

## • Pacers

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their own past success, staying on solid playoff footing so late in the season would be commendable. But fans have come to expect more.

Much more. This town wants — no, demands — a championship contender. Mediocrity won't cut it, especially with a team that prides itself on being among the league's elite in any given year.

Unfortunately, this is not one of those years.

Comparatively speaking, Indiana might be a beast in the horrid East. But no one is mistaking it for a title frontrunner.

Second-round playoff material? Possibly. Eastern Conference finalist? Maybe. NBA champion? No way.

But that's not the worst of the bad.

Two years after The Brawl, the Pacers still have an image problem. It's self-inflicted, ongoing and, as evidenced by current events, isn't improving.

Whether Jamaal Tinsley and Marquis Daniels were innocent bystanders, as both claim, during the recent after-hours dust-up at a west-side bar doesn't matter.

The fact they were there, in the wee hours, on a work night, in the middle of the work week, sends the wrong message to fans who already seriously question players' commitment to winning.

This incident doesn't exactly improve the perception. It fuels it.

For proof, consider the shrinking crowds at Conseco Fieldhouse.

In 2004-05, the Pacers ranked 17th in the league in average attendance at 16,994 per game. Last season, they ranked 24th with an average of 16,179.

Through 27 games this season, the Pacers are 27th with an average of 15,519.

For the record, the fieldhouse seats 18,345. And barely 13,000 showed up for Wednesday's win against Memphis, the Pacers' final game before the All-Star break.

Clearly, fans are turned off. They have been for the better part of the past two years. It's going to take more than an average product to win them back.

But the cause is not lost.

Saying good riddance to Stephen Jackson was a good first step. Bidding farewell to Tinsley might have to be the next. But if it's not, the Pacers can rekindle interest if they can consistently win and if they can keep players off the police blotter.

It's not an either/or equation. The Pacers have to accomplish both. They have to win, and they have to be likable. At the moment, they're light on the former and nearly bankrupt on the latter.

But enough about the bad.

Let's finish with the good.

Think about it. Only 4½ games separate the Pacers from the best record in the East. It's not beyond the realm of possibility they can overtake Detroit and polish up a bit of their once-sterling reputation.

That possibility might, and probably should, give otherwise disenchanted fans a reason to pay attention after the All-Star break.

Winning is key. Good behavior is critical. It can't be like the old days without both.

Perhaps like no other stretch in recent history, this one might go a long way in determining the Pacers' long-term prospects for getting fans back on board.

"You've got to concentrate here to make sure you don't check out early," coach Rick Carlisle said of the playoff drive. "We're right in the thick of things."

In more ways than one.



Indiana Pacers forward Danny Granger drives to the basket during a game against the Los Angeles Clippers in Indianapolis on Sunday.

## Granger's star rising

Pacers forward contributing more in second season; O'Neal sees himself as mentor

By CLIFF BRUNT  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### INDIANAPOLIS

Danny Granger has become so good so fast that Indiana Pacers team leader Jermaine O'Neal has made a special point to keep the youngster in check.

It's not ego that has been an issue for the second-year forward, as he's known for his humility and quiet manner.

But Granger went to Las Vegas for Friday's Rookie Challenge playing the best basketball of his pro career, and O'Neal, a six-time All-Star, wants to make sure the bright lights and increasing attention don't change the likable 23-year-old.

"I told him he needs to relax and get himself together," O'Neal said. "The rookie all-star game, the sophomore all-star game, is still a rookie and still a sophomore game. We've got to get him ready for the bigger lights, and that's the regular All-Star game."

It's easy for O'Neal to envision the 6-foot-9 Granger as an All-Star.

"Once he gets to his first one, I may fly out there if I'm not in it and help him enjoy that one," O'Neal said.

Granger has emerged as a key scoring option for the Pacers since the eight-player trade with Golden State last month led to an increase in his minutes. The day after the trade, he dropped a career-high 28 points on Miami. He's averaging 13.1 points for the season but has averaged 16.8 in the 14 games since the trade.

Granger jumped at the chance to play a more significant role.

"They never really sat down with me and talked about it; I just kind of went out and played my part, do what I do," he said. "I probably got a little more aggressive after the trade."

The expectations for Granger have been huge since he fell to the Pacers as the 17th pick in the 2005 draft. Ron Artest quickly com-

pared him to former Chicago Bulls player Scottie Pippen. Over the summer, Pacers CEO Donnie Walsh acknowledged that Granger's talent played a role in making former All-Star Peja Stojakovic expendable.

