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Mavericks Melting Pot: This Team speaks the International Language of Basketball

Ken Turetzky

For fans who can only imagine the sort of cultural exchange that occurs on a Mavericks team where six nations are represented and six languages -- if you count Steve Nash's Canadian dialect -- are spoken, here's the topic of discussion after one recent game: The proper pronunciation of reserve center and leading three-point threat Wang Zhizhi's name.

"I heard you say, `Wayng'," a member of the international press advises second-year forward Eduardo Najera, a native of Meoqui in Chihuahua, Mexico. "It's pronounced, `Wohng."

Nájera takes up the challenge. "What's his last name?" he asks in barely accented English, setting up a devastating retort.

"His last name is Wang. But in China you say the last name first."

"OK, his whole name, what is it?" says Nájera, persisting.

"`Wohng Zhoozhoo'," the visitor says, pronouncing the 7-foot-1 Chinese Red Army recruit's name phonetically.

"Ah ha, you said it wrong, too!" declares Nájera triumphantly. "It's `Wang Zherzher'!"

Nearby, Shawn Bradley, the native of Landstuhl, Germany, offers, "`Wang Zheezhee'."



Eduardo Najera slams home the easy two as Garnett looks on.
Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images

Finally, Wang himself settles the issue. His name is in fact pronounced, "`Wohng Zhoozhoo'."

"Does it bother you when people mispronounce your name?" the visitor asks Nájera.

"I could care less," Nájera says. "Because I'm sure I can mispronounce their last names, too. So, we're even." For the record, Nájera clarifies the proper expression of his last name: "NA-che-ra'."

Such issues are pertinent in the home of the NBA's most geographically diversified team. The Mavericks roster includes two German natives, versatile 7-foot forward Dirk Nowitzki, of Würzburg; 7-6 center Bradley (whose father was stationed in Landstuhl by the U.S. Army); Nájera; point guard Nash, born in England and raised in Victoria, British Columbia; Wang, from Beijing, China; and the latest arrival, Tariq Abdul-Wahad, of Maisons-Alfort, France.

Fortunately for this highly successful group of athletes, the only lingo that counts on the court is the international language of basketball. Throughout the season, the Mavericks Melting Pot has consistently confounded opponents while running up the league's highest scoring average.

Well-traveled Director of Player Personnel and Assistant Coach Donn Nelson says, "the cultures that these guys bring helps us grow as a team. Let's face it, it's what's made our country great, the old melting pot theory. In a small way, we're kind of experiencing that."

Each outlander brings a different look to the team. Nash, a lean and unimposing figure when at rest, disrupts defenses with continuous motion and body control adapted from his experience playing soccer. Allowing a



Steve Nash takes a jumper .
Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images

soccer player to touch the ball with his hands almost seems like cheating. "Soccer is the basis for all my sports. It's a very athletic sport and great for footwork and coordination," Nash says.

In his fourth NBA season, Nowitzki, who is just 23, has developed a nearly unstoppable set of offensive skills. He can rebound, run the floor, and shoot his accurate, splay-footed three-pointer over undersized defenders, or pass to an open teammate. Recently, Nowitzki added a low-post move that has contributed to several Mavs victories.

As Dallas' leading scorer and rebounder -- and a visitor from across the ocean, where the style of play emphasizes finesse over strength -- Nowitzki has taken a physical beating from NBA opponents, losing a couple of front teeth in the process. He's accepted the abuse without complaint, and when asked about the rough play, answers blandly:

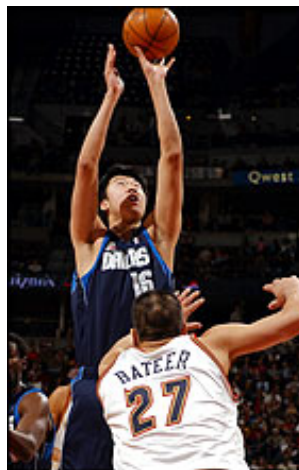
"You get fouled hard and stuff, but I don't really care. All you can do is go to the free throw line and knock the shots down. That's what it's all about. There will always be hard fouls, but you've just gotta take it like a man."

Abdul-Wahad arrived in the U.S. at age 18 to play for the University of Michigan, and then San Jose State. He speaks English with only a trace of an accent, and has begun contributing a much-needed defensive presence as a 6-7 guard-forward.

