



Beyer represents two dozen pro players in China.

The NBA's China Connection

How a 29-year-old sports agent lures top American talent to the Chinese Basketball Association. **by BEN SIN**

A DAY BEFORE THE NBA SEASON tipped off in October, the Boston Celtics cut their backup point guard, Will Bynum, to free up salary space. The previous season, Bynum had averaged a respectable nine points and four assists for the Detroit Pistons, and it seemed likely that he'd land another gig coming off the bench in the NBA. But his agent, Reggie Brown, had another idea: China. "Their season is only three months," Brown says of the Chinese Basketball Association's 32-game schedule. "And the pay is comparable to what he'd get here." Bynum wasn't convinced. "It was an opportunity for me to play the game I love," Bynum says, but the

prospect of moving 7,000 miles across the globe unnerved the 32-year-old Chicago native. "Don't worry," Brown told him. "I know a guy."

The guy in China is a lanky 29-year-old Wisconsin native named Matt Beyer. As China's only licensed Western sports agent, Beyer holds the keys to an increasingly lucrative revolving door between the NBA and the CBA. Stateside players unable to make the pros, or fighting for a last gasp in the twilight of their careers, rely on him to arrange every aspect of their transition to China — from negotiating contracts to arranging visits for family and friends. "We really provide a full service," Beyer says.

The NBA began broadcasting in China, where an estimated 300 million people play basketball, in 1987, but China didn't have a professional league until 1995. Foreign players weren't allowed until an opening season that saw just three dunks convinced team owners they needed to recruit better talent abroad. Cyril White, a shooting guard at Texas Lutheran University in the early Nineties was one of the first American players to make the jump. "The living conditions in China were not really up to par," he says. "The beds were rock hard, and the toilets in most cities were really just a hole in the ground."

That same year, a 10-year-old Beyer traveled with his parents from their home in Wisconsin to an orphanage in China, where they adopted a boy and a girl. After graduating from high school in 2004, Beyer intended to major in Chinese at college. "But that summer I thought, 'Why not learn it in China?'" he says. He moved to Xi'an, in the northwest part of the country, took courses during the day, and partied a lot at night. "I loved it here from day one," he says. "And that never changed." When he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin two years later, he could speak and write Chinese fluently.

During Beyer's junior year, the Milwaukee Bucks drafted Yi Jianlian — thought to be the second coming of Yao Ming — with the sixth pick in the 2007 draft. "I knew Yi would need a translator," Beyer says. "So I pestered the team every day with cold calls and emails offering my services, and they eventually hired me." The Bucks traded Yi to the Nets a year later, but Beyer saw a bigger opportunity in managing American players in China. "They perform well on the court," he says. "But nobody here was really helping them adjust off the court." The needs of his players are often as basic as finding food. "The first time a player sees cow intestine or a chopped chicken head on a plate," Beyer says, "it's always a shock."

To get his license in 2011, Beyer passed an eight-hour exam, conducted in Chinese, on the rules and regulations that govern professional sports in China — the only non-native speaker ever to do so. That same year, the NBA season was suspended as players and owners renegotiated the collective bargaining agreement. "The lockout was a big game changer," Beyer says. "That was when I saw all these American guys were willing to come to China."

The CBA's profile has only continued to grow. One of the biggest flameouts in NBA history, Stephon Marbury, is now a legend in Beijing, where he's won two championships for the Ducks, headlined a biographical musical, and had a bronze statue built in his honor. This past season, Metta World Peace was a Sichuan Blue Whale, and Delonte

West suited up for the Shanghai Sharks. At the same time, an increasing number of current NBA players, like the Phoenix Suns' sixth man, Gerald Green, and the Chicago Bulls' backup point guard, Aaron Brooks, have charted a path back to the league by way of China. "China has always wanted American players," Brown says. "Now more and more players are interested in China."

Much of that action passes through Beyer. Of the 60 Americans playing in China (each team is allowed only two), Beyer represents over a third of them. He gets 5 percent of the salaries he negotiates for his clients. The base pay for non-Chinese players is about \$500,000; the biggest names make more than a million. "It's pretty lucrative," Beyer says.

This season, Beyer signed one of the most heavily touted American transplants in history. Emmanuel Mudiay, a freakishly athletic 19-year-old point guard from Dallas, initially committed to Southern Methodist University before signing a \$1.2 million contract with the Guangdong Southern Tigers. "Emmanuel decided he wanted to explore professional options rather than the NCAA," Beyer explains. "So his people in the U.S. contacted me."

Mudiay is expected to be a top pick in the coming NBA draft and could open the door for other "one-and-done" prospects to skip college in favor of well-paid employment in China. That is a very profitable scenario for Beyer, but he says Mudiay, who spent his early childhood in the Democratic Re-



Bynum found stardom after Beyer (below) helped bring him to the Guangdong Tigers.

public of Congo, was uniquely prepared for the cultural change. "He's one of the most mature teenagers I've ever met," Beyer says. "He's very serious about training, and he's very serious about life off the court."

In December, Mudiay injured his ankle, and the team asked for another American point guard. That's when Beyer snagged Bynum, who went on to win his first 21 games in the CBA. "Everybody's embraced me," Bynum says. "It's been an easy transition."

Bynum lives in an upscale hotel owned by the team and spends his downtime playing PlayStation (Beyer's office bought it for him). One of his new teammates taught him how to use chopsticks. "A lot of NBA players have been asking me what it's like here," Bynum says. "I basically do the same



things in China I do at home: work out, eat well, and play basketball." Beyer's office organized his wife's visit over Christmas, and Bynum Skypes with his two kids every night. "I miss my family, but it's a sacrifice you make to have a career," says Bynum. "Home is on the court." ■

Made in China

Four top NBA players who launched their careers in the CBA.



WILSON CHANDLER
Denver Nuggets

CBA team: Zhejiang Lions
CBA season highlights: During the 2011 NBA lockout, Chandler was the first NBA player to sign a deal in China. In his first game, he dropped 43 points and grabbed 22 rebounds. He led his squad to the play-offs before re-signing with the Denver Nuggets.



GERALD GREEN
Phoenix Suns

CBA team: Foshan Dralions
CBA season highlights: After a disappointing early career with the Boston Celtics, the 2007 NBA slam-dunk champion spent a brief stint in the CBA in 2011. Although he returned to the U.S. after only a month, he left behind a YouTube treasure trove of monster dunks.



AARON BROOKS
Chicago Bulls

CBA team: Guangdong Tigers
CBA season highlights: Brooks also opted to go abroad during the lockout, when he played alongside Yi Jianlian, the seven-footer for whom Beyer interpreted in Milwaukee. Brooks was an All-Star and averaged 30 points per game in the Finals but fell short to Marbury's Ducks.



CHRIS ANDERSEN
Miami Heat

CBA team: Jiangsu Dragons
CBA season highlights: After just one year of junior college, Birdman played his first season of pro basketball in China in 1999. A year later, he was the first pick in the inaugural Developmental League draft, and then signed his rookie deal with the Nuggets a month later.

FROM LEFT: JOE MURPHY/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES; ISSAC BALDIZON/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES