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We like our basketball stars crazy. To earthbound office workers, it seems only fair that getting paid a CEO’s salary to play at the center of all human ecstasy and drama and adulation also has its drawbacks: It makes you gamble compulsively, choke your coach, brawl with fans, blow tender kisses to the rim, stage public weddings to yourself, and try to sneak foil-wrapped marijuana stashes through airport metal detectors in your pants. But, even by such elevated standards, the seventies superstar Pistol Pete Maravich took things a little far. He painted TAKE ME on his roof to attract passing UFOs. He once lived for 25 days entirely on fresh-squeezed juices. He got drunk before big games, cried when he lost, and drove his alligator-skin-topped car 100 mph through downtown New Orleans. Eventually, he turned into an alcoholic insomniac shut-in who devoured survivalist magazines, played Pong for five hours at a time, and fantasized about becoming invisible so he could “kill the heads of all the rich banking families.”

It doesn’t take much Freudian digging to trace Pete’s insanity back to its source, as Mark Kriegel does thoroughly in his new

biography, *Pistol*. Pete's father, Press (the most aptly named character you're likely to find outside of a Dickens novel), was a hard-nosed coach whose own playing career died just months before his son was born. He saw parenting as a euphemism for "behavioral engineering," and he decided to turn Pete into a prodigy—Mozart in Chuck Taylors (or, as Pete later described himself, "a basketball android"). Pete practiced his father's bizarre ball-handling drills (some of which originated in dreams) until his fingers bled. He dribbled at the movie theater, on his bike, and out the door of a moving car. When little Pete wanted to play baseball, Press hit a fly ball into his forehead.

Maravich emerged from this Jedi training scrawny (kids called him "lightbulb head") and socially warped, but also arguably the most skilled offensive player in the history of the game. In an era of conservative basketball, he was a revolutionary—instead of throwing easy passes to wide-open teammates, he'd look for someone who was covered and throw a behind-the-back bounce pass through the defender's legs. He'd put crazy spin on the ball or bump it off his chest or roll it down the floor. When he went pro in 1970, he became the highest-paid athlete ever, at the exorbitant rate of \$1.9 million over five years.

Unfortunately, that was his peak. In the NBA, Maravich pioneered the now familiar role of the underachieving ball hog (he wore a pendant that said ME 1ST). Whenever he had a run of success—he led the league in scoring one year and once put up 68 points on the Knicks—a nagging injury or a mystery illness would knock him back into despair. This was the sad irony of the *Pistol*: He imported a new species of joy into the game, and it made him totally miserable. (A friend once said his eyes looked like "two piss holes in a snow pile.") After ten disappointing years, he fizzled out of the league, then died at 40 of a heart attack.

Pistol skillfully pulls off the balancing act required of good sports biography. It plays large historical forces (segregation, the rise of televised sports) against the individual magic of its subject. Kriegel is best known for his acclaimed recent biography of Joe Namath, and it turns out that Broadway Joe and *Pistol* Pete's stories run almost absurdly parallel. Both were born in the mid-forties to immigrant families working the hellish steel furnaces outside of Pittsburgh; both (despite bombing the SAT) had glorious college careers in the South; both played flashy, mistake-prone styles that earned them historic contracts and controversial endorsements (Namath for panty hose, Pete for hair spray); both were polarizing white superstars in increasingly black leagues; both had bum knees (they even wore the same type of brace). But Namath occasionally tasted some recognizable version of the good life, while Maravich's warped, single-minded pursuit of perfection hardly seems like a life at all—it's like a Greek myth wrapped in a Bible story plagiarized by an *Afterschool Special* translated into a cautionary pamphlet about child abuse. Maybe the greatest tragedy of *Pistol* Pete's tragic life is that he played twenty years too early. He was a style martyr: He spoke fluently in highlights—the tweaking of a game's basic logic not primarily to win, but to surprise—before the media machine was in place to fully understand it. Although the crowds always loved him, his real audience was virtual and had yet to be born. He was Madonna without MTV, Trump without "Page Six." Today he'd be everyone's favorite player, the subject of endless YouTube clips, and the official mascot of *SportsCenter*.

Pistol: The Life of Pete Maravich

By Mark Kriegel. Free Press. 400 Pages. \$27.

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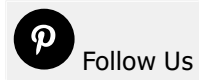
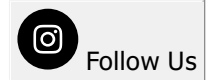
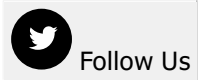
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