

Comparative Research and Analysis of CBA and NBA

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ABSTRACT

Since 1995, the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) has made a huge improvement in business development, hiring foreign players and basketball fans' engagement. However, comparing with the NBA (National Basketball Association), CBA still faces impressive challenges in financial scale, influence in the market and operating efficiency. This paper will analyze the difference between two leagues, by using the date-driven and SWOT analysis, which is able to offer CBA some advice to develop CBA into an advanced and more commercial accessible basketball league.

KEYWORDS

NBA; CBA; Business operating; SWOT analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Basketball Association, or NBA, is a professional basketball league comprised of 30 teams across North America featuring the best basketball players in the world. The league earns the profits through the broadcasting rights, jersey sales, tickets for the game and the relevant products. The latest broadcasting right fee is that the NBA reached an agreement with ESPN/ABC, NBCU and Amazon Prime Video in a new 76-million-dollar, 11 -year contract. The league will get 10% from each player's salary. In 2025, the highest salary is the 55,760,000 dollars from Stephen Curry.

In China, there is also a basketball association called CBA, The league was officially founded in 1995 by the Chinese Basketball Management Center. Initially, it served as a platform to develop domestic basketball talent and improve the performance of the China national team in international competitions. The league featured teams sponsored by provincial sports bureaus, maintaining a focus on amateur sports transitioning to professional standards. Each basketball team at least receives 30,000,000RMB a year, which is the nominal salary for a main player in NBA, such as the normal starting player Norman Powell. It is the nominal salary for a main player of CBA. As the second greatest basketball league, CBA has a giant gap between the NBA from financial scale to operating model.

In the current situation, this paper aims to explore the shortcomings of the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) compared with the North American Professional Basketball League (NBA), and analyze its differences. At the same time, this paper will discuss how to enhance the popularity of CBA and attract more foreign players to participate. The author aims to point out the successful experience and excellent practice of NBA and provide reference for the future development of CBA. In addition, the author is passionate about promoting youth participation in basketball and aims to train future professional players in the CBA.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Benefits of NBA in Their Operation

According to official records, the NBA provides services to thousands of media outlets worldwide, including newspapers, internet platforms, magazines, television, and radio stations.

During the 2002-2003 regular season and playoffs twenty years ago, the NBA issued a record-breaking 2,454 international media credentials to journalists from 48 countries covering NBA games. A total of 161 international media representatives from 27 countries and regions covered the 2003 NBA Finals between the Los Angeles Lakers and Detroit Pistons. In the 2003-2004 season, NBA regular season games and programming were broadcast to 212 countries worldwide through 151 different television partners in over 42 languages, reaching a potential audience of at least 3.1 billion viewers. NBA.com was the first and remains the only professional sports league website in the United States to provide international versions for fans globally. The NBA operated nine international websites, including: Brazil (NBA.com/brasil), Canada (NBA.com/canada), China (NBA.com/China), Spain (NBA.com/espanol), France (NBA.com/france), Germany (NBA.com/germany), Japan (NBA.com/japan), Chinese Taipei (NBA.com/taiwan), and the UK (NBA.com/uk). During the 2003-2004 season, NBA.com received 315 million page views, setting a new record. This represented an increase of over 30% compared to the 2002-2003 season, when the site averaged more than 1.6 million daily visits.

In 2002, the NBA signed a six-year, \$4.6 billion broadcast rights deal with ABC/ESPN and TNT (covering the 2002-03 to 2007-08 seasons), averaging approximately \$767 million annually. This represented a significant increase from the previous contract (a four-year, \$1.7 billion agreement with NBC in 1998). The deal made broadcast rights the league's primary revenue source, accounting for 30% of its total income. Moreover, the 2003 NBA Draft class - featuring No. 1 pick LeBron James, No. 3 pick Carmelo Anthony, and No. 5 pick Dwyane Wade - laid the foundation for the league's future market growth.

