

NBA Europe – Between Global Vision & Local Reality

Exploring the strategic, cultural, and economic stakes of a new European League in cooperation with FIBA

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Background

- On March 27, 2025, the NBA and FIBA held a joint press conference featuring NBA Commissioner Adam Silver and FIBA Secretary General Andreas Zagklis, publicly confirming the NBA's intention to establish a new basketball league in Europe in cooperation with FIBA.
- This announcement marked a **significant milestone**, formalizing ambitions that had been circulating literally for **decades**. Long before this event, there had been persistent rumors, strategic interviews, and statements, including those from **former NBA Commissioner David Stern**, hinting at the **NBA's high interest** in expanding into the European market.
- In fact, NBA leadership had already signaled growing interest earlier in the year. During the Olympics and in interviews at the beginning of the year, Adam Silver publicly acknowledged the NBA's exploration of international expansion opportunities, specifically referencing Europe as a promising region for growth. These remarks further fueled speculation, setting the stage for the recent announcement.
- The information shared during the press conference, however, remained limited in scope, as both parties officially announced that they would **start exploring different possibilities**, and nothing had been finally decided yet. As a result, the analysis presented in this report is primarily based on the available public statements and initial insights.
- This report aims to assess the potential project through the lens of European basketball stakeholders, focusing on ensuring that any future developments serve the best interests of European basketball as a whole.

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Current Situation

- European club basketball has a long and complex history, dating back to the inaugural season of the FIBA European Champions Cup in 1957–58. Originally established as a competition solely for national champions, the tournament evolved over the decades into a broader, more commercialized platform.
- In 2000, a **major turning point** occurred with the creation of the **EuroLeague by ULEB** (Union of European Leagues of Basketball), leading to a **split from FIBA**. This dispute redefined the landscape of European basketball, as clubs increasingly aligned with EuroLeague's independent model. Alongside EuroLeague, the ULEB Cup (later rebranded as EuroCup) was introduced to provide a second-tier competition for ambitious clubs.
- Today, European club competitions are divided between Euroleague Basketball and FIBA. Euroleague Basketball operates two main competitions: the EuroLeague, featuring 18 of Europe's top clubs largely through long-term licenses, and the EuroCup, which serves as a second division with promotion potential. Meanwhile, FIBA runs the Basketball Champions League (BCL) and FIBA Europe Cup, emphasizing open competition based on national league performance.
- This fragmented system has led to persistent tensions and fragmented governance across European basketball, creating a complex environment with competing interests between private leagues and governing bodies, setting the stage for new initiatives such as the NBA's proposed European league.

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Motivation for Creating a New League

- During the joint press conference and in prior statements, both NBA Commissioner Adam Silver and FIBA Secretary General Andreas Zagklis emphasized a key motivation for the new initiative: the existence of a significant opportunity gap in Europe. While basketball enjoys widespread popularity across the continent, its commercial potential remains largely underexploited compared to other regions.
- While this **commercial underperformance** is a known and widely acknowledged issue among European stakeholders, we believe that other, **more pressing factors** are driving the NBA's interest. In our view, the **NBA's strategic need to secure new growth avenues internationally** is the primary force behind this initiative. International expansion is no longer a choice but a necessity for the NBA's future financial trajectory.
- With the U.S. market indicating certain signs of saturation in terms of media rights, sponsorships, and fan base growth, the NBA's leadership has repeatedly identified international markets, particularly Europe, Africa, and Asia, as essential to its long-term business model. Initiatives such as the NBA Global Games, the Basketball Africa League (BAL), and the NBA's investment in overseas media platforms reflect a clear and deliberate shift toward global monetization on an ongoing basis.
- Establishing a **European league** fits squarely within this **broader strategy**, aiming to create new revenue streams, strengthen global brand presence, and tap into the growing commercial interest in international basketball markets including potential investors from the Middle East.

