

Sports

Pacers hold off Rockets despite Harden's 45 points

Clippers down Nuggets, seal West's no. 2 seed

MIAMI: Myles Turner and Justin Holiday scored 18 points apiece as the Indiana Pacers withstood a 45-point performance from Houston star James Harden Wednesday in a 108-104 NBA victory over the Rockets.

The Pacers snapped a five-game losing streak against the Rockets — who announced before the game that star guard Russell Westbrook was nursing a quadriceps strain that could jeopardize his appearance in the playoffs.

Harden did what he could to fill the void, contributing 11 of 14 Rockets points in a late-game surge that saw Houston cut a 104-90 deficit to 106-104 with 27 seconds remaining. Indiana held on, Holiday draining two free throws to close out the victory.

Harden barely missed an impressive triple-double with 45 points, 17 rebounds and 9 assists. It was his 21st game in the pandemic-disrupted season with 40 or more points. The win for the shorthanded Pacers — who were without All-Star forward Domantas Sabonis, leading scorer T.J. Warren and starting point guard Malcolm Brogdon — means Indiana clinched a top-five seed in the Eastern Conference.

They will face the Miami Heat when the first round of the playoffs begin in the NBA's "bubble" in Orlando, Florida. With their playoff matchup confirmed before they took the court, the Heat gave starters plenty of rest in a 116-115 loss to the Oklahoma City Thunder.

"That does create a little more of clarity of how we'll operate going forward," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "We still want to work on getting ready for the playoffs."

Duncan Robinson scored 19 points in the first half, Bam Adebayo added six and Jimmy Butler

notched seven before all were held out of the second half. Heat rookie Tyler Herro scored a season-high 30 points, but Oklahoma City's Mike Muscala drained a three-pointer with 5.2 seconds as the Thunder erased a 22-point deficit to seize the win.

Darius Bazley scored 21 points and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 18 for Oklahoma City, who out-scored the Heat 34-15 in the final quarter. The reigning champion Toronto Raptors grabbed a 125-121 victory over the Philadelphia 76ers, with Stanley Johnson making the go-ahead basket with less than five seconds to play. Assistant coach Adrian Griffin, standing in for Raptors coach Nick Nurse, got the win as the Raptors improved to 6-1 in the NBA's season restart in a quarantine "bubble" in Orlando, Florida.

Kyle Lowry and Chris Boucher scored 19 points each for the Raptors. Tobias Harris scored 22 points to lead the 76ers, who got a scare when star center Joel Embiid, back after missing a game with a left ankle injury, took a blow on his right wrist in the first quarter. Embiid didn't return in the second half, but the Raptors said X-rays on his wrist were negative.

CLIPPERS RALLY PAST NUGGETS

Indiana's victory meant the 76ers learned before tip-off that they will face the third-seeded Boston Celtics in the first round of the playoffs.

The Los Angeles Clippers locked up the Western Conference second seed and a first-round playoff clash with Dallas with a 124-111 victory over the Denver Nuggets.

The Clippers out-scored Denver 40-34 in the third quarter, powering past a Nuggets team who opted to rest starters Nikola Jokic, Jamal

were penalty. Players will bear a heavy responsibility both on and off the pitch.

Should any players breach the strict virus measures and a match subsequently has to be cancelled due to their actions they will incur the wrath of the authorities.

Their opponents will be awarded a 20-0 victory and five points as if it was a bonus point win. The frenetic nature of the rescheduled season which includes midweek matches will not allow for games to be postponed to a later date.

Those games that are cancelled by the government or authorities due to local lockdowns will be called a draw and each side will be awarded two points each.

The decision would be ratified by a Premiership Rugby panel. "If a club is unavailable through COVID then the opposition get a 20-point win," said Steve Diamond, Sharks' director of rugby.

"We are in Greater Manchester. If there was a lockdown here and Exeter Chiefs were coming up the following week and they couldn't play, then the points are shared." Diamond — whose side lie second ahead of the final nine rounds — has provided some entertainment for the players



LAKE BUENA VISTA: Edmond Sumner #5 of the Indiana Pacers drives for a layup against the Houston Rockets in the third quarter at AdventHealth Arena at ESPN Wide World Of Sports Complex in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. — AFP

Murray and Michael Porter Jr. in the fourth period. Paul George led the Clippers with a game-high 27 points, his sixth straight game of 20 or more. Kawhi Leonard added 26 — his 11th straight game with at least 20 points. Clippers coach Doc Rivers, still waiting to learn if guards Patrick Beverly and Landry Shamet will be back from injury when the playoffs begin, wasn't get-

ting too excited about securing the second seed in the West behind the Los Angeles Lakers.

"It doesn't mean a lot," Rivers said. "With the injuries that we've had this year and all the other stuff, for us being the two seed says we're pretty good. Everyone's done a hell of a job to keep this thing going. "Now let's hope we can get healthy and hopefully go from there." — AFP

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not been universal, even if the drivers who remained standing expressed their solidarity in combatting racism.

Former England and British and Irish Lions wing Ugo Monye believes the Premiership will be more like Formula One than the Premier League. The 37-year-old has been involved in a players' working group, containing a representative from each of the 12 Premiership clubs.

"I don't want people to jump to conclusions and assumptions that by people not taking the knee, that means they're racist," he told the BBC.

"Within the Premiership, there's a lot of different communities, cultures and different countries represented within the 12 teams.

"Everyone has a different personal relationship with racism." His assessment is reflected in the different approaches of the clubs. His former side Harlequins along with Bath and Leicester Tigers will take the knee.

Bristol Bears 23-man matchday squad will form the shape of a heart: "Love for our teammates and love for our community". Worcester Warriors and Gloucester will signal their support in combatting racism by forming into a V-shape before kick-off. — AFP

Premiership resumes in new era of COVID-19

LONDON: The English Premiership resumes today when Sale Sharks play Harlequins, bringing to an end a 159-day hiatus forced by the coronavirus pandemic. Rugby is the last of the major sports to restart in England and will have the nine rounds of games and play-offs — the top four qualify — crammed into a tight schedule with the Premiership final slated for October 24.

Much has changed, and not only due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Sportsmen have been taking the knee to support the Black Lives Matter movement sparked by the death of unarmed African-American George Floyd after a Minneapolis policeman knelt on his neck.

AFP Sport looks at both issues ahead of the resumption:

COVID-19 protocol breaches could carry se-