

# Pacers rookies making big impact

## Jasikevicius, Granger not typical NBA newcomers

By Jason Martin

DAILY JOURNAL SPORTS CORRESPONDENT

### INDIANAPOLIS

The Indiana Pacers have the NBA's best pair of rookies, yet those first-year players really aren't rookies at all.

Sarunas Jasikevicius and Danny Granger were two of the nine rookies chosen to take on sophomore standouts in Friday's Rookie Challenge during the All-Star weekend in Houston and the only set of teammates, but neither is a neophyte in the conventional sense.

Jasikevicius, who turns 30 on March 5, led his team to the previous two Euroleague championships before coming to the NBA. And Granger was widely considered the steal of last year's draft with the 17th pick in the first round after an increasingly rare four-year NCAA career that included success at both Bradley and New Mexico.

"We're not talking about your usual rookies at all," Indiana second-year center David Harrison said. "Sarunas is 30, and Danny's young (22), but he's mature enough to handle himself."

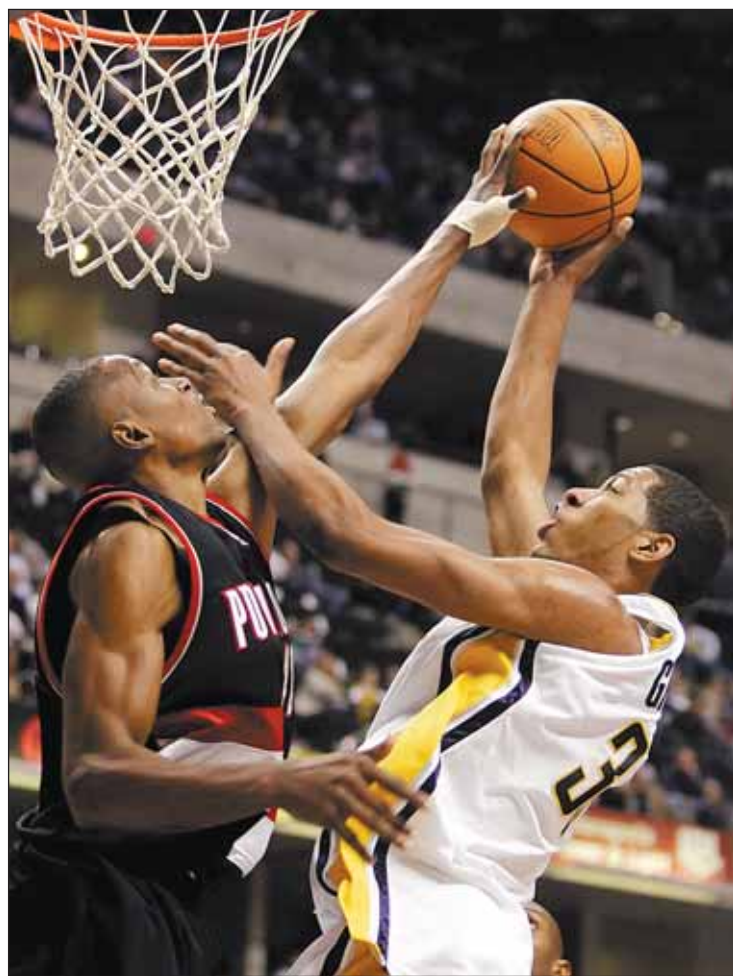
"We didn't have to wait for either of these guys to adjust to the NBA."

During their second consecutive turbulent first half of the season, the Pacers have had to rely on these two rookies, whom they expect to develop into cornerstones of the franchise in the next few seasons.

Jasikevicius, a 6-foot-4 Lithuanian guard who played collegiately at Maryland, is averaging 8.5 points and 3.2 assists, while the 6-6 Granger, a guard/forward, is averaging 6.6 points and 4.6 rebounds. Both players have been plugged into the starting lineup 14 times and have helped the Pacers remain in the top half of the Eastern Conference with a 26-23 record.

