

Chapter 1

Introduction

Basketball as a Cultural Practice

In the late 1960s I played a lot of pickup basketball with a group of friends on courts in and around Philadelphia. One of them was a gifted 6'5" center, Jim Greway. Jim liked to play the high post because he had a good turnaround jump shot, and I liked to drive the baseline because I had a football body and pretty good quickness. If I beat my man and forced the defender covering Jim to help out, then Jim would always move down the lane and be ready for a pass. We *killed* people with that simple play. We never talked about it or planned to use it. It just developed out of our styles of play and our understanding of the options available in the moment. Jim knew how to deploy his body to make himself available for the pass, and I knew how to slip the ball through the defenders to give him an open shot. I think back on those game moments with great pleasure—moments when players thought together, moved together, intuited each other's actions, played the game as it was supposed to be played. How did we do that? No coach taught it to us, no strategy session planned it out, no x's and o's. We could make that play because like all other pickup basketball players we were so immersed in the culture of the game, so caught up in its daily practice, that it seemed second nature, obvious and inevitable. We had learned in the game a way of thinking, a way of moving, a way of relating to others distinctive to the practice of basketball. We did not often reflect on it or discuss it explicitly, but we knew that we were experiencing something valuable in itself, something that would become part of who we were and how we lived our lives.

The goal of this book is to articulate the culture that made that play possible, the culture inherent in the practice of the game. Basketball is played by millions of people around the world, and its elite performances are watched by millions more. For many of those millions the game is a central part of their identity. They play every day, they watch as much as they can, they read about basketball in the paper, they talk about it with their friends, they wear clothes inspired by the style of the game, they rearrange their life schedules so they can participate, and they think about themselves as players and as members of a community centered around the game. The energy and interest these players and fans give to basketball produces a cultural return. They learn from their active engagement in the practice a set of values, beliefs, ways of thinking and feeling, and ways of moving, connecting, and creating communities—a rich, extensive culture. Every time they play or watch the game, they operate inside the culture of the practice, with its habits and inclinations, and in the moment of play, in the negotiations on the court, they recreate and renew the culture that in turn shapes their bodies and minds.

Because it is played by a huge and global community, and because of its media visibility, basketball is a significant and powerful *cultural practice*. I use this term, so common in the discourse of cultural studies, to designate any activity engaged in by people who derive from it a distinctive cultural style that then becomes a significant element in their own personal identity. In this sense cultural practices include jobs and professions, crafts and hobbies, daily tasks, sports and games, religious and spiritual exercises, and arts and sciences—any activities through which complex cultures are produced and consumed. All of us engage in *many* such practices, constructing for ourselves complex identities that derive from our distinctive ensemble of practices. Basketball is just one among many such practices, but it is one of my own, one that I have participated in and been shaped by throughout my life. I am a lifelong pickup ball player, with modest skills but serious intent. Like all players, I have internalized and embodied the culture of the game, especially the local games I have played in for years. I write this book as a participant in the basketball community, as a subject inside the practice, trying to put into words what my body already knows.

Pickup basketball teaches contradictory lessons about the culture of practices. On the one hand, the culture preexists any given player or game. The actions and interactions of players are shaped by the history of the game as it is passed down to them. But on the other hand, players are constantly recreating and altering the practice in their on-court negotiations. Pickup basketball is a living culture that responds to the local circumstances and personal histories of its players. Pickup ball in a Harlem

park is not pickup ball in an Indiana church hall, and pickup ball tomorrow will not be a simple repetition of pickup ball today. The culture of the game is not a rigid template that determines the actions of its practitioners. To use the language of Pierre Bourdieu, it is a set of habits and predispositions open to the improvisations of players reacting to the exigencies of the moment.

The word “practice,” which I will use so frequently in this book, produces many shades of meaning, both in ordinary language and in the theoretical terminology of cultural studies. In the world of sports, of course, “practice” is part of the vernacular—it refers to the process of preparing for competition. It is used in the same way that theater people refer to “rehearsal,” as opposed to “performance.” In this sense, “practice” is precisely *not* the thing itself; it is *merely* preparation, the repetitive, daily dues that must be paid in order to sharpen skills that will one day be put to use that matters. But in other cultural contexts, “practice” is often used to refer to activities that matter in themselves, not just as preparation, as in the usage that refers to the “practice” of medicine or law or teaching. These professions use the term *practice* because it suggests that they can never be mastered but must be pursued in their daily exercise, in which abstract ideas are put into unpredictable, real-life action in a process of endless learning. My use of the term is certainly closer to the second of these meanings; in pickup ball there is no performance other than the daily practice. It is not preparation for a future, high-stakes performance, it is the living game itself. In order to become so immersed in the culture of basketball that intuitive play becomes second nature, one has to invest years in the practice so that reactions and decisions become embodied and “instinctive.”

“Practice” suggests, on the one hand, the daily grind of practical action and, on the other, spiritual exercises that transcend the everyday. Thus one develops the mundane “practice,” say, of mowing the lawn once a week, but one also “practices” yoga or meditation, ways of rising above the mundane or finding spiritual enlightenment within it. In fact, “practice” often suggests a spiritual dimension. People refer to themselves as “practicing” Catholics or Jews, asserting by the use of the word that their religion is not just an inherited tradition but rather a preoccupation that affects the daily activities of their lives. My use of the term embraces both of these shades of meaning. To “practice” basketball is to make it a part of everyday life, a habit of ordinary action and attention. But I also will argue throughout this book that the “practice” of basketball can become a physical and spiritual discipline, an opportunity for personal growth and discovery.

