

Merely suspending Gilbert Arenas doesn't solve the NBA's image problem

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Gilbert Arenas' locker room conduct on Dec. 21 has earned him an indefinite suspension without pay from the Washington Wizards. Arenas allegedly transported multiple firearms across state lines and brought them into a public arena. Since Washington D.C. boasts some of the strictest gun laws in the country, he could face up to five years per gun in prison for his reckless actions.

Additionally, he has exacerbated a sensitive situation by making foolish public statements - an example of what not to do when you are in trouble. In an attempt to mend the NBA's already troubled image, NBA commissioner David Stern has suspended him for his public pranks.

Making an example out of Arenas, however, will fall on deaf ears and only further tarnish the organization's reputation. For example, having a knock-down brawl with the players union over an excessive punishment for Arenas only gives this story legs and degrades the league's image by allowing the press to rehash past issues with Latrell Sprewell, Scottie Pippen, Sebastian Telfair, Ron Artest and even Kobe Bryant.

Realistically, an overly aggressive suspension or an extended prison term serves as a minimal deterrent for Arenas or any other NBA player. Simply put, they make enough money in one year of professional basketball to live comfortably for a lifetime. So, what do they really have to lose?

To date, Arenas has earned an excess of \$70 million since he entered the league in 2001, excluding his endorsement deals with adidas and Vitamin Water. Not only can Arenas retire tomorrow and live comfortably for many lifetimes, but also the average NBA player can put himself in a position to retire after a few years in the league. Essentially, their love for the game is the only thing hindering them from making imbecilic mistakes. But as history has shown, it isn't much of a deterrent.

Furthermore, severe and extreme punishment does not always send the message it is intended to, and more often than not it alienates people. I'm not saying Gilbert Arenas should go unpunished for his actions, but rather that if Arenas is charged with committing a crime or violating a rule imposed by the

NBA, his sentence should only reflect his wrongdoing, nothing more.

If the NBA wants to have the courage to do something productive with this negative situation, it should take a different approach. It should embrace him and use his popularity and star appeal to influence adolescents and teenagers across the United States who need guidance. Helping to focus his energy on an intensive outreach program, during and after the suspension, aimed at teaching children and teenagers the dangers associated with guns would be a better use of his time. Let Arenas be an example to the American youth, but allow him to play the game that has brought him so much success through the years.

Gilbert Arenas must learn a valuable lesson from this monumental error in judgment, but so must the NBA. The NFL found out the hard way that heavy suspensions, fines and expulsions were not the answer and changed its approach accordingly. For example, Michael Vick paid for his transgressions, but was allowed to return to the NFL so long as he continued to speak out against dogfighting.

Punishing Gilbert Arenas by imposing an indefinite suspension and voiding his contract is only a Band-Aid for a recurring problem in the NBA. It is high time for the NBA to start thinking of lasting solutions.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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