

## Basketball and The Middle Kingdom ···

**Author:** dave-severns

Among all the countries of the world, only three can claim that basketball is their most popular sport. Before reading on, take a moment to think if you can name them·····OK? The Philippines, Lithuania, and China. In a country of 1.4 billion people, 300 million, roughly the population of the U.S., play basketball in China. Having spent some time there in the past few years teaching the game to Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Australians, and New Zealanders, I have found the relationship between the Chinese and hoops fascinating. As perhaps the only true national sport, originally the best players were in the military. Although anti-western to the extreme, Chairman Mao totally embraced basketball. With an estimated NBA fan base of 450 million since 1987, a walk in the streets of Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou will reveal jerseys from almost every team, especially "Houston Basketball", the former team of Yao Ming, far and away the most popular Chinese player in history. In an NBA game vs. Shaq and the Lakers in his first season, 200 MILLION Chinese viewers tuned in to witness the match up, (9/9 FG, 2/2 FTs, 20 pts.). Because of Yao and his influence world wide, the NBA started printing All-Star ballots in Chinese and Spanish. The Chinese basketball phenomenon had exploded.

No matter how popular the game is in China, they have performed far below average in world competitions, (16th in the 2010 FIBA World Championships, 12th in the 2012 Olympics for men and 6th for women). Although not an expert by any means as to why, I do have some observations after spending some time working with their players and coaches.

### COACHING

In the states, coaching is a choice. In China, it is decided for you. This simple fact has had a direct impact on the quality of their game internationally. From the early developmental programs and up to the national programs, coaches are basically mandated to coach. Some have the desire and passion to teach the game equal to those in the States. The problem, as I see it, is that far too many do not. A more organized national approach to choosing coaches based on interest and passion, and not on any other criteria, would help to start alleviating the poor showing in international competition. This will take several years, but in a country with that much interest and the resources (money), the results would be seen.

### TRAINING TECHNIQUES

Discussions with players, coaches and observers have revealed some interesting things about what is happening during practices/training sessions in China. The one common thread in these discussions is the inordinate amount of the practice time dedicated to conditioning. Not conditioning where the team is running a 5 on 0 drill for example, or using conditioning along with a skill development, (passing/shooting/dribbling), but just running laps, suicides, etc. This alone would take the fun out of playing in a structured setting. The game is enormously popular on the playgrounds of China, and would be just as popular in the organized games as well if practices were more structured to include the teaching the fundamentals of how to play instead

of how to run.

## **DIET/NUTRITION**

In a developing country where 300 million people play the game, the lack of proper diet and nutrition will have its impact. I have observed during training sessions that their players tire easily and are physically weak compared to Americans, Australians and the Japanese. As the Chinese economy continues to grow (and possibly eventually pass the U.S.), diet and nutrition will catch up and we will see stronger, better conditioned Chinese teams.

The Chinese are as passionate about hoops as any people on earth. They revere NBA players, NBA games and wear as much gear and shoes as anyone. This will only continue to grow. With an overhaul of the Chinese basketball system from the grassroots to the national teams, I think we will begin to see dominance on the international stage within the next 25 years. In addition, as the government eases their restrictions on players leaving the country to play college and professionally, we will again see the future coming of the next Yao Ming.