Sports

■ The Cowboys'

Kellen Moore tops the list of young players on parade for Dallas with two games remaining in the season. 4C



American Pharoah's Triple Crown tops list

■ AP votes horse's feat the sports story of the year

By Rachel Cohen

NEW YORK - American Pharoah's sweep of the Kentucky Derby, Preakness and Belmont Stakes for horse racing's first Triple Crown since 1978 was selected the sports story of the year Thursday in an annual vote conducted by The Associ-

Eighty-two ballots were submitted from U.S. editors and news directors. Voters were asked to rank the top five sports stories of the year, with the first-place story receiving five points, the second-place story four points and so on.

Crown win received 317 points and 43 first-place votes.

The No. 2 sports story, the "Deflategate" scandal that ensnared Super Bowl-winning Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, had 191 points and 13 first-place Here are 2015's top 10 stories:

1. TRIPLE CROWN

In the 37 years since Affirmed became the 11th Triple Crown winner — the longest drought in the sport's history — an unlucky 13 horses had won the Kentucky Derby and Preakness only to fail to complete the sweep at the Belmont Stakes. But American Pharoah took

the lead from the start of the grueling 1½-mile race and kept extending it. The bay colt with the unusually short tail went on to win by 5½ lengths for jockey

Baffert and owner Ahmed Zavat. It was Baffert's fourth Triple

Crown try and Espinoza's third, both records.

American Pharoah went on to cap his spectacular year with a victory in the \$5 million Breeders' Cup Classic. He then retired at age 3 and will stand at stud for \$200,000, one of the highest prices for a horse in his first year as a stallion.

2. DEFLATEGATE

The New England Patriots routed the Indianapolis Colts 45-7 in the AFC championship game Jan. 18 to return to the Super Bowl, but the on-field action was soon overshadowed by the scandal dubbed "Deflategate."

The NFL would go on to spend more than \$3 million for

See YEAR, 3C



American Pharoah, with jockey Victor Espinoza aboard, captured the Kentucky Derby, Preakness and Belmont Stakes to win horse racing's Triple Crown. It was the sport's first Triple Crown since Affirmed in 1978.



Grizzlies center Marc Gasol, with Tim Duncan, is a fan of FC Barcelona and says the influence of soccer appears in the play of international players in the NBA.

BLAZING A TRAIL HERE

■ International players add soccer's flair to NBA

By Mark Travis

Special to the Caller-Times

SAN ANTONIO - Memphis Grizzlies center Marc Gasol settled into a team meeting in a ballroom at the team hotel on Nov. 21.

Film of Memphis' upcoming opponent — the high-powered Spurs - played on a loop, the game plan was discussed and breakfast was served, but Gasol's attention was elsewhere. His eyes were

glued to his laptop, which displayed a live stream of El Clasico, the world's most anticipated rivalry, pitting Spanish soccer gi-ants Real Madrid and FC Barcelona against each

Gasol donned his Barcelona kit, supporting his hometown club and the team he first played professional basketball for in 2003. He is a fine ambassador for the club, representing the same selfless

and stylish ideals of the Catalan country every time he takes the floor for

Memphis. Barcelona is synonymous with a style of play called "tiki-taka", which prioritizes the sharp and swift movement of the ball and man. On that Saturday morning, Barcelona passed its way up and down the pitch, thrashing Madrid 4-0 in the Spanish capital.

See NBA, 6C



San Antonio guard Manu Ginobili (20), shown with Paul Pierce, is the Spurs' most avid artist. Many of his magic tricks are foreign to NBA opposition, literally and figuratively.

Watt still making plays

■ Broken hand not slowing Texans star

By Kristie Rieken Associated Press

HOUSTON – J.J. Watt hasn't had a sack in the past two

That could have something to do with the fact that he's basically playing with just one hand after breaking his left one on Dec. 9.



with a broken left hand. Despite the lack of

been adjusting to playing

sacks, Houston coach Bill O'Brien raved about the work Watt's been doing since he was injured.

"Here is a guy that is a great player that is having to learn to play basically with one arm," O'Brien

"When you really think about that, to me, it's remarkable. His ability to adjust from the New England game to the Indianapolis game and learn and keep being disruptive, I am telling you, it is probably frustrating for him, but you talk about a superb athlete trying to adjust to that type of an injury, that is a testament to him and his ability to still play at a very, very high level."

