

Penguin

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the card companies use when getting us to sign off on another rate increase.

Did you know that, according to published reports, the card companies collect in excess of \$15 billion in penalty fees each year? Talk about money for nothing! But the chicks aren't free.

Sorry about that last line. Had to reference a Dire Straits' song... Predictably, the credit card lobbyists were predicting the end of the world, blathering on that "those who manage their credit well will be subsidizing those who don't," and threatening to limit programs like those that let the customer accumulate "air miles."

Gotta say that I could care less about air miles. Keep my interest rates low--don't cheat me if I am tardy on a payment, or have to pay by phone.

As an added benefit to us normally ripped

off consumers, the Senate bill would also regulate retail gift cards, like the ones you might receive for Marie Callender's. No longer can the bandits charge an excessive hidden fee if the gift card isn't used up quickly. My wife had received a \$75 gift card to be used at the Callender's chain, which she didn't use in a timely manner. So the \$75 card was worth a measly \$25 by the time we got around to using it. Legal robbery, I call it.

And in conclusion, Fancy Nancy Pelosi seems to have had a prior career as a defensive back in some type of football league, what with all the back-pedaling that she has been doing over the "waterboarding" flap. What did the tarnished Speaker of the House know and when did she know it? And how many different stories can the Congresswoman from our Great Bankrupt State conjure up to cover her a**?

Pesky Nuggets Taking Lakers to the Limit

By Duane Plank

Worried, Laker fans? Did the "good Lakers" show up Wednesday night and take a 3-2 lead in the Western Conference finals? Or were the "bad Lakers" roaming the floor at Staples, missing shots, avoiding rebounds, letting the Nuggets grab the series lead?

Game Six is Friday night at 6. I trust you will find a spot in front of the TV?

Alrightee then, with Lakermania running rampant in town, as it usually does during the NBA playoffs, when hoop "fans" who couldn't tell you the difference between a pick-and-roll and a dinner roll become experts, I decided to ask a few folks who they thought the best-ever Laker guard was/is.

Narrowed it down to the Big Three: Jerry West, whose silhouette is utilized by the league as its logo; TV pitchman Magic Johnson; and current icon and scowler Kobe Bryant.

Are you old enough to remember the exploits of West, dubbed "Mr. Clutch" by the iconic Chick Hearn? The guy was voted to the All-NBA first team in 10 of the 14 years (1960-74) that he played for the Purple and Gold. Led the Lakers to the NBA finals nine times. Inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame in 1980. Averaged 30 or more points four times in the regular season. Playoff average: 29.1 Averaged more than 30 points per game seven times, including 40.6 in the '65 playoffs. Made multiple appearances on the All-Defensive first team.

And West, who will turn 71 today, accomplished all of this when the NBA actually had a semblance of rules that they enforced. Next time you see Lebron or Kobe or any of these other current studs take about four steps before jamming down a slam, remember that back in the day that was called "traveling."

West also made arguably the greatest shot in NBA playoff history, nailing a 60-foot toss at the buzzer in Game 3 of the 1970 Championship series. The shot, which was launched, sadly for Laker fans, many years before the advent of the three-point shot, was good for a deuce, evening the game at 102, forcing overtime. Alas, as was the Lakers way back in the day, the Purple and Gold couldn't capitalize on West's incredible shot and lost the game in overtime, later to lose the series to the New York Knicks.

"The Logo" recently made news when it was revealed that the West Virginian has suffered from a medical condition--atrial fibrillation--that causes a disturbance in the rhythm of his heartbeat. West also stirred the pot a little when asked about current superstars LeBron James and Bryant.

Said West, the Laker general manager who drafted Bryant: "James is just too big, too strong, and too quick. And he has incredible body control. But more than that, he's a great teammate. You can see his teammates love him."

So who would the greatest clutch shooter of his era want to hand the ball to with the game on the line? "If I had to have someone make a last-second shot, it would be Kobe Bryant," said West. "But even though it is hard for me to be objective because I brought Kobe to Los Angeles, I do think LeBron has surpassed Kobe as a player."

Sorry, young Laker honks.

Contestant number two in our little "best Laker guard" competition is one Earvin

"Magic" Johnson. You know the guy, right? All over the tube as a pitchman, trying to peddle rental furniture, a tax refund anticipation service and some Indian casino. Think Mr. Johnson needs the cash?

Anyway, before becoming a TV pitchman, Johnson had a pretty solid career in the NBA, fronting a fantastic Laker team that came to be known as "Showtime." Johnson, who will turn 50 in August, joined the Lakers in the summer of 1979, and led the team to the league championship in the '79-80 campaign.

The guy could do it all on the court, which was showcased by his 42-point, 15-rebound, seven-assist, three steals effort in Game Six of the '80 finals against the Philadelphia 76ers. Johnson, a 6-foot-9 point guard, had to play center in the contest because of an injury to Laker superstar Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. For his efforts, the 20-year-old with the million-dollar smile was awarded the MVP of the finals, the first time a rookie was so honored.

Johnson led the "Showtime" Lakers to a total of five NBA titles, but was forced to abruptly retire in 1991 when it was announced that Johnson was afflicted with HIV. He made a couple of "unretirements," finally retiring in 1996.

Magic's statistical accomplishments include: Three NBA MVP awards, nine NBA Finals appearances, and 12 All-Star game appearances. He averaged more than 11 assists per game during the regular season, and 12-plus assists in the playoffs. Add to that the 19-plus points per game that he averaged, both in the regular season and the playoffs.

But it wasn't the points that Johnson scored that defined the Hall of Famer. It was the points his teammates scored. Johnson made every player on the floor a better player. He was a passer first, a scorer when need be.

And yes, Johnson took advantage of the lax enforcement of the NBA rules, palming the ball continuously as he "hippy-hopped" (thanks, Chick Hearn) the dribble into the front court, burst down the lane, took the allowed three steps before dishing the ball to teammate for an easy lay-up. Or bellowed loud enough that the refs whistled a defender for a phantom foul even though Johnson wasn't touched.

Kobe Bryant rounds out our troika of Laker guards. Not much to add here about the current Laker superstar, other than the fact that 30-year-old icon has carried the Lakers for the past few years, ever since "The Big Fatty" pouted and was sent packing to Miami.

Bryant is a scoring machine and obviously wants the ball in crucial situations. He has averaged 25 points in the regular season in his 13 seasons in L.A., and 24-plus in the playoffs. And he is the only reason that the Lakers have been able to stay in the current playoff series with the pesky Denver Nuggets.

And the winner is... in a landslide, Magic Johnson. Okay, the folks who I asked were not your typical Laker fans. They had to have a clue about Laker history, a touch of gray in their hair, and remember the Fabulous Forum. And they all said basically the same thing: "Magic made everyone a better player."

So there you go, Laker fans.

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