The Places We Play

Before his death last year, J. B. Jackson stood virtually unchallenged as the pre-eminent scholar of the American landscape. Here, in one of his final essays, Jackson turned his thoughts to leisure, and found that where *we play our games often says as much about us as* what *we choose to play.*

by J. B. Jackson

We find ourselves driving down a street in a poor section of town. The uniform frame houses, each with a front porch and a patch of grass, are separated by narrow alleyways leading to the garages. In places the street is bordered by vacant lots and billboards, but along both curbs cars are closely parked.

Traffic proceeds by fits and starts. A dozen or more small children are running along the sidewalks; when they suddenly decide to cross the street and dart out from between the parked cars, some of them stoop to recover a cap or a glove or a baseball they might have dropped. Cars and trucks come to an abrupt halt, but the children show no alarm. They playfully slap the fenders of cars and pluck the aerials. They call

out some kind of greeting or cry of defiance, and skip out of sight.

The vacant lots, ugly with trash and bottles and cans, slope down to a small, stagnant puddle overgrown by weeds. What charm there is in the scene comes from the running children in their bright-colored parkas—blue and purple and green and pink.

When we have worked our way through the street congestion and halt to get our bearings, we watch them as they run and skip. We say what all drivers say on such an occasion: it is a public scandal for children to have to play in so dirty and hazardous a place. Why have they chosen it when they might have been playing in their familiar brick-paved schoolyard? But the street has undeniable attractions: there is a noisy construction site where great trucks come and go; the dark alleyways with their rows of trash barrels invite exploration, and each parked car offers a hideaway. For most of the children home is in one or another of the frame houses, and though they are old enough (so they think) to take care of themselves, they are happy to feel the eye of a parent or of an older brother or sister watching from an upstairs window. Lastly, the proprietor of the small corner convenience store has sworn undying hostility to them. If a ball so much as bounces—or even rolls—on his portion of the sidewalk, he runs out and yells that the police are on their way. The children respond with jeers and name-calling and a chorus of forbidden words. Then they take flight to the vacant lot beyond the billboards.

We who watch are curious to know what game it is that they are playing. It has features all of us recognize from our own childhoods: the children vaguely establish boundaries which they are not to cross and choose home bases. Other, smaller children hope to be included, but they are told to go away, they don't belong. Then, by the familiar process of counting out ("eeny, meeny, miney, moe"), they choose two team captains. The group disperses: all race through the scarred, vacant lots, bolting for places to hide. The more adventurous deliberately ("accidentally on purpose" is their phrase) splash through the oily puddle and emerge wet and muddy and triumphant.

The game, whatever it is, involves running and being caught, and proceeds with screams of delight. Then someone discovers a small garter snake moving in the grass, and it becomes the center of attention. With a long stick, a child turns it over and exposes its pale underside. Others dare to pick it up and watch it writhe. Laughing and shouting obscenities, they throw it into the air, hit it, and before they know what they are doing, they have killed it. Then they fall silent; play has suddenly ceased to be play.

Those of us still watching from the sidewalk are revolted. Dirty, cruel,

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little brats! And what language! Why is there no one to supervise their play? Those less harshly critical try to interpret the misbehavior as a temporary act of rebellion against adults—parents and police and teachers with their rules and restrictions. All agree that there ought to be a better place for play: one with a fence or a wall where there would be no intrusion, no dirt.

A fence, if it were high and strong enough, would be an excellent solution. It would keep out blowing trash and prevent shortcuts by strangers (so our speculations go). A fence would allow us to take care of the grounds, plant trees and grass, a place where all children, whatever their size, would be safe and have an equal chance; lawsuits would be unknown. Having a fence with a gate would mean that we could control how and when the playground was used and by whom; it would allow for special hours and special groups, and do away with quarrels. We could discourage troublesome gangs. This would, of course, entail constant supervision: a caretaker or a groundskeeper who could also serve as a program director. This person should have training in play or recreation supervision. That would give the playground a special identity and even create a sense of group identity among the children. The smooth, accident-proof surface would allow for a variety of games. More important, a fenced, well-kept playground would encourage efficiently organized activity, with records and scores and a kind of membership badge or uniform. Thus we visualize the ideal playground.

These are amenities we already have in many playgrounds. We find them in tennis courts and basketball courts and hockey rinks: all have man-made surfaces and limited access, and all are permanent. They cost money. But that, after all, is what makes a playground valuable: children learn to respect timetables and rules and the authority of the coach, and learn to respect the immediate environment. In short, a playground—fenced and well kept—allows children to develop skills, learn cooperation, and be valuable citizens. So what we must have (it is agreed) is more such playgrounds, efficiently designed and administered, and each one an essential element in its landscape, whether urban, suburban, or rural.