Motivation for Creating a New League

- Adding to the critical perception, **public messaging** surrounding the project has at times appeared **insensitive** to the realities and achievements of European basketball. For example, in the **official news section of NBA.com**, the initiative was described as the NBA "**returning the favor**" to Europe by "taking its act overseas," after having benefited for years from European players. Such framing **underestimates** the **maturity and deep cultural roots** of basketball in Europe and risks alienating key stakeholders whose engagement and support will be essential for any new venture's success.
- As for the timing of the initiative, FIBA Secretary General Andreas Zagklis stated that "Coming out of the most successful World Cup and Olympics ever, we believe it is the right timing that we also take the next step for club basketball."
- While strong recent international performances may create a favorable backdrop, we believe this is not the primary reason for the NBA and FIBA's decision to act now. In our assessment, the more decisive factors are the increasing competitive pressures within the basketball ecosystem, including ambitious new league initiatives and EuroLeague's ongoing negotiations with major international investors, as well as the fact that the licenses of EuroLeague's shareholder clubs are up for renewal next year.
- Taken together, these strategic and competitive factors provide a more compelling explanation for the motivation and the timing of this initiative, rather than wanting to "return the favor" to Europe and/or recent international on-court successes alone.

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Partnering with FIBA

- In our opinion, partnering with FIBA makes strategic sense for the NBA. As the global regulatory body of basketball, FIBA brings institutional legitimacy and can help navigate regulatory and political challenges. The NBA and FIBA have also maintained a longstanding relationship through initiatives like Basketball Without Borders and the Basketball Africa League (BAL), with NBA Deputy Commissioner Mark Tatum sitting on FIBA's Central Board.
- However, we also believe that this partnership raises significant strategic inconsistencies from FIBA's perspective. FIBA has traditionally advocated for open competition models, the protection of national leagues and teams, and the European sports model, values that seem difficult to reconcile with a potential NBA-style closed or semi-closed European league. Aligning too closely with the NBA might risk undermining FIBA's credibility among European stakeholders.
- Several key aspects FIBA claims to protect through this partnership, namely national team success, sporting merit, and youth development, appear, in our opinion, not fully compatible with cooperation with an institution like the NBA.
 - First, national team calendars and success have never been a significant priority for the NBA. NBA players' participation in FIBA windows has not even been discussed in the past (e.g. European NBA players coming to Europe to play in NT windows during the season), FIBA World Cups are regularly deprioritized due to NBA calendar challenges (i.e. number of games, late season ending etc.), and in the past insurance issues have often limited player participation in such tournaments. Thus, in our opinion, the NBA does not necessarily represent the "ideal" partner to promote national team interests.
 - Second, the indicated (possible) competition format 16 teams with potentially 12 permanent spots would be even more restrictive in terms of sporting merit than the current EuroLeague model. Balancing sporting success and financial stability is already a challenge in European basketball, and creating new "franchises from scratch" as Adam Silver also mentioned as a possible alternative, would, in our opinion, represent a fundamental deviation from the traditional European sports model that FIBA has defended for decades even against the EuroLeague model, including in legal battles.

Partnering with FIBA

- Third, the NBA's concept of youth development fundamentally differs from the European model. While the NBA has promoted important initiatives like NBA Academies, Jr. NBA Leagues, and the G-League, these programs are not equivalent to the club-based grassroots systems that underpin European basketball. It is even ironic to see the NBA emphasizing youth development without having addressed issues such as the lack of reasonable transfer fees from European clubs to the NBA, a long-standing concern. FIBA's inability to resolve this problem further highlights the gap between rhetoric and reality. Lastly, we respectfully disagree with the statement made by Mr. Andreas Zagklis that national championships and second-tier would be the "NCAA" of European basketball. The European model, rooted in club identity, youth development, and sporting merit, is fundamentally different from the American collegiate system.
- Moreover, while FIBA's experience in international club competitions was cited as a key asset for the creation of a new league, it is important to note that the top-tier European club competitions have been organized independently by Euroleague Basketball for the past 25 years, thus EuroLeague is in a way more superior position in terms of critical in-depth knowledge and expertise when it comes to all key operational, commercial and financial aspects of European top-tier club competitions. FIBA's own leagues, the Basketball Champions League and FIBA Europe Cup, have yet to achieve similar prestige or commercial success. As such, we believe that FIBA's support, while politically extremely valuable (and even essential), does not guarantee operational success or acceptance among basketball stakeholders in Europe including fans and (potential) investors. In our opinion, this has been proven especially in the case of Basketball Champions League, despite having tried different, partially innovative methods such as creating a new entity (FIBA ClubCo) enabling investor participation (GCBH LP).
- While the NBA and FIBA seem to have chosen to proceed without direct involvement from EuroLeague Basketball (based on the statements made so far), the exclusion of Europe's leading club competition, in our opinion, raises fundamental questions about the viability, credibility, and overall positioning of the proposed new league.

