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NEGOTIATION OF MEN'S BASKETBALL CONTRACTS ABROAD

DAVID ADKINS*

I. FINDING A NICHE

Finding a niche has been critical to being able to sustain a living in a very competitive business. My niche is the middle countries. I am not interested in the NBA people per se, but I do maintain NBPA certification to have that option. I am interested in Italy and Spain, but the middle countries are my main priority. I put most of my energy and effort there and do that as thoroughly and as well as I can.

Additionally, I work as a writer, an editor, and a publisher of my own publications. For instance, one is *Global Village Hoops*, a bi-monthly newsletter focusing on overseas hoops, statistics, changes in personnel and so on. I have NBA subscribers and others that try to track overseas players as potential representation. Moreover, my *World Club Almanac* is a directory of basketball clubs around the world. Approximately one-thousand overseas clubs will be listed in the 1993-94 edition, and it comes in quite handy for people attempting to do business overseas. Presently, I run these two ventures concurrently with my business.

I spend a lot of time with basketball people. I am a former coach and player. Basketball is something that I have always done, always liked, and something I have always had a feel for. I do not like the glitter as much as I like the eyeball to eyeball contact with players, coaches, and club administrators.

I have a niche, but I also have limitations. I would like to start with this disclaimer; I am not a tax consultant, a lawyer, or an insurance broker. I do not give advice in those areas. I am a basketball guy. I go to Portsmouth, Chicago, Phoenix, Salt Lake, and Los Angeles. I am involved at the pre-draft stage. I network with CBA coaches, with whom I am on a lot better working relationship and feel more at ease with than the NBA people. However, I stay in touch with some NBA assistant coaches who call me regularly about finding a job for them.

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II. AUSTRALIAN LEAGUES

My job is primarily focused in Australia, New Zealand, South America and some limited work in Europe. I was there when the National Basketball League started, and I recruited some of their first players. I used to be the only guy down there, but now others come and go. I like the League because it reminds me of the old NIBL (the National Industrial Basketball League) with such teams as the Denver Truckers, Phillips Oilers, and the Peoria Caterpillars. In those days, first round draft choices went there rather than the NBA because it made more sense. Kellen Winslow was talking to me the other day about an "after-life." Those people did not have an "afterlife." They went with those companies and learned to do something marketable with the company as well as how to play basketball. The standard of basketball was every bit as good as the NBA in those days. However, things have changed.

The League in Australia started in much the same way as the NIBL. It has become more professional. Australia is a middle country in regards to dollars and cents. My job is to find those clubs great players for their money. Once I do that and get those players plugged in down there, they do not want to leave. So, I spend a lot of time on airplanes, back and forth to Sydney and Brisbane and so on.

III. GETTING INTO THE BUSINESS

I first became acquainted with overseas hoops in the mid to late '50's. Jim McGregor, an NAIA coach in Washington, took a team to the NAIA tournament in Kansas City and finished fourth. He came back and thought that the president (of the college) was going to give him a raise and welcome him with open arms. But when he returned, he realized that his priorities, and the priorities of the president, were on two completely different sides of the fence. The president fired him and Jim went overseas. Jim was the original guy; a sort of "pied piper." I did a lot of work with him in the early days. I sent him a lot of players and rendezvoused with him around the world. He is retired now.

Eventually Richard Caner came on the scene. He became big in Europe later on, and there are many others now attempting to place players overseas. Overseas agents, if listed, are very much like NBA agents — few of them have clients making money. Caner made his mark in Europe and now Warren LeGranie is the prime mover in the big country market.

IV. THE BUSINESS ITSELF

I try to distinguish myself from others by focusing on club needs, and staying aware of the market in the middle countries. I do not look for a player that will just get by, or a player that is too good, or a player that views it as a consolation prize. I find a player who really will get his feet under the table and put his efforts toward meeting the club objectives.

It is a tricky business. Most players cannot make a living playing basketball. I think it is a disservice to encourage those who cannot. I do not deal with those I feel cannot play. I get probably 50 to 75 non-productive phone calls a week from people, players and agents with a blind spot. The blind spot sometimes swallows and engulfs them. The player market is a known commodity. If you go to Portsmouth and other places long enough, you become acquainted with the players in college, Portsmouth, the CBA, and maybe in the NBA. It becomes clear that today's college senior is not competing with just other college seniors. Rather, he is competing with players all the way up to eight classes ahead of him who can still be productive.

I also come across those who have too much experience. I do not deal with those players either. I get calls from people that are twenty-six-years old. When I ask them where they have been playing, they just say they have been playing "somewhere."

I try to find the right player for a particular job, working as sort of a broker. I look at myself as a practitioner and a generalist as far as overseas basketball is concerned. When I get calls from agents who say they have a player, I will most likely know the player and, if not, I will find out pretty rapidly. Position eliminates most of them.

V. OVERSEAS BASKETBALL

The strength of overseas basketball players, and the strength of overseas player personnel is in the players 6'2" to 6'5". That is the problem. A lot of Eastern Europeans are coming in now and taking Western European jobs because it is cheaper. You can hire those guys. They have humility and they are realistic. Their blind spot is or has been erased by more pressing needs. Therefore, a lot of Eastern Europeans are hired in Spain, some of the larger countries, Italy, and so on. In the 6'2 to 6'5 market, unless a guy has great skills as a point guard (I do not mean just running the team, I mean a scoring point guard with great skills who can create on his own and is exciting) then it probably will not work out. Is that possible overseas? Yes, it is.

