

# **Factors Influencing Choice of Team for NCAA and Professional Basketball Players**

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## ABSTRACT

Basketball has become one of the most popular and lucrative sports in the world, with over 3.3 billion fans and a market value exceeding \$30 billion USD. The rise of international professional leagues and the NCAA's adoption of Name, Image, and Likeness compensation in U.S. college basketball have magnified business opportunities for players and teams. Team success increasingly depends on recruitment, which in turn hinges on recruiters understanding the values and motivations of players. This thesis examines the factors influencing team selection for NCAA and professional basketball players and explores how career stage and competition level impact the weight of these factors. 63 current NCAA and professional players across genders, levels, and regions were surveyed with a mixed-methods questionnaire, utilizing Likert-scale and open-ended questions to assess the weight of various factors. NCAA Division I players prioritized exposure, playing time, NIL opportunities, and coaching staff, while Division III players valued academics and team culture and Division II players demonstrated a more balanced mix of priorities. Younger professionals in lower-tier leagues prioritized development and upward mobility, while experienced players in top-tier leagues valued salary, team culture, and stability more. These findings offer insight into the modern basketball landscape from the players' perspective and emphasize the importance of individualized recruitment in both NCAA and professional basketball.

**Keywords:** professional basketball, NCAA, team choice, NIL, recruiting

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## LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| FA       | Free agent   |
| FIBA     | Fédération Internationale de Basketball<br>(English: International Basketball Federation)  |
| G League | NBA Gatorade League (formerly NBA Developmental League)  |
| H1       | Hypothesis 1   |
| n        | Sample size  |
| NIL      | Name, Image, and Likeness  |
| NBA      | National Basketball Association (United States)  |
| NCAA     | National Collegiate Athletic Association (United States)   |
| P        | Population size  |
| P value  | Probability of observing the differences in sample means if the null hypothesis (all group means are equal) is true; ANOVA test term |
| SD       | Standard deviation   |
| U.S.     | United States of America   |

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

Professional basketball has become one of the most popular and lucrative sports in the world, rivaling cricket for the second largest fan base and market size (after football) with over 3.3 billion fans worldwide (FIBA, 2023) and a combined international market size of at least \$30.2 billion between men's and women's basketball (Forbes, 2021; EuroLeague, 2021; PwC, 2020; Statista, 2020). This reflects growth in global interest in the sport, a 6% increase between 2019 and 2023 (FIBA, 2023), as well as an increase in the level of basketball outside of the United States. The international growth in popularity is demonstrated by increased revenue in international leagues (EuroLeague, 2021) and the number of international players in the NBA (WorldMetrics, 2023) - the top league in the world. Today, more than 100 countries host over 400 basketball leagues, and there are estimated to be over 10,000 professional basketball players internationally (EuroBasket, 2025).

This multi-billion dollar industry expanded to previously-amateur collegiate players in the United States in July 2021 when the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) adopted a new policy allowing collegiate student-athletes to profit off of their Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL). The college basketball NIL market is expected to exceed \$2.5 billion in the 2025-26 season (Athletic Business, 2024), with individual players earning as much as \$4 million (SBNation, 2025). This NIL money is sourced from donor-funded collectives, corporate sponsorships, and, as of July 2025, direct payment from schools via media rights revenue, ticket and tuition fees, and budget reallocation (AP News, 2024). This shift has caused NCAA players, who formerly could not receive any monetary compensation at all, to now be some of the highest paid basketball players in the world outside of the NBA. NCAA players also have more freedom of movement than ever before, due to rule changes in 2021 and 2022 that allow players to retain immediate eligibility upon transferring schools, effectively nullifying previous incentives designed to discourage players from transferring (NCAA, 2021). As a result, NCAA teams are now scrambling to come up with competitive NIL offers to entice the unprecedented 26-27% of scholarship players that have already entered the transfer portal in 2025: 1,100 men and 1,300 women at the NCAA Division I level (On3, 2025; Swish Appeal, 2025). Strategic marketing is therefore an increasingly significant aspect of recruiting and team success, as now college teams as well as professional teams must compete to attract talent and secure commitments from players with a wide range of values and priorities.

Historically, financial compensation has been the foremost consideration in a professional player's choice of teams. More recent research, however, suggests that team

branding, organizational culture, location, and personal development opportunities have become significant factors in team selection (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2021; Ewing, 2020). The modern NIL landscape has introduced compensation as a new consideration for collegiate players, but decisions are still complicated by career development opportunities like playing time (Smith & Washington, 2023). Professional players internationally weigh prospective jobs with metrics like potential for career advancement, league status, and contract terms (Berri & Schmidt, 2021). Organizational culture (comprising leadership quality, communication, and player development) has been flagged as a major determinant of long-term success and job satisfaction in players (Cooper, 2023), and players also contend with factors such as the team's global reach, exposure opportunities, and the ability to build a lasting legacy (Liu & Zhang, 2021).

## **1.2. Aim of the Study**

This study is significant because it comes at a time when the business of basketball is at an all-time peak and athlete choice is a paramount component of team success, both in sport and financially. By combining perspectives from international marketing, consumer psychology, and sports management, this research aims to provide an understanding of players' choice of teams in a rapidly developing modern basketball context. Primary source data from collegiate and professional players currently making decisions about teams will shed light on the most current priorities and perspectives held by players, information which is critical for teams and executives seeking an edge in the extremely competitive recruiting landscape - in which attracting top talent is becoming the most essential component of team performance.

### **1.3. Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study is considerable, as it attempts to bridge gaps in existing research and add modern context, especially regarding the intersection of athlete decision making with the evolution of personal branding and NIL rights (Nelson & Williams, 2023). This study involves the input of both current collegiate and professional basketball players from various backgrounds in order to gather and synthesize the most relevant evidence as to players' ultimate decision making factors when selecting a team. Players from all three NCAA divisions (DI, DII, and DIII) as well as a wide range of professional players were surveyed in order to include voices from as many relevant perspectives as possible. Professional players from different tiers and regions were included in this study, and participants have played in professional leagues in the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bosnia & Herzegovina, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Kosovo, Lithuania, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Romania, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, and the United States (see Figure 1).

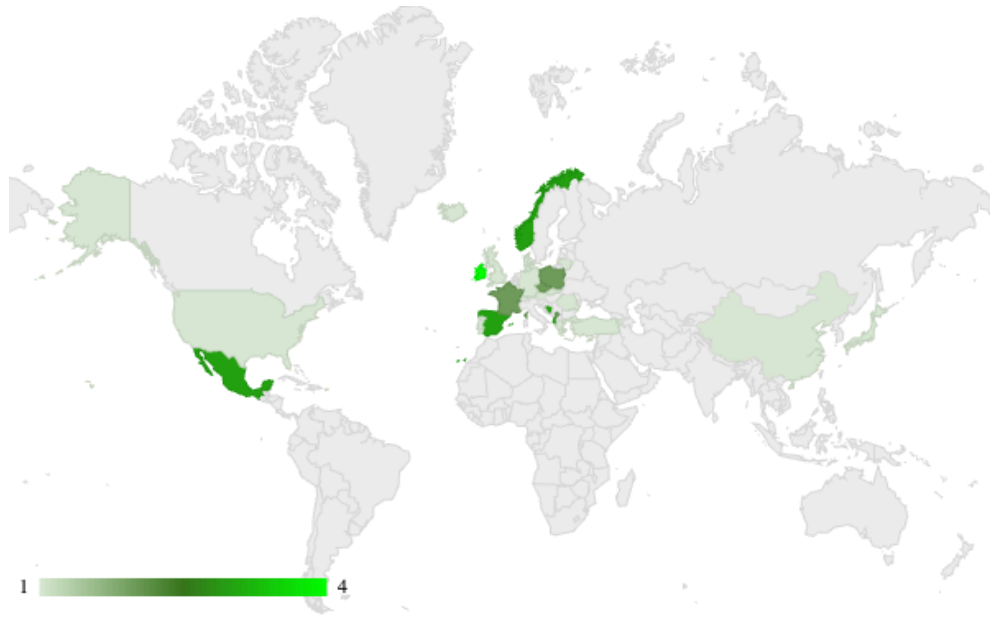


Figure 1: Map of Countries Played In by Surveyed Professionals

Surveyed professionals have also played at the top-tier of professional basketball in the NBA G League, FIBA EuroCup, FIBA Champions League, Chinese CBA, French LNB Pro A, and Spanish Liga ACB, as well as representing their countries on the national teams of Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Ireland, and Iran. In addition, both male and female athletes are included to explore gender-based variation in team selection considerations. Individuals from a variety of demographic and national backgrounds have also been surveyed, including respondents hailing from the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, Norway, Tonga, Australia, Turkey, Cyprus, Germany, Iceland, Denmark, Japan, Iran, the Czech Republic, and South Africa. This geographic diversity allows for comparative insights between very different regulatory, economic, and cultural environments. This study also integrates the perspectives of NCAA players

currently in the transfer portal and recent NCAA graduates planning to transition into the professional ranks, offering a more nuanced view of career inflection points.

#### **1.4. Methodology of the Study**

This descriptive study was conducted with a mixed-methods approach, using an online questionnaire to ask both quantitative and structured qualitative questions. Sections of the questionnaire were customized to fit three categories of players: current NCAA players who are not transferring, current NCAA players who are in the transfer portal, and current professional players. A series of Likert scale questions was developed for each category in order to obtain numerical data to represent the strength each factor influenced a player's choice of teams. For NCAA players, the 10 factors surveyed were location, coaching staff, team culture/environment, NIL money/sponsorships, player development, competition level, campus/facilities, playing time, academics/professional development, and winning/team success. For professional players, 11 factors were surveyed: location, coaching staff, team culture/environment, salary/benefits, player development, league/competition level, housing/facilities, role/playing time, upward mobility, contract length, and winning/team success. Five additional questions about career priorities were added for professionals, who have an even broader range of variables to consider in team selection. The total survey was intended to be easily accessible to the target audience of high-level basketball players, who have limited time to spend responding. Questions were designed to be quickly answerable but with space for more detail and side notes to be provided by participants with more time or interest.

