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“Man to Man”: Basketball, Movement, and the Practice of Masculinity

Alonzo Mourning, the great center for the Miami Heat, was diagnosed in the summer of 2000 with a rare kidney condition that threatened to end his career. At a minimum he was advised to take a year off from the game to adjust to the needed medications. Instead, when playoff time came around in the next season, Mourning could not resist the urge to return to play, and so he speeded up his rehabilitation process and played in the last twenty or so games of the regular season, as well as the playoffs. When he was asked by a reporter why he decided to take the risk, Mourning talked the usual clichés about his dedication to winning and to the good of the team, but he also said with great energy that he missed the physical contact in the game, what he called “the traffic.” Mourning’s game is very physical. He is best known as a fierce defender, patrolling the lane, contesting every opponent’s shot, fighting for every rebound. He scowls in menace and roars in triumph, and his body language communicates rage and violence kept barely in check. But when he described what he missed about the game, he did not seem violent at all. He evoked an atmosphere of friendly, competitive physical contact, and he seemed to need it like an addict.

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Mourning's term *traffic* articulates one of the chief pleasures of playing basketball—forceful and complex movement in contested space. Ten players move at high speed through a limited and articulated space, all of them every moment making movement decisions that alter the others' movements, creating together an impromptu dance. Their decisions are informed by the rules and objectives of the game, so their movements are neither random nor natural. They are shaped by the culture of the game, which is itself connected to larger cultural formations. For its players and fans, basketball is an important cultural practice precisely because it operates on the body, teaching kinetic and perceptual habits specific to the game. Players learn how to negotiate a spatial field occupied by many other agents, all with their own interests and goals, and the rules of negotiation are part of the cultural payoff of the practice.

Basketball culture, like other subcultures, teaches those who practice it a complex array of lessons. The game promotes a characteristic ethical style, a way of thinking and making decisions, and a specific range of emotional responses, as well as a way of occupying and moving through space. The lessons of the game and of other everyday practices are so deep that they shape the very identities of players, perhaps even more powerfully than the grand cultural identities of race and gender and class and sexuality. Operating below the cultural/political radar, basketball creates a loose community whose members recognize each other through their subtle embodiment of the lessons of the game.

Those lessons are very much a part of my own life, my way of being in the world. I have been playing since I was a kid, and I have had the good luck of finding an ongoing local game that has allowed me to continue to play into my fifties. I would describe myself as a lifelong mediocre player, physically limited but intense. I am also an avid basketball fan. I will stop and watch any pickup game I come across, and I watch college and pro games regularly. That is to say, I write this analysis from within the culture of basketball, as a person whose identity has been shaped by the practice. My goal is to use my own experience as a player to describe and articulate the usually unspoken feel for space and movement that the game encourages.

Playing basketball has particularly been central to my experience of being a man and of being in the company of men. I have occasionally played the game with women, but for the most part my regular practice has been with other men. In fact, it's the only regular practice in my life that is so exclusively masculine. Playing basketball provides men with the opportunity to

move together and make physical contact in a nonviolent and nonsexual practice. It is one of the many places where men learn to negotiate their masculinity, right down at the level of the body, movement, and emotion.

Sport has long been recognized as one of the crucial cultural sites where masculinity is taught and learned. Muscular Christians at the turn of the twentieth century saw it as a necessary antidote to the feminization of work and culture. Late-twentieth-century feminists have seen it as one of the practices that legitimate male power and the oppression of women. Young boys just learning games are taught to see sport as a test of their nascent manhood, and they recognize that the outcome can shape the rest of their lives as men. Coaches use the word *manhood* as a weapon to push players to risk injury and cause pain. Behind the belief that sport teaches masculinity is the assumption, acknowledged or not, that masculinity is not natural but cultural, a learned pattern of behavior and attitudes. Many of the coaches and moralists who believe that sport teaches masculinity would argue for a *natural* masculinity that modern culture denigrates and sport can recover, but their own practices suggest that, if the lessons of sport must be repeated and drilled so frequently, masculinity is an effect of their teaching—as an element in the entire gender-training mechanism of the culture—rather than a natural state.

But if it's true to say that sports teach masculinity, it's also important to remember that this teaching is not simple or monolithic. There is no essential "masculinity" that sports teach; there are only various modes of masculinity, and different sports teach different modes. Golf is not football. Both are powerful teachers of stereotypical masculine behavior, but one teaches its players self-reliance and rational decision making while the other teaches group loyalty and righteous violence. Adding to the complexity of this teaching is the fact that the men who learn these lessons are not blank slates on which sport makes an indelible imprint. Men and boys who engage in sport are active participants in learning gender codes, and what they learn may well not be what sports intend to teach. They learn the codes of masculinity from many sources, and they process that information in an active and critical manner. As a result of these diverse and often contradictory practices of teaching and learning, what sport teaches about masculinity differs from sport to sport and player to player.

One way to make an analysis of sport and masculinity more productive is to direct it to a particular sport, in this case basketball. There are, of course, millions of women who play basketball avidly and with great skill. This fact

clearly demonstrates that there is nothing *inherently* masculine about the game. But the practice of basketball is clearly *coded* masculine within our current cultural binaries. One day the growing number of women who play the game will change that coding, but for now they have to deal with the “masculinity” of basketball, just as male dancers have to deal with the “femininity” of dance. The question of how women negotiate that deal would have to be the subject of an essay in itself, one that I am not the person to write. But as a man who has played and watched the game for over forty years, and who has learned his own modes of masculinity at least in part on the court, I can make use of my own experience in order to reflect on basketball as a teacher of some particular modes of masculinity.

