

NBA CHAMPIONSHIP FINALS

Bulls could be on the verge of greatness

By BILL BARNARD
AP Basketball Writer

Repeating as champions is no longer enough to set an NBA team apart. The Chicago Bulls have the Los Angeles Lakers and Detroit Pistons to thank for that.

Nearly 20 years without a repeat championship made the accomplishment special for the Lakers in 1988 and the Pistons in 1990. Now that the 1992 Bulls have made it three repeaters in a row, they'll have to win it again to be remembered as a great team.

Tough struggle
The 1992 playoffs were such a struggle for the Bulls, seven postseason losses compared to two the year before, that they aren't about to start worrying about another season.

"I'm not ready to think about that until October," coach Phil Jackson said after Sunday's Finals-clinching 97-93 victory over Portland. "I anticipate we will get it done at some level next year because we have the same guys coming back."

Bulls are still young
The average age of the Bulls is 27, and the best players obviously aren't past their prime, so

their chances of a repeat certainly have to be considered good.

But the competition in the Eastern Conference clearly was not far behind in the playoffs, and Michael Jordan's and Scottie Pippen's Olympic duties could have long-term effects.

Improvements made by Cleveland and New York could make the difference if the Bulls stand pat in the next few months.

Jackson called last year's 15-2 romp through the playoffs "the honeymoon. This year was an odyssey. It's been a long, strange trip."

One of the strangest occurrences came in Sunday's fourth quarter, when four Chicago reserves were playing so well that Jackson considered letting Jordan stay on the bench awhile longer.

It wasn't until Portland coach Rick Adelman replaced Danny Ainge with Jerome Kersey that Jackson put Jordan back in the game because the coach knew reserve guard Bobby Hansen couldn't guard Kersey.

Michael Jordan was a defensive replacement?

It's hard to believe that the

Bulls' much-maligned backups could turn around Game 6 of the NBA Finals so thoroughly that Jackson would hold the amazing Jordan in reserve.

Maligned bench delivers

But four bench players and Pippen cut all but 3 points off a 15-point Portland lead in less than four minutes of the fourth quarter.

Stacey King, who played in just 14 of the Bulls' 22 playoff games, led the way with 5 of Chicago's points during the 14-2 spurt that opened the fourth quarter.

"Playing for Phil Jackson is a little like Russian Roulette," King said. "He will come down the bench with that one bullet, point it at you and tell you to go in there. It was a great moment for me."

Jordan, the first player to win both the regular-season and Finals MVP awards in consecutive seasons, scored 12 of his 33 points in the last 6:01, lifting the Bulls to a 4-2 series victory.

'Definite drive'

"As a coach, you just go play by play," Jackson said of his

fourth-quarter strategy. "Everything else I tried hadn't worked. It took a definite drive for us in the fourth quarter."

The Bulls played so poorly in the first half, trailing by 15 before Jordan scored 10 points in a span of 2:29 to help them close within 6 at halftime, that Jackson said "we went around and introduced ourselves at halftime. Then we went out in the second half and started the same way."

"But the fourth quarter was magic."

In outscoring the Trail Blazers 33-14 in the fourth quarter to overcome a 79-64 deficit, the Bulls outshot Portland 68 percent to 29 percent and forced seven turnovers leading to 16 Chicago points.

Pippen certainly silenced the critics who said he was inconsistent in big games, scoring 50 points in the last two, including 26 in the finale.

"I personally got a lot of criticism, but as a team we stayed together," Pippen said. "I have to thank them for stepping forward and helping me out. This was very sweet."

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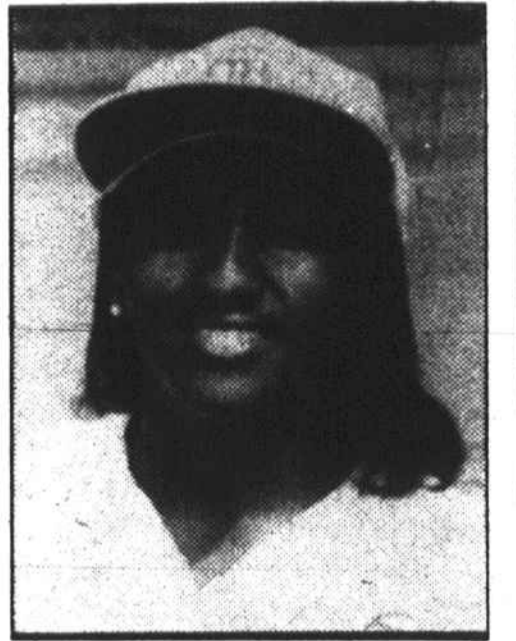
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Rumors about Blazers

By BOB BAUM
AP Sports Writer

Maybe the Portland Trail Blazers are destined to be the Minnesota Vikings of the NBA, a team good enough to reach the threshold of a championship but not good enough to win one.

After the worst fourth-quarter collapse in the history in the NBA Finals, the Blazers came home Monday amid questions about their future.

