

PRO BASKETBALL

Comparisons? Golden State Warriors Are Playing a Different Game

On Pro Basketball

By HARVEY ARATON MAY 31, 2016

What is the point, really, of historical comparison? How do you measure a basketball mutation, which is what the Golden State Warriors have become, with their long-distance dialing that makes relating them to storied N.B.A. teams of yore like distinguishing between a smartphone and a land line?

You watched Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson dishearten and finally defeat a resolute Oklahoma City team on Monday night in Game 7 of the Western Conference finals. You watched them make 3-point shots over the outstretched arms of men much taller, and you found yourself saying the unbelievable, ridiculous, stupefied words you mouth when you can't quite believe what you're seeing.

It is practically a reinvented game these so-called Splash Brothers are playing, having drastically extended the standard scoring range, the acceptable area from which to consistently unload and succeed.

After the Warriors had finally moved on to an N.B.A. finals rematch with LeBron James and his Cleveland Cavaliers with a 96-88 victory over the Thunder on Monday night, someone asked the hard-to-impress Russell Westbrook what Curry showed him late in the series that had been missing earlier.

Westbrook said, impassively: "Our bigs on the switches came out and he made some tough shots over the top of them."

He should have added that there was nothing negligent, or lazy, about the Thunder's defensive resolve in Game 7. The high screens forced Steven Adams and Serge Ibaka onto the perimeter time and again onto Curry or Thompson.

Adams is a 7-footer, weighing 255 pounds; Ibaka is listed at 6-10, 245. Big men are typically at a disadvantage in isolation against smaller, more creative players, but Adams and Ibaka are earnest, athletic defenders who contested and occasionally deflected a Curry or Thompson launch earlier in the series.

Is it easy shooting over an aggressive, skyscraping wingspan, pump-faking, sidestepping, creating just enough space to release with dead-on accuracy from that far away? Try it sometime. See how it goes.

Curry hit 7 3-pointers in Game 7. Thompson — coming off a single-game playoff record of 11 3s in the crucial Game 6 in Oklahoma City — nailed six more. In the fourth quarter, they were daggers to the heart of a team more than holding its own from inside the 3-point line.

Curry and Thompson each surpassed the previous individual high of 28 3-pointers (held by Ray Allen and Dennis Scott) made in a single N.B.A. playoff series, Curry with 32, Thompson with 30.

Amid it all, Bill Simmons posted on Twitter that, 30 years ago, in the 1986 finals, Boston and Houston combined to make 17 3-point shots in an entire six-game series won by the Celtics.

Those familiar with Simmons, late of ESPN and now with HBO, will know that he is an unapologetic Celtics fan. And that Boston team, anchored by Larry Bird, won 67 games in 1985-86, losing once at home, and certainly

staked its claim as one of the greatest in N.B.A. history.

Many of us who covered that decade have argued that it was the N.B.A.'s best blend of old-school fundamentals combined with the arrival of a new-age athleticism that would root itself in the 1990s marketing miracle that became Michael Jordan.

The Lakers of the mid-to-late 1980s – a team that included Mychal Thompson, Klay's father — belong in any best-ever conversation, given the prime of Magic Johnson's career, the still-potent Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and the Hall of Fame gifts of James Worthy.

But it was Jordan's Chicago Bulls team of 1995-96 that won 72 games and the fourth of six championships in eight seasons that these 73-victory Warriors are running a mythical race against. Make no mistake: A generation of Jordan worshipers was poised to gloat had the Thunder been able to close out the Warriors. It will be again if James can deliver a championship to Cleveland.

For all their titles, perhaps the true appraisal of the Jordan-era Bulls came in the 1993-94 season, when Jordan walked away to flail at minor league breaking balls. Scottie Pippen and a cast unintentionally derided as "supporting" won 55 games. They proved to be much more than a backup band, the Jordanares, when they came within one highly questionable foul call on Pippen of going home with a chance to finish off the Knicks and advance to the Eastern Conference finals.

But what they lacked without Jordan was another closer, or coldblooded scorer, to achieve what Thompson did when he dropped 41 points, making 11 of 18 3-pointers, on the Thunder in the series-turning Game 6.

A year ago, on the Warriors' way to the franchise's first title since 1975, all four of their opponents dealt with manpower shortages. This time around, they had to push on in the first two rounds against Houston and Portland without the injured Curry, the league's two-time most valuable player.

Against the Thunder, they had to deal with Draymond Green slumping and flirting with suspension while falling into that 3-1 hole. With the confidence of Westbrook and Kevin Durant soaring, with Curry struggling to reclaim his rhythm, the Warriors still rallied for three straight victories against a long and talented team that had taken out the 67-win San Antonio Spurs.

Now the Warriors' reward is James, a two-time champion in Miami and an N.B.A. finalist for the sixth straight season, with a Cavaliers team at full strength.

"I think any time you go through a long postseason, you grow," the Warriors' coach, Steve Kerr, said. "Now that we've been through this together for two years, going deep in the playoffs, I guess we played 21, 22 playoff games last year and now we're at 16, maybe 17. I haven't really kept track, but that's a lot of playoff games. That's a lot of pressure, a lot of circumstances that come your way."

And that may be our truest basis for comparing teams from different eras, rules and styles. Whom and what must a champion endure and overcome?

The Warriors made 73 wins look almost too easy, tempting those commonly referred to as haters to question or deride the quality of the competition, in the interests of historical context.

Forget all that now. Extreme playoff adversity has been met and surmounted, and here comes LeBron. This Warriors title defense has taken on a degree of difficulty not unlike the nightly audacity of their 3-point marksmen.

If Curry and Thompson continue making them, even the haters may have to mimic Joe Lacob, the Warriors owner who, upon spotting Thompson after Game 6, went down on one knee and bowed.