



Granger's season among best ever for a Pacer

By Cliff Brunt, AP Sports Writer
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INDIANAPOLIS — Reggie Miller never put up the kind of scoring numbers Danny Granger produced for the Indiana Pacers this season.

In fact, just one Pacer has averaged more than the 25.8 points per game Granger put up this season since the Pacers joined the NBA in 1976, and that was Billy Knight, more than three decades ago.

Granger ranked fifth in the league in scoring in one of the best seasons ever by a Pacer. As it became more likely he would remain among the league's leaders throughout the season, the 6-foot-9 small forward began drawing comparisons to Miller, the face of the Pacers franchise for nearly two decades. The comments increased when Granger became an All-Star for the first time and became a top candidate for the most improved player award.

Miller is best known for playoff heroics during an 18-year career that ended in 2005. His teams reached the Eastern Conference Finals six times, and he led the Pacers to the NBA Finals in 2000.

Granger hasn't won a playoff series, and his teams have missed the playoffs three straight years. So, while he likes the comparisons to Miller, he knows he must win to make them legitimate.

"I do love that pressure, and I relish it, and I only look to get better," Granger said. "I'm accomplishing a lot of things, but until we get this team at that championship level, I won't think I've succeeded."

In fairness to Granger, Miller was just on one winning team in his first four years and didn't win a playoff series until his seventh season. And Miller never averaged more than 24.6 points per game in a season.

The Pacers appear headed for better times. The team finished 36-46 this season despite an injury that cost Mike Dunleavy, the team's No. 2 scorer a year ago, most of this season. The Pacers got two starters, Brandon Rush and Roy Hibbert, out of the 2008 draft, and both improved late in the season.

Add Granger's growth, and the Pacers have much to look forward to. Granger has increased his scoring average by at least five points in each of the past three seasons. He averaged 7.5 points as a rookie, 13.9 his second season and 19.6 in 2007-08.

He expected to improve this season, but not so rapidly or so much.

"I think I did exceed my expectations for this year, and I hope to do it again next year," he said. "Hopefully, we'll be in a different situation where we're in the playoffs and we'll be competing for an Eastern Conference championship."



Granger missed 11 games in 2009 with a torn tendon in his right foot, and the team went 6-5 without him. Indiana coach Jim O'Brien said Indiana's success without their star shouldn't fool anyone.

"The team was playing well against the weakest part of our schedule," O'Brien said. "So it wasn't a matter of the team was playing well because Danny was out. Danny's an All-Star."

Granger returned and averaged 28.4 points in 15 games the rest of the season.

"Once he got back into a groove, he played like we expect Danny Granger to play," O'Brien said.

Granger knows what he must do to become a true superstar, the kind team president Larry Bird has said is capable of making the 2012 Olympic team.

"I'd like to improve my rebounding," Granger said. "Sometimes, I take it easy on the rebounding. I've got to be more of a leader on the defensive end. My one-on-one game, which is coming along, is not where I want it to be."

Granger elevated his game in January. He averaged 34.7 points and shot 49 percent over a six-game stretch against Western Conference teams that began on Jan. 3.

At about the same time, he began making dramatic Miller-esque shots. He drained a game-winning 3-pointer over two-time MVP Steve Nash on Jan. 7 in Phoenix, then made a game-tying jumper late in regulation before the Pacers beat Detroit in overtime a week later.

He made another clutch shot on Jan. 19, a game-tying 3-pointer with 2.5 seconds left Monday at New Orleans, before being one-upped by Chris Paul at the buzzer.

Granger doesn't expect to increase his scoring another five points next season, but that might not be the best measure of his improvement anyway. He wants to increase his assist-to-turnover ratio, his field-goal percentage, and most of all, the team's win total.

"I think I can get better every year," he said. "I got a lot of time left, and I'm trying to maximize it."

Granger said his success is more about determination than natural ability.

"It's just a tribute to my hard work," he said. "It just a testament to how far you can go if you do work hard."

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