



Powered by Clickability

Posted: Tuesday January 13, 2009 9:18AM; Updated: Tuesday January 20, 2009 1:51PM



Alexander Wolff > **VIEWPOINT**

[ARCHIVE SERIES](#)

The Audacity of Hoops: How basketball helped shape Obama

Story Highlights

As a boy Barack Obama began playing basketball, and he never stopped
As president, Obama is expected to put a full court in the White House

The path is a familiar one: Ancestry in Kansas; influences from Africa; a kind of apotheosis in **Michael Jordan's** Chicago; eventual acclamation by the world. And while, no, basketball itself won't be sworn in next Tuesday as the 44th president of the U.S., the game has played an outsized role in forming the man who will. Basketball, says his brother-in-law, Oregon State coach **Craig Robinson**, is why **Barack Obama** "is sitting where he's sitting."

The game provided space in which the young Obama explored his identity as an African-American. He won a reputation as a consensus builder while playing recreationally in college and law school. A pickup game with Robinson did nothing less than confirm Obama as a worthy suitor to his wife-to-be. In Chicago, basketball helped him connect with the South Siders he worked with as a community organizer and with the circle of professionals who would help launch his political career. He began to scratch out notes for his 2004 Democratic Convention speech, the one that loosed his career from the D league of state politics, while in a hotel room watching the NBA on TNT. As for the two reddest states Obama flipped in the '08 general election, Indiana and North Carolina, each narrowly chose him after he made a basketball lover's case to basketball-loving people.

The more than 300,000 people who have watched the **Barack O-Balla** mixtape on YouTube, with its highlights from high school through Election Day, might describe Obama's game as old-school schoolyard: reverse layups, double-pumps in the lane, mambos off the dribble and a signature fake-right, drive-left move. (Obama also shoots a decent midrange jumper, though his high school nickname, Barry O'Bomber, is a misnomer.) Ask whom he resembles, and an array of answers comes back. **Claude Johnson**, founder of the website **Baller-in-Chief.com**, sees the elegance and even temper of San Antonio Spurs guard **Tony Parker**. Others receiving votes include **Kenny Anderson**, **Dick Barnett**, **Manu Ginóbili**, **Lionel Hollins** and **Delonte West** (sans neck tattoos).

Robinson weighs the evidence -- 6' 1 1/2", savvy, lefthanded -- and comes up with **Lenny Wilkens**, the Hall of Fame playmaker who campaigned for Obama and whose autograph graces the basketball that decorated the President-elect's spare Chicago transition office. "Lenny was a thicker player and Barack is very slight, even if [defensive] physicality doesn't bother him," says Robinson. "But the calmness of Lenny, that's Barack. He knows the game well enough to fit in and isn't out of his element athletically."

In the same way that his candidacy confounded much of the political wisdom about race, Obama's game at age 47 makes a muddle of categories. "Here you have a laced-up professional off the court -- a 'white' persona -- who throws behind-the-back passes and busts crossovers," says Johnson. "You'd think he'd have a basically stiff game, like **Tim Duncan's**, but no, he's showing up at a North Carolina practice or playing ball with [NBA guard **Chris**] **Duhon**. So the guy on the street says, 'Whoa, he's got a little *game*!' It's part of his appeal."

Obama remains something short of the total hoops package. He can't dunk. He doesn't have a nickname. His usual getup of black sweatpants and gray T-shirt (call it the Police Academy Trainee look) isn't likely to set a trend. But he does stick his nose in it. In Kuwait last July he didn't merely visit U.S. troops, he swished a three for them -- first try, no warmup. And as president he'll keep the counsel of a roster's worth of former ballplayers, in and out of his Cabinet, many better at the game

than he.

Elizabeth Alexander is handling poetry duties at the Inauguration, but Obama himself could serve ably as bard of the new First Sport. In *Dreams from My Father*, his 1995 memoir, he captures both the cadences and the beguiling essence of the game: "And something else, too, something nobody talked about: a way of being together when the game was tight and the sweat broke and the best players stopped worrying about their points and the worst players got swept up in the moment and the score only mattered because that's how you sustained the trance. In the middle of which you might make a move or a pass that surprised even you, so that even the guy guarding you had to smile, as if to say, 'Damn....' "

Hoop Dreams from My Father

Obama's father, **Barack**, a Kenyan exchange student at the University of Hawaii, left his wife and son soon after the latter's birth in 1961. White, Kansas-born **Ann Dunham** was left to raise Barry first in the islands, then in Indonesia, where she moved in 1967 after marrying another exchange student, **Lolo Soetoro**. His mother, Obama writes in *Dreams*, believed that "to be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear... [and] we were to carry with style."

