

Changing image as easy as swapping jerseys

The public rehabilitation of Kobe Bryant is now complete, at least in the eyes of NBA fans.

That became official Wednesday with news that Bryant's jersey has regained its spot as the No. 1 seller in league stores.

No real surprise there. Look no further than Baltimore linebacker Ray Lewis as a prime example of how quick fans are to forgive and forget.

The only surprise with Bryant is how quickly they've forgiven and forgotten.

It wasn't all that long ago that Bryant was scorned as an admitted philanderer at best, a suspected rapist at worst. Bryant had used his celebrity to take advantage of a teenage girl and faced the real possibility of spending long years in a Colorado prison.

Women's groups protested against him, and to keep his wife happy amid all the turmoil, he



Tim Dahlberg

had to buy her a \$4 million ring.

On the court, things weren't much better. Bryant sent one large teammate (Shaquille O'Neal) packing, and his desire to always have the ball created such friction on the Los Angeles Lakers that Phil Jackson called him uncoachable.

To top it off, companies that once embraced the young superstar suddenly wanted nothing to do with him. Among them was McDonald's, which quickly figured out that a player charged with sexual assault wasn't the

best endorser for a family-friendly, fast-food chain.

Bryant still isn't pushing hamburgers. And he may never get the mainstream endorsements that once were his for the taking.

But a lot has happened in 28 short months, by design or not, to turn Bryant into a far more sympathetic and marketable figure than anyone who ever watched him enter an Eagle, Colo., courtroom could ever imagine.

He has stayed out of trouble since the charges against him were dropped at the last minute and agreed to pay his accuser an undisclosed amount to settle a civil suit.

While other NBA players have engaged in brawls, were shot and have been arrested by the handful since then, Bryant has stayed above the fray.

David Stern didn't have him in mind when he issued a league dress edict and, if not for the

charges in Colorado, he likely could have been promoted as the NBA's model employee.

Bryant has changed his game, too. While he did score 81 points one night last year, he has seemingly dedicated himself lately to becoming something other than a selfish player who wants the ball all the time and will take a shot from anywhere.

In a game last week against Denver, Bryant actually had more assists (10) than points (eight).

It was the first time since April 2004 that he scored less than 10 points in a game, and Bryant spoke afterward about how he simply wanted to make those playing with him better.

"It's about being a big brother, giving them encouragement, but also getting on top of them at times," Bryant said.

Shaq probably gagged when he heard those words, but the truth

is Bryant is comfortable now in his role as team leader.

It shows on the court, where the Lakers were 23-12 and in second place in their conference going into Wednesday night's game with Houston.

He's comfortable in his new jersey as well.

Bryant changed from his No. 8 to No. 24 this year, and the switch surely had a lot to do with his moving up from fourth to first in jersey sales at the NBA Store in New York and in the league's online market.

Bryant passed the Miami Heat's Dwyane Wade in jersey sales in NBA stores, but Neil Schwartz, who tracks sporting good sales for SportsOneSource, said Bryant's shirt is still anywhere from third to fifth in popularity nationwide.

Oddly enough, Schwartz said Bryant's jersey sales were hurt more by his feud with Shaq and

the breakup of the championship Lakers than the scandal. NBA fans can put up with a lot, but they apparently draw the line at being a bad teammate.

"I don't see this as a renaissance of his popularity," Schwartz said. "I see this as a great marketing ploy."

Indeed, the argument could be made that everything Bryant has done since escaping trial has been coldly calculated to improve both his popularity and his image.

That includes a Nike commercial, which ran last year, and Bryant's picture on the cover of the most recent NBA 07 PlayStation game. He's a spokesman for that, too.

Image rehabilitation can be a tricky thing, but so far, Bryant has done everything right.

Tim Dahlberg is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Send comments to tdahlberg@ap.org.

FOOTBALL

LOS ANGELES

USC receiver Jarrett will pass up senior year

Dwayne Jarrett, the leading receiver in school history, announced Wednesday he will skip his senior season at Southern California to enter the NFL draft. "The biggest thing was the challenge. I'm ready to compete on the next level," Jarrett said at a campus news conference, choking up as he talked about leaving.

