

Blazers' rally comes up short against Suns

PHOENIX (AP) — Season-high points by Eric Bledsoe with 33 and Isaiah Thomas with 27 saved the Phoenix Suns after they watched a 25-point first-half lead evaporate but still topped the Portland Trail Blazers 118-113 on Wednesday night.

The Blazers (31-12) went up 110-105 with 2:22 to play on a 3-pointer from leading scorer Nicolas Batum, who finished with 27 points. But the Suns went on a 13-3 run to close the game and win their seventh straight home game.

Portland got 22 points each for Damian Lillard and Wesley Matthews and 10 rebounds from Batum.

The Suns (26-18) have their longest home win streak of the season and longest since eight straight during the 2009-2010 season.

The Blazers had a chance to go ahead again with 20 seconds left, but Lillard missed a baseline jumper and fouled the Suns' P.J. Tucker.

A missed free throw by Batum also cost the Blazers a chance to tie the game at 114. Portland's last chance to tie was lost when Lillard stepped out of bounds trying to catch a high inbound pass with 9.8 seconds left.

The Blazers, losers of four of five, played without star forward LaMarcus Aldridge because of a left hand injury. They still overcame their worst defensive first quarter of the season and outscored Phoenix 80-60 from the 5:10 mark of the second. But they couldn't pull it out.

The Suns outscored the Blazers 27-2 over nine minutes between the first and second quarters to take control. Portland went scoreless over the last three minutes of the first and almost three minutes of the second before Will Barton's layup.

Gerald Green lobbed to Miles Plumlee for a dunk, and Phoenix led 53-31 at the 6:09 mark of the second. The Blazers trailed by as many as 25 but cut the lead to 14, 66-52, at halftime.



Portland Trail Blazers' Thomas Robinson, left, strips the ball from Phoenix Suns' Isaiah Thomas during the second half of an NBA basketball game Wednesday in Phoenix. The Suns defeated the Trail Blazers 118-113.

The Blazers rallied in the fourth quarter, trimming the Suns' lead to 93-86 with 8:57 left after Dorell Wright's conventional three-point play.

Phoenix's lead was four points until Thomas scored on a soaring layup and drew a blocking foul on Wright, making the score 99-92 after a free throw. Thomas kept the Blazers at bay with another basket with 5:59 to go, giving the Suns a six-point lead.

But the Blazers stormed ahead 105-102 with 4:05 left on the 3-pointer from Batum.

The Suns tied a season high for points in a first with 40 and the total was the most the

Blazers have surrendered in any opening period this season. Still, the Blazers maintain a comfortable lead in the NBA's Northwest Division.

Thomas scored nine of the first 11 points of the first and had 13 in the decisive run. Green scored 10 of his 12 points in the second quarter.

Tip-ins

Blazers: Batum eclipsed his season high by 10 points, and his six 3-pointers were also a season best. ... Wright, who started in place of Aldridge, scored a season high 15 points.

Suns: Phoenix has won seven straight at home over the Blazers. The Suns are 17-2

against Portland in 19 home games since January of 2005. The Suns are now 4-0 at the halfway point of their longest homestand in club history, eight games. They are home through Jan. 30. ... Thomas made the move of the game when he purposely slowed down his dribble while looking away, causing defender C.J. McCollum to slow his pace. Suddenly Thomas rose up and hit a quick jumper with 2.8 seconds left in the first quarter.

Up next

Blazers: Host Boston tonight.

Suns: Host Houston Friday night.



Portland Trail Blazers' Will Barton (5) drives past Phoenix Suns' Isaiah Thomas (3) during the first half of an NBA basketball game Wednesday in Phoenix.

SCOREBOARD

PREP SCHEDULE

TODAY

Girls Basketball — Catlin Gabel at Warrenton, 6 p.m.; Ilwaco at Ocosta, 7 p.m.

Boys Basketball — Catlin Gabel at Warrenton, 7:45 p.m.

Swimming — Seaside at Astoria, 4 p.m.

FRIDAY

Boys Basketball — Tillamook at Astoria, 5:30 p.m.; Seaside at Banks, 5:30 p.m.; Neah-Kah-Nie at Knappa, 7:45 p.m.; Jewell at Country Christian, 7 p.m.; Raymond at Ilwaco, 7:30 p.m.

Girls Basketball — Tillamook at Astoria, 7:15 p.m.; Seaside at Banks, 7:15 p.m.; Neah-Kah-Nie at Knappa, 6 p.m.; Jewell at Country Christian, 5:30 p.m.

