Hockey GMs nix penalties for blows to the head

PITTSBURGH (Reuters)—National Hockey League general managers had some advice for players concerned about hard hits to the head—"keep your heads up!"

A number of brutal postseason blows has shone the spotlight on referees' duties to protect players in recent weeks, and the NHL Players Association (NHLPA) has weighed in demanding stiffer penalties for harsh and deliberate hits. The players' misgivings have been given short shrift by their general managers, however, many of whom are former players and loathe to further dilute the toughness and bone-jarring contact they believe is a fundamental part of the sport.

"We don't want an automatic penalty where a legal check results in contact with the other players head," Toronto Maple Leafs general manager Brian Burke told reporters after a meeting on Tuesday prior to Game 3 of the Stanley Cup finals.

"There is some responsibility on a player to keep his head up.

"This is something that the people within the game, the general managers, don't feel we need to make a change."

Crushing blows

The NHL playoffs have seen a number of devastating head hits, some deemed legal and others deliberate attempts to injury.

A crushing blow by Red Wings' Niklas Kronwall, which left Chicago Blackhawks' Martin Havlat unconscious on the ice during the Western Conference finals, drew particular attention.

Kronwall was assessed a penalty on the play, but the blow was largely viewed as a legal hockey hit.

The NHLPA, which plans to put a proposal to competition committee meetings later this summer, would like to see all head checking result in a penalty and deliberate blows bring more severe suspensions.

A recent informal survey conducted by the players' association found that over 70 percent of its membership wanted to see changes to the current rules giving referees more discretion to penalize players targeting the head.

But NHL general managers on Tuesday said there was no interest among their group in automatic penalties for accidental head blows.

"They can bring that fight if they want but there is no appetite for it in this group, none, zero," said Burke.

Players will similarly draw little succor from the NHL, whose senior executive vice president Colin Campbell said the head check would not be denied to the fans.

"The managers' appetite was to keep it the same, do a little more education with the players but it is part of our game," said Campbell.

"We don't like it when a player gets hurt but it happens and it's part of the game fans have come to accept and if they didn't like it we would get rid of it."

Obama to be honorary chairman of Presidents Cup

MIAMI (Reuters)—President Barack Obama has accepted an invitation to be honorary chairman of this year's Presidents Cup, the PGA Tour said on Monday.

