

Professional Basketball in Taiwan

An EAA Interview with Ben Metcalf

Ben Metcalf is currently the Head Coach of the professional Pure Youth basketball team in Taipei, Taiwan. A lifelong basketball fan, he spent his formative years living overseas in Japan, England, and Turkey before moving back to the US. After graduating from George Washington University in 2003, he worked for the Orlando Magic before ultimately moving to Taiwan to learn Mandarin. In the following eight years, he was a part of four Taiwanese professional basketball championship teams and helped coach the Chinese Taipei (Taiwan) national team to a fourth-place finish in the 2013 Asia Championships and a gold medal in the 2013 East Asian Games.



Ben Metcalf. Source: Courtesy of author.

Lucien: *Tell us a little about your background and your earlier experiences with basketball as a boy and young man before you became a professional coach.*

Ben: From as early I can remember, my life seemed to revolve around basketball. Whether playing for teams in high school and college, obsessively watching college and professional basketball, or occasionally making it to an arena to watch a National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) tournament or National Basketball Association (NBA) game live, I was always wrapped up in basketball. While in high school, it was simply an obsession; as I entered college, I started turning my focus to how I could make basketball into a career. Since my lack of athletic ability limited my options as far as playing was concerned, I decided to try and get my foot in the door in the coaching side of things. Fortunately, studying in Washington, DC, at George Washington University gave me a number of options.

After a brief stop interning with the Washington Capitals hockey team, I managed to find a job as a ball boy with the Washington Wizards. As a huge basketball fan, this was the best job I could possibly imagine. Not only was I able to sit courtside for NBA games, I was also able to rebound and hand water to Michael Jordan during his final season, certainly a dream come true. Professionally, it was also the perfect opportunity to meet NBA coaches and team officials, and start networking with people involved in professional basketball. Throughout my three years working with the team, I was fortunate enough to build up a number of contacts, and after discussing numerous possibilities, I decided that the best way to get my foot in the door was through video editing.

For those not familiar with the daily responsibilities of basketball coaches, basically everything that a coach does starts with watching game film. Regardless of whether it's planning practice, preparing for opponents, or designing one's own game plan, the process always begins by watching videos of previous games, practices, or workouts to understand what the team needs to work on. The fortunate coaches will have a video coordinator responsible for taking a two-hour game and cutting it down to bite-size pieces to show the coaching staff and players, saving both time and energy. In the past ten years or so, NBA teams have recognized the importance of film study and have been progressively adding staff to edit film, with some teams having seven or eight people responsible for editing different aspects of the game. Teams have also seen the benefit of starting out in the video room and have increasingly hired candidates with this background to be their head coaches.

After graduating college, I joined the Washington Mystics of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and spent a season as their video coordinator before accepting an internship doing the same thing with the Orlando Magic of the NBA. Most of my year interning with the Magic was spent in the video room, breaking down hundreds of NBA games, thousands of college games, and even some high school games. Despite the long hours that led to me spending Thanksgiving and Christmas sleeping on our head coach's office sofa, the basketball knowledge I picked up in one season turned out to be invaluable and jump-started my journey in professional basketball. When the internship finished after the season, I was offered a job as the head video coordinator for the Magic, where I stayed for another three years.

Lucien: *How did you become involved with the Super Basketball League (SBL) and, especially with from what I can tell, one of the best teams in the league?*

Ben: Before the 2007–2008 NBA season started, the NBA announced that the Magic would be traveling to China to participate in a few preseason games. Knowing that we'd be spending a few weeks over there, I enrolled in an intensive Chinese-language course to prepare for the journey. Unexpectedly, after a few weeks, I found that my interest in learning Mandarin grew and grew, eventually resulting in my leaving the Magic and heading to Taiwan to study the language.

The initial plan was to stay two years and then head over to China to work for NBA China. However, learning Mandarin turned out to be more than a two-year project, and the NBA's expansion in China slowed dramatically. While initially a bit disappointed in the lack of opportunities in China, I slowly fell in love with Taiwan and decided to focus my efforts on finding a job in basketball in Taiwan.

