

## **Top Ten Things to Watch in the 2006 NBA Playoffs:** **BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**

Fan interest for this year's NBA Playoffs, which begin on Saturday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, seems to be down. But for the league to get it back up, there will have to be some things to catch the eye of the casual basketball watcher. A list of what to follow down below....

**#10 - Any 1<sup>st</sup> Round Upsets?** As of late, the lower seed in the NBA Playoffs hasn't pulled off an upset. Very rarely does a #8 beat a #1. Only twice has it happened; 1994-95 when Denver shocked Seattle and the lockout shortened 1998-99 season when the New York Knicks, thanks to an Allan Houston game-winner in the decisive game of the series, stunned Miami and later went on to reach the NBA Finals. This year I see a #7 beating a #2 when the LA Lakers take on the Phoenix Suns. Kobe Bryant is the type of dominant player that can go toe-to-toe with reigning MVP Steve Nash and the Suns, while the development of Kwame Brown in the middle and solid overall play of Lamar Odom down the stretch will help push them through in Gm. 7.

**#9 - That other LA team.** Yes, the Los Angeles Clippers are in the playoffs for the first time since the 1996-97 season when the Utah Jazz, led by the all-time dynamic duo of Karl Malone and John Stockton, put them to rest. The Clippers are looking to get to the second round of the postseason for the first time in 30 years (1976). To do so, they'll have to beat the third-seeded Denver Nuggets. But the good news? They have home court as they finished with a better record than George Karl's team. Elton Brand has put up excellent numbers all season long, while guards Corey Maggette and Sam Cassell could cause problems for Carmelo Anthony-led Denver. Then again... they are the Clippers.

**#8 - Can Carmelo get to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Round?** Each of his first two seasons in the league, Anthony has been one and done. Denver fell to Minnesota in his rookie campaign, while last year the Nuggets surprised eventual NBA Champion San Antonio in Gm. 1 at the SBC Center before bowing out. Anthony, who led Syracuse to a National Championship in April of 2003, was part of the same draft class that also included Dwyane Wade and LeBron James. He's anxious to get to the conference semis.

**#7 - Who has breakout showing the Playoffs?** Every year there will be that one or two players that emerge out of nowhere to make a name for themselves in the postseason. We call them breakout guys. Who's it going to be in '06? Try versatile Suns player Boris Diaw. Acquired in the trade that sent Joe Johnson to Atlanta, Diaw can play a few different positions and provide both scoring as well as defense. His passing skills are also tremendous. Last year Wizards guard Gilbert Arenas kind of had his coming out party so look for teammate Caron Butler to be the guy in the East perhaps.

**#6 - Will Shaq & Wade stay healthy?** Had they the outcome of last year's Eastern Conference Finals, maybe even the NBA Finals, would've been different. After dropping Gm. 1 against Detroit, the Heat responded by winning the next two games and a

pivotal Gm. 5 to setup the series clincher in Detroit. However, Wade was unable to play in Gm. 6 and both he and O'Neal were playing through much pain the 7<sup>th</sup> game. There's not a better combo of stars on the same team. Nor is there a more exciting duo to watch. For that reason, I hope we get to see them at full strength with a chance to win the title.

**#5 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Round Matchups:** There are some good one's potentially. At the top of the East bracket you could see reigning Eastern Conference Champ Detroit against LeBron and the Cavs. In the other East semifinal, you may have the best second round series of these playoffs. Miami taking on New Jersey has the makings of a seven game series and will mark a repeat from last year's postseason, except the Nets have a trio of Jason Kidd, Vince Carter and Richard Jefferson that'll pose problems for the Heat. Over in the West, the Spurs and Mavs both won over 60 games this season. They went head-to-head in the '03 Western Finals, a series San Antonio won in Gm. 6 after losing the first game of the series where Dallas was flawless at the free-throw line. At the bottom it could be Phoenix vs. Denver or the Clippers and that would present an up-tempo, high scoring series. Or it could be Kobe and the Lakers, always providing the star appeal. Maybe more so if it's against the city rival Clippers or a Nuggets team that often greets Bryant with boos [note: his trial was in Eagle, Colorado].

**#4 - East Battle:** No longer can the Western Conference say it is definitively better like it has said in the past. Following the retirement of Michael Jordan and the Bulls after they defeated Utah in the 1998 NBA Finals, the Western Conference won the next five NBA Championships. They were won by two teams: the Spurs and Lakers. When Shaquille O'Neal left Hollywood for South Beach, the balance of power shifted. Detroit won an NBA title themselves and are looking to make it three straight Eastern Conference Championships. New Jersey, which lost back-to-back Finals' to the Lakers, haven't advanced past the conference semis since, though feel confident they can. Nenad Krstic has given them a #4 option to go with Kidd, Carter and Jefferson, meaning they'll be awfully tough for a Miami team that's coached by a great (Pat Riley) and has a cast of exquisite talent.

**#3 - Can the Spurs Repeat?** I say they will not. However, it is hard to go against Head Coach Gregg Popovich and franchise player Tim Duncan, whose won three Finals MVP awards in the last seven years. Health concerns for Duncan and others have arose and that means staying healthy may be difficult for them. What'll help is there really isn't that second team that looks like a 'roadblock' to keep them from returning to the Championship. Dallas might be it, but they have had problems defending, while Phoenix is without emphatic inside presence Amare Stoudemire. Manu Ginobili and Tony Parker are the keys to another deep run. Keep in mind too that in the last two San Antonio title runs, it took a Robert Horry miss in a key playoff game vs. LA and a clutch Horry swish in last year's Finals to help them along the way. Of course, with 0.4 seconds left, who could forget Derek Fisher's unbelievable basket at the buzzer that helped the Lakers beat the Spurs in Gm. 5 of the Western semis two years ago. Had it not been for that shot, maybe we're talking about a third straight title for the Spurs this year.

**#2 - Kobe's Postseason Return:** The Diesel's running mate during three consecutive NBA Championships has returned to the playoffs. After missing it last year, Bryant welcomed back Head Coach Phil Jackson, the man that was with him through all four of his NBA Finals appearances. Can it be a fifth? Not that likely. That's because they don't have the supporting cast to do so, although Brown, Odom, Luke Walton and Brian Cook have played well in April. It could mean the Lakers will hang around for a little while, but Commissioner David Stern definitely has to be happy to have them back due to the large TV ratings #8 and the team from movie star land provide.

**#1 - LeBron's Playoff Debut:** Cleveland Cavaliers basketball has been... well to put it kindly... sleeping. That was until the team drafted LeBron James in 2003 with the #1 overall pick. Fan support soared like never before and LeBron, who jumped straight to the NBA out of High School, has become a household name. His debut reminds us some of MJ's and it'll be interesting to see how he does against the Washington Wizards in the opening round. If he and his teammates survive their first test, they'll be headed to Detroit for what should be a physical series. Only two guys – Kobe and Shaq – could be argued as more recognizable, popular names than James. Just like those two, the longer he hangs around, the better for the game. And 'King James' helps give these playoffs some life.



**AP NBA Commissioner David J. Stern knows fans will flock to their TV sets the longer guys like LeBron, Kobe and Shaq stay around in the 2006 NBA Playoffs.**