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MASAI UJIRI: “BECAUSE I’M BLACK”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Abbas Khambati and Mazi Raz wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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THE DECISION

Masai Ujiri had had an eventful run with the Toronto Raptors (Raptors). As the general manager (GM) of a National Basketball Association (NBA) franchise, he had needed to wear numerous hats. He was responsible for overseeing the “plumbing” of the organization, including the business and complex financial operations, player-related decisions, and contracts (see Exhibit 1). He also served as the poetic author of the Raptors’ publicity materials, thereby playing a significant role in public relations and promoting new business ventures and partnerships.

Ujiri’s tenure with the Raptors was marked by the orchestration of controversial trades, which propelled the franchise from irrelevance to securing its first NBA title in 2019, and more recently, by the emotional fallout from the Black Lives Matter movement. Although Ujiri had reached the pinnacle of the NBA universe by delivering the Raptors a championship, he had also increasingly taken on the role of an activist, both within and outside the organization. As a successful executive, Ujiri would need to decide whether and how to marry his responsibilities to the franchise and his desires toward achieving social change.[[2]](#endnote-2)

MASAI UJIRI: EARLY LIFE

Ujiri was born in Bournemouth, England, to Nigerian parents. After completing their university education, Ujiri’s mother and father moved back to Nigeria when he was two years old, where they worked as a doctor and a hospital administrator, respectively.[[3]](#endnote-3) Ujiri lived in multiple countries and was exposed to various cultures from a young age, although he spent most of his adolescent and formative years in Zaria, northern Nigeria.[[4]](#endnote-4)

As a young teen in Nigeria, Ujiri was introduced to basketball by the legendary coach Oliver B. Johnson (OBJ), who was known as the godfather of African basketball.[[5]](#endnote-5) As a member of the American Peace Corps, OBJ first visited East Africa in 1969. Shortly before he was due to return to the United States, he traveled to Nigeria. He chose to stay there and coach young children, and he eventually became the head coach of the Nigerian National Basketball Team. The young Ujiri was mentored, trained, and coached by OBJ.[[6]](#endnote-6) Knowing that OBJ had previously mentored another young Nigerian, Hakeem “the Dream” Olajuwon—who ended up becoming one of the most celebrated NBA players—Ujiri began to dream of playing in the NBA.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Ujiri’s keen interest and talent in basketball led him to move to Seattle, Washington, where he played for Nathan Hale High School. While it was uncommon for African youth to travel to and live in the United States for basketball purposes, Ujiri’s socioeconomic background afforded him the opportunity to pursue such a path. He later enrolled in and played basketball for Bismarck State College, followed by Montana State University and, ultimately, the Solent Stars in England. Ujiri spent his entire professional playing career (1991–2003) in Europe, playing for multiple teams in England, Belgium, Finland, and Denmark.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, owing to his roots and his love for Africa, Ujiri developed the idea of giving African youth the same opportunity to play basketball on an international stage that he had enjoyed.[[9]](#endnote-9)

GIANTS OF AFRICA

In 2003, while working as a scout[[10]](#footnote-1) for the Denver Nuggets (Nuggets),[[11]](#footnote-2) Ujiri started Giants of Africa (GOA), a non-profit organization that aimed to uncover talent. While one of the primary goals of the organization was to popularize the game of basketball in Africa, GOA’s aim extended to inspiring youth aged 15–19 to aspire to be great, dream big, and become “honest, hard-working, accountable, and positive” members of society. Operating in 17 African countries and territories, GOA ran basketball camps; provided facilities, coaches, and gear; and trained players for local, national, international, and professional playing careers.[[12]](#endnote-10)

While most youth who participated in GOA’s projects did not go on to pursue professional basketball careers, this reality did not hamper the primary objective of GOA. Fundamentally, GOA instilled the virtues of grit, perseverance, and passion in participants, complementing their basketball workshops with speeches and seminars on mental toughness, goal setting and planning, and the habit of dreaming big in relation to any pursuit. Notably, GOA hosted gala awards and dinners for its participants in many locations, giving both participants and facilitators the opportunity to connect with and learn from each other in a more casual setting.[[13]](#endnote-11)

Ujiri recognized the huge pool of untapped talent in Africa and felt compelled to establish a mechanism by which players could be discovered as well as honed for growth in their personal lives outside of basketball. Reflecting on his motivation to start GOA, Ujiri commented, “I don’t just want to be the first African GM in American sports… I want to make an impact in Africa and grow the game.”[[14]](#endnote-12)

Over 100 GOA participants attended high school or university in the United States and Canada, nearly 25 played in junior teams in clubs across Europe, and over 65 took part in the NBA’s Basketball Without Borders program in Africa.[[15]](#endnote-13)

UJIRI’S CAREER AS AN NBA FRONT-OFFICE EXECUTIVE

In 2000, Ujiri and David Thorpe, a player development coach and ESPN analyst, met at the Shaw Summer League in Boston. During a league game, Ujiri approached Thorpe and thanked him for training Olumide Oyedeji, a Nigerian player who had developed a mentorship with Ujiri.[[16]](#endnote-14) At the time, Thorpe worked with multiple NBA players as a player developer and adviser. Within NBA circles, Thorpe was informally known as the “godfather”[[17]](#endnote-15) of player development. Perhaps foreseeing that Thorpe could help with his own basketball career, Ujiri determined to keep in touch with him following that fleeting encounter.[[18]](#endnote-16) In fact, the “godfather” of player development could also help launch careers in the front office.

