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Jack Donahue, Western Washington University, undergraduate student, “Jonestown: A Means of Control and Rebellion through Basketball”

Abstract: In 1978, more than 900 people were killed on a plot of land known as Jonestown in northern Guyana. Those people were members of the Peoples Temple, a cult led by Jim Jones, who named the settlement Jonestown after himself. Originally based in California, Jones fled reports of abuse within the Temple by leading an exodus to Guyana. Facing pressure from the United States government, Jones then led his followers in a mass suicide, encouraging some and forcing others at gunpoint to drink Flavor-Aid that had been poisoned with a number of chemicals. Nearly every member of the Peoples Temple was killed. However, in Georgetown, Guyana’s capital, the Jonestown basketball team was unaware of the horror taking place back home. Created as a means of boosting morale among the people of Jonestown, the members of the basketball team were some of the only people to survive the event. This paper will explore the purpose of the basketball team itself to the different actors involved: the team’s purpose to Jones, to the members of the cult, and in the minds of the team itself. Basketball was used in a multitude of ways in Jonestown to both inspire hope and exert agency.

Jonestown, a Means of Control and Rebellion Through Basketball

Jack Donahue

Western Washington University

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Undergraduate

In 1978, more than 900 members of the Peoples Temple died in a mass suicide in Guyana. Better known as "Jonestown," in reference to the cult's charismatic leader, Jim Jones, the Temple originated in California, with bases in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Jones moved the Temple to Guyana in 1977 after bearing increasing pressure from investigations in San Francisco. The Temple was a major player in the local politics of the region, a leftist church who saw in Jonestown an attempt at establishing a socialist utopia. The cult was being investigated for physical and sexual abuses committed by Jones on various Temple members, and Jones and several hundred other members fled to avoid the coming controversy. After their arrival, Jonestown was run as its own state within Guyana, independent and under the same mechanisms used by nation-states to build loyalty and a sense of identity. One of these mechanisms was the use of sports. Basketball in Jonestown was an attempt at building identity and nationalism for members of the Peoples Temple. It backfired on Jim Jones when the team instead acted as a tool for agency and rebellion by the members of the team, some of the most prominent members of the cult. The identities of the team, their performance, the athletes themselves and their actions during the mass suicide greatly illustrate the importance of the Jonestown basketball team to the history and function of the Peoples Temple.

The identities of those on the Peoples Temple basketball team are incredibly important given their place within the cult's demographics and their status as prominent figures within it. In order to understand the team, it is important to understand who exactly was on it. Their place within the cult was heavily dependent upon the fact that they stood in contrast to the overall makeup of the Temple itself. According to the book *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown* by Mary

Elizabeth Maaga, the Temple's membership was largely black, two-thirds female, and had a disproportionate amount of elderly people.¹ A basketball team of young men stood out demographically, automatically establishing them as visible figures within the cult. In addition to their age and gender, the team also stood out through their proximity to Jones: four of the eleven players on the team were Jones' own sons.² Stephan Jones, Johnny Cobb Jones, Tim Tupper Jones, and Jim Jones Jr. were all prominent members of the team, and elevated the status of the team itself, because it had Jim Jones' direct attention. These were among the most privileged, most visible members of the Temple, and Jones used them as a point of pride. Young men were a rarity in Jonestown, and young men of such importance were even rarer. In her chapter "Demographics and the Black Religious Culture of Peoples Temple" in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, Rebecca Moore wrote that "About one-quarter of the survivors were black males, several of whom were members of the community basketball team, in Georgetown that day for a championship basketball game. In fact, almost a tenth (9%) of the male survivors belonged to the basketball team."³ The basketball team were standouts, making up a large part of an incredibly small demographic within the makeup of the Peoples Temple. That demographic difference only increased their prominence in the eyes of the members of the cult.

The prominence of the basketball team was put to good use by Jim Jones and the Temple's leadership. It was used as a means of inspiring pride among members of the Peoples Temple and providing a sense that the Temple was interacting with the outside world. Jones

¹ Mary Elizabeth Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 6.

² "Who was on the Jonestown basketball team and why were they in Georgetown on November 18?" The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University, Jan. 5, 2017, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=68416.

