Beaten Bulls have no choice but to look to future

by Mike Nadel - CNS

CHICAGO - What a shame. Just when the season was getting really good, it was over.

The Chicago Bulls made the great Detroit Pistons sweat, made them work, made them deal with adversity. But the Bulls couldn't make them go back to The Palace of Auburn Hills for a Game 7.

The Eastern Conference finals ended in six games, with Detroit winning 95-85 Thursday night, and the Bulls only could watch dejectedly as the Pistons celebrated on the United Center court.

"It's hard," Bulls coach Scott Skiles said. "You go, go, go, go ... and - boom! - the season's over. It's a hollow feeling right now. Three games, we didn't play to our ability."

He was talking about Games 1 and 2 as well as Thursday's finale. By losing the first two games horrifically, the Bulls put themselves into an almost impossible situation. They then compounded it by blowing a 19-point lead in Game 3.

Still, the Bulls rallied to make a series of it, winning twice impressively. Sure, the Pistons kept saying they weren't worried; that doesn't mean they were telling the truth.

If Skiles' players are as sharp and determined as I believe they are, they will learn from the experience and come back stronger next season and beyond.

Let's not forget the Bulls teams of the late-1980s had to learn by losing to Detroit in the playoffs - repeatedly - before they were able to become the dynastic bunch everybody remembers.

People like to think Michael Jordan always won. Fact is, he was a postseason loser year after year after year, and many observers thought he never would win the big one. When he finally broke through in his seventh season, it was oh so sweet, and he proceeded to win NBA titles in his final six full years in Chicago.

Well, these Bulls don't have a Michael Jordan, but in the watered-down NBA they don't really need one. Another year of maturity, along with GM John Paxson acquiring another good player - no offense to P.J. Brown, but the Bulls still need an inside offensive presence, especially at crunch time - and the Bulls have a

chance to be very good.

I'm curious to see if very good will be good enough. So are Skiles and Paxson.

"I can be as impatient as anybody else but I do realize we've gone from one of the bottom five teams in the league to one of the top eight in three years, with predominantly young players," Skiles said. "Now we have to take the next step."

That won't be easy. The Bulls need a Kevin Garnett, but if KGs were easy to get, everybody would have one.

"We won 49 games and our young guys - particularly Luol Deng, Ben Gordon and Kirk Hinrich - each had his best year by far," Paxson said. "I have every reason to believe they'll improve, and the two players we drafted last year (Tyrus Thomas and Thabo Sefolosha) will be very good players.

"But I'm not gonna stand here and say, 'OK, we're done.' I know we have moves we have to make and areas we have to address. Everybody - myself included - has talked all year long about getting an inside scorer. Problem is, they're not readily available. It better be a superstar if I'm supposed to give up talented young athletes. That's the reality. And getting a superstar's not easy, you know?"

I know. Glad it's not my job.

Paxson's $60 million gamble - turning Ben Wallace into the highest-paid non-scorer in NBA history - didn't really pay off in Year 1. The Bulls will argue they got exactly what they expected from Big Ben. If so, it wasn't enough when things mattered most. Wallace had only six points and seven rebounds Thursday, when Skiles trusted the league's worst free-throw shooter ever to play only 29 minutes.

With the Cubs and White Sox set to meet today at Wrigley Field, the Bulls will be forgotten quickly on the Chicago sports scene. Only by advancing deep into the playoffs can they reclaim what they had in the 1990s.

And they certainly demonstrated Thursday how far they have to go to be legitimate championship contenders.

They opened the second half by relaxing on defense, and Chauncey Billups and Rip Hamilton took advantage to re-establish their domination of Hinrich and Gordon in the guard matchup. Then, the Bulls folded on offense in the fourth quarter and they were finished.

Remember how hot the Bulls were in Game 5, when they shot 72 percent in the first half and 67 percent through three quarters? Well, that's how cold they were down the stretch this time. Playing tentatively and jacking up wild 3-pointers, the Bulls had only one basket and two free throws in the first 9 minutes, 52 seconds of the period.

Just like that, the Pistons turned a tight game into an 85-73 runaway.

And just like that, it was baseball season again in Chicago.

The Bulls' big challenge is to make the rest of us think about basketball in June.

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