



Rick Bowmer/The Associated Press

Portland's Terry Stotts shouts to his team during the first half Tuesday night in Salt Lake City.

Jazz leave Blazers playing sour note on Christmas

By John Coon
The Associated Press

Tough defense has reemerged as a staple for Utah. It starts with Rudy Gobert.

Gobert has seemingly regained the edge he possessed last season when he won NBA Defensive Player of the Year honors. His attitude and energy is spreading to his teammates and turning the Jazz into a nightmare matchup for most opponents once again.

Gobert totaled 18 points, 14 rebounds and a season-high seven blocks to lead Utah to a 117-96 victory over Portland on Tuesday night. He spearheaded a defensive effort that resulted in the Trail Blazers shooting just 39 percent from the floor and become the 11th Jazz opponent to fail to reach 100 points this season.

"Our mindset has changed over the last few games," Gobert said. "We want to play defense and we're having fun playing defense. It changes the way we play."

Gobert's seven blocks were three more than his previous season-high, which he tallied on four occasions. The Jazz center described himself as giving 200 percent in the game and Utah coach Quin Snyder felt like Gobert made his presence felt over the entire court.

"It's what we need from him," Snyder said. "He can still protect the rim and also be impactful on the floor."

Donovan Mitchell added 19 points for Utah. Joe Ingles chipped in 15 points, seven rebounds, and five assists for the Jazz.

Utah (17-18) won for the fifth time in their last six home games while shooting 55 percent from the floor. The Jazz have won 10 of 11 games this season where they have shot 50 percent or better as a team.

Damian Lillard score 20 points to lead Portland. Evan Turner added 12 points off the bench. The Blazers (19-

15) lost to Utah for the second time in five days after trailing nearly the entire second half by a double digit margin.

"They're a really good defensive team," Lillard said. "They make you work on the offensive end. You got to compete on the offensive end."

Jae Crowder scored seven of Utah's first nine second-quarter points, starting with the team's first 3-pointer of the game, to cap a 9-0 run that gave the Jazz a 33-26 lead. The Blazers pulled within three on three different occasions. Lillard hit a couple of baskets to cut the deficit to a basket, then fed Jusuf Nurkic for a layup to trim Utah's lead to 43-40.

The Jazz pulled away before half-time behind hot shooting from the perimeter. Ingles and Crowder buried back-to-back 3-pointers to spark a 16-5 run. Mitchell finished it off by beating the shot clock with another outside basket, giving the Jazz a 59-45 lead.

Utah went 5-of-7 from 3-point range in the second quarter after going 0-of-8 in the first quarter.

"We know how we want to score and how we want to attack these guys," Crowder said. "We believe in our shots. We believe in the work we put in."

The Jazz extended their lead to 68-51 on back-to-back baskets from Ricky Rubio early in the third quarter.

Portland chipped away at the lead and finally cut it to 92-83 on a floater from Seth Curry early in the fourth quarter. That's as close as the Blazers got.

Gobert answered with a dunk to push Utah's lead back to double digits. It sparked a 14-2 run that slammed the door shut on any potential comeback. Mitchell punctuated the run with a 3-pointer, putting the Jazz up 106-85 with 4:49 remaining.

Mitchell thinks Utah is ready to turn the corner heading into the new year because the team is learning how to

finish games defensively.

"We've been in this situation at the beginning of the year and we didn't have a counter-punch," Mitchell said. "Now we're adjusting and making that counter-punch. It's similar to what we had last year. And we have more. We have more to us."

CHRISTMAS CAMEO

Playing on Christmas day is a rare occurrence for Utah. The Jazz played for just the seventh time on Dec. 25 and improved to 5-2 on the holiday. Their previous game on the holiday came in 1997 when John Stockton scored 24 points to lead the Jazz to a 107-103 victory over Houston.

SHUT DOWN

C.J. McCollum finished with only 11 points on 4-of-14 shooting against the Jazz. McCollum came into the game averaging 19.8 points in his last four games against Utah. The veteran guard has scored at least 20 points in 154 games since the start of the 2015-16 season, which is the 13th most in the NBA in that span.

QUOTABLE

"He affects shots and his presence affects shots," Portland coach Terry Stotts on Gobert's play keeping the Blazers from finishing at the rim.

TIP INS

Blazers: Lillard did not attempt a free throw. He came into the game ranked fourth in the NBA in free throws made and eighth in the league in attempts. ... Portland scored 14 points off 17 Utah turnovers. ... The Blazers made just 35 baskets against the Jazz for the second time this season.

