

**SPORT  
AND GEOPOLITICS  
PROGRAMME**

# **GLOBALISED HOOPS: THE NBA AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**Interview with Dr Lindsay Sarah KRASNOFF /**  
Writer and Historian of International Sports,  
*Author of *The Making of Les Bleus: Sport in France, 1958-2010**

Conducted by Estelle BRUN / Research Assistant at IRIS

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**GEOSTRATEGIC SPORTS OBSERVATORY**



## ON FRANCE AND THE NBA GLOBAL GAMES

*In January 2020, Paris hosted its first National Basketball Association (NBA) global game. A total of 120,000 people attempted to obtain tickets for the game held in a stadium of 16,000 seats only, hence showing French enthusiasm for the NBA. It was confirmed that the next regular-season game in Europe will be hosted in Paris again next year in 2021. Since 2011 and before Paris, London's O2 Arena had regularly hosted the games.*

**IRIS: How is the culture of basketball – or of sports more broadly – in England compared to France? Why did the NBA first export its Global Games to London and then to Paris?**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** England has a vastly different basketball culture and history than France does. France was the first country in Europe to receive basketball, and the first game played on European soil was in December 1893 at the YMCA's new Parisian outpost on the Rue de Trévis. While basketball found its way to England shortly thereafter, France is still what we think as of “ground zero” for European basketball in terms of being the oldest basketball culture. Importantly, in France, basketball has consistently been played by both men and women, boys and girls.

England does not have as strong of a basketball culture as France does today, because England is a football culture more than a basketball culture and has thus not invested as much in basketball as France. A lot of the commentary about France and sport more generally is that the country traditionally lacks a football culture in the way that England, Germany, or Italy enjoy. So, there are differences that help explain some cultural attitudes and disparities between basketball in France and England.

On the question of why the NBA first exported its Global Games in Europe to London, certainly, the O2 Arena in London has very large capacities. Also, London is one of the headquarters for the anglophone global sports world. While I cannot speak for the NBA's internal decision-making, these were certainly considerations.

However, the NBA Global Games moving to France for 2020 and 2021 is the recognition that the French market is a very important one for the NBA — and is an entry point for the continental European market. The French market has been important historically and

has grown significantly over the years. It is also reflective of the fact that France is one of the leading pipelines for international players into the NBA, as well as into the WNBA. France has one of the largest numbers of all-time international players into the NBA, 32 : 29 according to how the NBA classifies international players, and then an additional three who are on two-way contracts with an NBA team and another team. Technically, that is 32 Frenchmen who have played regular season NBA minutes. When Marine Johannès joined the New York Liberty last summer, she became the 13<sup>th</sup> French player all-time in the WNBA and the Phoenix Mercury's recent signing of Olivia Époupa makes the tally 14, illustrating that France remains an important pipeline of international talent into the WNBA. The NBA coming to France reflects this, as well as the fact that there has long been ties between the NBA and France.

France was one of the earliest countries to broadcast NBA games, starting with Canal+ in the 1984-1985 season, with George Eddy. There has been a tradition of an NBA culture in France, and when you speak with a lot of French people, they are familiar with the NBA or at least much more familiar with the NBA than with the domestic French professional leagues.

There is also the significant investment by Nike and Jordan Brand in France, into the French basketball world. Jordan Brand is an official partner and supplier of the French Basketball Federation. Many French NBA and WNBA players are Jordan Brand athletes, and Nike and Jordan Brand sponsor a lot of basketball events and organisations, like Quai 54, the world's largest street basketball tournament. Part of this significant investment stems from Michael Jordan himself, who first visited France in August 1985 with Nike and developed a fondness for the country that brings him back most years. There is this historic tie and when the NBA was looking for the first team to participate in the NBA French Game, Michael Jordan was very interested in being part of that.

## **ON THE GLOBALISATION OF THE NBA AND BASKETBALL**

**IRIS:** In an article you wrote for the *Washington Post* in 2018, you explained how basketball has become the world's second-biggest sport<sup>1</sup>. Apart from overseas NBA games, what other strategies have been adopted by the NBA to globalise the league?

