

Jordan likes high-scoring players

By KRISTIE RIEKEN
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When it comes to scoring points, Michael Jordan is an expert.

So he couldn't help but delight in Kobe Bryant putting up 81 and a New York high schooler going wild for 113.

Still, Jordan insisted things would have been a bit different if he'd been guarding Bryant.

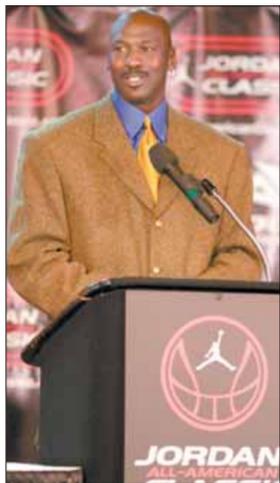
"If I was on the other side, there's no way I would have been in at the end of that game without six fouls," Jordan said Tuesday. "I don't know if I could have given up 81 points and not fouled out of the game."

Bryant's total in a come-from-behind victory against Toronto last month was the second-highest in NBA history.

Epiphany Prince set a national girls' record last week in a game that was a rout from the beginning.

Some complained her performance in such a one-sided contest was an example of poor sportsmanship.

"I can't fault the young lady for scoring 113 points when she goes out each and every minute



AP PHOTO

Basketball great Michael Jordan, shown talking about the 2006 Jordan All-American Classic in New York on Tuesday, is impressed with the play of the Lakers' Kobe Bryant this season.

to play the game hard," Jordan said. "If you're going to fault anybody, fault the coach for not taking her out of the game."

"If I had to pick the best player in the game, he certainly is up there right now. It seems as though he's got the edge over anybody in that position, if not in the league, right now."

Michael Jordan
Retired NBA star on the Lakers' Kobe Bryant

The former Chicago Bulls star was in town to announce the players for his high school showcase, the Jordan All-American Classic, set for April 22 at Madison Square Garden.

Jordan was so impressed by Prince, one of the top prep players in the nation, he's contemplating adding a girls event next year.

"I think that she's going to innovate this game," he said. "I think we should give women an opportunity to be recognized."

Jordan, whose NBA career-high was 69, couldn't remember a specific time when people got on him about scoring too much.

But he knows there were probably many occasions like that.

"I imagine you guys were mad at me a lot in New York," Jordan joked, in a lobby adjacent to the

Garden. "People got mad at me for playing hard every minute I was on the basketball court, and it so happened that I scored a lot of points (against) their team."

Bryant has often said he has fashions his game after the 10-time NBA scoring leader. Jordan said he can see some similarities.

"You see him playing with any of the elite guys in the league ... he's going to guard them defensively, and he will beg for them to guard him on the other end," Jordan said. "That's my approach. I would do the same thing."

He stopped himself before declaring the Los Angeles Lakers star the top player in the league, but came close.

"If I had to pick the best player in the game, he certainly is up

there right now," Jordan said. "It seems as though he's got the edge over anybody in that position, if not in the league, right now."

Back in the city where he was born, Jordan said he wouldn't give an opinion on why the Knicks are struggling this season because "someone would take my opinion and use it as the Bible."

But then he gave one anyway. "Everybody goes through up and down times in the season," Jordan said. "They haven't been able to find the right mix."

Jordan would like to see the NBA tinker with its new rule on when players can be drafted. Now, they have to wait one year after high school. He wants it to be two, so they get past their teens.

"I think from an educational and maturity standpoint it should have been at least 20," he said. "That way they get at least two years of college. Colleges get the chance to teach and educate them about the game of basketball and life, and it trickles down."

"There's no way that an 18-year-old kid is going to be mature enough to handle some of the business things that they have to deal with on a professional level," he said.

HOCKEY

EWING, N.J.

Hockey coach, players cited in gambling ring

Wayne Gretzky's wife and about a half-dozen NHL players placed bets, but not on hockey, with a nationwide sports gambling ring financed by Phoenix Coyotes assistant coach Rick Tocchet, authorities said Tuesday.

Gretzky, hockey's greatest player, is in his first season coaching the Coyotes and is a part-owner of the team. He has not been named as being part of the complaint.

Gretzky's wife, actress Janet Jones, was among those implicated, two law enforcement officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity because no bettors have been publicly identified.

State police Col. Rick Fuentes said an investigation into the New Jersey-based ring discovered the processing of more than 1,000 wagers, exceeding \$1.7 million, on professional and college sports.

Tocchet was served with a criminal complaint Monday and was expected to travel from his Arizona home to answer charges of promoting gambling, money laundering and conspiracy.

The NHL asked Tocchet not to attend Tuesday's home game against Chicago.

