



With the Cavaliers starting their season on Wednesday night an opening night litmus test against the Brooklyn Nets, the focus will be on Kyrie Irving, Anthony Bennett, Dion Waiters, and, of course, Andrew Bynum as the Cavs look to go from one of the worst teams in the NBA to a playoff contender in the Eastern Conference. We asked our staff for their thoughts on what they expect from the Cavs this season and who will play for the NBA Championship.

Erik Cassano:

The Cavs probably have the biggest variable potential of any team in the league. Their two best players, Kyrie Irving and Andrew Bynum, can both cement themselves among the league's top 15 players when healthy. Kyrie could be knocking on the door of the top five by the end of the season.

But it's that question of health. Kyrie has been the victim of freak injuries for the past three seasons, dating back to his lone season at Duke. The concerns about brittle bones and joints are legitimate.

Bynum has the best low-post game of any big man in the league, but his knees are ravaged. He hasn't played in an NBA game since May 2012.

If the Cavs can keep Kyrie on the floor for 70 or more games, if they can keep Bynum on the floor, focused and motivated for 65-plus, this is a team that can sniff 50 wins and get into the battle for a homecourt seed in the first round of the playoffs.

If injuries befall both players and limit their games and production, the burden to carry the team falls to Dion Waiters, a talented scorer who still has a lot to prove; Andy Varejao, who has had his own serious injury problems the past few years; Tristan Thompson, who is supposed to be focusing on defense and rebounding; and first overall pick Anthony Bennett, who is going to have to play himself into shape.

A Cavs team minus Irving and Bynum is probably a 30-win team that is bound for the lottery once again. Yes, Mike Brown's defense will improve this team regardless of who is on the floor, but it's well-documented that his intricate defensive schemes take several years to master. The Cavs will be improved on that end of the floor this year, but they won't emerge as an elite defensive unit for several years.

Still, Brown's focus on defense, coupled with the fact that Kyrie, and possibly Bynum, will play through some of the pain that they might not have played through in previous, rebuilding years, makes me believe that the Cavs are a playoff team that will finish on the plus side of .500.

I'll call their final record at 45-37, and they'll make the playoffs somewhere between the fourth and sixth seeds in an Eastern Conference that really isn't that impressive once you get past Miami, Indiana and Chicago (and maybe Brooklyn). If they manage to get to the second round and keep Brown's streak intact of never having been eliminated in the first round of the playoffs as a head coach, consider this season a phenomenal success.

Finals matchup:

Miami is the runaway favorite to three-peat, and they should be. But across-the-board Heat love is boring. And when you look back, the Heat were a lot closer to not winning a title last year than we seem to remember. Indiana had them on the ropes, taking them to seven games in the East finals. San Antonio was less than 30 seconds from winning the NBA Finals in six games, before succumbing to one of the most epic meltdowns in NBA history.

Let's give some love to the small-market team without a superstar. I'm taking Indiana to beat Miami in the East finals this season, before falling to a Spurs team that enters this season on a

mission to make sure their aging club's last Finals experience wasn't the debacle versus Miami.

San Antonio over Indiana in six. Tim Duncan, Tony Parker and Manu Ginobili all announce their retirements following the championship parade, electing to retire together, and as champions.

John Hnat:

After the Bynum signing, I pegged the Cavs for [50 victories](#) . In retrospect, that may have been a touch optimistic; but I am sticking by it. I see several strong tail winds for the Cavs this season:

1.

Better players. As I wrote in that earlier piece, the Cavs gave thousands of minutes to playing time to guys who are either (a) no longer in the league or (b) will never again get so much playing time. Andrew Bynum, Jarrett Jack, Earl Clark, Anthony Bennett, and Sergey Karasev should be better (in some cases, much better) than the guys they are replacing.

2.

Better health. Combined, Bynum, Kyrie Irving, Anderson Varejao missed 162 of a possible 246 games played in 2012-13. Even with their injury histories, they have to be on the court more in 2013-14.

