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Allen Iverson: Celebrity and the Event

Abstract: Allen Iverson can be characterized as an event, because listed at 6 feet and weighing just 165 pounds, he won four scoring titles in his NBA career, and was one of the best shooting guards in the history of the league. Small, quick and explosive, he was an exceptional talent with a complicated personality. Iverson was a trendsetter, as important off as he was on the court. He was a villain, but one that was "cool" enough to root for. His basketball career is best summed up by two events, which occurred just a year apart. One was his memorable crossover and shot in overtime of Game One of the 2001 Finals, the other was Iverson's press conference a year later, known now as "The Practice Rant." This article will analyze both of these events with the aid of various critical texts, most notably by Slavoj Žižek. It will explain their significance to the modern shape of the NBA, how they influenced players that joined the league after Iverson. In doing so, it will establish AI as an important, truly revolutionary event—a force that influenced not only basketball culture, but modern America.

Keywords: Allen Iverson, NBA, Žižek, event, basketball, celebrity

This article has been inspired by Fabio Vighi's and Heiko Feldner's analysis of the two goals scored by Diego Maradona against England in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. Following Slavoj Žižek's reasoning, they claim that the goals have "the structure of a revolutionary act" (235). They ascribe the goals' appeal to their "*shameful monstrosity*" (225, original italics)—both goals reveal an alien, almost inhuman drive to score. The famous "Hand of God" and the "Goal of the Century" are inseparable and, taken together, they serve as an example of "how drive and freedom are linked" (234). With the first goal Maradona clearly broke the rules of football, as he used his hand to send the ball over the English goalkeeper. With the second he broke the unwritten rules of team sports, as he refused to pass to any of his teammates and ran alone seemingly through the whole pitch. Both goals serve as expressions of drive and freedom, the latter understood not as a decision, but rather the result of the former—the will to win. According to Žižek, "at its most elementary, freedom is not the freedom to do as you like [that is, to follow your inclinations without any externally imposed constraints], but to do what you do not want to do, to thwart the 'spontaneous' realization of an impetus" (*The Parallax View* 202). In his understanding one cannot choose freedom, as it is rather a "no choice situation" (Vighi and Feldner 234). At the same time, in

what he calls "a Kantian antinomy of freedom," Žižek stresses that "if an act is fully determined by preceding causes, it is, of course, not free" (*The Parallax View* 203). Freedom is only "real" when it is unexpected, but what is more, it is only "real" when it is retroactive—only once the act is over, one can recognize the freedom behind it.

The notions of freedom and realness also apply to the event, which, according to Žižek, is "*the effect that seems to exceed its causes*" (*Event* 4, original italics). Just like freedom, the event also helps to organize the past, as once it occurs, what happened before it is understood as actions/occurrences leading to that particular event. The event is most powerful when it has the form of a truly revolutionary act. In the twenty first century no NBA player was more revolutionary (or free) than Allen Iverson. The player himself was an event—listed at 6 feet, weighing 165 pounds, he won four scoring titles in his NBA career and was one of the best shooting guards in the history of the league. Iverson-the event, understood as "a turning point [which] changes the entire field within which facts appear" (Žižek, *Event* 159), did not only redefine the shooting guard position or contribute to the development of "small ball." His explosive and quick style of play made him a big event, but he was an even bigger one off the court. Controversial, cocky and influential, he became the first hip-hop star of the NBA. Even though other basketball players before him used to record rap albums or even own their own labels, Iverson was the first to reject the formalities of the NBA and enjoy a truly hip-hop lifestyle of cars, tattoos, jewelry and parties. With his regular built, and a diet rich in chicken wings and Sprite, Iverson was able to win against much taller and bigger opponents. He wore cornrows—"a hairstyle most common among prison inmates" (Babb 107)—and baggy clothes wherever he went, even at official events. For example, at a conference where he was supposed to accept his MVP award Iverson wore baggy pants, Timberland shoes, a large T-shirt and about $300,000 worth of jewelry (Platt 3). His influence on NBA culture was so big that in 2005 the league implemented an off-court dress code, because too many young players were imitating his casual style.