The survey instrument employed Likert-scale assessments specifically with the intention of gauging the relevance of decision making factors to each respondent and utilized the accompaniment of open-ended short answer responses for qualitative depth. Data gathering was further segmented by NCAA division/professional country and league, gender, and year/career stage, allowing for layered analysis. These tools were designed to capture both general trends among respondents within each category and individual narratives from players who naturally have unique preferences and values irregardless of level or category. Convenience sampling was used to select a sample of 103 athletes from the first and second degrees of the professional network of the researcher.

The methodological structure implemented enables the study to evaluate why basketball players choose the teams, contracts, and leagues that they do, offering valuable insights into the relationship between purely transactional market forces, personal values, and career objectives.

## **1.5. Research Hypotheses**

The overarching hypotheses for this study were formed on the basis of the researcher's prior knowledge of the basketball industry and qualitative data gathered anecdotally over several years from innumerable NCAA and professional players. In regards to NCAA players, the hypotheses take into consideration the common justifications for choice of level in players; the most talented and athletic players usually play Division I and exhibit both the highest level of potential and motivation for athletic advancement. Therefore, DI players seem more likely to consider their athletic prospects

over any non-sport factors as opposed to players in the lower divisions. DI players are also by far the biggest beneficiaries of NIL opportunities. Approximately 90% of the NIL money in NCAA basketball goes to Division I schools (Front Office Sports, 2024) and the average NIL compensation per athlete in Division I is between \$15,800 and \$350,000 depending on the level of the conference (Bloomberg, 2024), while athletes in Division II average closer to \$200 (NBC New York, 2022) and Division III players, for whom there are significantly less data, likely average less than \$50 (Tuscon.com, 2021). As a result of this existing structure, Division I players have the opportunity to acquire six figure NIL deals from schools in certain conferences, and therefore are far more likely to place weight on NIL money as a factor in team choice. Division II players usually have not “gone DI” either because of lower grades or a slightly lower level athletically. Their priorities can be different from DI players as a result, but sometimes are similar - in the case of DII players who begin at that level with the intention of proving themselves and moving up to DI. Division III players, on the other hand, are traditionally less athletic and smaller than players at the higher levels, and therefore do not commonly seek to transfer to a higher level or play professionally after college. Statistically, over 40% of Division I men’s players play professionally, while less than 1% of Division III men’s players do the same (NCAA, 2024). Division III players therefore tend to seek more of a sport-life balance and focus more on their academics and non-sport careers, and DIII institutions are often academically rigorous. Logically, then, DIII players may value academic and career considerations more highly than players at other levels, while issues like NIL money will be a nonfactor.

For professional players, the career stage and competitive level of individuals is likely to be an important indicator for team selection priorities. Professional players who are just beginning their careers and/or playing in lower level “entry” leagues are usually working to get their foot in the door and prove themselves at the professional level, and therefore are willing to take jobs in less ideal situations (low pay, subpar coaching/team environments, subpar living situations). They usually have less options available to them, as teams may view these types of players as unproven and risky investments. After becoming more established with high statistical performances and film evidence of their capabilities at the professional level, players often have a wider range of options and begin to field offers from higher level leagues that can include improved living arrangements, resources, and pay. It is furthermore inevitable that professional players’ priorities change, as a significant number of pros play two years or less - 25-30% of undrafted NBA players are out of the league in their first two years and many overseas pros retire after the first year or two (Liu & Rees, 2008). Naturally then, players who have both the ability and aptitude to play longer than this initial period may have reevaluated their priorities and are more likely to vet potential jobs more thoroughly, with more choices available to them and higher standards for their employers.

## **1.6. Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited most significantly by the size of our sample and the method of sampling used. Prospective respondents were recruited through convenience sampling by utilizing the network of the researcher, and so although the final sample was satisfactorily diverse in gender, category, and playing level, a more representative

sample could potentially have been used with a random sampling method. Due to the time and resource constraints of the research, it was necessary to utilize a convenience sample and establish quotas and a total sample size that were realistic and achievable. In future research, a larger sample size of 1,000 or more respondents would improve the data quality. With the limited size of the sample, there exists underrepresentation from certain segments in a disproportionate manner to real life populations. For example, real world data show that 29.4% of NCAA basketball players attend Division II schools (NCAA, 2025), only 9.4% of NCAA player respondents were from the Division II level. DII players, therefore, are not accurately represented as a proportion of total NCAA players in this survey. The proportions in the other divisions are less skewed; Division III players make up 41.0% of the total NCAA basketball population compared to 34.4% of the sample, and Division I players represent 29.7% of the population and 41.0% of the sample (NCAA, 2025).

The study achieved a more realistic representation of gender identity, with the NCAA basketball gender split at 56% men and 44% women in our sample compared to 54% men and 46% women in the total NCAA basketball population (NCAA, 2025). The professional basketball gender split in the sample may be less reflective of the population, but reliable estimates are unavailable for reference. There are no precise data for the gender split in international professional basketball, but the split in the United States is around 82.6% men and 17.4% women (Zippia, 2023). The sample split for professionals featured comparatively stronger female representation, with 67.7% men and 32.3% women. Additionally, due to the sampling method and nature of the survey, the researcher acknowledges the possibility of self-selection bias in the responses. Out

of the total sample of players who were sent the questionnaire, approximately 61% responded (63/103). It should be noted for statistical clarity that the two responses which did not meet the criteria were not individuals to whom the survey was directly sent - they accessed it through a general link. These two responses were therefore omitted from the total sample size. The 63 individuals who chose to take the time to respond, therefore, could theoretically have had stronger sentiments that led to an increased initiative to respond. However, it is the opinion of the researcher that the considerable amount of deviation in the quantitative data gathered demonstrates a lack of obvious bias towards more polarized responses.

### **1.7. Structure of the Study**

At the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents are asked to self-identify and group themselves into the three major categories surveyed: current NCAA players, NCAA players who graduate in 2025 and plan on playing professionally, and current professional players. Based on the respondent's answers to initial biographical questions, they would be automatically redirected to the most appropriate category. Parallel questions were developed for the three categories with slightly different phrasing to make them relevant; for example, players who self-select as current transfer portal entrants received questions about the factors they were considering when choosing a new school, whereas players who were not in the portal received the same questions about what they had prioritized when choosing their current school. After a three-question biographical introduction, in which the categorical self-selection occurred, respondents who identified as NCAA players were routed to a second

4-question section in which they were asked for more background information and self-selected based on their transfer portal status. In the next step, respondents were redirected into one of the three aforementioned categories, and those who identified as professionals skipped the second section to go directly to this main subject area. Players of each category were then presented with a series of relevant Likert scale questions about how strongly each factor weighed into their choice of team. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data gathered from questions using a Likert scale, broken down into NCAA and professional categories. Figure 2 (below) shows the average importance rating (mean) for each decision factor involved in team choice. Each rating is on a 1 to 10 scale.

| <b>Factor</b>                                     | <b>NCAA<br/>Mean Rating</b> | <b>Professional Mean<br/>Rating</b> |
|---|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Location  | x/10                        | x/10                                |
| Coaching Staff                                    | x/10                        | x/10                                |
| Team Culture/Environment                          | x/10                        | x/10                                |
| NIL/Sponsorships (NCAA only)                      | x/10                        |                                     |
| Player Development                                | x/10                        | x/10                                |
| Competition Level                                 | x/10                        | x/10                                |
| Campus/Facilities (NCAA only)                     | x/10                        |                                     |
| Playing Time                                      | x/10                        | x/10                                |
| Academics/Professional<br>Development (NCAA only) | x/10                        |                                     |
| Winning/Team Success                              | x/10                        | x/10                                |

|                               |      |
|-------------------------------|------|
| Housing/Facilities (Pro only) | x/10 |
| Role/Playing Time (Pro only)  | x/10 |
| Salary/Benefits (Pro only)    | x/10 |
| Upward Mobility (Pro only)    | x/10 |
| Contract Length (Pro only)    | x/10 |

Figure 2: Table of Factors Surveyed By Likert Scale

The questionnaire concludes with short answer questions about how players' priorities regarding team choice have changed over their careers and if they strongly considered other factors that were not included in the survey in their team choices. This final section was designed to provide qualitative data to supplement the quantitative Likert scale questions and offer further insight into player perspectives. Summarical review of the responses to these questions will also demonstrate whether the factors involved in team choice are static correlating to each individual player's personality and values or if these factors are dynamic for the majority of players and display a pattern of adaptation over time.

## **Chapter 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1. General Information / Overview of the Topic**

##### **2.1.1. Definition of the Topic**

This study focuses on understanding the decision making process of collegiate and professional athletes when selecting a team, within the context of the lucrative and highly competitive global business of basketball. This important decision has always been undertaken at least once in every collegiate player's career - when selecting a college/university out of high school. However, in the modern basketball world, an unprecedented number of collegiate players are transferring every year; as of April 2025, over 2,320 men's college basketball players have entered the NCAA transfer portal, which is an 11.3% increase from 2024 (Front Office Sports, 2025). This figure represents over 40% of all NCAA men's basketball players, based on the 5,607 athletes listed at the start of the 2024-25 season (Front Office Sports, 2025). New data suggest that nearly 65% of current players (men and women) enter the transfer portal at least once during their collegiate career (MWC Connection, 2025). This means that collegiate

players are making this key decision of team choice significantly more frequently than the historical precedent, with some players transferring as many as five times (Rock M Nation, 2025) in a collegiate career that can span up to six or seven years with redshirt and injury exceptions to the standard four-year player eligibility rule. This is partially influenced by the recent adoption of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policies in the NCAA, which created a seismic shift in the decision making landscape. Student-athletes (the official term for NCAA players) can legally earn money through personal branding, endorsements, and partnerships as of 2021, which introduces new economic variables into their team selection process (NCAA, 2021) and infuses an additional element of professionalism in team choice and recruiting.