Jarrett, a 6-foot-5, 215-pounder from New Brunswick, N.J., ends his college career with 216 catches

for 3,138 yards and a Pac-10-record 41 touchdowns in 38 games.

While Jarrett is leaving USC, coach Pete Carroll again insisted he'll stay to lead the program.

Asked if he had closed the door on the possibility of becoming the Miami Dolphins' coach, Carroll said, "Yeah. I thought I said that (Tuesday). ... I'm not wavering."

Dolphins owner Wayne Huizenga, in the market for a coach since Nick Saban left to take the Alabama job, had met with Carroll for four hours on Sunday in Costa Rica, where the coach was vacationing.

TENNIS

MELBOURNE, Australia

Venus Williams sidelined

Venus Williams withdrew from the Australian Open on Wednesday because of an aggravated left wrist injury.

She joins top-ranked Justine Henin-Hardenne on the sideline for the first Grand Slam of the season.

Williams told organizers she aggravated the wrist, which kept her from playing in the Hopman Cup mixed teams competition in Perth last week.

HOBART, Australia

Serena Williams ousted

Serena Williams lost 3-6, 7-5, 6-3 to Austria's Sybille Bammer in the quarterfinals of the Hobart International women's tennis tournament Wednesday, ending a short winning run after a four-month injury layoff.

Williams took the first set easily in only 50 minutes and held an early service break in the second before giving up the set and then the match in two hours, 19 minutes to an unseeded opponent.

The Hobart tournament was Williams' first since the U.S. Open in early September. She

has been sidelined since then with knee and ankle injuries.

SYDNEY, Australia

Mauresmo falls in upset

Top-seeded Amelie Mauresmo was upset in the quarterfinals of the Sydney International on Wednesday, and Nikolay Davydenko, seeded No. 2 in the men's draw, became the fifth high-profile player to retire from the Australian Open warm-up tournament.

Mauresmo lost 7-5, 6-0 to Serbia's Jelena Jankovic in the quarterfinals.

WEST LAFAYETTE

Purdue to open facility

Purdue will debut the \$7.2 million Schwartz Tennis Center on Saturday in the men's Boilermaker Invitational against New Mexico, Kentucky and Western Michigan.

The new 600,000-square-foot facility includes six indoor and six outdoor courts, locker rooms for the men's and women's teams, offices, a pro shop and seating area for fans. The courts have a blue Plexipave playing surface, a nine-layer system designed to provide a better cushion.

BASEBALL

NEW YORK

Yankees broadcaster has malignant tumor

The tumor removed from former major-league outfielder Bobby Murcer's brain during surgery last month was malignant.

The 60-year-old Murcer, now a New York Yankees broadcaster, had surgery in Houston on Dec. 28 and returned home to Oklahoma last week. He was scheduled to travel back to Houston this week to consult with doctors at The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

Murcer played 17 seasons in the major leagues from 1965-83 and was a five-time All-Star and a Gold Glove-winning outfielder.

SAN FRANCISCO

Relief pitcher Worrell retires from Giants

Relief pitcher Tim Worrell retired Wednesday after a 14-year career that ended with the San Francisco Giants.

Worrell pitched for nine teams as a dependable, durable reliever and an occasional starter. But the

39-year-old right-hander spent his final season bedeviled by problems with his throwing shoulder and neck, and he decided to retire after experiencing several setbacks in rehabilitation.

Worrell was 48-59 with 71 saves and a 3.97 ERA in 678 career appearances. He pitched in his final game June 8.

ST. LOUIS

Pitcher Mulder decides to stay with Cardinals

Pitcher Mark Mulder on Wednesday agreed to a \$13 million, two-year contract to remain with the St. Louis Cardinals.

The 29-year-old left-hander, recovering from rotator cuff surgery, is expected to miss the first half of next season. He also had been negotiating with the Cleveland Indians and Texas Rangers.

His deal with St. Louis includes a club option for the 2009 season.

Mulder was 6-7 with a 7.14 ERA in 17 starts last year. He was sidelined from June 22 to Aug. 23 due to rotator cuff damage and what the team called an impingement in the shoulder.

• Coach

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

"We're going to try and get on one of those runs too," he said. "That's our plan, not to give it back."

