

National Foundation for American Policy

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New Research Finds Foreign-Born Athletes in NBA, MLB and NHL Have Increased in America

As the Number of Foreign-Born Players Increased an Improved Product Likely Helped Raise Salaries and Revenues

Arlington, Va. – New research shows foreign-born athletes play an important role in professional sports in America. Foreign-born players make up 23% of the rosters in the National Basketball Association (NBA), 29% in Major League Baseball (MLB) and 72% in the National Hockey League (NHL), according to a [new analysis](#) from the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP), an Arlington, Va.-based research organization. This is the highest proportion of foreign-born players ever recorded for the NBA and MLB. In 1970, 98% of NHL players were Canadian, but by 2018 less than 50% of players on NHL rosters were born in Canada.

“All employers want access to the best talent and consumers benefit from this,” said NFAP Executive Director Stuart Anderson, who was executive associate commissioner for policy and planning and counselor to the Commissioner of the INS in the George W. Bush administration. “American sports fans love to watch their favorite teams and favorite players, and many of the players they like to watch were born outside the United States.”

The study, “The Contributions of Immigrants to Sports in America,” can be found at <https://nfap.com/>.

Canada and France are the top source countries for foreign-born NBA players, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela are the leading foreign countries of birth for MLB players and Canada and Sweden are the NHL’s top countries for non-U.S. players.

The number of foreign-born basketball players in the NBA today has increased five-fold since 1992, when the NBA had 21 foreign-born players on its rosters, or about 5% of the league’s players, compared to 108 or 23% today. An immigrant from Canada, James Naismith, invented basketball in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1891.

In 1940, fewer than 2% of the players on Major League Baseball rosters were foreign-born, a number that climbed to 10% by 1990, and by 2020, 343 of 1192, or 29%, of the players on Major League Baseball rosters were foreign-born.

The immigration of Russian hockey players excited fans and brought innovation to the National Hockey League. Their legacy could be seen in 2018 when the Washington Capitals won the Stanley Cup, led by Russian-born Alex Ovechkin, the team’s captain, and Evgeny Kuznetsov.

While the Trump administration has imposed many immigration restrictions it has exempted professional athletes from such restrictions, [including those related to the coronavirus](#), even though, ironically, it could be argued, a foreign-born athlete is more likely to “take” a job than any other foreign-born workers. There is not a fixed number of jobs in the U.S. economy but the number of players allowed on professional sports team rosters is numerically limited. Despite the limited

number of roster spots, one never hears a professional athlete complain about an immigrant “taking” a job or a politician expressing concern that a Dominican-born shortstop prevented a U.S.-born infielder from making a Major League Baseball team.

Being open to talented athletes wherever they are born appears to be popular, as revenues in major sports leagues have risen dramatically along with the increased globalization of team rosters. NBA revenues have increased by over 3,000% (inflation adjusted) since 1982. Salaries for professional athletes have also increased substantially.

Among the most popular NBA players is Giannis Antetokounmpo, who immigrated to America after he grew up without legal status in Greece. Last season, hitting sensation Juan Soto, who was born in the Dominican Republic, led the Washington Nationals to a World Series victory. In 2019, the St. Louis Blues won the first Stanley Cup in the team’s history with a roster that included all but 4 players born outside the United States.

The ability to hire talent from around the world has enhanced the quality of play and attracted more fans, both domestically and internationally. “Why is foreign talent so important to the United States?” asked Dr. Rafael Reif, president of MIT, in arguing for greater openness to immigration. “For the same reason the Boston Red Sox don’t limit themselves to players born in Boston: The larger the pool you draw from, the larger the supply of exceptional talent.”

**Table 1
Foreign-Born Players on NBA, MLB and NHL Rosters**

Sports League	Foreign-Born Players	Percentage of Foreign-Born Players
NBA	108	23%
MLB	343	29%
NHL	529	72%

Source: National Foundation for American Policy; Basketball Reference, Baseball Reference, Hockey Reference. The 72% for the NHL is players not born in the U.S.

About the National Foundation for American Policy

Established in 2003, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan public policy research organization based in Arlington, Virginia focusing on trade, immigration and related issues. The Advisory Board members include Columbia University economist Jagdish Bhagwati, Ohio University economist Richard Vedder, Cornell Law School professor Stephen W. Yale-Loehr and former INS Commissioner James W. Ziglar. Over the past 24 months, NFAP’s research has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other major media outlets. The organization’s reports can be found at www.nfap.com. Twitter: [@NFAPResearch](https://twitter.com/NFAPResearch)

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