

It's Lakers' star power vs. Portland's depth

By John Nadel
The Associated Press

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. — Like the Chicago Bulls of the 1990s, the Los Angeles Lakers have Phil Jackson as their coach and two superstars to lead them.

Whether that will be enough for them against the Portland Trail Blazers and their superior depth remains to be seen.

It was plenty during the regular season, when Shaquille O'Neal, who missed becoming the NBA's first unanimous MVP by one vote, and Kobe Bryant, who at age 21 has already started two All-Star games, led the Lakers to a league-best 67-15 record.

The Blazers, meanwhile, went

59-23 to rank No. 2, prompting Jackson to say they under-achieved.

Now, as the teams enter Saturday's opener of the Western Conference finals at Staples Center, it's possible the Blazers will have an edge in the fourth quarter of close games because their top players will be more rested than the Lakers' standouts.

Perhaps, but Jackson didn't sound concerned about such a possibility. Of course, having stars like O'Neal and Bryant along with a group of players who know their roles and play them well give him confidence.

"I think the players can play 40 minutes in the playoffs," Jackson

said after practice Thursday. "They have plenty of time to rest [because of television timeouts and other breaks], and they're in great shape."

"The Combo," a nickname O'Neal coined for himself and Bryant, averaged over 52 points per game during the season, and have increased that rate an additional two points in the playoffs.

Their production is reminiscent of what Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen did for the Bulls, who won six championships in an eight-year span ending in June 1998.

Pippen now plays for the Blazers, but at age 34, his scoring was down to 12.5 points this season — lowest since his rookie year.

Pippen, Rasheed Wallace, Arvydas Sabonis and Steve Smith are all averaging double figures in the playoffs. Damon Stoudamire, Brian Grant, Detlef Schrempf, Greg Anthony and Bonzi Wells have also contributed significantly for the Blazers, as they did during the season.

"I love Pip, this is the time he raises up what he does best," said Lakers guard Ron Harper, a teammate of Pippen's on three championship teams in Chicago. "They've got a team full of superstars, we have two stars. What our role guys have to do is play our roles, do what we have to do to win."

Harper knows what that's about, having done so in Chicago, along with the likes of Steve Kerr, Luc Longley, Toni Kukoc and John Paxson.

With the Lakers, along with Harper, there's Glen Rice, A.C. Green, Robert Horry, Rick Fox, Brian Shaw and Derek Fisher.

"We quietly have been able to be effective and get the job done without getting a lot of hoopla," Shaw said.

True enough. The Lakers' reserves were probably never more prominent than in Portland on Feb. 29, when they outscored the Blazers' backups 25-18 to help Los Angeles win a pivotal 90-87 decision. Both teams entered that game having won 11 straight games and with 45-11 records.

Portland won two of the three previous games played between the teams, including a 95-91 win at Staples Center on Jan. 22, when Grant, a reserve, played a key role on defense against the much bigger O'Neal, who was held to 17 points.

The Lakers are 23-1 at home since that game.

"It was just one of those days," O'Neal said Thursday. "We just lost. I missed a couple shots because I missed them. Whenever I have a bad game, it's because I'm off, it's not because of anything [the defense] is doing. I've been

facing big bodies all year."

Rice, a proven scorer throughout his career, averaged 15.9 points during the regular season — his lowest since his rookie season of 10 years earlier — but is down to 13.9 in the playoffs. Usually a deadly outside shooter, he has made only 38.7 percent of his shots in the postseason.

"I haven't seen anyone give Glen breathing room in the playoffs," Jackson said. "I look for him to have a big series."

Rice figures to see a lot of Pippen, known for being a tough customer on defense.

"It's all right, I'm a handful, too," Rice said. "Me and Scottie have had our battles throughout our careers."

Meanwhile, Blazers coach Mike Dunleavy sent a not-so-subtle message to NBA officials concerning O'Neal.

"If Shaq is allowed to zone up like he was doing in their Phoenix series — I think I counted 57 times — and if he is allowed to push guys out of the way and gain his position, it's going to be tough for anybody to beat them," he said. "But, if it's called the way it needs to be called, then we're going to have a good shot. I think we go into it with the mind set that we're not going to get a fair shake in many ways, but we've got to play through it."

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Sports brief

Robinson hears Tigers appeal suspensions

CLEVELAND — Frank Robinson, baseball's director of on-field operations, heard the appeals

Thursday for three of the Detroit Tigers suspended for the April 22 brawl against the Chicago White Sox.

Robert Fick, Juan Encarnacion and Luis Polonia met with Robinson at a downtown hotel along with Paul Beeston, baseball's

chief operating officer.

Robinson is not expected to make a decision for a few days.

Fick was suspended for five games and Encarnacion and Polonia for three apiece for their part in the brawl.

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