3.

Better defense. In Mike Brown, the Cavs now have a coach who will stress defense, instead of treating it as "that time before we get the ball back." I don't expect the Cavs to get to where Brown wants them to be this season; that will probably happen 2-3 years down the road. But they won't be nearly last in the league in defense again.

4.

Better young players. The Cavs are the second-youngest team in the league. The elevator is still going up for guys like Irving, Dion Waiters, and Tristan Thompson. Rookies Bennett and Karasev will make an impact. Young teams tend to improve.

5.

Better upcoming draft. The 2014 Draft is one for the ages. The Cavs will hopefully be nowhere near the top of the lottery; however, about half the league will be actively tanking by mid-season, in hopes of securing a place in line to grab Andrew Wiggins, Jabari Parker, etc.

6.

The tank is over. The flip side of point #5 – that many teams will be tanking this upcoming season – is that the Cavs are no longer tanking. No more questionable substitutions with a minute to go. Fewer last-minute breakdowns (the game last spring against the Celtics, when the Cavs parted the lane like the Red Sea and allowed the game-winning layup, comes to mind). Like it or not, the NBA incentivizes teams to either win big or lose big, and nothing in between.

Add it up, and I will stand by my prediction of 50 wins. As long as I have the wine and gold-colored glasses on, I can even see a second-round playoff trip.

While the Cavs will have a surprising (well, to some) season, they won't make it to the NBA Finals ... yet. For the fourth year in a row, the East will be represented by the Miami Heat. (Fun fact: The nickname "Heat" should actually be written in all capitals, according to the team. Check out their [web site](#) – "HEAT" everywhere. As far as I know, the name is not an acronym; so why do they get to change the rules of written English? Can Dan Gilbert insist that "Cavs" be written in wine and gold colors? But I digress.) The Heat will face Oklahoma City in a rematch of the 2012 Finals. This time, the Thunder (or is that THUNDER?) will prevail.

Demetri Inembolidis

The Cavs are fun again. The team has depth at every position except small forward. Their young players are primed for breakout years. Kyrie Irving has a lot of preseason hype that he very well could live up to. Andrew Bynum is ready to play. Anderson Varejao is healthy and will hopefully stay that way now that less will be expected of him. Byron Scott is gone. More importantly, Mike Brown is back.

Yes, the Cavs are a fun team again. It took three very long years. We suffered through a 38.5% winning percentage since the Cavs were forced to rebuild. The big free agency signings were Joey Graham and CJ Miles. Trades were made that occasionally brought in players who could contribute, but they always came with assets. Chris Grant revamped the roster over the summer by bringing in Jarrett Jack, Andrew Bynum and Earl Clark. The days of making trades for picks out of necessity are a thing of the past. Now it is time to start using some of those assets to hopefully turn the Cavs from a good team to a great one.

It has been three long years and we are face to face with the light at the end of the tunnel. Here we are. The Cavs are primed for a playoff berth and Cleveland couldn't be more excited. The fact that we suffered through a 1-37 stretch in the 2010-2011 season makes this all that much sweeter. Watching the Cavs hold onto a lead against a very good team in the season opener was such a breath of fresh air after living through Byron Scott's collapses last year. There is something to be said about being a fan of a team that isn't always good. Being patient and living through bad times makes the good times all that much sweeter. I hope that one day soon we get to experience a championship in Cleveland. Our storied history of suffering as sports fans will make that championship celebration much more meaningful to us than a parade for literally any other city.

I think the Cavs will finish the season with a 42-40 record. This will be good enough to get them into the playoffs as a 7th seed where they will play the Chicago Bulls. A lot of the Cavs' success rests on health, which is a big concern. Hopefully the team stays relatively healthy and the new found depth will help the team out.

I believe that the Miami Heat will play the Los Angeles Clippers in the Finals. The Clippers will win the title, but only because of Dwyane Wade's health woes.

