Eighteen Years Old and Ready for Driving, Cigarettes and War, but not Basketball: Why the NBA is Committing a Foul on the Age Eligibility Rule

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EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD AND READY FOR DRIVING, CIGARETTES AND WAR, BUT NOT BASKETBALL: WHY THE NBA IS COMMITTING A FOUL ON THE AGE ELIGIBILITY RULE

BRIAN LOVELL

INTRODUCTION

Brandon Jennings grew up near Los Angeles California, "where hoops skills bring girls, hype and carte blanche." The six foot one inch, 170 pound guard, from Oak Hill Academy High School, was averaging, 32.7 points, 7.4 assists, and 5.1 rebounds for each game. With such an incredible performance as a high school athlete, he received the Naismith Prep Player of the Year award, Gatorade Player of the Year award, and EA Sports Player of the Year award and led his team to a record of forty-one wins and only one loss. In June of 2008, Jennings was listed anywhere from the top prospect in the nation to the fourth ranked prospect. The only obstacle that stood in Brandon Jennings' way was that he was eighteen years old. Due to the National Basketball Association’s (NBA) collective bargaining agreement (CBA), Brandon Jennings was forced to wait until his nineteenth birthday in order to obtain gainful employment in the NBA, the Mecca of professional basketball. Thus, instead of following the trend of the “one and done year on campus” Brandon Jennings decided that he would take a different path, possibly changing the landscape of college basketball, and potentially the trend of high school players looking to play in the NBA. Brandon Jennings went overseas and signed a 1.65 million

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1 See Chris Broussard, Exchange Student: The First American to go Prep to Pro by way of Europe, Brandon Jennings getting quite an education overseas, ESPN (Oct. 5, 2009), http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3715746 (“Everything is tiny. The bed looks like it could be palmed by Shaq. The room is the size of a Hummer. The hotel looks like a town house.”).


3 See Dwight Jaynes, Brandon Jennings may change the landscape of college basketball, DWIGHT
dollar deal with Virtus Roma, a professional basketball team in Europe.\textsuperscript{4} For a high school legend from Los Angeles, Jennings experienced quite a culture shock, including tiny living quarters.\textsuperscript{5} This would be where Brandon Jennings commenced his basketball career.\textsuperscript{6} The high school all star gained an inordinate amount of experience playing overseas, and was paid doing it as well.\textsuperscript{7} The high school phenom’s lackadaisical demeanor he carried throughout his high school days was not accepted in the Euro-league, and his coach made sure of that.\textsuperscript{8} Coach Jasmin Repesa kicked Jennings out of practice and would get in Jennings’ face, displaying his disgust.\textsuperscript{9} However, after being kicked out of practice, Brandon Jennings’ attitude changed winning him respect in the locker room and pushing him to play harder than ever before.\textsuperscript{10} An NBA General Manager explained that “[p]laying in Europe with grown men who are better than him is going to help him mature as a player, and he [is] definitely a lottery pick in ‘09”.\textsuperscript{11} Even Brandon Jennings noticed the difference, explaining, “[w]hen you’re the man in high school, you can do whatever you want; [t]his is something new for me, especially playing for a coach who’s real controlling and doesn’t take no stuff.”\textsuperscript{12} Although the NBA currently does not have to worry about losing players to other leagues, such as those in Europe, because the NBA is the most prolific league for basketball in the world, it may have to worry about their role in the lives of these potential NBA stars, and the legal ramifications of the eligibility rule.

This Note will argue against the NBA’s draft eligibility rule, which requires an individual to be nineteen years of age to play even though in most states a minor can be employed in other jobs at the age of sixteen.

\textsuperscript{4} See Jaynes, supra note 3; see also Joel McLean, Global Economic Crush Forces Players Home From Europe PASPN (Jan. 14, 2009), http://paspn.net/default.asp?p=12&stId=8142757.

\textsuperscript{5} See Broussard, supra note 1; see also Aldo Ciummo, Jennings, stop for the NBA, "Totti who?," WORD PRESS (Oct. 17, 2008), http://skapegoat.wordpress.com/2008/10/17/sportjennings-fermata-per-la-nba-%C2%ABtotti-who%C2%BB/.

\textsuperscript{6} See Broussard, supra note 1; see also Thamel, supra note 3.

\textsuperscript{7} See Broussard, supra note 1 (stating “[t]his is great preparation, because it’s a big learning experience over here”); see also Thamel, supra note 3 (discussing Jennings' improvements as a player).

\textsuperscript{8} See Broussard, supra note 1 (explaining that Coach Jasmin Repesa, after watching Jennings during drills, had seen enough, and made it a point to kick Jennings out of practice); see also Thamel, supra note 3 (confering when Jennings was removed from practice).

\textsuperscript{9} See Broussard, supra note 1; see also Thamel, supra note 3.

\textsuperscript{10} See Broussard, supra note 1 (quoting Jennings’ mom saying, “I can see that Brandon’s learning so much here. He didn’t used to play this hard”); see also Thamel, supra note 3.

\textsuperscript{11} Broussard, supra note 1.

\textsuperscript{12} Id.
Meanwhile, children even younger than sixteen can work under certain exceptions in certain states.\(^{13}\)

Part I of this Note will discuss the prior challenges made against the NBA’s age restriction, its collective bargaining process, and introduce the ideas of reverse age discrimination, and equal protection. This part will provide what is included in the collective bargaining agreement and the first challenge against the collective bargaining agreement and how it failed. Part I will additionally discuss a challenge against the NBA, which was successful because there was no collective bargaining agreement (CBA) in place. Furthermore, it will also establish an important aspect of the CBA, in that future employees/players are bound to the agreement, without having a say in the matter. Lastly, it will compare the NBA’s eligibility rule to the eligibility rule that the National Football League (NFL) imposes on teenage athletes, as seen through the recent case of *Clarett v. NFL*.\(^{14}\)

Part II will assert the public policy concerns and issues of the NBA’s rule requiring individuals to be at least nineteen years of age to be employed as professional basketball players. This Part suggests that when compared to other sports, the NBA’s age eligibility requirement is completely arbitrary. Furthermore, due to the rise of dissatisfaction from players, former players and established government figures, the NBA is in need of a new solution.

Part III of this Note will set forth two areas of law which possibly could, and should, give these extraordinarily talented players an opportunity to seek legal remedy for being denied their right to gainful employment. The first area of law involves reverse age discrimination with respect to the Age Discrimination and Employment Act (ADEA). While the ADEA focuses on employment discrimination of those over the age of forty\(^{15}\), this Note will focus on the relatively new claim of Reverse Age Discrimination.\(^{16}\) Secondly, this Note will contend that each high school player seeking to play in the NBA is being denied equal protection of the law, making the

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\(^{13}\) See Colo. Rev. Stat. § 8-12-105(1) to (5) (2009) (allowing minors over the age of fourteen to be employed); see also Code of Ala. § 25-8-33 (2011) (allowing any person 14 or 15 to be employed outside school hours).

\(^{14}\) See generally Clarett v. NFL, 369 F.3d 124 (2d Cir. 2004).

\(^{15}\) See 29 U.S.C.S. § 631(a) (2010).

\(^{16}\) See generally Bergen v. Sisler, 157 N.J. 188 (1999); see also Rebecca L. Ennis, General Dynamics Land Systems, Inc. v. Cline: Shrinking the Realm of Possibility for Reverse Age Discrimination Suits, 39 U. Rich. L. Rev. 753 (2005) (discussing the Supreme Court’s ruling with regards to reverse age discrimination under the ADEA).
NBA’s draft eligibility rules unconstitutional.  

Part IV will argue for more rights for the future employees of the NBA in collective bargaining agreements, and will call for a vast change in the NBA’s eligibility rules and the NBA draft.

I. THE NBA’S COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT AND DRAFT ELIGIBILITY CHALLENGES

A. The NBA Collective Bargaining Agreement

The NBA collective bargaining agreement is the primary instrument that holds teenage basketball players from asserting an anti-trust claim against the NBA, and also sets forth the rules and regulations of the league. “The draft... [is] not, however, the product solely of an agreement among horizontal competitors but [is] embodied in a collective agreement between the employer or employers and a labor organization reached through procedures mandated by federal labor legislation.” The NBA collective bargaining agreement is negotiated by NBA representatives, including the Commissioner, various owners, attorneys and financial experts, who attempt to get the best deal possible for the owners. Also included in the process are the player representatives, including the Executive Committee and a negotiating committee, which represent the players in the NBA, and try to obtain the best deal possible for all the players. These collective bargaining agreements are negotiated approximately every six years, and all players are encouraged to participate. The NBA likes to see itself as a “democratic organization,” soliciting the views of all the players, ultimately allowing all players to vote on the agreement. This arrangement of the NBA players association first arose in 1964, when players threatened not to
play in the first televised NBA All-Star Game. The rationale of the CBA is that since the views of both the players' representatives, and the NBA representatives are solicited, then the resulting agreement will be exempt from anti-trust claims.

