

In the world of fantasy basketball, LeBron is king

BY JON KRAWCZYNSKI
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The NBA season is nearly upon us, and one big question remains: Who is your No. 1 pick?

From Kevin Garnett to LeBron, Kobe to Shaq, there are plenty of options. And the NBA is embracing the fantasy phenomenon, providing in-depth analysis and information to help fans manage their teams.

While prospective fantasy team owners are fretting over first-round picks in approaching drafts, LeBron James knows exactly who he would take.

"Uh, uh, LeBron James," he said. "Because I'm an all-around team player, and all I care about is winning."

Well, LeBron, you might be the No. 1 pick in most fantasy drafts, but it has nothing to do with your unquenchable desire for victories.

How many games a player's team wins is about as important in fantasy basketball as how many high-flying dunks off a trampoline the team mascot makes during halftime. It's all about the stats, baby.

"Players on bad teams often make great fantasy players if they can pile up the stats," said Matthew Berry, aka "The Talented Mr. Roto," NBA.com's fantasy guru.

The league hired Berry to headline a comprehensive new fantasy section on its Web site and contribute to a fantasy magazine. The site offers fans a nauseating amount of stats, trends and breakdowns that were once available only to General Managers, scouts, coaches and players.

"If you want to know how (Timberwolves point guard) Marko Jaric has performed against Chauncey Billups on three days' rest in the second half of the season on a Wednesday, it's there," Berry said. "It's just insane."

The NBA also is sponsoring the "All-NBA First Fantasy Team." At the end of the fantasy season, the top five fantasy owners playing on NBA.com's free salary cap manager league will be given the award and allowed to meet with a real NBA GM.

"It's the first time in history that a sports league has recognized playing fantasy sports as a legitimate skill,"

said Berry, who has been playing fantasy sports since 1983. "When you had to wait for the USA Today to come on Wednesday so you could check the stats and see how your team did."

Fantasy basketball has exploded across the world in the last five years, and the NBA is striving to cater to the growing demographic.

"It's not just for geeks anymore," Berry said.

The league is offering a plethora of free services through the fantasy section of its Web site, including articles and advice from Berry, who also hosts his own radio show and has worked for the Sporting News and ESPN as a fantasy analyst.

"They came to me and my staff and said, 'You guys know fantasy,' and gave us the keys to the candy store. It was cool," Berry said. "Anything we asked for, we got."

And who is Berry's No. 1 pick? Well, let's just say King James may be on to something. In his pre-season Top 10, Berry leads with James, followed by Minnesota's Kevin Garnett, Dallas' Dirk Nowitzki, Phoenix's Shawn Mar-

ion and Philadelphia's Allen Iverson.

See a common thread?

"You want a guy that contributes in many, many categories," Berry said. "Points, steals, blocks, 3-pointers, assists, field goal percentage. LeBron James and Kevin Garnett, they contribute across the board."

An informal poll of NBA players turns up similar answers.

"It would probably be Allen or LeBron," said Sixers forward Kyle Korver, who was ranked 67th overall in NBA.com's fantasy magazine. "Jalen Rose is on there ahead of me? ... Jalen Rose?"

Timberwolves forward Mark Madsen didn't hesitate.

"Shaq, no doubt," Madsen said.

Don't worry, Mark, we won't tell Garnett.

"The numbers, the presence, it's all there," Madsen said.

Well, maybe not, Berry says.

"If you were starting an actual team and wanted to win this season, Shaq very well could be the pick. But in fantasy, he kills you in free-throw percentage."

Players get penalized for poor free-throw and field goal percentages as well as being one-dimensional, which is why players such as O'Neal and Carmelo Anthony often are bypassed for lesser stars such as Andrei Kirilenko and Gilbert Arenas.

This is why James, who stuffed the box scores with averages of 27.2 points, 7.4 rebounds and 7.2 assists per game, is on top of the fantasy world.

"I think almost in every category my numbers should go up just because of the floor space we're going to be able to have this year," James said. "Guys aren't going to be able to load the box on me. Guys are not going to be able to double-team me when I bring the ball up because of the guys we have on the floor this year. So I think every category of my game will go up this year."

AP sports writers Tom Withers in Cleveland and Dan Gelston in Philadelphia contributed to this story.

IN BRIEF

Chicago White Sox sweep Astros in World Series

HOUSTON — Jermaine Dye singled home the only run in the eighth, and the Chicago White Sox beat the Houston Astros 1-0 to win their first World Series title in 88 years.

Chicago's sweep, its eighth straight postseason win and 16th in 17 games overall, made it only the second team to go through the postseason 11-1 since the extra round of playoffs was added in 1995, joining the 1999 Yankees.

On a night when pitching dominated, winner Freddy Garcia and Houston's Brandon Backe pitched shutout ball for seven innings, with Backe allowing four hits and Garcia five. They each struck out seven.