Having immediate success isn't new to the Trojans' coach.

Hoover wrestled for two years at Purdue, served as an assistant coach at Anderson Highland High School for three seasons and then took over at Hamilton Southeastern.

He inherited a program that returned just one wrestler with regional experience.

Two years later, the Royals sent 13 wrestlers to regionals, six to the semistate and one to the state finals.

That type of success caught the attention of Center Grove officials, who hired the 29-year-old to guide the Trojans' wrestling program.

"It's a great school and a place where I thought you can build a big-time wrestling program," Hoover said. "From Southeastern, there weren't too many places I was going to be willing to go."

Hoover's decision to move south was made easier because his wife, Nora, is an assistant principal at Center Grove Middle School Central.

"We were kind of looking for a place to get into the same school corporation, and this was a great place to do it," he said. "Everything worked out and lined up, and I jumped at the opportunity."

Hoover's first meeting with



Center Grove High School senior Blake Harvey, center, tries to take down sophomore teammate Jerod Crump during wrestling practice Tuesday.

Center Grove's wrestlers was exciting, Harvey said.

Harvey already was familiar with Hoover from the state's club wrestling scene, but many of the Trojans were waiting to see what their new coach was all about.

When asked what the main difference is between this season and past seasons, senior Tony Zubia is quick to offer one word: intensity.

"Everybody is just beating up on each other. It's much more aggressive," Zubia said. "The practices are hard. The warm-ups are hard. Just everything together makes you as a wrestler tougher, which makes it more fun because then when you go out to a meet it makes it easier to win."

Harvey, a three-time individual county champion, attributes the Trojans' team county title directly to Hoover's intense practices.

"We had a lot of experience and a lot of depth last year, but I don't know if we were physically

pushed or mentally tough enough to withstand some of those matches," Harvey said. "It had been kind of history, accepted I guess around here."

"We would go out and wrestle tough for six minutes against Franklin, and in the end we would always get beat by one or two points. We never really had enough to pull out that last little bit."

Hoover's philosophy is simple. If practices aren't tougher than meets, then when the wrestlers get into a tough match they're going to be ill-prepared and break mentally.

"All along the lines from JV kids to varsity kids, seniors all the way down to freshmen, everybody has that mentality to be in your face all the time, always pushing you," Harvey said. "You can't help but get better in that kind of environment."

But practices aren't always up-

• Pacers

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

pull to within 84-80 with 4:27 left, but Danny Granger hit a 3-pointer the next time down the floor to start a 13-0 run.

Before the game, the Celtics announced forward Wally Szczerbiak would miss at least a week because of recurring ankle injuries. Delonte West also sat out with a sore back, joining Paul Pierce on the bench.

In other NBA action

Knicks 106 76ers 99

NEW YORK — Stephen Marbury scored 24 points, Eddy Curry added 20 points and 10 rebounds, and the New York Knicks rolled past Philadelphia.

The 76ers lost their fourth straight game, all without Chris Webber. Philadelphia announced it had bought out the forward's contract.

Samuel Dalembert scored 18 points, and Joe Smith had 16 for Philadelphia, which has lost 16 of 19 road games.

Quentin Richardson added 19 points in his return to action for the Knicks, who came home from a five-game road trip and won their fifth straight game at Madison Square Garden. The Knicks have won three straight overall, matching their longest winning streak of the season, and are 7-4 since last month's brawl with Denver.

Bobcats 102 Pistons 96

AUBURN HILLS, Mich. — Raymond Felton had 18 points and seven assists to lead six double-digit scorers for the banged-up Charlotte Bobcats in a win against Detroit.

The Pistons, one of the top teams in the Eastern Conference, seemed to play as if they could just show up and win against one of the conference's worst teams. The Bobcats proved that kind of lackluster effort can lead to a loss against them.

Detroit's Richard Hamilton scored 23 points before being ejected with two technical fouls.

Wizards 113 Bulls 103

WASHINGTON — With Gilbert Arenas slowed again by Chicago, the Washington Wizards relied on strong contributions from Caron Butler, Antonio Daniels and DeShawn Stevenson to beat the Bulls for a seventh consecutive home win.