2.2. Relative Products Sales

The NBA provides officially licensed merchandise to fans in more than 100 countries worldwide, with approximately 20% of NBA product sales originating outside the United States. The NBA's international licensing program aims to engage customers at all levels, further enhancing the NBA and WNBA brands while increasing league revenue. Licensed products include sportswear, athletic equipment, trading cards, stationery, publications, video tapes, home goods, video games, toys, collectibles, and phone cards, among others. During the 2003–2004 season, double-digit retail growth made it the NBA's best year for merchandise sales. NBA sportswear, athletic gear, toys, video games, and other products saw a 25% increase in total sales at the "NBA Store" on New York's Fifth Avenue and through NBA.com's online shopping platform. Additionally, reflecting rising consumer demand, the average ticket price in 2003 reached approximately \$48.37, marking a 35% increase compared to 1998.

2.3. Market Expansion

Over the past two decades, the NBA has gradually expanded into the international market. With its domestic market stabilizing, the league has devoted significant efforts to tapping into the vast potential of overseas markets. The NBA's strategy for global market development involves introducing international players and organizing summer leagues, preseason games, and even regular-season matches abroad. In terms of recruiting foreign players, the NBA's immense appeal has attracted top-tier international basketball talent, many of whom have achieved remarkable success. For instance, the "German Tank" Dirk Nowitzki led the Dallas Mavericks to an NBA championship

and was named Finals MVP. The participation of such international stars has significantly boosted the NBA's influence in their home countries. A notable example is Yao Ming, whose entry into the NBA garnered widespread attention from Chinese fans, allowing the league to effortlessly penetrate the massive Chinese market. This demonstrates the substantial impact of international player recruitment on the NBA's global expansion. Beyond importing foreign talent, the NBA has actively promoted its players and games overseas. Early on, the league established specialized international promotion agencies and implemented a systematic, step-by-step expansion plan. Every offseason, the NBA selects teams to play preseason games abroad. For example, the Milwaukee Bucks, led by Yi Jianlian, once traveled to China for preseason matches, and in 2012, the Los Angeles Clippers and Miami Heat played exhibition games in Shanghai and Beijing, respectively. Additionally, superstar players like Kobe Bryant and LeBron James have served as NBA ambassadors, engaging in charity events, mentoring local basketball development, and organizing youth training camps worldwide. These efforts have helped cultivate a positive brand image for the NBA among global youth, exemplifying the league's successful marketing and cultural promotion strategies. Meanwhile, The CBA has also made progress in market and cultural promotion in recent years, partly due to the influx of former NBA players. From high-profile signings like Bonzi Wells to recent seasons featuring JR Smith, Wilson Chandler, and the long-term presence of "Lao Beijing" (Stephon Marbury), as well as Tracy McGrady joining the Qingdao Eagles and Gilbert Arenas signing with the Shanghai Sharks, these acquisitions have drawn increasing attention to the CBA. Currently, the CBA's promotion relies more on well-known foreign imports rather than domestic stars.

2.4. Recent Developments in the CBA Over the Past Two Decades

In recent years, the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) has made significant progress in brand development and market operations. Through measures such as introducing foreign players, reforming competition formats, and increasing the number of games, the league has enhanced its commercialization, attracting more sponsors and audiences. Additionally, drawing inspiration from the NBA model, the CBA has introduced a club cup tournament to diversify its events and strengthen brand influence. To improve the league's competitiveness, the CBA has recruited foreign players and coaches and, since 2015, has held an annual draft to attract more domestic and international talent. The foreign player policy has undergone multiple adjustments—from initially limiting each team to no more than two foreign players to later implementing the "four-quarter, four-foreign-player rule" (4Q4P)—to balance fairness and entertainment value. The CBA has also encouraged expansion, gradually increasing the number of participating teams from the original 12 to the current 20. In 2005, the league abolished the promotion-relegation system and adopted a franchise-based entry model, allowing more financially stable clubs to join. In recent years, the CBA has planned to reinstate the home-and-away game format and extend the regular season to 52 rounds, further enhancing the league's appeal and competitiveness.