Jazz: Gobert has logged a double-double in nine of his last 10 games against the Blazers. ... Dante Exum matched his season-high with 15 points off the bench. ... Utah shot 13-of-21 (61.9 percent) from 3-point range over the final three quarters.

Consider the Golden Rule: Refs are people, too

We have moved from fall to winter sports, from football fields, soccer fields and volleyball courts to basketball courts, wrestling mats and swimming pools. The new year is just around the corner. It's the perfect time for a change, and I have a thought I want to share with the fans who have attended, and plan to keep attending, sporting events — one that should be considered as a New Year's resolution.

Lay off the officials.

I get it. It's fun to hassle and harangue the refs. I've engaged in plenty of it over the years. Even now, I'll once in a while give some of the referees I know a bad time about taking their "seeing-eye dog" to the game they're working that night or engage in gossip about an iffy call. So part of what follows is an indictment on myself.

Being on the sidelines at hundreds of sporting events the last 3-1/2 years has taught me several things, including to view the games with a non-biased approach. That's a necessity in my job if I'm to accurately report the facts of a contest.

Learning to look at the game with a more critical eye has shown me that, the vast majority of the time, the referees calling your son's or daughter's game make the correct call.

I hear a lot of vitriol from the bleachers directed at those on the playing surface trying to manage the game, and again I confess I've done so as a fan. Sometimes it's for a legitimately missed call, but more often than not, it's on a judgment call that could go either way and the referee (who, keep in mind, is closer to the action and trained on what the call should or shouldn't be) saw it differently. Or it's even one the referee got right, and the spectators are incorrect.

I know fans don't want to hear they're wrong on calls, but sometimes they are. I have been at plenty of games where I've heard fans complain about a "horrible call!" by a "blind!" ref, when in reality the referee made the right judgment.

Would you as a fan want to be called horrible and blind?

I doubt it. Consider the Golden Rule the next time you think about spouting off at an official.

Many officials I've talked to say they officiate for the love of the game, to stay around the sport, or to help the youth. Several have also said what comes from the stands is part of what is driving referees away, or keeping new referees from entering the fray. I wrote in an article back in September about the



RONALD'S REPORT
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statewide referee shortage and the shortage locally. Fans are part of the reason for that. If that shortage continues, and referee resources dry up completely, we could see the cancellation of games. Nobody wants that.

Yes, the referees will make mistakes from time to time. But before you take that as your justification for lobbing insults as an official, consider this:

1) Nobody is perfect. That includes the referees, the players, the coaches and, yes, the fans.

2) Do you as a fan yell at the players for EVERY missed shot, incomplete pass, or botched fly ball the way you holler as refs? If so, you should seriously do some soul searching.

3) I'm sure you've made mistakes at work in the past. I know I have. Would you want somebody yelling at you every time you messed up, or would you rather receive patience and kindness?

4) I'm willing to bet the referees get in the neighborhood of 90-95 percent of the calls or non-calls correct (probably more). You know what 90-95 percent in school is? An "A." If your child came home with, let's say, a 92 on a test, would you be happy for her? Or would you ridicule her for the answers she didn't get right?

One official I spoke to for the aforementioned story said he would hang up his whistle when he called the perfect game. He's been refereeing for three decades now, and still hasn't done so.

Being an official is tough work. It's a thankless job. I don't say this out of ignorance, either: I umpired Little League baseball for a couple years in my high school days. That in and of itself was a challenge. High school and college ranks, I'm sure, are tougher.

But it's also, at times, made tougher by fans. And needlessly so.

Don't get me wrong. I still see calls at games that I disagree with. But I've learned to keep those comments (for the most part) to myself. My job largely demands it. It wouldn't be very professional, after all, for a sideline reporter to be yelling about a bad call. I have, though, asked questions at times about a call I didn't understand or didn't think was correct.

I don't write this to paint myself as the shining light of how to handle referees, or holier than thou, because I'm not. I'm a sinner like everyone else.

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BRIEFLY

Clemson star could miss national semifinal

Clemson coach Dabo Swinney says star defensive tackle Dexter Lawrence and two other players failed NCAA tests for performance

enhancing drugs and might not play in the Cotton Bowl against No. 3 Notre Dame.

Swinney said at a news conference Monday at AT&T Stadium that the NCAA informed Clemson trace amounts of ostarine were

found in samples given by Lawrence, reserve offensive tackle Zach Giella and freshman tight end Braden Gallo-way. Ostarine, also known as enobosarm, is used to treat osteoporosis, but can also act like an anabolic steroid.

Swinney said the players told him they had not intentionally taken the substance. Clemson is awaiting results of a second sample from each player. The NCAA ban for failing a PED test is one calendar year.

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