But play and playground are different, and play is not an easy thing to define, especially when we include adults, as we are learning to do. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists no fewer than 30 current meanings, from "play" the guitar, "play" the stock market, "play" tennis, "play" house, and "play" the role of Hamlet to play in the sense of "to move or operate freely within a bounded space, as machine parts do."

The ancient Greeks honed body and mind in the gymnasium. Their sharpened skills formed the basis of their military supremacy.

The most common definition is that play is a way of spending our leisure in games and sports; play is an agreeable pastime. That is hardly precise, but it reminds us of an important characteristic we sometimes overlook: play is essential, for any existence would otherwise be divided between work and idleness. It is something we freely and gladly choose.

The man who first studied the concept of play—especially adult play—was the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. In 1935, he published his influential work, *Homo Ludens* (Man the Player). It has been criticized by anthropologists and sociologists for being what is now called Eurocentric, but it is widely recognized as the first serious attempt to analyze play as a cultural, not a biological or psychological, trait. Huizinga's thesis was that play is a basic, innate human urge, not only predating the religious impulse and cultural institutions but actually influencing their emergence and evolution. Play has had an impact on the practice of law, the performing arts, and even international policy because it emphasizes and codifies procedures and produces dialogue, and also (according to Huizinga) because it requires certain distinct, consecrated spaces, such as "the arena, the card table, the screen, the tennis court . . . forbidden spaces, isolated, hedged around, hallowed, within which special rules pertain. Play creates order, and *is* order."

Huizinga sums up play as being "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. It pro-

ceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy." Throughout the book, he underscores the physical and emotional benefits of play: a sense of bodily well-being and an awareness of our kinship with fellow participants. For, to him, play is essentially a group or interpersonal activity. The solitary play experience—that of the mountain climber, the hunter, the explorer—is of little cultural consequence. The truly unforgettable manifestations of play—the procession, the dance, the ritual re-enactment of myths, above all, competition in games and sports—what he calls the element of *agon*, from the Greek word for contest—are what matter. And since children rarely respond to play in this coherent manner, Huizinga has little to say about the rowdy or spontaneous aspects of play, or play as the pursuit of "fun."

What were the sources of this theory? In the years between the world wars, Huizinga was identified with a group of eminent Central European intellectuals and scholars who shared a vision of the future that was profoundly pessimistic. In their search for a good society, they turned (as their predecessors had) to the classical past. They sought to revive the values implicit in the culture of pre-Socratic Greece, and in particular its philosophy of education and character formation. Like other critics, Huizinga was inspired by Homer and Hesiod and Xenophon. What they had to say about the upbringing of young Athenians and Spartans confirmed his theory that play produced not only healthy bodies but sound minds and sound morals. Parents did not merely instruct the young in the martial arts and social graces, they impressed on them the cardinal importance of acting with justice and honor when dealing with others, and the importance of knowing how to compete.

"From childhood until the onset of the supreme attributes of culture," Huizinga wrote, "the urge to be praised and honored for one's superior qualities provides a powerful incentive to reach individual or collective perfection. . . . Virtue, honor, nobility and glory are to be found in the earliest kind of competition, that is to say, in games."

Here is one of the few references in *Homo Ludens* to the play of children, and the context suggests that Huizinga means adolescents who are already trained in the martial arts and in the rules of fair competition in sports. Instruction taking place in the youths' earlier years thus would have been a private family affair involving competition between equals or associates, a kind of restrained competition that might be called "playful" in that it entailed no reward.

In his discussion of what was essentially an aristocratic definition of play as "fair" competition in manly sports, Huizinga refers to the terrain of the ancient Olympic Games as a *gymnasium*. He thereby calls our attention to a link between landscape design and education: the gymnasium or play space as the locus of moral and physical development for an aristocratic society. The Academy in Athens (which we

usually associate with Plato and his teachings) was in fact the most celebrated gymnasium in the city, a designed park with flowing water, groves of trees, and spaces for play. The man-made landscape in the form of garden or park or collection of buildings and spaces became a part of the Renaissance revival of aristocratic sports, and in a debased form it flourishes today. Agon is part of the modern setup; all that is now missing is the moral or ethical ingredient.

In 1801, an Englishman named Joseph Strutt published a book entitled *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*. For its period, it was a model of research into obscure chronicles and ancient texts. It was reprinted several times up to 1903, when it was carefully edited and brought up to date. An American edition appeared in 1968. It deserves to be better known. It tells in detail how English men and women enjoyed themselves during a period of some 700 years. It does not pretend to be a sociological treatise, merely a vivid account of some of the more carefree aspects of everyday life in all classes of society.

"War, policy, and other contingent circumstances," Strutt writes, "may eventually place men at different times in different points of view, but when we follow them into their retirements, where no disguise is necessary, we are most likely to see them in their true state and may best judge of their natural dispositions." By "retirements" Strutt must have meant leisure, for what he describes are the pastimes, the diversions, and pleasures of public life, chiefly in London. These were surprisingly numerous and varied. Quoting from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), he notes how Londoners "take pleasure to see some pageant or sight go by, as at a coronation, wedding and such like solemnities, to see an ambassador or a prince received and entertained with masks, shows, and fireworks." But Londoners also created their own entertainments. "Dancing, singing, masking, mumming and state plays," to quote again from Burton, "are reasonable recreations in season. . . . Let them play at ball and barley brakes and afterwards, plays, masks, jesters, gladiators, tumblers, and jugglers are to be winked at, lest the people should do worse than attend them."

The public street, well into the 18th century, was the favorite place for adult play: football, wrestling, ninepins, shovel board, bear- and bullbaiting, cockfighting, and meetings of friends took place in crowded streets and alleys and open places. Strutt conscientiously describes these activities and tells when they were likely to occur and which group, young or old, poor or rich, took part. He writes about ceremonial costumes and banquets, and about how the façades of houses were occasionally decorated for celebration. He has much to say about fireworks—how Handel wrote music for them at Vauxhall Gardens and Ranelagh, both popular pleasure gardens.

Diversions of this sort were not confined to London. Just as in ancient Greece, many smaller games were played in places other than the main Olympic gymnasium; rural England saw a number of annual celebrations of sports in the provinces. For several days on end, thousands of

country people would gather in small towns to take part in traditional games and sports or to witness displays of strength and agility and grace. There were trained dogs and trained bears and trained horses, acrobats and sleight-of-hand artists and tightrope walkers. Musicians played and people danced. Charles II, on his way to Spain, stopped to watch such a rural meet in Cornwall, a region known for its wrestlers and boxers, and found the event so enthralling that he stayed all day and "became a brother of the jovial society."

"Persons of rank" seldom participated in these countrified celebrations, preferring their own pastimes and their own company. As they understood the concept, play meant certain traditional sports such as hunting, hawking, horse racing, or archery, or perhaps a version of handball or tennis. These called for expertise and knowing how to behave. It is true that until the 19th century, "persons of rank," when indoors at home, played games we now associate with children: puss-in-the-corner, blindman's buff, and musical chairs. But outdoors, when they engaged in other competitive games, they were usually in a more concentrated frame of mind: they wanted to excel. They had been brought up to believe that sports made them braver and stronger, more respectful of rules, and (socially speaking) more acceptable; if they won, they expected to be praised.

When common people played, however, the tone was informal and spontaneous and full of expectations of a good time. Often there were players who knew nothing about the game and had to be taught. While they played, they had no time to think about the workaday world to which they would soon return; "fun" was what they were after. Both kinds of play brought excitement and pleasure, but in intention they were very different, and their modern equivalents still are.

One important difference (at least in landscape terms) was this: with groups of working people—families or neighbors or fellow workers—play began wherever would-be players happened to be. In town the street was the logical place; in the country it might be the village green, the churchyard, or the field where they had been working. In any case, it was not a terrain especially prepared or set aside, merely one that was available and accessible. But when the gentry decided to play their various games of agon, the play space was familiar and well prepared. It was free of obstacles and uncertainties: a "level playing field," as the saying goes. That was probably what Huizinga had in mind when he stipulated that play should occur in spaces that were "hedged around, hallowed, within which special rules pertain."

