

NBA

Blazers relish being the league’s surprise at the break

By ANNE M. PETERSON
AP Sports Writer

PORTLAND — Not many expected the Portland Trail Blazers to be where they are at the All-Star break — but the Blazers themselves aren’t all that surprised.

Following the departure of four starters from last season’s team, including All-Star LaMarcus Aldridge, Portland was in the first year of a rebuild with one of the youngest rosters in the league. At the start of the season the Blazers weren’t expected to do much, and the playoffs seemed like a best-case scenario.

But at the All-Star break, the Blazers are at .500 (27-27) and surprisingly sit in seventh place in the tough Western Conference standings. The team has won eight of its last nine games, and is 12-3 since mid-January. Portland has won eight of its last 10 at home.

“Our team has done a great job of sticking to

the grind, working every day in practice and staying together,” guard Damian Lillard said. “That’s gotten us to where we are now.”

Lillard is also a big reason Portland is there now. The fourth-year point guard is averaging 24.3 points and 7.3 assists per game, the only player that ranks in the league’s top six in both categories.

Although he was snubbed this season for an All-Star nod, Lillard has 13 games this season with 30 or more points. So far in February, he’s averaging 25.2 points and 9.4 assists.

Lillard is the lone starter left over from last year’s Blazers, who went 51-31, clinched the Northwest Division title and advanced to the playoffs. But there was a mass exodus in the offseason, with Aldridge, Wesley Matthews, Nicolas Batum and Robin Lopez all heading elsewhere.

While early oddsmakers put Portland’s win total



FILE - In this Sunday, Jan. 10, 2016 file photo, Portland Trail Blazers guard Damian Lillard shoots over Oklahoma City Thunder forward Serge Ibaka during a game in Portland.

this season at 26.5 games, what was left of the team gathered with the new faces for a bonding trip to San Diego before the start of the season. With a starting nucleus that for the most part consists of Lillard, CJ McCollum, Mason Plumlee, Noah Vonleh and Al-Farouq Aminu, coach Terry Stotts

to a rocky start, with a seven-game losing streak early in November. Then Lillard missed seven games with plantar fasciitis in his left foot. McCollum started at point guard in Lillard’s absence and the Blazers went 4-3.

The Blazers saw improvement in January, going 9-5 for their best finish in that month since the 2008-09 season when they posted the same record.

“We dug ourselves a hole to start the season, giving up some games late, but we stuck with it, we kept going, we kept working,” Lillard said. “We didn’t get too high or too low.”

McCollum is making a case as most improved player of the year, averaging 20.7 points, 4.2 assists and 3.6 rebounds, and creating a dangerous backcourt tandem with Lillard.

“When those two guys are on the floor they demand your attention, they do a great job of working together,”

Atlanta’s Kent Bazemore said. “You see what they do on paper and watch film, but when you are out there on the floor it’s totally different.”

Lillard also said that Stotts and the rest of the coaching staff have been methodical about preparation.

“It’s hard to bring that energy and be on point every day and the coaches have all year,” Lillard said. “They’re pulling guys aside, watching film, getting there early and getting guys shots in. They’ve just done a great job with the team and being patient.”

The Blazers resume the season on Friday at home against the defending NBA champion Golden State Warriors, who have lost just four games this season. They head into the game with a three-game winning streak.

The NBA trade deadline also looms on Thursday. Portland has been a rumored participant in trade talks, but nothing concrete has emerged.

MLB

Revamped M’s head into spring with optimism

By TIM BOOTH
AP Sports Writer

SEATTLE — As he held different positions in the front office of various organizations, Scott Servais was building a portfolio of experience he hoped someday would land him back on the field as a manager.

The test has arrived for Servais. It’s time to see if the Seattle Mariners’ new manager can take those experiences and help end the longest playoff drought in baseball.

“First thing is to let the players know how much I care about them as people,” Servais said. “Got to earn their trust. I’ve got to build equity with them otherwise they’re not going to really buy into what we’re doing.”

