7/26/24; Breaking the Olympics

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <spin the wheel bmc>

SEAN RAMESWRAM (host): The first thing you need to know about breakdancing is don’t call it that.

Real ones call it *breaking*.

And *breaking* is making its debut at the Olympics this summer in Paris.

But is breaking a sport?!

SCORING OUT

ALIEN NESS (B-boy historian): No, I don't consider it a sport.

SCORING BACK IN

NESS: You know, but I don't see, for instance, swimming is not a sport. It's a way to keep from drowning.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
NESS: Yet, it's, it's in the Olympics and it's considered an Olympic sport. I don't think karate or judo is a sport. It's a way to keep from getting your ass beat.  
  
SEAN: <chortles>   
  
NESS: You know what I mean? But as … the Olympics to me is not so much about sport, but a test of skills. And when we talk about skills, breaking is the most physically demanding dance on a planet, probably second only to ballet.

SEAN: Breaking the Olympics on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: Alien Ness doesn’t break anymore. But he used to.

ALIEN: I’m probably the world's most ruthless battler.  
 SEAN: All right.  
 ALIEN: I try to be like the Genghis Khan of, of breaking.  
 SEAN: <laughs> Is that right?

SEAN: Ness was breaking back in the dawn of the dance:

SFX – TAPE IN

SCORING IN <RYL\_RYL\_0011\_02201\_Rap\_So\_Fly\_-\_\_Inst\_\_APM>

ALIEN: 82? 1982. It was inevitable. That's when the media really started blowing it up. Everywhere you see it – whether it was Norm Sky at the window at Macy's or Fred and Barney Rubble, you know, doing head spins and a Fruity Pebbles commercial. I come from that, exploitation era …  
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
ALIEN: … where almost everybody danced at one point.

SCORING OUT

SFX – TAPE OUT

SEAN: Because breaking’s showing up at the Olympics this summer, we asked Alien Ness what the hip-hop world – all the B-boys and girls even consider breaking to be – is it a sport, a dance, an artform?

ALIEN: Depending on who you talk to, you're going to get a different answer from different people. You understand? For me, it was an escape. For somebody else, they might say it's a form of expression. Back in my time, it was just a way to get girls, you know what I mean? Back in the 80s. So you could ask that question to ten, 20 different people and get ten, 20 different answers. But at the end of the day, breaking is a dance.

SEAN: And where does this dance come from?

ALIEN: The Bronx, the Boogie Down Bronx.

*<CLIP> Boogie Down Bronx Man Parish ft Freeze Force*

*Man Parish: the boogie down bronx it’s one of a kind. It’s the place to be, it’s a state of mind…*

ALIEN: But, theoretically, it's thousands of years old.

SCORING IN <SON\_SAS\_0006\_01801\_African\_Drum\_Songs\_1\_APM>

ALIEN: It's been embedded in man's DNA to get grounded whenever he hears drums.

SEAN: Oh, yeah?!

ALIEN: People's been shuffling around the floor and doing sweeps to a rhythm of a drum since the days of Mother Afrika. And before that. You know, I have always said that all dance movement is spiritually rooted. Like you don't teach a baby how to dance. But as soon as that baby can stand and you play music, that baby automatically starts to bounce. It's instinctive for the body to just react to rhythms in a certain type of way.

SEAN: So how do we get from Mother Afrika to the Bronx and when is breaking born?

ALIEN: Well, you have lots of dance movements that were going on at that time …

SCORING OUT

ALIEN: … specifically funk dancing, which the New York B-Boys saw that through platforms like:

*<CLIP> Classic Intro Soul Train 70's*

*Don Cornelius: The SOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUL train!*

ALIEN: A lot of the funk dancers came in through there. Then around that same area, early 70s, late 60s, you had TV shows:

*<CLIP> Nicholas Brothers perform on The Ed Sullivan Show*

*Announcer: The nationally syndicated columnist of the new york daily news and his toast of the town, named America's number one tv variety show!*

ALIEN: The Late Show, The Late, Late, Late Show, or These Days shows that showed all the classic musicals and brothers with see people like the Nicholas Brothers …

*<CLIP> Nicholas Brothers perform on The Ed Sullivan Show*

*Sullivan: So tonight we’re gonna take you up to Harlem, make believe, where you’ll find a typical cotton club chorus line lead by the widow of the late Bill Robinson preparing the stage for the dominic entrance of the Nicholas Brothers…*

*<CLIP>Dancing With A Hat Rack 1951 (Fred Astaire)*

*[just the sound of tapping will eventually fade out.]*

ALIEN: … even Fred Astaire, how they moved their swagger.