B. Wood v. NBA

The potential NBA players seeking employment with the NBA have no say in the CBA. Wood v. NBA shows that those outside of the agreement are bound to that agreement. There, Leon Wood, a guard from California State University, brought an antitrust action against the NBA and certain provisions of the CBA dealing with the salary cap, the draft, and player corporations. Among Wood's many arguments, he asserted that the rules created through the collective bargaining agreement were illegal because it affects those "outside the bargaining unit." However, the second circuit held that this is a common consequence of collective agreements in all industries. Furthermore, the court noted that the National Labor Relations Act defines employee in a way that includes those working outside the bargaining unit. Therefore, the high school athletes who seek employment with the NBA, will have no say in what is agreed upon as to the age eligibility rules, and can only wait and hope that the rules change.


When no CBA is in place, it is possible for a potential NBA player to succeed in asserting an anti-trust action. In 1971, the rules of the NBA required a college player to wait four years after graduating from high

23 See Wood, 809 F.2d at 960 (stating "[t]he National Labor Relations Act explicitly defines 'employee' in a way that includes workers outside the bargaining unit." (quoting 29 U.S.C. §152(3) [2010])).
24 See id. at 956.
25 See id. at 960 (noting that Wood believed that both the salary cap and the draft impacted the employees outside the bargaining agreement).
26 See id. at 960; see also Fibreboard Paper Prod. Corp. v. N.L.R.B. 379 U.S. 203, 210–15 (1964); Merk v. Jewel 848 F.2d 761, 764 (7th Cir. 1988) (stating "union and employer therefore may agree that employees hired in the future, who by definition are not yet members of the bargaining unit, will receive lower pay"); N.L.R.B. v. Laney & Duke Storage Warehouse Co., 369 F.2d 859, 866 (5th Cir. 1966) (articulating that "[t]he duty to bargain is a continuing one, and a union may legitimately bargain over wages and conditions of employment which will affect employees who are to be hired in the future.").
27 See 29 U.S.C. §152(3) (2010) (noting that the term employee includes any employee, and not limited to the employees of a particular employer).
school in order to be drafted. In *Haywood*, the plaintiff, Spencer Haywood, played with the 1968 Olympic team, then went to college, ultimately landing a contract with the rival American Basketball Association (ABA). Haywood repudiated his contract with the ABA, and signed with the Seattle Supersonics at the age of 21. However, the signing occurred less than four years after Haywood’s high school class had graduated, leaving him ineligible for the draft. After the NBA threatened to invalidate his contract and threatened the Supersonics with various sanctions, Haywood brought an anti-trust action against the NBA.

The Court held that if Haywood is denied the right to play for Seattle, he will “suffer irreparable injury in that a substantial part of his playing career will have been dissipated, his physical condition, skills and coordination will deteriorate from lack of high level competition, his public acceptance as a super star will diminish to the detriment of his career.” The Court further stated that the NBA preventing him from playing would cause him “great injustice.” This ruling paved the way for greats such as Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, and LeBron James to leave college early, or not attend at all.

**D. The CBA’s First Challenge**

The CBA prevents players from asserting an anti-trust claim against the NBA. The representatives of both the NBA and the players attempt to get the best deal for their sides, but the ultimate agreement does not always leave each party satisfied. At the expiration of the first Collective

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29 See *Haywood*, 401 U.S. at 1204.

30 Id. at 1205.

31 Id.

32 See id. (alleging that this is a per se violation of the Sherman Act).

33 Id.; see generally *Denver Rockets v. All-Pro Mgmt*, 325 F. Supp 1049 (D. Cal. 1971) (holding that the athlete had demonstrated irreparable harm and a likelihood of success, rendered the NBA’s draft an arbitrary and unreasonable restraint on the right of the athlete and other potential NBA players); see also *Linseman v. World Hockey Ass’n*, 439 F. Supp. 1315, 1326 (D. Conn. 1977) (finding that the probability of the 19 year old amateur Canadian hockey player’s ultimate success was a virtual certainty, and he could not be prohibited from playing professional hockey for any team in the association).

34 See *Haywood*, 401 U.S. at 1205.

Bargaining Agreement between both the players and the owners, fourteen NBA players filed a class action lawsuit in *Robertson v. NBA*, challenging the NBA’s rules pertaining to the college draft, the uniform contract, the reserve clause, boycotts, and asserting that the NBA was prohibiting players from playing in any rival league. The claim against the college draft did not focus on age eligibility, but did state that it was “designed to prevent competition among member NBA clubs for what is virtually the exclusive source of basketball talent in the country.” The United States District Court for the Southern District of New York held that although the practices complained of were per se violations of the Sherman Act, the NBA practices were exempt because of collective bargaining. It is, therefore, a fundamental principle of federal labor law that employees can eliminate competition among themselves through a “governmentally supervised majority vote selecting an exclusive bargaining representative.” Thus, the legal avenue of suing under anti-trust laws will most likely be unsuccessful when a collective bargaining agreement is present.

**E. Clarett v NFL**

The most recent case showing that an anti-trust claim against age eligibility will most likely be unsuccessful is *Clarett v NFL*. *Clarett* is most relevant because similar to the NBA, the NFL has a controversial age limitation on who can enter the draft, and likely the NBA’s justification for their draft eligibility rules would be similar to that of the NFL’s in the *Clarett* case. Maurice Clarett was a running back for the Ohio State University Buckeyes (OSU). Similar to Brandon Jennings, Clarett was a...
successful player prior to entering the draft, obtaining the Big Ten Freshman of the Year award, and becoming the first college freshman to start at his position at OSU. Before the start of Clarett’s second season, he was suspended for filing a false police report and receiving extra benefits worth thousands of dollars. Clarett moved his focus from returning to college football to entering the NFL draft. However, Clarett was ineligible to do so because of the rules of eligibility. Those rules at the time were collectively bargained between the NFL and its players union.

The district court held that the labor exemption sometimes allowed as part of the collective bargaining process should not apply because it fails the three prongs of a test called the Mackey Test set forth by the Eighth circuit. While the Mackey test is not relevant to what this Note proposes, the case involved a challenge brought by NFL players against the NFL rule (the Rozelle Rule) requiring an NFL team who signed a player, to compensate his former team. In Clarett, the NFL argued that the eligibility rules prevented those players who were not ready for the NFL, both physically and emotionally, from entering the league. Furthermore, the NFL believed that it would prevent the sport from losing its value because of an increase in injuries. The district court did not find these Ohio State University).


48 See id. at 129; see also Mackey v. Nat’l Football League, 543 F.2d 606, 614 (8th Cir. 1976) (putting forth a three part test: the restrictions to concern mandatory subjects of collective bargaining, the restrictions only affect the parties to the collective bargaining agreement, and the agreement is part of a bona fide arms-length bargaining process).

49 Clarett, 369 F.3d at 133 (explaining the NFL’s Rozelle Rule, which the NFL argued was exempt from antitrust laws because it was included in the collective bargaining agreement).

50 See id. at 129.

51 See id; See Boris v. United States Football League, No. 89-4980 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 19061, at *3–4 (Cen. Cal. Feb. 28, 1984) (stating the court’s reasons for the rule were to help further competitive balance and maturity, and for players to receive a college education).
arguments adequate, stating that these issues could be addressed through “less restrictive but equally effective means.”

The United States Court of Appeals reversed the district court ruling, stating that they never believed the Eighth Circuit’s test was not appropriate, and that the CBA itself makes it clear as to how to handle eligibility rules. Furthermore, the court expressed a concern about the impact of not having such rules in place would have on the job security of veteran players. Therefore, the court ruled in favor of the NFL, and Maurice Clarett was denied the right to enter the NFL draft.

This case is similar because it deals with the problem of draft eligibility rules and a collective bargaining agreement. Many people believe that a player may eventually win a suit against a major league association because of the district court ruling in favor of Clarett and because the Second Circuit is the only circuit to have ruled on this issue. Additionally, some argue that while Clarett would have had to argue a “hypothetical point” that he would succeed in the NFL, a potential NBA player would not. This is because, contrary to an NFL player, an NBA player can point to other players who made the jump from high school straight to the NBA with favorable statistics. This kind of data is not available in the NFL, because there are no players who made this jump. The NBA, on the other hand, has seven years of experience and data of athletes coming out of high school, and many of them have succeeded. However, the collective bargaining will be a difficult, if not impossible obstacle to overcome.

F. Reverse Age Discrimination

Since it is so difficult, or nearly impossible to obtain a successful
judgment in an antitrust action because of the labor exemption of CBAs, potential NBA athletes must make other claims. The first possibility for these individuals is that of reverse age discrimination. The second could be an equal protection claim.

