

NBA Western Conference Finals: Lakers vs. Nuggets

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

Michael Malone

Denver Nuggets

Game 1: Postgame

Denver Nuggets 132, Los Angeles Lakers 126

Q. 72 points in the second half; how relieved are you to get out of this one with a win?

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, it's the Western Conference Finals. We are up 1-0, so that beats the alternative. I just told our guys, we'll take the win. We protected our home court, and wins are hard to come by this time of the season. But our defense has to be a hell of a lot better. They shot 66 percent in that second half. They didn't feel us, and they scored way too easy. We don't want to get into trying to outscore teams and outlast teams.

They went to a lot of big ball with LeBron, AD and Rui out there. So definitely a lot of things we can look at and do a lot better. But to get 19 fast-break points, to outrebound them by 17 and 29 assists, only 11 turnovers are all really good numbers.

I'd much rather clean up things after a win in the Western Conference Finals than a loss. So we'll take it, but much work to do.

Q. On Nikola's night, what did you think of the aggressiveness he had to open that first quarter and how he set the tone? And what was your take on that third-quarter buzzer beater he had from three?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, let's be honest, we hit a couple of shots tonight, I think Nikola's, I think Jamal hit one at the end of the shot clock. I'm not sure if Michael Porter's corner three went off the glass or not. But we had some shots that we needed obviously in a game like tonight.

But Nikola was great: 31 points, 24 rebounds, 14 assists, 2 blocks. As you mentioned, his aggression, him driving the ball, dunking the ball in traffic. We always talk about an aggressive Nikola Jokic is a very effective Nikola Jokic. A hell of a job by him.



I have to give Jamal a lot of credit for playing through a game where he was questionable. 31, 5 and 5, 3 steals, another blocked shot. Battling through the illness. I give him a lot of credit.

Q. You mentioned that the Lakers went big with Rui out there on Jokic. How did the game shift when they started doing that?

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, we were having a hard time scoring. We were turning the ball over. We had 19 fast-break points tonight, but 17 were in the first half. That's because we were getting stops and turning them over and running out. In the second half we didn't get stops, so it became a half-court game, which is to their favor. They have the No. 1 defense in the Playoffs. So for us we have to continue to find ways to get pace into the game and not play against that set defense. They have tremendous size, length and athleticism out there.

But we did enough things -- I thought, by the way, one of the biggest plays of the night, Michael Porter getting on the floor for that loose ball. That 50/50 ball he came up with led to the only two transition points we scored in the second half, on the Aaron Gordon dunk, and the Ball Arena went nuts at that point. Michael shot the ball well, rebounded the ball well, but that 50/50 ball was a game-winning type of a play.

Q. You kind of touched on it there, but MPJ also had a couple blocks on the rear contest. I'm curious what you've seen from him defensively this postseason compared to what you got in the two or three previous post-seasons with him.

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, I think he's doing what he's done all season. I think you guys have heard me talk about it. I think this season has by far been Michael's best defensive season of his very young career. Why is that? I think he's using his 6-10 frame, 7-foot wingspan and most importantly he cares. He wants to. He wants to win a championship.

He came up to me during the Phoenix series and said, listen, man, if you want to get Bruce in at the end of a game, whatever you think is going to help us win the game, I just want to win. So it's just another example of a guy being selfless and realizing that this is much bigger than



any individual. This is about the collective.

But yeah, you're right, coming from behind, blocking Austin Reaves' shot, making plays at the rim, getting on the glass, 10 boards. So 15 and 10, making three threes on a very efficient night is a hell of a night for Michael.

Q. Similar to the last series where they obviously had two all-time kind of players, really good scorers, you kind of have to pick your poison, but how do you make it a little harder on some of the shots that Reaves was able to get or Rui at times and limit their role players?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, when Jamal Murray has got five fouls, we're not going to switch the pick-and-roll, let him guard LeBron one-on-one. Jamal is really important to us closing games. Austin Reaves made two threes late. I felt we did a great job on D'Angelo Russell -- so great that he wasn't even in the game much in the second half.

But when you give so much attention to a LeBron and to an Anthony Davis, who both had big nights, 40 and 26, other guys are going to step up and make plays. And to your point, Austin Reaves' 23 and Rui off the bench 17, that's where we'll go back and watch the film and figure out what we can do better and give them different looks to make it a lot harder for them.

Q. You mentioned the switching on pick-and-rolls, obviously Jamal in foul trouble. What's that healthy balance for you of switching or fighting through the screen to keep your defensive matchup?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, we've been a switch team for most of the season with our small ball lineups. Guys not named Nikola we switch quite a bit. We challenge our smalls to fight guys like Karl-Anthony Towns, to fight guys like Kevin Durant. Obviously tonight, LeBron and Rui, they had their way with us down there. Then are tough twos going to beat you? And if you start double-teaming, you open up the three-point line.

