

Unlikely Heroes Have Emerged On The Biggest Stages

by Thomas Neumann

This is a time of year - with the NBA and NHL playoffs in high gear - when role players and unlikely heroes can make pivotal contributions to championship efforts. With that in mind, we have compiled our list of 10 of the most unlikely sports heroes - athletes who made names for themselves based almost exclusively on putting forth their best efforts on the biggest stages. These are athletes who have come from out of nowhere to make their marks in the world of sport:

- 1. Robert Horry** No other athlete has raised his level of performance under pressure situations more often than "Big Shot Bob" - or "Big Shot Rob," as Horry prefers to be called. Horry has averaged 7.4 points and 5.0 rebounds during a 14-season NBA career, but his postseason heroics are the stuff of legend. Since arriving in the NBA out of Alabama in 1992, Horry has earned a reputation of hitting decisive three-pointers in the postseason with the Rockets, Lakers and Spurs. A sampling of his postseason glory: May 1995: Horry's only basket is the winner for Houston in a 94-93 win over San Antonio in Game 1 of the Western Conference finals. June 1995: Horry sets an NBA Finals record with seven steals as the Rockets beat Orlando in Game 2 on the way to a sweep. May 1997: Horry goes 7-for-7 on three-pointers for the Lakers in a Western semifinal game against Utah, setting an NBA playoffs record for most attempts without a miss. June 2001: Horry scores seven points in the last 47.1 seconds to lift the Lakers to a pivotal victory over the 76ers in Game 3 of the NBA Finals. April 2002: Horry nails the series-winning three-pointer as the Lakers sweep the Trail Blazers in the first round. May 2002: In perhaps the best-known shot of Horry's career, he drains the winning three-pointer in Game 4 of the Western finals against Sacramento with 0.6 seconds left, keeping the Lakers from falling behind 3-1 in the series. The winning shot came after misses by Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant when the Kings' Vlade Divac unwittingly batted a rebound directly to Horry at the three-point line. June 2005: Horry scores 21 points for the Spurs in the final 17 minutes of Game 5 of the NBA Finals against the Pistons, including the winning three-pointer in overtime. Said teammate Tim Duncan: "That was probably the greatest performance I've ever been a part of." Horry holds the record for career three-pointers in the NBA Finals and ranks second all-time in playoff three-pointers. He also leads active players with six championship rings. The brighter the spotlight, the more Horry seemingly thrives on pressure. As Horry said during last year's Finals: "Pressure can burst a pipe or pressure can make a diamond."
- 2. Don Larsen** Larsen is possibly the greatest one-hit wonder in baseball history. The Point Loma High alum pitched the only perfect game in World Series history - one of just 15 perfectos in the majors since 1900. Larsen, owner of an 81-91 career record, was an extremely unlikely candidate to toss a perfect game. He even led the American League with 21 losses for Baltimore in 1954. But on Oct. 8, 1956, he reached baseball immortality as a New York Yankee. Just three days after getting rattled in his Game 2 start in Brooklyn (four unearned runs in 1 2/3 innings), he retired all 27 Dodgers he faced with just 97 pitches at Yankee Stadium. Said Larsen: "When it was over, I was so happy, I felt like crying. I wanted to win this one for (manager) Casey (Stengel). After what I did in Brooklyn, he could have forgotten about me and who would blame him? But he gave me another chance and I'm grateful."
- 3. Buster Douglas** The star of the biggest upset in boxing history, Douglas stunned observers by knocking out undefeated Mike Tyson in a February 1990 heavyweight title bout in Tokyo as a 42-1 underdog. Unlike Tyson, Douglas was motivated. Douglas dedicated the fight to his mother, who had died weeks earlier. Tyson, however, seemed to treat it simply as a tune-up for an expected bout with Evander Holyfield. Tyson knocked Douglas down late in the eighth round, but Douglas would rebound to score a knockout in the 10th. Douglas was featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated with the headline "Rocky Lives," but fell into poor training habits and ultimately swelled to more than 300 pounds after losing his belt to Holyfield. Douglas made a couple unspectacular comebacks and ultimately hung up his gloves in 1999.
- 4. Ilya Bryzgalov and Jean-Sebastien Giguere** When it comes to recent Stanley Cup playoffs, the Anaheim Mighty Ducks have been blessed with some of the best postseason goaltending in NHL history. Both Bryzgalov and Giguere rose from obscurity to carry the team deep into the postseason. In Bryzgalov's case, he compiled the second-longest shutout streak in NHL postseason history (249:15) this season in leading Anaheim into the Western Conference finals. Coincidentally, he took the starting job from Giguere, whose scoreless streak in the 2003 playoffs (217:54) helped propel the Ducks to within one game of winning the Stanley Cup.
- 5. Jim Leyritz** Padres fans are likely to remember his clutch home runs during the team's run to the 1998 World Series. He hit four that postseason, including three in the

