ALEXANDER WOLFF


# BIG GAME, SMALL WORLD

## A BASKETBALL ADVENTURE

**PRAISE FOR *BIG GAME, SMALL WORLD***

"His reporting is terrific. The most entertaining chapters focus on people torn between their love of the game and conflicting, often incongruous forces."—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Every piece could be a book or movie in itself. . . . They're tied together by Wolff's search for the soul of hoops, in himself and in the lives of the people and cultures he meets. . . . This book's a keeper."—ESPN.com

"Alexander Wolff takes us through 16 countries, from Bhutan to Poland, and dozens of states in search of a community of hoops. What he finds may be just too quirky to win the Nobel Peace Prize, but the pieces are prize winners."—ROBERT LIPSYTE, *The New York Times*

"Wolff has a great feel for basketball and the people who love the game."—JOHN FEINSTEIN, author of *A Season on the Brink*

"Wolff's passion for the game burns feverishly. . . . This is a wonderful book, certainly the best on basketball this season."—*Booklist* (starred review)

"Enlightening. . . . Wolff's knack for finding fascinating people to interview goes far in humanizing basketball in a global context. Highly recommended."—*Library Journal*

"May lead the league in ambitiousness of scope . . . most instructive and great fun."—BILL LITTLEFIELD, NPR's *Only a Game*

"A lengthy, sprawling, eclectic book, *Big Game, Small World* is part travelogue, part memoir, a mélange of concise histories, quick-hitting ethnographies and biographical portraits. . . . [It] is a self-consciously meditative narrative, a historically informed, critically alert quest for authenticity and meaning."—DANIEL NATHAN, *International Journal of the History of Sport*

"One of the great sports books of all time, and one of the finest travelogues."—STEVE RUSHIN, author of *Road Swing*

# BIG GAME,
## SMALL WORLD

# BIG GAME, SMALL WORLD

A BASKETBALL ADVENTURE

*Alexander Wolff*

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham & London* 2022

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project editor: Lisa Lawley
Designed by Matthew Tauch
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Wolff, Alexander, [date] author.
Title: Big game, small world : a basketball adventure / Alexander Wolff.
Description: [Revised and expanded twentieth anniversary edition.] |
Durham : Duke University Press, 2022.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022007312 (print)
LCCN 2022007313 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478016151 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478018803 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478023456 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Wolff, Alexander, 1957–—Travel. | Basketball. |
BISAC: SPORTS & RECREATION / Basketball
Classification: LCC GV885 .W624 2022 (print) | LCC GV885 (ebook) |
DDC 796.323—dc23/eng/20220509
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022007312
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022007313

Parts of this book originally appeared in *Sports Illustrated, Sports Illustrated for Women, PhillySport, Princeton Alumni Weekly,* and *Attaché* magazines.

*For Vanessa—and with her*

When the individual was permitted to move about anywhere, so long as he did not have the ball, the game became spirited and kaleidoscopic.

—**DR. JAMES NAISMITH**

There is no truth but in transit.

—**RALPH WALDO EMERSON**

# CONTENTS

# PREFACE TO THE DUKE EDITION

Almost two decades after the original publication of this book, as the planet writhed in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic, I found myself returning to *Big Game, Small World* with two thoughts top of mind: How big can basketball really be when its apotheosis, the NBA, is condemned to play its games in a bubble? And how small can the world really be when so many of the people populating it are locked down?

A worldwide television event called *The Last Dance* offered windows onto those questions and ultimately helped me put both to rest. On each of five consecutive Sunday nights during the spring of 2020, two new one-hour episodes, rushed through production by ESPN and distributed globally by Netflix, kept the game big and the world small, even amid that first wave of the pandemic. I had reported this book during 1998 and '99, in the aftermath of events at the center of the documentary series—the six NBA titles won by Michael Jordan and his Chicago Bulls through that decade, which resonated from Ireland (see chapter 14) to Bhutan (see chapter 22) to China (see chapter 17) and points in between. As I began to draft this new preface, *The Last Dance* provided a welcome aerie from which to take a long, wide-angle look back.

In the first episode, Jordan and the Bulls begin that final season at the 1997 McDonald's Open in Paris, astride the world as both basketball players and brands. In the final episode, President Barack Obama describes the team and its superstar as a kind of cluster bomb of American soft power. "There are great players who don't have an impact beyond their sport, and some who become a larger cultural force," he says. "[Jordan] became an extraordinary ambassador not just for basketball, but I think for the United States overseas, a part of American culture sweeping the globe. Michael Jordan and the Bulls changed the culture."

*The Last Dance* wouldn't have captured the world's imagination if not for what has unfolded during those intervening years. Not long before this book appeared in 2002, the NBA was still sending VHS highlight packages by overnight air to many of its international broadcast partners. The

league now delivers games to 215 countries and territories in more than 50 languages, not only to satellite and terrestrial TVs, but to computers, tablets, and mobile phones too. Moreover, some 40 percent of visitors to NBA.com live outside North America, as do two out of every three of the league's social media followers, whose total is closing in on two billion globally.

Meanwhile, the parade of NBA players originating from beyond the United States continues apace. The 2002 World Championships and 2004 Athens Olympics undermined any residual claim to American basketball exceptionalism; even after the "Redeem Team" clawed back some honor by winning gold at the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, no Team USA has cakewalked its way to gold at any international competition since the turn of the 21st century. The tournament at the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Olympics in 2021 featured fifty-three players with NBA experience on national teams *other* than the United States. Indeed, since the American Dream Team's star turn at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, the number of foreign NBA players has increased by a factor of five, with non-Americans now claiming nearly one in every four of the league's roster spots. At the outset of the 2020–21 NBA season, every team could count at least one import and six suited up five or more. With the choice of Portugal's Neemias Queta by the Sacramento Kings in the 2021 Draft, some 80 countries—including such unlikely outposts as Belize, Cape Verde, Iran, Scotland, and South Korea—have supplied the league with at least one player. It's all a fan can do to tell Bogdan Bogdanović (of the Atlanta Hawks) from Bojan Bogdanović (of the Utah Jazz)—a good idea, given that the first is a Serb and the second a Croat (see chapters 7 and 8).

But the most striking characteristic of the current crop of NBA imports isn't their quantity. It's their quality. At the conclusion of the 2020–21 season, the Finals MVP, the Milwaukee Bucks' explosively agile Giannis Antetokounmpo (Greece), led the five-man All-NBA first team, where he was joined by Nikola Jokić (Serbia) of the Denver Nuggets and Luka Dončić (Slovenia) of the Dallas Mavericks—two players with the ability to slow a game down to their speed simply by the way they command the court. The Philadelphia 76ers' Joel Embiid (Cameroon), the Brooklyn Nets' Kyrie Irving (Australia), and the Utah Jazz's Rudy Gobert (France) helped round out the second and third teams. A transitional crop of international stars (Pau Gasol, Manu Ginóbili, Steve Nash, Dirk Nowitzki, Tony Parker) had come of age soon after the original edition of this book came out, and all would admit to having found role models among the Dream Team. Today's

marquee import, by contrast, freely credits anyone to pass through the NBA, American or not, for inspiration.

Part of the success of international players in the league follows from the steady demystification of their American counterparts. (Freshly called up to Real Madrid's senior team as a seventeen-year-old, Dončić found himself, in a 2016 preseason game against the Oklahoma City Thunder that the Madrileños won, guarding Russell Westbrook. He acquitted himself perfectly well.) At the same time, imports who had long been derided for being "mechanical"—and been condescended to by American coaches who supposedly knew better—now came with a brace of virtues. "They play the game with a kind of engineered beauty, economical and drama free," Chris Jones wrote in a February 2004 *Esquire* piece about the NBA's internationals. "More like the insides of a watch than a racehorse."

There's quite some distance between "mechanical" and "engineered beauty." This book is devoted to accounting for the transit between the two, and to explaining the origins of the cross-pollinated, crossover dreamt-up world we now inhabit—one in which James Harden Eurosteps past defenders like some SoCal Ginóbili, Kevin Durant hoists high a knee on his fallaway jumper à la Nowitzki, and almost every offense in the league comes with the baldly Balkan feature of a guard cornering off a high ball screen while three other players sprint to spots for three-point shots.