Jeff Rich:

The Cavs, for the first time in a long time, can be taken seriously. Let's be real for a moment, they're not contenders. They aren't even a name you throw into the conversation about champions just to meet a quota, but I don't anticipate Nick Gilbert being a lottery finalist, so that's good. What's not good is my fear of NBA purgatory, the dreaded vacuum that exists in the Association for the 7th seed, all the way down to the long-shot lottery suitors.

There's a lot to like about the young core, but it really starts and ends with Kyrie Irving. People see shades of special on him, and you don't need to watch the Cavs 82 times a year to understand why; he's selfish when he needs to be and trusts his teammates at the right time. The one that he and Mike Brown need to trust the most is Jarrett Jack, the leader of the second unit, for lack of a better term. Of all the pitiful and disgusting things that have taken place since the hire of Byron Scott, the disintegration of fundamentals displayed while the starters have rested has been the worst.

I anticipate better play from the bigs, especially if Varejao and Bynum can, at the very least, pretend to be healthy for a good chunk of the season, the defensive liability of a back-court might be bailed out by their buddies down in the post. A fourth year with no real solution (sorry, Earl Clark) at the 3 will continue to cost this team games. I don't believe that's a bold prediction, but this is; Waiters will regress and Karasev will get a lot more minutes at the 2, provided they don't get too cute with him at the 3. I don't know what to expect from Anthony Bennett, but the bar is low. The bar is low for Carrick Felix too, but I have a feeling he'll contribute somehow, even if he'll never be a Gilbert Arenas-caliber 2nd rounder.

Predictions

Cavs go 40-42, injuries cost them a low playoff spot.

I'll take the Heat in the Finals, but a team like Golden State might push them.

Jerry Roche:

About the Cavs: This will be the best Cavaliers team that we've seen in three years. But considering what we've witnessed since July 8, 2010, that might not be saying a whole lot. On the other hand ... they've got a lot of excellent young talent. Much depends on how much Andrew Bynum -- who is a monster when healthy -- can contribute.

I love Kyrie Irving, except for his spotty defense. I love Andy Varejao, as long as he's healthy. I really, really love Tristan Thompson (and I thought I'd never say that) because he's improved by leaps and bounds since the Cavs drafted him; I really feel he could be an 18/12 guy if Bynum ends up on the trainer's table. The rest of the roster is certainly good enough and -- now -- deep enough to get the Cavs to the playoffs. Just wish Coach Brown put a tiny little bit more emphasis on offense and that the team was a bit older and more experienced.

Final record: 46-36, a steppingstone to championship contention in 2014-2015? At the very least, a glimmer of hope.

About the NBA Finals: Los Angeles Clippers versus Indiana Pacers — a pick that no one on Earth agrees with, mainly because Miami has What's-His-Name, Dwyane Wade and now Greg Oden (a poor man's Andrew Bynum). Clips run past San Antonio (which should have won the championship last season), and Indiana physically beats up on the Heat in the Eastern Conference finals.

Clippers bring joy once again to Tinseltown by winning the coveted Larry O'Brien Trophy, using a script that only Rod Serling could write. Five, six, seven games ... what difference does it make?

Jesse Lamovsky

After three years and a 64-166 record, the rebuild is officially over in Cleveland- or so we'd like to think. 2013-14 is supposed to be the season in which the Cavaliers stop tanking and start winning at least as often as they lose.

Like any offseason for any team, it's new additions- Jarrett Jack and Andrew Bynum and top overall pick Anthony Bennett- that get the most attention. But the Cavaliers will stand or fall this year based on the performance of players who were already here- specifically, Kyrie Irving, Tristan Thompson and Dion Waiters.

Going into his third season, the dazzling Irving must do two things to become a superstar- stay healthy and perform on both ends of the floor. Too often in his first two years he did neither, missing 38 games with a variety of injuries and while healthy playing a brand of defense that could be charitably described as "indifferent." Kyrie has the complete arsenal offensively, but the superstars a.) play on both ends, b.) stay reasonably healthy and, oh by the way, c.) win.

