

How to shoot hoops like the pros

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Basketball might be the perfect metaphor for life: along with all the ritual humiliation, there are fleeting moments of grace.

A few weeks ago I joined a pick-up game on the west side of Manhattan. It was a friendly scrimmage – no insufferable dramatists or raging-ego horrors permitted. Just casual, unsightly, borderline parodic, old-fart basketball. Barack Obama, my basketball-loving new president, would have felt right at home.

Although I hadn't played in years, my shots fell reliably and I managed to feign adequate defence. I even stole a pass and scored a fast-break bucket, an almost unprecedented achievement in more than 20 years of playing. For a few minutes, I was a golden, indomitable Heracles in fading high-top sneakers and a sweat-encrusted headband.

Then my shot died. After which I missed probably 50 wide-open looks, to the point that my defender essentially stopped guarding me. Next came several unpardonable turnovers and defensive meltdowns, which in turn begat the lazy man's final recourse in basketball: grisly, almost lethal fouls. Even my most forbearing teammates began to look as if they'd like to tear out my spleen and eat it.

Finally, I accidentally mangled an opponent's ankle while diving for a loose ball (there's a good reason why these kinds of hustle plays are discouraged among guys in their thirties). The poor fellow, who'd recklessly placed his foot under my flailing torso, brayed like a dying donkey. "You murdered him!" someone shouted. I high-tailed it out of there before I could kill again.

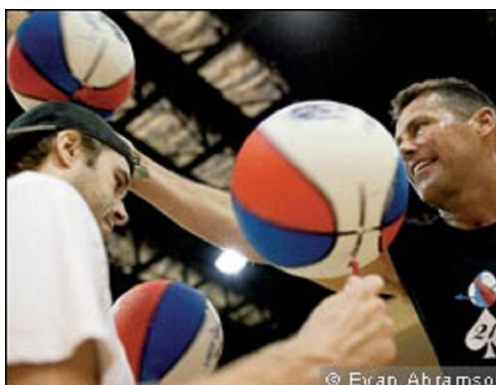
The day haunted me for weeks. I hadn't just been bad – I'd been toxic. And yet fairly recently I'd been able to play pick-up basketball with pride. At one Brooklyn court I'd even made a minor name for myself with unerring outside shooting. In just a few short years, something tangible had been lost.

Christmas came and went. I sulked through the city streets, kicking snowdrifts, silently cursing the Fates. Then one day a cartoon bubble with a light bulb inside it popped over my head and, after an internet search, I called the misleadingly named "Black" Jack Ryan. Ryan is that rare species of Caucasian who's also a New York City street-ball hero. He once dropped 44 points on former Detroit Piston player Phil Sellers at Manhattan's West 4th Street "cage" (Greenwich Village's legendary street-ball courts, named after the chain-link fence that encircles them). Now 47, Ryan has morphed into the "Hoop Wizard", a kind of basketball swami-cum-magician, who performs tricks at birthday parties (he holds three Guinness world records, including one for the longest time spinning a basketball on his toe – 9.53 seconds) and offers private lessons for catastrophe-inclined players such as myself.

We met for a two-hour session in New Jersey during the course of which Ryan sought to diagnose my many problems and suggest remedies. To my surprise, he said my shooting technique was sound. I just needed to keep my elbow tucked in and try to create space for myself. "The mantra for old guys like us", he said in an unfiltered Brooklyn accent, "should be: 'Run, run, run. Never stop running.'" To the reverently dissolute, there is no more odious a concept – but constant movement buys the time and space to get off a good shot. "Every cubic inch of space is a miracle," wrote Walt Whitman. He was never more perceptive.

Ryan also talked a lot about "building muscle memory". He said confidence – an indispensable commodity on the court – comes from good technique learned through repetition. "You get to the point in your mind where shooting becomes automatic," he said, and promptly hit 10 three-pointers in a row. (Ryan, it should be mentioned, is the National 3-Point Champion.)

To wrap up the session, we played a few games of one-on-one. In basketball-speak, Ryan is what is known as a "cold-blooded assassin". He does not miss. No, really: he does not miss, ever, even with my palm half an inch from his nose.



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Ryan seems powered by some kind of bionic fluid, his body triangulating with ball and basket to conquer Euclidean space. In the midst of shooting, he'll sometimes glance at his watch, as if unfathomably bored.

I kept the first game respectable (11-7), the second less so (11-3), and in the third succumbed to a dispiriting offensive collapse (11-0). "Don't worry," Ryan assured me. "You just need to build muscle memory."

The following Saturday, I strode to the site of my earlier humiliation, appointed with sweatbands and a degree of renewed confidence. After a rocky start, my shot found its proper measure, dancing with the bottom of the net in a ceaseless, resounding cavalcade. "Let it rain!" I said to nobody in particular. My defender that afternoon was my friend Rob, a bearded fortress of bone and flesh. He took

umbrage at my muscle memory and countered: "The sun is about to shine!"

But the rain continued unabated. Climatologically speaking, the day was mine. On play after play, my game showed no signs of waning. I was like one of those beady-eyed, glistening demons from the Old Testament, tormenting my opponents with high arching jumpers, behind-the-back passes and finger-rolls.

I ended one game with a particularly menacing post-move. Rob was on my back like a marmot, but I spun and floated the crispest of hooks into the quivering net.

The game ended shortly thereafter, with another calamitous ankle injury. Thankfully, I wasn't involved, although the shrieking was no less unnerving. At this rate, we'll all have to take-up wheelchair basketball pretty soon. Which, come to think of it, has its appeal.

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The Details

A lesson costs \$100/hr, or free if you beat Ryan in a game of "Horse" (a shoot-out). www.hoopwizard.com

The glossary: The low-down on basketball lingo

Fast-break bucket: A quick rush to the basket before opponents can get back to play defence

Wide-open look: A shot in which you have no defender

Hustle play: Aggressive, sometimes unwise moves made to compensate for earlier errors

Three-pointer: A shot taken behind an arc 25ft from the basket, worth three points instead of two

Post-move: When a player attempts to score with his back to the basket

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