

Offensive rebounding may be the least glamorous facet of the game, but it can be the most important factor in the playoffs

BY SAM SMITH

It's time to shoot, which for the Bulls means it's time for Michael Jordan to go to work.

Normally, this is also the time when Dennis Rodman, assuming Jordan will miss, also goes to work. These few seconds serve as the culmination of the work he did in practice the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that. It's the time when he simply says to himself, "I'm going to get that ball," the time to show people what makes him so special.

The past couple of weeks, however, have not been normal times for Rodman, even by his standards. Hampered by the knee injury that caused him to miss the final 13 games of the regular season, scrutinized as never before by the officials and unwilling to adjust his behavior accordingly, he has not been an offensive rebounder—he has simply been offensive. In the first four games of the Bulls' series with the Hawks, he accumulated almost as many technicals (4) as offensive boards (6). And that, perhaps more than any other reason, is why Chicago has at times looked vulnerable. Without Rodman, second-chance points have been hard to come by, and though the team led the Hawks, 3-1, entering the week, those points will be even harder to get against the Knicks or the Heat.

Rodman, and players like him who specialize in the dirty work in the NBA, is similar to the people who get the best job or the best-looking date. They simply go after it. It's what everyone wants, but it takes hard work, effort and thought. Yes, even for Dennis Rodman.

When it's playoff time, there's a lot of talk about scoring and 3-point shooting and defense and coaching.

What often is not talked about is offensive rebounding, which may be considered the least glamorous facet of the game, but is one of the key elements to success in the playoffs, if not the most important, and is more than an accident or good luck.

Creating a second chance to score can be the difference in a game—and a series. In the time it takes for a team to get a put-back, momentum can swing completely. Opponents can be demoralized.

In the fourth quarter of Utah's 110-95 Game 4 win over the Lakers, Eddie Jones and Kobe Bryant helped the Lakers cut a 13-point fourth-quarter deficit to four. That's when Karl Malone tried to take charge. Twice he took fadeaway jumpers. And twice he missed. But both times Bryon Russell was there for the rebound and score, and the Lakers were never the same.

Late in Game 2 in Seattle's only victory against the Rockets last week, Shawn Kemp rebounded a Gary Payton miss, scored and seconds later converted a three-point play, putting the Sonics ahead, 96-90, with 2:15 left. The Rockets' Clyde Drexler said it was the pivotal play of the game.

"Offensive rebounding is the meat and potatoes of what you're doing," Bulls coach Phil Jackson says. "That's why we emphasize it so much in the playoffs."

And why the Bulls, despite their success last weekend in Atlanta, need an effective Rodman to win a fifth title.

"The key to offensive rebounding is anticipation and knowing where the ball is going to go," Hall of Fame center and current NBC broadcaster Bill Walton says. "That's why Rodman is so good. He gets into the mind of his own shooters. He thinks, moves, sees the rhythm of Jordan and Scottie Pippen, and one big advantage he has is he knows they're not going to pass it to him. Dennis is out there saying, 'It's not coming to me. He's going to shoot it.'"

"It's like when I played in Boston with Larry (Bird) and Kevin (McHale) and Danny (Ainge). I'd say, 'Go ahead and shoot, fine. You're great shooters. I'm going to figure out where the ball is going and get an offensive rebound.'"

An extra shot, or an easy basket—the so-called "little things" that coaches talk about—can make all the difference in big games.

In the playoffs, there generally are fewer shots taken, and the shots taken are tougher to make, not only because of the pressure of the moment, but because of the pressure of the defense.

"No one's going to shoot that great in the playoffs," Jackson says. "The defense is going to be better, contact is going to be allowed more and there's going to be a hand in your face."

Which means more misses. In the first round, the combined overall shooting percentage was 45.7 percent. That was about the same as the percentage during the regular season. But those 16 teams were the league's best and included sharp-shooting Utah, Chicago, Washington and Charlotte. Eight of the nine poorest-shooting teams did not make the playoffs. The playoff shooting percentage should have been much higher than it was in the regular season, but it wasn't.

Enter Rodman, and his ilk, at least in the rebounding sense.

There's Shawn Kemp, Charles Barkley, Dikembe Mutombo, Alonzo Mourning, Charles Oakley, Shaquille O'Neal and Scottie Pippen.

Yes, count Pippen among the giants, because getting the ball involves not only strength, but guile.

"The best ever was probably Moses Malone," Pistons assistant John Bach says. "He'd shoot the ball to miss so he could get a second shot that was closer and better. I wish some players in the league now believed in that. You want guys to shoot and go after it hard, guys like Kemp or Pippen and (Grant) Hill. They slash and keep coming to the basket, where they can knock the ball loose. Some of the big men you can get to quickly and knock them off balance, take away their space. But the slashers like Pippen are hard to get to."

That's why Rodman, who epitomizes of offensive rebounding, is such a key. He averaged 5.8 offensive boards per game in the regular season, barely finishing behind the Nets' Jayson Williams (5.9), who didn't qualify among the league leaders because he played in only 41 games.