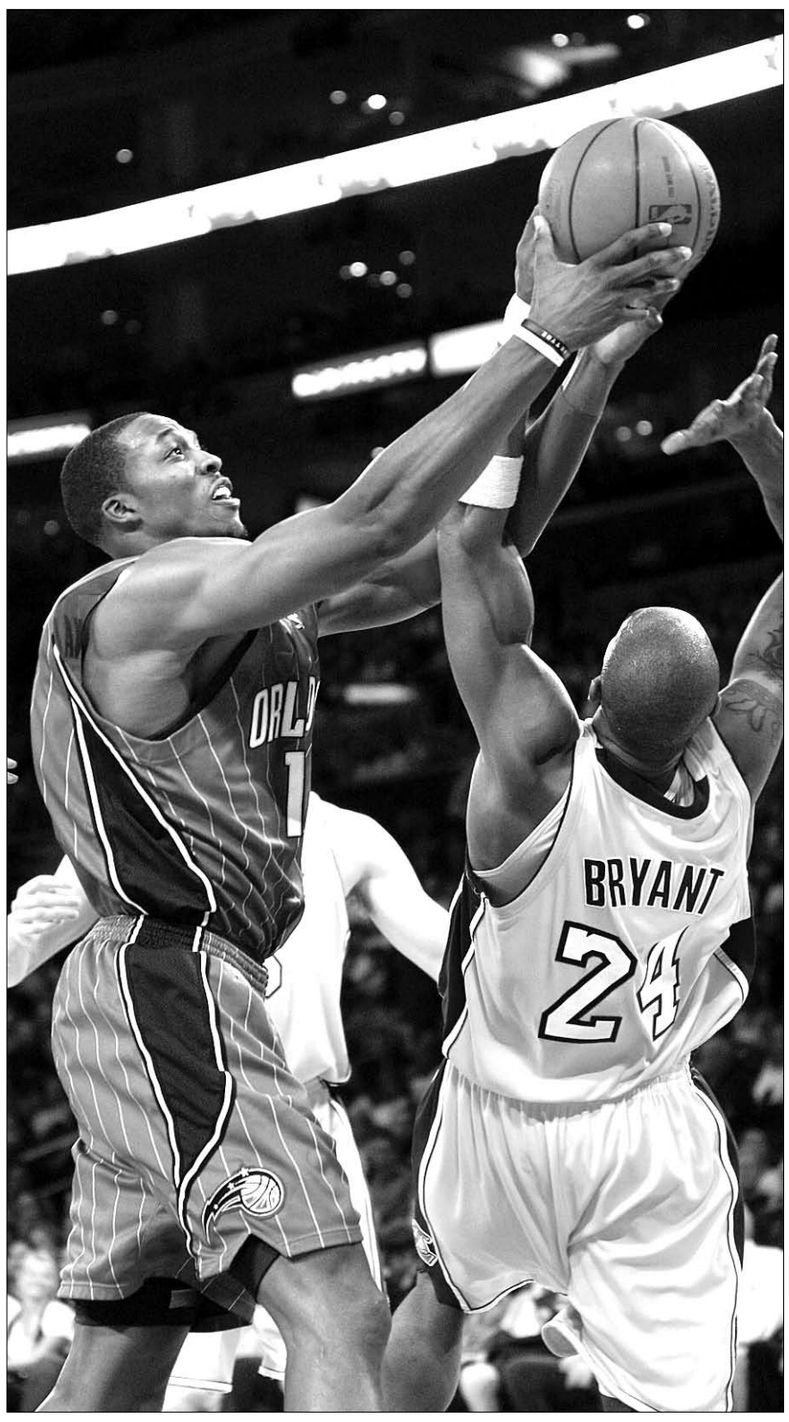
Obama, an avid basketball player who enjoys the occasional round of golf, will fulfill the role when the biennial team competition takes place at San Francisco's Harding Park Golf Course from Oct. 8–11.

"We are honored that President Obama has accepted our invitation to be honorary chairman of the Presidents Cup in October," PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem said in a statement.

"As the eighth head of state to serve in this role, President Obama continues a long tradition of support and leadership dating back to the first Presidents Cup in 1994."

The Presidents Cup is a Ryder Cup-style competition, which pits a U.S. team against a line-up of International players from countries outside Europe.

The U.S. won the trophy in 2007 for the fifth time in seven editions.



DONE IT BEFORE: Dwight Howard and the Orlando Magic emerged victorious in both meetings this year with Kobe Bryant and the L.A. Lakers. STEPHEN DUNN/GETTY IMAGES

Magic seek one more upset against Kobe and Lakers

Stopping 'Superman' Dwight Howard is Lakers' challenge

By MATT SUGAM

With the NBA finals, the Los Angeles Lakers are right where they are expected to be while the Orlando Magic are right where they, and a few of their diehard fans but not many others, thought they should be.

While fans and the media were getting hyped up for Kobe vs. LeBron, the Magic crashed the party by upsetting the Cleveland Cavaliers in six games after beating the defending champion Boston Celtics in seven games.

With another upset in the making on their minds, the Magic will have their hands full against Kobe Bryant and the Lakers.

Orlando is playing their best basketball of the season while the Lakers have been a bit inconsistent throughout the playoffs.

After falling just short of the title last year, Los Angeles should capitalize on its second chance, but it will be no easy feat against Superman center Dwight Howard and his Magic.

Match-ups

Matching up against Howard will be tough as he dominates the paint with his strength and athleticism.

The Cavs had no answer for Howard, but Lakers' big men Andrew Bynum, Pau Gasol, and Lamar Odom should fare much better than the Cavs' Zydrunas Ilgauskas, Anderson Varejao, and Ben Wallace.

Another key match-up for the Lakers will be shutting down the Magic's great perimeter shooting that is opened up by Howard's dominance in the paint.

