

Basketball notes

PETER MAY

Spurring James to greatness

Mike Brown was in his first year as an assistant with the San Antonio Spurs in 2000 when he got an eyeful, and an earful, of how Gregg Popovich deals with his best player. During one huddle, Popovich positioned himself in front of Tim Duncan and let the San Antonio franchise have it — in words that could not be printed in a family publication.

Brown can't decide what amazed him more — Popovich calling out Duncan or the professional way in which Duncan handled the blistering criticism. But now, as coach of the Cleveland Cavaliers and with a superstar named LeBron James, Brown is grateful for his three-year stint as Pop's lieutenant because it helped him in his relationship with James.

"I haven't quite called out LeBron like Pop did with Duncan," Brown said with a laugh. "But there are a lot of things I go back on where Pop dealt with Tim a certain way. I'll fall back on that."

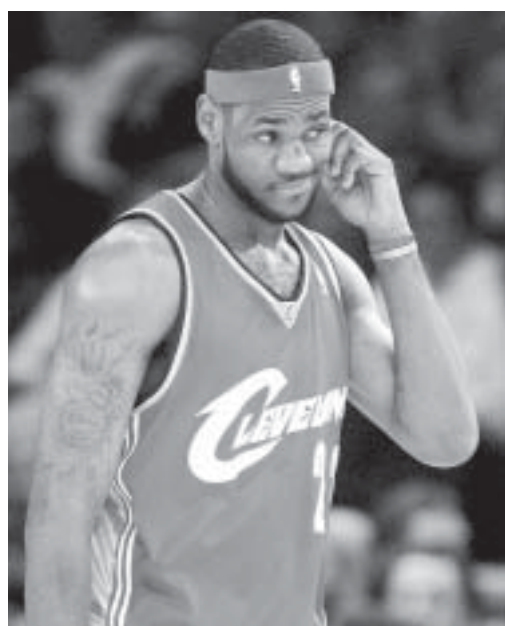
And now, after one season with James, Brown cannot say enough about the All-Star's willingness to be coached, to learn, and to lead. As a rookie head coach, Brown appreciates that. As a veteran coach, he knows it could have been very ugly had it gone any other way.

"He allows me to coach him," Brown said. "Tim Duncan allows Gregg Popovich to coach him. If a guy of that caliber didn't allow that to happen, you'd have total chaos on the team. We



CHUCK BURTON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Rookie head coach Mike Brown (above) has been stern with superstar LeBron James (below) when the situation dictated it.



JULIE JACOBSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

haven't had any problems or flare-ups this season, and all of that, in my opinion, is attributed to LeBron James allowing me to coach him.

"It's great he goes for 30 [points]. It's great he gets 7 rebounds and 7 assists. But if he doesn't allow [me to coach him], it would be total chaos and we wouldn't be where we are today."

Brown is James's third NBA coach in as many seasons. He had Paul Silas for the first year and most of the second, until ownership made Silas walk the plank. Brendan Malone finished up, and then came the widely expected housecleaning.

Brown, who was at Rick Carlisle's side in Indiana for the previous two seasons, got the job. He had never been a head coach before, unless you count summer leagues in Boston and Salt Lake City. But after observing the Popovich-Duncan dynamic in San Antonio, he called his former boss for some advice before the season. It helped even more that Popovich had a working knowledge of James from the otherwise disastrous 2004 US Olympic experience.

"I talked at length with Pop about LeBron," Brown said. "Every once in a while during the season, I'd give Pop a call."

The advice he got was pretty much what he expected: The great ones will accept coaching.

"I put [James] up on the film as much as anyone, if not more," Brown said. "I coach the team through his mistakes a lot of the time. He allows that to happen. In practice, if his team loses, or if he doesn't do something right, I can put him or his team on the line [for sprints]."

"He allows that to happen. He doesn't sulk. He doesn't get mad. He runs the sprints and tries to be the first one to finish. Whatever drill we do, he's into it. Those intangibles are things that people don't see, yet, to me, they are more important than the X's and O's."

And maybe that's why the Cavaliers won 50 games and had the third-best record in the Eastern Conference. And maybe that's why they are favored to win a playoff series for the first time in 13 years. It's definitely why James will be among the top five vote-getters for Most Valuable Player and will likely earn All-NBA first team for the first time.

