GLOBALIZATION OF BASKETBALL

Jay Wachtel

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Abstract

This paper seeks to look at the sport of basketball as one cultural benchmark to measure globalization. By looking at one American sport, I hope to provide greater insight into the global consumption of American culture and where we may be headed in the future. I will first look at the global state of basketball, in other words: where are we? Next I will look at the motivations and methods of how the game has spread: how’s it grown? Finally, I will look at some of the results of this global spread of basketball: Where are we going?

Examining the Globalization of Basketball Financially and Culturally

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Where Are We?

According to FIBA’s website, the most recent numbers in 2003 show over 450 million people play organized basketball. This is up from 350 million in 1991 (Presentation). One can assume that the sport has continued to grow in the last six years to even greater numbers in organized global participation as the number of affiliated leagues and federations have grown.

Basketball has come a long way from the days when a gym teacher named James Naismith invented the sport back in 1891 (Masin, 1). It took just 45 years for the sport to be first accepted into the Olympic Games (1). The United States dominated the sport by winning the first 7 Olympic gold medals until Russia won gold in both 1972 and 1988 (1). The sport of basketball was largely thought to be on par with most other Olympic sports.

The domination of the US ending meant two things. The sport of basketball was now being played and understood on a more global scale and becoming more popular and that the United States wanted to regain their dominance. This led to the introduction of the most famous team in history, The Dream Team, in 1992 (Masin, 2). The National Basketball Association’s (NBA) most popular stars were allowed to play for the first time providing global exposure to a sport that has already begun to take off in global popularity in the 1980’s. The Dream Team, led by Michael Jordan, won all games by an average of 44 points on their way to gold in Barcelona (2).

David Andrews claims that basketball is a “legitimate cultural industry” that has replaced manufacturing as a global product (Andrews, “Disneyization”, 91). It is tough to argue this notion when one looks at the staggering numbers of dollars involved in sport. Since David Stern took over as commissioner in 1984,
basketball has used television and commerce to grow the game to a globally consumed product fueled by television and marketing (91).

Television allows the NBA to reach over 750 million households in over 42 different languages in 212 countries around the world (Falcous, 61). There is clearly no denying how huge the sport has become from a global financial, consumption, and culture standpoint.

Finally to profile how the game has truly become global, we must continue to focus on the world leading league, the NBA. Foreign players represent 80 of the 430 roster positions on NBA teams (“Local”, Economist, 11). On the 2007 playoff rosters (16 teams) 60 foreign players hailed from 28 countries and 9 international players ultimately played in the finals (Johnson, 1).

Currently, foreign leagues are beginning to compete financially with the NBA. Josh Childress left the NBA for more money by signing with a Greek team for $20 million over 3 seasons (Saraceno, 1). Other players, such as Jammero Pargo signing in Moscow and Earl Boykins playing in the Italian League, demonstrate a playing field that is becoming more financially level (1).

This financial, consumption, and cultural growth lead us to asking how all this has occurred.

How's it Grown?

In 1984 David Stern became commission of the National Basketball Association. Since the time of his takeover, franchises have increased in value from $15 million to $300 million. Gross revenue from licensed products has increased from $10 million to $3 billion. League revenue is up from $118 million to $3 billion (Andrews, 91).

David Stern made basketball into a global, cultural, entertainment-based “spectacularization” according to Andrews (Andrews, 97). The league was stagnant and virtually ignored in the 70’s (97). Stern used rivalries, such as Larry Bird vs. Magic Johnson and Celtics vs. Lakers, as a way to rev up the media television spectacle (97). Individual players, mainly Michael Jordan, were heavily promoted and became pop culture icons (97). This was all put together on television through techniques emphasizing narratives as developed through Olympic Games telecasts on NBC (98).

The NBA let viewer see players’ faces up close on television and the personal dramas were heavily played up for TV (Andrews, 99). The Bird-Johnson rivalry led to more global viewers, but with an uneasy racial tension as the backdrop (99). Michael Jordan, however, was the answer. He represented a hip, camera-friendly, pop culture image that could be embraced globally without the racial tension (99).

In addition to Stern, a company called Nike also saw what Michael Jordan could financially mean to global culture through the context of basketball. Nike used Jordan as a means to spread basketball to previously undiscovered global markets (Andrews, “Jordanscapes”, 432). At the same time, global connectivity was exploding and the world seemed to be looking for a hero. Jordan became bigger than the sport (432).

As evidence of Jordan’s influence, Jordan was the most popular athlete in rugby-loving New Zealand in 1993 (Adrews, “Jordanscapes”, 433). In Poland in the late 1980’s, the NBA was essentially unheard of (443). Due to the fall of communism, Stern, Nike, Jordan, and television, today the pop culture NBA is familiar with virtually all young people in Poland (443).

