KUWAIT TIMES NBA POWER RANKINGS

By Ahmad Jabr

KUWAIT: In addition to its usual coverage of the NBA, Kuwait Times introduces a new feature this year: the NBA Power Rankings. It is a weekly list ranking each team based on its performance during the week. The actual record for each team (put between brackets, for games played as of Sunday morning in Kuwait's local time) plays a role in the assessment process but is not the main factor for deciding each team's ranking, thus making it different from traditional league standings. This week's edition features no changes in the top four spots. (For any comments or suggestions, e-mail the writer at: a.jabr@kuwaittimes.net)

1- Cleveland Cavaliers (27 - 8) Last week: 1 - The addition of Kyle Korver brings in another scoring option and a shooter that LeBron James can pass the ball to, and his true value will manifest during the playoffs. The Cavs are still looking to add another point guard before the Feb 23 trade deadline.

2- Golden State Warriors (31 - 6) Last week: 2 - The Warriors blew a 24-point third quarter lead and lost to the Grizzlies on Friday after shooting 5-for-22 and scoring 21 points in the fourth quarter and overtime. This is something the team has to address in order to avoid similar late collapses in the postseason.

3- Houston Rockets (29 - 9) Last week: 3 - Russell Westbrook went for 49 points compared to James Hardens' 26 on Thursday, but the rest of the Rockets propelled their team to victory over the Thunder. Some of that success can be attributed to Hardens' passing; he finished the game with 12 assists compared to Westbrook's five.

4- San Antonio Spurs (30 - 7) Last week: 4 - The Spurs could easily be first in the rankings if it was not for the stellar play of the Cavs, Warriors and Rockets, and they certainly have what it takes to compete with the rest of the league's elite. They demonstrated their offensive versatility and defensive prowess in their 28-point victory over the Raptors on Tuesday.

5- Boston Celtics (23 - 14) Last week: 8 - Riding a four-game winning streak, the Celtics next plays against the Raptors, Wizards, Hawks, Hornets and Knicks respectively - a stretch of games that could help them take over the second place in the Eastern Conference standings.

6- Toronto Raptors (24 - 12) Last week: 5 - Kyle Lowry's heroics were the reason behind the Raptors' only two wins in their last six games, whereas their offense was not enough to hold off the Bulls Saturday night. Acquiring Paul Millsap seems like a perfect solution to address most of their problems, but it is a tough decision considering the question whether it is worth surrendering multiple assets for a free-agent-to-be who could walk away in the summer or be simply too expensive to re-sign.

7- Utah Jazz (23 - 15) Last week: 6 - George Hill returned from concussion-like symptoms in time to help his team narrowly beat the Timberwolves on Saturday. Utah's record with Hill in the lineup is 11 - 3 and 12 - 12 without him.

8- Los Angeles Clippers (25 - 14) Last week: 11 - Chris Paul returned after missing seven of the Clippers' last eight games before their match against the Kings on Friday, which ended with a third-straight victory for LA. During that game, Paul passed Rod Strickland into 10th place on the NBA's all-time assists list and passed Isiah Thomas for 15th place on the all-time steals list.

9- Oklahoma City Thunder (22 - 16) Last week: 7 - Russell Westbrook recorded his 17th triple-double (54th overall) in Oklahoma's win against Denver on Saturday. He managed to reach that mark in just 38 games this season, compared to 18 triple-doubles he achieved in the entirety of last season. (P.S. He enters Monday still averaging a triple-double).

10- Memphis Grizzlies (23 - 16) Last week: 9 - Following ugly losses to the Lakers and Clippers, an emphatic win against Golden State prevented the Grizzlies from slipping further down in this week's rankings. Marc Gasol and Zach Randolph playing together, which has been used limitedly this season, was crucial in Memphis' victory over the Warriors.

11- Atlanta Hawks (21 - 16) Last week: 12 - Normally a team that trades away valuable assets would be struggling and looking to rebuild for the future. But the Hawks, fresh off trading Kyle Korver and still continue to aggressively shop Paul Millsap, are on a six-game winning streak that brought them right back up in the East's playoff picture after a shaky performance earlier this season.

12- Indiana Pacers (20 - 18) Last week: 15 - The trio of Paul George, Jeff Teague and Myles Turner have been playing exceptionally well as of late, fueling their team to victory in its last five games. They hope to remain healthy and continue their dominant performance to keep up with the East's tight playoff race.

13- Charlotte Hornets (20 - 18) Last week: 10 - Speaking of which, fellow playoff contender Charlotte do not find themselves in the most optimal position as they have lost four of their last five games - three of which against potential Eastern Conference playoff teams. Nicolas Batum played a key role in the Hornets' victory over Oklahoma on Wednesday.

