

THE PLACE might be a dance hall, the ceiling is so high and the polished wooden floor so wide and shiny and inviting. And we do a kind of dance, too. Men and women in roughly equal numbers, we pair off to

Divorce Court

Playing basketball with women has taught me many things. For openers, not to be guarded by anyone I love

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

swoop about the floor in loose, skimpy clothes that are sexy in their way. Occasionally we bring our bodies close together, so close that a woman might brush a stray hand across a man's cheek, graze a thigh or, even, lightly press her chest to his. But we aren't here to dance. We're here to play basketball.

I've been doing it twice weekly for a couple of years now with a group of about a dozen thirtyish legal-aid lawyers, musicians, social workers, editors and assorted other slow-track professionals of both genders. My sister brought me into the group. Siblings, spouses, significant others—we are one big family. We divide up to play among ourselves, five-on-five if the turnout is good. We have played a lonesome two-on-two on slow days.

Still, nothing short of disco dancing or sex itself quite so well combines the physical and the social. Regular pickup basketball games with the guys are too high testosterone for me: all those in-your-face moves and those ridiculous arguments about whether a mid-court collision was a block or a charge. And softball is great for camaraderie, but I'm sure that I consume more calories in the postgame libations than I burn crouching motionless in right field for seven innings or, if I'm lucky, sprinting to first once or twice a game.

But coed basketball—that combines many pleasures. It's a workout, at least if you play with the right coeds. Some of the women were a little green when they started, but now they can all post up, hit the occasional perimeter J, set picks and play some damn annoying D. It's true that none of them goes up strong for rebounds, but I'm not much on the boards either. More important, women basketball players are women, thank goodness. Their presence diffuses the macho tension that can build up among men, and you don't have to worry as much that a drive to the hoop is going to put you in the hospital. When women bump into you, they don't scream *foul!* the way men do. They stop, look mortified, apologize profusely, ask if you're okay.



The presence of women on the court diffuses macho tension and gives rise to a more perplexing set of game conditions.

As a group, we're way too sophisticated and politically correct to acknowledge these essential gender differences that make the occasion so pleasurable. In theory, once we step onto the court we are neither men nor women. We're people. As in: "Okay, everybody, now guard your people." By the same token, we don't play "man-to-man" in our group but "person-to-person," as if defense were a kind of long-distance call.

We keep the sexist remarks to a minimum, too. When a male newcomer jokingly suggested we strip down and play shirts against skins, no one laughed, or even hooted derisively. The remark just hung there awkwardly for a little while, like a ball that's gotten stuck between backboard and rim. Likewise, when a man accidentally elbows a woman in the breast, a certain strained silence follows while the man struggles to think of what to say. (I go with "Oops.") But the women do tend to titter openly when a guy gets kneed in the balls.

The unisex stuff is just the official line, of course. Unofficially, all the guys can see that playing with women changes everything. To begin with, not since Alexander Julian designed the uniforms for the Charlotte Hornets have I heard so much discussion about basketball attire as I have with these (continued on page 126)



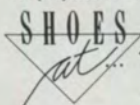
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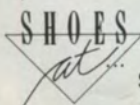
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games

(continued from page 124) women on the court. "Oh, where did you get that cute shirt?" one woman asked me when I showed up in a hand-printed T-shirt. And they like it when, on rare occasions, I color-coordinate my outfit. And when a guy comes in with a new haircut, the girls make him turn around so they can see it from the back.

But there is a lot more talk in general. The ladies are endlessly chatty, sometimes even wandering off the court in the middle of a fast break to continue a conversation. Still, I won't tell them to shut up and get back onto the court: I've received enough steely looks for being so hopelessly masculine about everything. One time, when I told a woman to set a pick for me at the foul line, she refused categorically because she didn't like my "tone." I had to apologize for *telling* her and not *asking* her nicely.

And then there's the whole time-consuming question of matchups. The men usually guard the men and the women the women, but, because of the prevailing unisex-ism, a man can't come right out and assume that or the women will get mad, so we go through a long routine of discussing who wants to guard whom, and, sure enough, the women guard the women and the men the men. Then it takes forever for the women to decide exactly *which* women to guard:

BETH: You want to guard Suzie?

JANE: No, I think you'd be better.

BETH [*flattered, coyly*]: Oh? You really think so?

The matchups are tricky because at any one time, there are, in fact, several games going on. There's one team against the other, of course. And there are the individual rivalries of the Larry Bird-versus-Magic Johnson variety that go on in any sport at any level. But with us there are special entanglements that come with bi-genderism (for lack of a better term), namely the private games played between the boyfriends and girlfriends, the husbands and wives, and the brothers and sisters when they end up on opposite teams. These are all the more pronounced when, for one reason or another, one of these special interests has to guard the other. Despite their physical disadvantages in size, strength and speed, girlfriends usually do quite a job on their boyfriends. Even the best male players turn to jelly at the prospect of being guarded by the woman they love. It is hard to tell whether they are being chivalrous or are overeager or simply flustered, but they

inevitably screw up—missing open shots, dribbling the ball off their foot. Wives, however, are hopeless against husbands, for husbands rarely show any mercy. They go hard against their woman, then laugh at her deficiencies. (No wonder my own wife has yet to join the group. But then, she may also remember the time I accidentally broke her ring finger during a friendly game of one-on-one a few years ago.) Sibling rivalries fall somewhere between the two extremes, which is to say they are pretty much unaffected by emotional content. I'm not put off by the prospect of guarding my sister, and I'm not wonderful at it either. I still haven't quite figured out how to stop her running left-hander.

Then there's the constant underlying game of boys against girls that continues regardless of the gender configuration of the teams at hand. When a man scores, he scores for his team. Simple enough. When a woman scores, she scores for Womanhood, and all the women on the court cheer.

Behind this gender war lies an essential philosophical conflict between men and women: Men like to shoot, women like to pass. Or, to be more precise, women like to pass to someone who is open for a shot, while men are inclined to shoot whether they have a clear shot or not. That fits current feminist theory, anyway, with men being egomaniacs and women community-minded. And the sad truth is that I do like to shoot. I like everything about it—the ball flicking lightly off my fingertips, arcing sweetly through the air and ripping through the strings with the sound of someone really desirable being unzipped, then the whole net jumping in excitement afterward. And it just so happens that I have a pretty good outside shot. But now, under the women's tutelage (they've started to chant "Bor-ing! Bor-ing!" when I overindulge), I am beginning to think that maybe there is more to life than scoring. Like assists, rebounds, blocked shots.

I'm working on this. Just the other day, I was open at the top of the key. I got the ball and prepared to let fly as usual when I suddenly spotted my sister breaking to the hoop. I fed her a bounce pass, and she flipped the ball up and in for an easy two. The smiles on our team's faces! The shouts of joy! My sister slapped my hand in a high five as we turned back up the court. And you know, it was all right.

John Sedgwick writes frequently for GQ.