



A Star Returns Home

Despite fears that he would leave China behind, basketball legend Yao Ming always planned to come back and use his fame and fortune for philanthropy.

BY RON GLUCKMAN

Yao Ming seemed omnipresent in 2009. A superstar with the Houston Rockets, China's premier basketball player peered out from hundreds of billboards across his hometown of Shanghai. But this was no game. His mission: saving sharks.


Shark's fin soup had long been a popular splurge in China. Rising affluence put the delicacy on tables across the mainland, boosting kills from 70 million to 100 million sharks annually. Many shark species were threatened with extinction.

Conservation groups sought to wean China from this habit but without luck. Then WildAid drafted Yao as the spokesman for its campaign. "Say no to shark's fin soup!" urged Yao, and China listened. Shark quickly dropped off menus. "It went down 60%, so that was pretty good," recalls Yao modestly. Others call it one of the most effective environmental campaigns ever.

A few years later, Yao turned to another crusade—the fight against the ivory trade. Ivory carvings are dear to Chinese,

encouraging the plunder of elephants. Although outlawed across Africa, poachers outgun park rangers, slaughtering animals indiscriminately. Unable to halt the brutal harvest, animal-rights groups pressed for bans on trading ivory, with mixed results. As the trade moved underground, Yao again put his huge frame and bigger fame on the line, traveling to Africa. A documentary was made, and photos of the 7-foot-6 star frolicking with a baby elephant went viral. "I believe it's important to get involved," he said. Wildlife groups believe that the campaign rapidly raised awareness of the issue and led the government to further restrict the market for ivory.

Chinese stars regularly figure in nationalist causes, but few had leveraged their celebrity to personally challenge society. And few are as celebrated as Yao, China's most famous athlete. Surveys say Yao, 36, is even more famous in China than Chairman Mao. A perennial All-Star, injuries curtailed his career in North America's National Basketball Association in 2011, but he remains intensely involved in sports in China. Re-



Bringing hoop dreams to poor kids in China: "What Yao Ming is doing in China is awesome."

turning to Shanghai, he bought the Sharks basketball team that he played for as a teen. In February, he was elected president of the Chinese Basketball Association.

Yao has never sought the spotlight. So it's no surprise to find that his Yao Foundation is little known—unless you are a poor kid in some Chinese backwater. Then Yao not only fuels your hoop dreams, but he may also be the sports saint providing your basketball court, shoes and sports training.

Working in remote areas of China, the foundation—with an annual budget of roughly \$2.5 million—equips and trains children aged 13 and under. Volunteers are recruited from universities, trained as coaches and then sent to schools that often don't have physical education programs. Boys and girls join teams that compete for

doing in China is awesome. He's really putting in the time to help his people, the kids, his country. Nobody else is doing anything like it."

Upon arrival, Yao was enveloped in a maelstrom of attention, handling it unlike almost any other superstar: patient, low-key, eternally cheerful. Grabbing a chair, he shrunk down to semihuman size but quickly bounced back on his feet, coaching his youth team as if an Olympics medal was on the line. And he displayed that Yao humor. When one kid attempted a sideline three-point shot, he extended a gigantic arm, as if to block the ball. The crowd roared.

Afterward came photo sessions; he posed for hours. "Helping other people is the right thing to do," he said, noting that NBA community projects taught him how

Yao's philanthropic journey involved many turns, but his path to basketball greatness seemed almost preordained. His parents were both basketball stars: Yao Zhiyuan was a top center, standing 6-foot-10, while mother Fang Fengdi is 6-foot-2. Intense anticipation surrounded his upbringing. By the time he was 10, he topped 5-foot-5 and shifted to a special sports school.

Most incorrectly call him China's first basketball export. Actually, he was third in a wave of NBA-bound big men. The Dallas Mavericks drafted center Wang Zhizhi of the Bayi Rockets, and in 2001, he became the first Chinese player to suit up for an NBA game. Later that season Mengke Bateer played for the Denver Nuggets. A beefy Inner Mongolian, he often logged more fouls than minutes and soon returned to the CBA. But he's the only player from China with an NBA championship ring, won with the San Antonio Spurs in 2003.

In 2002, Houston drafted Yao No. 1, making him the first foreigner chosen with a top draft pick. He debuted amid tremendous expectations from Chinese fans and skepticism from American commentators. Charles Barkley famously kissed a donkey's ass after betting that Yao would never score more than 19 points in any of his rookie-season games; he scored 20 in just his eighth game. Shaquille O'Neal, the dominant NBA big man, was dismissive and condescending. Yao was unrattled, responding with humility and humor. In his first game in Miami, Heat management distributed 8,000 fortune cookies, oddly stereotypical since they don't exist in China. Yao joked that he liked trying this American treat. O'Neal bullied Yao in their first meeting, but behind fervent Chinese balloting, Yao outpolled him in the All-Star voting.

Yao averaged 19.2 points and 9.2 rebounds a game in his NBA career. His success not only buoyed basketball in China, but accelerated the globalization of the game. During his induction into the Hall of Fame last year, O'Neal helped him into his Hall of Fame jacket. That the event was taking place only now was another example of his character. NBA players must be retired for five years before the Hall considers them, but Yao qualified in 2012 because



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local and regional honors, culminating in a weekend of playoffs, all-star events and a chance to meet and pose with the Gentle Giant. "Nobody could sleep last night," confided Ma Jing last year in Chengdu. A teacher in Panzhihua, in remote Sichuan Province, she had come with the school team, traveling 14 hours by train. Most had never seen a big city and buzzed about visiting an amusement park. "They are excited about everything, but especially meeting Yao Ming. Me, too!"

