

## Referee blunder kills off the Mavericks

Dallas Mavericks 105  
Denver Nuggets 106

**DALLAS:** Antoine Wright had a simple objective. In a game with 61 fouls already called, he was trying to commit another.

So he bumped Denver's Carmelo Anthony once, hard enough to knock him off stride. But not enough for a foul call.

So he jostled Anthony again, knowing that his team had a foul to give before the Nuggets started shooting free throws.

Still no call — and now Wright was out of position, leaving Anthony with a clear look at the basket. The Denver star's three-pointer went right through with a second left, giving the Nuggets a 106-105 victory over the Dallas Mavericks on Saturday, and a 3-0 series lead that has been insurmountable in National Basketball Association history.

"I have hit a lot of big shots in my short career, but never in a situation like this," Anthony said. "It was a thin line between 2-1 and 3-0."

It is even thinner than he thinks. About two hours after the game, the league office announced that Wright was right. In a brief statement, NBA president Joel Litvin said: "The officials missed an intentional foul committed by Antoine Wright on Carmelo Anthony, just prior to Anthony's three-point basket."

Nonetheless, the result stood. "I think this is about as tough of a loss as I've been a part of in my 11 years in the league," Dallas' Dirk Nowitzki, who had 33 points and 16 rebounds, said.

When time ran out, the crowd fell silent and the Mavericks began to gripe, although far less violently than Chelsea's protestations after being knocked out by Barcelona in football's Champions League semi-final on Wednesday.

Chelsea had claimed Norwegian referee Tom Henning Ovrebo failed to award them key penalties.

On Saturday, Josh Howard was among a cluster of Dallas players who appeared to be exchanging words with Denver players and staff. Owner Mark Cuban, brushed by a cameraman on his way to the scene, then blew off steam behind the scorer's table, his face reddening.

"Officiating has to be a science, not an art," Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle said.

The Nuggets can consider themselves lucky to be close enough to get saved by a controversial finish.

They missed 15 of their first 17 shots and made only two longer than 1.5m in the entire first half. They finished with as many fouls as field goals and their previously dominant tandem of Nene and Chris Andersen struggled — Nene missing his first eight shots and "Bird-man" fouling out in only 11 minutes.

Yet Denver never trailed by more than six points. The Mavericks' inability to pull away was as damaging as the non-call against Wright.

Said the Mavericks' Jason Kidd: "The game didn't come down to that last play. You've got to make plays down the stretch and we didn't do that."

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Carmelo Anthony shooting the game-winning three-point basket against the Dallas Mavericks that gave the Denver Nuggets a 3-0 lead in the series on Saturday. PHOTO: REUTERS

## There's just no stopping King James

Atlanta Hawks 82  
Cleveland Cavaliers 97

**ATLANTA:** LeBron James had that unstoppable feeling. Everyone get out of the way.

As if being the National Basketball Association's Most Valuable Player was not enough, he scored 47 points in his best performance yet of these play-offs, leading the Cleveland Cavaliers to the brink of their second straight post-season sweep with a 97-82 victory over the Atlanta Hawks on Saturday.

"It's unexplainable, honestly," James said, after carrying Cleveland to a 3-0 lead in the series.

"There's only a few guys in this league that can get into a zone like that, and I'm blessed to have the ability to be one of those guys.

"You just feel like you can make pretty much every shot you take."

He will get no argument from the Hawks, who put up their best fight of the series and still find themselves just one loss away from calling it a season.

The Cavaliers said "King" James was the first player to score that many points, grab that many rebounds (12) and dole out that many assists (eight) in a play-off game.

"LeBron was just out of his mind tonight," Atlanta's Josh Smith said.

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# TOUGH BREAK FOR YAO, HOUSTON

## Foot fracture means Chinese star will miss the rest of the play-offs

**HOUSTON:** Houston, we have a problem. No one is quite saying it around here, but things do look pretty bleak.

Rockets centre Yao Ming is out of the rest of the National Basketball Association play-offs because of a hairline fracture in his left foot.

That will give the Los Angeles Lakers one of the strongest 2-1 series leads the Western Conference semi-finals have ever seen.

Yao does not need surgery but will miss eight to 12 weeks while waiting for the bone to heal. And Houston, already undermanned, will miss the 19.7 points and 11.3 rebounds the Chinese star has been producing in this series.

"We've played without Yao before, and we've won without him before," insisted Houston coach Rick Adelman, who is already missing Tracy McGrady and Dikembe Mutombo.

A total of 12 players missed 179 games for Houston this season, and they still managed to go 53-29. But the truth is, they are done without Yao, one of the best centres in the NBA who has been developing into quite the leader.

