

ALIEN BALL

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch published two books in her Diving series in the past six months, *Squishy's Teams* and *Thieves*. The next Diving novel, *The Chase* will appear shortly. She's also returned to her Fey universe for the first time in twenty-five years. A novella will appear in August, with new novels to follow. At the end of 2020, she finished a novel about her popular mystery characters, *Spade* and *Paladin*. *Ten Little Fen: A Spade/Paladin Conundrum* will appear later this year. She continues to write her blog on the business of publishing every week and because she doesn't have enough to do, she's studying Spanish again for the first time in decades. We are pleased that she found some time to write this interesting take on . . .

ALIEN BALL

They have three arms, one of which, when they play against us, they tie behind their backs. They're short and squat and look more like the basketball writ large than any kind of basketball player. They can't dunk or even run very well.

But when they play against each other, they transform the game into something else. Something lovely and different, almost like clouds with limbs attempting to confine their movements to a single court with a tiny ball and strange rules.

It isn't our basketball. It is their basketball.

And it is beautiful to behold.

* * *

Basketball, by its very nature, is a gravity-based sport. Sure, there are versions on the Moon, on other planets, on some large spaceships. There are zero gravity rules, and Moon rules. Courts are different. The ball is weighted differently. The Moon has a no-dunking rule. Mars uses higher poles for their baskets.

Those games, to me, aren't basketball. Basketball is a two-team sport, played on a court that's twenty-eight meters long and fifteen meters wide. The hoop is 3.05 meters off the ground, and it's slightly less than half a meter in diameter. The basketball has a circumference of seventy-five centimeters and weighs 624 grams.

Rules vary slightly. There's professional basketball, with a longer three-point distance from the hoop, a shorter shot clock, a jump ball for possession, and a handful of other things, designed to confound, slow down, or challenge the exceedingly good player. There's college ball, which has twenty-minute halves instead of quarters, a

slightly smaller regulation court, and weird rules about uniforms.

High school ball and kids' ball all have their own variations. But at least the international side of basketball has adopted all of those rules, so that when high school kids from Beijing play high school kids from Paris, they're playing a game familiar to both of them.

I'm sure I'm the one writing this piece because I'm the one who lobbied for stringent rules that remain the same on international lines. I'm the voice of standards and measures.

I'm sure I was also brought in because someone, somewhere, figures I'd be the loudest, most well known voice against bringing aliens into the game.

And not just any aliens.

The Ashtenga.

The Ashtenga are our friends. They're our allies. We work with them well, especially compared with some of the other aliens we've discovered in this galaxy. We're compatible. In addition to our business and intellectual interests being (mostly) aligned, we also love entertainment of all types.

We share storytelling forms. I find theirs inexplicable—no real beginning or end, just a lot of middle that seems frenetic. I'm told that if I understood the culture the stories come from (and like us, the Ashtenga have several cultures), I would understand the drama.

I have no idea if I would. My expertise is in sport. I go to sport to relax, from baseball to basketball to soccer. For me, the sport has to be physical—played in person, not on a screen or holographically. I want the thud of feet on the floor, the grunt of a player who gets body-checked by another, the splash of sweat as someone pivots and heads in the opposite direction.

I'm fascinated by the small jobs, the way that the floor cleaner runs out onto the court to clean up that splash of sweat in the instant between the droplets hitting the court and the players catching rebounds at the other basket.

And yes, I'm discussing basketball, because all things being equal, basketball is my sport.

I realize I'm new to some of you. You don't listen when I announce the pro games, trying to keep them alive and lively for the off-planet crowd. You don't listen when I announce the college playoff games or when I cover draft day.

You don't understand my sense of ritual, the honor I feel in participating in a tradition as old as broadcasting itself. Not everyone can watch a game in person. Not everyone can watch in real time.

Not everyone can watch.

It is because of broadcasters that the Ashtenga learned about basketball in the first place. They saw our sporting events before they met us, just like they watched our television programs and our movies. Maybe we find their entertainment to be so simpatico because we have influenced the way they tell stories. They had a century or more of incorporating our techniques into their storytelling machinery before they met us.

And they also tried to imitate our sports as well.

Baseball confounds them. It's too slow for them. Soccer doesn't interest them as players. They like using their arms.

