

2016 NBA Playoffs Preview

WARRIORS EYE BACK-TO-BACK TITLES

By Ahmad Jabr

Last Wednesday marked the end of one regular season for the ages in the NBA. Records were broken, teams went to heights that were never thought to be reachable before, and others struggled to keep pace. Legends were born, others faded, and some others went out with a bang. As the 2016 NBA Playoffs are set to start today, we lay out a preview for each series in what is promising to be a very exciting post season:

The Eastern Conference:**Cleveland Cavaliers (1) vs Detroit Pistons (8):**

What makes the Cavs even scarier this year is that not only is the team healthy entering into the post season, but this could be the most well-rested LeBron James that we ever see enter the playoffs. The Cavs are one of six teams to finish in the top ten in offensive and defensive efficiency this year. They understand that anything less than a championship would be considered a bust season. Meanwhile, the Pistons return to the playoffs for the first time since 2009 - when they were swept by James and the Cavaliers in the first round. The Pistons did win the season series against the Cavs 3-1 this year, and coach Stan Van Gundy has many options in his roster to give Cleveland some headaches, yet a limited bench and lack of defensive options to contain James, Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love probably mean that the Pistons' chances of scoring an upset are very slim.

Toronto Raptors (2) vs Indiana Pacers (7):

It has been a season of firsts in Toronto. The Raptors reached the 50-win mark in regular season (56 to be more exact) for the first time in franchise history, en route to winning their third consecutive Atlantic Division title. They finished second in the East for the first time as well. They set new franchise win records at home (32) and on the road (24), and also posted a winning record against the West for the first time. They also look towards having a deep playoffs run and making it to the Eastern Conference Finals for the first time in team history. But to do that they first have to overcome the Pacers. Indiana has a versatile roster that gives coach Frank Vogel the option to play

small-ball or go with his bigs if the situation necessitates so. Obviously his best option is to attack the Raptors from the 3-point line where Toronto still struggles defensively, thus creating space for the wings to cut to the basket and the bigs to be more comfortable in the paint. However, the Raptors' squad that looks to avoid a third consecutive first round post season exit are not an easy opponent to handle. The return of defensive specialist DeMarre Carroll from knee surgery that sidelined him for three months, and the emergence of rookie Norman Powell as a reliable guard on both ends of the floor should solidify the Raptors' perimeter defense and help contain Paul George and the rest of the Pacers' wings. Meanwhile, the Raptors' offense, the fifth best in the league fueled by the team's All-Star backcourt duo Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan, its Center Jonas Valanciunas and a deep bench that has many scoring options could prove too tough for the Pacers' defense to contain.

Miami Heat (3) vs Charlotte Hornets (6):

The Hornets have arguably been the most exciting team to watch in the East. Kimba Walker is having the best season of his career, the addition of Nicolas Batum gave Charlotte a boost in perimeter defense and a reliable scoring option, while Jeremy Lin has provided a much needed spark off the bench. As for the Heat, although it does not seem that Chris Bosh will return for a playoff run, the team is stacked with many scoring options that can prove too difficult for the Hornets to handle. However, the Heat's fate in the playoffs perhaps hangs on the performance of three key players: Dwayne Wade, Goran Dragic and Hassan Whiteside. The first provides leadership and scoring, the second helps with assists and being a second scoring option while the third brings defense and toughness. Overall, there are so many indicators that give this series the potential of ending up being the most competitive and exciting in the first round.

Atlanta Hawks (4) vs Boston Celtics (5):

Perhaps the most hard to predict series in the East is this one. The Hawks are not the same team that finished with 60 wins and on top of the Eastern Conference a year ago, but they were still the second best defensive team in the NBA this



OAKLAND: Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry speaks at a news conference after an NBA basketball game against the Memphis Grizzlies in Oakland, California, Wednesday, April 13, 2016. The Warriors won 125-104, and finished the regular season with an all-time NBA record of 73-9. — AP

season, behind the mighty San Antonio. They were second in the NBA in assists and assist ratio, sixth in 3-pointers made, and sixth in effective field goal. Their system relies on tough defense and ball movement - two traits necessary to win in the playoffs. The Celtics meanwhile were fourth in defense and tenth in offensive efficiency. They were fifth in assists, 12th in 3-pointers made and eighth in total field goals made. Both teams also finished with identical records, making it even more difficult to predict the series' outcome.

