

# Iverson rallies East as All-Star game exceeds the hype

by Frank Isola

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WASHINGTON -- Finally, an All-Star Game that surpassed the hype and was actually worth watching, right down to the last frantic seconds.

Now, if only the NBA's regular season could be this entertaining.

With Allen Iverson, Stephon Marbury and Kobe Bryant providing all the drama in the final minutes, the Eastern Conference rallied from a 21-point deficit in the final eight minutes and 29 seconds and stunned the Western Conference, 111-110, in the 50th All-Star Game Sunday night at the MCI Center.

"Everybody felt like we couldn't win because we were overmatched," Iverson said. "You can't measure the size of someone's heart."

It was a dramatic ending to an All-Star Weekend where NBA commissioner David Stern spent his time going on the offensive against the media for criticizing his product. But despite declining attendance and sagging television ratings overall, Stern's players produced a classic.

Philadelphia's Iverson, the best player on the league's best team, was named MVP after scoring 15 of his 25 points in the last nine minutes. All of Iverson's points in the quarter came after the West had taken a 95-74 lead.

"Coming into the fourth quarter I think myself, (Jerry) Stackhouse, Vince (Carter) and a couple of other guys were sitting on the side and we kept saying, 'Why not us,'" said Iverson, who shot 9-for-21. Why can't we be the ones to come back from a 19-point deficit (after three quarters) in the All-Star Game? And I asked them and we said, 'Why not?'"

"We turned it on in the fourth quarter and we hit some shots. And then we started to feed off the crowd. The momentum was there for us and we were able to do it." Iverson started the comeback but it

was Marbury, playing in his first-ever All-Star Game, who provided the winning margin. The Brooklyn-born point guard hit a pair of three-pointers in the last minute, including the game-winner with 28.4 seconds left.

"I couldn't paint a better picture," he said. "It was exciting in those last two minutes. It was (a) championship

play for Bryant.

But Marbury received assistance in the closing seconds from Dikembe Mutombo and Bryant was not able to attempt the last shot. First, Marbury intentionally fouled Bryant with 10.9 seconds left and after a timeout, the West ran an isolation play for Bryant.

off a celebration usually reserved for the playoffs. Latrell Sprewell raced onto the floor and playfully taunted Webber, his good friend, by throwing a towel at him.

"We got to be cheerleaders," said Sprewell, who, like Knicks teammate Allan Houston, did not play in the fourth quarter. "The guys out there got the job done."

Sprewell and Houston each played 15 minutes, scoring seven and five points, respectively. The West opened the game with an 11-0 run, and Sprewell did not make his first appearance until there was 7:40 remaining in the second quarter. But after helping the East make it competitive, Sprewell was on the floor to start the third quarter.

"I think (East coach Larry Brown) was impressed with the way I played," Sprewell said. "One thing that Jeff (Van Gundy) told me before I left was, 'Play the way you've played to get to this point.'"

After going three years without making the All-Star team and spending almost a full season suspended by the NBA for attacking P.J. Carlesimo, Sprewell was clearly reveling in the moment.

When his name was called during pregame introductions, Sprewell clenched both fists and pumped them gently in the air.

"I think people had certain perceptions of me," he said. "But that first year when we went far into the playoffs (reaching the Finals) and they saw me play and saw me get interviewed I think people saw something very different from those original perceptions. That makes me feel good."

Bryant, relishing an opportunity to win the game and snare MVP honors, ran a pick-and-roll with Tim Duncan but when Mutombo moved toward the ball, Bryant was forced to pass.

Duncan appeared to have a clean look but Vince Carter soared through the air and managed to deflect the shot with his fingertips with 0.4 seconds left.

Chris Webber's desperate tap-in try came after the buzzer, touching

atmosphere."

Marbury scored 12 points and accepted the challenge from Bryant, who taunted the East with, "Oh, you're going small," when Iverson and Marbury were paired in the backcourt in the last five minutes.

The last 90 seconds evolved into a thrilling showdown between Bryant and Marbury. They were pitted against each other and Marbury seemed lost trying to guard Bryant, who scored the West's final three bas-



East Allstar Allen Iverson, of Philadelphia, drives towards the basket past Phoenix's Jason Kidd, in the third quarter of the 2001 NBA All-Star game Sunday night at the MCI Center in Washington.

JERRY LOORIGUSS/PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

# Tiger's slump not major crisis

by Samuel Chi

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Tiger Woods' reign as the king of golfdom is over.

Done.

Finished.

You heard it here first.

(And a couple of months from now, when you pull this grease-stained column out from under your fish tacos, you'll laugh out loud: "What a moron!" as you watch Tiger being fitted for a green jacket on television.)

But I'm going out on a limb here: Tiger Woods of 2000 was as good as it gets.

Don't ever question Woods' credentials as a golfing legend -- even at the tender age of 25, he already has to be considered one of the best of all time. But there are ample indications that while he's still the greatest player of his generation, he won't win or contend in nearly every single tournament the way he did a year ago.

Woods has not won an official PGA Tour event since the Canadian Open last September. Last week, Woods finished tied for 13th at Pebble Beach, his worst outing since tying for 23rd in the Western Open in July. Of course, he was in such a slump then that two weeks later he won the British Open by merely eight shots.

