

NBA FINALS

James targets Durant

By BRIAN MAHONEY

THE LeBRON James-Kevin Durant duel has been terrific. The NBA finals have been tense. The series between the Miami Heat and Oklahoma City Thunder is shaping up as a long one as it shifts to South Florida tomorrow, tied at one game apiece. The Heat pulled out a 100-96 victory on Friday when James stopped Durant on a tying shot attempt, getting away with a foul. Heat coach Erik Spoelstra expects game three to be similar. "This is going to be probably like this every single game, and that's the beauty of competition at this level, and embracing that competition and seeing what it brings out of you collectively," Spoelstra said. It's brought out the best of league MVP James and Durant, the NBA scoring champion. The series hype was built around them and they spent the first two games living up to every ounce of it. James has bounced back from his disappointing 2011 finals by scoring 30 and then 32 points, but Durant has been just as good. He followed up his 36-point performance in game one by scoring 32. Coach Scott Brooks said he was not considering a new starting lineup, even though the Thunder have been more effective with a smaller group on the floor. US television ratings are up 11 per cent from last year, and Friday drew the highest rating for a game two since 2004.



MVP: LeBron James fights to score against the Thunder. Photo: Reuters

BASKETBALL: BACK FROM THE DEAD

Tall Blacks dream lives on after horror car smash

By MARC HINTON
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LESS THAN a year ago, Hayden Allen stared death in the face after a horrific accident on the Auckland Harbour Bridge.

Now he's poised to become a 32-year-old Tall Blacks rookie, ending a decade-long quest to follow his father's legacy of playing basketball for his country.

Allen will today be named in Nenad Vucinic's 12-strong Tall Blacks squad for the Olympic qualifying tournament in Caracas from July 2-8, completing one of the feelgood stories of Kiwi hoops. No one plays harder than Allen, a two guard who won his second New Zealand NBL title with the Auckland Pirates last month. But for a long time it appeared as though he was destined to never quite make the international breakthrough.

Then a funny thing happened. Not funny ha-ha, but funny peculiar. Allen came within a hair's breadth of killing himself in a car crash, and since then has changed his outlook on life. Last August he was a non-seatbelt wearing passenger in a speeding car that smashed into a wall on the Auckland Harbour Bridge, sending him hurtling through a window and skimming along State Highway 1. Just days from the birth of his first-born, son Reggie, Allen woke up in a hospital bed with stern-faced medics telling him how close he had come to never waking up.

Now, as he looks back, he does so with a perspective that only those who have truly faced their mortality can understand.

"Without a doubt it was a life-changer," says Allen of the August 12 accident. "You don't stew the small stuff. The sun will come up the following day. You don't take anything for granted."

"I got thrown out the back passenger window, and if you could take things back I'd love to. It's one of those things where you live and learn, and I did learn the hard way." Allen took a battering in the crash, breaking his collarbone in two places and receiving 150 stitches to his head, and a further dozen in his knee. But he well



Hayden Allen: "Every nurse, doctor told me I was incredibly lucky."

Photo: Getty Images

knows it could have much worse. "Someone was looking down on me," he says. "I got a couple of chunks taken out of my head and all my points were pretty much skinned. I got a good battering on the way up the motorway, really."

"Every nurse, doctor told me I was incredibly lucky, first to still be alive and, also, to have the injuries I had. They were pretty superficial."

"To be on the motorway with cars still coming round the corner as my boys were running back to me, a number of things went in my favour."

Since then Allen has hardly looked back. Still swathed in bandages, he was allowed out of hospital to see Reggie come into the world on August 15, and within

a couple of months was back on the basketball court. "At that stage it was day-by-day, especially with Reggie coming along," he recalls. "You'd wake up in the morning and see what the day holds. I was lucky with my injuries and having a positive outlook helped. I never ruled out basketball, but I just tried to get back to life first. I'm fortunate to be where I am today."

Tomorrow he'll be a fully fledged Tall Black, joining his father Glen – a hard-nosed forward who had a long career with Auckland and Otago – in pulling on the black singlet of his country.