Teams have to double down on Howard when he gets the ball in the post, or he'll just have a dunk fest. But then, Howard will get the ball worked around the perimeter to great open shooters like small forward Hedo Turkoglu and shooting guard Mickael Pietrus, who single-handedly outperformed the Cavs bench throughout the series.

To shut down these perimeter shooters, the Lakers will rely heavily on small forward Trevor Ariza who is emerging as both a great perimeter defender and three-point shooter.

If shooting guard Sasha Vujacic can get his shooting touch back, the Lakers should be able to trade threes with the Magic. Between him, Ariza, and Bryant, the Lakers shoot much more effectively than the Cavs.

Where the Magic should have a definite edge is at the point-guard position. Rafer Alston has been outstanding since he came to Orlando in a mid-season trade and the Lakers' 34-year-old Derek Fisher isn't what he used to be. Jordan Farmar's game still needs some major improvements and lately Shannon Brown has been cutting into his minutes.

And if Jameer Nelson returns from a shoulder injury for the finals, as the Magic are saying he may, it would significantly up their chances at winning the series by increasing their advantage at the point.

The Bryant factor

But really what this series will come down to is none other than Kobe Bryant.

Kobe, "the Black Mamba," (Africa's most dangerous and feared snake) is still the most dangerous and feared player in the game.

Kobe is "Mr. Clutch," the ultimate closer, and hungry for a fourth title but more importantly, the first one without Shaq.

While Bryant cannot do it alone (he won't have to given he's on a talented young team that has finals experience), he will carry the load when needed throughout the series.

Prediction

The Magic have the confidence that they are now the best team in the NBA, as they dethroned King James and his Cavaliers who were the best team during the regular season. They also have the confidence that they can beat the Lakers as they did so the two times they met in the regular season.

The Lakers come into the series looking to take care of some unfinished business from last season while Bryant seeks his fourth championship to inch himself closer to "His Airness" Michael Jordan, and solidify his place as one of the greatest to ever play the game.

In the end Kobe won't let this championship get away from him and Superman will meet his kryptonite in the Black Mamba.

I'll take the best closer in the game and the Lakers in six.

Matt Sugam also writes for The Daily Targum at Rutgers University.

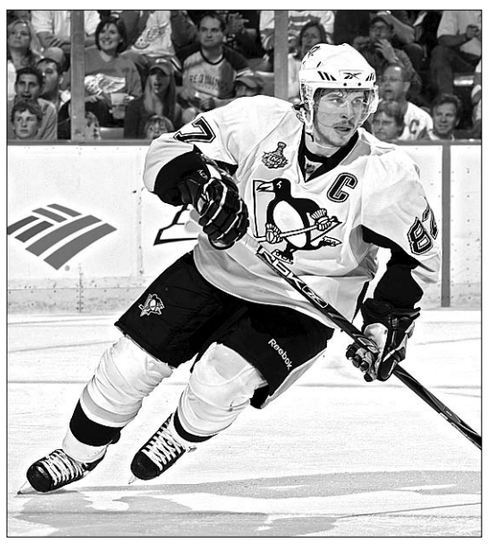
NHL edges NBA in playoff excitement

By KARL YU
Epoch Times Staff

Although Sports Illustrated opined "Why the NHL is hot and the NBA is not" on an issue cover back in June 1994, the NBA has pretty much been front and centre in terms of media exposure while the NHL has taken a backseat in the U.S.

The end draws nigh for both leagues as the Detroit Red Wings battle the Pittsburgh Penguins in the Stanley Cup final while the Los Angeles Lakers and Orlando Magic face each other in the NBA final.

With both leagues' playoffs occurring at the same time, one has to ask the question: Has the NHL been hotter than the NBA this time around?



STILL GOING: Sidney Crosby is one reason the NHL playoffs have been a resounding success. JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES

Marquee match-ups

The NHL showcased its two biggest stars in the second round when Sidney Crosby and the Penguins defeated Alexander Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals in seven games.

The league's top two young guns fired on all cylinders with Crosby scoring eight times and setting up five for 13 points and Ovechkin totaling 14 points, scoring eight goals and setting up six.

The NBA isn't seeing the Kobe Bryant vs. LeBron James showdown as the Cleveland Cavaliers were eliminated from the playoffs this past Saturday, depriving the NBA of a dream match-up.