And, it can't be noted enough, in a world in which more NBA fans (70 percent) live outside the United States than within, it helps that the league has met its overseas followers more than halfway. Gone are the days when its Spanish broadcast partner, Movistar+, relied on the marketing slogan DORMIR ES DE COBARDES—SLEEP IS FOR COWARDS—to induce fans to stay up into the wee hours to catch games live. Today the NBA tries to set Sunday afternoon tip times early enough so a fan in Europe or Africa can consume those games in prime time, a fan in Japan can watch on a smartphone on a bullet train during a Monday morning commute, and a fan in Australia can catch them on the office desktop over lunch hour. The early fever dreams of the late NBA commissioner David Stern envisioned a European Division, with interdivisional play featuring Utah at Barcelona and London at Los Angeles; the reality of jet lag compromising player performance—and the prospect of a carbon footprint of Bob Lanier dimensions—put an end to such speculation. Instead, accepting that 99 percent of its fans will never see a game in-person, the NBA pushes every button to deliver its product in the most convenient, comestible fashion.

No country beyond the United States now sends more players to the league than Canada. For each of the past seven seasons the native land of the game's inventor, Dr. James Naismith (see chapter 1), has led the cavalcade of imports into the NBA, with an unprecedented seventeen Canadians appearing on rosters as of Fall 2020. It may have been a coincidence that at the crest of this surge, in 2019, the Toronto Raptors claimed the first NBA title to be won by a team outside the United States—yet that championship was as much the world's as Canada's. If America is a melting pot that subsumes immigrants into a single identity, Canadians like to point out that their country is a salad bowl with the ethnic origin of each ingredient writ clear. And the Raptors found fuel at the salad bar that is Toronto, the world's most diverse city. When the pandemic forced them to relocate to Tampa for the 2020–21 season, they made sure the word NORTH—the heart of the team's slogan WE THE NORTH—ringed their floor in twenty-five languages, so no one would be misled into thinking that Florida was anything but a temporary home.

Over the past several years the Raptors' cosmopolitanism has gone beyond players like Pascal Siakam of Cameroon, Serge Ibaka of Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Marc Gasol of Spain to staff including Nigerian-born President Masai Ujiri, Spanish Assistant Coach Sergio Scariolo, Scout Jama Mahlalela of Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), and Video Coordinator and Player Development Specialist Fabulous Flournoy, a bona fide MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire). The team's global spirit extends to the courtside seats of Scotiabank Arena, where you'll find Nav Bhatia, the turban-surmounted face of the team's fan base, who fled anti-Sikh violence in India during the mid-1980s and since the Raptors' founding in 1995 has never missed a home game. And it spills out into Jurassic Park, the plaza where a majority-minority throng of Raptorontonians (Indian, Southeast Asian, African, Caribbean) reliably mosh together to watch games on a big screen.

Ujiri grew up in England, the son of Nigerian students who went on to become medical professionals. Like his countryman Hakeem Olajuwon, he started out playing soccer and only turned to basketball in his teens. After a spell as an exchange student at a high school in Seattle, he logged two seasons at a North Dakota junior college, a single forgettable semester at Montana State, and the remainder of the '90s with clubs in England, Belgium, and Finland. Only then did he find his basketball destiny, bootstrapping his way from an unpaid gig as an international scout with Orlando to a post in Denver in 2010 as general manager and executive vice-president. Three years later Ujiri presided as the Nuggets won fifty-seven games, the

most since their ABA days, a record that won him honors as NBA Executive of the Year—whereupon the Raptors brought him on to run their entire operation.

Nick Nurse, the free-of-airs coach Ujiri hired to deliver Toronto's title, had every bit the vagabond's pedigree as his boss. After a college career as a sniper at Northern Iowa, Nurse did time coaching in the NAIA ranks, Great Britain, and the D-League. In 1991 Ujiri was barely out of his teens, a 6′5″ guard playing for a fourth-tier English club called Solent Stars, when he watched Nurse coach a rival team in Derby. The future Raptors president took note of the personable Iowan—not just because Nurse too was in his twenties but because of the small-town American positivity and energy he brought to those dank sports halls where the English game barely registered a pulse.

I had looked in on Nurse during my travels in 1998–99, when he was coaching the Manchester Giants of the British Basketball League. Today I realize he was a kind of basketball Ted Lasso for his time, but I couldn't then figure out a way to shoehorn him and his story into the narrative. No matter. In the aftermath of Toronto's crown, Nurse wrote his own book: *Rapture: Fifteen Teams, Four Countries, One NBA Championship, and How to Find a Way to Win—Damn Near Anywhere*.

* * *

On May 25, 2020, barely a week after the premiere of the final episode of *The Last Dance*, a white police officer kneed the life out of an African American man named George Floyd on a Minneapolis street. Those nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, captured in the same viral video medium that sends the NBA's product around the world, touched off global Black Lives Matter protests and an even more pointed reckoning than the one already under way stateside. The following August, after Jacob Blake was shot in the back seven times by a policeman in Kenosha, Wisconsin, players on the Milwaukee Bucks took the unprecedented step of refusing to suit up for a playoff game in the NBA bubble. The league expressed its solidarity with the Bucks by postponing the full slate of games scheduled for that day.

By then NBA players had long since stepped to the center of the country's political conversation. The movement began in the mid-2000s with the early stirrings of Barack Obama's run for president. The candidate's engagement with the game as a player and fan only deepened his connection to NBA locker rooms, and once he became president, players rallied

to support his agenda. The Affordable Care Act appeared dead after the balky rollout of the HealthCare.gov Web site, as the administration faced the challenge of luring into the exchanges enough healthy young people to counterbalance the older Americans who needed little persuasion to enroll. As it happened, the first six-month open-enrollment period for coverage fell between October 2013 and March 2014, in the midst of the NBA season. With many of the league's fans being young, Black, Latino, or unmarried—all demographic groups marked by high percentages of the uninsured—the US Department of Health and Human Services placed ads and PSAs on NBA broadcasts and sites. The spots—featuring players like Alonzo Mourning, who had come back from kidney disease to win an NBA title, and Magic Johnson, the most recognizable American living with the AIDS virus—drove signups and helped rescue Obamacare from oblivion.

In foreign policy, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ramped up Foggy Bottom's Sports Envoys program, which sent American athletes overseas to teach their sport and the life lessons learned from playing it. Under Obama the vast majority of Sports Envoys were basketball players and, in keeping with the administration's emphasis on empowering girls and women in the developing world, many more came from the WNBA than from the NBA. Of course, it's in the nature of soft power that it won't necessarily be subject to control: four times during 2013, Jordan's old *Last Dance* partner Dennis Rodman kited off to Pyongyang to spend time with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. "His whole deal is to talk basketball with Obama," Rodman said, urging the President to reach out to Kim. "I ask, Mr. President, what's the harm in a simple phone call? This is a new age, man." Hard as it may be to regard Rodman's travels as anything but Ding-Dong Diplomacy, North Korea did release Korean American missionary Kenneth Bae, who had been sentenced to 15 years of hard labor on charges of trying to overthrow the regime, after Bae had served only 31 months—this after Rodman's repeated visits as well as a letter urging Kim to do so.

By the middle of Obama's first term, players hardly needed White House permission to engage in issues of the moment. On Cinco de Mayo in 2010, the Phoenix Suns wore jerseys reading LOS SUNS to object to anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona, which Steve Nash, the team's star guard, called "very misguided." A year later the Bucks spoke out in support of Wisconsin's public-sector employees, who had just been stripped of collective-bargaining rights. A year after that, the Miami Heat posed in hooded sweatshirts to honor the memory of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager who had been shot and killed by a vigilante dur-

ing halftime of the NBA All-Star Game after stepping out onto a sidewalk in Sanford, Florida, wearing a hoodie. By the end of 2014, in the aftermath of Eric Garner being choked to death during an encounter with a New York City policeman, the Chicago Bulls' Derrick Rose had appeared for pregame warmups in a T-shirt reading I CAN'T BREATHE, a moment that touched off similar messaging around the league.

