

Participant observation

Sport & Tourism, Basketball



ParticipantObservationSports are important social mediums in our country, but basketball is the only sport where you can go to almost any park and play with complete strangers. While other sports involve diverse equipment and numerous amounts of players, basketball is a quick and easy game that only takes a court and a ball. While using the participant observation method, one can easily see how pickup basketball becomes a common stage for social interaction.\n

While my original perspective of the sport was that of a friendly natured game among neighbors with a competitive aspect, my notes and observations revealed how diverse individuals who meet on the court can sometimes become aggressive to the point of hostility. As a gym member of 24 Hour Fitness, I regularly play basketball in their indoor gym. I chose the location in Hermosa Beach because of the diversity of players that attend there. Using the participant observation method, I was both observing and participating while taking notes (obviously not while playing, for that would be an incredible feat).

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In a time p of two hours, I ended up playing three games while observing six other games. The location I visited was crowded, while ten players were on the court (five against five), about twenty people were waiting on the sidelines throughout the night; however, this number changed as people grew either tired or impatient. On the sidelines was a list of names for people who wanted to play next. This called for a more organized system of who

had next compared to parks where people keep track of who verbally called next.

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I found that about half of the players at the gym were African-American, while the rest of the players were mixed evenly between Caucasian, Asian, and Hispanic. Certain players, based on body shape and skill level, were given different roles throughout the game. The ages of the players seemed to be mostly late twenties to early thirties, and at no point throughout my two hours being there did a woman enter the gym. Just as the demographics of the players were diverse, so was the gameplay.

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Some games were dominated by one key player, who scores most of the points, while other teams had strong team chemistry and relied on passing to the open player. I also noticed that when a team is dominated by one player that team usually ends up losing. The team that I played on was very pass oriented, while the team we played against was dominated by only two players. The other team assumed that since their other players were short and small, that they weren't athletic enough to receive the ball, and because of this our team was able to double team the players who didn't pass as much.

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Players match up to other players based on skill and body size, which is why I was guarded by someone very similar to me. I noticed that the biggest

factor was height, meaning our tallest player guarded their tallest player while our shortest player guarded their shortest player. However, during almost every game players make switches according to skill level in order to have a more sufficient defense. Another important aspect of the game of pickup basketball is respect. When players call foul, even if they disagree with the call, they allow them to get the ball back.

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During game two, a person called foul but the player on the other team disagreed. As they began to argue about whether it was a foul or not, a teammate yelled out "respect the call". After that he stopped arguing and gave him the ball. After I played, during the sixth game, a similar situation occurred in a more dramatic way. One player jumped and caught the ball, but flipped over another player, and landed straight on his back. After everyone saw he got up and was ok, the player through the ball "up top", so they could check the ball out and play again.

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A player on the opposite team began to argue saying that he shouldn't get the ball because his own player fouled him. After much hostile and loud arguing, I heard the injured player say, "if you really are that thirsty for the ball you can have it, if you really are that desperate for a win". Everybody on the court agreed that the player's allegation was a little too strict for a simple game of pickup basketball, and extreme competitiveness is frowned upon. Throughout the rest of the game the team did not pass it to him once, and before the game ended he quit.

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He became the focus of discussion for the rest of the night, as people began to criticize him behind his back. From my own personal experience, heated arguments over calls are not that uncommon in the sport of basketball, but usually from those with strong outgoing personalities. For the most part, the game is a civilized game where both teams compete for the win, and focus on teamwork and strategy. At the end of the day I found my perspective on this game had changed. The competitive nature of the game brought up the question: How important is it to win? I observed that to some people the rules of basketball should be enforced strictly, so that the game is fair. However, the general consensus was that respecting other players safety and calls were more important. Nevertheless, I noticed that almost every game had some sort of argument that entailed. I concluded that there is a certain culture on the court that calls for a fair game and places winning as a priority. The sharp contrast to the other players who were only there for the fun and love of the game brings up questions on whether social or even economic backgrounds are what causes people to become so passionate about a seemingly frivolous game.