Vighi and Feldner write that: "the Event, like the Lacanian Real, is always in its place, always attached to its specific Situation" (170). When analyzing Allen Iverson-the Event, it is therefore important to remember that his rise would not have been possible without specific circumstances. As Michael Jordan was about to retire for the second time and hip-hop was becoming a dominant part of American culture, it was inevitable that the NBA's first "hip-hop star" would eventually emerge. Nicknamed "The Answer," Iverson was determined to do things his way, which met with the scorn of older players and coaches. But urban youth embraced Iverson, impressed by his fearless play and attitude. One of his biographers, Larry Platt, characterizes him as "ghettocentric" (6), which best describes the public persona and the event that Allen Iverson was. He was one of the few players who actually seemed to be "themselves," which in the increasingly corporate and image-conscious league was a truly revolutionary act. Kent Babb, another Iverson biographer, describes the player as: "strong, determined, and potentially

dominant in a normal-sized body—far easier for the average basketball fan and shoe customer to relate to" (91). As troublesome as he was gifted, he influenced the league like few players before and after him.

Iverson's basketball career is best summed up by two events, which occurred just a year apart. One was his memorable crossover and shot in overtime of Game One of the 2001 Finals, the other was Iverson's press conference a year later, known now as "The Practice Rant." This article will analyze both of these events and explain their significance to the modern shape of the NBA, how they influenced players that joined the league after Iverson. In doing so, it will establish AI as an important, truly revolutionary event, which brought colossal (and unexpected) results. Jeffrey Lane stresses Iverson's importance not only to basketball, but also to African-American culture, as he emerged as a potential star just after two of the most iconic rappers—Tupac "2Pac" Shakur and Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace—were shot. "As if ordained to fill the void left by the premature departures of the genre's two most influential icons, Iverson was basketball's hip-hop incarnate; he brandished a badass swagger and street cred far more provocative than any previously seen in the professional game" (Lane 37). This means that Iverson was much more than just another basketball superstar—he became a global icon, a brand, but most of all, an event.

Event One: On the Court

The first event occurred in the first game of the 2001 NBA Finals, when Iverson made a shot over Tyronn Lue of the Los Angeles Lakers. Lue, who imitated Iverson during Laker training sessions, was believed to lack his scoring ability, but to make up for it with quickness, which exceeded Iverson's. Similarly to many great players, Iverson treated such beliefs as a challenge. Led by Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant, the Lakers were the reigning NBA champions. That season they dominated the Western Conference and the NBA, entering the finals without a single loss in the playoffs. Iverson was the sole star of the Sixers, the one player that the team relied on, and he wanted it that way. In his first years in the league he was perceived as a thug whose egotistical play frustrated his teammates and coaches. Another potential superstar, Jerry Stackhouse, had to leave the team, because he could not coexist with AI. Žižek writes that "the highest freedom is freely to assume and enact one's fate, what inexorably has to happen" (*Parallax View* 206), and the separation needed to occur for the two players to blossom. By exhibiting freedom on the court—which in the eyes of his critics was simply known as "ball-hogging"—Iverson chased his rival out of town, which led to him becoming the franchise player for the Sixers. Even though he was one of the most dominant players in the league, the NBA was afraid to market Iverson. According to Lane it was because "he was very difficult to impersonate: this guy was just too real" (41). But that year he

was presented as a changed man, who finally learned that basketball was a team sport. Such was his image in various NBA publications and documentaries, most notably in *Allen Iverson: The Answer* (Podhoretz), where all the negative aspects of his game and personality are omitted, while the focus is on his extraordinary plays.

The first game of the 2001 Finals went to overtime during which Iverson scored seven consecutive points, the last two with a shot over Lue. The Laker tried to stop him and Iverson used his famous crossover to get open. As Lue moved to Iverson's right, the Sixer stepped back and took a shot with the defender too far to block it. He scored and the Lakers were about to lose the only game of their postseason. In his attempt to block Iverson, Lue fell onto the floor. Iverson stood next to his rival, but instead of helping him to his feet, he stepped over the guard as slowly as possible: a sign of great skill was followed by a sign of disrespect. Ben Golliver of Sports Illustrated called the play: "quickness, skill, confidence and defiance, all in six seconds." The shot was an "event in the sense of *a traumatic intrusion of something New which remains unacceptable for the predominant view*" (Žižek 70, original italics). It convinced millions of sports fans that Iverson was "clutch," which meant that he could take ball in the most crucial moment of the game and lead his team to victory. He knew that this moment would live on forever, as it occurred in a game against arguably one of the best playoff teams in the history of the NBA. Now, whenever his decisions, work ethic or behavior off the court would be criticized, he could always return to that moment to state that his way was the best way. Barry Smart claims that celebrity is "created" in response to "people's exaggerated expectations of greatness" (11). The same is true of assholes, who according to Aaron James are "made, not born" (100). If other events in his life did not, this one definitely allowed Iverson to behave like an asshole, which does not mean that he had not behaved like one before. He was granted more freedom, which in this case meant the ability to act like an asshole. Already in his rookie season he was criticized for being arrogant and egotistic, and his behavior had not improved since. Only this time, after that memorable season, the NBA had no choice but to support Iverson. That meant he could do as he pleased and the league would cover for his mistakes. From a marketing standpoint, he became too important to ignore.

