

SOCIAL BENEFITS AND CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF BASKETBALL

IN ALASKA

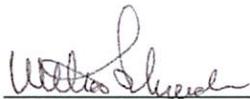
By

Andreas Droulias

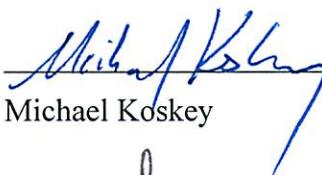
RECOMMENDED:



Peter Schweitzer



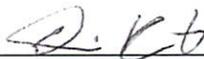
William Schneider



Michael Koskey



Sakis Pappous

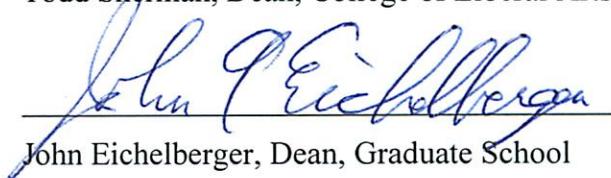


David Koester, Advisory Committee Chair and  
Chair, Department of Anthropology

APPROVED:



Todd Sherman, Dean, College of Liberal Arts



John Eichelberger, Dean, Graduate School

DATE:

8/1/13



**SOCIAL BENEFITS AND CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF  
BASKETBALL IN ALASKA**

**A  
DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of  
the University of Alaska Fairbanks**

**in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**By  
Andreas Droulias, B.A., M.A.**

**Fairbanks, Alaska**

**August 2013**



## **Abstract**

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the social and cultural significance of the game of basketball in the community of Nenana, Alaska. Since the building of high school gymnasiums across rural Alaska in the mid-1970s, basketball has become a popular and socially significant activity in rural Alaskan communities. The dissertation focuses on the nature of the social relations that arise from playing basketball and related activities and the constitution of a social space within which these relations become meaningful. It argues that the sport is a metaphor for community cohesiveness and ultimately a reflection of the social and cultural construction of community itself. Moreover, basketball has an effect on the everyday life of a community by providing a symbolic stage, which reinforces community identity and a sense of belonging through the renegotiation of interpersonal relations, dissemination of cultural values, and storytelling.

## Table of Contents

	<i>page</i>
<b>SIGNATURE PAGE</b> .....	<b>I</b>
<b>TITLE PAGE</b> .....	<b>III</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>V</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>VI</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
<i>1.1.1 Research questions</i> .....	5
1.2 THE COMMUNITY OF NENANA .....	7
<i>1.2.1 History</i> .....	8
<i>1.2.2 The community today</i> .....	10
<i>1.2.3 Demographic challenges</i> .....	16
1.3 AN ANTHROPOLOGIST IN NENANA.....	18
1.4 ALASKAN BASKETBALL LITERATURE.....	23
1.5 SPORTS AND SOCIAL THEORY .....	26
1.6 SPORTS SETTINGS AS SYMBOLIC SPACES.....	35
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	<b>40</b>
2.1 HISTORY OF BASKETBALL IN ALASKA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW .....	40
<i>2.1.1 Basketball as an indoor sport for students</i> .....	42
2.2 BASKETBALL IN ALASKA.....	44
<i>2.2.1 Organizational efforts</i> .....	47

2.3 BASKETBALL ADOPTED AND ADAPTED.....	55
2.3.1 <i>Why basketball?</i> .....	61
2.4 BASKETBALL IN NENANA.....	68
2.5 CONCLUSION.....	72
<b>CHAPTER 3.....</b>	<b>74</b>
3.1 BASKETBALL NIGHTS IN NENANA.....	74
3.1.1 <i>Basketball games; a wealth of symbolisms</i> .....	83
3.2 ANALYZING THE EXPERIENCE OF HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL.....	88
3.2.1 <i>Practices: learning the rules</i> .....	92
3.2.2 <i>Written rules: eligibility and the ASAA contract</i> .....	93
3.2.3 <i>Unwritten rules</i> .....	98
3.2.4 <i>Educative purpose and the teaching of values</i> .....	102
3.2.5 <i>Understanding conflict</i> .....	110
3.2.6 <i>Making friends in practice</i> .....	114
3.3 ROAD TRIPS IN ALASKA.....	116
3.4 THE GAME: LIVING IN THE MOMENT.....	121
3.5 WATCHING THE GAME: SPECTATORSHIP AND PARTICIPATION.....	129
3.6 CONCLUSION.....	138
<b>CHAPTER 4.....</b>	<b>141</b>
4.1 THE UPS AND DOWNS OF NENANA’S SCHOOL SPIRIT.....	141
4.2 COMMUNITY SPIRIT IN NENANA.....	148
4.3 THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF BASKETBALL.....	153
4.3.1 <i>Pick-up games</i> .....	154
4.3.2 <i>High school basketball nights</i> .....	159
4.3.3 <i>Nenana Invitational Tournament (NIT)</i> .....	166
4.4 THE HEART OF THE GAME AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY.....	171

4.4.1 <i>The “heart of the game”</i> .....	172
4.4.2 <i>Collective memory: consolidation of the social effects</i> .....	179
4.5 CONCLUSION .....	183
<b>CHAPTER 5</b> .....	<b>186</b>
5.1 GYM LIFE .....	186
5.1.1 <i>The gym as a contested space</i> .....	190
5.2 THE GYM: A SYMBOLIC WORLD .....	195
5.2.1 <i>The gymnasium deconstructed</i> .....	196
5.3 THE GYM VERSUS THE STREET .....	204
5.4 THE GYM AND THE WORLD; CONNECTING PEOPLE .....	212
5.5 CONCLUSION .....	215
<b>CHAPTER 6</b> .....	<b>217</b>
6.1 CONCLUSION .....	217
6.1.1 <i>More than science</i> .....	222
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>229</b>

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Introduction

One of the most salient features of everyday life in rural Alaska is people's preoccupation with basketball. From the state's northernmost community of Barrow to the city of Unalaska in the Aleutian Islands, and from the towns of the Southeast Islands to the western communities of the Yukon Flats, basketball has emerged as the most popular sport and is a consistent focus within a range of community activities. Alaskans spend energy, time, and money on playing, watching, and talking about basketball. This not only contributes to the cultural buzz surrounding the sport nationwide but also establishes for them a distinctly Alaskan basketball persona.

Sports journalists have repeatedly commented on Alaska's dedication to basketball (Patkotat 2008, Saari 2010), and they have even used the expression "hoop hysteria" to describe the phenomenon (Duncan 1993a). Such a characterization is well deserved, – indeed, many Alaskans would take pride in it – but in order to encapsulate its full meaning, one has to look beyond the traditional journalistic sensationalism often associated with mass sports culture. After all, there are no professional teams in Alaska with vested economic interests in the franchise to warrant flashy headlines and extensive sport reports that might stir the masses to "hoop hysteria." The two main universities in

the state in Anchorage and Fairbanks have men's and women's Division II basketball teams, each with a considerable following. Yet, they fall short when compared to the fan support and passion of universities with an established presence in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) or those with a tradition of feeding players to the National Basketball Association (NBA). Alaskans do not look up to any specific basketball superstars who hail from the state. In fact, very few players from Alaska have made a name for themselves in the NBA or abroad.

Basketball in Alaska does not operate within a professional and rigid structure; rather it is a quintessentially amateur endeavor. It has become an integral part of life in rural Alaska, which gives the local incarnation of the sport a distinct cultural color. Although it follows the general template of the sport in terms of rules and regulations, court size, and rules of play, its social foundation is the everyday people who play, watch, and commit to every aspect of the game. Most village residents have participated at some point in their lives in some form of a basketball gathering, whether this is a "pick-up" game, an inter-village tournament, or high school basketball. These social events point to the degree by which people relate to the sport and to each other through it. In addition, in each of these events one can observe a variety of social and cultural performances played out publicly.

There are other reasons that make the devotion to basketball remarkable. Alaska is a mammoth state with an extreme environment. Most rural Alaskan communities are off the road system and can only be reached by plane, boat, or dog team. Extremely low temperatures, icy conditions, snow- and windstorms make traveling between

communities quite a difficult (and sometimes dangerous) task. It follows that such conditions do not favor the promotion of basketball events. It is not that people refuse to travel when it is that cold; Alaskans have adapted to such conditions and they love visiting each other. Rather, the real difficulties arise because it can be a logistical nightmare to organize any event, which aims to gather groups of people over long distances with unpredictable travel conditions at a specific time and place so that they can play a game.

To provide an example, high schools participating in the Alaska School Activities Association (ASAA) basketball conferences must commit the largest portion of their athletics budgets, which may exceed hundreds of thousands of dollars, for their basketball teams' traveling needs and often those of their opponents' as well. For some teams, the distance between their communities can range from hundreds to thousands of miles. For instance, the Unalaska Raiders playing against the Barrow Whalers have to travel fifteen hundred miles from Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian island chain to the community of Barrow, the same distance as the Miami Heat would travel to play the Boston Celtics in the NBA (Pennington 2004). The budget must also include extra money as teams become stranded in their away games due to weather or last minute cancelations and schedule changes, making an already expensive and arduous trip longer and costlier.

These difficulties, however, do not deter communities from spending the necessary time, energy, and money to find solutions and still "play ball." Rural residents come together and raise the necessary funds so their team can fly out of town. Communities establish business relations with potential sponsors so that a single team

can pay for the tickets, gas, training kits, basketball shoes, and other expenses. Volunteers drive players and fans by car or by boat to neighboring basketball hosting communities. Winter trails are utilized for transport with dog team or snowmobile. Local radio stations send sports announcers to cover the games live for all those who remain behind. And, games are archived so that internet users can see or hear them at a later time.

The harsh Alaskan environment, subsequent difficulties, and solutions employed are just a few reasons why Alaskan basketball has its own unique color. For rural Alaskans the vast distances, costly travel, and extreme weather are simply the conditions of the game of basketball. Communities come together through organizing fundraisers. Sitting in the bleachers and chatting after a good pick-up game is their way of having fun on a Friday night. It is no wonder then that no player, parent, school, or community is deterred from enthusiastically participating in the social reality of basketball. It is ingrained in the everyday cultural context of each village, and it is deemed important enough to inspire participants, players, and fans alike to keep it going year after year. In the end, basketball has become (along with hunting, fishing, mushing) an activity that typifies the rural Alaskan way of life. Basketball is one of the most popular sports in the United States and, arguably, on the planet. In rural Alaska, it is also a profound cultural activity.

### **1.1.1 Research questions**

This dissertation explores the benefits and consequences of basketball for rural communities in Alaska. It discusses the sport's role in the everyday life of Nenana, a community situated on the banks of the Tanana and Nenana Rivers; and it examines the ways by which basketball facilitates social relations in the community and creates a social space within which these relations become meaningful. From the outset, certain characteristics of this space become evident as: a) it is a domain where playfulness and fun are encouraged, b) it is a trans-generational space connecting individuals of all ages via playing the game, and c) it is a source of shared experiences between participants.

Taking these attributes as a foundation, this research asks several questions. First, it asks the question: In what ways does basketball facilitate inter- and intra-village relations? This question identifies the common links between players and fans in an ever-expanding social network based on basketball. An analysis of basketball's lived social experience in specific components is used to describe the sport as "a lifetime commitment" (Eric and Cathie Gebhart, personal interview, 05/21/11) for rural Alaskans and explains how the game becomes common ground for participants cutting across boundaries of place and age boundaries. Certain concepts presented here, such as teamwork, are local ideas that relate to broader discussions of individual and community relations within Nenana and between villages.

The second question revolves around the qualities of the specific social space created by the game itself. This dissertation hypothesizes that interpersonal relations established in a game context are not ordinary in the sense that they mature within the

playful, temporary, extraordinary world that is established any time we play (Goffman 1961). Even more, the physical space within which basketball is being played, in this case the Nenana gymnasium, has been set aside for this specific reason—play. This rough hypothesis depends on an understanding of the cultural dichotomies between work and leisure, serious life, and play. In testing it within the social context of Nenana, the dissertation explores if playing can actually affect the participant's life in a way that serious domains cannot touch.

The third question investigates the dynamic relationship between people and the cultural space of basketball as defined by its temporal events (i.e. pick-up games, practices), its physical space (the gymnasium), and spatial dimensions (community, regional, state wide) as these are interpreted and experienced by the people of Nenana. This question adds an analysis of physical space to the discussion. It introduces the spatial element taking into account how people infuse a physical setting with meaning and importance and how, in turn, the physical transcends into a social space. This is a subject largely downplayed in the anthropology of sports, especially in relation to its symbolic importance. Within the local context of Nenana, the gymnasium is consciously recognized to bear similarities to a “shrine” (Chuck Hugny, personal interview, 10/27/10). Given the fact that of all the physical spaces in Nenana, such as the school or the church, the gymnasium is the only space designed to allow playing with a ball, the avatar of play, its symbolic importance warrants further investigation.

The fourth and final question touches on the answers to the previous questions: How do basketball and the socio-cultural space created around it inform the community's

local cultural logic? This question provides a detailed look at basketball, as not only a “functional” tool used at an educative level to positively influence the development of students’ individual characters but also as a significant cultural process in itself that affects the communities that invest in it. Through this process, socio-cultural values are celebrated and re-shaped as they are staged in the social drama of a basketball game for all of the community to see. It is argued that in the particular context of Alaskan villages, the end result is a recurrent and lively (albeit subtle and temporary) manifestation of community solidarity and village life.

## **1.2 The community of Nenana**

Nenana is a community situated at the confluence of the Tanana and Nenana Rivers, fifty-six miles southwest of Fairbanks, Alaska. According to the census of 2010, it has a population of 378.<sup>1</sup> It is an ethnically mixed community with 37% of the population being of Tanana Athabascan heritage. A significant portion of the village’s residents follows a subsistence lifestyle (Koskey 2007, Shinkwin and Case 1989). Unlike other rural towns, the Parks Highway (the main artery connecting Fairbanks to Anchorage) passes straight through the community. In addition, Nenana benefits from its connection to the railroad system as well as the barge system that uses the river to

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cubitplanning.com/city/18089-nenana-city-census-2010-population>

transfer goods to off-road villages. Nenana's close proximity to Fairbanks allows many residents to live in the community and commute to jobs in the city.

### 1.2.1 History

Historically, Nenana has been a trading and cultural crossroads for Interior Alaska. Even before contact with Russian explorers and traders, Tanana Athabascans used the site seasonally for summer fishing and potlatches. They called it *Toghotthele*, which means 'mountain that parallels the river.' The original location of the site was two miles up the Tanana River and across from where the community is situated today. In the early 1900s, as the gold rush brought non-Natives to the area, a stable settlement was born. In a period of five years twenty log cabins, a telegraph station, and a trading post became the foundations of a new community.

The community caught the attention of the Episcopal Church who planned to spread its missionary work across the Tanana River. In 1907, construction of St. Mark's Episcopal Church and school began on the opposite side of river from the Native community of *Toghotthele*. The idea was that this would alleviate any negative influences from the village itself. Eventually, St. Mark's became a boarding school with dormitory facilities housing about forty students from neighboring communities such as Tanana and Minto. In 1955, the mission closed after having served for almost fifty years.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.newsminer.com/article\\_41795094-32e4-5f34-acae-60fef741c75.html](http://www.newsminer.com/article_41795094-32e4-5f34-acae-60fef741c75.html)

The construction of the Alaska Railroad in 1915 was instrumental in changing Nenana's character. Essentially, a new community sprung up next to St. Mark's Episcopal Church. In 1922, the building of The Railroad Depot, today a museum, and the Mears Memorial Bridge in 1923, made Nenana the link between Fairbanks and Seward with President Warren G. Harding hammering the last "Golden" spike on the railroad tracks. For a number of years since, the community became a hub of economic activity. Mail, trade, and other services all passed through Nenana. The community's population skyrocketed; according to local records almost five thousand people lived in the community at that time,<sup>3</sup> although the percentage of the Native population had already started to decline.<sup>4</sup> The economic development was short lived, and in 1930 Nenana dropped back to a few hundred people.

A second burst of economic development came with the construction of Clear Air Force base in 1961, twenty miles southwest of Nenana. The base gave employment to a number of Nenana residents who commuted back and forth daily. In 1968, the construction of the Parks Highway Bridge connected Nenana to Fairbanks and made the use of ferry across the Tanana River obsolete.<sup>5</sup>

Nenana made history as the first relay point in one of the most extraordinary stories of human courage, the Serum Run. In a 1925 outbreak of diphtheria in Nome, a number of mushers carried the much needed diphtheria serum to the community using a

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://explorenorth.com/alaska/history/nenana-history.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.newsminer.com/article\\_41795094-32e4-5f34-acae-60fef741c75.html](http://www.newsminer.com/article_41795094-32e4-5f34-acae-60fef741c75.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.alaskarails.org/modeling/nenana-depot/nenana-depot-history/index.html>

650-mile route connecting Nenana to Nome. Twenty sled dog teams carried the serum over harsh terrain and extreme temperatures within a ground-breaking time of five and a half days.<sup>6</sup> The story popularized Alaska to the rest of the world and added to the image of the Last Frontier. Winter sled dog and snowmobile trails have always been, and still are, an important part of Alaskan life. Such trails have made Nenana a meeting point for the neighboring communities. Visitors from Fairbanks, for instance, often use the frozen Tanana River and Minto residents will sometimes use the Old Mail trail to visit relatives in Nenana or attend important community events.

### **1.2.2 The community today**

The heart of the community is the Nenana Public High School, which accommodates student-grades kindergarten through 12. Students attend classes from 7:45 in the morning until 2:45 in the afternoon. After classes are over, they may choose to stay on the premises and participate in after-school activities. The school offers a number of extracurricular programs and hosts community events as well. Between their classes, basketball practices and other activities students may spend up to fifteen hours in the school.

These are “school-oriented” students, as they are popularly known, referring to the fact that for some students life, even their free time, is spent on school. Most of these

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cmnh.org/site/AtTheMuseum/OnExhibit/PermanentExhibits/Balto.aspx>

extracurricular activities take place in the school's gymnasium. Located in the southeastern part of the school, it is a space with its own dynamic and serves many purposes. For most students, it serves as a social hub and it is the first choice among them for spending their free time. Both students and adults go there after school for pick-up basketball games. Students often stay on the school premises until early in the evening.

The Nenana High School's mascot is the lynx. The school's athletic uniforms feature a drawn lynx's head. As an image, the lynx is mostly associated with basketball. This is not to say that other sports and activities do not represent the lynx. Soccer, volleyball, cross-country skiing, running, and at times wrestling have their own share in generating school pride. Furthermore, the Nenana High School music band, one of the non-sport ASAA sponsored activities, is a significant part of the school's identity and has a longstanding tradition of winning music competitions around the state. However, basketball that gathers the most interest, not only from students but also from adults. Game nights, whether official high school basketball games or pick-up games, are important social events frequented by people of all ages.

Most students of the Nenana Public High School are not local but come from a variety of villages across the state. In 2001, the town of Nenana built the Nenana Student Living Center (NSLC), a residential facility for non-local students who sought better education in Nenana High School. In building the Living Center, the community complied with an ongoing need in rural Alaska for better and cheaper education and filled the gap that St. Mark's Episcopal Church and School closure left forty-six years ago. For years after St. Mark's closed, families from Interior Alaska still preferred to send their

children to Nenana's state operated public school to be educated. In the absence of St. Mark's dormitories, non-local students had to live with foster families in Nenana.

Today, the NSLC main purpose is twofold: to provide a roof over the students' heads and to play the role of the foster family. The NSLC has its own staff, separate from the one at the school, and they become the legal guardians of the students for as long as they attend high school. The application process is open to any student in Alaska who wants to join. Usually, applicants come from off-road communities such as Mountain Village, Emmonak, Tyonek, Kwillingok, Minto, Bethel, as well as numerous other places in the state.

In the academic year 2010–2011, the Living Center was home to seventy-five students, almost 70% of the Nenana High School's student body. Most students residing in the NSLC are Alaska Native. Some are also related. Extended families may choose to send their children together to the NSLC, so it is common for students to have their brothers, sisters or cousins in the school or as alumni. A favorite pastime of the newcomers at the beginning of the year is to look at the photos of graduated NSLC students hanging from the wall and proudly identify all their kinship or acquaintances from back home.

It is worth noting that the Living Center is not a boarding school. In everyday language, people will refer to the "NSLC students," which may create the misconception that they attend classes at the NSLC, but the fact is that all local and non-local students are educated in Nenana's high school. This is unlike the boarding schools in Galena and Sitka where local and non-local students attend separate facilities. In addition, NSLC

accepts non-Native students. Through the years, it has participated in international exchange student programs and in general has encouraged a diverse profile. Thus, the preferred term for describing the Living Center is that of a “residential facility” (Eric and Cathie Gebhart, personal interview, 05/21/11).

Other public places in Nenana are the local library, the recreational center, the tribal community hall, and the civic center. These are used by a variety of local groups, which host community events, workshops, club meetings, and community dinners. The community also has five churches of various denominations, three restaurants, a hotel, and two bars. During the spring and the summer months, Nenana is a popular tourist attraction. Bus tour companies from Fairbanks stop there to visit the Tripod Gift Shop, the Railroad Museum, the Culture Center, and the Tanana River.

Nenana hosts two community traditions that epitomize Alaska to both Alaskans and the rest of U.S. The first is the Nenana Ice Classic (NIC), a tradition that goes back to 1917 when railroad workers first bet on the exact time that the river ice would break up in the spring time. To keep track of the exact moment of the break, a tall wooden tripod connected to a timing device is placed on the ice. When the temperature rises in the spring months, the ice breaks and moves downriver. The tripod falls, stopping the connected timing device.

Today, the Nenana Ice Classic is both a lottery and fund-raising event. Contestants buy tickets on which they note their predictions as to the date and exact minute the ice will break. The money collected from ticket sales is put into a collective pool and then redistributed to the winners. Portions are kept for the operation itself, as

well as for the community. In addition, the NIC provides seasonal employment to many residents and high school students. Employees gather at the city hall, then file and organize all the tickets and the predicted times.

As an event, the Nenana Ice Classic engages the whole community. The Tripod Weekend, usually at the beginning of March, is the local celebration of the raising of the tripod on the river. The NIC organizing committee, the school, and other agencies host events such as dancing and cooking competitions, poker tournaments, and flea markets in the civic center. Traditionally, an adult basketball tournament is also organized as part of the festivities. Typically, first on the event catalog, the tournament used to be the highlight for the Tripod Days. Once it was a Native-only tournament with a great following from neighboring villages such as Tanana and Minto, but nowadays it has lost its glamour. For quite some time, spectators and players from neighboring villages have not shown the same interest they used to for this tournament, and as a result, despite the best efforts from the organizers it is sparsely attended. Typically, players and teams come straight from the Fairbanks City League and only a handful of Nenana's own residents play.

The other event known to all Alaskans is the Nenana Invitational Tournament, popularly known as NIT. The NIT is a high school basketball tournament. For the last twenty-eight years, it has been organized by the Nenana Public City School and its Athletic Director, Dean Overbey. Unlike the Tripod adult tournament, it has a considerable following and is considered by many to be the largest and most popular "small" high school tournament in the state. Schools across the state vie for the

opportunity to participate and put their name in yellow block letters on the NIT Championship board, placed prominently in Nenana's gymnasium. Indicative of its importance is the selection of participating teams that starts one year in advance.

The NIT has a special place in the minds of rural basketball fans. As a social event, it excites and motivates people on a variety of levels. For coaches and players, NIT is an excellent opportunity to test their team's mettle before the regional and state tournaments. For others, it is an excellent opportunity to travel and visit friends and relatives who are either playing on the court or cheering in the stands. A number of fans have previously played in NIT as students and want to come to relive and compare the experience.

The most important reason for participation in the NIT is that it epitomizes the heart of 2A and 1A (small school) basketball, which, in the Alaskan context, evokes positive images of village life. Residents in rural Alaska, the majority of whom are Native, can identify with this image much more than the urban and non-Native images that city or University of Alaska basketball games evoke. Indeed, NIT upholds the reputation that those who want to see "real" basketball in Alaska should not watch city and college games, but rather should see village ball. It is no surprise, then, that in 2011 fans traveled from Ruby, Fort Yukon, Minto, Tanana, Nikolaevsk, Mt. Village, Huslia, Tyonek, Rampart, Anchorage, and Fairbanks to watch NIT; and they all added their own energy to the tournament's reputation.

In the past, Nenana used to have a city league for adults as well, which included teams from Clear Air Force Base, Anderson, and even visiting teams from Fairbanks.

However, ever since the base reduced its personnel, League participation gradually truncated until it was abandoned altogether. There are also neighboring village tournaments in which teams from Nenana may participate, but these, although important, are few and far in between.

### **1.2.3 Demographic challenges**

Despite being a small community, Nenana is an important hub of social events characteristic of life in Alaskan villages. Moreover, similar to elsewhere in rural Alaska, the community's everyday life is subject to rapid social and economic changes. Current challenges are discussed in informal meetings with great concern. One of the most important issues is the migration of residents from the village to the city. This demographic trend results in rural communities "emptying out" at an alarming rate. Chuck Hugny, a Nenana teacher who worked in Tanana in the 1990s, gives the example: "In Tanana we had one hundred and twenty kids in our school at one time, now they're down to thirty. I mean it's really shrunk that much. And the community itself has gone from about five hundred people down to about two hundred. So, it's really changed the dynamics of what the community has to offer" (Chuck Hugny, personal interview, 10/27/10).

Research supports this firsthand experience. In a 2004 report on the Status of Alaska Natives, the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Alaska Anchorage concluded that 45% of all Alaska Natives have moved to cities and

that by 2020 this number could exceed 50%.<sup>7</sup> This directly affects communities in a number of ways, e.g., loss of labor force, gradual economic decrease, and an unbalanced ratio between men and women. For the most part, they have little ability to adjust.

Rural out migration causes major difficulties to school functions. As families move out of a community, schools with low enrollment have to face decreased state support for their programs. Typically, a public school receives around \$8,000 per student from the state. Any school with an enrollment of thirty students or less finds itself unable to offer quality education or hire new teachers, let alone organize athletic and extracurricular activities. In many cases, schools have to teach kindergarten to fifth grade in one unified class due to low enrollments. In the worst-case scenario, communities may have to actually close down the school because the expenses cannot be justified for the number of students enrolled (Demarban 2012). If one takes into account that, historically, educational facilities, schools, and missions, have been the pumping heart of villages in Alaska (Berardi 1999), closing down the school is a major impact on a community's future. It is not surprising, then, that much of the concern on rural migration revolves around the effects of outside pressure on a school's operations.

Nenana has had its own issues with this rural-to-urban migration trend and its aftermath. According to the 2010 census, Nenana experienced a 6% population decline.<sup>8</sup> Teachers have seen the immediate consequences in the declining participation of local students in the high school. They express concerns that there are too few local children to

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/statusaknatives2004-vol1.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cubitplanning.com/city/18089-nenana-city-census-2010-population>

sustain the public school. As previously discussed, the community's response was the construction of the NSLC in 2001 and the offer of its services to students across the state. NSLC helped the Nenana High School to cover the decrease of its local student body by boosting its numbers with non-local students. This has not necessarily changed the move of local families out of Nenana, but it has certainly provided the school with a buffer of viability.

Nenana residents have mixed feelings about the Living Center. At the same time that they understand the necessity of the Living Center in keeping ahead of statewide demographic changes, many see in its construction an affirmation of Nenana's changing community character. They are nostalgic of previous years when the town was much more closely knit and the school was full of children from Nenana's own families. They reminisce about the festivities of the Tripod Days of the past or the sled dog races on the frozen river and boat races during the summer, which would gather the whole community in celebration. Interestingly, a manner by which people compare past and present Nenana is through basketball stories, specifically those that depict the community's attendance and support in the games.

### **1.3 An anthropologist in Nenana**

I first visited Nenana in 2008 while exploring the possibility of doing research on basketball in Alaska. Since then, I visited Nenana on numerous occasions to play basketball and participate in a number of high school sports activities. These ranged from

assisting in coaching the Nenana High School soccer team to chaperoning Nenana students for the Western Interior Ski Biathlon Association meet in Tanana. Throughout all of this, my friend and mentor Chuck Hugny, science teacher in the Nenana High School, gave me his utmost help and assistance.

By the fall of 2010, I was ready to move to Nenana fulltime, having set up the research and acquiring all the necessary permissions. In September and October, I took the time to see, and be seen by, Nenana residents. Some people knew me, others knew of me, but only a handful knew the details about me and my project. Walking the town and visiting with people gave me a chance to introduce myself and explain my purpose. Open gym nights and basketball practices would start later in the year, so I spent most of my mornings in the local library and participated in soccer practices later in the day. At this stage, most of my notes describe the town's layout and provide brief comments on the people whom I met in the community. I did not pursue any specific research questions during that period.

In mid-October, the Junior High School basketball season started and this reminded everyone that high school basketball season was just down the road. Basketball became, for one more year, the main subject in school corridors and in the gymnasium. At this juncture, my notebook became my constant companion and part of how participants in the study remember me. Note taking was an invaluable tool, especially in those basketball events where a number of things occurred simultaneously.

From the end of October until July of 2011, I scribbled notes daily gathering information about anything associated with basketball, as well as facts and events that I

found interesting. In addition, I started a journal, which I updated every week, where I would try to recount the events of the last week without looking at my notes. My purpose was to get the “feel,” or general impression, of what I was doing that week and compare it with my notes. Mostly, there were no major differences between the two with the exception of a few cases where my journal included more details, which, at the time of note taking, did not seem important enough to include.

By the time the high school basketball season started, note taking and journal updating had become a habit. After all, my notebook guided the direction of my fieldwork through the wealth of information contained in it. The potency of scribbling notes became clear when I compared it to another method—video camera recording. Initially, I had planned to record all of Nenana’s away games<sup>9</sup> so that I could “analyze” them later in my own private space. However, after recording a few games on camera, I noticed that I was actually disassociating myself from the real game. Looking through the camera is not watching. Keeping the lens aligned with the action is, in fact, a full time job. This results in not participating in the game. The life of the bleachers, the coaches’ reactions, the players interactions away from the ball were all lost to me, and, in addition, I was not included in any of the verbal and visual communiqués of my fellow spectators. The cinematographer is in his own bubble and everyone leaves him alone. While recording games with a video camera produced a product that could be analyzed later, I was losing the effect of basketball as a lived experience, which is, essentially, what I

---

<sup>9</sup> Home game were always recorded by a Nenana School staff member and copies were easily accessed.

would be writing about. Note taking was much more versatile in such an environment and did not cut me off from the game atmosphere and the rewards of participating and observing (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). As such, field notes compile the majority of the data.

In addition to field notes and basketball game video recordings, I conducted twenty-one recorded interviews and three pen-and-paper interviews with twenty-eight individuals. Five of the recorded interviews included more than one individual, a technique that was successful in capturing the synergy of the participants' retelling of a story. Six individuals interviewed were not Nenana residents. These interviews provided comparative data from other villages in Alaska. The age span of the interviewees in Nenana was 16 to 70 years old, covering the basketball history of the community from its past to the present and from the youth to the Elders. The interviews were semi-structured with a framework of themes guiding the questions. Interviews were conducted between September 2010 and May 2011. All the interviews provided additional qualitative information and insights into the themes that emerged from the notes. After conducting the interviews, I would listen to them and transcribe any passages of interest. I would then make note of points of view that needed clarification. Conducting follow-up interviews was problematic since several interviews happened during basketball trips outside of Nenana with individuals I met there. In other words, these were one-time exchanges. Others were acquaintances, and since their time spent on the interview was not compensated, I was reluctant to ask for additional explanatory information. Follow-

up questions were easier to conduct with the students and coaches with whom I had daily direct contact.

I was fortunate to receive a warm welcome and help from the school and the people in Nenana. Being an international student, who was not only interested in basketball but could also play it, this made my initial introduction to the student group smoother. My “funny” accent and foreign origin broke the ice in almost all occasions, and my love of basketball guaranteed a measure of inclusiveness. Questions about my homeland or requests to pronounce specific words were common occurrences, as well as teasing and joking with the students.

The most rewarding part of the research was traveling around Alaska with the Lynx basketball teams. Writing about social connections and the social spaces created around basketball is one thing, but experiencing firsthand the specific moments in time when these connections and spaces are generated is quite another. The 2010–2011 Nenana High School Lynx basketball season was an exciting adventure with important last-second victories and losses, and new basketball heroes taking the stage with impressive and inspiring team efforts. It has also been a pleasure to write about these experiences.

My own preoccupation with sports has definitely influenced the outcome of this dissertation. As an ex-athlete, I am in a position to describe and analyze the unique sports moments I encountered in my research from the point of view of the researcher but also from the point of view of the player. On the other hand, I continuously struggled to not romanticize the reality of sports to the extent that my results would be skewed towards a

positively biased view of sports. My goal was to offer a balanced and objective critique of the role of sports in the social life of Nenana.

#### **1.4 Alaskan basketball literature**

In spite of the importance of basketball for Alaskans, there are very few social science studies on the phenomenon. Most of the published work has come from journalists. A few articles on basketball in Alaska (Duncan 1993a, Duncan 1993b, Pennington 2004, Patkotat 2008, Ruibal 2001, Saari 2010) and a special multimedia presentation by The New York Times (Yardley and Olsen 2011) all provide popularized reports of the significance of basketball in rural communities. The articles focus on the unique basketball traveling experiences for village students and the connection between traditional practices (such as whaling) and teamwork on the court. Various novelists have produced autobiographical narratives that refer to basketball in Alaska. Some examples can be found in chapters from Nick Jans' book, *The Last Light Breaking* (1993), which focus on the intensity of village games, or in John Foley's book, *Tundra Teacher* (2003), in his story about being hired as a principal in Tetlin because he was a good shot with the ball. These tales depict basketball's intimate connection to everyday life.

Sherman Alexie's 2005 short story, "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore," and Michael D'Orso's *Eagle Blue* (2006) offer heartfelt and engaging accounts of the meaning of basketball for Native American people in the United States. Alexie's story presents a basic reality of Native American reservations in

which disenchanted and despondent youth look to basketball as the only means to be someone on the reservation and perhaps escape the dire fate of their peers. Alexie makes basketball references in almost all of his novels because it is the one activity capable of breeding heroes, figures who embody the true spirit of being Indian. As one of Alexie's characters muses: "...Indians kind of see ballplayers as saviors. I mean, if basketball would have been around, I'm sure Jesus Christ would've been the best point guard in Nazareth" (Alexie 2005:52).

Similar is the experience of D'Orso who described the importance of basketball for youth in Fort Yukon, Alaska. D'Orso emphasized the point that social life in the Bush is hard and full of challenges. Alcohol, drugs, and suicide are critical social ills that plague villages. It is especially hard for teenagers who end up comparing their almost non-existent post-high school prospects with those afforded to others in urban centers. In such an unstable environment, basketball becomes a source of optimism. It gives youth goals to struggle and fight for and presents an alternative view of their future. Furthermore, it allows teachers and coaches a venue to reach their students and offer guidance. Throughout the book, basketball is treated as the sole means by which young people and adults in Ft. Yukon could earn some sense of achievement, pride, and the right to dream.

Both of these works read like novels, but the insights they offer speak to the striking similarities between reservations in the contiguous U.S. and villages in Alaska, with basketball being a foundational social activity that people look to for more than fun. D'Orso's book is also an example to any researcher about the consequences research may

have on the life of a community (Appell 1978). His book made Fort Yukon known to the general public inside and outside Alaska. However, not all residents have been happy with it. Some feel that the students' and their family's privacy was violated. Others believe that D'Orso made a profit without returning anything to the community (field notes 07/27/10). At the basis of these complaints may lie conflicting political stances between individuals and families in Fort Yukon and D'Orso's alignment with one set of ideas and attitudes rather another. In any case, D'Orso's legacy proves that even seemingly innocent subjects can have ramifications.

Published work on basketball from a social science perspective is rare. In 1985, researcher and historian Gil Truitt published a history of basketball in southeast Alaska called *Basketball: Past Day of Glory* (2010). Truitt, and his collaborators, compiled historical information, records of games, and personal accounts in three separate handbooks, offering valuable information of basketball's first steps in Alaska. Anthropologist Julie Sprott presents basketball as an integral part of cultural reality of the Iñupiaq in Noorvik, northwest Alaska (Sprott 1997). Sprott argues that basketball is imbued with Iñupiaq cultural values and comprises a meta-theme, which strengthens village identity and a sense of belonging (along Christmas and sled dog races). Stacey Rasmus' research on the ways young people cope with challenges in Alaskan villages found that basketball played a very important role in redirecting social energy towards tackling everyday problems and was a constant source of self-esteem (Rasmus 2008). Apart from these anthropological and historical papers, at the time of this writing there is no other published work on Alaskan basketball. The current project is an opportunity to

present basketball as an important and distinct sociocultural activity for Alaskans and possibly open new avenues of research on the subject.

