

Divine Hoops

Kareem Tayyar

1. The best time of day for outdoor pickup basketball is an hour before sunset. What was true for the Impressionist painters remains true for the playground hooper: it's all about the light.

I don't know exactly why this is, but decades of research — of the experiential, rather than scientific, variety — have proven that once the sky begins to turn lavender a game is far more likely to meet the poetic possibilities first sensed by Dr. James Naismith over a century ago.

Every rim-and-backboard begins to resemble the cathedrals at Notre Dame or St. Paul's, and everything — ball, sneakers, the faces of each player — begin to glow with the soft-focus beauty of Renoir's "The Boating Party."

Which is probably why I have often found myself wishing that Van Gogh had lived long enough to have witnessed those immortal summers in Rucker Park when, in addition to the assorted local legends, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Wilt Chamberlain, Julius Erving, and Earl "the Pearl" Monroe, would ride the subways into Harlem to glide up and down the courts in what must have been gloriously beautiful late-summer afternoons, the ball passing from player to player like a shining grail full of twilight.

2. Sense is important.

Not common sense, though, as in all things, it can hardly hurt.

Rather, I am referring to "sense" in the way that a character in a Poe story might "sense" he is not alone in a room.

When leading the fast break, for instance, one must sense if there is a defender gaining on him from behind who might be able to tip the ball away.

When filling the wing on a fast break, one must sense when to begin gradually arcing towards the basket without having to look down at one's feet to see where he is located on the court.

When shooting a free throw, one must sense that everyone else in the gym or arena has momentarily vanished, and that the only two entities left are one's own body and the basket.

When bringing the ball up against man-to-man pressure, one must sense when it is (and is not) safe to momentarily turn one's back to his defender in order to change direction.

(Failing this fourth one, of course, will lead to a second defender picking one's proverbial pocket before one has even realized what has happened.)

When one is the point guard, or a player in charge of keeping his teammates involved, one must sense when a particular teammate has gone too long without getting a shot, and immediately set about providing him with an open look.

When one's first few shots have not gone down, one must sense — sooner rather than later — that this may be an afternoon, or evening, where he will have to find ways to impact the game that don't involve scoring.

Similarly, one must sense whether the gods appear to be on one team's side on a particular night.

Just as, equally importantly, one must sense if there is anything one can do in the early stages of a game to reclaim the gods' favor.

(Possibilities include diving on the floor for a loose ball; boxing out on a free-throw; setting a hard screen for a teammate; etc.)

After all, basketball is a game where instinct is more important than thought; poetry more important than prose; feeling more important than fact.

How do I know this to be true?

You'll just have to trust me.

3. I don't want to discuss championships. Which players won them, and how many. Just as I don't want to compare the relative greatness of players, or to turn this into a mathematics lecture where statistics, many of them so advanced it would take an Albert Einstein hologram to explain them in anything approaching comprehensible language, are treated like sacred runes handed down by the deities of analytics.

This is a game, remember. One that, even at the highest levels, is played mostly by adults who haven't been adults for very long, and one where even the jerseys the players wear feature team names straight out of a child's choose-your-own adventure book: *Wizards, Warriors, Kings, Mavericks, Magic*.

Besides, any devoted child's scouting report is going to get us much closer to the truth of each player's essential qualities than an entire office of number-crunchers who believe that the Sound of One Hand Clapping is found in a player's Per-Thirty-Six-Minute averages.

4. A quick aside about the circus:

I always wanted the performers on the flying trapeze to grow wings and fly away. To float through the opened flap of the big top and into the clouds that slept like overweight angels in the low skies above Los Angeles.

Why this was I cannot say. Perhaps because, having known the mysteries of flight, I could never imagine that they were eager to see such an experience end.

In other words, every time the trapeze artists reached out for the bars, it seemed to be a reluctant acceptance of the strictures of gravity. “Alright,” they seemed to be saying, “We’ll come home, even though we’d rather not.”

And who can blame them? No one joins the circus only to find themselves called in for supper.

It is the same feeling I had every time I watched Michael Jordan slowly fall to earth after completing one of his airborne pirouettes, his apparent defiance of the laws of gravity as complete as anything I would later see in Cirque de Soleil.

Michael Jordan, the Reluctant Acrobat.

Maybe this, and not the myriad other reasons so often given by commentators and critics alike, was the reason for his near-homicidal competitiveness:

He was furious that the gods had let him fly so close to the sun only to demand, over and over again, that he return to earth.

At least he got a long career out of the bargain; Icarus was gifted only with a premature death.

Still.

Now a man in late middle-age, I wonder if Michael has made his peace with all those brushes with the inhabitants of Mt. Olympus.

It seems unlikely.

5. The sound of sneakers on a hardwood floor is birdsong — a cote of doves cooing early morning ballads to the lingering moon; a murder of crows calling up the blues from the stage of a downtown power line; a flock of seagulls serenading the wine-dark sea at twilight — and, if one listens closely, the sneakers can tell a detailed story of its wearers.

Close your eyes, and picture:

The boy, in sneakers already well-worn, still learning how to properly perform a jump-stop, which explains the two squeaks in quick succession rather than one.

The seasoned player, in sneakers freshly pulled from their box that very morning and hoping to stutter-step his defender into a deep freeze, which explains the rapid-fire of squeaks that come one after the other.

The old man, in sneakers from an earlier era, moving to his spots on the court with the slow-motion grace of a ballet dancer, which explains the long, extended squeaks that speak to a player who knows that, in basketball as well as in life, deliberative motion can be its own form of speed.

