Jun. 6, 2014

at

6:05 AM

What Ethan Swan Learned From Tracking Every Tattoo in the NBA

By Mike Wilson

Filed under Tattoos

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Chris Andersen. Getty Images

Ethan Swan. Allison Michael Orenstein

Ethan Swan and I couldn’t see the players’ tattoos from Section 217 of the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, but Swan still knew who was inked and who wasn’t. LeBron James? Obviously. Chris Bosh? A swirl of images (musical notes, tiger, skull) on his back. Deron Williams? ‚ÄúHe’s got a basketball tattoo,‚Äù Swan said ‚Äî just as at least one player on every NBA team [QV] did at one point three years ago [TV]. Of the Nets on the floor in this early May playoff game, only Shaun Livingston was a blank canvas.

Except nobody [QV] really is ‚Äî not any of us, and certainly not Swan. For four seasons [TV], he has kept a database of NBA players’ tattoos ‚Äî every Chinese letter, Bible verse, jersey number, Rolls Royce logo and winged angel. He puts it all on his Tumblr, his way of getting in the game. But ‚ÄúNBA tattoos‚Äù is more than a fanboy project; it’s an antidote to an Internet rife with articles, lists and superlatives mocking athletes’ tattoo choices: 11 [QV] worst [CV], 22 [QV] worst [CV], ugliest [CE]. Swan’s blog is a small protest against that kind of reflexive judgment.

‚ÄúIt’s just dumb to have an opinion about this,‚Äù he said. ‚ÄúYou don’t have enough ways to judge a player, you have to assert this thing that’s totally meaningless.‚Äù

Take Randy Foye of the Denver Nuggets, a guy who, Swan wrote, has ‚Äúone of the most heartbreaking tattoos [CE] in the league (or that I’ve heard of, period).‚Äù As the game unfolded below us, Swan told me the story. Foye’s father died when he was 3 years old [TV], and after Randy finished kindergarten his mother walked out on the family. On his 22nd birthday [TV], Foye had her picture tattooed on his chest.

‚ÄúIf my mom was here today, she would probably be the most important person in my life,‚Äù Foye once told an interviewer. ‚ÄúI just felt as if I needed something of her attached to me, so I just put her over my heart.‚Äù

Even in the dark of Section 217, I could see the story moved Swan.

‚ÄúHow,‚Äù he asked, ‚Äúcould you root against a guy like that?‚Äù

And yet the verdicts keep coming in. A few years ago, Swan encountered his b√™te noire, a piece on Yahoo that used data to argue that players with visible tattoos were egotistical ball hogs and guys without them were selfless rebounders and passers. Ethan Swan, defender of the NBA tattoo, was worried. What if he was rooting for the wrong guys?

Ethan Swan | Allison Michael Orenstein

Swan, 38, has tattoos on his belly, arms and chest, trimmed hair, and a quiet manner that gives the impression he’s more at ease listening than talking. His day job has nothing to do with the NBA ‚Äî he manages a gallery and performance space called 356 South Mission Road in Los Angeles. Before that, he lived in New York and worked in the education department at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.1 When one of my colleagues found his blog I got interested in what inspired it.

Swan learned early about the importance of empathy. He grew up in Rochester, New York, one of three children of activist parents. His father volunteered for the Peace Corps and became a teacher; his mother is a nurse practitioner and HIV educator. Swan found his own revolution in the punk community, where empathy for everyone else’s angst nestles just below the outrage. He traded tapes and zines with friends across the country, urged his favorite bands to come to Rochester and featured their records in the store where he worked. The impulse to share helped drive his decision to catalog tattoos.

