

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

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Abstract: Verticality was an important aspect of urban African American life in the early twentieth century. In this paper, the term stands for three different but entangled concepts of verticality: vertical city planning, vertical social mobility, and vertical movement. Basketball, as an expression of urban African American culture, serves as a connecting link between these three different notions of verticality, incorporating facets of all of them. Firstly, due to its spatial adaptability and upright dimension, basketball thrived in the confined space of the inner city where traditional American team sports like baseball or football faded. Secondly, the founding of athletic clubs and the organization of basketball-and-dance events did not only strengthen African American communities by instilling black pride and a new urban identity, but also promoted hope for upward social mobility. Thirdly, basketball quickly became entwined with other aspects of African American culture, primarily dances that, like the Lindy Hop with its jumping motions, also involved a vertical aspect.

The 1890s were the decade that saw the end of horizontal America. Vertical America was on the rise. The city of Chicago, birthplace of the skyscraper, played a decisive role in this spatial shift of the imagined American landscape. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed his influential frontier thesis at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago. According to his thesis, the Anglo-Saxon settlers' specifically American character was formed through the cathartic experience at the frontier where civilization and wilderness clashed (293). On the same occasion, Turner also noted that the official closing of the frontier by the Superintendent for the Census of 1890 had put an end to expansionist American history of old (1). In accordance with Turner's thesis, new immigrants and African Americans moving North in search of a better life were thus almost automatically

barred from this horizontal version of Americanization. The new immigrants' first American experience, as well as the African Americans' coming-to-terms with the nation they had been held bondage in for generations, primarily took place in the big city and not in the Wild West or in the rural South. To them, the city of turn-of-the-century America had become the new, vertical frontier.

By focusing on basketball, it is the aim of this paper to uncover the 'vertical' as a structural and sociocultural element of African American life in the big city of the early twentieth century. In this matter, different concepts of verticality have already been offered by scholars from various fields of history, although the exact term verticality itself may not have been used. The two most insightful works, Steven A. Riess' *City Games* (1989) and Gena Caponi-Tabery's *Jump for Joy* (2008), both include basketball as an explanatory variable for the vertical dimension of the urban scenario.

In his sports-historical treatise, Riess traces the development of urban sports from the era of folk games in the early nineteenth century until the era of professionalism and consumerism in the mid to late twentieth century. At home in the fields of urban and sports history, Riess chooses a sociohistorical approach for his work. Among others, he focuses on the integration of the new immigrants and African Americans as well as on the social and economic structures and group identities of ethnic communities. Notions of verticality that can implicitly be derived from his work are mainly architectural and socioeconomic in nature. Using the example of basketball, Riess shows that the inner city was lacking appropriate horizontal space for other team sports. A very vivid example for the vertical adjustment to this shortage of horizontal space is an 1898 photograph of a rooftop playground (*City Games* 168-69). Riess also does not fail to mention that traditionally urban sports like boxing and basketball usually were an indicator of the low social status of an athlete, but at the same time proved to be a possible, if narrow, avenue for economic success.

Caponi-Tabery explicitly mentions the term verticality in her book, even naming a subchapter "The Vertical City" (28). Although she leaves out neither discussing the cityscape nor touching upon the low socioeconomic status of urban African Americans, the bulk of her work is dedicated to cultural aspects, mainly black jazz music and dance. Caponi-Tabery's roots within the 'new cultural history'¹ can, for

1 The 'new cultural history' stands for a number of developments and concepts in cultural history that, since the mid 1990s, have aimed to advance or even transcend traditional social history that was felt to be outdated. By and large, the new cultural history focuses on areas of study like consumer culture, black culture, Indian culture, or women's culture that were formerly neglected by social history. The new cultural history is interdisciplinary in approach and is influenced by concepts from literary studies and anthropology. Among others, it is trying to understand patterns of human perception and construction, and it examines the historical change of experiences, emotions, and behavior (cf. Heideking 148-49; or Jordan 175).

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

instance, be seen in her interpretation of the skyscraper as a symbol of ambitious culture rather than as a structuring, sociogeographic element of the inner city (*Jump for Joy* 29). Her reading of the jump in dances and in basketball as a symbol of rising confidence and enthusiasm among African Americans prior to World War II is intriguing (“Jump for Joy” 40). The jump hints at a hope for upward social mobility but also at the beginnings of a visually African American-dominated consumer culture in the entertainment industry of the twentieth century, particularly in music and professional sports.

In the following, basketball, as an expression of urban African American culture, will be used to bring together three different notions of verticality: vertical city planning with a focus on the lack of horizontal space and the symbolism of the skyscraper; vertical social mobility with an overview of emerging separate black sports structures; and, lastly, vertical movement with a comparison between elements of black social dances and basketball. To retrieve those elements that help make the vertical visible—not only in its individual aspects, but also as an integrated picture of the vertical city of early-twentieth-century America—I consulted texts from diverse, relevant scholarly fields: sports history, architectural history, urban history, and cultural studies. I argue that basketball serves in a unique way to unite arguments from cultural and social history and thus offers the vertical as an integrated concept to read urban African American history of the time.

