

PUT ME IN COACH: SURVIVING THE BENCH AND THE LOCKER ROOM IN
ADOLESCENT BASKETBALL LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the off-court spaces of adolescent basketball literature. In most sports literature, the spotlight is placed on the field of play, whether it be a football field, a baseball diamond, or a basketball court. However, I take the spotlight off of the court and place it on the bench and in the locker room.

After a short history of adolescent sports fiction, I examine the bench. Although the bench may be “the best seat in the house,” it is just that—a seat. The young adult athletes in these basketball novels want to play; anything that keeps them from playing becomes a threat. For this reason, the bench becomes the coaches’ best form of punishment. On the bench, both players and coaches are powerless. They are part of the team, but the fact that they are sidelined renders them helpless. As a result, the bench often becomes a place of selfishness and cynicism.

Next, I take a look at the locker room. The locker room is different for each young adult athlete. While some are able to find community in the locker room, others see it as a place where social orders are strictly enforced. The coach is also a dominant figure in the locker room. His or her behavior often determines whether an athlete’s locker room experience is a positive one or a negative one. Moreover, I analyze the locker room as a gendered space and discuss the sexual images that arise.

This thesis is grounded in close readings of various young adult basketball novels. I also incorporate both adolescent literary theory, as well as sports theory in order to find out the impact that these spaces have on young adult athletes.

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INTRODUCTION

Professional and collegiate sports dominate our television screens, our morning papers, our Google searches, and our everyday conversations. We bet on sports, participate in leagues—real and fantasy—and gather together to watch opposing teams and players duke it out. We scream at referees, give high fives, and argue about players, teams, and coaches. We drink Gatorade and wear Jordans. If we happen to miss the score of the Laker's game the night before, we can rest assured knowing that a classmate or a colleague has caught the eleven o'clock Sportscenter. Information about our favorite teams and favorite players is remarkably accessible. There are numerous television stations, hundreds of specialized magazines, and thousands of websites begging us to read, learn, and watch nothing but sports, sports, sports.

Nevertheless, the abundance of information is not always enough. The sports fan can read the latest article in Sports Illustrated or visit an athlete's personal website, but most likely, all he or she will get is a plethora of sports-related clichés. He or she will read about how athletes take it “one game at a time,” give it “their best,” and hope to represent their franchise and their city to the “best of their ability.” Athletes make sure to let their fans know that they don't do it for the money, but for the love of the game. The “investigative sports journalist” might tell us a bit more. He or she may follow the athlete around for an entire season, telling us pre and post-game routines, off-season regiments, and personal life successes and blunders. However, this still does not satisfy all sports fans. None of this can tell them what is in the athlete's head, what drives him

or her, and what makes him or her an athlete, both on and off the court. For these answers, fans often turn to sports literature.

In Laurel & Thorn: The Athlete in American Literature, Robert J. Higgs argues, “For the most comprehensive and pluralistic view of the athlete, at least of his life off the field, literature is still the champion” (viii). Through literature, the sports fan, the literary critic, and the avid reader are all able to see and learn about the athlete in ways that watching from the stands could never equal. Higgs explains that it is typical to view an athlete simply as a body. Perfection in the athletic arena is much easier to fathom than perfection of the mind or spirit. We can actually witness athletes do things with their bodies that most can only dream about. However, Higgs maintains, “The heroics of the athlete simply cannot be confined to the playing field since the self manifested in the physical struggle is the same self that directs the body in activities off the field” (2). According to Higgs, an athlete is an athlete whether he is playing his or her respective sport or not. Whatever force it is that drives them to jump up and catch that ball is the same force that dictates other areas of their lives. Even though an athlete may not be as successful in these other areas, sports literature still allows the reader to witness how an athlete’s mind works.

However, sports literature is not always realistic and does not always create an accurate depiction of current athletes. In fact, sports literature often sensationalizes athletics. It is often about a star athlete whose achievements are far from realistic. Nonetheless, this is one of the reasons why many people get so much pleasure out of reading about sports. It is not the average athlete who most fans are interested in; it is the perfect athlete whose achievements reach beyond the playing field. It is the athlete who

allows readers and fans to forget about their own mundane life and fantasize about what it would be like if they too were a star athlete.

For many years the bulk of sports fiction has been about baseball, football, and boxing. In Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction, 1868-1980, Michael Oriard maintains that these three sports have dominated sports literature for two reasons. The first reason is obvious—popularity. For over a hundred years these sports have dominated American culture. The second reason is because each of these sports, according to Oriard, “offers the writer a vehicle for a distinct representation of reality.” Oriard goes on to explain:

Baseball is our most pastoral game and combines most obviously to the spectator a balance between offense and defense, individual and team, organization and individualism. Football is more complex, employs attack and defense motifs more clearly than baseball, and represents most obviously the subservience of the individual to the team effort for the common good [...] it also has a reckless, desperate quality [...] Boxing represents most clearly the pitting of one man against another in a stark, impersonal environment; it is the most primitive of all sports. (7)

Each of these sports creates a distinct picture of American culture. A poem about baseball may evoke feelings and memories of summer afternoons, hot dogs, and patriotism; while a short story about football might remind the reader of sore muscles, hard hits, and falling leaves; and a boxing novel may summon forth images of gambling, blood, and cheering crowds.

Only recently, due to its rapid and massive popularity, has basketball emerged as a major player in sports fiction. Basketball was invented in 1891 by Dr. James Naismith, who originally conceived the game by nailing two peach baskets to the balcony of a gymnasium. His intent was simply to find an indoor game that would provide exercise during the cold winter months. However, within less than a hundred years, basketball had become the most popular American spectator sport (Oriard 5). Like baseball, football, and boxing, basketball has emerged as a subject of sports fiction not just because of its popularity, but because, according to Oriard, it also offers a “distinct representation of reality.” Oriard claims that “basketball is the most artistic of our national games, the one allowing the most creativity and spontaneity by the players.” While baseball is a pastoral sport, football reckless and desperate, and boxing primitive, basketball seems to be loose and free. Oriard maintains that “basketball exemplifies the life of the individual ill-suited to regimentation and control” (7). In this sense, basketball can be a wonderful subject for literature; it can act as a metaphor for the creative and spontaneous individual who finds it difficult to live under the rules of society. More specifically, basketball can symbolize the struggles of many adolescents. “Conventional wisdom” tells us that young adults are at a crossroads in their lives when they desire freedom from the restrictions of childhood, but are still unable to cope with adulthood head-on. As a result, young adults resort to and are encouraged to play sports. Sports are liberating for many adolescents because they enable them to break free from the inhibited environment that they feel they live in.

Nevertheless, basketball, like any sport, is restrictive because of the rules of the game. Players cannot go outside the designated boundaries, they can only move with the

ball while dribbling, and they cannot put their hands on the opposing team. Basketball is also a team sport, in which success does not rely on the performance of a single player. To many adolescents, these rules and/or restrictions are very familiar. Because of their age and social status, they are often prohibited from going certain places and acting in certain ways. They are also dependent on others—usually parents—for survival. The restrictions can be hard for them to deal with because, like the basketball player, they may be “ill-suited to regimentation and control” (7). As a result, many adolescents need to find an avenue that liberates them. For many young adults, sports seem to be the perfect escape and basketball the perfect sport.

Participating in sports like basketball is an acceptable way for adolescents to hang on to their notions of childhood and play. Thomas S. Hendricks argues that “sport offers people a chance to re-experience some of the themes of early life.” According to Hendricks, this means “the opportunity for a sort of social regression, i.e., a return to simpler, smaller scale social structures” (21). Physical play, for Hendricks, brings people closer to their childhood. Running and jumping and sweating reminds them of simpler times, when they did not have to sit and think and make decisions. For many adolescents, this is very important. They are experiencing real problems—making real decisions that have consequences—perhaps for the first time in their lives. Sports can bring them back to childhood, as opposed to moving them forward into adulthood. Hendricks argues that sport “is a world of social, emotional, and moral simplicity where people can re-experience what it means to be alive without fear of consequences” (19). According to Hendricks, sports allows the adolescent “an escape from the complications of modern life” (19) and “the freedom from interference” (21). When they are on the

basketball court, some adolescents can presumably forget about whatever problems exist outside those lines and are empowered by their athletic ability because it liberates them from other aspects of their life.

However, sometimes the perfect escape—what seems empowering to adolescents—can actually come back to haunt them. Their empowerment seems to be a significant and beneficial way of dealing with and coming to terms with an otherwise cruel world, but it is not always a positive thing. What appears to be an empowering experience—for instance, a young adult athlete excelling on the basketball court—can also be disempowering in the sense that it allows players to avoid other important aspects of their life. Because they concentrate on basketball so much, their schoolwork may suffer or their relationship with friends may deteriorate. Consequently, Hendricks is shortsighted when he claims that sports do not have any real consequences. In fact, for many adolescents, sports have important consequences that affect not only their current situation, but their future as well.

These consequences involve problems that many adolescents face, both athletes and non-athletes alike. The life of most teenagers in adolescent literature is usually “a huge, unrelated, fascinating, frightening hodgepodge” (Holland 64). Presumably, then, reading about characters their own age facing similar problems allows young adults to realize that they are not alone. A great number of these novels have even been labeled as “social problem novels.” Nevertheless, many authors and critics argue that young adult literature cannot be categorized or easily defined. Isabelle Holland maintains that adolescent literature is whatever a teenager may be reading at a certain time. She explains, “An adolescent, depending on age, sex, and taste, can read Beatrix Potter,

Henry Miller, John Knowles, Leo Tolstoy, Louisa May Alcott, the Bobbsey Twins, Arthur Clark, Jane Austen, Philip Roth, or Tolkien—or all of them together within the same six months’ period” (61). Since adolescents are both child and adult, they have many different tastes and it is, therefore, difficult to declare what is and what is not adolescent literature.

