

Pro athletes bolster star status through team selection, teammates and career evolution: study

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Basketball fans in Cleveland may disagree, but two-time NBA Most Valuable Player LeBron James' decision to play with a higher-profile Miami Heat team and all-star teammates shows sound marketing and career-management acumen, according to newly-published business school research focused on the evolution and importance of star status for today's professional athletes. In order to maximize their earnings and endorsements, today's celebrity athletes -- from James to David Beckham to Peyton Manning -- need to be mindful of the evolution of their star status.

So what makes a star shine even brighter in the world of pro sports? It's a combination of not only personal performances and team records, but also includes the markets that athletes play in and the star calibre of the athletes they compete with.

The study, "Investigating the evolution of star status in professional team sports," describes the rise and fall of celebrated athletes using data from the [National Basketball Association](#) (NBA) from 1987 to 2008.

Published in the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, it was authored by professors Yupin Yang of the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and Mengze Shi from the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. To measure star status, they measured the number and share of votes received by pro [basketball players](#) for the annual NBA all-star game.

It turns out that the careers of star athletes have a natural life cycle. In the early years, individual performance is more important – but as time passes, winning a team championship becomes more imperative than personal statistics or accolades.

The results of the research, which arguably vindicate LeBron James for managing his career so deliberately, show that stars should play for a winning team – which not only helps an athlete rise up to being a star, but also extends a star athlete's playing career. Also in James' favour, Profs. Yang and Shi maintain that star teammates can help each other. An athlete's popularity is strongly associated with the popularity of teammates, and explains some blockbuster deals in recent years that have brought stars together to form star teams.

There is risk associated with this kind of career movement, as the researchers point out: Stars who move to star-laden teams could be eclipsed by more popular star teammates and eventually lose star status. Depending on his team's performances in the coming years, this could apply to James' teammate Chris Bosh, who was already a star in his own right when he left the Toronto Raptors to join the star-studded Miami Heat.

The researchers' results can be useful to managers of professional sports teams in managing their star athletes. According to the researchers, "if a team intends to develop a new star, the team should build up the player's individual performance statistics by providing him with more support and playing time."

From the perspective of sports franchise managers, teams may leverage their assets such as a large fan base, current star players and a winning record in attracting or retaining a star player.

Finally, their results have implications for companies such as Adidas and

Nike, who employ star athletes as endorsers of their brands. "By knowing the evolution patterns of athletes and the impacts of surrounding factors, corporate brands can make better informed decisions regarding which athlete to sign and what endorsement contracts to offer."

Surprisingly, despite the prevalence of star athletes and the enormous economic value of these celebrity brands in the marketplace, such marketing-focused empirical research on star athletes to date has been scarce.

Provided by University of Toronto

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