

Loft

The Rules and History of the Greatest Sport Never Played



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1. THE BEGINNING

Geoffrey Sills, Paul Rupp, and space 88

On the morning of October 4, 2002, a thirty-four year old man walked onto the lacrosse field at Fort Hill High School in Cumberland, Maryland, carrying a pink plastic ball he had bought an hour before from a large bin at a nearby department store. The man's name was Geoffrey Sills, and two weeks before he had won the Drama Desk award for writing the best off-Broadway play of the year, his second such honor in the last five. Sills' head was totally shaved and he wore a black sweatshirt and black sweatpants as he sat cross-legged on the field that morning, deep in thought. Sills had chosen this field for his ruminations because it was close to where he was staying for next few months: the small house where his elderly father was nearing the end of his life, stricken by kidney disease.

Sills had come to the field to invent a new sport. He had grown up at his father's knee watching football on autumn Sundays and baseball on summer Saturdays, at first captivated as most young boys are by the speed, pageantry, star power, and competition he saw unfold on TV. As he entered adolescence and fell more and more out of favor with his father, Sills' interest in sports remained but as a more intellectual pursuit; he wanted to learn precisely why he enjoyed what he saw and what made millions of people invest so much emotion in the day to day struggles of their favorite teams. Much as he spent years studying the psychology of theatergoers to determine how much he could stretch their imaginations before going too far, he watched endless hours of dozens of different sports, and talked to hundreds of fans, in a quest to intellectually grasp their rewards and their significance. In 2002, burned out by his exhausting work in the theater, he decided that slow days caring for his ailing father, from whom he was still estranged, would afford him the opportunity he had craved for some time to muse upon a task few would dare attempt: to invent, from scratch, a sport combining elements which made others great. His plan was not only to see the sport into being, but to see it played on a large scale, introduced to the world just as one of his new plays would be. He saw sport as a different kind of theater, and perhaps even superior in some ways, filled with drama

and emotion but less predictable than any play. He regarded his challenge to come up with a new one—and a great one—as no less significant than any year-long creative project he had ever completed.

So he sat on that poorly mown lacrosse field behind the high school he had grudgingly attended for three years and he mused from morning to dusk, turning the cheap pink plastic ball over and over again in his hands, kicking it from place to place without meaning and without much grace; he had never really been into the actual playing of sports, finding it unpleasantly taxing. As the day progressed he ignored both his hunger and the very few passersby who noticed him. When he was involved in his work, he was unreachable, and when he wasn't working, his few friends knew, he was usually unreachable still. With a great intellect had come a life marked by long periods of loneliness and silence; Sills was truly content with both.

He left the lacrosse field as the sun began to set, having had only the germ of an idea, but the germ was enough, and his sport was on its way. The key idea had come to him through observing the uneven seeding patterns in the grass left behind by a disinterested groundskeeper, who had created a few wide swaths where the field was more dirt than playable turf. This random observation, combined with Sills' penchant for kicking the pink ball as high in the air as he could when frustrated over his inability to resolve some half-developed notion, formed the genesis of Loft.

Sills returned to the lacrosse field alone every day for the next twelve days. At night he returned to his father and to a blue notebook in which he compiled his notes. On day thirteen of his project, he got into his Jaguar and drove to an industrial park in Frederick. After taking a walk around the area, he called the number he saw on a For Lease sign clinging to an enormous unit nestled between a karate studio and a workshop that made road signs. By the end of the month he was given the keys to space 88, a disheveled cavern ninety yards long and sixty yards wide. Sills paid three workmen to clear out any clutter and on November 8 he stood in the middle of that empty space with a tape measure and a pail filled with white, green, and red chalk. On the thin gray carpet he'd had installed on the floor the space, he set about the four-day process of drawing a crude representation of the first Loft field. Still he worked alone, just the way he was accustomed to.

On November 14, the following advertisement was posted on a classifieds web site:

Twenty athletic men, ages 20-30, needed for one week's work in Frederick participating in a new sport. Should have some formal amateur league experience. Pay rate \$15 an hour.

Sills received more than two hundred responses to his ad and briefly interviewed five dozen men over the phone during the next week. The following Monday his twenty hand-picked athletes showed up at space 88 for Loft training. Sills told them that his was an idea in progress and that if the men had any suggestions for improving Loft, there would be a full hour of discussion after five hours of practice, but he asked them to not question or challenge any rule or procedure during the practice session itself; it interrupted his thought processes. Secondly, he informed the men that once the rules were set on the sixth day, the seventh would consist of a head-to-head tournament with the winning team given \$5,000 to split amongst themselves. This guaranteed that the athletes would go all out from day one. Those who were not selected to participate in the tournament based on what Sills saw of their skills and effort would merely be paid for their hours and dismissed with a brief thanks—after they signed a strict confidentiality agreement, of course. They were not to speak of Loft to anyone outside space 88.

One of the men selected for the sport's trial run was named Paul Rupp. Rupp was twenty-eight, quiet, muscular, and claimed to have played on the University of Maryland's soccer, basketball, and baseball teams, followed by three years with the Bowie Baysox, a minor league affiliate of the Baltimore Orioles. In truth, Rupp had neither college nor amateur league experience of any kind. While he had excelled at high school sports, he had turned down a partial athletic scholarship to Towson State University in order to work in his family's sheet metal shop. After a falling out with his father at age twenty-three, he left the family business and spent three years in the army, earning a reputation as a skilled boxer while stationed in Germany. He returned to Maryland and worked as a mountaineering tour guide in the Shenandoah Valley for a time, but he had engaged in no formal athletic activity beyond keeping himself in perfect shape by rock climbing and hiking on the weekends. He showed up to play Loft at an age when most athletes are considered just barely past their prime. But Paul Rupp was no ordinary athlete.

It was the blind luck of geography which brought him into Geoffrey Sills' world; had he lived another twenty miles distant, Rupp would have never come across Sills' internet posting. Finding himself at loose ends during a two week vacation, Rupp answered the ad and the rest is history. During Loft practice he said little, but immediately proved himself to be not only in top notch shape, but the newborn sport's most energetic and talented player. Geoffrey Sills was not terribly interested in sporting brilliance at the time, requiring little more than a gathering of warm bodies to develop the rules he had in mind, but Rupp's fellow Lofters, even those who did not go on to play professionally, never forgot how he dominated the group both advancing and obstructing, even hurling

himself with abandon onto the hard floor if a dive was required to save a ball in play. On the third night of practice, remembered Walter Lopes, who would become Rupp's teammate on the 2005 Loft champion team from Vandalia, Illinois, Rupp took Geoffrey Sills aside as everyone was leaving for the night and started to explain something that was bothering him about the arrangement of the field's unusual pattern of lines, which was one of the most original features of the sport. As he spoke with Sills he became more and more animated, running a sample route and gesturing emphatically as Sills continued to disagree with him. The conversation became heated, Lopes recalls, and ended with Rupp merely nodding in aggravation before he departed. Never again did he speak directly to Sills, and never again would he vocally contribute to Loft's development. Instead what he did was play the game brilliantly and with every ounce of energy in his body. What he could not convey to Sills with words he did with his play, improvising on the field and putting the ball and his team through every permutation of action he could in order to expose Loft's strengths and weaknesses. Some Lofters still claim that without Rupp's daring physical efforts, Geoffrey Sills would not have made the sport as contact-oriented as it later became. It was the addition to the proceedings of real, hard hitting that made Sills move the second round of practices outdoors, where he leased an abandoned soccer field from the county and set about the process of creating a fully realized grass playing area where Lofters could dive freely and engage in blocks and rolling tackles without fear of destroying their bodies on the unforgiving floor.

But that grass field wasn't ready yet, which meant that the first ever Loft championship tournament took place before a humorless crowd of one inside space 88 on Sunday, December, 6. Also watching were four video cameras rented for the occasion, so that Rupp could examine the tapes later. The teams were called the Montagues and the Capulets, a reference lost on almost all the athletes present, and certainly Paul Rupp, who would later admit to not having read a book or seen a play since he was sixteen years old. Sides were chosen playground-style, with Rupp being named one of the captains. And then Sills blew his whistle to begin play, acting as the sole referee, just like usual. The seven-on-seven competition lasted four hours with a brief break for lunch in the middle. Paul Rupp's team won with ease, despite the Capulets' attempts to concentrate about ninety percent of their energies on slowing him down. He was simply too good. Rupp paid out the prize money on the spot in fifty dollar bills, offered a few curt words of thanks to everyone he had selected for the tournament, and ushered them out of the building. He had a lot of tinkering to do.

He kept Paul Rupp's phone number though, as well as the numbers of several of the others who had shown up to play. Sills watched videotape for week, filled another notebook with notes, and sooner than expected, his outdoor field was ready for use.

Another ad went up on the Internet asking for more athletes, for ten straight days of work this time, but at a lesser pay rate—Sills did not yet have money to burn. Rupp was there early on the day the second round of practices began. Although Sills had never overtly hinted to anyone that he intended to make Loft a professional sport, Rupp had quit his job upon receiving the follow-up invitation. Obviously he suspected something grand was in the offing—if not now, then at some point in the near future, and he intended to be a part of it. He would later say that he remained totally ignorant both of Sills' playwriting career and the man's bold intentions throughout the entire process of Loft's invention. He would have devoted his days and nights to Loft even if it had never traveled anywhere beyond space 88.

Two weeks later, there was no doubt that if being a Lofter ever did become a true profession, Paul Rupp would be its master. After taking home a new five hundred dollar bonus for taking his team to victory in the second tournament, he was again sent home to await further instruction. Three full weeks of Loft play had given Sills all the notes and videotape he needed to go forward with his grand plan. What the athletes who attended the outdoor practices remembered most about him was his visible distrust of the few passersby who idled a bit to watch the men play. Some of them asked questions about what was going on; Rupp was short with them, as he was with most people, and fed everyone the same lie: that the men were rehearsing for a display of choreographed sport for an upcoming Thanksgiving Day parade in North Carolina.

Geoffrey Sills' father died in his home two days after the second Loft tournament. Only three days later Sills was on a train to New York to begin mining for investors for the league he now envisioned, and to meet with a group of lawyers about the rights he would possess concerning its development. It would be only two years before the league came into being, but those two years felt immeasurably longer to Paul Rupp, who privately went about the process of becoming the greatest Lofter there would ever be. He had no money to rent a field or hire fellow players; in fact, he was not legally allowed to play the sport or even speak of it to anyone else. This did not stop him. For two years he worked in a pet food warehouse, spending his weekends bicycling, hiking, swimming, and developing his Loft skills all on his own, occasionally practicing with one or two other men, casual acquaintances from pickup basketball games. He did not reveal either the nature or the name of the activity he involved them in. For all they knew, Rupp was just an eccentric practitioner of an odd combination of volleyball, soccer, and dodge ball whose pieces didn't seem to add up to any sort of definable whole. Rupp eventually found out who Geoffrey Sills was and kept an eye on any news involving what sort of projects Sills was involved in. There was always just enough to keep him hopeful that Loft would one day become a full time occupation. Sills turned out a single theatrical play over the next two

years as he honed his sport and negotiated for its introduction to the world, and in the meantime, rumors leaked out of what he was developing. Fed by these rumors, Rupp labored on, keeping in perfect shape. Where Sills' loneliness stemmed from an intellectual alienation from those around him, Rupp's isolation, which was just as intense, was a product of utter disinterest in anything but the thing which grew to obsess him: athletic perfection. There was no room for anyone else in his quest to dominate a sport which no one yet knew about. After a life of searching for something to feel passionate for, a quest made all the more difficult by his only average intelligence and minimal interest in anything he did not fully understand, he had discovered that thing. For better or for worse, it was Loft.

From the beginning, Geoffrey Sills held total control over every aspect of Loft's development. After privately cementing such details as the weight and color of the ball used in the sport and well as the exact field dimensions which had revealed themselves slowly and organically during practices, he turned his attention to what interested him most: the structure of the league and the fan experience. He wrote often in his notes that what made one sport more compelling than another was often not what happened on the field but what happened between games and outside the lines. A child of the theater, he knew that limiting an experience only increased its rewards, and Sills intended to go farther with the concept of artificial scarcity than any other sport ever had: there would be no actual Loft season, just a single annual one-and-done knockout tournament to grip the viewing public and make every game truly meaningful. And when people entered the stadium, Sills would expect them to commit their attention in a way more akin to watching a play than soaking up some sun as athletes did their thing. He believed that sports fans had long been seduced by the peripheral niceties of cozy stadiums and the coddling of commercial-driven TV broadcasts, and he intended to make Loft a more personal, intellectual experience for spectators, believing they longed to be totally absorbed, not just breezily entertained. He even went so far in his early notes as to ban scoreboards within the stadium, requiring word-of-mouth communication among fans to keep current, but later dropped this overly challenging requirement.

It has been argued by some that Sills' greatest achievement was a marketing one. In only two years he was able to create a hunger for Loft in America before tickets to a single game were sold to the public. This he accomplished through the production of a television show called, simply, *Loft*, which over the course of twelve hour-long programs traced the training of the four hundred-odd Lofters who would participate in the inaugural tournament. While slowly being taught the rules and strategies of Loft, viewers followed the drama of the selection of the teams after nationwide tryouts and the players' subsequent departure to small towns throughout the country to set up camp and prepare

for the tournament. Open tryouts lasted ten days, slowly whittling down the roll of potential players and ending with actual staged games of Loft which showed impartial representatives of the Association of American Lofters just which finalists were good enough to advance, with men who had quickly become friends during the first days of the tryouts going head-to-head to settle the rosters. At the end of training, the sixty-four assembled teams were assigned not to big cities but to places like Ketchum, Idaho; Inverness, Florida; and Red Roak, Michigan. The athletes would play their hearts out for populations which had never even fielded minor league baseball teams. Not only were regional rivalries immediately created, but teams were embraced wholeheartedly by their hosts, giving rise to the tradition of Arrival Day, when the seven Lofters who played for their team first came to a town inevitably festooned with streamers and loud with the music of marching bands. The competition among towns to outdo those in other states when it came to welcoming the men who would live there for months while they trained was both comical and touching. Americans learned about places whose existence they never suspected, athletes learned the congenial humility of living through winter and spring in a small town not their own, and their hosts did everything they could to treat them like royalty. Disallowed from receiving any official payment for playing Loft beyond a small three-month per diem, the volunteer athletes were wined and dined and taken in by strangers. *Loft*, the documentary TV show, became an enormous hit and when tickets went on sale for the first August tournament in Boston, they eventually sold out. Emboldened by regional pride, people from all over America boarded planes, trains, and buses to follow their team to Fenway Park, even though they had no guarantee the team would even survive past the first round of the tournament.

