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# BULLS BREAK DOWN DEFENSIVELY, FALL TO TIMBERWOLVES 150-126

In defense of the Bulls... there wasn't much.

Not much defense and not much to defend about the Bulls Sunday night in an historic 150-126 loss to the Minnesota Timberwolves.

Because it was one of the poorest defensive performances in franchise history, the most points given up by the Bulls in 40 years and fourth-most in regular season franchise history against a middling Minnesota team without its only two All-Stars scoring a franchise-record points.

Which led to a new word for the day from Bulls coach Billy Donovan, who Friday after that withering loss to the New York Knicks repeatedly called out his team for a lack of "resolve."

This time it was "compete" as Donovan repeatedly faulted the team for not competing well and serious enough.

This is not the sort of grammar lesson a team should be studying this far into the season as the Bulls dropped to 11-18 with their fourth consecutive loss and seventh in the last nine. They are in Miami Tuesday to start a back to back in this four-game road trip leading up to Christmas.

These days it's just not a wonderful life around the Bulls. It's getting to the point where they are going to need a miracle on Madison Street. Wasn't Die Hard a Christmas movie?

"The bottom line is we're not escaping competition," said Donovan. "We need to compete a whole lot better on the defensive end of the floor. That's five guys being connected. I can switch to zone, I can switch to different pick and roll coverages. But if the compete level is not high enough collectively as a group out there it doesn't make a difference.



MINNESOTA SCORED A FRANCHISE-RECORD 150 POINTS IN REGULATION AGAINST CHICAGO.

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CONT.

"If we want to be any good we have to confront the fact—you are not escaping this—you have to line up and physically put your nose, you body, your spirit, your soul in front of people, put your body in plays, block outs, loose balls, the physical confrontation of a game you're not escaping. I'm not saying every possession we did not do it, but we clearly did not do it enough. The compete level on the defensive end collectively was not good and not up to where it has been and needs to be, and that's the disappointing part. As much as from the bench I am trying to help those guys, there has to be a collective competitive spirit; you've got to be able to line up and put your nose in plays and physically battle, and I didn't think we did that at the level you have to do to be successful."

Not that Donovan escapes scrutiny since this has become a team all too frequently not ready for the moment as they come into each game, and the charge that it is a must game, as it was after losing at home to the Knicks and playing them again, and as it was Sunday starting a four-game road trip with the next three against Eastern Conference teams with superior records.

But it was shocking—that's my repeat adjective since I remain shocked and in shock about these results—the way the Timberwolves virtually toyed with the veteran Bulls without both Karl-Anthony Towns and Rudy Gobert, and then starting center Naz Reid getting injured early after scoring Minnesota's first 10 points.

Anthony Edwards led Minnesota with 37 points and D'Angelo Russell had 28 with seven of 10 threes, again one of the bottom third three-point shooting teams in the league, like the Knicks, putting on a Steph Curry display with 23 of 43 three pointers and 66 percent shooting overall. There were some oddities, like when Edwards hoisted in an off balance half court three after an inbounds pass steal to end the third quarter. But what was most concerning was the turnstile blow by, straight line drives for scores from the top of the key, the driving slam dunks, layup scores after Bulls made baskets, back door cuts.

And then in the closing minutes of a second straight empty-the-bench game Edwards turning a missed corner three into a one-man fast break windmill dunk—anyone getting back?— with the young wolves howling and dancing their way off the court. Donovan called two timeouts in the last three minutes while trailing by 17 points.

"You have to handle adversity and embrace adversity and have to lean into adversity and adversity does one of two things," said Donovan. "It brings you really, really close together. Or it divides you."

This, as Donovan has insisted often, is a good group of people. It doesn't seem likely they are going to splinter or turn on one another.

But their age could be showing a bit. In a bad way.

There have been these head scratching losses—at least to us—against the supposedly inferior teams like the Timberwolves, Magic, Thunder and Spurs. But what these teams have in common is young, athletic players who in the prevailing ethos of the day were raised on the three-point line.

The Bulls young players are more skilled than athletic, and their veterans, especially DeMar DeRozan and Nikola Vučević, are more the wily kind who playoff teams seek for stability. But they're finding themselves too often lately being run down by the high flying kids and their season facing something of a Dickensian fork in the road.

Are the Bulls looking at a bleak house and hard times or the great expectations that seemed destined a year ago?

And you thought I was going to say it was the best of times...

It's perhaps not the worst, but it's moving closer to that neighborhood.

Fortunately for the Bulls, the Eastern Conference remains a jumble without any team truly taking control and the Bulls 3-1 against the two best teams in the conference. Oh, remember those days. It was the best of times. Gotcha.

No one's quite sure where that compete went. Maybe the veteran Bulls are just potentially a good playoff team against other veterans. Now they just have to get there.

It's still 11th place for the Bulls, though as I have to frequently point out only about five games out of the last guaranteed playoff spots. Hey, no big deal. Fifty-three games to go.

But there will have to be some urgency at some point.

Perhaps Sunday's offense was a start.

# BULLS BREAK DOWN DEFENSIVELY,

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CONT.

If you just looked at the Bulls box score, you'd have assumed a win. Even the way Donovan has been suggesting.

The Bulls had three players score at least 20 points led by DeRozan with 29 points, Vučević with 23 and Zach LaVine with 22. LaVine also recorded his 10,000th point in the NBA, though there were no celebration this night even in his return to where LaVine began his NBA career. The Bulls had six players score in double-figures with 31 assists and 16 of 38 threes and just 11 turnovers after double that against the Knicks. They even looked good early in the game moving the ball with Goran Dragic taking a bigger role at point guard.