URBANIZATION, THE SKYSCRAPER, AND THE ETHNIC DIMENSION OF INNER-CITY SPORTS

In 1890, when real estate prices in central Chicago were skyrocketing, the tall office building featuring twelve or more stories became the trendsetting symbol of the future (Merwood-Salisbury 1). This development was not restricted to Chicago alone, but very soon also captured other northeastern cities that were short on inner-city office space. At the end of the nineteenth century, these cities, especially New York, also felt the increasing pressure of having to accommodate a rising immigrant population.

Most established Americans were far from enthusiastic about the fast growth of the cities and were later just as annoyed by the architectural change in the urban landscape. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, stated: “I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man” (qtd. in Krieger 40). Almost a century later, Henry James mentioned that he disliked skyscrapers and much preferred the horizontality “of the great Palladian pile just erected by Messrs” (qtd. in Nye 255). The “culture of congestion,” as Caponi-Tabery describes the situation of the confined

inner city, stood witness to the changing spatial realities in the United States (*Jump for Joy* 28-29). By the early 1900s, the vertical city had succeeded the concept of horizontal America, challenging the traditional pioneer lifestyle that was based on the claiming of space and the restless urge to move westward, on to better horizons.

Architects trained to think in the Italian and French schools agreed with intellectuals like Jefferson and James, feeling that skyscrapers violated classic proportions. They were interpreted as manifest symbols of human hubris as their verticality communicated soaring energy, if not divinity. They dwarfed official buildings and churches, visibly surpassing them in height. On a more philosophical note, they were also deemed to violate the sense of the sky as the limit; at first by thrusting up too high into the air and later by eliminating the framing cornices and crowning domes that used to signify the end of traditional buildings (Nye 255-56). In such a critical reading of their nature, skyscrapers were regarded as sheer physical expressions of economic power in an urban equation of height with might (Caponi-Tabery, *Jump for Joy* 29).

Not all views on the skyscraper as a commercial symbol of modernity were as negative, though. Especially prominent European visitors to New York adopted a less biased stance towards the rapidly changing urban landscape. Jean-Paul Sartre stated that “American cities change faster than their inhabitants do” and that, for Europeans, “a city is, above all, a past,” while for Americans “it is mainly a future” (qtd. in Krieger 41). During his 1935 trip to America, Suisse architect Le Corbusier also remarked upon the fact that “New York is nothing more than a provisional city” that, as a “suggestion of a truly modern city,” still had not gone far enough in its reinvention (qtd. in Page 181). To him, Manhattan’s skyscrapers were still too small and too disorganized. The changing cityscape, that is, the replacement of the old townhouse with the new skyscraper, also was not missed by countless contemporary American photographers and painters who picked it up as a leitmotif in their work (Page 165). The tall buildings, which had created an all-new skyline—shaped by ambitious architects and shaping a new urban culture in turn—were thus most often interpreted as symbols for a bright future and for the upward thrust of the human spirit. While they were symbolizing and physically suggesting upward mobility, skyscrapers ignored horizontal mobility (Caponi-Tabery, *Jump for Joy* 28). No one felt this lack of horizontal space more directly than the people living in the narrow urban canyons of the inner city. However, it was up to these common people, mostly immigrants and African Americans, to infuse this new urban space with their experiences, knowledge, and culture.

It may be oversimplifying the matter to draw a direct comparison between the skyscraper, as a symbol of the vertical, and basketball, which, with its slam dunks and jump shots, more than any other team sport involves an upright dimension. The two

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

phenomena, the skyscraper and the game of basketball, were, however, indirectly linked. Both their vertical developments were at least to some degree nurtured by the lack of horizontal space in the inner city. Up until the 1920s, basketball courts were usually surrounded by a cage-like mesh barrier (Kirchberg 22). This fact highlights the urban aspects of the game, namely the very limited space of play and the roughness that was as much an element of original basketball as of life in the inner city. As journalist Jeff Greenfield puts it, basketball—its small-sized court resembling the cramped space of the inner city—is about the expansion of existing and the creation of new space, a technique that African Americans were the first to adapt to by incorporating a vertical dimension into their game (374).

