

Clark's late scratch prompts questions

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Caitlin Clark was ruled out at the last minute as she missed her first game of the season, and Indiana Fever coach Stephanie White's comments about the decision presented more questions than answers.

An hour and a half before the Fever's 90-73 win over the Portland Fire tipped off on Wednesday, May 20, the Fever announced that Clark would be sidelined with a back injury.

The WNBA requires teams to submit injury reports the day before a game by 5 p.m. in the time zone of the contest's location.

From then, teams are meant to immediately inform the league with status changes in the case that new injuries or illnesses arise.

This year, the WNBA adopted a new game status reporting system that generates real-time injury/illness reports for all 15 teams every 15 minutes and can be viewed by fans.

The league has fined teams for failure to abide by these rules in the past. USA TODAY spoke with multiple sources familiar with the league's policies. Based on those conversations, it's reasonable to anticipate that the league will be looking into the circumstances that led to Clark's absence.

• Stephanie White's comments cause confusion

In her pregame news conference, White said that Clark did not participate in Tuesday's practice and instead received treatment.

White added that the team's general approach is to wait and see how players' bodies respond.

"(Clark) just woke up with some stiffness and soreness," White said. "For us, it's not the time to take a chance. We just really want to be cautious."

An early report claimed Clark's absence was "part of a strategic management plan for the season," but White said otherwise.

"No, absolutely not," White said when asked if Clark's absence was related to injury management. "She's healthy, we're not managing anything. This is just a back issue that we want to make sure we give the time to be ready."



Fever guard Caitlin Clark, front, and head coach Stephanie White are seen during a game last season against the Connecticut Sun. TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI/IMAGN IMAGES

If Clark playing on Wednesday would have put her long-term availability at risk, White has a looser definition of the word "healthy" than most. Outside of that word choice, the choice to keep Clark out certainly sounds like part of a load management strategy.

The other reasonable explanation is that Clark is hurt.

The confusion from fans is understandable, as White opposed both of those ideas.

Postgame, White was asked multiple follow-up questions about Clark and why her status was not updated sooner.

"Not everybody that doesn't practice or gets a pro day is on the injury report. That happens all the time," White said. "She wasn't listed on the injury report earlier because we expected her to play."

When asked if Clark is hurt, White in-

ited reporters to ask the training staff for more information. This is the second time she's made that recommendation this season, and the media is not allowed to interview training staff of any team.

"Her back is sore," White said. "If there's anything more detailed than that, that's the training staff."

This back injury is not one of the many ailments that plagued Clark in her limited 2024 campaign.

It was made public for the first time after the team's season-opening loss to the Dallas Wings, when the former Iowa Hawkeye returned to play after she went to the locker room to get her back adjusted.

"It's going to be an ongoing thing," White said of Clark's back at the time. "We wouldn't have played her 30 min-

utes if she wasn't okay."

• Will the Indiana Fever be fined?

White told reporters "no, no," when asked if she expects the Fever to be fined for failing to provide a prompt update on Clark's status.

Multiple sources with knowledge of the league's policies indicated it's too soon to know whether that's true. If the league does investigate the matter, the first item of interest is likely to surround Clark's missing practice on Tuesday.

None of the local media members who cover the Fever reported Clark's absence from the court that day. This is likely because Clark was present and in practice gear, and teams are only required to make 30 minutes of practice available for media viewing.

If Clark's back discomfort was significant enough to warrant her missing practice, WNBA media policy experts agree that she should have at least been added to the status report as "probable."

As Clark's back discomfort continued the next morning, it's unclear why the team didn't report that development by the afternoon, but that's likely what the league will endeavor to find out.

There is no firm guideline for WNBA fines, and experts said they are issued out on a case-by-case basis with a consideration for past offenses taken into account. The league is also not required to announce if it's probing the Fever or if the team is getting penalized.

Teams aren't punished often for failure to comply with the rules for status reporting.

In one of the most recent examples, the Las Vegas Aces were fined an undisclosed amount for a similar situation, nearly two years ago.

The Aces didn't report any injuries the day before a game against the New York Liberty on Sept. 8, 2024, leading many to believe that now four-time MVP A'ja Wilson would be available after sustaining a late-game injury against the Connecticut Sun in the previous game.

Wilson was later ruled out on game day and arrived at the arena in a medical boot. Aces coach Becky Hammon said postgame that Wilson's absence was "precautionary," and the Aces were penalized.

ANALYSIS

Thunder get even vs. turnover-prone Spurs

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The NBA Western Conference finals are all knotted up.

The Oklahoma City Thunder outlasted the San Antonio Spurs on Wednesday, May 20 in Game 2, 122-113, as the series now heads to San Antonio.

