

REVEAL DIGITAL

IO Magazine

Source: *Reveal Digital*, 01-28-1980

Contributed by: Daniel Rudman; Rick Telander; Gerald Locklin; John Updike; Paul Clegg; Bill Cosby; Gerald Locklin; Leonard Michaels; Leonard Michaels; Barry Beckham; Jim Carroll; Linda "Jungle June" Loskutoff; Ken Hjelle; Ron Loewinsohn; Ron Jones; Stephen Vincent; Sandy Robinson; Tom Meschery; John R. Tunis; Anne Forer; John Updike; Pat Jordan; Gerald Locklin; Jeremy Larner; Tom Meschery; Stanley Cohen; Charles Stetler; Bill Russell; Taylor Branch; John Maloney; Larry Keith; William Matthews; John McPhee; Peter Ellis; Pete Axthelm; Charles Stetler; Herbert Wilner; Fred Gardner; Mike Gleason; Philip Singerman; Thomas Farber; David Kleinberg; Pete Axthelm; Clive Matson; Michael Novak; John Boe; Jack Litewka; Bill Russell; Taylor Branch; Tom Meschery; Scott Ostler; William Matthews; Robert Garner; Jeff Greenfield; Bill Pearlman; Ted Vincent; Tom Meschery; Woody Allen; Mark Shechner; Cisco Brushman; Gerald Locklin; John Krich; Bill Bradley; Roger Martin; Joe Flaherty; David Hilton; alta; David O. Weber; John Updike; Nick Lyons; Stephen Dunn; Charles Entrek; John Boe; Dennis Trudell; Joe Shivers; Dennis Trudell; Peter Najarian; Stephen Dunn; Roy Blount

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28038526>

Licenses: Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

This item is openly available as part of an Open JSTOR Collection.

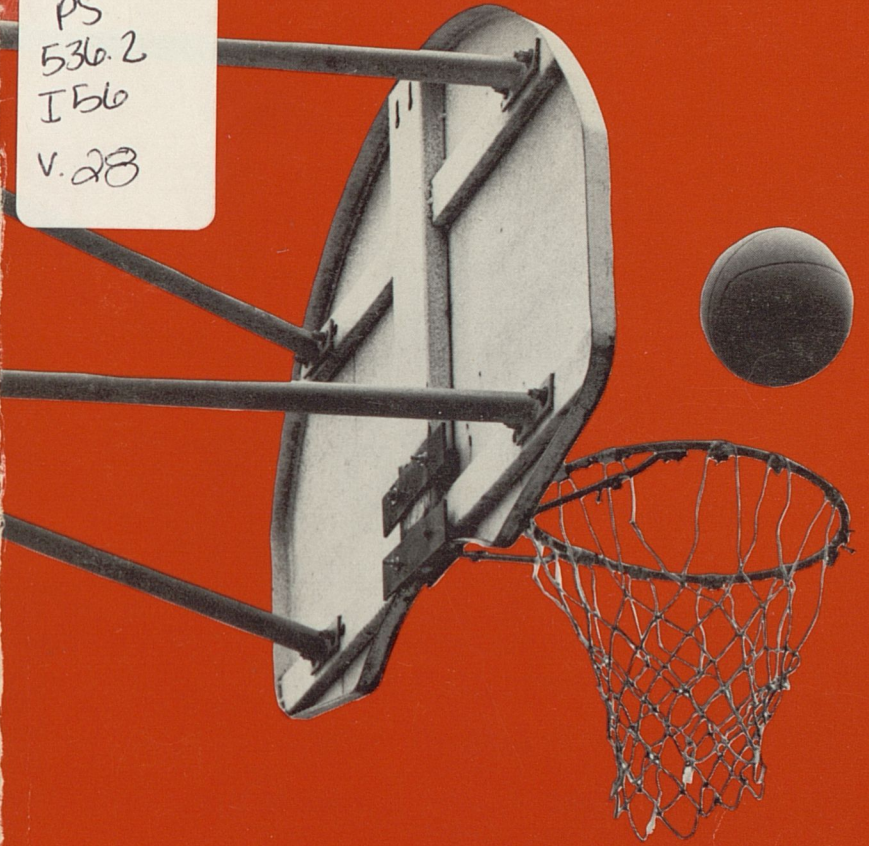
For terms of use, please refer to our Terms & Conditions at <https://about.jstor.org/terms/#whats-in-jstor>



JSTOR

Reveal Digital is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Reveal Digital*

MEM
PS
536.2
I56
v. 28

A black and white photograph of a basketball hoop and ball is set against a solid red background. The hoop is on the left, and the ball is on the right, positioned as if about to be shot. The net is visible below the hoop.

TAKE IT TO THE HOOP

...A BASKETBALL ANTHOLOGY

edited by DANIEL RUDMAN

TAKE IT TO THE HOOP

Take It to the Hoop

EDITED BY DANIEL RUDMAN

NORTH ATLANTIC BOOKS
BERMONDSEY, CALIFORNIA

TAKE IT TO THE HOOP

EDITED BY DANIEL RUDMAN

NORTH ATLANTIC BOOKS
RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

Take It to the Hoop
Copyright © 1980 by Daniel Rudman

ISBN 0-913028-76-2 pbk.
ISBN 0-913028-80-0 limited edition hardcover

Io / #28

Cover Photograph: Michael Gleason
Cover Design: Ron Hall

This book was set in ten-point Times Roman
by Rock & Jones, San Francisco

This project is partially supported by a grant from the National
Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal agency.

North Atlantic Books
635 Amador Street
Richmond, California 94805

PRINTED BY ABBEY PRESS, INC., OAKLAND



Dedication

2428515

I would like to dedicate this book to my father, Morris Rudman, who first taught me how to play basketball, came to all my games and was always there when I needed to talk.

3423012

1950

I would like to thank you for my name with the name of the
lighter the box to the right, come to all my name and the others
which when I needed to call

W. J. ...
...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

Credits

All copyrights for individual pieces revert to the author.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the following for permission to reprint material owned by them:

WOODY ALLEN

"A Fan's Notes on Earl Monroe" from *Sport* magazine (November 1977). By permission of the author.

ALTA

"Mother's Milk" from *Plexus* (July 1977). By permission of the author.

PETE AXTHELM

"The Fallen Idol: The Harlem Tragedy of Earl Manigault" and part of "Two Games: The Challenge of Basketball" from *The City Game*. Copyright © 1970 by Pete Axthelm. Reprinted by permission of Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc.

BARRY BECKHAM

Section from *Double Dunk* published by Holloway House. Copyright © 1981 by Barry Beckham. Reprinted by permission of William Morris Agency, Inc. on behalf of the author.

ROY BLOUNT JR.

"47 Years a Shot Freak" from *Sports Illustrated* (April 20, 1970). Reprinted by permission of Sports Illustrated Magazine. Copyright © 1970 by Time Inc.

JOHN BOE

"Religion and Basketball" and "Basketball Dreams." By permission of the author.

BILL BRADLEY

From *Life on the Run*. Copyright © 1978 by Bill Bradley. Reprinted by permission of Times Books, A Division of Quadrangle/The New York Times Co., Inc.

CISCO BRUSHMAN

"It's a Challenge, But It's Very Difficult." By permission of the author.

JIM CARROLL

From "The Basketball Diaries." Copyright © 1978 by Jim Carroll. Reprinted by permission of Tombouctou Books.

PAUL CLEGG

"King's Court." By permission of the author.

STANLEY COHEN

From *The Game They Played*. Copyright © 1977 by Stanley Cohen. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.

BILL COSBY

"How to Cheat at Basketball" from *Look* magazine (January 1970). By permission of the author.

STEPHEN DUNN

"Losing Steps" and "Basketball: A Retrospective." By permission of the author.

PETER ELLIS

"The Tall Boys of Summer." By permission of the author.

CHARLES ENTREKIN

"At Codornices Park." By permission of the author.

THOMAS FARBER

From "The Mad Dog Instructional League" from *Hazards to the Human Heart*. Copyright © 1980 by Thomas Farber. Reprinted by permission of E. P. Dutton.

JOE FLAHERTY

"Geriatric Memories of a Basketballer" from *Life* magazine (April 1971). By permission of the author.

ANNE FORER

"After the Game." By permission of the author.

FRED GARDNER

"Take Who Takes You" from the record album *Love Shortage*, © 1979 by Leaves In October. By permission of the author.

ROBERT GARNER

"The Shot." By permission of the author.

MICHAEL GLEASON

"Live Oak Park, Berkeley. Summer 1980." By permission of the author.

JEFF GREENFIELD

"The Black and White Truth about Basketball" from *Esquire* magazine (October 1975). Reprinted by permission from Esquire Magazine. Copyright © 1975 by Esquire, Inc.

RON HALL

"Basketball Blues" and "Drawings." By permission of the author.

DAVID HILTON

"The Poet Tries to Turn In His Jock" from *Huladance* (The Crossing Press, 1976). By permission of the author.

KEN HJELLE

Photographs from "Hard Times with the Mama Bears" in *California*

Living magazine, *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle* (October 31, 1976). By permission of the author.

RON JONES

“Winning” from *The Co-Evolution Quarterly* (Summer 1976). By permission of the author. Copyright © by Ron Jones.

PAT JORDAN

From *Chase the Game*. Copyright © 1979 by Pat Jordan. Reprinted by permission of Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc.

LARRY KEITH

“A Conversation with Chairman AI” from *Sports Illustrated* (November 1977). Copyright © 1977 by Time Inc. Reprinted by permission of Sports Illustrated Magazine.

DAVID KLEINBERG

“Weekend Warriors—On the Courts” from *The San Francisco Chronicle* (April 1977). By permission of the author.

JOHN KRICH

“Stoned Love” from the novel *Midnight Socialists*. By permission of the author.

JEREMY LARNER

From *Drive, He Said* (Bantam Books, 1970). Copyright © 1971 by Jeremy Lerner. The chapter was rewritten from the original Delacorte Press edition published in 1964. Reprinted by permission of the author.

JACK LITEWKA

From *The View from Section III*. By permission of the author.

GERALD LOCKLIN

“Shooting for Teams” from *Pronouncing Borges*, “the hook shot” from *Wormwood Review*, “basketball” from *Poop*, “The NCAA MidEast Regionals, and other Existential Setbacks.” By permission of the author.

RON LOEWINSOHN

“The Basket.” By permission of the author.

LINDA LOSKUTOFF

“Hard Times with the Mama Bears” from *California Living* magazine, *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle* (October 31, 1976). By permission of the author.

NICK LYONS

From *Locked Jaws*. Copyright © 1979 by Nick Lyons. Reprinted by permission of Crown Publishers, Inc.

JOHN MALONEY

“Good.” By permission of the author.

WILLIAM MATTHEWS

"Foul Shots: A Clinic" from *Rising and Falling*. Copyright © 1978 by William Matthews. First appeared in *Quarterly West*. By permission of Little, Brown and Company in association with the Atlantic Monthly Press. "Oscar Robertson: Peripheral Vision" from *Poetry: Points of Departure*. Copyright © 1974 by Winthrop Publishers Inc. Reprinted by permission of Winthrop Publishers, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts.

CLIVE MATSON

Poems from *Hoops*. Copyright © 1979 by Clive Matson. By permission of the author.

JOHN MCPHEE

From *A Sense of Where You Are: A Profile of William Warren Bradley*. Copyright © 1978 by John McPhee. This material originally appeared in *The New Yorker*. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.

ROGER MERTIN

Hoops: Nine Photographs. Copyright © 1980 by Roger Mertin. By permission of the author.

TOM MESCHERY

"Lowell High," "pro basketball players," "To Bill Russell," "Portrait of a Rebound," from *Over the Rim* (McCall Publishing Company). By permission of the author.

LEONARD MICHAELS

"Basketball Player," "Lefty-Righty," from *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*. Copyright © 1972, 1973 by Leonard Michaels. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.

PETER NAJARIAN

"For We Would Be That Boy Again." By permission of the author.

MICHAEL NOVAK

"Hooping It" from *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit*. (Basic Books 1976). Copyright © 1976 by Michael Novak. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books Inc.

SCOTT OSTLER

"They Also Serve Who Sit and Sit and Sit" from the *Los Angeles Times*. Copyright © 1980, Los Angeles Times. Reprinted by permission.

BILL PEARLMAN

"West Is West." By permission of the author.

SANDY ROBINSON

"Jenny." By permission of the author.

BILL RUSSELL AND TAYLOR BRANCH

From *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man*. Copyright © 1979 by William F. Russell. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

NAOMI SCHIFF

Illustrations. Copyright © 1980. By permission of the author.

MARK SCHECHNER

"Elgin Baylor." By permission of the author.

JOE SHIVERS

"End of an Era for a Basketball Family" from the *New York Times* (March 1980). Copyright © 1980 by the New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

PHILIP SINGERMAN

"Playing Doctor" from *Esquire*. Reprinted by permission from *Esquire Magazine*. (October 1976). Copyright © 1976 by *Esquire, Inc.*

CHARLES STETLER

"Iron Duke" from *Pyramid*, "The Full Court Press" from *Wormwood Review*. By permission of the author.

RICK TELANDER

From *Heaven Is a Playground* (St. Martin's Press). Copyright © 1976 by Rick Telander. Reprinted by permission of St. Martin's Press, Inc.

DENNIS TRUDELL

"The Jump Shooter" from *The Fiddlehead* (1968), "Politics Again" in *Abraxas/The Chowder Review*. By permission of the author.

JOHN R. TUNIS

From "Ain't God Good to Indiana." Copyright © 1958 by John R. Tunis. Reprinted by permission of The Sterling Lord Agency, Inc.

JOHN UPDIKE

"Ex Basketball Player" from *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*. Copyright © 1957 by John Updike. Originally appeared in the *New Yorker*. Reprinted by permission of Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc. Sections from *Rabbit, Run*. Copyright © 1960 by John Updike. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

STEPHEN VINCENT

"Basketball" from *White Lights and Whale Hearts*. By permission of the author.

TED VINCENT

"Mo Udall's Denver Nuggets," from "Sporting Life," KPFA Radio, 1976. By permission of the author.

DAVID O. WEBER

"Hoop Heroics on the Half Court" from *California Living* magazine, *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle* (April 20, 1980). By permission of the author.

HERBERT WILNER

"Whistle and the Heroes" from *Dovisch in the Wilderness*. Copyright © 1968 by Herbert Wilner. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.

Special Thanks

I would like to thank Richard Grossinger for publishing this anthology, Hilda Johnston and Richard Track for suggesting the title, Ed Kalbaugh for his valuable proofreading help, Ron and Sandy for their continuous support and Paul for his critical feedback and encouragement when I needed it most.

I would also like to thank three other individuals who, though not contributing directly to the book, were essential to my basketball growth: Albee Rothman, who took me under his wing when I was twelve years old, Hilty Shapiro, my high school coach, and my dear friend Seymour Blank.

DAVID O. WEBER

Chief Justice of the High Court, from California State Magazine, Summer 1981 (Vol. 12, No. 2)

I would like to thank David O. Weber for publishing this article. His thoughtful and detailed analysis of the judicial process, for all the fascinating help and advice for all the support and help for his critical feedback and encouragement. I would also like to thank those other individuals who, though not mentioned directly, were essential to my successful journey. After a lifetime who took me under his wing when I was twelve years old. This chapter, my high school coach, and my dear friend, Samuel H. Blank.

I'm only happy when I'm playing the game. . . . I play because I love it. It's not to prove anything. When I'm out there, man, it's like I'm free. My friends always get on me, that I'm quiet. But on the court I open up. It's really me. Everything else is on the side. I don't care about nothing else, just running up and down the court, handling the ball, oh man. . . . I make a nice pass, I help somebody out, it's almost a way of life. You pat someone on the ass. Everything's involved in basketball—psychology, you got to relate to them, know when to pass it to them, let them do their thing. You thank 'em. You pick 'em up. It's all natural stuff. It ain't just a game for me, it's a way of life. That's why when I have to stop playing I'll miss it more than my cousin or Walter. It's the only time I'm me.

—Barry McLeod

from *Chase the Game* by Pat Jordan

I'm not happy when I'm playing the game... I play because I love it. It's not to prove anything. When I'm out there, man, it's like I'm free. My friends always get on me, that I'm quiet. But on the court, when you're really one, everything else is on the side. I don't care about nothing else but running up and down the court, landing the ball, etc. etc. I make a nice game. I play for the love of it, it's almost a way of life. You can't compare on the pro level, it's really a joy—because you get to play to them, know when to pass it to them, let them do their thing. You think, you know you play with it's all natural stuff. It ain't just a game for me, it's a way of life. That's why when I have to stop playing I miss it more than when we come to practice. It's the only time I'm in...

—Barry Bonds
From *Catch the Fever* by Paul London

Table of Contents

Daniel Rudman: Take It to the Hoop: A Preface	21
---	----

Youth

Rick Telander: from <i>Heaven Is a Playground</i>	27
Gerald Locklin: the hook shot	38
John Updike: from <i>Rabbit, Run</i>	39
Paul Clegg: King's Court	41
Bill Cosby: How to Cheat at Basketball	43
Gerald Locklin: Shooting for Teams	47
Ron Hall: Basketball Blues	48
Leonard Michaels: Basketball Player	49
Leonard Michaels: Lefty-Righty	50
Barry Beckham: from <i>Double Dunk</i>	51
Jim Carroll: from <i>The Basketball Diaries</i>	57
Linda "Jungle June" Loskutoff: Hard Times with the Mama Bears	59
Ken Hjelle: Mama Bears (photographs)	63
Ron Loewinsohn: The Basket	71
Ron Jones: Winning	72
Stephen Vincent: Basketball	80
Sandy Robinson: Jenny	81
Tom Meschery: Lowell High	84
John R. Tunis: from <i>Ain't God Good to Indiana!</i>	85
Anne Forer: After the Game	91
John Updike: from <i>Rabbit, Run</i>	92

On Campus

Pat Jordan: from <i>Chase the Game</i>	95
Gerald Locklin: The NCAA MidEast Regionals, and other Existential Setbacks	104
Jeremy Lerner: from <i>Drive, He Said</i>	106
Tom Meschery: Portrait of a Rebound	113
Stanley Cohen: from <i>The Game They Played</i>	114
Charles Stetler: Iron Duke	119
Bill Russell and Taylor Branch: from <i>Second Wind:</i> <i>The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man</i>	120
John Maloney: Good	124
Larry Keith: A Conversation with Chairman Al	125
William Matthews: Foul Shots: A Clinic	131
John McPhee: from <i>A Sense of Where You Are</i>	132

Chasing the Game

Peter Ellis: The Tall Boys of Summer	139
Pete Axthelm: from <i>Two Games: The Challenge of Basketball</i> ..	145
Charles Stetler: The full court press	148
Herbert Wilner: Whistle and the Heroes	149
Fred Gardner: Song: Take Who Takes You	160
Michael Gleason: Live Oak Park, Berkeley, Summer 1980 (photographs)	161
Philip Singerman: Playing Doctor	180
Thomas Farber: from The Mad Dog Instructional League	185
David Kleinberg: Weekend Warriors—On the Courts	188
Pete Axthelm: The Fallen Idol: The Harlem Tragedy of Earl Manigault	191
Clive Matson: Hoops	199
Michael Novak: Hooping It	202
John Boe: Religion and Basketball	205

The Big Time

Jack Litewka: from <i>The View from Section III</i>	213
Bill Russell and Taylor Branch: from <i>Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man</i>	214
Tom Meschery: Pro Basketball Players	220
Scott Ostler: They Also Serve Who Only Sit and Sit and Sit ...	221
William Matthews: Oscar Robertson: Peripheral Vision	225
Robert Garner: The Shot	226
Jeff Greenfield: The Black and White Truth about Basketball ..	229
Bill Pearlman: West Is West	234
Ted Vincent: Mo Udall's Denver Nuggets	235
Tom Meschery: To Bill Russell	240
Woody Allen: A Fan's Notes on Earl Monroe	241
Mark Schechner: Elgin Baylor	248
Cisco Brushman: It's a Challenge, But It's Very Difficult (Jim Barnett talks about defense)	249
Gerald Locklin: basketball (with an assist to Charles Stetler) ...	255
John Krich: Stoned Love	257
Bill Bradley: from <i>Life on the Run</i>	261

<i>Hoops</i> : Roger Mertin (photographs)	263
---	-----

Joe Flaherty: Geriatric Memoirs of a Basketballer	277
David Hilton: The Poet Tries to Turn In His Jock	279
alta: Mother's Milk	280
David O. Weber: Hoop Heroics on the Half Court	282
John Updike: Ex-Basketball Player	286
Nick Lyons: from <i>Locked Jaws</i>	287
Stephen Dunn: Basketball: A Retrospective	296
Charles Entrekin: At Codornices Park	297
John Boe: Basketball Dreams	298
Dennis Trudell: The Jump Shooter	301
Joe Shivers: End of an Era for a Basketball Family	303
Dennis Trudell: Politics Again	306
Peter Najarian: For We Would Be That Boy Again	307
Stephen Dunn: Losing Steps	309
Roy Blount, Jr.: 47 Years a Shot-Freak	311

Take It to the Hoop: A Preface

It rarely happens, rarely, maybe nine or ten time in your life, that you're dribbling up court and suddenly everything seems effortless. You feel strong and light and energized and deeply confident. Whatever you want to do you can do. You don't know why you feel this way because warming up you weren't particularly hot. It's mysterious, magical. But you don't care because you're too busy bathing in the joy of it. You glide rather than run, soar rather than jump, and your usually inconsistent jump shot spins softly, easily off your fingertips and through the hoop. Again and again and again. And you become even more confident. Cocky! Arrogant! You shoot from further out. You shoot when you're closely guarded. You shoot off-balance and with a man's hand in your face. And you start to stutter step and fake and drive as you did before the operation, as you did in your glory days in high school. You smile, you gloat, you float on the waves of this miracle and forget that you're a thirty-three-year-old, once-a-week basketball player with no cartilage in your left knee and weakness in the right and though you see the defensive man waiting for you at the foul line you keep coming. You see him waiting there and know that he is tall enough to block your shot, quick enough to cut off your dribble and strong enough to stop you from driving past him down the lane. But this isn't any night. This is a night when you've hit seven out of nine jump shots in the first two games and a couple of spectacular drives and you're sure that if you come right at him dribbling left handed, shoulder and head fake left, switch hands, go up in the air shifting your body to the right and double pump, with the ball in your right hand, you'll be by him for the lay up. But the crash of his hand against the ball and the sharp wang wang pain inside your knee as you, off-balanced, hit the floor proves you wrong and your embarrassed grin can't hide the fact that your right knee cartilage has been torn.

That was the last time I played basketball.

The first time I played I was nine years old, with a smooth, shiny Bob Cousy Beginner's Basketball that my father brought home the night before and which I slept with under the covers. How heavy the ball felt. How far away the basket. How difficult it was even to reach the rim, first heaving it one-handed from my shoulder, then trying it two-handed from my chest jumping as high as I could, until finally, at the prodding of my father, I started shooting underhand, two-handed underhand and thrilled each time the ball sailed through the netless hoop.

In between I spent twenty-four years playing the game.

I played at P.S. 201 in Queens—giving my key or wallet to Leo, the parky, for a playground ball, squeezing through the gate or climbing over on weekend mornings, challenging for the court, getting yelled at by the

older kids when I played with them, “Dribble the ball, stupid”; summers when the asphalt burned the bottoms of my feet through my sneakers, winters when I couldn’t shoot my Bob Cousy one-hander because of the wind, rainy days when the ball was too slippery to hold let alone dribble or shoot, and even nights when I could barely see the rim.

I played at Jamaica High School where I was obsessed with becoming the best backcourt man in New York City—gleaming red satin uniforms, the crowd roaring like a hundred subway trains as I raced onto the court (I once was so pumped up I touched the rim for the only time in my life), cheerleaders doing cartwheels, handstands and splits so I could see their red underpants, “Danny Danny he’s our man, if he can’t do it no one can”; practicing incessantly (though I never mastered the jump shot), afraid to slow down, to stop for even a day because some other kid might get the advantage over me; Madison Square Garden in the playoffs, high scorer, All Queens but never good enough, never as good as I wanted to be.

I played at playgrounds in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Berkeley, playgrounds with reputations, black-dominated, where my ego was always on the line—“In your face! In your eye! Reject that shit!”—needing to prove to myself that in my mid-twenties I could still play tough D and drive past almost anyone; playgrounds where I heard and participated in hundreds of arguments over who hit the ball out, who fouled who, and how many steps the man took; playgrounds where it was not unusual to wait an hour for “next” or have a teammate get pissed off at me for setting a pick because it hindered his “moves” or to have a defensive man sticking his hand, hip and elbow in my gut, especially when we’re leading 20–18 and the game’s 24; playgrounds where I was constantly struggling against being intimidated while at the same time hoping to avoid a fight.

And finally I played at an old gym in Berkeley, after knee surgery and a year and a half away from the courts—the Monday Night Game, full court, all of us in our thirties, some my close friends, seven baskets win, changing teams, no one plays more than three straight games and when it’s over a couple of pitchers of beer and all the popcorn you can eat down at the “Blind Lemon”; Victor’s twirling back to the basket moves, Lenny’s no-look hook shot, Big Bob’s octopus arms, Clive taking three steps on the drive (“I didn’t travel damn it!”), Sandy’s 1950 two hander, Jerry’s Clifford Ray picks, Dobbie going up in the air before deciding what to do with the ball and me, always one of the first ones there, trying all the passes I’d ever dreamt were possible.

Take It to the Hoop comes out of all those years.

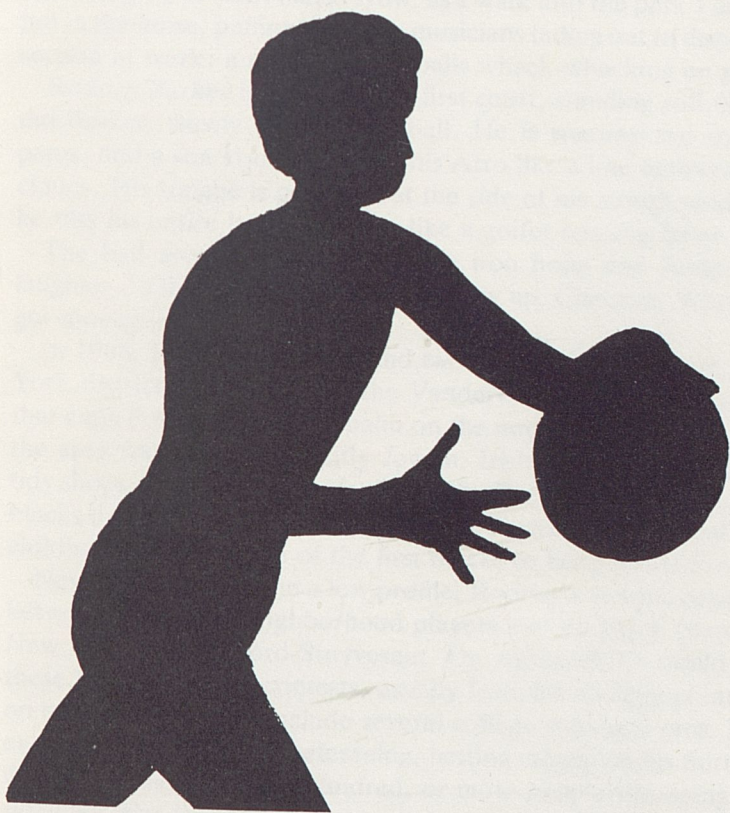
I look at the book as a kind of autobiographical anthology. The material gathered here such as “Heaven Is a Playground,” “The Jump Shooter,” “Winning,” “The Fallen Idol: The Harlem Tragedy of Earl Manigault,” “Whistle and the Heroes,” “Locked Jaws,” and “47 Years a Shot Freak,”

to name only a few of my favorites, expresses much of what I've thought and felt about basketball from childhood to the present.

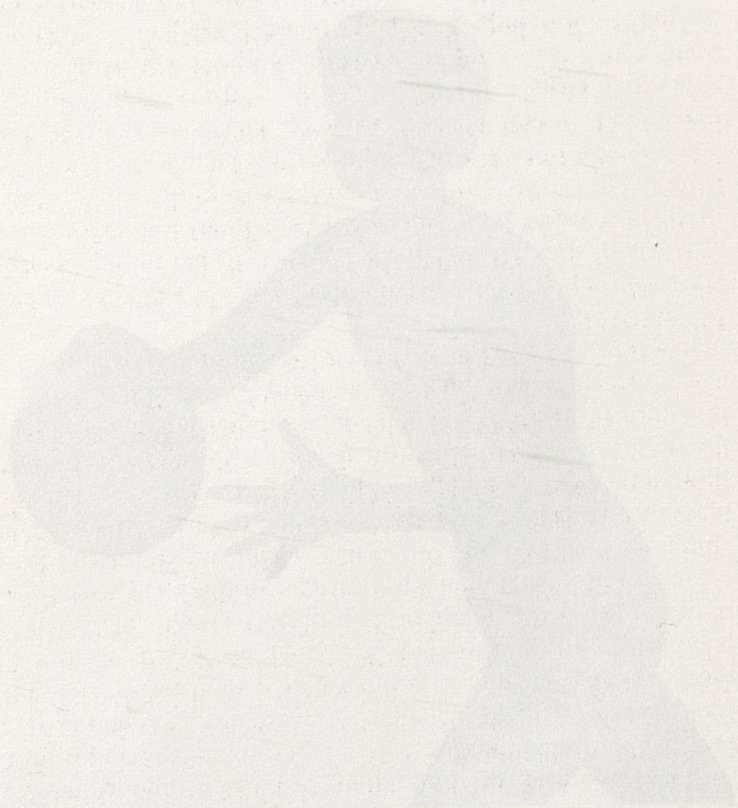
Every few months I still have the same dream. I am in my old high school gym talking to my basketball coach. We are standing there in the empty gym and he is saying that everything is all right, that I'm going to be able to play another season in the backcourt, that I still have one more year of eligibility coming.

—Daniel Rudman
Berkeley, September 1980

YOUTH



WUJOY



Rick Telander

from Heaven Is a Playground

May

Coming around the corner of Foster and Nostrand at dusk, I see a ten-foot fence and the vague movements of people. Men sit on car hoods and trunks, gesturing, passing brown paper bags, laughing. Stains on the sidewalk sparkle dully like tiny oil slicks in a gray ocean. Garbage clogs the gutters. At the main entrance to Foster Park, I step quickly to the side to dodge a pack of young boys doing wheelies through the gate. When I came out of the subway, I had asked directions from an elderly woman with a massive bosom like a bushel of leaves, and while she spoke I had involuntarily calculated the racial mix around me—ten percent white, ten percent Latin, eighty percent black. Now, as I walk into the park I am greeted by a lull in the noise, pulling back like musicians fading out to display the rhythm section at work: a million basketballs whack-whacking on pavement.

Rodney Parker is there on the first court, standing still thirty feet from the basket, slowly cocking the ball. He is wearing red sneakers, sweat pants, and a sun visor that splits his Afro like a line between two cumulus clouds. His tongue is pointed out the side of his mouth, and as he shoots, he tilts his entire body sideways like a golfer coaxing home a putt.

The ball arcs up and through the iron hoop and Rodney bursts into laughter. "Oh my God, what a shot! Pay up, Clarence. Who's next, who's got money?"

In 1966, Rodney, his wife, and two children moved from the East New York district of Brooklyn to the Vanderveer Homes, the housing project that cups Foster Park like a palm on the north and east sides. At that time the area was a predominantly Jewish, Irish, and Italian neighborhood of tidy shops, taverns, and flower beds. The Parkers were among the very first blacks to move into the Vanderveer and Rodney, a basketball fanatic since childhood, became one of the first blacks to hang out at Foster Park.

Never one to maintain a low profile, Rodney was soon organizing games between the white neighborhood players and his black friends from East New York and Bedford-Stuyvesant. On weekends he would preside over these frequently wild contests, usually from his vantage point as fifth man on a team that might include several college stars and pros. He would be everywhere, screaming, refereeing, betting money on his thirty-foot shots, with two hundred, three hundred, or more people whooping it up on the sidelines. For identification purposes some people began referring to the playground as "Rodney's Park."

Then as now, Rodney's occupation was that of ticket scalper, a freelance bit of wheeling-dealing that took him to all the big sporting events in the New York area, and put him in contact with most of the sporting stars.

He already knew several basketball heroes from his neighborhood, among them, pros Lenny Wilkens and Connie Hawkins, and with the connections he made through scalping, it wasn't long before Rodney was giving reports on Brooklyn players to interested coaches and scouts and anyone else who might be interested.

Rodney, whose education ended in ninth grade and whose basketball abilities were never better than average, derived a deep sense of personal worth from his hobby. "I can do things that nobody can," he liked to say. He helped boys get scholarships to college, he pushed them into prep schools, he got them reduced rates to basketball camps, he even arranged for two of the local white baseball players to get tryouts with the New York Mets. He became known around the park as somebody who could help out if you played ball and weren't getting anywhere on your own. Kids said that Rodney knew everybody in the world.

Now, seeing me by the fence, he comes over and demands that I play in a game immediately to help me get acquainted with "the guys." He charges into the middle of the players and throws commands right and left. This is the rabble—the young men who populate every New York City playground all summer long. Faceless, earnest, apathetic, talented, hoping, hopeless, these are the minor characters in every ghetto drama. They move, drifting in and out in response to Rodney's orders.

The ball bounces away from one of the players and is picked up by a small boy on the sidelines. He dribbles it with joy.

"Gimme that ball 'fore I inject this shoe five feet up your black ass and out your brain," hollers a somber-looking player named Calvin Franks.

The boy dribbles, wriggling his hips and taunting; Franks lunges at the boy who drops the ball and sprints through a hole in the fence into the street.

Franks retrieves the ball and begins talking to himself. "Calvin Franks has the ball, oh shit, is he bad. He takes the man to the base. . . . No, no, he shakes one! . . . two! . . . he's on wheels . . . the crowd stands to watch the All American . . ." Franks shoots and the ball rolls up and around the rim like a globe on its axis, then falls out. "He's fouled! Butchered! They gots to send him to the line . . ."

The sun is gone now, passed behind the buildings in a false, city sunset. Old women with stockings rolled to their ankles doze near the slides.

A boy locates his younger brother who had errands to do at home and pulls him from a card game. "I'll kick yo' ass!" he shouts, slapping his brother in the face. The boy runs out of the park, blood flowing from his nose. The friends at the game laugh and pick up the cards. Crashes of glass rise above the voices, forming a jagged tapestry interwoven with soul music and sirens.

I am placed on a team with four locals and the game gets underway. Rodney walks to the sidelines and begins coaching. He hollers at the players to pass the ball, not to be such stupid fools. Do they want to spend their

whole useless lives as nobodies in the ghetto? Pass, defense. "You're hopeless! Fourteen-year-old Albert King could kill you all," he shouts.

"Rodney, my man, my man! This is pro material," screams Calvin Franks. "Kareem Jabbar come to Foster Park."

There are no lights in the park and vision is rapidly disappearing. The lights, I learned last summer, were removed several years ago to keep boys from playing basketball all night long.

"What? What's happenin' here?" says a young, stocky boy named Pablo Billy, his eyes wide in mock surprise as he dribbles between his legs and passes behind his back.

"Boom! She go boom!" yells Franks.

"You done now, Skunk," answers Lloyd Hill, a skinny 6' 3" forward with arms like vines and large yellowish eyes.

"Here come the street five! Jive alive. Loosey goosey."

"Look at him!" shrieks a player named Clarence, apparently referring to himself, as he spins out of a crowd. "His body just come like this."

The fouls become more violent now, with drive-in lay-ups being invitations for blood. I don't consider myself a bad basketball player, a short forward who at twenty-five could probably play on a few mediocre high school teams, but out here I pass the ball each time I get it, not wanting to make a fool of myself. Players are jumping over my head.

"Gonna shake it, bake it, and take it to the . . ." A boy named Eddie has his shot batted angrily out to half court. "Reject that shit," says someone called "Muse" or "Music," I can't tell which.

The Vanderveer project rises on our left like a dark red embattlement against the sky, TV's flickering deep within like synchronized candles. The complex covers part of four city blocks and houses nearly ten thousand people, a small American town. At one time—no more than ten years ago—the Vanderveer was totally white. Flatbush itself (a name coming from the eighteenth-century English bastardization of *Vlacke Bos* which is Dutch for wooded plain) was a haven for the working and middle-class whites who had fled Manhattan and inner Brooklyn, believing no city problems could reach this far.

By settling in the neighborhood, Rodney and the other first blacks started the chain reaction again. Within days, white residents began leaving. Apartment for Rent signs went up as fast as the rented vans carried families and belongings out further to Canarsie, Sheepshead Bay, or Long Island. The exodus continued in an unbroken stream until by 1970 the Vanderveer and surrounding area was less than half white. By 1974, whites had become a small minority and the Vanderveer Homes had turned entirely black, the number being split fairly evenly between West Indian immigrants and "native born." Soon, the real signs of decay began to appear—the broken glass, graffiti, garbage, and battered buildings that had been predicted by the doom-sayers all along.

If, indeed, there was any plus side to the degeneration, it showed itself

on the Foster Park courts where a new grade and style of basketball was developing. Premier leapers and ballhandlers appeared almost overnight. Patterned play and set shots dissolved to twisting dunks and flashy moves. Black players seemed to bring more of themselves to the playground—rather than follow proven structures they experimented and “did things” on court. Soon they controlled the tempo on the half-block of asphalt between Foster and Farragut, and the whites, who came as visitors the way the blacks once had, seemed ponderous and mechanical in comparison.

To Rodney it was simple justice. “Blacks own the city,” he said. “They should own the game, too.”

But as the talent escalated, so did the problems. Almost every boy now came from a broken home and was, or had been, in some kind of trouble. The athletic potential had multiplied but the risk had doubled.

I think about this as I attempt to guard my man, wondering if he’s had it bad, if he has dreams. He blocks me and I push off, feeling his heart through his jersey like a butterfly against a screen.

There is almost total darkness now. Yellowish speckles from a street light fan through a tree at the other end but do not come this far. Teammates and opponents have merged and the only thing I can do is hold on to my man and not let him disappear. Rodney is still hollering, “Pass, dammit. Pass like Danny Odums. Hit the boards! Looking for another Fly! Who’s gonna fly out of the ghetto?”

Passes have become dangerous, starting off as dark orbs which do not move but simply grow larger and blacker until at the last second hands must be thrown up in protection. The first ball that smacks dead into a player’s face is greeted with hoots.

Lloyd Hill unleashes his “standing jump shot” and the ball disappears into the night. It reenters, followed by a sharp pop as it whacks straight down on someone’s finger.

“Oooh, god day-yam! Pull this shit out, Leon. Thing’s all crunched up.” The damaged joint is grabbed and yanked. There is a similar pop. “Eeeeeee! Lorda . . . ahh . . . there, now she walking around a little . . .”

“Where’s Franks?” shouts Lloyd Hill. “Where’d he went just when I’m shooting the rock in this eyeball.”

Franks reappears from the side.

“It’s gone.”

“What’s gone,” Lloyd asks.

“The bike.”

“What bike?”

“My bike.”

“You ain’t got a bike, fool.”

“Friend gave it to me. Had it right over there.”

The ball is punched out of Rodney’s arm as little kids appear like phantoms out of the darkness to shoot and dribble during the break.

“Shit, Franks, that ain’t funny.”

"It's terrible."

"Can't laugh. Heh, he he."

"Five seconds, gone. Man walks in and rides out."

"Hee ga-heeeee."

"It's terrible and I ain't laughing."

"Hoo hoo oooooohhhh . . . they steal things in the ghetto."

"Niggers . . . hoo hoo . . . they take your shit."

"Some little spook halfway to Fulton Street . . ."

"Hoo ha hoo haaa . . . peddlin' his ass off in the motherfuckin' ghetto . . ."

"In the for real Ghet-toe . . ." Franks is now laughing hysterically, doubled up and slapping palms.

The darkness is complete. The old people have gone home. Slow-moving orange dots point out groups of boys smoking reefers under the trees. Two other basketball games are going on, but the farthest can only be heard. I start to wonder what I'm doing here, in this game, under these conditions. Playing basketball in total darkness is an act of devotion similar to fishing on land. Soon, I know, someone will rifle a pass and shatter my nose.

"Come on now, let's be serious," says Eddie. "We down, twenty-four, twenty-one."

The ball is returned and the contest starts again. Laughter fades and the bicycle is forgotten. Everything is in earnest and yet I am blind; I cannot follow the game with my ears. Rodney shouts but does not exist. Quietly, on an inbounds play, I walk off the court.

"Hey, hold it," says Lloyd. "Where's that white dude we had?"

"Yeh, we only got four men." Someone counts. "Where'd he go, Rod?" The players look around.

"He went to get some water, I think. He's not used to this shit, he's quitting. Just get another man."

"Come on, little brother," says the tall player called "Muse" or "Music" to one of the hangers-on. "Put the weight to this dude and keep him outta the sky."

From thirty feet away on the bench, I can barely see the occasional sparkle of medallions as they catch the street lights along Foster Avenue. I'm exhausted and relish the chance to wipe my face with my shirt and rub my sore knees. I can hear the players' voices, and it sounds to me like they'll go all night. . . .

At 9:30 p.m. the park is dark and nearly deserted. Standing by the fence is an old man wearing a green cap, a German who comes to the park frequently to watch the games, carrying a radio from which wafts the classical music of Wagner and Beethoven. He seldom speaks, indeed there is no one for him to talk to. He is always alone, content to watch.

Under the first basket there is a bit of commotion as Cameron, a fifteen-year-old park regular with legs as thick as stove pipes, is being taught the rudiments of stuffing. Eight or nine other boys are all trying to explain their personal techniques for palming the ball, approaching the basket, hooking over the rim, returning to the pavement.

Cameron listens to each intently, nodding his head as the points become clear. When the last man is finished Cameron backs up, wipes his hands, and runs at the basket.

At 5' 8" he is an exceptional leaper, but on his first attempt the ball slams into the back of the rim and bounces ten feet in the air. Cameron remains above, hanging on the rim.

Lloyd Hill, who has been walking down the sidewalk, steps through the hole in the fence onto the dark court. He looks up at the body dangling above. "Get off there, boy," he orders. Cameron drops.

Lloyd points back to the free-throw circle, "Now try the dunk again."

Being the master leaper and stuffer of Foster Park, Lloyd's word is a solemn and valuable thing. Cameron backs up and snorts like a bull before charging down the lane. Though he seems to rise beyond all normal boundaries for a man his size, Cameron's second attempt is a repeat of the first, with him again hanging like wash on the rim.

"Don't be scared," says Lloyd. "Man, that first time you got to overcome. The dunk is something, specially for a little man." He pats Cameron paternally on the head.

"Now I know you is kinda scared of falling over ass-backwards and smacking your head on the floor. But it ain't gonna happen if you just let the ball go once it's over the hole. See, you doing the two-handed power stuff, which is cool because you kinda squatty and all, and so you make the run a little different than if you was hook-dunking or behind-the-head dunking."

Lloyd simulates a takeoff without leaving the ground. The other players begin dunking the ball to show how it's done, and soon they form two lines as in pregame drills. Cameron joins the group and gets closer than ever to dunking but is not quite smooth enough to flip the ball down.

The boys become earnest, silent except for loud "aahs!" as they jump into the night air. "Yeh, I hear you!" they shout to each other, sweating and tossing off their shirts. "In his face!"

There is an atmosphere of ritual surrounding the event, as though Came-

ron is in the company of braves, with Lloyd a chief watching from the perimeter. What I have seen of dunks in playground games has made me realize their importance: a man can leave his opponent behind with fancy dribbling or he can embarrass him by blocking his shot or stealing the ball, but nothing makes a statement of dominance better than a resounding stuff shot.

After one shot the ball bounces into the street and one of the players chases it, nearly getting run down by a bus. "That's the spirit Leon," they yell. When the player returns Lloyd asks for the ball. He takes it and saunters to the front of the line. "You just not cool enough, Cameron," he says.

Carefully removing his shirt and folding it into a square which he places on the sidelines, Lloyd palms the ball and looks at the basket ten yards away. He puts the ball down and reaches into his pockets, pulling out an Afro pick, some change, and a dollar bill. He places these things on top of his neatly folded shirt and then picks up the ball. He rolls his shoulders two or three times and starts loping toward the basket. When he is close enough, his skinny legs uncoil and he sails into the air, cradling the ball in the crook of his elbow before casually smashing it through the hoop.

He slowly returns to the front of the line. A boy hands him the ball again. This time Lloyd runs in a little faster. While in midair he waves the ball around his head like a pendulum before dunking. Again, he returns.

On his third approach he cocks his arm back like a pitcher in his windup and throws a strike straight through the rim at the pavement.

For his final attempt Lloyd walks back an extra ten paces and blows on his hands. He grasps the ball in front of him and takes an all-out sprint at the basket. He cuts sharply through the row of silent boys like a halfback turning upfield and then, nearly ten feet from the hoop, flings himself into the air. As he floats slowly to the rim he rubs the ball on the back of his neck like a man with an itch under his collar and then slams it through the rim so hard it caroms wildly off to another court.

Lloyd walks silently back to the sideline. He picks up his comb and change and puts them in his pocket. He picks up his shirt and puts it on, buttoning it as carefully as he removed it.

The lines start moving again, with added energy and a sense of respect. But Cameron has peaked and will not dunk tonight.

From the shadows the old man is laughing and shaking his head. "Ooooh, that was great," he says, clapping his hands quietly. "How high they go and hang there."

I walk over and sit next to him because I'm a little excited myself. The middle chords of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* weave from his radio.

"They're just like flies, eh, buzzing. Different bodies—see, the short one and the long one with his shirt on—like the green flies and the blue ones and the big horseflies. They come right out of the pavement, that's what I say. Flatbush was never like this, but now there is such a pretty game and so good to watch. Flies all summer." . . .

Late July

Bad happenings seem to be in the air, of a sudden. Two days ago DeMont, Pontiac Carr, and I had taken the bus to the sports shop in Bedford-Stuyvesant where our Subway Stars shirts were being made. One of the heavy plate glass windows on the side of the store was boarded up and there were bloodstains on the pavement.

"What happened?" DeMont asked the clerk.

"Some boys tried to break in last night."

"Didja catch 'em?"

"Yeh, the police caught 'em. The alarm went off. One of them nearly lost a finger."

"Wow!" said DeMont.

"What were they after?" asked Pontiac.

"Got me. We don't keep any money here."

The boys looked around at the store's contents. Basketballs, posters of Julius Erving and Abdul-Jabbar, sneakers, tube socks, sweatbands, shorts and bags, uniforms. A paradise.

The man followed their eyes.

"Maybe some Pro-Keds," he said. "Seems funny to do five years for that, though."

Despite the incident our shirts were ready. I paid the man the balance due, approximately fourteen dollars. The players had all paid me their share, a dollar apiece. Yanking a shirt out of the box DeMont held it up and began yipping with joy.

"Oh, man, look at my jersey! Number thirty-two! Dr. J! That's me. Number thirty-two!"

Back at the park the shirts were instant sensations. Red with black stars and the logo: "Subway Stars, Foster Park, All-City, Brooklyn, N.Y.," they drew boys out of every nook and cranny like a pied piper's flute. Pontiac had to fight to hold onto the box, but within minutes each team member had arrived and gotten his own shirt. Personally I was quite pleased with the shirts, enjoying the sight of the red splotches spreading through the park as the boys made the rounds.

It was in that same spirit of enthusiasm the next day, Sunday, that I suggested the team take a trip to Manhattan for a ball game. The players were all for it and immediately began shooting craps for subway fare.

"Where we going, Rick?" Pablo Billy asked.

I didn't really know. Someone had told me there was a park with a few decent courts on East 18th Street. On Sunday, I figured, there was bound to be some action, and if we wanted to get a game it should be easy.

We got on the subway at Newkirk, with Pablo Billy, Mark, and Sgt. Rock, hopping the turnstile and diving through the train doors as they closed. The man in the booth shook his fist in anger. At West 14th Street in lower Manhattan we got off.

"Where did you say those courts were on 18th Street?" Pontiac Carr asked.

"Eighteenth and Lexington, I think the guy said."

"Well, goddamn, Rick, we're on Eighth Avenue."

It was a bright day and there were artists and sculptors and dogs scattered along the sidewalk. The paintings hanging on the fences resembled skylines done in a hurry and the sculptures looked to have been welded from hangers and spoons and carburetors. The dogs were mangy and half-rabid-looking, but there was a cheerfulness lingering over the area as tourists came and went and the bells in a nearby church chimed the hour.

We started walking crosstown, a loud defiant group openly evaded by pedestrians. DeMont jogged in the front, kicking cans and rattling car doors. I wasn't sure how far we had to go but I wanted it to be short; I felt this could be a strong, unifying day if conflict was meticulously avoided.

Pontiac Carr walked on my left, and Doodie, his large ball peen head trembling with excitement, clung to my right arm.

"Rick, we gonna donut 'em," he yelled in my ear, "put the skunk on their ass! They ain't gonna believe it when we walk in, they be so petro-lized, all these nasty niggers jackin' and jivin'..."

He got on my nerves sometimes, all eagerness, malapropisms and stupidity. And his gawky body only added to the effect. All of the boys were growing but Doodie seemed to be haphazardly elongating, like a rubber figure grabbed at each end and stretched. I worried that some day his threadlike neck would no longer support his head and the entire affair would simply wilt on his shoulders like a bloated sunflower.

Doodie did not have an easy time of it at Foster Park, and his jabberings and false cockiness were mostly reactions to his lowly status there. Under the basket he was pushed around by much shorter players; on the bench he was the brunt of the jokes.

"Hey, you cross-eyed motherfucker," they teased him. "What's it look like outa that eyeball." In the photos I had begun taking of the park boys Doodie always tried to hide half of his head behind another player or under a towel or jersey in an attempt to keep from looking ridiculous.

His one hero was Fly Williams, whom he called "my man" and imitated both on and off the court. He worked endlessly at "finger-rolling" the ball and dribbling through his legs and other useless tactics which he equated with Fly's court prowess. In all debates Doodie defended Fly's behavior with his own honor. Whenever Fly came to Foster Park Doodie followed like a shadow, grinning with reverence. Whenever Fly drove off Doodie watched the departing car until it vanished. Fly, for his part, never noticed the boy.

We reached 17th Street and Second Avenue but there was no basketball court in sight. This made me nervous. En route the boys had demanded we stop in a candy store and had then proceeded to shoplift the place blind. Now, after the long walk they were in a rather volatile humor. Without

stopping I turned left. At 18th Street, where the park was supposed to be, there was nothing. "You on your own now, coach," Pontiac Carr whispered to me.

At 19th Street I could see an asphalt treeless park a block away on First Avenue, and I led the boys there without a hint of the relief I felt. The players in a basketball game on the far court turned to watch us file in through the fence.

"Who you guys?" a small Puerto Rican boy asked as the players changed into their shorts and red T-shirts.

DeMont told him we were a basketball team from Brooklyn looking for a game, so why didn't he go find some suckers for us to play.

The boy ran off and within moments we had our challenge. The entire park and its mixed Puerto Rican, black, and Italian population mobilized into a unit, putting together a ragged squad of ten players varying in age, I estimated, from thirteen to thirty-five. The remaining locals stood at one end of the court and shouted out insults. One of the Manhattan players, a barrel-chested black man about thirty years old with a razor scar from his nose to his ear, came up to Sgt. Rock and said, "We don't lose in here."

I gathered the stars together and told them to go out and play team ball, to hustle on defense, to pass the ball and wait for the good shot on offense. "Just like we worked on in practice," I said. "If you get a chance to run, go ahead and run." I was amazed at how easily the clichés rolled out of my mouth. I was a little scared. I sent the first five out: Martin and Pablo Billy at guard, Vance and Arthur at forward, and Sgt. Rock at center.

The game started and soon passersby began drifting up to the fence to watch the action. Cabbies pulled over to look, and men in suits and ties stepped up, shading their eyes with newspapers.

The Stars, unable to figure out the swirling air currents or the bounce of the unfamiliar rims, quickly fell behind. They made only five baskets before crumbling completely and being swept away. From the park crowd came a din of humiliating catcalls. "Subway assholes!" they chanted. "Go play on the D train!"

Attempting to regroup, the Subway Stars stood in a cluster yelling at each other. Lloyd Hill, who had come along as assistant coach, tried to calm them down while I went over to the other team and asked hesitantly if they'd like to play another game.

"Hell, yes," said a tall red-haired kid. "We'll send you back to Brooklyn in baggies if you want."

As the game began the Subway Stars seemed to realize they had little to lose by playing as hard as they could. I'd told them as much, asking them to perform as though they were back in the confines of Foster Park. DeMont had looked worried. "I'm gonna break some bottles," he said, tugging on my belt.

For a while the boys played wildly, taunting the other team and elbowing them under the boards. Pablo Billy opened his eyes wide and shook his

head back and forth as he stutter-dribbled through a fast break. Sgt. Rock and Vance combined to block a shot so hard that the entire rim, backboard, and pole spun around in its foundation. Mark, talking all the way, threw in a blind reverse lay-up. But soon the disorder returned.

Doodie attempted a Fly-style whirlybird which disintegrated pathetically in midair like a watch exploding. Then Mark got so disgusted with Pablo Billy's dribbling that he stood statuelike in the corner, facing the street. I called time out and told Mark to start playing or he'd sit on the bench.

"Man, how'd *you* like to play with that yo-yoing punk nigger?"

Lloyd held Pablo Billy, but I knew the day was lost. Shortly after that, Champagne, still uncertain of the rules, called time-out while the other team had the ball and then watched from the sidelines as his man went in to score.

By the end, with the game again turning into a rout I could hear crashes of glass against pavement as DeMont started breaking bottles. "They gonna fight, I know it," he said, slipping the necks over his fingers like claws.

But there were no fights. While I placated the Manhattan team in my most diplomatic voice, Arthur, the quietest of all the Stars, grabbed Sgt. Rock who was muttering about "caving someone's chest in," and Martin grabbed Doodie, who was squaring off with a bowlegged Puerto Rican. Lloyd Hill directed the squad out the gate and I quickly joined as we beat an angry and embarrassed retreat toward the subway.

Back at Foster Park Rodney Parker watched as the Subway Stars entered their territory. He was feeling sorry for himself of late, I knew, but his words were even more contemptuous than usual. "Look at them, every one of them an attitude case and not one of them a ballplayer. The scum."

He closed his eyes and feigned deep thought. "Don't tell me. I bet they just got their asses kicked by a team half as good as them, but if you ask them they'll say the game was stolen, the refs were crooked, everybody cheated." I said nothing, but he was very close.

the hook shot

at one time basketball was my life.
no one taught me more about the game
than don garland, my eighth grade coach.
he was a big man, firm and gentle ;

only his patience exceeded the bulk
of his forearms. i never knew him to
raise his voice—but who had the
cojones to test him? he was the man.

he drilled me nightly in the hook shot:
bounce pass, step to the basket, lean
with the shoulder, brace with the elbow,
sight the glass target, and arc it up lightly.

from *Rabbit, Run*

Boys are playing basketball around a telephone pole with a backboard bolted to it. Legs, shouts. The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles seems to catapult their voices high into the moist March air blue above the wires. Rabbit Angstrom, coming up the alley in a business suit, stops and watches, though he's twenty-six and six three. So tall, he seems an unlikely rabbit, but the breadth of white face, the pallor of his blue irises, and a nervous flutter under his brief nose as he stabs a cigarette into his mouth partially explain the nickname, which was given to him when he too was a boy. He stands there thinking, the kids keep coming, they keep crowding you up.

His standing there makes the real boys feel strange. Eyeballs slide. They're doing this for their own pleasure, not as a demonstration for some adult walking around town in a double-breasted cocoa suit. It seems funny to them, an adult walking up the alley at all. Where's his car? The cigarette makes it more sinister still. Is this one of those going to offer them cigarettes or money to go out in back of the ice plant with him? They've heard of such things but are not too frightened; there are six of them and one of him.

The ball, rocketing off the crotch of the rim, leaps over the heads of the six and lands at the feet of the one. He catches it on the short bounce with a quickness that startles them. As they stare hushed he sights squinting through blue clouds of weed smoke, a suddenly dark silhouette like a smokestack in the afternoon spring sky, setting his feet with care, wiggling the ball with nervousness in front of his chest, one, widespread pale hand on top of the ball and the other underneath, jiggling it patiently to get some adjustment in air itself. The moons on his fingernails are big. Then the ball seems to ride up the right lapel of his coat and comes off his shoulder as his knees dip down, and it appears the ball is not going toward the backboard. It was not aimed there. It drops into the circle of the rim, whipping the net with a ladylike whisper. "Hey!" he shouts in pride.

"Luck," one of the kids says.

"Skill," he answers, and asks, "Hey. O.K. if I play?"

There is no response, just puzzled silly looks swapped. Rabbit takes off his coat, folds it nicely, and rests it on a clean ashcan lid. Behind him the dungarees begin to scuffle again. He goes into the scrimmaging thick of them for the ball, flips it from two weak white hands, has it in his own. That old stretched-leather feeling makes his whole body go taut, gives his arms wings. It feels like he's reaching down through years to touch this tautness. His arms lift of their own and the rubber ball floats toward the basket from the top of his head. It feels so right he blinks when the ball drops short, and

for a second wonders if it went through the hoop without ruffling the net. He asks, "Hey whose side am I on?"

In a wordless shuffle two boys are delegated to be ³his. They stand the other four. Though from the start Rabbit handicaps himself by staying ten feet out from the basket, it is still unfair. Nobody bothers to keep score. The surly silence bothers him. The kids call monosyllables to each other but to him they don't dare a word. As the game goes on he can feel them at his legs, getting hot and mad, trying to trip him, but their tongues are still held. He doesn't want this respect, he wants to tell them there's nothing to getting old, it takes nothing. In ten minutes another boy goes to the other side, so it's just Rabbit Angstrom and one kid standing five. This boy, still midget but already diffident with a kind of rangy ease, is the best of the six; he wears a knitted cap with a green pompom well down over his ears and level with his eyebrows, giving his head a cretinous look. He's a natural. The way he moves sideways without taking any steps, gliding on a blessing: you can tell. The way he waits before he moves. With luck he'll become in time a crack athlete in the high school; Rabbit knows the way. You climb up through the little grades and then get to the top and everybody cheers; with the sweat in your eyebrows you can't see very well and the noise swirls around you and lifts you up, and then you're out, not forgotten at first, just out, and it feels good and cool and free. You're out, and sort of melt, and keep lifting, until you become like to these kids just one more piece of the sky of adults that hangs over them in the town, a piece that for some queer reason has clouded and visited them. They've not forgotten him; worse, they never heard of him. Yet in his time Rabbit was famous through the country; in basketball in his junior year he set a B-league scoring record that in his senior year he broke with a record that was not broken until four years later, that is, four years go.

He sinks shots one-handed, two-handed, underhanded, flatfooted, and out of the pivot, jump, and set. Flat and soft the ball lifts, That his touch still lives in is hands elates him. He feels liberated from long gloom. But his body is weighty and his breath grows short. It annoys him, that he gets winded. When the five kids not on his side begin to groan and act lazy, and the kid he accidentally knocks down gets up with a blurred face and walks away, Rabbit quits readily, "O.K.," he says. "The old man's going."

To the boy on his side, the pompom, he adds, "So long, ace." He feels grateful to the boy, who continued to watch him with disinterested admiration after the others grew sullen, and who cheered him on with exclamations: "God. Great. Gee."

King's Court

I went up to the park. That's how it had always been. Going up to the park. From the time I was five years old until I went off to college. Out the door and past the one block of wood frame houses and brick apartments. Hello to Mrs. Denine, hello to Duffy the dog, hello to the Ryan family sitting on the stoop. Then I would turn in through the big gate and be home free.

I had been away from New York for ten years. The park looked like a double exposure. The four square blocks of asphalt, metal fences, oak trees looked smaller than I remembered. A new crowd had taken over the benches between the basketball courts and the softball field. A row of faces glanced at me from behind their beer cans and cigarettes. A few nodded hello, the teen-aged faces of kids I had known.

The four half courts were empty. The two at the far ends were for nothing ball players. The third one was for intense grammar school kids. The second court was the only one that mattered. It was the big court, the king's court. A good surface with no pebbles in the asphalt. There was a long crack at the top of the key and one down the right side. Grass was growing through the cracks now.

That never would have happened in the old days, back when the park was loaded with ball players for the three-on-three and one-on-one battles. They cleared the court for Big Jim Davis and Bobby Mahoney. The big guys and the little kids—we all sat on the benches that morning and watched them go at it. Fifteen baskets and Mahoney took it to Davis all the way. Big Jim stuck to three-on-three after that. Mahoney was the king. No one ever beat him. He retired to Ricco's bar a few years later and spurned all challengers.

I had to get up there early on Sunday mornings to play in the court. Nine years old and going one-on-one against Terry O'Reilly. He was Malloy High School and I was Jamaica. Catholic versus public. I beat him all the time although he was a year older.

At eleven I knew the dead spot on the backboard and could arch a long semi-jumper between the oak tree branches that hung over the left side of the court. At twelve I was cutting diagonally out of the corners and popping fifteen-foot jump shots. That was my shot. A few quick dribbles, come down hard on the last one and up in the air.

The jump shot was my start. It got me on the king's court in prime time the summer before eighth grade. The big guys were hard up for a sixth man. Vincent Licata came walking over to the third court. I figured he'd pick me. He lived around the corner and was my brother's friend. Besides, I was the best among the younger kids. He knew that. He tried to teach me some moves from time to time. But his style didn't fit me. He was a crazy

man on the court, a snapping dog defense and score-any-way-he-could offense.

“That jump shot of yours any good against a real defense?” he asked.

“I can get it off against anybody.”

“Big shit. Anybody can throw the ball in the air. The thing is, is it gonna go in?”

He didn't wait for an answer. “C'mon let's go and see what you can do.”

I couldn't do much as things turned out. Big Jim stuffed my first jumper from five feet away. Moriarty kept stealing the ball from me, slapping it away or reaching behind me as I tried to drive past him. Wilson gave me a hard elbow to the stomach on his first drive. Twelve years old and the son of a bitch gave me an elbow. We were getting killed. Vincent was pissed and glared at me. But at least he didn't say anything. He was all over the court, scrambling for every loose ball, driving like a maniac. He almost landed on his head when Wilson submarined him on a drive. The next play he drove Wilson into the pole and sank a nice lefty hook. It wasn't enough. I made one jump shot before we got kicked off the court. When I returned from the water fountain, I saw that Mahoney had arrived, short-circuiting any comeback plans I had. I felt like shit. Vincent came over and gave me a tolerant smile. “You got time,” he said.

I watched the next few games and ran over to Abe's candy store to get sodas for the guys. Vincent threw me a quarter tip. Later I watched him drive off in his big red Pontiac. The guy had style. I'd see him taking off for the city on Saturday nights dressed in flashy clothes. They said Vincent had a lot of women, but he never brought them around the park. I imagined him dining by candlelight in expensive Manhattan restaurants, tipping hat-check girls, soft-talking his woman in smooth dark bars.

The king's court, the big guys—it all seemed so far away. I thought of all the emotion, the intensity, the dreams that had flowed over this square of asphalt with a gray metal pole stuck in the ground. I was going to work my way up the ladder, take over the court, go off to college and come back as one of the park establishment. I'd live in the neighborhood, come home from work and watch the kids play, show them a few moves, teach them a thing or two. But things changed. When I was king, there was hardly anybody around. The action had gone to other parks.

How to Cheat at Basketball

When I played basketball in the slums of Philadelphia—outdoors on concrete courts—there was never a referee. You had to call your own fouls. So the biggest argument was always about whether you called the foul *before* the shot went in, or whether you had waited to see if the ball went in. See, if you yelled “foul,” you didn’t get the basket. You just got the ball out-of-bounds.

Sometimes you called a *light* foul. Like you have a guy driving in on you and you punch him in the eye a little. That’s a light foul in the playgrounds.

Another light foul is submarining a guy who’s driving in on you. He comes down on the concrete, and you visit him every two weeks in the hospital. Of course, there is always a pole sitting in the middle of the court. Something has to hold up the basket. So you let a guy drive in, and you just kind of screen him a little bit, right into the pole. This is where you visit him three times a week in the hospital.

There’s always a big argument, too, about whether you stepped out-of-bounds or not. That’s a four-hour argument. So usually you take another shot—20-minute argument. Another shot—20-minute argument. Out-of-bounds—four-hour argument. So this one game—the winner is the first team to score 20 points—can go maybe two weeks. The most important thing is to remember the score from day to day. Sometimes you argue four hours about *that*.

To play on any team outdoors, you have to have a pair of old jeans that you cut off and shred a little bit above the knees so they look like beachcomber pants. You get an old sweat shirt of some university—mine was Temple—and you go outside to the playground, and play basketball all day, until dark, and your mother has to come get you.

Let me say something about mothers. When I was a kid, mothers were never really interested in sports. Even if you became a fantastic star, your mother was probably the last person to know. She was more concerned with you being on time for dinner.

My mother was a fantastic color changer. Whatever color my uniform was, my mother would always put it into the washing machine with different-colored stuff—the red bedspread, the green curtains, the yellow tablecloth or the purple bathroom rug. And when the uniform came out, instead of being white, it would be avocado.

I’ve worn a pink uniform, and I’ve worn a running yellow-and-blue uniform—which of course startled my teammates quite a bit. One time, I had to learn how to use karate in order to answer for a pale-lavender uniform.

Later, I graduated from playground basketball to indoor basketball. I

played for a place called the Wissahickon Boys' Club along with a very famous defensive back by the name of Herb Adderley.

Well, very few teams could whip the Wissahickon Boys' Club on our own court, mainly because our court was different. First of all, the floor hadn't been varnished and the out-of-bounds lines hadn't been painted since the day the gym was built, about two weeks after Dr. Naismith invented basketball. We didn't have to see them. We could feel where they were. Our sneakers had soles as thick as a piece of paper. But it was hell on the other team.

So was the ball. We used a leather ball that had been played with outside—in the dark of night, in the rain, in the snow. It was about as heavy as a medicine ball, and just as lively. There were stones and pieces of glass stuck into it, and it never had enough air, because the valve leaked. You could wear yourself out just trying to dribble it.

Now about the basket. The rim was loose, and hanging, and shaking. And all you had to do was kind of lay that heavy ball up softly. The rim acted like a trampoline. It lifted the ball up and threw it through the center of the hoop and you always had two points.

Another thing about playing at the Wissahickon Boys' Club. We would get ol' Weird Harold, who was six feet nine and weighed about 90 pounds, to make black X's all over the backboard. Now, only our team knew what each X stood for. See, we aimed maybe two inches under a mark, and, zap, two points. If you followed our mark, you'd miss the rim. We always had something going for ourselves.

The ceiling in the gym was only 15 feet high. For those who may not know that much about basketball, that means our ceiling was only five feet above the rim of the basket itself. When other teams came to play us, they weren't aware right away that the ceiling was low. So when they shot the ball, they hit the ceiling—which was out-of-bounds. And we would get the ball. Meanwhile, we had practiced shooting our jump shots and set shots on a direct line drive. No arch, no nothing—just straight ahead into the basket. Sort of Woody Sauldsberry style.

We also had a hot-water pipe that ran around the wall, and the wall of the gym was out-of-bounds. If you touched the wall or anything, you were out-of-bounds. So whenever a guy on the other team would go up for a rebound or a jump shot, or drive into the basket, we would kind of screen him into the hot-water pipe.

At the Wissahickon Boys' Club, we had graduated to the point where we had referees for the games. We had them because they were honest and fair and impartial. Which is what they teach at boys clubs. Also because we were playing teams from other neighborhoods and had to finish the games in one day. The referees cut down on the long arguments.

We had two steady refs whom we named Mr. Magoo and The Bat. You might say they did not have Superman vision. They more or less had to make their calls on what they could hear. Like if they heard a slap, and

thought they saw the ball fly out of a guy's hands, they cried "foul" for hacking. So whenever a guy would go up for a rebound or something, all we had to do was just give him a little nudge, and boom! He'd wind up against the wall and probably that hot-water pipe. His screams would tell The Bat and Mr. Magoo he was out-of-bounds.

When new teams came down to play us and saw our uniforms, which consisted of heavy old long-sleeved flannel pajama tops over below-the-knee corduroy knickers, they'd call us "turkeys" and all kinds of chicken names. Maybe we weren't cool. But we were protected from that hot-water pipe.

One time, Cryin' Charlie's mother had his PJ tops in the washing machine at game time, and we had to make him non-playing coach that day so he wouldn't cry.

In the middle of the court, we had five boards that happened to be about the loosest boards that you ever stepped on in your life. So that while dribbling downcourt on a fast break, if you hit one of those five boards, the ball would not come back to you. Many times, a guy on the other team would dribble downcourt on the fast break, and all of a sudden he'd be running, and his arm would be pumping, but there was no ball coming back up to him. All we had to do was just stand around at the loose boards, and without even stickin' the guy, let him go ahead and do his Lamont Cranston dribble, and we could pick up the ball, dead and waiting, right there. Whenever *we* went on a fast break, we dribbled *around* those loose boards.

One team I remember we lost to was the Nicetown Club for Boys & Girls. We played in their gym. They had a balcony that extended out over one side of the court about ten feet. It was almost exactly the same height as the rim of the basket. So if you went up for a jumper, the balcony would block your shot. The defense of the Nicetown Club was to force the flow of your offense to the side of the court with the balcony. When we tried to shoot from there, the Bill Russell balcony would block the shot, and the ball would bounce back and hit our man in the eye. Whenever *they* came downcourt, they would play on the free side of the floor away from the balcony.

I would say, on a home-and-home basis, the Wissahickon Boys' Club and the Nicetown Club were even.

In high school, I had one of the greatest jump shots—from two feet out—anybody ever saw. The only man who stopped me was Wilt Chamberlain.

We played Wilt's high school, Overbrook, and they had a guy on the team by the name of Ira Davis, who was a great track man. He ran the 100 in like nine-point-something, and a few years later was in the Olympic Games. Ira was great on the fast break. So Chamberlain would stand under our basket and growl at us. And when he growled, guys would just throw the ball at him—to try and hit him with it. And he would catch it and throw

it downcourt to Ira Davis, who would score 200 points on the fast break. We lost to them something like 800 to 14.

My best shot was where I would dribble in quickly, stop, fake the man playing me into the air, and then go up for my two-foot jump shot. Well, I was very surprised when I found Mr. Chamberlain waiting under the basket for me. I faked, and faked and faked and faked and faked, and then I threw the ball at him and tried to hit him. But he caught it and threw it downcourt to Ira Davis: 802 to 14.

So then we tried to razzle-dazzle him. But for some reason, he could always follow the ball with that one eye of his in the middle of his forehead. And of course, the only thing we could do was just throw the ball at him.

We had one play we used on Wilt that had some success. We had one kid that was completely crazy. He wasn't afraid of anything in the world. Not even the Big Dipper. He was about as big as Mickey Rooney, and we had him run out on the court and punch Chamberlain right in the kneecap. And when Chamberlain bent over to grab our guy, we shot our jumpers. That foul alone was worth our 14 points.

Now that I'm a celebrity making a million dollars a year, we have Celebrity Basketball. I play with guys like James Garner, Jim Brown, Don Adams, Sidney Poitier, Mike Connors, Mickey Rooney, and Jack Lemmon.

In Celebrity Basketball, you pull up to the fabulous Forum in your Rolls-Royce, and your chauffeur puts you in a beach chair and wheels you out on the court. And after each shot, you have a catered affair.

And the ball. The pros wish they could find a ball this great. It's gold covered and has a little transistor motor inside, with radar and a homing device, and it dribbles and shoots itself.

A 60-piece orchestra plays background music while you're down on the court, and starlet cheerleaders are jumping up and down. After every basket, we all stop and give the guy who scored it a standing ovation.

Another thing about when I used to play basketball in the playgrounds. If you went to a strange playground, you didn't introduce yourself. You had to prove yourself first. No names.

"Over here, my man."

"Yeah, nice play, my man."

Later on, if you earned it, you'd be given a name: Gunner, My Man or Herman or Shorty or something.

Now, when we play the Celebrity games, they come out on the court and they say, "Hi, my name is such and such. I'm from so forth and so on," and the whole thing. And I say, "Oh, very nice to meet you."

But later, during the game, I forget the cat's name anyway and I just go right back to "Over here, my man. I'm free in the corner, my man." And I'm back in the old neighborhood.

Shooting for Teams

As kids, if we arrived at the basketball court
while a pick-up game was already in progress,

we just yelled, "Our challenge,"
and we got to play the winners.

Or if the gym was just opening,
we all lined up at the free-throw line
and shot for teams.

the first five to make a shot
against the next five.