The specific spatial and social conditions of the industrialized city of turn-of-the-century America decisively shaped the young game which had only been invented in 1891 by Canadian teacher Dr. James Naismith.² The spatial conditions were made up of two different categories of space in which basketball was played: the open space, i.e. streets or school yards, and the developed space, i.e. dance halls, churches, even empty hospital wings, or, rather rarely, gymnasiums (Riess, *City Games* 107; Kuska 6). The social conditions consisted of the ethnic composition and the class structure of the urban population that took to playing basketball, as well as of the organizations and social institutions—like YMCAs, settlement houses, or athletic clubs—that offered sports programs and suitable facilities (Riess, *City Games* 2, 107). In Chicago, for example, the Special Park Commission, set up by well-to-do volunteers in 1899, began to complement its offer of playgrounds with organized sports and competitive games for the over half a million children living in the city (McArthur 377, 381). This ambitious program was soon copied by other cities. A 1904 equipment list of the Public Playground Committee of Washington, DC, exemplifies the hierarchy of team sports in the inner city. Basketball was clearly favored, since the Committee owned only “2 baseball sets” but “7 sets of basket-ball goals and posts” (Mergen 390-91). In short, basketball literally was a niche sport that thrived where lack of space did not allow for any other games to be played and it was mainly pursued by those living in these confined urban spaces.³

2 Dr. James Naismith originally designed the game to keep his rowdy students at the International Training School of the Young Men’s Christian Association in Springfield, MA, busy during the winter season, but it also quickly caught on with urban youth (Carruth and Ehrlich 49-50).

3 Cf. Riess: “Professional ballplayers had always been disproportionately urban, particularly from major cities, and that pattern still holds. In the 1960s and 1970s nearly all NBA players (91.3 percent) were urban; and nearly half, from large cities (49.5 percent)—usually from the inner city, where boys did not have much money or many constructive alternatives for their free time other than sports. [...] As Pete Axthelm pointed out a few years ago, ‘Other young athletes may learn basketball, but (inner) city kids live it’” (*City Games* 116-17).

Between 1890 and 1920, the population of northern cities exploded. New York's population more than tripled, increasing from 1.5 to 5.6 million ("Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1890"; and "Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1920").⁴ By 1910, more than forty percent of New York City's population and thirty-six percent of Chicago's population were foreign born (Heinze 142). In contrast to the large immigrant population, black populations in northern cities were rather small at the turn of the century. Between the two World Wars, however, an influx of African Americans, moving from the rural South to the industrialized North, additionally contributed to a dramatic demographic shift. Of those blacks who had migrated north in search of better jobs and a life free from the racial discrimination of the Jim Crow laws, seventy percent lived "crowded in ghetto communities" (Riess, *City Games* 92).

One way in which the urban lower classes of African American, Irish, Jewish, or German ethnicity displayed a common identity was through sports activities, which served recreational purposes, evoked group consciousness, and helped lift their self-esteem. In the cities, this often meant the formation of ethnic basketball teams which quickly became the pride of the whole community. The industrialized city was the perfect breeding ground for the sport of basketball. Since traditional American team sports like baseball or football demanded wide open pastoral spaces that only were to be found in the suburbs, the large, young, and ethnically diverse urban population made basketball their game of choice. Keeping these demographics in mind, it is not surprising that many successful professional and amateur basketball teams of the early twentieth century were of Irish, German, East European, or Jewish ethnicity. Team names like the Irish Brooklyn Visitations, Buffalo Germans, Polish Detroit Pulaskis, and South Philadelphia Hebrew Allstars bear witness to a lively immigrant basketball tradition in northeastern cities (Kirchberg 26; Riess, *City Games* 108).

The fast urban growth did not only pose challenges to city planners, though. Social conflicts between white and black Americans troubled the United States, especially during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Apart from scores of brutal lynchings all over the country, during which more than one thousand African Americans were murdered, white mob actions targeted black neighborhoods and led to serious unrests, the worst of them occurring in Chicago during the Red Summer of 1919 when twenty-three blacks and fifteen whites were killed (Knopf 315).

This racially hostile atmosphere also found its way into the sports arena. In the 1910s, black or integrated basketball teams were frequently facing hostilities—ranging

4 Even without taking into account the consolidation of the five boroughs Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx, and Richmond (today Staten Island) into Greater New York in 1898, New York City's population grew dramatically from 1900 (3,437,202) to 1920 (5,620,048) by more than two million people.

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

from dirty fouls and racist insults on court to physical assaults after games—whenever they traveled into white sections of a town. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations describes one such incidence in a 1922 study:

Two Seniors in a high school mainly white [...] described the way they handled the Negro members of a visiting basket-ball team: “On the way over here fellows on the outside bailed them out, but our fellows sure got them on the way home. There were three black fellows on the team and those three got just about laid out. Our team wouldn’t play them, so there was a great old row. Then, when they went home, some of our boys were waiting for them to come out of the building to give them a chase. The coons were afraid to come out, so policemen had to be called to take them to the car line. The white fellows weren’t hurt any, but the coons got some bricks.” (Chicago Commission 253)

White Anglo-Saxon skepticism and discrimination in the sports arena was not exclusively directed against African Americans. Especially Jewish immigrants also received their share of discrimination. By the 1920s and 1930s, sportswriters had identified basketball as the “Jewish game” (Levine 299). According to estimates during that time, half of all players in the American Basketball League were Jewish, with the Cleveland Rosenblums and the Philadelphia SPHAs (South Philadelphia Hebrew All-Stars) being the most successful teams (Riess, *City Games* 108). Rational explanations for the success of Jewish basketball players—the fact that most of them lived in urban centers where no other team sport was available—were largely ignored. Instead, journalists like Paul Gallico, sports editor for the *New York Daily News*, came up with discriminatory statements that are in many ways reminiscent of racist arguments used to explain today’s black domination of the game:

“The game appeals to the temperament of the Jews.” While “a good Jewish football player is a rarity . . . Jews flock to basketball by the thousands,” he insisted, because it placed “a premium on an alert, scheming mind . . . flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smart aleckness,” traits naturally appealing to “the Hebrew with his Oriental background.” (qtd. in Levine 299)

Whereas the large number of southern and eastern European immigrants steadily gained recognition and, in turn, political strength in the years around World War I, African Americans living in northern cities experienced a decline in their position. In this respect, sport serves as a reliable indicator of social status and ethnicity. By the middle of the twentieth century, the absence of Jewish athletes from boxing and basketball, two typically urban lower-class sports they had excelled at in the early 1900s,

was a sign of the changing racial and ethnic makeup of the inner city.⁵ Many Jewish Americans, who had become better educated or had founded successful businesses, moved to the suburbs—a process in line with Frederick Jackson Turner’s idea of horizontal Americanization. African Americans followed into their urban footsteps, quickly achieving dominance in the boxing ring and on the basketball court. Until today, this pattern has proved to be a very narrow road of social mobility for African Americans, though. Only around four percent of high school players make the roster of a college team, and even fewer get to play professionally, let alone in the National Basketball Association (Riess, *City Games* 116-17).

SEPARATE AFRICAN AMERICAN SPORTS STRUCTURES AND THE RISE OF BLACK BASKETBALL

Prior to the massive migration of Southern blacks between the two World Wars, many African Americans had lived in integrated neighborhoods in northern cities, despite racial prejudices. With an increasing black population, however, residential ghettos formed and once latent discrimination in public places became more frequent. Discrimination against African Americans was manifold and showed as much in official neglect of their needs as in everyday open hostilities.

African Americans’ access to semipublic and public sports facilities was also limited in numerous ways. Some athletic clubs or Young Men’s Christian Associations asked for fees to cover their expenses, almost automatically excluding poor urban blacks; others offered their facilities to African Americans only at fixed hours (Riess, *City Games* 114-15). School sports in inner-city districts were also perennially underfunded and the situation was especially dire in cities like Washington with its segregated school system. In Washington, public money was spent on improving white playgrounds while the development stalled in African American neighborhoods. By 1911, only two black playgrounds existed for fifty thousand children (Kuska 18). Although New York City—in contrast to Washington—offered parks, playgrounds, and baths to whites as well as blacks, many African American families would not make use of these facilities because of “the rude treatment awaiting them from other visitors” (Ovington 108). At the same time, professional African American athletes had been forced out of baseball and most other organized sports by the late 1880s (Rader 294-95). Outside of a very few northern universities, no integrated basketball teams

5 Regarding the success of Jewish athletes in basketball, cf. Levine 299-307.

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

existed during the first few decades of the twentieth century.⁶ African Americans were only allowed to compete in the low-status sport of boxing but, following Jack Johnson's tenure (1908-1915) as heavyweight champion, were not given the chance to fight for another title until Joe Louis in 1937 (Riess, *Major Problems* 278).

In the early 1900s, these severe limitations and instances of discrimination prompted African American urban leaders to promote black self-sufficiency, including economic and political independence (Heinze 152). With respect to the abysmal situation of black athletics, African American activists also began to seek alternative solutions outside of white sports organizations. In Washington, DC, the focus was on improving existing black school sports structures. In northern cities like New York, newly gained independence, which was as much based on an early form of black pride as on social exclusion by the white majority, showed in the formation of black athletic clubs that offered numerous sports, among them basketball. With its diverse facets, African American sports activism would become a symbol of new black confidence and, speaking in terms of verticality, it carried with it the hope for upward social mobility.

Although Riess refers to basketball as the "ghetto game," it took well-educated black men to break racist barriers and establish an African American basketball tradition at the dawn of the twentieth century (*City Games* 116). Two of the most important men in this regard, albeit for different reasons, were Edwin Bancroft Henderson, who established the first black High School Athletic Association in Washington, and Cumberland Posey, who was the most influential black basketball player and manager of the 1910s and early 1920s:

Posey and Henderson were dedicated, smart men who wielded their education like weapons. Henderson funneled his knowledge into athletics to mold young minds muscular-Christian style, while Posey was a businessman who made segregation work for him [by organizing highly anticipated, profitable matches between black and white teams.]. Both, in their refusal to accept the limitations mandated by racism, worked as cultural rebels in a blues era. (George 19)

Men like Posey and Henderson did not only change the way basketball was played, they were also influential in turning the game into an expressive form of urban African American culture. On top of that, the successful founding of separate sports institutions and professional basketball teams infused African American communities

6 According to Arthur Ashe (qtd. in George 16), only eight African Americans are known to have played on white varsities from 1900 until the end of World War I, among them future Loendi Big Five star Cumberland Posey (Penn State, 1909, and Duquesne, 1916) and famous athlete, artist, and social activist Paul Robeson (Rutgers, 1915-1918).

with pride and confidence and opened up an avenue, if very narrow, of upward social mobility for talented black players.

