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NBA Finals

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There were times when I thought I was watching the World Wrestling Federation. All that was missing was a gold lamay cape worn by Patrick Ewing, cowboy boots and stetson for Charles Oakley, or designer trunks with matching shoes for John Starks. As for Pat Riley he has always looked the part.

What a great sigh of relief when Game Seven of the NBA Finals reached its last twenty seconds and it was certain that the New York Knicks had not succeeded in setting professional basketball back several decades.

In the past decade and a half Bird and Magic, followed by Michael and the Bulls, presented the nation with a form of basketball that was smooth, fast, graceful, and enormously entertaining. It was basketball that was marketed properly and brought the fans streaming back to the arenas and television sets in record numbers, and allowed the expansion of the league into new and lucrative markets.

The New York Knicks play a brand of basketball that seems more appropriate in style for the New York Rangers. Clutch and grab basketball, used by Detroit to some success, looked like a serious threat to make a comeback as the Knicks moved on through the playoffs. It made you miss Michael Jordan and the style and grace with which he played more than ever.

It just is not possible to play decent basketball when you are being body-slammed, cross-checked, or simply tackled; three maneuvers taken from wrestling, hockey, and football.

Where, you may ask, were the referees during all of this? Well they were there on the floor, and every once in a while they made some bizarre call or another to acknowledge their presence. More often than not it helped the New York Knicks move on. The Knicks-Indiana series gave real credence to the notion that the League office dictates to officials who should win games. It really was pathetic.

The other facet of officiating that must be commented on is the fact that the basketmugging played by the Knicks is only possible because referees are told not to enforce certain rules. Before game seven of the finals Jack Ramsey and Dan Patrick on ESPN demonstrated how Derek Harper was slowing down the Houston guards with a hand-check. He simply grabbed onto them and held them, something which is illegal even in hockey. But the

officials ignored it, and the Houston offense became as ineffective as that of the Knicks.

As for the meat grinding under the basket, it surprises me that Hakeem Olijawan or Patrick Ewing or anyone else is ever able to do anything on offense. WWF stars would find it much too physical under the basket.

Contrast all of this to the National Hockey League which just had one great playoff run. The quality of the hockey played in this year's Stanley Cup playoff was remarkable. The San Jose Sharks' success, first over Detroit and then taking Toronto to the limit, offered wonderful hockey in the Russian style with Larionov and Makarov, two thirds of the famous Russian KLM line displaying the fact that they still could dominate the action. The Vancouver-Toronto Series was just magnificent, not to mention the early round in which Vancouver came back from the dead to beat Calgary. Maybe the best hockey of all was played in the Eastern Final between the Rangers and New Jersey Devils. This seven game set, with the Rangers coming from behind, offered superb end to end action and high drama.

And then came the final, with its wild momentum swings. When Vancouver stole the first game in Madison Square Garden it looked like the curse on the Rangers was real. Then when the Rangers went to Vancouver and took two it looked like a short series. But beginning with game five this Stanley Cup Final began to resemble the stuff of legends. Game five in the Garden was fascinating. While the Ranger fans waited to celebrate the winning of the cup, the Rangers looked so tight it is surprising they could even skate. So they went back to Vancouver and again the Canucks rose to the occasion with the goal explosions by both teams in the third period, while Pavel Bure was demonstrating why he is called the "Russian Rocket."

So it was back to the Garden for Game Seven with the Curse of 1940 hovering over the Rangers. Then Mark Messier stepped forward and took over the game, as it had done against New Jersey, and as he had done so many times for the Edmonton Oilers. Messier and his former Edmonton Oiler teammates, along with Leetch, Richter, and two Russians, Kobalev and Zhubov took over the game. The Canucks were never really able to get their game started. It was as exciting a Stanley Cup Series and Final as it was a dreadful and dismal NBA Final.

This could be a great step forward for the National Hockey League, and it should be a reminder to NBA officials that

basketball did not become popular by being a showcase for Raslin.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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