

Sports and communication

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American sports have enjoyed popularity and diversity. It is not uncommon for a city to have several prominent sports teams and athletes at any given time. In an effort to expand its markets and audience, many sports have sought to capture foreign audiences, particular in Asia where memorabilia are a big industry. David Charles reasons that this has subsequently opened American doors to the influx of foreign players as well as perspectives about the industry (114-117). The entry of Yao Ming to the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 2002 is a good example of the phenomenon.

From joining the league's draft, his career has been one of the most chronicled, if not critiqued, in history. Among the most notable commentaries about Yao was made by retired forward Charles Barkley who stated his belief that the 7'6" is unlikely to be able to compete in the NBA ("Bad predictions about Yao"). At the same time, Yao's performance with the Shanghai Sharks begged to dissuade all reservations about him. Jayda Evans says that the idea of a center that performs like a forward generated significant interest among coaches and players alike. Yao and the NBA: Hit or Miss

Initial efforts concentrated on the promotion of sports which include hosting of games, goodwill projects and sports development partnerships. The exposure of American audiences to foreign players is changing characterizations made regarding their nationalities and standards of performance of professional athletes. From a sociological perspective, the introduction of foreign players into American sports is part of the overall impact of globalization: sports are considered microcosm of society and thus,

the presence of foreign players in a sports is parallel to level of representation or recognition they have in society (Charles 55-62).

Great Expectations American interest in Yao came about from his performance in the 1998 Junior World Championships, where he was voted MVP, the 2000 Sydney Olympics and was cemented in his performance in the 2002 World Championships (“ Yao Ming: The Next Asian Superstar”).

Whereas centers were often relegated to defensive positions, Yao was an offensive threat, easily averaging thirty points in international competitions and in the CBA (Chinese Basketball Association).

Opinion was that his entry to the NBA will pose as a challenge to the athleticism of the NBA’s centers and in particular serve as an antidote to Shaquille O’Neal’s domination of the paint (“ Player Profile: Yao Ming”). “ Team Yao”, consisting of Erik Zhang, Bill Duffy, Bill Sanders, John Huizinga, and Lu Hao, secured permission from the Chinese government to allow Yao to play for the NBA in 2002 and as soon as it was announced, profiles and studies of Yao were launched.

According to the NBA Draft website, it was to be expected that he will be the number draft choice, citing that despite Yao’s youth and still underdeveloped physique, he easily “ get(s) up and down the floor and has good hand and foot speed. (And) Has very intriguing shot blocking abilities. (And is) Beginning to dominate against the competition in China”. Though having no prior experience in American basketball, the Houston Rockets who had the privilege of first pick, early on expressed significant interest in choosing Yao.

They said that Yao's proven effectiveness in high stakes games, team skills and personality holds great promise for the team (Del Deo & Stern). At the same time, the team said that choosing Yao supports the team's ideology of supporting diversity and hoped that choosing Yao' will also enhance their appeal to fans (Evans). Matt Jung who was invited to interview Yao in Oregon before his NBA rookie season, described him as having the " timing of Russell coupled with the size of Bol and the agility of Sampson".

Rough Start

Barkley was not alone in contesting the Houston Rocket's choice of Yao as the first draft pick: " Yao Ming may not even make the CBA. He is perhaps the biggest hype the NBA has seen for a long time" (Associated Press, " Yao's road to NBA a long, hard one"). Sports columnist Andy Munger said, as early as May of 2002, that Yao, " may be able to penetrate inside against Japanese or Korean players in international play" but will undoubtedly not be able to perform effectively against the leagues leading centers like O'Neal because of being, " soft on top and will not be able to handle the NBA defense or pressure play" (" Bad predictions about Yao").

The opinion was supported by reports that Yao was having difficulties with adjusting to NBA regulations and communicating with the coaching staff and other players, needing the constant assistance of his interpreter, Colin Pine (Del Deo & Stern). However, it was Barkley's bet with TNT co-host Kenny Smith, who championed Yao on their November 14th show in 2002, promising that if Yao was bale to score 19 points in a game, then he would kiss his co-host posterior (" All eyes will be on Barkley, Kenny Smith's backside"). Early games also showed that he seemed awkward and unable to follow the pace of the game.

Ian O'Connor points out that given Yao's output and the money being paid to allow Yao play in the NBA, the CBA team Shanghai Sharks, " should be renamed the Shanghai Loan Sharks". Neither did basketball fans in New York mince words, saying that " The Rockets gambled on Yao Ming in the draft and so far it's looking like they crapped out. " (" Bad predictions about Yao"). Interviews with the Rockets' coaching staff also expressed reservation regarding Yao's freshman year in the NBA, considering him a as work in progress (Yao 35-37).

At this point in time, his performance that doesn't promise any longevity in the NBA which made Randy Brickley of the Arizona Republic predict that, "... Inside of three or four years, (Yao will) probably be history. " (as cited in " Bad predictions about Yao")O'Neal also expressed his doubts and it what will become a highly criticized statement that included mimicking speaking in Chinese (Karas). Transition Challenges O'Connor's opinion is that Yao is at a disadvantage in the NBA culturally and professionally.

