

NY earns matchup with Pacers, Miller

By Chris Sheridan
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — For the first time in 30 years, the New York Knicks swept a seven-game series. For the first time in five years, they're in the Eastern Conference finals.

On another day of politicking off the court and precision on it, the Knicks completed a 4-0 sweep of the Atlanta Hawks with a 79-66 victory Monday.

New York moves on to a conference finals matchup with the Indiana Pacers beginning next Sunday, a series that coach Jeff Van Gundy will enter without knowing whether his job is safe for next season.

Madison Square Garden president Dave Checketts met with Van Gundy before the game and apologized to him for lying about his meeting with former Bulls coach Phil Jackson in mid-April. But rather than give Van Gundy a vote of confidence, Checketts again said the fate of the coach and the players will be decided at the end of the season.

By the end of the fourth quarter, the fans were chanting Van Gundy's name and giving him a standing ovation — a first at Madison Square Garden for the beleaguered fourth-year coach.

Game 4 was much like the first three in this series — lopsided in favor of the Knicks,

the first eighth-seeded team ever to advance to the third round.

New York outscored Atlanta in every quarter, leading by seven points after one quarter, by 11 after two and 15 after a third quarter in which the fans started chanting "We Want Reggie" — reference to Knicks nemesis Reggie Miller of the Pacers.

The Knicks and Indiana will be meeting in the postseason for the fifth time this decade, including two conference finals. The last time they met with a trip to the finals at stake was 1994 when New York won in seven games. Last season, Indiana ousted the Knicks 4-1 in the second round.

Allan Houston scored 19 points, including 12 in the first quarter when the Knicks took the lead for good. Patrick Ewing had 17 in his highest-scoring game of the series and Latrell Sprewell added 11.

Defensively, the Knicks held Atlanta to 29 percent shooting from the field for the second time in the series.

Steve Smith had 14 points on 5-for-20 shooting to lead the Hawks, whose shortened rotation due to injuries doomed their chances against the much deeper Knicks. The Hawks have not made it to the conference finals since 1969-70, their second season in Atlanta after moving from St. Louis.

Jazz try to avoid early retirement

By Greg Beacham
The Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — The Utah Jazz are watching their championship dreams wither before their eyes, and they don't know what to do about it.

The last time the Utah Jazz lost three games in a row, they were in the 1998 NBA Finals. But in dropping three straight to the Trail Blazers over a four-day span, the Jazz didn't look much like a team that can return there.

And now Utah is down to its last chance to shake this postseason funk.

Portland visits the Delta Center on Tuesday night for Game 5 in the best-of-7 second-round series. Up 3-1, the Blazers have three chances to eliminate the Jazz and advance to face San Antonio in the Western Conference finals.

Most observers thought this shortened season would be the last best chance for Karl Malone, John Stockton and company to

win the title that has eluded them for over a decade. Now, it will take a miraculous three-game winning streak for the Jazz to climb out of the hole they have dug — and even then, the Spurs await.

"We're up against it now," Jazz guard Jeff Hornacek said. "We put ourselves in this situation, and now we have to see if we can get out of it. How? Well, we need everything, sort of."

After three games in four days, the Jazz didn't practice Monday. Coach Jerry Sloan hoped a day off might give one more injection of rest for his aging, ailing team.

The Blazers worked out in Portland before flying to Salt Lake, where Utah is 3-4 in its last seven home playoff games. If necessary, Game 6 will be Thursday at the Rose Garden.

Ever since their blowout of Sacramento in the first game of the first round, the Jazz have mostly played miserably during

the playoffs, and there's no single reason why. Utah is 3-5 in its last eight games, and two of those wins came only when the Kings missed shots that could have won it.

The Jazz's scoring is down, their defense has trouble keeping up with young legs and their big men have done nothing. Even Stockton has missed two critical layups in the final minute of close games against the Blazers.

Utah is shooting 43 percent as a team, and its scoring average is down to 90.3 points per game, a number that's significantly raised by the 117 points the Jazz scored in Game 1 against Sacramento. As one of the league's highest-scoring teams over the last decade with a normally reliable offense, those numbers are disheartening.

"It would really help if we were hitting our shots and scoring more points," Hornacek said. "We've been struggling on offense, and it hasn't got any better."

Spurs rest, await winner of Jazz-Blazers

By Kelley Shannon
The Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — The Spurs' sweep of the Los Angeles Lakers earned San Antonio a rare day off Monday.

With no practice scheduled, Spurs players rested and waited to learn whether they'll face Portland or longtime nemesis Utah in the NBA's Western Conference finals.

"Whoever comes, we don't have much control and we can't do anything about it," Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said. "I don't want to play either one of

them."

The Trail Blazers lead the Jazz 3-1 in their semifinal series.

San Antonio beat the Lakers 118-107 Sunday to win their semifinal series 4-0 and advance to a conference final for the fifth time in franchise history. The last time was 1995, when the eventual NBA champion Houston Rockets beat the Spurs in six games.

San Antonio never has won an NBA championship.

Thousands of cheering fans hungry for a title crowded around a private airport terminal to greet the team's charter plane when it

arrived Sunday night from Los Angeles.

"I've been here off and on for seven years. They're so much more enthusiastic than they were in '95," Spurs point guard Avery Johnson said of the airport welcome.

This is only the second time in David Robinson's 10-year NBA career that San Antonio has advanced past the second round.

"It's great," Robinson said. "I like this group. It is special. We work all season to put ourselves in this position ... It is not lucky that we got here. We did a nice job playing together."

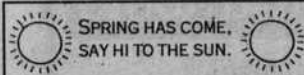
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