The encounter at the Shaw Summer League set the foundation for a long and meaningful professional relationship between Ujiri and Thorpe. In 2001, unable to achieve sustained success in his career as a player, Ujiri took stock of his ambitions and decided to follow a different path.[[19]](#endnote-17) Having retired from his playing career and in search of the next rung on the professional ladder, Ujiri reached out to Thorpe to help chart his path, whether it be coaching or scouting. Owing to his extensive network in Africa, Ujiri felt that he could foster meaningful interest among NBA teams with regard to scouting and recruiting African players. Thorpe believed that an upcoming basketball tournament, the Final Four, was the best place for Ujiri to develop new connections.[[20]](#endnote-18) The events leading up to and during the Final Four served as the main pipeline for sending player, coach, and executive talent to the NBA.[[21]](#endnote-19)

Thorpe was unsure if he had room for Ujiri to stay with him during the tournament, but if Ujiri could manage to get himself to Atlanta, Thorpe agreed to introduce him to as many key people in the basketball universe as possible. Thorpe gave his cell phone number to Ujiri and arranged to meet him on a street corner before the first day of the tournament. As Ujiri did not own a cell phone, he frequently borrowed Thorpe’s during the tournament weekend in order to make connections. To Thorpe’s surprise, numerous people called his cell asking for Ujiri. Thorpe said he was getting lots of phone calls from famous coaches who he didn’t know. Clearly Ujiri had charmed a lot of people and really had something to offer, which was good players in Africa.”[[22]](#endnote-20)

Thorpe recognized Ujiri’s ability to make connections and to spot talent in far-flung corners of the basketball universe. As he had advised many basketball players, he counselled Ujiri to document all of his relationships with players, coaches, and front-office staff. Together, they worked on a document they called “Masai’s Sphere of Influence,” which outlined all of the places in Europe and Africa where Ujiri had played or had connections. This exercise to map his network, along with his ability to broker connections, helped Ujiri to land an unpaid scouting job with the Orlando Magic, an NBA franchise located in Orlando, Florida, which played in the Eastern Conference’s Southeast Division.[[23]](#endnote-21)

For the next few months, Ujiri travelled across Europe meeting sports executives and discovering talented players and coaches. Ujiri’s proclivity for connecting with people as well as his understanding of the player development and recruitment pipelines in both North America and Europe were instrumental in growing his network in the increasingly global sport of basketball. Crucially, spotting talent from across the world allowed him to build equity in a league that tended to acquire and consolidate the best players, regardless of their place of origin.[[24]](#endnote-22)

Within a year, Ujiri had secured a paid, full-time scouting position with the Nuggets. In 2008, he left the Nuggets to join the Raptors as the director of global scouting and assistant GM—only to return to the Nuggets in 2010 as the GM.[[25]](#endnote-23)

The position of GM within a professional North American sporting franchise primarily entailed liaising between the ownership and the rest of the front-office team, hiring for several other important front-office positions, and charting a path toward a championship for the team. Furthermore, leadership style aside, the GM typically oversaw the recruitment of star players who could define the future for their organization.

During his stint as the Nuggets’ GM, Ujiri facilitated many important trades, including orchestrating the departure of embattled star Carmelo Anthony to the New York Knicks to allow for a fresh and young cohort in 2011.[[26]](#endnote-24) While facilitating trades was one aspect of the job of a GM, the consequences of transfers could not necessarily be attributed to the decision maker. Until that point, Ujiri had proven his ability to spot talent; however, the outcome of the inclusion of certain players could have been the result of several factors. Similar to the situation in many other sports, the elements of luck, timing, and trades played a vital role in the success or failure of a basketball team.

