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Phoenix Suns forward Shawn Marion and Los Angeles Clippers forward Elton Brand watch Marion's layup during their Western Conference semifinal. The Suns lead the series 3-2

## Double-teams take Nash out of offense

By Bob Baum  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX — Steve Nash insists he's fine, that it's the Los Angeles Clippers' defensive strategy, not any ailment that's cutting down his scoring.

"They're double-teaming me, but it's great," Nash said after the Phoenix Suns' practice Monday. "We're getting lots of open shots because of it, and my teammates are more than capable of making them."

Other than Raja Bell's career-high 33 points, though, the Suns were misfiring all over the court in the Clippers' 114-107 victory Sunday night that squared the best-of-seven series 2-2. Yet the Suns were optimistic about their chances if the Clippers go with the same "stop-Nash" defense in Game 5 of the Western Conference semifinals on Tuesday night.

"We've seen things we like on tape, and we're going to take advantage of them," Shawn Marion said. "We had some pretty good shots, we just couldn't knock them down."

Nash hasn't made a 3-pointer since the series opener, going 0-for-8 since then. He's 6-for-20 shooting overall the last two games, averaging 10 points per contest, but he had 21 assists as the Suns pulled off a split in Los Angeles to regain the home-court advantage in what is now a best-of-three series.

"I think we're just kind of building a wall around him where he's not getting easy looks," the Clippers' Corey Maggette said.

The 32-year-old Nash acknowledges he hasn't exactly been at his freshest for the Suns, who have played every other day since Game 2 of the first-round series against the Lakers on April 26. That's 10 games in 19 days.

"I think my legs have just been a little dead the last few games, but it's not really a big deal," Nash said. "That comes and goes. They were pretty tired most of the Lakers series, but I found a way to fight through it, and I'll find a way to get through it."

Bell said Nash is taking what the Clippers' defense is giving him.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with him," Bell said. "I think they've done a good job of double-teaming him, getting the ball out of his hands, and he's done a good job of setting the table for some of us to get some offensive looks. If they're committed to doing that, there's not a whole lot Steve can do."

"When you've got two guys draped all over you, you have to get rid of the ball."

That's where his teammates come in, and the shots have to fall for the Suns' version of "small-ball" to be effective. While Bell made 13-of-20 overall and 7-of-12 3-pointers on Sunday, the rest of the team was 27-for-68 — just under 40 percent — and a horrid 3-for-24 on 3s.

Tim Thomas again will start as the Suns' best option for guarding Brand, who is averaging 29.3 points and 10.7 rebounds in the series, even though he's had to fight through double teams.

## Bonds feels haunted by Ruth

By Jim Litke  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON — Catching a ghost turned out to be no easier on the road than it was at home.

At least not for Barry Bonds.

En route to a 10-1 win over the Houston Astros, guys hitting around Bonds in the Giants' lineup Monday night demonstrated that with good timing and a little pop in the bat, driving a baseball beyond the outfield fences in Minute Maid Park hardly required Ruthian power.



Bonds

But it must have looked and felt otherwise to Bonds.

In one of those ever-rarer interviews the slugger has granted recently — outside of those earnest bits he does for his infomercial, "Bonds on Bonds" — he mused before the game:

"This thing, it's like chasing two ghosts, you know. I can imagine what Roger Maris went through. Babe Ruth, I think he just kind of hovers over people a lot."

When a young reporter asked a follow-up question moments later, Bonds shut him down in a hurry.

"You wouldn't even understand it, kid," he said. "I don't even know how much you know about baseball, really. It's too long."

What's too long, to be sure, is the homerless skid the greatest power hitter of his era finds himself sliding on. At his current pace, Bonds' chances of ever matching the 755 homers put up by Hank Aaron — the second "ghost" — have all but disappeared in the distance.

During Bonds' single-season record of 73 homers in 2001, he averaged one for every 6.5 at-bats. Coming into the season, his career average was one for every 12.7 at-bats. Since pulling

within one of Ruth's 714 mark on May 7, Bonds has gone without in seven games and his last 22 at-bats.

Bonds made no secret of hoping to catch the Babe during a seven-game homestand last week, before the nightly drama headed back into enemy territory, where it has come to resemble a witch hunt more than a home run chase.