Starting from scratch was virtually impossible. Knowing nobody involved in the league or how to get in touch with them made it tough to even know where exactly to start, but I eventually started emailing all the journalists who wrote about the league. One responded. He was gracious enough to meet with me, chat basketball, and give me some guidance as far as which teams would be more open to helping me out. Using the contact information he provided, I emailed and called a few dozen people connected to the league and waited for a response. None responded.

As a last-ditch effort, I took a day off from the cram school in Taichung where I was teaching English and made the trek up to Taipei, where most of the games are held. I went to five or six games, trying to get some face

time with anybody who would talk to me. Eventually, I was able to connect with the import (foreign player) for the Pure Youth team and picked his brain as he was warming up for that evening's game. He basically said that nobody in Taiwan was doing any of the stuff that I had done in the past, that for the most part the league was in the dark ages, and that very few of the "old school" coaches would even be willing to listen to someone in my position. Despite his ringing endorsement, he did recognize the necessity for the league to start working in this direction and agreed to help out in any way he could.

After heading back home, I decided to do what I had done for years in Orlando. Throughout that year's playoffs, I recorded and watched all of Pure Youth's games. Afterward, I would proceed to cut up some video clips, break down some plays, and suggest some game plan adjustments, combining everything into a scouting report that I emailed to the player for him to, hopefully, pass on to the coach or anyone else who would listen. I did this for every one of their games, and despite hearing no response from anybody on the team, I finally felt like I was getting my foot in the door.

A few weeks after the season ended, the head coach, Coach Hsu, called me and told me he wanted us to meet. We had a great conversation talking about a number of different ways we could work together, and heading back down to Taichung, I felt very optimistic. Unfortunately, the next day, he called me and let me know that the owner and rest of the company didn't see a need to hire this position. Hitting another dead end, I just went back to teaching English and studying Chinese, trying to think of different ways to make someone give me a chance. However, regardless of whom I talked to or which team I got in contact with, the result was always the same: "sounds great, but we can't do it."

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Right when I was about to give up, Coach Hsu gave me a call on Thanksgiving Day in 2010, telling me to write a proposal highlighting all the things I could do because he was meeting with the owner again that upcoming Monday. I jumped feet-first into my first Mandarin proposal, describing how I could break down film, help on the court, teach the players English, introduce better imports to the team . . . I went a little overboard—especially the part where I said that I'd do it all for free—but in the end, the owner was convinced, and I moved up to Taipei the next week. Seven years later, I became the head coach.

Lucien: *How popular is school, university, and recreational basketball in Taiwan, relative to other team sports and to basketball in the US, Canada, and China? Does interest in the sport in Taiwan in general seem to you to be expanding, holding steady, or declining?*

Ben: Basketball is unbelievably popular in Taiwan, especially with the younger generation. Elementary and middle school kids all seem to be able to recognize the biggest NBA stars, and you can always find high school and college students playing basketball on the local courts. As a spectator sport, the NBA has eclipsed all the other professional sports as the most popular in Taiwan.

Domestically, on the other hand, professional baseball is much more popular than professional basketball. Despite the Chinese Taipei Baseball Association only having four teams, the fan attendance and TV ratings both dwarf that of the SBL. As far as basketball is concerned, high school is by far the most popular. Because of alumni participation, schools allowing students to miss classes to attend games, and the passion of a younger generation, the high school championship games manage to bring in some 13,000 fans to Taipei Arena. This is partially because the high school

basketball tournament is run by the Ministry of Education and is therefore unable to sell tickets and must distribute them for free. Still, when compared with a playoff game the SBL held in the same arena a few years ago, in which they were only able to sell some 3,000 tickets, the difference in popularity is tremendous.

Lucien: *Regarding the professional level, there are many things I'm sure our readers would like to know. For example, how are Taiwanese and foreign players selected for the SBL? How many exhibition (if applicable) and regular-season games are played in the SBL schedule, and what months do the regular season begin and end? I am sure you know that the eighty-two-game NBA schedule is controversial because of its length. How is the playoff system structured? What are the differences in SBL and NBA rules? What are the ownership and management structures of the SBL like compared to the NBA? What is the range of crowd sizes at typical SBL games and during the playoffs?*

Ben: The SBL is entering its fourteenth season and consists of seven teams owned by both private and government institutions. The league is run by the Chinese Taipei Basketball Association, and because the revenue generated by ticket sales does not go back to individual teams but instead is handled by the Association, the league is technically considered semiprofessional. However, for all intents and purposes, it is a professional league.