Paul Rupp played for TLO (The Lofters of) Vandalia, a town 250 miles south of Chicago. He made it through the open tryouts with a breeze, and if he was disappointed that there would be no substantial pay for being a Lofter, he never showed it. After two years of playing the game, he was chomping at the bit to take the field in front of thirty-five thousand people and show them all how it was done.

Even as the inaugural tournament began, Geoffrey Sills, having already amassed a personal fortune from pre-selling Loft to the country, was in negotiations to give most of that money away to charity and to theatrical groups he considered groundbreaking. He was also in daily complex negotiations of another sort, attempting to do what seemed utterly impossible: dictate the ultimate destiny of a concept, a product, and a market force that was already employing hundreds of people and influencing the lives of thousands more, to say nothing of the legion of Loft fans and commentators that was growing every day. Sills' team of lawyers was carefully laying the legal groundwork to make sure his original vision went uncorrupted in every aspect. Accustomed to complete directorial

respect for his brilliant stage plays, Sills was applying the same notion to Loft: while he refused to act as league commissioner, appointing instead the head of a major computer company to that office, nothing about the sport could be changed or altered without his consent. As he made strides to return full-time to the theater, he remained the sport's most influential figure behind the scenes. He never realized just how much mental energy and how many boardroom discussions, arguments, and courtroom struggles it would take to ensure that the entire sweep of Loft's story remained his creation alone. But from day one, neither the athletes nor the fans had to think about any of that. Sills wanted to give them a sport of pure excitement and joy and he would allow nothing to interfere with that. Nothing ever did.

He was in the stands as TLO Athens (Ohio) triggered the ball into play against TLO Vandalia (Illinois) on a hot August day to get the inaugural tournament underway. Sean Van Persig's initial trigger landed squarely inside the target circle, scoring a graze, and the ball was then struck forward by Paul Rupp, beginning his offense's attack. The crowd cheered, and the Loft era truly began.

2. LOFT: HOW IT'S PLAYED

The official rulebook

Preface: The tournament

THE ANNUAL CHAMPIONSHIP OF THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN LOFTERS is staged each August and consists entirely of a “one and done” knockout tournament comprised of sixty-four teams created from scratch each year. It takes place entirely at a single site over the course of eleven consecutive days, beginning on a Thursday, ending on a Sunday. Doing away entirely with the concept of a regular season, Loft creates a festival atmosphere rare in sports.

Any American city which meets a minimum population requirement and has the proper basic practice facilities can enter itself into the annual election lottery. No city with a population larger than 50,000 may enter the lottery. The lottery is held sixty days after the end of the previous tournament, with one team awarded per state. A supplemental lottery awards fourteen more teams,.

Lofters are not part of their teams beyond each annual tournament. Ten days after the lottery selections assign teams to the states, new open tryouts are held around the country, with the top 448 players chosen to participate in the tournament and assigned randomly to each team. Open tryouts last ten days. A.A.L. Coaches are also assigned randomly.

Names of teams are taken solely from the cities they represent; to accentuate regional identities, no team is given an official nickname. Uniforms consist of single-color short-sleeved shirts, shorts, and black shoes, with no patterns, designs, or player names allowed. Even team colors are assigned randomly. In the event that two teams with similar colors face each other, one will wear a lighter-shaded uniform.

Lofters are only paid a per diem for their work from the time they are assigned to a team through the final day of the Loft tournament. No player may be paid more than any other.

The schedule of the annual tournament is as follows:

Days one through four, Thursday through Sunday: 8 games played per day, 32 total, to reduce the field to 32 teams.

Days five through eight, Monday through Thursday: 4 games played per day, 16 total, to reduce the field to 16 teams

Day nine, Friday: 8 games played, 16 teams, to reduce the field to 8 teams

Day ten, Saturday: 4 games played, 8 teams, to reduce the field to 4 teams

Day eleven, Sunday: 3 games played, 4 teams, to crown the champion

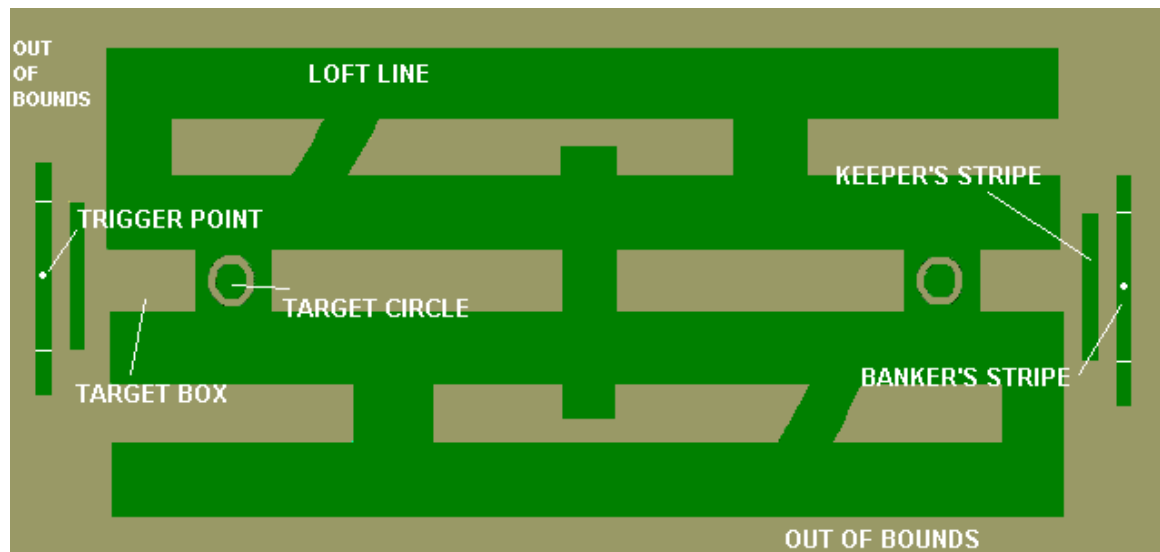
No game ever begins after 8 p.m. EST, so that no fans of any age will ever have to miss its completion.

The stadium site is divided into two equal halves; when fans purchase tickets, they must choose which side of the stadium to watch from, with the goal being to sit like-minded fans with each other.

1. The Team, Field, and Ball

Loft is played between two teams, each with a total roster of seven players, on a field roughly 70 yards long and 30 yards wide. The ball is approximately the size and weight of a regulation volleyball. The field consists mostly of wide patches of grass, called loft lines, broken up by areas of packed dirt.

The game is decided when one team wins four of a possible seven rounds. Each round is divided into three playing stages.



In the first stage of each round, five players take the field for each side:

*Three **advancers** or three **obstructors***, according to which team is granted possession of the ball. Possession alternates with each play.

*One **banker***. The banker is confined to the longer of the two vertical stripes at the far end of the field. His goal is to catch balls struck toward him by an advancer.

*One **fenceman***. The fenceman is confined to the shorter of the two vertical stripes at the far end of the field. His goal is to keep the banker from catching the ball.

There are only two available players on the bench for each game, rounding out the roster. **No coaches of any kind are allowed on the field or the sidelines**, nor may they contact their players during the game. An impartial equipment and medical staff are assigned for each contest.

For each game, a coin toss decides which team is said to be “home” and which is the

“visiting” team.

This set of rules uses as examples the two competitors from the 2012 Loft Championship game: TLO (The Lofters of) Temple and TLO (The Lofters of) Barnstable.

TLO Temple (home)

Starter: Miguel Tuerrera
Starter: A. J. Toms
Starter: Gary Dell'Ardo
Banker: Kelvin Morrow
Fenceman: Benedict Jones
Reserve: Stuart Larchmont
Reserve: William Lennon

TLO Barnstable (visitors)

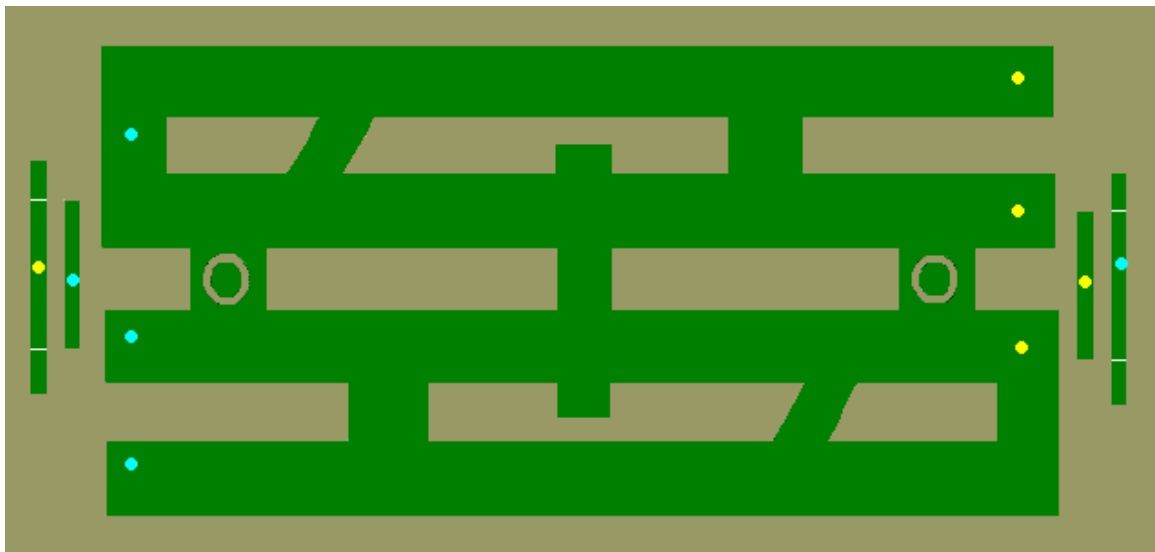
Starter: Harrison Julian
Starter: Conor Lindensmith
Starter: Paul Rupp
Banker: Derek Canton
Fenceman: S.K. Spungen
Reserve: Dave Punter
Reserve: Christian Pruitt

2. Game play: Stage One

Both teams get five chances, or plays, to **bank points** during stage one of each round. Banking points is different than scoring them; a banked point is not yet part of a team's score. Banked points, also called **potentials**, are accumulated during stage one, then converted into actual points, also called **reals**, during stage two.

With the ball in play, a team's **advancers** can bank points in two ways: either by striking the ball with the hand or kicking it to their banker standing in the banker's stripe, or by striking the ball with the hand or kicking it so that it makes contact with an obstructor. The **obstructors'** goal is to impede the advancers from getting into good scoring position to deliver the ball to their banker, and also, to a lesser extent, to try to draw attacking throws from the advancers.

A play begins with the receiving team's three advancers standing within five feet of their own back-line, which is an imaginary vertical line connecting the four ends of the outermost loft lines. They must stand within a grass loft line when play begins. The three obstructors stand inside loft lines within five feet of their own back-line on the opposite side of the field. Both fencemen stand within their respective stripes, and both bankers stand within theirs.



During stage one game play, neither advancers nor obstructors may step outside the field's wide grass loft-lines into any area of packed dirt.

A) THE TRIGGER KICK

Temple has been named the home team for today's game. When the referee's whistle is first blown, their fenceman, Benedict Jones, kicks the ball into play from the **trigger point** in the center of the fenceman's stripe where it sits in a fixed position. His goal is to kick the ball so that it lands on its first bounce inside the **target circle** at the opposite end of the field. If it does, the ball is in play and must be struck with the hand or kicked by a Barnstable advancer before it hits the ground a second time. By landing the ball inside the target circle, Jones has achieved a **graze**; this means that on subsequent plays, he is free to kick the ball from the trigger point to a much wider area. Then, if any of his stage one kicks strike in bounds and bounce a second time with no advancers able to keep it in play, he has achieved a **pierce** and the play is over.

Until Jones achieves a graze, Barnstable's advancers are under no obligation to make a play on any of his kicks and they may, if they choose, simply let the ball go out of play, making him kick again.

STRATEGY: *The sooner Jones achieves a graze, the better. This means that he is free to launch his next kicks to parts of the field where it will be more difficult for Barnstable's advancers to put the ball into play, aiming especially between them.*

Serving the ball so that it falls within the target circle requires loft and accuracy and is about as difficult as making a 50 yard field goal in football. The faraway position of the target circle on the field ensures that the trigger kick won't have much velocity and will be relatively easy for an advancer to handle the ball when it strikes there. But when a graze is achieved and Jones is then free to kick the ball to a vastly wider area, he can apply more power and willful direction to his kick, which makes it more difficult for an advancer to strike it where and how he wishes. Jones' ultimate goal is to kick the ball with such speed and accuracy that no advancer can handle it successfully, ending the play outright, leaving the advancers no chance to score.

At no point during a game of Loft can the ball be allowed to bounce more than once. If the ball ever bounces more than once before a player touches it, the play is over.

After Jones has achieved a graze, his subsequent kicks must cross the field's midpoint before the first bounce. A **pierce** is achieved if the ball either bounces twice inside the field of play or bounces once and goes out of play. After a graze, one of Barnstable's advancers may stand anywhere inside the loft lines behind the field's midpoint in order to be better positioned for a possible short kick, while the other two advancers must still begin play within five feet of their own back-line. If Jones kicks the ball out of play, he must kick again with Barnstable awarded a single **potential**.

If Jones is not able to achieve a single graze over the course of five kicks, he must leave the field immediately upon the errant fifth kick and a stay off the field for the duration of the play.

As soon as Jones kicks the ball, the advancers and obstructors are free to move. Temple's obstructors will start moving toward the opposite end of the field while Barnstable's advancers will slowly work their way forward, trying to control the ball. All players are initially confined to the grass loft lines as they move; if any advancer steps outside a loft line onto the dirt, the play is blown dead and considered over, while if an obstructor steps outside a loft line, play continues but with the advancers immediately

being awarded **one potential**. If a player is forcibly knocked off a loft line, there is no penalty as long as he returns to it at his exit point. A penalty kick or even an ejection may be given if an obstructor willfully leaves a loft line to make a play on a ball.

The home team always kicks to the visitors to begin stages one.

B) THE ADVANCE

Barnstable's advancers are said to be on the advance as soon as one of them touches Jones' incoming kick. Barnstable's goal is to work the ball up the field, setting up a scoring opportunity.

Barnstable may advance the ball by either striking it with the hand or kicking it. Players will almost always choose the former, as it gives them much more control of their strike. An advancer may not catch, hold, or palm the ball; the play is blown dead and considered over if he does so. Generally, the ball will be struck with the base of the wrist or the fist so as to get the strongest strike possible. Incidental contact with other parts of the body is acceptable.

