

Original Scientific Paper

Welcome to Brazil: An Analysis of the Migration of Foreign Players to Brazilian Basketball

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the migration of foreign athletes to compete in the New Basketball Brazil (NBB). This descriptive study was used for documentary research, and data were collected from the National Basketball League (LNB), referring to all seasons of the competition. The results point to a gradual increase in the number of foreign players until the 2013/14 season, after a slight decline. It was also observed that Minas was the club that received the most foreigners and that counted on them in all the seasons. The country with the highest number of migrant athletes in the NBB was the United States. It was concluded that the pattern of migration of foreigners in Brazilian basketball is predominantly continental and that the coming of many Americans to Brazil can be explained by the fact that the United States is the mother country of many players whose quality is superior to their domestic demand. That leads these players to leave the world's largest basketball league, the NBA, corroborating the reality of other countries' leagues around the world.

Keywords: *Sport Migration, Basketball, Sport*

Introduction

Migration can be understood as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence (Nolasco, 2016). However, Koser, & Salt (1997) have already warned that the academic literature is not unanimous in pointing to a solid definition of migration. For the authors, one of the major problems of this conceptual impasse is the determination of the time needed for the individual who moves from his place of origin, not his destination, since a short-term displacement can be considered as a movement or mobility, and not as migration (Koser & Salt, 1997). In a nutshell, the attributions found on migration refer to aspects that address the movement of people through the dimensions of space and time (Nolasco, 2016).

When considered as an area of study, migration is investigated in its relationship with different areas, including sports. Sports migration is a theme that has been consolidating and qualifying discussions (Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire, 2004), especially after the 1990s, when the first proposals for conceptual frameworks for researching the phenomenon occurred (Maguire, 1994). The most investigated sport modality is football, whereas other modalities

appear less frequently as a topic of interest among scholars who carry out research on the theme (Elliott & Maguire, 2008; Rojo, Simiyu, & Starepravo, 2020).

With regard to research on sports migration in Brazil, an important gap was found by an initial survey, as there are few published studies on the subject. Among them, there was one that addresses Kenyan street runners (Ribeiro, Lovisolo, Gomes, & Sant'anna, 2013), another that deals with volleyball (Garcia, Nascimento, & Pereira, 2017), one about collective Olympic modalities (Rúbio, 2017), a review of literature on expatriates in the sports context, derived from psychology studies (Faggiani et al., 2016) and some that deal with football (Silva, Rigo, & Freitas, 2012; Rial, 2008; Ribeiro & Dimeu, 2009). However, Brazilian football also appears in studies by international researchers (Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Elliott, 2013).

Basketball is a sport that has not been studied in Brazil in terms of sports migration (Gonçalves, Rojo, Cavichioli, & Moraes, 2017). Although this modality is not considered popular in Brazil, basketball has recently undergone significant transformations, especial-

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ly with the creation and consolidation of the National Basketball League (LNB), an entity that brings together the elite of male athletes in the country and is responsible for organizing the New Basketball Brazil (NBB), the main basketball competition in the country.

Over its twelve years, the NBB has been through a gradual professionalization process, transferring this condition to participating clubs. As a result of this relevant contribution, basketball started being progressively commercialized and spectacularized in the country (Hirata, 2020).

In this process, hiring foreign athletes, North Americans and other nationalities, played a prominent role in improving the performance of the teams or by the technical skills of the athletes' performance, which, consequently, raises fans' interest (Hirata, 2020). After presenting the current scenario of professional basketball in Brazil, the general objective of this research is to analyze the migration profile of foreign athletes to compete in the NBB. As secondary objectives, an attempt was made to survey the number of athletes per season, check the athletes' countries of origin and which clubs received them.

Methodology

This research is characterized as descriptive-documental. Reports on foreign participation in the National Basketball

League (NBB) were used as a research source. The information was collected from the Ombudsman of the National Basketball League (LNB), the institution responsible for organizing the NBB. The request for information was made via email and phone calls.

The timeframe encompasses the NBB seasons from 2008 to 2018. Microsoft Excel software was used to organize the data contained in the reports, thus, generating the information for the analysis of this study. For the purposes of the analysis, we decided to present the basic statistics of the frequency percentage.

It is important to note that the number of players is presented from the sum of the volume of each season. In other words, the same athlete added a frequency mark for each season in which he participated, regardless of the team, and not just one mark in the total for number of seasons.