"Best in the West," was a meek cheer from some of the estimated 400 hard-core Blazer-maniacs who greeted the team at Hillsboro Airport. That's not what this team had in mind.

So it was a disappointed group of players who climbed off Blazer One, the team airplane, and headed for a fleet of limousines. Most of the players didn't stop to talk to the media. Jerome Kersey was an exception.

"I still think this is a team that's going to win a championship," he said. "It'll be tough if they do trade some of these guys, or myself. We're just too good together."

The Blazers reached the Finals in 1990, but lost to Detroit in five games. They won a league-best 63 regular-season games in 1990-91 but fell to the Los Angeles Lakers in the Western Conference finals.

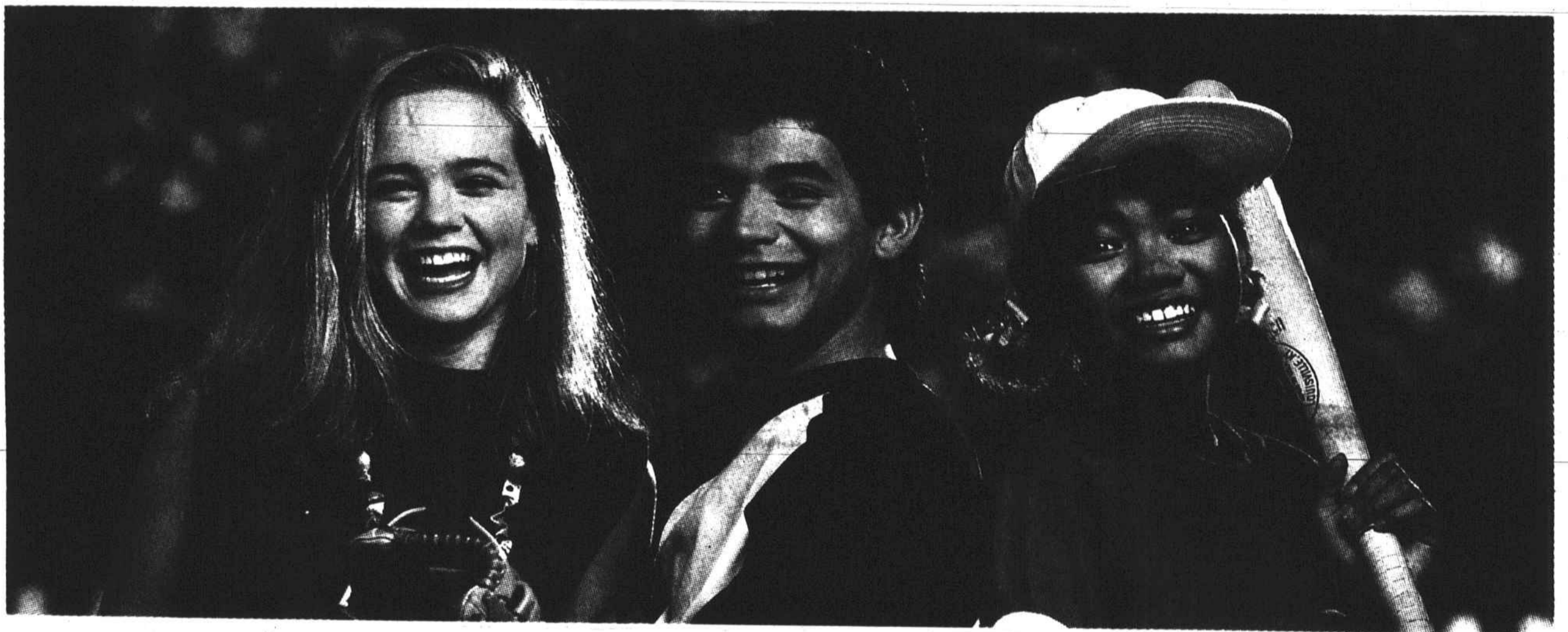
Against Chicago in the Finals this year, Portland lost in six games, blowing a 15-point fourth-quarter lead in the final game on Sunday night.

Clyde Drexler, in his much-publicized showdown with Michael Jordan, couldn't stop the collapse.

This team has had enough chances, many critics say, and the time has come to make some major changes.

Geoff Petrie, Portland's senior vice president for basketball operations, cautions against any wholesale changes.

"Do we need to try to improve the team? Sure we do," he said. "But I'm not in a mode that all of a sudden you're going to be smart enough to go out and replace a lot of major parts and think you're going to have something better."



Philip Morris Doesn't Want Kids To Smoke

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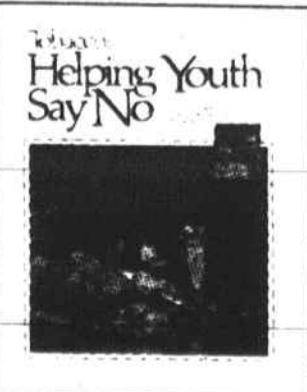
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