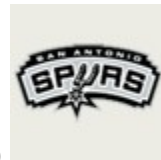


2006 NBA Playoffs Preview --- Friday, April 21st, 2006 BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Western Conference Playoffs:



#8 Sacramento (44-38) @ #1 San Antonio (63-19)



Winners of three of the past seven NBA Finals', the San Antonio Spurs aren't really prohibited favorites to win it all more than just the Western Conference lacks the strength from top to bottom that it has had in the past. Still, the trio of Tim Duncan, Manu Ginobili and Tony Parker makes the defending Champs the team to beat. Especially when you factor in they added guards Michael Finley and Nick Van Exel for this time of the year, have one of the most clutch shooters of this generation in reserve Robert Horry, and have a lockdown defender in Bruce Bowen. Sacramento also has a lockdown defender of their own in Ron Artest, who since coming over in a trade from Indiana in exchange for Peja Stojakovic, has given the Kings new toughness, particularly on the defensive end of the floor. Back on April 5th at the SBC Center, Sac defeated San Antonio by ten and will need contributions from its bench to steal one of the first two games. Point guard Mike Bibby is one of the smoothest, maybe most underrated players, in the conference and Brad Miller has drawn All-Star consideration up front the last few seasons.

Pick: Spurs in 5. Gregg Popovich (69 career playoff wins) and company will benefit from having that extra off day for rest. Otherwise, this series could go six or even seven with a Kings team a little different from one's of the past.



#5 Memphis (49-33) @ #4 Dallas (60-22)



While the Grizzlies are still in search of their first ever victory in the team's postseason history, the Mavericks have won 25 playoff games over the last five years. However, Dallas has yet to get to the NBA Finals, though feel this might be the year with improved defense. Improved maybe, but it's still an area of concern as Head Coach Avery Johnson will admit. Star scorer Dirk Nowitzki, averaging nearly 27PPG and nine boards a night, heads an offense that wants to get these games in the high 90's and 100's. What they're hoping is that he doesn't fade down the stretch like he did in Gm. 6 of the West Semis vs. Phoenix last year and attack Jason Terry, a reliable source of offense as well. Mike Fratello and the Grizzlies use a deep rotation and most of the parts are interchangeable. The key question with Memphis is who will be the go-to-guy come crunch time? Despite the fact that Pau Gasol continues to steadily improve, going from

17.8PPG and 7.3RPG last year to 20.4PPG and 8.9RPG this season, we're still not sure he can put this team on his back in the fourth quarter. If not, then guards Bobby Jackson and Damon Stoudamire may have to hit a big shot to keep this series entertaining. The matchup to watch should be between Eddie Jones – used for his D' and Mike Miller – used for his shooting stroke – against active Mavs small forward Josh Howard.

Pick: Dallas in 5. Fratello's Grizz steal Gm. 1 then are unable to come back down to Earth after their first ever playoff win.



#3 Denver (44-38) @ #6 LA Clippers (47-35)

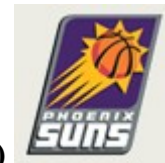


Denver won its first division crown since 1988. So how in the world are they, the #3 seed, beginning this series on the road? Because they finished with a worse overall record than the Clippers, who suddenly find themselves in the playoffs again. Yes, the same Clippers that haven't reached the second round in thirty years (1976). Of course, winning your division like the Nuggets did doesn't mean too much in today's expanded six-division NBA. Denver dropped three of four regular season meetings with the Clips, shot under 33% from three-point land as a team, and have a pack full of injured players. If healthy, Marcus Camby (3.29BPG) and Kenyon Martin are each capable of averaging a double-double, and sensational scoring threat Carmelo Anthony would round out that starting front-court from the small forward position. However, backup Nene isn't available and that means Reggie Evans and Francisco Elson will have to rise to the occasion against daily double-double Elton Brand if Martin cannot be an impact force. The lone Nuggets player that started all 82 games? Point guard Andre Miller (8.2APG), who will share time in the backcourt with tiny energy player Earl Boykins. LA, coached by Mike Dunleavy, will look to impose its will in the post with Brand as well as Chris Kaman. Where they must be able to hold their own and then some is at the guard spots. Sam Cassell and Cuttino Mobley have playoff experience, which should help. Series x-factors to watch? Corey Maggette for the Clips and Ruben Patterson of the Nuggets.

Pick: Denver in 6. Although the Clippers have the healthier, stronger front-line, the Nuggets have Carmelo. He might be just enough to pull this series out.



