

It's Cavs/Nets in the second round of the playoffs and the action gets started Sunday at 1 PM at The Q. The Nets will be a formidable foe for the Cavs. They have three superstars in Jason Kidd, Vince Carter, and Richard Jefferson. And they have all kinds of playoff experience, making the post-season the last six seasons. In my latest, I break down the Cavs next opponent.



After a week of rest following their 4-0 sweep of the Washington Wizards, the playoffs start back up for the Cavaliers tomorrow when the New Jersey Nets come to Cleveland for game one of the second round playoff series between the two teams.

In advancing to meet the Cavs, the Nets defeated the Toronto Raptors four games to two in the first round. Both teams reside in the Atlantic Division of the Eastern Conference, a division the Nets were heavily favored to win at the beginning of the season. However, the Raptors shocked the basketball world by winning the division with a 47-35 mark thanks to a 34-17 finish to the season. The Nets battled injuries all year, losing starting center Nenad Krstic for the season with a torn ACL, and Richard Jefferson for 30 games due to arthroscopic surgery on his right ankle.

By virtue of winning the division, the Raptors earned the #3 seed and home court advantage in the first round. The Nets rallied to the finish line - winning eight of their last ten to finish 41-41, securing the #6 seed in the weak Eastern Conference in the process.

The teams split the first two games in Toronto, then the Nets dominated games three and four in New Jersey. Toronto got out to a huge lead in game five, nearly squandering it all, and surviving a Bostjan Nachbar three pointer at the horn that would have won the game for the Nets. The series returned to Jersey for game six, won by the Nets last night by a 98-97 count on a basket by Richard Jefferson with five seconds remaining.

This is the sixth straight playoff appearance for New Jersey; a streak that started the first year Jason Kidd arrived on the scene after being acquired from Phoenix for Stephon Marbury. This

was also the year the team drafted Jefferson out of Arizona. Despite recently turning 34 years old, Kidd has been as good as ever for the Nets as of late ... improbably averaging a triple double in the first round series win over the Raptors.

The first two playoff appearances in the Kidd/Jefferson Era resulted in Eastern Conference titles for the Nets, but they were unable to get it done in the Finals each season. In 2002, they were swept by Phil, Shaq, Kobe, and the Lakers. In 2003 the Nets lost in six games to the San Antonio Spurs. Kidd became a free agent following that series, and he was pursued hotly by the Spurs. Citing "unfinished business in New Jersey", Kidd decided to stay with the Nets after most figured him gone for San Antonio.

Kidd has been unable to get that elusive title ever since, and was joined in Jersey the following season by Vince Carter ... who was stolen away from a Raptor team desperate to deal him. Kidd, Carter, and Jefferson are considered one of the top 1-2-3 punches in all of basketball.

The Cavs and the Nets have a little playoff history. The teams faced off in the first round of the playoffs in consecutive years, following the 1991-92 and 1992-93 seasons, with the Cavs winning both series. These were the last two years of the Lenny Wilkens and right before things started to fall apart for the team. The Cavs defeated the Nets three games to one in 1992 before ultimately losing to the Bulls in the Eastern Conference Finals. The next year the Cavs beat New Jersey three games to two, then were swept in the second round by Michael Jordan and the Bulls once again.

In the LeBron Era, the Cavs had really struggled against the Nets prior to this season, winning just four of their eleven games against them. However, this season the Cavs took two of three from Jersey. The Cavs lost on the road to the Nets back in December in a 113-111 thriller that saw LeBron James and Vince Carter combine for 75 points in a great mano y mano showdown. The Cavs then proceeded to beat the Nets twice at Quicken Loans Arena, winning by a 96-91 count in January ... then dominating the Nets 94-76 three weeks ago in a game the Cavs needed in their pursuit of the #2 seed.

As a team, statistically, the Nets have nothing that sticks out and grabs you outside of the facts that they finished dead last in the NBA in steals this season and were 27th of 30 teams in blocked shots. The Nets were right in the middle of the pack in scoring, scoring defense, FG%, and opponent's FG%. They were 14th in rebounding, a category the Cavs finished 2nd in. While the Cavs were dead last in the NBA in free throw shooting at 69.5%, the Nets weren't much better. They finished 25th in the league in that area, making just 72.7% of their attempts. The Nets were 3rd in the league in assists, thanks almost solely to Kidd.

When the Nets are at their best is when Kidd is aggressively running the floor and Vince Carter is attacking the basket with drives instead of settling for jumpers. Much like LeBron, Carter is near unstoppable when attacking the rim, but often tends to get lazy and settle for jumpers. Jefferson was superb in the series against the Raptors, averaging 22 points per game on 53% shooting to go along with five rebounds and three assists per contest.

The Nets big men are primarily defensive players, but power forward Mikki Moore actually led

the NBA in FG% this year at 65.6%, becoming the first undrafted player ever to lead the league in that category. Moore averaged 9.5 points and 5.4 rebounds, coming on strong for the team after the loss of Krstic. Center Jason Collins has little to no offensive skills, but did a hell of a job shutting down Chris Bosh in the Toronto series.

The Nets bench is weak, and in addition to on the boards ... this is where the Cavs need to expose them. Their sixth man is Bostjan Nachbar, who has been very good for them of late ... coming on down the stretch and averaging 12 points per game in the first round. But behind him there is little. Second year swingman Antione Wright spells Carter and Jefferson. The only other guys that have been seeing time off the Nets bench are their pair of rookies from the University of Connecticut – point guard Marcus Williams and big forward Josh Boone.

A couple other subplots ...

Cavs coach Mike Brown and Nets coach Lawrence Frank are the two youngest head coaches in the NBA. Additionally, rap star Jay-Z is a co-owner of the Nets. Jay-Z and LeBron James are good friends, which has led to speculation that James may flee Cleveland for the Nets once his contract here expires. The Nets will move to Brooklyn, NY for the 2009 season.

The action starts Sunday at 1:00 at The Q and game one will be televised by ABC. Game two is Tuesday night at 8:00 and will be carried by TNT. The action moves to New Jersey for game three one week from today on Saturday, May 12th.