During the advance, the ball must bounce once and only once before it is struck by another advancer. If Barnstable allows the ball to bounce twice, the play is considered over. No advancer may touch the ball again after striking it until another advancer has touched it.

Because of an opportunity for Temple's obstructors which is put into effect upon Barnstable's fifth strike of the ball (see section D), Barnstable will want to send it toward their banker on that key fifth strike if possible. The length of the field and the five-strike limit will normally cause the advancers to run at top speed throughout the play in order to get the ball as close as possible to their banker's stripe.

The only time an advancer may step outside a loft line is when he is knocked out of it or his momentum carries him beyond the line after striking the ball toward his banker.

STRATEGY: *Advancing demands speed, great precision, and an ingrained knowledge of the field's dimensions and lines. The length of the field and the five-strike limit requires advancers to sometimes strike the ball high so as to allow their teammates to get into position to receive it, but accuracy is also a key. Evading the obstructors by choosing indirect routes along loft lines that run vertically or diagonally will slow the advancers down, but these routes are often necessary to avoid tangling with obstructors; an advancer will especially want to fake out an obstructor when receiving the fourth strike of the ball, when he needs to send it toward his banker and wants as much clear space around himself as he can get.*

Every glance downward by a player to make sure that he or she is staying within a loft line means a break in concentration, so a professional lofter will have spent untold hours running patterns and counting steps to memorize their dimensions and make them second nature. And the best players will be ambidextrous so as to make a play on the ball from any angle.

C) THE OBSTRUCTORS

Temple's three obstructors try to impede the progress of the Barnstable advancers by using their bodies as obstacles. No Temple obstructor may initiate contact against an advancer, even to hand-check, while an advancer may push or shove any obstructor at will as long as his contact is confined to the obstructor's chest, arms, and shoulders. If an

obstructor ever initiates contact against an advancer, the whistle is blown and the Barnstable advancer in question is allowed a penalty kick toward the banker's stripe from the spot of the foul (see section F). The only time an obstructor may aggressively go after an advancer is when executing a rolling tackle (see section D).

STRATEGY: *In Loft, the obstructor's role is often one of total sacrifice. While he cannot initiate contact against an advancer, he must endure constant aggressive force. An obstructor will spend a great deal of time being knocked to the ground during the game. His very patience and resiliency is a skill in itself—obstructors are also referred to as "batteries" for the way they store the pain they endure. Because players will be both advancers and obstructors during the game, the urge for payback when the ball changes possession will be strong indeed.*

There is still much skill to be used on defense: a player must know just when and how to impede an advancer's progress so as to slow his opponent down, and an obstructor can also change the outcome of a play through sliding tackles, intercepting the ball (during stage two), and drawing direct strikes from the advancers (see section D).

D) INTERPLAY

The play proceeds with the Barnstable advancers striking the ball, moving it forward, and the Temple obstructors trying to impede them. While the ball may bounce anywhere in bounds, the advancers and obstructors are initially restricted to the grass loft lines.

Upon the fifth offensive strike of the ball, the three Temple obstructors are freed from the loft line restrictions and can run anywhere they wish, short-cutting their way to the ball or to the Barnstable advancers. For this reason, an advancer will always aim for the fifth strike to be the one that is sent toward his banker standing in the banker's stripe. The advancers may actually strike the ball as many times as they wish before attempting to bank potentials, but once the obstructors are loosed from the loft lines, it is very difficult to maintain possession of the ball.

The Barnstable advancers can bank potentials *without* sending the ball toward their banker by striking a Temple obstructor with it. This is done by kicking or striking the ball at any spot on the obstructor's body except his head. If the ball hits the obstructor legally, **one potential** is banked for Barnstable and the play is over. If, however, Barnstable strikes the ball at a Temple obstructor who can successfully catch it, the obstructor is allowed a penalty kick toward his own banker (see section F).

STRATEGY: *The advancers must be able to judge during the progression of the play whether they've worked the ball well enough to send the ball toward their banker or whether they should try for a single potential by striking an obstructor with the ball. An obstructor, then, must always be on guard against this possibility. An obstructor who guards his man too closely opens himself up to the possibility of being struck. A clever obstructor can make himself seem unprepared to evade an offensive strike while in reality anticipating it and angling his body at the last second to dodge the ball or actually catch it, ending the play. Catching the ball requires incredibly fast reflexes, as the strike will almost always come from close range.*

The ultimate obstructor plays so well that the advancers will neither be able to keep the ball alive nor get a good shot at striking him.

A ball which just barely brushes a player's body without noticeably deviating from its path might not be considered as having struck him; it is the referee's decision to make. If an obstructor is struck in the head due to a reckless strike on the part of an advancer, the referee may award the obstructor a penalty kick from the spot of the foul.

If a Temple obstructor tries to catch a strike but fails, he is considered struck and Barnstable is awarded one potential.

There is one aggressive maneuver which a Temple obstructor may legally make against a Barnstable advancer. He can, at any time, attempt a **rolling tackle** of the player who is **in the process of receiving the ball after a strike**. This rolling tackle may only be attempted when the Barnstable advancer is facing the obstructor. The Temple obstructor's entire body must be on the ground as he rolls lengthwise toward the advancer, and he cannot rise until he is completely clear of him. An illegal rolling tackle is punishable by immediately awarding the advancers a penalty kick.

STRATEGY: *The rolling tackle is a powerful but risky tool for an obstructor, and is all about timing. He achieves a perfect tackle by dropping on his side on a dead run and rolling directly at the advancer's legs. If he goes into a rolling tackle too early, he runs the risk of the advancer leaping out of the way while striking the ball downwards at the prone obstructor, banking in an easy potential. Mostly an obstructor will err on the side of being late with his tackle; if it is well done he can either take the advancer down or cause him to leap clear, slowing him somewhat and perhaps disrupting his strike. An overly aggressive tackle can result in a damaging foul, but even without a foul it can take an obstructor too much out of the play if he is not quick to get to his feet again. He must also make sure that the ball can only realistically be played by the advancer whom he targets with his tackle; taking out an advancer who is not in the process of receiving a strike results in a penalty kick as well. The sliding tackle is another test of the obstructor's stamina, as he will want to hit the ground hard and fast to make the tackle as swift and clean as possible.*

If the advancers haven't gotten into good scoring position on the field by the fifth strike, they're in trouble. When the obstructors are loosed from their loft lines, they can get to the advancers very quickly to disrupt their strikes.

E) SENDING THE BALL TO THE BANKER

During play, Barnstable's banker, Derek Canton, who is standing in the banker's stripe, will want to keep moving so as to make sure he is in the best possible position to receive a ball struck toward him, while Temple's fenceman, Benedict Jones, will want to move as well so as to be in the best spot to defend against the scoring strike. Barnstable's advancers may try to send the ball to Canton at any time regardless of how many strikes they have completed. Canton may not step beyond the two white lines marked inside his stripe until the ball is struck to him. Breaking too early causes the play to be blown dead.

If the ball is struck by Barnstable and caught by Canton inside his stripe, Barnstable banks **2 potentials**. If the ball is caught by Canton off a *kicked* ball rather than one struck with the hand, Barnstable banks **5 potentials**. A five point score is referred to as a **noble**.

Temple's fenceman and the obstructors may attempt to block or catch a ball sent to the banker, but again, any sort of contact on the advancer results in a penalty kick. When a Barnstable advancer attempts a noble, the defending fenceman and obstructors are not allowed to use their hands or arms to attempt to touch, strike, or catch the kick.

Bankers and fencemen are given credit for making a catch if they secure the ball before landing a single foot outside their stripe. The play is dead when the ball is either caught, missed, or dropped.

STRATEGY: *The advancers will always be thinking about setting up the key fifth strike. If the ball is sent too short, too long, or otherwise off target to an advancer, his send to the banker will be more difficult. On the other hand, if an advancer has to play a ball with his*

back to the obstructor, it does by rule prevent a sliding tackle from being made.

Although the shortest path to the banker is from the middle of the field, the advancers may want to work the ball toward the edges of the field to get a better angle into him. The banker's stripe is longer than the fenceman's stripe, which means that an advancer has a chance to get the ball to the banker on a clearer line if he makes his send from one of the corners. The fenceman would be physically prevented from reaching the ball then, although he is free to leap out of his stripe to deflect the ball, knock it down, or catch it.

The fenceman must always be aware of the movements of the banker behind him. The banker will want to move left and right constantly to fake the fenceman out if possible and get a clear line between himself and the advancer trying to send the ball into him. Either player is free to leap out of his stripe; as soon as any part of his body touches the dirt area outside the stripe, though, he is considered to be out of bounds and he can have no further influence on the play.

The distance between the banker's stripe and the fenceman's stripe is such that a good amount of loft is necessary to send the ball over the reach of the fenceman unless the advancer attempts to send the ball to the banker on a hard, forceful low line. In Loft it is not uncommon to see a fenceman and banker leap at the same time for a send, almost colliding in the no-man's-land between their stripes.

The ultimate play for the advancers is a ball successfully kicked to the banker instead of struck with the hand. Worth five points, the **noble** is a difficult, ambitious, but potentially game-saving play.

If Temple fenceman Benedict Jones, on defense, can take control of a ball sent to the banker by catching it or blocking it, he has the chance to score 2 potentials by throwing the ball down the field to his own banker, Kelvin Morrow. As soon as Jones touches the ball, Morrow is released from his stripe on the other end of the field and allowed to run forward, freed from any movement restrictions. If he can catch Jones' throw (which must be released within ten seconds) before it strikes the ground, Temple banks **2 potentials**. Barnstable may not impede the Morrow in any way. If any sort of contact is made, even incidental, he is given a penalty kick at the spot of the foul. Barnstable may, however, attempt to knock the ball away from Morrow before it gets to him, and if they intercept it, they are given a penalty kick from that spot. Jones' throw cannot be impeded by the Barnstable banker in front of him.

STRATEGY: *It is always better for an advancer to send a ball long than short because of the fenceman's ability to put a short send back into play for a possible 2-potential score. Upon collecting the ball, the fenceman will have to be quick with his throw downfield to his rushing banker, who must be alert and ready to run to find a clear space between the opposing players. Throwing the ball downfield after a short send requires power and accuracy and is yet another skill that must be mastered by a fenceman.*

Sometimes, a team ahead on the scoreboard which catches a short send might just want to hold onto the ball and decline to throw it into play, lest they have the ball intercepted, leading to a penalty kick for the other team.

A play is fully resolved when the advancing team, in this case Barnstable, makes either a successful or unsuccessful send, is unable to keep the ball in play, achieves a pierce, commits a play-ending foul, or is awarded a penalty kick (see section F). After a play is resolved, Barnstable's fenceman, S.K. Spungen, will kick the ball to Temple, with advancers becoming obstructors and vice versa, until each team has had a chance for five advancing plays.

If both teams have scored the same number of potentials after five plays, a sixth play is added for each, followed by a seventh if necessary, et cetera, until one or both teams has banked more potentials than the other. The home team will always get the last chance to

bank potentials.

F) PENALTY KICKS

Play is blown dead for some fouls in stage one and a **penalty kick** is awarded to the fouled player. The ball is placed at the spot of the foul for most offenses, such as aggressive or unnecessary contact, delay of game, illegal rolling tackles, and striking a player in the head with the ball. For example, let's say Barnstable advancer Paul Rupp was fouled by Temple obstructor Benny Toms during play. Paul Rupp sets the ball down and kicks it toward his banker, Derek Canton, with no obstructors involved in the play and with an extreme restriction placed on the defending fenceman, Benedict Jones: he must stand in place before the ball is kicked, and can take just two steps afterward, able to only dive or leap in any direction upon the second step. Canton, having set his position first, must also stand in place until the ball is kicked, but after that, he is free to move anywhere inside his stripe. If Canton catches the ball inside his stripe during stage one, **2 potentials** are awarded.

The spot of a penalty kick changes when the referee judges any foul to have been flagrant. In this case, the ball is placed anywhere inside the target circle closest to the banker's stripe. If the referee judges that a team has committed an intentional foul in order to limit the opponent's scoring opportunities on the last play of stage one or two, he may award a team a penalty kick **plus** require the opposing fenceman to kick the ball off again so that they may have an additional advancing play.

A team fouled in the act of attempting a noble is awarded **5 potentials** if their penalty kick is successfully converted.

A penalty kick is also awarded if a team achieves an interception off a short send.

If a team's fenceman has been sent off the field because of an inability to land his trigger kicks inside the target circle, he is not eligible to defend on penalty kicks.

G) PURGE NOBLES

If a team is down by so many points late in stage one that even a noble will not help them, they may attempt a **purge noble**. This is achieved if an advancer can successfully kick the ball **directly off the trigger kick** to his banker. If the banker catches it within his stripe, both teams lose all their potentials, making the score 0-0.

STRATEGY: *If they're so far behind on potentials that a purge noble must be tried, a team will want to play at least two of their advancers farther up the field so that the trigger kick won't create too long a purge noble attempt. The opposing fenceman may just want to try to float the trigger kick over their heads in this case.*

H) GAME FLOW

When a play is resolved, both teams have ten seconds to set themselves for the next play from the time the referee hands the ball to the fenceman for the next kick. At the ten second mark, the fenceman is free to set the ball on the trigger point and kick it. Players performing a trigger kick or penalty kick have no more than ten seconds from the time

they are handed the ball by the referee to do so.

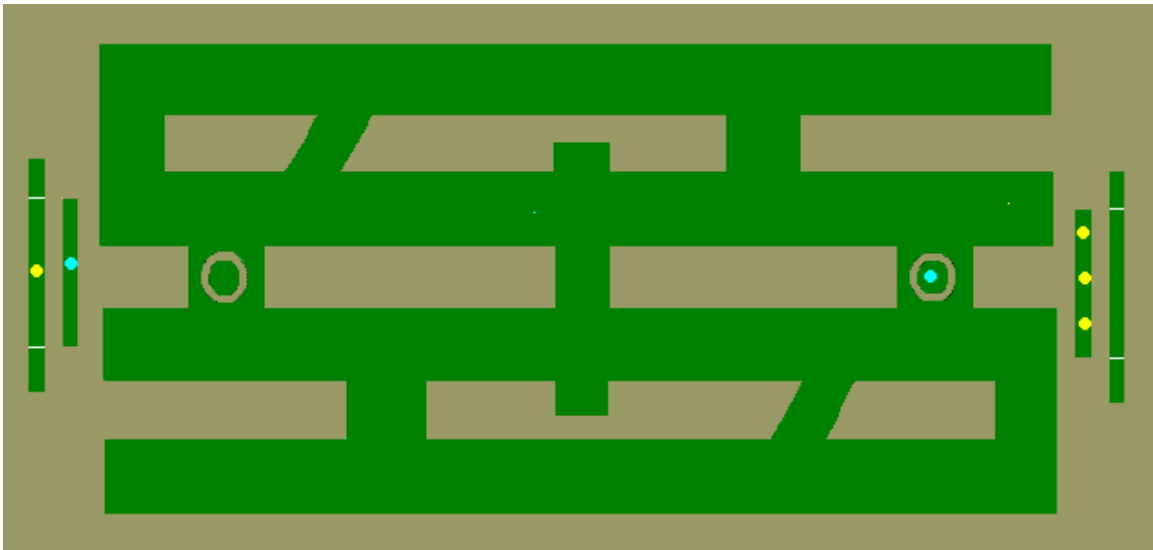
Each team is given just one opportunity during the game to stop play for a time out. Otherwise, play may stop only if a player is injured. Any delay of game is penalized by awarding a penalty kick to the opposing team.