One of the reasons why sport shapes gender identity so powerfully is that it operates on the bodies of players. Sports are systems of physical discipline that also inevitably affect the values and beliefs of players. Following Foucault, we know how profoundly the soul can be shaped by the “docile bodies” produced by disciplinary practices. My strategy in this essay will therefore be to describe and analyze basketball as a movement system, a way that bodies move through and occupy a particular spatial environment. I will then examine the modes of masculinity that those movement practices promote, pressing the question of whether they are the modes of a “hegemonic masculinity” that oppresses women and institutionalizes homophobia, as many analysts of the cultural role of sport have argued. My conviction is that basketball the game provides for its players a rich aesthetic and emotional experience, more complex than the stereotypes of traditional masculinity would predict.

Basketball occurs in a variety of environments, but the space of the game is always carefully defined. Perhaps we first think of huge arenas sponsored by municipal, corporate, or academic institutions, where a brightly lit court is surrounded by thousands of spectators assembled for a theatrical display of elite athletic skill. But the vast majority of basketball games are not spectacles at all. In the pickup game that millions of people play each year, there are no spectators except for the players waiting for the next game. And the locations of courts vary significantly. Basketball is played in school gyms, church halls, schoolyards, rec centers, driveways, backyards, playgrounds, anywhere a basket can be hung. Some of these spaces are official courts with foul lines, three-point arcs, half-court lines, and out-of-bounds markers. But others are so informal that the space must be defined by negotiation

and consensus of the players. In a backyard game the boundaries might be a hedge on the left and a garage on the right. And even on official courts, players in pickup games negotiate the use of the space. In my local game, for example, there are three-point arcs, but we don't count three-point shots. Our court is a little short, so we don't follow the "backcourt" rule. Similar negotiations of "ground rules" occur throughout pickup basketball. The definition of the space for the purpose of these games is a local social construct rather than a product of official rules. In these informal games, the men who show up to play must engage in a peaceful and cooperative negotiation of the spatial practice.

But no matter how informal the game, players do construct or accept territorial rules and boundaries. The philosopher Johan Huizinga sees such boundaries as essential to the nature of play. In his classic study *Homo Ludens* he argues that play must have its own separate space: "All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course." Such spaces are "forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (2). While I will argue later that the "apart-ness" of the play space and of the game is far from absolute, basketball clearly exists within an arbitrary and delineated space and enforces its boundaries with precision. If even the tip of a toe of a player with the ball touches the out-of-bounds line, the ball goes over to the other team. If the offensive team doesn't get the ball past half-court within ten seconds, it loses the ball. The space of basketball is demarcated, and players accept and enjoy the feeling of moving within a familiar and defined space that at least seems to exist apart from the space of ordinary experience.

Here is a story about the emotional charge that these arbitrary boundaries can create. They define not only where the players can go, but also where those who are not players cannot go. I play in an oldguygame at the university gym on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at noon. Some semesters there is a class in this space beginning at one. Students often arrive early and hang around the edge of the court. One day some of the students were milling around, chatting, getting gear out of storage. And they were getting onto our court, in the periphery of our way. They didn't think twice about it. Teen basketball culture tolerates sideliners edging onto the court. Oldguy basketball culture *doesn't*. We felt pinched and distracted. Serious players

get into a Zen state that is the whole point of the exercise and therefore precious. And the students were disrupting that state. They didn't intend to, but that didn't matter. I said and others said, "Get off the court please. Somebody's gonna get hurt." No response. "Get off the court." Raised voices, sharper tone. "Get off the damn court." Testosterone and adrenaline, space and limits, contest and anger. Some of the guys on the sideline didn't like it, bristled, thinking *who are you to talk to us?* But the answer to that question was—old guys who, because we were older, felt the right to tell young guys to give us space. "Heads up," we were saying without saying, "the rest of the world exists. We're playing a game here. This is our space and time. Twelve to one. Sideline to sideline, baseline to baseline. We play our game within these limits for this moment. Respect that. Back off." And they did. There was one football player who would have liked to kill us, as we probably deserved. But he backed off too, then quickly forgot about us.

This is a story, of course, about *men* and space. Any woman of our time is likely to roll her eyes at it, lamenting the stupidity and the simian predictability of men. Contesting spatial boundaries is often seen as a basic element of biological masculinity. Our testosterone makes us territorial, so the argument runs—willing to fight to defend the space of the clan, willing to kill and die in wars that expand the space we can define as our own. On the contrary, women are seen to inhabit and domesticate space, make it a surrounding, an extension of the body. But my story suggests that this masculine desire to control space is not so much a biological imperative as it is a profound habit learned in the game itself. As Shirley Ardener says in *Ground Rules and Social Maps*, "Space defines the people in it. At the same time, however, the presence of individuals in space in turn determines its nature" (3). That is, the "ground rules," or definitions of boundaries in space, are dialectically related to "social maps," the definitions that produce social groups and hierarchies. Space is defined by social process, and spatial rules in turn shape the people who inhabit the space. Basketball teaches that play is made possible by limits, and that the play-space is worthy of defense. In this lesson basketball is clearly a conservative force, teaching a traditional male value; but as we will see, not all of its lessons are so traditional.

