

A photograph of an outdoor basketball court in an urban setting. In the background, there are tall brick apartment buildings and bare trees. A basketball hoop with a white backboard and orange rim is visible on the left. The court floor is asphalt with yellow boundary lines. Several pigeons are captured in flight throughout the scene, some near the hoop and others further away. The sky is overcast.

Lost in the Game

**A Book
about
Basketball**

**Thomas
Beller**

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“His essays shimmer with comedy and insight and exuberance. I absolutely loved this book.”—Jonathan Ames

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A Book about Basketball

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**Thomas
Beller**

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For Elizabeth, Evangeline, and Alexander

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**Along the journey of our life half
way I found myself again in a
dark wood wherein the straight
road no longer lay.**

—Dante, *The Divine Comedy* (1472)

**We said, “Hey, let’s just go out
there and get lost in the game
and we will live with the results.
Confidence and momentum is a
real thing.”**

—Lou Williams, after leading the Los Angeles Clippers to victory after being down 31 midway through the third quarter against the reigning Champion Golden State Warriors (April 15, 2019)

**We go to the playground in search
of our fathers.**

—John Edgar Wideman, *Hoop Roots* (2001)

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ACRONYMS

AAU	Amateur Athletic Union
CUNY	City University of New York
FIBA	International Basketball Federation
JCC	Jewish Community Center
MVP	Most Valuable Player
NBA	National Basketball Association
NCAA	National College Athletic Association
NYU	New York University
OKC	Oklahoma City Thunder
OMG	Old Man Game
PER	Player Efficiency Rating
PGA	Professional Golf Association
PPS	points per shot
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles
U MASS	University of Massachusetts
USBL	United States Basketball League

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The New York Times: “The Court on Horatio Street” and “Most Definitely.”

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The Paris Review: “The Maserati Kid.”

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INTRODUCTION

The other day I got into a screaming match with an enormous guy at the playground in Riverside Park. He was huge, burly, a kind of miniature Shaq. He was killing me in the post. And he was talking trash, louder and louder: a bully who sensed my weakness. But I yelled back; I held my own. That's what I have, that was my education, acquired on that very court when I was a kid and then refined at many others—playing hard, arguing, being loud when need be, being strong. Or trying to be. His team won, which was very annoying, since I did, in fact, back off and become more passive on the court—the old mental weakness. But afterward, we were friendly. Slapped hands. It turns out his hero is DeMarcus Cousins. This softened things, but still, I had to sit on a park bench on the way home, cooling down. I wrote to a friend, a former high school teammate from Brooklyn, and described the scene. The streetlamp turned on while I sat there texting. He responded, “I am so proud of you (and jealous) that you're still playing ball. It is a way to connect with the world around me that I miss in the most profound way.”

Basketball—playing it and watching it and thinking about it—is a bigger part of my life now, as a grown man, than it was when I played on high school and college teams. And yet this book began back then, long before I knew I was writing a book about basketball. The sport always felt walled off from and apart from my real life. It felt illicit. At some point, in my thirties, I started calling the game my last vice. This was partly because I had by then given up so many others. (The circumstances by which I

stopped drinking, or commenced the “break” which has now lasted over twenty years, were strangely wound up in basketball, as discussed in “The Nets.”) But it was also in my thirties that I began to take the game more seriously.

Perhaps I was swept up by a phenomenon in our culture in which the midlife crisis now manifests not in sports cars and affairs but in sudden commitments to triathlons or CrossFit or some other way to push the body to the extreme and attempt to cheat time. Or maybe it was around then that I noticed that all this time spent playing ball was the equivalent of a drug.

I had always dismissed basketball as secondary to the real action of my life, which is probably in part why I never got very good at it. And yet it took up so much time! From practices and games during the winter months, when the sport moves indoors, to spring and summer, when it flourishes in playgrounds around the world where anyone can take an afternoon sojourn in the park, I enter the world of the playground and pickup ball with the sense of relief and enclosure with which I once entered bars. This book is an attempt to make sense of this phenomenon on both a personal level and a cultural level while providing a close read of the game as it ascended to what will surely be seen as a golden age with Steph and LeBron as the successors to Larry and Magic.

The book moves along two axes: the world of organized basketball and the world of pickup basketball. In terms of talent, money, and milieu, they are light-years apart. And yet the street game, and its attendant culture, is a wellspring of energy and innovation for National Basketball Association (NBA) players. And NBA players, by their embrace of that culture and milieu, connect their aura and talent to the world of playground ball. When, for example, you see footage of Kevin Durant draining buckets in his orange jersey at Rucker Park, the energy and elation feel mutual: Durant bestowing his All-World talent on the playground while he absorbs love, enthusiasm, and validation from that very playground. He is not from Harlem, but it is nevertheless a kind of homecoming.

