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Richard Florida

Toronto is sending no one to the NBA all-star game this Saturday. In fact, Toronto hasn't had an all-star since Chris Bosh decamped for Miami in 2010. Andrea Bargnani's all-star campaign was cut short by injury and it is doubtful he would have made it even if he were healthy.

Sure, Toronto lacks the size, scale and media market to compete with L.A., which has four all-star starters this year, two from the Lakers and two from the Clippers. Miami, a city a fraction the size of Toronto, has three all-stars, including one who used to play for the Raptors (Bosh). Memphis and Indianapolis are sending one player each. Even tiny Oklahoma City has two.

Toronto players have made eight all-star appearances over the past decade (2002-2012), according to detailed data compiled by my former MPI colleague, University of Toronto alum and now UCLA doctoral student, Patrick Adler. Los Angeles has produced 24 all-stars over the same period and Boston 21. Even if we agree that it's not fair to compare ourselves to such fabled basketball towns, our city is far behind places like Phoenix (17), Miami (16), San Antonio (16) and Dallas, Houston and Detroit (14 each).



Kobe Bryant, left, of the Los Angeles Lakers and LeBron James of the Miami Heat played in the NBA basketball all-star game in 2011. The Raptors have a poor record when it comes to all-star players.

Jae C. Hong/AP

It could be worse, of course. Toronto ranks 18th out of 31 NBA cities in all-star player appearances, a little below the middle of the pack. But where we really underperform, as every Toronto basketball fan knows, is in our inability to hang onto the all-stars that come our way.

Three players drafted by the Raptors have gone on to the all-star team over the past decade — Bosh, Vince Carter and Tracy McGrady. All three of them have since left Toronto and gone on to represent other cities in subsequent all-star games. The Raptors acquired three other all-star-calibre players since 2002 — Alonzo Mourning, Shawn Marion and Peja Stojakovic. None of them represented the city at the all-star game; not one lasted a year in Toronto.

Toronto's inability to hang onto superstar talent is reflected in a single telling metric. Players drafted by the Raptors made 19 all-star appearances over the past decade, but less than half of them were as Raptors. Eleven were for the franchises and cities they left for. Toronto's performance on this score was by far the worst in the entire league, according to Adler's analysis.

To compensate, the Raptors have developed a strategy of leveraging Toronto's ethnic and cultural diversity by going after international players, especially from Europe. But that hasn't worked so well either.

International players have become an increasing force in the NBA. No international players made the all-star team from 1976 to 1984, but since 1985, 73 all-star slots have been taken by international players like Hakeem Olajuwon and Dikembe Mutombo, Dirk Nowitzki, and the Canadian Steve Nash. This year, international players account for more than one in five members of the all-star team.

Yet not one of them plays for Toronto, the league's most international city and its most international team. Linsanity, stoked by the young Asian star Jeremy Lin, is happening in New York City.

Pundits and basketball fans have no shortage of explanations for this drain of basketball talent. Toronto suffers from cold weather (so do Boston and Chicago). Provincial taxes are relatively high, but state and local taxes in New York and L.A. are considerably higher than in smaller markets. Our separate media companies and TV stations (TSN versus ESPN) cause fewer games to be broadcast in the United States — just try getting media attention (or direct flights for that matter) in Oklahoma City or Memphis.

I'm not buying it.

Toronto is the fifth largest city across Canada and the United States. It has a huge fan base and an enormous media presence compared with cities outside of New York, L.A. and Washington, D.C. Films and TV shows made in Toronto regularly go on to huge success in the United States. Our universities have no trouble attracting global talent, well, like me. Top talent has flocked to our stable, well-managed banks

in the wake of the economic crisis. Our condos are selling to global investors; even Mark Wahlberg bought one. Musicians like Feist, Nelly Furtado and Drake continue to call Toronto home, even after they've achieved global superstardom. Time and time again, pro athletes rate Toronto among their favourite cities to visit and hang out in. But not as a place to work.

I'm the first to admit there's more to being a world-class city than success in professional sports. And I'm on record as being against using public dollars to underwrite stadiums. But our experience in basketball simply does not match up to the city's growing size, wealth and stature. The outflow of basketball stars is no longer a metaphor for any larger talent drain, but an increasingly isolated and unique problem.

Instead of elevating Toronto's global stature, our basketball team is pulling it down. It, and our other sports franchises, simply need to start doing more of what it takes to compete on a global scale. If not, maybe they should just get out of the game.

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