The Ashtenga excel at synchronized swimming and most forms of dance, except those, like Irish Stepdance, that don't use the arms. The Ashtenga love lacrosse and have developed their own (rather frightening) form of rugby.

Some Ashtenga even play a version of the long-defunct American football, the kind not related to soccer at all. Ashtenga rugby is violent; Ashtenga American Football (as they call it) is violence in slow motion and as such seems to have a lot more in common with dance than I would have expected, hearing it described.

But the Ashtenga love basketball, enough that they want to join one of our leagues—or, maybe, play alongside our professionals in games that mirror the old international rivalries that existed hundreds of years ago.

They don't care that we're physically different. They don't care that the game is designed for our physiology, not theirs.

They want to challenge themselves by playing against us.

They want to—as they put it—reach for the stars.

They want to see how, with (literally) one hand tied behind their backs, the Ash-tenga stack up against the species that invented basketball and still plays it with a fervor that makes the game seem new every single time.

I'm all for interspecies rivalries. I like the idea of playing against others who look different from us.

But when Interglobal Sports Network asked me to weigh in on a possible Ash-tenga/Human League, I laughingly said, *You're bringing me in to be the voice of reason.*

My boss looked at me—she has withering looks that can make the most hard-bit-ten sports reporter retreat to his corner—and said, *No, Frank. We're bringing you in to make the anti-alien point of view seem rational. You're good at that.*

* * *

Her words bothered me for days, and I couldn't quite pinpoint why. And then I realized it was for what she didn't say as much as she did.

Seem rational . . . even though it isn't.

Good at that . . . making the nuttiest topic sound logical.

I could have challenged her and asked if that was what she really meant. I have so much work—I'm one of the most in-demand broadcasters of Earth sports for the stars—that I really don't need the Interglobal Media job.

And maybe younger me would have challenged her. Maybe younger me would have taken offense and said loudly, with a bit too much bite, that she's always misunderstood me and my positions.

I would have made it about her.

But I'm older now, and I've come to realize that some of the things I love are not things that others love. I know—I have always known—that none of us are exactly alike, that our tastes vary, that our opinions differ.

I also realize that some of those opinions become mired in the past. I worry about my own rigid tendencies, something I wouldn't even have acknowledged twenty years ago.

I know those tendencies make my passage through this world difficult, as difficult as my aging face, and that moment a younger person looks at me, already judging me for things I haven't said (and might never say) before I even open my mouth.

I don't want to be a caricature of myself.

An older man opposing changes to his beloved Earth-based basketball—that might be a cliché. I might be the caricature that I was afraid of becoming.

It is that fear, the fear of being judged narrow-minded—and finding that judgment to be *true*—that led me to write this piece.

This piece; not the screed my editor hoped for. I'm not exactly sure what it is.

A voyage of discovery, perhaps?

An attempt at change?

Or maybe a delusion—a man who thinks he's retraining his mind to be open, when, in truth, it can never be opened again.

* * *

The first game I went to was in Los Angeles, in one of those neighborhood courts surrounded by barbed wire and crumpling apartment complexes. You can hear the faint artificial swoosh of cars rumbling over the 110, the ancient freeway that had

its roots in what is now erroneously called the “Great” Depression of the twentieth century. The highway became a historic landmark more than fifty years ago, but none of that reverence for history shows here.

The history, in this part of Los Angeles, is in those crumbling buildings and the neighborhood basketball courts, where kids have played pick-up games since long before some urban planner came up with the idea to expand Figueroa all the way to the Port of Los Angeles, creating the foundation for the 110.

The designation “bad” neighborhood applies here, although I’m told that no neighborhood is bad, just underprivileged. All I know, without doing the research into the neighborhood (which is peripheral to my work here), is that various neighborhoods in this part of Los Angeles have been considered “bad” for my entire adult life, and the thing those neighborhoods have always had in common was the presence of “undesirables,” however each generation defines them.

Those undesirables have almost always been immigrants—starting with the Irish and the Germans before the roads had anything but horses, Blacks about the time of the “Great” Depression, Mexicans and Latin Americans when my great-grandparents were young, and the White Diaspora when my grandparents got married, and the so-called Mouth Breathers—aliens who could handle Earth’s atmosphere—around the time my parents had my oldest brother.