Players in the WNBA were even more engaged than their male counterparts. The league's finest, Maya Moore of the Minnesota Lynx, joined teammates to embrace the cause of criminal justice reform in 2016 after the police killing of Philando Castile during a traffic stop in a St. Paul suburb. Then, in 2019, she suspended her career entirely to work to overturn the wrongful conviction of a family friend, Jonathan Irons, who would spend 23 years in prison before winning his freedom in June 2020. During the time they worked on his case, Moore and Irons fell in love, and shortly after his release they married. Moore described her decision to leave the Lynx—and pass up the 2020 Olympics and lucrative overseas contracts during WNBA off-seasons—as choosing to embrace the breadth of her human potential. "I've been an athlete my whole life," she said, "but I'm also a citizen."

Later the same year, players with the WNBA's Atlanta Dream, furious that their owner, Senator Kelly Loeffler (R-Ga.), had disparaged the Black Lives Matter movement, posed united in T-shirts emblazoned with the name of Raphael Warnock, one of Loeffler's opponents in her race to defend her seat. Warnock, the longtime pastor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, then barely registered in polls of Georgia voters. But after the Dream turned up in those VOTE WARNOCK T-shirts, support for his candidacy ticked steadily upward, culminating in victory in a January 2021 runoff. That seat handed incoming president Joe Biden the advantage of a Democratic Congress.

Even NBA coaches began to mount their soapboxes. After the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016, a web entrepreneur did brisk trade in T-shirts, mugs, and bumper stickers emblazoned with POPOVICH/KERR 2020. Tchotchkes, to be sure—but Gregg Popovich and Steve Kerr, the coaches of the San Antonio Spurs and Golden State Warriors respectively, rarely passed up a chance to call out the nativism and racial divisiveness of Trump and many of his supporters and vented freely on such issues as gun violence, immigration, and voting rights.

In short, basketball had found its voice. Players filmed PSAs or launched charitable initiatives on behalf of causes that spoke to them. Grant Hill threw himself into improving child nutrition and reducing inner-city food

deserts. LeBron James established his I Promise public charter school on the Akron streets where he grew up, tailored to the kind of kid he had been—at risk of falling behind. Buddy Hield of the Sacramento Kings and Deandre Ayton of the Phoenix Suns each donated $100,000 to relief efforts after Hurricane Dorian swept through their native Bahamas in 2019; in Senegal, Gorgui Dieng of the Atlanta Hawks bankrolled dialysis and prenatal clinics and conducted tutorials on sustainable agriculture on farmland he owned. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Charlotte Hornets' Bismack Biyombo built schools in three cities, renovated two hospitals, and underwrote a mobile clinic, and then donated another $1 million in medical supplies after the coronavirus hit his homeland. Gone were the go-along, get-along '90s, the era of *Jerry Maguire* and "Show me the money!," and Michael Jordan's discussion-stopping rejoinder that "Republicans buy sneakers too"—a dodge, *The Last Dance* told us, that the Bulls star used on the team bus to justify not having taken a stand in the 1990 US Senate race in his home state between Harvey Gantt, the Black mayor of Charlotte, and segregationist Jesse Helms. The "citizen-athlete" ballplayer who spoke out with conviction, in press conferences and over social media alike, had become more norm than exception.

* * *

At first the NBA's interest in talent from overseas seemed to be confined to two types: the standstill jump shooter and the big man who could pass. Players from the former Yugoslavia embodied the beau ideal in each category. But by the end of the '90s, NBA imports had already begun to bust out of those pigeonholes. In Dražen Petrović and Toni Kukoč eastern Europe was producing players who could shoot and post up, to be sure, but also beat a defender off the bounce and thread a pass on the move. *The Last Dance* portrayed Chicago executive Jerry Krause as every Bull's favorite piñata, but Krause's judgment of Kukoč and his NBA-ready skills turned out to be on the mark. Today, NBA scouts are willing to imagine internationals into any role on the floor. As Kim Bohuny, the NBA's senior vice-president for international basketball operations, told me, "There isn't a country our teams won't scout."

The one-dimensional international player was destined to give way to the more well-rounded one as the game was played in an ever-flatter world in which young talent anywhere has instant access to the inspiring moves of every NBA pro. But the league now engages worldwide in conscious player development beyond simply delivering highlight clips. It now presides

over a pyramid of multiple tiers, from the broad grassroots to the high-performance pinnacle. Jr. NBA, the league's global skills-building program for children age six to fourteen, is established in more than fifty countries, including India, where some ten million boys and girls take part. NBA Basketball Schools are one level up in seriousness, a pay-as-you-go option up to age eighteen; by 2021 they could be found in six countries, with more in the works. Finally, for 16-, 17-, and 18-year-olds around the world, the NBA offers two finishing schools. Basketball Without Borders (BWB) sends top prospects from its feeder camps on six continents to BWB Global, which features players with the best chance to join the eighty-nine former BWB campers, including the Raptors' Siakam, who have been drafted or signed as free agents by NBA teams since the first BWB camp in 2001. And the league has begun to roll out NBA Academies, year-round BWB-level schools that offer promising young men and women of college-prep age a kind of stationary replication of the domestic US travel-team scene, particularly in countries where coaching and infrastructure lag, like India, Mexico, and Senegal. As of 2021, some fifty-five NBA Academy participants had landed on teams in the NCAA's Division I and eight had signed professionally. "We're finding young players who may not be on everybody's lists," Bohuny said, "but are diamonds in the rough."

The NBA is particularly devoted to player development in Africa. The league staged three charity games on the continent between 2016 and '18. After the third, Stern; Ujiri; NBA executives Adam Silver, Mark Tatum, and Amadou Fall; FIBA chief Patrick Baumann; and FIBA Africa executive director Alphonse Bilé (whom you'll meet in chapter 25) repaired to a Pretoria pizzeria. There they hatched the Basketball Africa League, or BAL—the first NBA-operated league outside the United States. Twelve teams—one each from a dozen countries—would compete for the title. This formalized club championship is a major step for the game on the continent, where basketball has been rife with instability and corruption and players subject to exploitation by unscrupulous scouts and sexual abuse by coaches. By bringing infrastructure above ground and placing the league's reputation front and center, the NBA hopes to pull the African game out of the shadows.

Over the summer of 2021, shortly after the BAL's inaugural championship tournament, NBA Africa added Barack Obama as a strategic partner and equity stakeholder. The league's goals of combating gender-based violence and promoting girls' education on the continent aligned with those of the former president's own foundation. Obama was also eager to engage

with fellow NBA Africa partners who want to keep connected to the continent of their ancestry. They include former NBA players Luol Deng (South Sudan), Ian Mahinmi (France, with ties to Benin), Dikembe Mutombo (Democratic Republic of the Congo), and Joakim Noah (France and United States, with ties to Cameroon).

As inspiring as the story of Giannis Antetokounmpo is, it's also a tale of pain and exploitation. By the time he was born, Antetokounmpo's family had migrated out of desperation from Nigeria to Greece. As an undocumented child in Athens, Giannis vended in the streets to earn pocket change, lived in fear of beatings from neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party thugs, and sometimes had to share a single pair of basketball shoes with his brother Thanasis. The NBA's ultimate goal is that its next MVP of African descent be developed and finished on the continent. "Yao Ming was an All-Star level player who not only opened up China, but all of Asia," Bohuny said. If Antetokounmpo had come straight from Lagos, Africa might be about to experience an even more pronounced version of a Giannis Effect. When the NBA Academies fully kick in, young talent like Antetokounmpo could be groomed just as the Gasol brothers, Pau and Marc, were schooled at their hometown club, FC Barcelona.

For now, Africans who reach the NBA owe their success essentially to chance. "It's something of a miracle that so many *have* made it," Tatum told me. "Joel Embiid was first spotted playing volleyball. We're trying to create a more predictable pathway for [African players] to eventually play at the highest level."

As the NBA became more dedicated to developing elite talent, the league happily ceded the participatory grassroots scene to its counterparts at FIBA. For nearly three decades basketball's international federation had been led by Borislav Stankovic, the Serb who joined Stern to open the Olympics to American professionals and accelerate parity across borders. Stankovic stepped down as secretary general in 2003, yielding to his protégé, Patrick Baumann, a Swiss lawyer with three relevant features: a modern understanding of sports marketing, an aversion to excessive centralization, and a seat on the International Olympic Committee.

As the audience for the Olympic Games began to skew alarmingly older, the IOC and its broadcast rightsholders smuggled on to the Olympic program events like BMX cycling and skateboarding in hopes of appealing to younger, more urban viewers. An earlier generation of Swiss lawyer might have blanched at such pastimes darkening hallowed Olympic spaces. Instead, asking what basketball could offer to similarly excite young play-

ers and drive participation, Baumann landed on the playground game—specifically, half-court three-on-three.

