

Spurs oust Mavericks to set up tilt with Lakers

By Jaime Aron
The Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Despite all the barbs the Los Angeles Lakers have thrown, the San Antonio Spurs haven't fought back.

Now they're going to get their chance.

Tim Duncan had 32 points and 20 rebounds as San Antonio cruised past the Dallas Mavericks 105-87 Monday night, sending the 1999 champion Spurs to the Western Conference finals against the defending champion Lakers.

"This is the series everybody wanted," Duncan said. "I don't know if we wanted it."

The showdown, which starts Saturday in San Antonio, will be the first conference finals pitting the two previous NBA champions since 1985. It's only the fifth such matchup in league history.

This one comes with some baggage to it. Lakers center Shaquille O'Neal called the Spurs a WNBA team last summer, and coach Phil Jackson has said San Antonio's title deserves an asterisk because it came

in the lockout-shortened season.

"It's a good series to hype up, isn't it?" said San Antonio's David Robinson, the target of some harsh words in O'Neal's recent book. "They've been playing great basketball, their best of the year, and our level of basketball has been extremely high. This is exciting. No question this is a big series."

After blowing a chance for a sweep Saturday in Dallas, the Spurs made it clear from the start of this game that they wanted to prepare for the Lakers and not go back up 1-35 for a sixth game.

Duncan and Robinson threw down dunks for San Antonio's first two baskets and a three-pointer by Danny Ferry put the Spurs up by double digits within eight minutes.

The Spurs, who trailed by 17 early in losing Game 4, made 15 of their first 20 shots and led by at least 11 for the final three quarters.

"You could tell from the moment everyone walked in this morning that everyone was extremely focused," said Antonio Daniels, who set his playoff high with 19 points

and nine assists.

Dallas, which had won four straight elimination games this postseason, didn't have the energy — or accuracy — to come back.

Except for Dirk Nowitzki, who scored a career-high 42 points and had 18 rebounds, the Mavericks resumed the inept shooting that cost them the first three games of the series. Michael Finley missed 16 of 17 shots and Dallas was 0 for 11 on three-pointers.

"Worst game of my life," Finley said. "Being that it was the biggest game of my life, I didn't give my team a chance."

Dallas, which in the first round became the sixth team to win a five-game series after losing the first two, became the 64th team unable to overcome an 0-3 deficit in a seven-game series.

But the Mavs can feel good about their best season in 13 years. They won 53 games and upset Utah in the first round.

"It's a disappointment to end the season on a blowout," said Nowitzki, who had his fourth game with at

least 30 points this postseason, the first in a loss. "But maybe it's better than ending on a one-point loss. That'd be even more frustrating."

O'Neal will make things tougher on the inside than Dallas' thin tandem of Shawn Bradley and Calvin Booth. Shaq's Lakers, who wrapped up a sweep of Sacramento Sunday, split the season series with San Antonio 2-2.

But the Spurs have home-court advantage against Los Angeles and they're 5-0 at the Alamodome this postseason. The home fans were already looking forward to the next round by chanting "Beat L.A.!" in the final minutes against Dallas.

Steve Kerr, who won several titles playing for Jackson, doesn't expect his former coach to fan the rivalry's flames.

"He might kill us with kindness to change things up a bit," Kerr said.

Another trait San Antonio will carry into the Lakers series is its regular-season ability to blow out opponents.

After winning an NBA-best 40 games by at least 10 points, the Spurs have won six of their seven

postseason games by at least 13 points. Their average margin over Dallas was 15.5.

This is the sixth time the Spurs have made the conference finals. They faced the Lakers in 1982 and '83, losing both times. San Antonio's only NBA Finals appearance was in 1999, when it beat New York for the championship.

Game notes: The last time the Western Conference finals featured the two previous champions was Los Angeles-Milwaukee in 1972. Boston, the 1984 champ, and 1983 champ Philadelphia met in the East finals in '85. The other conference finals meetings between the last two champions were Boston-Philadelphia ('58) and Minneapolis-Rochester ('52). The '52 and '58 matchups were during the era of two rounds of playoffs. ... After making 18 of 19 free throws in Game 4, Dallas missed three of its first 11. ... Although San Antonio has made six conference finals, this is only the fifth in the West. The Spurs played Washington in the Eastern Conference finals in 1979.

Sports brief

Colorado takes 2-0 series lead in NHL Western Finals

DENVER — On one end of the ice, Patrick Roy continues to make critical saves. On the other end, Roman Turek is simply becoming a critic.

Roy stopped 28 shots and the Colorado Avalanche got three goals from unlikely offensive sources as they took control of the Western Conference finals with a 4-2 victory over the St. Louis Blues on Monday night.

"They scored three goals, but they were pretty lucky goals," said Turek, who faced only 15 shots. "We had two nice goals, but they scored three lucky goals and they won."

Turek, who had been steady in the first two playoff rounds, vented his frustration after defenseman Ray Bourque and Adam Foote scored on long slap shots and Shjon Podein burned him with a nice move to complete a 3-on-2 in the third period.

Podein's goal with 6:39 remaining proved to be the game-winner as the Avalanche took a 2-0 series heading into Game 3 in St. Louis Wednesday night.

"Being up by two games really puts the pressure on the Blues right now," Colorado captain Joe Sakic said. "We all know what happened the last two years in Dallas, so we don't really have to talk too much about it. We knew how important this game was."

The Avalanche won Game 1 of the conference finals each of the past two years only to lose Game 2, and ultimately the series, to the Dallas Stars.

Since moving from Quebec to Colorado in 1995, the Avs have won all eight series after taking a 2-0 lead.

"I know that being down 2-0 is a tough hole," St. Louis coach Joel Quenneville said. "But we go home and get some momentum back. We need to get a win under our belt."


Roy has prevented the Blues from getting any momentum. He has allowed just six goals in the last six games, making the most difficult saves look easy.

"I'm impressed, very impressed," Avalanche coach Bob Hartley said. "It seems that he's playing with a tracking device out there."

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