Reverse age discrimination is a claim that is rarely made, however both the Seventh and Ninth circuits, both dealing with retirement plans, have heard cases dealing with such a claim. In 1975 Congress passed the Age Discrimination Act (ADA), which prohibits age discrimination in federal programs. It was suggested in this Act that the young are often discriminated against and therefore deserve protection as well. However, this logic did not follow when Congress passed the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act's general provisions state that it is unlawful for an employer to “fail or refuse to hire or to discharge an individual or otherwise discriminate against an individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual’s age.” While this may seem to protect individuals of any age, ADEA Section 621 states that the purpose of this Act is to “promote employment of older persons based on their ability rather than age, to prohibit arbitrary age discrimination in employment; and to help employers and workers find ways of meeting problems arising from the impact of age on employment.” More specifically, the ADEA was intended to protect individuals between the ages of 40 and 65, and to prevent having their careers unreasonably taken away from them. Ultimately, confusion existed as to which individuals the ADEA actually protected, ending with a Supreme Court decision with unfavorable results for potential NBA stars.

In Hamilton v. Caterpillar, the Seventh Circuit held that legislative history provides no evidence of intent to protect against age discrimination

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60 See 121 Cong. Rec. 9212 (1975) (statement of Rep. John Brademas) (“Its provisions are broad and it is the intent of the committee that it apply to age discrimination at all age levels, from the youngest to the oldest.”); Fuhrman, supra note 59, at 599.

61 See 29 U.S.C. § 631 (2010); Fuhrman, supra note 59, at 599 (noting that Section 631 of the ADEA states it only provides protection for those of at least forty years old).


against the young.\textsuperscript{66} Furthermore, the court noted that this circuit had explained in a prior decision that the ADEA "does not protect the young as well as the old, or even, we think, the younger against the older."\textsuperscript{67} There, a corporation, Caterpillar Incorporated, announced the closing of two separate plants, and implemented early retirement plans for its employees who were fifty years old, and had ten years of service.\textsuperscript{68} Plaintiff Michael Hamilton brought a class action suit against Caterpillar, alleging that Caterpillar had violated the ADEA. Hamilton sued Caterpillar, both for himself, and on behalf of other persons similarly situated, because they were too young to qualify for early retirement benefits.\textsuperscript{69} Therefore, the Seventh Circuit has made it clear that the ADEA does not provide a remedy for reverse age discrimination.\textsuperscript{70} In \textit{Stone v. Travelers}, the Ninth Circuit, however, while not resolving the issue of reverse age discrimination directly, "expressed incredulity at the idea that the petitioner could recover for being discriminated against because he was too young."\textsuperscript{71} There, John Stone filed a complaint against his employer, Travelers Corporation, alleging that the distribution of the severance payments violated the ADEA.\textsuperscript{72} As a result of the split between the circuits, a claim for reverse age discrimination seems hopeful for young talented NBA players. Nonetheless, the Supreme Court's decision in \textit{General Dynamics v. Cline} could hurt the chances of a successful reverse age discrimination claim.\textsuperscript{73}

G. Equal Protection

The Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution states:

"No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges and immunities of the citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of the law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."\textsuperscript{74}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{66} See Hamilton v. Caterpillar Inc., 966 F.2d 1226, 1228 (7th Cir. 1992).
\textsuperscript{67} Id. at 1227 (citing Karlen v. City Colls. of Chi., 837 F.2d 314, 318 (7th Cir. 1988), superseded by O'Brien v. Bd. Of Educ., 92 F. Supp 110 (E.D.N.Y. 2000).
\textsuperscript{68} Hamilton, 966 F.2d at 1226–27.
\textsuperscript{69} See id. at 1227.
\textsuperscript{70} See id. at 1228.
\textsuperscript{71} Ennis, supra note 16, at 757 (citing Stone v. Travelers Corp. 58 F.3d 434, 437 (9th Cir. 1995) (invoking a claim that Travelers' manner of providing for Stone's early retirement violated ADEA).
\textsuperscript{72} Stone, 58 F.3d at 436.
\textsuperscript{73} See discussion infra Part III.
\textsuperscript{74} U.S. CONST. amend. XIV, § 1.
\end{footnotes}
Throughout litigation of Equal Protection claims, the Supreme Court has established three levels of judicial scrutiny; in other words the Court established what standard each side needs to prove in order to assert a successful Equal Protection claim.

The first level is minimum scrutiny, otherwise known as the rational basis standard. Minimum scrutiny requires a classification in a statute to be rationally related to a legitimate government objective, resulting in great deference to the state under this level of scrutiny. A plaintiff challenging a classification must prove that the classification does not rationally advance a legitimate state objective, or that the state objective is not legitimate.

The highest level of scrutiny is known as strict scrutiny. This level renders a classification presumptively void because of the classification is one of a suspect criteria, such as race, or because it substantially impinges on a fundamental right. In this instance, the burden is on the government to prove that the classification is narrowly tailored to accomplish a compelling state interest. If the classification impinges on fundamental rights, a suspect class is not necessary. Certain rights that the Supreme Court found to be fundamental throughout years of litigation are interstate migration and denying or diluting the right to vote.

The last level of scrutiny is intermediate scrutiny established in Craig v. Boren, after both strict scrutiny and minimal scrutiny were introduced. In Craig v. Boren, Oklahoma passed a law forbidding the sale of beer to males under twenty-one years old, and females who were under eighteen years old. The Court held that the law did not satisfy Oklahoma's goal of improving the state's public health and safety, and while not applying strict scrutiny or rational basis scrutiny, the Court adopted a "new, middle level of scrutiny." This level of scrutiny requires the government to prove that

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75 See generally Lindsley v. Natural Carbonic Gas Co. 220 U.S. 61 (1911) (holding that a NY statute prohibiting owners from pumping water, gas and oil on his own land is not a violation of Equal Protection because of the rational relation between the law and the goals of protecting mineral springs and preventing waste); United States R.R. Ret. Bd. V. Fritz, 449 U.S. 166, 179 (1980).


77 See Saenz v. Roe, 526 U.S. 489, 498–99 (1999) (holding that the proper standard for the right to travel is strict scrutiny); see also Southold v. Cross Sound Ferry Servs., 477 F.3d 38, 53 (2d Cir. 2007).

78 See Dunn v. Blumstein, 405 U.S. 330, 336 (1972) (finding that durational residency requirements deprive citizens of the fundamental right to vote); see also Harper v. Virginia Bd. of Elections, 383 U.S. 663, 670 (1966) (holding that the requirement of a fee to condition a ballot violates the Equal Protection Clause because it results in invidious discrimination).


80 Id. at 197.

81 See id. at 200; see also Julie R. Steiner, Age Classifications and the Fourteenth Amendment: Is
the statute’s classifications are substantially related to an important government interest. Due to the fact that this test required less than a compelling state interest, but more than a legitimate state interest, the test is intermediate in nature. The intermediate standard was established after Massachusetts Board of Retirement v. Murgia, which held that the standard used for age discrimination is the rational basis standard, or minimum scrutiny.

II. POLICY CONCERNS OF THE AGE LIMIT

The current CBA of the NBA requires an individual to be at least nineteen years old in order to be eligible for the NBA draft. In fact, the current Commissioner of the NBA, David Stern, plans to attempt to raise the age eligibility rules from nineteen years of age to twenty, or until the player is two years out of high school. His rationale is that the NFL’s eligibility requirement is three years after high school, so the NBA should follow suit. There are many reasons why the NFL and the NBA cannot be compared, and rather should be distinguished with regard to the age limit.

A. The Rise of Dissatisfaction

The current age limit, joined with the potential increase of the age limit, has caused an uproar from a Congressman, current and former NBA players, and many interested fans. Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, explained that there is no reason to prevent these players from entering the

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82 See Nguyen v. INS, 533 U.S. 53, 60 (2001) (stating that gender based classifications must serve important governmental objectives, and must be substantially related to achieve those objectives); see United States v. Virginia, 518 U.S. 515, 541–42 (1996) (holding that gender based classifications, based on generalizations and stereotypes about the differing abilities and interests of the different genders, violate the Equal Protection Clause under intermediate scrutiny).

83 See Craig, 492 U.S. at 218 (Rehnquist, J., dissenting) (stating that the majority applied an intermediate level of scrutiny); see Steiner, supra note 81 (discussing that the test applied in Craig v. Boren was a new middle level of scrutiny that was intermediate in nature).


85 See discussion infra Part III.


87 See Stern Wants NBA Age Limit Raised to 20, supra note 86 (quoting David Stern as saying, “I’m optimistic the union will agree to some raise in the minimum age in the current collective bargaining.”); see also Steve E. Cavezza, Can I See Some ID?: An Antitrust Analysis of NBA and NFL Draft Eligibility Rules, 9 U. DENV. SPORTS & ENT. L. J. 22 (2010) (stating that the NFL requires players to be three years out of high school before joining the league).
NBA when eighteen year olds can enlist to be sent to Afghanistan.88 Furthermore, he believes that players who are forced to go to school for one year will barely take enough credits, and cruise through the year not learning anything.89 This completely defeats the purpose of the “one and done” rule. LeBron James was quoted as saying “what’s the point if you don’t want to be in school?” 90 If the purpose of this rule is to force an education on these athletes, and to mature them, this simply is not succeeding.

