

NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION

Professional basketball has changed drastically since its early days; in fact, its evolution has perhaps been more pronounced than that of any other major sport—in dress, style of play, and, most noticeably, the racial composition of teams. Once a sport that featured white men in close-fitting uniforms hoisting up set shots from chest level, by the late twentieth century basketball was largely an African-American phenomenon, featuring loose-fitting fashions, a hip-hop sensibility, and an emphasis on the shortest-range shot of all: the slam dunk. Even though a sport such as hockey, for example, has always been dominated by white fans and players, basketball's racial shift has led to an identity crisis of sorts, with the issue of race becoming a major feature of discussion about the game.

NBA Structure and Administration

The thirty-team NBA is divided into two conferences: the Eastern Conference, which consists of the Atlantic, Central, and Southeast Divisions; and the Western Conference, which consists of the Northwest, Pacific, and Southwest Divisions. Each division contains five teams.

The NBA regular season begins in early November. A season consists of eighty-two games for each team, divided evenly between home and away games. Teams play each of the other teams in their own division four times per season; they play teams in the other divisions of their own conference three or four times, and they play teams in the other conference twice each. The NBA is currently the only one of the major sports leagues in which all teams play each other over the course of the regular season.

The NBA Playoffs begin in late April. Eight teams from each conference qualify: the winners of each of the three divisions plus the five teams with the next best records. Each round of the playoffs is a best-of-seven series. The third round of the playoffs is for the Conference Championship, and the winners of these two series compete against each other in the NBA Finals, the winner receiving the Larry O'Brien Trophy.

Plunkett Research reports in "Sports Industry Overview" that the NBA generated a total of \$3.1 billion in revenue during the 2006–07 season. SportsBusiness Journal estimates that sales of NBA-licensed merchandise brings in approximately \$1 billion per year. With such revenue teams can afford to pay high salaries. The average player salary was \$5.2 million during the 2006–07 season, the highest among the major sports in the United States. In addition, as of 2006, twenty-one NBA players, the most in any professional sport, earned salaries greater than \$15 million per year, according to the USA Today Salaries Databases.

NBA History

Basketball was invented in 1891 by James Naismith (1861–1939), a Canadian physical education instructor and physician. Working at a

Western Conference

Northwest

Portland Trailblazers
Oklahoma City Thunder
Utah Jazz
Denver Nuggets
Minnesota Timberwolves

Southwest

Houston Rockets
Memphis Grizzlies
San Antonio Spurs
Dallas Mavericks
New Orleans Pelicans

Pacific

Golden State Warriors
Los Angeles Clippers
Phoenix Suns
Sacramento Kings
Los Angeles Lakers

Eastern Conference

Atlantic

Toronto Raptors
Boston Celtics
Brooklyn Nets
Philadelphia 76ers
New York Knicks

Central

Cleveland Cavaliers
Chicago Bulls
Milwaukee Bucks
Indianapolis Pacers
Detroit Pistons

Southeast

Atlanta Hawks
Washington Wizards
Miami Heat
Charlotte Hornets
Orlando Magic

Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Springfield, Massachusetts, Naismith was directed by the head of the physical education department to create an indoor athletic game that would keep a class of young men occupied during the winter months. In two weeks Naismith had developed the game, including the original thirteen rules of basketball. Among them: "A player cannot run with the ball" and "The referee shall be judge of the ball and shall decide when the ball is in play, in bounds, to which side it belongs, and shall keep the time." Even though he never sought recognition for his invention, Naismith was present at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany, basketball's first appearance as an Olympic event.

Basketball was first played professionally in 1896, when members of a YMCA team in Trenton, New Jersey, left to form a squad that would play for money. Two years later a group of New Jersey sports journalists founded the National Basketball League (NBL), which consisted of six teams based in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The NBL petered out after several years, but in the mid-1930s a new league with the same name was founded. A second professional league, the Basketball Association of America (BAA), was formed by a group of New York entrepreneurs. The BAA, which was in direct competition against the NBL, had teams in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit. Right before the start of the 1948–49 season, four NBL teams—Minneapolis, Rochester, Fort Wayne, and Indianapolis—joined the BAA, and the following year the NBL's six surviving teams followed suit. The BAA was then divided into three divisions and renamed the National Basketball Association. One division was eliminated the following year, leaving the two that became the forerunners of the modern Eastern and Western Conferences of the NBA.