STRATEGY: *Along with the barring of coaches from the field of play during the game, the near elimination of time outs demands that players of Loft make every single one of the most important strategic decisions themselves on the fly. Also, the rapid, uninterrupted play and small roster size demand that players be in top-flight shape, pushing on through minor injuries and fatigue. Loft is designed to be a true test of intelligence and physical endurance.*

3. Game play: Stage Two

Going into stage two, the team which banked the **greater number of potentials** during stage one will be given a chance to convert them into actual points (**reals**). The other team has the total number of potentials they banked during stage one subtracted from the leading team's total. This is the number of points available for conversion in stage two. The leading team will either **convert them all** or **lose them all**. For example, if Barnstable scored 8 potentials during stage one to Temple's 5, Barnstable enters stage two attempting to convert 3 total potentials into reals.

Barnstable will get **up to** five chances, or plays, to convert their potentials. Two Barnstable advancers and their banker face off against a lone Temple obstructor and a fenceman. The bankers and fencemen assume their regular positions on the field, but both advancers must stand beside their fenceman on the stripe itself. The lone obstructor stands within the far target circle.



A) THE TRIGGER KICK

Barnstable will receive the Temple fenceman's kick to begin the first play. Temple's fenceman, Benedict Jones, places the ball on the trigger point. As in stage one, he kicks the ball toward the opposite end of the field, but now his goal is to merely have the ball bounce within the **target box** as opposed to the target circle. The target box is the

general square area between a target circle and the closest banker's stripe. If the ball strikes outside this area, the play is blown dead and Jones must kick again, with a restriction placed upon his team for the ensuing play: neither the Temple obstructor nor Jones himself may use his hands to touch, strike, or catch the ball. This strips Temple of both defensive effectiveness and the ability to intercept the ball (See section D). If Jones misses the target circle *again* during the same play, his obstructor—in this case, Benny Toms—is removed from the field entirely for the duration of the play. If Jones fails a *third* consecutive time, Barnstable is simply given a penalty kick from the target circle.

If Jones' kick does land within the target box, the ball is in play. As soon as he kicks the ball, the two Barnstable advancers are free to move swiftly down the field in order to receive their own fenceman's ensuing strike. Upon leaving the fenceman's stripe, they must immediately confine themselves to the loft lines and may not initially step outside of them.

Unlike in stage one, the single obstructor is *never* confined to the loft lines. He may roam freely, beginning to move as soon as the trigger kick lands.

STRATEGY: *The kicking fenceman has a more spacious target to kick to during stage two, and it is not very difficult to hit it to get the ball safely into play. However, if he wants to make it at all difficult for the opposing fenceman to strike the ball toward his advancers, he will have to take a bit of a risk by aiming it to the left or right of the fenceman, making him move swiftly in reaction and giving him less control over his own strike. The kicking fenceman's normal chances of landing the ball inside the stage two target box are about ninety percent. Playing conservatively means leaving very little risk of missing the box and having the no-hands restriction imposed. Trying to work the ball toward the edges of the box means possibly suffering that restriction (or a much stronger one if he misses a second or even third time) or, conversely, making the ball very difficult for the opposing fenceman to strike with accuracy. It's all up to the kicking fenceman to decide how ambitious he wants to be.*

B) THE ADVANCE

The receiving Barnstable fenceman, S.K. Spungen, free to leave his stripe and move forward to make a play on the ball as soon as it is kicked, must let the ball bounce once and only once before he strikes the ball downfield toward his running advancers, Conor Lindensmith and Paul Rupp. Their goal is to get down the field to receive Spungen's ensuing strike so that they can catch the ball to set up a **conversion kick** toward their banker, Derek Canton.

Spungen strikes the ball a single time according to the rules of stage one, choosing either Rupp or Lindensmith to receive the strike. One of the two must then catch Spungen's strike **on a single bounce** to be eligible to take a conversion kick. The ball *must* bounce once and only once before it can be caught.

The job of Benny Toms, the lone Barnstable obstructor, is to impede either Rupp or Lindensmith as they try to catch the ball. While he may not cause contact with either man, as is the case in stage one, he is now free to catch the ball as well—and he does not have to wait for the ball to bounce to try to intercept it. An advancer and obstructor have an equal right to catch the ball in stage two, but neither may initiate even incidental contact. Only the natural contact of two players simultaneously going for a free ball is allowed. If one player or another is judged to have caused unnecessary or excessive contact, a team is awarded a penalty kick.

If Spungen's strike is not caught by either player before it bounces twice, the play is dead and there is no ensuing conversion kick; the next play then begins with Temple's next

trigger kick. If, however, the ball is secured by either Lindensmith or Rupp before it bounces twice, he is entitled to a conversion kick toward his banker from the spot of the catch (see section C).

If an advancer bobbles the ball before catching it, the spot of the conversion kick is marked from where he first touched the ball.

STRATEGY: *Because of the length of the field and the necessity of getting the ball relatively close to the banker's stripe to give a conversion kick toward Derek Canton a chance for success, Rupp and Lindensmith will have to run at top speed from the second the ball is kicked from the trigger point. Confined to the loft lines, they will want to run different routes downfield to confuse Benny Toms. The required single bounce they must allow before catching the ball gives Toms, who has no such restriction, the opportunity to make more of a play on it.*

Toms will quickly have to commit to one advancer or the other in pursuit of making a play on the ball. While Benedict Jones' kick is airborne, he must quickly determine its impending placement. If Jones was able to kick the ball well, it will cause S.K. Spungen to move left or right on the ball, making it difficult to send the ensuing strike where he would prefer and letting Toms better anticipate which direction it will travel. This might also cause Rupp and Lindensmith to alter their routes to help Spungen's efforts.

Spungen will want to strike the ball far, but not too far: a ball caught at the far edge of the loft lines, near the back-line, places the ball so close to the Temple fenceman that it will be a great challenge for an advancer to then kick the ball over his reach toward Derek Canton. The ideal position for a conversion kick is near the corners of the field because the angle of the kick will take the opposing fenceman more out of play.

Sending the ball far downfield toward one of the advancers so that it can be caught while they remain inside the loft lines requires power and finesse. The game's most soaring lofts come during stage two. To evade the lone obstructor, Benny Toms, S.K. Spungen will want to lead either Rupp or Lindensmith as much as possible, or else project the ball with great force to get it there quickly. If the ball is not caught on the first play of five, or the second, the advancers may have to become more conservative and focus more on just getting the ball caught on a shorter strike rather than getting into the ideal conversion kick position. The greatest blow to a team there can be is to lose all their potentials because of an inability to deliver a conversion kick to the banker.

C) CONVERSION KICKS

Let us assume that advancer Paul Rupp has caught Spungen's strike. Upon securing the ball, he has ten seconds to set the ball on the field and kick it, with the goal being the same as in stage one: to have Derek Canton catch it within the banker's stripe. Benny Toms may not impede the kick in any way. Only Benedict Jones may from the fenceman's stripe.

The play is blown dead and considered over if the conversion kick to Canton is not caught before hitting the ground. A new play begins with Barnstable kicking the ball to Temple.

STRATEGY: *Because Rupp only has ten seconds in which to set the ball down and try the conversion kick, Canton must immediately begin to maneuver into position along the banker's stripe. Benedict Jones will try to keep pace with him, not allowing a direct line between Canton and Rupp. Depending on the spot of the ball and the angle, the shot will either be a floater over Jones' reach, a hard shot designed to get past him with sheer force, or, if the angle allows, a simpler kick with Jones unable to make a play on the ball*

because of good positioning set up by the preceding catch. One of Loft's most dramatic plays comes when the conversion kicker, left with the ball too close to the fenceman, has to fake him out with deception and quick maneuvering of the banker before firing the ball in low and fast, counting on the banker to make a tough catch—sometimes a diving one.

D) INTERCEPTIONS

If Temple's Benny Toms should intercept S.K. Spungen's strike to his advancer, he is given a penalty kick from the spot of the interception. If the penalty kick is successful, Barnstable loses all their potentials, reducing the game score to 0-0. In this case, the game proceeds directly to stage three with both teams needing to dodge to decide the winner of the round (see Stage Three rules, section A).

STRATEGY: *Because an intercepted strike might award such a high prize to Temple, Rupp and Lindensmith will want to split far apart during the play so as to make Toms have to travel the farthest distance possible to have a chance to deflect or catch the ball. However, because of the way the loft lines are arranged, moving toward the outer edges of the field will slow the advancers down in their forward rush, causing them to have to make a longer conversion kick toward their banker.*

E) SCORING

A team trying to convert its potentials into reals, in this case Barnstable, is given up to five plays to do so. If Barnstable's banker catches a conversion kick or a penalty kick inside his stripe, the potentials they banked in stage one become reals, having been successfully converted.

Temple then has one last chance to take away those reals to reduce the score to 0-0 heading into stage three. Possession changes and now Barnstable will kick to Temple instead with two Temple advancers and their banker facing off against a lone Barnstable obstructor and a fenceman. But instead of trying to catch a strike from their banker to set up a conversion kick, Temple must score a **noble** by kicking the ball on a single bounce to their banker. Only by scoring a noble can they take away Barnstable's reals. As in stage one, an attempted noble cuts off the obstructor's and fenceman's ability to use their arms or hands. As soon as an advancer touches the ball with his foot, the noble is said to be in action.

If a noble is accomplished, stage two ends immediately, and the game proceeds directly to stage three with both teams needing to dodge to decide the winner of the round (see Stage Three rules, section A).

If Barnstable converted their potentials on their first play, Temple gets five chances to score a noble; if they converted on the second play, Temple gets four; if on the third, Temple gets three; if on the fourth, Temple gets two; if on the fifth, Temple gets one chance.

If the Barnstable advancers, through their five plays, are **unable** in stage two to make a successful conversion kick to their banker, they **lose** all of the potentials they banked in stage one, reducing the score to 0-0. The game then proceeds to stage three with both teams needing to dodge to decide the winner of the round (see Stage Three rules, section A).

Interceptions achieved when a team must try for a noble in stage two have no value beyond ending the play outright.

4. Game play: Stage Three

No matter what the score of the round is entering stage three, it is this stage that decides the round's winner.

The rules of stage three change depending on which round is being played. In a non-deciding round (that is, a round which cannot be the final one of the game), there is a three minute break before the stage begins during which the team which trails on the scoreboard decides which of its players will act as the **dodger**, attempting to evade the opponent's strikes for a preset amount of time. In rounds which might be the last of the game, one team will choose which player from the *opposing* side they wish to have act as the dodger. They may name any player on the roster as long as that player has not been removed for injury reasons.

STRATEGY: *The selection of the dodger in deciding rounds can come off as an overt criticism of an opponent's skill, as it is obviously to a team's advantage to select the player they think is least capable of the athletic maneuvering necessary in stage three. Their announcement to the referee amounts to a public statement that they believe they know who the least agile—or perhaps the most exhausted or injured—player is. This rule also demands that every player on a team possess a good amount of athletic ability, because anyone can be forced to dodge.*

A) THE PLAY

The dodger's objective in stage three is to evade the opponent's strikes for a duration equal to **the number of reals the opposing team has scored, multiplied by fifteen seconds**. For example, if Barnstable scored three reals in round two, the Temple dodger must successfully avoid being struck by the ball for forty-five seconds. If he can accomplish this, **Temple wins the entire round**. If he fails, the round is over and Barnstable wins it.

STRATEGY: *The difficulty of the dodge ensures that a team will always try to score more potentials than their opponent in stage one and do everything they can to convert them to reals in stage two so as to force their opponent to dodge.*

The dodger will face three obstructors, who may stand anywhere on the field they wish. The dodger places the ball on either trigger point to kick it off. His kick must land in play beyond midfield. His goal is to kick the ball so that it is difficult for the obstructors to handle.

Just as in stage one, the opposing players must strike the ball with their hands or kick it. They may let the ball bounce no more than once, as usual, but in stage three they may also strike it *before* it hits the ground if they wish. If they are unable to keep the ball in play, the play is blown dead and the clock stops when the ball goes out of bounds or is touched by an obstructor, and the dodger re-kicks the ball from the trigger point.

The obstructors' lone goal is to work the ball between them and strike the dodger with it. Both the obstructors and the dodger may move anywhere during stage three as long as they do not step outside the field of play. The ball is considered to have struck a dodger if the ball's contact with his body visibly re-directs its path. A ball which just barely brushes a dodger's arm without deviating from its path at all, for example, may not be considered as having struck him.

The dodger may not catch a struck ball during phase three. All his efforts must be devoted toward outright evasion. If he should ever step outside the field of play during his dodge time, he is ruled to have been struck by the ball.

Game play is continuous in stage three for the duration of the time on the clock unless the ball bounces twice, or another foul is committed, or the dodger is struck with the ball. Fouls by the obstructors include palming or catching the ball, letting the ball bounce twice, or impeding the dodger in any way. After a penalty, the play is blown dead, the clock stops, and the dodger re-kicks the ball from the trigger point.

The dodger may not initiate contact with any obstructor, and vice versa. If the dodger is judged to be the aggressor, thirty seconds are *added* to the time he must evade the strikes of the defense, after which he must kick the ball into play again from the trigger point. If an obstructor impedes a dodger in any way during stage three, the dodging team automatically wins the round.

STRATEGY: *The dodger will initially try to rely on his kicking skills to make the ball difficult for the obstructors to handle off the trigger kick. They will try to triangulate and slowly trap the dodger, engaging in occasional strong, swift strikes to hit him with the ball. The harder the strike, however, the more difficult it will be for a fellow obstructor to strike the ball again safely before it gets past him, so all players must be in good position before one of them decides to strike the ball hard at the dodger. No longer having to allow the ball to bounce before it is struck, the obstructors can also use the element of surprise to help their attack.*

If the teams are tied 0-0 entering stage three, there will be two dodge sets, with the team whose dodger evades the defensive strikes for the **longest period of time** winning the round. The visiting team always dodges first.

