

## 2008 NBA Playoffs Preview – Friday, April 18, 2008 BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

The 2008 NBA Playoffs are here and some compelling matchups await us this weekend when first round action gets underway. In the Western Conference, it was such a logjam near the top that seven different teams were in first place with none leading by more than two games. Over in the Eastern Conference, things are more cut and dry with the resurgence of the Boston Celtics, a franchise with more Championships than any in pro basketball. Here's my analysis of the first round series' .....

### Western Conference Playoffs:



#### **#8 Denver Nuggets (50-32) @ #1 LA Lakers (57-25)**

It's rare for a #8 seed to win 50 games, but that's what the Denver Nuggets did this season, beating out the Golden State Warriors for the final playoff spot in deep, competitive Western Conference. In fact, last year eighth-seeded Golden State stunned the top-seeded Dallas Mavericks in the opening round of the playoffs, though only three times in history has a #8 seed beaten a #1 seed. Ironically one of the times came in 1994 when top-seeded Seattle, then coached by current Nuggets Head Coach George Karl, fell to Denver. What would be re-assurance to the Lakers is to get Andrew Bynum back and healthy to team with MVP candidate Kobe Bryant (28.3PPG, 6.3RPG, 5.4APG) and forwards Lamar Odom (14.2PPG, 10.6RPG) and Pau Gasol (18.9PPG, 8.4RPG), who they picked up before the trading deadline from Memphis for basically Kibbles and Bits {*otherwise known as Kwame Brown and three other marginal-at-best players*}.

Denver has had a first round playoff exit in four straight years. Both Carmelo Anthony (25.7PPG, 7.4RPG) and Allen Iverson (26.4PPG, 7.1APG) are the type of gifted scorers who can heat up for 30+ on any given night and carry their team to victory. What they need to advance though will be a third player stepping up and playing at an All-Star caliber level. The guy that could do it is Marcus Camby (9.1PPG, 13.1RPG, 3.6BPG), someone drafted one pick after Iverson in the 1996 NBA Draft. At the age of 34, Camby, the reigning NBA Defensive Player of the Year, had the best rebounding year of his career, and we know what a presence he is defensively when it comes to shot blocking. LA's unsung hero in the playoffs may very well be guard Derek Fisher, a savvy vet that made some clutch plays for the Jazz in the postseason a year ago, and who can forget about his buzzer-beater with 0.4 seconds in the second round vs. the Spurs in 2004?

**Pick: Lakers in 6. Neither team is as consistent defensively as they are offensively, but the Nuggets have more obvious defensive deficiencies at this point in time. LA averaged 118 points per game in three regular season meetings, so that's a pretty good indication that Denver will struggle to stop them.**



#### **#4 Utah Jazz (54-28) @ #5 Houston Rockets (55-27)**

For the second year in a row, the Houston Rockets host the Utah Jazz in the opening round of the Western Conference playoffs. Earlier this season, the Rockets put together the second longest winning streak in NBA history; reeling off 22 consecutive victories and doing so for a chunk of it without All-Star center Yao Ming. The adjustment from Jeff Van Gundy to Rick Adelman as Head Coach has been a relatively smooth one for the most part. Tracy McGrady (21.6PPG, 5.1RPG, 5.9APG) has never won a playoff series in his career, despite being one win away from doing so on three separate occasions, including last year. T-Mac and company have good reason to believe they're finally poised to bust through, particularly the longer the series goes. However, Houston will be without the services of starting point guard Rafer Alston (13.1PPG, 5.3APG) at least until Gm. 3, meaning Bobby Jackson is now shoved into the starting lineup.

As for the Jazz and Jerry Sloan, arguably the best Head Coach to never win Coach of the Year, they are rugged, tough and physical. Last season's team surprised many by reaching the Western Conference Finals, where they met their match in the eventual Champion San Antonio Spurs. The tandem of polished point guard Deron Williams (18.8PPG, 10.5APG) and hard-nosed power forward Carlos Boozer (21.1PPG, 10.4RPG) isn't the best combo this franchise has seen due to all of those wonderful years with John Stockton and Karl Malone, but they get the job done too. Mehmet Okur (14.5PPG, 7.7RPG) joins Boozer in the front-court as another guy who crashes the glass as well as scores in double-figures.

