

Victories adding up for improved Mavericks

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season until after their 64th game.

"It's very difficult to put so many new guys together, and we've had so many injuries that slowed the process," said Nash, who like the rest of the starters, has missed some games. "We're starting to get better, and hopefully it will continue."

There were so many rumors swirling about Nelson's future two weeks ago that Mavericks owner Mark Cuban met with the coach to ensure him that he wasn't planning any

changes.

"About the only way to stay out of hot water as a coach is to win every game, but that's impossible," Nelson said. "Look what happened in New Jersey. They've been to the finals the last two years. Look at my situation, could that have happened? I think the answer is yes."

The Nets fired coach Byron Scott on Monday. They led the Atlantic Division, but at 22-20 were the only team in the division with a winning record.

Cuban said that the Mavericks (28-16), even

after going through the tough adjustment period, are definitely a better team than last season.

They may finally be proving it on the court, and again establishing themselves as legitimate Western Conference contenders.

"We're confident and have a sense of swagger, something that was missing early in the season," Jamison said.

Dallas, which plays consecutive nights at Seattle and Utah starting Tuesday, has held four straight opponents under 100 points, a season-best. And the Mavs are get-

ting contributions from all of their best players.

In Sunday's win, the big three, plus Walker and Jamison, all scored in double figures - making the

Mavericks 13-1 when that happens.

Finley had the tiebreaking basket, Nash had 13 assists and just one turnover, and Nowitzki and Jamison both had at least 10 rebounds.

"It's fun when you know what you're doing out there. We knew it was going to take a while," Walker said. "We're only scratching the surface as far as how good we can be."

Soccer helps Rwanda heal

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child born that day will bear the name 'Rwanda,' Bitana predicted, a strong statement in a nation where children used to be named after the royalty of their colonizers and ID cards specifically mentioned if one was Hutu or Tutsi.

Now, regardless of ethnicity, fans from all over the lush, central African country back the Amavubi, as the team is known in Kinyarwanda, Rwanda's national language. It is a far cry from a decade ago when a 100-day killing spree spurred by an extremist Hutu government pillaged the nation.

It took two years to form a semblance of a national team. Early on, the team was riven with suspicion.

"It was terrible. Players were thinking of that. You could meet someone who killed your wife, your family. That's the way it went," said Bitana, a 20-year-old defender who was fortunate enough not to lose close family.

Assistant coach Jean-Marie Ntagwabira was a lieutenant in the army of Paul Kagame that swept to power in the wake of the slaughter and played during those early postwar years.

"Some of the players were really fearful to show up," he said.

Rwandans' love of soccer is so strong that even during Kagame's military campaign to take power every battalion found time to set up a team and play games.

"We had to start out from scratch again," said Ntagwabira, adding this explains why the average player's age is in the low 20s.

Bitana still remembers how reconciliation was taught in schools as of 1996.

"Brothers, sisters, fathers and grandfathers are dead. But when we start playing, we for-

get that and look at what has been achieved already," Bitana said. "It is as if we are shown the way ahead. The more obstacles we face, the more we scale."

He may be an ethnic Hutu, but he insists on being called "a Rwandan, neither a Hutu or a Tutsi."

Serb coach Ratomir Djukovic has had to deal with poor facilities, lack of funds and players with only a rudimentary sense of tactics. He knows, however, he can always count on a unity of purpose.

"Today, no Rwandan player still mentions this terrible genocide," he said.

The team has the full support of President Kagame, who came out in the middle of the night to celebrate one of Rwanda's successes.

"We are not to be seen as a nation of genocide that is bent on self-destruction," Kagame has said.

Rwanda's rise is regarded as astounding. It has gone from one of the world's lowest-ranked countries to 109 in last year's rankings by soccer's governing body.

Most other teams have players in some of Europe's biggest leagues. Rwanda fields mostly amateur players, and its captain, Desire Mbonabucya, plays in the lowly Belgian league. Only eight play abroad, mostly in Belgium, Rwanda's former colonizer.

In qualifying for the African Cup, Rwanda first swept past regional rival Uganda, a huge achievement in itself, before taking on Ghana, which had won the African Cup no less than four times. The 1-0 victory made sure the soccer world took notice.

"If it were not for reconciliation, we would be eliminated each time," Bitana said. "It is our spirit which brought us to where we are now."

USOC deal about more than shoes

By John Marshall
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Nike's sponsorship deal with the U.S. Olympic Committee is about more than just sneakers and money. The organization believes it's a way to boost the United States' medal chances.

Under the deal announced Thursday in New York, Nike will provide podium and competitive apparel and footwear to U.S. Olympic and Paralympic teams through the Beijing Olympics in 2008. The agreement, which begins in 2005, also includes a partnership in product design and opportunities for Nike to expand its involvement with Olympic sports.

"Nike has very well-developed sport research labs and athlete performance teams that work directly with athletes to develop apparel that's pushing the bounds of being a competitive aid," USOC chief executive Jim Scherr said. "We look forward to extending that out."

Nike has a sports research lab of about 30 people working in kinesiology, biomechanics and injury prevention. There's also a division that works with elite athletes to customize apparel and footwear to maximize performance.

That group designed Michael Johnson's gold shoes for the Sydney Games and the racing skins that the U.S. long track team wore while winning eight medals at the Salt Lake City Games.

Now Nike will get to work with a wider

range of Olympic athletes. It will also collaborate with the USOC's sports research team in Colorado Springs, Colo. and athletes at USOC training centers across the country.

"This deal really works to our strengths because we get to work with athletes, innovate and, we hope and we think, help them perform and win medals for the United States," said Adam Helfant, Nike's vice president of sports marketing.

The agreement also includes resources for the USOC to negotiate deals between Nike and the national governing bodies of Olympic sports.

Nike already has deals with eight USOC sports, including USA Track & Field, USA Hockey and the U.S. Soccer Federation. It also has individual contracts with numerous athletes like Mia Hamm, Marion Jones and Lance Armstrong.

Helfant said the USOC agreement should allow Nike to add 10-15 more sports.

The deal suggests the USOC is headed in the right direction after several resignations and a congressional investigation last year worried many sponsors.

A proposed restructuring of the organization and stability at the top behind Scherr seem to have quelled sponsors' concerns. In the past year, the USOC has renewed or added deals with six sponsors.

"We're certainly confident that they're headed in the right direction with their leadership team," Helfant said. "We like what we see."

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