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Predicting breaking in the Olympics: A 40-year retrospective

ABSTRACT

Before breaking's official announcement into the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, other practitioners and members of pioneering crew the New York City Breakers had already dreamed about this future. This article presents an interview with breaking's first impresario Michael Holman, who was the first individual to document this vision of breaking's Olympic future in his book Breaking and the New York City Breakers (1984). Holman's history in hip hop culture is both well documented and persists as one of the most important accounts of hip hop cultural intermediation and entrepreneurship. Notably, his early work in the New York scene was instrumental in developing hip hop and setting in motion the first wave of commercial viability for breaking. Holman's discovery and management of breakers pushed boundaries in a time where few opportunities for professionalization existed – presenting breaking in new contexts for performance, showcase and expression, such as on television and in theatre. Our interview looks back to brushes with the Olympics in the past to think critically about what potential outcomes emerge from this pivotal moment in the dance's global mainstream rediscovery. Holman's reflections demonstrate how breaking in the Olympics has been articulated in the past while reminding us that breaking's industrialization has already been underway for decades.

KEYWORDS

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Michael Holman, is a musician, filmmaker, artist, dancer and impresario from the United States. Holman's life has been a story of creativity, experimentation and innovation. Growing up across the globe, Holman developed an affinity for the arts and in his adulthood quickly became involved in theatre, music and dance. He found early success in the arts working with Michael Cotten and the theatrical rock group The Tubes and went on to be a founding member of the experimental music group Gray alongside Jean-Michel Basquiat. Holman's history in hip hop culture is both well documented and persists as one of the most important accounts of hip hop cultural intermediation and entrepreneurship. Notably, his early work in the New York scene was instrumental in developing hip hop and setting the first wave of commercial viability for breaking in motion. Holman's discovery and management of breakers pushed boundaries in a time where few opportunities for professionalization existed, presenting breaking in new contexts for performance, showcase and expression, such as television and theatre. Among the many people credited to the dance's early development, Holman is perhaps most well known as a host of the first hip hop television show *Graffiti Rock* (1984), his management as an impresario of the New York City Breakers and his role in producing *Beat Street* (1984). In many ways Holman's entrepreneurial instinct has been a significant contribution to the overall industrialization of hip hop. Committed to elevating breaking to new heights, it is unsurprising that he also forecasted breaking's potential future as an Olympic sport in his book *Breaking and the New York City Breakers* (1984). Given his prescience on the matter and entrepreneurial prowess, this interview offers a retrospective on the past 40 years in the lead up to the, now very real, breaking in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.

JN: Where did the forecasting of Breaking in the Olympics come from?

MH: I guess it really started when I first saw the Floor Masters and when they battled Rock Steady Crew at the club (Negril) that I was running with British expat Ruza Blue. Right then and there, I decided with the inspiration of aerosol-writer PHASE II, that this is a different kind of breaking – this is 'power breaking'. These guys (the Floor Masters) are a little less on the dance finesse rhythm side (which was more like Rock Steady Crew), and a lot more on power, speed, rapid repetition – just a completely different kind of look that I was used to. I already had a relationship with Lil' Lep, who was a ringer for the Rock Steady Crew in their battle with the Dynamic Rockers at the famous Lincoln Center battle. At that time I was temporarily managing Rock Steady Crew actually.

That was the first seed planted – when I first met the Floor Masters and started to build the New York City Breakers. I wanted to build a power crew, not knowing that power breaking would then become the language of breaking. I'm building the crew and looking for other power breakers, like Bobby Potts (aka Flip Rock), Corey Montalvo (aka Icey Ice), you know, the definition of a power breaker. Even Mr Wave as a power dancer, a power popper. It was the idea of power that keeps building and *that* has a natural connection to athleticism.