Nonetheless, telling stories is a business and publishers must find a way to label and market certain texts. In “The Sand in the Oyster: Our Side of the Fence,” Patty Campbell describes the young adult novel: “To be a YA novel, then, a book must have a climactic epiphany of new maturity as the subtext and be told in the YA voice from the limited adolescent viewpoint. In addition, it must be relevant to the lives of young readers in some way” (361). For the most part, this is a very broad definition and authors have a great deal of flexibility. However, it is the last part of this definition—the fact that the novel must be “relevant to the lives of young readers”—that most authors pay particularly close attention to; young adult sports fiction is no different. Adolescents go through a number of physical and emotional changes and it is often hard for many teenagers to understand the consequences of these changes. Norma Klein, who often writes adolescent novels dealing with sexuality, argues that the goal of young adult literature should be to help ease the complexities of adolescent life. She writes, “I may be asking a lot of books, but I’d like as many of them as possible to somehow make life easier for adolescents, to make them aware that even their deepest and most private feelings are not freakish or strange but are shared by others, have been experienced not only by their peers, but by us, the older generation, as well” (26). Klein believes that if young adult authors present narratives in a realistic manner, then adolescents will not be

as threatened by their peers, their elders, or by their future because they will have seen their experience reflected in literature. Although Klein's discussion concentrates primarily on issues dealing with sexuality, the same applies to issues revolving around sports; issues such as relationships with coaches, parents, and teammates, as well as the consequences of winning and losing, are all problems that many adolescents face.

In this discussion, I will limit my analysis to young adult basketball fiction. I am not going to examine the problems that these characters face on the court, or even in their lives outside of basketball; I will concentrate more specifically on the off-court aspects of basketball and the problems that exist there. These off-court aspects include the relationships that are formed and the events that take place on the bench and inside the locker room. These two places are very different for many young adult athletes. Some enjoy the atmosphere of the locker room; others cannot wait to leave. Some do not mind being out of the "spotlight" and sitting on the bench; others despise it. Nonetheless, the locker room and the bench occupy a great deal of the young adult athlete's time and energy. And, if it is true that adolescent literature must be "relevant to the lives of young readers," then analyzing what goes on in these spaces becomes important when interpreting who the young adult athlete is and how he or she is affected by the bench and the locker room.

Despite this optimistic aspiration that adolescent literature will help teenagers make the transition from childhood to adulthood, it is not always so cut and dry. Many young adult authors try to simplify teenage problems by tying the novel together with a moral. Often, this easy fix or sermon-like novel does more harm than good, creating "black and white issues which are really subtle shades of gray" (Klein 24). Within the

genre of young adult sports literature, this has been a dominant trend. Therefore, before I discuss the bench and the locker room, I will first give a brief history of young adult sports fiction.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF YOUNG ADULT SPORTS FICTION

In the late 1800s, dime-novels and serial magazines provided the majority of reading material for boys. Parents thought that these stories were too violent and too sensational and they did not want their children to read them. As a result, the traditional boy's sports story evolved as a means of instilling character in young boys, rather than another source of entertainment. Weekly magazines such as St. Nicholas and Street & Smith's All-Sport Library became very popular. Gilbert Patten, who wrote under the pseudonym Burt L. Standish, was one of the first and most prominent juvenile sports novelist. According to Chris Crowe, Patten is "generally given credit both for permanently establishing sports novels as a legitimate commercial genre and for creating the formula for sports stories that would last into the twenty-first century" (More Than a Game 15). Referring to his sports novels, which were usually about baseball, Patten wrote, "Such stories would give me the opportunity to preach—by example—the doctrine of a clean mind in a clean and healthy body" (qtd. in More Than a Game 13). Writing about sports allowed Patten and his contemporaries to "preach" to their young readers; their stories were sermons on good, moral behavior, but they still maintained their readers' interest through sports action. If the boys were merely reading guidelines on how to behave, they would most likely become bored. However, by placing these

“sermons” within the context of a sporting event—by “preaching” before the climactic touchdown pass or last second shot—the majority of boys continued reading with interest.

As Crowe mentions, these stories were formulaic; they were usually about honest, good looking white boys who excelled in various sports and led their school teams to victory. By the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century there were numerous juvenile sports authors including Edward Stratemeyer, H. Irving Hancock, Lester Chadwick, Ralph Henry Barbour, and William Heyliger. All of these authors copied the blueprint that Patten laid out for them and they created their own version of Patten’s star protagonist, Frank Merriwell.

Frank Merriwell is the quintessential student athlete of the early young adult sports genre. As Crowe puts it, “He succeeded at every sport he played—from baseball to billiards—and always, through his wit, athletic skill, and quite often through dramatic and incredible last-second heroics, managed to overcome whatever obstacles a story’s villains threw his way” (More Than a Game 16). In fact, Frank Merriwell, and characters like him, are responsible for creating a myth in American sports. According to Wiley Lee Umphlett, “However unreal he may seem, Frank was the personified ideal in action of what every American boy thought he could become, simply because the American way of life led him to believe the mythical accomplishments of a Frank Merriwell possible” (37). The accomplishments that Frank achieves in sports are unrealistic to the extreme; no boy is that good at that many sports and could conceivably win every time in such dramatic fashion. Frank is not only shown as victorious on the playing field; he is also courageous and honest off the field, often setting impractical examples for readers by

making melodramatic, moral decisions. As a result, athletic accomplishments became exaggerated myths and the athletes themselves were perceived as super-human.

As young adult sports literature evolved, it became less preachy and more reliable on play-by-play game action. In 1948, Clair Bee published his Chip Hilton series, and in the 1950s Matt Christopher hit the scene, publishing more than 120 novels about various sports with Merriwell-esque protagonists. Before the 1980s—with the exception of John R. Tunis—the conflicts of young adult sports novels did not stray from events within the sports themselves. However, Tunis was a groundbreaking author; he produced adolescent fiction that set sports as a backdrop for more serious issues facing young adults. In his article “John R. Tunis and the Sports Novels for Adolescents: A Little Ahead of His Time,” John S. Simmons argues that Tunis was revolutionary because he did not preach to his readers the importance of a wholesome, healthy lifestyle, nor did he emphasize winning as necessary. While discussing a number of Tunis’s novels, including two of his basketball books, Yea! Wildcats! (1944) and Go, Team, Go (1954), Simmons maintains that Tunis “provided a series of YA novels which reached beyond the ambiance of the Algeresque sports books” (68). Crowe also credits Tunis for breaking the genre’s superficial reputation: “His characters possess many heroic and athletic qualities, but their encounters with life are much more realistic, and the outcomes of many of those encounters are distinctly un-Merriwellian” (More Than a Game 18). Unlike his predecessors, he does not see success on the playing field as paramount. In fact, he looks at sport as a sociological phenomenon that can have negative effects. For instance, in both Yea! Wildcats! and Go, Team, Go, Tunis criticizes the role of basketball because the community places too much emphasis on winning. In Tunis’s fiction there is

no Frank Merriwell; there is not a star athlete who shines above the rest and wins the game. Nonetheless, sports play an important role in illuminating other narrative or plot conflicts.

Today's young adult sports novels are similar to the standards that Tunis set; they cannot and do not rely on game action or moral sermons to carry the story. According to Crowe, "To be successful in today's market, a sports novel must contain an interesting story with interesting characters and be able to be judged by the same standards of quality as other books" (More Than a Game 26). For the young adult market, an "interesting" story with "interesting" characters usually implies that the main conflict is internal. Although Hendricks argues that sports take adolescents back to childhood, young adult fiction is usually about an adolescent's journey into adulthood. According to Campbell, "The central theme of YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answers to the question, 'Who am I, and what am I going to do about it?'" (360). With this underlying question, today's young adult sports literature is not necessarily as formulaic as its "pulp-fiction" beginnings; it does not always contain a student-athlete who realizes the American Dream by sinking a last second shot. Different protagonists have different answers to these questions and sports are a way in which authors allow their characters to find these answers. John R. Ritter, a prominent young adult sports novelist, comments on why he uses sport—more specifically, baseball—in his fiction. Ritter says, "I'm more interested in using baseball scenes as metaphor, or for challenges to character, or to advance the story. I could easily set the stories in the world of ballet, were I as knowledgeable in that arena. But the thrust would be the same" (Crowe 7). Current young adult sports fiction is not all about the sport itself. Instead, it uses sport as a stage

in which various conflicts are played out and the protagonists have a platform on which to perform.

The best young adult sports novels fall under a category that Crowe refers to as Sportlerroman. Crowe has coined this phrase after the long-established Bildungsroman novel, and claims that the Sportlerroman is more specific because it is a coming-of-age story of an athlete. Sports play a major role in the Sportlerroman novel, but the protagonist's main conflict is internal and cannot be solved by excelling in his or her sport. Crowe explains:

Authors of the Sportlerroman often use sport as a device to develop interesting and realistic characters because sports provide characters with challenges, antagonists, mentors, friends, time for introspection, opportunities for growth, and other plot elements that contributes to more sophisticated fiction. In the Sportlerroman, it doesn't matter if sport contributes to the conflict or the resolution of the plot; its central location in modern adolescence makes sport a natural component in the contemporary coming-of-age novel. (More Than a Game 40)

Although not all current young adult sports fiction is Sportlerroman, the genre is more consistent in using sport as metaphor, as opposed to relying on it for the central action and conflict. Authors such as Chris Crutcher, John R. Ritter, Walter Dean Myers, Carl Deuker, and Bruce Brooks have created many young adult sports novels that appeal to many young, reluctant readers, and closely examine the psyche of an adolescent athlete, both on and off the field.

