



Reasons for the Substantial Increase in NBA Overseas Players

Yuan Gao^(✉)

College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison 53706, USA
gao342@wisc.edu

Abstract. In the field of basketball, the NBA is one of the most famous basketball games in the world. NBA games are known for the virtuosity of the players on both sides. Although the NBA is famous all over the world, there are relatively few studies on foreign players who play in the NBA, especially why the number of foreign players in the NBA has increased significantly after the 1990s. This article studies why NBA players began to increase significantly after the 1990s from the perspective of David Stern's reform of the NBA and the changes in the world pattern. Among them, the reform is divided into the establishment of the dream team and the globalization of the NBA. At the same time, it analyzes the positive impact of these two reforms on the rapid growth of the number of NBA overseas players. In addition, by analyzing the changes in the world pattern, especially the civil war in Yugoslavia, it is analyzed why most of the overseas players are from the former Yugoslavia. Analysis shows that the civil war had a huge negative political and psychological impact on Yugoslav players, causing many skilled Yugoslav players to lose confidence in the local area. In this context, many Yugoslav players went to the NBA to seek opportunities to continue playing. Therefore, from 1990 to 2002, the number of overseas players in the NBA ushered in an era of rapid growth in the number of overseas players. Because of these findings, this paper can serve as a basis for future research on the factors behind it. The rapid development of the NBA.

Keywords: oversea players · reform · globalization · civil war

1 Introduction

The National Basketball Association (NBA) was founded in New York City on June 6, 1946, formerly known as the Basketball Association of America (BAA). The earliest history of the NBA employing overseas players can be traced back to when the NBA was founded. In 1946, Italian-Canadian Hank Biasatti played for the Toronto Huskies. Although the NBA has a long history of recruiting overseas players, in the first few decades, foreign players were so unpopular that their numbers were few. "During the 1980–81 season, only 1.7% of NBA players were born outside the United States" [1]. Cork uses the numbers laid out in his article to amply demonstrate to his readers the dearth of overseas players outside of the United States. In the early days of the NBA, this

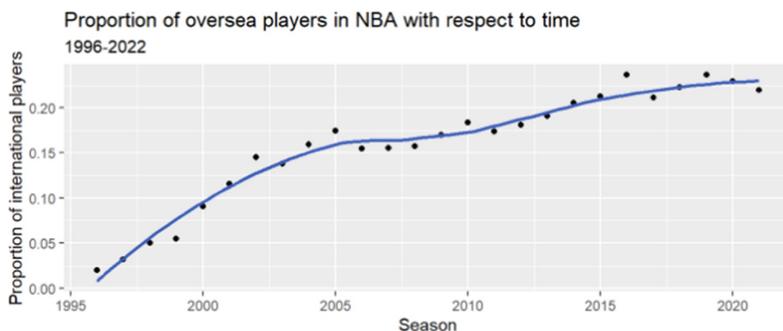


Fig. 1. The proportion of overseas players in NBA respect to years, from 1995 to 2020 (self-painted)

phenomenon began to change with the passage of time. According to Fig. 1 prepared by Yuan Gao, based on the data obtained from Kaggle, the proportion of overseas players in the NBA has changed from 2 in 1995. % to around 22% in 2020. The reasons for the substantial increase in NBA overseas players can be roughly divided into two aspects: policy and international situation.

2 Background

Before discussing the two major reasons, understanding the history of the NBA plays an important role in explaining the two major reasons behind it. Although the NBA is now one of the most popular sporting events in the world, in its first few decades, it was plagued by issues ranging from drug use to a poor image. NBA Hall of Famer Alex English complained about the problems “Our image was rough. We were on tape delay. People thought the league was too black” [2]. This phenomenon has to a certain extent, led to the reluctance of many overseas players to participate in NBA games. But in 1984, after David Stern took office as NBA commissioner, he introduced a series of reforms and policies to curb the above problems. The NBA has thus been able to reshape itself and successfully find a way to break through. In this situation, many overseas players began to change their minds and chose to join the NBA. According to the data disclosed in October 2022, the number of NBA overseas players has reached a new high. “The NBA currently features 120 players from 40 countries and six continents on its rosters for the 2022–2023 season” [3]. This is a good validation of what David Stern has done for the NBA before. It’s all worth it.

