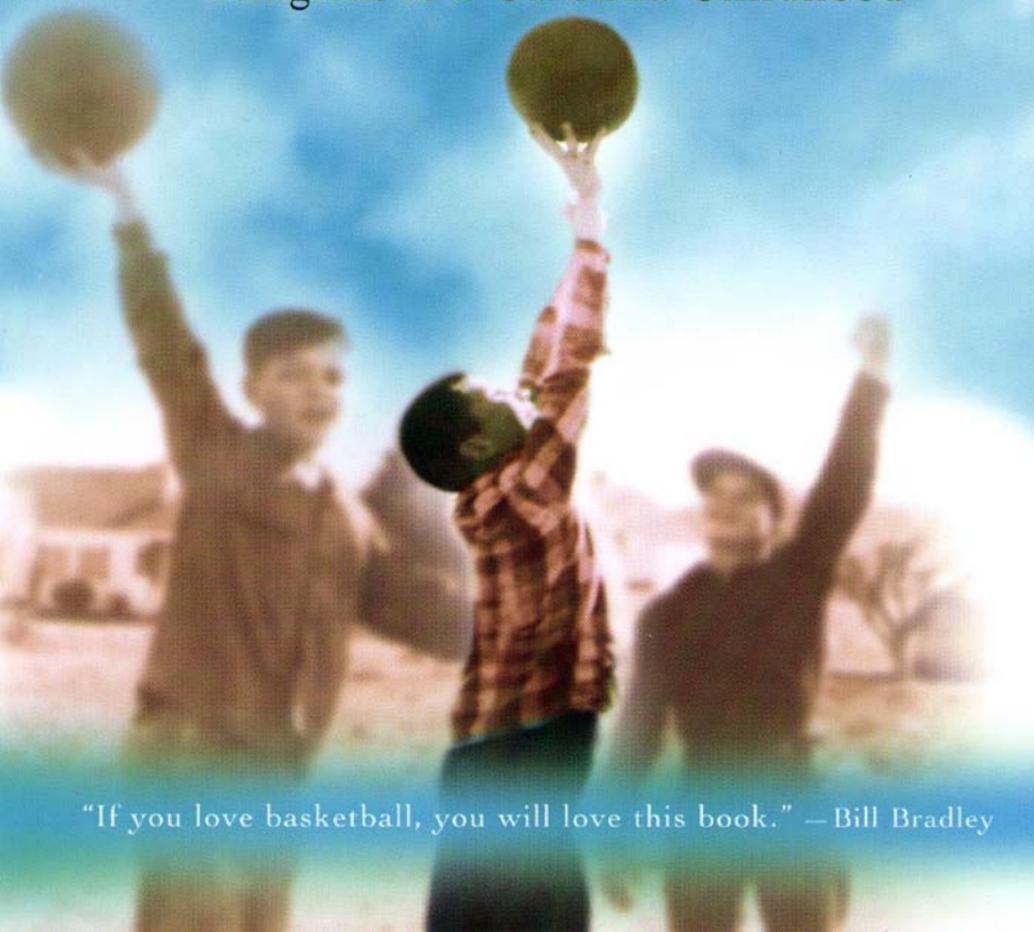


F r e d   H o b s o n

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# Off the Rim

Basketball and Other  
Religions in a Carolina Childhood



"If you love basketball, you will love this book." — Bill Bradley

## Praise for *Off the Rim*

“Basketball and North Carolina go together like a horse and carriage. Fred Hobson knows because he lived it. If you love basketball, you will love this book.”—Bill Bradley

“I’ve read most of Fred Hobson’s books and admired his relaxed and seemingly effortless style, but *Off the Rim* is his best, in my opinion. This is Hobson at the top of his game, using the first-person narrative like an inmate who has sprung his lock and flown free.”—John Egerton

“*Off the Rim* is a marvelous basketball memoir, sprightly and entertaining, and it will take a place on the shelf alongside great autobiographies of fandom like Tim Parks’s *A Season with Verona* or Nick Hornby’s ruefully comic *Fever Pitch*. But Hobson also brings to the task his experience as one of the South’s most distinguished literary critics and commentators, and along the way he provides thoughtful and moving ruminations on race, on family, and on coming of age in piedmont North Carolina in the 1950s and ’60s. A delightful account not only of what sports mean to us but of *why* they matter.”—Michael Griffith