Bobby Jenks got his second save and Astros closer Brad Lidge fell to 0-2 in the Series and 0-3 in the postseason.

Houston was 0-for-11 with runners in scoring position on the night and 10-for-48 (.208) in the Series, and the Astros were shutout for the final 15 innings, stranding 18 runners.

This year's World Series gets record-low ratings

NEW YORK — The Chicago White Sox's first world championship in 88 years was also the lowest-rated World

Series ever.

Chicago's four-game sweep of the Houston Astros averaged an 11.1 national rating with a 19 share on Fox. That's down about 7 percent from the previous low, an 11.9 with a 20 share for the 2002 World Series between the Anaheim Angels and the San Francisco Giants.

While the 2002 World Series, which went seven games, rated higher overall, it was only averaging an 11.0 through four games.

This year was a drop of almost 30 percent from last year's series, in which the Boston Red Sox swept the St. Louis Cardinals for their first title in 86 years. That had a 15.8 rating with a 25 share.

Wednesday night's 1-0 Chicago win had a 13.0 preliminary national rating with a 21 share. It was the highest-rated prime-time show on Fox since the finale of "American Idol" in May, but still not enough to save the series from being the lowest-rated.

Despite rating so low in comparison to other World Series, the four games of this series were each the highest rated prime-time network programs on their respective nights.

Saints home games to be broadcast in Baton Rouge

BATON ROUGE, La. — Saints fans

in New Orleans will be able to watch their team's home games in Baton Rouge even if they're not sellouts.

With the Saints based in San Antonio, their fans scattered and the Superdome severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the NFL said networks may broadcast the games as a gesture of good will.

The Saints host Miami on Sunday, Chicago on Nov. 6, Tampa Bay on Dec. 4 and Carolina on Dec. 18, all in LSU's Tiger Stadium.

Cashman agrees to stay with Yankees

NEW YORK — Hoping the behind-the-scenes matters are behind the New York Yankees, Brian Cashman is ready to address the issues on the field.

The general manager is staying with the only team he's ever worked for, agreeing Thursday to a three-year contract worth more than \$5 million.

Cashman's deal was set to expire Oct. 31, and he took more than two weeks following the Yankees' division series loss to the Los Angeles Angels to decide that he would return to what he called "the hardest job in sports."

Following New York's Game 5 loss in Anaheim, Cashman became emotional when asked about his future. Though he said he had been told

throughout the season that the Yankees wanted him back, he wasn't sure that would still be the case after another playoff disappointment.

Though New York won its eighth straight AL East title, Cashman said this season "wasn't as enjoyable." He said dealing with the team's Tampa, Fla., office, which houses some of owner George Steinbrenner's trusted advisers, on different issues caused "too many different philosophies being injected into it."

Cashman wants to be the voice in charge of baseball decisions, and believes he's been given enough assurances that will remain the case.

"We've all suffered this past year in different ways because of the splintering," he said. "I want to be that filter that everything goes through me."

Cashman dealt mostly with general partner Steve Swindal, but said Steinbrenner called him on Friday to tell him he wanted him back.

ACLU files grievance on behalf of NM State player

LAS CRUCES, N.M. — The American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico has filed a grievance against New Mexico State football coach Hal Mumme, saying he discriminated against a now-released Muslim player by repeatedly questioning him about

al-Qaida.

The grievance, filed Tuesday on behalf of former Aggies running back Muammar Ali, also said the football staff required the team to recite the Lord's Prayer at the end of each practice.

The ACLU is seeking a public apology from Mumme and disciplinary action against him.

Air Force coach reprimanded

DENVER — Air Force coach Fisher DeBerry met the academy's new superintendent for the first time, and found himself being reprimanded, but not fired, for statements he made about black athletes and recruiting.

After his meeting with Lt. Gen. John Regni, DeBerry issued an apology at a news conference.

On Tuesday, in discussing last weekend's 48-10 loss to TCU, DeBerry said it was clear TCU "had a lot more Afro-American players than we did and they ran a lot faster than we did."

DeBerry first discussed the topic Monday, telling The Gazette of Colorado Springs the academy needed to recruit faster players and noting, "you don't see many minority athletes in our program."

—The Associated Press

Cross Country: Long, hilly courses provide steep challenges in postseason

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on the team is awesome. Workouts are great. We're working together well and supporting each other."

The Pac-10 Conference Championship course is going to push the Ducks harder than many of the other courses they might be used to. It is a

very hilly meet including tests of strength, speed and endurance. This course has been considered one of the toughest courses the Ducks have

seen so far this season. The men will be competing in an 8,000-meter course and the women will run a 6,000-meter course.

"I think our team is young, but I believe that we have the potential to turn a lot of heads in the next couple of years," Winter said.

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