

DURANT RECOVERS FROM INJURY, RETURNS TO MVP LEVEL

OKLAHOMA CITY: Kevin Durant had finally reached the pinnacle. After years of chasing LeBron James, the Thunder forward finally was named league MVP two seasons ago. His emotional acceptance speech was as memorable as his play, and soon, endorsement deals piled up like points for the four-time scoring champion.

Everything was moving in the right direction heading into last season. Superstar point guard Russell Westbrook, who had missed much of Durant's MVP run due to injury, was healthy again, making the Thunder one of the favorites to win it all.

Then it happened. Durant, the most reliable of ironmen, broke a bone in his right foot. It required three procedures, and a player who had missed 16 regular-season games in his first seven seasons missed 55. The Thunder didn't make the playoffs, Golden State won the NBA title and Stephen Curry replaced him as MVP.

Through it all, Durant kept reminding himself who he had been, and who he planned to become once again. "I just

told myself every day that, 'I'm the best player in the world,'" Durant told The Associated Press. "I'm the best player in the world. I wrote that on my wall. I wrote that on my mirror in the bathroom, just because it's easy to say that when you're on top of the world, but it's kind of hard to say it when everybody's dogging you."

Durant listened to his doubters and made it a goal to shut them down. "I was able to change the perception that was out there of me of, 'I won't come back from this, this is going to be devastating, career threatening,'" he said. "I just used all of that. I think that type of pride is good for the game of basketball - just wanting to prove yourself after you fall down and wanting to stand back up even taller and stronger than I did before."

Durant has some opportunities this month to make an even stronger claim to being the best. Oklahoma City hosts James' Cleveland Cavaliers on Sunday and Curry's Warriors next Saturday. It wasn't clear immediately whether

he'd be ready to make any kind of claim, but after limited minutes in the preseason, Durant announced his full return in the second game of the season. He dropped 43 points in 54 minutes during a double-overtime win at Orlando.

He missed six games in November with a left hamstring injury, but bounced back again. He shared the Western Conference Player of the Month award with Westbrook in December, then won it in outright in January.

INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS

For the season, he ranks third in the league with 27.8 points per game. He's also posting 7.9 rebounds and 4.5 assists per game while shooting .508 from the field. He said it's meaningful to be playing at such a high level.

"I put in the work," he said. "We talk about individual success a lot, and we kind of deem that as being selfish when you think about yourself like that. But I looked at it as the total opposite. I felt like I needed to think about myself a little bit more. I needed to worry about my

health, and my game, my mindset."

Thunder general manager Sam Presti took some time to reflect with Durant before this year's All-Star game. "I'm truly grateful for the fact that he was participating in the All-Star Game, healthy, with a great spirit, having fun," Presti said.

Indiana forward Paul George, whose broken leg cost him most of last season, also has bounced back and regained his place among the league's elite. He worked out with Durant at times during rehab and is impressed with how his friend has recovered.

"It's either or," George said. "There's guys who have that self-doubt, that can't get back to where they were, and there's guys that live up to that moment. Knowing at the end of the day where he wants to be, and that's one of the league's best players - ultimately, at the end of his career, one of the league's best players - that's what it comes down to. Same way for me. My approach for coming back from my injury was wanting to be back to who I was."

Durant was especially good in the

final 16 games heading into the All-Star break, and it went beyond points. He averaged 30 points, 8.4 rebounds and 4.8 assists while shooting 49 percent from the field as the Thunder went 14-2.

"Since he's been in this league, he's proven to be one of the great scorers of right now, but maybe the history of the game with his efficiency," Thunder coach Billy Donovan said. "I think the one thing I admire with Kevin is his willingness to pass and make people better and be a playmaker. I think there's so much more to his game than scoring."

Durant is thriving while Westbrook is peaking, too. Last season, Westbrook won the scoring title, in part, because Durant was injured. This season, Westbrook is averaging 24.1 points, 10.1 assists and 7.5 rebounds per game.

