The National Basketball Association (NBA) is the most distinguished and globally recognized men’s basketball league in existence. The organization was birthed from the historical mergence of the Basketball Association of America (BAA) and the National Basketball League (NBL) in 1949. [[1]](#footnote-1) The NBA is not only a common household phrase in the homes of North American basketball fans, but also an internationally romanticized league with followers reaching across the seas. This preeminent league is the prime example of the magnitude of globalization through sport and leisure. This paper will digress the structure of the NBA through works by Huang and Hong, Jozsa, Goldberg and other sport analysts to examine how globalization occurs through this multi-billion dollar franchise, specifically examining the rapid success of the NBA, the contributions towards this success through inclusion of foreign players, as well as the organization as a profitable business.

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From 1898 to 1953 there existed four major basketball leagues in America: National Basketball Ball League (NBBL), American Basketball League (ABL), National Basketball League (NBL), and Basketball Association of America (BAA). These four leagues spurred the beginning of the “acceptance, growth, and popularity of the sport and its significance.” [[2]](#footnote-2) Basketball was becoming increasingly popular among American culture, as the simplicity yet challenge of the game was something to be goggled after. The admiration for this sport was even more so solidified with the birth of the NBA on August 3rd, 1949 as the NBL and BAA joint forces and produced a universal league that could reach many major cities and gain attention from star players. The NBA rapidly expanded due to their new list of franchises through the merge and by 1975, “the NBA expanded into nine metropolitan areas, some of which has hosted professional clubs in MLB, the NFL, and/or the NHL.” [[3]](#footnote-3) With this growing success, the organization took the opportunity to optimize its fame by creating sectors in the league that specifically dealt with the teams’ “business, growth, image, reputation, and success within the sports industry throughout the United States (US) and in other countries.” [[4]](#footnote-4) They put their most skilled employees in jobs concerned with communications, merchandising, and television partnerships. [[5]](#footnote-5) Crediting to the success of the league were the players within the teams who quickly rose to become national icons, idolized by young boys and men. Players in the current globalized sport and leisure scene have an undeniably influential power that comes with their reputability in their professional careers. This can highly benefit the mobilization of the brand as the NBA encourages their teams and players to engage in social events for the community.

According to Jozsa’s article on the NBA, many professional sports leagues participate in various domestic and international affairs each year and NBA clubs allocate time to visit hospitals, nursing homes, retirement facilities, schools, and run camps and clinics for amateur basketball players. Whether it is to boost their public relations schemes or purely driven by moral sentiment, these programs highly affect the sport’s local and global reach. Grassroots programs such as a tournament named “Hoop-It-Up 3-on-3” have been established by the NBA in rural countries and urban areas such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, an the Philippines.[[6]](#footnote-6) Not only does this promote a positive, feel-good sentiment towards the organization, it also is a very pro-active and intimate way for players to engage with the international audience that contributes to the NBA’s global success. Another key program driven by David Stern, the former commissioner of the NBA, is “Basketball without Borders (BwB).” The NBA and FIBA created this initiative with a goal to “unite young basketball players in some positive social changes in education, health, and wellness.”[[7]](#footnote-7) By establishing these grassroots programs in 11 countries and 5 continents, running camps in Beijing, Johannesburg, and Mexico City, the organization increases publicity and transcends to become less of an exclusively elite sport and more of an “international language to promote global friendship and sportsmanship” as quoted by David Stern. [[8]](#footnote-8) This humanistic and ethical approach is an infallible method of the globalization of sport and engages struggling families in developing nations. Jozsa’s analysis sums up this sentiment perfectly by noting, “there are business, economic, and social reasons for pro sports leagues to lead by example and therefore adopt programs and affiliate with different types of domestic affairs within their community, region and nation, and also with international affairs within countries across the globe.” [[9]](#footnote-9)

The good ethics and prestige of the NBA’s global involvement in international crises’ and foreign countries has evidently advanced basketball onto the forefront of international sports and has generated a transnational audience. The NBA influences the attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles of all of the spectators that actively follow the franchise. The League’s foreign affairs broadcast NBA all-star games into more than 35 countries and territories by more than 100 international telecasters,[[10]](#footnote-10) with the league’s regular season games broadcasted in 42 languages to more than 200 countries.[[11]](#footnote-11) The range of its audience and the multiculturalism of the sport further promotes international engagement in basketball, especially observed through China’s obsession with the NBA. Running events such as the “Legends Tour” where former stars compete against the Chinese men’s national basketball team, help to bring cultures together in one cohesive and comprehended sport. Competing against national teams from places other than America helps to exceed the boundaries of geography and combine shared passions for an international sport. According to Jozsa’s article, “since 1978, there have been approximately 57 games played between NBA and Euro league basketball teams,” and “from a business perspective, these games benefited the NBA because of lower expenses from playing elite foreign teams at home rather than overseas.”[[12]](#footnote-12) By engaging in sport with other countries, the audience expands to the spectators in those respective countries and in turn, the NBA gains new exposure and followers. Clifford vocalizes the significance of sport by expressing that, “sport acts as a medium for cultural exchange.”[[13]](#footnote-13) For 48 minutes, cultural gaps are reduced to nothing while players play a game of like-rules and limit any controversy to stay on-court; it is a sure way to engage two countries in a mutually loved and fun activity. Sports leagues have the unique opportunity to captivate parties from various ethnic backgrounds and enhance the globalization of basketball, as “there are more national players in various leagues around the world which leads to more diversity in the competitive arena.”[[14]](#footnote-14) These borders are further surpassed when foreign-born players get drafted into the NBA.