The Western Conference**Golden State Warriors (1) vs Houston Rockets (8):**

What better way to enter the post season and begin the road for back-to-back championships than by finishing with the most regular season

wins in NBA history? But just as the 1995-96 Chicago Bulls - whose 72-10 record stood for 20 years before the Warriors notched win number 73 in their regular season finale last Wednesday - acknowledged that their record 'does not mean a thing without a ring', Stephen Curry and company understand the importance of what lies ahead, and cannot allow themselves to be distracted. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that the Rockets, whose defensive rating dropped from seventh last year to 21st this season, could win one match in this series, much less have a chance to accomplish what would be the biggest upset in NBA history.

San Antonio Spurs (2) vs Memphis Grizzlies (7):

The Spurs, owners of the league's best defense and fourth best offense, continue to impress. Their 67 regular season win total is their most in franchise history; and so is their 40-1 home record which also ties the all-time NBA record. The team's core of Tim Duncan, Tony Parker, Kawhi Leonard and LaMarcus Aldridge looks better than ever. Furthermore, playing a heavily depleted Grizzlies' squad perhaps also gives Gregg Popovich the chance to better manage his players' minutes in preparation for a potential showdown with the Oklahoma City Thunder in the next round. Memphis' 'grit and grind' style of basketball that is based on slowing the tempo and suffocating defense can be problematic on paper, but with key injuries to players such as Marc Gasol, Mike Conley and Tony Allen, the Grizzlies simply do not have enough bodies to execute a plan that could contain the Spurs' balanced offense.

Oklahoma City Thunder (3) vs Dallas Mavericks (6):

Oklahoma City's Point Guard Russel Westbrook led the league this season with 18 triple-doubles, putting him into a tie with Magic Johnson (1981-82) for the most in a single season in the past 50 seasons, according to Elias Sports Bureau. Kevin Durant has returned to production levels similar to two years ago before foot injuries plagued him last season. The Thunder, who missed the playoffs last year due to injuries and playing in an ultra-competitive Western Conference, look to show they belong among the elite in the league. Dirk Nowitzki, who led Dallas in scoring at 18.5 per game this season, has helped his team make it into the post season once again this year. But the Mavericks, who ranked 17th in defensive rating this year, will have a hard time especially containing the Thunder's dynamic duo of Durant and Westbrook. The two have led their team into finishing with the second best offensive rating in the league this season, behind the Warriors.

Los Angeles Clippers (4) vs Portland Trail Blazers (5):

Coming into the season, perhaps no one (except for Damian Lillard) thought that the Trail Blazers would be in the position they are in today after losing four starters in free agency. The emergence of CJ McCollum, and him forming with Lillard one of the most dangerous backcourts in the league has helped Portland's offense finish the sixth best in the league this season. But the Blazers will need more than just their offense to beat the Clippers, who eliminated the Spurs last year before losing to Houston in the second round. They need to figure out a way to stop Chris Paul from setting the tone on offense, stopping him from finding Blake Griffin or DeAndre Jordan, and to avoid giving JJ Redick open looks on the perimeter. And even if they could do all those things, the Clippers still have a secret weapon in Paul Pierce, who was the x-factor in the Washington Wizard's first-round series sweep of the Toronto Raptors in last year's playoffs.



OAKLAND: A Golden State Warriors fan holds up a sign during the first half of an NBA basketball game between the Warriors and the Memphis Grizzlies in Oakland, California, Wednesday, April 13, 2016. The Warriors finished the season with 73 wins, breaking the 72-10 record set by the 1995-1996 Chicago Bulls. — AP