

Exclusive Interview: USA Basketball Star Chris Paul

INTERVIEW

On the eve of his quest to reclaim USA basketball's status as world leader, New Orleans Hornets point guard spoke with China Brief

By Josh Gartner

USA Men's Basketball point guard Chris Paul has established himself as one of the best and most personable young players in the NBA.

In 2008 Paul led his New Orleans Hornets to the top of the Western Conference in a year when little was expected of them. His amazing season drew comparisons to the heyday of Isiah Thomas in the late 1980s. The Beijing Olympics came at just the right time in his career, the very moment when his amazing skills are melding together with his increasing maturity.

Yet the international basketball scene is extremely different from the one that the "Dream Team" faced in 1992. USA Basketball, led by Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley and Magic Johnson, obliterated the Olympic field. That year, the Americans won every game by at least 28 points, and unbelievably, never used a timeout in any of its eight games. Yet the international community quickly caught up to, and even surpassed the Americans. Over the last decade, a series of US teams, many of which critics argue were slapped together based on star power rather than complimentary skill sets, has frequently gone down to defeat to countries far less known for basketball.

The Beijing Olympics have set up to be Team USA's return to glory. With unselfish floor leaders like Chris Paul, the 2008 squad hopes to bring a team concept to the world arena and reassert itself as the international basketball leader. Yet it will be a difficult task for Paul and company. Teams



from Germany to Argentina, and Spain to Australia, have all raised their levels of play tremendously in recent years. Plus home team China boasts stars like Yi Jianlian and Yao Ming, and will certainly have the backing of the local crowds.

It is in this difficult environment of increased competition, and on potentially unfriendly turf, that Team USA looks to tackle the world's best teams. On the eve of this formidable challenge, arguably its most critical player, its decision-maker Chris Paul, sat down to talk with *China Brief*.

CB Americans of a certain age still think of USA Men's Basketball as an unbeatable force. Yet the US team has not won a gold or silver medal in the FIBA World Championships in 14 years, or an Olympic Gold since 2000. To what do you attribute this shift away from American dominance?

CP I think this is a testament to the globalization of basketball. More countries are continuing to get better each and every year and international play is very competitive. I think this is great for the game of basketball as more and more people are taking up the game. I am really looking forward to the challenge of bringing the gold back to the US this summer in Beijing.

CB In 2006, when you were named to the USA Men's Senior National Team, you were an excellent, but still inexperienced, player. How has your MVP-caliber season and elevated status as one of the elite players in the NBA changed how you fit into Team USA's plans?

CP Playing with the USA National Team in 2006 was a great experience for me and I learned a lot about my game. Heading into Beijing, I just think I am more experienced as a player and have a better understanding of international competition. With the success we had this year and our run in the playoffs, I also learned a lot more about leadership and playing with con-

fidence and how important that is for the point guard of any team.

CB Five years after the Rockets chose Yao Ming as the number one overall draft pick, only Yi Jianlian has joined him as a high-profile Chinese player in the NBA. Do you see these two players as exceptions, or do you still expect Chinese players to become a major force in the league?

CP Yao and Yi are very talented players and have had a great impact on the NBA. I am sure there will be more Chinese players in the NBA in years to come as well.

CB The US team drew China in its first game of the 2008 Olympics. Clearly the crowd will be overwhelmingly pro-China, and knocking you off would arguably be Chinese Basketball's biggest international victory. This will not be "just another game" for you. How will you adjust to the situation?

CP There is no question that game one against China will be very important and we have to make sure we are ready to play. China will be a great challenge and will certainly be energized by the home crowd. I am sure Coach K [USA Basketball's head coach Mike Krzyzewski] and the rest of the coaching staff will have us ready for the importance of getting off on the right foot.

CB In recent years, US Men's Basketball has been criticized for not having a real floor general. As a point guard and famously unselfish player, how do you see your role on this year's team?

CP As the point guard, it is my job to get everyone involved and set the tempo. Each game and each opponent is different, so I have to be able to adapt to the situation and make sure everyone is on the same page. I am confident in my skills and am willing to do whatever Coach K needs me to do, whether that is passing, scoring or

playing great defense. Whatever needs to be done to win is what I focus on.

CB What will be the biggest obstacle to success for the US Men's Team this summer in Beijing?

CP Our training camp and practice time before we head to China will be critical. We are all familiar with each other, but we have to have good practices and get comfortable with each other and what we can do. This preparation will go a long way in determining our success in Beijing.

CB On a non-basketball note, rumor has it that you are quite a bowler. How did you get into it and what is your high score?

CP Yes, I really enjoy bowling. In fact, one of my sponsors happens to be the United States Bowling Congress. Bowling was always an activity we did as a family growing up. It was a great way to spend time with each other. The more I played, the better I got and the more fun I kept having. My brother and I have a good rivalry going on the bowling lanes. We both have our own shoes, ball and ball bag. My Dad isn't a bad bowler either. My high score is 256.

CB Finally, the men's basketball gold medal game will be one of the last competitions of the Olympics. What plans do you have to explore China once the Games are over?

CP I hope we have the chance to play in the gold medal game. That would be an amazing experience. As for traveling, I would love to check out some of the sights of Beijing, although I am not sure yet what our schedule will be like. But I hope we have some free time where I can explore Beijing and learn more about Chinese culture.

CB Thank you for taking a few minutes out of your busy training schedule and good luck in Beijing!