Before April 1989, NBA teams consisted of mostly American-born athletes, as there were tight restrictions on eligibility for NBA players to participate in international events. However in April 1989, FIBA committee voted to eliminate distinction between amateurs and professionals, making all players eligible for FIBA competitions including the Olympics. [[15]](#footnote-15) This meant for the first time, international players could play in the NBA without being disqualified from representing their countries in the Olympics. The 1992 Barcelona Olympics Games was a historic moment in the globalization of the NBA as the United States men’s basketball team was deemed “the Dream Team”, composed of NBA superstars and “immediately evoked a global NBA mania at the Barcelona Olympics.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This event sparked an insight to how valuable foreign athletes are to the success of the sport and the organization. Since then, basketball players from foreign countries and territories on rosters of NBA teams have increased substantially, statistics from 2008 showing an influx of foreign players from 77 athletes and 33 nations to 83 athletes and 36 nations in the span of one year. [[17]](#footnote-17) Some of these featured international players include All-Stars like Pau Gasol (Spain), Yao Ming (China), Steve Nash (Canada), Dirk Nowitzki (Germany), and Tony Parker (France).[[18]](#footnote-18) Not only does this multicultural and diverse group of men have the ability to demonstrate their talents, but they also carry the honorable duty of representing their countries and bringing a sense of nationalism to their fans at home. This notion is extremely evident in the case of China, as the booming fame of Yao Ming converted the entire country into religious NBA fans. The *nba.com* website averages three million page views from China per day, attesting to the fact that, “more than 80 percent of Chinese males aged 15-24 are NBA fans, while each week at least 30 million people there watch the league’s games on television.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Not only is the role of foreign-born players critical in globalizing the sport and drawing international attention, but it also changes the discourse about race in sport. Grant Farred’s analysis of “phantom calls” in the NBA regarding referee calls against Yao Ming that may have been ethnically biased shows how race can take a political standpoint within sports. He argues that, “race and racism are more complicated than ever before because there is a ‘difficult, contorted, and fluid interplay of blackness, whiteness, and Asian-ness in the NBA and the larger culture.’”[[20]](#footnote-20) Despite controversies and racial biases within the NBA, the overall benefits of having foreign-born players participate are prominent as they bring these issues into the discourse and draw universal awareness that might not have existed beforehand. Foreign players are contributing positively to NBA franchises and are receiving more playing time and spotlight. Goldberg’s article measuring the impact and valuation of foreign players yields a chart showing the meaningful impact and talent of foreign players, comparing the top nine who attended college and top nine without college.

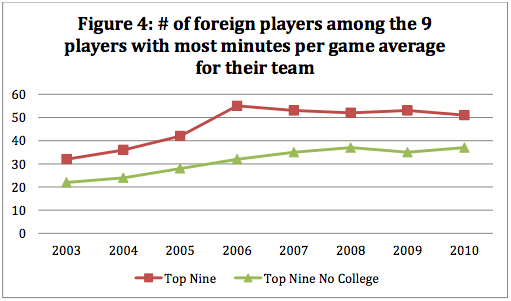


Figure 1. Increase in foreign born players among the top nine most minutes per game average