The Mavs clearly enjoy each other's company, and appreciate the circumstances that brought them together. "I think it's funny having people from all over the place, coming together to play basketball on one court," Nowitzki says. "The best thing is everyone is a great guy and having a fun time in the locker room and hanging out with each other. I guess we all like each other and like to do stuff together. That's the best thing about it."



Dirk Nowitzki celebrates a Mavericks win.
Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images



Wang takes a shot over Mengke Bateer in Denver.
Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images

Wang, meanwhile, grows bolder with his English, and more frequently eschews available translators from the local Chinese-language media (The Mavs recently brought in Sary Benzvi, a basketball player and coach from Israel who also speaks Mandarin Chinese, to assume translation duties) to describe his efforts to play NBA-caliber defense. "America is difference, one-hand push. Two-hand is foul," he says. The game is faster, and requires more upper-body strength. "It's physical, stronger. Sure, I run in practice. It's very hard."

Wang provided a glimpse of humor when he signed a large banner congratulating Head Coach Don Nelson on his 1,000th career victory: Wang decorated his signature with a symbol of national goodwill -- a picture of a panda's head.

The Mavericks surprised the league when they reached the second round of the NBA Playoffs last season, and they hope to improve on that performance this year. But later, the team will disperse and even find themselves on opposite sides for the 2002 FIBA Men's World Championship of Basketball, August 29-September 8 in Indianapolis.

Nash will play for Canada, Nowitzki and Bradley (who has dual U.S. and German citizenship) for Germany and Michael Finley and Raef LaFrentz for the U.S., while Wang will play for China in the 16-team tournament. Nash led Canada to a bronze medal last August at the Tournament of the Americas in Argentina, earning a berth in the World Championships. Nowitzki and Bradley helped Germany qualify for the World Championships with a fourth place finish in last summer's European Championships in Turkey.

In addition, Player Development Coach Rolando Blackman, the Mavericks all-time leading scorer and a native of Panama, will continue his role as an assistant coach for Germany. Donn Nelson, an assistant coach for Lithuania's Olympic basketball team, says he will participate in the tournament if time permits. The Mavericks also expect to see Ruben Wolkowyski, who was with the team in training camp, at the World Championships, representing his native Argentina.

The spirit of international competition will reach a peak in 2004, with the Olympic Games. Nash was captain of the Canadian team in 2000, and Wang, although just 24, has already played in two Olympics with China. Nájera hopes to play for Mexico in 2004, Abdul-Wahad for France, and Bradley looks forward to his first opportunity to play on the worldwide stage.

"That's the goal here," he says. "Dirk and I talk about that. We want to be in the Olympics. I think everyone in this room would like to be in the Olympics. My goodness! That'd be awesome!"

**International Mavs Sidenote:
Foreign-born Players Sparked Another Great Mavs Team, Rolando Blackman Recalls**
by Ken Turetzky

Once upon a time, an upstart Dallas Mavericks team with five foreign-born players on its roster won 53 games and made waves in the NBA Playoffs.

That scenario occurred last year, as Mavs fans easily recall, but precedent was set in 1987-88, when Dallas took the Los Angeles Lakers to seven games in the Western Conference Finals. As with the current squad, that Dallas team featured two Germans, forward Detlef Schrempf and backup center Uwe Blab; and a Canadian, reserve center Bill Wennington; along with shooting guard Rolando Blackman of Panama; and English-born post man James Donaldson.

"I think at that time it wasn't played up as much as right now. We took one picture but nothing ever came of that. As far as basketball was concerned, it just brought us all together and a lot closer," says Blackman, 43, a member of Head Coach Don Nelson's player development staff.

"Simply, everybody's not from one place, not one situation, not one economic background. Sports is the No. 1 bringer together of people," Blackman says, coining a phrase. "You don't think about anything but what you're trying to do together, period."

Blackman served as an assistant coach for Germany in last summer's European Championships, and plans to return for the 2002 World Championships. He's well aware of the NBA's growing worldwide appeal, and this team's role in that effort.

"I see it as a marketing feast," he says, laughing. The Mavs' international makeup, he says, "helps people from all different backgrounds identify with someone who's on the team or from a certain place. You talk about Steve (Nash) in Canada and playing on the national team, having an opportunity to be a national hero.

"Dirk (Nowitzki), of course, *is* Germany. He's just so large over there. Eduardo Nájera is from Mexico, a nation so close to Texas, and brings the Spanish-speaking population to the game while actually helping us to win. And we've only begun to see what Wang Zhizhi (of China) can do.

"Basketball opens a great deal of doors and offer goodwill throughout the world," Blackman says. "I think that's very good."

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