

WHY IS NBA BASKETBALL A JOKE?

John Speckhard

(1) If I were to walk into a crowded room and announce that I thought Houston would beat Georgetown in the NCAA championship game next weekend, I'd be sure to start an argument. Some would agree with me and go on to praise the Cougars and their star, Akeem Olajuwon. Others would argue that the Georgetown Hoyas are too physical for the Cougars and that their star, Patrick Ewing, is better than Olajuwon. Either way, there would be some kind of reaction from almost everybody, because college basketball is extremely popular. Aside from the Super Bowl and the World Series, the NCAA Basketball Championship is the most popular sports event in the country. During the entire season the excitement builds, the stadiums are packed, and teams like Dayton and Wake Forest play in front of millions of people on national television.

(2) If I were to walk into the same room and announce that the Cavaliers are sixteen games back, the reaction would be quite different: "Sixteen games in back of who?" and "What's a Cavalier?" If I went on to tell them that the Cleveland Cavaliers were sixteen games behind the Milwaukee Bucks in the NBA Eastern Conference, the reaction might be something like this: "My Grandparents live in Cleveland."

(3) "Speaking of bucks, can I borrow a five?"

(4) "Who cares?"

(5) Nobody cares. Nobody is interested in professional basketball. The NBA can't even get its championship on prime time television. How can a sport be so popular at the amateur level and be just the opposite at the professional level? One major reason is the fact that, although both college and professional players call the game they play basketball, the two are not the same game at all.

(6) When basketball was in its infancy and final scores were fourteen to twelve, the NBA got the idea that a high scoring game would be more exciting than a low scoring game. So, in order to increase scoring, they came up with the 24-second rule, which makes it a violation for a team to keep the ball without shooting for more than twenty-four seconds. This rule did cause one problem: the defensive team would just sit back in a zone defense and force the offensive team to shoot from the outside. To compensate, the league made another minor adjustment in the rules: playing zone defense became a technical foul. All defense must be man-to-man.

(7) These two rules successfully eliminated from pro ball much of the strategy that makes college ball exciting. A college coach must decide if and when to slow the game

down and set up for a good shot, or to try to run out the clock if his team is ahead. At the other end of the court, he must choose his defense carefully, which usually means changing defenses several times during a game. A professional coach, on the other hand, doesn't do much of anything except yell at the refs every time a call goes against his team.

(8) Professional referees also do their part to increase scoring in the NBA. Offensive fouls are rarely called and traveling calls are almost non-existent. When the NBA refs went on strike recently, they were replaced by college refs who didn't know they were supposed to favor the offense. A lot of players complained about how bad the officiating was, since they were no longer allowed to walk with the ball or commit offensive fouls.

(9) Another difference in the two games is the size and talent of the players. Thousands of college players across the country probably consider themselves to be good basketball players, but there is room for only about two hundred players in the NBA, so a good player doesn't cut it. A great player has a chance, but the NBA prefers players who are perfect. Professional players are so good that they take all the fun out of the game. In college ball, a player who consistently makes his shots is exciting; in the pros, a player who occasionally misses is intolerable.

(10) Not only are they too good, professional players are also much too big to make the game interesting. When the game was invented, a man measuring six feet was quite tall, and someone over six feet, six inches unheard of; so, in 1891, the height of the basketball rim was set at ten feet. Today the rim is still ten feet high, but the average NBA player is over six-six, and every team has at least one seven-footer. Although there are tall players in college ball, only the tallest make it to the pros.

(11) A college game consists of two sets of five players working as a team, passing the ball, looking for a good shot and changing defenses in different situations. A professional game amounts to five games of one-on-one played simultaneously as the players run up and down the court and take turns throwing a ball through a hoop that they could probably use as a chin rest. Pass? Who has time to pass the ball? Why play defense when either team can score at will? This goes on until both teams have scored well over a hundred points, or until the last fan leaves, whichever comes first.

(12) The length of the season also lowers fan interest in pro ball. A college team can expect to play under thirty games in a few short months, a pace which keeps both the fans and the players excited during the entire season. The NBA season starts in October and doesn't end until the championship game in late May. By mid-season even the players don't seem interested in their games, so how can they expect the fans to show up for them?

(13) Another difference between the two that turns fans away from pro ball is the ridiculous amount of money the players make for playing a "kid's" game. The NBA has lost money for years, yet they still pay the average player over \$200,000 a year, and several players make over a million a year. NBA salaries are higher than those in any other professional sport, yet they're the only ones to lose money every year. I find it amusing that the L.A. Lakers feel Mike Kupchak is worth 1.2 million dollars a year to the team, when I doubt if his own mother would pay fifteen dollars to watch him play.

(14) Maybe next year the NBA will do away with its offense-oriented rules. Maybe they'll lower player salaries and shorten the season. Maybe they'll model their games after the successful NCAA. I doubt it. But, then again, who cares?