

Out of Bounds

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NBA lockout questions players' love for the game

In what could have been one of the most exciting off-seasons the National Basketball Association has ever offered, the childish disputes between players and owners took the league a giant step backward from its growing popularity.

With the Chicago Bulls' celebrations of their sixth championship in eight years completed this past June, the basketball world had many questions of what was next for this great dynasty and what team could start another dynasty that would take the league into the next century. Fans also pondered what players would make up "Dream Team IV" that would fill the Greek stadiums as the U.S. took on the world in the World Championships.

Many questions surrounded the future of the league, but the most overshadowing was whether or not there would be a complete 1998-99 season. Once again, the league and its players were having one of their annual "labor disputes." But this time, it was serious. So with the summer complete and the season scheduled to start on Nov. 3, the questions now change to whether or not there will be a season at all.

Questions echoed throughout the 1998 NBA playoffs of whether or not the 1998 season was "The Last Dance" for the aging Chicago Bulls and the great Michael Jordan. Would Scottie Pippen leave the shadow of the league's greatest star and begin his own dynasty somewhere else? And if the Bulls were dismantled, which team would seize the opportunity and pick up the right players to finally have a shot at NBA dominance?

All the answers to these questions would have raised much media attention for the league and kept basketball on the front page of national newspapers right under the "McGwire and Sosa chase Maris" headlines. But instead of a media boom that could have kept basketball on close to the same page (or rather chapter) of the tear-jerking '98 baseball "renaissance", there was a rather annoying thud. Basketball hit rock bottom, and now it's digging a hole so deep that even Michael "Air" Jordan in his younger years couldn't jump out of it.

Hasn't anyone learned anything from baseball's strike shortened season of 1994? Major League Baseball players were booed and taunted by fans for years. Before this season, baseball still needed something to get the fans back in the seats. Luckily for the sport, unbelievable moments in 1998 raised baseball's popularity.

But with the NBA, there was already enough doubt as to who or

what could keep fans filling the stadiums. With Michael Jordan closing in on retirement and no player right now showing signs of filling his shoes, the league will not have anyone to save the once respected and admired NBA. This is not the time for the NBA and its players to be having one of their disputes, because unlike baseball, they may not be able to rebound.

Without knowing the terms of the dispute, it is hard to determine who de-

cused on greed.

This business outlook on the game of basketball has taken away so much from the original ideas and plans for the game invented over 100 years ago. Who would have thought that hanging two peach baskets to a gymnasium balcony would turn out to be such a popular sport in this day and age? And who would have ever fathomed that a sport that was once so less complex, would change to a sport so fixated on not only a variety of skills on the court, but also the skills of bargaining and negotiating off the court? Those extra hours players used to put in practicing their moves are now being spent in an office with some big name owner, figuring out how to get the best deal.

Well, the league has had enough! And it's about time fans begin to open their eyes and realize what is really going on here. The bottom line

is that everything the players have wanted in the past, they got. The owners said in the short NBA lockout of 1995 that players were entitled to between 48-51.8% of team revenues. Players, of course, agreed at the time because they were making out on the deal. But now that the players' salaries have reached 57% of team revenues, owners are forced once again to try to slow down the growth of players' salaries. Sure enough, the players feel they are being cheated.

Players now argue that the end of the Larry Bird rule will not please the lower level players. But since when have the big name stars ever been concerned with the salaries of less experienced players? Have you heard Patrick Ewing say he would take a cut in pay so Charlie Ward could make a better living? Could you imagine Shaquille O'Neal sacrificing one of his gold chains for Elden Campbell? The only reason the big stars are fighting this is because they don't want to lose money themselves.

This past Tuesday was the last chance for the owners and the players union to come to some type of an agreement to save the entire 82 game season. The NBA has never lost a game to a labor dispute in its 51 year history. This span has included 35,001 consecutive games. But with the two sides unable to come anywhere close to an agreement, the league will be forced to break this streak and cancel the first two weeks of the season.

So as long as the players continue to fight the ban of the Larry Bird rule, the NBA will be forced to cancel games from the schedule. You'd think that this would anger players. I mean, wouldn't you be angered if someone took something from you that you claimed you loved? The only difference is that the NBA players have a choice. Their choices are their love for the game, or their obsession for money. Looks like we'll be hearing a lot more about the players and their Benjamins, than the players' jammin'.

The players union executive director Billy Hunter, speaking for the players, has argued that a "hard cap" is not possible. He says that a hard cap will give all the money to the top two or three players on the team and will take away from the salaries of the middle/lower level players.

Well then, wouldn't the success of the team center on the hopes and ambitions of those two or three stars? With the termination of the Larry Bird rule, players would then have to make a decision between the success of their team and the almighty dollar, a decision that most players don't want to have to make.

Sure you hear players all the time talk about how they "Love This Game," but if it came right down to it, how much of their decision would focus on the amount of money they will make? If this labor dispute is any indication, the attitude of NBA players is moving basketball away from its competitive spirit and ultimate dream, to a business fo-



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Registration Deadline:
October 30

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Registration Deadline: November 6

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