I am attracted as well to the usages of “practice” that refer to informal habits of operation, as opposed to formal, institutionalized rules. Thus an organization might have as its “practice” the habit of granting preferences to

workers with seniority, even if there are no official rules that mandate the action. Daily life operates, of course, within the constraints of formal rules and laws, but it also proceeds by unspoken assumptions, habits of thought and action, and rules of thumb, expectations that go without saying. Pickup basketball is particularly characterized by such informal and tacit agreements, but all cultural practices involve this tacit dimension, which is created by the actions and decisions of participants. In sum, then, the ordinary meanings of the word “practice” suggest an action that becomes part of everyday life, that proceeds by informal codes of behavior, and that carries with it powerful moral and spiritual consequences. To see basketball as a “practice” in these terms is to see it as a site where a culture is created and learned.

The term *practice* has been investigated extensively by theorists of society and culture. This attention comes as a reaction, I think, to cultural theories that deny agency to individual subjects either by characterizing culture as an impersonal system or by reducing individual subjects to victim status, manipulated by the dissemination of cultural commodities in mass media. The idea of a cultural “practice,” with its emphasis on the daily activities of ordinary people, turns attention to the practical embodiment and creative consciousness of individuals, without the illusion of unfettered freedom implicit in the concept of the autonomous subject. To engage in a practice is to act as an individual, but to act within a social context, since the habits of a practice are always constructed cooperatively by many individuals in complex social relationships. The agent of the practice may be in total isolation at the moment of action, a single kid shooting a basketball at a backyard hoop, but he or she has already internalized the habits and the mind-set of the practice. The term *practice* has therefore attracted theorists interested in questions of individual agency and identity, but always in social and historical situations.

One such theorist, whose work I make use of especially in thinking about the ethics of basketball, is philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre is interested in practices because he sees them as situations in which the virtues are enacted. He defines “practice” as

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (1994, 187)

In this sense, a “virtue” for MacIntyre is “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices” (1994, 191). For the individual involved in a practice, the achievement of virtue accrues to his or her own personal endowment, but it involves a profound engagement in social relations. MacIntyre asserts that the goods of a practice “can only be achieved by subordinating ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners” because “the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like it or not, we define our relationship to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices” (ibid.). The social nature of practices is a function of their need for pedagogy; practices must be acquired by conscious effort, learned in a social context from more expert practitioners:

To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences, and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. . . . If on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch. (MacIntyre 1994, 190)

In MacIntyre’s analysis, individuals make moral sense only as members of communities constructed around shared activities directed at shared goals. The moral culture of these communities is a function of the practice that they pursue—the practice itself generates the virtues necessary for its own successful functioning. The individual either submits to those self-evident requirements or ceases to be useful to the practice.

I take from MacIntyre the conviction that the practice itself generates ethical norms. Players learn to behave in ways that enhance the pleasure of play. But I also believe that in basketball at least, the norms of behavior are not as *given* as MacIntyre makes them appear. That is, the ethics of basketball as a practice are generated by negotiations at the local level among practitioners of the game. The process is not impersonal, with habits of behavior deriving via a pragmatic logic from the needs of the game. Basketball ethics, I will argue, are interpersonal, deriving from the shared histories of the real subjects engaged in the practice. For me, MacIntyre underestimates the agency of practitioners as the source of the culture of practice. They do more than choose whether or not to submit to norms—they generate the norms themselves, in part as a function of the needs of the practice but also as a function of their own desires and their

complex relationships with other members of the community. Practices do not call only for obedience, as MacIntyre suggests, but for a shared creativity, a willingness to negotiate the practice even as it unfolds.

Among social and cultural theorists, the great proponent of creativity in practices is Michel de Certeau, for whom the practices of everyday life are the “tactics” of the people, their ways of countering the “strategies” of the powerful institutions that seek to discipline and regulate their lives. De Certeau sees cultural life as a struggle between the forces of control that Michel Foucault described so persuasively in *Discipline and Punish* and the subjects of those disciplinary schemes, whom de Certeau sees as possessing resources of resistance that Foucault does not extensively enough address. In the rhetoric of his discourse, de Certeau is the poet of practices, describing these “tactics” in stirring terms. “Many everyday practices,” he says, “are tactical in character . . . victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’ . . . clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning,’ maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike” (1984, xix). As a lover of pickup basketball, I am strongly attracted to de Certeau’s language, which could well describe any game in any schoolyard. A “tactic,” de Certeau says, “operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them.” A tactic must “accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment” (1984, 37). Basketball happens precisely “on the wing,” with players constantly making use of the “maneuvers” and “clever tricks” by which a smart player can overcome a physically stronger opponent. I try a move, an opponent reacts, I react to his reaction—together we make up the game on the fly, improvising every decision, deploying our bodies in unpredictable tactics that make sense only in that unfolding temporal process. De Certeau depicts cultural life itself in terms that recall a pickup game—rules are established by powerful institutions, but what matters most are the improvisations, the clever practices that allow the weak to make their own use of the rules or to slip between the cracks in their jurisdiction.

