

The 1996-97 Season of the Utah Jazz

Riley Gisseman

Mr. Brown

4A Effective Writing

Sky high expectations for the Utah Jazz, the 1996-97 season was one to remember. A team led by Karl Malone and John Stockton, a finals appearance - which they had not yet accomplished - was an absolute necessity for the hall-of-fame duo. In a historic playoff run and rollercoaster of emotions, the season ended on a sour note. They had made the NBA Finals for the first time, but they failed to win the Championship. "The 1998 Utah Jazz came into the season off both a breakthrough and heartbreak." says thesportsnotebook.com, "Their Dynamic Duo of John Stockton and Karl Malone - as good a point guard/power forward combo has ever existed - had finally broken through and reached the 1997 NBA Finals." This shortcoming at the highest level of basketball was not means for discouragement. It was, however, seen as a stepping stone into their second straight appearance in the finals where they would be ready mentally, emotionally, and physically for the challenge of bringing Utah its first Championship . They would not back down.

John Stockton was the best passer the NBA has ever seen. He holds various records, as does Malone. He holds the all time assist record, with fifteen thousand, eight hundred and six total assists, which is nearly four thousand more assists than Jason Kidd, who is currently in second place. This is said to be an unbreakable record (Basketball-Reference.com). Herman Masin remarks "He keeps the ball moving. He's the league's best quarterback". Aside from his remarkable passing, Stockton is remembered for his favorable defensive play. Stockton owns the record for career steals as well, with 3,265 steals. No other player has ever reached two-thousand, seven-hundred. This is also said to be an unbreakable record. Masin continues on Stock's impact on the game, "We remember thinking: 'how many other point guards could have done so much for their team without a point or an assist?'" Masin also describes his motor in a different way. "With his superlative motor skills, quick hands, and huge intelligence, he initiates the offensive flow, gets everyone involved, keeps the ball moving, and finds the open

man. He makes the total team effort greater than the sum of its parts.”, continuing, Masin says, “[Stockton] is the blue collar artisan who works his tail and glands off doing all the ‘little things’ that win basketball games.” However, to go along with his skills both offensively and defensively, Stockton was one of the most humble guys on the court at all times, “I think it will mean something later on. Now, I just want to play” (Garrity, John). Herman Masin continues his praise for Stockton, “Very obviously, the selection committees who put together our all star team’s knew what they were doing when they tapped Stockton for the awesome dream team of 1992 and then chose him as one of the greatest 75 players in the history of the NBA.”

Stockton’s counterpart, Karl Malone had his fair share of accomplishments as well. Seen as a top fifteen player of all time, the two-time MVP, Malone, is remembered for being second on the all time scoring list, totalling 36,928 total points (basketball-reference.com). His work ethic is one of the first things brought up when having an NBA conversation, and it’s proved when looking at his career free throw numbers. He came into the league shooting a poor fifty percent, improved to sixty percent, and then hovered around a respectable seventy and eighty percent for the rest of his twenty year career. In the 1996-97 season, Malone averaged twenty-seven points. He benefitted from Stockton’s ten and a half assists per game. They were thirty-three and thirty-four years old, respectively. Something understated about Malone, however, is his toughness and willingness to protect those he relates with. Stockton praised his toughness in an article by Ralph Wiley, saying “I’ve never seen Karl tired, He’s on a different standard than the rest of us.” Stockton continues, saying “Karl wishes there were 20 games a year. He gets stronger as the year goes on. He thrives on playing.” Later in the article, Malone compliments Stockton, and lets everyone know he’s got his back, saying “What John Stockton doesn’t know, is that he is like one of my older brothers to me, and not because he gives me the ball on the fast break. Mess with Stockton, and you mess with me”.

As a duo, Stockton and Malone nearly perfected the fast break. Herman Masin remarks on Stockton's ability to run the floor, saying: "No matter where he is on the floor, soon as one of the big guys come down with a rebound off the defensive board, Stockton is on the move. If the fast break is there, he will go right for the hoop. If it isn't there, he will head straight for the rebound, show himself to the man and call for the ball."

Stockton and Malone would go down as one of the best combos in the history of the league, but what made them work together and work well, cannot be understated. Jerry Sloan, the coach of the team may have put more effort into building the team, chemistry-wise and roster-wise, than any of the players on the court. John Garrity says it best, "No one frets over the roster dilemma more than Sloan does. When asked recently before a practice if he feared another 50-plus win season with no championship ring, He recalled his own career as an all star guard for the Chicago Bulls. 'We won 50 games a year, 3 years in a row, and never won a championship,' he said, and almost savagely added, "It doesn't mean we're not going to do it." Although he never won a coach of the year award, Jerry Sloan is considered a top 10 all-time coach. He won one-thousand, two-hundred and twenty-one games in his coaching career, compared to eight hundred and three losses.

