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Marketing and Media **RSS**

NBA pitches hoops to local fans, players

Several measures are under way to step up the game of basketball in India, including an undisclosed investment by the National Basketball Association

Anik Basu
New Delhi

New Delhi: Sozhasingarayer Robinson lopes down a Chennai court, dribbling, pirouetting and dunking. The 6'8" Robinson sweats through five hours of daily practice with dreams that top his size 14 shoes: the former India player wants to play professional basketball.

New Zealand is the latest to call—"I will start negotiating with the Auckland league authorities soon"—but his decision is rooted in disenchantment. A former Asian All-Star team member, Robinson's game impresses professional leagues overseas. New Zealand, for example, ranks 12th among the 74 basketball-playing nations.

But in India, ranked 46 with its government-sponsored state teams, Robinson is a nobody, lesser known than a minor league cricketer. To play professional ball, he must leave the country, which has no pro league.

One day, that might not be the case for India's aspiring basketball players. Several measures are under way to step up the game in India, including an undisclosed investment by the National Basketball Association, a \$3.3 billion empire that coordinates 32 teams across the United States.

Fresh from lessons learned in China, where basketball has become a national pastime, the NBA is eyeing India as its next big growth market. In November, eight NBA officials toured the country, and the same sports management firm that handles the NBA in China finalizes its India strategy this year. India's basketball chief left for the United States last week to continue discussions on formalizing a partnership with the NBA.

In India, basketball has been played for decades, but so dismal has India's performance been that the Central government blocked the national team's participation at the Doha Asiad in November. For decades, Indian players—who earn no money for their game—such as Robinson have complained of indifference by the nation's official basketball promoters, the Basketball Federation of India, which coordinates basketball tournaments among states.

Marketing efforts picked up this past June, as the Punjab government invited former NBA player Robert Reid to hold a three-day clinic for coaches. Other NBA officials scouted out the Punjab countryside for tall talent and business opportunities, from merchandising to digital broadcasts of games. Their enthusiasm rubbed off on Indian basketball representatives.

"We will take their suggestions on how a professional league can be introduced," said federation secretary general Harish Sharma.

Last summer, shoemaker Adidas sent NBA player Kevin Garnett, a hoopster for the Minnesota Timberwolves, on a tour of India to promote the company's limited edition KG3 sports footwear, priced at Rs8,499.

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siddharta Said:

Almost a year later and still no progress? Need more of an American led influence in India to teach the game to youngsters and open the country up to the game of basketball. The infrastructure needs to improve tremendously as well, not enough courts and stadiums there at all. www.ipbhoops.com

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