## **1.5 Sports and social theory**

In the last few decades, the field of anthropology has embraced sports as a valid theme of study. The discipline has become part of an interdisciplinary approach to sports, known as sport studies. The term refers to a focus on sports that combines theoretical perspectives and methodology from a variety of traditional disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, history, sociology, geography, and human biology. As such, sport studies is viewed both as an institutionalized field within the academic setting and as a mind frame for understanding sports (Dyck 2000, Giulianotti 2004). Anthropology benefits from an ever-expanding literature on the subject and in turn contributes its own cross-cultural and holistic perspectives. The discipline refines its own theoretical agenda and methods with the purpose of conducting fruitful ethnographies both in long-term and short-term sports settings. It follows that anthropology can contribute to the study of sports both within its own specific framework as well as the larger body of scholarship.

Within this interdisciplinary context, anthropologists perceive sports as complex cultural categories that embody profound values and beliefs: “a common theme found in much of the anthropological literature on games and sports is the notion that these activities frequently serve as representations of selected aspects of culture, and that these representations reflect and interpret culture” (Harris 1983:177). Even more so, some

argue that not only are sports useful in our understanding of a variety of cultural domains, but they are themselves a reservoir of cultural richness (Lithman 2004, Palmer 2002:254).

Erving Goffman best conceptualizes the cultural significance of games and sports. Goffman considers games to be “world building activities,” within which actors are allowed to reject everyday rules and code of conduct and create new ones for the duration of the game (Goffman 1961:27). For example, approaching too close to a stranger and violating his personal space could be inappropriate outside a sport context, however, during a game, where physical contact is normal, it is appropriate. As such, games do not only represent culture but also recreate it in their own specific way.

Anthropologists have pursued a number of related themes, which provide the theoretical framework for this dissertation. Some ethnographers have studied the processes by which sports have been adopted and adapted by groups of people to fit their inherent cultural logic (Appadurai 1997, Fox 1983 [1961], Heider 1983 [1977], Kaufman and Patterson 2005, Csoba DeHass and Droulias 2010, Wilde 2004). Much of this literature focuses on games and sports that have been introduced to, or even imposed upon, particular groups as assimilation catalysts. Ethnographic research shows that sports quickly become congruent with their new cultural surroundings and are used to introduce dominant social values to specific groups and strengthen policies of assimilation.

Heider and Appadurai use as examples the game of “flip the stick” and the sport of cricket, respectively, which were introduced by the colonial governments in Indonesia and India with the aim of inducing guided culture change toward the dominant society’s paradigm. Despite the governments’ practical appreciation of the significance of games

and sports in culture change, their efforts ultimately backfired. The groups not only adopted the games but also adapted them to their own reality and used them to renew the strength of their own identity. Thus, sports and games are malleable enough to be shaped by the direct actions of the individuals and groups who play them.

Fox focuses on the adoption of baseball by the Cochiti Pueblo Indians and explains that the consequences are not always steered or positive for a community. With the introduction of the sport, the Cochiti's social system of harmony and cooperation broke down and revealed underlying forces of interfamilial competition and aggression, so much so that the Cochiti council had to threaten to ban the game from the community—a move that was in itself unprecedented (Fox 1983 [1961]). Kaufman and Patterson maintain that the process of adopting and adapting new games and sports may be less about orchestrated efforts and more the result of cultural diffusion. They use the example of cricket to demonstrate this process further. They explain the mechanics of cultural diffusion through sport, the importance of intermediaries, and the social conditions, which make a new sport relevant to a culture. They conclude that although cultural diffusion is, by and large, a bottom up process, in some cases it is the involvement of elites and their distinctive disassociation from the local population that causes a sport to be successfully adopted (Kaufman and Patterson 2005).

A number of sport anthropologists perceive sports and sporting events as significant cultural phenomena that strengthen social relations, enhance identity, and uphold the social order (Blanchard 1983 [1974], Blanchard 1995, MacClancy 1996, Palmer 2002, Sands 1999). Kendall Blanchard's work in the community of Rimrock,

New Mexico shows how basketball has facilitated inter-ethnic relations between the Navajo and Anglo-Americans. Despite playing the game for different reasons and goals, basketball helps the two groups avoid cultural value conflicts (Blanchard 1983 [1974]: 474). Published work on spectator sports such as American football, baseball, and soccer discuss the relationship between local, regional, national, and transnational identity as these are created and expressed in stadiums around the world. Stadiums and other venues of sport events are presented as stages where different identities are temporarily fused and celebrated collectively (Alamillo 2010, Anderson et al. 2001, 2004, Bergin 2002, Lindquist 2006, Moniz 2007). Of particular interest to this dissertation is work examining the effect of athletics in the school environment in terms of positive development, socialization, and social relations (Coakley 2011, Damon 2004, Eitle-McNutly and Eitle 2002, Jordan 1999, Mahiri 1994).

Much of sport studies literature connects to, or is influenced by, Emile Durkheim's writings on religion and, specifically, moral community (Durkheim 1965 [1912]). According to Durkheim, the moral community created by people's religious beliefs and value systems not only functions in a prohibitive and restraining manner, but, in unique moments, it becomes a source of inspiration and heightened community. In using Durkheim, writers make implicit comparisons between religious and sports gatherings.

Indeed, similarities between the two are numerous. As we shall see, the energy that fans exert in the form of social support during a basketball game is perceived by players to be the catalyst of a tremendous boost to their efforts and even directs their

focus toward the goal at hand. A reciprocal connection is established between players and fans, conjuring a sense of community, which, even though temporary, is extremely powerful (Schwartz and Barsky 1977). Research shows that popularized perceptions of “home advantage” or exclamations of “my house!” are anything but just everyday expressions. They confer a feeling and a certainty of belonging. Fan support also has a practical and consistent value and helps players perform better at the same time that, by a process of exclusion, the opponents may feel disadvantaged (Mizruchi 1985).

Lastly, another body of literature of specific interest to this dissertation comes from the combined work of phenomenologists from a variety of social sciences who deal with human experience and the different ways it affects reality (Bateson 1983 [1955], Goffman 1961, 1974). Also of interest here is the anthropology that focuses on symbolic culture, the creation of meaning, and social and staged dramas (Geertz 1973, MacAloon 1987, Turner 1974). Both groups overlap considerably in their exploration of the concept of play, the contrast between playful and serious reality, and the interpretation of their conclusions through the lenses of philosophy and psychology rather than traditional anthropology and sociology. Researchers from this particular area use play to explore people’s creative propensities and the alteration of reality and experience. Games and sports feature prominently in their discussion, but they consider play in broader terms, not merely as a need for fun and recreation but also as an activity of creation. Therefore, play can be manifested in other activities and social events such as dancing, drawing, writing, or theater and music recitals.

Play can be defined as an attitude or state of mind which addresses, interprets, and communicates reality in a slightly different way from the more immediately recognizable and familiar modes of interaction. In order to convey this attitude, play involves *metacommunication*, or communication about communication (Bateson 1983 [1955]). Metacommunication is a level of human interaction that involves verbal and non-verbal signals that tell people how to interpret specific meaningful actions. Its “reality” is dependent on a shared and sometimes fragile acknowledgment between actors that an action does not mean what it would normally mean. Combat play, for instance, involving wrestling and grabbing, requires metacommunication so that players know that it is not real combat but is play (Bateson 1983[1955]).

Gregory Bateson developed the concept of metacommunication in play in an effort to explain its relation to reality, experience, and culture. One could say that, at its core, the urge to play is autotelic and beyond culture; “to play” is fun and this is the only justification needed to engage in it (Lewis 2008). It is also one of those universal realities that can be communicated across species, for example, when a human plays with a dog. The action of play, i.e., “playing,” adds the element of culture. People’s comprehension of when to play depends largely on circumstance, cultural signifiers, and context. What is played with and how also depends on what takes place in ordinary or “serious” activity. Indeed, play can be seen as a parallel reality. Not only do people play as much as they engage in ordinary action, but they also play with elements from “serious” life. For example, joking, itself an expression of play, uses everyday occurrences to tease and make fun.

By its very nature then, play is always temporary; it is limited in the present time and/or space and it ends within these confines. Indeed, for “playfulness” to take effect and retain its meaning, it needs to intersect momentarily between instances of “serious” life. One can visualize it as bracketed action in the continuum of everyday life (Goffman 1974). Victor Turner focuses on play’s creative abilities. He regards play as a free activity; its very essence rests in being erratic, uncontrollable, and with no definite purpose. Nevertheless, people who are playing are also creating. By using normative reality as the subject of play, one may reinforce it, contradict it, subvert it, or invert it. Because of these abilities, play is also sacred. It is the essence of ritual interactions between individual and community and becomes part of a spiritual experience during such an event. Thus, playful reality cannot become normative reality. Bordering the premises of a paradox, when the result of play becomes part of the normative reality, then it is time for this new part itself to be played with (Turner 1974).

For Turner, the intersecting and temporary nature of play is the defining characteristic between structure, or normative, everyday reality, and anti-structure, its playful mirror image: “The normative structure represents the working equilibrium, the anti-structure represents the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it” (Turner 1974:130).

A seminal difference of post-industrial complex societies and simpler agricultural societies is this exact dichotomy. Simpler societies do not distinguish between everyday secular work and sacred, spiritual work; plowing one’s fields serves as much a functional

purpose as it satisfies the gods' intentions. Thus, people can switch between normative everyday life and spiritual, playful counter-life much more fluidly.

Alternatively, complex societies have set boundaries between serious life and non-serious life. This dichotomy is the source of much theoretical work by prolific writers from all social disciplines. For many writers, the antithetical relation between structure and anti-structure breeds a number of similarly antithetical pairs: serious vs. playful, work vs. leisure, and paid time vs. free time are all characteristics of the post-industrial social order and have never been as pronounced as at they are in western societies (Elias and Dunning 1986).

In dealing with such themes, writers have to reach deep into individual, human, and cultural psyches. Play and the experience of playing in all its manifestations are subjects that cannot be easily verified nor validated using scientific methods and still pay justice to the intricacies of their subject. For instance, play is a state of being so close to the essence of humans that at some point its connection with scientific observation ends. Nonetheless, researchers feel that there is still more to explain and elaborate upon even beyond the scientific method. In doing so, one has to reach for psychological or/and philosophical interpretations. Turner notes that in dealing with "an anthropology of experience," structural-functional analysis can do only so much before the psychological properties of individuals are taken into account (Turner 1980: 144). Likewise, in his discussion on the organization of experience Goffman cautions the reader that even though his conclusions cannot be grounded in any sociological research, they can still be

a valuable theoretical model that can be used to explain experiences in the living world (Goffman 1974).

An example of the interpretive depths that may be needed to explain human activity within the anti-structure is Geertz's final conclusion on Balinese cockfighting. In his examination of "deep play," – play where the stakes are so high that they vastly outweigh any utilitarian anticipation of benefits – Geertz concludes that fighting roosters represent fighting men and their struggle to reach (and at the same time prove) perfection. In addition, the play symbolizes the dark side of human beings, their animality (Geertz 1983 [1972]: 46). These symbolic expressions are performances of metasocial commentary (MacAloon and Csikszentmihalyi 1983 [1977]: 377). "Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive – it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell about themselves" (Geertz 1973: 448).

From the start of his preoccupation with symbolic culture, Turner maintained that it is imperative for anthropology to come to terms with work published in other disciplines such as history and psychology. His idea was that in dealing with symbols and the creative powers of play, all social disciplines converge from different pathways into the essence of being human (Turner 1980). In such an effort, the standard model of scientific method can be restrictive. In different degrees and ways, all these writers escape the confines of the traditional scientific methods and reach conclusions that delve into individual and social psyches. To delve that deep, the researcher needs a combination of observable data and a level of intuitive subjective understanding that is achieved only through exposure to a specific cultural group. While there is no doubt that

the writers believe their interpretations to be important and true, there is no apparent way to test or validate their findings or replicate their findings. Concepts such as play and experience or terms such as “deep play” require “deep analysis,” venturing into areas that quantitative science cannot follow. In places, the conclusions in this dissertation may be of the same type.

## **1.6 Sports settings as symbolic spaces**

The cultural spaces that arise from sports and games are the result of the dialectic between the actions and energy of people and the symbolic settings reserved for them (Droogers 2004). Any playing field is an excellent example of the creative capacities of people. Throwing a rugby ball to a receiver opposite oneself is an action that creates a symbolic game space recognizable by everyone. People understand their role in that game by situating themselves in or out of the field; extra players will seek to position themselves in such a spot inside the playing field so that co-players understand they want to participate. Spectators will seek a spot where they do not interfere with the play, while those passing by will make sure to give a wide berth to the play area. People automatically act out these different roles even though there may be no visible lines demarcating the field’s boundaries. Indeed, the very essence of playing is exemplified by people’s ability to symbolically conjure game spaces anywhere; roads, yards, corridors, or even airport fields can momentarily serve a purpose that has nothing to do with their

initial function. Because the gymnasium is a structure whose primary purpose is playing, this makes it a symbolic space with a constant presence.

Despite the presentation of the sport setting as a symbolic space, little systematic work has been done to analyze its qualities. Ellis Cashmore (2000) focuses on the need of human beings to escape a regimented and controlled way of life and to experience the thrill of danger without fear of actually getting hurt. Loic Wacquant describes the sporting space of a boxing gym along similar lines but with more specificity; he regards the gym as a space reserved for people who think alike (Wacquant 2004). In that space, participants can reconstruct part of their ordinary life according to the agreed-upon values of the male fighter. Similarly to Cashmore, Wacquant views this space as distinctive from the “outside” public space and, specifically, in the context of a black ghetto neighborhood, from what takes place in the “streets.”

Interestingly, this notional opposition between the “streets” and a sporting setting has been an important theme in the local context of Nenana. Discussions with community members on the positive aspects of basketball reveal the belief that the sport keeps children safe and “off the streets” by bringing them into the gymnasium. Pnina Werbner also identifies such a space emerging in the context of Pakistani cricket (Werbner 1996). She views that space as a dynamic arena where the symbolic practices and discourse of two groups, the Islam-focused Pakistani immigrants and the more nation-focused Pakistani youth, is negotiated and reproduced to include an amalgamation of both worlds.

At first glance then, the sporting setting exemplifies game-like qualities or “ludic,” to use Victor Turner’s term, regarding the *liminoid* spaces of post-industrial

societies (Turner 1974:58, 1983 [1972]). Turner's understanding is that in an effort to negotiate the dichotomy of structure and anti-structure, post-industrial societies have set aside specific symbolic structures in which socially imposed rights and obligations are suspended. Thus, this allows individuals or groups the freedom to engage in playful symbolic creation, or in his own words, to "play with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them" (Turner 1974:60). These structures, set into sharp contrast with the normative structures of society, are the spaces where basic sociocultural principles become manipulable by people. Therefore, as people experiment with established norms and values, symbols reveal their dynamic potential and attain their multivocality.

For Turner, symbols are "social and cultural dynamic systems, shedding and gathering meaning over time and altering in form" (Turner 1983 [1972]:125). People change them all the time by playing and, thus, changing and creating culture. Liminoid are the spaces, both private and social, which are set aside from normative reality and can potentially become an independent domain of cultural creativity and, in turn, feed back to the mainstream arena. Such a space could be the opera or the theater, as well as seasonal performances such as festivals or carnivals. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that basketball games played in the physical space of the gymnasium exhibit Turner's game-like qualities and can be considered liminoid.

This dissertation features a combination of functional analysis, in which questions are answered concerning the role and purpose of basketball in a community, and an in-depth exploration of a sport's distinct symbolic properties and capabilities. It is my belief that both complement and describe the everyday universe of basketball in Alaska. Victor

Turner's work is fundamental in facilitating such hybrid analysis because throughout his prolific career he went through both schools of thought, eventually rejecting the former for the latter (Weber 1995). In addition to his ideas of liminoid spaces and structure and anti-structure, this dissertation treats basketball games as aspects of social dramas, which generate *communitas*, the heightened sense of belonging and togetherness (Turner 1983 [1972], 1980). Through Turner, this dissertation assesses the presence of basketball as an enculturated experience, which is informed by people at the same time that it informs them and their community. In the process, it interprets in ethnographic, but also in philosophical terms, the story that this experience tells about the people and their rural communities in Alaska.

Under this theoretical framework, several research questions have been posed, and their answers make up the chapters of the dissertation. Chapter 2 attempts to provide important background information on the game's development into an organized sport and its diffusion through the school and college environments everywhere in the state. Chapter 3 establishes the links that make basketball a consistent trans-generational lifetime activity by dissecting and describing those aspects that create the experience of basketball. With the possible exception of Native American reservations, this element is unique to Alaska.

Chapter 4 discusses how basketball exerts a positive influence on community solidarity. Nenana is an interesting case due to the existence of the Living Center students and the accompanying mixture of divergent school and community loyalties that do not necessarily represent Nenana. Yet, as we will see, the idea of a community does not need

to be confined to a locality. Through basketball games, social links are established between local and non-local residents transcending the immediate boundaries of Nenana. In fact, playing the sport in rural Alaska has become a marker of identity, which proudly differentiates life in the village from life in the city. Chapter 5 tests the hypothesis that Nenana's local gymnasium, and, for that matter, gymnasiums in rural Alaska in general, function like liminoid spaces. This is done by evaluating the extent to which the gymnasium exhibits game-like qualities. In the conclusion, the findings of the research will be reiterated and connected to each other.

## Chapter 2

### 2.1 History of basketball in Alaska: a brief overview

In this chapter, the history of basketball in Alaska is discussed. The historical lens focuses on southeast Alaska, the area where basketball took its first steps in the state. It is also the first area in Alaska that organized inter- and intra-community basketball leagues and kept official records of games. Combined with information from interviews conducted in the research, this section compiles a basic idea of the diffusion of basketball through the school and college environments across the state. This begins with the early 1900s and the introduction of the sport and continues through to the early 1980s and the aftermath of the Molly Hootch case. Undoubtedly, concurrent developments in Alaskan transportation, especially aviation, had a considerable effect in the sport's diffusion, however, these are not discussed at length in this chapter.

This historical account is by no means complete, but the journey is necessary. Glimpsing into the past exposes the merits of basketball as a game, gradually adopted and adapted by Alaska's populace. According to this history, basketball proves to be a considerable force behind social and cultural developments. For instance, its spread and popularity became the reason for the formation of high school extra curricular programs and organizations in Alaska, some of which are among the oldest in the United States. In

addition, basketball contributed in restoring and reflecting Alaska Native sense of pride and achievement, which, at the time, was under pressure from the dominant society. This chapter investigates the above legacies in an effort to explain the reasons behind rural Alaskans' fascination with the sport as well as showcasing Heider's process of adoption and adaptation (Heider 1983 [1977]).

Historically, southeast Alaska has been at the foreground of many important sociopolitical events. It is an area that underwent rapid social change due to the flourishing fishing and timber industries of the early 1900s and the subsequent population explosion (Barnhardt 2001). All the groups present, Native and non-Native, displayed early on strong incentive for political organization and action on a variety of social issues (Mitchell 2001). Given this ethnically mixed environment and sociopolitical activity, it is no surprise that the southeast was the first area in Alaska where they played basketball in an organized fashion.

Historian and researcher Gil Truitt, himself an alumnus of Mt. Edgecumbe Boarding School in Sitka, compiled in 1985 a historical account of the basketball phenomenon in southeast Alaska. In three separate booklets, he, and various other contributors, present historical information, such as descriptions of championship games and records of southeast Alaska champions covering a period of almost seventy years from the start of the century to the 1980s. They also discuss various themes that were found to be unique to Alaskan basketball from the start, traveling being chief among them. The main booklet, named *Basketball: Past Day of Glory*, conveys Truitt's and his co writers' sense of pride in their schools and southeast Alaska itself (Truitt 2010).

### **2.1.1 Basketball as an indoor sport for students**

Since the beginning of its history, basketball's popularity is entrenched in the specific conjuncture of the development of interscholastic athletics and the building of gymnasiums as inseparable parts of schools and colleges in the U.S. This includes the inspired idea of Dr. James Naismith, teacher at the now named Springfield College in Massachusetts, to design a ball game students could play indoors.<sup>10</sup>

In the first half of the 19th century, European- and U.S.-wide recreational movements maintained the incorporation of leisure time and physical exercise as part of the modern worker's everyday reality, and this was taking hold of the popular imagination. The argument was that for the laborer who finds no joy in the factory, and who goes to work with the same eagerness a slave goes to the galley, life needed to become meaningful again. To counteract this, workers should be encouraged to exercise, engage in recreational activities, and have fun in their spare time (Spring 1974: 484). Fun, the argument continued, makes people happy, and happy people are most likely to be productive and uphold social order. On the contrary, the boring and alienating work most workers had to do in factories was a ticking bomb that could cause upheaval (Spring 1974).

These social movements were the first to introduce the concept of leisure in practical terms and make a sharp conceptual distinction between work and leisure. They pushed for the inclusion of physical exercise into the academic environment in order to

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Naismith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Naismith)

propagate this new ethos of leisure time. In the 1820s, the first U.S. schools brought gymnastic equipment from Germany, and courses on physical education became part of most school programs. Trained gymnasts became part of the school's staff and students were urged to construct and maintain a healthy body. Soon, the first gymnasiums were built as part of high schools and colleges. These indoor spaces were devoted exclusively to gymnastics. Then, by the end of the 19th century, physical education had become the norm in schools.

However, parallel to these developments was the fact that people, even the modern worker, already played a variety of games and sports. The reasons for doing so were not necessarily the result of the recreational movements, as it is unlikely that at that time "keeping healthy" was a goal in itself. Rather, sports and games had a strong foundation at the grassroots in both Europe and the U.S. simply because they are fun and enjoyable. The implication was that this parallel cultural current soon disposed gymnastics from the gymnasium. Even though initially athletics such as competitive team sports were not even on the educational radar, the leap from physical training with an educational purpose to competitive team games with an educational purpose proved to be a small one.

Deeming that competitive games had something to offer to the social and educational endeavors of students, schools started including them in their curriculum. By the 1920s, games and sports had all but overwhelmed physical education classes. Even the gymnasiums changed in appearance. Whereas, before, training instruments occupied

every corner of the gymnasium , the indoor space was now emptied out, allowing participants the freedom to choose and play any number of games (Spring 1974).

## **2.2 Basketball in Alaska**

By the time basketball came to Alaska, about ten years after the game's invention and seven years before Alaska was reorganized as a territory, pure physical education courses had been displaced by interscholastic athletics. Basketball was the “new sport on the block” all through the nation, and it introduced the novelty of a team ball game played indoors. For Alaskan schools and colleges Naismith's invention was a blessing. Due to the extreme weather conditions throughout the long winter, a ballgame that could be played indoors was invaluable. Additionally, basketball is a game involving a number of elements, which entice playfulness: a ball, a hoop, the skill to shoot the ball through the hoop, and teams that need to cooperate to achieve their goal. Officially, basketball in Alaska started in 1905 with the first ever recorded game between Sheldon Jackson's College team and the U.S. Marine Corps. Unofficially, Native college students from Sheldon Jackson, then named Sitka Industrial and Training School, were playing pick-up games as early as the 1890s (Truitt 2010:59). One can only guess what people in other parts of Alaska knew about the game or how consistently they were playing it. Though, historical photos of that era reveal that individual high schools and colleges in major

ports such as Nome featured basketball teams as early as 1913.<sup>11</sup> In southeast Alaska, home of numerous high school and college environments, the ground was fertile not only for basketball's organization as a sport but also its dissemination across the state. All the major cities had high schools, missionary schools, and colleges; and immediately students (a great number of whom were native) embraced the sport. Even more, colleges and universities were quick to form their own basketball teams and build the first gymnasiums in Alaska.

In those early years, Sitka was the center of high school basketball activity in Alaska. From 1905 through 1914, Sheldon Jackson College would put teams together to play games against teams from the community and U.S. military units stationed in the city. There was also a high school league, but it was not organized. Many times finding high schools outside one's own community was pretty difficult, so it was not unheard of for high school teams to play competitively against adult teams in their community, an activity that by today's standards would be unfathomable. Even more so, high school games were scheduled during local businesses events. This resulted in adult basketball tournaments overshadowing high school games (Truitt 2010).

Students were not the only basketball enthusiasts. Concurrent with the formation of school teams was the creation of city leagues. Adults, as well as teenagers, could participate in those teams and play against other communities. Scrimmage, or "pick-up games," became an everyday activity for even the smallest community. In Sitka,

---

<sup>11</sup><http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm4/results.php?CISOOP1=all&CISOBOX1=basketball&CISOFIELD1=CISOSEARCHALL&CISOROOT=all>

impromptu city leagues were played before 1905, many featuring teams from the local business.

The Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB), the sole political organization advocating for civil rights for Natives during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, also participated in the Sitka city league with its own basketball team.<sup>12</sup> The team's coach was Peter Simpson, a founding father and Grand President of ANB from 1912 to 1916.<sup>13</sup> Ever since, ANB teams have had a consistent presence in the history of Alaskan basketball and city leagues. Many of ANB's players, coaches, and managers were also politically active and outstanding community members. In its earliest steps in the southeast, basketball had a significant and upstanding Alaska Native following, which draws a possible historical connection between basketball and leadership roles and activities (Truitt 2010).

The formation of basketball city leagues is an important aspect of basketball's diffusion in Alaska. Not only did the game spread regionally, but it also crossed generational, social, economic, and ethnic boundaries; the modern manifestation of which are seen in the inclusive culture of pick-up games. Other high school sports and athletics, such as track and field or activities such as spelling bees and debates also became known through the school environment and were always welcomed in the communities. However, none had the energy, passion, and support that basketball received. People's investment created a basketball culture that sustained itself when other extra-curricular

---

<sup>12</sup> [http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/cdmg21&CISOPTR=1814&REC3](http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/cdmg21&CISOPTR=1814&REC3)

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.sitnews.us/Kiffer/PeterSimpson/021810\\_peter\\_simpson.html](http://www.sitnews.us/Kiffer/PeterSimpson/021810_peter_simpson.html)

school activities and sports were introduced in the school environment. It is not surprising that by the 1920s “basketball was already the only game in town” in Alaska (Truitt 2010).

### **2.2.1 Organizational efforts**

Despite the game’s popularity, organization was lacking at every level. For instance, refereeing was a major problem. Games seldom ended without controversy due to poor decision making. Referees were untrained, did not know the rules, and were often accused of favoring the home team by making new rules on the spot. Truitt describes the disputes that arose due to bad “reffing,” threatening to overthrow whole tournaments, with teams walking out of the court in protest, vowing never to play again against their opponents, only to come back the next month or year for a rematch (Truitt 2010).

On a league level, poor organization was another problem. During a season, schools would participate in city leagues, while trying to play a number of games with high schools from neighboring communities. Most claims to titles, championships and to being the best team, however, were arbitrary. The most prominent way to play a game against another high school team was for the schools to arrange a game or simply issue a challenge. A school or a pick-up team would issue the challenge, which the other team had to accept or refuse. Whether a team accepted and lost, or if they refused to compete, the winners derived the ethical and moral foundation to proclaim their team “Southeast Champions.”

There was even a bolder claim of “All Alaska Champions.” This claim happened when teams from very different regions played each other. For instance, if a high school team from the southeast was victorious over a team from Fairbanks or Anchorage, they would usually title themselves as such. It was up to the other teams around Alaska to acknowledge the champions or issue their own challenges in exchange for recognition. In the end, claims were settled after negotiations, but actual ratification of those claims was based on public response. Sometimes, one team would be so good as to become a champion on everyone’s minds but there was nothing to regulate objections. More often than not, the state would have two teams who would claim to be “Alaska Champions” (Truitt 2010).

In 1922, a first effort for a governing body over all school activities was created in the southeast. It was called the Board of Control and it aspired to introduce more activities to the school system such as a music festival, debate, and other sports. However, its main purpose was to improve and expand high school basketball. The Board of Control lasted only six years before it was disbanded for reasons Truitt never explained in his book (Truitt 2010).

For a number of years, there was no official body for basketball or any school activity until the early 1950s. At that time, there were two independent efforts to form official bodies: the Western Alaska High School Activities Association and the Southeast Alaska High Schools Activities Association. Formed by educators in both regions, the two organizations had two basic aims: 1. to form and regulate new basketball

competitions and tournaments by freeing high schools from the local business basketball leagues, and 2. to introduce new sports and activities in the regional school systems.

The two associations were a first response in the effort to keep up with the pace of basketball in the state. By the 1950s, more and more people outside the southeast and Anchorage were playing basketball. High schools from Fairbanks had been participating on and off in basketball tournaments since the late 1920s. The town of Bethel would occasionally make up teams and try to play as many games as they could. In the 1950s, the town of St Mary's was added to the school association, which consistently participated in tournaments, even creating leagues in their own regions (Truitt 2010). It became evident to the people involved that basketball was becoming the main sport across the state, and that an overarching body to regulate the sport was necessary. This need was reinforced by two controversial southeast Alaska tournaments in 1948 and 1954 that brought communities and schools at odds with each other and formed rivalries, which are still remembered to this day.

In 1957, the two associations decided to unite and the main governing body of the state of Alaska, the Alaska High School Activities Association (ASAA) was created. The main idea behind that was that a unified association would be able to consolidate the leagues in the two regions. For some years, the ASAA had administration privileges in the west and southeast regions as well as Anchorage, but in the 1970s a series of state

educational reforms, which led to the expansion of secondary education to rural Alaska, changed the basketball map to include the whole state.<sup>14</sup>

These changes were the direct result of sociopolitical development in the educational system of Alaska brought about by a lawsuit popularly known as the Molly Hootch case. In 1975, Molly Hootch, a teenage student, joined a petition along with twenty-eight other students and their families, suing the state of Alaska and demanding the provision of secondary education at the plaintiff's place of residence. This lawsuit intended to provide resolution to the traumatic migration of students from their homes to boarding schools thousands of miles away. Even though the court did not rule in favor of the plaintiffs, the state pledged to seek a solution to the problem anyway. In 1976, it vowed to build schools in villages and over a period of twenty years, it undertook the expansion of the school infrastructure in those Alaskan villages that opted so. Part of the infrastructure included the construction of gymnasiums, by now as important a part of any school as a library (Case and Voluck 2002:196).

Within the physical space provided by gymnasiums, basketball took a new turn in remote villages. For the first time, students and adults, many of whom had played ball in their boarding schools, could play the game in their own school in their communities. Since villages now had their own home venues, one of the first things that the new schools did was to form their own teams and join the ASAA basketball tournament. This change invigorated and spread basketball to most villages. It was the very first

---

<sup>14</sup> <http://asaa.org/asaa/about-asaa/history-of-asaa>

introduction to basketball for many residents – a game that they had perhaps heard about, and possibly knew individuals who excelled at it, but they had never played it themselves. The Molly Hootch case led to today's social and cultural village condition: i.e., basketball as an inseparable part of everyday village life across many communities in the state.

As more schools and gymnasiums were built, more high school teams wanted to participate to the ASAA league. State intervention placed ASAA under the Department of Education, essentially making ASAA an all-state organization. Three more regions were added to the initial two for a total of five initially, and then six in 1976. At the onset, ASAA organized the first high school conferences in terms of region only. As a result, schools with a small number of students had to compete against much larger schools, creating an uneven field of competition. As more and more schools started participating, the ASAA had to expand and try a variety of other formats for the tournaments.

In 1983, ASAA reclassified all schools not only geographically but also in terms of school size. The new classifications, 4A, 3A, 2A, and 1A, refer to student enrollment numbers in the local schools. 4A schools have an enrollment of over 500 students; 3A are between 500 and 100; 2A is any enrollment between 100 to 50 students; 1A schools are anything between 50 and 5. At the lower end of the 1A category, when schools have only 5-10 students many communities will start to consider closing the school down. Schools of the same classification in a particular region play into their own leagues called

conferences. Alaska has about 50 4A and 3A schools and about 141 2A and 1A schools, an indication of the dispersed demographics of the vast state.<sup>15</sup>

The aspiration behind the ASAA's classifications and the conferences was to create an equal and just competitive field for all the teams. It is generally thought that the more students a school has, the better a team it can field, since the pool of competent athletes is much bigger and consistent for a 4A school than a 2A or 1A. In smaller sized schools, coaches realize that their high school teams are bound to go through a cycle. If for instance, the team consists mostly of freshmen, coaches realize and accept that for the next two years their team will probably not be strong. Their hope is that by their players' junior and senior years, their team will mature to be competitive. Therefore, they work and schedule potential participation in tournaments accordingly. Even so, at no point can their pool of students guarantee a competitive team in the same way 4A schools can. In 4A if they lose an important player, in all likelihood, they can replace him/her. As a result, unless a 2A or 1A school happens to have an exceptional team, these schools will lose games against 4A and 3A teams most of the time (Dean Overbey and Colin Stone, interview with author, 12/23/10).

The ASAA brought about several other major changes. Some of the most important changes concerned the introduction of conference basketball games for female students into the male student tournaments and the creation of contracts between ASAA

---

<sup>15</sup> <http://asaa.org>

and student–player, which must be honored throughout the high school years. Both changes are important in their own way.

The first was part of an effort to give girls’ and boys’ basketball equal footing. Despite the fact that some high schools had girls’ basketball teams before the 1970s, female students did not have the same opportunities to participate in interscholastic activities. Their contribution to the school athletics and pride ended with participation in drill teams and cheerleading. Title IX, the federal law that safeguards against sex discrimination in all educational institutions receiving federal assistance, changed this initially for university female athletes. Later, teachers and educators at the secondary education level adopted the legislation. In Alaska, the ASAA had already addressed the issue even before Title IX (Gary Matthews, interview with the author, 05/16/11). Today, even though fans have their preferences on which of the two, boys or girls basketball, they watch, the schools grant equal importance to training, practicing, and managing the girls and boys teams.

The ASAA contract is a binding document for any school or student wishing to participate in any ASAA activity around the state. It sets definite conditions, which the school and the student have to honor once they sign the contract. It also sets penalties in case the school or the student breaks the contractual agreement. By signing the contract, the student vows not only to be responsible for appropriate behavior while playing any sport or activity but also commits to making positive choices outside of school. The contract requires a student athlete to abstain from drugs, alcohol, and other substances. On the other hand, the school is expected to safeguard and promote the academic

environment, which will help the student make positive choices. Through the years, the contract has changed to include new provisions and advertise sportsmanship and healthy living. As a final note, the ASAA also put rules in place for player recruiting or the use of undue influence by a school or coach to coax a player to play in their school.<sup>16</sup>

In 1986, the ASAA initiated a process to become independent from the Department of Education and the state of Alaska. Today, it is a non-profit organization with a membership that includes one hundred and ninety schools with thirty-five thousand students. It regulates about thirty-three extra-curricular sport and athletic activities, and it sponsors the Alaska Association of Student Governments. It is also a member of the National Federation of High School Activities Associations (NFHS), the overarching body for all associations in the U.S.

In the last decade, the organization expanded its mission statement to include: a) becoming an integral part of the education program, b) providing opportunities for students to apply skills beyond the classroom, and c) guaranteeing equitable and fair level of competition between students of different sex and different localities. An unofficial, but still important, aim of the organization is to create memories for the students and their families by organizing quality basketball tournaments (Matthews, interview with the author, 05/16/11).

---

<sup>16</sup> <http://asaa.org>

### **2.3 Basketball adopted and adapted**

Truitt's handbook provides a wealth of information from which to glean the reasons behind basketball's popularity in Alaska and the process by which basketball was adopted and then adapted to express a specific cultural logic. By its very nature, basketball is a fun and easy game to play. Based on a simple idea, which involves a ball, a hoop, and the ability to throw the ball through the hoop, the game allows for a number of variations and consequently becomes adaptable to many different social locales and physical environments. It is also an inexpensive sport. Many backyards in rural Alaska feature homemade basketball hoops and any bouncing ball can be used for the game. Furthermore, other than the ball and the hoop, there is no specific gear requirement. Another advantage of basketball, in relation to other team ball sports is that it is an indoor game. In addition to protecting the players from weather, it does not require as much space as most outdoor ballgames.

All of these characteristics have been important in facilitating the adoption and adaptation of the game anywhere in the world. Truitt (2010) provides specific examples of the process in Alaska. He implies that the game benefited from the liberties one could take in interpreting the rules and from the variations employed in the use of the play space, especially in relation to other sports that had stringent rules. In the early 1900s, basketball players in Alaska had to face both poor refereeing and increasing problems with finding suitable indoor spaces. However, since none of these problems affected the main idea of the game, players and officials had to "work out" the rules and change them accordingly to fit specific needs and challenges.

