

## PRO BASKETBALL

# Hoping to Finish With a Flourish That Isn't Orchestrated

Do Kobe Bryant a favor and spare him the pregame testimonials, the gold-plated plaques, the sporty cars and easy chairs. Just deposit his check, give him the

**HARVEY ARATON**  
ON PRO BASKETBALL

ball and get in his way. Or so he says. "The biggest sign of respect to me would be to approach it just like it was any other game and try to kick our butts just like it was any other game," he said. "Those are the things I hold extremely dear." Dear Lord, will the Nets ever win a game? Before a loss in Milwaukee on Saturday night, their season record had fallen to a New Jersey throwback 0-6 when they were beaten by Bryant and his previously winless Los Angeles Lakers, 104-98, Friday night at Barclays Center, in Game 1 of his purported farewell swing through New York.

Sunday's stop at Madison Square Garden promises to be more sentimental than the one in Brooklyn, despite the Nets' alleged fan base's embracing Bryant with cheers and chants, or what he — more accustomed to less tender shows of respect — called "an uncomfortable hug."

Like Michael Jordan, another coldhearted assassin and Bryant's spiritual ancestor, he has never been the cuddliest of road-show superstars. But the Knicks are steered by Phil Jackson and coached by Derek Fisher, both of whom he is emotionally tethered to by five Lakers titles. And unlike in Brooklyn, where the Nets have played only three full seasons, Bryant has a long history in

Midtown Manhattan, where he broke the Garden scoring record in February 2009 with a 61-point explosion against the Knicks.

Carmelo Anthony reclaimed it by one for the home side five years later. With both shot-happy warriors experiencing a lack of leg propulsion because of injuries or age or both, a high-voltage Kobe-versus-Melo duel is unlikely, and not what their coaches, rebuilding with youth, would prefer.

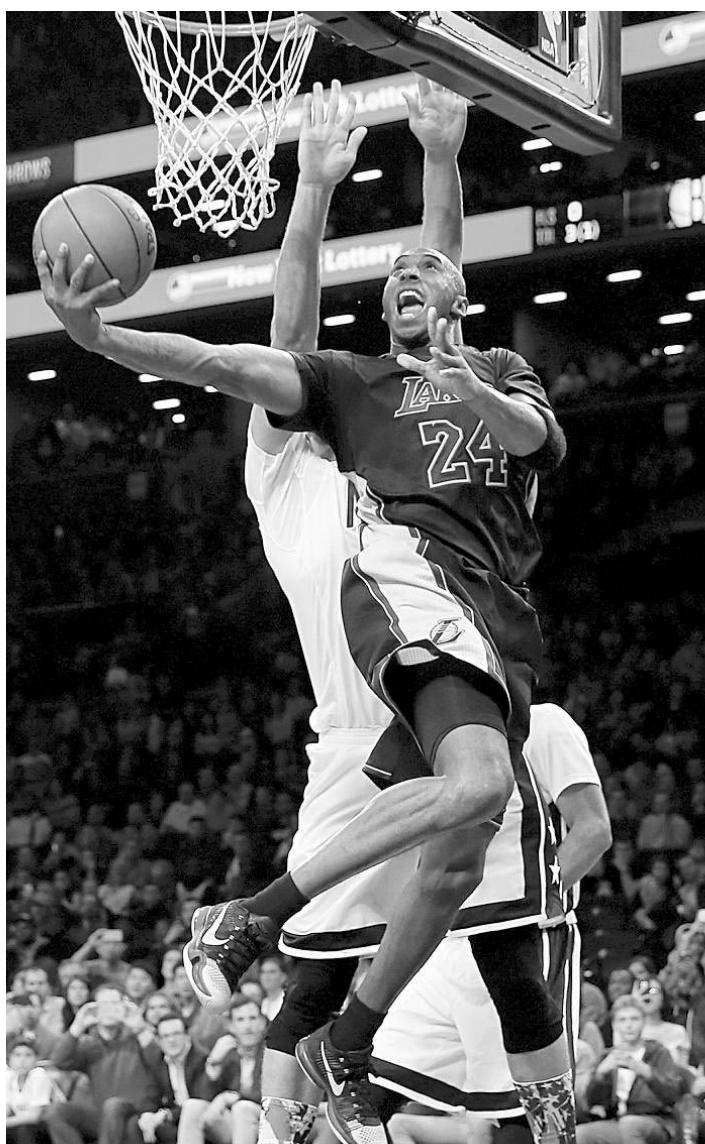
Given Bryant's and Anthony's competitive conceit, it wouldn't be shocking if they tested the waters early to determine if it's possible.