*<CLIP>Dancing With A Hat Rack 1951 (Fred Astaire)*

*[continues playing]*

ALIEN: And things progressed in its own way. You know, nobody really knows who the first person was.

*<CLIP>Dancing With A Hat Rack 1951 (Fred Astaire)*

*[clip finally out.]*

ALIEN: A lot of people like to credit Trixie:

*<CLIP> The For What Movement, Trixie the First break dancer*

*TRIXIE: Well, my name is Trixie. I am the first breakdancer– well, I am the creator of breakdancing. I started breakdancing in ‘69, ‘70, ‘71, ‘72 on. I stopped in ‘74, 75. Man, I had so much fun doing it.*

ALIEN: But, um, I just think one day somebody decided to take a dip and not come back up. All do respect to your favorite rappers or your favorite deejays, but at the end of the day it was the visual aspect of hip-hop that made everybody take notice of hip-hop.   
  
SEAN: Hm.

ALIEN: Breaking is the first element that made hip-hop what it is today on a global scale because it was the visual.

SCORING IN <PRM\_PRM\_0144\_01401\_Pickpocket\_RMX\_APM-04 APM>

ALIEN: They come hand-in-hand, even down to the name of the dance breaking it. It traditionally is done to the break of a record, and it's the chunky as part of the record. When you look at the grooves, that's the best way to identify where the break is and DJs go straight to it. But basically what the break beat is: the, that split second where all the instruments just start playing and you just get percussion. You know, sometimes I break a glass half a second sometimes because you know it lasts the length of a verse than a song.  
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
ALIEN: But it's always been about the break beat. You break on a beat and it's a genius DJ to finally understand. Kool Herc was the first one, to understand that that's the best part of the record. Whenever that part of the record came out, he noticed that's where he would get the most energetic reaction from people.

SCORING BUMP  
  
ALIEN: So he started a method called Merry Go Round, where he would just actually use two turntables and just play the break of a song. But DJs that came after him found a genius in that, and started extending the break by using two turntables in a mixer. Once you start extending the break, you have the birth of hip hop music.

SCORING OUT

ALIEN: It's a very competitive dance. And whenever you have anything that's competitive, it's going to evolve in one way, shape or form or another, because somebody is always trying to do the next person or take the next person's moves to the next level.

SEAN: So what does that look like in, in this form of expression – in this dance?

ALIEN: It looks so many different ways and takes on so many different shapes and forms because we could find inspiration in anything. I find a lot of inspiration in martial arts. Other people find inspiration, you know, it's it's to be successful at this dance. You have to have a genuine, authentic outlook, energy, type of energy, so to say. And the only way to be genuine, the only way to be authentic is to make sure that you find inspiration for the dance and things that you can relate to. Once you're moving, you know, creating patterns that are birthed and inspired from something that you truly understand or love or enjoy – now it resonates, it relates to you. And then that movement is a lot more believable, a lot more genuine looking, a lot more authentic. There's always a winner and loser. It's battle culture. Hip hop is battle culture. When you look at hip hop's humble beginnings, it was always about the battle. Whether it was the DJ battling or the MC battling, or the graffiti writers killing each other over turf and, you know, battling who made the biggest and most beautiful piece and B-Boys, you know, just getting out of their neighborhood and making those pilgrimages to other neighborhoods just to get their name out for what we call nowadays ghetto celebrity status. It was just about ghetto celebrity status. There was no money involved. There was no thoughts of Olympics. There was no huge competitions as we know them today. You know, I was always you versus somebody else. Toe to toe, blow to blow, without no H20 until somebody gave – ran out of moves or gave up.

