

Marketing imigrantů v českém basketbalu

Marketing Immigrants in Czech Basketball

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Abstrakt

Jak se pracovní síla ve sportu stává globálnější, jaké jsou důsledky pro marketing sportu, a to jak pro fanoušky, tak pro hrající mládež? Posun od týmů složených převážně z domácích hráčů k týmům, kde jsou i hráči odjinud, vytváří nezbytný souběžný posun v marketingové a propagační strategii týmů. Cizinci jsou často hvězdami týmu a mohou se dokonce stát předobrazy rolí v klubu, avšak jejich kulturní vzdálenost si žádá přehodnocení, zda a jak je lze využít k pěstování hry ve městě, regionu a kultuře. Český basketbal vykázal výrazný posun nejen ve využití cizinců na hřišti, od 11 v lize v roce 1998 na 50 v roce 2010, ale i ve využití cizinců v marketingu a rozvoji mládeže. Jak se tato cizokrajnost ve sportu uvádí na trh? Do roku 2011 mělo 71 % týmů na svých webových stránkách cizince, 36 % je mělo v materiálech pro média a na každém týmovém plakátu, který výzkumník sledoval, byl obličej černého hráče.

Abstract

As the labor force becomes more global in sport, what are the ramifications to marketing the sport, both to fans and to youth to play the game? The shift from teams composed predominantly of players from the home culture to teams including outsiders creates a necessary concurrent shift in the marketing and promotional strategy of teams. The foreigners are often the stars of the team and can even become the role models within the club, yet their cultural distance makes it necessary to rethink if and how they can be used to grow the game in the city, region and culture. Czech basketball has shown a marked shift not only in the use of foreigners on the court, from 11 across the league in 1998 to 50 in 2010, but also in the use of foreigners in marketing and youth development. How is this exoticism in sport being marketed? By 2011, 71% of teams featured foreigners on their websites, 36% featured them on their media guides, and every team poster observed by the researcher had the face of a black player on it.

Klíčová slova: marketing, cizinci, basketbal, cizokrajnost.

Key words: marketing, foreigners, basketball, exoticism.

INTRODUCTION

The sport of basketball is a secondary sport in the Czech Republic behind the culturally primary sports of football and ice hockey. Recent research places it as the fifth most popular sport in Czech culture. Thus the sport is battling with primary sports and other secondary sports for fans and participants. With average game attendance just below 1000 and 35417 players registered with the federation (composed of 16488 under 19), teams and the federation are fighting for every person (CBF.com, 2011). With this said, marketing in Czech basketball is very undeveloped. Over the last 15 years the number of foreigners competing in the top Czech basketball league (called the MNBL) has grown from 11 to 50, out of a total of 200 players on 12 teams. These foreigners are the most visible players on the courts with regards to minutes played and in the statistics. They thus create a level of exoticism and spectacle which Stewart et al. state is required to draw "theatre-going" fans (2003). At present Czech basketball is primarily marketing to passionate partisans and aficionados. The commodity of exoticism as presented by Segalen, and transferred

to sport by others has begun to be marketed in Czech basketball (Grainger et al., 2005; Schuft & Massiera, 2012; Segalen, 2002; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Given this rapidly changing reality teams have had to adjust their marketing efforts.

It needs to be understood at the outset that Czech remains a very homogenous culture. Research shows Czechs to be behind Western Europe in mass value orientation and public opinion concerning cultural integration (Hampl, Dostál, & Drbohlav, 2007). Gabel goes further, calling Czechs xenophobic, and states that there is “a strong tendency on the part of Czechs to reject foreigners and immigration” (1999, p. 77). Thus using foreigners in marketing is full of risks and not guaranteed success.

With this in mind we have undertaken to examine the shifts teams have made in adjusting their marketing efforts to the changing face of the game of basketball in the Czech Republic.