Throughout Western history there has always been a class requiring, and able to produce, such areas dedicated to athletic performance and moral training. Those spaces not only multiplied throughout our landscape but have persisted up to the present: spaces designed to suit the tastes of a class of citizen who thinks of play as an effective way of teaching the young how to conduct themselves and how to develop certain physical skills. Even our comparatively new American landscape contains innumerable examples, some inherited, some recently designed: the col-

*In this 16th-century painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder (*Hunt in the Honor of Charles V at the Chateau of Torgan*), actions reveal social rank: the common folk beat the brush and drive stags toward the noblemen, who wait in the foreground with crossbows cocked.*

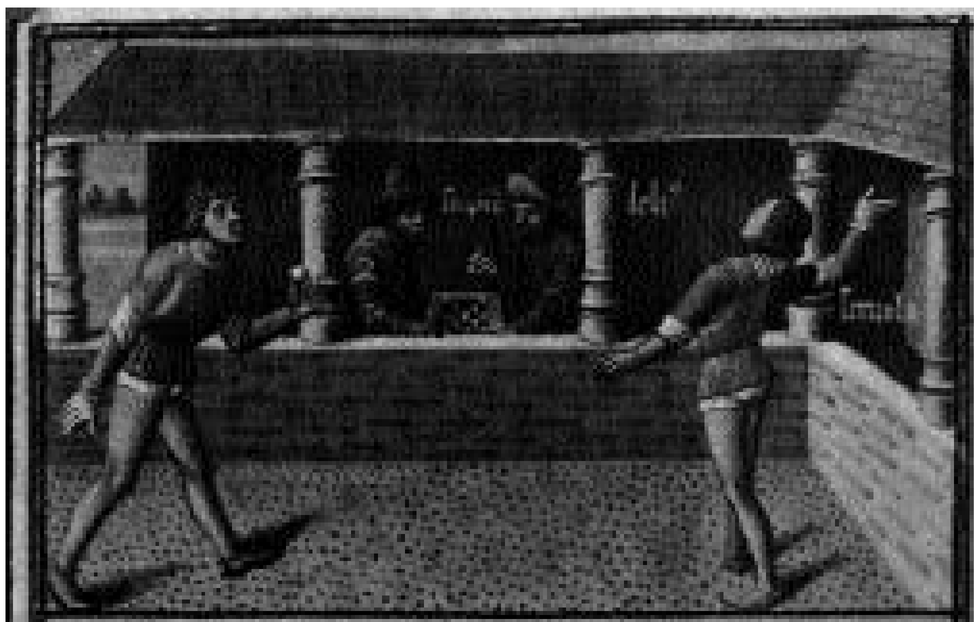
lege campus, the country club, the sports arena, not to mention the many once-private parks and estates now open to all. What more can we ask for than well-kept, enclosed areas of greenery where we can (if we want) develop our social talents and at the same time acquire strong bodies?

Only one need is neglected—the inner need to be part of a nonhuman cosmic order; that we have to satisfy as best we can by ourselves.

Historically speaking, the hunting forest is the earliest and most familiar of these "consecrated" spaces for play. We tend at present to perceive the forest as an unspoiled and beautiful fragment of nature; if it has any moral function at all, it is to encourage a kind of nature mysticism. But beginning more than a thousand years ago, when it was already legally defined and protected against intruders, the forest was identified with skill and bravery and a rigid social hierarchy. It is in the forest that we glimpse an attitude toward the natural environment that we have long ignored: nature was to be *used* and modified and even occasionally destroyed, in order to produce an environment that would promote a certain kind of behavior. In the medieval forest, undesirable types of game and objectionable vegetation were done away with, and desirable specimens introduced. Forests were logged and, as we have seen in many European forests, long, straight avenues or drives were often cut for the convenience of hunters.

On a smaller scale, other agon sports demanded a similar remodeling of the environment. Horse racing, as well as bowling and archery, required a small version of the "level playing field"—usually a smooth stretch of lawn surrounded by a hedge or fence. Tennis, when it was introduced in a refined and regulated form from France, was particularly demanding. As a kind of handball, it had long been played by schoolchildren on any convenient open field, but when it became popular among the English gentry in the 15th century, it required the smoothest of surfaces and walls, along with protective gloves and eventually racquets. The only suitable setting at first was the exterior of a church, and for a brief time tennis was played *inside* St. Paul's Cathedral in London. An indignant clergy put an end to this desecration, and the totally artificial environment in the form of a measured court soon evolved.

An unusually elaborate example of space for agon in the late Middle Ages was one for tournaments; strictly speaking, the space devoted to combat between knights was called the lists. A medieval chronicler defined the tournament in what could be called terms of make-believe



Wimbledon's roots: early tennis was played with bound hands in a walled court.

or play: "a military exercise carried out not in the spirit of hostility but solely for practice and the display of prowess." Surprisingly, Huizinga treated tournaments with scorn. In *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924), he dismissed them as essentially shallow pageants without deep meaning: "Overloaded with pompous decorations, full of heroic fancy, they serve to express romantic needs too strong for mere literature to satisfy." Strutt, by contrast, wrote enthusiastically about the tournament as theater: "Such a show of pomp, where wealth, beauty, and grandeur were concentrated, as it were, in one focus must altogether have formed a wonderful spectacle."

