

NBA rule changes not a black and white issue

by Sam Smith
Chicago Tribune
April 17, 2001

The NBA made headlines last week with its proposals to change rules, including allowing zone defenses.

The issue has been much debated since then and, rather than wandering into gray areas, some around the NBA are saying this is a black and white issue.

Too many black players, too many white fans.

This is usually a subject too taboo into which to dive directly, so those who formulated the new rules appear to have stepped around the edges. They have talked about bringing mid-range shooting back to the game, to curtail the one-on-one game, to increase overall team movement, to lessen the need for dunks and three-pointers and to encourage playing a team game.

Sounds like the recruiting brochure for the Princeton basketball team.

But forget racism here. The NBA is the most progressive U.S. sports league, perhaps the most liberal sports league in the world. African-Americans and other minorities getting jobs or even ownership stakes haven't been news in the NBA for years. Women are top team executives. Black coaches, team executives, owners and top league executives are common.

No league, in fact, has embraced its black stars like the NBA. Julius Erving was the face of the NBA almost 25 years ago, until Michael Jordan took it over along with Magic Johnson and Isiah Thomas. Jordan and Johnson are now owners, Thomas is Indiana's coach after running the Toronto Raptors.

Now, the NBA is saying, it's time to watch the Bulls--not Jordan; the Lakers--not Magic; the 76ers--not Dr. J. Nothing against those guys, and basketball thanks them for everything they have done, but their era is past. Now it's time to pass--the ball. And move and cut and sell the team pic-

tures, not the 8-by-10 photo. Get everyone in there and make it a true rainbow coalition of basketball.

The problem for the NBA is the stars--like Jordan, Erving and Johnson--were beloved. They sold tickets. They sold products. Sponsors wanted to embrace them.

No one wants to embrace this season's likely MVP, Philadelphia guard Allen Iverson. Whether it's his look, his dress, his musical tastes or his attitude, Iverson hasn't translated much into box office and sponsorship appeal. Neither, really, has Iverson's likely top challenger for the award, Sacramento's Chris Webber. His appearance isn't so radical, but his behavior over the years has been.

Even the high school darling, Kobe Bryant of the Lakers, has encountered issues of attitude and selfishness this season that make people recoil. Tim Duncan of the Spurs appears to be a wonderful young man, but he comes off as compelling as an Al Gore speech. Shaquille O'Neal remains a brooding kind of giant unable to make a public connection. Toronto's Vince Carter appears to pose for a statue after every basket he makes as he still looks for his first playoff game victory.

For several years, NBA spin doctors argued that the tattoos, baggy pants, hip hop dialogue and hair styles of this era of NBA stars was a generational factor, that it was kids being kids. And today's kids admired these stars and the way they looked.

Not in my house, you don't! said their parents.

Now, the NBA finally appears to be giving up. And giving in.

The impact of the new rules will be felt mostly by those stars, like Iverson, Carter, Webber and O'Neal. Sure, they still will be the dominant players in the game because they are the most talented. But the message from the NBA is that it's time to see the team, not the individuals.

It has been an issue that long has been debated in the NBA and some blame it for the recent decline in TV

ratings and attendance. The argument has been that a reliance and promotion of individuals leads to an individual game, makes players selfish because they benefit from individual success over team accomplishment.

The opponents, however, note the league's greatest success came when the league was promoting individuals such as Jordan, Johnson, Erving and Thomas.

Some say there aren't stars today to match their abilities. But that's a difficult case to make with the varied skills of players such as Webber, Iverson, Carter and Bryant. Jordan couldn't shoot nearly as well as Bryant at a comparable age. Few big men ever have been able to run the court and handle the ball like Webber. No one, even Jordan and Erving, could perform in midair like Carter.

And Iverson's crossover probably takes Tim Hardaway's breath away.

But the NBA appears finally frustrated in its effort to sell these players to the public.

When team, five-man basketball is talked about in connection with the effect of the proposed changes, it's a statement that the NBA doesn't believe it can embrace its top young stars any longer.

Code words for zone breakers, such as perimeter shooting, movement and playing without the ball suggest an increased role for white players, who generally are regarded as less athletic, but more fundamentally sound. Critics say that is merely because they aren't good enough to compete, and it would be hard to find better shooters and more fundamentally sound players than Sean Elliott and Terry Porter of the Spurs, Ray Allen of the Bucks and Reggie Miller of the Pacers.

