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*Journal of Sport and Social Issues* published online 22 November 2014

DOI: 10.1177/0193723514559054

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# Getting Free: The Arts and Politics of Basketball Modernity

Journal of Sport and Social Issues

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/0193723514559054

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## Abstract

I employ Marshall Berman's and Stephen Kern's cultural analyses of modernity in late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe and the United States to examine basketball's invention, rules, and technical and institutional development. This yields two overlapping images of basketball. First, I situate basketball within the broader context of 19th-century modernization, where, as an effect of and response to modernization, I view it as a specimen of 19th-century modernism. Second, zooming in to this first image of basketball as a 19th-century modernism, I examine basketball as a semi-autonomous modern world of its own. Within this world, I identify the appearance of a new subject—the basketball player—who engaged and transformed the spatio-temporal experiences of modernity by inventing artistic “varieties of basketball modernism,” which achieved significant popularity in the American cultural landscape of the first half of the 20th century. I therefore also track the consolidation of an institutional network—the “modern basketball state”—arising to control the basketball player's creativity and capitalize on the sport's popularity, and I critique the myth the modern basketball state generated to obscure its own real history and to promote the belief that the sport could not exist without it.

## Keywords

basketball, modernity, art, history, politics

## Introduction

In this article, I employ Marshall Berman's and Stephen Kern's cultural analyses of modernity in late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe and the United States to examine basketball's invention, rules, and technical and institutional development.

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This yields two overlapping images of basketball. First, I situate basketball within the broader context of 19th-century modernization, where, as an effect of and response to modernization, I view it as a specimen of 19th-century modernism. Second, zooming in to this first image of basketball as a 19th-century modernism, I examine basketball as a semi-autonomous modern world of its own. Within this world, I identify the appearance of a new subject—the basketball player—who engaged and transformed the spatio-temporal experiences of modernity by inventing artistic “varieties of basketball modernism,” which achieved significant popularity in the American cultural landscape of the first half of the 20th century. I therefore also track the consolidation of an institutional network—the “modern basketball state”—arising to control the basketball player’s creativity and capitalize on the sport’s popularity, and I critique the myth the modern basketball state generated to obscure its own real history and to promote the belief that the sport could not exist without it.

Viewing basketball through the framework of modernization, modernity, and modernism illuminates the underlying political implications at work in the tension between the creative aspirations of players and the regulating disciplinary functions of the sport’s governing bodies whose primary aim is the commodification of sporting performance for profit.<sup>1</sup> Late 20th-century forms of the modern basketball state, facing racial integration, the rise to preeminence of African American players, and, consequently, the transformation of the sport have sought at once to capitalize upon and to regulate the creative expressions of, especially, Black basketball players (Leonard, 2012; McLaughlin, 2008). Rhetorically, the institutions of the modern basketball state have appealed to ahistorical images of the putatively universal moral values supposed to be embedded in certain tactics and style of play, notions first articulated in the context of the game’s invention as a response to late 19th-century modernization (Kretchmar, 2007). Institutionally as well, these state forms have relied upon mechanisms of enforcement and exclusion that may be traced back to the game’s emergence in the rapidly shifting terrain of modernization. By recognizing the historicity of the images and mechanisms of the modern basketball state, and, especially, by tracing a counter-tradition of player prerogative that these institutions emerged to corral and control, we can more clearly identify the political stakes of contemporary issues arising in the sport.

## Modernity and Basketball

### *Basketball in Modernity*

In his landmark analysis *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman defined “modernity,” first and foremost, as “vital experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils” (Berman, 1988, p. 15). This experience, Berman argued, arose and evolved between the early 16th and the end of the 20th centuries. Berman situated “modernity” conceptually between two other terms: “modernization” and “modernism.” “Modernity” is the lived experience of “modernization,” and “modernism” refers to “the visions and ideas” that men and women have created out of “modernity”; that is, out of their lived experience of modernization. Modernization

entailed the capitalist industrialization of production, transformations in science and technology, mass migration, immigration, and urbanization, and new forms of social and political movement, conflict, and control (Berman, 1988, p. 16). These processes comprising modernization, I should emphasize, were ambiguous, simultaneously creative and destructive, ordering and chaotic (Taylor, 1999). Modernity accordingly expresses a corresponding ambivalence (especially as modernization accelerated over the course of the 19th century): nostalgia for the past mixes with eager anticipation of the future, fear of the unknown mixes with the thrill of new experiences, longing for the familiar mixes with disdain for stodgy tradition (Berman, 1988; Harvey, 1992).

Stephen Kern (1983), meanwhile, offered a detailed view of how, within the general context of modernity, specific experiences of time, space, and speed changed between roughly 1880 and 1918. Kern described a “culture of time and space” in which the belief in the objective, fixed, and homogeneous nature of both time and space gave way to a belief in (and an experience of) time and space as subjective, dynamic, and heterogeneous (Kern, 1983, p. 34). Space, moreover, came to be seen as active and as constituent of objects and experiences rather than an as a passive, inert, empty void in which these simply existed or unfolded (Kern, 1983). Finally, the experience of speed—which, as the “junction of time and space,” Kern views as the heart of the modern experience of time and space—changed dramatically in these decades (Kern, 1983, p. 3). A great acceleration in the pace of almost of every domain of daily life and of human beings’ experience of their own bodies—transportation, communication, work, social life—provoked a characteristically modern mix of feelings: “alternately overwhelmed, inspired, horrified, and enchanted” (Kern, 1983, p. 130).