The vision of the new FIBA chief included all the open-air atmospherics, from hip-hop music to trash-talking commentary to officiating of the no-autopsy, no-foul school. Half-court streetball had the additional virtue of not requiring large numbers, which meant a Thailand or El Salvador could field a team with a fighting chance against the huge nations that routinely claim the dozen spots in the Olympic five-on-five tournament. More, three-on-three would be easier to add to the Games than an entirely new sport like lacrosse or ultimate frisbee; as an additional "discipline" within an existing sport—think how beach volleyball is an edgier, more TV-friendly version of the indoor variety—three-on-three would appeal to the IOC, Baumann figured, for it wouldn't excessively drive up costs by requiring legions of athletes or the construction of an indoor venue.

As Baumann envisioned it, the Olympics would host the ultimate in three-on-three—or, as FIBA calls it, 3×3 (pronounced "three-ex-three," with that polyglot preposition signaling the X-Gamesy spirit of the exercise). But more broadly, FIBA hoped for a multiplier effect. "If 3×3 goes on to the Olympics, it's an extraordinary boost," Baumann told me in 2013 in Istanbul, at the finals of FIBA's second 3×3 World Tour for men. "In the meantime, we have an incredible tool to grow the game."

I got a taste of how during that weekend in Istanbul's Beşiktaş Port Square. Amid a mash-up of the sacred and the profane—a muezzin's call to prayer would duel with raunchy rap from the turntable of a guy named D.J. XXXL—the event's Japanese entry seemed to vindicate FIBA's claim that 3×3 was the lone sport that could take an athlete "from the streets to the international stage." None of Team Nagoya's four players (3×3 allows each team one substitute) learned the game in an orthodox, sanctioned club. Each traced his basketball origins to the street and counted himself a member of Underdog, a Tokyo-based urban crew that included graphic artists, concert promoters, and clothing designers. Earlier that year, during the World Tour stop in Tokyo, a Russian player had opened a cut on the face of an Underdog, who gamely slapped a Band-Aid over the wound and carried on. For the team's next game, twenty members of the collective turned up in decorative masks, each graced with multiple Band-Aids.

Early returns indicated that, in 3×3, the minnows did indeed have a chance against the big fish. The New Zealand boys won the Under 18 Worlds in Rimini, Italy, in 2011. The Estonian girls took silver at the Under 18 Worlds in Jakarta two years later. The Spanish men's entry at the

2012 Worlds in Athens included three veterans of that country's Olympic medal-winning five-on-five team, among them former NBA player Jorge Garbajosa—yet Team Spain lost to Ukraine in the first round, largely because the full-courters couldn't adapt to the pinball pace. Guam, Kyrgyzstan, and Nepal have all participated in at least one men's Worlds and, on the women's side, Andorra (population seventy-eight thousand) qualified for five in a row. "It's not science fiction, it's reality," Baumann told me. "At the Youth Olympics in Singapore [in 2010], Central Africa almost beat the United States. Likewise, the Philippines did very well in Jakarta. The Philippines is a basketball country, but as you know, you won't find a Yao Ming there."

To watch the dozen teams to reach Istanbul was to witness a pageant of regional idiosyncrasy. Eastern Europeans, schooled by club coaches, ran an unpitying two-man game, setting screens and rolling smartly from them as the third player spotted up on the weak side. South Americans featured rougher fundamental edges, so they would scrum up near the basket and, when a shot went up, assault the boards in pursuit of anything that failed to go in. With few big men to claim the paint, Asian teams acted on a sophisticated understanding of spacing, making sure to keep a shooter or two stationed at the two-point arc. "There's structure," Karron McKenzie, a member of the US team in Istanbul, told me. "You can run plays. It's pickup in a way, but more professional than you'd think it could be."

The most radical feature of FIBA's move into 3×3 isn't all the urban iconography or scatological hip-hop. It's an organizational model that subverts the top-down approach long the norm in international basketball. Standard five-on-five around the world asks dues-paying players to join dues-paying clubs that report to a national federation, which in turn kicks some of that revenue up to FIBA, organizer of events for clubs and countries. With 3×3, FIBA instead throws a very light administrative canopy over a welter of preexisting or not-yet-born tournaments, founded and run by any promoter or grassroots organization. A Phys Ed teacher anywhere in the world, with a handful of players and a mobile phone, can launch an event from scratch and plug into FIBA's 3×3 platform. Factotums at the Argentine federation, alarmed that they would have no control over all this freelanced chaos, tried to put the kibosh on 3×3 in the Pampas until Baumann stepped in. "Hey, they're not your enemies," he told them. "We need to grow." As Baumann told me, "That's the challenge when you've got monolithic organizations. We need to shake the tree. Streetball players are basketball players, part of the family. We're just grafting them onto a system."

How might his old boss, Boro Stankovic, react to it all?

"'What is this shit?'" Baumann replied, adding a grin and a laugh.

Baumann wouldn't live to see his dream realized. He died of a heart attack in 2018 at age 51. But by then, thanks to his foresight and backroom politicking, the IOC had placed 3×3 on the program for Tokyo. There, the streetball spirit prevailed in the form of patter over the PA that might describe a player as "quicker than a Kardashian marriage" or a team as "all business, like the front of the plane." The minnows had their day, with the Mongolian women gamely bumping and grinding with the eventual gold-medal winners from the United States, while men's teams from Belgium, Poland, and the Netherlands all qualified for the draw and Latvia walked off with the gold.

Play featured plenty of classic schoolyard touches. A coin flip instead of an opening tip determined initial possession, and games ran to the proverbial 21, with coaching from the sidelines banned during play. Where FIBA had added rules, most were designed to encourage the breathlessness that made for good spectacle: a 12-second shot clock; no "make it, take it," much less any "check" up top after a basket; and a hard stop to any game that ran past 10 minutes, with the team in front declared the winner. To encourage style to go with substance, 3×3 scorekeepers logged drives, buzzer beaters, and the thoroughly subjective but wholly essential category of "highlights." In the meantime, a 6′4″ holdover from the Underdog crew in Istanbul, Tomoya Ochiai, suited up for the hosts. In 2012, Ochiai had helped his team qualify for the Istanbul World Tour finals with a second-place finish at the Tokyo Masters; nine years later, in the same converted parking lot overlooking Tokyo Bay, he helped Japan finish sixth, the country's best international basketball result ever. Band-Aid, you could say, as badge of honor.

Strutting around the venue during the five days of Olympic 3×3 was a 6′3″ Serb widely regarded as the finest half-court player in the world. Dušan Domović Bulut had caught *White Men Can't Jump* on TV as a nine-year-old in the grim city of Novi Sad. If the Woody Harrelson–Wesley Snipes film served as a kind of gateway drug, copies of *Slam* and *Dime* and mixtapes from the And1 Tour kept him buzzed through adolescence, which he spent developing his game in the shadow of a cityscape that would have left such New York City counterparts as Rafer (Skip) Alston and Lloyd (Swee'pea) Daniels feeling right at home. At a FIBA-sanctioned event in Amsterdam in 2017, Bulut laid on his defender the move popularized and eponymized by former NBA player God Shammgod—an inside-out, one-handed crossover that nods at how they play in Peoria (see chapter 9). By

the time he finished executing that "Shammgod," Bulut had nutmegged a hapless Spaniard and swanned past him for the game-winning layup. The moment lives on YouTube (youtube.com/watch?v=lUnJZWrza28), with commentary that could come from any sideline kibitzer stateside: "You cannot *do* that to another grown man!"

Bulut had led Serbia to four 3×3 World and two European titles and in 2018 was named MVP of both the Worlds (for national teams) and the World Tour. (The World Tour resembles the tennis tour from which it takes its name: like tennis pros, players ply the 3×3 circuit, sometimes partnering across nationalities much as doubles specialists do on the ATP Tour. They bank points with each round they advance, all with the goal of qualifying for the World Tour finals.) As well as Bulut played in Tokyo, he and his Serbian teammates stumbled in the medal round, settling for bronze after a loss to Russia in the semifinals. No more than a journeyman in mid-level five-on-five leagues around eastern Europe, Bulut would soon turn 36 and now stared down the twilight of his career. He could nonetheless take pride in having been more than a pioneer. He had embraced the chesty spirit of the playground game (Twitter handle: @MrBullutproof) and proved you can make a living in the streets.

