

Nowitzki's groove has Mavericks back in playoffs

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 19 April 2014 11:05

DALLAS (AP) — Dirk Nowitzki has the spring back in his pogo stick of a jump shot.

The one-legged fadeaway that Kevin Durant admittedly stole is also back in the playoffs after carrying Nowitzki the last few thousand points to the top 10 on the NBA's scoring list.

The 7-foot German — relatively new dad and old hand at this postseason thing after missing last year for the first time since 2000 — is just happy to be back in what he calls the "big dance," a little phrase he stole himself.

"How big our shot is, we'll see," said Nowitzki, whose eighth-seeded Mavericks open the playoffs Sunday at San Antonio, the defending Western Conference champion that finished with the league's best record. "But we have a shot. It's better than being ninth, so we're going to go for it."

The 35-year-old Nowitzki started his 16th season not really knowing where his future Hall of Fame career was headed. He was coming off the first knee surgery of his career, a setback that had a lot to do with Dallas' 12-year playoff streak ending.

He also had new priorities after his daughter was born last summer, keeping him in Dallas and away from family in his native country longer than usual during the offseason.

Nowitzki figured he could be the same player, and everybody around him said he was.

Sure enough, his scoring average went up for the first time in five years, and the rest of his numbers looked a lot like they did in 2010-11, when the Mavericks won the franchise's only championship. Nowitzki credited an intense summer of working out to stay in shape.

"The thing that you don't know fully is the load he carries for this franchise," Dallas coach Rick

Nowitzki's groove has Mavericks back in playoffs

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 19 April 2014 11:05

Carlisle said. "It's a mammoth load not only in scoring but the leadership aspect of it, how he changes games for other players. And the seriousness with which he takes responsibility for winning and losing."

The Mavericks haven't won a playoff game since beating Miami in Game 6 of the NBA Finals three years ago, and they might have the same dubious distinction in a little more than a week because they've lost nine straight to the Spurs.

The "underdog" tag puts Nowitzki in the strange position of having something and nothing to prove all at the same time.

He has a title, and yet another productive season pushed him past seven players on the career scoring list, starting with Jerry West and finishing at No. 10 after supplanting Oscar Robertson.

President of basketball operations Donnie Nelson openly wondered whether Nowitzki really had to do anything else for Dallas, but then remembered who he was talking about.

"He's so incredibly competitive," Nelson said. "He's like the great ones, man. He's got that spirit that the Staubachs and the Nolan Ryans and the Mike Modanos and the Troy Aikmans and those kinds of guys have."

In other words, Nelson places him among the biggest names in Dallas' football-leaning sports history. And since Nowitzki's contract is up after his 13th trip to the playoffs is over, owner Mark Cuban has to decide how much life is left in those legs.

One thing seems certain. Nowitzki won't play anywhere else.

"There's a lot of guys who've been able to score," Cuban said. "But it's that mental toughness, competitive aspect, the type of person he is and the example that he sets, not just for basketball fans in North Texas and around the world but for every future Maverick that walks into the

Nowitzki's groove has Mavericks back in playoffs

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 19 April 2014 11:05

clubhouse."

Nowitzki has a new scoring sidekick in Monta Ellis. His 14th straight season of leading the Mavericks in scoring could be his last. Carlisle will always be trying to limit his minutes, and there's no telling when the production will drop dramatically.

But it's not likely to be in the next couple of weeks, even if the Mavericks get swept in the first round just like they did two years ago against Oklahoma City.

"If I didn't like to compete still, I might as well go home," Nowitzki said. "That's why I'm still playing, because I love to be out there trying to help my team win games. Yeah, it's going to be a great challenge, but also a fun one. We've got to make it fun."

Nowitzki will certainly have a sense of familiarity in the playoff opener. It will be the sixth time he has seen Tim Duncan and the Spurs in the postseason. San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich has been there for all of them.

"He's been everything," Popovich said of Nowitzki. "He's needed to rebound more and he did. He's had a myriad of shots that every year we see new things whether it's his fadeaway or his drives or his spins, pump fakes. He worked himself into a position offensively where he's impossible to guard. But he's still pretty much the same thing."

Even though nobody was sure where Nowitzki was headed when the season started.

Follow Schuyler Dixon on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/apschuyler>