Marcus. It’s like running into a rock.”
  - “I zoom down court, ferocious like a lion.”
  - “I’m happy as the last day of school.”
2. Draw attention to the use of color and irregular size type in the book. Discuss why some words might be in color and larger than others. Ask students to talk about the effect the large color words have when they read. If necessary, guide students to understand that a basketball game often has a stop and start rhythm, and this use of type helps create that effect when reading the story. Suggest that students experiment with different typefaces and colors on a computer to add to the expressiveness of a saying, favorite poem, or familiar short story.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**John Coy** has always loved basketball despite the fact that other sports dominated his family; his father was drafted by the National Football League and his grandfather was a semi-professional baseball player. Coy enjoyed writing *Strong To The Hoop* because his research included about five years of pick-up basketball games at his local YMCA.

Coy is a graduate of St. John’s University in Minnesota and holds a Masters degree in human development with an emphasis on children and creativity from St. Mary’s University. *Strong To The Hoop* has won numerous children’s book awards, including an ALA Notable, Notable Books for a Global Society, and a “Choices” selection by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center. His other award-winning books for children are *Night Driving*, *Vroomaloom Zoom*, and *Two Old Potatoes*. Coy and his family live in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

**Leslie Jean-Bart** is a freelance photographer specializing in editorial, corporate, and industrial work. When approached to illustrate *Strong To The Hoop*, Jean-Bart's first book for children, he was thrilled, and he was determined to make the book "different" from other children's books he had seen and researched. "I wanted the illustrations to feel 'real and surreal,' almost like a movie," says Jean-Bart. "So I approached it and treated it like a movie. Second, I wanted the reader/viewer to be able, if so inclined, to imagine himself or herself in the story, just like I used to when reading the fables of Jean de La Fontaine when I was a child."

Jean-Bart was also the photographer for the adult book *Blue Guitar*, and his photo collages have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers, including *Newsweek*, *New York Magazine*, and *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Jean-Bart is a graduate of Columbia University and the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. He is a native of Haiti and now lives in New York City.

**Resources on the Web**

Learn more about ***Strong to the Hoop***

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/112/hc/strong\\_to\\_the\\_hoop](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/112/hc/strong_to_the_hoop)

***Strong to the Hoop*** in Spanish

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/147/hc/directo\\_al\\_aro](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/147/hc/directo_al_aro)

**John Coy's Basketball Workshop**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-coywksp.mhtml>

**Performance Reading of *Strong to the Hoop***

[http://www.leeandlow.com/p/hoop\\_reading.mhtml](http://www.leeandlow.com/p/hoop_reading.mhtml)

**Also by John Coy*****Around the World***

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/13/hc/around\\_the\\_world](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/13/hc/around_the_world)

**BookTalk with John Coy about *Around the World***

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/coybt.mhtml>

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