

Social Benefits and Cultural Consequences of Basketball in Alaska

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One of the most distinct characteristics of everyday life in rural Alaska is people's obsession with basketball. High school basketball, pick up games, adult city leagues and basketball tournaments can be considered major social events involving people of all ages and genders. This dissertation explores the socio cultural consequences of basketball in the community of Nenana. In particular it describes the relationships between people, the game and the physical space by means of which and in terms of which this social, non-economic activity takes place. The dissertation argues that basketball can be considered a "liminal" experience and the gymnasium as a "liminoid" space within which people have the opportunity to reconstitute and recreate social relations. Basketball games offer a stage on which an open ended story, which symbolically evokes the community, is being played out by the community's members. Basketball games present an image of the community to its members making them aware of their linkages to it. In light of the demographic changes that Nenana and other villages in rural Alaska have experienced, the community building effects of basketball are highly valued. The dissertation also suggests that the gymnasium itself has become a distinct social space, with both symbolic and practical functions. Lastly, it makes the argument that the idea of community among people involved with the sport transcends local boundaries and connects people all over the state.