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# NJBA: A Player-Driven League Abolishing The NCAA Cartel

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## Abstract

In recent years, the number of high school basketball stars has evolved at an unprecedented rate. I propose that the only way that this growth continue is if prospective players are diversely represented by those with and without traditional backgrounds in collegiate-level basketball. Thus, there is a need for aspiring players to be provided with a competitive, yet financially-inspired alternate opportunity. The NJBA serves as a gateway into a professional basketball career leveraging student's social media popularity and athletic talents for endorsements, sponsorships, advertising, merchandising, and promotions. This league features all the traditional features of the NBA including annual compensation, bonus incentives, an All-Star Game, Playoffs and Finals series, the NJBA Scouting Combine, among other features. My proposal of the NJBA's core competency demonstrates significant viability of the league.

## 1 Introduction

After its induction into the Olympic events in the 1936 Berlin games, the sport of basketball has become widely adopted as one of the world's most popular team sports. In a 2018 US national survey conducted by Statista, basketball reported to have approximately 23.4M active participants ranging from youth basketball leagues to senior leagues. Among these participants, high school athletes accounted for 551,373 male participants and 412,407 female participants.<sup>[1, 4]</sup> In regard to professional trajectory, the traditional path for someone interested in playing for the National Basketball Association (NBA) follows a path where students commit to playing at least one year of collegiate level basketball before entering the NBA Draft, effectively titled the "One-and-Done Rule" when instated in 2005.<sup>[9]</sup> In an increasing number, the nation's top college basketball recruits are looking for alternative options to this career path due to the limitations that the college athletic scene brings financially. This paper outlines how the traditional professional basketball model is a not suited in today's modern era and proposes an alternative league for aspiring professional basketball players.

## 2 NJBA

**Why and what?** The collegiate basketball industry is a cartel orchestrated through the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Often times, students have no real interest in attending college for academics and only are interested in playing professional basketball after high school, but are forced to adhere to the industry standard one year participation requirement. This creates a natural conflict of interest between the students and the university because in theory, schools ultimately have the responsibility to promote the academic interest of the student, yet behind the scenes, many universities take interest in using their

prospective student's athletic ability to make money for the university. Students are being admitted to prestigious schools on their athletic merit exclusively to enhance the cash cow that is the collegiate basketball industry.

Eventually, there may come a time where a major event or significant public interest disrupts the NCAA's entire business model. There are various examples of this within business in other industries. Looking at the music industry, for example, major record labels have seen a rise in the number of independent music artists who do not sign contemporary record deals after being offered them because the Internet, social media, and streaming platforms, such as Spotify and YouTube, allow musicians to break into the music scene themselves. In 2017, Chance the Rapper became the first mainstream independent artist in history to win a Grammy without ever selling physical copies of a compact disk.<sup>[9]</sup> He was self-promoted and extremely successful, bringing home three Grammy's that year. As we have seen, social media popularity is nothing to take lightly. In today's world, many social media stars are becoming modern day celebrities.

With respect to basketball and the rise of social media fame, high school athletes are now susceptible to gaining a worldwide fanbase. For example, LaMelo Ball is a high school basketball star who has 4.9M followers on Instagram alone.<sup>[6]</sup> That is more followers than well-established NBA players Kemba Walker (1.3M followers) <sup>[5]</sup> and Anthony Davis (4.1M followers) <sup>[2]</sup> who were both featured in the 2019 NBA All-Star Game. Anthony Davis was also a candidate for the NBA's most valuable player (MVP) award in 2017 and 2018. Despite this, there exists a 16 year old high school basketball phenom that is already more renown socially than one of the NBA's most popular franchise players. Henceforth, there is a demand for high school basketball players to monetize their social media popularity and leverage their fame as would the NCAA, financially.