5. Other rules

A) THE PRAYER RULE

Before the trailing team's dodger takes the field in a round which, if lost by that team, means the loss of the entire game, the team may choose, if they feel their dodger does not have a realistic chance to evade the opponent's strikes for the length of time needed to win the round, to instead invoke the prayer rule. Instead of attempting to evade strikes, the dodger will attempt to catch and hold a single free kick from a teammate while a lone obstructor attempts to break up the play using brute force.

The "prayer" begins with the dodger standing on either fenceman's stripe. His teammate places the ball at any point inside the target circle closest to his dodger. The lone obstructor then sets himself at the halfway point between them.

When the referee gives the signal, the kicker kicks the ball toward the dodger. As soon as the kicker moves, the obstructor is free to charge the dodger, who, confined to the fenceman's stripe, will attempt to catch and hold onto the ball while the charging obstructor is free to drive his body into him at full speed for a single blow, even if the ball has not yet arrived. He may not make contact above the dodger's shoulders and he may not use his head or legs to make contact with the dodger, nor may he slap or punch the dodger. He is, however, permitted to wrap his arms around the man or push them forward in a single motion, or make a direct play on the ball itself. No matter how he chooses to make contact with the dodger, he is limited to a single hit and cannot continue

aggressive contact beyond what the momentum of the impact creates.

If the dodger is able to hold on to the ball after contact, even if he is driven off the fenceman's stripe, his team wins the round and the game is over. If he cannot maintain possession of the ball and it strikes the ground, his team loses.

STRATEGY: *The prayer rule, rarely invoked by a team even on the brink of losing the game, requires a team's cruel decision to "sacrifice" its dodger to a brutal body blow in the hopes of salvaging a victory in a deciding round. While the odds of a dodger catching and holding onto the ball after vicious contact are often higher than the odds of evading a team's strikes for several minutes, the dodger is risking his entire body to the cause of the round. It is a last ditch play made by a desperate team, and a game which ends in a prayer is a game which ends in pain and a view of the stadium from the ground.*

While the distance between the kicker and the dodger is such that a successful kick is not terribly difficult, the kicker will have to send the ball with a certain amount of velocity to make sure the dodger has the split second necessary to secure the ball and brace himself for the hit. Too soft a kick can result in the obstructor driving his body into the dodger before the ball even gets to the fenceman's stripe, while too hard a kick may be somewhat inaccurate and put the dodger's body in an awkward position—if he even has the fortitude to make the catch in the face of the charging opponent.

The opposing team always selects the dodger before the prayer rule is either invoked or not. The trailing team then makes the decision.

B) CLOSE CALLS

In Loft, there is no video review of any referee's call, nor any technology employed to help them. Their judgment is final. Loft accepts the fact that due to the speed of a professional sport, the difficulties for referees in getting perfect visual angles, and the very nature of any physical activity which requires extreme precision, there will always be "gray areas" in which close calls arise. If a referee has any doubt about which way a call should go, an instant judgment is made according to the play's essence rather than its sometimes indefinable "truth." The benefit of the doubt is always awarded to the player who makes an exceptional effort or displays superior skill on a play, while a close call that arises because of a player's inaccuracy or error will go against him. The game of Loft is designed to flow as uninterrupted as possible, and while referees may confer briefly about their decision-making, play will never be stopped because of close calls.

C) WEATHER

The entirety of the Loft tournament takes place in August so as to reduce the weather's effects on play, but games progress regardless of inclement weather if at all possible. The weather is recognized as a sometimes cruel random element of the game, but the sport of Loft fully accepts randomness and chance as part of the competition.

D) GAME PACE

Loft aims to be the fastest flowing sport in history; when a play is blown dead, referees are asked to immediately get the game going again, with tight time limits set on the setup of the ball after a whistle or any other sort of inactivity. The time between the final whistle of one stage and the first action of the next is no more than three minutes. The rapid pace of the game is designed to challenge the physical limits of the players and put their decision-making skills to the greatest test possible.

E) STATISTICS AND GAME REPORTS

One team's victory over another is expressed with first the round victory count and then the number of reals that team scored. For example, if TLO Barnstable defeats TLO Temple four rounds to two, and totals 23 reals, the final is expressed like so: **Barnstable 4-2 (23) over Temple.**

An advancer's statistics include potentials scored, assists made, points scored off striking obstructors, conversion and penalty kick success percentage, and stage two catch percentage.

An obstructor's statistics include tackles made, strikes broken up, points lost due to being struck, points lost due to penalties, interceptions made, and percentage of successful strikes against a dodger.

A banker's statistics include points scored, balls dropped, and short send success percentage.

A fenceman's statistics include trigger kick success percentage, pierce percentage, graze percentage, number of stages without a graze, short send success percentage, and strikes obstructed.

A dodger's statistics include evasion success percentage per dodge attempt, evasion success per obstructor strike, and percentage of times chosen to dodge as opposed to teammates.

Statistics are also kept for success when invoking the prayer rule.

Scoring Summary

STAGE ONE

- Advancer strikes an obstructor with the ball: team is awarded **1** potential.
- After achieving a graze, the fenceman kicks the ball from the trigger point out of play or fails to trigger the ball beyond the midfield point: opposing team is awarded **1** potential
- Obstructor steps outside a loft line: opposing team is awarded **1** potential and play continues
- Banker catches a ball struck to him: team is awarded **2** potentials
- Banker catches a ball struck to him via a kick: team is awarded **5** potentials
- Banker catches a penalty kick: team is awarded **2** potentials
- Banker catches a penalty kick after a foul committed in the act of attempting a noble: team is awarded **5** potentials
- A fenceman throws a short send back into play down the field to his banker, who catches it before it hits the ground: team is awarded **2** potentials

STAGE TWO

- The team attempting to convert their potentials makes a successful send to their banker via a conversion kick or penalty kick: the potentials immediately become reals
- The team without potentials intercepts the ball and makes a successful send to their own banker via the ensuing penalty kick: the opponent loses all their potentials

- Banker catches a ball struck to him via a kick: the team which has converted their potentials into reals loses them

STAGE THREE

- Dodger evades the obstructors' strikes for the amount of dodge time set: his team wins the entire round.
- Dodger is struck by the obstructors' strikes within the amount of dodge time set: the opposing team wins the entire round.
- Dodger catches the ball after invoking the prayer rule: his team wins the game.

3. THE RISE OF PAUL RUPP

Easter Island, self-martyrdom, and the Principles of Foundation

The story of Loft took its most interesting twist on an August night seven years after the conclusion of its inaugural tournament. In front of a crowd of more than sixty thousand fans at Camden Yards in Baltimore, TLO Temple of Texas squared off against TLO Barnstable of Massachusetts to decide the 2012 title. Barnstable was led by Paul Rupp, who had already led his various teams to five championship titles.

Any team captained by Rupp was an automatic heavy favorite to take the crown; the only failures he'd known in securing one were due to a serious knee injury during his second year and a surprising upset in a late round during his fourth, when it was widely acknowledged he was playing for perhaps the weakest team in the field of sixty-four. Though there was no official annual league selection of Loft's most valuable player, the press had been mostly unanimous in anointing him MVP year in and year out. He dominated every tournament, eluding any defensive trick that could be thrown his way while laying down punishing slide tackles and striking hopeful dodgers with eerie accuracy. Meanwhile, his popularity with fans had become akin to idol worship fairly quickly. While most Loft teams, representing tiny and sometimes economically deprived populations, were delighted to have a few hundred fans from their town of origin make the trip to the tournament, Rupp often inadvertently corrupted daily life there when thousands of people took spontaneous vacations to watch him play. Even when playing in year three for TLO Mackville (Kentucky), whose title game appearance took place 1200 miles from the town, newspapers were filled with stories of citizens who had decided to get to Denver any way they could. Those who didn't travel gathered in bars and held Loft parties to make the night of the title game a unifying event rare in this modern age of community detachment.

Paul Rupp was both much more and much less than the average sporting celebrity. His demeanor, attitude toward the game, and approach to fame simply had no precedent. It was said he only lacked two things that might have made him a complete human being: an awareness of the outside world and any other interest besides Loft. Dedicated only to being the best, Rupp politely but firmly spurned the attention of the media and fans, and each night after practice went back to the dormitory-style housing in which he was mandated to live during the tournament and watched videos of athletes playing Loft. There were three hours of video study every night from January to August, seven days a week, no exceptions. Journalists cited this ferocious (and tedious) preparation ethic as the main reason for Rupp's success; only an above-average athlete, possessed by neither tremendous speed nor awesome strength, his immense knowledge of the movements and techniques of his opponents gave him a mental advantage no one could match. Because he faced so many competitors of whom he knew nothing (a by-product of the huge turnover rate in the ranks of Lofters), he narrowed his focus mostly on patterns consistent in all of them. He learned the behavioral quirks and tendencies of every type of player, becoming able to predict their motions and decisions on the fly. Personally hiring a statistical service to track and quantify every sort of action that could be performed during a game, he pored over charts and tables on weekends and in the cold months before open tryouts began again. It was said that he could size up an opposing player and know exactly what the man was capable of based solely on his body language during the first five minutes of a game. And those who were good enough and serious enough about the sport to return to it every year were known to Rupp's mind as intimately as he had known the members of his own teams. When he wasn't educating himself about the players, Rupp was mastering the art of strategy by learning what worked on the field and what didn't, when gambling made statistical sense and when it did not, what the likelihood was that a team would choose to try one thing and not the other. Though he had an assigned coach every year, he was given the authority to make virtually every decision on the field during the game. While many teams needed to use a precious timeout to meet for the setting of strategy, Rupp's teams had few such meetings during a tournament. His directions were followed to the letter and without second guessing.

His humorlessness was as famous as his disinterest in celebrating victory with anything other than a simple pumping of the fist and a handshake for a fellow teammate who had exceeded expectations. During training, Rupp was rarely invited to nights out by those he shared lodging with; rarely actively unpleasant, he simply never seemed to smile or share in a joke. He appeared totally detached, even somewhat lost, during conversations about anything other than Loft or perhaps action movies, which he tended

to watch alone and seemed to be one of the few pastimes which gave him pleasure. He was occasionally linked to women in the towns where he trained but the relationships never lasted long. His interest in remaining someone's companion always seemed to have an expiration date. He had no threatening temper and didn't seem capable of any real cruelty beyond the playing field; he was just too obsessed with his *raison d'être* to expand beyond himself.

He consented to interviews only when he perceived something he had said or done had been misperceived, and these were painfully dry affairs. Journalists sensed that his unwillingness to speak also had much to do with his obvious discomfort with exposing his lack of formal education. Never eloquent, he left the room if confronted with the sound of his own voice on television or radio. He knew that his brainpower extended only to Loft and there were those who pitied him somewhat for the way he devoted so much mental energy to the sport while remaining unable to make any sort of vivid statement about anything else he experienced in life. "Somewhere inside Paul Rupp might be a personality," a writer once noted, "but it has certainly never seen the light of day." Finding it necessary to act in a handful of commercials to boost his virtually non-existent official income, he spoke his lines dutifully and with all the passion of a bar of soap. Somehow it was just what the public expected and they completely forgave his woodenness. He was called "Easter Island" by some fans in reference to his slack-faced determination on the field and his reluctance to express any joy off it. The nickname was uttered with true respect by most. Rupp's one-track mind and his sheer relentlessness was a genuine inspiration for those who believed that the definition of greatness lay in a human being's desire and ability to reach the apex of his private mountain, with no apologies made, no distractions allowed, and a total mastery of the path to the top. It wasn't just young athletes who revered him and his iconoclasm; he was a role model for anyone with a dream who felt burdened by the things that prevented its realization. Here was a man who had simply cut away everything that stood between him and perfection, and who held fast to his course despite all the distracting adulation that came his way.

After his fourth year as a professional Lofter, in which he failed to win a title for the first time when playing a full tournament, Rupp inadvertently transformed himself from star to legend when he stopped doing commercials and interviews of any kind, took no more money for personal appearances, and vowed that he would never again share in the financial bonus awarded to the sport's annual champion. His vow of poverty, he explained, had no purpose beyond proving to himself that his motivations for becoming the best player he could be were not tainted by a desire for riches. Disappointed with what he perceived as a personal lack of drive during the fourth year tournament, he felt he needed to completely avoid the possible corruption of monetary reward in order to re-

capture his desire to win. He wanted everyone who watched him play to know that he had taken the field for only one reason: to get that crown. Fans were amazed and overwhelmed by this unprecedented sacrifice and the media deified him, with the exception of a few philosophical sportswriters who strived to speculate on what sorts of personal demons were pushing Rupp toward self-martyrdom. He had no interest in being praised for his choice and refused to discuss it beyond his final interview with *Sports Illustrated*. While turning his back on financial gain made him more famous than ever, it only heightened the invisible wall between himself and his teammates, as he seemed to retreat further into a world of endless practice, video study, and rumination they did not share or understand.

There were a handful of Lofters who became temporarily famous for their achievements on the field, but only Paul Rupp was a household name. Every year dozens of successful Lofters who might have become stars did not return to open tryouts because they could make better money at even the lowest levels of other professional sports. Rupp refused all offers that came his way while similarly talented Lofters chose to try basketball, football, and soccer. In fact, a Lofters who had led his team to the title in the second year (when Rupp was conveniently sidelined after knee surgery) and in doing so set the tournament scoring record for an advancer quietly opted to report to the Green Bay Packers six weeks later, where he went on to have a middling career as a backup tight end. He never played in front of a TV audience as large as the one that had watched him score 35 potentials against TLO Norwich (New York) in 2006, but at least he could afford to feed his family.

Geoffrey Sills was often criticized for Loft's policy of keeping players poor, but he was intractable in his insistence that Loft remain a sport played only by those who participated for the love of the game. The A.A.L. donated tens of millions of dollars to charity in an effort to keep any private individuals or companies from profiting too much from the sport, and it put back every penny it could right back into the tournament, keeping ticket prices low and making sure that no one ever had to pay to watch a game outside the stadium. Loft's famous Principles of Foundation, the eighty page document which dictated its purpose, organization, and daily procedure, guaranteed that the fans were kept much happier than the athletes. Much to Sills' contentment, it was an ironclad legal document which managed to withstand the constant overtures of wealthy business interests who wanted to vastly expand Loft's profit potential. It drastically limited the amount of money that could be made in such secondary Loft industries as fantasy leagues, video games, and clothing merchandise, and stripped the TV networks of their ability to engage in any sort of advertising during the action of a game. Commercials of any kind were allowed only between stages one, two and three; still, the ratings for the

tournament were high enough that the networks rotated the rights to show it, happy to break even on the deal. The Principles of Foundation gave Loft the power to create millions of dollars without the creation of many millionaires other than the game's creator.