Thus, fit them they did. Improvisations in the use of space provided good examples of how the game was adapted to specific circumstances. Finding a suitable space was a problem for any school that did not have a gymnasium. In the absence of gymnasiums, schools had to rely on the next best indoor open space they could find. This included warehouses, tribal halls, and any space that could be emptied. As a result, many games had to be played in smaller sized courts, handicapping both teams.

Solutions to court size varied, but one of the most impressive improvisations involved periodically shrinking and expanding the court during the game. In Nenana during the 1960s, the newly founded Lynx team had to play in the tiny space of the community's civic center. The court was so small that the halfway court rule (in which once over the halfway line, the attacking team can not move the ball back across the line) was often broken. The teams and the referees agreed that the half court line could be "moved" backwards during offensive plays to momentarily allow the expansion of the court size. So, once the attacking team passed over the half court line on their way to the opponents' basket, that line was mentally moved backwards, effectively expanding the field of play without being penalized for it (Nick Monroe, interview with author, 04/11/11).

Concessions to space were also made in order to accommodate fans on the side and base lines of the court. The most common solution was a respective diminishing of the court size. The outside lines shrunk, respectively, allowing room for fans in the sidelines and behind the hoops without obstructing the players' movement and plays. Truitt points out other curiosities of the time. In the southeast many gymnasiums had

balconies so that fans could watch the game from atop. This of course meant that fans could sometimes interfere with the play, catching the ball from above on its way to the hoop (Truitt 2010). In general, players and fans considered all of these challenges to be part of the program and prepared accordingly for the local flavor of their games. For instance, in the 1940s teams that played in Sitka knew that some of their games would be played in a basement. In the Wrangell Institute players had to adjust their shots accordingly due to a very low ceiling (Truitt 2010).

Even today, teams make specific adjustments. In Nenana's basketball region, Minto and Northway are known to have "small gymnasiums." By today's standards, this invariably means that the three-pointer line almost touches the sideline in the corner of the court. Coaches have to adjust their plays accordingly and conduct their pre-game practices in diminished court size so that the players get used to the specific circumstances. It is worth noting that these variations never induce complaints or discomfort on the part of coaches and their teams. In fact, playing in irregular spaces adds to the mystique of playing basketball in the villages. Truitt himself reflects upon those years of irregularities with nostalgia, as if the improvisations reflect a period of innocence and a higher degree of people's involvement with basketball (Truitt 2010).

In order to understand how flexibility in rules made a significant difference in the games, one can compare it with another game introduced in the school system that never became as popular because its rules were too stringent. Volleyball started having a following only after the 1970s when regular size gymnasiums were built in Alaska. Before that, volleyball's rules were too specific and unalterable. The competing

volleyball teams have clear boundaries between them, which they cannot cross. Six players in each side still need to dive and jump in their half without crashing on each other, therefore, their positioning must be much more orderly than basketball. Using space efficiently in volleyball is paramount, but it also means that there can be no concessions on court size. Making an already small space even smaller makes the game itself unplayable (Truitt 2010: 3).

Flexibility in adapting the rules of basketball also allowed female students to play basketball in Alaska as early as the 1920s, almost fifty years before Title IX. Basketball rules changed once more for the female students, seemingly expressing that period's gender views on appropriate conduct. In short, girls were penalized when they became "aggressive," i.e., they chased the ball or stole the ball from the opponent. Each team consisted of three girls, and the means to score points involved almost no physical contact. In addition, many games were played only on half the court.

Despite the fact that, at that time, proper basketball was a male sport, even playing this version of basketball was considered revolutionary for female players who were put on the high school sports map through basketball. Many female players went on to become coaches themselves, and in the 1980s, along with male educators, supported the efforts to include the girls' tournaments alongside with the boys' tournaments. The success of their effort brought girls and boys basketball to the same level, and their titles are featured on gymnasium walls side by side.

In reviewing these improvisations, one should keep in mind that basketball was a game before it became a sport. When first introduced, there was not one version that

everyone played, and it did not have an official governing body. It was still a new game everywhere in the world, and the rules were still changing. For instance, dribbling the ball, today one of basketball's fundamental characteristics, only became part of the game forty years after its invention.<sup>17</sup>

People use the two terms “game” and “sport” interchangeably, but for the purposes of this research, the following distinction can be useful: games are playful activities based on a general game idea, which may or may not involve competition and the pursuit of a team goal. They also have loose structure. Most games already have rules, but local and cultural contexts may lead participants to come up with agreed upon changes on the spot. As a result, games have a strong local character and may develop to become a variation of the basic game idea. People are allowed to be creative with them, and oftentimes, cultural aspects are expressed through the game (Csoba DeHass and Droulias 2010: 25).

A sport, on the other hand, is the formal, crystallized version of a game, as an overarching authority decides this. The players agree to specific rules and a third party, a referee or umpire, is always present to make sure that the rules are being followed (Csoba DeHass and Droulias 2010: 25). This is what the ASAA tried to do upon its formation, i.e., align and regulate both the rules and the organizational structure of high school basketball in the state according to the rules of the sport of basketball. These rules are dictated by international organizations and the NFHS. In most situations, when a sport is

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basketball>

played at a local level, the distinction between a game and a sport is blurred. Certain rules are followed almost religiously and in accordance to the highest authority, while others are ignored or changed. For instance, in pick-up games in Alaska, important game rules such as traveling and fouling are followed according to the universal template of the sport. However, the scoring patterns and teaming-up rules differ considerably, reflecting local needs under which the game must be played.

As a spectator sport, basketball was well received in Alaska. It is characteristic of basketball's compatibility with Alaskan cultural contexts that the game was greeted from the start as a major social event. Support came not only from players, students, or otherwise but also from spectators and communities. Even in its earliest days, basketball games were highly anticipated and often became the main topic of everyday "chit chat." Highly competitive games between neighboring communities and schools brought about the first traditional rivalries, some of which survive even today.

According to Truitt, as the game witnessed increasing participation of students, communities with predominately Alaska Native population showed immense enthusiasm in hosting basketball tournaments (Truitt 2010). This was not an easy undertaking given the scarcity of available basketball venues and the difficulties of traveling in Alaska. At the time, commercial flights were unheard of and all travel was by boat or car. Any trip to go "play ball" in another community might last a whole day in addition to extra time added by harsh weather conditions.

In southeast Alaska, schools often employed community members and leased their boats to assist transportation of visiting teams. Other schools even had a boat of

their own for these trips (Truitt 2010). In Interior Alaska, travel was by cars or buses. Many of the drivers were community members without any official capacity with the school (Monroe, interview with the author, 04/11/11). Yet, people were not deterred by any of this. During the 1920s, Petersburg High School of Mitkof Island in southeast Alaska undertook a two-week journey by steamboat and train to go play Fairbanks for the state championship (Gary Matthews, interview with author, 05/16/11). Stories like that have become legendary in Alaskan basketball lore and are often offered as examples of the unique nature of basketball in the state.

### **2.3.1 Why basketball?**

Rule improvisations, organizational changes, high school tournaments, and generally the energy and money spent on watching and playing basketball are parts of the process of adoption and adaptation. However, in order to make the connections between a game and the local cultural context and uncover the reasons of why it became enculturated into Alaskan rural reality, we have to address the political and economic status of Alaska Natives at that time. This status put them at a disadvantage to self-determine their own social, political, economic, and cultural future. At the turn of the 20th century, Alaska Natives were disenfranchised. They experienced a rapid and traumatic transition (both at the individual and community levels) from a familiar to a foreign way of life (Mitchell 2001). The official U.S. policy towards Alaska Natives was

assimilationist, and the education of Native children under strict western standards was a foundation of any such policy.

For most Native students, the immersion to the school system was not smooth. First, it removed them from their communities. In the beginning of the 20th century, Alaska (like the rest of the U.S.) operated under a dual system of education by which Alaska Native children had to go to schools operated by the federal government. The exception was the children of “civilized” Native families who had the right to attend schools run by the Territory of Alaska (Barnhardt 2001). The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) established a number of elementary schools in many Alaskan villages, however, for anything higher than the 8th grade Native students needed to go to school at the bigger population centers of Alaska, such as Anchorage, Fairbanks, Sitka, and Bethel.

Another option students had was to join missionary schools across the state, such as the Jesuit school of St. Mary, Sheldon Jackson in Sitka, and St. Mark’s in Nenana. In the late 1940s, a third option arose when federally operated boarding schools such as Mt. Edgecumbe and Wrangell opened. These schools accepted Native students from all over the Alaskan territory and housed them at the premises. Most of these options required that students from “the bush” leave their communities and families for extended periods of time. Therefore, for Native students, going to high school equaled major life changes; and for many it was a traumatic experience.

It was in such a difficult environment that Natives students started playing basketball. Unlike other school related activities, basketball was not forced on them. Rather, they wholeheartedly embraced it. Truitt’s historical account provides strong

indications that in basketball Alaska Native students found a tool of facing up to the new challenges and circumstances, as well as a stage of expressing and presenting Native cultural values. Indeed, if there was a subversive assimilationist purpose on the part of white educators and officials, which followed basketball's introduction to Alaska Native schools, this was lost or altered beyond recognition by what Native basketball enthusiasts themselves made the game to be (Truitt 2010).

Basketball aided students in the following ways. Through the game, the disenfranchised students got a chance for achievement and an opportunity to gain social recognition and visibility. For many of them school was a foreign institution that used foreign practices to achieve inexplicable goals. As a result, academically and socially, students found it difficult to adapt to the new environment. Depending on which school they went to, they would find themselves always in competition with other students or their non-Native teachers and had to struggle away from their own support groups.

A Nenana Elder told me that as a teenager he discovered many social ills in high school, such as discrimination. He recollected how he did not recognize immediately what was happening to him. Other people's actions against him had no meaning that he could understand. However, as soon as he realized discrimination as his social reality, his school life became a blur of fistfights and conflict. He was labeled a delinquent, and he never managed to stay in the same school for long. Against this negative current, basketball became the one activity with which he identified. Despite the fact that he only played in junior high, he became an avid fan of the sport and today is a recognizable figure in the stands of the Lynx gymnasium where he comes to cheer the team on.

Achievement through sports was, and still is, a very strong drive for high school students or any professional athlete (Diez 1980:164). The synergy between players and the crowd is one that pushes the players to perform at the best of their ability. Through basketball, players establish a mutual connection with the spectators, becoming visible as the actors who can influence the outcome. For struggling, disenfranchised Alaska Native students, these in-game processes were invaluable. They could compete in an arena of equal rules and opportunity. For a short period of time, it did not matter if one was a “problematic” youth. What mattered was that one tried their best and hardest within the context set by the game.

Moreover, basketball helped Alaska Native students create a new identity, which supplanted their village and ethnic group associations. Truitt (2010) commemorates the newfound school identity in the extensive nostalgia and pride students (himself among them) felt playing basketball for their school. The school spirit each student-player, spectator, or cheerleader exhibited when participating in a basketball game was a measure of loyalty and gave the participants a sense of belonging that transcended village identity. In a letter published in *The Daily Alaska Empire* in 1961, an anonymous fan wrote about basketball and the game between Mt. Edgecumbe and Ketchikan high schools:

Friday night, we journeyed to the high school gymnasium to see a basketball game... After arriving at the gym, we discovered that Ketchikan was playing Mt. Edgecumbe... Somehow, watching that team

and its cheering section perform gave us a feeling of pride in Alaska. Whatever the fortunes of the team, the Mt. Edgecumbe cheering section never gave up... Actually, Edgecumbe's team represents people from all parts of Alaska. The student body of the school is made up of Alaskans from every corner of the state. That is why a large portion of the audience sort of adopted the team and was backing it to win...To us the important thing is that we saw loyalty, faith, determination and courage displayed by a team and its supporters. We don't know much about Mt. Edgecumbe, but after watching that game we bet that it is a good school with high standards and a fine spirit...We'd like to say that the performance of the Edgecumbe team and the loyalty and enthusiasm of its cheering section made us proud to be an Alaskan (Truitt 2010).

The letter highlights the social standards fans looked for in a game. Today, most of these can be found in official decrees of sportsmanship, as well as posters on Alaska Native traditional values. Back then, games were a work in progress. Basketball games were simultaneously a workshop and a public stage where the game was molded into expressing the specific local context. Even more so, basketball games became a stage for the diffusion and reaffirmation of a new identity, one that was gripping Alaska Natives across the state. The formation of the school spirit represented more than the village and the ethnic association; it embodied the pride of being an Alaskan Native.

The energy of sports for marginalized groups has been recorded in the literature in three basic aspects: as a chance to increase social capital (Eitle-McNutly and Eitle 2002); to gain support from their group (Schwartz and Barsky 1977, Mizruchi 1985); and as a method for re-strengthening individual and group identity (King and Springwood 1999). Within a dominant society that operates against their own cultural and social values, marginalized individuals have been able to use sports for their own collective expression. This suggests that the sport setting, in the Alaskan case basketball and the gymnasium, is set aside from everyday reality in the sense that it is a space in which the dominant society's prohibitions become temporarily obsolete. As such, it becomes useable by marginalized groups because in its physical and symbolic space the dominant society, asymmetric cultural values, and social status are separated from the sociopolitical rubric that enforces them. This enables one to gain equal footing and be reformed by the people present in that space.

This interpretation is further analyzed in subsequent chapters under Victor Turner's theoretical framework. It is important to refer to it here, however, since at that specific conjuncture Alaska Natives were subjected to pressures from the dominant society to completely and rapidly alter their way of life. They found not only a game through which to express their own cultural values but also a space, the high school gymnasium, which became the stage where those values were presented to them.

Truitt's account, the Nenana Elder's story, and the 1961 letter indicate that basketball helped students from villages to connect with a new environment, in terms of both locality and culture. Basketball was not just a game that people played, it also

became an ever-expanding network of relations, which included teammates, spectators, and educators and branched inside and outside the school or community. Village students were able to “hustle” for themselves, their friends and parents, their team, and their school. They received positive attention for it by fans and spectators. Most importantly for Native students, Elders and outstanding community members appreciated, applauded, and enjoyed their efforts. Indeed, students found themselves actors in a drama that was unfolding to the surprise and delight of the onlookers. Their efforts, ability, and drive were appreciated despite the outcome. The students understood that their basketball performance was also a social one (Truitt 2010).

Native students’ basketball experience and consequent appreciation of the game go hand-in-hand with their experience of the school and college environment. This has historically been the way in which basketball evolved to become the sport that epitomizes Alaskans, especially those who live in the villages. The malleability of the game, the emergence of a new school identity that supported village students and, lastly, the passion and energy people spent in playing a game are components that allowed actors to adopt basketball and adapt it to their specific socio-cultural reality.

In all its versions, the game of basketball became a mode of the expression of culturally varied social relations. As such, today “playing ball” has a specific social and cultural legacy for Alaska Native youth. These are people who went back to their communities after their boarding school experience with stories of basketball. The stories included the noise of the gymnasium, the cheers, the excitement and the drama, the loyalty to one’s teammates, the minute-by-minute sensation of the game, their sense of

self-esteem and achievement, and a feeling of belonging to a group larger than the village. In turn, these stories became part of the collective consciousness. These are stories that every generation from the 1900s until today grew up wishing to experience.

## **2.4 Basketball in Nenana**

By the early 1950s, basketball was already popular in Nenana. Nick Monroe, long time community resident born in 1949 remembers:

When I first can remember [sic] there was always a hoop....two hoops in the civic center. And that was the community center and in the evenings if we wanted to play, we'd have to get somebody to come to sponsor, we'd have to ask a parent and they could go get the key and open it up and we'd just have scrimmages and play that way (Nick Monroe, personal interview, 04/11/11).

The civic center opened any night children or adults wanted to play. Children played basketball or dodge ball, while adults played basketball exclusively. Pick-up games were between the "skins" and "shirts." A combination of the two teams made up Nenana's first City League team. The team would often compete with teams from neighboring Anderson, especially from the Clear Air Force Base, and Fairbanks. The Clear Air Force Base alone featured about three teams. They had a Warehouse, a

Security-Cop, and an Air Force team. All in all, the civic center had become a space where local people of the area around Nenana met during the weekdays.

At that time, basketball was predominantly a male sport. Women did not play basketball and the high school did have a girls' basketball team. Female students participated as cheerleaders for the basketball team. They also made up the drill team, the pride of the Nenana High School. Drill teams had developed their own competitions and were an integral part of basketball tournaments in Alaska. Often Nenana's drill team would compete against other teams during basketball tournaments.

In Nenana, the first basketball team started in 1963. The whole school was involved in the process of defining the team's colors and coming up with a nickname. "In the multipurpose room, we had just a big vote. Everybody got together from the school and there was options [sic], people put out, you know, they wanna be the Tigers and...but it turned out that we were named Nenana Lynx. And we had the options of colors so we decided on black and gold" (Nick Monroe, personal interview, 04/11/11). The team name does not seem to have had any particular meaning, except for a general preconception about Nenana high school. Nenana students, both local and non-local, joked that the Lynx is an overused nickname adopted by many other high schools. If they ever decide to change it, they would choose a name that no other team has. "At least we are not called Warriors," they added, since that is one of the most common high school nicknames (field notes 04/20/11).

In the 1960s, preparations for the team's game was a community effort. The Lynx had homemade uniforms. A community member gathered shorts and T-shirts and stitched

the black and yellow colors, stripes, and huge numbers on the backs. Practices would take place in the civic center, the small community space right on Nenana's main street.

The civic center's purpose was for social events, such as gatherings, community dinners, and potlatches, but it could be emptied to accommodate basketball. Its size is about three quarters that of a basketball court with no seating arrangements, but the Lynx practiced and played their first basketball games there. The experience was new for many of the students who had not participated in an organized team sport before. They awaited their first games with excitement, especially because they knew that they would be playing in front of a community crowd. Many of the older players have very fond memories of their games. In casual conversations, they describe the feeling of playing in front of so many people, especially their Elders. Although, the civic center was small, people would cram in wherever there was some space just to see the game.

There was one characteristic that was true for Nenana and for most, if not all, Alaskan villages. The Elders embraced basketball from the start. The image of Elders with their chairs in the front row and a blanket over their feet, and then watching, cheering, and applauding the students' efforts despite the outcome, is a familiar memory among basketball players, especially those of the older generations. It is an image that came up casually in conversation during our team's resting time between pick-ups.

The approval that the Elders show in basketball games is considered a gift in itself and a very good reason to play high school basketball in the first place. It is also an image that highlights the positive side of living in a village. In Nenana, it is less common than it used to be. However, some Elders still come to games. Their presence completes the

image of community, as they are generally the most respected individuals in the villages. The Elders, in turn, come to support and pay their own respects to the younger generation. They see in those young basketball players an embodiment of moral principles and social characteristics that they value: hustling, working hard, and playing in good spirit.

In its history, Nenana has had 1A, 2A, and 3A status in different years, reflecting fluctuations in school enrollment. In the years 2009 and 2010, they were given a new independent status. Independent means that the team can participate in any league of their choice, but has no right to play in the regionals; thus, it has no chance of qualifying for the state tournament.

According to the 2010-2011 format, high schools play in their region against other schools with the same enrollment status. At the end of the basketball season, they will participate in a regional tournament. A winning record throughout the year determines their tournament opponent; the team with the best record, for instance, will play against the team with the weakest record. The team who wins the regional tournament will participate in the state tournament and play against the other winners from all the other leagues. This happens in the month of March, becoming a part of the famous March Madness, where all the final basketball games for high schools and colleges around the U.S. are played. The winner of the Alaska Basketball Championship usually competes with out of state teams in separate tournaments.

## 2.5 Conclusion

In narrating the history of basketball, I have attempted to explicate some of the reasons behind the sport's particular popularity in Alaska. The school and academic environment in the Territory of Alaska set the stage for the introduction of the sport to younger generations. This in itself is unremarkable, if one takes into account the U.S. school system has been the seedbed for the diffusion and production of professional sports in the nation. What is unique to Alaska, however, is the fact that Alaska Natives adopted the game immediately and internalized it in a way that expresses their own particular cultural logics.

When Alaska Native students graduated from boarding schools and returned to their communities, they took with them the positive appreciation they had for basketball. They also brought their memories and the feelings attached to them. In retelling their stories of their high school basketball adventures, of traveling, of practicing, of watching, and of course of playing the game in front of a crowd, they laid the groundwork for the younger generations' connection to the game. In turn, young students would go to school already excited to play this new sport.

At the specific conjuncture between the introduction of a new game, which was not yet a sport, and the pressures of the dominant society, basketball offered an egalitarian court of competition within which disenfranchised Native youth of boarding schools could temporarily play with and against each other, as well as non-native groups. Basketball games became a Native social event by which expressions of cultural and social values, Alaskan identity, and the opportunity for social visibility, positive support,

and achievement were, literally, played out inside the court for everyone to see and participate in. ANB's participation in Sitka's City basketball league, the letter by the anonymous reader in the Daily Alaska Empire and Truitt's compilation of the two handbooks are testaments of the way Native Alaskans received the game in their everyday reality. In addition to scientific and historical interest, Truitt wrote about basketball out of love for and the need to pay tribute to the game.

With the physical infrastructure developments following the Molly Hootch case, almost every village in Alaska obtained its own school and gymnasium. ASAA managed to expand its regional conferences and include almost every single rural village that could put together a basketball team. The construction of high school gymnasiums also gave the opportunity for older players to pick up a ball again and shoot hoops, remembering their high school days or trying something new. City leagues began to spread across Alaska, in the major town centers as well as in smaller communities. With all this, the game gained enough momentum to reach every corner of the state. It became a trans-generational and lifetime activity internalized like any other traditional activity in the village. In addition, with it came a new opportunity and mode of expression to create and retell more stories about Alaska, its communities, and its people.

## Chapter 3

### 3.1 Basketball nights in Nenana

During winter, high school basketball nights are Nenana's weekly social event. On those nights, the gymnasium resembles a beehive buzzing with people. There is constant movement in and out the gymnasium and up and down the stands as fans dressed in black and gold Lynx t-shirts are trying to find a spot to watch the game. The noise is ever present as people talk, yell, and laugh while fully engaging in the event about to happen. A number of children run loose around the gym. They are not expected to sit put and get ready to watch the game. More often than not, they engage in a game of their own, skittering in the bleachers, dodging relatives and friends, and generally having the time of their lives. Despite all the bustle and erratic movement, the court itself is off limits. On high school game nights, only the players, the coaches, and the referees are allowed on the court because anyone wearing outdoor boots and sneakers full of snow can make it a very slippery place. So, as if a stage, people avoid walking on it and take the time to walk around its perimeter. Even the youngest have learned to follow this rule.

Many of the spectators on the stands are relatives of the players. It common to see an extended family with three generations of the grandparents, parents, and siblings trying to sit close to each other on the bleachers. Local students are almost always

guaranteed to see their families up on the stands. For students from the NSLC it is a bit more complicated. Their kin would have to take a costly flight and a car ride to reach Nenana. Interestingly, relatives consider a basketball game an excellent reason for a visit. Thus, even though it does not happen regularly, when it does happen it is a special treat. Players will announce with pride and excitement the upcoming visit to their friends.

The rest of the high schools students also take their seats in the stands. They usually sit close together so that they can generate more noise and make their presence known to the players and other spectators. After all, they represent the high school's spirit and pride and must be seen and heard by all present. Other groups to take the stands are radio commentators, video camera operators, and the die-hard fans comprised of community members who support the Lynx in both home and away games throughout the season.

This is a social setting of anticipation in those moments before the game begins. As with most performances, basketball games have preludes, which introduce the game to the spectators and consist of vibrant expositions of high school culture. About twenty minutes before the start, while the visiting team is already warming up on the court, the rapper Whiz Khalifa's song "Black and Yellow" starts booming from the speakers. Almost immediately, the children, Nenana students, and parents climb down the bleachers and move towards the southern entrance of the gymnasium. There they form a human corridor, which leads to the basketball court. The creation of the corridor is just one of the many exhibitions of school spirit— the display of camaraderie, pride, and

loyalty for the school, including the people, students, and teachers who are involved with the school.

This human corridor welcomes the Lynx basketball team about to enter the court. Previously hidden from public view, the players run through the corridor and onto the court, as the soundtrack intensifies the effect of the fans' collective action. The participating fans applaud, cheer, and extend their hands for high fives from the players as they run through the human tunnel. In this performance, the Nenana Lynx players have to look, and ideally feel, ready to play ball. Their demeanor of straight shoulders and back, head, and chin held high and a purposeful running pace demonstrates that they mean business.

They run the perimeter of their own half of the court, one behind the other and in an orderly fashion, they get into their places for lay up drills. It used to be that home teams could run the whole length and width of the court, encircling their opponents, but the ASAA put a stop to that. The message was too aggressive, definitely not aligned with ASAA's sportsmanship decree. Notwithstanding the new rules, the Nenana players concentrate in executing even simple lay ups and shots with precision. They have been practicing for almost a month and now they must, once again, show their ability as individuals and as a team.

After a few minutes of warming up, the players move to the benches. The singing of the U.S. national anthem or a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance follows warm up. Everyone, including the players, coaches, officials, and spectators, pay their respects to

the U.S. flag, which decorates the south wall of the gymnasium. Often a choir leads and the students from both schools participate in singing.

Moments before the jump ball, the announcer presents the two teams and their five starting players. The announcer then says the visitors' names and numbers for all to hear. This is the visiting players' queue to run towards the referees, high five them, and then move into the middle of the court to form a line. Then it is the Lynx's turn. The announcer changes the tone of his voice; it becomes louder, more pronounced, and commanding. Even the casual observer understands that this is the team that everyone will root for. The Lynx boys have devised their own personal handshakes with the team's captain, executed as each name is called. A Lynx player, nicknamed "the Birdman" has styled his hair into a Mohawk. He and the captain imitate a bird for their handshake; they flap their "wings," slouch, stand erect, and high five. After the handshake, they enter the court one by one, greet the referees, and high five the opponents. The fans love this colorful addition. Students "in the know" can read in these ritualistic handshakes a personal joke or story. They are delighted and laugh aloud.

The game begins amidst cries and cheers from the crowd. The Nenana crowd has been enjoying the Lynx boys' games. They are faster paced and more technical than girls' games. The girls recognize that and understand, albeit grudgingly, why the fans would be more interested in the boys games rather than theirs. Truth be told, sometimes they would rather watch the boys themselves (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11). That being said, when a game is competitive and dramatic, these comparisons become irrelevant. People are as excited and immersed watching their local high school playing

with a final score of thirty-five to thirty-six, as they would be if they watched an NBA final with scores in the hundreds. True, there are no dunks, alley oops, nor high skill dribbling. There is also no cussing, elbows flying, or fighting. Many fans would choose rural high school basketball to watch any time of the day.

Tonight shows promise for excitement. Nenana started with a four-point lead, but the visitors came back with six straight points inside “the paint.” The opponents play a markedly different style than Nenana. Whereas Nenana’s team is small and quick, the visitors are tall and strong. This usually creates difficulties in rebounding. The opponents’ center and power forward are not very skillful, but they know how to exploit their strength and size. They consistently get the better positions inside “the paint,” collect most of the rebounds, and score. “Boxing” them out is a team effort on Nenana’s part. As soon as they make a shot, the Lynx players must put their backs against their opponents and obstruct their way to an easy rebound. This is what the Lynx coach, Tim Gebhart, is yelling at his players.

Ten minutes into the game, the score is sixteen to twenty-two for the opponents, and the boys have huddled around their coach for a timeout. They listen to his instructions, but it is not unusual for them to chime in, giving their own advice to their teammates. Each time before they return to the game it is customary to huddle closely, put their hands in the center, and yell out the central idea of their timeout. This time it was, “Box out!” Nenana quickly comes back in the game by improving their rebounding, which allows them to break fast and score some easy lay-ups on their heavier opponents. They also improve their defense, forcing turnovers on their opponents. The Lynx are

playing faster and when they do that, they become more efficient. Nenana has so far won most of their games by setting up a tempo of play that is too fast for other high school teams.

It is almost the end of halftime and the Lynx are up by fifteen. Even though some of the Lynx players are new to the school and to the community, the crowd enjoys the game. It is not only what they see right now that excites them but also the team's potential. Occasionally, someone in the stands will voice a certainty that this year the Lynx will do something good. It is the same conversation carried out previously during pick-up games and school bus rides. Given the fact that Nenana has no right to play regionals again this year, "good" refers to winning the NIT. For most community members, especially those of Alaskan Native heritage, that is more than enough.

During the halftime, it is the spectators' turn to convert their vicarious participation in the game to direct involvement. Kids and teenagers rush down the stands for the opportunity to shoot some hoops before the game restarts. The sight of toddlers carrying a basketball bigger than them while trying to shoot it upwards under the gentle coaxing and support of their older siblings is a familiar image in most Alaskan gymnasiums. At the same time, cakewalks – the main fundraising events for high school students – will urge spectators to go to the center of the court with their kids and for only \$1 get a chance to win baked cakes or cookies. Participants of all ages stand on the printed numbers thrown on the jump ball circle, and when the music starts, they walk to the beat. When the music ends, they look on the number they are standing on and hope

that their number is picked from the lottery. When the game restarts, some happy spectators are munching away on their winnings.

Halftimes give the chance for everyone to catch their breath literally and metaphorically. While the players of both teams use the school's classrooms to take advice from their coaches, the referees go to a designated area where they can have a sip of water and decompress. Being a referee in any sport event is an odd experience and is definitely not for sensitive characters. Referees stand as a third party in the brink between basketball as a game and basketball as a sport. At the same time they are required to enforce the sport's established rules, they must allow the game to unfold in exciting and dramatic fashion influencing the outcome as little as possible. This is not an easy job. There is also a performance, but unlike the players, they seldom get any support from the crowd. On the contrary, if they make a mistake, or if the crowd thinks they made a mistake, they are judged harshly.

Practically, this means that if something goes wrong with a game, referees will have to listen to a number of complaints from the crowd. These are not specifically against them as individuals, although at times they can sound very personal. Rather, they are against their perceived role in the game. "Oh I see how it goes ref. Go on kids, he calls it only one way" and other variations of the same sentence may fly down from the stands. Their purpose is to influence the referees' decisions to the benefit of the home team. During the Kotzebue Klassic high school basketball tournament, two fans of the local Huskies had the following conversation:

Huskies fan 1: So, last time I was yelling so hard at the ref that he threatened to throw me out of the gym.

Huskies fan 2: Yeah, that's a problem. I decided that for Lent day, I will yell less at the refs.

Huskies fan 2: Yeah, I mean, I told him, "I can't help it! When the game is that competitive, it just comes out" (field notes 02/18/11).

Whether heckling and complaining at the referees works or not is hard to say. The referees do not show any signs they are even listening at the comments, and in any case, their decisions have to be subjective every time. They have to make split-second assessments as to how they will apply and interpret the rules of the game in a variety of situations. Snide comments at the referees are just one of the ways the crowd feels that they participate in the game, and it shows their devotion to their team. Officially, the rules prohibit heckling, but unofficially the referees tolerate it as long as it does not get out of hand. After all, the affected parties of heckling are also the ones who may serve the punishment; if they do not mind, no one else will.

In this particular game, the Nenana fans have no reason to be concerned with the referees. The Lynx are dominating the second half and they are up by a comfortable margin. Another point score and the fans break into cheer. The Lynx just scored a point exhibiting teamwork. Four Lynx players passed the ball between them before it ended in an easy layup. They worked on the passing sequence in practices, the ball always passed

to the open player, fast, without dribbling. This type of passing game confounds the opposing defense, which seems to be a step behind the ball's destination.

The fans love those moments of teamwork. It is the one characteristic that they prize. A successful effort is always applauded, but some baskets are better than others. People in the stands enjoy efforts that exceed each player's individual skill with the chemistry that occurs between them. Whenever the ball is passed in fast and creative ways from one teammate to another, fans believe that they get a glimpse into the players' everyday interpersonal relations. A true team outside the court is more likely to be brimming with teamwork inside it.

The end of the second half is near, the Lynx still have a comfortable lead and the coach has a chance to put in some players who, for a variety of reasons, do not get to play often. A positive aspect of small schools is that coaches usually do not have to cut any players from the team's roster, even though their skill level is not high enough. Everyone is included and will get playing time, as long as they keep their grades up. Today's game is an important moment for another Lynx student. He gets to play ball for a school in front of people for the first time in his life. He is a short, stocky kid who has worked hard both in practices and in school to earn the right to play on this team. He managed to lift his grades up through considerable work, and he became eligible for this game. For the Lynx coach, he epitomizes what high school basketball is all about, and he is glad that he can reward the student's hard work by putting him in the court.

As he steps in, the student is visibly nervous. He makes two fast turnovers and commits a foul. His teammates keep encouraging him and the coach shouts directions.

The student looks at his coach, nods, throws a shaky smile, and keeps playing. Students describe playing in front of a crowd as a “nerve racking experience” (Students, personal interview, 04/20/11). Once they manage to focus on the game, however, the players stop paying attention to the nerves. The Lynx player seems to be going through that process. He took a second shot in the game and scored his first two points in his career. He is delighted!

A loud, and somewhat long, buzz from the electronic clock informs that the time is up and the game has ended. People stand up, stretch, and applaud both teams. The players and coach go back to their bench. The end ritual is nothing like the beginning exhibitions. The gathered players will once more place one hand in the circle that their huddled bodies have created around their coach. Each hand piles on top of the other until every single member of the team puts his hand with the others. Displaying sportsmanship, they chant out a positive comment for their opponents and then they yell their team name. The game is over.

### **3.1.1 Basketball games; a wealth of symbolisms**

In all its characteristics, the above social sporting event is an ideal example of what Goffman would call focused gathering. A focused gathering involves:

...a single visual and cognitive focus of attention; a mutual and preferential openness to verbal communication; a heightened mutual

relevance of acts; an eye-to-eye ecological huddle that maximizes each participant's opportunity to perceive the other participants' monitoring of him. Given these communication arrangements, their presence tends to be acknowledge or ratified through expressive signs, and a "we rationale" is likely to emerge, that is a sense of the single thing that we are doing together at that time (Goffman 1961:18).

One can witness the localized version of Goffman's concept within Nenana's gymnasium during this high school basketball game. All the elements are there: the game is the focus of attention; the crowd provides verbal and moral support; and the performance of everyone involved is monitored. It also presents a social setting within which the participants engage into symbolic dialogue. Actions, words, and gestures mean more than they actually say and in this the sports setting seems to be the ideal stage.

However, an important element that the definition does not capture is that the focus of attention, in this case a basketball game, has a life of its own; with or without spectators the game unfolds minute by minute and often in such a way as to create uncertainty and excitement towards an unknown end. It is a live enactment of an open-ended and unscripted story with the main actors being the players and a ball. The performative manifestations and rituals described are, in fact, dependent on the game and permeate its beginning, middle, and end. In short, the activity itself induces the attributes of a focused gathering. However, depending on circumstances, the actual emergence of the "we rationale" will differ from game to game. In really exciting games, it exceeds the

initial levels set by the social occasion itself. In such games, communal connections arise fleetingly as spectators and players are immersed into specific moments in the game, each from his or her own point of view, but each is aware that the other is watching. If players are lost in the moment, so can be the spectators.

This is what makes high school basketball nights different in essence from other focused gatherings, social events where the “we rationale” may also occur but can never reach the emotional sincerity and intensity present in basketball games. It is not always a given that a basketball game will offer the conditions that will draw in players and spectators. Today’s game ended without as much excitement. But, as we will see, through the course of a basketball season, dramatic victories or inspiring efforts become stories where the main protagonist is this very “we” of the “we rationale.”

Other in-game rituals have important roles to play in setting the stage for the game. The human corridor and the dramatic entrance of the team through it, for example, convey a number of subtle messages to the other Nenana students, the fans, and the opponents. The willingness of the students to get up from the stands, run down, and create the corridor is a collective action that exhibits Nenana’s school spirit. This specific ritual is, by and large, spontaneous. It does not happen in an orderly fashion, and the signs of when it is time to do it are subtle. Usually, a few people will start the corridor in the hopes that more students will follow. There is no outright pressure to join, for that would be against the very idea of school spirit. One has to want to be part of it, and voluntarily doing so is a demonstration of the desire.

Nonetheless, as with all acts within this focused gathering, Nenana's community is watching. This is a performance. Expectations are involved and comparisons are made between one's own school spirit and the one the opponents may exhibit. How many students got up to form the corridor? How long is it? Who did get up and who did not? The observable answers set a mood in the crowd, which influences all the other in-game acts to come, as well as the game's community feeling. This is a ritual, which denotes a reciprocal relationship between players, students, teachers, parents, ordinary fans, and community members. It is also a non-verbal declaration to the Lynx players themselves. "Play earnestly, and everyone will support you," the corridor says.

