

# **NBA JAM: The recent popularization and notarization of the NBA and its image**

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Abstract for “NBA JAM: The recent popularization and notarization of the NBA and its image”

This paper will analyze the National Basketball Association and its recent urgency to pay attention to its public image. It will examine the way the media, especially the print media, helps portray the NBA and its progression in recent years. There are many interesting aspects to sports media as far as professional men’s basketball is concerned, and it is important to look at the fine lines of the situation, using statistics, opinions from the professionals and the target audiences, and various case studies. I concluded that the NBA wants the public to know that the NBA knows about its public image. However, getting deeper, I found that the NBA is more concerned about the acknowledgement of its public image than actually doing something constructive about it.

It was not until I was 8 years old that I began paying attention to basketball or the NBA in general. I had a favorite basketball player then, Michael Jordan, but I did not watch basketball, did not play basketball, and had no intentions on learning how to. I was, however, into my Super Nintendo Entertainment System. This all changed at the Police Athletic League in Atlantic City, New Jersey. I rarely had a quarter to play the arcade, but when I did, I would always play NBA JAM: Tournament Edition. That was the game that got me hooked on basketball, and it did not hurt that the gym was right across the hall from the arcade wall. I would look at the video game for long stretches at a time, and when court space became available, I would go into the gym and shoot underhand shots into the basket since I was not strong enough to shoot overhand.

Over time I learned the proper way to shoot, how to dribble, and the rules of the game. I had my mom buy me first pack of basketball cards (she always bought baseball cards as if I liked baseball), I started watching games on NBC, and in a matter of time I began to start analyzing basketball statistics and formulating them. I went from an 8 year old with no real interest in basketball to a student of the game. All it took was a video game. A video game that made the players seem larger than life, that had the NBA's best players in a fantasy

world within another fantasy world on the court. These players were not even the best of the best in the league. Michael Jordan was not in the game because he was playing baseball. Shaquille O'Neal was not in the game because if he was, no one would play with the other 26 teams in the league at that time. Same rule applies to Charles Barkley, one of the most visible superstars in the 1990s. Yet the game was popular and so was the NBA.

Now, in 2006, the National Basketball Association (NBA) has undergone many changes since 1995. The league is bigger, younger, and more global. The league is bigger because there are now 30 teams in the league, up from 27 at the end of the 1994-1995 NBA season. Some of the league's teenage fans from 2005 are now veterans (not rookies, veterans) in the league now. Legends have either retired or are being replaced within their team. The league has expanded its global audience in recent years with players such as China's Yao Ming and Germany's Dirk Nowitzki. Most notably of all these however is the way the sports media has affected the NBA in recent years. The NBA is a very visible league now. The NBA reaches areas that some major sports do not touch on. The NBA rivals National Football League in the United States, and rivals only soccer in worldwide popularity. However, the NBA is far more notable overseas than the NFL is, as evidenced by the few foreign born NFL players compared to the NBA. Likewise, the NBA is far more notable in the United States than soccer is. The NBA holds a great influence in the urban community. Finally, the NBA has developed a crossover appeal that has made it easy to market. The sports

media has helped popularize the NBA. However, as good as the sports media has been to the NBA, the NBA is struggling now in 2006 with its public image, and the new NBA dress code is the event that has finally highlighted this point. My argument is that the NBA is well aware of its public image and is going the extra yard to prove to its receptive public that it is aware of its public image, but the actions taken by the league are just posh gimmicks that have no real effects or value.

The NBA on television has gone through minor struggles since the second retirement of Michael Jordan and NBA lockout, both in 1998. When the game of basketball lost its most popular player *and* missed half of the season as a result of a labor dispute between players and owners, popularity was going to decline. The NBA was fortunate, however, that the lockout did not cancel the *entire* season. For one, the NBA did themselves a big favor by not cancelling the 1998-1999 NBA season. They had to compress the schedule and cancel the 1999 NBA-All Star festivities, which were to be held in Philadelphia. In addition to that, they had to return without the most popular player in the game and the team that won the previous three NBA championships (the Chicago Bulls) let their entire starting lineup go. This would have been a major blow if the entire NBA season was cancelled.