But this is a black and white issue. Individual versus team. The NBA is saying it's finished with individual basketball and wants to focus on teams, whatever that suggests.

Whether that is possible remains to be seen.

For Capitals' Halpern, postseason is personal

by Jason La Canfora
The Washington Post
April 19, 2001

On April 18, 1987, Jeff Halpern raced to his hotel room in Arizona, where he was playing in yet another youth hockey tournament, and switched on the seventh game of the Washington Capitals' first-round playoff series with the New York Islanders. The Halpern family, longtime season ticket holders, figured they would catch the end of the game and go out for dinner.

Instead they spent the next four hours glued to the television - they had pizza delivered - and went to bed frustrated when Pat LaFontaine ended the seventh-longest game in NHL history in the fourth overtime, giving the Islanders the series and the Capitals another gut-wrenching playoff defeat.

"It was 11 at night their time - about 2 in the morning here - when that game finally ended," said Mel Halpern, Jeff's father. "I'll never forget my wife and daughter and Jeff in that hotel room suffering through that. It was gruesome."

No one in that room could have known that 14 years later to the day, on Mel's 57th birthday, Jeff would send Capitals fans to bed with smiles on their faces, scoring a huge overtime goal Wednesday night in Pittsburgh to even Washington's first-round series with the Penguins at two games each. The Capitals' win was their first in five postseason overtime tries against Pittsburgh.

The Halpern family was again camped around the TV set, this time in their Potomac, Md., home. While Jeff was stomping his feet up and down on the ice, thrusting his arms to the heavens and letting out a huge yell, his parents, who will be at MCI Center for Game 5 Saturday afternoon, were off their couch, screaming right along with him.

"That's absolute joy on Jeff's face," Mel Halpern said. "I couldn't ask for a better birthday gift than that. The whole series is different now."

Halpern, 24, and his wingers - Steve Konowalchuk and Ulf Dahlen - have formed the club's most consistent line the past two seasons despite limited resumés. Halpern, the first player born and raised locally to make an impact in the NHL, was undrafted out of Princeton and signed as a long-shot free agent in 1999. Konowalchuk played much of his youth

hockey in Salt Lake City, another area not known for producing NHL players. Dahlen was waived out of the NHL in 1997 and was playing in Sweden when the Capitals took a chance on him two years ago.

The overachieving forwards produced three of Washington's four goals Wednesday, including two power-play goals from Konowalchuk, while continuing to render Penguins superstars Mario Lemieux and Jaromir Jagr ineffective at even strength; those players are primarily responsible for Pittsburgh's 5-1 playoff series record against Washington.

"Defensively, they've been outstanding," Coach Ron Wilson said of Halpern's line.

In Game 4 they were dominant offensively as well, back to their tenacious forechecking and board work. That work ethic led to the game-winning goal 4:01 into overtime. Dahlen came up with the puck in the corner and left it for Konowalchuk, who fought off defenseman Marc Bergevin behind the net. Halpern was sliding to the low slot at the time, but Mel could not see his son; the TV cameras were fixated on the action behind the goal.

Halpern had found an opening in the defense - losing center Wayne Primeau in the play - and found his favorite spot on the ice. He had taken just two shots in this series - both early Wednesday night - but Halpern made this one count, firing a one-timer that skipped along the ice, beating goalie Johan Hedberg's stick, slipping between his legs.

"I kind of shut my eyes and hoped it went in," Halpern said. "I had no idea where I was aiming other than to shoot it hard on net."

Halpern, Konowalchuk and Dahlen know their work is not done. It will take more defensive gems, and more timely goals, for the Capitals to buck a history of futility against the Penguins, a history the Halperns have lived through.

"Any kid growing up playing hockey wants to score an overtime goal in the playoffs," Jeff Halpern said. "My limited (playoff) experience has been against the Penguins and obviously there's a history in Washington when the Penguins and Capitals play. It helps to do my part, but I don't want this to be our one nice memory in this series; I want this to be something we can build off of."

Bonds hits no. 500 and it's a game turner

by Paul Gutierrez
Los Angeles Times
March 18, 2001

Barry Bonds never speaks to the media before games. So why should Tuesday have been any different?