For this project, I propose the National Junior Basketball Association (NJBA), a competitive player-driven, highly energetic and entertaining, fast-paced professional basketball league. The league features players between the ages of 16 and 22 including graduating high school seniors or others working towards a General Educational Development (GED), with rare exceptions being included. All featured players undergo rigorous tryouts at the NJBA Scouting Combine, an invitation-only weekend-long showcase where aspiring youth athletes perform physical and mental tests in front of NJBA coaches, agents, and scouts before being handpicked from each team's coaching staff during each offseason. The NJBA season will include an All-Star Game, Playoffs, and Finals series. The national champions of each season are rewarded with a healthy bonus check, public notoriety, and ceremonial team trophy, among other incentives such as endorsements and sponsorships.

The NJBA features sixteen teams from major American cities. The regular season includes eight games per team, with games taking place in venues across the United States. The NJBA will air its games on national television stations CBS Sports, Fox Sports, ESPNU, and NBATV. Each team has 15 player roster spots. For a team's game eligibility, at least 10 players must be present to play in a game for the team to be eligible for competition. If less than 10 active players are available for a given game, the team will forfeit that game. If both teams are ineligible, both teams will record a loss. Each team will have at most one head coach. The team can have any number of assistant coaches that offer a variety of player development expertise (e.g., shooting, offensive strategy, defense strategy, game film review, etc.). Unlike the NJBA's competitive counterpart, NCAA basketball, the NJBA provides its players with better preparation for the NBA by playing NBA-style rules (e.g., four 12-minute quarters, NBA three-point line, 24-second shot clock, etc.).

**What real world problem do you solve?** The principal problem with the current American basketball career model is that there is a collegiate-level prerequisite for players who do not have at least 1 year of professional basketball experience. Due to the rise of the high school student's social media popularity which lead them to be considered to prestigious NCAA Division I colleges, students must commit to not receiving any monetary benefits to ensure their eligibility with the NCAA. All the while, the colleges capitalize on the publicity these student athletes attract to their university by way of advertising and

merchandising. Thus, the NCAA solely benefits from the profits generated by its product, the students playing the sports, while controlling authoritative power over players through a host of provisions as stated in their official compliance documentation, thereby exploiting the student's interest.

The NBA does have an official minor league, the G-League (Gatorade-League), formally known as the NBA Development League (NBA D-League) from 2005 until 2017, however, it is not nearly as popularized and has developed a bad reputation over the years. Historically, players who do not get drafted during the annual NBA Draft often end up playing in the G-League or players who were cut from NBA team's roster play for the G-League. Los Angeles Lakers guard Larry Nance Jr said in 2016, "Definitely the (G-League) right now has that negative connotation. I would like to see that change because it is for development. It's not punishment."<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, there is a notion that the G-League is a second-hand league who admits NBA rejects rather than a high-prestige development league that recruits top talent. This fails to provide a solution to the problem.

In recent years, top high school basketball athletes have opted out playing for the NCAA and have chosen to play professionally overseas in countries such as Australia. The NJBA solves the problem of domestic students committing to play internationally after high school in order to play professionally by allowing them to be eligible to earn revenue for their talents. It also creates competition for the NCAA. As young athletes become more and more popular, subsequently the NBA will increasingly recruit players from the NJBA instead of the NCAA which places the NCAA the profit scheme in jeopardy.

**Who are your customers?** Frankly, any basketball savant or lover of the game of basketball will enjoy the NJBA. The league welcomes everyone to become a customer. Specifically, any collegiate basketball fan will be our primary customer. The NJBA's target demographic are Caucasian-American and African-American males in the age ranges 35 - 54 of 65+ years old who have some college experience or at most a Bachelor's level degree.<sup>[7]</sup> It is notable that academics or professionals with higher education degrees are less likely to subscribe to watching professional basketball sporting events. To compete with the social camaraderie that is associated with the NCAA's widely famous tournament bracket, the NJBA seeks to capture the same excitement in their Playoffs and Finals from their audience demographic as in Figure 1.<sup>[8]</sup> This also coincides with the fact that men in the 35 - 54 age range are likely to have children in the player age range of 16 - 22 years old. Thus, parents are inclined to support their children's peers.