In the 80s I'm not really thinking so much about those differences (between style and power), but I'm choreographing the guys, presenting them and having them perform on different TV shows as performers, like on *The Merv Griffin Show*. 'Cause breaking was such a big deal and everybody, every variety show, wanted a break dancer or break dance crew on their show. There

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were [*sic*] a lot of shows at the time in the early eighties, which breaking and any other novelty would have been perfect fodder for. But then came the seminal moment for this idea (of the Olympics).

Again, we had been booked for a lot of different shows, and one of them was NBC's *Salute to the Olympics* show. It wasn't a big deal, it was just another show that we were booked on, and, you know, 'make sure the contract's right, and where's it going to be shot? And what time should we show up?' and, 'let me talk to the directors about shooting this because they would never get it right'. They'd always have a close-up of a head spin instead of like the whole body shot and just making wrong choices because they just didn't know. There were a lot of Olympic athletes, as well as entertainers, and we're hanging out backstage and as per my mind and imagination, you know – 'this is the Olympics show. We're honouring the Olympics'—it all kind of makes sense.

We got these grey jackets that were NBC and the Olympics, and it had the New York City Breakers name on them, and they made them for everybody that was on the show. And while we were waiting backstage for our time to perform it just occurred to me: 'wait a second, they're really hiring us because we're the flavour of the year as breakers'. Well, by the time we were on the show in the green room, backstage, it was like, 'this *is* an Olympic sport. *We're* an Olympic sport. Why are we just entertainers? Why aren't we the athletes?' And so it was right then and there that I wrote up this proclamation and I had all the dancers sign it and it says:

We, the New York City Breakers, see the Olympic Games as our future.
We see break dancing as a future Olympic sport and ourselves as
pioneers in making this dream a reality. Signed by all the New York City
Breakers.

(transcribed in Holman 1984: 146)

There were entertainers and there were athletes on the show. So it's a little appropriate and a little ironic that for this event we're only dancers, only entertainers, the same way Ben Vareen was an entertainer on this particular show. We were obviously in the entertainment column of the people performing that night and maybe we should have been in the athletes' column.

Knowing the way I think that was no doubt the catalyst, the impetus, the trigger, that made me think of this:

Hey, I think we're in the wrong column here. We're not just entertainers here, we're athletes. So we should be honoured as athletes, as Olympic athletes, but it doesn't exist yet, so it's not possible, but it could be possible, and let's make this prediction that it'll happen.

Now some 40 years later, almost to the year that, that proclamation was written, it's going to come true.

JN: I know that you probably had a number of thoughts from that point in the 1980s, how has your forecast measured up to what's happening today?

MH: Well, you know, at the time of coming up with it, I had no idea that all the originators, the nationality of the originators, Americans, New Yorkers, wouldn't even make competition, wouldn't even be good enough to compete with the other international dancers. From my understanding (in 2021), there

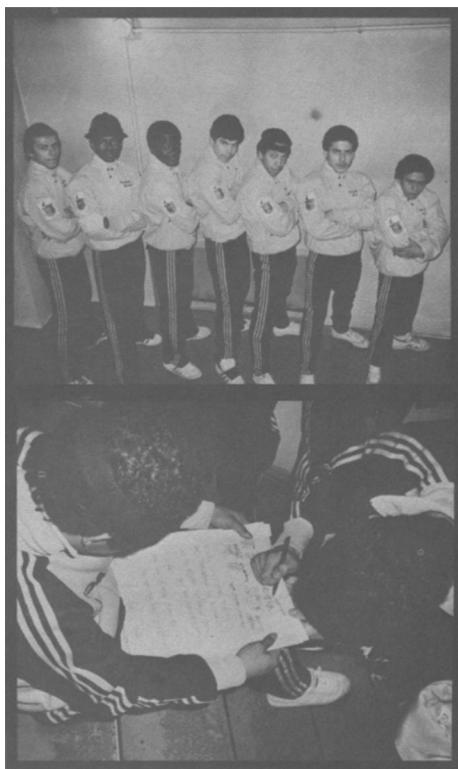


Figure 1: Image of New York City Breakers on NBC's Salute to the Olympics and signing the Olympic proclamation (Holman 1984: 145).

