

THE HERESY OF ZONE DEFENSE

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It's in the third quarter. The fifth game of the 1980 NBA Finals. Lakers versus Seventy-Sixers. Maurice Cheeks is bringing the ball up the court for the Sixers. He snaps the rock off to Julius Erving, and Julius is driving to the basket from the right side of the lane against Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Julius takes the ball in one hand and elevates, leaves the floor. Kareem goes up to block his path, arms above his head. Julius ducks, passes under Kareem's outside arm and then under the backboard. He looks like he's flying out of bounds. But no! Somehow, Erving turns his body in the air, reaches *back* under the backboard from behind; and lays the ball up into the basket from the *left* side!

When Erving makes this shot, I rise into the air and hang there for an instant, held aloft by sympathetic magic. When I return to earth, everybody in the room is screaming, "I gotta see the replay!" They replay it. And there it is again. Jesus, what an amazing play! Just the celestial athleticism of it is stunning, but the tenacity and purposefulness of it, the fluid stream of instantaneous micro-decisions that go into Erving's completing it... Well, it just breaks your heart. It's everything you want to do by way of finishing under pressure, beyond the point of no return, faced with adversity, and I am still amazed when I think of it.

In retrospect, however, I am less intrigued by the play itself than by the *joy* attendant upon Erving's making it, because it was well nigh universal. Everyone who cares about basketball knows this play, has seen it replayed a thousand times, and marveled at it. Everyone who writes about basketball has written about it. At the time, the crowd went completely berserk. Even Kareem, after the game, remarked that he would pay to see Doctor J make that play against someone else. Kareem's remark clouds the issue, however, because the play was as much his as it was Erving's, since it was Kareem's perfect defense that made Erving's instantaneous, pluperfect response to it both necessary and possible—thus the joy, because everyone behaved perfectly, eloquently, with mutual respect, and something magic happened—thus the joy, at the triumph of civil society in an act that was clearly the product of talent and will accommodating itself to liberating rules.

Consider this for a moment: Julius Erving's play was at once *new* and *fair*! The rules, made by people who couldn't begin to imagine Erving's play, made it possible. If this doesn't intrigue you, it certainly intrigues me, because, to be blunt, I have always had a problem with "the rules," as much now as when I was younger. Thanks to an unruly and unruly childhood, however, I have never doubted the necessity of having them, even though they all go bad, and despite the fact that I have never been able to internalize them. To this day, I never stop at a stop sign without mentally patting myself on the back for my act of good citizenship, but I *do* stop (usually) because the alternative to living with rules—as I discovered when I finally learned some—is just hell. It is a life of perpetual terror, self-conscious wariness, and self-deluding ferocity, which is not just barbarity, but the condition of not knowing that you are a barbarian.

And this is never to know the lightness of joy—or even the possibility of it—because such joys as are attendant upon Julius Erving's play require civilizing rules that attenuate violence and defer death. They require rules that translate the pain of violent conflict into the pleasures of disputation—into the excitements of politics, the delights of rhetorical art, and competitive sport. Moreover, the maintenance of such joys requires that we recognize, as Thomas Jefferson did, that the liberating rule that civilized us yesterday will, almost inevitably, seek to *govern* us tomorrow, by suppressing both the pleasure and the disputation. In so doing, it becomes a form of violence itself.

An instance: I can remember being buoyed up, as a youth, by reading about Jackson Pollock in a magazine and seeing photographs of him painting. I was heartened by the stupid little rule through which Pollock civilized his violence. *It's okay to drip paint*, Jackson said. The magazine seemed to acquiesce: *Yeah, Jackson's right*, it seemed to say, grudgingly, *Dripping*

paint is now within the rules. Discovering this, I was a little bit more free than I was before, and I know that it was a "boy thing," about privileging prowess at the edge of control and having the confidence to let things go all strange—and I know, as well, that, in my adolescent *Weltanschauung*, the fact that Jackson Pollock dripped paint somehow justified my not clearing the debris from the floor of my room (which usually, presciently, resembled a Rauschenberg combine). Even so, I had a right to be shocked a few years later when I enrolled in a university and discovered that Pollock's joyous permission had been translated into a prohibitive, institutional edict: *It's bad not to drip!* the art coaches said. *It means you got no soul!* Yikes!