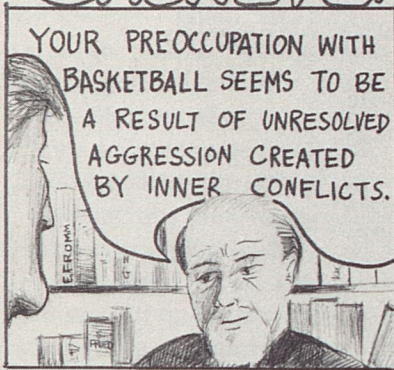
We had similar procedures for arbitrating
first outs and jump balls.

No matter how much bigger or tougher
some kids might have been than others,
I can't remember these conventions
ever being violated.

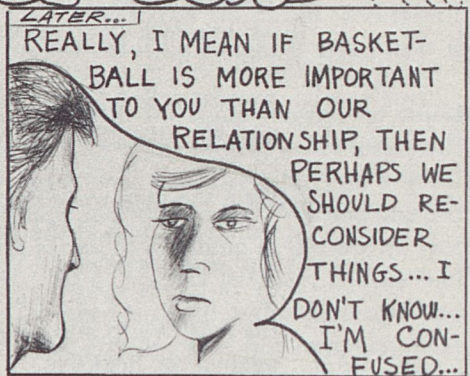
Guys my age who still play ball
instinctively abide by these rules.

I wonder if the kids today do?
Civilization may depend on it.

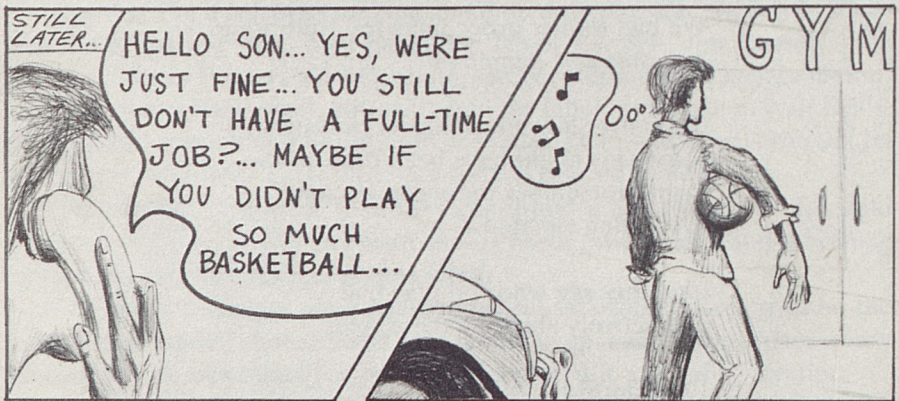
BASKETBALL BLUES



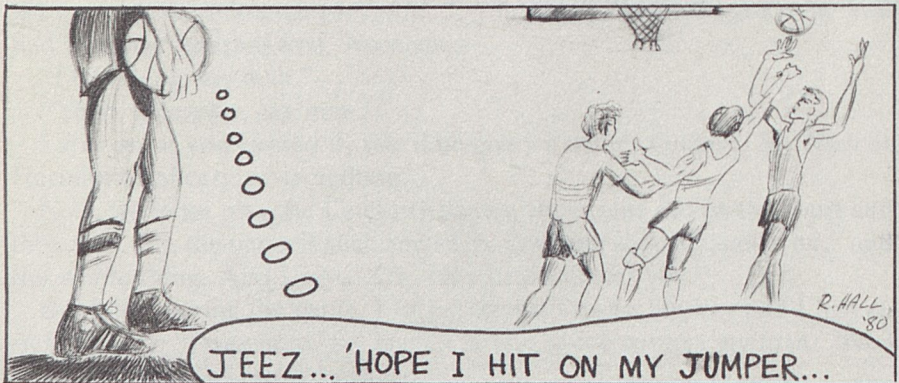
YOUR PREOCCUPATION WITH BASKETBALL SEEMS TO BE A RESULT OF UNRESOLVED AGGRESSION CREATED BY INNER CONFLICTS.



LATER...
REALLY, I MEAN IF BASKETBALL IS MORE IMPORTANT TO YOU THAN OUR RELATIONSHIP, THEN PERHAPS WE SHOULD RECONSIDER THINGS... I DON'T KNOW... I'M CONFUSED...



STILL LATER...
HELLO SON... YES, WE'RE JUST FINE... YOU STILL DON'T HAVE A FULL-TIME JOB?... MAYBE IF YOU DIDN'T PLAY SO MUCH BASKETBALL...



JEEZ... 'HOPE I HIT ON MY JUMPER...

R. HALL '80

Basketball Player

I was the most dedicated basketball player. I don't say the best. In my mind I was terrifically good. In fact I was simply the most dedicated basketball player in the world. I say this because I played continuously, from the time I discovered the meaning of the game at the age of ten, until my mid-twenties. I played outdoors on cement, indoors on wood. I played in heat, wind, and rain. I played in chilly gymnasiums. Walking home I played some more. I played during dinner, in my sleep, in movies, in automobiles and buses, and at school. I played for over a decade, taking every conceivable shot, with either hand, from every direction. Masses cheered my performance. No intermission, no food, no other human concern, year after year they cheered me on. In living rooms, subways, movies, and schoolyards I heard them. During actual basketball games I also played basketball. I played games within games. When I lost my virginity I eluded my opponent and sank a running hook. Masses saw it happen. I lost my virginity and my girl lost hers. The game had been won. I pulled up my trousers. She snapped her garter belt. I took a jump shot from the corner and another game was underway. I scored in a blind drive from the foul line. We kissed good night. The effect was epileptic. Masses thrashed in their seats, loud holes in their faces. I acknowledged with an automatic nod and hurried down the street, dribbling. A fall-away jumper from the top of the key. It hung in the air. Then, as if sucked down suddenly, it zipped through the hoop. Despite the speed and angle of my shots, I never missed.

Lefty-Righty

Running in a fast game, I was pushed and went running off the court into a brick wall. My palm flattened against brick, driving shock into my wrist. The city wasn't big enough for that pain. Other players left the game to watch me. Buildings grumbled in their roots. In tiny grains of concrete I saw recriminations. I rolled onto my back. A circle of faces looked down. I looked at the sky and didn't scream. I might have broken my nose, my cheek, my left wrist. Why had it been the right? Then someone replaced me in the game. It resumed before I left the playground. I was abolished by tenements. For six weeks I wore a plaster cast. It itched in warm rooms. The left hand held forks and spoons, combed my hair, buttoned shirts. It could soon knot a tie. But it took passes like a wooden claw. It threw them like a catapult, not a hand. Broken this way, a wild animal would have been noticed, killed, got out of sight. I appeared daily, lingering on the sidelines, shuffling in among the healthy when they formed teams. Not saying a word, I begged: "Choose me." Nobody looked in my direction, but being there gave me a right. Begrudged, but a right. Sooner or later, at least once a day, I'd be chosen. Any team I played on lost. Before and after games, alone, I practiced running to my left, dribbling lefty, shooting lefty. I became less bad. The left hand became a hand. In a tough, fast game, a few days after the cast was removed, my opponent said, "Hey, man, you a lefty or a righty?" I mumbled, "Lefty-righty." My team won easily. He came up to me and whispered, "How do you wipe your ass?" Out of noblesse oblige, I laughed. He grinned like a grateful ape, then offered me a cigarette, which I declined.

from *Double Dunk*

Nice dark lips—thick. Short hair. Brown eyes moving over your face. She is fine. How do you get these fine women without doing anything? All you do is walk in the door good and she comes after you. Luck ain't the word for it. "Let me take off my jacket. I'll be right back." Romeo takes it for you and you return, this time counting the folk in the room. Must be about twenty—decent size for a hooky party. Direct Cindy over to a pillow.

"I saw the GW game. You played your ass off. I never saw anything like that tip-in. The whole place went wild. How'd you even think of something like that, Goat?" Her face tilts toward yours. Joint's gone; you have finished it. The colors suddenly explode: The red carpet, shag, easy to play with by pulling the ends; white and green bean bag pillows. Mellow, very mellow. The walls are clean and white. You smile, then start grinning. Think about that tip-in. Funny as hell going that high in the air. What can you say?

"It just came to me, you know. Something in me said try this." Are you making any sense at all? Doesn't sound like it. Your voice seems to be losing you. Your mouth is moving but are words coming out? Some couples get up to jerk. It's the Contours. *Do you love me (Do you love me?)? Do you love me (Do you love me?)? Now that I can dance . . . I can do the twist . . . Do you like it like this?* That's one dance you can do if necessary. Usually you lay dead, though, get high, talk to the women.

"Hey, we gon put on some Latin music. I'm tired of this American b.s." Romeo comes back into the room. This time Wanda is holding his hand.

"Well, whose record is it, anyway. Ain' nobody told you to put on that shit." Some voice from the corner.

"What shit you talking about, man?" Romeo searches through his collection—albums leaning against the wall next to you. "Hey, Goat I forgot to tell you my little brother wanted to see you. He said he had some shots to show you. Ha ha ha." Nod your head and smile.

"I'm talking about that good shit you got over there you calling American b.s. Gene Chandler, Isley Brothers. You got the Marvelettes, you got Barbara Lynn, you got Shep and the Limelites."

"Well, yeah. But you know what I'm putting on now—some real shit. Check this out. This is the man—Johnny Pacheco. This brother gets down. And look who's on deck—Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri. And don't even talk about Joe Cuba."

The percussion and bass start booming now that Latin has taken over. More joints are rolled, are going around. This is one of those stogies. Your eyelids get heavy. Where were you anyway? Oh yeah, the G.W. game. Look over at Cindy. She's nodding her head to the beat. A lot of people

are doing the cha-cha. Romeo is into his thing and saying this reminds him of the Palladium.

Yeah, it was a regular foul shot situation. A one-on-one. You lined up on the far side, close to the foul line. Reese makes the first try and you are just bent over now with your fingers pulling down on the edges of your shorts when the second shot hits the rim and floats in the air, coming down toward the foul line. Something tells you to jump. You glide into the air just a few feet in front of Reese and grab the ball which is not even rotating, with both hands. And now you are struck with the fascinating idea of jamming the ball from there. You are already in the air and your body is already leaning toward the basket. Why not. Show George Washington what you think of them. Make it clear you mean business. Slam it through the net with enough force to take the air out of their stomachs. Do it. *BLAM*. Leave the ball trickling along the floor, snatch a look at one of the bewildered G.W. cheerleaders. Turn now that your feet are on the floor, bump into a few chests—you don't know whose they are—and head back up court. They must know you're serious now. Place goes mad. Your teammates look at you and nod their heads as you set up defense. God, you want to smile, you feel so good. That's the way you relive it. No other way to explain it. Something that came to you; you took it, it worked. That simple. . . .

Oh, man; that's what's such a groove about these fucking hooky parties. You can really get off. Now tomorrow or the next day you'll have to beat the mailman home. That fucking homeroom bitch, Miss Walker, will send a letter asking for Mrs. Manigault to explain your absence. She had a nerve for a while. For almost all of October she calls in the morning and wakes you up. "Earl? Miss Walker here. Your homeroom teacher. Are you arisen from the bed yet?" What kind of nerve is that *anyway*? You can't even stay in the fucking bed and play hooky. Have you *arisen* no less.

Then your moms gets on your case. "Why you don't want to go to school?" Seems like she's been asking you the same question for all your life. You've gone through how many schools and she's had only two jobs—at the laundry and now at the hotel. She's quiet, the eyes are deep and pleading, her hands are folded over her apron. She doesn't raise her voice. When you were little she could make you cry by just sitting and talking to you. "Earl, come here," she would say. "I heard so and so about you. Is it true?" If it was something crazy and you weren't guilty, of course you would sit there and cry. How could she believe something like that? If she caught you red-handed, you would sit there blankly. Wasn't nothing *to* say. She knew you were guilty. She never says anything bad to you. Never has. She listens to every word you say. Every word.

Only once did she whip you.

"Hey Goat, you dancing or not, blood?" Romeo goes in a circle and takes Wanda's hand over his head. He's looking right at you and smiling,

then twirls in a circle and takes her by the waist. "This is Rodriquez in case you were wondering who the brother is. Ooh, ooh, get down."

Just ignore him. Must be his age—what is he, twenty-one?—which allows him to smoke and continue to party. Been going with young Wanda for years now. You—you are almost wasted. Just cool out with Cindy, dig on the music and the motion. Her head is on your shoulder, her hand keeps the beat on your knee. You turn to see she is looking at the side of your face. Kiss her on the cheek. She runs her hand along your thigh.

Only once. Oh, how old? Maybe about nine or ten. You had stayed out of school again. She's waiting for you when you come in from the movies. Sitting in the big stuffed chair. "Come here, boy." Oh no. Not me. She's going to kill me. Turn around and run out the door. Crying like mad. You'll never do it again. No more hooky. You'll go to school every day. Keep running until some older boys catch you two or three blocks away. They drag you home. "Where you run to?"

"I don't know." You can't even get those words out, you're shaking so badly.

"Don't ever run from me, you hear?"

It's so dark in the room you can barely see her. The voice is quiet, steady. The shoes of the two boys who caught you scrape against the linoleum in back of you. She turns to get a belt from nowhere, nods to the boys to leave, beckons you to come forward.

"Earl, how do you stay in the air, that's what I don't understand. It looks as if you just hang up there." Cindy's voice cracks on *hang*.

She's straightening out now. Maybe she isn't. Maybe she really likes to talk about basketball. That's a nice sweater she's wearing. Feels like mohair. Damn good question. All your life you've been sticking in the air. You love to get up. You don't know how or why, you just go up and stay up. Can there be anyone else in the city who does it as well as you? You've seen them all. You can't think of anybody. Nobody. You know you can out jump any man within six inches of your height. Answer her. "I don't know, I just jump and try to stay up, Cindy."

Commerce High. That was when you really got off. You missed the shot. Damn ball hit the rim. Was that the first time you tried to go over a giant dude? He was about six-eight. You remember precisely. Have twenty-two before the half but they are beating you. Was it Reggie?—yeah, the center. You get the tap at the start of the half. Drive. Reggie hovers. Laying. You are angry, determined to go over his head. He can't stop you, not one person between you and scoring. He's more than a half foot taller than you. Rise up. You go *over* his head and just miss tipping it in nicely except you put spin on the ball and it bounces off the rim. You still go completely over him and miss only because of bad placement. He *couldn't* have stopped you.

Well, you're definitely too big to be whipped on now. No way at sixteen can she even think about whipping you for playing hooky. But your moms

ain't thinking about hittin on you anyway. You can count the number of times she's even scolded you. Too bad she doesn't like basketball as much as she does baseball. Wonder how Romeo got into these bean bags? Pretty hip things, but you got to move around in them a lot. They still more comfortable than chairs. Ain't this a bitch—there ain't a ball player in the room but me. Anyway, they all know me, know who I am.

Chairs. Chairs. You remember the chairs being thrown. Last summer in the high school Rucker Tournament. Hot as Hell. Somebody at half time twists the bottom of his jersey and wrings out a cupful of perspiration on the ground. The all-star game. Everybody in Harlem is out there. They have chairs—the folding wood chairs—lined up along the out-of-bounds lines. You can't even dribble along the line, the chairs are so close. Motorman is there for commentary. Couple of bitches you are hitting on. Carmen is even there for a while. All the bad young boys eager to make a rep for themselves. You are nervous as you warm up and realize that after one year of high school you are considered one of the best. This is the baddest bunch of schoolboy players in the country. This is where it counts—in New York. A few bad dudes come out of Philly and from on the coast. But here is where the competition is for real. Alcindor is loping around, getting ready for his second year at Power. Everybody comes to see him, really, towering above the trees, the gum sliding inside his cheek, arms swinging at his sides. Vaughn Harper. "Big Thing" Ed Henry. Val Reed. All the bad boys.

At warm-up Lew stands around the basket and throws in hooks and dunks. Crowd goes "ooh" every time he jams it. Don't look too concerned about anything, that's the trick: be cool. You check out Alcindor to see how he does it. Motorman is on hand to give unofficial commentary. He knows all the stats—tells the crowd who just shot what, what school the player goes to, how tall, his average, what college he's interested in. Babies cry. You hear somebody's television. WWRL, "Your community station" is on two radios. *Blam, blam, blam*—three dunks in a row. Two kids are in a tree just above a basket. *Swish*: somebody hits from outside. You take off a missed shot and dribble out to the chairs, turn, bank it. One of the kids in the tree pops a firecracker. You go back under the basket. Over the heads of the crowd you see the ice cream man's truck. Behind the hot dog man is the frozen lemonade man, and behind him is the soft pretzel vendor. Here's a dude walking just inside the in-bounds line. He's selling cotton candy.

You think while you're throwing up a lay-up of the dudes you've seen at the Rucker: the Hawk; Big Wilt; Pablo Robinson, who could trick a stadium; Clinton Roberts, who you also hear went on to the Globetrotters; Helicopter, rejector of everything. You feel something about this all-star game. It's the crowd. Middle of the summer. Some outstanding ball is expected. Comments from the crowd. "Hey JoJo, Christine said she ain't gon' give you none if you don't score 30 . . . Look out Big Thing, don't hurt

nobody . . . Yo, Bob ain't you got no new moves yet? . . . Man, take that sorry hook on back downtown. You won't score nothing here with that shit." Dudes are serious too. You've seen cats lose their girlfriends on account of bad play. Chicks would just walk away from the game with somebody else.

Game gets started and everybody is running his ass off. You sure glad Lew is on your team the way he rejects the first shot. Damn frightening the way he simply knocks the shit out of the court—into the street. "Reject that shit with authority!" You know it's Motorman. "You won't try that no more, will you?" Laughter. Run back, set up a play. Glide. Take ball, head fake, dribble to left, pass off. Already you know you can take your man: that wasn't even your quickest fake and his foot was trailing off balance. Next time you'll drive right past him.

You sit half dazed in the living room of Romeo's, about to sober up, Cindy's hand on your thigh, her nose warm against your neck, and think back to this game and this move. You can see it clearly now. Lew gets a rebound and here it comes. You run down court while looking back. Pass hits you in the stomach right at the top of the key. Three big dudes have fallen back to guard. They are like guards too—big dudes, over six-eight—with two on either side and one in the middle. Later someone tells you it was Val and Vaughn on both sides, Big Thing in the middle. No time to set up, so keep going straight down the lane. You hear somebody yell, "Behind you," but you won't hardly pass off now. The three stand there, get set to pulverize you. There's no way you can get even close to the basket without them banging you around at least a little. Get strength from somewhere. Feel that you can do anything. Feel lifted by the crowd. Begin your leap. Go up, Goat. Palm the ball, hold it back by your hip. They all go up too. You can't even see the basket but for a split second when it seems that you have gone an inch higher than they—that you are still up there as they begin to fall back to earth. A tangle of wet brown and black faces, arms, palms, chests. It's all arms and hands in front of you but you are still higher than any of them so you sling the ball in an arc up from your hip, up to the sky and then finally down through the white cotton strings that are so clean and new for this game. *Blam lam*. The beautiful shaking rumble of the backboard. Noise that everyone understands.

Now come crashing down to the ground, the hard concrete, with the three defenders stumbling and falling over you like the time you were in a play at PS 119 and you all got all mixed up and wound up bumping into each other. Nobody falls here but everybody is off balance. Now the part you remember so clearly and will remember for the rest of your life. Chairs. Chairs are thrown on the court. Scared the hell out of you at first. You don't know what the crashing noise is on the side until you turn to see a chair a few feet away from you, legs folded up. People on the sidelines are throwing chairs on the court because they can think of no other way to show their amazement.

“It is the Goat, ladies and gentlemen. He has done a throwdown on three of the giants of New York and lived to tell about it,” shouts Motor-man, now having taken over at half-court with a portable megaphone. “Have you ever seen anything like this? History is being made. It’s the Goat, ladies and gentlemen. Let the name stick in your minds. The Goat has done it.”

They say later the game is stopped for ten minutes. You only recall the hands slapping your back, phrases like “damn nice,” “out of sight,” “helli-fied.” You can’t distinguish any faces, any voices. It’s confusion, a beautiful confusion; jitteriness in your stomach. Chairs. You wonder when the last time somebody threw chairs on the court. People talk about it for days. Little kids point at you and mention they had been there when you did it. “I heard about those chairs,” an old lady taking numbers would say. “Turned out the park, huh?” asks a barber.

“Hey, Romeo, I thought we were going to catch a flick.” This comes at the end of a Palimeri and there is only the quiet click of the record player arm moving off the forty-five and you are staring at the wall and fading away from the all-star game. Romeo stops, runs over to click the box off, asks if anyone wants to go downtown to the movies. Everyone yells out yes. You are feeling sober now. Cindy looks straight. Okay, let’s go. What will be seen? Go downtown and check it out. Always some good monster movie. You all can get there by four before all the traffic starts and the subway gets jammed up. Romeo hustles around; Wanda follows him, emptying ashtrays, picking up glasses, kicking a pillow in place. You stretch, look out the window and remember you are in the Bronx, where your moms worked in a laundry for almost a dozen years. You haven’t worked a day in your life. Here you are just coming to, having partied your ass off. And will do it twice more this week.

Well, what else is there? you wonder. You know there’s something, but what? Now go down the landing to the first floor and wait with the others for Romeo and Wanda. Small talk, giggles. Check that ride. So-and-so was robbed. What’s-his-name has some good smoke. Romeo and Wanda meet you all on the sidewalk and the group of you march down the hill toward Jerome Avenue and the downtown express to Forty-Second Street.

from *The Basketball Diaries*

Fucked up yesterday, lost our last game in the summer 15-and-under league up at George Washington High School, and that deuced us out of the championship game today. We had a good squad, mostly cats from down the block in the projects but that had a rule that no Varsity players could play. That ruined our chances of using big Lewie Alcindor even though he's from the neighborhood and all. I mean, shit, most of the teams got ringers but it's a little difficult to sneak in a seven foot All-Everything cat onto a court. He can't exactly use a fucking pair of sunglasses, dig? So I go up to watch the game today and pick up my trophy for the all-league team and what a hassle is steaming as I bop into the gym. THE SUGAR BOWL ALL-STARS, one of the teams playing, are in a rage bitching about the ringers on RUTGER'S team. So true! those cats didn't have a dude under eighteen running for them, none of them played school ball, but they were some of the best playground players in Harlem. I walked over and was rapping to a few friends, Vaughn Harper, an All-American from Boys High, and Earl Manigault, a Harlem legend of 5 ft. 10 ins. who can take a half dollar off the top of a backboard. He's invariably on and off his school team because of drug scenes and other shit. These two cats are, with big Lew, the best high school players in the city. Finally the captain of SUGAR BOWL points over to us and tells the other team and the man who runs the gig that if they're gonna use that team, that their team's gonna use Harper, "Goat" Manigault, and me. The bossman axes the idea of letting in Harper and "Goat" but says they can use me, which is fine with the other team who don't even know who the fuck this white boy is. Before I say a fucking word I get a uniform tossed in my mug and since there're bunches of chicks in the stands, my new team mates are huddling around me and I whip on the shit and start warming up. Big fucking difference I'm gonna make 'cause we need leapers for the boards and no back-court dude like me. Anyway the slaughter starts and I'm hitting long jumpers like a fucker (I gotta say that I always burn up that gym, something about it that I just can't miss, crazy) so we're holding our own by the half and I got twenty-eight points, each move of which I make sticks out like a hardon because I'm the only whiteman on the court and looking around, in the entire fucking place, in fact; my bright blond-red hair making me the whitest whitey this league has ever seen. So in short we made a good show for a team our age, but can't keep up with the other dudes and lose by ten, but that ain't bad and I got myself forty-seven points and at least got to play for once with these cats I've always had to play against in various tournaments since Bidy League days. Then to bust all kinds of balls, the bossman gets some college scout in the stands to testify the other

team got at least three ringers he knows and we are awarded the champ bit. After the gold is handed out and all (I didn't get a trophy for the game 'cause they were one short and I had to say "fuck it," but got an outofsite plaque for All-League), we go in a corner and pose a team picture for the Harlem paper, "The Amsterdam News." We're waiting for the birdie to click when the photog calls over the SUGAR BOWL coach and whispers something to him who then walks over to me and mumbles, "Dig, my man, don't know how to say this but for, well, . . ." I cut him short and told him I got the message and stepped out of the pix. I guess I would have messed up the texture of the shot or something. Or maybe they didn't want to let the readers get to see that the high scorer was a fucking white boy.

Hard Times with the Mama Bears

Win together. Lose together. Basketball is a team sport.

When you're down in the cellar, the only way is up. I think I exhausted every known locker room cliché last season, trying to convince myself and my team that, contrary to the American Way (at least at their level anyway), winning isn't everything.

Basketball's back in the sports pages again, the pros and college teams are hitting the boards. By spring it will be time for the third year of girls' interschool competitive basketball in San Francisco.

The first year at Potrero Hill Junior High, I had the undefeated division champs. Last year, at Mission High School, I coached the sixth place team in a field of six.

Out of thirteen starts last season, three practice and ten league games, the Bad & Beautiful Mama bears outscored their opponents only twice.

We definitely had talent, although our good days rarely coincided. Strategy failed us.

We lost in a press.

We lost in a stall.

They got through our zone.

No one was on the boards.

Our shots were off.

Our lay-ups were blocked.

We telegraphed passes and made stupid fouls.

As emotional manager, my task was enormous. We defeated ourselves many times just by losing composure, blaming the refs or another player. "If we don't win, we beat you up" was a credo reluctantly abandoned.

Forget the practice games—our first league game at Wilson, we should have won. We just psyched ourselves out. Then at the end of the second quarter, Ginger, the hope of my season, comes off a rebound and falls to the floor, curled up, rocking in pain.

We all rush from the bench. The game is stopped. She's twisted her ankle, the one she's hurt before.

Susie unlaces the tennis shoe. There are no icepacks, only cold, wet towels to keep the swelling down.

I'm blotting perspiration from Ginger's forehead, when suddenly the color drains and her eyes roll back. Her face goes pale.

Is this what shock is?

Ow, Ms. Loskutoff! It hurts!

It's okay, Ginger, it's okay. (Is this what I get for telling them to go out there and hustle?)

The trauma passes. Soon she is able to be helped off the court, hopping

over to the bench to spend the rest of the game rooting for her teammates with her ankle elevated.

Judy hits nineteen points, but we still lose 36–31.

Game Two against Washington, we are all off, except for Shirley, the center. To everyone's joy and surprise, she starts getting the offensive rebounds and putting the ball back up into the basket.

"Loskutoff loves Ken" yell my girls in the huddle, trying to embarrass me that Wednesday afternoon of Game Three at McAteer. They can't decide whether I'm too cute for him or he's too cute for me.

We lead the Jaguars all the way, despite starting two fast breaks towards the wrong basket. Ginger has recovered, she scores twenty-eight points. In the last minutes of the fourth quarter, however, we blow it when short tempers and a technical get the best of us.

Down by nineteen at the half, we come back in Game Four to outscore Galileo by thirteen and lose by only six. It feels like we won. I suspend three players one game for poor sportsmanship and treat the rest of them to a soda at McDonald's. After the game, instead of disappearing as they usually do, one of the refs, youngish looking guy with sideburns and a mustache, sticks around making small talk, asking me if I know anyplace nearby. He's thirsty.

Understanding the innuendo, I ponder the possibilities, the definite advantages of some sort of an informal get-to-know-thy-ref type situation. Knowing my luck, he's probably married. It wouldn't be worth it. For calling the game my way, I'd have to play his.

Game Five is the Battle of the Basement. Lowell has lost three in a row before they meet us. The game is late. At 3:30 p.m. only four of my players are present and in uniform. Martha, the fifth, has forgotten both her suit and her tennis shoes.

After a brief consultation, the officials agree to begin play with Martha wearing her street clothes and my Adidas. Just then, the rest of the team arrives, having gotten lost trying to find the place.

One of the suspended players, who has brought her uniform along just in case, graciously insists on loaning it to Martha.

I pace the sideline in my stocking feet. We lead by four at the end of the second quarter. The Lowell spectators are very rude, barking like dogs every time Mission gets the ball. I feel like writing a letter to their principal—better than that, spray-painting obscenities across their center courtyard.

We are killed by fast breaks in the third period but make a superb comeback in the fourth, scoring eight points in under one minute.

I should have put Shirley and Ginger back in sooner.

Game Seven, a very warm day at Washington, I should have substituted more. It's a hard decision to make, when you're maintaining or even leading by a few, do you pull out people who are playing well? How do you know if they're going to get tired later? Sometimes if you pull them out when they're hot, they never get hot again. Then there is foul trouble to

worry about. Your best player gets three fouls in the first quarter, do you let her keep playing, she's the only one making the baskets?

One of the girls tells me a dream she had—she quits the team and I have a nervous breakdown. Not too far from the truth.

All the problems—my mother, teachers, friends and one-way loves—that I had gratefully shed with adolescence appear reincarnate in my players, making me feel older for the simple reason that I don't have those problems anymore.

As a team, we reach our lowest point at the end of Game Seven. We have now lost ten in a row.

Game Eight: we beat McAteer 60–49! Thank heaven for small miracles. For once, everything goes right.

Maybe Judy's birthday has something to do with it? The signs I made—Go Bears! & Happy Birthday, Green Eyes! The fact that we took team pictures today? I wore my new shoes?

Judy and Ginger split forty-eight points, twenty-four each. As the game ends, there are actual tears in my eyes. Everyone is hugging each other, jumping up and down.

"I knew we could do it," I tell them and treat the whole team to McDonald's.

Back to the Basement—Galileo annihilates us 48–24 in Game Nine, truly our worst effort except for Zenaida's defense and that incredible reverse falling down shot.

Game Ten: We end our season on an upnote, squeaking past Lowell 42–40.

"If you ain't coaching next year, I ain't playing," is one of the nicest compliments I have ever received.

Our season lasted from April 21 to May 19. We played each team twice, sometimes three games in a week. My sixty allotted hours of pay was used up rather quickly. I worked the month of May for free.

Through a combination of anxiety and skipped meals, I lost five pounds. I became philosophical. I started going to church again.

When I asked friends to pray for my team, I knew I was taking the job too seriously.

One day on an impulse, I bought a stylish pair of rope and denim sandals.

"My Mother's Day gift to myself," I rationalized to the salesman.

"You look too young for that," he answered politely.

"Oh, but I am a mother, of sorts," I said, trying to be funny.

I only wore those shoes twice this season and both times we won.

If only Mother's Day had been earlier . . .

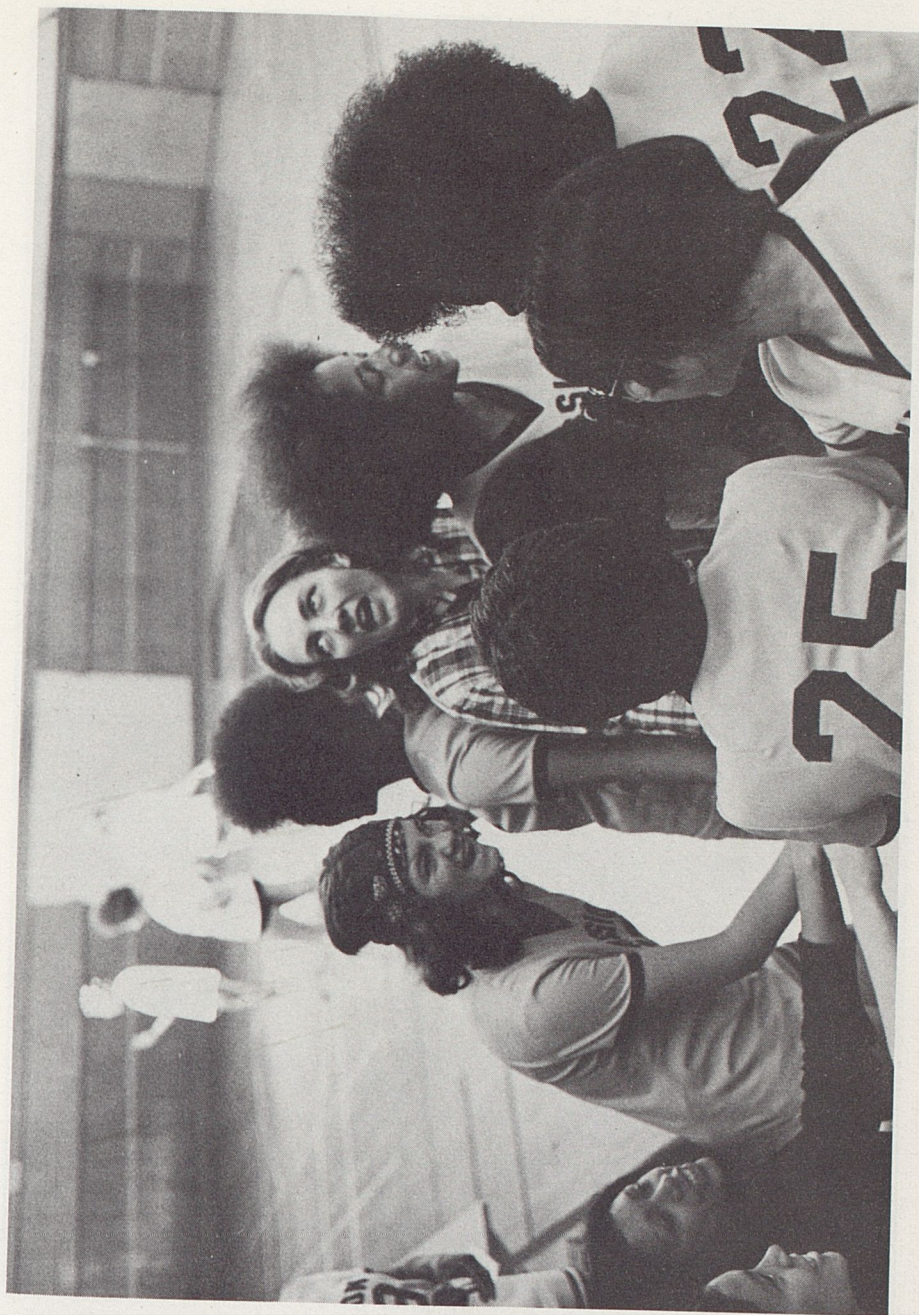
For the Mission High Bears, last year was a building year. Galileo may have aced the round robin tournament and Lowell taken the championship, but wait till next time. We know how to win now, and I'm wearing my lucky shoes to every game.

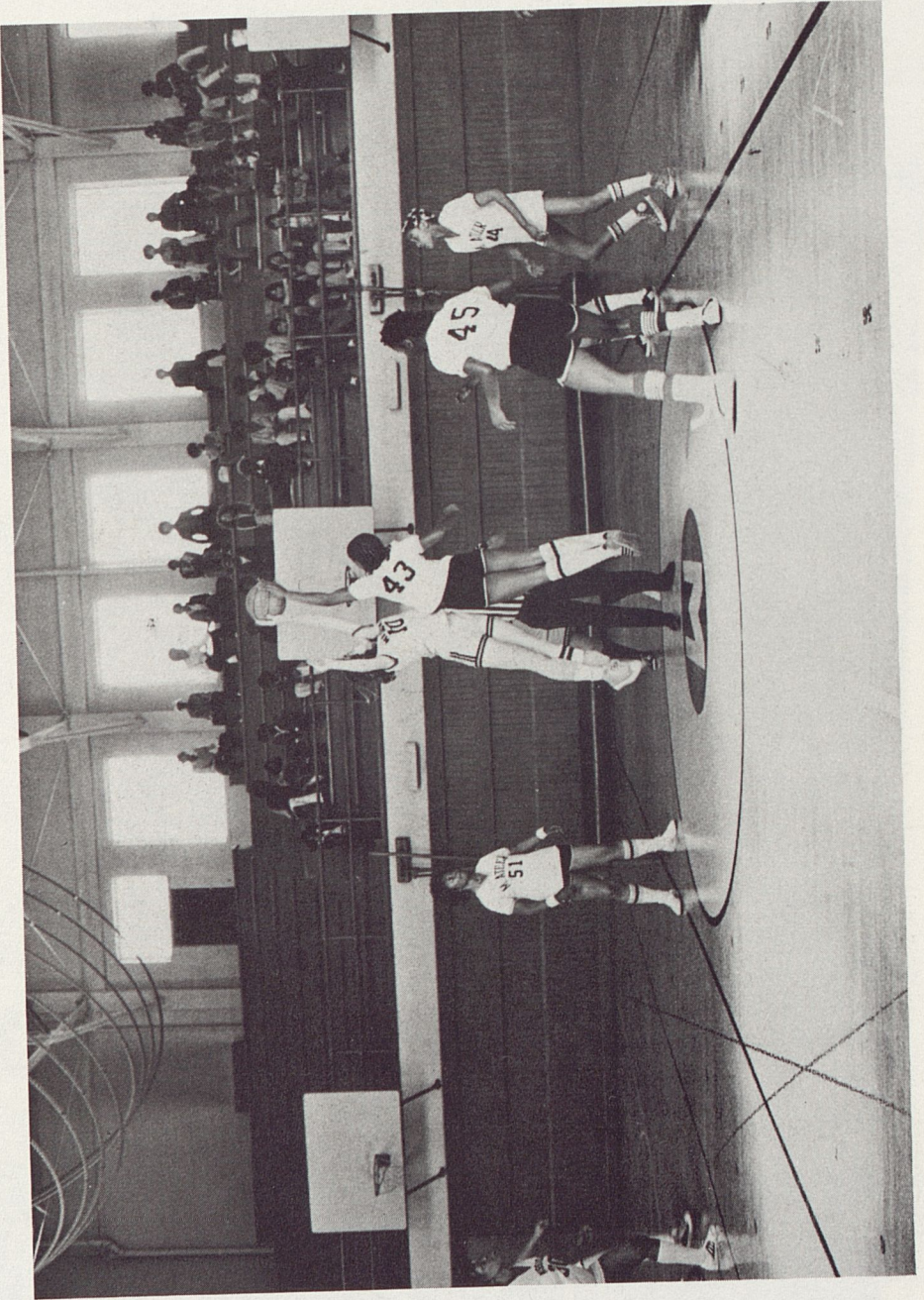
THE MAMA BEARS

By Ken Hjelle

THE MAMA BEARS

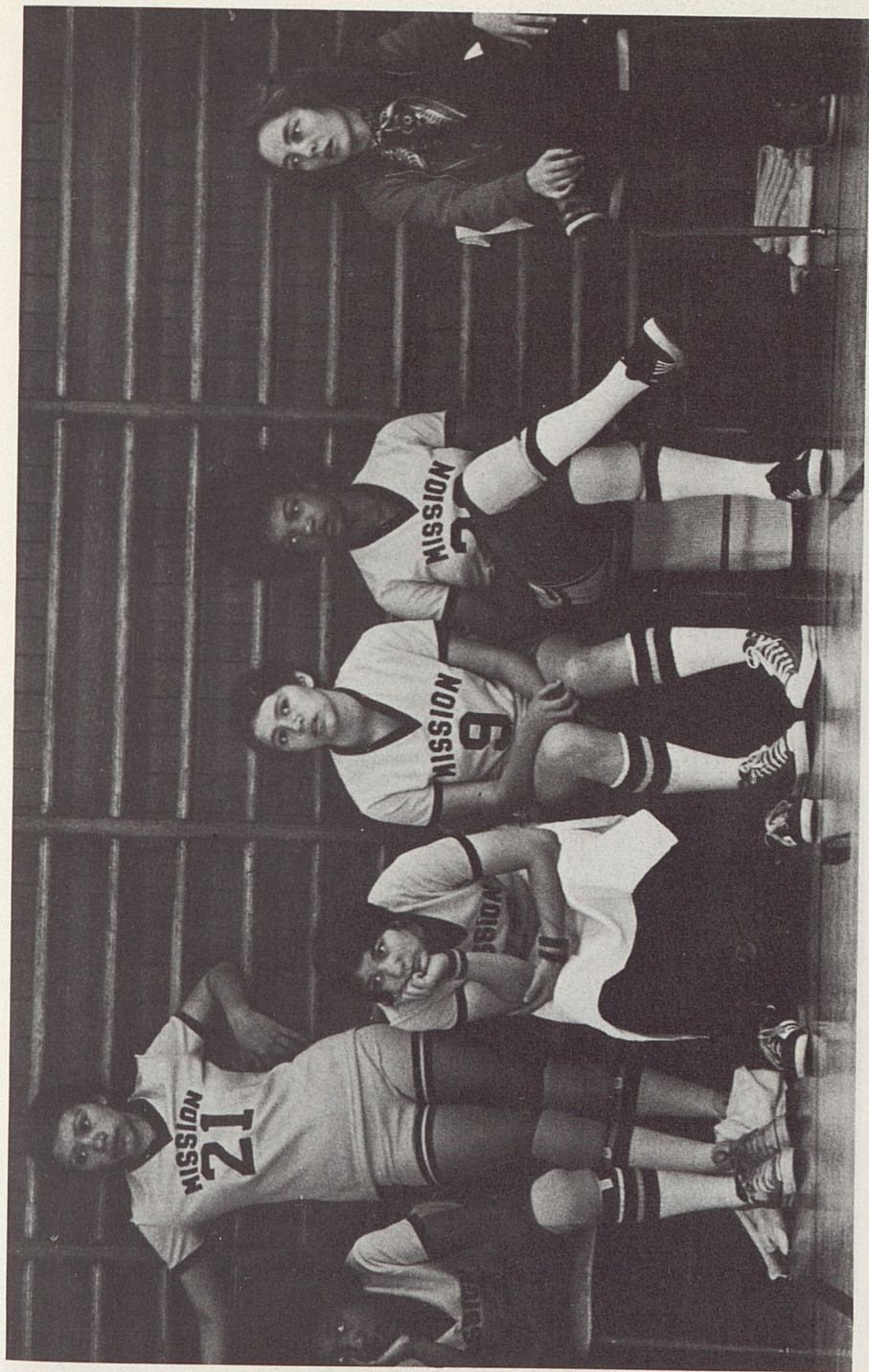
By Ken Hells

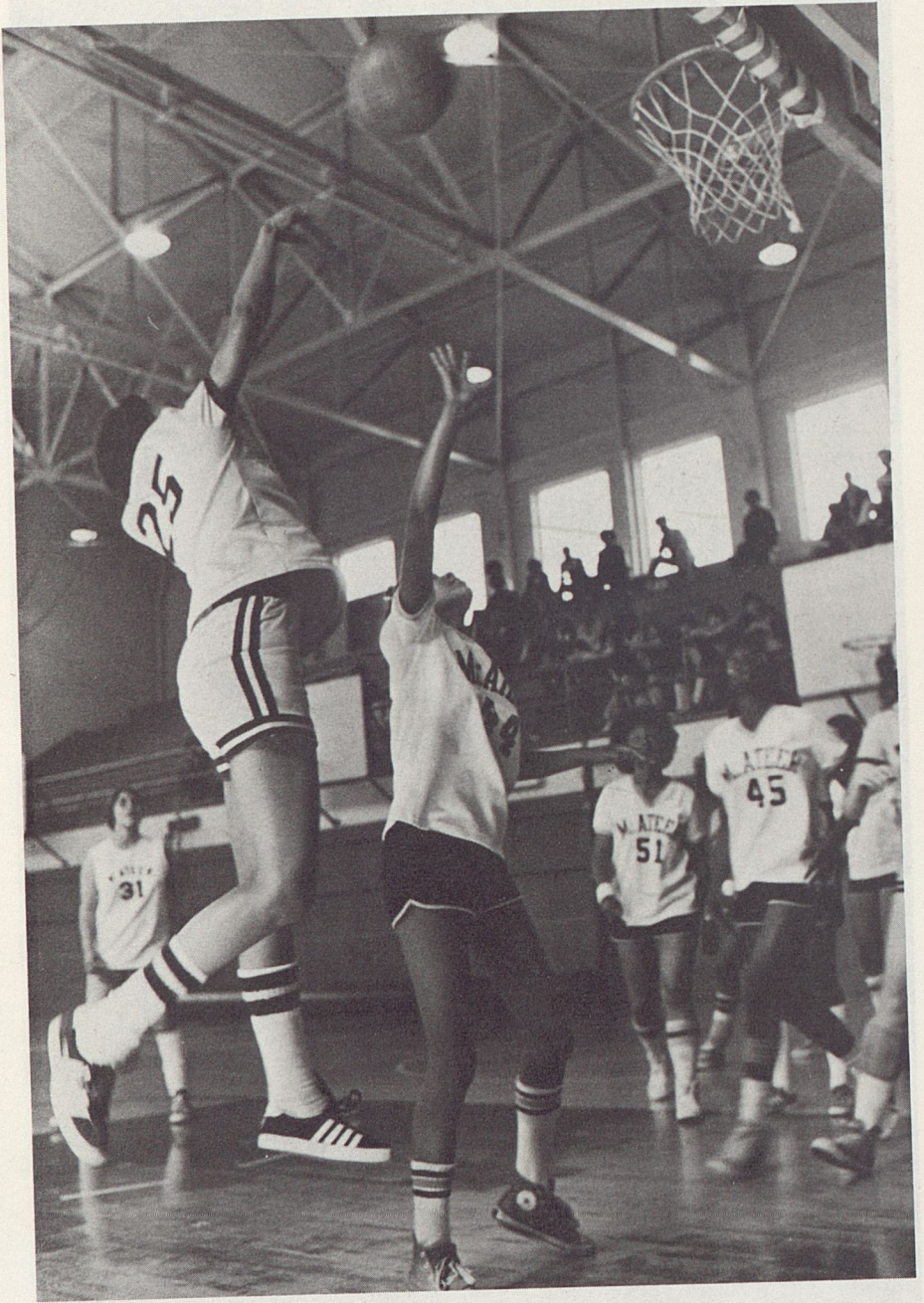












The Basket

hangs in the air all night long and all through the day when the schoolyard fills slowly with children in the morning, some of them throwing a red ball into it, the basket that holds nothing but lets everything through, like one day driving past I saw a boy throwing a baseball glove into it over and over again with a little layup motion off the backboard. The basket doesn't even define a shape or a volume but only pretends it—the ball swelling the shape of the netting, twitching it white in the air as it whistles through the strings. All day long and all night it hangs in the air above the lines painted on the asphalt, the boundary markers over which the older boys and men now after 2:30 when the schoolyard has emptied of children move in abrupt, broken arcs and pivots, the basket, poised above them, in this schoolyard, in that gym. There was a time when they were in school in which they'd played, and now they talk, remembering the speed, the sureness of their moves as they watch the ball swish through, distending the net, making the basket dance in the hot sun like a living thing. The game is just a whole different thing from what it was when I played. We never had any of this behind-the-back dribbling and passing, all these moves and spins the kids have made up, must have felt forced to make up, actually. The men and boys speak of it. They speak of it as they do it, it contains nothing but gives shape to

Winning

Every basketball coach hopes to encounter a "benny" somewhere in their coaching career. A benny is one of those special kids that come along once in a lifetime. A kid that won't leave the gym until you've turned out the lights and locked the door. And after it's locked will have fourteen ways and nine friends ready to re-enter. They possess all the natural skills and instincts of a great player. A desire to work hard perfecting the most elementary moves. And work even harder to help their teammates experience success. Perhaps that's the invisible quality that makes a benny. The unselfish willingness to share the art of basketball with anyone that cares to listen or participate in the game. Whatever that spirit is, it's the quality each coach looks for. It's the thing to build around and learn from. It's a winning season and perhaps a lot more.

At Cubberly High School in Palo Alto, where I was basketball coach, the presence of a benny was extremely unlikely. The students at Cubberly were white middle-class children of professionally oriented parents. For the most part, these kids mirrored their parents. They were striving to become successful at something; what that something might be was never made clear. Without an objective in mind, the striving became all important. At Cubberly it meant getting in "advanced ability" groups, getting good grades, getting accepted into a good university. Getting ahead. Getting through school. Getting. There was little time for intensity or giving to any one thing, especially a sport.

By a strange series of events it turned out I was wrong about ever finding a benny at Cubberly. It started when school integration came to Palo Alto. Black students volunteered to be bused across the freeway tracks. Cubberly High School as "host" school received its allotment of twenty-three "guest" students. As the basketball coach I waited anxiously to see if any athletes might be a part of this transfer. Of course I was looking for a benny. Three days after the transfer students arrived I called the first basketball practice.

The turnout was excellent. Our basketball program had been successful during the past few years and it gradually became known that if you turned out, you would get a chance to play. The prospect of gaining some new players from Ravenswood High School in East Palo Alto added to the tension and excitement of the first practice.

As the players came out on the floor for the first time I noted some familiar kids that had started on last year's team. In fluid movement they began the slow and graceful art of shooting their favorite shot. Dribbling a few steps and rearing up to take another shot. Rebounding and passing out

to a fellow player. Reliving past plays. Moving to the fantasy of future game-winning shots. Eyeing the new players.

At the baskets on each side of the central court the new players are assembled. They dribble the available basketballs in place and watch the players moving on the center court. They don't talk much and look a little frightened. Then as if on cue they begin to turn and shoot at the available baskets. They too have a private shot and a move to the basket. Soon the entire gym is alive with players outwitting invisible foes and arcing up game-winning shots. Another season is beginning.

Midway into this first practice Cubberly High School basketball met Huey Williams. He came rushing into the gym. In fact he ran around the entire court three times. He didn't have a basketball. He was just running. And smiling. Nodding his head to the dumbstruck players. He didn't speak a word. Just smiled and nodded hello. By his third lap, everyone knew we had our first black athlete.

Huey Williams wasn't exactly the transfer student coaches dream about. He was short, about the shortest player on the club. With stocky frame and bowed legs and radar-like hair, he seemed like a bottle of soda water, always about to pop. His shots were explosions of energy that pushed the ball like a pellet. When he ran, he couldn't stop. He'd race in for a layup and instead of gathering his momentum and softly placing the ball against the backboard, he raced straight ahead, full speed, ejecting the ball in midair flight like a plane letting go a rocket. The ball usually slammed against the backboard or rim and careened across the gym. To say it simply, Huey was not a basketball player. He was something else.

Every player carries to the game a personality. That's part of what makes basketball so interesting. That personality is directly reflected in the way a person plays. Now, Huey brought with him a personality I had never quite seen before. He loved life, people, school, anything and everything. "Mr. Jones, how are you today?" he'd say. "Fine I hope." You would have to agree with Huey. His view of the world was contagious. He always had a smile that burst out when you least expected. "Mr. Jones, I didn't shoot too well did I?" He'd be smiling, getting ready to shoot again.

As the first black player on our team, Huey was well received. After all he didn't represent a threat to any of the white players. If anything he was a puzzlement. How could anyone try so hard, smile so much, and play so bad? Weren't all blacks supposed to be super athletes? How come he doesn't know his place, isn't solemn, and I like him? You couldn't help but root for Huey and want to be around him. Carnegie and the make-you-feel-good folks could take lessons from Huey. He was a good human being that shared his optimism about life with anyone that ventured in his path. With a smile Huey started every practice with "We're going to win this whole thing, Mr. Jones. Just watch!"

I didn't share Huey's enthusiasm. It was the most unusual group of kids I had ever coached. In fact the team really constituted three distinct groups.

Huey represented one of these groups. This was a collection of five kids who had never played before. They couldn't shoot or dribble, let alone jump. Passing was iffy. When they were on the court my greatest fear was that they might run into each other. Although lacking skill, they personified Huey's faith and willingness to work hard. My God how they tried.

A second group of kids on the team had all played together the past year. They were typical Palo Alto kids. I guess Chris Martin most exemplified the personality of this group. Chris was a class officer, good student, achievement oriented and serious about winning and of course playing. Christ just tolerated Huey and most everything else. His attention was on the future. Basketball at Cubberly was like the Pony League, Little League and Junior League he had participated in so well. It was one more right step to some mythical big league called Farah, Hilton, or perhaps Standard Oil.

Chris knew all the lessons and skills of basketball. His jump shot was a picturebook example of perfection. He released the ball at the peak of his jump and followed through with his hands guiding the path of the ball as it slid into the basket. The closest parallel to Chris' behavior might be described as that of a little old man. He was "finicky" at the age of sixteen. If things weren't just right, his voice would stretch several octaves and literally squeak. For Chris things going just right meant a championship and of course a star role. I liked and felt sorry for Chris all at the same time. He reminded me of myself. A little selfish and awfully conceited. Extremely insulated from feelings.

A third group of kids making up the team can best be described as outlaws. Dave Warnock characterized this group. Whereas Huey had a reverence for life and Chris was busy controlling life, Dave seemed always on guard and challenging hell out of it. He was always in trouble. Usually a team is composed of kids like Huey who can't play and kids like Chris who have played throughout childhood. Kids like Dave rarely show up on a team. To have five kids like him on the same team was most unusual. If not intolerable.

Dave's style of life and play was outside prediction. Dave reminded me of a stork trying to play basketball. His arms and legs flayed at the air as he stormed up and down the court. His shots were what players call "watch shots." He would crank up the ball without facing the basket from some unexpected place and yes it would go right in. Prompting the defensive player to say, "Look in the other hand . . . you might find a watch." Dave was always a surprise. A surprise if he showed up for practice and a surprise that he stayed with it. In a strange way he was also a breath of fresh air. He lived to the fullest. He didn't stop to explain his actions. He just acted.

So there you have it. Not exactly a dream team. Five kids charging around looking for the pass they just dropped. Five kids straining for an expected championship. And five kids who might not even show up for the

game. The entire team tilted on the verge of combustion. The kids that centered around Chris and Dave openly hated each other. Huey and his troop of warriors became the grease that kept the team moving together. Happy and delighted to be playing they were oblivious to the conflict. In their constant attempt to mimic a Warnock pass or a Chris jump shot they inevitably made the originals look ridiculous. Huey with his intensity and honesty put everything in perspective. It was simply impossible to get angry or serious about yourself with Huey around. He had girlfriends to tell you about, a cheer for a good play, a hand for someone who had fallen, and a smile for everything. And if all that failed, he always had his "new shot" to show you.

It wasn't long before everyone was working to help Huey and the other inexperienced players. Chris was telling players about the right way to shoot. Dave was displaying one of his new trick passes. I was working hard to teach defense. If you don't have the ball, go get it. Don't wait for someone to put it through the basket or even start a play. Go get the ball. Chase it. Surround it. Take it.

We worked on how to press and trap a player with the ball. How to contest the inbound pass. Double team. Use the full court. Cut off the passing lane. Work together with teammates to break over screens and sag into a help position. Work to keep midpoint vision. Block out. Experience the feeling of achievement without having the ball or scoring the winning point. Take pride in defense.

The intensity and intricate working of defense was something everyone on the team could do, and something new for everyone to learn. Defense is something most basketball teams just do not concentrate on. It's the unseen part of the game. Working hard on the techniques of team defense began to slowly draw the team together with a common experience. As for offense, well, I taught the basic passing pattern, but the shooting was up to whoever was on the court. Chris and his group ran intricate patterns for the layup or percentage shot. Dave with his team took the ball to the hoop usually after three dribbles and a confederate yell. Huey's team did their best just to get the ball up the court.

By the start of the season we had one spectacular defense and three offenses. In fact I divided the team into the three distinct groups. In this way everyone could play. It confused the heck out of opponents. According to basketball etiquette you're supposed to play your best five players. We played our best fifteen. You are also supposed to concentrate on scoring. We emphasized defense. Finally a good team has the mark of consistency. We were the most inconsistent team you could imagine.

We would start each game with Huey's bunch. They called themselves "the Reverends." With their tenacity for losing the ball and swarming after it plus their complete inability to shoot, they immobilized their opponents. The starting fives they encountered couldn't believe the intensity and mad-caps of Huey's Reverends. By the time they realized they were playing

against all heart and very little scoring potential it was time to send in Chris' group. Chris' team called themselves the "A Train." That they were. They methodically moved down the floor, executed a series of crisp passes, and scored. By this time in the game Huey was smiling his all-knowing smile, and the coach from the other team was usually looking over at our bench in a state of confusion. Just as the other team adjusted to systematic and disciplined play, we sent in Dave's "G Strings." Dave's team played with reckless abandon. They were always in places they weren't supposed to be. Doing things that weren't in the book. Playing their game.

By the middle of the season we were undefeated. Oh, I had to suspend Dave twice for smoking a cigar in the locker room, once for smuggling a girl onto the travel bus. And on occasion I had to remind Chris that I was the coach, not him. But all in all the team was actually becoming friends. It was a joy to witness this chemistry. Huey's group gradually improved. They started believing they could beat anyone. The basketball still didn't go in the basket, but in their minds and actions they were "starters." As for Chris, he was actually beginning to yell for someone besides himself. And Dave, well he didn't change much in an outward way. He was still frantic on the basketball court. It was off the court that he was becoming a little less defensive. He started telling me of things he wanted in life. Things not that much different than those securities and accomplishments sought by others. In fact it was something as simple as friendship.

Our first defeat of the year came not on the basketball court but at the hands of the school superintendent. With twelve games already played, the superintendent declared that all transfer students were ineligible for interscholastic sports. It was a knee-jerk reaction to other coaches in the league who feared we might "raid" Ravenswood High School of its top black athletes. No one worried about us stealing away their intelligent students or class leaders, yet that's just what we did. No one thought to ask the students and parents how they felt. This was a coaches' decision. Coaches who thought only about winning.

The superintendent ordered Huey off the team immediately. The announcement of this decision came not in a telephone call or personal visit, but in a ten word directive. "No transfer students will be eligible for interscholastic athletic teams."

The announcement came on a game day. The team was already suited up waiting for the last minute game plan. I read the superintendent's decision to the team. They were stunned. And angry. Ideas and plots for Huey's survival rang out against the white-tiled dressing room walls. Dave slammed his shoe against a locker. "It's a shitty decision." Chris agreed, "We can appeal. . . let's go to the board of education." Dave snapped, "When—in three weeks?" Everyone joined the argument. "Let's give Huey a new number." "Yeah, but can we also change his color?" "We can play against ourself. . . can't we." "Let's make up our own league." In the din my own

thoughts were welling up. How I hated the way decisions were made at this school.

It happened every day in a hundred ways. The textbook to use, the schedule to follow, the course to teach. At no point in the schooling process were the teacher or student allowed to make a decision and then be responsible for it. Every day I and those around me were being robbed of the chance to make decisions. It was like a draining away of life itself. Life must be tended daily. It can't be simply studied. Or mandated. Like basketball it must be played the best way you know how. What do we teach when all we do is hand down and follow directives?

My thoughts were obviously slipping out of my mouth. I didn't know when I started verbalizing my feelings, but I became aware of it as my whispers all of a sudden were audible in the now silent locker room. As my personal decision became clearer so did my pronouncement of it. "Huey's dismissal is wrong. It's unfair to defer the decision or obey it. I think we should forfeit all our remaining games. Huey is a part of this team. If you are willing to give other teams an automatic win over us in exchange for having Huey play . . . raise your hand." Fifteen players leaped to their feet. Dave was yelling, "Well, all right then, we've got a game to play!" It was unanimous.

The players streamed onto the floor to begin their warm up. I could hear a few rebel yells and even that high pitched squeak of Chris'. Huey still brought gasps of surprise with his high velocity layup. When he did his latest new shot, a sweeping, running hook, the assembled fans roared approval. Huey grinned and promised more. As the players finished their warmup, the school principal came by to remind me of the superintendent's decision. "Ron," he said, "I'm sorry about Huey, but he hasn't scored many points for you has he?" "No," I replied, "Huey hasn't scored a point." "Things will be different next year," he confided. I agreed.

As the game was about to start they huddled for final instructions. "Any after-thoughts?" I asked. "There is still time." We were all bundled together in a knot. Hands thrust together in a tight clasp. Everyone looked up. Eyes all met. Every single kid was smiling. My God, I've got fifteen Hueys.

The horn sounded calling for the game to start. I took the entire team to the scoring desk and informed the league official. "We formally forfeit this game." The opposing coach from Gunn High School rushed over to see what the commotion was about. "What are you doing?" he asked. I told him of our decision. "That doesn't make sense. You guys are undefeated," he stammered. "We let two of *our* players go today." "It's our decision," I explained. "We're here to play basketball, all of us."

And we did. All of us. Huey did his patented dash, Chris his jump shot while Dave relied on surprise. It was a combination hard to beat. We poured in twenty more points than Gunn and, more importantly, displayed a constant hustle. Players ran to shoot free throws. Ran to take a place in

the game. Ran off the floor on being replaced. It reminded me of that first practice with this strange kid running around the gym. Perhaps we had learned more from Huey than we taught. At the close of the game the Gunn coach stopped to comment, "Congratulations, you've got quite a team there." I reminded him that we had forfeited the game, that his team had won. He turned, "No, your kids won. They're a bunch of bennys."

Dave Warnock was dead. Chris brought the message to me. His father was a school official and he heard of the news from the police. Dave had been at a party and suffocated inhaling hair spray. Like a tape recorder erasing its content I couldn't think or act. Then in forced flashes I began to retread the past days. Searching for glimpses of Dave. His face. His antics. Was there something there? A warning? A plea? What did I miss?

The school community for the most part remained ignorant of Dave's death and its self-destructive cause. There were faculty murmurs, "That crazy kid." Other than side glances at what had happened there was no marking of Dave's death. Drugs and death are not part of the curriculum. It was improper to alarm parents. The school didn't stop its parade. Even for a moment of respect or some such other platitude. Nothing. Everything as usual. Including basketball.

The team gathered for practice out of habit. The season actually had only a few days left. It had been a corrugated course. Our protest to allow Huey the right to play had sparked a boycott of all team sports. The boycott led to a change in the rules allowing transfer students to play with the condition that "due to the disruptions" no league championship would be awarded. It was ok with us. We declared ourselves champions. Actually it was Dave's idea. Oh shit, it didn't seem fair. Dave was a storm. He kicked and dared the world. And lost. Or did he? I don't know.

One good thing about sports is that you can lose yourself in physical exertion. Push yourself into fatigue. Let the body take over the crying in the brain. I informed the team that this would be our last practice. We would have a game, full court scrimmage.

It was then that I realized Dave wasn't there. It's funny, Dave was dead yet I expected him to come prancing into the gym, the final trick on death itself.

Being short one player I joined in the scrimmage. First Chris' bunch against Huey's team and then Dave's group to play Chris'. I stood in for Dave. The play was strangely conservative and sluggish. Perhaps this measured play was in deference to Dave. Were we all letting our thoughts wander? Just doing mechanical steps? Or was it a subconscious statement that Dave's life was errant and not to be emulated? Whatever, the play moved from one end of the gym to the other like the arm of a ticking clock. Up and down the floor.

It was Chris that broke the rhythm and silence. Without warning he sliced across the floor, stole a pass, dribbled the length of the court and

slam dunked. Then in an unexpected leap he stole the inbound pass. Taking the ball in one hand he pivoted up a crazy sweeping hook shot. It was a "watch shot" if I'd ever seen one. Out of the blue as the ball cut through the net Chris erupted with a shrill guttural yell that pierced the stillness. It was a signal. The game tempo picked up, and became frantic. Everyone pushed to their maximum. Straining for that extra effort. Hawking the ball. Diving for a loose ball. Blowing tension. Playing with relaxed abandon.

It felt wonderful. The game was fierce. Everything learned in years of play was used. New moves were tried. I crashed for a rebound, dived, elbows flying after a loose ball and got it. Sprinted full tilt on a fast break. Yelled full voice as I fed Huey with a behind-the-back pass that he laid up for two. Everyone is moving as if driven by some accelerating spell of power and will. Everything goes in. We can play forever. Play Forever.

The scrimmage raged on. The afternoon became evening and still we played. The gym glowed in the yellow light, warm and wet. We were racing now back and forth. Exploding for shots. Playing the toughest defense. Jumping over a screen. Blocking out. Back for one more sensation of excellence.

My chest heaved for relief. Body throbbled. I couldn't stop playing. And didn't want to. Didn't Want To. Down the court. Set up. That's it. Feed the cutter. Fantastic. Now the defense. Keep low. Fuck no. Take it away. That's it. Steal the god damn ball. Now go. Fly.

In a heap I collapsed. Legs simply buckled. I was shaking. Head not able to move. In slow motion the team centered around my crumpled form. I'm all right. The air is rushing back into an empty body. Giving life and movement. "I'm all right." Everyone is breathing hard, pushing out air and taking it back in. Grabbing their knees and doubling over. Letting the body know it can rest.

Without any words everyone gathered themselves, then silently headed for the locker room and home. It's over. The scrimmage was ended. Practice finished. The season complete.

I slowly shower and dress, waiting for the locker room to empty. Walking through the silenced place I stop to look and say goodbye. There is Chris' locker. A good kid. Hope his life goes well. He has changed and matured. Been a part of other lives. Huey's locker is still open. God, even his locker has a smile. What a person. I'll never forget. Dave's place. The cigar smoke is missing and so is Dave. I hate you for leaving us. I love you.

I push up a twenty-five foot jump shot that is five feet beyond my range. It goes in. Rush to chase the ball. Try again. Seek the magnificent feeling of doing the undone. The unplanned. The unexpected.

There is a sign that hangs over the exit from the locker room. It reads, "There Is No Substitute For Winning." Someone scratched out the word winning and replaced it. "There Is No Substitute For Madness."

Basketball

I never let you come to the games. I never invited you. You never asked. You never saw me on the court handle the round skin of the basketball. You never came to see me spread my warm fingers like the edges of stars around the ball as I went like a smooth fox down the court my tennis shoes squeaking faster than a grasshopper through clover. At sixteen I travelled fast
father. Lay in, set shot, jump shot, bounce pass, chest pass, bucking, elbowing as high as I could, reacher for what was never given, the smooth flow of the ball arching high towards the rim, its high arc lifting subtly down, a smooth swish through the star shapes of the unbroken white net. Let me play that game again. I was on the court with Willie, Leroy, Hobo & Sam. I the only white with four blacks. Don't get me wrong. I was scared of them as you of me or I of you. But it began. Somebody poked me in the eye, it stung, and I released everything travelling up and down the court a young man with a quick gun and a sharp elbow. For the first time we held together like a rapid running loom weaving up and down between the other players who held together stiff as strings as we broke through all their empty edges. Suddenly it was no game. Perfect harmony of movement and song. The referee could blow no whistle. In victory I always refused you entry. This time I am going to win.

Jenny

In the summer of 1976 our family left Berkeley and moved to rural Northern California. We left behind electricity, indoor plumbing, television, Chinese food, and my regular Monday night basketball game. It took us two years to decide how much we missed it all. While we were living on "The Land" a friend erected a basket for me on a long deserted slab of concrete incongruously placed in a small oak grove with a marvelous view of snow-topped mountains. It was on that court that Jenny began to play the city game. After school my little second-grader would yell from the court and I would run down from our cabin to meet her. The basket was too high for her but she wanted me to teach her. I taught her all the old games I used to play as a kid. Horse, 21, 5-3-1, poison, around the world. Her favorite was poison as that game involved little skill and lots of running. After a time we would stop to watch the hawks play with the wind and check out the sunset on the mountains. Then we'd race back to the cabin with its wood stove and kerosene lamps dreaming of hook shots and slam dunks.

Since we had no TV, the radio and the *Sporting News* became my only sources of sports events and statistics. Some nights Jenny and I would huddle under the covers, listening to an NBA game. It might be the Lakers with Chick Hern, or Bill King and the Warriors, or Bill Schonley and the Blazers. On a clear night I could get them all. Jenny was still too young to "see" the court as I did but the excitement was catching. "Six seconds left Daddy. Tie game." I would explain the options to her. Barry should take the shot because he's a great foul shooter or how Kareem will be double-teamed when the ball is passed in bounds. Jenny didn't care. She just liked to see me nervous, pacing the small cabin as the radio would suddenly fill with static. "What happened?" I would moan to the radio and Jenny would laugh at me getting so worked up over a game.

That winter I took Jenny to a girls' basketball tournament held at the local high school. Watching those games turned Jenny on to the game. The stands filled with people cheering on the girls ("just like me") who were racing up and down the court in bright uniforms. There was a big electric score board ticking off the seconds and tallying the score and my god the noise. Jenny loved it. We sat through four straight games until I had had enough, but Jenny wanted more. This was not L.A. or Portland but Fort Jones, California, population 947.

When she was in third grade, Jenny wanted a little more from our sessions on the court. "Teach me a play." So we worked on the give and go. I taught her how to cut close off the high post, running her man into the pick, and then going to the basket. I showed her how to practice dribbling with either hand by placing oak leaves on the court as an obstacle course.

In the spring of our second year she would walk down to the court through the wildflowers and play by herself, shooting with two hands but now reaching the basket. Often other kids would join her and I would take out my binoculars (the ones we had bought to watch the eagles) to see them play. Laughter floated up the hill mixed with the rhythmic pounding of the ball and I felt I could reach out and hug them all.

That summer we left the country to fly to New York and visit my parents. They still live in the same house where I grew up but the trees are bigger and the basketball court–driveway is smaller. The hours I spent on that court. There was a new backboard hanging on the garage for my nephews. Somebody placed it in the middle of the driveway, enabling a person to drive to the right without trampling the lilac bushes. “See that crack in the cement, Jenny. That’s where I would shoot foul shots trying to decide if I should shoot them with two hands or one.” The corner shot that seemed so hard was now a six-footer while the most difficult shot on the court—the one I used to heave like some grenade—is now a 17-foot jump shot. Jenny and I played a quick game of horse and all the memories flood back. Seconds ticking off the clock, game tied. I would play both sides, all the time keeping up a running commentary as if millions were listening. It never failed to amaze me how quickly I would get lost in the story line, the drama of the moment. I would go so far as to fake injuries while playing the game. “Cousy is hurt. He’s down on one knee holding his ankle. He’s obviously in pain folks. Red has called a time-out as the Couz limps to the bench, Russell helping him over as a worried Auerbach checks the clock. One minute left and the Celtics are behind by one. The ref signals the teams back onto the court. The Celtics pretend not to hear the whistle, giving their injured star a few extra seconds. The crowd is on its feet, and yes Cousy is coming back to the floor, his ankle taped, and obviously limping. The Garden is going crazy!” I would hit two limping one-handers and win the game just before my mother would call me in for roast chicken. The endless hours playing a game. Larry Bird played endless games and became great. Sandy Robinson played those same games and the best he made was seventh man on his high school team.

We now live in Ashland, Oregon, and Jenny has finished fifth grade. She plays on a team in the YBA program run by the local YMCA. She has been the best player on her team (boys and girls) for two years and the best girl in the league. Once this past season she came up to me before one of her games all sweaty red-faced from the warm-ups and asked, “How do I stop Thad?” Thad, whom I had seen the year before, was a tall blond boy in Jenny’s class whose legs seemed to start from his chin. Apparently, no one had mentioned to the boy that he had a left hand because he always went to the hoop to the right. Today, Jenny was determined to shut him out. “Make him go left—overplay him to the right.” And that’s exactly what she did. The poor boy didn’t have a chance. Later that same season I nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw Jenny steal a ball, dribble the length of

the court, stop at the foul line, and pass the ball to a teammate cutting to the basket. Never mind that the kid threw the ball over the backboard. Jenny understood. The game is pure communication. It is a chance to star and solo but also a chance to say I know where you will be without looking. You are in a better position than me so here's the ball. I trust you.

I love to watch her play. She is playing my game and enjoying it. All my secret hours of fantasizing with a ball and a basket and now she loves it too. Jenny is growing old quickly. She is leaving me and yet the game binds us together. We sit in front of a TV watching the pros. Lloyd Free propels another thirty-footer off the fast break and I groan. "Should have hit the man under the basket, right Dad?" She is beginning to understand the game.

There have been times late at night underneath our down quilts when my wife and I talk about our daughter. Future and past, back and forth whispering softly, questioning our actions, our fears and hopes. "She is so beautiful," we boast to each other. "Remember the time she wandered our Berkeley neighborhood naked waiting to be toilet trained. Crying in the dark when Dumbo's mother was thrown in jail. Her first bra and her second baseball mitt." A girl changing into a woman and then in the same breath my wife will ask me quietly, "Are you sorry you never had a son too?" And everytime Judy asks that question I get the same clear image of Jenny racing down the court dribbling with her left hand and then the right.

Lowell High

Our red brick square gymnasium was an anachronism
Among the steel-ribbed, concrete muscled ellipses
And angles of the day; it was full of shadows—
The floor corduroy, the backboards wood
And the rims were bent with age
(the relentless ricochet of basketballs)

It had none of the embellishments
Found in more modern gyms.
It was simply a no-nonsense structure
Built to house players not spectators.
Surrounded by its gray walls and wrinkled floor
We practiced two-to-six, six days a week.
And throughout that time—four years—
Our coach, who was as old as the building,
Taunted and inspired us, swore and cajoled us.
He taught us to play without frills.
We became red brick and corduroy
And learned to see through shadows.

from *Ain't God Good to Indiana!*

Autumn in Indiana means yellow corn stacked in the fields and country fairs from north to south. As the days grow shorter, politics rears its ugly head around Courthouse Square, and a bit later comes the thing that unites everyone: basketball.