Finally, as for “modernism,” Berman employs the term to categorize all the philosophical, artistic, and broader cultural forms through which individuals, in concretely manifesting visions and ideas out of their experience of modernity, sought to transform themselves from passive objects to active subjects of modernization. Berman himself pays particular attention to 19th-century modernisms that give form and shape to the intense ambivalence of that period’s modernity. He argues that prior to the French Revolution, modernism tended to be premonitory, and that after the First World War, modernism tended toward flat, polarizing, uncritical acceptance or equally uncritical wholesale rejections of modernity. Nineteenth-century modernisms, by contrast, grasp firmly the double-edged implications of modernity and generate visions that not only convey this complexity but also inspire concrete engagements with the forces of modernization, such that we may transform ourselves from passive objects to active subjects of those forces (Berman, 1988).

With these lenses before us, basketball, which was invented in 1891, appears—whether we view it from the perspective of its inventor’s biography, the ideology of the institutions sponsoring its invention, or the social situations to which it sought to respond—as a quintessential expression of modernity. Both its inventor James Naismith and the supervisor, Luther Gulick, who charged him to devise a new, indoor sport exemplified Berman’s 19th-century subjects of modernity, whose experience of modernization is fraught with emotional and intellectual ambivalence: witnessing transformations that at once threaten older, more familiar structures and values and

promise new capacities and opportunities. Both men were raised in rural areas with roots in the moral values and small community structures of an earlier age, but both also came to spend their adult lives in the thick of the rapidly modernizing world (Cavallo, 1981; Hopkins, 1951; Rains & Carpenter, 2009). Moreover, both men responded to what they saw as distinctly modern social problems by utilizing what they also saw as distinctly modern intellectual and social tools. Thus, for example, in response to social problems and moral vices they attributed to too-rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, they at once embodied and advocated as a solution a professional, socially rationalized, and scientific approach to physical education (Guttman, 1978). These experiences and the shared visions to which they gave rise brought both men to the Springfield YMCA, where their experimental approach to modernizing physical education led to the invention of basketball, a form of indoor recreation devised to replace antiquated gymnastic routines that bored students and failed to exercise the whole human being (mind, body, and spirit)(George, 1999; Horger, 2001).

Basketball's inventors sought to secure through the game a place in the modernizing world for what they considered traditional—indeed, timeless and divinely ordained—values. But if Naismith and Gulick sought to cultivate those values in their students, it was not by erecting a premodern bulwark against the flow of history but rather, on the contrary, by utilizing modern intellectual and technical developments to equip their charges with the tools necessary to make themselves agents of modernity (Horger, 2001). It is in this sense that I propose viewing the game of basketball as a specimen of Berman's complexly ambivalent "nineteenth-century modernism" (Berman, 1988, p. 19). And, granted this, we might then reread basketball's original 13 rules as a *document* of 19th-century modernism.

### ***Basketball as Modernism***

In at least one very real sense, the rules of a sport may be said to constitute as a unique human activity. According to Bernard Suits (1980), the "constitutive rules" of a sport are those specific rules that prohibit use of more efficient, in favor of less efficient, means for achieving a specific state of affairs (p. 41). Suits (1973) noted that constitutive rules of sport place "obstacles in the path leading to" the achievement of the desired state of affairs (p. 52). In the case of basketball, the specific state of affairs to be achieved is putting a ball inside a basket. Presumably, the most efficient way to achieve this would be to place the basket on the ground, kneel down next to it with the ball, and place the ball into the basket. The rules of basketball prohibit these means, however, placing vertical space and opponents between the basketball player and the basket and prohibit both running with the ball and kicking it. These rules are "constitutive" in that they constitute, in this case, basketball as a specific, identifiable activity distinct from, say, tossing a piece of paper into a trash can.

Of course, while the rules constitute the sport theoretically, the sport would remain abstract were it not for the players who embody it. Suits (1973) used the phrase "lusory attitude" to capture the disposition adopted by the player who accepts constitutive

rules (and the obstacles they impose) simply because they make the game possible (pp. 53-55). Observing that, applied to any other goal-oriented activity in daily life (such as getting to the office) the lusory attitude would appear absurd, Suits suggested that “games are essentially different from the ordinary activities of life” (Huyzinga, 1949, p. 13; Suits, 1973, p. 54). While we may enhance our enjoyment of mundane, daily activities by making games of them, a game or a sport nonetheless remains a self-referential world contained within the world of everyday life. And the rules of the sport are what constitute that self-referential world.

Still, the rules of the sport do not *completely* separate the sport from the world beyond its boundaries. Some components of the world outside the sport—for example, gravity, our inability to travel in time, or the impossibility of two bodies occupying the same physical space—obtain and impact the world of sport. Others—such as laws requiring us to be licensed to operate a motor vehicle—do not. Still others—such as social categories and attitudes—may operate but in highly irregular, unpredictable ways. The rules of sport, in other words, create permeable, but consistent boundaries that simultaneously differentiate our life *in sport* from our life *beyond sport* and relate each to the other. The permeability of these boundaries contribute to the attraction of sports for its participants because sports can offer opportunities to experience (and possibly manipulate) elements sports shares with the world beyond in ways that may not be available outside the sport (Feezell, 2004; Hyland, 1990).

As much as James Naismith, in devising the rules of basketball, was seeking to inculcate in bored students the YMCA’s message of spiritual and moral uplift through physical activity, he was also—perhaps more immediately—concerned to minimize roughness as the game was to be played indoors on hard surfaces bounded by walls (Naismith, 1996). In addition to Rule 5, explicitly prohibiting various forms of roughness, Naismith sought to discourage it through the introduction of three factors: (a) the prohibition against running with the ball; (b) the elevated, horizontal goal; and (c) the definition of the playing area. All three, beyond their immediate utility to Naismith, show how basketball implied at least an unconscious acceptance of Kern’s late 19th-century “culture of time and space,” and, accordingly, put players in the position to manipulate the modern spatio-temporal experience.