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<sup>1</sup> Krasnoff, L. S. (2018, August 16). "How basketball became the world's second-biggest sport", *Washington Post*, retrieved from : <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/08/16/how-basketball-became-the-worlds-second-biggest-sport/>

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** I think this breaks down into three key areas. Not all of them were necessarily planned strategies but together, they very much played into globalising the NBA. The first one was the broadcast of NBA games, or the accessibility of watching NBA games in various countries and territories around the world. This began in earnest under then - Commissioner David Stern, when he took the helm in 1984. Fast-forward to today, where NBA games and the NBA finals are broadcast in 215 different territories around the world in some 50 languages, really bringing the league and their games, their players and their cultures directly into the homes of millions around the world. So, broadcasting games is one of those longer-term strategies that paid off.

The more organic things that helped to feed and support this globalisation has been the growth of international players in the NBA. The first international players were drafted in the 1980s, but these players first played in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for American universities and colleges. It was not until the 1990s, when the first internationally born and trained players entered the NBA [the first foreign-born and trained international to sign an NBA contract was France's Hervé Dubuisson, who played with the then-New Jersey Nets during summer 1984, but never played a regular season NBA match]. And certainly, the more international players who play in the NBA, the greater the league's popularity globally. People will tune in to watch one of their own and follow them, an important factor that played into the league's globalisation.

But the 'Dream Team effect' cannot be underestimated. Again, this was not necessarily a planned strategy, but if you think of the US Dream Team that competed at the 1992 Barcelona Games, the first Olympic basketball tournament that allowed professional players, the United States sent the Dream Team of iconic NBA stars like Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Larry Bird, and captured the imagination of millions around the world. They fed dreams of young players that they, too, could dream of playing like Michael Jordan. The 'Dream Team effect' helped encourage many kids around the globe to take up the sport and to pursue basketball to their highest level. And many NBA players, international players who entered the league in the late 1990s, early 2000s, players like Tony Parker for example, for whom the Dream Team and the NBA were hugely influential in helping to inspire their own play. So the 'Dream Team effect' was certainly a huge factor in the NBA's globalisation, even though it was not necessarily a planned strategy.

Since the 1990s, you also have the NBA taking a different strategic approach, which is to help globalise the league, but also to grow basketball more generally, to encourage more

kids, more people to start to play the game. And they have done that in a variety of different ways through basketball development. They have partnered with the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), the international governing body, for several programs, including Basketball Without Borders which began in the early 2000s. Basketball Without Borders is a series of basketball camps for boys and girls. The first edition was held in Europe to bring together kids from various Balkan states, to help bridge some divides that the wars of the 1990s created. Over the years, Basketball Without Borders has been a key driver of basketball's growth around the world and helps illustrate the NBA partnership with FIBA.

Another strategy to grow the game and globalise the league has been the NBA's focus on elite youth development. The NBA created an elite youth development academy system, the NBA Academies, launched in 2016-17. The main global academy is in Australia, and there are academies in Africa, in Senegal, in Latin America, in Mexico, in India and in China. But the NBA also has a series of localised efforts like Jr. NBA, as well as participating in sports diplomacy exchange programs through the U.S. Department of State. These are other ways that the NBA has grown globally under the larger umbrella of basketball development - and basketball diplomacy - but hand-in-hand with the boosted recognition of the league.

**IRIS: Besides the Basketball Without Borders program, do you know about other initiatives taken by FIBA to increase the practice of basketball?**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** FIBA's mandate is global growth and governance of the game. FIBA has been an active partner in Basketball Without Borders, and they partnered with the NBA for the forthcoming Basketball Africa League (BAL), a major initiative that seeks to grow the game - and the business of basketball - across Africa. But FIBA has also invested a lot to promote its continental championships, like AfroBasket, EuroBasket and especially, as we saw in last summer in 2019, the FIBA World Cup. FIBA did a lot of work to attract more World Cup sponsors who could help provide greater visibility for the event and teams, and to try to generate greater mediatisation and consumer ship of the basketball world cup.

**IRIS:** Do you feel that the NBA has some sort of bigger influence than FIBA in the overall promotion of the popularity of basketball?

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** Yes, I do think that the NBA is probably more successful in terms of being the much more visible entity promoting and developing basketball, simply because of the huge worldwide popularity of the league and specifically of its star players. If you think of LeBron James, for example, or Stephen Curry, these are NBA players that casual fans around the world are somewhat familiar with. People might not know about FIBA or who its key officials are, but they will, at least, have heard of LeBron James. And I think social media has played a huge role in this. Social media first burst in the scene in 2007, 2008. If you look at studies of which leagues and which governing bodies have had greater success in terms of audience reach and engagement through social media, FIBA is usually one of the top federations, as is the NBA. The two are successful at reaching audiences around the world, but the social media presence and activism, and activity of specific NBA players, I think, dwarfs what FIBA is able to do in comparison.

