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1971-72 Lakers Were A Dream Team<

By RICK WARNER=

AP Sports Writer=

When Bill Sharman became coach of the Los Angeles Lakers in 1971, he inherited a team of aging stars and unfulfilled promise. He quickly transformed them into one of the greatest teams in NBA history.

During Sharman's first season, the Lakers won an unprecedented 33 straight games, posted a NBA-best 69-13 record and won their first championship since moving from Minneapolis to Los Angeles in 1960.

"It was a dream season," Sharman said. "I know they had a 'Dream Team' at the Olympics, but I had my own dream team."

While the 1971-72 Lakers' record for consecutive wins has never been seriously threatened, their 69-win mark appears ready to fall.

The Chicago Bulls (69-9) can set the record Tuesday night in Milwaukee. Even if they lose, the Bulls would have three more chances to break the 69-win barrier.

Whatever they do, it won't diminish what the Lakers accomplished almost a quarter-century ago. And it won't settle the barroom arguments over which team was better — the Lakers of Wilt Chamberlain, Jerry West and Gail Goodrich or the Bulls of Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen and Dennis Rodman.

"The Bulls are a great team with three great players, but I honestly think the Lakers would have the edge with Wilt in the middle," Sharman said. "The other players would probably balance each other out, but I think Wilt would dominate underneath."

Chamberlain scored only 14.8 points a game in 1971-72, six points fewer than the previous season and his lowest average since entering the league in 1959. However, he led the league in rebounding (19.2 per game) and field goal percentage (.649 percent), was third on the team in assists and anchored the defense in Sharman's team-oriented system.

"Wilt turned his game around for the benefit of the team," longtime Lakers announcer Chick Hearn said. "He became more of a defensive force than an offensive force."

With West and Goodrich in the backcourt, the Lakers didn't have to rely on Chamberlain's scoring. Both guards averaged just under 26 points, and West led the league in assists with 9.7 per game.

"Wilt had tremendous confidence in them," teammate Keith Erickson said. "He knew they could score, so he didn't have to carry the offensive load. He just did whatever the team needed to win."

Even attend shootarounds.

Sharman, who had coached the Utah Stars to the ABA title the previous season, was the man who introduced game-day shooting sessions to the NBA. Known for keeping late hours, Chamberlain wasn't crazy about the idea of getting up early to practice shooting on the day of a game. He did it, though, after Sharman convinced him it would help the team.

"He missed only two (shootarounds) all season, and he let me know in advance both times," Sharman said.

Miami Heat coach Pat Riley, who was a substitute on the team, said Sharman was ahead of his time.

"He was a real stickler for detail. His practices were very structured and organized," said Riley, who has used the same philosophy to compile the second-highest winning percentage of any coach in NBA history. "He had us run in place and stretch to get loose before a game, which wasn't done back then. He was always thinking of ways to improve."

The Lakers didn't look like world-beaters at the start of the year, losing three of their first nine games. Then came a critical decision that changed the course of their season.

Forward Elgin Baylor, an 11-time All-Star who was plagued by knee problems, retired on Nov. 4 and was replaced in the starting lineup by second-year pro Jim McMillian. The following day, the Lakers began their 33-game winning streak with a 110-106 win over Baltimore that featured a 22-point, 13-rebound performance by McMillian.

"Elgin had been playing on one leg, and he was hurting the team from a defensive standpoint," said Erickson, now a broadcaster for the Phoenix Suns. "When McMillian came in, he gave us a young guy with fresh legs. From that point on, we were off and running."

McMillian and Happy Hairston gave the Lakers a versatile duo at forward. McMillian averaged 18.8 points, was a good passer and ran the floor on the fast break. Hairston played tough defense and grabbed 13 rebounds a game, helping Chamberlain control the defensive boards.

They were perfect role players on a team that put a premium on unselfishness.

"We had great chemistry," said Sharman, who played on four championship teams with the Boston Celtics. "Everybody sacrificed for the good of the team. Jerry West and Wilt could have scored a lot more points, but they did other things to help us win."