When talking about the 1995 NBA season, Ralph Wiley remarks: "Malone wore down the league last season, when he averaged 25.9 points per game in the first half of the season and 29.4 in the last". In 1995, Utah went on a 11 game winning streak, breaking the Seattle Sonic's winning streak in the process. Jerry Sloan didn't care about the winning streak, however, saying they must keep playing well and not let up on the gas. (Garrity)

Utah starts the season well, but people think they will again miss the Finals (Hoffer). They stumble through the month of December, but regain pace to end the year. Their season ends with a 64-18 record, although they had a stretch of ten losses over sixteen games. If you

remove this outlier of losses, the Jazz played this season on a seventy-two win pace, good to tie the single season record for team wins set by the Chicago Bulls a season before (Basketball-Reference.com). Fighting through the playoffs, Utah took out the Los Angeles Clippers in three games (3-0), the Los Angeles Lakers in five (4-1), and found themselves on the brink of their first ever NBA Finals appearance when up three games to two against the hated rival Houston Rockets. It came down to one shot, as the sixth game of the series, in Houston, was tied at 100 with just under three seconds to go. "The Jazz had just 2.8 seconds to make their game-winning play, after Clyde Drexler's 16-foot bank shot was rebounded by (Karl) Malone, who quickly called timeout. As the teams lined up after the timeout, Houston guard Sedale Threatt said he'd take the first guard through. That was Jeff Hornacek, leaving Drexler on the much-smaller Stockton. Hornacek had told Russell to fake a pass to him, which he did, freezing the defenders for a moment. Malone set a pick on Drexler, allowing Russell to pass to an undefended Stockton, some 35 feet from the basket. Stockton dribbled once and fired, as Charles Barkley rushed at him." Antoine Carr looked back at the shot after the game, saying "As soon as I saw he was wide-open and he took that little dribble, it was money," said Carr. "That was pure cash." John Stockton would end up hitting this 3-point shot over Houston's Charles Barkley as time expired to send the Utah Jazz to the NBA Finals for the first time in NBA history. "I don't think I can describe it," Stockton said after the game. "It was a tremendous feeling." This single shot set up one of the more iconic NBA Finals matchups and sequel matchups for the next two years, while effectively wrapping up one of the most iconic Western Conference rivalries from the past years.

The stage was set. The Utah Jazz were about to play in their first NBA Finals appearance against the iconic Chicago Bulls, led by Michael Jordan. Jordan and the Bulls had made and swept the NBA Finals the past 4 years which "Air Jordan" played. Stock and Malone

were seeing something they hadn't yet in the playoffs - which was unusual for the aging duo - an eastern conference opponent. Phil Taylor, previewing the Finals, talked about Malone's matchup with opposing Power Forward Dennis Rodman. "It is crucial to Utah's success that Malone remain unfazed by Rodman. Put aside all the talk of Rodman's foot and Jordan's penchant for playing golf during the playoffs and Stockton's notorious picks, but understand this: Utah doesn't have a chance if Malone loses his temper." When talking to Malone, Taylor noted that "The 6'9", 256 pound Power Forward had shrugged off his highly anticipated confrontation with Chicago Power Forward Dennis Rodman." Come game one, Karl Malone was put on the free throw line with a chance to take the lead late. A single free throw would put Utah ahead and put pressure on Chicago to match early in the shot clock so that they could get another chance should they miss. But "The Mailman" missed both. Michael Jordan won the game for the Bulls on a last second shot just moments later. "Asked if he had said anything to Jazz forward Karl Malone before Malone missed two foul shots with 9.2 seconds left and the score tied at 82, Pippen replied, 'Not really, I just kind of whispered that the mailman doesn't deliver on Sundays.'" The Jazz proceeded to lose the second game of the series before winning the third and fourth. The fifth game of a seven game series became iconic. "In Utah during the NBA Finals, Jordan had woken up violently ill. It seemed impossible that he would play." Halberstrom continues, "The greatest player in the world looked like a weak little zombie. The general assumption was that he would not play." But Jordan shocked the world, playing and winning the game for the Bulls, putting up stats that proved his point as the greatest player of all time. "The Jazz let a fourth quarter chance slip and when Steve Kerr hit a jumper to break a tie game, the game was over" (thesportsbook.com). The Bulls came away victorious from the game and series, winning 5 of the last 7 titles.

