

Offense plus Defense Equals Evolution: How did the National Basketball Association evolve into a cultural and economic icon from 1970-2000

Cameron Black
History
Stetson University
421 N. Woodland Blvd.
DeLand, FL 32723 US

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Nicole Mottier

Abstract

Research Question: How did the National Basketball Association grow into a cultural and economic icon in American Society? In the twenty-first century, economics has increasingly become a larger factor within how sports are represented and interpreted by the American public. This extends to the National Basketball Association, or NBA; it has experienced vast economic and cultural change over the past thirty years. Though multiple lenses have been used to analyze this change, I assert that cultural and economic evolution of the National Basketball Association can be analyzed through application of symbolic capital. I assert that symbolic capital impacted the cultural and economic evolution of the National Basketball Association by the Association using the symbolic concept of professionalism and language manipulation to increase the symbolic capital needed to increase revenue that drove the cultural and economic evolution of the National Basketball Association as an economic and cultural institution. My provisional conclusion is that symbolic manipulation was used as a tool to influence Middle Class Americans to watch the NBA by increasing the perception of the organization's professionalism through language manipulation. My methods of research will be divided into two sections for each perspective. For the economic history, I will use various archived sources that document the economic evolution of the National Basketball Association, specifically the average attendance, television revenues, and the growth of the salary cap I will also study the collective bargaining agreements reached in 1995 and 1999 to analyze for economic evolution. For social and cultural reactions, I will use archived newspapers, magazines and sports-related media to determine how contracts were depicted in popular media. I will use prominent modern day archives extensively, specifically Sports Illustrated Vault, and Archives from the LA Times, and Chicago Tribune to name a few prominent magazines.

Key Words: National Basketball Association, Symbolic Capital, Professionalism

1. Introduction

“The inbounds pass comes in to Jordan. Here's Michael at the foul line, the shot on [Craig] Ehlo...GOOD! THE BULLS WIN IT! THEY WIN IT! They upset the Cleveland Cavaliers! Michael Jordan hits it at the foul line! 101–100! 20,273 in stunned silence here in the Coliseum.”¹ This moment, dubbed the Shot, elated the entire city of Chicago..... and shattered the city of Cleveland. However, “The Shot” immortalized itself into both the cultures of Cleveland and Chicago: the legend of “God Hates Cleveland” gained another victim with the Cavaliers while Chicago gained a legend in Michael Jordan.² The legendary status “The Shot” achieved poses a question: How did the National Basketball Association, founded only in 1949, become a core piece of American iconography by 1989?

The traditionalist historiographical perspectives on the evolution of the NBA attribute its successful integration into American cultural iconography to the “great men” of basketball history, such as Larry Bird and Magic Johnson.³ This perspective does not account for the structural policies that the NBA used to further this evolution. I assert that it was

symbolic capital that transformed the NBA into a cultural and economic icon from 1970-2000. Furthermore, due in part to the successful creation and utilization of symbolic capital, the NBA grew substantially from the mid-1980s onward, beginning in 1984, which created a flexible framework for its evolution into a cultural and economic icon. For utility purposes, the periodization of this paper will be separated into two parts: pre-1984, post-1984. 1984 is a crucial point in this analysis; before 1984, the National Basketball Association created and used negative symbolic capital, which was detrimental for both the owners and players. By 1984, the NBA produced positive symbolic capital that was largely limited to the NBA. However, though the NBA began to successfully create and use symbolic capital after 1984, the struggles over this capital continued far beyond 1984, and into the 1990s, and 2000s.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital is particularly relevant to discuss how the National Basketball Association evolved into a cultural and economic icon. Symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu, is a subsection of cultural capital; this form of capital refers to the resources available to social groups based on honor or prestige that elevates their status and provides them with a privileged position.⁴ When symbolic capital is created, it is constituted through collectively understood activities, both formally and informally established by that particular societal group.⁵ Symbolic capital operates symbiotically: for collectively understood activities must occur within common sets of knowledge by the entire social group. This type of capital is established by the dominant social group within a particular culture. As this knowledge is required throughout the entire social group, I argue a useful way of measuring these commonly understood activities within the National Basketball Association is through language, in this case, the language used by prominent sportswriters, owners and players, due to it being commonly understood throughout the American middle class. As Bourdieu states, the creation of symbolic capital through language assumes that the subordinate party not only adheres to the dominant language, but that the subordinate party desires their language to be changed, and these changes are subliminal.⁶ The collectively understood activity crystalizes with agents and historical structures and crystalize in what Bourdieu defines as a Field. A field is a form of social organization field with two main aspects: the first aspect is a configuration of social roles that consists both of actors and structures agents fit into.⁷ The second aspect consists of the historical process in which those positions are occupied by actors.⁸ In addition to the concept of Field, Bourdieu's analysis of taste proves useful to how the players were unable to create and use symbolic capital. In conjunction with language, a commonly understood activity by American society is professionalism, which is defined as the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional. A useful way of analyzing symbolic capital within the National Basketball Association is through the way language was used by journalists, owners and players.⁹ Through analyzing language, and how professionalism interacted with the National Basketball Association, the players, and the American middle class, I argue that symbolic capital was constantly used to define the professionalism of NBA athletes based on American middle class values, which increased the growth of the NBA dramatically.