Outside shooting is something that will go a long way towards determining the outcome of this series. Chuck Hayes, Carl Landry, Luther Head and Aaron Brooks make up a very solid bench for the Rockets. Depth certainly is one of the pluses in Houston's corner, though getting Luis Scola and Dikembe Mutombo, two players that aren't used to playing major minutes, to contain Boozer and Okur will be a major challenge.

**Pick: Jazz in 6. Without Alston and Yao, I'm not sure Houston has enough scoring options around McGrady to beat the Jazz, an exceptional home team. However, if the series reaches a Gm. 7, that favors the Rockets in my opinion, even though Utah went to Houston and won a Gm. 7 last year. Utah isn't as strong on the road this year as they've been in the past.**



#### **#6 Phoenix Suns (55-27) @ #3 San Antonio Spurs (56-26)**

There's a lot of history between these two teams when it comes to playoff basketball. The Phoenix Suns and San Antonio Spurs have met twice in the past three

postseasons, including a year ago when a flagrant foul by Robert Horry of the Spurs on Steve Nash resulted in some suspensions. Phoenix won three of four regular season head-to-head meetings, holding San Antonio to below 87 points per game. As long as the Suns show up defensively, then they should have a great opportunity to win this series. That being said, San Antonio has won four NBA titles in the last nine years.

The enormous deal Phoenix made mid-season was trading Shawn Marion to the Miami Heat in exchange for Shaquille O'Neal (13.6PPG, 9.1RPG), who's looking for his fifth Championship and in the process trying to become the first player to reach the NBA Finals with four different teams. Team Shaq with Amare Stoudemire (25.2PPG, 9.1RPG, 2.1BPG) inside gives Mike D'Antoni's Suns arguably the best interior combo in the game today. Not to mention, Nash (16.9PPG, 11.1APG) is a two-time MVP that will find ways to score and distribute equally well.

We'll find out if the Spurs' big three of Tim Duncan (19.3PPG, 11.3RPG), Manu Ginobili (19.5PPG) and reigning Finals MVP Tony Parker (18.8PPG, 6APG) are healthy and fresh or if they're still banged up a bit. Often times Ginobili is their difference maker. When Ginobili comes off the bench, he's the best sixth man in the league. When he doesn't, then it is Suns guard Leandro Barbosa, a possible x-factor in this series. A healthy Grant Hill would benefit the Suns greatly.

**Pick: Suns in 6. It wouldn't surprise me in the least bit to see it go to a Gm. 7, which is when the edge would go to the home team, San Antonio team. This has the makings to be a slugfest of a series. Phoenix seems a tad fresher to me going in, but you can never count out the Spurs in the playoffs.**



**#7 Dallas Mavs (51-31) @ #2 New Orleans Hornets (56-26)**



After winning 67 games last year during the regular season and collapsing in the first round of the playoffs in a six-game exit to the eighth-seeded Golden State Warriors, the Dallas Mavericks come into this postseason with a much different expectation level. Two years removed from falling to the Miami Heat in the NBA Finals, the Mavs are making their seventh straight playoff appearance, but this is the lowest seed they've had during that stretch. In the head-to-head series, the Mavs have dominated the Hornets, winning 13 straight at home and 23 of 25 overall. New Orleans does have a guy in Chris Paul (21.1PPG, 11.6APG, 2.7SPG) that led the NBA in steals and assists, and should get the Most Valuable Player award if Los Angeles' Kobe Bryant doesn't. Paul truly is the pulse of Byron Scott's team, and without him they are probably looking at the lottery instead of a division title.

What makes Paul special also is the fact that he elevates the game of the others around him. David West (20.6PPG, 8.9RPG), an All-Star, has come into his own and Tyson Chandler (11.8PPG, 11.7RPG) seems to be flourishing and re-vitalizing his career in

New Orleans as he finished third in the league in rebounding. Dirk Nowitzki (23.6PPG, 8.6RPG), the league's MVP a year ago, keys Dallas' attack. Owner Mark Cuban made a big trade by sending Devin Harris to New Jersey in exchange for Jason Kidd (10.8PPG, 7.5RPG, 10.1APG), a likely future Hall-of-Famer with 100 triple-doubles in his career. The deal was made in hopes of putting the team over the top and bringing them a Championship in the next few years.

Josh Howard (19.9PPG, 7RPG) and Jerry Stackhouse supply scoring for Dallas from the outside, and it'll be interesting to see how consistent guys like Peja Stojakovic, Morris Peterson and Bonzi Wells are shooting the ball for the Hornets because the Mavs logically will look to get the ball out of Paul's hands. The point guard matchup really is the intriguing part of this series.