Playground, here, is a euphemism—it is more than a patch of asphalt amid buildings or nestled beside a highway (as is often the case in New York City), though the structural origins of the basketball court, whether found in the city or the country, are interesting to ponder. Where there is

a hoop there is a scene, a community, a neighborhood, a world. Rucker Park is known as the mecca, which is to say a shrine to which the faithful go to worship, but I contend that every playground where serious basketball is played is a kind of mecca that bestows blessings and acceptance on those who worship there.

Early on, right after I graduated from college, I had the experience of attending a few NBA games at Madison Square Garden as a journalist. The encounter with my college coach at one of these Knicks games is detailed in this book. I wasn't there as a beat writer, and I wasn't interested in being a sportswriter, or even a journalist. But it was a glimpse into the world of professional basketball, as well as the old, now almost prehistoric arrangements of arenas, before the multimedia big screens, the luxury boxes, and so forth. Most important, it provided an up-close look at the players themselves, not as figures in the distance or on a screen but in the corporeal present, these humans who are gods, and vice versa.

Almost three decades later, at the 2014 NBA All-Star Game in New Orleans, I reentered the world of the NBA with a press pass, for I had begun attending games regularly for the *New Yorker*. Because of my own literary predilections, I wrote as an outsider. But I was aware—mostly unconsciously—of the long tradition of sportswriting at the magazine in which the reporter functions as a kind of credentialed amateur, an outsider to the working press even if also a member of it. I was aware, in particular, of Roger Angell, with whom I had worked directly on short stories and nonfiction. His pencil passed over all of three or four paragraphs in this book, but his influence as a writer and editor goes beyond that.

This book is peppered with close reads of some of the most famous athletes in the world, interspersed with the undistinguished basketball adventures of the author. I was on the basketball team for ten years of my life, from middle school to high school to four years of college, a massive commitment of time and energy, even if my college, Vassar, was a small-time Division III program. After college, I continued to play, more out of habit than love, but it was not important to me, and for about three years, because of injury and a kind of depressive sloth and lack of care for my body, I stopped playing altogether. The main emotion I felt at the end of my college career was relief—my body, during the season, was always in some degree of pain. Perhaps the fact that I was always failing

to live up to my potential as a player has made me sensitive to the strange secondary market in expectation that surrounds all the young talent in the basketball pipeline, which swirls with phrases like *ridiculous upside* and *high ceiling*. Maybe it has something to do with my fascination with those players invested with so much hope who are struggling to pan out and survive in the league—players like Lenny Cooke, Al-Farouq Aminu, or Bol Bol, to cite examples discussed in this book.

Similarly, my days playing pickup basketball, on the playgrounds of New York City and elsewhere, were and are exhilarating in part because they feel so perilous—the court as a source of insult to my pride and ego, if not physical injury, where every visit poses the question of whether I can overcome the old fears. When I was a kid and young man, the playground was a place of intense competition with players who were better and stronger than me and who were on their own territory, with me as an interloper, which is to say it was a largely black environment in which a white, weak, soft, very tall kid appeared. And continues to appear. No longer a kid. And finally, in middle age, not quite so emotionally fragile. And even in some instances liked and respected, a fact that gives me an unseemly amount of pleasure, I admit. But then, it's my experience that when someone shows up to play ball, no matter their height or physique, they have a reason to think they can play ball, and often they care passionately about the game.

That I kept going back to the court as a kid might be a story of masochism or of willpower, but the element I am most interested in is the story of basketball's mystical, spiritual allure—basketball as a drug, as a safe space, as a unique experience of time. Organized basketball is built around regimented and organized blocks of time: basketball practice in the afternoon or in the morning; the coach counting down from ten to zero as the team runs suicides (the drill is no longer called that, I have been informed) with the threat that if he reaches zero while someone is still running, everyone has to run again. Invariably that someone is the lumbering big man, the project, which is to say it was me. And then the games themselves, with the referees, the clock, the buzzer. Time here as cruel God, slightly fungible in late game situations when someone's finger has to press a button to stop or start the clock, but largely immutable and unforgiving.