#7 LA Lakers (45-37) @ #2 Phoenix (54-28)



LA's strong finish to the season and twenty point win over the Suns on Easter Sunday indicate that this could be the most entertaining series of the first round. Need more reasons to watch? Both teams are going to get out on the break as they each

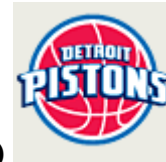
average over 99 points per game; Phoenix at a league-best 108.4. LA has an HOF Head Coach in Phil Jackson and an HOF go-to-guy in Kobe Bryant, a pair that owns more Championship rings than the Suns franchise and its entire roster combined. And finally, how does Phoenix, led by reigning MVP Steve Nash, adapt in this year's playoffs without a healthy Amare Stoudemire and a nucleus that has been battered and bruised for much of April? From an athletic and speed standpoint, the Suns have the ingredients to eventually run LA into submission. Boris Diaw and Shawn Marion (21.8PPG, 11.8RPG) bring the high flying acrobatics into the mix, while Eddie House and Raja Bell are major reasons why Phoenix shoots three-pointers better than any other team in the league. All that said, if Lamar Odom can put up triple-double type numbers [note: he had two this month], Luke Walton continue to be a playmaker with his passing, Kwame Brown can be a strength down low, and point guard doesn't become a weakness, the Lakers will be more than a competitive underdog. They will be looking to pull the upset because they have a guy in Bryant that averaged 42.5PPG in four regular season meetings vs. the Suns.

Pick: Lakers in 7. Suns went 0-7 in games decided by three points or less and LA has that Kobe guy, who'll win one – maybe the pivotal one – in crunch time.

Eastern Conference Playoffs:

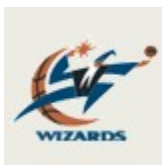


#8 Milwaukee (40-42) @ #1 Detroit (64-18)

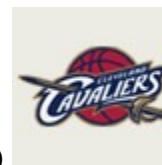


Milwaukee Head Coach Terry Stotts, who's 37 games under .500 here, has his hands full. His Bucks are facing a Detroit team that has owned the Eastern Conference title each of the last two years. Their starting five of Chauncey Billups – an MVP candidate at the point guard position – Richard Hamilton (one of the best mid-range shooters), lengthy Tayshaun Prince, the emotional Rasheed Wallace and Defensive POY Ben Wallace makes for the best in all of professional basketball. They upgraded their bench this year with the addition of Tony Delk, adding to a group that already includes Lindsay Hunter, Carlos Delfino and Anthony McDyess. Milwaukee must get dead-eye shooting from guard Michael Redd, who will be matched up against the always curling Hamilton, and also need T.J. Ford to operate well at the point with Mo Williams banged up. Rookie Andrew Bogut has done a nice job in his first season with the team, but has yet to play a team that physically exhausts you as much as the Pistons or one that controls the offensive boards like them. Two years ago these two met in the first round of the playoff with the series evened after two games. I doubt that happens this time.

Pick: Detroit in 4. If the Bucks aren't swept, I'll be a tad surprised. If they force a Gm. 6 or 7, I'll be shocked. If they win the series, the Earth falls off its axis.



#5 Washington (42-40) @ #4 Cleveland (50-32)

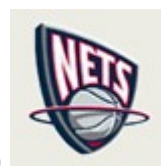


All eyes will be on the superstar guards in this series; Gilbert Arenas (2.01SPG) for Washington and LeBron James of Cleveland. Of course, James is more of a marquee name than Arenas, but this is his first ever appearance in the playoffs in his third season in the league. A matter of fact, this one of the best Cavs teams in awhile and the first to reach the playoffs since 1998. First-year Head Coach Mike Brown, former assistant in Indiana, is making his first ever trip to the postseason just like counterpart Eddie Jordan did a year ago. Jordan's team got excellent playoff experience last year by taking care of the Bulls in a grueling seven-game series before bowing out vs. Miami. A member of that team was guard Larry Hughes, a fine defender now apart of the Cavs roster, which also includes two big bodies inside in Drew Gooden and the oft-injured Zydrunas Ilgauskas. Those two could be the difference makers inside as could Hughes on the perimeter, who will likely be guarding his ex-teammate in Arenas. Keep in mind though, Arenas also is a solid defender, very underrated in some respects with his ability to get steals. Forwards Caron Butler and Antawn Jamison should be able to score with regularity and the key in my mind will be getting out in transition because Cleveland has been a poor transition defense team in numerous instances. Of all the first round playoff series', this may be the most evenly matched. The LeBron vs. Arenas scoring dual looks like a wash to me and the Cavs win it with Hughes on their side, contributions from Ronald 'Flip Murray' and Donyell Marshall, and winning the points in the paint battle. Nonetheless, it's a tough call.