Since its “pulp fiction” beginnings, young adult sports literature has evolved from stories about wholesome white teenage males excelling in their respective sport, to mature and sophisticated narratives about adolescent boys and girls of all races who deal with serious real life issues. John R. Ritter says that good young adult sports fiction is about adolescents making tough decisions. He says, “They’re stories about that first time in life when one has to stand on one’s own two feet, make a life-altering decision, then live with the consequences of that choice. If it happens on the ball field, fine. But usually it doesn’t. It’s just that events on the ball field may lead up to that moment and help shape the kid so that one day he can take his stand” (Crowe 7). Sports play a large part in these narratives, but they act more as a vehicle through which authors are able to create both conflicts for their characters and a chance for these conflicts to be resolved. Within the genre of adolescent basketball literature, Tunis’s 1944 novel Yea! Wilcats! sets the tone for many recurring themes that revolve around basketball action. Among these themes are relationship issues between parents and child, young adult athlete and coach, the concept of teamwork, and issues involving racism. Novels that include these themes are Walter Dean Myers’s The Outside Shot, Slam!, and Hoops; Carl Deuker’s On Devil’s Court and Night Hoops; Thomas J. Dygard’s Outside Shooter; David Klass’s Danger Zone; and Chris Crutcher’s Chinese Handcuffs.

In the following sections I will discuss each of these novels, paying particularly close attention to how these themes play out inside the locker room and on the bench. I have divided each sporting event into three important areas of emphasis. The first and most obvious is the playing field. To the fans, this is where all the action occurs.

Whatever happens between these lines—whether the lines designate a baseball diamond, a football field, or a basketball court—is what determines the outcome of any game. The second is the locker room. Although the fans are not able to see and hear what goes on inside the locker room, for the coaches and players, what happens in the locker room can be just as intense as the action in the game. The bench is the third area of emphasis. There are both players and coaches seated on the bench, but their involvement in the game is limited due to the fact that they are not actually on the court playing. When we examine these sites separately, we notice that they each have a very distinct personality, all of which are important in creating the atmosphere of any sporting event. I will show how in these novels the bench and the locker room are portrayed in a much more realistic manner than the playing field. The playing field is generally idealized by the heroics of the players, but the bench and the locker room often have negative effects on the young adult athlete.

While the fans in the crowd obviously place their attention on the action on the court, it is the off-court areas of the game where a great deal of the drama unfolds. On the court, players often suspend thought and allow their bodies to take over. They become entranced by the game and seem to act without thinking. Basketball is a game, like many sports, where the athletes' instincts are important to success. However, it is during breaks in play, whether it is in the locker room at halftime or on the bench during the game, that the characters are able to think about and reflect on the actions on the court and in their lives. It is in the moments where the fan assumes that the athlete is not performing that I am interested in. On the court the players are acting out their roles. They are carrying out certain duties and there are spectators who watch the action. In

spite of this, it is often “in the wings” where the real drama takes place. It is in the locker room and on the bench where these young adult athletes communicate with teammates and coaches; it is these secondary spaces where conflicts are created and harmful behavior arises.

Although the bench is not “backstage”—the crowd can still see it from the stands—players are not performing for the fans. However, this is not to say that players are idle; they remain mentally and emotionally involved in the game. In these young adult basketball novels, there are three main characteristics that describe the attitudes and actions of the players on the bench. The first is a lack of power. Coaches and players on the bench, although competent and aware, can do little to stop or alter the action on the court. Coaches pace the sidelines yelling and screaming because that is all they can do. They can make substitutions and defensive and offensive adjustments, but once the players are on the floor, the coaches are powerless. Players riding the bench are also useless to the team on the court. They can declare what is going wrong and how they would capitalize on their teammates’ mistakes, but sitting on the sideline with their warm-ups on does not do them or the team any good. Moreover, the bench, which ideally encourages and supports the team, can become a place of cynicism and selfishness. Bench players often root against their teammates and hope for mistakes so that they will see playing time. The bench becomes more about the individual and his or her needs, than about the team and its goal of winning. Finally, the bench is also the most obvious form of punishment. Above all else, these characters care about basketball and will do anything for the chance to play. However, when things go wrong, when they

do not live up to the expectations of others, the bench is their penalty box. They are so close to what they desire, but still confined to the sideline.

Similar to the bench, the locker room is a focal point for much of the action in these novels. Although it is also “backstage,” coaches and players perform certain roles and bring with them certain attitudes and emotions. The locker room is not just a place where young adult athletes change in and out of their gym clothes; it is a place where some adolescents go to find community. They bond with teammates and are inspired and learn from coaches. However, more often than not, the locker room is a place where social orders are easily formed and where many athletes become outcasts, confined to corner lockers where they change quickly and alone. The coach is also a prominent figure in the locker room. Young adult athletes spend the majority of their time there listening to instructions and following the coach’s orders. Depending on the coach, this can make the sweaty, cramped facilities a home away from home, or a living nightmare. Coaches’ attitudes can be educational and nurturing or violent and mean, both of which affect the adolescents’ perception of this space. Furthermore, the locker room is also a gendered space. Male coaches often instill a dominant vision of masculinity that distorts a young athlete’s perception of what it means to be a “man.” Locker rooms are also undeniably sexual. Boys and girls strip naked and shower with one another. While there may not be any “real” sexual activity taking place, the language used to describe these locker room scenes is quite evocative and, at times, very suggestive, even erotic.

While both the locker room and the bench are different things to many different adolescents, they remain an important aspect of the young adult’s athletic experience. Since the majority of young adult athletes spend at least a portion of their athletic career

on the bench, and countless hours in the locker room, it is important to examine what impact these areas have, especially if the impact is harmful. Like most sports, basketball is played within a limited space. The court is designated by boundary lines and inside those lines, the players are at play, interacting with one another in a way that they normally would not. According to the philosopher Johan Huizinga, “play must have its own separate space” and this is consistent with the rules of basketball (qtd. in McLaughlin). However, the bench and the locker room are unspecified territory. They are neither inside the official boundaries of the game, nor outside the “world” of play. Whether inside the locker room or seated on the bench, athletes are still emotionally, and sometimes physically, involved in the game. It is these spaces that I will discuss next.

THE BENCH: SO CLOSE YET SO FAR AWAY

Sitting on the bench appears to be rather effortless. After all, while the players on the court are running up and down, sacrificing their bodies, the guys on the bench seem to be seated comfortably, exerting very little energy. However, the fact that the bench players are not physically expending any energy is deceiving. Sitting on the bench is actually both mentally and emotionally draining. Carl Deuker’s Night Hoops is a novel about a young basketball player, Nick, who although talented, must prove to his coach and to the senior players that he is ready to play at the high school level. Nick is extremely passionate about basketball and he explains, “Inside the lines, going all out, I didn’t have to think. My mind turned off and my body took over” (173). But on the bench he has a very different experience. While his body may be at rest, his mind is

working overtime. And unfortunately, his mind is consumed with thoughts of getting off of the bench. The only thing that Nick and other bench players are concerned with is when their name will be called and they can finally check into the game.

On the bench, when Nick is not watching Coach O'Leary pacing the sidelines, anticipating eye-contact and an order to get in the game, he is obsessed with what he would do were he playing rather than sitting. He analyzes the play of his teammate Fabroa, critiquing every mistake. When Fabroa "threw the ball away twice and missed all three shots," Nick thinks to himself, "I could do better. I knew it, and I wanted to show it" (116-117). However, Nick is powerless on the bench. He sees mistakes being made and knows how to fix them, but the fact that he is confined to the bench takes away his ability to help his team. At the beginning of the third quarter of a particular game, Nick explains, "I was riding the pines again. The lead seesawed back and forth. Time after time I saw fast break opportunities, opportunities that Fabroa passed up. I wanted to burst. If I'd been on the court playing my game, we'd have pulled away from them" (117). In situations such as this, when players are more concerned with getting off the bench and playing, all teamwork is lost; bench sitters resort to being critical of teammates and coaches. As a result, the bench becomes a space of negativity and cynicism, rather than encouragement and support.

In Deuker's On the Devil's Court, Jim, who gets a good deal of playing time, also becomes selfish when it comes to time on the bench. Early in the first quarter of a meaningless game, he says, "Like all the guys on the bench I was ready for a little playing time, but all Raible did was switch to a two-three zone defense. It was smart basketball even though it didn't do me any good" (133). Despite the fact that the coach's

adjustment was good for the team, Jim is disappointed because it doesn't benefit him.

The team may be succeeding, but the players on the bench are not satisfied because they feel as though they are not involved.

Not only do the players feel uninvolved on the bench, but many feel as if the coach is deliberately out to make their lives miserable. Whenever the protagonist in Walter Dean Myer's Slam! is taken out of the game, he takes it personally. After Slam admits that he "blew another jumper," the coach benches him. Once he arrives at the bench, he puts a towel over his head, embarrassed and angered by the fact that the coach has taken him out of the game. Seeing that he is upset, another player on the bench approaches him:

"What's the matter?" Ducky asked.

"What you think is the matter?"

"You're not playing?"

"You must be Einstein or somebody," I said. (112)

Slam knows that he "blew another jumper," implying that it happened on more than one occasion, yet he still does not want to face the fact that he might deserve to be sitting on the bench. Instead he blames the coach and is mean to his friend by using sarcasm.

When the second half begins, Slam is still on the bench and his anger turns into stubbornness. He explains, "The coach looked over at me and I looked the other way. If he was expecting me to show humble he was wrong big time" (112). Slam resents his coach for putting him on the bench and going back into the game becomes a matter of pride. In Outside Shooter, by Thomas J. Dygard, personal pride also becomes an issue. The year before Deke coaches the team, the star player Bobby quits because the previous

coach benches him. Quitting the team “was almost a heroes exit—or, at least, Bobby was able to see it that way” (74). The fact that both Slam and Bobby do not have control over when they play and when they sit bothers them. If they are going to be sitting on the bench, they want it to be on their terms.

Roberta Seelinger Trites, in her book Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature, argues that much of adolescent literature deals with young adults coming to terms with various power structures. Adolescent basketball fiction is no different. The most prominent power struggle within the institution of the basketball team exists between player and coach, and much of this struggle involves the bench. In Outside Shooter, Bobby’s refusal to be benched, or even Slam’s refusal to go back into the game despite his desire to do so, is seen as heroic by the boys because the power ostensibly rests with the young adult and not with the coach. Trites argues that “power can be simultaneously repressive and enabling [...]” (16). In the case of Bobby and Slam, the power originally seems to rest with their coaches because they determine whether or not the two players go into the game or sit on the bench. Therefore, the coaches’ authority represses Bobby and Slam. However, the coaches also need Bobby and Slam if they want to be successful and win the game. By refusing to play, then, these young adult athletes also possess a significant amount of power; they are able to “demonstrate empowerment within repression” (16).

