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Pippen confirms he can be clutch

■ The \$14.8 million role player is poised to lead the Blazers all the way by doing whatever needs to get done

By Landon Hall
The Associated Press

PORTLAND — Whenever Scottie Pippen disappears, his Portland Trail Blazers teammates know he won't be gone for long.

Take Tuesday night's playoff game against the Utah Jazz. Pippen had struggled his previous three games, scoring just 15 points, including a six-point effort in Sunday's Game 4, which Utah won to avoid being swept.

Pippen came back with nine points in the first quarter of Game 5. Then he was quiet again until late in the fourth quarter, when he made a series of huge plays, highlighted by his game-winning 3-pointer with 7.3 seconds left.

"Once it left his hand, it felt good, and after watching the replay, you just saw the confidence. You knew it was going in," teammate Steve Smith said. "He didn't have particularly great games the last two or three games against Utah, but then he comes up with the big game one we need."

Pippen finished with 23 points, nine rebounds, eight assists, three steals and one block in the 81-79 victory, which sent the Blazers to the Western Conference finals to face the Los Angeles Lakers. Game 1 is Saturday in Los Angeles.

Pippen's all-around performance won raves from Phil Jackson, the Lakers' coach who helped Pippen and Michael Jordan win six titles when they were in Chicago.

"I'd like to think I helped develop that ability," Jackson said. "He's the one that did it."

Of the Blazers' 91 games this season, Pippen scored in single digits 28 times. Yet he never publicly complained about his shots or the offense one time, preferring to be a \$14.8 million role player.

"I'm going to do what I've got to do to help us win, and that's something I've been trying to do all season long," he said before Wednesday's practice. "Whatever holes we need to be plugged, I'm going to try to plug them."

Even on his dramatic 3-pointer Tuesday night, his first thought was to get the ball to Rasheed Wal-

lace. But when Utah's Bryon Russell eased off to guard against the post feed, he took the best shot available.

"Scottie's value to all his teams has been that he's a great defender and more of a playmaker, a decision maker," Portland coach Mike Dunleavy said. "He made all the big plays down the stretch."

Pippen said he couldn't rank his 3-pointer among the most clutch shots of his career, because he didn't know how important it will be.

"I can only answer that after we win the championship," he said.

BLAZERS "But it was a big shot. It helped us to advance to the next round, but there's a lot more basketball to be played."

After agreeing to be traded out of Chicago last year, Pippen forced a trade from Houston after he ripped into Rockets teammate Charles Barkley on national TV. He arrived in Portland with baggage in tow, but he joined a team that was willing to overlook his character flaws for a chance at a title.

Pippen not only has avoided tarnishing his reputation further, he's become the team's trusted leader, especially since the post-season began. He averaged 12.5 points during the regular season, but has boosted that to 14.8 in the playoffs. He's also kept Wallace from getting numerous technical fouls by calming him down in heated situations.

With Pippen in the lineup, there's no way the Blazers will repeat their blowup of a year ago, when they lost their cool and were swept by the San Antonio Spurs.

"The only thing they lacked was just a little bit of guidance, and I think a lot of the players have leadership qualities," Pippen said. "But none of them was really willing to step up and sort of lead that task for us, so I tried to take it upon myself."

Pippen said there's nothing special about playing Jackson, other than the chance it gives him for another shot at the NBA Finals.

"As a player, you know how hard it is to get where you are right now, and you know that these opportunities don't come very often."

Griffey graces cereal in his Reds uniform

CINCINNATI — Ken Griffey Jr. has made it onto a cereal box wearing the red pinstripes of his hometown team for the first time.

Wheaties unveiled a "Welcome Home" box Wednesday that will be shipped to stores in Ohio this week. Collectors can buy a box online.

Some stores in Cincinnati still carry boxes of Frosted Wheaties showing Griffey in a Seattle Mariners uniform on the front. Griffey rejoined his hometown Reds in a Feb. 10 trade.

Griffey has been on numerous Wheaties boxes, but never before as a Red. He's shown swinging in a home Reds uniform, though the team logo has been removed.

"First of all, I'm excited about being on the orange box," Griffey said, standing next to a 6-foot-tall replica at a pregame news confer-

ence. "Hopefully the next time we're on the orange box it will have 'World Champions' on it."

After the Reds swept Oakland to win the 1990 World Series, a Wheaties cover featured Barry Larkin, Jose Rijo, Eric Davis, Chris Sabo, Randy Myers and Hal Morris. That box was shipped to stores in the region.

Pete Rose was on a box in 1985, when he broke Ty Cobb's career hits record. Johnny Bench made the cover of a box distributed regionally in 1989, when he was voted into baseball's Hall of Fame.

Griffey said his 6-year-old son Trey and 4-year-old daughter Taryn were excited that he made it onto another cereal box.

"They're like, 'We want to eat the cereal that daddy's on.' That's pretty cool," Griffey said.

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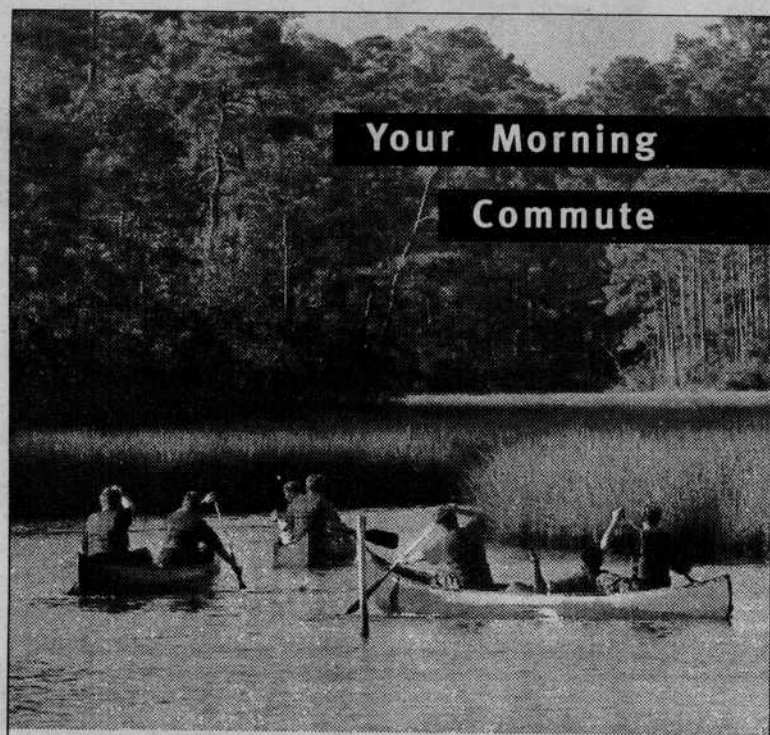
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