Within and because of these boundaries, basketball is played in a highly *oriented* space. The baskets and backboards at either end of the court are the most obvious orientation points. Because the goal of the game is to put the ball in the basket, the game flows from end to end, and the players operate within a clear, understandable, and reassuringly rectilinear space. The

basketball court is far more defined than a baseball field, with its wide open outfield spaces, and it is smaller than the rectangles of a football or soccer field, so its orientation markers are closer and more powerful. But within this simple grid, more complex orientation points exist in endless movement. The most obvious is the ball itself, which as it moves orients the movements of all the players. Offensive players move in relation to the placement and direction of the ball, and defensive players react to the offensive players' movements and to the likely direction that the ball will take. Players also know the points on the court where strategic moves are best performed, so they orient to those points as well. "The post" is a spot from which a strong player can get an easy shot, so it is often an orientation point and a contested location. Players push and jostle for control of that space, and some of the most physical play in the game occurs there. Defensive players learn over time where an offensive player likes to take a shot, so those spaces are also orientation points. Unlike the basket, these points are constantly shifting and require adjustment and expectation. Players don't know where they will occur until the flow of the game creates them. But once they are created, they shape the movement of the players and provide points of visual interest for fans.

Albert Mehrabian's *Public Place and Private Space: The Psychology of Work, Play, and Living Environments* provides a useful scheme for describing spatial arrangements. Mehrabian assesses the "information load" of spaces. The continuum between "high-load" and "low-load" environments is a function of their location within the following qualitative oppositions:

- uncertain—certain
- varied—redundant
- complex—simple
- novel—familiar
- large scale—small scale
- contrasting—similar
- dense—sparse
- intermittent—continuous
- surprising—usual
- heterogeneous—homogeneous
- crowded—uncrowded
- asymmetrical—symmetrical
- immediate—distant

moving—still
 rare—common
 random—patterned
 improbable—probable (12–13)

On most of these scales, the basketball environment is closer to the left than the right term of these oppositions, creating a “high load” information space. Basketball occurs in a complex space that requires a high degree of attention and mental process, but it is an oriented space. What tames the complexity of the space is its symmetry and its familiarity to the practiced player. Over time, the shifting, complex space of the court becomes more manageable and more pleasurable as a movement environment. And as players move together on the court again and again, the points of orientation that their cooperative movements create become clearer and more available for strategic use.

The result for players is a rich, engaging environment within an arbitrary but comforting set of boundaries and points of orientation. The character of this space might explain in part why basketball and other sports are so popular in contemporary culture. Fredric Jameson has characterized the spatial environment of postmodern culture as disoriented and confusing:

This latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surrounding perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment . . . can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (44)

The spaces of most sports, in particular basketball, could therefore be thought of as anti-postmodern, in that they provide a comforting experience of orientation and belonging within a complex but comprehensible environment.

Doreen Massey makes a similar point in her book *Space, Place, and Gender*, when she describes a gendered contrast between “space” and “place.” She argues that our culture connects “space” and its connotations of open-

ness, freedom of movement, and disorientation with traditional definitions of masculinity, and that we associate "place" and its connotations of limits, belonging, and community with traditional femininity. But Massey wants to undo this opposition and rethink "place" as a node in larger spatial systems. She characterizes the desire for place in the traditional sense as a nostalgic, romantic need to get our bearings in a disorienting postmodern world (162), and she demonstrates clearly that even the most tightly knit, community-oriented "places," such as villagelike neighborhoods in cities, are in fact connected up to larger spatial environments through economic and communicational apparatuses. Following Massey, one could therefore argue that, in Huizinga's terms, there is no such thing as the "place apart" that he believes play requires. The "place" of the basketball court, for all of its boundaries and orientation points, is in fact part of, say, a university space, which is part of a municipal space, and so on out. Basketball does not exist in an "other" place, cut off from the wider geographical and social world. But the fact that it *feels like* it does is clearly part of its appeal.

If playing basketball gives pleasure in part because it occurs in what seems like a comfortable, enclosed place, I would argue that part of what it teaches in terms of gender definitions is not so traditionally masculine. For all of their connections with macho style, basketball and other sports could be seen as expressions of a traditionally feminine desire for a defined and comforting place. Massey's analysis suggests that this desire for a "feminine" space cannot finally be sustained, but it is a desire that men replay almost daily in their consumption of and participation in sport. The notion that sport expresses a doomed masculine desire for a "feminine" place flies in the face of conventional cultural assumptions, and it suggests that men may be less comfortable in their traditional masculine roles than we assume. It also suggests that easy oppositions between masculine and feminine cannot account for the complexity of gendered experience. The fact that sport is defined by our culture as a hypermasculine pursuit provides an effective cover for an exploration of traditionally feminine values.

