

Nuggets, Natt shine in NBA playoff replay

'Healthy' Denver surprises L.A.

There are many reasons for playing Strat-O-Matic games; to replay your favorite team through an entire season, to replay an entire league, to beat the neighborhood bully in something to make up for the physical beatings he's administered to you, for camaraderie and good times, etc. The list could go on and on, ad infinitum.

One of the most popular forms of gaming methodology is the "what if?" What if the 1927 Yankees played the '53 Dodgers, the '68 Chiefs met the '72 Dolphins, or the best Islander team skated against Edmonton and Wayne Gretzky, 1984 or '85 vintage.

Neal Linkon, who resides in Denver, CO, - and is a fan of the Denver Nuggets, naturally - wanted to find out what would have happened if the Nuggets had been at full strength when they faced eventual champion, the Los Angeles Lakers, in the playoffs.

Remember this is the Denver team that had acquired some defense to go with one of the NBA's most explosive lineups offensively. Wayne Cooper, Calvin Natt, Fat Lever and two draft picks went to the Nuggets in exchange for high-scoring Kiki Vandeweghe in a trade with Portland.

And remember also that Denver has traditionally given the Lakers trouble in the Western Conference playoffs.

In real life the Nuggets battled L.A. with point guard Lever hurting with a bum knee and, with the series at 2-1 in the Lakers' favor and the fourth game being played in Denver, Alex English, the Nuggets' leading scorer, broke a finger.

The Lakers breezed the rest of the way, as they did through most of the playoffs.

"The question burning in the minds of most Nugget fans, and perhaps NBA fans nation-wide," says Linkon, "centered on the 'what ifs' that make Strat games so fascinating. What if Lever and English had been healthy?"

"Could Denver have beaten the high-powered Lakers with a full deck? We will never know for sure, but a replay using the Strat cards from last year's season could provide some clues."

THE 'NATT' ATTACK

Calvin Natt, one of the acquisitions from Portland, turned out to be the difference as Denver surprised L.A. in Linkon's replay, winning in six games. Natt averaged 34.5 points and grabbed 9.1 rebounds, plus managed to draw enough fouls on Kurt Rambis to keep one of the Lakers' unsung heroes on the bench for long spells.

The Nuggets were deployed in a sag defense to shut down Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and James Worthy inside. Bryan Scott and Michael Cooper did hurt Denver from the outside with 3-point shots, however. L.A. used a normal defense and both teams ran a fast-break.

The Lakers opened the series by scoring a 104-96 victory as Jabbar rang up 36 points. Natt had 33 for Denver. Rambis was a major force as he blocked five shots and had four steals to go with six points and five rebounds.

Denver captured game two as the Nuggets began to go inside more to draw fouls on Rambis. Natt poured in 34 as Denver won 107-101. Jabbar had 32 for the Lakers, who faded in the fourth quarter as Denver ruled the offensive board.

Game three was a two-point thriller, won by Denver, 111-109. Natt had 32 points and nine rebounds, Jabbar 34 tallies, but Rambis got into immediate foul trouble and the Lakers again lagged on the offensive boards. Denver's inside game also slowed L.A.'s fast-break to a walk.

Game four was another thriller, with Denver winning 116-114,

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despite Magic Johnson being credited with a whopping 18 assists. The Lakers, however, were hampered by foul troubles as Jabbar, Rambis and Scott all exited via the six-count. Cooper of the Nuggets also fouled out, but Dan Issel, Denver's greybeard, turned in a 21-point, five-rebound performance. Worthy led the Lakers with 28 points and eight rebounds.

The series returned to L.A. for game five and the Lakers pulled out a 107-106 squeaker as Magic had a scoring/assist double of 17. Denver had trailed by 23 points midway through the third period, however, before almost overtaking the Lakers.

Denver did clinch the series in game six, winning 123-122. Never more than seven points separated the two teams in another tight battle that wasn't decided until the last action card.

Natt again led Denver, pouring in 36 points, while English and Lever chipped in 21 apiece. Magic was spectacular for the Lakers in a losing cause, pumping in 24 points, grabbing eight rebounds and dishing out 20 assists. He was perfect from the field, swishing all 10 of his attempts, plus was four of five from the free throw line.

The result of the playoffs has Linkon convinced that a healthy Denver squad could have toppled the Lakers in real-life, too. But Linkon stresses "how well the Nuggets have always matched up against the Lakers," and adds, "I doubt the Nuggets would match up very well with the Celtics."

Summary (statistical averages):

<u>DENVER</u>	<u>Points</u>	<u>Rebounds</u>	<u>Assists</u>	<u>Blocks</u>	<u>Steals</u>
Natt -	34.5	9.1	-	1.0	-
English -	17.8	7.0	2.1	1.1	1.1
Lever -	12.8	5.6	3.5	-	2.5
Issel -	12.0	3.3	-	-	-
Evans -	8.5	2.0	2.0	-	-
Cooper -	7.3	7.3	-	1.8	-
Kopicki -	7.1	3.0	-	-	-
Dunn -	5.3	2.1	-	-	1.0
Hanzlik -	3.6	2.5	-	-	-

<u>LOS ANGELES</u>	<u>Points</u>	<u>Rebounds</u>	<u>Assists</u>	<u>Blocks</u>	<u>Steals</u>
Jabbar -	23.6	6.5	2.1	3.8	-
M.Johnson -	21.0	8.0	13.3	-	0.8
Scott -	19.5	1.6	1.0	-	1.6
Worthy -	18.8	8.6	1.3	2.5	-
Rambis -	6.6	5.0	-	3.5	1.6
McAdoo -	6.6	3.8	-	-	-
M.Cooper -	6.5	2.3	2.6	-	-
Spriggs -	4.0	1.5	-	1.5	-
Wilkes -	1.6	1.1	-	-	-
McGee -	1.0	0.8	-	-	-
