

# Blazers blow big lead but rebound to defeat Thunder

By Cliff Brunt  
AP Sports Writer

OKLAHOMA CITY — Damian Lillard scored 12 of his 31 points in the final 4:11 to help the Portland Trail Blazers beat the Oklahoma City Thunder 115-104 on Tuesday night.

The Trail Blazers squandered a 24-point lead in the second half. Lillard rescued them by making all four of his 3-point tries — all from at least 25 feet — during the closing run while playing with five fouls. On one, he had Thunder defensive stopper Lu Dort in his face and hit a step-back, 28-footer to give the Trail Blazers a 109-102 lead.

It was enough to make Portland coach Terry Stotts dust off 1970s movie references.

“When he made those, all I could think of was the theme from the movie ‘Shaft,’” Stotts said. “That Dame is a bad — somebody say ‘Shut your mouth!’ Can you dig it?”

Lillard also had 10 assists

and seven rebounds. At one point, teammate Enes Kanter put his hands on his head in amazement.

“I went up to him and told him, ‘You crazy, man!’” Kanter said. “He’s like a cheat code. I’ve never seen anything like this before and I’ve played with some great, great players.”

Gary Trent Jr. scored 19 points and Kanter had eight points and 21 rebounds for Portland, which has won five straight. Lillard is averaging 30.2 points during the streak.

Portland has been rolling despite C.J. McCollum and Jusuf Nurkic being out for the past month. McCollum has a fracture in his left foot and Nurkic has a fractured right wrist.

Dort scored 23 points and Hamidou Diallo added 17 for the Thunder. Oklahoma City guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the team’s leading scorer, missed his fourth consecutive game with a sprained left knee.

The Thunder trailed by 22 in

the second quarter before finishing strong and cutting the deficit to 64-50 at the break. Anfernee Simons scored all of his 15 points in the first half for Portland.

Oklahoma City, as has been customary this season, was hard to shake. The Thunder made a run, but Portland still took a 93-79 lead into the fourth quarter.

Oklahoma City stayed hot, and Dort’s 3-pointer put the Thunder up 98-97 midway through the fourth.

“I feel like it just takes will and fight,” Diallo said. “And I feel like with this group of guys that we have here, we’re never going to give up, no matter what we’re down.”

Portland scored four points in almost eight minutes to start the final period before getting its offense going again. The Trail Blazers closed the game on an 18-2 run. Oklahoma City’s last field goal was a layup by Diallo with 5:09 remaining.

## AUSTRALIAN OPEN TENNIS

# Nadal upset in 5 sets

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Rafael Nadal entered his Australian Open quarterfinal with a 223-1 record when grabbing the first two sets of a Grand Slam match.

Thanks to his own mistakes — and some spirited play by Stefanos Tsitsipas — that mark is now 223-2.

A couple of uncharacteristically sloppy overheads and a framed backhand in a third-set tiebreaker began Nadal’s undoing, and his bid here for a men’s-record 21st major championship eventually ended Wednesday with 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (4), 6-4, 7-5 loss to the younger, sharper Tsitsipas.

“Was little bit of everything, no? I missed a couple of balls in the tiebreak that I shouldn’t — that I could not — miss if I want to win. And that’s it,” said Nadal, who briefly left the Spanish portion of his post-match news conference after clutching at his cramping right hamstring.

At his put-the-ball-where-he-wants-it best in the early going, Nadal went ahead rather easily, winning 27 consecutive points on his serve in one stretch and running his streak of consecutive sets won at major tournaments to 35, one shy of Roger Federer’s

record for the professional era.

Nadal and Federer are currently tied at 20 Grand Slam singles titles, more than any other man in the history of a sport that dates to the late 1800s.

But Tsitsipas never wavered and that surprisingly poor tiebreaker by Nadal — thinking too far ahead, perhaps? — helped hand over the third set and begin the epic comeback.

“I started very nervous, I won’t lie,” the fifth-seeded Tsitsipas said. “But I don’t know what happened after the third set. I just fled like a little bird. Everything was working for me. The emotions at the very end are indescribable.”

So now, instead of Nadal attempting to surpass Federer, it will be Tsitsipas — a 22-year-old from Greece with a flashy game — who will meet 2019 U.S. Open runner-up Daniil Medvedev in the semifinals Friday.

Neither Tsitsipas nor Medvedev has won a Grand Slam tournament.

In the other men’s semifinal, 17-time major champion and No. 1-ranked Novak Djokovic will face 114th-ranked qualifier Aslan Karatsev, who is making his Grand Slam debut.

# Honor NBA’s best, but don’t mandate participation in All-Star Game

As the National Basketball Association nears the halfway point of the season, all eyes would normally be fixated on All-Star Weekend. During this annual break we have witnessed memorable moments such as Blake Griffin dunking over a car, Magic Johnson announcing his retirement after testing positive for HIV, and, in 2020, the league coming together to honor Kobe Bryant a month after his passing.

Eleven months later, in the midst of a pandemic, Lakers forward LeBron James has a different opinion about the All-Star Game.

LeBron isn’t at all excited about the prospect. I can’t blame him.

After the NBA announced the 73rd All-Star Game would take place March 7, reporters began asking players what they thought.



COREY KIRK

James didn’t hold back.

“I have zero energy and zero excitement about an All-Star Game this year,” James said. “I don’t even understand why we’re having an All-Star Game.”

The league’s best-known player, James’ opinion carries some serious weight. Basketball fans are wondering if James’ fellow players share his disdain. One possible compromise is to make participation voluntary rather than mandatory, eliminating the hefty fines players would normally be assessed if they

refused to play after being selected.

These times are unprecedented, and with either a limited number of fans attending, or none at all, I think the NBA should make All-Star Weekend optional.

The NBA should follow the lead of other major sports in the states. During its shortened 60-game season, Major League Baseball opted to elect all-stars, but didn’t have an all-star game as originally planned in Los Angeles.

The NFL during a normal season would host the best of the best in Hawaii for the Pro Bowl a week before the Super Bowl; however, the league canceled the game this year, although recognizing the top players and producing commemorative jerseys.

The NBA would be sacrificing

revenue by canceling its All-Star Weekend. During last year’s events, the NBA generated around \$15 million with broadcast partner TNT, which packed more than 160 advertisements during the game itself. Besides generating a profit, the event is a chance to bring attention to charities, and even, this year, to raise money for COVID-19 relief. Though a lot of good comes from All-Star Weekend, NBA players including Los Angeles Clippers forward Kawhi Leonard say health should be the highest priority.

It’s money on the line; it’s an opportunity to make more money,” Leonard told reporters last week via NBC Sports. “Just putting money over health right now, pretty much.”

After playing in the Florida Bubble during its abbreviated 2020

season, the NBA has had to deal with COVID-19 issues during the season that started in December.

Having players test positive has been relatively common, and 30 games have been postponed. Earlier this month, Brooklyn Nets forward Kevin Durant was taken out of a game after it was found out that he had come into contact with someone who had tested positive. Durant expressed his dismay on how the situation was handled.

Given the NBA’s experience with the virus this season, it’s tough to justify a mandatory All-Star Weekend. Players should decide if they want to partake. It’s hard to blame them for wanting to be safe.

Corey Kirk is sports editor for the Baker City Herald.



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