Wrestling — Astoria at Tillamook Invitational, Noon

SATURDAY

Boys Basketball — NW Christian at Ilwaco, 7:30 p.m.

Girls Basketball — NW Christian at Ilwaco, 5:45 p.m.

Wrestling — Ilwaco at Coyote Classic, Kittitas, 10 a.m.

BASKETBALL

HIGH SCHOOLS

Standings

Boys		Lewis & Clark League		League Overall	
Portland Adv	8-1	8-1	9-7		
Clatskanie	7-2	7-2	11-5		
De La Salle	7-2	7-2	10-6		
Rainier	6-3	6-3	6-9		
Catlin Gabel	5-4	5-4	11-6		
Riverdale	2-6	2-6	5-11		
OR Episcopal	2-7	2-7	7-10		
Warrenton	2-7	2-7	8-9		
Portland Chr	1-8	1-8	3-15		

Northwest League

Nestucca	6-1	6-1	11-5
Knappa	5-1	5-1	12-4
Vernonia	5-1	5-1	8-8
City Christian	4-4	4-4	8-9
Delphian	3-3	3-3	7-7
Faith Bible	2-4	2-4	5-10
Gaston	1-5	1-5	4-12
Neah-Kah-Nie	0-7	0-7	3-14

Girls

Lewis & Clark League		League Overall	
Portland Adv	8-1	8-1	10-6
Portland Chr	8-1	8-1	15-3
Rainier	8-1	8-1	11-5
De La Salle	5-4	5-4	5-12
OR Episcopal	4-5	4-5	9-8
Clatskanie	4-5	4-5	8-9
Riverdale	1-7	1-7	3-11
Catlin Gabel	1-8	1-8	4-13
Warrenton	1-8	1-8	1-16

Northwest League

City Christian	6-1	6-1	8-7
Vernonia	5-0	5-0	13-2
Faith Bible	4-1	4-1	9-4
Knappa	2-3	2-3	8-8
Gaston	2-4	2-4	5-11
Neah-Kah-Nie	1-5	1-5	6-7
Nestucca	0-6	0-6	3-13

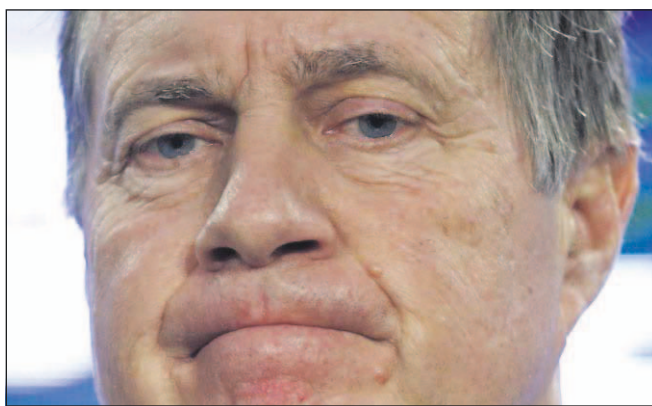
Patriots' coach says he doesn't know how balls were deflated

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. (AP) — Patriots coach Bill Belichick said today he doesn't know how footballs became deflated during the game that got his team to the Super Bowl.

But Belichick declined to answer questions after saying he knew nothing about accusations that his team cheated with underinflated footballs in its win against the Colts in the AFC championship game.

The NFL is investigating. "I had no knowledge of this situation until Monday morning," said Belichick, who said he was "shocked" to learn the news.

"I would say I've learned a lot more about this process in the last three days than I knew or have talked about in the last 40 years that I've coached in this league," Belichick said. "I had no knowledge of the various steps



AP Photo/Elise Amendola

New England Patriots' head coach Bill Belichick reacts during a news conference prior to a team practice in Foxborough, Mass., today. Belichick addressed the issue of the NFL investigation of deflated footballs.

involved in the game balls and process that went through."

Belichick did not specify who in the Patriots organization was responsible for the underinflated

balls, or absolve anyone besides himself of potential wrongdoing.

Softer balls are generally considered easier to throw and catch, and quarterbacks, specialists and

equipment managers are known to have very individualized preferences in how footballs are readied for games. Belichick said he was unaware of the process for game balls until the accusations were raised.

Belichick says he sometimes hears quarterbacks, kickers and other specialists talk about their preferences.

"I can tell you and they will tell you that there is never any sympathy from me whatsoever on that subject. Zero," Belichick said.