Javonte Green remained out and Donovan decided not to use Andre Drummond, he said, in attempt to inject energy with smaller, active lineups. Donovan, a Rick Pitino protege, tends to prefer those kinds of lineups that Pitino empowered for pressure and transition. It's effective, though perhaps not exactly aligned with the Bulls personnel. So Donovan said he tried to speed up the game some with Derrick Jones Jr. at center, and Jones did have 13 points while Donovan used Alex Caruso less down the stretch, presumably in seeking out more offense.

But there wasn't going to be enough to stop that Minnesota onslaught.

"Obviously, we scored enough points to win the game," noticed DeRozan. "But giving up 150 points is beyond embarrassing; we've got to feel that. You've got to feel low right now, you've got to feel frustrated right now, you've got to feel all the bad emotions and try to understand why as competitors it's embarrassing to give up that many points. Nothing against Minnesota. But it's not like we're playing against the 2016 Golden State Warriors."

Uh, DeMar, 1996 Bulls?

OK, he was seven then so maybe we can excuse him. But we know those '96 Bulls take out the 2016 Warriors. Heck, didn't even win a title. I digress, though we do like to talk about those Bulls.

That start to the game Donovan referred to had the Bulls leading 34-32 after one quarter, all eight Bulls playing having scored and seemingly in control after a 16-10 Bulls start. Dragic was running things nicely as an outside chorus lately has been suggesting perhaps he should start at point guard since with Lonzo Ball out he's the only true point guard on the roster. OK, other than Carlisle Jones, now on a two-way contract. It's apparent the Bulls appropriately are concerned about overuse of the oldest player on the roster, but there was better ball movement with Dragic playing.

Donovan moved to basically four guards with Jones early in the second quarter, but the Timberwolves began to get some separation. Though more concerning as the little resistance as Minnesota shot 71 percent in the second quarter and made six of nine threes. Not all were open, but the Bulls failure to protect the basket against multiple driving slam dunks did sink the defense and allow more open shots.

The Bulls were getting cut up badly on pick-and-roll as Vučević often had to slide up to help. So his man often ducked in for dunks without any weak side help. Donovan noted that combustible mix.

"I always look as a team a living, breathing unit," explained Donovan. "When we get the mentality that, 'I feel like I'm doing it for him and I'm not letting the guy I'm out there with down.' There were are times when you are up a lot (on the screen) you're going to be vulnerable in the middle of the floor, which we were. I thought we were late in the first half. There were not quick enough rotations to the next guy.

"Everybody's job is really hard, but Vooch has a really hard job," Donovan added. "I think he defended last year more pick and rolls than any center in the league; that's a hard job. Well, you've got to be there behind him to support him and, 'I'm going to be here and you're going to take care of me, and the next guy and the next guy.' You've got to be able to do that, and we just didn't do that at all tonight like we have. I don't know what the difference is. To me we've got to get out of the mindset of worrying about scoring and how it's going offensively and realize the ball scores and if the ball is moved and passed, whoever scores scores."

After games like this there's all sorts of comparisons and analogies, and Donovan went Richard Sherman from the then champion Seattle Seahawks on defense. Sherman told him it was about the personal connections and how well everyone knew one another and bonded together.

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CONT.

DeRozan didn't fully disagree, but pushed back on that one a bit with references to land line phones with cords and being able to keep his own basketball when at the park as a kid.

It does eventually make sense.

"It definitely sucks; it's frustrating," said DeRozan. "Not being connected, not being one, not understanding what needs to be done collectively to help out each other defensively. Obviously, we've got to find that connection. What we need is that good moment to lean toward to make it that contagious feeling. Everybody means well, but because you mean well it doesn't mean you don't have to go out and compete and give it all you've got; we've got to step that part of it up.

"At the end of the day we've got a great group of guys," DeRozan reiterated. "We don't got no big ego guys. We don't have a bunch of superstars fighting against attention. That's not an issue. Whether we hang more or not, it's just us understanding what needs to be done and going out there and competing. A phone with a cord won't work if you take it off the wall."

There then was some media discussion about what if it were cordless. Now you understand why media needed to be back in the locker rooms. Though once DeMar is going with one of his allegories he can adjust.

"If it's cordless you have to make sure it's charged," said DeRozan. "We've got to be charged up and understand when it's time to make a phone call you've got to put the phone in the charger."

Talk about veteran moves. DeRozan's post game sessions can be as head shaking as his head fakes. And leaving you smiling in wonder as much.

The game seemed about over when the third quarter was like the arcade at a state fair, and this time the basket rim wasn't smaller. The Timberwolves scored 42 points with the Edwards half court three exclamation for a 113-97 lead after three quarters.

But these Bulls always seem to have a run in them. DeRozan came out to start the fourth with a four-point play from a flagrant foul and Jones got a drive and a lob score from Dragic and it was 115-105 with 10 minutes left, Minnesota timeout. Hey, that's doable.

Not the way the Bulls were giving up threes and baskets, and Minnesota quickly got three more threes and a three-point play with cross court skip passes and then the windmill. Talk about creating electricity. The 'wolves were charged up.

And they were hot. So the Bulls then left for Miami.

"We've got to go out there and compete; we're not competing like we should every single night and getting our butts whoops is unacceptable," said DeRozan. "We've got to have that competitive nature like we had against Milwaukee (winning last month). We've got to carry that every single night.

"I grew up playing in a park where you want to go home with your ball," DeRozan began. "You want to fight and make sure you play with your ball and take your ball home."

The park ethic often is the ball stays until the games are over. So you better win.

"Until we buckle down and realize we're leaving this park with our ball regardless, we're going to keep getting the same results," said DeRozan. "I'm tired of going home without a ball."

And we all know how sad that is.





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