As black basketball pioneer Edwin Bancroft Henderson painfully had to learn one night in late 1907, even the brotherly love of the YMCAs did not transgress color lines. When Henderson, the first African American to teach physical education at a black public school, and a friend entered the gym of the segregated Central YMCA in Washington, they were hoping to watch or even play with the all-white team because no organized black basketball teams existed in Washington at the time. Instead of being invited to join, however, they were rudely expelled from the gym by the YMCA's athletic director, because several members had been complaining about "uninvited blacks invading the club" (Kuska 1-2). After all, a lax enforcement of segregation was feared to negatively affect the YMCA's membership figures.

Ed Henderson had organized the Interscholastic Athletic Association as a governing body for all secondary schools in the Mid-Atlantic States in 1906 (Bayne 81-82).⁷ He was driven by a far bigger vision, though. Henderson saw sports as a viable means to accomplish racial equality and—according to Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins—used it as a strategy of "muscular assimilation" (270):

Henderson envisioned achievement in athletics as the best weapon for attacking and destroying Jim Crow. He believed that in sports, unlike politics, all races followed the same rules. Henderson reasoned that with formalized training, black athletes would have a rare chance to compete on equal terms with whites. They would have the opportunity to outperform them, capture the nation's imagination with their poise and talent, and debunk the stereotypes that stigmatized the race. For an unproven young man like Henderson, these were radical notions. (Kuska 13)

Keeping in mind the time and age at which Henderson voiced his thoughts on the competitive role and at the same integrative force of sports—decades before the 1960s' Civil Rights Movement had formed—his notion of a 'level playing field' was indeed radical. At least for the duration of a sports contest it meant a serious social uplift for African Americans.

While Washington—thanks to Edwin Henderson's initiative—had early on established itself as the capital of black school sports, New York would become the

7 Henderson's dedication to black school sports was bearing fruit. In 1908, an eight-team all-black basketball league had formed and by 1910, just four years after its inception, the ISAA had trained forty teams and about one thousand players. The eight entries in the first basketball league in Washington, which became known simply as the Basket Ball League, were Armstrong High School, M Street High School, Howard Academy, Howard Medical, Howard College, Crescent Athletic Club, Oberlin Athletic Club, and LeDroit Park (Kuska 3, 25-26).

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

hub for professional black basketball over the next twenty years. Nevertheless, the first steps for basketball enthusiasts from the Big Apple were difficult. Unlike in Washington, where the leaders of the black physical education movement were able to build on existing sports programs of the city's black school system, New York's schools were not segregated. Additionally, none of the existing black YMCAs in Manhattan and Brooklyn had the capacity to house appropriate sports facilities. Since the black YMCA building boom of the late teens and early twenties was still a decade off, black New Yorkers had to rely on private initiatives. The black churches, not valuing the benefits of physical education, proved to be no help to the movement, the single exception being the Episcopalians (Kuska 22).

With support from the Episcopalian diocese, black New Yorkers began organizing independent athletic clubs in Manhattan and Brooklyn in 1904. Quickly, these clubs, which resembled fraternities, developed into community centers where people could meet, relax from everyday stress, and, above all, keep themselves fit. By 1905, some of the clubs began introducing team sports like cricket, baseball, and basketball (Kuska 23). In 1906, the Smart Set Athletic Club of Brooklyn became the first organized black basketball team in New York. Only one year later, Harlem's St. Christopher Club and Manhattan's Marathon Athletic Club joined the Smart Set in organizing the Olympian Athletic League, the first black club league in New York City (George 16; McKissack 24). Other New York athletic clubs soon followed suit. The prime reason for the large number of black basketball clubs in New York was the scatteredness of the city's black population. The approximately 90,000 African Americans living in the city had not gathered in a single neighborhood as the move to Harlem, though underway, had not yet peaked (Kuska 24). Therefore, the clubs did not only instill racial pride in African Americans as a group, but also nurtured a strong local identity among their followers, almost to the degree of fanaticism.

The first interregional competition between 'Black Fives'⁸ took place in 1909 between New York's Smart Set and a couple of Washington high schools from the Henderson-founded Athletic Association. To showcase the dominance of the New York basketball scene, the Smart Set demolished Crescent High School 27:11 and Armstrong High School 18:4 (McKissack 25). The defeat of two of their most talented teams was bitter for Washington. Making adjustments for the next interregional competition, Henderson put together a more physical team, consisting of former Washington high school players: the 12th Street YMCA. During the 1909-10 season, the 12th Street YMCA would go undefeated, winning all of its eleven games.

8 The term 'Black Five' refers to all-black basketball teams and was mainly used during the first half of the twentieth century.

