

# Case study: How the media framed Yao Ming's career-ending stress fractures

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## **Introduction**

Since he entered the NBA in 2002, Yao Ming made a huge impact on the league. Standing at 7 feet 6 inches tall, the eight-time all-star played a major role in bridging the gap between American and Chinese basketball and making the NBA a global force. Though his contribution to the game of basketball will never be forgotten, it will also be hard to forget the many injuries that plagued his career. Yao Ming battled several lower-body injuries throughout his eight seasons with the Houston Rockets, and they ultimately cut his promising career short. In this case study, I will discuss how the media framed Yao's career-ending stress fractures and what I recommend for future coverage of related cases.

## **Topic**

This case study explores several articles that discuss Yao Ming's injuries and their causes and implications. It also studies medical articles that explain what stress fractures are, how they are caused, how they are treated and how they can be prevented. According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (2009), "a stress fracture is a small crack in a bone that develops from overuse, such as from high-impact sports like distance running or basketball." A 1994 study funded by the NBA and the Dr. Scholl's company found that "the most severe stresses occurred from layup landings, which produce peak vertical forces averaging 8.9 times body weight, and as much as 14.58 times body weight" ("MR," 2004). The main themes highlighted in the sports media articles were that Yao Ming's size was the leading cause for the issues with his lower body and that the repeated injuries plus his lack of rest made it difficult for him to fully recover. During the second half of his career, Yao Ming suffered an array of lower body injuries, especially in his left foot: a bone spur in his left foot and osteomyelitis in the big toe of the left foot in 2005, the broken bone in his left foot and right knee in 2006, the stress

fracture in his left foot in 2008, the hairline (navicular) fracture in his left foot in 2009 and the stress fracture in his left ankle in 2010.

### **Incident Details**

The injury that ultimately ended Yao Ming's career occurred in the beginning of the 2010 season. Yao left in the first half of a November game against the Washington Wizards after suffering a tendon strain in his left foot as a result of a collision with opposing center Javale McGee. Yao had plans to return to action on December 7, but an MRI showed the arrival of a new stress fracture that previous tests had not detected. This was another major hit to Yao after he suffered a navicular stress fracture and broken foot the season before in 2009 that had to be repaired with surgery. The injury sidelined him for the remainder of the season, and questions arose about whether or not he would return during the following season. Rather than trying to play another year, Yao Ming decided to retire in the summer of 2011.

### **Media Coverage**

I studied two articles from ESPN.com about Yao Ming's injuries; one was from 2009 about his broken foot and the other was from 2010 about the last stress fracture. They were both breaking news stories that told of Yao Ming's condition and how he would miss the remainder of his seasons. However, each article highlighted different points. The article from 2009 told of how Yao would miss the rest of the 2009 playoffs. It focused on Yao's contribution with the team and how he was the "focal point" of the offense since Tracy McGrady underwent season-ending knee surgery in February of that year ("Yao," 2009). The story also highlighted the Rockets' record without Yao from that season and the season before. This article's frame was less about the injury and more about how the Rockets could possibly manage without him for the

time being. The 2010 article featured an interview with the Rockets' team physician, Walter Lowe. Lowe discusses the previous surgery performed on Yao and how he has always been "prone to stress fractures" ("Yao," 2010). The article also focuses on the financial aspect of the situation. At the time, Yao was due to receive \$17.7 million that season. Team general manager Daryl Morey expressed that the team would look into possible trade and signing exceptions to alleviate the pressure. The article also alluded to the fact that Yao's career was now in jeopardy by featuring a quote from Ron Artest that said he hopes this was not the end of Yao's career. Again, this frame focused on the implications on the team rather than Yao's actual health.

I studied two articles from the Houston Chronicle—one from 2009 and one from 2010. The 2009 article discussed how stress fractures are common for "big men." In the article is a quote from Dr. Jeffrey Whelan, a sports medicine orthopedist for Kelsey-Seybold in Houston, which states that larger individuals are "more prone to injury" (Hamilton, 2009). It then goes on to compare Yao to other injury-plagued big men like Bill Walton, Sam Bowie, Rik Smits, Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Greg Oden. All of these players are at least 6 feet 11 inches or taller and missed a significant amount of playing time in their careers. The frame here is that major injuries are inevitable when you are a large center or forward in the NBA. The 2010 article questioned Yao's ability to play again, just like the previous ESPN article. This article also features quotes from the team's physician Walter Lowe stating that Yao has always been at risk for these types of injuries. Both Walter Lowe and Daryl Morey are quoted saying this injury may not be the end of Yao's career, but his "quality of life" was definitely in question (Feigen, 2010). This story shows concern for his personal health rather than just his career standing.