Henceforth, it has always seemed to me that the trick of civilization lies in recognizing the moment when a rule ceases to liberate and begins to govern—and this brings us back to the glory of hoops. Because among all the arts of disputation our culture provides, basketball has been supreme in recognizing this moment of portending government and in deflecting it, by changing the rules when they threaten to make the game less beautiful and less visible, when the game stops liberating and begins to educate. And even though basketball is not a fine art—even though it is merely an armature upon which we project the image of our desire, while art purports to embody that image—the fact remains that every style change that basketball has undergone in this century has been motivated by a desire to make the game more joyful, various, and articulate, while nearly every style change in fine art has been, in some way, motivated by the opposite agenda. Thus basketball, which began this century as a pedagogical discipline, concludes it as a much beloved public spectacle, while fine art, which began this century as a much-beloved public spectacle, has ended up where basketball began—in the YMCA or its equivalent—governed rather than liberated by its rules.

Basketball's fluidity and adaptability in this century has been considerably enhanced by the fact that it has no past to repudiate—by the fact that it was *invented*, and amazingly well-designed as a passionate, indoor game. It was less well-designed to serve its original purpose, which was to stave off a delinquency problem in Springfield, Massachusetts in the winter of 1891, where the "incurable" working-class youth who hung out at the Y were perceived as needing some form of socially redeeming "physical expression" during those months when football and baseball were unfeasible. Ideally, this diversion would involve some intense (i.e., exhausting) physical activity that would leave both the gymnasium and the young hoodlums physically intact.

James Naismith was enlisted in December of that year to design such a game. So he evolved some Guiding Principles. Combining the most democratic, least territorial aspects of rugby and lacrosse, he invented basketball—and succeeded well beyond his wildest dreams. Within three years, literally thousands of gymnasiums, in every corner of the nation, smelled like teen spirit. Not long thereafter, the YMCA newsletter *New Era* began running a series entitled "Is Basketball a Danger?" It posed the following questions: Was basketball getting too rough? Was it too exciting for America's youth? Did it incite unruly behavior in its fans and participants? Did kids neglect their studies to "play it all the time"? And was it, therefore, losing the pedagogical aura of gentlemanly American sport and becoming professionalized? The answer to all these questions, in 1894, was Yes.

Within four years of Naismith's inventing the game, basketball's ground rules were in place. By 1894, the size of the court and the five-player team were normalized. The backboard was added to discourage spectators from goal tending, and the rules defining passing and dribbling were codified. And, amazingly, from that time until this, all subsequent legislative changes to the game have been made in the interest of aesthetics—to alter those rules that no longer liberate its players, that have begun to govern the game through tedium and inequity. And

all of these changes probably would have come to pass more rapidly had Naismith codified his most profound insight into the game that he invented: *It does not require a coach.*

Naismith thought his game would teach itself, which it does, and that the players, trying to win, would teach one another, which they do. But coaches were a part of the gentlemanly, parental tradition of American sport, so basketball got coaches whether it needed them or not. But consider the potential consequences had Naismith acted on his original intuition: Without coaches, there would be no "education." And without education, there would be no basketball gyms at universities. And without basketball gyms, there would be no "basketball programs." And without basketball programs—designed to exploit the unpaid labor of impoverished city kids by lying to them and corrupting their adolescence, by teasing them with the false promise of an education and the faint hope of a pro career—basketball would still be a brave and beautiful game.

The long-standing reform coalition of players, fans, and professional owners would have doubtless seen to that, since these aesthetes have never aspired to anything else. They have never wanted anything but for their team to win beautifully, to score more points, to play faster, and to equalize the opportunity of taller and shorter players—to privilege improvisation, so that gifted athletes, who must play as a team to win (because the game is so well-designed), might express their unique talents in a visible way. Opposing this coalition of ebullient fops is the patriarchal cult of college-basketball coaches and their university employers, who have always wanted to slow the game down, to govern, to achieve continuity, to ensure security and maintain stability.

These academic bureaucrats want a "winning program" and plot to win programmatically, by fitting interchangeable players into pre-assigned "positions" within the "system." And if this entails compelling gifted athletes to guard little patches of hardwood in static zone defenses and to trot around on offense in repetitive, choreographed patterns until they and their fans slip off into narcoleptic coma, then so be it. That's the way Coach wants it. Fortunately, almost no one else does; and thus under pressure from the professional game, college basketball today is either an enormously profitable, high-speed moral *disgrace* or a stolid, cerebral celebration of the coach-as-auteur—which should tell us something about the wedding of art and education.

