

How Did We Get Here? *A Brief History of the NBA Dress Code*

On October 7, 2005 the then NBA commissioner David Stern implemented a mandatory dress code for all players. While it is true that most companies require their employees to adhere to some kind of dress code, the NBA was the first major sports league to do as such. The dress code required players to dress in “business or more conservative attire”. It banned any articles of clothing believed to be associated with hip-hop culture: jerseys, jeans, hats, t-shirts, Timberlands, large jewelry, and do-rags are a few examples. The dress code was to be enforced while conducting NBA business; to and from games, on the bench while injured, press conferences, charity events, in addition to other places and events.

The NBA and David Stern’s public reasoning for this new dress code was to fix an image problem that had developed following the Pacers – Pistons brawl during the 2004 season (colloquially known as the “Malice at the Palace”). David Stern thought this would cause players to better represent the league in the public eye. The dress code was met with opposition from both NBA and non-NBA sports figures alike.

The dress code was seen as nothing more than slightly veiled racism from the NBA and commissioner. Associating hip-hop culture with a negative or violent image is a racist generalization. It also targeted young black males, and in a league that in 2015 was 74.4% black, you can understand the outrage and opposition. Paul Pierce, Stephen Jackson and more specifically Allen Iverson, were all high profile players to address their opposition publicly. Allen Iverson stated, “the dress code is not who I am and doesn’t allow me to express myself.” He was one of the most public faces of the NBA and also one of the biggest would be violator of the dress code prior to inception. He was partial to oversized white t-shirts, jerseys, and large jewelry, in addition to hats, Timberlands and jeans.

More recently players have turned course and have fully embraced this dress code, and even allowed it help them elevate to new and diverse levels of fame and increased business opportunities. It used to be just shoe companies like Adidas, Nike and Under Armor in competition over players. Now? Beats and Bose headphones, as well as fashion labels from Saint Laurent to Off-White are even trying to work with NBA athletes. Post-game press conference outfits are talked about as much as the player’s actual comments. What players wear into the arenas has become a major talking point of pregame shows, and another form of competition amongst players. Last year, the 2017 All-Star game even had a fashion show, and awarded a “Best Dressed Player” award. Players such as James Harden (recipient of the 2017 “Best Dressed Player” award), Carmelo Anthony, and Nick Young are teaming up with and modeling for major fashion houses. Russell Westbrook has a clothing line that is sold exclusively at Barney’s.

Players’ embracing of fashion has transcended the 2005 dress code. Brands outside of athletic wear have realized that NBA players allow them access to a previously untapped demographic. A dress code that was originally designed to remove the NBA from association with hip-hop

culture, and attack the preferred clothing choices of young black males has helped to chauffeur in a new era of fashion in hip-hop.