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As Playoffs Begin, the League's Highest-Scoring Team is Talking Defense

by Ken Turetzky

The Mavericks, by reputation, are all about offense. The Big Three, Michael Finley, Dirk Nowitzki and Steve Nash, had been breaking down opponents with a fast-paced, sharpshooting game for some time before Nick Van Exel and Raef LaFrentz arrived in a February trade to add much-needed depth and energy to the league's highest-scoring team.

So, why, on the eve of Dallas' second consecutive playoff campaign under Head Coach and General Manager Don Nelson, are the Mavs talking about defense?

"We just have to continue to take pride in our defense," says Finley. "We know we can score, but defense and rebounding is what's gonna get us over the hump."

Wang Zhizhi, whose English skills are improving along with his move to the basket, adds, "Shooting's good, defense, maybe, so-so. Mavericks is strong playoff, have tough defense, good rebound. Have already good shooter."

So, the Mavs know they can score, and they hope to coax playoff rivals into a running game that benefits the offense. But they're also aware that a whole new season begins at playoff time, when the pace slows, defenses get tougher, intensity heightens, and teams must really work for their points.

"Right now, we're still getting our rhythm down," says Director of Player Personnel and Assistant Coach Donnie Nelson. "As you can see, we're deeper, we're better at every position, we're more versatile, we've got more scoring firepower. We're better defensively."

"Obviously, our nature is to get into the open court, and we'll do that as much as we can, whether it's after a make or a miss (by the other side). But the reality is, the playoffs become more of a half-court game. So when I say 'rhythm,' it's not run-and-gun rhythm. It is execution on the half-court, reading your teammates."

"We don't have to, and probably won't, score 120 points a game in the playoffs, but we've gotta have a good flow and a good rhythm to our game."

Eduardo Najera, one of the league's most aggressive young players, expects the pace to change. "Actually, playoff time, it's gonna slow down. Whether you want it or not, it's going to come down to playing defense," Najera says. "So, I think all the teams will try to slow us down, and we've just gotta play better defense."

But LaFrentz thinks the Mavericks can control the tempo. "We're a running team, a very talented offensive team with a lot of shooters. I think the idea is to get a wide-open style of game. We have a lot of different weapons capable of hurting (opponents). I think we have that combination here."

"We've got real good scorers," he says. "Offense is not the problem. In a loss, we're probably still going to score more than 100 points. It's just a matter of us not giving up 120. We'll tighten the screws a little bit defensively."

Even if the pace slows, LaFrentz says, "we've got go-to guys, Dirk and Mike, in the half-court set. It's looking good."

Nowitzki shares a similar view. "We want to run and get open shots if we can. That's our game. The playoffs will always be a slower game, but I think even in a half-court set we have enough good players and good scorers and shooters that we should be fine."

One key will be experience, and this team gained plenty with a first-round upset of Utah in the 2001 playoffs, followed by another 50-plus-victory regular season this year.



Michael Finley stays focused as he gets fouled.

Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images



Steve Nash takes it to the hoop.
Glenn James/NBAE/Getty Images

"I think we're still improving," says point guard Steve Nash. "We still have a ways to go, but we're definitely improving. We're definitely going to be a better team when the season ends than we are now."

Can the Mavericks run in the playoffs? "We will, of course," Nash says. "We did last year. We're a year older, more experienced. Hopefully, we can play with balance, get some transition, get some easy buckets, go inside, and hit some threes. So, it's really about balance for us."

The San Antonio Spurs and defending champion Los Angeles Lakers remain the toughest targets in the Western Conference. Last year, Avery Johnson helped the Spurs knock off the Mavericks in five games in the second round of the playoffs. This year, he says, Dallas will put up a tougher fight.

"We're more experienced. We're deeper than last year. I think Raef and Nick bring a lot to the table, and so do I, especially with my experience. We've been there before, so that's very important," he says.

Spurs star and MVP candidate Tim Duncan says of the Mavericks, "well, they're tough. They can put five people on the floor who will shoot that three-ball. And that's really tough to

defend. So, they've improved as a team, I know they'll get better and we're gonna see them down the way."

Adds San Antonio Head Coach Greg Popovich: "They've been together longer, they've got better players. There's no doubt -- they're ready."

Kobe Bryant of the Lakers says, "It's definitely going to be an entertaining battle if we meet in the playoffs. I think it'll be something the fans'll enjoy."

Spurs center David Robinson praises the Mavs' depth, but realistically, he says, the Spurs are still dominant on the boards. "I mean, there are not many teams in the league that should be able to match up with Tim and myself, so, yeah, I still feel pretty good about that. The Mavericks have good size but they play a perimeter game. They're going to shoot the ball, they're going to pass the ball and spread the floor, so we've got to take advantage. We've gotta pound it inside and just try to draw fouls and continue to do what we do best."

Rebounding, matchups and defenses are all subjects of coaching strategy sessions, but Don Nelson isn't discussing his plans. "I think it's a pretty dumb thing for a coach to do, to give away his strategies in the paper. I read 'em all the time on the road -- not all the time, but occasionally -- by either players or coaches. And it's just not a smart thing to do."

The essentials to success in the playoffs, however, are easy enough to define for Donnie Nelson: "We know that the things that will take us to the next level are defense and rebounding. And those are areas where we must get better as individuals and as a team," he says.

But offense brought the Mavericks this far, and Donnie says offense will continue to define the team's style -- offense, and that Mavericks rhythm. "Whatever we're doing offensively has a way of transferring into our defense. When we're clicking offensively, the energy jumps to a new level and we're just better defensively. So that's why our rhythm is really important."

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