With the two playing at a high level, the Thunder feel they have a chance to push for that elusive NBA title. Westbrook, who missed significant action two seasons ago with a knee injury, fully expected Durant to return to form. — AP

VONN WINS RECORD 20TH W CUP TITLE

LA THUILE: Lindsey Vonn won a record 20th World Cup trophy with second place in yesterday's downhill in the northern Italian resort of La Thuile, after having to withdraw a video on social media for fear of upsetting her ski sponsor.

Second place was enough to leave the American 173 points ahead of nearest rival Larisa Yurkiw of Canada in the downhill cup standings with one race-offering a maximum 100 points- remaining on the calendar.

Vonn, who had previously shared the record of 19 titles with Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark who raced in the 1970s and 1980s, cut a much more cheerful figure after Friday's controversy which followed her early exit from the first downhill at La Thuile.

After her right ski came off on a sharp turn and she slid out of the race, Vonn posted a video on Facebook showing her attacking the broken ski with a hammer.

She deleted the video yesterday and posted a statement apologising to her ski

suppliers HEAD, saying her action had been "a huge mistake" caused by frustration.

"The video was posted on social media to express my emotions but I understand how it could be misinterpreted," Vonn said. "In fact, thank goodness the binding released as it should, preventing a possible injury."

Saturday's podium place, sandwiched between Italians Nadia Fanchini and third-placed Daniela Merighetti, enabled Vonn to take back the overall World Cup lead from Swiss Lara Gut, winner of Friday's downhill.

"With all the records this year that I'm breaking it's still really hard to process what I'm doing," said Vonn, who has won 76 World Cup races and is chasing Stenmark's record of 86.

"I won't fully grasp the magnitude of everything until I'm done with my career."

Today's super-G in the same resort will give Vonn, four times World Cup champion in the discipline, another shot at moving closer to Stenmark's all-time mark. — Reuters



PORTLAND: Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry, left, drives to the basket as Portland Trail Blazers guard Damian Lillard, right, defends during the first half of an NBA basketball game in Portland, Ore., Friday. — AP

LILLARD SCORES 51 POINTS AS TRAIL BLAZERS ROUT WARRIORS

PORTLAND: Damian Lillard scored a career-high 51 points and had seven assists and six steals to lead the Portland Trail Blazers to a stunningly dominant 137-105 victory over the NBA-leading Golden State Warriors on Friday night. C.J. McCollum added 21 points and seven assists for Portland in the first game after the All-Star break for both teams. The Trail Blazers have won four straight and nine of 10 to improve to 28-27, the first time they've been over .500 since they were 3-2 on Nov. 4. Stephen Curry led the Warriors (48-5) with 31 points and five assists. Draymond Green added 14 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists, but also had nine turnovers. Golden State had won 11 straight. The Blazers used a stifling defense throughout the game, but especially in the third quarter when they forced the defending champions into 13 turnovers. Portland led 104-79 after three and the lead could have been bigger if the Blazers had been able to convert more of those turnovers into points.

SPURS 119, LAKERS 113

Tony Parker scored 25 points in San Antonio's victory over Los Angeles in the final matchup between Kobe Bryant and longtime Western Conference adversary Tim Duncan. Bryant is retiring at season's end with the Lakers way out of the playoff picture at 11-45. Bryant and Duncan have each led their clubs to five NBA titles and have at least one league MVP award to their credit - in addition to MVP of the Finals and All-Star game MVP. Bryant had 25 points in 29 minutes, and Duncan finished with 12 points and 13 rebounds to help San Antonio complete a four-game season sweep. The Spurs (46-9) are three games behind defending champion Golden State in the race for the league's best record. Spurs scoring leader Kawhi Leonard missed his second straight game because of tightness in his left calf.

PACERS 101, THUNDER 98

Monta Ellis scored 27 points to help Indiana beat Oklahoma City. Paul George had 22 points and 10 assists, Ian Mahinmi matched a career high with 19 points and grabbed 11 rebounds, and Myles Turner had 16 points and a career-high six blocks for the Pacers. George Hill had nine points and nine assists and matched a career high with 11 rebounds for Indiana. The Pacers have won six of nine. Kevin Durant had 31 points and eight rebounds, and Russell Westbrook had 23 points and a career-high 18 assists for the Thunder. Oklahoma City had won 14 of 16.