For here is the game of the people, rich, poor, young, old, town dweller and farmer, the sport that stirs every Hoosier heart, that everyone in the state understands and responds to. Unlike some of its neighbors, Indiana is full of small towns and small homes. Here in the middle land folks are, as Dreiser said, warm, generous, hospitable, the epitome of American virtues. There are more lawn mowers per capita in this state than in any other. Indiana also has basketball.

Basketball means various things to different people. To the high school principal or superintendent, the game is a big headache. Folks besiege him for seats he hasn't got. Businessmen downtown want a winning team—or else. If the school continues to lose, the principal's head rolls. Unless that of the coach rolls first. On the other hand, victory helps the principal with the school board, and to the winning coach means more money, power, and prestige.

To the boys on the high school team—in some states girls play interscholastic basketball—this is the Great Adventure, their first chance to see the big outside world. The sport can be fun and torture at the same time with its daily drudgery of practice, elation of competition, agony of losing, and ecstasy of triumph. To folks in town, Saturday night is something to look ahead to, the high point of many a drab existence. To the men shooting pool in the rear of Joe's Steak House on East Michigan, basketball is their bread and butter, a large part of their yearly take. (Nobody knows how many millions are bet on basketball; but far more than on any other game.) For although some teams win and some lose, gamblers are apt to come out ahead.

Throughout the state there are hoops over every garage door and above every barn. You'll find them also inside the homes—nailed up to bedroom doors or hanging in the hall. There are grade schools with no other recreational equipment; but a basketball court is a must. Not long ago a high school in a fair-sized Indiana town burned to the ground. The gymnasium was rebuilt immediately: the school not for several years. In one south-central town of 23,000, a new school, the first for thirty years, was built at a cost of \$375,000. The hat was then passed around among the townspeople for a gymnasium, and more than one million dollars was raised for a magnificent structure of stone, brick, and glass, the fourth largest in the state. The high school gymnasium today in the Midwest has the role of the play-

house of the Elizabethans, the bull ring of Seville, the theater of the ancient Greeks. Indeed the Greeks would have been entirely at home watching a basketball game in Kokomo, Indiana.

Kids throughout the state play alley basketball all summer and even go to bed with a basketball. Dad gives his youngster a regulation ball as soon as he can toddle, and teaches him to toss it through his elder brother's outstretched arms. And each year comes the biggest event of all, the Tournament, usually called "The State." Eight hundred teams from high schools compete each winter, with 4,500 boys from fourteen to eighteen in action. This event has been held regularly without interruption since 1911. About a million and a half admissions, costing almost nine hundred thousand dollars, are sold every winter.

In this game, in this region, no coach ever has to worry about material. His problem is to assimilate it, to pick out the five best youngsters on the team, and get them out on that hardwood. Businessmen, housewives, kids, the president of the Merchants National Bank, the chief of police, that loafer in the booth at Hank's Bar and Grill, the farmers turning on their television sets out on the National Road, and Doc Showalter, the local osteopath, all know basketball. They know it, love it, live it.

And every single one of them could coach a team better'n that fella down to the high school, too!

Going to the game tonight, Mac?

Silly question. Of course we're going.

For this is *our* team, not just the high school's team. It's Muncie, Marion, Logansport, Jeffersonville, East Chicago, or Vincennes. We know these boys. That six-foot-four-inch center lives two doors down the street. We remember the cold January day he was born, and that hot summer he was so sick with polio; we recall the first day he went to kindergarten, and when he got well and made his grade school team. That blond guard with the crew haircut tosses the *Sentinel* up to our front porch each evening. Joe, one of the forwards, carries our groceries out from Kroger's on Fridays. Chester, the other guard, cuts our lawn each summer. We've watched these youngsters all their lives, know them and their parents.

Going to the game tonight, Mac?

Don't be silly. Of course we're going.

Who watches basketball in an Indiana town? Everyone. That means everyone who can hobble to the Gymnasium, the Field House, the Auditorium, or the Coliseum. Men, women, kids, young, old, and middle-aged, business leaders, doctors and lawyers, factory workers, machinists from the Chrysler plant, storekeepers, and the lady who runs the best beauty parlor in town on West Walnut. Everybody is there save the blind, the crippled, and the town drunk. And, of course, those unfortunates who didn't apply for a seat in time and must watch the game over television, or, worse, listen to it on the radio.

I stepped off the train at the Monon Depot that rainy February night to find my friend waiting. To him it was very meet and right that if anybody wanted to understand basketball he should come to Indiana. Across the wide Mississippi and over the wide Missouri they're nuts about basketball, too. Granted. But not the way Hoosiers are. And if a seeker for truth comes to Indiana, naturally he should first visit Springfield.

Listen to the pride in his voice. "Why, man, there's no town in Indiana for basketball like Springfield! Hurry up! First game's almost over." He chucks my bag onto the rear seat and jumps quickly in behind the wheel. "Wildcats were behind, 36 to 38, end of the third quarter."

Through the icy, slithery streets at a fast pace, too fast, and so to the Gymnasium, and into that hot, fetid smell of popcorn and 6,000 people cooped up together. He led me up to the balcony where a seat had been reserved in the front row. The electric scoreboard at the end showed fifty-six seconds to play and the Wildcats behind by a single point. The entire crowd was on its feet shrieking, yelling at the ten sweat-stained youngsters on the floor below.

Beside me was a little old lady in gray. She wore a faded gray dress, an especially ancient gray hat, and held in her right hand an umbrella. Down on the floor cheerleaders leaped and turned handsprings, people in the stands thumped each other's backs and screamed. An orgy of emotions gripped the place and everyone in it.

Suddenly a towhead on the floor below stole the ball. Now the noise overwhelmed us all; you found yourself on your feet yelling in that Niagara of sound. Although insulated, indifferent to the two teams you never saw five minutes ago, this fever was contagious. It conquered you until you were one with the screaming mob as the little towhead dribbled the ball down the floor, passed to a teammate, took it back again.

The tension tightened, became taut, unendurable. There was no world but this. Reality was the heated enclosure below. Space was the confines of these four walls. Time was the electric clock beating out these final seconds. Life was this thrusting surge beneath.

The boy swung the ball around adroitly, passed and received it back, zig-zagging nearer the goal, pivoting, turning, twisting. The little old lady in gray beside me could stand it no longer. Leaning over the balcony rail, she waved her umbrella.

"Get the sonofabitch!" she shrieked. "Get the sonofabitch!"

This is the Finals of the State in the Butler Field House in Indianapolis. We are in the dressing room of the Springfield Wildcats, favorites to win the title, just as the first half is ending. Now comes the last act of this drama which started four weeks ago when 832 teams hopefully began the long, hard road through the Sectionals (64 teams left), to the Regionals (32 teams left), to the Semi-finals (16 left), to the Finals (4 left). Only the Wildcats and Tigers remain to fight it out this evening.

The dressing room, like all dressing rooms, is spare, square, humid, with steam pipes crossing the ceiling, and over everything that dressing-room odor of sweaty flesh, the smell of Doc Showalter's liniment mingled with that of a pile of dirty towels in one corner. Lockers stretch along the side. Opposite is a bank of showers. The walls are a dingy concrete, the floor the same. Two long benches form a kind of V. A blackboard leans against a side wall, a clothes rack with plaid shirts, windbreakers, and slacks stands near the lockers. Two wooden chairs and a table complete the furnishings, save for a large sign hung on the wall.

EVERY DAY THINGS ARE BEING DONE
WHICH COULDN'T BE DONE.

The only person in the room is Tommy Kates, the assistant manager, a chubby, bespectacled boy of fifteen in a red-and-blue Wildcat sweater. He is placing clean towels along the benches, moving the blackboard up against one locker where it will be accessible. From outside come bursts of noise. Listen! You can distinguish the hoarse, tense shouts of the players, the cheers from both sides of the arena. Then there is a sudden roar, a cry of piercing elation that penetrates the room, seems to possess the whole building.

Tommy stops, a pile of towels in his arms. He knows the first half is dying in the frenzy of exultation. He also knows what he hears isn't good for the Wildcats.

The door bangs open and a man rushes in. It's Doc Showalter, followed by Russ Davis, the assistant coach, and a couple of subs in satin jackets with WILDCATS and their numbers on them. Then a hot, dejected boy in shorts and a red jersey, a big 34 on front, stumbles in. Another enters, another, and another, all tall, for this team averages six feet two. They tromp into the room, fall slumping and sprawling onto the benches. Behind them is Jack Stevens, the manager, with the score book in one hand, and last of all Art Benson, the coach.

Art, which is what everyone in town calls him, is a youngish man with an oldish look. Gray hair is traced over his ears, there is a deep furrow above his eyes, he is tight-lipped and tense. He steps to the center of the V made by the two benches, facing the exhausted team. The assistant manager walks silently past, handing out two vitamin pills to each player. Heads come up, heads drop again. The Doc goes along the row, kneeling to adjust an ankle brace on one player, tightening a knee supporter on the next man.

The coach's voice is hoarse after all the shouting at them he has done from the bench. "Lemme see the score book." Notice how his hand trembles as the manager hands him the book, and says in low tones, "Two on Spike. One on Jerry. Three on Tom."

Now the room is silent. Not a sound, not a movement, save for the everlasting panting from the benches. No friends, no parents or school

officials, no reporters, fight their way past the guard at the door. They are all in the dressing room of the other team. The dressing room of a losing team is usually empty. We are not interested in losers in the United States.

"Nice boys? Oh, sure, too bad they couldn't make it. But d'ja see that Tiger forward, that boy Karson? He's fast, he's sneaky, he's shifty, all right. . . ."

The coach stands engrossed, reading the score book in agony. There in black and white is the story of disaster. All the time the boys sit, heads down, not even using the towels in their fists; necks, backs, shoulders, and shirts soaked with sweat.

At last he reaches down, picks up a basketball from the floor, slapping it back and forth in his hands, the only outward and visible sign of the nerves he tries to suppress. He looks at each boy carefully. Their heads are still down, their eyes avoid his, they gaze at the dingy concrete, miserable, panting. Suddenly he screams at them, at the lowered heads along the bench:

"Well! You got anything to say?" No response. He shrieks at them. "Have ya?"

Nobody answers. Although each man is dying of thirst, not one ventures as far as the water cooler, or even looks at him. Heads remain down.

The manager, who has been walking around handing out towels, stands immobile. Even the Doc, his arms full of bottles and adhesive tape, is motionless.

"You patted yourselves on the back too soon." Half-crazed with the agony of it, he stalks back and forth, turning the ball around and around in his palms. "Thought you'd get by the easy way, on your reputation. Won the State last year, so you were the champs, you were the best. Then you met this gutsy gang of kids from a school of ninety students, a gang that wasn't scared of you. Didn't you? Hey?"

Still no sound or movement from the benches save that everlasting panting. No heads rise. Just an awful silence over the room. "Now mebbe you realize in Indiana a team . . . cannot . . . get by . . . on its reputation. That's something. If you guys will stop reading your clippings . . . we might get back to basketball."

Heads down, they listen as they never listened before. A bench creaks ominously. The coach's tone burns them, sears everyone in the room, the subs in the background, the two managers.

Slap-slap, slap-slap, the ball goes from one hand to the other. "Got anything to say? If you have, please say it. You figured you were safe because you had an eight-point lead at the quarter, 'cause you were the great Wildcats, you thought they'd fold. You fell asleep out there, didn't you. Hey?"

"Is there anything I can do'll wake you up?"

Still they sit panting, not even using the towels, in a state of shock. With a quick glance the coach tosses away the basketball and grabs a wooden

chair beside him. Swinging it around his head, he flings it hard against the concrete wall ten feet away.

It strikes with a crash and crumples into splinters.

The heads come up, the heads immediately go down. A door slams and a voice calls:

“Three minutes!”

He turns back. “You played like you were glued to the floor. Joe, you didn’t make six passes all evening. Tom, ain’t a mite o’ use chuckin’ from way out there, you know that. *Move that ball!*” His voice rises to a shriek as he glares at them. “Basketball is a game of movement; move to the strong side. Swing-it-wide-and-swing-it-true. You had things sewed up, then what happened? The roof fell in. So you lost your heads, you saw you might be beaten, and you quit. Bunch of quitters. You quit cold. You got scared, you didn’t pass, you acted like you had boxcars in your shoes. . . .”

Back and forth, back and forth he stalks, suffering as they suffer, sharing their agony, yet pleading, abusing, entreating. “Watch that ball. Alla time, watch . . . that . . . ball. At no time . . . take . . . yer eyes . . . offa that ball. An’ get those bricks outa your britches. This isn’t kindergarten, it’s basketball. How you gonna go back home and face those folks if you lose? Get out there and fight.”

He turned, saw the table, kicked savagely, taking out some of his rage and disappointment upon it. The table overturned, fell, clattered to the floor with a bang, and a roll of Doc Showalter’s adhesive tape jangled and bounced along the concrete.

Then he was back at them again.

“This is your last chance. The bread-and-butter quarter. Every shot counts. Have you got guts? Are you a bunch of quitters, that’s what I wanna know? Have . . . you . . . got the . . . guts?”

They rise together. Benches scrape on the floor. Their voices, hoarse and husky from shouting, conquer the room.

“Les’ go, big team . . . les’ get those guys. Les’ win this one. . . .”

Together they pour out the door onto the arena floor. You can hear the sudden cheers from the Springfield side as they appear.

After the Game

The quiet
more intense after
the overwhelming noise
a frightening silence
in the big empty gym

I crouch nervously
on the side
sometimes happy
a proud happiness
suffusing my body
sometimes sad
I feel the frustration
too
but always
always nervous
as I wait alone
in the big empty gym

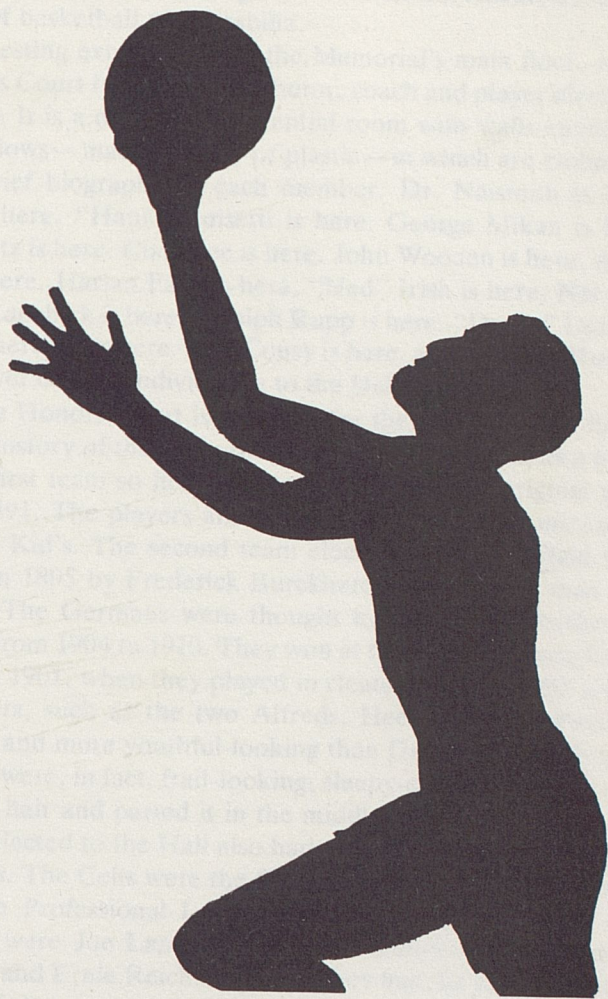
Then I see him
the agility has left
his body
like a man grown
suddenly old

We hear some
boys arguing on the other side
the perennial
discussion
their voices
reverberating—as we
walk slowly across
the big empty gym

from **Rabbit, Run**

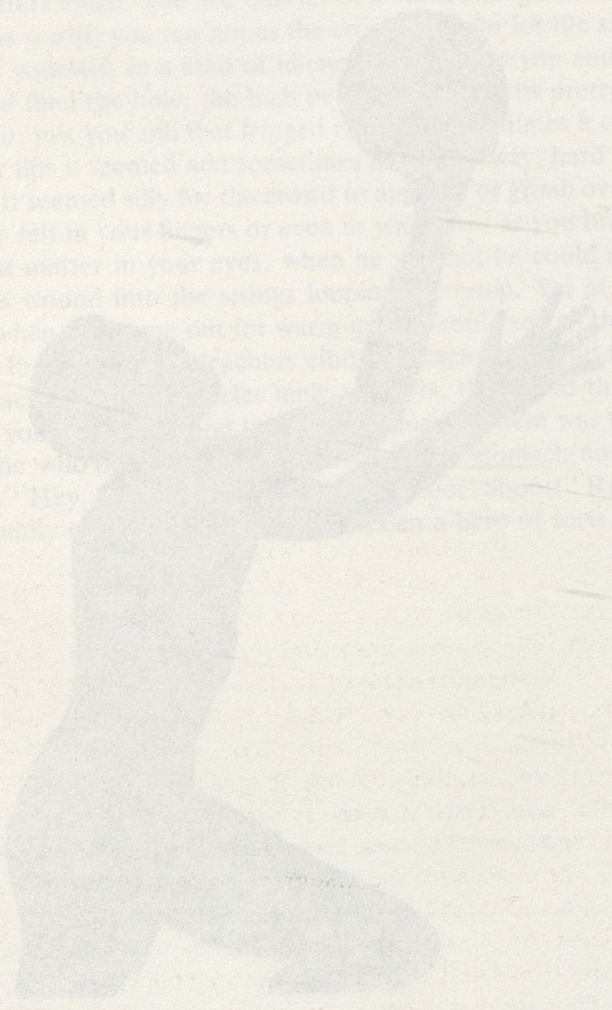
The trip home is easier. Though he has no map and hardly any gas, an all-night Mobilgas magically appears near Hagerstown and green signs begin to point to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The music on the radio is soothing now, lyrical and unadvertised, and, coming first from Harrisburg and then from Philadelphia, makes a beam he infallibly flies in on. He has broken through the barrier of fatigue and come into a calm flat world where nothing matters much. The last quarter of a basketball game used to carry him into this world; you ran not as the crowd thought for the sake of the score but for yourself, in a kind of idleness. There was you and sometimes the ball and then the hole, the high perfect hole with its pretty skirt of net. It was you, just you and that fringed ring, and sometimes it came down right to your lips it seemed and sometimes it stayed away, hard and remote and small. It seemed silly for the crowd to applaud or groan over what you had already felt in your fingers or even in your arms as you braced to shoot or for that matter in your eyes: when he was hot he could see the separate threads wound into the strings looping the hoop. Yet at the start of the night when you came out for warm-up and could see all the town clunkers sitting in the back of bleachers elbowing each other and the cheerleaders wisecracking with the racier male teachers, the crowd then seemed right inside you, your liver and lungs and stomach. There was one fat guy used to come who'd get on the floor of Rabbit's stomach and really make it shake. "Hey, Gunner! Hey, Showboat, shoot! Shoot!" Rabbit remembers him fondly now; to that guy he had been a hero of sorts.

ON CAMPUS



ON CAMPUS

The first book of essays I wrote in my late sixties and early seventies, *On Campus* might be said to have been a kind of "last will and testament" of sorts. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the "campus" was no longer a place of intellectual and cultural ferment, and my years as a writer had been spent in a different world, a world that was no longer the campus of the past. I wrote this book as a kind of "last will and testament" of sorts, a way of saying goodbye to a place that was no longer the campus of the past. I wrote this book as a kind of "last will and testament" of sorts, a way of saying goodbye to a place that was no longer the campus of the past. I wrote this book as a kind of "last will and testament" of sorts, a way of saying goodbye to a place that was no longer the campus of the past.



from *Chase the Game*

If Dr. Naismith never grasped the significance of basketball, others did. On February 18, 1968, in Springfield, Massachusetts, the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame was completed, as modest in size and scope as its progenitor. It stands on the edge of the Springfield College campus amid failing Victorian homes at the end of a tiny road called Hall of Fame Street. The Memorial is a rectangular, red brick building with only a plaque to differentiate it from the thousands of grammar schools it resembles. Inside are three floors of basketball memorabilia.

The most interesting exhibits are on the Memorial's main floor, where there is an Honors Court for every contributor, coach and player elected to the Hall of Fame. It is a dark and reverential room with walls entirely of stained glass windows—made actually of plastic—in which are embedded a portrait and brief biography of each member. Dr. Naismith is here. "Phog" Allen is here. "Hank" Luisetti is here. George Mikan is here. Christian Steinmetz is here. Clair Bee is here. John Wooden is here. Amos Alonzo Stagg is here. Harlan Page is here. "Ned" Irish is here. Nat Holman is here. Joe Lapchick is here. Adolph Rupp is here. "Dutch" Dehnert is here. "Red" Auerbach is here. Bob Cousy is here, and so is Bill Russell, the first black player elected individually to the Hall of Fame.

A section of the Honors Court is reserved for the four teams in the almost ninety-year history of the game that have been enshrined, as a team, in the Hall. The first team so honored was Dr. Naismith's original gymnasium class of 1891. The players are stern-looking men with mustaches like the Sundance Kid's. The second team elected was the Buffalo Germans, organized in 1895 by Frederick Burckhardt, a wild-eyed man also with a mustache. The Germans were thought to be the best basketball team in the world from 1904 to 1910. They won at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901, when they played in cleats on a 40' by 60' court. The Buffalo players, such as the two Alfreds, Heerd and Manweiler, were clean-shaven and more youthful-looking than Dr. Naismith's Springfield players. They were, in fact, frail-looking, sleepy-eyed young men who slicked down their hair and parted it in the middle.

The third team elected to the Hall also had a northern European name, the Original Celtics. The Celts were the first great professional team, winning the American Professional League championship in 1926–27 and 1927–28. Its stars were Joe Lapchick, "Dutch" Dehnert, Nat Holman, "Horse" Haggerty and Ernie Reich. To a man they had the classic, sharply chiseled features of their supposed Celtic origins.

The last team elected to the Hall was the New York Renaissance or the New York Rens or, as they were often called, the Harlem Rens. The Rens

were considered the finest team in the world from 1932 to 1936; they won 473 games and lost 49, and during the 1933–34 season fashioned an eighty-eight-game winning streak. Their stars were Eyre Saitch, Clarence “Fat” Jenkins, Bill Yancey, James “Pappy” Ricks, “Tarzan” Cooper and “Wee Willie” Smith. Saitch was an inordinately handsome man who could have passed for Clark Gable’s brother except that his skin was black like the rest of his teammates—the first of their race to master the game they now dominate.

Also on the main floor of the Memorial is an exact replica of the gymnasium in which Dr. Naismith first nailed up his peach basket. It is complete with stepladder, overhead track and the original peach basket. The rest of the room contains exhibits tracing the growth of his invention. There is the first soccer ball used by Dr. Naismith, the long gray uniform pants worn by his gymnasium class, the first quilted and padded shorts worn by a basketball team and the coarse woolen uniforms worn by the Original Celts. There are more recent exhibits, too, such as the uniform worn by Bevo Francis of Rio Grande College when he scored 113 points in a collegiate game; the uniform worn by Wilt Chamberlain when he scored 100 points in an NBA game; the basketball used to record the longest successful shot in a game (84' 11") and another with which a college player recorded his sixty-fifth consecutive successful free throw. Bob Lanier’s sneakers are there, too, for they are the largest ever worn by a player: size 20.

The criteria for which such memorabilia are enshrined are simple, says Lee Williams, the Memorial’s executive director. “The events commemorated must reflect a significant moment in the history of the game. The first, the last, the most, the least, the highest, the lowest, the longest—things like that. We do not try, however, to make judgments on ‘the greatest.’ We let others determine such things and we just reflect their judgments. For example, we have recently opened a High School Room in the basement. It would be beyond us to determine who was the greatest high school player in the country each year, so we leave that to other ‘experts’ like, say, *Sports Illustrated* magazine. We would just record their judgment for history.”

The High School Room contains the basketball used by Ashland, Kentucky, when it defeated Canton, Illinois, 15–10 for the First National High School Championship in 1928. It has photographs of the various Passaic, New Jersey, High School “wonder teams” that won 159 consecutive games from 1919 to 1925. On dummy torsos roped off from other exhibits are the uniforms of several high school players whose achievements were deemed significant enough to warrant being immortalized. There is the uniform of Tom McMillen, now with the New York Knicks, who was the first high school player to have his photograph on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. There is the uniform of Moses Malone, now with the Houston Rockets, who was the first high school player drafted directly into professional

basketball. And there is the uniform of Walter Lockett, Jr., the No. 1 draft choice of the Detroit Pistons in 1975, who was generally thought to be the greatest high school basketball player in the world in 1972.

During his four-year high school career in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Lockett scored more points—2691—than any player in New England history. He averaged 31½ points per game over that span, and his 39½ per game average in his senior year was the second highest mark in the country. He converted over 60 percent of his field goal attempts. Today Pete Maravich, the greatest offensive player in the National Basketball Association, converts less than 45 percent of his shots. Like Maravich, Lockett was a guard. He stood only 6' 3" and made many shots from distances greater than 25 feet from the basket. Most of the 200 or so college scouts who followed him call him the greatest pure shooter the game has ever seen.

Lockett's shooting skill was a complement to his other talents. When an opposing team used a full-court press, Lockett's teammates would pass him the ball under their own basket and would then vacate that half of the court while he dribbled through the opposition. When he crossed half-court he either shot immediately from distances as great as 35 feet or hit one of his teammates (often in the head) with a pass they neither saw nor expected. In his senior year Lockett averaged thirteen assists per game. If there was a missed shot, more often than not Lockett grabbed the rebound; he averaged sixteen rebounds per game as a senior. He also checked the opposition's best scorer. From the stands he appeared to be a shade slow for a guard, but on the court he moved with such grace and economy of effort that he was often compared to Walt Frazier and Oscar Robertson. Like those two great players, he maneuvered deliberately, as if calculating each move before executing it. He played less on instinct than on intelligence. On offense, Lockett never turned his back on his man to spin left-right-left-right à la Earl Monroe. Holding the ball low between his legs, Lockett faced his man squarely, looked him in the eye to read him, then made his move. His fakes and feints were subtle and often imperceptible to the fans in the stands who never saw the flick of his eyes or the quick shift of his shoulders, and so wondered how he always managed to get off his shots without being contested. He never humiliated his defender, never left him grasping at air. He left him paralyzed, flat-footed, looking up pitifully as Lockett lofted yet another successful jump shot. Lockett's genius lay in his ability to know without seeing when his defender's weight had shifted left, or right, or when he was unprepared, and he had the split-second timing that enabled him to take advantage of this.

Lockett was not a temperamental player. His game was cool and self-assured without being arrogant. He was unselfish to a fault. Once when his high school team lost an important game to their arch rival, Walter was held responsible for that loss because he had not taken enough shots. In fact, he had taken twenty-four shots and converted twenty of them, scoring

forty-eight points in all—which, at that time, was only four points above his season's average.

Luckett had so mastered Dr. Naismith's game in 1972 that there was talk he might go directly into the pros from high school, the first player and the only backcourt man ever to do this. Rumor had it that he would play in the American Basketball Association for two years and then, after his game had matured a bit, would leap into the NBA. The rumor never came true, for Luckett chose to accept a scholarship from Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. It was only one of the 200 or so offers he had received from every major college in the country, including UCLA, Maryland, Notre Dame and Providence, all of which had sent so many scouts to his every high school contest that they often outnumbered the fans.

Before Luckett played his first game at Ohio University, his picture appeared on the cover of the November 27, 1972, issue of *Sports Illustrated*, featuring a story that claimed he was the best freshman college basketball player in the country. Luckett's high school career had given the magazine's editor ample evidence on which to base this opinion, but that was not the only criterion for deciding to use his picture on the cover. It seems that in 1972 Walter Luckett was blessed not only with talent but also with luck. For years the black community had accused *Sports Illustrated* of being a racist publication because it used too few cover shots of black athletes in proportion to those of whites. The magazine editors claimed that when pictures of blacks were used, recognizability suffered on newsstands and the magazine appeared dark and infinitely less visible than other more colorful publications. The editors further admitted that they actually sought out light-skinned black athletes whose skin tones would reproduce satisfactorily enough to be used for a cover. That was why those editors were only too eager to put this freshman's picture on their November 27, 1972, issue. Walter Luckett was black, or rather he was *a* black, since actually his skin was the color of the hardwood floors on which he played.

That cover shows Luckett wearing a white Ohio U. uniform trimmed in green. He is hunched forward, his arms and legs spread, about to bounce a basketball into the open jaws of a bobcat (the Ohio mascot), whose angry visage is painted at midcourt of the school's Convocation Center. Luckett's skin melts into the caramel-colored court. He is long-limbed, lean and faintly muscled. His lightly tensed pose exudes a look of feline grace, which is marred only by the lumpy white brace on his left knee, injured at the close of his senior year in high school. Over the summer of 1972 he underwent knee surgery and at the time the cover was being shot, his knee had not yet healed. Fluid was constantly being drained from it and the pain was excruciating, but it does not show on his face. It is a handsome face, long and narrow and topped by a modest Afro. He has a straight nose and pouty, slightly parted lips. He is looking up at the camera as if at his man, the defender. He is trying to read him. His eyes are deep brown. They look puzzled. . . .

. . . Shortly after Walter Lockett told the world that he would attend Ohio University on an athletic scholarship, *Sports Illustrated* sent a reporter and a photographer to the Athens, Ohio, campus to record his arrival. The magazine's November 27, 1972, issue featured a photograph of Walter Lockett on its cover and a long rambling story inside, the gist of which was that Walter Lockett was probably the best freshman basketball player in the country at the time. Walter himself seemed to agree with that estimate of his prowess. He was quoted as saying, among other things, that last season's Ohio U. team "stunk on ice" and, with his arrival in Athens, that state of affairs would soon be remedied. "They get the ball to me in our two-guard front," he was quoted as saying, "and I will positively freak. I mean, I will drive those rascals wild." He did concede, however, that scoring forty points a game, as he had done so effortlessly in high school, was a rather unrealistic goal for him to aim at. But, he added, "I'll tell you this. I'm shooting it. I'll get fifteen just hanging around. . . ." To anyone who had seen Walter play in high school, this was not an idle boast. Even his former rival from Notre Dame, Barry McLeod, did not doubt that Walter would easily score over fifteen points a game. "Why not?" said Barry. "He's Walter Lockett. His picture was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. I mean one week Walter Lockett, the next Muhammad Ali. I was in the Centenary library when I saw his picture on the magazine rack. I went wild. I stole the magazine and ran to show it to my teammates. 'That's my man!' I said. 'The man I been telling you about!'"

In his freshman year at Ohio U., Walter Lockett averaged thirteen points a game. Opposing fans booed him and threw pennies at him on the court. His own fans booed him. His teammates disliked him and disparaged his talent. Walter cried often that year and longed to return to Bridgeport. Over the next two years his play improved considerably. He averaged almost twenty-five points a game, was named to a number of All-American teams as an honorable mention and was even named Most Valuable Player in the Mid-American Conference in his sophomore year, when his team won the league title.

Yet Walter Lockett would never fulfill the potential his talent once hinted at when he was in high school. In fact, many of the people who had seen him play during his earlier years claimed that far from improving, or even merely stagnating, Walter Lockett actually deteriorated as a player during his college career. "Walter was never again as good as he was in high school," said Kenny Sumpter, echoing the sentiments of Don Clemmons and a host of Walter's old friends who were so sorely disappointed in Walter's choice of colleges and the effect it would have on his career. The reasons for that effect are many.

Before Walter enrolled at Ohio U. he injured his left knee during practice prior to one of his last high school games. Over the summer it was operated on. The knee healed slowly, and by the time basketball practice

began at Ohio U., it still caused Walter considerable pain and greatly impaired his mobility. But since Ohio U. had invested so much in him and was so hungry for the success the school was sure he would bring, he was rushed into action. Walter, ever anxious to please, allowed himself to be so abused despite the excruciating pain.

“Walter called me from Ohio after he had the knee operation,” says Barry McLeod. “I felt sorry for him. He’d say, ‘Barry, they’re draining it every day. They’re sticking needles in it. They’re trying to get me ready too fast. It swells up after a game and they got to drain it. It hurts all the time.’ He started crying. ‘It’s not like they told me, Barry,’ he says. ‘They’re shooting me up with cortisone. I gotta get outta here!’ I mean, he was getting two points a game. He’s Walter Lockett! He’s supposed to get fifteen points just walking out on the court. I remember watching him on TV with my teammates one afternoon. He looked bad. One guy says, ‘He ain’t nuthin.’ I say, ‘He’s playing on only one leg, man. He’s my man. He can play.’ But they just kept cuttin’ him up.”

Despite the pain in his knee Walter played each game, and because he did the Ohio U. fans and players felt they had a right to expect him to produce as much as he had promised them. Since he was not living up to his braggadocio, they felt free to boo him unmercifully. His own teammates were particularly hard on him, as well they should have been after he was quoted as saying they “stunk on ice” without him.

“It’s funny,” says Dr. Yanity, “but Walter got along better with the whites than the blacks on the team. The blacks didn’t like him. He was moody. One time he missed the team bus and they had to wait for him. He was always acting pouty, like a big-city dude. The problem was that the people who’d always kept Walter’s ego under control were no longer there.”

Though, if Walter no longer played like a star on the court, he continued to act like one off it. He was particularly hard on his mild-mannered coach, Jim Snyder.

“I cracked on the coach a couple times,” says Walter. “He didn’t like it much but he had to come through. Once my car broke down, a raggedy old Pontiac. He gave me an even raggedier old Corvair that didn’t have no brakes. I was driving home one day and the brakes went and I drove it right into a saving bank. I mean, right through the window. It was some small town with about 101 people and only two of them were black. I called up the coach and called him an s.o.b. I told him I wanted another mother-fuckin’ car right that minute. Oh, I cussed his ass out. He sent me a Vega.”

If Walter was able to manipulate Snyder off the court, he did not have such luck on the court. Snyder had a conservative philosophy about the game. His team moved the ball deliberately, opting generally to work the ball underneath to one of the team’s big men, none of whom could shoot as well ten feet away from the basket as Walter could from thirty. Most of the opposition—teams such as Toledo, Miami of Ohio and Bowling

Green—were at best mediocre major college teams that played the same kind of controlled offense. During Walter's three seasons at Ohio U. his school posted consecutive records of 11–16, 18–9, 12–14. Often those teams scored less than sixty points a game. They played ponderous, plodding matches, more suited to a football field (for which most MAC schools are noted) than a basketball court. These games were difficult for Walter to adjust to, having come from the East where even high school teams played a slick, fast-paced game that resulted in over eighty points per side. No matter how deliberate Walter's game might have seemed in the East, when compared to the slicker tactics of, say, Frank Oleynick and Barry McLeod, in the Midwest he seemed positively flashy in contrast to the Ohio U. style. Often Walter managed to get off less than fifteen shots a game (he hit over 60 percent of those shots), a far cry from the twenty-five or so shots he often managed in high school. Walter bristled at this kind of controlled action.

In his freshman year, playing with a bad knee, he was a point guard and was allowed to control the action somewhat. But since his mobility was impaired, he was often too closely guarded to free himself for a shot, and so had to pass off to a teammate. In his sophomore and junior years under Snyder and later his replacement, Dale Bandy, Walter was made a forward and no longer handled the ball as much. He stood around in the corner, clapped his hands and waited for a pass. Often his teammates ignored him. When he finally did get the ball he was frequently double-teamed, and because he was buried in the extreme corners of the court, he was unable to break free and make his own shot. To this day, he claims that if he had been a point guard in his junior and senior years, after his knee had completely healed, he would have been able to read the opposing team's defenses spread out before him and would have had the room, the entire half-court almost, in which to maneuver.

"I told the coach to let me handle the rock," Lockett says. "I told him I should be droppin' forty a game. He says I'm a head problem. He just didn't understand. Snyder wasn't really a bad guy, it was just he never even had a player who averaged twenty points a game, and here I am talkin' forty. All he ever say is, 'Work the power play to the big men. Work the power play.' I said to myself, I got to break this shit quick. But I couldn't. Snyder was a religious freak too. He was always prayin' before a game. 'The only way we win is with God,' he say. The guy who eventually replaced Snyder, Bandy, he promised me the world. He promised I'd handle the rock in my junior year, but I never saw it. I was stuck in the corner waitin' for the ball. I couldn't make things happen."

As a forward who did not handle the ball, Walter had to wait to receive it. Once he did, he had no operating room and he also had to contend with the opposing team's tallest men. Instead of trying to work his way through the opposition's defense (never his strong suit) for a lay-up, he began to take the easy way out. He either took long fadeaway jump shots or simply

returned the ball to the team's point guard. His game became stagnant. His skills—ball handling, passing and graceful movement—began to deteriorate. Even his shooting fell off. He still managed to score twenty-five or so points a game and still managed excellent shooting percentages, but he was no longer the phenomenal-shooting, multifaceted talent he once had been.

As his skills deteriorated, so did his confidence. Although he claimed he could do things his coach would not let him do, he began to doubt, privately, that this was the truth. On those rare occasions when he did get breathing room and a chance to maneuver, he still opted for an easy long jump shot rather than trying to penetrate to the hoop. What he said he could do and what he actually did when he had the opportunity no longer bore any relation to one another. In fact, after Walter's knee healed he seemed disinclined to function as he once had. He seemed to have lost confidence after his disastrous freshman year in which he was booed. No matter how brazenly he talked, in reality it seemed that Walter really preferred to remain in the background, standing around, clapping his hands for the ball he never got. He seemed to take comfort in not getting the ball, in not having to prove himself again, as he had all his life, and in still being able to put the blame for his less than inspired play on his teammates and coaches. On the court he was almost timid. He admitted, "I lost my confidence."

Even before he went to Ohio, his friend Kenny Sumpter said, "Walt never knew how good he was. He only knew what other people told him." For example, when Walter was asked why he chose a nondescript school like Ohio U. instead of a more prestigious basketball school like UCLA, he said he would rather be a big fish in a small pond. He added that because of his knee injury he would be behind his teammates at Ohio in conditioning, but that they would wait for him to catch up because the team needed him.

"You think the big names [schools] would have done that?" he said. "Man, UCLA and Maryland have so many stars they'd forget me or send me home." This is a curious statement coming from the nation's second leading schoolboy scorer, whose picture was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and who, it was claimed, was one of the best freshman players in the country.

At Ohio during his first year, people told him he was a disappointment, that he was nowhere near as good as he had been touted to be. This had an effect on Walter. He began to doubt his talent. He disappeared on the court. He hid himself at times, and in the process his talent atrophied. He seemed, like the greenest rookie, to be more worried about doing something wrong that would come to the fans' attention than about affirmative action. He hid this insecurity with braggadocio off the court and complaints that his talent was being strangled by his coaches and teammates. But the truth of the matter was that Walter Luckett was tired of being Walter Luckett; he was tired of having to prove himself over and over again. He

had been great for so long, greater than most could envision being, and now that greatness had become a burden he wanted to shuck. He was the fast gun in town grown tired of proving himself, trying to sustain his image by bluster instead of performance. But this was a difficult task, made harder by the fact that even in Walter's own home town, Bridgeport, his talent had become suspect. His friends began to question his ability too. Maybe he was not as good as they had thought. Maybe he was not the best player ever to come out of the city.

The NCAA MidEast Regionals, and other Existential Setbacks

It was #1 ranked Indiana
against #2 ranked Marquette

and the announcer announced
that the Indiana coach Bobby Knight

had his office walls papered with uplifting slogans,
in particular one from General Patton

about having one goal and driving towards it
singlemindedly, and that people will try to stand between

you and your pinnacle, and the closer you come to it,
the more furious shall be their resistance,

but on the wall of the Marquette coach, Al McGuire,
there are pictures of clowns,

and he is reputed to have said,
"All of us in public life are clowns."

I had also read an article about McGuire,
about how all his players are crazy about him,

and how he'll get pissed off and end up
wrestling with them on the locker room floor,

and five minutes later all animosities are forgotten.
Once he told the reporters that one of his players

couldn't throw the ball in Lake Michigan
and the next day the player called his own press conference

and drove the press out to the lake
where he proceeded to toss a basketball

off the end of the pier. I also remembered
when he brought his team into the Long Beach Arena

back when we had our greatest team
and had never been beaten at home

and nobody in the top twenty (UCLA and USC most noticeably)
would schedule us even at their places

and no coach in his right mind
brought his kids to the Arena,

so naturally Long Beach beat Marquette
but it was a close game in which our guys

spent the whole night at the foul line,
and afterwards McGuire didn't bitch

or temporize or alibi,
and so I now said,

"Right on, Al McGuire;
I hope you kick those goose-step Hoosiers' asses,"

but he drew two technicals
and Marquette lost by nine big points.

from *Drive, He Said*

The trainer shaved all the hair off his upper leg, and wound a thick bandage round his thigh. Hector wouldn't let him tape his ankles.

He put his shoes on carefully. Mustn't bunch the socks or he'd get blisters.

Laced up the high tops. The socks were clean and everything felt snug. His elastic jockstrap held him at the waist and kept his balls on. The practice uniform had been washed, too, and smelt like a laundry. The sweatsuit was warm and covered up his limbs.

None of the others was there, and as he bounced up the iron steps from the lockerroom to the gym floor, the separate clanks echoed lonely metal sounds. He could feel his toes pressing him upward and the arch of his foot.

He scooped up a ball and stood there stretching it over his head, whirling it in one hand then another with his arms stiff as semaphores. Leaning over backwards to wake up his back muscles, then bouncing the ball very low and fast off the floor in little figure eights around his feet.

He liked to take some shots all alone. He had learned to shoot alone on the darkening California concrete long after the others had gone home to supper, on into the dark, when his red cat's eyes needed no help but the moon's. Silver moonshine—the ghostly silver cords flipping as an invisible ghost ball passed through.

He wasn't really warm yet—he was lazy, basically lazy, and needed the press of others to warm him. It was mostly for his fingers that he came up early by himself—his fingers had to learn the ball all over again each time in a kind of ritual remembering. When Hector was in a hurry, he was chancing it might be no go.

He took a couple of stretchy hook shots, without aiming—one with the right, one with the left hand. The cuffs of the sweatsuit felt tight and sweet on his wrists. But the bandage threw him off balance. *Damn*: he resented it like a defense that hung on his back all night. *A big train pulls so many passengers. . . .*

“Chug chug chug chug chug chug chug chug chug chug,” he said to himself, as he tried a series of short jumpshots. He let the ball bounce away, and cupping his hands made a locomotive whistle, beautifully shrill & enormous in the high-beamed field house.

He stood under the backboard and tossed up hundreds of lay-ups on both sides of the basket and from the front, hardly ever bored. It was a wonder to him how infinite were the ways of angling the ball off the backboard and into the basket. And his fingers were flexing. Occasionally he would spin the ball like a globe on one fingertip, then let it roll down the arm and across his back and out into his other hand. He jumped easily off his feet and stuffed the ball down through the basket, then went back again

to lay-ups. Frequently he missed, to his fascination. After about two hundred lay-ups he began bouncing the ball high off the backboard and tapping it back into the basket. There was no noise: he cupped his hand and cushioned each ball on his fingertips as he tapped it through. Everything depended on the feel in his fingertips and the control when his wrist straightened. And his timing: to get the ball at exactly the right time & place.

He could see right through the glass backboard and into the vacant stands behind. It looked almost as though the ball were stopped by an invisible hand that took his pass and made the score. But Hector had made the play so many times the board was real to him whether he saw it or not, real as the ball which he never looked at while dribbling so as to be constantly ready for the shift or the shot or the pass.

While he was working on his tips his teammates began to drift in and collect at the basket at the opposite end of the floor. It was their custom to stay clear of Hector till he was ready.

Hector knew that Goose Jefferson was at the bottom of the stairway.

He stood waiting with his back to the stairwell for two seconds, then threw the ball over his head so that it took one long bounce into the corner of the gym and would have fallen straight down the stairs had not Goose Jefferson emerged at just that instant, caught the ball without surprise, and dribbled right on to lay it in the basket.

Goose and Hector passed the ball back and forth, took lazy shots at the basket. Goose had the way of the great Negro ballplayers of going up in the air and shooting only after he had stayed a few ticks longer than anyone's nerves would have figured, the defensive man down and Goose still there, finally shooting. He seemed to hang, the result perhaps of a couple of centuries with a rope at his neck.

Hector instead of hanging seemed simply to keep going up. He could grab a rebound off the defensive boards, pivot on his way down, dribble up court while the others were turning and catch maybe one or two back on defense. When he got to the foul line Hector would take off, sailing right up over their heads, either passing off to a teammate unguarded in his wake or shifting the ball from hand to hand and cramming it through the hoop.

There were six boys at the far basket and six at a basket off to the side. They played three on three as Hector and Goose stopped to watch them. The boys played white-boss style. There are two styles of basketball in America, where the white-boss grimly prevails. The loose lost Negro style, reckless in beauty, is joyous to play if you can, but white-boss is the style that wins. Even Negroes must play white-boss to win, though the best ones can't, they end up with the Negro coming out right on top of the other. And these boss Negro players boss the basketball world, they are the ones you need two or three or six of to stay beautiful and win.

The boys were *hustling* for all they were worth: 'cause that is the first

rule, see, of white-boss basketball. He who wants to relax and enjoy it is gonna be left behind, or knocked over and his ball ripped away. For white bossies play very rough. Unlike Negroes, they will not back off and let a man keep the rebound he has jumped for: they tackle him, lean on his back with slapping grabbing to jar away his prize. And before the rebound even, the grim jostling and bumping for position. Football America—deadly, brutal and never satisfied, by golly! What keeps the white boss going is the dandy little thought that he and no one else must win always, every instant. Let him win twenty games and he will sulk and sob and kick down the referees' lockerroom door because he did not win the twenty-first. So by definition there can be no enjoyment. The millions tied in by their legs know this well. They scream not for pleasure but revenge. Revenge for a crime that is committed fast as it can be wiped away. Because for every winner there is a loser, and then it is the winner who must pay, sooner or later, and on & on & on, right up to heaven vs. hell.

O sweet god, thought Hector, this is my heaven right here! He swished a blind hook from the middle of the floor. He and Goose played a wild hilarious one-on-one.

Kiss me, Jesus, by chance I'm still alive!

At this point Fighting Coach Jack Bullion entered the gymnasium. His blood had not the slightest drop of black. His line of scripture was, "If you don't hear from me, you're doing fine; 'cause if you screw up, you'll hear plenty!" Even the most competent ballplayers glanced at the bench each time they made a mistake, to see if a substitute were getting up. Before Hector, the players used to pass the ball through carefully rehearsed patterns for five minutes, then either take the shot they had in the first place or lose possession. Hector Bloom was the only player in Coach Bullion's career who remained absolutely unaffected by his coaching; because his ups and downs depended entirely on what went on inside him.

The boys at the other end played twice as hard and twice as bad when Coach Bullion came on the scene. They would play on ferocious, all their lives, hustling on & on, so that someone else would lose and pay and take the blame. Then truly when the final seal was lifted and the great scorer came to write etcetera, he might reveal that they'd had "winner" stamped across their bellies all the time. They might even get by.

Coach Bullion walked in with his legs spread and stood planted. He wore basketball shoes and a big baggy pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt with "COACH" on it and a silver whistle hanging down on his expansive chest and paunch. His head was getting bald and was covered by a short-peaked baseball cap, but around his neck and where the sleeves ended on his arms the black and white tufted hair crept out and rioted.

He called the team around him and explained how lousy they looked and how badly they were going to get beaten the next night.

Then began the calisthenics. They circled the empty gym doing the good old American duck-walk, the exercise of grasshoppers that bulges the

thighs and ruins the knees for life. Then the sit-ups and the stretching, with a partner clamping the feet while each in turn stretched and turned and stretched and turned in panicked time to numbers that were always just a little too fast. Then flat on your bellies, thirty push-ups, over on your backs, feet three inches off the floor. Hold it . . . hold it . . . now everyone running in place, faster, knees up to chest, faster faster! NOW FALL FLAT! TEN PUSH-UPS! UP AGAIN & RUNNING! FASTER!

After half an hour they were permitted to sprawl flat and rest thirty seconds, then up and twenty laps at good speed around the gym. When Luther Nixon emptied his big canvas sack and passed out the basketballs they were grateful as orphans climbing up on Santa Claus. The first drill involved sets of three men each and was designed to practice ball-handling and fast-breaking. Each man ran full speed straight down the floor, one in the middle and one on either side, passing the ball to the center and out, to the center and out with no dribbling, till they got to the end and one man took a final pass and laid it in. The whole thing took three seconds and five passes, and by the time one trio got past center court another would begin from the end line. After each man went through five runs at each position, Coach Bullion decided on a two-man defense, Hector Bloom and Goose Jefferson, as a punishment for their not hustling. Hector and Goose stood one on each side as the trios came down on them and tried to break up the play before a shot could be gotten off, or, failing that, to force a bad shot and grab off the rebound. They didn't mind, really, and began unstringing the boys with Indian whoops, small ones, whoopwhoopwhoop, and broke up eight plays in a row. But still they came, one trio after another bearing down with them having to pick themselves up and momentumless defend the same position time after time; it got wearing and they began to sag, save their breath, play it safe and let the middle man come just a little closer inside the foul line where he could score and did. "One lap duck-walk," said Bullion. Whupwhupwhup, mimicked the delighted unpunished boss boys, who knew nothing of Indians. "No," said Hector, and there was a silence, and Coach Bullion said "What did you say?" . . . and Hector Bloom said "I prefer not to," and there was a long pause and Hector Bloom turned and walked into the corner of the gym and kicked a basketball into the wall with a smack while Coach Bullion switched to another drill.

Plays had to be practiced, whether or not they would actually be used in a game, to protect the team from fear of improvisation. So they split into three teams of five and dry-ran their plays for half an hour with no shooting allowed until after five passes, while a manager counted and Coach Bullion blew on his silver whistle and stopped everyone to shout at each wrongdoer.

Still not ready for a scrimmage: the first team played defense in a half-court game while the second and third teams tried to run off the plays they'd been practicing. Again, the five-pass rule, which usually gave the

regulars time to disarm the play before it started, and again more shouting and blaming. At first some of the plays worked, but as more corrections were added and more movements inhibited, things went worse and worse, until finally a fifteen-minute stretch went by without a basket. The second and third teams duckwalked ten times around the gym and sprinted two lengths of the floor backwards while the first team took their first free shots since practice officially began.

At last the scrimmage, with the second team all ashamed and fighting. Coach Bullion played referee and smiled benevolently and refrained from blowing his whistle as the underdogs carved their revenge with elbows and fingernails, proving in capsule both the benefits of insult as education and the rightness of the educator's prediction as to how basically inept his best team would look on the following night.

"You stink!" he shouted at them. "You couldn't beat your own beavers!"

But they went right on stinking, because they were tired, and because most of them didn't care most of the time. They were sliding down a long season, and the bottom was not yet in sight. All of them carried tape or elastic on some part of their bodies, and four of the five favored an arm or a leg or a hand. Coach Bullion tried to fire them up by injecting third-string substitutes, but the eager sophomores just got in the way and things went worse than ever. The scrimmage ran on for an hour of plodding up and down the floor, shouting, cursing, giving and taking blows, two fist-fights and one disabling injury. By this time there was not a single man on the floor who had any love left in him for his body or what it was doing. As for Hector Bloom, he had been disconnected from the moment he preferred not to.

At six o'clock, three hours after practice had begun, Coach Bullion strode off the court shaking his head in disgust. But before the players could drag themselves into the showers, one hundred freethrows had to be shot by each and every one and recorded by a manager. Luther Nixon in person counted for Hector and passed back the ball, entering his score in an official book that contained the memory of every freethrow Hector had shot since his freshman year. Hector made 71 out of 100 freethrows, whatever that means.

From the beginning the monkeys were howling, all 15,000 in a far faraway place: "Hector Bloom-Bloom-Blooble—To Heck with Hector!" Looking for Olive, searching her eyes among 29,998 others searching his. It was not too far to come, *if she really* . . .

The monkeys were dressed in sweaters and tweed jackets and special haircuts all their each and every own.

Abruptly the warm-up was over. The whole thing had just started, yet the others were sweating and vibrating and clenching their fists ready to go. Butch Buckholder went around slapping each one on the pants hard. "Come on, fellas, let's get it on!"

“Bloom! Snap out of it!” Coach Bullion gripped at his arm.

The State five bounded out on the floor flexing their pectorals. Bronco Gibbon appeared in front of him and mangled his right hand. Hector stood staring at the back of Gibbon’s head as the ball was thrown in the air and the game began.

The others had the ball . . . so the thing to do was to run back to the other end of the floor, to be accomplished by throwing the weight forward on alternate legs. Then he faced himself around and waited. State went into their tedious bob-and-weave, playing to bore the defense into letting them through. So Hector went sidestepping following his man as one Stater dribbled & handed off to another Stater who dribbled & handed off to another Stater who . . . Gibbon lowered a shoulder and dribbled straight in. Bouncing Hector for a five-yard loss, he went leisurely into his quaint version of the jumpshot, which he loosed from around his navel.

Cowbells, foghorn, & a number of carolers to the tune of “Davy Crockett”:

*Hec-tor, Hec-tor Bloomberg
King of the La-zy Ass.*

Sure, ass anyone.

He was being hemmed into his corner. Bronco from behind bumped with granite stomach; in front backed up the cubical McCoy. When they couldn’t get the ball to Hector, a teammate shot from the far corner, and when Hector tried to follow for the rebound, McCoy trailed him and held onto his pants.

“Fuckin’ pretty-boy,” commented Bronco. He took a short pass and barreled in again. From the floor Hector heard a whistle and saw the little man in the striped shirt go into his acrobatic routine. The foul was on Hector, and Bronco stepped to the line for two free throws.

The God of Israel is a just God: he’ll miss.

Bronco poised still as a stuffed boar amid the tumult, then calmly grimly plumped the ball up. Real sergeant material—made both shots.

Behold! I am vile.

Four minutes went by before Hector even touched the ball, and he was vaguely sulky. He grabbed a loose ball in the corner and dribbled craftily out and toward the middle. His theory was that one spectacular shot might yet cool everything. Breaking back, stopping, then going full speed he lost Bronco and cut in straight for the basket. The defense rushed to fence him out and he swerved and sent up a long hook from the top of the key. It missed everything—rim, backboard, everything.

Hector was curious. Perhaps this was all very funny?

But when time-out was called and the team was muttering while Coach Bullion’s pig-fat eyes were shouting up in his face, Hector felt his stomach clamp tight as an oyster. He was far away, seeing himself from the rafters, and his stomach was sending him a message of nausea. *Oh this would all be*

comic, said the soul in the rafters; *but it's me, really me*, pulsed the stomach frantically. *Come quickly please please please! No*, said Hector, *I can't accept it*.

This was how he looked to others: the clown, the chief performer. *Olive's wild lovely laugh by definition apart from me*.

Sapped with self-hate, saw himself play out half mechanically. Closed out noise, stands, spirit; took part in back-and-forth running, holding up of hands, moving-shifting. Bumped for rebounds. Took safe play, scored two baskets when properly set up and screened. Permitted one thought—that soon it would all be over. Whatever came next could not be so endless as this.

Upset of the Year, Unsung Hero, Overrated Star... the typewriters clacked left & right & in a few years it was the half. On the scoreboard, Random State: 49–34. It was customary for players to go down a ramp to sullen crowded visitors' dressing room. *4934: by that time we'll all be dead but this game will still be going on & on... on the moon, on Mars...*

Fighting Coach was angry, swelled up all red & cute. Reviled whole team so nice and added special personal nastiness for Mr Guess-who, said to be loafing etc. Threatened. Brought out colored chalk and screeched demented across blackboard unveiling Master Plan for recoupment. Small red manager approached, tried to cram chocolate bar down Hector's yaw. Luther Nixon busy-busy feeding pure oxygen through hoses to tired warriors but not to Hector.

Hector took a lemon to suck and sat off behind the lockers in his frozen sweat. He was humiliated, only he didn't care: if it were someone else he would have felt sorry, but since it was only himself it was all right, no need.

Yet, slowly, as he sat, a rage built. His old rage, that had carried him so far. It was a rage at the whole world sitting, the world of spectators, at everything not himself for putting him in the middle and mocking him. And at himself, too, because, beyond the weariness which he could not penetrate, he *did* care, he did he did he did. He had spent too long a life shooting balls into baskets. And so he found himself committed to the final degradation: though he no longer had use for self-respect he was forced to respect the only kind of self he knew, the self he had been given. Or else his only self must die. *Because that was me out there, really me. Like it or not I will have this game to remember me by.*

Therefore he clenched his fists and fought with all his might against his sickness of himself and his symbols and his deadly soul-fatigue, went back to the game and put his hands in the air and shot as best he could: so that when his team lost, he would not lose. *Not everything, not yet.*

And the funny thing was that later he remembered nothing, absolutely nothing.

Portrait of a Rebound

I trained for years,
tendons fixed to muscles tuned
for that particular exertion,
eyes accustomed to the
slightest variation of movement—
the exact point of departure
of ball and hand,
the decisive second of the jump.
I have even come to revel in
the stink of bodies, the bust of elbows,
the sudden spasm of the knees.

Thus, I look at the portrait and marvel.
I sit in my chair and stare,
within its black frame
two figures
leap through the painted air.

from *The Game They Played*

It was the big man who drew the crowd. He had been gone for a long season and now, in the first true chill of November, he was back, doing the thing he had always done best. He was playing the pivot in a schoolyard basketball game, positioned with his back to the basket and spinning left or right in the brief pirouettes of an unrehearsed choreography.

He was a big man, but he had an unorthodox shape for the game he played. His body seemed to be formed by a succession of sharp hooks and angles, except for the slightly rounded shoulders and the face, which was full and fleshy. His very presence spoke of awkwardness, but in context everything he did acquired the mysterious beauty of function. For there was to his movements the quick stuttering ease, the economy of motion, that is taught in the brightness of the big time but is refined and finally possessed in the lonely litanies of the schoolyard dusk.

The crowd had gathered slowly. They were clustered in a tight semicircle around the back of the basket, drawn in almost directly beneath the backboard. It was late in the day, and beyond the crossed wire fence, some six feet above the playing surface, twilight figures moved like shadows in the direction of the five- and six-story tenements that lined both sides of the street. Except for this one small corner, the schoolyard was empty now, and it was quiet. The only sounds to be heard were the sounds of the game itself, the ball drumming against the concrete court, or rattling against the rim or the metal backboard.

There were five other players on the court. The big man was being guarded by a player of perhaps six feet two, who was giving away almost four inches in height. But he was quick and lean and very agile, and as one watched him the impression grew that his body had been wired together with catgut and whipcord. He wore a close-cropped crew cut, which was the fashion of the time, and his soft, almost casual jump shots were flicked lightly from the top of his head. The two had very different playing styles, one seemingly set against the other in the practiced medley of counterpoint.

The remaining four players formed the supporting cast. They had their own skills, some of them considerable, and on other days one or another might have stolen the game, but not today. This day, they all seemed to understand, was special because the big man was back. And so they played to the strength of his inside game, feeding the pivot and then cutting across, fast and tight, like spokes slicing past the hub of a wheel.

The pace of the game was swift and precise. The big man's team scored the first three baskets. He made the first two himself on two short spin shots, one to his right, the other to his left. On the next play he passed off

for a driving lay-up. Then a shot was missed, and the crew-cut player answered back with two jump shots, fired in a flat trajectory that appeared to be short of the basket, but somehow just cleared the top and grazed the inside of the back rim before falling to the ground.

There were no nets on the baskets, and as the afternoon faded the rim seemed to lose itself against the green of the backboard. But schoolyard basketball is a game played on the accumulated instincts of one's own time and place. There were no markings on the court; no keyhole or foul line, and one learned to take his points of reference from anonymous landmarks—a jagged crack in the pavement, an imperceptible dip in the wall along the sideline, the subtle geography that is known and stored only in the private preserve of the body.

Three-man basketball is conceivably the most demanding game played in the schoolyards of America. Is it not as sophisticated as the full-court game. It does not require the same kind of speed or versatility, the almost artistic devotion to discipline. But what it lacks in complexity is compensated by the intense quality of the game. It is pressure basketball, compacted in time and space, as if a boxing match were to be held in a ring cut to half its normal size. There is no place to hide and no clock to offer respite.

The game is played by the improvised rules of the home court. In some neighborhoods ten baskets win a game, in others the point is eight, but always a two-basket, or four-point, margin is required for victory. It is a game played to its own cadence, and without a referee to call fouls, it can be brutally tough. But the most important feature of three-man basketball is that the team that scores keeps possession of the ball, and so one plays always with the nagging knowledge that the game might be lost without his ever having had the chance to score. It is a shooter's game, a game that is won or lost quickly on the trigger of the hottest gun.

Now, from the corner of the court, the big man sent up a one-hand push shot that cut the center of the rim so cleanly that one could not be certain it had gone through. It broke a 10-10 tie, and before the defensive team could recover, another shot, as whistling clean as the first, fell through from slightly closer range, and the game was one basket short of completion. They were the first outside shots the big man had made, and now one recalled how easily he had made those shots, and how often, on brighter nights, beneath the hundred blazing suns of big-city arenas.

That was a while ago of course, and a long season had passed since those days of early spring in 1950 when time seemed to move on private clocks, and each night was a herald to the sound of trumpets. He was not yet twenty then, a college sophomore with honors for grades and a basketball talent that might earn him All-American mention. He had not played much basketball until he reached high school, and his natural gifts were modest. He had size, of course, and good hands, and a remarkably soft touch from the outside. But the rest of it was learned. It was learned while

in high school, and then honed and polished in the schoolyards of the Bronx. He worked hard at it, shooting at night-darkened rims, and in winter clearing a path through the snow so that his shooting eye would not lose its edge. Basketball was a sport without season in the canyons of New York, and the big man, who had grown to love the game, worked at it through the months and years of his teens.

He was all-scholastic in high school, and in college he joined four other all-scholastic players on a freshman squad that could have taken the measure of more than a few college varsities. A year later they moved up as a unit to a team that was deep in talent. It was a team marked early for greatness, but no one, not even its most optimistic fans and alumni, suspected that by season's end this young racehorse band of schoolyard players would beat the best the country had to offer and win both of America's major college tournaments.

They had become instant celebrities, their fame of a type seldom known to professional athletes. For they were, after all, college kids, none yet old enough to vote, and they were the local property of the neighborhoods in which they lived. It was not through bubble-gum cards or the filter of the television screen that you knew them. You would see them on the block, or at the corner candy store, and of course in the schoolyard where you would watch them play in street clothes on the Sunday after a game, and on occasion, if the available talent was skimpy that day, you might even share the court with one of them in a three-man game.

The big man was a schoolyard regular. He would arrive late on a Sunday morning, sometimes carrying a basketball under his arm, and he would shoot at an open basket while waiting his turn to take the court. He was genial and unassuming, and even on the day after his team had won the National Invitation Tournament, he came to play choose-up ball, and as he entered the schoolyard he received the applause with a diffident grace.

It had all seemed right then. The days fell together with brickwork precision, and time was the filament on which success was measured. There was not the slightest intimation then that a year later his well-ordered world of campus and schoolyard would lay in ruin. Other glories waited; the NCAA championship would be added to the NIT title within the next two weeks, but further on, around the bend of the seasons, lay the wreckage of a national scandal. He and some of his teammates would be arrested for manipulating the scores of basketball games. They would be booked on charges of bribery and conspiracy, they would be arraigned, bail would be set, they would be convicted and sentenced. Some would receive jail terms. That is what lay ahead, eleven months to the day, and that was not necessarily the worst of it.

The worst of it, they would find, was that forgiveness would be slow. They would be remembered more widely as dumpers than as the celebrated grand-slam team. Careers would be broken, their educations stunted. They would never again play big-time basketball. Culture heroes in their teens,

by the time they turned twenty they would be part of the dark side of American folklore. And it would not be short-lived. Twenty-five years later their telephone numbers would still be unlisted. They were to learn something soon about one of life's fundamental truths, as relentless as it is just: that the past is not neutral; it takes revenge.

Now, as you watched him again, you had to wonder what it all meant for him, you would like to know how much of it he understood now that the legalities were done, now that he was free to do anything except what he really wanted to do. You imagined the inside of his head to be a kaleidoscope of gray-green colors, of pictures that fed one into another, whipping like wind through the tunnels of memory. And you wondered where it might stop, which frame might be frozen in view even now, as the ball snapped into the pivot, into the hands held high above the head, the ball raised like a torch against the dusk.

He stayed that way, motionless, for an instant, his back to the basket, the ball held high. Then he started to turn quickly to his right, his head and shoulders doing all of the work, and as quickly he was spinning the other way now, spinning left, the ball balanced lightly on the tips of his fingers, his arm stretching high toward the right side of the basket, and then the ball, in the air now, struck the crease between the rim and the backboard and bounced away, out of bounds.

And then something happened. It happened so quickly that it all seemed at the time to blur into the bleakness of imagination. But it would be recalled later in the finest of detail, summoned forth as if it had all taken place in slow motion to be run at will in the instant replay of the mind.

Two copper pennies were thrown out onto the court. They were tossed at the same time, in the same motion, and they hit one in back of the other with the abrupt report of two shots fired from a pistol. You heard them hit that way, and then you saw them roll briefly and fall, and then they were lying right beneath the basket, at the big man's feet.

The game stopped now, and everyone was looking in the direction of a boy of perhaps fifteen or sixteen. He was of medium build, and he was wearing a brown suede zipper jacket above faded blue jeans. He was smiling now, a tentative smile, as if to assure that no malice was intended, but he said nothing. He said nothing and you could hear the silence as the crew-cut jump shooter walked toward the youth. He was just a few steps away, and he walked up to him matter-of-factly and with his left hand he seized the kid by the front of the jacket, and without saying a word he eased him back in the direction of the wall.

Then, with a quick, short motion, he punched out with his right hand and landed hard and clean against the side of the youth's face. You could hear the sound of the punch landing and then the kid's head bouncing lightly against the black metal door, and nothing else. The kid did not even cry out. All you heard was a muffled groan, almost inaudible, the type that follows a blow to the body. But the punch had landed flush, and the kid,

making hardly a sound, sagged to the single step at the base of the door. He said nothing, and for a moment you could hardly believe it had happened.

But when the kid picked himself up you could see that his jaw was hanging loose. His jaw was dangling as if from a swivel, and on the left side of his face, where the blow had struck, there was a lump that jutted out and up in the direction of his ear. It was not the puffed-out swelling that comes with a bruise. It was, clearly, the sharp impression of a splintered bone pushing against the inside of his cheek.

The jump shooter had turned away, even before the youth drew himself up, and he walked slowly back to the court. He stopped beneath the basket, at the in-bounds line, and he waited.

"Your ball," the big man said.

Iron Duke

Joe Camic played center for the Duquesne Iron Dukes back in the late Forties. He was only six-four but pivoted past puffing giants with velvet hook shots; could also work the weave, then step back against a zone for a lethal lengthy set or drive for the hoop like a peewee guard. The complete player is the phrase.

And on top of all this he always moved with his chin held high like he felt better than everyone else, which was partly true, the reason being an attitude that's hard (particularly for me) to copy on or off the court.

Like other mortals, Joe would blow his share of layups during the year. Would he curse? Slap his forehead? Writhe in self-demeaning agony for that short second that allows the opposition to get momentum going? Never!

After each and every miss he'd dash back down on defense with his chin as Empire State as ever, looking like the hero he knew he was and would be time and time again.

Oh, that I could
Camic out the past.

from *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man*

K.C. Jones took up where Giudice left off. When I was assigned a room with him in a USF dormitory, I had no way of knowing that we'd become lifelong friends. At first I didn't think we'd be friendly at all, because K.C. didn't speak a word to me for a solid month. Not a *word*. He'd slap my bunk on the way out of the room in the mornings, and he'd nod at the salt or sugar during the silent meals we ate in the school cafeteria. That was the extent of our communication, until one day when he suddenly started talking like a normal person. Nothing in particular had happened; he just started talking. It was as if somebody had forgotten to plug him in before then. To my relief, I found that he'd just been shy, even more than I was. Once he got used to me we became inseparable. At a Jesuit university, we were in an alien world, so we leaned on each other. At first I did most of the leaning; K.C. was a year older and had a slightly better scholarship, so he looked after me. He seemed to spend his money more freely on me than he did on himself. He bought me shoes, meals, movie tickets and books.

K.C. was usually silent except when basketball was being discussed. The barest mention of the game would throw him into a Socratic dialogue that would go on for as long as anyone would carry his half of the conversation. Since I was always around, the conversations would ramble on for hours. We decided that basketball is basically a game of geometry—of lines, points and distances—and that horizontal distances are more important than the vertical ones. If I were playing against someone a foot shorter, the vertical distances could be important, but in competitive basketball most of the critical distances are horizontal, along the floor or at eye level. Height is not as important as it may seem, even in rebounding. Early in my career at USF, watching rebounds closely, I was surprised to discover that three quarters of them were grabbed at or below the level of the basket—a height all college players can reach easily. (This is also true in the pro game.) Generally, the determining distances in those rebounds were horizontal ones.

K.C. and I spent hours exploring the geometry of basketball, often losing track of the time. Neither of us needed a blackboard to see the play the other was describing. Every hypothetical seemed real. It was as if I was back on the Greyhound, assembling pictures of my moves in my mind, except that K.C. liked to talk about what combinations of players could do. I had been daydreaming about solo moves, but he liked to work out strategies. K.C. has an original basketball mind, and he taught me how to scheme to make things happen on the court, particularly on defense. In those days almost every player and coach thought of defense as pure reaction: that is, you reacted to the player you were guarding. If he moved to

the left, you moved with him, shadowing him. Whatever he did, you reacted to guard the basket. K.C. thought differently. He tried to figure out ways to take the ball away from the opponent. He was always figuring out ways to make the opponent take the shot *he* wanted him to take when *he* wanted him to take it, from the place *he* wanted the man to shoot. Often during games he would pretend to stumble into my man while letting the player he was guarding have a free drive to the basket with the ball, knowing that I could block the shot and take the ball away. Or he'd let a man have an outside shot from just beyond the perimeter of his effectiveness, and instead of harassing the player would take off down the court, figuring that I'd get the rebound and throw him a long pass for an easy basket. He and I dreamed up dozens of plays like these and fed into our equations what we knew about the weaknesses of our opponents. On both offense and defense, our plans included two or three alternatives if the primary strategy failed to work. We liked to think ahead, and before long K.C.'s way of thinking erased my solo images. Whenever I got the ball near the basket, I tried to have two of three moves in mind in advance. They didn't always work, but at least they were there. I found that such planning cut down on my mental hesitation on the floor and generally reduced the number of times I messed up teamwork. I began to daydream about sequences of moves instead of individual ones.

Gradually, K.C. and I created a little basketball world of our own. Other players were lost in our conversations because we used so much shorthand that no one could follow what we were saying. Most of the players weren't interested in strategy anyway. Basketball talk was mostly an ego exercise in which they flapped the breeze and pumped themselves up over their last performance or in preparation for the next one. The prevailing strategy was that you went out, took your shots and waited to see what happened. It was not considered a game for thinkers. K.C. and I were thought to be freaks because of our dialogues on strategy, which were fun for us but dull to everyone else. I used to get a kick out of a remark by Einstein, who said that his most difficult thinking was enjoyable, like a daydream. We were inspired, rocket scientists in sneakers.

After a game, only K.C. and I would appreciate certain things that had happened out on the court—at least that's the way it felt. We shared an extra fascination for the game because of the mental tinkering we did with it in our bull sessions. For example, K.C. was instantly aware of what I thought was the best single play I ever made in college. We were playing Stanford in the San Francisco Cow Palace, and one of their players stole the ball at half court for a breakaway lay-up. He was so far ahead of us that nobody on our team bothered to chase him except me. As he went loping down the right side of the court, I left the center position near our basket and ran after him as fast as I could. The guy's lead was so big that he wasn't hurrying. When I reached half court I was flying, but I took one long stride off to the left to change my angle, then went straight for the bucket. When

the guy went up for his lay-up in the lane, I too went up from the top of the key. I was flying. He lofted the ball up so lazily that I was able to slap it into the backboard before it started down. The ball bounced back to K.C., trailing the play.

Probably nobody in that Cow Palace crowd knew anything about how that play developed. They didn't see where I came from, and they saw only the end of the play. But to K.C. and me, the sweetness of the play was the giant step I took to the left as I was building up speed. Without that step the play would have failed, because I'd have fouled the guy by landing on him after the shot. The step to the left gave me just enough angle coming across to miss him and land to the right of him without a foul. K.C. was the only guy in the Cow Palace who noticed that step and knew what it meant. I noticed similar things about his game, and they were the starting points of our daydreams.

