

## Chapter 1

# Bare-Bones Basketball

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Man-eating sharks! (Okay, not really)
  - ▶ This game's for everyone
  - ▶ Whether to play, coach, or cheer?
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Outside of death, basketball may be the most non-discriminating exercise known to humanity. The Chicago Bulls team that won an NBA-record 72 games during the 1995–96 season featured among its top six players three black athletes and three white athletes from three different continents: Australia, Europe, and North America.

Twenty-eight of the 30 NBA teams in 2010–11 had at least one foreign-born player, led by the Toronto Raptors with six. Eighty-four of the 436 NBA players on opening day rosters were foreign born, including 59 who never played college basketball in the United States.

What other sport is this accessible? You can always play basketball. You can play indoors or outdoors. By yourself or with a friend (or a few). Half-court or full-court. Winter, spring, summer, or fall.

You need a basket. And a ball. (You're beginning to understand the etymology here, eh?) But that's all you need. No mitt, racquet, shoulder pads, or five-iron required. No ice, no pitcher's mound, and no tee time.

## *We're Having a Ball*



Basketball is an American game — invented by a Canadian (Dr. James Naismith) — that has gained worldwide popularity. Sort of like Levi's. Or *The X-Files*. Why? Because basketball, also known as *hoops*, *roundball*, and so on, is fun to watch, play, and even — unlike most other sports — practice. When was the last time you witnessed a football offensive lineman working on his blocking technique in the park?

## Male-female bonding

Steve Alford, the former All-American guard who led the Indiana University Hoosiers to the 1987 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship, used to love shooting baskets by himself. For hours upon hours, during summer vacations and on weekends, Alford practiced his outside shot. Eventually, Alford's girlfriend, Tanya Frost, realized that if she wanted to spend some quality time with her beau, she'd have to visit the gym.

Frost was the ideal partner for Alford at these shooting sessions. She rebounded for him, and on those occasions when he "hung the net" (meaning that his shot had swished through so cleanly that the bottom of the net had lapped up and become entangled in the rim), as deft

shooters often do, Frost located a stepladder and untangled it for Alford. In basketball-mad Indiana, Frost was nothing less than a dream girl.

Alford, now the head coach at the University of New Mexico, realized this. One afternoon in the summer of 1986, he arrived at the gym early and hung the net. When Frost appeared, Alford behaved as if he had just hung the net moments earlier. Without a word, she grabbed a ladder and began climbing — and then noticed a tiny box perched on the back of the rim.

Inside the box? An engagement ring. (She said yes.) Twenty-five years later they have three children and are enjoying life in Albuquerque.

You can practice alone: just you, the ball, and the basket. Or you can grab a friend. Shooting hoops is one of the most fail-safe means of bonding (male or female) around — see the sidebar titled "Male-female bonding" if you don't believe me. Nothing beats just standing around a basket with a pal, shooting the ball and the breeze, and getting to know one another better as you work on your jump shot. Such scenes often appear on the hit television show *ER*: A back-alley basketball hoop sits just outside the emergency room — not more than a bounce pass away from the defibrillators and operating tables.

The game evolves like so: You shoot alone long enough, and eventually someone ambles over and asks if she can shoot with you. You say yes — having someone rebound your misses saves energy. Competitive juices soon begin to flow, and the two of you find yourselves playing one-on-one. The game attracts a crowd, and now you have enough players (ideally six) to stage a half-court contest, in which both teams shoot at one basket. Such spirited action attracts more interest, and now you have a bona fide full-court, two-basket game. Just add uniforms, referees, 18,000-seat arenas, and two dozen 7-foot centers and — voilà! — you have the National Basketball Association (NBA).

## The Object of the Game, Simplified

Basketball is a simple game, although not everyone may see it that way. At an interview session with the United States' Dream Team II before the 1996 Olympics, a Finnish journalist timidly approached NBA forward Karl Malone and said, "Excuse me, I'm not very familiar with this game. Why do you get *two* points for a basket?"



Malone laughed, but the question was a good one. I answer that and similar questions — like, what's that white square on the backboard for? — later, in Chapter 3. For now, I can tell you the simple object of the game: *to put the ball in your basket and try to prevent your opponents from putting the ball in theirs.*

## Digger's Ten Reasons to Like Basketball

*Like* basketball? Maybe I should say love. This section lists a few reasons why I love this game — and why I think you should, too.