‚ÄúI was spending so much time watching basketball, I think it was important to find a way to participate, to not just be a spectator,‚Äù he said. ‚ÄúI wouldn’t say much of that was conscious, but looking back at the other work I’ve done in my life, it clearly fits a pattern.‚Äù

In the early 2000s [TV], he lived in Philadelphia and rooted for the 76ers, led by Allen Iverson, whose shoulder bore a cross of daggers and the words ‚ÄúOnly The Strong Survive.‚Äù (Iverson once said, ‚ÄúI put shit on my body that means something to me.‚Äù2) Tattoos were still edgy then, and the NBA worried about whether its largely white fan base would accept tattooed black players. At one point the league altered the cover of its Hoop magazine so Iverson’s body ink wouldn’t show. Later, it instituted a ‚Äúbusiness casual‚Äù dress code for its players. The response from the man known as The Answer: ‚ÄúThey’re targeting guys who dress like me ‚Äî guys who dress hip-hop. Put a murderer in a suit and he’s still a murderer.‚Äù

That was when Swan saw a connection between basketball and punk. Iverson’s tattoos obscured the person beneath them ‚Äî he was an archetype, in other words, of the players Swan was most drawn to.

‚ÄúHe was just so defiant. I loved it.‚Äù

Trevor Ariza | Getty Images

The tattoo database came early in 2011 [TV], after Swan bought a subscription to stream games on his computer. He watched with his laptop open to a spreadsheet. He learned it was easiest to see a tattoo when a player shot free throws because he stood still and the camera zoomed in. Swan searched the web for photos of tattooed players. He followed athletes on Twitter so he’d know when they got new ink. He set up a Google alert for ‚ÄúNBA tattoos.‚Äù One day, the IT guy at the New Museum confronted him about why he had searched so often for ‚ÄúCarmelo Anthony shirtless.‚Äù

{LINE}<Swan posted his first complete list of tattoos that May. He counted 433 players in the NBA [QV] ‚Äî 230 [QV] with tattoos [CV] and 203 [QV] without [CV]. That’s 53 percent of players [QV]. The next year [TV] the tattooed percentage [CV] rose [TE] to 55 [QV], and the year after that [TV] to 56 [QV].>

Swan saw every banal and predictable tattoo imaginable. But he also knew that a tattoo often documented something important. Chris Andersen of the Miami Heat, whose upper-body art makes him look like he’s wearing a freaky turtleneck, covered himself in ink after recovering from drug addiction. The Atlanta Hawks’ Demarre Carroll has an RIP portrait tattoo in memory of a brother who died from a brain tumor. Trevor Ariza of the Washington Wizards honors his brother Tajh, who died in a fall from a hotel window at 5 years old.

Early on, Swan analyzed each team’s tattoos in a brief essay. Of the New York Knicks he wrote:

For whatever reason, [they] ended up tied with the Lakers for most tattooed players on one team in 2010-11 [TV], and that’s without Eddy Curry. Or Wilson Chandler, Nate Robinson, Starbury, Al Harrington, Quentin Richardson, or any of the other heavily tattooed guys to wear a Knicks uniform in the last few years. I have no idea what’s driving it, but it does make me happy.

More recently [TV], Swan has limited his remarks to individual players: ‚ÄúAmong [Al] Harrington’s many tattoos is a great snarling wolf on his chest with the text ‚ÄòKiller Instinct.’‚Äù

Swan made an exception to this just-the-facts approach in 2012 [TV], when Grantland3 published a piece called ‚ÄúThe Boy With the Dragon Tattoo ‚Äî And other horrible ink in the NBA.‚Äù It was a list of player tattoos followed by quips written by the authors, who were screenwriters.

‚ÄúThis is just a reminder for the medics that he has a peanut allergy,‚Äù they wrote about Mo Williams’s Mr. Peanut collage. For the Abe Lincoln tattoo on DeShawn Stevenson’s neck ‚Äî one of the most-mocked tats in the league ‚Äî one writer cracked, ‚ÄúWhen you play for the Nets it’s more about the Lincolns than the Benjamins.‚Äù

Swan took to his keyboard:

The real disappointment was the way in which the tattoos were used as a method to further distance players from spectators. The authors ‚Ä¶ treated the tattoos as another line between themselves and the players mentioned, evidence that the players are ignorant or out of touch. Why would you want to do that?

I asked Swan what he thought about Stevenson’s Lincoln tattoo. ‚ÄúLook, he is a problematic dude,‚Äù he said. ‚ÄúHis tattoos are bonkers, he gets arrested, he wore a T-shirt saying, ‚ÄòLeBron, how’s my Dirk taste?’ But you know, he barely knew his father.