The best series of this year's NBA playoffs was the opening round tilt between the defending champion Boston Celtics and the Chicago Bulls.

The Celtics and Bulls went the full seven games, with four games going into OT with two of them going into multiple overtimes—Game 6 was decided in three overtime periods.

Despite the fact that arguably the best player in the series—Boston's Kevin Garnett—watched the entire series in civvies, the Celtics were able to prevail over guards Ben Gordon and 2009 NBA rookie of the year Derrick Rose, who put up a good fight.

Cinderella teams

Everybody loves to see a team make that proverbial jump from the outhouse to the penthouse and the NHL and NBA both saw such teams this postseason. Cinderella teams pulling off big upsets are another intriguing aspect of the playoffs, after all.

Going into the playoffs, the Carolina Hurricanes were the East's sixth seed but they caught fire and eliminated the third-ranked New Jersey Devils and top-seeded Boston Bruins.

Their miraculous run was ended by the Pens in the Eastern Conference finals.

Chauncey Billups returned home when the Detroit Pistons packaged him and traded him to the Denver Nuggets in the Allen Iverson deal. The deal hasn't worked out so well for the Pistons.

The Cleveland Cavaliers swept the Pistons in the first round, while Billups led the Nuggets to 4–1 series wins over the New Orleans Hornets and the Dallas Mavericks before succumbing to the L.A. Lakers in the Western Conference final 4–2.

Although Denver has made the playoffs for six straight seasons, it has never advanced past the first round prior to Billups's arrival.

In fact, the Pepsi Center is so used to early playoff exits, it double-booked Game 4 of the Western Conference final with a WWE Monday Night RAW event.

"Rating" the NHL and NBA playoffs

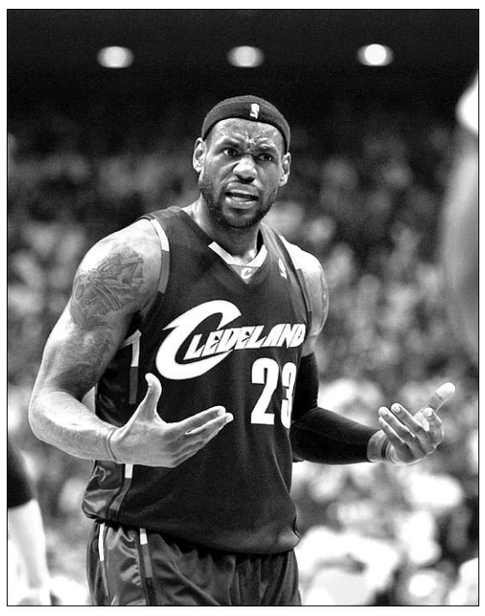
All the great hoops action has not gone unnoticed.

According to the Web site americanchronicle.com TNT, one of the NBA's broadcast partners, has averaged a 3.1 cable rating—which equals 4 million viewers—for the 37 games it broadcast through the conference semifinals while ESPN has a rating of 3.5 (4.6 million viewers) for six conference semifinal games it has broadcast.

Meanwhile, the NHL hasn't done well on the ratings front with NBC.

Speculation is that the people at the peacock network didn't want to risk a game going into triple OT on Conan O'Brien's Tonight Show debut on Monday and therefore pushed to have Games 1 and 2 on back-to-back nights (Saturday and Sunday).

However, there was a ratings increase between the first and second games of the Stanley Cup final.



DISAPPOINTING EXIT: LeBron James showed the frustration of not having a solid supporting cast. ELSA/GETTY IMAGES

"The NBC telecast drew a 3.4 rating and a 6 share. That's up from the 2.6 rating and 5 share of Saturday's Game 1," reported the AP.

The Nielsen rating refers to the percentage of households with TV sets while the share refers to the percentage of people watching a given program.

Both have had great postseasons but the NHL wins out for sportsmanship.

After a humiliating loss in Game 7, Ovechkin still found time to shake Crosby's hand after the game while LeBron James exited the court without saying a word to anyone following his team's elimination.

Image is everything and the NHL's two stars shone brightly while one of the NBA's brightest didn't.

