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Teague pushes improbable Hawks

By Israel Gutierrez

INDIANAPOLIS -- Go ahead, try to figure out the Indiana Pacers.

Try to explain how a team that secured the best record in the Eastern Conference over six months has forgotten how to play basketball together in a few weeks.

That's actually the less complicated mystery.

Try figuring out the Atlanta Hawks.

They have an All-Star power forward who converted a four-point play Saturday night.

They have a "stretch 5" who doubles as an enforcer and is more than willing to get in the face of known bully David West. Oh, and he's a 31-year-old rookie from Macedonia.

They have a sharpshooter, possibly the best shooter in the NBA, playing the role of rim protector, twice emphatically blocking the biggest man on the floor.

They've been missing arguably their best player, Al Horford, since December, but they just beat the Pacers at Bankers Life Fieldhouse decisively for the second time in 13 days. This time, in the playoffs. As an 8-seed.

The Hawks might get mocked as one of the worst playoff teams in recent memory because of their 38-44 record, but they're also a team that has struggled with injuries all season long and only recently rediscovered a chemistry that allowed them to close the season 7-3 to secure a playoff spot.

Atlanta might've beaten a Pacers team that apparently hasn't recovered from its late-season tailspin, but it can also be true that the Hawks are now playing far better than their record would indicate.

"We don't think we're an 8-seed," said Paul Millsap, whose four-point play in the first half included one of 11 Hawks 3s. "We think we're better than an 8-seed."

They certainly look like more than your average 8-seed when Jeff Teague is showing off like he was Saturday.

The 25-year-old Indianapolis native was mesmerizing, crossing up and carving through the Indiana defense for 28 points and five assists, half of his points coming in a third quarter when the Hawks outscored Indiana 30-16.

"He's the head of the snake for us, for sure," said Kyle Korver, who made only two of his seven 3-point attempts but easily had two of the most memorable blocks of his career. "If he's putting pressure on the basket, it frees up the rest of us. And because we have a lot of shooting on the perimeter, there's not always a lot of help there."

Teague has an intricate tattoo of the Indianapolis skyline along with the area code 317 on his left forearm. He grew up dreaming of being an And1 streetball legend, even playing against the And1 greats

when the tour stopped by Indianapolis.

He said he played against celebrity streetballers like The Professor and Hot Sauce.

"They had some crazy tricks," Teague said. "I can't do most of the stuff they could do, but I was alright."

He was more than alright Saturday. When Hawks 7-foot rookie Pero Antic drew Roy Hibbert away from the basket, Teague would find his way to the vacated rim.

Or, when he felt like it, he showed off some of those streetball-inspired handles to shake eager defenders like Evan Turner. And it all happened in his hometown, which must've meant a little bit more for Teague.

"No, not really," he said. "My mom and dad never come to the games."

Well, let's hope they were watching, anyway.

But Teague wasn't the only Hawk pulling out his best tricks.

The Hawks as a team assisted on only 13 of their 33 field goals. A lot of Atlanta's scoring came as a result of impressive one-on-one moves. DeMarre Carroll, Shelvin Mack and Millsap all confidently attacked one of the best defenses in the league and cashed in for 45 points among them.

From the start, the Hawks had the look of a team that knew how to attack the Pacers. Maybe that was a confidence lingering from that April 6 demolition of Indiana on this same court.

"It's like a respected confidence," Elton Brand said. "We know what that team is capable of. To me, it's kind of a guarded confidence. We can play well, but we know they haven't played their best yet."

It's also quite possible the Hawks haven't played their best yet. It's not just Horford who the Hawks have lost to injury throughout the season. Millsap, Korver, Teague and Carroll have all missed significant chunks of time throughout the season, all as the team was learning how to play without Horford.

The result was a wildly inconsistent regular season that included a 1-14 stretch from Feb. 4 to March 8.

"We started the season playing really well," Korver said. "Al went down, and we had to figure out how to play as a team again. We lost our starting center like three times. We had a bunch of injuries in the middle, and we obviously had a horrible February. We finally got healthy during the regular season. We just needed some wins, needed to play well. It just happened that one of those big games was here."

The Hawks certainly aren't the only team that tries to draw Hibbert away from the paint defensively, but they seem to be one of the best at it.

Much of that has to do with the threat of Antic on the perimeter. He hit only two of his five 3-point attempts Saturday, but Antic had been shooting 72 percent against the Pacers for the season.

And it's quite possible the double technical drawn by Antic and West is what sparked a 20-6 Pacers run in the third quarter.

But even if it meant nothing, Antic's explanation of the skirmish with West was priceless.

"Throughout the game, he used the elbow a lot, and the referee warned him," Antic said. "I made the

foul, just a normal foul, and he just came in my face for no reason.

"It's too expensive for me to do something else, so I just stayed in his face, too."

Of course, Atlanta coach Mike Budenholzer has done a quality job of bringing that even-keeled, San Antonio Spurs culture with him as a former assistant in San Antonio. So these Hawks didn't exactly look like a team celebrating some major accomplishment Saturday. In fact, if you would've watched the postgame news conference with Teague and Millsap on mute, you'd assume you were watching players who just suffered a devastating loss.

"I think it's who we are individually," Millsap said. "We're pretty much a low-key, laid-back group of guys. But with that being said, we know what's at stake. We know it's just one game."

One game in this series, yes. But that's two straight impressive wins in Indianapolis. That's more than a mysterious occurrence.