For the purpose of this study, NCAA players are defined as men's and women's basketball players who either were on an official roster at an NCAA member school in the 2024-25 season or attended a non-NCAA institution (a high school or non-NCAA college/university) for the 2024-25 season but are considering transferring/have already committed to an NCAA institution for the 2025-26 season. The latter exemption is made to include all players who have, are currently, or will undertake a selection process involving NCAA teams.

For professional basketball players, the factors influencing team selection extend beyond opportunity, salary, and contractual benefits to include lifestyle factors, relationships with coaches, team competitiveness, exposure, and cultural fit (Berri & Schmidt, 2021). Professional players, especially those competing in international leagues, must also weigh legal considerations such as dual citizenship, visa requirements, tax obligations, and language barriers. As a result, career planning and

team choice for professional players is a particularly strategic and individual endeavor - one that is often undertaken with very limited resources, reference points, and contextual information compared to the selection of college teams. For the purposes of this study, professionals are defined as men's and women's basketball players who either played on a professional team for the 2024-25 season or played for an NCAA team in the 2024-25 season, graduated or will graduate in 2025, and intend on playing professionally during the 2024-25 season.

Due to the increased professionalism of NCAA basketball, decision making for both collegiate and professional players in this context involves financial, social, and psychological considerations that collectively influence athletes' career trajectories. This literature review outlines what research has shown to be the primary factors that guide these decisions and examines how previous studies relate to the research question.

### **2.1.2. Development of the Topic**

Athlete-decision making in NCAA and professional basketball has become increasingly crucial as a focus for teams, coaches, managers, and executives to understand, as the modern basketball landscape has introduced more factors for players to weigh while the business of basketball has continued to grow in lucrative fashion around the world. In terms of professional basketball, the global ecosystem now includes over 400 leagues worldwide (EuroBasket, 2025), and continues to expand as leagues in areas like China, Southeast Asia, and Europe grow rapidly in popularity and demand. This growth has added opportunities for players around the world to pursue basketball as a part- or full-time career, but it has also made many leagues far more competitive in

terms of roster spots for foreigners and added a level of complexity to the considerations players have. American professional players, for example, frequently receive offers to play in Europe, Asia, or Australia, but must weigh exposure and career progression against cultural and personal adjustments, even irregardless of salary and financial consideration (Roderick, 2013).

At the collegiate level, the NCAA's 2021 NIL ruling created a major policy shift, ending a long-standing absolute prohibition against athlete compensation (NCAA, 2021). Analysts have estimated that the NIL market will surpass \$2.5 billion by the upcoming 2025-26 basketball season, indicating a massive transformation in the previously-amateur athletics landscape (Athletic Business, 2024). Because of this, collegiate athletes now face decisions increasingly similar to their professional counterparts, which factor in personal brand development, sponsorship optimization, and monetization strategies (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2021).

As a result of these ongoing developments, scholars and industry professionals have attributed a greater need to devote attention to the psychological well-being of players, long-term planning, and value alignment between athletes and teams (Cooper, 2023; Liu & Zhang, 2021). The explosive expansion of the transfer portal and the subsequent rise of third-party agents and NIL collectives have further impacted the ways in which players navigate team selection, making athlete decision making a multidimensional and rapidly evolving area of study. This topic is therefore exceedingly relevant to the current state of affairs in basketball, with player recruitment and team selection becoming more lucrative as professional basketball leagues expand and the domestic NIL market grows each season.

### **2.1.3. Scope of the Topic**

The scope of the issue of team selection in this study is considerable, but is limited to men's and women's basketball players in the American NCAA collegiate league, which spans three levels (Divisions I, II, and III) and men's and women's professional basketball players in leagues of varying calibers across the world. This notably includes two key segments of players who are typically excluded from market research: non-Division I NCAA players and professional players from international leagues other than the NBA and WNBA. By surveying collegiate players in lower divisions, who are less affected by NIL considerations in the modern college basketball landscape (as 90% of NIL funding goes to Division I schools), the scope of the topic is broadened to give voice to perspectives from players considering factors that most Division I players may not have to (Front Office Sports, 2024). For Division I players, the college basketball NIL market may exceed \$2.5 billion in the next season (2025-26) (Athletic Business, 2024), so the financial considerations for players undergoing the team selection process are at an all-time high.

The scope of team selection for pros is also considerable, as there are currently estimated to be 10,000+ professional basketball players in over 1,000 teams in the world (Eurobasket, 2025). These range all the way from local players who have played for their hometown club since childhood and receive a small stipend for playing on the club's top team to high-caliber veterans like DeMarcus Cousins, a former top five draft pick and four-time NBA All-Star who averaged almost 20 points per game in his outstanding NBA career before playing overseas in countries like Puerto Rico, where he finished the past season with career earnings of over \$92 million (The Sporting Tribune,

2024). Every professional player has a different resume, affected by the level of university(s) they played at, their playing time, statistics, and highlights from their collegiate career, previous professional experience, agent involvement, professional connections, family ties, and citizenship considerations (Berri & Schmidt, 2021). These all factor into the interest of professional teams from different levels and regions, and subsequently create the pool for the process of team selection. Sometimes the team selection process for young professionals involves only one opportunity, and sometimes for the best and most established players in a region, they can choose between any team and affect the future of the entire league with their choice (SI Staff, 2020). Thus, the scope of the team choice decision making process for professional players is even more all-encompassing.

Furthermore, a range of academic disciplines intersect in this topic, which include but are not limited to sports management, economics, marketing, psychology, and organizational studies. The implications of understanding the decision making process of high-level athletes not only is a psychological topic, but is an increasingly important strategic marketing issue for stakeholders in the growing business of NCAA and professional basketball. Stakeholders including athletic departments, professional team management, agents, marketing firms, and policy-makers seeking to support athlete development and wellbeing are inherently affected by the topic as a whole, and the financial wellbeing of institutions and teams are dependent in many ways on the athletes they recruit in the modern era.

#### **2.1.4. Dimensions of the Topic**

The core elements of athlete decision making in team selection can be categorized into two dimensions: tangible and intangible factors. Tangible factors are measurable considerations like NIL earnings potential (for NCAA players) or base salary (for professionals), performance bonuses (which professional contracts often include), team facilities, competition level, historical team success, and remaining eligibility/redshirt options (for NCAA players) or contract duration (for professionals). These are quantifiable metrics which can be easily used in cost-benefit analyses by players to compare opportunities. Intangible elements, which include players' perspectives of team coaches, team environment/culture, playing style and role, team location/region, and personal growth opportunities, are more a reflection of what the academic field of organizational culture has named the affective and relational dimensions of decision making (Schein, 2010). These complement tangible elements of decision making, but research is not conclusive on whether tangible or intangible elements have a propensity to supersede one another on a consistent basis in the context of individual decision making (Misuraca et. al, 2015). Some research does suggest that intangible considerations inherently influence tangible factors in the psychology of decision making (Smith, 2022), and it is a logical extension of this theory to suggest that the weight of certain tangible factors in consideration may be buoyed or diminished by relevant intangible factors. Previous studies have been conducted more specifically to evaluate factors influencing school choice for student athletes (Chard & Potwarka, 2017; Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015; Finley & Fountain, 2021; Magnusen et. al, 2014; Popp et. al, 2011), but most qualitatively establish factors without direct comparison between

tangible and intangible factors for players. These studies also all focus on NCAA student athletes across different sports, without parallel consideration for professional athletes or specificity for the sport of basketball.

Another dimension utilized to structure this study was the grouping of three categories delimiting respondents to ensure context-specific insights. Responses were separated into the categories of current NCAA players (with subgroups of those remaining at their current institutions and those in the transfer portal), recent NCAA graduates pursuing professional careers in the following season, and current established professional players with one or more years of experience. As referenced previously, existing research done on the topic of team selection for athletes almost exhaustively involves collegiate athletes choosing schools, so a key differentiator has been introduced in this study with the inclusion of additional groups with differing decision making factors.

### **2.1.5. Models / Theories of the Topic**

The conceptual foundation for this study is influenced by multiple theoretical frameworks that seek to explain how individuals broadly, and athletes specifically, navigate complex decision processes. Consumer Choice Theory is a well-established concept espousing that individuals make purchasing decisions based on a combination of price, quality, and personal utility (Thaler, 1980). When applied more specifically to sports, athletes can be viewed as consumers evaluating the “product” range of teams which offer varying packages of benefits (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2021). Human Capital

Theory (Becker, 1964) is more relevant to younger players making a choice of colleges or early-career professionals seeking their first contracts. It frames athletes' decisions as rational investments into their own professional development in sport and future earnings, which is applicable to the approach many players take when selecting teams but does not apply as closely to others who weigh intangible factors more heavily.

Organizational Culture Models (Schein, 2010) can be applied to explain how internal team dynamics, like shared values, norms, leadership styles, and communication affect the satisfaction and performance of players. While these models do not offer predictive evaluation of team choice, they can offer justification for the priority that team culture and environment has for some players over tangible factors like compensation. Everett S. Lee's Push-Pull Migration Framework (Lee, 1966) is a theory created to analyze labor mobility, and it can also be applied to basketball in a similar manner to that which it has been in previous studies to English football (Roderick, 2013). "Push" factors, like limited playing time or poor team culture, drive players away from current teams where these negative situations are known and proven, while "pull" factors, like increased exposure, more substantial compensation packages, or better level and developmental opportunities attract players to new teams (Roderick, 2013). When specifically applied to the psychology of team selection, this theory is less of a utility because it biases "pull" factors that players consider in their decision making process but discounts the element of attraction also exhibited by some "push" factors. For example, many players actively seek out what seems to be good team culture and environment, so "push" factors can also be "pull" factors in the converse during the process of team choice.

