

NBA

Lillard's March surge and Nurkic Fever mark Blazers' season

By ANNE M. PETERSON
Associated Press

PORTLAND — The Portland Trail Blazers got “Nurkic Fever” late in the season and it helped carry them into the playoffs.

But without big man Jusuf Nurkic — except for about 15 minutes — in the postseason's opening round, the young Blazers were no match for Golden State. The defending conference champion Warriors swept Portland in its fourth playoff appearance in as many years.

“We had a tough draw, the best team in the league,” Blazers guard Damian Lillard said. “I felt like we played them really well but they also showed their championship pedigree. When you can't sustain that mental focus for 48 minutes, five minutes and you're down 25 points.”

Expectations were higher for the Trail Blazers this season after they surpris-

ingly advanced to the second round of the playoffs last year. There wasn't a whole lot of turnover in the offseason, with just a few new pieces added to the puzzle.

But the NBA's youngest roster didn't appear to have the same cohesiveness or consistency as they had last season. December was especially brutal, with Portland going just 4-11.

The low point came Feb. 28, when the Blazers dipped 11 games below .500 with a 120-113 overtime loss at Detroit.

Then March happened. Lillard caught fire and Portland finished the month 13-3, best in the NBA. Lillard was named the conference's Player of the Month averaging 29.1 points, 4.4 rebounds, 6.0 assists and 1.44 steals in 16 games. Terry Stotts was named the conference Coach of the Month.



Season Wrap

Nurkic happened, too. He was just getting comfortable when the month started after coming to Portland in a Feb. 12 deal with the Denver Nuggets.

Nurkic scored 28 points with 20 rebounds against Philadelphia on March 9 and Stotts noted that fans had taken to the newcomer known as the Bosnian Beast: “Nurkic fever? Why not?” The catchphrase was born.

“I love being here,” said the 7-foot center. “I appreciate what the city is doing for me. I just want to give them back something.”

Nurkic developed chemistry with Lillard and guard CJ McCollum, going on to average 15.2 points, 10.4 rebounds and 1.9 blocks in 20 games with the Blazers. Portland was 14-5 with Nurkic in the starting lineup.

“I'm sure we'll evaluate this season but this was a roller coaster for us from day

one. It's been an up and down season, frustrating in some ways, but I think, as I told the team, what I'll remember most about this team is how we competed after the All Star break to make the playoffs,” Stotts said.

Misfortune struck and on March 31 it was announced that Nurkic had a non-displaced right leg fibular fracture. It was unclear when the injury occurred.

Nurkic missed the final seven games of the regular season but returned to take part in pre-game warmups in the final few games — leading to speculation that he could return for the playoffs. Portland clinched the eighth and final spot with two games left before finishing at .500.

Nurkic returned for Game 3 against the Warriors. He had two points and 11 rebounds playing in obvious discomfort for about 15 minutes.

The offseason gives Nurkic adequate time to heal from the

injury. Lillard is excited at the prospect of having him for an entire season.

“I think to win in this league you have to have guys who have true confidence. I think he's a guy who has that,” Lillard said. “He just brings something to our team that we didn't have, a swagger that he has, he's really impacted our team so I'm excited about moving forward with him and getting on him this summer, making sure he's working.”

Lillard finished the season with a career-best average of 27 points per game, along with 4.8 rebounds and 5.9 assists. Backcourt teammate McCollum also finished the season with a career-best 23 points per game.

The Blazers' winningest starting lineup included Lillard, McCollum, Nurkic and forward Noah Vonleh and Maurice Harkless.

Portland signed hefty contracts with Evan Turner,

Allen Crabbe and Meyers Leonard last year, and the team has the third-highest payroll in the league. With a disappointing finish, moves may be in the offing. The Blazers also have three first-round picks in the draft to look forward to.

Lillard was asked after the Game 4 loss to Golden State whether the Warriors were the benchmark for what the Blazers aspire to be.

“I think about when the Pistons were just beating up on Jordan and kicking his butt every year and he had to get through them if he wanted to get to where he wanted to get to,” Lillard said. “That's just what it is because they (the Warriors) are going to be there, they're going to be there every year and we have to look at that and understand that we have to be better, we have to get better and come back better as a group if we want to move past them.”

SCOREBOARD

Local Slate

PREP BASEBALL	
Friday	Stanfield at Enterprise (2), 1 p.m. Umatilla at Nyssa (2), 1 p.m. Vale at Irigon (2), 1 p.m. Riverside at Burns (2), 2 p.m. Pendleton at Hermiston (2), 3 p.m.
Saturday	Weston-McEwen at Culver (2), 11 a.m. Pilot Rock at Dufur (2), 11 a.m. Elgin at Heppner (2), 11 a.m. Ontario at Mac-Hi (2), Noon

PREP SOFTBALL	
Friday	Heppner at Union (2), 11 a.m. Irrigon at Riverside (2), 1 p.m. Weston-McEwen at Umatilla (2), 1 p.m. Pendleton at Hermiston (2), 3 p.m.
Saturday	Pilot Rock at Culver (2), 11 a.m. Echo at Glide (2), 11 a.m. Ontario at Mac-Hi (2), Noon

PREP TRACK & FIELD	
Thursday	Hermiston, Heppner, Pilot Rock, Umatilla, Stanfield, Helix at Riverside Twilight Relays, 4:30 p.m.
Friday	Echo, Umatilla, Ione, Arlington at Condon/Wheeler Invitational, Noon Hermiston at Gresham, 2 p.m. Hermiston at Nike Relays (Jesusi HS), 2:30 p.m.
Saturday	Pendleton, Mac-Hi at Ontario, 10 a.m. Irrigon, Pilot Rock, Heppner, Helix, Ione, Echo, Condon/Wheeler at Sherman Invite, 11 a.m. Stanfield at Portland Christian Invitational, 11 a.m.