Additionally, Spencer Haywood, a former NBA star who is known for paving the way for future stars such as LeBron James, spoke out against this rule as well: “How can the players association do that? They represent veterans who pay dues. They don’t represent kids trying to get in early.”91 Tennessee Congressman Steve Cohen went as far as calling this rule “a vestige of slavery,” although he slightly retracted his statement by saying it was not the same type of slavery as 150 years ago.92

NBA forward Jermaine O’Neal believes that the NBA’s age eligibility rule arose through racism.93 He explains that in the last couple of years the winners of the Rookie of the Year awards were players straight out of high school.94 O’Neal expressed concerned that “[a]s a black guy, you kind of think that’s the reason why it’s coming up. You don’t hear about it in baseball or hockey.”95 While this Note will not go as far as proposing the NBA’s rule to be a product of racism, it will compare the rule with that of

88 George Vecsey, Arne Duncan Challenges the N.C.A.A., N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 15, 2010), available at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/sports/ncaabasketball/15vecsey.html; see Am Tellem, Arn on Arne, HUFFINGTON POST (Jan. 22, 2010, 12:48 PM), available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/am-telle/arn-on-arne_b_433138.html (discussing that the NBA should change the minimum age back to eighteen because eighteen is the age at which men can get married, vote, and fight in foreign wars).
89 See Katie Thomas, Education Chief Criticizes NBA and the N.C.A.A., N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 15, 2010) (noting that some players are simply passed through their institutions); see Vecsey, supra note 88 (pointing out that players take as few as six credits a semester).
90 Vecsey, supra note 88; see Tellem, supra note 88 (quoting LeBron James discussing the “one-and-done” rule).
91 Brady, supra note 35.
95 NBCSports.com, supra note 93.
other sports, and show that the rule seems quite arbitrary.

B. NBA v. Other Major Sporting Industries

Vast differences exist between the NBA’s draft eligibility rules and those of other sports. Other leagues, in which a higher risk of danger exists, such as the National Hockey League (NHL) and National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), provide no age limits as to those who are eligible to play. The NHL’s eligibility rules state that all players age eighteen or older are eligible for claim in the entry draft.96 John Tavares, for example, an NHL player, was drafted at the age of fourteen by the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) because he was considered an “exceptional player.”97 Major League Baseball (MLB) allows players to be drafted if they have graduated from high school and have not yet attended college or junior college. Also eligible are college players who have completed their junior or senior years or are at least 21, and junior college players, regardless of how many years were completed.98 In other words, MLB virtually has no age limit, similar to the rules of NASCAR, Boxing, Tennis,99 and Golf.100

Although the idea that the NBA rule is a product of racism may seem farfetched, Jermaine O’Neal has a valid point. What about the other sports? In baseball, a player can risk a 99 mile per hour fastball hitting his head at any age after high school, but he cannot play in the NBA.101 In
hockey, a player runs the risk of being hit with a hockey stick or hockey puck, or being cut by a skate, yet any player out of high school is eligible to play. In NASCAR an athlete can drive around in circles at extraordinarily fast speeds, where crashes are what fans sometimes look forward to most, yet you still cannot play in the NBA. An individual is mature enough to physically hit someone in the head in boxing, and be hit, but not to dunk a basketball and cash a check at the same time. The NFL includes a high level of risk, and an age eligibility rule, but is incomparable to the NBA. In contrast to these other sports, the NFL requires three seasons of the NFL to be played after high school graduation before being able to enter the draft. The NFL, in Clarett, set forth arguments that some players would not be mature enough, nor be physically able and ready to play in the NFL. The NFL also expressed concern of a decrease in value of the game. The NFL is not the same as the NBA. The point of the game in the NBA is not to knock the other player off his feet. Regarding maturity, it is only necessary to look at players such as Ron Artest and Latrell Sprewell. Ron Artest played two years of college and started the biggest brawl in the history of the NBA. Latrell Spreewell played college basketball for four years and was suspended for choking his coach. Some may argue that there will always be thugs in any sport. While that may be true, how can the NBA argue that the maturity of older players is a reason for its rules? The NFL and the NBA are


103 See McCann & Rosen, *supra* note 58, at 748; see also Rules of World Boxing Assoc. Section (G) (11).


different sports, and just because one sport has an age eligibility requirement, does not mean that the other should too.

The NBA is taking a paternalistic role by trying to presume that it knows what is best or proper for a young man. The NBA is trying to assert these arbitrary rules by saying that success in life must run through college. Whether society likes it or not, college is only an option in America and it is wrong to demand that professional caliber athletes do what society says they should do. The NBA prefers this method because there will be no cost to the league, giving the players no option but to develop their skills elsewhere. The truth of the matter is that some players who went to college for a year, such as Derrick Rose, who went to Memphis, and O.J. Mayo, who went to U.S.C., never belonged in college. They were always good enough to be in the NBA straight out of high school, and they were only students because they were forced. At first, many believed that this rule would turn NBA players on to receiving an education. While David Stern admitted it was a business decision, it seemed like “genuine altruism on his part when he said that it was time to get NBA scouts and general managers out of high school gyms.” The truth is that Stern raised the age because owners and general managers

107 See Spencer Morris, Why the NBA’s Rule is a Disgrace, BLEACHER REPORT (Apr. 8, 2009), http://bleacherreport.com/articles/153153-the-nbas-eligibility-rule-is-a-disgrace; see also Susan McAleavey, Spendthrift Trust: An Alternative to the NBA Age Rule, 84 St. John’s L. Rev. 279, 280 (2010).

108 See Morris, supra note 107 (“Have we determined that the only path for ‘success’ in life must run through college?”); see also McAleavey, supra note 107, at 284.

109 See Morris, supra note 107; see also McAleavey, supra note 107, at 286–87.

110 See Fuhrman, supra 59, at 588 (explaining why the NBA prefers the age eligibility rules); see also, Scott R. Rosner, Must Kobe Come Out and Play? An Analysis of the Legality of Preventing High School Athletes and College Underclassmen from Entering Professional Sports Drafts, 8 SETON HALL J. SPORTS L. 539, 570 (1998) (discussing the justification that maintaining intercollegiate athletics as a developmental system will save the league money).

111 See Michael Del Muro, USC Basketball is Dead, but NBA Rules Share the Blame, BLEACHER REPORT (June 11, 2009), http://bleacherreport.com/articles/196977-usc-basketball-is-dead-but-nba-rules-are-to-blame (noting that the NBA draft eligibility rules have created a system that taints college basketball and future stars. This is because none of these college athletes would have received gifts and money in order to either stay in college or to construct an agreement of future representation in the NBA, if they were allowed to go to the NBA straight from high school); see also Michael A. McCann, Illegal Defense: The Law and Economics of Banning High School Players from the NBA Draft, 1 VA. SPORTS & ENT. L.J. 295, 314–21 (2002).

112 See Muro, supra note 111 (noting the ‘one and done’ rule requires the athletes to go to school for one year, when they never wanted to be there in the first place); see also McCann, supra note 111, at 326–28.

resented the amount of time it took to train players out of high school. The NBA decided to deal with this issue by acting as decision makers for the potential NBA stars, and sending a message to them that school should come first. This paternalistic role that the NBA is taking on is not what the business of the NBA entails.

While both disaster and success stories of those who have made the jump straight from high school have occurred, the Commissioner, requiring an athlete to be nineteen to enter the draft is arbitrarily denying the rights of these athletes to work because of their age. A path for these players must be available in order to rectify the problem that the NBA has caused. Therefore, it is time for the players to start looking at other opportunities and making new arguments, to allow their voices to be heard, and asserting their rights through different applicable laws.