Now that Watt's feeling better and getting used to the club-like cast he wears during games the Texans hope that will help him get to Zach Mettenberger on

He's had plenty of

See WATT, 40



With his performance against Mississippi, Alabama's Jake Coker established himself as the Crimson Tide's field general in the only game he didn't start and the only game 'Bama lost.

Coker another just-win-baby 'Bama QB Tide couldn't complete the of confidence. I think we Dec. 31 in Arlington and

■ He gets job done, like his predecessors

By John Zenor Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. – Jake

Coker won the team over even when Alabama lost the game. Coker came off the bench to take charge of the offense and lead No. 2 Ala-

bama back from a 20-point

deficit against Mississippi.

Even though the Crimson

comeback, there was no longer a question of who was the Crimson Tide's quarterback.

that time, there's been no "I think he won the team doubt who the leader of over with the way he comthe offensive team is." peted in the game," Alabama coach Nick Saban said. "I think that was probably the most significant thing that happened for Jake. And I think rather than worrying about what

"I think he gained a lot

the first time.

he was supposed to do and tles, not just games. Coker trying to be perfect, he just has guided the Tide (12-1) went out and played for into the College Football

That means being efficient if not dynamic,

With all that being the

gained a lot of confidence.

I think the players gained

a lot of confidence. Since

leader of an Alabama offense entails. poised if not prolific. Mostly, it means winning — ti-

Playoff semifinals against

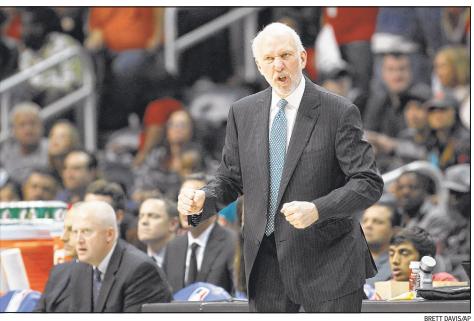
No. 3 Michigan State on

also been selected a captain by his teammates. So far, Coker has neat-

ly fit the bill of Alabama national championship passers like AJ McCarron, Greg McElroy and Jay Barker. He's also thrown in a dose of never-say-slide bravura when he's running that teammates love, even if it makes coaches cringe. Coker is the least her-

alded of the playoff quarterbacks that include a Heisman Trophy finalist

See COKER, 50



San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich has mixed in a number of international players on the Spurs roster over the years come from soccer-crazed countries and have brought a soccer style to basketball.

NBA from 1C

Hours after Barcelona tore apart its arch rivals, Gasol's Grizzlies suffered the same fate against the NBA's version of Barcelona — the Spurs.

NORTH AMERICA'S BARCELONA

semble Gasol's beloved Barcelona, especially when it comes to their expressive and fluent combination play. San Antonio passes the ball perpetu-

In more ways than one, the Spurs re-

ally, straining defensive rotations and their opponent's attention spans, always in search of the best shot possible. The Spurs' collective unselfishness leads to a potent attack derived from a Barcelonaesque commitment to moving the ball.
"The Spurs have been doing that for a

long time, the tiki-taka style" Gasol said. "A guy is going to pass it without knowing who is there because he just instinctively knows that someone will be there to catch it and pass it again. That's the way they train. You don't have to think the game, it's just instinct. The defenses actually tells you what the answer is. It's just so fluid, the way they play."

No NBA team passes the ball as effectively or as frequently as the Spurs. San Antonio leads the league in passes per game despite playing at the fourth slowest pace, and its pass-happy style reminds many international players of the way the soccer is played in their home countries.

"They play with a lot of passes, and that is how soccer is," Jazz guard Raul Neto, a Brazilian international, said. "In order to succeed in soccer, you have to connect with your teammates and use each other to break down defenses. San Antonio brought that style to basketball."

SOCCER STYLE

It would be hard for the Spurs to avoid the influence of soccer on the way they play both individually and collectively.

In the past few seasons, players from soccer-crazed countries such as Argentina (Manu Ginobili), France (Tony Parker and Boris Diaw), Brazil (Tiago Splitter) and Italy (Marco Belinelli) have played critical roles for San Antonio. Even though basketball turned out to be their professional callings, they were inevitably exposed to the world's most popular sport, which has a way of influencing a player's inventiveness.