3. DATA DESCRIPTION

3.1. SWOT Analysis for NBA

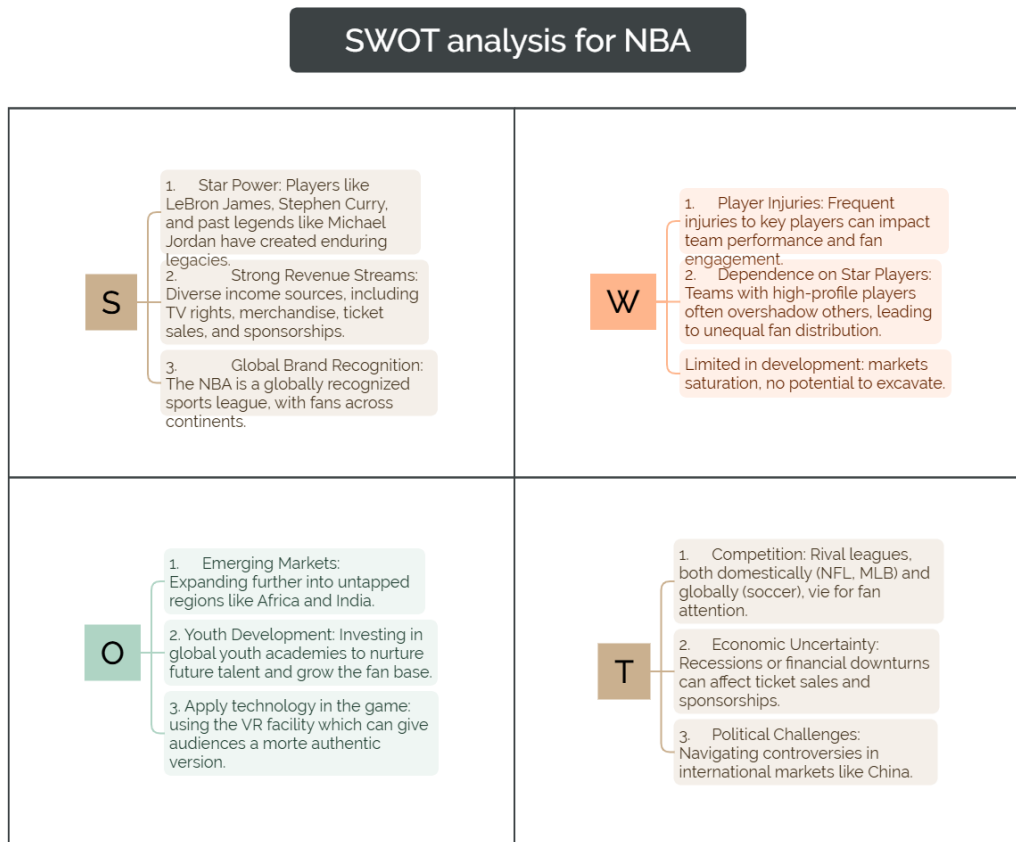


Figure 1. SWOT analysis for NBA

In the NBA, the influence of star players significantly determines a team's performance and ticket sales. In 2021, the Los Angeles Lakers, boasting LeBron James and Anthony Davis, ranked first in sales revenue, while the Brooklyn Nets, with Kevin Durant, Kyrie Irving, and James Harden, came in third. This clearly demonstrates the NBA's reliance on superstar players to drive profits.

Compared with the NFL, the NBA still lags significantly behind in the U.S. domestic market. NFL games consistently achieve much higher TV ratings than NBA games, with the Super Bowl typically being the most-watched sporting event of the year. For example, the 2024 Super Bowl drew over 123 million viewers, setting a new record. In comparison, the NBA Finals have far lower TV ratings, though they perform better on social media and streaming platforms. For instance, the 2023 NBA Finals averaged around 11.6 million viewers per game.

However, the NBA is more popular with the young and international market, such as China and Europe. Its influence in social media is more profound than other American sports leagues, such as the NFL and NBL. Therefore, it has more potential in foreign markets.