### *Basketball is ballet*

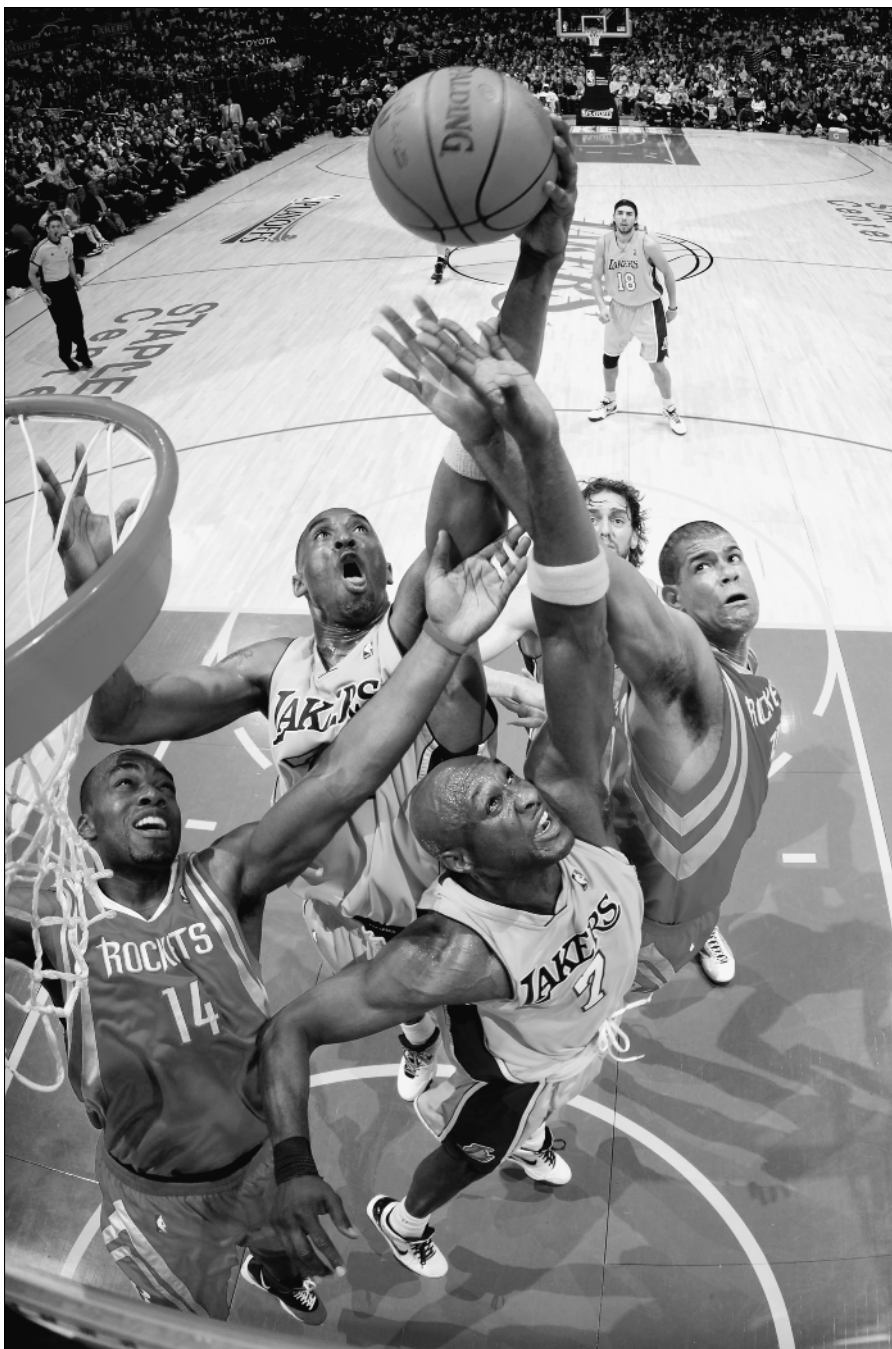
The 94-x-50-foot stage (or 91'10" x 49'2.6" in international basketball) holds ten performers (the players), two maestros (the coaches) and three judges (officials). Seeing the grace and finesse of the performers reminds me of watching the ballet Swan Lake. The performers run, leap, and even pirouette in the air to perform a dunk. Take a look at Figure 1-1; Kobe, Carl, Lamar, and Shane are like poetry in motion! And while he is no Mikhail Baryshnikov, Nate Robinson showed some artistic ability when the 5'9" guard won the 2010 NBA Slam Dunk Championship, his third win at the event in four years. The NBA's clever marketing arm often sets promotional highlights to classical pieces of music.

