

“Not a game, Not a game, Not a game”: Outline of Some Theories of Practice

Cait McKinney (York University) and Dylan Mulvin (McGill University)

Cait McKinney and Dylan Mulvin use ex-NBA star Allen Iverson’s 2002 “Practice Rant” as a starting point for their dialogue. Iverson’s broadside was part heated press conference and part poem, a speech in which the point-guard dismissed the importance of practice. Practice, for Iverson, is negligible because it is, by definition, “not a game.” Taking our cue from his speech, we define practice as the repertoire of necessary and repetitive activities that precede “performance”—activities that are ignored, elided, and generally taken for granted because of their necessity and repetitiveness. Our dialogue considers the relationship between sports practice and intellectual practice, focusing on the question of whether graduate school might be productively or provocatively thought as a form of practice or apprenticeship. As long-time friends, sports fans, and mediocre athletes who have often practiced together, we consider a range of practice-related sites: drills, pre-game rituals, dissertation writing, comprehensive exams, the academic job market, and our jump shots. Ultimately we ask whether sports practice, in its often-deferred promise of improvement through the production of habit and bodily comportment, might help us better understand the complex pleasures and disappointments of ascending toward academic careers.

Pour ce dialogue, Cait McKinney et Dylan Mulvin utilisent comme point de départ la diatribe contre l’entraînement sportif (dit *sports practice* en anglais) qu’a prononcée en 2002 l’ex-star de la National Basketball Association, Allen

Iverson. Cette attaque verbale prenait la forme d'une conférence de presse survoltée mais c'était aussi un poème. Dans son discours le meneur récusait l'importance qu'on prête à l'entraînement sportif. Pour Iverson, s'entraîner est une activité négligeable, parce que – par définition – « s'entraîner n'est pas jouer ». Partant de son discours, nous définissons la pratique comme un répertoire d'activités nécessaires et répétitives qui précèdent la « performance » – des activités qu'on méprise, qu'on passe sous silence, qu'on considère généralement comme allant de soi, vu leur nécessité et leur caractère répétitif. Au cours de notre dialogue, nous réfléchissons sur le rapport entre entraînement sportif et pratique intellectuelle, et nous nous demandons si les études de deuxième et troisième cycle à l'université pourraient être considérées (idée productive, ou provocation ?) comme une forme d'entraînement ou d'apprentissage. Étant nous-mêmes deux amis de longue date, deux supporters, et deux athlètes médiocres qui nous entraînons souvent ensemble, nous passons en revue un certain nombre de sites ayant rapport à l'idée de pratique : l'entraînement, les rituels précédant le jeu, la rédaction d'une thèse, les examens doctoraux, le marché de l'emploi académique, sans oublier nos tirs en suspension. Pour finir, nous nous demandons si l'entraînement sportif – dans la mesure où il utilise la mise en place d'habitudes et de comportements corporels pour promettre une progression souvent différée – serait susceptible de nous faire mieux comprendre les complexes plaisirs ainsi que les désillusions que comporte l'ascension vers une carrière académique.

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Allen Iverson on practice

*We're talking about practice.
I mean listen, we're sitting here talking about practice,
not a game, not a game, not a game,
but we're talking about practice.
Not the game that I go out there and die for
and play every game like it's my last
but we're talking about practice, man.*

Dylan Mulvin: This is a 2002 poem delivered extemporaneously by ex-NBA star Allen Iverson. The poetic device is called epiphora, the repetition of a word or a phrase at the end of a clause or a sentence. Allen Iverson's epiphora game is tight. The poem was delivered in the modern style of press conference blather and though the lineation is mine it was obviously already there in the text.

I think I'm right in saying that this is the moment we both returned to when we started our conversation on practice. Iverson was provoked by reporters to respond to his coach blaming him for the Philadelphia 76ers' playoff defeat. Coach Larry Brown claimed Iverson had missed too many practices. At the time, Iverson was the NBA's two-time scoring champion, a man who had (re)popularized cornrows *and* compression sleeves—compression sleeves being those tubes of springy synthetic sausage-casing that athletes of all kinds now wear because they supposedly make your muscles more *muscly*. Allen Iverson did that: he made that tubey sausage thing a must-have fitness accessory. When I think of 2002, I do not think of weapons inspectors in Iraq or the DC snipers, I think of *sleeves*.



Allen Iverson's reverse layup, too good for practice. Click on image to open animated .gif.

When I looked at this quote in preparation for our conversation, I noticed that Iverson's epiphoric criticism is two-pronged: he attacks both the importance of practice *and* the idea of talking about it:

We're talking about *practice*[?]

