



# Sport drives baller to greater heights abroad

SHENZHEN — He can't master many languages, but he has succeeded in reaching 70 countries and regions all because of sports, a language that is understood around the globe.

Nels Hawkinson, a former American basketball player, left his footprints in those places before his appearance in Shenzhen for the Universiade.

"At the party I attended today, 150 countries formed one family, one group. We celebrated each other, and celebrate sport," Hawkinson said.

"Today, there is no black or white. There is no religion or politics. We are all athletes," said Hawkinson.

"Sport is the only thing in the world that can do that, and nothing else can bring people together like this."

The 70-country trek started in 1979 when a 32-year younger version of Hawkinson left home for the first time as a basketball player. Representing the US team, his destination was China.

The different culture made him nervous, but when the ball was thrown in the air, the nerves disappeared.

After the match against China, the teams held a party. Although they could not communicate well, they still joked and laughed as brothers.

"I mean, at that time I realized I can do this. I can't understand their language, but sports can do that thing (unite people)."

From then on, he started doing basketball-related jobs all round the world.

Hawkinson coached the Norwegian nation women's basketball team, but because of funding limitations, he and the 11 players had only six rooms to share.

The starting center said, "I'm sharing a room with you tonight." He was shocked and thought, "this is a really a strange culture."

However, she ended up sleeping on the floor of another room.

"When you go to another country, you'd had better know a little bit of the culture, because you don't want to be rude," said Hawkinson.

"I am actually writing a book, which is called 'Traveling Violations', telling people about my experiences in different parts of the world."

He had met one of the richest men in the world and had also reached some of the poorest parts of the globe.

Once he was in Senegal doing a basketball clinic.

The players didn't have much money ... or even shoes, so Hawkinson's group bought all the stuff for them. "The kids were so excited about basketball after that because that may be the only gift they had ever received. Many



WANG HAOFEI / XINHUA

**Former American basketball player Nels Hawkinson is spreading the word of unity in Shenzhen after traveling through 70 countries and regions.**

of them were orphans," he said.

"We also went to an orphanage. There were hundreds of babies there. We held some for a long time and when we put them down they started crying.

"The staff there said there were not enough nurses at the facility, so many of the babies had never been held for that long a time."

Besides his contributions through sport, Hawkinson has also gained a lot, including meeting his wife.

"She came to my camp to give out gifts to

the kids, and I saw that she was good looking," he said.

Now, they had been married for more than 20 years.

"My dream of a basketball camp is to attract kids from all over the world and also do some cultural exchanges," said Hawkinson when asked about his future plans.

"This has been my dream for 20 years, to bring young kids from around the world together before they develop their own ideas about how things should be."

XINHUA

## Yao Ming still ambassador, says US official at Universiade

SHENZHEN — Nels Hawkinson, a former basketball player and an official of the US Universiade delegation, gave a high evaluation of China's retired basketball center Yao Ming during his fourth visit to China in Shenzhen last week.

"Yao Ming was and still is a great Chinese ambassador to people from all over the world," said Hawkinson.

"People in the United States enjoyed watching him play. I never heard one bad thing ever spoken or written about him. That is a great thing to say about anyone."

The former basketball player made his first trip to China in 1979, when he was 19 years old. During that tour he met Mu Tiezhu, another great center in China's basketball history. He was impressed by the "Chinese height" for the first time.

"I'd never seen such a big guy before. I was turning around, trying to face the basket, only to see his chest right in front of my eyes. That's incredible."



Mu passed away in 2008 after a heart attack.

"I was terribly sad to hear of his passing," said the 51-year-old. "Even though each of us could not communicate, we knew each other was a very nice person."

"Playing against him and the China team was truly one of the highlights of my athletic life."

The US has sent its largest-ever squad to Shenzhen Universiade, including sports stars in track and field and swimming, as well as NCAA first division elites. However, Hawkinson doesn't expect a first-place finish for the team at the Universiade.

"China will be first, and we have to find a good place after China. That's what we are trying to do."

As for the NCAA stars, Hawkinson was reluctant to predict their expected crowning on the basketball event.

"The rules in NCAA are quite different from the rules in the Universiade," said Hawkinson. "And our guys have only gathered for two weeks, so we have to adjust to the rules as quickly as possible."

"Some top players didn't come with us because of the schedule of their colleges."

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