### *Basketball is a simple game*

As I said earlier in this chapter: Put the ball in the basket. Keep your opponent from doing the same. Do I need to review?

Okay, coaches can make the game sound complicated. You may hear nonsense like, "Double down on the center in the low post after he puts the ball on the floor, and watch the skip pass to the three man beyond the arc." But making baskets and keeping your opponent from scoring is the gist of it.

**Figure 1-1:** Like poetry in motion, Kobe Bryant (#24) and Lamar Odom (#7) of the Los Angeles Lakers reach for a loose ball against Carl Landry (#14) and Shane Battier (#31) of the Houston Rockets in Game One of the 2009 Western Conference Semifinals.



## *Basketball requires very little equipment*

What are you wearing right now? Chances are you can play basketball in it. Shorts, a shirt, and sneakers make up the only outfit you need to play the game. And if you're playing a pickup game (see Chapter 12), one side is probably skins anyway, so if you're a man (or a very adventurous woman) you may not even need the shirt. True, you wear less in surfing, but then not everyone lives near an ocean or owns a board.

Not everyone owns a basket, either, but you can find a court in practically every gym or playground. If you can't find a court, you can improvise by using a milk crate with the bottom punched out, which is basically what founder James Naismith used. If a peach basket was good enough for him, it's good enough for anyone.



You don't even need a net to play hoops; you can get by with just the rim and a backboard. Many an outdoor court at a school or playground is net-free, which is a shame. If I were elected president, one of my first initiatives would be "No rims without nets." Every good shooter lives for the satisfying swish of a net.

## *You don't need anyone else to play*

One of my neighbors in South Bend, Indiana, has had a hoop over his garage for 20 years. Just about every weekend or after school, kids shoot jump shots in the family driveway.

You can play basketball by yourself, like my neighbor, or you can play the game with any number of players. If you have an even number, divide by two and play a half-court or full-court game, depending on the number. (If you're in good shape, four-on-four makes for a good full-court run.) If you have 15 people, split up into three five-person teams and play a revolving format, with the loser going out each game. If you have 637 people, I'd suggest ordering out for a couple hundred pizzas instead.

## *You're watching people, not uniforms*

Whether you attend a game in person or view one on TV, basketball is intimate theater. You can see the faces of the players because no caps or helmets hide them. Plus, the dimensions of the court allow less distance between the fan and the athlete. As a result, you experience the emotion up close. You see the players' emotions when they go up for a rebound or dive after a loose ball. By the time you're done watching a game, you feel as if you've glimpsed the character of at least a few players.

One of the reasons that NBA stars Kobe Bryant and LeBron James are so marketable is that everyone can see their expressions on the court. James is well known for throwing powder into the air prior to the tip-off. (The powder supposedly gives him a better feel for the ball.) The powder reaches the nearby patrons within the first five rows of the stands. It is a ritual that fans in Cleveland . . . check that . . . Miami, look forward to prior to every game.

## *You're home by supper*

You don't need all day to play hoops. You set your own time limit, by virtue of how many points you play to in a pickup game. If you have time to play to 21 baskets, do it. If the sun is going down, or if Mom said that you had to be home for dinner (tonight is lasagna night), shorten the game to 15 points. You still play the same game.



