

# Player Transfer as an Outsourcing Activity in Sport: The Opinions of the Coaches and Managers

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(Received): 31/10/2019 / (Accepted):31.12.2020

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## Abstract

The popularity and accessibility of sports at global level allow the mobility (transfer) of athletes worldwide as labor force. This is called 'sport labor migration' and allows clubs to access a global market as an alternative to local market. In this study, foreign player transfer is accepted as an outsourcing. In this context, club managers and coaches were asked to evaluate their foreign player transfers in terms of outsourcing. The data were collected through the interviews conducted with the coaches and administrators of 9 teams, which were chosen through purposive sampling method among 16 teams playing in Turkish Women's Basketball League. The participants were asked to provide their opinions regarding the transfer of foreign players and evaluate them in terms of three basic functions of outsourcing: (1) cost minimization, (2) quality improvement and (3) resource access. According to the findings, while sports clubs can increase the quality of their teams through foreign player transfers that they can use globally, they can also reducing the player costs. Sports clubs should be able to manage foreign player transfers correctly not only in terms of sporting success but also in terms of their economic sustainability. The results of this study may reveal that the transfer of foreign players as outsourcing is seen as a successful activity of sports clubs.

**Keywords:** Foreign Player, Player Mobility, Labor Migration, Immigration, Productivity

## INTRODUCTION

In today's world, sport is considered an important industry at global level because it brings millions of people together from six different continents. In economic terms, sport is now a business in which supporters are also a sort of customers because they play direct or indirect roles in the incomes of sports clubs or organizations from different resources such as sponsorships, broadcasting rights and ticket sales. This commercial dimension of sports have encouraged sports-based organizations to act like business enterprises. During this industrialization process, sports organizations are supposed to make strategic decisions for their economic activities. As a result, clubs have more responsibilities and they need to be managed more professionally. They also need to follow and apply recent trends in their management

practices. Outsourcing is one of the postmodern trends that might provide a solution to meet such demands. Although outsourcing is a strategy applied in the world of business, 21st century sports clubs increasingly use this strategy in their activities.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the related literature by examining outsourcing practices of sports organizations and transfer of players as an outsourcing activity. In addition, as a result of the individual interviews made with the sports clubs' coaches and managers, the advantages and disadvantages of foreign player transfers have been tried to be revealed. This study was conducted within the Turkish Women's Basketball League, which is a top-level organization of Turkey.

## Conceptual framework

When business enterprises hire experts or institutions to contract some of their activities –other than their basic activities-, we define this process as ‘outsourcing’ (32). Similarly, Hurley (20) defines outsourcing as “carrying out certain activities with the help of third party people or institutions” (p.53). The aim of outsourcing is to help an enterprise to focus on certain activities through which it can stand out and be unique. In addition, enterprises can get optimum benefit from their activities by contracting some of their secondary activities to other suppliers because they can use their limited budget more effectively for their basic activities. If they do not prefer to do so, they will have to distribute their limited budget among secondary activities such as marketing (25, 29), information technologies (41), accounting, security, car rental (32), logistics (19) or human resources (13), which will considerably decrease the productivity of the company. Nike is one of the companies that apply such a strategy. Although this company is known for its trainer production, manufacturing is completely carried out by other suppliers. The company only focuses on Research and Development (R&D) and marketing activities, which are considered the basic capabilities and activities of the company (32). Although the related literature presents various functions of and reasons for outsourcing in detail, three basic functions are commonly agreed in the studies: cost minimization, quality improvement and resource access (23).

‘Cost minimization’ is one of the priority aims of business enterprises in a competitive market. Khirallah (21) suggests that India has the potential to access cheap labor force in the field of information technologies. Therefore; he claims that it would be a low-cost choice if American companies employed their IT personnel by choosing among IT experts from this country. Another function is ‘quality improvement’. The study conducted by Mukherji & Ramachandran (31) reports that an educational institution in India outsourced all its non-academic activities, which enabled the institution to focus on only educational and research-based activities. The last function ‘resource access’ is the basis of this study. Lee (23) explains this function with an example from the world of sports. He states that the young talents of baseball in Middle and South America outnumber those from other regions, so the

clubs in the North outsource promising young baseball players from these regions.