2. Historiography

The historiography of the National Basketball Association is sparse in comparison to the two other major sports due to its youth. As such, a useful question to ask is how do the other major sports leagues generate and use Symbolic capital? A pertinent example is Major League Baseball: it is not only the oldest of the three major sports, but it possesses commonalities in the creation and utilization of symbolic capital. Few scholars have applied Bourdieu's theory to the study of sport; however, the way in which they have applied it to the MLB proves very helpful for our purposes. Though Robert Burke does not invoke Bourdieu in his work, he nonetheless applies some of Bourdieu's principles: he argues that not only did the reserve clause allow for the restriction of salaries and player movement, it provided a type of social legitimacy: players would additionally need to keep appearances to attract an audience that fit within the parameters of Victorian respectability.¹⁰ Burk's analysis, though he does not use the terminology of symbolic capital, represents an attempt to infuse symbolic capital within professional baseball; similarly to the NBA in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the National League's failure to create and utilize symbolic capital in the early 1880s partially created a stagnant situation: the capital created by the National League was incompatible with the audience they were attempting to attract. The work by Willem Schinkel and Mirko Noordegraaf contributes to the historiography because it analyzes the creation and utilization of symbolic capital within basketball itself. However, they do not address how symbolic capital is created and utilized by an institution like the NBA. David Andrews and Michael Silk contribute to the historiography in a similar fashion as Burk pertaining to basketball. As Andrews and Silk argue, the National Basketball Association, beginning in the 1980s, became synonymous with urban America, which was becoming increasingly black.¹¹ With this came an association of the National Basketball Association with criminal elements of urban America; deviant players represented the entire NBA as a zone of criminality, and an out of control

urban population that needed guidance. William Hanks additionally contributes immensely to the historiography by synthesizing habitus and field in regards to how language affects and assists in the reproduction of symbolic capital.¹² These works contribute immensely to the historiography of both symbolic capital and the National Basketball Association; however, the historiography does not address how symbolic capital is reproduced and legitimized in the context of a sporting arena, particularly the National Basketball Association. As the National Basketball Association's growth occurred in a social arena, and that arena reflects different social tendencies, analyzing the growth of the National Basketball Association's growth through the lens of symbolic capital is particularly useful to the historiography. My purpose is to partially bridge the gap between how symbolic capital recalibrated racialized portrayals of the National Basketball Association in an attempt to argue that language was constantly used to create the perception of professionalism in NBA based on American middle class values from 1970-2000, which played a crucial role in its rapid growth.