Along with issues of power, the bench also deals with issues of merit. In his book Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction, Timothy Morris examines four themes associated with baseball fiction: assimilation, heterosexuality, language, and meritocracy. Among these themes, meritocracy is most clearly tied to the bench and to

the players who end up there. Morris asserts, “The evil of meritocracy is that it rationalizes inequality” (6). While the “good” players are being rewarded by being out on the court playing, the “not so good” players (or the players who are being punished) must remain on the bench where the entire crowd becomes aware of their mediocrity. Morris argues, “The strict logic of the game provides for continuous comparison among players to ensure that a team fields its best lineup and that the best players in a league or age group are consistently recognized for their talents. Meritocracy is therefore on every page of baseball fiction” (116).

Although Morris’s discussion revolves around baseball, such meritocracy clearly exists for young adult basketball players in real life and in fiction. Coaches size up players to determine who will benefit the team the most. In practice, in games, and in their behavior off the court, young adult athletes are compared to one another. Those that the coach feels have more merit, get to strip off their warm-ups and play in the game. Those who lack certain abilities remain on the bench. Morris maintains, “One looks through these representations of meritocracy directly to an underlying cultural value of merit that is never challenged. The better an individual’s performance, the more that individual should be recognized and rewarded” (116). According to Morris, then, meritocracies are normal in our capitalistic American society and this attitude naturally spills over into our recreational sports. Those that get playing time are not only rewarded by being on the court, but they also receive recognition from fans and classmates. Those on the bench are not rewarded with playing time, nor do they receive recognition from fans. In basketball, the bench is a symbol for the meritocracy that Morris discusses. The audience knows that the less merit a player has, the farther down the bench he or she sits.

These young adult athletes care so much for the game and work so hard in practice that the thought of not being rewarded by playing, and the embarrassment that this causes, is terrifying. In fact, even while they play, the bench remains a constant threat. In his book Playful Fictions and Fictional Players: Game Sport and Survival in Contemporary American Fiction, David Neil Berman argues that “play,” often in the form of athletic competition, liberates a person. According to Berman, “True play, for the athlete, for the child, and for the artist, is an expression of human joy, freedom, and creativity” (8). Nevertheless, these young adult athletes are often unable to experience “true play” on the basketball court because the threat of being benched is always in the back of their minds.

In Night Hoops, Nick continually looks over at the bench after the slightest mistake. After his man scores on him he tells us, “As I brought the ball upcourt, I saw O’Leary pacing in front of the bench, his hands behind his neck, dark halfmoons of sweat showing on his light blue shirt. He had the same look on his face that he’d had just before he yanked Fabroa” (119). Nick is so concerned with whether or not he will be pulled from the game that even while he’s on the court, the threat of being benched consumes him. The bench is like a lurking monster threatening the players at every turn. Even though they want the monster to disappear, they cannot ignore it. Nick does not pay attention to the details of the man he is defending quite as much as he does to the details of the coach seated on the bench. Instead of concentrating all of his energy on the action on the floor, Nick is distracted by the coach on the bench and the threat of being pulled. The recreational fun of the sport is lost and the values of the meritocracy prevail.

When players are on the bench all they think about is getting into the game and when they are in the game all they think about is how they can stay in.

The emphasis on the bench also displays the importance of the coach's role in adolescent sports literature. Coaches are the boss, the manager, and much more. Above all else, they make the decision to send a person into the game or to bench him or her. For the most part, coaches are "enthroned in positions of power and prominence, often governing students' extracurricular lives with an omnipotent and impudence that even a Democratic president with a majority Congress would envy" ("The Coach" 1). Along with this power comes pressure. Coaches are held responsible for the success and failure of a team. Most work very hard in practice preparing their team and they do their best to instruct and motivate them in the locker room. Nevertheless, once the game begins, they cannot cross that magical line that designates the boundaries of the court. They must remain on the bench, where their power often becomes useless. According to Don Henderson in Yea! Wilcats!, "This was what made coaching so wonderful. So awful, too. It was giving to kids, giving them everything you had, your experience, your knowledge, your life, yourself. Then sending them out into the world while you sat and looked on and suffered with them and for them" (255). Henderson explains how helpless being on the bench actually is for a coach, who can only sit and look at what's happening on the court. In these novels and in real life, coaches yell and scream because that is all they can do. They cannot lace up their shoes and throw on a jersey themselves. They must remain on the sideline, watching and hoping that their players are able to perform the duties that they assign them.

In Outside Shooter, Deke is a young coach. He is just out of college and he has even turned down professional contracts in order to coach high school basketball. There are many times throughout the season when “Deke wished he could take the court himself” (88). But of course, he could not. He is restricted to the bench and his lack of power is often quite obvious. A number of times he found himself “no longer seated on the bench,” but instinctively “standing at the boundary line” (183). In the championship game, helplessly sitting, his words aren’t enough to save his players. During a particular defensive stance,

Deke, seeing what was happening, instinctively said, “No.”

But even if he had spoken loudly enough for Dennis to hear, it was too late. The play was working. There was no stopping it now. (182)

Deke knows what is happening on the court, but the fact that he is sidelined leaves him powerless. He cannot go on the court and play defense himself, and just because he recognizes the play from the bench, doesn’t mean that his players will. He is defenseless and can do nothing but desperately yell, “No.” To the players, the coach’s power is deceptive. He or she calls the plays and determines who goes into the game and who doesn’t. But once the ball is in play, the coach—like the players on the bench and the fans in the stands—is an observer. He or she is restricted to the bench, yelling instructions, only hoping that they will be carried out.

In Outside Shooter we experience the game from the bench, where Deke sees it. It is written in third-person from the perspective of Deke. As a result, the game action, although intense, is distant. In other words, we are not in the game, as we may have been were it written from the point of view of a player. During the championship game, we

follow the action from the bench as if we were coaching rather than playing. The language used to describe the game is more of an analysis of basketball strategy, as opposed to a play by play explanation of what is happening. Dygard writes,

On defense, the tightening of the net around Wallace was paying off. At first, the Tigers ignored the Bulldogs' jamming of the pass route. They tried to fire the ball through the crowd to the big center. Then they gave up the tactic. The guards, in relative freedom, began firing away from the outside [...] they wanted to lure the Bloomfield defense out and away from Wallace. Their shots scored often enough to concern Deke [...] But Deke stuck to the close-in defense. (171-72)

Unlike books such as On the Devil's Court and Night Hoops, where the action revolves around one player, Dygard shows the game through the eyes of the coach and how team strategies are or aren't carried out. When he refers to the action on the court, he refers to particular groups of players and what their job on the court is. He discusses the Bulldogs' defensive strategies as opposed to specific players lunging or reaching for the ball. The language used is the language of a coach, who employs certain "tactics" in hopes of "jamming [] the passing route." This point of view, although describing the game action, emphasizes the importance of the bench and the performances that are carried out there.

Also, no particular player—aside from the opposing team's dominating center, Wallace—is mentioned by name. The only individual with whom Dygard concerns himself is Deke, who ironically, is not even in the game. Nonetheless, what Deke does seems to be important to the outcome of the game. Dygard does not tell us what certain players do on defense, or even what the star point guard Bobby does; he tells us that

“Deke stuck to the close-in defense.” Dygard takes the emphasis away from the players on the court and puts it on the bench and the coach. This is different from the majority of adolescent sports novels. In On the Devil’s Court, the protagonist Joe explains a key play in the championship game: “Eddie brought the ball up. Alex set a screen for me. I came around it, caught the ball, and in one motion went up for the shot. I felt a slap on the elbow, but I kept my eye on the hoop and released the ball just as the whistle blew” (247). Unlike Dygard, Deuker does not refer to “the defense” or “the guards,” but to individuals. Players are referred to by their names and not by the duty they are to carry out. This can be an example of the differences between being on the court and sitting on the bench. On the court, players are working together, forming a very intimate and personal connection. This may be why Joe refers to his teammates by name. However, when instructions or encouragement is yelled from the bench, it is distant, as if it were from an outsider. Deke is not on the court; he is not one of them.

The only time that this intimacy extends to the bench is during timeouts. In Outside Shooter, Dygard describes a timeout in which the crowd becomes a factor. Two distinct worlds are created: the hectic cheering of the crowd in the stands, and the intense, but intimate team huddle on the bench. As the players run to the bench after the first quarter, the fans continue their frantic cheering:

The fans were on their feet with a roar when the buzzer ended the first quarter. They still were shouting. Somewhere in the noise, the rhythmic chant was coming through: ‘Go-Bobby-Go! Go-Bobby-Go!’ The Bloomfield fans wanted to see the slender redhead standing at the edge of the keyhole and pumping in field goals. (172)

For the fans, the break in play is anything but a break. The timeouts create an atmosphere that intensifies the outcome of the game and the suspense is heightened as the fans anticipate what is going to happen next. They want the game to continue and they chant Bobby's name, hoping that he and the rest of the Bulldogs will come through.

As they yell and scream, the fans hover above the players and the coach in the timeout. The team is aware of the crowd above them, yet they must huddle together and concentrate on the game. While the crowd chants Bobby's name, "Deke pulled the players in close and shouted to make himself heard above the din" (172). Although the stands above them are imposingly frantic, Deke has to create an intimate, business-like environment on the bench. He addresses each player seated on the bench and tells them what each must do:

To Benjy: "Stay on the high post. Keep hooking them over Wallace. He can't stop you. He's awkward trying to get back under the basket. He fouled you once. He'll do it again."

To Skipper and to Dennis North: "Stay on those forwards when they go to the corners. Both of them, Altheimer and Crowe, are good. But you've held them scoreless so far. It's beautiful. Keep it up."