Yet one day, roaming the library of the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, where his mother worked, Barry read in a magazine of a black man's unavailing efforts to lighten his skin and the physical and emotional scars that followed. By age 10, sent back to Honolulu to live with his grandparents and attend Punahou, the elite private school to which he won a scholarship, Barry sensed a gap between his mother's romantic notion of blackness and the signals society sent his way. As for raising oneself to be a black man in America, he remembers, "no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant." Aside from those stationed with the military, Hawaii in the mid-1970s could count barely 400 black residents.

Soon two events conspired to help Obama address his alienation. In December '71, during a visit that would constitute Barry's only memory of the man, his father gave him a basketball as a Christmas present. A photo survives of the two of them posing with the ball before the Christmas tree. Barry would come to regard that basketball as a charge as much as a gift.

The second event would take place a few months later, after Barry's grandfather scored two scarce tickets to watch Hawaii play. Between 1970 and '72 the Rainbows put together a 47-8 record and received the university's first NIT and NCAA invitations. With aloha-print shorts and bountiful Afros, the Fabulous Five averaged 90 points a game as the pep band played *Jesus Christ Superstar* and fans spilled into the aisles. As Obama recounts in *Dreams*, "I had watched the players in warmups, still boys themselves but to me poised and confident warriors, chuckling to each other about some inside joke, glancing over the heads of fawning fans to wink at the girls on the sidelines, casually flipping layups or tossing high-arching jumpers until the whistle blew and the centers jumped and the players joined in furious battle."

This, he decided, was a world into which he could fit his young black self. By the time he hit his teens, he was taking his father's gift to school, shooting between classes and over the lunch hour. Teachers and students soon remarked that his gait had taken on a ballplayer's bounce, a suppleness of foot that can be seen today when he bounds onto a stage. As he grew more confident, he drifted to the school's lower courts, even after basketball practice. There, and at the university gym and at playgrounds around town, he would engage the island's best adult players. **Chris McLachlin**, Punahou's varsity coach, can't recall a player who loved the game more.

Posted: Tuesday January 13, 2009 9:18AM; Updated: Tuesday January 20, 2009 1:51PM



Alexander Wolff >VIEWPOINT

The Audacity of Hoops (cont.)

In those pickup games, Obama has written, "a handful of black men, mostly gym rats and has-beens, would teach me an attitude that didn't just have to do with the sport. That respect came from what you did and not who your daddy was. That you could talk stuff to rattle an opponent, but that you should shut the hell up if you couldn't back it up. That you didn't let anyone sneak up behind you to see emotions -- like hurt or fear -- you didn't want them to see." An airy civility prevails in Hawaii -- *No talk stink* goes an idiom in the local pidgin -- but the playground offered an alien rhetoric that suited Barry just fine.

Obama admits to "living out a caricature of black male adolescence" with his embrace of the game. A Punahou senior who hoped to become a lawyer watched Obama, two years younger, inscribe a parting message in his yearbook: Get that law degree, and someday you can help me sue my NBA team for more money. But even if Obama played "with a consuming

passion that would always exceed my limited talent," as he writes, that passion came with perks. "At least on the basketball court I could find a community of sorts, with an inner life all its own. It was there that I would make my closest white friends, on turf where blackness couldn't be a disadvantage."

With all those hours of play he developed what he'd later call "an overtly black game." One of his favorite R & B songs was **William DeVaughn's** *Be Thankful for What You Got*, a mid-'70s ode to inner-city pose-copping, with its invocation of *Diggin' the scene/With a gangsta lean*. Obama's immersion in basketball was, in fact, a kind of pose. Eventually he would have to apply the message in the song title to his experience as a senior on McLachlin's Buff 'n' Blue varsity.