Allen admits that, 10 years after his first national trial, he'd wondered if he was ever going to make the breakthrough. Playing the

same position as the world-class Phill Jones and Kirk Penney hadn't helped his cause either.

"Being a bit competitive, whenever you want to achieve something and don't quite make it you're always disappointed. But over the last year I've put it in perspective. There are bigger things in life to worry about, and you don't sweat the small stuff."

"But you want to push yourself to the highest level you can and there's nothing better than representing your country. A lot of my good mates have played for the country, and you hear the stories and a bit of envy kicks in. It's nice to have a shot at it."

Allen also pledges one thing as the Tall Blacks set out for

CASEY GETS CALL

Auckland-based Tall Blacks regular Casey Frank has won the nod as the team's naturalised player for the tilt at the Olympics.

The American-born Frank nudged out Manawatu Jets small forward Marcel Jones, who became a Kiwi citizen on Thursday, for the sole spot allowed under Fiba regulations for a player who has changed nationalities. Frank, a power forward or centre, has played almost every campaign with the Tall Blacks since 2006 and his experience won him the nod ahead of the 26-year-old Jones. Point guard Kevin Braswell did not get his citizenship through in time to be considered.

Likely Tall Blacks squad: Lindsay Tait, Josh Bloxham, Jarrod Kenny, Everard Bartlett, Hayden Allen, Tai Webster, Leon Henry, Mika Vukona (captain), Casey Frank, Jeremiah Trueman, Alex Pledger, Rob Loe.

Venezuela via Australia and Brazil – despite leading scorers Penney and Tom Abercrombie and emerging superstar Steve Adams all being unavailable, the Kiwi underdogs will give it their all.

"Guys like Mika [Vukona], Pledge [Alex Pledger] and Lindsay [Tait], the onus on them goes up a couple of notches, and it's going to have to be a team-first mentality where we scrap for everything. We need a bit of ticker, a bit of die-hard passion, and we have to believe." Allen, who is the community partnerships manager with the New Zealand Breakers, had a minor scare when a hamstring injury forced him to sit out the first three days of the trial. But he rejoined the fray yesterday.

"It will be an honour," says Allen. "My dad played for New Zealand, and you see his singlet in the wardrobe growing up. The boys I kick around with have all got singlets, and you just want one."

Meanwhile, the late withdrawal of Breakers development player Isaac Fotu means a likely spot for schoolboy Tai Webster, 17, in the squad. Fotu confirmed yesterday he had pulled out to fulfil academic requirements before heading to the University of Hawaii.

WORLD OF SPORT

OLYMPICS

Bus drivers to strike

London bus drivers will strike on June 22 and may stage further walkouts up to and during the Olympics, in a dispute over extra payments for working during the Games, their union said yesterday. Any walkout during the Olympics would embarrass the government, which has promised that London's transport system will not buckle under the strain. Bus drivers are seeking a \$780 bonus to compensate for a "massive increase" in their workload during the Games.

ATHLETICS

Hamblin hobbled

Injury has ruled Kiwi Commonwealth Games double silver medallist Nikki Hamblin out of the London Olympic Games. Hamblin has been nursing a troublesome achilles tendon for some time and withdrew from a race in Shanghai. She has consulted specialists in the US and an MRI scan this week confirmed a small tear in the tendon.

ATHLETICS

Aussie misses deadline

Steeplechaser Genevieve LaCaze says a late decision to select her for Australia's Olympic team will not be unfair to other athletes. LaCaze missed Athletics Australia's deadline by a day when she bettered the qualifying standard in Indianapolis. But AA has refused to budge, saying to include her after the June 11 deadline would be unfair to those who made the deadline.

TENNIS

Nadal falls quickly

French Open champion Rafael Nadal's start to the grasscourt season at Halle was cut short when the top seed crashed out in the quarterfinals to Germany's Philipp Kohlschreiber yesterday. Kohlschreiber, ranked 28 in the world and the defending champion, notched up his first victory over Nadal in nine encounters, winning 6-3 6-4.