What Bryant insisted we would not see around the country during what he has said, though not sworn, would be his 20th and last season is a ceremonial fuss. Friday, a Lakers spokesman said there had been no discussions with opposing teams, especially those in the Eastern Conference that he only visits once.

Bryant probably could live with a video tribute. As for gifts, he said, "Don't do that."

With Bryant, the self-fashioned Heir Jordan, or No. 23 plus one, there has always been one overriding question: What would Michael have done? So it was no surprise that, after scoring 18 points on 5-for-16 shooting, he conjured up a memory of Jordan's final All-Star appearance in 2003, a baton-passing moment.

"He and I were catching up in the locker room and he says, 'You know, I just want you to approach it like any other game, compete against me just like it's any other game,'" Bryant said. "I said, 'Michael, what the hell about me



Kobe Bryant, driving for a layup against the Nets on Friday, said he did not want farewell ceremonies at opponents' arenas.

made you think I was going to approach this any differently?"

His voice rose to the loudest it got during interviews both before and after the game when he spoke in near-funereal tones. Was this his way of lending gravitas to the first of many such occasions? Bryant's stated preference for nothing more than a competitive salute aside, his career-long love of stage and spotlight make it difficult to believe that he doesn't dream of finishing with a flourish.

The chances of him getting what he most wants — a sixth championship, equaling Jordan's haul with the Bulls in Chicago — are less than remote. But it has become a little too fashionable for people to blame Bryant for his own predicament of finishing with an N.B.A. bottom-feeder because he signed a salary cap-clogging \$48.5 million, two-year extension in November 2013.

The Lakers weren't forced at gunpoint to make the offer. They did it at least as much to mollify their Kobe-struck fan base as to reward Bryant for meritorious service. And when they did have ample cap room to sign a premier free agent last summer, they whiffed, as Jackson did in New York.

Hollywood no doubt remains a draw for stars on the move, but the franchise will have more curb appeal once Bryant's baggage is no longer cluttering the living room. On his way out, the Lakers are hoping he will share the secrets of his ultracompetitive character — if not his propensity for making teammates invisible — with their youthful core of Jul-

ius Randle, Jordan Clarkson and D'Angelo Russell.

All three played well against the Nets, and with Clarkson and Russell starting in the backcourt, it was strange seeing Bryant operate at small forward, setting up in a corner, not as much at the point of attack. Along with the legs, that probably helps explain the 32-percent early-season shooting that recently evoked a self-evaluation as the league's 200th best player.

"I was being facetious," he said after starting slowly but making a few trademark shots in the second half. "I really don't think that."

He believes he'll be better. He's probably right. But while Bryant will dominate the headlines, he can no longer be the franchise focus the way Anthony is in New York, even as attention inevitably shifts to Kristaps Porzingis.

Bryant does have his full hand of unquestioned greatness, a ring for each finger, even if there will be no sixth, no iconic Jordan-in-Utah N.B.A. finals closure next June.

The 38-year-old Jordan resurfaced in Washington three years after the Bulls' last title run, but Bryant, 37, dismissed Jackson's recent assertion that he might eventually play elsewhere, setting off speculation of his joining Anthony in New York.

"I've said it so many times," he said. "I'm here. I'm a Laker for life. I'm not playing anywhere else, no matter what."

Twenty years, five titles, with a \$48.5 million gift contract thrown in. Uncomfortable hugs aside, what else does he need?

## FOOTBALL

## While Time Marches On, A Referee Jogs, Sprints or Dashes

By GRANT GLICKSON

BAY SHORE, N.Y. — On a recent Sunday on Long Island, Joe Gaeta sprinted nearly 10 miles over the course of a four-and-a-half-hour workday. Wearing an exercise tracking device, Gaeta put in the kind of day that has become rather routine for him over the last quarter-century: He officiated four Police Athletic League youth football games, jogging across the gridiron more than three dozen times to back up a fellow official's call. He dashed 100 yards on three occasions to follow long scoring plays and sprinted to the end zone a dozen other times to chase touchdown jaunts of more than 40 yards.

