

Portland Blazers knocking on door of basketball elite

The month of May is upon us and to most students that means the end of the spring semester and the start of final exams. However, May signifies the start of finals of a different kind to sports fanatics such as myself, the NBA finals.

Tim Schnettler
Columnist

The grueling 82 game season is over and the playoffs are in full swing, bringing with them the question that every basketball fan asks at this time of year — "Which team will be the next world champions?"

This question is one which has sparked many a heated debate among NBA fans. Every fan has their own opinion on who will win the championship, but only one team will win it all.

That team is the Portland Trailblazers. I am from San Antonio, so my heart is with the Spurs, but my common sense says to go with the Blazers. Portland reached the NBA finals last year and was swept in 4 games by the Detroit Pistons. The sweep was due to a lack of depth on the Blazers bench. Driven by this sweep, the Portland front office wheeled and dealt to obtain bench players that will help bring a title to Portland.

Two of their acquisitions stand out from the others they made, the first of these being the deal that brought them Danny Ainge.

Ainge came to Blazers from the Sacramento Kings, and prior to that he played for the Boston Celtics. While with the Celtics, Ainge was a key factor in their title runs of the 80's. Ainge brings this playoff experience to the

played for the Boston Celtics. While with the Celtics, Ainge was a key factor in their title runs of the 80's. Ainge brings this playoff experience to the Blazers along with an excellent shooting touch.

During the regular season Ainge averaged 11.1 points a game and drained 102 three-point shots.

He also was able to come into the game and pick up the slack when the Portland starters were not on their game.

The second player that the Blazers obtained was Walter Davis.

Davis was a mainstay of the Phoenix Suns teams of the '80s and was always among the team leaders when it came to scoring.

Davis, whose career has spanned 14 years has always risen to the challenge of the playoffs.

His valuable playoff experience will be a major factor in the Blazers drive to the title.

The contributions of Ainge and Davis, combined with one of the best starting lineups in the NBA will bring the city of Portland a world championship.

Now that the question of who will win this year's title is answered, the next question that will be asked is, "Can they do it again next year?"

Spurs coaches impose curfew

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Golden State State surprisingly used a short lineup to stop San Antonio's 7-foot-1 David Robinson in Game 2, but Warriors coach Don Nelson may use a different strategy for Wednesday's Game 3.

"I expect there will be some changes," said Nelson, who used his big men in the loss to the Spurs in the first game of the best-of-5 playoff series, before countering with a smaller lineup to beat Robinson and the Spurs in the second game.

"We're going to continue to make some changes throughout the series. Sometimes you need a major one, like we did from Game 1 to Game 2, sometimes you don't. But there'll always be things we see we can do a little better, hopefully."

Meanwhile, San Antonio coaches also have made a change, imposing a midnight curfew through the remainder of the playoffs, which continue at Oakland on Wednesday and Friday.

"If everyone's in at a decent time, it tends to help everyone focus on what they need to do," Spurs forward Terry Cummings said. "We have to remember not to let them (the Warriors) get the upper hand."

Some Spurs players were spotted at a club after midnight Friday, before San Antonio's loss to the Warriors Saturday afternoon, the San Antonio Express-News reported. Team officials said they don't know what happened but will look into it.

"I think the Saturday game was an awakening for us," forward Sean Elliott said. The Spurs discussed the rule at a players-only meeting Monday.

Saturday's Game 2 also removed the spotlight from the Warriors' Big 3 of Chris Mullin, Mitch Richmond and Tim Hardaway — who all shot under 50 percent from the floor — and onto the reserves.

"The bench has done a great job for us in this series," Nelson said. "I think they're getting 36, 37 points a game, and we couldn't have written it any better."

Rockets welcome trouble; adversity bonds players

HOUSTON (AP) — When many coaches would be looking for a silver lining, Don Chaney is encouraging gloom.

Lakers center Vlade Divac has played evenly with Houston's Hakeem Olajuwon and James Worthy's performance in the first two games has forced his Rockets counterpart, Buck Johnson, into silence.

If there's any more bad news out there, Chaney wants to hear it.

"I like the idea of people counting us out because this team understands how to get themselves together and stay as a unit and fight the world," Chaney said. "And when they fight the world, they are at their best."

The Rockets do have a good track record for overcoming adversity this season. They lost Olajuwon for 25 games from Jan. 4-Feb. 28 and bonded together for a 15-10 record that launched them into a 14-1 mark in March.

"When you have all this speculation and adversity out there, this team, instead of separating, they bond closer and that's what I like," Chaney said.

Now the Rockets must overcome the Lakers, who eliminated them in the first round of the playoffs in four games last year. They'll be trying to improve by sweeping the Rockets.

Divac averaged 11.2 points and 8.1 rebounds in the regular season but in

two playoff games against the Rockets, he's got four blocked shots and is averaging 20 points and 10.5 rebounds.

Johnson has had the duty of trying to hold down Worthy, who is hitting at a 21.5 clip through two playoff games.

