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Friday, May 23, 2008

Detroit wins, JW gloats

Not to gloat, but I kind of called that Detroit win over Boston in Game 2, didn't I?

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski at 01:25

Thursday, May 22, 2008

Paul Lukas on Mike Piazza

ESPN Page 2 - Lukas: Good riddance, Mike

The linked article is tremendously stupid. Lukas should stick to uniforms. It's internally inconsistent (he refused to play first, and also he sucks at first! Uh, maybe that's why he refused to play first?) and only the gay thing (that he should have used the opportunity to say, "Ok, I'm not gay, but so what if I was?") carries any weight.

I wonder if maybe it's a joke? It's almost too over the top to be believable.

Hat tip to Deadspin.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Baseball at 21:00

Matthew Cerrone on Omar Minaya and the grand scheme of baseball

MetsBlog.com [Â»](#) Opinion: Minaya, from Howe to Here

The Yemen Deli sent me this, and this is my email in response.

1. The old market was changing ten years ago, from one that focused on athletes and tools to one that focused on performance. Beane was part of that, getting cheap guys who could hit but didn't sell jeans. Then the market changed again, as everyone went "holy shit, OBP". Beane realized that hitting started becoming overvalued relative to pitching, and had his three-aces years (top draft picks from terrible teams didn't hurt as to Mulder and Zito; Hudson was just a hell of a find). Beane then realized that everyone knew they needed young pitching, and would overpay for it, so he dealt his young pitching and built a team based on defense: Eric Chavez, Bobby Crosby, and Mark Ellis is the best defensive infield in baseball if Chavez ever comes back, though Daric Barton at first drags them down a bit. Mark Kotsay the last few years was tremendous. None of these guys has hit a lick in years, yet the A's were competitive. Finally, despite the spread of information about hitting and whatnot, Jack Cust and Frank Thomas still cost the A's almost zero.
2. Players hitting the open market aren't the way that Minaya and Beane have thrived. The Mets have precisely one major free agent on their team (Beltran), and the A's have none. More importantly, the "locking them up" phenomenon doesn't reduce "players hitting the open market" because most players are being locked up only through their arbitration years, and occasionally (Evan Longoria) for one or two years beyond that. Those guys will become free agents exactly when they used to. They stop being the property of the team that drafted them exactly when they used to.
3. Cleveland, a small market team, inaugurated the idea of buying out the arbitration years of its young players back in the mid-90's. This isn't anything new.
4. Maybe he's not talking about the arb-buyout contracts at all, but small-market teams actually locking up guys who are heading into free agency? If that's the case, I can't think of a single example. One reason for this is because there will never be any examples -- guys are, by definition, not young when they are heading into free agency. Most are past their peak, only hitting free agency for the first time at around 30. Only a guy like A-Rod hits free agency as he's entering his peak.
5. The idea that older players are breaking down more now is probably not supported by the evidence. I'm not going to make a list, but I just don't see any difference now as compared to previous years.
6. The idea that this supposed extra breaking down is because of a lack of PEDs is preposterous. Most of these old guys have never been linked to a thing in their lives, and most of them never will be. Remember, something like 93% of players tested negative that year they did the anonymous sampling to see if there should be real drug testing in baseball. Is it really the case that Carlos Delgado sucks because he's not shooting up anymore? I highly doubt it. Hell, Canseco was loaded with that stuff, and he still sucked at the end of his career.
7. Relying on older talent has never been a good strategy. It works as a supplement, but you always have to have talent coming from elsewhere. The Mets weren't going to be good because of Delgado and Pedro, they were going to be good

because of Wright and Reyes. And Johan, who's still young because he was rushed to the majors after being a Rule 5 pick.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Baseball at 20:46

On Jack Cust

Athletic Supporters | MVN - A's Must Find Consistency at the Dish

Consistency, Matthew Nielsen says! That's straight from the Joe Morgan playbook, as is calling out Jack Cust, wondering why he plays every day when he so clearly sucks. Answer? Best OBP on the team, at .426. No one else, aside from Frank Thomas, is even sniffing .400. Slugging at .462. That's tied with Thomas for the team lead. His seven homers lead the team. In short, he plays every day because he's the best offensive player on the team!

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Oakland A's at 20:11

Wednesday, May 21, 2008

Liveblogging the second half

So because the Lakers are goddamn horrible, I'm going to blog the awfulness to keep myself from punching things, like the poor cat, who just wants to nap in peace. The liveblog is followed by my (as usual) completely scattered thoughts on the game, the matchups, and what's happening going forward.

We're at the ~8:00 minute mark in the third quarter the and the Spurs lead has ballooned due to the refs not bailing out Derek Fisher twice, terrible attempts to thread the needle, an awful pass by Pau Gasol, and the fact that it's clear Kobe doesn't have a jump shot tonight. This even though Duncan has already traveled once and gotten away with an egregious offensive foul, pushing Lamar Odom, which resulted in a makeup three-seconds call on Oberto. We're in time-out now as Phil Jackson tries to pull the Lakers heads out of their asses. The Lakers are just not crisp right now and you can't beat the Spurs unless either (a) you're super-crisp; (b) two of their three best players are hurt.

7:52: There's some offense, nice pass to Kobe at the free-throw line, easy jumper.

7:34: Still not a stop, but Parker missed a floater he usually makes. Rebound, bad foul by the Spurs.

7:19: Duncan gets away with a big reach in on Pau. Badly missed shot.

6:57: Finally a turnover, leads to a fumbled pass that would have been a wide-open three, eventually lost ball by Sasha, leading to a midrange jumper by Udoka. God!

6:29: Bryant still can't shoot.

6:25: Farmar still can't guard Parker, but he can put an elbow in his back. Two free throws for Parker, sunk them both.

6:11: Offensive rebound, easy, but they fumble the ball right into the Spurs. Two more points given away.

5:54: Gasol still can't guard Duncan. Easy hook for Tim.

5:32: Finally a jumper by Bryant, which'll help, but it's not going to be enough. Free throws, Kobe, free throws! I think he doesn't feel confident that the refs are going to give the offense borderline calls tonight, so he's relying on the outside and midrange game instead of the drives to the bucket. This is not to say the referees are calling a bad game, they're just calling a game that gives the defense the benefit of the doubt. (This will, of course, benefit the Spurs, so one has to hope that the trend won't continue all series. If David Stern has anything to say about it, and Pops hasn't turned off his Stern Button, it won't.)

5:13: Turnover by the Spurs into easy two for Gasol off a pass by Bryant, very nice. Finally. Characteristic timeout by Pops, who hates it when the other team scores twice in a row.

16 points is a hell of a deficit, yo.

4:42: Vujacic blocks Manu's shot, leading to an airball from someone and then a foul on Ime.

4:33: Kobe three. Ok, maybe jumpers can work after all.

4:10: Duncan miss, tough shot, good defense by Pau to push him away from the bucket.

3:55: Bryant to the drive game, gets Ime's fourth foul, which is a happy occurrence. On the replay, I really don't see the foul. What was I saying about the defense getting the benefit of the doubt?

Collins is talking about Pops being nervous. With his team up at 11 going back down the floor. Uh, ok. I mean, yeah, the last two minutes have been bad for San Antonio, but really.

3:35: Nice poke-away by Pau on Parker ends up delaying the offense, leading to a contested shot by Dunc.

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3:08: Sasha dagger special! It came after a Kobe miss resulted in a long Laker rebound.

2:47: But then Dunc blocks Kobe's drive after a missed wide open three.

That's a horrible fucking call by the refs -- Ginobli flies into Pau, pushing Gasol into Tim, and the foul goes on Pau!? Jesus fucking christ. Karma says Dunc misses the first one. Karma says "yeah bitch", as he misses both.

Yeah bitch.

2:28: Pau gets shoved in the back on a Kobe lob, no call, but Pau gets the shot to fall anyway. That was an unfuckingbelievable no-call. On the replay, Finley has both hands squarely in Pau's back. That's ridiculous. It's called And-1! Come on!

Still, the lead is down to six as the Lakers have gone on a tremendous run. Ok, so maybe Doug was right that Pops should be nervous. But still, no overconfidence, L.A.

2:19: Sasha special again as Ginobli elbows Vujacic as he's riding his ass across the court.

2:05: Well-defended lob attempt by Dunc on Pau leads to easy three for Ginobli on the other end. There goes the run.

1:38: Jesus, another lob from Kobe to Pau, this one works again. Is that three in a row?

