

A Reality Check As NBA Commissioner Says No to 18-Year-Olds

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It must be good to be National Basketball Association Commissioner David Stern. The NBA strongman snaps his fingers and the National Basketball Players Association Executive Director Billy Hunter jumps and agrees to a new collective bargaining agreement that says high-school graduates can no longer apply for a job in Stern's domain starting in 2006.

Stern doesn't want new high-school grads in his league because he says it's not good for his business.

But Stern will welcome 18-year-olds in his league for a final time in 2005–06. If any of them are any good, he will market their likenesses globally if the NBA can make a buck off them. Stern defends his hypocritical stance by saying that once a player joins the NBA, he has full membership rights.

Just as Stern got his way, the Pentagon decided to go after the same high-school-student pool that Stern decided was too young, immature and unproven for his franchise owners and the high rollers who buy NBA tickets whether they are in the comfort and safety of a luxury box or sitting in seats with WiFi-equipped waiter service.

Stern repeatedly said that there is no room for recent high-school graduates in his domain. Perhaps, the new graduates are better off in Iraq or Afghanistan. The Defense Department is trying to market military service to 16- and 17-year-olds with the hope that high-school seniors will sign up for the military upon graduation.

The Defense Department is working with a private marketing company to create a database of high-school and college students. The Defense Department is trying to identify potential recruits by getting information such as birth dates, Social Security numbers, e-mail addresses, grade-point averages, ethnicity and subjects the students are studying.

It has some information already on potential recruits through the No Child Left Behind Act. Military recruiters have called students' homes trying to find 18-year-olds to join the armed forces.

Last time anyone looked, basic training was a lot tougher than any NBA training camp. Qualifying to become an Army Ranger is harder than making the Orlando Magic and sitting on the bench at 18.

The United States is sending 18-year-olds into harm's way. Stern is banishing 18-year-olds from his league. Maybe Stern is trying to shield them from the Knicks City Dancers or the Lakers Cheerleaders. He said it does not send a good message that his league's scouts are in high-school gyms looking at players. One has to wonder what Stern thinks about the Defense Department's recruiting techniques.

What is even more baffling is how NBA-beat writers and sports-radio talk-show hosts have bought into Stern's argument, and how NBA basketball will benefit from not having 18-year-olds in a 30-team league. Basketball, both on the college and NBA level, is fluff entertainment, that's all. Yes, billions of dollars flow into the industry, but it's not the real world.

Somehow, all of us have allowed sports to get out of hand. Years ago, Howard Cosell told this reporter and anyone else within earshot, "Sports is out of whack." Sports is even more out of whack now than when Cosell uttered the phrase back in the late 1980s.

Stern is wrong in barring 18-year-olds from his private business that depends heavily on government largesse and approval.

Stern is the keeper of fluff entertainment. How can he welcome an 18-year-old into his league this year, and then deprive another one of the same chance the next? Is an 18-year-old old enough to serve his country, but not old enough to play basketball?

There is something very wrong with that picture.