

Dunk you very much

The return of All-Star Saturday Night

One dunk.

That's all it took to transform that which had become in recent years the NBA's most boring and unsatisfying piece of sports entertainment into the superb showcase it once was.

One dunk.

A mere five seconds, maybe less, and NBA All-Star Saturday Night was reborn. Hail the once and future king. Thank you Vince Carter.

The one they call Air Canada truly is half-man, half-amazing. He brought All-Star Saturday Night—once a wondrous, splendid event—back from the mostly dead. Left to suffer a few more years, and we all could have searched its pockets for loose change. When I was younger, my friends and I gathered around the television in the early evening on the West Coast to sit and watch in awe as Michael Jordan and Dominique Wilkins battled for the slam dunk crown, while Larry Bird sent everyone home in the three-point contest. We would judge the dunks for ourselves on handmade score cards and scream at the TV when we thought somebody was robbed. We even had our own mini-hoop dunk contests on Nerf baskets afterwards, trying to relive the excitement, and even some of the dunks of the contest.

The dunk contest was an idea the NBA stole from the ABA, which held the first dunk contest at one of their All-Star games. In that inaugural contest, Dr. J beat high-flying David "Skywalker" Thompson with an eye-popping dunk from the free throw line. When NBA All-Star Saturday Night began it was solely the dunk contest. Larry Nantz, then of the Phoenix Suns, won the first contest, defeating Dr. J and Orlando Woolridge. Eventually the three-point shooting contest was added, as was an old-timers game. These three events made up the backbone of an event that was, for my friends and I, a childhood tradition. I even watched the old-timers game (get a life, young fella!) that was constantly dominated by Calvin Murphy, the only one of the geriatric old fogies who could actually run down the court. The whole night was simply special.

Trashing the slam

Yet as the nineties progressed, something happened to All-Star Saturday Night. The slam dunk contest began to lose its creativity. It was as if we had seen every dunk before. No-names like Brent Barry instead of stars such as Jordan and Wilkins were winning the contest. In 1997, the NBA inexplicably made the three-point contest the main event, pushing the dunk contest to second billing.

In 1998 came the ultimate atrocity: the NBA cancelled the dunk contest, replacing it with some monstrosity called 2ball. I ranted. I raved. I screamed. I cried. I wrote a column in this very space lamenting the death of the dunk.

Never again, I thought, would we see the likes of the amazing 5'5" Spud Webb coming out of nowhere and winning the contest, nor would we have men like The Human Highlight Film, "Air" Jordan, Kenny "Sky" Walker and Harold "Baby Jordan" Minor flying into our living room and our imagination. I needed Dee Brown's no-look dunk or Cedric Ceballos' blindfold. I would have even taken Larry Bird walking into the locker

room for the three-point shootout and declaring, “Which one of y’all is playing for second place.” I needed my All-Star Saturday Night.

Air apparent

In my column two years ago, I suggested that the only solution would be for Jordan to reenter the competition and take on the young high flyers like Kobe Bryant. Only the man who had made the contest so spectacular could do so again.

Turns out I was wrong.

One dunk was all it took to prove it.

Last weekend, All-Star Saturday Night was proceeding at what had become its usual, unexciting pace. 2ball, despite coming down to the second-to-last shot of Jeff Hornacek, just wasn’t that exciting. It’s 2ball for goodness sake. The three-point contest was the worst in recent memory, with Hornacek defending his title despite only having 13 points in the final round. 13 points?! Craig Hodges once made his first 19 shots in the final round of the shootout.

Then the newly reinstated dunk contest got off to an auspicious start, with Philadelphia 76er Larry Hughes missing his first dunk. Two mildly impressive slams followed Hughes’ brick. Yet one had to wonder if it would get better.

Then along came Vince with an emphatic answer.

Carter’s first dunk of the competition was a twisting, spinning, 360° windmill-in-reverse that sent the crowd into a frenzy. The seven guys in my living room exploded in cheers and fell on top of each other in disbelief. The TNT announcers asked, “Was that the best dunk ever?”

The life was back in All-Star Saturday Night. The fans and the viewers were on the edges of their seats for the next forty-five minutes. Shaquille O’Neal put down his video camera for the night. He had all the shots he needed.

Vince-torious

One dunk.

The excitement of my childhood—of Jordan, Wilkins and Spud—was back. All-Star Saturday Night had been reborn.

One dunk.

That was all Carter needed. It was just icing on the cake when on Carter’s third dunk he leapt into the air, caught a bounce pass from teammate Tracy McGrady with his left hand, put the ball between his legs into his right hand and stuffed it home. Upon landing safely on earth, Carter struck a pose and mouthed to the cameras, “It’s over.”

But Carter wasn’t finished. In the final round he rose into the atmosphere and slammed home the ball while sticking half his arm down the hoop and hanging by his elbow from the rim. It was equally thrilling when the entire crowd at the Arena in Oakland stood up as Carter prepared to attempt his final dunk, an unprecedented occurrence for the dunk contest. All-Star Saturday Night was alive and kicking. Vince Carter, playing the role of Miracle Max, had given the near-dead event its chocolate-coated miracle pills.

One dunk.

That was all it took to have me wanting to go out and buy a Nerf hoop again.

CASEY SHEARER B’00 can be found at the OMAC playing 2ball daily.