

Blazers kick L.A. at home to keep series alive

By Bob Baum
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A celebration seemed inevitable. You could almost see the Western Conference championship banner hanging above the star-studded crowd at the Staples Center.

Talk radio was already speculating on who Los Angeles would face in the NBA Finals.

Then the Portland Trail Blazers spoiled everything.

Led by Scottie Pippen, playing most of the game with two dislocated fingers on his left hand, the Blazers stunned the Lakers 96-88 Tuesday night to stay alive in the conference finals.

With Los Angeles up 3-2, the series shifts back to Portland for Game 6 on Friday night. In the first five games, the home team has won only once.

"We're going to have to take a little more time to win this series," Lakers coach Phil Jackson said. "I think that's good for us as a basketball team. This team hasn't grown enough to understand the subtleties of what we are trying to do and it is a good measure for us."

The Lakers lost two in a row at home for the first time all season. A team so poised and confident in their weekend sweep in Portland could never get rolling.

Portland never trailed. Despite injuring his fingers late in the first

quarter when he was called for an offensive foul against Robert Horry, Pippen had 22 points, six steals and four blocked shots. In the process, Pippen broke Michael Jordan's record for career playoff steals with 380. Jordan's record was 376.

"That's just Pip being a warrior. This is no time to sit out," Portland's Rasheed Wallace said. "Like the other night when I hurt my ankle. That team is just too tough for us to sit out."

Jackson said he told Pippen he shouldn't even have been playing in the game after elbowing John Salley in the back of the head late in Portland's homecourt loss in Game 4 Sunday.

"He shouldn't have been playing in this ballgame," Jackson said. "He clearly threw a cheap-shot elbow to the back of the head and he just got fined \$10,000. I wanted to tell him that he was a presence who shouldn't have been there."

In the latest of what has been a back-and-forth bickering between the player and his former coach, Pippen was unimpressed by Jackson's opinion.

"Phil is not my coach. I'm not listening to nothing you tell me about Phil. Have a good day," said Pippen, who then left the postgame news conference.

Wallace was just 7-for-21 from the field, but scored 22 points, including seven of eight free throws, and grabbed 10 rebounds. Steve Smith added 13 points, and Arvy-

das Sabonis 12. Two reserves who barely caused a ripple in the series, Brian Grant and Detlef Schrempf, added nine each.

Shaquille O'Neal did his best to make it the big night everyone expected with 31 points and 21 re-

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bounds. Ron Harper added 14 points.

But Kobe Bryant made only four of 13 shots, scored 17 points and committed six turnovers before fouling out with 4:45 to play. Glen Rice was 1-for-8 from the field and 0-for-5 from 3-point range, finishing with four points.

The Lakers were just 6-for-27 from 3-point range and shot 38 percent from the field.

"I thought we played pretty good defense. We couldn't put the ball in the basket," O'Neal said. "I think we tried to put them away with all 3s. It's disappointing. We just have to learn from this."

Portland coach Mike Dunleavy's defensive tactic of double-

and triple-teaming O'Neal and leaving others open worked to near perfection.

"This game validates for us what it is we're doing and that we can get it done," Dunleavy said. "It's just a matter of us making it happen for ourselves. It's a high-risk business, and we're taking chances. We're leaving a lot of people open."

Bryant sprained his right foot in the first half, but said it wasn't a big factor in his game. X-rays after the game were negative.

"If we're going to be a championship team, we have to go through some adverse situations," Bryant said.

Then he mentioned the noisy crowd in Portland and the prospect of facing a deciding Game 7 Sunday in Los Angeles.

"I think it's good for us," he said.

Even though they never led, the Lakers were just a short run away from taking the lead through most of the game.

Trailing 80-67 entering the fourth quarter, the Lakers mounted one challenge. Bryant sank two free throws with 10:02 to play, then scored on a layup and was fouled, making it 82-74 with 9:33 remaining.

O'Neal waved his arms to get the crowd roaring, but after a timeout, Bryant missed the free throw. Grant scored inside and was fouled by Horry for a three-point play to boost the lead back to 87-76, and the Lakers were finished.

Los Angeles closed to 72-67 on Harper's reverse layup with 1:52 left in the third. But the Lakers followed with three consecutive turnovers, and the Blazers scored the final eight points of the period for an 80-67 lead.

The Lakers are 43-7 at home this season, but three of those losses came against Portland.

The Blazers led 52-45 at the break on Pippen's 3-pointer at the halftime buzzer.

The Lakers shot 31 percent in the first half, 22 percent in the second quarter (4-for-18).

The Lakers were 3-for-13 from 3-point range in the first half, but made 14 of 15 free throws, while Portland was 11-for-17 at the line.

Pippen scored 12 in the first quarter on 5-for-5 shooting, but was only 2-for-5 at the foul line.

Notes: O'Neal made his first three free throws to run his string to 15 without a miss over three games. ... Portland was 9-for-15 at the foul line in the first quarter, while Los Angeles was 3-for-3. ... The Lakers were called for 11 fouls in the first quarter, three apiece on Harper and Brian Shaw and two apiece on Bryant and Rice. ... Smith drew three fouls in 1 1/2 minutes in the second quarter. ... Horry was 0-for-6 from the field in the first half. ... Midway through the first quarter, referee Joe Crawford called a technical on Wallace, his first since he was thrown out of Game 1 with two technicals.

Devils strike first with decisive victory over Stars, 7-3

By Alan Robinson
The Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — The New Jersey Devils surprised the Dallas Stars in nearly every way possible — with their speed, their persistence, their nonstop scoring.

Most of all, they surprised themselves.

Petr Sykora scored twice in a four-point night and Ken Daneyko, who has played every postseason game in Devils history, scored his first playoff goal in five seasons as New Jersey's top line embarrassed Dallas' stars in a commanding 7-3 victory Tuesday night.