Ujiri was named Executive of the Year during the 2012–2013 season with the Nuggets.[[27]](#endnote-25) While commenting on Ujiri’s work in the NBA, Thorpe said:

He has always been a valuable guy in the eyes of the NBA GMs because he knows how to find good players the rest of the league does not know about… One value he definitely brings is that he knows everybody and has no enemies. That’s how he gets deals done in the NBA. He’s not out late clowning around. He’s very classy. He values character.[[28]](#endnote-26)

Although it was not uncommon for former professional athletes to pivot to front-office roles, Ujiri’s transition represented a stark departure from the norms of players retiring into the sunset and enjoying their time off the court as analysts or talk-show hosts.[[29]](#endnote-27) Notably, *not* having played in the NBA—and presumably not having cultivated relationships with players and executives—presented a barrier to entry for anyone looking to enter the league in any capacity other than as a player. This barrier may have proved difficult for Ujiri to overcome as an outsider, which led him to leverage Thorpe and his connections. His involvement at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Final Four tournament also highlighted the importance of understanding the player pipeline for the NBA, as most NBA players hailed from the highly competitive college basketball pool.[[30]](#endnote-28)

GM AND PRESIDENT OF THE RAPTORS (2013–PRESENT)

The Raptors, a professional basketball team in Toronto, Canada, competed in the Atlantic Division of the Eastern Conference. During the 2018–2019 season, the Raptors won a historic first NBA Championship, defeating the Golden State Warriors in six games. The Raptors were owned by Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE), which was part-owned by Rogers Communication (37.5 per cent), Bell Canada Enterprises (28 per cent), and Larry Tanenbaum (25 per cent). MLSE was also the parent company of the National Hockey League’s Toronto Maple Leafs, the Canadian Football League’s Toronto Argonauts, the Major League Sports’ Toronto Football Club, and the developmental teams Raptors 905, Toronto Marlies, and Toronto FC II.[[31]](#endnote-29)

The Raptors had a beleaguered history in the Eastern Conference, having missed the playoffs for five straight years. During Bryan Colangelo’s tenure as president and GM, the Raptors developed a negative reputation, receiving criticism from fans, commentators, and players alike.[[32]](#endnote-30)

In 2013, Tim Lieweke, then president and chief executive officer (CEO) of MLSE, approached Ujiri and asked him to rejoin the Raptors. On May 31, 2013, Ujiri signed a five-year deal to become executive vice president and GM of the Raptors, while Colangelo remained president.[[33]](#endnote-31)

Lieweke’s motivation for hiring Ujiri was heightened by his frustration and disappointment with the team’s recent performance. In response to a related question, Lieweke said, “There is accountability here and we need a new set of eyes and a new thinking.”[[34]](#endnote-32)

However, Lieweke specifically wanted Ujiri because of his clear desire to win. Referring to Ujiri in a separate interview, Lieweke said, “He had the same kind of juice and determination that I did… A desire to be great wherever he went.”[[35]](#endnote-33)

Lieweke handed complete autonomy and control to Ujiri, allowing him to do what was necessary to win a championship in Toronto. Critically, Ujiri was tasked with reforming the Raptors’ culture. The Raptors’ spate of losses and disappointing showings had resulted in a culture of complacency and a lack of accountability. Being the only Canadian team in the NBA, as well as being located in the large metropolis of Toronto, ensured that the team was financially viable. However, fans, players, and other teams had written off the Raptors, viewing the team as merely an afterthought.[[36]](#endnote-34)

One of the most pivotal moments in Ujiri’s tenure came in the early days when he recommended that the majority of the Raptors’ front-office staff be fired. It was evident both within and outside the organization that Colangelo had been stripped of the final say in front-office matters. On June 26, 2013, as Ujiri took the helm and filled the remaining positions, Colangelo resigned.[[37]](#endnote-35)

During his time with the Raptors, Ujiri sought to change the team’s performance on the court and to shape the culture of the team against the broader backdrop of the city of Toronto. More specifically, Ujiri wanted to develop a professional sports team that would represent the pride that fans and players felt with regard to the city. Instead of being ashamed of being in the (Canadian) “North,” Ujiri wanted players, fans, and the organization to consider the location a badge of honour. Consequently, he sought to remake the image of Toronto and, by extension, the Raptors through the “We The North” campaign, which was designed to invoke historical myths concerning who or what Canada was.[[38]](#footnote-3),[[39]](#endnote-36)

Ujiri’s skill in terms of managing perceptions was not confined to developing slogans and press briefings, however, as became apparent during the 2014 NBA playoffs. Standing on a stage in front of Raptors fans in Maple Leaf Square in Toronto, Ujiri shouted, “F\*ck Brooklyn!” ahead of Game 1 of the Brooklyn–Toronto playoff series. Some commentators noted that this may have been a stunt intended to energize the fan base.[[40]](#endnote-37) While Ujiri was a prominent mascot and fixture of the team in the minds of fans, the players, front-office staff, and management also picked up on his impact as GM.