3. Contextualization

In order to better understand how and why the National Basketball Association redefined professionalism regarding the players, one must briefly discuss the background of the NBA, and how whiteness and blackness operated in a historic context. How did the professional values instituted by the NBA in the mid-1980s resonate to the American population? A useful way of explaining this is Bourdieu's analysis of taste. Bourdieu defines taste as "a classification system constituted by the conditions associated with a condition situated in a determinate position in the structure of different conditions, governs the relationship with objectified capital, with this world of ranked and ranking objects which help to define it by enabling it to specify and so realize itself"¹³ As such, according to Bourdieu, the system of goods offered, in this case, the National Basketball Association, particularly the players, induces a change in the tastes of those consuming the goods, in this case, the audience that watched the NBA.¹⁴ However, this inducement was neither simple, nor seamless, which was in large part due to the racial makeup of employees, and the audience and employers. As Yago Colas notes, throughout the history of the NBA, the vast majority of the paying audience was white, and all the franchise owners were white.¹⁵ However, with the exception of George Mikan, by the late 1950s, and early 1960s, a vast majority of the best players were African American, though the overall majority of players remained Caucasian.¹⁶ This Caucasian majority eroded quickly; by the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, most of the players in the league were African American. In contrast, most fans and all owners were Caucasian from the late 1960s, into the 1970s. The NBA was not the only social organization to experience a demographic change, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the fabric of American society began to change; African Americans began to be assimilated into mainstream American society as segregation was dismantled. However, a crucial change was occurring in NBA locker rooms: by the mid-1970s, larger society's experimentation with recreational drugs made its way into NBA locker rooms. This became a significant problem for the audience in context with the rapidly increasing earning potential of professional basketball players. By 1965, the minimum salary increased by over 12,000 dollars by 1970, with veterans making within the range of 20,000-50,000 dollars annually.¹⁷ The average salary of the NBA increased from 13,000 dollars to 20,000 dollars during the 1966-67 season including veteran salaries; when the 1970-71 season started, the average salary doubled to 40,000 dollars including veteran salaries.¹⁸ This newfound competition predictably caused considerable financial trouble for the owners of both leagues: "in 1966, more than half of the National Basketball Association teams lost money and in their first year all of the American Basketball Association teams did."¹⁹ The tastes of the customers, the viewing public, did not change as rapidly as the system of goods, the players. Not only did the salary of the players increase dramatically, in 1970, the average salary for a NBA player was 150,000 dollars; by 1980, the average salary nearly tripled. Yet, these players, who were majority African American, were receiving enormous sums of money, despite allegedly consuming illicit drugs, which prevented them from being considered professionals by members of the viewing public. Bourdieu notes that taste governs the relationship with objectified capital; as the taste of the audience did not change with the tempo of the goods produced, this created conflict in symbolic capital production and usage with the NBA, its athletes and the audience.

4. Economic Stagnation Of The National Basketball Association From 1970-1984 Explained Using Symbolic Capital.

From the early 1960s to mid-1970s, the NBA was competing with the American Basketball Association (ABA), and succeeded in ending their competition by 1976. Predictably, both parties were harmed by this competition: attendance in the NBA stagnated along with the ABA's during their competition. From 1970 to 1976, the average attendance in the NBA never increased by more than 1,000 people in any one given year.²⁰ This seemed like a godsend to the ABA, which never observed positive profits for its entire existence. The televising of these leagues occurred infrequently, and this significantly which significantly hampered revenues for both leagues, particularly the ABA.²¹ Due to these twin blows, the ABA failed and the sides merged in 1976. Naturally, this led to short term growth in both attendance and television revenues for the NBA from 1976 to 1978. Interestingly, despite the merger between the NBA and ABA, the NBA began to lose money from 1978 into the mid-1980s. This poses a very interesting question: Why did the National Basketball Association experience short term growth, yet go on to experience stagnation until 1984? The traditional viewpoint employs an economic analysis. This perspective indicates that the stagnation of the NBA occurred due to a combination of rapidly increasing salaries, stagnating ticket sales and television revenues.²²