"In the playoffs, it's who controls the boards. That is the team that usually is going to win," former Bulls center and current assistant Bill Cartwright says.

It's a simple formula: E=MC.

Effort equals more conversions.

"A lot of times offensive rebounds lead to easy baskets," Hawks forward Christian Laettner says. "And the team that usually wins is the team that gets more easy buckets."

The only Eastern Conference team to win the battle on the offensive boards and not advance past the first round was the Hornets, and the Knicks didn't have much chance at the offensive boards because they shot 57 percent in their three-game sweep, a staggering figure for the playoffs.

The Bulls are a little different from most teams because they run a set offense, the triangle, which establishes offensive rebounding position within the offense.

"The best teams offensive rebound easily," Bach says. "Like the Bulls. They come at you with at least three guys and a man at the foul line, who can be Michael or Scottie, so sometimes it doesn't even matter if they have Rodman in there."

Chicago's system benefited the team Saturday in Game 3, when Rodman was so useless that Jackson chose to sit him the entire second half. Jason Caffey, Brian Williams and Toni Kukoc all crashed the boards and compensated for Rodman's absence. The Bulls pulled down 25 offensive rebounds (to the Hawks' 14), nearly matching their total from the first two games combined, and converted them into 31 second-chance points in their 100-80 win. But it's questionable whether the team can hit the offensive boards like that consistently without Rodman. Jordan has been the team's leading rebounder, but if he continues to expend a lot of energy in the middle, he may not be as strong when the team needs him to take over games in the fourth quarter, especially against New York or Miami.

Another benefit of getting an offensive rebound—or at least of battling for one—is it keeps a team from breaking out on the run and getting easy scores. If a team has to keep players back to make sure they get the defensive rebound, it slows the team's game and prevents it from getting easy baskets unless, like Chicago and Seattle, it can start its fast break with a lot of steals.

And the psychological advantage you get from an offensive rebound can't be overstated. "Obviously, getting an offensive rebound gives you another chance to score," says Bulls center Bill Wennington, who is

jured and on the inactive list for the post season. "But it really can become deflating if a team to play 22 seconds of defense and to have to do it over again. We're, obviously, fortunate enough to have Dennis, but

thing we also try is tips. Luc (Longley) Toni (Kukoc), if they can't get the ball, try to hit it to a spot where they know someone will be. That's one advantage of offense, that we know where guys are

posed to be because we play a system, although Phil would rather we go up and get the ball."

And bring it back out.

Most teams like to take advantage of working a team's defense through two 24-second clocks, although the temptation exists to go right back up for the shot.

"The best offensive rebounders are usually the guys who are the worst offensive players," Walton says, citing Rodman, Oakley and the Lakers' Jerome Kersey. "Nobody is ever guarding them, so they have a lane to the basket."

"But what drives me crazy," he says, echoing a refrain among some coaches, "is the guys who get offensive rebounds and insist on shooting no matter what."

Teams that miss a lot of shots have more opportunities for offensive rebounds, but the other key element is having a star, as the Bulls do with Jordan.

Defending him almost always involves a double-team, which means someone who is less likely to score is left open—someone such as Rodman, who then has a clear lane to the basket for the rebound.

Also, a team with good defensive players can offset the great offensive rebounder. The Bulls are one of the best, along with the Heat and Jazz. If your team plays good defense and has good individual defenders, then you have to double-team less frequently, thus not leaving those open lanes to the basket for rebounders.

Knowing not only who is shooting, but when and from where is another key. One of the regular elements of Bulls practices is a shooting drill in which Jackson divides the team into three-man units. Jackson usually puts Rodman with Jordan and Pippen. Most have believed the purpose has been to rein in Rodman by keeping him under the watchful eye of the two senior members of the team.

But the combination also gives Rodman a chance to watch how and from where and in what motion the two players in the Bulls' offense most likely to shoot will take their shots.

"One of the big keys to offensive rebounding is knowing where the shots are coming from," Bach says. "If teammates don't expect a shot, then that is a bad shot. A good shot is one that is expected, one that can be rebounded and allows you to get back and play defense. Any ill-advised shot can jeopardize your whole defense."

"The great ones, like Rodman, know distances and shots," Jackson says. "What's truly amazing about Dennis is his tipping angles. ... He's got some amazing skills at that level." As do Barkley and Kemp, and Hakeem Olajuwon and Mutombo and Oakley.

"Guys get intimidated when you're active," Rodman says. "I've gotten a knack for knowing where the ball is and where it's going and other guys tend to give up on the ball. I never do. I see a shot sometimes and I think, 'I'll be the first guy ever to get a ball like that.' You think there's no chance, and then I'm there."

Lately, he hasn't been there. But the Bulls are hoping that sometime soon, when Jordan shoots again, Rodman will be back at work. A title may hang in the balance. ♦