**Nuggets’ Gary Harris rewarding coach Michael Malone’s loyalty: “He stuck with me”**

Harris’ suffocating defense has never been in doubt. And neither has Malone’s loyalty to the longest tenured Nugget on the roster.

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Nobody has Gary Harris’ back like Nuggets coach Michael Malone.

“Gary Harris is a guy that so many people have been down on,” Malone said in the aftermath of Denver’s 109-82 win over Miami Wednesday night, extending their winning streak to five. “I’ve been with Gary for six years now. Gary Harris has a lot to do with me still being the head coach here. I believe in Gary Harris.”

Consider Malone’s remark a referendum on Harris’ defense, the example he sets in the locker room and the poise he’s maintained through injuries and extended shooting struggles.

But recently, Harris’ offense has turned a corner.

In his last eight games entering Wednesday, the seventh-year shooting guard was shooting 47.5% from 3-point range. Against the Heat, though he finished with just seven points, Harris tallied a season-high seven assists.

When Harris was asked specifically about his shooting streak, a smile crept across his face.

“I’m the same person I’ve always been,” he said. “A few shots are falling, that’s it.”

Behind the scenes, Malone has stayed in Harris’ ear, encouraging him to keep firing. Malone knows his team is better when Harris is aggressive, when he’s probing, when he’s hunting his offense.

“Coach, he was the first one to give me a chance to play,” Harris said. “He stuck with me. It’s all love and respect.”

During his well-documented shooting struggles, Harris prided himself on playing with the same effort regardless of whether his shot was dropping.

“Still be me,” he said. “That’s all I can be.”

And the reason why Malone never publicly wavered on his support was because of how valuable Harris has been to Denver’s defense. Since January 3rd, the Nuggets have lost three games. Their 10 wins in that time are a direct result of their defense, which ranks 5th in the NBA over that time span.

“We’re helping each other out,” Harris said. “We’re flying around. It’s not perfect, but we’re giving it effort.”

It’s taken less than a month for Nuggets newcomer JaMychal Green to learn he had a kindred spirit in Harris.

“Never knew how much he cared until coming to the team,” said Green, when asked about Harris’ approach to the less-heralded side of basketball.

Harris, whose dogged defensive effort is a trait his teammates have long admired, harassed Heat sniper Duncan Robinson into a miserable 3-of-11 shooting night, including just 2-of-10 from 3-point range. Robinson entered Wednesday shooting over 40% from 3-point range.

During Denver’s current five-game winning streak, Harris has hounded everyone from Phoenix’s Devin Booker to Dallas’ Luka Doncic to Robinson.

“The one thing that I love about Gary Harris is that every night, he doesn’t complain,” Malone said. “He embraces the challenge of guarding the other team’s best weapon. And that’s every single game that we play.”

There was perhaps no better example of Harris’ defensive will than six minutes into the first quarter Wednesday night. After Heat center Bam Adebayo corralled an offensive rebound, he handed the ball to Robinson at the top of the arc. Despite Adebayo’s screen, Harris launched himself and swiped down into Robinson’s shooting pocket. It turned into one of 15 3-point misses the Heat had in the first quarter.

“Gary accepts that challenge, embraces it and goes out there and tries to be a disruptive force, getting into guys, taking away their air space, taking away their separation and just trying to make life difficult,” Malone said.

Harris’ suffocating defense has never been in doubt. And neither has Malone’s loyalty to the longest tenured Nugget on the roster.

“I thought Gary was phenomenal tonight,” Malone said.