To Bobby and to Ken Flaherty: "Be alert for the fullcourt press. The Tigers can move their zone down the court after you. They love to do it. Be ready."

And to Bobby alone: "Start shooting from the outside more often." (172-73)

Despite the craziness in the stands, Deke keeps his player's attention and hands out orders. The crowd chants "Go-Bobby-Go!" as if Bobby's heroics are the only ingredient for victory. But the team knows that there is much more to winning the game than Bobbie's outside shooting. In the timeout Deke encourages—"It's beautiful. Keep it up"—and instructs—"Stay on the highpost [...] Start shooting from the outside." Despite the roar of the crowd, each player "nodded his understanding of Deke's shouted instructions" (173). Also, this timeout is personal because Deke refers to each player by name and not by position. In the timeout, the "guards" do not have to "Be alert for the fullcourt press," but Bobby and Ken Flaherty do. The timeout is special to them because in the gym full of screaming fans, they are the only ones allowed in this tight, important meeting. Their unity is expressed as they "clasped hands, the five players and coach, and pumped once in unison" (172). As they return to the court, the "deafening shouts of the crowd increased," emphasizing the importance of the team's huddle (172). Their intimate meeting within the chaos of the crowd has prepared them, hopefully, for what is to come next.

Emerging from the bench to a cheering crowd must be an empowering experience for these young adult athletes. However, it is only the five players that are going back into the game that receive the cheers from the crowd; it is only the five players and the coach who "pumped once in unison." The players returning to the bench are not mentioned at all. They must return to the bench where they sit and watch their teammates reap the rewards of their hard work in practice and in the off season. Because they do not even join in on the clasping of the hands, they are not even considered a part of the team. Arguably, the biggest disappointment basketball players face is sitting on

the bench. Not only do they miss out on physically playing the game that they love, but they are outcasts from the team's huddle and they do not receive the cheers from the crowd.

In the majority of these novels, each adolescent expresses how empowering playing basketball can be. When everything else is going wrong in their lives, these young adult athletes can escape to a basketball court somewhere and forget about their worries. However, when benched, these athletes are not able to escape their day to day problems because they are sitting rather than playing. Their avenue for venting is stripped from them. In Walter Dean Myers The Outside Shot, Lonnie is struggling with his first year of college. He is having trouble meeting friends, making good grades, and getting along with his new coach. He often contemplates dropping out of school altogether. "But there were times I didn't want to leave," he says (136). He explains that these were the times when he was on the basketball court. Lonnie explains,

There were moments when I would be on the floor and the ball would come to me and the world would be round and pebbled-grained and in the palm of my hand.

Other dudes would be around me, trying to get the ball, trying to snatch my play away, but they couldn't. Suddenly I would feel full of power and full of life.

There was no place on earth other than the court where I had ever felt that, and the moments were like some kind of crazy magic that was happening to me. (136)

For many of the characters in these books, basketball creates the same feeling of power. Just like Lonnie, they feel like the world is in their hands when they are on the court. In the players' real lives people interfere, steal their happiness and force them to compromise who they are. But on the court, the world is the basketball; they have

possession and no defense can stop them. This is a wonderful feeling for these players. However, because basketball is so important, because it brings them so much joy, it also sets them up for greater disappointments.

If they are like Lonnie, who is liberated by being on the basketball court, the bench is purgatory. These young adult basketball players have practiced hard and are at the game, dressed and warmed up, sitting closer to the action than any other spectator is allowed, but forbidden to step on to the court and play. They must sit and watch while others experience what they desire above all else. As a result, players often entertain thoughts that they are not supposed to think. Even though they want their team to win, they find themselves wishing that things will go wrong for their teammates because it will help their chances of coming off the bench and playing. In Night Hoops, Nick sits on the bench for the early part of the season. While sitting through a particular game, he says, “I found myself hoping we’d fall even farther behind. Thirty points down and I figured O’Leary would stick [...] me in” (180). A player hoping that his or her team will lose is an obvious violation of sportsmanship. These young adult athletes represent their team and their school and are supposed to follow a general “code of ethics.” Schools and athletic associations across the country have developed such codes and even require them to be signed by the athlete and his or her parents.

Scott Farrell has published such a code in which he compares the athlete’s code to the Code of Chivalry and the Seven Knightly Virtues. Farrell maintains that “adopting codes of conduct and ethical statutes [...] help young players internalize the concepts of respect, fair play and sportsmanship.” However, when Nick hopes that his team “fall[s] even farther behind” so that he can get some playing time, he is not abiding by the code,

and he knows it. While sitting on the bench during another game, he roots against one of his teammates. Nick says,

You're not supposed to root against a guy on your own team, but it's hard to be riding the pines and not have some negative thoughts creep in. Carlos Fabroa had the job I wanted. If he did well, I was going to sit. But if he struggled, I just might get a chance. (99)

The only way Nick is going to play is if the starter does not perform well. To secretly root against him, then, is a violation of the athlete's code. Nick is a member of a team and if he has to, he should be content with sacrificing his own playing time for the benefit of the team. According to the code, he must share his "enthusiastic spirit generously with coaches and teammates" (Farrell). Nonetheless, he is not content, nor is he "enthusiastically generous" by wanting his teammate to perform poorly.

Nick describes sitting on the bench as "riding the pines." This phrase literally means sitting on the bench. The bench was originally just that—a wooden bench. More often than not, today's players sit on soft, cushioned chairs, but historically the bench was a hard, uncomfortable wooden plank. Consequently, while Fabroa is playing, performing "the job" that Nick wants, Nick is metaphorically shuffling in his seat getting splinters in his rear. There is a big difference in the two roles and as a result, Nick "roots," which is not really rooting at all, against his teammate. However, any thought of rooting against a teammate is wrong; it is something that he is not supposed to do.

Ironically, the same code that tells Nick he can't think this way is the same code that, in On the Devil's Court, tells Joe that it is not okay for him to be fine with sitting on the bench. Joe says, "You're *not supposed to* [my italics] think this way, but I was

suddenly glad I wasn't starting. I was too tight, and when I tried to remember the plays I went blank on all of them. Sitting on the bench for a game or two wouldn't be the worst thing in the world" (133). When a player admits that he or she is fine with sitting on the bench—even for a moment—that willingness becomes another thing that he or she is not supposed to allow. In David Klass's Danger Zone, the teen protagonist Doyle expresses similar feelings. When he's benched in the third quarter of a particular game he explains, "Normally I would have been angry at having been taken out of a close game, but that night I felt relieved. I sat at the end of the bench, hunched over low, secretly glad to be out of the bright lights" (188). Doyle is happy to be out of the game, but he must be secretive about it. This implies that if a player does not want to be the star—if he does not want "the bright lights" shining on him—then he is not worthy of being a player at all. He or she must resort to sitting "at the end of the bench, hunched over low." This further emphasizes the fact that the bench is a secondary stage; it is a place young adult athletes are conditioned to believe is embarrassing and second-rate and any contentment with being there is wrong.

Even when a player's reasons for wanting to be on the bench are logical, the thought of expressing it to others is unacceptable. In On the Devil's Court, Joe has a good reason for not wanting to start the game. He is new to the team and does not remember all of the plays. Nonetheless, his lack in the desire to be on the floor for every second of the game becomes a violation of the "athlete's code of ethics." Conversely, this is the same code that tells Nick in Night Hoops that he should be fine with sitting on the bench. There is a contradiction between Nick in Night Hoops hoping that his teammate will struggle so that he can get in the game, and Jim in On the Devil's Court

and Doyle in Danger Zone who are content with not starting. Nick is not a malicious person. He does not really want anything bad to happen to Fabroa; all he wants is to play. Jim and Doyle are not scared or “soft” for not wanting to start. Nevertheless, when each player expresses how he feels, they preface it by explaining that it is traditionally unacceptable to think this way, and it is the bench that has caused these feelings to surface.

Some athletes, as we can see with Jim and Doyle, find comfort on the bench. When things are not going well in the game, the bench can often act as a safe place. However, for the majority of young adult athletes, sitting on the bench is the ultimate form of punishment. In Outside Shooter, Deke recognizes this and he uses it to his advantage. During an important midseason game, Deke recognizes that his players are not passing the ball to their teammate and star player, Bobby. Bobby is an outcast. He has a chip on his shoulder, gets in trouble at school, and does not fit in with the rest of the team. The other players resent Bobby because despite his reclusiveness, he is the one who receives all the credit for the team’s success. As a result, the four other starters decide that they will freeze Bobby out, or not pass him the ball.

Deke notices this right away and is furious. On the sideline, he contemplates how he will fix this situation: “He could call a timeout at the earliest opportunity and lash them with words. That might jolt them enough to end the freeze” (114). However, Deke, a former player himself, knows that this will not alleviate the situation. He does call a timeout, but he knows that simply “lash[ing] them with words” is not enough and instead he threatens to bench them. In the huddle:

“Now let me tell you what I am going to do,” Deke said. He fixed his eyes on Skipper. He lifted a finger and pointed at Skipper. “You’re first, Skipper.”

Skipper’s eyebrow shot up.

“The first time that I think any of you—any of you—is still freezing Bobby out, you—you, Skipper—are coming out of the game—out, for keeps. You will spend the rest of the game on the bench.”

Skipper frowned but said nothing. The other players glanced at each other.

“Do you understand, all of you?” Deke asked, glancing around the group.

(118)

By excluding Bobby, the Bulldogs were on their way to losing the game; nonetheless, a loss is not what concerns them. They are willing to accept a loss and still follow through with their plan. However, the threat of losing playing time straightens them right up. At the mention of his name, “Skipper’s eyebrow shot up,” as if he knew trouble was approaching. Once Deke threatens to bench him, the boys “glanced” at one another, implying that they knew they couldn’t risk their playing time. After all, if they did not follow orders, they were “out, for keeps,” and this isn’t something any of the boys are willing to chance. For these young adult athletes, being benched is the worst form of punishment they can receive. They are so consumed with basketball that any threat of not playing whips them into shape.

