

## **2006 NBA Finals Review: BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**

Promise fulfilled. Two years ago when he came to Miami from Los Angeles - we're talking Hollywood to South Beach now - Shaquille O'Neal guaranteed he'd bring a World Championship to the city of Miami. Thanks in large part to Finals MVP Dwyane Wade – and the hungry veterans around him [O'Neal included] – Shaq proved to be true to his words.

“Unworthy opponent,” wrote one Dallas sports columnist after the first game of the Championship when Dallas was victorious. Following Gm. 2 - it looked like he was right. Even with less than seven minutes to go and the Heat down by 13 at home in Gm. 3 - the Miami crowd started to become a little restless and the series appeared close to over. But as they say, close doesn't count.

Wade's refusal to lose was too strong. Should you play a zone defense on him? Double team him, triple team him? Do that and he'll find James Posey in the corner for a key three-pointer as he did in the fourth quarter of Gm. 6 on Tuesday night. No matter who Avery Johnson and the Mavericks put on him, he either nailed the jump shot, got to the rim with ease or made a trip to the free-throw line. **My question: HOW IN THE WORLD WAS THIS GUY SELECTED 2<sup>ND</sup> TEAM ALL-NBA???** If you can't figure out he's one of the five best players in the league, you're not paying close enough attention. As a rookie he averaged 16.2 PPG and led the Heat to a first round playoff series win over the Hornets. As a sophomore he averaged 24.1PPG, and had it not been for he and Shaq being banged up, they would've likely defeated the Pistons in Gm. 7 of the Eastern Conference Finals. His scoring average rose from 24.7 in the first round, to 27.6 in the second round, to 34.7 in the NBA Championship at just 24 years of age.

What is most impressive, amazing and mind boggling about Wade? He shot 97 free-throws in six NBA Finals games. Think about that – over 16 attempts a game. Simply on his way to greatness. Truly a special player. When Hall-of-Fame coaches Hubie Brown, who called the game on ABC, and Jack Ramsay (ESPN Radio) tell you he's unbelievable – you listen. And watch.

**Super Stat:** One lead change the entire game. Dallas jumped out in front 26-12 on a Dirk Nowitzki dunk, capping a 14-2 Mavericks run. Once Miami got the lead, however, they never relinquished it and therefore, won an NBA Championship.

.... Forwards Udonis Haslem and Antoine Walker played their best games of the series; Haslem the best of his pro basketball life. Had someone told Head Coach Pat Riley that both would get a double-double, in spite of Walker missing 11 shots, he would've smiled. Walker was a vocal leader for this team who gave up some points to have a shot at a title. Haslem, who had to work for everything to even be in this league, was with

Wade back when the Heat started 0-7 in 2003-04. His toughness defensively and on the boards, playing through pain in a hurt shoulder, really mattered.

.... Alonzo Mourning. What a story this guy is. Zo could've called it quits after the kidney problem. He didn't. Too much pride, too much desire and too strong to give up. His defensive presence in the second quarter on Tuesday night changed the complexion of the game as Dallas went from leading 46-36 to trailing 49-48 at the half. Mourning had five blocks, intimidating the opposition and giving Shaq a breather. Up five in the fourth quarter, Zo really had a defining moment. He came in flying in for a block, daring Dallas to drive the rim at their own risk. Passion clearly overflowing.. 450 gallons of flex oil... 1 NBA Championship ring: priceless.

.... How about a vet like Gary Payton coming through with clutch baskets late in Gm. 3 and 5? Payton went to Los Angeles with Karl Malone, hoping to be the missing pieces to a Lakers team that had already had Shaq and Kobe. LA had won three straight titles, the lost to the Spurs in the conference semis the next year. Derek Fisher's incredible shot in Gm. 5 vs. the Spurs that year in the playoffs helped propel LA past San Antonio and eventually into the Finals. However, it ended on rough note as the Pistons defeated the Lakers – playing some of the series without the Mailman at full strength – in five games. How was Miami different than LA for the Glove? Easy. Less bickering between players, plus Payton bought into Riley's system a lot better than Phil Jackson's. Payton even took a back seat to Jason Williams and came off the bench this year. Williams also sacrificed, coming up big at the end of the Detroit series and leading them in assists quite a few times. The third time was a charm for GP.