14- Chicago Bulls (19 - 18) Last week: 16 - The Bulls can thank Jimmy Butler for their three-game winning streak entering Monday. He scored 52, 20 and 42 points in his teams' wins over the Hornets, Cavs and Raptors respectively, drawing "MVP! MVP!" chants from the home crowd on Saturday.

15- Milwaukee Bucks (18 - 17) Last week: 14 - Giannis Antetokounmpo, who continues to lead his team in every statistical category, added yet another element to his superstar resume: the buzzer-beater. His game-winning shot gave the Bucks victory over New York last Wednesday.

16- Washington Wizards (17 - 18) Last week: 13 - John Wall was named the Eastern Conference Player of the Month for December, in which he averaged 24.5 points, 10.7 assists and 4.4 rebounds in 37.1 minutes per game. He scored a career-high 52 points on Dec 6 against the Magic.

17- Detroit Pistons (17 - 20) Last week: 18 - The Pistons have found some success last week behind strong play from its bench. In Thursday's win over Charlotte, Tobias Harris scored 25 points on 10-16 shooting, and Boban Marjanovic finished with 15 points and 19 rebounds - both coming off the bench.

18- Portland Trail Blazers (16 - 22) Last week: 21 - In the first game since Damian Lillard returned from injury, the Blazers recorded a tough, come-from-behind victory over the struggling Lakers. They rose up to seventh in the league in defensive efficiency in the last five games (they rank 28th overall).

19- New York Knicks (17 - 20) Last week: 17 - The Knicks lost seven of their last eight games, allowing their opponents to score an average of nearly 111 points while averaging only 104 points per game during that stretch. Carmelo Anthony's ten assists were integral to key his team's only win during that stretch, which came against the Bucks on Friday.

20- New Orleans Pelicans (14 - 24) Last week: 20 - The Pelicans have lost three straight games after winning four in a row following the decision to shift power forward Anthony Davis to the starting center position. Their losses came against the Cavs, Hawks and Celtics respectively, and they hope to end their current losing streak as they visit the Knicks and Nets.

21- Sacramento Kings (15 - 21) Last week: 22 - It appears that not only are the Kings, who remain in the playoff picture for the eighth seed in the West, are willing to keep DeMarcus Cousins past the Feb 23 trade deadline, but according to reports, they also plan to offer their star center an unprecedented extension worth over $200 million.

22- Denver Nuggets (14 - 23) Last week: 19 - With names like Jusuf Nurkic, Danilo Gallinari, Kenneth Faried and Wilson Chandler likely on the trading block (plus draft picks), the Nuggets could possibility present the most lucrative offer to obtain the services of Atlanta's Paul Millsap.

23- Orlando Magic (16 - 22) Last week: 23 - The Magic lost four of their last five games which were all played against potential playoff contenders (their only win came against the Knicks), and embark on a tough six-game road trip in the West; starting with last night's game against the Lakers which is probably their easiest challenge in that stretch.

24- Phoenix Suns (22 - 25) Last week: 26 - In addition to the rumors surrounding Brendon Knight's future in Phoenix, reports emerged last week that Portland - looking for a solution to their defensive woes - could potentially offer to trade for the Suns' defensive anchor Tyson Chandler.

25- Dallas Mavericks (11 - 26) Last week: 25 - The experiment of starting Dirk Nowitzki at center failed miserably, prompting coach Rick Carlisle to reinsert disgruntled center Andrew Bogut back to the starting lineup. Not only that, but Nowitzki made it clear that he would not even mind coming off the bench if that would help the Mavs find ways to win.

26- Los Angeles Lakers (14 - 26) Last week: 27 - Julius Randle finished with a triple-double in the Lakers' win over the Grizzlies on Tuesday, snapping Memphis' league-best streak of 177 consecutive games without allowing one - a streak that survived multiple attempts from triple-double machines such as Russell Westbrook and James Harden.

27- Minnesota Timberwolves (11 - 26) Last week: 24 - You know your defense must be really bad when the President of the United States takes a break from his busy schedule to offer you an advice to play better defense. The Wolves received that rare insight from Barack Obama during their visit to the White House ahead of their match against the Wizards last Friday.

28- Philadelphia 76ers (9 - 25) Last week: 29 - The Sixers benched both Nerlens Noel and Jahlil Okafor in favor of power forward Ersan Ilyasova in their last two games as the team continues to struggle to find a way to pair one of their natural centers with rookie standout Joel Embiid in the frontcourt.

29- Miami Heat (11 - 27) Last week: 28 - Justise Winslow is likely out for the season after he underwent surgery on his injured right shoulder last Thursday, dealing yet another heavy blow to their already slim chances of making the playoffs this year.

