

- » Man-eating sharks! (Okay, not really)
- » This game's for everyone
- » Whether to play, coach, or cheer?

## Chapter **1**

# Bare-Bones Basketball

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.

All 30 NBA teams in 2024–25 had at least one foreign-born player, led by the team that won the most regular season games, the Oklahoma City Thunder, with seven. One hundred and twenty-five of the the 540 NBA players on opening day rosters were foreign-born.

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



OFFICIALLY  
SPEAKING

Basketball is an American game — invented by a Canadian (Dr. James Naismith) — that has gained worldwide popularity. Sort of like Levi's. Or *A Game of Thrones*. 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?

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. 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. When President Barack Obama took office in 2009, he converted the tennis court at the White House into a basketball court. He frequently used the court for a personal workout or pickup games with staff and distinguished guests.

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?"



REMEMBER

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 94×50-foot stage (or 91'10"×49'2.6" in international basketball) holds 10 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.

Although he is no Mikhail Baryshnikov, Mac McClung showed some artistic ability when the 6'2" guard won the NBA Slam Dunk Championship for the third year in a row in 2025, the only player to win the title three years in a row. 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.

## **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, one side is probably skins anyway, so if you're a man 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 many 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 usually see the faces of the players (unless they're wearing a face guard after a nose injury). 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 professional stars LeBron James and Caitlin Clark are so marketable is that everyone can see their expressions on the court. James is well known for throwing chalk powder into the air prior to the tip-off. He has done this for most of his 20 years in the league. (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. But they aren't complaining, it's from LeBron, the all-time leading scorer in NBA history.

## 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 NBA games average two hours and 15 minutes. 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. After I retired from coaching, the NCAA added a rule where the clock stops after each made basket inside the last minute of the game and the last minute of overtime. The NBA rule states that the clock stops after a made basket inside the last two minutes over regulation and overtime. The clock does not restart until the ball is in-bounded in each situation.

## 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 2025 NCAA Championship game between Florida and Houston, the Cougars Ja'Vier Francis drove and hit a left-hand floater in the lane (the area of the court between the basket and the free throw line). Just 10 seconds later, Florida's Will Richard hit a three-pointer from the top of the key (the area enclosed by a semi-circle above the foul line). You could hear broadcaster Ian Eagle's excitement as he described the action with barely enough time to catch his breath.

## 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. Only a few football games have been rained out (see video of the 1975 college football All-Star Game in Chicago when my late friend Ara Parseghian coached his last football game) and 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.

## OUTDOOR BASKETBALL

Caitlin Clark, a career 86 percent free throw shooter at Iowa and college basketball's career scoring leader, had just one game in her career in an Iowa basketball uniform that saw her miss five free throws, including an airball.

Fortunately for her, the game did not count on her NCAA statistics.

Prior to her senior year, the school played an exhibition game against DePaul in its famed football facility, Kinnick Stadium.

Clark was five of ten from the foul line in Iowa's 94–72 victory, including a wind-blown airball that put a smile on Clark's face and laughs from the 55,646 fans in attendance. "It was a little windy," Clark said. "The cold was perfectly fine (50 degrees). It was a bit chilly and I'm glad I play an indoor sport. I promise I'll never air ball a free throw again. The wind took that one, for sure."

The airball received a lot of attention, but Clark finished with a triple-double (that is, two-digit values in at least three of the five major statistical categories: points, rebounds, assists, blocked shots, and steals). Her final line included 34 points, 11 rebounds, and 10 assists.

The NBA has played four exhibition games at outdoor facilities. The first took place at Hiram Bithorn Baseball Stadium in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on September 24, 1972, a

game between the Phoenix Suns and the Milwaukee Bucks. It featured future Hall of Fame players Connie Hawkins, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, and Oscar Robertson. Thirty-six years later, the first of three exhibition games at a tennis facility in Indiana Wells, California, was played.

The New York Liberty and the Indiana Fever played a regular season WNBA game at the Arthur Ashe Tennis Stadium in New York on July 19, 2008.

There have been multiple regular-season men's and women's college games played on aircraft carriers. In 2011, President Barack Obama attended a game between North Carolina and Michigan State that was played on the flight deck of the USS Carl Vinson in San Diego, CA.

There was a college basketball doubleheader on an aircraft carrier in Jacksonville in 2012 that was called off because of condensation on the court.

The most recent was a game between Gonzaga and Michigan State on the USS Abraham Lincoln in San Diego on November 11, 2022.

I don't see there being many outdoor games in the future, even exhibition games, because the weather is going to be a factor. Schools or NBA teams don't want to travel a long distance to play a game that might be cancelled and many coaches feel poor shooting performances might have a carryover effect and start a slump.

## 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 staged at the same time of the year, also includes 68 teams. In both tournaments, 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. At the outset of the 2017-18 NCAA tournament, Virginia, with a 31-2 record, was the number-one seed in the South regional and the number-one team in the nation. The Cavaliers faced Maryland-Baltimore County in the first round, the number-16 seed in the South regional. UMBC, led by second-year coach Ryan Odom, won the game 74-54, the first time in the history of the tournament a number-16 seed beat a number-one seed.

Virginia came back from that shocking upset to win the national championship the following year. In 2025, Odom was named the head coach at Virginia. Stories like that are why we love the NCAA tournament.

Since 1977, six times a team has entered the NCAA tournament undefeated and none have gone on to win the national championship. In that period, eight teams have entered with two losses and won the NCAA tournament. Go figure.

Only five times since 1983 (Duke in 1992, UCLA in 1995, Duke in 2001, Kentucky in 2012, and UConn in 2024) 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 (soccer comes to mind), it is the most visible. The WNBA, which began play in the summer of 1997, has 13 teams with the addition of the Golden State Valkyries in 2025. It has been growing in popularity each year, especially with Caitlin Clark joining in 2024, and with the support of the NBA. Pro leagues for both sexes also exist overseas.



DIGGER  
SAYS

### 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, still the longest winning streak in men's basketball history.

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 defense that, when the opposing team broke that defense, moved to a man-to-man, which put a priority on guarding the area close to the basket. Additionally, he featured an offense that aimed to have a balance between scoring from the inside and the outside. 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, the court is your 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.

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 Golden State Warriors guard Steph Curry works without the ball to get open. Brittney Sykes of the Seattle Storm is regarded as one of the WNBA players who creates opportunities by moving well without the ball.



TIP

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?