The team's entrance and their warm up are also part of a communicative process that establishes symbolic links between the players, the crowd, the space, and the goal at hand. Through this prelude, the team aims to ignite the reciprocal relationship between players and fans and call upon the community for their solidarity and support. Aligning the crowd with the team's goals guarantees support, and support induces the players' best performance in the game. Once these connections are made, another collective message is communicated, this time at the opponents. It simply says, "This is our house." Inside the Nenana gymnasium, the Lynx are stronger because they will play with heart and with the support of all these people who are part of the players' lives inside and outside the gymnasium — a support that the opponents will not have.

Furthermore, before the jump ball, the Lynx players and coach huddle and commit to play their hardest to win the game. Inside the four lines of the court is where their actual performance starts. Defense, for instance, is a form of performance; students

have to remember their practices, defensive plays, and their coach's directions. They must act accordingly as per previously specified roles. The beauty of team sports is that in the game, the players must make split-second decisions that are unscripted.

Lastly, symbolic connections do not only occur at the local level. Within the cultivated climate of community solidarity, for many participants nationalism is the ultimate form of loyalty, and it too is celebrated. The singing of the U.S. national anthem is an affirmation from both opponents that even though local boundaries and opposition are about to be played out in a basketball game, these are only transient as far as national solidarity is concerned.

In less than fifteen minutes, the Lynx gymnasium becomes a stage for the representation of interlinked identities: school, community, and nation. It is not surprising that people can switch between these identities with ease. Sport settings serve multifunctional purposes, one of which is the presentation of a variety of narratives whether these emphasize local affiliations or a larger national community (Lindquist 2006). In addition, the narratives are not antagonistic but rather complimentary to each other.

This vignette narrates most of the in-game rituals, one can encounter social interactions and energetic support in any gymnasium across Alaska. Differences and variations are common, but they just add color to a familiar mix of the lived experience of basketball. This athletic universe revolves around basketball and that becomes a common link between generations and locals across the state. The shared pool of

basketball experiences is an everyday topic of small talk, as people use these stories to establish links across time and space.

In the following lines, I illustrate the components of the basketball universe and discuss what they reveal about the ways in which players experience basketball. I start with a depiction of early memories of basketball in order to give examples of the trans-generational aspect of the sport and situate the reader along a timeline in an individual's life where the past, present, and future contain a degree of involvement with the sport. After that, I pay special focus to the high school years, which represent the bulk of the analysis. It is, after all, the period of time that, for many participants, epitomizes the best basketball years of their lives for reasons that I will explain throughout the next chapters.

The components analyzed in relation to high school are practices, travel, playing, and watching the game. In reality, they are experienced as a whole, each of which contributes to the story across time and space. Their separation is solely for analytical purposes in the hopes of gaining important insight on the specific role of each one. However, it is important to remember at every step of the way that these components happen in a convoluted, fragmented, even blurry way, pieced together by the feelings that they induce the moment they occur.

### **3.2 Analyzing the experience of high school basketball**

In Nenana, children's socialization into the sport starts from an early age. Most toddlers have been to Lynx basketball games huddled in baby clothes and blankets.

Although they may grow up and not remember their first basketball involvement, they will also be unable to remember a time without basketball in their lives. In most of the interviews, parents and other relatives introduced the sport to the Lynx players. Tracy Snow, alumna of Nenana High School recollects her first acquaintance with the game:

Well, growing up in Nenana it just seems like you're just doing it from the time you kinda walk, like at every...my grandpa's house, at our house there's always just a hoop it seems like and that's what all the cousins are doing all the time. I had older uncles and so they were always playing so...even just running through the yard, when you're a kid just stop, grab a ball and are playing ball instead (Tracy Snow, personal interview, 03/08/11).

An NSLC student from Mountain Village recollects the traveling he did with his father for basketball:

When I was a kid my dad used to play City League and they'd take me with them, everywhere he goes from town to town and I'd get in for free, but I wasn't interested in watching the games. I'd run around with the other kids until I got to the 4th grade and I finally joined basketball (Student, personal interview, 05/11/11).

Other students are fuzzier on their earliest memories. So, they reiterate what their parents have told them about their own history with basketball:

Yeah, like my dad told me that him and my mom and my older sister used to always drive to Tok and stuff to watch games, I don't remember that cause I must have been very little, but we used to drive like hours and we used to go to Anchorage to go to the shoot outs and always came to Nenana games (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11).

By age ten, many children will have participated in Nenana's Little Dribbler's program that has been teaching the basics of the sport to multiple generations of basketball players. During that time, some have probably seen a number of Lynx basketball games, slowly becoming aware of the social dimensions of the sport. They have seen their siblings and their cousins playing with the Lynx and have made a mental note of the support parents have given their relatives by cheering them on or traveling long hours to other communities to see them play. They have also familiarized themselves with the processions and social environment of high school games; they have seen the crowd applauding a good effort and getting frustrated over a bad one. They have been called to support their team by clapping their hands in rhythm with others. They have heard the buzz of the clock and the sound of the referee's whistle. They may have even felt the satisfaction and happiness that comes with success and the disappointment of failure.

Younger students become immersed in the Alaskan culture of basketball long before they play with their high school. In school, they realize that playing basketball is accompanied by several other perks. Social visibility and high school popularity are valued attributes a student can acquire once involved with the Lynx team. Most players have been both fans and role models in their high school basketball careers. As young students, they have idolized older high school players and cheered for them in games. Later, they themselves become role models for the younger generation (Eric and Cathie Gebhart, personal interview, 05/21/11). Students note that, “If you are awesome in basketball...people know your name” (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11). They also understand that high school basketball is a community affair; participating as a player or a spectator is something that their relatives and friends do. They will do it as well.

By the time they are about to join the Lynx teams, students have a general idea of what to expect and what is required of them. The full basketball experience, however, starts when they actually participate in the Nenana High School team. Up to that point, even if they played in junior high basketball, the only requirement was that they have an appropriate grade point average (GPA) in order to play. Though, in high school the obligations, requirements, and conditions are much more stringent. Even more, the basketball games are more competitive, the training is harder, and for the first time spectators have expectations. So, once a student athlete makes that transition to play basketball for the high school, a new story begins, one that shapes his/her lived experiences in a more in depth way.

### **3.2.1 Practices: learning the rules**

Practices are a preparatory activity in sports similar to rehearsals in theater. Even though the outcome of the actual game is uncertain, teams seek to increase their chance of success through the physical condition of the body, improvement of individual skill, and the calibration of the different players into a cohesive and organized whole — i.e., the team. In Nenana, basketball practices take place after school when classes are over. Players are required to be ready and dressed in their uniforms ten minutes before the practice officially starts. The girls' practices start first at 3:00 p.m., followed by the boys' practice at 4:30 p.m.

Practices include warming up, physical exercises, a variety of shooting drills, and repetition of offensive and defensive plays. Senior players who have been part of the team for a couple of years have a good idea of what is required of them. They know most exercises and drills and can easily pick up new ones. Younger players usually need extra help and adapting to an organized practice can take time. Junior High practices are different in intensity and purpose than high school practices. The success or failure of their effort to adapt depends a great deal on the quality of help and guidance they receive from their coach and the senior players.

Learning the offensive and defensive plays is only one part of the activity. Other aspects are less obvious but are of the utmost importance for the coaches and the players themselves. These form a tree of rules, obligations, responsibilities, a code of conduct, and values that exceed the rules of the game, per se, and touch on its social repercussions. Some of these are official and emulate a contract between the players and respective

governing bodies. Others are unofficial but no less strict. Yet others are subtle, operating under the radar and setting the tone for the success or failure of the team.

During practices, the coaches and the players have access to a private social space away from the public eye, within which they engage in decision making, discussion, and relationship building. Situations that may arise within the team are not discussed openly, although they eventually become known. For an ethnographer, watching and participating in practices is an excellent way to understand how this space operates in relation to the public image of the team as it appears on the basketball court.

### **3.2.2 Written rules: eligibility and the ASAA contract**

The obligations and responsibilities a basketball player has towards the team, the coach, the school, the fans, and the ASAA are numerous. The coaches and the senior players will try to teach and remind the new players of what they have to do. Not all of the rules are on paper, but all of them (including the written ones) are passed down from the generations of players. Eligibility standards are among the most important evaluations during the high school season in Nenana, and they delegate who can play basketball and who cannot. They are one of the most basic written rules, enforced by both the school and the ASAA. Basketball players have to keep their GPA average to 2.0 with no failing grades in order to be allowed to participate in any ASAA-sponsored sport. The idea behind the GPA average is that, in all circumstances, students are students first and then athletes. In everyday terms, this means that if a student wonders whether he/she should be

going to practice or going to study in order not to fail a specific class the answer is always the latter.

This fundamental rule puts an official end to a regrettable situation where basketball competes with schoolwork. The Lynx's coach, Dean Overbey, remembered the feeling of disappointment when, back in the 1980s, two of his star basketball players did not manage to graduate because the school did not have a strict policy. Coaches, who work daily with their players during the season and develop a unique rapport, invest emotionally and feel responsible for what happens to them. It was coaches and other educators who brought the issue to ASAA and asked that they raise the grade standards. Since then, basketball in specific, and athletics in general, have become like "a carrot and a stick" (Dean Overbey and Colin Stone, personal interview 11/23/10). In order to play athletics, a student needs acceptable grades.

The eligibility system works well for those schools that manage to enforce it. In Nenana, eligibility reports come every Tuesday so coaches and players know who is going to be playing that weekend. Students react well to this rule and it is a known fact that during basketball season grades are higher than during the off-season. Not all students have the will to keep their grades up. In some cases, students who love basketball simply do not hold any love for school. Such attitudes depend on the individual and the choices his or her family make.

One should also keep in mind that the school system in Alaska was designed to express the values and goals of the dominant society. Rural students and their families may have difficulties internalizing school goals, especially when they choose a more

traditional way of life, which requires different skills than those offered in the school. The idea of basketball as an educational tool (and the relationship between grades and playing for the Lynx) is one such dominant value that some students will refuse to engage (field notes 01/13/11). The situation does not improve if the village school has a shortage of funds and lacks teaching personnel. In places like Nenana, where the school is strict on eligibility, students with difficulties adopting school values and directives end up never playing for the high school team.

Ultimately, it is up to the school to enforce or even increase the eligibility standards. Despite the unequivocal rules, some cases are not always clear cut from the public's point of view. When the whole community is rooting for the basketball team and specific star players, the school itself may balk under the pressure. Rumors and stories abound about schools in rural Alaska where students play basketball with failing grades placing the sport in direct opposition to the school.

Schools in rural villages may not meet the expectations of teachers, students, and community members. Many Living Center students retain their loyalty and pride for their previous schools, at the same time that they recognize that, in terms of education, their schools failed due to economic circumstances and this is the reason for their coming to Nenana in the first place. This is where any community's school administrators, teachers and the ASAA come in. The basketball team may be the only activity that holds the spirit of the school together, and by extension, it is the only way for the students to represent the community. The failure to keep and enforce eligibility standards is perhaps a sign of

the general deteriorating social presence of schools in communities in rural Alaska. If the school dies, so does the community.

Mostly, the eligibility system wins more than it loses. Playing ball for one's high school is an important step, and many students will work hard on and off the court in order to keep the social privileges associated with it. In Nenana, the coaches and the players are conscious of the fact that being ineligible is the Lynx's biggest opponent. In failing their classes, the students suffer the consequences of their actions. Much-needed players may be absent for the next game, but, in addition, team cohesion weakens. If the players do not care about their grades, this also means that they do not feel responsible for their team and teammates. Every week Tim Gebhart's relief or disappointment was visible in his face when checking the grades of the Lynx boys. More than once, he reminded his team that this is a constant battle: "It is important to be able to count on all of you, being ineligible doesn't allow me to do that" (field notes 12/01/10).

Being eligible, then, becomes a team goal like any other. Players are responsible for their own grades, but they will consistently support any member of the team who struggles. In this way, they help each other in the same way that they would help someone execute a basketball drill. The boys in the Living Center, for instance, would have study sessions, mixing stronger students of a particular subject with weaker ones.

When basketball season ends players feel that their obligations related to the sport are over, and their grades drop. This demonstrates the close relationship between basketball and academic performance. In a small school like Nenana, this is particularly noticeable. Teachers are prepared to face this situation year after year. Nonetheless,

students and teachers consider this relationship between school grades and basketball beneficial. Some students manage to keep their grades up even after the season ends. Insofar as the game supplements and strengthens academic work instead of competing against it, most teachers are satisfied with the arrangement.

Students who aspire to join a sports team are also obliged to sign contracts with both their school and the ASAA. These contracts set the rules of engagement from the view of the school and the ASAA viewpoint. They are binding documents and aspire to make things clear for students and their parents. For instance, the Nenana school contract explains the rules, which the school's Athletic Director sets for the students. Therein, one can read rules on eligibility but also on appropriate conduct and sportsmanship.

The ASAA also has a very strict set of rules that pertain to infractions, eligibility standards, enrollment policies, and sportsmanship; and it presents them in the form of a contract to any student who participates in sports. The student has to sign them before he can participate in ASAA leagues. The ASAA also issues penalties for breaking those rules. These depend on the severity and occurrence of the infractions. The penalties can ban the individual student – or even his team – for a few weeks to a full year from ASAA sport activities.

The punishable offenses may also be illegal under state and federal law, and some rules target the wider challenges that young people face in rural Alaska. Under ASAA's policy known as Play for Keeps, the use of drugs, alcohol, and aggressive behavior are all punishable. Students, who are punished for any of the above start a record of infractions

for the rest of their sport career in high school, even if they change high schools. ASAA has the right to sanction the school itself if, for instance, it uses ineligible players.

The ASAA contract is a very interesting document because its power and effect pertain to accentuating the athletic repercussions of a student's actions, rather than emanating from any precise legal authority. In short, ASAA punishes students by severing their social and public connection to the sport. For example, a student-athlete caught drinking alcohol might have to face independent penalties from the law, from the school, and from ASAA itself. As a result, students must take into account three different types of punishment, which affect them on different levels. The legal authorities might press charges and fines, the school could suspend them, and the ASAA could prohibit the student from playing basketball. The first two are private matters, in principle, but the last punishment is destined to be public. Everyone will want to know why a particular player is not on the team anymore. As a result, if a few incidents with the law or school are not such a big deal to delinquents, a banning from a sports team, especially basketball, might be.

### **3.2.3 Unwritten rules**

There are two coaches in the Nenana High School, one for the girls' team and one for the boys' team. Rules set by the two coaches constitute another set of obligations and responsibilities. These overlap with the contracts students have signed, but most will not internalize them until the coaches make them explicit during practice. As of this writing,

the girls' coach, Dean Overbey, had been at the school for about thirty years. The boys' coach, Tim Gebhart, had only been there for one year. Thus, generations of students already know coach Overbey, as a result, his reputation precedes him. On the other hand, Gebhart was still working to gain the trust and reciprocal relationship of respect of his players (Tim Gebhart, personal interview, 11/03/10).

The players learn most of the coaches' rules through the practices and by word of mouth. For many students, becoming part of a team through a high school sport is a new experience. Their ideas about how to play basketball may be very different from that of their coaches. Students whose peers consider them good players and who are used to a certain style of play, might need to attune to an organized team's specific needs and different style of play. At the start of the season, both coaches wasted no time teaching and standardizing any deviant opinions about what practices are about.

For instance, in the first practice of the girls' team, any girl who did not "hustle," (that means run instead of walk) to an appointed spot in order for a new drill to begin, invariably caused the whole team to run "suicides." Suicides are drills in which players start sprinting from baseline towards the foul line, touch the floor, run back to baseline, touch the floor again, run to the middle of the court, and so forth, until they make contact with all the lines in the court and sprint back for one last time to their starting point. This type of physical exercise is the one of the most demanding and least favorite among the players. Alternatively, it is one of the favorite coaching means of discipline.

On that specific occasion, the girls coach did not even explain to the new players what the offense was. When he saw his players walking instead of running, he yelled,

“baseline!” and pointed to one end of the court. The senior players, exasperated, started the suicides immediately with the younger players hesitantly following their example, unsure of what was going on. Upon repeating the transgression, the older players adamantly urged their teammates to hustle or else the whole team would run more. By keeping silent, the coach allowed the newest players to figure out their mistakes on their own. It also convinced them, in dramatic fashion, to obey the rules and demonstrated the authority of the coach as the foundation on which the team’s unity and its collective well-being rest.

Students accepted such disciplinary measures throughout the year without complaint. Amidst sounds and expressions of frustration, none voiced dissent to running suicides. On the contrary, they would reprimand the player(s) who committed the infraction. In interviews with the students, they explained that the coaches apply such punishments collectively, to the team as a whole. As such, no player is ever punished individually. The coaches and the students perceive this to contribute to team spirit: “...we’re a team. We work as one. If one person messes up...you’re only as strong as your weakest link and if one person messes up we all mess up” (Students, personal interview, 04/20/11).

The boys’ coach used another form of penalty. During a free-throw drill, he required anyone who missed his shot to watch the rest of his team running suicides. The purpose was simple: to simulate a cause-and-effect situation of losing a game because of missed free throws. In such a way, he sought to imprint on the players that free-throws are an important area of the game and one needs to practice them like any other skill. The

idea was to make the player instantly witness the effects of his actions on the team, a luxury that the players would not have during an actual game.

The coaches applied other rules with the aim of regulating the general interactions of students during traveling and away games. Specifically, since both the boys' and girls' Nenana Lynx basketball teams travel together, several rules pertain to the interaction of the two groups. Students were more resistant to these rules. They did not challenge them directly, but they were more likely to break them covertly. If the coaches took notice, they would decide on a punishment, which ranged from the culprits' suspension from the next game to running suicides during practice. When the latter happened, students would sometimes show apathy toward the whole situation. It was a way to show that they did not really care about the rule itself, but at the same time, being a part of a team, they were willing to follow. For instance, after a few practices the coaches noticed that the presence of players' boyfriends or girlfriends in the stands during practice would distract them from the drills. They introduced a rule, which forbade other students to be present in basketball practices. This rule did not seem necessary or important to some of the players on both Lynx teams. At the beginning, they broke it a number of times and ran suicides as punishment during practice. At the same time, no one complained, but they mechanically executed the drill.

It is important to understand, however, that the interactions between coaches and students are not without strife and are constantly negotiated (Timothy Gebhart, personal interview, 11/03/10). For example, exceptional basketball players never made the team for a variety of reasons. Some students do not care about school, thus they never get the

grades to play ball. Others do not care about sitting on the bench. Yet, others outright disagree with the coaches' approach. Even more, during the season some players will quit the team, mostly because they believe they do not get the necessary playing time they should. However, in all cases, players have expectations of their coaches. During practices or in private conversations players voice their disagreements and concerns or even provide feedback. Doing so is another indication of the special rapport players have with their coaches.

### **3.2.4 Educative purpose and the teaching of values**

Coaches have always stressed the educative purpose of basketball, which goes beyond simply having to keep one's grades up. "Practices are less about drills and plays," said Colin Stone, former coach and teacher in Nenana. "They are about building productive members of societies" (Dean Overbey and Colin Stone, personal interview, 11/23/10). This is a shared idea present in coaches' philosophies, in the official ASAA mission statement, and even in the walls of gymnasiums around Alaska where quotes intended to promote positive character building are displayed. For example, the ASAA writes in its mission statement that interscholastic sports help, among other things, to "promote citizenship, leadership, and personal responsibilities" and to "promote the academic and social development of students."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> <http://asaa.org/asaa/about-asaa/mission-statement/>

The coaches in Nenana think that practices are the main mode of basketball that helps them teach children discipline, respect for authority and their fellow players, teamwork, sportsmanship, dealing with adversity, hard work, and delaying gratification. These values are central to the American understanding of a functional member of society and have been hailed as such through sports (Diez 1980). These are also taught in classrooms, but during basketball practices the students themselves get to be co-actors in the teachings. As the principal, Joe Krause, notes:

The other thing that they get in basketball is some of the most authentic teaching that we have in campus. They have teachers who are coaching them, which they should have in the classroom, but it's hard to translate that to the classroom. You tell the ball players what to do, you let them do it, then you show them, then you make them prove to you right there that they can do it, they have this whole authentic assessment thing going on that should be in the classrooms (Joe Krause, personal interview, 11/11/10).

The idea of “positive development” through high school sports is one that needs further elaboration. As Jay Coakley cautions us, assuming that sports have some mystical power to infuse youth with positive characteristics is a slippery slope. There are three main assumptions that Coakley re-examines. The first is that participation in a sport has “a fertilizer effect – that is, if it is tilled into their [young people’s] experiences, their

character and potential will grow in socially desirable ways.” The second assumption is that for young people at risk participation in sports “produces a car wash effect – that is, it cleanses character and washes away personal defects so that young people become acceptable to those in mainstream society.” The third assumption is that sports have “a guardian angel effect that is, it will guide young people in success-oriented and civic centered directions throughout their lives” (Coakley 2011:308).

Coakley views these assumptions as part of a neo-liberal rhetoric, which induces local and national expenditures on sport programs that do not actually work. Even more, this type of uncritical thinking also hinders valuable research done on what actually works in youth development programs. He suggests instead that the positive effects of sports participation is contingent on multiple factors such as type of sport played, orientation of people involved, local meaning given to sports, and social networks developed around sports.

In my own research, most teachers and coaches have a very clear, practical understanding of Coakley’s objections. Although, theoretically, they operate along the same premises that Coackley criticizes, i.e., they do not perceive sports as panacea for their students. They aspire, however, that sports will provide students with necessary developmental tools to succeed not only in the present but also in the future. Additionally, they know through years of experience that for sports to fulfill any educative or “positive” purpose, they must be closely guided and multiple factors need to be taken into account.

Examples can be drawn from in-game conditions and everyday life situations. At any moment in a game, a coach and the players may have to test their commitment to certain ideals and values. In a physical game, such a moment may occur through the altercation of two players. To the extent that the coach or coaches allow unsportsmanlike behavior to “slide,” any commitment to non-violent behavior during sports, and respect to others, takes a direct hit which affects everyone participating from players to spectators. The struggle, then, to keep true to one’s own ideals is constant (Timothy Gebhart, personal interview, 11/03/10). It is also very subjective and relevant to the prevailing ethos of each sport.

The fans are also constantly monitoring the player’s moral and ethical development. Any transition and change is often the subject of conversation because during games students publicly exhibit socially valued personality traits. For instance, fans may remark on an otherwise shy student’s leadership role in the basketball court: “I love the way she guides and urges her teammates through the games. Last year (in junior high), she barely spoke” (field notes 02/13/11). Alternatively, negative comments may occur when a player does not seem to mature. Therefore, if a player complains consistently or exhibits anger, such as slamming the ball on the ground because of a foul, fans regard this as a sign of immaturity and lack of advancement. In short, behavior in a game is a representation of a person’s path to adulthood, character, and overall potential. As such, it also reflects the cultural differences and nuances of what is important for each group participating, watching, or playing, basketball. As we will see in later chapters, these can be significantly different between groups.

In using sports as a tool for developing certain positive character skills, coaches understand that permanent results are far from certain. What coaches in Nenana agree on is that sports, specifically basketball, help students remain in school, improve academically, and eventually graduate. However, as to what happens later on in the student's adult life, they do not see any specific positive trend relating to sports excellence. In answering whether he thinks that members of the basketball team do better in life than other students, coach Overbey replied, "I have seen it go both ways, some kids do better than others" (Dean Overbey and Colin Stone, personal interview, 11/23/10). In the end, if coaches succeed in positively influencing the life of a student after school, it is not due to any innate power of basketball but rather the mentoring relationship they develop with their players through basketball.

The coaches' major contribution to the academic improvement of students is that they facilitate the setting of goals and provide the expertise of how to get there. This is an important element because on the one hand it aligns academic excellence with basketball, and, on the other, players lose interest without specified goals. A few weeks before the beginning of the season in December 2010, the boys' coach had a meeting with the team to discuss the Lynx's goals for that season. They agreed that their goals would be a) to improve the team record, b) to win the NIT, and c) to support each other. The motto of the team would be "family first" (field notes 12/01/10).

The players also agreed that to get there would require hard work and discipline on and off the court. It would also require supporting each other and obeying the rules. This becomes, for many educators, a prime example of delayed gratification. The

students have to work hard, physically and academically, for a result that may or may not come much later in the basketball year. If they succeed, however, this becomes a positive character-building foundation. Whether this particular foundation catches on and withstands the test of time, however, is anyone's guess.

Coaches also work with the students to convince them that the manner of achieving their goals matters as much as achieving the goal. In rural Alaska, sportsmanship is a value that is positively encouraged by coaches, fans, and the players themselves. Despite the carved-in-stone nature of ASAA rules, good sportsmanship is continuously tested in a game and inevitably subjectively evaluated. In general, players, coaches, and fans try to maintain the appearance of good sportsmanship at all times.

The students believe that the most important value that their coaches are trying to teach them in practices is teamwork. The players understand being a team is much more than simple cooperation or passing the ball around the court to score a point. Being a team refers more to the responsibilities they have to each other and their coach and embodies several of the values already discussed. When asked what a team means for him a player answered, "...Just look for one another on and off the court... Like people get in trouble, get busted for various reasons and if there's alcohol and tobacco and all that stuff, and if people get bad grades, we are there to try help and stuff." When asked to give an example, his teammate said:

Earlier in the season, very close to NIT, we heard stuff about, you know, basketball kids mouthing off to teachers, not having very good grades, just

starting to really go downhill, so us captains we actually held a meeting remind people that we're family, and that first they're letting down the family right now and how they need to start working hard on their grades, with better attitudes. I'm not a 100% sure, but I'm pretty sure, that grades and attitude got a lot better after that meeting (Students, personal interview, 04/20/11).

In practices, the players work out to become a team on and off the court. The motto "you are only as strong as your weakest link" finds its practical application in the support students provide to each other so that they become stronger individually but also collectively. Through basketball exercises, players evaluate and appreciate the effort their "weakest" link is making to keep up, and in the end they start treating their efforts collectively. Suicides runs, again, provide a very good example of this team feeling. Several times after finishing their suicides, the players who finished first would turn around and start encouraging those who were struggling to finish by clapping their hands. During shooting drills, players who shoot are also encouraged by their teammates.

Within the context of the established relation between coach and players, there is considerable freedom. Their interactions are not solely based on rules but also on genuine trust between the individuals involved. Through practices, the coaches get to build rapport with the players. In a way they try to understand how best to teach each individual player how to be a member of a team. That involves mini-psychological profiles for each player. As the girls' coach explains, some players you can reprimand or

yell at in front of the team, which makes them react positively to the coach's directions. If you do that to other players, however, you "lost them," and they clam up.

The rapport between coaches and players exceeds the boundaries of the basketball court. A coach can also play the role of teacher, mentor, and guardian. Students seek the council of their coaches in a variety of life issues. The Nenana Lynx coaches have provided "shelter" to their basketball players from bad domestic situations, personal difficulties, and other challenges. Colin Stone said, "Sometimes teachers will come and ask us to intervene when a student gets low grades because we have that kind of a relationship with them" (Dean Overbey and Colin Stone, personal interview, 11/23/10).

Coaches will also give advice on colleges that the children should attend after graduation or write letters of recommendation. These services are not restricted only to basketball players since the coaches are first teachers in the school. However, the relationship with their basketball players is such that it creates a zone of comfort and familiarity. I was amused one time when one of the boys "pushed" one of the coaches as if he were fighting him. The coach pretended to charge after him and they both laughed. In other social contexts, such an interaction would be considered inappropriate, but in Nenana, it spells out the unique relation the coaches have with their players.

The extent to which a team will manage to realize this potential depends on the characters and personalities of the players themselves. Any individual involved in a team must interact with many different player personalities. These interactions may range from positive to negative, and it is in practices that the coaches and the students get to set boundaries and guidelines on how people can voice their discomfort or complaints. These

are important in establishing a spirit of teamwork in the team. In one case, a student noticed that certain individuals on the team would not pass him the ball during drills. When his turn to execute a drill came, some of his teammates would pass the ball to the person behind him, so that the student was obliged to continue so as not to delay the flow of the drill. The point was clear; the student was not good enough. He voiced his concern to the coach. The coach decided to talk to his team the next day, but first he wanted his captains to explain to all that this behavior was unacceptable. Indeed, the captains had a meeting where they discussed, as a team, this behavior. The next day, the coach also discussed the situation in practice by calling attention to ideas of respect, teamwork, and tolerance.

### **3.2.5 Understanding conflict**

Tense situations such as these arose a number of times in the two Lynx teams. Most of the time, they were subtle; with the exception of in-game yelling, outright conflicts did not happen. As a result of situations that go under the radar, one day practices may be done in a good atmosphere and the next, for some unknown reason, the atmosphere is heavy. Often the pressure of winning creates a gap between more skillful players and less skillful players.

There have been cases where a more skillful player would be disappointed at specific teammates who did not hold the ball after a pass or who committed a turnover. From their side, less skillful players might complain that the best players in the team are

not being good teammates, for instance, they do not pass the ball. Other times people may be mad at the coaches themselves. Lastly, it could be something that was completely unrelated to basketball, but, for some reason, it manifested on the court.

A more obvious manner to express conflict is yelling. As in most forms of communication, the act of yelling has several nuances. While coaches can yell at the players, they urge the players not to yell at each other. Naturally, reaction to yelling depends on the level of friendship and familiarity between individuals. It can be a source of frustration, more so than any other kind of team punishment, when the recipient of the yelling believes he or she is singled out from the team for wrongdoing. Other players may seem completely apathetic. They take yelling from certain individuals as a natural phenomenon, and they let it take its course. Yet, others actually play better after the yelling. The urgency has a positive result. Lastly, others take it personally and may bear the grudge for a while.

For example, in a game against the West Valley Junior Varsity team, two Lynx players yelled at each other over a series of turnovers. When I asked them after the game, they shrugged the incident off as unimportant and even joked about it. In another situation, a girl broke into tears after one of her teammates yelled at her. This created interpersonal complications off court. They were subtle, but they were known in the school. In addition, while the two boys did not think anything about yelling in anger at each other during a game, the two girls could not do that, and it became an issue to be resolved.

In practices, these relations are continually being negotiated. One will see, practice, and play with the same people repeatedly. The coaches are there to mitigate differences, but it is on the players themselves to find solutions or at least to tolerate each other. Thus, resolving conflicts for the good of the team is, in most cases, a given even if the people involved appear to be unwilling to make any concessions. It is through this everyday negotiation of relationships that coaches expect the students to resolve conflicts so as not to weaken the team dynamic. In practices, they are also expected to make the extra step and strengthen their team cohesion by building rapport with their coach and each other. These efforts depend on the students' character and their willingness to personally improve and become part of a team.

Another interesting aspect that high school players are introduced to through basketball practices is physicality. On the basketball court the players are required to hustle for the right to a spot in the court that gives them an advantage over their opponents. This, of course, involves touching and pushing, those human actions with specific social rules in a multitude of cultural contexts.

In a physical sport such as basketball, one might expect that this is not a problem, yet the reality is quite different. Initially the students, especially the freshmen, feel particularly uncomfortable invading the physical space of other people, which they were taught to respect in most ordinary social settings. It was very amusing during practices to see awkward moments where players would not approach their opponents. In one case a teenager, who was walking backwards even as his coach was trying to get close to show

him how to defend, yelled, “You are too close!” Other times, new players would execute defensive drills without actually touching their opponents.

For the Lady Lynx physicality proved to be a problem right from the start. In their first game, the team lost countless rebounds because the players would not box out their opponents. Later, their coach had to spend a number of practices forcing his players to block out as hard as they could without breaking the rules. This proved easier said than done. Students run a number of suicides those days because they did not execute the box out drills correctly and did not push hard enough. The boys also needed constant reminding. During a bad defensive play when none of the boys boxed out, their exasperated coach had to turn around to his players, slap his behind and yell, “Use this!”

Being physically aggressive and, in general, invading another person’s physical space are not acceptable behaviors in day-to-day life of mainstream American society. In basketball, however, the norms of the court allow these actions. Physicality is, in fact, encouraged within the specific limits and rules set by the game. In practices, the players learn to temporarily switch their social behavior between different contexts and recognize that an action does not necessarily mean the same in all situations.

Goffman analyzed such contexts or “frameworks” as he calls them, in trying to understand how people organize experience. He maintained that since the human body is always used on some framework or another, people are required to be competent in interpreting the different frameworks that they may have to use (Goffman 1974: 37). So, whereas before the student was respectful of the socially determined physical space of others, in basketball the player must fight for spots on the court as part of the playing of

the game. In addition, he/she is required to do so with grace realizing that pushing and shoving is just a part of the game and not a personal insult. In that sense, players get to develop their social skills, understanding the nuances and social contexts of other people's actions.

Finally, basketball increases the ability of the players to deal with conflict in a socially appropriate manner as it constantly puts them in controversial situations. During a game, players may perceive themselves as the "victims" of injustice by the referees. An opponent may foul them and the referees may or may not call the foul. In such situations, players are required to be mature, to hold their nerves and frustration, to recognize that people make mistakes, but also to respect authority of the referee and their coach. The coach is the only one who is allowed to officially complain to the referee.

### **3.2.6 Making friends in practice**

Practices are a good chance to observe the social groups and networks that students have formed in interactions with each other. For instance, group exercises (e.g., where one person is shooting baskets while two other players grab the rebound and pass it back) reveal the fluidity by which basketball generates new relationships. At the beginning of the year, the girls' practices were organized in identifiable groups. The coach split the groups among senior players who usually exhibit the drills for the newer players. When the choice was left to the girls themselves, however, interpersonal relations decided how the groups would be formed. In the case of the Lynx girls'

practices, these were generally split on the basis of locality, ability, and seniority in school.

One of the most stable and exclusive groups was formed by three local girls. Two of these girls were seniors, and all three of them had known each other for a long time. The rest of the drill groups also reflected this initial partition between local and Living Center students. However, this proved to be no more than a natural inclination to be on familiar ground. As the season progressed and the girls got to know each other better, the groups started mixing. Even the initially exclusive group of the three girls started mixing up and included in their practice drills girls from the Living Center.

The boys' practices did not have any recognizable patterns based on locality. The team itself included only four local children. The rest were all from the Living Center. As a result, groups were more loosely formed, and they were based on seniority, ability, and friendship. The boys' coach would often split the groups in terms of position and he mixed his best players with those freshmen that he thought would benefit from the subsequent interaction.

Switching from social contexts and applying different sets of behavior also refers to the established relations that people exhibit in practices. Not everyone is best friends with each other just because they are on a team together. Some individuals may not have any relations outside the basketball court. What is important, however, is that due to the idea of a team once the players step onto the court they are required to forget all their problems, difficulties, or outside conflicts and focus on the goal at hand. Frequently, this

acts as a reset button for relationships; through focusing on team goals and executing demanding drills, players have a chance to mend broken relations.

### **3.3 Road trips in Alaska**

Students in Alaska travel a substantial amount. Alaska is geographically a gigantic state with a relatively small population of less than 750,000 people. Communities and cities are far apart, so school-oriented students with any kind of participation in the school's programs must travel extensively around the state. The vastness of the state and extreme and unpredictable weather make basketball trips unique adventures, a condition that differentiates Alaska from the rest of the United States. Schools budget their expenses for traveling early in the year and a big chunk of that money goes to basketball. The Nenana Lynx benefit from playing in an ASAA basketball regional conference, which includes other towns on the road system such as Fairbanks, Northway, Tok, Anderson, Healy, and Talkeetna. The distance from these on-the-road communities is anywhere from an hour to twelve hours round-trip, which is considerable, yet it is minor compared to the demanding travel of off-road communities.

Student-players enjoy these trips greatly, notwithstanding the occasional complaints about the weather. In fact, students will join sports teams for the traveling and will keep their grades up so that they are able to go on those trips. For them this is vacation time, away from school and close to their friends, teammates, and coaches for two or more days. A collective mentality permeates all aspects of the trip. Players share a

classroom for the night, watch movies, play ball, joke, and share stories. In short, they develop camaraderie, a result of living and sharing experiences with a group. For students from the Living Center, who have left family and friends back home, this is especially important. In addition, in those trips they have the opportunity to expand their social network and meet new people from different schools. Students then, look forward to the potentially unique experiences that traveling in Alaska has to offer.

In addition to the regular trips, it has become a tradition for the Nenana Lynx to schedule a trip in an in-state distant destination. In 2011, the students went to play at Kotzebue in a basketball tournament that the Kotzebue Huskies hosted. In previous years, they visited Skagway, Nikolaevsk, and even Whitehorse in Canada. In 2012, they planned to visit Yakutat. Although organizing such trips can be a hassle for the school administration, there is a strong belief in the constructive outcome for the students' characters. According to the coaches, students can experience something new and acquire positive memories.