3 Reforms

After David Stern took office in 1984, what did he do to make the number of overseas players in the NBA explode? In order to explore in-depth, this paper chooses the establishment of the Dream Team and the NBA’s globalization policy as the main research objects, because they have played a decisive role in the rapid development of the number of NBA overseas players.

3.1 The Establishment of the Dream Team

In 1988, the US basketball team lost to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. This is the first time in the history of the US men's basketball team that they did not participate in the gold and silver medal contention. After that, the game's policy changed to allow NBA players to compete in the Olympics. But many team owners at the time refused to let their players sign up for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics because they were worried that their players would be injured after playing. At this time, David Stern insisted that the participation of NBA players in the Olympics could bring unprecedented development opportunities to the NBA, so he tried his best to negotiate with the team owners. In the end, the team owners were successfully persuaded, and their players were allowed to sign up for the Olympics.

In the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, the dream team headed by Jordan and Larry Bird successfully defeated the Croatian men's basketball team, which had inherited many former Yugoslav players, and won the championship with a proud score of 117 to 85. The result of the victory was expected by David Stern. When the news of the Dream Team's victory over the Croatian men's basketball team came out, the Dream Team successfully attracted the attention of the whole world, especially Europe. Tony Parker, an NBA star from France, mentioned the influence of the Dream Team on the young generation in Europe at that time in an interview. "That was the point that we were like, 'Wow, basketball is cool' and 'I want to go to the NBA. Maybe it's possible'" [4]. The victory of the Dream Team at that time aroused the longing of many European teenagers to go to the United States to participate in NBA games. Paul Gasol is an outstanding representative of these young people. At the age of 21, he traveled across the ocean from Spain to the United States to participate in NBA games and won two NBA championships in 2009 and 2010. Pau Gasol's experience is a good example of how David Stern's new policy has played an important role in the NBA's expansion of foreign players.

3.2 NBA's Globalization Policy

After David Stern took office, the globally televised NBA has been well promoted. The NBA has found broadcast partners in most countries and regions. This makes NBA events no longer limited to the United States. For example, an NBA game in London in January 2019 was broadcast to 215 countries and territories in 34 languages. This example shows that with the smooth implementation of the globalization of the NBA, the NBA already has a huge number of fans around the world. In Tony Parker's story, it is mentioned that many European NBA fans want to go to the United States to participate in NBA games. In the same way, the NBA has a huge fan base around the world, and fans from many other continents will have the same thoughts as European fans. Therefore, with the global broadcast, more and more powerful overseas players are attracted to the United States to participate in NBA games. In addition, the globalization of the NBA not only focuses on attracting many existing basketball players to join the NBA, but also focuses on cultivating a new generation of basketball players on a global scale. Basketball Without Borders was originally created by the NBA and The International Basketball Federation (FIBA) to bridge the gap created by youth in the Balkans during the Yugoslav Civil War. Over time, the organization tends to develop elite basketball

youths around the world. Since its inception in the early 2000s, Basketball Without borders has produced many talented players for the NBA. “The program has trained a total of 69 NBA players, 30 of whom are currently playing in the league” [5]. This data also explains why since 2005, the proportion of overseas players in the NBA has remained above 18%. In general, the globalization of the NBA promoted by David Stern not only enables the NBA to discover outstanding players from overseas, but also allows the NBA to cultivate and discover future overseas players suitable for it. In this way, the NBA has obtained a virtuous circle in terms of the quantity and quality of overseas players.

4 International Situation

In the 1990s, the social situation in Eastern Europe changed suddenly, and many countries were in turmoil. Yugoslavia, which defeated the United States in the 1988 Olympics, split into several countries during this period due to internal conflicts. Unrest in these countries led many Yugoslav basketball players to the US to play for the NBA.

4.1 Yugoslav Basketball Team Past Glory

Since winning the first gold medal at the FIBA World Championships in 1963, the Yugoslav basketball national team has become more and more active in international competitions and has become frequent visitor to the medal list of basketball competitions. According to Land of Basketball.com, Yugoslavia has the third-most medals in Olympic basketball behind the United States and the Soviet Union [6]. Also, in Yugoslavia, in addition to the national team, there is a famous basketball team Jugoplastika Split. This team is the only team to win three consecutive Champions League titles in the FIBA Euro Cup. Regarding the strong strength of Yugoslav basketball at that time, Zelko Pavlicevich, who led the Yugoslav team to win the FIBA European Champions Cup twice, described it this way: “That 1990 team had incredible chemistry. It was a team that did everything. Guys like Kukoc played multiple positions without a drop in performance. That team was considered the greatest of European teams” [7]. As Zelko Pavlicevich said that the strength of the Yugoslav basketball teams made them the pride of the entire country at that time. But the glory of the Yugoslav basketball teams is as fleeting as a beautiful sunset. With the outbreak of the Yugoslav Civil War, Yugoslav basketball culture collapsed in 1990 with the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