He had played jayvee as a sophomore and made Punahou's second varsity as a forward the next season. (The school fielded multiple teams in some sports to accommodate its huge enrollment.) After having learned the game on the playground, Obama ran up against McLachlin, a disciple of **John Wooden, Dean Smith and Pete Carril**. "We had some conflict," Obama told SI last year. "Some tension." A black friend, ratifying Obama's belief that he should be getting more playing time, hinted that Obama was now stuck in that other hoary African-American hoops narrative: Black Prometheus, Straitjacketed by the Man.

In McLachlin's telling, it was simpler and less sinister than that. "He was really, really good and could have started for any other team in the state," the coach says. "But we were really good, and it was so hard to break into that group. Three kids went on to Division I scholarships, two at his position." McLachlin, then in his early 30s, believes that if they had met later in his coaching career, Obama would have had a more rewarding experience. "I would have made a place for a player like him," McLachlin says. "But in those early days I was much more conventional. Play five, maybe one or two subs, go to the bench with a big lead. Obviously it was frustrating for him. So he negotiated."

During his senior season Obama led a delegation of pine-riders to McLachlin's office to make the case on their behalf for more playing time. "I reminded him it wasn't about him, it was about the team," McLachlin says, "and the end result was that we had a pretty amazing year." The Punahou team that beat Moanalua High 60-28 for the 1979 state title is regarded as one of the greatest in Hawaii history. In that game Obama missed a free throw and scored on a garbage-time breakaway.

That season, Obama told SI a year ago, he learned about "being part of something and finishing it up. And I learned a lot about discipline, about handling disappointments, about being more team-oriented and realizing that not everything is about you."

McLachlin agrees. "Despite the fact that there was pushback, he never lost sight of what the goal was," the coach says. "We sometimes don't get the lessons teachers teach us until years later."

When he returned to Punahou in 2004 to address a packed chapel, Obama admitted to having been "kind of a pain in the butt when I was here." From the dais the old second-stringer found McLachlin in the shadows. "Coach Mac, is that you?" said the new U.S. Senator from Illinois. "I've gotta tell you something. I really wasn't as good as I thought I was."

McLachlin felt a weight leave his shoulders. "As much as I berate myself for my own lack of maturity as a coach at that time, obviously some stuff stuck with him and helped shape his character," he says. "I didn't screw him up, is what I mean."

Obama has alluded to the many hours he devoted to basketball as time he might have spent rounding himself out. "I had bought into a set of false assumptions about what it means to be black," he has confessed. The game had nonetheless dug its hooks into him. And while by the time he left Punahou he knew how to get lost in a book, discuss geopolitics with friends and write up something for the literary magazine -- clique-conscious classmates wondered whether Barry wanted to be a jock or a brain -- one phrase leaps from his senior yearbook page. It's a kind of epitaph for his time in Hawaii: *We go play hoop*.

Community on the Court

If a presidential campaign is an MRI of the soul, as Obama strategist **David Axelrod** likes to say, a pickup basketball game is a polygraph of the heart. Obama's experience with the organized game would total three high school seasons, only one of them on Punahou's top varsity, and that largely on the bench. Thus he's less a retired ballplayer looking to keep in shape than what's known as a *baller* -- a product of basketball's speakeasies, not its licensed establishments.

"If he'd been in organized ball, it's very possible he'd have gotten the whole thing out of his system," Johnson says. "He might say he's better now than he ever was, but there's pathos there. You're still trying to prove you're good enough to start on your high school team. In basketball you're continually trying to prove yourself, and in pickup even more so, because there is no record. You can't say, 'Oh, I'm 19-1.' It's all on you."

Pickup ballplayers don't talk as much as golfers during a round, but they more quickly reach judgments about temperament and collaborative aptitude. And there's the emotional containment that ballers learn to bring to the court, even if only to ensure that no one can *sneak up behind you to see emotions... you didn't want them to see*. Asked the boxers-versus-briefs

question, Obama gave the pitch-perfect pickup baller's reply: "I don't answer those humiliating questions, but whichever one it is, I look good in 'em."

Posted: Tuesday January 13, 2009 9:18AM; Updated: Tuesday January 20, 2009 1:51PM



Alexander Wolff > VIEWPOINT

[ARCHIVED STORIES](#)

The Audacity of Hoops (cont.)