The trip to Kotzebue is a good example of how trips are a unique aspect of the basketball experience in Alaska. In February of 2011, the Lynx flew from Fairbanks to Anchorage and then to Kotzebue in order to participate in the Kotzebue Klassic Basketball Tournament. Other schools participating in the tournament were Dutch Harbor, Point Hope, and Nome. For a number of students, this was their first visit to an airport. At the Fairbanks International Airport, the students were surprised to find out that to carry on their luggage they had to leave all their shampoos, conditioners, and lotions behind. Despite their losses, they were very amused by the whole affair. One student kept

repeating to herself and to others the phrase that the security officer had used at the checkpoint: “Too big shampoo” became a punch line, which made everyone laugh repeatedly.

Upon arriving in Anchorage, the coaches gave the students a time limit to be back at the gate and then allowed them to venture on their own. The students split off into several groups, most of them keeping close to the same friends that they have in school and during practice. Some kept close to the coaches, observing their surroundings and asking a number of questions. Eventually, they discovered the airport’s moving walkways. A group of them bought coffee from Starbucks and proceeded to stand on the walkway, enjoying the slow ride and the view from the window. Soon more students joined in. As soon as they reached the end of the destination, they walked back again at the start and repeated the process. All this time, the group was taking pictures and videos of each other. This scene brought smiles to both coaches. It is that moment that the girl’s coach commented, “This is why we’re doing this. They will remember this trip for a long time” (field notes 02/16/11).

The trip was about to get more exciting in Kotzebue. Unbeknownst to the team, the airplane landed in a window of good weather. Throughout the day, winds were blowing at 25 miles per hour (mph). The weather was supposed to get worse that weekend with 40 mph winds and gusts of 80 mph. Typically, students of the hosting school still attend classes. This time, however, the winds in Kotzebue were so strong that school was cancelled. Soon enough the organizers announced they were cancelling the first day of the games as well. Several teams and the referees were stuck in Anchorage.

Later in the day, after some rescheduling, some games were played. Conditions for flying did not improve even by the end of the tournament; and, as a result, the Lynx were finally able to leave Kotzebue after six days instead of the scheduled four.

Such conditions are no surprise to Alaskans. Even so, the weather definitely colored the students experience of the trip and provided for an exciting turns of events. For six days, the Nenana players socialized with each other and with students from the invited schools. Their daily program involved watching the tournament games, arranging impromptu pick-up games with other schools, shooting hoops, and kicking a soccer ball. At times, an adult would escort some of the students to the city, and in one of the few times that the weather cleared up, most students walked to the beach. Many students had never seen the ocean before so they took photos and shared them with everyone on the walk. In the evening, they watched movies and hung out with their best friends.

Students even socialized with people they would not necessarily hang out with in school. In-school solidified groups of people mix more in these trips, especially when everyone is experiencing the same predicament. On one particular night, students from all the invited schools got involved in a night game of “sardines.” In this game players have to hide while others search for them. Those who find anyone have to hide with the person found. On that same night, the school was buzzing with excitement even after the designated bed time, much to the dismay of the security guard. Though, he was a good sport and allowed the students to be in the corridors for a little bit more time.

The basketball event and the weather conditions enhanced the quality of relations people developed with each other. Being stuck together became a common topic

of discussion, the source of retold stories about similar situations, and a great introduction to chitchat with strangers. Naturally, new friendships started to develop between students from different schools. Pick-up games were the most obvious point of contact as these had to be arranged between the students themselves. Other interactions were negative. In one case, a scuffle between two boys broke out, which was quickly stopped. In another case, it was obvious that after long days together people started annoying each other. Awkward conversations, for instance, would transpire as some students may have misjudged proximity in space with proximity in relation and asked some personal questions.

Even these negative interactions, however, were part of the program and did not change the fact that visiting students at the Kotzebue Klassic have that story in common. The friendships that students developed during this tournament in Kotzebue should not be evaluated according to how long they will last. Rather, it is the common link, the experience of an event, or a moment that connects people. Therefore, to the extent that two acquaintances can see a photo and remember the time when 80 mph gusts swept through Kotzebue, this creates a shared memory that connects two people on some unique level. During those six days, I heard students and adults narrate traveling experiences from different places. The girls' coach described a visit to Barrow High School where the school's playground has armed guards on towers to protect children and the community from polar bears: "They shot a polar bear that very day" (field notes 02/18/10). Other students talked to me about the friends they made in various trips, long hours spent on the bus, and other stories that they had experienced together.

All these snippets of “traveling adventures” are, in a sense, the quintessential example of why students and teachers value sports traveling, and why schools make every effort to make travel a possibility. In the case of Nenana, one can see the benefits in the students’ feelings of camaraderie. After the adventure in Kotzebue, computer desktops and cell phones featured photos from the trip of those moments that a group of individuals created and shared together. Some photos were with new friends and others with new acquaintances. In the end, traveling has a special meaning for the basketball players who get to experience life outside their communities.

### **3.4 The game: living in the moment**

Interviewer: Who’s gonna describe that last moment against Glennallen?

Student A: Well, she was the only one playing.

Student B: I was the only one playing. Well, everybody else had fouled out...

Student C: ...but you. Only one on the court!

Student B: I remember StudentD and she just yanked the ball out of this girl’s hand...

Student A: I swear it was a foul, I am so surprised the ref didn’t call a foul on her...

Student C: ...on the other side of half court...

Student B: ...on the other side of half court, I don't even know how she did it, she just yanked it away from her and just threw it back across the other side of half court...

Student A: ...to you, which was right next to the baseline...

Student B: ...I ran and I grabbed it and it was right next to the sideline and I hear people yelling and I turn around and there's Student E right under the hoop so I throw it to her and she shoots it and I look up at the scoreboard and there's two seconds left and I turn around at the bench and everyone stood up at the same time and it was like screaming and it was just great.

Student A: Aww.

Student C: It's like indescribable, gives you tingles when you think about it.

Student B: It's like you don't even hear the buzzer when it happens, cause it's just like oh my gosh!" (Students, personal interview 01/26/11)

At the sound of the buzzer, the Nenana Lynx bench, the coach, and spectators all rushed the basketball court to hug the five players that had won an impressive victory against Glennallen Panthers. The victory came in a dramatic fashion at the last 20 seconds. Student E, a freshman from Mt. Village, was in the middle of everyone's hugs. The big smile on her face indicated her happiness.

She had just won the game for the Lynx, taking initiative that at other times she was reluctant to take. Repeatedly in practices, coach Overbey insisted that as soon as Nenana steals the ball or takes a rebound, a quick pass is necessary to the fast break point guard. Although the system would work just fine in practices, Student E needed a lot of urging and sometimes yelling from her coach and teammates to lead the fast break. This time, however, she ran on her own and was where she was supposed to be at the right time. When the ball came her way, she scored the layup with phenomenal calmness, even though everyone in the gymnasium was frantic with excitement.

The intensity of the game was building as Lynx and Panthers were head-to-head for most of the game. Some questionable arbitration against the Lynx united the Nenana fans even more, who took it upon themselves to urge their team to play to their fullest. When the game reached those last dramatic seconds the crowd had reached a boiling point. Lynx fans were on their feet yelling to Student B to lift her head and see her wide open teammate under the hoop. Overall, when the buzzer sounded the drama ended.

It seems almost sacrilegious to analyze such a moment. Being present and immersed in the game as anyone else in Tri Valley's gymnasium, I already know that I cannot pay the moment the justice it deserves in my description. Its uniqueness and meaning are precious, and the sentiments it brings about are such that it becomes, as the student says, "indescribable." As a result, it is better to "feel" the moment again, to relive it through a memory of feelings, rather than a memory of faces in sequence. Yet, the attempt must be made.

During the actual game, the basketball players are the main actors. If they want to win, they have to perform and execute the moves and coordinated actions for which they have been training in practices. They have to do well in defense and offense, and they have to follow a tactical plan. However, this is only half of their game. The other half employs aspects of their personality and tests them against the idiosyncratic circumstances of the game itself. They know that at times they must exploit any opportunities that they come across and break away from the tactical plan.

The coaches encourage such initiative during practices. For instance, when the teams learned offensive plays, where the movements of the players in offense are predetermined, the defense would some time “cheat” by running close to their mark, since they knew where the ball would be going. Because of the cheating, however, gaps to the hoop were created. Repeatedly, the coaches would stop the practice and would say to the offense, “If that happens in a game, just drive to the hoop” (field notes 01/26/11). It is in such in-game situations where the players needed to show initiative and make choices. The choices happen intuitively and they can be bad or good. There is no way for the players to foresee if their choices will be ultimately successful or unsuccessful.

Players understand that, at the end of the game, all of their performance in executing the tactical plan, as well as making the correct unplanned choices, will bring them close to winning or losing. Therefore, there is a sense of individual responsibility among most players about their part in said performance, which sometimes weighs heavily on students. A student told me during a trip that before games he had trouble sleeping: “I haven’t slept for two days, I am thinking of the game too much. It always

happens to me.” This sense of responsibility brings an individual vis-à-vis with the expectations of one’s teammates, the coach, and of course the spectators. The coaches will try to help the players relax, but ultimately it is up to them to find ways that will help them relax and focus for the upcoming test.

Before the game, certain players follow little rituals, for instance wearing headphones, listening to music, and withdrawing from the rest of the group. The result of those activities is that by the time the team makes their entrance to the court for the first warm up, they have to be “pumped up.” This is another expression for “being concentrated” or “having your head into the game.” However, it also implies a positive and competitive or even aggressive attitude. When a player is “pumped up,” he/she feels that their team and the player as an individual can face whatever comes their way. Typically, in so many activities where the outcome is unknown, the high school basketball player will try to prepare him/herself physically and mentally for an open-ended event.

Playing the game itself seems to compensate the students for all the pre-game anxiety they may face. Indeed, even though the responsibility and anticipation to play a good game may weigh on their shoulders, none of them would give up the opportunity to play. Student E could not play the season 2010-2011. Having missed the first game due to a pulled muscle, he waited patiently for a whole month during Christmas break to restart practices. Then at the first practice, he pulled the same muscle again. The season for him was over. He would miss the two big basketball events of this year, the Nenana Invitational Tournament (NIT) and the trip to Kotzebue. He followed the team in their

trips around Alaska and sat on the bench, but the disappointment of not being able to play was evident. He did not feel the pressure his teammates felt, but he also lost his chance to be part of that pressure and test his mettle.

At the end of the NIT tournament where the Nenana Lynx boys lost by one point in yet another dramatic finale, the student told me, “even though people tell me that I am part of the team, I didn’t feel like that.” In a later interview, Student F and his basketball teammate Student G commented:

Student F: I wasn’t part of the team cause I couldn’t do anything to contribute anything to our victories. Like I couldn’t play or do anything...I felt like even if we did win NIT, it wasn’t like I won NIT, more like I was along for the ride since I didn’t do anything to contribute. I don’t know, I still feel that way a little bit.

Interviewer: What do you think about that Student F?

Student G: I think it’s BS. Even though he didn’t play, he was there, he was there, every day, every practice, he’s working, but unfortunately he got injured. I mean the thought that he’s injured and he knows that he won’t play for the rest of the year, but he still shows up and he is there for us, that helps more...

Student F: I still wanted to be there just in case, maybe some way that I could help, like with the drills or something like that, and on the off chance that the doctor could say I could play again and then I wouldn’t be

out of the loop. I'd know all the plays and stuff...but watching is one of the hardest things ever.

Student G: I was in that situation but only for two games. It's terrible (Students, personal interview, 4/20/12).

In watching the Lynx games the student felt that he lost the chance to be a main actor in winning and creating a story and a memory for himself and others. Along side with the “nightmares” of bad games and terrible mistakes come the “dreams” of amazing individual and team performances — to surpass one's best performance and lose oneself in the game and the goal at hand. The student felt that he was deprived of this potential.

In sharp contrast to being out of the game and “just watching” is the idea of “flow experience.” A tentative term, coined by MacAloon and Csikszentmihalyi, flow experience refers to the holistic experience that saturates individuals when they act in total involvement (MacAloon and Csikszentmihalyi 1977). The two researchers used the term to explain the state of mind of rock climbers. They were intrigued by the apparent irrational activity, in which participants have to face extreme situations and the threat of serious accident or even death. How then, do these athletes manage to overcome their fears? In recording and decoding the climbers' experience, MacAloon and Csikszentmihalyi describe an almost ideal state of experience in which fear plays only a brief role.

Six characteristics of flow experience surfaced: a) there is a merging of action and awareness. The climber is aware of what she is doing (climbing a rock) but is not aware

that she is aware. If that happens the flow breaks. b) The climber's attention narrows and focuses on the purpose at hand. c) A cognition of "self" is lost in the action. The self becomes irrelevant and immersion in the task is total. One could compare this characteristic to a state of meditation as the reality of what one is doing right then becomes malleable. To forget oneself, however, does not imply that one loses self-awareness. A person will experience heightened kinesthetic and mental awareness, but he will only feel its full effect, exhilaration, in a sense, after the task is complete. d) The climber finds herself in full control of her actions. This, again, is not something one realizes while active but later. e) Taking actions is unproblematic and unambiguous. There is no second guess in a flow state as it is always clear what one has to do. The action itself provides the answers to the next move. f) Finally, flow experience is autotelic; there is no apparent reward apart from the experience itself.

The idea of flow experience, although of a psychological nature, can connect the dots between different theories of play, games, and sports. First, it could be considered the common denominator between games and sports that do not appear to be of the same quality. Long distance running, chess, car racing, and baseball may have something in common after all. Second, it expands the potential of participation not only to the players of a game but also to the spectators, referees, coaches, etc. The synergy between different experiences of a game creates a collective appreciation and understanding of it. In this magnitude, it is no wonder that during a game, the emotional energy of a crowd can be overwhelming, permeating specific moments and creating memories that may affect

one's everyday life. What and how it changes is in itself a fascinating research subject. As Victor Turner says "to flow is to be as happy as a human can be" (Turner 1974:161).

Even though the Lynx players recognize the different degrees of participation in basketball, playing the game is the source of the experience. Everything else revolves around the game. This is not the opinion of the injured player only but also of the coaches: "The hardest thing for me, and I think for any coach, is wanting to play with them more than coach them. And I've seen myself develop out of that" (Colin Stone, personal interview 12/23/10). Moments like the Glennallen last few seconds or the NIT finals where both Lynx teams played would explain why playing the game is the most fundamental component of the basketball experience.

Yet, the experience is complete when the rest of the components come into play. In Glennallen, it was the crowd that made Student B lift her head and see Student E under the hoop. It was the coach who gave the directions for the last play; and it was practices that got the players ready to face the odds. Lastly, it was the perception of bad refereeing that sparked the excitement of the crowd. The synergy of all these unfolding with no specific plan and corresponding to the ever-changing circumstances of the game created the last moment in Glennallen.

### **3.5 Watching the game: spectatorship and participation**

The act of watching the game manifests the complex reciprocal interrelations between players, spectators, the physical and symbolic space of sporting setting, and

perceptions of community in the local, regional, and national levels. Most sports become a stage where people not only watch the players perform but actively participate and support the performance. Support can be defined as the vocal and gestural demonstration of one's alignment to a particular team with the expectation and desire that this team would do well in the competition. Ideally, the fan's support will form into a collective off-court performance with the main recipients being the teams playing and the opposing fans. These performances can take many forms from hand clapping, singing, hugging other fans, stomping the legs on the ground, and painting one's face. All of these demonstrations are based on the conviction that support works to the benefit of the favored team, which hopefully encourages them to play better.

In the context of athletics in Alaskan schools, a spectator may be supporting a team for a variety of reasons; some support the community or village while others may focus more on the high school. Others may be supporting just a group of people along ethnic lines, while others may support a geographic region. Yet many people may support the idea of high school basketball in general. In addition, all aspects of support are relative to whom one is playing against. The opponent is usually a team of players but, at times, it can be a symbolic opponent such as drugs or racism. All these affect the levels of support of each spectator, player, coach, and referee. Moreover, all these are employed in different circumstances and can be reflected in the crowd watching the game.

In Nenana, school spirit is the local term for supporting the high school. As we saw, school spirit is the collective assessment or appreciation of an individual's, or group of individuals', efforts in any kind of activity, competitive or non-competitive, that

represents the school and the way it operates. Moreover, as a concept school spirit is used to describe the relationship of the players with the spectators and characterizes the latter's participation in the actual game. School spirit can also be considered as a proto-identity for the students on their way to becoming adult members of their community. As such, the term operates within a collection of sociocultural values that the school, an institution popularly perceived to be a microcosm of local and national society, tries to teach.

The students themselves are the main actors of upholding the school spirit, fanning its flames, and keeping it alive. The students, especially the basketball players themselves, feel responsible whenever school spirit is at a low. Thus, school spirit exists only when students work hard, collectively or individually, to achieve the goals and standards that the school has set for itself, and when they perceive that others are doing likewise. All of these expectations underscore the argument that basketball games are social and cultural performances. The players are testing themselves in front of their community. The students view basketball as an activity through which they can accomplish individual, team, school, and even community goals. Gratification comes from people's recognition that the team did well in striving towards and succeeding in achieving them. In that sense, fans can very actively participate in the game, even though they may not be playing. The way that they recognize the teams' efforts is the manifestation of school spirit.

However, school spirit is based on reciprocity. The players are not the only ones scrutinized for their efforts on the court. The fans themselves are also judged for their efforts and support in the stands. Each other's performances are monitored and mutually

interconnected. Both sides recognize that they are active participants in this process. The players expect that the spectators will give positive support to the team by being vocal. In basketball, more than any other sport in Nenana, school spirit is expected to be visible and spontaneous. It is not enough that an individual is at the gym watching the game. She needs to express support for her team by dressing up in black and yellow and by cheering. The players on the boys' and girls' basketball teams understand this principle of reciprocity better than any other student. Throughout their high school basketball careers, they will be called to uphold school spirit both as players and as fans. When the girls' team is playing, the boys will usually watch the game and cheer for the girls; and when the boys play, the girls will do the same. There are definite expectations in this exchange of support. For instance, at one game when the female players were late coming out to watch their game, the boys mused, albeit somewhat teasingly, that they might decide not to watch the upcoming girls' game.

Spectators will dress up with Nenana Lynx tee shirt or hoodies, and during NIT they also hold small yellow towels during the games. They wave these with a twist of the wrist whenever the crowd thought that support was needed. In order for the colors and towels to express a visible sense of school spirit, the fans would have to sit close together in one specific part of the stands. That way they were visible to everyone in the gym and especially the fans of the opposing team who would usually sit directly across from them. However, they also differentiate themselves from spectators who just came to watch the game without expressing school spirit. The unspoken rule is this: if you sit in this part of the stands, you have to yell, cheer, and wave the yellow towels.

Players believe that the crowd can give the team the necessary energy to play harder and “give everything” on the court. They also appreciate when the fans show their support when the team is not winning. On the contrary, the players will not be happy if there are only fifteen very enthusiastic spectators at the stands. They would rather see everyone they care about, i.e., their parents, relatives, friends, teachers, and other community members waving the black and gold towels over their heads and being as loud and emphatic as they can. In expressing school spirit, moderation is not always prudent. For a limited amount of time, fans are required to give it all, in the same way that players need to give their all.

At the same time, it is accepted that if the Lynx constantly do not do well or if they do not care to do better, spectators will eventually stop coming to the games. When a student was asked about Nenana’s girls lost NIT’s Championship game against Noorvik, she replied, “That was my 8th grade year so I was just a fan and I remember I really wasn’t as sad, I was just mad, I was like ‘C’mon girls.’ Like, I’ve seen them play and they did not play up to what they should have been playing, they should have beat them in my opinion” (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11). After a poor game, coach Overbey asked the girls to be more cautious in their everyday lives, sleep better, eat well, and focus because people came to see them and the team was letting their fans down. He gave the example of spectators who approached him after the game and asked him what was wrong and why the team did poorly. Coach Overbey initiated the talk in an effort to inspire the team to play better.

The fans themselves are also cognizant of their participation in the game through cheering and urging the team on. The epic win against Glennallen High School in which the crowd had a direct influence on the game was not the only example. In other games, the fans yelled advice from the stands down at the players. These are not, by any means, sophisticated instructions, but they are meant to offer what help they can. Individual comments like “settle down!” or “you have time, relax!” are meant to influence to keep a connection of support to the player and influence the game. Typically, “positive” feedback usually takes the form of a chant and becomes a direct manifestation of school spirit. The most common chant is when people yell, “defense, defense!” while banging their feet on the stands or clapping. The rhythmic and orchestrated creation of noise creates a palpable feeling of support. People need to yell for the focused players to hear them. Alternatively, the crowd never orchestrates negative comments for the home team, those typically happen on an individual basis.

Yet, fans must also face the consequences of their actions when their vocalized support gets out of hand. Depending on the situation, the line between school spirit and bad sportsmanship can be blurred. Playing against archrivals, the Tri Valley Warriors, the Nenana fans thought they were the victims of continuous bad calls. At the end of a very heated game where the Lynx boys lost, some of the students yelled “balls and nuts, we

got screwed.”<sup>19</sup> This made a negative impression on the staff and teachers of the Nenana High School but also on the Tri Valley visitors.

The next day the coach and administration in Nenana had a discussion with the basketball players about the chant. It was made clear that the school spirit of Nenana should not be at odds with the general principles of good sportsmanship and also that the school did not want to get a reputation as “sore losers.” What also made an impression is that the coach told his players that they themselves (meaning the coaches of both teams) “did not have their best game” in terms of behavior (field notes 02/02/11). Both coaches had received technical fouls at different occasions in the two games against Tri-Valley school and that might have negatively influenced the reaction of the fans. This is another example of the reflexive nature of accountability and responsibility members of the team have for each other. The way spirit is expressed can affect the school’s image. Therefore, although there is some leniency due to the spontaneous nature of school spirit, players, students, parents, coaches, and the school administration make it a point to align their expressions with other cultural values as much as possible.

“Spontaneity” is a key word concerning school spirit. The school is supposed to inspire spontaneous manifestations of school spirit. Hand-in-hand with individual goals, a student is expected to do the best for the school as well. Playing basketball or supporting the team are two activities through which this spontaneity is expected to be funneled. The players and the fans are not just expected to show school spirit by playing ball or

---

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, few minutes before the same group of students had addressed the fans asking them to relax and stop heckling the referees.

cheering from the stands. They also associate with their school to such an extent that they actively feel joy when they win and sadness or distress when they lose. The presence of the opponents only accentuates those feelings. However, these expectations, of course, are not enforceable. Their absence or presence is noted and is believed to speak volumes about the social cohesion of the school.

A second characteristic of school spirit is that it is considered a measurable quality. In fact, like many other sports in the world, there is an unspoken competition between spectators about which team, or in our case school, exhibits the most spirit. At the same time the ball is bouncing on the court between the opponents, spectators at the stands engage in their own symbolic exchange of exhibitions of school spirit. Pre-game rituals such as the human corridor cannot really replace the energetic show of school spirit. When fans accompany the opponents, the informal competition ensues. For the Lynx students and players it is a matter of pride – or bragging rights – to meet any challenge to their school spirit in kind. This happens no matter how loud and as energetic the opposing crowd is; and the more traditional the opponent, the stronger the solidarity in the stands. This symbolic competition takes place, regardless of which team is winning the game. It is also part of the expectations and reciprocal relationship between the teams on the court and their fans. A school can win with spirit, even if their basketball team loses.

Games between traditional rivals are prized because they are guaranteed to be exciting both on the court and in the stands. Furthermore, through competition, people expect the players to push themselves to the limit and reach a performance of flow

experience. Nenana players and fans respect Tri Valley because their supporters are loud, supportive, and consistently show up at most away games, which, given the size of Alaska, is considered to be the ultimate proof of their loyalty to their school and community. Within this competitive context, of course, relations between the two schools are not always harmonious.

In the past, Nenana students have expressed a disappointment with their school spirit in previous years, although they consider the situation better this year. “It is disappointing to go to play in a NIT game in front of empty stands,” said one student. Another added, “Tri Valley have so much more school spirit than we do. They paint their faces and stuff, and students and adults, parents, watch the games” (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11). Painted faces, cheering, and holding placards along with a full gym in every single game are indications of good school spirit. However, more so is the solidarity of the school in relation to that of another school. Tri Valley parents and fans, for instance, are known to follow their team at home games as well as away games. When they go to away games, they choose a spot in the gymnasium, sit together, and cheer constantly, win or lose. For Nenana students it is a sign of low school spirit when Tri Valley comes in the Lynx Den, as the gymnasium is sometimes called, and they do not have as much of support as the Tri Valley Warriors have. In the end, school spirit is not only about support. It is about loyalty.

School spirit is an important aspect of high school culture. It is a spirit that everyone involved in the school, fans, players, even teachers and parents must exhibit. The students themselves may discuss why someone does not display school spirit because

this is a serious subject for them. Within the temporal and spatial limits of the gymnasium and a basketball game, displays of school spirit reaffirm the students' connection to each other, their team, their coaches, and teachers. It also re-strengthens their sense of belonging to their school, an identity itself that several residents will hold for the rest of their lives.

In many villages in Alaska, school spirit is synonymous with community spirit, at least for as long as a basketball game goes on. School spirit is a basis for pre-identity that develops prior to the community identity before teenagers are socialized in the community as adults. This is how in many expressions school spirit and local community identity are fused and experienced as one. At the same time that the students express their loyalty to the school and the community, spectators express their devotion to their community and school. In Nenana, for reasons that I will explain later, this is not the case. School spirit and community identity appear to have been separate for some time now, because of the general changes in demographics. In fact, the construction of The Nenana Living Center is a result of these changes.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the components of the Alaskan high school basketball experience were analyzed in an effort to understand how each of these fit into an individual's life. In basketball games, such as the ones I described in the vignettes, all the components of the sport, the practices, the traveling, the game itself, and the watching of a game come

together in an interconnected whole. Participants comment on them individually, sharing their own perspective and experiences, but always in relation to the game that they are watching or playing. The game is the focus of attention, the one undeniable moment of truth, which promises the potential of unscripted challenge and adversity, potential, and connection.

These are the reasons for the existence and creativity of the described pre-game rituals. To create connections of solidarity with one's support and adversity with the opponents, to reaffirm loyalty to the individuals present, the school, the community, and the nation. All these connections operate on a symbolic level and, as such, reach deeply into a person's emotional substrate. Indeed, feelings are involved in such exhibitions more than reason, because the moment of heightened connection and clarity, which the game could potentially bring about are felt rather than reasoned.

In the next chapters, using the symbolic theory of Victor Turner, I elaborate on the feelings of heightened connection described to me by students and spectators. The discussion branches out into two related themes. One refers to the feelings of community solidarity and support and the moments in which it reaches an almost spiritual level, one induced by collective immersion in the unfolding drama of a basketball game. This collective moment is what Victor Turner was describing when talking about *communitas* (Turner 1983 [1972]). The other theme discusses the physical space of the gymnasium as a particular type of space with a specific purpose. Inside it human qualities and cultural values are allowed to flourish in such a way and manner than no other space allows.

Within the context of Nenana both themes can be discussed adequately with the expected twists flavored by the local cultural of the community. Of interest is the presence of the NSLC and the non-local students who bring with them their own sense of belonging and connectedness, which does not always correspond to the expectations of the Nenana's local residents. However, from an ethnographic point of view, this dynamic brings Turner's theory in full view and tests it against particular conditions. The next two chapters, then, will discuss the two themes in an effort to explicate the way by which basketball has created a social space sustained and renewed through generations of players in rural Alaska.

## Chapter 4

### 4.1 The ups and downs of Nenana's school spirit

Student athletes meet countless people in the course of a basketball season outside their own school; other basketball players, coaches, referees, community members, teachers, administrators, and journalists become part of the student's ever-expanding social network. This is part of the charm of playing any sport in rural Alaska, especially in off-road villages where young people seek opportunities to interact with people outside their immediate community (Rasmus 2008). Being visible creates associations in a variety of levels, intra- and inter-school, particularly among players of the same age group, community, region and, if one makes a name, the University and the state. Each of these levels has its own characteristics. The expectations and obligations among teammates in a school are different in quality and range from expectations of a player's community members or one's opponents. This social network has as a common denominator, basketball, the one activity that connects like-minded people not only through goal-directed action but also through shared and familiar experience.

From these linkages, students choose to identify with particular associations switching between different groups at any given time. For most, the first identification is with their community's high school. Students are expected to support their high school in

the same way they will be expected to support their community in their adult lives. One of the ways students can show their commitment to the community and school is by exhibiting school spirit at the stands during basketball games. It is expected that a student will publicly express support and loyalty by being vocal, cheering, and supporting the team. In theory, there are no standardized sanctions for not showing school spirit because it is supposed to be spontaneous; no outside force may compel a student from showing it. Yet, in practice, subtle forms of persuasion may occur, such as peer pressure or even frustration when a student visibly chooses not to participate in exhibitions of school spirit. All such “transgressions” are noticed.

In Nenana High School, there is a widespread recognition that school spirit has been low for many years. Local students have expressed concerns that the Lynx school spirit is not what it used to be or, at least, what it should be in their minds. As we have seen, school spirit is a measurable quantity and within the confines of accepted behavior, students are urged to be as vibrant, as loyal, and as loud as they can. Even more, its potency is compared to that of other schools. By all accounts the academic year of 2010 – 2011, when this research took place, school spirit was making a notable resurgence, but the issue still lingered as a sensitive matter of discussion between local and non-local students as well as Nenana’s teachers.

A variety of reasons underpin the perceived decrease in school pride. At the beginning of the academic year 2007, the ASAA moved Nenana from the 2A division to 3A since the high school enrollment had crossed the mark of 101 students. The results of this move were detrimental for Nenana’s competitive prospects. The 3A division has the

widest range of student enrollment of all the ASAA conference divisions. Schools with enrollment between 100 and 500 students all participate in the 3A league. In terms of competition, such a wide range is problematic. Simply put, schools close to the 100 mark of student enrollment cannot compete against schools with 300 students or more. While 2A schools must plan in 3-year cycles for a competitive team due to a limited student numbers, 3A schools can draw competent players from a comparatively huge pool of students every year. Nenana barely exceeded the 100 students mark at the start of the year and despite the division change, coaches at the school still had to work with small numbers and predict whether they would have a competitive team two years down the road by evaluating their freshmen or even their Junior High basketball players. What is more, the school would fall back to less than 100 students because, for a variety of reasons, many Living Center students chose not to come back to the school after Christmas break.

In any case, planning around Nenana's basketball team proved to be for naught. Having to play against 3A schools, such as Eielson, the Lynx lost badly by 20 to 30 points difference in almost all of their games with the exception of two wins. In each game players and fans felt that their team had no chance to compete, score a basket, or even play defense against their opponents. For a period of almost two years, parents and students did not want to come to the games and see the Lynx lose unconditionally. This also affected the players who did not want to play. Parents did not even attend the Nenana Invitational, a traditionally important event for expressing school spirit and the values of 2A and 1A high school basketball. One student remembers:

Because like when the alumni that graduated, when they were into school they had school spirit, people showed in the games but then...I remember NIT in my freshman year, I remember thinking that the stands were so empty during our games, like people weren't coming to watch us. So, I mean...I think that definitely did affect us, made us not play as hard as we do now because there are people watching us that care and before that there wasn't so why play? Well, play your hardest but just not at that certain level that it should have been (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11).

Once more, active spectatorship in basketball games became the mirror for the student's appraisal of a low school spirit. In addition, for the players the empty stands were an indication that reciprocal relationship between fans and players was strained to a breaking point. In addition, the lack of competitiveness took away the enjoyment of playing and watching.

The solution came in 2009 when Nenana opted to acquire Independent status. This meant that the Lynx teams could chose to compete in whichever division they pleased, but they had to relinquish the right to play in the Regionals of any division. As such, Nenana returned to the familiar 2A conference. The students were happy with the change of status and preferred to have a chance to compete, win games, and generally have fun playing rather than losing each of their games. The same was true for parents

and other students who started returning to watch Nenana's games to support the team. For many players, going Independent was the spark that revitalized the spirit of the school during the 2010-2011 season.

A second element affecting Nenana's school spirit was the introduction of the Nenana Living Center in 2001. The Nenana Student Living Center brought changes to the social reality of the school. Tensions between the newcomers and local kids in the school had been subtle, but they resulted in what one student called "a fine line between local and Living Center kids" (Students, personal interviews, 04/20/11). The tensions arose due to perceived differences in social conduct, behavior and attitudes, and loyalty to the school. Moreover, the idea of a line persists even when individuals from both sides cross it by developing strong friendships.

According to the local students, there are two main reasons for the emergence and persistence of the "fine line." The first reason has to do with "bad blood" that had developed between the students when the NSLC was first introduced. This was before any of the current students were connected with the school and it can be largely attributed to mistakes made by NSLC administration. The main reason for the divide in the minds of students was that initially local students lost many privileges because of the newcomers' arrivals. Before the Living Center, students told me that they used to go on trips to Disneyland or other places around the U.S. However, upon arrival of the new students, these trips stopped because of insurance expenses and other logistical problems. At the same time, the Living Center would organize trips for all their students, except the local children. Local students, who at that time were more numerous and had a stronger

connection with each other, their school, and their community felt left out (Students, personal interviews, 01/26/11, 04/20/11). The newest administration, in cooperation with the Nenana High School, has taken steps not to repeat any such discrepancies. Now major Living Center events, such as this year's trip to San Diego, are open to all the students regardless of residence.

The second reason revolves around school loyalty and expressions of school spirit. Students at the Living Center come from all over Alaska. Having lived most of their lives in communities such as Nulato, Tyonek, Mountain Village, and Minto, they come to Nenana with an already established set of social associations. One such association is their school spirit from their previous schools. Several Living Center students are still loyal to their old school and bring that school spirit to Nenana. Most will try to manage both throughout the year and avoid any conflicting sentiments that may arise (Eric and Cathie Gebhart, personal interview, 05/21/11). They will energetically support the Lynx but will also proudly exclaim their connection to their old school. Such behavior is acceptable among local students who respect the fact that the newcomers keep their loyalty to their old school and support Nenana at the same time.

However, during the basketball season, inevitable comparisons between Nenana's school and the Living Center students' hometown schools emerge and this is when subtle tensions between them arise. These become obvious when, for instance, the two schools play against each other in any sport. In such cases, Living Center students harbor more loyalty for their own school, and they vocalize it inside the gymnasium to the disappointment of local students and Lynx players. Other students, cognizant of the

sensitive situation may opt to support both teams or keep relatively quiet. However, even silence is noted (Students, personal interview, 05/11/11).

There is no outright pressure to support Nenana's school spirit, however, all these actions are closely monitored and commented on after the game. This is how, largely, the idea of the "fine line" has been sustained despite the fact that many non-local students will eventually develop strong ties with the school. It is worth noting that the negative discourse around school spirit can also mask individual conflicts that have nothing to do with school spirit directly. As such, in the course of the year, these conflicts may be resolved, but the overall impression of school spirit discord still lingers.

Overall, both local and non-local students believe that Nenana's school spirit is low because of this geographical diffusion of the new students' loyalties. There is widespread insecurity about which school Living Center students will choose to represent and support at any given game. To the extent that all exhibitions, or non-exhibitions, of school spirit are monitored, students believe that they are not fulfilling their role in strengthening school spirit and are letting down their school and community by being divided. However, it is also understood that since school spirit is about loyalty, it would be counterintuitive, to say the least, to expect those students to exchange their own school spirit for Nenana's. At most, students try to accommodate both identities showing support for the Nenana high school but without necessarily expressing any particular loyalty to the school.

Concurrent with discussions on the divide between the two groups is what actually happens on the basketball court. The strong friendships developed and the fact

that, by the end of the year, most Living Center students will form strong ties with the school paints a more positive picture. In the practices, one could notice cliques of people. Some friendships were stronger than others, but these were mixed between local and non-local students and gradually changed to become more inclusive. In fact, according to the students, basketball, and any other sport for that matter, facilitates the majority of relations between local and non-local students. A local Lady Lynx player commented on this process: “Some kids, I wouldn’t even talk to, if it wasn’t for basketball. Like Student D. We didn’t talk and now she is the funniest person ever” (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11).

Friendships develop because players on the basketball team work hard for the same goals, spend time in the same rooms, and compete against the same adversaries. These conditions create shared experiences and bonds between individuals who, initially, may have started on the wrong foot or may have being subject to preconceived notions of local versus non-local behaviors and attitudes. In everyday terms, basketball bridges the “fine line” between students, even if the idea lingers.

## **4.2 Community spirit in Nenana**

In discussing issues of Nenana’s school spirit with adult residents, issues of community solidarity and cohesion are always brought to the surface. They see some connection, commenting on how the community is not as involved as it should be in the basketball games of the school. They remember with nostalgia when Nenana was

considered to have “basketball fever” as high as any other community in rural Alaska. Residents in Nenana will use Minto and/or other neighboring communities such as Healy to make these comparisons. In neighboring Minto, for instance, any basketball game will find the gym packed, with many Elders present, as well as parents, friends, and community members. In Nenana, this is not the case. Even though, games are relatively well attended, Elders and other members of long standing Nenana families do not regularly come to the games.