## ON CHINA AND THE NBA

*In 2019, the Houston Rockets' general manager sparked controversy when he expressed his support to Hong Kong amid pro-democracy protests. A backlash quickly ensued, with the Chinese Basketball Association and other Chinese businesses cutting all ties with the team<sup>2</sup>. The controversy was particularly symbolic as Shanghai-born Yao Ming played for the Houston Rockets before he retired in 2011 and contributed to the popularisation of basketball and the NBA in China.*

**IRIS:** What does this controversy tell us about the NBA's diplomatic and financial relationship with China? Has the controversy impacted diplomatic relations between the US and China? If so, how?

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** It tells us that the NBA has a very complicated, nuanced relationship, diplomatically and financially with China. The incident, the controversy that ensued highlighted the fine line, the tightrope, that the NBA is walking in terms of balancing its diplomatic and financial relationships with China. Certainly, China is

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<sup>2</sup> Deb, S. & M. Stein (2019, October 6). N.B.A. Executive's Hong Kong Tweet Starts Firestorm in China. *New York Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/sports/daryl-morey-rockets-china.html>

financially and numerically one of its biggest markets in the world. And NBA sponsors, as well as athletes, have a huge stake in the Chinese market. Yet, the NBA represents the values of the United States. It is a very complicated relationship, but is certainly a relationship that many other multi-national companies face.

The NBA pushed back against the Chinese Communist Party, and the fallout was not kind for the league financially-speaking. The NBA has lost millions of dollars as a result. But quietly, things have begun to slowly amend themselves, overshadowed however by other events. This has been a difficult season for the NBA overall. In early January, former Commissioner David Stern passed away, followed quickly by the untimely death of Kobe Bryant, an iconic star who inspired many. Then everything has been on hiatus because of the novel coronavirus.

As for your question, did the controversy impact diplomatic relations between the United States and China, I think there are many other things that have caused greater stress upon diplomatic relations between the two countries, although the NBA controversy illuminated some tensions that already existed.

## **ON SPORT DIPLOMACY IN THE UNITED STATES**

*The United States has often resorted to sports diplomacy to exert its soft power, most notoriously with its ping-pong diplomacy with China in the 1970s. Dennis Rodman, an American retired NBA player, visited Pyongyang for the first time in 2013, marking the beginning of the so-called basketball diplomacy with North Korea. In 2018, he travelled to Singapore, at the occasion of the historical meeting between US President Donald Trump and its North Korean counterpart Kim Jong-un, although he was not officially invited<sup>3</sup>.*

**IRIS: What is the role of the US Department of State in basketball diplomacy? Has it been effective in improving US relations with North Korea?<sup>4</sup>**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** This is a really great question because the U.S. Government is set up differently from many other governments. We do not have a federal sports ministry that works closely with the foreign ministry. We have the U.S. Department

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<sup>3</sup> Andrews-Dryer, H. (2018, June 12). "A brief guide to Dennis Rodman's long, weird history with North Korea". *Washington Post*, retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/reliable-source/wp/2018/06/12/a-brief-guide-to-dennis-rodman-s-long-weird-history-with-north-korea/>

<sup>4</sup> \*Dr Krasnoff no longer works for the US Department of State, therefore her views are her own\*

of State, and within that the Sports Diplomacy office, which does fantastic programming and I'm their biggest fan and supporter.

But they have a limited mandate because of the way that U.S. foreign policy operates and is structured. Traditionally, the Sports Diplomacy office focuses on facilitating cultural exchanges through sports exchanges, sports envoys and visiting programs. It is more limited than other countries' sports diplomacy initiatives.

However, the U.S. Department of State works closely with the NBA on sports diplomacy initiatives. Ever since the Sport Diplomacy office was launched in the early 2000s, there has been a close partnership between the two organisations. Many Women National Basketball Association (WNBA) and NBA players have served as sports envoys in overseas exchanges and many players, coaches and officials from overseas have travelled to the United States on a cultural exchange program through the basketball lens. I think one of the important programs to mention is the GSMP, the Global Sport Mentoring Program, which each year brings women from different parts of the world to the United States for a mentoring program in which they are partnered with a mentor in the U.S. sports ecosystem. It promotes women's empowerment through sport and basketball has featured prominently in GSMP exchanges.

