

SPORTING GREEN

NBA Elite — Games Above The Rim

By Ron Thomas

They are the daredevils of the NBA — the skywalkers who soar, swoop, dip and slither in midair to score points and thrill crowds.

"Going above the rim and making a play," says Julius Erving, the unofficial captain of the skywalkers' air corps, "blocking a shot, pinning a ball on the glass, dunking the ball, bringing the ball down then, taking it back up — that's the stuff dreams are made of."

Not to mention reputations.

Erving, Dominique Wilkins, Michael Jordan and James Worthy explore the atmosphere around and above the rim in a way few mortals can.

All are small forwards or big guards — the positions that seem to have the best combination of size, strength and flexibility — and they symbolize the playing-in-the-air artistry more prevalent now than ever in the NBA's 40-year history.

But by "daring to be great" — one of Erving's personal mottos — they also expose themselves to serious injury.

"The element of danger doesn't really enter the priorities you think about when you're on the ground," Erving said. "It's right up there one or two when you're above the rim.

"Where am I going to land, and who's going to be under me? Is it going to be some guy who will take my legs and put them where my head was, or will this be a safe flight and a safe landing?"



By Bill Cone

When Erving goes up, he says he's always looking or feeling for "ground space." Sometimes, opponents provide it. "If guys see you coming down wrong, they'll catch you to keep you from hurting yourself," Wilkins said.

Other skywalkers don't acknowledge the danger. "I'm so used to it now, there's no fear," Jordan said.

Skywalking was a stranger to the NBA until the late 1960s, when Elgin Baylor and Johnny Green joined the league. They both are black, and in the 1980s, eagle-like thrusts to the basket became more common as the number of black players increased.

Tom Sanders, a Boston defensive star in the '60s,

Today, dunking and playing in the air are accepted fundamentals of pro basketball

said black players learned to defy gravity because they concentrated on developing their skills more than white players.

In addition, basketball is king in predominantly black urban areas, where there is a scarcity of playing space and money required for other sports (such as golf and tennis).

"It comes down to the number of blacks who take the game seriously," Sanders said, adding a personal concern that too many young players place basketball above academics.

Sanders said that when he played, every team had at least one player with extraordinary leaping ability — Connie Hawkins, Joe Caldwell — but there was much less dunking because of a popular defensive philoso-

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phy: "If you make me look bad, I may hurt you a little bit."

Today, dunking and playing in the air are accepted fundamentals of pro basketball, says Lakers coach Pat Riley, executed best by "disciplined leapers" who have tremendous body control.

"It's the evolution of the athletes," Riley said. "The training methods and their physical makeup have changed the game. It's being played much higher and taller than in the past."

In skywalking, there is no prepared flight plan. Says Wilkins: "I just do whatever comes to mind."

So does Worthy, who credits skywalking to "God-given talent" and spontaneity.

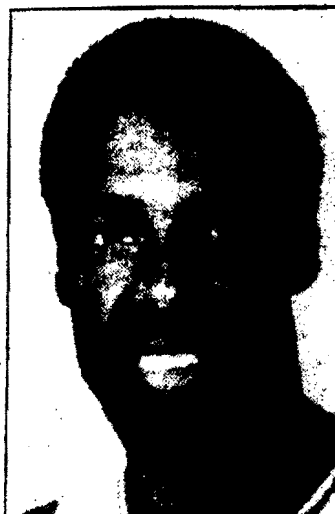
"You run into obstacles you don't expect when you first take off," he said. "Once you run into them, creativity is just automatic."

A few years ago, Worthy pulled off one of the most sensational moves ever seen in the Coliseum Arena, when he went up for a baseline shot, spun 360 degrees around the Warriors' Larry Smith, then banked in a jumper.

Credit it to planned spontaneity.

Earlier in the game, Smith had blocked two of Worthy's shots after Worthy had eluded his main defender. The next time, Worthy shook Purvis Short, waited for Smith to leap, then jumped and spun around him.

"I didn't know it was going to be a turn," Worthy said. "That playground instinct just came out. I never practiced that before." And he has not been able to duplicate the move since.



JULIUS ERVING
'Electricity goes through you'

Jordan, who has missed most of this season with a broken foot, appears to change direction in midair effortlessly, but he says it's easier to play earthbound.

"On the ground, you control your steps," he said. "In the air, you can't. You can't go around a person."

But Jordan does, doesn't he? "It looks like it," he said. "A lot of times when you change direction, (it's because) you got bumped."

Worthy never rehearses his moves, but Erving takes a studious approach that defies the concept of the "natural athlete." He sometimes will sit at courtside and think about different ways to expand the court's dimensions.

For a memorable basket in the 1980 playoff finals, Erving drove down the right side of the foul lane, floated under the backboard with the ball extended out of bounds,



JAMES WORTHY
'Creativity is automatic'

then curled under the left corner of the backboard for a reverse layup over Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

"They don't know what to do when I'm holding the ball out of bounds," Erving said at the time. "Do they go for it? Do they wait for me to bring it back? It has a tendency to freeze defenders. That's from studying the game — that's not natural, either."

Even Erving's subconscious reaches skyward. He has dreams in which he is flying, which inspires his on-court imagination.

Perhaps Erving is more studious because he is a skywalker by necessity, rather than by nature.

As a youngster growing up in Roosevelt, Long Island, he most admired Jumpin' Johnny Green, the 6-foot-5 Knicks forward who often would grab a teammate's off-target shot in midair and guide it into the basket.

"I always got a kick out of that part of his game," Erving said.

Erving's flights of fancy began for more practical reasons: He wasn't a good outside shooter, so he needed a way to get closer to the basket.

"I started saying, 'This is wonderful. I can create an avenue for myself and get to the basket, (where) I can jump up and just drop it in. It was almost a no-brainer."

"And out on the break, there was the challenge of taking the little guys for a ride."

Erving's flights can get dangerously bumpy.

"There's an electricity that goes through you if you think you should be on the ground and suddenly you're not," Erving said. "Suddenly you're riding on somebody's shoulder or you get turned around. It's like a shocking experience and it's very, very scary."

After one of those flights, Erving likes to stay on the runway for a while.

How do defenders stop skywalkers? Denver small forward Alex English has the unenviable task of guarding many of them. He doesn't let his ego get in the way of reality.

"It's difficult in that they may go over your head, but you use your fundamentals like blocking out and staying on the floor when they shoot," English said. "Some plays, you just have to accept that you can't do anything."

Of all the players who specialize in playing in the air, English is most awed by the former NBA star who officially carried the nickname "Skywalker."

"When I played with David Thompson," English said, "he did things that just blew my mind."