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Exclusion of EuroLeague

- As indicated above, when it comes to in-depth knowledge about the operational, commercial, and financial aspects of European club competitions, EuroLeague holds a uniquely strong position. Over the past 25 years, EuroLeague Basketball has built direct working relationships with key stakeholders including virtually all major basketball clubs across Europe, either as current or former participants in EuroLeague and EuroCup competitions or potential candidates for participation. We think that this proximity has enabled EuroLeague to accumulate unparalleled expertise, supported by detailed databases covering the commercial, financial, and operational profiles of key clubs.
- Throughout its development, EuroLeague has also collaborated closely with leading marketing agencies, major brands, and (potential) investors. Despite numerous challenges, difficulties, and (its own) missteps along the way, in our opinion, EuroLeague has consistently raised the level of organizational quality, both on and off the court. Key initiatives such as the implementation of financial stability and fair play regulations, mandatory organizational standards for clubs, the appointment of Chief Business Officers, and the creation of the BOCS department (inspired by NBA's TMBO) have provided valuable insights into club governance. Clubs are required to submit audited financials and future budget projections, giving EuroLeague deep access to sensitive financial and operational data across highly diverse basketball environments.
- Moreover, we believe that the **commercial partnership with IMG** which exists since 2016 further enhanced EuroLeague's capabilities, providing additional resources and know-how, even if criticisms regarding the lack of overall club profitability remain as a main concern. Critically, EuroLeague's model of **direct engagement with clubs** (rather than working through national federations as FIBA does) has given it a **distinctive edge** in understanding different basketball cultures and management practices across Europe.

Exclusion of EuroLeague

- Historically, EuroLeague maintained a relatively cooperative relationship with the NBA, with preseason games between NBA and EuroLeague teams highlighting the mutual respect between the organizations, particularly during Jordi Bertomeu's tenure. More recently, also FIBA-Eurolegaue relations have shown signs of improvement. Notably, a temporary agreement was reached regarding the February 2025 national team window.
- In his December 2023 online press conference, FIBA Secretary General Andreas Zagklis openly recognized the progress made in the relationship with EuroLeague, emphasizing the importance of unity within European basketball. He acknowledged the internal management changes within EuroLeague, the improved communication channels, and expressed optimism about further collaboration, stressing that "the problems between us are smaller than they seem."
- Given these constructive developments, and considering EuroLeague's unique expertise and operational knowledge, we believe that excluding the EuroLeague organization, specifically the league's management, from the (exploratory phase of the) NBA-FIBA project represents a strategic misstep. In our view, meaningful and sustainable progress for European basketball requires inclusive cooperation that recognizes the practical realities and accumulated experience EuroLeague brings to the table.
- In the above-mentioned press conference back in December 2023, Mr. Andreas Zagklis had also emphasized this aspect by making the following statement: "For me **unity in our European** basketball family is not just important, it is **the only way** for growth of European basketball, and this is why we are trying so hard. To create more unity and consensus.." which also directly resonates with the **strategic vision and mission of FIBA**.

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Key Success Factors

In light of the strategic ambitions outlined by NBA and FIBA, the success of the proposed European league will depend on a number of **critical factors**. Based on our assessment, the **following key elements** should be addressed thoughtfully and pragmatically to build credibility, secure stakeholder engagement, and ensure long-term sustainability. Failure to adequately consider these factors will significantly limit the project's potential impact.