**Quotable: “I packed one shirt, one suit and one tie,” - Heat Head Coach Pat Riley, who is now 5-4 in the NBA Finals and won his first ring since 1988 with the Lakers. This one certainly helps ease the pain for the loss to the Houston Rockets in the 1994 NBA Finals when his New York Knicks led 3-2 before losing a Gm. 7.**

The Stan Van Gundy part of the equation aside, Riley did an excellent job as Head Coach of this Heat team. He built this team... making the moves in the off-season that were often criticized, but praised. Bringing in Jason Williams, Antoine Walker, Gary Payton, James Posey and Shandon and Derek Anderson didn't have the same feel chemistry wise. That said, it worked with Riley's motivation, firm, calm hand on this team and no panic. They respected him so much, the Big Fella included. Known as a fitness freak, Riley's time-out were timely. He called two of them in the first quarter of Gm. 6 with the team playing from behind and it helped them get back into the game. 15-strong. Now his 5<sup>th</sup> title, has to be considered no less than 3<sup>rd</sup> greatest NBA Head Coach of all-time.

**Notes:** Four Heat players had double-figure rebounds (56 total for team) in Game 6..... Dallas settled for quite a few jump shots, going 5-for-22 from beyond the arc and shooting just 37% for the game. What also is interesting is that the Heat went 2-of-18 shooting the three-point shot. So where did the Mavs go wrong? They had ten shots sent

back by Miami, Nowitzki went 0-for-4 from the field in the fourth quarter, and Jason Terry made zero trips to the foul line..... Teams trailing 0-2 in an NBA Finals series had won only twice in 27 tries until the Heat did it on Tuesday night. Miami also won every postseason game when leading at the half.

### **Playoff Summary:**

This year's NBA Playoffs were the one of the best in recent memory. There were exciting series' such as the Mavs and Spurs that went all seven games and Dallas winning it in OT on the defending Champs' home court. After Kobe Bryant's amazing game-winner, the Phoenix Suns rallied from 3-1 down to defeat the Lakers in Gm. 7. Phoenix also out-lasted the LA Clippers in a seven games series. A new superstar was born this postseason in Cleveland's LeBron James, who not only led the Cavs past the Washington Wizards, but also gave Detroit all it could handle. King James brought his team back from a 2-0 deficit to win the next three, though unable to finish the Pistons off in Gm. 6 - Detroit re-grouped and won the series in the final game. Cleveland might be one of the teams of the future as may be the Chicago Bulls, who took Miami six games to finish off because of their outstanding perimeter play. Like Dallas vs. San Antonio, Miami got over the hump by beating Detroit in a six game series. Both the Mavs and Heat made their first appearance in the Championship and gave us an entertaining series.

Need further proof the NBA had one of its best playoffs in years? The '06 NBA Playoffs had ten overtime games - the final one coming in Gm. 5 between the Heat and Mavs. Three second round series' went the distance, and the final three series' all went six games. Commissioner David J. Stern couldn't be happier. No, not because he didn't have to hand the trophy to Dallas Owner Mark Cuban, but because numerous countries around the world are tuning into the playoffs. The game has become so global. New star names like Wade, LeBron, Carmelo and Dirk are fascinating to fans, while the old familiar faces such as Kobe, Duncan and Shaq are still getting it done. Yes, as long as the game can have playoff basketball half this good, it'll be in good shape.



**At the age of 24, Heat guard Dwyane Wade put on one of the most memorable performances in NBA Finals history, averaging 34.7PPG to earn MVP honors. Coach Pat Riley won his fifth title, Shaq got his fourth and Wade - his first.**