

SPORTS

NBA All-Star game needs to be dunked

By Marvin Wamble
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Now that we have all basked in the glow of the Michael Jordan love fest that was the 52nd NBA All-Star game, it is time to put an end to the old, tired tradition of bringing together the league's best for a Harlem Globetrotter-like exhibition. The thought of eliminating the age-old mid-season classic is near blasphemy in some circles, but let's be realistic, over the past few years the game has become NBA superstars doing a poor man's imitation of the streetballers. There has got to be a better way for the NBA to use its players and financial resources than throwing a gigantic corporate-sponsored party that just happens to culminate with a poorly played basketball game.

If you love basketball—I'm talking about the real game with defense, strategy and hard-nose intensity—you can not be a fan of the All-Star game. It is tofu for a steak lover; Diamonique for a lover of real stones and hash browns instead of grits.

Back in the day, the All-Star game had its place. With limited television exposure—no cable, no satellite dishes and no Internet—the yearly gathering of the hardwood's best was one of the few times to see all of the top players from across the country. Nowadays, technology and NBA over saturation has made the game an antiquated shell of years gone by. Between two cable channels and network TV, there is rarely a day that at least two NBA games are not on the tube. This year alone, more nearly 250 NBA games will be televised. The NBA has so saturated us with "marquee match-ups" during the season that seeing Jordan vs. Kobe Bryant in an All-Star game is old hat. Been there, seen that.

The league has recognized that the game's appeal has lost a little luster. That's why all the peripheral activities have been added. The NBA and its corporate salesmen have come up with the Phillips \$1 million Big Shot; 1 800 CALL ATT Shootout; Sprite Rising Star Slam Dunk contest; got milk? Rookie Challenge; 989 Sports Skills Challenge; and on and on. The additional activities are a cash cow for the league, but boil down to putting corporate lipstick on a 52-year-old pig.

Unfortunately, the All-Star game is usually inundated with turnovers, wild passes, no defense and uncontested slam dunks. A tape of the game will never be an instructional video for aspiring basketball players. In fact, the technique in the game is so poor, it should be rated PG-15 so young kids don't get the wrong impression. There is really no incentive for the players to play hard. The winner of the game gets \$20,000 the losers \$10,000. That's little more than pocket change for these brothers. Players are trying to make sure that no one gets hurt because they have the second half of the season to play. Let's face it, we will never, ever get your best performance from the players in this game because what really counts is the final 33 games of the season plus the playoffs.

Here are a few alternatives to the NBA's traveling party called the All-Star Weekend. Why not take the five days of inactivity and let NBA players, all-stars and others, visit schools in the community and talk to students about the importance of an education? Why not have the players participate in a work exchange program in local schools and see what the real world does every day? Maybe, some of the players can visit high schools, community colleges and neighborhood playgrounds and talk about the astronomical odds of making it to the NBA or becoming a professional athlete. Or possibly, the players, more than 80 percent African-Americans, can meet and discuss how they can combine their wealth and influence to make a real impact in inner-city communities.

That impact does not mean more parties, more night club visits or trying to see how many people can fit in a stretch Hummer. It certainly doesn't mean 20 more minutes of Kool and his Old Gang singing "Celebrate." Let's celebrate a new beginning with a fresh concept for how NBA stars, among the most prosperous and influential African-American males in our culture, can make a difference

Marvin Wamble has covered sports in California, Texas and Washington, D.C., and has hosted several Dallas sports radio talk shows.

Black fans scarce at NASCAR events

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP) - It was a sunny Havoline day with Miller Lite clouds streaking the blue Kodak sky.

A 185 mph box of Tide zoomed alongside speeding M&Ms and Cheerios. There was Viagra on wheels, Rubbermaid roaring on the straightaway, Kellogg's/got milk? with an attitude. Home Depot battled Lowe's, the National Guard took on the U.S. Army, Caterpillar chased Georgia Pacific.

Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s Budweiser Chevrolet captured one of the Gatorade twin 125-mile qualifiers for Sunday's Daytona 500, and Robby Gordon's Cingular Wireless Chevrolet won the other, holding off Jeff Green's AOL Chevy, which had already secured the pole.