To this day, agon sports are the ones we take most seriously. They are the ones with their own permanent terrain, not accessible to everyone; the ones with established historical records and their rosters of heroes; the ones with their own uniforms and logos, their own hierarchies. Huizinga was not entirely accurate when he declared that agon games provided no material rewards or social advantages. Thus it is that even in the modern commercial city, with its monuments and spaces dedicated to government, crown, or church, there are those, often architecturally impressive, that celebrate a certain kind of play and certain players. In time, we may learn to include other, more vernacular kinds of play: many American communities are learning to provide permanent, designed spaces for skateboards, and many resorts focus on ambitious and expensive ski and toboggan runs. On the whole, however, we still identify agon sports with the secluded "level playing field" of grass (or Astroturf) in its own protected terrain: ornamental areas, identified with traditional notions of sportsmanship, and as such worth preserving. It was only a few years ago that the International Olympic Committee consented to consider a

number of sports that placed less emphasis on person-to-person competition and more on awareness of the natural environment: scuba diving, hang gliding, alpinism, and surfing.

There has never been a time when agon was the only game in town, nor when there was not a vernacular or working-class version of collective play. They first confronted each other on our Western landscape about 400 years ago, when cities grew in size and brought together in one place many elements of the population. The impact of archery—essentially an aristocratic agon sport—on vernacular sports is an instance.

The use of the bow and arrow in fighting, hunting, and target practice was probably the favorite sport of all classes in 15th-century England. The average archer was a working man, but his leader and commander was usually a person of rank. To the nobility, archery symbolized manly virtues: strength, bravery, skill, and patriotism. English bowmen were widely respected for their effectiveness in warfare, and the fact that gunpowder (and ultimately artillery) threatened to make archery obsolete by the 16th century merely served as a reason for cherishing the longbow and arrow as signs of England's past military prowess. Englishmen of every class were obliged to have a bow in their dwelling and to practice their skill in leisure hours. Indeed, many English cities retained spacious fields in the center of town, even when open spaces were becoming rare, where archers could practice.

But the working-class English, like working-class men and women throughout the world in the Renaissance, had discovered a potentially more profitable way of spending their leisure: gambling. We think we have learned to exploit all forms of gambling with our bingo parlors, casinos, slot machines, lotteries, and other means of gaming, but as long ago as the 11th century an English authority listed no fewer than 10 ways of gambling with dice, and even chess, checkers, and backgammon were considered games of chance. When small coins and decks of playing cards became common, gambling was almost irresistible, not simply as a way of making money but as a way of demonstrating skill and judgment, and of foretelling the future. Tarot became immensely popular in the 16th century.

England's conservative establishment reacted to this competition with a vigor that anticipated by several centuries that of the National Rifle Association. A lobbying group composed of "bowers, fletchers, stringers and arrowhead makers of the realm" petitioned the Crown in the 15th century to repress the spread of gambling, and the Crown obliged by forbidding all "artificers, apprentices, labourers, mariners, fishermen, watermen or any serving man" from playing any of the following games, except on Christmas: "football, quoits, putting the stone, kayles, tennis, bowls, clash legating, half bowl, slide thrifts, or shore groat or backgammon." (Gambling had previously been banned.) What these various games with Gothic or Celtic names might have been, I cannot discover, but they were presumably popular, and

their outlawing must have had its effect on the public play. A list, compiled at a later date, of locations in the city where all public games were forbidden gives us a picture of how scattered and how modest those places of vernacular diversion must have been: "public houses, bars, archways, small plots of wasteland, bootmakers' stands and even the large umbrellas of bookmakers."

This campaign against gambling may not have had the intended effect—to return working-class men to the practice of archery—but it undoubtedly discouraged much informal play in crowded parts of town. Gambling moved out to the racetracks or into clubs, and street lotteries became popular, but the increasing shortage of space did the most dam-

Playing kayles outside an English tavern

age. Strutt and other chroniclers of sports often note that because of the heavy traffic in city streets, one game or another went out of existence. Football, in its vernacular form, was always a violent and dangerous sport, played only by the roughest element and constantly condemned by the authorities. It disappeared from the streets in the 16th century and took refuge in graveyards—specifically, those on the north sides of churches, where few bodies were buried. Even in the countryside, space for casual play became hard to find: the introduction of cattle raising fostered the planting of hedges; new kinds of crops rendered land unsuitable for games. In 16th-century France, changes in cultivation forced such rural games as bowling and ninepins and horseshoe pitching to seek space in the village, and the players had to pay for using private land. In brief, much traditional play, popular with working-class citizens, located in the center of town where the players lived and worked, was driven out, either by the shortage of space or by police decisions to improve traffic circulation and promote order.