New literature in the emerging NIL era also puts an emphasis on identity-based decision making and the increasing importance of aligning personal brand with team and school opportunities, particularly considering the influence of social media and NIL regulations (Cooper, 2023). Theories like this create a more robust, interdisciplinary view of player decision making across multiple contexts and reflect a modern environment in which top players are becoming influencers as much as (or even more than) athletes.

## **2.2. Opportunities and Effects of the Topic**

The advancement of basketball to become a lucrative global business has created a range of opportunities for both collegiate and professional players. The foremost such opportunity is the empowerment of NCAA athletes to monetize their brand, which has created paths to financial independence at a very early age (AP News, 2024). Especially at the Division I level, NCAA players now benefit from NIL deals that can reach six or even seven figures, which exceed most international professional salaries by a significant margin (SBNation, 2025). As high-earning professionals instead of amateurs limited to only the on-campus resources provided by their scholarships, this enhances their ability to invest in training, health, education, and personal branding in the same way that NBA and WNBA players do. Since social media is integrally intertwined with NIL - in fact, an athlete's social media presence has been shown to have a larger impact on NIL valuation than their institutional affiliation (Kunkel et. al, 2021) - many NCAA players now have similar income structures to social media influencers. Paige Bueckers, a University of Connecticut star who garnered the highest NIL valuation in women's

college basketball during the 2024-25 season before declaring for the WNBA draft, boasts over 2.4 million followers on Instagram and 3.5 million on TikTok. This has contributed to her NIL valuation this past season of an estimated \$1.4 million, including endorsement deals with Nike and Gatorade, and the launch of her own Nike Player Edition sneaker. Out of that \$1.4 million for the year, she made no money directly from the University of Connecticut (unlike many top athletes) - all of her income was from sponsorships and partnerships (NBC Connecticut, 2025). Success in sport has made many of the best collegiate players bonafide celebrities, which, when combined with correspondent NIL compensation, has made at least 10 NCAA players millionaires in the 2024-25 season (Sports Illustrated, 2025), and hundreds of others now make six figures per year. In fact, the *average* NIL earnings for the approximately 990 men's basketball players in Power 4 conferences are a whopping \$171,272 per player (NCAA, n.d.; Painter, 2024). Power 4 conferences have the highest NIL averages in the country (Painter, 2024), but the figures are nonetheless staggering for 17-24 year old collegiate athletes. While these NIL estimations may only represent the highest percentile of NCAA players, NIL has undeniably created a lucrative opportunity for collegiate basketball players.

NIL has also had an enormous impact on business opportunities for organizations affiliated with NCAA players: third-party NIL collectives, marketing agencies, and NCAA member universities themselves. NIL collectives have emerged as powerful financial intermediaries. For example, the Texas One Fund (an NIL collective associated with the University of Texas athletic program) was responsible for paying out \$11.7 million to student athletes in 2023, and the University of Texas anticipates spending up

to \$40 million on just its football roster alone in 2025 (Chron, 2024) - building on the opportunity for the Texas One Fund. In the heavyweight Power Five conferences, NIL collectives are expected to raise an average of nearly \$10 million per year (NIL NCAA, n.d.). Meanwhile, third-party marketing agencies like Blueprint Sports have facilitated over \$70 million in NIL deals since the rule change in 2021 (Blueprint Sports, 2024), and continue to capitalize on the NIL landscape by facilitating deals for athletes with substantial commissions. Online platforms like Opendorse and INFLCR also profit from brand partnerships they source for collegiate athletes through commissions (Axios, 2021). Some companies have even approached the NIL marketplace with value to athletes, collectives, and institutions; Athletiverse monetizes NIL by offering comprehensive services that enhance the digital presence of athletes, facilitate brand partnerships for athletes, and provide strategic support to both NIL collectives and NCAA universities.

In adjacent fashion, brands and sponsors have capitalized on NIL, too. The overall NIL market is projected to surpass \$2.5 billion in 2025, and has grown by an estimated 40% annually (Keller, 2024). This has created marketing opportunities for all sizes and shapes of businesses, from local coffee shops to major companies. Some of the latter, including Adidas, CVS, and Gillette now partner with athletes via agencies such as Postgame (Postgame, n.d.) and can profit from lucrative ad campaigns, brand awareness, and increased sales as a result of athlete partnerships. Financial advisors and lawyers have also become increasingly involved in the management of complex brand deals for athletes, and are compensated by commission or set fees for their services (AdvisorEngine, n.d.). It is also important to note that social media platforms, especially

TikTok and Instagram, account for up to 80% of total NIL earnings for some NCAA players, which positions these platforms themselves as indirect financial beneficiaries of NIL and direct beneficiaries of the increased traffic and influencer-type following that top athletes garner (Athletic Business, 2023). Universities benefit from NIL in a less direct fashion, using NIL success as a pivotal device for recruiting and marketing. The University of Kentucky's 2025 creation of Champions Blue LLC, a limited liability company formed to oversee its athletics department, exemplifies a significant innovation in the administration of college athletics with the goal of agility and adaptation to the NIL landscape (AP News, 2024). Through this type of innovation, universities can find ways to generate athletics revenue outside the realm of traditional methods. NCAA institutions can also benefit from the enhanced recruiting power that NIL ecosystems generate, as well as increased brand visibility, media attention, donations, sponsorships, and ticket sales as a cumulative side effect of NIL growth and player stardom.

In the international market, the expansion of professional basketball opportunities worldwide has effectively democratized access to viable careers for American high-level collegiate players and international standouts. Many leagues around the world offer travel compensation, accommodations, transportation, exposure, and salaries that amount to at least living wage, allowing players who cannot make the NBA or WNBA to pursue long term careers in basketball (EuroBasket, 2025). Playing professionally overseas gives players the opportunity to travel the world, experience different cultures, learn new skills, pursue side hustles, and, in some cases, attain cost-free postgraduate education. These benefits can be obtained regardless of the level of competition athletes play at and the salary players earn. Even in the lowest level professional leagues, where

foreign import players make \$300 per month or less, athletes still can access the cultural benefits and personal and career development tied to overseas basketball. Living abroad can foster adaptability, broaden life perspectives, and offer cause to learn new languages and skills. These experiences inevitably contribute to personal growth and can help enhance an individual's maturity and worldview (Creppy, 2018).

Moreover, for high-caliber players in mid- and top-tier international leagues, the financial incentives are considerable and overseas basketball offers the opportunity to make a comfortable living from sport and build wealth. Many international basketball contracts offer comprehensive financial packages, which often include tax-free salaries, subsidized lodging and transportation, and round-trip airfare. These arrangements allow players to retain a larger percentage of their earnings than most domestic jobs - up to 100% of salary money can be saved in situations where all other costs are covered by the team. Many contracts also include performance bonuses and other monetary incentives, making overseas careers a stable financial option for professional players (Six Star Pro Staff, n.d.). Even despite contract perks, players who advance to such top-tier international leagues can earn very robust salaries. In the EuroLeague, Europe's top professional competition, most players earn between \$400,000 and \$800,000 per year with top players making upwards of \$5 million (Colorado, n.d.). In the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), average salaries range from \$1 to \$3 million, and top players make up to \$4.4 million (Colorado, n.d.). In Spain's top league, the Liga ACB, players earn between \$250,000 and \$500,000 per year on average. Star players can make up to \$5.4 million, while the league minimum is approximately \$30,000 (Colorado, n.d.). In the Turkish Super Lig (BSL), average salaries range from \$250,000 to \$500,000

annually and top players can earn up to \$3.7 million (Colorado, n.d.). On average, there are at least three other European leagues (France's LNB Pro A, Italy's Serie A, and Germany's BBL) that pay players a salary of over \$100,000 per year (Colorado, n.d.), and several other leagues in South America, Asia, and the Middle East are scaling rapidly to the point of offering lucrative contracts to big name players. One example of this occurred in 2022, when former NBA superstar Dwight Howard signed a contract in Taiwan's T1 league for over \$1 million for one season, despite the league's established policy of capping salaries for foreign imports at around \$200,000 per year. Men's professional salaries, of which the aforementioned figures are composed, are still significantly higher than women's (Her Hoop Stats, 2024), but both are rising in the major markets around the world. As basketball continues to grow globally in popularity and, subsequently, financial return, international leagues will also continue to grow in revenue and salary strength. As a result, overseas basketball likely will only become more lucrative and produce more opportunities for blossoming professional players.

### **2.3. Challenges of the Topic**

Despite its previously stated benefits, the evolving landscape of NIL and college basketball in the United States has introduced an additional layer of complexity for both athletes and organizations. One major issue is the increasing disparity between high- and low-revenue programs (particularly between divisions and between mid-major and high-major Division I schools), which will likely continue to exacerbate inequities between institutions and divisions. Over 90% of all current NIL money goes to Division I athletes, leaving DII and DIII players with negligible financial benefit from NIL (NBC

New York, 2022). This creates a higher incentive for star players at lower levels and in smaller DI conferences to transfer up, which poses a challenge for coaches and recruiters at institutions that cannot offer NIL packages to their players. Moreover, NCAA coaches are experiencing increased difficulty in retaining players; almost 65% of current players enter the transfer portal at least once during their collegiate career and many programs replace more than half of their scholarship players every single season (MWC Connection, 2025). This directly impacts intangible team attributes like team chemistry, roster continuity, and veteran leadership, which in turn affects in-game performance and winning percentage. Coaches from schools with less resources and NIL money to offer prospective players are particularly impacted by the rise of NIL influence, as they are far more likely to lose good players to the transfer portal and subsequently fail to recruit similar talent to replace them - players frequently change schools in search of better playing conditions and are easily drawn to higher level schools or improved offers (On3, 2025). This makes the modern age of NCAA basketball a strenuous environment for tenured coaches who were successful when recruiting did not involve the financial element of NIL and was more basketball-focused, but now struggle in a far more business-like competitive arena in which they are at a severe disadvantage.