SEAN: Except now breaking’s making its debut at the Olympics. How did this happen? And what do you think of it?

ALIEN: How did it happen? It's not so much of how did it happen. It was the … it's more to me like it was bound to happen.

SEAN: Mm.   
  
ALIEN: You know, me myself, I've been an advocate for breaking the Olympics since 2005.

SEAN: Wow.

ALIEN: You know, and you have Action from the New York City Breakers who’s the first one to speak about breaking at the Olympics:

*<CLIP> Beyond the Streets NEW YORK CITY BREAKERS, 1984. ⁠  
Action: Me and my whole crew, we challenge the 1984 [Olympic] gold medal winners in the floor exercise gymnastics team in a competition.*

ALIEN: So this is a progression that I think was very inevitable because at the end of the day, the Olympics isn't so much about the sport. It's more about the skill. The Olympics is a contest of skill. And when you have something like breaking, breakdancing, as the layman's call it, then yes, you have an art form that's based on skill, originality, you know, finesse, style, character, all that stuff. And it's been a competitive dance since day one. So when you have something that's – was birthed out of competition and, and, and has progressed this far because of competition, then that's the last stage left. It's the biggest stage, but it's the last stage left.

SCORING IN <Stars and Stripes Forever - Trap Remix (Prod. by Sabertooth Beats)>

ALIEN: Hip hop is all absorbing. Hip hop just keeps moving forward and growing and growing. Kind of like the movie, *The Blob*. You ever seen *The Blob*?

*<CLIP> The Blob (1958)*

*Steve McQueen: it’s kind of like a mass that keeps getting bigger and bigger*

ALIEN: It just keeps getting bigger and bigger as it rolls along and, and absorbs everything in its path. And that's where hip hop is and breaking is. It's like the Blob. It, it's all absorbing.

SEAN: <laughs>

ALIEN: To the point where you see it in commercials and you see it in country music videos. Now you see breaking. And it's not that they take from us, is that hip hop has a way of kicking down the doors and saying, ‘I'm here. I fit in. And you're going to deal with me.’

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Alien Ness. He’s a B-boy. He’s a historian. He’s got a book called *Art of the Battle*. And he’s apparently training our breaking Olympians!

ALIEN: I like to say that no matter who wins the gold, the silver or the bronze, chances are they'll be thanking me.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: When we’re back on *Today, Explained*: how exactly sports get added to the Olympics, and how to keep ‘em there.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. Our b-boy is gone. But we’re now joined by Roger Sherman, who’s an Olympics obsessive. He writes about all the games on Substack – especially the overlooked ones. So we asked him here to talk about …

ROGER SHERMAN (WRITER, PODCAST HOST): Breaking. It's the sport that's debuting in Paris and it's the sport that's going away after Paris.

SEAN: Whaaaaaat?!?

ROGER: So it's kind of got, like a one shot, one opportunity situation here.

*<CLIP> “Lose Yourself”*

*Eminem: Seize everything you ever wanted. In one moment.*

RODGER: And it, it changes the idea of what an Olympic sport is a little bit in that it is so, like, free flowing and modern when typically the Olympics are like trying to hold onto things that were popular in like 1924.

SEAN: We were kinda shocked to hear this was a one and done outing for breaking, so we had to ask Rodger how the Olympics giveth and how the Olympics taketh away – starting with giveth:

RODGER: Well, I think the people at the Olympics, the IOC, are well aware of the perception that they're a little bit stuck up and a little bit stodgy and a little bit, you know, older. And I think every sport in the world, not just the Olympics, not just the IOC, but is trying to figure out how to break through and be relevant for the next generation. And I think they decided it's not by just sticking with fencing.   
  
SEAN: Hm!