After knocking knees with Kobe Bryant and collapsing into a heap of pain, he refused to go to the locker room to be examined and helped close out the Rockets' stunning Game One victory.

In Game Three, he tried to play through the pain, not knowing it was a broken foot, knowing it was a game his team had to win to have a chance of unseating the defending Western Conference champions. He was not able to finish the game.

"He is made of China," the joke goes,



Houston trainer Keith Jones attending to Yao Ming as he sits on the bench grimacing during the fourth quarter of Game Three on Saturday. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

## Injury prone

**2005-06 season:** Yao Ming's big toe was infected. He had surgery in December 2005 and missed 21 games. Four games before the end of that regular season, he broke the fifth metatarsal in his left foot in Utah. Houston did not qualify for the play-offs.

**2006-07:** He broke a bone under his right knee while trying to block a shot and was out for 34 games. Houston made the play-offs. They won the first two games against Utah but still blew the series.

**2007-08:** In February 2008, he suffered a stress fracture in his left foot. In March, screws were put in to strengthen the bone. He recovered to play in the Beijing Olympics.

although this is far from a laughing matter for Yao, Houston and the NBA, for whom the centre provides the entry point to the Chinese market.

Yao missed only two games in his first three seasons since being the No. 1 draft. Since then, the NBA's tallest player (2.3m), who has had foot issues since childhood, has suffered a major injury in each of his four seasons due to all that pounding — a swollen big toe, a broken right knee and fractures to his left foot.

His latest bad break might prompt the Rockets to consider going in a different direction. After all, when you build a team around a star player, particularly a centre, his absence from the line-up cannot be overcame.

Yao, who has a year left on his contract, may be the hardest worker on the team, but there seems to be little point retaining him when he breaks down just when he is most needed.

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## Safina proves her class on Rome's clay

**ROME:** World No. 1 Dina Safina knows she is a marked woman, but the Russian 23-year-old is enjoying her new, lofty position in women's tennis.

Safina, the younger sister of former men's No. 1 Marat Safin, ascended to the top spot in the Women's Tennis Association rankings on April 20 and since then has reached two finals and won one title.

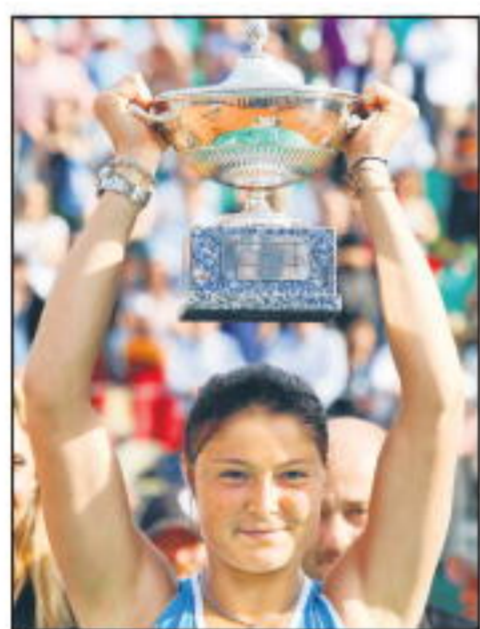
Having dismantled compatriot Svetlana Kuznetsova 6-3, 6-2 on clay to win the Italian Open title in Rome on Saturday, just a week after she lost to her fellow 23-year-old in the Stuttgart final, Safina admitted she is happy to be the target of the other players.

But, having had to fight back from a set down three times to reach the Rome final, she has already felt the difference in being the one everyone wants to beat.

"When they step on the court, they have nothing to lose. It's the same as what happened to me last year," she said.

"Whenever I was playing somebody who was No. 1, you just go out there and you swing. Whatever you do is great."

Now that she has proven that she is the player to beat on clay, Safina can be



The Italian title helped Dina Safina avenge the loss to compatriot Svetlana Kuznetsova in Stuttgart a week before. PHOTO: REUTERS

considered one of the favourites for the French Open, which starts on May 24.

"I'm feeling great, it gives me lots of confidence winning here, especially as I've started the clay-court season with one final and one title," she said.

It was her fourth final of the year and she admitted it was a relief to finally win one following defeats in the Australian Open, Sydney and Stuttgart.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

## Phelps' stripper affair

**LONDON:** Less than a week after ending his "marijuana" ban, Olympic hero Michael Phelps was back in the news yesterday as the star of another scandal.

The British tabloid News of the World carried an explosive interview with a Baltimore stripper, who claims she has been having a six-month affair with the record 14-time gold medalist.