Organized basketball, particularly in high school, is an exercise in submission to social control. Pickup ball, by contrast, involves collective governance and constant conflict resolution. It is, to borrow Sarah Palin's phrase, community organizing in which everyone has "actual responsibilities." For all its associations with inner-city pathologies, pickup ball harks back to a traditional time, when kids weren't squired to playdates or stashed with third parties but made their way to the park on their own, picked teams and -- as Obama did -- grew up along the way.

"There's an ethical undertone in pickup that people miss," Robinson says. "The game has to be played fairly or it breaks down. You practice an honor code, making your own calls and giving them up. If Barack travels, he'll give it up, not sneak it by you. You play with hundreds of guys who'd never do that. It all gets back to how you can tell a guy's character on the court."

One of the flaws Obama owns up to is "a chronic restlessness." As he made his fitful way after high school, however, basketball abided. He spent two years at Occidental, a small liberal arts college near Pasadena. The first fall he worked out informally with 15 or so freshman hopefuls, many of whom remember his stylish game. He never was on the school team, but he played "noonball" with faculty, students and staff. As **Eric Newhall**, a professor who played in those games, has put it, "The greatest contribution Occidental has made to American democracy was to help Barack Obama decide that his future wasn't in basketball."

By his sophomore year Obama had thrown himself into classwork and antiapartheid activism, and begun to map a path east. He transferred to Columbia and became more serious about his future, though he still made pilgrimages around Manhattan "to play on courts I'd once read about." After graduation he took a job on Chicago's South Side, where he brought together white priests, black pastors and civic leaders to solve common problems. It was frustrating work marked by intermittent victories. For example, he used basketball as a means to get through to an on-the-edge adolescent who was scaling back his expectations for life.

Several years later, at Harvard Law, Obama joined a group of law students who played against inmates at a nearby prison, where the cons lining the court made sure their visitors knew how many packs of cigarettes rode on the outcome. When he became the first African-American elected to head the *Harvard Law Review*, he won a 19th-ballot victory largely because conservative and liberal factions both believed he'd give them a fair hearing. At least a few fellow students had taken his measure on the court. "He was a passer despite the fact he could score," remembers classmate **Andrew Feldstein**. "*Inclusive* is the best way to describe him."

Soon after Obama began his second tour in Chicago, as a summer associate with the law firm of Sidley & Austin, he started seeing a lawyer there named **Michelle Robinson**. She would introduce him to John Rogers, an investment executive who had captained the team at Princeton; her brother would connect Obama to **Marty Nesbitt**, a parking garage baron and former small-college player. Both would help bankroll Obama's plunge into elective politics.

But before matters between Barack and Michelle could advance too far, she had a test to administer. Having grown up listening to her father and her brother, a two-time Ivy League Player of the Year at Princeton, insist that a man's character gets laid bare on the court, she hatched a plan. Craig Robinson rounded up a quorum of friends of varied abilities. "I didn't want the game to be too intimidating," he says, because it would've been painful to tell Michelle the prospect with the odd name hadn't made the grade. He needn't have worried. Obama found that sweet spot between not shooting every time and not always passing to Craig. In campaign appearances Robinson would retell the story with a kicker: "If I could trust him with my sister, you can trust him with your vote."

He Got Next

In the spring of 2007 the Obama campaign looked like tiny Milan (Ind.) High next to **Hillary Clinton's** Muncie Central. The director of the candidate's New Hampshire operation wanted to have Obama play ball with high school kids around the

Granite State. Axelrod, who has a track record of persuading white voters to support black candidates, balked. "People didn't know him well yet, and I didn't want him to play into a stereotype," he says. But after losing primaries to Clinton in Ohio and Texas on March 4, the campaign looked at a two-month gap before critical votes in Indiana and North Carolina. "We wanted to do campaigning that got us closer to the ground -- more diners and less platform speeches," Axelrod says. "Basketball was a no-brainer. Besides, any excuse to play is one he'll take."

