

BEHIND THE NEWS SPORTING BOUNDARIES

As a top African-American basketball player in China's fledgling league, Alex Scales had made the cultural leap, just as former teammate Yao Ming did when snared by the NBA. Scales stood out – perhaps a little too much for his liking, writes *Dan Washburn*

Cultural rebound

Alex Scales was surrounded. Moments after the Shanghai Sharks defeated the Zhejiang Horses, a huge push of people had its favourite foreign basketball player corralled. With his head and shoulders poking through the throng, the 1.93-metre-tall guard was at the mercy of the masses. If the crowd moved, he moved too – a bust bobbing on a sea of black hair. They wanted autographs and photos. He wanted a way out.

It was the only time Scales looked lost on court that night.

After two seasons playing in the fledgling Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), Scales has become somewhat of a minor celebrity in China, a hoops-crazy country with an estimated 200 million people involved in basketball. This season, Scales was an All-Star and the league's second-leading scorer, averaging 25.2 points per game. Two seasons ago, playing for the Jiangsu Dragons, Scales won the league's slam-dunk contest and his explosive, exciting style of play earned comparisons to Kobe Bryant.

But for Scales, a 25-year-old African-American, the fame, and the culture, is all foreign to him.

He can't understand what's written about him in the local papers. He can't communicate with his fans. He signs autographs that most people in Shanghai can't read. And while it's flattering to draw comparisons to one of the National Basketball Association (NBA)'s most gifted players, Scales would prefer to be known as an NBA player himself.

He has come excruciatingly close to realising that dream. Last autumn he

China," Scales said recently over dinner at Shanghai's Hard Rock Cafe. "It was always NBA, NBA and more NBA. I took the option to play out here, but I didn't think China was going to be like the way it is. Everything was shocking."

Scales did not make the big move eastward because of a keen interest in Chinese culture. He came for the money – foreign players can earn anywhere from US\$10,000 to US\$35,000 per month playing in the CBA – and the exposure (thanks to Yao's success, NBA scouts are now paying quite a bit of attention to professional basketball in China).

Not unlike most CBA imports, the then 23-year-old black athlete from Oregon arrived in China with no friends, no Chinese-language skills and a long-standing aversion to Chinese food. You can see why the CBA tends to have a high turnover rate when it comes to keeping foreign talent.

"It's definitely a hard adjustment, but they have to do it," said Detroit Pistons international scout Tony Ronzone, who has coached in the CBA and, back in 1997, was one of the first NBA scouts to visit China. "If they don't, some other American will do it. It's a great job for them."

Scales stuck it out, but there were times when he wondered whether he could last the entire season. In Nanjing, Scales started to settle in. He found some western-style restaurants that served food he could stomach, and pieced together a daily routine. But after one month, the team moved him outside the city – to "the middle of nowhere", according to Scales – to a place closer to the Dragons' stadium, but far



Shanghai Sharks' Alex Scales never quite adjusted as a foreigner in China. Photo: Guo Yijiang

other American on the team. It was the same thing every day. I'd go to the internet bar, come home and try to catch a game on TV – and I wasn't understanding none [sic] of the Chinese language – and practise.

"That's it. Do that every day for five months, you got no life. You just wonder, 'What the hell am I doing here?' I'm not having fun. All I do is work and come back and sit here in the hotel."

Ah yes, the hotel. The room was tiny, and Scales didn't fit on his bed. He laughs about it now. "When I had to roll over, I had to roll over on the same spot," he said. "But you've just got to look at it like you're over here for a reason. I'm getting paid doing what I love to do. The living conditions just aren't the best."

"I thought if I can survive here, I can survive anywhere. I just stuck it out. And as the days started winding down, I was ready to go home."

Scales stayed in the US for the 2002-2003 season. While the overall level of play in the American Continental Basketball Association is better than the Chinese league, the money doesn't come close.

By the time Scales got cut by the Rockets in October, all the top European leagues were already well into their seasons, so the guard headed back to the land of small beds and fried rice. But this time he made sure he was play-

ing in Shanghai, which he called "the closest thing you can get to the [United] States" in China.

And at Shanghai's Hard Rock, eating a steak and watching a tape-delayed NBA game between the Los Angeles Lakers and Philadelphia 76ers, Scales looked comfortable. Wearing a jersey inscribed with "Shanghai Sharks", he was back in the CBA: where the two foreigners allotted to each team are only allowed to play a combined five quar-

ters per game; where Chinese players live two to a room at the team training facility; where courts are never heated and coaches often roam the sidelines in winter parkas; where the dance teams smile and giggle a lot but never seem to move in synch.

"It doesn't matter," Scales said. "Basketball is basketball. If an NBA team wants you, they'll come get you. They know where you're at."

