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By BRIAN LEWIS

For the first time in six years, the Nets won't be in the playoffs. But that doesn't mean they won't be playing for anything.

These are still highly-paid competitors that need to show they have some competitiveness left. Interim coach Kevin Ollie — and more important, general manager Sean Marks — will be looking to see who is fighting and who is quitting.

And even though the Nets didn't reach the postseason, those that end up returning need to build some kind of positive vibe going into the offseason and next season.

"Yeah, you learn from it," said Ollie, who will reassess his rotation down the stretch. "Through the process you learn from it and how you can do it better. And when you get in that opportunity again, you have valuable experience from it."

There certainly will be plenty of hard lessons to be taken from a season this trying.

The Nets are 30-47 entering Saturday's game against the visiting Pistons, eliminated from contention for the play-in Wednesday night. It marks the first time they will have failed to make the playoffs since 2017-18.

Are they doing that learning organically as this disappointing campaign limps on, or will that be done over the summer as they look in the mirror in an organizational self-evaluation?

"Both," Ollie answered. "Both. You can still grow in the season, you can still grow now. You can ask yourself what are you really made of? Because a lot of people will quit in this situation. But you can ask yourself what kind of man am I? What kind of team do we want [the] Brooklyn Nets to be? And



IT'S NOT OVER YET: Though the Nets are no longer in play-in contention, Kevin Ollie said the Nets are going to play out the schedule and see who is fighting and who is quitting. "You can still grow in the season, you can still grow now," the interim coach said. AP

these are the times — and the challenging times — when you really see your true character.

"So that's the message I give them. Yeah, that goal, we wanted to make the playoffs. But we've still got great fans that are showing up and paying their money, and you're getting paid handsomely. I'm getting paid. We need to come up and do our job. And tomorrow is not promised to nobody. And it's not promised that we wake up tomorrow."

The Nets will fall short of their goal and miss the postseason despite coming into Saturday having taken four of their last six.

But with five dates left on



the schedule, there is a value in at least trying to finish strong and salvage some momentum out of this season. Mikal Bridges and Cam Johnson were both on the 2019-20 Suns team that missed the playoffs but was the only undefeated squad in the Bubble and finished with eight straight wins.

Phoenix reached the NBA Finals the next season. Granted, the Nets won't have an incoming Chris Paul, but they can at least have some

pride in their finish.

Bridges didn't take the All-Star jump many had hoped, Johnson — doubtful vs. the Pistons — has dealt with a number of lower body injuries and Ben Simmons has been a costly non-factor. But that's not a license to capitulate.

"Life happens like that sometimes where you don't get to where you want. But you don't just stop playing, start quitting," Bridges said. "You keep going until the end.

"[You] learn from it and get better. It's not a rocket science thing. Just get better, learn what you have to get better at and attack that."

Bridges and Johnson will

be part of the core moving forward, as will Nic Claxton if the Nets can retain the free agent. Dennis Schroder just arrived at the trade deadline, but he's quickly ascertained what Brooklyn must do.

"When we come in, first off, team chemistry is always the biggest thing. Building that, we've got to set the tone," Schroder said. "On the court, we've got to make sure we're the most competitive group every single night. That gives you a chance to win a basketball game, especially in the NBA. That's about it, just competing on the highest level defensively and offensively, and we'll be good."

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Ollie unfazed by earthquake: 'I'm from LA'

By BRIAN LEWIS

With the Nets at practice Friday morning, they — like almost everybody else in the area — felt the 4.8 magnitude earthquake that hit at 10:23 a.m.

The quake, centered in Lebanon, N.J., was reportedly one of the biggest on the East Coast in the last century and reached HSS Training Center.

"I felt that for sure. I think everybody did," Mikal Bridges said. "I was by our locker room."

Interim coach Kevin Ollie, who was raised in South Central Los Angeles and went to Crenshaw High

School, may have felt it, but was unfazed.

"I'm used to it," Ollie smiled. "I'm from LA."

► While the earthquake rattled the area on Friday, a report coming about **Donovan Mitchell** out of Cleveland may have stirred up the NBA rumor mill — and the aftershocks could shake up the Nets' offseason plans.

Bleacher Report stated that Mitchell — a New York native who has been linked with both the Nets and rival Knicks — is "all but certain" to decline his \$371 million player option

for 2025-26 to explore free agency.

The report added that the buzz in league circles suggest that if Cleveland doesn't reach at least the NBA Finals, that "Mitchell will decline an extension and look elsewhere, and the Cavaliers are more likely than not to move him well before he can leave outright

as a free agent."

Brooklyn has genuine interest in Mitchell. The star guard is close with Bridges and represented by CAA — which also reps Nets GM **Sean Marks**. Mitchell, whose father is a longtime Nets executive, is a 27-year-old Westchester native who perfectly

fits the Nets' timeline and is an ideal target for which to open the vault.

Despite Cavs owner **Dan Gilbert** proclaiming last week that he believes Mitchell will sign an extension, the All-Star himself threw cold water on that and was noncommittal just a few days ago.

Bleacher Report also cited the Knicks, Heat and Lakers are potential suitors.

► **Cam Johnson** (left big toe sprain) and **Dennis Smith Jr.** (right hip synovitis) are both doubtful for the Nets Saturday against visiting Detroit. **Nic Claxton** is available despite his nasal fracture.

NETS NOTES