Two decades earlier, at the Gus Macker three-on-three nationals in Celebration, Florida (see chapter 5), I found myself musing on how often sets of three surface in basketball and how the game's feng shui comes embodied in that configuration. The Olympic Games have their trinities too. Gold, silver, bronze. *Citius, altius, fortius*. Up, close, personal. Seen through that lens, it's less bizarre that the Olympics would find a place for basketball's extreme sport—and that you could draw a straight line from the original Macker driveway in Gerald Ford's old Congressional district to an Olympic podium.

* * *

For the first edition of this book I couldn't go everywhere. I regretted as much as anything not getting to Australia, a country of twenty-six million with a professionalized domestic league and a national team that has long enjoyed outsize success in international competition. Yet the Aussies didn't seem to feature a single theme or personality that told a compelling narrative about basketball in their country—not in the way the struggle for independence encapsulated Lithuania's relationship to the game (chapter 2), or how Filipinos' passion for all things American found expression in both playing and following the sport (chapter 16), or the way the need

of His Majesty the King to shoot hoops meshed with the Buddhist stillness of life in pastoral Bhutan (chapter 22). And then, through the 2010s, there emerged a player who, as native an Australian as an Aussie could be, came wrapped in two strands of the globalized game at once: the multicultural workplace of Gregg Popovich's San Antonio Spurs and the social justice activism of athletes that now found expression on an international scale.

The story begins at the Spurs' practice facility on June 3, 2014, on the eve of the NBA Finals, with the team gathered in a conference room to prepare for the Miami Heat.

Popovich opened the session with a question: "Anybody know what today is?"

As a clue, Popovich flashed on a screen behind him the portrait of a bearded and freckled middle-aged Black man. The image, the Spurs' Australian guard Patty Mills would later tell me, "made my hair stand on end."

"It's Mabo Day," said Mills's teammate Aron Baynes, another Aussie, voicing what Mills knew but was too dumbstruck to say, whereupon Popovich shared with his team the story of Eddie Mabo, Patty Mills's great-uncle and Australia's answer to Dr. King.

Eddie Koiki Mabo had grown up on an island in the Torres Strait, which separates the Cape York Peninsula of far northeastern Australia from Papua New Guinea. Australians have long considered Torres Strait Islanders to be Indigenous compatriots, but well into the 20th century the country's legal regime still didn't treat them as full citizens. They were subject to segregation, restricted in their movements, and paid wages not in cash, but in credits for food and housing. Most insultingly, Australian law failed to recognize the claim of Torres Strait Islanders to land that had been passed down within their families over centuries. In the early 1980s, Mabo became lead plaintiff in a court challenge to *terra nullius*, the doctrine holding that Australia had been barren of human settlement before the arrival of the first white Europeans in 1788. It took a decade for the case to find its way before the High Court of Australia. But, in a six-to-one decision handed down on June 3, 1992, five months after Mabo's death and exactly twenty-two years before the Spurs gathered to prepare for the Heat, "native title" became enshrined in Australian law.

Even on a team that featured more players from abroad than from the United States, Mills's background was easily the Spurs' most exotic. It's not just that Benny Mills, Patty's father, had grown up in the Torres Strait, where for millennia people of Melanesian descent have survived by fishing, gardening, and diving for pearl shell. His mother, Yvonne, the daughter of

a white father and an Aboriginal mother, belongs to what Australians have come to call the Stolen Generations. In a massive social-engineering project, sanctioned by the government and church groups and conducted between the late 19th century and the 1970s, tens of thousands of mixed-race children were forcibly committed to group homes and missions or fostered to white families. The goal, historians say, was to socialize the children as white in hopes that their Indigenousness would be gradually bred away.

The story of Yvonne Mills's mother, Gladys Haynes, begins in South Australia, where she had grown up in a Lutheran mission home for Aboriginal children, learning to cook and clean, and at age 12 was placed as a domestic with a white family. By the time she turned 30, now with five children, Gladys had attracted the attention of the authorities. Yvonne has no memory of it, for she wasn't yet two, but older siblings recall that day in 1949 when they were all locked in a room, only to be removed one at a time and placed in separate group homes. For decades, if they asked, they were told flatly that their mother didn't want them—even as they would eventually discover her letters to the authorities pleading that her children be returned to her. "We knew what had happened to us," Yvonne Mills told me in Canberra in 2015. "But reading the records we learned what happened to her. How she tried to get us back and they kept shifting the goalposts: 'Get a house.' 'So many rooms.' There was also mention of her color, 'her dark appearance.' You could read between the lines."

At 17, by now fostered to a white couple, Yvonne was granted permission to attend the wedding of an older sister. There, amid her reassembled family, recognizing common mannerisms among siblings and spending unsupervised time with her mother, she felt a dawning sense of self-identity. Several decades later, when the results of an official inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children became public, she braided that fresh identity to an acute awareness of group solidarity. As she put it to me, "My experience was true, because it happened to lots of others too."

As young adults, Benny and Yvonne separately found their way to Canberra, the capital, where each worked for the federal government in Indigenous affairs. There they met and married, eventually founding the Shadows, a social club for First Australian youth that included the basketball team with which their only child would learn the game.

At every turn, Patty Mills tries to hold high his inheritance from each of his parents. To put it in American terms, it's as if his father's family had marched at Selma and his mother's had walked the Trail of Tears. But as the Black Lives Matter movement gathered momentum, and NBA players of all

backgrounds stood up for themselves or their teammates, it wasn't enough for Mills to celebrate his heritage. He began to speak out about how he had been targeted for that heritage and call out the racism he had endured as an Indigenous youth and that lingers in Australia today. The only child of color in the classroom on his first day of kindergarten, Patty had stood unsuspecting while the largest kid in the class walked over to him and sent an uppercut into his solar plexus. Standing at the edge of the room, watching the incident unfold, Yvonne Mills experienced a trauma familiar to her mother—that of a parent powerless to protect her child.

As he continued to make his way through sports and school, Mills did so amid racist abuse or discrimination, not only from fellow students but from teachers and administrators, too. That's one reason he chose in 2020 to donate some $1 million to three organizations founded to address the racial justice moment in his native land—Black Lives Matter Australia, Black Deaths in Custody, and We Got You, a multiracial coalition of Australian athletes that he helped found to address persistent racism in the country's sports culture. After the Aboriginal sprinter Cathy Freeman lit the cauldron at the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the foreign press heralded a new day for the host country. Yet 71 percent of Australians disapproved of Freeman's selection, and the letters columns of local newspapers brimmed with criticism of her throughout the fortnight, even after she won a gold medal. As recently as 2015, Aussie Rules football star and anti-racism campaigner Adam Goodes had been fêted as Australian of the Year, in part for the measured way he turned racist abuse from a teenage spectator into a teachable moment. But within a year, exasperated by ongoing invective from opposing fans, Goodes would choose to retire.

Popovich's Mabo Day presentation was no departure for the San Antonio coach. He would routinely devote part of a team meeting to the culture or history of one Spur or another. With so many players "from elsewhere," he told me, "I'm always looking for ways to make them part of the story." Popovich hesitated to credit his salute to Eddie Mabo in that team meeting for the heroics Mills delivered off the bench during those 2014 Finals, including a 14-point burst during five minutes of the clinching game of a series that the Spurs would win in five. But he believes that knowing one another's origin stories off the court can bind players on it. "It builds camaraderie and helps them grow as people, and all that carries over," he said. "They feel connected and engaged and do better work."

Popovich's players hardly needed cues from their coach to burrow into one another's narratives. Manu Ginóbili may be Argentine, but he made

sure to watch *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the decorated film about the Stolen Generations. Two other Spurs, Boris Diaw of France and Tiago Splitter of Brazil, studied videos of Mills performing island dances and listened to their teammate explain the meaning of each. During that championship season, all four took to addressing one another as *bala*, the Torres Strait honorific for *brother*, and pledged to meet one day on Thursday Island, the Mills family's ancestral home.

