

Under the Boards **The Cultural Revolution** **in Basketball**

JEFFREY LANE







UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS • LINCOLN AND LONDON

Under the Boards

The Cultural Revolution
in Basketball

JEFFREY LANE

© 2007 by Jeffrey Lane. All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America



“Ten Crack Commandments” words and music
by Khary Kimani Turner, Chris Martin, and
Christopher Wallace. © 1997 EMI April Music
Inc., Weblife, Hertzrentatune, Gifted Pearl
Music, and Justin Combs Publishing Co.,
Inc. All rights controlled and administered
by EMI April Music, Inc. All rights reserved.
International copyright secured. Used by
permission.

Libray of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lane, Jeffrey, 1979–

Under the boards : the cultural revolution
in basketball / Jeffrey Lane.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8032-8053-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8032-8053-x (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Basketball—Social aspects—United States.

2. Basketball—United States—History—20th
century. 3. Basketball players—United

States—Social life and customs. I. Title.

GV889.26.L36 2007

796.3230973—dc22

2006029803

Designed and set in Scala by A. Shahan.

To my mother and father,
for believing in me with
loving devotion and utter
conviction so powerful
that I became a believer too.

CONTENTS

- List of Illustrations* viii
- Acknowledgments* ix
- Introduction* xi
- 1 Can't Knock the Hustle:** Individualism in Hip-Hop, Hoops, and the Drug Culture 1
- 2 Peddling the Street:** Gangsta Wannabes, Allen Iverson, and Black Masculinity 27
- 3 Power Game:** Ron Artest, Latrell Sprewell, and Politics in the NBA 69
- 4 The Last White Superstar:** Larry Legend and White Nostalgia 113
- 5 My Dad Was a Military Man:** Bob Knight, Paternalism, and Hoosier History 147
- 6 The New Globetrotters:** Why the NBA Outsources Talent 197
- Conclusion** 237
- Bibliographic Essay* 243

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 The rapper Freeway in front of
Keith Haring's mural *Crack Is Wack* xx
- 2 Allen Iverson of Team USA
at the 2004 Athens Olympics 26
- 3 Latrell Sprewell of the
Golden State Warriors in 1995 68
- 4 Larry Bird driving hard
to the hoop in 1986 112
- 5 Indiana University coach Bob Knight
and player Steve Alford in 1987 146
- 6 Vince Carter dunking over
French center Frederic Weis at the
2000 Olympics 196

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer heartfelt thanks to my mother and father for their constant support, encouragement, and love, not just with this project but with all things and at all moments, and for generously making sure that I had what I needed to get this book written; my father again for his dutiful, contemplative reading of each and every word of this book; his illuminating input; and his grammar and language wizardry; my loving godparents, Sheila and Brett, for always believing in me and in this book; their infectious enthusiasm for life and learning; and for connecting me with wonderful, helpful people; my agent, Dan Carlinsky, for believing in my potential as a writer and pushing me to get there, teaching me about the book business and taking a chance on the project; Rob Taylor, acquiring editor at the University of Nebraska Press, for his confidence in me and commitment to the book; my project editor, Ann F. Baker, for her supportiveness of a first-time author; my copyeditor, Bojana Ristich, for her rigorous and sophisticated refinement of the manuscript; the University of Nebraska Press for taking on and investing in the project; my family and friends, not all of whom I'll name here but to all of whom I'm grateful—you all contributed to this project in one way or another: Pauline, Michael, Natalie, Roy, Zach, Sam, Craig, Eddie, Ian, Jon, Bones and Bones, Team Hot, Suzie, Eli, McGoey, Molly, Evan, Billy, Matt P., Krin, Gavin, Stu (I

