

Playing Pickup With Oscar

By IRA BERKOW, The New York Times / Published: April 27, 1997

Indoors in a half-court basketball game a few years ago, I took one step to begin my dribble and heard a popping sound, like the shell of a Brazil nut being cracked.

The guy guarding me stopped. "What was that?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, holding the ball. "But I think it was me." It was. I had severed the anterior cruciate ligament, the rubber band, so to speak, that connects the thigh to the calf. My doctor recommended against reconstructive surgery and gently suggested that, at 52, my playing days were over.

I had played basketball since I was a small boy. And while I never became a pro -- never close -- I did become a starting player on my high-school and college teams, and would later play for my regiment in the Army, and in various amateur leagues and tournaments. Even now, in my so-called middle age, I was still playing in pickup games in parks and schoolyards and gymnasiums, long after many of my friends had stopped playing altogether.

But I couldn't accept that this was the end of the road of my basketball life. I mean, I knew I still had a lot of missed shots left in me. So I had arthroscopic surgery to repair cartilage that had been torn when I severed the ligament and, equipped with a \$750 brace, worked for two years to bring my game back

I did make one concession. I had been playing primarily with younger guys, some even in high school, and this concerned my parents, who are both past 80. If you are going to continue playing, they said one day last spring, why don't you play with those of your own age? I said I would try.

There was a story I wanted to cover in Cincinnati, and so I decided to get in touch with an older fellow I knew there who might be up for a pickup game while I was in town. I had met him in the course of my work -- he's 58, a year older than I am -- and I learned a few years ago that he played recreational basketball at noontime at the Y.M.C.A. Well, I thought, I'll give it a shot.

"Hello, Oscar?" I said.

"Yes," came the long-distance reply.

Oscar Robertson owns three businesses in Cincinnati, and I had reached him at the office of Orchem, the Oscar Robertson chemical supplies company. "The Big O," as Robertson was called, was once regarded as the undisputed greatest all-around basketball player in history -- until Michael Jordan came along.

Oscar and I chatted amiably for a bit before I managed to slip in the question, as nonchalantly as I could. "By the way, Oscar," I said, "are you still playing basketball?"

"Not to amount to much," he said.

"But you play?"

"Yeah. I play with guys of a certain age." He laughed softly. "Most of the guys are 40, 45 and over."

"Guys like you who still enjoy the game?"

"Right. The way I play is, I always try to get a fast guard, one younger guy. And I fast-break guys to death. But I don't play as much as I used to. Some guys don't care to play with me."

"You mean, you're too good?"

"No, too rough."

"Too rough?"

"It's terrible. They're always calling all these fouls. I tell 'em: 'Whoever told you basketball was a noncontact sport? It isn't.' "

I laughed out loud. "Oscar, you sound just like someone in any of my games, complaining about the fouling. It's funny coming from one of the all-time greats." There was a kind of silence at the other end. I think he was getting steamed just thinking about the hackers.

I remember watching Robertson in college and in the pros, and marveling. At 6 foot 5 and 220 pounds, playing both guard and forward, he was strong, confident, effortless and competitive. He always seemed to get the shot he wanted, even when a battalion of players was storming him. He was never a flashy player, and was always fundamentally sound. He was a pleasure to watch.

Robertson had a patented spin move that I tried to imitate -- still try, in fact. You're on the base line dribbling the ball and your back is to your defender. And then you spin around him, hooking your hand on his hip. Oscar did it so quickly and smoothly that he was rarely called for it. When I do it, I usually end up with a foul called on me, or an argument. That is the difference between pluck and genius.

After having been a three-time All-America, college player of the year and three-time major college scoring champion -- with a 34-point average -- at the University of Cincinnati, Robertson went on to play 10 years for the Cincinnati Royals in the N.B.A. He scored 30 points a game for the Royals, at the time an output second only to the titanic Wilt Chamberlain, and along with that he averaged about 10 rebounds and 11 assists a game. That is, he averaged a triple-double for five years -- and something close to that for his entire 14-year pro career. Robertson broke Bob Cousy's record for most all-time assists, and he held the record until Magic Johnson topped it. Oscar was traded to Milwaukee in 1970 and, teaming with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, helped the Bucks win the N.B.A. championship.

Robertson retired from the N.B.A. in 1974 but didn't give the game up, as so many star players do. Oscar just switched from arenas like Madison Square Garden and the Los Angeles Forum and Chicago Stadium to the Cincy Y, of all places.

I asked Oscar what his game is like today.

"I can still shoot," he said. "I hit the three-point shot right behind the circle. Most pickup players don't understand how to guard a guy and they sag off you and I kill 'em with the outside shot."

Do you drive? I asked. He said: "I drive if I'm 15 feet in or closer. But at the top of the key it takes too long" -- how true! I thought -- "and guys hack you to death."

I asked him if he'd take me up to play in his game at the Y when I came to town.