In addition, ethical oversight and regulation is a growing concern in the NIL marketplace. Without many standardized rules or financial literacy education, young student-athletes are more likely to fall victim to mismanagement or predatory contracts. Such contracts can exploit athletes' inexperience and lack of business acumen, leading to long-term financial and legal consequences for unsuspecting young players. In one notable case, current Chicago Bears baseball player Gervon Dexter filed a lawsuit over a

whopping 25-year NIL agreement he unwittingly signed while playing at the University of Florida. The lawsuit alleges that the contract was "predatory" in nature and violated Florida's NIL and Athlete Agent laws. This situation is not isolated, and serves as a cautionary tale for NCAA players navigating lucrative NIL offers despite their financial inexperience (Fox Rothschild, 2023). Similarly, the investment fund Big League Advantage has been criticized recently for offering contracts to collegiate athletes that require them to pay commissions up to 40% or sign away their intellectual property rights (The American Prospect, 2024). These contracts are exemplary of how ambiguous contract language can also be used to exploit young athletes, a danger that may only worsen as the NIL market grows. The immediate lack of regulation in the NIL landscape has already led to several such situations where student-athletes have signed contracts that are inherently not in their best interest (NIL.store, 2025), which emphasizes the need for increased player education and market regulation to protect student-athletes.

The international professional basketball landscape and the decision making process of players in recent years has been challenged by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and, for women's basketball players, the gender-wage gap - which is more substantial in professional basketball than most modern industries.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on the overseas basketball market and ended or restricted the careers of many professional players. After the 2020 shutdown, most professional leagues postponed or cancelled their seasons, which resulted in a severe reduction of available jobs for foreign players - especially Americans (Sentinel Colorado, 2020). Economic uncertainty further burdened teams in smaller leagues with limited resources, and logistical challenges, such as international

travel restrictions and quarantines, caused a serious reduction in overseas professional opportunities for players (The Ringer, 2020). Geopolitical instability has also impacted particular key basketball markets - for example, the Russia-Ukraine war effectively closed one of the largest and most lucrative women's professional basketball markets to American players. This was illustrated dramatically by Russia's politically-charged imprisonment of WNBA superstar Britney Griner in 2022. Griner was arrested in February 2022 attempting to fly back to the United States after playing professionally in Russia for possessing cannabis oil, which most decried as a politically motivated and wrongful imprisonment (AP News, 2022). She was finally freed in November 2022 in a prisoner swap for a Russian arms dealer, but the highly publicized and traumatic ordeal that Griner had to endure effectively ended American participation in Russian professional basketball leagues for the foreseeable future - a major blow to high-level women's players looking to earn additional income outside of the WNBA season. International conflict further restricted international basketball markets in 2023, when the Israel-Hamas war disrupted another major professional basketball destination. Like the Russian market, this acutely affected American athletes, and disproportionately so for women's players who would otherwise compete in Israeli leagues during the offseason (AP News, 2023).

For American women in particular, who face exponentially smaller salaries than their male counterparts in the world's best leagues in addition to the aforementioned geopolitical complications, some domestic alternatives have emerged to fill the void. Newly-developed leagues like Athletes Unlimited and Unrivaled have introduced in-country options for elite American players during the WNBA offseason, and offer

safer, more stable alternatives without the risks associated with overseas leagues (SBNation, 2024). This is a key development in the professional basketball ecosystem, as the salary gap between professional male and female basketball players remains substantial despite recent progress. At the highest level of basketball, the average annual salary for NBA players this season (2024-25) is approximately \$11.9 million (Sports Illustrated, 2024). In stark contrast, the average annual salary in the WNBA is around \$102,000 (College Transitions, 2024). NBA players therefore earn, on average, over 100 times more than their WNBA peers. In an even more dramatic juxtaposition, the maximum NBA salary is over 200 times higher than the maximum WNBA salary. The highest paid NBA players will earn over \$55 million in salary in the 2024-25 season (ESPN, 2024) while the maximum salary for a WNBA player in 2024-25 is \$241,984 (Her Hoop Stats, 2024). The pay disparity begins at the onset of players' careers, when rookie Victor Wembanyama, the NBA's highly-publicized first overall pick in 2023, signed a four-year contract worth \$55.7 million - just under \$14 million a year (People, 2024). Caitlin Clark, the WNBA's viral sensation and first overall pick in 2024, signed a four-year contract totaling \$338,056, with a first-year salary of \$76,535 (People, 2024). This disparity is partially due to a difference in viewership, but this cannot fully justify the scope of the gap. For example, Wembanyama's first game in the NBA garnered an average of 2.99 million viewers across all platforms (Karp, 2023), while Clark's debut WNBA game was watched by 2.3 million viewers (AP News, 2024). While viewership does not explain the salary gap, however, the disparity has been at least partially exacerbated by contrasting revenue sharing agreements. NBA players receive about 50%

of the league's revenue, while WNBA players only receive about 20% of their league's revenue (Gettysburgian, 2024).

International professionals face many additional hurdles, including but not limited to inconsistent league quality, non-standardized contracts, delayed or denied payments or benefits, vague contract terms subject to loose legal regulation in some countries, and common cultural or linguistic barriers. Unreliable management, particularly in lower-tiered leagues but even in top international destinations like the CBA in China, and the physical toll of travel - especially for players participating in multiple leagues every year - have substantial effects on individual wellbeing and career longevity (Liu & Rees, 2008). Playing overseas and the international team selection process has real individual and career benefits for many players, but these benefits always come at a price - one that is sometimes far more considerable than players anticipate.

## **2.4. Research on the Topic / Summary of Studies**

Recent research on team selection for basketball players primarily focuses on NCAA players and school selection, as well as the ongoing impacts of NIL in college athletics, but when considering the full scope of this study more research is relevant in decision making, satisfaction, and athlete psychology. The preceding subsections of this chapter reference a variety of established literature and earlier studies that interact with the subject matter of this study, but this subsection will specifically identify several of these studies that serve as an intellectual foundation for the research conducted presently - as well as noting their limitations that this study seeks to address.

Most recently, Smith and Washington (2023) concluded that playing time and NIL earnings were the two most important factors for DI basketball players post-2021, but the study did not encompass other divisions or expand beyond the NCAA. Cooper (2023) isolates organizational culture as a key determinant of long-term satisfaction and performance, which echoes Liu and Zhang's (2021) analysis of player-brand alignment in light of NIL and professional individual branding. Grewal and Roggeveen (2021) focus more broadly on how branding and institutional prestige affect consumer decisions, especially in a saturated market - this research can logically be extended to apply to players as "consumers" in the context of this study. Berri and Schmidt (2021) study the economics of professional basketball, examining how contract structure and salary affect team choice. Their study was launched with the precedent of those two factors, however, and is therefore topically limited in comparison to this study. More recently, Nelson and Williams (2023) have conducted research concerning how the NIL era is reshaping student-athlete identity and decision frameworks, but the scope of the research is rather dissimilar from this study. In addition to the multitude of other research referenced earlier in this literature review, these particular studies summarily align to provide evidence that decision making in basketball is becoming more multidimensional and is influenced by a wider range of both economic and psychosocial factors in the modern landscape of both NIL and international professional basketball.

## **2.5. Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This study was conducted with the intention of answering several primary research questions, which guided the literature review, survey design, and hypothesis

generation. The first and foremost question was: what are the most significant factors influencing NCAA and professional basketball players in the process of selecting a team? While the development of the specific factors measured by Likert scale questions in the questionnaire was inherently a form of hypothesis, the study was also intended to discover whether the factors tested seemed comprehensive for most respondents or whether many respondents added additional factors that may have been greater determinants of team choice in the short answer sections. Moreover, this research question has two components: which factors are considered, and, more importantly, which factors are the key determinants of choice. These factors are also variable amongst the different competition levels for both NCAA players and international professional players, so the second research question must be: how does competition level (NCAA Division or professional league tier) affect which factors are considered and which factors are the key determinants of choice? These two overarching questions served to guide the research conducted in this study, the design of the study itself, and the methods of data analysis post-collection.

Five hypotheses were developed in prediction of how the research questions would be addressed through questionnaire data. With the foundational knowledge gathered through the literature review as well as the personal anecdotal evidence mentioned in subsection 1.5, the researcher hypothesized that the elements that most strongly correlated to team choice would vary depending on level (NCAA division and professional league status) and track as follows: the strongest factors in team choice for NCAA Division I players would be playing time, competition level, coaching staff, and NIL money/sponsorships (H1), while Division III players would prioritize

academics/professional development, team culture/environment, and coaching staff over other factors (H2). Division II players were considered to fall somewhat evenly in between the two former categories, valuing playing time, competition level, coaching staff and player development (H3).

Professional players have a different set of considerations, as reflected in the survey design with a slightly adapted array of factors, and furthermore should weigh different factors depending on the stage of their career and competition level. Young professionals (1 to 2 professional seasons or less) and players competing in lower level leagues around the world (entry-level leagues in areas like Mexico, South America, and Northern/Eastern Europe) would hypothetically place the strongest value on role/playing time, player development, and exposure/opportunity to prove themselves and move up to higher leagues, which is tracked in the survey through the upward mobility category (H4). More seasoned professionals (3+ professional seasons) and players in higher-tier leagues (mid- to top-tier leagues in areas like Southern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Australia, and the United States), on the other hand, would hypothetically shift their priorities to place a higher emphasis on coaching staff, team culture/environment, and salary/benefits, with a premium on league/competition level (but not of more value than the aforementioned factors) (H5).