On the walls of the Spurs' locker room in San Antonio's AT&T Center, Popovich made sure to hang, in every language represented on the team's roster, his preferred motivational saying. "I wasn't interested in 'There is no I in team' or any of that crap," he told me. Instead he chose these words from Jacob Riis, the 19th-century Danish-American social reformer and champion of immigrants devoted to self-betterment through hard work: *When nothing seems to help, I go back and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it—but all that had gone before.* (The Spurs usually outsourced translations of the Jacob Riis quote to professors at San Antonio's Trinity University. But the language of the eastern Torres Strait, Meriam Mir, is so obscure that members of the Mills family had to step in to help.) When a Spurs international left the team, the panel in his particular language came down, destined for a storeroom, to be dusted off and hung again if the team were to sign another native speaker. As much as sustained success over time and unsurpassed stability in the front office, this radical cosmopolitanism has come to define the franchise.

"Obviously he can shoot the basketball and has a lot of energy," Popovich said of Mills, whose run in San Antonio ended in 2021 when he signed as a free agent with the Brooklyn Nets. "But he's beloved on this team for his enthusiasm, his kindness, his understated gravitas. As long as I'm here, he's going to be here. Unless we can't afford him."

* * *

After traveling so widely in pursuit of the game, I must have been pining for basketball closer to home. How else to explain that, shortly after publication of *Big Game, Small World*, having just moved to an old farmhouse in the Champlain Valley of Vermont, I would persuade my wife, Vanessa, that we start a pro team in the Green Mountain State?

Yes, I was road-weary—not just from reporting this book, but from 25 years of chasing the news each week for *Sports Illustrated*. Yes, I had

heard editors in New York clamor for content for the magazine's website. And yes, I had just sat in the suburban Atlanta office of NBA scouting director Marty Blake, who prided himself on opening a dossier on every legitimate prospect on earth, and heard him bellyache about the reconstituted American Basketball Association, a minor-league outfit so fly-by-night that not only did its rosters change hourly, but Marty couldn't get a reliable schedule to know where to send his scouts.

"A team called the Reigning Knights of Georgia is playing out of some high school gym near here," he said, kvetching about the low standard of ownership. "Apparently it takes only ten thousand dollars to get a franchise."

"For that," I blurted out fatefully, "I could start a team."

With the support of my editors and a couple dozen local investors, we did. The idea was to use the franchise as fodder for a kind of web-based reality series. And so I rode a whipsaw, going from basketball at its most far-flung to the game at its most intensely local. Even the team's name—the Vermont Frost Heaves—smacked of a you-have-to-live-here clannishness. But by starting a team from scratch, we could tailor it to Vermont. We were carbon neutral, traveling in a biofueled bus wrapped in the heraldry of one of our sponsors, Ben & Jerry's. We subverted sprawl and bucked up our downtowns by bringing life to old gyms, splitting home games between bandboxes in working-class Barre and college-hip Burlington. And in the spirit of the New England town meeting, we let our fans pick our coach—or at least vote over the web for one of the two finalists I placed on the ballot.

Vermonters chose one of their own, a 29-year-old then coaching a club team in Norway. Will Voigt had been valedictorian and played three sports at Cabot High School, the smallest in the state. As an undergraduate at California's Pomona College he landed an internship with the Los Angeles Clippers and, a few years later, while cutting his teeth in the video room of the Spurs, briefly house-sat for his boss, Gregg Popovich.

Will coached the Frost Heaves for the three full seasons of the team's existence, leading us to championships in 2007 and '08 before we ran into the Great Recession of 2008–09. He went on to spend five seasons with the Bakersfield Jam of the NBA's D-League; lead the Nigerian national team to the 2016 Rio Olympics; and guide club teams in China's Shanxi Province, Manila, Bonn, and Cairo. But it was during a two-year term as coach of the national team of Angola (see chapter 25) that Will learned, and acted upon, one of the great lessons of this bigger and bigger game worming its way into every corner of our ever smaller world.

After a few weeks of practice, Will noticed that his players would reflexively switch on defense if a teammate on the perimeter got beat off the dribble. Only the Angolans wouldn't merely switch—they would switch *times five*. Each rotated over and, more, hollered urgently to make sure everyone knew of these changes in assignment.

At first, Will thought this was lunacy. His instinct was to correct—to impose the western, Calvinist tenets of individual responsibility and narrowly channeled tenacity he knew so well. But he gradually realized that his players' actions were deeply embedded, born of a society marked by mutual aid and verbal communication. He took a deep breath and a step back. "By that point I'd had enough experience internationally to understand that every part of the world is unique," he told me later. "In Angola, there's a free spirit, the kind you see in soccer, a culture of expression and freedom of movement, of chatter and adjustment. As a coach you're always thinking, 'OK, where's our competitive advantage?' It wasn't in our size, and we only have middling-level athletes. But our style is a free-flowing deal, with constant communication and effort—*that's* our competitive advantage."

Will set out to systematize those serial defensive switches, even ramping them up to sow more chaos within an opponent's attack. Soon the scheme had a name: the Peel Switch Defense. Over the summer of 2018, at a tournament in China, Angola sprang the Peel Switch on Serbia, perhaps the most well-drilled, fundamentally reliable national team in the world. That day, confronted by materializing Angolan defenders at every turn, the Serbs turned the ball over twenty-two times. (Will shares the basics of the Peel Switch with Filipino coaches at youtube.com/watch?v=qnomLGpRerU, in a session moderated by Quinito Henson, whom you'll meet in chapter 16.) Sport and cultural distinctiveness part the ten-thousand.

Basketball knowledge no longer flows in one direction. To be sure, Angolan coaches aren't yet fielding invitations to headline clinics in Indiana, to share insights with the descendants of John Wooden. But neither are most national teams bereft of some national style they can proudly call their own, and with which they can hold their own. Even when brought in as mercenaries, American coaches like Will Voigt now have the humility to recognize as much.

Two decades ago, about to set out on the journey that follows, I mused about how the game's growing internationalization would leave me feeling at times as if I were both home and away. If the past 20 years have highlighted anything, it's that the membrane between the two is ever more permeable. And that the game—to say nothing of the world—is better for it.

# BIG GAME,
## SMALL WORLD

# PROLOGUE

The café shimmered with chrome and glass. Like so much of modern Shanghai, the decor seemed to hold in contempt anything more than a few years old. But the man seated across from me appeared immune from the cutting-edge scorn of the place, even as his appearance evoked a time long past.

Bai Jinshen has one of those furrowed faces that tend to soak up and neutralize their surroundings. Lineage grounded him, too: During the 19th century an ancestor lived in Beijing's Forbidden City, serving in the court of an emperor of the Qing dynasty. Bai himself had learned basketball from American missionaries while growing up in Tianjin during the 1930s before going on to play for and coach the Chinese national team when it suited up for the greater glory of Mao Zedong and the revolution. If basketball in China has a birthplace, Tianjin is it: The Tianjin YMCA was the site of the first game played in the Middle Kingdom, and a factory in that northeastern city produced the country's first basketball.

"A basketball has eight slices," Bai was telling me. "Four slices belong to yin and four slices belong to yang. We call the yang side hardware. Hardware includes body strength, skills, psychology, and teamwork. We call the yin side software. Software includes coaching, development of young players, support staff, and education. Four and four. Eight things."

If I'd handed him a basketball just then, Bai might have picked up a knife and peeled the ball's pebblegrain rind into a seamless coil.

"Because a basketball is like the earth, it spins every day. And because it spins, it must develop. And for it to develop, those of us involved with the

game must think forward—think progressively. And if we think progressively, we can control the game's progress. In our life and work, if we think, we gain insight. Everybody has curiosity. Which leads to interest. And if we devote ourselves to that interest, our ability increases.

"So you see, it all starts with thinking."

Despite his blood ties to the Qing dynasty, Bai did not look back fondly on its reign. "The Qing eliminated the Ming reforms and spoke of the 'foreign devil' at the very time the West was quickly developing. Yes, the Qing united the country. But during its rule China was left behind.

"I am 66 years old. I once learned from my parents and teachers. Now I learn from young people like my son. They understand things more quickly than I do, and they're more tolerant than I am. In the past dozen years the Chinese people have opened their eyes and started to accept different ways of thinking. Of course, buying Air Jordans and Bulls T-shirts aren't really ways of thinking. But one of the motivations of human beings is to pursue things in their heads—to imagine. Some of these imaginings are just illusions, but others can keep you going. And during the 1990s, after Chinese television bought the rights to the NBA, that's what started to happen here. On the surface, you could see kids trying to copy Michael Jordan. But at a deeper level, when children open their minds to fantasies, their minds are being conditioned. They become more receptive to other things as well."

