NBA season kicks off with Blazers vs. Lakers

By Landon Hall
The Associated Press

PORTLAND—Damon Stoudamire thought he had put the events of June 4 behind him when the memories all came rushing back, beamed at him by NBA.com TV.

On Sunday night, the cable channel showed clips from Game 7 of the Western Conference finals between Stoudamire's team, the Portland Trail Blazers, and the Los Angeles Lakers. It was the first time Stoudamire had seen any videotape of what stands as possibly the greatest pratfall in the history of playoff basketball.

It was just as Stoudamire had remembered: The Blazers led by 13 at the start of the fourth quarter, on their way to the Finals for the first time since 1992. The lead stretched to 75-60 with 10:28 left to play before everything fell apart. Portland missed 13 straight shots, and the Lakers went on a 15-0 run and ended up winning 89-85.

"You watch it and just wonder what could have been," Stoudamire said Monday, 31 hours before the Blazers were to open the new season against the defending champion Lakers.

The Blazers know that if even one of those missed shots during that awful stretch had fallen, they probably would be receiving their championship rings Tuesday night at the sold-out Rose Garden. But they already seem bored with the topic and say they're ready to move on.

"That season's over," Scottie Pippen said. "Hopefully, we can use that as fuel. It's definitely in the past for us, but we have to realize that they are the world champs and they still have to defend themselves as the champs, so we want to measure ourselves and see where we are against the best."

The Lakers aren't so sure the Blazers have forgotten that easily.

"I'm sure it's been on their minds all summer and most of the preseason, in terms of knowing that this was the first game they were going to play," forward Rick Fox said Monday. "Seeing us again and knowing that we came out the victors, it probably left a bad taste in their mouths."

Although both teams acquired new high-profile players in the offseason, the Lakers appear to have improved themselves more. Horace Grant is 35, but should provide some of the offense at power forward that A.C. Green lacked. And the Lakers hope Isaiah Rider can stay out of trouble long enough to make up for the loss of shooting guard Glen Rice and his 15.9 points per game last season.

The Blazers, thinking specifically about stopping Shaquille O'Neal, got Shawn Kemp, Dale Davis and Will Perdue, all 6-foot-10 or taller. But Portland won't have center Arvydas Sabonis, who is out at least the next few weeks with an injured left knee. Backup point guard Greg Anthony also is recovering from offseason surgery on both ankles.

"We don't know where we are yet, quite honestly, because it's been kind of a slow process for us in the preseason with the injuries and the new guys," Anthony said.

The Lakers also will be shorthanded. Backup forward Robert Horry, a key role player during the title run, will miss the first two games — including Wednesday night's home opener against Utah, at which the Lakers will receive their championship rings — to attend his grandmother's funeral in Alabama.

How much is one game worth? It depends on the team, and who wins. The Blazers can gain a valuable psychological edge, not to mention an early lead in the race for homecourt advantage.

"We all know that when it's all said and done, there's a very good chance that these two teams are going to have an impact on what the other does in terms of the playoffs," Anthony said. "Based on what happened last year and what both teams did in the offseason, a lot of people are expecting these two teams to be there at the end."

O'Neal said the Blazers, with a payroll that soared from about $73 million to around $90 million, will have something to prove Tuesday night. But the reigning league and NBA Finals MVP played down the significance.

"It's going to be a very intense game, but whatever happens tomorrow is not going to make or break anybody's season," he said. "Somebody's going to be 1-0 and somebody's going to be 0-1."

Titans hand Washington its first loss in five games

By Joseph White
The Associated Press

LANDOVER, Md. — Had Samari Rolle returned the interception 80 yards, it wouldn't have meant a thing.

Instead, Rolle stumbled his weary body across the goal line for that final yard on the last play of the first half, and the Tennessee Titans were on their way to their seventh consecutive victory.

Rolle's score was one of two touchdown on returns for the Titans as they beat Washington 27-21 Monday night, ending the Redskins' five-game winning streak.

"It came down to two plays: the punt return and the interception before halftime," Washington quarterback Brad Johnson said. "Basically, that was the ball game."

Derrick Mason returned a punt 69 yards, and former Washington tight end Frank Wycheck caught an 18-yard TD pass as the Titans (7-1) maintained a two-game lead over Pittsburgh in the AFC Central.

"Again this football team found a way to win," Tennessee coach Jeff Fisher said. "It was not necessarily the conventional way."

The loss knocked the Redskins (6-3) out of first place in the NFC East, one-half game behind the New York Giants. Washington's players put a premium on winning this game under the national spotlight after losing a Monday night game to Dallas earlier this year.

Rolle's interception was as dramatic as they come. The Redskins, trailing 13-7, had the ball on the Titans 34 with 10 seconds remaining in the half.

Johnson tried to force a pass, and Rolle stepped in front of Irving Fryar and caught the ball at the 19. Then, knowing that he had to run it all the way back because time had expired, Rolle went from sideline to sideline, reading his blocks all the way to the end zone.

Rolle also had another interception at the Redskins 33 with 1:59 to play, ending Washington's last real chance to drive the ball downfield.

The Titans used Eddie George on seven consecutive plays to set up their only offensive touchdown, scored by Wycheck in the fourth quarter. George sprained his right knee early in last week's 14-6 victory over Baltimore and was not confirmed to start until shortly before kickoff.

The most dynamic third-down play came when Johnson, hardly the most mobile of quarterbacks, escaped a sack by spinning away from Jevon Kearse and scrambling 13 yards before taking a stiff hit from Denard Walker. A pass interference call on Rolle gave the Redskins first-and-goal, and Johnson hit fullback Mike Sellers two plays later with a 5-yard pass to make it 7-0.

The Titans responded with a more chaotic, 11-play drive that included three scrambles by quarterback Steve McNair. Al Del Greco capped it with a 46-yard field goal that barely cleared the crossbar.

Less than two minutes later, a flying block by Keith Bulluck sprang Mason for a 69-yard punt return to put the Titans ahead 10-7. Mason darted left and juked punter Tommy Barnhardt for his second career punt return touchdown.

Rolle's touchdown then made it 20-7 at the half. The Redskins closed to 20-14 late in the third quarter with a 13-play, 66-yard drive, relying heavily on Stephen Davis. Davis' seventh touch of the drive was a 1-yard TD run.

"I was hungry for that end zone. I wanted it bad," Wycheck said. "I just wanted to go out and prove to them that they made a mistake. It was definitely an emotional game for me."

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