There always seemed to be new lessons to make the game more interesting. In my sophomore year Coach Woolpert gave us a lecture on peripheral vision. People have a line of focus on whatever they're trying to see, and objects outside that line are blurry. In fact, they lose sight of the objects *within* their peripheral vision unless they train their eyes to pick them up. K.C. and I became fascinated with this and practiced for hours. We stood near each other day after day, focusing straight ahead at different distances while trying to keep track of each other peripherally. Eventually we discovered that under certain conditions you can hide on a basketball court. With no one on the floor but ten players and two referees, you can still position yourself so that a player facing you will not see you. It's possible because everyone has a blind spot in each eye, about fifteen or twenty degrees on either side of straight ahead. Most people are not aware of this.

K.C. had such a bad case of appendicitis that year that he could not play, but he could talk and experiment with me. I'd stand still a few feet away, and he'd rotate slowly until part of me faded into his blind spot. Once we convinced ourselves that it really existed, our experiments began. We discovered that the blind spots seem larger when the eyes are tilted. A player who dribbles with his head down, adjusting with the tilt of his eyes, will tend to have a larger blind spot. Also, a dribbler will have more of a blind spot on the side where the ball is. He won't lose sight of you completely, but his impression may be so dimmed that he won't react the way he should. This was our theory, anyway, and it had some practical effects. I found that if I positioned myself in a player's blind spot as he drove toward the basket, he'd be more likely to charge right into me or to take a shot easily within my blocking range. When K.C. could play again he found that he was more likely to succeed in a steal if he tried to make his move through a player's blind spot.

K.C. and I also talked a lot about jumping. If an opponent goes up for a jump shot and you're trying to block it or just harass him, you have to

come as close as possible to the arc the ball makes between the opponent's hand and the basket. Since the ball usually climbs rapidly after it leaves the shooter's hand, your hand must intercept it as it travels through the first one or two feet of that arc—the earlier the better. Therefore your hand must be close to the plane of the shooter's body. In other words, you've got to be close to a jump shooter in the air to have a chance of blocking his shot. That's why there are so many fouls called in the act of shooting.

K.C. and I noticed that most defensive players got close to a shooter by jumping toward him and then reaching up for the ball. We figured that you wouldn't lose as much reach toward the arc of the ball if you jumped straight up and reached out instead, so we tried not to jump toward our opponents, for often you commit a foul with your body. It's also the way you get hurt, because your body is unstable when it's leaning in the air. The vertical technique—jumping straight up and reaching out with your arm—puts a premium on long arms and high jumps; it was made for people built the way I am. After I worked on it I could get rebounds even when I was screened, because I could jump straight up and reach out over the screener for the ball. I could also block shots that could not be stopped with any lateral motion in the jump. In one game against Marquette University, for instance, I found myself standing right behind a player as he went up for a jump shot facing the basket. He was already in the air when I went up behind him, reached over his shoulder and batted the ball in the direction it was already going. The shot missed, the ball bouncing off the backboard. Blocking shots this way made jumping even more fun.

K.C. and I were to keep our dialogues going for many years with the Boston Celtics, as my lucky streak continued. I can think of no coach other than Red Auerbach who could have made me feel as comfortable or work as hard as I did, and I was lucky to play with teammates who had such compatible ideas about how to have fun and win.

Good

The ball goes up off glass and rebounded
down the court, outlet flung to the quick guard
like clicking seconds: He dribbles, hounded
by hands, calls the play, stops short, looking hard
for a slant opening, fakes it, passes
into the center—he lobs to the tall
forward, top of the key/ a pick: asses
crash (the give & go), he cuts, bumps, the ball
reaches him as he turns, dribbles, sends it
back to the baseline, forward back to him
Jump— & In mid-air, twisting, he bends it
over a tangle of arms— SHOOTs, the rim
gives as it jerks against the back joints
and into the net, trippingly, drop two points.

A Conversation with Chairman Al

Larry Keith: That was a dramatic touch, winning the NCAA championship in the last game of your career.

Al McGuire: Actually, if I had known we were going to win, I wouldn't have made plans to quit, because I don't think it's manly to leave after you win.

K: But this way you left your successor, Hank Raymonds, with some talent.

M: My original plan was for Hank to coach last year's team with me as athletic director. Then I would have gone to Medalist in May, Hank would have become the AD, and somebody else would have coached this season. I couldn't do it because the Medalist board didn't make its decision until the season had started. Also, Hank told me he wanted to coach more than one year. My plan might have offended him, but though I think he's a great coach, I honestly felt we'd had our Shangri-La together.

K: Did you have someone in mind to coach this season?

M: No. I wouldn't have gotten involved. I never even thought about it.

K: What is your relationship with the school now?

M: I'm gone. I said, "If you need me, call me. I'd be flattered, but otherwise I won't interfere." The only games I'll see will be the ones I'll cover for NBC. The toughest thing about all of this for me is that it means I've got to keep away from the players. Several of them have come down to my office at Medalist but I wouldn't see them. I'd love to have a beer and talk about the championship, but that's going to have to wait until they graduate. Every school in the heavyweight division has periods of crisis and dissension, and I can't let myself be the players' sounding board if they have one of those periods at Marquette.

K: Well, you can talk to us about the championship. What did it mean to you?

M: Obviously it was an immense pleasure, but I really only thought about it a month or so later when I was motorbiking up in Nova Scotia. I was going into Truro, and I said to myself, "Yeah, it was nice to win that."

K: But what did you feel the night you won it?

M: I was thinking about something else, really. When I got on the bus to go to the airport, it struck me that this would be the last time I would sit in the front seat. All my life I had wanted to sit in the front because that's where the coach always sits.

K: While you were sitting there, what went through your mind?

- M: That it had been a nice run, a good ride. A lot of the kids I had coached flashed through my mind. And I thought about the Police Athletic League games and the fights and the early years of six guys getting into a car to play in Wilkes-Barre or Elmira. If you didn't give the crowd three fights in a game they weren't happy. The halftime always lasted an hour and a half so there could be a dance. By the time you got back to play, the floor was slippery. That's what I was thinking about. All those things, and what made them happen. Maybe because I never thought I would win a national championship.
- K: You didn't? Why not?
- M: Because of the way I coached. I didn't build for particular games or particular seasons. I built for continuity. That is not the best way to get the greatest team in sight and win the national championship. Besides, I had five or six teams better than last year's.
- K: John Wooden's UCLA teams were consistent but they also won national titles.
- M: When you talk about normal coaches and normal systems, you have to eliminate Coach Wooden. But I think Dean Smith works about the way I do. North Carolina is always good, but I don't know if this is the smart way of doing it if you want to build to a national championship. Take Bobby Knight's 1976 Indiana team. Four seniors and a junior, and all dynamite. And North Carolina State when it won with David Thompson and the big white kid [Tom Burleson] underneath. San Francisco is taking one shot now, but then there will be a drought.
- K: What makes a team a winner?
- M: I view it differently from most people. To me the important things are scheduling, referees, coaching and material—in that order.
- K: Perhaps you had better explain. You just put 200 recruiters out of work.
- M: I rank scheduling first, because that includes not just whom you play but when and where you play them. For instance, South Carolina opens this year against Minnesota and Alabama. That's Dunkirk. You're supposed to play your first game against East Cupcake.
- K: Where are the toughest places to play?
- M: DePaul is one, because it's a real pit. I always liked Notre Dame, because when you go there you must be confident, aggressive and obnoxious. Otherwise they'll blow you out. They'll give you Pat O'Brien and *The Late Show* and the Gipper walking across the Golden Dome. But going there is something I'll miss.
- K: You placed officials second.
- M: Officials are very good people who want to be part of the sports world, but the public doesn't understand that coaching is a livelihood and refereeing is a supplement. A referee can sit on a barstool all week, come out to a game with a hangover and his belly hanging out, and we're not supposed to say anything. I used to classify officials as

red-necks or flowers. A red-neck would come back at you if you got on him; a flower would wilt.

K: For someone who enjoyed sitting in the front of the bus so much, it's surprising you placed coaching third.

M: I was talking the first time about coaching as a profession. It's manly and honorable. Coaches are the last of the cowboys; the last of the truly manly Americans are in coaching. But coaches must realize that they are only coffee breaks. People only talk about sports when they are away from the office. When they go back to work, they worry about their real problems—about their stomach trouble or their daughter dating a crook—not whether Jack Armstrong scored 25 points or not.

K: What problems confront coaches?

M: Security, mainly. Your life depends on a 19-year-old, freckle-faced player. Your unity and your whole season can be blown if the cheerleader gets pregnant. Look, I know the fears coaches have. I know how it is when you've lost five or six in a row and the flower of your youth is gone and you're worrying about what you can do next. I know what it's like when the student body is booing and the papers are writing bad things.

K: Would it help if coaches had tenure?

M: Yes. When a school hires a coach, it should give him a five-year contract. Then if it rehires him, the school marries him. They sleep together.

K: What if he turns sour and starts to lose? Can't the school divorce him?

M: Yes, but at least he would have a guarantee of doing something else, teaching or raising funds.

K: Let's get specific. Who are the best coaches in basketball now?

M: The true coaching is in high school where you take the kid with the underwear hanging out. There you're a teacher, but on the college level you get what you want and then you mold.

K: If you were an AD looking for a coach, whom would you want to hire?

M: A lot of them. I have a Will Rogers philosophy about coaches.

K: Come on now, there are good and bad coaches, just like in any other job.

M: There are coaches who coach material, and there are others who can coach better when they don't have material. Gene Bartow does better without material. I mean that as a compliment, but with five blue-chip players he has a problem getting them to the tournament. He's more of a technical coach. Guy Lewis at Houston does better when he has material. I was a material coach, too.

K: How else do you account for your success?

M: I was a good bench coach. And there is no doubt that I was a black

coach, although I never said “hey, man” or gave out any of those Knights of Columbus handshakes. And in all the years I coached no one ever realized that the most disciplined team—not in the United States, but in the world—was Marquette. All people saw was the carnival atmosphere, the fancy uniforms, me kicking and yelling and the players yelling back. But, hey, there was no hanky-panky on the court.

K: Would you like to be remembered with the Ibas, Rupps and Woodens?

M: It would be nice. But if I’d won as often as Wooden, you’d need four guys to carry my head around.

K: What about Bobby Knight? He has been up and down the last two years.

M: Bobby is an excellent coach. If you want to have a successful program over a long period, he’s your man.

K: Oh, so as AD, you would hire him?

M: Well, I’d hire Dean Smith, too, but here you’re talking apples and oranges. Dean adjusts to things a little more. Bobby is still a General Patton type—you know, into machine guns.

K: Getting back to your list of ingredients, you put material last. Why?

M: I guess that’s counter to the whole universe, but to me the material is only No. 4, because you can have the best talent in the world and still lose if the other three aren’t set properly. There are 500 great high school players every year. The key is getting the maximum effort and eliminating all the dissension.

K: What about the illegal recruiting that sometimes occurs in getting those first-rate players?

M: When the scandals happen, they’re the result of the fears and pressures I was talking about before. A coach thinks a certain player can make him highly representative. It’s not very smart, though, and it’s pretty tough to get away with.

K: Did the NCAA ever investigate Marquette?

M: They started to before Bernard Toone came to school two years ago. A few questions arose, and we told the NCAA we wouldn’t take him if there was going to be a problem. But nothing serious came up.

K: Are you aware of any alumnus giving a player favors after he arrived?

M: I’m going to answer your question with a question. How does a player from a poor family fly home when his mother or father dies?

K: Did you ever answer that question?

M: Well, the kid’s got to get home.

K: Do you think the NCAA exercises proper authority in its investigative and enforcement procedures?

M: My main problem with the NCAA is that it has no respect for coaches. If a coach went to a leper colony, they wouldn’t send him five dollars. The guys on the investigating crew will all be conference commissioners someday, and the infractions committee is composed of six guys

who get into games for free. I just wish the whole organization would be more concerned about the coaches and athletes, and forget about trying to control the whole athletic world.

K: What, specifically, should it do?

M: The main thing they should change is the way they blackmail a school on probation into releasing its coach. You shouldn't take a man's livelihood away from him. There are certain things that cannot be done, even if the person is worse than a John Dillinger. The NCAA does it like Pontius Pilate; it pretends to be washing its hands, when what it's really saying is "crucify that guy." I have no super love for Jerry Tarkanian, but they had bounty hunters out after him in Las Vegas. It was like they had made a contract in New York for a hit man, a button man.

K: Should the NCAA have the authority to declare an athlete ineligible?

M: Not under any conditions. The young person doesn't know what's going on.

K: He knows what's illegal.

M: Hey, coaches are hypnotists. When we bring high school kids in to visit, we've got bridle paths that we walk them on. We push a button and the lights go on. You put me with a 17-year-old kid, pal, and I'll leave him in a tailspin. Now you're going to turn around and tell him he flew out to this school twice so he's ineligible for the next two years? What are you talking about? You can't crush his life and his career because of what professionals tell him.

K: What are some of the changes you anticipate in the future?

M: I'm not wacked out but I think that in a few years the students will pick the coach, and the athletes will sue the coach if they think they are not getting enough playing time to help their professional chances. I think that the lane will be made wider and that anything that happens around the basket while a player is in the air will be legal. I believe that after an offensive rebound the ball should be passed once before it can be shot again. And I think you're going to see a rule that will restrict a team's combined height on the court at any one time to maybe—this is a guess—32 feet.

K: That would drive coaches crazy who substitute freely.

M: Don't be thinking about *now*. Think about the future. Eventually the officials' whistle will be tied in with the clock so it will start and stop at the right instant. I also think there should be a 24- or 30-second shot clock in the last five minutes of the game. Something I'm not in favor of that will probably happen is the use of instant replay to review an official's call. But if the official is correct there should be a severe penalty—like foul shots or loss of ball—slapped on the protesting team.

K: Perhaps we'd better return to the present. Are you going to miss not coaching this year?

- M:** Yes, but I'll play tricks on myself. Maybe read a lot and take a trip to New Zealand before the TV job starts. This will be the first time in 35 years or more that I won't be involved in short pants in the winter. You know, I don't know how to ice-skate or what Christmas morning is like without a game three days away. Once the season began I could never really appreciate things.
- K:** Do you think you'll ever want to come back?
- M:** No way. I've got to move on to other things. It will be difficult, of course, because I had smoke rings blown at me all those years. I was fortunate, because I won.
- K:** All right, before you go, what will you miss most?
- M:** The dance at halftime. I thought that was the best thing of all.

Foul Shots: A Clinic

for Paul Levitt

Be perpendicular to the basket,
toes avid for the line.

Already this description
is perilously abstract: the ball
and basket are round, the nailhead
centered in the centerplank
of the foul-circle is round,
and though the rumped body
isn't round, it isn't
perpendicular. You have to draw
"an imaginary line," as the breezy

coaches say, "through your shoulders."
Here's how to cheat: remember
your collarbone. Now the instructions
grow spiritual—deep breathing,
relax and concentrate both; aim
for the front of the rim but miss it
deliberately so the ball goes in.
Ignore this part of the clinic

and shoot 200 foul shots
every day. Teach yourself not to be
bored by any boring one of them.

You have to love to do this, and chances
are you don't; you'd love to be good
at it but not by a love that drives
you to shoot 200 foul shots
every day, and the lovingly unlaunched
foul shots we're talking about now —
the clinic having served to bring us
together—circle eccentrically
in a sky of stolid orbits
as unlike as you and I are
from the arcs those foul shots
leave behind when they go in.

from *A Sense of Where You Are*

Bradley has a few unorthodox shots, too. He dislikes flamboyance, and, unlike some of basketball's greatest stars, has apparently never made a move merely to attract attention. While some players are eccentric in their shooting, his shots, with only occasional exceptions, are straightforward and unexaggerated. Nonetheless, he does make something of a spectacle of himself when he moves in rapidly parallel to the baseline, glides through the air with his back to the basket, looks for a teammate he can pass to, and, finding none, tosses the ball into the basket over one shoulder, like a pinch of salt. Only when the ball is actually dropping through the net does he look around to see what has happened, on the chance that something might have gone wrong, in which case he would have to go for the rebound. That shot has the essential characteristics of a wild accident, which is what many people stubbornly think they have witnessed until they see him do it for the third time in a row. All shots in basketball are supposed to have names—the set, the hook, the lay-up, the jump shot, and so on—and one weekend last July, while Bradley was in Princeton working on his senior thesis and putting in some time in the Princeton gymnasium to keep himself in form for the Olympics, I asked him what he called his over-the-shoulder shot. He said that he had never heard a name for it, but that he had seen Oscar Robertson, of the Cincinnati Royals, and Jerry West, of the Los Angeles Lakers, do it, and had worked it out for himself. He went on to say that it is a much simpler shot than it appears to be, and, to illustrate, he tossed a ball over his shoulder and into the basket while he was talking and looking me in the eye. I retrieved the ball and handed it back to him. "When you have played basketball for a while, you don't need to look at the basket when you are in close like this," he said, throwing it over his shoulder again and right through the hoop. "You develop a sense of where you are."

Bradley is not an innovator. Actually, basketball has had only a few innovators in its history—players like Hank Luisetti, of Stanford, whose introduction in 1936 of the running one-hander did as much to open up the game for scoring as the forward pass did for football; and Joe Fulks, of the old Philadelphia Warriors, whose twisting two-handed heaves, made while he was leaping like a salmon, were the beginnings of the jump shot, which seems to be basketball's ultimate weapon. Most basketball players appropriate fragments of other players' styles, and thus develop their own. This is what Bradley has done, but one of the things that set him apart from nearly everyone else is that the process has been conscious rather than osmotic. His jump shot, for example, has had two principal influences. One is Jerry West, who has one of the best jumpers in basketball. At a summer basketball camp in Missouri some years ago, West told Bradley

that he always gives an extra hard bounce to the last dribble before a jump shot, since this seems to catapult him to added height. Bradley has been doing that ever since. Terry Dischinger, of the Detroit Pistons, has told Bradley that he always slams his foot to the floor on the last step before a jump shot, because this stops his momentum and thus prevents drifting. Drifting while aloft is the mark of a sloppy jump shot.

Bradley's graceful hook shot is a masterpiece of eclecticism. It consists of the high-lifted knee of the Los Angeles Lakers' Darrall Imhoff, the arms of Bill Russell, of the Boston Celtics, who extends his idle hand far under his shooting arm and thus magically stabilizes the shot, and the general corporeal form of Kentucky's Cotton Nash, a rookie this year with the Lakers. Bradley carries his analyses of shots further than merely identifying them with pieces of other people. "There are five parts to the hook shot," he explains to anyone who asks. As he continues, he picks up a ball and stands about eighteen feet from a basket. "Crouch," he says, crouching, and goes on to demonstrate the other moves. "Turn your head to look for the basket, step, kick, follow through with your arms." Once, as he was explaining this to me, the ball curled around the rim and failed to go in.

"What happened then?" I asked him.

"I didn't kick high enough," he said.

"Do you always know exactly why you've missed a shot?"

"Yes," he said, missing another one.

"What happened that time?"

"I was talking to you. I didn't concentrate. The secret of shooting is concentration."

His set shot is borrowed from Ed Macauley, who was a St. Louis University All-American in the late forties and was later a star member of the Boston Celtics and the St. Louis Hawks. Macauley runs the basketball camp Bradley first went to when he was fifteen. In describing the set shot, Bradley is probably quoting a Macauley lecture. "Crouch like Groucho Marx," he says. "Go off your feet a few inches. You shoot with your legs. Your arms merely guide the ball." Bradley says that he has more confidence in his set shot than in any other. However, he seldom uses it, because he seldom has to. A set shot is a long shot, usually a twenty-footer, and Bradley, with his speed and footwork, can almost always take some other kind of shot, closer to the basket. He will take set shots when they are given to him, though. Two seasons ago, Davidson lost to Princeton, using a compact zone defense that ignored the remoter areas of the court. In one brief sequence, Bradley sent up seven set shots, missing only one. The missed one happened to rebound in Bradley's direction, and he leaped up, caught it with one hand, and scored.

Even his lay-up shot has an ancestral form; he is full of admiration for "the way Cliff Hagan pops up anywhere within six feet of the basket," and he tries to do the same. Hagan is a former Kentucky star who now plays for the St. Louis Hawks. Because opposing teams always do everything they

can to stop Bradley, he gets an unusual number of foul shots. When he was in high school, he used to imitate Bob Pettit, of the St. Louis Hawks, and Bill Sharman of the Boston Celtics, but now his free throw is more or less his own. With his left foot back about eighteen inches—"wherever it feels comfortable," he says—he shoots with a deep-bending rhythm of knees and arms, one-handed, his left hand acting as a kind of gantry for the ball until the moment of release. What is most interesting, though, is that he concentrates his attention on one of the tiny steel eyelets that are welded under the rim of the basket to hold the net to the hoop—on the center eyelet, of course—before he lets fly. One night, he scored over twenty points on free throws alone; Cornell hacked at him so heavily that he was given twenty-one free throws, and he made all twenty-one, finishing the game with a total of thirty-seven points.

When Bradley, working out alone, practices his set shots, hook shots, and jump shots, he moves systematically from one place to another around the basket, his distance from it being appropriate to the shot, and he does not permit himself to move on until he has made at least ten shots out of thirteen from each location. He applies this standard to every kind of shot, with either hand, from any distance. Many basketball players, including reasonably good ones, could spend five years in a gym and not make ten out of thirteen left-handed hook shots, but that is part of Bradley's daily routine. He talks to himself while he is shooting, usually reminding himself to concentrate but sometimes talking to himself the way every high-school j.v. basketball player has done since the dim twenties—more or less imitating a radio announcer, and saying, as he gathers himself up for a shot, "It's pandemonium in Dillon Gymnasium. The clock is running out. He's up with a jumper. Swish!"...

The depth of Bradley's game is most discernible when he doesn't have the ball. He goes in and swims around in the vicinity of the basket, back and forth, moving for motion's sake, making plans and abandoning them, and always watching the distant movement of the ball out of the corner of his eye. He stops and studies his man, who is full of alertness because of the sudden break in the rhythm. The man is trying to watch both Bradley and the ball. Bradley watches the man's head. If it turns too much to the right, he moves quickly to the left. If it turns too much to the left, he goes to the right. If, ignoring the ball, the man focuses his full attention on Bradley, Bradley stands still and looks at the floor. A high-lobbed pass floats in, and just before it arrives Bradley jumps high, takes the ball, turns, and scores.

If Princeton has an out-of-bounds play under the basket, Bradley takes a position just inside the baseline, almost touching the teammate who is going to throw the ball into play. The defensive man crowds in to try to stop whatever Bradley is planning. Bradley whirls around the defensive man, blocking him out with one leg, and takes a bounce pass and lays up

the score. This works only against naïve opposition, but when it does work it is a marvel to watch.

To receive a pass from a backcourt man, Bradley moves away from the basket and toward one side of the court. He gets the ball, gives it up, goes into the center, and hovers there awhile. Nothing happens. He goes back to the corner. He starts toward the backcourt again to receive a pass like the first one. His man, who is eager and has been through this before, moves out toward the backcourt a step ahead of Bradley. This is a defensive error. Bradley isn't going that way; he was only faking. He heads straight for the basket, takes a bounce pass, and scores. This maneuver is known in basketball as going back door. Bradley is able to go back door successfully and often, because of his practiced footwork. Many players, once their man has made himself vulnerable, rely on surprise alone to complete a backdoor play, and that isn't always enough. Bradley's fake looks for all the world like the beginning of a trip to the outside; then, when he goes for the basket, he has all the freedom he needs. When he gets the ball after breaking free, other defensive players naturally leave their own men and try to stop him. In these three-on-two or two-on-one situations, the obvious move is to pass to a teammate who has moved into a position to score. Sometimes, however, no teammate has moved, and Bradley sees neither a pass nor a shot, so he veers around and goes back and picks up his own man. "I take him on into the corner for a one-on-one," he says, imagining what he might do. "I move toward the free-throw line on a dribble. If the man is overplaying me to my right, I reverse pivot and go in for a left-handed lay-up. If the man is playing even with me, but off me a few feet, I take a jump shot. If the man is playing me good defense—honest—and he's on me tight, I keep going. I give him a head-and-shoulder fake, keep going all the time, and drive to the basket, or I give him a head-and-shoulder fake and take a jump shot. Those are all the things you need—the fundamentals."

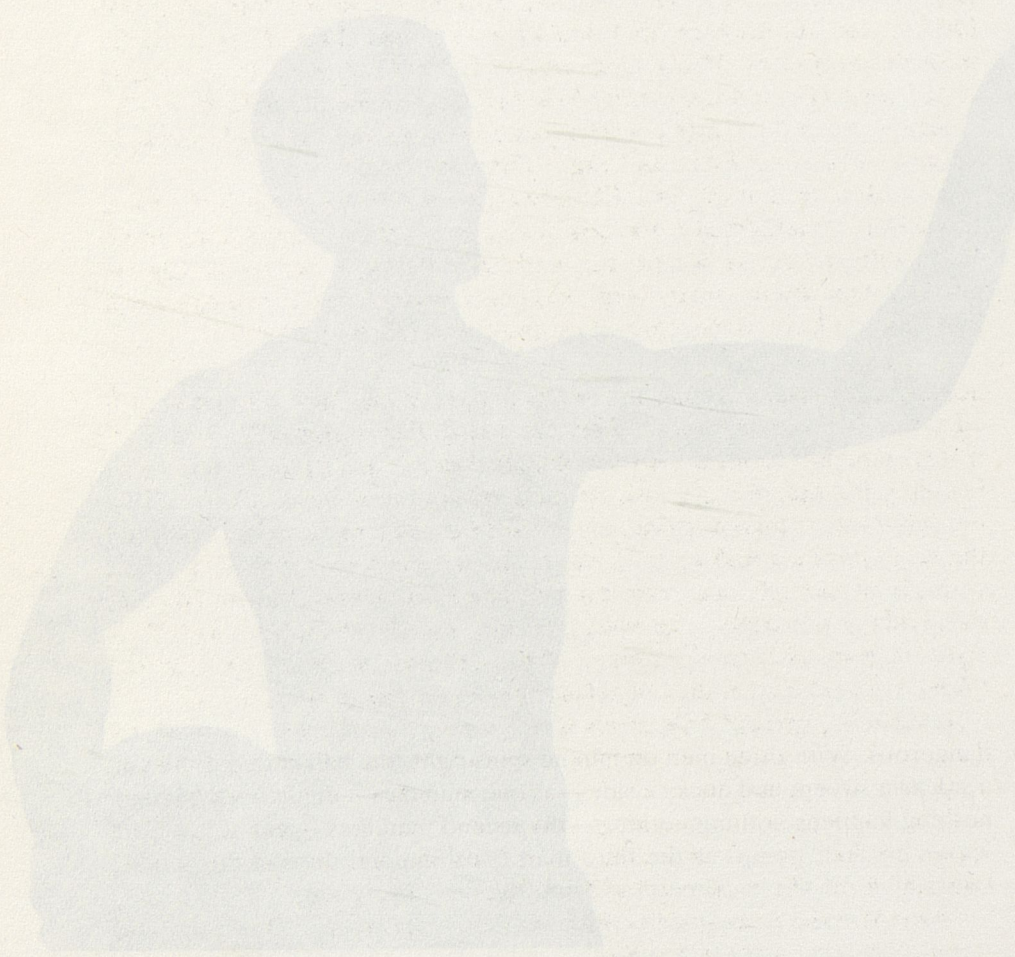
Bradley develops a relationship with his man that is something like the relationship between a yoyoist and his yoyo. "I'm on the side of the floor," he postulates, "and I want to play with my man a little bit, always knowing where the ball is but not immediately concerned with getting it. Basketball is a game of two or three men, and you have to know how to stay out of a play and not clutter it up. I cut to the baseline. My man will follow me. I'll cut up to the high-post position. He'll follow me. I'll cut to the low-post position. He'll follow me. I'll go back out to my side position. He'll follow. I'll fake to the center of the floor and go hard to the baseline, running my man into a pick set at the low-post position. I'm not running him into a pick in order to get free for a shot—I'm doing it simply to irritate him. I come up on the other side of the basket, looking to see if a teammate feels that I'm open. They can't get the ball to me at that instant. Now my man is back with me. I go out to the side. I set a screen for the guard. He sees the situation. He comes toward me. He dribbles hard past me, running his

man into my back. I feel the contact. My man switches off me, leaving the pass lane open for a split second. I go hard to the basket and take a bounce pass for a shot. Two points.”

CHASING THE GAME



CHASING THE GAME



The Tall Boys of Summer

A soft shot, a lollypop, and the ball caroms high off the front rim. Jim Morgan leaps—skies—in midair bumps his man, swaps an elbow for a knee and snatches the ball. The fast break begins. The outlet pass to Chris Ford onto Earl Monroe and then the Earl begins, with his old man's knees, a careless slapping dribble, and the fast break slows to his own sweet time.

"Do it, Earl."

"Do it to it."

He has been doing it since John Bartram High School in 1963, since he led the nation in scoring at Winston-Salem with a 44-point average, as Rookie of the Year for the Baltimore Bullets, and as All-Star guard and fashion plate for the New York Knicks, yet still and always he remains the pride of Philly and of Philly's summertime Baker League, the fastest league in the country—and the mother lode for any genuine basketball freak.

Again, we watch. It is a league game between Nate Ben's Reliable in green and National Football League Films in black.

Earl Monroe, age 29, for NFL, still controls, still doing it—with moves too slow to be anticipated, too quick to be awkward, he comes and is gone. He has slipped our notion of time, and found the point between discipline and freedom where gravity stops and music begins, and no one can touch him, and nothing, no amount of pressure, can reach him.

Some great players, a Walt Frazier or a Jerry West, have a court knowledge that is closer to wisdom. They are aware of everything. But with Earl that wisdom has attained the level of innocence, so that he seems oblivious, handling the ball like a yo-yo, roaming freely, inventing moves based on nonsense rather than practice, which have the advantage of being new and the reputation for making fools of grown men; and what does a West do, with his instant reflexes, against a man like Earl, who will waste fakes all day, risk the ridiculous, and, finally, tricking no one, shoot blind with West right on him, *and score anyway?* What can anyone do except admire? (West has said Earl is the only player he would pay to see.)

Meanwhile, and dribbling, Earl is within range, at the foul line now and dangerous. With three men on him he spins right, the ball curled to him in a sidearm sweep, and ducks inside—as one man flies—ducks back out and nothing happens nothing nothing—the second man flies—and at last Earl leaves his feet, pumps as the third man fouls him and the ball floats free, twists high off the backboard and into the net. Two points.

"Earl Monroe is the greatest black man that ever lived," a boy yells, and slaps palms across the entire row.

"*Black Jesus*," a man yells, and the whole congregation is standing. For His name's sake: Testifying.

"*Earl Earl Earl*."

Olé. It is Spain. The bull has just died a perfect death.

"EARL."

The play will be talked about for days to come, imitated on kitchen floors, barstools, in daydreams on the subway; for he has done no less than offer our dry bones the hope that we *can* fly. There is magic to be had.

The game goes on. Green ball. Feet pounding, ball echo, out of bounds. Black ball, they flow upcourt. Earl from the corner fades, lets fly. Do I hear two?

"Two," a man says.

"Amen," another says.

"Only in the Baker League can you see this happen," the PA announcer promotes, and he's close enough.

Going on 13 years, the league has come from a playground at 25th and the Ghetto (Diamond Street) to a weekly TV game on channel 29 from Temple's air-conditioned McGonigle Hall. New Yorkers talk about their Rucker League, but it is understood, by those who understand, that the Baker is better. Years before the press discovered it existed (before there was any percentage in being black), the league had names like Wilt Chamberlain, Guy Rodgers, T Parham, Hal Lear, Woody Sauldsberry and Andy Johnson.

They came then, as stars and rookies from the NBA, ABA and Eastern League now come—most of them summa cum laude graduates of Philly schoolyards, some from out of town, from the Chicago Bulls, Virginia Squires, and especially the New York Knicks. Bill Bradley, Henry Bibby, Hawthorne Wingo, coming back each summer—to stay in shape and sharpen skills and just do it to it.

And because there are no salaries paid and no jobs on the line, the pros freewheel, keeping a schoolyard tempo, and taking risks (as typified by Earl Monroe, who was the league's Most Valuable Player in 1973, and who once, enraged at an official, stalked off the court and out of the building only to return minutes later smiling and eating a water ice).

* * *

Below, play has become ragged. Willie Sojourner, for Nate Ben's, drives the baseline, commits himself—it's a suicide drive—with nowhere to go, and passes—no one to pass to—out of bounds. Nate's is getting head-whipped 35 to 24 and not even the officials can keep the game close.

It is an ordinary Tuesday evening and the crowd as always is easy—mostly black and sportswise. It's cool here; there is no admission charge. The kids drop in off the street and acquire a few heroes. A three-year-old crawls around the scorer's table. Somewhere a radio plays, "It's a Rainy Night in

Georgia." A woman watches with her arms folded. And for myself, being white and proud, in North Philly at this point in time, I find it pleasant not to catch a single hostile glance or stiff shoulder. People come for the fun and games, and if a white player makes a sweet play, they holler as loud and more power to the man if he can make the grade. At least here and now, the fellowship and spirit of the League has quieted the anger that hangs over this city, and for two hours you can forget the time bomb.

* * *

Below, Sojourner is fouled and makes the foul shot. Nate Ben's trails by 14.

T Parham is beside me and says, "All white cats can shoot fouls. How come all white cats can shoot fouls?"

Being a good foul shooter, what can I say?

"All except Herky Herdlin, you know, used to play for LaSalle. *He* couldn't shoot fouls," T says.

I nod. Thank you, Herky. I smile. I stop smiling. The half ends and I'm in trouble. I'm to interview Claude Gross, the angry six-foot-seven-inch coach of Nate Ben's, which is losing, 43, to 27.

Question: Have you ever been five-foot-nine in a locker room of unhappy men who are six-foot-nine? Quickly I sit down, and somberly bow my head along with the players while Claude gestures to every corner of the room and shouts at the light fixtures.

"*What kind of bullshit half was that? What kind of bullshit ball was that?* I mean, *bullshit*. I don't know why you come here and you go out there play that bullshit."

He pulls his arms flat to his sides, closes his eyes, then throws out his arm and points a finger. "I mean, pass the fuckin ball. I mean, the next man that put the ball on the floor when a man's open is gonna come and *join-me-on-the-bench*. *Pass the fuckin ball*. How you expect to do anything you ain't got confidence in the man? *Pass him the ball*. This man . . ." (he points to Lee Tress) ". . . was in the game a whole quarter didn't see the ball. How's he supposed to do what I tell him he don't see the ball? You got to have faith the man can play. *Give him the ball and find out*. And . . ." He throws up both hands. ". . . *Ain't no team nowhere 20 points better than us. Bullshit, ain't no fuckin team in this league can beat us if we play some ball*. And rebound. That's the first thing you learn how to do is block the man out. Hell, you lettin them climb all on your backs. Jim Morgan come down and get himself a rebound. Joe Neuman do the same thing. Chris Ford standin at half court he come down say, 'Shit, I'm a get me one too.' Damn, ain't you got no pride? What's the matter with you?"

"Now let's go out and play some ball."

They all stand, grip hands in the center of the room, mumble to each other and walk out. Claude Gross stays, puts a hand on my shoulder, and sits beside me on the bench.

"They're all right," he says.

He has on a hat, a silver-dollar watch, and a flowing dashiki-style shirt. His eyes are direct and warm and in no time at all I find I like this man. He gives off something you can keep.

Claude has been around a while. He outplayed Chamberlain in Wilt's only Public League loss (and later married his sister), and starred in the service and independent ball. Had he been born later or whiter some college would have snapped him up and perhaps a pro team.

We talk about the pros, how a dying team like Philadelphia 76ers can year after year pass up the local talent available in the Baker League for unseen draft picks out of Nowhere State, which are based on computer analysis. Six years ago, the 76ers had the best team in the world, a team with so much talent it required almost no coaching. Enter Jack Ramsay, a coach with a Ph.D. and a lot of adrenalin, who traded off legitimate stars because they acted like stars and did not have the proper attitude, men like Chet Walker, Wali Jones and Johnny Green for Johnny Hustlers, men who needed to be coached, molded into a team. So from a group of *individuals* who won a world championship, the 76ers went to a scrappy *team* that couldn't win a game, that any team in the Baker League could beat. Meanwhile, Ramsay, ex-coach and general manager, leaves the wreckage for a coaching job in Buffalo.

The subject is too negative, and Claude talks about some of the basketball minds in the Baker League, men who once came to play and stayed to become officers in the league, coaches, and pullers of weight in the community. John Chaney is head coach at Cheyney State, Jay Norman an assistant coach at Temple, T Parham an official in several leagues, Herb Janey a policeman working with PAL, and others, Vince Miller, Tee Shields, Moose Burton, Bob Newman, Ducky Birts, men who know the game and have grown with the league and now turn to help others—and of course Sonny Hill, who has gone from a big jump shot at the top of the key to a knowledgeable radio announcer for the 76ers, and founder of the high school-level Sonny Hill League—which plays its games as a preliminary to the Baker games, and which showcases the pick of the schoolboys. College scouts, from what they've seen in the Hill League games, have given dozens of athletic scholarships, to UCLA, Penn, Maryland, Utah . . . The whole long and winding story is sweet. What began with a few pickup games changed a few men's lives, and now draws water and sheds light for numberless young people.

What is not so sweet is the game Claude and I return to. The second half has started and Nate Ben's is 25 points down and fading. This is the weekly TV game, no less. Sonny Hill, who is announcing, must be talking his mouth off to hold the audience.

I sit down again beside T Parham and watch as Nate Ben's inbounds the ball. Hubie White brings it up, shoots his soft familiar shot off the hip and

misses. There is time out. I turn to T and listen while he talks shop, and listen as the game resumes.

T was a childhood hero of mine. We grew up one playground and five years apart, and about a million points. A schoolyard legend, All-Public for two years at the old Northeast High (now Edison), a superstar before the word was coined, he is also the saddest story of the Baker League, for T Parham was the greatest *would-be* of them all. I mean, did you ever see T play? Warming up, banking in soft 15-foot hooks with monotonous consistency, *twist-plop twist-plop*, then moving to the other side and with the other hand hooking, *twist-plop* . . .

Once inside the building T was a threat to score. Even at five-foot-nine he was too big for the game. He had Calvin Murphy's eye and speed and a better head, Nate Archibald's moves and a surer shot. To the equation of Earl's brilliance, subtract seven inches and add a T: they both equal magic—only T, like Claude Gross, was born too soon. Basketball pretty much meant white ball back then, and he got lost between Supreme Court rulings. Despite trouble with his studies, as he spent 100% of his time playing ball, filling the basket, it is hard to believe some small college did not grab him up.

He says, "I tell those kids today this used to be a white game and they laugh. They can't *believe* it."

I ask what he thinks of the caliber of high school ball today. A lot of people, Earl included, see the empty schoolyards and gangs and say the game is falling off. Everyone's driving a car and partying.

He laughs. "It's true. Some of these kids, four or five maybe, can play anywhere. But most of them don't have the fundamentals down. They start *off* bein' fancy. I mean, we used to play all day every day, hit every schoolyard in the city, but now there's just the Hill League for these kids and *that's* great, but it's the same kids playin' each other, seein' the same things over and over, and before they can develop—maybe all they can do is *jump*—sportswriters are calling them superstars."

Bozo Walker, a former Globetrotter, walks by, sees me writing and says, "Write this. *That man there*," meaning T, "was the greatest shooter I ever saw and I've been playing a hundred years. One game I remember he had 30 points and was forcin' shots. I called time and said, look, we'll *give* you the ball. He got 50 points after that. That's 80 points. If he didn't miss three layups he'd a had 86."

T smiles, obviously enjoying the story.

Bozo continues. "See, T *had* them, he *had* them. He knew how to stop short and draw the foul, duck under a man and draw it everytime. They changed the rules for him. He was impossible to guard, I mean, it might look easy—be a close game, the lead see-sawin', and all of a sudden T'd *wreck* it, hit six or seven in a row and *wreck* it."

To look at T, there is nothing to indicate how good he was. His wife half doubts it, his mother has thrown away his clippings, and he has a stomach

on him fit for a man who owns a candy store. It is called Parham's Variety and is located at 1915 Somerset Street.

To listen to T, though, you can tell there is no false modesty, no you-should-have-seen-me tone; he speaks simply out of the knowledge of his talent, and without visible bitterness about what happened to it.

We watch the game. Earl is dribbling, flowing; it looks as easy as fun. He rolls a pass to Ford, who scores. They lead by 30.

At the scorer's table Irv Kosloff, the owner of the 76ers, looks bored. Throughout the game people come over to talk to him. An approachable man, he contributes equipment to the league, which pretty much supports itself on the admission charged at its All-Star games.

Again T is talking, he breathes basketball, though the only contact he wants with the game now is to officiate—covering the Baker and Jewish Leagues—and pass his knowledge on to his son.

"You know, these kids today. They never covered anyone like me. You see, they used to guys *missin*, see . . ." T laughs and I join him. He's right. He didn't miss.

The game ends, but before the evening does, T indulges himself in some bittersweet thoughts, and goes over the days when he tried to crack the old Warriors—when there were too many blacks on the team already, for 1961, and owner Eddie Gottlieb did not want to try a small man. It wouldn't work. It took ten more years and Nate Archibald's 30 points a game to prove that it would; that a smart little man will beat a leaper every time. And with Wilt behind him in the pivot, no one could have taken T inside.

"You know why Boston beat Philly all those years? Because of the guard situation—Wali Jones could move the ball in traffic, and Greer, who couldn't, could shoot. So they lay off Wali and help out on Greer. Every time Wali had a big game, Philly won, but they *needed* a shooter who could move the ball, take the pressure off Greer."

It is not hard to fill in the name. Then, for a minute, T let me in on a fantasy and it more than sounded good. "You want to hear something crazy?" he said. "Imagine this team. At center, Wilt Chamberlain, the greatest offensive player and rebounder." The year, of course, was 1961. "Then Tom Gola, the greatest defensive player and big enough for forward, and three guards, Guy Rodgers, the greatest passer, Hal Lear, a pure shooter. And me. Imagine it, the speed. Wilt, the shooting, five guys from Philly, we'd have packed the house."

from **Two Games: The Challenge of Basketball**

The Rucker Tournament is actually not a tournament but a summer league in which teams play one another through the weekends of July and August. Established in 1946 by a remarkable young teacher named Holcombe Rucker, it was originally intended mainly to keep kids off the streets and in school by encouraging them in both studies and basketball. Rucker's idea was to give dignity and meaning to pickup games by adding referees, local publicity, and larger audiences; it worked, and gradually the Rucker Tournament expanded to include divisions for young athletes from junior high school through the pro level. A project that had begun with four teams and one referee began to offer basketball from morning until dark in various Harlem parks, before crowds estimated as high as five thousand. When Rucker died of cancer in 1955 at the age of thirty-eight, a well-known Harlem player named Bob McCullough and pro guard Freddie Crawford, now with the Milwaukee Bucks, took over the direction of the tournament. It remains the pinnacle of playground ball in New York, annually attracting stars from both pro leagues, members of touring teams such as the Harlem Globetrotters, as well as the best players of the regular pickup games of the city.

The pro section of the Rucker Tournament had long since been moved to another storied playground, at 155th Street and Eighth Avenue, but the lure of a decade-old game remained in that Seventh Avenue park for Pat Smith. Outside the ragged fences, the quiet Harlem Sunday was interrupted by the sounds of the women on the ubiquitous church steps, straightening uncomfortable dresses and pushing veils away from their faces as they chatted feverishly, in the weekly ritual escape from rat-infested kitchens and endless labor. Near the knots of women, grown men in boys' uniforms joined small children in formation for one of the minor parades that still serve some Harlemites as straggly symbols of unity and pride. Young, educated, and militant, Pat Smith had very different ideas about black dignity; moments earlier he had been depressed by the Sunday delusions of some of his people. But under the tree that had once been his reserved seat, he occupied his mind with loftier drama, recalling a game of street basketball at its best.

"It was the kind of game that established citywide reputations. Clinton Robinson was playing. Jackie Jackson was there. So was Wilt Chamberlain, who was in his first or second year of pro ball at the time. . . ." He savored each name as he spoke it; this was a very special honor roll. Some of the names, like Robinson's and Jackson's, would be familiar only to the ghetto kids who once worshipped them; others, like Chamberlain's, would

be recognized by every basketball fan. But to Smith and many others they were all gods, and their best games were Olympian clashes.

“Chamberlain and Robinson were on the same team along with some other greats, and they were ahead by about 15 points. They looked like easy winners. Then, up in the tree, I heard a strange noise. There were maybe four, five thousand people watching the game, and all of a sudden a hush came over them. All you could hear was a whisper: ‘The Hawk, The Hawk, The Hawk is here.’ Then the crowd parted. And the Hawk walked onto the court.”

The Hawk was Connie Hawkins. When you ask ghetto basketball fans to cite the very best players ever to come out of New York, you find much disagreement; but a few names are invariably included, and one of them is The Hawk. Yet for years he seemed fated to become one of those virtually forgotten playground stars who never earn the money or fame they deserve. Connie made his reputation at Brooklyn’s Boys High in the late 1950s, but when he was a freshman at the University of Iowa in 1961, he was linked to a gambling scandal. His chief crime had been naïveté in talking to glad-handing gamblers, and he had never been indicted or even accused of trying to shave points or fix games. But his college career was shattered and for almost a decade he was an outcast, barred from the NBA, laboring in the short-lived American Basketball League and then in the American Basketball Association as it struggled for survival.

In 1969, after a prolonged legal battle, Hawkins won a million-dollar lawsuit and readmission to the NBA as a member of the Phoenix Suns. He quickly justified everything the playground kids had been saying about him for years. At the time of the game Smith described, Hawkins was a year or two out of Boys High, a man without a team or league. Yet he was the most magnetic star in Harlem.

“The crowd was still hushed as they called time out,” Smith continued. “They surrounded the man. They undressed the man. And finally he finished lacing up his sneakers and walked out into the backcourt. He got the ball, picked up speed, and started his first move. Chamberlain came right out to stop him. The Hawk went up—he was still way out beyond the foul line—and started floating toward the basket. Wilt, taller and stronger, stayed right with him—but then The Hawk hook-dunked the ball right over Chamberlain. He *hook-dunked*! Nobody had ever done anything like that to Wilt. The crowd went so crazy that they had to stop the game for five minutes. And I almost fell out of the tree.

“But you didn’t get away with just one spectacular move in those games. So the other guys came right back at The Hawk. Clinton Robinson charged in, drove around him, and laid one up so high that it hit the top of the backboard. The Hawk went way up, but he couldn’t quite reach it, and it went down into the basket. Clinton Robinson was about six feet tall and The Hawk was six feet eight—so the crowd went wild again. In fact, Clinton

had thrown some of the greatest moves I'd ever seen, shaking guys left and right before he even reached The Hawk.

“Then it was Chamberlain’s turn to get back. Wilt usually took it pretty easy in summer games, walking up and down the court and doing just enough to intimidate his opponents with his seven-foot body. But now his pride was hurt, his manhood was wounded. And you can’t let that happen in a tough street game. So he came down, drove directly at the hoop, and went up over The Hawk. Wilt stuffed the ball with two hands, and he did it so hard that he almost ripped the backboard off the pole.

“By then everybody on the court was fired up—and it was time for The Hawk to take charge again. Clinton Robinson came toward him with the ball, throwing those crazy moves on anyone who tried to stop him, and then he tried to loft a lay-up way up onto the board, the way he had done before. Only this time The Hawk was up there waiting for it. He was up so high that he blocked with his chest. Still in midair, he kind of swept his hands down across his chest as if he were wiping his shirt—and slammed the ball down at Robinson’s feet. The play seemed to turn the whole game around, and The Hawk’s team came from behind to win. That was The Hawk. Just beautiful. I don’t think anybody who was in that crowd could ever forget that game.”

The full court press

is basketball's most electric defensive tactic: one team checks the other as soon as they get the ball and hounds them all the way down court. it works because it irritates like a second hand trying to get into your pocket; or having a shadow that slaps back.

why then is it rarely used for a whole game, never a full season? simple: no one should be pressing all the time.

but some try: sammy glick (it made him run), jerry lewis, the bank of america, preachers, rookies, new kings and teachers, the straight A student; insurance men, drunk or sober.

the opposite of the full court press is taking it easy, no sports term, but one that works in any field. it is the only way to drop a putt, pick up a spare, drink a beer, write, read, remember, love, smoke, live.

it's a pity something all-pro on one court fouls out everywhere else.

Whistle and the Heroes

It is only basketball, yet twice a week, in the early night, Marvin Wessel lives the life of a man. He doesn't play before the Garden crowds, and even the time of club ball is far behind, yet Wednesdays and Fridays are the best days of his week. The community center is open on Monday evenings too, but on that night he drives his mother for her injection. It's a sacrifice for Marvin, and they both know it. She might change the day of her appointment, but he never presses her to. Next to the nights that he plays basketball, giving it up on Monday is the other big thing in his week.

His mother alludes often to a devil, and when the doctor first explained her child's cleft palate, she always spoke of it as more of Satan in her life. As a boy, he knew what she said had something to do with him, and he understood no more of it than that. But now he no longer thinks of it. He tries to think of little that is in the past: basketball on the two nights and his job satisfy his idea of time.

Whistle—as his friends have always called him—works as a packer in one of the city's largest department stores. Before that, four years ago, he worked for a button company, but his present job is better. The building is huge and he is shifted among departments often enough to overcome the monotony of his work. The frequent changes make it unnecessary to get too friendly with anyone, and this, also, satisfies Whistle. He feels no need for new friends, and his speech makes it difficult to talk to people he doesn't already know. When the work gets too dull, he thinks ahead to his two big nights.

On a Wednesday or Friday, Whistle is always nervous. This happens as early as breakfast. He fries an extra egg and has milk instead of the usual coffee. He is grateful at these times that his mother always sleeps late and he can manage the mornings for himself. On the subway, he pushes back against the jostling with a little more force, although he is careful to avoid argument. If he is close to a window, he peers at his face, which is trapped in the window against the darkness of the tunnel. He thinks he hardly looks the part he will play that night, and the deception gives him some kind of advantage over the others in the car. At work, when he walks from the packing table for empty cartons, he pushes hard against the balls of his feet. He can feel his calves tighten, and he has to fight the impulse to run a few steps. Even when he packs, the work is not enough to wear away the energy that builds inside him. He is almost pained by the sense of his body, and he is able to isolate parts of it: the weight of an arm, the tension in a leg, the bunching behind a shoulder. This impatience for violent movement compels his mind to wander as he packs, and he lapses into a familiar image of himself. They are jumping under the backboard for a loose ball,

and he suddenly angles in from the corner of the court and finds an opening. He cuts in cleanly and leaps with the power of his run to snatch the ball out of the air and come down without contact some fifteen feet away toward the other corner, already dribbling quickly downcourt. The picture excites him, and he works with more conviction at the carton on his packing table.

At lunch, he runs the short distance to the cafeteria, finding little spaces in the hurrying noon crowds. He runs with his feet wide apart and his legs bent slightly at the knees so that he might veer sharply through any sudden opening. Though he can tell himself he runs to get a window seat, he doesn't care to understand why this seat isn't so important on other days. He eats quickly, again having milk instead of coffee, and spends the rest of the hour smoking cigarettes and staring out the window. He can usually guess which of the girls that pass are models, and he can even decide between those who work in the high-price houses and the cheaper ones. He has heard enough stories to know they are all tramps, and he has seen it himself when he worked in a dress house. But when one walks by who is beautiful, yet clean—like the fragile girl in a perfume ad—he finds the stories and what he knows hard to believe.

In the afternoon his mind wanders again, and the time passes quickly. If he grows too conscious of his straying thoughts, he works at the packing with a renewed vigor. When it gets toward quitting time, he is pleased by the energy that is still in him. At five o'clock he turns in his slips, knowing that he has packed more than he does on the ordinary days. Men in the same department mutter goodbye to him, and he nods his head and smiles in return. Three middle-aged women work there, but they say nothing to him, though they joke with the other men. In the crowded street he runs again to the subway—the feet wide apart, the knees slightly bent.

When he gets home on Wednesdays or Fridays, he takes the stairs to their first floor Bay Ridge flat two at a time. His mother knows the community center opens at seven, and supper is always ready for him. She finds it a nuisance to have her time fixed this way twice a week, and she complains bitterly about it. She often tells him that he must stop playing ball, that he is no longer a boy, that were his father alive he would have to toe the line. But she never forces an argument because she has come herself to depend on these two nights. When he hurries out the door with his gym clothes in a traveling bag, she begins to mutter about her devil as she rubs a hand across her chest.

On the gym floor, Whistle moves with a bird's grace. He uses the game as a gull does the wind, tacking toward the basket in what is almost flight. He is slender and not more than five-ten, and though all the fellows he plays with are much younger than he, many of them are taller and stronger. Some of them, swelling in their late teens, strip to their shorts so that the sweat will shadow the contours of their bodies. But Whistle wears a grey fleece-lined sweater and track pants.

They play on only one basket, yet Whistle rarely stops moving. If there is a loose ball—no matter how far away—he chases for it. If someone is about to shoot, he is already moving toward the backboard for the rebound. Even when he crouches to jump for a ball that has not yet begun to drop, there is so much tension in his poise that there is no apparent halting of motion between the wait and the leap. Yet with all his running, there is a great economy to Whistle's movement. He possesses a flawless instinct for knowing where to be. Despite the smallness of the court, he never collides with the other five who play. There are many such collisions in this unrefereed game, but Whistle is seldom involved in the tangle. The kids, often desperate with his near perfection, claim that his one shortcoming is a fear of the rough stuff, and they try to provoke him. But Whistle knows this is not a part of his game, and he is able, by the certainty of his movements, to avoid it.

It does not matter to him that he is twenty-eight and most of the boys he plays with are still in their teens. Nor does it matter that there is no great audience and the game is only a pick-up affair. It is enough that he performs well and the sweat is on his body. But more than other things, there is that fine chemical change as he plays. Sometimes he will put a hand to his abdomen, as though to feel it. Things inside of him—hard things he is unaware of during the day, but feels now he should be able to touch—loosen as though parts of his body had begun to dissolve. After a few minutes on the gym floor, he can almost hear himself unwinding, as though there were some connection between running and health. When he leaps in from the corner of the court to steal a ball from the taller fellows under the backboard, he may—as he begins to dribble away—raise his head slightly and look back toward the players with a curiously defiant stare in his eyes, a thinning of the lines in his already taut face. Aside from this one lapse, he is all but oblivious to place and time. He does not think once while he plays how much better it all is than his work as a packer, or his life at home. He runs with pursed lips and never speaks, but neither is he aware that he has not spoken.

Yet in his mind there are the impressions of a long time ago. There are many people and various days, but if he were to remember well there would be only one night, there would be the girl and Bernstein. It was eight years ago and a good time in Whistle's life.

It was a winter evening that came with a heavy snow. He would remember that because the girl sat on his lap and he wouldn't help when the car settled on the ice and the fellows got out to push. It was winter, too, because the last he'd ever seen of Bernstein was after the game when the kid had thrown a snowball at the lamppost outside the school, threw it so well that he hit not the post but the lamp fixture, and when it came down it made a splattering thud in the soft snow. Then Bernstein and his gang ran off around the corner, shouting, and Whistle stood there. He looked into

the darkness where the lamp had been, looked up at the falling snow, and listened to the echoes of Bernstein's laughter.

It was the winter of the year. Even with the car as crowded as it was, they made vapor funnels with their breathing, and they passed the bottle around often. She swallowed from it along with the other girls, and when she finished and gave the bottle to Whistle, he saw her shoulders shudder and felt her squirm on his lap. She was broad and thin, and her name was Alice. When she turned her face to hand him the bottle, the edge of her profile was rimmed in a soft light. Whistle thought she was very pretty.

It had been Dox's idea that they take the girls to the game. Whistle worked with Dox in the dress house, and Alice worked there too. Dox's date was a model in the place, but Alice worked in the office. Dox insisted she was too thin to be a model, but Whistle thought she was clean and would not be one. He had never spoken to her, and it was Dox who had arranged the date. That made Whistle angry, but he could not understand why. For weeks he had wanted her to see him play. At nights, the desire had made him restless with a new excitement.

After work they went to the New Yorker for dinner. Flip and Artie met them there with their girls, and it was almost a party. They had drinks before dinner, but Artie kept insisting about the game, and so none of the fellows had more than two. Whistle wanted to drink more, but he felt himself tighten when Artie mentioned the game, and he held back.

But in the car when the bottle Dox had bought went around and she would swallow from it and then turn to hand it to him, Whistle was afraid she would hear the beating in his chest. There was the soft light on her face, and she said, "Here, Whistle," without even a smile. But there was an edge to her voice that startled him. He did not think from seeing her at work that she would drink the way she did, and he believed she was doing it because the other girls were. But she didn't say anything or even change the expression on her face when Dox's girl started to curse, and Whistle felt the blood inside him to the ends of his fingers. He wanted to take a long swallow when she said, "Here, Whistle," but Artie still kept on about the game, so he ran a little of it over his lip and passed it on. She sat well back in his lap, and he had a hand on her shoulder. He thought ahead to when he would be running on the gym floor and she would be watching him. Thinking of that relieved the sense of his awkwardness. It would be much easier for him after the game. He could look forward to the party in Dox's basement. He was almost not afraid to think of taking her home by himself afterwards.

But suddenly, even the thought of the game was strangely frightening. She might not know anything about basketball. She might not care at all about how he played. He remembered he had not spoken a full sentence to her since the evening started. That terrified him now. The others were all making noise in the car. When he listened, he could hear Dox's girl laugh loudly. But Alice was quiet. Maybe Dox had spoken to her before the

date. Quickly, without thinking, his fingers—as though they were apart from the anguish inside him—tightened about her shoulder. He waited for her to protest, wanting now to be out of the car, not caring anymore about the game. But she didn't speak. She didn't even move. She just sat there on his lap looking out through the opposite window, the light shading the edge of her fine profile. He felt his fingers loosen on her shoulder.

Then Flip, sitting in front with his girl on his lap, twisted his head toward the corner where Whistle sat in the back. Looking past Alice, Whistle could see Flip's thick neck wrinkle in two ugly folds.

"It's awful quiet back there," Flip said. "They must be having fun. Whistle didn't even get out to push." Dox's girl laughed. Whistle thought hard for something to say, but Alice was quiet too. Then Artie's girl, sitting next to Whistle, spoke.

"Nothing's going on. You take care of your own troubles."

"What did I say?" Flip called back. "I thought I was being nice. I was looking out for Alice."

"I'm fine, thank you," Alice said without moving. Her voice, clear, brittle, sounded in Whistle's ear like the tapping of metal. It came upon him quietly—as though the thought had been in his mind for years—that he was going to love her. They were on the bridge now, and the water below them was dark in the twilight. Looking out between the massive, bolted girders at the river, at the boats, at the snow, and at the lights that beamed their narrow yellow tracks across the water, Whistle lost himself for a moment in a surprising calm. It was as though he had done all this—Alice on his lap and his hand on her shoulder—many times before. He thought he would ask her, after the party, when they stood before her door, to go on a boat ride with him when the warmer weather came. When he turned away from the window, he saw that she had raised a hand to her face to touch precisely with a finger near the corner of her eye. The nail was long and polished lightly, in pink.

"There won't be much for us to do at the game, just watching you guys run around," Dox's girl suddenly said.

"Anxious to get to the party?" Dox asked. Whistle knew Dox had smiled.

"It'll be better than the game," she said.

"I suppose it will," Dox said.

"You girls can bet on that," Flip said.

"There he goes again," Artie's girl said.

"For Christ's sake, what the hell's eating you?" Flip answered.

"Oh, can it already, will you," Dox said. It grew quiet and Whistle wondered why Alice hadn't said anything when they spoke about the game. Then Dox looked quickly at his girl.

"You watch Whistle during the game. That'll give you enough to do."

"Why? Is he something special?" She turned a little to look toward Whistle. He bit his lip to stop the childish grin.

"The best basketball player you ever saw," Flip said.

"So what?" she laughed.

"This one's got the giggles," Flip said. "Listen kid, if girls were basketballs Whistle would have you all screwed by tomorrow." Flip laughed, and Dox's girl laughed. A small knot of breath caught in Whistle's throat. Then Alice laughed, louder than the others, filling the car with the sound of it, tilting her head back so that her hair fell against his face. She jerked on his lap as she laughed, and then began to cough and laugh at the same time. Whistle heard himself mumble, "Take it easy. Take it easy." When she stopped at last, they were all quiet again. Whistle listened to the continuous grinding of the snow beneath the tires.

"It's going to be a rough game," Artie said, breaking the silence.

"Quit worrying," Dox said.

"Is this a very special game?" Alice asked. Whistle shrugged, then nodded toward Artie. "He thinks so," he heard himself say.

"They're only kids," Artie said, "but they play high school ball together. They got this guy Bernstein on the team. He's got offers from colleges already."

"Oh, is that the kid who plays for Madison?" Alice asked. Whistle looked up eagerly at her. Her mouth was half-parted in surprise. It was small, pretty. He turned his head away.

"How did you know?" Flip asked.

"He lives on my block. I used to date his brother."

"No shit?" Flip said.

"Bernstein's a nice kid," Alice said. "I've seen him play."

"You watch Whistle tonight," Dox said.

"Are you really that good, Whistle?" she asked, turning her face down to him. He could not see her face for the shadows, but he thought surely she must hear the beating of his heart. He wanted to be out of the car and on the gym floor. He wanted that very much. He opened his mouth to say something, not knowing what he would say. But then Dox began.

"He ought to be that good. Hell, even I might be if I worked at it like him. Hey Artie, you remember when we were kids and it was ass-cold outside. Below zero, remember? We were going to a movie—*Captain Blood*, wasn't it? You nearly lost an ear on the way. And when we passed the schoolyard, there was Whistle running around in a sweater and steaming like the fourth of July. He even shoveled the snow away from the backboard, remember?"

"I ought to," Artie said. "I had to go to the doctor account of my frozen ear. Whistle, you were a crazy kid."

Whistle smiled.

Flip began to sing a song, and his girl joined in. Then Dox and Artie sang, and Alice hummed. Whistle thought confidently of the game. He had hardly spoken to her, had not really touched her. It would be different afterwards. He would sing with them on the way to Dox's place. The words

were almost in his mouth now. He liked the light weight of her on his lap, but he wanted to be in the game already. He thought of it longingly, saw himself angling in from the corner for that free ball. But it was hard for him to think only of the game. He got it mixed in with the metallic ring of her voice: "Here, Whistle. Here, Whistle."

When the car pulled up before the community center, Whistle thought he should help Alice out, but she was on his lap and had to leave first. Inside the building, they all lingered for a while at the steps to the locker room.

"You girls keep together," Flip said. "We'll see you after the game." Then, looking at Alice as the fellows started down the stairs, Flip added, "Having fun?"

"Terrific," she said flatly. Whistle, already hurrying down the steps, did not look back. The word, the sound of it, terrified him. He'd been a fool with her. He should've said more in the car. He should've maybe touched her arm now before leaving her. He should've held her hand when they were going through the snow. The steps had been icy too.

"You got a big mouth, Flip," Dox said, as he pushed open the door to the locker room.

"Say, what the hell is all this?" Flip complained. "I ain't said one word tonight when everybody didn't come jumping on me."

"Then shut up!" Dox said.

"Cut it, will you guys. Think about the game a little," Artie said. "It ain't going to be a breeze with that Bernstein kid."

They met the rest of the team in the locker room, and as they dressed Whistle outlined the way they'd play. But even as he spoke, he heard the single sound of her sweet voice. He urged them all to hurry.

When they were finally on the gym floor for the pre-game practice, Whistle moved like a diving gull, as though an idea of his body had become dependent upon it. His teammates sensed the urgency of Whistle's motion, and believing he was being driven only by the thought of Bernstein, their own movements became gracelessly self-conscious. The kids and girls and men of the neighborhood who had come to watch talked in low voices, looking from one end of the court to the other, from Bernstein to Whistle. But Whistle, even up to the moment when the ball was about to go into the air between the two centers, and Bernstein crouched beside him, thought only that she was watching, that her eyes—with the brows arched curiously—were on him. And a second later, when he moved quickly and the ball was in his hands, he thought of nothing when the ball went through the basket. He indistinctly heard the clamor that rose up from the shot he had made, feeling now only the tremendous uncoiling inside him, as though a wall of air had finally burst from his throat. A moment later when he was under and then past the basket and had scored again, his temples beat with the image of his body that had twisted itself between two men, had gone beneath an outstretched hand and angled the ball against the backboard,

all in the motion of an instant. He had no thought that he had twice within a minute's time outmaneuvered Bernstein.

So lost was he in the sensation of his running that he could not say when Bernstein first moved in on him, to be no more than six inches away, no matter where Whistle turned or how fast he ran, to stay there continuously as long as Whistle or his team had the ball, hawking him that way with his adolescent face, his eyes bulging, his mouth open, but with no sweat on his body. He did not even know at first that it was Bernstein who had begun to cling to him, and did not know until he had spent the deliberate effort of minutes in trying to shake him off—who would not be shaken—that the stalking figure always inches away was the Bernstein who'd been spoken of so much, who was the high school star, who had the pop-eyes and open mouth and no sweat and who was to be the way of measuring him. It was against this recognition that Whistle made—when he next got his hands on the ball—his first desperate effort to overcome the kid who was taking him. With a violent wrench of his body that feigned movement in a direction he did not go, Whistle got a foot ahead of Bernstein and drove toward the basket. He left his feet, raising the ball for the shot, and then saw, too late, the blur of the hand that came over his shoulder without touching him to hit the ball cleanly from his grasp. Whistle knew without turning it had been Bernstein's hand. He ran wildly to retrieve the ball he had lost, his body colliding against others. When the foul was called against him, and Bernstein, unperturbed, went to the line and quickly made his throw, Whistle began, for the first time, to think not in the images he always made, but of himself against Bernstein; began to think in advance even of what movements he might make with the other hounding him so. With his mind working feverishly as he ran, Whistle lost possession of his game. When he began himself to sense the loss, his thoughts went past Bernstein, went to Alice who was watching him from somewhere in the crowd. Then Bernstein, almost from the center of the court, soon after the foul, lofted a long set-shot that he turned his back on even before he could see it drop cleanly through the basket. Whistle felt an unfamiliar panic as he ran. He even looked for a second toward the crowd, trying to find Alice where he could not see one face in the blur that was before his eyes.

During the time-out that Artie called, Whistle could hear the words, but he did not listen to what the others said to him. He stared across the floor to where Bernstein stood among his teammates, nonchalant, unsweating, listening and talking. Whistle could see now that Bernstein was not even tall, that he was comically thin, with a sunken chest and no spread at all to his shoulders. Bernstein put a finger to his side and scratched slowly, and Whistle—his eyes hot with anger—thought he would like to drive his fist through the ribs where Bernstein's finger picked indifferently. When they began to play again, Bernstein started to move as he had not before. Something close to fright tore at Whistle as he tried to keep up with him, to try sometimes even to find him. And always, when Whistle had the ball him-

self, Bernstein was on him, never touching him, but never more than six inches away, his face thrust out to Whistle's so that Whistle saw, whenever he turned, the popped eyes, the open mouth, the dry skin. Whenever he could get close enough to raise his hands for the shot, there was the other hand raised to the same height, blocking or worrying the ball. Whistle swore at himself for his clumsiness, angry with the body that would not move as he wanted it.

At half-time, on the way to the lockers, moving through the crowd, he passed next to Alice, suddenly, unexpectedly. He lowered his head. He was grateful she had not seen him, that she was talking with Sonny who kept score for them and did not play. But when he moved on and heard the brittle pitch of her laughter come after him, he felt anew the weight that had fallen on his heart since the first moment after work.

In the locker room, Whistle sulked and the others left him to himself. He ran his hands nervously over his knees, and the legs felt insensitive to the touch. He began to think then that he was ill, or having a bad night, and then began to believe that, and believed too—as he remembered the two quick baskets he'd made at the beginning of the game—that it might be only a bad stretch. The name Bernstein came to him from all parts of the room, the words "great" and "what a ballplayer" and "what can you do with him," so that Whistle blurted out, "I'm on to the sonofabitch now. I'll get him this half." He spoke so hurriedly and with so little expectation from the others, that they could not understand the words. But they took from the tone what he had meant, and when they ran from the locker room to the gym, they called encouragements to each other.

A minute after play had started again, Whistle was in the corner of the court, and there was a ball loose in the air under the backboard. He angled in quickly toward the ball, feeling the oppressive weight fall out of him as his feet came off the ground with his leap, his hand outstretched under the ball he was about to seize. And then it was not there and his fingers clutched against the empty space. When he turned his head the thin, no-shouldered, unsweating Bernstein was dribbling quickly downcourt. Whistle felt the air go out of him—as though from a blow—then ran wildly after Bernstein, finally leaving his feet in a desperate lunge for the ball. He came down with a thud against the hard floor. He could feel his fingers claw against the smooth, hot wood. Even in the sudden darkness before his eyes, he knew that he was rolling, felt the joints of his knee and elbow grate against the hardness. Then he knew he was on his feet again and trying to run, but Dox had him by the arms, shouting, "Take it easy, Whistle. Take it easy." They called a foul and Whistle watched Bernstein calmly make it good, watched him while he felt his legs trembling and the blood running from his knee. But he would not leave the game and he was glad about the blood. He began looking once more to the sidelines. He ran wildly after that, not even knowing that Bernstein had begun to ease off, and he fouled freely. He could not hear Dox telling him during the time-outs that it was only a

game, that he would be in no shape for the party afterwards, that Alice would get sore.

When they were undressing after the game, Whistle did not know by what score they had lost, nor did he try to think of how many points Bernstein scored and how many he made himself. He started to complain about his knee, and Dox said he would drive him home. But Whistle said no and Dox assumed he would go the party and went with Flip to find the girls. But Whistle got out of the room later and left the building. He stood for a moment on the corner in the snow that was still falling and saw Bernstein throw the snowball and heard the laughter as they ran away. He started to walk home, not knowing now why he had left. He knew he must have played better than any of the others. Certainly better than Flip. The crowd had clapped when he stayed in the game with the bloody knee. It hurt him now. It hurt a lot. He should get home and clean it out. He wondered if the blood might be staining the snow, but he did not look to see.

He did not go to work the next day, or the day after, then finally quit, telling Dox to say he'd torn the ligament in his knee and the doctor had said to lay off. He learned that Sonny had taken Alice to the party. He could not believe and tried not to care when they told him Sonny had made out.

It was hard to be with the fellows afterwards. No one spoke of Alice to him. He did not want them to talk of her, though it made him uncomfortable to have them say nothing. But they all talked to him of Bernstein. He'd gone on to college and was the leading scorer on the freshman team. He had scored less against Whistle than he did against some college players. They told Whistle this often, but they could not make him care. He tried never to think again of Bernstein. He tried not to think at all about that night. And sometimes, most often at night, late and in bed, he'd shut his eyes tight when he heard the brittle, metallic, "Here, Whistle. Here, Whistle." He continued to play at the community center, but the club team had broken up and none of the fellows was there. Flip had bought a car and Artie had married. They had parties almost every Saturday night in Dox's basement.

When Whistle's mother some months later insisted they move closer to her relatives, she had—against Whistle's indifference—to abandon unused the many arguments she had prepared.

The three hours are over quickly for Whistle, and only while he takes off the sweated suit in the locker room does he begin to feel the punishment of his body. But under the needling spray of the shower, the fatigue leaves him, and he knows only the pleasant splash of the cool water. He thinks of nothing as the shower breaks against the nape of his neck and, clinging, wets the length of his back. He takes no part in the horseplay, but the others are not angry at his aloofness. They think of Whistle as older and funny, but they never accuse him of playing the hero.

Always, after the shower, the close night air of the city lingers on his face with a fragrance it does not really own. When a high breeze slants occasionally from the bay through the rows of houses, Whistle is glad he does not bring the car on the nights he plays. He walks the half mile to home in a measured, predictable stride, and there is inexpressible assertion for him in the small weight of the traveling bag he carries. He has a choice of streets, but he walks along the busiest one, though he pays no heed to the night-noises. The exhaust from a bus, the shouting from a window, a distant, muffled knock are provoking sounds, but Whistle is not trapped in their loneliness. He is conscious only of a fine freedom released inside him, of a restored balance in his body. Occasionally a group gathered idly on a corner will begin to suggest things, but only vaguely, and the impressions are already abandoned by the time he crosses the street. Even on other days, it is hard for Whistle to think back in any specific way. The few fellows that haven't married go their ways, and months pass before Whistle will bother to look up any of them. Even on the Mondays that he drives his mother to the doctor, he prefers to sit in the car and wait for her, looking absently out the window, stirred only by the annoyance of having the night at the gym taken away from him.