1:15: Patented Duncan left elbow glass shot. Too easy.

57.9: Kobe behind the back, step-back, up-fake, step under, easy. Jesus, so smooth, so easy. Did Michael have these moves?

39.2: Parker special, too easy into the lane. Come on, L.A., keep him out!

26.7: Kobe drive, dish inside to Pau, tough play but results in a Pau bucket. Interior passing by Kobe is another nice skill, especially with great finishers inside.

0.0: And the quarter finishes with Parker missing a tough shot inside and a Laker rebound.

Ok, so the first half of the quarter was awful, the second half was beautiful, and the result is that we're basically where we were at halftime, Lakers down seven. It could be worse, but it could be better -- if their heads had gotten out of their asses sooner, this could be a tied ballgame or even a small Laker lead. Each team blew the other out of the gym for six minutes.

I'm curious to see what lineup Phil goes with at the start of the quarter. He likes to rest Kobe at this time, but can he do that? Is Lamar-Sasha-Jordan-Ronny-Luke enough? They played well in the first half, putting up +3 with Kobe out, but I'm not sure now is the time, in Game 1 of the WCF, to take chances.

Phil says Kobe went to the Bermuda Triangle in the first half. Marv refers to him as "the basketball standup."

Fourth Quarter

12:00: Kobe's on the floor.

11:43: Bowen pulled the chair out from under Kobe, who takes a spill, but holds the ball and takes a twenty. That sucks from a timeout perspective, because hopefully this will be a close game. If it's not, it's a Spurs blowout, so not having that twenty could hurt. Nice defensive play by Bowen on Kobe's half-spin move.

11:39: Horrible miss on a three by Kobe.

11:30: Spurs miss a quick non-transition three. Pops executes a Spur. I think it was Damon Stoudamire.

11:10: Kobe saves the bacon with a steal in the backcourt making it five, after an easy Turiaf miss inside.

10:50: Brent Barry tried to go inside, but he's white and can't jump. Vujacic's shoulder is bothering him, the same one he was holding earlier in the game. This could be something to watch. His defense will still be tenacious, but hopefully

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his jump shot isn't affected.

10:30: Miss on the Fisher patented jumper. He has to hit those most of the time for the Lakers.

10:18: Good foul by Luke on Duncan's wide open drive on a discombobulated Laker defense. Plus he almost got ball. But Tim hits both, sigh. Back to seven.

10:03: Pass broken up, as the Spurs have been doing all game. I'm not sure what Kobe was thinking with the pass, as the Spurs defense was all over it. Luckily, it's knocked out of bounds, Laker ball. Bryant then hits a jumper off the inbounds.

9:41: Manu misses a wide open three. Whew. The Spurs are just getting too many of those. If they'd hit one or two more that they missed, this game would look really ugly.

9:30: Ronny misses a jumper. Ronny, I don't know man, maybe in the first half that's an ok shot, and I guess you have to pretend you're not Mark Madsen, but I don't really like it when you're not dunking the ball. It was a wide open look from about 17, though, so it's not like it was a terrible shot. He makes some of those.

9:14: Three point play opportunity for Dunc as Turiaf fouls him. In real time, it looked like a foul. On reply, I'm not sure what it was. Maybe a push in the gut with the off hand. Another missed FT, though. Seven.

8:58: Fisher drive, he's all shoulders, fighting tough, push with the head and shoulders, difficult finish. Wow. That's a Fisher special: not pretty in any kind of way, but it's points in the bucket. Five.

8:41: Turiaf fouls the jump shooting Dunc, three fouls already on L.A. I don't know about that call.

Hey hey, Frank Robinson is here. And, uh, Brad Garrett. Pat Sajak! That's a new one. Tobey Maguire! So cute.

Ok, Timmy, time for a one-for-two special. He hits the first, making my wishes less likely to come true. And the second. Seven.

8:34: Out of bounds, still Laker ball. Fisher doesn't understand the lack of fouls on the Spurs here. Pick and roll, Bryant all the way to the bucket, he gets all slithery (Fisher's more of a Hufflepuff), finish. Five.

8:10: Kobe with another tough finish inside, three. This came after a Parker miss on the baseline on the other side.

7:40: Near steal by Kobe, but then Bruce hits the damn corner three. I hate him.

7:18: Tough shot by Kobe, miss. He's doing his Kobe thing, which he has to be careful of, because I don't mean the "Kobe leading the team to victory" thing but the "Kobe takes every shot regardless of whether it's good or bad" thing.

6:56: Spurs miss, the ball works down to Lamar inside who stays in the lane a loooong time, then puts up a tough shot from like the baseline, but gets a bailout foul on Finley. And hey, Lamar hits the first free throw! Five. Lamar's talking to himself. Hits the second. Four.

6:40: Fuck. Fisher misses another patented transition jumper after nice hands by Pau result in a steal. Jesus. I smelled a one-possession lead. I can see why Farmar has been getting more time in this game than in the Utah series. That and Farmar's nice offensive spurt in the first half, that is.

6:10: Parker missed three, lucky offensive board by Dunc. Well, to be fair, not pure luck (it never is, I guess), because Dunc did fight for the ball, but it did bounce right into the spot between Pau in front of him with defensive rebound position and the man behind him who had been guarding Parker.

5:50: Udoka in-and-out, loose ball foul by Dunc, I'm not sure where the foul was. Maybe a little shove with an underneath hand. Doug's talking about how Dunc set up the play by passing on a wide-open foul-shot jumper. He's right. I'm not sure what Dunc is thinking there. He's not KG from the middle of the floor, but he's certainly good enough to hit that shot. Instead, Laker ball, still four, plus one extra foul on the Spurs and Duncan are the result.

I don't understand these G2 ads. What the hell is happening? Especially the Nomar & Mia one. That's just weird. "We're not bowling." And Zo? "Watch out Tiger?" Come on. This isn't funny, it's just uncomfortable.

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5:30: Terrible shot by Kobe, he did precisely what Bowen wanted him to do. L.A. has to move into position for a bailout pass at that point, and Kobe has to make that pass.

5:12: Parker dropped a pass from Manu that would have given him a wide open shot. Lucky. Same as what happened to L.A., with Sasha in the corner in the first half. Results in a missed jumper elsewhere.

4:57: Pick and roll foul on Bowen, four on him. Yes.

4:47: Sasha misses the open three off a PAR drive by Kobe. What was I saying about his jump shot?

4:32: Steal by Fisher off the long cross court desperation pass by Manu (bad play) results in two Fish free throws on the other end. Hits the first, three. Hits the second, two points now. Fist pump.

4:13: Pau swats the shit out of a Manu shot. Good, because Fish had switched to him. We miss the shot on the inbounds because TNT is still running the replay, but a Laker rebound results in a miss in transition. Ugh. Odom is not on his game.

3:39: Very nice D by Gasol with help by Odom on Dunc, but the miss results in a ball out of bounds to the Spurs as Odom just fumbles it. Unlucky / poor play by Lamar.

3:33: Finley open dagger attempt, miss. Whew. I was waiting for that. You knew he was going to get an open three, and you know he always seems to hit them.

3:18: Odom has the mismatch on Finley, easy back down, little hooky shot, almost comes off the rim, but drops in, tie game. That was the obvious play and Kobe got the ball to the right spot. Finley can't really guard anyone as a general matter, but asking him to play Lamar is just unfair. I mean, Lamar's a tough guard for everyone in the league except guys like Tayshaun Prince (ok, I guess that means except for Tayshaun because there isn't anyone like him), but Finley's like 6'6". He's giving up four inches and probably thirty to forty pounds to Odom, not to mention Lamar's ridiculous length and his knowledge of how to use that length to finish in the lane. Woo, tie game.

3:00: Great feed inside by Dunc to Parker, but the Lakers knock it out of Parker's hands and Kobe ends up with it in transition. Nice defensive play again after the initial mistake of permitting the entry pass.

2:42: Kobe baseline clear out, drive, foul on Bowen. He's not happy, and I see why. Kobe basically jumped into his chest. The refs have completely reversed course since the first half and are giving the offense the benefit of the doubt this time around. Spurs are over the limit, so Kobe's shooting two. Lakers take their first lead. Plus one. Plus two.

2:30: Contested drive by Parker, kick to Udoka, his man hadn't collapsed, shoots a contested three, hits about as much of the rim as you'd expect Ime Udoka to hit on a heavily contested three standing right next to an excited Laker bench.