"Like I said, the games are kinda rough," he cautioned.

"I think I can manage," I replied, not knowing if in fact I could.

"O.K., any time," Oscar said. "Just call ahead. I'll round up some guys to play with."

I arrived early for the noontime game with Oscar in order to limber up. After all, if I were going to sing with Luciano Pavarotti, I'd want to get in a few extra notes before going on stage.

I went to my locker and began to dress. I was adjusting my knee brace when I looked up and saw Oscar come through the door. As we greeted each other, I noticed that he seemed broader than I remembered him in his playing days, and of course older, with flecks of gray in his hair. His hand was large and his shake firm. He wore a plaid summer sport jacket, tan slipover shirt, tan pants, brown loafers and a smile that was, well, cryptic. As if to say: are you sure you really want to do this? Why did it remind me of a cat's grin, and why did I feel like the mouse?

Like a lot of older gyms, this one had a regulation-size basketball court but with only a little room to shoot on the four baskets -- two on each side -- that hung parallel to the court. I noticed signs on the yellow-painted walls: FIGHTING WILL RESULT IN IMMEDIATE SUSPENSION, and NO CUSSING. Yes, I thought to myself, a typical Pickup Game Heaven.

The squeak of sneakers and the faintly gamy smell of sweat were clear indications that a game was in progress. It was a full-court game, and I took in the caliber of play. It was pretty good, though not of the highest level, even by Y standards. There were some older players who looked as if they might be in their 50's, and some younger ones, including, Robertson later pointed out to me, one very good 31-year-old. This was Tim McGee, a wiry, 5-foot-10-inch veteran wide receiver for the Cincinnati Bengals and a onetime high-school basketball standout in Cleveland.

Shortly after I got in the gym, Oscar appeared. He dressed plainly, in gray T-shirt, gray shorts and white sneakers. And when we warmed up, he took that jump shot that was so familiar and seemed nearly impossible to block. He cradled the ball in his right hand like a waiter carrying a tray of Champagne glasses. He seemed to hang in the air, not as high as Michael Jordan -- not nearly as high now, to be sure, or even then -- but just as inaccessible. It was the shot I had seen him take and score against stars like Jerry West and Bob Cousy and Wilt Chamberlain. The ball snapped through the net with an uncommon but customary authority. The one difference, however, was the discernible paunch

under his shirt. He told me he tipped the scales now at about 250, some 30 pounds over his playing weight.

"Oscar," I said, "the floor feels a little slippery, or is it my sneakers?"

"This is the Y," he said. "They never mop it."

Then he spit on the wooden floor -- my eyes widened at this -- and rubbed the sole of each foot into it. "For traction," he said. Naturally, I did the same. It worked, too.

Oscar had written both our names on a sheet of paper that hung on the wall. Good, I thought, we would be playing together. Since the winning team stays, you get a better workout if you win, and the chances of winning with Oscar Robertson on my side in a pickup game, I figured, would be substantially better than if he weren't.

We played and lost, 10-6.

Oscar never seemed to get fully in the game. I felt a little nervous, as I always do in a game in a new place, with new people. There is always that thing about proving myself, or at least demonstrating that I belong. Like starting a new job.

The first time I got the ball on offense, I passed to Oscar in the corner. He missed the shot. He took another and missed that one too. He was playing their tallest man -- someone about 6 foot 8 -- and muscling him out for rebounds. ("I don't jump much anymore," he said. "I just lean into people. And these guys up here don't really know how to box out.") As for me, I took a jump shot that hit the rim and bounced away. I took another and missed. My shots were just off, and I wasn't feeling confident. I have no doubt that Oscar sensed it. "They'll fall," he said to me, as we backpedaled on defense.

The third time down, I passed to Oscar, who motioned that I come around him. I did, and he set a wide screen with his ample body. He cleared out my man, and his man and, it seemed, everyone else in the gym. He was setting me up for the shot. I don't remember ever getting a screen like that. I felt all alone, as if I were in an empty meadow. I was buoyed. Oscar was, as the saying goes, trying to "get me off." I'd like to think he saw that I had a shot, and that he'd make use of it.

I shot from about 17 feet away. All net.

But Oscar didn't quite seem to be taking charge. Tim McGee, meanwhile, made three straight shots, on twisting, athletic moves. "Get him!" Oscar called out to the man guarding McGee. "He's scoring all the points." I was not, I am happy to report, guarding Tim McGee. McGee told me later that Oscar has mellowed in the last few years. "When I first came up to the Y 10 years ago, he still had an N.B.A. mentality," he recalled. "He'd holler at you if you missed a layup. He was in charge. Oh yeah. He's a little cooler now."

The Big O, one of the highest scorers in history, was shut out in our game. Didn't make a single hoop in three tries. But Oscar still had some Oscar left in him. And it became clearer when we were waiting for next.

