

Nothing But Neat at the NBA All-Star Game

by Con Chapman

LOS ANGELES. It's been five years since the National Basketball Association adopted its "business casual" dress code in an effort to combat the league's "gangsta" image, personified by a 2004 brawl between the Detroit Pistons and the Indiana Pacers that started on the court and spilled into the stands. The results of that initiative are on display here this week as hoop heroes from around the nation gather for the league's 60th All-Star Game.



"Hey, fellas," said the Heat's LeBron James as he walked into the Eastern Conference locker room. "What's new?"

"Not much," replied his teammate Chris Bosh as he smoothed out his formerly fearsome "corn rows" with Wildroot Cream Oil.

"Cool Dockers!" said Paul Pierce of the Celtics with an admiring glance as he greeted James.



"Thank you," James said with a sheepish look on his face as he smoothed the pleats on his pants. "I was totally wrong about the dress code!"

"That's for sure," said Duane Wade as he put the finishing touches on a four-in-hand knot in a British rep tie.

"Hey 'Duane'—since when did you go from 'Dwyane' to 'Duane'?" Rajon Rondo asked.

Now it was Wade's turn to crack a little smile of embarrassment. "'Dwyane' was kind of—I don't know—*déclassé*. A little 'street', don't you think?"



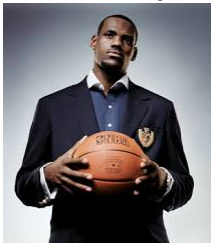
A cloud passed over Rondo's face as he considered the implications of his teammate's decision. "So you think 'Rajon' is too . . ."

"Ghetto?" suggested James.

"Well, yes," Rondo replied with a hurt look.

"I'm sure he meant no disrespect," James said, playing the peacemaker. "For example, I used to be 'The Chosen One' but I changed my nickname to 'Chip'. Like it?"

"Very collegiate," said UConn grad Ray Allen.



A cloud came over James' face. "You *would* have to mention that, wouldn't you?" he said, clearly embarrassed that he had never gone to college. "But I decided, if I'm going to dress like a dork, I need a dorky nickname."

Dwight Howard appeared at the door, a ball in his hands, eager to shoot some "hoops" with his dream teammates for the weekend.

"Guys," said Howard. "Gather 'round."

The Celtics' Kevin Garnett ambled over, all ears. "What is up, dog?"

"I've been working on a two-handed set shot!"

"Neat!" Garnett exclaimed. "How do you do it?"



"It's all in the wrists. Keep them loose, rotate the ball towards your tummy, and when you release, keep your feet firmly planted on the hardwood!"

"That's 'East Coast Basketball' at its best!" Derrick Rose shouted from his stool in the corner. "Like Holy Cross in the '40's!"

"You'd better save your voice for your *a cappella* group, Derrick!" Pierce yelled, poking good-natured fun at the Bulls guard.

The other players laughed so hard they didn't realize that Celtics' coach Glenn "Doc" Rivers had appeared at the door.

"Okay, gents, let's cut out the horseplay," Rivers said with a gruff voice. The players had hoped that their coach would go easy on them over All-Star Weekend, and his tone gave them a start!

"We have a tough row to hoe against these fellows from the Western Conference," Rivers said once the room had quieted down. "They're a disciplined bunch over there."



"You just ruined my suit jacket!"

"You'd better believe it," James chimed in with a "flip" tone. He had lost none of his former impertinence, even though he looked like a sales associate from the Gap.

"Can you give us a 'for instance', Coach?" Pierce asked.

"Well, Carmelo Anthony is wearing brown kiltie loafers," Rivers said. "With tassels."

"I can handle him," said the lone New York Knickerbocker on the team.

"Are you sure, Amar'e?" Rivers asked skeptically.

"Sure I'm sure. And I'm not 'Amar'e' anymore. I had the apostrophe removed from my name."

Pierce gave out a low whistle. "That was a gutsy move," he said with admiration.

"How about Kobe?" Garnett asked.

"He's changed," Rivers replied sharply, his eyes narrowing to grim little slits. "He's got limited liability."



"You mean when he drives the lane . . ." Rondo began before Rivers cut him off.

"It's not him—it's Kobe Bryant, LLP. Personally, you can't touch him."

"Golly," Dwight Howard said with a look of disappointment on his face. "I thought the All-Star Game was supposed to be fun!"

"Bullfeathers," Rivers snapped. "It's only fun if you win."

A gloomy mood settled over the players, and they stared down at their sneakers. In their dejected state they failed to notice Tim Duncan and Chris Paul lurking outside the room with air horns. The two interlopers waited until Rivers was about to speak, then let out a blast you could hear a mile away!

"Duncan, you stupid fish stick!" Pierce screamed with his hands over his ears.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Paul laughed.

"We'll see you guys on the court," Duncan said with relish as the two Western Conference stars ran away.

"You practical jokers had better behave yourselves or I'll tell your coach!" Rivers yelled after them.



After order was restored, the coach grabbed a felt-tipped pen, wrote the words "Core Competencies," "Changing Marketplace" and "Strategic Goals" across the top of a white board on the wall and turned to face his players.

"Let's make a list of what we hope to accomplish this weekend," he said, and hands shot up around the room.

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