I do think it is fair to say that basketball diplomacy is one of the most impactful areas of U.S. sports diplomacy, because basketball is seen, in many parts of the world, as originally an American sport. That the NBA has become global helps for it introduces many overseas to a certain strain of American culture, through basketball.

Dennis Rodman is an interesting example, and we cannot deny that he personally has played a role in creating greater dialogue with North Korea under President Donald Trump. But there are still no official diplomatic relations between the two countries.

**IRIS: Was he officially sent by the US Department of State to Pyongyang?**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** No, he was not sent in any official capacity to North Korea by the U.S. Department of State. Rodman's trips have stemmed from his personal relationships with Kim Jong-Un.

**IRIS: Is basketball diplomacy used to improve external relations with other countries. If so, how?**



**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** Basketball diplomacy, and specifically informal basketball diplomacy, whether it is through the NBA, basketball initiatives, or basketball culture in general, has played an important role in exposing a lot of people in different countries to other cultures. Speaking of basketball diplomacy in a United States context, this means that the NBA has helped introduce many people around the world to American culture. Whether that has helped to improve foreign understanding of or official relations with the United States, that is much more difficult to say.

## ON BASKETBALL AND THE FRENCH REPUBLIC

*The practice of basketball in France, you explain in Sport and Diplomacy (ed. Simon Rofe, 2018)<sup>5</sup>, was brought about through people-to-people diplomacy. In your book entitled The Making of Les Bleus (2012)<sup>6</sup>, you argue that sport has been used by the French Republic to promote republican ideals, mentioning two particularly relevant sports: basketball and football.*

**IRIS: How is basketball used by the Republic to promote Republican values and how does it differ to its use of football? Does it have a similar use in the United States?**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** This is an interesting question. Sport, in general, has long been used by republican France to promote ideals of citizenship, democracy, playing by the rules, fair-play, and this larger sense of teamwork and community.

Both, basketball and football, have been used to promote republican values in France, historically speaking, but football perhaps much more prominently because it is the most popular, populous and mediatised of the two sports.

In terms of comparing its use to that in the United States, again the system there is a little different. But certainly, both basketball and football/soccer are used at the youth level in the United States to teach kids about teamwork, the values of team sports that apply to creating good citizens. So I think they are similar. Soccer/football has different demographics in the United States. It's more the suburban middle class and upper-class

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<sup>5</sup> Krasnoff, L. S. (2018). Brainstorming French Men: The impact of Paris Université Club's US tours and the individual in sports diplomacy. In. In Rofe, J. S. (Ed.), *Sport and Diplomacy: Games Within Games* (pp. 130-146). Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Krasnoff, L. S. (2012). *The Making of Les Bleus: Sport in France, 1958-2010*. Lanham, MD : Lexington Books.

sport in terms of a 'pay-to-play' youth system and to progress into the elite divisions requires financial resources that not every family has access to. That has been a restriction, a problem in the system.

**IRIS: What explains the fact that France figures among the countries that produce the largest number of players over to the NBA?**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** That is the topic of my next book. The short answer is that the French youth development system for basketball is one of the best in the world and the Federal Basketball Centre (CFBB) at the National Institute of Sport, Expertise, and Performance (INSEP) is its pinnacle. Also, the professional clubs' *centres de formation*, several of which have very good reputations in terms of producing stellar players. I think a lot of the factors as to why this is are found in the way that the country, developed its elite basketball development system dating back to the CFBB's first season, 1983-1984. One of its best-known alumni is Tony Parker. Since Parker arrived in the NBA in 2001, the first to prove to Americans that French players could play well in the world's elite league, there's been significantly greater numbers of scouts focused on France, as well as Europe, to find the next Tony Parker, the next good player. And this is not just at the NBA level, but also at the NCAA level as university scouts are regularly brought through France and recruit French talents into their programs. This produces a bit of tension with INSEP, because of who might leave INSEP early to go play in the NCAA. Think of players like Killian Tillie, who was at INSEP before going to Gonzaga.