When Whistle gets home his mother is already asleep. He takes one of the picture magazines that always lie about the kitchen and goes into his room. Undressed, in bed, by the dim light that hangs from the ceiling, he scans the pages, unmindful really of what he sees. When he puts the magazine away and flicks the light switch, he smokes a cigarette. The taste of it sharpens his ease. In the bright glow of the cigarette's end, there is a hypnotic focus for his sleep. Whistle's mind begins to make pictures. He thinks ahead to the weekend and the possibility of driving to Scranton once more, or maybe this time to Fall River. Since he has bought the car, he toys frequently with these trips, but he does not often go. For he always, afterwards, hates the clumsy, unusable violence he feels toward the women.

When he feels the heat of the cigarette on his fingers, he drops it, still lit, into the ash-tray on the night table. His mind lingers on the impressions of shots he has made that night, of rebounds he has grabbed by angling in that way from the corner of the court. He thinks of Scranton again, and then of the next night that he will play. The poise—so fine before in his enervated body—begins now to crack. Whistle feels once more the dangerous soaring of his anticipations as he waits for sleep.

Song: Take Who Takes You

Ice Man, Magic, Bird and McAdoo
Cliff, Kevin, Jamie and Lou
In the real world
just like the schoolyard game:
You Take Who Takes You

Somedays no way they're gonna fall
Play good D and move the ball
in the real world,
just like the schoolyard game:
don't call every call

Any pick-up game I ever been to
any pick-up scene of any kind
you will find they're easy to get into
if you only bear in mind that

You take who takes you
it's a basic principle and true
in the real world,
just like in the schoolyard game:
You take who takes you

No, me and my old lady, Heaven knows
It was a good match-up I suppose
But in the real world,
just like the schoolyard game:
It's good if it goes

(Oh no it ain't)

It's good if it goes

(Oh no it ain't)

IT'S GOOD IF IT GOES!

LIVE OAK PARK, BERKELEY
Summer 1980

By Mike Gleason

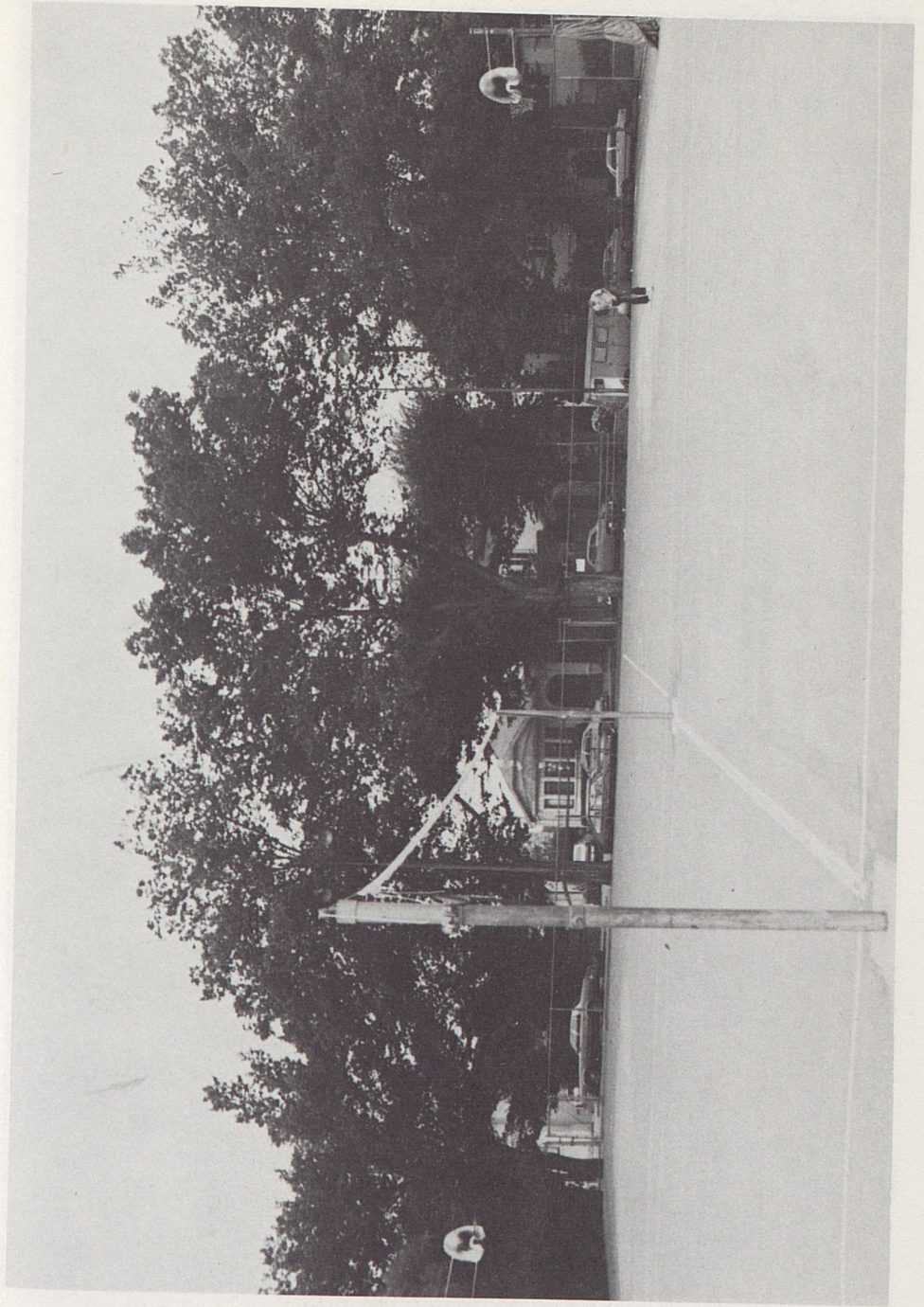
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

LIVE OAK PARK, BERKELEY

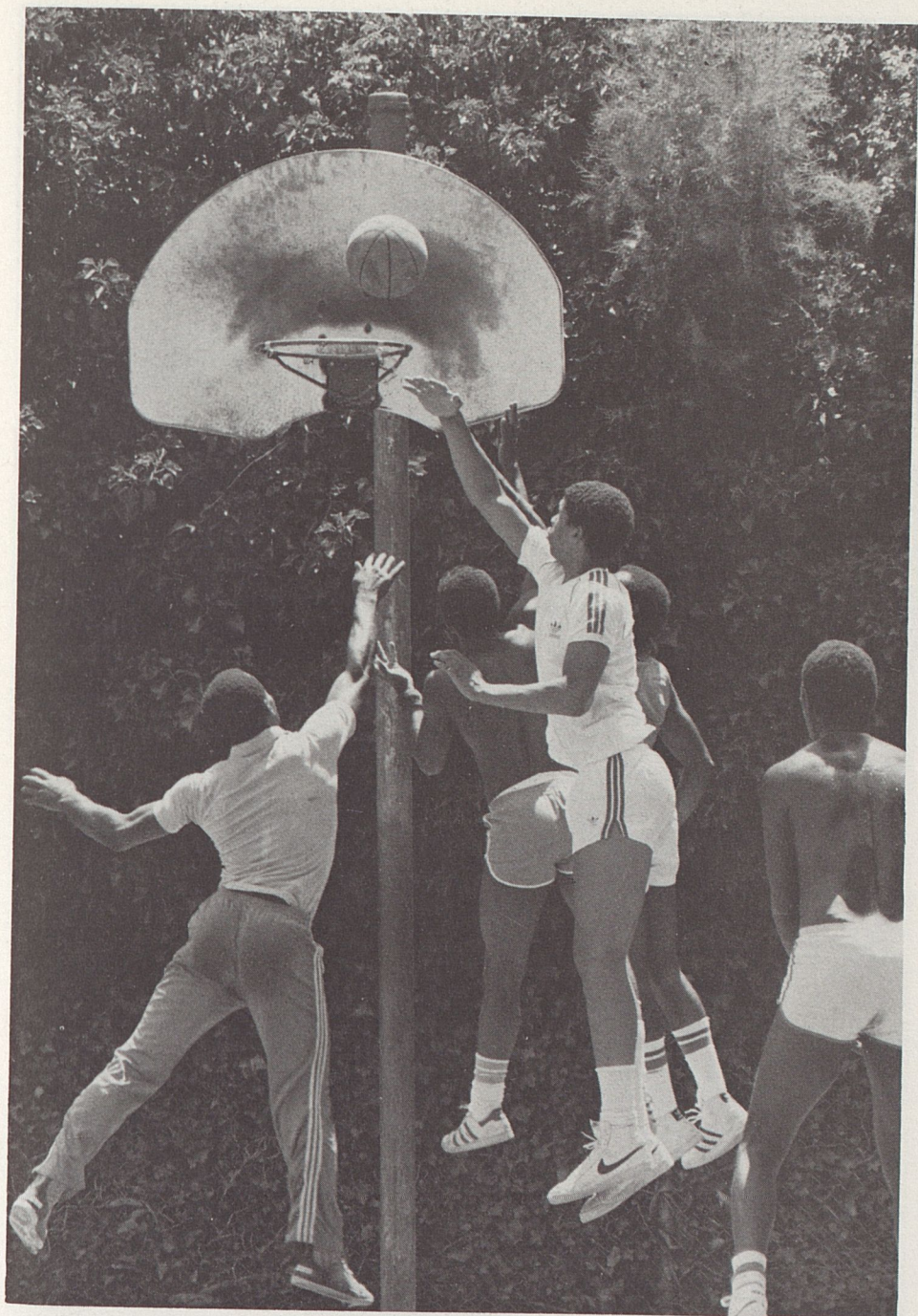
SUMMER 1990

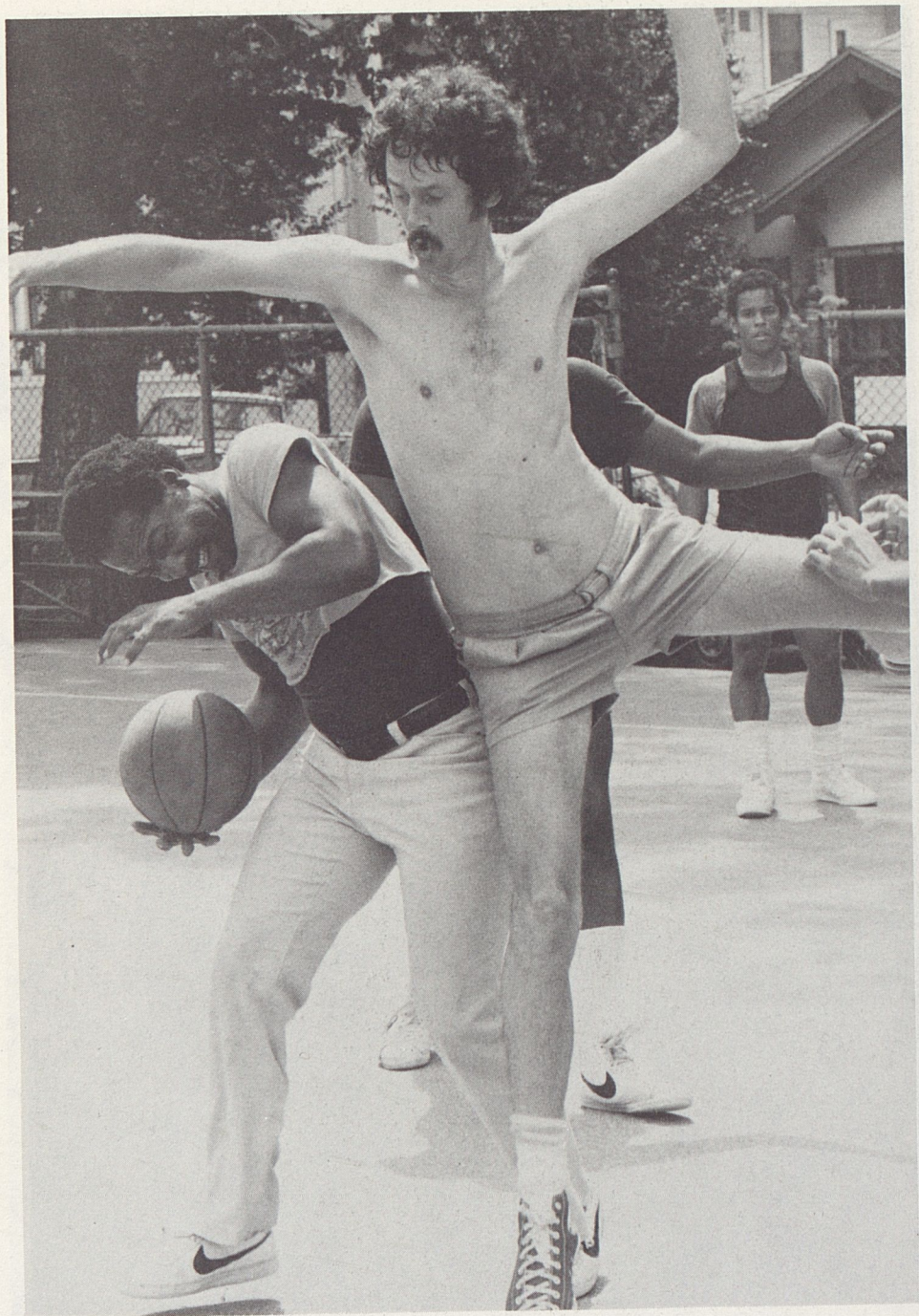
By MICKY LINDON

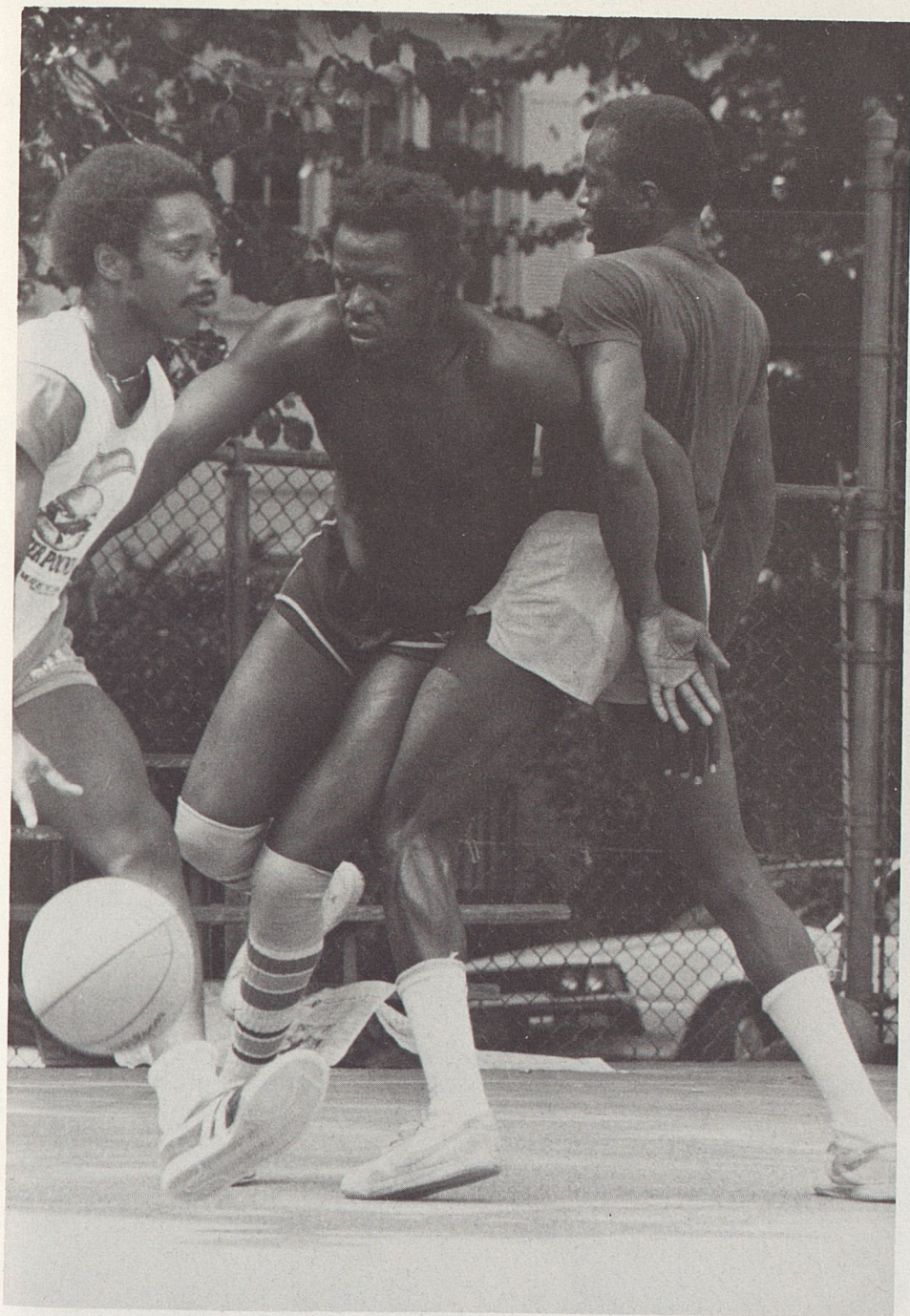
[Faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page]

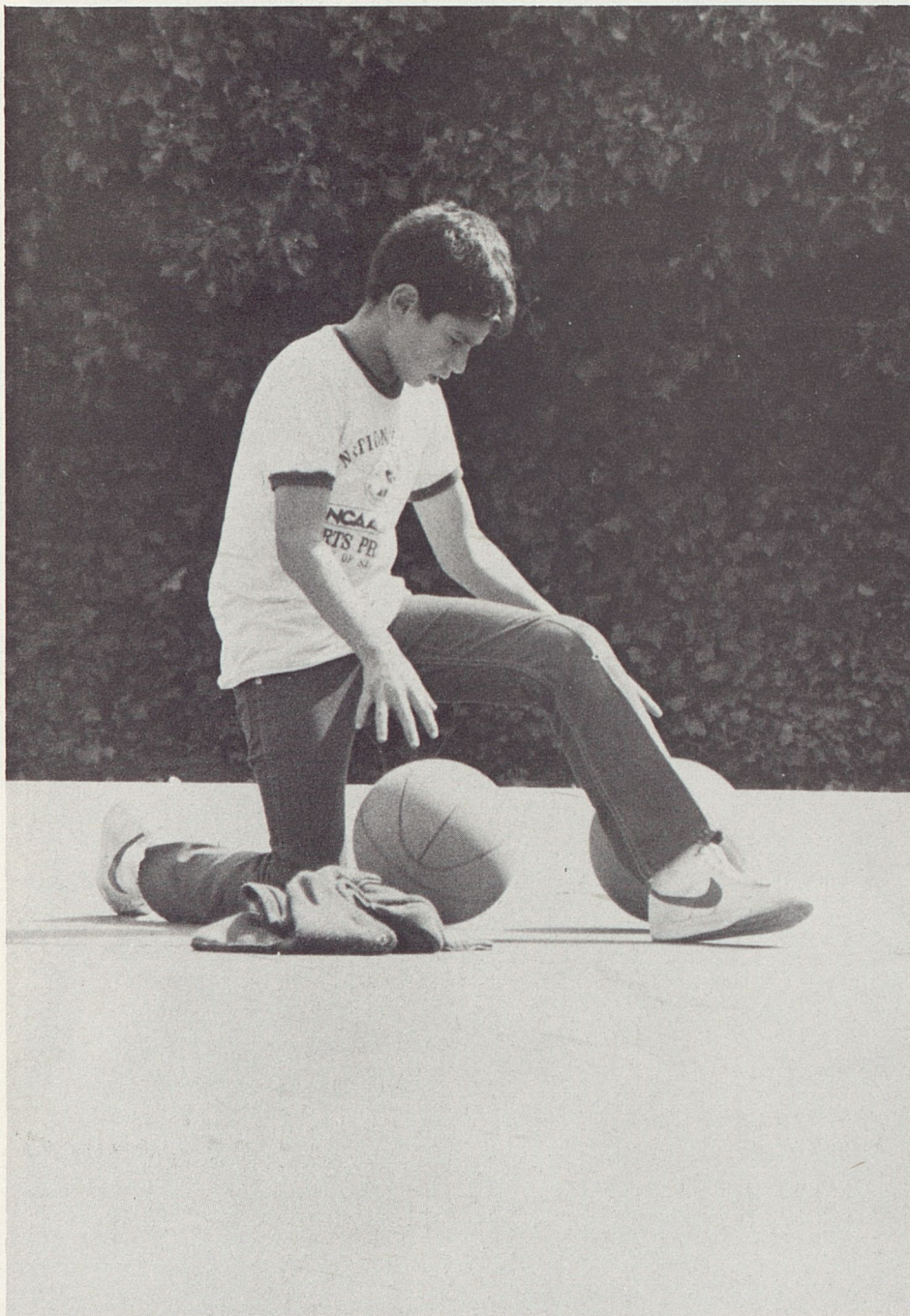




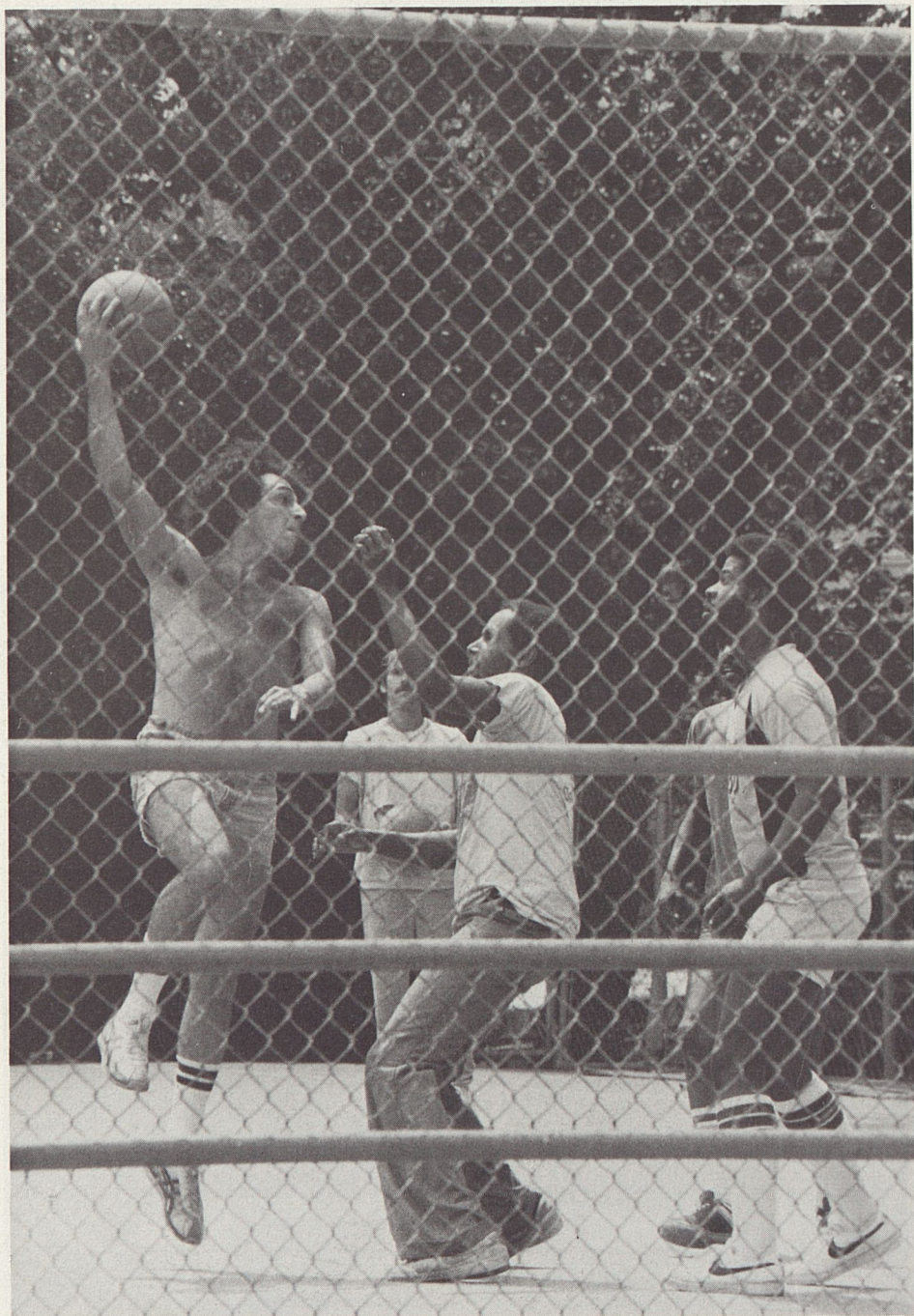


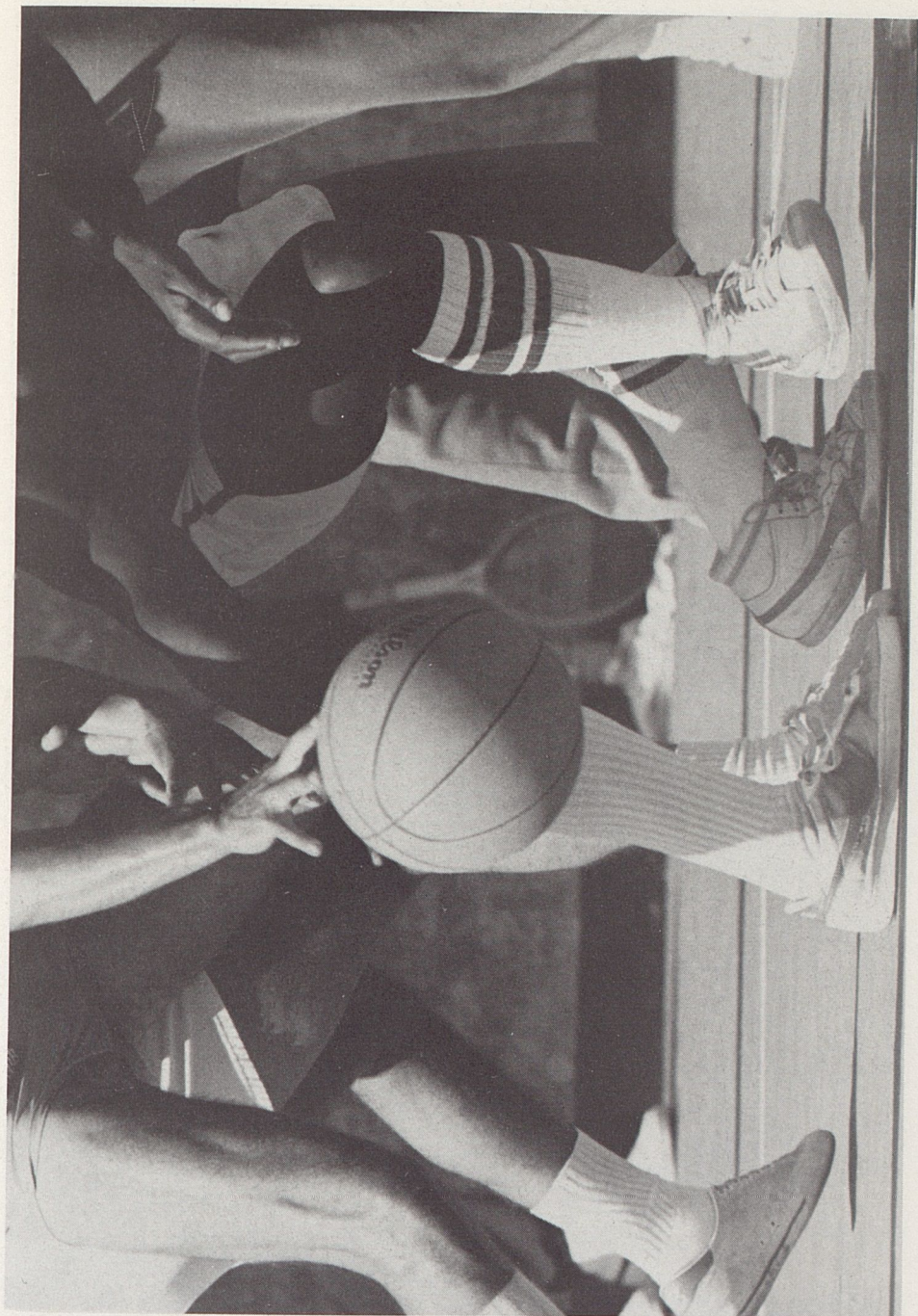




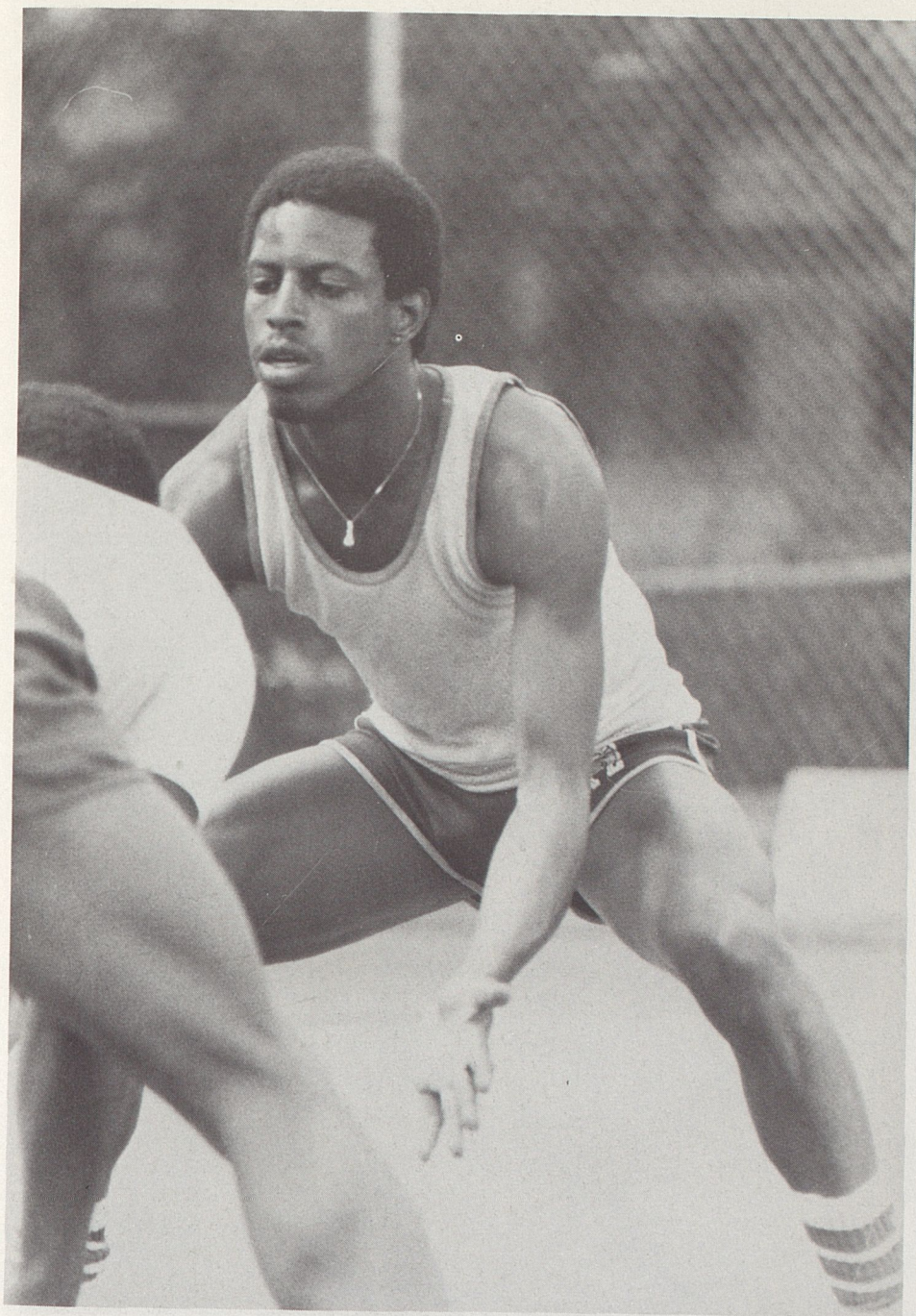




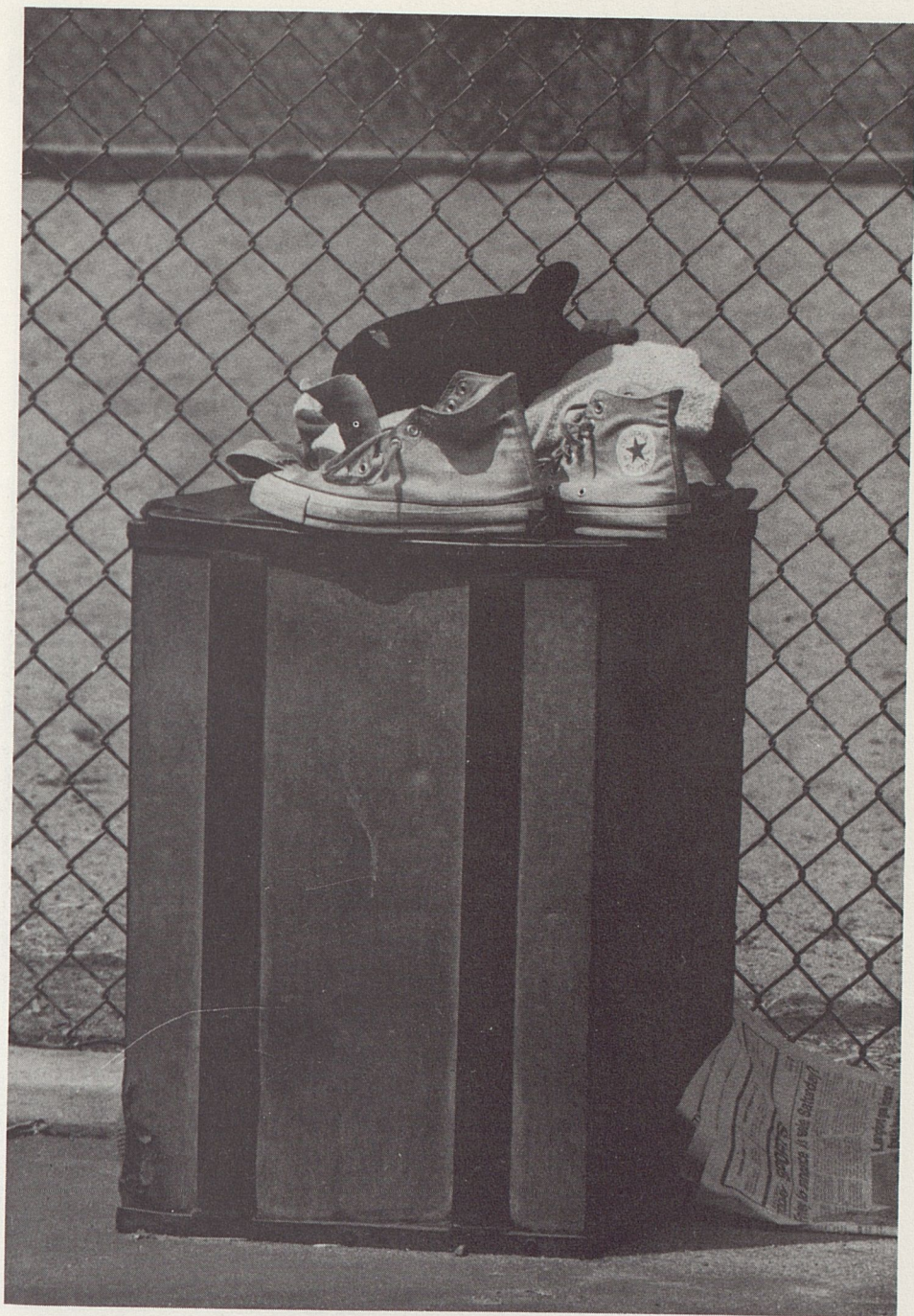






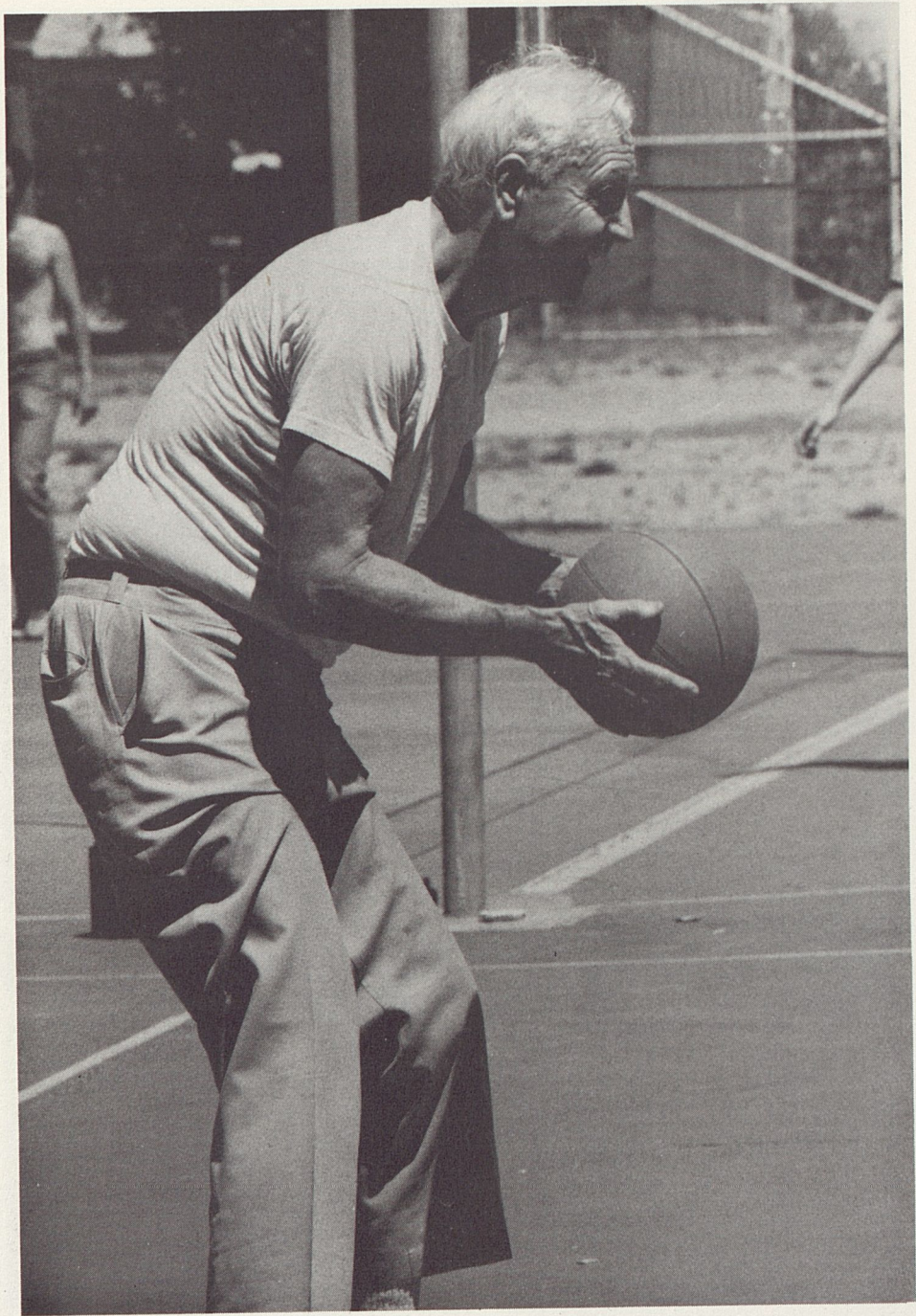


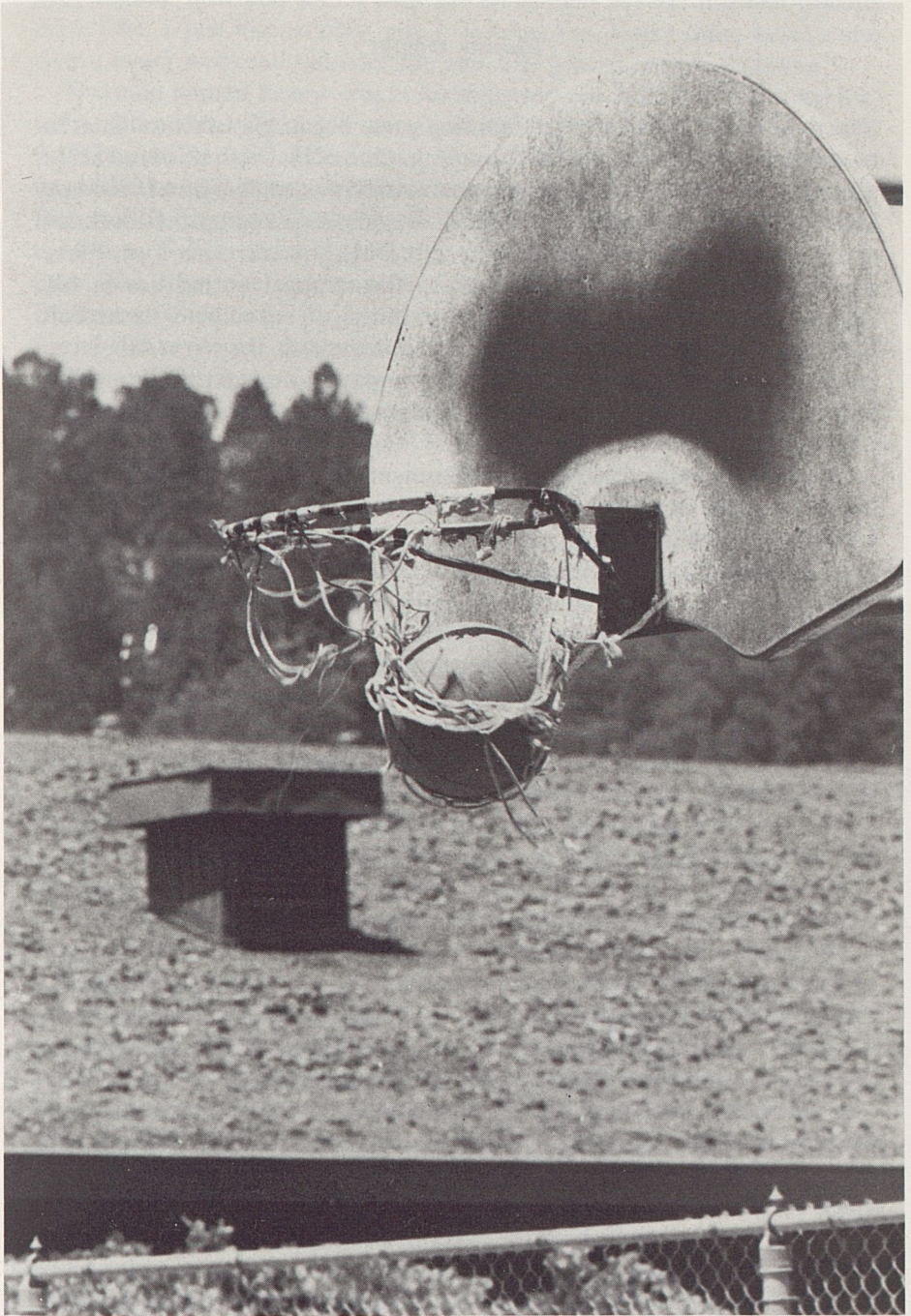












Playing Doctor

Shortly after the first Saturday-morning game began, Satisfaction Guaranteed caught an elbow square in the mouth. One of his teeth skittered across the concrete court and came to rest between Davidson's leg and an empty bottle of Guckenheimer's rye whiskey. Davidson picked up the tooth and studied it with mild professional interest. Davidson was a six-foot, thirty-year-old dentist. "Cuspid," he said to the stranger sitting beside him against the chain link fence. In the tradition of schoolyard basketball, Davidson had "called winners" when he arrived at the West 4th Street court. He needed four other men, and the guy sitting next to him looked like a ballplayer. "I got next game," Davidson said. "You want to play?" "Yeah," the man said.

The two of them watched in amazement as Satisfaction Guaranteed, blood dripping from his chin, pulled down a rebound and, shedding defenders with a number of forearm shivers, drove the length of the court, slam-dunked with his right hand, grabbed the rim with his left, and swung for a moment or two before dropping lightly back to earth. Satisfaction Guaranteed was five feet ten inches tall and his dark, shaved head glistened with sweat. A thin scar ran down his right side from his armpit to the base of his rib cage. "That," he said through a mangled grin, "makes it three-nothing, ours."

"That basket don't count, man," screamed Spice. "I'm callin'. You can't play that way, man. You crushed my lung."

"You callin'? You callin' what, Spice? I be missin' a tooth and I ain't callin'. Somebody get me a ice cube so we can play basketball."

"Oooweee!" shouted a spectator from behind the fence. "Get a football. It's going to be *physical* out there today."

The game resumed. Satisfaction Guaranteed played with a wadded napkin and an ice cube stuffed into his mouth. Baskets were traded back and forth until Long Enough, a man with no expression on his face, came down the middle, double pumped, and went behind his back to a skinny blond kid in the corner where the court dipped toward the steel grating of a drain. The kid took a jump shot, but six-foot-six-inch Arthur Pope, his red and white satin shorts sparkling in the sunlight, picked the ball off in midair and, still soaring above the ground, hooked a blind pass to Spice for a quick bucket.

"Goal-tending," yelled the blond kid. "Man, that was goal-tending. The basket counts."

"No way, sucker. I blocked your J on the way up. Only basket counts is the one down the other end of the court." Pope gave the kid a broad smile.

"You ever play here before?" the stranger asked Davidson back on the

sidelines. Davidson shook his head. "Games go fifteen baskets. You think they arguin' now you wait'll they get up around twelve, thirteen baskets each. Me, I just like to play ball. I never argue. I play some here, some there, every weekend, all over the city. Get lots of variety that way."

The man named Kenny was in his mid-twenties, had finely chiseled features and a short Afro. He wore a white T-shirt and red warm-up pants.

"They say you called next, man. You got your squad?" Davidson turned around. The two guys behind him were about Davidson's height and both wore yellow jerseys with the words "169th Street All-Stars" in black across the front. The one who spoke had a neatly trimmed moustache and tough eyes. The other one was bearded, with a sad, kind face. "I got next," said Davidson. "And so far it's just me and Kenny here, so with you two we got four." "Take Pope," the bearded man told him, "for the boards. I'm Tony Chiles and this is my main man, Stack."

Davidson was slightly dizzy when his team took the court, but as soon as he began to sweat he felt better. Floyd, the man guarding him, was built like a bull and had the wild eyes of a shaman. The first time Davidson drove for the basket he was clouted in the forehead and jammed in the ribs, but the shot fell so he didn't say anything. The second time he faked a drive, but before he could pass he found himself crumpled against the fence. He called a foul, took the ball in under the hoop, and shuffled crabwise along the base line waiting to make his play. Stack took a long jumper that hit the front of the rim and caromed off the metal backboard. When Floyd went up for the rebound Davidson was firmly planted on his foot. Tony picked the ball off the board and laid it in. "I'm callin', I'm callin'," screamed Floyd. "No basket. The dude was standin' on my foot, man."

"Shit, Floyd," hollered Satisfaction Guaranteed from over by the water fountain, "you don't know your foot from your asshole."

"He wasn't standin' on my asshole, turkey, he was standin' on my foot. No basket!"

"The basket counts," said Stack. "You come down here for the run, Floyd, or some sympathy?"

Back and forth they went, man to man, each wild move answered by another even more outrageous; then slowly the chaos of tangled arms and legs and careening steamroller charges for the hoop dissolved into smooth, patterned basketball. Stack, cool and steady, set the plays from the top of the circle with Pope underneath, Davidson and Kenny in the corners, and Tony outside. The score was six apiece when Tony began to fire twenty-foot jump shots that slipped silently through the netless rim. "Okay. Okay," yelled Pope. "Get that man the ball. His J's are bound to fall."

Tony hit seven in a row, Kenny scored on a drive from the corner, then Pope stole one and went over his man for a two-handed slam-dunk. "No, no, no. I got pushed," said Pope's man. "You never got pushed, sucker."

"Then what'm I doin' on the ground, man?"

"You must've slipped, turkey."

"The game's over," said Stack. "What you wanna argue for after the game's over?"

"There you go," said the man on the ground. "You dudes got the shots, you got the boards, you got the passes, and you got the lawyers. How you going to lose?"

"Gotta have the lawyers on Fourth Street," said Stack.

After his team won its third game in a row Davidson collapsed on the park bench next to the water fountain. "C'mon, man," said Tony. "We just warmin' up. Now's the time for some serious runs." "That's forty-five baskets we just scored, Tony," Davidson said. "Ninety points, man. My body's on fire. I gotta rest."

"Stack'n me played on a team down here one time won thirteen runs in a row," Tony told him.

"You ain't goin' no thirteen today, T," said a man named Dennis. "You look like your heart's about to collapse."

"Bullshit," said Tony. "I play all day, party all night, I'm still all right."

"I'm thirty-two years old," said Stack. "Tony's twenty-nine. Basketball's what's keeps us young. Tony played till eleven last night up at the gym. I played till nine-thirty, then I was in the recording studio until quarter to two. We be here all day today, up at the gym again tomorrow. It's the only way to go, man." They grabbed Dennis and ambled back onto the court, leaving Davidson sitting on the bench.

Three days earlier, as darkness settled over Long Island, Davidson, his accountant, Big Fred, and Ira "Spider" Rosenbloom, a drapery manufacturer, were hot and heavy into their final half court, three on three at a county park twenty minutes' drive from Davidson's house. They'd been at it for just over two hours with only one break when they lost and had to sit out a game. Their opponents were two schoolteachers in their twenties and a gangly kid who could scratch his calf without bending over. It was eleven baskets to win and the score was five apiece as Rosenbloom put the ball in play. Davidson took the pass, flipped it back to Spider, then took it again as the two of them worked a weave on the teachers. The only sounds were hard breathing and the slap of Converse All Stars on cement. Spider, looking the other way, slipped the ball to Big Fred at the high post for a give-and-go, but the tall kid's hand was glued to Fred's nose so he dribbled twice, fed the kid a hip, and bounce-passed back out to Davidson. Davidson faked a drive, caught his man off guard, and let go his soft "Bill Bradley" jump shot. Six to five.

Again Spider took it in with a pass to Davidson. One dribble and the same jumper. Seven to five. "Okay. Okay. Dr. H you got the range, baby," hollered Fred as Davidson pumped in another. Then a fake instead of a fourth jump shot and a quick pass under the hoop to Spider for an easy lay-up. "All right, Spidah! All right, I." The tall kid still dogged Big Fred with conviction, but the teachers, sensing the end, began to lay back. Rosen-

bloom caught his man flat-footed with a change-of-pace dribble, went in for the lay-up but faked instead and, floating under the hoop, got the bucket with a reverse-spin, left-hand hook shot over his head. "Yes! Yes! It's the Jewish Earl Monroe!" screamed Big Fred. "Whoeee!"

They got the last basket on another Davidson jump shot off a quick pick set by Spider. "We'll let you have it," said one of the teachers, "but that was a moving pick."

"Moving pick, my ass," said Spider.

"Face it, turkey," said Fred. "You boys been trounced."

An hour later the three of them sat in the backyard of Davidson's \$70,000 ranch-style home, drinking beer. "Kids keep growing taller and taller," said Big Fred. "That guy on me in the last two games must've been six six easy, and he couldn't have been more than sixteen." Big Fred was thirty-one, stood six three and weighed two forty-five. He had been a shot-putter and second-string linebacker in college. He pulled the hood of his sweat shirt up over his head against the cool night breeze rolling in off the shore. Davidson leaned back in his chair and propped his bare feet on the ledge of the brick barbecue pit. "You held that kid good, Fred," he said. "He only scored once in the last game. And, man, did you catch Spider's move to the hoop on the next-to-the-last play? You must'a been in the air a good five seconds."

"Thank you. Thank you," said Spider. "I just keep getting better with age." Spider was thirty-four years old.

"In the winter we play full court indoors twice a week over at the local high school," said Davidson. "Five man. But I'll take three on three, half court, anytime. It's more scientific, you know. More teamwork and less one on one. When the weather's nice the three of us'll play together once a week, like tonight, and then I usually find a game somewhere else one other night or on a weekend morning, just for variety. This Saturday I'm going to play down in the Village. I never played ball in the city. I hear it's pretty crazy."

"You're what's crazy," said Spider. "Those spades are going to hand you your head. And you a dentist with a wife and two kids. For shame, Howie, for shame. You wait. Come Sunday morning you'll be buying a sailboat."

"Shit, Spider." I grew up playing street ball in Philly. Only difference between that and New York is that in New York the winners take the ball out in half-court games."

"Winners keep the ball," said Big Fred. "Ain't that just like New York."

"Big Fred's from Omaha," said Davidson. "He played a lot of basketball as a young man, only it was stockyard ball instead of schoolyard ball, huh, Fred? Wore hip boots instead of sneakers."

"You watch your mouth, boy, or the I.R.S.'ll own this house come next April."

"Fred's really not from Omaha," said Spider. "He's from Texas. But who'd hire an accountant from Texas?"

"A goddamn fool, that's who," said Fred, choking on his beer.

"Where you from, man?" Davidson jumped. He had been dozing, and for a moment he didn't remember where he was. The kid next to him on the bench was shirtless and had a round, dark face. He looked to be around fifteen. "Where you from?" the kid repeated.

"From Philly, originally," Davidson told him.

"No shit," said the kid. "Oxford Circle, right?"

"How'd you know?" said Davidson.

"Man, I got people in Philly. My cousin played for Overbrook. Played with Walt Hazzard'n' them. All the Jewish ballplayers came from Oxford Circle."

"How'd you know I was Jewish?"

"Man, you *moves* Jewish. You went to Northeast High, right?"

"Right."

"All *right*, man." The kid held out his hand, palm up, to Davidson, who slipped him five. "You play ball for Northeast?"

"Nope," said Davidson.

"Just schoolyard?"

Davidson nodded.

"You play a lot of schoolyard?"

"Every day, when I lived in Philly."

"Where you live now?"

"Out on the Island."

"What do you do, man?"

"I'm a dentist."

"Smokin', man. Hey, Satisfaction Guaranteed, the dude's a dentist, man. Maybe he put your tooth back in."

Davidson held his palm out to the kid. "All *right*," said the kid, and slipped him five.

"Hey, dude, you ready for one more run?" Dennis split and we short a fifth man." Davidson looked up and saw two rivulets of sweat running from either side of Stack's moustache. A tiny muscle twitched uncontrollably in the black man's thigh. "Why not?" Davidson said, getting up off the bench to stand beside Stack. His chest and shoulders were sore, a lump had formed above his left eye, and both his hipbones throbbed; but he was no longer tired. He loped carefully to the far end of the court as Tony brought the ball down. The familiarity of the sport and the plays, worn and comfortable as an old slipper, warmed Davidson in a way he could never explain. In the corner, in the depression over near the drain, he took a behind-the-back pass from Pope and dribbled out around the foul circle, sliding off a pick to shake his man; then, leading with one lowered shoulder, he made his move, accelerating toward the hoop.

from **The Mad Dog Instructional League**

Soon Mad Dog was stopping by nearly every afternoon. He'd come walking down the street sipping a "Tall Boy" can of Schlitz wrapped in a paper bag. Liquid brunch under wraps. Always he was careful to have me step outside immediately, afraid that if my wife saw him too often she'd find a way to set me against him. Usually we'd go play pickup half-court basketball near campus with the other unemployed and unemployables, three-on-three or four-on-four. Or maybe we'd go one-on-one, Mad Dog showing me another move Cousy taught him or criticizing me for not protecting the ball better on the drive. Urging me to run with him in the mornings to build up my stamina.

He was a good teacher, carefully explaining a complex move, breaking it down into components, working steadily and quietly on each with me until he felt it was time to try the whole. Day after day he was methodical and persistent, if too quick with praise. But he wanted me to learn, "to reach my potential."

"With your height," he often said—I'm around six-one—"there's nothing you can't do in this game." And it seemed true. After a while he had me jumping out from a low post to take a pass, setting, and going way up in the air for my jump shot. Strength from underneath, soft touch on the release. By the time I thought I had it down he was waving a broom in the air in front of the hoop to force me to put more arc on the all. And, amazingly, my shots were going in, the net giving that beautiful soft swish on the clean ones.

Despite the beauty of what I was learning and my rapid progress, both Mad Dog and I were of course begging a simple question: what sane man would be getting deeper into basketball—not to mention giving it the best energy of each day—at age thirty-three, just the time when most court heroes switch to tennis or concede to paunch, if they haven't long since. When the prospect of being clobbered from the blind side or twisting an ankle outweighs even the possibility of dunking the ball. But there I was, the hoop my Bodhi tree, a self-confessed space case my guru.

As a player Mad Dog was very good, no question about it, especially when he didn't flip out. Which, unfortunately, happened regularly. Someone wouldn't be passing to him. The game would get senselessly rough. There'd be too many big men on the court—Mad Dog brooding about how great he could have been at six-three—clogging the middle, and no rule in half court to make them move around, opening space for more agile players. Or he'd become despondent to think of how it was when he played full-court ball on a hardwood floor, banking shots off a glass backboard.

Not untypical was the day he simply quit playing defense altogether

during a game. No one on his team noticed until they saw the man he was supposedly guarding drive in for a second uncontested basket. When his teammates, not unreasonably, asked him what he thought he was doing, Mad Dog exploded.

“Look, this maniac is clobbering me. I’m not going to get hurt just because he’s out here.”

“Then sit down and let someone take your place.”

“To hell with that. Tell this fool to sit down. He doesn’t know anything about the game.”

“Fuck. What an asshole.”

“Who’s calling me an asshole? Come on, say it again and see if you can still remember your fucking name. Scumbag.”

“Hey, man, be reasonable, will you? If you don’t want to play why don’t you be cool and sit down?”

“You be cool. You sit down. The man can’t play ball. Get him off the court. I’m staying and that’s all there is to it.”

Though Mad Dog was not all wrong, since the man he was covering had no body control, of course he could have switched assignments with one of his teammates. Instead, enraged, he’d destroyed the game. It was, sadly, also true that he’d missed his first five shots. Had they gone in, he might have put up with almost anything for the chance to keep shooting.

Despite such explosions, when it occasionally all came together he’d be jubilant—achievement and community so clearly defined. Hitting his jump shot. Or faking it, waiting till he had his man up in the air, then driving all the way, sometimes finishing with a stutter-step underhand layup to rub it in. Or he’d hurry back on defense, intercept the ball, and set up a back-door play with sharp passing.

Such moments waned too quickly, however, and there was no film crew recording it all for posterity. Players could and did praise each other, one might sit for an hour after the game savoring what had happened, but it was often bad feelings that lingered longest.

At the least, the rules of the game were a source of endless conflict. Without the penalty free throws of organized basketball, there was little reason not to foul. The injured party could only stop play and take control of the ball. Further, in the absence of referees, disagreements over even these barely punitive calls were often resolved by sheer obstinacy and verbal violence: a man would insist he was right and hold up the game until he got his way. Such infantilism, surprisingly, was motivated less by a desire to win than by the endemic court affliction—a hopeless disparity between ability and self-image. Since many a player was in his own mind an undiscovered or former star, it followed that no one else could possibly know as much about the game. Certainly not the other players, obviously bums.

Much of this on-court autism and assertion of infallibility derived from the maxim, “I shoot, therefore I am.” Though aware that the great pro-

fessional basketball dynasties subordinated individual virtuosity to team play, many pickup players seemed incapable of passing the ball once it came into their hands, as if it were thence irresistibly drawn up toward the hoop. The need here was not simply for the visible success of scoring but for a conclusive demonstration of dominance. To teammates, the message, "I'm the best, therefore I'll do the shooting"; to opponents, "Do you really think you can possibly stop me?" Strangely, off court many of these atavists—their hungers harkening back to an era well before the arrival of the hunter-gatherer—were reasonable men. The game, however, brought out the very worst in them. In most of us.

"I'm going to tear that asshole's larynx out," Mad Dog said one day as we walked off the court. He was speaking of a ball hog who had kept yelling for Mad Dog to pass to him. I could find no fault with Mad Dog's sentiment, particularly since we'd lost a close game that had been a hybrid of rugby and UN debate.

No doubt this depiction of the game's negative qualities is overdrawn. There was also much banter and camaraderie, savoring of skill and idiosyncrasy, respect for ability, and even gentility. Courtliness! Especially when one became a regular and, very important, played when there weren't too many men waiting. Then at least there wasn't so much competition for scarce resources, the court less a behavioral sink. Yet life in the game was often nasty, brutish, and—if you lost—short, a Hobbesian microcosm that only confirmed Mad Dog's world view.

Weekend Warriors—On the Courts

Jamie Howell is the road manager for the rock group Hot Tuna and a playground basketball player. He has shot at more hoops in more cities than Rick Barry has in his NBA career. But Jamie shoots best on his home court—the James Lick Junior High School concrete in the center of the city.

Jamie's two-story stucco-faced home is across the street from James Lick. He insists he did not buy there because his front door was just a long jump shot from the nearest basket. I know differently. In his rented flat, only four blocks from where he now lives, I once spotted 14 pairs of sneakers lined up against the bedroom wall.

Each Saturday morning, when he is not on the road, Jamie shakes himself free from Friday night, puts on a pair of those shoes and peers out through the dim light to the playground. When he sees nine men warming up, that's the time to get moving.

Jamie always wants to make the first game. Everyone does, because the contests at James Lick have become the most reliable and probably the most popular pickup games in the city. There seems to be no obvious reason. Perhaps it's because James Lick is centrally located (underneath Twin Peaks in Noe Valley) and the weather is good (usually sunny) but probably the most significant attraction is the guarantee of continuous action (three outdoor and one indoor court available every weekend).

When the full-court pickup games began three and a half years ago, the first shooters showed up about 1 p.m. They occupied one of the 65-foot-long courts (NBA regulation is 90 feet), and found only a few replacements waiting on the benches for the next game.

As the game became more popular, through summer sun and winter rain, the starting time seemed to begin an imperceptibly-few minutes earlier.

Two weeks ago, Burt Adams, a muscular guard, left his house in Burlingame 15 miles south of the city, at 7:55 a.m. and arrived at James Lick at 8:30 a.m. By 8:55 a.m., he had already made his first steal.

By 11:45 a.m. all four courts were occupied, including the one in the gym (which we have reserved, specifically for rainy days, under the name of the Noe Valley Basketball Association, the NVBA, if you will).

Ten other players, with no place to warm up, waited impatiently on the bench. Some among us are concerned over showing up at 6:30 a.m. one weekend to find 12 players camped out in their sleeping bags.

I do not know why all those people were there. But I knew why I was there. In his book *Sexual Suicide*, a scathing attack on the feminist movement, George Gilder talks about men's relationship with sports.

"Sports," he writes, "represents to males a realm where they can collectively test themselves against the highest ideals and standards of human performance. . . . The boy runs back, back in the playground outfield, stumbles around a bush, leaps desperately in the air, glove extended in the sky in the image of Willie Mays, and slumps in delectable pain to the ground, the ball clutched in his hand. He will never be closer to God."

I understand that. I felt it one recent day. It doesn't matter that I'm the last one chosen to play on a pickup team at age 34, just as I was the last player chosen at Laguna Honda school yard when I was 14. The sun flashed off the sweat on my forehead. My joints were well-oiled.

A shot went in. Then I knew it. From that moment, they would all go in. Bang! Bang! Bang! Three more in a row from 15 to 20 feet. It didn't feel like me. I was the intermediary, a mere messenger. I knew all I had to do was get the ball, whirl and let it go.

I don't know what playground ball is like in other cities—I am a native San Franciscan—but our game couldn't be any more egalitarian. We transcend age, race, color, national origin, sexual orientation and sex. The long-hairs occupy the neighborhood, the gay ghetto is to the north, the barrio is to the east. One guard is 16, a forward is 41. The center, Larry, is black. Art is Chicano; Mooney is Chinese. There are Jews, Greeks, Irish, Italians.

As I dribbled down court one Saturday, Linda tried to pick the ball away. She was a tall, slim, attractive woman. I could ignore her physical features, but I found it difficult to concentrate against an opponent with the aroma of perfume. On those days, we played a person-to-person defense. (Another player suggested an erogenous zone defense.)

Cliff, who is six-foot-six, can barely touch the rim. He likes to stop the game for cheap calls like "three seconds in the key" and "moving screens." He used to drive a cab. Ira, who showed up late on a recent Saturday because he was still coming down from a cocaine trip, is an unemployed lawyer; Kerwin, the father of two girls, is a bookie; Dennis drives a truck; Kent, who plays basketball like a middle linebacker, teaches philosophy at San Francisco State.

My favorite player is Fred Gardner because he's like me—34, slow, a weak jumper, crazy, loving the game and taking it far too seriously.

Fred is also a writer, the author of *The Unlawful Concert* (the story of the Presidio Seven case), a decade-long veteran of radical politics, who once closely knew the Rubins, Haydens and Fondas. In a reflective moment, he once confessed that if he had to choose—The Revolution or The Game—it would be our disorderly court, one he helps create.

When Fred plays, he pushes me. I call foul. "You're swinging your elbow every time you drive," he charges. Then he calls me for swinging my elbows when I drive. I tell him he's full of it. I scream it's a miserable call. I throw the ball down.

Fred tries to reduce me to adolescent shame. "That's *pathetic*. . . *dis-*

gusting . . .” he cries. “A grown man acting like a boy.” My rebuttal: “If I can’t act like a little boy here, where can I?”

The rest of the little boys are waiting for it to subside. Anarchy could easily become endemic to playground basketball. There is no real referee. Our jurisprudence is to play the call—whether the driving guard actually got hit or not. “Wasn’t that walking?” an opponent asks. “Not if you have to ask,” I respond.

Nothing, however, can be done when Lou is on the court. Every playground has a Lou. This Lou is a brute. No one wants to play with him or against him. He has a wild look in his eyes. He clinches his fists as he runs down court. His elbows are battering rams.

Lou likes to use his 190 pounds. He goes to the basket on a break like a bowling ball for the one-two pins. On one occasion I froze under the bucket at the moment he hit the top of the key. I knew he would keep coming. I was going to take the foul, though he had 45 pounds on me. Lou plowed me between the backboard posts. My right hip hit the cement like a hammer. I could not sleep on that side for three nights. Lou called me for blocking and warned me not to do it again.

We are not the best players in the world, but we have a nice Saturday morning community. I now know a hundred neighborhood people by name and face. I honk to many of them as I drive down 24th Street.

And I have to admit it. When I see Lou playing chess in the Meat Market Coffee House, I even say hello to him.

The Fallen Idol: The Harlem Tragedy of Earl Manigault

In the litany of quiet misfortunes that have claimed so many young athletes in the ghetto, it may seem almost impossible to select one man and give him special importance. Yet in the stories and traditions that are recounted in the Harlem parks, one figure does emerge above the rest. Asked about the finest athletes they have seen, scores of ballplayers in a dozen parks mention Connie Hawkins and Lew Alcindor and similar celebrities. But almost without exception, they speak first of one star who didn't go on: Earl Manigault.

No official scorers tabulate the results of pickup games; there are no composite box scores to prove that Manigault ranked highest among playground athletes. But in its own way, a reputation in the parks is as definable as a scoring average in the NBA. Cut off from more formal channels of media and exposure, street ballplayers develop their own elaborate word-of-mouth system. One spectacular performance or one backward, twisting stuff shot may be the seed of an athlete's reputation. If he can repeat it a few times in a park where the competition is tough, the word goes out that he may be something special. Then there will be challenges from more established players, and a man who can withstand them may earn a "neighborhood rep." The process continues in an expanding series of confrontations, until the best athletes have emerged. Perhaps a dozen men at a given time may enjoy "citywide reps," guaranteeing them attention and respect in any playground they may visit. And of those, one or two will stand alone.

A few years ago, Earl Manigault stood among the loftiest. But his reign was brief, and in order to capture some feeling of what his stature meant in the playground world, one must turn to two athletes who enjoy similar positions today. Herman "Helicopter" Knowings, now in his late twenties, is among the most remarkable playground phenomena; he was a demigod before Manigault, and he remains one after Earl's departure. Uneducated and unable to break into pro ball, the Helicopter has managed to retain the spring in his legs and the will power to remain at the summit after many of his contemporaries have faded from the basketball scene. Joe Hammond, not yet twenty, is generally recognized as the best of the young crop. Neither finished school and vaulted into the public spotlight, but both pick up money playing in a minor league, the Eastern League—and both return home between games to continue their domination of the parks.

The Helicopter got his name for obvious reasons; when he goes up to block a shot, he seems to hover endlessly in midair above his prey, daring him to shoot—and then blocking whatever shot his hapless foe attempts.

Like most memorable playground moves, it is not only effective but magnetic. As Knowings goes up, the crowd shouts, "Fly, 'copter, fly," and seems to share his heady trip. When he shoves a ball down the throat of a visiting NBA star—as he often does in the Rucker Tournament—the Helicopter inflates the pride of a whole neighborhood.

Like Connie Hawkins, Knowings can send waves of electricity through a park with his mere presence. Standing by a court, watching a game in progress with intent eyes, the Helicopter doesn't have to ask to play. People quickly spot his dark, chiseled, ageless face and six-foot-four-inch frame, and they make room for him. Joe Hammond is less imposing. A shade over six feet, he is a skinny, sleepy-eyed kid who looks slow and tired, the way backcourt star Clinton Robinson appeared during his reign. But like Robinson, Hammond has proved himself, and now he stands as the descendant of Pablo Robertson and James Barlow and the other backcourt heroes of the streets.

The kings of playground ball are not expected to defend their titles every weekend, proving themselves again and again the way less exalted players must. But when a new athlete begins winning a large following, when the rumors spread that he is truly someone special, the call goes out: If he is a forward, get the Helicopter; if he's a guard, let's try him against Joe Hammond. A crowd will gather before the star arrives. It is time for a supreme test.

Jay Vaughn has been in such confrontations several times. He saw the Helicopter defend his reign, and he watched Joe Hammond win his own way to the top. He described the rituals:

"When I first met the Helicopter, I was only about seventeen, and I was playing with a lot of kids my age at Wagner Center. I was better than the guys I was playing with and I knew it, so I didn't feel I had anything to prove. I was playing lazy, lackadaisical. And one of the youth workers saw how cocky I was and decided to show me just how good I really was. He sent for the Helicopter.

"One day I was just shooting baskets, trying all kinds of wild shots, not thinking about fundamentals, and I saw this older dude come in. He had sneakers and shorts on and he was ready to play. I said, 'Who's this guy? He's too old for our games. Is he supposed to be good?'

"The coach sent for him,' somebody told me. 'He's gonna play you.'

"I said to myself, 'Well, fine, I'll try him,' and I went out there one-on-one with Herman Knowings. Well, it was a disastrous thing. I tried lay-ups, jump shots, hooks. And everything I threw up, he blocked. The word had gone out that Herman was there, and a crowd was gathering, and I said to myself, 'You got to do something. You're getting humiliated.' But the harder I tried, the more he shoved the ball down into my face. I went home and thought about that game for a long time. Like a lot of other young athletes, I had been put in my place.

"I worked out like crazy after that. I was determined to get back. After

about a month, I challenged him again. I found myself jumping higher, feeling stronger, and playing better than ever before. I wasn't humiliated again. But I was beaten. Since that time, I've played against Herman many times. He took an interest in me and gave me a lot of good advice. And now, when I see he's going to block a shot, I may be able to fake and go around him and score, and people will yell, 'The pupil showed the master.'

"Then, of course, he'll usually come back and stuff one on me . . ."

"Joe Hammond was playing in the junior division games in the youth centers when I was in the senior games," Vaughn continued. "He was three years younger than me, and sometimes after I'd played, I'd stay and watch his game. He wasn't that exceptional. Just another young boy who was gonna play ball. In fact, at that time, I didn't even know his last name.

"Then I came home from school in the summer of 1969, and one name was on everybody's lips: Joe Hammond. I thought it must have been somebody new from out of town, but people said, no, he'd been around Harlem all the time. They described him and it sounded like the young kid I'd watched around the centers, but I couldn't believe it was the same guy. Then I saw him, and it was the same Joe, and he was killing a bunch of guys his own age. He was much improved, but I still said to myself, 'He's young. He won't do much against the older brothers. They've been in the business too long.'