## Examples of outsourcing in sports

Outsourcing has recently been a popular practice in increasingly commodified sports industry (25). Today, sports clubs – especially football clubs- are among the large-scale companies with their capitals and profitability. The football teams listed by Forbes magazine in 2017 have a market value over billions of dollars, and they deserve more than simply being considered as sports teams (18). In other words, sports clubs now have a commercial identity and their management requires a more professional approach accompanied with a wider vision. Ekmekçi (15) emphasizes that there are many factors affecting the structure of sports organizations, and these factors should be managed professionally with a modern sports management mentality in mind.

Outsourcing is used for different purposes and under different names in sports, which is a multi-disciplinary field. Sports clubs today meet their certain needs through outsourcing such as ticket sales (24) food and drink services at stadiums (8), sponsorship contracts (11), travel organizations (42) and the generally marketing outsourcing (28). In addition, it is stated that some stakeholders take part in management process through outsourcing (4). On the other hand, Lee's (23) study is the first study to focus on sport labour migration from global outsourcing perspective. This study focuses on players as labor force in sports and suggests that supply of players from abroad should be considered a sort of outsourcing practice.

## A different perspective of outsourcing activity in sports: Player transfer

The effects of globalization have allowed the evaluation of sports, which is a universal phenomenon, from a wider perspective. Today, a more professional approach to doing and managing sports is available when compared to the past, which was once characterized with an amateur spirit. At this point, we can conclude that sport is now evaluated as a labor force, and players are considered human resources at global level due to certain established standards (27). The presence of international laws regulating working conditions, social security practices and trade union rights (1) allows professional players to work in different

countries and have the same rights everywhere. As a result of these standards, athletes are now considered as a human resource at a global level (27). This situation is called 'international labor force migration' in the related literature (9, 23, 26, 27, 33, 34, 38).

Transferring football players is a common practice for sports clubs because it is a more practical and a quicker solution to short-term needs. Transfer practices may result in the circulation of local players among local clubs, and they can employ foreign players in their teams if they want. The sport which globalization has affected the most is football. The initial step towards industrialization is said to be 'Bossman Ruling' by European Court of Justice in 1995, which has given European Union citizen footballers the right for mobility not only among the clubs in the union (3, 37) but also a mobility at international level (2). At this point, UEFA warned member countries stating that the abundance of foreign players in local leagues may negatively affect the competition in these leagues and the attempts to train young talents (22).

There are also some rules regulating the possible number of foreign players in a team. In Turkey, the number of permitted foreign players in a team is determined by the federation of each sports branch. For example, according to the regulation published by Turkish Football Federation, Turkish football teams are allowed to have 14 players in the team, and all 11 players during a match can be foreign players as of 2015-2016 football season. Although this decision is seriously criticized, the weakened trust for local players and the shortage of local players at national team level are not, unfortunately, the primary concerns of clubs anymore. The rules regulating the number of foreign players in basketball are similar to those of football. As of 2016-2017 season, the clubs playing in Tahincioğlu Basketball Super League (the official highest level basketball league in Turkey) are allowed to have 8 foreign basketball players in the team and 6 foreign players during the match, which means that a team may consist of all foreign players during the matches. This situation is seriously criticized because teams are believed to lose their national team spirit. Yüce, Katurcı and Kuzu (43), in their study focusing on players' opinions regarding limiting the number of foreign players, conclude that the flexibility on the number of foreign players in a team may result in many disadvantages such as;