The Ashtenga were a small group then, but they’ve since taken over the neighborhood. They sponsor—if that’s the right word—mixed species pick-up games, and have done so for a generation now.

If rumors and gossip can be believed, this is where the idea of a Human/Ashtenga Series was born, among the broken glass tangled in the weeds poking out of the cracked surface of the aging outdoor courts.

I didn’t find this place on my own. My guide isn’t human or Ashtenga. EllaLyn, as she introduces herself, is Cabreeyra. She’s slender and willowy, as most of the Cabreeyra are, her skin grayish-green, her eyes large, and her chin pointed. She comes up to my shoulder, and I’m not tall.

She grew up near here, when the local Alien Laws—the Roundups, for those of you old enough to remember—were still being enforced, but she now lives in one of the protected high-rise condos UCLA provides its most distinguished professors.

That she returns here often to maintain that title is an irony that’s not lost on her.

She used to play pick-up ball here when there weren’t enough Ashtenga kids to form a team. She was better at it than they were—the Cabreeyra’s long multi-jointed arms could stretch and reach the top of a regulation hoop—but she never used that to her advantage.

When she was a young adult, she was offered a position with a team on the Inter-Species League, out of the Moon, and she turned it down. She was interested in sport in theory, not in practice. She likes the history of it, the changes in it, and the way it brings disparate communities together, under the lights of a hot Los Angeles night.

She does me the courtesy of not explaining how this pick-up game is played, assuming I will pick up (pun intended) whatever I need to know. And I do pick up things.

The rules of the game are less fluid than I expect: they’re playing five to a team, but they rotate players in and out as folks arrive. One young woman, who wears an exoskeleton on her lower limbs, sits in the only chair on one side of the court, near the center. She keeps score—verbally—and handles the most controversial calls with an aplomb I haven’t seen before.

It takes me about ten minutes to realize that what I thought was a soccer ball beside her is actually a young Ashtenga, arms and legs rolled around its torso, head at an angle that makes it almost impossible for me to see.

The Ashtenga is consulting with her, and she doesn't make any of her calls until they both appear to agree.

No one argues with her, although every human on the court is bigger and more physically powerful. The Ashtenga float back, their arms blowing in the wind the way that long hair would. Only when the game gets underway do the arms seem to have any substance at all.

The Ashtenga don't play with one arm tied behind their backs here. They play with all three arms, apparently to make up for the height disadvantage. With that third arm, they're able to hold the ball between two hands, and use the third arm as a springboard, launching their much lighter bodies upward, often completing a dunk.

Apparently, gripping the edge of the rim is allowed, as is forcing the ball inside. The only dunking disallowed—at least while I was there—was when one of the Ashtenga overshot her target and went through the hoop ball first, letting go as her body hit the edge of the rim, making it vibrate.

She flipped midair, using the third arm to catch some kind of stability halfway down, and landed on her sneaker-clad feet, then immediately chirped an apology.

The apology didn't sway the judges. Both teams stopped to argue, but it seemed good-natured, no shoving or loud voices. Politeness, EllaLyn tells me, is one of the things that the Ashtenga always insist on in a game. Should the human players say or do something offensive, they will lose points. If the behavior continues, the Ashtenga walk off the court en masse.

Before I got here, I would have thought that the humans wouldn't care if the Ashtenga leave, but they do care. The young human players want the challenge of playing against a team that has extra abilities, just like they love playing pick-up when bona fide pro players show up at these informal outdoor games to test their skills.

The game is interesting, the Ashtenga enthusiastic, the kids willing to give as well as they take, but I'm not as interested as I thought I would be.

I wanted to see a game that approximates the vision the Ashtenga have for the Human/Ashtenga league, not yet another variation on the game I love. At last count, there are three hundred and fifty official variations of the game of basketball, and none of them interest me as much as the pure pro game that has been played in similar style for more than two hundred years.

I told this to EllaLyn, and she couldn't hide the grimace of disappointment that crossed her face.

"You know," she said, "your pro teams aren't pure either. They were once segregated by gender."

"And race," I said. "Times change."

She inclined her head toward the court. "That's a change."

At that point, I was unwilling to concede that it was a change on par with letting other humans play a human game. I didn't have to say it, though; as adept as I was at reading her mood, she seemed even more adept at reading mine.