- Strategic Positioning and Differentiation: The new league should establish a clear and compelling strategic position within the European basketball ecosystem. This requires a unique value proposition, a strong identity that resonates with European basketball culture, and thoughtful integration with the NBA brand without appearing as a mere NBA label to a new product. Lessons from past initiatives, such as the failure of NFL Europe, highlight the importance of creating a product that feels authentically European rather than artificially imported.
- Cooperating with the Right Partners and Clear Role Allocation: Success will depend heavily on partnering with the right organizations and stakeholders. Involving EuroLeague management is essential, given their unique operational, commercial, and financial expertise. Beyond EuroLeague, NBA and FIBA should also engage leading clubs, marketing agencies, media partners, and investors, ensuring that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. A fragmented or selective approach would undermine credibility; broad-based cooperation is needed to align interests and build lasting support.
- Stakeholder Buy-In: Securing genuine buy-in from key stakeholders is essential for building a sustainable foundation. NBA and FIBA should prioritize integration into local basketball communities, with a clear focus on supporting grassroots initiatives and youth development programs through clubs. A "real" investment in the broader ecosystem, rather than only top-tier competition, will help foster trust and long-term loyalty across all levels of European basketball.

Key Success Factors

- Solid Financial Model: A robust and sustainable financial model is critical for the long-term viability of the league. NBA and FIBA should ensure that revenue streams, including media rights, sponsorships, and ticketing, are realistically aligned with the European market conditions. Clear mechanisms to support club financial stability, transparent budgeting requirements, and incentives for responsible growth will be essential to avoid the financial challenges that have impacted other European basketball projects in the past.
- Long-Term Vision and Sustainability: The success of the project depends on a clear long-term vision that prioritizes sustainable growth over short-term commercial gains. NBA and FIBA should commit to patient investment, consistent stakeholder engagement, and gradual integration into the European basketball landscape. Without a stable, multi-year plan that balances sporting, commercial, and community goals, the league risks becoming another short-lived experiment rather than a lasting contribution to European basketball.

The success factors outlined above represent **five critical areas** that we believe will play a decisive role in determining the viability of the proposed new league. However, these are **not exhaustive**. There are certainly additional elements, including legal frameworks, player relations, governance models, and brand positioning, that will also need careful attention as the project develops. A holistic and adaptable approach will be essential to navigating the complex and dynamic landscape of European basketball.

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Possible Risks of Failure

Despite the opportunities identified, the **project also faces serious risks** that could compromise its credibility and long-term viability. These risks arise both from structural challenges within European basketball and from strategic misalignments in the project's current approach. Without proactive measures to mitigate these risks, the new league may struggle to gain acceptance and could ultimately further fragment the European basketball landscape.

- Creating the "NBA Division II": European basketball fans are passionate about the "original" NBA brand and its unique appeal. A poorly positioned new league (in terms of game quality), lacking real integration with the NBA ecosystem, risks being perceived as a second-tier, primarily European competition with limited authenticity. This would significantly reduce its attractiveness to fans, sponsors, and media partners, making long-term success much harder to achieve. Visionary former NBA Commissioner David Stern had originally envisioned European clubs becoming part of an NBA division, not simply placing the NBA label on a separate, lower-level league. At a minimum, integration through the NBA Cup should be created to ensure credibility. Without such connection, the project risks following the same path as NFL Europe, which ultimately failed to gain lasting traction, among others also due to the relative game quality.
- Miscalculating the Financial Potential: Overestimating the initial financial potential of the project poses a serious risk. Figures such as a projected \$3 billion revenue potential per year in Europe and Middle East are, in our opinion, highly unrealistic in the current market environment and could create inflated expectations among investors. Misaligned return-on-investment (ROI) timelines may trigger destabilizing measures, such as club relocations or drastic structural changes, that are common in the NBA landscape but fundamentally incompatible with the traditions and mentality of European sports.