less interest and fewer attempts for youth academy services, fewer local players to be trained for specific positions in teams, an increase in the number of naturalized players, more problems while building up the national team. In the Basketball Women's Super League (KBSL), this rule is 3 + 1 as of 2017-2018 season. However, in the Turkish Women's Basketball League (TKBL), which is a sub-league where foreign player limitations are much more stringent, teams have the possibility to play only '1' foreign player. This leads to the necessity of determining the needs in the most accurate way and accordingly making the decisions to be much more carefully. Despite these possible negative consequences, sports clubs increasingly prefer to transfer foreign players. Since football and basketball are more popular sports than others, the transfer activities in these two branches attract media's attention more. People curiously follow the details regarding the transfer of world-famous players in the media. Although transfer of foreign players are known to bring many indirect advantages, it is evaluated within the framework of three basic functions of outsourcing in this study; cost minimization, quality improvement and resource access.

In this study, foreign player transfer was considered as outsourcing in sports. Besides, the transfer policies of the basketball clubs and the use of foreign players are handled in accordance with the rule of only one foreign player in the Turkish Women's Basketball League (TKBL). In addition, individual interviews were made with the trainers and managers of sports clubs and the advantageous and disadvantaged aspects of foreign transfers were tried to be put forward.

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to explore the opinions of the coaches and the administrators of the teams playing in Turkish Women's Basketball League (TKBL) regarding foreign player transfer as an outsourcing activity. The study also aims to focus on the following issues: how the clubs determine their transfer policies; how they manage their transfer activities; on what needs or criteria they base their player selection process; how the transfer costs affect the team budget; and their opinions about the performances of foreign players.

## Participants

The population of the study consists of 16 teams playing in Turkish Women's Basketball League (TKBL). The participants are the executive administrators of 9 teams which were chosen by using purposive sampling method. This method means choosing the situations or participants that are more likely to provide rich data from an

available population in order to carry out in-depth analysis (5). Table 1 presents the data about the list of the participant teams, and the duration and the dates of the interviews conducted.

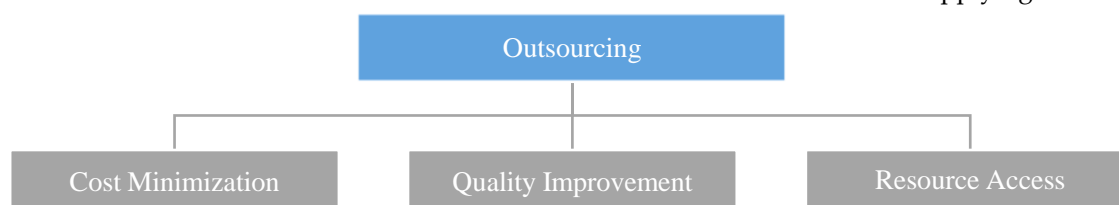
-	Clubs	Interview Date	Interview Duration
1	Mersin Basketbol Kulübü	27.02.2018	33 m. 04 sec.
2	Edremit Belediyesi Güre Spor Kulübü	09.03.2018	17 m. 57 sec.
3	Urla Belediyesi	10.03.2018	37 m. 18 sec.
4	Ferko Ilgaz Hotel KSBK	15.03.2018	30 m. 06 sec.
5	Mersin BŞB. Gelişim Spor Kulübü	18.03.2018	21 m. 39 sec.
6	Bayraklı Belediyesi	21.03.2018	18 m. 03 sec.
7	Çankaya Üniversitesi	23.03.2018	49 m. 09 sec.
8	İzmit Belediyesi Spor Kulübü	23.03.2018	18 m. 26 sec.
9	Kırçiçeği Bodrum Basketbol Kulübü	27.03.2018	53 m. 42 sec.

## Data collection and Data Analysis

The data in this qualitative research were collected through individual interviews conducted with the coaches and the administrators of 9 teams playing in Turkish Women's Basketball League (TKBL). Qualitative methods were used for both of the studies because qualitative research enriches the scholarly field through multiple viewpoints. Interview technique is often used as an oral data collection method in qualitative research (7). A semi-structured interview form which consists of 14

questions was used to collect data. It was prepared by the researchers according to the aims of the study after a detailed literature review and edited by experts from the field. The participants were asked open ended questions in these semi-structured interviews.