Now that potential is turning into results.

"Last season, I was still kind of finding my way in the NBA," Granger said. "It was still a new world to me, and I wasn't sure about a lot of things. This year, I'm trying to take off running and find myself."

O'Neal said he needs Granger to excel if the Pacers are to make a run in the Eastern Conference.

"His margin for error is slimmer now because he's not the guy coming off the bench; he's the guy that's in there, he's the guy that's trying to be the second option, and some nights, first option," O'Neal said.

O'Neal sees Granger and rookie forward Shawne Williams as the future of the team. O'Neal promised to pass on the leadership skills Reggie Miller gave him before he retired to Granger and Williams.

"I'm going to be on their backs almost every single day until they say, 'We're going to take this team and guide it,'" O'Neal said. "Just like Reggie was on my back every single day."

Granger's importance to the Pacers goes beyond his on-court success. He's clean-cut, hasn't been in trouble with the law and doesn't snipe at officials, all counter to the reputation the Pacers have developed since the brawl with Detroit Pistons fans in 2004.

Danny Granger Sr. is most proud of his son as a person.

"When I tell people I'm Danny Granger's father, every one of them really loves the kid," the elder Granger said. "Love the image he brings to the Pacers organization. That's what I judge. That how I see where he is maturity-wise."

## Barkley to race older ref in run-up to All-Star game

By MEL BRACHT  
THE (OKLAHOMA CITY) OKLAHOMAN

Tonight's activities at the NBA All-Star weekend often are more entertaining than the game itself. This year is no exception.

Not only can fans watch the usual skills competitions, but they also get a special added event.

Dick Bavetta, a 67-year-old NBA referee, will race rotund, outspoken TNT analyst Charles Barkley in a 78.3-yard dash (baseline to base-

line, and then to the half-court line of the court at the Thomas & Mack Arena).

The smart money is on Bavetta, who reportedly runs eight miles a day.

The race is the result of comments Barkley made during the Kings-Lakers telecast Jan. 4. He took shots at Bavetta as well as Jess Kersey, another referee on the three-man crew that night, saying, "You've got two guys who parted the (Red) Sea with Moses."

He then claimed he could beat Bavetta in a race.

Bavetta quickly took him up and offered a \$5,000 bet, with the winner's money going to a charity of Barkley's choice.



BARKLEY

# NBA brings 'biggest event' to hit Las Vegas

By BRIAN MAHONEY  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### LAS VEGAS

Even a city that spares no expense for a good time has never seen anything like this.

The NBA All-Star game on Sunday may be meaningless and after three nights of parties might be sloppy. But try telling that to people paying top dollar for a chance to see it.

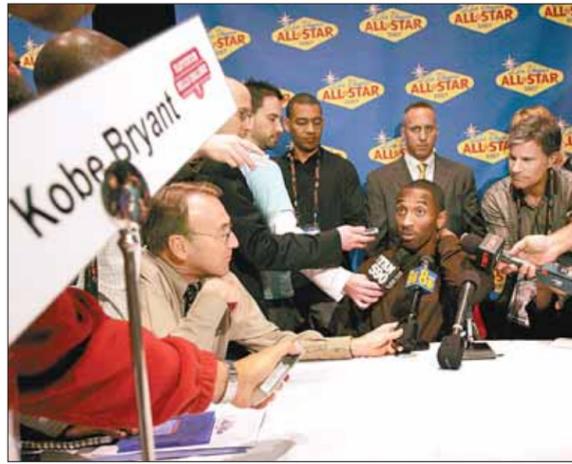
"This is the biggest event that ever hit Las Vegas," said Gavin Maloof, whose family owns the Sacramento Kings and the Palms, where the players are staying. "No question about it, bigger than any fight. Let me tell you why. The tickets, they're brokering the tickets 10 rows up, five rows up for \$27,000 a ticket."

"There's never been an event that I know of in the history of the world that goes for \$27,000. I don't care if it's World Cup, I don't care if it's the Stones, Super Bowl. There's never been an event that a broker has charged that kind of an amount for any ticket, not that I know of. It's just incredible."