Soccer empowering women in war-torn Uganda

Women forgotten in the rehabilitation of a region until now

PAICHO, Uganda (Reuters)—Auma Okot fled Uganda's most notorious rebel group five years ago and, after getting married, joined the local soccer team.

In a field of long grass, overlooked by a decrepit blue church and an expectant crowd, she scored the winning penalty for Paicho Village in a recent tournament.

The crowd, having lived for more than 20 years in constant fear of abduction or mutilation in the brutal migrations of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels in north Uganda, erupted.

"This is my wife!" Okot's husband screamed, lifting her on to his shoulders.

In a region ravaged by rebellion and a society long dominated by men, Okot's team hope to change attitudes towards women and empower them through the power of the boot.

Typical of many of the players, team captain Nancy Lakot's family abandoned their home 12 years ago and has lived in Paicho, a densely populated refugee camp, ever since.

Her brother was abducted and killed by the rebels.

"Before this project started working it was very hard; there was no respect from boys. They said: 'How can a girl kick a ball?'" Lakot said in the gloom of a thatched mud hut. "Now the boys are sure that anything a boy can do, a girl can do too."

In 2006 the LRA, led by a man who says he is possessed by ancient Acholi spirits, began a peace process that eventually broke down last year.

They have since operated across the border in the Democratic Republic of Congo with occasional raids into Central African Republic, leaving north Uganda peaceful but socially gutted.

Effective change

Anna Phillips, an American researcher, founded the Paicho team four years ago. "We're giving them leadership skills," she explained in the shade of a mango tree beside the pitch.

Women bore the brunt of civil strife in conflict zones, Phillips said, but were frequently excluded from rehabilitation programs because they were not classified as combatants.

Many of the players had lost husbands and sons, or been forced to work as slaves for the rebels, she said, and when they escaped many of them were HIV positive, pregnant, or had suffered mental and physical trauma.

Using a model pioneered in Afghanistan, Phillips said sports could be used as a catalyst for rehabilitation and change.

"They're going in with the confidence that if they can make a difference on a soccer pitch, they can go to local councils and straighten things out, they can speak their mind, and they can really make effective change."

Uganda's female empowerment goes beyond the grassy expanse between rusty goalposts in Paicho. Phillips noted the importance of parallel trends on a national level in Uganda's parliament which boasts 32 percent female MPs.

According to a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the global average of women in parliament is 17.7 percent.

Over the last 25 years, women had gradually gained more responsibility in policy-making, said legislator Margaret Baba Diri, especially in areas of education, health, and gender which should eventually improve Ugandans' standard of living.

She attributed the prominence of women MPs to quotas introduced by rebel-turned-president Yoweri Museveni.

Equal roles

According to Baba Diri, women played significant roles in Museveni's insurgency in the 1980s, causing him to endorse female leadership when his government came to power.

Laws that empowered women and fostered female entrepreneurs directly improved the development of a country because they prioritized feeding and educating the family, she said.

"We have seen that when the loans are given to women, they are better spent than the loans given to men because the men use it for alcohol and women and so on.

"Maybe in the next years we shall get 40 percent," she said. "Our ultimate goal is for men and women to have equal roles."

Uganda's example mirrors what may be a slowly emerging pattern across the continent. At almost 50 percent, Uganda's southern neighbour Rwanda has achieved the highest level of women's representation in parliament in the world.

Indeed, with 17.7 percent female representation in government, sub-Saharan Africa leads countries across Asia (16.7 percent), the Pacific (15 percent) and the Arab world (9 percent), according to IPU statistics.

As the world prepares for next year's FIFA World Cup in South Africa, Lakot is training for her own—the Homeless Women's World Cup.

Her real dream is to become a nurse and improve prenatal and infant care in the Paicho community.

After a full day of tilling her land, Lakot downs her hoe and cycles along a tawny dirt road to the football pitch, past a hand-painted sign advising her to "say no to sex" and that "violence is wrong."

Paicho is a no longer a theatre of conflict. The crack of semi-automatic weapons and abductees' screams have been replaced by the thump of bare feet on leather and frantic shrieks for Lakot to fire in another cross.