The SBL season typically runs from late October to early May and consists of two preseason games, thirty regular-season games, and three rounds of playoffs. Last season, in an effort to prevent teams not in the playoffs from giving up on the season, the league altered the rules so that six of the seven teams make the playoffs. In the first round, the first- and second-place teams get to rest, while the third- and sixth-place teams and fourth- and fifth-place teams play each other in a best-of-five series. The higher seeds start off with a one-to-zero lead as a reward for finishing with a better record in the regular season. After the first round of the playoffs, the series are all best of seven.

While the schedule may vary a bit from year to year, for the most part games are played Thursdays through Sundays with two games on the weekdays and three on the weekends. Because none of the teams have their own arenas, all the games for each week are played on one court, one game after another, very similar to the NCAA Tournament. While the majority of the games are played in Taipei, in an effort to increase the league's visibility and service its other fans, the league has done a good job scheduling weeks of games in some of the cities in central and southern Taiwan.

The league plays under International Basketball Federation (FIBA, acronym uses French name) rules, so the games are shorter than NBA games (four, ten-minute quarters), players have fewer fouls (disqualified on the fifth personal foul), and the three-point line is shorter (about eighteen inches shorter). This is done because, unlike in the US, there is a huge emphasis put on preparing for international competition. While the NBA Championship is the pinnacle of basketball in the US, in Taiwan, coming in fourth place in the Asian Championship or winning the gold medal in the East Asia Olympics has much more of an impact than winning the SBL Championship.

As mentioned earlier, the crowds at SBL games can be a little underwhelming. In Taipei, attendance at a regular-season game will get a few hundred fans, whereas a game in Taichung in central Taiwan will get two or three times that number. Because the league only makes it to the cities outside Taipei a few times a year, attendance at games in central and southern Taiwan is always better than in the capital. For that reason, for this upcoming season, the league has decided to almost double the number of games played outside Taipei.

The only real bright spot is the playoffs. Because the parent companies view the playoff games as a great advertising opportunity, most of them will buy huge blocks of tickets for their employees, outfit them in logoed shirts, and put big posters with the company's name in their hands. This

combined with the fact that the games are mostly on the weekends means that the Association can finally take in some money at the box office. The last game of the finals this previous season had around 5,000 people in attendance.

There are basically three types of players in the SBL: locals, imports, and American-born Chinese (ABCs). All have different ways of entering the league. For locals, the SBL is in the middle of a transition from more of a European system to the US system. In the past, a number of players signed ten-year contracts in high school, basically binding them to the professional team for their careers. While they may have attended college and played for their college team, because there were no rules to dictate pure amateurism, they were primarily professional players who happened to enroll in college and play in the college postseason tournaments. Six years ago, after a number of teams objected to the richer teams basically poaching and signing all the best players before they even reached college age, the league instituted a draft and also forced players to choose between playing college basketball and playing professionally. Predictably, this change did not come without some difficulties that six years later are finally starting to get sorted out.

A few years ago, the league also started opening roster spots for ABCs. Despite the acronym, the category applies to any foreign player with a Taiwanese passport but no Taiwanese ID card (those with an ID card are considered locals both by the league and by the government, meaning they are eligible for mandatory military service). The purpose was to encourage more players with NCAA experience to come play in Taiwan and improve the quality of the league. Initially, each team was provided one roster spot for these players, who could sign with a team immediately, forgoing any draft process.

The results were mixed. Regardless of whether it was a player graduating from a Division I university or a player who finished playing at a National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) school, the key was the culture shock. Not only was there the culture shock that every foreigner experiences when moving to a new country, there was the added pressure of basketball culture shock.