Results

The numbers referring to the distribution of foreign players in the NBB seasons include athletes of many nationalities, considering the teams participating since the first season of the competition, as it can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows an increasing line in the number of foreign

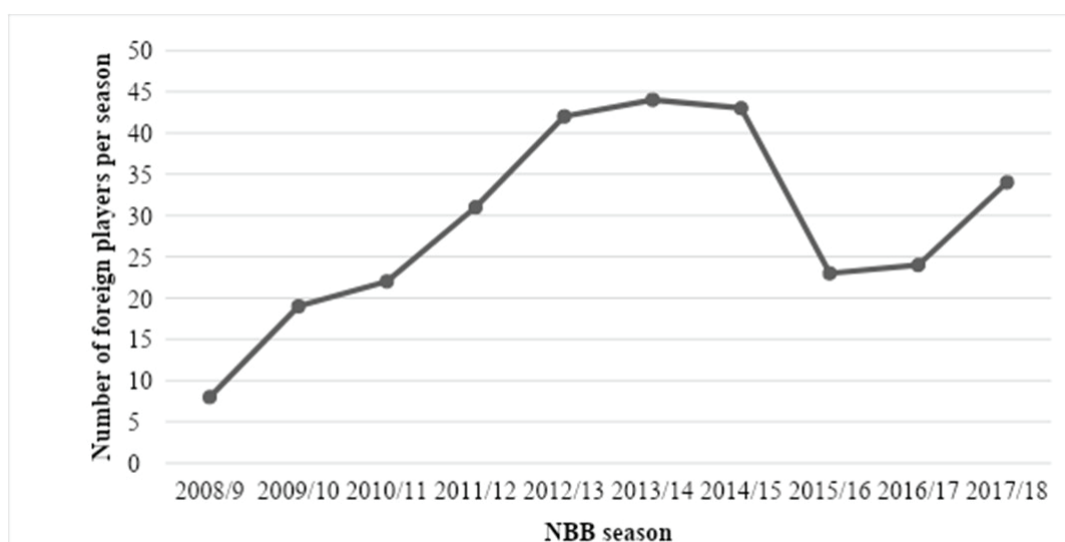


FIGURE 1. Number of foreign players per season of the NBB (Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data provided by the LNB)

players in the New Basketball Brazil between seasons 2008/09 and 2013/14, and between seasons 2015/16 and 2017/18. In the first season, only 8 players were distributed in seven teams, which represented 46.7% of the total of fifteen who competed in the league. The gradual increase takes place until the 2013/14 season, when the maximum number of players of non-Brazilian origin is reached in the NBB. There were 44 athletes in action during the season, distributed in all seventeen teams (100%) in the league.

During the 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15 seasons, the number of foreign athletes remained practically the same, with 42, 44 and 43 athletes, respectively, and most of the participating teams also had at least one foreign player in their cast. In the 2015/16 season, there was a drop in participation in numbers of players, but the logic of previous seasons remained, with most of the participating teams having foreign athletes on their rosters.

Regarding the destination team of foreign players in the NBB editions, the following table shows in numbers the clubs that

received the most foreigners during the timeframe that encompassed the competition.

Table 1 shows by quantitative means that Minas Tênis Clube was the club that received the most foreign athletes in the accumulated total of ten seasons. By taking a deeper look at the club, we identified that it had the presence of foreign players in all seasons in the league with, at least, 2 players from another countries.

Despite the great presence of foreigners in that club, it is clear that the characteristics of the teams, whether they are large clubs or representatives of a municipality, are not a major factor in relation to sports migration. For example, among the six teams with the largest number of foreign players, three of them are clubs based in state capitals (Minas Tênis Clube - Belo Horizonte/MG, Pinheiros - São Paulo/SP and Flamengo - Rio de Janeiro/RJ) and three of them are representatives of large municipalities (Liga Sorocabana - Sorocaba/SP, Bauru - Bauru/SP and Franca - Franca/SP). The absolute numbers must be viewed with caution

Table 1. Number of foreign athletes by destination club (Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data provided by the LNB)

Destination Club	Participating Seasons	Total Foreign Athletes	Foreigners Average
Minas Tênis Clube	10	24	2,4
Pinheiros	10	22	2,2
Liga Sorocabana	7	21	3
Flamengo	10	20	2
Bauru	10	19	1,9
Franca	10	17	1,7
Mogi	6	16	2,6
Vitória	3	14	2,8
Paulistano	10	14	1,4
Uberlândia	5	13	2,6
São José	8	13	1,6
Limeira	6	13	2,1
Vila Velha	6	12	2
Palmeiras	3	11	3,6
Basquete Cearense	6	11	1,83
Macaé	4	10	2,5
Campo Mourão	2	6	3
Joinville	6	5	0,83
Brasília	9	5	0,55
Assis	3	5	1,66
Vasco	2	4	2
Araraquara	4	3	0,75
Espírito Santo	3	3	1
Tijuca	2	3	1,5
Botafogo	1	2	2
Rio Claro	2	2	1
Caxias do Sul	3	1	0,33
Goiânia	1	1	1
Total		290	

depending on the number of seasons that each team participated, because, when looking at the top of the table, it appears that the 6 teams that participated in the 10 seasons are also those that present important numbers for this statistic.