These young adult athletes want to play so much that the bench often becomes an image of horror and trepidation. The characters in these novels are not happy unless their

playing time remains intact. Whether a young adult is the star point guard or a freshman who barely made a spot on the team, the bench plays a major role in their athletic experience. Characters such as Dygard's Bobby and Myer's Slam are the best players on their team, yet the lurking monster still has the ability to consume their thoughts, make them angry, and threaten their sense of self-worth. The bench also has the ability to turn players against their teammates and make them quit the team altogether. It is an idle, hopeless space where players and coaches are powerless against the actions taking place on the court. The bench can take something like basketball, which is so empowering for some individuals, and strip them of all happiness, leaving them worse off than if basketball wasn't even a part of their life at all. As they sit on the bench, the object of their desire is right at their toes, and yet they are forced to sit and watch.

LOCKER ROOM LESSONS: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SEXUAL

The locker room is stereotypically a place of sweat and dirty jokes, but each young adult athlete does not perceive the locker room the same way. To some, the locker room can be a place of happiness and grief, camaraderie and torment, victory and defeat. All of these varying emotions can occur in a locker room during one season, even one game. They spend time in the locker room before and after every practice, as well as before, during, and after every game. It is where teams listen to coaches' instructions together, joke around together, fight with each other, motivate each other, celebrate together, and of course, shower with one another.

One important aspect of the locker room is that it can be perceived as a sacred place in which players and coaches feel connected. Just like a tree house is a place for neighborhood kids to run to in order to escape bullies, family life, and share experiences from the neighborhood, the locker room is a place where teammates can go to to get away from school, the opposite sex, and convene with people like themselves. Thomas McLaughlin explains, “For all of their connections with macho style, basketball and other sports could be seen as expressions of a traditionally feminine desire for a defined and comforting place” (177). The locker room is a place where many male athletes go to in order to feel like they are a part of a group. Dennis Barone, in his article “Locker Room Lessons,” explains how the locker room is often seen as a “transitional space” where people are viewed as equals. No matter what their differences are in the outside world, while in the locker room, people are treated the same. In the locker room, Christopher Isherwood explains, “Nobody is too hideous or too handsome to be accepted as an equal” (qtd. in Barone 27). For some people, the locker room is between worlds and ordinary differences go unnoticed.

In The Outside Shot, Lonnie has befriended and works with a young autistic boy named Eddie. After a particular game, Lonnie brings Eddie back into the locker room with him, telling “the guys that he was a buddy” of his. The fact that Lonnie brings Eddie into the locker room is an extension of his companionship. He likes Eddie enough to show him what goes on behind the scenes—in this intimate, special place that the team does not share with outsiders. Lonnie explains how Eddie was received by the players in the locker room:

I watched Eddie Brignole as he stood among the guys. His eyes darted around and he was as happy as I had ever seen him. It wasn't anything special, but just being one of the guys mattered to him. Maybe he had dreamt about being a ballplayer and he was edging toward that dream here in the locker room. Same as I was. (184)

Even though Lonnie mentions that being in the locker room “wasn't anything special,” it is for Eddie. The locker room isn't necessarily a special place—sweaty clothes and dirty towels clutter the floor—but the club-like atmosphere makes it special. The way Eddie's “eyes darted around” the room emphasizes that to him there are many interesting things in the locker room; he doesn't want to miss any of it. In the outside world Eddie is treated differently because of his autism, as is Lonnie because of his Harlem background; however, within the confines of the locker room as “transitional space,” Lonnie and Eddie are happy “being one of the guys.” Lonnie explains that in the locker room he and Eddie were “edging toward” the dream of becoming basketball players; but more importantly, they seem to be “edging toward” the dream of fitting in with a different group of people.

Although this view of the locker room may be true in some circumstances, it is still a very idealistic representation. Eddie walking into the locker room and automatically fitting in is unrealistic. Even though the guys make him feel welcomed, he is still a visitor. In fact, the locker room is not always a nice place. The locker room is “more often [...] a place to learn about pecking orders than to learn about utopias” (Barone 27). In Outside Shooter, Bobby is the best player on the team, but he is also the most disliked. Deke notices this from the first time he walks into the locker room. When

Bobby is present, the team acts differently. Not only do they make him an outcast by not talking to him, but the way they interact with each other also changes. Before one particular game, the “locker room chatter had ended abruptly when Bobby entered. The expressions on the players’ faces told the story. Their dislike showed” (104). Contrary to the idea of the locker room as a “transitional space,” where outside differences go unnoticed, these boys turn the locker room into a very discriminating place where social orders are strictly enforced.

Within the confines of the locker room, Bobby is an outcast. This is especially obvious when Bobby is not present. When Bobby is suspended for a particular game, Deke is very doubtful that the team will be successful. Nonetheless, other players disagree:

“Coach, we’ll win without him,” Skipper said. He spoke the words in a flat, conversational tone, simply stating what he saw as a fact.

“Who needs the dude?” Benjy chimed in. His face was expressionless, his brown eyes unblinking. “I’m sick of hearing that we’re nothing without him.”
(79)

While the “locker room chatter [...] ended abruptly” when Bobby was there, the team speaks freely about him in his absence. Skipper speaks “flat,” in a “conversational tone,” because he does not feel like he is betraying anyone. Bobby is not one of them and there is no need to be deceptive in the locker room when he is not there. Benjy also refers to him as “the dude,” implying that he is not even worthy of being called by his name. This further emphasizes his status as an outcast.

Although Bobby does not seem to be affected by not fitting in with the guys in the locker room, other characters are. In Night Hoops, Nick is a young player and he wants to fit in with his teammates and not let them down. When he is not accepted by them, his feelings are hurt. After a poor performance in the first game of the season, Nick is not welcomed into the locker room. He says, “In the locker room before practice it was as if I had some contagious disease. Even Luke left me alone. I dressed in the corner, then headed out, head down” (107). As Nick enters the locker room, the players gravitate away from him, exiling him from the community of the team. His best friend Luke doesn’t even talk to him because communicating with Nick may mean that he too will become an outsider. Nick is forced to dress in the corner, alone, with his “head down,” dejected.

Ideally, the locker room is supposed to bring teams together. Like Lonnie in The Outside Shot, it follows the cliché and allows him to feel like he’s a part of the group. However, for many other young adult athletes, like Nick, a “wall” is present and players are divided. One aspect of the locker room that divides players involves difference of opinions with regards to the actions of the coach. While some players listen intently to the coaches “motivating” speeches and instructional chalkboard diagrams, others see it as “old-time movie bull” (Slam! 203). William H. Beezley argues, “The coach has become the bearer of national traditions; he replaces the teacher, the minister and parent as guardian of values and the businessman as the model of success” (56). Crowe agrees, adding, “Our society reveres coaches, especially successful ones, often granting them carte blanche in locker rooms and on playing fields” (“The Coach” 4). Many young adults listen to their coaches intently, hanging on to every word they say, wanting to

make them happy and themselves worthy of the coach's time. Others see coaches as something they must put up with in order to play the game they love. To these players, coaches abuse their authority, take out personal vendettas against players, and spit out cliché after cliché.

In sports, one of the most common ways to motivate a team is to question their "manhood." In the locker room, coaches stand in front of and above their players, challenging them, claiming that they are not men unless they are able to take the court and produce a victory. In his article "'Man to Man': Basketball, Movement, and the Practice of Masculinity," Thomas McLaughlin argues that "sport has long been recognized as one of the crucial cultural sites where masculinity is taught and learned" (171). The coaches in these novels and in real life often criticize their players by questioning their masculinity; when struggling on the court, not going after loose balls or grabbing rebounds, they are, according to their coaches, playing like girls. McLaughlin explains, "Coaches use the word manhood as a weapon to push players [...] Behind the belief that sport teaches masculinity is the assumption, acknowledged or not, that masculinity is not natural but cultural, a learned pattern of behavior and attitudes" (171). By this rationale, many young adult male athletes are "learning" how to be "men" from their coaches in the locker room. However, as R.W. Connell points out, "There is no one pattern of masculinity that is found everywhere. We need to speak of 'masculinities,' not masculinity" (162). Within different institutions and different cultures, there are different ways of expressing one's manhood. Nonetheless, most of the coaches in these novels—as well as many coaches in real life—do not consider this; they create a hegemonic masculinity and expect their players to live up to it if they want to win basketball games.

Inside the locker room, this hegemonic masculinity is often a homophobic one. In Hoops!, Coach Cal implies that Lonnie is “sweet on Stealer John,” his opponent who keeps scoring on him. According to Cal, Lonnie is playing soft, “giving him [Stealer John] everything he wants” and therefore acting unmasculine (48). Lonnie becomes defensive; he is angry that Cal is implying that he is playing like a girl and he threatens to walk out and not play. Cal lashes back at Lonnie:

“That’s right,” Cal said. “Go on home. Because it takes a man to have enough pride to go out there and play the second half like he means it. And I don’t think you guys are men enough!” (49)

After Cal’s challenge, Lonnie storms out of the locker room and heads out to play the second half. The fact that Cal challenges Lonnie’s and the rest of the team’s “manhood” is enough to fire them up for a strong second half performance. In other words, Cal has been successful with enforcing a dominant conception of masculinity. The boys in his charge are led to believe that there is only one way to be a “man.” Unfortunately, this hegemonic masculinity that Cal wishes to instill includes both homophobia—Lonnie does not want to be thought of as being “sweet on Stealer John”—and it denigrates women—Lonnie does not want to go home, a place that he associates with women’s work. Instead, he goes out and plays hard because, according to his coach, that is what a “man” would do.

Like McLaughlin, Connell argues, “The exemplary masculinities of sports professionals are not a product of passive disciplining [...] they result from a sustained, active engagement with the demands of the institutional setting” (164). The coaches in these novels have a conception of what they believe masculinity to be and the locker

room is a place where they try to pass this notion of masculinity on to their players. Any behavior deviating from their view of masculinity is “symbolically assimilated to femininity” (Connell 166). In Yea! Wildcats!, Coach Don Henderson makes sure that his players realize this. When he walks into the locker room during halftime of a losing effort, he sees that it “was silent [...] No shouts, no yells, no handclaps. None of the usual exuberance” (261). Typically, in a men’s locker room there exists, what Tunis refers to as, “the usual exuberance,” where boys yell and shout and slap each other five. But since none of this is going on when Don walks in, he assumes that the boys must not be “men.”