Naismith’s prohibition on running implied a conceptual and practical separation between ball and player where movement was concerned (Naismith, 1996). This presumed and expressed recognition of the variable relation between our experience of space and our aims and behaviors as individuals and in relation to others. A player holding the ball must remain still—a fixed, single point on the surface of the playing area—and, thus arrested and so vulnerable, might attract one or more defenders seeking to steal the ball or block the player’s attempts to pass or shoot it. Double-teams or traps (as such defensive maneuvers are known) present the offensive player with an intensified sense of spatial confinement. Where the rules simply stipulate that the player holding the ball must stand still in open space, they *imply more*: namely, the possibility that the player may be forced to stand still in a space now crowded with aggressive opponents. By contrast, her teammates are completely free to move in any direction, at any speed, starting and stopping, accelerating and

slowing at will. Indeed, the constitutive rules of the sport encourage teammates to trace two-dimensional lines and curves on the surface of the playing area as—considering and anticipating the positions of various defenders, including those guarding the player holding the ball—they move without the ball to create openings through which the passed ball might travel. Whereas the ball holder experiences space as congestion and constraint, the teammate may experience space as openness and freedom.

The second factor Naismith introduced with the conscious aim of discouraging roughness was the horizontal, elevated goal, which Naismith hoped would force defenders to disperse away from the goal (as standing under it offered no advantage) and force the offense to prize floor positioning, calculation, and accuracy over brute force in scoring attempts (Naismith, 1996). Of course, the elevated, horizontal goal makes basketball a constitutively three-dimensional sport. Although at the time of its invention players themselves stayed below the goal, the ball itself would move not only along a relatively stable plane a few feet off the ground as it was passed from player to player but also, from time to time—whenever a goal was attempted—suddenly rise up out of that plane in an arcing trajectory, effectively opening the experience and stimulating the imagination of players to the potential and possibilities of verticality.

The final factor Naismith introduced to discourage roughness perhaps most obviously expressed a consciousness of space: the definition of the playing area itself. Rather than stipulate boundaries in fixed, mathematical terms, Naismith instead maintained that the dimensions of those boundaries should remain flexibly adaptable in relation to the number of players (Naismith, 1892). The “population density” of the basketball court should be low enough to minimize incidental and discourage deliberate physical contact, but not so low that passing becomes too difficult. As with the prohibition on running with the ball and the elevated, horizontal goal, Naismith’s conceptions of critical, constitutive elements of basketball evinced the modern attitudes toward space as relative, plastic, and active in shaping human experience and behavior.

Where the time of play was concerned, Naismith elected to define the basketball game by a fixed amount of measured time (rather than by the completion of some stipulated event as in baseball or tennis; Naismith, 1892). However, the exact amount of time stipulated for contests in the official rules would change over time (and according to the level of competition; Naismith & Gulick, 1894). I propose that Naismith, similar to others of his time, according to Kern, recognized that a fixed time constraint could be a condition for giving rise to variable subjective experiences of time within the world of the game. Certainly, the subsequent history of the game shows that its rule makers manipulated the temporal framework of the game to change the temporal experiences of both players and spectators (Koppett, 1999). Having explored how basketball arose within and in response to late 19th-century capitalist modernization in the United States, I now wish to “zoom in,” as it were, to examine in detail the experiential, aesthetic, and political dynamics of the semi-autonomous basketball world that Naismith and his first players invented.

## Basketball Modern

### *Basketball as Modernity*

Basketball, then, resembles in tone and aim other 19th-century modernisms through which men and women, experiencing rapid transformations in their world and in their experience of such basic categories as time, space, and speed, crafted cultural artifacts to try to take hold over these transformations. But Naismith's vision for coping productively with modernity also established the formal, spatio-temporal laws governing the semi-autonomous world we might call "the basketball universe." It may be that there are other parallel, or intersecting, similar "football" or "baseball" universes. However, to respect the specificity of the dynamics of the basketball universe, within the space of an article, requires me to set an investigation of these aside. Abiding within that universe, the player of basketball was thus led to particular experiences of space, time, and speed—some similar, some different from the experiences they might have of these outside the basketball universe. I propose that, following Berman (1988), we think of the "vital experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils" undergone within the basketball universe as "basketball modernity."

What has been called basketball's phenomenology of time and space was (and remains), similar to the attitudes that went into devising the rules, distinctly modern in its thoroughgoing richness, complexity, and variability. The result of Naismith's invention was, in the words of one philosopher, "a sport that reveals to us the potential to play *with* and *in* time and space" (Elcombe, 2007, p. 217). Whether or not basketball, as Elcombe argues, "more than any other sport, opens space for humans to meaningfully live space and time," the more relevant point stands: basketball's rules constitute a universe in which the experience of space and time may be viewed as distinctly modern in that its subjects confront at one and the same time dramatic limitations and expanded possibilities. I would go further: Participants experienced new limits as an indirect result of experimenting with expanded powers and augmented their powers in part through the confrontation with newly experienced limits.

