

LeBron James, Lakers Pull Off First Victory of Season in thrilling 100-95 Home Opener vs. Suns

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LeBron James (23) drives to the basket against defender Jusuf Nurkic (20) for a layup.

Following their disappointing 107-119 loss to the Denver Nuggets, the Los Angeles Lakers looked to make things right against Phoenix at home.

Leading up to tonight, there certainly were a lot of headlines that generated buzz around this game, with the most notable one being that this game would be the first head-to-head matchup between LeBron James and Suns forward Kevin Durant since Christmas Day of 2018. Although Durant would be without stars Devin Booker (left foot soreness) and Bradley Beal (lower back tightness), fans have been deprived long enough of this faceoff to really mind. Other noteworthy storylines regarding this contest include this being Los Angeles' home opener and former Lakers head coach Frank Vogel (fired after three seasons, one title with the team) making his return to Crypto.com Arena as the leader of the Suns.

But at tipoff, all of the buzz and chatter ceased to matter, as both teams clamored to be victorious. The Phoenix Suns, fresh off a statement road win against the Golden State Warriors,

aimed to maintain their momentum and start the season 2-0 while the Lakers continued their quest to obtain their first overall victory.

And at the end of the first quarter, with Phoenix leading 30-18, it seemed that the Lakers' search for that win would have to wait. Coming out the gate flat-footed obviously wasn't ideal, but the purple and gold managed to pull within 4 right before half to make the score a manageable 52-48 Phoenix advantage.

At the end of three, it was apparent that despite the absence of two of the Suns' top three players, Durant would be getting the best of this matchup against LeBron as the Suns, powered by massive performances from role players Josh Okogie, Eric Gordon, and Jordan Goodwin, stretched the lead to 12 with only one more quarter left to play.

If you closed your eyes and listened to the noise (rather lack thereof) in the arena at the beginning of the fourth, you could not tell that this was the season opener for the vaunted Los Angeles Lakers, and in all fairness to the fans, this performance was one that they did not want to see.

But as the Lakers rallied back to tie the game from a LeBron layup with 1:11 left to play, the entire building was rocking. When James scored a consecutive basket to take the lead, the roof almost came off. The Lakers ultimately capped their comeback efforts with a 100-95 victory over Phoenix, fueled by star center Anthony Davis' 30 points and 13 rebounds along with LeBron James pouring in 21 himself, with 10 of those coming in the fourth as he played the entire quarter. From the other side, Durant's valiant 39 points and 11 boards made up a good portion of the Suns' scoring, with 15 from fellow starting guard Eric Gordon and 14 from Jordan Goodwin off the bench.

The Durant-James matchup, like the countless ones before tonight, did not disappoint. The fourth quarter mirrored a bout between two absolute heavyweights, each looking to deliver the knockout blow, but LeBron and his Lakers proved to be too much in the end as they delivered in the clutch.

The Lakers were able to win this game largely in part of them relying on their defensive prowess (which surprisingly has only shown up in spurts so far to start this season), holding the Suns to 11 points in the fourth. Although they did not shoot well by any means, going 5-29 (17.2%) from three-point range as a team, LeBron and AD were able to grind out timely baskets while players such as Gabe Vincent, D'Angelo Russell, and most impressively Christian Wood put the clamps on their respective opponents. Wood's tall and lanky 6'10" frame allowed him to hold KD to uncomfortable and forced shots, especially without the offensive punch that Booker and Beal would have provided down the stretch.

After escaping with a narrow victory against the short-handed Suns, what's next for the Lakers? Well, as they prepare for a Sunday night matchup against the Kings in Sacramento, it is key that they look within to establish their identity. Following an offseason designed to promote

continuity, it appeared that at times, this team did not know how to play with each other at all. If the Lakers want any chance at a championship this season, head coach Darvin Ham and his team must figure this out quickly.