Yes, he allowed Brown to coach him. But, all in all, you'd have to also say the coach did his job just as well.

Money time

A look at the top performers in the fourth quarter this season:

1
KOBE BRYANT
LA LAKERS
9.1
POINTS
41.1
FIELD GOAL PCT.



JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/KRT

2
LEBRON JAMES
CLEVELAND
7.3
POINTS
49.1
FIELD GOAL PCT.



MARK DUNCAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

3
GILBERT ARENAS
WASHINGTON
7.3
POINTS
39.1
FIELD GOAL PCT.



GEORGE BRIDGES/KRT



BILL KOSTROUN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

4
ALLEN IVERSON
PHILADELPHIA
7.1
POINTS
43.2
FIELD GOAL PCT.

5
DIRK NOWITZKI
DALLAS
6.8
POINTS
43.9
FIELD GOAL PCT.



GEORGE BRIDGES/KRT



CARLOS BARRIA/REUTERS

6
DWYANE WADE
MIAMI
6.7
POINTS
45.8
FIELD GOAL PCT.

7
RAY ALLEN
SEATTLE
6.4
POINTS
44.9
FIELD GOAL PCT.



JOHN FROSCHAUER/ASSOCIATED PRESS



ROBERT PADGETT/REUTERS

8
VINCE CARTER
NEW JERSEY
6.3
POINTS
40.7
FIELD GOAL PCT.

9
PAUL PIERCE
BOSTON
6.2
POINTS
45.2
FIELD GOAL PCT.



JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF



BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

10
WALLY SZCZERBIAK
BOSTON
6.2
POINTS
55.5
FIELD GOAL PCT.

SOURCE: 82games.com

No breathing easy on road

There has always been a line of thinking that the Nuggets benefit from playing at home because of the high altitude/oxygen issue in Denver. But I never imagined that the opposite could also be the case — that they are at a disadvantage at sea level.

But there it was, in black and white, in the Nuggets' notes prior to their season finale at Seattle. Had Denver won that game, it would have been the Nuggets' 19th road win, *tying the team record*.

Say what? Do you mean to tell me that the Nuggets, who won 54 games and a division title

in 1987-88, who won 52 games and a division title in 1984-85, and who have had three other seasons with 48 or more victories, have *never* had a winning record on the road since the NBA annexed them in 1976? Yep. That 1987-88 assemblage holds the team mark with 19 road wins (against 22 losses); Denver has won 18 road games each of the last two seasons.

And in case you're wondering, the Nuggets' first-round opponent, the Los Angeles Clippers, won a franchise-record 20 road games this season. The Clips also have home-court advantage in the playoffs for the first time in franchise history.

Win put Celtics on the losing end

That season-ending victory by the crypto-Celtics over the crypto-Heat turns out to be costly, at least in the draft order.

The Boston win pushed the Celtics into a tie with Minnesota for the sixth-worst record in the league. (Has there ever been a trade that made both teams worse? Minnesota lost seven of its last nine, the Celtics' six of their last nine.) The Timberwolves won the tiebreaker Friday and moved into sixth in the potential draft order, while the Celtics dropped to No. 7.

Both teams will have the same number of Ping-Pong balls (53 out of 1,000) in their hopes of moving up in the May 23 lottery.

Thus, the Celtics will pick anywhere from 1 to 10 in the June 28 draft, but the most likely spot is still No. 7 overall.

Additionally, the Celtics do not have a second-

round pick because of another tiebreaker between Houston and Golden State. The Warriors won that one, which made their pick No. 38 overall. The Celtics would have received that pick (it was from Phoenix and the **Walter McCarty** trade, which then was sent to the Warriors) had it fallen to No. 39. They will get it next year.

Also, the Celtics agreed to send a second-round pick to Minnesota in the **Wally Szczerbiak-Ricky Davis** trade.

With the 38th pick now going to Golden State, the Celtics will instead send Minnesota their own second-round pick, 36th overall.

Next year, the Celtics could have two No. 1s (their own and Cleveland's via the **Jiri Welsch** deal, unless the Cavs finish with one of the 10 worst records) and two second-rounders (their own and Golden State's).

