

# Star Globetrotter

There are a lot of cool, connected, classy and powerful people making a big impact on the world's sports scene who call the Valley home. And when roll call for that group is being taken, one name definitely being called out is [Vada Manager](#), Director of Global Issues Management for Nike, who recently returned from a memorable trip to China for the Olympics.

BY BROOKE AVANA  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF NIKE MEDIA

“I have been to five Olympic Games but China took the events to a whole new level because of the speed of how the first-class sporting facilities were prepared for competition and the scale of the Chinese marketplace.”

Vada Manager

The Valley isn't simply the world's premier home to the biggest collection of professional athletes; it also is home base for numerous big-time executives at the highest levels of sports and corporate management. One of them is Valley resident Vada Manager, Director of Global Issues Management for one of the most iconic brands on the planet, Nike. Vada has a hybrid role of providing both strategic business and communications counsel on a variety of initiatives and issues faced by a global company in today's competitive marketplace. Vada has played large roles in some of Nike's biggest endeavors, including their 2005 acquisition of Converse for \$305 million, approving graphics on a new line of apparel and handling consumer and media responses to their products and marketing. An average day for Vada consists of a lot of meetings, conference calls and e-mails from around the world. He also serves on the board of directors for Ashland Inc., a Fortune 500 specialty chemical company. Even more important than all of his professional and personal accomplishments is the fact that Vada is flat out one of the classiest people you will ever meet in or out of sports. It's an honor for Phoenix to be the place Vada and his family have decided to make home, and we wanted our readers of *POST* to get to know Vada a little bit, and find out what his experience was like as he was in Beijing for the Summer Olympics with many of the highest-profile Nike-endorsed superstars.

**POST: You've been to countless world-class sporting events in your career. Just how big and exciting was it to be at the Olympics in China?**

Vada Manager (VM): I have always classified the Olympic

Games as one of the great quadrennial showcases of athleticism, nationalism and product innovation. Its only rival, perhaps, is soccer's World Cup. Although I have been to five Olympic Games, including the historic 2004 Athens Games, China took the events to a whole new level because of the speed and scale of the country. The speed refers to how the first-class sporting facilities like the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube were prepared for competition. And the scale for the Chinese sports marketplace. As an example, over a billion people watched the USA vs. China basketball game on television — I saw large families in homes and customers in shops crowded around small TVs watching the game. Truly amazing!

**POST: Do Nike athletes, even the ones from competing foreign countries form a bond and act like a mini-family?**

VM: At no time is this more evident than at opening and closing ceremonies of the Games. Nike athletes and non-Nike athletes alike are on the field taking pictures with athletes from other countries. I was really proud to see Nike athletes Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Roger Federer and others talking with and honoring photo and autograph requests from international athletes who may never be that close to them again as athletic peers. The athletes also did a good job of visibly attending the competitions of other athletes outside of their own sports — not always the case in previous years.

**POST: You've got an exciting, glamorous job with a world-class company and an iconic brand. How did you end up here?**



Valley resident, and Nike executive Vada Manager at the Nike hospitality center and in front of the Birds Nest, the Olympic Stadium in Beijing.

## POST ACCESS

Mover & Shaker ↓

VADA MANAGER

The USA Men's Basketball Team on a yacht cruising the East and Hudson Rivers near the Statue of Liberty on a team get-together before they left for China to restore USA Basketball to international prominence.



**VM:** Nike is a very unique company and I am fortunate enough to have been recruited there in 1997 from Levi Strauss & Co. As they were rapidly growing, Nike was attracted to my combined government and global corporate background — it also didn't hurt that I previously represented Major League Baseball, the PGA TOUR and Major League Soccer on various matters. No one had held this type of role at Nike before; therefore, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to shape it. Rarely does the opportunity arise where you can marry your professional background with your passion for sport, while simultaneously engaged in the intellectually stimulating pursuit of building a global brand in an evolving international trading structure.

**POST:** We saw what Michael Phelps and other swimmers did in that Speedo swimming suit. Is this something that you've known for a long time, that technology plays a huge role in success of athletes at the world-class level?

**VM:** To be competitive in today's sports industry, you have to be on the offense and innovation has to be at the center of helping athletes achieve their full human potential. That isn't only about elite athletes like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, but anyone who is seeking to run a marathon or develop an exercise regimen. Innovations like Nike Air have forever changed footwear cushioning. More recently, Nike Flywire technology — the basis for the new HyperDunk basketball footwear that is approximately 18 percent lighter than the average basketball shoe — is enhancing sports participation. Even the fusing of music with sport through Nikeplus.com (which now boasts 25 million users) has helped elevate and preserve Nike as the leading sports and fitness company in the world. In this business, one must innovate or perish.