30- Brooklyn Nets (8 - 27) Last week: 30 - The Nets are reportedly looking for two first round picks in exchange for Brook Lopez, which is a reasonable price considering the fact that their first round pick in the 2017 Draft, projected to be in the top five, will be swapped with Boston's pick instead, courtesy of the infamous Kevin Garnett

— Paul Pierce trade four years ago.

OKLAHOMA CITY: Denver Nuggets guard Will Barton (5) grabs a rebound in front of Oklahoma City Thunder forward Andre Roberson, left, and guard Russell Westbrook (0) in the fourth quarter of an NBA basketball game in Oklahoma City, Saturday. Oklahoma City won 121-106. —AP

Thunder beat Nuggets, Bulls down Raptors in OT

OKLAHOMA CITY: Russell Westbrook had 32 points, 17 rebounds and 11 assists for his 17th triple-double of the season as the Oklahoma City Thunder beat the Denver Nuggets 121-106 in the NBA on Saturday night. Westbrook made seven 3-pointers after hitting a career-high eight Thursday night at Houston, and matched his season high in rebounds in the 54th triple-double of his career. The Thunder improved to 32-3 the past two seasons when Westbrook gets a triple-double. Steven Adams scored 16 points, and Victor Oladipo added 15 to help the Thunder snap a three-game losing streak. Wilson Chandler scored 24 points for Denver. The Nuggets have lost five in a row.

BULLS 123, RAPTORS 118, OT

Jimmy Butler scored 42 points as Chicago overcame a 19-point deficit to beat Toronto. Butler led a big run in the fourth quarter and hit a 3 with 17.3 seconds left in overtime for a five point lead. He also hit the 40-point mark for the third time in six games. Dwyane Wade added 20 points, and Doug McDermott had 17 to help the Bulls win their 10th in a row against Toronto. DeMar DeRozan led the Raptors with 36 points, and Kyle Lowry added 27 points, 12 assists and nine rebounds. The Atlantic Division leaders lost for the fourth time in six games.

CELTICS 117, PELICANS 108

Isaiah Thomas scored 38 points and Marcus Smart added a season-high 22 to lift Boston beat New Orleans. It was the 21st consecutive 20-point game for Thomas. Gerald Green added 15, and Kelly Olynyk had 12 to help the Celtics win their fourth straight. Anthony Davis had 36 points and 15 rebounds for the Pelicans.

HAWKS 97, MAVERICKS 82

Tim Hardaway Jr. and Dennis Schroder assumed Atlanta's 3-point shooting role with Kyle Korver traded, leading the Hawks past Dallas. The Hawks dealt Korver, their leading long-range shooter, to Cleveland earlier Saturday. Hardaway finished with 22 points, going 5 of 8 on 3-pointers. Schroder scored 20 points and was 3 for 5 from 3-point range. Dwight Howard had 20 rebounds and 15 points in Atlanta's sixth straight win. Harrison Barnes led Dallas with 21 points.

