

Sports

Rockets, Spurs head West to begin NBA playoffs

Adversity primes Houston for Sacramento

HOUSTON (AP) — The Houston Rockets had every opportunity to wilt under the steady assault of adversity this season.

A lesser team might not have held on to win the NBA Midwest Division title and take the conference's second best record into the playoffs against Sacramento on Thursday night.

"Adversity, if you can deal with it, will make you a better club," Coach Bill Fitch said. "We've made some pluses out of minuses."

— On Feb. 15, Akeem Olajuwon suffered a bruised knee ligament and sat out 14 games. The Rockets went 7-7 without Olajuwon but never lost their division lead.

— On March 15, starting point guard John Lucas was dismissed from the team for the second time with a drug relapse.

— On March 24, Ralph Sampson missed three games with a back bruise after a chilling fall during a game at Boston.

— On April 3, Allen Leavell, who had replaced Lucas, suffered a sprained hand with a week to go in the regular season, leaving Robert Reid, most effective as the sixth man, to fill the starting roll and further weaken the bench.

Each setback brought predictions that the Rockets would fade from the lead but after an early season battle with the Denver Nuggets, the Rockets took over the lead for good on Dec. 26.

Houston led by as many as 5½ games and although Denver closed the gap to one game in mid-March, the

Rockets took the division title by four games.

The minuses kept turning into pluses for the Rockets.

Olajuwon returned strongly to finish eighth in NBA scoring at 23.5 points per game and 11.5 rebounds.

Sampson charged into a dominant role while Olajuwon was sidelined. Sampson performed well at both forward and center to average 23.1 points and 11.2 rebounds.

The Rockets even went on a six-game winning streak in the final two weeks of the season, although they closed out with losses to Los Angeles and Phoenix.

The season-ending loss to the Suns reminded the Rockets of a concentration lapse last season when they lost to underdog Utah in the first round of the NBA playoffs.

Fitch doesn't think his team will have a similar lag. "If I had to worry about that, I'm in trouble," Fitch said. "I'd have to think that last year's Utah series would take care of that. Or we could give them a copy of our final game with Phoenix and go from there."

Fitch became so frustrated in the Phoenix game, he pulled a Halloween mask from his pocket and wore it while lecturing the team during a timeout.

"He had to wear the mask because it was a bet if we won the championship," Reid said. "He just picked a strange time to put it on."

But the team got the message. "Sacramento can do the same thing that Utah did last year if we are not careful," Olajuwon said.

L.A. faces San Antonio feeling unrespected

INGLEWOOD, Calif. (AP) — The NBA playoffs are about to begin, and the defending champion Los Angeles Lakers don't feel like they've gotten the respect that they deserve.

"The (Boston) Celtics have already, in so many words, dethroned us," Coach Pat Riley of the Lakers said. "They're already planning the coronation back in Boston Garden. So be it."

"Teams are always blowing their horns about how they are going to beat us. They're knocking on the door, we're hearing them coming, it's going to be their year, all those things."

"Last year, it was 'Will Boston repeat?' starting Los Angeles guard Byron Scott said. "Now, it's 'Will Boston win the title?' It's not 'Will the Lakers repeat?' Everything is turned around in Boston's favor."

"All those other teams who say they can beat us will have to come through us to get where they want to go," Earvin "Magic" Johnson of the Laker said. "Since I've been here, this team has not gotten any respect."

"I love the position we're in. I've always loved being the underdog. We could win 70 games and it would be the same. They just don't respect the Lakers. It don't matter to me, though. We'll do our thing out on the court."

The Lakers, who had a 62-20 regular-season record for the second consecutive year, face the San Antonio Spurs at the Forum Thursday night in the opener of a best-of-five first-round playoff series. The second game, also at the Forum, will be played Saturday afternoon.

Los Angeles will be trying to become the first team to repeat as the NBA champion since the Celtics accomplished such a feat 17 years ago.

The Lakers had the best record in the NBA's Western Conference while the Celtics, who lost to Los Angeles in six games in last spring's Championship Series, had a 67-15 mark, the best record in the Eastern Conference.

"Even though I think we may not have played our best basketball on a consistent basis (during the regular season), we always found a way to win," Riley said. "This is the trademark of a veteran team, this one in particular."

Los Angeles won four of its five regular-season games against San Antonio. The Spurs had a 35-47 regular-season record, worst in their history. But that hasn't dampened their optimism.

"I think we can do it," San Antonio guard Alvin Robertson said. "If I didn't think that, then I shouldn't be playing."

Said center Artis Gilmore of the Spurs: "I think that San Antonio is the last team the Lakers wanted to meet in the opening round. We play them real well. It's going to be a straight-up ballgame."

Gilmore was one of many San Antonio players sidelined because of injuries during the regular season. But the Spurs enter the playoffs as well off physically as they've been in some time.

"I think the pressure is going to be on them," San Antonio guard Wes Matthews of the Spurs said. "They have everything to lose. We have nothing to lose."

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