2:17: Kobe pick and roll with Pau, Duncan can't really come up on him, Kobe strokes the jumper like ... well, this is a family site. (Ok, no it's not, but whatever.) Plus four.

1:55: Udoka has a three, pump fakes his man into the air, steps in for an open two, blows everything (this is the problem with relying on Ime Udoka -- the magic wears off). The ball falls to Parker, who tries to put up a shot, but Pau swats it away without much trouble. Laker ball again.

1:32: Pau has a mismatch on Manu, Kobe gets the ball to him, but Pau can't find the open man because Duncan comes over to double and the Spurs rotate to the easy looks well. Pau throws a tough pass to Fisher who catches it but doesn't have the space he wants for a three. He pumps his man into the air, drags over to his left and in for a two, and misses again. Over the backboard, Spurs ball. Fisher's jumper is just straight up Ugh Lee tonight.

1:22: Fisher and Ginobli both flop on a Manu drive, but Fisher gets hit with his fifth foul, and Ginobli goes to the line as L.A. is over the limit. Plus three. Plus two.

1:04: Lamar to the hole, classic Lamar spin, miss, Duncan rebounds, it looks like Lamar knocks it out of his hands, Danny Crawford calls the ball to the Lakers. Duncan is pissed, appeals to the third base umpire. After talking with the Undercover Brother and the Third Dude, the call is still Laker ball. Lucky lucky break for L.A., as if no Laker touched the ball, it probably, as Doug is saying, should have been a pushing or hacking foul on L.A. Excellent turn of events here as there's basically a minute to play and a full shot clock. That said, L.A. needs a bucket to make it a two possession game.

Yeah, on replay, that's just a dead hack by Gasol, completely blown call by the refs. You can understand how they missed it, because Pau was shielding the outside ref with his body while Lamar was shielding Crawford off from the play. To Crawford, it'd look like Duncan just fumbled the ball after coming down with it. Huge break for L.A.

55.4: Ball denial on Kobe leaves the baseline relatively open for Pau who goes up for the dunk, good recovery by Duncan, who maybe blocks the shot or maybe just alters it. Pau goes to chase down the ball on the other side as it's heading out of bounds, Manu goes flying with a hip check into him, but no foul is called (makeup!) and Pau was the last guy to touch the ball. That's two blown calls in the space of ten seconds. God.

On replay, you can really see that Gasol is going in a straight line for the ball until Manu hits him, when he's throw about two feet to the left of where he would have ended up. Loose ball scrums aren't basketball, they're ugly. Call fouls on these plays, referees! It's not rugby!

41.7: Duncan goes up for a tough contested shot in the lane, misses, goes back up for the follow, and it actually looks like it's Lamar who pushes the ball through for San Antonio. Obviously Duncan gets the credit, but that's a hell of a break for the Spurs since Lamar and Kobe were both there in front of Duncan, but the ball bounced straight back out instead of to one side or the other. Tie game.

23.9: Bryant drives the lane after a failed PAR, puts a shoulder into Bowen around the foul line, Bowen staggers back, Bryant has an easy 15-footer, nothing but net. Is it an offensive foul? If you're a Spurs fan or Bruce Bowen, obviously yes. If you're a Laker fan, you say that it's a "play on" 95% of the time, and the refs swallow their whistles in the last minute, so ... plus two.

(Are we all better off if we don't have to play these stupid guessing games about fouls? Of course.)

Spurs time out with 20.0 seconds to go.

On the replay, it turns out that it might have been Kobe who actually put the ball through for the Spurs. Ugh.

And on the other end, if it's an offensive foul on Kobe, it's not egregious, at the level of Michael against Bryon Russell or something. He maybe gets an elbow into Bowen, but he doesn't extend the arm, and Bowen looks like there's some acting going on as well.

7.3: Ginobli misses the game-winning three. He wasn't wide open, but he was open enough to make it. Luckily, he's off tonight. There's a scrum for the ball, and Sasha comes out with it, getting fouled as he races toward the other end of the floor. He hits the first free throw. Plus three. Plus four. That's our Sasha! Yes! The Machine!

Doug says, "If the Lakers were going to come back, they had to do it on the defensive end." That's true, and that's precisely what they did. The offense wasn't tremendous, as they'll be well under 100 at the end of this, but they've so far held the Spurs to 85 despite 51 at the half, which is fantastic. Missed shots have helped, but the Laker defense has been much more disruptive in this half.

0.0: Finley airballs a difficult fallaway three and the game is over. What a great comeback by the Lakers. They got outplayed for 30 minutes, ending up down twenty, but they in the final 18 minutes, they were plus 24, which is tremendous, and turns out to have been just enough to win. I was gloomy about this game before it started, I was really gloomy in the first half, and I was apoplectic in the third quarter. Then came the blog. Clearly it worked.

What did we learn about matchups in this first game? Fisher and Farmer can't guard Parker, as I said. Pau is a better shot blocker than I remember, though, and the fact that he's guarding Duncan means he's always in the lane, so he can alter some of Parker's shots. The game started with Manu and Vladi on each other, and neither of them can handle the other. Vladi can hit any jumper he wants over Manu, and Ginobli can get to the rim at will. Vladi didn't play much after starting, though. Sasha spent most of the game on Manu, and he's precisely the guy who can give Ginobli trouble, including the frustration elbow Manu put in Sasha's grill in the second half. Sasha's defense on Manu may well be the key to the series, since it's clear that Pau can't stop Duncan and Fisher can't stop Parker.

Neither Udoka nor Bowen could keep Bryant down in any sustained fashion. Bowen had a few good possessions against him, but I don't recall Udoka having any, and even Bowen's were really just scattered stops here and there. Duncan did a better job on Pau than vice versa, but he didn't exactly shut him down, which bodes well for the future. Lamar was kind of a non-factor in this game, but it seemed like more of a Lamar thing than a Spurs thing. Oberto, as expected, can't handle him, and he'll get mismatches to exploit if Popovich continues to go small at times.

Despite Pau's inability to really slow down Duncan on more than isolated occasions, I was happy that the Lakers stayed true to their game plan and didn't double off of the three-point shooters. This wasn't universally true, but it was close enough that open threes from the Spurs resulted from defensive breakdowns rather than defensive design. The former are dispiriting but correctable; the latter are the kind of thing that push a series one direction or the other.

Ronny couldn't stop Duncan in the second half any better than you'd think he would, and really was just a guy who would give Pau a breather. He's a dangerous shot-blocker still, but his total defensive game isn't going to stop Timmy. Kurt Thomas only played four minutes, but he can't stop either of the Lakers two bigs: he's too slow for Lamar, and he's too small for Pau. Yes, Thomas is smaller than most bigs, but most bigs don't play the style of game that Pau plays. He's perfectly happy to just shoot over the top of a guy like Thomas even if Kurt has done a good job pushing him away from the rim or into a worse angle than he'd like. Thomas also can't stop the unending lobs Kobe likes to throw to Pau.

Because Popovich was playing Wacky Wednesday with his subs in the first half, I'm not sure we learned anything about his rotation and future matchups. His bigs outside of Duncan played a total of 26 minutes (spread over four guys), so he obviously played small today. Most of that smallness came in the second half after it seems like he didn't like the defense his bigs were giving him in the first half. The thing is that the offense didn't get it done in the second half with the small lineup. But would subbing out Finley for Oberto (or something) help the offense? Of course not. I wouldn't be surprised, then, to see Pops bite the bullet on defending Lamar and go mostly small the rest of the series. It would have worked in this game if the Spurs had hit a few of the open jumpers they had throughout the game (though they got less frequent as the game went on).

