

Blazers, Lakers are two big fish in a dry pond

Get ready for the big one. Tonight at 7:30 p.m., the Blazers and Lakers meet for the fourth and final time of the regular season. Los Angeles is winless in its last seven trips to Portland, while Rasheed Wallace and company lead the series 2-1 after winning at the Staples Center last January.

How about this: The Oregonian calls tomorrow's matchup "only the biggest game of the NBA season."

Pumped up yet?

No?

I don't blame you.

Because when all is said and done in this grudge match, it won't matter to anyone. Except the Blazers and the Lakers.

If there's one way I hate starting a sentence, it's with "Back in the old days ..."

But back in the old days, the NBA used to be so exciting. Even while Michael Jordan was continually leading the Bulls to the title, there always loomed the possibil-

ity that another of the league's top teams could steal the show and bump them off.

And the rivalries used to be much stronger.

I finally made my way to a Blazers vs. Sonics game in Seattle — a pilgrimage that, if attempted six or seven years ago, may have resulted in death if you showed signs of being a Blazer fan.

Even with courtside seats, however, I found it rather boring. Especially when Portland was up by 25 in the fourth quarter.

And what ever happened to the Pacers and Knicks? Maybe somebody needs to wake up Spike Lee. Or Reggie Miller, for that matter. And who's Patrick Ewing? I know that name from somewhere. I think he used to be a basketball player.

Glancing at the headlines on ESPN.com today, I was happy to see that Vince Carter scored 51 points on Sunday to lead the Raptors past the Suns.

Then, when I looked at the standings, the incredible weight

of boredom returned to my shoulders.

The Raptors are 29-25, and the Suns are 34-21. Translation: One of the league's most fun-to-watch

teams sucks, and one of the league's best teams is nowhere close to being 45-11.

Another fun team to watch is the Kings, 31-24. Or Kevin Garnett's Timberwolves, 32-23. How



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'bout them Bulls?

Surely, the defending NBA Champions must be playing well, but sorry Mr. Duncan, 36-20 just won't cut it anymore.

Last time I checked — which was about 30 seconds prior to writing this line — the NBA has 29 teams. Those teams are split

into four divisions, and those divisions create the Eastern and Western Conferences.

East vs. West. That's the way it's supposed to be.

Instead, it's West vs. West.

Because nobody can hang with the Blazers or Lakers.

Every once in awhile, an upset may occur. Obviously they have, because if upsets didn't happen, Portland and L.A.'s only losses would have come from themselves.

The Blazers' Bonzi Wells said it best after beating Utah on Sunday: "We still feel we should have only lost one or two games this year — total."

I believe him.

Last season, nobody predicted that Isaiah Rider and Brian Grant would lead the Trailblazers to the Western Conference Finals. And they got there, but nobody thought the Spurs would beat them.

The same thing can be said about Shaquille O'Neal and his Lakers. In the past, people ques-

tioned O'Neal's postseason abilities because his teams have a combined record of 1-24 in their playoff-exiting rounds. But Shaq has expanded his game beyond three-feet from the hoop, and he's making more of those free throws.

Portland and Los Angeles — the only two real teams in the diluted NBA — have left no questions unanswered. Except for who will win the title, which, this season, shall be known as the Western Conference Championship.

But until then, go ahead and get excited about today's matchup.

Just remember one thing: When it's all over, and if your team is the winning team, just remember how little it means. In a league where cupcakes are the competition, the Blazers or Lakers could play every game on the road from here-on-out and still win.

Big game? No. Not really.

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Arizona's Richard Jefferson given clearance to play

TUCSON, Ariz. — After a year full of bad news, No. 4 Arizona finally received some good news when Richard Jefferson was medically cleared to play again this week.

Jefferson, who fractured his right foot in the opening minutes of a Jan. 8 game against No. 1 Stanford, is expected to play in Arizona's game at Oregon State on Thursday.

"He will go as full as his condi-

tioning will allow him to go. We will see how much he will be able to help us on this trip," Arizona coach Lute Olson said Monday.

Jefferson's return helps soften the blow of starting center Loren Woods' absence for another two-to-four weeks because of a back injury. Arizona (24-4, 13-1) only has seven available scholarship players due to injuries or transfers.

Arizona was 11-2 while its start-

ing small forward was sidelined. The Wildcats struggled at times on the perimeter without him, but that should change if Jefferson can quickly get into playing shape.

Jefferson is not only the Wildcats' most athletic player but their best 3-point shooter. Prior to his injury he was averaging 12.2 points, making 45 percent of his shots from 3-point range and averaging 4.9 rebounds.

Olson said the best the team

might expect from Jefferson is four minute intervals because of his lack of conditioning.

Jefferson disagrees.

"I think I can play 10 to 15 minutes if I am not being effective, and 20 to 30 minutes if I am being effective," Jefferson said.

Luke Walton, who scored a career-high 23 points Saturday against Arizona State, has been starting in Jefferson's place.

Walton's development means

Jefferson won't automatically be placed back in the starting lineup right away.

"I think we have both earned the job," Jefferson said. "Luke definitely deserves to start. I just want to help the team. He has been doing a good job, and is starting to play better and better. I think only a fool would take him out of the lineup now."

The Associated Press



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