As written in the article, “They All Want to Be Like Mike” in Fortune Magazine, Georges Eddy, a French TV NBA Analyst, is quoted as saying, “Jordan is on the scale of Pele. To me, there was Pele, there was Jordan, and that’s it.” (Gunther, 52). Considering the global popularity of soccer, this quote is remarkable and truly speaks to globalization of the sport of basketball.

Stern and NBA have used other marketing vehicles besides television. In September of 2003 the Inagural Africa 100 Camp was held to assist in developing players in Johannesburg, South Africa (Wahl, 68). These camps already exist in both China and Europe (69) and demonstrate the lengths the league will go to promote the sport.

Culture comes through loud and clear on the foreign broadcast of the NBA, but cannot dictate how audiences perceive the ‘cultural text” of the message (Falcous, 62). In the UK, the NBA worked closely with Channel 4 to create a local version of the global NBA broadcast that allowed viewers to take in culture of the NBA (65). This included slang, hip hop music, and more upbeat presentations (65). The NBA is primarily interested in marketing greatness over television greatness (68).

This type of broadcast where a global product is presented with local control is called a “glocalized"
broadcast by Falcons (67). The global image is clearly the most important while local tweaks must be made to educate viewers to the sport’s intricacies (71). The broadcasts may provide a more in-depth cultural look at US cities where games are played and teach viewers such important facts such as: Chicago is called The Windy City and is home to the Sears Tower, Al Capone, and major businesses (72). The NBA is always portrayed as very important to these cities culture and lifestyle (71).

Other cultural factors have played into the spread of basketball as well. In China, the dunk carries much cultural significance. It is seen as a spectacle, most typically performed by black players, that is viewed over and over on television as a representation of “physical violence and commercial domination” (Wang, 272). This is in stark contrast to the respectful ‘Chinese way’ represented by players such as Yao Ming (272). The dunk, therefore, represents much of what the Chinese view as the American way (272).

These factors have all helped the sport of basketball grown globally. One becomes curious as to where we may go from here.

Where Are We Going?

As we look at the increased media culture around the globe, basketball remains a cultural method that can be used to attract viewers. Players around the globe are simply more reachable by scouts or coaches than at any time in the past. African players in Nigeria all have the ability to communicate by using email (Wahl, 69). This interconnectedness will only increase over time. These Nigerian players also have a better understanding of their options. They can research American schools or find out more about the European Apprentice System and what would be best for them (69).

In China, basketball cultural effect is even larger. Yao Ming, who plays with the NBA’s Houston Rockets, represents the “China Global” (Wang, 264). This means China feels they are viewed more as a new China that is a player in the global marketplace and a worldwide force and not defined by politics or old ideologies (264). In addition, Yao’s success in the NBA is largely believed by Chinese to have reduced negative racial stereotypes of Asian men in Hollywood (264). No longer are Chinese solely portrayed as short, smart, and bookish (264). We could further predict that other nations will put a similar burden on their own future NBA stars. Not only are they playing for themselves, but also the betterment and advancement of an entire nation.

To further demonstrate what Ming has done and how he is poised to change the nature of the game of basketball in China, we can look to the policies of the Chinese Government. As of August 2008, a plan has been put in place to put a basketball court and ping-pong set in every village (“Local”, 13). Many of the Olympic facilities are being torn down, but the basketball arena will stay put out of popularity of the sport (13). There is not telling how this government policy may someday alter the global landscape of the sport.

For the final measure of basketball’s future, we must turn back to the almighty dollar. It is how we have arrived here and what will propel the sport forward. We are seeing a global shift in where basketball talent is playing. The European and foreign leagues have become more stable financially and the salaries are rising (“Basketball’s”, 2). Many NBA agents are using contracts with foreign leagues as leverage to negotiate (3). As mentioned earlier, some high profile players have begun signing contracts with foreign leagues (3). Ironically, what David Stern worked so hard to build could actually lead to the NBA being matched by another league. Two superleagues dominating the planet: The NBA and the Euroleague (ULEB) could provide the same dollars to players, global fame, and equal competition (4).

There are problems holding basketball’s expansion back. In Africa, post-9/11 security can make player movement difficult and scouts and coaches are often run out of town by street gangs and turf wars (Wahl, 69). But these seem to be more hurdles or roadblocks on global cultural expansion of the sport.

Basketball seems to have followed much of the globalization of commerce around the world. Some key factors helped to expedite the process. As global connectedness continues to expand and the world’s desire to get closer the culture of the game grow, there is no telling exactly what the future holds. One can be sure that as globalization grows around the world, basketball will surely mirror that growth.

Works Cited


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