On the Laker side, I love how Vladi is looking for his shot, both inside and out, to start each of the last few games. He can shoot over anyone and his cuts are precise. It gives the Lakers a nice lift. I also like that Jordan Farmar appeared to regain some of his confidence in the first half, driving in fearlessly and getting fouled on one 3-on-2, hitting some open jumpers, and not appearing to be bothered by his inability to guard Tony Parker. Fisher had a bad game, but it wasn't a bad game in a terribly meaningful way: he had open shots and he missed them. He'd normally hit three of the shots he missed, and I see no reason, going forward, why he won't hit those shots in the future.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in L.A. Lakers at 22:44

L.A.-San Antonio at the half

Despite the Lakers scoring just 43 in the first half, the problem is their defense, not their offense. The offense relies for its scoring on a certain number of runouts and, even when it's a five-on-five situation, defensive mismatches occurring from pushing the ball up quickly. In order to do that, though, L.A. has to do two things: get stops and get rebounds. The Spurs have been getting on the offensive board pretty successfully: a few were luck, but a few were bad rebounding by L.A. More importantly, though, L.A. hasn't bumped San Antonio off of its sets, its cuts, its shots, its passes. The Spurs are getting everywhere they want to get on the floor and thus getting the shots they want. Tim Duncan is on his game, as Pau Gasol can't bother his shot. Ronny Turiaf did a nice job, even blocking one of his shots straight-up (though Duncan recovered and hit a shot seconds later), but he can't play Duncan all the time. Pau has to do a better job, because the Lakers can't go to a double. The one thing that didn't happen was a number of Spurs threes. That said, that only wasn't happening because San Antonio was getting everything it wanted in the post and the midrange game. This has to stop in the second half if the Lakers want to climb out of this hole. Further, climbing out of the hole is necessary because if the Lakers lose this game, I think the prediction becomes Spurs in six.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in L.A. Lakers at 22:19

Monday, May 19, 2008

Conference finals

The conference finals kick off tomorrow, with Detroit at Boston (as everyone figured) and then continue Wednesday with San Antonio at Los Angeles. My thoughts, breakdown, predictions, etc., in a more or less random fashion.

First, the East. Detroit, as I've mentioned before, matches up with Boston better than anyone. They've got the offensive firepower to give the vaunted Boston defense fits, and the matchups in particular don't look favorable for Boston on Detroit's offensive end. I suppose Paul Pierce has to guard Tayshaun Prince, because I don't think he's quick enough to match up with Rip Hamilton. This is bad news for Prince, but the great thing about Detroit's offense is that it's equal opportunity. The fact that the Celtics' best perimeter defender will be busy keeping Prince down means that Rip Hamilton can run crazy on Ray Allen. Allen and Hamilton matched up with each other could be really fun: neither of them can keep up with the other running around screens and whatnot. Kevin Garnett should be watching Rasheed Wallace sometimes, and Wallace could get frustrated with the refs in those situations, because Garnett gets away with quite a bit on the defensive end -- not an exorbitant amount, and he is an excellent defender without the help, but he gets the benefit of the doubt here and there. If there's anything 'Sheed hates, it's the benefit of the doubt. That said, Wallace's penchant for hanging around the three-point line will pull one of the Boston bigs out, which will hurt their defense. I'd guess, though, that precisely because you have to watch Wallace on the perimeter, the Celtics won't want to sacrifice Garnett's defense and rebounding inside, so Perkins should spend the majority of the time on Wallace, which is problematic in itself because Perkins isn't quick enough to match up well. The other interesting matchup on this end is Rajon Rondo on Chauncey Billups. Billups could have his shot bothered by Rondo's length, and Rondo's strength, while not enough to neutralize Chauncey's post-up game, could at least slow it down more than smaller guards do. Given Wallace's ability to disappear for lengthy periods of time, the offense for the Pistons may come down to whether Hamilton can run Allen into the ground, and whether Rondo can bother Billups's ability to get Hamilton the ball in the right spots at the right times.

At the other end, Rondo might be too quick for Chauncey, but it's not like he's Chris Paul or anything, so that's not that big a deal. The Allen-Hamilton matchup should work the same way in reverse, except Allen has to prove that he's over his Cleveland shooting woes in order to be a factor. Tayshaun should be able to neutralize The Truth, which is a much bigger problem for Boston's offense than the reverse was for Detroit's offense. (Although Boston did win three out of six with LeBron keeping Pierce in check ...) The big-man matchup is similar on this end as it was on the other: Garnett will score from 20 feet, but you don't want to lose Rasheed's interior defense and rebounding, so maybe you put McDyess on him out there. Nobody can bother Garnett's jump-shot anyway, so it doesn't matter that you lose height and length that way. You want Rasheed on KG when Garnett is inside, though, because Rasheed can actually do some damage on Garnett's post moves (to the extent that Garnett has post moves, that is).

In terms of the starters' offense-defense matchups, then, I like Detroit. It more or less comes down to Rip Hamilton's relative youth, Ray Allen's recent struggles, and the fact that the Celtics need Paul Pierce's offense more than the Pistons need Tayshaun Prince's.

I think Boston's bench only avoided being exposed in these last two playoff rounds because Cleveland is basically one star and a bunch of bench players (i.e. they don't really have a defined bench so much as a bunch of guys that rotate in and out around LeBron) and Atlanta's lack of depth. Against Detroit, who sport quality reserve bigs in Jason Maxiell (who's actually played more minutes than MyDyess in the playoffs) and Theo Ratliff (a block per game in just 11.4 mpg) and backcourt guys in Rodney Stuckey and Lindsey Hunter, the Boston bench of Leon Powe, PJ Brown, Big Baby, et al., should have its weaknesses revealed. There's a reason nobody but James Posey is getting more than 15 minutes, and that's a combination of the fact that James Posey is one of just two good bench players and the fact that Doc Rivers didn't figure out until Game 7 of the Cleveland series that Eddie House needs to be playing over Sam Cassell. In any case, Leon Powe and PJ Brown can't slow down Maxiell, and they can't score against Ratliff. House is a good streak shooter, but he doesn't play defense, which will be necessary against any of Detroit's four guards (Hunter isn't really an offensive threat, but he will knock down a three, so you do have to watch him).

Given that I think Detroit's starters already have an advantage, and that I don't see anyone on Boston's bench who can slow down Detroit's starters, much less their bench players, this one should be a clear Detroit victory. Boston won't get blown out, but I think their home dominance will come to an end in Game 2, after which Detroit will hold its serve, Boston will win Game 5, and then Detroit will finish things out at home in Game 6.

On to the West. The beautiful thing about this Conference this year is that, regardless of which playoff team you're a fan of, every other team scares you in some way or another. I'm terrified that the Spurs' starting backcourt is going to run wild in this series and end up shocking the Lakers on their home floor, resulting ultimately in a series loss. I'm not sure that's rationally likely, but I'm terrified nonetheless.

Beginning with the Lakers on the offensive end, nobody can stop Kobe. Obviously. Bruce Bowen can bother him, because dominant 2-guards are who Bruce Bowen was built to defend, but Bowen has lost a step, and with this, I think he's lost some of his intimidation factor. He sat for long stretches of the New Orleans series even though Peja wasn't really going off because, as I mentioned before, if he can't switch off to the true threat, Chris Paul, he loses a lot of his value. Against the Lakers, though, this won't be true. He can play Kobe and only play Kobe and not have to worry about anything else. That said, a guy who can shut down explosive drives and get a hand in the face of a jump shooter won't bother Kobe as much as it used to, as he's developed a series of slithery moves to shed defenders inside and out, freeing himself for shot or passes. I really don't anticipate Kobe slowing down against the Spurs. At the point guard spot, Tony Parker just isn't going to bother Derek Fisher, mostly because Derek Fisher's offensive role is to hit jumpers, and he elevates so well and shoots the ball from so far behind his head and has such confidence in his shot that no point guard is going to worry him. If Bowen is on Kobe, this leaves Manu Ginobili on either Sasha Vujacic (late) or Vlad Radmanovic (early). Manu's not a big defensive presence anyway (he does have quick hands and is annoying, but still), and he wouldn't bother the kinds of games Sasha and Vlad play anyway: hit open jumpers. The Lakers really should make an effort to get Vlad some easy looks early on, probably by cutting to the basket. Manu likes to cheat for steals, so he could be beaten with ball fakes followed by bounce passes to a cutter, and Radmanovic is big enough to finish at the rim even if Ginobili is trying to recover from behind. Manu's also kind of a roamer on defense, so the ability of Vlad and Sasha to hit their open jumpers when Ginobili is caught elsewhere will be key. In the frontcourt, who can deal with Lamar Odom? Off the top of my head, I can think of two guys in the league I'd be comfortable putting on Lamar, and neither of them are Spurs. (For the record: Kirilenko and Josh Smith.) Odom's much too quick off the dribble for Tim Duncan and Fabricio Oberto, and his ability to pull them out from the middle of the lane will open things up for cutting teammates and Pau Gasol's post-ups. Gasol, though, I'm worried about. Oberto's a quick and nasty defender, and Tim Duncan has great feet in the defensive post. This is where I think the Lakers might miss Andrew Bynum most, because he could power his way through the defense. Gasol has to finesse his way in and scrap for offensive boards, and he'll be outfinessed by Duncan and outscrapped by Oberto. The key for Gasol will be accepting his more-limited role offensively, getting lobs when they're there and being a facilitator on offense more than a scorer. Most importantly, he can't force the issue and then get upset at the refs for not giving him calls.