*Watching* hoops can be another story, however. College games usually take about two hours, and pro games last slightly longer. But coaches — and I was as guilty of this as anyone — milk the clock at all levels. Coaches seem to possess an endless reserve of time-outs at the end of a game. (Don't you hate that?) I tried to save all my time-outs for the end of the game to help set up the defense after a scored basket in case my team was behind. I'm sure that many of my cohorts can make the same argument. (If you were late for Saturday night mass or a date because of all those time-outs, I'm sorry.) Ironically, in the greatest comeback Notre Dame ever made (versus UCLA in 1974), we made up an 11-point deficit in the final 3 minutes and 22 seconds without taking a time-out. Hmm.

One rule that has been added since I last coached cuts down on hoarding time-outs for the end of a game. In 1993–94, a rule was added to the college game that stops the clock after a made basket inside the last minute of each half and the last minute of overtime. The clock does not restart until the ball is in-bounded.

## *The game flows*

Basketball brings constant action. As an experiment, I invite you to videotape a baseball game, a basketball game, and a football game. Now break down each tape into the amount of minutes of live action, and divide this number by the total length of the game. You'll find that basketball is your best action-per-game deal around.

The momentum of hoops is one of its greatest entertainment assets. When a football player runs back a punt for a touchdown in the Super Bowl, the stadium is jumping. But by the time the extra point is kicked, the network goes to three minutes of commercials, and then the ball is kicked off . . . well, do you even remember how I began this sentence? Exactly my point.

Basketball, however, moves a lot faster. In the 2010 NCAA Championship game between Duke and Butler, Duke's Lance Thomas made an outside jumper off a sharp pass from Kyle Singler. Before Jim Nantz had a chance to describe the play to his CBS audience, Butler's Ronald Nored drove the length of the court for a layup. How can you top that?

## *Weather or not, you can play*

Rain, sleet, or snow — it's not just the mail that will go. Your scheduled basketball game will go on because you can play inside.

A baseball game can be rained out. A football game can't, but at times, excessive heat or cold may make you wish that you'd taken up bowling instead.

Unlike baseball or football, you can play hoops just as easily indoors as outdoors. If on a beautiful summer day you want to hoop it up outside, you can bask in the sun. On a snowy New Year's Day, you can still play; just move the game indoors.

Basketball's all-season accessibility may explain why the college and pro seasons usually run from November to April or later, but Olympic teams and the WNBA play it in the summer.

### **NBA outdoor games**

On October 12, 2008, the NBA held an outdoor exhibition game at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. The game featured the Phoenix Suns against the Denver Nuggets, the first outdoor NBA game of any kind since 1972, when an exhibition game involving the Milwaukee Bucks and all-time greats Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Oscar Robertson, played on a court placed on top of a baseball field in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The conditions are always an issue when it comes to outdoor basketball, as it was this night in 2008. Temperatures dipped into the low 60s, and more important, there were 15 mph winds that affected shots in the second half.

The Nuggets made just 18-38 free throws and shot 36 percent from the field. The Suns shot just 31.6 percent from the field, as players were not used to taking the wind into account on their three-point shots. The two teams combined to make just 3-27 three-pointers.

The 2008 experience did not damper the NBA's enthusiasm, and they have continued to play one outdoor exhibition game each year during the exhibition season in this same facility. The last two years, the weather has cooperated. Both teams reached the century mark in the second meeting, which was played in 90-degree temperatures and no wind.

Don Nelson, the winningest coach in NBA history who has since retired, coached in the second indoor game for the Golden State Warriors against the Suns. Nelson once commented, "It's kind of fun to play outside. I didn't even think about it much, but once in a while I would look up and there was a big hole in the sky."

## *March Madness*

Upsets. Cinderella stories. Miracle buzzer-beater shots. Sixty-eight teams, 67 games. Nothing in sports matches the 21-day spectacle that is the NCAA men's basketball tournament. The distaff version, which is staged at the same time and employs a 64-team single-elimination format, is gaining on the men's tournament in popularity. In both tourneys, everyone has a chance for an upset. Unlike the NBA playoffs, you have to be sharp every game, or it's *hasta la vista*.

Above all, the single-elimination format of the tournament makes everything so dramatic. During the second round of the 2010 NCAA Tournament in Oklahoma City, the number-one seed Kansas Jayhawks were riding high with a 33-2 record, including a sparkling 15-1 ledger in the competitive Big 12. But, they lost to upstart Northern Iowa, 69-67. It was a shocking two-point loss for Kansas, who many had selected to win the NCAA title.