We'll once again watch the film and see how we can do a better job, especially in that second half, of just making it harder. I really liked how we played in the first half. Got off to a tremendous start, 21-point lead, but they just continued to chip away and then made a game of it, and fortunately we were able to pull it out.

Q. When the Lakers were making that run in the fourth, what did you sense from the guys when you called a couple of time-outs and how they responded to that running and they ultimately won the game?

MICHAEL MALONE: I mean, I think it was imperative for

everybody. Went into one of the timeouts that everybody -- a lot of time left, they made their run, we have two timeouts left, let's go down and get a score out of the timeout and get a stop and take control of the game once again. A lot of our guys are battle tested. We've been in a ton of close games. I didn't think there was any panic. I think there was poise. Our guys looked at one another and realized what we had to do to close this game out.

Their second-to-last timeout, our guys did a great job of adhering to the game plan. We forced a turnover.

We know winning Game 2 is going to be even that much harder, but we'll be better, I think, come Game 2, as well.

Q. KCP has always been bringing it on defense but he's had a couple games with big scoring outputs. What are you seeing from him and his ability -- is it matching what the game demands in terms of veteran leadership? Is it matching what the game demands in terms of coverages? What are you seeing in these last couple outings from him?

MICHAEL MALONE: What I'm seeing is a 10-year vet who has won a world championship and who is built for moments like these, whether it's in the Phoenix series, Game 5 and 6. The first quarter he had in Game 6 in Phoenix was just incredible.

I marveled at his game tonight, not just on the defensive end, but 21 points, knocks down some big threes, late in the game drove the ball and finished over Anthony Davis with a finger roll. KCP, that's why we went out and got a guy like that. He's been in these situations before. He embraces this opportunity, and I think that's exactly what he's doing.

Q. Michael, to follow the poise-rather-than-panic statement you made, for an old guy like myself, I've seen a lot of ghosts of past playoff failures during that run. What's that say about the maturity of this team that it didn't fold under the -- it was a hard run by the Lakers.

MICHAEL MALONE: Oh, really hard run. They definitely had us on our heels. They became the aggressor and turned the tide in this game with how aggressive they were playing. Late in the game they put Rui on Nikola and they were just free-safetying with Anthony Davis and letting him man the paint and make it look really crowded.

Our execution can be better. But we made enough big plays down the stretch on both ends of the floor to win the game. We talked a lot about how the Lakers had gone into Memphis, they had gone into Golden State and won Game

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

1s and wrestled control of the series right away. We worked too hard for that. We didn't want to give it away.

Come Thursday night, it's going to be even that much harder because they're going to get off to a better start, I imagine. So our game plan discipline and our defensive acumen and just disposition has to be a lot better for close to the 48 minutes.

Q. I wanted to ask about Nikola's start. He told us the other day he didn't have a strategy against Anthony Davis, but I think his actions probably told otherwise. He looked about as aggressive trying to take him off the dribble and attack the rim. Can you talk about how he set that tone, and was that about as hard as you've seen Nikola drive to the rim that many times?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, well, it was interesting, when you look at the game tonight, his first post-up they double-teamed and they were sending an extra body at him early on. We had a great example we showed at halftime where they double-teamed him, KCP cut to the basket, got a layup. Then they started guarding him one-on-one. Then they switched the matchup. All you'd expect when you're guarding a great player like Nikola, because you have to give him different looks from a game plan standpoint and from a personnel standpoint.

But I would agree, I thought when he felt there was one-on-one coverage, facing up and getting to the basket and using that understated athleticism to finish in traffic. That was great to see.

He's going to continue to have to do that at a high level. But the rebounding, I thought his rebounding early on, I think there was a point in this game we were up rebounding I think 22-3. So we were just kind of imposing our will on the glass. That's got to be for four quarters. It can't just be for a half.

Q. You mentioned what Jamal was going through, 12 of 20, finishes with 31 points. What was he able to do in the past few days in terms of practice, and as much as you can say, what was he going through, obviously a non-COVID illness?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, I sometimes marvel at the kid because he hasn't done anything the last couple days. He came to listen to the film work, the personnel, but once we got to practice, we wanted him to go home and get some rest to try to get anything we could out of him tonight. He showed up and performed like he always does.

31 points, 5 assists, 5 rebounds, 3 steals and a block, and what is he going through? I don't know. I think something,

a little bug that's kind of gone through our whole team. But once that jump ball goes off, he's able to shake it off and perform at a high level, thank goodness.

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