For Dion Waiters, the challenge lies in becoming more efficient and less of a ball-stopper. As a rookie he shot a sluggish 41.2 percent and struggled to play in tandem with Irving, preferring to dominate the ball when he had it. Waiters became more confident in the drive as the season went on- less chucking- and showed the killer instinct and the desire to be clutch that you want to see. The mindset and the athletic ability are there: now it's a matter of simply improving overall both individually and within the team concept.

The true wild card is Tristan Thompson. After looking completely lost for his first season-plus, the big Canadian suddenly blossomed midway through last year, becoming a double-double machine while displaying a startling and unexpected offensive touch. Speaking of unexpected, Thompson switched shooting hands in the offseason, going from left to right (he bowls right-handed, which I suppose means something.)

I'm suspending disbelief with Tristan, because he's already better than I once thought he'd be (a poor man's Stromile Swift.) He clearly works hard at his craft and he carries himself with intelligence and maturity. I won't say he isn't capable of being an important part of a championship contender, left or right-handed.

Championship contenders have both stars and superstars. The health of Bynum and Anderson Varejao, the development of Anthony Bennett, the contributions of Jarrett Jack, the defensive schemes implemented by Mike Brown and, of course, health- all of those elements are big. But stars and superstars are bigger. How far Waiters and Thompson go to become the former, and how far Kyrie goes to become the latter, will chart the path of this organization moving forward.

Prediction: I'm feeling optimistic after the hard-fought Opening-Night victory over the Nets and their "mysterious Russian Billionaire" owner. The sky is the limit- that, or a 43-39 regular-season record, a first-round upset of the Knicks (please let this happen) and a competitive five-game second-round loss to LeBron and the Heat.

Finals Prediction- Miami 4, Oklahoma City 2: An older, tougher Thunder team plays better in its Finals rematch with the Heat but can't get over the hump. Three straight titles for the Heat, which to me equals LeBron either playing out his option in Miami or simply re-upping altogether. No way he turns his back on a chance to win four in a row- something MJ (who has never been particularly warm or complimentary toward LeBron) never did.

□ **Tom Moore**

There is a sense of excitement and quiet confidence surrounding the Cleveland Cavaliers as they embark on the 2013-14 NBA season.

The excitement comes from the belief that after three years of high draft picks, forgettable players and too many losses to count (actually we counted, it was 166), the Cavs finally have the pieces in place to once again join the relevant portion of the NBA.

The confidence comes from the return of Mike Brown as coach. Brown was made the scapegoat in the spring of 2010 for LeBron James' short-comings in the Boston series and, like his choice of Comic Sans, the decision to fire Brown became one that Cavs owner Dan Gilbert came to regret.

Now that Brown is back on the sidelines, the one certainty is that the Cavs will play defense. On many nights, that will keep the team in the game and buy some time for what is still a very young roster to grow up and learn how to play together.

There is much to like about this Cavs team, from Kyrie Irving all the way down through a second unit that includes pros like Jarrett Jack and Andrew Bynum, who made a surprising eight minute appearance in Wednesday night's season-opening win against Brooklyn.

While it was just one game, the fact that the Cavs won on a night where Irving and shooting guard Dion Waiters were a combined nine-of-28 from the field bodes well for the future. There are nights where Irving and Waiters are going to light up the scoreboard and then there are going to be nights like the opener; if the Cavs can find offense from other places on a consistent basis, rather than having to just rely on one or two players, they will be light years ahead of the way the team was built the last time Brown was in town.

Barring major injuries to Irving and a few other key players, Anderson Varejao quickly comes to mind; the Cavs should be nowhere near the lottery come draft time next summer. The question then becomes, can this be a playoff team?

The Eastern Conference is not anyone's idea of a brutal conference – Milwaukee took the No. 8 seed last season with just 38 wins. It's not unreasonable to think that a healthy Cavs team that improves during the season as it embraces Brown's defensive philosophy can be a .500 team this season and challenge for one of the bottom playoff positions in the conference.