Since 1977, 21 teams have entered the men's NCAA tournament with zero or one loss and not one of them has won it. Five times a team has entered with two losses and won the NCAA tournament since 1977. Go figure.

Only three times since 1983 (Duke in 1992, UCLA in 1995, and Duke in 2001) has the number-one ranked team entering the tourney gone on to win the NCAA title.

## *Fun for boys and girls everywhere*

Although basketball is not the only team sport that offers men and women opportunities to play professionally (volleyball comes to mind), it is the most visible. The WNBA, the distaff version of the NBA, which began play in the summer of 1997, has 12 teams and has been growing in popularity each year thanks to the support of the NBA. Pro leagues for both sexes also exist overseas. Someday — who knows when — a female will have the goods to play in the NBA.





## Facing the master

"It takes ten hands to make a basket."

That was one of the many great axioms of basketball John Wooden professed on his famous Pyramid of Success.

That team-first approach is one of the reasons Wooden was the master, winning 10 NCAA championships in 12 years, an accomplishment that will never be duplicated.

When Coach Wooden passed away in the summer of 2010, I was asked for my thoughts on his career because we became linked when we were fortunate enough to end UCLA's 88-game winning streak in 1974.

John Wooden was successful for many reasons, but three things stand out and they are basics that young coaches can use as their career progresses.

First, keep it simple. Wooden had some basic principles that featured a full-court trapping defense that moved to a man-to-man that put a priority of guarding the interior when the opposing team broke the press. Offensively, he featured a high-post-based offense that put a high priority on having balance between scoring from the post and the perimeter. Work on these basics and become proficient in each area.

Second, be disciplined in working on the fundamentals. He taught all his players to use the square behind the basket. They all became proficient at banking the ball in the basket, whether it was Bill Walton under the basket, or Keith Wilkes from the outside.

Finally, he was honest with his players from the day he recruited them to the day they graduated. A team will reflect a coach's personality, and if you have that basic trust you can go a long way.

## Coaching a Team

In my mind, basketball is the best team sport to coach. Every player must play both offense and defense (unlike football) and must switch from one to the other at any moment (unlike baseball). If you enjoy teaching, these qualities provide two huge plusses — the former because any lesson you teach applies to all your students, and the latter because you must teach those students to make split-second decisions on their own.

Soccer is similar to basketball in this respect, but soccer games last more than twice as long — and soccer fans have been known, on occasion, to kill one another. That puts a little undue pressure on a coach. Intimacy is another attractive facet of coaching basketball. A basketball court is tiny compared to a football field or a baseball diamond, and you have fewer athletes to manage. When you conduct a basketball practice, you don't feel as if you're Louis Gossett, Jr., in *An Officer and a Gentleman*; you feel as if you're Professor Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase* . . . although you may bark like Louis Gossett, Jr.: "I am a basketball coach. The court is my classroom. Class is never canceled on account of lightning."

Another thrill that a basketball coach has is proximity to the opposing team's coach. Unlike football, for example, you share the same sideline, and you are usually no more than 40 feet apart — almost within spitting distance and, yes, definitely within shouting distance. (That is unless you are coaching at Vanderbilt where the benches are in the end zones.)

Coaches are competitive, after all. Being that close to your nemesis is much more exhilarating. See the sidebar “Facing the master” for one of my favorite coaching run-in tales.

## *Don't Become a Tunnel-Vision Fan*

Unlike many other sports, basketball can be as fun to watch as it is to play. As a fan, you need not concentrate solely on the player who has the ball. Try watching the game that occurs away from the ball, something you can more easily do when you attend a game in person. Observe how UCONN star guard Maya Moore works without the ball to get open. The same can be said at the NBA level for Kevin Durrant of the Oklahoma City Thunder.



After you read this book, you should be able to spot a double down on defense or a pick and roll on offense. But to understand the game fully, you'll need to take that last step: Play. You can memorize notes and chords, but unless you pick up a guitar and strum, you don't really understand music. The same rule applies here.

So grab a ball and shoot. It'll make you a better player *and* a better fan. Making two free throws in a row isn't as easy as it looks on TV, is it?