We're *talking*[!?] about practice

If you listen, as Iverson implores in the second line, you hear that he's not just appalled at the idea of practice; He's appalled at the escalation of trivialities.

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Practice isn't just practice, it is by definition *not a game* ("not a game, not a game"). The game is mortality for Iverson. He dies for it and he plays every one like it is his last (one should follow from the other). The shot clock is a memento mori that screams shoot or be shot. Shaquille O'Neal is the cyclops. The floor is made of lava. The point is Iverson likes games and hates practices and the only thing that could be more trivial than the trivial thing of practicing is talking about the trivial thing of practicing.

So here we are, Cait. We want to talk about practice despite the fact that Allen Iverson was actually right. His critique of athlete scapegoating was precise and a fierce antidote to the performative hair-shirted moralizing of sports management and sports journalism. But we are not professional athletes. We want to talk about practice and we have some reasons for doing this that I'm sure will come out, implicitly or explicitly, as we talk.

Here are some of the reasons I can think of:

Reason 1, the theme of this issue is practice, and we are contributing to the issue and we told the editors we would talk about sports. We even mentioned the Allen Iverson thing and people were into it.

Reason 2, we are nominally graduate students, which most of the time feels like practice for something else, either being professors (the game?) or some other unknown future.

Reason 3, we love sports.

Reason 4, for a variety of reasons related to the alienating force of aggro-posturing, we both elect to practice sports alone or with only trusted companions. Sports then, like scholarship, are an arena of experience we know *best* through practice.

Cait, you have strict practice regimens for everything. And I know that practice isn't merely a means to an end for you—that is, practice is not simply a way of winning games—but a technique in its own right. I'd like to hear about your practice technique and whether or not you wear a compression sleeve.

Cait McKinney: I practice sports a lot, especially basketball. I have a whole routine that I do, generally the same set of drills a few mornings each week. This is absolutely the same approach I take in my “practice” of doing intellectual work: I set up a lot of routines and I try to invest a lot of time in exploratory writing or early drafts (the “running drills” of dissertation writing). So in that sense, sports practice bleeds into my academic “practice.” But the differences are also important.

Dylan, you emphasize Iverson's disgust at the idea of talking about practice, which is what we're doing here. Practice, in its most meditative state, is precisely not talking or thinking, it's doing the same thing over and over again with your body, not your brain, sometimes with others (a team) and sometimes alone. One of the things critical theory knows is that our bodies and our brains are all bound up with each other, but for some reason athletes like to get really Cartesian about practice. I'm not calling jocks dumb, more like controlled in their ability to bifurcate thinking and doing. Because thinking is exactly what you have to suspend to be able to run the same drill

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over and over and over without losing interest. In *Open*, his dare-I-say “masterful” autobiography, the tennis great Andre Agassi describes daily childhood practices at which he returned 2,500 balls fired in succession from a machine:

*My shoulder aches. I can't hit another ball.
I hit another three.
I can't go on another minute.
I go another ten.*

....

The net is the biggest enemy, but thinking is the cardinal sin. Thinking, my father believes, is the source of all bad things, because thinking is the opposite of doing... I often think about how I can stop thinking.¹

As you pointed out, one of the things we're trying to do here is talk about practice as a broader technique that might bring together some of the things we think we know about doing academic work, and some of the things we think we know about sports, either as fans or amateur athletes. But the place I have to go to when I practice my squash serve or basketball shot over and over again is very different from the place I go to when I'm writing an article

¹ Andre Agassi, *Open* (New York: Vintage, 2009), 31.



Nine-year-old Andre Agassi at practice. Image from *Open* (2009).

or a lecture. When we talk about someone’s “art practice” or “writing practice,” maybe we’re not really talking about the kind of “practice” we see in sports. Or maybe what intellectual or creative practice have in common with the kind of practice to which one wears a compression sleeve is something else altogether, something you and I might try to figure out here.

Oh, and for the record, I don’t wear lycra sleeves because I would have to be way better than I am at basketball to show up at a YMCA pickup game wearing something so GAME FACE. But if I was going to go there, I would

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encase all four limbs, Carmelo Anthony-style. Actually I might wear this to my dissertation defense under a blazer.



New York Knick Carmelo Anthony's Four Limbs of Compression.

DM: As long as you cut off the arms of that blazer, I think dual orange compression sleeves is a perfect dissertation defense look.

CM: Thanks.

DM: You and I have had the opportunity to practice a bunch of specific sports maneuvers together: pick-and-rolls; drop shots; that weird lunging and dribbling thing you do. You even took me to your YMCA drop-in basketball clinic where your coach, Mo, taught me not to fear contact (ha ha ha, nice try, Mo). And the one thing that I think you and I are both good at—and this became really clear after about my fortieth missed jump shot in a row—is that you and I are good at being not very good at something. Like, we are exceptionally good at being mediocre. Ninety-ninth-percentile coping with being lackluster.

