

# The Star-Ledger

## **Nets no match for McGrady**

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**For the Star-Ledger**

Apparently his back is okay.

After missing the past three games with back spasms, Tracy McGrady made his triumphant return last night at the Nets' expense. The Rockets' franchise player converted the 94-foot court at Continental Airlines Arena into his personal canvas, brushing past helpless defenders and drawing a perfect fourth-quarter picture with 20 of his game-high 35 points as Houston defeated the Nets, 99-91.

"He was unbelievable," said Nets coach Lawrence Frank, whose team fell to 3-4. "We tried trapping him on pick-and-rolls, to trying to get the ball out of his hands before the pick-and-roll, to playing zone."

Nothing worked.

Following a 3-pointer by Jason Kidd (team-high 20 points, nine rebounds) that pulled the Nets within 77-74, and gave the 20,098 in attendance some life, McGrady took charge, scoring the Rockets' next 10 points, capped by a 21-foot pull-up jumper with a defender in his face.

"He got hot, and more than anything he got comfortable," said Richard Jefferson, who scored 17 but had the unenviable task of guarding McGrady for most of the game.

"We were there with our defense, and a couple of times we weren't there," Kidd said. "He just got going, he got a comfort level, he took what the defense gave him. That's what makes him a great player. ... I mean, he was shooting 'em deep. People were in his face, he was shooting over them. There's nothing you can do."

In the first half, McGrady looked like a player who hadn't played in 10 days, missing eight of nine field-goal attempts.

"No problems with the back, he said. "The only problem was trying to catch my breath the first five minutes of the game. But I felt pretty good physically.

"The second half I definitely felt like I was going to come out and attack the basket and be more aggressive on the offensive end."

That was something Vince Carter couldn't afford to be, nursing three fouls. Carter had a rough night, shooting 6-for-19, never finding his rhythm after sitting out the last nine minutes of the second period.

"It was tough," Carter said. "I couldn't really participate and get back on track with the team. But it's not an excuse. We have to find a way to win if we're to be where we said we want to be."

Still, by the start of the fourth quarter, a 17-point Houston lead was down to 70-64, and Rockets coach Jeff Van Gundy was having flashbacks to the last three games, which were all characterized by fourth-quarter meltdowns.

In a home loss to New Orleans, the Rockets were outscored by 13 in the fourth period; against Orlando, they blew a four-point lead in the last two minutes; and they were outscored 28-20 in their four-point loss at Miami.

"To lose the same way three straight games should be disturbing to all of us," Van Gundy said, "because it shows we don't believe in what we're doing, we don't trust enough or the plan is flawed because we can't physically do it."

Of course, the only flaw in that analysis is that the Rockets didn't have McGrady in those three games.

And as he usually does, McGrady made the fourth quarter his own.

"It was one of those cases where I was feeling good, in a zone, and the defense doesn't matter," McGrady said. "Richard Jefferson was playing good defense, but sometimes it doesn't really matter."

Jefferson agreed.

"Of their points, he had a lot of them and forced us to guard him and their guys had open looks," he said. "But most of the shots he took were contested."

Jeff McInnis, who made some big plays for the Nets, opened the fourth with a 3-pointer that brought his team within 70-67, but that's as close as they would come.

A Kidd 3-pointer made it a 77-74 game with 8:27 left, but McGrady immediately responded with a 3-pointer over McInnis from the wing, and two possessions later, he hit a catch-and-shoot fadeaway from the left elbow to make it an 82-75 cushion.

He had his rhythm now, and he was only getting started. One stop later, he knocked down a 3 from the wing after McInnis arrived late on a close-out. The Rockets' lead was back to double digits (85-75), and Frank called time out at the 6:06 mark.

The Nets had one last run left, getting consecutive scores from Carter (a bump-and-fade against David Wesley) and McInnis (a 3-pointer) to get back within 87-80. But they began doubling McGrady off every screen, leaving them vulnerable elsewhere, and both Wesley and Jon Barry made them pay with back-to-back 3-pointers to make it a 93-80 runaway by the 3:38 mark.

"We could never get over the hump." Frank said. "Every time we (got closer) they hit momentum-changing shots."