

Los Angeles Lakers guard Kobe Bryant is handed the NBA's Most Valuable Player Award from Commissioner David Stern (left) of the NBA, during a presentation in Los Angeles on Wednesday. Bryant, regarded as one of the league's top players, wins the award for the first time in his NBA career.

## Kobe Bryant wins his 1st MVP award

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

Finally, an MVP award for Kobe Bryant.

Regarded as the NBA's best player for several years but never its most valuable, Bryant earned the honor at last on Tuesday after leading the Los Angeles Lakers to the best record in the Western Conference.

He called the award a blessing and an honor and emphasized that he wants another trophy this year.

"It's Hollywood, it's a movie script. The perfect ending would be for us to hold a championship trophy at the end of it," Bryant said at a news conference attended by his teammates, club officials, his wife and two daughters.

"This is an award I couldn't have won on my own. I can't thank these guys (his teammates) enough. These are my guys, these are my brothers."

Bryant will receive the MVP trophy from commissioner David Stern before game 2 against Utah.

Bryant entered the season as the league's two-time defending scoring champion. He had finished as high as third in the MVP voting twice — after the 2002-03 season, when he averaged 30 points for the first time, and last year when Dallas' Dirk Nowitzki won.

"I don't know anybody who's ever deserved this trophy more. I don't know anybody who's ever worked as hard to accomplish what he's accomplished," said Lakers coach Phil Jackson, who had

five-time MVP Michael Jordan with Chicago and was at the Lakers' helm when Shaquille O'Neal won the award in 2000.

Bryant received 82-first-place votes and 1,100 points in the media vote. He was followed by New Orleans' Chris Paul (28 and 894), Boston's Kevin Garnett (15 and 670) and Cleveland's LeBron James (1 and 438).

"I've said since two, three years ago that Kobe Bryant is the best player in the league," James said before the Cavaliers faced the Celtics in Game 1 of their Eastern Conference semifinal series. "He's been the best player the last five, six years. I'm glad he won it. His team had a great year, finishing first in the West."

Bryant averaged 28.3 points, 6.3 rebounds, 5.4 assists and 1.84 steals while playing all 82 games despite tearing a ligament in his right pinkie in February. He put off surgery until after the Olympics.

The knock on the 29-year-old Bryant had been that he didn't make those around him better — not anymore.

"He's deserving in this particular season with all of the question marks and everything going on coming into the season and the uncertainty," teammate Derek Fisher said. "Not only did he statistically have an MVP type of season, everybody can reasonably say they were better this year because of what he did. He met the so-called criteria, elevating his

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## Black youth more likely to drown

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

(NNPA) — Nearly 60 percent of African-American children can't swim, almost twice the figure for White children, according to a first-of-its-kind survey which USA Swimming hopes will strengthen its efforts to lower minority drowning rates and draw more Blacks into the sport.

Stark statistics underlie the initiative by the national governing body for swimming. Black children drown at a rate almost three times the overall rate. And less than 2 percent of USA Swimming's

nearly 252,000 members who swim competitively year-round are Black.

To alter the numbers, USA Swimming is teaming with an array of partners — local governments, corporations, youth and ethnic organizations — to expand learn-to-swim programs nationwide, many of them targeted at inner-city minorities. One of the key participants is Black freestyle star Cullen Jones, who hopes to boost his role-model status by winning a medal this summer at the Beijing Olympics.

As part of the initiative, USA Swimming commis-

sioned an ambitious study recently completed by five experts at the University of Memphis' Department of Health and Sports Sciences. They surveyed 1,772 children aged six to 16 in six cities — two-thirds of them Black or Hispanic — to gauge what factors contributed most to the minority swimming gap.

The study found that 31 percent of the White respondents could not swim safely, compared to 58 percent of the Blacks. The non-swimming rate for Hispanic children was almost as high — 56 percent — although more than

twice as many Hispanics as Blacks are now USA Swimming members.

The lead researcher, Professor Richard Irwin, said one key finding was the influence of parents' attitudes and abilities. If a parent couldn't swim, as was far more likely in minority families than White families, or if the parent felt swimming was dangerous, then the child was far less likely to learn how to swim.

Irwin said this means learn-to-swim programs in minority communities should reach out to parents.

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