Game Column: Jazz now 1-1 against Spurs this season

It has been four years since the Utah Jazz made it to the NBA playoffs and after suffering a 100-86 defeat to the San Antonio Spurs on Friday night, fans may be wondering if the Jazz have playoff potential this year.

The Jazz have lost three of their first six games and losing, at home, to a team they just beat on the road three days prior, doesn’t bode well for fans who still recall a first round loss to the Spurs in the 2012 playoffs.

However, I wouldn’t dismiss the Jazz from playoff contention just yet. They have been the only team to beat the 5-1 Spurs this year and started the 2016 season with a tough schedule. They have also been without their star forward Gordon Hayward throughout their first six games. Out with a broken finger on his left hand, Hayward may be the difference maker when he returns; although he may not have been enough to change the outcome of their 14-point loss to the Spurs.

Friday night’s game started with momentum for Utah, as it quickly outscored San Antonio 10-2 in the first two minutes. But that momentum was short lived. The Spurs called a timeout and reversed the tide, scoring eight unanswered points and only allowing the Jazz to score seven more points for the remainder of the quarter.

The Jazz struggled defensively throughout the game as they failed to contain Spurs forward Kawhi Leonard, who logged a double-double with 29 points and 11 rebounds. Aside from Leonard, they couldn’t defend against LaMarcus Aldridge and Patty Mills who had 19 and 16 points, respectively. With about three and a half minutes remaining in the third quarter, Mills was left wide open on a three-point shot as Jazz defenders sluggishly retreated into position.

Utah was repeatedly beaten on defense in the paint and in the field as it allowed the Spurs to hit 44.6 percent of their field goals. Comparatively, San Antonio’s defense only permitted the Jazz to shoot 37.5 percent from the field. If the Jazz have any hopes for the playoffs this season, they will need to play a tighter defensive game.

Offensively the Jazz were stifled a bit by San Antonio but there is some good chemistry between players. In the third quarter, Dante Exum assisted Derrick Favors with a perfectly timed lob that resulted in an easy layup off the glass. However, it remains to be seen if this team chemistry will extend to Gordon Hayward when he returns. After missing six games he will probably need a couple of games to regain his timing and rhythm with the team.

With a .500 record the Jazz must prepare for five consecutive games on the road and if they hope to regain a winning record, a couple things will need to happen – they will need to play better defense as a team, and they will need Hayward to get healthy and off the bench.

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