"There's an exhibition game at UCLA tomorrow," she said, as if that was news to me.

One of the reasons I came to LA was that exhibition game. I already had a press pass—a generic one, so that no one knew my agenda.

I thanked her for letting me know, keeping the fiction between us that I'm a bit naïve about all of this, and then we walked away from the court.

I looked up at the crumbling apartment buildings, saw round faces in the windows, a bit of movement on the balconies that hadn't mostly rotted away.

This pick-up game had a large Ashtenga audience. They watched with a reverence I hadn't expected.

I found myself wondering if basketball was more than a game to them. If it had some other kind of meaning, something I didn't quite understand.

Times don't just change. The click of the calendar means nothing if attitudes don't change too. Women fought to play basketball since the 1890s, from the day the game was invented. To play by the same rules as white men, to play without corsets, to play in comfortable clothing.

African-Americans played, but in segregated leagues, although when they did go head to head with white teams, as they did in 1939, they won, despite rules created to make sure no African-American team would do well.

Other groups found themselves closed out of professional basketball for decades as well, but exhibition games, barnstorming games, and local games filled the gap. Anyone who wanted to play basketball could, on one level or another. If they wanted to get paid for playing basketball—whether in scholarships or in actual cash—well, that was another thing, one that didn't happen often.

Even though the segregated teams—from the Black Fives to the women's leagues—were created because the “science” at the time claimed their bodies were different and therefore not worthy. Of course, real science said otherwise. It took generations of pioneers to make the changes, and when they came—in 1950 to integrate African-Americans into professional basketball, and almost a century later to allow women to play professionally in the dominant National Basketball Association (which, at that point, had been a men's club)—other changes came with them.

Transgender players were able to play professionally once the professional players were no longer segregated by gender. It didn't matter how much (or little) testosterone a player had; all that mattered was that the player was exceptional.

Sometimes the physical changes brought a change in rules, always designed to make the game more interesting, more challenging, not less. For decades, smart money said that women couldn't dunk. And then they started dunking.

The rules weren't dumbed down when players who had previously been excluded joined the game; if anything, the rules got tougher, in an attempt to eliminate those players entirely.

And those players stepped up. They played better than their (white, male) counterparts because they had to, just to be considered a part of the game.

Eventually, they became the game itself: Every team has players of all backgrounds and a subtle variation of genders. The focus isn't on the color of the skin, the ethnic background, or the gender of the players; the focus is on how well they play—not just individually, but as a unit.

That's what should count, right? Not how they look, or even what disadvantages they have to overcome. There are some players who top 240 centimeters, and others who barely make 160 centimeters. There are players with limited mobility who have mad skills in passing and ball retrieval.

The rules now allow players to correct problems that would have kept them out of the game in the past—from artificial eyes and ears to artificial knees and shoulders. The augmentation can't be done to improve performance—a rule I agree with—but an augmentation, done the way that every other person on the planet who gets such augmentation does it, is completely fair and legal.

All these changes (and more) happened since the game was invented, and yet, if James Naismith somehow found his way out of 1891 and into the present, he would still recognize the elements of the game he'd invented when he nailed a peach basket above a running track.

I know this. I like the changes, many of which happened long before I was born.

I'm not sure why the addition of the Ashtenga bothers me.

I worry that it's the word “alien.”

I worry about that, because it puts me on the wrong side of history, which is somewhere I never ever want to belong.

* * *

The exhibition game takes place at Pauley Pavilion, which once housed the Bruins before UCLA built a much better court. Pauley Pavilion has all the features that mark it as a product of the distant past—too large, too many seats, no functional way to view the game and the virtual representation at the same time.

Sound echoes in here in a way that's almost painful, especially when the seats are mostly empty, as they usually are. I've seen events in Pauley Pavilion before, and I've always found them frustrating. Some people claim they enjoy the old-fashioned experience, but I'd rather watch ringside virtually than Pauley Pavilion's ringside. The seats aren't close enough to trip the players, which was a feature in its time but is no longer. Not that anyone would be allowed to trip players ringside, not these days.