What is unusual about Gaeta is that he is 88 years old.

"People look at me as if I'm some kind of miracle," said Gaeta, sipping a Gatorade between games. "They tell me that I set a positive example and that I inspire them."

Gaeta, who officiates an average of eight games a week during football season, is also a senior aide in charge of physical activities at five senior centers in Islip, N.Y. In his spare time, he works out at a gym three days a week

At 88, still putting in the miles, from end zone to end zone.

and helps maintain his stamina by jogging at least a mile every day except Sunday.

"I'm 55 years old, and I can't run the field the way Gaeta does," said Al Procida, a P.A.L. representative for Bay Shore football. "And he lets me know it, too."

John Russell, a college official for almost 20 years who worked in three P.A.L. games with Gaeta last month, said he was in awe of him.

"It's amazing that he's 88 and still sharp as a whip," Russell said. "Knowing that my father is 90 and my mother is 87, and then I look at him, running up and down the field, it makes no sense."

It makes plenty of sense to Gaeta, who grew up in Astoria, Queens, playing baseball with Whitey Ford, the Hall of Fame Yankees pitcher. Gaeta has remained active on the playing field by combining his stringent exercise regimen with a diet that includes plenty of fish, fruit and vegetables and little red meat.

He is 5 feet 6 inches tall and still weighs 145 pounds, his fighting weight from his Navy days during World War II.

"I have 100 guys who work for me, and not everyone runs up and down the field," said Rich Platia, the 52-year-old director of officials for P.A.L. in Suffolk County. "Joe gives 120 percent ef-



Joe Gaeta, 88, suited up to officiate three football games on Sept. 27 for the Police Athletic League in Suffolk County, N.Y. "I'm 55 years old, and I can't run the field the way Gaeta does," said Al Procida, a P.A.L. representative for Bay Shore football.

or at a Long Island mall.

"I'm amazed what Joe Gaeta can do," said Shelly Jeter, a neighborhood aide who knows Gaeta through one of the senior centers, in Oakdale, N.Y. "He just has this aura about him that attracts people, and they want to be involved in what he's doing. He's a great motivator because he shows that just because you are a senior citizen, you don't have to stop doing physical activities."

"He breaks the mold when it comes to be able to get up every day and do what he does."

According to Platia, Gaeta is nine years older than the next-oldest active P.A.L. football official in Suffolk County. Gaeta also officiates junior high school, junior varsity and occasional varsity games for Section XI, which encompasses all public school games in Suffolk County. Mickey Kane, president of the Suffolk County Football Officials Association, said he believed Gaeta was also the oldest in Section XI.

Thoughts of putting his whistle in storage or retiring from his work with seniors are nowhere to be found in Gaeta's playbook.

"A lot of people ask me when I am going to pack it in," he said. "My answer is that as long as I can keep up with a wide receiver and am at the goal line before he gets there, I will never retire. I'm 88 years old, and I'm still in the kind of shape that keeps me right there with these younger players."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HEATHER WALSH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

fort in every game. You always see him chasing the 7-year-olds because they are running 60-yard plays every play. Joe is right behind them. He's not going to miss a down. He's looking to work with a partner who runs like him. He hustles. He calls the game like I like to call it."

Gaeta, a long-retired bricklayer, said he was most proud of helping other seniors stay active.

Gaeta, who has worked at senior centers for the last 16 years, runs a Sit and Get Fit program that includes exercise routines and an aerobic swimming class. He also has his fellow seniors feeling younger by encouraging them to play Wii sports video games and compete in billiards and bocce tournaments. He accompanies them on long walks, either at one of the senior centers

## N.B.A. ROUNDUP

## Nets' Skid Reaches Seven With a Loss in Milwaukee

By The Associated Press

Greg Monroe had 20 points and 8 rebounds Saturday night, leading the Milwaukee Bucks to a 94-86 victory over the visiting Nets.

Monroe shot 8 of 16 from the floor and contributed his only two assists down the stretch for the Bucks, who handed the Nets their seventh straight loss to start the season.