A similar argument can be constructed with regard to the movement that occurs within the spatial boundaries of the court. Of course all sports involve movement, but each sport encourages different movement patterns with different aesthetic styles. Think of the precise and constrained movement of the golfer putting, as opposed to the flamboyant and courageous leap of a wide receiver in football. And even within a particular sport, movement patterns vary. Different teams feature characteristic movement pat-

terns, from the precision motion and passing offense of Princeton hoops to the wide-open athleticism of recent Duke teams. In pickup basketball there is a similar, even wider, variety, depending on the space the game is played in and the personalities of the players. In some pickup games the play is all individualistic, while in others the players move in perfect concert. Movement styles also differ from player to player. Some are balletic and lightfooted; some are musclebound and bullish. Some are angular, some are fluid. Part of the fascination of the game for fans is the idiosyncratic movement styles of great players, from the transcendent grace and power of Michael Jordan to the darting speed of Alan Iverson to the sheer strength of Karl Malone. Basketball is a kinetic experience for fans and players, and part of the appeal of the game is the simple pleasure of movement for its own sake.

Despite the variety of movement styles in the game, it is possible to describe the characteristic movement qualities of basketball, which I believe explain its appeal to men and its effects on their gendered identities. I will first describe the movements of individuals in the game, then the movements of players as a group, focusing throughout on the modes of masculinity that these movement patterns promote. "Movement for its own sake" is not of course the official function of movement in sport. Sport uses movement for goal-oriented purposes. In basketball, players leap to rise above the defender for the shot; they run to get to a strategic spot first. But we need not constrain our analysis of athletic movement to its official purpose. There is an aesthetic and kinesthetic appeal to sport, almost independent of its competitive goals. The competitive and utilitarian function of movement in sport is part of its traditional masculinity, but that function does not explain all of the appeal of athletic movement. What if we thought of the ball as an excuse for men to dance? Maybe the ideology of competition allows for joyful movement and bodily contact, a way of minimizing homophobia while still enjoying the "feminine" pleasures of exuberant movement, friendly bodily contact, and complicated cooperation in space.

Once the analogy between basketball and dance is admitted, some of the similarities are striking. Drawing on the vocabulary of ballet, think of the layup as a *grand jeté*. Think of the defensive shuffle as a *chasse*, the defensive stance as second position. Think of spin moves as *chaines* turns. Some of the players we remember most vividly have this dancelike quality. Michael Jordan and Mikhail Baryshnikov are the great artists of the air in my cultural memory. Both of them created the illusion that they could leap,

pause in midair, then go higher. Clyde ("The Glide") Drexler got his nickname from his smooth but powerful movement style. Jerry West's jump shot had a beautiful and precise delicacy in the extended fingers of the follow-through, the pointed toes of the jump. Even in pickup games a casual observer can notice the *beautiful* player, the one with extension, lift, balance, balletic grace.

Of course basketball need not explicitly resemble dance in order to be aesthetically pleasing. There is an aesthetic quality to the ordinary movements of the game: running, jumping, gliding through complex traffic, spinning off opponents, dribbling with extreme dexterity. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar made beauty out of the simple basketball move of pivoting and taking a hook shot. Players develop a repertoire of individual moves, repeating them endlessly in solitary practice sessions. As skill increases, the beauty of the movement increases. The aesthetic move is usually an effective move. How much of the pleasure of those individual practice sessions has to do with the pleasure of aesthetically pleasing movement? Little kids (and not so little) shooting in the driveway at a basket above the garage door are engaged in a complex practice. Bill Bradley in his book *Values of the Game* astutely lists "imagination" as one of those values. That kid is often thinking to himself, "Three, two, one, he shoots, he scores!" playing out endgame heroics, grace under pressure. But isn't he also enjoying the pleasure of graceful bodily motion, lifting off the court in a leap that is a good in itself, even if the shot misses? This pleasure in beautiful movement is underappreciated in the analysis of sport, perhaps because it does not fit our assumptions about what constitutes masculine pleasure. To be traditionally masculine is to ignore the aesthetic and to deny the more delicate pleasures of the body. But basketball gives players and spectators an experience of aesthetic enjoyment and thereby quietly extends the range of "masculine" pleasures.

The dancelike pleasures of the game become even more intense when we turn from the individual player to teams moving in concert. Especially in informal games of basketball, the game flows without interruption across the full court. No foul shots or time outs interrupt the action. Ten people in constant motion occupy the arbitrary and limited space of the court. They have to move together at high speed without benefit of preexisting paths. They improvise, opponents together with teammates, without choreographed plays, making the game up on the run. They race for those shifting points of orientation, and their movement creates other races on the court as the ball moves and as the advantage shifts from team to team.

Sometimes players crash into each other in those races, sometimes in the air, so there is an element of risk in the movement of the game; people can get hurt banging knees or getting poked in the eye or getting elbowed. But much of the movement in the game is an attempt to *avoid* contact: running around screens, avoiding picks, eluding contact with defenders who want to block the way. As a result, among experienced players, almost all contact is intentional, almost none accidental. Given the constraints of space on the court, making strategic contact and avoiding accidents require spatial awareness and grace. Like dancers on a stage, players have to share space while engaged in vigorous movement, and the pleasure of the game comes from the improvisatory process of group creation.

Group movement in basketball is a shifting and subtle process, usually learned through years of practice, or sometimes miraculously grasped in an intuitive flash by even the youngest of players. Skilled offensive players watch for shifts of weight in a defender's stance in order to make a move that takes advantage. A good player will cast his eyes in one direction and pass the ball in the other. Passers notice the precise angle of advantage that a teammate has on his defender and deliver the ball at the strategic moment and at the right angle so he can receive the pass and make his move, which is sometimes another split-second pass, sometimes a drive to the hoop, sometimes a quick shot, sometimes a dribble and hesitation, and so on, depending on how defenders react, how teammates move in response, how confident you are in the moves available to you, how well you know and how much you trust your teammates, how they can best use your move to their advantage. The understanding that leads to those decisions would be very difficult to lay out in a logical system. It develops through testing and observation, experiments in movement in real time. Players take pleasure in this group movement experiment, and informed fans take pleasure in the resulting kinetic patterns.