In 2009, the Hospital for Special Surgery presented an article from Hoopsworld explaining Yao Ming's foot injury. The story features an interview with the New Jersey Nets'

team physician, Dr. Riley Williams, who works for HSS. Williams stated that he had no prior knowledge of Yao's injury, but he knew what it meant to have a navicular stress fracture. He explains that the navicular bone sits above the arch of the foot, and arching your foot places force on that bone. He then goes on to say that "Yao's so big that, even if, as a surgeon, you go in and 'fix' the crack, it still doesn't bode well for the future because you aren't able to do anything to correct the morphology of the foot, the actual structure of the foot" ("Yao Ming's Injury Explained," 2009). Furthermore, he mentions that this is not an injury that is hard to come back from, but the risks of playing more could be detrimental to Yao's future health and may not be worth it.

A medical article from eMedicineHealth discusses the fact that some stress fractures take longer to heal than others. One of the striking points from the articles states that running can "multiply a person's weight by more than 12 times" (Wedro, 2009). Being 7 feet 6 inches tall already places enough pressure on Yao's feet and muscles, but when you add the force of him running while playing basketball, that pressure is magnified to an unimaginable extent. According to the article, the navicular bone has a design flaw: poor blood supply. Injuring this particular bone is worst than others because the potential for it to fully heal is extremely poor, even with standard treatment and rest. The article then goes on to say that both athletes and military personnel are prone to stress fractures but are also "highly motivated to ignore pain and continue their training regimen" (2009). Though this was not the first or last stress fracture Yao Ming endured, it hindered his potential to fully rehab, making his 2010 injury that much more detrimental.

SB Nation released two articles in 2010 regarding Yao Ming's injury. The first came in November following the initial incident. The article was very short and simply stated the reason

for the injury—the collision with Javale McGee—and that he had not returned to the game. It finishes by saying, “Yao’s minutes have been limited this year so as to preserve his health” (Rotter, 2010). The second article came in December, and, rather than going into more detail about the actual injury, it gave the report of Yao missing yet another season due to stress fracture and questioned his ability to return. They give an account of how many games he had missed that season and the prior seasons: 164 in the past two, 27 in 2007-08 and 34 in 2006-07. This article seemed to focus more on hard facts of his playing time rather than his personal health.

In July 2011, immediately following Yao Ming’s official retirement, Bleacher Report released a feature story by Gabe Zaldivar about the effect his injuries had on his overall legacy. According to Zaldivar (2011), Yao’s legacy was “largely unfulfilled.” He mentions that Yao had three promising seasons that showed the wonderful player he was before injuries began to take their toll on him. He gives a small account of every injury Yao faced during his career, but then goes on to discuss the positive impact he had on the league.

Zaldivar (2014) ends the article by saying:

Once again, the greatest villain in sports rears its ugly head. There is no getting around it, injuries have taken some great athletes from this sport, and they have claimed another victim today. Yao Ming will always be the promising star that welcomed millions of new fans to this great game. That should be his legacy going forward, one that anyone would be proud to have.

A 2011 article by Wu Junkuan was the only story I found that placed the blame of Yao’s repeated injuries on something other than his size. Instead, Junkuan talks about his early career in China where his injury history first began. He experienced his first major injury in 1997 when he was a junior player for the Shanghai Sharks and broke his left ankle. Yao did not undergo surgery; instead, he only received “conservative treatment” (Junkuan, 2011). He injured the same

ankle two years later and received the same treatment. According to Junkuan (2011), “if Yao had undergone surgery to treat either of the two early injuries, maybe his career should have been extended, and the left foot would not have been the ‘Achilles heel’ that brought down the basketball titan.” He goes to describe the problem with China’s treatment of its athletes, and how the Chinese tend to focus more on winning games than the players’ health. Though they have made improvements, the Chinese are still behind in terms of injury prevention and scientific treatment.

