

Hoopla

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I was out of shape when I showed up. I had kind of thought I was done. I had already made it through the hoop that counted, the admissions hoop. I had stuck my landing; now I could relax. They don't tell you when they accept you that hoop-jumping is the official sport of the College. Especially at the beginning, I had this sense that I was in fact a hoop-jumping recruit, a scholarship kid. I had to keep jumping to earn my spot here. I would later talk about the sport in terms of the fix: that dopamine rush as your toes have cleared and you realize *you're through*. In those first months we were all obsessed with recreating the experience of that first successful jump.

You get the sense that you have to join a cult to make it here. There are a lot of options for what cult to join, but you have to join *one* or you're never gonna have a Real College Experience. Unless you have really great roommates. If you have really great roommates, you're exempt.

To join a cult, you have to jump through that cult's hoop. When you meet people here, you look at their bodies. You look at what muscles they have where, whether it looks like they could make a particular jump.

The cults recruit every semester. They run training programs that last most of the semester and culminate with the Jump where you either make it through the hoop and into the cult or you don't. Sometimes there is a preliminary hoop that happens halfway through training, and if you don't make it, you aren't allowed to try to make it through the final hoop that semester. Every cult has its own hoop—different shapes, different heights—and each training program is tailored specifically to the cult's hoop. Sometimes training for one can make it very hard for your muscles to learn to jump through a different one. Some hoops are easier for certain body types.

It's a big deal. At the very end of College there's always the prestigious Hoops prize which I think is for the senior who has jumped through the most hoops. If you get that you can do whatever you want. Then you definitely don't have to jump through any more hoops.

I knew pretty early on which cult I wanted to try out for. I went to the Intro Training meeting. I was shaking a little bit when I walked into the cult-house—it felt important and intimidating, like the very wood was charged with gravitas. I looked at all the older affiliates and thought they looked much cooler than me. They were sitting around a heavy wooden table, with the Big Kahunas sit-

ting in the middle looking important, looking out at us. All the jumpers were on the floor. All the affiliates spoke with the same cadence. Perhaps they spent so much time around each other that one had adopted another's distinct manner of speaking in turn until everyone spoke with the same unified nuances. This was true of a lot of the cults: You could tell who was in what by how their voice sounded. All these affiliates made it through the hoop, I thought to myself. This terrified me. I imagined their bodies tensing up with nerves, sprinting and vaulting and *clearing the hoop*, muscles taut. I imagined the smiles on their faces when they stuck the landing. Some of their bodies had since gone to seed. Once you made it through the hoop, I guessed, you didn't really have to stay in shape. You didn't have to worry about much at all: In a cult, you had it made. People *respected* you.

At the training meeting, we watched all the old videos, in which famous old affiliates, long graduated, cleared the cult hoop with *style*. I felt my toes pointing in my boots. I was anxious to prove myself. I was on *fire* with it. At the end of the meeting, the Big Kahunas looked at each other and took the big group of us jumpers into a small locked room in the basement of the culthouse. We were all huddled in the doorway—I went up on my tiptoes to see over the group in front of me. And there it was.

"Of course, it will be higher," said the Big Kahuna. It was old and made of a warm brassy medal and extensively engraved. It was a small hoop—not more than three feet in diameter—but I heard they kept it relatively low down. This was good, because I was not very tall. It seemed like it would weigh a lot and hurt a lot if you messed up your jump and crashed into it. I looked back at the other jumpers. They were all shiny-eyed. Some of them were already in very good hoop-shape. I was going to have to train very hard, but I really wanted it.

I spent long hours doing the calisthenics the cult's trainer recommended.

There are rumors that affiliates lower the hoop for jumpers they like, for jumpers who look like they would belong in the cult. I didn't know whether to believe them or not, so I tried to dress like the affiliates and try to get the cult trainer to like me, just in case it helps. I got to know some of the other jumpers during our training sessions and we would laugh in hushed voices about the vocal tics of the cult trainer or the Big Kahunas'

pretensions during the Intro Training meeting. I felt connected to these other jumpers.