A basketball court sits just beyond the Tiananmen Gate in central Beijing, on the threshold of the Forbidden City, the very ground where Bai's ancestors once trod—a court from which NBC broadcaster Ahmad Rashad and a crew, filming a segment for *NBA Inside Stuff,* had recently been chased away by guards who mistook cue cards for propaganda. I asked Bai how he felt about the game to which he had devoted his life, as player and coach and philosopher, having a place in his country's hallowed seat of power.

"It makes me happy," he said.

In Shanghai that evening, listening as a man told me how the simplest of games was changing the world, I lost his words in a contentment of my own. Kierkegaard, the favorite philosopher of a more familiar basketball thinker, Dean Smith, once remarked that a man is no happier than when his wish coincides with his duty. I was that man. Wish and duty had fused into a compulsion, one that had carried me half a world from home, and would take me many other places as well.

# CALLED FOR TRAVELING

I had bought the Russian nesting dolls from a street vendor in St. Petersburg. Over the years, as they peered at me from a shelf in the study of my Manhattan apartment, I'd come to appreciate their tidy hierarchy. The Michael Jordan figurine enclosed the Magic Johnson. The Magic Johnson enclosed the Larry Bird. For an argument over where these basketball greats rank you once had to flick on sports-talk radio or go down to the corner bar. Yet here some faceless Russian artisan had thrown in his two kopecks' worth and underscored for me a truth: Scarcely a century after basketball's invention in Springfield, Massachusetts, by an aspiring clergyman, NBA iconography and schoolyard dreamers are commonplace in virtually every country on earth.

Midlife crises come in many guises, but mine, after two decades spent writing about the game and nearly twice that long playing it, took the form of an imperative. I needed to do what ballplayers do. I needed to move, to pick up, to go—to watch and play and puzzle out basketball wherever I found it. Just as removing the top of each doll revealed another inside, I would set out in search of the truths at the core of the game.

As a student at Princeton during the late 1970s, I learned much from two teachers, each of whom grew up in eastern Pennsylvania under hard-scrabble circumstances. As it happened, the two—sociology professor Marvin Bressler and basketball coach Pete Carril—were friends, drinking buddies who could often be found at a tavern on the edge of campus, as likely to be discussing international trade policy as the best way to break a zone trap. Carril's class I only audited, watching his teams as they won a

couple of Ivy League championships. But I actually took Bressler's course on the sociology of education. As plans for this book took shape I ran into him on campus, and there he told me a story.

It seemed that Bressler had just shared dinner with E. D. Hirsch Jr., the academic whose book *Cultural Literacy* stipulates what every educated American should know. As the evening progressed, Bressler brought the conversation around to basketball. He told Hirsch how, one preseason toward the ends of their careers, an interviewer approached Magic and Larry separately with the same questions. "How do you motivate yourself after all these years? How do you get yourself ready for one more season?"

"I think of Magic," Larry replied. "Wherever he is, I know how hard he's working."

"It's Larry," said Magic. "Larry Legend. I'd *better* be working hard, 'cause I sure know he is."

"Each one was bound to the other," Bressler told his dinner companion. "Like Ahab and the whale."

Hirsch caught the *Moby Dick* reference. But he looked at Bressler blankly and said, "Who are Magic and Larry?"

Preparing to light out for the country of basketball, I could think of few places where Hirsch's response would fail to cause consternation. Ever since the NBA Dream Team's appearance at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, the game had become a global lingua franca. When NBA commissioner David Stern paid a visit to a remote Chinese province at the height of the reign of Jordan and the Chicago Bulls, a local VIP came alive with recognition upon learning of Stern's identity. "Ah!" he said. *"The Red Oxen!"*

But basketball's ascendancy was most evident among young people the world over. According to a study of middle-class teenagers conducted during the mid-1990s, no sport more passionately engaged adolescents internationally, not even soccer. Some 71 percent either played the game or watched it, including nearly two of every three girls on the planet. Despite all the passions soccer can still unleash, that game is world-historical in pace and analog in structure—ill suited for the Information Age. Basketball is quick-cutting, digital, perfectly adapted for a generation eager to supplicate itself to music videos, computers, and other manifestations of American cultural power. In 1995 a boy named Tomasz was among a dozen people pulled from an avalanche in an Icelandic fishing village. After spending 24 hours buried in snow, he had three questions: Where am I? Is there school today? And who won that game between the Orlando Magic and the Philadelphia 76ers?

* * *

My father is an immigrant who left Germany in 1948 to study chemistry at Princeton. After earning his PhD he took a research job with RCA just outside town. Growing up, I did not toss a baseball with my dad in the backyard. He had broken his nose three times playing field hockey as a schoolboy in Bavaria, and his eagerness to assimilate never overcame a vow to swear off ball games of all types. But our family pediatrician told my American-born mother that, for orthopedic reasons, he preferred basketball to other sports, and my mom channeled doctor's orders into a subtle encouragement to play hoops.

At the same time, Bill Bradley was installing himself as a local hero. He would be written up at great and approving length in the pages of the *New Yorker,* a publication that held truck in our household. Studious, clean-cut, and churchgoing, Bradley appeared to be wholly admirable, and though my parents were baffled by his devotion to a sweaty game, it seemed to be part of a larger, disciplined approach to life, and for basketball they were prepared to excuse him. One of my earliest memories dates to December 1964, when I was put to bed so my parents could watch Bradley and Princeton hook up with Cazzie Russell and Michigan on TV in the semifinals of the ECAC Holiday Festival. This has stuck in my head, I think, not so much because of my disappointment at missing the game, but because I don't recall my parents ever again accommodating their lives to a televised sporting event.

As a result of the unlikely status basketball held in our home, my parents hadn't removed the hoop put over the garage by the previous owners. And so I found myself spending many hours alone beneath it. I played even when the net, rigid from rain and cold, would catch my shot fast, and I'd have to whack the ball free with a broom handle after each basket. Nevertheless, in the act of trying to send a ball through a hoop I found hours of solitary pleasure. At an annual summer carnival in town I discovered that I could sink a shot better than most kids my age. Even after my father left RCA for Xerox and we moved to a suburb of Rochester, New York, I ignored the vogue for ice hockey in our new neighborhood and went on to become a decent high school player on a decent high school team. But I wasn't good or big enough to play at the summit of the Ivy League. So upon returning to Princeton for college I began covering campus news for the *Trenton Times,* an evening paper down Route 1.

I took a front-row seat in Carril's lecture hall, sometimes typing out a skeletal play-by-play for the sports information office. For that duty—for coming

up with pithy gems like SOWINSKI 15-FT JUMP and OMELTCHENKO 2 FT, GOOD, GOOD—I received $15 a game and a taste of my future profession. My greatest failure as a player had always been a reluctance to mix it up, and this extracurricular choice would complete my transit from participant to observer. From time to time I regretted not having tried out for the team. This wasn't because I believed I could have made it, much less made any contribution. It was because to watch Princeton play was to be reminded repeatedly of why I loved the game.

Yes, I adored basketball for its style and argot, its racial ecumenism, its jaunty, loose spirit. But the Tigers under Carril pulled off something just as appealing. Canny, throwback, almost pious in their respect for each possession, they seemed to share an intuitive understanding of Newton's third law. Their offense flowed away from the ball, with players moving in opposition to defensive pressure. The transcendent Princeton moment—the Tigers' earthbound answer to the alley-oop dunk—was the backdoor layup, the play available when the balance of an opponent has tipped irretrievably away from the goal he's supposed to defend. Think of the reverse commuter at rush hour, or the martial artist well-practiced at jujitsu. The overdefended player cuts to the basket, then takes a teammate's pass for two easy points. If its constituents can all pass, move, and shoot, and no one cares who ultimately scores, a team running a backdoor offense will press against the limit of its potential, while the opposition suffers death by a thousand back cuts.

Treated regularly to so artful a display of the game, I was hardly able to abandon its practice. For my first two years on campus I drifted over to musty Dillon Gym in the afternoons to play pickup. I abandoned college after my sophomore year, kiting off to Switzerland to spend a season with a club team there. To my parents' relief I eventually came back to school. But the summer after junior year, a buddy and I threw a ball into the trunk of a car and vagabonded around the United States in search of the perfect pickup game, then wrote up an account of our journey called *The In-Your-Face Basketball Book*.

