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The proposed NBA age limit

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The proposed NBA age limit
MAY 18, 2005

Open Letter to Mr. David Stern, Commissioner, National
Basketball Association

Dear Commissioner Stern:

I have been reading with some interest newspaper reports about the current negotiations between the NBA and its Players Association. Of particular concern to me is your proposal to bar from the NBA any person who has not reached the age of 20. I am distressed by this not because I am under 20 and a 6'11" guard with a fantastic passing ability, tremendous speed, and a three-point shoot of awesome accuracy. No, I am in fact over sixty, with limited mobility, and would be lucky to reach the basket with a shot from three-point range.

So why should this concern me?

As a university faculty member who teaches history to undergraduates, I see all sorts of students in my classes: some good, some bad, and occasionally one of brilliance. Unfortunately I also see any number of students who clearly do not want to be at the university. These are young men and women who have come to college because their parents think they need a degree, because they are following their peers along the path of social expectations, or because they feel they need to be in the university to advance some life goal which has little or no connection to the educational mission of the university.

I should say, Mr. Stern, that I have a great deal of admiration for the way in which you have transformed the National Basketball Association from a struggling sports league into a worldwide sports and entertainment juggernaut. I have watched with interest your achievements, and am impressed by your management, marketing, and public relations skills. Living and traveling abroad I have seen the power of your marketing genius in both Europe and Africa.

However on this issue of an age limit I must say you are completely and totally wrong. Well, perhaps not completely. I would agree that in some select cases those under 20 years of age are not ready for the NBA. In those cases I would urge you

to urge your general managers not to draft these players. Indeed I would even agree that in some rare and exceptional case one of these young people might even benefit from a year or two at a college or university, although that really is a long shot.

Unfortunately neither the unwilling student nor the university classroom benefits from the presence of such captive students on campus. The one thing that I do not need, that my university does not need, and that higher education does not need is another student or group of students who do not want to be on campus and who regard the classroom as some sort of dungeon of oppression. To force talented young basketball players to serve a year or two on a college campus while they await their twentieth birthday, is foolish and detrimental to the goals of everyone concerned. I would remind you that maturity is not a number, and the university is no more anxious to be a babysitting service than is the National Basketball Association.

If there were an attractive alternative to college for those who want to hone their basketball skills and prepare themselves for the NBA, I would be less concerned about your proposed age limit. Unfortunately anyone who is looking for a career in the NBA who does not enter the NBA out of high school will, and indeed must, choose the career path that takes them through a college classroom. Because universities have allowed themselves to become sports and entertainment complexes, and because college basketball has become a professional experience designed to enhance the market value of its players, college basketball is seen as the ONLY viable option to direct entry into the NBA from high school.

I know that you have tried to create alternatives in the form of development leagues. I realize that Europe might be an option for a few, but the harsh reality is that the NCAA and the television executives have created a marketing monster of their own which requires the best players, regardless of educational goals or skills, to enter the college basketball industry, the creator of instant millionaires.

Let me offer one example, if I might, and this is not to single out or embarrass this particular player. Jayson Williams, currently of the Memphis Grizzlies, is a primary example of what happens when a basketball player of great skill is dragged onto a college campus for the sole purpose of playing basketball. Jayson Williams hated college, hated classes, and hated the very idea of being near a college. Yet, under the influence of Coach Billy Donovan, Jayson Williams was recruited to play basketball

at Marshall University where he proceeded to flunk out. When Donovan moved to the University of Florida he again persuaded Williams to enroll there to play basketball. The result was the same. Williams simply did not want to be in college. He only wanted to play basketball and he saw no alternative except college.

The last thing I or any other faculty member at a university needs is another student in our classes who is hostile to the very notion of being in college. So I ask you, Commissioner Stern, to reconsider your desire for an age limit for the NBA. I really do prefer students to athletes in my classes, although I would certainly welcome that rarest of breeds, the student athlete.

If you promise not to send us students who don't want to be in college, I promise you I will not send any of my students into the NBA draft who do not want to be basketball players. If you do force such students into college, I will insist on my right to place some of my very best students over the age 20 onto NBA rosters.

I hope you see we have a mutual interest here.

Sincerely,
Richard C. Crepeau
Professor of History

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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