"But then I heard, 'Joe's up at 135th Street beating the pros. . . . Joe's doing everything to those guys.' I still didn't take it too seriously. In fact, when Joe came out to Mount Morris Park for a game against a good team I was on, I said, 'Now we'll see how you do. You won't do anything today.'

"Now I believe in him. Joe Hammond left that game with seven minutes to go. He had 40 points. Like everybody had said, Joe was the one."

Many reputations have risen and fallen in the decade between the arrival of the Helicopter and of Joe Hammond. Most have now been forgotten, but a few "reps" outlive the men who earn them. Two years ago Connie Hawkins did not show up for a single game during the Rucker Tournament. When it was time to vote for the Rucker All-Star team, the coaches voted for Hawkins. "If you're going to have an all-star game in Harlem," said Bob McCullough, the tournament director, "you vote for Connie or you don't vote." (Having been elected, The Hawk did appear for the All-Star game—and won the Most Valuable Player award.) One other reputation has endured on a similar scale. Countless kids in Harlem repeat the statement: "You want to talk about basketball in this city, you've got to talk about Earl Manigault."

Manigault played at Benjamin Franklin High School in 1962 and 1963, then spent a season at Laurinburg Institute. Earl never reached college, but when he returned to Harlem he continued to dominate the playgrounds.

He was the king of his own generation of ballplayers, the idol for the generation that followed. He was a six-foot-two-inch forward who could outleap men eight inches taller, and his moves had a boldness and fluidity that transfixed opponents and spectators alike. Freewheeling, unbelievably high-jumping, and innovative, he was the image of the classic playground athlete.

But he was also a very human ghetto youth, with weaknesses and doubts that left him vulnerable. Lacking education and motivation, looking toward an empty future, he found that basketball could take him only so far. Then he veered into the escape route of the streets, and became the image of the hellish side of ghetto existence. Earl is now in his mid-twenties, a dope addict, in prison.

Earl's is more than a personal story. On the playgrounds, he was a powerful magnetic figure who carried the dreams and ideals of every kid around him as he spun and twisted and sailed over all obstacles. When he fell, he carried those aspirations down with him. Call him a wasted talent, a pathetic victim, even a tragic hero: he had symbolized all that was sublime and terrible about this city game.

"You think of him on the court and you think of so many incredible things that it's hard to sort them out," said Bob Spivey, who played briefly with Earl at Franklin. "But I particularly recall one all-star game in the gym at PS 113, in about 1964. Most of the best high school players in the city were there: Charlie Scott, who went on to North Carolina; Vaughn Harper, who went to Syracuse, and a lot more. But the people who were there will hardly remember the others. Earl was the whole show.

"For a few minutes, Earl seemed to move slowly, feeling his way, getting himself ready. Then he got the ball on a fast break. Harper, who was six feet six, and Val Reed, who was six feet eight, got back quickly to defend. You wouldn't have given Earl a chance to score. Then he accelerated, changing his step suddenly. And at the foul line he went into the air. Harper and Reed went up, too, and between them, the two big men completely surrounded the rim. But Earl just kept going higher, and finally he two-hand-dunked the ball over both of them. For a split second there was complete silence, and then the crowd exploded. They were cheering so loud that they stopped the game for five minutes. Five minutes. That was Earl Manigault."

Faces light up as Harlem veterans reminisce about Manigault. Many street players won reputations with elaborate innovations and tricks. Jackie Jackson was among the first to warm up for games by picking quarters off the top of the backboard. Willie Hal, the former St. John's leader, apparently originated the custom of jumping to the top of the board and, instead of merely blocking a shot, slamming a hand with tremendous force against the board; the fixture would vibrate for several seconds after the blow, causing an easy lay-up to bounce crazily off the rim. Other noted leapers were

famous for “pinning”—blocking a lay-up, then simply holding it momentarily against the backboard in a gesture of triumph. Some players seemed to hold it for seconds, suspended in air, multiplying the humiliation of the man who had tried the futile shot. Then they could slam the ball back down at the shooter or, for special emphasis, flip it into the crowd.

Earl Manigault did all of those things and more, borrowing, innovating, and forming one of the most exciting styles Harlem crowds ever watched. Occasionally, he would drive past a few defenders, dunk the ball with one hand, catch it with the other—and raise it and stuff it through the hoop a second time before returning to earth.

“I was in the eighth grade when Earl was in the eleventh,” said Charley Yelverton, now a star at Fordham. “I was just another young kid at the time. Like everybody else on the streets, I played some ball. But I just did it for something to do. I wasn’t that excited about it. Then there happened to be a game around my block, down at 112th Street, and a lot of the top players were in it—and Earl came down to play. Well, I had never believed things like that could go on. I had never known what basketball could be like. Everybody in the game was doing something, stuffing or blocking shots or making great passes. There’s only one game I’ve ever seen in my life to compare to it—the Knicks’ last game against the Lakers.

“But among all the stars, there was no doubt who was the greatest. Passing, shooting, going up in the air, Earl just left everybody behind. No one could turn it on like he could.”

Keith Edwards, who lived with Earl during the great days of the Young Life team, agreed. “I guess he had about the most natural ability that I’ve ever seen. Talent for talent, inch for inch, you’d have to put him on a par with Alcindor and the other superstars. To watch him was like poetry. To play with him or against him—just to be on the same court with him—was a deep experience.

“You can’t really project him against an Alcindor, though, because you could never picture Earl going to UCLA or anyplace like that. He was never the type to really face his responsibilities and his future. He didn’t want to think ahead. There was very little discipline about the man. . . .”

And so the decline began. “I lived with the man for about two or three years,” said Edwards, “from his predrug period into the beginning of his drug period. There were six of us there, and maybe some of us would have liked to help him out. But we were all just young guys finding themselves, and when Earl and another cat named Onion started to get into the drug thing, nobody really had a right, or was in a position, to say much about it. And even as he got into the drugs, he remained a beautiful person. He just had nowhere to go. . . .”

“The athlete in Harlem,” said Pat Smith, “naturally becomes a big man in the neighborhood. And if he goes on to college and makes his way out of the ghetto, he can keep being a big man, a respected figure. But if he

doesn't make it, if he begins to realize that he isn't going to get out, then he looks around, and maybe he isn't so big anymore. The pusher and the pimp have more clothes than they can ever get around to wearing; when they walk down the street they get respect. But the ballplayer is broke, and he knows that in a certain number of years he won't even have his reputation left. And unless he is an unusually strong person, he may be tempted to go another way. . . ."

"You like to think of the black athlete as a leader of the community," said Jay Vaughn, "but sometimes the idea of leadership can get twisted. A lot of the young dudes on the streets will encourage a big-time ballplayer to be big-time in other ways. They expect you to know all the big pushers, where to buy drugs, how to handle street life. And if they're fooling with small-time drugs, maybe they'll expect you to mess with big-time drugs. It may sound ridiculous at first, but when you're confronted with these attitudes a lot, and you're not strong enough, well, you find yourself hooked."

It didn't happen suddenly. On the weekends, people would still find Earl Manigault at the parks, and flashes of the magnetic ability were there. Young athletes would ask his advice, and he would still be helpful; even among the ones who knew he was sinking deeper into his drug habit, he remained respected and popular. But by early 1968, he seldom came to the parks, and his old friends would find him on street corners along Eighth Avenue, nodding. "He was such a fine person," said Jay Vaughn, "you saw him and you wished you could see some hope, some bright spot in his existence. But there was no good part in his life, of course. Because drugs do ruin you."

In the summer of 1968, Bob Hunter was working on a drug rehabilitation program. He looked up Earl. They became close, building a friendship that went deeper than their mutual respect on a basketball court. "Earl was an unusual type of addict," said Hunter. "He understood that he was a hard addict, and he faced it very honestly. He wanted to help me in the drug program, and he gave me a lot of hints on how to handle younger addicts. He knew different tricks that would appeal to them and win their trust. And he also knew all the tricks they would use, to deceive me into thinking they were getting cured. Earl had used the tricks himself, and he helped me see through them, and maybe we managed to save a few young kids who might have got hooked much worse."

"But it's the most frustrating thing in the world, working with addicts. It's hard to accept the fact that a man who has been burned will go back and touch fire. But they do it. I have countless friends on drugs, and I had many more who have died from drugs. And somehow it's hard to just give up on them and forget that they ever existed. Maybe you would think that only the less talented types would let themselves get hooked—but then you'd see a guy like Earl and you couldn't understand. . . ."

Some people hoped that Earl would be cured that summer. He did so much to help Hunter work with others that people felt he could help

himself. Hunter was not as optimistic. "The truth is that nobody is ever going to cure Earl," he said. "The only way he'll be cured is by himself. A lot of people come off drugs only after they've been faced with an extreme crisis. For example, if they come very close to dying and somehow escape, then they might be able to stay away from the fire. But it takes something like that, most of the time."

Earl was not cured, and as the months went on the habit grew more expensive. And then he had to steal. "Earl is such a warm person," said Vaughn, "you know that he'd never go around and mug people or anything. But let's face it: most addicts, sooner or later, have to rob in order to survive." Earl broke into a store. He is now in prison. "Maybe that will be the crisis he needs," said Hunter. "Maybe, just possibly... But when you're talking about addicts, it's very hard to get your hopes too high."

Harold "Funny" Kitt went to Franklin three years behind Earl Manigault. When Funny finished in 1967, he was rated the best high school player in the city—largely because he had modeled himself so closely after Earl. "We all idolized Earl in those days," Kitt said. "And when you idolize somebody, you think of the good things, not the bad. As we watched Earl play ball, we had visions of him going on to different places, visiting the whole world, becoming a great star and then maybe coming back here to see us and talk to us about it all.

"But he didn't do any of those things. He just went into his own strange world, a world I hope I'll never see. I guess there were reasons. I guess there were frustrations that only Earl knew about, and I feel sorry for what happened. But when Earl went into that world, it had an effect on all of us, all the young ballplayers. I idolized the man. And he hurt me."

Beyond the hurt, though, Earl left something more. If his career was a small dramatization of the world of Harlem basketball, then he was a fitting protagonist, in his magnitude and his frailty, a hero for his time. "Earl was quiet, he was honest," said Jay Vaughn, "and he handled the pressures of being the star very well. When you're on top, everybody is out to challenge you, to make their own reps by doing something against you. One guy after another wants to take a shot, and some stars react to all that by bragging, or by being aloof from the crowd.

"Earl was different. The game I'll never forget was in the G-Dub [George Washington High] tournament one summer, when the team that Earl's group was scheduled to play didn't show. The game was forfeited, and some guys were just looking for some kind of pickup game, when one fellow on the team that forfeited came in and said, 'Where's Manigault? I want to play Manigault.'

"Well, this guy was an unknown and he really had no right to talk like that. If he really wanted to challenge a guy like Earl, he should have been out in the parks, building up a rep of his own. But he kept yelling and

bragging, and Earl quietly agreed to play him one-on-one. The word went out within minutes, and immediately there was a big crowd gathered for the drama.

“Then they started playing. Earl went over the guy and dunked. Then he blocked the guy’s first shot. It was obvious that the man had nothing to offer against Earl. But he was really determined to win himself a rep. So he started pushing and shoving and fouling. Earl didn’t say a word. He just kept making his moves and beating the guy, and the guy kept grabbing and jostling him to try to stop him. It got to the point where it wasn’t really basketball. And suddenly Earl put down the ball and said, ‘I don’t need this. You’re the best.’ Then he just walked away.

“Well, if Earl had gone on and whipped the guy 30 to 0, he couldn’t have proved any more than he did. The other cat just stood there, not knowing what to say. The crowd surrounded Earl, and some of us said things about the fouling and the shoving. But he didn’t say anything about it. He didn’t feel any need to argue or complain. He had everyone’s respect and he knew it. The role he played that day never left anyone who saw it. This was a beautiful man.”

from Hoops

(drawings by N. Schiff)

I don't care if I'm flu-ridden, swollen kidneys, cough, aching eyes: I'm off to the courts. Hands want that ball.

Ball on hip, watch floorplay, pivot left, watch floorplay, put ball behind my head—cut, someone, cut! I want to pass this potato!



Cinderella, Witch Hazel and a ghost, three kids in costumes skip around a summer playground and shoot hoops.

Right foot hits, grab ball same instant, fake, one long step left, jiggle, fake, leap, shoot, —goddamn! I didn't travel!

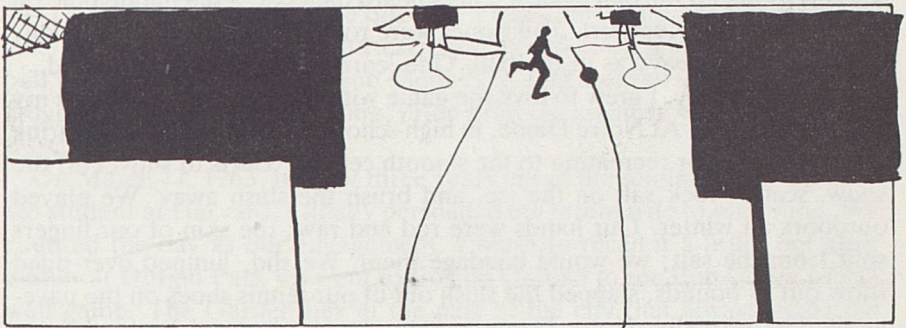


Scrambling for a loose ball: get near where it's going, don't get hurt, don't foul, arch body to ward off thieves. Focus and grab.

Your bum knee may take you from the game but nothing can take from that last clutch shot, fade-away from the corner—down! Or from the memory.

A 40-minute shoving match, guard against quick spins left or right, this guy's a refrigerator on wheels! —only higher.

Smack! Stung right arm. Swing ball right. Whack! Left arm. Foul! Yeah, you aimed for the ball. I moved it.



Hungry. Walk through the schoolyard ears pricked for a klong! off the rim or bonk! bonk! as a rangy fellow dribbles to the courts. Hooked.

Hooping It

I grew up in an era when basketball was constantly changing. Luisetti introduced the one-hand shot when I was three years old; from my first memories of playing basketball, about age eight or nine, I remember almost *everybody* shooting one-handed. I don't remember seeing baskets in the Slovak section of Johnstown where I grew up. When we moved to a suburban neighborhood, I remember being made to dribble a ball in the gymnasium for the first time. It was a humiliating effort. I remember being awkward and stiff for those early years. My family moved around a lot; I attended five different schools in the first eight grades. By the time I was twelve, I remember feeling determined and adequate and getting better. Anticipation, quickness, attentiveness could make up for lack of special skills. Spirit reaps rewards in basketball. We played until we could scarcely see, throwing up the ball against a backboard nailed to a telephone pole on the corner in McKeesport. The games were rough, brutal even. The bodily contact was as heavy as in football. One learned not to be intimidated.

In the seminary, I grew to love the game with a passion bordering on my love for football. At Notre Dame, in high school, several of us raced during our brief hour for recreation to the smooth cement courts to shovel off the snow, scatter rock salt on the ice, and brush the slush away. We played outdoors all winter. Our hands were red and raw; the skin of our fingers split from the salt; we would bandage them. We slid, jumped over piled snow out of bounds, slapped the slush out of our tennis shoes on the pavement. Occasionally, Notre Dame varsity players dropped by to shoot a few. Leroy ("Axle") Leslie, at that time the highest scorer in Notre Dame history and a lithe, brave young man from Johnstown (a polio victim, he had never played the game until his junior year in high school, and at six-foot-two, playing center, made All-State) put on a show for us once. I had only one small pleasure: dropping in an over-the-head shot I had practiced by the hour, although Axle only laughed when it went in.

In those years, Bob Cousy was graduating from Holy Cross in Worcester. Occasionally, we high school seminarians would get a game with one or another local team and play in a real gym—for example, with the Brothers at Dujarie Hall or the college seminarians at Moreau Seminary. Our coach didn't like my two "junk" shots—a running hook and an underhand drive—and used me as the sixth man. "Cut the cute stuff, Novak!" he would shout. "Play ball!" My greatest satisfaction was entering one game in the second quarter and hitting, by the end, for 19 points. Still, he wouldn't start me. The next time I hit 26. (All these years later, I remember the exact totals; they surprised me and pleased me so much then. I never thought of myself as a player able to score that much; several of my

friends were better players. Scoring well, I felt as though I were living out forbidden fantasies, doing exactly what I had always wanted to but never thought I would. Entering the seminary had meant saying no to an athletic career.)

In college, near Brockton, Massachusetts, where we could watch Cousy on television, my cousin Jim Bresnicki and I used to stand any comers, two-on-two, every evening after dinner, no matter how hot or cold it was. Our favorite opposition were Brothers Richard, Peter, and William, religious like ourselves; we even let them have the third man. We seldom lost. "Bres" could hit from anywhere; he shot like an angel, consistent as the day was long. He loved the game more than I. He used to wink: "Wanna hoop?" I never resisted. We played at every possible free moment. We were almost insane about the game. I think it's true that I reached my peak in my sophomore year, and never again was so good. I loved, above all, to be on the weaker side, against odds, and to be losing near the end. The final rush of intensity at the end of the game was even more demanding, relentless, and exhausting than football. We used to play toward a target: 15 baskets, winner has to win by 2. Often our games went to 21-19 or 19-17. We played much more often on a half-court, with two or three on a side. I never did master the intricacies of the full-court team game. Fire the ball up, tight defense, twist and shoot. The cold scent of wintry air, or the mugginess of a summer evening, often prod my memory with images from those days.

On March 17, 1963, by now three years out of the seminary and a graduate student at Harvard, I finally persuaded my future wife to marry me. We counted the day as our engagement. I blush to recall it a little, but after dinner at Durgin Park we went to Boston Garden to see Bob Cousy's farewell game. The Garden lies in the part of the city that always made me wary, a white ghetto, rather like some scenes in novels of Boston's seedy underworld. Basketball is an indoor game, and the emotions of the crowds, on this occasion 13,000 strong, reverberate off the walls and rafters. Shouts and yells fill one's brain, seem to penetrate inside and to be heard not through the ears but through the cells within. That night, the feeling was overpowering. At the final presentation to Cousy, everyone was standing. For minute after minute, the chant was unendurably affectionate, loud, nostalgic, throbbing: "We love Cooz! We love Cooz! We love Cooz!" I shouted myself hoarse. Karen covered her ears. In the end, Cousy broke into tears. I doubt if there was a dry eye in the house. That was the first time Karen pointed out to me that during the game my hand was moist; I might as well have been playing for all I put into the game, she said. I don't think she was envious then, although with all the research "necessary for this book," she may have changed her mind.

The championship games between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Celtics in those years must constitute, it seems, the most perfectly balanced, intense, and sustained championship rivalry in the history of sports. Every

year, in the midst of heavy studies and endless duties, I found myself setting aside seven entire evenings or afternoons to hear or watch every game. Unbelievably, against all odds, the Celtics won almost every time.

In the seminary, I had gone to Mass every day. We used to see many of the championship games there, too. But now sports events rivaled churchgoing in the frequency of my religious liturgies. The liturgies do not have the same worldview, of course, nor celebrate the same way of life. Yet as Aquinas said, so I found it to be true: grace exceeds, but does not cancel, nature.

Religion and Basketball

On any given Sabbath day people gather to watch ball games. In many ways these games are pagan substitutes for the collective religious experience of church. I've often seen newspaper photos of basketball games—the eyes of all the players and all the fans are fixed upon the ball frozen above the rim. When the game is on T.V. there are millions of eyes focused upon that same ball. This is a *collective* spiritual experience; the group consciousness is united by a single thing, the ball. The ball acts like the *mandala* in Tibetan systems of concentration and meditation, focusing the psyche of the individual, uniting the consciousness of the group.

Shortly before his death, Black Elk, a priest of the Oglala Sioux, gave an account of the seven rites of his people. These were recorded and edited by Joseph Brown in *The Sacred Pipe*. The seventh and last rite is a game that was revealed in a vision, "The Throwing of the Ball." A ball is painted red (the color of the world), and with blue (the color of the heavens) there are made dots at the four quarters. Then by making two blue circles going all around the ball, Heaven and Earth are united into one sacred ball. (This ball makes me wish our culture had a more symbolic ball, perhaps a whole earth ball, a rubber, bouncing globe). In the Sioux rite, a little girl takes the ball, which is both the world and the great spirit, *Wakan-Tanka*, and throws it to the west, where whoever is lucky enough to catch it embraces it and offers it to the six directions (East, West, North, South, Up and Down) and gives it back to the girl. She then throws it to the north and the other directions. Black Elk explains this rite: "Just as the ball is thrown from the center to the quarters, so *Wakan-Tanka* is at every direction and is everywhere in the world; and as the ball descends upon the people so does His power, which is only received by a very few people, especially in these last days."

In the man's vision which gave birth to this game, the little girl who threw the ball turned into a buffalo calf, nudged the ball towards the man, and said: "This universe really belongs to the two-leggeds, for we four-legged people cannot play with a ball." Black Elk says that this is true because of all creatures in the universe "it is the two-legged men alone who, if they purify and humiliate themselves, may become one with—or may know—*Wakan-Tanka*." The unique spiritual capacity of us two-legged ones is symbolically related to our ability to play ball; we are the creature who plays with a ball (the symbolic union of heaven and earth), and so the universe belongs to us. *The Sacred Pipe* ends with Black Elk's moving words: "At this sad time today among our own people, we are scrambling for the ball, and some are not even trying to catch it, which makes me cry when I think of it. But soon I know it will be caught, for the

end is rapidly approaching, and then it will be returned to the center, and our people will be with it. It is my prayer that this be so, and it is in order to aid in this recovery of the ball, that I have wished to make this book."

I sometimes feel, when I play basketball, that I am in some large sense trying to recover the ball. To play well is to unite body and mind, to play badly is to be out of Tao. What a fine feeling it is to go up for a jump shot and as you release the ball to know it is going in, to be able to say in your mind or out loud, "Swish." Sometimes you don't even need to see the basket; you can go up for a shot with a defender or the sun in your eyes and still know the ball is going in. It almost feels as if there is telekinesis involved; you think the ball into the basket. I play basketball in order to experience those moments when I feel in rhythm, and it is more a matter of the rhythm having me than of my having the rhythm. I find myself moving to the open spot at the right time and putting the ball surely in the empty circle that the rim defines. It is like the skill defined in *Zen and the Art of Archery*; It moves me on the court, It shoots the ball.

Usually you don't have time to think out what you are going to do; you move and react instinctively, unconsciously. At magic moments you and your teammates can seem to read each other's minds; you can throw a blind pass knowing that a teammate will have moved to that spot. You feel a part of a greater whole, a group mind, a Team. But while It may shoot the ball, and It may move you on the court, this does not mean that consciousness is eliminated. What is demanded is a sort of union of consciousness and unconsciousness; you can perceive and analyze, discuss and plan, but the analyses and plans have to blend with unconscious knowledge in a flow and rhythm. In the flow of a five-man team, you sink to the level of group mind while at the same time intensifying your own individual concentration, heightening your own consciousness by focusing it on the narrow field of a basketball game. It is popular to talk about rhythm and flow in basketball. And when playing basketball you do indeed feel the rhythm, flow with the group mind in a way that is much like improvising music in a small group; you are all improvising together, paying attention to each other and to the structure of the game (or the music), trying to let the It within you the individual direct your flow, all the while maintaining awareness of what the group is actually doing. And the problem in both music and basketball is often playing *together*. It can be relatively easy to "synch" in with someone you have played a lot with before. If you two can play together as a unit, then that dual unity can reach out to include a third, and eventually, hopefully, all five will be playing together.

The ball is the focus of the group consciousness; it is *Wakan-Tanka*, the great mandala. A basic rule of defense is to see the ball; even when watching your own man, you must be conscious of the ball. On offense, to have the ball is to be the center of attention. It is easy to understand how difficult it can be for gifted offensive players to learn the selfless art of giving up the ball.

My favorite way of passing is to jump into the air, hang in mid-air as if preparing to shoot, and as the defense freezes awaiting the shot, pass off. The sensation of hanging in the air before shooting or passing is one of the most pleasurable in basketball. When you are hanging in the air, time can seem to stretch out as the moment fills with the perception of a variety of alternatives. Oscar Robertson, a truly great if not flashy ballplayer, urged players to never go up into the air unless they knew what they were going to do with the ball. More and more contemporary players choose the pleasure and uncertainty of going up in the air in order to create a situation, deciding what to do when in full flight. As a player I have an ambivalent attitude towards flying; it is such a pleasure that I sometimes leave my feet too often, get hung up in the air with nothing to do with the ball. The problem of when to fly and when to stay grounded is a symbolic one for me; I have had to learn, in my non-athletic life as well, when to keep my feet on the ground.

Julius Erving, "Dr. J.," says, "My game is in the air." Dr. J. was probably the first player obviously to fly, to really defy the laws of gravity. Scientists used to say a baseball couldn't curve, just as they would now say a person couldn't fly; but certain basketball players do sometimes fly, or so it does seem. Dr. J. inspired me to write a little poem in which I envisioned a great basketball player of the far future: "Wondrous bird-man, enlightened athlete-monk, / Flying through the air and then, slam-dunk!" I love the vision of some future shaman-athlete. Flying has always been a symbol of spiritual power; in many cultures the shaman was the bird-man, the man who could fly. I only wish that the symbolic flying power of current players was matched by flights of consciousness, of spiritual soaring.

Like many men, I root for my team today as I rooted as a child, with an almost religious fervor. Since I live in the San Francisco Bay Area, I root for the Golden State Warriors. The Warriors are not so much my team as my totem. It is interesting to consider sports teams, so often named after animals, as totems of specific areas, magic representatives of a certain group of people. I know my friends and I felt uplifted, blessed with luck (the gift of the gods) when, a few years ago, the Warriors won the championship.

To go to a ball game is to participate in a primitive rite, a Dionysian revel. The Oakland Coliseum, where my totem-team plays, takes on a ceremonial character. Between the parking lot and the arena there is a long winding row of small stone penis-shaped pillars. In India they would be recognized immediately as what they are, *lingams*, ceremonial stone phal-luses. Ascending along the line of *lingams*, you approach the great round colossus, the Coliseum, looking like the Great Mother at the end of a row of her sons.

After giving your ticket to the gatekeeper, you pass into the other, ceremonial realm. The attendants help the confused find their way through the maze of seats and sections to their spot. Down below, at the bottom of the

great circle that is the Coliseum, there is the rectangular court. As a magic space within its own center circle, the rectangular court within the circular building suggests the proverbial squared circle. At a prearranged time, the players symmetrically distribute themselves around the middle of the symmetrical court. The referee throws the ball above the exact center of the court and the game begins. Anyone profane enough to step onto the sacred space during the game will of course be subject to ejection and arrest. The players move in waves, from north to south and south to north, as all attention focuses upon the special space, with its special rules and own time frame. As the game progresses the crowd becomes less inhibited; an exciting playoff game can almost *possess* a crowd. Conscious control slips away, mass mind takes over. There can be a wonderful relief or purge involved in this sinking into unconsciousness, as a mass of people focus on a simple game; it can also be rather frightening, as primitive emotions surge to the surface.

This game, basketball, was invented by James Naismith in 1891, in Springfield, Massachusetts. While Dr. Naismith deserves credit for his invention and ingenuity, in some ways the roots of basketball reach into Native American culture. It is important to realize that before the discovery of the "New World" there was no rubber in Europe. Rubber was called "India Rubber" because it was first brought to Europe from the West Indies, the land Columbus mistakenly thought was India. Archeological evidence suggests that rubber was used by the Maya perhaps as early as the 11th century. The rubber ball is a Native American invention, and a hoop game with a rubber ball was popular throughout Native American culture.

There were a number of different rubber ball games, but I am interested in those which used a stone ring, through which the rubber ball was to be propelled. There was no real parallel to the use of a ring in European games, so early observers tended to focus on this aspect also. The game played throughout Mexico was like a combination of basketball and volleyball. The object was to score points by sending the ball into the opposing team's court so it could not be returned. Generally the ball was to be struck with the hips, buttocks, or knee; to use the hands or another part of the body was to forfeit a point. There was a stone ring in each team's court, and if a player sent the ball through the ring (a very difficult feat) he won the game outright. Such a lucky player had the right to claim gifts from the losing team (who would abuse him as bewitched and run away), and would be honored by his teammates. He would also make sacrifices to the game's patron deity and to the stone ring itself.

The magical-religious elements in the ancient rubber ball games was obvious. Every court had images of the patron deity (or deities) of the game. Players might magically prepare the game balls the night before a game, and ask for supernatural help during the game. The referees were likely to be priests.

But if the magical-religious element in the ancient games is obvious, so

is the aggressive component. The players understood the game to symbolize warfare, and sometimes it would even be used as a substitute for warfare. The duality implicit in this and similar competitive games was made conscious by making the god of twins a deity of the game. The game itself was quite violent, in that the ball (often made of solid rubber) was heavy enough to cause serious injury (and even death) to the player struck in the wrong place. And like the rubber ball games played today, the Native American rubber ball games were inextricably linked to gambling. Players and spectators inevitably wagered upon the outcome, and used all their aggressive energy and magical power to achieve victory.

Basketball, a modern American rubber ball game, is like the ancient American rubber ball games. It involves competitive as well as religious energy, aggression and ritual. I love the intensity with which I play and watch basketball, but I must admit that my attempts to see basketball as a religion are inadequate. Basketball is a very *primitive* spiritual event. The Native American rubber games were primitive religious and secular events, but the players were at least conscious of the spiritual symbolism of their game and court. I have written this essay in an attempt to make conscious some of the spiritual implications in my game, basketball. Basketball does play an important part in my spiritual life; but I am sad to admit how limited, primitive, and unconscious that spiritual life really is. The problem comes, I think, from the way in which the spiritual has been cut off from the secular. In our modern world it is unnaturally difficult to see the spiritual dimension in anything so secular as a ball game (or a dance, a carnival, a party). In Europe, as late as the 16th century there were ceremonial ball-dances held in churches. Priests danced to the rhythm of the chant, and a ball was thrown or handed around. This game was finally banned as secular, not "spiritual" enough for priests and churches. We have forgotten that the Olympics are in honor of the Great God; we have separated the secular from the spiritual. I envy those so-called "primitive" cultures where this division was not so clear cut. I can only wish, with Black Elk, that we might begin to try to recover the ball.

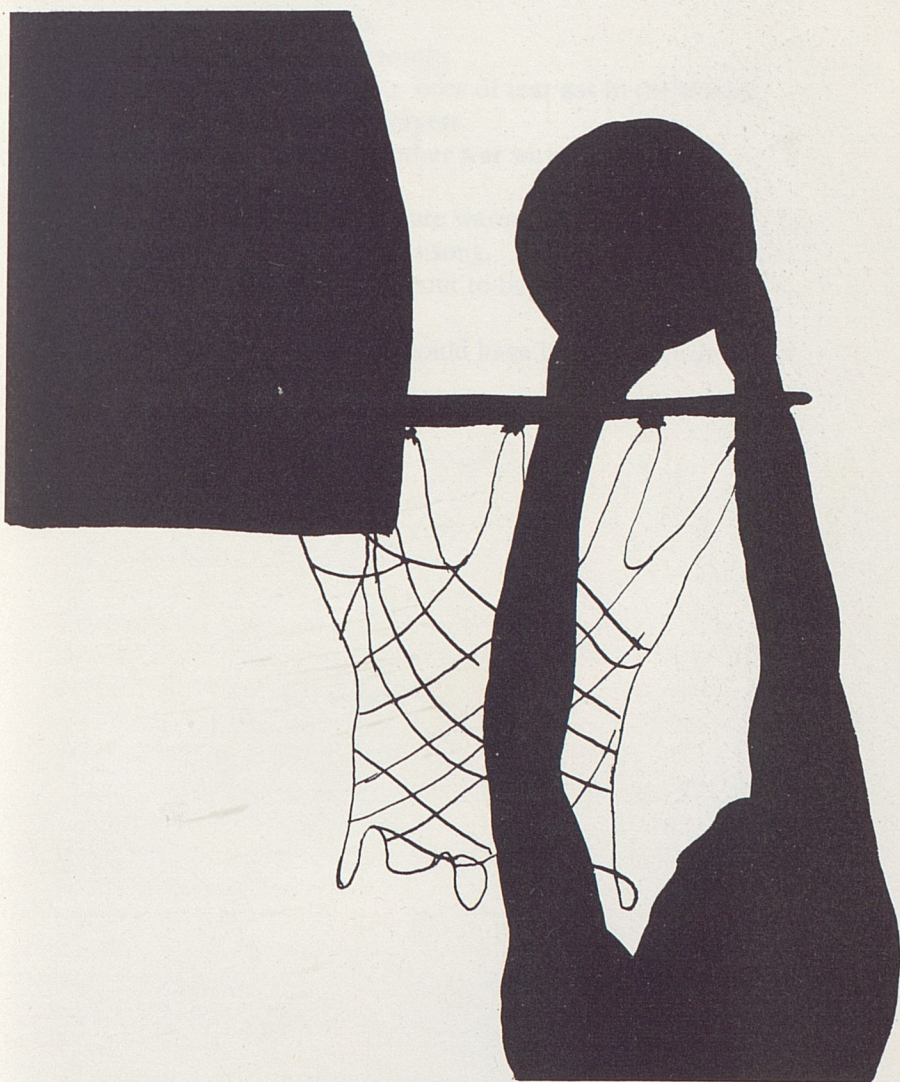
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Phlegon, *History of Olympia* (c. A.D. 138).

Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, ed. Joseph Brown, Penguin, 1971.

Theodore Stern, *The Rubber-Ball Games of the Americas*, University of Washington Press, 1966.

THE BIG TIME



THE BIG TIME



from **The View from Section III**

Far below the bottom of an orange bowl
are two baskets and a hardwood floor,
20,000 colored seats
and 20,000 people filing in.

We have all met before.
In Macy's.
In voting booths.
On opposite sides of tear gas in the streets.
Everyone forgets.
There is another war we are waiting for.

The athletes are warm.
The anthem is sung.
The play is about to begin.
I know
nothing else could have brought us together.

from *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man*

Every so often a Celtic game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even mental game, and would be magical. That feeling is difficult to describe, and I certainly never talked about it when I was playing. When it happened I could feel my play rise to a new level. It came rarely, and would last anywhere from five minutes to a whole quarter or more. Three or four plays were not enough to get it going. It would surround not only me and the other Celtics but also the players on the other team, and even the referees. To me, the key was that *both* teams had to be playing at their peaks, and they had to be competitive. The Celtics could not do it alone. I remember the fifth and final game of the 1965 championship series, when we opened the fourth quarter ahead of the Lakers by sixteen points, playing beautifully together, and then we simply took off into unknown peaks and ran off twenty straight points to go up by thirty-six points, an astounding margin for a championship series. We were on fire, intimidating, making shots, running the break, and the Lakers just couldn't score. As much as I wanted to win that championship, I remember being disappointed that the Lakers were not playing better. We were playing well enough to attain the special level, but we couldn't do it without them.

That mystical feeling usually came with the better teams in the league that were challenging us for the championship. Over the years that the Celtics were consistently good, our rivals would change, as teams would come up to challenge and then fall off again. First it was the Hawks, then the Lakers, Royals, Warriors, 76ers and then the Lakers again, with the Knicks beginning to move. They were the teams good enough to reach that level with us some nights. It never started with a hot streak by a single player, or with a breakdown of one team's defense. It usually began when three or four of the ten guys on the floor would heat up; they would be the catalysts, and they were almost always the stars in the league. If we were playing the Lakers, for example, West and Baylor and Cousy or Sam and I would be enough. The feeling would spread to the other guys, and we'd all levitate. Then the game would just take off, and there'd be a natural ebb and flow that reminded you of how rhythmic and musical basketball is supposed to be. I'd find myself thinking, "This is it. I want this to keep going," and I'd actually be rooting for the other team. When their players made spectacular moves, I wanted their shots to go into the bucket; that's how pumped up I'd be. I'd be out there talking to the other Celtics, encouraging them and pushing myself harder, but at the same time part of me would be pulling for the other players too.

At that special level all sorts of odd things happened. The game would be in a white heat of competition, and yet somehow I wouldn't feel com-

petitive—which is a miracle in itself. I'd be putting out the maximum effort, straining, coughing up parts of my lungs as we ran, and yet I never felt the pain. The game would move so quickly that every fake, cut and pass would be consistently correct, and I always felt then that I not only knew all the Celtics by heart but also all the opposing players, and that they all how the next play would develop and where the next shot would be taken. Even before the other team brought the ball in bounds, I could feel it so keenly that I'd want to shout to my teammates, "It's coming there!"—except that I knew everything would change if I did. My premonitions would be consistently correct, and I always felt then that I not only knew all the Celtics by heart but also all the opposing players, and that they all knew me. There have been many times in my career when I felt moved or joyful, but these were the moments when I had chills pulsing up and down my spine.

But these spells were fragile. An injury would break them, and so would a couple of bad plays or a bad call by a referee. Once a referee broke a run by making a bad call in my favor, which so irritated me that I protested it as I stood at the foul line to take my free throws. "You know that was a bad call, ref," I said wearily. He looked at me as if I was crazy, and then got so angry that I never again protested a call unless it went against me. Still, I always suffered a letdown when one of those spells died, because I never knew how to bring them back; all I could do was to keep playing my best and hope. They were sweet when they came, and the hope that one would come was one of my strongest motivations for walking out there.

Sometimes the feeling would last all the way to the end of the game, and when that happened I never cared who won. I can honestly say that those few times were the only ones when I did *not* care. I don't mean that I was a good sport about it—that I'd played my best and had nothing to be ashamed of. On the five or ten occasions when the game ended at that special level, I *literally* did not care who had won. If we lost, I'd still be as free and high as a sky hawk. But I had to be quiet about it. At times I'd hint around to other players about this feeling, but I never talked about it much, least of all to the other Celtics. I felt a little weird about it, and quite private. Besides, I couldn't let on to my teammates that it was ever all right to lose; I had too much influence on the team. We were the Celtics, and our reason for being was to win championships, so I had to keep those private feelings to myself. It's good I did; if I'd tried to explain, I'd never have gotten past the first two sentences. Anything I confided would sound too awkward and sincere for Celtic tastes, and I could just hear Satch and Nelson. The next time we lost an ordinary game they'd have been cackling, "That's all right, Russ. It don't matter that we lost, because we had that special feeling out there tonight. Yeah, it felt real special." . . .

* * *

During my career with the Celtics they beat the Los Angeles Lakers six times in the NBA finals, without a single loss, and so had just as much reason to brood, but they never did. I always got along with Jerry West, and have always had a carefree friendship with Elgin Baylor. The Celtics and Lakers could be beating each other's brains out in competition, but Elgin and I still played golf together and shared movies and meals. We even tried out new recipes on each other. (His were better.) As with Wilt, my friendship with Elgin was partly a result of those highs that occurred in our games. Elgin and West could inspire the whole Laker team, and if circumstances and luck were with us, we'd have a run out there that would make our teeth chatter. It was contagious, and whenever we got it going Elgin would almost break into laughter. He loved to play.

If I sensed that our teams were in a high, I'd always keep a sharp eye out for Elgin, hoping he'd come at me. Of all the numbers going between ten hot players, I most enjoyed the one between Elgin and me. He was a smart player who loved to take advantage of what we called "peekers." He'd stand facing the man guarding him, and whenever the player even thought about peeking behind him to check on the position of the other players, Elgin would sense it and be gone. He'd fly past, coming toward me and the bucket. We'd both take off and go up in the air together, with him wiggling around the way he always did so as to get me to go for some move and foul him. But I'd be waiting for him to let go of the ball; sooner or later he was going to have to carry or throw it across the arc to the basket, and so I wouldn't fall for his body fakes. But sometimes he'd fool me. I'd be waiting for him to let go, and waiting some more, and then he never would let it go. Elgin would simply dunk the ball. Whenever he did something like that, we'd both laugh. A play like that never broke a high; it was part of it. Elgin took advantage of my preference for finesse over muscle in blocking shots, knowing that I liked to deflect the ball in the air rather than try to check it in someone's grip. He had an instinctive awareness of the eccentricities of my game.

So did Oscar Robertson. Of all the players in the NBA, I had the most fun playing against him and his teams. He was so brilliant that he could orchestrate the Royals' offense and pump so much energy into it that all by himself he could push a game into a high if we could respond. He had a joy and a ferociousness that nobody else could match. When he was cooking and dealing, the Celtic-Royal games had a way of revving up to a high for a few minutes at the beginning of the fourth quarter. Those few minutes were enough to make me feel good for a month.

In the middle of all the frenzy out on the court, Oscar and I would usually butt heads in ways I'd remember. On many an afternoon we'd eat a meal together, and then go out that night to kill each other. He knew that if he ran into me I was going to hit him, and he'd probably have been upset if I hadn't. And I knew that whenever I guarded him on a switch, Oscar would be dribbling with one hand and trying to club me to death with the

other. This was what we called Oscar's "free foul," because the referees would never call it on him. Most of the established stars in the NBA had quirks that the refs let them get away with. For example, they tended to wink at my goal tending and the "Russell elbow." (I didn't like getting hit while going after rebounds. You wouldn't either. So deliberately, from my first year in the pros, I began to throw my elbows and knees around on the court. My strategy, which worked fairly well, was to get the referees to accept the flailing elbows as my "style" so that they wouldn't call fouls on me. When opposing players realized that I might hit them "for free," they became less inclined to bother me on rebounds.) And the referees let Bob Petit take a whole bunch of little steps just before he shot the ball. (I always protested Petit's steps, and one night a referee just laughed and said, "Well, maybe he was walking, but he didn't go very far.") Oscar's free foul was in keeping with his attitude toward the game. He'd gobble his way up your arm if he could. He always wanted something extra. If you gave him a twenty-footer, he'd *take* a fifteen-footer; if you gave him a five-footer, he'd *take* a lay-up and try to make it a three-point play. He always had the moves to take these advantages. Of all the photographs taken of Oscar shooting when he was in his prime, very few will show a defensive man hanging all over him. Somehow he could always get himself free.

Oscar came into the league with a big reputation, and I remember one night when we played the Royals in a Philadelphia double-header in his rookie season. At one moment when the game was flying, he stole the ball and took off on a break with only me between him and the basket. In a split-second he was coming at me, one-on-one. He was scheming and so was I. "This guy's a pretty good jump-shooter," I thought. "But he doesn't know what I can do. I'm gonna make him go for a lay-up." When he hesitated near the foul line for the jump shot, I would take a step toward him, faking a move to block his shot or to steal the ball. But what I really wanted him to do was to take the opening to drive by me for a lay-up, and I'd be able to recover in time to block it. So I timed my move for the beginning of his jump shot, but Oscar reacted instantly to the *start* of my move. While my foot was still going forward in my sucker play, he was already driving around me. His pulling up for a jump shot had been a fake in itself, and I couldn't quite recover in time the way I did with other players. I was trying to be one step ahead of him, but he was two steps ahead of me. As he ran back up the court, I thought, "Okay, you got that one, buddy," and I filed his move away in my little book.

Three years later when we were playing a game in Washington, D.C., the same situation arose. Again Oscar was in a breakaway, one-on-one with me. Because of that time three years earlier, I had worked on a move in which I could take a bold step forward, as if I was moving to block a shot, but my body weight would actually be shifting backward toward the bucket. This made my reaction time even shorter when I was trying to sucker guys into going for the lay-up. So I put this move on Oscar, and was

two feet over the rim when the ball got there. Only something was wrong. Oscar had remembered, too, and he'd let the ball go from the foul line, even though it had looked as if I were coming straight at him to block the shot. He got me again.

I got him just as many times; I like to think more. One night in Cincinnati he stole the ball, and we were running side by side down the court. I knew he had a way of going up in the air and simultaneously swishing his ass into you in a way that would get the ref to call a foul on you instead of on him. He could move his ass sideways like a burlesque dancer and still make his body look straight. What he did seemed anatomically impossible, but he could get himself into contorted positions and still make the shot. He was an expert at drawing the three-point play. On this particular occasion I sensed that he was going to run into me at the foul line while shooting. So just when his body committed itself to the ass swish, I cut straight off at a right angle toward the stands for two giant steps, so that when he jumped toward me I was gone. Usually the defender obscured the view of this contortion, but this time I could clearly see his ass making a sideways detour between his chest and legs, so that he looked like a side view of a brace and bit. Oscar had a stunned look on his face in the air, and he was so embarrassed to be caught out that he shot the ball like a high-school rookie and didn't come close.

Oscar knew that he'd rarely get a lay-up off me, especially when the Celtic defense was set up for his attack, so he'd come right to the edge of the no man's land where my territory started, and take most of his shots from there. I'd made all kinds of efforts to get him to come into my turf, and he'd try to sucker me out, a little like the way Sam Jones played Wilt. We each knew instinctively where the territorial line was; it was about a yard wide just outside the three-second lane, and in a hot game we always had something going there. One night I was guarding him on a switch and he came just to the edge of my territory and stopped, holding the ball over his head. *He* knew that if he tried to take a jump shot I'd block it, because I had slipped a foot or so out into no man's land, and *I* knew that I couldn't come out any further because Royals were breaking for the basket behind me and Oscar would hit one of them. So he just crouched down low with the ball over his head, and I got down there with him; the instant he went up for a jump shot I'd go up too, and he'd have no chance. He faked a few times, but he knew I wasn't going to fall for them. I leaned away a little bit, but he knew better than to be suckered into a jump shot when I was that close. We just stared at each other, like two roosters, both of us twitching. All of this went on between us in the course of two or three seconds, and the net result was that because of all the hundreds of moves we'd tried on each other in scores of games, we were at a stalemate. Oscar just stared right at me, his eyes never moving toward the basket or another player. His arms didn't move either, only his fingers. With the only part of his body I wasn't watching, he flipped the ball up there blind. Plink! The ball swished

through the basket while he was still staring at me. We both laughed all the way up the court. I got such a kick out of it that I sprinted out ahead of Wayne Embry, took a lob pass, and dunked it at the other end, still laughing. The game was sweet at moments like that.

Pro Basketball Players

pro basketball players
live in bat caves
upside down
hotel rooms
minds pointing
to darkness. . . .

They Also Serve Who Only Sit and Sit and Sit

Marty Byrnes, a reserve forward for the Lakers, played for the New Orleans Jazz last season. He also sat a lot. He remembers a game at Detroit when he was sitting, as usual, and the Jazz was losing, as usual. Every Jazz player except Byrnes had been in the game.

“Hey, Byrnes!” yelled a fan behind the Jazz bench. “You gotta be better than *somebody!*”

Not exactly the type of quote you’d want inscribed on your tombstone, but when you sit on the bench in the NBA, you learn to cope with the insecurity, inactivity and cute little remarks from the customers.

The loneliness of a long-distance sitter. It’s the hardest easy job in the world.

The Lakers’ non-starters, who refer to themselves collectively as the Pine Brothers, were discussing the subject recently in an airport as they sat (what else?) and waited for a team flight.

“Sitting on the bench is tough to deal with,” said Laker rookie Brad Holland, who is averaging 46 minutes a game on the bench. “So you try to make it as fun as possible. It’s not that we’re goofing off or not taking the game seriously. We’re kidding around, but it’s not really funny.”

We’ll be the judge of that, Brad.

But first, a little historical background.

The team seating area in basketball used to be called the bench, until about 15 years ago when a frustrated second-string NBA center named Reggie Harding (who is now dead) declared: “I ain’t ridin’ the pines any more.”

Pines. Technically incorrect. Courtside seats in the NBA are not constructed of pine, or any other wood. But backboards in the NBA aren’t made from boards, either. And Harding, who had a feel for the language, if not the game, knew it would sound silly to say, “I ain’t gonna sit on no metal folding chairs any more.”

So the bench became known as the pines (or pine), and ridin’ the pines became the accepted term for exile on the bench.

The Lakers’ non-starters adopted the name Pine Brothers this season. It’s not original. The name was used by subs on rookie Ollie Mack’s high school team.

The Pine Brothers: Don Ford (5th season, USCB), Mike Cooper (2nd season, U. of New Mexico), Byrnes (2nd season, Syracuse), Mack (rookie, E. Carolina), and Holland (rookie, UCLA).

The interview went something like this:

Question: Is there a leader of the Pine Brothers?

Cooper: Prez [Don Ford] is our leader. He's my hero. He's President Pine.

Ford: I even use Pine Sol deodorant.

Q: Do you have assigned seats on the bench?

Ford: No, but if the team's going good, no one will change up. That's protocol. If the team's going bad, we'll switch seats around. Sometimes the starters are perturbed when they come out of the game. They like to sit at the end of the bench, so we move. You don't want them to sweat on you, so you give up your seat. Especially if it's a long road trip. You don't want to get your uniform wet and dirty.

Q: Which is the best seat?

Ford: You like to go to the end, away from the coach.

Keith Erickson (Laker broadcaster, eavesdropping on the interview): When I played, some guys would fight to get next to the coach.

Holland: It's the opposite here.

Q: Who usually gets the end seat?

Cooper: Marty or Prez, usually. They leave the huddles early.

Q: Why is the end seat the best?

Byrnes: You don't have to ask for water or Gatorade, you can just reach it for yourself. There are disadvantages. At the Forum there's one cheerleader I've never seen because she sits in the same spot every game and you can't see her from the end of the bench.

Ford: When you sit at the end, you can make comments without being censored. In fact, if the bench is long enough you can barely hear the coach when he calls you into the game.

Holland: The end seat in San Diego is the best because it's angled toward the court so you can see real well.

Ford: That seat is usually taken by Brad or the chicken [San Diego's mascot].

Q: Prez, when interim coach Paul Westhead first took over, he asked you to sit next to him for a few games. Was that a tough adjustment?

Ford: I told him I didn't know if I could enjoy the game from there. It's a completely different angle, you're sitting near midcourt instead of the end line, and everything looks different.

Q: Sort of like switching from shortstop to second base?

Ford: Exactly.

Q: During the game, do you try to notice things about strategy and plays?

Ford: If we knew anything about strategy and plays, we'd be starting. We just try to give a little encouragement, like "Way to go."

Q: How are the fans who sit behind the benches?

Ford: You can establish a relationship with the fans. In Portland they talk to me a lot. Well, actually they yell at me a lot. It's kind of fun really, as long as they don't throw anything. I've been hit with beer, ice, things like that.

Q: What kind of comments do they make?

Ford: They'll say things like, "You'll get in—eventually," or, "What are you this year, Ford? Fourth string or fifth string?"

Byrnes: Last year Rich Kelley [New Orleans center] was having a bad game and he sat down on the bench. A fan handed him a box of popcorn and said, "Here, eat this. You ain't going back in."

Q: Marty, how does this team's bench compare to New Orleans'?

Byrnes: This is a mild bench. At New Orleans they liked to play jokes. I was sitting on the end of the bench and a guy three seats up said (cupping his hands over his mouth to disguise his voice), "Byrnes! Byrnes!" I ran up to the coach, but of course he hadn't called me. That was my initiation.

Q: How are the actual seating accommodations?

Ford: Houston has excellent seats, real thick padding, but there's not enough seats, so you can't spread out. That's especially important on the road, when everyone's got smelly uniforms. Last night [Detroit] was poor. The seats are nice, they're well padded, but the floor is elevated, so you sit with your knees in your chin.

Byrnes: The worst thing is when you're up by 12 points with a minute and a half left and the other teams' got three timeouts left. You have to keep getting up and down.

Ford: You can get cramps in your legs.

Q: Speaking of timeouts, where do the Pine Brothers stand during timeouts?

Byrnes: That depends on where the [TV] camera is. If you can, you lean down and try to get on TV.

Ford: We see the red light, that's when we pep up.

Byrnes: If at all possible, you try to show a bandaged hand or a knee brace, so they know why you're not playing. And you have to act like you're into the huddle. You do that for about 15 seconds, then you figure they're into the commercial.

Holland: Ollie keeps his head down like he's paying attention, but his eyes are up, looking in the stands.

Q: You mean looking at girls?

Ford: I noticed Brad stretching like this [bending at the waist, looking back through his legs] the other night. The coach thinks he's dedicated and getting ready to play, but he's really sneaking a look, even if it's upside down.

Q: Do you spend a lot of time looking at girls?

Ford: The starters do when they're on the bench, because they don't have time to do that while they're playing. We have more time, so we can pick our spots.

Q: A few last questions—what do you drink on the bench?

Ford: At Atlanta it's just water. That's horrible. Detroit and Washington are the best, you get something like a Tiki Punch. You have to be

careful though. You can drink too much and get a little bloated and you're not hungry later.

Q: Do you get your uniforms cleaned even if you don't play?

Ford: Jack [trainer Jack Curran] will tell us we can get our uniforms washed, then he'll kind of giggle, like it's really necessary to wash 'em.

Q: Is there a Pine Brothers Hall of Fame?

Byrnes: My all-time great Pine Brother is Aaron James [at New Orleans]. He knew what was going on at all times, in the game, on the bench and in the stands. He was on every player and both officials simultaneously. He could be screaming at the ref and pointing out girls in the stands at the same time.

Ford: I used to idolize Pat [Riley, Lakers assistant coach and a former player—and nonplayer]. He had a lot of style on the end of the bench.

Riley (eavesdropping): I remember after one game, Gail [Goodrich] was really upset. He said to me, "Can you believe I only played 42 minutes?" And here I hadn't played in 10 games. Wilt [Chamberlain] used to tell the coach, "I think you should put Pat in, he hasn't played in 30 games."

Q: When you're introduced in pregame ceremonies, is there anything special you try to do?

Ford: The main concern is not to trip over your warmups.

Oscar Robertson: Peripheral Vision

They clear the left side for him.
An eye-fake, dip and ripple
of a shoulder, he runs his man
into a pick. He's done this so many times
it hurts him the right way.
The ball blooms away from his wrist.
The body is most vulnerable
when it claims space,
shadows in the moist
and painfully kept open
corners of his eyes.

The Shot

'Shot? Why do they call me 'Shot? It's short for The Shot, Youngblood. Few years back in the play-offs. They call me 'Shot because of The Shot, Youngblood.

Actually the shot was a new variation on an old theme—you hip to that ain't you, Youngblood? You an Ivy League man, right? Naw? Seton Hall, huh? Yeah, that's right. I saw you play up there a coupla times 'smattera-fact, yeah. The old man's knees ain't gonna take many more operations—so I do a little scouting now and then for the organization on the side, you understand.

Anyway, like I say, the shot was a little riff, a little riff on the basic tune. You hip to that I know.

The basic shot I practiced from when I was a kid on the playgrounds. Actually, when I was a tyke, I loved baseball most. Yeah. Shortstop. Don't laugh. Used to go wide gobble up them hot ones. Know what I mean. Move in at the crack of the bat fast low, skip the glove 'cross the grass snap into the right hand without a thought WHIP across the horn. Or underhand to secondbase he pivots on the DP and watching him kick and throw is like doing it yourself. You know, Youngblood? Like when you watching Muhammad do some dude in—WOOF, WOOMP—'slike you throwing those punches yourself.

Then, when I gotso tall. Had to play first base, but that was cool, too. Coordination, smooth on the sack, you understand. Hahaahaa. You laugh, huh.

But when I got into junior high school—you know how it is, probably. In high school back there, back in Indiana, the heroes were the basketball players. Yeah. There was something special about being a basketball player—they stood head and shoulders above the rest, and I don't mean 'cause they were tall. AaahHa, that's funny to you, huh, Youngblood. So I started in practicing on basketball, you understand. Wanted to get me some them letters and jackets and pussy too. AaahHaHaHa.

And the shot was this way. One day on the black-top court on Douglass Park, never will forget it. I drove down into the left corner and the cat guarding me had the baseline covered so I turns my back to'm, switches to a right hand dribble and start to drive for the hoop but the dude wasssss-FAST and he was right there when I got ready to go for the hoop so right then, and all without thinking, I stuck my foot back to the cornerFastand-Jumped from the edge of the court—left the dude stanning five feet away. NothingBUT Nets. Swish.

So I would practice it, going fast to right corner with the right hand or to the left corner with the left. Say I was going to the right corner, for instance. Have the left arm crooked out to protect the dribble and all that, head-FAST for the corner lick-split, then at the end, turn your back on the man FASTswitch the dribble into the left handFAST and start to drive for the basket. Now, if the man is too close to me, if he's standing right up on me when I head for the hoop, I Just Blow Rite-on PASThim Everytime and then the center'll have to pick me up. But it'll be too late. By the time the center gets there, I'm in the air. If the center's tall, over 6'10", I give him the left shoulder and elbow; palm the pill down low and shoot from the chest. On Russ, Stilts, Lew, an'em guys, if you shoot that from up top with the ball above your head, they'll ram it down your throat everytime. You got to palm it and flip it from down low while you're floating in with your back and arm protecting so they can't see when you gonna flip it. If they can't see it, they can't time it. But if the guy's my size, a forward on the low post, maybe, or a 6'8" center at most, I'll go headON and sssTUFF-It on 'm. Once in a while, I'll go head on and do it to Lew too. Just to show'm whose boss, you understand. AaahHaHaHa.

But, the shot. If the dude guarding you is where he's supposed to be when you drive to the corner and make your turn, if he's not too close when you switch and head for the hoop, then you step back to the corner fast and float on up. That's the basic shot. When the move's right, I hardly ever miss. Like radar, you understand. The Shot was in the play-offs back in '66 in the Garden. Came down on Sam and when I got to the corner he knew what I was gonna do so when I got ready to turn I saw he had already moved over waiting for me to turn and head for the hoop. But it registered on mind that the baseline was open because he'd moved over to wait for me coming back, and all without thinking, I gave a hop sidewise like I was gonna take that base rather than turn and switch like he thought. So Sam had to jump back over to the baseline, you see, he was a goner then. Just put the dribble across my body into the left hand and pivoted out away from him on the baseline. That was the riff. He was still leaning the wrong way and I knew it was good then. *Two steps left spring n' float even gave the legs a doublepump don't even remember bringing the ball up just the softness off the fingertips like a pigeon flying from your hands. Nothing but Nets. sssSWIüssSHH. Came down on the balls of my feet like slow motion so loose. My arms hung down like an ape, and the knuckles on both hands hit the hardwood floor.* Then the crowd was crazy people all over the place. The buzzer'd sounded. We won by two, 126-124. Never Will Forgetit.

That night, we rolled. All night long, Youngblood. Up at Small's. Little grass. All Kindsa Women. Yeah. Into the wee smallhours, Youngblood.

There was this one fine little thing. Foxy brown leather with deep, deep dimples. Well PUT TogethAH.

Pete was drunk out of his mind; that's one cat you don't ever wanta see drunk. Partyed all night loong, man.

Me and the little lady went over to her pad in somebody's kitty long-about five in the morning. I remember the upholstery was white-on-white-in-white, but not quite . . . AHHa. Big soft seats n' things. Yea, that was a nice hog.

And I woke up feeling good, too.

It was Sunday. We went up to her folks place on Sugar Hill. Drank a bit of whisky with her old man. Ate her Mama's chicken. Father had a room-full of stereo stuff and some boss Parker and Dolphy. I remember watching the sun go down while we were digging the sounds and drinking scotch.

And she was looking fine, she had on a white jersey dress and her razzle was adazzle. We got the Jag out and drove all around. New York's pretty night, in the right places.

But . . . That was the shot, Youngblood. Yea, it was rite nice: it's like that one time when you know you can't miss and you pick up all the marbles. You know what I mean, don't you, Youngblood?

Hand me that towel off top of the locker, will you. Come walk me down to the whirlpool. Damn, my knees are getting worse every minute. Good game tonight, Youngblood. You'll make it okay in this league. Boy, you bonus babies got it made nowadays. You know how many years it took me to make what you're making now? Five years, Jack. Five years and five all-star games and three playoffs and one MVP award before I got into the tax bracket you're in now. Inflation, huh? Yeah . . . okay, Mr. Inflation.

Get hold of that knob down there and turn on the juice for me, will you. Hey, can you take a piece of advice? Look here, Youngblood, you oughtn't spend all your time on the pussy posses in every town we hit. Ain't no future in it, man. One day you'll look back and see it's a waste. You know what I'd like now? I'm getting ready to go over the hump, and I WISH I HAD a family now. You know. A wife and kids to go home to. Ain't nothing a man can do with too many women, Youngblood. Nothing. I know that seems funny to a young man in his prime like you, but you'll see for yourself one day what I mean.

The Black and White Truth about Basketball

The dominance of black athletes over professional basketball is beyond dispute. Two thirds of the players are black, and the number would be greater were it not for the continuing practice of picking white bench warmers for the sake of balance. The Most Valuable Player award of the National Basketball Association has gone to blacks for sixteen of the last twenty years, and in the newer American Basketball Association, blacks have won it all but once in the league's eight years. In the 1974-75 season, four of the top five All-Stars and seven of the top ten were black. The N.B.A. was the first pro sports league of any stature to hire a black coach (Bill Russell of the Celtics) and the first black general manager (Wayne Embry of the Bucks). What discrimination remains—lack of opportunity for lucrative benefits such as speaking engagements and product endorsements—has more to do with society than with basketball.

This dominance reflects a natural inheritance; basketball is a pastime of the urban poor. The current generation of black athletes are heirs to a tradition half a century old: in a neighborhood without the money for bats, gloves, hockey sticks, tennis rackets, or shoulder pads, basketball is accessible. "Once it was the game of the Irish and Italian Catholics in Rockaway and the Jews on Fordham Road in the Bronx," writes David Wolf in his brilliant book, *Foul!* "It was recreation, status, and a way out." But now the ethnic names are changed; instead of Red Holzmans, Red Auerbachs, and McGuire brothers, there are Earl Monroes and Connie Hawkins and Nate Archibalds. And professional basketball is a sport with a national television contract and million-dollar salaries.

But the mark on basketball of today's players can be measured by more than money or visibility. It is a question of style. For there is a clear difference between "black" and "white" styles of play that is as clear as the difference between 155th Street at Eighth Avenue and Crystal City, Missouri. Most simply (remembering we are talking about culture, not chromosomes), "black" basketball is the use of superb athletic skill to adapt to the limits of space imposed by the game. "White" ball is the pulverization of that space by sheer intensity.

It takes a conscious effort to realize how constricted the space is on a basketball court. Place a regulation court (ninety-four by fifty feet) on a football field, and it will reach from the back of the end zone to the twenty-one-yard line; its width will cover less than a third of the field. On a baseball diamond, a basketball court will reach from home plate to just beyond first base. Compared to its principal indoor rival, ice hockey, basketball covers about one fourth the playing area. And during the normal flow of the game, most of the action takes place on about the third of the court

nearest the basket. It is in this dollhouse space that ten men, each of them half a foot taller than the average man, come together to battle each other.

There is, thus, no room; basketball is a struggle for the edge; the half step with which to cut around the defender for a lay-up, the half second of freedom with which to release a jump shot, the instant a head turns allowing a pass to a teammate breaking for the basket. It is an arena for the subtlest of skills: the head fake, the shoulder fake, the shift of body weight to the right and the sudden cut to the left. Deception is crucial to success; and to young men who have learned early and painfully that life is a battle for survival, basketball is one of the few games in which the weapon of deception is a legitimate rule and not the source of trouble.

If there is, then, the need to compete in a crowd, to battle for the edge, then the surest strategy is to develop the *unexpected*; to develop a shot that is simply and fundamentally different from the usual methods of putting the ball in the basket. Drive to the hoop, but go under it and come up the other side; hold the ball at waist level and shoot from there instead of bringing the ball up to eye level; leap into the air and fall away from the basket instead of toward it. All these tactics take maximum advantage of the crowding on a court; they also stamp uniqueness on young men who may feel it nowhere else.

“For many young men in the slums,” David Wolf writes, “the school yard is the only place they can feel true pride in what they do, where they can move free of inhibitions and where they can, by being spectacular, rise for the moment against the drabness and anonymity of their lives. Thus, when a player develops extraordinary ‘school yard’ moves and shots . . . [they] become his measure as a man.”

So the moves that begin as tactics for scoring soon become calling cards. You don’t just lay the ball in for an uncontested basket; you take the ball in both hands, leap as high as you can, and slam the ball through the hoop. When you jump in the air, fake a shot, bring the ball back to your body, and throw up a shot, all without coming back down, you have proven your worth in uncontestable fashion.

This liquid grace is an integral part of “black” ball, almost exclusively the province of the playground player. Some white stars like Richie Guerin, Bob Cousy, and Billy Cunningham have it: the body control, the moves to the basket, the free-ranging mobility. They also have the surface ease that is integral to the “black” style; an incorporation of the ethic of mean streets—to “make it” is not just to have wealth, but to have it without strain. Whatever the muscles and organs are doing, the face of the “black” star almost never shows it. Bob McAdoo of the Buffalo Braves can drive to the basket with two men on him, pull up, turn around, and hit a basket without the least flicker of emotion. The Knicks’ Walt Frazier, flamboyant in dress, cars, and companions, displays nothing but a quickly raised fist after scoring a particularly important basket. (Interestingly, the black coaches in the N.B.A. exhibit far less emotion on the bench than

their white counterparts; Washington's K. C. Jones and Seattle's Bill Russell are statue-like compared with Tommy Heinsohn, Jack Ramsay, or Dick Motta.)

If there is a single trait that characterizes "black" ball it is leaping agility. Bob Cousy, ex-Celtic great and former pro coach, says that "when coaches get together, one is sure to say, 'I've got the one black kid in the country who can't jump.' When coaches see a white boy who can jump or who moves with extraordinary quickness, they say, 'He should have been born black, he's that good.'"

Don Nelson of the Celtics recalls that in 1970, Dave Cowens, then a relatively unknown Florida State graduate, prepared for his rookie season by playing in the Rucker League, an outdoor Harlem competition that pits pros against playground stars and college kids. So ferocious was Cowens' leaping power, Nelson says, that "when the summer was over, everyone wanted to know who the white son of a bitch was who could jump so high." That's another way to overcome a crowd around the basket—just go over it.

Speed, mobility, quickness, acceleration, "the moves"—all of these are catchphrases that surround the "black" playground style of play. So does the most racially tinged of attributes, "rhythm." Yet rhythm is what the black stars themselves talk about; feeling the flow of the game, finding the tempo of the dribble, the step, the shot. It is an instinctive quality, one that has led to difficulty between systematic coaches and free-form players. "Cats from the street have their own rhythm when they play," said college dropout Bill Spivey, onetime New York high-school star. "It's not a matter of somebody setting you up and you shooting. You *feel* the shot. When a coach holds you back, you lose the feel and it isn't fun anymore."

Connie Hawkins, the legendary Brooklyn playground star, said of Laker coach Bill Sharman's methodical style of teaching, "He's systematic to the point where it begins to be a little too much. It's such an action-reaction type of game that when you have to do everything the same way, I think you lose something."

There is another kind of basketball that has grown up in America. It is not played on asphalt playgrounds with a crowd of kids competing for the court; it is played on macadam driveways by one boy with a ball and a backboard nailed over the garage; it is played in Midwestern gyms and on Southern dirt courts. It is a mechanical, precise development of skills (when Don Nelson was an Iowa farm boy, his incentive to make his shots was that an errant rebound would land in the middle of chicken droppings), without frills, without flow, but with effectiveness. It is "white" basketball: jagged, sweaty, stumbling, intense. A "black" player overcomes an obstacle with finesse and body control; a "white" player reacts by outrunning or overpowering the obstacle.

By this definition, the Boston Celtics and the Chicago Bulls are classically "white" teams. The Celtics almost never use a player with dazzling moves;

that would probably make Red Auerbach swallow his cigar. Instead, the Celtics wear you down with execution, with constant running, with the same play run again and again. The rebound triggers the fast break, with everyone racing downcourt; the ball goes to John Havlicek, who pulls up and takes the jump shot, or who fakes the shot and passes off to the man following, the "trailer," who has the momentum to go inside for a relatively easy shot.

The Bulls wear you down with punishing intensity, hustling, and defensive tactics which are either aggressive or illegal, depending on what side you're on. The Bulls—particularly Jerry Sloan and Norm Van Lier (one white, one black for the quota-minded)—seem to reject the concept of an out-of-bounds line. They are as likely to be found under the press table or wrapped around the ushers as on the court.

Perhaps the most classically "white" position is that of the quick forward, one without great moves to the basket, without highly developed shots, without the height and mobility for rebounding effectiveness. What does he do? He runs. He runs from the opening jump to the last horn. He runs up and down the court, from base line to base line, back and forth under the basket, looking for the opening, for the pass, for the chance to

The Stars In Living Black and White

Skin color is a clumsy guide to black and white styles of play. The mobility, leaping ability, and quickness of black players, the hustle, drive, and intensity of white players break down too often. Here, for example, are four teams: black "black" players; white "white" players; black "white" players; and white "black" players. It was prepared with the patient advice and help of Bob Ryan, basketball writer for *The Boston Globe* and *The Sporting News*.

BLACK "BLACK"

Julius Erving, New York Nets **F**
Connie Hawkins,
 Los Angeles Lakers **F**
Bob McAdoo, Buffalo Braves **C**
Nate Archibald,
 K.C.-Omaha Kings **G**
Earl Monroe, New York Knicks **G**

BLACK "WHITE"

Paul Silas, Boston Celtics **F**
Bill Bridges,
 Golden State Warriors **F**
Nate Thurmond, Chicago Bulls **C**
 Norm Van Lier, Chicago Bulls **G**
Jim McMillian,
 Buffalo Braves **F-G**

WHITE "WHITE"

John Havlicek, Boston Celtics **F**
Mike Riordan,
 Washington Bullets **F**
Sven Nater, New York Nets **C**
Jerry Sloan, Chicago Bulls **G**
Dave Twardzik, Virginia Squires **G**

WHITE "BLACK"

Rick Barry,
 Golden State Warriors **F**
Billy Cunningham,
 Philadelphia 76ers **F**
Dave Cowens, Boston Celtics **C**
Pete Maravich,
 New Orleans Jazz **G**
Paul Westphal, Phoenix Suns **G**

take a quick step and the high-percentage shot. To watch Boston's Don Nelson, a player without speed or moves, is to wonder what this thirty-five-year-old is doing in the N.B.A.—until you see him swing free and throw up a shot that, without demanding any apparent skill, somehow goes in the basket more frequently than the shots of any of his teammates. And to watch his teammate John Havlicek, also thirty-five, is to see “white” ball at its best.

Havlicek stands in dramatic contrast to Julius Erving of the New York Nets. Erving has the capacity to make legends come true; leaping from the foul line and slam-dunking the ball on his way down; going up for a lay-up, pulling the ball to his body and throwing it under and up to the other side of the rim, defying gravity and probability with moves and jumps. Havlicek looks like the living embodiment of his small-town Ohio background. He brings the ball downcourt, weaving left, then right, looking for the path. He swings the ball to a teammate, cuts behind a pick, takes the pass and releases the shot in a flicker of time. It looks plain, unvarnished. But there are not half a dozen players in the league who can see such possibilities for a free shot, then get that shot off as quickly and efficiently as Havlicek.

To Jim McMillian of Buffalo, a black with “white” attributes, himself a quick forward, “it’s a matter of environment. Julius Erving grew up in a different environment from Havlicek—John came from a very small town in Ohio. There everything was done the easy way, the shortest distance between two points. It’s nothing fancy, very few times will he go one-on-one; he hits the lay-up, hits the jump shot, makes the free throw, and after the game you look and you say, ‘How did he hurt us that much?’”

“White” ball, then, is the basketball of patience and method. “Black” ball is the basketball of electric self-expression. One player has all the time in the world to perfect his skills, the other a need to prove himself. These are slippery categories, because a poor boy who is black can play “white” and a white boy of middle-class parents can play “black.” K. C. Jones and Pete Maravich are athletes who seem to defy these categories. And what makes basketball the most intriguing of sports is how these styles do not necessarily clash; how the punishing intensity of “white” players and the dazzling moves of the “blacks” can fit together, a fusion of cultures that seems more and more difficult in the world beyond the out-of-bounds line.

West Is West

Whenever stardom in light
I craved the sharing of
comes to mind there is
the image of Jerry West
Hitting a 20 foot jumper
with an ingenious precision
made one think
he was always right there:
scoring at the edge of the key

Mo Udall's Denver Nuggets

Presidential candidate Morris K. Udall is said to be a pleasant fellow; but as a presidential hopeful it is said he appears to be too much the intellectual. Of late he has been trying to appear less erudite, more like one of the boys. He declares: "What this country needs is an athlete, a former professional basketball player"—meaning himself. Mo Udall is good at making wry comments, but the joke here, unfortunately, is lost on most of his listeners. They are unaware that the professional basketball team he played for was more representative of socialism than capitalism. It was the player-owned, player-controlled Denver Nuggets of the 1948–49 season.