‚ÄúThe world is so ‚Äî it will just break your heart. The world is just so gnarly. It’s not that he deserves a pass or isn’t responsible for his actions. But how many times are people going to sit down and try to think of a way to make a joke about his tattoo? There’s this whole other story that can be told about him and his reality.‚Äù

Only a few people noticed what Swan was doing.4 Once, somebody on Reddit linked to his blog with the headline, ‚ÄúNBA Tattoo Percentages per team, somebody did this research!‚Äù Inked magazine gave him an assignment to interview Dorell Wright, then of the Sixers, who has ‚ÄúG.H.O.S.T.‚Äù tattooed on his shoulder. ‚ÄúIt’s something me and one of my closest friends thought of,‚Äù Wright told Swan. ‚ÄúGo Hard Or Stop Trying.‚Äù

Swan has never spoken to another NBA player. He doesn’t often try to contact them on Twitter, doesn’t write to NBA or team spokespeople to get information. Near the end of each season he simply Googles every player and the word tattoo. He describes this task as ‚Äúnot un-fun.‚Äù

{LINE}<This season [TV], by Swan’s count, 241 players [QV] had tattoos [CV], down [TE] from 250 [QV] the year before [TV]. He was a little disappointed. He likes it when the numbers go up [TE].>

DeShawn Stevenson | Getty Images

At the Nets-Heat game in May, I asked Swan about his own tattoos. He lifted his shirt and undershirt and showed me one on his belly ‚Äî a misshapen tattoo of a ghost. He opened the top buttons of his shirt and revealed an image of a pet rabbit that had died. The bunny is wrapped in a ribbon that says, ‚ÄúMy Warm Heart.‚Äù

He has eight others [QV]. Inside his right arm: ‚Äúalas,‚Äù his sister Abigail’s initials. Right shoulder: a heart. Left shoulder: a polar bear taken from this album cover. Right arm: ‚Äú138,‚Äù a song about violence by the punk band the Misfits. Left belly: another rabbit, this one homemade. Left hip: the words ‚Äúbaby foxes.‚Äù Left chest: ‚Äúabsent friends.‚Äù Finally, inside his left arm: a rooster that matches one his sister Jordana got years ago.

Jordana, five years younger than her brother, shared a lot of his interests: art history, punk rock, travel. In 2005 [TV] they spent a month bicycling across France together, sleeping on riverbanks and sometimes encountering sketchy people who eyed their expensive bikes. Jordana’s tattoo helped keep them safe. In France, Le Coq Gaulois has represented the aspirations of the people since the Revolution. ‚ÄúIt made her approachable,‚Äù Swan said.

He and his sister loved to talk basketball. On their birthdays [TV], they bought Knicks tickets and went together. He remembers that LeBron James dropped 50 or more points [QV] on the Knicks at his birthday game one year and at Jordana’s the next.

When Swan started the tattoo blog, he consulted Jordana on what to name it. ‚ÄúJust call it ‚ÄòNBA tattoos,’‚Äù she told him, ‚Äúbecause that’s what people will search for.‚Äù

In 2012 [TV], Jordana was 31 and living in Brooklyn while on leave from a master’s program in sociology. She had long struggled with mental health issues, and when Hurricane Sandy tore through New York she couldn’t cope. A week after the storm, Ethan got a call telling him to come to the hospital; Jordana had overdosed. She died on Nov. 3, 2012 [TV].

Within two months [TV], Swan moved to California. He couldn’t be in New York anymore.

‚ÄúYou don’t actually meet many siblings that are really that close,‚Äù Heather Anderson, Swan’s wife of five years, told me by phone from Los Angeles. ‚ÄúI don’t know exactly what it was. They had some kind of sibling magic.‚Äù

Anderson’s own sister died 10 years ago [TV], of alcoholism.

