

# The Power of Sport

An Interview with David J. Stern,  
Commissioner, National Basketball Association



**EDITORS' NOTE** David Stern became the NBA's fourth Commissioner in February of 1984. Before that, he served as the league's outside counsel from 1966 to 1978; as inside general counsel from 1978 to 1980; and as Executive Vice President of Business and Legal Affairs from 1980 to 1984. Stern is the Chair Emeritus of the Trustees of Columbia University and serves or has served on the boards of Beth Israel Medical Center, the Rutgers University Foundation, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission, the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, The Paley Center for Media, Jazz at Lincoln Center, and the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Stern is a graduate of Rutgers University and Columbia Law School.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** The NBA is a global sports and media business that features three professional sports leagues: the National Basketball Association, the Women's National Basketball Association, and the NBA Development League. Games and programming reach 215 countries and territories in 47 languages. NBA.com averages more than 35 million page views per day, with more than 50 percent of the site's visitors coming from outside of North America. The NBA is the number one professional sports league on social media with more than 240 million fans and followers globally across all league, team, and player platforms.

## Why is social responsibility so critical to the NBA's culture and how have you driven it throughout the organization?

Ten years ago, we decided to ask our colleagues at the NBA and the teams what they would like to see in a mission statement. They came back with two principles: it's our job to grow the sport of basketball, and because of who we are, it is our obligation to be leaders in social responsibility. We have the ability to call attention to important issues and to inspire young people around the world to live healthy, active lives. So we announced that, in addition to everything we do on a global basis, we were going to build hundreds of places where kids and families could live, learn or play; that we were going to raise tens of millions of dollars for good causes; and that we were going to devote millions of hours to serving our communities.

As a result, for every event that we do, up to and including when the season is over, we try to impact people's lives. During the weekend of the All-Star

Game, we have a day of service where we build houses, pack food for the hungry living in shelters, and create new learning centers, and all of our guests are asked to join us and contribute to these causes.

## Is it important to align the philanthropy with the business?

We don't look at it that way, but we do have enormous opportunities because of who we are, so it lines up naturally. For example, there are so many countries where obesity and diabetes are now focal points. The positioning of the NBA as a sport of exercise, healthy living, and teamwork has made us very popular in China where the government is building 800,000 basketball courts. It has also helped us make inroads in India where obesity and diabetes are becoming a problem.

Also, because of who we are, we have television time with huge audiences, so organizations ask us to help them get their messages out. We work with organizations like Special Olympics, Share Our Strength, Thurgood Marshall College Fund, GLSEN, the NRDC, and UNICEF to help spread their message to our fans.

We also have a strong commitment to environmental awareness and sustainability. Five of our arenas are LEED-Certified and we focus on environmental awareness with our All-Star Game and our efforts with NBA Green Week, which takes place in early April.

We use every opportunity to draw attention to important causes and great organizations.

## Is your giving around the All-Star week mainly in the form of donated time or is there also a monetary component?

We believe in the importance of doing both. We have helped renovate homes for low-income families; built a playground and donated a new reading and learning center; and raised money to help deal with the enormous problem of childhood hunger in this country. We have used our convening power, and thanks to the enormous efforts of our current players, our retired players, our staff, our guests, and our partners at every level, we know we have had an impact.

## Do you ever have any difficulty getting your various constituencies onboard?

In many cases, they trample us in their desire to do the right thing. We didn't tell the teams they should build LEED-Certified buildings or make significant changes in their operations to become more energy efficient. We make information available and we provide support and guidance, but our teams were ahead of us.

Our players and the union have been great partners in this effort and our teams have as well. We use the NBA Cares umbrella because we don't necessarily think we should be monolithic. As long as we set a tone, we're happy to have our teams embrace an issue that may be specific to their communities.

## Is it tough to put metrics around philanthropic investments?

We made a mistake five years ago in that we established metrics that we shot past very quickly. We said we were going to build 100 places where kids could live, learn or play in the next five years and we are now at 677; we said we would raise \$100 million and we're up to \$175 million; and we said we'd provide one million hours of hands-on service and we're at 1.8 million.

The companies with whom we deal are those that are like-minded because they're important, respected brands with enlightened leadership. So when one talks to American Express or Coca-Cola or Sprint, the dialogue is easy.

## Do you try to partner as you reach out globally?

Yes. Everywhere we go, as we work to grow the game, we connect with global partners and local NGOs. We not only talk about healthy living, but we create programs for kids to learn the fundamentals and values of the game of basketball, and we have created legacy projects in 123 countries around the world. We build something and leave it behind as we do in each of the NBA Finals and All-Star cities.

## People tend to pass judgment on the inflated salaries they see going to players today, but not as much of a focus is placed on how much they give back. Is that frustrating?

It's frustrating, but we accept it for what it is. We're so pleased that our players come into the league, wherever they're from, and want to help and give back in significant ways. It's embedded. But if a player does something we'd rather he not do, there is some bad publicity. That is the soap opera that is sports.

What's most frustrating is that we can hardly begin to make a dent in the need, no matter what we do. ●

*Kevin Love of the Minnesota Timberwolves, Marc Gasol of the Memphis Grizzlies, and NBA Commissioner David Stern help revitalize homes in the Tangelo Park neighborhood of Orlando for a Rebuilding Together Orlando project during NBA Cares Day of Service as part of the 2012 NBA All-Star Weekend in February.*