## **ON WOMEN AND THE NBA**

*The WNBA was formed in 1996, and the first game was played in 1997.*

**IRIS: Why is women's basketball in the US seemingly particularly popular compared to other sports? How is it in France?**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** One answer to this question is that the WNBA was one of the first major professional women's leagues in the United States. The only earlier example I can think of is the WTA, the Women's Tennis Association founded in 1973, but tennis as a team sport is vastly different than basketball as a team sport. Also, there's Title IX, the legislation passed in 1972 that has helped provide equal opportunities, for girls

and women, to play sports in school and at university. Yet, until more recently, women could not pursue their sport at a level beyond college - unless they were an Olympian - because there was a lack of professional leagues in the United States. The WNBA was one of the first major professional team sports leagues for women.

The WNBA is rivaled by women's soccer/football and the sheer success that the U.S. Women's National Team has had. Yet the WNBA just celebrated 20 years. Compare that to the NWSL, which is the country's third iteration of a professional women's soccer/football league. Financial solvency has been a big issue for professional women's football in the United States, where that is not quite the case for the WNBA, which has the lifeline of the NBA. We will continue to see the WNBA because it is now intertwined with the NBA's overall brand.

**IRIS: We've been talking about the globalisation of the NBA, but what about the globalisation of the WNBA?**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** That's a great question. I think that the NBA was still the main reference point for many present-day WNBA players when they were younger, simply because it was in existence and the WNBA was not — or it was in its earliest years. But that's changing. I spoke last summer with Marine Johannès and asked who inspired her as a kid; she said "NBA players" but that today for her the WNBA is the ultimate dream. The WNBA continues to grow, and they have a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), which devotes significantly more money as well as resources and new provisions to players. This is viewed as a very influential example for women's basketball globally, not just in the United States.

## **ON THE NBA AND CORONAVIRUS**

*The NBA was among the first leagues to suspend its season after a Utah Jazz player was tested positive amid the international health crisis caused by the spread of coronavirus.*

**IRIS: What do you think will be the impact of the NBA hiatus over the league and its players, in economic but also in social terms?**

**LINDSAY SARAH KRASNOFF:** The coronavirus crisis has significantly changed our world, including the global sports world. The NBA was the first major global sports league

to suspend operations, after Utah Jazz and French international Rudy Gobert tested positive. For better or for worse, Gobert will now go down in history as the NBA's "patient zero." The NBA was the first, but their decision paved the way for everyone else to follow. Before Gobert's diagnosis, people were indecisive, but once the NBA made its decision, other sports leagues and federations in the world followed. It led in that regard. This crisis highlights the importance of ethical leadership in sports more generally. The NBA is not perfect but, in this example, they really helped to pave the way as an ethical leader. Since that evening, the NBA has pursued different ways to interact and engage with fans digitally on social media.

The coronavirus pandemic will have a huge economic impact. Some within the NBA ecosystem have come under justifiable criticism for cutting or furloughing staff during this time, but there are also many owners, as well as individual NBA players, who have contributed financially to help make up the cost of lost salaries for employees, especially the hourly-paid workers who would have staffed games. And they've also helped the communities in which they play, donating money for healthcare efforts, donating money for COVID-19 research initiatives, the players, who tested positive and have now recovered and tested negative, are donating their blood plasma for experimental treatment therapies, as well as donating money and meals to local communities significantly impacted by the general halt in game life. This is not to say that other athletes or leagues are not undertaking similar initiatives--they are. But the NBA has such a big platform on social media, domestically as well as globally, they're getting a lot more of the attention. And I think that because of this, they have to a certain extent a different kind of impact.

Also, one in four NBA players are from outside the United States. They are donating to coronavirus initiatives in the United States as well as back home. They have the ability to have a greater global impact in this crisis than, say NFL players who do not have this scale of global connection.

That's why I think this crisis will, in the end, benefit the NBA. There is going to be a lot of money lost, it is not going to benefit them financially, but, I think, it will benefit them in terms of social value added in a greater "so what?" context. ■

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Dr Krasnoff no longer works for the US Department of State, therefore her views are her own.  
<https://www.lindsaysarahkrasnoff.com/>

Conducted by Estelle BRUN / Research Assistant at IRIS

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*An observatory of the*

**SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PROGRAMME**

Under the direction of Carole GOMEZ, researcher at IRIS ([gomez@iris-france.org](mailto:gomez@iris-france.org))

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INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES

2 bis rue Mercoeur

75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

[contact@iris-france.org](mailto:contact@iris-france.org)

@InstitutIRIS

[www.iris-france.org](http://www.iris-france.org)