

SPORTS

BASKETBALL



From left: Former San Antonio Spurs player Mengke Bateer and former Los Angeles Sparks center Zheng Haixia interact with students at a primary school in Inner Mongolia autonomous region on Friday, as retired NBA star Robert Horry tips off the inaugural basketball game on the school's newly-built court. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Encouraging girls to see net gains

New NBA initiative supports the development of female students in less developed regions



By XING WEN in Beijing and
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On Friday afternoon, at a remote school over 70 kilometers from Horqin Right Wing Middle Banner in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, an exciting girls' basketball game got underway.

Playing on a brand-new outdoor basketball court, the air was filled with a continuous, sharp squeak from the friction of the girls' sneakers gripping the colorful playing surface.

What made the game particularly special, though, was the presence of retired NBA star Robert Horry, tossing the ball high into the air to start the game, while Chinese basketball legends Mengke Bateer and Zheng Haixia looked on from the sidelines, coaching the two teams.

This event, along with the construction of the new court, is part of a recently launched charity initiative called Her Time to Play, under the auspices of NBA Cares, the National Basketball Association's global social responsibility program.

The initiative seeks to support the holistic development of young female students in underdeveloped regions through a range of strategies, such as upgrades to sports facilities in rural schools, basketball skills training programs and the organization of basketball matches among local schools and communities.

From Aug 20 to 22, 41 physical education teachers from schools throughout Horqin Right Wing Middle Banner participated in professional basketball training led by NBA international youth development expert Bryan Gamroth. The training sessions included instruction on fundamental basketball skills, physical fitness and testing, sports psychology and healthy eating.

Since 2004, NBA Cares has hosted more than a hundred community events, which have included participation by more than 300 NBA athletes. Thirteen men's and women's



Girls compete in a basketball game in Horqin Right Wing Middle Banner in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region on Friday. The game and the construction of the basketball court were part of a new NBA charity initiative, Her Time to Play. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

players from China, including Yao Ming, Bateer and Zheng, have played in the NBA and the WNBA. Equally, more than 150 former NBA and WNBA players have played in the Chinese professional leagues over the past two decades.

Bateer, an NBA legend who won the NBA championship with the San Antonio Spurs in the 2002-03 season, and currently chairman of the basketball association of Inner Mongolia, explained that Inner Mongolia Nongxin's standout performance in the WCBA has notably boosted the region's participation in basketball, creating even more enthusiasm for the sport.

"Kids are all interested in the sport, and parents support their involvement," said Bateer.

He added that he has been dedicated to promoting the sport to more grassroots areas, especially the vast pastoral regions of Inner Mongolia.

"Imagine a scene where a basketball court is built on a paved area. Children are playing games on the court while herders watch from horseback. That's a vision I've always hoped to see," he said.

Zheng, a WNBA legend who played for the Los Angeles Sparks and the national women's team's former star center, and the first Chinese player inducted into the FIBA Hall of Fame, wants more girls to persist in pursuing their favorite sports.

Born in a small village in Shangqiu, Henan province, Zheng says that basketball changed her life. She now encourages more girls from remote areas to experience personal growth through sports, develop a stronger sense of responsibility and hope that it will eventually open doors to a broader world for them.

Jin Changsui, the principal of

Bayanmankh Central Primary School where the new court was built, hopes the star power of the event will inspire more local children to take up basketball.

"The court is also open to the public. We hope that alumni will return to their alma mater to play, and that basketball enthusiasts from the area will take advantage of this high-quality facility," he said.

As the game finished, students flocked to the three legends, some standing on tiptoes to get autographs on their caps and notebooks.

Among them was Zhang Wuyua, a sixth-grader from Bayanmankh Central Primary School.

She developed a love for basketball after first trying it out in the school's basketball interest class last semester.

"I love playing with my friends,

and hitting a shot feels so exciting," the 11-year-old explained.

Born into a pastoral family, she carries a ball with her while helping her parents herd sheep, practicing dribbling and shooting wherever she can.

Her father fully supports her passion, and even made a simple basketball hoop at home.

When asked about her happiest basketball moment, Zhang immediately recalls playing with her father at home. Since her father is much taller, it was challenging for her to get the ball.

The normally shy youngster became visibly excited as she recalled with a big smile: "I got so frustrated that I jumped up, grabbed the ball, and made a shot!"

"I felt really cool at that moment."

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BASEBALL

\$30m expected for iconic Ruth shirt

Nearly a century after Babe Ruth supposedly called his shot during the 1932 World Series, the jersey worn by the New York Yankees slugger when he hit the home run to center field could sell at auction for as much as \$30 million.

Heritage Auctions was offering up the jersey on Saturday in Dallas, and, at the time of going to press, bidding had reached \$17.7 million.

Ruth's famed, debated and often imitated "called shot" came as the Yankees and Chicago Cubs faced off in Game 3 of the World Series at Chicago's Wrigley Field on Oct 1, 1932. In the fifth inning, Ruth made a pointing gesture from the batter's box, before hitting the home run off Cubs pitcher Charlie Root.

"It is the most dramatic moment in World Series history, and it may be the most dramatic moment in all of baseball," said Michael Gibbons, director emeritus and historian at the Babe Ruth Birthplace and Museum in Baltimore.

The Yankees won the game 7-5 and swept the Cubs the next day to win the series.

That was Ruth's last World Series, and the "called shot" was his last home run in a World Series, said Mike Provenzale, the production manager for Heritage's sports department.

"When you can tie an item like that to an important figure and their most important moment, that's what collectors are really looking for," Provenzale said.

Heritage said Ruth gave the road jersey to one of his golfing buddies in Florida around 1940 and it remained in that family for decades. Then, in the early 1990s, that man's daughter sold it to a collector. It was then sold at auction in 2005 for \$940,000, and that buyer consigned it to Heritage this year.

In 2019, one of Ruth's road jerseys dating to 1928-30 sold for \$5.64 million in an auction conducted at Yankee Stadium. That jersey was part of a collection of items that Ruth's family had put up for sale.

The "called shot" was an extraordinary moment from a man Gibbons called "the standard-bearer for all of Major League Baseball." Ruth popularized home runs and, in fact, "out-homered complete teams," Gibbons said.

"It thrilled fans, but it also thrilled the country," he said.

"He was always uplifting, he was something very positive for this country to root for," Gibbons said.

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