III. THE NEW ROUTE FOR INELIGIBLE ATHLETES

A. The ADEA Should Allow For Reverse Age Discrimination Claims

Potential NBA players received a crushing blow when the Supreme Court made its ruling on reverse age discrimination claims in 1997. The Court held that the ADEA does not cover reverse age discrimination claims. In General Dynamics v. Cline, the petitioner had a collective bargaining agreement with the United Auto Workers. This agreement eliminated an obligation to provide health benefits to subsequently retired employees, except as to the current workers, who were at least 50 years old. Cline and the respondents, who were then between the ages of 40 and 50, were protected by the act, but missed out on the health benefits. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) agreed with Cline that the agreement violated the ADEA, and invited General

\[114\] See Bissinger, supra note 113 (noting that Stern did this to appease the owners of NBA teams, who wanted to avoid the possibility of players in their early twenties being free agents, able to choose the team they want to play for); see also Weisfelner, supra note 113, at 210.

\[115\] See NBA Age Limit Pros and Cons, 21ST CENTURY PALADIN (Apr. 18, 2005), http://www.21stcenturypaladin.com/2005/04/18/nba-age-limit-pros-and-cons/ (highlighting the successful players who made the jump straight from high school such as LeBron James, who averaged 20.9 points per game at the age of 18, and the unsuccessful, such as Jonathon Bender, averaging 2.7 points per game at the age of 18); see also McCann, supra note 111, at 314–21.

\[116\] See General Dynamics Land Sys., Inc. v. Cline, 540 U.S. 581, 600 (2004) ("We see the text, structure, purpose, and history of the ADEA, along with its relationship to other federal statutes, as showing that the statute does not mean to stop an employer from favoring an older employee over a younger one.").

\[117\] Id. at 584 (discussing the elements of the collective bargaining agreement).

\[118\] Id.
Dynamics to settle with Cline. The attempt to settle had failed, and Cline brought action in the district court, which held that no court ever granted relief for reverse age discrimination under the ADEA. The Sixth Circuit, however, reversed the district court’s holding, reasoning that "the prohibition of 623(a)(1) covering discrimination against any individual . . . because of such individual’s age,’ is so clear on its face” that if Congress intended to protect only the older worker, it would have said so. Unfortunately for the potential NBA players, the trial did not end here.

The Supreme Court reversed the Sixth Circuit’s decision for two main reasons: legislative history and the plain meaning of age. The majority opinion pointed to the legislative history behind the ADEA, noting that the law does not provide for reverse age discrimination. It stated that not only was age left out with regards to the different types of discrimination forbidden by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but in Congress’ proposal for the Fair Labor Standards Amendments of 1966, the testimony at both hearings concentrated on assumptions about the effect of age on ability to work. Thus, the Court stated that all findings and statements produced proof that age discrimination intensified over time, or are "couched in terms that refer to ‘older’ workers, explicitly or implicitly relative to ‘younger’ ones.”

Secondly, the Court focused on the plain meaning of age. They determined that it is a commonplace conception of American society that its character is “youth culture” and a world where better means younger, and that discrimination because of age is commonly understood as against older individuals. Furthermore, Cline argued that the meaning of age was uniform throughout the statute, and that specific provisions could not mean to only protect older individuals. However, the Court counters this

119 See id. at 585.
120 See id. (citing Gen. Dynamics Land Sys., Inc., v. Cline, 98 F. Supp. 2d 846, 848 (N.D.Ohio 2000)).
121 Id.
122 See Ennis, supra note 16, at 759–63 (comparing the arguments of both the majority and dissenting opinion).
123 See id. at 759 (citing Gen. Dynamics, 540 U.S. at 585).
124 See id.
125 See Gen. Dynamics, 540 U.S. at 588; see Age Discrimination in Employment: Hearing on H.R. 3651, H.R. 3768, H.R. 4221 Before the Subcomm. on Labor, 90th Cong. 151 (1967) (statement of Rep. Joshua Eilberg) ("[A]t age 40, a worker may find that age restrictions become common . . . by age 45 his employment opportunities are likely to contract sharply, and shrink more severely at age 55 and vanish by age 65 . . . ").
126 Gen. Dynamics, 540 U.S. at 590.
127 See id. at 591.
argument by stating that this is an incorrect presumption. Additionally, the Court added that this presumption will be overcome when there is a variation in the connection in which the words are used as "reasonably to warrant the conclusion that they were employed in different parts of the act with different intent." 

However, this Supreme Court ruling should not apply to claims of reverse age discrimination with regards to the NBA eligibility rule. There is a vast difference between receiving benefits and attempting to obtain gainful employment. These cases often deal with retirement or health benefits, resulting in employees who already have jobs and are being denied extra money, or health insurance. The potential NBA players, the young athletes who are playing hard and training every day, are being denied the right to work at all based on their age.

Moreover, the Supreme Court ruling in General Dynamics should be overruled for three reasons; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 allows for reverse discrimination suits, the language of the ADEA, and the legislative history of the statue. First, since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 allows for reverse discrimination suits based upon race and sex, reverse age discrimination claims should be allowed as well. Opponents may argue that the intent of Congress when passing the ADEA was to protect the older employees, and not the young. However, two cases preclude such an argument. The first case is Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services, where the court found that males were protected under Title VII from sexual harassment. The second case is McDonald v Santa Fe Trail Transportation Co., where it was held that Title VII protected whites discriminated against in favor of racial minorities. Undoubtedly, Congress was not concerned with male sexual harassment, nor discrimination against whites when it passed these acts, however, both cases show that reverse discrimination still violates an individuals' civil rights. Opponents will argue that age is not an immutable characteristic, and therefore does not require the same protection. On the contrary, opponents may argue that allowing for reverse age discrimination will be a slippery slope, eventually leading to younger individuals having a

131 See Ennis, supra note 16, at 763; see also Gen. Dynamics, 540 U.S. at 597–98.
133 See McDonald v Santa Fe Trail Transp., 427 U.S. 273, 295–96 (1976) (noting that Title VII prohibited all racial discrimination in employment, without exception for any group of particular employees).
history of unequal treatment. While it is true that older individuals will have a harder time obtaining a new job when they are fired, as opposed to younger individuals, that does not mean that younger applicants should be denied all of the protection of age discrimination laws.

Second, as Scalia explained, the EEOC’s interpretation that the agreement violated the ADEA was “neither foreclosed by the statute [ADEA] nor unreasonable” and that the Court should defer to EEOC, which is charged with administering the statute, and allow for reverse age discrimination.134 Third, the plain meaning and language of the ADEA calls for the admissibility of suits brought by the young.135 The Court explains that “the starting point for the interpretation of a statute is always its language.”136 The ADEA clearly states that one must not discriminate against another on the basis of the individual’s age.137 This phrase does not restrict discrimination to only those of an older age.138 As Justice Thomas stated in his dissent:

“If an employer fired a worker for the sole reason that the worker was under 45, it would be entirely natural to say that the worker had been discriminated against because of his age. I struggle to think of what other phrase I would use to describe such behavior. I wonder how the Court would describe such incidents, because the Court apparently considers such usage to be unusual, atypical, or aberrant.”139

Lastly, legislative history proves that the ADEA should bar discrimination of the young. A statement made by Senator Yarborough, a sponsor of the bill, when discussing this particular issue in question, confirmed that “the text really meant what is said.”140 This is further proof that the primary meaning of “age” as used in the ADEA is an “individual’s chronological age.” 141 While age may have alternative meanings, such as “the state of being old” or “hair white with age,” Congress clearly intended

135 See id. at 603 (Thomas J., dissenting); but see id. at 598 (majority opinion) (interpreting the plain language in the opposite way).
136 Id. at 602 (Thomas J., dissenting) (citing Cmty. for Creative Non-Violence v. Reid 490 U.S. 730, 739 (1989)).
138 See Gen. Dynamics, 540 U.S. at 603 (Thomas, J., dissenting) (stating that the plain language of the ADEA clearly allows for suits brought by the young when discriminated against in favor of the old); see also 29 U.S.C. § 623(a)(1).
139 Gen. Dynamics, 540 U.S. at 603 (Thomas, J., dissenting).
140 Id. at 606 (explaining that, although the statute is clear and legislative history is unnecessary, the history confirms that the plain reading of the text is the correct reading); see 113 CONG. REC. 31, 255 (1967).
141 Gen. Dynamics, 540 U.S. at 604 (Thomas, J., dissenting).
to use the primary meaning of the word, given the context of the statute.\textsuperscript{142} The statute would be incoherent if the alternate meaning of age was intended for two reasons. \textsuperscript{143} First, Section 623(f)(1) of the ADEA provides a defense where “age is a bona fide occupational qualification” and if “age” was meant to be limited to older age, then this defense would “provide a defense only where a defense is not needed, since under the Court’s reading, discrimination against the relatively young is always legal under the ADEA.”\textsuperscript{144} Second, Section 623(e) of the ADEA bans printing of any notice or advertisement indicating a preference, or discrimination based on age.\textsuperscript{145} If “age” was intended to mean “old age” then an employer would be able to advertise asking only for young applicants, and could not advertise for older applicants, even though the ADEA bans this kind of discrimination.\textsuperscript{146} If anything, it is not unclear as to whether Congress intended to include the young, or whether they intended to favor the old.\textsuperscript{147}

It seems that the Supreme Court has settled on the determination that the ADEA is meant to protect older employees, even though the statute says that one cannot be discriminated against because of such individual’s age without specifying the required age to make a claim.