In the last game of the season, the 12th Streeters beat the Smart Set in Brooklyn 20:17 in front of more than 2,000 spectators and in this way directly dethroned the reigning champion. How much significance players and coaches already attached to winning, even though organized black basketball was still in its infancy, can be seen in the Smart Set's rude reaction to the loss. As Bob Kuska describes it, Smart Set coach J. Hoffman Woods "shoved the game trophy into Henderson's hands, saying that there would be no formal presentation of the trophy later that evening" (Kuska 28).



RELIGIOUS TRAINING AND PHYSICAL CULTURE
An evidence of the remarkable advancement of members of the Young Men's Christian Association in the development of mind and body.

Fig. 1. "Religious Training and Physical Culture." *Hoopedia*. NBA, n.d. Web. 31 Mar. 2010. <http://hoopedia.nba.com/index.php?title=12th_Street_YMCA>.⁹

Although Henderson's team was able to repeat its success the following season, the future of black basketball lay in New York and other more populous cities in the northeast, where bigger locations meant larger attendances and more revenue. Slowly but surely a rift was growing between those teams who were adamantly propagating the spirit of amateurism and those who were opening up to profit. According to sportswriter Romeo Dougherty, it was only logical that promoters, team managers, and players sensed an opportunity to make money out of the game since basketball was "king of the winter," generating thousands of dollars each season in New York (Kuska

⁹ Colored Basketball World's Champions 1909-10, Edwin Bancroft Henderson is holding the Basketball.

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

59). Professional players for the Loendi Five or the New York Incorporators were earning approximately \$25 per game. Though not as lucrative as baseball, the combination of basketball games with dance events was able to attract more than 3,000 spectators in New York's Manhattan Casino (McKissack 36).

Despite the different approaches to establishing basketball in Washington and New York—either through school associations or through private athletic clubs—one of the main motivations for black physical education activists was identical: the high black mortality rate, especially that of children.¹⁰ The hard urban life, Henderson argued, left blacks neither the time nor the space to exercise regularly and to reinvigorate their ‘natural vitality.’ He therefore saw the building of an athletic association as one of the central steps towards reaching the goal of training young African Americans in “hygienic habits” and “physical education” (Kuska 12). In New York, African Americans were also eagerly campaigning to see physical fitness programs expanded. They all hoped that regular exercise might increase their resistance to diseases and, in turn, would do away with white prejudice regarding their supposedly inferior physical fitness.

African Americans benefited from the establishment of separate black sports structures in a number of ways. Firstly, the founding of athletic associations and clubs schooled African Americans in democratic institution-building processes—a skill that those among them who had fled the unfree life of the post-Reconstructionist South had not been able to hone. Secondly, being able to do physical exercise allowed African Americans to develop a positive connection to their bodies, thereby also improving their health. Last but not least, team sports were a particularly important corner stone in building urban African American communities since they offered people an opportunity to gather, celebrate, and exchange ideas in a public space. All of the above-mentioned developments are indicators of the ‘socioeconomic vertical,’ as they all contributed to an improvement of urban living conditions.

10 In 1908, in New York City, two out of seven African American babies died before their first birthday (Ovington 29-30). While some white public health officials remarked upon the “sickly city-dwelling black,” Henderson was aware that not only African Americans were dying of tuberculosis, since the “White Plague” had also killed nearly four hundred whites in 1900 (Kuska 12). Journalist and NAACP cofounder Mary White Ovington also contests such racist views in her book *Half a Man* (1911), arguing that the poor sanitary conditions of the overcrowded tenements were the most important cause for the high black infant death rates.

WHEN BASKETBALL MET MUSIC AND DANCE

From its very beginnings, basketball was connected to music and dance events in the black community, no matter at what level of play: scholastic, collegiate, or professional. The combination made sense since both basketball and dancing were indoor activities that required active crowds as well as hardwood flooring. Most importantly, though, appropriate locations were scarce in inner-city districts, so sharing them was almost inevitable. Since 1907, Howard University games, which were held at True Reformer's Hall—a four-story brick building on the corner of 12th Street and U Street NW Washington, DC, seating about five hundred spectators—were always followed by a dance:

After each game, Henderson turned the lights down low, and the orchestra leader struck up the band. While the Lyric Orchestra thrummed through the numbered selections in the printed dance card, couples clasped hands and waltzed away their cares. (Kuska 3)

By the late 1920s, slow waltzes had been superseded by faster swing tunes in Harlem ballrooms. The new swinging sound contained different stylistic features, among others the extensive use of four-four rhythms, pizzicato string bass, and prominent drumming. Together, these elements produced innovative timbral and rhythmic effects (Spring 183). The Lindy Hop, first introduced by African American dancer 'Shorty' George Snowden during a 1928 dance marathon at the Savoy Ballroom, became the popular step to this new tune (189). In continuation of the Charleston, which became very popular in New York after it appeared in the Broadway show *Runnin' Wild* (1923), the Lindy Hop produced increasingly high levels of energy in social dancing (Monaghan 124; Spring 186).