Servais begins his first spring training in charge of a major league club later this week when the Mariners pitchers and catchers report to Peoria, Arizona. He’s inheriting a Seattle roster that underwent a massive offseason overhaul with 17 new additions through a series of trades and free agent acquisitions by new general manager Jerry Dipoto.

Those moves were made with an eye on what Servais saw as the important attributes Seattle needed to contend in the AL West, which the Mariners believe they can do in 2016. They needed to be more athletic



FILE - In this Oct. 26, 2015, file photo, Scott Servais talks to reporters after he was introduced as the new manager of the Seattle Mariners in Seattle.

in the outfield. They needed a revamped bullpen. They needed to emphasize on-base percentage and devalue home runs. They needed to use the spacious dimensions of Safeco Field to their advantage.

That led to a dizzying offseason of changes, built around the core of Felix Hernandez, Nelson Cruz, Robinson Cano and Kyle Seager. But getting all the new pieces on board with those that remain from the previous regime won’t be a simple task.

“This is going to be much different than what we’ve seen in other camps, and there’s a reason. We’re trying to get a different result,” Servais said.

“I think if you want to get a different result, you’ve got to do something different.”

Here are things to watch as the Mariners pitchers and catchers being spring workouts on Saturday:

FIFTH IN LINE: Four spots in the Mariners’ rotation are mostly settled. Hernandez is the ace. Taijuan Walker is the burgeoning star with huge upside. Hisashi Iwakuma and Wade Miley are the steady veterans. Then there is the fifth spot. Right-hander Nathan Karns and lefty James Paxton are the likely favorites. Karns was acquired in one of Seattle’s big offseason trades, coming over from Tampa Bay, where he

was 7-5 with a 3.67 ERA in his first full season in the majors in 2015. Paxton has flashed signs of being a star, but has been unable to stay healthy. Paxton has started just 13 games in each of the past two seasons.

RIGHT AT FIRST: Adam Lind will see the majority of time at first base. But his career splits against left-handed pitching have Seattle searching for a right-handed hitting complement. Once-prominent prospect Jesus Montero could be an option. Seattle signed former All-Star Gaby Sanchez to a minor league deal. The curious unknown could be Korean slugger Dae-Ho Lee, who signed a minor league deal after hitting 31 home runs last season in the Japan Pacific League.

CLOSE IT OUT: Of all the moves Seattle made in the offseason, the one that could provide Servais the most security in his first season could be the addition of Steve Cishek. Cishek saved 73 games combined for the Marlins in 2013-14 before falling apart last season.

MARTE’S MATURATION: One of the few bright spots among Seattle’s youngsters last year was the season of shortstop Ketel Marte. In 57 games, Marte hit .283 and played capably at shortstop. Now he goes into spring with the expectation that he will be the Mariners’ everyday option at shortstop for most of the season.

NBA

Sources: Bosh resumes taking blood thinners

By TIM REYNOLDS
AP Basketball Writer

MIAMI — Chris Bosh of the Miami Heat has resumed taking blood thinners to treat a blood clot in his leg, said a person with knowledge of the situation.

Bosh began the new medication regimen with hopes that he can resume playing this season, the person told The Associated Press on Tuesday. The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because neither the team nor Bosh has revealed anything publicly.

Typically athletes in contact in contact sports are discouraged from playing while taking blood thinning medication.

Bosh missed the final 30 games of last season because a blood clot was found on one of his lungs. The person said the current situation is not believed to be as serious as what he faced a year ago.

Bosh is Miami’s leading scorer at 19.1 points per game this season. He said over the weekend in Toronto that he was optimistic about playing again this season.

Bosh pulled out of the All-Star Game and the 3-point contest over the weekend because of what he and the Heat described as a calf strain. He was shut down at the All-Star break last season because a blood clot had found its way to one of his lungs, and that issue is something that Bosh believes started as a calf problem.



Bosh

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