So to me notions of movement have always attended the game. Indeed, basketball owes its very existence to human mobility: It was invented in Springfield, Massachusetts, by a Canadian immigrant, Dr. James Naismith, at the International YMCA Training School, which was chartered to groom missionaries. When Bradley won two NBA titles with the New York Knicks, he catalyzed the team as a hyperkinetic forward, helping to enshrine perpetual motion as one of the great virtues of offensive play. Today

there is still no greater crime against the game than to "stand around"; no compliment—not "nice pass," not "good shot"—gladdens a player's heart more than "sweet move."

Princeton had been the site of my childhood fascination with the game. It had indulged my affection when I was a college student there. Now, nearly 20 years out, the school figured in my summons. During the 1996 NCAA tournament, Pete Carril made his final victory a 43–41 upset of defending national champion UCLA, with the Tigers winning on their signature play in the game's dying seconds. Then, two years later, Princeton spent most of the season in the Top 10, losing only twice. The Tigers had long been regarded as a "visit to the dentist" team that would numb opponents with the Novocaine of 10, 15, 20 passes or more before applying the drill. Yet here they were drilling patients without anesthesia. They'd never passed so deftly, cut so hard, or scored so audaciously. With play so selfless that in one game each of its 21 baskets came on an assist, Princeton drew the attention of every segment of the mainstream media and won legions of new followers, all curious to know how a school that couldn't offer athletic scholarships consistently found wide-open layups against national powers.

At times that season Princeton hardly seemed to need a coach. During their all-assist game, at the ECAC Holiday Festival, the Tigers found themselves momentarily bamboozled after Niagara jumped into a zone defense. The man who had succeeded Carril, Bill Carmody, called timeout to tell his players nothing more than this: "You're smart guys. You figure it out." In that long-ago Holiday Festival semifinal my parents hadn't let me see, Princeton lost a lead and ultimately the game after Bradley fouled out. Thirty-three years later the Tigers scored those 21 assisted baskets in the very same tournament. Having evolved from a gross dependency on a single player to a consummate interdependency, this time they won the Holiday Festival, in as fine an example as any of basketball virtue rewarded.

Princeton's remarkable year set me to wondering whether the Tigers didn't embody a kind of hoops metaphysics. Carmody hinted that something Eastern sat at the heart of the team's approach. "We run a lot of yin stuff," he said at one point during that season. "Oak tree, willow tree—you know." Carril had preferred to sound a note more in keeping with Western moral philosophy. "Guys who come around to the ball just feed greed and ignorance," he once told me. Whatever their provenance, Princeton's precepts worked, and I tried applying them when I took the court for my regular Wednesday night run in a rented gym on the Upper West Side.

I vowed to pass and cut away, and never to come around to the ball—to spread love rather than greed and ignorance. Of course, in the hurly-burly of a pickup game this made me the crank screaming "Repent!" in Times Square at rush hour, and I quickly reverted. But I was at least looking at basketball with a heightened consciousness.

And then, during the second half of Princeton's game with Brown that February, I had my epiphany. From where he dribbled to the right of the key, one of the Tigers' seniors, Mitch Henderson, saw a teammate bolt toward the basket from the opposite wing. In a trice the ball left his hands and found its way, on a bounce, through a bramble of bodies in the lane and into the hands of another senior, James Mastaglio, for a layup. Or so I believed; I wasn't sure that what I thought I'd seen was even possible. I checked with one of the people who had by now flocked to follow the Tigers. The bard of the ballparks, *Washington Post* columnist George Will, sat next to me on press row, and confirmed that Henderson had indeed whipped a pass through and past most of the players on the floor. My neighbor wasn't wearing his usual bow tie, but if he had been it might have spun cartoonlike on the top button of his Oxford shirt. It occurred to me: If George Will could write rhapsodic essays on the Jeffersonian origins of the infield-fly rule, surely there was a thing or two worth saying about hoops.

"The appeal of basketball is that it is a game easy to play, but difficult to master," Doc Naismith once said. In that lacuna between just playing—"piddling at it," as Naismith put it—and perfection, people could get blissfully lost and pull off wonderful things. Mitch Henderson's crosscourt backdoor bounce pass through traffic had been one of those wonderful things. It moved me like a prod.

* * *

I prepared to set out in the fall of 1998 under what might have seemed like inauspicious circumstances. The NBA and its players were mired in a small-minded and rancorous labor dispute. Basketball's greatest player ever had just taken what appeared to have been his last shot. Standards of sportsmanship lagged at every level of the game. But I was not setting out in search of basketball only at its competitive summit, or even primarily in its sunlit uplands. I wanted to discover it elsewhere, too—in places from which it bubbled up and others to which it filtered down. I wanted to see how far the bird that is the TV satellite had carried the game's seed. If something of Naismith's original vision still held, basketball would be gaiting the young in their striving, annealing the spirit of the poor, and

connecting people of all races and genders, able-bodied and disabled alike, regardless of nationality. But if commercialism, racism, nationalism, and other noxious isms had won out, I was prepared to reckon with that, too. Regardless of what I found, by journey's end I hoped to have taken the measure of the game, and much of the world, and maybe even my sorry, settle-for-the-jump-shot self.

Mine wouldn't be an entirely contiguous route. But my movements would reflect the spliced-together essence of the sport and its multiple misdirections. Even as I tried to keep in mind the distinction between basketball stateside and the game abroad, the barrier was blurring: There had never been so many non-Americans on rosters of NBA and college teams. FIBA, the international basketball federation, was about to pass a rule abolishing all restrictions on nationality in its club competitions. This meant a top European team like Panathinaikos Athens or Real Madrid could, if it wanted, suit up an entire roster of players from the United States, the country of basketball's invention, propagation, and, with the NBA, apotheosis. As my odyssey would take me, in turn, around America and overseas, I was sure to feel sometimes as if I were simultaneously home and away.

Finally, I'd take along a traveling companion. Among those who chronicle the game for a living, it has become a cliché to survey the sprawling reach and saltatorial sallies of modern basketball and ask, "What would Naismith say?" I decided to apply that question wherever possible, but more than proverbially. I would enlist Doc Naismith's sensibility, reflected in comments he made and writings he left behind, as my conscience.

Back in the mid-1980s I spent an evening with the late Jack McMahon. An assistant coach and scout for the Philadelphia 76ers, he was the man who had bird-dogged Andrew Toney and Maurice Cheeks, the guards who helped lead the Sixers to their 1983 NBA title. We met up at a game between Oklahoma and Missouri in Columbia, Missouri, which McMahon had come to scout despite a blizzard that left tractor-trailers jackknifed the length of his drive along Interstate 70 from the St. Louis airport.

McMahon impressed on me two things that night. One was the importance of seeing a game in person. McMahon's very presence, despite the weather, testified to that point. Scores of fine pros had never appeared on TV as collegians, and McMahon took the time to ferret out Toney and Cheeks, NBA All-Stars both, from a couple of backwater schools, Southwestern Louisiana and West Texas State. The Sixers drafted each in the first round based on what their top scout believed to be predictors of NBA success—basketball skills, to be sure, but also ostensibly trivial things

that can only be judged up close: expression, carriage, spirit, even pigeon-toedness (the more the better, McMahon believed). In Toney, McMahon had been struck by a kind of ruthlessness, a quality that reminded him of Iago, the villain from *Othello,* on whom he had written a long-ago high school essay; in Cheeks, he saw an almost implacable knack for getting to the basket no matter how hard or often he'd get knocked down en route. That was the standard by which McMahon judged guards: whether they could find their way to the basket. "When you go to the hole, you either score, or pass off to someone who scores, or get fouled," he told me. "Only good things happen when you go to the hole."

McMahon died of a heart attack within several years of our meeting, very likely from the toll of the road—one too many high-cholesterol, sodium-saturated room-service meals, or stressed-out dashes to catch a last flight for a last chance to see what just might be the last piece in the Sixers' player-personnel puzzle. But I'll always associate a single verb with him. It was on my mind as I hit the road, and it hinted at a unified field theory of this game of constant motion. Go. Go to the basket, go to the game. Only good things happen when you go.