Despite spending decades in the hot California sun, the pavilion smells of old wood with a hint of mildew. I suspect the source of the smell is the forced air system, which is older than I am. I'm five rows up from floor level so I can watch the game with a bit of detachment.

Even here, though, I can smell human sweat and the faint odor of strawberries, which is what I'm told Ashtenga smell like after a lot of exertion.

The game is fast-paced and more physical than I would have expected. Even though the tallest Ashtenga barely top 160 centimeters, they handle jump balls better than I expected. Their legs seem to be made of rubber or some kind of spring. When they bend at the knees and push themselves upward, they seem to float.

I remember some kind of controversy early on that claimed the Ashtenga used their arms like wings, but I saw none of that here. And the third arm, which is not in use, has been flipped over what I can only call a shoulder. (It's not, but looking up the terminology doesn't clarify. The word to describe the body part that the arm folds backward over is unique to the Ashtenga, just like that third arm and its difficult-to-describe parts are.) After the flipping, the arm is tied around what we would call a waist, although what the Ashtenga have is the opposite of a waist. More like a circumference, since they are widest at that midpoint.

If you tied one of my arms to my back or my side, and then forced me to play basketball, I would lumber ungainly across the court—or more ungainly, since I'm not a professional athlete and have no pretense at being one. But even if I were to tie an arm of one of the human players, their motion would be restricted in such a way as to possibly unbalance them.

Certainly, they would be thinking about that arm, maybe even more than they would think about the game itself.

The Ashtenga do not appear to be distracted. But, I remind myself, they have had years to get used to this way of playing. The Ashtenga have lobbied for inclusion in the professional basketball ranks for nearly a decade now, which means they've been playing with one arm tied behind their backs for much, much longer.

They do lack the grace of the Ashtenga at the pick-up game. While I'm watching the exhibition game, I make note of the difference, but I don't attribute it to the incapacitated arm. I only make that connection later.

Right now, though, I'm leaning forward, elbows on knees, hands folded under my chin. I'm watching the live game, not the streamed game, because I want to see how the two teams play in real life.

There's grunting and the squeaking of shoes against the highly polished wooden court. The ball bounces, the sound of dribbling echoes, the shouts—low and modulated or deep and resonant from the humans, and loud and chirpy from the Ashtenga.

Despite the fact that they're playing by professional rules, some things are different. The human players, with their long legs and extended torsos, focus on their passing game, keeping the basketball out of arm's reach for the Ashtenga.

The Ashtenga retaliate by playing a ground game, bounce passes, lots of dribbling, and the occasional dart between someone's legs.

The humans don't always see the dart. More than one Ashtenga gets kicked, sprawling across the court with limbs splayed. A kick like that seems unintentional, but I'm seeing it too much, and the refs—human and Ashtenga—agree with me. Each kick is a personal foul, and the personal fouls mount up.

The coaches bring in new players, rotating, just like they would in a game with real stakes.

The Ashtenga have their own tricks. They will stop in front of a human player concentrating on the upper game, and that player—often forty centimeters taller than the Ashtenga—won't even see the Ashtenga right in front of them.

If the human player deliberately barrels into an Ashtenga, that's another personal foul, just like it would be if a human barreled into another human player with intent to harm.

But this maneuver by the Ashtenga is a tactic, and the refs see that as well.

There are other maneuvers, though, ones that aren't illegal, just unusual. The human players will often leap over an Ashtenga—a maneuver that doesn't always go well, particularly if there's another Ashtenga nearby.

The Ashtenga will bend at their hips (which are far below their middle) and hover in that position, their eyes moving ever so slightly up their heads so that they can see what's going on without standing upright. They look like large footstools, and it would be tempting to think of them as vulnerable at that moment, but they are not.

If the ball bounces anywhere in their vicinity, their arms extend forward, and they grab that ball, at a much lower point than any human player ever would. The Ashtenga will steal the ball, pass it from one bent-over player to another at lightning speed, until the ball is near their basket.

The way the players are scattered, and the width of their bent-over bodies, makes it almost impossible for the larger human players to get around them quickly. In that single exhibition game, I watched the Ashtenga rack up thirty-five points with that maneuver alone.

So the game is different and yet it is the same—fast-paced, exciting, surprising in ways I have not expected.