Theresa White, a Latina exotic dancer in Phelps' hometown, said she met the swimmer in November, the same month the News of the World released the infamous photos of Phelps inhaling from a marijuana pipe, an act which saw him banned for three months by USA Swimming.

"He turned to me and said, 'I can't believe that happened. I'm terrified my career will be over'. He was almost in tears," the tabloid quoted her as saying.

"I think the whole thing's made Michael paranoid. I've seen him tell friends that he'll throw their mobile camera phones in the river if he sees them using them around him."

Phelps first encountered the dancer on a celebratory trip to her adult club, after claiming eight golds in Beijing to eclipse that most hallowed of Olympic records — Mark Spitz's seven golds at the 1972 Munich Games.

He invited White and two other girls

back to his waterfront pad where she propositioned him with a threesome.

"The sex lasted for about three hours. Michael should get another Olympic gold for marathon love-making," White claimed.

"When I ran into another girl called Jen at a party, it turned out he was sleeping with both of us. And I've heard that there are at least five or six girls he can call on any time to come over and be with him.

"Michael's not the all-American boy the public thinks he is. I never saw him smoke marijuana, but he was into booze — and chewing tobacco. He chews tobacco like a sailor. It's disgusting. All over his house are plastic bottles that he spits it into.

"He might not be doing marijuana any more, but he sure likes to party. That'll never change."

Phelps recently talked openly about the problems he had dealing with fame and fortune.

"Olympic athletes have a lot of post-Olympic depression," he said. "You go from such a high, from being on top of your game at the highest level of competition you can be at, then all of a sudden the next day, you're back to doing nothing. It's hard. We just don't know what to do with ourselves."

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## Singapore's shooters on target in Darwin

BY MAY CHEN

SINGAPORE'S shooters are hauling in the medals at the ongoing Arafura Games in Darwin, Australia.

Eunice Chong, 17, shot her way to a silver medal in the 10m air pistol women's junior individual event yesterday, adding to the gold she won with teammates Samantha Tung, 18, and Shermaine Tung, 14, in the team event.

On Friday, Christopher John Chia, 17, and Dexter Koh, 16, took first and second place respectively in the 10m air pistol men's junior individual event.

The duo also teamed up with 15-year-old Tan Ting Yew to finish first in the team event.

Civon Loke won a bronze in the 10m air pistol women's open category.

There was also joy for the Republic in athletics.

Long jumpers Matthew Goh and Calvin Cheng leapt to a top-two finish in the open category.

Matthew, 18, jumped 6.99m to take the gold, while Calvin followed with a distance of 6.79m.

However, these distances were nowhere near their personal bests — both over the 7m mark.

Calvin, 19, for instance, holds the national record of 7.45m.

Coach Valeri Obidko said: "The winds were very strong and were working against them."

The Arafura Games is a multi-sport event held biennially in Darwin.

Singapore is also represented in boxing and lifesaving. The Singapore Disability Sports Council has also sent athletes to compete in athletics, powerlifting and swimming.

The Games ends next Sunday.

## Steady Cejka shows Tiger and Co. the way

**PONTE VEDRA BEACH (Florida):** Alex Cejka ended a wild afternoon of collapses at the Players Championship with a five-foot birdie for a five-shot lead on Saturday and an unexpected date in the final round with Tiger Woods.

The German kept out of the water over the closing holes and wound up with an even-par 72 for a 11-under 205 total to build the largest lead after three rounds in the 36 years of this prestigious event.

But Woods, the world No. 1, put himself into contention despite struggling

throughout the scorching afternoon, where temperatures climbed above 30 deg C.

He had to hit one shot left-handed from the base of a pine. He made a putt from 50 feet and missed others from inside 10 feet.

But he got a huge break at the end of his round. He two-putted for birdie on the 16th and made a slick eight-foot birdie on the island-green 17th before again hitting his tee shot into the trees. But his six-iron came out hot and towards the

left, running through the green and tumbling towards the water until the rough grabbed the ball a foot from the pond.

Woods chipped to four feet and saved par for a 70. He left the course not knowing he would improve 20 positions to a tie for second on 210, let alone play in the last group.

"You figured some of the guys would shoot three or four under today, but it's just not happening," Woods said.

Instead, everyone went in the other direction. Henrik Stenson was two shots be-

hind until he bogeyed three of the last five holes and wound up with a 73 and in a six-way tie for second.

No one had quite as wild a day as Kevin Na. He was two strokes behind at the turn, then bogeyed the next two holes and put a tee shot in the water on the par-three 13th and took triple bogey. He got back in the mix with a birdie on the 15th and an eagle on the 16th, only to bogey the last two holes for a 74.

He was in the group at 211.

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