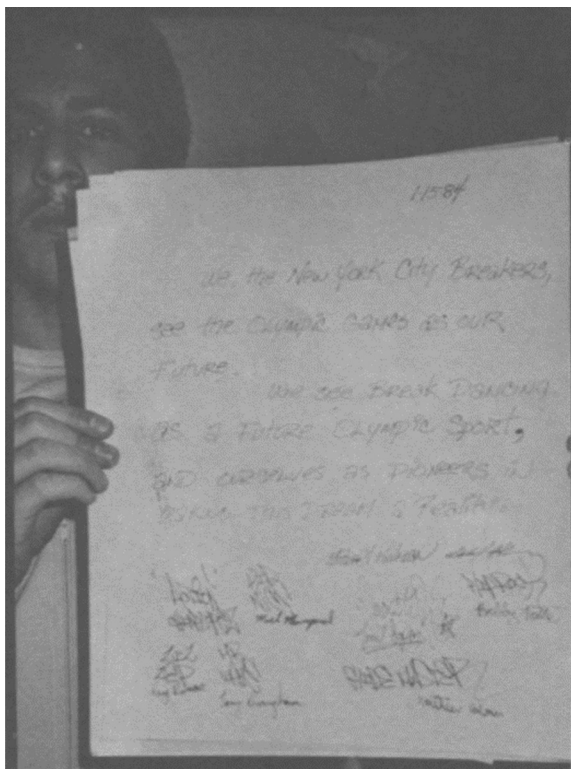


Figure 2: Image of the Chino holding the New York City Breakers' Olympic proclamation (Holman 1984: 164).

isn't even an American team, invited in competition. Maybe you know better than me, but out of the top competitors, none of them are American. I don't know if it would have shocked or surprised me back then. I certainly knew that at that point, by '84, the dance had already spread around the world.

These things all happened in a very short, like eighteen-month period of time. It's just so short [and] concentrated. I mean, it was every other day I was, you know, planning something – View-Master toy meeting with Mattel one day and then, you know, getting ready for a performance another day and then getting to work on the book another day. And, the reason I talk about this heavy concentration of events happening in a short period of time is because in 84, you had me preparing for Beat Street. I was, as you know, staging and second unit directing the battle scene. I was a talent wrangler. I was bringing in people to be interviewed, to be part of the film, etc. At the same time, I'm bringing the New York City Breakers to gigs around the country and around the world. Not only that. But I had found time to come up with the rules and regulations for an Olympic break dance competition, which ended up being the first rules and regulations written for any break dance battle, ever. Nobody had ever done it. That was the first time anyone had done anything like that, which I hadn't really thought about until recently.

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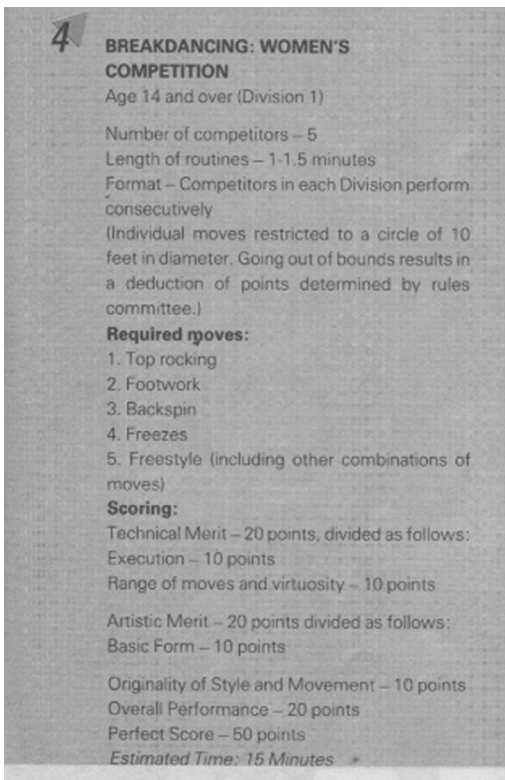


Figure 3: Excerpts of the first Olympic competition rules for breaking devised by Michael Holman (1984: 169).