A couple days before the preliminary hoop, I cried over lunch with an older friend who had cleared a number of well-respected hoops. Sometimes around here it feels like everything's about who's jumped through what hoops. I asked why we even needed cults. If there were no cults, I told him, we could just *spend time together* and get to know each other in the normal way and not spend our time sniffing out who was worth knowing based on what cult they were in. He nodded patiently and told me that all of these things had occurred to him when he was a young jumper. This complacency made me terribly angry: Once you were enfranchised, once you were in, there was obviously no motivation to do anything about it. I imagined myself, suddenly, years down the line, a complacent affiliate, watching all these freshmen making the jump they'd trained for months for and missing the hoop and knowing they would spend another semester on the outside. Don't let me be that person, I told myself. A small voice said, *But if you make it, of course you will be.*

I made it through the preliminary hoop, which was just like the final one but larger, easier, made of a flimsier and more forgiving material, and kept training hard. I watched my body change. I woke up to aching muscles I didn't know I had. I dreamed about that final hoop. There it was, dusty, winking at me from the basement of the culthouse.

Final hoop day was less of a big deal than I thought it would be: They hauled the thing up into the big main room on the second floor of the culthouse and you waited in line until it was your turn to jump. You made it through or you didn't, and then you landed.

When you're looking at a hoop—even a low hoop, even a hoop that everyone makes it through eventually—you're thinking a couple of thoughts. You're thinking that this hoop is the measure of your worth as an individual. You *know* that this isn't true—you know that there's a lot of chance and variables you can't control that go into whether you make it or not—but you inadvertently can color the result as the ultimate reflection on your innermost self. Do I deserve this, you're thinking, or you're not, because you're focusing too hard on the jump itself.

I made it, and I stuck my landing, thank god. The cult trainer and a couple of other affiliates marked notes on clipboards. A Kahuna carefully

measured my final distance from the hoop, which was discouragingly small. Other jumpers had jumped further. There was some polite applause, and I was ushered into a room downstairs to wait with the other jumpers who had made it.

Because I was a freshman the cult swallowed me pretty cleanly—I didn't have many strong attachments. After I became an affiliate of my cult, I saw those other jumpers—the ones I'd gotten to know who hadn't make it—around the College. They didn't really want to talk to me. It was okay: Suddenly I had a place to go, somewhere I felt a little bit special every time I walked in the door. The culthouse felt like it was a place of magic. It radiated out from the hoop stored in the basement, permeating everything we did and said inside the culthouse. I felt lucky to be a part of all of it.

A week or so after I made it through the hoop, a Big Kahuna mused that he was jealous: He wished he could be a new affiliate again. I stared at him, wide-eyed, and asked why he'd ever want that. Big Kahuna smiled and said that as a new affiliate, everything felt so magical and shiny and new. Over time, he said, with more responsibility, the magic wears out. I have a song for you, he said, and hooked up his phone to the speakers to play a song which repeated a single lyric to an infuriating beat. "You can normalize," a voice said over the sound system, "Don't it make you feel alive?"

I thought about that glowing hoop in the basement. I couldn't imagine normalizing any of this. We have this notion that we can reach out and grab the self-assurance of affiliation and hold onto it forever. Really we can only take validation in doses. The feeling always fades, and then you need a little more. You find yourself another hoop, but there are always diminishing returns: Suddenly the same dosage won't do it for you anymore. It's like when you get stronger and suddenly the ten pound weight doesn't make your muscles burn. You get something heavier. It seemed like if you wanted to feel like a real part of the cult, you had to be a Kahuna.

Becoming a Kahuna meant another jump—this time through the separate intracult hoop, which was a different deal entirely. This one was very large but was some kind of a polygon, a scalene triangle, they said, so it would be easy to guess the angle wrong and get stuck. The Kahuna hoop was set out annually and the jump was set to happen about a month after I became an affiliate. Luckily for new affiliates they kept the hoop pretty low. (It was higher, of course, if you wanted to be a Bigger

Kahuna). I was still in good jumping shape and made it right through.

As a little Kahuna, I had new responsibilities.

I could play my own music over the speakers in the culthouse. Suddenly I couldn't hear the different cadence in the voices of the Big Kahunas and couldn't tell if I'd adopted it or not—it just felt normal. At first, cult-ural acclimation is confusing and weird and stilted, and then it's natural, and then it's just like breathing, and then you can't imagine not doing those things. You can't remember a time when you didn't know to play this song or drink that drink. I was starting to normalize. There is something really satisfying about feeling like a part of a place just by knowing its little customs.