When asked to comment on Ujiri’s approach, Fred VanVleet, then an emerging Raptors player, commented, “He values the little things about a person… more than just their basketball talent.” Furthermore, VanVleet was surprised at how direct, assertive, and involved Ujiri was in providing pointers and occasional coaching to the players.[[41]](#endnote-38) Similarly, his front-office staff frequently used the word “trust” when describing Ujiri. The highest accolade, however, came from Larry Tanenbaum, MLSE chairman. Following a tense moment in the team’s history, the MLSE board continued to have faith in Ujiri. As Tanenbaum commented, “his [Ujiri’s] vision… is a championship vision.”[[42]](#endnote-39)

Ujiri was also renowned for establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships outside the Raptors organization. Whether it was his storied friendship with Canadian rapper Drake,[[43]](#endnote-40) the support he routinely received from Toronto Mayor John Tory,[[44]](#endnote-41) or his friendships with heads of state, including Barack Obama and Uhuru Kenyatta,[[45]](#endnote-42) Ujiri fostered diverse networks in his personal and professional life. In essence, Ujiri’s role in Toronto was not limited to the responsibilities of running the Raptors organization.

Ujiri’s friendship with Drake,[[46]](#endnote-43) for example, dated back to 2013, when the latter was appointed the Raptors’ global ambassador.[[47]](#endnote-44) Drake’s role later morphed into that of part fan, part Raptors representative, frequently leading to him being courtside at Raptors’ games cheering on the team while trash-talking the opposition.[[48]](#endnote-45) Drake also made more substantive contributions to the Raptors. In early 2018, he and Ujiri jointly announced a new initiative that would see Canada Basketball and the City of Toronto receive CA$2 million and CA$1 million in donations, respectively.[[49]](#endnote-46) In recounting one of many conversations with Drake, Ujiri said during a news huddle:

I was watching the game [at home] on my couch when [Jonas] Valancuinas gets hurt. He [Drake] is at the game… and he texts me ‘what’s wrong? How bad is it? How much are we going to miss?’ He starts going on this rant, and I wanted to say to him… Drake, you are right there. You know more than me.[[50]](#endnote-47)

While Ujiri’s burgeoning friendship with Drake caught the public’s attention, Ujiri simultaneously cultivated something of a mentor relationship with former President Barack Obama.[[51]](#footnote-4),[[52]](#endnote-48) Indeed, Ujiri was invited to the 2015 White House Correspondents’ Dinner during Obama’s presidency,[[53]](#endnote-49) the two attended Game 2 of the NBA Finals together,[[54]](#endnote-50) while reports also suggested that President Obama had attempted to persuade Ujiri to join the Washington Wizards’ management team once his contract in Toronto expired.[[55]](#endnote-51) However, beyond basketball, what likely bound the two most was their shared love of community impact, which was evident in their joint effort to establish and open a community centre in Kogelo, Kenya, at the behest of Dr. Auma Obama, Barack Obama’s sister.[[56]](#endnote-52)

When describing his experience at the community centre’s inauguration, Ujiri said, “I didn’t know that the president was going to come open [the community centre] when we were doing all of this.”[[57]](#endnote-53)

The inauguration coincided with Nelson Mandela’s 100th birthday, which served as the perfect talking point for Ujiri and Obama. Ujiri commented, “We talked about Mandela a lot. The impact he’s had on so many people’s lives and how all of us have continued to build on and to remember his legacy. It’s special with the 100 years of Nelson Mandela.”[[58]](#endnote-54)

Ujiri’s fleeting encounters with such personalities left a deep mark on his person and his profession, as he often applied the lessons he learned from experiences outside basketball to his day job. This approach was perhaps best characterized by one of his comments to a reporter:

It is so much of a great experience. You can’t even imagine. It’s the best experience you can ever have, you meet people. You stay in touch with these people and the contacts you make. It’s almost been my way of learning. These people help you in other areas of the game…[[59]](#endnote-55)

Ujiri added:

You take different things [from these interactions]. You’re trying to figure out if it translates from your sport. A lot of the things we deal with, whether it’s how you deal with superstars, practice facilities, what your style of building analytics, sports science and injuries, media, how you deal with the pressure of homecourt advantage… I read my notes every day.[[60]](#endnote-56)

ROAD TO THE NBA CHAMPIONSHIP

With a clear mandate as well as the will to execute it, Ujiri made a series of eyebrow-raising moves to help the Raptors achieve their ambitions. Almost immediately, he traded Andrea Bargnani, dispatching the 2006 NBA Draft’s No. 1 pick to the New York Knicks.[[61]](#endnote-57) Bargnani was the face of the Raptors’ subpar performance, and his departure injected energy and optimism into both the Raptors’ fan base and the organization itself.[[62]](#endnote-58)

Ujiri and his management team continued to acquire, develop, and re-sign a strong group of players during the rebuilding phase. Ujiri fired Dwane Casey, the 2018 NBA Coach of the Year, who also had the highest number of wins in franchise history, and he traded fan favourite DeMar DeRozan for Kawhi Leonard[[63]](#footnote-5) on a one-year deal.[[64]](#endnote-59) While none of the acquired players were superstars, they were molded to Ujiri’s and Nick Nurse’s—Casey’s replacement—philosophies of playing as a team and having the desire to win a championship at all costs. [[65]](#endnote-60)