6. I do not, in fact, dream very often about flight. Nor do I have recurring nightmares where I am unable to shout, or to run from an attacker, or where I am afraid that, if I do not immediately wake myself up, I am going to die in my sleep.

I do, however, dream more often about basketball than I probably should, and more than is certainly healthy.

Sometimes I am a young boy again in these dreams, and I am on the court across the street from the apartment where I grew up, and all of the locals from the neighborhood that I used to play pickup with are there. It is usually the middle of summer, and Felix, like always, has placed his boom-box beside the court. The Beastie Boys are playing. No, it is KRS-One. Except when it's Slick Rick. Or Kool Moe Dee. The chain-link fence could use some work. The chain-link nets on the hoops could too.

I am wearing my *Purple Rain* t-shirt, the one featuring Prince on his 1981 Hondamatic motorcycle. and my white Reebok high-tops, which look like miniature ocean liners.

My God, I am happy.

Other times I am roughly the same age that I am now, except that my knees are in perfect condition. My back and shins are too. My left wrist doesn't hurt when I follow through on my jump shot, and I appear to be every bit as able to blow by my defenders as I was in my physical prime. Yet I am just as likely to still be on that same childhood basketball court as I am anywhere else, and the people I am playing against are fully-grown versions of the same people I described to you in the previous paragraphs. The Beastie Boys are still on the boombox, except they're now men in late middle-age, and MCA is still alive, and the songs playing aren't ones I'm familiar with, because Felix — now a man in his early 60s — informs me that it's from their forthcoming album.

Clearly, it doesn't take a trained psychologist to explain what is likely going on here. As Prince himself comically expresses late in the title track to his 2004 album *Musicology*: "Boy, I was fine back in the day."

But just as one cannot control what one finds funny, one cannot control what one dreams. And this is a dream that makes me even happier than the one where I am a young kid again. Perhaps this means that I am, like millions of other American men, destined to be a perpetual Peter Pan. Or perhaps it simply means that I have refused to let the little kid inside of me die. Not surprisingly, I choose to believe it's the latter, rather than the former.

7. There are various crimes against nature and humanity, all of which exist far beyond the concerns of this book. Except, that is, the existence of the zone defense.

If there is in fact an afterlife, and if upon arriving we are given the opportunity to cross-examine St. Peter after he has put us on the proverbial stand for our assorted crimes and misdemeanors, one of my first questions will be to demand an answer as to why a sentient god would have allowed zone permutations such as the 2-3, the 1-3-1, the matchup, and the amoeba, to flourish.

I say this after a lifetime of thoughtful deliberation, where I have tried to be as fair-minded to the zone's enduring existence as to the mind-blowing fact that American colleges still take the works of Karl Marx seriously. Yet no amount of cool-headed reflection has been able to explain why a sport that otherwise represents the pinnacle of human grace, intellectual creativity, and emotional richness, should continue to allow itself to be marred by a gimmick so cheap that it makes Muzak seem thoughtfully nuanced by comparison.

And because I wouldn't want you to think this opinion is yet further proof of the conservatism inherent in so much writing about sports — there are few people more set in their beliefs than the middle-aged sports fan — I would kindly offer up this rejoinder: if sports is one of the last true spaces for meritocracy in our national life, then a defense whose fundamental purpose is to remove one's personal responsibility from the competitive equation is one that runs counter in spirit to the game at hand.

It occurs to me that the previous sentence isn't much of a rejoinder.

In fact, it isn't a rejoinder at all.

Fair enough. If there can be people who consider themselves “social liberals and economic conservatives,” then there can be space for a writer who considers himself a “social liberal and an athletic conservative.”

In other words, guard your man.

8. In Alfred Tennyson's classic poem, “Ulysses,” the greatest of all Victorian poets imagines the twilight years of Odysseus, the epic hero of Greek Mythology whom, as a younger man, spent the immediate years following his fighting in the Trojan War on a series of adventures — some willful, many accidental — that turned him into perhaps the most famous wanderer in literary history. Tennyson, a romantic at heart, chronicles a still-restless soul who has made peace with the fact that old age has not blunted his desire to “sail beyond the sunset,” even though he is aware this all but guarantees that he will die at sea.

It's a marvelous poem, especially in its ability to evoke a courage untethered from physical strength and youthful virility, and one that I find myself often thinking about when watching a past-his-prime athlete succeed despite a diminished physical capacity. Indeed, watching a formerly great player call up the old magic can be a kind of mystical experience, as the player temporarily becomes a secular manifestation of the idea of resurrection.

9. One more thing:

On nights when I cannot sleep (and therefore do not have the opportunity to dream), I often sink back into my sofa, pull YouTube up on my television screen, and spend a few hours watching various games and highlights from the past half century of professional basketball.

Here is Patrick Ewing with the follow-up dunk off a John Starks miss to send the New York Knicks to their first NBA finals since 1973...

Here is Julius Erving taking off from the free-throw line in the 1976 ABA dunk contest, his goatee making him look like Gandalf's much younger, cooler sibling...

Here is Magic Johnson leading a three-on-two fast break against the rival Celtics in the 1985 finals, spinning around the first defender before no-looking passing to a streaking James Worthy for a one-handed dunk...

Score one for Team Insomnia, I sometimes think, since it's a condition that's given me more time than I would have otherwise had to commune with the ghosts of my childhood, and a good reminder that not all ghosts return to haunt us, and that some games, if played for long enough, move from the secular to the sacred somewhere along the way.

Kareem Tayyar's most recent collection, *Keats in San Francisco & Other Poems*, was released in 2022 by Lily Poetry Review Books, and his work has appeared in literary journals including Poetry Magazine, Prairie Schooner, and Alaska Quarterly Review.