Reverse discrimination claims are not impossible, regardless of the holding in \textit{General Dynamics}.\textsuperscript{148} Section 1625 of the ADEA makes it clear that “the ADEA does not preempt State age discrimination in employment laws.”\textsuperscript{149} Therefore, it is possible to make a state law claim for age discrimination. Two influential states have determined that reverse age

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Id.} at 603; see \textit{113 Cong. Rec. 31, 255} (1967) (stating, in Congressional debate before passing the ADEA, that the law was intended to prevent both age discrimination and reverse age discrimination).

\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Gen. Dynamics}, 540 U.S. at 604 (Thomas, J., dissenting); see \textit{29 U.S.C. § 623(f)(1)} (providing a defense for “age” as a bona fide occupational defense, where “age” is not qualified as “older age”).

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Gen. Dynamics}, 540 U.S. at 604 n.1 (Thomas, J., dissenting).

\textsuperscript{145} \textit{29 U.S.C. § 623(e)}.

\textsuperscript{146} \textit{See Gen. Dynamics}, 540 U.S. at 604 (Thomas, J., dissenting); see also \textit{29 U.S.C. § 623(e)} (prohibiting advertisements expressing preference for age, and failing to limit “age” to “older age”).

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{See Gen. Dynamics}, 540 U.S. at 604 (Thomas, J., dissenting) (referring to the fact that the majority believes it is clear that Congress intended to protect the elderly, as opposed to the young); see also \textit{113 Cong. Rec. 31255} (1967) (stating, in the only legislative history on point, that the ADEA was intended to protect both young and older employees from age discrimination, contrary to the majority in \textit{General Dynamics}).

\textsuperscript{148} \textit{See Ennis, supra} note 16, at 768 (discussing the possibility of state law claims); see \textit{e.g.}, Bergen Commercial Bank v. Sisler, 723 A.2d 944, 957 (N.J. 1999) (holding that a reverse age discrimination claim could be brought under New Jersey’s state law).

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{29 C.F.R. § 1625.10(g)} (2011); \textit{see Hulme v. Barrett}, 449 N.W.2d 629, 631–32 (Iowa 1989) (stating that the Iowa statute makes it unfair to discriminate because of age, and, since the action is brought under the state statute, that is the statute the court applies); \textit{see also Fisher v. Quaker Oats Co.}, 559 A.2d 1, 2 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. 1989) (explaining that the ADEA does not preempt state age discrimination laws).
discrimination can be present under state law: New Jersey and California.  

First, in the California case, Lazar v. Hertz, the plaintiff brought a class action suit alleging age discrimination for himself and on behalf of others between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. The plaintiffs believed that a rental car company's refusal to rent automobiles to persons under the age of 25 resulted in an unreasonable restriction. While the court did not allow for a reverse age discrimination claim, it demonstrated that this area of law could be susceptible to a reverse age discrimination claim had the court not been required to defer to a vehicle regulation.

Secondly, in Bergen v. Sisler, plaintiff Michael Sisler lost his job without an opportunity to prove to his employer that he was capable of the job, and was replaced by an older employee. The applicable statute in New Jersey was the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination, (LAD) which provided that “all persons shall have the opportunity to obtain employment . . . without discrimination because of age.” New Jersey followed an Oregon court decision holding that when there is a qualified applicant for a position, and he or she is not hired without any legitimate reason, along with age being a per se fact, then it would be an unlawful employment practice. The New Jersey court constructed its own standard, and found that the LAD encompassed Sisler’s claim. The New Jersey standard requires the employee to show that age “played a role in the decision making process and that it had a determinative influence on the outcome of that process.”

The court further distinguished between direct evidence of age discrimination and circumstantial evidence of age discrimination. When there is direct evidence of age discrimination, the burden shifts to the employer to show that it would have made the same decision regardless of

150 See Bergen Commercial Bank, 723 A.2d at 957; see also Lazar v. Hertz Corp., 82 Cal. Rptr. 2d 368, 377–78 (Cal. Ct. App. 1st Dist. 1999); Fuhrman, supra note 59, at 605.
151 Lazar, 82 Cal. Rptr. 2d at 371.
152 Id.
153 See id. at 377–38 (denying an age discrimination claim for other reasons, implicitly leaving open the possibility of a reverse age discrimination claim); see also Fuhrman, supra note 59, at 605.
155 Id. at 199.
156 See id. at 204; see also Ogden v. Bureau of Labor, 299 Or. 98, 100 (explaining the statute that New Jersey based their opinion off of); OR. REV. STAT. § 659.030(1)(a) (2009) (noting that it is an unlawful employment practice to refuse to hire someone based on age if the individual is 18 years or older).
the impermissible consideration.\textsuperscript{158} If there is circumstantial evidence, which is more likely to be the case, a three-step process is commenced. The first step in the process requires the plaintiff to prove four separate elements by a preponderance of the evidence.\textsuperscript{159} First, that the plaintiff belongs to a protected class; second, that the plaintiff applied and was qualified for a position for which the employer was seeking applicants; third, that the plaintiff was rejected despite having adequate qualifications; and lastly, that the employer continued to seek applications for that job.\textsuperscript{160} Next, the employer must show that he/she had legitimate non-discriminatory reasons for rejecting the employee.\textsuperscript{161} If this evidence is shown, then the presumption of discrimination will disappear.\textsuperscript{162} The third and final part of the process requires the employee to prove by a preponderance of the evidence that the legitimate reason given by the defendant was not true, and was "merely a pretext for discrimination."\textsuperscript{163}

In the end, the fact that one influential state accepted a claim for reverse age discrimination, and another did not dismiss it, indicates the potential for state reverse age discrimination claims for NBA athletes.\textsuperscript{164} Additionally, age discrimination law is extremely vulnerable to changes in the economy, especially under state law.\textsuperscript{165} A standard like the one set forth in Bergen should be a standard that the Federal courts should consider when dealing with the age requirement of the NBA. Due to the fact that

\textsuperscript{158} Bergen, 157 N.J. at 209; see Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins, 490 U.S. 228, 230–31 (1989) (explaining the shifting of burdens on proving that age is a substantial factor in an employment decision).

\textsuperscript{159} See Bergen, 157 N.J. at 209–10 (discussing the McDonnell Douglas standard, which is the test used to determine discrimination through circumstantial evidence, since direct evidence is hard to come by); see also McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green, 411 U.S. 792, 802 (1973).


\textsuperscript{161} See Bergen, 157 N.J. at 210; see also Tex. Dep't of Cnty. Affairs v. Burdine, 450 U.S. 248, 253 (1981) (noting that the plaintiff's burden is not onerous).

\textsuperscript{162} See Bergen, 157 N.J. at 211; see also Burdine, 450 U.S. at 253 (stating that the defendant's showing of legitimate non-discriminatory reasons for the plaintiff's rejection rebuts the presumption that the employer unlawfully discriminated against the employee).


\textsuperscript{164} See Fuhrman, supra note 59, at 605–06 (explaining what the two states, California and New Jersey, did in terms of recognizing reverse age discrimination); see also Megan Jordan Strickland, Note, \textit{The Impact of Interpretation: The Age Discrimination in Employment Act as Determined by the Sixth Circuit}, 28 SETON HALL LEGIS. J. 197, 208 (2003) (noting that plaintiffs have succeeded in arguing a reverse age discrimination claim in some states).

\textsuperscript{165} See Fuhrman, supra note 59, at 606 (discussing why younger individuals should maintain hope for protection from age discrimination); see also Lazar v. Hertz Corp., 69 Cal. App. 4th 1494, 1502 (Cal. App. 1st Dist. 1999) (discussing that business retain the right, under state law, to adopt reasonable regulations for their services).
direct evidence of age discrimination will be rare, the test for circumstantial evidence will allow for protection of both those teenage athletes who in fact are being discriminated against, and for teams and owners, who genuinely decided in a non-discriminatory fashion to proceed in another direction, with another player. Therefore, the NBA player should have a much better chance of success if they allege a state law violation of age discrimination.

**B. The Age Eligibility Rule is a Violation of the Equal Protection Clause**

Denying high school players the right to obtain gainful employment based on their age is unconstitutional and violates the players' equal protection of the laws. Thus, another legal avenue for potential NBA players would be a constitutional claim under the 14th Amendment of the Constitution.166 “It requires no argument to show that the right to work for a living in the common occupations of the community is of the very essence of the personal freedom and opportunity that it was the purpose of the Amendment to secure.”167

There is a difference between the test required to prove age discrimination under the ADEA and that of age discrimination under the Equal Protection Clause. On one hand, the ADEA requires the employer to show that the job classifications that are based on age are necessary for business and that a basis exists to make an employer believe that all those protected by the ADEA would not be able to do the job, or that the protected class’ ability to do the job is impossible.168 The test for Equal Protection, on the other hand, requires the challenger to show that there is no reasonable basis for the classification.169

The Supreme Court in *Massachusetts Board v. Murgia* is responsible for the formation of this test.170 In *Murgia*, a police officer was forced to retire on his 50th birthday, resulting in a civil action alleging that he was denied

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166 U.S. CONST. amend. XIV, § 1 (stating that no state shall deprive anyone of life, liberty or property, without due process, nor deny any person within its jurisdiction equal protection of the law).