³ Rebecca Moore, "Demographics and the Black Religious Culture of Peoples Temple," in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America*, ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 64.

regularly made the basketball team examples of how Temple members should act. In one of his day-long speeches made over a loudspeaker to the people of Jonestown, Jones stated that the team lead “exemplary lives, working hard. That’s their jobs until they go off to play on the *court*. The basketball problem is also— another significance, they have to practice on a regular court. They’re *tough*. They’re a good team. I played basketball, I was a *star*. And they’re tough, even under the present limited circumstances that they *have*. So I’m asking that everyone pick up your pace – some have – and we’ll be announcing those soon, at least by next people’s rally.”⁴ He used them not only as an example of how to behave, but as a rallying cry for the rest of the Temple to work harder. He instilled in the cult qualities that he saw in the players: toughness, importance, hard work, and cast them as these figures for the other Temple members to aspire to. And it worked, too. The Jonestown Institute’s timeline of the events describes the team’s departure to Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, for a tournament with the national team, stating that they were “cheered on, sincerely and ... in some cases with tears by the entire community, departs from Port Kaituma aboard the Cudjoe, a 72-foot Temple-owned trawler, for Georgetown to play in a tournament against the Guyana National team.”⁵ Conditions were tough in Jonestown. It was stiflingly hot and boring, and daily life consisted almost solely of work to keep the settlement running.⁶ The basketball team gave Jonestown’s residents a sense of legitimacy, of importance in the eyes of Temple members. Jones once lied about a ten-point loss to the Guyana national team, restating it as a ten-point win that was met with resounding cries of joy by

⁴ The Jonestown Institute, “Q212: Jones issues instructions, speaks against suicide, reads news.” Oct. 18, 1978, Jonestown, Guyana, MP3, 63:08, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27377.

⁵ Judy Bebelaar and Ron Cabral, “Timeline: And Then They Were Gone,” The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University, July 25, 2013, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=30368.

⁶ Jonestown Institute, “Jones issues instructions,” https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27377.

the members of the Temple.⁷ Whether factual or not, the team's exploits were used by Jones as a propaganda machine, one that inspired positivity and hope in the darker, more paranoid days of Jonestown's later existence.

Jim Jones did not always approve of basketball, though, and for the members of the team the sport was a place of solace, away from the prying eyes of their leader. For the team, some of the most prominent and public members of the Peoples Temple, basketball became a means of self-expression and, eventually, rebellion. Jones' sons had always used basketball as a tool of rebellion against the abuses of their father. In an article for *Sports Illustrated* entitled "Escape from Jonestown," Gary Smith wrote that the Jones boys saw basketball as "laced with liberation, a feeling that they were thrusting a middle finger at the holy hypocrite every time they shoveled snow or swept leaves off their concrete patio court and went at it."⁸ Even before they arrived at Jonestown, basketball was used as a means of escape. Jones did not approve of his sons' love for the sport, and would "shame the boys instead, snort, 'What a folly! What a waste of time when the world's in shambles and we need to be changing it.'"⁹ Eventually Jones conceded, but knowledge of their father's distaste for the sport helped them use it as a means of finding solace and self-expression, even in the stifling atmosphere in Jonestown. Stephan Jones, Jones' son and a captain of the basketball team, said that he "remember[ed], even in Jonestown, basketball being such a release, a place to go and let go all of my frustration and rage. It was a borderline rebellious act for us to play organized ball, we always felt guilty."¹⁰ Acting recreationally,

⁷ Stephan Jones, "Death's Night," The Jonestown Institute, San Diego State University, Oct. 13, 2013, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40172.