On the other end of the floor, Derek Fisher can't stay in front of Tony Parker. Everyone knows this. Fisher's success against Deron Williams, to the extent it exists, is due to the power vs. power matchup. When Williams went to his quickness moves, though, Fisher couldn't keep up. All Parker has, by contrast, are quickness moves. The Lakers have to rely on their shotblocking to bother Parker's shot, but Parker is incredibly skilled at avoiding shotblockers and getting them in foul trouble, so Pau and Ronny Turiaf will have to watch out. Parker, in short, could be trouble all series long. Manu Ginobili could be in for frustration if the Lakers are on their defensive games: Kobe is long, quick, and strong when he's dedicated, and Sasha plays that obnoxious, in-your-face, who-cares-if-I-foul defense that can get people frustrated. On the other hand, if Ginobili's jumper is falling, his drives are too quick for any Laker defender to deal with, so, like with Parker, there could be trouble. Bruce Bowen is dangerous to the extent Kobe roams off of him, as he's wont to do. If Radmanovic guards him, Vlad's job will be to stay awake. He does fall asleep, though, so for differing reasons, Bowen could find himself some open jumpers. He doesn't seem as automatic as he used to, but he's still quite dangerous out there. The front court is less bothersome to me: Duncan will be faced with defenders who aren't as good as Tyson Chandler, but they're quicker, so he, hopefully, should have to rely on his faceups and turnarounds more than getting to the rim. Oberto's not a threat to score, but whoever's defending him has to stay awake for the beautiful passes he makes from time to time. Hands, head, and feet up.

Other players: Kurt Thomas can't guard Lamar any better than anyone else can, but he could be part of the multi-headed beast frustrating Pau. If Michael Finley's shot is on, it doesn't matter who's guarding him. If his shot is off, L.A. will essentially be playing 5-on-4 because he just doesn't do much else. Udoka is another guy the Spurs might throw at Kobe, besides Bowen and Ginobili, but while he's big and strong and relatively quick, I'm not sure he's quick enough. His length could bother Bryant's ability to create, though. Ronny Turiaf seems to bring one huge swat per game -- sending a Manu or Parker drive into the second row always manages to create some energy in the Staples crowd. He'll be a body on Duncan, but he's more energy than skill, so he'll probably get five fouls per game. Luke Walton is interesting, because, except for Udoka, the Spurs don't have anyone to match up with him. Walton's most effective when he's able to work his post up game to create for other people and to cut to the rim for easy layups. Matt Harpring didn't let him do either of these things in the Utah series, but Walton might be able to get his game back against San Antonio. Jordan Farmar simply has to start shooting better. He's valueless on the defensive end against Tony Parker, or really against anybody, so if he's not making fearless drives to the bucket and hitting open threes, he's not pushing the Lakers to victories.

In the end, it's not clear that either of these teams can stop the other. The thing is, that makes me want to pick the Lakers in six, because the Spurs rely on stopping people. In three of the four games they won against New Orleans, the Hornets scored 80, 80, and 82 points. The Lakers were held under 90 just once all year, and have been held under 100 only once in the playoffs. That said, San Antonio did hold the Lakers to two of their lowest point totals all year, 92 and 91, both in San Antonio, and in the L.A. games, which the Lakers won, they "only" scored 102 and 106. The Spurs, then, do slow the Lakers down. It should be noted, though, that the Lakers starting centers in the two San Antonio games were Chris Mihm (Bynum wasn't yet the starter) and Kwame Brown (in between the Bynum injury and the Pau trade). The Lakers with Pau are just a different team, as they showed in beating San Antonio by 21 in the second-to-last game of the year (for L.A.). Of course, Ginobili didn't play in that game. And in the other L.A. game, Tony Parker and Tim Duncan were both out.

In short, these two teams, as currently configured, haven't played each other yet. All of the above notes about matchups are theoretical, purely "on paper" exercises. I honestly have no idea how this will work out. The only prediction I feel safe making is that the series will go at least six. I don't think the Spurs can win in six, but I think they can win in seven. I think the Lakers can win in six or seven. I just can't make a call, so I'll call Lakers in seven.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 23:14

Friday, May 16, 2008

The NBA playoff teams

As a "just 'cause", here's my assessment of the eight teams that made it to the second round of the NBA playoffs.

Cleveland is better than people think. Some people got overexcited about the big trade they made, and then people kind of went into backlash, and now I think they're underrated. We've seen how they're playing Boston, who are supposed to be a very good team (more on them later). Cleveland has four quality bigs, which not everyone can say. Ilgauskas can score, rebound, and block shots, and he knows how to use his body in the defensive post, although he doesn't move his feet well anymore. Varejao is a tremendous defender who moves his feet really well, allowing him to stay in front of almost anybody: he's really been hanging with Kevin Garnett, and he can even block the occasional shot as a help defender. Varejao is also a surprisingly good shooter with decent touch around the rim. Joe Smith is a savvy defender who gets out well on screens and can hit the little short-mid jumper. And there's Ben Wallace, who's seriously declined, because he's lost a lot of his athleticism, but he can still get a rebound for you. They've got three lights-out shooters, with Wally, Pavlovic, and Boobie Gibson. They've got LeBron, the second-best player in the universe. What are they missing? A point guard. Delonte West isn't cutting it, and Boobie Gibson reminds me a lot of Jannero Pargo, a guy who's so small that he's miscast as a point. Or like Eddie House. Eventually people always realize that these guys aren't point guards and just let them stand around and shoot. The other thing this team doesn't have is a second all-around player. LeBron does it all, of course, and even his defense has improved as he's learned to harness his strength and quickness on the defensive end. But who else is there? Everyone else is a role player: they are often excellent at that role (in particular the shooters), but none of them are really threats to do anything else. When's the last time Boobie Gibson took anyone off the dribble? Ilgauskas used to be nearly that second banana, but he's not that guy anymore, I think starting this year. The team is also surprisingly old. The problem with building a team the way they have, or the way Boston has, is that your window is tiny. With Cleveland, though, this is appropriate, because they've only got LeBron until June of 2010.

Boston is built the same way as Cleveland, except they have three #2 guys, no #1, and then a bunch of role players. I haven't yet decided which team construction I like better. Also, Mike Brown gets derided for his coaching, but Doc Rivers really doesn't seem very good. His substitutions often seem bizarre, and he's hung with Sam Cassell long after it's become obvious that he's any good. Eddie House, a good shooter, has been buried. So those are bad. But there's also plenty of good. Garnett is a tremendous defender and a good offensive player, though he's complementary on that end, not a #1 guy. Allen is still a great shooter, and can get his shot with a guy on him, with a hand in his face, whatever. He'll still take people off the dribble as a change-up, but it's not that effective anymore. He's not quite Wally yet, though. Finally, Pierce can get his own shot, but he's the only guy who can do so. He also isn't an at-will scorer the way LeBron or Kobe or Iverson are. He's in the next group. People have been asking all year, "Who takes the last shot?", but they've been asking it the wrong way. The question isn't, "Which of the three stars takes the shot?", it's "Who can actually get a shot at the end?" I'm not sure anyone can. You guard Garnett, guard Allen, keep an eye on Rondo, and double Pierce with Powe's or Perkins's or whoever's man. Anyway, Boston's role players are similar to Cleveland's, except that they don't have any shooters. Or at least none that play (again, Eddie House). Sam Cassell is a backup point who isn't worth playing. Kendrick Perkins and Leon Powe are nice energy guys, guys who can focus on their defense and rebounding and be valuable that way, though they aren't necessarily outstanding at those jobs. James Posey is a nice piece, a pretty good shooter and defender who isn't truly dangerous at either job. Rondo is a very nice defender who can shoot a little and run the offense without going nuts. It's the defense that makes this team, and in that sense the roster is a good fit for Doc Rivers, because there's little offensive talent here. They're good, but they went to seven against Atlanta, a clearly inferior team, they're not blowing out Cleveland, and Detroit is probably better. People will think of them as a disappointment after their tremendous regular season, but the reality is probably that they overachieved before the playoffs, and then played down to their true level in the playoffs. Oh, hey, Big Baby is also pretty useful.