After Loft's third year, people more or less forgot about Geoffrey Sills, who rarely attended games and whose involvement in the sport eventually amounted to little more than an occasional signature. He considered Loft one of his better achievements in drama but was anxious to pick up where he left off in the theater. Eventually he declined to speak about the game in any real detail, although it continued to fund any number of his theatrical projects. When he did talk about Loft, he was inevitably asked what he thought of Paul Rupp. Sills, always anti-social, had never spoken to the man after "directing him" years before during Loft's infancy, but he tended to be unguarded in his praise. It was not so much Rupp's athletic skill that intrigued Sills as the way he conducted his life. In Rupp he saw a kindred spirit; both men cared about their craft to an extent that made them seem exotic and strange to normal people. They lived in utterly different worlds beyond that and would never become friends, and as fate would have it they would never even be photographed together. So as Rupp continued to win championships, it was never Sills' hand he shook as the crowds cheered, but the appointed commissioner's instead. The playwright had moved on.

4. CHAMPIONSHIP NIGHT, 2012

Pruitt's folly, Dell'Ardo's gift, and the final game of a Loft legend

THE 2012 CHAMPIONSHIP OF THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN LOFTERS

AUGUST 27, 2012

CAMDEN YARDS, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

TLO Temple (home)

Starter: Miguel Tuerrera
Starter: Benny Toms
Starter: Gary Dell'Ardo
Banker: Kelvin Morrow
Fenceman: Benedict Jones
Reserve: Stuart Larchmont
Reserve: William Lennon

TLO Barnstable (visitors)

Starter: Harrison Julian
Starter: Conor Lindensmith
Starter: Paul Rupp
Banker: Derek Canton
Fenceman: S.K. Spungen
Reserve: Dave Punter
Reserve: Christian Pruitt

Championship Night in 2012 began with Paul Rupp scoring a noble on the game's first play, and then, much to the shock of TLO Temple's squad, scoring another as 47,000 fans whooped and hollered, never having seen anyone notch back-to-back nobles, putting ten potentials on the board for TLO Barnstable before some people were even seated. An unsmiling Rupp accepted a pat on the back from teammate Harrison Julian and continued about the business of dropping back in defense before the next trigger kick; even if the team from Massachusetts had wanted to celebrate, Loft left them with no time to do so. In stage one of the game's first round, the Texas side seemed overwhelmed. Their normally brilliant fenceman, Benedict Jones, was unable to notch a graze in five consecutive trigger kicks, allowing Barnstable to advance the ball on those easy floaters within easy striking range of the banker's stripe every time down the field.

After Rupp's two nobles, both flawlessly kicked line drives from the right side of the field which allowed banker Derek Canton to catch them on the stripe's far edges, completely vexing Jones, they banked another potential on a swift downward strike against obstructor Gary Dell'ardo. Then Barnstable's Conor Lindensmith, a red-haired Irishman notorious for his foul mouth and propensity for fouling, upended a Temple attacker with a perfectly timed rolling tackle, causing a short send which was intercepted by keeper S.K. Spungen. His ensuing downfield throw to Paul Rupp scored two more potentials. After Temple's final impotent purge noble attempt, which landed twenty feet long, Barnstable entered stage two with a whopping seventeen potentials and another record was put into the books: biggest lead ever recorded at that point in a round. Temple was then able to rally somewhat, using Benny Toms' impressive speed to break up the first two Barnstable attempts to set up a conversion kick and then becoming downright hopeful when Jones swatted away a long, brilliant conversion try from Harrison Julian to Derek Canton with a last second leap. But then Paul Rupp placed a short kick just where it needed to be after juking Toms out to make an easy catch from Spungen's strike, and Temple's dodger found himself with the impossible task of evading Barnstable's stage three strikes for an unheard-of four minutes and fifteen seconds if he wanted Temple to pull off a miracle round one victory. It didn't happen of course, but the way it didn't happen set the tone for the relentless physicality which would overwhelm the rest of the championship game. At the two minute mark, Rupp fed Lindensmith near the corner of the field with a solid layup strike which had Benny Toms cornered and cooked. Lindensmith then struck the ball at Toms as hard as any Lofter ever had, connecting with his head from a distance of five feet. Toms went down and immediately came up cursing at the man who had made his life miserable in stage one with a couple of hard hits to the chest which had put him to the ground. The players were separated quickly, but the bad blood was established. Barnstable led Temple 1-0 headed into round two.

Temple's strategy for rebounding from an early deficit seemed to have been worked out long beforehand. It was simple: they intended to hit Paul Rupp again and again, no matter how many penalties they incurred or even how many easy strikes they gave to the Barnstable advancers. Twice the burly obstructor Miguel Turrera went at Rupp's legs with dicey rolling tackles, and twice he was penalized for it. Then, on Barnstable's fourth advancing play, he made such a frantic, ill-advised tackle that Rupp easily struck downward at him, connecting for two potentials. The tackle brought Conor Lindensmith running over to Tuerrera to speak a few choice words. The crowd was riled up, sensing Lindensmith was already close to completely losing his temper, while Rupp had no visible reaction to being targeted with such physicality. Temple's overzealousness, which then included double-teaming Rupp, forcing him to knock over

two consecutive obstructors like dominoes, cost them potentials when he was able to recover his balance enough to feed the ball to an open teammate. On the stage's last play, though, the rough defense worked, as a slightly panicked Harrison Julian, almost rocked backward by a terrifically sharp line drive target kick by Benedict Jones, skied his strike to the well-covered Rupp, who somehow managed to get off a long send to Derek Canton which was disrupted by another Toms rolling tackle. The ball landed short of the banker's stripe and was caught by Jones, who hurled it downfield for what would be Temple's go-ahead score. But Paul Rupp was in the way, as usual, reading Jones's eyes and anticipating his throw to Gary Dell'ardo, even after a fake throw to Toms which confused even the cameraman covering the play. Rupp tipped the ball away at the last second, preserving a 7-6 stage one final score. The Barnstable players conferred briefly at the beginning of stage two, and Rupp chose to defer his usual stage two duties for the first few plays to rest what appeared to be a slightly strained hamstring. Those pundits who claimed that Barnstable lacked focus without him and relied too much on raw physical talent rather than strategy and concentration were given much ammunition when they could not convert their potentials through the three plays that Rupp missed, dropping one easy strike and getting too cute with a mid-range conversion kick, botching it. Rupp pointed to Harrison Julian before the fourth Temple kick and Julian was replaced without a word of protest. S.K. Spungen played it safe and tried to strike the next incoming trigger kick to Rupp over a short distance to ensure a catch, but this emboldened Benny Toms to go for an interception. He made hard contact with Rupp, fouling him, and Rupp was wincing noticeably when he set the ball for a successful penalty kick. Temple entered stage three needing Benny Toms to dodge for one minute and forty-five seconds, but with Rupp watching from the sidelines, his teammates finished him off in just thirty on a hard shot to the legs. Barnstable was up 2-0 going into round three, and it seemed like Temple would simply have no way back.

They gave Paul Rupp more room to move in the third round, because it was obvious he was in some pain. He seemed determined to play on while Dave Punter and Christian Pruitt, who hadn't played more than five minutes between them through the entire tournament, looked on from the bench. Temple completely regained their advancing form, keeping the ball well away from Rupp and striking the ball with awesome accuracy to take an impressive nine potentials into stage two. Rupp stretched on the sidelines, watching as Conor Lindensmith tried to somehow keep Temple from converting their potentials into reals. Barnstable's inspired defense, combined with Temple's inability to run their routes with the precision that Benedict Jones required in order to deliver them the ball, left them unable to convert through the first four plays, and Barnstable fans came to their feet, sensing that the championship might be won right here, with Temple

perhaps having to enter stage three ready to dodge for their life instead of forcing their opponent to evade the ball for over two minutes. A 3-0 lead in the game would have surely been insurmountable. But then Temple pulled it out on a long conversion kick that just eluded S.K. Spungen's leap. Kelvin Morrow actually bobbled the ball briefly before securing it and it was to be Barnstable who had to dodge alone. The two minute fifteen second length proved to be too much for Harrison Julian, who lasted 1:48 before falling to Miguel Terrera's strike. It was 2-1 Barnstable. A golden opportunity to clinch almost certain victory had slipped past them.

Round four, it is safe to say, featured the worst performance ever put on by a team led by Paul Rupp. Barnstable was utterly disastrous in every respect, and even Rupp himself couldn't avoid being faked out by Temple's Gary Dell'Ardo at one point as they notched another easy 2 potentials. Coverage assignments got crossed up, balls were dropped, S.K. Spungen was unable to hit the target circle, and at one point Benny Toms struck the ball squarely at Harrison Julian's back; the obstructor was completely unprepared, expecting Toms to send the ball to the banker and completely giving up on the play. Lindensmith and Rupp descended on him briefly, but no amount of criticism was going to save Barnstable, whose dismal display continued in stage two. In the end, they had put a total of one potential on the scoreboard to Temple's eleven, making round four's dodge a sad spectacle indeed. Julian went down within a minute and Barnstable fans fell silent as their team conferred, having been soundly whipped. The tide of momentum had changed overwhelmingly.

Things got much worse when Paul Rupp turned around a moment later to see Conor Lindensmith being ejected by a referee. All it had taken was a single frustrated shove on a very cocky Benny Toms after the round had been resolved to make the ref decide that everyone, himself included, had taken enough abuse from Lindensmith for the day. It was the third time he had been ousted from a game. The Irishman stood, defiantly quiet, as the ref instructed him again and again to leave the field; he finally had to be ushered off by teammates. The crowd roared as he exited, disappearing beneath the stands.

The growing tenseness of the situation translated to Barnstable's play in round five. They played too conservatively, giving up too much ground on defense and pushing forward too long on offense instead of going for quicker strikes. Temple was not much better and they dropped stage one by a score of 3-2. It was then that veteran Conor Lindensmith's substitute, twenty year old Christian Pruitt, inadvertently became the focus of unwelcome media attention for weeks after the game when his admittedly slipshod play—far more due to inexperience than effort—greatly addled Barnstable's efforts to convert their potentials and exposed a side of Paul Rupp few had seen before. Pruitt had

already been clearly outclassed in stage one, barely hanging on among athletes far superior to him, when on Barnstable's first advancing play of stage two, he ran an incorrect route and gave Temple the chance for an easy interception. Their penalty kick was mercifully wide. On the second play, he mis-read Spungen's fake to Rupp and was not fully prepared to receive a pretty, arcing strike, getting to it too late, blowing a chance for a close conversion kick.

Rupp called for the use of Barnstable's only time out right then and there. Walking delicately because of his hamstring, he went over to Pruitt, and while no one could hear what was being said, it was obviously disparaging. Where he normally spoke calmly and at least somewhat supportively to teammates who made mistakes, he had far less patience with mental errors that came from a lack of preparation. He pointed a stern finger at Pruitt from inches away and had never appeared more like a stern coach rather than a fellow player. Pruitt backed away without a word, nodding once quickly. Barnstable's timeout had been used not for strategic planning but for a dressing down, something rarely seen. Paul Rupp did not replace Pruitt at that moment, however, knowing the young man's impressive foot speed was at a premium at this stage of the game. Dave Punter remained, a decent obstructor with hands of clay, stood on the sideline beside him.

On Barnstable's fourth advancing play, Spungen's strike to Pruitt was a little short but still catchable; Pruitt, however tried to get away with a subtle push to the back on Gary Dell'Ardo in order to get position, and it was spotted, rendering his catch moot. Paul Rupp took the field quickly, replacing him with a disgusted wave. As they passed each other, he spoke a few words to Pruitt, who countered with a couple of his own. Rupp stopped, turned, and shouted something at Pruitt which shut the man up and sent him off the field—and out of the game of Loft forever, it turned out—in morose silence. S.K. Spungen remembered Rupp yelling this: *"What kind of man are you to do this to us?"* Pruitt took his place on the bench and his expression of humiliation became the darling of every camera the networks had in operation that night. He appeared chastened and lost, and the thing that captured the most attention and commentary was the fact that his eyes never seemed to leave Paul Rupp, suggesting not just frustration with his play but a mortal wounding of the pride at the hands of someone he had respected and admired. Rupp's words and actions had reduced him to a shell of his normally enthusiastic self. No one could quite remember another instance in which one teammate undercut another in such a brutal fashion, and in front of such a wide audience.

Rupp had no time to think about the way he had approached Pruitt's mistakes. The ball was in the air already, and on Barnstable's fifth advancing play, he himself was able to make a sliding catch of Spungen's strike and deliver a good conversion kick to

Derek Canton. It was caught. Temple nearly stripped those precious three reals away with a noble attempt that went just long and Temple needed to have Benny Toms dodge Barnstable's strikes for forty-five seconds in order to win the round. Temple came at him with crazed, sloppy aggression, failing to keep the ball in play twice on wide strikes at Toms' legs, and when he evaded a scary long line drive from Rupp at the last second, Temple was jubilant, finding themselves needing just one more victory in round six to take the title.

One of sports' most beloved clichés has to do with a single player "taking over a game," "imposing his will" upon the contest, and if anyone ever required a tangible historic example of this phenomenon, round six of the 2012 Championship game was it. Referred to as "Rupp's Revenge" in the annals of Loft, it saw the star push past the pain in his leg to overwhelm Temple both advancing and obstructing. He sent the ball perfectly four times to Derek Canton in stage one, once making an extraordinary play on a ball headed out of bounds by knocking it blindly behind him, seeing it sail high and true half the distance of the field, stunning the crowd. Never had a ball been struck with such perfection. Twice he took out Temple advancers with tackles, and on Benny Toms' short send late in the round, when Barnstable was already ahead 7-0, he made a stretching one-handed catch of S.K. Spungen's throw to give his team another 2 potentials, with Temple's sole point coming when Harrison Julian stepped briefly off a Loft line.

But Rupp wasn't done yet. Visibly exhausted, he took the field for stage two, trusting no one else to defend against Temple's attempts to obviate those 9 potentials. Rupp gambled twice on Benedict Jones' kicks to his advancers. The gambles resulted in two interceptions. The first required him to leap over Benny Toms, an admirable feat in itself. The second was more spectacular. Going deep down the field with the strike in a last ditch attempt at a noble, Jones sent the ball high and just barely long to Toms, who beat Rupp by a step. Both men dove for the ball, fully outstretched, but it was Rupp who came down with it, not just batting it away but catching it outright, avoiding contact with Toms until the ball was secured, at which point he landed on him, knocking the wind right out of him. Rupp's short conversion kick secured Barnstable's reals. Temple answered well, nearly scoring on two consecutive noble attempts, but it wasn't to be.