Obama engaged voters in those two states with an idiom familiar to Hoosiers and Tar Heels alike. In Indiana he played H-O-R-S-E with a boy in the hamlet of Union Mills. He played three-on-three in Kokomo. He sank a "buzzer-beater" at an arcade game during a visit to the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame in New Castle. Then he ran full-court with coach Roy Williams's varsity in Chapel Hill. "He actually got to the hole and blew the layup when he saw [college Player of the Year Tyler] Hansbrough coming at him," says Axelrod. On May 6 Obama won North Carolina and nearly captured Indiana, essentially locking up the nomination. Six months later, by which time Dean Smith had endorsed him, Obama carried both states against **John McCain** -- in each case by a lone percentage point. Basketball might well have made the difference.

Posted: Tuesday January 13, 2009 9:18AM; Updated: Tuesday January 20, 2009 1:51PM



Alexander Wolff >VIEWPOINT

[Alexander Wolff >VIEWPOINT](#)

The Audacity of Hoops (cont.)

On Election Day, Obama and 40 or so others picked teams and played round-robin at the Attack Athletics complex in Chicago. "He was the one who had noticed the pattern," Nesbitt says. "We played in Iowa and won. We didn't play in New Hampshire and lost. We played every election day thereafter."

Before the Iowa caucuses, after Team Obama won a game, the candidate offered a high five to the captain of the losing team. **Alexi Giannoulis**, the Illinois state treasurer, refused to deal digits in return. "Why are you being a sore loser?" Obama asked.

"I'll give you a high five back if you admit you stack the teams."

"I don't care who I play with. I'll play with anybody. You want to switch teams? We can switch teams if you want!"

Giannoulis declined as a point of pride, then got the grin that Obama has long deployed to defuse tense moments.

As the lone former Division I players under 35 in Obama's basketball circle, Giannoulis and **Reggie Love** always line up on opposite teams. Obama makes sure he's teamed with Love, the 6' 4", 225-pound former Duke captain (class of 2005) who served as his "body man," or personal assistant, during the campaign. "Barack gets feisty," says Giannoulis, 32, who stands 6' 2" and played at Boston University. "He always makes Reggie guard me, and it drives me nuts."

Indeed, following the May 6 primaries Obama campaigned with bruised ribs, the result of a shoulder Giannoulis gave him on a drive to the basket. "He's tough but not dirty," says Giannoulis, who won statewide office at age 30 thanks largely to Obama's support. "He has fun, but he's intensely competitive. Even as he gets along with everyone, he tries to find a way to win."

"I've seen him stand up for himself," says Robinson, "but I've never seen him lose his cool. That's the Lenny Wilkens part of him."

Not everyone accepts the Wilkens comparison. The McCain campaign aired an attack ad suggesting that Obama had disrespected the troops by shooting hoops with them, with footage of his three-pointer in Kuwait drawing a portrait, as *New York* magazine's John Heilemann put it, of someone "blinged up and camera-hungry.... **Allen Iverson** with a Harvard Law degree." By the end of the campaign, however, Obama had sold himself to the great, broad middle as a Wilkens type, a man who could channel street cred into the mainstream, who wanted the challenge and was up to it.

"It wasn't that he made or missed that shot," Robinson says of Obama's three-pointer in front of the troops in Kuwait. "It's that he took it."

That, Axelrod says, is what consistently strikes him about his boss. Before the first debate with McCain, Axelrod recalls, "We're standing in the greenroom and he's about to take the stage, and I could've easily gone to the bathroom and thrown

up. So I ask him how he's feeling. 'I'm a little nervous, but it's a good nervous,' he says. 'Give me the ball. Let's play the game.' "

Baller-in-Chief

The outdoor half-court on the White House grounds isn't up to the all-seasons, all-court basketball ambitions of the new President. Giddy at what Obama's election could mean for its product around the world, the NBA has offered to help install an indoor full court. Meanwhile, Washington Wizards owner Abe Pollin has offered use of the Verizon Center. At the very least, Axelrod and Nesbitt predict, there will be regular trips to the full court at Camp David.

After helping make him who he is, after helping him get elected, how might basketball influence the way Obama governs? People it will behoove him to get along with -- both **Sen. John Thune** (R., S.D.) and Spanish prime minister **José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero** play regularly -- could wind up as guests in Presidential games. For Cabinet officials there will be face time with the President, and for those who play (prospective Education Secretary **Arne Duncan**, Attorney General-designate **Eric Holder**) there will be in-your-face time as well.

