Nuggets~’ Gary~Harris~ rewarding coach MichaelMalone~’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.

By  |  | TheDenver~Post~

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Nobody has Gary~Harris~’ back like Nuggets~ coach MichaelMalone~.

“Gary~Harris~ is a guy that so many people have been down on,” Malone~ said in the aftermath of Denver~’s 10~9~-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 475~ 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 3~rd, 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 JaMychalGreen~ 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 DuncanRobinson~ into a miserable 3~-of-11 shooting night, including just 2~-of-10~ from 3~-point range. Robinson~ entered Wednesday shooting over40~ from 3~-point range.

During Denver~’s current five-game winning streak, Harris~ has hounded everyone from Phoenix’s~ DevinBooker~ to Dallas~’ LukaDoncic~ 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 BamAdebayo~ 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.