But despite my attraction to the aptness of de Certeau’s language for basketball, I cannot accept his conflation of “practices” with “tactics.” He may begin by saying that “*many* everyday practices . . . are tactical in character,” but he often is carried away by his own rhetoric into speaking as though they were one and the same, as though all of the practices of everyday life were acts of resistance to power—tiny, local, momentary insurrections. One of de Certeau’s favorite examples of a “tactic” is *la peruque*, the act of using the time and equipment of the owner to do the worker’s own personal work. Thus a woodworker might use the boss’s machines on the sly in order to fashion a chair for his own home, or a

bookstore clerk might find time to read the shop owner's books while pretending to do inventory. No doubt such maneuvers are the everyday practice of workers everywhere, and they *are* small victories, which de Certeau calls "the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires" (1984, 34) that "elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised" (1984, 96). But de Certeau has little to say about the practices of everyday life that do not "remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate" (1984, 34), but simply perform and fulfill the task they are assigned. Bookstore clerks as part of their everyday life in fact do the inventory. Woodworkers turn out chairs for the factory. Everyday practices do not necessarily resist power. They are often as "docile" as Foucault describes, reproducing systems of power rather than challenging them. In fact, without the daily background of such compliant, uncritical practices, the clever defiance of "tactics" would have no force. It is true, to use de Certeau's famous metaphor, that consumers of mass culture act as "poachers," making their own use of the media products made available by an alien, detached power elite, but consumers also routinely take in the messages and products of mass culture just as they were intended to. Practices are not inherently revolutionary, and the fact that they *can be* must be maintained without being exaggerated.

Therefore, I will argue throughout this book that basketball is simultaneously a vehicle for the inculcation of conventional cultural values and an opportunity to explore alternatives. Especially in organized basketball and in its media representations, the game is a mainstream cultural practice, an educational tool designed to create well-disciplined young men and women. Listen to any television basketball commentator or any big-time coach and you will inevitably hear about the conventional virtues of the game, life lessons in hard work, sportsmanship, team play, and self-sacrifice. You will hear, that is, the "strategies" of power rather than the "tactics" of resistance. Players who practice basketball in these contexts are not encouraged to put the game to their own subversive uses. In the pickup game, where there is no obvious authority structure, there is more room for "tactical" maneuver, and I will certainly argue that playing pickup ball encourages resistance to the mainstream culture of sports. But that is not to say that pickup basketball is a radical or an anarchistic practice. Even in the absence of authority figures, the game imposes conventional rules of behavior and patterns of thinking. I will only argue that the culture of pickup ball is looser, less restrictive, and more open to the creative and even subversive play of participants.

This *potential* for resistance in pickup basketball and other everyday practices is important to remember as we turn our attention to Pierre Bourdieu, who has described such practices more thoroughly than any

other theorist, but who sometimes implies that such resistance is impossible. Bourdieu sees practices as socially significant actions made possible and meaningful by habits of mind, presuppositions, and shared ways of looking at the world—what he calls a *habitus*. The habitus of a practice develops historically as a cultural reaction to the objective “conditions of existence” faced by a social group. It is a “system of structured, structuring dispositions” (1990, 52), “structured” in the sense of being produced by the conditions of existence, and “structuring” in the sense that it produces the particular actions and perceptions of the practice itself. The habitus is the tacit set of assumptions accepted without reflection by practitioners. Their actions make sense because they are agents who have accepted the mind-set of the habitus as “what goes without saying” (1990, 92). As such, their actions put the habitus into play without ever drawing it into critical reflection. Jim and I could make that play, to use Bourdieu’s terms, because we shared the same habitus.

In his thinking about practices, Bourdieu is literally a “poststructuralist.” That is, the relationship between practice and habitus clearly derives from Saussure’s distinction in structural linguistics between *parole* and *langue*, but Bourdieu adapts and revises the concept for his own less rigid and abstract purposes. Saussure understands *parole*, or individual utterances, as a function of *langue*, the abstract system or set of laws that structures the language. No *parole* has meaning unless it conforms to those laws and makes sense within that system. Speakers of a language internalize the system of *langue*—the laws of syntax and semantics—and it allows them to produce infinite and novel *paroles*, but only those that work within the system. In Bourdieu’s thought, by analogy, “practices” are *paroles* and the habitus is *langue*. But Bourdieu defines the habitus in a much less systematic and abstract way. The habitus is not a system of laws or norms; it is a loose set of dispositions, habits of mind, typical emotional responses, ways of making sense of experience. Bourdieu resists all attempts to reduce the habitus to a rigid system, because he wants to emphasize the adaptability of the habitus, its ability to enable the improvisations required by the practices it makes possible. Practices do not simply derive from the logic of the habitus; they are responses in the moment to the needs of real social interactions, but they still find their meaning within the habits of thought encouraged by the habitus, or they find no meaning at all.

Bourdieu emphasizes the flexibility of the habitus, which allows “agents to generate an infinity of practices adapted to endlessly changing situations” (1977, 16). The only interest of these agents is to respond effectively to the opportunities and challenges that face them. They are not interested in consistency or logic but only in the pragmatic outcomes of their actions. They need to “cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situ-

ations" (1977, 72), so they must be open to the present, capable of "the intentionless invention of regulated improvisations" (1990, 57). Practices are inherently temporal, which is why they are misrepresented by abstract theorization, which prefers timeless laws and systems. Bourdieu himself uses the improvisations of the athlete, creating the practice in the moment of play, as his example of that temporality. The athlete's "'feel' for the game is the sense of the immanent future of the game, the sense of the direction of the history of the game that gives the game its sense" (1990, 82). A player, like any practitioner, must be responsive to other players in the temporal flow of the game: "Each move triggers off a counter-move, every stance of the body becomes a sign pregnant with a meaning that the opponent has to grasp while it is still incipient, reading in the beginnings of a stroke or a sidestep the imminent future" (1977, 11). The practitioner is a master of "the art of living," "the art of the necessary improvisation" (1977, 10). What matters to the practitioner are not rules and models but "tact, dexterity, or *savoir-faire*" (*ibid.*), which allow maximum flexibility for the practice.