3.2. SWOT Analysis for CBA

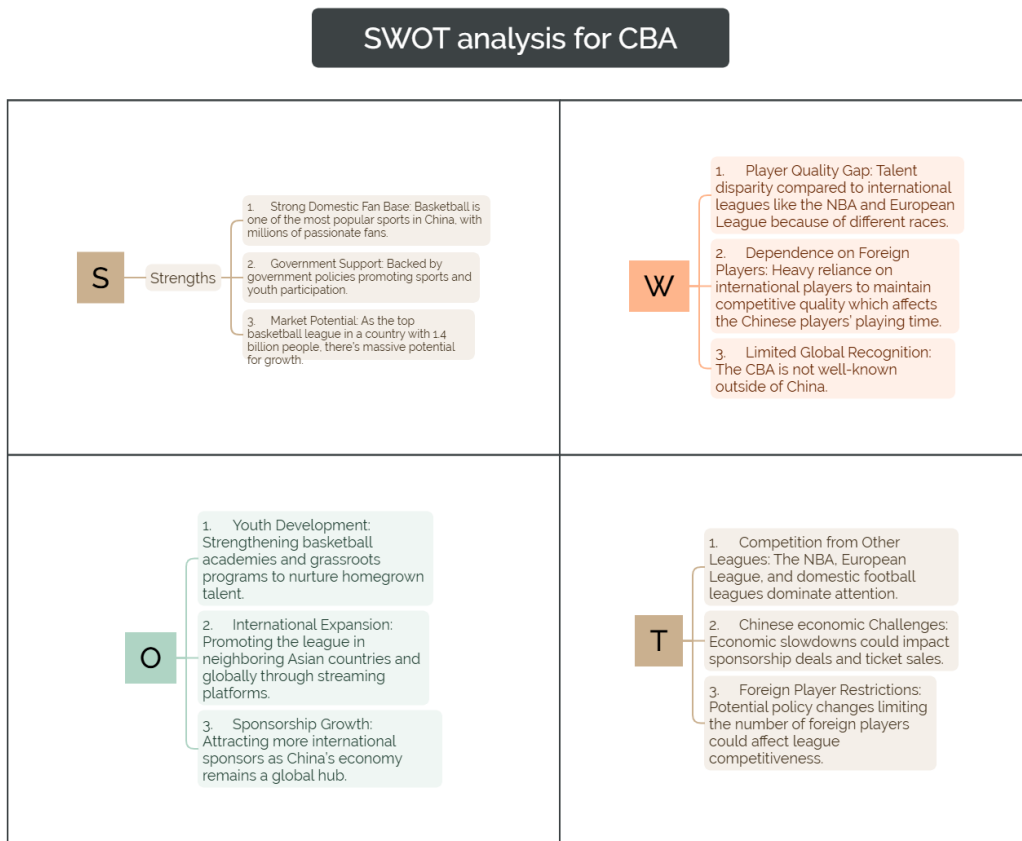


Figure 2. SWOT analysis for CBA

Compared to the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) is acutely aware of the racial differences between its players and those in the NBA, which result in disparities in physical talent. CBA teams fully recognize this and have therefore established their own youth training programs, nurturing players from as young as 14 years old. Approximately 80% of CBA players come from team-affiliated youth academies. However, this development system primarily determines a player's position based on height, without sufficiently considering factors such as speed, ball-handling skills, and other technical abilities. As a result, the overall skill level of CBA players remains relatively weaker compared to international standards. To address this, the CBA has drawn inspiration from the NBA by introducing a draft system (launched in 2015), which has gradually opened up in recent years. Nevertheless, high-quality draft prospects remain scarce (e.g., the 2022 first pick, Wang Lanqin).

The CBA also boasts a massive fan base. During the 2024 CBA Finals, the four-game series accumulated 123 million views on CCTV Sports, with an average live viewership of nearly 10 million per minute. While these numbers are impressive, they still pale in comparison to the NBA's global influence and audience scale. The NBA leverages cultural exports, such as hip-hop culture and other collaborations (e.g., partnerships with Supreme and Louis Vuitton), to attract younger demographics. The 2023 NBA All-Star Game, for instance, drew over 300 million viewers worldwide.