Enhancing the parallel with dance is the fact that man-to-man defensive play is, in dance terms, a form of partnering. Wherever the offensive player leads, the defender will follow, or if possible try to anticipate and arrive at the orientation point first, forcing the offensive player to revise his plan and make a countermove. If the offensive player fakes right and moves left, the defender will move as an exact mirror image. Matched up players will move in this responsive way throughout the game, sometimes initiating the move on offense, sometimes replying on defense. Simultaneously, both players must be aware of the other pairs on the court, and the pairs inter-

weave in complicated and nonrepeatable patterns. If a team is playing a zone defense, the movement pattern changes, but it still resembles dance. In a zone defense each player defends an area of the court rather than an individual opponent, so as the offensive team moves the ball, looking for open areas in the zone, the defensive players must move as a team to cover the areas threatened by the opponent's moves. A good zone defense team moves as a coordinated unit, as an *ensemble*, a choreographer would say. They shift from side to side of the court, not all five with identical movements, but each player moving in support of all the others.

As a group improvisation, basketball resembles "contact improvisation," a dance style developed in the 1970s that involves two or more dancers who improvise movement following the direction of energy created by the contact of their bodies. The point of contact energy moves, and the dancers' bodies follow it. The movements of each dancer produce the movements of the others. As Cynthia Novack, in her book on contact improvisation, *Sharing the Dance*, says, "Contact improvisation defines the self as the responsive body and also as the responsive body listening to another responsive body, the two together spontaneously creating a third force that directs the dance" (189). The goal is *not* to arrive at predetermined body shapes or movement patterns chosen for their aesthetic appeal, but to move through a process of kinetic flow. Contact improvisation has appealed less to trained dancers than to alternative-culture students of movement and the body. Its goals are spiritual as well as somatic; the aesthetic of the movement arises from the spiritual practice.

The movement of basketball, as in contact improvisation, is produced by the shared energies of the players in the game. My move makes your move possible and necessary. I spin off your body to follow the energy of the play to the right spot. And movement in basketball is almost always improvised. In organized ball there are plays, but plays are only choreographed opportunities for structured improvisation. And in pickup ball, there are no plays at all. No one knows what the next movement will be. Players have to know the possible moves, the likely strategies, given the situation and the tendencies of the other players, but they never *know* what will evolve in the improvisatory flow. The future is open. In this uncertainty, players rely on imagination, anticipation, and adjustment. Surely the ball will go here, so I move here, but the ball goes *there*, so I shift my strategy and make a new move. All these creative decisions are made possible by the choices of the other players, and this trading of energy, these movements in exquisite response,

are shared by opponents as well as teammates. There are *ten* movers in the space, creating the energy that shapes the movement.

Of course this account of movement in basketball has so far neglected one crucial point—basketball is a competition, and its movements are *contested*. It is this fact above all others that characterizes basketball as a stereotypically masculine practice. Unlike contact improvisation or other forms of dance, players fight for space and for control of orientation points. Many of the movements in the game are blocking tactics, attempts to get in the desired path of opponents, forcing them to change direction, denying them the moves they like best. Playing defense is an effort to create kinetic frustration, to take away options and dictate disadvantageous movement. So it is certainly not true that all the movement in basketball is cooperative and shared in the manner I've been describing. The goal of the game is not—at least not consciously—to share the energy of movement. It is to gain spatial advantage and to impose one's will on the opponent. But the cooperative flow of the movement arises precisely out of its antagonistic structure. Defense not only stifles offense, it creates offense. When Michael Jordan beats his defender off the dribble, another defender shows up to help, and some of Michael's most memorable moves are his reactions in midair to that second—or third—defender. That's when he seems to leap, pause, and soar again, or somehow manage to turn in midair. Still, if we are to understand the gender lessons that basketball teaches, we cannot forget the sometimes fierce competitive spirit of its players. Cynthia Novack explains the difference between sport and contact improvisation in just these terms: in contact improvisation, she says, "the realization of the individual is placed within the context of cooperation and group activity rather than in the context of competition and personal achievement"(190). And though I will later argue against this simple opposition of competition and cooperation, it is important to acknowledge the fact that basketball is an agonistic game, that in its battles for territory it is a form of ritualized, civilized violence, and that as such it is a central element in stereotypical masculine culture.

But the physical contest of the game need not be read as mere ritualized violence. One of the attractions of basketball for me is that it is a contact sport. When I think about getting too old for the game, I cannot think of any of the individual sports—tennis, golf, bowling, aerobic or weight training—that will provide the same pleasure of physical contest. One easy explanation for this pleasure is that it provides an outlet for stress and repressed aggression. Working in a sedentary and intellectual profession, I and others in my

game certainly enjoy the chance to blow off some steam. But the pleasure is more positive. The bumping and pushing for strategic advantage are a satisfying experience of force and skill, and they are constrained enough by the rules and ethics of the game that they very rarely turn to outright violence. The contest requires not just force but insider knowledge of the precise patterns and possibilities available in the game situation, and the combination of physical struggle and intellectual strategy constitutes the unique pleasure of the game.

