

Lakers suddenly walk on the edge

By Rob Gloster
The Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The coronation of the Los Angeles Lakers is not going exactly as planned.

After leading the NBA with a 67-15 record and comfortably winning the first two games of their best-of-five playoff series against the Kings, the Lakers expected to leave Sacramento with a few days to relax before the second round.

Instead, they headed home needing a victory Friday night to advance. And with Shaquille O'Neal struggling with his shooting, the once invincible Lakers — who had winning streaks of 19, 16 and 11 games this season — seem flawed.

"I have to dig deeper and play my game," said O'Neal, 18-for-44 from the field in the last two games after shooting 63 percent in the first two games. "As a team, we didn't shoot well."

After losing a second straight game in Sacramento, the Lakers will be forced to focus on the Kings while the Phoenix Suns — who dethroned the San Antonio Spurs in the first round and await the Lakers-Kings winner — can look ahead.

The conference semifinals begin Sunday in Los Angeles if the Lakers win Friday night or in Phoenix if the Kings win.

"We didn't want to be in this situation," said Lakers guard Glen Rice, whose team never lost three straight during the regular season. "Now we're in it, and we have to be prepared."

Chris Webber had 23 points, 13 rebounds, eight assists, seven blocks and four steals Tuesday night as the Kings beat the Lakers 101-88 to even the series at 2-2. Los Angeles never led in the game, and got no closer than six points in the fourth quarter.

Jon Barry had 17 points, Tony Delk had 12 and Predrag Stojakovic 11 as the Sacramento backups, who call themselves the "Bench Mob," outscored the Lakers' reserves 42-8 and provided the decisive spark for the second straight game.

While Sacramento point guard Jason Williams went 1-for-8 from the field and was benched for

nearly the entire fourth quarter for the second straight game, the Kings' reserves outscored their Los Angeles counterparts 20-5 in the final period.

"Our game is not our bench, that's their game," Lakers coach Phil Jackson said. "It's playoff basketball, it's a different type of basketball, and we didn't pick up the intensity."

Kobe Bryant had 32 points for the Lakers, O'Neal had 25 points and 16 rebounds and Glen Rice had 17 points. But the rest of the Los Angeles squad had 14 points.

"We know Shaq and Kobe are great players and they're going to get their points," Kings coach Rick Adelman said. "We kept Rice around his average and the other players didn't hurt us."

The normally unflappable Jackson looked pained at times, and his brow was covered with sweat. A sign in the crowd mocked "Zen Schmen," referring to Jackson's sometimes mystical approach to coaching.

Sacramento is trying to become the 13th team to come back from trailing 2-0 to win a series. No team has done it since the Houston Rockets in 1995.

The Lakers began preparations for Game 5 by meeting and watching film Wednesday.

"I don't think they're stunned, I think what they are is angry, there's frustration," Jackson said afterward. "They've used their talent well during the year. There's no reason to break from that now."

Asked about the Lakers' confidence, Jackson said, "It's got to be shaky. We're pretty human. That's what shakes teams into action is when they get anxious about surviving. That's what this is."

The Lakers said Sacramento benefited from referees' calls — or lack of calls — on its home court, and they hope that will be reversed when the series moves back to Los Angeles. They accused the Kings of playing an illegal zone defense around O'Neal.

"Some of the aggressive defenses they got away with here on their home court, hopefully they won't get away with that on our court," Bryant said.

Padres take three to drown Marlins

By Bernie Wilson
The Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Brian Meadows came within two outs of his first career shutout, and Phil Nevin homered for the second straight game as the Padres beat the Florida Marlins 3-1 on Wednesday night.

Meadows (3-2), facing the Marlins for the first time since they traded him to the Padres for reliever Dan Miceli on Nov. 15, allowed five hits and struck out four.

It was the sixth straight game that a Padres starter has pitched at least seven innings.

Meadows was backed by solid defense. The Marlins got a runner to third with one out in the second inning and another runner to third with two outs in the fifth only to strand both.

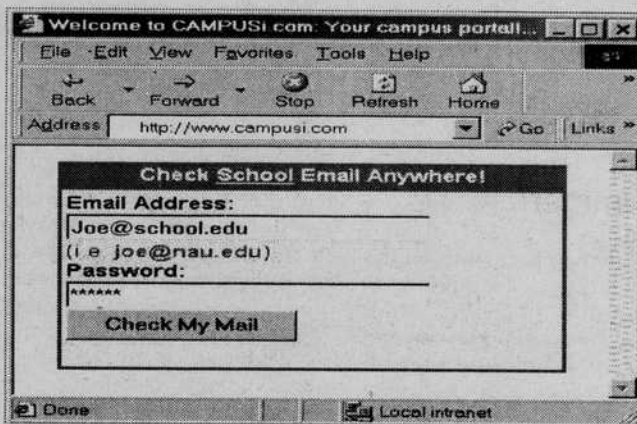
He left after giving up a homer to Cliff Floyd with one out in the ninth inning. Trevor Hoffman struck out the final two batters for his fifth save.

Nevin homered off Brad Penny (3-3) leading off the second, his eighth. Nevin hit a two-run homer off Vladimir Nunez in Tuesday night's 8-3 win.

The Padres made it 3-0 in the third. Al Martin walked with two outs and scored on Jackson's double. Jackson took third on Ryan Klesko's infield single and scored when Penny bobbled the throw from first baseman Derrek Lee and let the ball roll away.

Penny allowed three runs — two earned — and five hits in 6 2-3 innings, struck out five and walked five.

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