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A Basketball World

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Bringing Basketball to the People

Ed Winkle '86 has forged a career making meaningful connections between the NBA and its growing global fan base.

Story by BRIAN HUDGINS

Within Ed Winkle's work environment, the shortest distance traveled often comes during his daily commute.

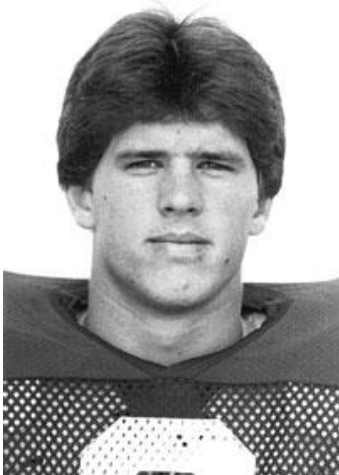
As vice president of global partnerships for the National Basketball Association, Winkle deals with the marketing aspects of a rapidly growing global sport. It is a career that has taken him through many Asian countries — and now to Midtown Manhattan, where Winkle works at the NBA League's 5th Avenue headquarters and resides just a few blocks away.

Winkle likes the simplicity of the arrangement. "I don't own a car in New York because there is nowhere to park," he says. "I walk to work every day. It's very different than if you are living in most places around the world."

Since graduating from IWU with a degree in finance and insurance, Winkle has logged countless travel hours to and from destinations around the globe. Before launching his NBA career in 2009, he managed a team of over 300 Fed Ex sales professionals across the Asia Pacific.

"That really opened up my global perspective because I lived in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Bangkok, Thailand — all with Fed Ex," Winkle says.

While Winkle was advancing his career at Fed Ex, the NBA was going through its own growth spurt. Professional basketball players from overseas began to make inroads into the league. The effect was noticeable in China, where basketball was first introduced by YMCA missionaries in the late 1800s and thrived even through the Cultural Revolution. When Shanghai-born Yao Ming signed a contract with the Houston Rockets in 2002, it gave his country a face to attach to its growing fervor for the sport. Now, the NBA is among the most popular brands in China, and the only American sports league with a significant following throughout Asia.



Winkle (above) says IWU helped prepare him for a global career. A finance and insurance major, he also was a football receiver and co-captain, with his coach describing him as "one of our more intense players."



Winkle (right) with Erik Spoelstra at a press conference in the Philippines, where the Miami Heat coach hosted a fitness clinic as part of the NBA's FIT program. "The NBA is more popular in the Philippines than it is in the United States," says Winkle.

Winkle was part of the ground swell of this growth in his first job for the NBA. Based in Hong Kong, he served as senior director of business development and marketing partnerships for all of the Asia Pacific markets outside of greater China. "The NBA brand was very relevant in China, but what was happening was the NBA brand started to grow all over the region," he says. "If you look at countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the NBA was expanding to all those markets."

Part of the sport's popularity in Asia comes from the basic elements of basketball, Winkle observes. In countries with very crowded cities, finding available land and the cost of a sport become two major considerations. What does basketball bring to the table in these markets? All you need is a basket and a little bit of land in a gym or outdoor park.

Winkle got a firsthand look at basketball's impact in the Philippines while traveling with Miami Heat Coach Erik Spoelstra as part of the NBA FIT program, the league's initiative to promote healthy lifestyles. Over the course of 10 days, the program hosted a series of interactive fitness clinics — a combination of on-court physical activities, exercises, nutrition seminars, and basketball clinics.

"People don't understand that the NBA is more popular in the Philippines than it is in the United States," says Winkle. "In the U.S., you have a segment of people who like other sports, but in the Philippines it is such a basketball-focused and NBA-focused country. The Philippines is unique in that the NBA is such a massive brand there," Winkle says.

Spoelstra, whose mother is Filipino, was greeted as a superstar during his first trip to the Philippines in 2009, and he has returned almost every year since. “They identify Erik as a Filipino-American,” notes Winkle. “Erik does a lot of great work.” Watching him coach youngsters in the basketball clinics, Winkle was impressed by Spoelstra’s intensity. “Once he gets going,” Winkle told a reporter at the time, “I don’t think he can differentiate between these kids and his players.”

