

Co-MVPs mutual admirers

By Arne Stapleton
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Brett Favre didn't mind sharing his unprecedented third consecutive MVP award with Barry Sanders.

"The more I've thought about it, the more excited I am about it," the Green Bay Packers quarterback said. "Sure, I'd like to win it outright. But I can't complain. I'm sharing it with probably the best running back ever to play the game. I'm not going to argue with that."

The deadlock didn't diminish the award, Favre said. In fact, he called the draw poetic justice.

"Barry's team hasn't been, record-wise, as good as we have. But yeah, I think it would have been a shame for either one of us not to win it with the years we've had," said Favre, who became the first passer to throw 30 or more touchdowns in four consecutive seasons while leading the Packers (13-3) back into the playoffs to defend their Super Bowl title.

Sanders, Detroit's 2,000-yard rusher who carried the Lions into the playoffs, was similarly satisfied with the first MVP tie since Philadelphia quarterback Norm Van Brocklin and Detroit line-backer Joe Schmidt shared the award in 1960.

"I guess it puts me in elite company," said Sanders, who set a

league record with 14 straight games of more than 100 yards rushing. "I'm glad he let me share it with him this year, because the last couple he's taken it for himself."

Favre said his third award was his most satisfying.

"I can't believe a little country kid like me has won it three times," said Favre, who has overcome a car accident in college and an addiction to painkillers to etch his place in history as one of the finest quarterbacks the NFL has known.

"The scary thing is he's not done," Packers receiver Antonio Freeman said. "He's still in mid-stride."

Sort of like Sanders. Besides their extraordinary talent, what separates Favre and Sanders from their contemporaries is their uncanny ability to turn broken plays into big ones, to drop jaws with stunning regularity.

"You might stop Barry 10 times in a row, but you can't shut him out," Favre said. "As soon as you say, 'Well, we got him,' he gets away. He's a great player and you can't hold a great player down for long."

The admiration is mutual. "He reminds me a lot of Michael Jordan," Sanders said. "No matter how successful he's been, he's still always the most competitive

person on the field. Outside of his incredible talent and everything, he's always just really competitive."

Favre said he enjoys watching Sanders more than any other player in the league.

"He's just fun to watch, his ability to make plays when they're not there," Favre said. "So many times we've all seen him and said, 'Well, he's not getting out of this one.' And all of a sudden he comes out of the pack of 8-10 guys getting ready to tackle him and now he runs for 60 or 70 yards and you go, 'How did he ever do that?'"

"That's what scares you about Barry Sanders — he's going to do it somewhere in the game and you know it."

Favre might just have easily been talking about himself.

"Both of those guys are all-world," said Packers free safety Eugene Robinson. "Dude had 2,000 yards. Barry Sanders, the most prolific running back in history. In history. He's the bomb, too. Both are deserving. I'm glad it kind of worked out that way."

"It was a photo finish, but we'll never see the photo," Packers strong safety LeRoy Butler said. "I think it's wonderful, because both of them had wonderful years."

But Sanders' year ended Sunday in a 20-10 playoff loss at Tampa Bay.

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Lakers, Celtics renew rivalry

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five NBA titles and the Celtics three.

The Celtics and Lakers have taken a back seat to several teams in the 1990s, especially the Michael Jordan-led Chicago Bulls, who have won five titles in the past seven years.

The Lakers appear to have moved back into the elite group of teams — their record of 22-7 is the second best in the NBA, and they've been without Shaquille O'Neal since Nov. 19 because of a strained abdominal muscle.

The Lakers are 8-0 with O'Neal in the lineup, and the big center said before Sunday night's game he's hopeful of returning to action in a week or so.

The Celtics hit rock-bottom last season, compiling a miserable 15-67 record. Then, Pitino was lured from one of college basketball's finest programs at Kentucky to turn things around.

So far, so good. The win over the Lakers was the seventh in the past nine games for the Celtics (14-13), who are one win away from equaling last season's total.

"We are very confident right now," Pitino said. "This was a game where we were at their level."

"We are playing very hard each night. What we are is young and aspiring to be good. It is going to take some time."

Maybe not that much, if the last couple of weeks are an accurate indication.

"Rick Pitino is a great basketball coach, and the guys he has out there running up and down the court are very athletic and talented," Lakers guard Eddie Jones said. "He just keeps shipping them in and out."

Pitino used 10 players against the Lakers. Only three — Walker, Dana Barros and Greg Minor — were members of the team last season. Walker started and played 37 minutes; Barros and Minor came off the bench and played 27 minutes combined.

Pitino and Lakers coach Del Harris met each other in the Forum hallway about 30 minutes after the game, and Harris extended his hand and said, "Great job."

Harris had said a few minutes earlier that the Celtics "came in and had a little better work ethic than we did."

"You have to give them credit for tremendous effort," Harris said. "The losses that hurt the most are probably the ones where you feel like the other team simply wanted it more. They exhibited that by harder play and more hustle."

NBA suspends Kings' Williamson, Sixers' Coleman

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Corliss Williamson of the Sacramento Kings and Derrick Coleman of the Philadelphia 76ers were suspended by the NBA Monday for fighting during a game.

Williamson was suspended without pay for three games and fined \$15,000 and Coleman was suspended without pay for two games and fined \$10,000 by NBA director of basketball operations Rod Thorn. Both players were fined an additional \$1,000 for their automatic ejections from Sunday night's game.

Williamson received the harsher punishment because he initiated the fight. The fight erupted midway through the fourth quarter following an intense battle on the boards between Coleman, Philadelphia's 6-foot-10, 260-pound power forward, and Williamson, also a power forward at 6-7, 245 pounds.

After Sacramento's Mitch Richmond missed a shot, Coleman grabbed the rebound and made a pass. Williamson attempted to block the pass, but ran into Coleman, who then shoved Williamson before heading upcourt.

Williamson chased after Coleman and swung wildly from behind him, just grazing the top of his head with a right forearm. Coleman retaliated with a punch, and the two ended up in front of the scorer's table, where they exchanged punches before wrestling each other to the floor as teammates piled on.

Williamson will be eligible to play Jan. 6 against the Los Angeles Clippers. Coleman can return to action Friday at Seattle.

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