

PUBLICATION: Sun-Sentinel

DATE: 10/14/14

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Mario Chalmers, Josh McRoberts out for Heat; Norris Cole, Danny Granger start

Al Horford returns to Hawks lineup after missing 10 months with pectoral injury.

Heat's next two exhibitions on road, Friday in Kansas City vs. Warriors, Saturday in San Antonio.

One team grew closer to whole Tuesday night at AmericanAirlines Arena.

And then there were the Miami Heat.

On a night Atlanta Hawks center Al Horford returned to the lineup for the first time since tearing a pectoral muscle Dec. 26, any chance of getting a read on the Heat's regular-season rotation remained an abstract with a 109-103 exhibition loss that dropped Erik Spoelstra's team to 0-4 this preseason.

"It's building right now for this group," Spoelstra said of what remains most important for his team. "Our process, right now, is to get our system down.

"We're pecking away, making some steps forward."

As their division rival returned to a sense of stability, a preseason of randomness continued for the Heat, with point guard Mario Chalmers sidelined by a hip injury sustained during last week's trip to Brazil, power forward Josh McRoberts still sidelined from offseason toe surgery, and Danny Granger making his first-ever Heat start.

The Heat certainly had their moments, including building an early 19-point lead behind strong early play from Granger, Chris Bosh and Norris Cole. And rookie forward James Ennis again created hope that he could rapidly mature into a valued member of the Heat's perimeter rotation, this time with 10 first-half points.

"They were playing together, very unselfishly," Spoelstra said.

There also was a strong closing kick, after falling behind by 20, with Spoelstra taking the unusual preseason step of reinserting Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh midway through the fourth quarter, which opened with the Hawks up 88-70, after a 43-18 Atlanta third quarter. Rookie point guard Shabazz Napier also had his moments late, in a 12-point performance.

But only so much solace was taken.

"A loss is a loss," Bosh said. "I don't take many positives out of that one. Yeah, there is a concern. We need to win a game.

"After a while, the ball just stopped moving. We kind of got very monotonous with the offense."

Spoelstra said the return by Wade and Bosh was by design.

"I asked them at halftime whether they wanted to go in the fourth," he said. "We have to start steadily building up their conditioning."

Bosh said Wade suggested the return.

"We're just working on our legs," Bosh said. "We know we're going to have to carry a huge load this season."

For the moment, this remains a team finding its way, just as Wade continues to search for his legs, this time opening 1 of 6 before closing 4 of 12, albeit with a pair of 3-pointers.

"Progress is going to have to be made," Wade said of the first half of the Heat's eight-game preseason. "We'll eventually get there."

As for the late return, Wade said, "I just wanted to play more minutes."

Bosh led the Heat with 22 points and nine rebounds. Granger added 11 points and Cole nine.

After previously going with Udonis Haslem and Shawne Williams in place of McRoberts in the starting lineup, Spoelstra wound up with his fourth starting lineup in as many exhibitions.

Wade, Bosh, Luol Deng started for the fourth time in as many games, with Cole starting for the third consecutive game at point guard. Deng shot 1 of 6, with one rebound and one assist in his 21 minutes.

"It's still preseason. Coach is trying a lot of different things," Cole said of the variety of looks the Heat have opened with. "And we're open, receptive to what he's trying to do. We understand that in order to win, you have to have different combinations of players that can make plays out there and can play together. He's trying it; we're trying it."

Cole, Granger and Bosh played particularly well together at the outset, with a pair of Granger 3-pointers helping the Heat push to a 14-0 lead, their best sustained play this preseason. But the alignment with the three was not nearly as efficient at the outset of the second half, when the Hawks, from 19 down, pulled ahead.

Shortly after signing Granger as a free agent, Heat President Pat Riley spoke of the possibilities of time for the veteran swingman at power forward. That experimentation began Tuesday.

Against that backdrop, the Hawks rolled out the primary lineup they utilized prior to Horford's season-ending injury and one they likely will go with again, with Horford flanked by Paul Millsap, DeMarre Carroll, Kyle Korver and Jeff Teague.

Horford missed his first two shots, made his third and wound up limited to 11:03, all in the first half. He finished with two points and one rebound. Millsap, a notorious Heat killer, dating to his days with the Utah Jazz, paced the Hawks with 23 points on 9-of-14 shooting, with guard Kyle Korver adding 17, including five 3-pointers. Millsap did much of his damage against Granger, while the bulk of Korver's scoring came against Wade.

Spoelstra said he felt there was no need to press the issue with Chalmers, with the Heat still with exhibitions this week on Friday in Kansas City against the Golden State Warriors and Saturday on the road in a rematch of the past two NBA Finals against the San Antonio Spurs.

"He probably could play if this was a regular-season game," Spoelstra said of Chalmers' hip pointer. "He fell on it in Rio last week and re-aggravated it in the game [Saturday against the Cleveland Cavaliers]. He is OK."

That had Spoelstra shaking up his rotation, playing both Ennis and rookie point guard Shabazz Napier in the first quarter.