wish he were here to celebrate with me), Danny, the Grossmans, my crews—HCES/HS, Wesleyan, Gonzalez, and Shockamania; Mary Ann Clawson and Charles Lemert of the Wesleyan University Sociology Department for inculcating a love of the discipline and for their guidance in the embryonic stages before I even realized that I was writing a book; my caring, sharp principal readers: Joan Bryant (who helped get this book in gear in the early stages), Christopher Hayes, Judy Polumbaum, Kristofer Rutman, Bob Segal, Jessica Seidman, and Matthew Stimmel (a helluva roommate too); Todd Boyd and Nelson George for providing a well of inspiring, provocative writing from which to learn and draw upon; Ghostface Killah, Biggie, and Jay-Z, and Chris Rock for the creative stimulation and for breaking things down; Tom Blatchford, Jeff Cohen, Tom Konchalski, Jackie MacMullan, Tony Rosa, Dan Shaughnessy, and Jeff Twiss for their thoughts, candor, and expertise during our interviews; Harvey Araton for his valuable input on the Larry Bird chapter; the Indiana University Media Department for generously providing photos and information; the family at Diner in South Williamsburg, Brooklyn, for (first) great company and (second) grub and caffeine; the Atlas Café on Brooklyn's Havemeyer Street and DT/UT in Manhattan for the high-speed Internet and good vibes; Emily for all that she has contributed to the book and, more than that, to my life; the Osler family for taking good care of me during my stay in Cambridge/Boston; Ruth Witmer at the *Indiana Daily Student*, Mike Schreiber, Angelika Jauch at *imago*, and Jaime Calsyn at *Icon Sports Media* for providing brilliant photos and for looking out for me; and, of course, God and the sport that I love.

INTRODUCTION

Best-selling mystery novelist Lisa Scottoline's 2005 *Devil's Corner* begins with a black male teenager, his hair in cornrows, holding a Glock handgun to the head of the main character, a female lawyer. The teen offender, a product of the Philadelphia ghetto, wears Iversons (Reebok-produced sneakers named after the ballplayer Allen Iverson), baggy jeans, and "a red satin Sixers jacket." Scottoline probably selected this look for her character because it would likely bring forth a familiar mental picture of a street thug in her readers' minds.

This stock image of a hoodlum fits with, and even helps explain, the depraved act being perpetrated. By aligning the teen's physical appearance with controversial Sixers star guard Allen Iverson, the author seals the connection between the character and criminality: the invented gun-wielding delinquent and Iverson, who has been arrested multiple times—including at least once on a gun charge—share the same hairstyle, sneakers, jeans' style, and team apparel and allegiance.

Precisely because many people reflexively associate both hip-hop fashion and Allen Iverson with unlawfulness, the National Basketball Association (NBA) no longer permits its players to dress in the way described above. Prior to the implementation of an off-court dress code for the 2005–06 season, the league's mostly young and black athletes usually dressed in one of two ways

over the last decade or so: hip-hop casual or hip-hop corporate. NBA chic meant that a player either looked like a wealthier, bejeweled version of Scottoline's fictional troublemaker or went instead with a snazzy, custom-fitted dress suit accented by shiny accessories — diamond earrings, watches with bezels, designer shades. A player with a sense of humor and notion of self-grandeur — someone like seven-foot-one Shaquille O'Neal of the Miami Heat — might, as a playful nod to his flamboyant predecessors who played in the funk- and Afro-centric American Basketball Association (ABA) days, throw in a top hat, cane, or loud suit color. With the announcement of the dress code, hip-hop corporate now pervades but in a toned-down, censored form: no chains or pendants outside the shirt; no headwear or sunglasses indoors; and — though they aren't explicitly mentioned — no canes.

NBA players who prefer the outlawed new-money hip-hop look celebrate an aesthetic they helped popularize along with a conspicuous cast of movers and shakers from the inner cities nationwide; they have ascended income brackets by legal or illegal means such as sports, entertainment (e.g., rap music), drugs, and gangsterism. In the interwoven circles of rap music, basketball, and drug culture, the hangouts, automobiles, ideology, jargon, and sexual partners of each group are frequently one and the same. For example, "Me against the World," a well-liked rap song by Tupac "2Pac" Shakur, functions also as a self-reliance mantra for embattled young black men and is a commonly found tattoo on hoopsters' bodies. Moreover, the notorious boss of Death Row Records, Marion "Suge" Knight, a major player in the Los Angeles underworld, is believed by many to have orchestrated Shakur's killing.

Although hip-hop had become institutionalized in the NBA as a meaningful part of players' lives and a commercial force essential to the NBA's standing in popular culture, the league, always careful in its handling of the genre, plainly changed its relationship to it. After a series of disparaging incidents — most glaringly a 2004 brawl in Detroit during which players on the Indiana Pacers tussled violently with the Pistons' fans on national television — the league took

a stand against hip-hop. With fan and player welfare, legal responsibility, and (most important) image at stake, the NBA introduced a series of housecleaning reforms for players—including random in-season drug testing, age limits, and mandatory etiquette workshops during the preseason. Featured in the league’s list of quality-of-life and safety adjustments was a ban on oversized jeans.

