

Tibet Is Going Crazy for Hoops

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Basketball first appeared in the Tibetan highlands about 100 years ago. At that time, the rugged, sparsely populated Tibetan plateau was ruled by warlords on its eastern frontier and in central and western Tibet by the Buddhist government of the Dalai Lama.

In his book *Seven Years in Tibet*, the Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer wrote that upon his arrival in Lhasa in 1946, the city “made no provision for games,” with one exception: “a small ground for basketball.” Particularly in eastern Tibet, the sport spread in part for topographic reasons: The uneven and rocky landscape encouraged basketball over soccer, which requires much more level ground.

Alex McKay, a Tibetologist and sports historian of the Himalayan region, suggested to me that the macho image of the American basketball star likely appeals to eastern Tibetans because they have roots in a warrior culture. As one Tibetan player from Amdo told Chinese media during a tournament in March: “We don’t have professional coaches back home. All of us learned to play by watching NBA and CBA games on TV, by following the players’ movements. No one gave us any direction.”

Still, Willard Johnson, the team coach, was enthusiastic as he ran his new players through drills for the first time. Practices, which lasted from 5:30 p.m. until sundown, became must-see events. Villagers brought stools and thermoses of hot water. They laughed when shots were missed and clapped when they went in. They watched as Johnson shouted at his guys and occasionally played alongside them. Sometimes, to everyone’s delight, he would dunk the ball.

For women especially, nomadic life is difficult. Days are long and dominated by chores: starting fires, milking animals, chopping wood, churning butter, cooking meals, collecting dung for use as fuel, cleaning pots, caring for children. The idea of a hobby never came up. “In traditional life, women don’t play basketball, but it doesn’t mean women don’t like it,” Jamyang Dolma told me. “It may be because they never had the opportunity, or anybody to lead them.”

In 2016, a female Norlha employee, Wandi Tso, asked Johnson whether women at the company could form a team.

“Whenever you want to play,” Johnson told her, “let’s do it.”

Johnson’s vision for Norlha basketball is to build a program so well respected across the plateau that the best and most driven players will flock to train in Ritoma and then return to their towns and villages as player-coaches to spread what they have learned...If his commitment remains steadfast, Johnson believes he could become one of the best players in all of Tibet.