Secondly, the lockout happened at a time where the NBA would definitely have the time to recover. That time was outlined in the four-year, \$1.616 billion

dollar contract the NBA had with NBC, according to InsideHoops.com (2006). The NBA also had long-time television partner TNT airing games. Anytime a station can market a big comeback (in this case, the “return” of the NBA), they will milk it as much as possible. For example, when the NBA returned to ESPN for the 2002-2003 season, it was a big comeback for the network: “In ESPN’s case, home is the literal theme of the campaign as the network’s anchors and NBA stars are shown living under one roof and muddling through various family situations...’We haven’t had the league [since 1983] and we just wanted to communicate that...it’s back on ESPN,’ said Lee Ann Daly, senior VP-marketing, ESPN” (Thomaselli, 2002, p.47). In sports media circles, the NBA is a big deal, and not just because of the money involved with the league. Money is still an important part of it, as the NBA’s deal with ESPN was its richest television contract yet, and rates would have gone down, not up, if they renewed with NBC. The NBA’s deal with a cable network was also important because it was a fresh start for the league, and something new is something good. Even still, this was a sign of recognition that the NBA’s popularity was in need of damage control. In moving the majority of it’s games from a broadcast network (NBC) to cable (adding ESPN to an already existing TNT package), the NBA was clearly taking a gamble: “...Will the NBA fall off the radar screen, or does cable level the playing field? The NBA would like to reverse a precipitous ratings decline. Since its peak rating of 18.7 and a 33 share for the 1998 NBA Finals, viewership has dropped to a 10.2 rating and 19 share for this past June’s championship series. Ratings for the NBA All-Star Game have also declined, going from a high of

14.3/22 in 1993 to a 5.1/8 share this past February. 'When you're talking about falling off the radar, that's mostly with the press,' said Steve Sternberg, senior VP-director of audience analysis for Magna Global USA. 'The core audience is going to watch NBA on cable. ...You're fragmenting the audience, but you're not necessarily having people spend less time watching the NBA'" (Thomaselli, 2002, p.47). The gamble is that the NBA, with a shadow of its best ratings, will get its best fans at the best times. What does this have to do with the NBA's image? The answer is that the ratings decline is firmly attached to the negativity the NBA has received over the past few years over a number of controversial issues.

In the 1995 NBA draft, the Minnesota Timberwolves selected forward Kevin Garnett with the fifth overall pick. This was a highly controversial selection because for one, there hadn't been a player drafted straight out of high school in since 1975 (Moses Malone). In addition to that, the feeling in the league at the time was that high school players weren't physically or emotionally ready for the NBA. The success of Kevin Garnett, a nine time NBA-All Star as of 2006, led to many more high school players skipping college for the NBA between 1995 and 2005. However, the league, in an attempt to promote high school players to spend at least a year in college, included in a new collective bargaining agreement that players must be at least 19 years old and one year removed from high school graduation. This was a move by the NBA recognizing its influence; this was an example of NBA image reflection. The NBA knows the successes of

some of the best high school players, but there are flameouts every season, and with no college experience, these players have tougher life decisions than those that have completed at least a semester of college. This was one move that the NBA made that showed they recognized that the impact of what they do affect many youth. One of the NBA's goals is to promote education and alternative career options. College has a great potential to change minds, and it is a positive boost to the NBA's public image.

The NBA is so conscious of its image now because of the legal problems and careless behavior of many of its players. The NBA was plagued in the 1970s and early 1980s as being labeled as a drug infested league: "When current NBA Commissioner and CEO David Stern took over in 1984, the league's image was in trouble. In his words, 'sponsors were flocking out of the NBA because it was perceived as a bunch of high-salaried, drug-sniffing Black guys'" (Hughes, 2004, p. 164). The league and David Stern have worked to improve this image of the NBA, and he has succeeded in making the NBA much more popular. So what are these things that cause him to be concerned about the league's image now? According to lawyer and investigative journalist Jeff Benedict, "Baseball is dealing with steroids. Basketball is dealing with aggravated manslaughter and felony rape" (Benedict, 2004, p. 221). Jeff Benedict looks into the NBA and suggests that the NBA is a safe haven for NBA players. Many NBA players' legal issues are highlighted, but more intriguing than



that is the lack of seriousness of the NBA in handling the transgressions and trespasses of its players.

