NBA didn't get it right on this non-incident

by Mark Kreidler

(SACRAMENTO BEE, April 17, 2001)

The NBA's ludicrous overreaction to the Jason Williams towel-waving incident in San Antonio ought to be seen for what it is: A straight-up face-slapping from the New York headquarters of a business that has decided to get the attention of one of its most recognizable faces, one way or another.

This isn't about fairness, it's about a zero-tolerance policy being directed at a player who has absolutely set himself up for this kind of dopey, every-night, Bob Knight scrutiny. It may not be just, but you sure can't say it hasn't been earned.

And the Kings, from the front office right down through the last players on the roster, understand that. Sacramento fans who would rather be talking about playoff positioning and Chris Webber's ankle -- they certainly get it. They've been living with these absurdities.

The only question remaining is whether the guy who starts at point guard has received the message. And it tells you everything you need to know about Jason Williams that not one person in the organization interviewed Monday night seemed too confident about that.

The defenses came fast and furious on Williams' behalf after this one, and the one thing that appears certain is that the league didn't much care whether it got the particulars of the San Antonio incident just exactly right. What is known is that a) Williams had been ridden vocally by some fans near the Kings' bench at the Alamodome last Thursday night; b) toward the end of the game, Williams and several teammates stood up along the bench to cheer, with Williams holding up his usual white towel well outstretched in an obvious effort to block some fans'
views, and c) despite the fans' bellowing and a security guard asking, the players never sat down again in a game the Kings finally won in overtime.

"Hey, you can stand up during a game," said Nick Anderson, who was seated near Williams. "That game was tight. The whole bench was up, and we weren't going to sit down."

Anderson and Jon Barry both adamantly denied that Williams said anything derogatory or made gestures toward the fans (Williams, as is his recent custom, had nothing to say to anyone publicly Monday), but that didn't stop the league.

After receiving an e-mail from a Spurs fan angered by the incident and conducting a fact-finding process that managed to include no one from the Sacramento organization, NBA official Stu Jackson levied a $25,000 fine that was utterly out of whack with the deed.

And that is exactly the point. Williams is going to appeal the fine and he might even win, but you're looking at a larger story here -- and he should be.

Jason Williams has finally exhausted every iota of goodwill that the NBA ever extended him, and we're talking about one hellacious truckload of goodwill over the last three years. The man is on the Mark Cuban list of everyday suspects.

"Every arena that he walks into now ... it can become a real difficult environment," said Kings vice president Geoff Petrie. Is there any recess of Williams' mind which this thought has not yet penetrated? That's not a 55 on Williams' back, it's a target with a sign in the middle that says, "Heckle Here!"

By his consistent inability to rise above the level of the fractional minority of truly repellent fans out there, by his own foolish and often incredibly offensive
behavior, Williams has effectively declared open season on himself.

There isn't a place in the NBA the Kings visit that doesn't include at least a couple of people who are certain they can get Williams to crack -- and anyone who fails to make the connection between his off-court behavior and his on-court erraticism just isn't taking enough notes.
It gets personal and it gets profane, and it can be tough to take. As Anderson noted, "It's OK for them to cuss you out. That's what the league is saying. They (the fans) can say anything to you, and you can't say anything. That's totally unfair."

Point taken. It sure is life, though. If you want to be amazed that so many NBA players manage to daily stay outside that obscene scrum, go ahead. In our corner, we'll call it worthy professionalism. As of today, there can be little doubt that the league is going to make Williams worthy or break him trying.