Most of the players who have come over are Americans with Taiwanese heritage who have spent their entire lives in the US or in American schools overseas, and the majority cannot speak Mandarin or Taiwanese. Because of the emphasis put on both on- and off-court communication, and the necessity for team bonding and chemistry, the language barrier becomes a much bigger issue for basketball players than it does for the average expatriate. An innocent miscommunication during a game could mean the difference between a made basket and a turnover. An inability to express what one is attempting to accomplish could be the difference between a simple apology and the entire team hating a player.

Additionally, the basketball culture is vastly different in Taiwan. There are no limits on practice times, no recognition of the body's need to recuperate, and certainly no illusion of players having any authority within the team dynamic. Regardless of whether it has been the inability to adapt to practicing three hours a day, twice a day, six days a week, or the futility of trying to communicate with the head coach or front office, many players have played in Taiwan for one season and then simply decided it was not for them. Others have lasted even less time. Last year, an ABC came out to Taiwan, tried out for the team, eventually signed a contract, and within a month opted to move back to the States and work at a department store.

While the rules regarding foreign players have changed numerous times within the last few years, currently every SBL team is allowed to have one "import." The ability to sign an import is a fairly recent change in the league, and restrictions have been loosened as the years go by. For the first few years of the SBL, no imports were allowed. Then, they allowed one import for each team, but he had to be shorter than 200 centimeters (six feet, six inches) and monthly salary was limited to US \$10,000 a month. A

few years ago, they raised the height restriction to 205 centimeters (six feet, eight inches) and eliminated the salary restriction; then, a year after that, the league got rid of all restrictions, allowing teams to find any import at any price.

For the most part, teams use the import roster spot to find the one thing Taiwanese players lack: height. Last season, five of the seven teams brought in imports over seven feet tall. While locals and most ABCs play eleven months of the year, the imports are usually brought in about a month before the season and remain until the team is eliminated, about six or seven months.

There are basically three types of players in the SBL: locals, imports, and American-born Chinese (ABCs).

Lucien: *What do you think are the future prospects for the SBL, and why?*

Ben: The SBL is in a really tough situation right now. Despite the popularity of basketball in Taiwan being at an all-time high, the local league still can't get enough fans to come to games and can barely get anyone to watch on TV. While there might be some owners who want to put money and effort into their team, because the revenue from ticket sales goes straight back to the association, there is really no incentive to do any sort of marketing or PR. It's really just a matter of how much money an owner is willing to lose every year, because none of the teams make any money. At this point, most owners see the league as a unique kind of PR for their company, a big tax write-off, or a fun little side project that they can play with as they see fit. As long as the league is structured in this fashion, there is little chance that there will be change for the better.

At the same time, the quality of basketball is suffering. While the top, top players in Taiwan certainly make a good salary for the country (approaching US \$100,000), if they have an opportunity to go to the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) in China, they can triple or even quadruple that money. For this reason, every year, one or two players seem to head to China and leave the SBL, affecting both fan involvement and the overall quality of basketball. Much of the Chinese Taipei national team roster is made up of players who play in China's CBA. Half of the 2015 team's twelve-man roster, for example, were players from the CBA.

At the same time, Nike has taken a huge interest in the future of Taiwanese basketball and started helping place young players in schools in the US to gain some experience. It started ten years ago with them helping introduce a few players to Brigham Young University–Hawai'i and has slowly progressed to allow younger and younger kids to have the chance to go to the US to study and play basketball. This year, there will be Taiwanese athletes in colleges, high schools, and junior high schools throughout the US. The hope is that they'll be able to come back to Taiwan and not only raise the level of competition, but also the level of interest.

With the continued support of third parties like Nike and the willingness of owners to lose money on a league that really doesn't do much to promote itself or its biggest stars, the league will continue along at the same pace, not doing enough to grow its profile, but just enough to not collapse. If a few owners suddenly decide that it's not worth it and fold their teams, the league may fold like its predecessor twenty years ago or may exist like the Taiwanese baseball league, with only four teams. Needless to say, knowing how much the Taiwanese people love basketball and seeing just how much the players and coaches put into improving the product, I hope I don't see that day.

Lucien: *Ben, thanks for the interview! ■*