Scales is part of a new breed of for-

eign players in the Chinese league. In the past, image-conscious CBA teams would only look at players who had NBA experience on their resume. Gradually, they are starting to take on younger players who are still hungry, who are still gunning for a shot at the NBA.

"Alex is unlike most players they have seen in China," said Bruce O'Neil, a scout for the Seattle SuperSonics with close ties to the Chinese professional basketball community. "He has the talent and the leaping ability and the excitement that really gives the people a glimpse of what somebody close to being an NBA player really looks like."

Scales is not an imposing presence. His lean, muscular upper body sits atop two skinny legs – chopsticks with calves. In fact, it's the impression that Scales is too small for the NBA shooting guard position that has helped keep him out of the league thus far. In Shanghai, he was able to show that he could stick the long-range jumper.

His Chinese-language skill was another story. "All I need to know is how to get home," Scales said. "If I can get home, I'm good."

Home was a comfortable apartment – with a bed that Scales could fit on – in one of those ubiquitous high-rises on Shanghai's south side. It was largely undecorated, as though the occupant knew he would not be staying for long. On the floor was a copy of *Lonely Planet China* that looked brand new. Scales said he always planned on packing it for road games, but for some reason never did. Stacked neatly beside the entertainment centre and Scales' large collection of black-market CDs and DVDs were boxes and boxes of new athletic shoes. Easily Scales' favourite Shanghai activity was going to the famous fake market on Huai Hai Road and bargaining with the shopkeepers for the best deals on sneakers.

"I do what every other foreigner does," Scales said of his life in Shanghai. "I try to get some American food in me, I go to the markets. I see what the latest DVDs are. And I watch all the people stare at me like I'm an alien." Inevitably, Scales said, people ended up staring at his size 13 feet.

And it was those size 13 feet – or, more to the point, 15 new pairs of size 13 shoes – that created quite a dilemma for Scales earlier this week. The season was over. It was time to pack up his life again, and this time Scales wasn't sure if he had enough space in his suitcase.

"I had a good time in China," Scales said on the eve of his departure for the US. "It's going to be missed. Just because of some of the things that you go through, things you see and you can express to other people, but they won't understand unless they were there."

"Will I be back? I don't know. I know that what I want to do won't allow me to come back. I want to play in the NBA. That's my goal. And they understand that. Who wouldn't understand that?"



"I do what every other foreigner does. I try to get some American food in me, I go to the markets. And I watch all the people stare at me like I'm an alien"

was on the Houston Rockets' pre-season roster – right alongside former Shanghai Shark Yao Ming – only to be cut seven days before the start of the regular season. That's when Scales, taking Big Yao's advice, signed on for his second tour of duty in China, his NBA ambitions once again, ironically, sending him thousands of kilometres away from the NBA ... and home. Now Scales has played professionally in Italy, Argentina and Brazil. But he's spent most of his career in, of all places, China.

"I never had the idea to play in

away from anything that reminded the American of home. From then on, his diet basically consisted of fried rice and fried shrimp.

"They tricked me," said Scales, who in Shanghai stuck to restaurants with familiar names: the Hard Rock, Tony Roma's, TGI Friday's and a local place, Malone's American Sports Bar and Café. "It's like somebody just took all of your stuff away and you can't do anything," he said.

"You're just sitting there and you're lonely. At one point, I didn't have an-

SCOUTING FOR TALENT AND OTHER TALL TALES

Four years ago, China wasn't even an afterthought for most NBA teams. Then along came a young man named Yao Ming. Now, NBA scouts visit China by the dozen – no one wants to miss out on a chance to land the next Chinese superstar.

"Teams are starting to get clued in," said Detroit Pistons international scout Tony Ronzone who, while with the Dallas Mavericks in 1997, was the first NBA scout to enter China. "Most teams are still

behind, but they are starting to realise that they need to come over here."

Ronzone estimates that, over the next three years, at least four Chinese will be drafted by NBA teams. Two of the most hyped prospects are seven-footers Yi Jianlian and Tang Zhengdong. Yi, just 16, plays for Guangdong Tigers and has been dubbed by some in the Chinese media as "the next Yao Ming". Tang, 19, plays for the Jiangsu Dragons and was named

MVP of the CBA All-Star Game this season.

Yet another seven-footer, 21-year-old Xue Yuyang of the Xinjiang Flying Tigers, was chosen in last year's NBA draft. The Denver Nuggets own the rights to Xue, but the CBA refuses to let him go.

This is the fear with drafting Chinese players – they may never play for you. Right now, China is more worried about making the CBA a money-earner and building a medal-contending

national team for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Many believe the latter is a definite possibility.

