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OPINION | COMMENTARY

## Even in Retirement, Yao Ming Continues to Court Greatness

Through his philanthropic work, the NBA legend remains an inspiration to the next generation of Chinese basketball players.



Yao Ming coaches his all-star team in Chengdu last month. PHOTO: RON GLUCKMAN

By **RON GLUCKMAN**

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*Chengdu, China*

Oohs and ahhs swept the gymnasium, and the chanting hit a fever pitch even before the Chinese giant lumbered into view: “ Yao Ming! Yao Ming!”

The basketball legend remains an icon in China long after retirement. Surveys put him ahead of Chairman Mao as the most famous person in China. An All Star in both China and America, in April he was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame, a feat he finds astounding. “Those are legends. I’m not that old,” joked the 35-year-old Mr. Yao.

His modest manner underscores his sky-high accomplishments, and he earns universal praise from fans, coaches and players. After injuries ended his career with the Houston Rockets in 2011, Mr. Yao chose a humble path, eschewing the multimillions guaranteed a sports celebrity in America to return to China.

He bought his hometown team, the Shanghai Sharks, invested in a sports business, and devoted endless hours to philanthropy and social causes, most prominently a highly successful campaign against the harvesting of shark fins.

But his most important game plays to the smallest of audiences, like the one last month in the gymnasium of the Chengdu University of Information Technology. Mr. Yao hooped with children from some of China’s poorest regions, the finale to another season organized by his Yao Foundation.

Philanthropy was always a big part of Mr. Yao’s life. He organized the Yao Foundation while still putting up All Star stats with the Rockets. Propelled into action by the 2009 Sichuan earthquake, his charity began building schools, and now provides sports equipment and trainers to hundreds of thousands of Chinese children.

In contrast to his charity’s beneficiaries, Mr. Yao’s stardom and riches almost seem a birthright. The 7-foot-6-inch Mr. Yao was born to top professional basketball players. He attended an elite sports academy and became a star while still a teen.

“I don’t pretend to know what it is really like,” he said, surrounded by idolizing fans at a weekend of games for children under 14. “But I do know how important this can be when you are young. Sports can change people’s lives.”

With an annual budget of about \$2.3 million, the Yao Foundation trains volunteers to

coach youth in the provinces of Anhui, Guizhou and Sichuan. These are regions rich in ethnic minorities but low in funding and opportunities. Schools may lack courts, and the children often have no shoes. The foundation partners with shoe companies and other donors to provide equipment, and hope, for the kids.

From 45 schools in 2011, the program has expanded to more than 370 schools in just five years. Winners of local leagues advance to county and then prefecture competitions. The Chengdu games, which featured an array of all-star events and celebrities from the NBA and CBA, were a prelude to the finals on Aug. 1 in Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia, an autonomous region largely populated by Hui Muslims.

“What Yao Ming is doing here in China is awesome,” said George Hill, a lanky guard recently traded by the NBA’s Indiana Pacers to the Utah Jazz. “He’s putting in the time to help kids and his country. He’s the greatest.”

Mr. Hill spent two weeks in China on a promotional tour with Peak, a shoe company that sponsors him and the Yao Foundation. “We always try to get outside big cities, to the places other companies don’t go. It’s important, and you seen it in all the faces,” he added.

Sha Qiu Long, the star forward for the Panzhihua School, was intensely focused during the competition. The school of 1,300 sits in the mountains along Sichuan’s border with Yunnan. Half of the students are Yi minority, according to teacher Ma Jing. “Before we had basketball,” she said, “but the Yao Foundation gave us clothes, balls and real training.”

“The coach showed me lots of things, like how to jump and shoot,” said 13-year-old Qiu Long. “He taught me strategy, how to stop.”

Teammate Ma Ruixue was one of the two girls on the team. As long as she could remember, she had played basketball, or something like it. “We didn’t know the rules or anything. We just ran around. Now we learn the right way.”

Qiu Long stands 5 feet 5 inches tall and was his team’s top scorer, netting 33 points

in one match. Yet his team was eliminated in the early rounds. On the final day, he was back on the court as an All Star coached by Mr. Yao.

Thus he realized one dream: meeting Yao Ming. Maybe someday another dream, also inspired by China's basketball legend, will come true: "I want to play in the NBA."

*Mr. Gluckman is a Bangkok-based writer.*

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