These are, of course, the virtues of the basketball player. In strategy decisions, movements of the body, and even ethical judgments, the game rewards the ability to improvise, to create in the moment in response to the creative actions of other players. Especially in pickup basketball, in which all strategy decisions are made by the players within the flow of the game, there is nothing but practice as temporal process. Every thought and movement occurs in real time, with almost no anticipatory plans or set plays. Bourdieu's account of practice, therefore, is richly applicable to basketball, which in turn comes to seem a perfect symbol for practice itself. Basketball happens "on the run," "in the open court," with ten independent agents making decisions and moving in a process so complex that chaos and confusion are always possible. What makes their play cohere, and even at times attain a magical psychic synchronicity, is the fact that they share a habitus. Because they have internalized the strategic and kinetic dispositions of the game, they are capable of "the conductorless orchestration which gives regularity, unity, and systematicity to practices" (1990, 59).

Bourdieu is clear that although practices are flexible, they are not absolutely free, since they are always governed by the dispositions of the habitus, which is in turn governed by the objective conditions that generate it. The practitioner has the freedom of the improviser, but the range of improvisations never includes moves that are unthinkable within the habitus. Bourdieu says, "The habitus makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions, and actions inherent in the particular conditions of its production—and *only those*" (1990, 55, *emphasis added*). The habitus is inherently conservative; Bourdieu calls it "a present past that tends

to perpetuate itself into the future” (1990, 54). Thus in a basketball game, among the myriad choices open to players, it is *unthinkable* that a player would take a baseball bat to the ball, or tackle an opposing player, options perfectly thinkable within other athletic practices. Bourdieu’s ideas in this context recall Marx’s famous dictum that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” The habitus of a practice sets up as an outer circumference within which infinite but not total diversity is possible.

The limits of the habitus have their power because they are embodied in the practitioner. That is, unlike Saussure’s *langue*, the habitus is not an abstract system. It is not primarily intellectual, though it controls the practitioner’s thinking as much as his or her emotions or movements. The habitus is so deeply internalized that it becomes embodied, worked into the neural networks and habitual movements of the practitioner. It becomes, Bourdieu says, “a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and (how could it be otherwise) a certain subjective experience” (1977, 87). As Susan Brownell says in *Training the Body for China*, the habitus of any given sport works as a means of “obtaining from the body an adherence that the spirit could refuse” (1995, 12). Paradoxically, this structured embodiment is necessary for improvisation in the moment, which happens so fast that systematic thought is useless. The fine muscle control at breakneck speed and the instantaneous decision making that basketball requires can only occur when players have played the game long enough so that their bodies make decisions while their minds plot strategy. A player may *think* “I need to pass the ball to my teammate who’s open for an easy shot,” but it is the educated body of the player that puts the necessary spin on the ball so it is delivered to the right hand of the other player, just barely eluding the grasp of the defender. It is in the context of this embodiment that the habitus can be said to be “unconscious,” taken for granted by the practitioner interested only in the outcome of the move, not the set of dispositions that makes it possible.

Bourdieu is adamant in his conviction that because the habitus is embodied and unconscious, it is invisible to the practitioner, who processes it as simply the way things are rather than as a specific cultural formation. The habitus is “history turned into nature, i.e. denied as such”: “The ‘unconscious’ is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second nature of the *habitus*” (1977, 78–79). The result is a lack of understanding that Bourdieu sees as necessary to the practice,

which has no time to question its own operation. Theory, which Bourdieu defines as a systematic, abstract knowledge of the habitus, is both impossible and useless to the practitioner. Bourdieu argues that “the necessities of practice never require such a synoptic apprehension but rather discourage it through their urgent demands” (1990, 83). “Caught up in ‘the matter at hand,’ totally present in the present and in the practical functions that it finds thus in the form of objective potentialities, practice excludes attention to itself (that is, to the past). It is unaware of the principles that govern it and the possibilities they contain; it can only discover them by enacting them, unfolding them in time” (1990, 92). As a result, the practitioner’s account of the practice is unreliable, “quasi-theoretical”: “Simply because he is questioned, and questions himself, about the reasons and the *raison d’être* of his practice, he cannot communicate the essential point, which is that the very nature of practice is that it excludes this question” (1990, 91).

It is on this point that my understanding of practices differs from Bourdieu’s. In my earlier book *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, I argued for the existence of “vernacular theory,” theory produced by practitioners themselves. My case studies examined the theoretical questioning produced by elementary schoolteachers, advertising professionals, popular culture fans, adherents of various New Age practices, anti-pornography activists, and others who would never think of themselves as “theorists” but who asked fundamental questions about the premises of their practices. On one level my differences with Bourdieu are terminological—we mean very different things by “theory.” Bourdieu characterizes theory as abstract and totalizing, while I think of theory as the act of raising fundamental questions rather than the production of systematic answers. But the difference is not simply semantic. Bourdieu famously says, “It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know” (1977, 79), and while I agree that our practices have more meaning than we know, I do not accept that subjects do not know what they are doing. Bourdieu does remark that “reflexive attention” sometimes occurs when “the automatisms have broken down” (1990, 91), but I would argue that, for many reasons, the automatisms routinely do break down. Sometimes practitioners encounter others within the practice who operate with different assumptions, as when basketball players from different local runs with different local customs are thrown into a pickup game together. At that point, just so the practice can proceed smoothly, they have to confront their presuppositions, the obvious truths that they can usually take for granted. Or perhaps a practitioner is asked to defend the practice, explain it to an outsider, or teach it to a newcomer. All of these situations lead to reflection on the premises of the practice, and all of them are routine moments *within* any practice. This is

not to say that at these moments the practitioner steps outside of the practice into an abstract, theoretical state. No such step is necessary or desirable. Only an insider, intimately familiar with the fine details of the practice, would bother to raise such questions, and raising such questions can only occur inside of the practice.