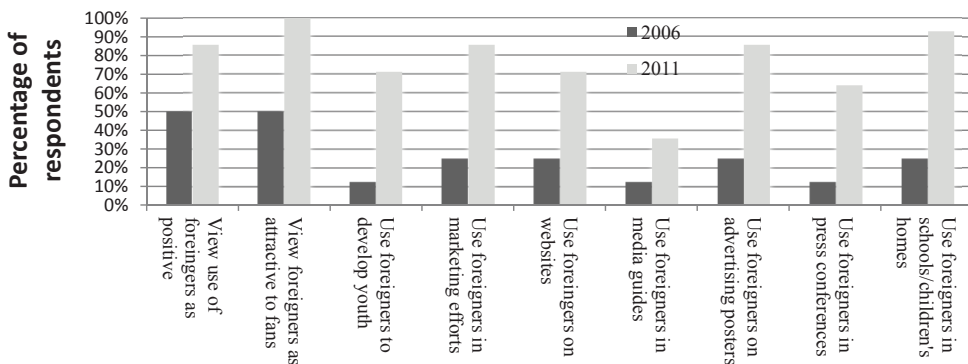
METHODS

This study is composed of a series of qualitative interviews across a five-year period with management and decision makers of the individual teams which played in the MNBL. The first set of interviews was conducted in the fall of 2006 and the second set in the fall of 2011. These interviews were structured interviews with two sets of questions. The first set of questions were scaled questions using a 5 point Likert scale. Each question was based on earlier quantitative findings about the overall usage of foreigners in Czech basketball (Pecha & Crossan, 2009). The second set of questions were open-ended to understand the thought processes behind the marketing efforts observed from the individual teams and the thought processes leading to the employment of foreigners and their use in marketing. In total decision makers (coaches or general managers) were interviewed from 14 of the 18 teams which played in the MNBL during the 5 year period studied. Eight teams in 2006, and 14 in 2011, which were composed of the original 8 decision makers from 2006 and an additional 6 team decision makers from other teams.

Prior to each set of interviews a traditional SWOT analysis was conducted of each teams marketing efforts, with a focus primarily on the use of foreigners in marketing efforts. Websites, media guides and sponsorship packages were examined. This was followed by a visit to each competition site for at least two home games. The SWOT analysis comprising these data informed the researcher in the interview processes.

RESULTS

We begin with a graphical overview of the general feelings of decision makers on the use of foreigners in Czech basketball and a broad view of their use in marketing. The first four categories on the horizontal axis represent team perceptions from interview questions. The remaining five were observed from the SWOT analysis.



Graph 1: Time comparison of foreigner perception and use in marketing

Several findings are immediately evident:

- Between the two sets of interviews the views of decision makers on the overall use of foreigners as positive and that foreigners attract fans both almost doubled.
- The use of foreigners in youth development and in team marketing efforts both went from almost non-existent to the overwhelming norm.
- In every category of marketing reviewed teams exponentially increased their usage of foreigners.

2006 overview

Of the eight teams interviewed and analyzed for their marketing efforts in 2006, only two of the teams made any effort to utilize their foreigners in marketing. One of the teams used a foreigner who was in his 8th year in the MNBL and 4th season with their team as the face of all their marketing efforts: he was on the cover of their media guide, used extensively in schools in the city, featured prominently on all posters and on their website, and they sold jerseys with his name on them. The second team, though having more foreigners on their roster than Czechs, chose to feature the Czechs on their website and printed material. They did, however, use their foreigners frequently in schools across their region, and regularly ran stories on them on their website. Additionally, each of their foreign players had team cars with advertising of the team and its sponsors on them.

In the 2006 interviews, five of the eight teams said it made no sense to use foreigners in their marketing efforts as the foreigners are “only nameless faces” to their fans. It was also stated in 2006 on three occasions, that since the foreigners would only be there for one season and the Czechs were there multiple years, that it was more profitable to use the Czech faces and personalities in their marketing efforts.

2011 overview

By the 2011 interviews and marketing analysis, these perspectives had all changed. Ten out of the 14 teams featured their foreigners on their websites. Five of the teams featured them on their media guides. Every team poster observed by the researcher had the face of a black player on it. Additionally, it had become a norm to host a press conference after the games by the 2011 interviews. The foreign stars of the game took part on behalf of their teams in nine out of 14 occasions.