JAZZ 94, TIMBERWOLVES 92

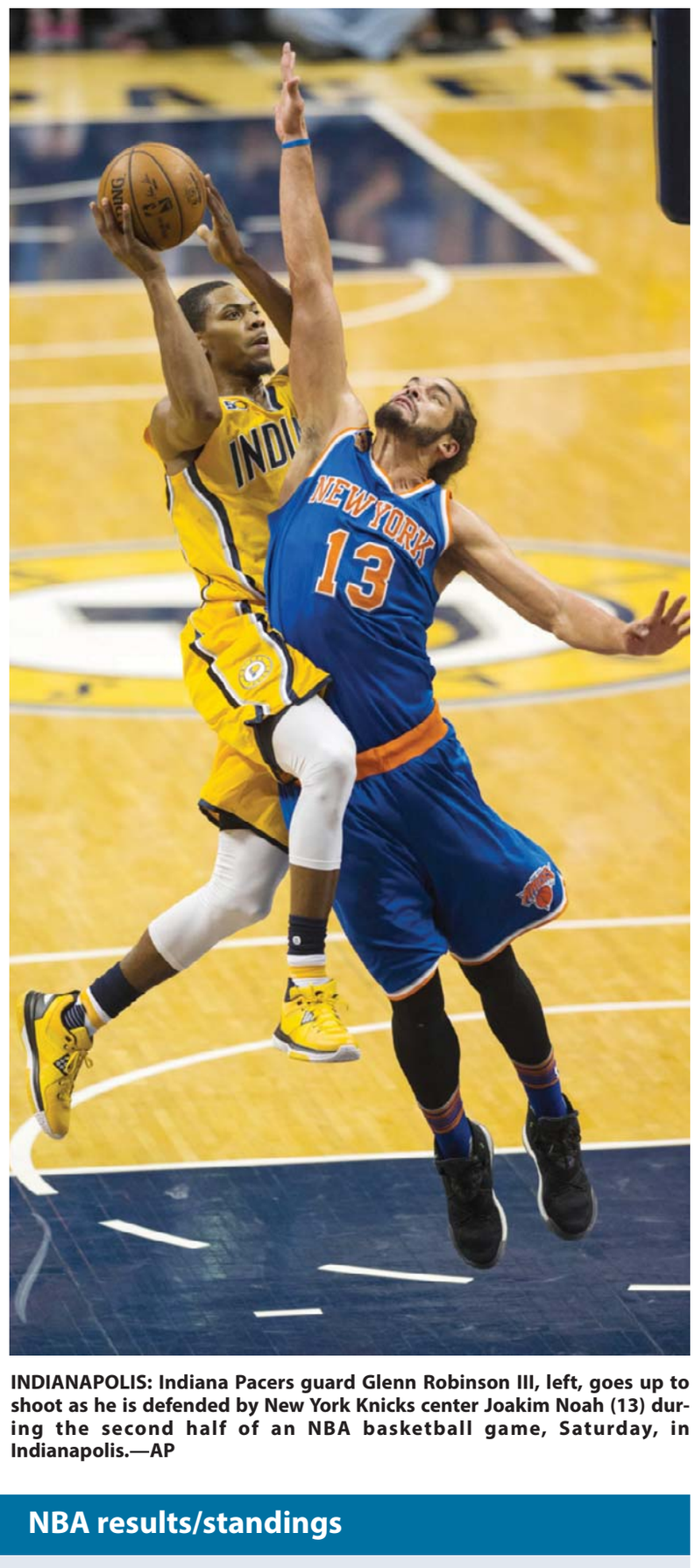
George Hill scored 19 points in his return from a concussion and Rudy Gobert tipped in a rebound with 27.5 seconds to play to lift Utah past Minnesota. Derrick Favors scored seven of his 15 points in the fourth, and Gobert finished with 12 points, 13 rebounds and four blocks as the Jazz rallied from 11 points down to start the final quarter. They still trailed by nine with three minutes to play, but closed on an 11-0 run. Zach LaVine had 24 points, nine rebounds and four assists and Karl-Anthony Towns had 18 points and 15 rebounds for the Timberwolves. They have lost four straight games.

SPURS 102, HORNETS 85

Davis Bertans scored a season-high 21 points to help San Antonio beat Charlotte. Kawhi Leonard added 19 points and LaMarcus Aldridge had 15 points and 11 rebounds. San Antonio has won nine straight at home and 13 of 15 overall. San Antonio is 13-0 when Bertans scores a point and he was 4 for 5 on 3-pointers in leading the Spurs in scoring for the first time this season. Kemba Walker had 18 points for Charlotte.

PACERS 123, KNICKS 109

Paul George and Jeff Teague each scored 19 points to lead Indiana over New York. Thaddeus Young had 16 points and nine rebounds, C.J. Miles added 15 points, and the Pacers won their fifth straight. Carmelo Anthony and Brandon Jennings each scored 17 points for the Knicks. They lost for the seventh time in eight games. — AP



INDIANAPOLIS: Indiana Pacers guard Glenn Robinson III, left, goes up to shoot as he is defended by New York Knicks center Joakim Noah (13) during the second half of an NBA basketball game, Saturday, in Indianapolis.—AP

NBA results/standings

Oklahoma City 121, Denver 106; Utah 94, Minnesota 92; Boston 117, New Orleans 108; Indiana 123, NY Knicks 109.

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division	W	L	PCT	GB
Toronto	24	12	.667	-
Boston	23	14	.622	1.5
NY Knicks	17	20	.459	7.5
Philadelphia	9	25	.265	14
Brooklyn	8	27	.229	15.5
Central Division				
Cleveland	27	8	.771	-
Indiana	20	18	.526	8.5
Milwaukee	18	17	.514	9
Chicago	19	18	.514	9
Detroit	17	21	.447	11.5
Southeast Division				
Atlanta	21	16	.568	-
Charlotte	20	18	.526	1.5
Washington	17	18	.486	3
Orlando	16	22	.421	5.5
Miami	11	27	.289	10.5

Western Conference

Northwest Division	W	L	PCT	GB
Utah	23	15	.605	-
Oklahoma City	22	16	.579	1
Portland	16	22	.421	7
Denver	14	23	.378	8.5
Minnesota	11	26	.297	11.5
Pacific Division				
Golden State	31	6	.838	-
LA Clippers	25	14	.641	7
Sacramento	15	21	.417	15.5
LA Lakers	14	26	.350	18.5
Phoenix	12	25	.324	19
Southwest Division				
San Antonio	30	7	.811	-
Houston	29	9	.763	1.5
Memphis	23	16	.590	8
New Orleans	14	24	.368	16.5
Dallas	11	26	.297	19