An example involves an incident from the 2001-2002 NBA season when former Portland Trail Blazers forward Bonzi Wells, along with then teammate guard Erick Barkley, disrespected a police officer when Wells was threatened of being charged with criminal trespassing. What Wells says to the officer, Mark Friedman, is what is considered to be what is wrong with some of the league's players: "You don't just walk over here and tell me what to do. You even know who you're talking to?" (Benedict, 2004, p. 113). The condescending attitude exhibited by Wells and other players in similar confrontations with law officers (such as Darrell Armstrong, Tim Hardaway, and Clifford Robinson) has direct effects, even from the officers: "Officer Mark Friedman, who arrested Wells in Portland on the trespassing charge, said his respect for the NBA has faded with the endless train of offenses and no accountability. The following is a view from not only a police officer, but a citizen of an NBA city, and as such, he represents the expressions of many others:

'I've given up on NBA basketball,' said Friedman. 'I don't watch them anymore. People tend to be extra forgiving in Portland because there's no other game in town. If there was, the team would really be feeling it in their pocketbooks. It's a sign of the times'" (Benedict, 2004, p. 122).

On November 19, 2004, towards the end of the highly anticipated Indiana Pacers-Detroit Pistons match up at Auburn Hills, Michigan, the worst brawl between players and fans erupted, resulting in the suspensions of Pacers Ron

Artest (remainder of the 04-05 NBA season), Stephen Jackson, Jermaine O'Neal, Anthony Johnson, and Reggie Miller and Pistons Ben Wallace, Chauncey Billups, Elden Campbell, and Derrick Coleman. The case was taken to court and has been an intense debate over which sides should be held most responsible. Some commentators openly suggested that the fans have gotten out of control, and the other side of the argument is that there should never be a reason for a player to attack a fan. The sports media had plenty of material, and again what they present to the public plays a role in the NBA's image. The incident was negative, but the reaction to it was Commissioner David Stern's "no tolerance" policy toward the man who was at the center of all of this, Ron Artest. When Artest was suspended for the remainder of the 2004-2005 NBA season, it was viewed as a harsh punishment but one that was necessary to offset the public image hit that the NBA took. In an incident in the 2005-2006 season that brought back thoughts of the Throwdown in Motown, then-New York Knicks forward Antonio Davis, a veteran in the NBA since 1992, ran deep into the stands to attend to his wife. There was no physical contact; Davis was ejected from the game versus the Chicago Bulls, suspended for five games, and later traded. Would this punishment be administered without the incident from the previous season? This depends on the situation. In terms of going into the stands and making violent contact, the NBA has lowered the boom before: "Vernon Maxwell of the Houston Rockets was suspended for ten games and fined \$20,000 for running into the stands and punching a heckling fan during a game against Portland on February 6, 1995" (Teitelbaum, 214, 2005). However, Davis made

no physical contact, instead acting with a cool head to see what the cause of commotion in the stands was. Regardless, the NBA took Davis' actions out of proportion, used the "Malice at the Palace" as "justification", and punished Antonio Davis accordingly.

The Palace incident was probably the straw that broke the camel's back. The NBA has recently adopted a dress code, usually seen in professional businesses but never before in professional sports. This dress code, established starting in the 2005-2006 NBA season, is intended to improve the NBA's image among middle class NBA fans and also to bring in more corporate sponsors.

David Stern, the NBA's commissioner, described it this way:

"We're working on a job description...It's to help the players understand what the job is. The job is not only to go to practice and win games. The job is representing the NBA to all constituencies. Community relations. Public relations. Sponsor relations... [The dress code is] a small thing that contributes to a sense of professionalism. It's what the job entails" (Springer, 2005).

In this way, the NBA is again being very aware of their role in society and its public image as they want to become more marketable. By putting an emphasis on appearance, Stern is hoping that translates into a new way of looking at the NBA, literally. USAToday journalist Christine Brennan agrees with the Commissioner's ruling and she echoes the audience that Stern is attempting to appease when she states that:

"[NBA players] are pitching a product they know well; they're selling themselves. And they know that when some Americans hear the words 'NBA', they're still picturing The Place brawl from last season, or some other thuggery from years past. It might not be fair, but we're not talking

about fair. We're talking about the public's perception of the league" (Brennan, 2005).