Much has been made of how Obama has assembled, Lincoln-like, a "team of rivals" to advise him. Last summer McLachlin, Obama's high school coach, asked an AP reporter to relay a message to the candidate: In 40 years of coaching he'd learned that there's no such thing as the perfect coach, but there is such a thing as a perfect staff if you surround yourself with people who are good at what you're not. "People seem to agree he's done an amazing job of putting together a Cabinet," says the old coach. "It says a lot about why so many people latched on to him as a dream-giver. Because he's honest about his shortcomings, he can reach for the stars."

During his family Christmas vacation on Oahu, Obama and several Chicago friends met up with a handful of the President-elect's high school buddies and Coach Mac at the Punahou gym. Over nearly two hours they squeezed in four games. Obama dished out no-look passes and finished off a spin in the lane with a finger roll. He sank several shots from deep. Twice he crossed over former Punahou teammate and NFL player **John Kamana**, the best athlete on the floor. McLachlin, having bought into Craig Robinson's analogy, yelled "Lenny!" from the sidelines a half-dozen times.

There's more of McLachlin and his coaching influences in Barack Obama than Barry O'Bomber would ever have imagined. "Avoid the peaks and valleys," John Wooden used to tell his teams, much as Obama told his campaign. Dean Smith was a master at setting aside a loss and moving on, as Obama did after New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Ohio. In November, Rogers, the old Princeton Tiger, supplied interim offices for the Obama transition team at his firm, Ariel Investments -- which meant that for three days the President-elect called world leaders from a conference room named after Pete Carril. The undomesticated high school ballplayer has fallen in with Duncan, Robinson and Rogers, ex-Ivy Leaguers who have won national three-on-three titles by using smarts and structure to school players half their age. Says Rogers, "He's around a lot of guys who know how to play and aren't just running up and down the court."

Throughout Obama's career there's been a pattern of counterweight, of his providing yin where there's yang, and vice versa. At Punahou, with order and orthodoxy all around, he chose to develop a gut-bucket game. On Chicago's South Side, where hoops and life tend toward entropy, he worked as an organizer. At a Harvard Law School roiled by ideological polarization, he was the difference-splitter. Basketball's appeal, Obama told HBO's **Bryant Gumbel** last year, lies in an "improvisation within a discipline that I find very powerful." With its serial returns to equilibrium -- cut backdoor against an overplay; shoot when the defense sags -- the game represents Obama's intellectual nature come alive.

Another dialectic, as old as the ancients, poses the great challenge of government: How best to balance the rights of the individual with the welfare of the group? That tension surfaces in Obama's speeches and writings again and again. "Our individualism has always been bound by a set of communal values," he writes in *The Audacity of Hope*, "the glue upon which every healthy society depends." In the Africa of his roots he sees the pendulum swung so far toward the collective that the individual can be overburdened and paralyzed. In the America he's poised to lead he sees individuals gaming a financial system so enfeebled that the collective faces deficits and recession. Where is the golden mean, that place where We the People might find "a way of being together," where the best players stop worrying about their points and the worst players get swept up in the moment and the score only matters because that's how you sustain the trance?

The same tension sits at the heart of hoops. Titles await teams that can braid what Obama, speaking of America here, has called "these twin strands -- the individualistic and the communal, autonomy and solidarity." Maybe Barry O'Bomber needed to be a Punahou reserve to become a Hawaii state champion. Maybe Barack Obama needed to be a community organizer to become a U.S. Senator. And maybe, just maybe, Americans chose him as their next president because they too have come to recognize that in the end it's not about you, it's about the team.

Perhaps on Tuesday he will say it: Come, let us get swept up in the moment. Let us create and sustain the trance.

MORE ON OBAMA

GALLERY: [Obama and an SI writer battle on the court](#)

WOLFF: [Obama's game reflects his persona](#)

VIDEO: [Barack O-Balla](#)

TIME: [B-Ball with Barack](#)

VIDEO: [Obama's White House court](#)

Find this article at:

http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2009/writers/alexander_wolff/01/13/obama/index.html

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright ☐ 2007 CNN/Sports Illustrated.