"This team worried us," Devils goaltender Martin Brodeur said. "We have a lot of respect for them, and we still do. We knew we couldn't let up at all."

They didn't. Sykora also assisted on Jason Arnott's two goals as the Devils, attempting to become the first Eastern Conference team to win the Stanley Cup since they did it five years ago, badly outplayed the defending champions at their own game.

The Devils' top line of Sykora, Arnott and Patrik Elias combined for four goals and now have nine in the last five games. By contrast, the Stars' Brett Hull and Mike Modano, the top two scorers in the playoffs, went scoreless, with Brodeur making a key save of Hull's shot less than a minute before the Devils took a 3-1 lead.

"We were flat and a step late all night," Stars coach Ken Hitchcock said. "I think our

whole group really struggled in our own zone with the quickness. I don't think we've played against a group of forwards this quick before, and we made a lot of mistakes because of it."

The Devils, considered the underdogs just as they were when they upset Detroit in four games in the 1995 finals, can take a 2-0 lead in the best-of-seven series by winning Thursday night at home.

The Stars are 11-1 at home in the playoffs, but even they can't like their chances if they go back to Reunion Arena down two games.

"This puts a lot of pressure on us, but we know we're going to play a better game," Hitchcock said.

The game was vintage Devils — vintage 1995, that is.

The Devils followed still-new coach Larry Robinson's game plan to perfection. They seized the critical early lead, dusted off the neutral-zone trap that was so effective in '95 to shut down Dallas' scorers and let Brodeur stop the shots that sneaked through their defense.

"We had some goals squeak through there for a change, and our guys were skating well," Robinson said. "But I don't consider this a 7-3 game. I've seen Dallas come back before, and we're in for a game Thursday."

Dallas goaltender Eddie Belfour was no better than the forwards in front of him. Belfour, who had allowed two or fewer goals in 12 of his previous 13 games, yielded six goals on 18 shots before being replaced by Manny Fernandez with 16:58 left.

The Stars allowed just 13 goals in the entire Avalanche series — the fewest in 50 years in a seven-game Stanley Cup semifinal series.

Belfour took a decongestant, antibiotics and cold medicine before the game, and wishes now he hadn't.

"It affected my judgment," he said.

When did he realize it? "After they scored the sixth goal," he said.

Still, the Devils' oft-overlooked offense obviously ambushed a baffled Belfour and the Stars, who looked fatigued and off their game almost from the opening minute despite having three days off since eliminating Colorado on Saturday.

"They have a history of slow starts in the playoffs," the Devils' Bobby Holik said. "This is not surprising, they played a day later than we did and they traveled. No one thinks this is over. They're too good to feel that way."

The Devils, known more for their give-no-ground neutral-zone trap, were the NHL's second-highest scoring team during the season, but Robinson reshaped their game after succeeding the fired Robbie Ftorek with eight games left in the regular season.

Robinson sold the Devils on returning to their '95 style, in which the trapping defense set up an opportunistic offense, rather than vice versa. But even Robinson couldn't have expected this, not against a determined, defense-driven team that Hitchcock said was extremely focused on winning a second Cup.

"This series, just like in 1995, we have a lot of respect for the team we're playing," Brodeur said. "We were scared of that series in '95, they were supposed to beat us bad, and next thing you know the series is over. This time around, it's the

same thing — we know they have a lot more to give."

The Stars have already matched the worst result of the last four defending champions — Detroit, Pittsburgh and two of Wayne Gretzky's Edmonton Oilers teams — who returned to the finals the year after winning the cup. All four of those teams

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repeated as champion, and only one lost even one game in the finals.

After Arnott and Stars defenseman Darryl Sydor traded goals in the first period, the game quickly got away from Dallas in the second period. And the biggest goal of all was scored by perhaps the least-likely player.

John Madden won a face-off in the Stars' end that bounced to Daneyko, who didn't score a goal all season. Daneyko teed up a knuckleball-type shot from the top of the left circle that somehow eluded Belfour at 2:52 of the second for his first playoff goal in 49 games since June 5, 1995.

The Stars should have known then they were done. And they were, even if the Devils weren't.

"We wanted (Daneyko's goal) to be the game-winner," Brodeur said. "He's been the heart and soul for New Jersey for the last 15 years, and it was great for him to score a goal like

that in the Stanley Cup final."

Sykora effectively finished them off at 10:28 with the first of his two goals, grabbing Elias' blind pass from behind the net and slipping it by Belfour, who began the game with a 1.88 goals-against average.

"He hasn't had too many nights like that," Hitchcock said of Belfour.

Defenseman Scott Stevens, whose punishing hits left the Flyers' Daymond Langkow and Eric Lindros with concussions in the Eastern Conference finals, made it 4-1 at 16:04 with a soft wrist shot from the left point, and the rout was on.

"Individuals are playing well, and that means the team is playing well," Stevens said. "Everybody was expecting a boring, slow game and I remember thinking, 'Geez, this is a lot of scoring.'"

Sykora and Arnott scored again in the third period, and Sergei Brylin added a goal before the Stars' Jon Sim and former Devils captain Kirk Muller scored meaningless goals 12 seconds apart.

The Devils, who won all four games of the Eastern Conference finals against Philadelphia in which they scored first, did so again. Elias' wraparound attempt deflected off Belfour's glove to Sykora, who swept a pass across the slot to Arnott at 7:22 for his fifth playoff goal.

The first goal in the first game of a Stanley Cup final can be critical to determining the early momentum — the Game 1 winner has won the cup 79 percent of the time.

Stars defenseman Derian Hatcher left in the third period with a slight hyperextension of his right knee, but Hitchcock expects him to play in Game 2.