Stars come from the CBA and the NBA: Last year, it was George Hill of the Utah Jazz and, in 2015, Golden State Warriors forward Draymond Green. "I'd do this anytime for Yao Ming," said Hill. "What Yao Ming is

enriching it was to be personally involved. He described going to people's homes, with food, games or, in one case, a mattress. "I remember looking at that guy, in his eyes, and seeing his reaction, how happy he was just to have a bed. It was so touching. That is very small for you, but big for other people."

Thus the seed was planted to make philanthropy an integral part of his life. He formed the Yao Foundation and continued to work for other causes, such as the Special Olympics. "The reason I do it this way is I like to feel people. I believe in the power of example. I believe that making eye contact, face-to-face, heart-to-heart, is the only way that can really change things," he says, adding: "And change yourself."

of his earlier play in China. He demurred, however, saying it was too early to think of joining such illustrious company.

Such was his style from the start. “He was so patient,” recalls Peter Hessler, author of several bestselling books about China, including *River Town*. As the *New Yorker* magazine’s China correspondent, he shadowed Yao that first season: “I can’t imagine anyone being under such pressure and handling it so gracefully.” Tim Noonan, a longtime sports columnist in Hong Kong, has followed Yao since he was a teen. “He’s the real deal. He broke all the barriers and handled it all so well,” he says. “I’ve been around a lot of athletes, but he’s more comfortable in his skin than any I’ve seen.”

Yao’s adjustment to America was quick. He savored new foods, played videogames, learned English and soaked up everything. Yet unlike many players who come to America, playing for colleges or basketball-focused academies and hoping to make it big in the U.S., Yao never lost sight of his goal of making a difference back home.

Since returning to China he’s revamped the operation of the Shanghai Sharks, financially struggling when he bought the team in 2009. He’s been an advocate for better training and wages and for broadening the fan base, and many expect him to quickly scale up the CBA now that he’s president. He likens the league to the NBA decades ago, when some teams were insolvent and lacked a strong following. “It will take time,” he says, “but I believe we have a good window now. The owners are mobilizing to make changes.”

In Yao’s time, players were poorly paid and lacked many perks. Games rarely attracted more than a few hundred fans when I first saw Yao play while based in China in 2000 to 2005. Gyms were decrepit and smoke-filled, and travel was a long haul by bus. Players shared rooms or bunked in dorms. Hessler recalls that Yao couldn’t fit on a standard bed, so he pushed a cabinet alongside his bunk to support his lengthy frame. “He never complained.”

China made tremendous demands on Yao, which many think compounded his injuries and shortened his career. Serving team and country, he kept an insane

schedule, rushing home after every season to play with the national team. Despite such dedication, he was hounded by officials and the public, who questioned his every move. Did Yao really need surgery before Beijing’s 2008 Olympics? (He cut short his recovery to play and did spectacularly.) He married Ye Li, a basketball star he met when he was 17—she was the only girl he ever dated. The birth of their daughter, Yao Qinlei, was a national obsession, but chat sites blazed over their decision to give birth in Houston.

The fear was rampant that Yao would abandon China for greater stardom and rewards in the U.S. “I wouldn’t have been surprised if he stayed in the U.S.—a lot of athletes would have,” notes Hessler. “He could have stayed in the U.S. and continued going back and forth to China. That would have been the easy path.”

But Yao had been planning his philanthropic future since his early days in the NBA. His inspiration was Dikembe Mu-

and most important pro basketball league,” notes Terry Rhoads, a former Nike China marketing executive and now co-owner of Shanghai-based Zou Sports. “Ultimately he will lift China basketball to new heights.”

Yao’s vision for China is long term: nurturing a love of the game and slowly developing new generations of players. That’s what he’s been doing for five years. He launched his youth leagues in 47 schools in 2012. Last year, he had programs in nearly 380 but reached thousands more children through a partnership with Hope Schools. “I don’t pretend to know what it’s like for these kids,” says Yao, who spent weeks coaching to gain some insight. “I wasn’t in a village. I grew up in a big city, Shanghai.”

Ma Ruixue was one of two girls on the team from Panzhihua at the tournament in Chengdu. She had played for years, although it wasn’t really basketball before Yao helped the school. “We didn’t know the rules or anything. We just ran around in

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tombo, another barrier-breaking big man who also played for the Rockets. Mutombo has been a force in his native Congo, building hospitals and providing scholarships. “Mutombo taught me about the entire idea, the philosophy, doing it on a different level,” says Yao. “It’s about management. That makes this more efficient. And efficiency allows us to help more people.” In fact, he’s studying management. Basketball sidetracked his education, so he’s returned to school, taking courses for an undergraduate degree. He plans to earn an advanced degree in business and management.

His business interests involve myriad partnerships and endorsements, and he has a sports management company. With his election as CBA president, many see parallels to David Stern, who helped take the NBA to new heights. Yao will be taking “the CBA from an SOE [state-owned enterprise], essentially privatizing Asia’s largest

circles. Then the coach [sent by the foundation] came and we learned the right way.” Added Yao after the games ended: “Seeing how this impacts children makes me happy. Sports can change people’s lives.”

Yao says he had been researching laws and planning to launch his foundation after the Olympics in Beijing in 2008. Then an earthquake struck Sichuan Province, and Yao leapt into action. “I had already planned to do something for schools, but this just sped it up.” His group began building schools: 21 are now finished. “But I realized that building schools isn’t what we do best,” he says. “Basketball is our specialty.”

Many believe that he’s just getting started. “Yao has always embraced the role of ‘Great power requires great responsibility,’” says Rhoads, who has watched Yao firsthand from the start. “The next 10 to 20 years will further solidify his status as perhaps China’s greatest sports leader.” **F**