Detroit is tremendous. They lose Chauncey Billups and don't even miss a beat because Rodney Stuckey, while he's still learning, is pretty damn good. Jason Maxiell is one of those annoying "angry" players, but he's good at what he does, which is run around and knock balls around and grab rebounds. Chauncey, if he's healthy, isn't Mr. Big Shot, but he's still a very good big point who knows how to use his size on both ends of the floor. Rasheed Wallace is always dangerous, even if he settles too much. Antonio McDyess will hit that little pop shot and play good D and rebound. A quality big, in other words. Rip Hamilton is still Rip Hamilton, although he looks like he may have lost a step. He also plays excellent annoying D if the refs are letting him get away with it, which is something that can easily be forgotten given the other excellent defensive players on the team, as well as his own excellent offense. But Tayshaun Prince is,

in some ways, what makes this team go. Incredible defensive player with quick feet and Kirilenko-style freakish arms. He never gives up on plays, which is why he has more "blocked layup from behind" highlights than anyone in the history of the league. He's turned into a good jump shooter, even if it's unorthodox, and he can get to the bucket and use his length to put the ball up, or pass the ball on the interior or kick it out. He's the best player on the team, and he's showing exactly why I was really hoping the Lakers could get him in the draft years ago. Detroit, in short, is dangerous, and it looks like they might have the pieces to keep being dangerous for years to come, with Tayshaun at the core.

Orlando is a fantasy roster team. They've got good players, but where's the defense? Turkoglu, Rashard Lewis, Jameer Nelson, Keith Bogans, Carlos Arroyo -- they're all accomplished or useful offensive players, but none of them really plays plus defense. There are only so many problems that Dwight Howard's athleticism can patch over, especially as his offensive game continues to improve and he's using more and more energy on that end of the floor. It's a nice core of talent, but they have to build around it with players that fit (a defensive-minded power forward, allowing you to move Turkoglu or Lewis to the 2-guard spot) to rise to the elite teams in the East. They're not at the level of the top three, but they're a lot closer than Atlanta, for instance. (Mike Bibby? Done!)

In the West, let's start with New Orleans. I haven't figured out how David West gets his numbers every night, but he does it. You watch and you watch, and he just doesn't jump out at you. Then you start to realize that he shoots that mid-range jumper at a tremendous percentage, and that he can also put the ball on the floor and get to the hole if you close out on him too hard or try to play up in his face. He has the strength to grab rebounds and finish at the hole, even if he looks a little short. Perhaps most importantly, he's a mean bastard who doesn't back down. This makes me dislike him, but it also means he's got the juices going the entire game. Chris Paul is really good. You can exploit him on defense, but there aren't so many guards on good teams with the size to bother him: Deron Williams and Chauncey Billups are all that come to mind. Tyson Chandler will always be linked with the great Ben Wallace mistake; but he's a very good player in his own right. He can't score, but he can finish a lob as well as anyone, and he's a very good rebounder and help defender. He gets a little out of control with his emotions at times, as much of this team does, but it also feeds them at times. Peja is still a lights-out shooter, and with his size, he can surprise you by getting to the rack at times. Julian Wright is a great energy guy off the bench, Jannero Pargo is wicked fast, even if he doesn't bring much else to the game. Melvin Ely is ... well, he's big. Really, this sentence shows New Orleans' weakness: no bench. If Chandler gets in foul trouble, there are no bigs to back him up worth mentioning. There's no real scoring off the bench, unless you count Bonzi Wells, which I don't. There's no real backup point. If you can get any of their main players in foul trouble, they're screwed.

San Antonio just keeps coming back. They haven't reloaded in forever, unlike Detroit, but Tim Duncan + Manu Ginobili keeps equalling winning, at least for this year, and maybe one more after that. Tony Parker is good at what he does, which is be quick and shoot his floater, Tim Duncan is probably the third-best player in the game, and Manu Ginobili is a ridiculously good offensive player. Yes, they're a team of floppers, with Duncan, Ginobili, Parker, Horry, Oberto, and Bowen falling down at a moment's notice. But until the rules change and they start red-carding these guys, it'll keep working. Bowen, I want to note, has really slipped. He's not nearly as quick as he used to be, so he gets beat off the dribble with regularity. Popovich has tried him on Chris Paul a few times, but he just can't handle that assignment the way he used to, which means he's stuck guarding two-guards and small forwards, which is a less useful skill than being able to swap over to shut down a point guard from time to time. With Deron Williams and Chris Paul in the conference, that'd be an important skill. The front-court defense, though, with Oberto, Duncan, Horry, and Kurt Thomas, is top-notch, if ancient. It's the kind of defense that can guard the Shaqs and Dwight Howards and Pau Gasols of the world, though, not the David Wests, Carlos Boozers, and Mehmet Okurs. So you've got front-court defense, you've got backcourt scoring, you've got some shooting (Michael Finley, Brent Barry, Manu), you've got a coach who knows what the hell he's doing, ... no wonder this is a good team.

Finally, Utah is an odd team. Carlos Boozer is overrated, because he's either all-in with unstoppable mid-range jumpers and some inside moves, with rebounding to boot, or else he's disappeared completely from the flow of the game. Mehmet Okur is great if his shot is on, because that opens up his dribble-drive game and seems to energize him to rebound and play a little defense. But if his shot is off, forget about it. Granted, his shot is probably on two games out of three. Deron Williams is obviously tremendous, although he has a tendency to fall in love with his quick three point shot, and it's not clear that he plays defense on anyone but Chris Paul. Ronnie Brewer is energy, but it'd be more useful if he were actually a shutdown defender instead of just masquerading as one. Kirilenko's prime as an awesome force of defense who can hurt you with the shot, the drive, and the ridiculous court vision has been wasted. Really, it's the most tragic thing since Reggie Lewis died. Have you seen the passes he makes? He knows where the offense is going, and he's got the size and armspan to implement it. And his help defense, flying out of everywhere to block anybody's shot he wants. And Kyle Korver has added a seriously dangerous dimension to the team while playing the kind of obnoxious defense that Manu Ginobili and Sasha Vujacic specialize in, except with the kind of size and length that Ginobili can only dream about. Paul Millsap may have reached the overrated category by virtue of everyone talking about how overlooked he is: he's basically a decent rebounder who can dunk. If he adds a midrange jumper, watch out, because

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then he's basically Antonio McDyess. And somehow Matt Harpring is still hanging around, bitching his way into fouls and hitting the occasional jumper. Isn't he just a Jerry Sloan assistant coach in the making? It's like Greg Paulos or Steve Wojciechowski at Duke. You just know Coach K is grooming these guys.

I won't talk about the Lakers. I'll just gush for hundreds of words and then bitch for hundreds more. I've done it before and I'll do it again. I don't need to do it here.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 23:32

Monday, May 12, 2008

LeBron's mom

Dude, LeBron's mom is awesome.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 23:49

Rich Harden back; Denorfia to the DL

It turns out that Chris Denorfia is, in fact, hurt, and that he is the move the A's made to get Rich Harden on the roster -- he heads to the DL. The A's are thus down to four outfielders, and one of those is Jack Cust, who Geren likes to sub for late in the game. This means, though, that when Mike Sweeney, Frank Thomas, and Cust are all in the game, Geren's going to have to pick his spots carefully regarding pinch-running. He can't just wholesale with Denorfia and Rajai Davis like he did before.

Nice to see the A's bring the bats back to life, by the way. They kind of took a week off, but 12 runs, even if against Sidney Ponson and the Rangers, is nice.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Oakland A's at 00:08

Sunday, May 11, 2008

Refereeing and Game 4 of the Lakers-Jazz series

I am sick to goddamn death of the referees in the NBA. Yes, I'm emotional about the fact that the Lakers got robbed of this game, that they got called for six more fouls (20 more Utah free throws) despite playing their entire offensive game at the Utah rim. The referees didn't entirely lose the game for L.A. (eleven missed free throws, Kobe's back, and the disappearing Jordan Farmar did that), but they sure as hell helped. Let's review the bad calls on both sides this game.