PREP TENNIS	
Thursday	Sherman at Riverside, 4 p.m. Helix at Stanfield, 4 p.m.
Friday	Pendleton (boys) at Redmond Tournament, TBD Pendleton (girls) at Bend Tournament, TBD Hermiston (boys/girls) at Capital (ID) Tournament, TBD Riverside at Weston-McEwen, 3:30 p.m.
Saturday	Pendleton (boys) at Redmond Tournament, TBD Pendleton (girls) at Bend Tournament, TBD Hermiston (boys/girls) at Capital (ID) Tournament, TBD Riverside, Umatilla, Mac-Hi, Stanfield, Helix, Ione, Weston-McEwen at Helix Tournament (at Hermiston), 9 a.m.

PREP GOLF	
Friday	Heppner at Alpine Meadows G.C., 11 a.m.

PREP LACROSSE	
Saturday	Sprague at Hermiston, 5 p.m.

COLLEGE BASEBALL	
Saturday	Blue Mountain at Walla Walla (2), 1 p.m.

COLLEGE SOFTBALL	
Friday	Walla Walla at Blue Mountain (2), 2 p.m. Eastern Oregon at Southern Oregon (2), 2 p.m.
Saturday	Eastern Oregon at Southern Oregon (2), 2 p.m. Columbia Basin at Blue Mountain (2), 2 p.m.

Basketball

NBA	
Playoff glance	FIRST ROUND (Best-of-7; wif necessary)
EASTERN CONFERENCE	Boston 2, Chicago 2 Today: Chicago at Boston, 5:30 p.m. Friday: Boston at Chicago, 8 p.m. x-Sunday, April 30: Chicago at Boston, TBA
WESTERN CONFERENCE	Atlanta 2, Washington 2 Today: Atlanta at Washington, 3 p.m. Friday: Washington at Atlanta, 4:30 p.m.
Toronto 3, Milwaukee 2	Monday: Toronto 112, Milwaukee 93 Thursday: Toronto at Milwaukee, 4 p.m. x-Saturday, April 29: Milwaukee at Toronto, TBA
Cleveland 4, Indiana 0	Sunday: Cleveland 106, Indiana 102
WESTERN CONFERENCE	Golden State 4, Portland 0 Monday: Golden State 128, Portland 103
San Antonio 3, Memphis 2	Tuesday: San Antonio 116, Memphis 103 Thursday: San Antonio at Memphis, 6:30 p.m. x-Saturday: Memphis at San Antonio, TBA
Houston 4, Oklahoma City 1	Tuesday: Houston 105, Oklahoma City 99
Utah 3, L.A. Clippers 2	Tuesday: Utah 96, L.A. Clippers 92 Friday: L.A. Clippers at Utah, 10:30 p.m. x-Sunday: Utah at L.A. Clippers, TBA

Hockey

NHL	
Playoff glance	SECOND ROUND (Best-of-7)
EASTERN CONFERENCE	Washington vs. Pittsburgh Thursday: Pittsburgh at Washington, 4:30 p.m. Ottawa vs. N.Y. Rangers

MLB	
AMERICAN LEAGUE	East Division
Baltimore	13 6 .684 —
New York	11 7 .611 1½
Boston	11 8 .579 2
Tampa Bay	11 11 .500 3½
Toronto	6 14 .300 7½

MLB	
Central Division	West Division
Detroit	11 8 .579 —
Cleveland	10 9 .526 1
Chicago	10 9 .526 1
Minnesota	10 10 .500 1½
Kansas City	7 13 .350 4½

MLB	
Central Division	West Division
Chicago	12 8 .600 —
Milwaukee	11 11 .500 2
Cincinnati	10 11 .476 2½
St. Louis	9 11 .450 3
Pittsburgh	8 12 .400 4

MLB	
West Division	Tuesday's Games
Colorado	14 7 .667 ½
Arizona	14 8 .636 ¾
Los Angeles	10 11 .476 4
San Diego	8 14 .364 7
San Francisco	7 14 .333 7

MLB	
East Division	NATIONAL LEAGUE
Washington	14 6 .700 —
Miami	10 8 .556 3
Philadelphia	9 9 .500 4
New York	8 11 .421 5½
Atlanta	6 12 .333 7

MLB	
Central Division	West Division
Chicago	12 8 .600 —
Milwaukee	11 11 .500 2
Cincinnati	10 11 .476 2½
St. Louis	9 11 .450 3
Pittsburgh	8 12 .400 4

MLB	
West Division	Tuesday's Games
Colorado	14 7 .667 ½
Arizona	14 8 .636 ¾
Los Angeles	10 11 .476 4
San Diego	8 14 .364 7
San Francisco	7 14 .333 7

PGA	
World Golf Ranking	Through April 23
1. Dustin Johnson	USA 12.77
2. Rory McIlroy	NIR 8.72
3. Jason Day	AUS 8.18
4. Hideki Matsuyama	JPN 7.97
5. Jordan Spieth	USA 7.56
6. Henrik Stenson	SWE 7.33
7. Sergio Garcia	ESP 7.24
8. Justin Rose	ENG 5.52
9. Rickie Fowler	USA 5.44
10. Adam Scott	AUS 5.37
11. Justin Thomas	USA 5.37
12. Alex Noren	SWE 4.87
13. Jon Rahm	ESP 4.76
14. Paul Casey	ENG 4.38
15. Patrick Reed	USA 4.33
16. Tyrrell Hatton	ENG 4.17
17. Matt Kuchar	USA 4.03
18. Charl Schwartzel	SAF 4.01
19. Brooks Koepka	USA 3.96
20. Phil Mickelson	USA 3.88

Golf

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