*<CLIP> CBS Sunday Morning*

*B-Boy Victor: That's something we’re trying to bring to the Olympics, like, that hip-hop flavor, you know?*

RODGER: They need to do things that appeal – not, not just appeal visually to younger fans, but also that our sports, we might be able to play, you know, sports that a regular person can, you know, pick up a skateboard and go to the skate park and do that just by themselves; whereas fencing, you need a fancy sword and you need to be hooked up to a thing, or water polo is not … equestrian is probably the least accessible sport ever invented, because I don't see horses very often.

SEAN: Haha! Because you live in Brooklyn. <laughs>

RODGER: And the IOC recognized that these sports are declining in public interest, and declining in the amount of people that, you know, actually participate in them and therefore wanted to bring the next level of games to the Olympics. And so it's really not just breaking. You also see skateboarding:

*<CLIP> NBC SPORTS*

*Announcer: Look at that! The frontside 50 fakie on the island at the buzzer. AAhhhh, that was nice.*

RODGER: And surfing:

*<CLIP> NBC SPORTS*

*Announcer: FERREIRA up and riding. Jumping, bouncing, building speed through this set. Flat section of the wave. Cuts back…*

RODGER: And climbing, was a big one at the last Olympics:

*<CLIP> NBC SPORTS*

*Announcer: That toe is in, she’s struggling though. Just hits the left hand. Right to the block crimp. Got to be careful through here. Barely breath as you adjust the feet.*

RODGER: And three on three basketball. They kind of took basketball and they made a shorter, quicker, more accessible version of it.

*<CLIP> Olympics, Women's 3x3 Basketball Final*

*Announcer: And the U.S., historic gold medal! The first ever olympic champion in 3X3 basketball.*

RODGER: Overall that's the trend that they're trying to make the Olympics a little bit more accessible. Things that people might actually be interested in watching or playing.

SEAN: A little less ancient Greece, let's say.

RODGER: A little less ancient Greece.

SEAN: I mean, just to push back a little bit here on the IOC, no disrespect IOC, but if they wanted to, like, get with the, the times, shouldn’t they have added breakdancing in like 1988?

RODGER: Yeah. It's very much like a 60-year-old's perception of what a 20 year olds are watching.

SEAN: <laughs> 2024 time to add breakdancing.

RODGER: <chortles> Yeah. And like I think they're, they're going for like, the Bart Simpson 1980s demographic. People who say:

*<CLIP> The Simpsons*

*Bart Simpson: Cowabunga, dude!*

SEAN: <laughs>

RODGER: I think you're onto something there. It's definitely true that they're not, they're not spot on. They're they're a little bit more Gen-X than Gen Z right now. But it's getting closer.

SEAN: Okay.

RODGER: They're, they're in the right direction. And also like – I can't, I'm not sure what sports have been invented in the last 15 years besides like E sports, which they're also kind of freaked out by.

SEAN: Pickleball?

RODGER: Pickleball. I'm, ooph, we’re keeping that out of the Olympics. Sorry to all the pickleballers, listening.

SEAN: <laughs>  
  
RODGER: Sorry!   
  
SEAN: I also have an ax to grind with pickleball. How are these sports added? Is it just someone at the IOC says, oh, the kids, they're they're working. They're wearing baggy jeans and crawling all over the floor. It's time! How does it – is there a committee?

RODGER: Yeah. So the addition of all these sports I mentioned skateboarding, surfing, it represents a distinct change in the way that sports get added to the Olympics.

SCORING IN <03 Neutral Betty (neutral, podcast, moving along, marimba, pizzicatos, hand claps, box drumming, found sound, organic drums)>

RODGER: It used to be that sports to be added to the Olympics kind of had to go through the entire IOC. And the IOC is like a 100 person board of like, I think princes and princesses on the board.

SEAN: Wow. Like legit legit like old school princes and princesses.

RODGER: Yeah, like Monaco,, Liechtenstein…

SEAN: The kinds of people who just found out about breakdancing.