After winning that game Iverson became "a beloved prodigal son to Philadelphia fans" (Flynn), as his further mistakes would always be forgiven because of that special moment. The fans in Philadelphia are known for their affection for players who are not only winners, but who play with a chip on their shoulder. "Philly's" favorite players have to overcome big obstacles in order to succeed. Platt points out that before Iverson "Philadelphia had long been a sucker for… lesser talents who overcame odds by virtue of work ethic and competitive fire" (171). Former idols include Pete Rose and Bobby Clarke, as opposed to superstars like Donovan McNabb or Eric Lindros, who were great players, but did not possess the edge that the fans in Philadelphia value so much. It did not matter that McNabb or Lindros played numerous times through injuries, the

city still could not accept them and probably would not even if they had won a championship. In Iverson's case, people believed that he sacrificed himself in every game, playing especially hard for a player of such a small size. And by making that crucial shot he was now allowed to do things his way, justifying his claim to uniqueness.

As soon as a player is accepted as "one of them," the fans love him unconditionally and are willing to blame everyone else in the organization for his shortcomings. It is one thing for the player to be successful, but when he creates a special bond with the fans, they almost worship him, to the point when they are willing to overlook his failures. According to Smart, this may be because "consumers are encouraged in various ways to identify with celebrities and the images and life-styles with which they are associated in press, magazine and television reports and advertising" (9). With his size and commitment Iverson instantly became a fan-favorite and "when [he] took the Sixers to the championship series against the Lakers in 2001, Philly fans fell in love with a 'thug'" (Lane 20). Before his rookie year, he signed a ten year contract with Reebok and released his first signature shoe—Question. Even before his professional career started, "the company gave Iverson license to be himself, whatever that might eventually become, and if the NBA did not like it, then, well, fuck the NBA" (Babb 110). Urban youth responded to that attitude by making Iverson their new idol and he holds the fifth place in the largest shirt sales of the past decade (Dorsey). This implies, according to Lane, "that there [was] a major white contingent of purchasers" (34), which may be surprising, considering that Iverson embodied the stereotypical African-American hoodlum, in contrast with players like Michael Jordan, whose "blackness has been deliberately underplayed in promotions that have sought to emphasize his All-American virtues and his status as a role model" (Smart 124). Babb suspects that Iverson's bad boy persona may have been partially created by the league and its sponsors, while Lane thinks that the NBA actually downplayed the most dangerous aspects of Iverson's personality: "in the post-Jordan era, NBA executives have successfully contained the 'cool pose' of stars like Allen Iverson, leaving it edgy enough for some to fetishize yet adequately safe for white, middle-class consumption" (238). The reports of his gun possession and domestic violence became known only after Iverson had already established himself as one of the best players in the league and during his various legal troubles he had full support of his fans, whether he was in Philadelphia, Denver or Detroit. The league just could not ignore the marketability of Iverson's "realness" and eventually had to accept him. The same was the case with executives and coaches—Iverson was just too big an icon to contain.

High school and college teachers, coaches and fans tend to turn a blind eye whenever a talented player misbehaves. Babb mentions how Iverson clashed with his youth coaches, unwilling to do the things that were considered natural by other members of the team. Instead of punishing the player, the coaches and teachers "enabled" him, and while Iverson remained grateful, he got used to his privileges. He became part of

a "quasi-aristocratic culture in which privilege and prestige and other rewards accrue inordinately to athletes, and in which, therefore, they come to feel entitled to special treatment" (Kimmel 234), known as "jockocracy." This culture allows an athlete to feel special off the court—people are willing to take care of his every need, as well as to cover for him when he misbehaves. And while James rightfully notices that "what makes someone an asshole is a special way of being wrong about what one's entitlements are" (18), Iverson was raised in this culture and got used to his privileges, especially freedom. He went to Georgetown University straight out of a minimum security prison, where he had served a sentence for a brawl in a bowling alley in his hometown of Hampton, Virginia. If it had not been for his extraordinary talent, he would never have had the possibility of studying at Georgetown and joining the NBA after two years of college.

