



CLEVELAND: Cleveland Cavaliers' LeBron James (23) drives past Atlanta Hawks' DeAndre Bembry (95) in the second half of an NBA basketball game. — AP

## LEBRON CONFIDENT AS NBA PLAYOFFS BEGIN

**LOS ANGELES:** LeBron James believes the Cleveland Cavaliers are ready to defend their NBA crown as the postseason gets under way this weekend with the Golden State Warriors desperate to reclaim their throne. The Cavaliers stumbled into the playoffs after an erratic finale to the regular season which saw them pipped for the number one ranking in the Eastern Conference by the Boston Celtics. But despite a four-game losing streak which culminated with Wednesday's 98-83 defeat to Toronto, James is confident the Cavaliers will raise their game as they prepare for game one of their best-of-seven series against the Indiana Pacers today.

"We have good chance to win it all, but it starts with our opponent in two days," James said. "So we have to be very determined but we have to be very smart about our game plan and how we execute. Through everything that went on with our team, we're in a position where we can do something special still." The Cavaliers will head into today's opener buoyed by the knowledge they have already dominated the Pacers this season, winning their mini-series 3-1 over the course of the campaign.

James however insists that his mind is solely focused on the challenge of the here and now as he leads the Cavaliers into battle once more. "I'm not going to harp on about what happened in the regular season through injuries, through good wins, through bad losses," James told reporters on Thursday. "We have a good club going to the postseason and that's all I can ask for right now. At the end of the day I can't have my mind focused on the past right now. The present is the only thing that matters." In last year's epic NBA Finals series against the Warriors, James inspired the Cavaliers in an unprecedented recovery from 3-1 down to a 4-3 series victory.

### 'Locked in'

James is once again relishing his leadership role as

the playoffs come into view. "Preparing this group, getting us locked in, and understanding what our opportunity is," James explained. "Let's get ready to go. Nothing changes for me. I've got to be the leader of this team every time I step on the floor. "I've gotta command these guys and put them in the right positions to be successful. And I've gotta do it at both ends. And if I do that we've got a good chance."

The biggest obstacle to James and the Cavaliers chances of a repeat NBA title comes in the formidable shape of the Warriors. The Western Conference top seeds have by far the best record in the NBA this season, finishing in first place with 67 wins against 15 losses. Ominously for their rivals, there are signs that the Warriors are building irresistible momentum at the right time.

Kevin Durant has returned to form and fitness following his extended injury lay-off, draining 29 points in 27 minutes during a routine 109-94 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers on Wednesday. Stephen Curry meanwhile, who added 20 points in the win, revealed that the Warriors were brimming with confidence as they geared up for Sunday's opening playoff game against the Portland Trail Blazers.

Curry explained that the team's mindset had changed from a year ago, when they were defending their title following a record-breaking regular season. "We're chasing something—we're not protecting anything this year," Curry said. "Feel good. Feel confident. I just like the way we ended the season this year." Elsewhere in the Western Conference this weekend, a battle of triple-double kings Russell Westbrook and James Harden looms large as the Oklahoma City Thunder open their series against the Houston Rockets. Game one takes place in Houston on Sunday. The second-seeded San Antonio Spurs meanwhile open against the Memphis Grizzlies today while the fifth-seeded Utah Jazz travel to the Los Angeles Clippers. —AFP

## CLIPPERS LOOK TO AVOID INJURIES AND BAD LUCK

**LOS ANGELES:** When it comes to the playoffs, the Los Angeles Clippers' history is short and not at all sweet. The once-beleaguered franchise has never made it past the second round, and in two of the last three years under coach Doc Rivers they've blown comfortable series leads and ended up going home. At least they're going to open these playoffs at home, and given the team's recent history, that's no small thing. Neither is the momentum they're riding.

The Clippers won seven in a row and 11 of 13 to end the regular season. They clinched home court for the first round against Utah six months after starting the season as the NBA's hottest team at 14-2. "This really could be their year," Sacramento coach Dave Joergel said. "They could really do something. They're in a rhythm, they're playing well." The Clippers have shown maturity down the stretch, seizing home court after the Jazz put the pressure on by winning on Wednesday night. The Clippers had to beat the Kings to end up tied with Utah at 51-31, and they owned the tiebreaker by virtue of winning the season series 3-1. "This team has grown a lot," Blake Griffin said. "Maybe more than any other season that we have had here."

The Clippers survived a combined 42 games without Griffin and Chris Paul, going 19-23 in their absence. Their worst stretch was a six-game skid between Christmas and New Year's and they responded by starting the new year on a seven-game winning streak, equaling their longest of the season. "When you have as many injuries as we did, the ups and downs of the season, the length of the season, you go through a lot of adversity," Griffin said. "You always say that when we come out on the other side we are going to be better for it, and I truly believe that we are."

### Infamous meltdown

The Big Three of Griffin, Paul and

DeAndre Jordan are in their sixth season together and still in pursuit of their first title. Their sense of urgency may never be greater. Paul and Griffin are in the final year of their contracts, which include player options for 2017-18. Jordan has a year remaining, with a player option for 2018-19. A year ago, the Clippers owned a 2-0 lead against Portland in the first round only to lose in six games after injuries to Paul and Griffin.

In 2015, they gave up a 3-1 lead against Houston and blew a 19-point lead in Game 6 with a trip to the Western Conference finals on the line. In 2014, Paul had an infamous meltdown, twice turning the ball over and fouling Russell Westbrook, who made three straight free throws to beat the Clippers by one point in Game 5 of the conference semifinals. They lost Game 6 back at home. In fact, the Clippers have lost at least once at home in their last six playoff appearances.

"Because of the experiences we've had, I think we're concentrating on finishing," Paul said. "Trying not to have those different lapses in games. That's probably where we've showed a little bit of growth and we won't really be able to tell until the playoffs." Heading into Saturday's playoff opener, the Clippers are healthy, with the exception of back-up guard Austin Rivers, who missed the final six games with a strained left hamstring. He could return soon.

Despite their recent failures, Doc Rivers insists he never goes into a new playoff series thinking about the past. "Does that mean there's no residual effect?" he asked. "I can't say." While they can't change their painful past, they recognize it and clearly want to get past it. "We've been waiting a long time for this," said Jamal Crawford, three-time Sixth Man of the Year. "Ultimately, we'll be one of the teams judged on our postseason success, so we're ready for it." — AP



LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles Clippers forward Paul Pierce, left, is fouled by Houston Rockets forward Troy Williams, right, and is able to score on the play during the second half of an NBA basketball game, Monday, April 10, 2017. — AP