Here is a basketball example: Some players are putting together a game at a backyard basket, a place where most of them have never played before. In such circumstances, none of the official rules that regulate court space can apply. There are no out-of-bounds markers, no foul line, no three-point arc, no lines to define the lane under the basket, so local ground rules must be created by the negotiation of the players. Maybe one of them owns this backyard, so he has to explain to the others that the boundaries of the court are by convention the end of the blacktop and the rear wall of the kitchen, or whatever. In the midst of the game, one of the players may just camp out under the basket, taking advantage of the absence of a clearly defined lane, where during an official game a player can stay only for a three count. If there is no lane, it might seem obvious to him, then there is no rule in play. But one of the others might gripe about “three seconds,” on what seems to *him* the obvious grounds that the spirit of the rule should be in play, even if the lines are not on the court. The offender might refuse to listen, secure in his own “obvious” interpretation. One of my friends in such a situation would begin to count—loudly—“six, seven, eight, nine,” calling out the offending player and embarrassing him into compliance. Such negotiations are of the essence of the practice. They occur, as de Certeau and Bourdieu would say, “on the wing,” in the temporal flow, the give and take, of the practice. But in my terms they are moments of theory, moments when the habitus is being brought into question by the practitioners themselves. Not only are they thinking about and discussing the relationship between official rules and local customs, they are negotiating questions of interpersonal power and practice-specific fairness. They know what they are doing.

This is an important point for me, of course, because this study is based on the proposition that one can give an account of a practice from within it, relying on insider experience. Cultural practices have a strong personal dimension, since they are the sources from which individuals learn the cultural styles that they identify as their *personal* styles. Individuals commit so much of themselves and their daily lives to certain cultural practices that these practices become central to their personal identities. And if we remember the sheer number and diversity of cultural practices, then we can see the power they have in shaping subjectivity. For several years now as a writing teacher I have been encouraging students to write about the practices of everyday life that matter most to them, on the

conviction that they will learn much about themselves as well as their social behavior and relationships. For me, then, this exploration of the culture of basketball begins in my own experience of the game, my own engagement with its practices, and my relationship with hundreds of other players that I have encountered, enhanced, I hope, by years of reading on the cultural issues that the game raises but never straying from the insights produced by direct engagement.

I have been involved with basketball as a player or fan since the 1950s. My earliest memory of the game is going with my father to the outdoor courts near Overbrook High School in West Philadelphia to see a young player who was dominating the older guys in a summer league—Wilt Chamberlain. Almost since the beginning of the game, Philadelphia has produced great players and great teams on every level of the game. I went to high school games, college games, and professional games throughout my childhood. When I was seven I went with my older sister and her boyfriend to see our West Catholic High School team get blown out in the city championship by Chamberlain in his senior year at Overbrook. I went with my dad to see the Philadelphia Warriors at the smoky, crowded Convention Hall when they played the Boston Celtics with Bob Cousy and Bill Russell. I remember standing at the end of the court as the Boston players came through the crowd to start the game, booed and cursed at every step. As these early memories suggest, I was a fan before I was a player, and the experience of being in a crowd, energized by the game, immersed in the group emotion, remains very powerful for me.

The most exciting basketball in Philadelphia in the 1950s and 1960s was the “Big Five”—Villanova, Penn, LaSalle, St. Joseph’s, and Temple—all of which were national collegiate powers during this era. Growing up as a Catholic schoolboy, it was inevitable that I would attend one of the local Catholic colleges, and I do not exaggerate when I say that I chose LaSalle in great part because I saw that it was assembling a dominant team. By the time I was a junior in college, it was ranked second in the country (the next year it was put on probation by the National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], but that is another story). All of the Big Five teams at the time played their home games at The Palestra, the arena on the University of Pennsylvania campus in West Philadelphia. When they played against each other, half the crowd was for one team and half for the other, so the noise never stopped, and the emotional pitch of the games was very high. The Palestra developed a legendary status as a basketball arena, and as a fan I feel privileged to have been a part of that experience. I remember being a lovesick twenty year old, recently broken up with the woman who would later become my wife, going to a LaSalle-Villanova game and completely forgetting my sorrow, caught up in the frenzy of the game and the

crowd. Just recently, my daughter, whose fiance was serving in Iraq, went to a North Carolina-Duke game and experienced the same emotions. These fan experiences of my childhood and youth taught me about the *local* nature of basketball practice. For me basketball was a matter of neighborhood, school, ethnic affiliation, religious identity, and city loyalties. I grew up around people who identified strongly with the teams that represented them, and who saw in the game an ethical, cultural character that in turn defined their own identities.

My experience as a basketball player has always been in the pickup game. I was never good enough to play for a school team, but I played endlessly on courts in backyards, schoolyards, recreation centers, church halls, and school gyms. I played intramural ball in high school and college and later in industrial leagues as an adult, but never on elite-level teams in highly competitive organized basketball. As a teenager and college student, with whichever friends wanted to play at a given moment, we roamed from court to court looking for games. I still think of an outdoor court on a hot summer night as the ideal situation for basketball. I always liked to play with and against players who were better than I was, so I had to survive on muscle and intelligence against their talent and skill. In and around Philadelphia, pickup games were highly sophisticated, with players who had internalized the mental game, so there were picks away from the ball, lots of help on defense, and uncanny passes. I was never better than mediocre, but I played a lot of good ball.