The Leonard trade drew criticism from the Raptors’ fan base and the media[[66]](#endnote-61) (see Exhibit 2), especially because he was nursing an injury and was known to be a difficult player to manage, while DeRozan had shown loyalty to both the Raptors’ fan base and the organization.[[67]](#endnote-62) Many also questioned the value of acquiring Leonard, who had the option to leave Toronto in free agency after just one season.[[68]](#endnote-63)

Despite the criticism, during the 2018–2019 season, the Raptors advanced to the NBA Finals against the Golden State Warriors (Warriors).[[69]](#footnote-6) It was the Warriors’ fifth straight appearance in the NBA Finals, three of which they had won, and they were the favourites to win yet another title.[[70]](#endnote-64)

Despite a gruelling series that led to multiple injuries, the Raptors won their first NBA Championship in Game 6 against the Warriors on June 13, 2019. The victory was shared across Canada, with millions of fans streaming onto the streets in celebration. The Raptors accomplished this feat after 24 years, becoming the first team since the 1993 Blue Jays to bring a major sports championship to the city and to Canada.[[71]](#endnote-65) While Leonard was named the NBA Finals most valuable player (MVP), it was Kyle Lowry and Pascal Siakam[[72]](#footnote-7) who stepped up, scoring 26 points each.

AN ALTERCATION WITH AN OFFICER IN OAKLAND

Moments after the Raptors clinched their first NBA Championship, Ujiri rushed toward the court in the Oakland Arena, where the players he led was celebrating their win. As he pulled out the credentials that would allow him access to the court, he was shoved twice by Alan Strickland, an on-duty sheriff’s deputy officer. Ujiri shoved back. A few bystanders intervened and helped Ujiri onto the court to celebrate with the team.[[73]](#endnote-66)

Despite video footage showing that Strickland shoved Ujiri first before being shoved back, the sheriff’s office reported that Strickland had been shoved by Ujiri first. In court filings, Strickland’s representative stated that Ujiri’s reaction caused “injury to his [Strickland’s] body, health, strength, activity, and person, all of which have caused and continue to cause [Strickland] great mental, emotional, psychological, physical, and nervous pain and suffering.”[[74]](#endnote-67)

Strickland claimed that he had first attempted to use words and physical guidance (i.e., gently grabbing Ujiri’s right elbow) to prevent Ujiri from getting courtside. He further commented that his failure to stop Ujiri might have resulted in “the suspect” (that is, Ujiri) committing serious crimes on the court. Justifying Strickland’s actions, his representatives pointed to the circumstance of the “high-profile sporting event” and referenced the 1993 stabbing by a fan of tennis star Monica Seles as well as the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre.[[75]](#endnote-68)

In response, Ujiri released a statement via Raptors.com:

Thank you to everybody who has expressed disappointment and concern regarding the video that was recently released. My family and I are deeply grateful for your care and consideration.

The video sadly demonstrates how horribly I was treated by a law enforcement officer last year in the midst of my team, the Toronto Raptors, winning its first world championship… unfortunately, I was reminded in that moment that despite all of my hard work and success, there are some people… who will always and only see me as something that is unworthy of respectful engagement. And, there’s only one indisputable reason why that is the case – because I am Black.[[76]](#endnote-69)

Due to the attention drawn by the altercation, along with the fact that both parties chose to pursue legal action, Ujiri held his tongue until after the video evidence was released. In his response, Ujiri chose to highlight the fact that he was treated with a lack of respect specifically because he was a Black man.[[77]](#endnote-70)

Ujiri could have reacted in myriad ways in the heat of the moment and in the following days and weeks. The incident brought Ujiri to a critical juncture in his personal and professional life. While he was at the basketball game in his capacity as Raptors’ president, he related to the experience equally as a minority and as a Black man. The moment, then, presented a dilemma for Ujiri; the timing and method of his reaction would resonate throughout the NBA and, more broadly, in wider society.[[78]](#endnote-71)

The altercation in Oakland between Ujiri and Strickland hit home for many Black Canadians. To highlight the possible racial undertones of the altercation, Toronto’s main daily newspaper published an article with the title, “In 1999, cops pulled over Dee Brown, a Black Raptors player. Two decades later, CEO Masai Ujiri is shoved on a basketball court. Has anything changed?”[[79]](#endnote-72) While efforts to address the gulf between Canadian Black communities and broader Canadian society had waxed and waned over the years, the report pushed police race relations to centre stage and questioned whether true progress was in sight. It also made it clear that the grave social inequalities experienced by Black and other minority populations were not limited to those who were economically marginalized; even an extraordinarily successful sports executive was not immune to the broader Black experience.