The economic explanation does not adequately explain the root cause of these economic factors. The origins of these economic factors can be partially explained by a failure to create symbolic capital: the National Basketball Association did not create symbolic capital from 1970 to 1984. This can be explained in part using Bourdieu's concept of a Field: in this case, the one of the actors, the players, acted out of context to historical actions in Field encompassing the NBA. The major actors in this field are the owners of NBA franchises, the players who played for these franchises and the journalists who wrote about these franchises and players. The structure these actors fit into are the National Basketball Association and into American society as a whole. Until the late 1950s, and into the early 1960s, the NBA was not a diverse organization, and the players acted out of "loyalty" to both their organization and to the fans. The owners of NBA franchises were the dominant group of actors. They possessed an immense amount of power over these players: the "loyalty" perceived by the public occurred because until 1976, players could not leave the team that drafted them unless they were traded to another team. Contracts were deemed reasonable by both the owners and public for what the players contributed to the team, and these contracts were legitimized due to the racial solidarity of these teams. Therefore, within the field of both the NBA, and overall American society during this time, professionalism became directly related to a lack of market value, and the willingness to sacrifice for one's team and work as an athlete. Thus, though players possessed symbolic capital for being professionals, this capital was dependent on them staying dependent on the owners of the professional franchises. However, by 1976, the realities of the NBA as a business were changing, as well as its racial composition, in contrast to the established tastes of the audience. Throughout the 20th century, sport in America was viewed through an almost mythical prism: sports were regarded as pure, untainted by most business practices. The NBA was not perceived as a business: professional basketball was not perceived as a profession. Hence, when the NBA's business practices were revealed, particularly with the merger with the ABA and the subsequent increase in player salary, the historical processes that made the field, and the goods within that field, identifiable to larger audiences such as the middle class began to become misaligned with the specific tastes of larger audiences, which alienated much of the Caucasian fanbase. This can be observed in works by Tom Meschery, and Martin Kane. As Meschery states in his *There is a Disease in Sports Now....*: "Integrity is disappearing. Contracts mean nothing; not between owner and player, or owner and fan. Players jump teams. Teams jump cities. An all the while the money flows as from a cornucopia."²³ According to Meschery, players and owners, specifically players, do not emulate values of previous generations: loyalty, integrity, and most importantly, do not appear grateful for any opportunity, regardless of monetary payment, which broke from the traditional tastes of the American audience. Hence, the symbolic capital available to the generation of players in the 1950s and early 1960s was unavailable to the players that played after the early 1960s. This disillusionment was conveyed through language by many journalists and thus became a viewpoint widely accepted by the public.

What was the spark that changed the historical processes that formed within the Field surrounding the NBA? It was the introduction of the American Basketball Association (ABA) in 1966. With the establishment of the ABA came economic competition; the value of franchises doubled from 1966 to 1970.²⁴ The establishment of the ABA additionally drove up the value of salaries in both leagues; as the players could choose which league they desired to go to, the franchises needed to bid for their services. This change in the subordinate agents of the Field was unanticipated by the consumers of the product; the historical processes of the NBA's Field, these changes, combined with the rapidly evolving league and American society as a whole, did not match with the tastes of the audience watching, which related to the 1950s image of the NBA. This impacted the perception of the players more than owners due to the player's visibility and identification with the team. This misalignment between tastes and product blocked

players from obtaining, or using symbolic capital, which can be observed through the language used by journalists during the late 1960s until the late 1970s. The language, commonly influenced by late nineteenth and early twentieth century perceptions of African Americans, was positively identified by the audience; combining this legitimate language with receiving increasingly exorbitant amounts of money compared to their predecessors, and players were delegitimized as professionals. This can be observed in Meschery's piece discussed above; this disease largely referred to the drastic increase in salary by NBA players. The article contends that NBA players should not only be content with any salary that the owner is willing to pay, but if they are not satisfied with either their salary or experience, they have violated their professional responsibility.²⁵ Thus, Meschery's piece illuminated how the Field surrounding the NBA interacted with the American workplace, and reflected the tastes of American middle class culture: the players, instead of being gracious for privileged employment were ungrateful for their salaries, which lowered their symbolic capital the NBA could create aimed towards the middle class. This forceful combination conjoined with racial prejudices, further lowering the symbolic capital of the NBA. Martin Kane provides an excellent example of how this process occurred in his "An Assessment of 'Black is Best.'" Kane inquires if African American athletes are inherently physically superior to their Caucasian counterparts. The logical conclusion of this argument is that if African Americans are inherently physically superior, they do not need to work as hard as Caucasian athletes do to achieve success. Thus, within athletic pursuits, many of which commanded very large salaries, African Americans possessed an inherent advantage due to their physical attributes. Hence, this represented another break with the historical processes that defined the Field, and the tastes the audience were acclimated to. Bourdieu notes that tastes depend on the state of the system of goods offered, and vice versa; tastes and the system of goods produced not only are a majority of these players African Americans, but they receive an inflated salary without working sufficiently to become a professional. With *Sports Illustrated*, the magazine in which Meschery and Kane published their work in, being the most popular sports magazine of its era, its readership encompassed many middle class Americans, which hampered the NBA's efforts to market and promote to middle class Americans.

