

Pau Gasol: courting a successful career

Now playing with the Chicago Bulls, the Spanish basketball player has managed to fill his career with successes. Here are his best moves, including game plans, contract terms and more.



March 15, 2016

On July 1, 2014, after 13 years playing in the NBA, basketball star Pau Gasol was declared a free agent. Having reached the age of 34, Gasol could choose his next home court. The Los Angeles Lakers were very keen to keep him while other teams wanted him to join their ranks

instead.

This junction in his career opens a [case study](#) by professor [Santiago Álvarez de Mon](#) and research assistant Juan Enrique Flores. The case explores Pau Gasol's international career drawing on numerous interviews with Pau and his family (his mother, father and brother Marc), coach Phil Jackson and many others who played key roles in the basketballer's professional development.

Laying the foundation: Pau's early years

Why was he so in demand in the world's top basketball league? Pau Gasol's "emotional intelligence" was among the virtues extolled by his teams, a feature already notable in his childhood, his mother said, along with his natural ability as a basketball player.

When he was only 18, in January 1999, Pau Gasol made his debut on Barcelona's first team. Two seasons later, he made his mark as MVP (most valuable player) in Spain's top tier basketball league, the ACB. He also led Barcelona to win the ACB league finals and the Spanish National Cup (Copa del Rey). His coach at the time, Aíto García Reneses, recalled that Pau had "good mobility for his height, court savvy and mental strength. Pau's capacity for hard work was impressive."

That same summer, Pau Gasol was the NBA's third draft pick. With an initial contract offer worth \$3 million a year, he could pay off the penalty stipulated in the termination clause of his Barcelona contract and join the Memphis Grizzlies, based in Memphis, Tennessee.

2001-2008: Memphis Grizzlies

In Memphis, culture shock was initially a challenge. Integration "was easier with the younger players, but the veterans, the guys who've been in the NBA more than 10 years, don't treat rookies as equals," recalled Pau. "Together with my language difficulties, that made it hard at first."

But the fact that his entire family came with him to live in the United States helped Pau concentrate on the day-to-day, a focus that otherwise would have been much harder.

That initial season, the Barcelona-native became the first non-U.S. player to be honored as rookie of the year. But, as a team, the Grizzlies did not win much. Accustomed to playing on a winning team like Barcelona, "the last year and a half in Memphis wasn't easy, because I lost part of my motivation and passion for basketball due to the frustration of continuously

losing," said Gasol. In addition, a coaching change had him sitting on the bench more than he expected in his final stretch on the team.

During this time, Pau had to learn how to manage the stress generated by the exacting demands of the NBA.

2008-2014: Los Angeles Lakers

In February 2008, Pau was traded to the L.A. Lakers — a team with a real chance of winning the NBA championships. Pau found an even more competitive atmosphere in California than he had encountered in Tennessee. But this time, his accumulated experience and his excellent relationships with coach Phil Jackson and incumbent star Kobe Bryant helped Paul feel part of the team from the start.

Jackson noted: "Pau has a sense of community. He's a team player. He likes to share the ball and knows that it's not always about him. He understands that what's going on with the team overall is more important than his game."

The results came in quickly: Pau ranked second on the team in points, rebounds and assists and was its best blocker. That year, 2008, the Lakers reached the NBA Finals, where they ended up losing to the Boston Celtics. In 2009 and 2010, the Lakers won the NBA championships.

Meanwhile, Paul was able to combine his passion for basketball with other concerns. His commitment to humanitarian causes led him to collaborate with UNICEF and then create the Gasol Foundation, together with his brother Marc. He was also interested in culture and music.

After Phil Jackson retired from coaching in 2011, Gasol began a new chapter, one marked by coaching changes, injuries and, eventually, defeats. In July 2014, he became a free agent, which opened up a range of choices for what could be the last stage of his career.

2014: Decision time

LeBron James was in favor of bringing Pau to his team, the powerful Miami Heat. Another contender for the top NBA title, the Oklahoma City Thunder, also showed interest. A third option, joining the Chicago Bulls, represented a slight step back financially, but there was an interesting plan afoot for the team.

Meanwhile, the San Antonio Spurs also offered an ambitious plan, with another star, Tony Parker, featuring prominently. In addition, the New York Knicks — with his former coach Phil Jackson as president — made a more modest offer, but working with Jackson could be a plus. Finally, the Lakers, his team of the past six years, made him a financial offer that beat all the others.

What was the best alternative? At this juncture in his career, what was more important: the economic terms or the professional project? Or was it time to put personal preferences above all else?

www.iese.edu/insight