THE NBA AND “OWNERSHIP MENTALITY”

The altercation between Ujiri and Strickland highlighted ongoing concerns about the discrimination experienced by Black NBA players and managers. Another incident that caused ripples across the league saw Donald Sterling, then owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, stripped of his ownership rights. Sterling had made several racist remarks about African Americans to his mixed-race girlfriend. As per TMZ, an online newspaper, Sterling allegedly said to his girlfriend:

It bothers me a lot that you want to broadcast that you’re associating with black people… I’m just saying, in your lousy f\*\*\*\*\*\*\* Instagrams, you don’t have to have yourself with, walking with black people… You can sleep with [black people]. You can bring them in, you can do whatever you want. The little I ask you is not to promote it on that... and not to bring them to my games.[[80]](#endnote-73)

Sterling was subsequently exiled from the NBA.[[81]](#endnote-74)

Subsequently, NBA teams began to respond to their players’ calls to reform myriad practices. For example, Draymond Green, a well-known player with the Warriors, was vocal about racial injustices and encouraged teams to do away with the term “owner.” Appearing on The Shop, a highly popular talk show, in late 2018, Green commented, “You shouldn’t say ‘owner’… When you think of a basketball team, nobody thinks of the f\*ckin’ Golden State Warriors and think of that d\*mn bridge. They think of the players that make that team….”[[82]](#endnote-75)

Around the time that the episode aired, the Philadelphia 76ers changed the titles of the team’s owners and co-owners to managing partners and limited partners, respectively.[[83]](#endnote-76)

Green’s outspoken comments were emblematic of the increasing activism of NBA players with regard to race-related matters. The rise in sports activism was particularly telling, as more than 80 per cent of NBA players were people of colour, while only three non-white men (Michael Jordan of the Charlotte Hornets, Vivek Ranadivé of the Sacramento Kings, and Joseph Tsai of the Brooklyn Nets) owned a majority share of an NBA franchise.[[84]](#endnote-77)

BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

Race and racism had long been subjects of conversation within the NBA. In 1984, when David Stern began his 30-year tenure as the NBA’s commissioner, he encountered overt criticism that the league’s image was too Black. A reporter told Stern that “nobody wants to watch ten Black guys in short pants running up and down the court.”[[85]](#endnote-78) According to Stern, “sponsors were flocking out of the NBA because it was perceived as a bunch of high-salaried, drug-sniffing Black guys.”[[86]](#endnote-79) During Stern’s tenure, the NBA instituted policy changes that emphasized the management of players’ behaviour, including instituting the requirement that all players dress in business or conservative attire while arriving at and departing from a scheduled game. During the late 1980s, to deracialize the league, the athleticism of Magic Johnson (a Black player for the Los Angeles Lakers) and Larry Bird (a white player for the Boston Celtics) was brought to the fore. In the 1990s, the league magnified its image of colour-blind athleticism with new characteristics of spontaneity, creativity, style, and independence, as projected in the league’s star player, Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls.[[87]](#endnote-80)

Although the NBA had an interest in deracializing the league, several players used the metaphoric platform for advocacy and activism. For instance, following the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, several players from the Miami Heat – LeBron James included – posed for a photo wearing hooded sweatshirts in which their heads were bowed and their faces hidden.[[88]](#endnote-81) To make their intentions clear, the same afternoon, James had tweeted a photo of his sneaker alongside a statement of solidarity with Trayvon Martin, a Black teen who had been shot dead in Florida by a neighbourhood watch volunteer.[[89]](#endnote-82)

Many continued to question whether activism and politics had a place in athletics and sports. In response to NBA players’ political commentary, during an interview with the media, a Fox News radio host grunted that players needed to just “shut up and dribble.” The radio host went on to express having no interest in hearing political advice from someone “who gets paid US$100 million a year to bounce a ball.”[[90]](#endnote-83) Yet, in spite of the radio host’s wishes, NBA executives worked to establish the league as a forward-looking and inclusive organization. For instance, every year, the league celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day, honoring the life and legacy of the American civil rights leader. In addition, to recognize its Latina/o fan base, the league started holding a series of “Latin Nights” (known as Noches Ene-Be-A) and created alternative jerseys featuring Spanish versions of teams’ names.

During the summer of 2020, hot on the heels of the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the United States, the issues of race and the responses of NBA players stepped into a new spotlight. This was during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, [[91]](#endnote-84) when NBA teams entered “the bubble,” a location teams could opt into and continue with a shortened 2019–2020 NBA season. The bubble aimed to pack all of the players, coaches, staff, and relevant management representatives into one location in order to ensure that nobody with the virus could enter, while nobody outside of the bubble would be affected once the players had left.[[92]](#endnote-85) The ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida, served as the location of the bubble.[[93]](#endnote-86)

The killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor weighed heavily upon Ujiri. In a bid to spread awareness and support the movement, the Raptors decided to cover the team bus in the Black Lives Matter slogan and drive through Florida during their time in Orlando.[[94]](#footnote-8),[[95]](#endnote-87)

When responding to a question from Draymond Green about why a Canadian team felt compelled to push for social change in the United States, Ujiri commented:

For us, we… were going to use the bubble as a statement… as a platform. Coming in here, you have to create a statement, [for me] you have to create a platform. What you guys are doing over there is creating awareness. We thought what greater way to drive through Florida for three hours and show people… what’s going on in the country. We represent not just the Toronto Raptors, [but] the NBA. This is something that is on the minds of all the players and teams.[[96]](#endnote-88)

While the bubble was established to complete the season, the Raptors and other teams used the platform it offered to express the anguish and pain they felt as a result of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake, and many others. Continuing to lend a voice to the Black Lives Matter movement, the Raptors and the Boston Celtics discussed whether to boycott their upcoming games,[[97]](#endnote-89) and on August 25, 2020, the Milwaukee Bucks, one of the favourites to win the championship, began a three-day boycott in protest at Jacob Blake’s killing in Kenosha, Wisconsin.[[98]](#endnote-90)

Commenting on the actions undertaken by NBA teams and players in the bubble, Ujiri stated, “…sports brings us all together. We have the ability to address these issues head-on and galvanize and hope for change and try to create that change. We have to be in that space, and the bubble was that space at that time.”[[99]](#endnote-91)

What started out as an attempt to salvage the 2019–2020 NBA season quickly turned into a vibrant movement among players that aimed to shine a light on the racial injustices plaguing the United States. Basketball became an afterthought.

TRAVELLING TO AFRICA AFTER THE CHAMPIONSHIP

One of Ujiri’s first international trips after winning the 2019–2020 NBA Championship was to Africa, where he continued to lead efforts to build facilities, acquire and train talent, and spread the message of sport. As his involvement with GOA deepened, Ujiri’s personal and professional journeys evolved as drastically as the goals and objectives of the GOA organization itself. When relating his journey through his years as an adolescent in Nigeria, a professional athlete in Europe, and then a front-office executive at the top of his game in the NBA, Ujiri commented extensively on the struggles, motivations, victories, and defeats he faced.[[100]](#endnote-92)

He mentioned, for example, players tossing their used sneakers into a bin in Denver in 2003 so that they could later be used by GOA participants during the organization’s first year, along with Ujiri telling his equipment manager to procure the cheapest possible shorts and jerseys.[[101]](#endnote-93) Once the ball had started rolling and GOA began to garner the attention of Africans and North Americans alike, its core purpose morphed from simply teaching kids to play basketball into creating outreach programs for communities in need, such as United Nations-sanctioned refugee camps.[[102]](#endnote-94) Through its work, GOA started to inculcate the combined valuesof hard work, grit, giving back, and selflessness into its participants. The mission of GOA evolved to include as many people from various walks of life as possible, regardless of whether or not they wanted to make a career out of organized basketball.

After his post-championship visit to Africa, Ujiri candidly spoke of the importance of role models, giving back, having a championship mindset, and hope. He commented:

It doesn’t matter whether there’s been a war. If you’re from Toronto, you’re always going to go back to Toronto. You know it as the place you grew up, and you’ll always go back. That’s how I feel about Africa. I’ll always want to go back there, and GOA will always want to help however we can. Because if we won’t go, then who will?[[103]](#endnote-95)

Stepping back from GOA momentarily, Ujiri commented on perceptions of Africa and its citizens:

The truth is that Africa is like everywhere else. There are poor areas, there are rich areas, there is a middle class. Some of those areas are bigger in one country than another, and some countries have real problems that they’re working through. But there’s great people, good people and a small percentage of bad people—just like everywhere else…

It’s time to stop thinking of Africa as a charity and start thinking of it as an investment. There are so many wonderful things about it that people in the West don’t see. Strictly from a basketball standpoint, the talent level is abnormal. There are tribes where the average height is six foot three. So why don’t we think on a grander scale and try to help everyone capitalize?

You have to bring those good people with you. To me, I won’t be successful if I’m the only one who makes it here.[[104]](#endnote-96)

While organized basketball served as a crucial slingshot for Ujiri’s and GOA’s parabolic trajectories, it was nonetheless merely a tool used by both to advance their broader interests in society.

**THE PATH AHEAD**

On August 5, 2021, Ujiri re-signed a multi-year contract with Toronto Raptors as Team President and Vice Chairman.[[105]](#endnote-97)

As the president of a professional sports team, Ujiri had reached a pinnacle by leading his team to a championship for the first time. With the extended contract, the continual success of the franchise was undoubtedly expected by the players and fans alike. As a Black sports executive, however, the path ahead was not as clear. Ujiri had shown his willingness and his capacity to rise above his expected role and make tough and impactful decisions when necessary.

As Ujiri continued his career as a Black executive, he would invariably need to deal with the dilemma of bringing his social values to the fore in every professional role or prioritizing his day job and letting his advocacy surface only when appropriate. Would he be able to continue to marry the worlds of sport and activism and to chart his own path toward achieving social justice?

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EXHIBIT 1: THE NBA

The NBA is a professional basketball league in North America. Established in New York City in 1946, it has grown to 30 teams, 29 of which are located in the United States and one in Canada. The NBA is known as the premier and most competitive basketball league in the world, and it is one of the highest-paying professional sports leagues worldwide.

