

Axthelm, Pete. *The City Game: Basketball from the Garden to the Playground*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999 (reprint, original 1970). \$12 pb.

In 1970, when this book first appeared, the hopes for both the New York Knicks and for Pete Axthelm were high. The Knicks had just won an NBA championship with a great blend of defense and ball movement. Their future seemed limitless in the limited atmosphere of professional basketball. Pete Axthelm was 27 years old and had his senior thesis from Yale published by Yale University Press when he was just 24. His future, too, seemed limitless and this new book on the champion Knicks only solidified his auspicious start. Unfortunately for both the Knicks and Axthelm, the promise was not fulfilled. The Knicks did win another NBA championship in 1973, but have been a franchise of unfulfilled dreams ever since, reaching a nadir this past season when they struggled to make the playoffs after being viewed as a championship contender once again.

For Axthelm the promise was more tragic than frustrating; he lost a continual running battle with alcohol, dying in 1991 at the age of 47. It is almost fitting that in this book Axthelm captures the rhythm, the passion, and the melancholy of the game of basketball. The unintentional foreshadowing of 1969–70 becomes ironic when viewed through the lens of 1999. In this new reprinted edition from the University of Nebraska Press, Rick Telander's introduction offers remarkable insight into Axthelm and the creation of this volume. Though it runs only six pages, this addition truly bridges the 30-year gap between its original publication date and today.

As Telander notes, Axthelm's original purpose was to write a book about the NBA champion Knicks; with his writing skills, Axthelm would have undoubtedly created a lively and successful volume. But many other writers were doing that; the Knicks were a New York phenomenon, and that made their success seem bigger or more important than other teams' successes. Axthelm scrutinized the literary landscape and noted the crowd of books on this same topic. Not wishing to be just another "rah rah" book, he expanded his scope and his vision to include a "parallel universe"—basketball as it was played on the playgrounds of New York City, and its legendary players. It was in this volume that Earl "the Goat" Manigault first became known in print after years of being acknowledged at playgrounds throughout the city as the king of his generation of players. Manigault's struggles end in Axthelm's book with him a dope addict in prison. Telander's new introduction notes Manigault's ultimate end when in May, 1998, "his twice-operated-upon, heroin-damaged heart gave out"(x).

There are other fallen idols like Herman the Helicopter, Kenny Bellinger, Funny Kitt, and Joe Hammond. It is hard enough to be as good as these young men, but even harder when you have nothing but bad luck. Of course, people make bad decisions, and these men did, but there are other factors—the expectations of others, the need to excel and perform immediately, the ready availability of drugs. All these can and did intercede, making these individual stories bittersweet (with an emphasis on the bitter).

Contrasting with these are the stories of the 1969–70 Knicks, both individually and as a team. Axthelm focuses on three aspects of the Knicks: the creation of the team and its

slow start in the season; the players and their individual stories; and, finally, the games that ultimately led to their triumph as champions. It is interesting to view the changes in the pro game, both subtle and blatant, since that time. The three-point shot has both extended the defense and changed shooting percentages. The game today seems to be one of dunks and three-point shots. The medium jump shot today is either eschewed or, in many cases, simply missed; the 1969–70 Knicks did not miss the fifteen-footer. All of their starters (Frazier, Barnett, Bradley, DeBusschere, and Reed) finished the year shooting better than 45%, as did their top two reserves (Russell and Riordan). In the playoffs their shooting dropped off by only one or two percentage points, despite the increased quality of the opponents and the intensity of the games. The Knicks were also seen as an outstanding defensive team with a defense that rotated to cover up for attempted steals and a press that could shut down the hottest shooting opponents, yet scores of games regularly exceeded 100 or 110 points; holding an opponent to 90 points was seen as clamping down on defense. Today reaching 100 is seen as a complete breakdown on defense. The rougher play today is called tougher defense, but I see it more as an acceptance of the league and its referees of what would have been fouls in 1969–70. Is the game better today? I think not. The shooting is poorer, the shot selection embarrassing, the fouling constant, and the passion largely missing.

Did the Knicks signal the end of good basketball? Hardly. The Lakers of Magic Johnson, the Celtics of Larry Bird, and the Bulls of Michael Jordan were exceptional. What the Knicks did herald was the ability of great individuals to subsume their egos to triumph as a team. Axthelm saw it in the Garden and on the playgrounds in 1970. It has largely vanished, driven out by greed, television, and instant gratification. Reading this book recaptures the pleasures of the city game.

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