Division Series against Houston. Leyritz also hit four postseason homers as a Yankee - most notably a game-tying, three-run blast off Atlanta fireballer Mark Wohlers in Game 4 of the 1996 World Series - giving him eight postseason homers in 61 career at-bats. All this from a player who wasn't selected in the amateur draft and hit 90 homers in 2,527 career at-bats in the regular season.

6. Larry Brown and Timmy Smith Super Bowl heroes Brown and Smith seized the moment, each enjoying his greatest performance when it mattered most. Brown made two interceptions in Super Bowl XXX to set up Dallas touchdowns as the Cowboys beat the Steelers 27-17. He then parlayed the game's MVP award into a \$12.5 million contract with the Raiders, a pact he never lived up to. Smith, who ran for 126 yards during the entire 1987 season, filled in for the injured George Rogers and rushed for 204 yards and two TDs as Washington rolled past Denver in Super Bowl XXII in San Diego. He would rush for 602 career yards over parts of three seasons.

7. Jack Fleck Fleck made perhaps the most unlikely jump from obscurity to major champion by defeating one of golf's most beloved figures in the 1955 U.S. Open at The Olympic Club in San Francisco. Fleck didn't break 80 in his practice rounds, and even thought of withdrawing after driving from his Davenport, Iowa, home to compete. He would win by three strokes in a playoff over sentimental favorite Ben Hogan, who was trying for his fifth Open victory. Hogan hadn't played in more than seven tournaments a year since suffering injuries in a devastating car accident in 1949. But the anonymous Fleck birdied two of the final four holes to tie Hogan, his idol, then shot a 1-under-par 69 to win the playoff.

8. Steve Kerr Kerr is best known for making the series-winning shot for the Chicago Bulls in Game 6 of the 1997 NBA Finals against Utah, securing a fifth championship ring for Michael Jordan, who would say "tonight Steve Kerr earned his wings from my perspective." More impressive was his play for the Spurs in Game 6 of the 2003 Western Conference finals. Kerr was called upon late in the third quarter with San Antonio trailing Dallas by 15 points. He steadied an ineffective backcourt with 12 points on 4-for-4 three-point shooting, and sparked the jittery Spurs to a 23-0 fourth-quarter run en route to a 90-78 series-clinching win. Kerr then sparked a pivotal run in Game 5 of the '03 NBA Finals and won his fifth championship ring when the Spurs beat the Nets in six. Not bad for the 50th overall selection in the 1988 draft.

9. Salvatore "Toto" Schillaci A surprising selection by Italy for its 1990 World Cup roster, Schillaci rewarded coach Azeglio Vicini by leading the tournament with six goals. Schillaci had played in just one international match when tabbed by Vicini, but the Sicilian quickly became the toast of Italy by lifting his team into the semifinals when it last played host to the World Cup. His fame quickly faded, however, and he was dropped from the national team. He wouldn't be a consistent goal scorer again until he went to play in Japan in 1994.