NETS 109, KNICKS 98

Brook Lopez scored 33 points and the Brooklyn beat New York to hand the Knicks their seventh straight loss. The Nets buried the Knicks under two big second-half runs and put six players in double figures in a strong showing in front of new general manager Sean Marks, who was hired Thursday. Lopez shot 13 of 23 from the field and added

eight rebounds in dominating twin brother Robin, who had 10 points and seven boards. Carmelo Anthony had 22 points, seven rebounds and six assists for the Knicks. Interim coach Kurt Rambis continues to say the playoffs are the Knicks' goal, but they may have blown any shot of that by losing 11 of their last 12 games since they were 22-22. They've dropped both games under Rambis after Derek Fisher was fired Feb. 8.

BULLS 116, RAPTORS 106

Doug McDermott had a career-high 30 points and Chicago beat Toronto to snap a five-game losing streak. Derrick Rose scored 26 points, and Pau Gasol added 18 points and 11 rebounds for the injury-depleted Bulls. They won for just the fifth time in their last 20 games. Chicago was playing without Jimmy Butler, Nikola Mirotic and Joakim Noah because of injuries. Kyle Lowry had 27 points for Toronto, and Jonas Valanciunas had 25 points and 12 rebounds.

ROCKETS 116, SUNS 100

James Harden had 27 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists in Houston's victory over free-falling Phoenix. Trevor Ariza added 25 points and six rebounds, and Patrick Beverley had 18 points and six rebounds for the Rockets. The Suns have lost 10 straight, their longest losing streak of the season, and 25 of their last 27. Houston led by 25 points in the third quarter after taking control in the first half. The Rockets had lost three straight games by double figures leading into the break.

Mirza Teletovic had a season-high 25 points and added eight rebounds for Phoenix a day after the Suns traded Markieff Morris to Washington.

HEAT 115, HAWKS 111

Luol Deng scored 30 points and Josh McRoberts had 19 - season highs for each player - and Miami, playing without All-Stars Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh, beat Atlanta. Wade was ruled out about an hour before the game due to soreness in the back of his left knee, leaving the Heat with nine healthy players. Bosh is out indefinitely with a blood clot in his leg. Miami also was missing center Hassan Whiteside, who was suspended for one game. Jeff Teague led Atlanta with 23 points, and Kyle Korver had 18.

MAGIC 110, MAVERICKS 104, OT

Victor Oladipo had 17 points and a career-high 14 rebounds and hit the 3-pointer that put Orlando ahead for good in overtime against Dallas. The Mavericks overcame an early 21-point deficit to lead by as many as 14 and broke a franchise record with 19 3-pointers, but lost for the fifth time in six games. Deron Williams scored 25 points for Dallas and Chandler Parsons added 24, and the pair combined to make 11 of 16 3-pointers. Williams' record-setter with 9.3 seconds left in overtime was Dallas' only 3-pointer in more than 14 minutes. Nik Vucevic led the

Magic with 21 points and 12 rebounds.

WIZARDS 98, PISTONS 86

John Wall scored 22 points and Bradley Beal had 17 to help Washington beat Detroit. Markieff Morris scored six points in 22 minutes in his Wizards debut - against twin brother Marcus' Pistons - after arriving from the Phoenix Suns following a deal at trade deadline Thursday. Marcin Gortat had 15 points for Washington. The Wizards never trailed and led by as many as 23 in their second straight comfortable victory against another team on the edge of the playoff picture. Tobias Harris scored 21 points on 9-of-12 shooting in his Detroit debut, three days after the Pistons acquired the forward from Orlando.

HORNETS 98, BUCKS 95

Kemba Walker scored 25 points and Cody Zeller added a season-high 23 in Charlotte's victory over Milwaukee. The Hornets were without Michael Kidd-Gilchrist and didn't play Courtney Lee, the guard acquired in a three-way trade with the Memphis Grizzlies on Tuesday. Lee dressed for the game and is expected to replace Kidd-Gilchrist, out for the season after reinjuring his right shoulder. Coach Steve Clifford made the decision based on Lee's lack of quality practice time with his new team. Jabari Parker had 23 points for Milwaukee.

