

Yao Ming retiring from NBA: report

Written by Administrator
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Yao Ming shoots a free throw in a November 2010 game, but he'd soon be shut down for another season. □ (Bill Baptist/NBAE via Getty Images)

The Associated Press

Houston Rockets centre Yao Ming is retiring, according to a report by Yahoo! Sports.

The seven-foot-six Chinese star, plagued by lower-body injuries in the second half of his career, has informed the league office that his playing career is over, the website reported.

The Rockets declined to comment on the report because of the lockout, and the NBA has not received official retirement paperwork from Yao.

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Yao's contract expired after last season, and the Rockets said they were interested in re-signing him if he came back healthy.

Yao said in April in China that his professional future depended on his recovery from a stress fracture in his left ankle.

John Huizinga, one of Yao's American agents, would not confirm the report during a phone interview last Friday.

He said Yao's recovery was "on track," but Yao's future with the Rockets has been uncertain for some time.

"He's really enjoyed his time in Houston," Huizinga said.

"If he feels that he's recovered enough to play, and if the lockout ever ends, and if the Rockets are interested in him, then there's certainly a good chance he'll stay in Houston.

"But there are a whole lot of 'ifs' in that statement."

An eight-time all-star selection, Yao averaged 19 points and 9.2 rebounds in his eight seasons, but his impact on the league goes far beyond the numbers.

Yao single-handedly expanded the NBA's reach throughout Asia, spiking merchandise sales and TV ratings for games after the Rockets made him the top overall pick in the 2002 draft.

Marc Ganis, president of Chicago-based consultancy SportsCorp, said Yao's worldwide impact

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on the league will probably never be duplicated by another player.

"There's never been anything like him before," Ganis said, "and I doubt we'll ever see anything like him again."

Ganis said Yao became an iconic symbol of China's growth and status.

He carried the Olympic torch through Tiananmen Square and proudly carried his country's flag during the opening ceremonies in Beijing in 2008.

He also donated \$2 million US and set up a foundation to rebuild schools in the wake of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan.

Larger-than-life

"He was the embodiment of the cultural aspirations of the Chinese society," Ganis said.

"He always talked about 'team,' always talked about sacrifice, always talked about those who needed help."

Yao was already a larger-than-life national hero in China when he joined the Rockets.

He played for the Chinese national team in the six summers before he joined the NBA.

Skeptics doubted Yao was ready for the league, but he made the All-Rookie team after averaging 13.5 points, 8.2 rebounds and 1.74 blocks in 82 games.

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He was the only rookie to lead his team in both rebounds and blocks, and the only rookie to rank in the top 20 in three statistical categories.

Yao helped the Rockets reach the playoffs in the next two seasons.

Houston acquired versatile star Tracy McGrady before the 2004-05 season, and the franchise envisioned the duo as the cornerstones of a championship team.

The Rockets lost first-round series in seven games in both 2005 and 2007.

Yao and McGrady both started encountering injury problems in the seasons that followed.

Yao played in 77 games in the 2008-09 season and with McGrady sidelined, helped Houston reach the second round of the playoffs for the first time since 1997.

But Yao broke his left foot in a post-season game against the Lakers, and underwent complex surgery that sidelined him for the entire 2009-10 season.

He lasted only five games at the start of the 2010-11 season, before breaking his left ankle.

He underwent surgery in January, and was lost for the season again.

Yao, who turns 31 in September, missed a total of 250 regular-season games over the past six seasons due mostly to injuries to his left foot and leg.

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The Rockets missed the playoffs for the second straight season in 2010-11, parted ways with coach Rick Adelman and hired Kevin McHale.

McHale said Yao's future with the team was contingent on his health.

"We'd all be really happy if Yao comes back to play, and I hope he can," McHale said.

"I think he'll give it his best shot. His body is going to dictate if he can come back and play. That's all going to be laid out in the future."

Ganis said the NBA's popularity in China may never be the same without Yao.

"There was a fascination, with Yao Ming and the Chinese fans," Ganis said.

"It was almost like the Michael Jordan effect. The casual fans that Jordan brought to the NBA, when he retired, they simply disappeared.

"That doesn't mean there isn't interest, that doesn't mean there isn't significantly higher, long-term interest in the NBA there. But the numbers the NBA attracted, in Yao Ming's heyday, will never be reached again — unless there's another Yao Ming around the corner."