Pick: Cavs in 7. LeBron and Arenas will square off in a classic Gm. 7 that sees Marshall and Hughes make big plays for Cleveland in the clutch. The Wizards won three of four regular season meetings and I ultimately see this as a tight series.



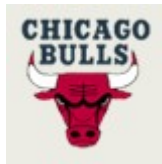
#6 Indiana (41-41) @ #3 New Jersey (49-33)



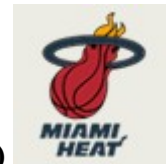
Since Rod Thorn and the New Jersey front office made the brilliant trade to acquire All-Star point guard Jason Kidd, a possible future Hall-of-Famer, New Jersey has won 32 playoff games and made the NBA Finals twice – losing both times. As of late, the Pacers have been a playoff fixture, but are in the postseason this time without future HOF shooting guard Reggie Miller, who retired after last season. Miller was one of the best clutch shooters of all-time and gave Indiana fans their share of playoff memories despite never winning an NBA title and making the Finals once. Also gone from the Pacers mix is Ron Artest, the defensive stud that got dealt to Sacramento for three-point threat Peja Stojakovic. Capable of scoring 20+ on any given night, Peja hasn't gotten to play much with All-Star power forward Jermaine O'Neal (25PPG, 10RPG, 3BPG the last 5), a force in the post the Nets may not have an answer for as the series progresses. Rick Carlisle,

one of the best Head Coaches in the game, will tell you too that they really haven't had their entire team healthy all season. So they don't have the chemistry yet and could suffer without Jamaal Tinsley at the point and Anthony Johnson, usually a decent reserve, taking his place in the lineup. They'll have to count on Scott Pollard and Jeff Foster to do the dirty work, rookie Danny Granger to be an intangible player and Stephen Jackson to be that quality #3 offensive weapon. New Jersey, which won 14 straight games at one point in the season and had another 10+game winning streak earlier in the campaign, should be able to play an up-tempo style of basketball. Kidd has been and still remains one of the best in the business at the controls of an NBA offense. He'll be tallying plenty of assists with outstanding wings Vince Carter and Richard Jefferson to work with as well as the up and coming Nenad Krstic inside. Their depth isn't too shabby either. It'll be an absolute must for the Pacers to cut out the turnovers to have a chance in this series.

Pick: Nets in 6. New Jersey has too many weapons for the Pacers to handle unless Indy can get good PG play and both Peja as well as O'Neal to shine brightly.



#7 Chicago (41-41) @ #2 Miami (52-30)



Making their 11th playoff appearance (8th under Head Coach Pat Riley), the Miami Heat feel it's now or never. Well, not quite, but the chances to win a title with Shaquille O'Neal and Dwyane Wade in South Beach aren't going to be there forever. Shaq is getting older, and naturally, a guy his size will see his body deteriorate as well as his production slip gradually through time. Wade, meanwhile, wants to really make a name for himself after two very strong showings in his first two postseasons. He's developing into a dominant player on the perimeter that could help Miami challenge for a Championship on a yearly basis if he stays around and gets help. Keeping these two healthy ultimately will tell us a lot, but they also must become a rock solid defensive team, which they have yet to do under the defensive-minded Riley. Chicago, which finished the regular season on a 12-2 hot streak, has been atop the league's defensive rankings each of the last two seasons. They got off to a slow start last year (0-9 to be precise) and rebounded once a season this season. They are thin on the inside, though. Tyson Chandler really is their only interior presence, whereas the Heat can throw Shaq at you, Alonzo Mourning, Udonis Haslem and Antoine Walker. Guards Ben Gordon and Kirk Hinrich have the makings to be special players for the franchise for quite a few years in the windy city. Upsetting the Heats here, however, would be a colossal upset that seems unlikely. Miami's role players – such as Walker, Haslem, Jason Williams, Gary Payton, James Posey and Derek Anderson – could do enough in this series. The next couple series' may be another story; they'll need their very best to keep advancing.

Pick: Miami in 4. Chicago certainly has the capability of taking the series five, even six games. But the Heat ought to get serious when it matters most.