

Pick Me Up

Shooting bricks builds communities

“Hey, man, your peripheral better be fucked up!”

In a pickup basketball game on a New York City playground, a player ignores his teammates. He hoists a bad shot. On the next possession, he turns the ball over.

“Mother fucking Michael Jordan. Yeah, go ahead and shoot, Jordan-ass wannabe.”

Laughter erupts from the spectators. The player tries ball-hogging again. The spectators boo. To teach him a lesson, his teammates stop passing him the ball.

Pick-up basketball is often derided as “street” and “schoolyard” and as encouraging selfish play. It is maligned as an immature version of the textbook games organized by civic associations, high schools, and universities.

But on that New York City playground, both the players and the spectators tried to teach an ill-mannered player how to be a good sport.

Francisco Vieyra, writing for *Qualitative Sociology*, spent over a year in the Big Apple playing and talking with players and spectators on several dozen basketball courts.

He found that, far from being a hot-headed haven of selfishness and immaturity, pickup basketball is a welcoming and well-organized place. It provides informal mentoring on how to improve your game, how to get a job, and how you can deal with life’s everyday troubles.

Shoot bricks all you like: pick-up bball is a foundation of urban communities.

Welcome

Anyone can be a spectator and everyone - no matter who they are or what clothes they wear - can play.

“I often found white-collar workers wearing the athletic shoes they tucked away in their briefcases, blue-collar workers still in their overalls and boots, and underemployed or unemployed men and children in their shorts and sneakers on the same court,” Vieyra writes.

There are social rules for every aspect of the basketball experience: for fair choice in who will play next and for pre-game practice shoot-arounds. Everyone is expected to help clear the court of ice or other seasonal debris.

Players organize “contests,” which can be 3-on-3 or 5-on-5 matches that, to get as many different folks onto the court as possible in a reasonable amount of time, are between fifteen minutes and a half an hour. While some of the rules differed from game to game – such as how fouls will be called and the point allotment for baskets – the players negotiate and agree on these rules before tipoff.

Talk about It

Some guys were hanging around the court, waiting for their turn to play. One of these guys started talking about how he recently lost his job. One guy pointed to a short fellow who worked at an employment agency and suggested that he talk to him. Another guy chimed in that, just a few months ago, he got a construction job that way. They first guy took the suggestion for help and, later on, got a job as a janitor.

In the pickup basketball world, one can find friends, news, gossip, advice.

They also share stories about racism in America.

“In one memorable conversation,” Vieyra writes, “a player told us how earlier in the day he overheard his white boss make racist remarks about Blacks to several white co-workers. Rustling a few papers to establish his presence in the room resulted in his boss quickly turning around, awkwardly stammering that it was ‘just a joke,’ and leaving the room without waiting for a response.”

The others listened and some told their similar stories of racism at work. A discussion ensued “over the merits of filing a grievance, quitting on principle, or begrudgingly tolerating such abuses because of the difficulty of finding a new job as a Black man.”

If You Build It

Communities are sustained by special events. In good weather, the community turns the basketball courts into tournaments and summer leagues that, over time, can develop a long standing and well-known local history, like the Entertainers’ Basketball Classic at the Holcombe Rucker Basketball Court, and that can draw over a thousand spectators. Out-of-town tourists come there for “a big part of Black history.”

Most of these special contests are smaller affairs of the local community. They exhibit the kind of “flashy” play that is highlighted on YouTube, but this is because they are, first and foremost, festive. Vendors sell ice cream, artists hawk their wares, and players’ family and friends cheer.

“Yeah, this makes my mom proud,” a player said. “She comes to every tournament. Every one. Doesn’t matter where it’s at. And afterwards, that’s all she’ll talk about.”

Pickup basketball is not a utopia: insults, bad manners, and undesirable conduct happens. Generally, bad manners are done in-game and spectators and players try to cool heated disagreements. Rarely is it

personal and once the game is over, the conflict ends. Fights are rare.

Pickup basketball can be a deep and meaningful experience that is woven into the fabric of players' everyday life. Within it, they become a part of the larger community.

“Pickup basketball does not escape New York City’s greater structural realities,” Vieyra writes. “It can, however, serve as a reprieve from these issues.”

Notes

This is written by Joshua K. Dubrow and is based on “Pickup Basketball in the Production of Black Community” by Francisco Vieyra in *Qualitative Sociology* in 2016 (39:101–123).

Notes for Teaching “Pickup Basketball” in a Sociology Class

What’s the article about?

Pickup basketball is a marvelous display of homegrown community building where folks help one another and create and enforce rules of equality.