Even though he was only one swing away from becoming only the 17th member of the 500-home run club, Bonds still shooed reporters away from his private corner of the San Francisco Giant clubhouse, a personal sanctuary that features a leather recliner and accompanying television set.

"Just looking for a stress-free environment," Bonds said as he retreated to his stall.

Nearly six hours later, though, at 9:55 p.m., the environment at Pac Bell Park was anything but placid. Not after Bonds, amid exploding camera flashes and garish orange rally rags being waved by the record 41,059 in attendance, blasted a 2-and-0 Terry Adams slider 417 feet into McCovey Cove in San Francisco Bay for his 500th home run, a game-winning two-run shot.

After jumping on home plate at the end of his eighth-inning celebratory trip around the bases, Bonds was joined on the field by family members and co-500-home run club members Willie Mays, who is also Bonds' godfather, and Willie McCovey for a nine-minute ceremony that delayed a 3-2 Giant victory over the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Bonds, in the final year of his contract, was talking then. "First of all, I've got to thank my parents for having me," he told the crowd after the fireworks and water cannons died down. "And I want to thank Willie Mays for being here and Willie McCovey and most of all, thanks to all of you. I love you and I'm proud to be in a San Francisco Giant uniform."

At 36 years, 268 days, Bonds is the 11th-youngest member of the 500-home run club. He reached the milestone in his 7,502nd at-bat, an average of one homer every 15.00 at-bats, the fifth-lowest home run-to-at-bat ratio among members of the 500-homer club.

Bonds' blast was the ninth homer to reach the water outside the right-field wall, the seventh by Bonds. He is

the only Giant to homer into McCovey Cove since Pac Bell Park opened last season.

Bonds, who has homered five times in his last five games, is a three-time National League most valuable player and is the charter and lone member of the 500-homer, 400-steal club. And with 28 more stolen bases, he establishes the 500-500 fraternity.

The Sporting News named Bonds, who signed with the Giants as a free agent on Dec. 8, 1992, the player of the 1990s, an honor that irked Ken Griffey Jr. supporters. But not Giant Manager Dusty Baker.

"When you've been the best player for a long time," Baker said, "you want to remain the best player."

Baker began his managerial career in San Francisco the same year Bonds arrived, in 1993.

"What's more remarkable than the home runs is the home runs and the stolen bases," Baker said.

"That's where he sets himself apart. But his swing is still quick as hell."

Despite all his accomplishments, Bonds has faltered in the postseason.

Since joining the Giants he has batted only .207 in seven division series games with no homers and three runs batted in. With the Pittsburgh Pirates, Bonds hit .191 with one homer and three RBIs in 20 playoff games.

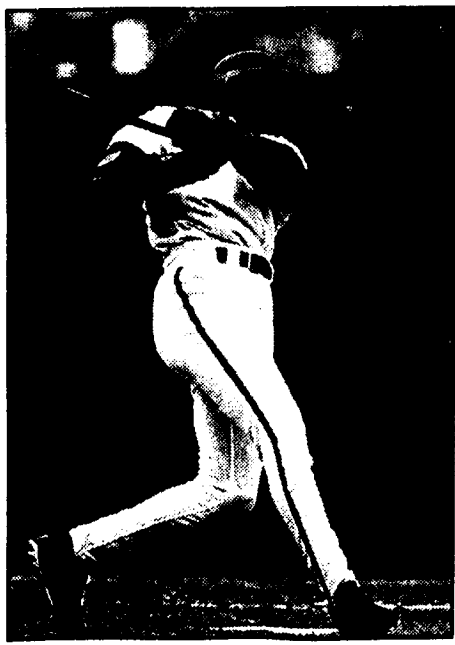
Bonds has never played in a World Series.

But even if Bonds finishes his career ringless, Hall of Famer Orlando Cepeda said Bonds can look back on his status as a member of the 500 club.

"Maybe he'll take it for granted," said Cepeda, who entered Cooperstown in 1999 after a 17-year career in which he hit 379 home runs. "But some day he'll look back and see that it's a great thing to do. It's amazing, really, with the consistency, the durability, never getting hurt."

"People don't let you forget."

Bonds, who has been on the disabled list only twice, nearly hit No. 500 in the third inning, lofting a high fly ball to the warning track in left-center field. Dodger left fielder Gary Sheffield floated over, though, and caught the ball at the 382-foot sign for the third out of the inning.



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