So let's allow early season optimism to carry the day and put the Cavs in the No. 8 playoff spot come the end of the season, bringing with it a first-round match up with the Miami Heat – one that the Cavs have been working toward ever since that July night in 2010 at the Boys and Girls Club altered the trajectory of the franchise.

Jeremy Klein:

The Cleveland Cavaliers probably have as wide a range of possible outcomes for the coming season as any team in the league. I can see this team winning 50 games just as easily as I can see them winning 20.

Any honest prognostication of the Cavaliers' season should probably not factor in any contribution from Andrew Bynum. At this point, it seems his body may be irrevocably broken down, and expecting even ten games out of him this season seems like a stretch.

As for the rest of the roster, there are still a lot of issues. They still don't have a legitimate NBA-caliber small forward. The guard troika of Kyrie Irving, Dion Waiters, and Jarrett Jack is going to get torched defensively, and if (when?) Anderson Varejao goes down injured, there's no one else on the team that can protect the rim. The roster is fraught with injury risk between Bynum (obviously), Varejao, Irving (I believe he can avoid injury this season, but it still deserves mentioning), Waiters (missed 21 games last season), and Anthony Bennett (coming off of shoulder surgery). For some reason, I get the sinking feeling that we'll be seeing a lot of Jarrett Jack iso's and Tyler Zeller 18-footers before too long.

Like I said, this season can go in a lot of directions for Cleveland. Ownership seems committed to making the playoffs this year at all costs, even though the team would probably be better served trying to get a lottery pick in a loaded draft. If I knew they were going to get 70-plus games from Irving and Varejao, I would definitely pick this team to go over .500. But if Varejao goes down or Irving misses an extended stretch, things will go south in a hurry. I'll go with 31-51 as my prediction and hope against hope that I'm wrong.

As for the Finals, I think the Heat still have to be the favorite to come out of the East, and not just because they spanked Chicago on opening night. Frankly, as long as LeBron is in Miami, they have to be considered the favorites.

In the West, I'm all ready to climb aboard the overcrowded Rockets bandwagon. I think Dwight Howard was unhappy and (more importantly) unhealthy last season, and I expect him to get close to the level of performance he displayed in Orlando. I also think GM Daryl Morey still has one big trade left to push his team over the top.

In the Finals, I'll go with Chris Bosh and company in six games, followed by the city of Cleveland collectively lighting itself on fire. Good times!

Anthony Joki:

For the past three seasons, the Cleveland Cavaliers and the front office have been in "Wait till Next Year" mode. Well, it is time to get out of that mode and get into "Playoff" mode. The Cavs have done a good job remaking their roster since the departure of the former self-proclaimed king. Two number one overall draft picks, Kyrie Irving and Anthony Bennett, and two number four overall draft picks, Tristan Thompson and Dion Waiters, make up the bulk of the rotation. The rotation is also made up of veterans who have made significant contributions for previous teams. Jarrett Jack is a good point guard that will see the floor with Kyrie Irving and the big free agent signing of Andrew Bynum. Let's not forget about Anderson Varejao. He has only played in 81 games the last three seasons combined. The entire Cavs seasons is dependent on him and Bynum staying healthy and making contributions. The only glaring weakness of the Cavs is the small forward position. Who will step up? Down the road, I see Anthony Bennett starting at small forward. Mike Brown 2.0, as Dan Gilbert would say, will have to find a way to play Bennett, Thompson and Varejao or Bynum at the same time.

Overall, I see the Cavs being above .500 for the first time since the 2009-2010 season. As a low, I see them with 42 wins. As a high, I see them with 45 wins. They will make the playoffs and will be fighting with Washington, Detroit and New York for the 5-8 seeds.

The NBA Finals will include the Miami Heat and the Oklahoma City Thunder. Kevin Durant and the Thunder will get their revenge against the Heat and take home the Larry O'Brien Trophy.