## **Chapter 3**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **3.1. Survey Results**

As a conglomerate, the questionnaire results for all surveyed segments reinforce that the importance of each factor considered in team selection is strongly influenced by both the level a player competes at and the stage of the player's career. NCAA Division I players indicated that they care most about exposure and development, while Division III players were evidenced to be more focused on athletic-academic balance and team culture. Professional players at different career stages demonstrated a tangible shift in priorities, with younger players in lower tiers focusing more on playing time and development while more experienced players in higher tiers value stability, team situation, and compensation. These statistical insights provide a quantitative foundation to the qualitative conclusions drawn from the survey data, addressing the thesis objective of understanding the decision making process for basketball players at different levels.

## **3.2. Data Analysis**

Cross-sectional analysis of decision factors was conducted across men and women who are current NCAA players and current professional players. Out of the sample of 103 individuals selected through convenience sampling and to whom the questionnaire was sent, 63 responses were acquired. From the NCAA level, these included 32 current players representing 19 conferences and all 3 NCAA Divisions (DI, DII, and DIII). The NCAA sample consisted of a fairly even split of 56% men and 44% women. Responses from 31 current professionals were collected, from 68% men and 32% women with a combined 86 years of professional experience in 29 different countries around the world. 2 additional responses were obtained from respondents who were not intended to be in the original sample, most likely due to sharing of the survey link. These 2 respondents did not fit the survey criteria and were therefore omitted from the data analysis.

Analysis was conducted between groups (NCAA versus professional) and between group segments (NCAA divisions and professional tiers). Through this analysis of the data obtained in the questionnaire, this study has unearthed some clear insights into how surveyed factors such as playing time, coaching staff, team culture, and salary intersect with relative externalities such as competition level and career stage to shape athletes' team choices.

### **3.2.1. Professional Data Analysis**

Professional players were segmented into 4 tiers corresponding to the league level they competed in. Based on players' responses to a survey question asking for the

highest level league the individual had competed in and a short answer response listing all of the leagues/countries the player had competed in, each professional respondent was coded into one of the four tiers. Tier 1 comprises the top leagues in the world: the NBA, NBA G League, EuroLeague, Spanish ACB, French LNB Pro A, Turkish BSL, German BBL, and Chinese CBA. Tier 2 includes top level professional competitions in other countries and major inter-regional competitions like the FIBA EuroCup and FIBA Champions League. Tier 3 features lower level leagues that are still well resourced and competitive as well as smaller inter-regional competitions like the European North Basketball League (ENBL), and Tier 4 consists of all other entry-level professional leagues and leagues in countries with little basketball infrastructure or resources. To place rising professionals (who have not yet signed with a team for their first professional season) in the tier system, realistic placements were estimated based on the NCAA division of the player and any additional information they provided about their prospective options upon further direct request. All of the professional leagues in which surveyed players competed are sorted into their appropriate tiers in Figure 3 (below). The distribution of professional respondents was skewed towards Tier 4 pros, as the Tier 4 sample was approximately the same size as the other three tiers combined (see Figure 4).

| Professional League Tiers |  |           |   |
|---------------------------|--|-----------|---|
| <b>Tier 1</b>             |  | <b>3</b>  |   |
| M                         |  | 2         | NBA G League, Spanish Liga ACB  |
| F                         |  | 1         | French LNB Pro A, Chinese CBA   |
| <b>Tier 2</b>             |  | <b>8</b>  |   |
| M                         |  | 5         | FIBA EuroCup, FIBA Basketball Champions League (BCL), Austria SuperLiga, Spain LEB Plata, Poland 1Liga, Japanese B.League, Czech Republic NBL                                       |
| F                         |  | 3         | FIBA EuroCup, Liga Portuguesa de Basquetebol (LPB), German ProA (2nd Division), Women's German DBBL   |
| <b>Tier 3</b>             |  | <b>4</b>  |   |
| M                         |  | 2         | Denmark Basketligaen, European North Basketball League (ENBL), Slovakia Extraliga, Lithuania NKL, England NBL1  |
| F                         |  | 2         | Australian NBL1, Icelandic Úrvalsdeild karla  |
| <b>Tier 4</b>             |  | <b>16</b> |   |
| M                         |  | 12        | Norway BLNO, North Cyprus SuperLigi, Bosnia and Herzegovina A1 Liga, Albania Super League, Kosovo Liga e Pare, Australian Big V, German Regionalliga, Spanish Liga EBA, Turkey TB2L |
| F                         |  | 4         | Ireland National League (Division I)  |

Note: Rising Professionals have been placed in tiers based on their collegiate level, & 1 signed with a team after submitting the survey.

| Rising Pro (M/F) | NCAA Level | Proj. Pro Tier | Notes                                    |
|------------------|------------|----------------|--|
| (M)              | DIII       |                | 4 FA, pursuing Australian Big V contract |
| (M)              | DII        |                | 3 FA                                     |
| (F)              | DI         |                | 3 Signed in Australian NBL1              |
| (F)              | DIII       |                | 4 FA                                     |
| (F)              | DI         |                | 2 FA, Signed to reputable agency         |
| (M)              | DIII       |                | 4 FA                                     |

Figure 3: Professional League Tiers

### Competitive Levels of Surveyed Professionals

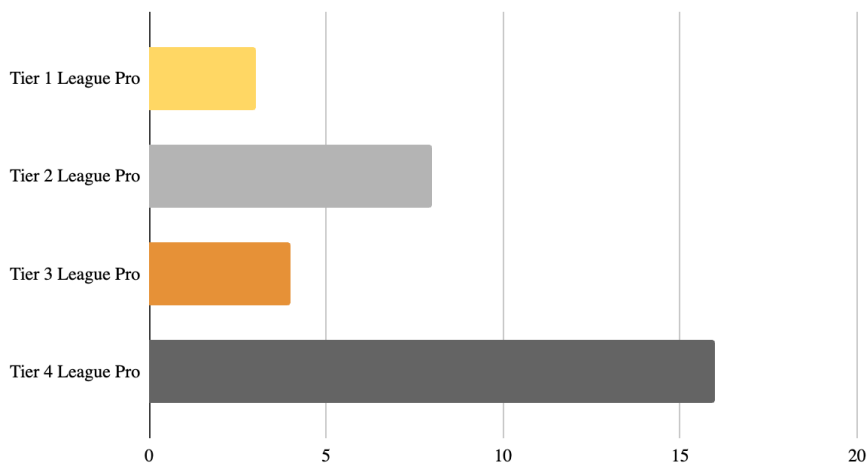


Figure 4: Competitive Levels of Surveyed Professionals

Tier 4 professionals (n=16) placed the most weight on factors such as role/playing time, development, and mobility, validating H4. The mean rating for mobility in Tier 4 was 8.31, the highest among all factors in this segment, supporting H4's prediction that immediate performance, improvement, and the opportunity for movement into better leagues is a foremost consideration for lower tier and early career professionals. Player

development (mean score of 7.38), role/playing time (7.06), and housing/facilities (7.69) were also rated highly, reflecting a strong emphasis on personal growth and foundational support as players begin their careers. Tier 4 players placed less emphasis on winning (5.31) and contract length (6.94), implying that competitive success and more specific contract types were less important than securing a pathway to higher competition levels at this career stage. Qualitative responses reinforced these insights, as players in this tier mentioned goals such as “advancing quickly,” “more income,” “good location,” and “exposure to better teams” as significant motivational factors. It should be noted for clarity that although tiers are based solely on the level of the leagues in which players competed, they also are somewhat correlated to experience level. The average amount of professional experience for Tier 4 was 1.75 years played, and so based on the sample data, it is safe to conclude that there is some correlation between tier and experience level, especially in lower tiers. Therefore, the factors that Tier 4 players in particular consider most important in team selection reflect both their level of competition and their career stage - an association that is not as strong in Tier 3 and Tier 2.

Players in Tier 3 (n=4) were also mostly early in their careers, but played in mid-tier leagues and/or more mobile situations, implying greater talent or stronger NCAA background, decisive career intent, and ambition. These respondents provided the highest overall mean scores across all categories, most notably contract length (mean score of 9.25) and mobility (8.75). Tier 3 players rated team culture, salary/benefits, player development, role/playing time, and housing/facilities all consistently high as well (all between 7.5 and 8.0). The strong valuations across all dimensions suggest that ambitious, younger professionals seek more well-rounded, secure experiences even in

their first seasons. These pros may be more selective, well-informed, or supported by agency backing and/or an accomplished NCAA background.

Tier 2 players (n=8), who average more experience (2 to 9 years playing in stronger European and Asian leagues), demonstrated a more balanced set of priorities than lower tier players, especially those in Tier 4. Their top decision factors included mobility (mean score of 8.5), player development (7.88), and housing/facilities (7.25). Unlike lower tiers, however, salary (6.75) and culture (7.13) also began to play a larger role, indicating some level of transition toward broader professional and personal aspirations. While Tier 2 players still showed initiative to climb the competitive ladder, they also were more focused on team environment and lifestyle fit - consistent with the gradual shift towards more holistic life and career balance predicted in the initial hypotheses. Interestingly, winning (3.88) remained the lowest rated category for Tier 2, emphasizing that mid-career professionals may also prioritize individual advancement and stable conditions over team success.

The highest level of competition, Tier 1, also corresponded to the highest average experience level. This top tier consisted of players (n=3) averaging over 5 professional seasons in 4 out of the top 8 leagues in the world, including the United States' NBA G League, France's LNB Pro A, Spain's ACB, and China's CBA, amongst others. In alignment with H5, there was a distinct pivot in priorities for these elite professionals. Tier 1 players responded with the highest average rating across tiers for competition level, housing/facilities, and salary/benefits (mean scores of 8.33 each) and ranked role as the strongest consideration overall (9.0). These factors were complemented in this tier with stronger consideration of mobility (8.0) and coaching staff (8.0), reflecting both the

drive to play in the most competitive circumstances that is a prerequisite hallmark of the best players in the world and the desire to be compensated and treated accordingly. Development (5.0) was lower rated than any other tier, as predicted, which is likely a reflection of these players already having reached an elite level and prioritizing more team and lifestyle related factors at a later career stage. Moreover, winning (4.67) remained a low priority relative to other factors, suggesting that even at the highest level, fit and stability are more significant individual considerations than team success. Qualitative responses from Tier 1 players supported the quantitative findings, with respondents stating that decisions at this career stage are based more on "coaching staff and salary" or "contract specifics and family needs" instead of earlier career motivations like "exposure" or "league reputation".