“Fred Hobson has written a lovely, wry account of his life-long devotion to Tar Heel basketball. He knows that he stands out even among Tar Heel fans for how much Carolina-blue blood he bleeds and how often he bleeds it, and he also knows that readers will find his obsession more amusing than he does. Even if you don’t care who wins the Carolina-Duke game—is that possible?—you’ll enjoy this book.”—John Shelton Reed



# Off the Rim

Sports and American Culture Series  
Bruce Clayton, Editor

# Off the Rim

Basketball and Other  
Religions in a Carolina Childhood

F r e d   H o b s o n

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For Jack and Annabel  
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## Preface

The child is father of the man.

How else can I explain it? Why else should it mean so much? Why else should I approach each college basketball season, particularly that part of it known to much of America as March Madness, with such a mixture of delight and terror, euphoria and dread? Why should a particular game, played with a round ball by twenty-year-olds in short pants often hundreds of miles away, mean so much to me, since I seem to have so little to gain or lose by its outcome? I get no promotion or raise if my team wins, no financial gain, no book contract, no social benefits, no recognition. Still, I confess, to my great shame and discredit, that I experienced deeper joy when North Carolina (there, I've revealed my bias) won each of its national championships than I ever did over any raise or book contract or the successful resolution of any number of international crises. And in the various years — say, most recently, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000 — when the Tar Heels lost in the Final Four, I suffered more acutely than I have ever suffered because of financial failure or unrequited love.

Several explanations for my condition offer:

1) Arrested development. If it's true of Bobby Knight, could it be true of me? As all time stopped for an earlier generation of southern boys just before two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863 when Pickett began his charge at Gettysburg, did all time stop, or at least subsequently cease to have the same meaning, for me on that Saturday night in March 1957 when Joe Quigg hit two free throws to beat Kansas and Wilt Chamberlain in triple overtime (in what Frank Deford has called the greatest college basketball game ever played) to win the Heels' first national championship? The image on the blurry television set that I saw as a thirteen-year-old is fixed in my mind. The child is father of the man.

2) Limited fulfillment in my own life. That is, one identifies with a successful group of some sort in order to fill a vacuum in one's own life, just as one identifies with a great leader: Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Bear Bryant. Ah, the easy answer, one for the shrinks, but I plead not guilty. While there have been no transcendent successes, in general things have rolled along pretty well.

3) The opposite of No. 2: The world is *too* much with us. My life is too full, too complex, national problems are too overwhelming—I need an escape. Sport is a safety valve. Also untrue. Sport is an escape *to* tension. "Enjoy the game," they say as they take your ticket at the door. *Enjoy the game?* Impossible.

4) True involvement; or arrested development, part II. I did, it is true, once briefly wear Tar Heel blue. Thus, the moment, also fixed in my mind, at which the child, now

the man-child out of the Carolina hills, overachieved in October walk-on tryouts and thereby won the right to guard Billy Cunningham in practice and, in games, grace the bench of the Tar Babies (for such was the name given the freshman team that, for a while in 1961–1962, was called the nation's best). Was my tenure on the Tar Baby bench too brief? My moments of glory too few? But that would be the shabbiest excuse, the most shameful admission, of all. Arrested development, part I, is preferable.

5) The most complex explanation but perhaps the truest of all: the impression on the part of the viewer (or listener) that he or she can actually control the outcome of a game three hundred—or three thousand—miles away. If you leave the room for five minutes, your team will rally. If you flat-hand the ceiling twice, the other team will choke from three-point range.

And, during the regular season, not only the particular game at hand but the scores of numerous other games drifting in can be controlled through the manner in which you receive them. No game is an island, entire of itself. If, in Lawrence, the Jayhawks lose by fourteen, then the Bruins climb back into the top ten. If, in Lexington, Kentucky stumbles often enough, the Tar Heels—currently number two—will reclaim the all-time lead in games won. Games have consequences. The ripple effect. Robert Penn Warren's theory of history applied to sport: all Wednesday night games in February compose a gigantic web; all are related. If you touch the web, "however lightly, at any point," the vibration reaches "to the remotest perimeter."