The portrayals of the 1970s were not addressed in the early 1980s by either the owners, or the players. The worsening situation was brought to light by the establishment of the ABA. With the introduction of the ABA, salaries in both leagues drastically increased, which in turn introduced a question: is the athlete more attached to his market value and extracurricular activities, or to sacrifice his market value and activates and thus become a professional according to values Meschery espoused? This question decreased the symbolic capital of the NBA by introducing contradictions in the historical processes of the field by creating more doubt into the prestige, respect and professionalism of NBA players as professionals, which already was insignificant in public perception. To observe how the question above interacts with symbolic capital, the alleged drug activity of the late 1970s and early 1980s within the NBA proves useful, as the drug crisis in the NBA played an integral role in damaging its symbolic capital in the early 1980s. The image crisis in the NBA concerning drug abuse has been addressed amply within the cultural historiography of basketball. In 1980, Chris Cobbs, a writer for the LA Times, published an expose of the NBA: "NBA and Cocaine: Nothing to Snort At." In this piece, he chronicles how cocaine infiltrated the culture of the NBA. This was especially problematic for the NBA; the professionalism of the players already was being questioned, and rampant drug usage did not assist in attracting a middle class audience. This disconnect between professionalism and drug use combined with the racial tension within broader American society As cocaine was widely believed to be an inner city phenomenon, its mere association with a league perceived as black prevented any symbolic capital from being created and utilized. Todd Boyd, who argues that the NBA embodied racial tensions of the 1980s, is particularly helpful in this regard.²⁶ The NBA was the only sport during this time period to have a majority of African American players, in addition to numerical superiority, the NBA was perceived as black: "Basketball was becoming a *Black* sport, and not just in numbers but in overall vibe and attitude."²⁷ In conjunction with this societal change and subcultural embrace on drugs, as Irwin Katz and R, Glenn Hass notes, due to the exclusion of African Americans from mainstream society, African Americans are often perceived by the majority population as both deviant and disadvantaged, though in the case of mainstream views on athletics, African Americans were perceived as advantaged.²⁸ Katz and Hass additionally note of a positive correlation between a Protestant work ethic and certain negative perceptions of African Americans, and note that Protestant work ethic is a central part of American society; this combined with the perception of inherent African American superiority indicates that the tastes of the dominant group inherently stayed from African Americans during this time.²⁹ Hence, allegations of drug abuse did not have to be true, but merely exist to create a misalignment between the audience and the producer of the product.

Hence, the subordinate agent in the NBA's Field, as well as the players, not only acted out of context with their historical counterparts, the demographics of the players began to change, misaligning the tastes of the audience with the product being produced by the NBA. This reality further drained symbolic capital away from the NBA: "Some critics unabashedly complained that the league had become 'too black;-too black to sell to white ticket buyer's audiences and advertisers.... Many white fans began to view the sport as an undisciplined style of playground

basketball.”³⁰ This conflict was reflected through language of articles during this time period. Curry Kirkpatrick, a writer for *Sports Illustrated*, laments these new changing times of the late 1970s-early 1980s: “He (John Havlicek, a Celtic great who happened to be white) was the quintessential throwback to the old days, to the pre-trillionaire days to the days when players cared about such trivial things as pride, teamwork and the difference between winning and losing.”³¹ The language here is notable: pre-trillionaire, used to hyperbolic effect, resonates with the exorbitant salaries made by players during this time period, players who take no interest in winning, or teamwork. In addition to the citation of Havlicek, Dave Cowens was cited as the last of a dying breed: a player who played every minute with intensity, grit, and most importantly, hustled. In contrast, grit, and hustle were not words used to describe Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, one of the greatest players of all time. One could make the argument that as the all-time leader in points scored, Abdul-Jabbar is the best player to ever play the game; yet, these adjectives were not used to describe him at the time. Conversely, the language used to describe Abdul-Jabbar was laying back on defense and waiting for players to come his way; a far cry from the tireless, hustling Cowens. Abdul-Jabbar was lazy for using his physical gifts, as he was over 7 feet tall; he could afford for players to “come to him,” something that the Cowens could not afford to do. These beliefs of laziness in African Americans traditionally associated with 19th and 20 century rhetoric, which despite the relative integration of American society in the 1980s, were deep-seated within the consciousness of the American middle class, and prevented the tastes of the audience from changing as quickly as the product, which decreased the symbolic capital of the NBA. In the eyes of the public, the relations between the NBA and players were not legitimate; how could these players purchase and knowingly ingest illegal drugs and still keep their jobs? This sentiment was exacerbated by racist attitudes towards the NBA. Smith notes, “Philadelphia Daily News poll showed that 57 percent of fans believed that a white audience would not pay to watch black athletes.... People see them dissipating their money, playing without discipline.”³² This situation was noted by owners as well, particularly Ted Stepien: “White people have to have white heroes,” he said. “I respect [black players], but I need white people. It’s in me. And I think the Cavs have too many blacks.... You need a blend of white and black. I think that draws.”³³ With the League being majority African American and with the common perception of African Americans being that they were lazy and were on drugs, the NBA was thus seen as unprofessional as work ethic is a key element in professionalism.