"We've kind of asked them to come in and play," starting center Jeff Foster said. "And they've responded."

Jasikevicius said the grind of the NBA season, which averages about four games per week with plenty of travel, has been his biggest adjustment.



Indiana Pacers forward Danny Granger, right, has his shot blocked by the Trail Blazers' Theo Ratliff during a Feb. 8 game in Indianapolis.

"I've been tired more for some games than others or haven't felt the freshest going in," he said. "Otherwise, I'm very confident and happy with the way things are going other than a couple of small injuries."

"I feel like I'm sort of an unusual case for a rookie."

Granger said he came to the Pacers unsure of what to expect. He said the speed of each possession and the rapidness of the games shocked him at first.

"There have been flashes where I've played well, and that gives me confidence," he said. "I knew as a rookie I would have my ups and downs."

Pacers CEO and team president Donnie Walsh said both players are performing beyond his expectations.

"Danny's been schooled in a lot of areas: he has great footwork, and while his shooting will continue to get better, he already is good defensively, and he's a great rebounder," Walsh said. "He's on his way."

Walsh said he is pleased with Jasikevicius' conversion to the NBA.

"He's still adjusting to the 3-point distance, but we expect him one day to hit eight in a game," Walsh added. "We're not concerned about it."

In the past decade, the Pacers

have been alone among NBA teams who have been able to rebuild the majority of their roster while remaining a playoff regular.

The Pacers are in the second of such roster reworkings following the retirement of Reggie Miller and the trade of Ron Artest to Sacramento for Peja Stojakovic.

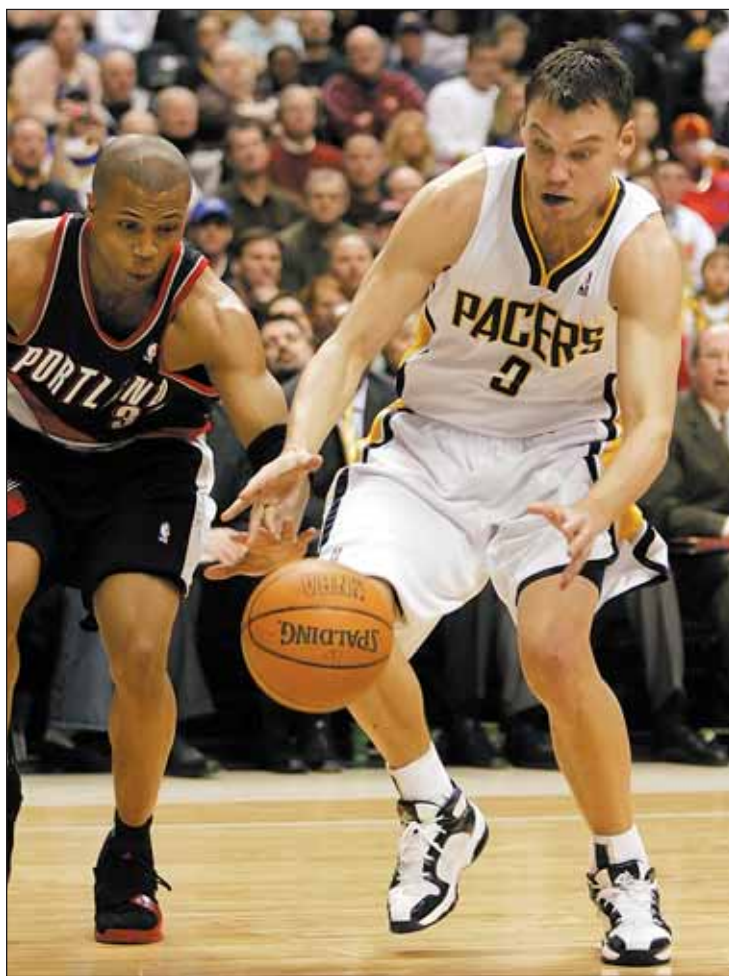
Despite persistent injuries to starting point guard Jamaal Tinsley and another months-long derailment of franchise forward Jermaine O'Neal, Indiana has the fourth-best record (26-23) in the Eastern Conference during this weekend's All-Star break.

