

Globalizing the NBA

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



David Stern visits with children at the Mastan YMCA in Mumbai, India in April 2013

EDITORS' NOTE In February of 1984, David Stern became the NBA's fourth Commissioner. 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.



David J. Stern

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The NBA (www.nba.com) 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 42 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 most followed professional sports league on social media with more than 435 million fans and followers globally across all league, team, and player platforms.

What makes the NBA work so well?

It's a group of very talented executives, united around the unifying theme of a dynamic and progressive game and determined to be leaders in social responsibility.

Will much of the growth going forward come from overseas?

It has to come from there. Our buildings in the U.S. are 90 percent full. It has already been written that we will have our highest attendance and gross in our history for the 2013-2014 NBA season.

We can't be published or shown in too many more outlets, although there is a new favorable domestic television deal on the horizon.

But globally, the growth of television and of digital will propel us to much larger percentage gains outside of the U.S. since we're starting with a smaller base.

In terms of percentage gains, you're talking mostly about viewers?

About everything; users of social media, those who would go to NBA.com, or one of the 15 localized versions of it internationally, to get the latest in scores and updates; e-commerce; viewership on TV and streaming; merchandise, like Adidas' 6,000 stores in China; and

about games that get streamed and sponsors that use our brand to promote their brands. I'm also talking about events, everything from the 10 games we will play this year – eight friendlies and two regular season – outside of the U.S. and the three-on-three tournaments that went forward this summer in 14 countries, to the Basketball Without Borders events in Argentina, Portugal, and South Africa.

We view our traveling players as part of the legion of NBA ambassadors.

Are you surprised by how the NBA has grown?

The logic behind it is compelling: There are 300 million people in the U.S. and there are seven billion in the world. It doesn't surprise me that a game that is shown in 215 countries in 47 languages has begun to attract youngsters who want to be not like Mike but like Dirk, Manu or Yao.

It doesn't surprise me that elite athletes of every nationality are focusing on this game and have decided to play more basketball. We don't have the next Yao yet nor the first great Indian player, but we're getting more great African players.

At some point, will the NBA have teams in overseas markets?

In the absence of a better basketball model emerging in Europe, it's inevitable that there will be an expansion of the NBA to Europe.

With respect to the other markets, it will come in stages. It's inevitable that the NBA Development League, which went from 8 teams to 17, will go to 30 teams or more and that will include teams in Latin America.

It's also inevitable that there will be NBA-sponsored or affiliated leagues, but not NBA leagues based in Asia.

Are you focused on the long-term education of your players?

Of the top 60 players this year, only seven or eight were college freshmen. If I could choose, rather than their spending one year in college, they would spend two. I have trouble saying that we should keep players from coming into the NBA for our narrow benefits. On the other hand, we receive a broad business benefit from having more well-rounded players who are prepared for life.

It used to be that many of our players didn't go to college at all and now they're spending at least that first year there.

Is it frustrating that the message of all the good that players do off the court doesn't always get publicized?

By and large, NBA Cares would not be the successful model it has become if it weren't for our players embracing it and engaging in similar activities. So I'm comfortable that we have proven to our fans over time that our players – as well as our league and teams – care, and that they deserve to be listened to.

During your 30 years as Commissioner, there has been much change. Would you discuss this?

We identify ourselves as a learning organization. The development around sports, media, education, and globalization have provided a perfect environment for us to keep learning and doing.

We see these changes as opportunities. For example, the change to digital was an opportunity for NBA.com; for NBA TV; and for the NBA on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Globalization allowed us to take NBA.com and present the NBA in 15 localized versions around the world.

We are discovering what is relevant to our own offices outside of the U.S. as they develop our brand in their regions. We're not just taking the U.S. model out to colonize.

In regard to New York, what has made Mike Bloomberg such an effective mayor?

Mayor Mike understands globalization perfectly. He knows that New York is in competition with Paris, London, and other great cities for tourism. It's in competition globally and domestically for the best and brightest minds as well.

He understands that New York has to live in a world where the next terrorist is out there and that solutions to the biggest problems – health, education, environmental – are not merely city issues but that cities will play a defining role from this century into the next.

The citizens of New York and its environs hope the successor will continue Mike Bloomberg's policies. ●