⁸ Gary Smith, "Escape From Jonestown," *Sports Illustrated*, Dec. 24, 2007, <https://www.si.com/more-sports/2007/12/24/jonestown1231>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Donald Hunt, "Basketball heals family of cult leader," *Philadelphia Tribune* (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 5, 2007.

playing basketball for the fun of it, stood in direct conflict with Jones' oft-repeated mantras of hard work for the greater good. It went against his vision for Jonestown, and in doing so was a subtle act of rebellion that Jones' sons could use to their advantage. When the team formed, that provided the Jones boys with the structure needed to commit their most vital act of rebellion. The team was made up of those who were, naturally, opposed to the direction that Jones was taking the Temple. A few on the team were members of the crew who originally constructed Jonestown, including Stephan Jones. He "and the other pioneers especially resented the well-educated elite who introduced committees that 'second-guessed' the work of the manual laborers."¹¹ Building a basketball team, while a means of inspiring pride among members of the cult, also built a coalition to express dissent. Some sources characterize the members of the team as blind followers of Jones and the Peoples Temple, but testimony from former members of the cult itself and Jones' sons calls this into question. An FBI interview of Andrea Walker, a survivor of the suicide, contends that the team was not involved in the more coercive practices of the cult. Instead, she "reiterated that the security force was comprised of the older people, unarmed."¹² Many members of the team, especially Jones' sons, saw through their leader's facade. They would not help in the more oppressive aspects of Temple life, refusing to partake in the violence and abuse committed by the security force, and instead sought to defuse that at every turn. Their attempts to stop the mass suicide in Jonestown on November 18, 1978, would constitute their ultimate act of rebellion against the Temple.

The Peoples Temple basketball team was in Georgetown on the day of the suicide, playing against the Guyanese national team. They had lost their first two games, by 30 points and

¹¹ Maaga, *Voices*, 7.

¹² The Jonestown Institute, "Serial 1207 - 10: Andrea Walker." Dec. 5, 1978, New York, Transcript, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=91433.

10 points, respectively.¹³ They were enjoying contact with civilization, and Stephan Jones later wrote that he “went to the movies the night [his] world died.”¹⁴ Jim Jones Jr. and his brothers received a radio message from Jones in which the cult leader told them a tractor full of “avenging angels” would soon dispatch Congressman Leo Ryan, who came to Guyana to investigate alleged abuses in Jonestown.¹⁵ Jim Jones Jr. later stated that “‘Dad said, ‘You’re going to meet Mr. Frazier,’ which was code for everybody dies.”¹⁶ Jones directed his sons to kill themselves, to use knives or piano wire if they didn’t have poison. They refused. He ordered them to kill the Concerned Relatives, an anti-Temple activist group who were staying nearby in Georgetown.¹⁷ They refused. Instead, Jones’ sons and the rest of the Peoples Temple basketball team tried to stop what was coming. Stephan Jones told Lee Ingram, the coach of the team, to direct the members of the Temple to not do anything until they’d heard from him, fearing the worst.¹⁸ Then they headed for the US Embassy. Jim Jones Jr. said that “We still thought we might have some time... we could stop whatever my dad was doing... The embassy could fly us there, we figured.”¹⁹ But the Embassy wouldn’t let them in, and they were forced to return to Lamaha Gardens, a house owned by the Temple that they stayed in for the tournament. The team tried as hard as they could to defy Jones, to return to their home and stop the deaths of everyone they knew. While they weren’t able to halt the suicide as a whole, their actions prevented the death toll from rising higher, and their collective rebellion toward Jones saved not only their own

¹³ Jones, “Death’s Night,” https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40172.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Doyle Paul Johnson, “Dilemmas of Charismatic Leadership: The Case of the Peoples Temple,” *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 4 (1979): 321.

¹⁶ Jeff Guinn, *Road to Jonestown* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 435.

¹⁷ Jones, “Death’s Night,” https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40172.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Guinn, *Road*, 449.

lives but the lives of several Concerned Relatives and the Temple Members still in San Francisco.

The Peoples Temple basketball team remains one of the more fascinating aspects of the story of Jonestown, and clearly illustrates how sports could be used to build a sense of shared identity and unity, even on a micro level. Sport is important in a lot of regards, not only in how it is utilized by the state or by controlling powers but by what sport becomes to those directly involved within it. For the Jonestown basketball team, sport became a means of self-expression that other members of the cult could look to for pride but also for solace from the backbreaking and oppressive state of day-to-day life within Jonestown. Their identities, the way Jones used the team, the ways in which the team rebelled and how they survived the mass suicide all serve to illustrate how sports can be effectively used by leaders to forge identity, or by participants to create change. The basketball team was a point of pride for Jonestown, but it was a tool for agency by the members of the team. Eventually, that agency would save lives.

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