Possible Risks of Failure

- Conflict Between Win vs. Profit Maximization: In European sports culture, the primary focus has traditionally been on sporting success rather than pure profit maximization. Balancing these two objectives is a complex challenge, as shown in other sports such as soccer, where even the Premier League struggles with tensions between financial interests and competitive integrity. If the new league prioritizes commercial gains over sporting achievement, it risks alienating fans, clubs, and broader stakeholders who expect sporting merit to remain at the heart of the competition. In this context, it might also be difficult to find sports manager acting in European market who are equipped with the right balance.
- Underestimating the Complexities of the European Market: Europe presents major legal, financial, organizational, and cultural complexities that cannot be overlooked. Issues such as taxation, foreign exchange, labor laws, and language diversity, among others, can create significant operational challenges for any new league. The current NBA management structure, which combines Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) under a single unit, may not be suited to the distinct realities of the European market. We believe that managing Europe effectively will require a more focused governance approach, recognizing the substantial differences in market maturity, culture, and business practices across the region. This also should include the assessment of financial potential of a new European league on stand-alone basis, rather than a combined view, since seeing the economic potential of Europe together with Middle East, might be misleading.

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Possible Risks of Failure

Infrastructure Gaps: The NBA model, both operationally and financially, relies heavily on the availability of large, modern arenas equipped with extensive hospitality and VIP infrastructure. In the NBA, the average arena capacity is around 18,000–20,000 seats, whereas in Europe, even newly built, state-of-the-art arenas like Adidas Arena (Paris) or SAP Garden (Munich) are smaller and less commercially oriented by comparison. The limited availability of suitable venues across Europe would require significant CAPEX investments to meet NBA standards. The challenges of arena funding are not new, even for the NBA itself, where for instance the highly successful Seattle SuperSonics franchise ultimately relocated due to unresolved funding disputes. Without a realistic and sustainable infrastructure plan, the viability of the new league would be seriously undermined. This aspect should be factored in the business plan for the new league.

The risks outlined above reflect the **main challenges** we foresee based on our current analysis and understanding of the project. However, also this list is **not exhaustive**. Other risks such as governance issues, regulatory hurdles, or unexpected market reactions could also impact the success of the initiative. A **proactive and realistic assessment** of these and other potential challenges will be critical to shaping a credible, resilient, and sustainable project for European basketball.

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The following suggested actions are intended to support the development of a sustainable and credible project that serves the best interests of European basketball as a whole. As EBAG, our focus is to promote a balanced and inclusive approach that strengthens the overall ecosystem rather than favoring any single institution or commercial interest. We believe that long-term success can only be achieved through strategic collaboration, respect for the unique characteristics of European basketball, and a shared commitment to the sport's future growth.

Suggested Actions for FIBA

- Take a True Leadership Role in Uniting Stakeholders: FIBA should fully embrace its unique position as the global regulatory body by facilitating a truly inclusive dialogue among all major stakeholders including EuroLeague, national federations, clubs, and players. FIBA should act not merely as a project partner with NBA, but as the independent guarantor of balance, fairness, and unity in European basketball.
- Develop and Enforce a Transparent Regulatory Framework: FIBA should lead the development of a clear, transparent and comprehensive regulatory framework for the new competition, ensuring alignment with broader European basketball structures. This framework should address governance models, eligibility criteria, sporting merit mechanisms, financial regulations, and respect for national team calendars.
- Safeguard the Integrity of European Basketball: FIBA should ensure that any new league integrates into the European basketball ecosystem in a way that respects the core values of sporting merit, youth development, and open competition in a reasonable and realistic manner. FIBA's credibility will depend on demonstrating that it can balance commercial innovation with safeguarding the sport's cultural foundations.

- Proactively Engage EuroLeague: FIBA should prioritize structured engagement with EuroLeague management, not only to avoid fragmentation but to leverage existing expertise and strengthen the overall ecosystem. Building strategic partnerships across institutional divides will be key to avoiding further polarization.
- <u>Create a Governance Structure that Ensures Fair Representation:</u> FIBA should advocate for a governance model in the new league that guarantees fair representation for all key stakeholders, including clubs, federations, and players' associations. This will be critical to establishing long-term legitimacy and maintaining stakeholder confidence.

