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Bird on One of His Rolls

By Ron Thomas

If a city could frown, worry and fret collectively, then Boston must have been in a funk from June until December.

Favorite son Larry Bird was hurting.

During last season's NBA playoffs, the aching elbow pained him so much that Bird couldn't straighten his right arm or his jump shot. Even the creaked word "hangry" was mentioned.

"There was great concern," said Bob Woolf, Bird's agent, friend and next-door neighbor. X-rays revealed foreign bodies in the elbow, but rest was the prescribed cure. "The elbow is so delicate that if you go in there surgically you could sever something," Woolf said.

Then during this preseason Bird — who will lead the Boston Celtics against the Warriors in tonight's game at the Coliseum Are-

na (Channel 36, 7:30) — tried to play with recurring back pain that began during the offseason.

"One day I woke up with a minor pain that I thought was just like any other injury — a bruise that will go away," Bird said after yesterday's practice. "A week later, it started bothering me a little more. Two weeks later, I had some

his back stiffened and sometimes he had to go to the locker room to stretch before he could play again.

When the regular season began, Bird could pass and rebound as well as ever, but he lacked quick acceleration to the basket. His shot was off, he couldn't come over to pick up the ball, and he felt frustrated.

He has scored 20 or more in 25 of the last 26 games.

problems. A month later, I was in bed, and this is from just shooting and playing ball. I waited too long to see a therapist that knew what he was doing."

When training camp began, Bird says he was "struggling real bad." Bird missed practice time and exhibition games. If he came out of a game for a few minutes,

"I struggled for a month or two months," Bird said. "When (the back pain) quit, my game just started coming."

"All of a sudden," Boston coach K. C. Jones said, "he was moving and fluid and he was the old Larry Bird. Everything was there. The flow on the shot, the cuts, the moves and the pass."

That was mid-December, and Bird's game has soared ever since. More so even to new heights, which is not easy for someone who has won the NBA's last two Most Valuable Player awards.

The past two months, he played as well as I've seen anyone play. My teammate Danny Ainge says Bird does so many things well. He's always up in the categories like two-point shooting and scoring, but the difference this year is he's had three or four blocked shots and has had games when he's had eight or nine steals.

"I can't explain how he's doing it, but he's just doing everything well."

Since December 18, Bird has scored 20 or more points in 25 of 26 games. During All-Star weekend, he won the Long Distance Shoot-out by sinking 11 three-point shots in 12 attempts.

He was last week's NBA player of the week. And in the last four games, Bird has averaged 31

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An expressive Larry Bird protected the ball from Ed Pinckney earlier this week in

BIRD ON ONE OF THOSE ROLLS — UNSTOPPABLE

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points, 14 rebounds and eight assists, even though he was ejected (with two technical fouls) with 10 minutes left to play in Monday's loss in Phoenix.

The streak began with back-to-back triple-doubles against Seattle and Portland. The latter was a dreamland performance that included 47 points, 15 rebounds, 11 assists, 21-for-34 shooting, at least eight baskets with his left hand, the game-tying basket that forced overtime and the game-winning jumper with Trail Blazers hanging all over him for a one-point victory.

"He was awesome," Ainge said that night. "On the last shot, I saw him go up and I said to myself, 'No, no,' but he made it. I couldn't believe it, and I think he even got fouled on the play."

"Three times," Bird said. "I got fouled three times before I finally hit the shot."

That was no surprise. "Bird is maybe the greatest clutch player that ever played the game," said Portland coach Jack Ramsay, usu-

ally a master of understatement.

"There's a lot of guys who can shoot it if they're up by one or it's a tie score," Bird said. "There aren't many guys in this league who are going to take the shot if they're down by one — especially the last-second shot.

"That's a tough shot to take. To tell you every time I would like to do that, that would be ridiculous."

But Bird takes it — and makes it — again and again.

"I shoot so much, by the time you get the ball and start moving, when you go up for the shot you don't think about being scared or missing," he said.

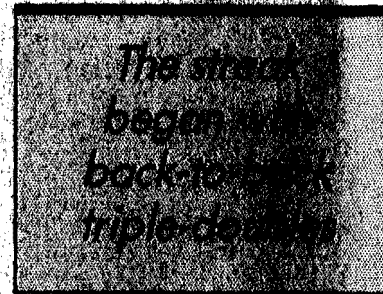
"I just do what I always do. After it leaves my hand and I watch it, that's when I start thinking about it."

Has he ever played better than he is now?

"I don't know," said Bird, who has excelled despite feeling pain in his elbow again the past month. "Some days you go in spurts and

you wonder why you do. Some days you struggle a little bit and you wonder why you struggle.

"I play the game the same way every night, and some nights you're a little better than others. It's hard to say if I'm on top of my game."



There are technical reasons why Bird even betters himself sometimes. He doesn't know why, but shooting a lot of free throws during a game seems to help his outside shot. And recently, his teammates have been looking for him near the basket more than usual.

"Usually, if I start out hitting my inside shots, my outside shots

fall too," Bird said. "In this past two weeks, everything inside and outside has been going."

Sometimes there is an extra special night when the game belongs to Larry Bird.

"I've been in a lot of games where I knew I had complete control of the game," Bird said.

"It's a cocky feeling. I had it (Monday) night. When the game started, I really thought I could have scored 50 points — easy."

Bird scored 18 points against Phoenix in the first quarter, but sat out a few minutes in the second period, never regained his rhythm and finished with 24.

But the power to control a game is always there, and neither Bird nor his opponent knows when it will surface.

For the Warriors, tonight may be one of those nights.

(Tomorrow: The Beginnings of Larry Bird)