School spirit is measured by various expressive means in specific school events, but community spirit is based on “showing up” in community events, including, of course, basketball games. In the games, the regular non-student spectators are parents and relatives of the players themselves. However, with the exception of specific die-hard fans, other community members do not watch and participate in the games. The absence of community residents is a noticeable feature of high school games. These are people who had built their own basketball legacy and had led the high school to several wins. They are also basketball-playing adults who frequent pick-up games, but are noticeably absent. In addition, Nenana games have only a very small number of Elders watching the games, another community absence that in the stands, especially when comparing with what happened “back in the day” and what happens in other communities.

Several practical reasons can explain this phenomenon. The low numbers of local students in the school are the result of local families moving out of Nenana to urban centers. The presence of NSLC students re-balanced school enrollment but did not replace the community members. Even more, most non-local students’ families reside far

away from Nenana, thus they cannot watch the games on a regular basis. Local youth will also move out after high school in search of work. Finally, as far as Elders are concerned, several have passed away in previous years.

The reality is that for many, this situation reflects a sense of deteriorating community solidarity. Many residents expressed that they “do not know many people anymore,” or “the community feels different.” In a question of how strong school spirit was in the 1990s, an alumni Lynx basketball player answered:

For me now Nenana is a very different place....Where growing up for me, Nenana was so community oriented. I mean there was always community events and activities, and now I see those happening still, but it's just different, there is a different feel about it. Even before we were really winning, before my senior year, there was people, like people that lived even in Minto that would take dog sleds, they didn't have vehicle and they would get dog sleds 'cause they're from Nenana to get back and watch us play. Everybody, my grandma, uncles, everybody, nobody would miss a game, everybody's always there; basketball was so supported...Every time we'd win it was like, Nenana was winning. It wasn't just our little team that was winning, but it was Nenana (Tracy Snow, personal interview, 03/08/11).

The above statement suggests that ideally school spirit goes hand in hand with community spirit. Although they are not the same, the presence of Nenana residents in a game is a sign of a close-knit community. In the past, residents actually felt that by supporting their school, they also supported their community. Of course, most of the spectators were still relatives of the students. Given the fact that at that time most, if not all, students were from local families one can see the already strong connection of kinship to be the foundation of Nenana's school spirit. In high school basketball events then, one would see the triad of social associations in the community connected through the game: kinship – school – community.

With the demographic developments and trend of rural-to-urban migration, this social chain broke and all its components underwent changes. At the same time that the school managed to replenish its student body with Living Center students, the community has lost valued individuals and families to migration. The new students' families are residents in other communities and, in any case, cannot replace those that left. Therefore, even when the parents of NSLC students come to watch the games, their presence will strengthen the school spirit but will not affect in any way the community spirit.

Community members do not show the same fervor that they once did for basketball games, because now the Nenana basketball teams contain unknown players, players with no previous social associations to Nenana. Even when community members try to get to know the students and the teams, they understand that each semester the students may return to their villages. As such, the community cannot establish familiarity and stable relations with the students in a consistent manner, with the exception, of

course, of school and basketball related activities. This social fluidity, then, of Nenana's student body discourages any personal investment in the communal face of Nenana as this used to be expressed in basketball games. Joe Krause sums up the discussion:

We used to have a community that was big enough to field teams to do just about anything, and for many of the people that was their glory years and they remember the great school that it was and how community-minded it was and how tight of a feeling and how they were winning state championships and things like that. And basketball is the main reason for all that and now they look at it and some of them don't have that... (Joe Krause, personal interview, 11/11/10).

By their participation in all levels of the game, Nenana's community told a story about itself, a story that may have had different endings, thrills, and twists, but there was always a consistent message — a communal reaffirmation and a re-strengthening of those social links that made the story possible in the first place. For many this feeling is not there anymore. However, to say that a story and a message have stopped being told is not to recognize that basketball games still happen, players and coaches still get involved, and fans still frequent the games. In addition, the social space that basketball has carved for itself is still strong in minds and hearts of people who are committed to the sport in their everyday lives. The message of the story may have changed, but the process still goes on. A new message is being conveyed and the community is trying to understand it.

### **4.3 The social function of basketball**

Teachers in the Nenana High school believe that, in fact, the Nenana Student Living Center students have actually revitalized school spirit. For them it is a practical matter of school enrollment. Without the newcomers, the high school might not have been able to field a basketball team, nor any other team for any activity. The village of Nenana and the school have been shrinking steadily in the last decade. The Nenana Living Center was built as a reaction to these trends and at the same time that it has been able to provide better education, it is also safeguarding its future. They also note that since Nenana has a tradition of providing education to non-local students, the NSLC did not present the community with unprecedented circumstances. Instead, they focus on the new dynamic that the Living Center has brought about, one that is still evolving.

Taking their opinion as an initial starting point in understanding the current local context, an explanation of the process by which basketball helps recreate inter- and intra-village feelings of community is needed. This is a continuous and ongoing process and manifests, in part, the social function of basketball in the villages around Alaska. In Nenana, basketball games have immediate ramifications and consequences for the community, which residents themselves are quick to point out. They are not only used to tell stories about Nenana's past but also stories about the community's present and, in the case of high school basketball, future. The discussion can be extended to more general conclusions, which correspond to existing theories on the ways communities reaffirm, re-strengthen, and even change their perceived social outlook.

There are two major forms of basketball games in Alaska, in general, and Nenana in particular: “pick-up” games and high school basketball games. Each has its own characteristics, and in Nenana’s particular case, they play different roles in constructing basketball’s social space. In the next pages, I explore the two forms and discuss their effect in Nenana’s community spirit.

#### **4.3.1 Pick-up games**

Pick-up games are a prime example of basketball’s grassroots character. The designation refers to the informal basketball games that take place in the school gymnasium outside of school hours. The word “informal” describes not only *who* plays in those games but also *how* to play the games. As far as participation is concerned, anyone, including newcomers to the community, can join and play, even though in practice things are a bit more complex, since skill and ability are always an issue. Regarding *how*, a pick-up game is an activity that often returns basketball to its basic form as a game. Free of the restrictions, rules, and obligations present in official high school games, pick-up games allow considerable leeway to experience the game in a variety of other forms, such as “Twenty one,” “Knock out,” or “Horse.” These are all games of basketball but with different rules. In this setting, the players decide how their game of basketball will be played.

Pick-up games take place during open gym nights, although at times other sports are played. Open gym nights are part of the everyday reality of the village. Communities

specify designated days when the local gymnasium opens its doors to the public. Residents count on open gym nights for their weekly recreation and socializing. In Nenana, gym nights are frequented by female and male local and non-local teenagers and adult men. One group absent from pick-up games is women over 18, who, in general, do not come to play. Their absence will be discussed in a later chapter. The gym remains open for 2 to 3 hours, depending on the people playing and the level of the competition.

As a social outlet, the value of open gym nights cannot be over emphasized. During the winter, especially in extreme low temperatures that can last several weeks, open gym nights become consistent community events as more and more residents participate. Winters in Nenana are especially hard for NSLC students who are forbidden from engaging in several winter activities such as snow machining for safety reasons. “Having nothing to do” is a common complaint among teenagers in Nenana, especially when they compare their social options with those in cities such as Fairbanks and Anchorage (Students, personal interviews, 01/26/11, 04/20/11). It is within this context that open gym nights become one of the few indoor, after-school options and a consistent hub for social activity. It is characteristic that during those nights the gym will be frequented not only by the players but also by onlookers who are there to socialize. Nenana has pick-up games three times per week. Other places such as Minto, Barrow, or Kotzebue may have more in order to maximize on the open gym nights’ socializing role.

Players and spectators communicate in all possible conventional forms, from chatting casually to laughing and yelling or having arguments. But, there is something to be said on the ability of the game itself to establish relations by simply playing ball. This

is not direct communication, but, like any other type of play, it is metacommunication (Bateson 1983 [1955]). Passing the ball to a teammate is a temporary verification of inclusion to the team's playing goals. Given how important basketball is for rural Alaskan culture this becomes the basis for relationships outside the court, if the participants so chose. Indeed, passing teams are thought to be the result of everyday healthy relations between players. Alternatively, teams that do not share the ball become subjects of discussion with references to problematic interpersonal relations. In pick-up games, the simple act of passing can "break the ice" between strangers or even reform existing relationships. In short, "playing pick-up" is a non-intrusive, non-threatening way of making friends and meeting people in the community and a procedure that occurs on regular basis. And, open gym nights are the ideal space to do it.

I also experienced the social function of pick-up games personally during fieldwork. It was the manner by which I was introduced to a number of community members when I decided to explore the possibility for research on basketball. I drove to Nenana from Fairbanks at 7:00 p.m. on a December night without knowing anyone in the community. I was a bit intimidated by the unfamiliar place. It was cold and dark, and I found myself processing the images on Nenana's streets. Searching for the school, I could see American flags hanging from the walls of wooden cabins, snow machines parked on yards, lots of firewood, and chimneys smoking. The roads were all empty. This was a place that had no reference to my previous experiences.

Nevertheless, as soon as I stepped inside the gym for the first time, the familiar thud of bouncing basketballs put me at ease. In the gym, I saw four men playing "Top of

the World,” a game in which each player must score against all the other players. At the time, I did not know what game of basketball they were playing. Still, I was in familiar territory, one that I had experienced back home in Greece or even when I lived in England. After looking at me for a moment and deciding that they did not know who I was, the four men turned back to their game. They were content to know that I was there to play. After all, a stranger does not show up just to watch a pick-up game; he comes to play. So, I dressed up, asked if I could play, and sure enough I was accepted into the game. After the game introductions were made, they asked me questions regarding what was I doing in Nenana or if I knew anyone in Nenana. However, no one asked why I chose to come and play basketball that evening. Business, work, every day circumstances may bring anyone in a community, but for that specific activity, one is accepted as a teammate or an opponent without any questioning.

This manner of introduction is different from what occurs in other social settings, such as community gatherings or even high school basketball games. Established localized links and associations may appear to exclude newcomers in partaking in the event at hand, and, in any case, strangers have to be careful not to violate any local etiquette or codes of conduct in a new environment. However, playing informal pick-up games is an activity that is, inclusive, even if ability and skill play a role. Basketball, as a universal activity, is the foundational link for this inclusiveness and the idea of pick-up games and open gym nights is the call for participation.

In the case of Nenana, open gym nights and pick-up games have been instrumental in introducing the Living Center students to members of the community.

From October to May, the students constantly occupied the gymnasium. In late January, adults also played ball regularly, especially since the high school basketball season was raising the excitement for pick-up games. In addition, visitors from Fairbanks, friends, and relatives of locals, would also come and play. In certain nights in February and March, the gymnasium was so packed that playing ball became problematic. After all, the gym was only open for a couple of hours. To manage participation and facilitate the games, the administration decided to put some rules in place by which Sundays were reserved for adults, while Tuesdays and Thursdays were for youth. These rules were never really enforced, except for those nights that increasing number of players wanted to play pick-up.

The main outcome of this vibrant social setting was a steady and observable progression of relationships. Throughout the year, the Living Center students were integrated in the basketball community in Nenana. At the beginning of open gym nights, junior or senior NSLC students were quite at ease at open gym nights. Along with local students, they were “regulars” as they always showed up to play basketball. Their interactions and communication with fellow basketball players were friendly and familiar. It was clear that their basketball relation had been going on for a while. Several had exchanged phone numbers so they could communicate their presence at open gym or even urge friends to show up. Their network included adult community residents, and throughout the year, new students from the Living Center were added to the list of contacts, especially when they were considered to be skillful players.

Peripheral to this expanding network of basketball players are other students who frequent open gym nights but do not play. They use the gym specifically for its socializing potential. In such a way, Living Center students, whether they are basketball players or not, developed friendly relations with local students as well as adult residents in Nenana. Even though by then, the Nenana community may not have been what it used to be in the eyes of locals, basketball still facilitated everyday interpersonal relations and sustained an enduring, albeit specific, social space where local and non-local, long time residents and strangers can connect on familiar ground.

#### **4.3.2 High school basketball nights**

High school basketball nights create another stage where, much like open gym nights and pick-up games, relations are renegotiated and strengthened. They are different from open gym nights in that they are organized and officiated. They also have an audience with the distinct role of spectatorship. As discussed, spectatorship in high school games is in itself a performance which corresponds to perceptions of school spirit and solidarity as well as general and regional values of sportsmanship. Therefore, support in rural Alaska high school games is always positive in that spectators focus on supporting their own team rather than booing or heckling the opposing team. Spectatorship achieves two socializing functions. First, through the display of school spirit and solidarity, the crowd bestows to the player a particular type of support; and second, the focus of the players and the crowd shifts from facilitation of interpersonal

relations to a more collective appreciation of self, community, and locality. Both of these aspects are subject to the intensity of the game and may reach different levels of experience for the players as well as the spectators.

The belief that support from the crowd, in its ideal form, can boost a player's or a team's performance, is not new. It exists across a variety of sports where spectators can vocalize their support to the players. It is the reason why there is a distinction between "home" and "away" games. In home games, teams are perceived to be stronger and more focused because they are playing in front of their own crowd and fans. Schwartz and Barsky confirm that the home advantage exists in sports (Schwartz and Barsky 1977, Mizruchi 1985). Players, especially in indoor sports like basketball and ice hockey, play much better when they have the support of the crowd.

The two writers use Emile Durkheim's concept of moral community as background theory. According to them, the crowd sets the conditions and expectations and the players move towards achieving them. Every expression of support and loyalty, every effort contributes towards the goal. Typically, in real life conditions, this translates in to that extra dive for the ball a player may attempt or a strong and physical rebound. People in the stands lend even more support to the players' efforts as soon as they realize that their energy is influencing the performance of their team.

In Nenana, the reciprocal relation of support and subsequent enhanced performance is commemorated not only in the pre-game rituals of high school games but also in the physical space of the school itself. The school's west side entrance greets newcomers with the Lynx emblem and informs that this is the "den" of the Lynx. Inside,

posters adorn the corridors, which celebrate Nenana's school identity and spirit. Glass cases of trophies in the main building and along the gymnasium walls offer testaments of what Lynx students have achieved in a variety of athletic events over the years. These may not mean much to a newcomer in an ordinary day, but, when the gymnasium is packed in anticipation of a "high stakes" game, the idea of the "den" of the Lynx starts making sense. The vocal and energetic people who are collectively focusing in supporting their team make this specific gymnasium a home for the Lynx.

The players of the Nenana Lynx also consider the presence of the crowd as a catalyst for better performance. They describe playing in front of a crowd a nerve-racking experience but also as particularly rewarding:

Interviewer: Is it better to play in front of people or without people?

Student A: In front.

Student B: I think in front.

Interviewer: Even though it's nerve racking?

Student C: Yeah, the pressure makes you play better.

Student B: It's nerve racking but when you get that win, when you get past the nerve racking part...

Student A: It's so much better.

Student B: ...it's so amazing.

Student C: It makes it all worth it.

Student B: It's the greatest feeling.

Student C: It's like when we played at Tri Valley and we played Glennallen.

Student C: That was the toughest game...

Student A: ...of my life (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11)

It is imperative for the players to give their best performance when they play in front of their own crowd. The fans expect that of them. Accordingly, the players expect the fans also to give best performance, which they will intuitively translate into social support. The practical result is a synergy between crowd and players, which results in the latter's boost of performance to new levels of achievement.

The idea of synergy needs further elaboration. In discussing the premise of home advantage, Schwartz and Barsky use Durkheim's quote on social congregations and the effects of support on the individual:

There are occasions when the strengthening and vivifying action of society is especially apparent. In the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces; and when the assembly is dissolved and when, finding ourselves alone again, we fall back to our ordinary level, we are then able to measure the height to which we have been raised above ourselves (Durkheim 1965 [1912]: 240).

This passage fits well with descriptions of the Glenallen game discussed above. The social function, to which Durkheim refers, occurs in the immediate context of the social group. “Home” does not refer as much to the physical space in which a game is being played but more to the support of spectators and the expectation of their energetic involvement. In that sense, any basketball court can potentially become “home” if the fans succeed in affecting their team’s performance.

The Glennallen game, which became a success story for Lynx students, took place in neighboring Healy. On that specific day, the Lynx fans were numerous and especially vocal. Their encouragement made the Nenana Lynx girls play as hard as they did. About 20 seconds before the end of the game, a Lynx player dove to steal a seemingly lost ball from her opponent and while on the ground passed it blindly down the line. This would have been a heroic but wasted effort if another player did not sprint as fast as she could to catch the ball before it went out of bounds. The crowd was yelling to her to lift her head and see her open teammate under the hoop. Even though the defense was already on her, she threw the ball over their outstretched hands to her open teammate who scored the winning basket. The human emotional energy and involvement produced by players and spectators within these last seconds was astonishing. Through the social support and energy of the people in the gymnasium, the players exceeded their ordinary standards and elevated their efforts to new heights.

Still, the question must be asked, What else do we know about this synergy? Participants, players, and fans understand it intuitively and experientially. However, an observer may not necessarily see a link between a team’s phenomenal game and the

support of the crowd. Even Durkheim's statement lacks tangible proof that this link even exists. There is no further explanation about how this mystical link works and operates. It is as if sociological and anthropological explanations – or at least their scientific aspect – have reached the end of the road. Yet here it is; a human condition beyond what we can understand of culture, a connection that both student/players and fans believe and share together. And, a feeling that what was achieved was a collective effort.

In practice, support from the crowd brings about a player's best performance by inducing an almost spiritual connection and meditative state of action. MacAloon and Csikszentmihalyi accurately described this in their discussion of flow experience, i.e., the state of mind where an individual is so focused on the goal that he/she experiences heightened senses and abilities (MacAloon and Csikszentmihalyi 1977). In this state, self and surroundings fuse together, and one is completely attuned to the game. Basketball players in Nenana speak of such a state when they talk about the point where players stop being aware of the crowd and concentrate on the game. They become completely absorbed in the task and put all their energy towards it. In the case of basketball, this affects their ability to make consecutive shots or increases their ability to make the best decision in any given play. Popular announcers in basketball will claim a player is "on fire" or "in the zone."

A poignant example of flow experience involved two high school basketball players who played against each other in the final of the NIT in 2011. In that game, the Lady Lynx faced the Fort Yukon Eagles. The Eagles featured the star of the tournament, a six-foot junior with amazing technique and skill and an ability to score from afar as

well as up close. The rest of the Eagles team included hard workers and some excellent three-point shooters, but, from the very start, the Lynx had to focus on stopping that specific player. Nenana had a similar roster. The team was comprised of hard workers who could shoot well. It also featured its own star, a senior who, although not as skillful as her opponent on the Eagles, had athletic ability and a knack for driving the ball close to the hoop.

In terms of scoring, the game became their personal competition. The senior from Nenana scored forty-two points and the junior from Fort Yukon fifty-one with a final score of sixty-two to sixty-one for Nenana. In terms of performance, these two students did remarkably well. Yet, while the Eagles player had performed similarly in the past, for the Lynx player forty-two points was an all-time high. For people who knew her playing style, it was evident that she was scoring in ways that were not typical. In this game, the student had added to her repertoire shots from far range (her least favorite way of scoring) with phenomenal success.

Flow experience is not a point that everyone reaches. Many times, it is so stressful for students to be playing in front of an audience that they remain conscious of their playing throughout the games. It is also not a point that everyone reaches at the same level. Clearly, there needs to be some aptitude and ability for the game or aspects of it that make a person liable to achieve such a level of involvement. There are many players who will play as hard as they can, but far fewer are those who will be “in the zone.”

Even so, the feelings described in the term flow experience become a common and shared idea, one that every player would like to experience, and one that is

irrevocably linked to spectatorship. The crowd itself has no way of scientifically verifying that their support actually works but is content with the result of a good game, nonetheless. Spectatorship, after all, is a mutual arrangement. The better the players play, the more the crowd supports and urges on their efforts. But, what is important about this arrangement is the emotional investment of the audience, which, in a definite form of metacommunication, has an effect on the players themselves and leads them to the state of flow experience. This is an observable connection but difficult to verify. The word of the people involved remains the strongest evidence.

#### **4.3.3 Nenana Invitational Tournament (NIT)**

There are social nuances in the Nenana Invitational Tournament, which place it in a different category than typical high school basketball nights. First, the NIT has created its own tradition and legacy and represents significant cultural values of life in the village. It is treated as a cultural event specific to rural communities in Alaska and provides an excellent opportunity for social gatherings. As such, the local gymnasium is guaranteed to be at full capacity for most of its games, since the community itself is full of visitors. Spectators come from neighboring communities such as Minto and Tanana or from far away villages such as Ft. Yukon, Nikolaevsk, or Port Lions.

In the NIT of 2011, the fans were more organized than regular season games. Visitors sat close together, occupying specific spots in the stands for the remainder of the tournament. Nenana fans also organized well. They chose seats close to the entrance,

which the team used to run into the court. They wore uniform black and gold tee shirts with the head of a Lynx and “Nenana Lynx” written across the chest. Most of them also waved small yellow towels for added effect. Diagonally across from them, at the other side of the court, Nenana Native families, some of them three generations deep, and most of them ex-basketball players, enthusiastically supported the Lynx. In front of them, the Lynx mascot and Nenana’s cheerleading squad engaged the crowd. Mostly made up of junior high and elementary school students, the squad gave a colorful rhythm to the cheers that were coming from the fans. Several chants involved a call and response, usually with teachers, who were sitting across from the cheerleaders. As the teachers responded, the cheer squad would break into different chants. Students photographed all of these interactions for the school newspaper.

A second characteristic of NIT was that, for the first time this season, the composition of the crowd included Nenana community members, several of whom were Alaska Natives and had not showed up to any of the previous games. NIT’s cultural and social legacy became an adequate incentive for their presence. The tournament is more than just a regular basketball game night. This time, the basketball court is elevated onto a stage where participant communities can potentially tell a story about themselves. For rural Alaskan basketball, the open-ended basketball dramas provide metasocial commentaries (Geertz 1973) about perseverance in the face of adversity and about cooperation and sacrifice. All of these cultural values are meant to inspire, connect, and bring about feelings of togetherness and sense of belonging. In the end, the audience of the game seeks to witness an ideal portrait of their community.

In Nenana's local cultural context, such moments of togetherness and support arise in specific and sometimes tragic situations. Generally, most Nenana residents keep to themselves and go about their business. Social associations within the community have created distinct groups, which may have only cordial relations to each other. The relative absence of interaction can be witnessed when one group organizes and hosts an event that is open to the community, but only members of that group will attend. To be sure, there are individuals who bridge those gaps, but mostly such groups keep to their own activities. However, group relations change in response to community emergencies. In times of need, the different groups pull together to support the affected parties. Residents use two examples to highlight this point: 1. a fire that burned a family's house, and 2. a wildfire that threatened houses in Nenana. In both situations community members offered more than anyone could have asked for and faced the challenge collectively (Joe Krause, personal interview, 11/11/10). The residents' reaction to these tragedies is a testimonial to Nenana's strength as a community.

NIT is the stage for a symbolic representation of community strength. Stepping into the gymnasium, one is expected to leave outside all those everyday life concerns, attitudes, and differences that may associate one with a particular group and exclude him/her from another. The focus is on the Lynx team and all the collective energy of the crowd must be spent on supporting their efforts, much like those instances in everyday life when the community had to pull together to help their fellow residents.

During NIT, players, coaches, referees, spectators, and the whimsical ball, an inanimate object that so often evades the player's control, all contribute to the unfolding

of a potentially amazing story. Since a basketball game is an open-ended drama, it follows that the intensity of the emotions present will also fluctuate. Only competitive and exciting games inspire the audience and lead players to the state of flow experience. However, this dynamic process does not end with a good basketball game. If, indeed, the crowd manages to support a player by boosting his/her performance to a new level, and if the relationship between crowd and players is reciprocal, could one make the claim that the players, by way of the intensity and focus they put in the game, can boost the crowd to its own best performance? Is this an alignment of temporarily shared thoughts, energy, and focus that, for a moment, connects people emotionally? In short, can flow experience with its traits be applied collectively?

Victor Turner described such a process in his discussion of *communitas*. *Communitas* is an acute sense of togetherness, solidarity, and equality that can be experienced in temporary ritual settings and sacred time. Through basketball games, people in Nenana experience a sense of their community as a unified whole. This is not a coherent, rational thought process, but rather a feeling in a moment: “*Communitas* is always thought of or portrayed by actors as a timeless condition, an eternal now, ‘a moment in and out of time,’ or as a state to which the structural view of time is not applicable” (Turner 1983 [1972]: 335).

To be part of the *communitas* means that one leaves behind – or rather outside — all those social obligations and conditions, social and political strata, which bind people in ordinary time and space. Everyday rules are suspended allowing a range of expressions, such as play, that may have no place in every day conduct. As a result,

through exciting games and the state of *communitas* one becomes aware of Nenana's community at its potential best. It is this feeling that people in Nenana have been nostalgic about, a feeling that was made possible and was expressed by the social event of basketball. In sum *communitas* "...presents a model of human relatedness other than what routinely prevails, one that contrasts with the mediated, abstract, and ultimately arbitrary nature of social roles and modes of relation established by law, language and custom" (Rowe 2008).

According to Maxwell, Turner was careful not to equate the flow experience described by Macaloon and Csikszentmihalyi with the experience of *communitas*. This was because Turner felt that *communitas* was an even more extreme form of pre-structure, devoid of culture. If Macaloon and Csikszentmihalyi had managed to analyze the specific characteristics of flow experience, this in itself was proof that culture – or, in Turner's mind, structure – allowed its description and the experience itself was rule bound. Conversely, to explain the flow experience of *communitas* would be to do violence to the moment itself, because *communitas* is about the collective liberation from all rules, social, cultural, and even the determinism of language (John 2008, Maxwell 2008).

According to Turner, then, *communitas* informs and expands the collective feeling of the idea, which becomes first and foremost a spiritual rather than cultural link, addressing, in a sense, the soul of an individual as well as the soul of the community. However, its intense and intimate appearance is confined within the temporal setting of

the event, which induces it, in our case, basketball. One could ask then, how can this feeling affect the ordinary everyday life of the community?

#### **4.4 The heart of the game and collective memory**

Both in pick-up games and in high school basketball nights, the basketball court provides a multipurpose stage for the establishment of interpersonal and collective links. Pick-up games are geared to facilitate day-to-day interactions, while high school basketball games, especially NIT, offer a symbolic portrait of the community at its best. Often the established links transcend local boundaries of Nenana and reach regional levels. This is a game, after all, that is shared across the state.

The feeling of *communitas*, for example, is only exclusive to those who are not physically present when the moment occurs. To the extent that during a game all social rules and relationships can be symbolically reset, a feeling of togetherness could include even outsiders who, by virtue of being a part of the moment, become temporarily, part of the group. Those who are present, then, can feel part of the *communitas* and share the experience regardless of their immediate social and cultural group association. We have already described this process in our discussion of the relationships between the local and non-local Nenana basketball players. A number of NSLC students each year end up having attachments with Nenana, the school, the community, or other individuals, despite the initial relational handicap of the “fine line.”

Moments of basketball greatness and *communitas* become stories, which offer a connection not only with one's family or other community members but also with non-local participants such as opponents, referees, or other fans. As such, it is no surprise that generations of high school basketball experiences, pick-up games, socialization, and high school basketball nights have given rise to common cultural values, which inform the everyday sense of community in the local and regional spheres. The manner by which these intense moments affect everyday life in Alaskan basketball communities is with the emergence of cultural concepts such as the "heart of the game" and the dynamic processes of collective memory.

#### **4.4.1 The "heart of the game"**

...my sophomore year is when my sister decided to move to Fairbanks and we've always been playing basketball together since 7th and 8th grade and...the Tri Valley coach asked me where she went and I said, "well she's going to Lathrop now playing 4A sports" and the coach was like, "oh 2A sports is where it's at." And, it really is because, like rural Alaska or rural communities, you're a family in 2A sports, you're a family, like in your region, you know everybody in the region, the coaches talk to you, you talk to the coaches. It's just that comfort zone. Like even though on

the court you are enemies, off the court you're like, "oh man that was a good game, that was nice stuff," or whatever.

But, if you go to a 3A and 4A game it's all about "oh I'm gonna punch you in the face after the game"...and, yeah, it's really bad. I just recently went to an Eielson and Lathrop game, and they were getting up in each other faces and refs had to back them off each other, and they want to punch each other...It's not pretty. They don't have the heart of the game. When it comes to rural Alaska you just...have more, I don't know, more of a heart and you care more and you just have fun doing it...it's not a job (Student, personal interview, 01/26/2011).

The student's statement best exemplifies the place that basketball has carved for itself in village consciousness. 1A and 2A school basketball is a social sport with specific characteristics, attitudes and behaviors embodied in the concept of "the heart of the game." The concept encapsulates the quality of inter- and intra-village connections and the sense of community that have developed through the game. In addition, it embodies important social and cultural values, realities and experiences expressive of life in the village and differentiates rural Alaskan basketball from urban basketball.

Life in the village is different from life in the urban centers of the state. In fact, while cities like Anchorage and Fairbanks have many similarities with other cities around the United States, life in Alaskan villages has few similarities with other communities anywhere in the nation. From the extreme weather conditions, to a subsistence way of life

and ethnic composition, residents in rural Alaska believe that their lives are unique. This, at least, is their perception, one that comes to light when they discuss out-of-state people's reactions to the mention of their village hometown. According to Nenana students, the perceived differences between rural Alaska and urban centers are present in the way basketball (and other sports) are played. While 4A and 3A school city school competitions are impersonal and many times forgo values of sportsmanship, 2A and 1A village schools – which represent the majority of schools in the state – not only keep sportsmanship alive but also reflect values found in the village reality such as family, friendship, cooperation, and healthy competition.

Ethnic composition, of course, plays an important role in this perception. Sixty-one percent of Alaska Natives reside in villages across the state. As such, everyday reality contains values and mentalities intimate to Alaska Native cultures. Whoever decides to live in “the bush” must acquiesce to a particular lifestyle and conform to certain realities set by the local cultural logic. In such small communities, any severe dissension from the local values is noticeable and becomes a matter of concern. It is no wonder that, on the heavily monitored basketball court, urban-rural differences in behavior and practices are magnified.

Furthermore, rural high school basketball involves generations of spectators and players. It has created relations between individuals of different communities who are very often actually related to one another. It is indicative that in two tournaments, one in Minto and another one in Fairbanks, fans identified players in terms by kinship. In order to place the players onto their own social map, a conversation could sometimes begin

with, “Who is that? He looks familiar.” “Do you know cousin X and his wife? It’s his kid. He has a family of his own now.” Additional information could be shared and exchanged, spurring a discussion about “this part of the family.” Other times voluntary information would be provided by a fellow spectator, “She was an amazing basketball player in her youth. She still is.” In identifying an individual, his/her basketball prowess through the recounting of a relevant story may be used as a reminder. “Do you remember the game between X and Z? He scored the last shot.”

The division between urban and rural is not only reflected in high school basketball but also in adult basketball tournaments. A major cultural misunderstanding between village communities and urban centers has to do with basketball tournaments that are designated “Native-only.” This exclusion on seemingly racial or ethnic basis has brought tension between basketball players across the state. In the past, non-Native players petitioned against such a basketball tournament that was organized yearly in Nenana for the Tripod Days, and they managed to be allowed to play. The aftermath of their actions was that the tournament opened up for teams from Fairbanks and Anchorage. As a result, whereas the tournament once had teams from neighboring predominantly Alaska Native communities, in 2011 it hosted teams only from Fairbanks, with only one or two Nenana residents actually playing.

Still these “Native-only” tournaments are a mode of exclusion, which do not correspond to the general principles of basketball, especially pick-up games where anyone can play. Further investigation revealed that “Native-only” does not refer to racial or ethnic exclusion but to an exclusion based on cultural and social behavior. As it was

explained to me that city teams and players do not have the appropriate behavior and attitude when competing. Their main focus upon entering a village competition is not only winning but dominating. For that purpose, they come with a stacked team, which they can easily build due to the huge pool of players they can choose from, intent on playing as hard as they can to beat all the other teams in their path.

This is an attitude that adequately serves the dominant society's idea of competition but not necessarily the rural idea of "heart of the game." In village tournaments where basketball is a social occasion for people from different communities to see their kinship and enjoy a good game with friends and family, the presence of unknown basketball players who arrived at the tournament with the sole purpose of winning is out of place. If the non-Native sports ethic in a tournament is to win at all costs, the Native sports ethic is different and revolves around social relations rather than winning.

Native basketball tournaments are social events similar to potlatches (Simeone 1995) and are organized along precise ethical and moral lines. Organizers always try to keep a level field of competition by mixing up rosters and establishing categories that place players of similar ability in the same bracket. This happens informally and organizers base their decisions on previous knowledge of the participants' basketball prowess, an ability that has been acquired from years of being involved with rural basketball. Stacked teams become a subject of discussion. A team cannot be too good, or else the competition becomes unfair. In truth, players themselves will often attempt to

balance their teams out by exchanging players. Thus, the social and moral aspect of the game is at the forefront of the competition rather than winning.

The intrusion of urban players in village tournaments puts those aspects to the test. Organizers have no way to place teams from Anchorage or Fairbanks in acceptable brackets, since those players are outside the intra-village basketball network. Even if they did, city teams are much better than anyone else is, often featuring seven-foot college players. When a city team enters a village tournament, it becomes a distressing reminder of the differences between urban and rural life. In practical terms, it also ruins participation for those teams that travel the extra mile expecting a decent chance at winning but are unlucky enough to face city teams in their first game. Within a few hours of reaching their destination, they may have lost their games by a huge margin and are obliged to sit out for the rest of the tournament.

To further elaborate on “the heart of the game” and the attitude towards winning, it is worth taking a brief look at the Native Youth Olympics, an athletic event that is a distinctly Alaska Native creation and therefore there is less contention on the ethical and moral guidelines of competition. Despite its name, Native Youth Olympics (NYO) is open to any high school participant, regardless of race and ethnicity. It involves competitions, which test numerous physical and mental human skills such as strength or will power.

Participants compete against each other and aspire to perfection, in the sense that, in the effort to break established records, they have to execute specific movements in perfect form. For instance, in the Alaskan High Kick the athlete starts from a sitting

position holding one foot with the opposite hand. With his/her free hand, the athlete must push his/her body into a vertical position and extend the free leg to touch a ball hanging over him/her. After touching, the athlete must land in the initial position. The ball is lifted for four-inches after each successful touch, so at higher heights the movement must be executed perfectly. All the events in NYO represent real life situations that Alaska Native peoples have faced in their subsistence lifestyle. For example, Eskimo Stick Pull, is a game where two competitors have to pull on a stick two-feet long. The loser either loses the stick from his/her hands or is pulled off the ground. This event resembles the fight of a hunter to pull a seal from its hole before it escapes.

The competitions featured in NYO are unique to circumpolar regions of the Northern hemisphere but so is the mentality expressed in them. Participants could be accurately characterized as co-competitors since they are allowed to offer advice to their competitors as to how to execute a movement better. In those events where form is important, athletes are allowed three efforts to execute the movement and reach their goal. In their last effort, it is customary for co-competitors, who patiently wait their turn on the sideline, to approach the athlete and offer advice and encouragement even if that means that they themselves may eventually end up losing the event. Officials will also provide advice and expertise to the athletes. This mentality, unprecedented in most forms of popular sports and athletics, is expressive of traditional Alaska Native values, where cooperation and individual ability are integral to survival in Alaska.

Ideally, the “Native-only” tournaments exhibit the same values of cooperation not only between players of the individual teams but also between opponents. And, while it is

highly unlikely that participants will advise their opponents on how to shoot better within the game, the ease of competition and familiarity are fundamental aspects of both athletic events. Basketball competition itself is intended to make individuals and a team better at the game by working harder and trying more, but winning is not the most basic aspect of that. Therefore, “Native-only” basketball tournaments are meant to safeguard the basic ethical and moral character of Alaska Native competitions.

#### **4.4.2 Collective memory: consolidation of the social effects**

The idea of collective memory through basketball refers to a “common fund of familiar experience” (Goffman 1974:16), which is most commonly shared between individuals of the same or different age groups through verbal communication and, specifically, storytelling. As we have seen, basketball is a trans-generational activity in Alaska, knowledge of which, from technical advice to stories, is passed down from generation to generation. No other activity gathers community members of all ages so consistently for every week for five months each year. In addition, no other event allows residents to experience collectively the secular and symbolic interactions before and after a basketball game. Thus, basketball has become a tradition characteristic of Alaskan life, much like hunting, with an unbroken flow of at least forty years (Yardley and Olsen 2011).