All the talk about Woods' "struggles" has everything to do with what lofty standards he set in that incredible 2000 season. In 20 tour events last year, Woods failed to finish in the top five only three times -- tied for 18th at Nissan Open, tied for 11th at Buick Open and tied for 23rd at Western Open. He did not go four consecutive tournaments without a victory.

Now, he's gone six events without a win, including three this year. His streak of 52 consecutive rounds without going over par ended in the second round of the Phoenix Open. At the AT&T, where he was the defending champion, Woods was not much of a factor.

A few dared to ask Woods whether he was in a slump. He bristled at the suggestion, at least in public. He said there was nothing wrong with his game and that he just needed a few more putts to drop. What's more, he said he was more annoyed at the bumpy greens at Pebble Beach than he was with his swing.

While there may be nothing wrong with his game, he won't dominate the way he did a year ago. There are a couple of reasons for this: Woods' peers are catching up to him, and he's more concerned about his place in history than winning tournaments.

Not since the mid-'70s has the caliber of the top players on tour been this good. While Jack Nicklaus was in his prime, he was challenged by Johnny Miller, Tom Watson, Lee Trevino and Gary Player, all winners of multiple major championships. As great as Nicklaus was, one forgotten fact is that, besides winning 18 majors, he also finished second 19 times in majors. That's a testament to his greatness, as well as to the greatness of his competition.

Now, such players as Phil Mickelson, David Duval, Ernie Els, Vijay Singh and Davis Love III all are trying to make Woods sweat. All of those players are in their mid-30s or younger, and they're doing all they can to get out from Woods' considerable shadow. Woods has yet to taste defeat in a major when he's had a chance to win it down the stretch, but one of those players will disappoint him, perhaps soon.

Woods also is less concerned about winning tournaments other than the majors. He proved last year that he can win almost at will, and now he's concentrating more on winning the big ones. Ever since he was a child, Tiger had his sights on breaking Nicklaus' record of major victories. He's still 14 shy.

Last week, Woods spoke of "being in peak form for four weeks a year." He's not kidding -- he can live with winning only four tournaments a year, as long as they're the right ones. He's got money, fame and nearly absolute power in the golfing industry. But he's more interested in being the greatest of all time.

Woods is entered in this week's Buick Invitational at Torrey Pines in San Diego. But the upcoming tournaments he really cares about winning are The Players Championship and the Masters. TPC is the biggest non-major tournament that he has yet to win, and last year's loss to a laquacious Hal Sutton left him with a bitter taste. Of course, the green jacket, which Woods hasn't acquired since 1997, is something he really covets.

# Elliott leads Dodge charge to win Daytona 500 pole

by Shav Glick

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DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. - For two weeks, during unofficial preseason practice and official Daytona 500 practice, the Dodges weren't running fast enough to get out of their own way.

On Saturday, the first day speeds really became important, Dodge chieftain Ray Evernham turned his troops loose and the new Intrepids took over Daytona International Speedway.

Former 500 winner Bill Elliott, a proven campaigner chosen by Evernham to lead the Dodge return to Winston Cup after an absence of two decades, showed a remarkable improvement in speed to take the pole for next Sunday's Daytona

500. Elliott, who had been no better than 30th in pre-season speeds and only 25th fastest Friday, ran 183.565 mph in his red No. 9 Dodge owned by Evernham.

Thanks to a disqualification of the second-fastest qualifier, Jerry Nadeau's Chevrolet, another Dodge driven by Stacy Compton will start alongside Elliott on the front row.

While Elliott and Compton are guaranteed front-row starts, the remainder of the 500 field will be determined by two 125-mile qualifying races Thursday and the qualifying speeds of those not finishing 14th or better in one of Thursday's races.

Nadeau, whose car was found to be a half-inch too low in post-race inspection after posting a speed of

182.763 mph, will be permitted to requalify Monday.

Elliott, 45, who had won 49 poles driving a Ford throughout his career before signing with Evernham, is no stranger to the front row at Daytona, but because of new restrictor-plate rules, the speeds are much slower. In 1987, when Elliott was known as "Awesome Bill from Donaldsonville," his pole speed was 210.364 mph, still the record for the 2.5-mile track.

"Back then, when you left pit road you didn't know if you'd come back," said Elliott. "Now, you know you'll come back, you just don't know how long it will take."

It will be the fourth time for Elliott to start on the Daytona 500 pole. In 1985 and 1987 he won

from the pole. He also started first in 1986.

It was the first pole for Dodge since April 1, 1978, when the late Neil Bonnett was fastest at Bristol, Tenn.

The obvious question about the sudden emergence of Dodge speed -- sandbagging, the art of not showing your hand before the main event -- was answered by Gary Nelson, NASCAR's series director and the man responsible for maintaining the proper balance between the four makes - Ford, Chevrolet, Pontiac and Dodge.

"If you look at the first five qualifiers and you find all four represented, I think that answers the question," he said. "One of the four had to have two qualifiers in the five, it just happened that Dodge had the top two."