**POST:** How was the food in China?

**VM:** I have been all over the world — from Joliet to Johannesburg, and I have always been able to find something to suit my palate. While some were obsessing about the images of the scorpions on a stick as a food item, I thought to myself, "Phoenix's Wild West Rawhide restaurants have rattlesnake on the menu (taste pretty good too!) and the restaurants in Sydney during those games also served kangaroo." Therefore, who are we to judge the devouring of scorpions? However, I do miss the healthy plate of dragon fruit I consumed in the morning — it is a delicious fleshy white fruit with small edible seeds. The only time I see it is when I travel to Asia. It is so tasty I start thinking about it even before the plane lands!

**POST:** Are the Chinese, with their huge population, eventually going to catch and surpass Americans in most team and individual sports?

**VM:** The Chinese commitment and investment toward excelling in international sports competition across the board will place a lot of pressure on the perennial medal-winning countries like the USA, Russia, Japan and others. As Chinese society has further opened up, they have also imported coaches from other countries to share their expertise on how to develop athletes and training regimens for international competition. The USA's athletes also have many advantages, and great athletes emerge from our various levels of competition from youth through college. However, the gap is also closing around the world. The sheer numbers of participation in a sport like basketball make the Chinese competitive. Approximately 240 million people — of their total 1.3 billion people — play basketball. That rivals the entire population of the USA!

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**POST: Having the job that you have, where hanging out with and socializing with world-class athletes is just part of your day, what were some of your personal highlights from the Olympics this summer?**

**VM:** Correct: Hanging with world-class athletes is probably the smallest percentage of what I do. However, after some years and relationships in this business, it does occasionally occur. More than usual, the Olympics provide greater engagement with athletes. As a tennis player myself, one of the special nights I experienced was sitting in the athletes' box with USTA tennis coaches and former WTA professionals Lori McNeil and Zina Garrison, who were monitoring the play of Wimbledon Champion Venus Williams. After she won, we hustled to the main court where Venus then joined us to cheer on sister Serena in her victorious match over a French opponent. It was fun to briefly be on the inside of the sister banter and nicknames for each other. They are truly one of the most remarkable stories in sports. Another special Olympic moment actually came before the Beijing torch was lit — spending time with the USA Men's Basketball Team on a yacht cruising the East and Hudson Rivers and positioning the boat near the Statue of Liberty in New York City to take a team photo that was emblematic of their "United We Rise" theme to restore USA Basketball to international prominence. I have to credit USA Basketball Chairman Jerry Colangelo with that idea. The iconic photo and stories about the team were circulated around the world.

**POST: How huge is Nike as a brand in China?**

**VM:** As a prominent business magazine article once opined: "The Nike Swoosh is as ubiquitous in China as the image of Chairman Mao." That didn't happen through just billboards or cool commercials. It was the result of great products and nearly 25 years of relationships with Chinese athletes, sports ministries, political officials, business people and youth influencers. Our chairman and founder Phil Knight and current CEO Mark Parker had the great foresight to see that China's rising economic clout would soon evolve into one of Nike's largest markets on the planet. It is already our second-largest market, behind the United States. To give you an example of our growth in China, over the last two years we have averaged opening a new store every single day, which really reflects the rapid expansion of the middle class. Our model will always be to partner with the best athletes, develop the best product with their input and communicate stories to connect with youthful consumers.

**POST: What would happen if a child in your house brought home a pair of Adidas? Would a two-week grounding be enough or would they be ejected from the home?**

**VM:** Being banished to Guantanamo Bay may not be sufficient punishment for such an offense! Seriously, we have had the household discussion regarding competitor product and set some reasonable boundaries. Our kids are athletes and sometimes have to wear or receive non-Nike product. The guiding principle should always be to remain loyal to the products of the company that has played a large part in making our blessed lifestyle possible. Nike, Olympics and sports are integrated in our lives. In part, our two youngest kids learned their primary colors from the multi-colored rings on the large Olympic flag in my home office.

**POST: It would probably be best and easiest if you lived in Oregon. What is it about the Valley that makes commuting and all the travel worth it?**

**VM:** We maintain dual residences — even my driver's license has an Oregon and Arizona address — the only double-double I'll probably ever achieve! However, what is easiest isn't always what is best. Upon our marriage in 1999, my spouse Charlene was still working in Arizona, our older children were still attending school here and we eventually opted not to disrupt their lives and separate them from other family. Although challenging, the positive benefit is that we remain connected to the Phoenix community that has provided so much opportunity and many lifelong friendships over the years. I also owe a lot to ASU and enjoy being close to the university. The early experiences and academic nurturing provided me the skill set and confidence to become the best corporate strategist I could become. 