



6 Steps to Playing Basketball Overseas through AIA

We are often asked what steps a player can take to put them in the best possible position to play basketball overseas. The following are suggestions for those who have a desire to be used by the Lord through Athletes In Action. There are many ways to get on teams overseas. These guidelines are for those who would like to have AIA's support, assistance and encouragement in the process. Our goal is to assist players in finding positions with teams so that Christ can be made known. If a basketball career blossoms and grows, we would be truly excited. But we also have a heart for placing players on teams in parts of the world where basketball is not as financially lucrative nor even a stepping stone to other 'better' basketball opportunities. The Gospel needs to be seen and heard in every corner of the world. Basketball provides a vehicle to get 'insiders' into a culture to let the light of Christ shine through our lives.

Step 1 – Play with AIA

It is a guideline for all the players we recommend, to play for AIA on a tour. This is important to us for two reasons. The first reason is getting to know you spiritually. We need to feel comfortable in recommending you as a person who is ready to grow in your desire to live for Christ. We are not seeking perfect people or those who can pass a theology test on paper, but rather those who have a heart to seek the Lord and pursue personal spiritual growth. Ministry is often born out of personal growth and expresses an openness to keep learning. This translates in coming across to others as a sincerely humble and broken person who Jesus has redeemed. We are not people who have 'the right answer' for life, but we are people who have experienced the right answer. You can know something or you can know something by experience. You can only share what you have experienced.

I'm 39 and feel that I've got so many areas to grow in to be effective in ministry to those around me, my family and church, let alone to anyone who is outside of my community. Growth is part of the spiritual journey. Those who seem the most confident or sure in their ministry skills are the ones who usually will not make it. Having a vibrant walk with the Lord is more important than any 'specific' ministry training. We do value training, but in the end, you may be in a situation that there is no answer about what to do. Training your ear to listen to the Lord, seek out the wisdom of those who have gone before you and being open for the unexpected are the most valuable tools you can have. Traveling with us allows us to engage these traits in you.

The second aspect of evaluation for AIA that guides our thinking is the player's ability to produce on and off the floor. We have a reputation around the world for quality people and players. To accurately place you on a team that suits your level is important so that you succeed and your platform is enhanced. If we place you on an NBA team and you are at the level of a good high school team, you could quickly see how not many people will care what you have to say or how you live, because you won't be there long.

The other aspect related to this is the player's ability to open more doors. If the player does not represent Christ credibly on and off the court, then they will shut a door with that club. We have been sending players to a Christian team in the Western Australian league for years. The past 4 seasons for this Christian team have been incredibly blessed by God and now other teams in the league are asking us for players. If teams are successful, then others will want to copy their success.

Step 2 – No Debt

Keep your college debt to a minimum. The number one reason that derails a basketball missionary career before it starts is debt at home. Regardless of your basketball level, the world of professional basketball is changing. With the lack of success at the international level, the perceived value of American players has dropped. It is becoming more and more rare for a major college player to get a substantial contract overseas their first year out of school. I know and have worked with 4 year starters from ACC basketball programs, which have had to start at the lowest level of pay and work their way up.

Many players will say to me, I need to make a certain amount of money a month to pay my bills. Often times the amount seems reasonable at first, until the person sits down with a pen and paper to start creating a budget, buying food overseas (which is often times very expensive in Western Europe), gas (also very expensive) and then how much money you need to survive between the end of your contract and the beginning of the next (Lord willing).

Even the most basic entry level job in playing basketball is financially, at best, treading water. The experience of playing basketball overseas is more about the spiritual adventure and taking advantage of all the years of basketball training to invest in God's kingdom. I firmly believe that taking 2 or 3 years of your life after graduation to make Christ known through basketball will solidify many basic spiritual tools you will need to follow Christ for a lifetime, regardless of where God leads you beyond basketball.

I have yet to meet a player who regretted taking the time or the chance to pursue this opportunity.