Playground basketball, in contrast, is timeless. It exists on its own time, summer time; it's ruled by the sun, or by the night lights, if there are any, or by the willingness of those with a ball to keep shooting in the dark. The rules on the playground are implicit—universal, if variable. For if basketball is a global language, it has dialects. This is true at the highest level of the game, such as the Olympics, where the rules of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) differ in small but significant ways from the NBA (ask Tim Duncan). And it is true at the playground level. Each court has its own rules, its own character and aura. But these are peripheral differences—the language of basketball translates everywhere it is played, among all who play it. To be a committed player or fan is to be part of a club that has members in every part of the globe.

I was recently asked if this book was about the history of the game. In a way it is, with a focus on the recent history. In 2014 the All-Star Game came to New Orleans, and I attended with a press pass and wrote about what I saw. I began covering the league soon after. The year 2014 was a significant juncture in the NBA. It saw the last great victory of the Spurs dynasty and the swan song of the Heatles team. That year was the dawn of the Splash Brothers' era, with Warriors coach Mark Jackson making the claim, mocked at the time, that the Stephen Curry–Klay Thompson backcourt was the best-shooting backcourt in history. At the end of the season, Jackson was replaced as coach by Steve Kerr, whose team, over the next years, would make Jackson's remark seem like a matter of fact. The spring of 2014 was also the first All-Star Game Kobe Bryant missed because of injury.

The way the league and its players were discussed was likewise changing rapidly—the focus on analytics and data dovetailed with the ever-expanding supply of video footage of all levels of the game and its distribution on social media, where this footage and data were put to use by amateur scouts/pundits/data analysts, to make their case for or against certain players and teams.

I had begun, around that time, to take my own basketball game more seriously. When I was a kid, we were told weight training would ruin our shot. Now the best NBA players post their workout videos online, and expert training has been largely democratized. Everyone can be their own six-million-dollar man or woman, with a body honed and enhanced by the latest in training techniques, without spending six million dollars. And

then there is the feeling, or fact, that at some point in the twentieth century a group of people in middle age began to turn their energies toward the radical improvement of their own functional fitness. People in sweat suits and tennis shoes jogging around Central Park had once—in the long-ago dawn of fitness culture as a mass movement—been a novelty, and slightly absurd. In the twenty-first century there has been an explosion of gyms across the land, including CrossFit, to which I belonged. Everywhere you looked, oldsters were training for Ironman contests and triathlons, a form of survival through self-obliteration that any dedicated player of pickup basketball would recognize. Based on personal experience, the underachievers are the ones who are most motivated; converts are always the biggest zealots.

“Do you still play?” Bernard King asked me toward the end of a thrilling impromptu conversation we had at the opening of the Museum of the City of New York’s exhibit *City/Game*. King was one of my earliest heroes. Dapper and sophisticated, he was indulging me with this question, I knew. I explained that I did, with more passion than ever, and then asked, “How about you?”

Now it was my turn to be polite. He waved me off. “Never.”

I knew all about his incredible recovery from knee surgery, a return to All-Star form, the first person to do that after such a surgery. I had played once on the Tillary Street Court just down the street from the Fort Greene housing projects where he grew up in Brooklyn, a fact that I was well aware of at the time of that first visit, in 1983, and that lent the visit part of its drama and tension.

Serious athletes are always living at the precipice of permanent damage to their bodies, always living with pain or the recent memory of it. As we walked down the stairs, it was clear from King’s gait that he was no longer playing. What I took from our exchange was that he no longer felt the desire, or maybe I should say the need. Instead, he told me of his intellectual pursuits, the writing of his memoir, *Game Face*. When I told him I enjoyed the documentary about his college career, *Bernie and Ernie*, he said he had brought the idea for the project to ESPN.

There is something compulsive about basketball. I love the detail, mythic in flavor, about the game’s founder, James Naismith, reporting

that he had once walked past a young boy throwing a ball into a basket and then a few hours later walked past the same boy, who was still tossing the ball at the basket. When he asked the boy why, the answer was, “To see if it goes in.”

This feeling of a story being continuously written, a waterfall of balls splashing through nets, so to speak, ongoing and hypnotic, underpins this book. I got the title from a passing remark made by Lou Williams after he led the Clippers back from a twenty-eight-point halftime deficit against the defending-champion Warriors, whose roster that season featured not only Stephen Curry, Draymond Green, and Klay Thompson but Kevin Durant. Williams’s phrase, uttered in response to a “How did you do it?” question from the television reporter after the game, contains a sense of the game as a refuge, a state of grace in the present moment, a thing in which to get lost. The game as a place where one might find a kind of redemption. The line that immediately follows “We just got lost in the game,” said in a continuum of thought as though one naturally follows the other, was “Confidence and momentum is a real thing.”