As can be seen on the Figure 1, outsourcing has three basic functions: cost minimization, quality improvement and resource access (23). The interviews were conducted to carry-out an in-depth analysis of these three dimensions, which are considered the reasons for applying outsourcing.



**Figure 1.** Three basic functions of outsourcing

The researchers asked for permission for voice recording, and the participants were informed that the recorded data would be used only for scientific purposes. The recorded data was transcribed by the researchers themselves on that day. The transcribed data were uploaded to a computer and analyzed in terms of the three dimensions of outsourcing (cost minimization, quality improvement and resource access), which is the main theme of the study.

## FINDINGS

### Cost minimization

The coaches and the administrators interviewed reported that they are quite satisfied with their performances to a great extent. At this point, the researchers tried to make inferences about whether foreign players have cost minimization effect. In this respect, when the replies provided by the participants for the question "What are your comments on foreign player costs in the league in general?" are considered, it can be concluded that there is a consensus on the idea that although

foreign player transfer is costly at the beginning, it, in fact, results in cost minimization in the long term.

Let me say like that. Our foreign player is awesome. Since she plays the center, it is difficult to replace her with a local player. How many tall Turkish players are there like her? If you want to have a Turkish player of the same quality for that position, you may pay the same amount of money or even more. I think we reduce the cost. Because foreign player portfolio is wider than that of local players. (P1)

In other words, the cost is worth in terms of productivity; even better. In this respect, the cost reduces the total amount, and productivity is quite high when the work done is considered. In other words, I personally believe that having foreign players is a good idea. (P3)

They make them win the games. And the club earns money after these wins. She amortizes her own cost. A qualified foreign player, I think, does not waste your budget. It even adds to your budget. (P4)

In fact, I get a foreign player in position 4. Number 5 position must be the Turkish. But do you know that a more quality Turkish number 5 is more expensive than a foreign player. So, naturally, we tend to transfer foreign players. I am very sincere in that opinion. I tell this as a player who played basketball for 27 years in this position. It is certain that the player we transfer is low in cost but high in efficiency. So, I believe that we are doing well. (P6)

I think it is costly in monetary terms, but I don't think it is too costly. The reason is the difference in quality. If you transfer a Turkish player of this quality, she is more costly. What I mean is here is this... I do not see any harm sharing this opinion. For instance, my foreign player costs 40.000 TL. But I am not sure whether I can get the same performance from players (he means Turkish players) for whom I spend 200.000 TL and 250.000 TL. Question mark! To me, we minimize the cost. That is what I mentioned above. If I were, I would increase the number of foreign players. Because, Turkish players are more expensive. Turkish players are very expensive indeed. (P8)

## Quality improvement

The second part of the interviews with the participants involves comments regarding quality improvement through outsourcing.

When the participants were asked "Do you think that foreign players increase the quality of your team?" majority of them stated that foreign players are indispensable for teams, and they cannot be successful in the league without them. In addition, they made comments on the reasons for the differences between local and foreign players in terms of quality.

Exactly, exactly! If you don't have a foreign player in that position, you fall to 10th rank in the standings...Think that we are playing without having a foreign player. If we continue to have only Turkish players in our team, we may not need them one day, but who can stand failure for a long time? being up in the standing is important. So, I believe that they improve the quality. "You cannot be the champion without them (especially Americans). We relegate! (P1)

They are special players. They have mean basket score, rebound over 15. I worked with high quality local players as well. Even they do not have the same effect as foreign players. They cannot contribute to the game like them. (P3)

"Absolutely. So true. I mean, the quality of foreign players. Especially, if they are quality enough, they boost the team in terms of training, performance and professionalism." (P8)

They certainly do. The quality foreign player, strong character certainly do increase the quality. Also, not every foreign players improve the quality. There are very problematic foreign players as well. For example, they have various problems such as alcohol or smoking, which cause serious problems in the team. The most important thing is character. If the foreign player has a strong character, this incredibly increases the productivity of the team. (P9)

The findings reveal that the participants generally gave positive replies to the questions related to the quality of foreign players.

