

Jazz expect tough test vs Houston

When Andrei Kirilenko arrived at his locker at Golden State for the Utah Jazz's season opener Tuesday night in Oakland, one of those taunting posters was hanging there. The one the Warriors gave out to some 20,000 fans on opening night immortalizing Baron Davis' monumental dunk on top of Kirilenko in last season's second round of the playoffs.

The poster had been put there for fun by a trainer, Kirilenko said, and he was unfazed about all the retro attention on the old dunk. "It's part of the game. It will happen, and what I can do about it? I'm trying to contest every shot," Kirilenko said.

On Tuesday, the Warriors wanted to avenge Utah's 4-1 playoff-series victory, but Utah won by 21.

Tonight, when the 1-0 Jazz hold their home opener for the 2007-08 season at 7 in EnergySolutions Arena, they'll meet the other team that they dispatched in the 2007 NBA Playoffs, the 1-0 Houston Rockets, who won at the Los Angeles Lakers Tuesday. Utah won Game 7 in Houston last spring to advance to the second round and Golden State, whom they will host on Saturday night in ESA.

"We've got, like, two playoff openings," mused Kirilenko. "That's so interesting in the beginning of the season, but what we can do? We're not choosing our opponents.

There are differing opinions from the Jazz about whether Houston will be out for revenge for when the underdog Jazz eliminated them from the last postseason on their own court.

"It's not about payback," said Kirilenko. He sees a difficult home opener tonight but not Revenging Rockets. "Huge force, T-Mac (Tracy McGrady, 30 points Tuesday). Huge force, Yao (7-foot-6 Ming). That's pretty much two guys who rules the team. It will be tough matchup.

"I don't think they're going to be in revenge (mode). I think they're going to come to win the game," Kirilenko added. "We want to prevent it."

Jazz co-captain Carlos Boozer does expect the Rockets' red glare over that Game 7 loss, even if they have new players and a new coach, Rick Adelman. "They'll be ready for us. Just like Golden State. They wanted revenge last night, they're going to want it again Saturday, and Houston will want revenge (tonight).

"They (Rockets) gave us all we could handle in the first round last year. We expect them to be even better," he added, noting pickups of Mike James and Steve Francis.

That first-round victory was monumental for a Jazz team with many players who'd never been to the playoffs. Boozer said it taught Utah the importance of "staying poised. We just have to use each other, stay committed to what we're doing and believe down the stretch that we can stay poised and win the game."

It will be another playofflike atmosphere tonight in ESA there will be fireworks and the biggest balloon drop in Jazz history, 40,000 and the Jazz would like to accommodate their fans with a victory.

But they can't be overly sensitive to playing to the crowd, said coach Jerry Sloan. "If you're trying to put it on for fans, you're going to be sitting with them."

"Of course you want to play good," Kirilenko said. "You don't want to play bad. More important if you get a win."

Sloan is unsure how an Adelman-coached Houston will handle things. "I don't know how they'll play us specifically, but they'll play us differently than they played us last year because they've got a different coach," he said.

As of Wednesday's Jazz practice, Sloan didn't seem to be leaning toward changing much from Game 1, though the large Rockets are very different than the small "Nellie Ball" Warriors. He sees 6-11 backup center Jarron Collins getting more minutes as Utah tries to cope with Yao & Company, but he won't activate 7-foot rookie Kyrylo Fesenko. "No, he's not ready to play right now in this league," Sloan said.

Sloan wasn't sure if he'd activate first-round draft pick Morris Almond because third-year man C.J. Miles "played pretty well" Tuesday.

Center Mehmet Okur will be a focal point tonight. He put all his energies last spring into defending Yao pretty well, at the expense of his offensive game. "I'm just going to go out there, try to play solid defense and play aggressive at the other end" tonight, he said.

"Yeah, I look forward to play against him because he's such a good player, and obviously, one of the best big men in the league. I've got to go out and play 100 percent on him, got to push him off the lane, try to make him take shots over my hand and box him out.

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