Rupp could easily have sat out stage three, as Toms' chances of dodging successfully were very slim. But he played anyway, and seemed determined to be the one to take Toms out, which he did a minute into the stage despite a couple of miracle dives by Toms which spared him contact by mere inches. In tying the game overall 3-3, Paul Rupp had recorded a couple of highlights which would enter the annals of Loft's history and reminded everyone of how he could change a game merely by wanting it badly enough. Upon striking Toms, he bent over, put his hands on his knees, and

exhaled deeply. Derek Canton patted him on the back and asked if he was all right. The favoring of his right leg had stopped briefly during the round but as soon as it was over, it returned, more pronounced than ever. He would not allow Christian Pruitt to come into the game for him, though.

While “Rupp’s Revenge” would never be forgotten, neither would another term used by a television announcer for the first time in round seven. The term was “Dell’Ardo’s Gift,” and it referred to something which happened on Temple’s last advancing play of stage one, after the teams had struggled mightily with each other just to deliver a single send to their respective bankers. The obstructors took over from the first and so did the fencemen, notching four pierces between them, their trigger kicks sent into play too hard and fast to be handled. Neither team had banked a single potential going into their last plays of the stage. Paul Rupp had waited in vain through the first four advancing plays for a single strike to come his way, but his teammates either never got the chance to get it to him because of Benedict Jones’ pierces or Benny Toms’ defense, and all Rupp could usually do was strike the ball right back to the man who gave it to him. Then, a window of opportunity: Toms fell while backpedaling on Barnstable’s fifth play. Seeing his chance, Harrison Julian struck the ball to Rupp so that he could drive the ball downward and strike the obstructor before he could fully regain his balance. But Julian hit the setup ball fat and the chance disappeared. Rupp struck the ball long and high into the corner for Canton, and while the ball was well placed, Benedict Jones was in perfect defensive position to tip it away. The ball was lost and Temple would have the final chance to bank potentials.

After using their timeout, Temple handled S.K. Spungen’s nasty trigger kick and began to move forward. Paul Rupp guarded Gary Dell’Ardo, just barely keeping up with him. On the third touch of the ball, he broke down the field at full speed, as Rupp thought he might—but he had lost at least ten percent of his speed to injury, and instead of being able to get ahead of Dell’Ardo, he had to gallop to keep up and hope to throw himself into a last-second slide tackle. Miguel Tuerrera’s strike sailed over Dell’Ardo’s right shoulder. Instead of going for a traditional send, he took a huge gamble on the well-placed strike and went for a noble, kicking it hard and very low toward Kelvin Morrow, who had gotten in excellent position behind Spungen. Paul Rupp chose not to try a rolling tackle for fear he might commit a foul, playing the odds that the kick was just too difficult. Morrow dropped to the turf and got his hands under the ball, barely saving it from scraping the ground. Keeping his knees inside the stripe as he made the catch, he then rolled out of it, jumping victoriously into the air. Twenty yards away, the force of kicking the ball had knocked Dell’Ardo’s loose shoe clean off his foot; it flipped up awkwardly into the air, forcing Paul Rupp to throw a hand up in front of his face to keep it from making contact

as he flinched backward. Two men came away with “gifts”—Kelvin Morrow with the ball and five potentials banked for Temple, Paul Rupp with his opponent’s shoe, which he caught and flung down in disgust. Dell’Ardo’s overly risky attempt at a noble had paid off handsomely, and Temple had given themselves a huge advantage going into stage two.

Barnstable set itself to make five consecutive trigger kicks to Temple, desperate to stop them from converting their potentials into reals. Through the first two plays, they were given great hope, as Paul Rupp perfectly anticipated the direction of both strikes from Jones to his favorite advancer, Benny Toms. What Rupp had lost in speed he still had in intellect, and from tirelessly studying Jones’ strikes on video, he was able to time his cuts toward Toms at just the right time, a split second before the strike actually came. Then on the third play, the impossible happened. Jones’ strike to Toms, again anticipated by Paul Rupp, was woefully short. Rupp stepped in front of Toms—and dropped the ball. He fell to his knees, clutching his head. A cry of shock went up from the crowd, and in Massachusetts, the citizens of Barnstable, having congregated in bars and living rooms, leaving the streets empty, couldn’t believe their eyes. A successful interception would have led to a conversion kick which, if successful, would have wiped out Temple’s potentials. But Rupp had simply mishandled the ball. Stone-faced, Christian Pruitt sat wordlessly on the bench, his expression unchanging. The cameras went in tight on his face after replaying Rupp’s unlikely gaffe.

On the very next play, Jones hit the ball well down the field into the corner, taking Rupp entirely out of the play with a low-percentage strike which Miguel Tuerrera nonetheless managed to chase down. The high conversion kick was rescued with one hand by Kelvin Morrow and Temple had locked down their five reals. The crowd was given another sock when Rupp immediately booted a perfect noble attempt to Derek Canton, who made a sliding catch on the ball only to have it waved off—Canton had broken too early to the edge of his stripe. Heartbreak descended on Barnstable.

Barnstable would have to dodge Temple’s strikes for one minute and fifteen seconds: doable but not likely. Paul Rupp went to the sideline to await word on whom Temple would choose to suffer those long odds. They were well aware of his injury, his fatigue level, and his frustration, and so they picked him even above Dave Punter. The spectators inside the stadium got to their feet and would remain there for the rest of the night.

Rupp and his teammates stood in a quick, informal huddle. Christian Pruitt said nothing. Barnstable was ready with a decision of their own when the referee informed them of who would be required to dodge. Rupp had calculated the odds of surviving given his injury and considered them too difficult to confront. And so he chose, with the support of his teammates, to invoke the Prayer Rule, Loft’s most controversial three

seconds. Regarded by many as gimmicky and others as a beautifully primal moment of athletic contact unduplicated in any other team sport, the Prayer Rule would ask Paul Rupp to receive a quick kick from the target circle as a Temple player charged him, intent on driving his body into Rupp as hard as he could with the sole intent of dislodging the ball—if Rupp could even catch it. If Rupp held on, Barnstable would be the champions. If not, the year belonged to Temple. It could not have been simpler.

Rupp had never been the recipient of a Prayer Rule kick. Harrison Julian lined up to send it to him, and Benny Toms dug in, staring Rupp down, ready to bolt toward him at the sound of the whistle. Rupp stared back. Cheers filled the stadium and flash bulbs popped. The whistle sounded and Julian kicked the ball almost as hard as he could. It whizzed past Toms' shoulder. Rupp reached to his left and reigned it in, and a split second later, Toms connected with him.

The force of the contact did its work. The ball was jarred loose and Rupp was sent backward like a rag doll, committing his second agonizing drop in ten minutes. Toms leapt up, arms held high, and his teammates encircled him, jumping, shouting. Paul Rupp did not get up, not even when Julian came over to offer his hand. The cameras zoomed in on him as he put his hands over his face. He had been completely wiped out by Toms' hit; it had been no contest. The only question would be how much soreness there would be the next day, the next week. Paul Rupp limped off the field beaten, looking stunned. Reporters flocked around him, but of course he had no comment. He entered the locker room well behind his teammates and walked directly to an empty office. He went inside, closed the door, and slumped down in a chair. The others on the Barnstable team did interviews, cleaned up, left him there. At some point the press was ushered out of the locker room and no one was ever quite sure how Rupp got out of the stadium completely unnoticed.

5. THE END OF THE ROAD

Article 7.7, Patrick Rollins, and the second chance no one thought possible

On September 19, three weeks after Paul Rupp's heartbreaking defeat in the title game, Geoffrey Sills called a press conference at the Sherry Netherland Hotel in New York City. He planned to give a half hour speech on the future of Loft. Two hundred members of the press showed up to listen.

Joined on the podium by the commissioner and other representatives of the sport, Sills spoke in public for the first time in four years about his game. He announced that day, with little preamble and little emotion in his voice, that he was electing to exercise Article 7.7 of the Principles of Foundation, which stated that at any time, the creator of the sport, holding its copyright in full, could forbid any profit-making interest from collecting payment for any activity involving the staging, broadcasting, or casual exhibition of Loft. Article 7.7 effectively disallowed individuals and corporations from charging a single dollar to attend a game of Loft, or to even take in a dime from concessions, parking, or merchandise sales. Furthermore, the television networks could not show Loft on TV if they took in any advertising money whatsoever.

Article 7.7 went further than that. Even not-for-profit organizations like colleges, high schools, and local leagues were no longer able to open Loft games to the public if people were required to pay to watch. Any sponsorship of Loft would now have to come entirely out the sponsor's own pocket, whether it was NBC or a local church group's Thursday night tournament.

It took some time for those watching the announcement to process just what they were hearing. It seemed impossible that every conceivable profit that Loft generated in America could be suddenly cut off; such a thing just couldn't be done. There was too much money being funneled through too many different channels, and no one person could own the right to throw a wrench into the works of capitalism when the product in

question had been absorbed so deeply into both the marketplace and consumer consciousness. Yet Article 7.7 had years of behind-the-scenes legal arguments and victories behind it, upholding the principle that Geoffrey Sills was the sport's sole creator and that he owned it just as he owned any other of his other works. If he chose to go entirely without personal gain, he did in fact have the right to establish Loft as a protected property.

The backlash began, of course, even before Sills got to the second half of his speech. Phones began to ring in boardrooms all over the country as he explained, with minimal eye contact with the camera and in a low monotone borne of an aversion of public speaking, why he had arrived at the decision to essentially stop Loft from going forward. Here is what he said:

'When I was seven years old, my father took me to see *The Wind in the Willows* at the community center two miles from our house. It was put on by the local theater group, none of whom had any professional stage experience. But to my young imagination, what they did on stage that night was completely captivating. When I asked my father a week later if we could go back and see the play again, he told me that the group wasn't doing that play anymore, that its run was over and I would have to wait for something new. I remember I cried that night, alone in my room, and I think this experience seeded my love of the theater. As the years passed I began to see both the real sorrow and the real beauty of something that could only happen briefly in time and then be found only in our memories. That is what the theater is, and that is what I always meant Loft to be.

'There was another experience in my life that got me thinking about the closing of stories. This time it was my father himself who affected me so. Until I was fourteen I admired him more than any boy has ever admired his father. He seemed to me a figure of daring and strength and courage, and after an injury on the job made it difficult for him to walk and he became depressed, beginning a lifelong problem with alcoholism, I came to hate him because he now seemed weak to me, the fire that was once inside him allowed to burn out over the years. He would say to me sometimes that his purpose on earth had been fulfilled by the age of thirty and his days after that were only the force of habit.

'People will and must go on and on, but the things we create with our imaginations do not need to experience the aches of old age and the pangs of regret for the ways things might have turned out, if only the story hadn't stumbled on beyond its climax. For years I sacrificed financial profit for the right to keep my plays from being adapted into films or performed for years after their first run, and I did that because I

wanted the viewer to keep the moment with them as they had first experienced it, never to be tainted by accidentally re-visiting that moment in a forgettable, secondhand way somewhere further down the line. It is when something leaves us that we truly come to appreciate it, and that's when the stories begin, the stories we tell the people who never got a chance to experience what we did. These stories make them dream, and dreams are what keep life compelling and what keep creators working to produce beauty.

'It's my belief that we keep almost everything too long these days. We buy movies and put them on a pile of others for a rainy day, we put songs on a hard drive and come back to them when we're bored. We can record the most immense happenings in history and re-run them at will. Loft is in danger of becoming just another habit, just another product taken down off the shelf once in a while to briefly amuse us. I don't care for habits like that. I would rather lose something than take it for granted. In the wake of a loss like that, others will come forward to replace that void with something they've molded with their own imaginations and their own efforts, and something amazing will be given life. Creation is driven by loss.

'If Loft is allowed to continue as a profit-making venture, I fear it will someday soon go the way of other sports: fought over by warring unions, cheapened by commercial encroachment, tainted by unfortunate behavior. Already in the past two years we've had to fight to keep TV timeouts and higher ticket prices out of the game, all the while fending off corporate interests who wanted longer, more expanded, and thus less dramatic tournaments featuring bigger rosters of athletes who are now demanding more pay and more fame. I don't have the energy to fight the forces which want to turn Loft completely into a business instead of merely a sport. I can think of nothing sadder than the prospect of hearing someone one day say, 'Loft used to be so much better, so much more pure.' That is unacceptable to me. Better to look at it as something that came into our lives, gave us some fun times and vivid memories, and simply moved on to the place where good things go when they want to stay good forever.

'I fully expect the legal challenges to my decision to go on for years and years, but I'm afraid they'll have to take place without me. Today is my last official day as Loft's creator. While there may be no more Loft on television, no more superstars or T-shirts or crowded stadiums or tailgate parties, I urge everyone who has come to love the sport to play it on the fields of elementary schools and in the street where the only intruding interest will be the occasional car that comes along. I want Loft to now be free for everyone; if I were a stronger man and not occasionally victim to my own drive for glory, comfort, and accomplishment, I would have kept everything involving Loft free from the moment of its creation. Let today be known as the day I decided to take Loft away from the money-changers and give it to people for their own personal enjoyment, a small gift

that can't ever now be cheapened by those with more money than they have. Let it go back to being what it was on the autumn day when I first began to build it: an interesting pastime which can bring people together so that they can have their own championship moments. Let Loft's story end at just the right time. If you feel a little betrayed today, wait a few years, think back on your enjoyment of the sport, and realize how many other good things have come into the world since the day I stood at this podium. I hope you'll think I was right to make Loft into a nice memory you can return to from time to time even as you get yourself in shape for the tournament being held right down the street for your family, their friends, and their neighbors. The sport is not going anywhere; the only thing being taken away, in my view, is its possible decline.

'Good day.'

When Geoffrey Sills stepped away from the cameras that afternoon, he stepped into a year-long shroud of seclusion from which he answered not a single question about Loft or his bold move to bring it to an end. While the public backlash against the measure raged on, he was safely out of sight in a small farmhouse in Long Island, where he began work on a new play.

The ramifications of the execution of Article 7.7 were devastating to anyone who had ever made money off Loft. The television networks, unable to sell advertising time (even the minimal amount dictated by the sport's non-stop nature), were still willing to broadcast the tournament at a large financial loss—but without being able to charge for tickets, parking, concessions, or merchandising, no event site would host it, and no one came forward to absorb the immense expense. The loss of Loft from the programming schedule was a definite blow, but there were still other major sports to show. Gambling concerns immediately scratched Loft from their dealings, and more than half of all collegiate and high school Loft programs came to an end due to the inability to budget for a sport that was not permitted to pay for itself even in some small way. The year after Loft's end was filled with an endless procession of magazine and newspaper articles condemning Sills' decision, as well as thousands of hours of protests from radio and TV hosts and their callers. It was difficult to find a single sports fan who saw the logic in Sills' intellectual position; no one wanted to see Loft disappear. He briefly became one of the more reviled figures in all of sports, but he seemed not to care one whit about his image in that world. His lawyers did all of his talking for him and he remained immune to all emotional and financial pleas to change his mind.