Suggested Actions for the NBA

- Respect the Distinctiveness of the European Basketball Culture: The NBA should recognize that Europe's basketball ecosystem operates on fundamentally different cultural and structural principles than the U.S. model. Respect for traditions such as sporting merit, club identity/loyalty, and grassroots integration will be critical for credibility and acceptance.
- Integrate the New League Meaningfully into the NBA Ecosystem: To avoid the perception of creating an "NBA Division II," the NBA should design real points of integration between the new European league and the NBA itself. Initiatives such as including European teams in the NBA Cup, structured crossover games, or creating joint branding opportunities would strengthen legitimacy and fan engagement.
- Adopt Realistic Financial Projections and Investor Communication: The NBA should ground its financial forecasts in the realities of the European market. Managing investor expectations transparently, especially around ROI timelines and infrastructure needs, will be critical to avoiding the pitfalls of past international expansions like NFL Europe.

- Prioritize Direct Engagement with Clubs and EuroLeague Management: Beyond working with FIBA, the NBA should proactively engage EuroLeague Basketball management and leading European clubs. Building direct relationships and leveraging existing operational expertise will be crucial for ensuring practical, culturally aware decision-making.
- Establish a Europe-Focused Governance and Operations Team: Managing Europe as part of a broader EMEA structure is, in our view, insufficient given the market's complexity. The NBA should establish a dedicated governance and operational unit focused exclusively on Europe, staffed with personnel who have deep knowledge of the region's basketball, business, and cultural landscapes.

Suggested Actions for EuroLeague

- Demonstrate Unity Among Shareholder Clubs: EuroLeague clubs should recognize their collective responsibility towards their fans, the league, and each other. With some clubs already having been approached or soon to be contacted by the NBA, it is critical that all shareholders act with unity and prioritize the long-term interests of European basketball over short-term individual gains. Past failures to fully exercise fiduciary duties should not be repeated in this crucial period.
- Further Strengthen and Innovate the Commercial Model: EuroLeague management should continue to drive commercial growth by adopting more creative and innovative approaches. Expanding partnerships, developing new revenue streams, and refreshing the league's commercial narrative will be essential to compete effectively in a rapidly evolving market.

- Reassess Cost Control Strategies: The newly introduced "salary cap regulations" appear to focus mainly on pushing down club spending without offering strong incentives to drive revenue growth. We believe that EuroLeague should revisit this model, ensuring that cost control mechanisms are balanced with initiatives that encourage clubs, especially those in large markets, to invest and expand responsibly with the intention of maximizing revenues. Limiting club ambition in the current environment risks undermining the league's competitiveness and market appeal.
- Proactively Engage with FIBA and NBA: EuroLeague management should keep communication channels open with both FIBA and the NBA, engaging in a proactive and constructive manner. Maintaining dialogue, even if informal, will help avoid isolation, promote mutual understanding, and create potential opportunities for collaboration or coordinated development initiatives in the future.

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Conclusion

- Given its global brand strength, organizational as well as financial capabilities, the NBA, in cooperation with FIBA, would undoubtedly be able to launch a new league in Europe. However, the key question is not whether a new league can be created, but whether it would represent a true improvement over the current state of European basketball. In this report, we have outlined several critical factors that should be addressed to ensure the project contributes meaningfully to the sport's long-term growth.
- It is our opinion that, ultimately, all parties involved, primarily the NBA, FIBA, and EuroLeague, have a collective obligation to act responsibly and prioritize the broader interests of the basketball community. It is important to remember that the sport of basketball does not belong to any institution or commercial entity. It belongs first and foremost to the fans, players, coaches, and referees who bring the sport to life every day.
- As we stated in our founding declaration at EBAG, the guiding principle should be to **maximize sport participant value**, not merely shareholder value. Staying true to this principle will be essential to building a sustainable, credible, and inspiring future for European basketball.

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