I understand all that, but I am still confounded by the

power the game holds over me, and I think I am not alone. In the narrative that follows I speak largely of Tar Heels—and of other things related to growing up (and not quite growing up) in North Carolina—but what I say also holds true of others who find themselves in emotional bondage to Hoosiers and Bulldogs and Ducks, to Wolverines, Gophers, Badgers, and various other species of upper midwestern low-lying ground fauna, to Blue Devils and Blue Demons, Sun Devils and Demon Deacons, to Hawkeyes and Buckeyes, Longhorns and Sooners, Tigers and Wildcats and Lions and Cougars and all other breeds of cat. In the telling I hope I have discovered, among other things, why I care so much. It's because I once cared so much, and it was knowledge carried to the heart.

The child is father of the man.

# Off the Rim



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## Walk-On

Old Woollen Gym has long since been eclipsed as the home of basketball at the University of North Carolina—first by Carmichael Auditorium and then by the Dean Smith Center—but on a particular Monday night in mid-October 1961 it was the center of my universe. On the gleaming court, beneath a banner proclaiming the 1956–1957 Tar Heels national champions, tryouts for the 1961–1962 freshman team were about to begin, and to me it was no small matter. Neither was it to a number of on-lookers who were anticipating Carolina’s finest freshman team in years, and were also there to see a changing of the guard. The previous summer Frank McGuire, the dapper Irishman who had led the Heels to the 1957 championship, had resigned as Tar Heel head coach (under some pressure, because of his freewheeling ways and excessive spending habits) and his low-profile twenty-nine-year-old assistant, Dean Smith, had been promoted to the top spot. This meant Smith was no longer freshman coach, but he was still on hand to see the celebrated recruits—who would all have to play on the freshman

team, no matter how good they were, since that was the NCAA rule in those days. Also on hand were Ken Rosemond, new coach of the freshman team, and his assistants, Joe Quigg and Danny Lotz, stalwarts on the '57 championship team.

I probably don't need to say that I was not one of the celebrated recruits the fans had come to see, but I was as curious as anyone else to see them in action—particularly Billy Cunningham, a 6'5" leaper from Brooklyn already becoming known as the Kangaroo Kid, and Jay Neary, a slick guard also from New York. Cunningham and Neary—as well as the homegrown all-state scholarship players, Ray Respass, Bill Brown, and Pud Hassell—didn't have to worry about impressing the coaches. They were already in. But for the ninety walk-ons, more than half from North Carolina but a good number from out of state, particularly the Northeast, the moment was critical. We had four nights, four practices, to show we were better than the rest. Only eight of us would stick on the team.

The tryouts came at a moment of high drama on the Carolina campus. Four days earlier my political hero, President Kennedy, had spoken at University Day in Chapel Hill, warning of perils and challenges ahead and issuing a version of his "Ask Not" challenge. Even more on my mind—and a headline story four days running in the *Raleigh News and Observer*—were the deaths, by cyanide poisoning, of two Carolina students, roommates, found in their beds across the hall from me on the second floor of Cobb Dorm. After a week authorities had still not determined how they died—that is, how the cyanide

had gotten into their systems—and rumors, fueled by a couple of other recent mysterious deaths on campus, haunted all of us, especially in Cobb Dorm. When somebody said the cyanide probably came in the form of gas and had been sprayed under their door, we all stuffed towels under our doors. But that didn't help me. I was certain that my roommate, silent and moody, was the murderer, and I would be next. In fact, he was guilty of nothing but being a loner from Syracuse, but that was enough for me, a provincial from the North Carolina hills, to convict him. By the time it was announced—a couple of weeks later—that the deaths had been murder-suicide, I had already moved out of Cobb Dorm to safer quarters.

So basketball tryouts were not only the moment I had waited for all summer and early fall but also a much-needed distraction. I showed up at Woollen Gym in my Converse shoes and white shorts, signed in, shot around for a while on one of the side goals and, after the whistle blew, joined one of six layup lines. Mine happened to be on the main court, and I was one of fifteen or so players headed for the goal under the championship banner. A layup line is what I had hoped for because it would let me do the one thing I could do best—jump. All the coaches had their eyes fixed on center court, ready to give each of the walk-ons, as well as a couple of the scholarship players in my line, a look, when it was my turn to take off from midcourt. I took a pass about the foul line and headed in for the right-handed dunk I had mastered in high school. I planted my left foot, palmed the ball, got good liftoff, and felt confident about it until the ball