

Bird trying to keep nest happy

By Hank Lowenkron
The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Larry Bird, the former player, knows the dilemma facing Larry Bird the coach as his Indiana Pacers drive for the Central Division championship.

With a bench that includes Derrick McKey, Travis Best, Jalen Rose and Antonio Davis, Bird must divide the playing time and hope his players understand.

The bench has been a major weapon for Indiana, which leads the Central Division by 2 1/2 games and is trying to catch Miami and Orlando to secure home-court advantage throughout the Eastern Conference playoffs. Indiana reserves have outscored the opposition's bench 35 times this season, including a 54-20 margin in Wednesday's 108-100 overtime victory over Milwaukee.

"One thing you've got to understand is we've got 10 guys. ... It's hard to distribute minutes. The one thing about us if we go into the playoffs and guys are really worried about their minutes, it's really going to hurt us," Bird said.

"They've got to know we've got 10 guys that can play, and we're going to play everybody. ... Guys have got to stay as a team, and play as a team if we're going to win."

In recent weeks, Bird has adjusted the rotation more than he did earlier when he often used two units. Reggie Miller, Dale Davis and Chris Mullin have started every game and Mark Jackson and Rik Smits have missed only one game each.

The division of minutes has become more complicated since McKey, who missed the first 37 games before coming off the injured list April 12, is seeing more action in recent games.

"It's not important as far as what we're trying to do," Jackson said about concern over playing time. He has consistently spent the fourth quarter on the bench with Best at point guard. "The main thing is winning and whoever is out there getting the job done, that's what it's all about."

Jackson admits he would rather play than watch Best with the game on the line in the fourth period.

"If I'm a coach, I wouldn't want

a player who is happy on the bench. That doesn't mean guys are complaining about minutes," he said. "Our chemistry has always been great. We've got a bunch of guys who only care about winning, sacrificing individual ego to achieve it."

The depth of the Pacers has been noticed by others.

"It's like they have two teams. They have one team that starts and another team that comes off the bench," Chicago's Mark Bryant said.

"They've got so much talent on that bench, they tend to wear you down," Milwaukee's Glenn Robinson said.

McKey's return has made a big difference defensively as the 6-foot-10 forward with the big wingspan uses it effectively against shorter forwards.

"I think they activated Derrick McKey to put him on Vince (Carter). I thought Vince had his most unproductive night and that was a good personnel move by them," Toronto coach Butch Carter said after McKey's first game this season.

Devils pick off Penguins in Game 1

By Tom Canavan
The Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. Petr Sykora led the New Jersey Devils in scoring in the regular season and he picked off right where he left off in the playoffs — playing against his idol.

Sykora scored twice and the Devils started making amends for recent playoff failures by beating Jaromir Jagr and the Pittsburgh Penguins 3-1 in the opener of their Eastern Conference quarter-final series on Thursday night.

"I feel pretty good about this team," said Sykora, who led the team in scoring with 72 points on the season. "I feel pretty good about myself. I feel pretty good about what I am doing on the ice. I don't feel like a star. We don't have a star on this hockey team. We are stars as a team."

A lot of them contributed as the Devils took the lead in the best-of-7 series with Game 2 on tap Saturday afternoon.

Martin Brodeur had 24 saves, Patrik Elias set up two goals and Jay Pandolfo scored into an empty net as the Devils struggled more than expected against the eighth-seeded Penguins, who probably had more good scoring chances than New Jersey.

"We don't want to prove we can compete, we want to win the series," Penguins forward Matthew Barnaby said. "We still think we can win the series. We thought it going in."

Jan Hrdina was the only Penguin to beat Brodeur, but the Devils' goaltender had to come up with at least seven good stops to prevent Pittsburgh from tying the game at 2-2. His best were glove saves against Jagr late in the second, another on Kip Miller with 3:27 to play and a pad save with 2:07 left on a shot by Jagr in full stride.

"You have to make some big saves to win some big games in the playoffs," Brodeur said. "I was pretty fortunate to get lucky on a few of them."

It was what the Devils needed to prevent doubts from starting to creep in again in the postseason. New Jersey, which has been the conference's best team in the regular season the last three years, was eliminated by Ottawa in the first round last year and by the New York Rangers in the second round two years ago.

"It was very important for all of us. We're feeling very good about it," said Sykora, who referred to Jagr as his "hero." "It was a very tough game."

The Devils got off on the right foot this time because Sykora continued his great play. He led the team with 29 goals in the regular season and he continued to lead them on Thursday night.

"He's a very good player," Jagr said of Sykora, a fellow Czech. "He scores goals. He's also playing with very good players. They are playing together well and they are dangerous with their speed and skill."

Sykora, who only played in two games in last year's opening-

round loss with Jacques Lemaire in charge, was in the right spot at the right time on the game winner. It was a play on which the Devils kept the puck in the Penguins' zone and got a little lucky.

Elias' pass from behind the net deflected off a Penguins defender to Devils defenseman Sheldon Souray at the right point. He skated on goal and took a shot into a group of players in front of the net. The puck hit off someone and bounced to a wide-open Sykora, who backhanded the puck past Tom Barrasso, who faced 22 shots.

Hrdina got the first goal of the series at 7:20 of the first period, but it was Jagr who did all the work. The NHL's leading scorer took a pass from Jiri Slego in center ice, split the Devils' defense only to be stopped by Brodeur. Hrdina put the rebound into an open net.

Elias set up Sykora's first goal just 15 seconds later, stopping a Penguins pass at the left point. Elias took a stride toward the middle and then caught Barrasso out of position by passing the puck to Sykora above the right circle. His shot found the upper corner of the net.

Pandolfo scored with 31 seconds to play.

Jagr left the ice after the goal but he insisted he was not upset and that he was not injured. He had a groin injury late in the season.

The Penguins played without Alexei Kovalev, a 23-goal scorer who sprained his right wrist in the season finale on Sunday.

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