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"WNBA Star Paige Bueckers and Artist Sadie Barnette on Why So Many Artists Love Basketball"

By Sam Falb

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Paige Bueckers. Photography by Miles Diggs.

Perfection, Paige Bueckers and Sadie Barnette agree, is a dubious pursuit. Basketball is too messy for a flawless game; art too personal for any universal measure of perfection. What

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matters is the feeling that comes before the result: the repetition, the rhythm, the instinct, the sudden sense that everything might click. Recently, the WNBA star and multimedia artist talked about finding that feeling, losing it, and learning how to return.

Maybe the point is to get lost. On the court, Bueckers disappears into rhythms the Dallas Wings guard has rehearsed thousands of times. In the studio, Barnette disappears into a drawing, music playing as she takes the occasional dance break between lines. Both know that the deepest kind of concentration can look a lot like surrender. They are after something difficult to quantify: the feeling of being fully, unmistakably there.

When do you feel most like yourself: during the work or after it's finished?

Sadie Barnette: When I'm listening to music in my truck.

What type of truck do you have?

Barnette: It's a Toyota Tacoma, black on black.

Paige Bueckers: I feel most like myself in the preparation of the work—the practice, the repetition—and then when I'm out there on the court, I feel it as well. You kind of just get into a flow state of mind where you're out there living your passion and joy.

What's something your field celebrates that you secretly think is overrated?

Bueckers: Perfection is overrated. There's no such thing as a perfect game. Basketball is imperfect. There are so many mistakes that happen in the game—turnovers, missed shots. But honestly, there aren't many overrated things in basketball. Everything is so important.

Barnette: I don't exactly have an answer, but I'll just use it to explain an overlap that I see between hoop and art. I first learned this from rap music: It's not just about what you say but how you say it. That's so prevalent in basketball, and maybe that's why a lot of artists really fuck with basketball, because it's not just about getting the three points—it's about how you make it look, and the swag and elegance that you put on it.

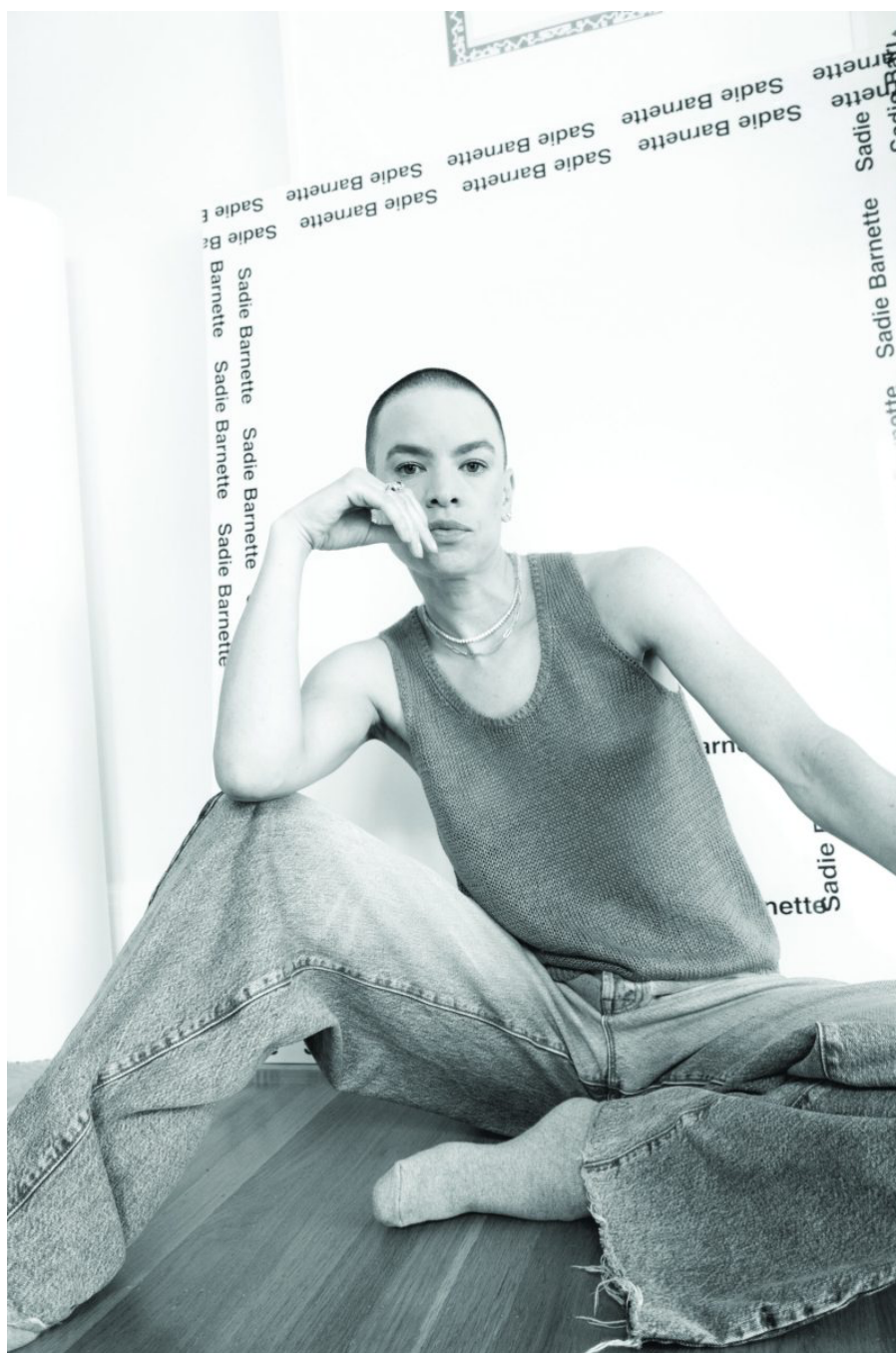
Is there a compliment you've received that has stayed with you longer than any accolade?

