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# Gamesmanship has begun

■ **Lakers vs. Blazers: It's finally official, and the trash talking — or sweet talking — is under way.**

By John Nadel  
The Associated Press

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. — Kobe Bryant said there's no doubt about it — the Portland Trail Blazers have better players than the Los Angeles Lakers.

Lakers coach Phil Jackson, who coached Scottie Pippen in Chicago for nine seasons, believes the Blazers underachieved this season, and said Pippen has to step forward or they won't advance to the NBA Finals.

And with that, the gamesmanship officially began Wednesday for the dream matchup of the NBA playoffs, the Western Conference finals, which start Saturday at Staples Center.

"I personally think if Scottie doesn't lead this club and take them by the horns, they're not going to get by us," Jackson said at the Lakers' practice facility on a day off for his team. "I'm going to try and take that strength away."

"I don't know who else can lead them, I don't see another leader on that basketball club."

Pippen didn't fill that role with the Bulls, who won six championships during the 1990s — Michael Jordan did. Neither Jackson nor Pippen has won a championship without Jordan. Perhaps one will next month.

"This is what it's boiled down to, as ironic as it is," Jackson said. "I think this is great intrigue."

The Lakers and Blazers were the NBA's best teams record-wise during the regular season, winning 67 and 59 games, respectively.

When asked if Portland was the best team he had faced, Bryant replied, "I'd say so, yeah."

"Everybody's been talking

about this series forever, now it's here, let's play," Bryant said. "I'm ready to rock and roll, man, I'm ready to play. We'll be ready."

Pippen said much the same thing in Portland, and expressed confidence in the Blazers.

"This is kind of what everybody anticipated it would come down to, so I think both teams are looking forward to the challenge," he said. "We're very confident that we are pretty much the team to beat."

“I think Portland under-achieved this year.”

**Phil Jackson**  
Los Angeles  
Lakers coach

"But the focal point is not between me and Phil Jackson. It's the Lakers against the Blazers, and it's the players out on the court. But it should be a fun series. I'm going to enjoy competing against him."

Bryant, who scored 17 points as the Lakers manhandled Phoenix 87-65 Tuesday night to earn their berth in the conference finals, said he had a "tremendous amount of respect" for the Blazers.

"As far as athletically, everybody knows they're better than we are," he said. "They have better players, too. Physically, we can't match up with them; they're bigger than we are. We beat teams with execution."

Bryant also said he believes the Lakers are the steadier of the two teams, who split four games this season, with each going 1-1 at home.

In their last meeting, on Feb. 29 in Portland, the Lakers rallied to win 90-87. Both teams entered that game with 11-game winning streaks and 45-11 records.

"I think Portland under-achieved this year," Jackson said. "They had a low spell in March,

after we beat them up there."

Starting with the loss to the Lakers, the Blazers went 14-12 to finish the season. However, they were without Brian Grant because of an injured right foot for 11 games, including the one against the Lakers, and later lost starting center Arvydas Sabonis, who also injured his right foot.

Both are healthy now.

Grant, a burly forward, played a major role defensively against Shaquille O'Neal, the NBA's leading scorer and MVP, when the Blazers rallied for a 95-91 victory over the Lakers at Staples Center on Jan. 22. O'Neal scored only three points in the second half and 17 overall in that game.

O'Neal and Bryant provide the Lakers with a 1-2 punch the Blazers can't match. However, as Jackson said: "They're pretty deep one through 11 or 12 or whatever. That's the one intriguing thing about this series — does quantity beat quality, in terms of experience, talent?"

"Our key is Shaquille, going inside, making them adjust. Our key is to corral their offense. They have a lot of things that they can do, a lot of bodies for Shaq."

The Lakers have a 23-1 record at Staples Center since losing to Portland nearly four months ago, with the lone loss a meaningless 98-80 setback to San Antonio on April 8. The Lakers played without O'Neal in that game, and they had already clinched homecourt advantage throughout the playoffs.

"There's one thing that hasn't changed," Blazers coach Mike Dunleavy said. "If we're going to win this series, we've got to win at least one game in LA."

Dunleavy was the Lakers' coach the last time they played in the NBA Finals, in 1991. Their opponent? The Jackson-coached Bulls, who won their first championship that year.

# Philadelphia eyeing historic run

By Rob Maaddi  
The Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — They began their comeback by playing for pride. Now, the Philadelphia 76ers are halfway to making history.

The Sixers, a missed shot away from getting swept by Indiana, are two wins away from becoming the first NBA team to rally from a 3-0 deficit in a best-of-seven series.

"We still have a chance to win the series when everybody counted us out," Sixers guard Aaron McKie said. "But we never counted ourselves out. That's been our attitude all year long. Whenever somebody counted us out or the odds were against us, we found a way to pull it out."

The Pacers nearly swept Philadelphia out of the Eastern Conference semifinals for the second straight season, but Travis Best's 3-pointer at the buzzer rimmed out in a 92-90 loss in Game 4.

With Reggie Miller serving a one-game suspension for a fight with Matt Geiger, the Sixers won Game 5 handily, 107-86, on Monday.

"The momentum has shifted," Indiana guard Mark Jackson said.

"After we won one game, Jalen (Rose) said they won't be coming back to Philly," Allen Iverson said before practice Wednesday. "Now they are."

But Iverson said the Sixers are not content being just the seventh team to force a Game 6 after losing

three straight. In all, 59 teams have fallen behind 3-0. Four teams lost in six games. Two teams lost in seven games. The other 53, or 90 percent, were either swept or lost in five.

"We want to make history," Iverson said. "We have a chance to do something special. We're not satisfied with winning two games. We won't be satisfied until we win the series. That's the most important thing."

"It would be easy to be satisfied with two wins, then go home for the summer and watch somebody else win the championship. We got the chance to do it ourselves. Why not us?"

Miller returns for Game 6 Friday at the First Union Center. Geiger must sit out another game. Iverson said the Sixers will be ready if Miller whips out his Superman T-shirt to motivate Indiana.

"If they feel like Superman can come save the world, we have Kryptonite here in Philadelphia," Iverson said. "They are a different team without Reggie. Everybody knows that. They're better with Reggie. We can't think about that. Our goal is to win the next game."

Miller donned his Superman garb before Game 3 of the opening-round series against Milwaukee and scored 34 points. He wore it again before the final game of that series and scored 41. He hasn't worn it since.

The Sixers may have some unexpected help of their own Friday

night. Eric Snow, out since Game 2 with a chip fracture in his right ankle, will test it at practice Thursday. Snow, who had been ruled out for the series, hopes to be able to play a back-up role.

"It's 50-50," he said of his chances. "I haven't done anything. It feels better, but I haven't tested it out. It's not going to heal until July."

Snow has faced a 3-0 deficit before. He played for Seattle in 1996 when the Sonics took Chicago to six games in the NBA Finals after losing the first three.

"We didn't want it to end at home," he said. "We wanted to show some pride. We didn't want to get to the finals and get swept."

Now that the Sixers are in a similar position, Snow said, "It's about advancing to the next round."

The Sixers say Indiana's trash-talking motivated them for Game 5, but they refuse to get caught up in it. After the Pacers' victory in Game 3, someone wrote "Lights out, baby" and "RIP" on the visitors' blackboard at the First Union Center.

"It takes four wins to win the series," said Theo Ratliff, who scored a career playoff-high 26 points in Monday's victory.

Sixers owner Pat Croce was most annoyed by Indiana's swagger.

"If you said Rest in Peace, you might as well slap them in the face," he said.