

Blazers tune up for playoffs by quieting the Jazz

■ Arvydas Sabonis returns to action to score 10 points, and the Blazers survive stifling second-half defense by the Jazz to win 90-86

By Tim Korte
The Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — The Portland Trail Blazers picked the perfect opponent to end their recent tailspin.

Greg Anthony's 3-pointer with 21.8 seconds remaining lifted the Trail Blazers to a 90-86 victory over the Utah Jazz on Monday night in a possible Western Conference playoff preview.

Steve Smith hit another big 3-pointer for Portland, with 51.9 seconds to play, as the Blazers, who blew a 16-point lead early in the second half, survived Utah's fourth-quarter charge.

"That got us over the hump," Anthony said. "It's such a big victory for us because of the way we've been losing games like this. So to win over such a good team was a big confidence builder."

Portland had stumbled in its previous three games, losing to non-playoff teams Houston and Vancouver. The Jazz hadn't done much better, losing Sunday at Houston, and it carried over to a first-half where Utah trailed 45-36.

"That's the NBA," Jazz center Greg Ostertag said. "You have good games and you have bad games, and sometimes you carry them over. We've just got to put four quarters together instead of two."

After Bryon Russell pulled the Jazz within 86-83 on two free throws with 13.8 seconds on the clock, John Stockton immediately fouled Damon Stoudamire on the ensuing inbounds play.

Stoudamire hit both shots to seal the victory, giving the Blazers three wins in the four-game season series against the Jazz.

"It's a game we really needed," Scottie Pippen said. "They really bring out the best in you. We've been able to play their style and win. We were just very patient and we executed."

If the Jazz hold off San Antonio for the Midwest Division title — Utah's lead slid to three games with the loss — they will be the

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No. 2 seed in the West. But they need to make up a four-game margin in the loss column to seize home-court advantage from the Blazers, should the teams meet.

Portland eliminated Utah 4-2

in the second round last year.

Smith and Brian Grant each scored 16 points to lead Portland, while Stoudamire had 12, Rasheed Wallace 11 and Arvydas Sabonis 10. Sabonis was activated from the injured list Monday after sitting out with a right foot sprain.

Karl Malone led the Jazz with 29 points while Russell scored 14 of his 18 in the second half. Stockton had 18 and Howard Easley 10 for Utah.

Portland seemed ready to roll after opening the second half with a 9-2 run. Pippen's three-point play just over two minutes into the third quarter gave the Blazers a 54-38 lead.

The Jazz picked at the deficit by tightening their defense, holding the Blazers to one field goal through the first six minutes of the fourth quarter, and taking advantage of turnovers.

Utah went ahead 76-74 on Easley's 19-footer with 3:25 to play. The teams duelled from the free-throw line from there, and nei-

ther side had the advantage until Smith's two foul shots gave the Blazers an 80-78 lead with 1:24 remaining.

Russell couldn't match the effort, hitting one of two with 1:08 to play.

Smith made the Jazz pay, extending the lead to 83-79 on his 3-pointer with 51.9 seconds remaining. After Stockton added another two foul shots, Anthony iced the victory with his shot.

Notes: Malone needs nine assists to reach 4,000 for his career. He will be the fourth NBA player, after Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Wilt Chamberlain and Charles Barkley, to have at least 20,000 points, 10,000 rebounds and 4,000 assists. ... The Jazz, hurt by 16 turnovers, couldn't capitalize on a 38-30 rebounding advantage. ... Portland's playoff appearance later this month will be its 18th straight, the NBA's longest active streak and third-longest in league history. The Jazz rank second currently with 17 straight trips.

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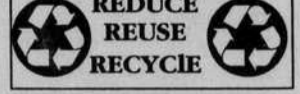
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