

## Pitching to Pujols very risky

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on out is likely to turn into a chess match. Leyland has considered giving up smoking more times this season than giving a hitter - any hitter - an intentional walk. So it's a safe bet that every time the camera catches him during one, expect to see a lighted cigarette dangling from his lips.

The Tigers issued just 35 free passes during the regular season, the sixth-lowest total in the American League. Before Saturday the only time Leyland saw Pujols up close and

personal was during a three-game series against St. Louis in June, and he walked him intentionally exactly once.

And before this one, Leyland was very cagey about his plans. But Verlander went right at Pujols in the first inning, mixing fastballs and curves, snapping off a sharp breaking ball at 2-2 and striking him out. Then came Pujols' first swing in the third, and it quickly made any debate about strategy irrelevant.

"I just try to see the ball," Pujols explained, "and put a good swing on it."

## Shaq, Flash aim for seconds

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"It might not be an everyday occasion type of team, but there's something about them, when it's the right time, and it gets hot and it gets real competitive, that they're formidable. I think they showed that."

So when the NBA's new microfiber composite Spalding ball - no, it's not leather anymore - gets tossed up on Halloween night in Miami to open the NBA season against the Bulls, you can bet O'Neal will want to tip it to Wade. As long as it's in his hands, the Heat might still be the best in an NBA that lacks a dominant team.

"That guy is pretty good. I mean really, really, really good," Hornets assistant Darrell Walker said. "He's getting to the point, and I'm telling you I love MJ, but we're going to have to start putting the Jordan rules on him. He's a pretty special player."

There are plenty of those. Kobe Bryant beat out Allen Iverson and LeBron James to win a thrilling scoring race last season, while Steve Nash won a second straight MVP award as recent rules changes allowed offensive stars to shine.

Wade stands out as the

briest of all after what he did in the finals, turning the Heat's 2-0 deficit against Dallas into a six-game victory in a Flash-Shaq's nickname for him - and earning that highest of NBA compliments: comparisons to Jordan.

So for all those teams hoping to pounce on what they see as a vulnerable champion, take heed.

"He's going to only get better," Philadelphia coach Maurice Cheeks said. "I don't know him, but he looks like a guy that loves to play, loves to make his teammates better. To think that a guy won a championship in his third year and is only going to get better is a scary thought."

"Everyone said he couldn't shoot a jump shot. Well, he got better at shooting a jump shot, kind of like when people said Michael Jordan couldn't shoot a jump shot, and then he made his jump shot even better into a 3-pointer."

Don't call the Heat world champs, by the way. The only team that gets that title is Spain, which earned it by rolling through the world championships in Japan this summer.

The United States, even with Wade, James and Carmelo Anthony, finished third. Then two NBA teams lost to international clubs in exhibition games in Europe. So if you're looking for an up-and-coming team, consider Toronto, in the NBA's only non-U.S. city, where No. 1 overall pick Andrea Bargnani from Italy is among a handful of foreign players on the roster.

Not that the Raptors claim to notice their own continental flair.

"We don't talk about those things. We're the Toronto Raptors, Canada's team... we are an NBA team," coach Sam Mitchell said. "And all our guys are proven players, and like all players, have a lot to prove once they get to the NBA. But basketball players are basketball players. As a coaching staff, we never walk out there and say, 'We have two guys from Spain, a guy from Italy, Rasha Nesterovic from (Slovenia).' We just don't... it's not that big of a deal to

us, it's really not."

The Raptors aren't the only team with a different look. Chicago signed Ben Wallace away from Detroit, possibly altering the balance of power in the Central Division and becoming Miami's biggest threat in the Eastern Conference.

Don Nelson is back on the sideline in Golden State, and former Warriors coach Eric Musselman is in Sacramento. Across the country, Isaiah Thomas replaced Larry Brown and is now coaching the Knicks team he assembled - though maybe not for long.

He's already been warned that he has one season to show "evident progress" with the high-priced mess he's created, or he'll be gone, too. He might be able to pull it off in the East, where there are no more than a half-dozen strong teams.

The West, on the other hand, remains a killer.

Los Angeles might have two playoff teams again - and for the second straight season, the Clippers might be the higher-seeded one.

It took 44 wins to make the playoffs there last season, and the conference figures to be even tougher now with the improvements made by teams such as Houston, where Bonzi Wells joins a healthy Tracy McGrady and Yao Ming, and New Orleans.

The Rockets and Hornets are both in the Southwest Division, where San Antonio and Dallas each won 60 or more games last season but were forced to meet in the second round, ushering in a rules change: A division title no longer guarantees a team a top-three seed if the fourth-place team has a better record.

"We've got the best division in the NBA, I don't care what people say," Spurs guard Tony Parker said. "Our division is tough."

The Mavericks beat the Spurs - one of three second-round series that went seven games - as part of a thrilling postseason. The preseason, on the other hand, hasn't been nearly as fun for the NBA.

## Pee-wee football playoffs

A place in the regional Junior Pee-Wee football playoffs will be at stake Saturday.

The Freedom Drive Broncos will play the Plaza Rams at 10 a.m. at East Mecklenburg High. The winner will get a berth in the regionals in Charlotte next month. Both programs have a history of national success, with the Rams finishing second in the national midget playoffs in 2003 and the Broncos earning the junior midget title in 2004.

For information, call Dexter Hayes at (704) 492-0671.

Herbert L. White

## For ride and features, Chevy Avalanche wins by landslide

Imitation is supposed to be the highest form of flattery. Chevy's Avalanche is a sweet crew cab truck with a neat mid-gate feature.

So why has no other truck maker copied the design?

### Test Drive



WINFRED B. CROSS

I don't know and I'm sure Chevy doesn't care because they sell a good amount of these things. Even so, Chevy decided to make the 2007 better.

Thank you, Chevy. The Avalanche gets the same changes as Chevy's other trucks. The grill is new and much, much cleaner-looking. The body has a more athletic stance as well. Actually, the truck gets a complete makeover.

The interior gets the best makeover. All that awful Playskool plastic is gone - banished to bad dashboard purgatory. The new look is sleek and luxurious. Wood grain, expensive plastic and chrome accents are the ingredients to this winning recipe. Who knew?

The engine's a big ol' 5.3-liter V8 which pushes 310 horsepower in all wheel drive

form. Torque is 335 pounds-feet. The transmission is a surprisingly low-tech four-speed that works to perfection.

The suspension is called premium smooth ride and that about says it all. You don't mistake this thing for anything but a truck, but there's a comfort quality that will put a grin on your face.

Handling is good as well. Again, it's a truck, but somewhat nimble for its size. Until you try to park the thing. But even that's not so hard with the optional backup assist - i.e. backup camera.

There is a lot of standard equipment and even more optional stuff. Air bags, antilock brakes, Stabilitrak, cruise, heated mirrors, AWD, programmable door locks and rear audio controls are standard. Twenty-inch wheels, rear DVD system, power sunroof, rain sensing wipers and a \$3,650 LT3 package gives you all but the kitchen sink.

The as-tested price jumps from \$35,295 base, to \$46,235.

As midsize trucks go, that's not terribly expensive, but it also ain't cheap. Still, the new Avalanche is something to be seriously considered.

All that awful Playskool plastic is gone - banished to bad dashboard purgatory.

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