Overseas, you may have strength at every position, but not quickness. The holes on the fast break are open longer. The margin of error is greater. But, the statistics become more and more realistic, and less and less inflated as the standard of basketball around the world rises.

As the standard of basketball in the middle countries improves the requirements on the American players are greater. Yet, the pay still fits into the general hierarchy of pay structure around the world. So, it requires a better player for lesser money to make these jobs. It is amazing that several of the players who go overseas and are successful are not primarily motivated by money. You cannot make a lot of money overseas unless you stay there awhile.

The turnover overseas is very high. This is the common malady of a player with distorted perceptions. Players come to me and say they want to go overseas because they know someone they are better than who is playing overseas. I like to have them qualify, rather than quantify. I place people in jobs for a reason. If it was obvious to the fan, or a lawyer with 2-3 clients, or even the NBA guys who make all the money, then I could not make a living. But, it is not clear to them, and, therefore, I make a living. I try to develop some insight into the market, as well as into the ability and talent of the player. I then attempt to match them with a team.

The players that are the most marketable, generally, are point guards with some skills, who can create, with quickness and some humility. Small forwards are also exciting — on the court, not after the game. These forwards are exciting, quick to the hole, can handle it, and can go over big people, are also marketable. There are not many American centers in my market. American centers that are any good (and there are not many around, even in the NBA) can make a lot more money in other leagues than in the market I deal in. I would take a nice, quick, active guy, like Marquis Bragg from Providence. He is a prototype overseas inside player. He has a sensational body, he is very quick to the ball, and he plays on both sides of the basket. Moreover, of the few are available. There is no place for big, slow centers on a CBA bench. I look for quick, active, athletic, strong players, regardless of height.

My only insert regarding the legal profession is that I use a disclaimer regarding heights and weights. I do everything I can to accurately report the height and weight of these guys and their statistics. However, I am at the mercy of the official NBA register, the CBA register, and college SID's. It is best to determine these factors for yourself. When you measure a college basketball player, measure how he plays, not the way he is three hours after the game, because he has his basketball shoes on when

he plays. That is the only problem I have ever had. Sometimes, when someone is dissatisfied with a player, they use height as a reason, rather than the real reason.

VI. RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PLAYERS

After twenty-three years in the profession, I have only had two players that I have not been paid for; that is pretty good. I try to form a relationship with the player based on the reality of the situation. I have about fifteen players overseas that I say I represent. I simply find them a job and every year thereafter I talk realistically with them about whether they should stay in the job, rather than trying to move to somewhere where they have no chance of making it. That is, "counter-negotiation." I have found that when players get overseas, they become scared or a bit lonely, and forget why they came. They forget the reason they called me and explained so eloquently the virtues of their game and their character when they wanted a job. When they get the job, it is just not quite like home, and many times it does not work out. So, I do not think you can possibly know whether a player going overseas is going to cut it over there. By cutting it, I do not mean scoring thirty-five points a game; I mean going in and eventually getting his heart where club objectives are, and doing a good job.

Let me give you an example. In Australia, there are many non-household name players. James Crawford is a 6'6 Larry Nance. James Crawford came out of a small NAIA school in 1980, before those schools started calling themselves Division I, and went to Australia. After five years retaining his job as a player, he became an Australian citizen. Now, he is playing in the NBL finals. With Perth and Melbourne playing, I have two players in the finals. That is low for me, but I am pleased with them.

Another example is Ricky Grace, as you might remember, from Oklahoma. Ricky Grace was not good enough to meet the expectations of a CBA coach. However, he is a fine basketball player. He is smart, quick, he can penetrate, and he understands the game. He is there along with James Crawford. James became a citizen when he was twenty-five and now he is making a living. Even though his job becomes somewhat less competitive now that he is naturalized, he still does his job. Ricky and James both have nice homes on the Indian ocean, and they both do very well. They are very happy. They even listened when I told them to forget this other crap and get over there and do a good job. I told them not to sit down there and dream about making a million bucks, because

they were never going to. I told them to use their talent and brains and do something!

Discussions of material wealth and actually achieving a comfortable way of life are two entirely different concepts. They are like discussions of honesty. My perception of honesty and your perception of honesty will obviously be two totally different things.

I work with some NBA agents who are despicable because they stockpile basketball players that they have no intention of attempting to place in jobs. They hang on to them anyway. They want you to beg them to share a few players with them. They do not return phone calls from the player or from people attempting to help the player. This happens too often.

To be fair, I recognize that there are others who are cooperative and call me to say, "Gee, I thought so and so was going to be drafted, and we would like you to look after him because we know you will do a good job for him." It only takes twenty years to build a reputation, so you can start anytime.

Essentially, the business of overseas basketball is finding the right player. I put a lot of effort into listening to what club administrators perceive as their needs in the U.S. player content of their team. The objective is a longer term relationship with the club, replete with renewals, rather than a 'quick hit and quick buck.' The renewal is a strong endorsement of a job well done, and that is the objective. Everyone wins—club, player, and agent. And everyone gets paid.