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From the Past, a New Game Emerges

The Unselfish Pistons Gave a Primer on How to Win as a Team

Younger squads in better shape are thriving by pushing the ball and playing pressure defense.

By OSCAR ROBERTSON

Before the N.B.A. finals last spring, I picked the Pistons to beat the Lakers in six games. People said I was nuts. And they were right. It took the Pistons only five.

Coach Larry Brown persuaded the Pistons to play his style — harmoniously, unselfishly and with better results than they had thought possible. He got Rasheed Wallace, a player everyone else had written off as incorrigible, to buy into the system. Wallace has always been a formidable talent; I'm happy he finally got his act together mentally.

When the Pistons won, I thought there might be hope yet for the National Basketball Association. A group of virtual unknowns who played together as a team beat a more talented team built around four superstars. How old-school can you get?

Going into this season, I was curious to see what influence the Pistons' success would have on play in the rest of the league. With the season past the first-quarter mark, I see some encouraging trends.

For one, the up-tempo game seems to be making a comeback. This is good news for both fans and players. Younger and better-conditioned teams that run, play aggressive defense and force turnovers can steal games from less-mobile teams with superior talent. And teams that run have more fun. When not micromanaged by coaches who insist on a controlled halfcourt offense and a prevent defense, players can learn from their mistakes, develop discipline and build confidence in themselves and one another.

Other teams in the Detroit model — without big names but anchored by one or two established veterans more concerned with winning than with being stars — had surprisingly good starts. Most have little-known coaches who are getting their chance and making the most of it: Mike D'Antoni in Phoenix,

Johnny Davis in Orlando, Eddie Jordan in Washington, Nate McMillan in Seattle.

The SuperSonics are winning without a bona fide low-post player. But they get up and down the court, play good defense and run the right offense to get the most out of their talent. Ray Allen has made a big difference. He has assumed a leadership role, brings stability to the backcourt and can hit the outside shot.

Dallas, a running team, has gotten younger and faster and has veterans coming off the bench. You need a strong bench to win and especially to sustain an up-tempo game.

Washington's young players seem to be maturing quickly (as young players can with an opportunity to play and with positive reinforcement from their coach). In Orlando, Steve Francis is showing that he's serious about continuing to develop his game and his leadership skills.

Phoenix wasn't a bad team last year. Now the Suns are a year older, and they have added two All-Stars in Steve Nash and Quentin Richardson. Amare Stoudemire has gotten stronger in the pivot and is playing better defense against the bigger people in the Western Conference.

All the teams I've cited may not be able to keep up the pace for an entire season, but their resurgence and their focus on team-oriented basketball are bringing much-needed excitement to the league.

Returning to the Pistons, exactly what is this old-school concept called team basketball?

First of all, it's not old; it's timeless, basic, fundamental basketball. That style of play has been out of fashion for almost two decades as the N.B.A. has focused on marketing individual stars. Unfortunately, you can't manufacture stars, but you can manufacture and sustain good teams. The fans can pick their favorite players from teams that play exciting ball and are consistently competitive.

There's an art to putting together a team like that. It isn't just a matter of having talent at each position or matching up with other teams position by position. The players have to be able to play the game, to want to play together, to be willing to pick one another up and to be capable of making intelligent decisions.

Teams that move the ball, keep moving on the court and play serious defense will do well. They don't necessarily have to have the best talent, but they do have to play as a team. They have to pass the ball and involve the weakside in the offense as much as possible.

The Pistons are tough because they have good speed and they run a good offense. They try to get their guards open. They also mix things up instead of relying on any one style or offensive set. A team that moves on the court and has players continually cutting to the basket creates more opportunities, not only for open shots but also for offensive rebounds. Last spring, the Pistons ran rings around the Lakers, helped by the fact that the Lakers were like statues.

One reason the Pistons have been so formidable on defense is that few teams know how to move the ball effectively against them. The only way to counteract a swarming, aggressive defense is with better court movement and ball movement. Teams that play a perimeter game in the halfcourt for fear that they won't get back on defense quickly enough are simply playing right into Detroit's hands.

But the Pistons' record has hovered around .500. Does this mean they're a one-hit wonder? The Pistons are discovering that after winning a championship, all the other teams face them with more adrenaline. And I wonder why they traded Corliss Williamson, who was a solid low-post player. That leaves only Wallace in that role.

But it's still early. Let's see whether the Pistons can peak once again at playoff time.

Oscar Robertson, a 12-time All-Star, is the author of "The Art of Basketball" and "The Big O: My Life, My Times, My Game".