The Power to Unite

In looking back on his international career trajectory, Winkle cites his IWU experiences as a crucial launching point. The diversity of the student body and the overall educational experience helped prepare him for a global career, says Winkle, who matriculated to Illinois Wesleyan from Hinsdale South High School in Darien, Ill.

Winkle also learned leadership skills through his role as rush chairman for Sigma Chi fraternity, and his character was shaped by his experiences as a wide receiver for the Titan football team. Winkle, who never missed a game in his four years on the varsity squad, was known for making catches in clutch situations. Named co-MVP in his senior year, Winkle was described by his coach, Don Larson, as “one of our more intense players, and his teammates showed good judgment in honoring him.”

His employers at Fed Ex noted those same qualities when they offered him a promotion, and the chance to work and live abroad. “When it came time at Fed Ex to kind of raise my hand, I was 25 years old, and they asked me to move to Tokyo,” Winkle recalls.

His family background helped the transition. His mother, born and raised in France, immigrated to America, where she met Winkle’s father. Traveling abroad was a familiar event for him growing up, so “it wasn’t that much of a stretch for me,” he says. “But it was the first time I ever went to Asia. I did have a moment on the plane where I said, ‘Oh, my God. I’m moving to Tokyo!’ — and at that time, I didn’t speak one word of Japanese.”

In hindsight, it turned out to be the best decision he ever made, Winkle says, not only from a business standpoint, but also as a learning experience in understanding and appreciating other cultures.

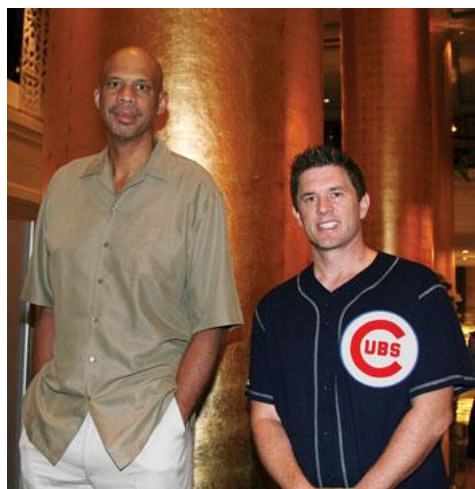
Even after relocating to Manhattan with his 2012 promotion, Winkle’s worldwide perspective on business and culture remains an essential part of his NBA career. As head of the league’s global partnerships efforts, Winkle and his team engage some of the world’s top companies — including Nike, PepsiCo, Anheuser-Busch, and Gatorade — “through deep and authentic



Winkle makes contact with the NBA championship trophy in Indonesia.

brand integration.” Those efforts, he says, extend well beyond traditional advertising methods.

“With Gatorade, for example, you are used to seeing a bottle,” he explains. “We work with them on *programs* — it is much more than a logo slap and getting your brand out there.”



Winkle with basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

“It’s harder to reach consumers,” says Winkle. The challenge to create strategies that attract and engage customers in meaningful ways can be daunting in today’s competitive, fragmented and rapidly changing media landscape. But it helps that the NBA spotlights so many engaging personalities among its players and coaches, captivating fans around the world.

“If you go to Bangkok, I guarantee you will see a kid in a Stephen Curry jersey in 20 minutes,” Winkle says. “But 99 percent of those people will never get to go to a game.”

Basketball’s power to unite people and cultures around the world continues to fascinate Winkle. While driving business results for the NBA’s league, teams and partners, he still finds time to stay involved in the sport’s philanthropic efforts through its Basketball Without Borders (BWB) global development and community outreach program.

Since its founding in 2001, thousands of youngsters from Asia-Pacific,

Europe, Americas, and Africa have attended four-day BWB camps, where they learn basketball skills and life lessons about leadership, education, sportsmanship, and healthy living from current and former international and NBA stars. In addition to Winkle's collaborations with Spoelstra, he has worked with retired players such as Tim Hardaway Sr., A.C. Green, and Dominique Wilkins and in BWB camps and related community-action efforts such as HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention.

As he continues to promote the reach of basketball worldwide, Winkle is also relishing his recent move back to the States and the opportunities it gives to stay closer to family and friends both in Chicago and at IWU. He even had the chance to attend four World Series games last year. As a lifelong Chicago Cubs fan, Winkle says, "That was cool!"