Bueckers: When people tell me I've helped them reconnect with their faith or find a belief in God—where somebody who wasn't necessarily a believer is now a believer. Sharing my faith is a really huge thing for me, and that's way bigger than basketball: the trust in my faith.

Barnette: Mine is going to be really small compared to that. My framer, who frames all my drawings, told me that they stopped measuring my drawings because they're always exactly the perfect size that I say they are—to the thirty-second of an inch. It's so nerdy, but I was like, *Oh my God, this is the best day of my life.*

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Sadie Barnette. Photography by Smeeta Mahanti.

Has success in your respective fields made you more confident or more self-conscious?

Barnette: I would say the thing that's made me more confident is therapy, if you want the real answer.

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Bueckers: That's real.

Barnette: Success is subjective, and people are so caught up in the result that they forget about the process, and I think that's where it really comes from—when you put in the work and surround yourself with people that you love.

Bueckers: Success makes you confident, but it also makes you self-aware—you don't get complacent. It's all about staying grounded, staying present, and just trying to win the day.

Barnette: I love "win the day," because if you're not grounded, then even a great success won't feel like a success, because you're comparing it to the next thing.

What's something you've had to unlearn to get where you are now?

Bueckers: For me, it was thinking I was invincible. In high school, I thought I couldn't get injured. I was super healthy, everything was going right for me, and then adversity hit in college. To have that humbling experience taught me: I'm not invincible, these things can happen to me. Adversity strikes everybody in different ways. Life is literally about how you respond. In university, I had to learn how to handle that, embrace it, and actually seek it out.

Barnette: I'm learning to unlearn some perfectionist tendencies. Even though my work is so invested in material perfection and pushing the limits of what's possible with drawing and with commercial processes and machining, the thing I had to unlearn is that I should be normal. I'm not that normal, but there are still layers to uncover, to let yourself fully be who you are, and it's always a journey, especially with art, which can be a long, slow burn.

If someone could watch one ordinary day of your life, what would surprise them most?

Barnette: Maybe how much I dance. I just like dancing and cleaning in the studio and at home—but definitely dancing in the studio. If I'm really feeling it, I'm drawing and then I'm taking a little dance break, drawing, taking a little dance break.

Bueckers: I think it would be how much I sleep. I'm a napper. I'm not really good at napping in the car, but everywhere else, I can find a way. I've always loved to nap.

Who has influenced you in a way that people might not expect?

Bueckers: My three little siblings. I don't necessarily draw basketball inspiration from them, but human inspiration—wanting to be a good role model, a great person, and someone that they can emulate and look up to. Obviously, they're their own people, but I want to make them proud as much as I can.

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Barnette: I would definitely echo family. A lot of my work has been about my family, like the historical moments that we have, and also just the small moments, birthday cakes, you know, life.

If you could preserve one moment from your career forever, which would it be and why?

Bueckers: It would be the national championship game from my senior year. It was the culmination of so much—gratitude, overcoming adversity, and making it through so much turmoil throughout my entire college career.

Barnette: For me it's not so much a moment but a feeling that I would want to preserve. It's the feeling of drawing and just being in the state of really making the work, and the work is coming through you and it's not about anything else outside of it. Those are the moments that I really try to preserve—when the music is perfect, the sunlight is perfect, and just making is the right thing to do.

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