As an adult, I had the great fortune to find a game that has kept me playing into my fifties. All too often players think of basketball as a young person's game, to be abandoned for golf or tennis when adulthood settles in. But around the country there are now hundreds of local runs in which players into their sixties and even their seventies are still playing full-court basketball. As a college teacher, I have been part of a noontime "oldguygame" since the early 1980s. About a year ago I finally had to retire from the full-court game, because of bone spurs and chronic weak ankles. Now I am limited to half-court games, which I hope I can play as long as I live. At the core of the experience that is the foundation of this book are my more than twenty years of playing in the noontime game in the Broome-Kirk gym on the campus of Appalachian State University. Similar games are found on almost all college campuses, open to faculty, staff, and community players. An internet search with the key words "noontime basketball," will reveal scores of sites that suggest the extent and variety of the phenomenon. They are classic local "runs," many of them with long histories, and all of them with distinct local cultures. As I discuss in the chapter on basketball communities, there are many other kinds of runs, at workplaces, churches, prisons, military installations, YMCAs, and health cen-

ters. My own experience with the local culture in Broome-Kirk certainly colors my view of basketball culture in general, but it also is a constant reminder that there are *many* local basketball cultures, as many as there are local runs.

The quality of play at Broome-Kirk is relatively high. Over the years there have been ex-college players, ex-high school stars, and even one guy who played for about three games in the National Basketball Association (NBA). There are many lifelong pickup players like myself, and some people who play more for the workout than for the basketball. Ages range from the mid-twenties to mid-sixties, and most players are in good physical condition. The game is full-court, with a lot of running, though the number of fast breaks decreases as the hour or so winds down. The games are fairly competitive, but the fact that many of us work together keeps down the level of physical intensity. Because of the years of experience most players bring to the game, the cognitive level of play is very high. Players know each others' moves and tendencies, so there are a lot of clever passes and subtle interactions. Players are able to anticipate others' moves, leading to constant adjustments and readjustments on offense and defense. Good young players who join the run often enjoy the high level of the mental game, the moves and countermoves. That is, it is a fairly typical oldguygame, one in which many players can stay happy for a long time.

The game also has a very positive affect. It includes faculty, administrators, coaches, staff, and a few local players from off campus who know about the game. As I will discuss later, the game therefore breaks down some barriers, bringing together in this practice people who would otherwise never meet. There are occasional animosities, usually between players who perceive the level of competition differently. But there is a general consensus that we want a competitive game but not a hyperaggressive game—competitive enough to generate a sense of commitment, but without damaging the fabric of the community. This consensus is in part a function of the fact that we all live in a fairly small town and therefore have other points of social connection, and in part a function of our age. Younger players with an excess of testosterone and adrenaline quickly become socialized into the prevalent playing style, or they decide to leave the game.

The extended group of players frequenting the game is fairly homogeneous. Currently all of the players are male, though over the years several women have played comfortably and successfully. Reflecting the racial composition of our university and town, the players are mostly white, though there have always been black players, almost all of whom have felt at home in the game. The game has tended to retain players for very long periods, so players tend to know each other well, over many years. Strands

of diversity exist in the community of players, especially in terms of social class, which has ranged from senior administrators and successful business professionals to groundskeeping and housekeeping staff. There also is a religious diversity in the group, especially because several ministers from the town have found the game. Players are therefore faced with the challenge of interacting and cooperating with representatives of different social groups and lifestyles, but they can rely on some social commonalities that ease cooperation.

From my experience in this game I have learned a number of lessons that I have put into play in this book. I have learned to look past the macho bluster of elite-level, televised basketball to find a much more complex form of masculinity at work in the game. I have learned to appreciate the beauty and complexity of even the most ordinary game. I also have learned to appreciate the “localness” of basketball, recognizing that every game develops its own unique ethical style, movement patterns, and cognitive habits. I have understood the emotional intensity of the game and the many ways that it depends on shared interpersonal histories and relationships. All of these themes play a role in this study, shaping my observations of the game’s details.

Most importantly, my experience in this game and in the many others in which I have played over the years has convinced me that the essence of basketball is not the NBA or the NCAA tournament but the pickup game, even the most casual session of putting up a few shots at a picnic or a family gathering. Unlike football, for example, which requires for its ideal form of play the organization and institutional support that only a formal game can provide, basketball is inherently a simple game that needs only a rim and a ball. Of course there is sandlot football, touch football, but they are only pared-down versions of the real thing, which requires referees, timekeepers, helmets and pads, and coaches and boosters. Basketball, on the other hand, is the purest when it is the simplest, when the least institutional apparatus is in force. No coaches, no referees, no clock, no spectators, no general managers or athletic directors. Just a court, a few players, some time to play. It is under those conditions that the creativity and flow of the game exist in their ideal state. Pickup basketball is made up in the moment, by the players themselves, with no one to tell them how to do it, what decisions to make, or how to relate to each other. They have to improvise it all, in the real-time experience of the game. At its best, organized, elite-level ball aspires to that creative flow, despite the efforts of coaches and officials and media packagers to submit it to their disciplines. Pickup basketball is a rough democracy, created by the players and for the players, and in that sense the game finds its purest expression on the schoolyard, in the driveway, in the church hall, or at the Y, not at Madison

Square Garden or the Staples Center. Almost all players, even at the NBA level, would agree with this assessment, romantic as it seems.