The earliest reports of basketball play during the 1890s support this view. YMCA physical directors, team managers, journalists, and, less frequently, players themselves report positively on the new sport for its fast pace, the freedom of physical movement it privileged, and for cultivating qualities such as agility and quickness of thought and action that were—sometimes explicitly—identified as critical for adapting to the accelerating pace of modern life ("Clippings," 1893a, 1893b; Gubi, 2011; Reach, 1893). Game administrators often expressed concern about the roughness developing in the game and worried about how to order "the chaos" of basketball—the prescribed remedies usually involving expanding the powers they and their organizations held over the rules of eligibility and play and over their enforcement (Hepbron, 1902). But their concerns may also be read as testaments to the ways that basketball provided a distilled version of the temporal and spatial qualities of modern life.

Perhaps the phenomenological similarity the game bore to the experiences of time and space that modern subjects at the time of its invention were already having in their daily lives contributed to the rapid growth of the sport. Of course, this is not to

diminish the importance of the institutions—not only the YMCA, but schools, churches, and the military—that spread the game, nor the developments in transportation and communications technology that facilitated their efforts. This combination of factors was crucial, but only underscores the sport's modernity with its mix of new technologies allowing the spread by traditional institutions of a new sport intended to communicate traditional values. But, although these factors explain why people were exposed to basketball, they do not explain why they chose to play it.

People at the turn of the 20th century became basketball players faster and in larger numbers than they became players of any other sport. And I believe much of this can be attributed to the ways in which basketball offered a controlled environment in which to live the temporal and spatial conditions of modern life *and to experiment creatively with them*—a hypothesis, incidentally, that may acquire support from the disproportionate representation among the swelling ranks of basketball players of individuals and groups experiencing marginalization in modern society at large: women, African Americans, ethnic minorities, and those abroad subject to American military intervention and occupation (Naismith, 1996).

### *The Arts of Basketball, or Varieties of Basketball Modernism*

Recalling Berman's understanding of modernism as the visions and ideas, inspiring practical engagement, by which men and women sought to make themselves agents of their own modernity, I now propose seeing the technical innovations developed by basketball players as varieties of basketball modernism—that is, practical visions and ideas through which they sought to make themselves agents of the spatio-temporal experiences offered by basketball modernity. Indeed, virtually every basketball skill—dribbling, passing and moving without the ball, shooting, steals, shot blocking, and rebounding—could profitably be reexamined in view of the social and aesthetic framework I am proposing. However, a complete examination of this entire repertoire exceeds the bounds of this article. In lieu of it, I propose to provide a selective, but I believe representative, examination of dribbling and passing.

Dribbling was originally prohibited in basketball. It evolved from an accidental loss and recovery of the ball into a deliberate play deployed by an individual to escape a defensive double-team or a trap, and so advance the ball without running with it, but also without passing it (Colás, 2012; Horger, 2001; Naismith, 1996). In this early phase of development, dribbling meant either rolling the ball along the floor with the hand, or, a bit later, bouncing it, two-handed, as an individual charged up the floor in a straight line. To this point in its history, the dribble appears to express a resistance to the forms of spatial imagination encouraged by the game. It is as though the early dribblers—caught in a trap encouraged by the spatial rules of the basketball universe—were themselves unable (or unwilling) to assimilate those new rules, which would have encouraged them to throw the ball through the air to whichever of their teammates—due to the double-team—must have been open, thus utilizing the vertical dimension to advance the ball through horizontal space as quickly as possible.

From yet another perspective, the dribble may express an assertion of the priority of the individual over the collective. Where the prohibition on moving with the ball—in addition to discouraging roughness—was supposed to encourage teamwork and self-sacrifice, traits thought to be critical for success in the modern world, the outlaw dribbler displayed an unwillingness (or an inability) to imagine moving the ball as a collective, cooperative enterprise, let alone to participate in that enterprise. This dribbler is still experiencing his place in space and his relation to others in that space, similar to a football player running with the ball: as an individual subject for whom sharing the ball is as unthinkable as standing still, the only goal being to advance it and where others—teammates or opponents—are passive objects hindering or aiding in that goal.

All this may be so, but anyone who has been double-teamed knows that it is not always possible to find a free passing lane to an open teammate. And with this in mind, we can understand even the early dribble as a creative means of defying (or taking agency over) the spatial (and social) laws of the basketball universe. In particular, as one-handed dribbling evolved, and players become more adept at changing directions while they dribbled and at dribbling without watching the ball, dribbling could be seen as a way to alter unfavorable spatial configurations for tactical advantage. In such scenarios, dribbling is not antithetical to passing and its cooperative values, but rather complements them. As the skilled dribbler moves freely in space *with the ball*, both eluding her defenders and drawing others' defenders to her, teammates will be left open. And the skilled ball-handler, seeing the approaching defenders, will be able to pass to her now-free teammates before the defenders arrive. By dribbling in this new way, the individual ball-handler has, in effect, not only moved through space in an inventive way not envisioned (and yet implicitly encouraged) by the spatial dynamics of basketball, but also *created open space* for her teammates, whom she sees now as active collaborators in the shared task of advancing the ball. In other words, we can see in this micro-history of the dribble how the play evolved from a reactive response to unfamiliar spatial conditions to an active assimilation and creative transformation of those conditions (W. E. Allen, 1895).

If the dribble constitutes a kind of renegade basketball modernism—born of an initially inadequate adaptation to the basketball world and contrary, certainly, to the spirit of that world's law—the experiments with passing and moving without the ball exhibited by early basketball players might be seen as a full-blown embrace of that strange new world. Particularly for those who did not come to basketball from football (from which they were excluded either because of gender, or because it was primarily a college sport and so excluded a range of ethnic and racial minorities), the conditions constituted by the rules of basketball provided inviting physical opportunities to solve spatial and temporal challenges without the use of brute force.

