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Far Beyond the Park

Abstract

Basketball is one of the top dominating sports played in American culture. From the NBA league to local games, many people gather to watch this event from the sidelines. However, how much do people know about basketball in relation to urban politics? Many scholars began analyzing the racialization of basketball and how it is viewed from those who do and do not participate in it. Scholars also examined how white commentators view professional basketball players (NBA) in comparison to those who play in the street. In the context of white media, street-style basketball is un-legit. This led to the questions: Why do men play basketball outdoors as opposed to indoors? Does the park serve as a safe space for these men to decompress? To explore these questions I observed a group of basketball players in Lincoln Terrace park, located in Brooklyn. On Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, from 1:15pm to 3:00pm, I observed the group's patterns and how they interact with one another and others in the area. As a result, I discovered the park's basketball courts serve as a safe space for these men to unite and be vulnerable with one another.

Introduction

You leave your house around 12:45pm on a Saturday afternoon. You have plans to meet up with your friends to play basketball. On your way there you pick up a water bottle and

Gatorade. You sweat as the sun beamed on your forehead. Losing the last game made you angry and the heat from the sun made you angrier. You fast walked into the park entrance first admiring the scenery. Kids are playing on the slides while parents are chasing their kids from riding their bikes into the busy streets. This does not bother you much as you were once one of these kids. Finally making it to the basketball court, you greet your friends. They trash talk you into giving up. Calmly taking a swig of water you pull out your basketball and soon your friends set up the teams.

This was one of the scenarios I observed in a local park called “Lincoln Terrace”. Located on East New York Ave, Lincoln Terrace park is a park home to many local Crown Heights and Brownsville residents. Being one of the many parks in Brooklyn, this park offers many activities. From tennis to baseball, many people come to this park during their free time. One of these activities that will be looked into is basketball. Known as a competitive sport, many of the young men in the area find the game itself thrilling. This led to the following questions: Why do men play basketball outdoors as opposed to playing indoors? Does park usage have more to do with one's desire to connect with nature? People use the park as a safe haven from the busy outside world.

Context of “Street-Basketball” and Development of Public Parks

Basketball is thought to exist primarily in two spaces. First is within the NBA, National Basketball Association. Here is where professional basketball players compete with each other for championship titles. This style of basketball is usually played in a stadium. There is a certain way how activities function inside the arena. The other side is “street style”, a form of basketball typically played in local parks. Street style games are mostly found in “black urban locations, such as Jackson Park in Chicago, Mosswood Park in Oakland...” (Oates, 2017, p. 94).

Oates (2017) referenced Joel Dierstein identifying “‘the black style’ in athletics- a performance of sport closely associated with black masculinity, though not always performed by black men” (p. 95). This image of the street-style basketball games paints a negative stigma on local Black players. Usually, people who play street basketball are thought of as being the “unproductive ones” (Vieyra, 2016, p. 103). This segues into the way how professional or decent players view themselves. Vieyra included a study done by Reuban May which examines the way high school basketball players separate themselves from street players. “May finds that high school basketball players empathetically disassociate themselves from street culture, particularly the ‘three d’s’ of drugs, drinking, and delinquency” (Vieyra, 2016, p. 104). This separation also reflects the “decent-street” dichotomy mentioned in Oates article because the street players are an example of what not to become like.

The relationship urban park users have with the park has also changed over time. “Prior to the 1880’s, American park proponents tended to believe that nature included both the physical world and humanity” (Young, 1995, p. 537). As mentioned by Young, this idea stemmed from romanticism (p. 537). During the Romantic period, artists (whether it be musicians or painters) focused on communicating emotions, individualism, nature and the sublime through their work. As opposed to the Enlightenment era which draws on social order and industries, Romanticism is our personal relations within the social institutions. This does not mean that urban parks were at first “beautiful” though. “Park designers thought it best to create generic spaces linked by a composed repetition of earth, water, and the same plant species throughout...Later advocates considered a romantic park not as unacceptable but as underdeveloped” (Young, 1995, pp. 537, 539). The people who thought this were what Young calls, “rationalistic designers”. These park designers viewed goodness and nature as a union, which led them to want to improve the park by

making it aesthetically pleasing and purposeful (Young, 1995, p. 539). The basketball courts are a part of this goal. Objectively speaking, the court's function is to encourage people to be physically active, perfect their craft and stay focused. Especially in urban areas where crime is believed to be the most active in these spaces.