This book is an attempt to enter this flow—the flow of being lost in the game—both as a witness to the NBA spectacle and as a player in the global pickup game. The point of view—and the geography—reflects my life as a native New Yorker who moved to New Orleans in 2008 but who still spends a lot of time in New York City. Indeed, I am here now, and soon I will go down to play on the courts in Riverside Park.

The subject of fathers comes up in this book now and then. Or perhaps I should say the subject of absent fathers. “We went to the playground court to find our missing fathers,” writes John Edgar Wideman in his book *Hoop Roots*. When I first read that line, I felt a shock of recognition. I also recognized that this identification is absurd: Wideman grew up in a black neighborhood in Pittsburgh and was a standout athlete. His game got him a scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a basketball star. Most important, his father literally played basketball on the courts when he went to play. None of that applies to me—not the race or the talent, and certainly not the paternal legacy in basketball. The line that comes next, though, cannot help but resonate, if only as a possible explanation for why I—who lost my father at age nine—have been drawn

to this environment so intensely. “We didn’t find them, but we found a game, and the game served as a daddy of sorts.”

It just so happens that in the past six months or so, my son, who until the age of nine had been emphatically uninterested in sports, has started to show an interest in the game of basketball. For years now I had brought him to NBA games, mostly Pelicans games. More recently, I have been bringing him to the courts—first in New Orleans and then in New York City. I will shoot with him, play a game against him, at times giving him space to shoot and at times smacking the ball out of the air. Sometimes there are pickup games with other kids, and his ability to navigate this unstructured, city space fills me with pride.

At some point I will peel off and play with the grown-ups. On occasion these games get a little heated. I have a strange identity in pickup games these days, a change that became more pronounced after the COVID break. “I want to be like you when I grow up,” some young guy said to me after a game, and I was not sure if this was a compliment or an insult—if he was referring to the level of skill I demonstrated playing basketball, or the degree to which I was into it, being an antagonist, difficult, loud, competitive, all the things that in the proper measure make these games more fun. In either case, the message seemed to be one of surprise that I was so invested in the game. Because I talk now. I never did when I was younger. I was mute on the court. But now I speak a language I would describe as bellicose encouragement: calling out “We’re good” or “We’re fine,” slapping teammates five if they hit shots, encouraging them to shoot when they are open, making little Nikola Jokić-like gestures with my chin or my hand, directing them to cut, setting screens to give them space. I have discovered the joy of giving other people confidence. A little of this can go a long way. I once was playing HORSE with Jason Kidd, as part of a magazine piece, and I was so nervous I kept missing. I mentioned this, jokingly, and he responded in his murmurous way that he could tell I had a good shot. Whatever polite expedience was behind this remark, there was a germ of sincerity, and hearing it from him was like a drug.

The joy of instilling confidence in a teammate is an extension of the joy of getting an assist, which I think matches or in some ways exceeds the pleasure of scoring. But I offer this support not from the sidelines but from on the court. A player, not a coach. Or maybe a player-coach. That may change, one day, but this book is written from the point of view of

someone emphatically in the game. Someone working to improve their game. I am asked, sometimes, “Did you play basketball?” And I always respond, “I still play basketball.”

When my own son was shooting around with me, I began to see this insistence on being a participant and not just an observer in a new light. I realized that my thoughts about basketball and fatherhood had been, up to that point, from the point of view of a kid who lost his father. I want to acknowledge that there is another story unfurling as well, in which I am on the court as a father.

And what kind of example am I setting?

A few days after that screaming match with baby DeMarcus Cousins I was at the playground with my son. I shot baskets with him, and then I went and entered the full-court game. Baby Boogie Cousins was in my face again, yelling, talking trash. He was so much stronger. He bullied me in the post, and I struggled to get mine on the other end. But I played hard and was able to maintain my dignity. Eventually we got into a shouting match, and I heard myself shouting, with violently cranky indignation, “I’ve been coming here since 1977!” I saw the boy nearby watching. We lost the game. I thought the boy handled it fine, or maybe he didn’t register anything unusual.

But then on the walk home, he made some remarks about finding that guy and—I paraphrase—being violent. This was alarming. Also refreshing in its lack of guile. He wasn’t playing it cool. He wanted revenge. Furthermore, he was only putting into words the feelings that had been coursing through me moments earlier, and that were only now beginning to abate. I made a speech about staying cool, about moderation, about love of the game, about the importance of leaving it all on the court, not bringing all the craziness home with you. He made fun of me for yelling, “I’ve been coming here since 1977!” I wondered, all the while, what sort of education this game, and this father, was passing along to the younger generation, and what basketball would mean to him, and what role I might play.

But that is a subject for another book.

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