According to this logic, clothes were part of the problem. The NBA therefore needed to ban all banable symbols of hip-hop (prohibiting tattoos would certainly prove more difficult) because there was something treacherous about these items that was either impelling wearers to behave like criminals or impelling spectators to see the items as symptoms of a broader disorder and destructiveness.

Standout player Tim Duncan of the San Antonio Spurs didn’t understand why the NBA had infused clothing with such transcendent meaning. In an unlikely incendiary quip, Duncan, the league’s quietest and least hip-hop superstar, called the NBA dress code “retarded.” Duncan doesn’t dress hip-hop cool; he dresses comfortably, without actively using his clothing to make a statement. His outfit was now a concern, but for what purpose? Was he one person in a blazer and khakis and another in a low-hanging Jesus piece and do-rag? Clothing doesn’t actually make the man as advertisers and fashion magazines allege, does it? There’s no known correlation between fashion sense and common sense.

But there’s something more complicated going on here.

The New York Police Department profiles the city’s most successful rappers. It’s no secret that a section was created in the department to map out the rap world and monitor these musicians through secret surveillance. In 2004, Court TV’s thesmokinggun.com posted portions of a five-hundred-page dossier of mug shots, rap sheets, and incident reports of hip-hop heavyweights like Jay-Z, 50 Cent, and Ja Rule. The folder’s thickness reflects the alarming fact that most of the popular rappers in the area have criminal records (some

for serious charges, some for lesser ones; some before and some after rappers had become famous).

Such tracking by the police is an obvious attack on hip-hop and a seeming breach of civil rights. Yet defeating this probe is probably not the first personal liberties cause most people would champion, nor is such internal intelligence irrational from the police perspective. Big-name rappers have an unusually powerful cultural position and can influence world events, yet at the same time they are frequently figures of dubious legal standing: they often bait police with insults and threats or start beefs with rival rappers that have been known to unfold violently. Many rappers openly maintain ties to organized crime and street gangs, and drug dealing routinely finances rap label start-ups.

In a controversial book, *Out of Bounds: Inside the NBA's Culture of Rape, Violence and Crime*, Jeff Benedict found that 40 percent of NBA players active during the 2001–02 season had criminal records. (The statistic was based on documents available for 177 of the 417 American-born players listed on team rosters.) While one can debate the merits of Benedict's research—he doesn't distinguish between a player's being investigated and his being convicted, for example—and the accuracy of his findings given his small sample size, it is nonetheless obvious that the NBA has to confront criminality, the victims of which, specifically and sadly, are often women. Although NBA commissioner David Stern was critical of Benedict's work, the NBA has essentially reacted to the connection between hip-hop and the criminal culture in the same way as the New York Police Department. Because a substantial proportion of both rappers and ballplayers has been in trouble with the law, these two groups currently find themselves the targets of sweeping reactionary measures and, in the case of NBA players, a movement to separate them from their most obvious association with hip-hop: their clothing fashion.

Doesn't it behoove the NBA to more closely monitor the product it's selling and to protect its image? After all, it is a business, and a

sound business controls image and makes money while limiting liability.

From the NBA's vantage point, it doesn't matter if a connection exists between baggy clothing and criminality. According to Virginia Postrel, author of *The Substance of Style*, now more than ever consumers make purchases based on their aesthetic response to a product. Whether it is the lead performer in a play or an espresso machine, a customer invests in items that have the "right" appearance because of the values that customer intrinsically attaches to them. In an arena where many ticket buyers are higher-income white men in their mid-forties, the goal of the NBA as a business is to cater to the tastes of such ticket buyers and to attract companies advertising products aimed at this demographic. If these consumers, cognizant of their reactions or not, see a criminal when they see Carmelo Anthony of the Denver Nuggets on the sidelines in a flat-brimmed New Era cap, oversized white T-shirt, and droopy jeans, then it makes business sense to adjust his appearance.