Here’s What’s Interesting: What scholars considered unstructured and individualistic, is actually structured and communal:

“...I found a communitarian atmosphere based on cooperative action, understanding, and signification. In other words, pickup basketball fundamentally served as an active site of Black community-making.” (105)

“Freed from dichotomous understandings, pickup basketball is clearly more than just a series of atomistic attempts to define or achieve masculinity, personal identity, or the hoop dream. Instead, pickup basketball helps produce Black community. Pickup basketball directly contributes to

community-making by expanding social networks and strengthening bonds. Pickup basketball also bolsters community indirectly. It articulates, enacts, and disseminates essential communal values, such as sharing, responsibility, trust, cooperation, respect, and fairness, among others.” (117)

Community Building

Rules:

Enforced social rules for preparing the court; for choosing who will play next; for ball use; for pre-game practice; and contests (3-on-3 or 5-on-5, typically lasting 15 minutes to a half an hour - short contests allowed more players to play a game). While some of the rules differed from match to match, the players negotiated and agreed upon the rules prior to tipoff.

Scholars of basketball use Elijah Anderson’s Code of the Street distinction between decent (good) and street (bad) to analyze the distinction between institutional basketball that is good and virtuous, and pickup basketball, which is bad and immoral. The author uses qualitative methods -- interviews, participant observation -- of pickup bball in NYC. He argues that pickup bball is a means to build Black community. He argues that the decent-street binary doesn’t work in pickup bball.

Inclusion and equality: Everyone can play

“Indeed, I often found white-collar workers wearing the athletic shoes they tucked away in their briefcases, blue-collar workers still in their overalls and boots, and underemployed or unemployed men and children in their shorts and sneakers on the same court.” (107)

Special contests

Tournaments and summer leagues, some with long standing local history, can exhibit “flashy” play, but they are so because they are first and

foremost festive, social events. They are “neighborhood events, family events, a means of strengthening bonds, and a means of overcoming difference,” (113) and thus crucial for community building. These festive basketball festivals are a place for bonding, including between folks who do not meet often in the neighborhood.

Mentoring and problem solving:

Communication between players and spectators about life, providing advice, and spreading news or gossip.

“a player waiting to enter a match mentioned that he had recently lost his job. Another player-in-waiting suggested that the first talk to the short guy over there, since the identified man worked at an employment agency. A third player agreed, saying that he acquired a construction job in this way a few months earlier. I later learned that the suggestion had led to the player obtaining a custodial job at a health center.”

“In one memorable conversation, a player told us how earlier in the day he overheard his white boss make racist remarks about Blacks to several white co-workers. Rustling a few papers to establish his presence in the room resulted in his boss quickly turning around, awkwardly stammering that it was “just a joke,” and leaving the room without waiting for a response. Upon hearing the player’s story, several others recounted similar accounts of workplace racism. This then resulted in a short debate over the merits of filing a grievance, quitting on principle, or begrudgingly tolerating such abuses because of the difficulty of finding a new job as a Black man.” (111-112).

Social Bonding

“While compliments tended to be about one’s play—making a difficult shot, making a defensive stop, or just being exceptionally quick, for example—they also frequently involved other matters, such as a player’s new shoes, haircut, or a well-told joke.” (109)

Sportsmanship over winning:

“In one contest, as a player ignored his teammates on consecutive possessions, resulting in an errant shot and a turnover, one of his teammates yelled, “Mother fucking Michael Jordan. Yeah, go ahead and shoot, Jordan-ass wannabe.” Another shouted, “Hey, man, your peripheral better be fucked up!” The irony of comparing the player to one of the all-time basketball greats was not lost on anyone. The spectators laughed, and, when the player tried it one last time, booed. Moreover, after that final mistake, his teammates avoided passing him the ball for several possessions to teach him a lesson in sportsmanship. In other words, contrary to stereotype, the goal was to play well within the bounds of the team, not to make the most difficult shot, score the most points, or embarrass another player for one’s own aggrandizement.” (111)

Gender

Playing Pickup BBall is male dominated, with few women on the court. The author did not detect any strong signals of gender bias when women were there, but did notice that few played. The author did note that women’s participation was strong off-court: “women commonly attended and watched practices, contests, and competitions, mingling with and commenting on the other spectators and players The interactions and comments seemed just as rich and lively as men’s. And out of this, all sorts of relationships sprang.” (115)

Limitations

Pickup BBall is not a utopia:

“None of this is to say that gloating, insults, and challenges were absent from the court. They occurred frequently. However, despite some scholarly and media characterizations of pickup basketball as based on braggadocio and conflict, players rarely tried to attack personally or embarrass others

players. More often, they were attempting to rouse one's own team and to raise the overall intensity of the match." (109)

"pickup basketball certainly does not escape, let alone solve, the troubles afflicting many Black areas." (119)

"Pickup basketball does not escape New York City's greater structural realities. It can, however, serve as a reprieve from these issues." (119).