Archery long held out in the city, thanks to powerful protectors. But Strutt reports that in 1780, when a last ceremonial unit of archers went to what was later for Huizinga its consecrated space, "hedged around, hallowed, within which special rules pertain," the men discovered that their field had

been enclosed by a brick wall. A determined group of "toxophiles" (amateurs of archery) sought to keep the sport alive in the 19th century by promoting it as a suitable recreation for ladies and gentlemen. The same process of gentrification, led by Thomas Arnold of Rugby, kept football alive in the 1850s, much regulated and refined. Cricket was also rescued—and subject to "agonization" and the rule of white flannels—at much the same time.

Historians are in general agreement that some time in the second half of the 18th century, what we call popular or vernacular culture began to lose its vitality and charm. Until about that period, almost all classes of society shared the same tastes in dress and music and play and speech; what differences there were came from different ways of life and never implied a different culture. But the 19th and 20th centuries were hard on the vernacular. The cult of agon, with all its rites and restrictions and ethical hang-ups, drove much innocent public life from the streets and quite unintentionally fostered the mania for gambling by emphasizing the role of money. Gambling brought hardships of its own: it produced economic instability and discouraged both work and play in favor of low-spirited idleness.

In the cities of the United States in the first years of our independence, there was joblessness and much bad behavior. "The great number of idle boys who frequented the wharves on Sunday," the historian John Bach McMaster wrote, "playing pitch and toss and other games destructive of morals, and who during the week spent their time in pilfering goods landed on the wharves from ships, was an evil as serious as any which received public attention." In town after town, therefore, the citizens formed committees to improve the economy and the moral tone. The poor were given food and fuel and shelter, and among the first resolutions passed by the various societies for moral and economic improvement were those proposing schools for the training of youths and the production of healthy and useful citizens.

The usual agon response was to create new and specialized spaces in the landscape. Early in the 19th century, middle-class America started to think about parks in the nation's towns and cities, carefully designed cemeteries and college campuses, and promenades along the waterfronts. In keeping with the ancient Greek idea of agon and the importance of healthy bodies and healthy minds, it created a space, distinct from the street, where gymnastics could be taught and practiced.

The idea came from Germany. A theology student named P. L. Jahn, much distressed by the despondent moral tone among German youth occasioned by their country's defeat at the hands of Napoleon in 1809, resolved to remedy the situation by offering vigorous outdoor gymnastic exercises to all young Germans; to the space where this training was to take place he gave the classical name *gymnasium*. The students were required to wear uniforms and to receive political indoctrination as well as physical exercise. The gymnasium experience proved highly popular.

In 1819 Jahn fell out of favor with his Prussian superiors, and the experiment came to an abrupt end. Three of his assistants, Karl Beck, Francis Lieber, and Charles Pollen, young theology students, fled to the United States. Beck created the first gymnasium class in a small school in Northampton, Massachusetts. Lieber started a public outdoor gymnasium on Tremont Street in Boston. He later became the first professor of German at Columbia University, and it was he who translated Tocqueville into English. Pollen established the first course in gymnastics at Harvard University and was also the first to teach German there.

Much of the enthusiasm for the new kind of sport called gymnastics derived from the physical well-being it produced; its moral and patriotic teachings left most young Americans unimpressed, and yet one is struck by the numerous references in early gymnastic writing to the influence of religion, beginning in Germany and continuing through the 19th century in New England. Edward Hitchcock, son of the clergyman and geologist who presided over Amherst College, was the head of the first comprehensive program in gymnastics at Amherst, held in one of the first college buildings to be labeled a gymnasium. He described his program as designed "not with exclusive attention to the muscular system, but to keep bodily health up to the normal standards so that the mind may accomplish the most work, and to preserve the bodily powers in full activity for both the daily duties of college and the promised labor of a long life." The body, in other words, was a machine, and play represented occasional maintenance.