This comparative analysis illustrates a progressive evolution in priorities, corresponding to both competitive tier and career stage of surveyed professionals (see Figure 5). Tier 4 players are most concerned with exposure, development, and upward mobility while Tier 3 players seek comprehensive professional value from the outset. Tier 2 players incorporate personal and professional lifestyle factors more concertedly, and elite Tier 1 players place a premium on money, support, and freedom.

## Mean Weight of Team Choice Factors by Pro Basketball Tier

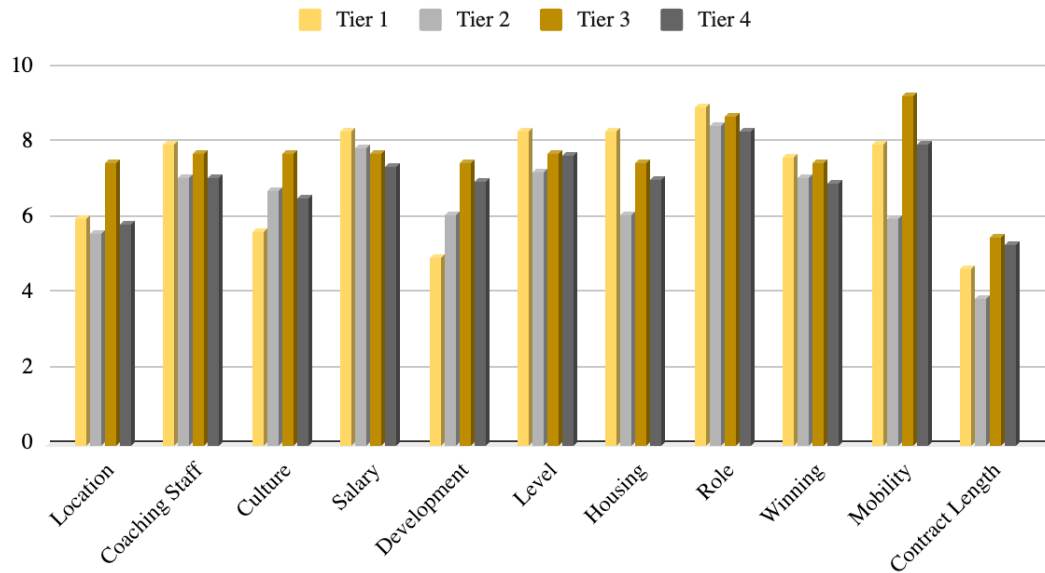


Figure 5: Mean Weight of Team Choice Factors by Professional Basketball Tier

Additionally, though not directly correlated to the primary research questions, surveyed professionals exhibited a strong preference for signing their next contract in Europe over leagues in other continents (see Figure 6). This may be due to the general stability, contract fulfillment, and opportunities for upward mobility that characterize the European professional basketball market more so than other regions. It may also pertain to language and cultural comfort level, due to the large number of English speaking countries and more Western culture.

## Desired Region for International Professional Basketball Players

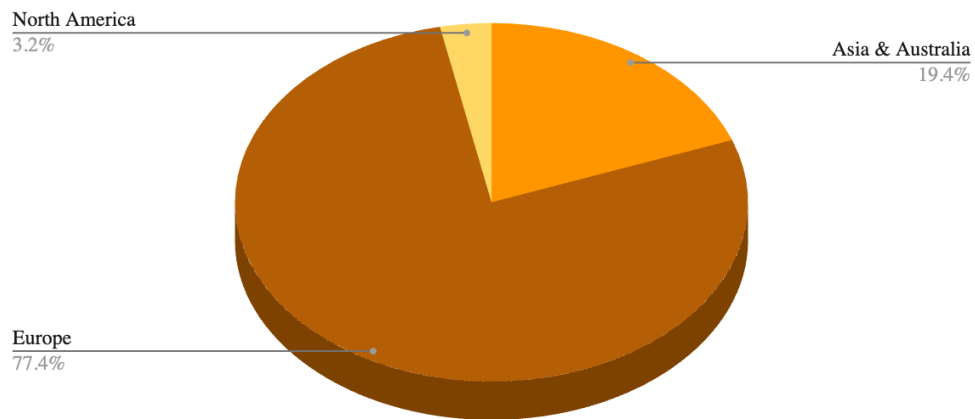


Figure 6: Desired Region for International Professional Basketball Players

These data support the central thesis that competition level and experience meaningfully affect the determinants of team choice for professional basketball players. Furthermore, the findings of this study demonstrate that while factors like mobility and role remain consistently relevant, others, like team culture, facilities, and contract specifics, vary in relevance in relation to career phase and league context.

### 3.2.2. NCAA Data Analysis

The analysis of NCAA players' responses, spanning Divisions I, II, and III, provided insight into how current collegiate athletes assess team fit and how those priorities evolve over time. This segment complements the findings from professional respondents by revealing how earlier life stages shape team choice and how decision factors are developed in the pre-professional career stage. From the sample of Division I respondents (n=13), the highest rated factors on average were team culture/environment

(with a mean score of 8.85), coaching staff (8.54), and player development (8.23). These averages suggest that DI players, who must navigate a more competitive environment with higher pressure on performance than lower levels, place the highest value on institutional support, team atmosphere, and sport-specific improvement. The considerable weight of the coaching staff factor reflects the influential role that the relationship with team coaches has on a player's choice of teams. NIL/sponsorship money (4.77) was not one of the higher rated categories, implying that DI players even in the current NIL landscape still value relationships and personal and career growth over financial incentives. However, some respondents stated in open responses that financial considerations (like cost of attendance or scholarship structure) played a more significant role earlier in the recruiting process and in their careers, especially when team choices were limited. It should also be noted that the financial factor was still a greater consideration for DI players than those in lower divisions, reflecting the disproportionate impact of NIL and sponsorship money on Division I sports.

Qualitative data gathered reveal that many respondents' priorities changed over time; for instance, one player said that their responses were different at this point in their career: "I'm older and I know what I want more in terms of coaching and development than I did when I first did the recruiting process." Another DI player shared that their transfer experiences reshaped the factors that determined their team choice: "Each year my priorities are different because of the specific situation and environment that I am in." This fluidity in priorities is similar to trends observed in the professional tiers, in that as players mature and gain experience, their team selection considerations become increasingly nuanced and tailored to their current context and career priorities.

Division II respondents (n=3) rated team culture (mean score of 9.67) and winning (9.67) the highest, followed closely by role/playing time (9.00) and campus/facilities (8.33). Although this segment had the smallest sample size, DII athletes appear to balance team success, program infrastructure, and individual opportunity more evenly than other levels. Their mean ratings were generally higher across all categories than those in Division I or III, suggesting a highly engaged and ambitious subset of athletes who chose their current environments to meet their specific career goals and strong sport-specific focus. Notably, all DII respondents (albeit a small sample) expressed satisfaction with their team choices, potentially signifying a stronger alignment between initial expectations and reality at this level. More research would have to be conducted with Division II players to establish a basis for this phenomenon.

As predicted, Division III athletes (n=15) presented a different profile. While team culture (8.53) and coaching staff (6.46) remained relatively important, there was greater dissipation of ratings across categories in this segment. Non-basketball factors like academics (7.36) and campus/facilities (7.68) were judged comparably to basketball-specific factors like playing time (7.39) and player development (7.20), which underlines Division III's established emphasis on the student-athlete model and the balanced priorities of players at this level. Many DIII respondents also reported high levels of satisfaction with their team choices, with multiple responses stating that individual fit within the team and academic structure at a school outweighed competitive aspirations. One player explained: "I'm here for a good group of guys who all like to hoop... Athletics comes after school (sic)." For some respondents, however, misalignment still occurred; one cited "lack of change within the program... I feel I

could have success at a higher level.” This divergence reinforces that while Division III athletes are more academically motivated than any other level, most still seek meaningful athletic experiences, and frustrations can arise especially when sport-specific ambitions exceed program limitations. Figure 7 visually exhibits the variation in factor weight across divisions.

