



WU JUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Stephon Marbury's teammates throw him in the air after the Beijing Ducks won the Chinese Basketball Association championship on March 30 at Beijing's MasterCard Center. It was the first title in the franchise's 17-season history.

A brand new home court

Former NBA star Stephon Marbury has reinvented himself in China, **Sun Xiaochen** reports in Beijing.

Former NBA star Stephon Marbury has been rebounding in China. The 35-year-old New York City native has been reinventing himself in the country since 2010, after 13 oftentimes tumultuous NBA seasons.

He has won fans in the country, where people are prone to forgiving past transgressions, not only for his success in leading Chinese Basketball Association teams — most recently, he led the Beijing Ducks to the championship in March — but also for his insistence on shunning many privileges demanded by his counterparts.

He has turned down the offer of a chauffeur, opting instead to elbow his way through the subway crowds for the long commute from downtown to the suburbs, where his team practices.

He flies economy, like the rest of the team, and joins them for meals in the canteen.

It is a humble life for a man whose bronze statue has been erected outside Beijing's MasterCard Center, the venue where he led the Beijing Ducks to their first championship in 17 years. No other athlete in China, including former Houston Rockets center Yao Ming and Olympic champion hurdler Liu Xiang, has received a comparable honor.

Wherever he goes, he's often greeted by fans sporting his Starbury shirts and chanting his Chinese name, "Ma Buli." Fans have also conferred upon him the title "Ma Zhengwei (commissar)", because of the way he motivates his team and inspires younger players.

Marbury takes pride in the moniker and is careful when pronouncing it in Chinese.

Before returning home for surgery, he had been busy off the court, promoting his charity, launching his autobiography and signing a deal for his youth basketball clinic.

Sports Illustrated China staff writer David Yang has closely followed Marbury's China career and believes the ex-NBA star's emotional ties with local fans has helped his "rebirth".

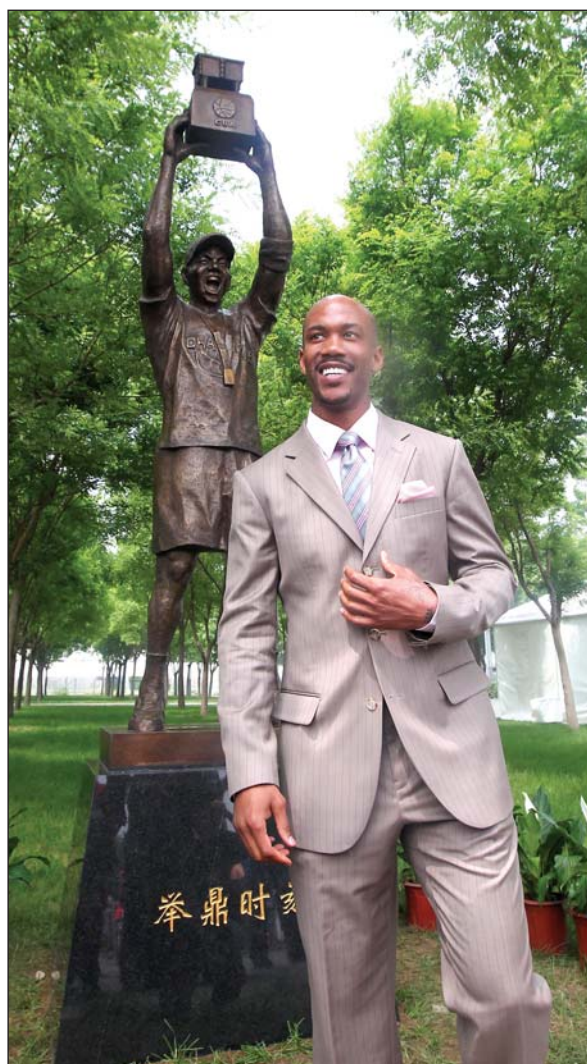
"No athlete has ever done this before, trying to get through to Chinese fans — not even Yao Ming or Liu Xiang. Stephon is the first," Yang said.

Marbury spends much time tweeting on his micro blog and keeping in touch with his estimated 380,000 followers. He takes time to reply to nearly every comment and posts photos to keep fans updated as to his whereabouts.

He also writes a weekly column for China Daily. This marks another new chapter in his life, given his tense relationship with the media back home.

"It's beautiful when you can tell your own story," Marbury said.

He suffered the humiliation of being called the "most reviled athlete in town" by the New York Daily News, during his stint with the New York Knicks.



LIU PING / FOR CHINA DAILY

Marbury stands in front of his bronze statue, erected outside Beijing's MasterCard Center.

"It's something about the serenity and peace of this country. It's more than basketball. It's about how it fits my life. China changed the direction of my life. I gained a lot that I did not have before."

It is, indeed, a different narrative than it was three years ago.

The Milwaukee Bucks made Marbury the fourth overall pick in the 1996 NBA draft, and he was then traded to Minnesota. He later struggled on the Knicks' bench and had very public feuds with two coaches — Larry Brown and Isaiah Thomas.

He was criticized for not leading the Knicks to win a single playoff series after he joined the team in 2004. Sports Illustrated voted him the "most undesirable teammate".

Marbury was shattered when his father, Don Marbury, passed away. He appeared on a live stream website, weeping uncontrollably and eating Vaseline in July 2009.

"That was a pretty low period in my life," Marbury says. "I lost my father. I was dealing with a lot. People couldn't really understand that. You think I'm crazy, but I'm so far from crazy."

The change came by way of an e-mail from a CBA team in Shanxi province. The ambitious Shanxi Brave Dragons, which had landed former Rockets swingman Bonzi Wells in 2008, made him an offer.

He hesitated because he knew nothing about China aside from that it had Yao Ming and the Great Wall. But he decided to go for it anyway.

He was shocked at the welcome he received at Taiyuan airport in January 2010.

Chinese reporter Yang Yi recalls that moment: "His face lit up, and he asked, 'Me? They are welcoming me?' He was stunned."

Marbury boosted the bottom-ranked Shanxi team's standing, pushed it into the media spotlight and helped make Taiyuan a landmark on the basketball world's map.

But the honeymoon ended when the team announced it would not offer him another contract just three weeks before the 2010-11 season's tip-off.

Just as he was about to head home, a new CBA team, the Foshan Longlions, offered him a one-year contract.

Marbury sensed something big was about to happen, when he signed with the Ducks last summer. He pushed his squad and motivated it to take the ultimate prize — the championship.

Marbury's sister, Marcia Marbury, couldn't feel happier about the inner peace her brother has found during his China saga.

"In life, you always have challenges," she said.

"People will have their own opinions about you. But what's most important is that you rebound from the toughness and learn from them. I think that definitely has happened to him."

Even the critical New York media had to acknowledge Marbury's success in China. According to Brendan Suhr, the Knicks' assistant coach when Marbury was playing, the US mainstream media have made an about-face to support the former New Yorker after his championship win.

"The New York media is the most difficult in the world," Suhr says.

"And this was unfair to him. But now, they are happy for him. They give him credit for coming, staying and enjoying himself."

Nine-time NBA All-Star Gary Payton summed it up when he said Marbury's story could trigger a ripple effect in the US.

"When he was in the NBA, the thing that took him out was the attitude," Payton said at a recent event in Guangdong's provincial capital, Guangzhou.

"Now that he is over here, he has done great things, and his attitude has changed. He's grown up. He's a man now."

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STEPHON MARBURY
FORMER NBA STAR NOW PLAYING FOR THE BEIJING DUCKS



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Marbury uses the subway to commute from downtown to the suburbs of Beijing.