Indiana fans saw flashes of the future during two key stretches in the second quarter of Wednesday's 88-77 defeat of Milwaukee at Consco Fieldhouse, the final game before the break.

With 11:05 to play, Jasikevicius grabbed a long rebound and fed it to Granger, who tossed a pass to Harrison for a basket that tied the game at 25-25.

About three minutes later, Jasikevicius and Granger executed a flawless pick-and-roll, with Granger draining a 17-foot jumper from the left side for a 31-27 Indiana lead.

On the next possession, following a 3-pointer by the Bucks, Jasikevicius pushed the ball in transition and found Granger for another successful jump shot



Indiana Pacers guard Sarunas Jasikevicius battles Portland's Sebastian Telfair for a loose ball during a Feb. 8 game in Indianapolis.

from 19 feet and a 33-30 lead.

Milwaukee never again closed within a basket. Jasikevicius finished with four points and six assists in nearly 26 minutes, while Granger had seven points, five rebounds, three assists and two blocked shots in 19 minutes.

Pacers coach Rick Carlisle said he'll be looking for both rookies to continue the ascents they've started during the season's second half.

"It doesn't matter what league you've played in, whether it's big-time college basketball or high-level European leagues, until you've played an NBA season, you've never played in a situation quite like it," Carlisle said. "The frequency of the games and the physical demands are different. They're getting used to it."

Carlisle said Jasikevicius is starting to get a better feel for the demands of running the Pacers' offense. The coach said he would like to see Granger continue to improve his overall performance.

"You hope a rookie develops a consistency for how to approach the game and how to improve," Carlisle said. "Danny's had a lot of important games and moments for us already."

"Now, when he goes through a little bit of struggle, we'd like to

### BY THE NUMBERS

Pacers rookies Sarunas Jasikevicius and Danny Granger have played early and often through the first half of the season. Here's how they stack up among the team leaders in several categories at the All-Star break.

**Jasikevicius**  
Averages: 8.5 points, 2.4 rebounds, 3.2 assists, 0.7 steals, 1.65 turnovers, 23.3 minutes in 49 games

Totals (team rank): points, 417 (fourth); minutes, 1,143 (third); assists, 157 (first); steals, 36 (second)

**Granger**  
Averages: 6.6 points, 4.6 rebounds, 1.0 assists, 0.8 steals, 0.8 blocks, 1.15 turnovers, 21.2 minutes in 46 games

Totals (team rank): points, 305 (seventh); minutes, 973 (sixth); rebounds, 213 (fifth); steals, 35 (tied for third); blocks, 34 (second)

see him get through it quicker because he has the experience."

Harrison, who also was thrust into heavy minutes for a rookie following last year's Detroit brawl debacle, said he expects his new teammates to finish the season strong.

"You have to learn how to play basketball again when you come into this league," he said. "It was a hectic year for me last year, but already Sarunas and Danny are handling it better than I did."

## Indiana finds rhythm after Artest trade

By Cliff Brunt  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### INDIANAPOLIS

Chemistry problems? What chemistry problems?

The Indiana Pacers, rid of the constant distraction of Ron Artest, enter the All-Star break looking like the team most people expected them to be when the season began.

They've won five of seven since sending Artest to Sacramento in exchange for Peja Stojakovic, including a victory against the league-leading Detroit Pistons and a near-miss against defending NBA champion San Antonio.

Stojakovic has averaged 19 points and seven rebounds as a Pacer while taking pressure off his new teammates. Now, instead of counting this as a lost season, Indiana is 26-23 and talking playoffs again.

Artest publicly asked to be traded in December and was inactive until being shipped to Sacramento in late January. While the trade was in limbo, so were the remaining Pacers.

Center David Harrison said the team needed closure on Artest to move forward.