In pickup ball the players themselves make all of the important decisions. In the absence of coaches, they create strategy on the run and make the million micro-decisions necessary for the simplest of maneuvers. They play off of each other's decisions, keeping up a keen awareness of the emerging situation on the floor. In the absence of referees, they make all of the calls in the game, including foul calls, out-of-bounds decisions, and rule violations. There is no authority figure on the court, so all calls must be negotiated instantaneously by the players. In the absence of league commissioners and general managers, players decide how teams will be selected, how substitutes will be used, how the court will be configured, how many points the game will total, and how the next team to enter the game will be constituted. And in the process of making these decisions, they construct the culture of the game, the habitus of their practice.

The differences between pickup ball and organized, elite basketball become an important theme in this study. Although I enjoy watching professional and college basketball on television, I recognize that organized basketball is a disciplinary structure in which players are subject to the power of coaches, bureaucrats, and team owners. Bero Rigauer, in his trenchant study *Sport and Work*, defines modern sport in the following terms: "discipline, authority, competition, achievement, goal-oriented rationality, organization, and bureaucratization" (1981, 1), and therefore he sees it as an embodiment of the norms of industrial society. In contrast, Michael Novak's *The Joy of Sports*, which sees the primal source of sports as "a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection" (1976, 19), seems hopelessly romantic, a willful denial of the role that sports can play in disciplining young people, training them to accept authority and follow orders. When I think about organized basketball, Rigauer's point seems undeniable, but when I think about pickup ball, I am willing to risk Novak's romanticism. Pickup ball is not bureaucratized; it is organized and disciplined only by the players present at the moment of play, and "goal-oriented rationality" is foreign to its spirit. Pickup ball really is *play* rather than organized sport, and although its culture is determined in part by its social circumstances, its players engage in a rough cultural democracy, creating their own practice right there on the court. In a disciplined, hierarchical society, pickup ball offers a real alternative—not a radical rejection of modern structures of authority but at least a momentary evasion, a model of the improvisations that de Certeau admires, the tactics by which power can be faked out, set aside for the moment of play.

I should note that many of the features I see in basketball as a cultural practice are not unique to basketball. For example, the improvised, real-time decision making of basketball is also present in soccer. The grace and beauty of basketball movement also can be seen in football and in many other sports. The fan communities that arise around basketball have arisen around almost all sports, but the *array* of practices making up the game is unique. The culture of basketball communities is a function of the characteristics of the game itself. As players construct a culture around the game, they extend its array of practices into the infrastructure that supports it. Thus, for example, the endless interpersonal negotiation that the game itself requires extends into the openness to negotiation that characterizes basketball culture. Every ongoing pickup game, for example, has to create its own method for choosing sides. There is no rule book to decide the process—it must be negotiated over time, and it constantly adapts to the needs of the players present. The game creates habits of mind and body unlike any other sport, and it is surrounded by its own unique culture.

Because I rely so much on my own experiences of the game, there are some limits to this study that I should acknowledge. First, I have little to say about the experience of organized teams in official leagues. Obviously there is an entire cultural experience in such environments, but my only knowledge of that culture is as a fan who has read the usual newspaper and magazine articles about locker room politics and the complex relationships between coaches and players. I have certainly learned much about the practices of the game by watching television coverage of elite ball, but because television abstracts the performance from its context, the culture of the elite game is almost invisible to outsiders. Also, I do not write directly about the women's game, which I follow as a fan but with which I have little direct experience. I can and do make a few guesses about whether my understandings of basketball culture would apply to the women's game, but I do not claim any great expertise. Finally, this book is limited by my own limits of experience in the game. I have not played overseas, I have not played often in majority black games, I have not played in prisons or on military bases or in church leagues, and so on. I have visited many games and talked to players with a vast array of experiences, but I base my insights on my own experience, realizing, I hope, that the game is different in all of those different circumstances. In fact, that *difference* is one of my central points. There is no such thing as a basketball culture—there are *many* basketball cultures, as distinct as the local practices that create them. This book, then, is the product of one player with one history in the practice, trying to articulate the complex local constructions of many players with their many histories.

The first chapter of the book examines the ethical practices of the game. Discussions of the *rightness* of play are remarkably common in basketball, at every level of the game, from the elite to the most casual. The ethical tone of the game is the result of a complex mix of official rules that govern play, virtues that arise out of the pursuit of the pleasure proper to the game, and locally negotiated ethical decisions that reflect players' personal relationships and histories. Every single game evolves its own ethical tone—some are bitterly competitive and cutthroat, while some are easy-going and mild—and local basketball cultures develop over time a characteristic ethical style, assented to tacitly by all who play in that local run, and maintained quite consciously by the leading players in the community. This chapter demonstrates that basketball communities are self-governing, creating their own moral constraints and policing their own practice. The ethical dimension of the habitus of the practice clearly demonstrates that the players themselves are responsible for the values and moral dispositions of the game.

The second chapter considers the physical culture of the game—its articulation of space and its characteristic kinetic styles. Once again the theme of negotiation arises, in that the rules regulating space are often worked out on the local level. The game of basketball moves ten large bodies at high speed through a limited and demarcated space and thus encourages physical grace and cooperative movement. The chapter emphasizes the beauty of the game, comparing it to dance and other movement systems. It also considers the physical intimacy of the game, which requires close and intense physical contact among players. This deployment of bodies in the game constructs a complex experience of masculinity for the men who play it. I argue that basketball, despite the often vivid hypermasculinity of its media images, has the potential to provide a more progressive, less predictable enactment of gender identity. In a culture that often encourages men to be intensely competitive and homophobic in their relationships with other men, basketball encourages nonviolent and nonsexual physical contact and creates strong affective ties. The spatial, physical, and kinetic habits of the practice tell us much about the culture of basketball.