CM: Yeah but we're both great at conspicuous learning: "Look at me, I am here to improve!" When Mo tells me I've done something well I know he's actually thinking "... for a short lesbian who started learning basketball at 30." I think you and I showing up together was straight-up perplexing to him, especially when you told him that we had to leave early to "catch the WNBA game."

DM: The other thing we spend all of our time doing, when not under the stewardship of Mo, is graduate school. And graduate students, together with the array of other liminal positions that exist in the academy between "college student" and "tenure-track professor," have to tarry with questions of practice. By practice, I mean what we've been talking about here: the repertoire of necessary and repetitive activities that precede "performance"; activities that are ignored, elided, and generally taken for granted because of their necessity and repetitiveness (cf. Iverson, *supra*). The implications of this sort of practice are most acutely felt in graduate school when we try to determine what our position is vis-a-vis a job—both the jobs we currently have as students,

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teaching assistants, research assistants, assistant editors, or whatever; and the jobs we might hope to have as professors, librarians, teachers, waiters, or letter carriers.

CM: Right, we're rehearsing to the point of exhaustion for a thing that we're not even sure is going to happen. Our pick-and-roll is flawless but the game isn't even on the schedule yet.

DM: And when we are forced to ask what the role of graduate school might be in creating professionals, both inside and outside the academy, our answer is in every way shaped by how we think about practice. Is graduate school an apprenticeship, an accreditation, an education, or just an experience? Surely the answer is some combination of all of these but the specificities of our answers also have implications for how we talk about supervisory relationships, unionization, PhD over-enrollment (including whether or not there is such a thing), and the disappointment of not finding an academic job. Even "imposter syndrome," I think, is a symptom of practice. A symptom, that is, of embodying mediocrity with the hope that the built habits of practice will transform you into a true performer but the fear that the practice is an accurate representation of your ability.

CM: Do you ever look back at old "practice" grad school work and cringe at earlier versions of yourself?

DM: Of course.

CM: Eve Sedgwick writes really beautifully about the complex combination of shame and love for a younger self that comes from reading old work.² The threat that shame keeps at bay is the possibility that you won't desire or recognize this past self. Sedgwick is talking about the risk of watching yourself practice, which is awkward precisely because it's hard to recognize this practice as such: at the time it seemed like everything, like the game. If I had to watch videotape of myself "practicing" everyday, the way athletes do, I would probably never play a sport ever again.

DM: Sure, but watching practice can be really nice, too. I love watching professional athletes warm up. It's always quiet and solitary even when there are already tens of thousands of people surrounding them. Watching athletes warm up you witness the slow, routinized calibration of human bodies that is as much a constitutive practice as the performance. Practice brings bodies to a fixed point of preparedness: "From here, I can perform."

[The NFL's Buffalo Bills and Miami Dolphins warm up to *Phil Collins' In the Air Tonight*](#)

A [recent profile](#) of the great American ballerina Misty Copeland includes this passage:

Near my apartment, there's a dance school on the second floor of a nondescript building, and sometimes, looking up from the dollar-a-slice pizza place across the street, you can see the students going through their exercises again and

² Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 39.

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again and again. You couldn't choreograph as ideal a work as that. A smart and witty ballet dancer once told me that he thought truly pure ballet would eliminate performances—that the essence of ballet is the practice of it.



One of Misty Copeland's Under Armour ads, which claims that Copeland used to practice ballet on the basketball court of her local Boys and Girl's Club.

Okay, this sounds like the kind of twisted little koan of wisdom that any “smart and witty” artist or baseball manager can produce. But I want to take it seriously for a second because I think that it might in fact extend to the academy. Which is to say, practice might be the focal problem of what we are doing with our lives, since practice is in some sense a psychic model for coping with the lagged timelines of academic work: the slow build of the dissertation, the publication process, the conference presentation. Even the apex of graduate school—the dissertation defense—is itself a weird, asynchronous event that is often treated, if you've made it that far, as a *fait accompli*. Why else would the champagne already be on ice while the committee is

deliberating? What ought to be the Big Performance—the culmination of all that practice—is actually just another rehearsal. It’s all proverb and no Carnegie Hall.

CM: Actually this morning I bumped into my supervisor Susan at the gym and she brought up my upcoming defense, specifically how the faculty of graduate studies doesn’t want to pay for one of my committee members to come in from out of town because as an administrator told her: “by that point it’s pretty much a done deal anyway.” It was not lost on me to be having this conversation while Susan and I were both “doing our weights.”