4.2 Civil War in Yugoslavia: An Opportunity for the NBA

The outbreak of the Yugoslav civil war not only changed the fate of the country and the people, but also dealt a heavy blow to Yugoslav basketball players. The civil war made Yugoslav basketball players the center of attention on the court because they were the pride of Yugoslavia. It is precise because of the popularity of Yugoslav basketball players before the civil war that they were involved in political disputes after the civil war began. Vlade Divac, a famous center of the Yugoslav men’s basketball team. The Yugoslavian team celebrates on the field during a game just before the outbreak of the

civil war. A fan walks onto the pitch holding a Croatian flag. Vlade Divac, bent on making it a Yugoslavian celebration, angrily grabbed flags and pushed fans away from the team. But when the team returned to the Croatian home ground, he was abused by locals for driving fans holding Croatian flags from the field. As well as being vilified by locals, Vlade Divac has also developed a rift with his teammates from other emerging countries in the team, especially his good friend Drazen Petrovic from Croatia. Drazen Petrovic was no longer associated with Vlade Divac after the Civil War broke out. Even years later, in the fall of 1993, when the two met at an NBA game, “archive footage shows the strain in the body language, with Petrovic avoiding Divac’s eyes” [8]. Even after so many years, the gap between them has not been eliminated. The experience of Vlade Divac above can be regarded as a microcosm of the difficulties faced by Yugoslav basketball players at that time. In this environment, the basketball players of Yugoslavia are like boats in the storm, lonely and helpless.

During the Civil War, “With so little funding to go around in a war-ravaged economy, cities were often unable to support the sport” [9]. From this time on, basketball was not as important in Yugoslavia as it used to be. It is precise because of this that some members of the Yugoslav men’s basketball team went overseas to seek development space. Among them are Željko Pavličević, Dražen Petrović, Peja Stojakovic, the core members of the Yugoslav basketball team. When these players came to the United States, they found that the social environment in the United States was very free. According to Ben Mehic’s description: “the United States had granted me freedoms that my parents couldn’t even fathom. They were allowed to practice (or choose not to practice) any religion they wanted, and no one would threaten to kill them for it” [10]. This relaxed social environment made those basketball players from Yugoslavia who had suffered from the civil war feel more relaxed than ever. At the same time, they can also earn a lot of money playing for the NBA in the United States, because these Yugoslav players can get more points for their teams in the game. When other basketball players in Yugoslavia saw their compatriots get good social treatment in the NBA. These athletes in Yugoslavia have also left Yugoslavia, which is in war, and come to the United States to play for the NBA. According to the list of NBA players born outside the United States, Canada is the country that provides the most overseas players to the NBA, with a total of 61 NBA overseas players [11]. But if all the overseas NBA players from Yugoslav countries are added up, Yugoslavia has provided a total of 83 overseas players to the NBA. Among them, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia had 30, 23 and 13 people respectively. In addition, there are 10 players, 7 players from Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under such circumstances, the NBA ushered in its own opportunities, and many high-quality Yugoslav basketball players came to work in NBA teams. This also led to a rapid increase in the proportion of overseas players in the NBA from 1995 to around 2002.

5 Conclusion

Overall, there are two main reasons for the substantial growth of NBA overseas players. First, the new policies and reforms implemented by David Stern have enabled the NBA to successfully establish the league’s global prestige and gain a huge support group, which has allowed the NBA to enter a virtuous circle of continuously introducing outstanding

overseas players. The second aspect is the influence of the international environment. The drastic changes in Eastern Europe, especially the disintegration of Yugoslavia, provided an opportunity for the NBA to recruit many outstanding overseas players in a short period of time, resulting in a substantial increase in the proportion of overseas players in the NBA between 1995 and 2002. The above two aspects have made great contributions to the NBA attracting many excellent overseas players after the 1990s.

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