

It's NBA All-Star Weekend, which climaxes with tonight's game on TNT at 8:30 PM EST. Last night was the Skills Challenge, Three Point Shootout, and Dunk Contest ... which Papa Cass tuned in for and recaps for us here today on The Blurbs. Cassano also opines on LeBron v. Wade, Charles Barkley's foot race and subsequent kiss on the mouth with the 67 year old Dick Bavetta, Damon Jones effort in the shootout, and the dunk contest in general in this, his latest.



Some selected observations (and observations of observations) from the NBA All-Star Weekend thus far:

Background noise

LeBron James is having a [quieter-than-usual all-star weekend](#) thus far. Dare I say, he's faded into the background a bit.

Dwyane Wade is currently the NBA's "player from the Class of 2003. He's the one with the ring, he's having the better season, he's doing cell phone commercials with Charles Barkley. LeBron, by comparison, looks overhyped and overrated since his star has failed to magnify this season as Wade's has exploded.

As a result, the fickle spotlight has shifted to Wade, Gilbert Arenas and old standbys like Shaquille O'Neal and Jason Kidd while LeBron has been relegated to the end of the stardom bench, at least for the time being. The media throngs that followed him around during his first three all-star appearances have been replaced by a comparatively sparse following. LeBron just isn't where the action is right now.

That's not entirely bad. For a 22-year old who has had larger-than life billboards of himself erected in New York, Los Angeles and Cleveland, maybe a taste of humble pie is in order. Besides, any way LeBron can reduce the hands that are grabbing for his attention, the more he can focus on resting up and getting ready for the stretch run and playoffs.

Fabulous Las Vegas

Can a pro sports franchise co-exist alongside the gambling houses of Las Vegas? This winter's all-star break has been a feeling-out process for the NBA.

Sure, it's about the fact that Las Vegas is rife with legalized gambling, and fixed games have long been a worst nightmare of upstanding sports league commissioners everywhere. But, especially for the NBA, it's also about the sheer number of opportunities their filthy-rich, ghetto-styling players will have to get into all kinds of eye-covering trouble.

It's not that Las Vegas' vices are different from those of many other cities. It's just that they are far more easily attainable. NBA players can find strip clubs and gambling anywhere, but in Las Vegas, it's far more above the table. So are fights between celebrities and their possies

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The Akron Beacon Journal's [Brian Windhorst blogs](#) that, upon arriving in Vegas, he soon realized he wasn't in Kansas anymore. Or L.A., for that matter.

It's only a matter of time before the NBA or NHL figures out a way to break the ice and put a team in Las Vegas. The city is engorged with money and, with a population of nearly 600,000, is soon to become the largest U.S. city without a major pro sports franchise. But adding Vegas to the major league pro sports scene will likely change how sportsbooks handle their jobs. It might also cause some teams to roll their petty cash accounts over to bail bonds so they can yank players out of the clink in time for a 7 p.m. tipoff

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Flabby, sweaty man love

The charity race between Barkley and NBA ref Dick Bavetta presented me with three things I never want to see again:



A) Bavetta in old-man shorts hiked up to his belly button.

B) Barkley running. Has that man lifted so much as a box of bran flakes since retiring?

C) Bavetta and Barkley punctuating a friendly embrace with a kiss. Now, I have no problem with men who are secure enough in their masculinity that they can express platonic love for each other. Hey, Magic and Isiah, Pudge and Ugueth Urbina, go for it. It's a bold move for a man to kiss another man. Just ask Tim Hardaway

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But flabby Barkley and scrawny, balding Bavetta? Lip to lip? Sorry, but there goes the appetite.

Three-point shootout

Damon Jones being a Cav until further notice, I was actually rooting for him in the three-point shootout, even though I knew he had little chance of winning. I have a feeling I was in the minority among Cavs fans, many of whom wanted to see Jones and his unjustifiably huge ego get stuffed.

The Jones-haters got their wish. He finished fifth out of six contestants and didn't make it out of the first round, scoring 15 of a possible 30 points, which is still way above his season average of 7.2 points per game.



Watching former Cav **Jason Kapon** win the contest was a pretty nice consolation prize. He went berserk in the final round, tying Mark Price's final-round record of 24 points.

The lowlight of the contest was Gilbert Arenas, who managed 17 points in the championship round. By the final rack, he was so out of contention, he was lobbing one-handed misses at the basket. Way to throw in the towel, Agent Zero. And you wonder why your coach gets mad at you.

Skills competition

LeBron played the skills competition at about three-quarter speed, which is how he has played most of the season. He ran the course fine. In fact, the only miss he had was his initial jumper. He made his second jumper, nailed all of the required passes on the first try, dribbled flawlessly and still managed to get eliminated in the first round with a time of 35.4 seconds.

Mostly, it was because he was jogging his way through the course. By contrast, Wade defended his skills competition title with a final time of 26.4 seconds, and he wasn't nearly as spot-on with his passes as LeBron.

Anyone who thinks Wade is a better all-around player than LeBron is not watching the same basketball I'm watching this year. But there is no question LeBron is picking and choosing the points at which he truly exerts himself, and it isn't often.

Dunk contest

I've been a consistent critic of the dunk contest over the past several years. I think it's right for

LeBron

to skip it if he doesn't think it's worth his time. Everything, short of vaulting a moose or implementing a fire ring, has been done.

The dunk contest is the same old derivative, rehashed tricks every year, and more and more, the marquee players are staying away.

That being said, you had to love the dunk that sealed the win for Boston's **Gerald Green**. With a short, black cloth-draped table placed just below the free-throw line, Green took off his warmups to reveal a throwback Dee Brown Celtics jersey.



Green then proceeded to vault the table, hide his face behind his arm in midair and slam the ball home, a tribute to Brown's signature no-look dunk en route to winning the 1991 contest.

Sure, it was reheated leftovers like every other dunk, but it was presented with artistry and imagination, and --most importantly-- executed flawlessly. Green upped the ante by adding the table vault as his own personal touch to contrast Brown's famous dunk.

Compare that with the brutal final-round showing of last year's champion, Nate Robinson, who needed 10 attempts to finally land a 360-spin, off-the-backboard dunk. When he finally executed the dunk, it was a weak slam at that.

Olympic figure skaters and gymnasts wish they could get the mulligans Robinson has gotten in the dunk contest the past two years. But this time, even 10 attempts couldn't save the Knicks' 5'-9" guard from defeat.

All this, and the game hasn't even been played yet. Which just goes to prove, that, just like the Super Bowl, it's really not about the game at all.