Defending 500 winner Dale Jarrett qualified third in a Ford, Tony Stewart was fourth in a Pontiac and Jeff Gordon fifth in a Chevrolet.

Nelson also said that rear suspension parts from Nadeau's disqualified car had been taken to the NASCAR garage for further inspection.

"When a car is lower, it goes faster," Nelson said. "What we want to find is how it got a half-inch lower after his run than it was when we inspected it before the run."

Evernham, the crew chief during Gordon's three Winston Cup championships, credited an unusual team concept for Dodge's surprising performance.

"We have five teams involved - my own, Bill Davis', Chip Ganassi's, the Pettys and Mark Melling - but the way we have oper-

ated we are one big team working together," Evernham said. "We share information and we work in the wind tunnel together and I think everyone benefits from it. Bill is our anchor and I think today you can see why."

Among other Dodge drivers, Ward Burton was sixth, Sterling Marlin seventh, Dave Blaney 14th, John Andretti 16th, rookie Casey Atwood 25th, Buckshot Jones 30th, Kyle Petty 31st and rookie Jason Leffler 36th.

Elliott will carry the load for Dodge Sunday in the Budweiser Shootout, an all-star race of sorts that has been stretched out from 25 laps to 70. Originally only for pole winners from the previous Winston Cup season, today's field has added former winners.

# Some drivers blow gasket over foxy move

by George Diaz

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DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. - Thanks to a little technological whiteout, Fox Sports already is on the fast track of controversy during its inaugural season telecasting NASCAR.

A series of graphics and still shots showing the starting lineup at the beginning of Sunday's Budweiser Shootout did not include logos or identification for any sponsors that did not purchase advertising time with Fox. Those sponsors who did purchase advertising time with Fox were identified on the graphics, which also ran during post-race analysis.

For instance, Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s Budweiser car included the logos on the graphic because Budweiser pur-

chased advertising throughout Speedweek events. But the graphic for Terry Labonte's Interstate Batteries car did not feature any sponsorship identification because that company is not in the advertising mix.

"The very first time we heard that Fox was threatening not to mention the teams or white them out, we knew this was going to be ugly," said Roush Racing President Geoff Smith, whose team was adversely affected by the decision.

The post-race scramble Monday included Fox executives meeting with NASCAR officials, and drivers threatening to pull out of scheduled interviews in conjunction with Sunday's Daytona 500. Jeff Gordon, Dale Earnhardt, Rusty Wallace and Labonte are among those drivers who reportedly are upset with Fox.

"The purses might be bigger, but it won't be any better for us at all if the sponsors start leaving," Wallace said.

Advertisers are set to pay an estimated \$250,000 for 30-second commercials during Sunday's Daytona 500. This marks the first year of NASCAR's six-year, \$2.8 billion television contract with Fox and NBC. Although Fox executives noted their intentions for the cosmetic-change policy during negotiations, NASCAR teams had assumed that the policy would be modified to appease sponsors who didn't buy time on Fox.

Although the graphics in dispute involved only a 20-second snippet of a three-hour telecast, NASCAR is one of the most sponsor-conscious sports in the world.

A substantial portion of the \$400 million raised by the competing Winston Cup teams comes from sponsors.

"It shows a complete disregard of the interests that it takes to balance the sport out to make it work," Smith said. "Even though the value of that little spot on television is very small in relations to the aggregate value, the tone that it sets carries a price point that is much worse."

A "fine" time: Looking to establish "permanent records" for rule-breakers, NASCAR officials suspended two crew chiefs and levied fines Monday totaling \$40,750 for numerous offenses involving 18 teams.

The four-race suspensions of Tony Furr, crew chief for Jerry Nadeau's Chevrolet Monte Carlo, and Kevin Cram, crew chief for Jason Leffler's Dodge, highlight NASCAR's attempt

to step up policing efforts.

Although Furr's fine of \$12,750 does not come close to approaching the biggest fine in NASCAR history--\$60,000, levied against then-Jeff Gordon crew chief Ray Evernham for using unapproved suspension parts in the Winston in 1995--it does reflect a different tactical approach by NASCAR.

"As we started raising fines, we started seeing sponsorship dollars and purse dollars going up so much that the fines weren't getting the message across," NASCAR Winston Cup Series Director Gary Nelson said.

"We still would find things. We changed our approach going into 2001 and we're going to try the suspension part of it. The message to the team is, 'It's a good way to get suspended if you break one of these major rules.'"

Furr was cited for modifying

Nadeau's car, making it lower than allowed specifications - producing less drag on the rear spoiler, which produces faster speeds - during qualifying runs Saturday.

The rear spring unit on Nadeau's car actually was two pieces, with the smaller one sliding off because of aerodynamic downforce when the car was in motion. NASCAR officials found the piece on the track during Nadeau's qualifying run of 182.763 m.p.h., second only to Bill Elliott's Dodge.

Nadeau's qualifying time was disallowed. He attempted to requalify Monday in the second round of time trials, but his time of 178.271 m.p.h. was not good enough to make Sunday's starting grid.

Cram was suspended and fined \$10,000 for fuel violations.

The suspensions begin Feb. 23.