

Linsanity II: Lin leading Hornets on playoff push

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Perhaps this is the start of Linsanity II.

Taiwanese-American Hornets guard Jeremy Lin is heating up and surging Charlotte is blazing a trail to their second playoff appearance in three seasons under coach Steve Clifford.

Lin scored 15 of his 29 points in the fourth quarter on Monday to lead the Hornets back from a 23-point deficit to beat San Antonio — the largest lead surrendered by the Spurs in the Tim Duncan era. Lin followed that with another strong performance on Tuesday night, scoring 21 points in a win over Brooklyn.

Michael Jordan's Hornets (41-30) now find themselves in a three-way tie with Boston and Atlanta for the fourth best record in the Eastern Conference, just a half-game behind third place Miami.

Lin is a major reason why.

Acquired in the off-season via free agency, Lin is averaging 11.8 points and 2.9 assists per game for the Hornets in a reserve role.

Ordinary numbers compared with his history, but he has stepped up his play the past two games, hitting 63 percent (19 of 30) from the field, including five of six from beyond the arc. He is scoring in a variety of ways — long jumpers, drives to basket and on fast breaks. He has also added nine rebounds and six assists, while providing a spark coming off the bench.

"He's been phenomenal," Hornets point guard Kemba Walker said.

When the Hornets trailed 30-7 to the Spurs in the second quarter, it was Lin who helped turn the momentum providing energy off the bench. He penetrated into the lane, which in turned opened up the offense.

“Jeremy was the catalyst,” Clifford said. “In the first quarter, we were just shooting. The ball wasn’t getting into the paint. And he got the ball going to the basket.”

Lin hit three-pointers in the fourth quarter and a 16-foot fall away jumper with 48 seconds left to give the Hornets the lead for good.

He said the win over the Spurs was a confidence-builder for him.

“I think being comfortable and not thinking as much on the court and letting the ball fly and having fun,” Lin said of the difference in his game. “Shots are going in and I think that helps me, helps open up my drive.”

Forward Nicolas Batum said Lin has been “huge” for the Hornets.

“He did it [Monday] night in the second quarter to give us life, and he did it again [Tuesday] night,” Batum said. “I don’t think we would have won that game if he didn’t step up again for us.”

Lin is no stranger to carrying a team.

He did so back in 2012, when as an unheralded player out of Harvard he took Madison Square Garden by storm with a series of outstanding games for the New York Knicks. He became an international sensation, and wound up on Time magazine’s list of Top 100 most influential people of the year.

The media attention is not what it was in New York, but three teams later, Lin appears to have found a home in Charlotte, where he says: “I love playing with this group of guys.”

Charlotte have won 17 of their past 21 games to break free from the pack in the East and vault into playoff contention.

Once a team that viewed simply making the playoffs as a goal, the Hornets now have a realistic shot to host a playoff series.

“We learned a lot about ourselves, and we just want to keep seeing what we can do,” Lin said. “That’s what coach has always been telling us. We don’t know what our ceiling is and we don’t want to say what our ceiling is because we don’t know. We’re just going to keep fighting, keep playing and stick with the process.”

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