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Steve Nash leads NBA delegation on historic Cuba trip

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Retired NBA stars Steve Nash and Dikembe Mutombo turned into basketball ambassadors on Thursday in the first outreach by a U.S. professional sports league to Cuba since the thaw in U.S. relations with the communist-ruled island.

Nash showed off his shooting, passing and ball handling skills and Mutombo took charge of a practice for aspirants to the Cuban women's national team and in the first day of a four-day workshop that will include playing street ball with kids.

The NBA conducts such workshops around the globe but this was the first in Cuba, which had been cut off for more than half a century by the antagonism between Washington and Havana.

That changed on Dec. 17 when U.S. President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro announced they would restore diplomatic relations. The two leaders met earlier this month at a summit in Panama, auguring a new era in bilateral relations.

The NBA was quick to take advantage. Though baseball remains the national sport, Cubans are also big hoop fans. Cuba has a long basketball history with the high point being a bronze medal at the 1972 Olympics in Munich.

"Basketball is a sport that can connect people," Mutombo, recently selected to the Basketball Hall of Fame, told reporters before the first workout at a Cuban sports institute.

"As an athlete, I'm not a politician. It's more about the cultural exchange. It's more about the

future of our young men and young women, how we want them to develop the game of basketball," said Mutombo, 48, a 7-foot-2 centre who played 18 seasons with six teams.

Nash, 41, who retired last year after 18 seasons as a point guard with three teams, is the NBA record-holder with a career free-throw percentage of 90.4.

The retired players were joined by NBA coaches James Borrego of the Orlando Magic and Quin Snyder of the Utah Jazz.

They will all get a close look at how the game is played in Cuba, often in the streets on improvised courts.

Together with the international basketball federation FIBA, the NBA is restoring three courts in Cuba and will conduct special courses for children, junior players and referees.

Two players and a coach will be chosen for Basketball Without Borders, a camp operated by the NBA and FIBA to develop international talent.

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