5. The Rise of the National Basketball Association from 1984-1990 as an Economic and Social Institution using Symbolic Capital.

Thus, during the mid-1980s, the NBA was in serious trouble: it was not only hemorrhaging revenue, it did not possess an adequate structure in which to generate and use symbolic capital due to a disruption in the historic Field surrounding the NBA, and a production of a cultural product that did not align with the traditional values corresponding to the audience. However, both attendance and television revenues increased dramatically after 1984. What happened in the year of 1984 to cause this increased revenue? In 1984, David Stern introduced the first collective bargaining agreement in the history of the NBA. The collective bargaining agreement is often viewed as an economic document that saved the NBA by regulating their finances. However, an effective way of analyzing this is through the concept of habitus, which Bourdieu has argued that objects and practices often mesh together to produce a habitus—a way of living, acting, and thinking—that simultaneously embodies ideological beliefs and demarcates social boundaries.³⁴ An object worth analyzing through this lens is a collective bargaining agreement, which Suchman elaborates on: “contract rituals emerge not in isolation, but in larger systems of social beliefs and power relations, and contractual symbolism responds not only to legal doctrine but to broader cultural themes, as well.”³⁵ Thus, the institution of a collective bargaining agreement did not merely balance the finances between owners and players; it realigned the subordinate agents in the Field, the players, with the traditional tastes of the audience, creating symbolic capital the NBA could use. Two main clauses within the collective bargaining agreement aligned the tastes of the audience with the changing historical Field: the institution of a salary cap and the institution of a drug policy.³⁶ To successfully merge an increasingly diverse league with the slower changing tastes of the audience, Stern implemented various disciplinary and marketplace strategies, including anti-drug policies and the subsequent creation of a salary cap. With the institution of a salary cap however, economic solvency was not merely created, an identifiable professional structure was also created, partially legitimizing the salaries of NBA players.

In conjunction with the salary cap, the addition of a drug provision within the collective bargaining agreement of 1984 conjoined with the salary cap to create a professional structure. A major business model that Stern wanted to imitate was that of Disney, yet one cannot imitate Disney without a sufficient amount of symbolic capital, and eliminating the drug stereotype of the late 1970s and early 1980s was necessary in obtaining symbolic capital. By

instituting a strict drug provision in 1984, Stern aligned the tastes of the audience with a staple standard that constituted those tastes: professionalism. By presenting its employees, the players, as subject to rules that regular employees are subject to, the NBA: the players as professionals.

The two “Great Men” of this time period, Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, were indeed vital to the growth of the NBA.³⁷ However, I argue it was not merely their basketball talent, and personalities that were significant as previous studies have suggested.³⁸ Rather, their significance lies in their contribution to increasing the NBA’s symbolic capital through being not only rivals, but by assisting the NBA with aligning the tastes of the audience within the NBA’s Field by bringing a contrasting sense of legitimate professionalism to the basketball court. In conjunction with this, this professionalism was delineated on racial boundaries: We can observe this in the language used to describe Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. Stereotypically, when combined with his intellect, Bird’s blue collar work ethic allowed him to surpass his more athletically gifted counterparts: Bird embodied the consummate professional, the worker that persevered despite being untouched by athletic abilities: “Work—at least work on a basketball court—is what Bird loves. It has been that way ever since he was old enough to dribble a basketball up and down the hilly streets to the playgrounds of French Lick, Ind.”³⁹ Johnson, for all his generalship, was hardly referred to as intelligent, or something Jack McCallum notes.⁴⁰ Johnson’s passes were categorized as sheer entertainment, while Bird’s were classified as embodying the game’s core traditions. Two statements here embody that belief, one from Isiah Thomas, and one from Jerry West. In 1987, after the Eastern Conference Finals, Isiah Thomas of the Detroit Pistons was asked about the performance of Larry Bird, who eliminated his team from playoff contention. Thomas replied with if Larry Bird were Black, he would be just another good player; after being asked to elaborate, he stated:

“When Bird makes a great play, it’s due to his thinking, and his work habits. It’s not the case for blacks. All we do is run and jump. We never practice or give a thought to how we play. It’s like I came dribbling out of my mother’s womb. Magic and Michael Jordan and me, for example, we’re playing only on God-given talent, like we’re animals, lions, and tigers, who run around wild in a jungle. . . . Blacks have been fighting that stereotype . . . for so long, and basically it still exists.”⁴¹

Though he was lambasted by both Boston’s local media, and by the national media, Thomas made a pertinent point. Bird’s capital lay in his work ethic and mental acumen, which were identifiable with the tastes of the audience and the historical Field of the NBA. This differed from African American athletes, whose popularity lay in their physical abilities, something that American society did not recognize as professionalism. Rather, it detracted from African Americans being regarded as professionals. Additionally, Jerry West made a statement that was typical of many basketball fans at the time: “Bird whets your appetite for the game. He is such a great passer and he doesn’t make mistakes. Magic handles the ball more and he makes more mistakes because he has it more. The one that best approaches the kind of game I would recommend a young player model himself after is Bird. He is a genius on the basketball floor.”⁴² West is a basketball authority, so iconic that his picture is the logo of the NBA, sharply contrasting with Thomas, who was viewed as a controversial figure. This is an ideal example for symbolic capital: both players have the respect of West, but Bird’s efficiency and grit outweighs Johnson’s “flash” of which Bird’s exploits are transmitted into role model material. In conjunction with the structural processes provided by the collective bargaining agreement, Bird and Johnson added to the symbolic capital of the NBA by providing in Bird a representative that identified with both the tastes and the historical field of the NBA, and in Johnson, providing an African American that partially identified to the tastes, but provided a rivalry as he did not fit racially with either the tastes or the historic Field.

6. The NBA with a Jordanesque twist: Symbolic Conflict from 1990-2000

If the Magic Johnson, Larry Bird and David Stern resuscitated the NBA, Michael Jordan took the NBA to new heights. Yet, though revenues increased, the NBA did not grow unscathed. Two apt analogies for this time period from 1990-2000 would be both the Gilded Age and the Golden Age of the NBA: The NBA grew substantially during this time, but at the price of labor disagreements with the players. Here, I wish to discuss the impact of Michael Jordan and the lockout of 1998 through conflict over symbolic capital. The symbolic capital of the NBA, unlike during the 1980s, became increasingly invested in individuals, for example, Jordan’s substantial symbolic capital epitomized itself in his numerous amounts of advertisements. Unlike the previous eras of African American players, Jordan’s symbolic capital was not limited to his physical ability: he was praised for his near maniacal work ethic and competitive spirit. Therefore, Jordan liberated hard work from racialized boundaries; in 1990, in the documentary *Michael Jordan: Come Fly with Me*, he was cited as both a man destined to fly, and as the embodiment of professionalism, hard work and

American values.⁴³ He was the golden boy of the Golden Age. Hence, there was a fragile peace between the owners and the players with symbolic capital. However, players still suffered from a lack of symbolic capital despite the peace between owners and player: even Jordan was victim to critiques of his professionalism. In 1996, Nike was sharply attacked for its repressive labor policies, and Jordan was endorsed by Nike. Throughout the season, Jordan was attacked by journalists for representing Nike despite their repressive labor practices. Being endorsed by Nike conflicted with being a professional athlete. As Kellner states, Jordan's attempt to become representative of American values became tainted, albeit temporarily, by the Nike scandal; though Jordan's symbolic capital was enough to overcome this particular setback, it still shows the limitations of players being able to use symbolic capital within the NBA's Field.⁴⁴