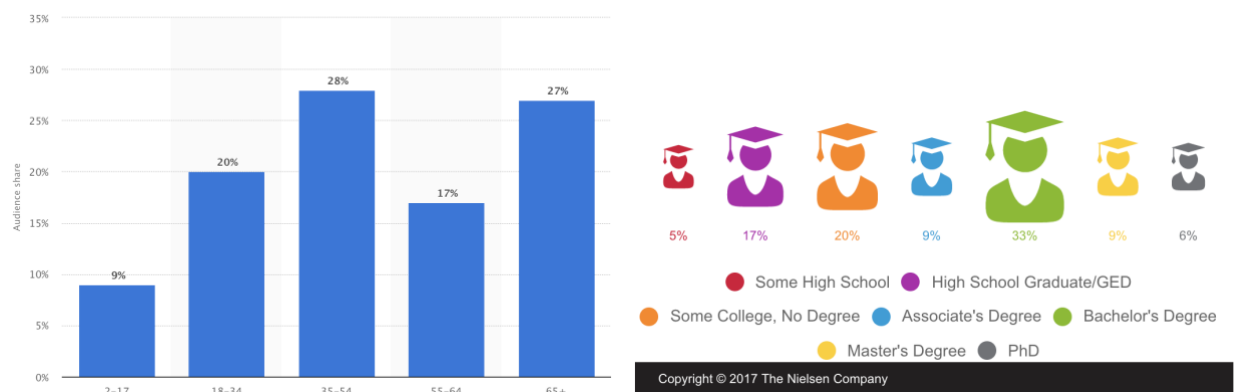


Figure 1: Results of the NCAA men's basketball television audience share by age from the 2014 season and by education from the 2017 season.

**What is your core competency?** So much more goes into the decision of your professional or post high school career than just basketball. The core competency of the NJBA is the ability for the players to have agents and players to capitalize on their social media following to earn profits. There will be no penalty for

sponsorships or endorsements. Here is a list of benefits that our athletes will receive for participating in the NJBA:

- NJBA players can expect to earn an average salary ranging from \$50,000-150,000 per season.
- The opportunity to sign individual endorsement agreements.
- The ability to monetize social media accounts while playing athletics.
- Receive a five-year scholarship - need-based, academic, and athletic-style scholarships will be available.
- Participate in workshops/seminars on topics such as: insurance policies, financial literacy, and more.
- Group licensing opportunities through the NJBA and its corporate partners.
- The ability to sign with an agent without jeopardizing NBA eligibility.
- Visibility with professional scouts and fans through the NJBA broadcast agreement and the NJBA app.
- Cutting edge, high performance training and nutritional programming.
- Opportunity to participate in the Preseason Combine to be played in Philadelphia, PA.

**How do you plan to make money?** The NJBA league will make money through ticketing, merchandising, sponsorships, and advertising (digital advertise revenue and television ratings). This parallels the traditional revenue methods demonstrated by the NBA. League paraphernalia including, but not limited to, shirts, jerseys, hooded sweatshirts, bracelets, coats, posters, sneakers, jackets, hats, gym shorts, athletic pants, socks, autographed basketballs, and water bottles, will be sold at every event as well as the official NJBA online store and app. All clothing items will be available in Men's, Women's, and Children's sizes. A large portion will be generated from ticket sales from the games. The largest portion of revenue generated will be through advertisements through billboards at the game events, online advertisements hosted on the NJBA website, and advertisements during commercials of televised games. A small portion of revenue will come through sponsorships with various third-party distribution and food vendors.

## 4 Conclusion

The National Junior Basketball Association (NJBA) proposes a conventional professional basketball development career to the sport which is advantageous for aspiring high school athletes without requiring them to complete at least one year of collegiate level basketball. Our analysis of each of the league's services serves as a testament of the feasibility of the league's features. It is demonstrated that the traditional professional basketball model solely reaps the benefits that players generate via their social media followings. Future work can be extended upon the NJBA including, but not limited to, a female equivalent to the NJBA known as the WNJBA which provides similar functionality. Documentation and code for the project tables will be housed in my private Github repository <https://github.com/fraziermatthew>.

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