

Hip Hop and the NBA

Not everything that ails the NBA is solved by the rest-of-the-season irresponsible to suggest anybody should have foreseen a brawl coming. But there have been signs of an increasing disconnect between people who identify themselves as basketball fans and the players they pay to see perform. Ticket holders and fans pay more than ever to see professional basketball, yet it seems they identify less than ever with the players. Some of that backlash was obvious this summer when a U.S. Olympic team of high-profile NBA players was ridiculed, at home and overseas, as pampered and spoiled before the competition had started.

Even the players' union chief, Billy Hunter, said on ABC's "Nightline" this week that players have become less accessible than ever. Older NBA players increasingly indicate they'd like to see an age-limit adopted in the effort to keep out kids who clearly haven't served an apprenticeship.

And not all the league's problems can be attributed to the players. League and club executives decided to marry the NBA to hip-hop, and clearly didn't know what they were getting into. As my friend Brian Burwell wrote in Tuesday's St. Louis Post-Dispatch, NBA marketing people "thought they were getting Will Smith and LL Cool J. But now they've discovered the dark side of hip-hop has also infiltrated their game, with its 'bling-bling' ostentation, its unrepentant I-gotta-get-paid ruthlessness, its unregulated culture of posses, and the constant underlying threat of violence . . . "

The marketing folks might not have realized that if you welcome in the mainstream group OutKast, you might also have to take the decidedly vulgar Young Buck. You welcome in the music, you also

get the misogyny and other themes of thug life that are admittedly the prerequisite values of the hip-hop culture.

And all this is relevant because this is where NBA players live. It's not a lifestyle they've adopted, it's a life most of them -- black and white -- have lived their entire adult lives. It's a life that boasts incessantly about, "my drink," "my smoke," "my women," and "my rides." And it is a life based on getting "respect" at any cost, including going into the stands and administering a beat-down if somebody "disrespects you."

The point here is not that I think hip-hop is bad; some Eminem or Snoop Dogg CD is constantly playing in my car. The point is NBA folks probably didn't know what they were getting into, how much hip-hop's street code might appeal to the players, and how much the league's very mainstream ticket buyers and sponsors might be resentful of a subculture they don't understand or distrust, even if their white, suburban, well-to-do children inhabit the same subculture. And that doesn't even address the notion that basketball, a decidedly team sport, doesn't exactly work with the theme of "my, my, my."

And that's just one element. Three years ago, while working with Charles Barkley on his book, "I May Be Wrong but I Doubt It," Barkley talked about how unfair it is for fans of the worst teams in the league, like the Bulls, Wizards and Clippers, to have to pay full price for tickets to watch bad teams featuring players straight out of high school. "How can it be fair," Barkley said, "to ask fans of a team that already stinks to pay full price for a seat, and then be told to 'be patient' while a 19-year-old kid learns how to be a professional? Ticket buyers don't get to say, 'I'll pay you full price in four years when Kwame Brown or Eddie Curry is ready to play.' The fans have every right to resent that."

And increasingly, they do. Antonio Davis, now playing for the Bulls and a players' union vice president, told reporters in Los Angeles this week he is worried that the league is overrun with unprepared young players. "I think that's what our image has become: a bunch of young guys who are really not understanding what it is to play in the NBA, what it means to put that uniform on, what it means to be in front of thousands and thousands of people who love what you do, what it means to be making a living playing the game of basketball. They're not thinking about that," Davis said. "As vice president of the union, I'm trying to get them to understand the business of basketball, why it's so important for us to have a good, clean image, why it's so important for us to connect with the fans and enjoy what they do and have some passion . . . I give them something to read about the union, about BRI, escrow . . . they look at me like, 'I'm sleepy.' "

How can anybody hear Davis's words and not think the NBA desperately needs the kind of age limit the NFL has? It doesn't matter that a specific player might have gone to college for a year or two, or that somebody in big trouble might be a college graduate. What Davis sees is a league going hard in the wrong direction, a league having fewer people worthy of being called professionals with every passing year, and another draft class eight players deep in high school kids.

It's those areas, much more than race, that are causing the divide between fans and players. The previous generation of stars was 70 percent black. Okay, there was Larry Bird, Kevin McHale, John Stockton and Chris Mullin, then just about every other star from Julius Erving to Magic to Michael Jordan to Grant Hill to Shaq has been black. And they've been embraced by white sponsors and ticket holders.

What I hear now, increasingly, is tolerance for the game, particularly in black America where basketball is the most beloved industry going, but a wariness of many of the players. Just last week, the league told Vince Carter he couldn't wear headphones during warm-ups. The inference from fans is that Carter would like to, if allowed, block them out right up until the opening tip-off. The night after the brawl in Detroit, the Rockets' Maurice Taylor conducted an interview and wouldn't even take off his headphones. The message, intended or not, is that the moment he was done talking he didn't want to be bothered. This came two weeks after Latrell Sprewell indicated he would need more than \$10 million a year to feed his family. And of course, Artest wanted time off during the season to promote his girl group's new CD.

Fans, for their \$85 tickets, would like to know the players are at least interested in being there, interested in playing, interested now and then in engaging the people who make it possible for them to bling-bling through life. The suspension of Artest and the other Pacers and Pistons doesn't address the disinterest, lack of professionalism and preoccupation with thug life a lot of mainstream patrons perceive, which means the NBA's work has only just begun.