



Success On and Off the Court

An Interview with David Stern,
Commissioner, National Basketball Association

EDITORS' NOTE David Stern graduated from Rutgers University with a BA in political science and history and then studied law at Columbia Law School. He proceeded to work at the New York law firm Proskauer Rose LLP, where he served as outside counsel to the National Basketball Association (NBA). He left the firm in 1978 to join the NBA as General Counsel, and was named the league's Executive Vice President in 1980. Stern was unanimously elected to his current position in February 1984.



David Stern

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The NBA is the world's premier men's professional basketball league and one of the major professional sports leagues in North America. Founded in New York in June 1946 as the Basketball Association of America, the league adopted the name National Basketball Association in the fall of 1949 after merging with the rival National Basketball League. With its games televised around the globe in 43 languages, the NBA (www.nba.com) also runs the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the NBA Development League.

Were you pleased by the success of the NBA's most recent season?

It was one of our best seasons. We were up in ratings across our networks for the regular season, the playoffs, and the finals; our teams did very well in terms of sponsorships, local television, and ticket sales; and our stable of players continues to improve as the older generation of Hall-of-Fame-bound players is joined by an outstanding group of young players.

In past years, television ratings were the primary barometer for success. Do you look at it differently now?

There's a transition taking place with respect to the digital world, and we need to map out an important digital presence, which will help us express ourselves on a global scale. China recently surpassed the U.S. in its number of Internet users, and these numbers are increasing across Europe and in Latin America. Africa and India continue to increase cell phone penetration in large numbers.

Is China a key market for you?

We have many key markets, but China, by its size alone, makes it the most important

for development. We have three offices and more than 100 people in China, and it's still a small staff compared to the opportunities available with the Internet, television, marketing partnerships, merchandise, and events. Following the Olympics held there this summer, we will return to China in October to play two exhibition games. We're in discussion with Chinese authorities about a joint venture for the construction of an arena and the establishment of an NBA-affiliated league in China.

Can you envision a time when you will have a franchise in Europe?

Within a decade, it's a real possibility based on the building of NBA-class arenas in Europe. We'll be playing four exhibition games in Europe in October – in Barcelona, Berlin, Paris, and London. Two NBA-style arenas – one in London and one in Berlin – have opened in the past two years. Venue development is beginning in Western Europe.

What impact has the age eligibility rule had on the NBA?

It's a hot-button topic in collective bargaining negotiations with the media, but from the NBA's perspective, it gives us an extra year to watch players develop, whether in the NBA Development League, in college, or in Europe, and decide whether they are worth taking the chance on. From that point of view, it has been a great success.

Has the NBA Development League been a success?

It has been very important in three respects. First, it enables teams to provide coaching and helps players who are not yet able to get enough playing time with an NBA team develop confidence and community spirit. This helps them grow as players and people. Second, it gives certain players a place to stay in shape and demonstrate their skills to the teams of the NBA, who can bring them up as free agents. Third, it enables good basketball to be played in communities that don't have NBA teams. That keeps the spirit alive and connects fans to the NBA in an interesting way.

Has the WNBA progressed the way you thought it would?

It has been here for a dozen years, and it had stock after year 10. It's very important in bringing additional fans into the basketball

community, and in increasing women's participation in high school and college basketball. It's a unique opportunity for us to increase participation and interest among younger women, to build a following, and to ultimately deal with sponsors who are very interested in reaching a higher concentration of women.

Is it important for the NBA to maintain its connections to former players?

It's very important to us. We have a staff member charged with the task of involving our retired players in community events across the country. They probably do 1,000 appearances a year.

Through NBA Cares, your players have become engaged in many community efforts. Does the public now have a better understanding of the good things players do off the court?

Yes. Our player reputation results continue to increase. People are beginning to fully understand that our players are hard-working, concerned about their communities, and reaching out to help others. They are the community leaders our fans want them to be.

We agreed to build reading, learning, and living centers. It gave us an iconic rallying point on a global scale, and our players, owners, and teams have certainly rallied around it. Our international partners are focused on it as well. This year, we'll have Basketball Without Borders clinics in Turkey, South Africa, and India. These clinics have been very well received by basketball authorities, government officials, and potential sponsors, because in each of these programs, we offer a variety of activities – not just basketball.

Are you ever able to escape your job and truly relax?

I manage to shut it down from time to time, but I'm always subject to being pulled back. But if I try to bifurcate my job from my personal life, I am able to relax and take some time off.

Do you ever think about slowing down or even retiring?

I think about it, but those closest to me say if I were sitting on the beach, I would be thinking about how to organize the beach in a more effective way. That is not a compliment. So I'm looking forward to slowing down, but I recognize that it may be harder to achieve than it sounds. ●