Storytelling has always been an important aspect of communicating history among Alaska Natives. When talking about basketball, adults focus on the differences

between their experiences and what they see the younger generations doing. Traveling with the team, for instance, is a favorite subject of older players who compare the hard circumstances of their trips to the “ease” by which high school teams travel nowadays. These memories, at times, will be shared by adults with the younger basketball players at the end of open gym nights. Despite the differences, the components of high school basketball such as the practices, the presence of the crowd in basketball events and, of course, those moments where the drama of the game reaches a climax, become common subject of discussion between different generations. Stories of rough coaches and practices, of great games, and adventurous traveling are exchanged and become the foundation of simple everyday verbal communication between basketball players.

Storytelling is also popular among the same age groups. It takes place during traveling and/or sleeping in the classes of host high schools. Several of these have one narrator and a number of listeners who may have heard the story before. One such story recounted the moment when the coach asked the freshman to go in and play her best: “...he like put his head close to my head, he’s like ‘just go in there and play your hardest,’ but it was like right up there (she brings her hand close to her forehead), all sweaty and everything” (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11). Another story retells the embarrassing moment when a player was tricked by his teammate to use a shower that was already occupied. All these stories revolve around basketball and the other sports in which the Nenana Lynx participate.

The idea of collective memory, however, goes deeper than simple storytelling in that it implies a symbolic connection between storytellers that withstands time and can

bring the past into present and a collective feeling of being part of the story. During the emergence of *communitas*, the memory of participants includes the game, the crowd, and the feeling of that moment. In those interviews where two or more student-players recollected intense game moments, the collectiveness of the memory is indicated by the rapid fire of intersecting sentences as one student finishes the sentence of another in what is a live and shared retelling of a past event. Each student adds snippets to the story making it fuller and more alive, including her own point of view but aware that this is a common retelling of a common memory.

There is also reason to believe that these experiences become part of a familiar set of stories, which enter into collective memory, available even for those who did not participate in the event themselves. A specific example will clarify this point. During one of the countless Lynx bus trips to Healy, Alaska, the Nenana basketball players were especially energetic. This may have been because they would be playing Tri Valley High School. Being energetic in the bus means one of two things. People will either be “burning” each other or telling stories.

“Burning,” in this sense, is a contest of witty insults. There are no official rules. The game is based on a good use of humor and an idea of respect in which the two contestants try to find original ways to tease each other. This game is very popular amongst the boys, who also use it as a measure of character and initiation ritual; seniors will take pride when they recognize that by the end of a trip the usually shy freshman may have become a powerhouse of “burning” remarks.

However, on this particular trip, a group of students were just telling basketball stories to each other in a lively discussion that lasted for most of the journey. What was important in this discussion was not the actual content of the stories but the interactions that the stories generated. I noticed that participants would jump in and add, correct, offer insights, and change a story while it was being recounted by the storyteller. But, in this case, some of the students participating in the story could not have been an active part of it when it happened. Yet, here they were, among the many narrators.

Indeed, that there could be only one main narrator to a story proved to be my own assumption. In fact, there were many narrators and many stories that were interjected into one another, forming a whole, a discernible and communal memory into which anyone could place themselves. When a student recounted the time that she was trying to talk to some older basketball players, despite the fact she was really shy, she asked another student, “I think you were there. Were you?” Her friend retorted, “I might have been. I remember that it was X and Y talking by the sideline. They were really happy for their game.” “Yeah and I had been meaning to talk to them for so long...,” continued the first student.

Some minutes later, I had to ask if she was actually there or not and the student answered me, “I am not sure. I don’t think I was to be honest.” In this storytelling, the student becomes an actor, as if she was there and the storyteller does not object or care. She actually “remembers” two people talking in the sideline, yet she is not sure if she was actually there. And, to be sure, it did not really matter. The group was comprised of local and Living Center students, yet all were participating in the basketball storytelling. The

local students that were communicating the specific experience had been playing basketball together for most of their lives. Thus, their basketball stories always have had some relevance to each other and familiarity to the extent that, being actively present in the moment did not affect the acquisition of the experience.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

Patricia Partnow writes that a viable community has a symbolic existence through its remembered history (Partnow, 2003: ix). In Nenana, the nostalgia over past community solidarity implies that this history is fading away with each Elder that passes away, with the community events that are not what they used to be, and with the families moving from the village to the city. Partnow informs us that such feelings are widespread across the state and reflect major economic and demographic changes in Alaska. She concludes, “As Alaskans endure these massive changes, we grieve for untold stories and weakened communities” (Partnow 2003: ix).

In this chapter, however, the effort has been made to highlight basketball’s effect in promoting feelings of community in the local and regional contexts. From pick-up games where interpersonal relations are fashioned to the more community orientated high school basketball nights and to the ever expanding social network of basketball players, coaches, and spectators of the small 1A and 2A High Schools, the game provides an occasion and common base to reset, renegotiate, and strengthen an inter- and intra-village sense of community. At the same time that community members are reminiscent of older

times, when Nenana was much more closely knit, a new sense of community is built, one that transcends loyalties to the locality of Nenana but reinforces symbolic aspects of its reality such as school spirit. It is not a given that all NSLC students will develop the strongest ties with Nenana as a community. Yet, it is highly likely that they will become active members of the school's spirit. The open-ended drama of the game and the potential emergence of *communitas* through the vocalization of support for one's team are parts of a dynamic process that persists despite the changing times. Due to the inclusive nature of *communitas*, any newcomers, non-local students or casual observers, can feel part of the moment and part of the group with whom they share that moment.

Such moments of enhanced clarity of community purpose and togetherness bring to the foreground shared cultural values, expressed in the "heart of the game" and collective memories, expressed through storytelling between players and other participants. In the academic year of 2010-2011, the Nenana Lynx and community members thought that school spirit showed definite signs of resurgence as local and non-local players managed to bridge the gap posed by the "fine line" and as more parents and community members came to watch the games.

Up to this point, the dissertation has brought to the foreground the ways people have enculturated the sport in their own local context. It has also explored the practical and symbolic values they express through it. In all its manifestations basketball is a temporary activity, the effects of which trickle down to everyday reality. In the next chapter, we add to the discussion the element of the physical space within which basketball and other sports are played — the gymnasium.



## Chapter 5

### 5.1 Gym Life

Throughout the analysis, Nenana's local gymnasium has been presented as a multipurpose stage for symbolic performances expressed through basketball. These performances express ideas of self and community, establish links between people, especially basketball players and the spectators who are there to watch them, as well as showcase significant cultural values. The gymnasium itself, however, warrants further description. As a physical and symbolic space, it features several attributes, which have contributed to making basketball a traditional practice in Alaska. Even more, it has other uses not directly related to the sport but important for the community, which differentiate it from other social spaces in Nenana. In fact, gymnasiums across the state have developed into distinctive cultural and social hubs.

Nenana's gym was built in the late 1970s and is officially known as the John Beedle Gymnasium. It has a certain gleam about it, the gleam things have when they are being taken care of. The hardwood floor is spotless. The metallic red hoops are shiny, the nets are bright white, and the padded backboards appear to be brand new — a fact that coach Overbey never fails to mention to his players every time they choose not to use them for their layups. This is the legacy of John Beedle, the janitor who used to take care

of the gym. He was involved in everything the Lynx did in that gym from practices to filming the Lynx games. He was a beloved character in school life and a firm supporter of the school's spirit, so much so that the city decided to name the gym after him, as well as maintain the same high standards he had in keeping the gymnasium in excellent condition.

There are stands at both sides of the court that can seat around 400 people, although during NIT the number can increase. Most of the time, these are folded against the two sidewalls and are unfolded only to seat spectators of organized events. The gym also has four rooms, two on each side of the basketball court behind the hoops. The two on the far end of the gymnasium are locker rooms for the boys and girls. Inside there are bathrooms, showers, and lockers. The two rooms closer to the first entrance are both devoted to exercise; one is a weight room, with a variety of dumbbells and weight instruments. The second room has exercise bicycles and a treadmill. Both rooms are small, but no students complain. Weight rooms are a luxury in rural Alaska. Other schools have barely enough space to fit a basketball court within their gyms.

The gym's walls are a good example of the ways people use a physical space for functional and symbolic purposes. The parts of the wall that are exposed to the game, such as behind the hoops, are padded. This has a strictly functional purpose, since an unpadded wall would pose a danger to anyone who dives in to keep the ball inbounds. The padding allows players to crash on the wall without much danger. Above the padding, the walls are decorated with a gallery of banners and brochures. Some of these are hung permanently, others only temporarily, but they all contribute to the social

construction of the game space. Handmade signs in the shape of a basketball welcome spectators and other schools to Nenana: “Welcome Nikolaevsk Warriors,” “Welcome Anderson Grizzlies,” and “Welcome Port Lions Kings.” Other signs contribute socially to the play of the game, giving general advice to participants: “Play hard, play smart, have fun.”

Several signs impart the moral and ethical standards of the Lynx athletic teams and school. Right in the middle of the two sidewalls, visible from both sides of the stands, the school has the painted head of a Lynx baring his teeth and under it the school’s decree of sportsmanship. This combination of painting and banner is like no other in the gymnasium. They are both framed and hung proudly in the same way doctors and lawyers display their diplomas on the wall. The decree explains to the fans what good sportsmanship is about. “Since booing and jeering do not support anyone, we hope you will be positive in supporting your favorite teams. We ask that spectators promote the ideals of good sportsmanship by applauding fair play and by showing respect for all participants and officials.”

High on the walls, behind the hoops, two very important symbols are displayed. On the one side, above the locker rooms is the American flag. It is a large flag so that when the national anthem is sung or the pledge of allegiance is recited people on both sides of the court can turn towards it and pay their respects. On the other side is the NIT Championship board. A simple black board with yellow letters, it has a dominating presence over the goals, aspirations, and memories of everyone present in high school games. The board lists all the schools that have won the “biggest little tournament in

Alaska” from the beginning in 1984 to today (Dean Overbey and Colin Stone, personal interview, 11/23/10). Each year a new name is put up on the board by hand. In 2011, the Nenana Lynx girls’ team added their own name to the list by beating Fort Yukon in an unforgettable game.

The board is a constant reminder of the “heart of the game” and the long-standing tradition of achievement and pride, not only for Nenana but also for other schools and communities. Each name and date carries its own story for different people. During NIT games, people pointed to the board and discussed their experiences. A fan recollected during a game, “Look, the boys and girls haven’t won the NIT at the same time since 1991 when we did it. Mom, do you remember our championship game when the crowd was so loud we couldn’t hear each other talking?” (field notes 02/03/11).

This and similar stories are part of the collective buzz of basketball games, crystallized on the board and carried down from generation to generation. Small village high school basketball players grow up wanting nothing more than to put their schools and ultimately their stories up on that board. This is a symbolic connection that transcends the community. Even Living Center students, often conflicted about their school spirit devotion, have already heard about NIT and eagerly wait the chance to compete in and win it: “The fact that your name gets to be put on a board that’s there for eternity. They could care less about the trophy; they just want their name up there” (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11).

### **5.1.1 The gym as a contested space**

As we have seen, the gym is a hub of social relations, especially during the winter months. When people say, “I’m going to open gym” they almost invariably imply that they are going to play pick-up basketball games. Three times per week, teenage students and several adults warm up and socialize by shooting hoops before they play a “serious” game, five-on-five. When enough people are gathered, basketball players are urged to join a line at the three-pointer mark in order to “shoot for teams.” The players take turns trying to make a three-pointer shot. If one makes the basket, he/she gets to play in the ensuing game. If not, he/she walks to the end of the line waiting for his or her turn to shoot again. The first five players to make the shot are put on the same team.

This system creates some interesting team compositions. It is not uncommon that one team will feature the most able scorers while their opponents will be weaker. Sometimes, if the teams are obviously unbalanced, last minute “trades” will be made in an effort to make a game more interesting. The players, who did not make the three-pointer shot will wait patiently outside and will play the winner of the first game. Usually, they shoot hoops at the side baskets while the two teams play on the opposite side of the court. If the people outside are numerous enough to make their own team, they can challenge the winner of the first game. In addition, any player waiting is guaranteed a spot in the next game. Others chat, or play other sports such as volleyball on the sideline, or practice Eskimo and Indian Olympics games, such as one-hand reach or two-foot high kick. Both take advantage of the increased free space available in the gym with the stands folded against the wall.

The numbers of people coming to play are never consistent but during specific periods, one can predict that participation in the pick-up games will be increased. There are periods during the winter months that one can expect that the gym will be “buzzing,” as a student put it. About eight high school students, from both Nenana and the Living Center, come and play every time. About seven more are regulars to the gym but do not always play basketball. Occasionally, a large number of Living Center students decide to show up, and this increases participation. After Christmas when the students have more time, for instance, Sunday nights would find twenty-five to thirty people in the gym.

Larger turnouts are guaranteed if news of a previous night’s high quality game reaches the ears of the basketball crowd. Good competition can create a momentum of energy among people who recognize the potential for fun and excitement. It also signals the possible return of individuals with a highly esteemed basketball reputation, who, for one reason or another, cannot play regularly in pick-ups. For instance, in April 2011, adult basketball players, many of whom were relatives, had decided to join the upcoming 15th Annual Minto Flats Shootout tournament on the last weekend of that month. This, they explained, would be family business, but it would still represent Nenana.

I was also told that, from now on, with the tournament on the horizon, gym nights would be considered “get into shape” sessions and that they would be starting a little bit earlier. They urged me to be there every single time to help them with that. That night the game we played was of a higher quality and much more competitive. The younger players on offense abandoned their free style basketball and played with many passes. On defense, many players remained focused, chasing their opponents and boxing them out

for rebounds. The faster-paced game was more physical, and one could hear in the urgency of people's in-game communications that there was a general feeling of not wanting to lose. Despite the fact that by April high school basketball season is over, for the next few gym sessions an increasing crowd of local and Living Center students, as well as some of the family's relatives from Fairbanks, showed up at the gym wanting to test their prowess in basketball but also to watch the games.

The rules of participation in pick-up games are complex and feature several exceptions. First, not everyone is urged to play. Of course, personal relations play a role. Nenana friends and relatives encourage even the shyest of their kin to participate, but the rest (such as Living Center Students) have to be courageous on their own. They must communicate, both verbally and non-verbally, that they want to play too. This, after all, is how many Living Center students are introduced for the first time to the community.

In addition, ability to play basketball is an implied prerequisite. No one will turn down anyone who wants to play. This would not be in accordance to the gym etiquette. However, being able to follow the pace of the game is important for the skillful players and intimidating for the less able. Even though the more accomplished players will not show any direct frustration, their in-game choices, such as not passing the ball, is a certain sign that a player is not good enough. In turn, a less skilled player may be afraid that he/she will not be able to perform according to the expectations of their peers. This fear deters many students from playing in pick-up, even though they want to. In the end, players tend to choose whom they will play with and against, with less skillful players preferring to play in teams more or less equal to their playing level.

This observation is important because it opens up a discussion of the gymnasium as a contested space. Who gets to play in pick-up games is part of a wider issue about who can use the gymnasium and for what purpose. Starting with basketball and pick-up games, male adults would have priority over any other participant, if everyday life responsibilities did not truncate their basketball playing time. As it is, adults play only on Sunday nights. On these nights, however, they have the right to ask the students to sit out, if they can field a five-on-five game. The “regulars,” both local and non-local male students, who attend every single night of basketball, take up the majority of playing time during pick-up games. They are also some of the better players. Female students will also get some playing time, but much less than the male students will. Typically, if they want to play, they must join a boys’ team. Lastly, adult women were a group with seldom presence in the gymnasium.

This research did not specifically explore gender issues associated with participation. The absence of adult women in the league may be for multiple reasons. First, several skillful women players from previous years have left Nenana with their families, and one can see them playing only in special events such as basketball fundraisers. There is not the same pool of women players in town as there is of men. Moreover, it could be that a certain generation of women in Nenana does not play basketball. The issue did not come up with any specific questions and answers on this subject. This would pose an interesting follow-up research question.

As an indoor open space, other groups also vie for the use of the gymnasium. For instance, Nenana has a martial arts program that trains in the gym at least twice per week.

It is occasionally used by other school and community groups for music concerts or fundraisers. All involved typically use the gym for two to three hours on any designated day, excluding the nights when Lynx home games are played. Between all these groups and pick-up games, access to the gym is limited, much more so since, as far as the students are concerned, there are not enough days or hours in the week to keep the gymnasium open. Many play basketball during school recess, open gym nights, and go to the gym whenever they believe there are no scheduled events. Oftentimes, they go only to discover that other groups are using the gym.

Most consider the gymnasium a unique space to access temporarily and must be used effectively to *play* basketball. The time limitations influence the attitudes of basketball players in pick-up games. At times, Living Center female students would suggest that there should be girls-only pick-up games so that more students are encouraged to play in the gym. In the current time setting, this would mean that those students who always show up would have to cut their playing time down in half. Although there has never been a resounding “no” to the idea, all parties involved prefer not to discuss the prospect at length, let alone implement the suggestion. In any case, any differentiation from the current program of using the gym would have to take into account every group involved and make sure that there would be no conflicts of time allotted.

## 5.2 The gym: A symbolic world

In his book *Body and Soul* (2004), Lois Wacquant studied boxing and boxers in one of Chicago's black ghettos. The physical center of their pugilistic world, the gymnasium, became the focus of his research because of the unique place it occupied in the minds of local residents. Wacquant characterized the boxing gymnasium as *polysemous*, meaning a place that has a number of secular and symbolic functions, which are employed on different occasions. Inside the gym walls, ordinary life is reconstructed through exercise and the code of conduct of the male fighter. The gym sets the physical boundaries of a pugilistic universe, which has its own values, moral and ethical compass, and pre-agreed rules (Wacquant 2004:17). Boxers believe that they are bettering themselves, especially in relation to what happens to people outside on the streets of their ghetto neighborhood:

...membership in the gym acquires its full social meaning only in regard of the structure of life chances offered – or denied – by the local system of instruments of social reproduction and mobility, namely, the public schools, the deskilled labor market, and the activities and networks that make up the predatory economy of the street (Wacquant 2004:17).

Wacquant maintained that the local gym was an island amidst the harsh reality of everyday life. It provided a temporary escape not only from the practical results of that reality but also from the decadence of moral and social order outside its walls.

Gymnasiums in Alaska are also polysemous spaces. Not only are they used for a variety of community events, but also different appropriate sets of meanings and symbols are employed on different occasions. The social interactions and exhibitions during open gym nights are different from those observed during high school games. Similarly, fundraisers are different from both of the previous events. Yet, they are all based on the physical and symbolic dimensions of the gymnasium. Following Wacquant's example, making sense of the complex physical and symbolic presence of the gymnasium in Nenana, we must situate it in the community's local context by describing how it relates to the community conceptually and practically. However, first we need to understand the essential elements of the gymnasium that make it unique from any other social space.

### **5.2.1 The gymnasium deconstructed**

Imagine the Nenana gymnasium with its basic infrastructure. There are folded stands at the side of the walls, the basketball hoops, a number of colored lines on the floor, and brochures on the walls. One may decide to run a few laps around the court or browse the signs on the walls. Apart from these and similar activities, there is not much else to do. This is an empty space that, by its own, denotes no purpose.

Now add to the image of the "empty" gymnasium a basketball. For that matter, add any kind of ball. The space starts to gain a new meaning, it starts making sense. Anyone can pick up the ball and shoot it at the hoops. Alternatively, if the ball present is a volley ball, someone can spike the ball at the wall, receive, and spike again. Add a few

more people in the picture, and the space makes even more sense now. If one is kicking a soccer ball or throwing a football, they need more space. People situate themselves in the space, according to the “needs” of the ball used and the concept of the game played. If you add even more people, a “proper” game may ensue. Now, the lines on the floor appear to have a specific function. The gym has lines that can be used for any kind of sport that uses a ball. If more people come, they may want to watch, so now the stands are full. Take away the balls and one sees an empty space once more. Bring in a makeshift stage and a microphone and one may see a high school band recital. Place some tables and chairs and one may see a fair or a school dinner.

The point of this thought exercise is to describe the local gymnasium as an indoor open space meant to be temporarily used for a variety of purposes, much like outside open spaces. Once a group of people finishes what they were doing, the gymnasium becomes “empty” again. Like an etch-a-sketch, someone draws on it and then shakes it off to allow someone else to draw something anew. The gymnasium’s meaning or function at any given point is decided by the people who occupy it. This is a characteristic that is not shared by other social spaces. In Nenana, the church, the school, and the Tribal Hall have specific purposes and do not accommodate a gamut of unrelated activities. One could fathom conditions where, if there was a need, the above social spaces could be used similarly to a gymnasium. However, there is one notable exception — the use of a ball.

The use of a ball is the single most important difference between a gymnasium and other social spaces in rural communities or, for that matter, in urban centers. It makes

the gymnasium a distinct space, which allows the free and, at times, whimsical movement of an object and, therefore, the free movement of the body. In Alaskan rural communities, only gymnasiums afford such a privilege. This may seem trivial, but any child, or adult who still likes to act like one, can attest that the use of balls and chasing after them is prohibited or sanctioned in most indoor spaces. Balls are not to be used in the house, the school corridor, and, God forbid, if the ball should slip from your school bag and roll around during church mass. Oftentimes, the ball is also prohibited from open spaces. It is fine if it bounces around a family's back yard, but what happens when it makes the trip over to the neighbors' yard? Or what if it lands on the street with parked cars, in houses with closed windows, or on construction sites. Any space close to some kind of property or social boundary is strictly restricted.

If this line of reasoning concerning the wild adventures of a ball is entertaining, that is because a ball is one of the most recognizable signifiers of "play." According to Goffman, a ball can only be viewed as a "play-thing," which sustains or evokes playing and playful attitudes and cannot be considered as an object relating to any serious behavior (Goffman 1974:43). A ball is essentially a symbol of "playing" in its ideal form. Just like "playing," with it is whimsical. No matter how good one is in controlling the ball, it is almost certain that, at some point, it will go its own way. The ball also knows no bounds, physical or social, and has no problem bouncing to places it should not. In fact, it is meant to follow no recognizable order, which is why, ball games are so entertaining and exciting.

The player is always accused for what the ball does, because ultimately, although it is recognized that the ball is a separate entity, the player is responsible for it. Even more, when the ball or the player causes trouble, their actions are not explained by any malicious intent. To be sure, when anyone adds malice to their playing, they automatically engage seriousness, at least for those affected. Lastly, the ball is an instrument of creation. One only needs to watch freestyle soccer or basketball tricks to understand that there is a whole subculture of aesthetic form devoted to tricks with a ball. Thus, a ball is also a tool of performance, playful and creative, and it is fun for the player to attempt and the spectator to watch. The same is true for energetic or playful body movement. In the gym, people can run, jump, dive, push, fall on each other, or lie on the floor. No other space in Nenana offers that kind of freedom. One cannot exhibit the same behavior in the library, in the rec-center, the school, or the church.

It follows then that when one is not allowed to play with the ball inside the house or any other indoor space, it is because that is not the appropriate space to allow “playing.” Most social “serious” spaces are set to follow a specific order and purpose and have rules against “playing” and “playful” attitudes that may temporarily disrupt order; most social spaces except the gymnasium.

Victor Turner’s concept of a liminoid spaces refers to such space where “play” even with a ball is allowed (Turner 1974, 1980). Western societies feature strict dichotomies between work and play, paid time, and free leisure time. This has not been always the case in human history. In pre-industrial or agricultural societies, the cultural dichotomy between everyday and playful reality did not exist in the way it does today. In

pre-industrial rites of passage, members of the group would symbolically pass from one social status to another through stages of separation, transition, and incorporation. The middle stage, also called *liminality*, is the space where individuals are allowed to “play” and to create. Embedded within the cultural fabric of pre-industrial societies, was a ritualistic practice of play by which an individual or group of individuals had the ability to change their social status, for example, from adolescence to adulthood in practical and symbolic terms.

According to Turner, when individuals go through liminality, they become distinct from other members of society and are not bound by society’s rules. In that state, possibilities for novelty and recombination of existing perceptions are realized. Liminality is meant to have a lasting effect for the individuals that go through it, in a sense they are supposed to change as human beings. It is within this liminal stage that Turner’s *communitas* occurs. Liminal phenomena exist only in societies where ritual processes and everyday activities have not been separated. Following rituals and pleasing the gods or God for many societies is an obligation that involves parts of the community in different times through the year and amounts to the participation of the whole community. “Sooner or later, no one is exempt from ritual duty, just as no one is exempt from economic, legal or political duty” (Turner 1974:134).

The human need to play and create did not disappear with the creation of industrial and post-industrial societies. These societies feature liminoid spaces instead of pure liminal phenomena within rituals. The difference occurs in the separation between work and leisure, serious life, and play. With the introduction of the work clock,

industrial societies have very clear boundaries between time devoted to work and time devoted to leisure (Turner 1974, Elias and Dunning 1986). However, that does not mean that industrial societies are rigid and uncreative. They devote particular spaces and cultural genres such as theater, music, and sports to do exactly what pre-industrial societies do year round, i.e., allow temporarily enough freedom for people to creatively express and transcend the boundaries of their culture. Turner regards the liminal stage and liminoid spaces as:

...the settings in which new symbols, models, and paradigms arise – as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact. These new symbols and constructions then feed back into the “central” economic and politico-legal domains and arenas, supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models, and *raison d’être* (Turner 1974:130).

The gymnasium is essentially a liminoid space. It allows for playfulness and playing, the establishment and reconstruction of relations and brings about the feeling of *communitas*. Inside the gym, social and cultural perceptions are “played out,” literally and metaphorically, momentarily liberating individuals and communities from social boundaries. Novelty is promoted, not only in the form of the performances that we have described, for example, the pre-game handshakes of the boys’ team, but also in the renegotiation of the individuals and community relations. For instance, the relations of players and their opponents are renegotiated at every game they play. Examples come

from those players who may have been strangers to each other or even on bad terms. Each time they played a game there was a possibility that they would, to some extent, reconfigure their social relation. Students/players often muse about the sport's ability to "separate them and then bring them back together" (Students, personal interview, 01/26/11) or about the ease with which they can make friends through sports.

At the same time that the gymnasium becomes a stage, which allows novelty; it is also a structure with its own etiquette and a monument of the school's and community's past, present, and future. On different occasions, community members focus on different aspects of the gymnasium. During pick-up games, the proper code of conduct is important for all participants who choose to follow it, even though there is not any official authority to enforce rules. For example, the "no-fighting" etiquette within the gymnasium corresponds to the established code of play within that space. It is a necessary code because people want to be able to play a physical sport without fearing that a fight will erupt. If there is also a "no-fighting" rule from a higher authority, this is secondary in importance and quality. Egalitarian establishment of rules between like-minded people is a basic difference between a village gymnasium and an average downtown bar. Both are social spaces, both have rules of no fighting, yet the latter has a much higher chance of a fight erupting because there is no code in place that prohibits such actions.

In high school games, the gymnasium allows the possibility of novelty and the rise of *communitas*. At the same time, it represents the community's past and established values, and it celebrates and retells a positive story about the community itself through a

basketball game. In all its manifestations, the gymnasium appears as a space with “playful” or “ludic” qualities (Turner 1974:132) because by its very nature and purpose it allows people to switch between different frameworks and contexts. Turner uses the term “ludic” to explain play in its broader sense as the action of experimenting, recombining, and creating in social life. The term also describes specific gatherings such as carnivals, where social rules and obligations are temporarily suspended. Thus, the “ludic” characteristic of carnivals is a temporary loss of order and a freedom to assume other roles, for example, men dressing as women, and generally a widespread sense of reinventing or even circumventing everyday normal expectations.

Similarly, the gymnasium contrasts with everyday reality physically and symbolically, because as a liminoid space it is meant to do so. The relationship between the time for schoolwork and the time for play is expressed spatially in the school-building’s structure. Both the main body of the school and the gymnasium are large spaces, but the first is devoted to academic work and improvement, filled with smaller class rooms, offices and a library, while the second is an open space dedicated to play and physical activity. One can pass from one space to another through two sets of metallic doors that lock from the inside of the school. Even if the gymnasium is rarely locked when the school is open, the implication that it can be locked. This gives a message to the students that schoolwork is separate — and of higher priority.

In discussing the multipurpose symbolic characteristics of the gymnasium, we need to keep in mind that it is people who imbue the space with meaning. Time can change the ways people view the gymnasium and it is exactly because the space is open

to interpretation that this may occur. However, here we have the interesting interaction between people and a space, which will be standing long after the first playing community is gone and their children take their place. How meaning can inform the generations that come after it and how these new generations influence it is a fascinating but extremely complex subject.

### **5.3 The gym versus the street**

Following Wacquant's example, we can also see the perceived contrast of the gymnasium as a social space within the context of everyday life in Nenana. Several residents in the community regard the gymnasium as the preferred place in comparison to the "streets" of Nenana. Basketball players of all ages, parents, students, and teachers say that the gym "keeps kids off the streets" or from "walking around, getting into trouble" or "partying." This is a universal opinion, even among critics of small village basketball, who claim that it competes with academics. Even they recognize that benefit. Specific reasons about why and how the gym compares to the streets are discussed in casual conversation. Yet, the idea is offered freely that the gym is a good place to be. The streets, in contrast, are not. Any activity associated with the gym is better than any activity associated with the streets.

To analyze this idea further one can distinguish the life of a high school student in two parts: when the student is in school and when he/she is not. The streets appear threatening to the student's wellbeing and to his/her ability to make positive decisions

after school is over in the afternoon. Up to that point, the school has the responsibility to keep an eye on its wards. For the rest of the day, the family or in the case of the non-local students, the NSLC supervises over their actions.

Nonetheless, the streets, especially during winter, are an unsupervised space where teenagers have to make their own decisions. Neither the family nor the school can play an immediate role in that. They have the freedom to make their own choices no matter how detrimental these may be. The only other place that students in Nenana have unsupervised freedom in their choices is the gymnasium. Yet, the gym, unlike the streets, carries a specific code of conduct decided by generations of basketball players. If the streets, then, are the space where people make bad choices due to the absence of a specific moral code, the local village gym is the space where people make good choices.

The concept of the “streets” specifically refers to the social pathologies plaguing Alaskan villages (Sprott 1997, Berardi 1999, Fast 2002). Alcohol abuse is chief among them and for many the root of all other evils such as drug abuse, suicide, domestic abuse, and violence. Individuals and communities carry with them traumatic experiences related to alcoholism. Bleak economic conditions in many villages also accentuate these social pathologies. Unemployment is staggering in relation to other U.S. regions. According to the Departments of Labor and Workforce Development and of the Environment, unemployment rates in Alaskan villages can exceed 50%.<sup>20</sup> Poverty levels are also relatively high.

---

<sup>20</sup> <http://live.laborstats.alaska.gov/labforce/>.

The problems of rural Alaskan villages are often acute in Alaska Native villages as well. Peter Douglas Elias analyzed the relationship between unemployment and destructive behavior among First Nations in Canada. He found that people in First Nations communities have to wrestle with being jobless for extended periods with nothing to do, which often leads them to bad choices. He concluded that it is important to focus on long-term economic development, as much as on treating social pathologies, *per se* (Elias 1996).

Elias' argument expresses part of a political stance of many rural Alaskans. In casual conversations people made the argument that economic development will never be possible if Native peoples in Alaska are not allowed to stand on their own feet, with whatever responsibilities that requires. This could happen by cutting off federal assistance and putting that money instead straight to economic development and the creation of jobs. Interestingly enough, the argument they use to make their point invariably revolves around basketball and their opinion that, in Alaskan villages people do not put the same worth that they put into basketball into finding a job. Some say, for example, "You have these kids who barely graduate high school and have no work to do afterwards but reminisce about that one basketball buzzer beater, which made them famous" (field notes 06/20/10). To be sure, this is a stance that causes a lot of dissension in rural communities. Several families depend on federal help to make due and regard such talk on cutting federal assistance dangerous for their well-being. Such arguments heavily influence communal decision processes in villages across Alaska.

Overall, “the streets” have become a symbol of pathologies and dysfunction in village social life. They are the space where accidents happen, where kids find drugs, get drunk, and get into accidents. They are also the space where violence occurs and the most likely place where people will make the worst possible choices for their well-being and that of others, with devastating individual and community results. These situations are reflective of the social challenges faced by many residents of rural Alaska.

However, despite problems in rural communities that should not be ignored, it is also important to note that community members in rural villages are not passively accepting these social problems. On the contrary, they are actively involved in solving the problems and celebrating the rich benefits of village life. Basketball is a significant part of the problem-solving effort because it allows parents, educators, and mentors to shield and equip the younger generations with the necessary moral and ethical tools to face social challenges. Notwithstanding the reality of the “streets,” there are a multitude of social activities such as hunting and fishing, snow machining, and sledding, which connect people with the land surrounding the village. For many residents, these are a constant source of pride and strength and, much like basketball. This tells a story of village life in a way that is exactly how residents would like it to be told.

In Nenana, students at the school have expressed frustration with village life mostly in regards to the options one has for having “fun.” In most of the interviews, students would explain how in the villages “there is not much to do,” especially in comparison to what Fairbanks had to offer. For the non-local students their comments were also colored by the restrictions the Living Center imposes on them and on the

activities that are commonplace back home. The lack of social options for youth is not a characteristic only of Nenana. In Stacy Rasmus' ethnography of an Alaskan village (2008), she describes youth who try to find "fun" stuff to do in order to fight "boredom." Similar to Elias' argument of joblessness among adults, idleness among youth can potentially turn into a vicious circle of bad choices and harmful behavior. "Kids partying" has become a phrase that in the village cultural context spells trouble.

In Nenana, threatening or tragic incidents are rare, but they do happen. Once, in the recent past, teenagers had to be collected from the side of the road; they were hypothermic and unconscious from drinking. Adults were involved in selling the alcohol. Such incidents are hard on the community and become a constant reminder to students and parents that they must remain vigilant.

Turner analyzed these kinds of effects on a community in his discussion of social dramas (Turner 1980). Turner defines a drama "as a sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive, or agonistic type" (Turner 1988:33). These occur regularly in society and may include small- or large-scope situations, which affect the whole community or population. Social dramas, according to Turner, have four phases: a) "breach" is the phase where a norm or rule is broken putting strain on social relations; b) "crisis" is the subsequent realization of the breach, which generally tends to widen the public gap and dissent; c) "redress" is the phase where the group or community becomes aware of itself as if looking itself in the mirror, realizing what has caused the dissent and trying to amend it; and lastly, d) "reintegration" or "schism" are the two opposite possible results of the redressive action (Turner 1980:149).

If the “streets” are conceived of as a breeding ground of social dramas, where breach and crisis occur, then the gymnasium and the communal space inside it are part of the mechanism to repair the social fabric. Almost perfectly contrasted with the negative elements of the “street,” the gymnasium’s etiquette and ludic character demands the suspension of outside occurrences. For example, participants in open gym nights who are known to have a drinking problem will sober up just to play pick-up. Of all gym nights that I witnessed, in only one case did a clearly intoxicated individual attempt to play basketball. He was accepted, somewhat reluctantly, but the fact that he had broken an important rule could be heard in the snide comments about his athletic prowess; and his co-players refused to run up and down the court with him. At the same time, the gymnasium has a practical value for the students’ safety at least as far as their guardians are concerned; it allows them to keep an eye on the students.

The following example also demonstrates the pervasiveness of a specific etiquette within the gym walls. The village of Minto organizes every year the Annual Minto Flats Shootout tournament at the end of April. The tournament is well attended by neighboring communities and features brackets for both men and women. One of the teams participating was formed by three brothers, known around the village for their abilities in the sport. They won their first game easily and showed that they could be competitive.

Following their game, members of the team socialized with other players around a bonfire and a brawl erupted among them. One of the brothers recounted the incident to me the next morning. He told me how he tried to help his brother who was being beaten and showed me his swollen ear where he was punched. He explained that his brother gets

reckless when drinking and that he became belligerent. That is how the fight started. By the afternoon, everyone in the village knew what had happened. Brawls and fights are, ironically, a common occurrence in the villages during basketball tournaments. As a matter of policy, the Tribal Council always asks for assistance from state troopers during such gatherings.

As luck would have it, the basketball players who brawled with the team in the story were their next opponents in the basketball court. Even during warm-up, one could feel that this would be an intense game. The opponents featured tall and full-bodied players, which meant a physical game especially under the hoop. And, so it was. The events of the previous night seemed to improve the drama of the game, which, although it was rough, they kept within the rules of good sportsmanship. Only in the last five minutes of the game, at the point where the brothers' team lost the lead, did anyone see some signs of the tension and conflict from the night before. Some words were spoken, and some pushing occurred, but the referees put a quick end to that without even having to penalize any of the parties involved. At the same time, the fans cheered both teams, seemingly oblivious to the previous night's incident.