Jerryd Bayless had 19 points, shooting 7 of 13, with 10 rebounds, and Khris Middleton chipped in with 14 points and 9 rebounds.

Milwaukee (4-3) has won four in a row after starting 0-3 for the first time since 1976-77.

The Nets were led by Brook Lopez with 20 points. Thaddeus Young had 18 points and 13 rebounds.

**HAWKS 114, WIZARDS 99** Kent Bazemore scored a career-high 25 points, and host Atlanta beat Washington for the Hawks' seventh consecutive victory.

Paul Millsap had 21 points, 7 rebounds and 6 assists for Atlanta, and Al Horford scored 14 points. Jeff Teague finished with 10 points, 8 assists and 5 steals.

Otto Porter paced the Wizards with a career-high 23 points, but Washington committed 26 turnovers and was unable to stop At-

lanta in the final quarter, when it scored 39 points.

**TIMBERWOLVES 102, BULLS 93** Andrew Wiggins scored 31 points, and Minnesota beat host Chicago in overtime.

The rookie Karl-Anthony Towns added 17 points, 13 rebounds and 4 blocked shots for Minnesota, which had lost two in a row. Nemanja Bjelica, a fellow rookie, also scored 17 points.

Pau Gasol had 21 points and 14 rebounds for Chicago.

**MAGIC 105, 76ERS 97** Elfrid Payton scored 20 points, and a balanced Orlando team beat host Philadelphia.

The Magic had seven players score in double figures in their third victory in four games following an 0-3 start.

**SPURS 114, HORNETS 94** Kawhi Leonard scored 23 points, LaMarcus Aldridge had 16 and San Antonio pulled away for a victory over visiting Charlotte.

San Antonio made eight 3-pointers in the second half.

**MAVERICKS 107, PELICANS 98** Deron Williams had 16 of his 19 points in the second half and Dirk Nowitzki scored 9 of his 18 in the fourth quarter as host Dallas beat New Orleans (0-6).

## HOCKEY

## N.H.L. ROUNDUP

## Rangers Win Fifth Straight As Raanta Stifles Coyotes

By The Associated Press

Antti Raanta shut out the Arizona Coyotes for all but the final five seconds on Saturday night, and the Rangers won their fifth in a row with a 4-1 victory in Glendale, Ariz.

Rantaa, the backup to the starter, Henrik Lundqvist, had 39 saves. He has allowed two goals in his three games and has the Rangers' only shutout of the season.

Jesper Fast, J.T. Miller, Chris Kreider and Kevin Hayes scored for the Rangers.

**SABRES 3, CANUCKS 2** Rasmus Ristolainen scored two goals, including the winner with 16.8 seconds left, leading Buffalo to a home victory over Vancouver.

Canucks goaltender Ryan Miller played his first game back in Buffalo since being traded in 2014 after more than 11 seasons with the Sabres.

**KINGS 4, PANTHERS 1** Drew Doughty and Anze Kopitar scored 55 seconds apart late in the second period to lead host Los Angeles over Florida.

**HURRICANES 3, SENATORS 2** Jordan Staal scored 2 minutes 51 seconds into overtime to give Carolina a victory over visiting Ottawa.

With the goalie pulled for a sixth attacker, the Hurricanes tied it when Jeff Skinner scored with just 3.3 seconds remaining in regulation.

**FLYERS 3, JETS 0** Michal Neuvirth made 28 saves, Brayden Schenn and Wayne Simmonds scored on power plays, and Philadelphia won at Winnipeg to end a six-game losing streak.

**CANADIENS 4, BRUINS 2** David Desharnais scored on a power play with 1:08 left in regulation to lift Montreal at home over Boston. Max Pacioretty added an empty-netter.

**CAPITALS 3, MAPLE LEAFS 2** Alex Ovechkin had a goal in regulation and scored in the fourth round of the shootout to lift Washington to a victory over visiting Toronto.

Nicklas Backstrom tied it with less than a second left in regulation for the Capitals.

**BLUES 4, PREDATORS 0** Jake Allen made 45 saves, and St. Louis scored three times in the third period to win at Nashville.

**WILD 1, LIGHTNING 0** Devan Dubnyk made 31 saves, and Minnesota beat visiting Tampa Bay. Jared Spurgeon scored the lone goal for Minnesota.