DJ Mbenga's completely clean block in the third quarter that was called a foul. This one wasn't even close, there was no body contact, no arm contact, nothing. It was utterly inexplicable. The Kyle Korver phantom elbow on Sasha in overtime -- Sasha sold it, but there was zero contact on the play. The overtime play where Fisher put his shoulder sideways into Deron Williams's chest, and yet Williams got hit with a foul. (I'm more ok with that call as a "quit flopping" foul on Williams, because it wasn't an offensive foul -- but it should have just been a no-call.) The most egregious one of all, Ronny's "flagrant 2." What on earth did the refs see? There was body contact and a swipe across the arms. Ronny's a big guy, so Price took a hard fall to the floor that looked worse than it was because he bounced his head. There was no head contact by Ronny, he was going for the block so it wasn't unnecessary, and it certainly wasn't excessive. Where on earth do they get calling any flagrant, much less a flagrant 2? I demand an apology to Ronny, to the team, to Lakers fans, and to NBA fans everywhere for this atrocious call. The referees were intimidated by the Utah crowd and the Utah players, especially Matt Harpring, who swarmed them, demanding a call. Rule change request: that's a technical foul. Players don't get to ask for flagrants, and they certainly don't get to run up on the refs like that.

Oh, and how about Ronnie Price's "block" of Luke Walton's breakaway. He got the ball cleanly, in terms of not getting arm, but his body just flew right through Walton's. That's the definition of a foul. He knocked Walton to the floor by flying into him. How do you not call that? Oh, and the Kyle Korver travel in the fourth quarter when he switched his pivot foot out on the wing, Phil Jackson flew up off the bench (the play was right in front of him), but no call. Carlos Boozer's shove (not tiny push, not subtle; Carlos Boozer doesn't do subtle; he gets away with full-on pushes and shoves the entire game) on Derek Fisher on a screen late in the game.

This was just atrocious, and it's nothing new. Half the flagrants this postseason (and I've seen almost every playoff game so far) weren't flagrants in February. Double technicals are handed out like candy instead of the referees actually making an effort to determine if one player doesn't really deserve one. Blatant travels are missed (and not just the hop-step style, or the LeBron to the bucket style, but switched pivot feet). Offensive fouls abound when guys are running in under the driver after he's already started off the ground. And the clock! Forget about the atrocious rule that resulted in an unjustified three for the Pistons the other night. What about the numerous clock problems and technical malfunctions? We're in the 21st century! This stuff doesn't happen anymore!

One last word on the Jazz -- I said it after Friday's game, and I say it now. They hit their jumpers, they got the benefit of every doubt from the referees, they got L.A.'s backup center and hit man tossed, Kobe was visibly weakened (the Kirilenko block from behind in overtime doesn't happen if Kobe's 100% because he stuffs that ball instead of trying to lay it up), Fisher got hit with early fouls again ... and it still took overtime to win the game! It still took the Lakers forgetting team offense and going to a guy playing at 60% on every possession in overtime for the Jazz to pull it out!

A word on Pau: he does complain too much, but at this point, the refereeing on him is getting downright bizarre. He's a skilled post player who spends the entire game in the paint. He took sixteen shots and grabbed ten rebounds. And he only shot two foul shots! He shot zero on Friday! What is the deal? Okur, who spends the entire game 20 feet from the basket, shot six. Kirilenko shot nine. Kobe took 33 shots, with at least half of those coming in the lane, maybe more, and he shot only ten. How on earth does Andrei Kirilenko shoot as many free throws as Kobe, when Kirilenko is the one who plays on the team that fouls more than anyone in the league? How does this happen?

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in L.A. Lakers at 21:21

LeBron to New York?

With Mike D'Antoni now in New York, is it automatic that LeBron is going there in 2010? James could average 50-10-12 in that system -- and given that he plays his best defense as a help guy coming over to make ridiculously athletic blocks and steals, the up-tempo game might help his defense as well.

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 10:48

Friday, May 9, 2008

Stream of consciousness thoughts on Lakers-Jazz Game 3

I hope the Jazz fans are really excited about this win, because it took ridiculous games from their three stars, terrible shooting and ball-handling by the Lakers, two early fouls on Derek Fisher, and a real adjustment in the first half by the officials, from calling everything in the first two games to calling nothing (before returning to the call-everything mode in the second half). All of this to win by five, and even then only because a horrible play on the final jump ball where Luke Walton just threw the ball away after getting exactly the tip L.A. wanted from Pau Gasol.

The Lakers deserved to lose this game, and the Jazz earned their win, for all of the above reasons. But you know what? When you only lose by five, despite doing everything wrong while the other team does everything right, you're the better team. The only question is whether the Lakers can regroup on Sunday, stop fumbling the ball away every other possession, and stop missing layups when you're not bailed out by the officials.

Really just a frustrating, frustrating game. Did Okur or Boozer miss a single contested jump shot? (Obviously they did, but it sure didn't feel like it. Every time you looked up, they were hitting a 20-footer with Lamar Odom's hand in their face.)

So what's the prescription for Sunday? Kobe: don't go 0-6 from three. Sasha Vujacic and Jordan Farmar: don't combine for 0-9 shooting. Referees: Pau Gasol works all game inside against a team that fouls more than anyone in the league; he seriously didn't shoot a single free throw in this game? Really? Pau: turnovers! Lamar: turnovers! Phil: don't be scared of Derek Fisher's two fouls; Jordan Farmar is a good player, but he's overmatched in this series because that position needs to guard Deron Williams, and Farmar can't do that. Fisher started with two fouls, and then, at the end of the game, you know how many fouls he had? Still two. It's not like Fisher stopped Williams, but he certainly did better on him than Farmar did. So in short, Phil, Fisher can play with fouls. If the offense is churning out the points, then you can sit Fisher, because the Jazz can't run with the Lakers. But if the offense is sputtering like it was in the first half tonight, Fisher has to be in the game.

One final note: the Lakers only lost one quarter tonight. The problem is they lost that quarter, the second, by nine, while they only won the second half by four, and tied the first quarter. They got seriously outplayed over those 12 minutes, and could only play more or less even with the Jazz for the other 36. That's on the bench mob, since they were playing that quarter, and Phil played the starters (more or less) the rest of the way, once he figured out that his reserves couldn't play the game tonight.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in L.A. Lakers at 23:49

Ariza also still hurt

Ariza still not healed; seeing specialist today | The Lakers Nation

What on earth is up with these Laker injuries?

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in L.A. Lakers at 18:18

Thursday, May 8, 2008

Foreigners and their presidents

Why, when we hear about a survey in which a foreigner is voted "most popular person" in their home country, do we respond with a surprised, "More popular than their president!?" I can name approximately 100 million Americans who are more popular than our President. Why would we expect other countries to be different?

(Prompted by hearing on ESPN: "Manu Ginobili was recently voted the most popular person in Argentina, more than the president!")

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 23:05

On flopping

Jeff Van Gundy is a freaking genius. Here are his three proposals for flopping: If the referee thinks it's an exaggeration of the contact, even if he thinks it's also a foul, call no foul; Review of every game tape to determine how often flops happen: points assigned for flopping; upon a certain number of points accumulated through the season, suspension; if you're suspended, you also have to wear a scarlet F on your jersey so the referees know who the floppers are.

JVG referred to this last proposal as "a little off the wall", and then Mike Breen teased him about it, but you know what? Nobody likes this flopping stuff. Nobody likes that a 6'9", 260 pound beast named LeBron James gets a little contact from Rajon Rondo and throws his arms around like a Mack truck hit him. It's not just LeBron of course; he's just (a) my favorite topic; (b) the guy who prompted the Van Gundy rant. But the problem precisely is that everyone does it, with a few exceptions: Kevin Garnett doesn't really do it; Shaq's another one. But name another star, or role player, or 12th man, and they'll fall to the floor acting like they got shot at the least contact.

Along the same lines, the referees have to continue to get more careful about the offensive players initiating the contact -- if the defender has his arms up and you jump into them, no foul! If you draw the defender into the air and then jump into his body (a Kobe special, I'll admit), no foul! The referees were supposedly emphasizing this recently, but from watching the last few weeks, it seems like they've gone back to the bad old Reggie Miller days at times.

Oh, and I hate the "if you hit a guy after he's released his shot, it's a shooting foul" rule. If you run into the guy as you're closing out on his jump shot, that should be a loose-ball foul if the shot doesn't go in and an and-one if it does. None of this shooting foul nonsense.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 19:39

Pitch F/X analysis of Greg Smith

The Transaction Guy | MVN - Most Valuable Network » Blog Archive » Pitch F/X Profile: Greg Smith

Here's a great piece by Dave Golebiewski at The Transaction Guy. Smith's pitches, in short, have great movement despite not much velocity, and, as David Pinto points out (and as I think is most important given the variety Smith throws), his release point is incredibly consistent.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Oakland A's at 11:46

Will the A's be sellers?