We see, for example, Senda Berenson (Director of Physical Training at Smith College and who was most responsible for promoting the game for women) describing the conscious cultivation of teamwork and passing among her players, as

the more one plays this game the more scientific does it necessarily become, and although a great deal of fun and recreation can be obtained from playing it without methodical work, the only way to create a permanent interest is to put a great deal of thought into it. (Berenson, 1894, p. 107)

Doing this “head work,” as Berenson called the scientific approach to the game, means that “a player must not only track her opponent and not be caught unawares, but must feel what the players on her side mean to do.” Berenson explains that through this disposition have emerged several good plays, “the best of which is the triangle. The object of this triangle is to work the ball to your opponent’s basket by a series of zigzag throws done by three players who work for each other.” Apparently aware of the spatial novelty of this basketball modernism, Berenson provides a diagram of the play. Berenson’s players were embracing and exploiting the spatio-temporal parameters of the basketball world to invent new forms of motion and of social relation. One player, she notes, displayed particular spatial ingenuity: “she threw a low ball against the wall at such an angle that it bounded back into the hands of one of her own players who was watching for it” (Berenson, 1894, pp. 107-108).

The creative agent of these and other innovative responses to the experiences of time and space in basketball, it should not go without say though it may seem obvious—the artist of basketball modernism, if you will—was a new social and cultural subject: “the basketball player.” I mean to distinguish this new figure from his or her predecessor: the individual who plays basketball. As Marc Horger puts it, “In creating a game playable for its own sake, Naismith and Gulick created a game *played* for its own sake—and not necessarily for the moral, masculine, or spiritual benefits allegedly contained therein” (Horger, 2001, p. 27). “The basketball player” played the game for its own sake and, in doing so, created forms of play by which the player could transform the lived spatio-temporal experience of basketball modernity in ways that tended to enhance the players’ speed and freedom of movement, as well as—certainly on the floor, and so to some degree off of it—the players’ sense of themselves as a social group. What Leonard Koppett once wrote of the tactical essence of the sport might thus be extended, at least implicitly, so as to acquire a broader resonance: “basketball players measure the quality of their play by the success they have in ‘getting free’” (Koppett, 1974, p. 15).

To make some meaningful patterns of basketball modernity, we might emphasize three characteristics of these new “basketball players.” First, they encompassed tremendous racial, religious, ethnic, gender, geographical, and national diversity. Not only White Christian men in American cities, but women, African Americans, the sons and daughters of Asian, Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants, the settled inhabitants of America’s rural areas, Native Americans, and individuals on every continent took up the new sport. Second, these players displayed remarkably energetic, inventive autonomy in experimentally innovating plays, tactics, strategies, equipment, and rules in response to their own desires and aims within the game as well as to the variety of conditions in which they played the game. Third, these players moved in and out of and between formally organized play settings (such as teams or leagues). We must imagine, then, the early basketball player: drawn from every demographic, experimenting with and reshaping the game on the court, forming, dissolving, and reforming self-organized and managed teams and leagues, and playing in a tremendous variety of settings and conditions.

In this experimental play and in the sheer diversity of the player population and the geographical range and variety of play settings, early administrators of the game found

both opportunity and challenge. Opportunities arose, first, in the obvious form of the swelled ranks of those exposed to the moral message carried by basketball. But opportunities also presented themselves as they discovered that people not only wanted to *play* basketball, they wanted to *watch* it, and they would pay to do so. More than one floundering YMCA at the turn of the century was buoyed by the receipts from weekly “basket ball exhibitions” that drew hundreds of paying fans (L. W. Allen, 1894). Yet, glad though they may have been for this influx of revenue, YMCA administrators and the early, self-appointed stewards of basketball were concerned that player prerogative, emphasis on competition, and the entertainment of spectators was pulling the sport away from them, evolving myriad forms and styles, and exhibiting new elements that they found at odds with the physical and moral purposes of the game (Horger, 2001).

At the same time, the quickly proven fact that basketball drew paying spectators suggested to entrepreneurs (included among them some players, institutional game administrators, and private financiers) that basketball might become a profitable segment of the entertainment industry. The participation of these individuals in early basketball culture, likewise, presented opportunity and challenge to player and administrator alike. Entrepreneurs created new material conditions—from transportation, to venues, to apparel, to business arrangements, to organizational structures—in which players played the game and through these launched them onto bigger and brighter stages and transformed their play from recreational pastime to viable—if not yet lucrative—occupation. Players benefited from these changes in obvious ways, but also paid a price in the relative degree of control they exercised over their labor power as athletes. Administrators too, although with greater trepidation, saw the promotional potential of selling the sport. However, along with their financial investment, entrepreneurs promoted a vision of the game that emphasized those aspects of it they believed most likely to draw crowds, aspects that sometimes did and sometimes did not coincide with the desires and visions of players and administrators.

In other words, the proliferating varieties of basketball modernism, through which the players expressed and gained some agency over the experience of basketball modernity, sometimes ran afoul of the promotional schemas of entrepreneurs interested in marketing the product on a mass scale (to say nothing of running counter to the moralizing pretensions of self-appointed stewards of the game in schools and religious organizations). As a result, institutions and powerful promoters begin the process of simultaneously marketing and regulating “the chaos,” thereby consolidating power in the basketball world. By the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, 60 years after the first basketball game was played in Naismith’s Springfield gym, an interlocking network of institutions including state high school athletic associations, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the National Basketball Association (NBA), fueled by capital investments in collaboration with media and manufacturing interests, was in place to regulate the participation, play, and marketing of tens of millions of basketball players around the United States, ranging from young teenagers to seasoned professionals. With the more recent addition of youth play under the very loosely overseen auspices of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), the reach of this network now extends to players of primary school age. I call this network the modern basketball state.