## Resource access

The questions about the last function of outsourcing – resource access- focused on the use of resources such as the country, league or the manager; or whether a scout team exists or not. The replies provided for the question “Which resources (country, league, manager etc.) do you access while choosing foreign players for your team?” can be presented as follows:

There is no basketball culture at all. Let it be Number 5, let it be an American. If you consider strength, basketball depends on strength. Nothing can compare to the strength of a black player. Because they are very strong. I think they were born to be basketball player. No club in Turkey has this yet. Scout has not been an option in Turkish yet. Because we do not have a budget for that. No youth academies. There are not youth academies in real sense! We receive offers from managers. We chose among them. (P1)

“While I choose a foreign player, I prefer white Americans. Their cultural level is generally “high culture”, it is better.” “I chose the player myself.” (P2)

Due to managers. Americans are more suitable for our game style. We are trying to play same basketball like NBA. That is, let the tall player get the ball and score the baskets, let her be close to the basket. (P7)

Generally, Americans are preferred. If you want a player, you cannot look for one by yourself and say to the player: “I want to transfer you”. You can’t do that. So, you have to contact a manager and he manages the transfers. (P9)

## DISCUSSION

First of all, as for ‘cost minimization’ function, local players are more expensive than their real value because of the shortage of available players. Because of high transfer fees of local players, foreign player transfer is likely to reduce player costs. In addition, the wins due to high performances of foreign players played a great role in increasing the incomes of the clubs, which means that these players amortize themselves in time. In this study, when the

opinions of the coaches and managers of basketball clubs were examined, it was revealed that domestic players demand higher wages when the costs of domestic and foreign players were compared. It is possible to reduce the cost indirectly by foreign player preference. (P1, P3, P4, P6 and P8)

On the other hand, considering the performances of foreign players for their costs, it may cause the costs of domestic players to decrease after a while. Before the rule specifying the possible number of foreign players in Turkish Super League was published, the transfer fees paid for local players were often discussed and criticized because there were serious restrictions on the number of permitted foreign players in a team. The Union of Football Clubs in Turkey also suggested then that transfer fees paid for players became more realistic when the rules about foreign players were revised (12). Yüce, Katırcı and Kuzu (43), in their study, collect the data regarding the opinions of local players about foreign players. They report that a majority of the participants believe that one of the effects of transferring foreign players might be lower transfer fees paid to local players. These results support the findings of this study with regards to the possible factors affecting cost minimization function.

As for ‘quality improvement’ function, it can be concluded that although ‘achievement in sports’ is a relative term, the quality increases because foreign players are more experienced due to their experiences at international level. The interviews revealed that the teams are satisfied with the performances of the foreign players they transferred. (P1, P3, P8, and P9) This satisfaction is also explained statistically on Table 2.

**Table 2. End-of-season statistics for the foreign players in the teams**

	Matches played	Duration of play	Mean (Individual score/Team Score)	Mean (Rebounds)	Mean (Assists)	Percentage (Score)
<b>Player1</b>	19	28' 46"	13,8 / 69	11,1	1,31	%20
<b>Player2</b>	19	32' 19"	20,3 / 74,9	11,1	4	%27,1
<b>Player3</b>	32	34' 23"	20,5 / 67,8	11,4	1,78	<b>%30,23</b>
<b>Player4</b>	20	<b>35' 55"</b>	17,6 / 63,1	12,1	1,65	%27,89
<b>Player5</b>	9	<b>36' 06"</b>	30,3 / 63,7	12,1	2,33	<b>%47,56</b>
<b>Player6</b>	29	<b>36' 29"</b>	22,2 / 69,4	11	1,44	<b>%31,98</b>
<b>Player7</b>	33	<b>38' 21"</b>	17,7 / 67,3	10,9	3,66	%26,30
<b>Player8</b>	39	<b>37' 19"</b>	19,9 / 69,6	10,4	2,56	%28,59
<b>Player9</b>	29	33' 33"	18,7 / 70,7	9,5	1,31	%26,44