Consequently, he takes it upon himself to set an example for the boys: “With a quick movement he turned back, looked at them scornfully, and then suddenly grabbed a chair. He raised it above his head and flung it as hard as he could against the opposite wall, ten feet away. It struck with a crash and crumbled into splinters” (261). By throwing the chair, Don resorts to violence to motivate the boys. He paces the locker room, “half crazed” and even kicks the table “with a savage gesture” (261-62). It can be argued that the locker room is an extension of the playing field. And basketball, like many sports, “is a form of violence, civilized violence, and that as such it is a central element in stereotypical masculine culture” (McLaughlin 182). For Don Henderson, winning a basketball game is dependant on whether or not his boys can act like men, and it is his duty to teach them. However, the example that Don is setting implies not just “stereotypical masculine culture,” but “crazed” and “savage” violence.

Barone argues, “In sports fiction the locker room is often a prime locus communis for the expression of violent passions” (28). We’ve heard of football players who slap

each other around in the locker room to get themselves pumped up. In this space, such behavior is excused, even acceptable. However, what about when it is a grown man, a coach placed in a position to teach boys? Often this can create an uncomfortable and even frightening locker room scene for young adult athletes. While Don is throwing chairs and kicking suitcases, the boys do nothing: “No one spoke. No one ventured as far as the water cooler, no one cared to watch him in his delirium” (262). Don cries out to the boys, “I wanna know . . . have you got the guts to come back? Have you got it?” (262). In his “delirium,” Don’s intensity warrants a response. But still, “Not a word, not a sound, not a motion from the bench” (262). Even though Barone argues that the locker room brings out violent tendencies, the boys do not join in on Don’s performance. For whatever reason, they abstain from any violent behavior. Nonetheless, this is not to say that their conceptions of manliness and violence have not been constructed. According to Connell, perceptions of masculinities are “sustained in institutions,” and the “institutions of competitive sport seem peculiarly important for contemporary western masculinities” (163). What takes place in the locker room, then, can create a singular vision of masculinity that these adolescents may or may not carry with them for the rest of their lives.

I am skeptical about whether all young adult athletes will fall prey to their coach’s perceptions of masculinity because all athletes respond to the coach in the locker room differently. In fact, how players view their locker room experience is often dependent on how they view their coach. While some players hang on to every word their coach says, others dismiss it as empty jargon. In Outside Shooter, Deke has “a word of caution to deliver” to his players. He begins lecturing them and he notices that each person is

responding to his words in their own way. As he's talking about teams developing good habits,

He paused and glanced at the faces around the room. The sober, serious Skipper was concentrating on Deke's every word. Benjy, expressionless, was sitting forward, watching Deke. Chris showed the excitement he was feeling after taking the court and scoring three field goals. Bobby's expression caused Deke to pause. With his eyes, Bobby was saying, "We all know that you think you've got to give us this bull. Just get it over with." (50)

Each player views Deke and his duty as "coach in the locker room" differently. Skipper, who is the most straight laced, hardest working kid on the team, is "serious" and "concentrating on Deke's every word." He seems to represent the coach's ideal athlete; he's smart, attentive, and genuinely cares what Deke is saying. Benjy is "expressionless." He is "watching" Deke, but not necessarily listening to him, perhaps giving Deke the impression that he is paying attention. He is "sitting forward," which may imply that he is too tired from the first half of play to comprehend everything that Deke is throwing at him. Chris is the opposite of the "sober" Skipper. Chris's attention is still on the court. He is thrilled by his own performance and unaware of whatever it is that Deke is talking about; he is too busy basking in the glory of his "three field goals." Bobby, on the other hand, knows exactly what Deke is saying; he just doesn't care. According to Bobby, Deke's advice is "bull" and he wants "it over with."

The two foils—Skipper and Bobby—are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. One buys into the American mythology, where the coach "stands for Daniel Boone's rugged individualism, for Charles Lindberg's lonely courage, for Horatio Alger's triumph

through hard work, and Abraham Lincoln's determination and tragedy" (Beezley 56). The other sees this as contrived, expected, and ineffective. Throughout these novels, coaches continuously bombard us with locker room jargon and clichés: "the coach said that we had to give a hundred and ten percent if we wanted to win" (Slam! 157); "it takes a man to have enough pride to go out there and play the second half like he means it" (Hoops 49); "have you got the guts to come back?" (Yea! Wildcats! 262); "Be yourselves. Play your game" (Night Hoops 216). Some players are motivated by these speeches while others view them as routine and are not effected by them one way or the other.

After Skipper declares that they will win the game against Warfield Tech without Bobby, Deke is happy that it came from a player's mouth and not his own. If Deke had made the comment, he "was certain to come across as a phony, simply saying what the coach was expected to say, nothing more" (79). Even the most loyal player, like Skipper, would have been able to tell that Deke's words were forced. However, Dygard admits that "coming from a player it was different. Skipper's announcement carried more weight than any statements Deke could have made" (79). In the locker room, athletes expect to hear these things from their coach. Before, during, and after games they listen to the same person giving the same speech. However, when someone else's speech breaks the monotony of the locker room, the players listen. What happens in the locker room is often routine; when things out of the ordinary occur, players and coaches pay attention.

This is not to say that all coaches' talk is empty rhetoric. At times, coaches will deliver effective and motivating speeches. However, coaches' locker room speeches

often depend not on the speech itself, but on who the coaches are and how the players view them. In adolescent sports literature, Crowe divides coaches into one of two categories: “the villainous demented sadist or the nurturing mentor” (More Than a Game 79). Describing a bad coach as a “demented sadist” may be a bit extreme; nonetheless, whether or not players like their coach can determine how they view their locker room experience.

Since the locker room is often synonymous with the coach who manages it, it can become a dark and dirty dungeon, or a bright, princely palace. The coach in On the Devil’s Court is someone who turns the locker room into a dungeon for many young adults. He is what Crowe refers to as a “demen-tor.” “Demen-tors” are coaches who abuse their authority and who “damage and confuse youth more than they help them to ‘grow, feel expansion, and realize his or her potential’” (“The Coach” 4). The first time Joe meets Coach Raible he is too scared to comprehend what the coach wants from him. Raible says to Joe,

“What do you say when you address me?” He looked furious and frightening. I stared at him, my mind blank.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I stammered.

“Then you don’t know much, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“You say ‘sir’ when you address me, understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?” he barked.

“Yes, sir.” (71-72)

When Raible first addresses Joe, he “looked furious and frightening.” This is not the type of description that an athlete wants to associate with his or her coach. In fact, Coach Raible is so scary that Joe’s mind goes “blank.” Raible’s abusive use of authority confuses Joe more than it helps him learn and he “stammered” to find the correct answer.

From this meeting on, Joe has a negative view of Raible. As a result, he does not listen to or respect Raible’s locker room advice. During the halftime of a particularly rough game, Joe explains how “Raible raved about reaching down and gutting it out” (134). In the locker room, Raible does not just speak to his players, but he “barks” and “rave[s],” turning the locker room into a very brute-like atmosphere. The images of “reaching down and gutting it out” are also bestial. Does Raible want these boys to play basketball or devour flesh? Joe even describes Raible’s locker room antics as “comical,” emphasizing that Joe does not take anything Raible says seriously. Nonetheless, Joe may look for the humor in Raible’s behavior because it keeps him from being frightened.

Not all coaches are “demen-tors.” Some are “mentors” who, according to Crowe, “provide hope, and perhaps reminders, that worthwhile, trustworthy adults still exist in today’s increasingly unstable society” (“The Coach” 7). With coaches such as this, the locker room can become a comfortable environment for most young adult athletes. Chris Crutcher’s Chinese Handcuffs introduces us to Coach Sherman, a female coach in charge of Chief Joseph’s championship girl’s basketball team. With Coach Sherman in charge, the locker room scene is very intimate. Before a game, “coach Sherman moved through the locker room, talking with individual players” (174). Coach Sherman knows that although this is a team sport, each player needs and wants individual attention. She does not pamper the star player while criticizing the bench warmers; she treats everyone the

same. After she meets with each player, she “called them all to a circle around her and summarized Chief Joe’s general game plan” (174-75). Like King Arthur’s Round Table, the locker room under Coach Sherman’s rule becomes a place of comfort and equality for these girls. In the locker room, the coach, nor the star player Jen, is above or more important than anyone else. The environment that Coach Sherman creates allows her players to trust her and as a result, they listen to what she says without finding it expected or trite. When she sends “the girls running onto the floor,” they go with the knowledge that their coach has prepared them well (175). It should be noted that the best coach in these young adult basketball novels that I examined is also the only female coach. This could be because of the fact that Coach Sherman does not try to teach her players a hegemonic masculinity.

Nonetheless, gender roles are still constantly being acted out and performed. Since there is usually only one gender present in the locker room, homosocial behavior is inevitable. However, when young adult athletes undress and shower with each other, homosocial behavior can easily turn into homoerotic behavior. According to Mariah Burton Nelson, behavior in the locker room, for men, is all about dominance and control: “Because men are naked in a locker room, they must emphatically prove their heterosexuality and to do so [...] men in a locker room brag ‘about sexual dominance’” (qtd. in Barone 26). However, this behavior is rarely, if ever seen in these young adult basketball novels. We do not see these boys boasting about how far they got with a certain cheerleader, nor do we hear many dirty jokes. In these novels, locker room behavior is mostly dependent on what happens on the court. Nonetheless, the fact that these boys play together allows them to create unique same-sex relationships.