In professional basketball, however, art wins. Every major rule change in the past sixty years has been instituted to forestall either the Administrator's Solution (*Do nothing and hold on to your advantage*) or the Bureaucratic Imperative (*Guard your little piece of territory like a mad rat in a hole*). The "ten-second rule" that requires a team to advance the ball aggressively, and the "shot-clock rule" that requires a team to shoot the ball within twenty-four seconds of gaining possession of it, have pretty much eliminated the option of holding the ball and doing nothing with it, since, at various points in the history of the game, this simulacrum of college administration has nearly destroyed it.

The "illegal-defense rule" which banned zone defenses, however, did more than save the game. It moved professional basketball into the fluid complexity of post-industrial culture—leaving the college game with its zoned parcels of real estate behind. Since zone defenses were first forbidden in 1946, the rules against them have undergone considerable refinement, but basically they now require that every defensive player on the court defend against another player on the court, anywhere on the court, all the time.

All offensive players need not be guarded, of course, and two defensive players may double-team a single offensive player, but nobody can just defend a space. Initially, it was feared that this legislated man-to-man defense would resolve competition in terms of "natural comparative advantage" (as an economist might call it), since if each player is matched with a player on the other team, the player with the most height, bulk, speed, or quickness would seem to have a permanent advantage. But you don't have to guard the same man all the time; you can switch, and this permission has created the beautiful "match-up game" in which both teams run patterns, picks, and switches in order to create advantageous situations for the offense or the

defense—to generate the shifting interplay of man-made comparative advantage that characterizes most post-industrial commerce. And once you learn what to watch in this game (basically, everything), it is civilized complexity incarnate—quite literally made flesh.

This is not to say that basketball is a religion. It is *better* than a religion. It is a gift and a pure allegory. Whatever local moralities I wish to assign to it, I may, and so may you, as you and I gaze down through the lens of hoops into the old barbarity that the game has elevated into joy. In doing so, of course, we recognize that the rules that once elevated us into joy now govern us. Still, in the complexity of the game, there is the promise of solutions as daring as Doctor J's. And they are *personal* solutions, because my basketball is not your basketball, and you are not me.

Probably you are not even a freelance writer, so you can hardly be expected to understand my pleasure at finding a refined armature for the "deadline life" in a game—of finding a spectacular analog for the nonstop intensity of it, an embodiment of the breathless *push* of writing and thinking about everything all the time, perpetually shifting from defense to offense, from reacting to acting, with no time off—the experience of arising each morning certain that if you don't write today, you won't eat in eight weeks, that if you don't get a job today, you won't eat in sixteen weeks—and knowing, most urgently, that the shot clock is ticking down and, eventually, as the deadline approaches, you are going to have to drive the lane. You are going to have to take the ball in one hand and leave the floor, with Kareem between you and the basket—knowing, finally, that there is no hope of your making *any* of those zillions of fluid, instantaneous decisions that you must make in the air, if you are not borne aloft, buoyed up, as you leave the floor, by a serene, tenacious, gravity-defying confidence that, in just a few seconds, you are going to duck, twist, extend, and *slam that sucker down!*

James Naismith's Guiding Principles of Basket-Ball, 1891 (Glossed by the author)

1) There must be a ball; it should be large.

(This in prescient expectation of Connie Hawkins and Julius Erving, whose hands would reinvent basketball as profoundly as Jimi Hendrix's hands reinvented rock-and-roll.)

2) There shall be no running with the ball.

(Thus mitigating the privileges of owning portable property. Extended ownership of the ball is a virtue in football. Possession of the ball in basketball is never ownership; it is always temporary and contingent upon your doing something with it.)

3) No man on either team shall be restricted from getting the ball at any time that it is in play.

(Thus eliminating the job specialization that exists in football, by whose rules only those players in "skill positions" may touch the ball. The rest just help. In basketball there are skills peculiar to each position, but everyone must run, jump, catch, shoot, pass, and defend.)

4) Both teams are to occupy the same area, yet there is to be no personal contact.

(Thus no rigorous territoriality, nor any rewards for violently invading your opponents' territory unless you score. The model for football is the drama of adjacent nations at war. The model for basketball is the polyglot choreography of urban sidewalks.)

5) The goal shall be horizontal and elevated.

(The most Jeffersonian principle of all: Labor must be matched by aspiration. To score, you must work your way down court, but you must also elevate! Ad astra.)