### *The Politics of Basketball, or Myths of the Modern Basketball State*

As with the varieties of basketball modernism, a properly detailed history of the myriad institutions comprising, or contributing to the consolidation of, the modern basketball state would exceed the space of this article. Armand Applin (1982) offers something quite close to such a history in the only book-length work analyzing the development of (U.S. men's) basketball at all levels during this period. Applin tells the story of an institutional contest over basketball between the champions of amateurism and commercial promoters. In this story, the champions of amateurism (principally the AAU, but also the YMCA, the NCAA, and state high school athletic associations) promoted the sport in the first decades after its invention, developed a broad national base of players, and primed the pump of nationwide spectator interest in the sport—all while trying to stave off the unsavory commercial byproducts of popularity—only to find commercial promoters swooping in after the Second World War opportunistically capitalizing on scandal at the college level to poach players and spectators. In effect, for Applin, not only did the NBA come to monopolize professional play, but the professional model eventually either squeezed out (as with the AAU) or co-opted (as with the NCAA) amateur organizations (Applin, 1982). Although one might take issue with the amateurist bias of the work, as a story of institutional struggle narrated within the framework of the changing values and an expanding economy in the United States during the period spanning the two World Wars, it is neither implausible nor unreasonable.

But viewed and narrated from the perspective of the basketball player—that emerging modern subject—the same events might look somewhat different. Rather than a battle won by commercial interests over the guardians of the amateur ideal, the basketball player might see the two ostensibly antagonistic parties increasingly (although often only implicitly) working together—much as the state and private capital worked together in the United States in the wake of the Russian Revolution and in the course of the Great Depression—to wrest control over the game's players and the profits they generated through their labor power. I mean neither to dissolve the distinction between the various institutional interests nor to cast the players as passive victims of colluding capitalist interests. Make no mistake, players were agents, who saw no reason why they should be forced to choose between playing for the love of the game and playing for a living. On the contrary, most simply sought to find a way, amid the thicket of ideologies, institutional rules and regulations, and market forces, to play the game they played for a living *and* in the ways they loved to play it.

From their point of view, the story might equally plausibly be framed as one in which they—the players—by experimenting with and inventing new forms of play, attracted spectators willing to pay to watch games—first in YMCAs, then in a variety of venues from dance halls to armories, then in high school and college gymnasiums, and finally in large commercial arenas. As the numbers, revenues, and stakes increased, administrative organizations, educational institutions, and financial agents (or groups of any of these united by a recognition of common interest) invested in basketball play. In exchange for that investment, they sought and gained a much greater measure of control over the game and those who played it. And, as this control expanded—as in

other sectors of American society—these basketball corporations virtually monopolized the sport, constituting the modern basketball state.

High schools developed, promoted, and then fed their best players to the colleges, which developed, promoted, and then fed their best players to professional franchises, which—especially when linked to commercial interests including equipment manufacturers and the mass media—shaped the desires, ambitions, and visions of a new crop of young players. Institutional regulators (high school athletic associations, the NCAA, and league commissioners) and corporate owners of the means of production (high schools, colleges, and professional franchise and arena owners) determined who could play, controlled the production process, and sought to regulate the product, and of course secured and collected profits. Meanwhile, barnstorming teams, micro-leagues, and player-controlled operations were squeezed out of existence. Given the slow but steady consolidation of this arrangement, a young person who aspired to play basketball for a living must abide by the laws—in each domain—of the basketball state or be exiled to a kind of uncharted wasteland of recreational ball, economically and culturally marginal minor leagues, sideshow traveling teams, or some combination of these.

Let me be clear: I use “modern basketball state” as a conceptual—and, if you like, metaphorical—means to convey the nature, power, and effect of the institutionalization of the sport by the middle of the 20th century. The sociologist Max Weber once defined the “state” as

that human community which (successfully) lays claim to *the monopoly on legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory, this territory being another of the defining characteristics of the state . . . The state is held to be the sole source of the “right” to use violence. (Weber, 2003, pp. 310-311)

Of course, “basketball” is not a geographical territory, and none of those institutions whose emergence I have described have, so far as I am aware, laid claim to a monopoly on physical violence against basketball players. But in a broader sense, the emergence of these institutions did constitute a certain basketball territory: the realms of sanctioned interscholastic, intercollegiate, and professional basketball competition. And within these realms, these institutions—backed ultimately by federal and state law in the United States—came to arrogate a monopoly—vis-à-vis basketball *players*—on two different kinds of power: the power to determine participation and the power to make and enforce the rules of the game.

Through a complex array of eligibility requirements, the institutions comprising the modern basketball state arrogated to themselves the power to determine whether an individual player may or may not participate in basketball games sanctioned by those institutions. This power grew as their sanctioned competitions came (because of the talent level involved) to enjoy greater prestige among players and to occupy a larger and larger share of the market in basketball production and consumption. At every level, the modern basketball state has certainly sought—usually successfully—to exercise its power to exclude from participation players who, for one reason or another, its agents have determined to be a threat to its integrity and stability. Thus, Section 2 of the NBA Constitution—“Eligibility of Players”—begins by establishing that

All Players shall be of good moral character and possess qualities which will make them proper members of their respective Teams. The Commissioner shall have the right to disqualify a Player if the Commissioner finds that the Player does not possess the requisite qualities of character and morality. (National Basketball Association, 2012, p. 59)

Finally, while these institutions may not have resorted to physical violence to enforce this power of exclusion, those against whom this power has been exercised have certainly suffered hardship and (arguably even physical) harm, as occurred with Connie Hawkins, a heavily recruited high school player from New York City who was unjustly implicated in a college gambling scandal in the early 1960s and blackballed by the NBA for nearly a decade. By the time his successful litigation forced the league to admit him, Hawkins' knees were shot from years of substandard playing conditions, and his earning power and window dramatically reduced (FreeDarko Collective, 2010; Wolf, 1972). But even in cases where players have not been accused of illegal behavior, or even of lacking "the requisite qualities of character and morality," the modern basketball state exerts control over the terms of participation, whether this be through the Byzantine rules "ensuring" the purity of college players' amateur status, or through the NBA's requirement that players be at least one year removed from high school graduation to become eligible for the league's annual draft.