These high levels of energy on the dance floor were mirrored on the basketball court by a rapidly increasing quality of play. In New York, where black nightlife had started to blossom in the wake of the Harlem Renaissance, the first professional all-black basketball teams had established themselves by the late 1920s. Nevertheless, teams still depended on having dances after games or “nobody would come to the damn thing,” McKissack quotes Eyre Saitch who played for the New York Rens during the 1930s (54; also cf. Caponi-Tabery, *Jump for Joy* 15). Framed in the nightlife atmosphere of the Renaissance Casino in Harlem, basketball games of the Rens were important social events where people came to see who was with whom and what they were wearing. It is not surprising that the style of play developed under these conditions began to differ from that of most white basketball players who had picked up their game under the more restricted patterns of college and official league play, opportunities that African American athletes were being denied in most cases.

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

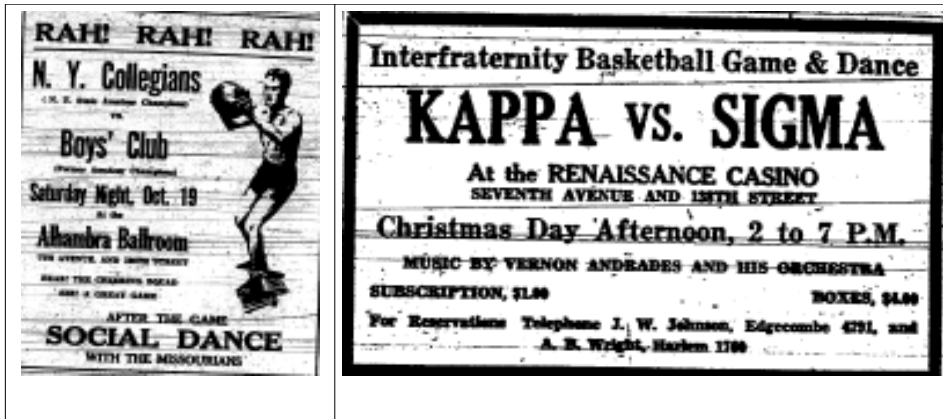


Fig. 2. “N.Y. Collegians vs. Boys’ Club.” *New York Amsterdam News* 9 Oct. 1929: 13. Print.
Fig. 3. “Kappa vs. Sigma.” *New York Amsterdam News* 18 Dec. 1929: 17. Print.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, newspapers—especially those catering to African American readers—were full of ads for basketball-and-dance events during the winter season. Of course, African Americans did not hold a copyright on the combination of basketball and music. “SPHA Saturday-night ‘Basketball and Dance’ parties,” for instance, were big social events, where many Jewish Philadelphians met their future spouses (Riess, *City Games* 108). What made the black basketball-and-dance combination unique, though, was the fact that sport and music formed a mutually reinforcing unit that became a confident expression of prospering black urban culture. Nelson George describes the nature of bebop, rhythm and blues, and the new ‘cool’ attitude of those young men immersed in big-city black culture in the following way:

The rhythm & blues band saxophonist often played bebop at after-hour clubs following his regular gig, and he always acted as cool as possible. Sometimes a neighborhood’s Bigger Thomas [the main character in Richard Wright’s book *Native Son* (1940)] was cool, hiding his hostility under a guise of distance, which made him both alluring and dangerous. It is in this context of creativity and anger that black athletes began displaying a new approach to basketball. “A distinctive ‘Black’ style of play developed that featured speed, uncommon jumping ability, and innovative passing skill,” Arthur Ashe wrote in *A Hard Road to Glory*. (62-63)

During the era of the Great Depression, playground basketball became one of the few avenues of expression open to unemployed African American men. Just like in jazz music and black vernacular dancing, they could earn a reputation for creativity and improvisation (Bayne 84; Jackson 40). Although African American expressive culture has often been described as improvisational by scholars, it is far from disorderly. It

relies on particular choreographies, enacted within the ritual moment of a dance, jazz concert, or basketball game. African American expressive culture thus functions through a constant overlapping and intersecting of individuation and ritualization (Jackson 49). Black basketball of the 1930s is a good example of the harmonious entanglement of individuality with conformity. The sport's fancy moves, like no-look passes, behind-the-back dribbles, and jump shots, were all not only within the official rules but also served the inherent purpose of the game, that is moving the ball and scoring.

The chance to leave a distinctively black mark on basketball made the game different from prize fighting and baseball, which, during the first decades of the twentieth century, were far more popular spectator sports in the African American community. As Frederick Ivor-Campbell rightfully argues, baseball had many fathers (6). Its core rules were set in 1845, at a time when the vast majority of African Americans were still enslaved and therefore unable to participate in the development of the game. Basketball on the other hand, only having been invented in 1891, was still a sport in the making. Constant rule changes—during the 1910s as many as four different sets of rules existed and were negotiated over before games—bore as much witness to the then still fluent state of the game as newly-evolving tactics and styles of play.¹¹

Black style of play, i.e. the style of successful black teams, set itself apart from most white basketball teams of the day. The Loendi Big Five from Pittsburgh, led by star player Cumberland Posey, won the Colored Basketball World's Championship an unprecedented four times in a row (1920-1923) with an up-tempo style of play that had never been seen before. At a time when most teams concentrated on stopping the opponent from scoring and taking only few low-risk shots themselves, the Loendi's fast-paced game with an emphasis on forcing turnovers, quickly running down the court, and taking lots of shots was breathtaking. As Fredrick McKissack, Jr., convincingly argues, there was a very mundane reason for Posey's Loendi Big Five to apply this up-tempo style of play: "The fans liked [it] and they flocked to the gate. More fans, more money" (34-35).