Patriots quarterback Tom Brady is expected to address reporters later Thursday.

Belichick says the Patriots going forward will inflate footballs to a safe level to prevent them from dropping below allowable air pressure during games.

"We will take steps in the future to make sure that we don't put ourselves in this type of situation again," he said.

The coach who has won three Super Bowls said he generally forces players to practice under bad ball conditions.

"Anytime players complain about the quality of the footballs, I make it worse and that stops the complaints," he said.

The issue has drawn strong reaction from around the game and its fans as the Patriots prepare to play the Seattle Seahawks on Feb. 1 in Glendale, Arizona, for the NFL title.

Belichick declined to answer several questions after his opening remarks at his press conference, answering several questions by saying: "I've told you everything I know," and "I don't have an explanation."

Scherzer's \$210M deal done, Nationals think about 'winning'

WASHINGTON (AP) — Forgive Washington Nationals owner Mark Lerner if he got swept up in the scene.

Speaking after a news conference Wednesday to announce the addition — via a \$210 million, seven-year contract — of 2013 AL Cy Young Award winner Max Scherzer, Lerner was thinking big thoughts. After all, the club's starting rotation, at least for the moment, also includes Stephen Strasburg, Jordan Zimmermann, Doug Fister and Gio Gonzalez.

"If they all stay healthy," began Lerner, whose father, Ted, is the team's principal owner, "I guess it's a possibility we may give up the fewest runs in National League history during a 162-game schedule, which is amazing."

Let the speculation begin, then. Who will start on opening day, an honor that's gone to Strasburg the past three years? How good could this staff be?

As it is, in 2014, Washington's starters led the majors with a 3.04 ERA.

How far can those pitchers take the Nationals, who won the NL East in 2012 and again last season before bowing out in



AP Photo/Evan Vucci

Washington Nationals' manager Matt Williams, left, and general manager Mike Rizzo, right, look on as pitcher Max Scherzer puts on a jersey during an introductory news conference at Nationals Park, Wednesday in Washington, D.C. Scherzer signed a \$210 million, seven-year contract to join the Nationals.

Washington's opening playoff series each time?

And, perhaps most intriguingly, will general manager Mike Rizzo keep that group intact? Or will he wind up trading someone, perhaps Zimmermann or Fister, who can both become free agents after next season?

Until those last two questions are answered, Rizzo certainly shares Lerner's enthusiasm for the current collection of arms.

"We'll stack our rotation up

with anybody's in our division, our league and maybe in baseball," Rizzo said, "and compete against them."

Of course, things don't always shape up on the field the way they do during the off-season.

The terrific Atlanta Braves group that included three Hall of Famers in Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine and John Smoltz wound up with only one World Series championship. That's

one more than the Philadelphia Phillies won after assembling Roy Halladay, Cliff Lee, Cole Hamels and Roy Oswalt.

Still, if that's the discussion connected to the Nationals now, it represents a sea change from where this franchise stood a half-dozen years ago.

It was noteworthy to hear the word "winning" over and over Wednesday at Nationals Park, where the scoreboard displayed a "Welcome to D.C." greeting for Scherzer and his wife, and the diamond was covered by the afternoon's dusting of snow.

This is a club that lost 100 games in both 2008 and 2009 and found it difficult to attract top talent in free agency, but the perception has changed.

"There's no doubt about it," Rizzo said. "We've got a lot of good baseball people around here. We've got a lot of good professionals. The selling portion of it from five years ago to today is night and day. We certainly have no problem with players wanting to be Washington Nationals."

Asked what reasons led him to sign with Washington, Scherzer replied, "One: winning. I think this team is capable

of winning and winning a lot. When you look at the near term and long term, this is an organization you want to be a part of."

The size of the contract probably didn't hurt, either.

The 30-year-old Scherzer, who became a free agent after spending the past five seasons with the Detroit Tigers, received the most guaranteed dollars for a right-handed pitcher in big league history.

"I don't play this game for money," said Scherzer, who was 18-5 with a 3.15 ERA in 2014, a year after going 21-3 with a 2.90 ERA, "but yet at the same time, when you have an offer like that, it just makes you go, 'Wow.'"

The deal includes a record \$50 million signing bonus, of which \$5 million is due this year and \$15 million each in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

The total payments of the contract are spread over 14 years, reducing the present-day value and making it palatable for the Nationals.

"If that didn't happen, there wouldn't have been a deal," Mark Lerner said. "We had to make it work for us financially. It was really my father and Mike coming up with a creative deal."