In addition to the power to determine what we might call "citizenship" (i.e., the right to play) in the basketball state, and concomitant with their monopolization of the basketball market, the institutions comprising the modern basketball state exercise sole legislative power with respect to the rules of the game itself. The concentration of this power in the hands of agents of the modern basketball state implies, in effect, the power to designate technical innovations in the game introduced informally by players as legitimate or illegitimate. In this way, the modern basketball state ensures that sanctioned basketball takes particular forms (and excludes others). In other words, the agents of the modern basketball state seek to wrest from the players control over the technical, tactical, and stylistic development of the sport. It is not necessarily that the modern basketball state seeks to homogenize the game, so much as to preserve control over the types of innovations that will be permitted and the pace at which these will be rolled out.

The NCAA, for example, outlawed the dunk shot prior to the junior season of dominating, 7'-2" sensation Lew Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul-Jabbar). The dunk loomed large in the imagination of the citizen of the modern basketball state around mid-century. It was, first of all, an unstoppable offensive tool. As such, it threatened with obsolescence any number of traditional patterns and scoring plays, especially those executed from below the rim. But perhaps most of all, as a play first popularized by superstar African American centers Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain in the 1950s, it signified the rising domination of the game by Black players. In this way, the banning of the dunk shot may be seen as an attempt not only to regulate the game by eliminating a key scoring tactic, but more nefariously as an attempt to curtail the ascendant power of African Americans to shape the game. Of course, Abdul-Jabbar responded by developing a devastating repertoire of alternative offensive moves and went on to become the NBA's all-time leading scorer. But despite his ability to elude the grasp of

the modern basketball state, Abdul-Jabbar was clear in identifying the nefarious desires motivating it: “The dunk is one of basketball’s great crowd pleasers,” he said, “and there is no good reason to give it up except that this and other niggers were running away with the sport” (George, 1999, p. 145; Houck, 2000, pp. 151-152).

The consolidation of the modern basketball state by around the middle of the 20th century—whatever its idealizing aspirations to preserve eternally the status quo—involved complexly related, uneven and sometimes chaotic, processes, and were frequently accompanied by contentious discussion over the putative essential nature of basketball as well as over the techniques and tactics that ostensibly best convey that nature. In these discussions, we may identify clusters of recurrent stories, metaphors, and images—which I refer to as the “myths of basketball culture”—arising around key events and personalities. I call these clusters “myths,” not to suggest that they are untrue, but rather to emphasize their narrative character and cultural function (Segal, 2004, p. 5). These myths give narrative shape to a collective struggle with changes—particularly related to race—taking place in basketball and in society. In general, they fabricate an idealized, timeless essence of the game and project it onto a succession of moments, individual players, coaches, and teams, or conversely fantasize that a contrasting succession poses a destructive threat to that essence. Sometimes, the same myth simultaneously hails an embodiment of basketball’s essence and decries an imagined threat to it.

Consider, for example, what I call the Myth of Foundation, which I might emblemize with the date the NBA gives as its date of origin: June 6, 1946. The date usefully emblemizes this myth not only because the NBA gives it as its date of origin, but equally or especially because the NBA was not in fact founded on June 6, 1946, but rather on August 3, 1949. What *did* happen on June 6, 1946, was that a group of wealthy hockey arena operators from large cities primarily in the Northeastern United States decided to utilize their arenas on off-nights to capitalize on the popularity of college basketball by forming a professional basketball league: not the NBA but rather the Basketball Association of America (Basketball Association of America; “Thirteen Arena Chiefs For New Pro Basket League,” 1946).

For 3 years, the BAA competed with an older rival, the National Basketball League (NBL), formed in 1937 and consisting primarily of franchises owned by local businessmen in small-to medium-sized Midwestern cities. They competed directly for spectators in only one market, but they competed everywhere for the services of talented and popular college and professional players. Although the NBL, with its established history and small but loyal audiences, unquestionably won the majority of these battles for players, the BAA’s owners had the deeper pockets, greater entertainment industry acumen, better media contacts, and, ultimately, the ability to promise the biggest stage for players. Eventually, with both leagues struggling to make ends meet, a merger agreement was struck, and a new league formed, the National Basketball Association, on August 3, 1949 (“Pro Basketball Leagues Merge,” 1949; Walsh, 1949). Of the 17 franchises comprising the nascent NBA, only 6 were from the original BAA. In other words, almost two thirds of the franchises in the new NBA had nothing to do with the BAA’s original vision, or its June 6, 1946 origin date. For the

first 5 years of the NBA's existence, most of the best players and league champions came from the NBL (Nelson, 2009). And yet, the NBA, many popular and scholarly historians of the sport and most fans—most of the basketball world, in short—persist in backdating the NBA's formation to June 6, 1946, when the BAA was formed (Fortunato, 2001; Hubbard, 2000; Jozsa, 2011; Kirchberg, 2007; Koppett, 1999; Rosen, 2009; Simmons, 2010; Surdam, 2012; Vancil, 1996).