Earlier this year, Hoops Habit, a fan site sponsored by Sports Illustrated, did a story on how serious stress fractures can be for NBA players. The article focuses on the most recent cases of stress fractures, including Brook Lopez, Javale McGee and Jrue Holiday. It also features a study done by the author that found there have been 61 cases of stress fractures or stress reactions since the 1999-2000 NBA season. In the study, it shows that, though every position has been affected, the majority of the injuries happen to centers (20 out of 60), with small and power forwards being tied for second (11 each). It showed that most of the cases were foot fractures (29), with the second highest being the lower leg (14). The article also shows that athletes that suffered the foot fractures were susceptible to “reinjury,” and stress fractures in general tend to lead to future injury to the affected area (Magnotti 2014). The frame here is that stress fractures are a major epidemic with the NBA, especially for the bigger players.

Philly.com did a story using Yao Ming and Michael Jordan, who experienced a navicular fracture in 1985, as indicators for Philadelphia 76ers draft pick Joel Embiid, who is currently recovering from a stress fracture in his back. Embiid’s career longevity is already in question here. They look at both Yao’s and Jordan’s situations: Yao is only a few inches taller than Embiid, while Jordan was “shorter and slimmer” than them both when his fracture occurred

(Sielski, 2014). Jordan's injury also came during a time before MRIs were a common sports-medicine tool, and he was treated without surgery. Stan James, one of the physicians who examined Jordan, states in the article that though body type could play a role in navicular fractures, "we don't really know what causes it" (2014). Mike Sielski, the author of the article, goes on to say that though we may want to be able to foresee what Embiid's future has in store, it is currently impossible to tell with the causes of stress fractures and treatment still being an uncertainty.

### **Analysis**

There were several different frames used in the articles that I reviewed for this case study. One of the biggest frames was that Yao Ming's large size was the leading cause behind his injuries, as stated in the 2009 Houston Chronicle article, the Bleacher Report article and the Hoops Habit article. These particular articles do not mention treatment or training as causes. They simply implied that his large frame made him a "freak of nature," making him more susceptible to these kinds of injuries. When you compare Yao's incidents to those of Bill Walton's, size is the common variable mentioned between the two.

Another frame—mentioned only once in my research—was the poor treatment. Wu Junkuan placed the responsibility of Yao's repeated injuries and poor rehabilitation on China and its lack of extensive treatment of injuries. He was very adamant about the fact that Yao's career might have been able to exhibit longevity if China treated his early injuries with the proper surgery and procedures.

Other articles went the scientific route by using the definition of stress fractures to explain the cause behind Yao's misfortunes. Stress fractures, by definition, are caused by



overuse, and they are especially common among athletes. This frame is showing that it is not necessarily “surprising” for basketball players to experience this type of injury due to the amount of pressure they place on their bodies—particularly their legs and feet—on a daily basis.

Many of the articles refrained from discussing the injury itself and instead chose to discuss its effect on Yao’s career, season and team. These particular articles used facts such as records and previous games missed as indicators of whether or not the injury would impede Yao and the Rockets. These articles fail to mention the effect the injury would have on Yao’s long-term health and instead decided to focus on him as just a member of a team rather than a human being.

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

In future cases, I would like to see the media cover injuries from every aspect. It is important to mention how an injury will affect a team’s championship hopes for the sake of the fans, but it is also important to give insight to why the injury happened, why it matters for that particular player and how it could be an example for other and future athletes. It would be helpful for writers to take time out to give a brief synopsis of what the injury actually is and its causes, like some of the writers of the articles above did and some did not. I also think it would be beneficial to look into what kind of research or strides the NBA or other leagues are doing/making to help prevent or treat these kinds of injuries and make this information available to the public.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, over the course of this case study, I have learned a great deal of information about these types of injuries. The way the media frames these stories greatly affects

what the public knows and how these injuries are perceived. As the media, it is our job to make this information available to ensure that the public knows everything that they should. Although the Yao Ming coverage was abundant, it could have been more thorough, and as an aspiring sports journalist, I feel it is my duty to fill in the gaps with future incidents.

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