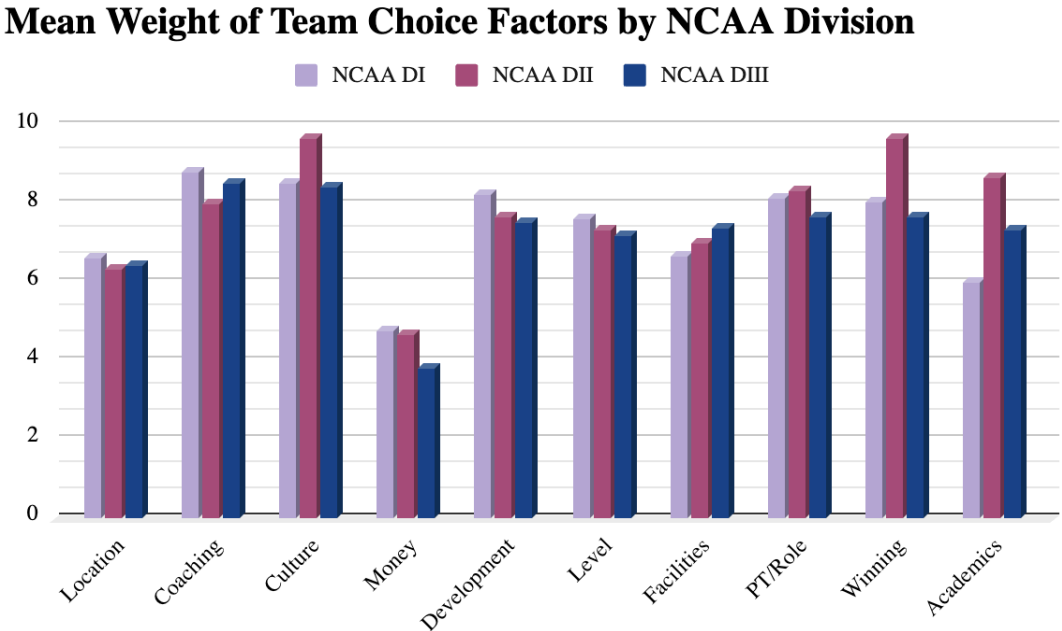


Figure 7: Mean Weight of Team Choice Factors by NCAA Division

Across NCAA divisions, some patterns mirrored those exhibited in the professional segment. Coaching staff and team culture were rated consistently important across all levels, but were weighted differently depending on the maturity and experience of individual players. Playing time, development, and facilities are more significant factors when players are early in their careers and/or seeking competitive

exposure. Athletes frequently reported that their priorities had at some point evolved, especially after transferring (in the case of NCAA players), gaining experience, or attaining greater professional opportunities. The NCAA data confirm that no one-size-fits-all model for team choice (or, conversely, recruitment) is realistic, and coaching practices and recruiting strategies should account for this complexity to achieve greater program success.

### 3.2.3. Intergroup Factor Weight Variation

Welch’s T-Tests and ANOVA tests were used to measure the variation in factor weights between NCAA players and professional players (see Figure 8).

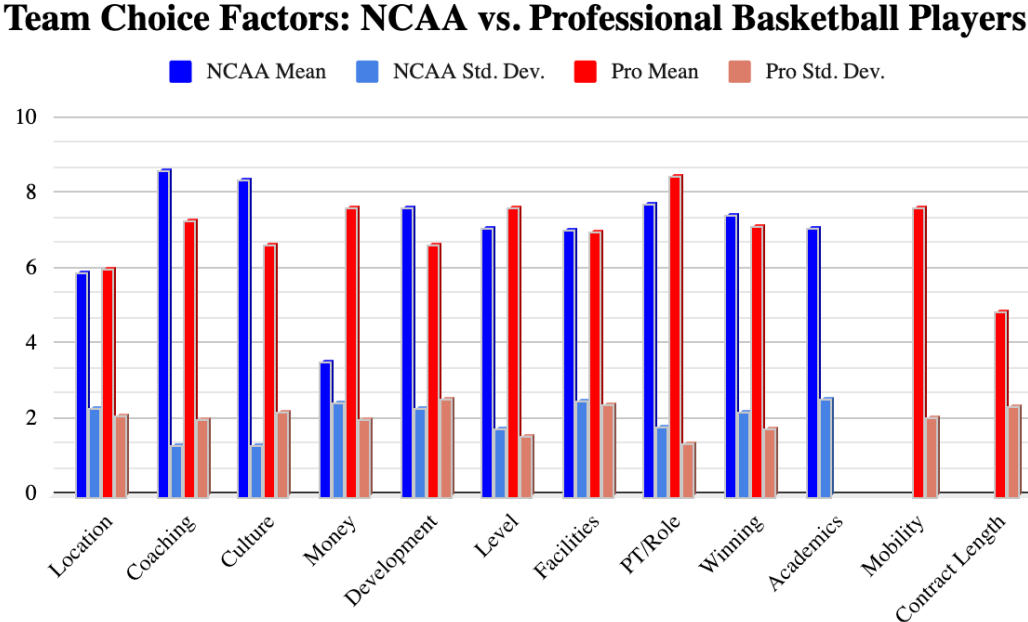


Figure 8: Team Choice Factors: NCAA vs. Professional Basketball Players

The results of the t-tests (see Figure 9) reinforced the study’s earlier quantitative analysis, determining that coaching staff, team culture, and compensation are more important priorities for professionals, especially seasoned players in higher tiers (in line with H5). Development and playing time are shared priorities between lower level/younger professionals and NCAA players, in support of H4. In the t-tests, no strong intergroup variation was exhibited in how players rated location, facilities, or winning, quantitatively implying that these may be universal or secondary considerations.

| <b>Intergroup Variation Of Factor Strength Between Professional and NCAA Players (Welch's T-Test)</b> |                |                 |                      |             |             |                    |               |              |
|---|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Location  | Coaching Staff | Culture         | Money                | Development | Level       | Facilities/Housing | PT/Role       | Winning      |
| 0.8216905172  | 0.002339125242 | 0.0003765051096 | 0.000000001268401002 | 0.102036182 | 0.224508164 | 0.9196713443       | 0.06253083227 | 0.5023658594 |

Figure 9: Intergroup Variation of Factor Strength Between Professional and NCAA Players (Welch’s T-Test)

ANOVA testing produced parallel results to those of the t-tests, showing statistically significant differences in coaching, culture, and compensation weights between professionals and NCAA players (see Figure 10). NCAA respondents gave comparatively greater weight to coaching and culture factors, which is unsurprising given that collegiate players spend more time with any given team on average than professionals due to their academic considerations and concurrent college education. Professional players comparatively demonstrated a far greater value for compensation, which is inherent given the nature of a profession. Factors like location, player development, facilities, and winning did not show significant differences between

groups. Playing time/role is borderline significant statistically, meaning that it may be more important for professionals but the results are inconclusive at  $p = 0.063$  (a p value under 0.05 signals a significant intergroup difference, while a value over 0.05 indicates insignificant variation between groups).

| Factor       | # | F-value | p-value | Significant? ( $p < 0.05$ ) | Interpretation   |
|--------------|---|---------|---------|-----------------------------|--|
| Location     |   | 0.051   | 0.822   | No                          | Location is similarly valued by both groups.   |
| Coaching     |   | 9.66    | 0.003   | Yes                         | NCAA players value coaching significantly more than pros.                                  |
| Team Culture |   | 14.18   | < 0.001 | Yes                         | NCAA players rate team culture as more important.  |
| Money        |   | 51.15   | < 0.001 | Yes                         | Pro players consider money far more important.   |
| Development  |   | 2.76    | 0.102   | No                          | Development is similarly valued by both groups.  |
| Level        |   | 1.51    | 0.225   | No                          | Competition level is similarly valued by both groups.                                      |
| Facilities   |   | 0.01    | 0.92    | No                          | Facilities/housing are similarly valued by both groups.                                    |
| PT/Role      |   | 3.6     | 0.063   | Borderline                  | Pro players may rate playing time/role slightly more important, but responses are similar. |
| Winning      |   | 0.46    | 0.502   | No                          | Winning is similarly valued by both groups.  |

Figure 10: Intergroup Variation of Factor Strength Between Professional and NCAA Players (ANOVA Test)

While the analysis of intergroup factor weight variation was not specifically relevant to the research questions, it provides a greater context to the research subject and further justifies the study design decision to separate professionals and collegiate players into distinct groups and evaluate the decision making factors of each separately.

### 3.3. Conclusion

This study sought to address two primary research questions regarding the most significant factors influencing NCAA and professional basketball players' team selection decisions as well as the effect that competition level has on the relative weight of these factors. A series of five hypotheses generated through a combination of literature review

and anecdotal evidence were tested through an online questionnaire sent directly to a sample of respondents selected through convenience sampling.

The first research question, concerning the most significant factors influencing team selection, was addressed through both Likert scale questions and open-ended responses. The data gathered indicate that NCAA Division I players prioritize factors like playing time, competition level, coaching staff, and NIL opportunities over other factors. This result aligns with H1, which predicted that Division I players would focus on these more high profile considerations as they seek exposure, development, and to capitalize on the lucrative NIL marketplace through NIL income. DI players, who are in higher stakes environments than their DII and DIII counterparts and are subject to more public scrutiny and external pressure, must balance academic commitments with the challenges of maximizing their athletic potential. It is logically predictable, then, that Division I players place a greater emphasis on these factors. Similarly, for Division III players, the survey results affirmed H2, which hypothesized that DIII players are more focused on academics, professional development, and team culture over the “high profile” factors like NIL money (a negligible concern at that level) and personal exposure. This reflects a lower amount of pressure for immediate professional success that Division III players face, with more emphasis placed on academic performance, personal development, and a balanced lifestyle. Division II players demonstrated a more even mix of priorities, valuing both team culture/environment and professional development, but with a greater attention to playing time and coaching staff than DIII players, supporting H3.

The second research question, focusing on how players' competitive level influenced the team choice factors they considered, was addressed through the analysis of variation in responses based on NCAA division and professional league tier and experience level. Young professional players in Tiers 3 and 4 (with 1 to 2 years of experience on average, primarily in lower level international leagues) placed greater emphasis on role/playing time, player development, and exposure to higher leagues, supporting H4. In contrast, more seasoned professionals in Tiers 1 and 2 (3 or more years in higher level leagues on average) demonstrated a distinct shift in priorities, in which factors like coaching staff, team culture/environment, and salary took precedence. Competition level was considered important by this player segment, but did not necessarily influence team choice more than other factors, as predicted in H5. These seasoned professionals, generally more established in their careers, indicated that they value stability, team environment, and financial security for themselves and their families over the pursuit of upward mobility or development. This shift exemplifies the evolving nature of career priorities as players mature, move to higher levels of competition, and gain experience with the business side of professional basketball.

These results generally contribute to the understanding of basketball player decision making in the team selection process, showcasing the dynamic and multifaceted nature of these decisions at the different stages in an individual's career. The findings of this study also emphasize the essentiality of individualized approaches to player recruitment from the team and management perspective, as the strength of decision factors is shown to vary in significance depending on the level of competition and career trajectory.

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