Arenas didn't even attempt a second-half shot until there were fewer than 6 minutes left in the game, and he finished 5 for 16 for 20 points, well below his 30.5 average, No. 2 in the NBA.

In a game of back-and-forth spurts, Washington was up 84-82 with about 7 minutes left. That's when Daniels hit a 3-pointer that opened a 12-0 run for Washington, during which the veteran guard also scored on a layup and drew a charge on big Ben Wallace, who argued the call and was whistled for a technical.

Butler made that free throw, then scored off the glass for a 96-82 lead with 4½ minutes left. Chicago never got closer than seven again.

Hornets 96 Hawks 77

ATLANTA — Jannero Pargo scored 24 points, and Rasual Butler added 21 to help the New Orleans Hornets end a five-game losing streak by beating the Hawks.

New Orleans had dropped eight of nine and 19 of 23 before beating an Atlanta team that's lost two straight, 10 of 11 and 14 of 16.

Hawks coach Mike Woodson, in his third season with the team, is now 99 games under .500 at 49-148.

Joe Johnson was 6 for 24 from the field to finish with 13 points for Atlanta.

Advertisement

A Gold Mine in Bedroom Drawers

Newsire: People are selling their old scrap gold that is gathering dust for its cash value because gold prices are so high. With the price of gold at a 25 year high (over \$650.00 per ounce), it makes sense ScrapGold.com, a gold recycler, offers free insured recycle kits so people may cash in their scrap with 24 hour service and guarantee satisfaction. They

accept broken and outdated items like chains, charms, rings and more. "Everyone has bits of gold just lying around which can be turned into cash" says Richard Zakroff, VP of marketing. "Even old dental gold has value." ScrapGold.com processes over 10,000 recycle kits per month. People can get a free GoldKit at 1-800-283-4700 or ScrapGold.com

real estate auctions Opening Bids from \$1,000!

These properties are being offered by the lenders for the first time!

Sales Mon. Jan. 22nd - Sat. Jan. 27th

BATESVILLE, IN • 709 S. Park Ave. BLUNKER HILL, IN • 201 South Lincoln St	FRANKFORT, IN • 856 South Jackson St MICHIGAN CITY, IN • 335 Walker St • 116 Southwind Dr.	WANATAH, IN • 112 W. Railroad St.
COLUMBUS, IN • 1408 Pearl St	OSSIAN, IN • 915 Prairie Ln	
CRAWFORDSVILLE, IN • 501-503 Oak Hill Road • 5900 East Highway 136	ROLLING PRAIRIE, IN • 6939 E Us Hwy 20	

For more details:
williamsauction.com 800.801.8003

WILLIAMS & WILLIAMS

DIXIE CHOPPER
The World's Fastest Lawn Mower
Call Now To Schedule A Spring Tune-up!

Indiana Top Gun Dealer
Factory Outlet
All mowers in stock

The dealer that has owned, operated, and maintained Dixie Choppers and our own lawn care business for 20 years.

Not only your BEST DEAL, but a dealer who KNOWS and CARES.

Complete Service Dept.

PRICE'S
Dixie Chopper
1090 Yandes St.
Franklin, IN 46131
317-738-0618
or 736-6091

0 Payments, 0 interest for 6 months (W.A.C.)
Certain credit restrictions apply

WWW.DIXIECHOPPER.COM

Visit us at thejournalnet.com

HALLMARK HOMES, INC.

Your Plan or Ours!
We are Indiana's #1
"On Your Lot" Affordable Custom Home Builder
Since 1992!

Call 800-644-6566 for your Free Plan Book

Anderson Model Kokomo Model Lafayette Model Lebanon Model
433 E. 53rd Street 2616 Albright Road 3621 Nikole Drive 126 Birchwood Dr.

"On Your Lot"
Affordable Custom Homes



Visit us at HallmarkHomes.com

Find Freedom This Year
Drive for Schneider National and enjoy the freedom of the open road.

Company-provided CDL training for qualified candidates
\$33,500-\$60,500 (depending on experience)
Low-cost medical and dental insurance

APPLY ONLINE AT schneiderjobs.com
1-800-44-PRIDE • 1-800-447-7433

SCHNEIDER NATIONAL