Good Problems to Have - Part I - Athletics Nation

Here's an interesting piece from notsellingjeans at Athletics Nation about how the A's are unlikely to be sellers in trades because of their hot start -- they'd have to tank enormously to put their record in a position where they could justify selling pieces like Blanton, Mark Ellis, or Justin Duchscherer.

I'm not sure I entirely agree because, supposing the A's do play, say, .460 ball from here on out, and supposing further that the Angels start running away with the West, I think Billy Beane is smart enough to put questions about "waving a

white flag" to the side in favor of actually maximizing the talent on the roster for the contention years.

Obviously this is all moot if the A's keep playing well enough to contend.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Oakland A's at 11:42

More Bynum injury news

Bynum may undergo surgery on left knee | The Lakers Nation

That's just terrible news. I mean, maybe not because we're talking about a 'scope, but really? We still haven't figured out what's wrong in there? He hurt it in January! What's going on?

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in L.A. Lakers at 11:37

Wednesday, May 7, 2008

Denorfia?

Donnie Murphy pinch-ran for Frank Thomas today and then played left field. Is Chris Denorfia hurt?

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Oakland A's at 19:54

Chad Gaudin to the bullpen

SFGate: Oakland Athletics : The Drumbeat : Gaudin to bullpen

Athletic Supporters | MVN - an Oakland Athletics blog Â» Blog Archive Â» Gaudin To The Bullpen â€¦ For Now

The Official Site of The Oakland Athletics: News: Gaudin to 'pen to make room for Harden

I saw this from Susan Slusser first: Chad Gaudin is heading out to the bullpen to make room for Rich Harden. Mychael Urban reports that Gaudin's (a) not happy about this; and (b) worried about what it might do to his health, coming back from surgeries as he is. I understand the frustration of a guy with an ERA below 2.50 over his last four starts being sent to the bullpen. But what are you going to do? Joe Blanton's not going anywhere, you can't bounce Justin Duchscherer around, Greg Smith has been even better than Gaudin, and Dana Eveland ... well, it's not clear to me why Eveland is staying a starter while Gaudin is heading to the 'pen. It's almost a coin-flip situation, although maybe there's a talent-evaluation component here: the A's pretty much know what they have in Gaudin at this point, but Eveland is still an unknown. Is this just a hot start? Are his runs-allowed numbers sustainable given his peripherals?

Melissa Lockard points out that putting Eveland in the bullpen might hamper his confidence -- he's been beat up pretty good the last few times he's made the majors, so to send him out to the sidelines now that he's having success as a starter might impede him mentally. Lockard also asks why the A's don't move Harden to the bullpen, and her answer is sensible: there's a good chance they're looking to get what they can for him in a trade, and you don't build up a starting pitcher's value by throwing him out of the bullpen.

But you know, remember Jason Isringhausen? Failed, injury-plagued starter turned dominant reliever after a trade to a new team? Nobody wants this to happen to Harden, where the A's insist on keeping him in the rotation before they finally just give up on him only to see him have a few great years for someone else in a role that fits him when the A's could just as easily put him in that role themselves.

Keith Foulke is also due back in a few days, and Dallas Braden is likely to get the ax when that happens, heading back to Sacramento. He somehow avoided the chopping block last time, being kept around over Lenny DiNardo, but I wouldn't expect it to happen again, not with the way Joey Devine has been pitching. Unfortunately, when Harden needs to be added to the roster, I'm afraid the A's might go back to a seven-man bullpen and send out Chris Denorfia or something. Here's hoping the A's do the right thing, pat Devine on the butt and say, "Look kid, good job, but we want a six-man bullpen, you're the odd man out, and you're also the guy who'll be up in probably two weeks because of the inevitable injury (Street, Harden, Duchscherer, Gaudin, a random reliever owie) or trade (Blanton, Harden). So keep it up!"

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Oakland A's at 18:42

Tuesday, May 6, 2008

David Pinto on the A's offense

Baseball Musings: The Oakland Offense

Pinto's basic point: throw strikes and you win the game. This seems dead on. On the other hand, it's been true for at least the last three years, and the A's have still managed to win more than their share of games. For instance, 2006's pennant-winning team lineup included such luminaries as Jason Kendall, Dan Johnson, Mark Ellis, Bobby Crosby, Mark Kotsay, Jay Payton, and Marco Scutaro. The team slugged .412, good for second-to-last in the league. (In 2005, they were a little worse pure SLG-wise, but were 10th instead of 13th in the AL.) Yet that 2006 won their first-round series against the Twins.

I still don't think this A's team is going to finish on the top of anything, but I don't think it's the poor hitting that will do them in, especially since I think some of the bats will come around, power-wise, in particular Daric Barton, Bobby Crosby, Jack Cust, and Frank Thomas. I'm not saying the hitting will be good; I just don't think it has to be good in order for them to win. Instead, I think the pitching will eventually fall off: Dana Eveland seems to be pitching over his head, and Sandy Casilla and Andrew Brown have to come back to earth at some point, right? Will Greg Smith finish with a 2.54 ERA? I don't have much confidence that he will.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Oakland A's at 13:10

D'Antoni to Chicago?

ESPN - Suns coach D'Antoni talks to Bulls, moves closer to leaving - NBA

It looks more and more like Mike D'Antoni will in fact be headed to Chicago. As I said before, this is a solid second-best (for the league, for us as fans) situation, certainly better on the whole than him going to the Knicks (with whom Marc Stein reports that he spoke, but it's apparently not really on the radar for him to go there).

I was down on Joakim Noah as a high draft pick because I just didn't think he had the skill to play in the league as a star. I thought he was the new Anderson Varejao. Having watched him with the Bulls a few times this year, I was clearly wrong, and I think Mike D'Antoni's system would be just the thing to make him incredibly valuable: he's a big man who runs the floor, finishes, and, most importantly, can dish to teammates like no one's business. He's a different player than Boris Diaw, but his utility to a fast-breaking, high-octane team is similar: you don't give up anything on offense because he can facilitate on the run or on the block, but he's big enough to at least nominally guard opposing centers and power forwards.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 10:21

Friday, May 2, 2008

No Songaila tonight

Ric Bucher is reporting that Darius Songaila is suspended for tonight's game for scratching LeBron in the face. The Cavs are mad because LeBron got away with throwing a clearly deliberate elbow into the face of Andray Blatche in Game 1. The Cavs win this argument, in my mind. That elbow was the most blatant thing I've seen in a long time that hasn't been followed by any actual official response.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 19:05

Awesome music

Ok, wait, that wasn't actually just a Def Leppard / Tim McGraw song to open tonight's Wizards-Cavs game, was it? Please?

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 19:05

More on NBA coaching

ESPN - Coaching carousel: D'Antoni aiming for Bulls? - NBA

First, a clarification about the Bucks: Scott Skiles is the new coach there. The Kelvin Sampson thing I mentioned yesterday is about him joining the team as an assistant. I had forgotten that Skiles had been hired (or maybe I never even knew), so I assumed that Sampson was being looked at as a head coach.

Second, and more importantly, the story above says that D'Antoni is apparently not an option for Dallas, which makes me sad, but, as the title says, he could end up with the Bulls, which would make me only slightly less happy than him coaching the Mavericks.

Third, there's apparently some talk that Flip Saunders might not be back with Detroit next year, which strikes me as crazy. I don't really have an opinion of him as a coach, but the Pistons have been a very good team under him, and he's done a good job of working in the young talent they have there, so it's not clear what the justification for a change could be.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 09:34

Thursday, May 1, 2008

Player A or Player B?

Time for the Player A, Player B game.

Player A's rookie stat line:

72 games, 71 starts, 37.5 minutes, 19.2 points on .414 shooting (15.2 shots per game), .318 on 4.1 threes, .747 on 7.2 free throws, 1.1 steals, 1.1 blocks, 3.5 turnovers, 3.7 rebounds, 3.9 assists, 18 wins.

Player B's rookie stat line:

80 games, 80 starts, 34.6 minutes, 20.3 points on .430 shooting (17.1 shots per game), .288 on 2.6 threes, .873 on 5.6 free throws, 1.0 steals, 0.9 blocks, 2.9 turnovers, 4.4 rebounds, 2.4 assists, 20 wins.

One of those has been a sixth man (albeit a very good one) for the last five years. The other is supposed to save basketball. Yes, Player A is Jerry Stackhouse and Player B is Kevin Durant.

To be fair, I left out one key piece of information: Stackhouse turned 21 his first year in the league, while Durant turned 19 just before the season started.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Basketball at 17:26