The Myth of Foundation claims, among other things, that the NBA was founded on June 3, 1946. In doing so, it falsifies the facts of the NBA's history. But my primary interest is not in the historical error or its correction. Rather, or also, I wish to underscore the purpose served by this *particular* error and the myth of which it forms an emblematic part. The NBA's effacement of the NBL and its superior player talent and its identification with the BAA amounts, in effect, to an assertion that the franchise owners—not players—are the agents and motors of basketball history. That is to say, that without owners, there would be no basketball. The grip that this Myth of Foundation has on popular consciousness and the ways it serves the Modern Basketball State was impressed upon me in two separate, but related anecdotes, with which I would like to conclude.

On April 29, 2014, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver held a press conference to announce the results of the league's investigation of Donald Sterling, owner of the League's Los Angeles Clippers franchise, who had been caught on a publicly released tape making racist comments. Under-examined in the extensive media coverage was Sterling's rhetorical question asserting his creative importance as owner: "Do I make the game? Or do they make the game?" Sterling posed the question in the context of describing his compensation to players as an expression of paternalistic goodwill:

I support them and give them food, and clothes, and cars, and houses. Who gives it to them? Does someone else give it to them? Do I know that I have—Who makes the game? Do I make the game, or do they make the game? Is there 30 owners, that created the league? (Marchman)

Let me dwell for a moment on that rhetorical question at the center of these remarks: "Who makes the game?"

For, although Sterling has appropriately been chastised, lampooned, and punished for his remarks and behavior, I believe he has also to some degree been scapegoated by other owners, league executives, the news media, and fans availing themselves of the easy opportunity to distance themselves from the kind of extreme and easily quotable form of racism that, too often, is the only form of racism acknowledged to exist in sports and in this country more broadly. As journalist Tim Marchman has put it, "Sterling isn't some anomaly; he's the perfect representative of his class" (Marchman, 2014). Indeed, I would argue that his claim that it is the owners, rather than the players, who "make the game"—and the racist logic from which it emerged: characterized as "plantation" by NBA star David West—expresses a key component of the myth that runs like a fault line back to the very foundation of the NBA, the preeminent institutional component of the Modern Basketball State (West, 2014).

The Myth of Foundation, which tells the story of its origins as the story of the actions of this small group of a half-dozen hockey arena operators, expresses fairly directly that the NBA sees wealthy franchise owners who then, as today, amassed their fortunes through capitalist activity in other areas of the economy, as the origins and engines—in every sense: intellectually, politically, economically, and culturally—of an entity (the NBA) of which they formed only a minority, which departed from their original vision in significant ways, and which depended for its early survival and long-term success on players, coaches, fan bases, and forms of basketball play they adopted with misgivings. In short, the NBA's backdating of its own foundation to that 1946 meeting says, in effect, as Donald Sterling says, we, the owners, make the game.

My second anecdote helps show how pervasive this view is, as well as how damaging its effects can be. In the Fall of 2011, I was teaching my undergraduate Cultures of Basketball class at the University of Michigan. That semester, NBA owners locked out the players when negotiations over the terms of the new collective bargaining agreement reached an impasse. When we discussed the lockout and tried to imagine possible solutions, not a single student imagined the possibility of the players simply forming a league of their own. Indeed, when I suggested it myself, they fairly roundly dismissed the possibility as laughably implausible. I think most of them literally laughed. That particular suggestion may or may not have been realistic at the time. But leaving that aside, I wondered why not one of these bright and imaginative students had been able to imagine anything other than minor reforms within the capitalist ownership model in professional basketball? After all, it was just a classroom thought experiment: no jobs were at stake, and I feel confident I'd established a dynamic whereby "outlandish" contributions were made welcome.

There could be many reasons for this, of course. But I propose that one lies in the effectiveness with which the Myth of Foundation has purveyed and naturalized the belief that basketball only reached its "maturity" when properly organized, sponsored, and regulated by capitalist franchise owners operating in large media markets. All other elements of the history of professional basketball, whether earlier teams or forms of organization, rival leagues, or of course the players themselves—with their initiative and excellence—become passive objects, mere role-players in a story whose principal protagonist is the League as subject of basketball history. That history is thus reduced to the actions of that League: sucking in capital from one part of the American economy, combining it with raw materials (infrastructure, communications, players' bodies), and spitting out the product that was seemingly destined to capture markets at home and, eventually, around the globe. In other words, the naturalization of this idea has the effect of obscuring the historical fact that professional basketball was indeed founded by the desires, and driven by the talents, of players (Peterson, 2002). But, along with disabling our historical perspective, the Myth of Foundation inhibits our ability to imagine those alternative basketball futures that elude the control of the modern basketball state. Perhaps the framework I propose here for understanding the first half-century of basketball history may provide a basis from which to critique also other myths of basketball culture and to offer instead stories rooted firmly in the autonomous agency of basketball players, creatively inventing new ways to get free.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Note

1. In this respect, I see the present article as in line with Richard Gruneau's (1988, p. 31) caution that accounts relating modernization to sport must be wary of reproducing "the ideological tenets of modern liberalism." I agree, and intend my emphasis on the aesthetic innovation of players to throw into relief the ways that the modern basketball state, *pace* its ideological rationalizations, has functioned in concert with capitalist economic entities to arrest and exploit what might be called the "living labor"—the "living, form-giving fire"—of basketball players (Marx, 1973, p. 361).

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