Coming into the 1997-98 season, the Jazz were motivated as ever. They won the second most games ever in franchise history, with 62. The Sports Notebook also notes that, "Just as important, in a ten day stretch encompassing late January and early February, Utah beat Chicago twice by nearly identical scores, 101-94 and 101-93". The Jazz went into the playoffs as the first overall seed for the first time in franchise history as well, securing home court advantage should they need it against the Bulls. They survived a first round matchup against the hated Rockets, winning 3-2, easily outplayed the San Antonio Spurs, 4-1, and swept the Lakers 4-0. They had no trouble reaching the point they had the year before, but may have had a tougher task against the Greatest of All Time and company, them all nearly in their last year in the league due to contracts and injuries. Utah took the series to the sixth game, down three games to two, and had a chance to win it on the final possession, ball in Karl Malone's hands, there was a chance to send the series to a seventh and winner-take-all game, but he fumbled the ball as the defense collapsed around him. Swiftly, the ball was given to the man, Michael Jordan. Jordan stood still with the ball for a moment, letting the clock tick down. The rest of the Bulls team cleared the court to let Bryon Russell attempt to guard Jordan one-on-one with a matter of seconds to go. In an isolation situation, Jordan created the single most iconic shot the league has ever seen. He drove 4 steps to the top of the free throw line, put his hand on Russell's back, and took a step back before attempting the most important shot of his career. He was wide open. "Jordan the drive... yes!" said Marv Albert as the ball landed in the back of the net. "Because of his jumping ability and threat to drive, that shot was virtually unguardable." said David Halberstrom. The events leading up to this shot go down as some of the most controversial in history. It is a very common belief that Jordan should have been called for an offensive foul as he "pushed off" of Russell. If he had been called for the foul, we would have

likely seen a game seven in Utah, and the Jazz may very well have had a championship banner hanging in the rafters of Vivint SmartHome Arena today.

This iconic moment signaled the end of an era for the Utah Jazz. They would fight for the next five years in the playoffs, but they would never get past the second round. “Night after night the stoic, efficient Stockton threw the perfect bounce pass to the stoic, chiseled Malone” Says Chris Ballard and David Sabino in a Sports Illustrated article about the retirements of John Stockton and Karl Malone. “Though most of the articles began with attribute to their departed heroes, there is a feeling in the air: change is good. ‘A group of people would have wanted Stockton and Malone to play till they’re 55.’ says David James ‘But there’s also a contingent that feels like ‘we weren’t going to get past the first round anyway, so why not change it up?’” Unfortunately, this lead to a bit of a muntiny inside of the locker room. “The NBA’s all-time assist leader may be getting pushed out the door by his new backup this season, and number 2 on the all-time assists leaderboard.” “They say that over a period of weeks, Mark Jackson succeeded in turning several teammates against Stockton, by the repeatedly remarking that those players would be better off if Jackson were the Jazz’s new floor leader” (Thompson, Ian). Unfortunately, this drama got to Stockton, resulting in him retiring from his 1,504, nineteen year career, in which he missed a total of twenty-two regular season games. Malone would sign a one-year deal with the Los Angeles Lakers trying to find a title. The Lakers would fail to win their fourth straight with Malone, however, as locker room issues surrounded the team. The Jazz would go on to rebuild the team around young Russian Small Forward Andrei Kirilenko. Chris Ballard summarises the end of this era best: “Seventeen years of edging this close to a title, before exiting at ‘Almostville’”

Citations

Ballard, Chris, and David Sabino. "The Jazz Has a Brand New Beat." *Sports Illustrated* 8 Dec. 2003: n. pag. Print.

"Basketball Statistics and History." *Basketball-Reference.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2017.

Garrity, John. "Sweet Music." *Sports Illustrated* 6 Feb. 1995: n. pag. Print.

Halberstrom, David. "Jordan's Moment." *New Yorker*. N.p., 21 Dec. 1998. Web. 21 Dec. 2016.

Hoffer, Richard. "Twilight of the Gods." *Sports Illustrated* 02 June 1997: n. pag. Print.

Masin, Herman L. "Taking Stock(ton)." *Coach & Athletic Director*. Sept. 1998: n. pag. Print.

Taylor, Phil. "Can Nice Guys Finish First?" *Sports Illustrated* 28 Apr. 1997: n. pag. Print.

"The 1998 Utah Jazz: One Shot Short." n.d.: n. pag. Web.

Thompson, Ian. "A Change in ZIP Code?" *Sports Illustrated* 14 Apr. 2003: n. pag. Print.

Wiley, Ralph. "NBA Preview: Does he ever Deliver? Karl (Mailman) Malone, the Rock Hard Forward of the Upsurging Utah Jazz, is the Whole Package." *Sports Illustrated* 7 Nov. 1998: n. pag. Print.