DM: Right, it’s as if you are always in the on-deck circle, swinging a bat with extra weight on it. But instead of actually batting, you just get really good at swinging that heavy bat in the hopes that you can show someone else how to swing the heavy bat. Okay, enough analogies.

CM: It’s also strange to be at the point with my dissertation where it’s “finished enough”; I just submitted the requisite finished draft but I can already anticipate the parts that I need to *revise more* toward a book. The document genre of “dissertation” fixes your research into something that is sort of definitive—this is the version Library and Archives Canada will get—but, as everyone knows, is actually temporary. I’m sure you’ve had plenty of wise folks tell you that your dissertation “doesn’t really matter” because “only five people will read it.”

It’s the book that matters. The book is winning time. And you’re right to question the status of the dissertation given this model. If this document speaks to the completion of one’s “apprenticeship,” then what does

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apprenticeship mean given “doing” graduate school today means apprenticing without guarantees?

There are certain basketball players (Iverson is one of them) who are famous for only showing up when it counts—they play really well or play more minutes in high-stake situations. This has even become a coaching strategy and political economy of ageing in professional sports: futures-speculation on bodies that are about to break. Skilled but worn-down players like Tim Duncan or Paul Pierce play fewer minutes in the regular season to save their bodies for the playoffs. They play enough minutes in the regular season to help the team win, stay in shape, and sell tickets. In a sense, what should count as Real Game Time becomes practice for the *really* Real Game Time, a situation that’s not unlike what I think we’re trying to point out about graduate school.

Reggie Miller excelled in this model—he was really good at what’s called “winning time.” In a documentary about his career (it’s called *Winning Time*), Reggie explains the stakes of “winning time” with another twisted little koan of wisdom: “There is a time to play, and there is a time to win. What do you do in winning time?”³ Really the home stretch of dissertation writing and defending should be winning time, but once you get there it isn’t that thing at all. But importantly it’s not the “garbage minutes” at the end of an unwinnable game, into which Coach throws cumbersome bench players—dissertation writing means something, it just means practice. And as Misty points out, practice matters.

³ ESPN 30 for 30, *Winning Time: Reggie Miller vs The New York Knicks* 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1O6pT0DHCU> (accessed March 20, 2015).



Reggie “Winning Time” Miller with his sister Cheryl Miller, who was the decidedly better basketball player.

I have all this work stored on my computer from years of graduate school and it adds up to a whole lot of evidence of practice. Stuff like my comps reading annotations (so neatly formatted and proofread for an audience of one), my course papers (oof), my dissertation proposal (yeah I didn’t really do that thing, did I?). This stuff fits in the genre of “work product” but it doesn’t really represent how I labored for hours and hours alone in my reading chair. Actually I’m not even sure that it’s fair to call this “labour” except to the extent that it fits with a Marxist definition of labour as something we toil at

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because at some level it's pleasurable, even if that pleasure is about deferred gratification or the idea of contributing to something valuable.

I feel a bit uncomfortable talking about unremunerated graduate work as “labour” given how important that concept has become for setting the terms of debate about the University. When we call studying for comps “academic labour” do we risk turning what we all agree to be the most visible and acute form of “academic labour”—adjunct teaching—into practice? I suppose adjunct teaching has already been turned into practice, literally, by [the growing use of the term “Professor of Practice” to describe permanent, non-tenure-track appointments](#). I worry about the kinds of conditions that this slippery language obscures, but at the same time I like the idea of accounting for practice as work.



Michael Jordan owning Larry Bird in the 1986 NBA playoffs. Click on image to open animated .gif.

We haven't really talked explicitly about bodies yet, but the sports gifs we've been sending to each other along with our texts are a medium designed for marvelling at what practiced bodies can do. If we're going to talk about practice as labour, there are very real, very material bodies that do this labour, with which we need to contend. If anyone can help us out here, it's Michael Jordan. This is a gif of Jordan embarrassing Larry Bird with a perfectly executed, step-back, pull-up, mid-range jump shot. It's one of the most definitive moments from the 1986 NBA playoffs, when the Bulls faced the Celtics. This clip is from Game Two, the famous "Boston Garden Showing" in which Jordan scored sixty-three points (the Celtics still won the game).

DM: Oh yes, I was born under the rising moon of this crossover.

CM: When Jordan pushes off of Bird's chest, he does so just hard enough to get him to bite on the bluff that he's going to drive to the hoop. Then he pulls back into an expert, too-fast, too-forceful triple-crossover. Bird can't keep up. He's been caught off-balance by the push to his chest and he can't recover. The half-hearted swat Bird makes at Jordan with his left hand doesn't stand a chance against Jordan's speed, finesse, and the way his body knows how to move before his brain does.