**Pick: Mavericks in 6. It's hard not to question the Hornets' playoff inexperience, even if guys like Chandler, Peterson and Stojakovic have been in postseason games before. This group as a whole isn't used to this setting, so unless they win both of the first two at home, Dallas probably has the upper hand, especially since they matchup well with them.**

#### Eastern Conference Playoffs:



#### **#8 Atlanta Hawks (37-45) @ #1 Boston Celtics (66-16)**



Re-kindling memories of the great days in the 1980's when Larry Bird and Kevin McHale led title runs, the Boston Celtics won more games this season than any other team in the National Basketball Association, which is astonishing since they finished 34 games below .500 during the 2006-07 campaign. In fact, Doc Rivers' team won 42 more games from the previous season, capping the single greatest regular season turnaround in league history. A big reason why came in the off-season when Danny Ainge brought in two bona-fide star players to go with Paul Pierce (19.6PPG). Ten-time All-Star and 2004 MVP Kevin Garnett (18.8PPG, 9.2RPG) and fellow All-Star Ray Allen (17.4PPG), who holds the record the most three-pointers made in a season, were brought in to give Boston the best trio in the sport.

Hawks Head Coach Mike Woodson promised to shave his head if the Hawks made the playoffs, and that they've done, reaching the postseason for the first time since 1999. It was a pretty bold move, but it paid off for Atlanta, which got in despite finishing eight games under .500. Acquiring point guard Mike Bibby (13.9PPG, 6APG) mid-season from Sacramento gave them a boost, and rookie Al Horford (10.1PPG, 9.7RPG) looks like he will have a productive career for 10-12 years in the league. Joe Johnson (21.7PPG, 5.8APG) was selected to the All-Star team this year and for good reason as he quietly put together the best numbers of his career. Josh Smith was second in the NBA in shot blocking behind only Denver's Marcus Camby. His athleticism is invaluable to the

Hawks in a series where they have to get some easy fast-break baskets to have any hope whatsoever.

Boston has the much better second unit. James Posey and Sam Cassell, who'll backup starting point guard Rajon Rondo, have shown the ability to knock down clutch shots in crunch time. Between them, Posey and Cassell have three rings. Backup power forward P.J. Brown also can give them some boards and solid defense in spurts, primarily when someone gets in foul trouble.

**Pick: Celtics in 4. The Hawks may be able to steal Game 3 at home, but they just don't have the depth to keep up with Boston and the offensive firepower to make a comeback when they get down double-digits.**



**#5 Washington (43-39) @ #4 Cleveland (45-37)**

This marks the third straight year that the Washington Wizards and Cleveland Cavaliers square off in the first round of the playoffs. Cleveland has gotten the better of the Wizards in each of the past two years thanks to the brilliant play of LeBron James (30PPG, 7.9RPG, 7.2APG), who has had a couple of buzzer-beaters in the postseason and was the main cog in the Cavs' run to the 2007 NBA Finals. Washington enters this series confident, but also with a lot to prove after they feel they were disrespected by TNT analyst Charles Barkley, who called them "the dumbest team in the history of civilization." Those comments came after Wizards guard DeShawn Stevenson called LeBron overrated.

Cleveland made a trade mid-season that allowed them to acquire former NBA Defensive Player of the Year Ben Wallace (8.4RPG) and veteran reserve Joe Smith from Chicago. They also picked up guard Delonte West and Wally Szczerbiak from Seattle. Daniel Gibson shot 44% from three-point land this season and was a crucial part of the team's success in last year's postseason. Sasha Pavlovic has a sprained left ankle and will miss the entire series. Keeping that in mind, Gibson and Szczerbiak must make the most of their opportunities when left open beyond the arc. Zydrunas Ilgauskas (14.1PPG, 9.3RPG) needs to be productive inside and stay out of the foul trouble as well.

Washington really hasn't been healthy and able to gel all year. Caron Butler (20.3PPG, 6.7RPG, 2.2SPG) and Gilbert Arenas have battled injuries, so Antawn Jamison (21.4PPG, 10.2RPG) has had to do even more than before. When the Wizards get a lead, keeping their foot on the gas pedal will be highly important. That's because the Cavs have 28 wins this season coming from behind in the fourth quarter, the most in the entire NBA. LeBron also led the league in fourth quarter points scored.