When asked about the usage of foreigners in marketing in 2011, 12 of the 14 respondents were affirmative, while two said they did not see any value in it. The reasons for not using the foreigners had not changed from the 2006 interviews. As one respondent said, “99% of foreigners are here on one-year contracts and you don’t even know if they will make it, so it is too big a risk.”

The two teams who had used foreigners in their marketing in 2006 by 2011 considered it a part of their marketing strategy to have at least one of their foreigners signed to a multiple-year contract so that they could feature them in their marketing. Both of these early adapter teams even had jerseys available for sale of these marque foreigners. Two other teams printed team playing cards for their foreigners to sign autographs on and distribute to fans. In 2011 two teams stated that one of the reasons they hired black players was so that they could feature them on their posters in their small cities.

“We are in a small city, so a black guy, 210cm, walking around town gets noticed. He markets the team without us even trying. But we capitalize on him. We even bought him season tickets for the ice hockey games so the community could see him more and would view him as part of the community.”

Thirteen of the 14 teams interviewed in 2011 said they took their foreigners into the schools and children’s homes. The one team which did not, said that they had done it in the past and had not seen any effect in attracting more fans or getting more kids to play basketball. There was great variance in frequency of these school or children’s home visits, ranging from weekly (2 teams) to once per season (2 teams). Two teams said they used their foreigners at try-outs for children twice per year. Teams which are using their foreign players to regularly promote and recruit in schools,

and to assist in the training of their youth teams have more youth in their systems (13–16 youth teams as compared to four or less teams).

From the 2011 interviews, among the teams which had some sort of regular interaction between their foreigners and their youth teams, two of them said they put it in the foreigners' contracts, two of them have their foreigners at youth trainings at least once per week, and the other two have them there 1–2× per month. Other creative attempts to use their foreigners to help their youth teams included using the foreigners at awards ceremonies for the youth teams, bringing the youth teams to all home games (2×), and videotaping a foreign player doing a particular skill for all their youth teams and coaches (2×).

Player type desired

The interviews revealed several shifts in the type of players teams were looking for. The demographics of the foreign players preferred shifted from players from the former Yugoslav Republics to those from North America. There was a corresponding shift of preference from white to black foreign players. Also there was a shift of preference from cheaper, less experienced players (those just out of the American university system), to more experienced players (those with Euroleague experience). Teams began to value character and professionalism along with the skills of a player.

In regards to the type of foreign player the respondents thought the fans were most attracted to in 2011, the answers fell into two categories: skills and demographics. Specifically, skills that Czech or European players are seen as lacking (dunking 8x, jumping 4x), and a demographic largely missing from the Czech culture (black players were cited 8 times). The ability of American players to “put on a show” was also cited four times. Foreigners who are communicative, smile, give fans high fives and autographs were also frequently mentioned.

By the 2011 interviews with regards to whether foreign players are attractive to fans, all respondents were positive, returning answers such as “certainly”, “definitely”, and “without question”. Two examples are enough to convey the sentiment among decision makers with regards to attractiveness for fans:

“Certainly; they are faster, more dynamic. They jump better. In the years we used foreign players, our fan attendance increased exponentially.”

“Yes, they come to see their favorite players. They love the emotion the foreigners bring. The kids like the foreign players the best. The kids often don't know the names of the Czech players, or even care, but they all know the foreign players. They are exotic and interesting for them.”

DISCUSSION

Though the marketing done by Czech basketball teams remains in its infancy, and targets only those already in relationship with the sport, teams are beginning to use the foreigners to commercialize their product. Over time we saw a big shift in the use of foreign players in the marketing of teams. Teams see their sport and their players as a product to be marketed. That they are willing to market the cultural difference of their product in order to set themselves apart illustrates Segalen's concept of exoticism (2002).

