

This playoff win likely was born in Dale Davis' summer and fall

By BILL BENNER, SPORTS COLUMNIST
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Perhaps appropriate to a game that was all grit, grind, grunt and growl, it fell into the long, strong hands of the Indiana Pacer who best personifies those traits.

Dale Davis was Indiana's man of the momentous moments Wednesday night as Game 2 of the Eastern Conference semifinals slugged its way to a chaotic conclusion and, per usual, the Pacers' control was slip, slip, slipping away.

For the better part of three quarters, the Philadelphia 76ers had looked the part of a young playoff team not quite ready for the test.

And "The Answer" - also known as Allen Iverson - left only question marks with his shooting.

So as the Market Square Arena maniacs alternately howled and held their breath, the Pacers again played like the teen-agers who never pick up after themselves. And true to form, they almost left a victory lying on the floor.

Then along came D-Squared.

A year ago, "Ike," as his Pacers teammates like to call him, probably - no, make that certainly - wouldn't have been on the floor in this situation.

For all his defensive and rebounding capabilities, his woeful inability to make free throws made him a late-game gamble not worth the risk.

But over the summer and into the fall as the lockout wore on, Davis worked on his free-throw technique with a guy named Tom Nordland, a laid-off computer expert with some additional knowledge about the sometimes confounding art of making the uncontested 15-foot shot.

So somewhere last summer and fall, a playoff game was won Wednesday night. As the players on the Philadelphia bench shouted, "Rebound it, rebound it," Davis calmly stroked in 3-of-4 free throws and then turned to the Sixers' bench and smiled.

"I just wanted to let them know there weren't going to be any rebounds," he said.

He also had a game-turning block on a George Lynch shot that led to a Rik Smits jumper at the other end. He pulled down two more of his game-high 14 rebounds, including six that came on the offensive glass.

And on his best offensive play of the night, he somehow converted an off-balance fast-break shot in the lane off a feed from Mark Jackson, getting hammered in the process.

So OK, he missed that free throw, but on this night he was allowed.

And on a night when the Pacers got significant contributions from several people - notably, 25 points from Smits, 14 assists from Jackson, 17 points and eight rebounds from Reggie Miller - it says here that Davis was the man who tipped the scales Indiana's way.

"Just a great player who did a great job," Jackson said of Davis in the moments after the Pacers' 85-82 victory that gave them a 2-0 lead as the series shifts to the City of Brotherly Loathe for Friday night's Game 3.

Davis scored on three consecutive possessions for the Pacers - two free throws, 1-of-2 free throws, then the fast-break finish - as Indiana expanded a 76-72 edge to an 81-73 lead with 55 seconds left.

It proved to be just enough cushion, and it came courtesy of the man coach Larry Bird would have had chained to his chair in a similar situation a year ago.

"I'm just glad I'm shooting (free throws) better and shooting them with confidence," said Davis. "And going out there and playing hard."

"You always have to be prepared no matter what the situation is. We took it hard at 'em and I was in position and I'm happy I was able to complete some plays."

"Helping your team win ... that's what it's all about."

Thus, the Pacers remained unbeaten through the postseason and are halfway home to the conference finals. The Sixers came here hoping for a split and departed empty-handed.

From here, winning four of five against the Pacers would seem a mountain too steep to be scaled. Then again, they've won 10 in a row at home and beat Indiana twice in the First Union Center during the regular season.

Still, they're down 2-0 in this series.

"We gave ourselves two chances to win and that's all a coach can ask," said Larry Brown. "That's what I'm going to build on."

But the Pacers are building, too, and while victorious, neither of these first two wins were polished gemstones. Chris Mullin is still searching for his shot. Jalen Rose, after blooming in Game 1, wilted in Game 2. Miller hasn't really unloaded yet, and you wonder if he's saving it for Philly.

Brown's happy to have chances to win. The Pacers are unhappy because they gave themselves chances to lose.

When in doubt, go with the team that's 2-0, though, says Bird, "I don't like the way we are playing."

For now, coach, the way they are winning will have to suffice.

Even if it comes down to Dale Davis making free throws.

Or especially so.

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Page: D01

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