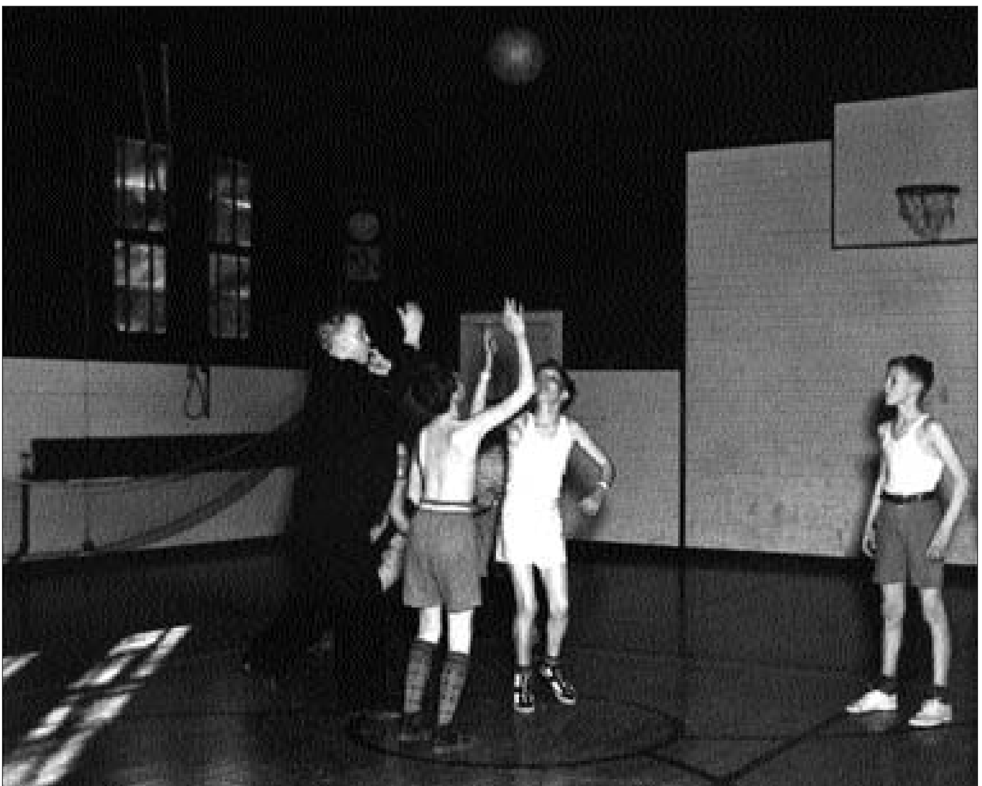
The plight of young men working in factories or ships or offices in unfamiliar cities far from their homes was of prime importance to reformers in 19th-century industrial cities. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) evolved into a network of centers for social contact and religious instruction. After the Civil War, when the larger YMCAs included a gymnasium and often a swimming pool, they became responsible for satisfying the sports and leisure needs of a whole generation. It became the duty of several of the urban YMCAs to invent suitable games for playing in gymnasiums; and it is to the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts, that we owe the formulation of two of America's most popular games: basketball and volleyball. It was also in the Y that competitive swimming, together with its rules and procedures, was instituted. But the remarkable aspect of these invented games was the considerations given to the limitations and needs of the players. The principles of agon promoting fairness in competition, simplicity of action, and a regard for justice and goodwill among the players, previously not matters of regulation, were made basic features.

It was at the end of the 19th century that the influence of the theological student was replaced by that of the professional coach and athletic director. The clergymen had tried to respect the identity of the individual amateur player and normal human limitations in sports. By contrast, at the close of the century, John Hoberman writes in *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (1992), "physiological thinking began to be applied to athletic performance. . . .

Anthropological and physiological assessments of the human organism during this period were cultural symptoms of an Age of Calibration—a mania for measurement that continues unabated to this day."

Yet, concurrently with the development of performance-oriented sport, with its dependence on drugs and medicine, there has emerged a new concept of sports, reminiscent in many ways of vernacular attitudes. It requires us to re-examine our definition of play and its significance.

