

## QUESTIONABLE CALL

By **Bavand Karim**

Originally published August 2008

The [Rocky Mountain Revue](#) is a summer basketball league that features up-and-coming players and draft picks in invitation-only competition. This year's Revue includes several NBA teams, an NBADL select team, and the [Iranian National Team](#). Amidst all of the international debate over Iran's nuclear program, a sporting invitation from the United States seemed unlikely. Furthermore, Iran's national sport is soccer; they haven't been competitive in international basketball for more than thirty years. Yet, the Revue had a standing commitment to FIBA to include the Asia Continental Champion, which everyone expected would be the Chinese Team. Without superstar center Yao Ming, China failed to advance, and [Iran went on to defeat Lebanon](#) in the championship game.

So the NBA, with approval from the U.S. State Department, invited Iran to participate in the Revue. And the Iranians, perhaps thinking it was a joke, accepted. After more than a year of nuclear fear-mongering by the American media portraying Iran as our most imminent and dangerous enemy, [we invited them to come over and play some pickup games](#).

The Iranian team's presence in Salt Lake City had a profoundly transformative impact on the community, mainly in form of a rapid influx of Iranian-Americans that descended upon the city for the Revue. With them came a particularly unique display of Iranian patriotism, complete with the vibrant sights, sounds, and smells that one might expect from such an impassioned cultural invasion.

Fast-forward to today, where it's a balmy 130-degrees in Salt Lake City as the [Iranians faced the Dallas Mavericks' summer league team](#) in competition. The heat doesn't seem to bother the Iranian fans, who traveled from their homes in California and Miami and New York and Canada and arrived two hours early to wait for the opening tipoff. [The Iranian team lost](#), but you wouldn't know it unless you were looking at the scoreboard. And I wasn't. I was watching the crowd, who were waving their flags and banners and blowing their vuvuzelas and shouting and chanting and singing until the very end.

Later, unable to find the video archive of the game through the Revue's website, I was informed that Iran's games would be neither webcast nor televised. I was surprised, since all of the [NBA summer league games from Las Vegas](#) were made viewable online, it made sense that the Revue would be also. Certainly this tournament featuring the Iranian team on the soil of the Great Satan would merit a webcast at the very least.

Then I began to notice a pattern. If you weren't a regular fan of Team Iran, there was no word of their participation until just a few days before the tournament. Revue officials did not bother to mention that Iran was participating in the tournament until opening day--all event programming listed the Iranian team as "FIBA Asian Champion." And there was no webcast or video footage, which denied greater audiences the opportunity to witness the fans, who were decidedly and passionately pro-Iran.

Why invite Iran to participate and go through the trouble of arranging the media circus and maximizing the public relations opportunities when nobody outside of the SLCC gym will be able to watch the game? If this was in fact the bold offering of goodwill that the [U.S. State Department claims it to be](#), why back off now? So far, nobody is offering any simple explanations. The Utah Jazz, which organize and manage the Revue, offered their official statement on the matter as "No comment."

It is worth stating that perhaps someone didn't want the nation to see its Iranian-Americans waving Iranian flags and chanting in Farsi from the Mormon heartland. Perhaps that same someone wants us to believe that Iranians are some distant, foreign enemy, and not our neighbors or pickup-game teammates. And, as Americans, perhaps we should ask why that is.

During the course of certain events, there are moments, however fleeting or seemingly insignificant, that ultimately transcend our shared humanity. Journalists have often reflected on the the role that sports play in helping conflicted people resolve their differences. In 2006, a civil war in the Ivory Coast was put on hold to allow the embattled nation's soccer team to qualify for the World Cup. I can't help but feel that if any sport does indeed wield such tremendous influence, that influence is being egregiously wasted.

Today, I watched players representing my hometown exchange gifts and hugs with players representing my homeland. Today, I witnessed two nations with a long and storied history of polar ideologies put their differences aside, and not for some grand design, but for a simple basketball game. It makes me want to believe that anything might be possible. Well, maybe anything except watching the game on TV.