Methodology

According to “Lincoln Terrace/ Arthur S. Somers Park Map”, Lincoln Terrace park is divided into six sections. When entering the park on the Rochester Avenue side one will see a kids playground. To the left there are sage green benches and an open light green grass field that is currently under construction. Usually it smells like tree bark, however, smells of marijuana lingered in the air. To get to the basketball area I had to walk down Rochester Ave until I reached Carroll Street. Once reaching Carroll Street, I turned left into the park and began walking down until I saw the basketball courts. The courts are colored in blue and red. There were also five net goals in total. The height of the goals looked about the height of 3 people stacked on top of each other. A few yards away from the courts were the exercise bars used for pull ups.

To conduct this study I used an observational approach. The first observation will be descriptive while the rest are analytical. I went to Lincoln Terrace park around 1:15pm on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. I sat on one of the benches directly opposite from the basketball court. To take notes, a composition notebook and pen was used. Each day notes on what the players were wearing, who was there, and any patterns were to be noted. In addition, inferences on what the players purpose of being there were noted. This process would continue for approximately two hours over the span of 2 weeks.

Observations

On April 8th and 9th it was about 55 degrees. When I went to the basketball courts there were 8 guys in total. All of them are black. The men grouped themselves into two teams of four. It was unclear how they decided who gets to go first. However, the rules of the game were easy to follow. Whoever lost had to play the defense side. The defense side is when the players are protecting their goal. The side who won, the offense, had to try and score the ball into the net. Once this was decided, both groups got into their defensive stands while attempting to steal the ball from the opposing side. While moving the player with the ball had to make sure that the ball kept bouncing. All of the men were wearing sneakers and shorts. This game continued even after it began to drizzle around 2:17pm.

On April 13th it was 66 degrees. I arrived at the courts at 1:15pm. This time, only two friends out of the group were on the court. These were the same guys as last time as one of them had an afro while the other was wearing a hoodie over their head. The guy with the afro was wearing a blank tank top which soaked heavily from his sweat. It was clear he had been playing by himself for hours. This may have been because he is focused on perfecting his offense position. The other boy had on a blue hoodie and green shorts. The same system is happening where when one scores, they take ownership of the ball first for the match. Two boys walked into the court about 15 minutes after. They sat on the dark green bench towards the sides of the court. They sat for about 5 minutes then pulled out their own basketball to play with on the other half of the court. So now, there are two men playing on one half of the court and two boys on the right. The two boys that played on the right had blonde and black hair. I noticed the two boys sitting down on the bench after playing for what felt like 10 minutes. One of them began to play music on their phone while his friend danced. They began joking with each other, throwing

profanities at each other. At 2:15pm the scent of weed hits my nose again. It appears as though the group is in their own world.

Results

In a 2016 journal article titled “Opportunity or Orientation? Who Uses Urban Parks and Why”, Lin et al., conducted research on what draws urban residents to their local parks. What they found was that “urban dwellers are motivated to use park space primarily by their orientation toward nature, and less so by the opportunity to access nearby parks and green space (Table 1 and 2)” (p. 5). I would suggest that the “nature” of the group of men playing basketball is companionship. One pattern that kept popping up was that it was always the same group of friends playing in the same area of the park. Not one time during this study has there been a different group occupying this side of the court. Also, this group routinely meets up at 1:15pm to play. Meeting up with their friends is habitual for them. The courts resemble a place of unity. The men competing against each other is not so much about someone “winning and losing”, as mentioned by Oates (2017, p. 95). Rather, it symbolizes a place for one to express their thoughts and emotions, similar to how people gossip in hair salons. The hair salon or court is the medium/place where conversations are taking place. I saw this when some of them sat on one of the benches nearby, talking about their personal relationships with one another. Interacting with each other in the court is just natural.