But that humming golden hoop in the basement just felt like an old hump of metal. For so long I had felt I was catching a glimpse of something furtive and beautiful that belonged to all of us, partaking in a set of customs and aesthetics decided by a Big Kahuna long ago. Now, another little Kahuna and I would play a certain song and then someone would ask for that same song a couple days later. We could do things that had never been done before, and affiliates might like them, affiliates might do them with us.

This was exciting, but it was also hard to be in awe of something we were making. I wanted that reverie back.

Suddenly I was on the other side of the Intro Training meeting. I was very conscious of this reversal, but it didn't really feel like a big deal. It felt hollower from the other side: The affiliates at the table were all familiar faces. I wondered if we seemed intimidating and cool to the jumpers. I couldn't imagine we did. We were just goons.

I was put in charge of training a couple of jumpers that Spring. I turned to older affiliates for training programs and held as many extra practice sessions as my jumpers wanted. I cared about them. Not one of my jumpers made it.

And then there are the would-be affiliates who were told from a young age that hoop-jumping isn't for them. Their bodies weren't built to jump through hoops, affiliates used to think. Moreover, maybe the hoops weren't made to allow their bodies through. This is a complicated problem which can't always be solved by changing the shape of the hoop (the shape of each cult's hoop is sacred, so sacred). From the inside, I badly wanted to believe that mystique and inclusivity were not mutually exclusive.

At the College, the absence of a cult can feel like a deep insecurity that leaves you open to a kind of death: the death of being just like everyone else. Or at the very least, it's like being the only vegetarian at a BBQ restaurant or the non-smoker on the smoke break, except instead of cigarettes we're talking about achievement-crack. I admire these people who do the College without it.

Sometimes I worry that one day I will be old with all of the spoils of my hoop-jumping career sitting around me and wish I had spent my life on something other than the stupid sport. I consider the arthritis some long-term hoop-jumpers get from the repeated exertion. I've already had one bout of this arthritis.

But the spoils can be sweet: the feeling of communal self-worth; a kind of special inclusion in something magical and secret; a humbling sense of one's own privilege to be a part of the group. I think some of it also really does come from all those good things we talk about in our pre-jump speeches: from having a community in which to invest your energies, a thing you have come to care about altruistically, for its own sake. The big old world, from inside of a cult, was whittled to a manageable size.

I don't think they're mutually exclusive—the community-mindedness and the validation—but I worry that the latter is addictive.

I decide to go for a bigger hoop. A lot of people expect that I'll have no trouble making it through—I've never missed, have I? I've done a lot for the cult and the Big Kahunas will recognize that and put the hoop lower.

I don't make it through the hoop. A tie on my jacket gets caught on one of the odd polygon's corners and I hang there, half in half out, for much too long before they figure out how to get me down.

People normally don't get stuck. When they take me down, everyone's sympathetic. It's okay, they tell me. We're still your family.

The other little Kahuna makes it through and

becomes a Big Kahuna. I feel a little bit left behind, and then again, I'm happy for him. I'm happy for the cult; I know he'll do great things as a Big Kahuna. But I'm sad that I won't get to do them with him. I didn't know how to look at this: The cult was in great hands, but those hands weren't my hands. It didn't need me.

These things are really fucking messy psychological experiences. They never sound good politically: In this article, I inevitably come across as overly ambitious or a traitor to my cult or allegiant to a problematic power structure. We talk about all this in such sanitized terms: Are cults objectively *good*, or objectively *bad*, for the College community as a whole? I think the real answer is much more nuanced—the structure as it is has oscillated between giving me a home and a sense of magic and breaking hearts (mine, others'). My time as a jumper and then as an affiliate and then as a Kahuna—an absurd trajectory which is completely illegible outside of the College—has given some meaning to my subjective and individual experience. I think there are conversations about these groups that aren't making it into the discourse (the politically-incorrect, subjective, biased experiences of people inside and out, which get sterilized into strong political statements). I think we too often conflate ambivalent subjectivity with emptiness, uselessness.

Let's end with a tally. I have gratitude for the strength I gained from jumps, successful and not, and gratitude for the family the hoop gave me. I worry about the way that love for the sport itself can tear this family apart. I worry about cult-ures of exclusivity and the lines (perhaps arbitrary) they draw between the inside and the outside. We dance across these lines (which make all of us uncomfortable, inside or out) with buzzwords like "inclusivity" and scathing op-eds and small acts of kindness toward our hoop-trainees. I think there are fulfilling ways to be in and around this cult-ure without hoop addiction. I am still trying to find them.