Historians and sociologists of sport, working from a feminist standpoint, have shown that sport developed as an institution in the late nineteenth century and became a dominant cultural force in the twentieth century because of its complex ties to masculine identities in a time of crisis. What we now think of as sport has not always existed, and feminist historians make a strong case that it developed within a culture and economy that devalued the physical strength of men and thus created a need for a ritualized space in which physical force could be displayed as a symbol of male political and cultural dominance, even in a world in which men's physical power was no longer needed. The institution of modern sport originates in late-nineteenth-century British and then American culture, in the elite schools of the upper classes. Texts from this period make it clear that educators and moralists saw sport as a replacement for the physical labor and adventure that early industrial economy and American Westward expansion had required (on this idea, see Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*). The worry was that men would become feminized by their work, and sport was seen explicitly as the manly antidote. One analyst describes the process this way: "Forms of masculinity well adapted to face-to-face class conflict and the management of personal capital are not so well suited to the politics of organizations, to professionalism, to the management of strategic compromises and consensus" ("Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity" 599). This history explains particularly well the rise of televised sport as a fantasy repossession of lost physical power. As Michael Kimmel says, "If manhood could no longer be directly experienced, then perhaps it could be vicariously enjoyed by appropriating the symbols and props that signified earlier forms of power and excitement" (118).

Sport also contributes in quite direct ways to the culture of violence against women and homosexuals. Many commentators have noted the vile misogyny and homophobia of the adolescent locker room, and statistics show clearly that college athletes are disproportionately responsible for rape

and other crimes of violence against women on campus. Sport is often presented in the media as a hypermasculine practice, focusing on its fierce competitiveness and its displays of masculine dominance. Think of the extremely photogenic high-fives, chest bumps, and sexualized dances of victory that seem to accompany any televised sports event. More generally, the popularity of sport can be seen as an aspect of hypermasculine popular culture, a panicked symbolic reaction to the ebbing real power of men in our culture and economy. Considering these historical and cultural realities, I agree that sport must be seen as an institution that reinforces patriarchy and heterosexual power.

But I don't think that is the whole story. To say that sport as an institution reinforces patriarchy is not to say something unique about sport. The same critique could be and has been raised against all the important institutions of our culture. Religion, education, media, medicine, law, the arts, science—all have rightly been identified as sites for the teaching of patriarchal values. This thoroughgoing critique suggests a simple fact: that we live in a patriarchal culture and that its values prevail in all of our most powerful institutions. So once the critique has been made, the question becomes, how do we engage in cultural practices in ways that question and challenge their patriarchal values, and how can we rethink those institutions and practices to uncover the qualities in them that have antipatriarchal potential? My argument is that basketball possesses such qualities, especially in the movement patterns it allows for the men who play the game. Given the feminist critique, what elements are there in the game that can be understood freshly as opportunities for men to operate outside the patriarchal mindset?

We could begin by questioning the assumption that competition is the soul of the game, or of sport in general. Perhaps we overestimate the importance of competition because so many of us experience sport through mass media rather than through personal involvement. On television, basketball seems extremely competitive. Players who make it to the top of the game are the most gifted, the most dedicated, and the most competitive. But even within elite basketball there are features of the game that could attract more media attention, which almost always fixates on the competition. The beauty of the game is rarely mentioned, nor are the moments of kindness and even tenderness that occur routinely in the flow of the game. Players show respect and concern for their rivals, they sympathize with injuries—even ones that lead to a competitive advantage, and they show signs of personal friendships outside team identifications. But for the media, basketball

is a ritual of competition, often explicitly connected to masculine competition in the economic sphere.

When you focus on the huge world of basketball outside this elite circle, however, competition must be understood in a much more nuanced way. Some pickup games are intensely competitive, even more violent than in the pros, while others are very casual, with players investing almost nothing in the outcome of the game. Think of a couple of kids shooting baskets in a driveway, or a game at a family picnic, or a single person shooting around—in some of these situations the competitive factor comes down near zero. And who is to say that the more competitive games are closer to the essence of sport? In some pickup games players lose track of the score and couldn't care less who is winning or losing. Their concern is, is the flow good, are we "getting a good run." My own local game is pretty competitive. We do keep score (in part because we take a needed break every total of seven baskets), and we feel better when we're ahead or when the game is close. We don't like losing big. But half an hour after the game, I would be hard pressed to remember who won. What I remember are plays that were satisfying or frustrating, moments of pleasure and shared spirit. I engage in the game as a contest for space, but I do not feel vindictive about opposing players. They are my friends, and in the next game might well be my teammates. I want to play well, and I want the game to go well. I want us to play in a way that honors the game, and excessive competition and brutal play are outside its spirit. Some pickup games, of course, are much less friendly, and there are routinely vicious players. But that's just my point: it is difficult to generalize about the competitiveness of the game, and it is a mistake to assume that competition is the soul of the experience for most players.

