

From Hoops to Herb: Ex-NBA Stars Enter Cannabis Market

NBA Veteran Al Harrington Opens New Cannabis Store in New Jersey, Marking Expansion in Former Players' Cannabis Ventures

Al Harrington, a former NBA player and New Jersey native, has opened Village Hoboken, his first East Coast cannabis retail store with partner Dan Pettigrew. This launch under their brand, Viola, highlights the ongoing trend of former basketball stars entering and expanding within the cannabis industry. Harrington, who spent 16 years in the NBA, sees this as a major achievement and aims to create meaningful change in the cannabis market while exploring future opportunities within New Jersey.

Harrington is not alone in making strides in the cannabis field. Gary Payton, another retired NBA star, has partnered with Green Label Rx founder Jason McKnight to launch Greater Purpose, a wellness-focused brand based in Los Angeles. Aimed at combining cannabis with recovery practices for athletes and active professionals, the brand targets the unique needs of those seeking both relief and recovery support.

Carmelo Anthony, also an NBA icon and Syracuse University standout, has co-founded Grand National Agency alongside Jescie Horton and Brandon Drew Jordan Pierce. This agency aims to foster cultural inclusivity, community engagement, and open new avenues for emerging and small cannabis brands in competitive markets.

A Store Designed for Female Consumers

Village Hoboken has tailored its store experience to attract women, now recognized as the fastest-growing consumer segment in the cannabis industry. A 2023 study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse revealed that cannabis consumption among women aged 19–30 has, for the first time, outpaced that of men in the same age group. Harrington and his team have prioritized creating a shopping environment in which women feel welcomed and comfortable, with approximately half of Village's staff comprising female employees across locations in Illinois, Missouri, and New Jersey.

A Personal Connection to Cannabis

For both Harrington and Payton, the journey into the cannabis business began with witnessing the plant's positive effects on their loved ones. Harrington's first encounter with cannabis as a healing agent was through his grandmother, Viola, for whom his brand is named. Seeking relief for her glaucoma, she experienced significant improvements in her vision after trying cannabis, which deeply moved Harrington and inspired him to create a business focused on health benefits. Since then, he has actively promoted cannabis for its therapeutic properties, especially for individuals battling addiction to opioids and other hard drugs.

Payton's entry into cannabis was similarly motivated by his experience with his mother, who found temporary relief from her cancer pain with THC-infused rubs. Greater Purpose's product line has been crafted for people with active lifestyles, those seeking natural pain relief, and aging individuals looking for homeopathic alternatives. Known as "The Glove" for his defensive skills on the court, Payton's mission is now to support people through cannabis-based wellness solutions.

Fostering Social Change and Addressing Inequality

For Harrington, cannabis has also become a platform to advocate for social justice. Having grown up in New Jersey, he recalls frequent encounters with discriminatory practices, such as the "stop-and-frisk" policies, which he believes have unfairly targeted people of color. Harrington now leverages his position in the cannabis industry to push for racial equity, striving to dismantle the negative stigma that has long surrounded cannabis. He emphasizes the racial disparities in marijuana-related arrests to underscore the urgency for change, pointing to statistics from the American Civil Liberties Union showing that Black individuals have historically been arrested at rates nearly four times higher than white individuals for marijuana offenses.

The 2020 report by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health noted that Black Americans accounted for 39% of marijuana possession arrests, despite representing only 13.6% of the population and using cannabis at similar rates as their white counterparts. Harrington hopes that by advocating for diversity and inclusion in the industry, he can help secure a future where people of color have a substantial presence in the cannabis business, creating opportunities for wealth and community development.

Empowering Culture-Driven Cannabis Brands

The mission of Carmelo Anthony's Grand National Agency reflects a similar commitment to empowering brands that prioritize cultural impact, community engagement, and premium cultivation practices. The agency's first product, StayMe7o Cannabis, debuted in collaboration with Black-owned dispensaries in Oregon. This venture is part of Grand National's larger goal to address challenges facing culturally relevant cannabis brands that are struggling to differentiate themselves in a crowded market. The agency's strategy focuses on bringing socially conscious and ethically sourced products to consumers nationwide, helping smaller players gain a foothold in the industry.

McKnight, who co-founded Greater Purpose with Payton, has a personal connection to the social justice aspect of the cannabis industry, having previously faced felony charges related to marijuana. His experiences with punitive drug policies motivate his commitment to creating a cannabis business that offers opportunities for individuals who have been impacted by the legal system. McKnight views the Greater Purpose brand as a historic step for Black-owned businesses in cannabis and aims to inspire others by demonstrating the industry's potential for positive change.

An Evolving Relationship Between Cannabis and Professional Sports

Professional sports leagues, including the NBA, have taken a progressively more lenient stance on cannabis. The NBA was one of the first leagues to suspend marijuana testing during the COVID-19 pandemic, setting a precedent for other sports organizations. The NBA's 2023 labor agreement eliminated marijuana testing for players and allowed them to invest in cannabis companies, making it one of the most cannabis-friendly agreements in professional sports.

This openness has encouraged current and former players, like Phoenix Suns star Kevin Durant, to openly discuss cannabis use among athletes. Durant has invested in several cannabis companies and highlights the significant role cannabis plays for today's players. The changing perceptions have sparked conversations within the sports community about cannabis's role in recovery, wellness, and mental health.

As Payton collaborates with the Los Angeles Clippers' training staff on possible product distribution, he envisions a future where cannabis products are widely accepted and accessible for professional athletes across various sports. Although he does not personally use cannabis, his popular "Gary Payton" strain, produced through a licensing partnership with the Cookies brand, has been well-received. Payton believes that integrating cannabis into athletic wellness could pave the way for other major leagues, including baseball, football, soccer, and tennis, to adopt similar stances.

The recent ventures of Harrington, Payton, and Anthony into the cannabis industry represent a growing wave of athletes transforming the sector through innovative wellness products, social justice initiatives, and culturally driven brands. As these former NBA stars use their platforms to influence industry practices and advocate for inclusivity, they are reshaping the cannabis market for future generations. Their collective efforts reflect a shift not only within the cannabis industry but also in the wider acceptance and integration of cannabis into various facets of society, including professional sports and wellness.

By addressing health, equity, and cultural relevance, Harrington, Payton, and Anthony are making lasting impacts that extend beyond their athletic achievements, helping to shape a cannabis industry that is more accessible, inclusive, and socially responsible.

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