RACING

RICHMOND, Va.

Investigation: Hendrick crash linked to error

Flight crew errors probably caused a 2004 Hendrick Motorsports plane crash that killed 10 people with ties to one of NASCAR's top racing families, the National Transportation Safety Board said Tuesday.

The crew improperly read instruments and missed a landing approach to Blue Ridge Airport in Martinsville, Va., the NTSB said in a report synopsis. The Beech King Air 200 crashed into fog-shrouded Bull Mountain in the foothills of the Appalachians on Oct. 24, 2004.

The crash killed the son, brother and two nieces of Hendrick Motorsports owner Rick Hendrick.

"Contributing to the cause of the accident was the flight crew's failure to use all available navigational aids to confirm and monitor the airplane's position during the approach," the NTSB said.

Nothing wrong with letting basketball's gunners fire away

By SCOTT OSTLER
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

COLUMN

Rick Barry, co-hosting his philosophical-discussion radio program one recent day, went off on a phone-in guest.

Barry called the guy an idiot and tried to reach through the phone line and grab the man's shirt.

Barry didn't cool off until co-host Rod Brooks dumped a tub of Gatorade over Rick's head.

It was not phony theatrics. Barry was deeply and personally insulted.

He had been speaking in praise of Kobe Bryant's 81 when the caller pointed out that this was "A gunner defending a gunner."

Which was true. Barry is on the NBA's all-time All-Gunner team. So is Kobe Bryant.

Where did I get this information? I made it up. After several minutes of exhaustive research and painful thinking, I invented this team.

Here it is (with shot-attempts-

per-game during the player's highest-scoring NBA season):

Wilt Chamberlain (39.5!) (exclamation mark mine!), Rick Barry (28.7), Pete Maravich (28.0), Elgin Baylor (33.1) and Kobe Bryant (27.0, this season).

What? No Iverson (27.8)? No Jordan (27.8)?

Settle down, don't make me get out my Taser gun. Those guys are honorable mentions.

Gunning isn't all about stats. It's a subjective thing, and it's a sensitive subject, as I was saying just this morning to Rick Barry's food-taster.

The world is divided into two camps: gunner-haters and gunner-lovers. Put me down for Camp B.

Gunners gun because they have to and because they can. For all the talk about the selfishness of the gunner, rarely are the great ones team-wreckers. I challenge you to say of any of my All-Gunners, "If he took fewer shots

in (name a season), his team would have won it all."

Gunner-haters say the machine-gunners fly in the face of team spirit. Barry has heard that kind of stuff since he was about 6.

But for the most part, criticism of the gunner rarely comes from his teammates. I don't remember former New Orleans Jazz center Rich Kelley ever saying, "If Pistol (Maravich) would share the ball with me, we could go all the way."

Maravich once said that he would gladly, giddily, give up the ball more if he could play with someone like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (no offense, Rich Kelley!).

Bryant is the one exception on my team. Even when he and Shaq were winning titles together, Shaq was often whining about lack of touches (not that Shaq was above reproach). Now, even though Kobe is making a subpar team a genuine playoff threat, there are rumbblings from within the team.

"Gunner" has the connotation of hoopster as Johnny-one-note.

But Barry was a superb passer. The 6-foot-5 Baylor in his biggest

scoring season averaged 18.6 rebounds. Wilt probably blocked more shots than defensive genius Bill Russell (no stat was kept back then). Maravich enjoyed passing as much as scoring.

I love the gunner because it takes great talent and creativity to get off a ton of shots every night when the other team is loaded up to stop you. It takes an old-West-gunslinger mentality and cool.

There's no way the gnat-sized Iverson should be able to get off 28 shots a game from beyond half court, let alone under the armpits of ill-tempered giants.

That's what irks a lot of gunner-haters, the real or perceived self-importance of the gunner. I'm told Barry in his heyday wore his arrogance like cheap cologne. "Shucks" isn't in the gunner's vocabulary.

Being a gunner is never saying you're sorry. Barry put up 48 shots in an NBA Finals game,

still a record (he made 22, the Warriors lost in OT).

Baylor is the one player I hesitated to put on the All-Gunner team, because not enough people hated him and his game, which oozed elegance and artistic creativity.

Adam Morrison of Gonzaga is a gunner. He says he hates to be compared to Larry Bird, and he shouldn't be, just because he has a bad haircut.

Bird was a different kind of bird, not a gunner. If Morrison must be compared, George "Ice Man" Gervin is a better fit.

The gunner is special. He is booed and degraded and double-teamed, hammered and hacked and heckled, even long after he retires.

But he is unstoppable.

Scott Ostler is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle. Send comments to ostler@sfcchronicle.com.

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