The game was not the end of their interactions. After the game, the brothers omitted the traditional handshakes with those opponents involved in the fight. They slowly moved towards the gymnasium door when, one of the brothers turned and stared back at his opponents, issuing in effect a non-verbal challenge to "finish" last night's brawl outside the gymnasium. This was not organized. As one brother stared back, the others walked away, only to stare back themselves, as their brother was walking away.

The co-brawlers did not immediately leave the gymnasium, so there was no further incident. Basketball on the court created a ritualized contest that ended up displacing the exterior conflict.

This event was instrumental in guiding the research towards understanding the qualities of the gymnasium as a structure and a space imbued with an agreed-upon code of conduct, which offered distance from ordinary, positive or negative, social reality. The players of both teams were involved in a fistfight the night before, and yet, they managed to compete in a sport that involves physical contact. Any foul could have been judged an insult and spark an altercation. What better place then, to settle their differences? Yet, they did not, despite the fact that at least one side appeared willing to continue the confrontation after the game and outside the gymnasium. For a brief time, both parties ascertained the liminoid effectiveness of the gymnasium and performed in the ideal story the community tells of itself.

In discussing this situation, Chuck Hugny, Nenana resident and teacher, who was previously responsible for open gym nights in Tanana commented:

The gymnasium is like a shrine. There are just some things that you don't do there. For a lot of people, also it matters not to be kicked out from the gymnasium. I had a situation once where someone almost started a fight in the gymnasium and his friends were the ones who restricted him and told him, "don't, you'll get kicked out of the gym." It's the worse banishment one can get in a village ... to be banished from the gym. It is a mighty

blow to the ego, individual but also social. It cuts deep and that it is a source of embarrassment (field notes 05/01/11).

The people themselves safeguard the unique potential of the gymnasium for having fun, socializing, and leaving the everyday challenges and problems outside. In the Minto case, it is not surprising that those involved sanctioned themselves from engaging in what would be considered unacceptable behavior in a space that is constantly monitored by fellow community members and is considered sacred exactly because outside negative behaviors are not allowed inside.

#### **5.4 The gym and the world; connecting people**

Another dimension of the gymnasium is the participants' understanding that playing ball in open gym nights is the same thing that other people are doing in other places in Alaska, around the U.S., and around the world. This knowledge confers a sense of connection between people who play the sport. It underpins understandings such as the "heart of the game," which although unique, is recognized to be part of a whole.

My personal experience may help to illustrate the point. One of my research trips took me to Minto to watch the Annual Minto Flats Shootout tournament. The games were an all-day affair, so I found myself sitting in the stands, taking notes, and photographing the social interactions around me. At the beginning of a game, one of the two opposing teams came out in the court with only four players. Their fifth player would not be able to

make it on time, and the game was about to start. Turning around toward the stands, the captain of that team asked if anyone wanted to play with them. My friend, who had accompanied me to the tournament, started yelling, waving, and pointing at me, “Here, this guy wants to play!” In turn, one of the Elders with whom I was chatting echoed my friend’s wishes, when finally everyone in the gymnasium was urging me to play. Despite my reservations and anxiety, it was impossible to refuse.

Out of nowhere, I was playing basketball in what I had understood to be a Native-only tournament and in the presence of a warm, supportive crowd. As the game progressed, I heard my name from the stands and I was teased (thankfully not for my basketball ability). “Who is that guy?” someone yelled from the stands after I successfully collected a rebound. “He is from Greece!” the Elder yelled out. “Wow, he really came from far away to play in Minto,” another one retorted as the gym burst into laughter.

For the rest of the day, people stopped me to talk and tell me that it was fun to see me play. Weeks after, a basketball player from Minto greeted me at the Tanana Valley State Fair in Fairbanks. A second person who was with him asked me, “Are you that guy?” I had heard the same question from an elementary student also from Minto a few days before. Basketball had made me a sensation in Minto, a story that people can tell others. Given the fact that I never had a chance to play anything but pick-up games in Greece, I can honestly say that this was the most exciting, and at the same time one of the most illuminating, experiences and memories of my whole research.

From the ethnographer's perspective, this experience became a valuable source of information, which put my project into perspective. It is evident that similarities between cultures, and similarities in social practices despite differences in culture, may be found in such spaces as local gymnasiums where people play universal sports such as basketball. We are, after all, humans; and despite our differences, we are prone to connect, a fact that Turner implies throughout his discussion of *communitas* as a state beyond culture. Furthermore, it would be highly unlikely that anything other than a "playful" activity, would allow me, a stranger and foreigner, to the community of Minto to become temporarily as involved as I was in basketball tournament. The intrinsic ludic characteristics of the event and random circumstance allowed the novelty of an outsider, non-Native playing in it.

Furthermore, through knowledge of the game and ability to play, and in terms of the cultural values that the crowd appreciated, such as hard work and team spirit, I found a means for establishing relationships. This was a temporary feeling, perhaps a temporary social condition. Yet, if I had then wanted to become a resident in Minto, I would have definitely made a very good start. The same is true for Alaska residents. Frequenting the gymnasium is a certain and unobtrusive way for a newcomer to see and be seen in the community. It is a place where people can count on feeling welcomed.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In describing gym life in Nenana, I portrayed a physical space in motion. The social and cultural energy that players and spectators bring to the gym defines its purpose and presence in the community. The gym is an enculturated multipurpose structure, the symbolic meanings of which are sustained by the people who use it. Within its walls a multitude of aspects of local and regional cultural logic are expressed. During high school basketball games, for instance, the gym is the stage for re-affirmation and renegotiation of school spirit and community solidarity. In pick-up games, the gymnasium can become the stage for the facilitation of interpersonal relations and the creation of a social space, where like-minded people are playing the sport they love the most. This is a continuous process, which plows through the conflicts that may arise due to time limitations for using the gym. In both of these situations, there is a certain emphasis on present time. For those involved, especially the players, the “now” is of critical importance in fully experiencing the drama of the game.

The gymnasium, though, also has a symbolic importance that withstands time. At the same that it is informed by the actions of people, it also informs people about their community’s history, individual achievement, cultural ideas, and values. Its walls provide testaments of that past for all to see and a familiar space for collective recalling of the events that community members shared within them.

At the same time, in order to understand its symbolic nuances and properties, one has to take into account the gym’s everyday code of conduct and etiquette and compare it with what happens in the local everyday context. It is on that basis that the discussion led

us to a comparison between the gymnasium and the streets in Nenana, and by extension other villages, as well as an introduction of Turner's idea of liminoid spaces. In Alaskan villages, the commonly held opposition between the "streets" and the gymnasium has added cultural meanings. If the streets are considered unsafe for wandering youth, it is generally understood that the gymnasium has to be free of these problems. The gym is a community space, not subjected to the whims of any specific individual or to destructive and negative behavior. It is a space where people can play basketball and excel among their peers, establishing both respect and mutual relations.

The contrast between gymnasium and the streets also led to a theoretical analysis based on Turner's ideas of liminoid spaces and their contrast to normative reality. The gymnasium features several of the characteristics of liminoid spaces as its base function is to allow "play" in the broader sense of the term, that is to allow a temporary state of creation, subversion, experimentation, and re-negotiation of ordinary reality, which culminates in the feeling of *communitas* among the participants. In Nenana, pre-game rituals and orchestrated support are the visible parts of the basketball event. However, the real ludic elements lie in the links established between individuals through the bouncing of a ball.

## Chapter 6

### 6.1 Conclusion

In exploring the social and cultural consequences of the game of basketball in the small community of Nenana in Alaska, this dissertation touched on a number of issues each of which contributes a piece in the puzzle to what it means to be human and a social being. The dissertation discussed the past and present of the sport in Alaska in an effort to identify the established social and cultural trans-generational links, which allowed the sport to be adopted and adapted. Heider's conceptualization of adaptation (1983 [1977]) served as a model for a bottom-up approach in which basketball in Alaska was, and still is, an amateur endeavor and specifically expresses the local and regional cultural contexts.

Historically, the game became a stage for the manifestation of cultural values, as well as a source of pride and achievement for Alaska Natives, which corresponded to the almost unanimous appeal of the sport among Native populations. Diffusion of the sport came through the college and school systems. In 1975, the Molly Hootch case and the subsequent expansion of school and gymnasium infrastructure in remote villages brought about a basketball "boom," reflected in the immediate expansion of ASAA High School basketball conferences.

For the average high school student, basketball is today a significant aspect of everyday reality. It has become a tradition passed down from generation to generation and an activity in which everyone engages in Alaskan rural communities. In high school, it is likely that a student will share and contribute in creating and promoting the experience of high school basketball. The dissertation explored this high school experience in four dimensions: practices, traveling, playing the game, and spectatorship. In practices, students have the chance to learn values, and through their activities they express a number of related cultural themes. From individual ideas of hard work, delayed gratification, and dealing with conflict to the more collective concepts such as cooperation, teamwork, and responsibility towards teammates, school, and community.

In traveling, students experience one of the seminal characteristics of Alaska, the vastness of the state and the harsh unpredictable weather. On those trips, basketball players develop camaraderie and relationships and become a team in a broader sense on and off the court. It is also on those trips that students engage in storytelling, comparing and contrasting their experiences of long trips and “wacky” weather.

Playing the game is at the center of the basketball experience. The other components revolve around it, and they would not make much sense on their own. In this dissertation, we treated team games and sports with a ball as open-ended dramas and as activities which can create, temporarily, their own universe. Basketball in Nenana is just that. A multitude of pre-game rituals are staged at the beginning, middle, and end of a basketball game in an effort to exhibit, verify, and re-strengthen established social links

and cultural associations. During the basketball game, the main actors are the players themselves, and everyone else outside the four lines of the court has a supportive role.

Watching the game is the last component of the high school basketball experience. Spectatorship is an integral part of the symbolic and emotional connection between players and fans. There is a reciprocal relationship between the two as both parties urge the other to put up their best of performance. Typically, spectators lend their energy to the crowd by collectively vocalizing and expressing what in Nenana is known as school spirit. In turn, basketball players employ all their abilities and work hard to please the crowd by playing well and, if possible, by winning.

People then use their knowledge of specific individuals to update and enhance already established social networks. Basketball is cultural performance, a social occasion and, a connecting link between people. In relation to the latter, the effects of basketball can be surmised in its trans-generational character: basketball becomes a common experience across generations of students. For places like Nenana, where there are not many options for social activities, this statement holds true for most sports and extracurricular activities offered in school by which students are introduced to people of all ages and already have a common ground on which to start a social relationship.

The discussion then focused on the qualities of the social and cultural space of basketball as these were exhibited in Nenana. Nenana is an atypical rural community due to the existence of the Living Center, which accommodates non-local students educated in the local high school. NSLC students come from a number of villages all across Alaska and bring with them a number of non-local loyalties and associations. The most important

of these is their old school's spirit. According to the perception of local and non-local students, Nenana's school spirit is no longer what it used to be. The community's spirit and cohesion is an extension of this relationship, which, as Nenana local residents claim, is also not what it used to be.

Participation in basketball, and specifically the fans' coming to watch the Lynx's basketball game, is considered an example of high or low community solidarity. This is because basketball games in rural Alaska are a vehicle of symbolic expression by which people can measure their own and their fellow residents' commitment to the idea of a community. Using the interpretive strategy of Clifford Geertz, we can claim that basketball games tell a story about Nenana's school, the community, and the sense of belonging in the community. Low attendance reflects low solidarity, at the same time that high attendance paints a much more positive picture. (Geertz 1973:448)

While Nenana community members are nostalgic about the basketball experience of past days, basketball continues to influence everyday reality in the town. Basketball games are still played on a regular basis, both in the pick-up and high school environments, and community members still go to watch them. During the basketball season of 2011, the Nenana Lynx players (of both the girls' and boys' teams) were noting that school spirit was resurgent. Exciting basketball games, where the conclusion cannot be predicted, creates the social effect that Turner called *communitas* (Turner 1974), the state of being where a heightened communal feeling, togetherness, and belonging become emotionally salient. In fact, the pre-game rituals can be considered the symbolic fuel on the road to reaching it.

The experience and memory of *communitas* are crystallized in the rural Alaska concept of “the heart of the game” and the idea of collective memory. During the research, participants used the example of “the heart of the game” to highlight the main differences in behavior and attitude between rural and urban context. In Alaskan villages, basketball is a significant social occasion in which community and interpersonal relations matter more than winning the game. On the contrary, basketball competitions in urban centers between schools or even adult tournaments are specifically geared towards winning and dominating the game. Thus, the rural play is said to express the “heart of the game,” which urban basketball teams lack. The example of Native-only tournaments was described to explicate this difference.

Distinct examples of collective memory were an interesting by-product of the research. High school basketball players in Nenana generated stories and engaged in storytelling by tapping into a “common fund of familiar experience” (Goffman 1974:16). In storytelling, students collectively told a memory related to basketball traveling without caring if the participating storytellers were actually present in the event. This familiarity is an indication of the depth of the relations between the student/players, as well as, the concrete link by which different generations of players can discuss and tell stories of their own basketball experiences. Overall, basketball has facilitated the type of relationships that are based on the shared experience of the activity and created a social space, which is informed by but also informs everyday life and context.

The last question explored was about the role of the gymnasium as a multipurpose space. In everyday life, Nenana residents have presented the gymnasium as a bracketed

social space, which provides youth and adults with solutions to the negative aspects of life in the village. The challenges that young people have to face in rural villages sometimes have devastating results for the community. Alcohol is chief among them. The social space of the gymnasium has been considered as an effective barrier to these influences. The permanence of its effect remains to be seen but many young people and adults consciously use this space, which has its own rules and regulations, to counteract, even temporarily, the negative alternatives. In conjunction to the multiple initiatives that villages take to provide solutions to this problem, basketball has become an important, and popular, part of the process.

In addition, the gymnasium is used to incur and satisfy the need of humans to play and create. As such, we have used another of Turner's terms to describe it. A liminoid space is a social space in which individuals can restart, reset, and renegotiate interpersonal and community relations. Pick-up games can create such a social space and have been instrumental in allowing NSLC students to meet the members of the community on the familiar and ruled-governed ground of the basketball court. The court also creates a space of *communitas* allowing the community to come together as both players and spectators (Turner 1974).

### **6.1.1 More than science**

People's lives are a collection of moments. Some of these are important, or serious, or traumatic enough as to echo our past and affect our future. Moments bring

about an explosion of strong feelings, positive or negative. Each time something happens, which we will remember for the rest of our lives, it is because it connects to us in profound ways. People seem to vest in these events a portion of their being.

This instantaneous process may make a moment memorable. It is a process that has always mystified me. It has become my favorite argument that humans are not fully rational beings, but rather they are largely emotional. Science cannot really explain how moments work and why they become ingrained in our brains. Are moments reproducible? Can they be controlled and manipulated or engineered?

Intuitively, people understand such moments better than might be explained by science. They have an idea of how and where moments may transpire. They understand that chance plays a huge role in a memorable moment — one's planned birthday party may be fun, but a surprise party has more potential to become something to remember. They realize that if they place themselves in certain circumstances, where chance has a free reign, they may get to experience the excitement of the moment. Lastly, they hope that a certain moment will be positively unforgettable. To the extent that people seek out circumstances such as these and expect specific results, they also make culturally based choices as to where and how opportunities will appear. They take into account the place, the activity, and the people involved and make conscious choices in their pursuit of emotional excitement and memorable moments.

It is this cultural construction of moments that prompted me to start research on sports anthropology. The relationship between a certain event, time, and space, and how these connect specific cultural environments, poses an interesting challenge for research

and writing. In moment-creating conditions, people are able to create meaning on the spot and feed into it all their, hopefully positive, energy. Sports and games provide excellent examples of cultural occasions where people seek to encounter or construct the moments of a lifetime. They chose to watch and play them exactly because they expect that there may be a chance that something surprising or unexpected will happen, something that will become unforgettable. In this, players and spectators are united.

Both participate, in their own way, in the unfolding drama. Players are the main actors. It is their efforts that procure the unfolding of the drama. The spectators provide emotional support, which urges the players to outdo themselves and to become better in their game. Through this synergy of spectators, players, opponents, and their performances, the drama unfolds with results that have the potential to surprise. And, when the surprise occurs, the energy that is created by everyone involved connects the participants in time and in memory. This feeling of togetherness, so eloquently described by Turner in the idea of *communitas*, is how memorable moments occur.

The anthropology of games and sports can help us to characterize and understand those moments where human beings exhibit abilities to connect and transcend social, political, and cultural boundaries that would otherwise keep them apart. Game and sport settings allow for egalitarian forms of competition, they give a chance to any individual to be a part of the drama regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, or status.

They also provide a space within which memorable moments occur. In participating in specific moments that may last as little as a minute, where everyone in the stands is cheering the efforts of a team to score a winning point, the anthropologist

enters a realm of total involvement in the moment. This is an ideal mode of participation, and I would argue, of observation as well, despite the fact that he can no longer consider himself detached. Nevertheless, ethnographic observation is not lacking because of this involvement. On the contrary, it is enhanced to provide insightful accounts of what goes on within his own mind and that of others at the exact climax of the sporting drama. As reality goes, this is the truest of them all, the reality where feelings and emotions can connect you to the human beside you.

It is not surprising, then, that many anthropologists of sports have been athletes themselves. Loic Wacquant almost gave up his academic career to follow the pugilistic sport of a boxer, a turn of events that took him by surprise (Wacquant 2004). Blanchard was a devoted basketball player (Blanchard 1995). Robert Sands trained and played with American football players to gain a better perspective of their world (Sands 1999). George Gmelch, an ex-baseball player who almost turned pro, joined a baseball team and turned his “native” perspective of the sport into anthropology (Gmelch 2008). Susan Brownell, an Olympic gymnast who competed at the highest levels, was very influential in introducing the study of sports into academia (Brownell 1995). Their athletic experiences are enough to excuse perspectives that may come off as romantic and self-reflexive. They were passionate about sports before they decided to do research on them. In short, when they write about games and sports, they do not write only about what happens to others but also about what happens to them (Palmer 2002).

For some of their critics this may be “too close” from the outset. For others, such as myself, it is an understandable and refreshing perspective (Lithman 2004). Certain

aspects of human involvement cannot be attributed solely to culture; they are intimately human and beyond-culture. Indeed one has to be careful of cultural over-determinism, a notion that Turner himself criticized (Turner 1980). Ideas such as flow experience and *communitas* have to be experienced by the person writing about them in order to be portrayed faithfully, as much as possible, in the written word. In a sports setting, these can be individual as much as communal feelings. Thus by describing the former, one is actually explicating on the latter.

Detachment is not an option here. If, for instance, there is a felt spiritual and/or emotional connection present in a sports setting, the reader needs to know this in spite of any scientific misgivings the writer may have about putting his “subjective” perspective on the paper. In reality, the anthropology of sports and games does not need to confine itself in the same way, as have other more traditional subjects that deal with intimate human moments. If then, there is a spiritual or emotional connection of a metacommunicative quality, as Bateson would put it, or a feeling of *communitas* according to Turner, or even if an activity is experienced in flow, the sports ethnographer should be able to courageously situate himself within the experience and proclaim, “Yes, I felt that connection myself” or, “No, there is no connection that affected me”.

It is, in a sense, a matter of being truthful to the readers and offering an idea that people in sports and games, and indeed any activity that involves play, exhibit human, emotional, and spiritual attitudes in earnest and are not just completing some preordained cultural requirements. It is this involvement, and perhaps opportunity, which has formed the opinion voiced by Sands and Blanchard that games and sports highlight the

similarities between cultures and the essence of being human rather than any social and cultural differences (Blanchard 1995, Sands 1999, Moore 2004).

What this means in practice is that a description of the feelings and emotions that arise as the result of an intense in-game performance and circumstance may be more accurate than what an ethnographer would observe if he/she was not invested in that moment. Whereas the detached observer would have to ultimately use his own cultural framework to understand a situation that may or may not have any relevance to it, the involved observer has to be emotionally open to the possibility that the moment may carry him/her away, in the same way it does others. This is, of course, an assumption that, by its very nature, would be hard to test. The science-minded reader will be skeptical, but the 'being there, done that' readers may discover similarities with their own experiences.

The process of doing research in any area that involves play is hard, exactly because an anthropologist would have to balance between his/her training and the benefits accrued from it, and the self-reflexive moments where what he/she feels becomes a significant part of data for the better understanding of the human condition. Striking such a balance is similar to laughing and, at the same time, analyzing a joke. The anthropologists needs to 'get it' first to understand its relation to the culture at hand but also appreciate it for its own innate reality and then find it spontaneously funny. 'Getting it' may be a challenge in itself, but later during the analytical explanation of the joke, one may stop finding it funny. In dissecting the joke and trying to uncover its DNA, one forgoes its innate reality and its temporary place inside a specific moment. In analyzing, one cannot forget that a joke is also the story of something funny happening, and that

needs to be preserved as much as possible. This is why the anthropologist will ultimately have to ask the questions, “why did I laugh?”

The anthropology of games and sports can shed light in areas of human activity and culture, which reflect the mental state of playfulness. Such a state has been traditionally studied in the shadow of “serious” everyday life, but in this dissertation I have contended that that play is a main source for cultural creativity and change. Anthropologists have the opportunity to tap into the source of culture itself by studying how humans interact with each other and their social environment through play.

## References

- Alamillo, Jose M.  
 2010 Playing Across Borders: Transnational Sports and Identities in Southern California and Mexico, 1930-1945. *Pacific Historical Review* 79(3): 360-392.
- Alaska School Activities Association  
 History of ASAA, <http://asaa.org/asaa/history-of-asaa/>  
 Mission Statement, <http://asaa.org/asaa/about-asaa/mission-statement/>  
 (accessed December 31, 2009).
- Alexie, Sherman  
 2005 The Only Traffic Light on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore. *In* *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Grove Press.
- Anderson, Connie M., Bielert, Troy A. and Jones, Ryan P.  
 2001 Soccer and the Construction of Reconciliation in South Africa. *Social Justice: Anthropology, Peace and Human Right* 2: 141-161.  
 2004 One Country, One Sport, Endless Knowledge: the Anthropological Study of Sports in South Africa. *Anthropologica* 46: 47-55.
- Appadurai, Arjun  
 1997 *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appell, George, N.  
 1978 *Ethical Dilemmas in Anthropological Inquiry; a Case Book*. New York: Crossroads Press.
- Barnhardt, Carol  
 2001 A History of Schooling for Alaska Native People.  
<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/curriculum/Articles/CarolBarnhardt/HistoryofSchooling.html> (accessed April 28 2012).

Bateson, Gregory

1983 [1955] A Theory of Play and Fantasy. *In* Play, Games & Sports in Cultural Contexts. Janet C. Harris & Roberta J. Park eds. Pp. 313-326. Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers.

Berardi, Gigi

1999 Schools, Settlement, and Sanitation in Alaska Native Villages. *Ethnohistory* 46(2): 329-359.

Bergin, Paul

2002 Maori Sport and Cultural Identity in Australia. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 13(3): 257-269.

Blanchard, Kendall

1983 [1974] Basketball and the Culture-Change Process: The Rimrock Navajo Case. *In* Play, Games & Sports in Cultural Contexts. Janet C. Harris & Roberta J. Park eds. Pp. 473-484. Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers.

1995 *The Anthropology of Sport; an Introduction (A Revised Edition)*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey.

Bonnell, Ray

2013 St. Mark's Episcopal Church a reminder of Nenana's Early History, *Daily News-Miner*.

[http://www.newsminer.com/article\\_41795094-32e4-5f34-acae-60fefa741c75.html](http://www.newsminer.com/article_41795094-32e4-5f34-acae-60fefa741c75.html) (accessed March 30 2011).

Brownell, Susan

1995 *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Case, David and Voluck, David A.

2002 *Alaska Natives and American Laws*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press.

Cashmore, Ellis

2000 *Making Sense of Sports*. New York: Routledge.

Cleveland Museum of Natural History

2013 Balto and the Legacy of the Serum Run; from the 1925 “Serum Run” to the Iditarod of Today,

<http://www.cmnh.org/site/AtTheMuseum/OnExhibit/PermanentExhibits/Balto.aspx> (accessed March 30 2011).

Coakley, Jay

2011 Youth Sports: What Counts as “Positive Development”? *Journal of Sports and Social Issues* 35: 306-324.

Csoba DeHass, Medeia and Droulias, Andreas

2010 Aleut Baseball: Cultural Creation and Innovation through a Sporting Event. *Etudes/Inuit/Studies*, 34(2): 21-37.

Cubit Demographic Data Fast,

Nenana City Census Data, <http://www.cubitplanning.com/city/18089-nenana-city-census-2010-population> (accessed February 15 2012).

Damon, William

2004 What is Positive Youth Development? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 591: 13-24.

Demarban, Alex

2012 In Rural Alaska, villages fight extinction once schools close. *Alaska Dispatch*, April 10, <https://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/rural-alaska-villages-fight-extinction-once-schools-close> (accessed February 10 2013).

2012 Are regional boarding schools the answer for Bush education? *Alaska Dispatch*, April 11,

<http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/are-regional-boarding-schools-answer-bush-education> (accessed February 11 2013).

Department of Labor and Workforce Development

2013 Research and Analysis, Preliminary Unemployment Rate, <http://live.laborstats.alaska.gov/labforce/> (accessed February 2013).

DeWalt, Kathleen, M. and DeWalt Billie R.

2002 Participant Observation; a Guide for Fieldworkers. New York: Altamira Press.

Diez, Fermin

1980 The Popularity of Sports in America: an Analysis of the Value of Sports and the Role of the Media. *Michigan Discussions in Anthrpology* 6(1): 161-165.

D'Orso, Michael

2006 Eagle Blue; A Team, a Tribe and a High School Basketball Season in Arctic Alaska. New York: Bloomsbury.

Droogers, Andre'

2004 Syncretism, Power, Play. *In Syncretism in Religion*. Anita M. Leopold & Jeppe S. Jensen eds. Pp. 217-236. New York: Routledge.

Duncan, Jeff

1993a Alaskans Have Hooped it up for Years. USA Today, August 17, Sports section, Final edition. <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/USAToday/offers.html> (accessed May 3, 2008, archived).

1993b Schoolboy Stirs Alaska Hoop Frenzy. USA Today, August 17, Sports section, Final edition. <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/USAToday/offers.html> (accessed May 3, 2008, archived).

Durand, Patrick

2002 Nenana Depot History; a Time Line History of the Nenana Alaska Railroad Depot.

<http://www.alaskarails.org/modeling/nenana-depot/nenana-depot-history/index.html> (accessed March 30 2013).

Durkheim, Emile

1984 [1893] The Division of Labor in Society. New York: The Free Press, a Division of Macmillan, Inc.

1965 [1915] The Elementary forms of the Religious Life. New York: The Free press, a division of Macmillan, Inc.

- Dyck, Noel  
2000 Sports, Games, and Cultures. Oxford: Berg
- Eitle-McNutly, Tamela and Eitle, David  
2002 Race, Cultural Capital, and the Educational Effects of Participation in Sports. *Sociology of Education* 75(2): 123-146.
- Elias, Douglas P.  
1996 Worklessness and Social Pathologies in Aboriginal Communities. *Human Organization* 55(1): 13-24.
- Elias, Norbert and Dunning Eric  
1986 *Quest for Excitement; Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* New York: Basil Blackwell Inc.
- Explore North  
History of Nenana Alaska,  
<http://explorenorth.com/alaska/history/nenana-history.html>  
(accessed March 30 2013).
- Fast, Phyllis A.  
2002 *Northern Athabascan Survival: Women, Community, and the Future*. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln.
- Foley, John  
2003 *Tundra Teacher*. Epicenter Press.
- Fox, J.R.  
1983 [1961] Pueblo Baseball: a New Use for Old Witchcraft. *In Play, Games & Sports in Cultural Contexts*. Janet C. Harris & Roberta J. Park eds. Pp. 503-512. Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers.
- Geertz, Clifford  
1983 [1972] Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight. *In Play, Games & Sports in Cultural Contexts*. Janet C. Harris & Roberta J. Park eds. Pp. 39-77 Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers.

1973 *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.

Giulianotti, Richard, (ed).

2004 *Sport and Modern Social Theorists*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gmelch, George

2008 *An Anthropologist on the Team; Studying Baseball as a Former Player*.  
*Anthropology Today* 24(5): 10-15.

Goffman, Erving

1961 *Encounters; Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis:  
Bobbs-Meril Company, Inc.

1974 *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*.  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Harris, Janet C. & Park, Roberta J. (eds)

1983 *Play, Games, & Sports in Cultural Contexts*. Champaign: Human Kinetics  
Publishers.

Harris, Janet C.

1983 *Sport and Ritual: a Macroscopic Comparison of Form*. *In Play, Games &  
Sports in Cultural Contexts*. Janet C. Harris & Roberta J. Park eds. Pp. 177-189.  
Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers.

Heider, Karl G.

1983 [1977] *From Javanese to Dani: The Translation of a Game*. *In Play,  
Games & Sports in Cultural Contexts*. Janet C. Harris & Roberta J. Park eds. Pp.  
491-501. Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers.

Institute of Social and Economic Research

University of Anchorage 2004 *Status of Alaska Natives*

<http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/statusaknatives2004-vol1.pdf>

(accessed February 15 2012).

Jans, Nick

1993 *The Last Light Breaking; Living Among Alaska's Inupiat Eskimos.* Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books.

John, Graham St.

2008 *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance,* Berghahn Books.

Jordan, Will J.

1999 Black High School Students' Participation in School-Sponsored Sports Activities: Effects on School Engagement and Achievement. *Journal of Negro Education* 68(1): 54-71.

Kaufman, Jason and Patterson Orlando,

2005 Cross-National Cultural Diffusion: the Global Spread of Cricket. *American Sociological Review* 70: 82-110.

Kiffer, Dave

2010 Canadian Tsimshian Was a Leader for Alaska Native Rights. Peter Simpson Also Owned Alaska's First Native Business, Sitnews, Stories in the News, [http://www.sitnews.us/Kiffer/PeterSimpson/021810\\_peter\\_simpson.html](http://www.sitnews.us/Kiffer/PeterSimpson/021810_peter_simpson.html) (accessed November 30 2011).

King, Richard C. and Springwood, Charles F.

1999 "Playing Indian," Power, and Racial Identity in American Sports: Gerald R. Gems' "the Construction, Negotiation and Transformation of Racial Identity in American Football". *American Indian Culture and Research* 23(2): 127-131.

Koskey, Michael

2007 *Subsistence Resource Use among Ten Tanana River Valley Communities: 2004 – 2005.* Fairbanks: Alaska Department of Fish and Games, Division of Subsistence.

Lewis, Lowell J.

2008 *Toward a Unified Theory of Cultural Performance: a Reconstructive Introduction to Victor Turner.* In *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance.* Graham St. John eds. Pp 41-58 Berghahn Books.

Lindquist, Danille C.

2006 "Locating the Nation": Football Game Day and American Dreams in Central Ohio. *Journal of American Folklore* 119(474): 444-488.

Lithman, Yngve, G.

2004 Anthropologists on Home Turf: How Green is the Grass? *Anthropologica* 46: 17-27.

MacAloon, John

1987 An Observer's View of Sport Sociology. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 4(2): 103-115.

MacAloon, John & Csikszentmihalyi Mihaly

1983 [1977] Deep Play and the Flow Experience in Rock Climbing. *In Play, Games & Sports in Cultural Contexts*. Janet C. Harris & Roberta J. Park eds. Pp. 361-384. Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers.

MacClancy, Jeremy (ed)

1996 *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*. Oxford: Berg.

Mahiri, Jabari

1994 African American Males and Learning: what Discourse in Sports Offers Schooling. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 25(3): 364-375.

Maxwell, Ian

2008 The Ritualization of Performance (Studies). *In Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*. Graham St. John eds. Pp 59-75 Berghahn Books.

Mitchell, Donald G.

2001 *Take my Land, Take my Life*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press.

Mizruchi, Mark S.

1985 Local Sports Teams and Celebration of Community: A Comparative Analysis of the Home Advantage. *The Sociological Quarterly* 26(4): 507-518.

Moniz, Miguel

2007 Adaptive Transnational Identity and the Selling of Soccer: The New England Revolution and the Lusophone Migrant Populations. *Soccer and Society* 8(4): 459-477.

Moore, Philip

2004 Scouting an Anthropology of Sport. *Anthropologica* 46: 37-46.

Palmer, Catherine

2002 Introduction: Anthropology and Sport. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 13(3): 253-256.

Partnow, Patricia H.

2003 Memory and Sense of Place in Alaska. *In* *Communities of Memory*. *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 3(1).

Patkotat, Elise

2008 Academics, not Athletics, Should be High School Priority. *Anchorage Daily News*.

<http://www.adn.com/2008/11/18/594037/academics-not-athletics-should.html>

(accessed February 18 2012).

Pennington, Bill

2004 In Alaska, Getting there is Half the Fun. *New York Times*, March 1, Sports Section,

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B04E1D6163FF932A35750C0A9629C8B63&scp=2&sq=basketball+in+alaska&st=nyt> (accessed January 7

2010).

Rasmus, Stacey M.

2008 Indigenous Emotional Economies in Alaska: Surviving Youth in the Village. Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Rowe, Sharon

2008 Modern Sports: Liminal Ritual or Liminoid Pleasure? *In* Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance. Graham St. John eds. Pp 127-148 Berghahn Books.

Ruibal, Sal

2001 Love of Basketball Links Alaska's far Flung Villages.

USA Today, February 21, Sports Section.

<http://www.usatoday.com/sports/preps/basketba/2001-02-21-alaska.htm#more>

(accessed April 24, 2009).

Truitt, Gil

2010 [1985] Past Day of Glory. Anchorage: Alaska School Activities Association.

Turner, Victor

1983 [1972] Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas. *In* Play, Games & Sports in Cultural Contexts. Janet C. Harris & Roberta J. Park eds. Pp. 327-359. Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers.

1980 Social Dramas and Stories about them. *Critical Inquiry* 7(1): 141-168.

1974 Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: an Essay in Comparative Symbolology. *Rice University Studies* 60(3): 53-92.

Sands, Robert, R. (ed)

1999 Anthropology, Sport and Culture. Westport: Bergin & Garvey.

Saari, Matias

2010 Basketball Rules in Alaska Village Sports. Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

[http://www.newsminer.com/view/full\\_story/6652959/article-Basketball-rules-in-Alaska-village-sports?instance=home\\_news\\_window\\_left\\_bullets](http://www.newsminer.com/view/full_story/6652959/article-Basketball-rules-in-Alaska-village-sports?instance=home_news_window_left_bullets)

(accessed February 15 2012).

Schwartz, Barry and Barsky Stephen F.

1977 The Home Advantage. *Social Forces* 55(3): 641-661.

Shinkwin, Anne and Case, M.

1989 *Modern Foragers: Wild Resource Use in Nenana Village, Alaska*. Fairbanks: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence.

Simeone, William, E.

1995 *Rifles, Blankets, and Beads; Identity, History, and the Northern Athapaskan Potlatch*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Spring, Joel H.

1974 *Mass Culture and School Sports*. *History of Education* 14(4): 483-499.

Sprott, Julie

1997 *Christmas, Basketball and Sled Dog Races: Common and Uncommon Themes in the New Seasonal Round in an Inupiaq Village*. *Arctic Anthropology* 34(1):68-85.

UAF Library Digital Archives

[http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm4/results.php?CISOOP1=all&CISOBOX1=basketball  
&CISOFIELD1=CISOSEARCHALL&CISOROOT=all](http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm4/results.php?CISOOP1=all&CISOBOX1=basketball&CISOFIELD1=CISOSEARCHALL&CISOROOT=all)

(accessed February 15 2012).

Wacquant, Loic

2004 *Body & Soul: Notes of an Apprentice Ethnographer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wikipedia Contributors,

2010 "James Naismith", Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia,

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Naismith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Naismith), (accessed November 30 2011)

2010 "Basketball", Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia,

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basketball>, (accessed November 30 2011)

Weber, Donald

1995 *From Limen to Border: a Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies*. *American Quarterly* 47(3): 525-536.

Werbner, Pnina

1996 'Our Blood is Green': Cricket, Identity and Social Empowerment among British Pakistanis. *In* Sport, Identity and Ethnicity. John MacClancy ed. Pp. 87-111. Oxford: Berg.

Wilde, Charles

2004 From Racing to Rugby: all Work and no Play for Gogodala Men. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15(3): 286-302.

Yardley, William & Olsen Erik

2011 Tracking Caribou, Shooting Hoops, Winning Trophies. *The New York Times*, November 5, U.S. section,  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/us/alaska-high-school-basketball-team-thrives-in-adversity.html?\\_r=2&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/us/alaska-high-school-basketball-team-thrives-in-adversity.html?_r=2&emc=eta1) (accessed November 30 2011).