The kickoff of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series at Daytona International Speedway was a rainbow of colorful ads and logoed items for sale, a bizarre bazaar of American enterprise at its liveliest.

No other sport so deftly and thoroughly immerses itself in commerce as does NASCAR, where everything and everyone has a sponsor. It is where Main Street meets Wall Street and country music blends with rock 'n' roll.

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AAU coaches," she said. "It's going to first take more men head coaches and institutions taking maybe initially what they might perceive as a risk of hiring a female assistant and getting them out in that world."

On Thursday night, the Tigers played with much more energy and tenacity on defense than they did Feb. 4 when they trailed the entire game and lost to Austin Peay by 25 points.

Austin Peay forward Adrian Henning was impressed with their improvement, and he credited Phillips for that. He said playing for a woman could be difficult for some men because of the differences between the sexes.

But Henning said being male doesn't help a lot of bad coaches. "I'd much rather play for Pat Summitt than some of these guys who are bad coaches," Henning said of the Tennessee coach who recently won her 800th game.

Color is everywhere - except on the faces in the stands and behind the steering wheels.

A walk through the crowd of more than 100,000 fans at the speedway Thursday found only nine black fans. Maybe there were more, but there surely weren't many more.

NASCAR, in its ever-expanding search for new markets, wants to change that. Black fans buy the same products as white fans, and their money is the same shade of green.

Tiger Woods changed the complexion of golf crowds, just as Venus and Serena Williams did with tennis fans. NASCAR is missing a similar black star, with only one black driver, Bill Lester, in any of its top three series.

"It's unfortunate for NASCAR," spokesman Jim Hunter said of having only one black driver among its top 100. "But that's up to individuals. If they have the desire and the talent, the opportunity is there."

There is one black car owner, Sam Belnavis, and more blacks working in the garages. NASCAR has greatly expanded its diversity programs, and Lester and others occasionally speak at historically black colleges to

tout the opportunities available to minorities.

NASCAR is pushing hard into America's top 20 media markets this year, an effort not only to boost its reach in general, but to broaden exposure to young blacks.

"We want to humanize it," Hunter said. "We want to show them this is something that's attainable and doable."

Here's a prediction: Someday, instead of a handful of black fans at Daytona, there will be thousands.

They will be people like Max Hawkins and his sons Bryan and Bobby of Daytona, who have been going to NASCAR races all their lives and were among the few black fans at the speedway for the qualifying Thursday.

Max Hawkins, a 59-year-old minister, went with his dad to the first Daytona 500 in 1959 and has been passionate about the sport ever since. Bryan, 24, and Bobby, 20, share that passion.

"I have to take care of the Lord's business on Sunday, so I can't come out to the race," Pastor Hawkins said. "But I'll tape-record it and watch it later."

"He records all the races," Bryan said. "And we're always watching them on the Speed Channel. It's a fun sport. I like Tony Stewart. He's got an attitude about him. He's not holding back."

Bryan is a Chevy man, at the track and on the road.

"I'd love to get a chance to drive one out here," he said. "If they're looking for

black drivers, I'm ready."

Bobby, a student at the University of North Florida, grew up a fan of Dale Earnhardt Sr. and has transferred his allegiance to Junior.

"A lot of the guys in the dorm don't understand why I love the sport, but there's so much to it," Bobby said. "It's all about balance and aerodynamics and strategy."

"It's like playing chess at 185 mph," Bryan said.

Pastor Hawkins is a serious collector of miniature cars, trucks and other NASCAR souvenirs. He's a Ford man, loyal to the car and its drivers, such as Dale Jarrett.

Hawkins and his sons said they have never felt uncomfortable being surrounded by nearly entirely white crowds at the races.

"Some might feel intimidated, but I don't," Hawkins said. "Years ago, there were some negative remarks, but we overlooked them. We were out here because we love the sport. We don't come here for trouble. I don't even think about racism. I don't bother to look at the Confederate flags. We have relatives in New Jersey and they fly down for the 500."

"Basically, it's a white sport," Bryan said, "but it doesn't have to be that way. It will be different when there are more black drivers, when there's someone who is really successful like Tiger Woods. That's when it will take off."

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