\*Data retrieved from Turkish Basketball Federation / Teams Stats

When the above statistics are examined, it can be concluded that the mean basket scores of foreign players constitute quite a higher percentage of overall basket scores. When we look at the end-of-season statistics in Table 2, it is seen that a single foreign player constitutes 25% to 50% of the team's percentage. It was also reflected in the statistics that eight of the nine teams played its foreign player 30 minutes or more per game, and five of the nine teams played its foreign players over 35 minutes.

On the other hand according to the Lee (23), the presence of foreign players in a team will increase the quality of the league and the related organizations in that country. The participant administrators and coaches agreed that the league they competed in has a significant brand value. They even stated that Bilyoner.com Women's Basketball Super League (KBSL) is the best league in Europe. Indeed, in the Eurocup Women's League, the last two years champion (2016/2017 Yakın Doğu

Üniversitesi, 2017/2018 Galatasaray) became the Turkish teams. In the Women Euroleague, the top-level league, Turkish teams played final series 3 times in the last 5 years and won one of them.

Resource access function also brings certain advantages such as the freedom to choose from a global market rather than from a limited pool of local players and meeting the needs of the clubs in a more logical way. Also called 'labor migration' in the field of sports, this situation enables the authorities of women's basketball to benefit from a wide range of resources.

The majority of the administrators interviewed reported that they preferred Americans as foreign players for transfers (P1, P2, P7 and P9). As can be seen in the report (16) released by FIBA in 2018 which is place in Table 3, Americans who play in Turkey are playing an average of 25.9 minutes per match. In addition, the number of foreign players in this league accounted for 53% of the overall league.

**Table 3. Player profiles of the Turkish Basketball League**

	Number of Players	Average Age	Points Per Game (min)
<b>Local</b>	119	24,0	10,1
<b>Foreign (US)</b>	86	28,4	25,9
<b>Foreign (Non US)</b>	48	28,4	21,2

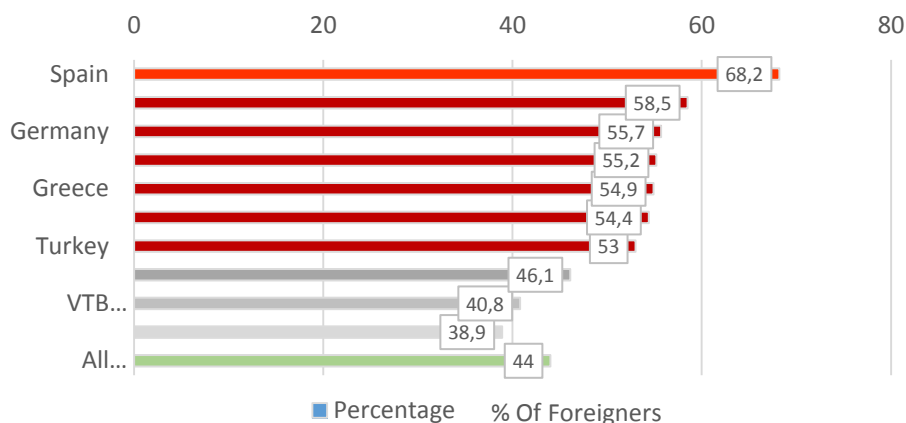
\*Data retrieved from FIBA International Basketball Migration Report 2018 (16)