Pierre Bourdieu describes habitus as a system of dispositions dependent on history and memory. Collective and individual, this history is so strong and potent that it subconsciously influences the actions of agents. If they "are possessed by their habitus more than they possess it, this is because it acts within them as the organizing principle of their actions, and because this modus operandi informing all thought and action [including thought of action] reveals itself only in the opus operatum" (18, original italics). This is especially true in the case of athletes and artists who come from humble beginnings. Numerous rap songs contain the lyric: "you can take me out the ghetto, but you can't take the ghetto out of me," which stresses the importance of "keeping it real." Often as soon as they achieve success, athletes tend to think that their talent puts them above everyone else. Because they did not have much, they feel free to take whatever they want. Bourdieu draws attention to the notion of social borders, as they are often "'fuzzy' and contested" (Thomson 78), but athletes usually do not take them under consideration and often do not understand that by crossing them they might be perceived as assholes. But as Iverson stepped over Lue, he seemed completely aware of what he was doing. He was liberated, "since this freedom, which truly liberates us, depends on the momentary [and traumatic] suspension of the familiar horizon of consciousness" (Vighi and Feldner 229). In a game of one on one, Iverson would not be able to beat the best Laker and he was aware of that. When asked whom he considered the best player in the league, Iverson answered: "If I had a vote, I would always vote for Shaquille O'Neal every year" (Narducci 2005). But in a team sport his Sixers beat the Lakers, while simultaneously creating the impression that it was thanks to Iverson's individual effort.

Iverson appealed to fans who wanted "a temporary trip to the dark side," and his replica jersey used to be the "official badass gear" (Lane 35) of the last decade. Since his arrival, "the NBA has harnessed Iverson while celebrating and selling his edge" (Lane 49). He was a villain, but one that was "cool" enough to root for. According to Smart, in the world of sports "an image is synthetic, in the sense that it is deliberately contrived.… To be effective an image needs to be vivid and simplified" (15). The tattoos

and cornrows were the attributes most associated with Iverson's name, while his image was that of a "thug." But stepping over his opponent, just as he scored on him during such a crucial moment, surprisingly elevated Iverson to the same category as Michael Jordan or Larry Bird—exemplary players who mocked their opponents after making memorable plays. Jordan, Bird or Magic were NBA icons, whose dirty plays and trash talking were deliberately downplayed by the league. But "this nearly universal acclaim for Iverson proved short-lived" (Lane 56). Only a year later, as his team got eliminated in the first round of playoffs, once again Iverson's lifestyle and attitude overshadowed his play and put in question his status as a role model.

Event Two: Off the Court

Four days after the Sixers fell to the Boston Celtics in the first round of the 2001–02 playoffs, the team's General Manager organized a press conference at which the journalists could ask Iverson about his problems. Throughout the season the team struggled with injuries and it barely made it to the post-season. Iverson himself missed 22 games and once again clashed with the team's coach, mostly because of the player's attitude. Seven months earlier his friend got shot and there were rumors circulating that Iverson was trying to cope with the loss by drinking. He was staying up late, neglecting his family and missing practice. At the end of the season coach Larry Brown was supposed to meet one-on-one with all of his players and discuss the way they had performed. The only one that did not show up was Iverson. During his conference Brown suggested that the player needed to change, otherwise he would be traded. And while during a personal meeting, which finally took place, Brown told Iverson that he believed in him, the player was disappointed and angry. Their conflict was not caused by the generation gap between Brown and Iverson—for example, Kobe Bryant, the clean cut star of the Los Angeles Lakers and the NBA, was a hard worker who loved to practice—but rather by what Pierre Bourdieu calls the "modes of generation" or life conditions, which "cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa" (78). While Bryant was the "middle-class" player like former Sixers star Julius Erving or Michael Jordan, Iverson considered himself a representative of the 'hood.' It was not a secret that Bryant was the type of player that coaches like Brown loved—he pushed his teammates and himself, never running out of motivation. Iverson seemed to care only about himself and his "part," simultaneously taking full responsibility for the team's wins and losses. Lane notices that "as an athlete who always 'keeps it real,' Iverson has repeatedly demonstrated a resistance to traditional authority figures" (47). In a sense his image was based on Iverson being a rebel, therefore to uphold it he had to clash and resist, even when he had nothing to rebel against. But there was something else at

play. Vighi and Feldner write that, according to Michel Foucault, "the discursive battle for hegemonic space functions as a somewhat spontaneous event" (36). Such was the case with the interview, which Iverson understood as an occasion to take revenge on his coach and everyone else who claimed he was to blame for Sixers' losses.