One particular issue that he pointed out, which in truth became apparent, was the language barrier. Though having an interpreter aided Yao in communicating with the coaching staff and team mates, much can be lost in translation, since his interpreter Pine, was not particularly educated technically with the game. ESPN's Bill Simmons points out that Yao's " laid-back demeanor" will prove to be his downfall in the NBA's often rough and vocal culture (" Bad predictions about Yao"). Another point of contention is the difference in training and playing styles (Yao 75-82).

Though impressive in height, Yao had little upper body strength in comparison to NBA players as a consequence of body building worked into training regiments, a practice not as emphasized in China's basketball teams ("Asian Athletes Limited By Genes Or Nurture?"). Barkley in particular pointed out Yao's inexperience in playing against professional basketball players of the same caliber as NBA players, citing that Yao's dominance among Asian and amateur leagues does not equip him with the skills to go against the likes of O'Neal (O'Connor).

The Rocket's coach Rudy Tomjanovich admitted that Yao had to adjust significantly to the pace of the game and still needed to develop a better understanding of how basketball was played in the United States, which required improving his language skills and cultural immersion. But he said that he believed that with the support of the team and Yao's own commitment to be part of the NBA, he still had the highest expectations for their recruit (Del Deo & Stern). In his memoirs of his rookie and sophomore years in the NBA, Yao recalls that what he struggled against most is the feeling of isolation and public expectation (112-147).

Having limited contact because of the language barriers he felt that his personality was being stifled and at the same time, being equated and considered representative of the whole Chinese population did little to ease pressure. Evans reflects that the interest in Yao, unlike any other Chinese or Asian athlete, stemmed from the fact that before the announcement of his joining the 2002 draft, little was known about him and from the fact that he challenged existing stereotypes about his nationality as well as the position he played.

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His physical stature and sport are not directly associated with the characterization of being Chinese. Joanne Tang points out that the popular characterization of the race has been that they are of diminutive in statures, associated with martial arts or as academics and involved in trade. Chinese athletes have also been more associated with gymnastics, diving and marital arts. Thus, Yao seemed to be distinctly out of character. At the same time, he also didn't subscribe to the idea of a basketball star, appearing even at times recalcitrant to face the public or the media.

Reckoning Despite being much maligned, Yao fans continued to support the seemingly beleaguered rookie and some team mates even made statements regarding their faith in Yao's ability (" Yao Ming: The Next Asian Superstar"). Six games into the season, opinions regarding Yao were decidedly against his favor (" Bad predictions about Yao"). Similarly, Barkley's bet with Smith on TNT regarding his performance was just as disadvantaged: Yao was only averaging about 3 points, 10 points being his best performance.

It was only two days later that in a game against the LA Lakers, albeit sans O'Neal, that Yao had his breakout game, scoring twenty points and shot 100% from the field center (Associated Press. " Yao goes 9-for-9, scores 20 in narrow win"). True to his word, Barkley stated that he will pay up the bet on TNT's Listen Up! double header feature of the November 21st where Smith, wanting to avoid having to be kissed by Barkley, procured an ass for Barkley to kiss (" All eyes will be on Barkley, Kenny Smith's backside").

However, it was in the next game against the LA Lakers, this time with O'Neal present, that Yao's presence in the NBA proved itself. In the game

which the Rockets won in overtime in part because of one of Yao's successful blocks of an attempted dunk by O'Neal, Yao proved that he could stand toe to toe with the league's avowed best. This prompted many of his earlier critics to recant their previous reservations regarding Yao's place in the NBA. Munger said that, " The Houston Rockets knew what they were doing when they drafted Yao Ming. ; Bob Matthews of the Rochester Democrat and Herald amended that he " couldn't have been more wrong in my premature evaluation of Houston rookie Yao Ming. He's one of the NBA's three or four best centers already and should be a dominant player for at least a decade; and Bob Wolfley of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel recalled that, " Back in June, this corner was referencing busts from the Ming Dynasty. Now? It's closer to Yao as in Yeoooww. Rhymes with Wow. " (" Bad predictions about Yao"). Conclusion

In addition to becoming the Rookie of Year in his first season with the NBA, he has been voted as the starting center in all of his five NBA All Star games even breaking all time voting records previously held by no less than Michael Jordan (Karas). He has also become visible in a number of charities and advocacies including SARS awareness and wildlife protection, in particular for sharks and elephants which are under threat because of the Chinese cuisine and medicinal industries (" Yao Ming and Steve Nash Charity Game").

He is considered as a top endorser attested by his endorsement of the Beijing 2008 Olympics (" A Brand Called Yao"). One of the best testaments to the regard for Yao has come from his own country which before his inclusion to the NBA was not directly associated with basketball: in the 2004 Olympics, Yao carried the Chinese flag, something that he considers as a fulfillment of

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a personal dream. The media interest in Yao, both positive and negative, is a testament of how much sport is regarded in society.

At the same time, the case highlights how much cultural orientations and perceptions influence perceptions and opinions, a challenge that has notably been less prominent in the entry of another Chinese player into the NBA in the Milwaukee Bucks' rookie Yi Jianlian (Yu). Though Yao considered himself only a basketball player, he himself recognized the degree by which he was made to bear the identity of a whole nation (Yao 159-163).

The irony of it was that he did not represent the general concept of being Chinese nor even Asian in people's mind, thus he was being pressured to prove and conform to a preconceived image at the same time. In conclusion, there is no denying that Yao had to contend with significant cultural and professional barriers, however there is an equal realization that it can be dealt with.