"I think just getting somebody to replace Ron and getting the trade behind us, that helped," he said. "I mean, so many people were on the (trading) blocks. Just getting that behind us was a weight off our shoulders."

Stojakovic has helped the Pacers' offense prosper without All-Star Jermaine O'Neal, who is out indefinitely with a groin tear. Stojakovic scored 16 of his 20 points in the second half of an 88-77 win against Milwaukee on Wednesday night. He is shooting 42 percent from 3-point range.

"Indiana has been playing well since their trade," Milwaukee coach Terry Stotts said. "Even without Jermaine O'Neal, they have created an identity as a basketball team. And Peja really opens up the spacing on the floor for them to be an effective perimeter team."

Stojakovic said the Pacers are playing well, even without O'Neal.

"We are just trying to hang in there and win some games," he said. "We have to hang in there and keep playing until our guys come back."

Besides O'Neal, forward Austin Croshere and guard Jamaal Tinsley are regular starters who have been sidelined of late.

# Hot All-Star topic: How many points will Kobe score?

By Brian Mahoney

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### HOUSTON

Even when it's only an exhibition, everyone wants to ask Kobe Bryant about point totals.

Bryant won't make any predictions about how many he'll put up Sunday night in the NBA All-Star game, even though scoring has made him the biggest attraction in the league during the first half of the season.

"I just look forward to going out there and winning the game, play-

ing defense, believe it or not, doing whatever we need to win the game," he said.

Uh, sorry Kobe. People in more than 200 countries aren't tuning in to watch you block shots.

The possibilities seem endless. After scoring 81 points in a game this season, imagine how many Bryant can get in a game where there is little defense played.

"I think it's fun to have the discussions about Kobe," NBA commissioner David Stern said. "I think it's a terrific water cooler subject. Can he go for 100? Can he outscore a team by himself?"

The latter seems unlikely, given that the Eastern Conference counters with Allen Iverson and LeBron James, who trail Bryant in

what is shaping up as the most exciting scoring race in years.

Bryant went into the All-Star break averaging 35 points, with Iverson at 33.2 and James at 31.2. The NBA hasn't had three players average 30 or more points since 1982, when George Gervin beat out Moses Malone and Adrian Dantley to win the scoring title.

Bryant and Iverson have already been the stars in the NBA's showcase. Iverson won his second MVP award in the East's victory last year in Denver, and Bryant took the award in 2002 after scoring 31 points back home in Philadelphia.

Maybe now it's James' turn. The Cleveland star headed into his second All-Star game after scoring 43 points in a win against San Antonio

on Monday, then adding 43 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists Wednesday night in a win against Boston.

James, the No. 1 pick in the 2003 draft, made his All-Star debut last year with 13 points, and he goes into the break with comfortable playoff position, which Bryant and Iverson don't have, after leading the Cavs to the third-best record in the East.

The All-Star game record, by the way, is 42 points, and Bryant wasn't surprised at all to learn who held it.

"Wilt? Oh, couldn't have guessed that one," he said with a smile.

Chamberlain set that record in 1962, the year of his 100-point game. Bryant's total of 81 against Toronto in January was the next-highest in an NBA game.

The scoring race has sometimes

overshadowed the other big story of the first half, the play of the Detroit Pistons. The Pistons got off to one of the best starts in NBA history before cooling off a bit and bringing a 42-9 record into the break.

Though none of its players was elected to start, four Detroit players were voted in as reserves. Pistons coach Flip Saunders, who will coach the East, said he may send Chauncey Billups, Richard Hamilton, Ben Wallace and Rasheed Wallace into the game at the same time.

"We are definitely going to have to work it out where all of us are on the floor together," Billups said. "We've got the man that is in control of it, so we should be able to work that out."

### ON TV

What: NBA All-Star Game

When: 8:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: The Toyota Center in Houston

Who: The Eastern Conference All-Stars vs. the Western Conference All-Stars

Pacers connection: None. Pacers forward Jermaine O'Neal was voted to start for the Eastern Conference All-Stars but cannot play because of a groin injury.

TV: TNT



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