

# FITCH FILES

As the NBA season begins, I found myself thinking about the *state of the league* and playing the role of commissioner - David Stern.

So, let's take a quick look at the NBA and ask yourself, *what do you think of today's NBA?*

I found myself not watching as much as I use to because the game isn't what it used to be. But maybe the game isn't the issue at all. Maybe it's the players... are the players people I can cheer for unconditionally... or is it I can't find myself reaching in my pocket to buy a ticket to watch him play live due to not being able to relate to them.

I took a quick poll, where else, but at my local barbershop (*Ms. Lisa's in South Holland, Illinois*). My poll indicated that many sports fans have failed to embrace the current crop of NBA stars the way they did in the past. Majority of the people in the conversation said the same thing "*it's a shame what's happening to the league.*" But when I brought up baseball, after getting laughed at, the same people thought even less of the NBA players today, in contrast to steroids surrounding this sport. And as for the NFL, the off the field issues are concerning, but kinda expected and/or overlooked (i.e., Mike Vick, Adam "Pacman" Jones)... Go figure there... I also found, from talking to my pollsters at the barbershop, that they think the typical NBA player is less likely than his counterparts in the three other professional leagues to respect the fans, remain loyal to his team or even love his wife—and more likely to carry a gun, use recreational drugs and have an entourage.

So where is the disconnect between fans' perceptions of what the game has become (and who's playing) and the reality of what it is (and who they are)? During this writing, I'm trying very hard not to play the race card but let's be honest, the casual fan regards NBA players under the a stereotype.... a rich thug!

Of course, the issue isn't as simple as black and white. While one recent study says the NBA is 75% black, the NFL, America's preeminent sporting attraction, is at 67%. One big contributor to the difference in perception of the leagues is the strong tinge of hip-hop culture. Ask yourself, who's more likely to *rock the bling* and hang with 50 Cent - Rasheed Wallace or LaDainian Tomlinson? Allen Iverson or Derek Jeter? Conventional wisdom says NBA stars are rap guys at heart, individuals seeking personal glory and all that goes with it. Baseball players are traditionalist and follow a basic pattern of policy and rules, as well as they love statistics... Statistics for everything!!! Football players, on the other hand, are system guys, and the system subverts their hood qualities with the exception of celebrating a touchdown by a few. In addition, the anonymity helmets provided makes it easier to cheer your team's blustery wide out while ignoring what you don't like about him. The NBA player is naked by comparison. Every glare, scowl or disinterested look comes through unfiltered.

But even without helmets, it is NBA players who have the misfortune of being lumped together in a blob. Some of those broad strokes can be attributed to fans who refuse to get past old stereotypes, but the people whose job it is to bring these athletes to you aren't without blame either.

Remember the dress code issued by the commissioner. Better yet, remember how players pushed back from it – complaining. As my older brother would say “I would have never guessed this in a million years when black men would have a problem of dressing sharp.” See, my brother grew up in a era when black men took pride in the wardrobe... everyone was not only clean but well manicured... when attending a meeting or gathering, you wore a blazer and a tie. And if you were at an event that was outdoors, you were a sky-piece (fedora style hat). Not to mention, everyone wore dress shoes not gym

shoes. And of course, everyone's clothes fit... if you wore a size 36 waist pants, you put on that size, with a belt, not a size 40 and showed the world your fruit o looms.

Another issue I came across was that the NBA is always looking for a savior... In 1995, a *GQ* cover story asked whether Grant Hill could be a savior. Less than 10 years later, multiple media outlets asked pretty much the same of LeBron James (King James) not to mention, KOBE, and both of these players came in to the league straight from high school. Michael Jordan has made it clear... "stop trying to duplicate what was..." there will never be another Michael Jordan just like there will never be another Kareem Abdul-Jabbar or Moses Malone. Jordan has also stated publicly "in some ways he (David Stern) created his own problem. Look at the way the league markets its players. When I came in, they marketed the athletes themselves, how they performed, what they accomplished. To reinvent someone is very difficult. When you say a player is today's Michael Jordan or today's Magic Johnson, the first thing the public will do is compare him to the real Michael Jordan or Magic Johnson. When the public doesn't see the same degree of success, you've just dug yourself a deeper hole." While that comment is fresh in your mind, do you remember Harold Miner... Where is he now?

Stern is kinda in a state of denial... he replied to Jordan's comments by saying he doesn't think there is an image problem. "I believe we are dealing with having the best-known, most recognizable players in the world. When they get in trouble, people can identify them and their faces. The troubles attached to other sports may be five times worse than ours, but we pay a price for being so recognizable. We have five of the 15 best-known athletes. The NFL has four. Major League Baseball has one. It's the downside of playing in a uniform that has no hat, no helmet."

To the point the commissioner was making, the NBA markets players that haven't even scored two points yet in some cases. So, yeah, if you are marketing player A as the next big thing, and he gets in trouble, well, you will go up in flames... Also, if you are marketing player A as the next big thing, and he's a bust... same results! Other professional sports market the *team*... sure in the NFL there are some exceptions – Brett Favre, Peyton Manning, and Tom Brady to name a few... but none of these guys would be as notable without a wide-receiver. Football is a team oriented sport. And I'm certain we can ALL agree baseball is too... even with the other top spending of the Yankees... they are team first not individual players except for signing contracts (LMAO).

Despite having reached the pinnacle of their competitive set, hard work is never assumed of NBA players. In what other sport would teams feel compelled to trot out their most articulate players on opening night to promise the crowd that everything will be left on the floor? It's as if—in the NBA, at least—finding committed professionals is as difficult as spotting a white tiger in a snow storm.

Let's face it, these are different times, but many fans seem not to have moved with them, so what's a commissioner to do? Better yet, look at all of the rules in NBA and NFL (baseball doesn't modify rules - smile) that were created since 2000... were they created for the improvement of the league, or were they created based on a certain distraction placed on the field of play in certain players?

We'll keep our eye on this and continue to provide our insight on this topic like no one else does...

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