"San Francisco is my biggest supporting cast. I've been able to do it for them forever since I've been here. There's nothing more gratifying than, you know, having them able to catch a ball on your turf," Bonds said.

But a moment later, he added, "The way I'm swinging, it looks like I can wait."

If there is a lonelier athlete on the planet, he should introduce himself to Bonds. Less hostile than the fans in Philadelphia and about as indifferent as those in Milwaukee, the Astros' faithful razed him almost as if it were an obligation.

He stuck his head out of the dugout and got booed. He walked to the plate and hand-lettered, neon-yellow signs with asterisks scrawled across them sprouted in the grandstands like daisies in a meadow. He looked at a called strike three and was cheered. He headed back for the safety of the dugout and sprinkled in amid the asterisks are even cruder sentiments — "Got Respect?" "Cheater" — and "Steroids=Imposter."

The biggest surprise of the night might have been that the crowd didn't boo the mid-inning announcement of the changes in the Giants' lineup when Bonds was replaced in left field just before the Houston seventh.

And just in case those same fans had a parting gift in mind, Bonds showered soon after and left the park just about the time his teammates made it back into the locker room. While his teammates plowed through the postgame buffet, at the far

end of the clubhouse, manager Felipe Alou, Bonds' designated mouthpiece was quickly tiring of fielding questions about his star's lengthening slump.

"Barry will be the guy to answer that. I've been talking about the same thing too long," Alou said.

But taking responsibility doesn't seem to be Bonds' strong suit at the moment. The Giants seem to be playing for his benefit instead of the other way around. He shows up at the ballpark when he wants, plays when he wants, picks his spot in the order — Bonds was back at cleanup Monday night after a one-game experience as the No. 3 hitter — and leaves when he wants.

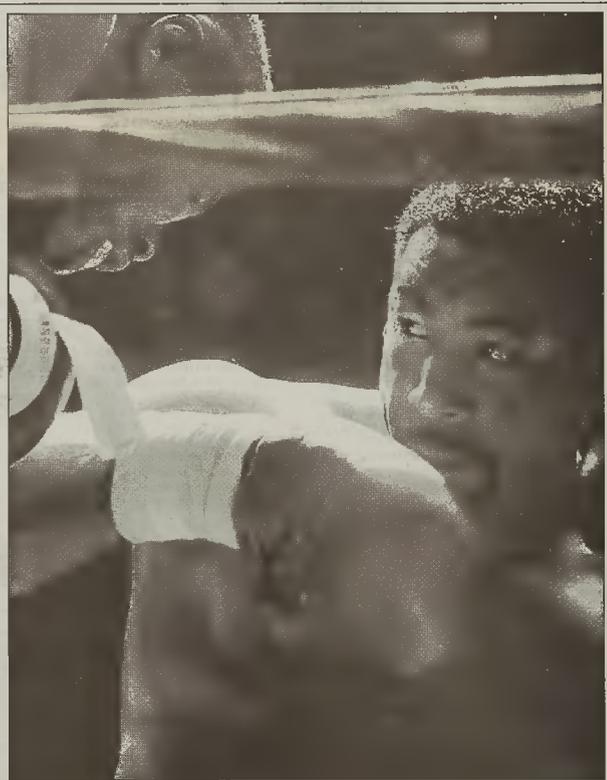
He admits to being impatient, swinging at pitches he would take in seasons gone by, "taking more chances than I ever have in my whole entire career." But Alou acknowledged that last week was the first time he ever talked about hitting with Bonds since taking over the club in 2003. Fat lot of good that did either of them.

Meanwhile, propped up in front of the slugger's locker — actually three lockers, an empty cubicle on either side serving as a buffer zone between Bonds and his teammates — were three dark maple bats with the handles meticulously taped and who knows how many more homers left in the barrels.

We'll learn that answer soon enough, about the same time Bonds learns whether it's fatigue or the inevitable decline of advancing age that has him in its grip. It's a daunting, haunting proposition either way, one captured perfectly in a sign that he could read with just a quick glance into the seats behind home.

"Bonds," it read, "Babe is watching."

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