10. Giacomo This horse shocked bettors and oddsmakers last year by pulling off the second-biggest upset in Kentucky Derby history. Giacomo, ridden by Mike Smith and trained by Derby rookie John Shirreffs, had won just one race and drew little attention in prep races leading up to the Derby. Nevertheless, Giacomo galloped to victory as a 50-1 long shot. He finished third in the Preakness and seventh in the Belmont. Giacomo is racing in California this year but hasn't won since his big day at Churchill Downs. "Giacomo winning the Derby is the same as me beating Tiger Woods on one hole of golf," said legendary trainer D. Wayne Lukas. "He'd have to hit one in the water. I'd have to play a perfect hole."

HONORABLE MENTION

Ten more who stepped out of the shadows into the spotlight:

Bucky Dent, New York Yankees: Dent's pivotal homer in New York's one-game playoff victory to win the AL East title in 1978 over Boston cemented the shortstop's place in Yankees lore and eternal hatred from Red Sox nation.

Martin Gelin, Calgary Flames: A solid but unspectacular player, Gelin scored the series-clinching goal in each of the first three rounds of the NHL playoffs as Calgary dumped Vancouver, Detroit and San Jose en route to a berth in the 2004 Stanley Cup Finals. The Flames lost to Tampa Bay in the Finals in seven games, and Gelin wound up leaving for Florida as a free agent.

Jeffrey Maier, New York Yankees: The only fan on our list (although you could make him a tandem entry with Steve Bartman), the 12-year-old Maier reached over the right-field wall in Yankee Stadium and snagged a Derek Jeter fly that appeared to be heading into the glove of Baltimore's Tony Tarasco in Game 1 of the 1996 ALCS. Fan interference wasn't called - although umpire Rich Garcia later admitted it would've been the correct call - and the Yanks beat the Orioles in five games en route to the World Series title.

Iva Majoli, French Open champion: At 19, Majoli stunned the tennis world by defeating heavily favored Martina Hingis in the 1997 final, ending Hingis' 37-match winning streak. Majoli won just one tournament after her triumph at Roland Garros.

Cedric Maxwell, Boston Celtics: "Cornbread," as he was nicknamed, scored 28 points in Game 5 of the 1981 NBA Finals, earning series MVP honors for his steady play as Boston beat Houston in six games. Maxwell also scored 24 points in Game 7 of the 1984 NBA Finals as the Celtics beat the Lakers.

Roger Milla, Cameroon national soccer team: At 38,

Milla was talked out of retirement to compete in the 1990 World Cup. He came off the bench to score four goals as Cameroon became the first African team to reach the quarterfinals. Dusty Rhodes, New York Giants: A part-time player who produced ordinary statistics, Rhodes played a large role as the Giants beat Cleveland in the 1954 World Series. After hitting a career-best 15 homers during the regular season, Rhodes went 4-for-6 with two homers and seven RBI against the Indians. His pinch homer in the 10th was the winner in Game 1 and set the tone for the series. Francisco Rodriguez, Anaheim Angels: After pitching less than six innings as a rookie in the 2002 regular season, he posted a 5-1 record and 1.92 ERA as a setup man for Troy Percival in the playoffs. His 28 strikeouts in 18 2/3 postseason innings earned him the nickname "K-Rod," as the Angels defeated San Francisco for the World Series title in seven games. Adam Vinatieri, New England Patriots: He only rates honorable mention because he has been one of the NFL's most accurate kickers in the regular season (81.9). Still, his winning field goals on the final plays of Super Bowls XXXVI and XXXVIII and his tying field goal in the snow against the Raiders in a January 2002 playoff game require recognition here. Al Weis, 1969 New York Mets: The light-hitting utility man laced the winning hit in Game 2 of the 1969 World Series and hit the tying homer in Game 5 as the Mets beat the Orioles in five games. One of the reasons the Mets acquired Weis from the White Sox in 1967 was that at age 29 he couldn't be called for military duty in Vietnam.

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