GRIZZLIES 109, TIMBERWOLVES 104

Mike Conley had 25 points and seven assists, Vince Carter added a season-high 15 points and Memphis beat Minnesota. Zach Randolph added 17 points and eight rebounds for Memphis. Zach LaVine led the Timberwolves with 22 points.

KINGS 116, NUGGETS 110

DeMarcus Cousins had 37 points, 20 rebounds and four blocks in Sacramento's victory over Denver. Rajon Rondo had 24 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists for the Kings. Rudy Gay had 24 points, Darren Collison 17, and rookie Willie Cauley-Stein 10. Danilo Gallinari led the Nuggets with 27 points.

PELICANS 121, 76ERS 114

Anthony Davis scored 18 of his 34 points in the first quarter in New Orleans' victory over Philadelphia. Ryan Anderson added 26 points, and Jrue Holiday had 24 points and 12 assists for New Orleans. Philadelphia turned the ball over 20 times and lost for the eighth time in 10 games. Nerlens Noel led the 76ers with 24 points and nine rebounds.

JAZZ 111, CELTICS 93

Derrick Favors had 23 points and 10 rebounds to help Utah beat Boston. Gordon Hayward added 22 points for the Jazz, and Rudy Gobert had 11 points, 15 rebounds and four blocked shots. Isaiah Thomas had 25 points and six assists for Boston. — AP



LA THUILE: US Lindsey Vonn, celebrates during the podium ceremony of the FIS Alpine Skiing World Cup Women's Downhill yesterday in La Thuile, northern Italy. Nadia Fanchini upstaged Lindsey Vonn and Lara Gut to provide a home winner in the women's alpine skiing World Cup downhill yesterday. —AFP

PARIS WINS MEN'S WORLD CUP DOWNHILL IN FRANCE

CHAMONIX: Italian skier Dominik Paris mastered tricky conditions at the French Alpine resort of Chamonix to win a men's World Cup downhill race ahead of American veteran Steven Nyman yesterday.

Paris finished second in Friday's Alpine combined race and carried that form over into the downhill, flying through the fog and heavy snowfall on the soft and powdery La Verte des Houches course for a fifth career win and 13th podium.

The Italian clocked 1 minute, 58.38 seconds to finish .35 seconds clear of Nyman and .39 ahead of Swiss racer Beat Feuz, who secured his 20th podium.

After a "rough start to the year" that he attributed to equipment issues, the 34-year-old Nyman is hitting form. He placed third in the downhill at the South Korean resort of Jeongseon two weeks ago and now has eight career podiums.

"Two podiums in a row, hopefully I can keep it rolling until the end of the season," Nyman said. "I had some questions in my head and when you have those doubts and those questions you're never fully sending it down the hill like you should."

Poor visibility that hampered Nyman's run slightly early ultimately cost him a shot at victory. "I had a mistake on the first split. The vision is the hard part, with the snow and the flat light today and the lines kind of changed," Nyman said. "Hats off to my ski technician, he prepared some rocket ships and I'm good at tucking so I really had a good bottom (section). But Dominik, that guy has some kilos on him and some fast skis, and he took me down."

Nyman explained how obscured visibility on a downhill course makes for somewhat of a guessing game for racers - one where strong instinct and faith in your memory of the terrain is required.

"It's all what you've convinced yourself of, going down the course and really throwing yourself over those blind rolls, over that ter-

rain you know has bumps but you can't see," he said. "So you just have to get your body in a position and go with it. You're going in there with a doubt in your mind: It is like, 'this is what I think it is and I'm going to go that way.'"

It's more exciting - for the spectators at least. "I would rather have good light so you can see where you're going," he said. "You can even see the road-gap jump; you're coming in there at 70-plus miles per hour but you don't see how far you actually fly." Guillermo Fayod of France, who has two downhill podiums this season, missed out on a third, placing fourth - .80 behind Paris. Peter Fill of Italy took fifth to close the gap on downhill leader Aksel Lund Svindal, who is out injured for the rest of the season. — AP



LES HOUCHEs: Italy's Dominik Paris competes to win the Kandahar FIS World Cup men's Downhill race on February 20, 2016 in Les Houches near Chamonix, French Alps. —AFP