Maloof has had a big hand in it. He said he and his brother, Joe, were talking about the idea of a neutral site All-Star game and pitched the thought of it being in their city to commissioner David Stern, who told them to bring it to Mayor Oscar Goodman on one condition: no betting on the game in the sports books. Being an exhibition that doesn't get heavy action anyway, that was no problem.

"If you bet the NBA All-Star game, you might as well get a life," Gavin Maloof said.

Besides, after all those parties — Maloof said his casino will host about a dozen, featuring everyone from Shaquille O'Neal to Dwyane Wade to Diddy — who



The Los Angeles Lakers' Kobe Bryant, center, speaks to the media during a news conference for NBA All-Star weekend in Las Vegas on Friday.

can predict which players will have energy left to play well Sunday night?

"There ain't going to be no sleep, I'll tell you that," Wade said. "There's going to be a lot going on."

The timing of this experiment couldn't be better. After an occasionally rocky first half that featured headaches from the ball to the brawl, the NBA could use a few days away to blow off some steam.

Is there a better place for that than Sin City?

"I got married in Vegas a couple of summers ago, and it was pretty crazy, so I can only imagine what it is going to be like with all the celebrities and an event this big," said Washington's Caron Butler, a first-time All-Star.

Goodman called the combination of NBA stars and his city's entertainers a perfect honeymoon. The players were to share the Sunday night stage with Las

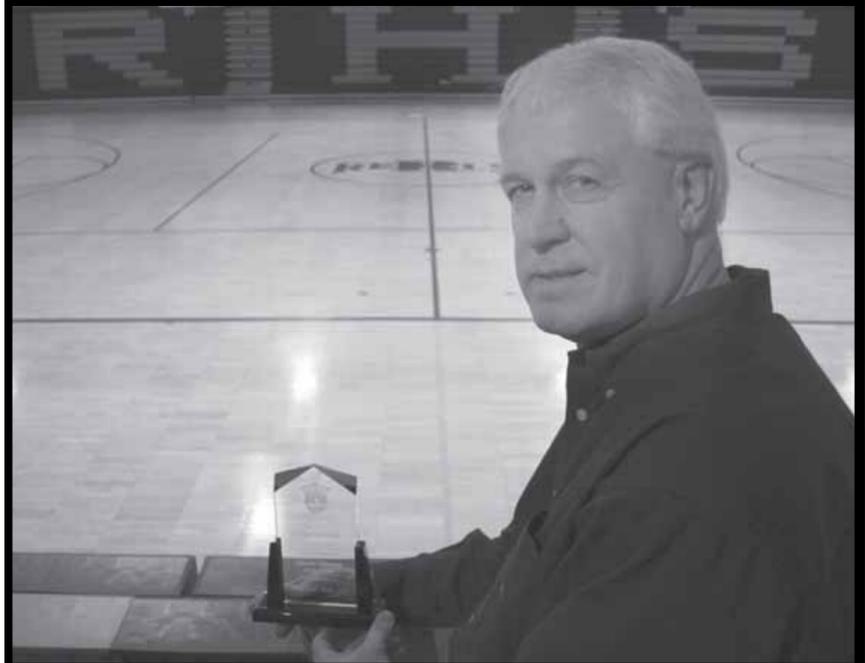
Vegas entertainment fixtures Wayne Newton, Danny Gans and performers from Cirque du Soleil, all scheduled to perform that night.

Last year, Goodman said the festivities would rival the heyday of a Tyson fight. Given a year to reconsider, the mayor has amended his prediction.

"As far as the expectations for this weekend, it outdoes any championship fight that I've experienced here," he said. "And I've lived here since 1964, and I've seen the Alis and the Listons and the Foremans and the Fosters and the Tysons."

"The buzz here is extraordinary. The parties that are being arranged at this point in time are extraordinary. It's just going to be a weekend and a couple of days of nonstop excitement and electricity and neon and glitz and glamour, and it's going to be everything that Las Vegas is all about."

# Roncalli Salutes Athletic Director of the Year Dave Toner



Roncalli Athletic Director, Dave Toner, was recently named the Indiana Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association District III Athletic Director of the Year. The IIAAA serves the state in a leadership role as a source of knowledge, an initiator of the best programs and practices, as well as an advocate of the student athlete's growth and development, both in the classroom and athletic arena. Dave has been serving admirably as Roncalli's Athletic Director for the past seven years and was selected for this award by his peers from over eighty high schools in the metropolitan area. Congratulations Dave! We are proud of you!!

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