

'Season of promise' strikes flat note for struggling Jazz

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — At the end of what was to be Utah's season of promise, the struggling Jazz instead limp into the NBA playoffs against the Seattle SuperSonics as the Western Conference's sixth-place team.

Last season, the Jazz made it to the Western Conference Finals before losing to Portland. This year, Utah finished 47-35 — the first time the Jazz have won less than 50 times since 1988-89.

The Jazz, an NBA-best 37-4 in the Delta Center last season, were 28-13 this year — their worst home record since 1985-86 (27-14).

"We went into the season with very high expectations," Jazz owner Larry H. Miller said. "I characterize it as an incredible rollercoaster ride. Even in the midst of it, we had really terrific spells where I thought we were back on track and then boom, we'd collapse."

After Karl Malone and John Stockton capped Salt Lake's hosting of the All-Star game by sharing MVP honors, the Jazz lost five in a row. With a 107-93 loss at Denver March 22, Utah fell to 4-11 since the All-Star break, its hopes for repeating as Midwest Division champion shattered.

"It's been a classic case of Jekyll and Hyde," said Miller, whose team ended its

regular season with a 113-111 loss to lowly Minnesota.

As Utah prepares for Friday's opening first-round game in Seattle, it is a team plagued by injuries, fatigue, and a sometimes abysmal defense that has repeatedly frittered away double-digit leads.

Seattle, which split regular season games with the Jazz 2-2, will have the homecourt advantage in the best-of-five series.

Unless Utah finally shakes off its malaise, the Jazz might go on summer vacation early, coach Jerry Sloan warns.

"We know how great a team Seattle is and how difficult they are to beat," he said. "It's up to them to put themselves in a position where they play like they're capable of playing."

The Jazz slide might be traced to the beginning of the season, if not further back to the Olympic Games in Barcelona, where Malone and Stockton helped the Dream Team win gold.

Statistically, Malone and Stockton seem unaffected by their short summer break. Malone is averaging 27.1 points and 11.3 rebounds, compared to last year's 28 points and 11.2 rebounds. Stockton is scoring 15.2 (15.8 last year) and still dishing out an NBA-best 12 assists (13.7 in 1991-92).

But fatigue has taken its toll, Sloan and Miller insist.

"I think they've really been tired because of their continual basketball effort," the coach said. "It has shown with the whole team. Look at the number of games where we haven't been able to make the big play or big stop."

Miller agrees, saying "some of the edge has been taken off for Karl and John."

Malone admits his concentration has lagged at times. He has often started slowly, scoring in a flurry late in games when the Jazz tried to rally from huge deficits.

"You just go out and play the game," Malone said. "You don't use that as an excuse."

"Nothing," is Stockton's terse answer when asked if the Olympics have hurt his game. Still, his 3-point shooting has slipped from nearly 41 percent last year to 38 percent, and his 197 steals going into Friday's final regular season home game with Golden State are far off last year's 244.

Then there is Mark Eaton. The soul of Utah's interior defense for a decade, the 7-foot-4 center underwent knee surgery in late October. He had just begun to return to his intimidating form when a sprained lower back put him back on the

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— Larry H. Miller, Jazz owner

injured list April 15.

He returned to action Sunday against Minnesota, managing just four rebounds and no points in 16 minutes.

In all, Eaton missed 18 games and was been used sparingly in others, watching his minutes dip from 25 per game last season to 17 this year. The Jazz signed 12-year veteran big man James Donaldson, who had been out of the league, after Eaton's latest injury.

"People now realize how important Mark has been to this franchise," Sloan said. "We struggle without him."

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