Etc.

It's about time for changes

NBA head coaches will be allowed to call timeouts all by themselves — at any time — from now on, thanks to some rule changes that were adopted last week by the Board Of Governors. The previous rule allowed coaches to call timeouts only during a break in play and only if a player was injured or bleeding. In truth, of course, the coach has always called the timeouts, but, during play, the referees could signal a timeout only if asked by a player. A couple of other rule changes will go into effect next season, including free substitutions during 20-second timeouts at any point in the game. That previously had been allowed only in the last two minutes of regulation or overtime. There was no word on whether the NBA would actually limit 20-second timeouts to, well, 20 seconds. Additionally, on a clear-path foul, the fouled player will now get two free throws and his team will keep control of the ball. Previously, the fouled player was given one free throw and his team kept the ball.



DONNA MCWILLIAMS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Keith Van Horn's broken hand will limit his playoff availability for the Mavericks.

Keeping their fingers crossed

A couple of interesting names showed up on NBA playoff rosters, which this year have been increased to 13, giving coaches some flexibility. The Suns put **Amare Stoudemire** on their roster, even though he has undergone a second procedure since his aborted return (three games) and is still out. The Mavericks included **Keith Van Horn**, even though he has a broken right hand and might not be available. It was another injury-marred season for the hard-luck Van Horn, who missed 27 games, the last nine because of the hand injury. When healthy, he can be a reliable veteran scorer off the bench and, as a free agent this summer, he could attract some interest from teams looking for veteran scoring off the bench (wink, wink). Dallas, by the way, is in the playoffs for a franchise-record sixth straight season. The Mavericks qualified for five straight years under **Dick Motta** and **John MacLeod** from 1984-88.

Ex-Celtic duo has moved on

A couple of old friends will be drawing playoff checks courtesy of the Clippers. **Vin Baker** (who started the tank-job game last week in Memphis that ensured Los Angeles a sixth-place finish and not a first-round matchup with Dallas) is on the Clippers' playoff roster, as is **Walter McCarty**. Baker, who joined the Clippers after the All-Star break, ended up appearing in only eight games, totaling 85 minutes. But that's eight games and 85 minutes more than a lot of people thought he would play this season. As for Waltah, who went to the Western Conference finals last season with the Suns, he appeared in 36 games, averaging just under 10 minutes per game. Excluding the lock-out season, during which he appeared in 32 games, it was the fewest games he's appeared in since he played in 35 as a rookie for the Knicks in 1996-97. Last season, McCarty appeared in 72 games for the Celtics and Suns, 28 of them in a Phoenix uniform.

Still getting plenty of rest

Two years ago, it took the Miami Heat and New Orleans Hornets a staggering 17 days to play their first-round playoff series. (The Beatles needed less time to write and record "Rubber Soul.") The NBA tightened things last year and this year as well, although the Cavs-Wizards and Spurs-Kings series could go 16 days. Alas, there still are the inevitable two-day breaks between games, which will allow the Lakers to return home to Los Angeles between the first two games of their series with the Suns. The opener is this afternoon, with Game 2 Wednesday night. The Lakers thus get two days of practice back in El Segundo before returning to Phoenix.

This acquisition a Net loss

The Nets will try to make it through the post-season without **Jeff McInnis**, which, come to think of it, is pretty much business as usual in New Jersey. McInnis, signed last summer and thought to be **Jason Kidd**'s experienced, valuable, and capable backup, has been a flat-out bust. He appeared in only 28 games, has not played since Jan. 14, and was left off the Nets' playoff roster. Asked how he felt about having his uniform taken away, he told reporters prior to Jersey's regular-season finale, "It was taken away all year, man. I mean, that's nothing. You're not reading my résumé. This is nothing. Come on, man, I'm a soldier. It's nothing. Serious. It's nothing." McInnis has a year left on his deal, a player option worth \$3.6 million, which he will exercise. It will surprise no one if the Nets trade him or, failing that, negotiate a buyout. "I'm in good shape," he said. "I'm working out, I'm going to be all right. I'm going to sit around a while, let my knee rest, get right. I'm good. I'm a good point guard in the league." He turns 32 in October.

Material from personal interviews, wire services, other beat writers, and league and team sources was used in this report.