Unlike the NBA, the Chinese Basketball Association plays a deep role in the CBA's operations (e.g., adjusting foreign player policies for no reasons, arranging centralized tournament formats), limiting the decision-making power of individual teams. Additionally, due to its strong political undertones, the CBA imposes numerous regulations that restrict player freedoms. For example, during the 2005 All-Star Game, Yi Jianlian was penalized for replacing the mandatory Li-Ning sponsored sneakers with Nike shoes. In a post-game interview, Yi explained that he made the switch because the Li-Ning

shoes were uncomfortable and posed health risks. This rule, which prioritized sponsor interests over player health and well-being, drew widespread criticism and backlash from fans.

3.3. Analysis of SWOT

In summary, based on a SWOT analysis comparing the CBA and the NBA, the NBA's development prospects appear relatively saturated, with limited room for further growth. In contrast, the CBA, despite its lower global recognition and reliance on foreign players who are no longer competitive in the NBA (many of whom still average over 20 points per game in the CBA), demonstrates notable potential for expansion. The competitive level of the CBA remains significantly below that of the NBA, yet the league retains considerable developmental opportunities. NBA viewership is heavily driven by star players, with most fans supporting teams based on their favorite athletes, such as LeBron James and Stephen Curry. This creates an overreliance on marquee players, leading to declining ratings when these stars are injured. Conversely, CBA fandom is primarily region-based, with fans loyal to their local teams and invested in homegrown talent developed through youth academies, enhancing both competitiveness and entertainment value. Additionally, the CBA benefits from government policy support, which facilitates team development and player cultivation, laying a solid foundation for future growth. The league has also made efforts to align with international standards, such as signing ethnic Chinese stars like Jeremy Lin to boost visibility, though frequent policy changes regarding foreign players have hindered progress. The NBA's strengths lie in its mature commercial ecosystem, globalized structure, and market-driven operations. Meanwhile, the CBA's potential stems from China's vast domestic market (a population of 1.4 billion) and its youth training infrastructure. To capitalize on these advantages, the CBA must reduce administrative interference, refine its draft system (drawing from CUBA's collegiate talent pool), and explore integrated "basketball +" industries (e.g., esports, tourism, and education). Looking ahead, if the CBA can achieve breakthroughs in market-oriented reforms (e.g., introducing private capital), enhancing event presentation (improving broadcasting technology), and youth development (better integrating with school basketball programs), it may narrow the operational gap with the NBA. However, in the short term, the two leagues will likely remain at different developmental stages.

4. CONCLUSION

In recent years, the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) has undergone significant qualitative improvements in both the entertainment value of its games and league revenue. The league has attracted numerous players with NBA experience and established fan bases, such as Eric Bledsoe of the Shanghai Sharks in the 2024-2025 season and former stars like Tracy McGrady. However, compared to the NBA, the CBA's excessive commercialization has not only failed to substantially boost revenue and viewership but has also left a negative impression among online audiences.

As the CBA continues to develop, the education system has also begun prioritizing talent cultivation. Youth basketball competitions, such as the Nike High School Basketball League, have been established across various age groups, encouraging schools to integrate basketball into their programs and actively recruit and train young talent. This initiative is expected to enhance both the future appeal of the CBA and the overall competitiveness of the Chinese men's national team.

The introduction of foreign player policies has elevated the overall entertainment value of the league while allowing domestic players to recognize the gap between themselves and overseas talent. For instance, the 2025 CBA All-Star Game, featuring former NBA Slam Dunk Contest champion Hamidou Diallo in both the dunk contest and the main event, transformed what was once considered a dull spectacle into a far more engaging experience. As more CBA teams recruit former NBA players, local athletes have greater opportunities to learn from their experience and skills.

Additionally, the CBA has adopted several NBA-style league structures, including home-and-away games and the All-Star Weekend since its inception. Preseason games before the regular season also provide more playing time for rookies rather than being dominated by starters and foreign players. These improvements contribute to the league's commercialization, viewership growth, and youth player development.

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