RODGER: Yeah. And like, so this is who it used to have to go through all these people. And the people who aren't royalty are like, typically people who represent an international sports federation. Yeah. And it was always hard to get sports added because they tended to have a vested interest in, like, protecting their own sport. So starting in 2020, they kind of announced this idea that to change the Olympics, what they're going to do is every four years, the host committee gets to propose a set of 4 to 5 optional events that are just being held at that Olympics, and they don't have to carry on. And this was kind of a good compromise, because the people who are representing, you know, cycling and fencing and all, all the big Olympic sports aren't like giving something away. They're just kind of adding on. And that's allowed a lot more flexibility in what sports are a part of the Olympics. At the 2020 Olympics, the Tokyo committee added baseball and softball, as well as surfing and skateboarding and climbing and also karate and then baseball and softball and karate, which are sports that are kind of popular in Japan, the, the Paris committee didn't take them because those sports aren't aren't that big in France.

SEAN: Hm.  
  
RODGER: But one of the sports they brought in was breakdancing.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: I think when people think about the Summer Olympics, they probably think about, you know, various swimming events and track and field events and gymnastics. Is there an example of a great success story – a sport that was added in recent memory, like, I don't know, in the last 50 years, since it only happens every four years, that just took off and became sort of quintessential Olympics?

RODGER: I'd say beach volleyball is probably a good guess.  
  
SEAN: Mmm.  
  
RODGER: It really, when it was added to the Olympics, kind of took on its own identity. And in many ways when people think of volleyball, you're probably now more likely to think of people playing it. Two people in the sand, wearing swim trunks rather than the indoor game with six people on a basketball court. And since they added beach volleyball to the Olympics, and I think 96 was the first time that's been a sport that's really gotten to like take off. And it was recently added by the NCAA as a as a college sport. So people are now going to college on beach volleyball scholarships, where in the past they would only play indoor volleyball. So it sometimes does work out that a sport gets added and then finds a home in the Olympics and also kind of spreads around the world and takes off in America. And one thing I noticed, I was looking at this recently like it used to be, that the first couple times the beach volleyball was won by like, beachy places. And now every once in a while, it's won by people by like Norway and Latvia and stuff like that. So it clearly got spread across the world in a way that it wouldn't have if it hadn't been made a part of the Olympics.

SEAN: Do you think breaking could end up being the next beach volleyball at the Olympics?

RODGER: Yeah. I mean, like, the ones that are unsuccessful are the ones that you can't actually go out and and participate in. Breaking, what's happening is someone is playing music and someone is dancing to it. You hopefully have a somewhat padded floor. All of the, the breakers that I interviewed ahead of these Olympics were like, ‘We don't do it on cardboard boxes anymore.’ But I imagine if you needed to use cardboard boxes in a pinch, it would work. So it is something that anyone can do anywhere, which is, a real positive. The problem is the LA Committee did not take it as a sport and breaking didn't get added. So like they immediately had to shift and now try to get back in the 2032 games.

SEAN: Rough. And LA, certainly people in LA break.

RODGER: I'm sure they do. I lived in LA and I did not see people actively dancing in the street with the cardboard boxes.

SEAN: Me neither.

RODGER: <chuckles> But more to the point, it is kind of a bummer that they didn't even get a chance to prove themselves and like, you know, show the world that people are going to get excited about it. And it seems like people are getting excited about it. So that is kind of a bummer, but it's still a little bit better than the old system where sports were just permanently locked in or permanently excluded.

SEAN: So we can be glad to see breaking at the 2024 Games in Paris, France. We could be sad to not see them at the 2028 Games in Los Angeles, California, but at least breaking is getting its moment in the spotlight. Maybe 30 years too late, but better late than never?

RODGER: Better late than never.

SCORING IN <OLYMPICS JAM>

RODGER: And you know, I imagine if enough people pay attention to it, there will be other Olympics in the future in 2032, in 2036 and 2040, and however long the world continues to exist, probably.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Roger have an excellent Olympics, my friend. Thank you.

RODGER: Thank you. I'm not competing in any of the events, but I will be, I'll be here on this very couch that you're currently looking at.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Rodger Sherman dot substack dot com.

Hady dot Mawajdeh made our show today. Amina Al-Sadi edited. Laura dot Bullard fact checked from horsetown. Patrick dot Boyd mixed.

This is *Today* comma *Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]