The third chapter turns to the mental dispositions of the practice. Just as basketball teaches habits of the body, it teaches habits of the mind. Both de Certeau and Bourdieu use sports as an example of the way that practices unfold in time, and basketball certainly does operate as a mental game in the unfolding of temporal exchanges among the players. Especially in pickup ball, where there are no coaches and no efforts to establish a "game plan," decisions happen in real time, in reaction to events within the game. This improvisation involves ten people, each unaware of the

mental process of all the others, yet all making decisions that react to the cues sent out by every player at every moment of the game. Basketball has a high decision frequency, with many independent agents making many decisions simultaneously. Yet even players who have never met each other before can collaborate in successful play. And players who have learned each other's moves and mental habits over time are routinely capable of minor miracles, anticipating reactions that have not yet occurred to the other players. I characterize the mental disposition of the game as "group, real-time, improvised decision making," and I therefore see basketball as a rich and complex cognitive practice.

Because players move and think together on the court, connecting cognitively, physically, and emotionally, they are capable of creating rich and meaningful communities. The fourth chapter of this book looks closely at these communities, ranging from intense local groups to the global phenomenon that is contemporary basketball. Using Etienne Wenger's work on "communities of practice," I argue that the practice of basketball generates communities that in turn produce the culture of the game. The most vital of these communities are "runs," ongoing local games that attract a shifting but stable group of players, often over many years. These groups make the decisions that create the habitus for their practice, internalized by all of the members of the group and taught to newcomers. I also argue that basketball creates looser "communities of interest" around the practice among fans and followers of the sport. These fan communities also develop distinctive cultural formations, habits of interpretation, and evaluation. These local communities of players and fans have in recent years become a global phenomenon, as television and other forms of cultural contact have spread this American game to virtually every country on the planet. The chapter therefore considers the relationships between local and global communities focused around a shared practice. I make the argument that communities of practice and communities of interest have the potential to cut across the divides created by identity communities organized around race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nation, religion, and so on. A practice such as basketball becomes an important element in personal identity for many people, but it does not bring with it the deep commitments that these identity communities require. Communities of practice can therefore connect individuals from diverse groups in a meaningful but nondivisive way.

The fifth chapter takes up the controversial issue of race within the basketball community. Because elite levels of the sport are dominated by African American players, race is an important issue within the community. The dominance of black players has led some white racist sport fans to shun the game or to see it in simple, stereotyped terms, and it has led

many black cultural critics to analyze the game as an element in the African American cultural tradition. This chapter argues that television and other media coverage of the game tend to reinforce racial stereotypes, casting the black player as the natural athlete and the white player as the hard-working coach on the floor. However, within the basketball community, such simple oppositions often are brought into question. Fans can and do easily refer to players who are counterexamples and who defy racial expectations. And players themselves quickly find that the stereotypes must be abandoned in the face of the actual players in a given game, players whose strengths and weaknesses cannot be reduced to simple racial categories. I therefore argue that basketball is one of the few cultural sites in which a healthy discourse and debate about race is possible within American society. Basketball as a cultural practice does not overcome racial divides, but it does bring people with diverse racial identities together around a shared practice that raises complex questions about racial identity itself.

The sixth and seventh chapters of the book deal with media representations of basketball. No local basketball community is immune to the representations of the practice current in mass media. Those representations become elements in the identity of members of the community, in part because they constitute the public face of the practice, the images that are available to outsiders and casual observers. The sixth chapter therefore focuses critical attention on television coverage of the game, which domesticates and submits it to the powerful gaze of its spectators, reinforcing conventional ideologies of gender and race for a mainstream audience. The chapter looks at the visual style of TV coverage, in terms of camera work, editing, and composition, as well as the discursive practices of play-by-play announcers and analysts, all of which operate to place simplifying frames of reference around a complex culture. Television removes basketball from its local contexts, reducing the variety of the game to a bland sameness in which every game in every context is framed within the same visual and verbal patterns.

If television coverage therefore radically simplifies the practice, then basketball films are more successful in representing the cultural diversity of the game. The seventh chapter examines recent films about basketball, noting the ways in which their richer narrative context allows them to get at the local cultures and idiosyncratic personal textures that the game takes on in its varied manifestations. Because of the conventions of realistic film narrative, which require individualized characterization and specific physical and social settings, basketball culture is better served by film than by the decontextualizing tendencies of television coverage. Taken together, recent basketball films provide a rich ethnographic account of basketball as a cultural practice.

Throughout this book I write not only as a member of the basketball community but also as a lover of the game. Sports rightly have their cultural critics, and I cite many of them in this study. Sports can teach cruelty and encourage a hypercompetitive mentality. They can be used to reinforce a spurious and narrow nationalism, male dominance, homophobia, racism, and violence. They can be integrated into media marketing systems that use them as little more than narcotic diversions or opportunities to advertise the latest snack food or athletic shoe. But when you get away from organized sports and media images, you come into contact with a much richer cultural phenomenon. Pickup basketball is not about advertising hype or political power or ideological manipulation. It is about friendly competition, rich relationships, local communities, and the pleasure of play. People engaged in that practice create in it and get from it a culture that sustains them and becomes part of their everyday life. Much of this cultural work occurs under the radar of sociological and cultural analysis, because it is apparently so casual and mundane. Not much appears to be at stake when some kids shoot hoops in their backyard, or when coworkers decide to start an after-work pickup game. No grand cultural policy enters into their thinking. No media coverage calls them to the public's attention. But it is in these almost invisible practices of everyday life that cultures are created. Basketball is just one of those practices, but the closer you look at it the more you can see it as an instance of how ordinary people quietly create the fabric of our cultural life.