The shift in perspective on using foreigners in youth development is insightful and multi-layered. In the 2006 interviews the positive effect of foreign players on the development of Czech players was a primary motivation for employing them, yet only one team had even tried to use the foreign player to aid in youth development. By the 2011 interviews this was a secondary motivation, yet all but four teams were using their foreigners with some regularity to aid in the development of their young players. As stated previously, those clubs with larger youth programs were trying more, and two of them had even made this involvement with the youth a condition in foreign player contracts. This also explains the enlightened understanding of decision makers in looking for players of character who act as professionals, as these are the ones influencing young players. Given the visibility of these star foreigners, if a team were to expose their youth teams regularly

to these players, the theory of distance tells us that if the distance is decreased between fans and heroes, then the commitment of fans increases (Westerbeek & Smith, 2002). This can easily be applied to the use of foreign players in building a team's youth participation. If the perception exists that by playing basketball for a club, one can spend time regularly around one of the best players in the league, then the likelihood that a youth will remain within the sport of basketball increases. In order to effectively capitalize on this theory, the team management also has to take it into consideration as they recruit and hire foreign players, and character (as mentioned above) becomes important.

The shift in the usage of foreign players in marketing is reflected in attractiveness being named as a secondary thing management is looking for in the hiring process. This perception that fans want a spectacle and the consequent reaction of buying more foreigners was found by others (Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Olin & Penttila, 1994). The consequent shift to blackness has also been researched extensively (Andrews, 1996; Araton, 2005; Farred, 2006; Lane, 2007; Leonard, 1997; Olin & Penttila, 1994; Zirin, 2010).

Using the categories created by Stewart et al. (2003) we can be confident in stating that Czech basketball teams targeted passionate partisans and aficionados. The consumer for MNBL basketball was composed of the family of the players, others associated with the club through youth and women's teams, and former players. Each of these have higher motivation to purchase the product and need significantly less marketing than others not associated with the club in this manner. To some degree this focus in marketing makes sense and is necessary, as these consumers are able and motivated to purchase the sport product of the club at multiple levels, thus making them return customers and moving them quickly up the marketing escalator. The targeted consumer ought also to include the average youth or adult from the city or region where the team is located who is interested in all sports. A majority of these people would fall into the category of theatergoers (Stewart et al., 2003). They are seeking comfort, excitement, sensory stimulation and uncertainty of outcome. The shift in type of foreigners recruited (athletic, who can jump and dunk), and to black athletes fits these elements of excitement and sensory stimulation. Yet, very few of the teams appeared to be marketing to these "theatergoers".

The primary barrier apparent to using foreigners in the marketing of teams was the constant turnover of foreigners. Previously it was shown that 62% of foreigners only play in the Czech league for one year, and when limited to the visible, desired black players, 91% of Americans only stay for one season (Crossan & Jezdik, 2011). Thus, teams still take significant risk in using foreigners in media guides and websites which are updated less frequently. This creates a barrier in the fans actually knowing the exotic black face on the court. This turnover of foreigners by contrast was not a barrier in using them to attract youth to their programs and develop the youth in their systems, a practice which was shown in the results above to be effective in that the teams that did this more frequently had more youth teams in their clubs.

Finally, it needs to be remembered that basketball is a secondary sport in the culture. Where primary sports are tied to nationalism, collective identity, and protected space, secondary sport is free from these ties and thus more malleable to globalization pressures. This has been and can be increasingly capitalized on in marketing a secondary sport. Were the same study to be conducted on the protected space of Czech ice hockey, the marketing of exoticism in this culturally primary sport, would be expected to meet much more resistance and be significantly less effective. Thus, the use of foreigners in promoting the sport of basketball in the Czech culture is predominantly a function of the cultural space it occupies.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, we would like to make several recommendations based on the increased use of foreigners in marketing exoticism to fans and drawing youth. Perhaps these suggestions would help teams market more to fans from the category of theatergoers. Teams should strive to

sign at least one of their foreign players to a multiple-year contract. Use them in the team's marketing efforts (which increases in effectiveness if they have multiple-year contracts). Make sure the team is taking their foreign players into schools and children's homes. Use foreign players in the team's youth recruiting efforts and to help run youth practices with regularity. Put these activities into the contracts of the foreign players. They are more likely to be noticed in the host team city, interact with fans after games, and be looked up to as a role model. Therefore, take the time to find out about the player's character and professionalism, not just his level of skill and experience.

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