

Sports

Celtics push James, Cavs to brink with game 5 NBA win

Game seven, if needed, will be in Boston on Sunday

WASHINGTON: The Boston Celtics, reinvigorated by a return home, beat the Cleveland Cavaliers 96-83 on Wednesday to move within one win of reaching the NBA Finals. Rookie Jayson Tatum scored 24 points to lead five Boston players in double figures as the Celtics took a 3-2 lead in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference finals.

Four-time NBA Most Valuable Player LeBron James led Cleveland with 26 points, 10 rebounds and five assists. But James looked at times as if he were feeling the effects of the heavy load he has carried for the Cavs in these playoffs, coughing up six of Cleveland's 15 turnovers, including four in the second half.

"I think everybody at this point is tired or worn down or whatever the case may be," James said. "I'm fine." Kevin Love, with 14 points, was the only other player to score in double figures for the Cavs, who host game six today trying to stay on track for a fourth straight trip to the Finals.

Game seven, if needed, will be back in Boston on Sunday. James himself is seeking an eighth straight trip to the title series, although he said that streak wouldn't be on his mind come Friday.

"Not at all," he said. "It's just all about just win

every game and it should put us in position to play for a championship.

"We look forward to having an opportunity to force a game seven. It's up to us to see if we can come back here (to Boston) for one more."

The winner of the series will play either the Golden State Warriors or Houston Rockets for the NBA crown. The Western Conference rivals are locked at 2-2 in their series.

With James on the bench to open the fourth quarter, the Celtics pushed a 16-point lead to 21. A 9-0 Cavs run reduced the deficit to 12 points, but Cleveland came up empty on their next four attempts.

"Defensively we gave ourselves a chance," said James noting the Cavs held the Celtics to 36.5 percent shooting. "At one point we had two opportunities to cut it to single digits and missed some really good looks, two three-pointers. We couldn't make. And if you don't make, it's going to come back to bite you."

The Celtics improved to 10-0 at home this post-season, and Tatum said there's no reason they can't wrap up the series today, even though so far the home team has won every game in the series.

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At one point we had two opportunities

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BOSTON: Larry Nance Jr. #22 of the Cleveland Cavaliers dunks the ball against Aron Baynes #46 of the Boston Celtics in the second half during Game Five of the 2018 NBA Eastern Conference Finals at TD Garden on Wednesday in Boston, Massachusetts. — AFP

"We've got to be focused, composed and play with a lot of poise and we'll be fine," he said, clearly up for the challenge.

"It's my first year. We're one win away from going to the Finals. It doesn't get any better than that," he said.

The Cavs got off to a rocky start, with five first-quarter turnovers nearly matching their

seven field goals.

With 10:47 left in the second quarter and the Celtics up 17 points, Boston forward Marcus Morris and Cleveland's Larry Nance tangled, with Nance sent sprawling to the floor.

Morris appeared to say something to Nance before turning away, and Nance rose from the floor and shoved him from behind. — AFP

Capitals blank Lightning to reach NHL Final against Vegas

MIAMI: Alex Ovechkin put Washington ahead to stay after only 62 seconds and the Capitals advanced to their first NHL Stanley Cup Final in 20 years by defeating Tampa Bay 4-0 Wednesday. Andre Burakovsky scored two unassisted second-period goals and Braden Holtby made 29 saves for his second consecutive shutout as the Capitals ousted the host Lightning 4-3 in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference Final.

Capitals captain Ovechkin, a seven-time goals champion, will play for the crown for the first time in his 13-season NHL career. The 32-year-old Russian winger had never reached the playoff final four until this month.

"We're really happy but we're not finished, not done yet," Ovechkin said. "We've been waiting for this moment for a long time. We understand what it takes to be in the final." Washington, seeking a first-ever Cup, will face a first-year expansion team, the Vegas Golden Knights, on Monday in game one of the best-of-seven championship series at Las Vegas, Nevada.

"We're pretty excited about the next step," Washington's Tom Wilson said. "It's a crazy feeling.

It hasn't sunk in yet. It's going to be a wild ride in Vegas. It's going to be a historic one. We're looking forward to a heck of a show." Ovechkin, whose 607 regular-season goals are the most of any active player, is a three-time world champion and three-time Olympian for Russia, but missed his compatriots' Olympic gold run at Pyeongchang in February as the NHL did not shut down for players to compete.

"He has just been a beast," Capitals coach Barry Trotz said of Ovechkin. "He has just taken it to the next level. He wants to get us to the next level." The Capitals reached their only prior final in 1998, when they were swept by Detroit.

"Oh my God. It's unbelievable," Ovechkin said. "I can't explain my emotions. I'm just happy for my boys, the organization, the fans. I can't wait to come back home and play in the Stanley Cup Final. It's going to be nuts up there." No Washington team has won a major sports title since the NFL Redskins won the 1992 Super Bowl. Vegas, a club of castoffs from other NHL teams assembled by former Capitals general manager George McPhee, went 2-0 against Washington in the regular season.

Ovechkin, the NHL goals leader this season with 49, put Washington ahead 1-0 with his 12th playoff goal, firing a slapshot under the right arm of Tampa Bay goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy.

"He wasn't going to be denied," Wilson said of Ovechkin. "He put everything into it. He's a phenomenal teammate. He has battled for this for a long time. So let's keep it going." Austrian-born Swede Burakovsky scored 8:59 and 16:31 into the second period and Nicklas Backstrom added a final goal with 3:43 remaining. — AFP

Djokovic ready for fresh start, says Wilander

LONDON: Far from being a fading force, 12-times grand slam champion Novak Djokovic has shown signs that he is emerging from the toughest spell of his career and is ready for a fresh start ahead of next week's French Open.

The 31-year-old will be seeded down at around 20 for the claycourt slam in Paris, but there will be a few players anxiously eyeing the drawsheet hoping the 2016 champion is not in their vicinity. Last week in Rome Djokovic went toe-to-toe with a rampant Rafael Nadal and though he lost their semi-final 7-6 6-3 the level of tennis he produced in an absorbing contest was much closer to what we have come to expect from the Serb.

If they are in opposite halves of the draw it would not be too much of a stretch of the imagination to imagine the same duo battling for the Roland Garros title on June 10.

"He's coming back for sure, if this slam wasn't called the French Open I think you

would have to put him up amongst the seven or eight favourites," three-times champion Mats Wilander, who will follow Djokovic's progress as part of the Eurosport coverage team, told Reuters.

"Even at the French, (he has a chance), he played very well against Nadal in Rome. Obviously it's easier to play when you have nothing to lose and everything to win in one way, but technically he is back where he was, or very close." A few months ago Djokovic could barely register a win.

His return from the elbow injury that ended his 2017 season after Wimbledon and then flared up again at the Australian Open was more difficult than expected. At Indian Wells, in his first match after losing to Chung Hyeon in the fourth round of the Australian Open, he slumped to defeat against 109th-ranked Japanese Taro Daniel.

"It felt like first match I ever played on the tour. Very weird," was his post-match reaction, admitting that he was battling himself physically and mentally. When he lost to Frenchman Benoit Paire in the Miami first round a week later he said it was "impossible" to play the kind of tennis that made him all but untouchable in 2015 when he was agonisingly close to a calendar year grand slam. — Reuters