Another important category for analyzing the presence of foreign players in a given country and modality is their country of origin, information that can be identified in the data presented in Figure 2.

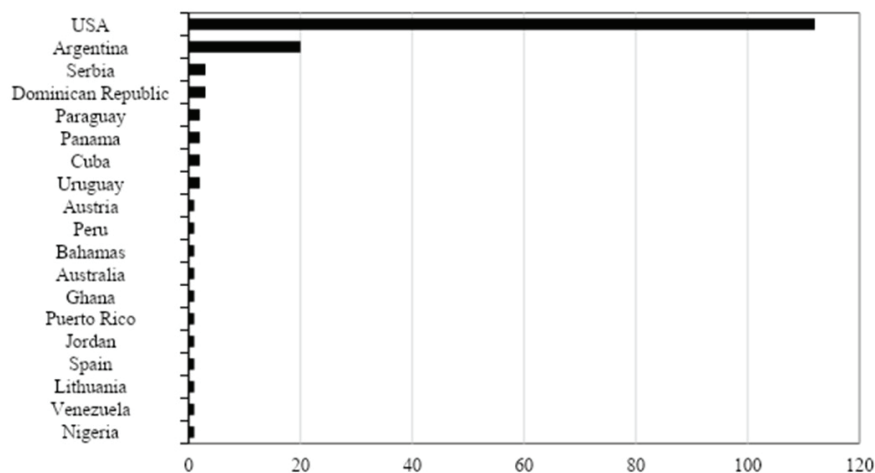


FIGURE 2. Number of athletes per country of origin. (Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data provided by the LNB).

When observing the graph with the countries of origin of the foreign players who worked in the NBB, at first, one can already see the variety of donor locations. Throughout the league's history, a total of nineteen different nationalities were represented by foreign athletes participating in the Brazilian competition.

Considering the nineteen countries with representatives in the NBB, all the continents are represented. In that scenario, there are six countries in Central and North America, with 77,07% of the foreigners, five countries in South America, with 16,56% of the foreigners, (added to the Americas, there are eleven countries or 93,63% of the foreigners,) four from Europe, which corresponds to 3.82% of the foreigners, two African countries, which is equivalent to 1,28% of the foreigners, one country from Asia, with 0,63 % of the foreigners, and one from Oceania, also with 0,63% of the foreigners.

If we focus on just one country in isolation, the massive presence of North American players is evident. Out of the nineteen countries, the United States alone represents 71.3% of the foreign athletes present in the 10 seasons of the NBB. This fact can be justified, although not exclusively, by the technical quality of North American players, many of whom do not find opportunities for professionalization in their own country and, therefore, seek peripheral markets to dedicate exclusively to playing basketball as professionals.

This trend is corroborated by a study named International Basketball Migration Report 2015, carried out in a partnership between the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) and the CIES Sports Observatory, which investigated the migration of basketball athletes in the main leagues in the world.

The second country with the largest number of foreign players is Argentina, with 12.7% of the players, which can also be explained to a large extent by the technical quality that Argentinian players have been presenting in recent decades. The other countries appear with few representatives, and eleven of them were represented by only one athlete.

Discussion

The first aspect presented by the results is the gradual increase in the number of foreigners in the NBB. As noted, until the 2013/14 season, there was a significant growth in the number of foreigners in the Brazilian league, to the point that all teams had at least one foreign player in their squad. By analyzing this movement, it is assumed that the consolidation of NBB as a league in constant search for professionalization and commercialization can boost the teams' possibilities of hiring foreign athletes (Capinussú & Apicelo, 2011; Hirata, 2020). However, even though the growing trend of foreign athletes in the NBB points this out, the Brazilian league is one of those with the lowest percentage of foreigners in their teams compared to the 16 major leagues in the world (CIES & FIBA, 2015). This question can be partially answered by the NBB General Regulation, which limits the participation of up to three foreign athletes per team. In most other leagues, regulations are less restrictive. Another way to explain that is linked to the economic reality of Brazil in comparison to more developed countries that tend to have financially stronger competitions and are consequently able to invest more in hiring foreign players.

According to Meneses, Júnior, & Almeida (2016), the performance of Brazilian basketball shows some evolution when its indexes are analyzed. For the authors, there has also been important changes in terms of play style, a factor credited to the increase in the number of foreign players in the league. In addition to the number of foreign players, a very relevant aspect in this regard is that a considerable volume of game is intended for these athletes. In the study by FIBA and CIES (2015), the NBB, despite being

the league with the lowest number of foreigners, is the third one that most provides playing time to foreigners, approximately 25 minutes per game, on average.