Step 3 – Community

It is important for you to be involved with your local church, at home and on your campus. To be in the body of Christ is an imperative from Jesus. Many reasons are obvious, but for the purposes of being a basketball missionary there are a few I would highlight.

The first is being part of a body of believers and loving those God puts in your path. When you go overseas, you will most likely not have the luxury to pick and choose a church like we do in America. Why someone chooses to join one church over another is often times due to reasons that are superficial and more about individual likes or dislikes rather than feeling led and called to serve in a particular church. President Kennedy's famous statement, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,' can be said of the church as well and our involvement there. Often times overseas, a player may have only one evangelical church in their city to attend, if you are so blessed. Then one can say to themselves, I'm only going to be here 6 to 9 months, it is not that important to attend church. Or one can say, the time is short, I am not going to really get involved. Both of those statements lead to a lonely and typically unfruitful life overseas.

If a person can't apply these basic principles here at home with people who know them and love them, what makes someone think getting on an airplane and flying over a big body of water is going to magically change that mentality?

Get involved locally. Share with your pastor, missions committee or small group your desire to be a basketball missionary (regardless if you think you will be a full funded paid player by a pro team). Seek out a spiritual mentor/discipler who can help prepare you and honestly evaluate your spiritual strengths and weaknesses. The enemy will attack those areas of your life when you are lonely and frustrated.

You also need to **start raising money**, regardless if you are thinking of getting a paying job. Often times the way a player gets a position overseas is either through playing with AIA or some other traveling team, but another way is to pay your own way for tryouts in the country you are

seeking a job. Also, some places you may go and play will not have the funds to pay you, so having a resource to meet your needs as you play overseas will enable you to go. I would ask your church to be your sending agency financially and create an account for you through the church to which people can send their support checks. This is the quickest and easiest way to make this happen. There are others we can address at a later time.

Step 4 – Become a learner

A skill that everyone needs is an attitude of being a life long learner. To be as fruitful of a believer as you can be requires an openness to the Lord and a desire to learn. The best information on missions I have found that would give you a great base to learn from is called 'Perspectives' (<http://www.perspectives.org>) It is a 16 week course which goes through the biblical, historical and practical aspect of missions. Classes are offered all over the country. The material presented really changed my life, even after being on the mission field for over 5 years. But the time spent in class will not give you all the information if you do not read the articles assigned. As I've been stumbling my way through trying to help prepare basketball players over the past 10 years, often times, when given the task to read a portion of scripture or come prepared for a Bible study, 50% or more of the players do not follow through.

Partly, I can understand. The information being discussed may not be interesting, meet a felt need or the teacher is just boring, probably a combination of all three. Often I will get a phone call or email from a player overseas and he will say these words, 'I now understand what you were talking about.' There is no substitution for a felt need. There is also no substitution for being honest and knowing there is much to learn.

I share all this because this step is the one most likely ignored. This is also the step that a mentor can help you with, especially if your church has a strong mission emphasis.

I would also suggest any cross-cultural training.

Step 5 – Become a pro

You will need to act like a professional basketball player before you get paid like one. Regardless if the team is 'paying' or not, you are playing basketball for Jesus. The approach one takes toward their basketball will convey much to those around them. When I coached overseas, we had a former NBA player, who worked his hardest in practice and on his own. This communicated so much to the rest of the team and made my job so much easier. Embracing this mindset before someone gets on airplane is crucial because we are talking about habits and not skills. This is a mindset and an approach. If you had a good college coach, he probably taught you this. You will need to have a plan for personal basketball development on the court after you graduate. Most players' basketball ability grows after graduate with maturity and a new found freedom. Be honest with where you need to grow your strengths and improve some of your weaknesses.

Step 6 – Get video online

It is important to get your video online so that teams who are interested can view your tape. The financial investment into this will save you money in the long run and also provides teams with instant gratification when they have an interest in your services. Edit down two of your best halves of basketball, taking out the minutes you do not play and free throws so that all the video is of you play in a game situation. Highlight films showing you making shots are not going to impress. Making the effort to do this lets us know that you are serious about attempting to get overseas.