Morris got into basketball following his brother Stewart, as Mo followed Stew, former Secretary of Interior, into national politics. Stew had led his Arizona University basketball team to a berth in the NIT in 1945. Morris's big moment in basketball came with the Nuggets. Mo says of his role, "I was a sub on an expansion team that went into a 13-game losing streak and then folded." Actually, Mo was the fifth best scorer on the Nuggets and a well respected rebounder. The team played all but the final two games of the season before folding, and despite the losing streak managed to end up second to last in the league, the National Basketball League. The following season a merger of the National Basketball League and the Basketball Association of America created the NBA.

The player-owned Nuggets were rather fortunate to survive financially until the last week of the season. The team was probably the most under-financed outfit in modern big-league sports history. Those who played for the Nuggets had to be committed to some kind of principle or ideal, since it was known from the start that the chance for profit was slim. By joint agreement the players would not be guaranteed a salary. They would try to live off the gate receipts. As described in a *Sporting News* article on this unusual team, players were recruited by manager Hal Davis who would explain, "We're just making a start this season. We're going to share whatever money we make, but probably it won't even be enough to keep us in groceries. We may break even next season. By the third year we ought to be well enough established to get a return on the time and money we've sunk in the first two years. And we'll be splitting the whole melon—there won't be any promoter getting the biggest slice." The Denver Nuggets were incorporated with stock distributed to the players; as Davis explained, "The value of this stock depends on the team's success. The harder we work at the game, the more we get out of it."

Manager Davis was granted authority to handle the club's day-to-day business affairs, but as pointed out in *Sporting News*, "important decisions

were left to all the squad members. In one meeting the players voted to fine one of their number guilty of an outburst of temperament. He paid the fine and has behaved since."

In 1949, big-league basketball teams required an initial investment of from 75 to 100,000 dollars. Getting players to forgo a guaranteed salary saved much of this cost. And the Nuggets found other ways. Ralph Bishop doubled as player and coach. Forward Jack Cotton was an expert mechanic and kept the players' cars in running order. Guard Leonard Alterman was the team auditor; and forward Mo Udall, after passing his bar exam, became the team lawyer. An office secretary was the only paid staffer for the Denver Nuggets Incorporated.

To keep their families in groceries, the players held moonlighting jobs. Alterman's job made him miss games for business trips. In this informal atmosphere, guard Al Guokas got permission to go home to Philadelphia for Christmas, missing a game. Without salaries there had to be some side benefits.

Mo Udall was of course allowed to go to Arizona in January to take his bar exams. He sent the team a telegram on the eve of an important game he was missing. "Please fellas, win one for the old Mormon," Udall being a Mormon. The next day the *Denver Post* sports page headline read, "Message from Mo Helps Nugs to Win."

The Nuggets became a pro expansion team under rather odd circumstances, at least by today's sports standards. The year prior to joining the National Basketball League, the Nuggets had been technically an amateur outfit, an AAU team, and had finished second to the Phillips 66 Oilers in the National AAU Tournament. The AAU had some tough teams, whose sponsors had scoured the country to win the services of good players by offering them paying jobs on the side. In those years, newspaper sports sections were filled during winter off-days with debate over who played the best basketball, the pros, or the AAU, or the collegians. The collegians usually whipped the pros in the annual All-Star game; and as for the big-time AAU teams like the 66ers and the Nuggets, many people felt they were really just pros in disguise. A magazine article on the 66 Oilers was titled "The Amateur Professionals from Bartlesville Oklahoma." Some said the 66ers were pro because they played like pros, while others said it was because the Phillips petroleum company provided the players so many fringe benefits they might as well have been pros.

When the Denver Nuggets went professional for the 48-49 season, they became the first major-league team in the West, an area where the pro game had been badmouthed as being a corrupt form of basketball, a commercial product rather than sport. In the years right after World War II, the so-called amateur AAU had an almost exclusive hold in the West, and openly professional teams in big-time ball in the East.

When Nuggets team manager Hal Davis, coach Ralph Bishop and a couple of players sat down to discuss the possibility of going pro, they were

searching for a way to avoid some of the drawbacks of professionalism. They felt there was room for a new form of pro team. Genuine major-league pro basketball was still rather new, dating only from the end of World War II. New teams in the East, like the New York Knicks and Boston Celtics, were run with all the drawbacks, player reserve, player drafts, and much buying and trading around of players. The Knicks, in their first year, ran through twenty different players.

The Nuggets decided they would not hold their fellow athletes to a reserve if they wanted to leave, and they would try to avoid the temptation of trading. Rather unavoidably, coach Bishop had to be given the right to cut a player from the squad, but as manager Davis said, in the case of the Nuggets, "When a player slows up . . . he is likely to be the first to suggest that he be replaced. After all, the players themselves own the club and are looking after its best interests. Ordinarily, professional basketball is a pretty cold-blooded business with players bought and sold like so much livestock, but every Nugget is also a stockholder."

As a pro team in Denver the Nuggets were going to have a hard time getting established with the fans. Denver was the AAU capital of the world, the host city of the national AAU tournament, and a city that for years had fielded at least one, and often three, of the top dozen AAU teams in the nation. The Nuggets began their inaugural pro season in a rather second-fiddle position to the AAU Denver Chevoletts. The Cheves had radio coverage. The Nuggets didn't. The Cheves played in the Civic Auditorium, capacity 7000-plus. The Nuggets played in the Denver University fieldhouse, capacity 3,600.

So why would the Nuggets try to go pro, and at that with such slim financing that they hardly had the money for uniforms? The question is a generic one, a question of why America has professional sports at all. From the players' point of view, the AAU so-called amateur system must have appeared as a rip-off of their talents. Ticket prices for AAU games were comparable to those on most pro teams, and attendance was about the same. AAU teams took in a lot of money and all the players got was a moonlighting job on the side. As long as spectators are willing to pay to see a game there will be money interests trying to cash in on potential profits, and players will be concerned that they get something of a fair return for their performance. College players may be willing to perform at profitable games merely out of school spirit; but in the late 1940s even a good number of college players felt ripped off and took money from gamblers. College players in Madison Square Garden were particularly susceptible to overtures from gamblers. The Garden's college double-header programs packed in the fans, and in order to sell more high-priced seats, the college rooting sections were removed from center court to the second upper deck behind the backboard. The players found themselves performing before well-dressed socialites and, of course, the gamblers.

In going openly professional the Nuggets were cutting through the

hypocrisy that was rampant then in so-called amateur basketball. Some of the Nuggets on the previous year's AAU team didn't like the pro idea, or didn't like the insecurity of no guaranteed salary, and they found positions on other AAU teams. There were plenty of replacements available, however; coach Bishop received letters from all over the country from players wishing a try-out on the player-owned Nuggets. Regrettably, only one experienced professional asked for a chance.

His case points out one of the problems faced by the Nuggets and facing any attempt today at player-owned, and under-financed, sport. Bob Doll had been for two years one of the better guards in the Basketball Association of America, then the league of the Knicks, Celtics, Warriors, etc. Doll jumped to the Nuggets of the National League in order to play near home. He was a graduate of Colorado University. Like others on the Nuggets, Doll appears to have been a man of some principles. During World War II Doll had insisted on being sent overseas to fight the Nazis, rejecting an offer to remain in the states playing basketball for the military base team.

Now he was in a battle to test the possibility of player-controlled sport, and he failed the test. His two years of big league paychecks had given him the good things in life, and some debts. After a month with the Nuggets he asked permission to go back to the high-paying Basketball Association. Coach Bishop freely gave Doll his release. The Denver press, however, did not forgive him, running a number of stories on the allegedly money-hungry home town deserter.

Today it is highly doubtful that a player-owned team could get a franchise in any sports big league. Today's sports club owners are even reluctant to allow in a civic-funded team—of which there were two in the old National Basketball League. The National League allowed in all kinds of teams, including one sponsored by the Pittsburgh YMHA. The National League integrated big-league basketball when it granted the barnstorming New York Rens, an all-black outfit, a franchise in 1948.

Financially, the Nuggets failed. But as a test case for player ownership of pro basketball they appear to have made their point. No sooner had the season ended than the National League admitted a second, and better financed, player-owned team, the Indianapolis Olympians. The Olympians were composed of virtually the entire 1949 squad from Kentucky University, the NCAA champions. Six of these players had been on the 1948 Olympic team. The Olympians wanted to stick together as a team, as friends are wont to stick together. The Basketball Association of the New York Knicks and company would have selected them piecemeal through the typical college player draft. The National League gave them a chance to stay together. Having the Olympians in their league would prove a strong bargaining point in the negotiations that summer that resulted in the merger creating the NBA.

The Nuggets were reorganized under private ownership and entered the NBA. Mo Udall did not go along. He most likely would have made it as

a player. He had been the "sixth man" on the Nuggets and a third of the time a starter. Probably his finest moment was in sinking the clutch basket in a game with the Syracuse Nats that had seen a street-fight-type brawl in which a ref had been twice punched and suffered a reported loss of a full inch of skin from his chin. Pro basketball was a rough sport in those days. A *Denver Post* headline after one game read, "Only One Fight as Nugs Lose."

The Nuggets might have lost less often had they been a more thoroughly professional outfit; had they been a team that didn't allow a player to take off for Christmas, a team that didn't have players showing up tired from working all day at a nine-to-five. When they did show up they could count on getting into the game; win or lose, coach Bishop almost always cleared the bench. Although the Nuggets ended up 18-44, the team did have a few glorious moments, as when Mo Udall put away the Syracuse Nats, the league champions and future NBA champions. When the Nuggets beat the Nats it was as if a bunch of working stiffs had gotten together, played a good game, and beaten the best, the champs. Things like that don't happen very much, anymore, in the world of sport.

Now an older Morris Udall stumps the country as a spokesman for a type of liberalism that isn't seen much anymore either.

To Bill Russell

I have never seen
an eagle with a beard
but if there is
in some strange
corner of the world
and the Hindu
belief is true,
you will return
and beat your wings
violently
over my grave.

A Fan's Notes on Earl Monroe

Toward the end of the 1976–77 basketball season, the editors of this magazine, aware of my interest in the game, called me and asked how I'd feel about covering the NBA playoffs for them. At first the idea seemed provocative, but then the thought of traveling around, and the time required to do a good job, not to mention the disappointment of the Knicks not making the playoffs, rendered the whole notion unappealing. But I said I wouldn't mind writing something about Earl Monroe, who had given me a great deal of pleasure watching him play over the years. I didn't really know Monroe, although we had exchanged several sentences on the Madison Square Garden floor two years ago. I was filming a comic sequence for my movie, *Annie Hall*, in which certain actors, including myself, played basketball against the Knicks. The sequence was later cut from the film because it didn't come off funny enough, but I did get to meet Monroe, who said hello and mentioned that he had received a fan letter I once sent him. He said it had meant something to him and that he had carried it around and showed it to friends. I didn't believe him because, exposed as I am to gratuitous pleasantries all the time in my profession, I am not a trusting person.

That was two years ago and it was the first and last time I met or spoke with Earl Monroe for any reason. When I suggested writing about him, *Sport's* editors suggested I spend lots of time with him, at practice, in the Knick lockerroom, even travel with the team for an away game.

All these things seemed superfluous to me. My ideas on Monroe had nothing to do with getting the feel of the lockerroom, experiencing the smell of sweat, hearing the players curse, and all that rigamarole.

The truth was, I immediately saw myself cast in the role of the bespectacled, white, pseudo-intellectual trying to form a "heavy" thesis about a gift of grace and magical flair the black athlete possesses that can never be reduced to anything but poetry. I have always envied this gift and have often said that if I could live life over as someone else it would be wonderful to be Sugar Ray Robinson or Willie Mays. With my luck, however, I would undoubtedly wind up John Maynard Keynes.

Assured finally that Monroe was thrilled about the cover story and even invited by the great man to his house in eager anticipation of a long chat, I agreed to meet him for a few hours on the weekend. Of course, I knew there was also the outside chance that when I met the magician Earl Monroe he would be disappointing. This has happened to me before when I've met famous people whose work I've loved. Not every time. Not with Groucho Marx, for instance, but with certain other comedians and film directors who shall remain nameless. I did meet another magician who did

not disappoint me. It was Stan Musial and he is indeed an amateur magician. For hours, in the bedroom at a party in Washington, D.C. he delighted me with astounding card tricks. It was quite thrilling to see the menacing left-handed slugger who had made my Brooklyn childhood miserable by lining one shot after another off of and over the rightfield wall at Ebbets Field, produce from his wallet the restored ace of spades that I had moments before torn up.

I didn't follow basketball until 1967. Baseball, boxing and the theater provided most of my entertainment. The theater has since become boring and there are no plays approaching the pleasure given by a good sporting event. Even a game against a last-place team holds the possibility of thrills, whereas in the theater all seems relatively predictable. Baseball remains a joy for me, but basketball has emerged as the most beautiful of sports. In basketball, more than in virtually any other sport, personal style shines brightest. It allows for eccentric, individual play.

Give the basketball to such diverse talents as Julius Erving, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Walt Frazier, Rick Barry, George McGinnis, Dave Bing or Bob McAdoo, to name a tiny fraction, and you get dramatically distinctive styles of dribbling, passing, shooting and defensive play. There is great room in basketball for demonstrable physical artistry that often can be compared to serious dance.

So there I was in 1967 leafing through the sports section of a newspaper one day (I still read that section first) when I came across the name Earl Monroe. I had never heard of Monroe, knew nothing of his daily rookie brilliance, nor ever heard of his astounding feats at Winston-Salem. I just liked the name, free-floating, three syllables and euphonious to me. Earl Monroe. The name worked. (Years later, when I did a film called *Sleeper*, I named myself Miles Monroe. On me it was kind of a funny name.) I came across Monroe's name again every few days as I glanced over the basketball boxscores in a casual, disinterested way and noticed that he invariably led the scoring column.

Monroe 34, Monroe 36, Monroe 24, Monroe 28, Monroe 40! I was impressed by the consistent high numbers and repeated his name every now and then like it was a mantra. It still sounded musical. Earl Monroe. I think I even recall seeing a picture of him on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* that year and thinking he was very interesting looking. I was, and I don't know why, aware of Monroe in some special way. Although I didn't follow his sport much then, if someone had awakened me in the middle of the night and said, "Quick, name your favorite basketball player," I'd have snapped back: "Earl Monroe." This was probably his first working of magic on me, though I had no real idea of what Baltimore Bullet fans were witnessing and feeling each night when they saw him play and referred to him as The Pearl or Black Jesus.

The first time I saw Monroe, an actor friend said, "Come with me to the Garden tonight. I want you to see this guy. You'll like his style. It's real

herky-jerky.” That was in 1968. By then I was more interested in basketball and had begun following the Knicks a little. They had made the playoffs and had captured the imagination of New York. I went and saw Monroe score 32 points against Walt Frazier. This is Walt Frazier, mind you, who played the guard position as perfectly as it has ever been played and who was to be voted on the all-defensive team seven years running. Thirty-two points and Frazier said, “I had my hand in his face all night. He shoots without looking.”

I went the next night too and while the Knicks double-teamed Monroe at every turn, he tore the place up with a buzzer beater that he flipped in as he ran across the midcourt line at halftime, and he kept running right into the lockerroom.

My impressions of Monroe then? I immediately ranked him with Willie Mays and Sugar Ray Robinson as athletes who went beyond the level of sports as sport to the realm of sports as art. Seemingly awkward and yet breathtakingly graceful, with an unimpressive physique, knobby knees, and the tiny ankles of a thoroughbred racehorse, Monroe in seasons to come would put on exhibition after exhibition of simply magical shot-making. One sportswriter wrote that his misses are more exciting than most guys’ baskets. It’s pointless to describe Monroe on the court. It’s been done a thousand times by good writers who try vainly to communicate in print the excitement with which he plays. They refer to his head fakes, shoulder fakes, spins, double pumps, stutter steps, hip shots, arms and legs flying in different directions at once, but these things in themselves do not sum up the ferocious rush he gives the audience. After all, there are players like Nate Archibald, Dave Bing, Walt Frazier, Julius Erving, Connie Hawkins, who have unusual grace, beauty and excitement, and who also dip and twist and toss their bodies one way while their arms move another way as they hang in space.

What makes Monroe different is the indescribable heat of genius that burns deep inside him. Some kind of diabolical intensity comes across his face when he has the ball. One is suddenly transported to a more primitive place. It’s roots time. The eyes are big and white, the teeth flash, the nostrils flare. He dribbles the ball too high, but with a controlled violence. The audience gets high with anticipation of some new type of thrill about to occur. Seconds later he is moving in aggressively, one on one, against a defender and you sense the man is in trouble. Monroe is suddenly double-teamed and now there are two men hanging all over him. Then it happens. A quick twist, a sudden move and he’s by both men. Either that or a series of flashing arm moves cease with a lightning pass to a teammate he has never even bothered to look at.

It’s amazing, because the audience’s “high” originates inside Monroe and seems to emerge over his exterior. He creates a sense of danger in the arena and yet has enough wit in his style to bring off funny ideas when he wants to. He has, as an athlete-performer, what few actors possess. Marlon

Brando is one such actor. The audience never knows what will happen next and the potential for a sudden great thrill is always present. If we think of an actor like George C. Scott, for instance, we feel he is consistently first rate, but he cannot move a crowd the way Brando does. There is something indescribable in Brando that pins an audience on the edge of its seats at all times. Perhaps because we sense a possible peak experience at any given moment, and when it occurs, the performance transcends mere acting and soars into the sublime. On a basketball court, Monroe does this to spectators.

I began watching the Baltimore Bullets, and while still a Knicks fan, always rooted for Monroe when Baltimore played New York. "We had no set offense," one Bullet player once said. "We gave the ball to Earl. He *was* our offense." The Bullets did very well with Monroe (not to mention such other great stars as Wes Unseld and Gus Johnson) and I followed his career like any dedicated fan. I was sorry I had missed his rookie year and his college games and I tried to imagine what he must have been like at that age, before the problems with his arthritic knees set in. Monroe is not overly fast these days, though he once was, but like the magician he is, he creates the *illusion* of speed. When he takes off with the ball and races the length of the court, he resembles an animated cartoon character whose feet never touch the floor. I recall a newspaper interview with Monroe after he had scored clusters of points against the Knicks in a playoff game, and he confessed to the desire to be a comedian. I thought, "*A comedian? But why? Why would anyone want to be a comedian when he can do what he does?*"

Then in 1971 he got traded to the Knicks. Naturally, I was happy to be able to watch him more often, but there were two uneasy questions. Could he play alongside Walt Frazier? Frazier was then the premier all-around guard in basketball and had set standards so high that years later when he might be off his game a fraction and could no longer single-handedly win games, the fans could not deal with it and turned on him. I found this unforgivable and it certainly says something about the myth of the New York sports fan.

In those days, however, Walt Frazier played with a serene brilliance that made it seem that he could steal the ball *whenever he wanted to*, dribble it behind his back and score at will. He was wonderful to look at (great posture, perpetual "cool"), dressed flashy off the court, drove a Rolls and got an awful lot of rebounds for a guard.

Monroe, who when he joined the Knicks reportedly said, "Man, I got two Rolls," was also used to being the cynosure of his team. He had never had to be overly concerned with defense and never had to share the lime-light with anyone approaching Frazier's greatness. This didn't worry me, because I felt the two guards would be simply breathtaking together, which they indeed were. They played brilliantly in tandem. Frazier was the steadier of the two. He did everything perfectly. Monroe was, as always,

the more dramatic and explosive one. Consequently, when Frazier dribbled up the middle you could count on your two points because of his smooth-as-satin style. When Monroe drove, his lust for danger took him in directions where he might get the ball slapped away or might miss a shot because of spectacular gyrations. Again, like Brando, Monroe takes risks, and while some fail, enough come off to make him an artist.

The second and more irritating question to me was, can Monroe fit into the flow of team play? Can he become part of that superb combination of Bill Bradley, Walt Frazier, Willis Reed, Dave DeBusschere, etc., that hits the open man, retains poise, and sooner or later grinds up opponents like a well-oiled machine? Some said Monroe would not be able to adjust. Others felt Monroe could learn to give off the ball, to play defense, to sublimate his brilliant one-on-one skills and contribute to this championship club. But I asked, why would anyone want that of him? After all, here is the single most exciting player in basketball, a solo performer. Do we really want him to abandon his individuality and become a cog in a machine. Would we ask Heifitz to become a sublimated member of the string section? Great Knick fan that I was, I would rather have seen the team set up Monroe for his dazzling solo feats than the other way around. Is winning so important that we can afford to sacrifice Monroe's essential gift to the game of basketball?

Now there were those who argued with me and said they derived more aesthetic satisfaction out of watching a five-man unit execute with the precision of the Knicks at their height. Nothing was more beautiful, they said, than the ball going from Frazier to Bradley, to DeBusschere, back to Frazier, to Reed for a basket. Well, what can I say? I don't agree. Perhaps because I'm a performer. Artistry like Monroe's does not come along often and I for one feel sacrifices must be made for art. It's great if the team wins (Baltimore did quite well with a Monroe-oriented offense), but if the price included the conformity of Earl Monroe to a patterned offense, I didn't like it.

The outcome we now know. Monroe learned defense. He modified his style in favor of team play. He scored fewer points. At other times, his irrepressible genius on the court asserted itself. The Knicks won with him until Reed and DeBusschere retired. Then Frazier and Monroe carried the offense. The team acquired other stars in Spencer Haywood and Bob McAdoo, but the Knicks have yet to jell. Monroe at 32 years old has emerged as the toast of New York's basketball fans because with the team's demise as a power, more and more they turned to his older one-on-one skills to get them out of jams.

While Knickerbocker problems seem to run deep, Monroe again burns brightly and enjoyed a great season in 1976-77. He has grown in all his skills and has returned to much of his own style play. The difference now is, that if a given night demands it, he can play defense, hand off, steal, and quarterback the team. He is now the Knick captain. He is also still the

magician. He might play a game as he did on January 1 and take ten shots and not miss one. Or he might win the game with a clutch basket in the last three seconds or, in the final ten minutes, score 16 of the Knicks' last 18 points. These are just a few feats he performed last year. When the fans see him pulling off his warmup jacket they get ready for the closest thing to a magical experience. They sense nature will be defied in some way.

At precisely two p.m., the appointed hour, I ring the bell of a fine old townhouse on New York's upper West Side. The name on the bell reads: Monroe. I am buzzed in and stand at the bottom of a staircase like a supplicant before Dr. No or the head of SMERSH. Suddenly an unbelievably beautiful woman descends the staircase and says with confidence unseen since the days of Mae West, "Hi—I'm Earl's lady." I smile, cough, look at my shoe tops, and mutter something that sounds like, "Aha-un-eh." As usual, I'm right on top of things. "Earl's not back yet. Would you care to wait?"

"Wait? Yes. Sure." The music from the rock station on the radio is flowing through the house at a level that would drown out the takeoff of an SST. I follow this utterly devastating woman up the stairs. The juxtaposition of our bodies causes me to think, my God, she's packed into those jeans with an ice cream scoop. We sit opposite one another and I manage to achieve maximum awkwardness in 30 seconds. To call "Earl's lady" beautiful is an understatement. I writhe, shuffle. She tells me her name is Tina and assures me Earl had some errands but was looking forward to our meeting. The house is simply furnished and here and there are mementoes of the great man's career. Plaques, photos, a game ball under glass, certificates of athletic achievement that bear the name Vernon Earl Monroe. (Vernon?) I learn through conversation with Tina that the photos of beautiful kids on the wall are Monroe's children from previous love affairs in other cities. "He's a good father," she tells me. "He loves his kids."

A half hour goes by as I chat with Tina. I learn how they met: at a disco-dance. I am told that Earl adores watching television. "There's a set in every room in the house and they're on all day and night." Tina tells me Earl eats lightly. Fish mostly. She says Earl took up tennis as a hobby a year or so ago and swiftly achieved tournament level ability. I learn that Knick players don't fraternize with one another that much, although they are friendly. An hour is gone. Still no Earl. Tina says that Earl has two cars and, unlike Clyde, no chauffeur because, "He's such a fantastic driver he could never have anyone else drive him." She says Dr. J has acknowledged Earl as an inspiration and model. Now and then the two phones ring and since they are identical but with different numbers, Tina must hold her hand on each instrument and feel it in order to tell which one is ringing.

"Earl's not here," she would tell various callers in her Mae West style, "he's been de-tained." I learn Earl and Tina stay in a lot, play board games, now and then dine late, sometimes around midnight, though then

they might hit a dance hall and stay out late. They generally keep to themselves. I ask about a story on Earl wherein he quoted Descartes and Tina tells me, "He likes reading sports magazines mostly."

Hours have now gone by and we are out of conversation. Finally I must leave for another appointment. "Earl will be so disappointed he missed you," Tina says.

I back out the door, fumbling and apologizing, for what, I don't know. Then, walking home this sunny, Saturday afternoon, I think to myself, how wonderful. This great athlete is so unconcerned about the usual nonsense of social protocol. Unimpressed by me, a cover interview and all the attendant fuss and adulation that so many people strive for, he simply fails to show up. Probably off playing tennis or fooling with his new Mercedes.

Whatever he was doing, I admired him for his total unconcern. Tina said he would be very upset that he had missed me, but I knew it was not the kind of thing Earl Monroe would dwell on with the anguish of a Raskolnikov.

That night Earl scored 28 points and had eight misses against Washington; the next day he tossed in 31 points against the same team.

I thought about how *Sport's* editors had relayed Monroe's enthusiasm about the prospect of our interview. I thought, too, that if I had missed an interview I'd be consumed with guilt. But that's me and I'm not a guy who can ask for the ball with the team down by a point, two second left on the clock and, with two players hacking at my body and shielding my vision, score from the corner. If I miss that basket and lose the game for my team, I commit suicide. For Monroe, well, he's as nonchalant about that tension-strung situation as he is about keeping appointments. That's why I'd tense up and blow clutch shots, while Monroe's seem to drop through the hoop like magic.

Elgin Baylor

you had to see it

the leap

sudden

selfgenerated

the moment

bursting

into golden petals

arch

of the neck

ex-

tension of the arm

you just had

to see

the feint

leading

to a takeoff

arms

lifting

the whole flower

glorious

and the great re-

lease

of energy

you had

to see

Baylor

before his knees went

how

he could

dance

**It's A Challenge, But It's Very Difficult
(Jim Barnett talks about defense)**

Editor's note: This interview has been edited down from a much longer interview taken in 1975 at Live Oak Park in Berkeley, California, between Jim Barnett, the then starting guard of the Golden State Warriors, and Cisco Brushman, referred to in the interview as C.B. (Mr. Brushman goes by the name Larry Schonbrun off the court.) The interview was accomplished by strapping a microphone around Jim's neck so that he could actually demonstrate on the court what he was saying.

C.B. Okay, you're guarding Walt Frazier.

JIM: Okay, Walt Frazier would come down, and he would . . .

C.B.: You're probably playing him very close, right, almost right on top of him?

JIM: Oh yeah. In fact, once you've picked him up at half court, you've got to start getting body contact, not only hand but body contact. If you don't get body contact, you're just like this [Jim is standing a foot away with his hands up]—you're backing up, and if you don't get body contact pretty soon, the guy's right in here [between the foul line and the circle]. And you can't let a guy come in here because he's going to bury that shot. See? [Jim sinks a shot.] So, once he gets to the top of the key or a couple more feet, I'll try to bump him. Especially, anytime they get to the top of the key, I always bump him. Yeah, he's doing it like that [Jim is pushing in on me and I am bumping him out with my belly]. When I do this kind of bumping, I try not to use my hand. Because with that much contact if I use my hands, they're going to call a foul. But if I get my body in front of him, the referee says, "Well, he's got good position on him, good defensive position." So, I'll throw my hips out into him like that as he's coming around. If he's just going around and just kind of comes back in here [Jim backs in, pushing me towards the basket] . . . Now you see I gained a couple of feet on you. See that? I'm a little closer than I was before. Now here's where I hope we used up enough of the twenty-four-second clock so that he had to get rid of the ball. Maybe he doesn't have that good of a shot. But, if he does have enough time, he can take me down in here [side of the lane] and then turn around and get this shot and make it, more often than not. That's another reason for picking him up early, to make him use some time. Take him up in the backcourt even. Make him use some time so he can't have a full twenty-four seconds to set up and get this kind of a shot. This is the kind of a shot right here [side of the lane] which is a good shot for Walt Frazier.

C.B.: In other words, this is where he does his damage? [Jim is standing on the side of the lane].

JIM: That's right.

C.B.: He's got you here even though you're guarding him as tightly as you possibly can.

JIM: Yes.

C.B.: Now, what does he do now that makes him so effective that his shot can't be blocked?

JIM: Well, I'll tell you, because he puts the ball back. He jumps fairly well. He uses a lot of head and shoulder fakes. Not necessarily to get you to leave the ground, but just to get you off balance for a split second. He knows where your equilibrium is. When you're going one way, he goes the other and he fades away. And he has a tremendous amount of concentration on the ball.

C.B.: So, you're saying that all he has to do is to get in close enough to where he takes a shot. Because once he gets in there, he can get it off.

JIM: More often than not. But the thing is, if you're playing good defense, he's not going to have the ball all the time. People say, "Well, why can't he do that every time?" As I say, he doesn't have the time; he doesn't have the ball; someone else is doing their own move with the ball at the time. You're going to win once in a while. The defensive player will come out ahead once in a while but very rarely. When he gets down in here and I have him stopped with the dribble, now there's a few things I learned too. I know that he's right-handed, and so I get on that side of him. I try to bother his shot this way [Jim places his right hand over the ball as I'm holding it]. I get right there, and now I can get the ball, but I leave myself vulnerable for this type of thing [Jim changes position, pivots away and shoots].

C.B.: Very vulnerable, because doesn't he do something like this? [C.B. moves around Jim on his opposite side.]

JIM: Right. You know, that kind of thing. You're very vulnerable when he's in very close and you're the defender on the side. You're also very vulnerable to a guy floating to the basket. But that's what you have a big center for. And so, if I have Nate Thurmond back in there, that's going to help. He's got to help me in there. It's a team game. Earl Monroe, I guard him much better than Walt Frazier. In my early years, when Earl first came in the league (he's gotten a little smarter since then) in one game I blocked seven of his shots, which is unbelievable for a guard. I blocked seven shots. I got on the side, and he went up and he put the ball right here [Jim holds ball below his neck and shoulders], and he just goes like that [Jim shoots

ball]. And I got my hand on the ball right on there, and at least three of them, I took right away from him. I went down the other end of the court for a layup. But I noticed the next year he came back around, and I started getting on the side and he was giving me all this stuff and came in with a hoopdedoo.

C.B.: You just can't describe that kind of Monroe shot can you?

JIM: Yeah, you can't describe it. He kind of jockies in there and throws it off the backboard. And so, you have to watch it. Then, you've got to play a little more honest and then all of a sudden he's back to his little easy shot. It's a game of instinct. You guess a little bit, but you just work hard and try to play. I try to play honest position defense. I don't use my hands as much as other players do. I try to get my body in front, as I say, and I am quick. I can stay with a guy and I try to get low and get my hips there. And so, when he's right in the middle of a dribble, I try to bump him to make him stop further out. For instance, if you were dribbling and you were trying to back me in with your back to the basket, right there [Jim takes the bulk of his mid-body area and pushes it into my back so that I can't move].

C.B.: That's devastating!

JIM: Right there. That's what I try to do.

C.B.: That's legal?

JIM: Well, I'm in front of you. I'm between you and the basket. So the referee says to himself, "Who caused the contact?" He sees you trying to go this way and I'm trying to hold you out, so he can't really tell who caused the contact.

C.B.: And that's what happens in the pros?

JIM: All the time. Yeah, go real slow [Jim keeps bumping my body out with his belly and hips].

C.B.: Oh, my God! That's really what happens?

JIM: Oh yeah, all the time. All the time. See, I only weigh a hundred and sixty-five pounds so that doesn't hurt Oscar Robertson that much. It doesn't hurt Walt Frazier that much.

C.B.: Yeah, but it's still hard to get by.

JIM: That's the first round.

C.B.: Okay, now let's do Jerry West.

JIM: Okay.

C.B.: What's he going to do? How is he different from . . .

JIM: He's a lot different than Walt Frazier. He's going to beat you differently.

C.B.: Where are you going to pick him up?

JIM: I pick him up here in the back court. I try not to let him get the ball. When they take the ball out of bounds, if Gail Goodrich is taking it into Jerry West, I try to make a forward come out and get the ball from Gail Goodrich.

C.B.: You're going to be on Jerry West that close?

JIM: I'm going to be on West just like this [Jim is right on top of me], and try to make him give the ball to someone else. And, also, when I walk up the court, I try to irritate a guy. As you go up the floor to that end, someone else already has the ball.

C.B.: Okay.

JIM: You're just running up the floor. Okay. Now you're going to run a straight line, and I'm coming back up like this [Jim gets in my way]. You're just looking over there at the ball, and I step in front of you even in the back court. Just to make you mad and irritate you and slow you up a couple of paces. The referee is saying it's kind of chicken to do that sometimes.

C.B.: How do you know that?

JIM: Through experience I know that a referee like Mendy Rudolph will call a foul on me for doing that. Other referees, especially rookie ones, will call a foul on him, a charge, but it's actually away from the play. It doesn't do a thing and I really shouldn't do that. I don't do that as much as I used to. I used to really do that three or four years ago. But with Jerry West, as I say, I pick him up clear in the back court and try not to let him have the ball. If someone else can bring it up, like McMillan, I'm a lot better off.

C.B.: You mean, it's a full time occupation on defense just to try to put yourself on Jerry West, and make sure . . .

JIM: Right, it's a full time occupation.

C.B.: Now what does he do?

JIM: Okay. Once he gets the ball . . .

C.B.: He gets the ball and obviously, you're going to be really close to him.

JIM: Now with West, if he has the ball out here [in the circle] with a dribble, I'm not going to be on him close because's he's just going to go around me. I'm going to be on him just where you are [Jim is about a foot away with his hands in my face] so that I prevent his shot, possibly. But with a dribble left, see, he can go around you. You have a lot more avenues of escape on offense if you have your dribble left. But, if he's dribbling out here, then I'm going to pick him up as close as I do on Frazier.

C.B.: But he isn't like Walt Frazier, right?

JIM: As I say, he's going to beat you with speed and quickness. He's got a tremendous jump shot. And all he has to do is take it. He knows what he's going to do so he just tries to get you off balance for a split second and then he goes up. See [in the middle of a word Jim just jumps up and shoots a jump shot] . . . See, Jerry West is going to embarrass you, whereas Walt Frazier and Oscar Roertson don't embarrass you. People can see you're on them and there's nothing more you can do. But Jerry West might leave you hanging high and dry, so that Chick Hearn, who's an announcer for the Lakers, will say, "He puts Barnett in the popcorn machine." In other words, he faked me clear out. In playground terms, he faked me out of my jock. So West has that asset of tremendous speed and ability to stop on a dime. I mean stop extremely quick and go up for a jump shot. Because before you even leave the ground his ball is released. You can try to cut him down out there [Jim has me force him away from the basket with my arms extended], but then he'll go back to the right and he'll come around to the left and then pop he goes right up for the shot. You see, when you go follow him to the right, he jumps back to the left and in that split second, when you are trying to catch up you think, "Oh, I'm being out here so he's going to be driving." Your first inclination is to go to block him from going to the basket and all of a sudden he stops on a dime with a little rhythm step and the ball is up and a good shot.

C.B.: Very quickly, huh?

JIM: Yeah, as fast as anyone in the NBA on a jump shot. No one has a quicker jump shot than Jerry West. But then, if you do get on him, he still has that quality that it doesn't bother him. Even if you do recover and try to block his shot, he's not as good as Frazier. I don't think. But even if you're all over him, he can still shoot pretty well with you in his face. He relies mainly on getting you off balance and he's also a good driver. He's a quick driver and he has a lot of moves underneath the basket. He's a tremendous player.

C.B.: I'm now Archibald, Nate the Skate.

JIM: Nate the Skate. That's the guy that I dread the most to guard because he can do so many things. He is the quickest guy on the basketball court ever born, has to be.

C.B.: Ever born?

JIM: Undoubtedly. There's no one quicker than Nate Archibald. He can shoot outside now, so you have to play off him. He'd rather drive, but he can shoot outside. He's only five-foot-ten and you say, "How can he get a shot off?" Well, because he's such a tremendous driver. That's the thing with the pros, people don't realize how good these individuals are. That's

how I stopped guys in high school that averaged twenty points a game. I'd hold them to four points because they couldn't drive. A guy could shoot like heck, but if you put a good guy on him he could never get loose and then his jump shot is no good. So, in other words, in order to have a good jump shot, you have to be able to drive. And in order to drive, to get yourself free for a drive, you've got to have a pretty good jump shot. So they enhance each other. And Nate Archibald has done this superbly. He's really developed his jump shot, but his quickness to the basket is even much faster than Jerry West's. Nate Archibald has you in these situations all the time. He gets the ball at half court, and he has the opportunity shot, what you call an opportunity shot. The other shots I was talking about with West and Frazier, they can be done at any time. They aren't really opportunity shots. They're in methodical sequence there. Nate Archibald gets a fantastic amount of layups for a guy five feet ten. The reason is because he gets the ball out on a fast break and comes at you. He also has, if you're watching him on film, a tremendous amount of ability once he leaves his feet to hang in the air for a long time. He can get a big man to commit himself one way or the other. He'll show him a head feint, show him the ball, and the big man will raise his arms to go in that direction. Then suddenly he'll change the shot and put it back here somewhere over his head. [Jim takes the ball and switches it from one side of his body to the other.]

C.B.: That's what Earl Monroe does, isn't it?

JIM: Yeah, similar. Also, Nate Archibald goes to the free throw line a lot. You might say, "Why does a big man foul him?" Because he gets up in the air and the big man gets up in the air, and Nate Archibald can still move his body into the big man and cause contact. Yet they'll always give him the benefit of the doubt and he gets two free throws out of it. I've watched him do this, and it's a skill. I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with this. It's perfect. That's what you should do. I wish I had the ability to do that. But once he's in the air, he can move around. Actually, he may even cause the contact into the big man. But even with the contact, he can still hold the ball clear out to the side and shoot it from the hip and have it go in and put some spin on it or something. He's just a tremendous player. I'm saying how many different things he can do. That's why you don't want to guard him. That's no fun. It's a challenge, but it's very difficult.

basketball (with an assist to charles stetler)

of course i always wanted to write poems,
– but the truth is i have always wanted even
more excruciatingly to play in the NBA.

growing up in rochester my hero natcherly was
the immortal bobby davies how he used
to drill those linedrive twohand setshots rattle
the rims and tear apart the lane a blonde
unbarbered dervish,

feed arnie risen for his so-soft hook shots, screen
for coleman's flips behind the cranium, set up
wanzer's tantalizing archers . . . oh my god

...

yes i loved that bobby davies like a father and was
there the night that he retired with thirty
points and set an NBA assist record . . .

and i loved that big black maurice stokes ill-fated
giant who could do it all, and how i loved jack
twyman, beautifully generous young gentleman,

and loved al butler, although i checked him once
in high school couldn't stop his drive and
couldn't stop his jumpshot couldn't even
block him out on rebounds (that my forte),

but somehow god had deigned me never
to enlarge beyond a foot and inch of slow and skinny
ambition . . .

and then i had a coach at holy cross who hated me because
i wanted oh so bad to overcome my obstacles
(but satan intervened to give him cancer of the ass his
pterodactyl brain was sucked into his ulcerous intestines!

at any rate the comedy of all this is that although i write
a lot of poems i am still in training for the NBA,

and every afternoon i wander to the secondary gym to jerk
around with other porcine faculty

and here's the tragedy of it,

at 27 my legs are gone i can't quite touch
the rim my jumpshot also has
departed, gone, i guess, with the
Bird and the Train,

but nonetheless

my high school coach GEORGE MONAGHAN used to
say: if nothing else will stop the gun
we will be forced to sick THE BULLDOG on him . . .

I AM STILL THAT BULLDOG!!!

and i caution you:

Beware ALCINDOR CHAMBERLAIN BAYLOR WEST and
RUDY LARUSSO—

THE BULLDOG is waiting in the wings AND
the day that GEORGE MONAGHAN, my revered coach, gives
the word,

i will arise to snuff your jumpshots, drive my shoulder through
your chest, fake you into chick hearn's infamous popcorn
machine — — —

you've faced them all: the leapers and the terriers, the hatchetmen
and the sleight of hand . . .

but you have never had to confront
the frenzy of the ultraromantic poet

Stoned Love

"Stoned Love," is what it said against the back wall of the boarded-up tenement beside our parking space — "Watch yo car fo ya, mister?" — "Stoned love," Lamb reads off the password, handing the black kids a quarter, one for each dude who's quick enough in his Converse hightops — A rascals' protective society — Guaranteed nobody will touch your hubcaps while you're inside the stadium, mistah — Not even us — That's the custom in these parts, where grizzly West Madison begs for the extinguishment of open plain, where the soup kitchens are pulpits & the pulpits soup kitchens — In Chicago, every neighborhood's got pride & hangs tough & this one's full of militant winoes who panhandle you, then tell you to get off their beloved turf — & of course, the kids at the parking lots, keeping warm with garbage can bonfires — Plenty wave the traffic on through with flares, try to lure into homegrown lots, but we'll take our chances down a side-street with the unofficial gangster attendants — It's Christmas even & we're feeling charitable — "God bless you, Jerry Mandelbaum — A Dickens scene, with black skins, hemmed in by red brick — The Bulls' colors — Besides, we're late for the game.

Up urinal stairways under bulbless marquees & the earmuff set breathing into silverized programs sold & serenaded about at each ticket-tender's checkpoint — This ain't a stadium, it's a stockyard — But we make it intact to row of seats which Lamb's old man has purchased for holiday-time — The Senator buys center court, or maybe they were freebies, but we'll take 'em, under pendulous mezzanine haze of scoring box lights that hang on Wallenda wires — Bulls & Bucks are near-naked, like animals should be — spiral of lay-ups on shellacked aztec court — First preposterous vision of basketball — The giants shrunk by their insubstantial goal, that little netted sack that even has a hole in the bottom — It's all in the getting it there — & the Senator's at the other end of our cheering section, handing out corned beef sannies & coffee from an official Illinois thermos — More traditions & an uneasy truce between his privilege & our homage to the poor boys at play down below.

Classes unite, races unite, row behind row — Chicago is hoarse before the official buzzers have buzzed or the organist in his moviola cockpit has played a swooning anthem — Enough to bust his pipes — To stand or not to stand? — It's all in the tradition — Sports is no diddly-shit shoe-shuffler in this town, but a forced bondage, the serious business of a serious town — To beat Milwaukee is this night's production quota, but can we pull the Bulls through? — Ben Bentley's intros are like a barker's, like he's already calling a horserace, & the thoroughbreds shuffle out into icy spotlights — Only opposition that matters is the unkind Alcindor, Kareem Abdul-

Jabbar, Maalik al Maalik, Mister Fez Hookshot — Skin like canvas & knobby joints, but so much of it in sweatsuit — A halo of baldness for the Islamic angel, a great pillar glowing with inner peace, hardly there at all, a private man before ten thousand, who hates to exhibit himself like this, won't go to slaughter in this stockyard, but when you're up over seven-feet, there's some people bound to look, people always looking, people go away.

& upon against him, "The ball team disguised as a street gang" — Chicago's own — Cheerleader dressed as horny steer is irrelevant as real cow might be — This team is part of commerce, I told ya, part of paycheck kin & injury to them is familiar & it hurts — First, there's Dick Motta, a real coach, you can see that at five hundred feet from his shiny double-breasted & shiny wave of hair, always dapper even when enraged, pacing sharp-eyed wonder & he has a plan — He's telling it at time-outs to Jerry Sloan, the original Bull, & he's crazy enough to think that's an honor — They didn't recruit him, they let him out of a cage — Dark-maned and broken-nosed before each contest & after polite hand-shaking, in between unleashed unabashed mania that goes airward for 'bounds & is drawn toward the stands or scorers table or collisions, real & imaginary — Black arm pits, our leader, he'll wind up on his back — & flip the ball to "Stormin' Norman," between-the-knees, behind-the-back, over-the-shoulder passer dribbler playmaker charger driver, Count Vän Lier, incurable high-socked show-off — Mixed it up with his hometown pigs — Would kill over a parking ticket — & loves "going against the big man." — Hates to lose, but if he has to, he does it in style.

Don't forget Chet the Jet Walker, too old to be anything but a smoothy, he's got time to conserve, man & he knows how — He runs without legs, he shoots without eyes, he dribbles without his mustache — But he'll hang up a defender with his little ball-gripping wrist fake, then fall away from him, releasing it close-in & never a disturbance of the testicle hoop — Everything about him's a fake but his points that do real damage — Only some nights, you can see his age, & then he's called Chester the Jester — Like a muted trombone, there's Bob Love behind him — Call him the Butterbean, he won't mind — Lima or Pinto or Black-eyed Lentil, no — Butter's all he ate & it sounds slicker: "Butter it, 'bean!" — "Love it to death!" Dark as the south, always disappearing act when he shoots from someplace behind his back, retreating thumbs-up, fists closed in globetrotter shuffle grinning to himself or just staring down at red tennies, his secret is not being there — Dropping them in with soft touch low liners that only a bank of fog could block — "Two with Love!" — The orange in his hands is all gentleness, even to bounce it would be too disturbing, it is meant for sweet kissing rendezvous with the rim.

There's so much hoof to these Bulls, and so many of them — Our adopted family with its boarding-house reach — Clifford Ray, hulking jackrabbit, a one-man charity on his off-nights, but Chicago calls him "The

Rejector,” for occasional long-armed guarding of his domain, which goes with always being a few inches too short for center, made up with the stilts of ferocity — & Tom Boerwinkle, a/ka/ “The Building” — Why can’t they call any of them by their rightful names? — “Seven feet of raw talent,” it says in the program, which means they’re still waiting for him to learn how to play — Chicago watches Tom with a hand over one eye, hoping for the best — Outgrown fat boy with lopsided motions & tippy-toed galumphing like a thing of the *veldt* — Unsportsmanlike groaning when he’s sent in, but high in the stands we can’t feel the effect of all that bulk — In tandem with The Rejector, Tom throws waves of jostlin’, leanin’ in ugliness & simple obstruction at Jabbar — Sometimes the room service refs blow their whistles at the Bulls — That ain’t right — They’ve got to let us overcome our handicaps anyway we know how — “The city that works” — & such hard work just watching.

Score tied at the half — Shuffling out tipsy to take a leak, ’scuse me, ’scuse me, toward the aisle & finally greeting the Senator with shared praise for the Butterbean — Only opinion we can agree on — Hip, hip, hooray — If politics is war by other means, then sport is regimented love — Stoned love — Most handy & accessible access to excellence — Which includes Bob Weiss, special pride of our row — Best Jewish third guard in the league — Why, he even looks a little bit like Lamb’s old man: prematurely bald, an empty bulb that glows in the lights, but plenty of mindfulness & caution underneath — Gasping-for-breath harried expression, short as a pawnbroker, but never stooped, he gives us tuberculoids some hope — & he’s the Bulls’ secret weapon — He knows his geometry & it tells him that el basket doesn’t really care if the ball’s coming at it from six inches or sixty feet — It’s all in the angle — & who knew a Jew could pop ’em like that from the perimeter? — Arrogant high-arches, too, nothing tricky, merely resplendent — The Senator shouting at us, “This used to be our game, boys” — & we’re still here — As inner city as anybody who plays the inner city game.

But why is it the Bulls are still behind, when they seem to be doing everything right? — There’s too much effort in their efforts — A bad sign — It takes us six passes & four rebounds to do what the Mohammedan Milwaukeean does with a quick fandag flip from somewhere up there where nobody can reach — Still, this is Christmas eve & we’re hangin’ close enough to expect miracles — At least, the kind that show up in numbers on a four-sided stadium display — Pucker up, Love Man — Butter this steaming game away with a pat of fade-away jumpers — Glide on, Chet the Jet — & Norm you must storm the citadel again & again — Answering the slow-mo curves of Jabbar’s monster hooks until we go for overtime & there’s no time left except to storm the last storm, answer the last point — With a wink from Mayor Daley, our job will soon be done — Jabbar’s tired of swatting at that fly down below his knees & Van Lier keeps flirting with the greasy rim, drifting in mid-leap & changing pedals

on his imaginary bicycle, then scoring & sprinting back down court, least surprised man in town, sayin' "It ain't nuthin' folks" — But we know that he loses ten pounds a ballgame — & so does Jabbar who answers, "If the brother wants this game so bad, he can have it" — & we got it — Gift-wrapped & all — Our whole row, our whole tier, is standing for the Bulls & there's even a few "Bravos!" — We couldn't care less if our tires got slashed — Momentary exceptional open-mouthed loss of self — It happens every time the score adds up right.

from *Life on the Run*

The money and championships are reasons I play, but what I'm addicted to are nights like tonight when something special happens on the court. The experience is one of beautiful isolation. It cannot be deduced from the self-evident, like a philosophical proposition. It cannot be generally agreed upon, like an empirically verifiable fact, and it is far more than a passing emotion. It is as if a lightning bolt strikes, bringing insight into an uncharted area of human experience. It makes perfect sense at the same time it seems new and undiscovered. The moment in basketball depends on the blending of human forces at the right time and in the right degree. It goes beyond the competition that brings goose pimples or the ecstasy of victory. With my team, before the crowd, against our opponents, no one else but me can feel what it all means. It's my private world. No one else can sense the inexorable rightness of the moment. A back-door play that comes with perfect execution at a critical time charges the crowd, but I sense an immediate transporting enthusiasm and a feeling that everything is in perfect balance.

These moments require a childlike imagination. "We can only know as adults what we can only feel as children," says Leslie Fiedler. In those moments on a basketball court I feel as a child and know as an adult. Experience rushes through my pores as if sucked by a strong vacuum. I feel the power of imagination that creates a sense of mystery and wonder I last accepted in childhood, before the mind hardened. When a friend tells me that his son cries when I miss a last-second shot, I know how he feels. I cry a little, too. That's why ultimately when I play for anyone outside the team, I play for children. With them the communication of joy or sorrow rings true and through the playing that allowed me to continue feeling as a child I sense a child's innocent yearning and love.

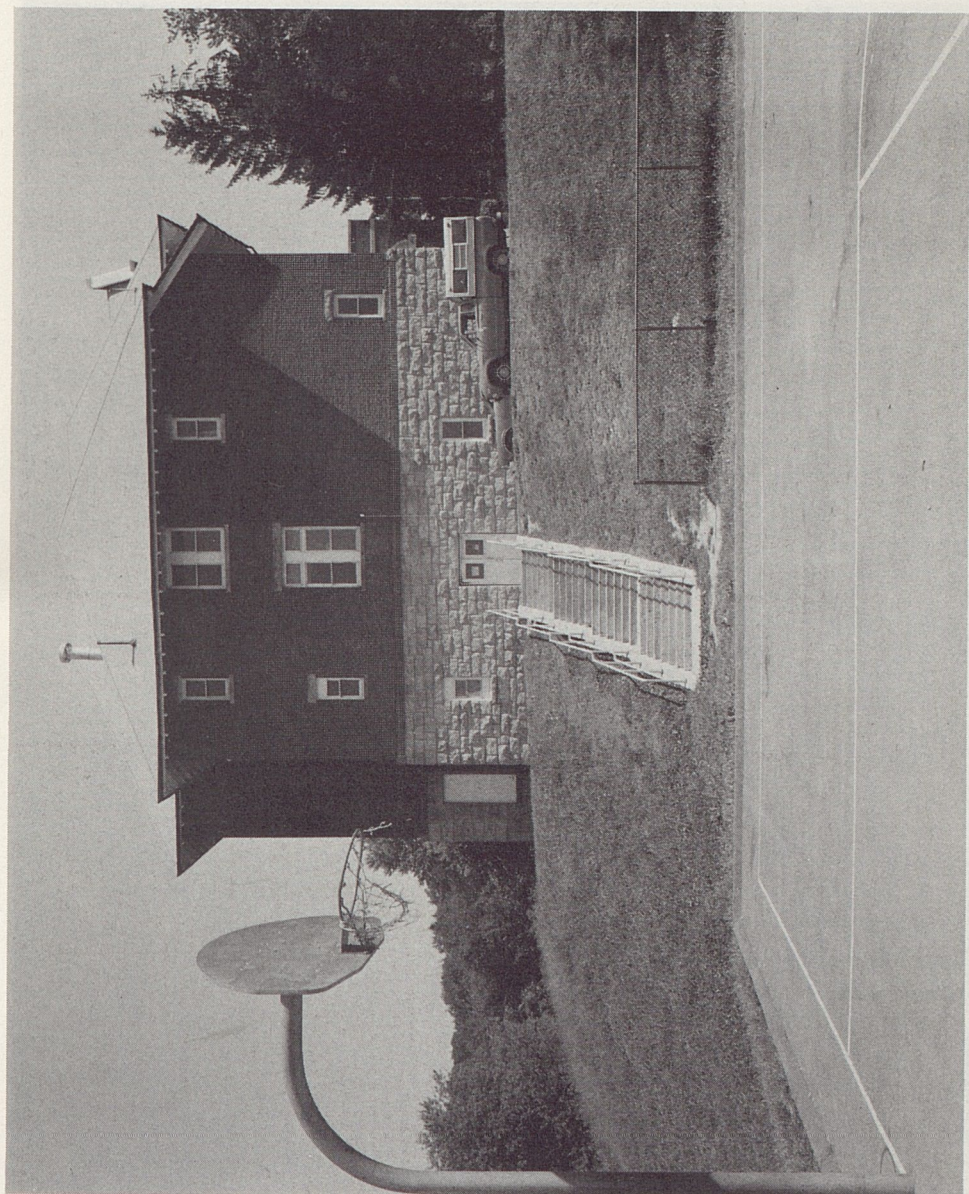
HOOPS

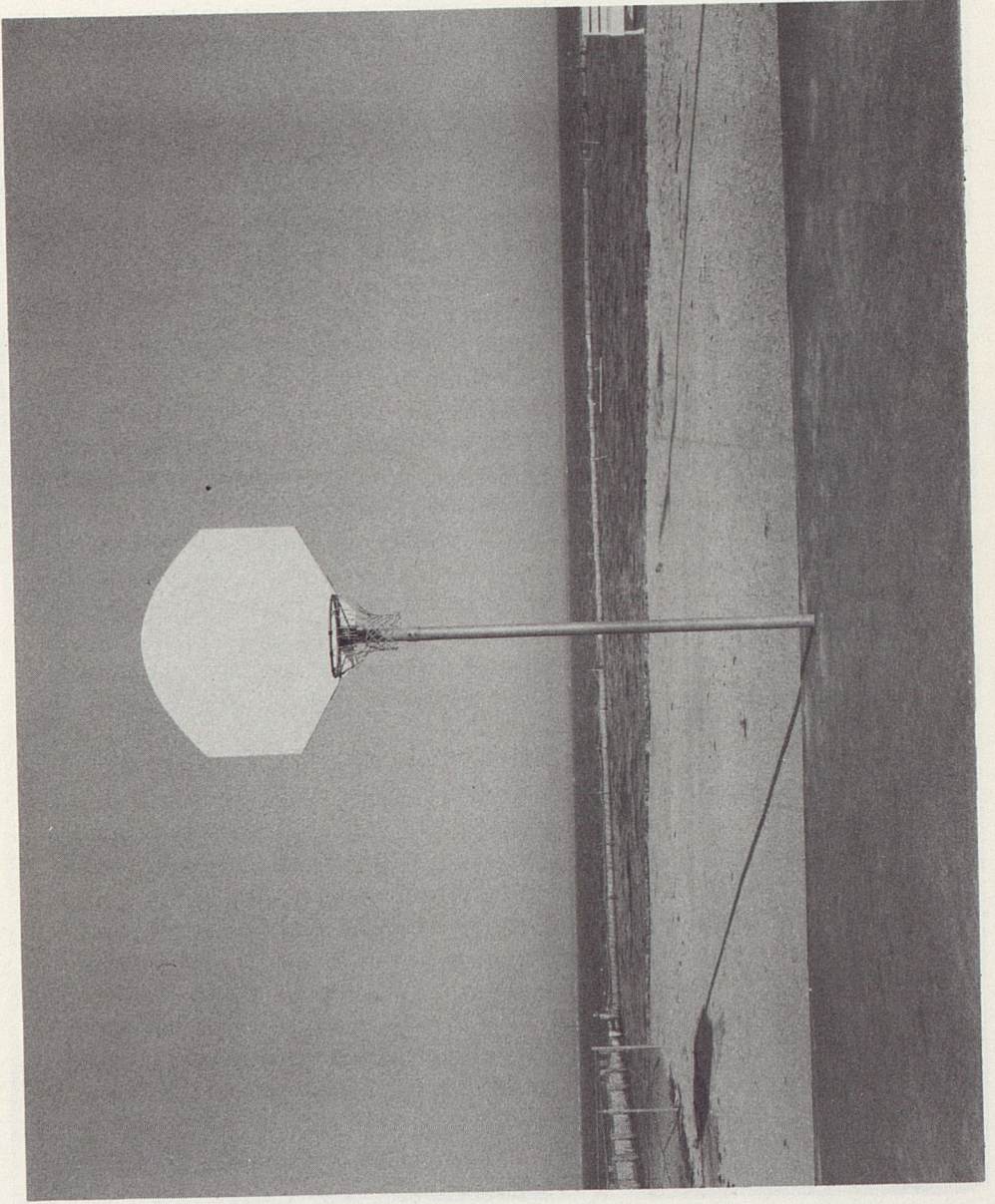
By Roger Martin

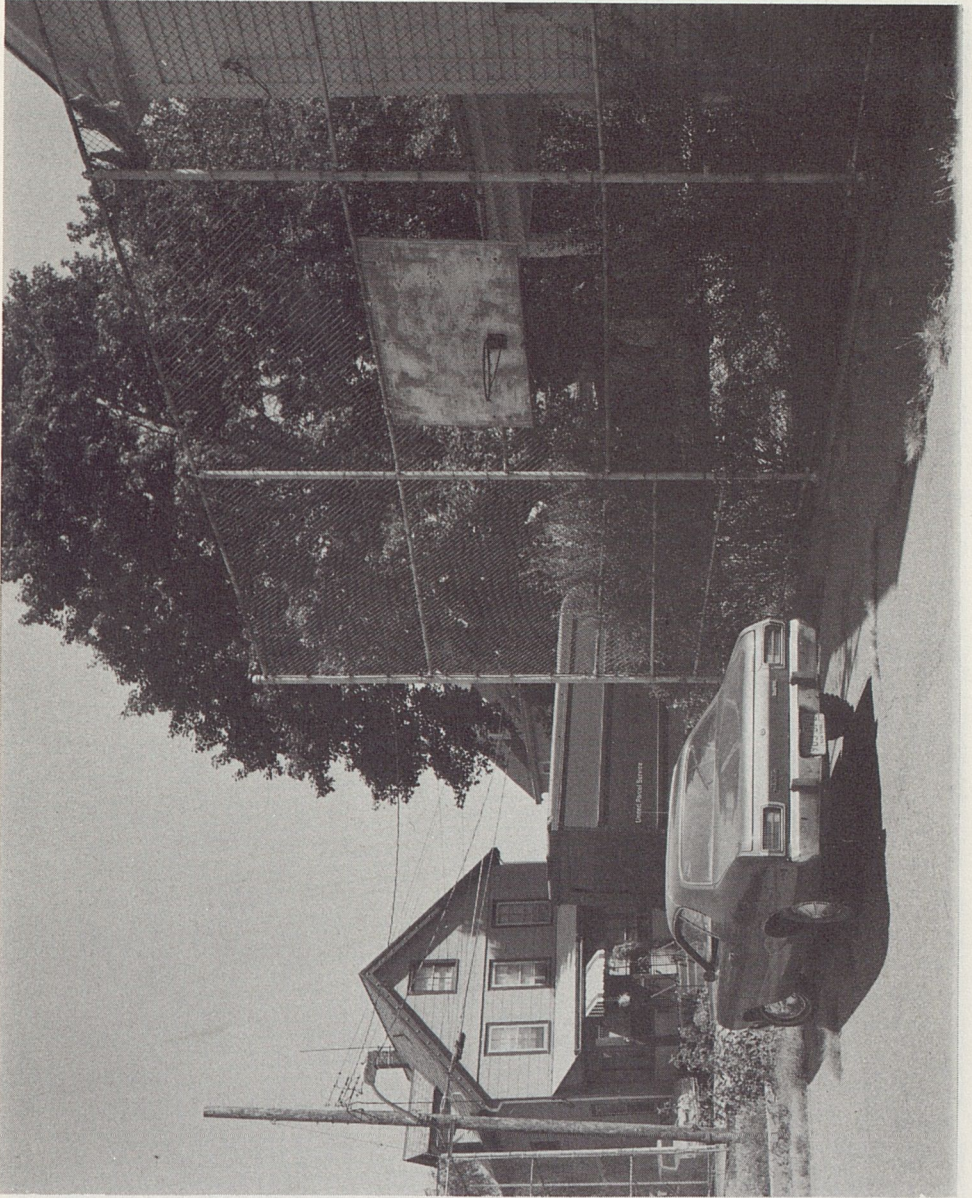
Breckenridge, Colorado, 1977
Route 20, Massachusetts, 1977
Peekskill, New York, 1978
Surf City, New Jersey, 1978
Peekskill, New York, 1978
New York State, Route 20, 1980
Albion, Nebraska, 1978
Michigan, 1977
Cumberland, New York, 1979











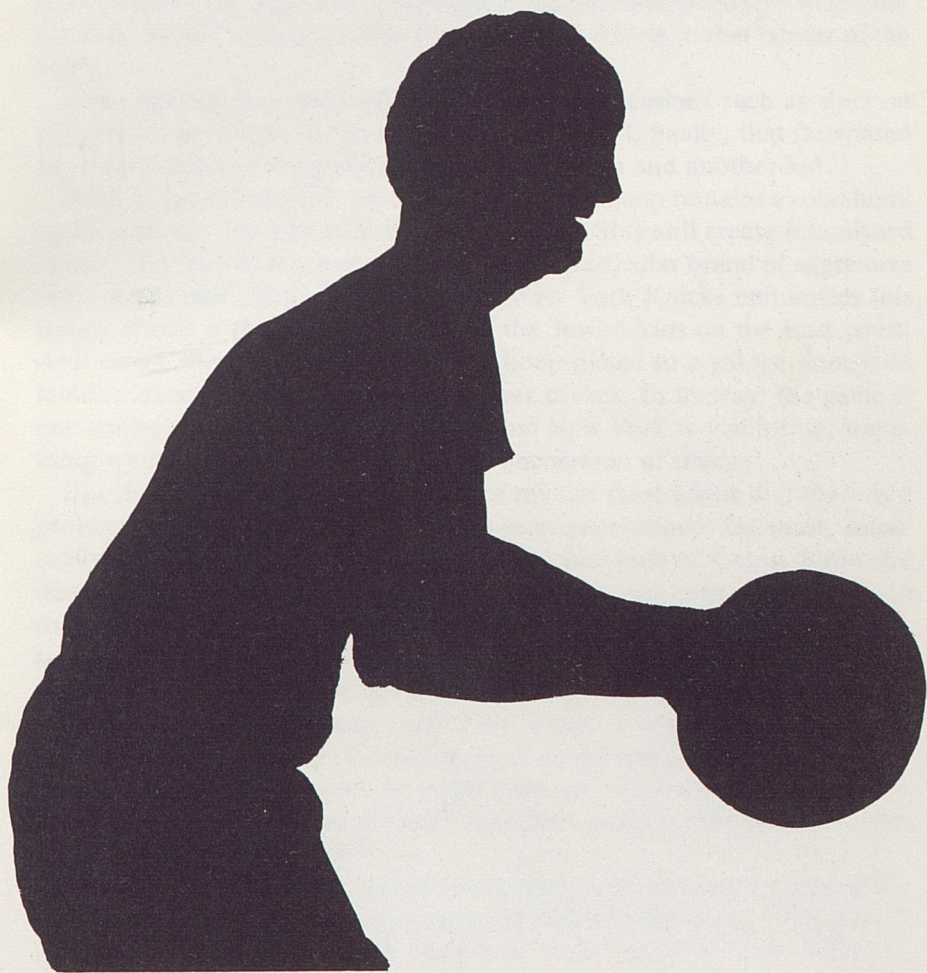




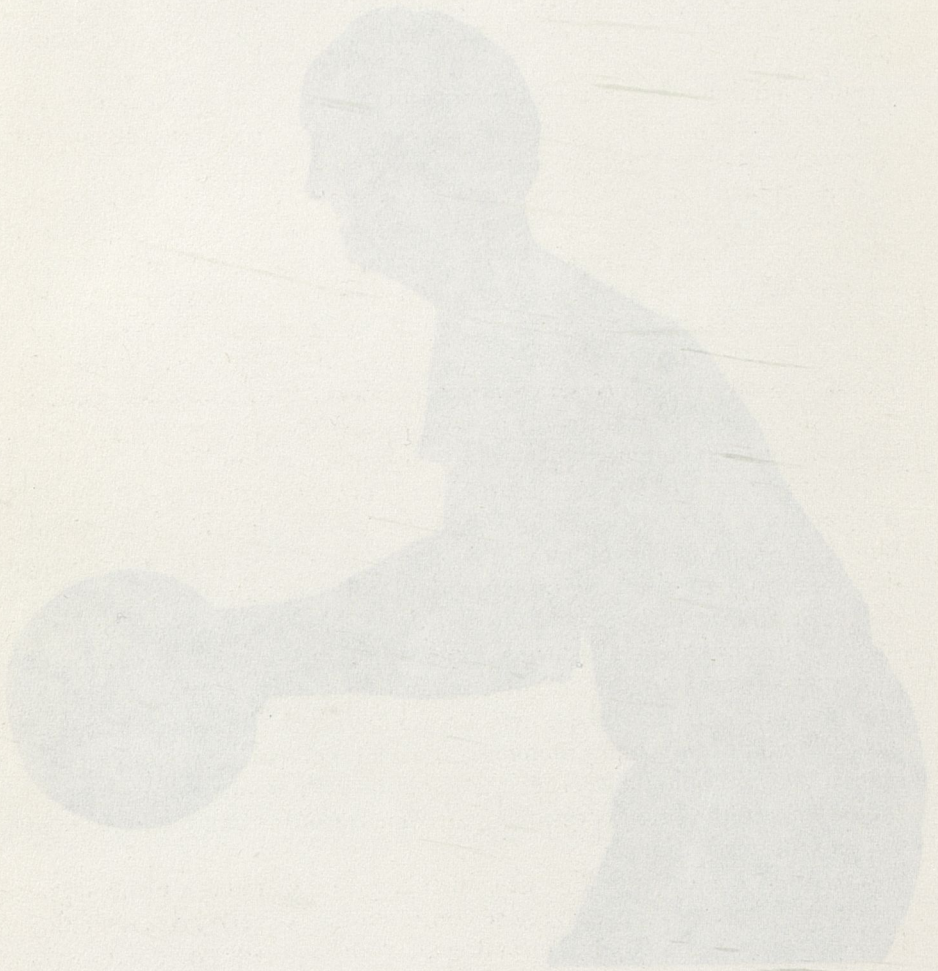




AGING



AGING



Geriatric Memoirs of a Basketballer

The great appeal of certain sports or combative contests such as boxing, bullfighting, basketball or boudoiring is that they can be broken down to their simplest unit—one on one. Boxer against boxer, man against bull, man against man, or man against woman. In short, there is a democracy of action, a one-man-one-vote concept, so to speak.

In some of these endeavors there is an economic democracy as well. One who is poor can always find someone to fight, someone to challenge to a head-on-head half-court basketball game—and, I hope, someone to woo. On the economic level, bullfighting must be dismissed; but little matter, since bullslinging was more renowned in my boyhood Brooklyn than bullfighting. Verbal veronicas drew the *olés* on the streets in that corner of the world.

Since fighting was reserved for monumental occasions such as slurs on our girls or invasions of our turf, it was basketball, finally, that fascinated us, simply because it requires only a ball, a hoop and another kid.

And, as far as I can tell, the affinity of kid and hoop remains a solid hunk of Americana. The blacks in Harlem and Bed-Stuy still create schoolyard magic. The Irish in Rockaway still play their particular brand of aggressive snub-nosed ball (Mike Riordan of the New York Knicks epitomizes this style). It still is the premiere game of the Jewish kids on the East coast. And across the breadth of the land, a hoop nailed to a garage door is as familiar as an “Honor America” bumper sticker. In its way, the game is one cohesive string, a full-court pass from New York to California, something we have in common in the most uncommon of times.

But if one is to be honest, the fan of my era must admit that there is a problem, a sort of technical foul, between generations. He must, reluctantly, blow the whistle on himself. A particular kind of fantasy forms the diet of sports—that on a God-given day, when our constellations are in order for a moment, we could compete with the very best. Occasionally, the old, the marvelously enduring notion still seizes me: Am I not capable of hitting a Texas League single off a major league pitcher? With the '49ers' offensive line in front of me, might I not uncork a dazzling six-foot screen pass? Couldn't I, in a lucky moment, land a left hook on one of those beer-bellied heavyweights before he smothered me? Probably not. But a gossamer wing in the brain occasionally becomes airborne and the marrow of the ego murmurs “maybe.”

But when I get to thinking of challenging one of today's professional basketball players to a nose-to-nose confrontation, the ego gives a reading as sober as a Sears Roebuck catalogue: “No way you could afford it, sonny.” To explain such a sensible response, the dreamer has but to turn

back the timekeeper's clock about 15 years and remember how basketball was played in his youth.

I was no dilettante at the game. I spent, or misspent, the better part of my youth playing not pool but basketball. During the summer months I wore out sneakers by the pair, and in winter I shoveled a path in the snow from the foul line to the basket so that I could practice my lay-up and that classic Cousy maneuver, dribbling behind my back. When it rained, a friend and I practiced in his cellar (which had a seven-foot ceiling), shooting baskets into a homemade hoop adorned with a net made from his aunt's bloomers. What a parlor Freudian could do with that tidbit!

When I played school league ball, I was known for my devastating two-hand set shot from 12 feet out, a shot that today is as useless in the game as a blacksmith in a Mustang factory. But what a shot it was! It took me about 14 seconds to set up for it, with my feet flat apart and my butt sticking out like Groucho Marx's, while my defensive opposite stood six feet away, waving his hands and grunting: "Ah-h-h, Ah-h-h!" If one threw a shot from more than 18 feet out, he was immediately sat down and suffered the scorn of his teammates for being a "heaver." Today, even in schools, a shot from 18 feet is like a conceded putt in golf.

Our professional hero in those days was Bud Palmer, the sportscaster who was then with the Knicks, and who was the innovator of the jump shot. He usually threw this shot from inside the foul line—now it would be considered a leaping lay-up. High school kids today cannonade with deadly accuracy from 25 feet.

But it is the pros who are beyond mere mortal comprehension. Earl "The Pearl" Monroe, with back to basket, spins in the air, lets go from 35 feet out and starts to break to the opposite end of the court, because he knows the damn thing is going in! Cruel, bloody revisionist without a sup of sympathy for history past.

And imagine trying to clear the boards against Reed or Alcindor! Or the certain humiliation of trying to dribble the ball across mid-court within 10 seconds with Walt Frazier defending you? Better to try to empty the sea into a sand hole by the cupful.

But rigor mortis finally set in on my fantasy in one of last season's play-offs when Jerry West threw in a 63-foot, one-hand push shot against the Knicks. When West was asked about his audacious luck, he flatly said: "It [the shot] felt good going off my fingers," the equivalent of saying, "I did it in six days and rested on the seventh."

This is not meant to be a crotchety carp. I still love the game and find it the most democratic we have. But it does hurt a little to have to admit that, even on the level of my interior dream machine, I can only participate voyeuristically on the sidelines.

The Poet Tries to Turn In His Jock

*The way I see it, is that when
I step out on that court and feel
inside that I can't make the plays,
it'll be time to call it quits.*

—Elgin Baylor

Going up for the jump shot,
Giving the kid the head-fakes and all
'Til he's jocked right out the door of the gym
And I'm free at the top with the ball and my touch,
Lofting the arc off my fingertips,
I feel my left calf turn to stone
And my ankle warp inward to form when I land
A neat right angle with my leg,
And I'm on the floor,
A pile of sweat and sick muscles,
Saying,
Hilton,
You're 29, getting fat,
Can't drive to your right anymore,
You can think of better things to do
On Saturday afternoons than be a chump
For a bunch of sophomore third-stringers;
Join the Y, steam and martinis and muscletone.
But, shit,
The shot goes in.