While the shot over Lue was a quintessential Iverson on-court event, the conference came to define him off-court. Many journalists agree that "by the year 2002, press conferences had become exercises in rote non-communication" (Cosentino). The players said what everyone already knew, doing their best not to cause any controversy. With Iverson it was different; according to Neal Hartman, one of the journalists covering the Sixers: "a lot of times when you ask a player what they're thinking, you know half the time what they're going to say. But with Allen, you had no idea, and that's what made it great television" (qtd. in Babb 199). Žižek claims that "from the materialist standpoint, an Event emerges 'out of nowhere' within a specific constellation of Being—the space of an Event is the minimal 'empty' distance between two beings, the 'other' dimension which shines through this gap" (*The Parallax View* 56). The beat journalists, those who were the closest to the team, knew what was going on, so did the Sixers' staff, and yet no one was expecting what is now known as "the practice rant"—otherwise someone would have prevented it. Iverson's tattoos, cornrows and famous armband were already "absorbed" by basketball players and fans all over the world. The first became a mainstay of the league, but the latter two are not as popular as they used to be. The rant lives on and is frequently remembered and imitated during NBA press conferences.

The season's final conference was broadcast live on TV in Philadelphia. It started with a supposedly drunk Iverson expressing his frustration with trade rumors, stating his commitment to the city, the team and the teammates. In a typical asshole fashion, he was forcing the blame on the executives and the coach—if he were to be traded, it was their decision, not his. Iverson was willing to do everything for the team, except practice. Finally Hartman asked: "Could you be clear about your practicing habits since we can't see you practice?" (qtd. in Babb 207). The journalists knew Iverson was constantly missing practice, they knew he was the reason behind the bad atmosphere in the locker room. Even though they were "talking about practice, not a game," for Iverson the conference was a game, at least as understood by Pierre Bourdieu—his feel of the social situation required him to defend his position. "According to Bourdieu, the game that occurs in social spaces or fields is competitive, with various social agents using differing strategies to maintain or improve their position. At stake in the field is the accumulation of *capitals:* they are both the process within, and product of, a field" (Thomson 69, original italics). As competitive as he was, Iverson had to win the media debate with his coach. Instead of winning basketball games and proving that his way was the best, he did the interview, which he later came to regret (Wolf). As habitus is "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (Bourdieu 78), one might say that Iverson's "true nature" came out during that conference. He treated

the press room as if it were the extension of the basketball court, a field at which he needed to dominate his opponent.

During Brown's tenure with the Sixers, his best player missed practice multiple times and the coach occasionally went to the press to complain about it. Each time Iverson felt betrayed and the coach needed to regain his trust. But now, frustrated, the player reacted by questioning his coach's judgments: "if coach tells you that I missed practice, then that's that. I may have missed one practice this year." As he was sitting there, Iverson's frustration grew: "I'm supposed to be the franchise player and we in here talking about practice." During the infamous interview, Iverson said "practice" seventeen times. He kept on repeating the word, as if trying to belittle its sense with each utterance, at the end exploding with the question: "How the hell can I make my teammates better by practice?" Iverson's question was met with ridicule, as it was practicing with Jordan that made Scottie Pippen one of the best players in the history of the NBA. This once again presented A.I. as the anti-Jordan. When Iverson brought up the term "franchise player" or spoke about how he sacrificed his health every night for the team, he was actually looking for excuses that would allow him to do as he pleased. "Coaches learned early on that Iverson was an incentive-based organism" (Babb 16), hence he could not motivate himself to play unless the game was about something. That is why he was not interested in attending practice.

The team's public relations specialist tried to stop the conference, but Iverson waved him off. He also questioned the journalists' knowledge of basketball. He was restless and defiant, just like on the basketball court. Iverson felt "his work ethic and character were on trial—and he was particularly sensitive to being on trial" (Platt 242)—the conference reminded him of his trail in high school. The oversensitive player would not accept any criticism from the journalists, but early on in his career he also turned down advice from such players as Jordan or Magic Johnson. Unsurprisingly though, when Gary Payton suggested to Iverson that he should stop practicing to keep his body well-rested, the player was happy to listen to his colleague (Freeman). Platt stresses the importance of the conference for the rest of Iverson's career. It marked the moment when he should realize that he could no longer rely on physical gifts alone. The conference could have been a wake up call, but it marked his decline. It "was nothing short of Iverson's way of stating the obvious: 'I'm not the problem with this team'" (Platt 243). Brown created a seemingly perfect system for Iverson by surrounding him with selfless players, who allowed Iverson to shoot as much as he wanted and it seemed that the system was not working anymore. Larry Brown quit during the next season, while Iverson was traded in 2006.

