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# N.B.A. Is Selling the Soul of the Game

*Most of [today's](#) so-called stars have fairly one-dimensional games.*

By OSCAR ROBERTSON

The question I am asked most frequently by youngsters who submit questions to my Web site is, "What can I do to increase my vertical leap?" It doesn't matter what age they are; everyone wants to dunk.

I think this question captures in a nutshell the state of basketball [today](#), and the influence of the N.B.A. on the game as it is played everywhere else.

Professional basketball has been trivialized and dumbed down to the level of a highlight reel. Marketing and entertainment rule the day rather than putting the best product on the floor.

Basketball is not a vertical game. The game is won between the foul line and the basket, an area where so few players [today](#) choose to, or are able to, operate. Dunking is such a tiny part of the game. My answer to these youngsters is always the same: concentrate on mastering all the fundamentals and becoming a complete player. I'm sure that's not the answer they want to hear.

N.B.A. basketball is mostly muscle and flash. Stylin' all the way to the hoop. Dunks and 3-pointers, with nothing in between. Shooting percentages continue to plummet. When people tell me that scores are lower [today](#) because defenses are better, I have to laugh. Once I resisted the idea of the N.B.A. permitting zone defenses. Any more, what does it matter? Defenses can't guard anyone properly and offenses can't score. One guy freelances while the other four stand and watch. There's no movement, no creation of an open shot on the weakside, no positioning for an offensive rebound.

I pity coaches at any level who believe in and want to teach fundamentals, when youngsters see players on TV with no fundamentals being paid huge sums of money. Why be concerned with traveling, double dribbling, palming or carrying the ball, or failing to box out under the hoop when there are no consequences in the N.B.A. for such behavior?

Players [today](#) are bigger, faster, stronger and more agile. But many of them can't dribble, can't shoot from outside, can't create shots off the dribble, can't guard anyone and are lost without the ball. Or even with it.

I can already hear the cries of protest: I'm "old school" and out of touch. You've got

that right. Many of my colleagues and I who were fortunate to play during the golden age of the N.B.A. - the mid-60's to the early 70's - are saddened by what the game has become [today](#). And it's not about the money. I believe an athlete should be able to earn whatever the market will bear. But I also believe he or she actually ought to earn the money by delivering true value in return, i.e., a level of play that advances rather than diminishes the game.

And why has the game of professional basketball changed so radically? Other pro sports haven't. To become a position player in major league baseball, you still need most or all of these skills: hitting, hitting with power, speed, defense and a strong arm. In football, offensive and defensive strategies come and go, but the basic attributes required to play each position haven't changed all that much.

Once upon a time in basketball, regardless of your position, you were expected to be able to dribble with either hand, master all the basic passes, play aggressive defense whether man or zone, at least be able to guard and contain an opponent to some degree, at least box out your opponent if not rebound, command at least three or four reliable shots from various distances, and execute basic offensive maneuvers like running routes without the ball, setting screens, running the pick-and-roll and creating a shot off the dribble.

Most of [today's](#) so-called star N.B.A. players have fairly one-dimensional games. Why? Potential stars skilled in one or two areas of the game are identified at a very early age and coddled and wooed from middle school on up. Few coaches will require them to develop a complete game or warm the bench until they do. So they reach the N.B.A., often after only a year or two of college if at all, without more than a minimal concept of the overall game of basketball. The exceptions like Kobe Bryant, Kevin Garnett, LeBron James and Carmelo Anthony are a distinct minority.

Thus, just as America imports cheap labor from other countries to do the jobs Americans don't want to do, the N.B.A. turns increasingly to foreign players who do have fundamental skills and an all-around approach to the game that fewer and fewer American players - even though they may be superior athletes - can be troubled to learn.

The N.B.A. has made a conscious decision to function as a marketing and entertainment organization, and seems much more concerned with selling sneakers, jerseys, hats and highlight videos than with the product it puts on the floor. The league wants to extend its footprint worldwide, which is good, but only to the extent of creating individual heroes who can drive sales of licensed products in their countries, a shortsighted approach that does nothing to grow the overall level of play. Team play is no longer considered sexy. Individual showmanship is. But one player, no matter how gifted, does not build and sustain a championship franchise.

I always thought the game itself was the product and that team success took

precedence over the achievements of individual stars. Such thinking [today](#) is passé. The N.B.A. has bet the farm on marketing those players it believes appeal to the hip-hop culture, which has the same relationship to true culture as N.B.A. basketball does to real basketball. Even if basketball people were allowed once again to influence the strategic direction of the N.B.A., it would take them years to reverse the damage.

As we take a break for another All-Star weekend, which is basically a made-for-TV miniseries, the focus is more on artificial contests created especially for television - the only thing missing is a three-legged race - than on the teams on the court, and on getting certain individual players onto the floor rather than creating teams that match up well against each other.

Now All-Star voting is in the hands of the fans, and extended worldwide via the Internet. Thus we have the spectacle of Yao Ming, an international marketing icon if not quite yet a fully developed basketball player, starting at center for the West instead of Shaquille O'Neal. Personally, I think voting should be returned to the players. Even if we don't have marketing degrees.

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