The NBA had no competition for the next two decades. That changed in 1967 with the formation of the American Basketball Association (ABA). The ABA lured fans, and quite a few players, away from the NBA with a flashier style of play that featured a red, white, and blue ball. The ABA disbanded in 1976, and several of its teams became part of the NBA. However, by the late 1970s professional basketball's popularity was sagging. Revenue and television ratings were down, and the game had become dull. The league received a huge boost with the emergence of two new stars: Magic Johnson (1959–) of the Los Angeles Lakers and Larry Bird (1956–) of the Boston Celtics, who together are credited with ushering in a new era of popularity and prosperity to the NBA. Behind Johnson and Bird, the Lakers and Celtics completely dominated the NBA through the 1980s. During the 1990s the game was dominated by Michael Jordan (1963–) and the Chicago Bulls. With the charismatic Jordan leading the way, the NBA continued to thrive through most of the decade.

After the 1997–98 season, tensions between players and owners began to heighten, as the salary cap and other issues came to a head. The owners instituted a player lockout, and the two sides did not reach an agreement until January 1999, by which time more than a third of the regular season had been canceled.

At the turn of the twenty-first century there was a dramatic increase in the number of foreign-born players in the NBA. The U.S. Olympic basketball team's mediocre performance in 2004 demonstrated that the rest of the world was starting to catch up with the United States in terms of basketball talent. Players from Europe appeared to have a better grounding in basketball fundamentals such as passing and long-range shooting. In "Solving USA Basketball's Long List of Problems" (September 6, 2002, http://espn.go.com/nba/columns/aldridge_david/1427992.html), David Aldridge notes that the top NBA coaches George Karl (1951–) and Larry Brown (1940–) (who coached the U.S. team to a bronze medal in the 2002 World Championships) have complained for years that there is less emphasis on skill development and fundamentals on U.S. teams than on teams in other countries. Bringing foreign-born players into the NBA is believed to be one possible solution to the problem. Tim Receveur notes in "Foreign Players Help San Antonio Win Basketball

Championship" (June 19, 2007, <http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2007&m=June&x=20070619155528btrueveceR0.3644831&t=livefeeds/wf-latest.html>) that in 2007 NBA rosters included eighty-five foreign-born players (about 20% of all league players) from thirty-seven different countries and territories. Some of them, including German-born Dirk Nowitzki (1978–) of the Dallas Mavericks, French-born Tony Parker (1982–) of the San Antonio Spurs, and Chinese-born Yao Ming (1980–) of the Houston Rockets, are among the best players in the league. In fact, the league's Most Valuable Player award was won by an individual born outside the United States for three straight years from 2005 to 2007—one by Nowitzki and two by the Canadian Steve Nash (1974–) of the Phoenix Suns.

Current Issues in the NBA

Salary Caps

Basketball has a soft salary cap, meaning the amount a team can spend on salaries is limited, but there are loopholes and complications. As a result, there are still great disparities in how much the teams spend. For example, the article "NBA Salary Report" reports that the New York Knicks started the 2006–07 season with a payroll totaling \$117 million, whereas the Charlotte Bobcats paid their players a total of \$38 million. Table 4.7 shows the history of the NBA salary cap since 1984.

Beginning in the late 1980s it became increasingly common for top college players to leave school before graduating and enter the NBA draft. By the mid-1990s the best high school players were foregoing college altogether and moving straight into the professional ranks. The NBA has long sought to discourage players from making the jump from high school to the pros. Toward that end, in 1995 the league enacted a salary limit for rookies, in the hopes of making the move less enticing.

In June 2005, as another labor dispute seemed possible, the league and the players union reached a new collective bargaining agreement. In "The NBA's New Labor Deal: What It Means, Who It Impacts", Liz Mullen and John Lombardo explain that the agreement's key provisions included a new rule preventing players from entering the NBA straight out of high school, increased drug testing, a 3% increase in the salary cap, and a reduction in the maximum length of free-agent contracts from seven to six years. This agreement remains in effect through the 2010–11 season.

Minimum Age

Among the issues addressed in the NBA's contract, the minimum age requirement generated the most public attention. This provision requires that a player be at least nineteen years old and be out of high school for at least one year. Proponents of age restrictions argue that allowing teens in the NBA does them a disservice and that they are much better off playing college basketball—even if it is just for a year—or playing in the NBA Developmental League than they are sitting on the end of an NBA team's bench rarely seeing significant playing time. They also say the NBA's skill level can become diluted with players who have not yet mastered the fundamentals of the game. According to the article "David Stern Media Conference", the NBA commissioner David Stern (1942–) has been the most vocal advocate of age limits, arguing that the presence of NBA recruiters in high school gyms has an overall negative influence on young players, that teens lack the maturity to handle the rigors of NBA life without getting into trouble, and that too many young urban Americans are unrealistically looking to basketball as a pathway out of poverty.

Opponents of the minimum age requirement point out that practicing every day against the best players in the world is not such a bad way to learn the game and wonder what young men can gain from waiting just one extra year before entering the professional league. In "Hunter Still Opposed to Raising NBA Age Limit", Chris Sheridan notes that Billy Hunter (1943–), the director of the NBA players' union, also questions the possible racial motivations behind the move toward age limits:

"I'm still strongly philosophically opposed to it, and I can't understand why people think one is needed except for the fact that the NBA is viewed as a predominantly black sport. You don't see that outcry in other sports, and the arguments that have been in support of an age limit have been defeated."