Returning to the analogy with dance, especially with contact improvisation, I think it is more accurate to think of the competition in basketball within a framework of group cooperation. The energy that directs movement within the game is produced by *all* of the players, not just teammates. And that energy creates a bond among the players and an agreement as to the limits and nature of the contest that they will engage in. Each player is trying to outdo the other, but the very existence of the contest requires a cooperative act as its premise. We agree to accept the spatial and ethical limits of the game, and we agree to share a communal expertise, a mutual awareness of possible moves and countermoves that can exist only within a community of shared knowledge and expectation. We have much more in common, even on opposing teams, than we would perceive if we thought

only in terms of a competition model. The pleasure of the game derives in great part from being a part of that community, no matter what the “sides” are at a given moment. We gather to play *together*, and that sense of belonging is much more important than our play at opposition. Anyone who dehumanizes or thinks of the other team as the enemy is either an adolescent or an idiot or a victim of excessive coaching.

Within this atmosphere of trust and community, strong emotional ties can develop among the men in the game. Competition and friendship interact in complicated ways within communities of players. Michael Messner, a sociologist who has interviewed many male athletes on the subject of friendship, found that the close ties between teammates were compromised by their competitive drives. They saw teammates as potential threats to their status within the group, and they could not share weakness or vulnerability because they could not risk giving another player a competitive advantage. Messner’s subjects were excellent to elite level athletes who had experienced a substantial “career” in sport, and I believe that his choice of subjects skews his results. My observations of lifelong athletes who never had an elite career, or who left it behind long ago, is that such perceptions of threat are less common. As a result, strong emotional bonds can develop. Messner tends to generalize his findings from elite athletes to all men in sport. His explanation for the comparatively superficial friendships that he observed derives not from the an analysis of the specific situations of elite athletes but from his sense of the general configuration of masculinity in our culture. Messner argues—as many psychologists do—that men tend to have less intimate and intense same-sex friendships than women. He says: “An interesting consensus has emerged among those who have studied gender and friendship in the United States: Women have deep, intimate, meaningful, and lasting friendships, while men have a number of shallow, superficial, and unsatisfying ‘acquaintances’” (*Power at Play* 91). In this line of argument, women are seen as sharing intimate details of their lives with their friends, while men tend to bond around a shared activity, forming “external” relationships that allow men to maintain their ego boundaries and avoid homophobic suspicions. In sports, then:

The hierarchical and rule-bound pattern of athletic careers, and especially of “antagonistic cooperation” on the team, dovetails with men’s ambivalent need to develop “closeness without intimacy” with other men. In short, competitive activities such as sport mediate men’s rela-

tionships with each other in ways that allow them to develop a powerful bond while at the same time preventing the development of intimacy. (91)

The result for male friendship is emotional impoverishment. I believe that Messner underestimates the depth of emotional ties among men who play a sport together because he equates intimacy with verbal sharing. If we are to understand the emotional connections among male players, we have to rethink the definition of intimacy.

I would report from my own game that strong bonds among players have developed over time. And I would agree that they are not intimate bonds in the terms that Messner uses. Typically, they do not involve explicit, verbal sharing of personal information and emotion. But I feel a strong affection for the men I play basketball with, even the ones whose playing style and spirit I don't particularly like. I don't know much about their lives off the court, and we don't tend to socialize, even though we live in a small community. In some cases, I don't even know the last names of men I have played with for many years. But I would maintain that I know these players intimately—as players. I know that one player can't go left, that another will always pass on the fast break, that another will back off if the game gets too physical. To someone outside the game, such knowledge might sound trivial, but within the game, this embodied knowledge (multiplied by a thousand) is both strategically useful and emotionally satisfying. It plays a role in the calculations I make about improvisatory choices, and so it may seem instrumental rather than intimate. But this personal knowledge, built up over time in the game, is also central to the familiarity and comfort of the experience. Knowing other players as I do means that we can move together in predictable and nonviolent ways, because of our familiarity with each other's tendencies and inclinations. And I would argue that such knowledge is rich and significant, not emotionally impoverished and shallow. If I know that another player is more likely to make a shot if he shoots quickly rather than if he has plenty of time to calculate and get set, what do I know about him? Can I judge that, outside the game, he is likely to be mercurial rather than deliberate in his decisions and actions? That is not my goal. My interest is in the game itself, in the knowledge of players as players, where men reveal deep truths about themselves. I believe that such knowledge is extremely intimate, though nonverbal and in a sense impersonal. And it leads to strong bonds of affection. Because we share the energy of

improvised movement and deep interpersonal knowledge, we have what I consider an emotionally fulfilling friendship, based on the experience of the body in movement.

Basketball also involves an intimacy of physical presence and touch. Players spend a lot of time in the personal space of other players. Defenders stay close to the players they are covering. Rebounders command space by bumping and pushing and leaning into one another. And this physical closeness occurs on the move, as players react to the changing strategies of the game. Maintaining close contact on the run requires physical cooperation between these “opposing” players, or else the game would involve nothing but falls to the hardwood floor. Defenders study offensive players’ moves, trying to anticipate direction and speed, relying on an intimate knowledge of the others’ movement patterns. Their ostensible goal is to frustrate the offensive players’ strategies, but players also rely on this knowledge to keep the game free of pointless, accidental contact that can lead to injury and needless friction. Of course some players also enter this personal space just to *bother* the opposing player, to demonstrate who has control of the space on the court, even the space the others believe is their own. Personal space in the game is at once contested and shared, so that much of a player’s time in the game is spent in close contact with other players.