I find myself thinking we need names for these maneuvers, things we can call them that aren't insulting or demeaning or unclear. I'm sure what I've said above isn't quite right, because I don't know how to describe these techniques in a way that gives my meaning but doesn't offend the Ashtenga.

Yet I need to be able to describe what they're doing to humans—and others—all over the galaxy, especially since so many of my listeners will not see any video accompanying my voice. All they will have is their imaginations, just like the radio listeners back when the World Championship went to the all-black New York Renaissance at the Chicago Coliseum.

I wonder, when I think of that game, if someone who had announced it had left out skin color, had simply described the fast breaks and the points in the paint, if the entire history of basketball might have gone differently.

I used to think that if I were ever faced with describing an event of that magnitude, one that upended the attitudes—the assumptions—the *beliefs*—of the day, that I would have been smart enough to keep all of those nasty things out of my commentary.

And then I sit here, watching the Ashtenga play the best players in Los Angeles and confounding them. The score is tied most of the game, and everyone playing is

struggling at the top of their game.

Well, not everyone. Because the Ashtenga have one arm tied behind them. They aren't allowed to make that lovely maneuver I saw in the pick-up game, the third hand planted firmly on the court, the other two hands clutching the ball as the Ashtenga's body rises—floats, really—toward the basket, as if she were made for the game.

My cheeks heat as I watch the exhibition game, and I can't quite separate out my tangled emotions.

Am I really moved by the Ashtenga's performance? Or am I trying to understand a change that is beyond me, one that is as inevitable as African-Americans joining the National Basketball Association in 1950, something that most open-minded people had seen as necessary in 1939, but others managed to ignore for more than a decade after?

Just like the inclusion of women and the trans community. What you needed to play basketball—or so I thought—was athleticism, height, and an ability to see the entire court, to watch for openings, to know how to move between players, to understand how to score, even when there are so many obstacles in front of you that you can't see beyond them.

Turns out I was wrong. You don't need height. You do need athleticism, but not the kind I was thinking of. Mostly, you need the ability to see the game in three dimensions, to understand your position in those dimensions, to see how you fit, and how you can capitalize on it.

I leave the exhibition game shaken. I enjoyed the game as much as I could while concentrating on learning from it, on my own opinion, which is not something I generally focus on when I'm watching basketball. Usually I'm trying to suss out maneuvers, figure out how to explain them, trying to cast as far forward into the future as I can, to see how the game will end up or turn out or what will happen in the play-offs or to a particular player. My mind is filled with trivia about each player, each team, the history of everything, because I need something to riff about when the action on the court stalls.

Here, though, I'm looking at things I don't normally look at—players' bodies (uninjured bodies), technique on a microlevel—and trying to figure out plays I've never seen before, to judge if they're worthy of the game.

I like to think it was that change of focus that made me so uneasy, but it isn't until I get back to my hotel room that I realize what has me on edge.

The Ashtenga are playing with a disadvantage, like professional players do when they face off against children at a basketball camp. The Ashtenga aren't using all of their skills, but the human players are.

You'd think—I'd think—that we invented the game, so we'd be the ones who have the advantage, but we aren't. Even when they play with a disadvantage, the Ashtenga win.

They beat the best players in the American West by more than forty points.

Other announcers, friends, people I've talked with—people who agree with me, or did, when we used to discuss the inclusion of the Ashtenga in the ranks of pro and college ball—they all say that the human players lost because they didn't know what to expect.

But that's not true. Humans have played against the Ashtenga for years now and generally lose.

In a game built for rapid play, for height and length, where—among humans, anyway—the tall and lean are at the biggest advantage, the Ashtenga dominate, and they have none of those qualities.

For days, I find myself pondering the possibility that a game designed by a rather foreboding looking white man with an eye to creating an athletic distraction to keep young men from going stir-crazy in the winter can best be played by individuals who

look nothing like the boys Naismith was trying to corral.

I needed one more piece to complete my own mental puzzle, and it took nearly a week to arrange it.

A friend snuck me into an Ashtenga gymnasium, where I finally got to see what the Ashtenga mockingly call “alien ball.”

* * *

The scent of fresh-cut strawberries fills the gym, dominating everything. The lights are not whitish-gold, but a pinkish-green, which takes some getting used to. The calls between players might be trash-talk or they might be something more profound, but I can’t understand them at all, since they’re whistled in one of the Ashtenga’s fifty-four languages.