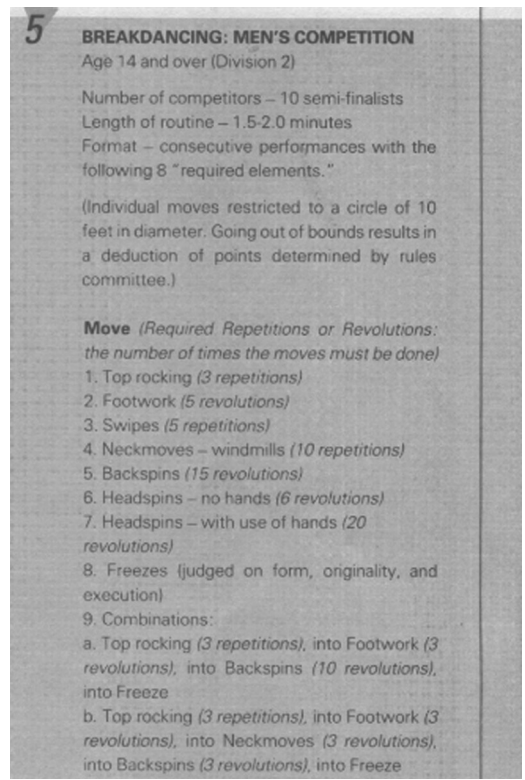


Figure 4: Excerpts of the first Olympic competition rules for breaking devised by Michael Holman (1984: 169).

I actually included Brooklyn rocking, which is like battle rocking, which is its own thing. Then I had breaking itself. I had solo battling, team/crew battling, kind of like with gymnastics, where you have individuals, but then you have individual scores contributing to team scores, but you won't have team events in the Olympics in 2024. I saw California-based dance in there too, like popping and locking, but it would be very subjective in terms of judging. But you know, in many ways, there's a lot of subjective judging going on in the Olympics.

JN: Given this shift into the Olympic format, what do you think the institutionalization of the dance into the sporting world does for dancers and the broader culture?

MH: It makes things more complex in a great way, instead of it just being an underground activity. Now, the dancers and the organizers are forced to ask themselves: to what degree is this a sport? To what degree this is an art-form? To what degree is it a dance? How do we navigate the world of sports? What can this world offer dancers – who, you know, had very minimal opportunities to turn this into a real lifestyle that could pay for itself, that could actually enrich them? Now with the Olympics, those variables have been multiplied a thousand fold.

Now you're talking about being in the Olympics, now you're on national television, you're on international television. And instead of, you know, getting a little pat on the back from Monster or Red Bull or something, now you might get a shoe named after you by Nike or by Puma, by Adidas, or you might as a B-boy or B-girl, make your own shoe and find some crowdfunding backers to help you launch your own shoe or your own head spinning gear, your own B-boy gear, your own B-boy floor surface or any of the myriad opportunities for sponsorship.

One thing I have a real problem with, and I'm not insinuating that that's what you're suggesting, but I have a real problem with people who say 'oh man, you have to keep it authentic', when keeping something authentic keeps people poor. [...] I mean, that's an authenticity too. It's authentic to be poor too, but who wants to be fucking poor? Why not (embrace partnerships)? Why not package that authenticity and turn it into something like a doll or an action figure that some kid, eight years old, can just go off and have a great time with?