Ben-Porat (2), evaluates the concept of 'foreign player' within the framework of temporary residency (sojourners) rather than an immigration practice. However, football clubs – especially those playing in the world famous leagues – now search for young talents in Africa, Latin America (9, 33), and Iceland (15) and transfer them to train according to the principles of their club culture. Rosas and Gerrard (35), in their study, report that a considerable number of players playing in Spanish La Liga come from different regions of the world rather than from their own youth academy training programs. Although such a 'resource access' practice is considered a neocolonialist\* mentality (23, 27), it

matches with the 'resource access' function of outsourcing in general. Similarly, NBA draft system allows players from Europe and the Far East to transfer to American basketball teams (36). Thanks to this system, many European and Asian basketball players have transferred to NBA teams. Although the NBA Draft System began in 1985, the most striking example as a milestone in the draft system is the transfer of Yao Ming from China to Houston Rockets in 2002 (30). In FIBA's International Basketball Migration Report 2018 for European basketball (16), it is seen that Spain is the country that played the most foreign players in its league. (Figure 2).



\*Neocolonialism: The use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence other countries, especially former dependencies (Oxford Online Dictionaries).



**Figure 2.** Number of foreigner of the basketball leagues (all leagues)

Just like all other management strategies, outsourcing also has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the disadvantages that might be observed in 'resource access' function is that clubs get used to transfer players instead of training their own players in youth academies. As seen, because of the rule stating that it is possible to have only one foreign player in Turkish Women's Basketball League, the clubs prefer to transfer foreign players for center position, which is a big obstacle for the training of long local players. Unfortunately, this situation is a clear evidence for the concern that there will be more demand for tall players at national team level in near future. Yüce (42), in his study focusing on the opinions of sport authorities about foreign players, concluded that preferring foreign players will negatively affect the national teams' quality in the long term. Unfortunately, many short but young talents who were not noticed due to the policy of Turkish Basketball Federation to train tall basketball players could not get any place in league teams and national teams. In order to avoid such problems, Turkish Basketball Federation launched a sports development project in 2017, which aimed to make basketball an effective tool for social education and train young people for perfection both in sports and academic areas. The report titled 'National Basketball Movement' (39) presented the findings of 51 interviews – 43 local and 8 international- with a group of people including representatives from different cities, referees, coaches, administrators, sports school owners, physical education teachers and academicians. In one section of the report, it was highlighted that because clubs often prefer

foreign players, local players play less time in the matches, which hinders their professional developments to a great extent. Similarly, Lee (23), in his study, reported that Korean basketball teams often transfer foreign players through outsourcing for guard and center positions. He also stated that although the transferred players have positive effects such as being a leader in the team and increasing overall team performance, young players of Korean basketball in guard and tall players (center) positions lose their advantages and the new talents will be discovered less and less.

## CONCLUSION

The popularity and accessibility of sports at global level allow the mobility (transfer) of athletes and players worldwide as labor force (10). This situation is called 'labor migration in sports' and allows clubs to access a global market as an alternative to a limited local market. CIES Football Observatory, which is a research group under International Centre for Sports Studies – CIES, published a report titled 'World expatriate footballers' in May 2017 (6). According to this report, there are '12,051' foreign football players who play in 137 leagues in 93 countries worldwide. CIES authorities state that the increasing number of foreign players plays an important role in the establishment of a sustainable and universal football world. As a matter of fact, according to the report prepared by benefiting from FIFA Transfer Matching System (TMS), in 2018, clubs reached a total amount of 7.03 billion dollar for transfer (17). This enormous figure shows the economic aspect of player mobility in sport. As a result, it can be said



that outsourcing in sports is a necessity in postmodern sports environment and the results of activities in these transfer processes are seen as outsourcing as a strategic movement used in modern management. In line with this requirement, in the process of outsourcing, sports clubs must accurately identify the advantages and disadvantages of the move.

The results of this study can make significant contributions to reveal the relationship between outsourcing in sport (especially football and basketball) and its necessity and efficiency.

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