In her essay "Jump for Joy," Caponi-Tabery focuses on the positive aspect of the jump as a symbol of rising confidence and enthusiasm among African Americans prior to World War II (40). The jump shot—which up to the 1950s had been exclusively associated with African American players, as it was regarded to be showy and undisciplined by white coaches—appeared around 1937, at almost the same time the

11 Cf. Kirchberg 23; or Kuska 39. For a summary of basketball rule changes, cf. "Basketball Rules 'Original.'"

Into the Vertical: Basketball, Urbanization, and African American Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America

Lindy Hop had begun to include jumping “air steps” (*Jump for Joy* 39, 54; Monaghan 125). Author Carl Van Vechten gives a biased description of the Lindy Hop in his novel *Parties: Scenes from Contemporary New York Life* (1930), attributing a certain wildness to the black dance. Nonetheless, Van Vechten’s observation serves well to display the specifically vertical elements of the dance:

The Lindy Hop consists in a certain dislocation of the rhythm of the fox-trot, followed by leaps and quivers, hops and jumps, eccentric flinging about of the arms and legs, and contortions of the torso only fittingly to be described by the word epileptic. After the fundamental steps of the dance have been published, the performers may consider themselves at liberty to improvise. (qtd. in Spring 187)

Another aspect through which the Lindy Hop, also sometimes called the Jitterbug, made itself comparable to basketball is the so-called jockeying motion (Jackson 47). It includes improvised, alternating weight shifting which is reminiscent of the crouching positions the ball-carrying player and the defender assume in basketball.

The almost simultaneous appearance of the jump shot and the Lindy Hop certainly was not owing to a coordinated effort. Nevertheless, it was at this urban juncture of basketball and jazz that an important part of African American expressive culture developed, which, sharing vertical elements like the jump, showcased the close connection of sports and music. Both the Lindy Hop and black basketball endured; they were, in fact, thriving. The Lindy Hop remained a central artistic motif of the cultural survival strategy of African Americans (Monaghan 126). The dance was readily picked up by white Americans who frequented the integrated balls at the Savoy Ballroom that attracted up to 7,000 people every night (Spring 189). Games of famous all-black barnstorming teams like the New York Rens and the Harlem Globetrotters were popular sports events and attracted large white audiences. In 1950, four black pioneers—Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, Nat ‘Sweetwater’ Clifton, and Hank DeZonie—entered the previously all-white National Basketball Association (Thomas x-xi). Basketball, as a joint symbol of the vertical, had gone all the way in making urban black culture visible to white America.

CONCLUSION

To African Americans living in large cities of the early twentieth century, the vertical was more than just a spatial dimension. The term verticality also encompasses social and cultural aspects of their urban realities, chief among them the hope for upward mobility and the establishment of an expressive black culture. The sport of basketball

is a constant encountered in the previously discussed concepts of verticality. It therefore does not only function well as a uniting link between them, but also serves as an analytical tool to make the separate yet entangled notions of verticality visible in the first place.

The urban scenario decisively influenced the advancement of basketball during the first half of the twentieth century. The lack of space made other traditional American team sports like baseball and football virtually impossible to pursue in the inner city. Just like architecture with its soaring skyscrapers had found a formidable way to make the best of the shortage of horizontal space, basketball excelled in the inner city. During the 1920s and 1930s, new immigrants and especially African Americans turned it into a truly vertical game through the invention of new techniques like the jump shot.

As African Americans were facing severe discrimination in all aspects of life during the early twentieth century, it was essential for them to develop separate black sports structures if they wanted to pursue games like basketball. Carried by sports activists like Edward Henderson in Washington or sports entrepreneurs like Cumberland Posey in Pittsburgh, the first black basketball teams and leagues were formed. The common effort to establish new sports institutions endowed urban African Americans, who had moved north in hope for upward social mobility, with a sense of a new black identity.

Also owing to the lack of space in the inner city, amateur and professional basketball games often came to be held as co-events with dances. The *mélange* with swing music would shape black basketball decisively. Elements of improvisation and vertical movement were paramount aspects of both basketball and dances. Most notably, it was the jumping motions of the Lindy Hop and the jump shot in basketball, both appearing at around the same time, that seemed to symbolize joy and confidence. In less than three decades, the game of basketball, which went on to become perhaps the most stereotypical expression of contemporary African American culture, came to define the essence of early-twentieth-century black city life as a vertical history.

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Martin Domke

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