Players enjoy the contact, and they feel safe within shared constraints. One of the attractions of basketball is the physical contact that the game requires and allows. A “good run” in basketball is a fluid game in which the movement of the ball and the players is constant, and the contact between players is intense but intrinsic to the game, not accidental or intentionally injurious.

Spatial proximity and contact are elements of the intimate knowledge of others that basketball encourages. Players not only know the histories and tendencies of other players, they know each other’s bodies—physical strengths and weaknesses, shifts of weight and force that can be anticipated and countered. They not only share the energy of improvisatory movement in a limited space, they share the energy of bodies in strong contact. They sweat together in their cooperative and contested work. If playing basketball together is an example of an “external” male friendship, one based on a shared activity rather than a verbal sharing of intimate personal experiences, it still has an interpersonal and physical intimacy of its own, and leads to strong affective bonds.

The dismissive take on such relationships is that they are examples of a

repressed homosexual desire that simultaneously produces homophobia—"male bonding." From this perspective, same-sex desire needs the cover of competition, and the violence of the game expresses a loathing for the object of desire and for the desiring self. But to me this dismissive perspective ignores the complexity of life in the body. *Of course* the contact has a somatic charge, but it is not a sexual charge. It does not anticipate or stand in the place of sexual contact. It is a good in itself, the object of desire, not a symbol of some other desire. Men and women desire many kinds of physical contact with other men and women. All of it has a physical charge. Very little of it leads to or stands for sexuality. Men in our culture are taught, and sport certainly is one of the places that we learn it, that touch can be used to dominate and oppress others. And we learn that same-sex erotic touch is to be despised in others and repressed in the self. We learn to be suspicious of all touch insofar as it reminds us of this despised erotic touch. It is not surprising in this cultural context that male touch requires elaborate legitimization. And if athletics serve that function, they do good psychological and cultural work for the men who play the game and for the culture they connect with. Along with the competition and homophobia that sports undeniably teach, they at the same time provide an opportunity for physical contact with others in a context of play rather than violence. Basketball particularly, I would argue, with its limits on violence and its energetic movement flow, provides players with an experience of kinetic pleasure that is missing from the rest of their lives and from the lives of most men. Women in our culture are allowed much more nonsexual touching, and it contributes to their emotional health and their nonviolence. Could the touching that sport makes possible do the same for men? If we thought of sport less as competition and more as *play*, could men find in games like basketball a way past homophobia in an acceptance of their desire for physical contact?

Despite this utopian reading, I do not deny that sports teach homophobia. Michael Messner is certainly right to emphasize the role of sport in teaching normative heterosexuality. "Heterosexual masculinity is collectively constructed through the denigration of homosexuality and femininity as 'not-male'" (*Power at Play* 97), and sport plays a central role in the denigration of homosexuality. Homophobic locker-room jokes are a staple of high school experience, and they do not completely disappear in adulthood. And as I said earlier, coaches and players can use the phrase "Be a man" as a call to violence, questioning the player's sexuality in order to manipulate an angry response that might be useful in the game. I would only claim that sports

need not teach homophobia—or at least *only* homophobia. They can teach—they have taught me and many others—modes of movement and touch that are nonviolent, friendly, nonsexual, humanly affirmative.

What basketball teaches men, in its ways of defining and occupying space, in its modes of movement, in its mix of competition and cooperation, in its promotion of friendly, nonsexual touch, is a complex mix of traditional and emergent modes of masculinity. About ten years ago a friend asked me if I wanted to join a men's group. He had in mind a group that would *talk about* how their lives had been changed by the changes in women's lives, and how men could learn to contribute to these positive developments. I knew instantly that I didn't want to be a part of the group, in part because I felt that I was already in one. I made the joke at the time that I was a member of a men's improvisational movement group—the basketball group. And now I offer the joke as a serious proposition, that the regular players in the game are in fact *working out* and *embodying* new modes of masculinity, in a new world in which the patriarchal order cannot be taken for granted. I believe that we are playing this old and traditional game in new ways, finding in it more than competition and facile male bonding. Basketball has the potential to teach men how to move gracefully in a fluid but limited space, in complex cooperation with others, sharing the energy of movement, the excitement of shared improvisation, and the pleasure of close, non-violent physical contact. These are not the lessons of “hegemonic masculinity.” Of course basketball also teaches force, domination, competition, and homophobia. As a powerful, traditionally male practice in a patriarchal culture, it cannot avoid those destructive lessons. But like many practices, basketball conveys contradictory messages simultaneously, thus making it possible for men to learn lessons that they never expected from a game that most people think of as nothing more than exercise and recreation.

I do not offer these lessons in movement and spatial behavior as a panacea for men moving beyond patriarchy. Basketball will not save us. But the somatic lessons it teaches have their effects on the everyday lives of players. A large part of men's lives is spent in a physical isolation that results from homophobia and from their belief that they are engaged in the economic war of all against all. Men in our culture are taught in many of their practices that life itself is competitive, that they cannot trust anyone who might one day be a rival for power, that they cannot make contact with others except in sex or domination. A movement experience that teaches cooperation and movement *with* others must be healthy for men caught in the fortress of the

competitive ego. Basketball teaches tenderness and peace. It teaches respect for physical limits and restraint. It teaches the joy of play. It teaches men much more than the stereotyped virtues of the traditional athlete. Basketball is a practice that provides men an opportunity to engage with new ways of social being, new modes of masculinity.

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