This chart shows that “a player in the team’s top nine with respect to minutes played means that he is a significant member of the team and is a valuable contributor.” [[21]](#footnote-21) Yao Ming as an NBA all-star has not only become an American icon but has unified his country through the major success of his career, further solidifying the national pride of China. “The Chinese are so ecstatic that Yao has become so popular. For the Chinese people, it’s huge. This big appeal for them is the sense of nationalism.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Above I have discussed the globalization of sport through humanitarian programs reaching rural countries, basketball’s rise of popularity through competition with other nations, as well as the weight of foreign-born players in the NBA. The most significant source of globalization through sport and leisure is manifested through the business and marketing aspects of the NBA as a profitable organization. The rising popularity of players and the league have opened up a new stage for commercialism as Huang and Hong state that, “capitalist sports are aggressively seeking profits and markets domestically and globally and have consequently accelerated the pace of sport globalization.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The Barcelona Olympic Games facilitated advertising for the NBA and consequently increased the global merchandise sales from $1 billion in 1990 to $3 billion in 1996.[[24]](#footnote-24) The prosperous NBA market is driven by the stats of its players causing the success of the athletes to establish a global fan base. The idolization of these players goes beyond having a poster taped to a wall as these athletes are further transformed into global commodities. Fantasy sports is an outlet where basketball lovers bet on their players and are able to participate in a lucrative industry while maintaining a sense of ownership and achievement. Fantasy Sports intersects sport and leisure and is able to be played, “across geographical and temporal boundaries with few limitations,” often for motivations such as “escapism or passing time, socialize, bragging rights, and fun and amusement.”[[25]](#footnote-25) The NBA fantasy league is a virtual site with people are consistently investing and engaging in an interconnected marketplace.

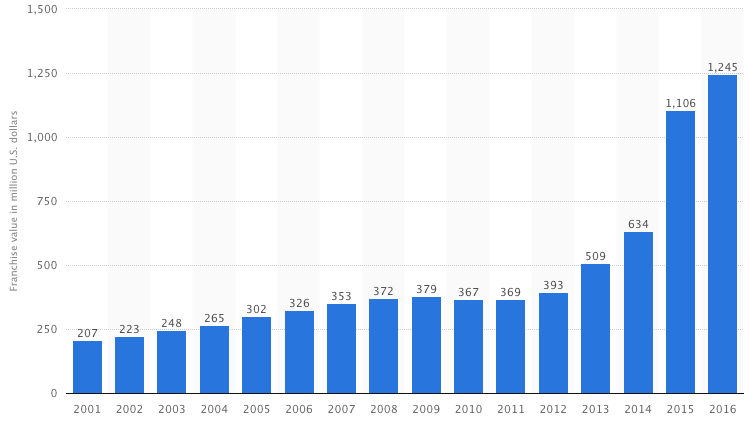
By having international players on the NBA teams it expands the league’s publicity and global reach, which works beneficially for the global marketing strategies. “The NBA has consistently expanded its international presence in recent years, and footwear giants are now capitalizing on the untapped potential of those markets by using international athletes as pitchmen.”[[26]](#footnote-26) This concept is proven through athlete collaborations with already established worldwide brands such as Nike, Adidas, Under Armour and Reebok. Yao Ming’s contract with Reebok and Stephen Curry’s endorsements for Under Amour perpetuate the commodification of their image and idol-like embodiment through mass production of t-shirts, jerseys, shoes, and other profitable merchandise. The NBA is well aware of the lucrative market and demand of team merchandise thanks to the public admiration of their players. An Adidas spokesman declares, “By signing these international players, it allows countries that have had a difficult time marketing basketball to do this through a country icon. Signing Darko Milicic gives Adidas a well-known European icon to use within its international marketing efforts.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The success of foreign and domestic icons of the NBA is not only reflected in their sports statistics but is also translated to the monetary value and global revenue of the NBA, espxsecially with advertising through worldwide brands that enable mass sales overseas.

Figure 2. Average franchise value\* of NBA teams from 2001 to 2016 (in million U.S. dollars)[[28]](#footnote-28)

The NBA’s worldly appeal is indisputably profound and has reached a height of globalization that is unique from other sports leagues. The epitome of the globalization of sport and leisure is best showcased through a VICE documentary called “The Hermit Kingdom” where three players from the Harlem Globe Trotters, Dennis Rodman (retired Chicago Bulls player) and host Ryan Duffy are invited into North Korea on the premise that they play an exhibition game and host a basketball camp for the best under 18 players in the country. One featured spectator of the exhibition game is the president of North Korea Kim Jong-un himself, a fan of the Chicago Bulls despite the differences between America and North Korea. If the NBA is able to penetrate into the world’s most high security, isolated, communist country, it speaks volumes to the ability for sport to surpass borders to enable international interaction. The astounding globalization of sport is recognized through this documentary as host Ryan Duffy concludes, “Through basketball we manage to bridge the divide between our countries, open a dialogue and make a connection with real people.”[[29]](#footnote-29) It is truly remarkable how far the NBA has escalated since it’s very homogeneous American focused league in 1975 to the wide extent of its current global reach. Through competition, eligibility of Olympic participation, and advertising foreign-born players, this sport has expanded in such a substantial international rate that no one can argue its vast globalization. Looking forward, and considering the positive impact on nationalism that comes with foreign all-stars such as Yao Ming, as well as the ability of sport to act as a vehicle of connection between disagreeing countries, we might concentrate more focus in using sports and leisure as a method to intensify globalization.

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