Stern-Donaghy can't overshadow Celtics-Lakers

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(06-13) 18:38 PDT -- If you'd granted David Stern one wish for Thursday night, he would have made the Tim Donaghy scandal disappear. Funny thing about that: It almost did.

In the wake of Donaghy's allegations, timed to coincide with the NBA Finals and create the maximum disturbance, virtually every newspaper account referred to the "nightmare" of the story, how it put a "stain" on the Lakers-Celtics drama and was "overshadowing" everything in its path.

Some nightmare. The story had all but vanished by the tipoff for Game 4.

On ABC's telecast, including the half-hour pregame show, there wasn't one word about possible game-fixing until halftime, when highlights were shown from Stern's "a thousand times, no" news conference. That's it: no commentary, no interpretation, not a single interview with anyone else.

One of two things occurred. Either (a) Stern essentially told ABC, "We've got a nice working relationship here. Don't ruin Game 4 with this Donaghy nonsense, OK? That's an order." Or (b) It really wasn't that much of a story, at least in terms of audience demand. I was in a room full of basketball fans that night, and it was all about the game. I had to replay Stern's comments later, because nobody bothered to quiet down when his face appeared on the screen.

You got names? Different story. We'll all pay attention in the face of specific allegations, confessions and concrete evidence. Instead, like the initial furor over Donaghy's transgressions last year, the story quickly faded into the background. In the exact manner of fans not caring that half of their favorite NFL players might be on steroids, the choice was entertainment over the specter of scandal.

Don't get me wrong. This is a huge story, with sinister implications and the notion that, in time, it could bring down Stern and his oppressive corporate dictatorship. Right now, all we have is Stern's condescending smile and a desperate low-life trying to reduce his jail sentence. That's going to "overshadow" Lakers versus Celtics? Not a chance.

Frontier justice

It's not often that the rough-and-tumble style of East Coast basketball becomes relevant in the NBA, at least to the point of being memorable. People would rather forget all those 82-78 games that so tormented the playoff aesthetics over the years. Now, though, we find Kobe Bryant legitimately stifled by
We find **Pau Gasol** exposed as a wimp, and the Lakers' bench rendered ordinary at best. We see a team that sailed through the powerful Western Conference, only to be flustered by a tougher, meaner opponent ... This column picked the Lakers in seven, due to Bryant's "unstoppable" game, and it's looking ever so wrong. Then again, he still could pull this off. Go ahead, laugh, but you can't rule it out. What no one forecast is that he'd have to do it alone ... And by the way, let's reflect on perhaps the dumbest pass ever thrown in the Finals. Game 2 at Boston. Lakers storming back from 24 points down. They've cut it to four, 18 seconds left, and Bryant darts to a spot behind the three-point line with plenty of space. **Vladimir Radmanovic** ignores him and passes to **Sasha Vujacic**, who has his shot blocked by **Paul Pierce**. Unbelievable ... Kobe's worst moment of the series, when asked how he'd react to the Game 4 loss: "Lot of wine, lot of beer. Couple shots. Maybe, like, 20 of 'em." Not funny, not cool ... Imagine being on the East Coast for Game 5 on Sunday night, with a bunch of excited kids tossing miniature basketballs through the kitchen, and having the game start around 9:15 p.m. Those kids would be lucky to make it through the first quarter. "There's no doubt that at 11:30 Eastern, that's when the largest audience is gathered in," said Stern, deftly applying His Arrogance cologne. "Our network partners tell us that (with an earlier start) ratings will be lower ... and why would you want to have a lower audience count?" *Because it's the right thing to do.* God, he's annoying ... First step in convincing the public that the NBA actually cares about potential game-fixing, while also improving the product: Eliminate the foul-out rule. Now you're guaranteed of seeing your favorite players at game's end, and the refs can't destroy a game (or escalate a fix) by calling two quick fouls on a superstar.

Great move by ESPN, leaving the play-by-play and game commentary to British announcers during Euro '08 soccer, making it must-see television each morning. The last thing we need is some clown like **John Buccigross** barging in with "No. 4, Bobby Orr" or "winner, winner, chicken dinner!" ... The wonderful thing about **Jim McKay**, the storied broadcaster who died this week, was his ever-so-rare combination of writer, reporter (as good as they come), enthusiast (he often had the hint of a smile on his face) and travelogue host. You hear his name and you're thinking ski jumps, the cliffs of Acapulco, demolition derbies, **Dave Wottle** and **Olga Korbut**. In the days of ABC's "Wide World of Sports," we tuned in having no connection with the city McKay was in, or the sport he was covering - but after an hour's time, we were hooked ... One of the more astute judges of minor-league talent, ESPN's **Keith Law**, says the Giants had a better draft than any team in baseball. Aside from the first-round picks, Law pointed to Texas Tech right fielder **Roger Kieschnick** and reliever **Edwin Quirarte** from Cal State Northridge ... **Brian Sabean** didn't mean to insult **Bengie Molina**, but he did, and that's a fence that needs mending. Molina was wrong to question why the Giants wouldn't commit to him beyond 2009. That's exactly how they should play it. But they'll need him in a relaxed, contented state over that time frame ... During an extensive tour of American ballparks, a New York Times food critic pegged the legendary Dodger Dog as "contemptibly bad: salty, greasy and tepid." A secret at the Giants' ballpark, for those unaware: the best hot dogs in baseball can be found at nondescript locations down each foul line on the field level. Grilled to perfection. Why the rest of the concession stands serve such cheap imitations, I cannot explain.

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