I've watched this clip dozens and dozens of times, in the frenetic way that gifs make possible. And I've tried, dozens and dozens of times, to replicate it in the gym. To practice it. My girlfriend Hazel plays Larry Bird, I play Jordan. We're practicing for Friday night women's basketball at the YMCA, but the stakes feel much higher than this. Try as I might, I can't quite replicate the way Jordan sells the drive; maybe I'm not pushing hard enough, I think, so I try it again and push harder. Maybe I'm pushing too hard and it's throwing off

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the force of my step-back, so I try again, easing up a bit. But Hazel is right there with me, and she doesn't swat gently the way Bird does. When I pull up, she's right in my face, contesting the shot. And let's be honest, my jump-shot isn't very good and my footwork is deplorable. I need to practice more, I guess.

There are these moments or gestures in sports—the little movements we fall in love with in an athlete. Breaking these gestures down into what it might take to get there is a very analytic approach to loving the way someone plays the game. So analytic it might even ruin the pleasure we take in the finished product. But I find myself doing it anyway, drawn to this kind of close reading of practice.

You are the person I know who pays the most attention to these little gestures, and who often points them out to me. For example, you and I played pick-up this spring and you were emulating the way long-time San Antonio Spurs centre, Tim Duncan, dishes the ball out to teammates from the post. I'm wondering what you think of as the most definitive maneuvers of the athletes you love. And how your appreciation of them relates to your understanding of practice?

DM: Well, that's flattering. It's true that I can't remember a single song lyric but when I close my eyes I can see the exact ellipsis of Kevin Durant's arms on a twisting lay-up. The gestures, maneuvers, and mannerisms that you are talking about all give voice to bodily expressions. And like your Jordanesque workouts in the gym, practice can be a mimetic technique. It's no surprise that Iris Marion Young uses "throwing like a girl" as her hook for enunciating a phenomenology of bodily comportment and the objectification of bodily

capability.⁴ Our theories of embodiment are based on our theories of practice as learned repetition. For Pierre Bourdieu, sociological *practice* derives from his understanding of bodily practices. Habitus—among his keyest key words—is “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations.” These learned, generative principles produce “practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle.”⁵ Habitus, then, animates the relationship between body and environment; practice is how the environment crystallizes in the body, and how bodies reproduce their settings. Sports are a primary way of learning bodily comportment and the escapist, mimetic exercises that you and I both enjoy are a way of thinking new bodies. Tim Duncanness is not available to me but Tim Duncan’s outlet pass—at least as it exists between you and I—is a set of gestures that can be disaggregated, understood, and (re)performed. This kind of practice is not so much about the possibility of improvement but about new kinds of embodiment.

CM: Once you practice a movement enough, it becomes natural—“throwing like a girl” really means “that is how girls throw,” where phenomenology becomes essence. I don’t want to wrap this sports talk up in too neat of a bow,

⁴ Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Comportment, Motility and Spatiality,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-45.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78.

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Oklahoma City Thunder star Kevin Durant (with ball), eponymously named Durantula for his long-limbed maneuvering.

but it strikes me that if practice leads to comportment, then part of why thinking about graduate school as practice stresses me out is that this comportment might not find its scene. This is the embarrassment of practice without ends. Our bodies have taken on the shape of that thing we have been practicing for, at the cost of becoming something else. I'm talking about all the techniques we know, the words we choose, the research methods we've been trained in, and the gestures of collegiality our supervisors have modelled for us. All these routines reside in our bodies and moreover, our bodies have been moulded to perform them; practice as technique for embodying "Professor." But this future, unlike Duncan's outlet pass, is not "a set of gestures that can be disaggregated, understood, and (re)performed," so we keep practicing basketball instead.



Howard Schatz, *Athletes* (2002)

In any case, your arms are way too short to move like Durant's; you, Dylan, are built for the world of dressage and I might have invested more in rhythmic gymnastics.

Cait McKinney is a PhD candidate in the Communication and Culture Program at York University. Her dissertation is titled *Feminist Information Activism: Newsletters, Index Cards and the 21st-century Archives*. <http://caitmckinney.com>

Dylan Mulvin is a PhD candidate at McGill University in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies and a contributing editor to *Seachange*. He has published on the history of videotape, television, and test images. He is the co-editor (with Jonathan Sterne) of "Media, Hot and Cold" a

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special section of *The International Journal of Communication* on the intersection of temperature and media studies. <http://www.dylanmulvin.com>

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