And win they did. The Lakers didn't lose for more than two months, from Nov. 5, 1971 to Jan. 9, 1972, and most of the victories were by comfortable margins.

One of the exceptions was a 126-117 overtime win over Phoenix on Dec. 10. It was the Lakers' 20th consecutive victory, tying the NBA record set the previous year by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's Milwaukee Bucks.

The Suns had a chance to win in regulation, but Connie Hawkins missed a shot at the buzzer. Goodrich then scored seven of his 32 points in overtime, including three long jumpers, to keep the streak alive.

On Dec. 22, the Lakers reached another milestone with a 127-120 win at Baltimore. Their 27th straight victory gave them the longest winning streak in major pro sports history, surpassing the 26 in a row by baseball's New York Giants in 1916.

Everyone was impressed, except Chamberlain.

"I played with the Harlem Globetrotters and we won 445 in a row," he said at the time. "And they were all on the road."

The streak finally ended in a nationally televised game at Milwaukee. Abdul-Jabbar was unstoppable, scoring 39 points to lead the Bucks to a 120-104 victory.

"I never saw Kareem so animated, so excited," said Hearn, who saw Abdul-Jabbar win five championships with the Lakers after the Bucks traded him to Los Angeles in 1975. "I remember when he was taken out late in the game, he ran to the bench and gave everybody a high-five."

The loss turned out to be the first of five in an eight-game span, but Los Angeles quickly righted itself. While the streak was over, McMillian said it gave the Lakers an unshakeable confidence that carried through the rest of the season and into the playoffs.

"We knew before we walked onto the court that we were going to win. And the other team knew it too," said McMillian, now a distributor for Ralph Lauren in Greensboro, N.C. "It was like we were in a zone. Each game, a different player stepped up. One game it was Chamberlain, another it was West, another time it was Goodrich or Hairston or me. We had so many ways to beat you."

The Lakers got victory No. 69 by beating Seattle 124-98, breaking the 68-win mark set five years earlier by Chamberlain's Philadelphia 76ers team. Then they set their sights on the playoffs.

After sweeping the Chicago Bulls 4-0 in the first round, the Lakers eliminated the defending champion Bucks in six games in the Western Conference finals.

The NBA Finals matched the Lakers against the New York Knicks, who had beaten Los Angeles for the title two years earlier. This time, the Knicks had to play without star center Willis Reed, who was sidelined by a knee injury.

The Knicks won Game 1 at the Forum 114-92.

"We were very concerned after that game," Goodrich said from Greenwich, Conn., where he works for a company that buys and leases golf courses. "We knew we had to win Game 2, or we'd be in big trouble."

Aided by an injury to Knicks forward Dave DeBusschere, the Lakers evened the series 106-92, then won Game 3.

Chamberlain fell and sprained his wrist in the first quarter of Game 4, but he kept playing and led the Lakers to a 116-111 overtime victory. He wasn't expected to play in Game 5, but received an anti-inflammatory shot, then went out and quieted the critics who said he choked in big games.

Playing with a huge pad on his right arm, Chamberlain scored 24 points and grabbed 29 rebounds as the Lakers won the championship 114-110.

During the postgame celebration, West raised a glass of champagne and toasted Chamberlain, who was voted MVP of the Finals.

"Wilt was simply the one who got us here," West declared.

Chamberlain had an underlying reason for wanting to get the series over quickly.

''Wilt was a serious volleyball player back then,'' Goodrich said. ''On our way to the Forum for Game 5, we passed a high school where Wilt was supposed to play a volleyball match a few days later. When I saw that marquee out front with Wilt's name on it, I knew we were in good shape because there was no way he was going to miss that match.''

Sharman, now a consultant with the Lakers, has another lasting memory of his dream season: He yelled so much that he permanently damaged his vocal cords.

''I lost my voice, but we won the championship,'' he said.

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