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The Value of Zero Is Increasing

By [LEE JENKINS](#)

SACRAMENTO, March 14 — Aaron Brooks averaged more than 17 points a game for the Oregon Ducks this season, led the Pacific-10 conference in scoring and helped his team capture a No. 3 seed in the [N.C.A.A.](#) tournament.

But deep down, he is still a zero.

“I’m proud of that,” Brooks said. “I look around college basketball this year, and I see zeros all over the place.”

He was referring not to the players themselves, but to the number on their jerseys. No. 0, which used to be assigned mainly to mascots, has become standard issue for college stars.

At least 20 tournament teams have had a player in the program this season with jersey No. 0 or No. 00. They include top seeds (Kansas’ Darrell Arthur), bottom seeds (Jackson State’s Marcus Jones) and bad seeds ([Georgia Tech](#)’s Lewis Clinch, who was suspended for the season for violating university policy).

They come from Brooklyn (Arkansas’s Gary Ervin) all the way to Nigeria ([Michigan State](#)’s Idong Ibok). They range from 5 feet 10 inches (Louisville’s Stuart Miller) to 6-10 (Holy Cross’s Tim Clifford). They played anywhere from around a minute a game (New Mexico State’s Trey Britt) to 37 minutes a game (Brooks).

“No matter who you are, wearing the number means something,” Brooks said. “It means that you’ve got to be more than a zero.”

Basketball players generally try to stay as far away as possible from anything having to do with zero. A goose egg is the ultimate sign of futility, at least when it comes to points, rebounds, assists and minutes.

On the surface, zero is a strange and disturbing choice for a jersey number. By selecting it, a player seems to be implying that he has no tangible value, that he is worthless, a total nonfactor.

But the zero’s negative connotation has actually driven its recent spike in popularity. Players do not choose the number because they lack confidence, but because they believe others lack confidence in them. They

believe they are viewed as zeros.

“The zero is a powerful statement,” said Gilbert Arenas, the [Washington Wizards](#)’ guard. “It is for anybody who feels unappreciated or feels like somebody is telling them that they are worth nothing.”

In other words, it is for the recruit who received zero scholarship offers, zero sneaker deals, zero love. By wearing the number, a player is able to embrace his past as a zero and motivate himself to put up bigger and bigger numbers.

What [Michael Jordan](#) did for No. 23, Arenas has done for No. 0. He chose the number as a freshman at the [University of Arizona](#), after hearing that he would play zero minutes for the Wildcats. Agent Zero, as Arenas is now known, was born.

So, too, was a generation of players who felt similarly dismissed. When they looked at Arenas’s jersey, they saw more than a number. They saw a message: You think I’m a zero? Now watch me score 30.

“That’s it,” said Russell Westbrook, who wears No. 0 for U.C.L.A. “You go with the zero when you’ve been through something and you are looking to get a new beginning. It helps you get going again. It helps you get the swag back.”

The swag, as Westbrook calls it, is short for swagger. Zero has clearly come a long way since the days when Orlando Woolridge wore the number in the N.B.A., simply because it looked like the first letter of his first name.

In the N.B.A., No. 0 and No. 00 used to be reserved for the league’s goofballs and contrarians. In college, it was often not available. Some players assumed it was against N.C.A.A. rules to wear. Many equipment rooms did not even stock it.

But one college kept the tradition of the zero alive. Robert Parish wore No. 00 at Centenary, and when he was drafted into the N.B.A., he took the number to Golden State and Boston. It now hangs in the rafters alongside the [Celtics](#)’ other retired jerseys.

Centenary is not in the N.C.A.A. tournament, but fittingly, the team’s best player this season was Tyrone Hamilton, proud wearer of No. 0.

“It’s like my own bull’s-eye,” Hamilton said. “When I put on the zero, I remember that all eyes are on me. I’ve seen a lot of guys wearing it this season, and they all seem to have the same attitude — they want the pressure. They want the bull’s-eye on their back.”

Last year, a zero carried his team all the way to the Final Four. L.S.U.’s Glen Davis became a star, with his

Big Baby nickname and a body that looked a lot like his jersey number. Davis was as round as a zero.

But this season, Davis showed up about 30 pounds slimmer, looking less like a No. 0 than a No. 1. L.S.U. did not even make the National Invitation Tournament.

“I know it seems like these guys are trying to say they’re just a big fat zero,” said Sally Faubion, a numerologist in San Francisco. “But in numerology, zero actually portends something very positive. It portends very good fortune.”

Few of today’s players studied numerology or grew up dreaming of being a zero. When Brooks went to Oregon, he wanted No. 30. When Westbrook went to U.C.L.A., he wanted No. 4. But those numbers were unavailable, so they zeroed in on something new.

Both of the players were transitioning from high school to college, trying to prove themselves in a new setting. No number spoke to their circumstances quite like zero. It symbolized where they stood and what they had.

“A lot of guys pick zero because it’s like a fresh start,” said Jermaine (Dolla) Beal, who wears No. 0 at Vanderbilt. “But I just picked it because of Arenas.”

Numbers go in and out of style, depending on what superstars are wearing at a given time. Brooks will probably be in the N.B.A. next season, so it is his responsibility to help Arenas carry the mantle and spread the goose eggs.

“I hope it works out that way,” Brooks said. “I hope zero is still available.”

Michael S. Schmidt contributed reporting from East Rutherford, N.J., and Daniel E. Slotnik from New York.

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