Race in the NBA

The debate over teens in the NBA and its possible relation to race is related to the broader issue of public image. Because it is dominated by young African-American males, the NBA struggles with the image the league projects to a predominantly white American public. Some basketball executives, particularly Stern, express concern about the message sent by the appearance and behavior of certain players. The arrests of high-profile players on sexual assault, drugs, and weapons charges have not helped matters. According to Jeff Benedict, in *Out of Bounds: Inside the NBA's Culture of Rape, Violence, and Crime* (2004), a startling 40% of NBA players have police records, although, not surprisingly, the NBA disputes this claim. Interestingly, it is not the younger players who are getting in trouble the most. In "Illegal Defense: The Irrational Economics of Banning High School Players from the NBA Draft", Michael A. McCann of the Mississippi College School of Law analyzes arrests of NBA players from 1995 to 2004 and finds that 57.1% of the NBA players arrested actually went to college for four years. Another 17.9% of the arrested players went to college for three years. Only 4.8% of those arrested did not go to college at all.

Nonetheless, the question of public image persists. As one way of addressing the image problem, Stern announced in October 2005 a new dress code that would apply to all players when they are participating in NBA-related activities, including arriving at and leaving games, participating in interviews, and making promotional appearances. The new rules banned sleeveless shirts, shorts, T-shirts, chains or medallions worn over the clothes, sunglasses while indoors, and headphones (except on a team bus or plane or in the locker room). The code also required players to wear a sport coat when on the bench but not in uniform. Reactions to the code among players were at best mixed. Some players applauded the league's effort to clean up the game's image. Others were outraged. According to the article "Spurs Superstar Tim Duncan Is Known to Be Understated and Shy, But Not about the NBA's New Dress Code", Tim Duncan (1976-) of the San Antonio Spurs, a player often touted by the league as a model citizen, described the dress code as "basically retarded." The article "Pacers' Jackson: Dress Code Is 'Racist': Forward Wears Jewelry to Protest Rules, Which He Says Attacks Culture" reports that Stephen Jackson (1978-) of the Indiana Pacers openly accused the league of targeting black players. Jackson was particularly critical of the ban on wearing chains, noting that chains are associated with hip-hop culture and are a common fashion choice among young black men.

A new image problem for the NBA emerged in July 2007, when it was revealed that the veteran referee Tim Donaghy (1967-) was under investigation for allegedly betting on the outcome of NBA games, including games in which he had officiated. The following month he pleaded guilty to two felony charges, admitting that he personally bet on NBA games and that he provided inside information to associates about likely game outcomes.

WOMEN'S NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION

The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) started play in June 1997 following the celebrated gold medal run of the U.S. women's basketball team in the 1996 Olympics. There had been other professional women's basketball leagues before, but the WNBA was launched with the full support of the NBA, making it much more viable than other upstart leagues. At its inception, the WNBA already had television deals in place with the National Broadcasting Corporation, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), and Lifetime network.

In its first season, the WNBA had eight teams. By 1999 four more teams had joined the league. That year, players and the league signed the first collective bargaining agreement in the history of women's professional sports. Four more teams were added in 2000. Following the 2002 season, the league's ownership structure was changed. Before that, the NBA owned all the teams in the WNBA. In 2002, however, the NBA sold the women's teams either to their NBA counterparts in the same city or to outside parties. As a result of this restructuring, two teams moved to other cities and two teams folded. Another team dropped out after the 2003 season.

As of 2007, there were thirteen teams in the WNBA: six in the Eastern Conference and seven in the Western Conference. Each team plays a thirty-four-game regular-season schedule, with the top four teams in each conference competing in the playoffs. The first and second rounds of the playoffs are best-of-three series. The WNBA Finals are best of five. The WNBA season starts in the summer, when the NBA season ends.

Even though the WNBA has gained in popularity, it has not been a big financial success. Through 2006, the league had not yet turned a profit in any year, although league officials expressed optimism that 2007 would be the season in which the league finished in the black. Average attendance at WNBA games is only about half that of NBA games. Player salaries are much lower as well. In "Free Agency 101", the WNBA indicates that the maximum salary for a WNBA player was \$93,000 in 2007; this figure was less than one-fourth the minimum salary for an NBA rookie.

Eastern conference

Chicago Sky
Connecticut Sun
Detroit Shock
Indiana Fever
New York Liberty
Washington Mystics

Western conference

Houston Comets
Los Angeles Sparks
Minnesota Lynx
Phoenix Mercury
Sacramento Monarchs
San Antonio Silver Stars
Seattle Storm