Two-time MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander bounced back with a 30-point, 9-assist game after he had struggled with double-teams and inefficiency in the series opener.

On the other side of that, Spurs phenom Victor Wembanyama (21 points, 17 rebounds) appeared to wear down late in the game, as Oklahoma City ramped up its physicality against him.

Here are takeaways from Game 2 of the Western Conference finals:

• The biggest issue for the Spurs is obvious

In Game 1, the Spurs committed 21 turnovers – against 14 by the Thunder – yielding to a 28-17 deficit in points off of those giveaways.

On Wednesday night, it was much of the same. San Antonio turned the ball over 21 times (compared to Oklahoma City's 9), leading to a 27-10 Thunder edge in points off of turnovers. Fourteen of those Spurs turnovers were on Thunder steals.

The main culprit here is Stephon Castle, who has had a solid series against Oklahoma City, overall, though he has committed 20 turnovers across both games. Some of that is because he has been tasked with more ball-handling than usual; starting point guard De'Aaron Fox has missed both games, and Dylan Harper left Game 2 in the third quarter.

That has forced Castle to be the primary play-maker. It's a role he's comfortable with in smaller doses, but Spurs coach Mitch Johnson already offered some possible solutions to cut down on those giveaways.

"We've addressed it and we'll continue to, in terms of trying to help him with some of his reads, especially when he's tired," Spurs coach Mitch Johnson said after the game. "Whether it's playing more off of two feet or getting off the ball earlier with the early pass and letting the ball find the open man.



Thunder guard Ajay Mitchell drives to the basket against Spurs guard Stephon Castle on May 20. ALONZO ADAMS/IMAGN IMAGES

"They do such a great job of showing crowds in the paint and having multiple bodies. So it's not just Steph. He had too many turnovers, but our whole team did."

Castle did put the blame on himself, but it's unclear whether Fox or Harper – or both – will miss additional time in the series. And while the Spurs did steal one game on the road, this pace of turning the ball over is not sustainable for winning.

• How Oklahoma City defends Victor Wembanyama will define the rest of this series

In Game 1, 12 of Victor Wembanyama's 14 made field goals came inside the restricted area, which is the semicircle that's four feet from the center of the rim. Another of those 14 was from just outside the restricted area, and the final one was the logo 3 he hit in the first over-

time.

In Game 2, the Thunder altered their defensive plan on Wembanyama.

Whereas in the series opener, Thunder coach Mark Daigneault chose to rotate a platoon of wing players – Alex Caruso and Jalen Williams being the primary ones – Wednesday night, he asked center Isaiah Hartenstein to be the primary defender on Wembanyama.

Hartenstein was physical, using his added bulk to displace Wembanyama down low and make it more difficult for him to get clean looks down low.

That said, Hartenstein also pushed the limits of what's legal, often grabbing Wembanyama's arms and jersey, pulling him and shoving him around the low block.

"I thought the other night, and during the regular season, having wings on (Wembanyama) was effective in the

macro," Daigneault said. "The other night, he just had way too much at the restricted."

"Two things that just didn't feel good were his stuff at the rim just felt too sustainable, so we had to make some corrections there; it won't be the last time we have a wing on him, we had a wing on him a couple of possessions tonight. And then the other thing that doesn't feel good is playing Hart 12 minutes. It just didn't feel good to me. And in order to get him extended past (12 minutes), that's the matchup."

Wembanyama still did score 21 points on 8-of-16 shooting and he hauled in 17 rebounds, but the added energy expended to battle Hartenstein appeared to take its toll late in the game; Wembanyama went just 2-of-7 in the fourth quarter, scoring only 4 points.

Daigneault added that the Thunder would never commit to having Hartenstein focus on Wembanyama the entire game, but that the injury to Williams prompted Hartenstein to take on the bulk of that responsibility in Game 2.

The Spurs will certainly tweak their plan to find ways to get Wembanyama easier offense. The Thunder, in turn, will need to adjust accordingly, because this is the central matchup in the series.

• Injury management is suddenly going to be a delicate matter

Thunder forward Jalen Williams seemingly reagravated the left hamstring injury that had kept him sidelined for a month-and-a-half.

Spurs rookie guard Dylan Harper left the game in the third quarter with a right leg injury.

After the game, there was no definitive update on either, but there's the chance that either or both could now miss extended time in the series. This comes as Spurs point guard De'Aaron Fox has missed both Western Conference finals games with right ankle soreness.

How both teams manage those injuries – and navigate any potential substitutions that might need to happen – will be significant because all three are essential to their respective teams.

The Spurs are in a particularly precarious situation, as Fox and Harper are often catalysts for the entire offensive operation.