He was critical of some of the play. "That guy hasn't passed the ball yet," he said of one player. "Look at that," he said, indicating another player, "he doesn't even try to get back on defense. Unbelievable."

But Oscar was also enjoying the camaraderie. "Kill 'em, Freddie," he called out to one guy. Freddie, a lawyer, tried to ignore him. Oscar needed a few others. "Oh, oh," he said, like an announcer, as one team scored several straight baskets, "the tide is turning."

In the second game we played, Oscar got more into it. A teammate was fast-breaking, and Oscar threw a perfect lob pass from half-court that sailed just over the outstretched fingers of the defender. I had the ball and he set a pick for a teammate to cut to the basket, and looked at me and pointed to the cutting teammate. I hit him with the pass for a basket. But on another occasion I threw a no-look pass that was wide of the mark. Oscar said nothing. He did shout to me, "Cut through," on one play, but I didn't do it quick enough and didn't get the ball.

At one point, I had the ball near half-court and looked to pass. Somehow, Tim McGee seemed to go from one end of the court to the other at the speed of light and stole the ball out of my hands. Outstanding athletes -- especially those in top shape -- are shocking to the layman in their quickness and strength; especially to the slowing layman.

I was feeling foolish and worthless after that steal, when, on the very next play, McGee stole the ball from Oscar! Off the dribble! Oscar looked not so much sheepish as disgusted with himself as he watched McGee put in a layup. The next time down, Oscar was pounding his dribble in that no-nonsense manner I remembered from his playing days. He got into the lane and scored on a jumper. He hit two more shots, including one on a rebound -- after he missed three straight shots under the basket, getting the rebound each time. He was determined to make the shot.

Oscar's court vision was remarkable. He seemed to know where everyone was, when to get them the ball and how -- lob pass, bounce pass, chest pass. And always with economy of movement. There wasn't an ounce of flab to his game. Never was. Oscar dribbling the ball between his legs would be as unimaginable as Pavarotti doing rap.

When Robertson was double-teamed, he always found the open man to pass to. When he was an active player, he once told me, "I always know who is guarding my teammates, and so when I'm double-teamed I naturally know who's open." He said it as though to say, "Well, doesn't everybody?"

Oscar threw me a sweet, crisp pass at the chest, just in my stride, and I hit another jumper. I missed my next two shots, however. With the score tied at 9 -- and the game on the line -- I passed the ball to Oscar at the top of the key. He went up for the jumper without hesitation and, with the same perfect mechanics he had employed a million times, swished it for the game winner. We won the next game, too, 10-7, and I had my best results, scoring three baskets, including the game-ender, a fadeaway one-hander on the baseline in which I started to drive to the basket and then pulled up.

According to the rules in that gym, the winning team has to relinquish the court after two wins, but we'd been there for more than an hour and it was enough for both of us. Oscar's shirt was splotched with sweat; I could see he was tired. I

think I was sapped as much from the tension and anticipation as from the games themselves.

"How about some lunch," Oscar said.

Oscar had said nothing about anything I did on the court, except for his "They'll fall." Which was enough. It elevated my spirits, and, along with his screens and passes, it also elevated my game. I imagine he gave me points for hustling, for I made certain I always got back quickly on defense, though, near the end, the brawny, 250-pound Oscar was having some problems doing so himself.

"It's really a simple game," he said to me as we went into the locker room. "It's rebounding and defense and maintaining control of the ball."

It's a simple game for Oscar, and, perhaps, in their fields, the same could be said for Picasso and Mozart. It's somewhat more difficult for the rest of us.

But I saw that Oscar still enjoyed the game, still delighted in the competition; it wasn't the N.B.A. but it was still a decent run, even for him. He still enjoyed mixing with the other players in a familiar setting, just as he had when he first began playing as a boy in the "Dust Bowl" playground of Indianapolis, his home town. And he maintained a competitive sense, even toward the pros of today. When I asked Oscar about Michael Jordan, who has averaged 32 points a game in his career, he said he was a great player.

I asked him how many points Jordan would have scored in Oscar's era.

"We had fewer teams and the talent wasn't as diluted as it is today," he replied. "So I think Jordan would have scored about 20 a game."

"Twenty a game?" I said. "But you scored 30 a game in that era."

"Well," said Oscar, with a shrug, "I handled the ball more than he does."

After we parted, I remembered something Oscar had told me near the end of his career. I had mentioned that his career scoring average was dropping. In his last season, he averaged 16 points a game, down from 30 after his first nine seasons in the league.

"I don't feel too bad that it's dropping," he said. "It's to be expected. I'm getting older." He paused. "But you know, it happens to everybody."

"What happens to everybody?" I asked.

"Autumn," he said.

Ira Berkow is a sports columnist for The New York Times. This article is adapted from "To The Hoop," to be published next month by HarperCollins. Copyright © 1997 by Ira Berkow.