The 1998 lockout was the penultimate gilding of the period, the event that removed the golden surface to expose the problems underneath the framework. I argue that it represents a conflict over symbolic capital between the two groups, of which race became an exacerbating factor within the conflict. The historical values represented in the Field, combined with the rapid change in taste and production of the product, were strained by this conflict to their utmost limitations, as such, conflict over symbolic capital occurred. However, this struggle was ultimately an unequal one: players displayed limitations in using symbolic capital against the owners. This occurred because not only are the players the subordinate group, it was perceived that they were challenging the historical construct of the NBA through an increase in their salaries conjoined with their perceived unwillingness to work, creating a situation in which the tastes of the audience aligned more with the owners than the players. For example, in 1998, Miami Heat center Alonzo Mourning stated: "I think there is a perception from the owners...that we're blacks who should be happy with what we've got, fair or not."⁴⁵ New Jersey Nets guard Sam Cassell concurred with Mourning: "I think the owners look at us as black, ghetto guys with tons of money that we don't deserve."⁴⁶ Fans disagreed with both Mourning and Cassell. A common trend was to blame the players for the lockout, according to a poll performed by the Desert News in Salt Lake City.⁴⁷ Therefore, even though Mourning was a highly respected player for both his on court contributions, and contributions to the community, neither he, nor Cassell possessed legitimate discourse: though they possessed the right to express their opinion, their expression of opinion decreased their standing in the conflict. This is in contrast to language that was legitimized by the owners. The players were perceived as merely playing a game, a game that they should be grateful to be playing a salary, regardless of their true market value. A poignant example is Chicago Bulls owner Jerry Reinsdorf. In 1997, Reinsdorf offered Jordan thirty million dollars in order to play one additional season for the Bulls, and Jordan accepted the offer. Reinsdorf then commented, "At some point in time, I know I'm going to regret what I just did," for although Michael Jordan was widely considered to be the greatest to ever play, he was nearing the end of his prime. However, this statement was to the chagrin of the players: how are you going to regret signing Michael Jordan, the greatest player of all time, simply because he is near the end of his physical prime? However, two crucial differences separated Reinsdorf from the players. One: Reinsdorf was perceived, correctly so, as running a business, while the players were perceived as merely playing a game. Additionally, Reinsdorf was the owner of the Bulls. His language was legitimized by being a part of the dominant class, the owners. Thus, his statements register within Field's historical processes and the players' statements did not, which weakened the players in public opinion. We can additionally observe this in a piece named the "Notable and Quotable," written by Dave D'Alessandro. In the piece, D'Alessandro satirically notes "poetic" quotes by players about the lockout, most notably their struggles despite having multi-million dollar salaries. Though the piece is satirical, it reflects public disdain for the players, while overlooking the vast disparity in class of NBA players during this time. Accordingly, fans sided with the owners: basketball fans often became disheartened with the lockout and its 191-day duration. According to one season ticket-holder of the Chicago Bulls, "If the situation next year is anything like this year, I'm out, I'm not coming back"⁴⁸ Randy Ruch, CEO of Schuylkill Valley Sports, a chain of stores in eastern Pennsylvania, claimed that the most common words from his customers when they were asked to comment on the NBA lockout were "Who needs them?"⁴⁹ Hence, professionalism, or the perceived lack thereof, played a role as well. Though the owners locked out the players, it was consistently referred to as a work stoppage, implying player responsibility for the lockout. Therefore, players were considered unprofessional for not playing. We can observe the limitation of the players' symbolic capital due to their nonconformity with the historical setting of the NBA's Field.

7. Conclusion

Despite the lockout, the NBA posted increased revenues that year. This occurred in part due to the successful symbolic manipulation by the owners: overall player salaries declined. As they utilized language to shift blame to the players, the lockout did not damage the reputation of the owners as much as the players. This would foreshadow the rise of hip

hop culture in the NBA: as Cassel stated, the perception of African Americans being black ghetto guys reflected throughout the League. With the introduction of Allen Iverson into the NBA in 1996, the poster child for “ghetto,” one would expect for the League to decrease in popularity as it perceived to be completely discontinuous from the symbolic framework established from the time of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. However, with the establishment of the symbolic framework, it adapted to manage this “ghetto” culture, particularly by instituting a League wide dress code in 2004. This occurred with professionalization: with the institution of a professional dress code, and a universal community service program, the NBA attempted to recreate symbolic capital on historical boundaries, and succeeded in their endeavor. Furthermore, it created a flexible framework for the utilization of language by dominant groups, namely owners and journalists. Therefore, symbolic capital, interacting with language and professionalism, drastically influenced the growth of the NBA from 1970-2000, as well as created a flexible framework for symbolic manipulation to occur as needed. Due to the flexibility of the symbolic framework established in the mid-1980s, symbolic capital, interacting with language and professionalism, influenced the growth of the NBA from 1970-2000.

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9. Notes

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