Few things have been constant in Iverson's career, but one cannot deny that he always "kept it real," which "meant that a player who had become a star would not abandon the people he'd hung out with before he'd made it" (Lane 42). Iverson refused to leave behind his childhood friends, even though they often got him into trouble

and used him for his money. His friends, to whom he referred to as "Cru Thik," were among the few who always believed in him and kept him company when he could not go home. Since his mother used to do drugs and party long into the night, the future MVP developed a habit of staying up late, which would later hurt his career. With his father in jail and his mother often intoxicated, Iverson was forced to grow up on his own. His failure to mature may be why his coach, as well as various journalists, did not treat him as an adult. His youthful features and his ability to constantly run into trouble caused Larry Brown to refer to him as "kid." The media liked the term and often called Iverson that, stressing his immaturity. Lane suggests that "rather than conceptualize Iverson as an overgrown baby or someone too dense or stubborn to be rehabilitated, it is more useful to recognize that his attitude [was] often influenced by [not determined by] his connection to the value system of 'keepin' it real'" (58). In other words, according to Lane, Iverson is a victim of his habitus. His prime objective was to represent the community that he had grown up in. When preparing to accept his MVP award, Iverson declared: "I want all my niggas back home to see this" (Platt 2), referring to his T-shirt "shouting out" his old neighborhood. He never bothered to say the right things, he wanted to remain true to himself and his community. His whole image was based on "realness," understood as defiance of social norms. In explaining Bourdieu's definition of "field," Patricia Thomson has compared it to a football field—a comparison used by the philosopher himself, who claimed that social life was like a game (69). Iverson "kept it real" not by making the best of his opportunity and changing his behavior, but by not acknowledging different fields in his theory of practice. He never bothered to change his style of play, and even when his skills diminished, he remained a me-first type of player who would rather score than pass. "Iverson never lifted weights, barely stretched, and ate like hell, and before games he would sit in the players' family lounge until a half hour before tip-off, wearing a tank top and making plans for after the game" (Babb 114). His persona was the basis for the 2005 Reebok "I Am What I Am" campaign—presenting him as a man who could not change and everybody else had to accept that.

Iverson often said that it was Michael Jordan who inspired him to become a basketball player. One of the obstacles that prevented Iverson from realizing his childhood dream of becoming "like Mike," was that "Jordan came from a vastly different home environment than Iverson [a middle-class, intact nuclear family]" (Lane 60), while Iverson was from "the hood" and had such traumatic experiences as losing eight of his friends during one summer (Babb 11). A.I.'s hero "had to carefully craft his image before he was able to transcend race and attract and inspire all segments of society" (Lane 60), while Iverson was never interested in how he was perceived. For sure, he wanted to play like Jordan, but he was never interested in becoming a brand. Taking the lyrics of hip-hop tracks to heart, Iverson believed in loyalty. He was praised because of these qualities, but they also led to his downfall. Žižek observes that "one is tempted,

in order to save freedom, to displace the free agent from 'I' to 'Me'" (*The Parallax View* 216). By becoming the focal point of the Sixers' franchise, Iverson guaranteed himself freedom to be himself, but also put himself in a position to be regularly criticized.

Allen Iverson was an event and "in an Event, things not only change, what changes is the very parameter by which we measure the facts of change, i.e., a turning point changes the entire field within which facts appear" (Žižek, *Event* 159). At his retirement conference he declared: "You know, my whole thing was just being me." It may actually be Iverson's best achievement—he played the same "game" on different "fields" and still was accepted by the fans and the league. Even though, as Lane points out, "the NBA's appropriated version of hip-hop was corny and watered down—not the Iverson style of hip-hop, laced with profanity and street grime, but Will Smith–style hip-hop, painted with a slick coat of Hollywood lacquer" (41). One may say that the league changed with Iverson, but to some extent it also changed thanks to him. Bourdieu claims that "the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class" (86). Allen Iverson is an example of a man especially proud of this collective history, who embraced the stereotypes of a thug and an athlete, and "represented" both of them. Thanks to these values and his extraordinary talent Iverson became an event—a "once in a lifetime" player, who was exciting on and off the court.

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