

U.S. basketball produces squad playing as one

Scott Ostler, Chronicle Staff Writer

Monday, August 25, 2008



[More...](#)

(08-25) 04:00 PDT Beijing -- The taxi driver stared blankly at my map. I had circled the Olympic basketball arena on the map, but there was a disconnect. The driver spoke no English; I spoke no Chinese.

It was Sunday afternoon, I needed to get to the U.S.-Spain gold-medal game, but it wasn't looking good.

After several moments of gloomy silence - the cabbie shaking his head slowly - his face suddenly brightened. He pantomimed a jump shot, flicked his wrist in graceful follow-through and cried out, "Kobe!"

And off we went to Kobe.

The Chinese fans love Kobe Bryant. He is their adopted son, who, with supernatural skill, sparkles above the rest of the world in the game that is their new love.

Everyone digs Kobe. When the U.S. basketball team visited the Olympic Village (the U.S. basketballers stayed in a luxe hotel), the other athletes treated Kobe like Elvis.

Seemingly the only person in Beijing who didn't embrace the Kobe-centric view of the Olympic basketball universe was Kobe.

In eight games, never did Bryant go off. Never did he shoot the ball 10 times in a row, or even three. In the few moments of stress the U.S. team faced, Bryant did not grow larger while his teammates disappeared.

He came through in the clutch, but almost quietly. He was one of the guys.

The executives, coaches and players of USA Basketball - the Olympic team - have been telling us for three years that this group of players would be different. It would be a team. The players would blend, respect one another, respect the coach, play hard for their country, not personal glory.

They would not be a bunch of knuckleheads.

The assurances sounded to skeptics like a slick sales pitch.

Why should we believe? It had become apparent that while America produces the world's greatest basketball players, those players treat the team concept with contempt and disdain.

Now we can believe. For eight games, the U.S. walked the walk, passed the pass, set the pick, played the D and honored the game of Dr. James Naismith.

The U.S. defeated Spain 118-107 on Sunday. The Spaniards played a gritty, ferocious game. Whenever the 2004 U.S. Olympic team was similarly engaged, it folded like a soggy roadmap.

"I do believe that what we instituted three years ago helped us not to crack today," said Jerry Colangelo, managing director of USA Basketball. It was Colangelo who stripped the program down and rebuilt it, picking players based on commitment, character and class.

Colangelo's message: Don't join this team to pimp your shoe-endorsement deal or to dominate discos for Uncle Sam. Join it to re-invent American international basketball.

Sunday's postgame news conference, based on a rigid format, was to be coach Mike Krzyzewski and one or two players. The U.S. team was having none of that. After the medal-presentation ceremony, LeBron James told his teammates they would storm the news conference as a unit - all 12 players, Krzyzewski and Colangelo.

Panicky young Chinese volunteers scrambled to find enough podium chairs for the sweaty Americans.

Colangelo, by the way, is now the most popular man in American basketball. He is receiving and will

continue to receive hundreds of pleas from American players and their agents to be allowed to jump aboard this crazy new bandwagon.

The second most popular man will be Krzyzewski, who will be fending off monster contract offers from roughly 28 of the 30 NBA teams.

If Coach K can get 12 skillionaire superstars to meld their individual brilliance into a team effort, he has a secret mojo that is priceless.

"Everybody wants to talk about NBA players being selfish, being ignorant, being individuals," Krzyzewski said. "What you saw today was a team bonding together, facing adversity, and coming out of here with a big win."

You saw a team believing in its coach, and vice versa.

"I told coach K (after the game), 'Thanks for believing in me,' " said Dwyane Wade, who came to this team with his rep badly sagging, partly because of two surgeries last year (shoulder and knee).

If the U.S. team had an MVP - and it didn't, of course - it would be Wade. In terms of sheer brilliance, Wade out-Kobe'd Kobe. Wade led the U.S. in scoring Sunday with 27, including three three-pointers (in four attempts). He had four steals.

And Wade never started a game here. When a team can bring Dwyane Wade off its bench, that team is going to break some hearts. But the U.S. victory was about more than talent.

"I've seen a big improvement" in the U.S. team's play between '04 and '08, Spain center Pau Gasol said. "I think they took this tournament very seriously, they were very hungry. They gave a better feeling of a team; it wasn't so much individual stuff, individual talent."

It wasn't about one person, not even Kobe.

In the athletes' village, at the many events he attended, during pregame introductions, Bryant was a god.

Once the games started, he was one of the guys. The supporting cast consisted of 12 players, supporting one another - one golden team, knuckleheads no more.

E-mail Scott Ostler at sostler@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/08/25/SPFG12HL2J.DTL>

*This article appeared on page **C - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*

© 2008 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)