In acting as a profit-minded enterprise, does the NBA advance a racist conflation between hip-hop clothing and violence that is not only unfounded but that also antagonizes the black labor force responsible for much of its financial success? Is the NBA affirming a devastating stereotype of the black male as a societal menace? Then again, isn't hip-hop in all of its incarnations—fashion surely included—about being provocative and undermining authority? Are the players, as Benedict's findings can be used to suggest, doing it to themselves? Regardless, the NBA is clearly guilty of having it both ways: it chastises players for looking or acting "too street" while it manipulates and sells their street-bred swagger for all its worth and cashes in on the celebration of its players and iconography in mainstream hip-hop. The NBA prohibits players from wearing trendy throwback jerseys during postgame press conferences but outfits them for games in uniform reissues to model an expanding inventory of merchandised apparel. The NBA can thank the rap world, from which it's rapidly distancing itself, for making retro team gear a fashion epidemic.

Ironically, the NBA, acting like an out-of-touch parent, weighed in too late with its announcement of a dress code and missed not only the boat but also the point: hip-hop polices its own fashion. Hip-hop's self-determined, always evolving style sense was already moving in a fresh direction long before the NBA worked the dress code into the new Collective Bargaining Agreement in the summer of 2005. Hip-hop trendsetters like Outkast, P. Diddy, and Jay-Z, applauded in such men's magazines as *Esquire* for their visionary understanding of high-end fashion, had already been telling their followers, at least for a couple of years, to put away the big jerseys and "go dressier," more sophisticated, more businesslike (but, of course, to do so with flavor). California-based Élevée Fine Clothing estimated recently that it had been customizing suits for 50 percent of the NBA *before* the league-mandated fashion makeover.

There's a major difference between black fashion leaders guiding a change in the preferred look of young black men and a white authority structure determining what is and is not permissible. Moreover, with more than eighty foreign-born players on team rosters at the start of the 2005–06 season, new looks and trends were naturally arriving through the sport's globalization.

The dress code and issues related to it have absolutely nothing to do with the game of basketball—the on-court parts of the sport, the in-game action. Unlike rule changes like the addition of a three-point line or permitting a zone defense, the dress code is designed exclusively to change what happens off the court—that is, its purpose is to affect image. Image is what much of basketball is about—looking good, bad, safe, edgy, cool, tough—and the manipulation, ownership, and selling of image is the contested terrain between the league and its players. The overall image of basketball has changed dramatically over the last thirty years or so. Since the 1970s, both amateur and professional men's basketball have become enormously more important and interesting. Basketball is America's most exciting sport not because of its dynastic teams, sublimely talented players, or most thrilling buzzer-beaters, but because of the emer-

gence of a transcendent culture of the game, complete with values and symbols; aesthetics and styles; and economic, political, and racial dynamics. Race in basketball, still basically a black and white category, is a particularly rich and revelatory subject, encompassing (among other things) tensions between black players and white owners and managers; the peculiarity of white minds—commentators and writers—thinking and talking about black bodies; the definitions and self-fulfilling expectations of black and white masculinity; and the overt and latent prejudices and fetishes of fired-up fans.

In addition to reflecting trends in society, the culture of basketball influences the everyday. Regular people shadow ballplayers in numerous ways—in dress: jerseys, warm-ups, and Air Jordans have become street clothes; in talk: “finish strong,” “fourth-quarter mentality,” and “I can take that guy” are part of the general vocabulary; in thinking: a free-agent attitude pervades the workplace and little showmen perform in the classroom; and in views of the future: the ubiquitous but illusory hoop dream is a practical goal for young people.

Focusing primarily on the NBA, in this book I explore six case studies that collectively tell the true, gritty story of basketball’s last thirty-plus years. These highlight the players, coaches, institutions, and events that have shaped the culture and politics of basketball while impacting and reflecting American life and popular culture. Taken together, these accounts show how and why basketball has changed, how it takes from and gives to the rest of our culture, and where it all leads.



Under the Boards



1. Jay-Z protégé and Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam rapper Freeway, in a vintage Michael Jordan jersey, poses in front of Keith Haring's *Crack Is Wack* mural in Manhattan. After his 2000 arrest for selling drugs, which came on the heels of his rap debut on a Jay-Z track, the North Philadelphia hustler switched his energy into music. © Mike Schreiber, Michael Schreiber Photography.