167 Traux v. Raich, 239 U.S. 33, 41 (1915).

168 See Ennis, supra note 16, at 754–755 (explaining the test for proving discrimination under the ADEA); see also Julie R. Steiner, *Age Classifications and the Fourteenth Amendment: Is the Murgia Standard Too Old to Stand?*, 6 SETON HALL CONST. L.J. 263, 289–90 (highlighting the differences between the test for proving discrimination under the ADEA and Equal Protection in the 14th amendment).


equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court determined that old age does not fall under the “discrete and insular” group requiring extra protection. Having made this determination, the resulting test for age discrimination was the rational basis standard. This standard requires that the statute, or law in question, be rationally related to a legitimate government objective. Under rational basis review, the statute requiring early retirement easily met this test.

The Murgia holding, calling for a rational basis standard with respect to equal protection and age discrimination, received support throughout the years. The Supreme Court had a chance to change the standard in 1979 while hearing another forced retirement case. The Court in this case affirmed Murgia reiterating that the rational basis standard was the correct standard for age classification cases. Furthermore, the Court found that forcing retirement at the age of sixty was a legitimate and substantial goal of Congress because it is necessary that the employees be mentally and physically competent. State courts also supported the Murgia holding. In O’Neil, the Supreme Court of Missouri “blindly followed the Supreme Court of the United States.” While the rational basis standard does not completely bar age discrimination claims under the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection provisions, it makes it difficult for one to be successful, and the Courts have made it clear that the rational basis standard is the proper standard.

The current standard for age discrimination set forth by Murgia is outdated and should be replaced by the intermediate standard. This will allow not only potential NBA athletes, but also others discriminated against on the basis of age to have more protection. When Murgia was decided, a few months passed before a middle level scrutiny was created. At the

171 Id. at 309–310.
172 See id. at 313 (quoting U.S. v. Carolene Prod., 304 U.S. 144, 152–53 n.4 (1938)).
173 See id. at 314 (noting that age discrimination requires a relatively relaxed standard).
174 See id. (“This inquiry employs a relatively relaxed standard reflecting the Court’s awareness that the drawing of lines that create distinctions is a peculiarly a legislative task and an unavoidable one.”); see also Dandridge v. Williams, 397 U.S. 471, 485 (1970).
175 See generally, Vance v. Bradley, 440 U.S. 93, 97 (1979) (following the Murgia holding and applying rational basis review).
176 See Steiner, supra note 81, at 282 (citing Vance, 440 U.S. at 97).
177 See O’Neil v Baine, 568 S.W.2d 761 (Mo. 1978) (involving a statute that requires one to retire at the age of seventy, with the plaintiff alleging that the statute deprived him of his right to pursue his livelihood); see also Nagle v. Haw. State Teachers Ass’n, 63 Haw. 389, 394 (1981).
178 Steiner, supra note 81, at 284.
179 Id. at 293 (discussing the reasons why the Murgia standard should be re-evaluated and changed); see generally Nina A. Kohn, Rethinking the Constitutionality of Age Discrimination: A Challenge to a Decades-Old Consensus, 44 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 213 (2010) (discussing courts applications of intermediate scrutiny).
time, the Murgia Court had to choose between strict scrutiny requiring proof that the classification is narrowly tailored to accomplish a compelling state interest, or rational basis review. However, Craig v. Boren adopted an intermediate scrutiny standard, requiring proof that the classification is substantially related to an important state interest.\textsuperscript{180} The level of scrutiny applied to equal protection claims based on age discrimination should be the intermediate level because while under current law employment is not a fundamental right, it still ranks among the most important of one’s personal concerns.\textsuperscript{181} A claim of an equal protection violation of a fundamental right would trigger the strict scrutiny standard. Regardless of whether this right is fundamental, “the right of the individual to engage in any of the common occupations of life” has been asserted by the Supreme Court as a liberty guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.\textsuperscript{182} Age is an immutable characteristic, one which cannot be controlled, like gender. Gender, or sex-based classifications trigger the intermediate scrutiny standard, and age should do the same.

In order for these athletes to have a claim against the age limit of the NBA draft rules, the age eligibility requirement would have to be construed as being enforced by the state. In virtually all litigation in which an individual argues that his constitutional rights have been violated, the court can grant relief only if it finds that there has been state action. There are three ways to prove state action. First, if the state delegates its power for one to perform a public function to a private person.\textsuperscript{183} Second, if the state becomes inextricably entangled with the private person in that their separate entities are lost.\textsuperscript{184} Third, if the state coerces or strongly encourages the private action in that the private person loses its power of

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  \item \textsuperscript{180} See Steiner, supra note 81, at 273 (citing Craig, 429 U.S. at 190) (adopting new middle level of scrutiny); see also Anonymous v. City of Rochester, 13 N.Y.3d 35, 48-49 (N.Y. C.A. 2009) (citing Craig v. Boren, 429 U.S. 190, 197 (1973)).
  \item \textsuperscript{181} See Vance, 440 U.S. at 113; see generally Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) (finding fundamental the women’s right to choose between giving birth and abortion); San Antonio Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Rodriguez, 411 U.S. 1, 16 (1973) (holding that the right of education was not fundamental).
  \item \textsuperscript{182} Mass. Bd. of Ret. v. Murgia, 427 U.S. 307, 322 (citing Bd. of Regents v. Roth, 408 U.S. 564, 572 (1972)) (quoting Meyer v. Nebraska, 262 U.S. 390, 399 (1923)).
  \item \textsuperscript{183} See generally Marsh v. Alabama, 326 U.S. 501 (1945) (finding that the more an owner opens up his property for use by the public, for his own advantage, the more his rights become circumscribed by the state and the constitutional rights of those who use the property); Ámalgamated Food Emp.’s Union Local 590 v. Logan Valley Plaza, 391 U.S. 308, 325 (1968).
  \item \textsuperscript{184} See generally Burton v. Wilmington Parking, 365 U.S. 715 (1961) (deciding state action because the financial wherewithal to run the parking facility was dependent on the public); Sheila Suess Kennedy, \textit{When is Private Public? State Action in the Era of Privatization and Public-Private Partnerships} (March 2001) (unpublished law review article, George Mason University) (on file with George Mason Civil Rights Law Review).
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voluntary choice.\textsuperscript{185}

The most relevant of the three with regards to the NBA's age eligibility requirement is the second, where a state becomes entangled with the private person. This prong can be seen in \textit{Burton v. Wilmington Parking}.\textsuperscript{186} In \textit{Burton}, the Eagle Coffee Shoppe, a restaurant within a parking building, owned by Wilmington Parking Authority, an agency of Delaware, refused to serve the plaintiff because he was black.\textsuperscript{187} The plaintiff alleged that the refusal was a violation of his rights under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.\textsuperscript{188} The Supreme Court of Delaware held that this act was "purely private" and that the action was not state action.\textsuperscript{189} The Supreme Court ultimately found that the relationship between the restaurant and the parking facility was enough to constitute the Coffee Shoppe's acts as state action. The Court reasoned that because the land and building were publicly owned, upkeep and maintenance of the building were payable out of public funds and because the restaurant is operated as an integral part of a public building devoted to a public parking service, there is a degree of state participation and involvement.\textsuperscript{190}

The state action requirement necessary to make a claim under equal protection can be met with respect to an NBA franchise.\textsuperscript{191} State action can be proven through the entanglement prong. The States are intricately involved with each of their teams, allotting tax revenue in order to build stadiums. Similarly to \textit{Burton}, any maintenance or upkeep of the stadiums will be publicly funded. Furthermore, the State provides teams with the venue and money to throw parades when the teams win championships. Additional entanglement between the private entity and the state can be seen through the states taking on the identity of the sports teams as fans and followers of that specific team.\textsuperscript{192}

Even if the standard is not changed, \textit{Baccus v. Karger} gives high school

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\textsuperscript{185} See generally Shelly v. Kramer, 334 U.S. 1 (1948) (holding that judicial enforcement of the restrictive covenant in deeds of residential property would constitute state action, and therefore be in violation of the 14th Amendment); Buchanan v. Warley, 245 U.S. 60 (1917).

\textsuperscript{186} 365 U.S. 715 (1961).

\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Burton}, 365 U.S. at 716.

\textsuperscript{188} Id.

\textsuperscript{189} See id.

\textsuperscript{190} See id. at 723–24.

\textsuperscript{191} See Fuhrman, supra note 59, at 606–07 (noting the different ways that the NBA can be seen as being involved in state action); see also Karen Martin Dean, \textit{Can The NBA Punish Dennis Rodman? An Analysis of First Amendment Rights in Professional Basketball}, 23 VT. L. REV. 157, 166 (1998).

