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Taking the Mission Seriously

There is a golden opportunity out there for retired players to live the NBRPA mission statement: "To promote basketball and enhance the sport's image through members building community relationships and support important charitable causes."

Professional basketball players who were lucky enough to have been born in the second half of the 20th century are privileged indeed. In unprecedented ways and in staggering amounts, these players have been lavished with the twin perks of wealth and celebrity. In fact, the correlation between wealth and celebrity is so pronounced that former NBA announcer Bob Costas recently observed: "Celebrity is the number one currency in America today." In fulfilling the noble mission of the NBRPA, there exists a sterling opportunity to mentor these newly minted multi-millionaire celebrities—an opportunity that could have a profound impact on hundreds of communities across America.

For years now, retired players such as Tiny Archibald, Bob Lanier, John Havlicek, and more recently Kevin Johnson and David Robinson, have had a tremendously positive influence on their communities as role models and activists for important charitable causes. However, Tiny, Bob and John played in a different era before globalization and inflation made \$100 million contracts commonplace and worldwide sponsorships made basketball players international celebrities. Bench players today routinely earn more than \$5 million per year and are household names in their own right. The NBA's "average salary" qualifies every current player to be a philanthropist if he chooses to become one.

As you are aware, current NBA players idolize and revere the players they watched and emulated while growing up. Former players can exercise this "celebrity" to influence the young minds of today's players to make a difference in their community. If every current NBA player adopted just one community—where they are from, where they live now, where they play—and invested in that community, financially, socially, or by personal example and identification, imagine the power and influence they could exert. Entire communities, especially in the inner city or in poorer rural areas, would be transformed into "Grant Hill's community," "Shaq's community" or "Wesley Person's community."

How would it work? Adoption is a serious commitment. When you adopt a child you take responsibility for that child's welfare, needs and development. The same commitment would be expected on behalf of a community. Leveraging his wealth, celebrity and influence, the player

would identify and then convene the business, political and social service leaders in a community to formalize the adoption and make it public and official. Who among such leaders wouldn't come to a meeting called by the likes of a Tim Duncan, Karl Malone or LeBron James?

During the "adoption" meeting the player will listen as the leaders describe the most urgent community needs and problems. Next, the community leaders form a team, which in turn appoints the player as "Team Captain." Together they develop a "gameplan." Benchmarks and deliverables are agreed upon; and in order to achieve the desired goal, the player would agree to provide some of his time, money, and connections to benefit the community. In this way, the player utilizes his unique resources to help mobilize the strengths in a community. After all, who better than an NBA player knows the benefits and value of teamwork?

There are numerous ways to get involved and promote basketball after retirement. As evidenced by how many former players go into coaching, mentoring is a skill seemingly found in abundance among retired players of the NBA. In fact, former player-coach Bill Russell was one of the founders of the National Mentoring Partnership. Furthermore, no group more than the Retired Players of the NBA, has a greater appreciation for just how fortunate their descendants are! If each retired player would take one current player under his wing and mentor him on the power and opportunity he has to make a real difference in the life of his community, this nation would be immeasurably richer.

The NBRPA Mission would be a living and fulfilled mission if retired players took the time to mentor those following in their footsteps and develop a "community." What better way to "promote basketball and enhance the sport's image"? Every town in America would be hoping to produce a future NBA player. And who would blame them?

Written by Marc Pollick, President and Founder of The Giving Back Fund, a national non-profit that facilitates high impact and efficient charitable giving for professional athletes and entertainers. With offices in Boston and Los Angeles, GBF has consulted with or managed charitable foundations for more than 50 clients including 10 current or former NBA players. For more information, please visit www.givingback.org



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