

Mavs-Spurs, Game 1: Can Carlisle Out-Pop Pop?

Contributed by Mike Fisher
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I'm sure Pop will have better days. After all, he can't make a decision regarding something as innocuous as which gum to chew (Pop picked Dubble-Bubble! He's a genius!) without earning national basketball praise. So he must be very, very clever.

But that Hack-a-Damp (Cramp-a-Damp? E-rick-a-Brick?) that mucked up Sunday's 100-94 Mavs win in Game 1? It was a desperate and disastrous move that dared to challenge one of the foundation pieces of what makes the Mavs what they've been for a decade.

And the idea that anybody is going to outcoach anybody else? That seems desperate, too.

Late in the third quarter, the Spurs decided that the only way to slow Dirk Nowitzki's offense was to foul the Mavs at the beginning of Dallas possessions.

"We wanted to put (Dampier) at the line and hope he would miss free throws rather than Dirk killing us the way he was," Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said.

So, for a few minutes in the third, instead of Dirk killing the Mavs, Dampier simply maimed them, making 4-of-6 free throws while the failed strategy played itself out.

Maybe SA's desperation was understandable; the manner in which Dirk was rolling on his way to 36 points on a record-level 12-of-14 shooting maybe meant he was going to get Dallas two points on every trip. With Cramp-a-Damp, maybe Dampier (a career 62-percent free-thrower) might net Dallas only half that.

So with 3:16 left in the third and Dallas up 67-63, Roger Mason finally made himself useful with the on-purpose foul. At 2:45, Mason tackles Damp again. At 2:17, it's Mason again. …

And in those two minutes, the Mavs went from being up 67-63 to being up 71-65.

Free points? Dallas will take those.

"When they went to the fouling tactic, Mavs coach Rick Carlisle said, "(Damp) made four out of six, which was great for us at that point."

Added Dirk: "I was surprised, but Pop, he's just like Nellie … You've got to be ready for everything with him. He's liable to do anything at any time, he doesn't care what anybody thinks or says, he's going to do whatever he thinks is right at that moment."

Yeah, yeah, that crazy Pop! But Dirk, what about your teammate?

"I actually thought Damp stepped up and made some big free throws," Nowitzki added.

Here's something else screwy about it: If it's a sound strategy, why not do it a fourth time? And a fifth? Instead, on the fourth possession in a row, Pop opted for another stroke of genius: He assigned somebody named Keith Bogans to guard Nowitzki.

What did the 6-5 Bogans do against Dirk on the Mavs' next possession? He committed a shooting foul – not intentional, of course -- so the Mavs paraded back to the line and made two more.

Which is what they do.

You may be noticing: Sorry, but I don't much fall for the Pop Mythology.

I said so in this piece, comparing Carlisle to Popovich …and I realize this is sacrilege. (To be clear: I fall for the wins and the rings, just not the mythology.) But please understand where I'm coming from.

Over the years, beyond the Mavs, I've worked as a daily beat writer covering the the Cowboys, the Broncos and the 49ers. I wasn't buying those NFL tickets; I had the good fortune of being able to work alongside some of the finest minds and most legendary names in their sports. Jimmy Johnson and Bill Parcells and Dan Reeves and Bill Walsh (you non-footballers can look some of 'em up on NFL.com).

And every one of them was only as good as their Aikman or their L.T. or their Elway or their Montana.

Pop is better than most … but he's not better or different than Jimmy Johnson or Bill Parcells or Dan Reeves or Bill Walsh.

Anyway ... Some San Antonio followers this morning are bemoaning the free-throw discrepancy in this game, but gang, if the Mavs are right (and if Pop is going to again swing the Roger Mason Stick) … get used to it.

Dampier, as crummy a free-thrower as he might be, is still part of the culture of a Mavs team that is in this decade one of the finest free-throw-shooting teams of all time. Getting to the line is critical to this club's success … While the Spurs were attempting 14 free throws, the Mavs were attempting 34, and making 25 of them.

Caron Butler was 5-of-6 from the line; he worked his way there.

Dirk Nowitzki was 12-of-12 … he's now made 86 straight free throws. … and is presently a better scorer from the line alone than most NBA players are from all other spots on the floor combined.

And Damp's 5-of-12? Well, how can the Spurs complain about this? They charitably, strategically, gave them to Dallas.

"Getting to the free-throw line is a really important thing in the playoffs," Carlisle said.

By the way, completely unnoticed here, I guess because Carlisle's choice of chewing gum isn't as important as Pop's: You will notice that Rick resisted the temptation to react to the foul plan by yanking Dampier.

Dallas's coach showed faith in his center … Does that count as a smart strategy or is it not “unique’’ enough?

After all, Dampier guarded Tim Duncan well enough (relatively; Timmy has 27) that Dallas didn't need to double-team him. (I had Dampier down for two blocks on Duncan in the third quarter alone.) Dampier played 30 minutes and pulled down 12 boards and if you combine that with Brendan Haywood's 18 minutes, six rebounds and 10 points? The Mavs centers totaled 15 points and 17 boards and maybe Slick Rick knows what he's doing here.

Anyway. … our own Don Nelson is the creator of this strategy, and way back when, it certainly made sense when the upstart Mavs used the Hack-a-Shaq to crawl into the head of awful free-throws Shaquille O'Neal.

But remember the main reasons Nellie used to do it … and for one game, anyway, let's see if this applies to Pop's thinking as well:

Nellie's teams had no other way to stop Shaq's team. And Nellie's squads were huge underdogs.