Mother's Milk

when i was in high school, at the age of 17, mind you (exactly half of what i am now!), i was one of the hot shots of the girl's basketball team. there was no thought of integrated basketball. forget it. boys were big, & strong, & nuts made them physically much more capable of carrying something nut shaped. none of us thought—at least i didn't—of not going to the boy's games to protest this separate but equal bullshit, nor did we think it odd that parents, little siblings, & assorted students came out en masse to sit in bleachers & yell for the boys to run & bounce their nut shaped thing while their nuts bounced. when we played, the gym was empty, except for the two teams & a couple of referees, whom we were all sure were dykes. i never heard the male coaches called fags, but the female coaches were all called dykes. at any rate, i loved basketball, & while no great shakes running from one spot to another, i could make a basket from almost anywhere on the court. all i had to do was stand somewhere & wait for the ball. when i got it, i would (usually) make points.

my boyfriend during the winter of 1959–60 was one of the varsity basketball team. letter sweater. gave me a bottle of MY SIN perfume for christmas (at my request). actually, we had broken up by christmas, but who the hell else could he give it to? one only has so many sins. but kelly hudson had some endearing aspects: one being that he never pushed sexually, on the theory that it was oppressive to the girl, who might get preggies; & the other that he was the only one in the whole world who was proud that i was a star on the girl's basketball team. it is true that the gym was empty for our games, but in my last year of school, when i was going with kelly, & wearing the sweater he won for doing the same thing i did every wednesday, kelly would show up, wearing the sweater, carrying two pom-poms, & whenever i got the ball—which i did often, my teammates being anxious to have us get points—he would yell, “GO ALTA!” i didnt realize how important that was to me, that he showed up. but i've told that story for years. it is one of the reasons high school was a great place for me. in college, basketball was frowned on by the girls in my dorm, & none of the boys gave a shit what my talents were—having two tits was all the talent they demanded—so i ended up in figure control, swimming, & ballet. & after college, i had this husband who was built like muhammad ali, & but he didnt get that way from sports—he got that way from being a farm boy, & he had no intentions of embarrassing himself publicly by playing ball where anybody could see him. i had no women friends.

in my second marriage, simon & i were much more sports & games minded, & we trucked over to the park to play a lil basketball. two tall type men were having a bit of a game. simon asked if we could join. they

laughed, "sure. & you can have a handicap." "why the handicap?" he naively asked. "cause you got *her!*" one said, astonished that simon would need to ask. "i dont think you wanta do that," simon smiled. "no, it's ok." they insisted. "i dont take it." i said. "no handicap." they shrugged, "ok, but dont say we didnt offer!"

simon has what i dont have—speed—& he ran all over the court, retrieving the ball from those guys who were so high up they couldnt touch their dribble until it was past their 3 foot tall knees, by which time simon would have it & be spiriting it to me, waiting unguarded, (what big man would be mean enuf to guard the little lady?) and i'd sink it in. we beat the pants off those motherfuckers. the second game, they said, "well, we underestimated the little lady. give us a chance to save face." they played their best; sweat was pouring down so heavy they could hardly see. we won, 21 to 19. i smiled at them & thanked them for the game. simon shook their hands & said, "see you." they didnt answer. i like that story almost as much as the story about kelly.

for a half a dozen years, i have had no one to play with, nor nowhere to play. a month ago, a guy at the med told me when i yelled at him that i was sick of hearing about his goddamn basketball practice all the damn time, that he would play with me whenever i wanted. & he invited me to wednesday practice. & from there, i learned about the women's game at the y. so i was gonna go with jane, but she hurt her ankle (playing basketball; sports, they say, are good for your health. compared to what. i broke my elbow skateboarding, jane sprained her ankle basketballing, joe namath's knees are the pits . . . sports are for FUN, & that's it—for health, you go walking with a mastedon to eat muggers, you dont play football or go skiing.) i decided without jane to introduce me, i wouldnt go. then i thought about that. art doesnt wait for some man to introduce him to the guys at the park: he just shows up, & stands around, & pretty soon, he's playing. (i tried that at live oak park, but the men resisted me ferociously. when they finally did let me in, they spent the whole game grabbing tit.) so i thot, if i werent a woman, i'd go, jane or no jane. so i went.

it didn't last very long; 20 minutes total. full court, but stamina wasnt my gig even in high school; & it's the first time i've played full court in 17 years! & they were patient with me at first, then that wore off & we just played, & i loved it. & one woman said, "come back." & when i got out, i was still a woman going thru yet another divorce, with notices from both the highway patrol & the bank on my desk about how i'm such a lousy, irresponsible person; but for one glorious hour, there was just me & the basket, & a round, tan ball that did what i wanted just enough of the time, & people yelling, "Here!" & i was able to forget the entire rest of my life, for one whole, wonderful hour.

Hoop Heroics on the Half Court

We're leading five baskets to four on a ten-foot jumper by Gary, the lanky insurance broker. John inbounds the ball to Barry, who drives hard for the basket. You've got to watch Barry. A computer programmer somewhere on Montgomery Street, he has an uncanny knack for banking in garbage shots that arch up out of spasms of what looks like pure, flailing desperation.

Tom, the black playground veteran, herds him into the corner. Barry passes outside to John. A little pudgy, hair thinning, John does something responsible for the phone company. He's another guy whose flatfooted style will lull you until he pushes off one of his 1950's set shots from thirty-five feet. Swish.

Saul, the corporate tax lawyer, harasses him. John dribbles right and feeds Pete in the key. Enrique slices out to set a pick.

"Left!" I bark in warning. Then, "Switch!"

I dart around Enrique and fling a hand at Pete. He flings himself at me. We're both about six-two, but he outweighs me by thirty pounds. As his left shoulder nestles under my jaw he fires.

My head snaps backward and I carom sideways. Pete's shot uncharacteristically skims the rim and flips out. Neither of us calls a foul. By our standards that was just a bit of routine, no-harm contact—even though I'll be chewing gingerly at dinner. Gary fights off Enrique with an elbow, seizes the rebound and slings it outside to Tom.

We set up play from the backcourt. We can win it now. Teamed with guys who like to slither into inside traffic, I've been lurking on the perimeter all day. This time, though, I sneak loose on the baseline. Tom penetrates the middle, shovels off to Saul, who goes up.

But Pete clambers high and manages to tick the ball. It clangs weakly off the front of the rim and hangs there . . . Just as I hurtle through the narrow backdoor corridor. Airborne, spinning—aware of the paws groping around me to snatch the prize from my grasp or purée my nose with it if I'm indiscreet enough to bring it down for a follow-up—I splay my fingertips. Left-handed, I tap at the ball. With a control and defense deftness out of some reverie of technique, I finesse it off the backboard perfectly. The ball settles through the net as I pirouette to earth. I whoop exultantly.

"Beautiful!" echoes Saul. Gary slaps my palms. Almost incidentally, I realize we've won the game.

So there you have it—a frankly self-glorifying slice of selective memory. But why not? No sportswriters or cheering spectators are on hand to celebrate my nourishing moments of hoop heroism at the Embarcadero YMCA.

I spent a year recently bashing a typewriter on downtown San Francisco's corporate altiplano. Bemused in that rarefied stratum of rep ties and pin-stripes, endless gauntlets of vice presidential approvals and rules of pecking-order decorum that might have been lifted from some manchu palace handbook, I soon found my three-times-a-week midday on the Y's dusty basketball court an essential respite, a link with democratic reality.

Basketball has no tony mystique. It's not genteel and it's not a fad. Any Gucci-shod middle manager can doff them for Pumas and jog. A passable game of racquetball can be picked up in a couple of sessions. But, like soccer, basketball requires that you grow up with it. You've got to devote snuffing years as I did, pounding up and down snow-fringed midwestern driveways, threading the bleachers of dingy gyms, to perfect the nuances of ball-handling and shooting essential to a level of satisfactory competence.

Once you've got it, though, it's hard to find an adequate substitute for this inspired blend of running, leaping, gyroscopic hand-eye coordination and controlled body contact.

I'd guess the highest organized level at which most of us noontime Y habitués have ever played is high school. That's not counting city or industrial leagues. Our ages range generally from the mid-twenties to the mid-forties. There's even one grey-bearded hustler who's the other side of fifty. What we share, aside from that certain—shall we say—maturity, is a modicum of skill and an unflagging attachment to the roisterous pastime of our youth.

To be sure, we play only half-court now. Four to a side, six baskets to a game, gotta win by two, losers' out and clear the ball beyond the foul line on change of hands off the backboard or rim. Relatively standard pickup rules with a few variations.

The exercise class that precedes us in the gym is still a writhing carpet of rippling leotards when the basketballers begin collecting at twelve-thirty. We pull on our socks—sodden and pungent as old cheese from weeks in the locker—lace shoes and exchange curt banter until the groaning exercisers totter upright from their floor-mats. Then, with a few chortles of anticipation and jostlings for priority, we form a ragtag line to shoot foul shots that will determine the teams.

It's often hard to walk out cold and sink your first shot. Sometimes it takes a while to string together two full complements for each end of the court. But that egalitarian foul-shooting test, not buddyship or otherwise known ability, establishes the sides. Those who are left over and late-comers in order of arrival have the right to challenge the losers of whichever game ends first. If necessary they choose numbers, flash fingers among themselves, to group into foursomes.

That haphazard openness contrasts with the elitism of the "advanced volleyball" whackers who own the gym after exercise class on Mondays and Wednesdays. I once made the mistake of volunteering to fill out a side.

A guy came over and patted the volleyball to me. I patted it back nonchalantly.

“Sorry,” he announced, “you’re not good enough for us.” It’s as close as I’ve come in a number of years to attempting dental work on another human being.

But maybe it’s their very snobbery, their insistence on advertising themselves as “advanced,” that makes the volleyballers such a scowling, dyspeptic bunch to observe. We have a few like that—guys who play mad, who grab and hack and angrily dispute foul calls (a judgment by the aggrieved, always honored).

Our basketball games are earnest, sure, and not without a flash of NBA brilliance now and then. Mostly then. But there’s more fun than frustration: the sheer exhilaration and shared admiration at a long bomb from behind a good pick, a driving feed that produces an uncontested lay-up, a radar pass out of Area Code 408 that eludes three opponents and leaves them waving limply as the ball arcs toward the hoop.

Not that it isn’t interesting to reflect on the temperaments unmasked in the heat of exercise. Or sublimated.

Jim, for example, a commodities trader, never bends above the waist. That regal posture and an easy grin give his polished game a cool indifference belied by the bitter opinions he voices in the sauna. There’s a handsome “attorney,” on the other hand, who’s a model of affability in the locker room but who sneers at his teammates for defensive lapses and is ready to trade punches over hand-checks. (And who am I to pass judgment, who stalked off the court after a particularly frustrating loss and drove my fist into the wall?)

And yet, it’s precisely that kind of authenticity—all the secret pettinesses, the petulance, clumsiness, unsuspected prowess and elegance laid bare—that I was looking for. It’s what I missed in the sterile gentility of corporate headquarters. I remember, in fact, my astonishment the first few times I saw my sweat-soaked companions from the basketball court—guys I associated with mouldering shorts and straggly hair, dirty-sloganed tee shirts and adolescent energy—slink meekly out of the locker room transformed into so many fellow Clark Kents.

“Among the activities through which men seek release from everyday life,” notes Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*, “games offer in many ways the purest form of escape. Like sex, drugs and drink, they obliterate awareness of everyday reality, but they do this not by dimming awareness but by raising it to a new intensity of concentration. Moreover, they have no side effects, hangovers or emotional complications . . .”

Well, I wouldn’t put it so dogmatically. Like all elixirs of escape, games indeed have addictive potential.

“I’ve been working out in the weight room lately,” Enrique once told me when I said I hadn’t seen him for a while. “Today I’ve gotta play basketball. There’s just too much crap on my mind!”

Thus succinctly endorsing Lasch, Enrique devoted the next two-and-one-quarter hours to a spaced-out orgy of running hooks and rebounds and pops from the top of the key. Self-employed, with a portfolio of business interests, he presumably has the right to dictate his own working hours.

I, as an employee, did not. At least in theory. But there I was, matching him game for game, until the last panting die-hards straggled off the court at ten of three. Once consumed by the rhythm of sport, I found it almost impossible to break off according to a time-clock. I often wondered how the others who I knew shared my situation reconciled their protracted mid-day absences.

So I did suffer an emotional complication: guilt. As long as I did my job well, no one would ever question my slack habits, I knew. And I tried to compensate for the time. But the sense that I enjoyed a luxury not shared by secretaries or lower-level associates always nibbled at my conscience. I invariably scurried back to my office sure a crisis had erupted and just retribution awaited. Of course, they never did.

There was only one thing to do. I quit. Now, on my own again, I never have time for basketball at the Embarcadero Y.

But then, I guess I don't really need it so much any more, either.

Ex-Basketball Player

Pearl Avenue runs past the high-school lot,
Bends with the trolley tracks, and stops, cut off
Before it has a chance to go two blocks,
At Colonel McCoomsky Plaza. Berth's Garage
Is on the corner facing west, and there,
Most days, you'll find Flick Webb, who helps Berth out.

Flick stands tall among the idiot pumps—
Five on a side, the old bubble-head style,
Their rubber elbows hanging loose and low.
One's nostrils are two S's, and his eyes
An E and O. And one is squat, without
A head at all—more of a football type.

Once Flick played for the high-school team, the Wizards.
He was good: in fact, the best. In '46,
He bucketed three hundred ninety points,
A county record still. The ball loved Flick.
I saw him rack up thirty-eight of forty
In one home game. His hands were like wild birds.

He never learned a trade, he just sells gas,
Checks oil, and changes flats. Once in a while,
As a gag, he dribbled an inner tube,
But most of us remember anyway.
His hands are fine and nervous on the lug wrench.
It makes no difference to the lug wrench, though.

Off work, he hangs around Mae's Luncheonette.
Grease-grey and kind of coiled, he plays pinball,
Sips lemon cokes, and smokes those thin cigars;
Flick seldom speaks to Mae, just sits and nods
Beyond her face towards bright applauding tiers
Of Necco Wafers, Nibs, and Juju Beads.

from **Locked Jaws**

April 12.

This will be the longest and most melancholy entry in this melancholy journal. It closes a chapter in my life.

Some weeks ago, encouraged by my weight loss, I made those few furtive walks to the Riverside Park basketball courts, and this led to renewed hopes and renewed dreams of that time when I weighed 150 and lived only for the hoop.

I had bloomed late. Though I had not played any high-school ball, I fought my way onto the freshman team at the University of Pennsylvania, past recruited ballplayers and men who had made all-state in high school. And then I spent three long years on the varsity as a sub-sub, my chief pleasure watching Ernie Beck, my friend and classmate, make All-America and lead us to the Ivy League championship in 1953. Dick Harter, who later became such a superb coach, was on that team, too, always talking basketball—and I remember Dick Dougherty's wise body-wit and Don Scanlon's jumper, some extraordinary left-hand drives by Bobby "Kangaroo" Brooks, Timmy Holt's lithe speed, and the day Howie Dalmar arranged a scrimmage with the Minneapolis Lakers and Slater Martin scooted around Vern Mikkelson and Jim Pollard and George Mikan and made me feel as though I had two broken legs and blurred vision.

Ernie used to pray and cross himself in the locker room before each game—and then get twenty-five points. I began to pray for Howie Dalmar to put me in. It didn't work. Once, when we played on television, I dribbled down court by myself, in those familiar last two minutes when all the subs go in and chaos reigns, and threw the basketball neatly over the backboard.

I finally won a full letter in my senior year, and the Bill Wollman Award for the Best Junior Varsity Player (thought there wasn't a JV then); my name is still on a plaque in the Palestra. But in my entire dubious career I scored only three points. All on foul shots. All at Dartmouth, during Winter Carnival. I had given the game every ounce of will and passion I could muster at 5' 9", with no high-school experience behind me, I had not gone nearly so far as my colossal dreams dictated.

But in the Army, in my early twenties, I suddenly came into my own, a couple of years too late.

If only Howie could have seen me burn up the league in western France that year!

At 148 pounds, just out of basic training, I could touch the rim easily, average twenty-two points a game, and lead a no-bench team from the dingy little post at Croix Chapeau to a divisional championship at Bordeaux and into the All-France play-offs in Paris. That had been a double-

elimination tournament and we had played SHAPE first, a team of ringers collected by some egomaniac sports colonel. They had two guys who later made All-America (one of them 6' 6"), an ex-Globetrotter, and a kid 5' 8" who jumped center and could dunk. We had no one taller than 6' 1".

When they went through their pregame warm-up, we stopped our own shooting and merely watched, wide-eyed.

But we pressed full court, the five of us, and hustled like mad the entire game, and we beat them by a point in double overtime. I scored thirty-five points. It was the high moment of my little career. My eighty-yard run. And I wished with my heart that Dalmar had seen it.

(After an interminable night in Paris, we comfortably lost to SHAPE two days later by a mere 53 points.)

When my three boys were small I used to tell them about those good old Army days. On a long noisy trip home from the country, I would tell the one about our winning the regional championship by taking three games in two days. At first they were awed and quiet. Later, when my weight rose to 195, then soared blithely over 200, Paul and Charles would interrupt.

"We *know* how you once won three games in two days, Dad."

"And how the games were played in a field hangar . . ."

". . . that was so dark you couldn't see the ball under the baskets . . ."

". . . and so cold they had heat blowers at half-court."

I would say: "They really did. Big, red heaters. At mid-court."

"And how you scored seventy-six points . . ."

"Seventy-eight."

". . . in the three games, all played within twenty-four hours. One the first night, two the next morning and afternoon. And how the opposing fans would trip you if you got too close to their sidelines, and spit on the cement floor of the hangar, and the refs never saw any of it."

"Did it *really* happen?" asked Anthony, my youngest, his eyes wide; he had only heard the story four or five times before. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," I mumbled. "Many many pounds ago."

But as the years went on, I wondered. There were no witnesses I could summon to vouch for my brief hour of glory. All that remained, of all those desperate, passionate years of hooping, was the faded scroll that announced I had been awarded a varsity letter in 1953.

My most vivid memories, which I now shared with no one, were of half-court ball at Wingate Field. It had been a whole world, the only world to me in Brooklyn, before I went to Penn, with its regular cast of characters and its own patois.

In our park we had Natey, George, Herbie, Stanley, the Commissioner (I never knew him by any other name), Hooks (nor him), Artie, Ira, Mike, and the Marine (who looked it, always wore fatigues, and rarely spoke). We played in the dead of winter, carrying our own shovels to the park and clearing enough space to play—the cold so sharp our lungs heaved until we coughed and gagged, our frozen fingers too brittle to manage a

ball. We had a joke about those guys like George who had one unbelievable push shot, banked from the right side: that he practiced all winter with gloves and came down at night and shot for hours with a candle on the rim. He was lethal from his one spot. And from no where else.

The pole was attached directly beneath the backboard, and you could not take a truly hard driving lay-up without either crashing into it or grasping it as soon as the ball left your hands, and then swinging around it like a monkey. People new to the court rarely left unscarred after an afternoon of ball with us, both from their own untutored moves and because we ceremoniously used the pole as a pick. I had only two serious confrontations with the pole: once, on a desperately determined drive, my knee went into it and turned to jelly for a month (I made the shot); and once my forehead met it squarely, opened like a can, and had to be stitched that afternoon.

Whereafter I returned to the park and still managed to get in four or five good games before dark.

“Nobody quits,” we would say on a dreamy June afternoon after twenty or thirty hard games, which had begun about eight in the morning and been interrupted only for a popsicle or two from Sam’s pushcart for lunch. “Nobody like us, like the *real* guys, ever stops playing basketball. Nobody ever kicks the habit.”

“Yeah. Who’d want to?” asked George.

“I’ll play till I’m eighty,” I said.

But even before I went into the Army, there were defections. Several of the older boys went into business and of course were not seen at all during the week. On weekends in November when the trees were sere and the games were hottest, they were pale portly remnants of our older heroes, snuggled into loose topcoats from which protruded dress slacks and dress shoes. One of them even began to smoke a cigar. I remember watching them that fall—three, four of the regulars—sitting on the bench outside the fence, caged away from all that was life, talking, kibitzing about a move or shot, remembering perhaps, never playing.

Did it finally come to *that*?

I felt closer to a guy named Schnaiter or Schlotter who was twenty-six and had tried out for the Knicks for five years running, though he’d never played college ball. He was a ball bum, an addict, and he’s probably at Wingate to this day, hooping merrily. I was at Penn then, a tenuous last man, but that did not keep me from vaguely wondering now and then whether I too should not try out for the Knicks some day. I was still improving and Wat Masaka could not possibly last forever.

But something unfortunate happened to me during my last months in the Army. My Wharton training flagged and I fell in love with the word. I began to read. First Maugham and Jack London. Then Hemingway—O, a lot of Hemingway. Then Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Yeats, Donne, Faulkner, Baudelaire. Jane Austen. Rimbaud. Melville. That kind of reading. And I did it with far more intensity than ever I had brought even to half-court.

And when I went back to school for a Ph.D. in English, suddenly, somehow, mysteriously, basketball was gone. Poof. I was years behind and there was time for nothing but reading—Nashe, Browne, Joyce, and Proust now, Morris Croll on “The Baroque Style in Prose,” nasty delicious Waugh, Pushkin and Goncharov and Babel—dazzling, athletic minds—and then marrying, fathering, and all those jobs, jobs that tore into the passion I had fanned with such a fine and fresh fury.

And suddenly I was past forty and over 200 pounds.

Poof.

My three boys had all taken a liking to the game, and for several years I had gone to the Riverside courts to watch them, and even, in my mid-thirties, I’d attempted to make a brief comeback, halted when I fell on my right elbow, which promptly popped a lump the size and color of a plum. Strange. My body did weird things now. All my old finger fractures started to swell up, my ankles were as brittle as candy canes, there was no rubber left in my arches, and I would get sharp, deep pains in my chest.

But there seemed a little left, a few good moves. And how I still loved the game—the rhythm and force of it, the blurring, twisting sensuousness of it, the speed and quickness of a drive, fake, spin, and shot.

I wondered if Ernie was still playing, how much *he* had left. I had last seen him in a pre-season Warrior game in Poughkeepsie: in the locker room, having his ankles untaped, he told me of the tours he had taken that summer, how many games he had played. He smiled when I told him, for some reason, that I was currently passionate about a guy named R. M. Rilke. Beck looked weary to the bone.

The names had changed but many of the same types were at the Riverside courts: a bell-shaped waddler with a lethal one-hand push—or heave; a guy who habitually played in dark glasses, a blue shirt with a little alligator on the breast, and pointed suede shoes—and had an incredibly long, seemingly off-balance two-handed shot that only occasionally missed: we had had one like him, too. Half a dozen players had those curiously defined stances and shots that characterize the pathological half-court player: a ball shift in midair and then a left-handed shot (and practically no other discernible talent); a magnet *only* from the left corner.

The one full-court game was dominated by big, lean, highly competitive men, eighteen to thirty, who played regularly and with all the flair and speed that have come to characterize the best of the city game. They were strong, agile highleapers, and often hard-mouthed. “It’s a tough game, little man,” one said to me the day I tripped and went over on my elbow. God, I’d have loved to be nineteen or twenty again and run with them all day.

But I was past forty, and only slightly regaining a few scraps of the past. I did not especially want to play Dick Diver in front of my oldest sons, who were getting sharper on the courts every day.

Several times I went down early on a Saturday or Sunday, to practice

alone. When I played, I was sure to choose a court with fourteen-year-olds or old-timers, and to use my head more than my body. The hardest part was remembering what I once could have done—and seeing how paltry was the music that I could wring from my aging instrument. Now and then someone would jock me—make two or three effective, scoring moves, block one or two of my shots—and I would feel that fierce competitive drive burn like acid in my brain and I would want to let out the wolf, take on the guy with all my force, chew him up.

But I held back. Always I tried to smile and let my man have his day. I had had mine. Briefly. Long ago.

Today, a gorgeous day in mid-April, a day all at once cool and calm and bright, I decided to check myself out, good and proper, on the courts. Alone. At midday. Perhaps there was something left.

No one would be there, and I could see exactly how much was left of the famous Lyons double-pump, the jumper, the quick moves I had always depended upon. My fingers were stiff but usable; my chest still hurt, but only when I breathed hard. Green buds were fuzzy on the park trees, and limberly I skipped and scuffed my feet a few times on the way down to the park, whistling, like in the old days.

The four courts were deserted.

I left my bush coat on and began close to the hoop—lay-ups without dribbling, short turnaround jumpers, a left-handed hook, a few wrong-side twists from underneath. I remembered Septembers at Penn and the same ritual and the huge hopes I would always have for each new year.

A few shots went in but there was a heaviness in my arms, a stiffness in my fingers. I moved out a few feet and tried a few more jumpers. Short. Too hard. A little to the side. There wasn't much of a touch left. Maybe they had raised the rim. I seemed farther from it on my lay-ups, farther than I'd been that year in the Army—four, five inches from the rim now.

I took off my bush coat and flexed my shoulders back hard several times. I jumped up and down for five minutes on the balls of my feet, to loosen my arches. I tried a longer jumper and nearly tripped over my feet. I tried a few old moves—faking once, twice, then sweeping right, toward the basket.

Maybe there was a *little* left to work with.

Maybe.

I felt a bit of power in the turn, authority, some of the old quickness. Double-pump then up, underhand, softly. *Yes*. Dribble out to the foul line, fake, jump, the ball held high, higher . . . *yes*. Another jumper. *Swish*. And another two. *Swish*. *Swish*.

The body remembered something.

Fifteen minutes of that—making more and more shots, having the sweet satisfaction of watching a decent percentage go in now, feeling the hard-earned grace recalled in arm and leg—and I knew it was still possible to enjoy this thing that had been my youth. I began to look for a couple of

guys to play with. *A little hoop, a little b-ball.* My children would not be out of school for another two hours. There was now a two-man game in progress on the end court but it did not look like much. Another hour of practice would be best.

A lean twenty-year-old with a moustache came over and began to shoot with me. He had a fair jump shot. Then two more young men came over—one 5' 10", about 180 pounds, built like a soccer player; he kicked the ball a few times, bounced it off his head, and I knew he was. The other was high on something. We shot for sides and I got to play with the guy who was high, and to cover the soccer player.

Something is going to go, I thought suddenly. *The fingers probably.*

The soccer player was all over me, fouling me, waving his arms madly, having a splendid time pounding the hell out of me. I did not call a foul. In the old days I rarely did. It slowed down the game.

I played tentatively, trying a fake, seeing what my man would do, letting my insanely wild teammate shoot the first five shots. They were all slammed against the backboard; only one even touched the rim. Our slim opponent dropped five one-handers in a row; he was a ballplayer.

I made a short jumper, then a left-handed lay-up, then a delayed pump. I got a few rebounds and felt my body grow hungry for harder play. I elbowed the soccer player away twice, slipped behind him and stole the ball, played weasel-quick. Not much of a game, not very good ballplayers—but I was enjoying myself. You have to learn to work within your limits, that's all. It was not even a game in which I would have played in the old days, but I was moving deftly now. I could score at will against the strong and awkward soccer player, without pressing too hard, without embarrassing him. No need to do that. I set up my teammate twice: he made one of the shots, from underneath, all alone, on a pick-and-roll worthy of the name. He had not seen where the ball came to him from. Even my passing was getting sharp.

The lean opponent dropped two more jumpers, the soccer player sent one flying from half-court two-handed, and it swished. He tried to ram into me on a drive but I side-stepped sharply, dipped behind him with my right hand, and, without touching him, stole the ball. Twice I outpositioned him under the boards and, though he jumped on my back, I scooted away with the rebound.

There was not *something* but a lot left. The chest pains were not too severe, my ankles were holding. I was slipping into the rhythm of the thing.

Swish. Two more: one jumper, one drive from the left. The soccer player whammed me but I made the shot anyway. And we won.

I sat down on the green bench outside the fence, pleased with myself—sweating profusely but damned pleased. I was in the game again. I could still do this thing. I would weigh 165 in a month and then I'd be able to regain even more of what I once had.

The courts began to fill up now. The regulars were arriving for the full-

court game. I watched them: a couple of 6' 4" black guys; a blond seventeen-year-old I had been following all spring; a guy with a wild Afro, about 5' 8", who dunked; Mel, a slim young black who put the bite on me for fifty cents again; Dick, a football player, in from college. They jostled one another under the boards for a free ball, took long one-handers.

Not for me. Not any more. They were too young, too strong, too quick, too aggressive. Enough. I had had one good game. My boys would be down in an hour; I could watch them. I could be that much of a fan. And I could remember.

"Holly—wooooo!" Mel said, making one of his strange, long one-handers. "All right, you mothers. A little ball. Les' play a game. I din' come here to shoot. Les' play."

I got up from the bench to retrieve my ball. It was not the best there and they would not need it. As I came around the fence, another ball bounced toward me and I took it, dribbled once, and shot. *Swish*. "Holly—wooooo!" shouted Mel, nodding his approval to me. "All right, these two here beg mens choose 'em up and we play a little bas-ket-ball."

I found my ball among those dropping with alarming regularity now, then walked toward the gate. They were choosing up sides and Mel had taken charge. I turned to listen to his quick patter and heard him coach one of the captains: "Take that there little white feller. One with the curly hair. There. He's sma-*art*. Smart ballplayer. Per-fessor. I'm a per-fessor, too. I per-fess. I con-fess. I de-press and jus' press."

The man motioned me onto his team.

Well, if Mel really thought I was worth picking I ought to give it a try. I hadn't played so badly before. I could run with them, full court, for a half hour. With Mel on my team we would at least be in the game.

Two minutes into the ballgame they gave the ball to the smart player. He was all alone on the right side, took a quick step after bobbling the ball, and jumped for a shot. Someone, he never knew who, swatted it cleanly into the fence before it had gone an inch. Two plays later they gave it to him again. He was, by now, panting wildly. All the old will to win was back in him. He drove for the basket, bobbed the ball again, took six or seven steps, felt like a perfect asshole, and was properly called for walking. He noticed that he who called the walk was Mel, who was therefore not on his side but the other.

Euchred.

I was the dud. The lemon. I knew it now and so did everyone else on my team. And on the other team. They huddled and my man, the lanky seventeen-year-old, left me completely on defense and double-teamed my team's ace, a lefty with springs for arches. On offense, the kid took me right into the pivot twice and scored twice, quite quickly.

Someone muttered: "Turkey."

But I played with the great Beck. I'm the only guy here who played college ball. In my day I could run rings around all of you, I thought, getting my

second wind, then my third, working my way into position, calling for the ball, hustling back on defense, stealing the ball on their fast break with a move I had learned from Timmy Holt, then losing the ball, moving always without the ball (since they appeared determined, now, not to let me touch it).

Two jumpers and I can salvage this disaster. A good double-pump, like the old days, and they'll know who I am. Like that time in the hangar, when the French shouted, Comme ça un danseur. And that's what I had been: graceful, lithe, a fantastic leaper. Once. Hang in. A little longer.

I looked to the sidelines, now packed with onlookers. My children weren't there. Neither were any of their hoop friends, who would have told. Neither was Dalmar.

I heard the word "turkey" again, and blanched. Ten to eight, theirs. We could still pull this one out, and in the second game I could come into my own. I knew I had enough left. I know I could still play in this league. I had played with Beck!

"Holly—wooooo!" shouted Mel, making his fifth straight shot from nearly half-court, dancing, clowning afterward.

I felt a twinge in my left leg. Nothing to worry about there. I had never had problems with my calves. When I went, it would be an ankle, or the chest (which hurt not at all now), or the elbow again, or the fingers. Probably the fingers.

Up and back. Up and back down again. Our left-handed ace was keeping us in the game with his long jumpers. The score was sixteen apiece. We could still win.

We?

My opponents' opponents were playing with four men. They didn't see me anymore. I was racing back and forth, diving for the ball, calling for the ball, playing a sort of butcher-shop defense, now and then taking the ball out, but never being given the ball when there was the threat that I would do something like shoot or dribble, never past half-court.

Then it happened.

Quickly. With finality.

I leaped with all my might for a rebound, fully ten feet away from the ball, and felt the muscles tear and the sharp, splintery pain in my left leg.

I put my foot down ever so gently and collapsed. I could not support myself. The pain was so excruciating that I could hardly hobble to our nearest man and beg him, in a cracked voice, to get a replacement. He had been a poker-faced, hard-nosed, unsmiling player the entire game. He wanted nothing more than to win, as I had once—with all my heart—wanted to win whenever I played. He looked slowly down at my leg, supported gingerly by my big toe, and a broad smile spread rapidly across his face. Replacement? Sure. Sure. He'd get a replacement. It would be a pleasure.

I was done. Probably for months. Perhaps, at last, forever.

It took me an hour to walk the eight blocks home. I clutched the basketball in my left hand, against my body, and flexed the perfectly limber fingers of my right. I saw nothing but the pavement in front of me. Each step was hell. Every curb was an Everest.

At least my boys had not been there. Perhaps I would take them to Philadelphia some day and show them my name in the Palestra. That sounded like the safe kind of thing a retired old hooper, looking for a moment of the past regained, ought to do.

The courts were surely "no country for old men."

Basketball: A Retrospective

My ethics were
a good pair of hands,
a good move
when things were difficult.

An exceptional man
could change direction
in the air,
could thread a needle.

At Codornices Park

And when pores open, legs pumping,
I see that his court awareness still survives,
a forty-year-old four eyes who understands
this language of fast breaks and finger-tip
finesse, the backdoor pass and give and go,
and easy lay-ups.

Because here is control
and that fun of full extension,
the face and flush of perfect
pick and roll. Because his hands
are filled with suggestions.
Because always his inscrutable sentences
begin in the arc of a hook shot.

And the ball falls, spinning backwards
a prescribed imagistic route,
a will creating its own reasons
for grinning: sunlight, trees,
this irrevocable letting go
of what is already falling,
that sense of sweetest swish
thru unbroken string.

*for Bruce Hawkins,
poet and Sunday morning guard*

Basketball Dreams

I have been writing my dreams down since 1969. I have here selected and commented on a few of my basketball dreams.

I am playing basketball outside, in a three on three game. I am matched up against Linda, the only woman in the game. She's a tall beautiful blonde, a friend of mine, and a good basketball player. Still, I am bigger and better than she is so she has to work very hard on defense. In one sequence I have the ball at the top of the key. I dribble strong to the right, then with a cross-over dribble I cut straight down the middle. She runs with me, tries to keep her body between me and the basket. I pick up the ball and leap for the layup. She leaps too, but I keep going up higher and higher, finally slam dunking over her outstretched body. Ahhhh.

This dream of dunking over Linda was exceptionally vivid. Never has the sexual symbolism of stuffing the ball through the hoop been more obvious, more wonderful. I have had a number of dreams that start with basketball and end with sex.

I am an old man, one of the richest men in the world. I make love to a beautiful young woman, then go arm in arm outside with her. In the background a flying saucer is half risen above the horizon. I see three ghostlike young men, all in white, shooting baskets. I call for the ball and one of them throws it to me. I will play against them. I dribble towards them, then go up for a real long jump shot. The dream ends with the ball still in the air, half way to the basket.

Wish fulfillment: when I am old I will be immensely wealthy, sleeping with a young woman, and still playing basketball. But somehow this dream was disturbing. I as the old man am perhaps too quick to leave my woman, too quick to play ball with three such weird and ghostly strangers. And I shoot from too far out, have no idea if I'll make the shot. Just as at the end of the dream the ball is only half way to the basket, so the flying saucer (a strange image of wholeness) is only half risen. There is something incomplete, as if the wished-for goal of money, sex, and basketball wasn't enough.

A game that is a combination of hockey and basketball. There is a hockey net at one end of the court, a basketball hoop at the other. I am Jim Barnett, talking to Jeff Mullins. Our coach, Al Attles, brags about how good he is. My shoes don't quite fit. The game stops for the singing of a soft song, but I notice that the game clock is still going. At my urging, Attles protests. In one part of the game, with us in the lead, there's a one-on-one duel, with Stan

Getz on our side and Charlie Parker (Bird) on theirs. Bird is incredibly fast, furious, graceful. He fakes Getz out and goes by him, but instead of shooting he just flows on by, goes in back of the hoop then back out again. We lose the game.

In the midst of the pedestrian problems of basketball (tight shoes, bragging coaches, protests) music emerges. There is a one-on-one duel between two great jazz musicians. Bird, his alto saxophone runs translated into athletic ability, has the grace of a hockey player on skates and the moves of a quick basketball guard. He makes a fantastic move, but doesn't want the shot. We lose the game even though (or because) Bird was more interested in the music of the move than in scoring.

I'm on the Warriors, playing in the championship game. With six seconds left, down by three points, we get the ball. I call time out, then find out how many time outs we have left (three). I talk to the team, but mostly to Phil Smith. I say we have to score fast, then foul, then call a quick time out.

Here I live out a fantasy. I act as coach for my favorite team. In the pressure of the final seconds, I take charge. That I talk especially to Phil Smith suggests that I think he is one of the most intelligent of the Warriors. I expect to him to take the quick shot, to commit the foul, to call time out. This dream is one of many I had about the Warriors in the years leading up to 1975, when they won the NBA championship.

My wife and I meet Jim Barnett. He's very nice. We tell him that we'd love to see him play another year. He admits he's not the greatest basketball player of all time, but I tell him he's the most fun to watch.

Jim Barnett was my favorite Warrior. I liked his wildly exciting drives to the hoop, as well as his obvious eccentricity. He'd debate with the referees before the game as to which should be the game ball; he'd have conversations with the Warrior announcer during the game. He loved to challenge the big man inside. I remember him driving on Wilt Chamberlain, pump faking and pump faking again and again. But Wilt stayed on the ground. Finally Barnett simply shot a set shot, from a distance of about three feet.

My friend Victor and I are practicing at an outdoor court. We work on pick and rolls. One of us sets a pick on an imaginary opponent, as the other one dribbles up to the pick. The one setting the pick then rolls to the hoop, catching a pass for a layup.

After playing basketball, someone says to me that I can no longer shoot my jump shot well, but I do drive much better now.

Playing basketball with two friends. I drive right for a layup, but as I go up I am closely guarded, so I spin in the air till I face the foul line and then I flip a blind little left hand hook swish into the basket.

Growing old, I improve my game even as my body deteriorates. I learn new left-handed shots, I learn to do the pick and roll. Like an old golfer losing his putting touch, I am no longer the great jump shooter I once was (at least as *I* remember it I was a great jump shooter). But I've learned the subtleties of the game. I've learned to drive, to double pump, to penetrate and pass off. And I have always worked on my left hand. Nothing in the game is more rewarding than making a left-handed shot. Behold, I have *two* hands.

Playing ball, being covered by Jack E. (who, unlike me, was on my high school basketball tea). I drive to the hoop, then go up floating with a beautiful reverse layup. Unfortunately the ball bounces out, but I get the rebound. Suddenly three men are on me, so I throw a blind pass which strikes the rim and bounces back to me. Then I make a great backhand pass to Jack E. (now on my team), but he misses the layup.

This dream has all the chaotic feel of under-the-basket action, the irrationality of how the ball bounces. Everything moves so fast, with great moves and great passes, but the bucket's got a lid on it, nobody can make the layup. How frustrating!

I watch a film of my Grandma Schneider and my Aunt Anne playing basketball. Eighty-year-old Grandma (in a long dress with sneakers on) makes a great cross under move (faking out the man covering her) but misses the reverse layup.

I had this dream only a few weeks after the previous one, and I'm touched by Grandma and me making the same move, blowing the same layup. Grandma is incredibly fluid and graceful as she drives to the basket in her long dress. Aunt Anne was in reality a terrifically strong woman and is the strong forward to Grandma's small forward. I was closer to Grandma than to any of my other grandparents. She liked my piano playing even before I knew how to play the piano, and I bet that somewhere deep in her unconscious she liked basketball too.

In a gym with my brother Herb. I am taping my ankles, but only have one ace bandage so I may have to cut it in two. A nice old doctor comes in and sees some marks on my ankles. He takes me to the back room and pours some strange solution on my knees. Another younger doctor is there watching the treatment and says I should rest for at least four days, but I want to play basketball.

Knees and ankles, tape and doctors, growing old. The kindhearted old doctor gives me the magic knee potion (ahh), but the young uptight doctor wants me to rest. Hell no, in four days I'll be older still. Let's play ball.

The Jump Shooter

The way the ball
hung there
against the blue or purple

one night last week
across town
at the playground where

I had gone to spare
my wife
from the mood I'd swallowed

and saw in the dusk
a stranger
shooting baskets a few

years older maybe
thirty-five
and overweight a little

beer belly saw him
shooting there
and joined him didn't

ask or anything simply
went over
picked off a rebound

and hooked it back up
while he
smiled I nodded and for

ten minutes or so we
took turns
taking shots and the thing

is neither of us said
a word
and this fellow who's

too heavy now and slow
to play
for any team still had

the old touch seldom
ever missed
kept moving further out

and finally his t-shirt
a gray
and fuzzy blue I stood

under the rim could
almost hear
a high school cheer

begin and fill a gym
while wooden
bleachers rocked he made

three in a row from
twenty feet
moved back two steps

faked out a patch
of darkness
arched another one and

the way the ball
hung there
against the blue or purple

then suddenly filled
the net
made me wave goodbye

breathe deeply and begin
to whistle
as I walked back home.

End of an Era for a Basketball Family

My youngest brother, Mark, played his final basketball game at Salem High School in Salem, Ohio, last week. That game marked the end of 17 consecutive years during which at least one son of John and Marge Shivers had been a member of the Salem Quakers basketball team.

John Jr., Jim, Paul, Bill and I all got together to see Mark's game and reminisce about the seasons since 1963–64 when, as a sophomore, I scored the first two of the family's points for Salem.

Everything that an athlete finishing his career feels is compounded in a family with six brothers. Indeed, it is almost as if all of us had put off "retiring" until Mark's final performance. And although Bill has two more years at Hiram College, and Mark will likely pursue a college career as the rest of us did, it was always the common experience of high school basketball that was the focus of our athletic interest. We have maintained a close connection with the basketball team since that first year and, when we give it up, it will be with all the brotherly fanfare we can muster—the ultimate basketball rap session.

As we look back over careers, seasons, games and moments, we will cover the point by point of every basketball happening, good and bad, of those 17 years. We will rehash everything in one comprehensive celebration.

First, probably, we will set straight the final family records—records in such bona fide categories as career scoring (Paul) and game high rebounder (Bill) and in such esoteric ones as only-brother-to-receive-game-shoes-as-a-freshman (John) and best-speech-delivered-as-captain-before-a-school-wide-assembly (Jim). Every brother will have a passel of family records by the time we finish.

Next we'll get into the meat of our experience—practice. Hours of practice. Years of practice. Endless dribbling, eyes off the ball. Left-handed, right-handed. Passing the ball against the garage wall: bounce pass, lob pass. Rebounding. Weights. Jump ropes. Running. And shooting, shooting, shooting: hook shots, jump shots, spin shots, set shots, power layups, turnaround fadeaways. Practice in the hottest summers when a younger brother or sister could be dispatched to the grocery for sodas and Gatorade; lonely practice in the winters, scraping the driveway clear and, under the glare of a single spotlight, shooting and retrieving a ball that bounced ineffectively in the cold.

We'll debate practice routines such as the drill that involved making ten out of twelve shots from a given spot before moving on; we'll remember drills that were invented, improved, added, discarded over the years. We'll consider again the logistics of trying to get as many brothers two hours

alone on the court as possible. The one-on-one's, the two-on-two's, and the big ones—three-on-three: six brothers dividing into teams, and, no matter how we were split, no team ever had an appreciable edge. Each brother more competitive than the next; each one intent on establishing himself in the basketball hierarchy that mattered most.

Practice also provided us a link that joined us to every basketball player, from the smallest grade school student throwing a ball underhand trying to make his first basket to the most talented NBA player.

We'll remember sharing equipment from the family sports drawer and borrowing from another's private stock, keeping in mind which things—a birthday gift pair of shorts, a T-shirt awarded for hustle, a pair of shoes financed with lawn-mowing money—that were never to be borrowed except, perhaps, in a pinch. And the phone calls that came any day, almost any hour, for whichever "Shives" and as many brothers as he could bring along for a game at the park or the recreation center or the high school.

We'll go on. The trophies, plaques, medals, and scrapbooks we'll recall. We'll look over a thousand and more photographs and reread clippings, appreciating every accomplishment.

We'll remember the injuries, those received and caused. First dunks. Missed free throws. Tournament games. Individual strengths. Individual styles. We'll reset the scenario for game days, nearly unchanged in 17 years: the player—the quintessential pampered jock—coming home from school, going to sleep (during which time Mom made sure that no one spoke above a whisper), being awakened at the precise minute he had requested, having the best piece of meat in the house prepared for him, having his gear repacked and rechecked, taking over the stereo for whatever songs he needed to psych up (at whatever decibel level he deemed most efficacious), and leaving dressed in one brother's shoes, another's overcoat, one of Dad's ties, Mom's kiss on his cheek and everyone's best wishes in his ears.

Dozens of people went out of their way to help us besides our parents, and we'll remember all of them. All four of our sisters sacrificed much during those basketball seasons. One would always stay home to tape the radio broadcast of the game, another would take charge of saving newspaper clippings, another would decorate or bake or iron or whatever. Other relatives made a fuss and offered encouragement. Coaches, neighbors and friends made impressions over the years that contributed to the continuation of our efforts.

Later, sometime after we've selected in all-time all-opponent team and an all-teammate all-star team, we'll talk about some of our private memories. Dedications, for example. It wasn't until recently that we discovered that each of us had dedicated seasons and specific games to different friends or relatives along the way; I remember every game I ever dedicated, but I remember never telling the person to whom I had dedicated the game. We'll talk about family favorites—those players that we mutu-

ally pulled for and tried to help and encourage from the first moment that we recognized that something in them, that spirit, that love of the game.

We'll talk about our brother Tom, who died of leukemia at the age of six, having lived to see only the first year of the "dynasty." Would he have been tall? Could he have helped win a state championship? We'll remember the anxieties of this or that bad game or slump. We'll remember arguments, criticism and encouragement and late night phone calls from around the country to find out about the game that night and the brother's stats.

For 17 years it was basketball. In the lean years when we ate potatoes six days a week, and when the Salem Kiwanis paid the \$20 for my team blazer; and in the good years—John now a lawyer, Jim a teacher, Paul in dental school, Bill at Hiram and Mark planning to study pre-med. We'll remember all those things.

Then in the early hours of the following morning, with everything remembered as well as possible, we'll fold the clippings, close the scrap-books, say good night and put a 17-year era to rest.

Politics Again

I thought to be *graceful* was what mattered, so I stayed back from the crowded bumping and maneuvering under the basket—often enough the ball would bounce off fingers and I would grab it up and pop in my jumper. I was too short to compete in that field of hands anyway . . . but I was strong in the shoulders and had quick reflexes; I could have blocked out, played *rough*, used my head—I was smart—made my more compact body a dynamo the taller, slower players would have had to make room for.

I didn't want to be a hydrant, I wanted to be a gull. My elbows were as hard as anyone else's. I became a better outside shot than most of them, and being left-handed helped—often they forgot and were leaning the other way. But that was a sort of trick, too, and reinforced the sense that I could always *evade* conflicts. I am thirty-eight years old now and living in a country run by those who are not going to release their grip on power and comfort. I thought the ones shoving and getting shoved under the basket were stupid—it was so easy to wait for loose balls and take fifteen-foot jump shots.

I don't remember ever getting hurt in a game. I scored a lot of points, but was never one of the first ones chosen. I have never been desperate—but many are hungry in this country now, one way or another, living in garbage, and I find I care about them. I write poems and prose poems that don't seem to change a thing. The ones who direct the secret police and make laws and change zoning ordinances are excruciatingly clever. I never realized that if the gangly ones on my team weren't in there grunting for rebounds, the other team would have had all lay-ups. Meanwhile in the ghettos and the sterile suburbs a desperation climbs higher than all the baskets and stuffs with long death-colored arms one day after another into every inch of hoop and flesh . . .

For We Would Be That Boy Again

We still play. And pray that our legs will last.

For we would be that boy again, alone in the schoolyard, his heart filled with the sky and the vision of the hoop. The winter clouds explode with his longing, his feet numb on the frozen pavement, his hands red and swollen.

Step light, sweet child, weave through the cold air and glide for your lay-up. Make it.

He practices, he practices.

Driven by his legs and the dream of flying, he prays: Please let me make it.

Not for fame, not for fortune, not even for a girl, but himself deep in the vision of his own magnificence. There is no end to his desire. He must be perfect. Nothing is more important. The clouds wait for him to reach their thunder, and he pivots, leaps, twirls until the twilight.

He dribbles dark streets and shoots to himself through the markettown. *Whiff, Whiff*, he never misses.

And comes home exhausted, ball at his side, hungry for a huge dinner to grow immense. Pores over the sports page and tapes his heroes on the bedroom wall. Adventures into the night to watch them close. They are gods in their luminous uniforms and he's in love with them. He too will one day carry a duffle and wear a letter on his coat. Read his name in the paper and take his place in eternity.

Then comes the night on the court and the flash of the bright gym. Earth odor of the lockerroom and his genitals snug in the jockstrap. Touch of the magic floor and the drum of balls in warm-up. His heart leaps.

And now his arms will shine, his face become flushed and throbbing. He bobs. He shakes his hands.

Will he make it? Will he float beatific through the wild chanting?

Please, he prays, please let me make it.

And become beautiful like the deer and the wolf and even the eagle, the glorious animal he would worship in himself, eternally hunting and hunted, body to body in the sacred dance.

Please.

But neither struggle nor desire nor the clouds themselves can help him, and no boy escapes the inevitable wound.

For he's not as good as he wants to be, and someone else is always better.

He learns to hate in order to win.

He can't stand to lose.

He turns and punches his best friend.

The crowd is merciless and he lets go of his vision.

He falls.

He becomes a man.

And years pass on the long journey of retreat.

Yet always beneath the scar in his eyes lives the image of that angel who once ran to get choosed in every saturday morning, the longing to be great and the joy of pretzels and soda while he waited.

And now we are forty.

And come to the court from a troubled marriage, from money problems, career worries and a painful failure in the mirror when we shave.

Now there is no crowd as we walk into the gym and undress. The butcher, the baker, the lawyer, the teacher, the writer, the painter, the cabinet-maker, the builder, the salesman, and the therapist. Cigarette smokers. Beer drinkers. Dreamers of beautiful women and a perfect work. Praising athletes half our age.

We want him back, the boy now bald and grey who puffs and grunts up court, gluttonous for another shot.

Our knees won't last forever but we know again we want to love ourselves and feel good.

Now we need each other to make sides.

Apologize for bursts of rage.

And recognize each other's wound.

Dear life, we are humble in your grace and praise our breath.

Send us out to other men in other cities as the boy who roams a strange neighborhood in his search of the hoop.

Losing Steps

•

It's probably a Sunday morning
and it's clear
you've begun to leave
fewer people behind. Perhaps

your fakes are as good as ever,
but when you move
you are like the Southern Pacific
the first time a car kept up with it,

your opponent at your hip,
with you all the way
to the rim. Five years earlier
he would have been part of the air

that trickled behind you
in your ascendance.
On the sidelines they are saying
he has lost a step,

it is something you've said
about others, harsh as clerk's talk
about the early dotage
of a superior.

•

Then it's Wednesday evening,
adult's night in some gymnasium
streaked with the abrupt scuff marks
of highschoolers, and another step

leaves you like some wire you never
thought about, leading to another wire.
This time you're playing defense,
someone gives you an old hesitation

and you're not fooled,
and he's past you anyway,
something more than dust
in your eyes, and points against you.

•

It's a Friday afternoon,
if you know anything about steps
you're playing chess
with an old, easy friend.

But you're probably walking
to a schoolyard where kids
are playing half court,
telling yourself the value of experience,

sneakers under your arm,
your legs hanging from your waist
like sloths from a branch
and so many leopards nearby.

47 Years a Shot-Freak

World's Greatest (and doubtless only) Freak Shot Expert Wilfred Hetzel, who was discharged from the Army in 1943 "for nervousness," is nervous now. In the assembly program at Ladysmith (Va.) High School this morning, the kids were a little restless, and his performance a little ragged. True, he hit over 70% of his gallimaufry of shots—with eyes shut, with legs crossed, with legs downright entwined, on the bounce off the floor, from one foot, from one knee, from both knees, from behind the backboard (frontward and backward), from up on his toes, from back on his heels (toes in the air) and in various combinations of the above. The kids responded with a gleeful shout, as he says they almost always do, to his "goofy series," in which he suddenly assumes a fey, exaggeratedly knock-kneed or bowlegged stance and then lets fly.

But the days of his 60-foot and 70-foot peg shots, which he used to make off ceilings or over rafters or simply from one end of the court to the other, are gone. Now, 58 years old and weakened by an operation for TB, the man who bills himself as "Thrice Featured in *Believe It or Not* and Twice in *Strange as It Seems*" can shoot the ball only underhanded (except on his bounce shots) and seldom from farther out than the foul line. And in 14 tries at Ladysmith, his 18-foot dropkick, his most spectacular remaining shot, was in and out once but never quite swished. The kids cheered frequently and came up for autographs afterward but, as Hetzel says, "If I can't impress them as the *best*—well, that's the point."

Now, sitting in the boys' dressing room of Louisa County High School in Mineral, Va., 30 miles from Ladysmith, he is shaking, and drinking his fifth cup of coffee to counteract "spots of fatigue." He got only four hours of sleep last night because the pills he has been taking for his sciatica since 1949 keep him awake in spite of Sominex. The principal of this just-integrated 580-pupil school has consented to move Mr. Hetzel's performance up from 2:30 to 1 o'clock so he won't have to sit around getting tenser.

"Nothing terrifies me more," Hetzel says, "than for the ball to be falling just short by inches—because these students don't know, they don't realize the handicaps. And then maybe some of the students start laughing, and I try harder. What some people can't understand is that I'm governed by averages, too."

With that he sheds his suit, revealing himself in the maroon shorts, the gold shirt lettered WILFRED HETZEL on the front and FREAK SHOT SPECIALIST on the back, the worn black-top shoes and the straggly strips of tape on his knees (kneepads shift too much when he kneels to shoot) that constitute his working uniform. He has worn this outfit underneath his clothes on the road since 1962; he had read that Esther Williams kept her

bathing suit on underneath for quick changes during her appearance tours. Distractedly, Hetzel proceeds to the gym and takes a few practice shots as the kids file in. Then he presents himself and relates, in an absorbed, recitative voice, a brief history of his involvement in freak shooting.

Not the comprehensive history, because he hasn't the time. If he were to include all the material he is more than happy to bring forth in conversation, he would go back to 1924, when, in Melrose, Minn., at the age of 12, he nailed a barrel hoop to the side of the family woodshed and took his first shot. If you start counting then, Hetzel has said, "and if you include all the times with a baseball, a kittenball, a soccer ball, a rag ball, some socks tied together in the form of a ball, a tennis ball, a football—I had to learn to shoot the football end over end so that it would nose down at just the right moment and pass through that small hoop"—if you count all those shots, along with the 30,000 hours he estimates he has spent shooting a regulation basketball through a real basket, says Hetzel—"I have probably shot more goals than any man in history."

In his backyard there by the woodshed he shot them year-round, in rain, snow, in tricky gusts of wind ("It was a thrill to have the wind pick up the ball and blow it six or seven feet through the hoop") and in temperatures down to 20° below. He pretended he was the University of Minnesota and also its opponents, which meant, since he did his best for both sides, that Minnesota lost half the time. He would plan out a complete schedule in advance, but when the Gophers had lost too many games to hope for a Big Ten crown, he would start over. When he tells audiences this, Hetzel says, it gives the coaches present a good laugh "because they wish they could start a season over. Of course, it's so much easier the way I do it, all make-believe."

The first time young Wilfred tried shooting with a real basketball, "it went straight, three feet under the basket, like a pass."

"Gee whiz," remarked an unkind neighborhood boy who was watching, "if I couldn't do any better than that, I'd quit."

"He was one of those boys," recalls Hetzel, "who move away a few years later, and you don't know what happened to them." One of those boys, in other words, who do not go on to become the world's greatest anything.

Somewhat later, Wilfred started doing a little shooting in the local gym—but it wasn't easy. "There were some boys there, after school, who were good at clever fakery, dribbling, passing and that, and they would hog the ball. I might have to wait two hours, from 3:30 to 5:30, until they went home and I could get in five minutes of shooting before the janitor locked the ball up. Or maybe he would lock it up as soon as they quit. I'd think nothing later of shooting 5,000 times, because I'd been deprived of it for so long."

There was no question of Hetzel's going after one of those clever-faking

boys one-on-one and taking the ball away, because ball handling has never been his forte. It has never even been a part of his portfolio. The truth is that Wilfred Hetzel, who has made 144 straight foul shots standing on one foot, who bills himself as “One of Basketball’s Immortals,” has never learned to dribble.

“I realized I would never be good at the game one day in PT class when I was a freshman in high school,” he says now. “We were supposed to do what they called a figure-eight drill. I’d be a forward, and the center would pass it to me, and I would pass it to the other forward and then I wouldn’t know where to go. They never explained it to me in detail, never diagramed it or anything. After I fouled it up twice, I knew I’d never play. I was too slow and kind of awkward in other ways.”

Hetzel did serve the high school team briefly as a scrub, and “I made a few shots against the first team, and I’d pass it pretty well, but I never did dribble. And I’d be open for a shot and very seldom would anyone pass it to me. There were cliques on the team—they’d pass it to their friends.”

He got into one unofficial game against a local telephone team, didn’t shoot and committed two technical fouls by neglecting to check in with the timekeeper each time he went in. The year before, his uniform was stolen twice. He decided to quit organized basketball forever (except for a brief exhibition game appearance with Western Union College in Le Mars, Iowa many years later, when he was inserted to shoot two foul shots and hit one).

In fact, young Wilfred found that he had no great knack for any competitive sport. In baseball he could hit fungoes with precision and catch fly balls gloveless in his big, long-fingered hands, but he was too slow to play the outfield and couldn’t get the bat around fast enough to hit pitching.

But that just meant more time for shooting basketballs by himself every day, including the day his father, a Bavarian immigrant and railroad man, was killed. The water tank for which the elder Hetzel was responsible was out of order, and evidently he went up to its rim to investigate. No one saw him fall in through the layer of ice, but when 16-year-old Wilfred came in for lunch, his father’s hamburger was overcooking on the stove. Finally Mrs. Hetzel took it off. “The ice froze back over,” as Hetzel tells it, “and they had to get special permission from division headquarters to go in and see if he was there. And he was.”

It is easy enough to see a fateful symbolism in the mode of the father’s death—the son doomed to act it out with a basketball over and over again—but Hetzel says he has never seen any irony in it. By the time his father died, at any rate, he had already devoted hundreds of hours to what was to become his vocation.

Pretty soon Hetzel was making 98 out of 100 from the free-throw line. But he never had any witnesses, “and people thought if I really had a talent like that I would be on the team.” So one day as a high school senior, he put on an impromptu lunch-hour exhibition in the school gym. That was

his first show, in 1929. "I've thought about writing Ed Sullivan," he says, "and saying they're all talking so much about the sports stars of the Golden '20s—Red Grange and so on—and here I am, out of the '20s and still performing."

But in those early days he had no tricks, just free throws, performed at no charge. Upon graduation from high school he moved with his mother, who had remarried, to nearby Sauk Centre, Minn., and began to do some sportswriting for local daily and weekly papers. In the line of duty, he would attend Sauk Centre games, and while the players were dressing he would seize the opportunity to take the floor in his street clothes and shoot before a crowd. He went so far as to write himself up in one of the papers, in the third person: "Wilfred Hetzel of Sauk Centre, in a recent practice session, hit 467 free throws out of 500."

Meanwhile, the local team was doing well to hit 40% from the foul line—and he reported that, too. "The fans in Sauk Centre were so hateful to me in those years," he says. "Maybe it was my fault because I slammed their team in the paper. Maybe I was like a prima donna. But once I made 120 of 122 before a game, 82 straight, and I walked off the floor, and there wasn't a single handclap. But you know, they've never had a bad team since? It kind of woke them up when I slammed them."

And then one night, in the visiting cheering section, someone woke up to Wilfred Hetzel. "This very beautiful girl came down and made such a fuss about me," he recalls. "The home people never made any fuss. The principal's son would take a couple of shots before throwing my ball back to me, and they would laugh at my embarrassment. But this beautiful girl raved about how good I was. Well, the next night Sauk Centre was to play at that girl's school, and I planned to ride with the team over there in hopes of seeing her again. But at the last minute they took only one car and didn't have room for me.

"So, rather than waste the day, I got in through the window of the gym in Melrose and practiced. I'd make 17 in a row several times, and then I'd miss. I got disgusted. 'I could do better than this with my eyes closed,' I told myself. So I just tried it that way. I shot 100 with my eyes closed and made 74. That was my first trick. I never did see that girl again."

Gradually Hetzel's reputation spread, and he was able to talk several area schools into letting him put on a free-throw show before a game or at the half. The Depression bore down, and he couldn't find much work, so he lived at home and kept on practicing his shots. When he was 20 he tired of pretending he was the University of Minnesota and began to work more on variety. He practiced for seven or eight years. After a few fans complained that free throws tended to grow monotonous, and after he lost a free-throw contest to an expert named Bunny Levitt who was traveling with the Harlem Globetrotters, he introduced his eyes-shut trick and a couple of other "unorthodox shots" to the public.

In 1937 Hetzel enrolled in the University of Minnesota and was able to

work out in the gym and book himself, occasionally for a \$2 or \$5 honorarium, into shows at high schools, colleges and military bases throughout the state and beyond. He hitchhiked from place to place, persuaded 60 businesses in Sauk Centre to chip in on a sweat suit with SAUK CENTRE, MINNESOTA on the front and WILFRED HETZEL, STUNT SHOT SPECIALIST on the back, and it was not long before he was popping up in *Ripley's Believe It or Not* and in *Strange as It Seems*. "Wilfred Hetzel, Minneapolis Basketball Star, Shot 92 Baskets Out of 100 Tries with One Hand, Standing On One Leg and Blindfolded!" right alongside "Mrs. M. J. Wellman, Oklahoma City, Has Worn the Same Set of False Teeth for 45 Years." "Wilfred Hetzel Shot 66 Straight Basketball Foul Shots From His Knees!" right alongside "Musical Teeth! For 4 Months After Having Dental Work Done, Mrs. Fred Stutz, Indianapolis, *Could Hear Radio Programs Without Having the Radio Turned On! Her Teeth Formed a Receiving Set!*"

Then in the early '40s, after he mastered the long peg shot and the drop-kick, Hetzel's career reached its fullest flower. In those years, aside from 10 months in the Army during which he experienced severe trouble with his teeth (though he heard no radio programs over them) as well as with his nerves, he spent September through May traveling the country, performing for around \$25 a show, sometimes four or five times a day. In 1941 he appeared at the Clair Bee Coaching Clinic at Manhattan Beach, N. Y., and was invited by Ned Irish to perform in a clown suit in Madison Square Garden, but that latter deal, to Hetzel's great regret, fell through. In the 1943-44 and '44-'45 seasons alone, he traveled 42,000 miles and performed over 150 times. He remembers all his best performances from this heyday in detail, especially the ones in Oklahoma. "I've done an extraordinary amount of spectacular things there," he says. "In Davis, Okla., on Feb. 29, 1944—which I remember because I thought at the time, 'This is an unusual day, it comes along once in four years, I wonder what feat I'll accomplish that will make me remember this day?'—I hit 40-foot, 50-foot and 70-foot shots, all on the first try. All straight through. In fact, I lost the thrill of the 70-footer because the netting moved so barely, I thought at first the ball had just brushed it underneath. In Okmulgee, Okla., on a 60-footer, the ball hit the inside of the rim, bounced way back up diagonally, hit the junction of a rafter and the ceiling, rebounded right back to the goal, bounced around the rim and went in. That was for a girl's gym class. It was funny. I had told them my superduper was coming up.

"In Miami, Okla., I made a shot over two girders at once that the coach remembered there 10 years later. In Jenks, Okla., there was just a narrow opening to throw the ball through to get it over two crossbeams. I tried it eight times before I even got the ball through, and then it missed the basket by a foot. But I've always thanked my lucky stars that I had guts. I kept at it, and on the very next try the ball went through the opening and right down into the basket. Fifty feet. Unbeknown to me, Mickey Mantle was

in junior high school in Commerce, just a few miles away, that very year.”

During these cross-country tours, Hetzel would book himself for three weeks in advance. As he traveled he would write to other schools, advising them to address their replies to him in care of the school where he would be performing at the end of that period, and when he reached the school he would check his mail and map out another three weeks.

It was a grueling routine, traveling by bus or train at night (he had no car, and anyway he finds that driving impairs his touch), often getting too little sleep, lugging around his two bags (one containing clothes and the other his ball and pump), casting about in each town for a room “in some respectable place,” struggling through snowstorms so as not to miss a date.

Albuquerque; Dodge City, Kans.; Forest Grove, Ore.; Homer, N.Y.; Ferndale, Mich.; San Luis Obispo, Calif.; Augusta, Ga.; Manassas, Va.; Muncie, Ind.; Louisville; Leechburg, Pa.; Ogden, Utah; Akron; Morgantown, W. Va.; Hagerstown, Md.; Maywood, Ill.; Tombstone, Ariz. It was a thorough way of seeing the country, but it paid Hetzel only about enough to keep him going, and the travel took its toll on his health. Not until years later did he realize that he had contracted tuberculosis, which lingered until his operation—the removal of a rib and part of a lung in 1968—but he knew he did not feel up to any more full-time barnstorming, so when he found himself in Washington in the spring of 1945, he decided it was time he got a regular job. In 1942 he had applied for a defense-plant job in Chicago but “they watched me for a while and then they rejected me. I asked why and they said I didn’t have no coordination. Well, if they’d known that coordination was one of the things I was famous for! I’ve always attributed my success to the three Cs—confidence, coordination and concentration. But then, you can be coordinated in one thing and not in another. I never did learn to dance.” This time, in ’45, his touch qualified him as a civilian typist for the Marine Corps, a job he holds to this day.

Settling down in Arlington, Va., where he lives now as a roomer in a private home, Hetzel kept up his shooting career through the ’50s and ’60s by spacing out his leave time in bits and pieces of two or three days. His job has not paid enough to support a wife—or so he concluded after meeting the girl of his life, a toe dancer, on a bus. He confessed to her in a letter, “I kissed you when you were asleep on the bus,” and she confessed in reply, “I wasn’t asleep.” They saw each other for some time and still exchange letters, but she married someone else. “I guess that’s why I’ve never married,” Hetzel says. “I didn’t want anyone to replace her.”

It was not until 1947 that he started taking off his sweat jacket to shoot—“before, on account I was so slender, I was afraid there would be more people laughing at me, and the jacket made me feel a little fleshier.” The greater freedom of movement helped him to keep up his distance shots; but he made his last 70-footer in ’54, his last 30-footer four years ago. In the ’50s he began to find it hard “to get my pep up,” and sometimes when that happened he got “snotty” receptions and reviews. “Those few times

when maybe I wasn't in form, no one asked for autographs," he says. "They looked on me as a fake or a cheat or a has-been. I get emotional when I think about the time, in Jeffersonville, Ind., some people were saying, 'He's not much,' and the coach there stood up and fairly exploded and said, 'I wish I could shoot half as good as that man.'"

In recent years he found that small, out-of-the-way black schools in the South were a fertile field, though once "they were envious—one of the boys came up and asked if I could spin the ball in my hands. I said if I could do those things, I'd have been a Globetrotter. But usually there's no resentment of me because I'm white. Without my saying it, the Negro kids come up to me and say, 'You're better than Alcindor.' Now that don't take no glory from him. He's still one of the greatest centers that ever lived. It's not the same competitive field."

In 1936 Hetzel heard Dr. James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, make a speech. "He said if you're doing something for humanity, don't think about getting a reward now, you'll get it later. I thought then, 'If I don't get a million dollars for it, I'll just enjoy it.' I do envy those football players. You know that commercial: 'Remember, Charley Conerly, such and such a day when you threw three TD passes,' and then they show the replay? I wish that on my best days they'd had TV cameras running. And I wish the people back in Minnesota that hated me and made fun of me and said, 'If there was money in it, somebody would be better at it'—I'd like to get all those people together in one gym and do all the greatest tricks I ever did."

But now, at Louisa County High School in Virginia, his audience is some 500 rural kids who have been charged 25¢ apiece by their student council for the benefit of a Korean orphan. And what Mr. Hetzel is saying now to the kids, in reference to all those doubters back in Minnesota, is "if they'd believed me back there in the beginning, when I tried to tell them I had made 98 out of 100, I might not be here now."

And he is advancing, in his gangly yet almost formal walk, to the foul line, where he begins to hit his underhanded shots, blim, blim, blim, coolly, crisply, now cross-legged, now on his toes, now on his heels, missing one occasionally but in command, running through his repertoire, down on his knees, up on one foot, and the kids are paying him mind. Mr. Hetzel's manner of shooting is memorable in many respects, but its most noteworthy feature is that when he releases the ball—even routinely in practice but especially when he knows he is going well—his face is lit by a proud and affectionate smile. The first time Wilfred Hetzel has ever tried a shot from behind a Louisa County backboard, over the crossed wires that raise and lower it, he scores. On his second try at that same shot backward, over his head, he scores. He scores on one more backspin bounce shot from his knees. And now, in closing: the dropkick.

Short. Short. Off to the right. Short. Off to the right. Short. Short. Off the rim. Off the rim. Off to the left. Off the rim. No, way short. A pause before the 13th try and then it is up, off the backboard, swish.

“Yaay! Aw-right! Sign him up!”

About the Editor

Daniel Rudman is thirty-six years old, lives in Berkeley, and is an actor and playwright. He is the author of *Hold Me Until Morning*.

Faint, illegible text at the top of the page, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side.

~~RARE BOOKS & T.
UNIV. OF WIS.
MADISON~~

\$8.95

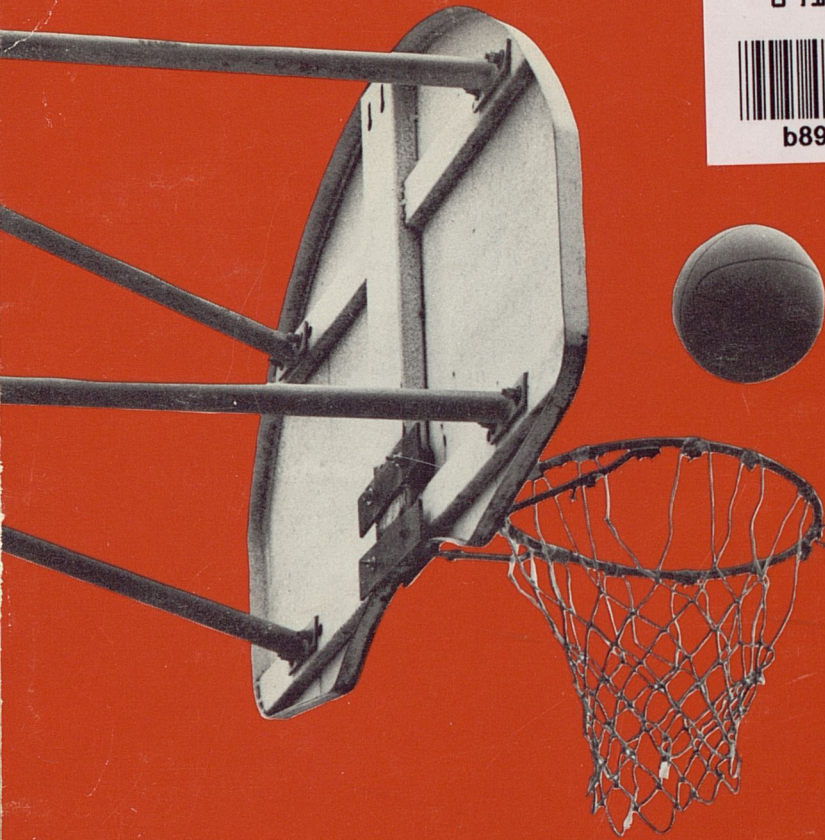
0-913028-76-2

Sports Literature

89119095420



b89119095420a



TAKE IT TO THE HOOP is a collection of the most moving, perceptive and knowledgeable writing about basketball: fiction, non-fiction and poetry. The book contains work by:

Pete Axthelm
John McPhee
Bill Russell
Jeremy Lerner
Bill Cosby
John R. Tunis
Jim Carroll
Leonard Michaels
Alta
Nick Lyons
Gerald Locklin
John Krich
Scott Ostler

John Updike
Roy Blount Jr.
Bill Bradley
Pat Jordan
Tom Meschery
Rick Telander
William Matthews
Thomas Farber
Ron Jones
Joe Flaherty
Philip Singerman
Ron Loewinsohn
and many more . . .