Anatomy of a Typical Basketball Game in the NBA

An NBA basketball game is played for a duration of 48 on-court minutes, which are divided into two halves and four quarters. Each team must have five players on the court at a time; however, the positions, specific players, and duration that each player may play are the prerogative of the coaching staff. At the end of the 48 minutes, the team with the highest score wins the game. In the event of a tie, additional “overtime” periods of five minutes are granted to decide the winner. There is no limit to the number of overtime periods that may be played.

Teams

Today, the NBA’s 30 teams are divided into two conferences, with three divisions in each conference. For example, the Raptors belong to the Atlantic Division of the Eastern Conference, alongside the Boston Celtics, the Philadelphia 76ers, the Brooklyn Nets, and the New York Knicks. The competitiveness within each division and conference changes from season to season, depending on myriad factors, including trades, player injuries, draft picks, and player development.

Regular Season

A regular NBA season has 82 games, half of which are played on the “home court” and half on the “away court.” Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the NBA shortened the 2020–2021 season to 72 games, which were played between December 22, 2020 and May 16, 2021.

Playoffs

At the end of the regular season, the eight teams with the highest winning percentages in each conference advance to the playoffs. The NBA playoffs begin with the best-performing teams playing the worst-performing teams in the first round. For example, in the first round of the 2019–2020 playoffs, the Milwaukee Bucks, with the best record in the Eastern Conference, faced the Orlando Magic, which had the worst record among the playoff teams in the Eastern Conference.

Each series is played as a best of seven, with the first team to win four games advancing to the next round. In total, there are four playoff rounds, with the last round being known as the NBA Finals. The winner of the NBA Finals is crowned the NBA Champion for the year.

Players, Coaching Staff, and Front Office

Each NBA team has up to 15 players on its roster. New players typically enter the league through an annual draft in which each team is awarded two selections—known as picks—over two rounds.

Exhibit 1 (Continued)

Each NBA team has a head coach who is assisted by four to seven assistant coaches. Collectively, the coaches draw up strategies, advise and motivate players, and interact with referees when required. The coaches must remain on the sidelines throughout each game.

The front office of a typical NBA team consists of the team president, vice president(s), GM, assistant GM(s), and other managerial positions spanning functional areas, such as finance, marketing, scouting, player development, and operations and logistics. The front-office employees are typically engaged in off-court team business, and they are often uninvolved in the play-by-play decision making within a game.

Contracts Between Players and Teams

**Salary Cap:** The rules for contracts between players and teams were established by the multi-year Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), which was the result of negotiations between representatives of the NBA and the National Basketball Players’ Association.

The CBA imposes a salary cap on teams in order to maintain a competitive balance within the league. The salary cap is based on the league’s basketball-related income, which includes sales of tickets, merchandise, broadcasting rights, and other items.

**Luxury Tax:** Teams that exceed the salary cap by a large margin must pay a luxury tax, that is, a progressive tax levied on teams that pay salaries within and in excess of certain tranches. For instance, during the 2018–2019 season, the penalty was US$1.50 for each dollar spent up to $5 million over the limit, $1.75 for each dollar spent between US$5 and US$10 million over the limit, and so on.

**Free Agency:** An unrestricted free agent (UFA) is free to sign with any team. Once a UFA agrees to a contract, they are part of the new team. A UFA is distinct from a restricted free agent (RFA) in that an RFA can *only* sign with a new team *if* their existing team does not match the terms of the new offer. In essence, an RFA’s current team has the right of first refusal.

**Sign and Trade:** A sign-and-trade agreement is a common type of trade within the NBA. A sign-and-trade agreement is executed by a team signing a UFA to a new contract only to then immediately trade the player to another team in exchange for a combination of players, cash, and/or draft picks. This allows the current team to capitalize on an asset they would otherwise lose.

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EXHIBIT 2: REACTIONS TO DEMAR DEROZAN BEING TRADED TO THE SAN ANTONIO SPURS

Jozy Altidore (@JozyAltidore), “Will be a strange sight going to @Raptors games and not seeing @DeMar\_DeRozan out there. All the best in the future to a city legend,” Twitter*,* July 18, 2018, https://twitter.com/JozyAltidore/status/1019706488355352576.

Tracy Tong (@TracyTongTV), “… (insert sound of heart breaking),” Twitter*,* July 18, 2018, https://twitter.com/TracyTongTV/status/1019615631795281920.

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Eduardo Martinez (@AshoMartinez), “The raptors fired the coach of the year, and got rid of their franchise player. What’s going on at the front office over there?,” Twitter*,* July 18, 2018, https://twitter.com/AshoMartinez/status/1019722094354092032.

Source: Twitter, accessed January 5, 2021.

Endnotes

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13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
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35. Trevor Cole, op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
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