

# Trail Blazers' cohesiveness helped them to conference finals

By ANNE M. PETERSON  
Associated Press

PORTLAND — The Portland Trail Blazers faced a number of challenges on the journey to their first Western Conference finals in 19 years.

But there was one they couldn't overcome: The Golden State Warriors.

Portland's run in the playoffs, which captured fans' imaginations after Damian Lillard's buzzer-beating 3-pointer to clinch the opening-round series over the Thunder, ended with a sweep by the defending champions.

"We put together a great season and we put ourselves in position to go to the Finals," Lillard said. "I think every other team in the league would wish they could be in our shoes; not only making the playoffs but playing for an opportunity to get a chance to go to the Finals. We just ran up on a team who has been there the last four years."

Portland was coming off two straight seasons that ended with first-round playoff sweeps. The team, which had surprisingly little turnover over those years, came into the season unified

and determined to take the next step.

But before the first game was played, the Blazers were hit by the death of owner Paul Allen after a battle with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. The co-founder of Microsoft was a hands-on owner and a familiar face at the Moda Center, and Portland dedicated its season to him.

Injuries would challenge the Blazers down the stretch. Lillard's back-court partner CJ McCollum missed 10 games with a knee injury.

But it was center Jusuf Nurkic's injury that caused the most concern going into the playoffs. Portland's 7-foot big man broke his left leg after crashing awkwardly in an overtime victory at home over the Brooklyn Nets on March 25.

Nurkic was averaging 15.6 points and 10.4 rebounds a game and many considered Portland's playoff prospects dim without him.

Fortunately, the Blazers were able to turn to Enes Kanter, who was waived by the New York Knicks following the trade deadline and signed by Portland for the rest of the season. Kanter



Portland Trail Blazers guard Damian Lillard, right, shoots near Golden State Warriors forward Jordan Bell during the first half of Game 4 of the NBA Western Conference Finals on Monday in Portland.

averaged 13.1 points and 8.6 rebounds in 23 regular-season games with the Blazers, including eight starts.

Portland finished 53-29 and clinched the third seed in the Western Conference, earning home court for the first round — and a series with the Thunder. The Blazers wrapped that series up in five games — capped by Lillard's walkoff 3-pointer.

But even in the playoffs the Blazers couldn't escape

misfortune. Kanter separated his left shoulder in the final game against Oklahoma City. He was questionable for the conference semifinals against Denver but played, although he often winced in pain.

Jonathan Yim, Portland's video coordinator and player development coach, was in a serious car accident before the series with the Nuggets. The Blazers coaching staff wore bow ties in his honor

in Game 2.

That series went to seven games, with the Blazers sealing their date with Golden State on Denver's home court.

The Warriors were simply too much for the Blazers, climbing back from double-digit deficits in each of the final three games. Lillard played with separated ribs in the final two.

The team's on-court leader, Lillard averaged 25.8

points and 6.9 assists and earned his fourth All-Star nod during the regular season. He averaged 33 points in the opening round against the Thunder, but his production fell against Denver and Golden State when he was double-teamed.

Lillard said the past few seasons of relative stability — after four of Portland's five starters moved on to other teams in 2015 — have bonded the team.

"Each year we've come back with the right attitude," Lillard said Tuesday. "We've been able to stick together through a lot of adversity and I think just what we've hung our hats on, what we've believed in, our culture, the togetherness, we've been able to truly build on that. And I think we should be encouraged."

Lillard could be in line for a hefty raise in the off-season. If he is named to one of the postseason's All-NBA teams, he'll qualify for a supermax contract extension worth \$191 million. Lillard has two years remaining on his current contract.

Asked about the prospects of a big extension, Lillard laughed and said: "I don't understand why that's even a question."

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