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No early exit for Portland

Well, it looks like I'm staying home on Thursday.

It's kind of a letdown. Since Sunday night, I've been readjusting my entire schedule so I could have all my articles (and homework) done by Wednesday. I called the place where I intern and got Thursday afternoon off.

Friend and fellow sportswriter Jeff Smith was even going to go with me.

Shoot, I'd made all the preparations.

But no sooner than when I was about to call my mom and grovel for a hot, home-cooked meal

in Milwaukie did the Blazers beat Minnesota in Game 4 on Tuesday, 85-77.

Guess I'll have to wait longer to see a first-round Game 5.

Those Wolves are in the past now. No more worrying about former-Duck Terrell Brandon or Kevin Garnett. No more pressure of an upset looming over Portland's red and black headbands.

From here-on-out, it's good ol'-fashioned, no-holds-barred, down-to-business, winner-take-all basketball. For the Blazers, all bets are off.

So who would the NBA's deepest team like to play next?

Utah or Seattle... the Elbow or the Glove... Vin Baker...

Enough said.

Unfortunately for Portland, it's doubtful that Gary Payton will be able to trash talk his Sonics out of a 2-1 deficit against Utah. The Jazz may never win a

championship, but no matter how old they get, they continue to be gifted at going deep into the playoffs.

So, with their sights set on the Jazz, the Blazers go back to work after winning three come-from-behind games against the Timberwolves.

These are some silly mistakes from the first round that Portland should fix before its series against the Utahans:

1. Make more layups: The Blazers were horrible in Games 3 and 4 when streaking to the basket. They missed eight layups and a dunk in Game 3. In

Keep Damon Stoudamire in his place: Which is ... the bench!

back-to-back Game 4 transition possessions, they missed an alley-oop, a layin and a putback.

2. Keep Damon Stoudamire in his place: Which is ... the bench! Portland would have undoubtedly swept the first round had it not replaced Greg Anthony with Stoudamire in the final minutes of Game 3. Mighty Mouse finished the contest shooting a pathetic 0-8.

3. Do that 'D' you do: The Jazz/Blazers match ups are always physical, so good defense in the middle will be crucial. When Portland turns up their defense to full power, I don't care who they're playing. They can't be beat. Problem is, they don't see any need to turn it on until late in the fourth quarter.

4. Keep Damon Stoudamire... oops, already covered this one. Other than that, the Blazers

played an eerily composed play-off series for a team that played close to .500 in the second half of its season.

When Minnesota threatened to run away with Game 4, up 64-57 heading into the fourth quarter, Portland stepped up. They didn't fold at all. And when somebody needed to step up, somebody stepped up.

And they've got to be loving Rasheed Wallace right about now.

The man who late-night television host Conan O'Brien called "a punk-ass bitch" squeaked through the series with just one technical foul. As teammate Steve Smith shot his mouth off and came awfully close to getting his "punk ass" ejected late in Game 4, Wallace was among the first to subdue him.

More importantly, the tattoo-laden Wallace hit the big shot, a banked, top-of-the-circle jumper at the shot-clock buzzer, virtually sealing the victory with 32 seconds remaining.

So much for all that talk about lacking a go-to guy.

By beating out Minnesota on the road, the Blazers made a statement. They aren't a team to be taken lightly. They are a team that is improving with each game. They can play for 48 minutes.

Home-court history indicates they will beat the Jazz.

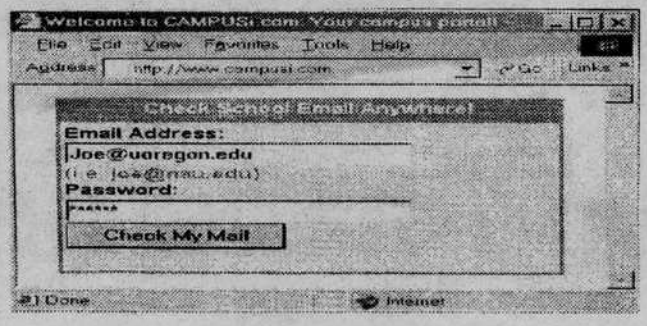
As of the conclusion of this column, their greatest obstacle is trailing Sacramento, 82-72, with 7:28 left in the fourth quarter.

There are no exit signs in Portland.

Scott Pesznecker is a sports reporter for the Emerald. He can be reached via e-mail at jflak1@aol.com

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