In all three games I watched, all of the players emulated the relaxed nature of streetball. Oates (2017) explains that this is because “The rules governing the game are loosened and are sometimes abandoned altogether to account for extended celebrations...” (p. 95). Usually in the NBA, the game starts by the referee throwing the basketball into the air. This is done so that the ball can be unoccupied. In order for the ball to be in either team's possession, one player must try

to grab the ball first before the other person can get a chance to. I did not see this once during my observations. When the guys arrived at the courts, one person pulled out a ball from their backpack. Then, they immediately started to spread out and arrange their teams. It seemed as if it was solely based on whoever brought a ball to the court that day.

Discussion

It may also be useful to break down how the house, home and outdoors impacts our behaviors. A house is a building or structure that has many parts. Usually they have one or many floors depending on the design. The basic function of a house is to protect someone from the outside world. Whether it may be crime or harsh weather, people feel safe knowing they can retreat inside their house at any time. A home is personalized. When someone calls a place their “home”, it means a space where they can fully express themselves. A home provides an opportunity for vulnerability, as it is considered to be a private place. A house can be a home, however, not all homes are found within a house.

While observing the men at the park, I mentioned how they were laughing and throwing profanities at each other. For someone who does not understand playful banter, they may see this as aggressive. From my perspective, the tones of the men were filled with sarcasm and love. I believe the negative stereotype happens because being outdoors is usually associated with shame. There are certain codes and ethics to abide by when you are in public. Deviating from them can make someone feel embarrassed or even thrown in prison. I believe the park was able to break some of these norms because it essentially connects us to “primitive” times. Parks such as Lincoln Terrace are man made, yet, do not have a modernistic feel to them. There were no skyscrapers or high technology observed when I went to the park. This eases pressure off of local community members and allows them to be free to yell, laugh and cry in front of people.

Commercialization & Demoralization of Basketball

As mentioned earlier streetball players usually get stereotyped as being purposeless. This is due to what it means to live in a racialized space. Oates (2017) explains racialized space and its relation with sports commentary:

“In addition to creating places, the white spatial imaginary also manufactures a relatively consistent set of stories about those places. Thus, while racially segregated urban ghettos are places most middle class white people seek to avoid at all cost, they are nevertheless environments familiar to the mainstream through the narratives and frameworks created by commercial entertainment companies” (pp. 95-96).

Marketing companies make up fantasies about basketball but when faced with the reality of it, they feel uncomfortable. Because these men are not playing in a confined space, such as a school building or arena, their work ethic is shunned upon. Marketers used this to their advantage by commercializing basketball for profit. These marketers repackaged the basketball dream by making it appear accessible through “hard work”(Vieyra, 2016, p. 103). Take for instance the “Be Like Mike” slogan. Michael Jordan is one of the most iconic basketball players in NBA history. His charisma, championship title, and educational background led to him being loved all across America (Wright, 2016, p. 7). This either creates a feeling of insecurity or determination within urban “streetball” players, insinuating they are inherently missing something. The “something” may be the professional title, money and/or fame. Without these qualities, you might as well be considered inferior, even to people within your own race. This is one limitation I found in my study as interviews would have been helpful to understand why each man was personally drawn to playing basketball outdoors.

I made basketball the focus of my study because it has been referenced many times in pop culture. My first introduction to the game came from my own experiences within Lincoln Terrace park and the popular hit 1996 movie, *Space Jam*, starring Michael Jordan. Lincoln Terrace park, like many of New York City's parks, has numerous activities for people to participate in. In regards to the basketball courts, I discovered it was used as a safe haven for black men and youth to decompress. My observations and analysis did not align with the ideologies of sports commentary. Within the commentary of sports there is a clear separation between what is considered legit and unlegit basketball. My studies disproved this concept as it shows how street basketball remains a prominent part in New York City culture and is not planning on being erased any time soon.



Osondu, C. (2022). "Lincoln Terrace Park Benches". An example of one of the sage-green benches I sat on for this study.



Osondu, C (2022). “Lincoln Terrace Park Information Sheet”. The list of rules for park users are found above. The no smoking rule was not followed by some users in the park.



Osondu, C. (2022). Lincoln Terrace Basketball Courts. There are 5 guys (different from the one studied) playing basketball with one another. To the right is the exercise area where there are pull up bars. On the left, spectators watch while conversing with one another about the game.

References

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