"If you grew up playing or being fans of soccer the way they probably did, it's a different kind of imagination," Grizzlies guard Mike Conley said. "When you play soccer, you see how many possibilities you have, and you see how many things you have to try to see if it works."

For most kids across Europe and South America, their imaginations are tested on the streets every day growing up.

"Soccer is a street game," Gasol said. "We grew up playing it on the street. We would make anything into a goal. I'm serious, anything. A door, two shoes. Whatever you can imagine. We'd make a goal out of anything to play soccer."

From turning trees into goal posts to creating tricks to impress their friends, for many international NBA players, soccer was the tool that carved their creativity.

Pacers coach Frank Vogel, who played soccer in high school in New Jersey and has coached his daughter Alexa's soccer team, said there is a difference in style for players who come from overseas, and he credited growing up around soccer as a reason for that.

"The European players and the South American players, they really play a different brand of basketball," Vogel said. "From the standpoint of unselfishness and trying to play for teammates, and I think a lot of that comes from soccer."

MANU THE MAGICIAN

Although the Spurs are more often associated with substance rather than style, there is a significant amount of flash across their roster. Tim Duncan might be The Big Fundamental and Kawhi Leonard might dunk the ball with the excitement of an 8-year-old doing math homework, but Parker's stunning spin moves, Diaw's dazzling dishes and Ginobili's poetic passes are all as aesthetically pleasing as it gets

"I think growing up with soccer gives them a different style to their games," Hawks guard Kent Bazemore said. "Soccer is a great game that requires a lot of creativity. The concentration and patience it takes to play that game, I think it prepares them for basketball well."

Ginobili is the Spurs' most avid artist. Many of his magic tricks are foreign to NBA opposition, literally and figuratively. "I think the way he grew up, seeing



Memphis Grizzlies guard Mike Conley said international players in the NBA who have been exposed to soccer have a "different kind of imagination. When you play soccer, you see how many possibilities you have, and you see how many things you have to try to see if

the way basketball and soccer are played over there, impacted the style he has," Jazz forward Gordon Hayward said. "He has different moves and does some different things with the basketball that you aren't used to as an American-born player."

Bazemore has had an affinity for Ginobili's game dating back to his time with the Warriors. During the 2013 playoffs, Ginobili hit a last-second 3-pointer in double overtime in San Antonio's Game 1 victory against Golden State, nullifying Bazemore's would-have-been winner. Since that game, Bazemore said he has been a

'People ask me who is the toughest player to guard, and he's the one I always bring up," Bazemore said. "He doesn't stop moving, he's very savvy and he is so creative. He just finds angles and finds pockets that you as a defender, sometimes it just takes you a second longer to process how in the world he was able to pull it off."

Ginobili's unbridled genius as a passer is one of the NBA's most enjoyable aspects, even for his opponents.

"His imagination is so much more developed because of how unselfish and creative soccer is," Conley said. "And he brings that to basketball. It can be really fun to watch."

IMPORTANT IMPORTS

The Spurs are the foremost pioneers of the collaborative style in the modern NBA, but their philosophical approach originated in Europe.

Phoenix Suns guard Sonny Weems spent four seasons in the EuroLeague playing for Zalgiris in Lithuania and CSKA Moscow in Russia before returning to the NBA this season, and he said his time overseas gave him a new perspective on the sport.

"In Europe, you have to think the game a lot more," Weems said. "You have to be able to read defenses and you have to be able to play a half-court game. It takes patience rather than just playing straight upand-down. In the NBA, you can survive off athleticism, but over there, you really have to learn how to play basketball."

San Antonio has thrived by importing seasoned and sophisticated international players like Parker and Ginobili, who brought with them not only natural skills and athletic ability but also a willingness to exert a style unique to European basketball.

"If you get a bunch of great NBA guys like they have and they know how to play and they play unselfishly, it works," Weems said. "The Spurs have Ginobili, Parker, guys who grew up in the European game and came to the NBA with more than just raw tools. They could think the game. And the Spurs have won multiple championships thanks to those guys.

Some players and coaches around the league think the Spurs go out of their way to draft international players because they know they will be familiar with their system and culture.