However, in the same way that the NBA is trying to improve how their players look off the court considering their potential business partners, they have caused a remarkable cultural divide in doing so. The items that are targeted by the NBA dress code are the same typically associated with that of the hip hop culture, a subculture that the NBA repeatedly goes to when promoting the NBA's urban appeal. These items that are now prohibited on "league time" and subject to penalty (suspension and/or fine) include T-shirts, throwback jerseys, caps, headbands, do rags, chains, pendants, and medallions. Most NBA players took the mandate in stride actually, but most is not all. Philadelphia 76ers guard Allen Iverson deemed it unfair and Denver Nuggets center Marcus Camby did not believe the dress code would work unless the NBA offered a stipend to help pay for suits for players, which drew criticism in its own right. After Charlotte Bobcats guard Brevin Knight made a similar comment about perceived player financial hardships, Brennan responded saying, "That's considerate of him to be looking out for the less fortunate, but the minimum player salary in the NBA last year was \$385, 000. People making \$38, 500 a year figure out a way to buy a few suits and keep food on the table. There has to be a way for a guy making 10 times that to make this work" (Brennan, 2005). All of this gives the sports media more to talk about during games, and cameras search openly for well dressed NBA players and also players that could possibly be breaking the dress code. The media however takes two approaches to it. One is the side of the media that

takes the NBA dress code as serious as possible, those that try to analyze the dress code's subliminal meanings. The other side puts things more in perspective of the NBA in general, treating the dress code as just something to watch out for and not much else. Tim Kawakami, a journalist for the Bay Area's *Mercury News*, suggests that the league's dress code misses the point, saying:

“Does Stern really believe he can disguise a fool by dressing him up in nicer clothes...if somebody is turned off of the NBA because he or she saw [San Antonio Spurs center Tim] Duncan on the sideline in a T-shirt and a necklace, I'm guessing that person probably wasn't that interested in the product in the first place” (Kawakami, 2005).

Kawakami again reminds people that material possessions don't necessarily make the man. *Sporting News* columnist Dave D'Alessandro alludes to a racial divide, exemplified by the Ron Artest incident, as to why Stern needs a dress code. He states that, “The white faces that started the mess should have been punished just as harshly [as Artest]. But in business-especially the NBA business-the customer always is right” (D'Alessandro, 2005). It is important to note that the initial player furor over the dress code has subsided as the season has progressed, and by next season it is possible that the dress code will be a complete non-issue. The media has control of this situation, and will most likely use its influential power to reduce the attention it gives to the dress code. It would then be time for the NBA to bring attention to a new publicity stunt.

In coming to a close, I observed the many stances on where the NBA is in terms of public image and weighing the effects of the dress code and the perceived golden age of the NBA, and a common theme in them was how

influential Michael Jordan was to the NBA. For those that had something to say about the NBA's dress code, Jordan and his exceptionally formal business attire and marketability for the NBA came up multiple times. In describing Jordan's marketability and influence on the game of basketball, Professor Michael Mandelbaum said, "No other single person made as large a contribution to basketball in its golden age..." (Mandelbaum, 2004, p. 268). Glyn Hughes commented that, "For nearly twenty years, the highly managed image of Michael Jordan (MJ) has been the exemplary racialized 'other' to Stern's 'drug-sniffers'..." (Hughes, 2004, p. 167). Tim Kawakami suggested, "Everybody, including Stern, wants another Michael Jordan. Everybody wants a return to the Golden Jordan Era. But it's silly to believe you can replicate Jordan just by asking players to dress like him" (Kawakami, 2005). And pro-dress code columnist Christine Brennan asked, "...wasn't it Michael Jordan who brought a whole new level of sartorial splendor to his league every time he stepped out of his closet?" (Brennan, 2005). All of this acknowledges the great and phenomenal influence MJ had on the NBA. However, there is one theory, an allegation that also proves how the NBA protected Jordan and his image, while protecting the NBA's image. In the years leading up to Jordan's first retirement after the 1992-1993 NBA season, it was reported that Jordan had done some deals with shady gamblers. Stanley H. Teitelbaum recounts that, "Some critics have postulated that the NBA played things down because it was imperative to protect Jordan's reputation and avoiding tarnishing the NBA's image. Suspending Jordan would have been crippling to the game" (Teitelbaum, 2005, p. 100). At most, the NBA conducted

investigations that didn't amount to anything. Some believe Jordan retired for almost two seasons to help the allegations die. No doubt the NBA helped. It worked, as no one in the media associates Jordan as a gambler, but as, well, Michael Jordan. The NBA is not in to real reprimanding. When it comes to the league's public image, everything, including the recent dress code mandate, is more style than substance.

The NBA has seen the best of times, and right now is trying to separate those days from the shadow they are currently in now. The demographic division between the National Basketball Associations players and fans has made the league less attractive to some, more attracted to others. It is clear that the league knows this schism exists. They want to be concerned about it. The reality is, the image of the NBA cannot be shaped entirely by its on court product, and this is something the league will have to realize ultimately.

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