CRICKET

Nicol for England

Black Caps batsman Rob Nicol will join English county Gloucestershire for the final two months of the season as a replacement for international teammate Kane Williamson. Nicol will join Gloucestershire after the limited overs leg of the West Indies tour, which ends on July 16.

BASKETBALL

Parker injures eye

San Antonio Spurs and France guard Tony Parker suffered a scratched retina in one of his eyes during a New York nightclub brawl involving singer Chris Brown. He is likely to delay joining the French national team by a week for a pre-Olympic training camp.

WOMEN'S HOCKEY

Third-time lucky for Russell to reach Olympics

By SIMON PLUMB
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SPORT CAN be sweet. But, it can also be very, very cruel. One person to go through both emotions is Black Sticks goalkeeper Bianca Russell.

After missing out on the 2008 Olympic Games and the 2010 Commonwealth Games – when her team-mates came home with silver medals – Russell has finally emerged on the right side of a high-stakes selection battle.

Days before her 34th birthday, Russell knew she was in for

another 50-50 race for the sole Olympic berth against good friend Sally Rutherford. Thursday's 11am email from Black Sticks management was always going to be bittersweet.

"I was so relieved and immensely proud. There was a big cry of joy. This chapter of my career has eluded me for so long," Russell told the *Sunday Star-Times*.

"I had to read the email twice to actually be sure it was third time lucky."

"But I also feel for Sally, we're very close. We've played together and been mates for years."

"To be honest, it's probably a subject we'd avoided talking about for a while, but spoke last week about how we would handle the decision."

"Ironically, it was while we were on tour in Korea. We were in Seoul, at the 1988 Olympic venue, there was no escaping the Games issue really."

"We swapped some nice texts yesterday and Sally's going to be a really, really important part of our travelling party to London. It's not realistic for one goalkeeper to take on all the training sessions single-handedly."

"We've got a joke going that we have to start talking to each other by 2013."

Making Russell's achievement even more impressive was securing selection through a bout of viral meningitis a few months ago, contracted on the Black Sticks' tour in Argentina.

But, the plucky Aucklander says, it's no time for celebration. In fact, the hard work has only just begun ahead of a crucial Olympic opener against Australia.

"If we can sneak a win it will give us some real momentum and it could well come down to a missed

shot or a great save. I've been through some setbacks this year and as a result my form has been a bit up and down. It's about finding consistency now."

"As a team, we know we can perform, we know we're competitive and capable of winning a medal."

"We're doing a heck of a lot of homework on the opposition and will have a very good handle on all the teams."

"It's definitely going to be a challenging chapter of my hockey career, but one I've been waiting to take on for a long time."

CRICKET

White backs Eden Park

TEST CRICKET could one day be played on a purpose-built outer oval at North Harbour Stadium, according to an issues paper released by the Auckland Council-controlled Regional Facilities Auckland on Friday.

But talk of the proposal came as news to the CEO of New Zealand Cricket, David White, who says he only learned of the suggestion on Thursday night.

In the document, which opens up for debate the future of Auckland's stadiums and was prepared after "engagement with a number of key sporting codes", is the proposal that North Harbour Stadium's outer oval be developed

into a venue that can host international test cricket.

Auckland Cricket has already condemned the idea, with CEO Mark Cameron saying his organisation intends to stay at its current base at Eden Park and would be opposed to relocating.

White said NZC would back Auckland Cricket in any debate about a test cricket venue in Auckland, but conceded his desire was to see the five-day game return to the country's biggest city on a more regular basis. When England tour New Zealand next summer they will play a test at Eden Park – the first in Auckland since 2006.

AARON LAWTON

The sort of fairy tales grandma never read you.

Once upon a time there was a brand new TV series that featured a detective from a family who could see monsters when they look at people. How does it end? Not happily ever after, that's for sure.



PREMIERES 8:30PM MONDAY

Watch a sneak peek of the show at FOUR.co.nz/Grimm



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