Spurs coach Gregg Popovich is one of the most well-respected coaches in the history of sports. Perhaps his most important contribution to basketball was his introduction of the European style into the NBA landscape.

"Pop has brought that mentality to the NBA," Weems said. "Now you are starting to see the Warriors use that European style, the drive-and-kicks and swinging the ball. Once teams in the NBA start to pick up on it, the game will be a lot more fun to watch.

As the exposure of Europe's five major soccer leagues grows exponentially in the United States and as FIFA tournaments determine locker room hierarchy across the NBA, more and more, Americans and basketball players alike are being won over

by the sport of soccer. With elements of "The Beautiful Game" beginning to seep into the NBA, teams across the league will have the Spurs to thank for blazing yet another trail.

Making their Christmas debut

Many stars to play for first time on holiday

By Tim Reynolds Associated Press

MIAMI - Jrue Holiday grew up watching Christmas Day games, with his hometown Los Angeles Lakers almost being an annual fixture in the NBA's holiday lineup. He's never gotten to

play on the holiday. That is, until now.

He's not alone. Several players will make their debut under the Christmas lights, including New Orleans star Anthony Davis — the reason why the Pelicans are on the Christmas schedule. Then there are some of the top rookies like Miami's Justise Winslow and the Lakers' D'Angelo Russell. And the wait may be over for veterans like the Clippers' Josh Smith, Miami's Gerald Green, the Lakers' duo of Roy Hibbert and Lou Williams, all set to play on Christmas for the first

"We got Christmas Day because of Anthony," Holiday said. "I think everybody knows why. I'm not offended or anything by being passed over or whatever. But it's pretty cool to play on Christmas. Thank you, Antho-

As many as 46 players could make their Christmas debuts Friday, when the league's holiday slate has New Orleans at Miami, Chicago at Oklahoma City, Cleveland at Golden State in an NBA Finals rematch, San Antonio at Houston and then the Clippers and Lakers meeting in Los Angeles.

For some like Kobe Bryant and Dwyane Wade, playing on Christmas is as much of a holiday tradition as presents. Bryant will be in his 16th Christmas game — his Lakers haven't had Dec. 25 off since 1998. Wade will play in his 11th Christmas matchup for the Heat, who are looking for their seventh consec-

utive win on the big day. "I'm so damn happy about it," Bryant said, "and so damn thankful for it.'

For others, like Cleveland's Richard Jefferson, this has been a long time coming: His only other Christmas spent on the court was 2002. But it's a relatively safe bet that the widest-eyed players Friday will be those first experiencing the day in which the NBA dominates the sports land-

"It's an honor," Oklahoma City coach Billy Donovan said.

Donovan remembers plenty of details from his only other involvement with the Christmas NBA slate. He was with the New York Knicks in 1987, playing seven minutes and shooting 1 for 3 in a loss to Detroit. He left Madison Square Garden after the game, caught the train from Penn Station — under the arena — to Long Island to his aunt's home for the family Christmas gathering.

When his Thunder play host to the Bulls on Friday, Donovan will actually be the coach with the edge in Christmas experience: Fred Hoiberg, in his first season

coaching Chicago, spent parts of 10 seasons in the league as a player but never got in a Dec. 25

"I think playing on Christmas Day is always an exciting time," Donovan said.

Many of the league's biggest names are in this year's lineup: LeBron James, Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson, Derrick Rose, Kevin Durant, Russell Westbrook, Chris Bosh, Dwight Howard, Tim Duncan, Tony Parker, Kyrie Irving, Chris Paul and LaMarcus Aldridge.

"It's a fun day," said Aldridge, who hasn't played on Christmas since 2010 and is in his first season with San Antonio. "Everybody's at home waiting for the games. It's an honor to be on Christmas Day. I think everybody's looking forward to it, for

Few are probably looking forward to it more than Davis. The start to the season has been dreadful for New Orleans, but that won't matter to him on Friday. He remembers being outvoted when he wanted to watch cartoons on Christmas as a kid, with family members keeping the television on the NBA games instead.

Now he'll be the one trumping the cartoons.

"We know all the hype around the Christmas Day games," Davis said. "It's kind of a big deal. ... Just love watching the games. The past couple of years you watch and I know we could be there. Now we're finally here and we've got to do whatever we've got to do



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