I think it's cool as long as it enriches the right people. Sometimes it's not going to enrich the right people, and you can really make a stink about it, but it can. It can open doors to do some amazing things. And sometimes you've got to find a way to, you know, you, as a dancer, need to find a way to jump in on that and you can. The world breaking competitions, through Monster or Red Bull and all that, that's not enough to do what we're talking about. It needs to be in the Olympics and then you can just go wild. I mean, you can almost push all the basketball merchandising to the curb, because even if you don't know about breaking, you'll want to have your own breaking shoes – cause' it'll be so novel. It'll be so new, kids will be lined up around the block because it's such a collectible culture now – sneakers are such collectible items and action figures. Why not have a collectible B-boy/B-girl doll? That's a real person and that person could make millions of dollars off of that or something. I mean, that's so cool!

JN: I really like your reflection on authenticity as there has often been a fear of commercial interventions and fear of 'selling out' when it's far more complex than just being 'authentic'. I assume there's also going to be a lot of different interests who want different things from this moment and it's happening very quickly, similar to what you were saying earlier – in a condensed period of time. With that in mind, are there warnings or concerns that you might reflect on from your own experience that might help others trying to get all this right and navigate new opportunities?

MH: Well, that's a great question 'how to get it right?' You know, no pain, no gain. Meaning the only way to get it right is to stumble and to fall and to pick yourself up, brush yourself off and start all over again. The only way to get it right on that scale, on that level, something that big – sponsorship, or representation, or the legalities of all of this stuff – the only way to get it right is to try to do it and maybe get lucky. The only easy answer is easily said, but it's not easily done, and that is trial and error. You know, try stuff, see what happens. Some of the obvious things are copyright protection and try to legally protect names and legally protect as much as you can, some things can't be legally protected – get a good lawyer. All that kind of stuff is obvious. But the real lessons happen – not in the academic or in the black and white world of legalities – the lessons happen in investing money in something that just kind of blows up in your face you know what I mean? All the rules and all the mistakes that you make as an entrepreneur, you know?

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JN: As an entrepreneur yourself you must be aware of concerns from the community around how commercialization and institutionalization might shift the mainstream understandings/perceptions around what breaking is going to be into the future. How might this be changed or shift over time?

MH: You know, it's a valid question and it's a valid concern. Well, I think that the general public – certainly of a certain age – is very well aware that breaking comes from the streets and it comes from the Bronx. The surprise for the general public is going to be how international it's become and how that's the thing that they missed. I think the general public thinks of breaking as something that came and left, you know? Started in the Bronx in the early eighties and it got all over the place and then it kind of disappeared. Well, we all know that it disappeared, it went underground, but by going underground, it reached hundreds of thousands of people, but the millions and millions of people in the general public don't know about that world. Red Bull to them is just an energy drink! They don't know anything about Red Bull and break dancing, that there's battles that happen in Germany and that the best dancers are Korean. So there's this impression out there that the general audience isn't going to know about how breaking started. What they're not going to know is where it is today. That's going to be the big shock to them, I think.

JN: Interesting you talk about the global reach and specifically the high level dancers coming out of Asia as part of this surprise of where the dance is today. I immediately think about how Japan took home the most gold medals in breaking at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games. I can imagine the Japanese Olympic Committee is already keenly planning for Paris in 2024.

MH: Japanese Olympics Committee! I mean, just hearing those words, it feels like I imagined this. I'm not saying I made it happen, because I didn't, but I imagined it first. I imagined this world 40 years ago that's come to be, and it blows my mind.

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Influential observer of popular culture, Michael Holman is a filmmaker, writer and musician based in New York City. He has performed his conceptual storytelling, filmmaking work and music at art institutions such as MoMA, The New York Public Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, Boston MFA, The New Museum and The Cocoran Gallery of Art. He also founded the band Gray – an industrial noise group – with Jean-Michel Basquiat and created and produced the first hip hop television show, *Graffiti Rock*, in 1984. He taught filmmaking at Howard University, The New School, SVA and The City College of New York, and has taken part in numerous panels and presented lectures at art and educational institutions, such as Yale University, New York University, Cornell University, Brooklyn Museum of Art and New York's Museum of Modern Art.

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