Two referees—wearing faded brown—keep pace with the players, occasionally windmilling one arm, which stops play entirely. Then there’s a consultation, and sometimes, a dejected hunch—body language that seems to be the same in both our species.

The game is fast, with lots of splits, and if it weren’t for the numbered jerseys, molded tight to the Ashtenga’s torsos, I wouldn’t be able to tell the players apart. I’m too far away to see their faces, and their bodies look stunningly similar to each other. I can’t say that I’m following the tall player, or the dark-haired player, because none of those things apply.

Instead, I’m watching the game as a pattern, and it looks less to me like basketball than it does basketball combined with chess combined with dance.

Sometimes four of the Ashtenga on a team plant themselves in various positions on the court, and bend over, like they did in the exhibition game, while the remaining member wends his way to the basket. Sometimes they float, slowly and dreamily, as if they’re made of air.

The basketball always bounces against the ground, though, following the time limits set in the original game. It’s only when the ball is passed from player to player in rapid succession, no dribbling or bounce-pass in that maneuver, that it looks like the ball can fly, too.

This isn’t our basketball. This is their basketball.

And yet—

It seems pure, driven, breathless. It looks like fun rather than work, and the players have a different mien than the exhibition players do, than even the pick-up players do. Remove the humans, and the game becomes something filled with joy.

Maybe I would see the same thing watching a game played in zero-G or watching a mix of human players and other alien races. Maybe the difference between this game and all the others I’ve seen on this trip is that I’m actually watching the play as something valuable, not something I have to fight against.

In the end, it doesn’t matter what I think. Just like it didn’t matter what James Naismith thought about teaching “his” game to women and people of color.

Naismith’s book, *Basketball: Its Origins And Development*, makes no mention of the World Championship played in Chicago a few months before Naismith turned in the manuscript.

He didn’t want to see “his” game transformed. He didn’t like the additions and changes. He had designed the game for young white men, and for young white men it remained “pure” for generations.

I am not Naismith. I did not invent the game. I did not change any of its rules. I have just loved it forever.

But now, after receiving an assignment to write a hatchet piece, to rehash an opinion I’ve espoused for more than a decade, I find myself wondering what, exactly, I have loved about the game. I thought its essence was human and gravity-based, but

maybe its essence is something else.

Maybe its essence is its flexibility, its ability to speak to people everywhere, people who want to modify this athletic distraction to become something more than a distraction, something that enables them to find worth in a game so simple it needs only ten players, a ball, a basket attached to some kind of pole, and a defined area to run.

Maybe in delving for greater meaning, I have lost the simplicity of the game. In attempting to justify my own self-worth, I have forgotten what the game gave me in the first place.

It used to give me the kind of joy I saw in the faces of the Ashtenga, not just in their own game, but in the pick-up game. The faces ringing those balconies of that crumbling apartment building, the self-satisfaction of the wannabe professional players as they looked at the scoreboard showing their victory over people billed as the best in the west.

Very few games are remembered. Generally, only the turning-point games make it into the history books.

None of the games I watched fit that bill. They are daily diversions, played with great focus. They are important in the now, but maybe not in the future—except as an accumulation. These games, played by these kinds of players, eventually led to this change.

I like to think that I'm incidental to those changes, but I am not. My voice is influential enough that my editor believed I represented a constituency she needed to address, in one way or another. I'm not sure if my voice was a chunk of red meat thrown as a token to a constituency she wishes would go away, or if my voice is important in its own right.

I suspect something in between.

I'm one of those voices basketball historians will cite in the future to show a reaction toward the presence of the Ashtenga. But how will I be used? As the voice of reason or as a barrier?

I suspect my editor thought I would be a barrier. I know I did.

And I'm not sure where I end up now.

Except that, if given the opportunity, I will return. Not to Pauley Pavilion or to that pick-up game, but to that gymnasium in a corner of LA that I hadn't even realized existed. I want to watch basketball played in Earth gravity with players who look like they're floating. I want to see a three-handed dunk. I want to see small squat players, forming complex patterns on a basketball court.

I want to think about new strategy in an old game.

I think maybe I have discovered my joy again—and this time, I'm not going to let it go.