McLaughlin maintains that a group of males playing basketball together “has an interpersonal and physical intimacy of its own, and leads to stronger affective bonds” (188). Once these bonds are created, physical contact may be desirable. However, for boys, physical contact is only acceptable on the court because it fits into the category of competition and violence, which are staples of masculinity. When this contact finds its way off the court and into the locker room—which it often does—homosocial bonding turns into homoerotic horseplay.

In Yea! Wildcats!, images of the boys celebrating in the locker room are full of sexual undertones. After their victory in the State semifinal, Tunis explains the scene in the locker room:

They swept into the dressing room hugging each other madly. It was over at last. Tom, the sweat running from his face, stretched out at full length on his back upon the table in the center. Yells, shouts, muffled cries, the slaps of bare hands on bare flesh echoed and re-echoed from wall to wall. Once more the Wildcats had come through.

“Hurry up now . . . get those wet clothes off, boys.” (248-49)

The images of the sweaty, naked boys can easily be interpreted as much more than celebratory hugs after a game. They enter the locker room hugging “madly,” which implies that they do not have control over their emotions. The thrill of the victory has compelled them to act differently with one another, presumably in ways in which they would not act under normal circumstances. The excitement of the win causes them to be much freer with their bodies, slapping their “bare hands on bare flesh.” Tom, who has “sweat running from his face,” stretches “full length” on a table in the center of the locker

room. He exposes himself to the team amongst a background of “yells, shouts, [and] muffled cries,” as well as the encouragement of his coach to “get those wet clothes off.”

The fact that the coach encourages them to take their clothes off is also evocative. Trites maintains, “Nothing demonstrates the power relationships between adults and teenagers as effectively as the abuse of sexual power” (96). In this situation, Don Henderson is not necessarily using his power to encourage the boys into sexual play; nonetheless, the sexuality present in his language is undeniable. The boys are ecstatic about their win and in this state, they overlook any behavior that may usually be perceived as odd. Moreover, the power relationship becomes more apparent because Don is fully clothed, ordering around a group of naked boys.

In Outside Shooter, Deke may also take advantage of his players. Before a particularly hard practice, Deke plays with his drawstring while two of his players get ready. First, he encourages other players to leave while “Bobby was stripping out of his classroom clothes” (105). Then, our narrator explains, “Deke probably did not fool anyone with the tactic, but he decided to change the drawstring at the waist of his sweat pants, keeping him in the locker room until all but Chris and Bobby had left” (105). The scene describes Deke watching two of his players strip while he changes the string in his pants, implying that his hands are down his pants as he watches. Directly after this we jump to the practice scene, which according to Deke, was “icy and stiff,” implying that he was playing with more than his drawstring (105). Even though the sexual connotation in these locker room scenes do not necessarily mean that the players and coaches are involved in any “real” sexual behavior, the fact that they are naked men behaving in such a manner is suggestive of the homosocial—even homoerotic—nature of the locker room.

In Chinese Handcuffs, Dillon is the trainer of the girl's basketball team. He breaks the "rules" of the locker room in the sense that he, a person of the opposite sex, is allowed in and able to interact with the girls. In fact, Dillon is not only inside the girl's locker room, but he helps the girls stretch before the game. While he stretches Jen, he asks, "How you feelin'?" (174). But Jen "put up her hand and shook her head," which was "her signal not to talk but to take care of business" (174). This tells us that Dillon is in the locker room because he has a job to do and the girl's, especially Jen, expect nothing else from him. As a result, Dillon proceeds to perform his locker room duties without interruption.

In order for Dillon to stretch her out, "Jen rolled over onto her stomach so he could apply gentle pressure to her upper hamstring with the heels of both hands. He felt the leg relax under the pressure and firmly, but still gently, applied more" (172). The language used to describe this process is sexualized. First of all, Dillon is in the girl's locker room; now he must place his hands on Jen in order to help her "loosen up." Jen is on her stomach, which leaves her vulnerable and visually unaware of what Dillon is doing to her or what he is looking at. Dillon has the heels of his hands on her upper hamstring, implying that his fingers must be on or hovering above Jen's butt. There also exists this oxymoronic use of pressure, which is both "gentle" and "firm." As Dillon feels Jen's leg relax, he knows that he is allowed to apply more and more pressure, but he is still very careful to be gentle. After all, he doesn't want to hurt or upset Jen. The loosening of Jen's hamstring draws obvious comparisons to the early stages of sexual penetration. Once Dillon is finished with Jen, he "moved about the other girls, taking care of their aches and pains and teasing a little to loosen them up" (172). Dillon is the

only male in the girl's locker room and he acts as a hired hand, working the girls, "taking care" of them, and "teasing" them. The way in which he prepares the girls for the big game is comparable to foreplay before sex. What appears to be an innocent pre-game stretching routine for the girls becomes a very sexualized scene, especially when it involves a teenage male in the girl's locker room.

At the close of his article "Locker Room Lessons," Barone asks, "Is the locker room a place of dominance and control or a democratic space?" (32). When we take a look at adolescent basketball literature, we cannot answer that question with any real certainty. In the case of Joe in On the Devil's Court, the locker room is definitely a place of dominance, ruled by one. Raible orders the boys around and they must do as he says. But what about the locker room in Chinese Handcuffs, where Coach Sherman goes to each player individually and has them sit in a circle? Is this not a democratic space? Referring to the locker room, Barone argues, "There is no experience of it until there are people in it and different people will experience the same thing differently" (32). The locker room appears to be a very simple place. There are stereotypically a few lockers, a shower area, and perhaps a couple of benches to rest on. But the locker room is actually quite complex, and defining it as a place of dominance or a place of democracy based upon these characteristics is impossible. It depends on the people who occupy a particular locker room. While Lonnie in The Outside Shot sees the locker room as a "transitional space," where everyone is treated equally, Nick in Night Hoops is aware of the pecking order that takes place. While Tom in Yea! Wilcats! may not see anything sexual about slapping "bare hands on bare flesh," Dillon in Chinese Handcuffs may have a different point of view. The locker room is a unique place for a basketball team

because it is not the physical structure that defines the space, but the people who inhabit it. Young adult athletes cannot walk into any old locker room and know what to expect. It is up to the players changing at their lockers and the coach giving out last minute instructions to determine how they will view their locker room experience. McLaughlin argues, “Space is defined by social process, and spatial rule in turn shape the people who inhabit the space” (174). The locker room is not only defined by the players and coach who inhabit it, but it also helps shape these individuals, as well.

CONCLUSION

I have examined the bench and the locker room because they are dominant spaces in the lives of adolescents. McLaughlin argues, “The lessons of the game and of other everyday practices are so deep that they shape the very identities of players, perhaps even more powerfully than the grand cultural identities of race and gender and class and sexuality” (170). If this is true, which for the dedicated athlete is very possible, the bench and the locker room are spaces where many “lessons of the game” occur. Unfortunately, the identities that these spaces help create are not always positive. In fact, they can be quite damaging. While the actions on the court tend to idealize sports and glorify athletes, the actions on the bench and in the locker room, as seen through these novels, often give a much darker, and perhaps more realistic view of sports.

Ideally, the bench and the locker room are support centers. They are spaces where players and coaches encourage the team on the floor to do their best. However, as we have seen in these novels, the bench and the locker room are actually, more often than

not, spaces where young adult athletes must learn to deal with uncomfortable and sometimes hostile behavior. Almost none of the players on the bench are happy being there, and if they are, there is something “wrong” with their competitive spirit, as we saw with Joe in On the Devil’s Court and Doyle in Danger Zone. Also, depending on the attitudes of teammates and coaches, the locker room can become a frightening place where social orders are firmly put into effect. For most players, the bench is a symbol of what they cannot have. Nonetheless, these adolescent basketball novels put a positive twist on the bench. They make the bench seem like a bump in the road; it is a hardship that players must overcome—a way for them to pay their dues. As a result, these spaces help illustrate the Algaesque roots of young adult sports fiction, but instead of rags to riches, it becomes bench to playing time, and usually even bench to stardom.

In the majority of these novels, the players who struggle with their coach in the locker room and with sitting on the bench eventually become the stars of their team. In actuality, many of these players hate the bench and the locker room and rarely see anything positive about them. They want to play and even though they are inches from the court, they are forbidden. The bench, then, becomes a physical representation of their inferiority. The fact that these players are sitting on the bench lets them know, as well as the fans and their teammates, that they are not as good as the five players on the court. Also, throughout an adolescent’s athletic career, the locker room and the bench becomes a constant, lurking threat, stripping young adult athletes from a great deal of enjoyment that athletics are supposed to provide.

While the novels tend to follow the Merriwellian heroics on the court—by the end of most of these novels the team has been successful and the teen protagonist is usually

the reason for their success—the actions that take place on the bench and inside the locker room are much more realistic. These books demonstrate a cognizance of the agony that the bench and the locker room create; the authors seem to be aware of the distress that these spaces cause. However, the novels still focus on athlete heroes who, like the traditional American hero, battles through adversity and becomes a success. Consequently, the novels do nothing about improving these spaces. The bench and the locker room are therefore shown as necessary burdens that the players must deal with in order to participate.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Norma Klein argues that young adult literature should “somehow make life easier for adolescents, to make them aware that even their deepest and most private feelings are not freakish or strange but are shared by others” (26). In the case of adolescent basketball literature, this is being done. For example, young adult readers can see that other bench players express thoughts that they are not supposed to think; or that other athletes are bothered by the violence demonstrated in the locker room. One might argue, then, that young adult basketball literature, according to Klein’s definition, is a success. It is helping adolescents cope with the bench and the locker room. But this is not necessarily a good thing. These novels teach young adults that if they stick it out, if they put up with the harmful effects of the bench and the locker room, they will one day be rewarded. Unfortunately, this is not realistic. Many bench players will never see playing time, nor will the locker room become a place of camaraderie or their coach a mentor. Acknowledging the actions and the attitudes that consumes these spaces does give a more accurate depiction of the life of a young adult

athlete; but within the genre of adolescent sports fiction, the themes of last second heroics remains and writing deviating from the idealization of sports is still far and few between.

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