A generation ago, in an essay entitled "Games of Dizziness and Fear," the French psychologist Jean Caseneuve wrote: "There is a kind of game or sport which can be designated by the term *helix*, the Greek word for whirlwind or an evolving spiral, to which is related a word which can be translated as vertigo or the dizziness of intoxication." How can dizziness be experienced as a sport? "By an effect both physical and psychological. The organs of balance, particularly in the inner ear, are momentarily disturbed by unusual movements and the result is a modification of the way we perceive our surroundings. Our relation to the world around us takes on a strange quality, and our self-awareness undergoes change. Even in harmless cases, as on a swing or merry-go-round, there is a certain shift in perception that is part of the pleasure children get from this kind of play. The definition of helix games and sports should include all activities involving . . . loss of physical balance and all the means we use to modify our self-perception." Caseneuve noted that in those sports the spatial dimension is not



The space defining the game: boys playing basketball at a New Jersey YMCA gymnasium

George Peck, here unicycling across the rough, broken terrain of an abandoned mine in Alaska, perhaps best exemplifies the aesthetic of helix sports. Rejecting the notion of contest so inherent in agon sports, Peck seeks other, more personal pleasures in wilderness settings made accessible by a conveyance he calls "more portable than a mountain bike and about as dangerous as walking." Recently, he added a new twist: seatless wilderness unicycling.

always well defined, but that the dimension of time remains precise; for only by consciously controlling the length of time we undergo this experience can we continue to maintain our freedom; the sport is still a game, still a kind of make-believe.

Helix sports are what we in America have called sports of mobility: skiing, gliding, soaring, sailing, snowboarding, skateboarding, as well as car and motorcycle racing, surfing, and mountain climbing. Many were inspired by the automobile. Most of them got their start during the Great Depression and became more widespread after World War II. Some arose among the unemployed youth of Central Europe, some among the prosperous younger generation of postwar California; still others are contemporary civilian adaptations of military performances. All seem to have certain characteristics in common.

In all of them we see an instinctive avoidance of the "beaten track": the familiar itinerary, the rails, the surfaced highway, the track, the lawn, even the gymnasium. We can see a revolt against the timetable, the schedule, the planned journey. It is as if a whole generation had taken off cross-country to explore the unfamiliar, nonhuman aspect of an environment, where tradition offered no guidance or warning.

Another characteristic is the rejection of traditional equipment and techniques. No matter how a sport may have originated—as Hawaiian ritual games in the case of surfing, or as Norwegian peasant transportation in the case of skiing—sooner or later the prototype is discarded or modi-

fied. Participants in the new sports of solitary mobility are no longer willing to follow established procedures.

A third characteristic is that these sports are not highly competitive. It is true that in many respects skiing has been assimilated into the world of commercialized competitive sports, but few skiers—and surely fewer surfers and hang gliders and mountain climbers—are primarily concerned with achieving "victory" or breaking records. Possibly related to this lack of competitiveness is the fact that few of the sports are inspired by an ulterior practical motive, or are practiced because they are body building or character forming or socially acceptable. The ski bum, the surf bum, and the motorcycle bum are typical products of such sports of mobility.

Finally, a most important characteristic of helix sports is the terrain itself, especially where there is an apparent absence of design or structure. I say "apparent" because many resorts design and engineer their ski runs, and surf-producing beaches have been built in California—to say nothing of the totally artificial surfing beaches in Phoenix. Yet, compared with the terrain of traditional competitive sports, the terrain of helix sports usually bears few visible signs of its function: a few marks in the snow, a strip in the desert, a buoy, a light. Weather, which plays so important a role in most helix sports, is of course unpredictable. What participants set out to do is not to follow a well-defined course; they simply head toward some remote destination, a new experience, a new environment, a dehumanized, abstract world of snow or water or sky or desert, where there are no familiar guidelines. With this goes a sense of uncertainty and of being totally alone. We note how we tend to revive an intuitive awareness of our surroundings, reacting to textures, currents, rides, temperatures, slopes, lights, and clouds and winds, even directions. The essential value of these sports seems to lie in a fresh contact with the environment and a new sense of our identity. Even if briefly, there ensues a temporary reshaping of our being.

The pursuit of many helix sports is unfortunately now confined to the few who can afford to go into the wilderness or to ski resorts. But their experience is one that many aspire to—of an unexplored world of great spaces: desert and mountain and sky and open water—and it is there that we can formulate a new relationship to the natural environment, or revive an old one. The helix movement involves something much more than a belated return to nature. I think it derives from a basic impulse to search for a fresh identity (or, more accurately, to search for a way of changing the identity we have). To quote Caseneuve, "This kind of sport finally results in diverting our consciousness, in creating the illusion of abandoning our everyday personality by modifying the relationship between the individual being and his environment. . . . It is not speed in itself that we seek . . . but the intoxication it produces. . . . There would be no helix sports if there were not a profound urge in all of us to escape from ourselves, and if there did not come to every living being a time to turn away from mundane existence."