

STRUGGLING PACERS STILL LOOKING FOR WAY TO REBOUND

INDIANAPOLIS: Lance Stephenson shook his head in disbelief. All-Star starter Paul George repeatedly urged his Indiana teammates to get going, and All-Star center Roy Hibbert sat speechless on the bench during the final 30 minutes on the game.

This wasn't just another bad loss for the Pacers. It was another chapter in their shocking collapse as the NBA regular season comes to a close.

"I don't think it's acceptable for any of us in our organization to play the way we played tonight and we're just going to get back to work to fix it, to get back on track," coach Frank Vogel said following Atlanta's 107-88 rout of the Pacers Sunday night in Indianapolis.

The Pacers missed their first seven shots and scored a team-record-low 23 points in the first half when they went 7 of 35 from the field. The league's No. 1 defense gave up 55 points and seven 3-pointers in two quarters. This has been a problem since the All-Star break, with the Pacers allowing 95.8 points per game and putting up the lowest scoring average of any team in the NBA last month. The Pacers are 20-17 since Jan. 24 and 7-12 on the road.

Even their once-invincible home-court edge doesn't look so imposing after losing to San Antonio by 26 points and Atlanta by 19.

Are the Pacers in a free fall? They look listless at times, sure, but San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich noted that all teams go through these sorts of struggles during the season. Spurs guard Tony Parker said he still expects Indiana and Miami to meet in the Eastern Conference finals.

But there's no doubt this is not the same team that started 17-2, was 33-8 at the midway point of the season and made two February moves - signing free agent Andrew Bynum and sending injury-prone Danny Granger to Philadelphia in a trade deadline deal for Evan Turner - that made it clear the Pacers thought they could dethrone two-time defending NBA champion Miami.

After losing for the fifth time in six games, the Pacers are now one game behind Miami in the Eastern Conference standings. Vogel benched Hibbert for the final 21/2 quarters Sunday because he thought Hibbert looked fatigued. Vogel noted afterward that his entire starting lineup looked tired,

though he played George and David West deep into the fourth quarter.

Hibbert did not take questions after the game. There has been speculation about a growing rift between the Pacers' young coach and their star center, who has publicly complained about "selfish dudes" and suggested the Pacers needed "group therapy."

Teammates deny there are any problems between the two. "Roy will settle down," West said when asked how Hibbert responded to the benching. "He's down on himself because he felt like he could have helped us, but coach made a decision. Coach has to make some tough decisions sometimes, and it was to get him some rest. ... Coach made the right choice."

There have also been questions about Stephenson's body language and his untimely ejection in the March 26 win over Miami and whether the Pacers' struggles can be blamed on a young team wilting in the spotlight. What can the Pacers do to fix all these problems before the playoffs start?

"For one, we just can't panic. I mean we can't pan-

ic. We've just got to be loose about it," George said. "We're just putting too much pressure where it doesn't need to be brought. We just got to do what we do. We're in a great position right now."

At 53-25, Indiana has clinched its second straight Central Division title, still has the NBA's best home record (34-6) and trails Miami by just one game in the East.

Before the season, fans would have applauded the Pacers' current position. On Sunday, they booed. "It's understandable. You know we scored 23 points in the first half. That's unacceptable and we know that," George said. "But I don't think we deserve to be booed. You know, all that we've done this year. I definitely thought it was uncalled for." They have four regular-season games remaining, including a Friday night showdown at Miami.

"We're playing good basketball, we're sharing the ball. We're taking the shots that we're supposed to, they're just not falling right now," a clearly frustrated Stephenson said. "We've just got to keep playing good basketball. The basketball gods will take care of everything." — AP



SPAIN: Team Omega Pharma's Tony Martin celebrates after winning the second stage of the Tour of the Basque Country, a 155.8km ride from Ordizia to Dantxarinea. —AFP

MARTIN STORMS TO SECOND STAGE WIN

MADRID: German three-time world time-trial champion Tony Martin claimed victory on the second stage of the Tour of the Basque Country yesterday.

The Omega Pharma-Quick Step rider broke clear in the final stages of the 155.8km ride from Ordizia to Urdazubi to finish 30 seconds ahead of Britain's Ben Swift (Sky) and Polish teammate Michal Kwiatkowski in second and third respectively.

Former two-time Tour de France champion Alberto Contador (Tinkoff-Saxo) maintained his lead in the overall classification, 14 seconds ahead of compatriot Alejandro Valverde (Movistar) with Kwiatkowski back in third.

Meanwhile, Welsh rider Geraint Thomas said he is happy to help Sky team-mates Bradley Wiggins and Edvald Boasson Hagen at next week's Paris-Roubaix, despite finishing an impressive eighth at the Tour of Flanders. Having finished third at E3 Harelbeke 10 days ago and come 10th in Flanders three years ago, double Olympic track cycling champion Thomas showed he is in good form on the cobbles.

Despite hurting his back in a crash Sunday, he climbed back onto the bike and kept up with the favourites until the last 15km, when he found himself in a fight for the minor placings.

He had come into the race as an outside bet for the win but despite not quite matching that expectation, he is happy to take a back-seat at Sunday's 'Hell of the North' race and take his turn working for others.

"I'm happy to ride for the team, I've said it all winter. I'm happy to ride for (Ian) Stannard or Edvald. Obviously Stannard's not starting (due to a fractured vertebrae) so now I'm happy to commit 100 percent to Eddy and do my bit for him," said Thomas, who briefly forgot 2012 Tour de France winner Wiggins. "Obviously Brad's got some great form, he's physically one of the strongest in the race.

"Positional-wise he was there (in Flanders, where he finished 32nd, 1min 43sec down). He did a great job for the boys. "Roubaix probably suits him even a bit more. Edvald, him, Bernie's (Bernhard Eisel) good, it suits Luke (Rowe) a bit more than this as well. I think we've got a good team and we can get stuck into that." As for his own performance in Belgium, Thomas said he had to be happy given how he felt after crashing.

"I was feeling my back all day. I felt terrible all day but managed to just hang in there, it's just frustrating," he said.

"I think I can still be happy with how it went considering how I felt because I didn't feel anywhere near half as good as I did last Friday in E3. But I managed to just hang in there.

"My back is just real stiff and sore now; just the left side of it. From the bike it's one of the places you don't want to be weak because it's one of the places you feel it."

Thomas, who was also a three-time world champion on the track, had nothing but admiration for Flanders winner Fabian Cancellara, although he believes Sep Vanmarcke, who finished third in Oudenaarde, will also be one to watch at Paris-Roubaix.

Swiss rider Cancellara, known as Spartacus by his peers, won the event for the third time, to equal the record, and Sunday will be going for his second successive Tour of Flanders-Paris-Roubaix double. "He's obviously the strongest guy here and to be able to follow him you've got to be good," said Thomas. "I don't think he was as dominant as he was before but he's obviously the strongest and for Sep (Vanmarcke) to follow him (when Cancellara attacked on the Kwaremont climb) shows he's got really good form and shows he'll be in there next week." — AFP

UConn WINS NCAA TITLE

ARLINGTON: Coaches and players left them. Others told them to go away. The guys who stuck around at UConn ended up with the last laugh and a pretty good prize to go with it: The national title.

Shabazz Napier turned in another all-court masterpiece Monday night to lift the Huskies to a 60-54 win over Kentucky's freshmen and bring home a championship hardly anyone saw coming.

"You're looking at the hungry Huskies," Napier told the crowd and TV audience as confetti rained down. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is what happens when you banned us."

The senior guard had 22 points, six rebounds and three assists, and his partner in defensive lock-down, Ryan Boatright, finished with 14 points.

The victory comes only a short year after the Huskies were barred from March Madness because of grades problems. That stoked a fire no one could put out in 2014.

Napier kneeled down and put his forehead to the court for a long while after the buzzer sounded. He was wiping back tears when he cut down the net. "I see my guys enjoying it," Napier said. "That's the most special feeling ever."

UConn (32-8) never trailed in the final. The Huskies led by as many as 15 in the first half and watched the Wildcats (29-11) trim the deficit to one with 8:13 left. But Aaron Harrison, who pulled out wins with clutch 3-pointers in Kentucky's last three games, missed a 3 from the left corner that would've given the Cats the lead. Kentucky never got that close again.

One key difference in a six-point loss: Kentucky's 11 missed free throws - a flashback of sorts for coach John Calipari, whose Memphis team blew a late lead against Kansas after missing multiple free throws in the 2008 final. The Wildcats went 13 for 24. UConn went 10 for 10, including Lasan Kromah's two to seal the game with 25.1 seconds left.

"We had our chances to win," Calipari said. "We're missing shots, we're missing free throws. We just didn't have enough." Calipari said he decided not to foul at the end "because they're not missing."

In all, Calipari's One and Doners got outdone by a more fundamentally sound, more-seasoned group that came into this tournament a seventh-seeded afterthought but walked away with the program's fourth national title since 1999. They were the highest seed to win it all since Rollie Massimino's eighth-seeded Villanova squad in 1985.

Napier and Boatright now go down with Kemba Walker, Emeka Okafor, Rip Hamilton, Ray Allen and all those other UConn greats. This adds to the school's titles in 1999, 2004 and 2011.

"When they say Ray, Rip, Ben, Emeka, Kemba - they'll soon say Shabazz," said their former coach, Jim Calhoun, who was in the crowd along with former Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and a father-and-son team whose dance to the "Happy" song got huge applause when played on the big screen at AT&T Stadium. The crowd was cheering for UConn at the end.

A short year ago, the Huskies were preparing for their first season in the new American Athletic Conference after the Big East Catholic schools decided to move on and none of the so-called power conferences wanted them. Calhoun, who built the program, left because of health problems. And most damaging - the NCAA ban triggered an exodus of five key players to the NBA or other schools.

Napier stuck around. So did Boatright. And Calhoun's replacement, Kevin Ollie, figured out how to make their grit, court sense and loyalty pay off.

"It's not about going to the next level, it's not about going to the pros, but playing for your university, playing for your teammates," Niels Giffey said. "And I'm so proud of all the guys on this team that stuck with this team." They were one step ahead of Kentucky all night, holding off furious rally after furious rally. Kentucky's biggest push started when James Young (20 points, seven rebounds) posterized Amida Brimah with a monster dunk to start a three-point play and trigger an 8-0 run.

In the middle of that, Boatright, who shut down Harrison's twin brother, Andrew, most of the night, twisted his left ankle while receiving an innocuous-looking pass from Napier. He called a timeout. Got it worked on and came back out.

"I've got a lot of heart and I wasn't coming out," Boatright said. "We put in too

much work all year for me to give up on an ankle sprain."

Napier and Giffey made 3s on UConn's two possessions after the timeout, and that one-point lead was back up to five - fairly comfortable by this tight, taut, buzzer-beating tournament's standards.

The big question in Kentucky is what will happen to all those freshmen. Julius Randle (10 points, six rebounds) is a lottery pick if he leaves for the NBA. Young and the Harrison brothers could be first-rounders. The big question is whether they'll want to leave on this note.

"I think all these kids are coming back, so I think we should be good," Calipari deadpanned, getting big laughs. He called his group the most coachable bunch he's ever had. They were preseason No. 1, a huge disappointment through much of this season. They were seeded an uninspiring eighth for the tournament and came on strong in time for a run to the final.

But they got outdone by a team on a different sort of mission - a team led by Napier, who stuck with the program even though he knew the 2012-13 season was for nothing but fun.

But what fun 2013-14 turned out to be. Napier was named the Final Four's Most Outstanding Player and he earned it on both ends of the court, keeping a hand in Aaron Harrison's face most of the night and holding him to a 3-for-7, seven-point, no-damage night.

He could also shoot it a bit - including a 3-pointer in the first half when UConn was having trouble dissecting the Kentucky zone. The shot came from about 30 feet, right in front of the edge of the Final Four logo at Center Court, or, as Dick Vitale put it: "He shot that one from Fort Worth."

They felt it back in Storrs, where they could be celebrating another title shortly. The UConn women play for the national title late yesterday. If they win, it will be the first sweep of the titles since 2004. The last school to do it: UConn, of course. — AP

THORPE IN HOSPITAL FIGHTING INFECTION

MELBOURNE: Australian swimming great Ian Thorpe is in a Sydney hospital fighting a "serious" infection and is unlikely to swim competitively again, his manager told Australian media late yesterday.

The five-times Olympic champion had contracted "two bugs" after undertaking a series of shoulder surgeries, manager James Erskine told Australian Associated Press. "It's serious but it's not life-threatening," Erskine said.

"He's quite sick but that's the situation ... From a competitive point of view - he will not be swimming competitively again, I don't think." The 31-year-old was being treated with large doses of antibiotics, state broadcaster ABC reported earlier on its website (www.abc.net.au).

Erskine said Thorpe had undertaken "two or three" operations on his troublesome left shoulder in the past two months, and suggested the injury, rather than the infection, would force Thorpe from the pool. "The shoulder operation was a major operation, he's got as many plates as Barry Sheene," Erskine said, referring to the late British motorcycle champion.

Erskine had denied earlier Australian media reports that

Thorpe might lose the use of his arm because of the infections, AAP said.

The agency added that the swimmer had received a number of visitors at hospital and was said to be in "good spirits". Thorpe's management was not available to comment when contacted by Reuters.

Australia's most decorated swimmer with 11 world championship golds, Thorpe was admitted to hospital earlier this year to treat depression after he was found disoriented in Sydney.

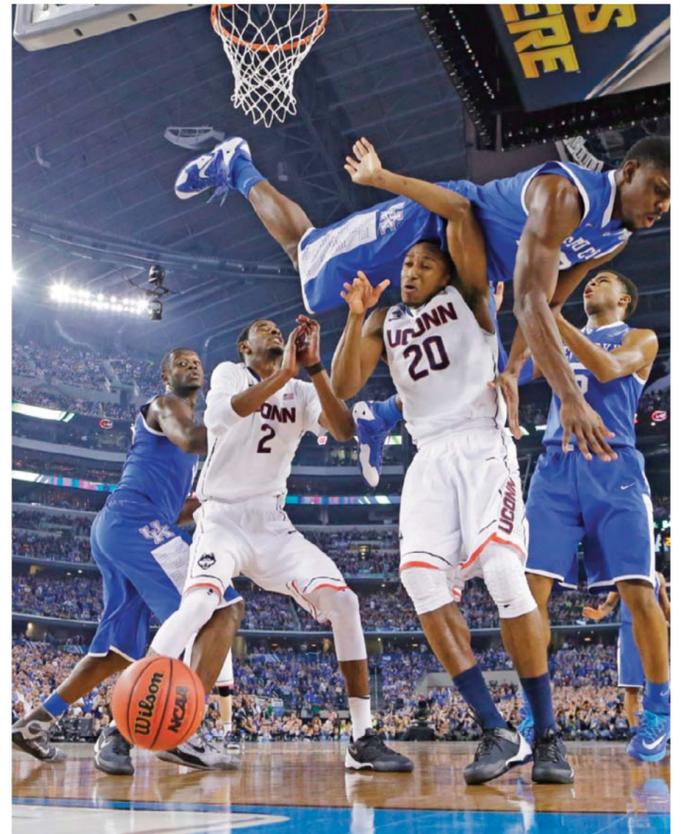
Police were called when a resident saw Thorpe behaving oddly near a vehicle and his manager Erskine later said he had been taking a mixture of anti-depressants and medication for his shoulder.

Thorpe won three golds in his Olympic debut at the 2000 Sydney Games and clinched another two at Athens four years later, but surprised by announcing his retirement in 2006 at the age of 24, citing a lack of motivation.

Thorpe announced he would return to the pool in 2011 in a bid to qualify for the London Games but he flopped at national trials the following year and failed to make the team in either of his targeted 100 and 200 metres freestyle events.—Reuters



Ian Thorpe



ARLINGTON: Kentucky forward Alex Poythress (22) goes over Connecticut guard Lasan Kromah (20) during the second half of the NCAA Final Four tournament championship game. — AP

AFTER SCANDAL, POKER GETS HIGH-TECH CHIPS

ATLANTIC CITY: A cheating scandal at a casino poker tournament has led to new security measures, including chips that are more intricate, have more colors and include an authentication element that can be checked under ultraviolet light.

The Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa told The Associated Press it was using new chips for its Spring Open poker tournament that began yesterday.

"This was very expensive, but very necessary," said Joe Lupo, the casino's senior vice president. "In order to have the biggest tournaments in Atlantic City and as the market leader, we need to ensure the integrity of the games."

In January, the casino was forced to suspend an event at its Winter Open after suspicions that someone introduced counterfeit chips. A North Carolina man who won \$6,814 during the tournament, Christian Lusardi, was arrested on charges including theft and rigging a public contest.

Lusardi is still in custody awaiting trial. Calls to a number registered to him in Fayetteville were met with a constant busy signal yesterday, and it could not be determined if he has hired an attorney.

Authorities said Lusardi, after suspecting the fake chips had been noticed, flushed them down the toilet in his hotel room at Harrah's Resort Atlantic City, where he had been staying. But the chips clogged the pipes, and guests on the floor below complained that water was dripping into their rooms.

Maintenance was called, and they found the chips, with a tournament value of 2.7 million, although they had no actual cash value.

A joint investigation by the New Jersey State Police and the state Division of Gaming Enforcement continues, and \$1.5 million in prize money is still on hold pending its outcome. About \$800,000 in prize money was already paid out before the fake chips were discovered.

The event under scrutiny was the tournament's Big Stack, No Limit Hold 'Em event. There were 27 people remaining in the contest when play was suspended.

The new, more sophisticated chips combine several design and technology elements in use in the industry. They were approved by New Jersey gambling regulators for use in tournaments.

Part of the new security measures will include spot checks of chips in play during games. "We will be checking chips randomly throughout the day using a new process involving the UV lights," Lupo said. He described the checks as "part of the new normal." The Borgata also will add more staff and will do more chip counts each day during its tournaments. — AP