Chaney said the Rockets would try to get the ball to Johnson more in the third game.

"We should go to Buck Johnson a little more in the offense but he's not to the Rockets what Worthy is to the Lakers," Chaney said.

Chaney is concerned with that matchup but he's more surprised by Divac's emergence.

"The key to their success so far has been Divac," Chaney said. "He's gotten a lot of his baskets from Hakeem rotating to help and they find him under the hoop."

Houston's two losses in Los Angeles haven't lulled the Lakers.

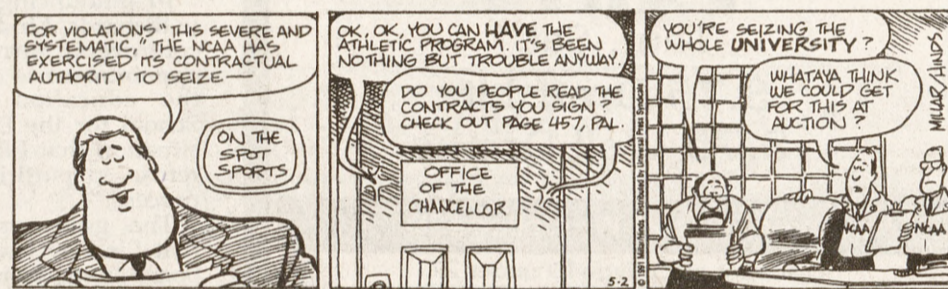
"This thing isn't over by any means," Worthy said. "If they continue to play like they did in L.A., then they will be trouble at home."

The Rockets have been eliminated from the playoffs in the first round for the past three years. They're accustomed to almost hopeless odds.

"They're not afraid of being down 2-3," Chaney said. "As long as the morale is high and the confidence level is high we're okay."

TANK McNAMARA

by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



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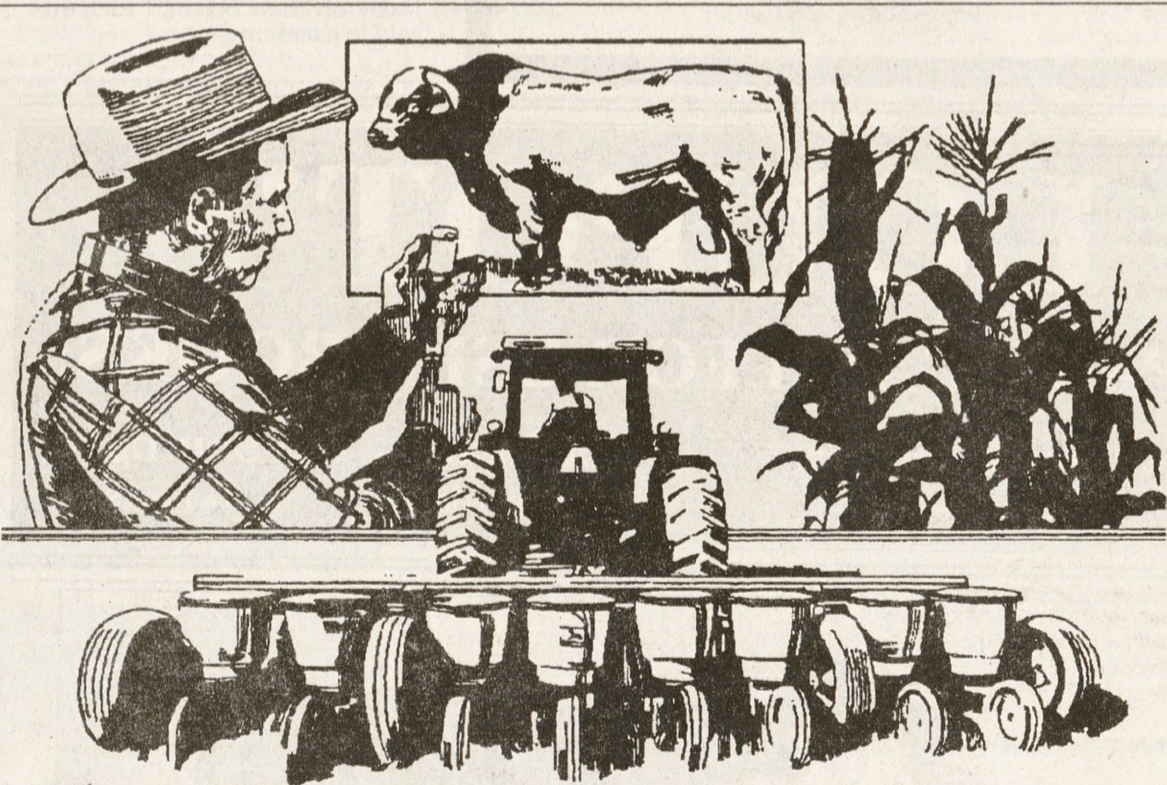


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