

Opinion: California needs Lonzo, not LeBron

By Joe Mathews

Go home to Ohio, LeBron James.

Yes, I'm happy to see the world's greatest basketball player join my favorite team, the Los Angeles Lakers.

But as a Californian, I fear LeBron is the last thing our state needs.



Joe Mathews

His arrival is a high-profile symptom of one of our state's big problems: California favors older, proven, and wealthy outsiders over our younger, poorer and homegrown compatriots.

Comparing LeBron to his youngest new teammate, guard Lonzo Ball, demonstrates the problem.

Lebron, 33, just received a \$154 million, four-year contract to leave the Cleveland Cavaliers and revive a losing Lakers squad. As a free agent mercenary, he has company here. A Stanford study shows that, despite our high taxes, the Golden State attracts more millionaires than it loses. The trend holds even among those who are merely upper-middle-class. People who move to California are better educated (the state has seen net gains in graduate degree holders) and have more income (\$110,000 annually on average) than most Californians.

And they need that money to afford our expensive housing.

But California has been struggling to develop and retain younger, less educated people like Lonzo Ball, a 20-year-old L.A. native who grew up in the Inland Empire. California has seen a big net outflow of its younger people—especially those who make less than \$55,000 a year, don't have college degrees (like Lonzo, who attended UCLA for just one year), or want to start families—to states like Texas and Arizona.

Lonzo himself may be on his way out the door; the sports media are reporting that he could be traded for older, proven players whom LeBron prefers as teammates.

Such a trade would make sense in 2018, when LeBron is far superior to Lonzo. But in the long term, LeBron's value to Lakers could be less than Lonzo's. LeBron, at age 33, is old for a pro athlete, and he is likely to be injured and in decline, if not retired, by the time his contract expires in 2022. In contrast, if Lonzo realizes his potential to be a future star, he could win games for the Lakers into the 2030s.

At this point, I'll leave the basketball debate to sports experts. But in the larger context of California's future, the Lonzos are indisputably more important than the LeBrons.

That's because so many more of us are Lonzos.

This Lonzo-ization of California represents a sea change. From the Gold Rush until 2010, we were mostly a state of LeBrons—people who migrated here from another state or country. As a state, we were like the Lakers, traditionally a franchise dependent on free agents from elsewhere, like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Shaquille O'Neal.

But in this decade, after a steep fall in immigration from 1980s highs, we've become a state of Lonzos.

Now, more than 54 percent of Californians were born and raised

here. Lonzo's rising generation of millennials is projected to be California's first generation that is majority homegrown.

With this shift, California needs to develop and educate its own future citizens, instead of relying on free agents from someplace else. In other words, we desperately need our Lonzos to succeed. And too many haven't. Some leave the state. Others contribute to our highest-in-the-nation poverty rate. Education levels have stagnated among California's young—a huge problem since today's youth will have to be more economically productive to support our aging population.

Yes, California's LeBrons help subsidize the Lonzos with their taxes. But the LeBrons also retard the growth of the young. Arriving LeBrons help run up the price of housing—LeBron himself has two homes in L.A.—making it harder for Lonzos to buy houses and start families.

The LeBrons of the world tend to be expensive—and less innovative, since younger people are responsible for most inventions. Even more important, California's Lonzos are far more loyal to the state; they are about three times more likely to stick around California and make their lives. When LeBron tires of his new Hollywood friends Leo DiCaprio and Al Pacino, with whom he recently lunched, he can go back home to Ohio. But Lonzo's family—including a father who may be sabotaging his career (though that's another story)—is here.

The Lonzos' loyalty has real value to the Golden State—it will help California retain its labor force as baby boomers retire in greater numbers. Polls show that the Lonzos are far more supportive than the LeBrons of taxing themselves to make bigger public investments the state needs.

In this context, the Lakers, in signing LeBron, are sending the wrong message to their fans, and to all Californians. So cheer for the imported superstar if you like. But don't forget that our future depends on Lonzo.

*Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column
for Zócalo Public Square.*