By observing the origin of the foreign players who play for the NBB, it is possible to think about some movement patterns of these migrants. Considering an analysis of the regions of origin to the destination in Brazil, migrant athletes can be classified into two of the categories presented by Maguire (1994): continental and transcontinental. The data show that 93.6% of foreign players made a continental movement, that is, their countries of origin are in the American continent. The other athletes, the minority (6.4%), have transcontinental migration as their standard, as they come from other continents. The figures for countries with active athletes in Brazilian basketball show a large proportion of players from the United States of America. This data represents some debatable situations in sport migration. By addressing the situation through an economic point of view, we can see that there is a contradiction in that information, as athletes from underdeveloped countries generally seek other more economically developed nations to work in (Magee & Sugden, 2002; Andreff, 2015). It is the case of the best players in the world, who seek to play in the NBA. Nationally, athletes like Leandro Barbosa, Nenê Hilário, Anderson Varejão, Thiago Spittler, among others, have followed this path. Regarding the NBB, it appears that an economically developed country (the United States) serves labor for a developing country (Brazil). Falcous & Maguire (2005) offer a possible explanation for this type of phenomenon when they state that, even though the United States are a country of socioeconomic centrality, where the largest basketball league in the world (the NBA) is hosted, and where, culturally, there is a greater sports consumption, there is also the massive development of talents among their school and university internships that feed the league, thus, resulting in a surplus. In fact, the production is immensely greater than the demand and, considering that the NBA is also the destination of the best basketball players in the world, the surplus of talents produced in the USA seek opportunities in countries around the world, as evidenced by the Brazilian reality. Chiba (2013) recalls that, during the 2010/2011 season, more than 5 university athletes participated in the NCAA, the main North American league for the formation of athletes that supply the NBA through Draft with new players. According to the author, NBA teams, in turn, need only 450 athletes to fill all vacancies in their rosters, with an average of 60 athletes annually recruited into the league and not only from the NCAA, but also from other parts of the world (NBA, 2019). In this sense, there is consistency in the proposals made in the studies by Crossan (2008), in which the author indicates the need to consider the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of the countries involved in the migration process. According to the author, it is also necessary to understand how the modality is understood in each country. It is important to say, then, that basketball is one of the main sports in the United States, that is, it is among the primary sports in that country. In Brazil, even though there have been historically successful times for the national basketball on the international scene, such as the men's world titles in 1959 and 1963, the sport is currently rebuilding professionalism. Even so, culturally, the predominant sport is football, which imposes on other modalities a secondary status in the sports scenario. That means less investment capacity by basketball teams.

Faced with these findings, even in financial conditions far below the ones provided by the NBA (due to the huge number of talented players in the USA), one of the options for these athletes is to migrate to other countries, even if semi-peripheral or peripheral, so that they will have the necessary conditions to continue working. In other leagues, athletes find the chance to play in countries where basketball is a culturally secondary sport, also because

the production of high-quality players in these countries tends to be proportionately lower. Studies by Crossan (2015; 2017) show that in the Czech basketball league, for example, the player profile desired by the teams became that of North American players. According to the interviewees, the visibility that this type of athlete attracts to the destination club is higher than that of local players or those of other nationalities. In the Brazilian case, one of the motivations of the teams is directly linked to an attempt to improve the qualification of their squad. In this perspective, considering the registration limitation of only three foreigners for each club (established by the NBB General Regulations), combined with the data previously presented on the condition of protagonism of foreign athletes in the teams, Balassiano (2017) highlights the importance of the work done by team's technical commissions in assembling the rosters. That includes reporting the participation and training of managers in events of the American League in order to improve the view on the athletes to be hired in the future and, in a way, enabling the strengthening of the technical level of the local league.

Considering the objective of analyzing the migration of foreign athletes to compete in the NBB, the results showed that, during the first six seasons of the aforementioned league, there was a gradual increase in the number of foreign athletes who migrated to Brazilian basketball. The clubs that received these players the most were Minas Tênis Clube and Pinheiros, the first of which relied on foreigners in all seasons of the championship. It was also observed that the greatest provider of foreign players to Brazil was the United States, which often happens in other countries as well. This information reveals that the pattern of migration of players to the NBB is mostly continental, that is, the migrants are from the same continent. It is also possible to understand that the use of foreign players has increased as the competition has consolidated. It should be noted that the type of standard established shows that a central country sends its surplus labor force to a country with a semi-peripheral status in the world system. That can be explained by the main culture of basketball in the origin of these athletes, generating a high volume of talent production. It is important to note that this research has some limitations, such as the investigation of how many seasons each athlete participated in the NBB, how many teams they competed for, what their destination was before arriving or after leaving Brazilian basketball, among others that can be considered in future studies.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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