There were no less than four dozen lawsuits brought against The Sport of Loft, which was the name of the company Sills had created to oversee its development. Media

companies, merchandisers, real estate concerns, state colleges—all could not bear to see Loft become a thing which could only be enjoyed for its own sake rather than its ability to generate revenue. The suits which Sills did not win were settled out of court; in the end, no one could defeat the air-tight legality of Article 7.7.

In time, as it became more obvious that there truly would be no Loft tournament in August of 2013, the debate over the wisdom and right of Sills to do what he did became more philosophical. At first sportswriters alone had been the voices of condemnation, but eventually Article 7.7 became a compelling metaphor for a wider variety of essayists and commentators. The myriad questions that arose could be argued about eternally. Could any one individual truly own something that affected the lives of so many? Was Loft just a possession, a piece of art on a wall that the artist could remove at will without responsibility for the after-effects? Were the personal interests of thousands, even millions of people, more important than the desire of one man, even if all the legal paperwork in the world guaranteed his wishes? Who owned the sport, and if it was the public, when had they claimed it from the mind that brought it into being?

Perhaps not so surprisingly, the outcry from Loft's athletes was not quite as vocal, as their employment had always been transitory and the money the vast majority of them made was a pittance, requiring ninety-five percent of them to take up outside employment between tournaments. Only a handful had endorsement deals which enabled them to stay professional Lofters year-round. A few migrated to other sports where they could make a solid living, even at the minor league levels, though none went on to become elite athletes with household names. The rest, more than likely already engaged in amateur pursuits, continued on that path. It could be said that the only Lifter whose devastation at losing his job was visible to the public was Paul Rupp.

At first Rupp, like most everyone else, was simply confused by the news of Loft's end, keeping a close, guarded eye on the first week's developments, not quite believing that Sills' decision was final or even his to make. After undergoing his second surgery to repair the damage Loft had done to his wrists over the years, he rehabbed and went on training privately as normal, awaiting the next open tryouts. When those were officially cancelled, he still believed that the training portion of the annual Loft calendar would merely be scaled back and that he should be ready to audition for a team come mid-winter. He spent time alone at his small house on Long Island and tried in vain to convince certain teammates he liked to join him for training, but there were no takers; they had all moved on, satisfied to be pleasantly surprised if the tournament should be put on again. Some spoke of how intently Rupp tried to persuade them to practice with him, as if Loft's existence depended on the sheer force of their will. When spring came and there was no positive word about the possibility of a reprieve for that year's

tournament, Rupp stopped talking to anyone.

It was then, according to the few people who really knew him, that he changed forever. He would not even answer phone calls from the agent responsible for securing his endorsements, which had naturally been put on hold. The Loft field on his property which he paid a small fortune to have maintained year round fell into disrepair, and no one saw Rupp for weeks. Sometime in June he left the country and evidently went to Germany for a period of months. By the time he was next seen in the states, America had come to terms with the end of Loft and moved on; another NFL season had begun and the World Series was approaching. Though the court battles raged on and on, Loft was truly done. The public consciousness had turned the page, and in keeping with Geoffrey Sills' wishes, the game had become more or less a memory. Even local amateur leagues had trouble staying afloat under the burden of too much financial responsibility. Something else that kept Loft from a continued full life on playgrounds and in neighborhood ballparks was the field itself; it was of a design too complex to simulate easily without a decent amount of funding. It was so much easier to just play baseball, soccer, football, basketball, hockey.

Sports historians did find a boom industry in documenting Loft's past, with dozens of books written and even a handful of movies made about the game. But the hurdles that needed to be cleared just to put a group of teams together for competition on a continuing basis were too great, and only at private universities did Loft continue to eek out a real existence, with some of them simply agreeing to fund the games entirely regardless of the fact that no money could be charged for tickets. Occasionally over the next few years, regional amateur tournaments were held as well, but none caught the attention of wide audiences. Loft became a novelty, practiced only by real devotees. Fans attended annual conventions to remember the seven years it had so influenced the sports landscape, trading memorabilia and playing host to its former stars.

Paul Rupp's continued absence from public life more than a year after Geoffrey Sills' press conference led to wild speculation about how he was passing his time, and some of the more accurate reports of his day to day existence were distressing to his admirers. For a period of months he lived on the coast of Maine in a rented cabin, fishing in a nearby creek for several hours each day and, according to neighbors, sleeping quite often on the beach, uncovered and alone. He then moved into a small apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he lived quietly and without friends, shooting baskets at a public court a couple of hours a day, but apparently not making any real effort to keep in optimum shape. He was believed to be in a state of depression, and despite the rumors that circulated about this, he did nothing to alter the public's perception of him, clinging to his silence. It was widely thought that Paul Rupp had come to value the fame

and glory he had achieved as a Lofter more than he ever wanted to admit to himself, and that despite his fierce dedication to the sport, it was just not rewarding enough to play it on his own or to perhaps organize a small league in his area and finance it himself. Some said the realization that he was just like any other athlete who had become dependent on public recognition and adulation was incredibly painful for him.

At some point during this time, his Barnstable teammate Christian Pruitt received a handwritten letter at his home in Cincinnati. It was from Paul Rupp. It read simply this:

Hello –

I'm sorry for what I said that night of the game and for making you feel less worthy. I watched the game on video and then I saw that it hurt you. It wasn't right for the TV to keep showing you. I don't know why I thought I could say those things. I wasn't a good teammate and now it's too late to play with you again.

-Paul R.

Sometime around the second anniversary of Sills' historic press conference, a quiet, bearded man named Patrick Rollins completed his first semester of emergency medical training at Bunker Hill Community College near Boston. He was studying to be a paramedic and took no other classes besides the ones most essential to his career path. He was 39 years old. Virtually no one suspected that this was actually Paul Rupp, ten pounds heavier and wearing glasses he did not need in order to make sure he was not noticed. He commuted to the school from his apartment every day and spent most of his weekends in the company of a nurse at St. Elizabeth's Medical Center named Susan. Because of a severe bicycle accident five years previous, she walked with a limp and the two of them did not engage much in any outdoors activity more strenuous than the occasional canoe trip in Newburyport or short strolls around town. From her, he made no attempt to hide his identity.

At some point the two went their separate ways; according to an unofficial biography of Rupp, it was due to his unwillingness to father children. He was alone again, and did not continue his EMT training. One winter's morning he picked up a newspaper and read that a high court had struck down the attempt of a media company called Downfield Pass to form a professional sixteen team Loft league, the most serious challenge yet to Article 7.7. The article pointed out that Geoffrey Sills had not accepted a \$220 million buyout to sign over the rights to the sport. Big business had failed again to bring Loft back to life. In that very same newspaper, Rupp then read a small human interest article profiling his former girlfriend Susan and detailing her move to St.

Petersburg, Russia, where she intended to work without pay in a bankrupt orphanage.

On that very afternoon, Paul Rupp got into his car and drove to New York City—to Geoffrey Sills' East Village apartment.

Accounts differ as to exactly how long the two men spoke that night, alone in the spacious apartment. It was at least five hours, ensuring that when Rupp eventually did leave the building at approximately 2:45 a.m., he had to face a pair of reporters who had been tipped off about the ongoing talk and were hoping that there had been a breakthrough, that Rupp's single-minded dedication had managed to win Sills over where years of other arguments had not. Sills did not come down with him and Rupp had to pass by the reporters alone, silently as always, while Sills watched from a window above, turning away without a gesture when he was spotted there. A light went out in the room and down on the street Rupp walked two blocks to his car, his body language conveying only an air of extreme fatigue. He got in and drove away. His face revealed nothing. Nor could anyone offer any inside details of what transpired during the meeting, for while Sills had been visiting with two theatrical producers when Rupp arrived, he had not allowed them to stay, answering no calls and ignoring repeated knocks at his door. Beyond that, neither party ever spoke of what transpired in the apartment, though the end result was no change to the continued enforcement of Article 7.7. Loft remained in its suspended state. One reporter who decided to follow Rupp on his drive back to Boston wrote that the ex-superstar pulled over at a rest area outside of Hartford, Connecticut and sat atop a picnic table for a full hour, simply watching a line of trees rustling in the wind, before moving on as the sun came up.

“He was a man who came into his life's purpose at a late age, only to have that purpose suddenly taken from him,” Geoffrey Sills wrote in the preface for a paperback edition of a play published a year after his conversation with Paul Rupp. The play, entitled *The Savant at Rest*, depicted the rise and fall of a struggling American industrialist—but those who worked with Sills on its production universally believed that the character of Frederick Holm was based on Paul Rupp, and more specifically, the things the athlete had said during those famous hours in Sills' apartment. “In that purpose he had found not only wealth and notoriety, but for the first time, an authentic state of being and a personality he had never known existed. It could be said that there was no Frederick Holm until the discovery of the copper mine created him. He spent years in amazement at who he had become, only to disappear from the world and from himself when his fortunes were taken, leaving him the man he was before: invisible, uncomfortable in his own skin, and utterly unable to forge a third act to his life's story. Sadder still were his painful attempts to express his predicament to the people he needed to set right his ship. Finding himself having to plead for something for the first time and not educated enough

to persuade with intellectual argument, he could only present his confused beliefs to the puppetmasters in a muted voice and let their judgment stand. When that judgment did not favor him, there was nothing he could do anymore to remain Frederick Holm.”

And that is where Loft stood more than four years after Rupp’s crushing loss in the title game. The sporting world continued to move on and the most recognizable names in Loft’s history became footnotes until the sport did indeed come to seem like nothing more than a piece of great theater taking its place beside a thousand others, with only a minor lingering bitterness embedded in the hearts of its diehard fans. Gaps in the sports and entertainment landscape do not last for long, and while there was no sudden invention of a new major sport after the end of Loft—so much for Sills’ belief that other creators would come forward upon seeing how immense the profits of an original athletic league could be—the public remained busy with the sports that had been around for decades. That particular section of the newspaper did not lack for stories, controversy, or drama, and probably never would.

Then something happened which drastically changed the saga. One year after marrying a chef from England, Geoffrey Sills fathered a son. After resisting settling down and starting a family for so long, mostly because he had convinced himself that his work and his solitude were things he could never possibly compromise, he found himself with a new life. The man who had changed so little during his adult years was suddenly a different person, his priorities seen through a new lens. The transition did not make him friendlier, or more accessible to the public, or less iconoclastic. But the fact that he now saw his legacy in terms of what might lay beyond his own natural lifespan caused him to re-evaluate his attitude toward the necessity of transience in all things theatrical. One moment he believed that nothing he ever created should be allowed to live beyond him, and that ideas which had had their day in the sun must be made to fade away before they became tired with age. In the space of just a few months, though, it became more rewarding to think that should he pass from the world too soon, those ideas could be experienced again by someone of the most immense importance to him. Sills admitted to another, more private reason for his changing attitude as well: never in his adult life had he found the need to explain himself to anyone, cynically feeling the public’s pre-conceptions of him were fixed in stone, the pre-conceptions that he was difficult, secretive, over-dedicated. But with the birth of his son, he saw the chance to re-invent himself as he wished to be. Here was someone to whom the name Geoffrey Sills could mean something pure, unadorned. Every new discovery about his father could possibly

make Nicholas Sills fonder and more proud. And this meant discovering his works too. Around the same time that Geoffrey started writing his memoirs, he made several phone calls to associates to begin the process of making his legacy a little more permanent.

So it was that a man named Richard Quarters recently found himself taking a commuter train from San Francisco to Mountainview, California to deliver some news to a fellow Loftter from some years back. Quarters had participated in Geoffrey Sills' original test group at the beginning of the story in 2002 and played in the first two national Loft tournaments, once in the same lineup as Paul Rupp. Never an elite Loftter, Quarters had stopped playing to become a coach, part-time math professor, and later, a historian of the game. Now he found himself excited to be given the assignment of telling Paul Rupp personally that open tryouts were being staged in four months for the next national Loft tournament—one which would be no more and no less grand than all the ones which had come before. Of course Rupp knew what was coming, as the newspapers were filled with the details of Article 7.7's "revision" to permit a new era of Loft in America, but it was the new commissioner's idea to send someone to Mountainview to ask Rupp face-to-face if there was any possibility that he still had some Loft left in him.

To my relief, the man who answered his door when I knocked that afternoon looked not much different from the one I remembered playing in the title game with (and visibly disappointing with my overly strong sends) in Austin, Texas. Dressed in jogging shorts and a T-shirt, he looked like he was ready to come out for training at that very moment. He was forty-two years old, and it had been four years since his last appearance in a game, the loss that had so broken him. He shook my hand, asked if I was now with the commissioner's office, and I said yes. I got right to the point and he did too, telling me he thought he would be ready for the tryouts and that he was willing to make the trip. And then he asked me if I still kept my head too low during rolling tackles.

The question is: Can he do it? Can Paul Rupp possibly come back after a four year layoff and not only make a Loft team but perhaps achieve some measure of greatness again? As I write this, we are nine days away from the open tryouts and he's been training full-time here in Los Angeles with a group of new Loftters, none of whom he had ever met before, for a little over three months. He has cancelled the lease on his apartment in Mountainview and is willing to live in whatever small town he needs to should he make a squad.

Loft, the television documentary, is back in production, and as one might expect, cameramen have been taking dozens of hours of footage of Rupp's Los Angeles preparation. He still gives no interviews. He just takes the field, goes all out for six hours, and exhausts himself to the point of collapse. The thought of becoming a coach has absolutely no appeal for him; he will either play or watch from the stands. So far, the

footage suggests that the calendar may have moved on, but his incredible skills have not eroded nearly as much as they should have. One columnist has suggested that what Rupp would like more than anything in the world is to have to truly struggle again to be the best. I think I agree, and I think the challenge this still solitary, single-minded man faces now is as exciting as any he's ever dealt with.

America is becoming excited about Loft again. Millions of people who have never seen it played on a grand scale are about to experience it for the first time. The site of the next tournament is Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri. It seems impossible to me that either of the two men who built Loft's legend will miss the opening kick, one sitting in the commissioner's box, one standing on the backline, tensed and ready to move when the whistle blows. They have changed, but the game has not. There are no new rules, no new wrinkles, no concessions to the dollar, no adaptations to the times.

Loft is what it was when this story began.

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