**Pick: Cavs in 6. Gibson and Szczerbiak are going to have to knock down shots from the perimeter for the Cavs so that the Wizards don't leave them open to**

**concentrate more on LeBron. Game 1 in my opinion is imperative for Washington if they're going to win this series. They've lost seven straight Game 1's.**



**#6 Toronto Raptors (41-41) @ #3 Orlando Magic (52-30)**



Perhaps the least intriguing of the eight first round playoff matchups, the series between the Orlando Magic and Toronto Raptors may very well be uneventful and not provide as many memorable moments as the other series'. One matchup to definitely watch though is the one inside as Orlando's big man Dwight Howard (20.7PPG, 14.2RPG, 2.1BPG) battles Chris Bosh (22.3PPG, 8.7RPG). Each guy is an All-Star and represents not only the future of their respective team's franchise, but the future of the league when it comes to dynamic post players. Bosh missed 15 games during the regular season. Had he not, the Raptors would likely be over .500 instead of even in the wins and losses columns.

A year ago, Sam Mitchell's Toronto team reached the postseason as a #3 seed and division title winner before being eliminated by the New Jersey Nets in the conference quarterfinals. This time there is far less pressure on them to advance since they are a #6 seed and don't have home-court advantage. For them to win this series, point guards T.J. Ford (12.1PPG, 6.1APG) and Jose Calderon are going to need to outperform Jameer Nelson of the Magic. Orlando has the better front-court overall with Howard, free agent acquisition Rashard Lewis (18.2PPG) and potential Most Improve Player of the Year award winner Hedo Turkoglu (19.5PPG, 5APG). These two teams are pretty proficient shooting the three-point shot. One of the guys the Raptors would like to get plenty of shot opportunities from long distance is Anthony Parker. Of course, Parker's younger sister, Candace Parker, recently led Tennessee to back-to-back National Championships.

**Pick: Magic in 7. Orlando must not get caught looking ahead to a potential second round playoff series with Detroit, where they would be a fairly heavy underdog. Van Gundy would definitely like another crack at the Pistons, who beat him when he was Head Coach of the Miami Heat in Gm. 7 of the 2005 Eastern Conference Finals.**



**#7 Philadelphia 76ers (40-42) @ #2 Detroit Pistons (59-23)**



Three years ago the Pistons and 76ers met in the first round of the playoffs. Back then, it was a slightly different cast of characters for the Sixers as they were led by Allen Iverson and Chris Webber. However, Detroit's starting five remains intact with the exception of Ben Wallace, who's now in Cleveland after a stop in Chicago last year. Fortunately for the Pistons, Philadelphia doesn't have an offensive presence inside that they have to worry about. If Philly's record was better than 40-42 and they made the

playoffs in the Western Conference instead of an Eastern Conference that has only five teams above .500 in the postseason, then Maurice Cheeks would get greater consideration for Coach of the Year. Cheeks may be doing more with less than any other coach in the league, given that Andre Iguodala (19.9PPG, 2.1SPG) really is this team's only All-Star caliber player. Iguodala was third in the league in steals per game and blossomed this season into a player that should get a long-term contract for the future.

Chauncey Billups (17PPG, 6.8APG) shot 91.8% from the free-throw line, better than anyone else in the Eastern Conference. Along with Richard Hamilton (17.3PPG), Tayshaun Prince (13.2PPG) and Rasheed Wallace, four starters remain from Detroit's 2004 title team that shocked a Los Angeles Lakers team with four Hall-of-Famers in the Finals. Wallace appears to be the key guy for this team if they are to have another deep postseason run. He must keep his cool and not let his emotions get the best of him, something he's allowed to happen many times in the past. Four of the Pistons' five starters are averaging in double-figures, but surprisingly the same can be said for the Sixers. Andre Miller (17PPG, 6.9APG) is doing a better than average job at the point, and Samuel Dalembert (10.5PPG, 10.4RPG, 2.34BPG) can keep Detroit from destroying them on the boards. Reggie Evans had 12 points and 11 rebounds when the Sixers defeated the Pistons a month ago on the road.

**Pick: Pistons in 5. While Detroit clearly is the more talented and experienced team, the Pistons do have a tendency to play lackadaisical. If they do so and Iguodala has a big series, then the Sixers have a chance to possibly extend this to a sixth game. Winning one of the first two in Detroit is mandatory for them to pull an upset and win the series.**