‚ÄúWhen you lose someone like that, there becomes a thing of wanting to live for them a little bit,‚Äù she said. ‚ÄúYou want to take on that person’s fire and interests and live right by that, because they can’t. I haven’t talked to Ethan about it, but I have to believe he has some of that.‚Äù

LeBron James | Getty Images

During the first year [TV] Swan collected NBA tattoo data, he got a Google alert about a story on Yahoo: ‚ÄúNBA Tats & Stats: Player Ink Reveals More Than You Think.‚Äù Writer Andrew Sweat, a contributor to Yahoo Voices, argued that tattooed players [CV] seek glory as point-scorers, while uninked players [CV] selflessly pull down rebounds and hand out assists.

Sweat backed up the claim with stats. Of the top 10 players in points per game in the 2010-11 season [TV], six [QV] had visible tattoos [CV] (Kevin Durant made it seven if you counted players with covered tattoos). In the ‚Äúteam-oriented‚Äù categories of assists and rebounds [CV], eight out of 10 leaders in each stat [QV] played in their original skin [CV].

‚ÄúVisible tats serve one purpose ‚Äî to invite the world to look at ME, ME, ME!‚Äù Sweat wrote. ‚ÄúBody ink draws attention to the individual, visually telling stories nobody asked to hear.‚Äù

Swan found the essay unsettling. It didn’t simply criticize players’ taste in body art, the way so many others did. It seemed to say that players with tattoos were worse people than those without them. After he read the piece, he checked some of Sweat’s numbers.

‚ÄúI got bummed,‚Äù Swan said, ‚Äúbecause I couldn’t immediately disprove him.‚Äù

Yet there was plenty of room for skepticism. To begin with, the Yahoo piece built skyscraper-size conclusions on a square-inch plot of evidence. Six of the 10 leading scorers [QV] had tattoos [CV]; therefore, tattooed players were selfish. Also, it wasn’t clear why rebounders and passers were ‚Äúteam-oriented‚Äù but point scorers weren’t. Guys who score don’t help the team?

Then there was this: ‚ÄúThe more visible tattoos a player sports, the more likely he is to excel in an individual-centered category like scoring.‚Äù So if a player has four visible tattoos [QV], he is more likely to score a lot of points [CE] than a player with only two [QV]? The piece offered no evidence.

Still, none of that meant the premise was wrong. To really know would require deeper analysis.

I asked my colleague Carl Bialik to help. He looked at stats of 636 NBA players [QV] in Swan’s four-year [TV] database ‚Äî 288 [QV] without tattoos [CV], 348 [QV] with at least one [CV]. Using Basketball-Reference.com, Carl examined the career regular-season stats for each player, separating the players into groups of guards, forwards and centers.

For each of the subgroups with [CV] and without tattoos [CV], he calculated their combined stats in 19 categories [QV] from offensive rebounds to personal fouls to three-point shooting.

The result: In none of the comparisons was there a major difference (20 percent either way [QV]) between tattooed players [CV] and those without ink [CV]. And nothing pointed to one group being more [CE] ‚Äúselfish‚Äù than the other: Forwards with tattoos had better per-48-minute rates for assists and steals, but also higher rates of turnovers and two-point field goals attempted and made.

Finally, Carl ran regressions on all 19 stats [QV] to see whether a player’s tattoos had any meaningful connection to that stat, after controlling for player position. And for each of the stats [QV], he found no statistically significant relationship.5 I emailed Andrew Sweat with the results and he didn’t argue with them, but stressed that he was merely writing about the statistical leaders in the 2010-11 season [TV].

A few days after the Nets-Heat game, I met Swan for breakfast at a diner. Over pancakes and coffee, I shared Carl’s analysis: If an NBA player has a tattoo, it means ‚Ä¶ at some point, he decided to get a tattoo. Nothing more.

Swan smiled a little smile. Now, this was a good day for his project. A good day for Randy Foye and Trevor Ariza. For DeShawn Stevenson and Chris Andersen and DeMarre Carroll. For the tattoos that tell stories and the ones that don’t say much at all. For The Answer and absent friends. For Ethan Swan’s warm heart. For Jordana. For this gnarly world.

‚ÄúYes,‚Äù Swan whispered, and gave a little fist pump. ‚ÄúYes.‚Äù