\textsuperscript{192} Id.; see Stephen M. McKelvey, \textit{Commercial "Branding": The Final Frontier or False Start for Athletes' Use of Temporary Tattoos as Body Billboards}, 13 J. LEGAL ASPECTS OF SPORT 1, 29–30 (2003).
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basketball stars, and others discriminated against on the basis of age, a
glimmer of hope that the rational basis standard can be defeated. The
plaintiff in *Baccus* was considered a child prodigy and began studying law
at the age of fourteen, receiving his Juris Doctor when he was seventeen
years old. The plaintiff claimed undue hardship, arguing that his
accelerated studies will now be forever meaningless and that he is in the
best position to pass the bar immediately following completion of law
school. The defendants argued that in order to sit for the bar, the age
requirement is necessary because one must be mature enough to practice
law. The defendants also argued that a person under the age of eighteen
does not possess enough maturity to "sufficiently appreciate and
understand the myriad factors and complexities found in the law and the
critical importance of attorneys in practicing law and counseling
clients."

While the requirement of being twenty one years of age to sit for the bar
examination passed the rational basis review, the court found that requiring
one to be at least eighteen before beginning law school would not pass
rational basis review. The court states that law schools are not in the
"maturity business" and that a law school’s purpose is to teach its students
the principles of the law. The fact that Baccus was approved for
acceptance by a law school and completed the course of study proves that
he is "entitled to the same academic recognition achieved by his older,
fellow graduates." Ultimately, the court found that this age restriction
was arbitrary, which is the only instance in which the court could strike
down the criteria. This case represents a plaintiff overcoming the
rational basis standard, which usually calls for great deference to the

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193 *Baccus v. Karger*, 692 F. Supp. 290, 292 (S.D.N.Y. 1988) (holding that the requirement that the
bar applicant be at least 18 years old to begin the study of law does not pass the rational basis standard,
and is unconstitutional).
194 *Id.* at 293.
195 *See id.* at 292.
196 *See id.* at 294 (holding that an age threshold can be rationally related to maturity).
197 *Id.* at 298.
198 *See id.* at 298 ("Simply put, we are not satisfied that this requirement rationally advances New
York's legitimate interest in protecting the public from the pitfalls of professional immaturity.").
199 *See id.* at 299.
200 *Id.*
201 *See id.* at 293 (discussing the only instance in which it would be necessary to strike down a
statute).
This case echoes the same problems with the NBA’s age eligibility rules. The NBA is trying to expand its horizons by going into the “maturity business” instead of focusing on basketball, and allowing the teams to make their decisions and assume the risk of whom they choose to represent their teams. It is hard to believe that a twenty year old, “treated like a god in college before deciding to drop out” is more mature “than an [eighteen year old] trying to start his professional career right away.” This paternalistic role that the NBA is taking is unfair, unreasonable, and completely arbitrary. Protecting younger players from dealing with a difficult adjustment of playing in high school to playing in the NBA may be a concern that is none of the NBA’s business. The concern should be that of the individual teams, and the NBA should allow the individual teams to rely on the “natural selection” of the draft. The best players will be chosen and those who are not qualified will not be chosen. The NBA should allow these athletes the right to enter the draft, and whether or not they are chosen depends on their skills and the teams drafting strategy. If the players are good enough to play in the NBA, as some have proven to be, then this may help invalidate the rule. What will happen when the next LeBron James desires to enter the draft but has to wait a year or maybe two in order to play in the NBA? Will the NBA turn their heads at the chance of having a once in a lifetime star enter their business, and let him risk injury at college, or play in Europe?

The NBA’s age eligibility requirement is arbitrary. The court in Baccus asserted it would only strike down a regulation if it was completely arbitrary. With regards to child labor laws, such laws have withstood scrutiny because they aim to protect children from harm, resulting in a law that is not arbitrary. In contrast, the success of players in the NBA who came straight from high school, such as Kobe Bryant and LeBron James,
may work against the league's justification of the age requirement, rendering it arbitrary. These are two of the most successful and talented players in the game, and neither needed to wait an extra year after graduating high school to enter the draft. If there is proof that those players who skip college do not deteriorate the game of basketball, then the NBA will have a hard time explaining its reasoning for the eligibility requirement. The success of these players makes the classification arbitrary, and proves that the legitimate goal of denying them the right to play will be obsolete.

IV. Solution To The Problem

A. The Collective Bargaining Process and Paternalism

Aside from the age eligibility rule itself, there are two basic problems that need to be rectified in order for the NBA to have a fairer draft process. The first is the lack of representatives that the potential college athletes have in the collective bargaining process. The second is the paternalistic role that the NBA is playing, or attempting to play in the team strategies and risk taking in drafting players for their teams.

It has been determined that it is common for industries to make decisions about potential or future employees in their collective bargaining agreements. However it would behoove the NBA to start a new trend, by including a group of representatives that could speak on behalf of the incoming class of players. The NBA is different than any other industry, aside from other athletic leagues, in that they gain much more publicity than do employers in the regular workplace. The NBA would be sending a message all around the country that they care about potential and future workers, and that they deserve to be heard. Even if this group of representatives had less to say than the group of current players and league owners, it would still be better than having no say in the matter whatsoever.

The second problem the NBA has is that they do not let the teams take the risks and determine their own strategy for drafting players. In all other aspects of the game, the team can decide who they want on their team through free agency, and trades. However when it comes to drafting, the NBA is limiting the pool. The NBA should allow the teams to choose and determine who is and is not ready for the NBA. Let the teams, the general

209 See Fuhrman, supra, note 59, at 613; see also Baccus, 692 F. Supp. at 293.
210 See discussion infra Part I.
211 See id.
managers, and the coaches assume the risk of selecting a player directly out of high school. The NBA should allow the players to play in the NBA depending on their skills and talents, not their age.

One final possible solution would be to create a better developmental league than the one already in place. The current NBA developmental league drafts players from colleges, and the NBA has scouts attend the games and make determinations as to whether any players are ready to enter the NBA. The NBA should create a system like the MLB farm system, where the teams draft the players and if they believe they are not ready for the NBA they can play in the developmental league under contract with their respective team. This would avoid denying these potential stars their right to obtain gainful employment because they would be playing basketball, and making money doing so, before being able to make the jump to the NBA.

CONCLUSION

The NBA has enforced an arbitrary age limit on potential NBA stars, differing from many other sports that do not have age restrictions, such as hockey, boxing, and NASCAR. The differences between these sports and the NBA are quite apparent in terms of physicality of the sport and the potential risk of injury. Furthermore, the NFL, which enforces an age requirement for players to enter the draft, is one of the most physically dangerous sports in the country, making for a better reason as to why the age limit may be necessary in the NFL, but not in the NBA.

Additionally, disallowing these teenage athletes to work because they are too young should be classified as reverse age discrimination. While the ADEA has been interpreted as applying only to those individuals age forty and over, the statute clearly indicates that discriminating on the basis of age is prohibited. Regardless of the interpretation of the ADEA, State Law claims of reverse age discrimination can still succeed. The ADEA does not


214 See discussion infra Part II.

preempt state law, and two very influential states; New Jersey and California have found that reverse age discrimination cases can succeed.216

Furthermore, depriving these individuals of their right to obtain gainful employment is a violation of their Fourteenth Amendment equal protection right, and should be deemed unconstitutional. While the standard set forth by *Murgia* seems to make it difficult for one to succeed on an equal protection claim, there are four reasons for the players seeking employment to maintain hope. First, the standard in *Murgia* is old and possibly outdated. Second, the rational basis standard was applied to age discrimination a few months before the intermediate standard was created.217 Third, the cases in which age discrimination was decided by applying the rational basis standard dealt with retirement and/or health benefits, employees who already were employed. In the case of the high school athletes, they are being denied the right to work completely. Lastly, the New Jersey Court in *Baccus* showed that this rational basis standard can be overcome when the requirement is arbitrary.218

In Brandon's rookie season in the NBA, he scored fifty-five points in one game, becoming the youngest player ever to score over fifty points in his rookie season.219 Ultimately, after his season playing overseas had ended, Brandon Jennings was drafted tenth overall in the 2009 NBA draft, and is now an up and coming star in the league.220 Even though Brandon Jennings got the experience and maturity that he needed from playing overseas, and avoided the issue that stands in the face of many other potential NBA players, many others may not have this opportunity. Some players will choose to go to college for a year, and then make the jump to the NBA. Some players will go to college for more than one year, until they believe they are ready for the NBA.

Others may do neither, contemplating other possibilities such as taking

216 See discussion infra Part III.
217 See id.
218 See id.
legal action. Brandon Jennings may or may not have started a trend of high school athletes traveling overseas for a year to play basketball before playing in the NBA. Perhaps another potential NBA all star will start a trend of their own; challenging the NBA’s age eligibility rules on new grounds.