"It's going to take years to get to the elite status," said Bruce O'Neil, an NBA scout who runs the US Basketball Academy in Oregon, where Chinese national teams often train.

"But they'll be able to beat anybody in the world here shortly."

And what is shortly? "Within the next five years," *Dan Washburn*

Tests of will: old foes face up to a friendlier future

Confining their battles to the cricket field could be a turning point for India and Pakistan, writes *S. N. M. Abdi*

Barely two years ago, India and Pakistan stood on the brink of war. Now, after a frighteningly short period of thawed relations, the countdown to the Indian cricket team's first tour of Pakistan in 15 years has begun, fueling hopes the gentlemen's game could provide the elusive catalyst to forge peace between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

Even before the Sourav Ganguly-led squad flies to Lahore tomorrow for three tests and five one-day matches, reviving bilateral cricketing ties that had remained suspended because of political and military tensions, a magic wand seems to have waved away the animosity plaguing India and Pakistan.

Since winning independence from Britain in 1947, India and Pakistan have fought three fully fledged wars over the biggest bone of contention: Kashmir.

Underlining the intensity of their hostility, former US president Bill Clinton once described Kashmir as the most dangerous

place on earth. Barely two years ago, Hindu-majority India and Muslim Pakistan were on the brink of a fourth war, before sense prevailed.

A dramatic thaw in strained relations since April last year has led to both countries restoring full diplomatic ties and reviving bus, train and air links, which were severed after a terrorist attack on India's parliament, allegedly by Pakistan-backed militants, in December 2001.

Diplomats say that, after India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Islamabad visit in January for peace talks with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, the next logical step for the two cricket-crazy neighbours was to meet on the subcontinent's wickets for a landmark series to mark an end to the feuding.

The tour, which starts with a one-day international on Saturday at the Karachi National Stadium, was given the all-clear only after India revoked its ban on bilateral cricket with Pakistan. And

the portents before the 39-day tour are rather good, analysts say.

The unprecedented bonhomie is manifested in the seemingly insatiable demand in both countries for tickets for the first full tour of Pakistan by India since 1989. And the daily stampede outside Pakistan's High Commission in New Delhi for "cricket visas" virtually forced Islamabad to open a visa camp in Amritsar to cope with the flood of Indian fans.

Appropriately enough, the trophy for the series is called the Friendship Cup. The theme song of the tour has been sung jointly by Indian band Euphoria and Pakistan's String, and its video is doing a roaring trade on both sides of the border.

Moreover, Indian Airlines has announced package tours to Pakistan – the first in the history of the two countries. Earlier, a package holiday to Pakistan was unthinkable, with traffic between the two countries limited to divided Muslim families.

With many flights already sold out, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) is deploying larger aircraft to meet the demand. "We will operate bigger Boeing 747 aircraft, which will raise the seat capacity to around 430 per flight

from 250," PIA sales manager, Salim Janjua, said in Mumbai.

Besides sanctioning extra flights and bigger aircraft, Islamabad and New Delhi have given the green light to additional buses and trains to ferry low-budget cricket lovers across the heavily fortified border.

Private tour operators are gleefully cashing in on the mania. One operator said: "For each group of 20 or more people, we will have a former test player accompanying them."

There are other commercial opportunities in the nascent tourism. India's leading mobile phone company, Airtel, has sought permission to offer a roaming facility in Pakistan to its subscribers. Indian and Pakistani mobile operators like Mobilink Pakistan do not offer roaming or SMS services in each other's country on security grounds. But Indian and Pakistani service providers are hopeful the two governments will waive restrictions during the series.

Islamabad and New Delhi have agreed – reportedly under US pressure – on a basic road map for peace, aimed at putting decades of enmity behind them.

But can cricket really help to resolve highly contentious issues



Members of a peace group show their colours to highlight the friendly tone of the first tour in 15 years between India and Pakistan. Photo: EPA

jingoistic passions and ultimately violence, which would defeat the very purpose of the series.

In the past, India-Pakistan matches were akin to wars fought on the cricket field with bat and ball. Recently, New Zealand captain Stephen Fleming provided an objective insight into their no-holds-barred rivalry. Asked to explain the intensity between New Zealand and Australia, Fleming replied: "It's like India and Pakistan," he said, before adding: "But without that tension."

At present, the biggest source of tension for India and Pakistan is the security of players. Safety concerns led to the volatile cities of Karachi and Peshawar being awarded only one-day games. General Musharraf's government has set up security fit for heads of state, according to reports. There is every likelihood the Indian players will meet their prime minister in Pakistan.

Taking a cue from General Musharraf's government, the Pakistan Cricket Board has invited not only Mr Vajpayee, but President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani and opposition Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi to witness the fourth and fifth one-day matches in Lahore.