

After three home routs over the Hawks in games 1, 2, and 5, the Celtics are big favorites to win and advance to play the Cavs in the second round tomorrow afternoon. But seventh games do not fall under the umbrella of death, taxes or any of the other guarantees in life. So the Hawks, who have done so much to frustrate the more-talented Celtics over the past two weeks, have at least a fighter's chance on Sunday. It begs the question, if you're a Cavs fan, who should you be rooting for on Sunday? Don't utter the knee-jerk response of "Atlanta, of course" just yet. Let's take a look at this in more detail.



When the Cavaliers lost Game 5 to the Wizards on Wednesday, many fans (including me) thought they had lost several critical days of rest for the second round. The Celtics surely would eliminate the Hawks in their Game 6 on Friday, meaning the Cavs would have to do the same to Washington just to keep pace.

As we know, the Cavs held up their end of the bargain, putting an end to Washington's season for the third straight year. Fortunately, the Hawks didn't go quietly into that good night, and the one-versus-eight seed series that just about everyone thought would be the first round's biggest mismatch is now the only series that will go seven games. Game 7 is slated for Sunday afternoon in Boston.

So far, the home team has won every game in the Boston-Atlanta series. There is no real reason to believe Game 7 will buck that trend. The Cavs would be wise to pack their bags for Boston, because that's in all likelihood where they're headed to open the second round.

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## **Boston Celtics**

*Regular season record: 66-16*

*Regular season vs. Cavs: 2-2*

### **Why you want them:**

#### **1. They've gone 11 rounds with the Hawks, and still aren't done.**

This is quite obviously not the first-round series Doc Rivers and his crew had in mind. They were supposed to take care of the Hawks in no-fuss, no-muss style and have a good, solid five to seven days to rest up and prepare for the winner of the Cleveland-Washington series.

Instead, the Celtics and their aging anchors Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce and Ray Allen have been subjected to a grueling seven-game set and will have two fewer days of rest than the Ca  
vs  
should they win on Sunday and advance.

#### **2. This is where the East Coast media spotlight becomes really hot.**

When you're good and you play in Boston, the praise is endless (see Brady, Tom). When you fail and you play in Boston, the criticism can pulverize you (see Everyone on the Patriots Roster, Post-Super Bowl XLII).

All season long, the national media has been singing high hosannas to the Celtics and how they're one of the greatest single-season teams of all time, how they won 66 games but had the team stats of a 70-win team, how KG is the ultimate leader and how that Doc Rivers might not be such a bad coach after all.

Now, one slip-up away from elimination, national media outlets are picking the Celtics apart to find out how this juggernaut can look so vulnerable. ESPN's resident spittle distributor Stephen A. Smith went on a two-minute tirade during halftime of Friday's Jazz-Rockets game concerning his belief that the situation the Celtics now find themselves in is unacceptable.

The Celtics can win Game 7 and advance, but nothing will change the fact that they will have had to survive a major scare to get to the second round, and no matter how much bravado they put up, they will not head into the second round brimming with confidence.

### **3. The Celtics have trouble stopping The Guy.**

If your team has The Guy, and the Cavs certainly do, he can give the Celtics fits.

Joe Johnson has been The Guy for Atlanta in this series -- at least in the games played in Atlanta. Games 3, 4 and 6 netted Johnson 23, 35 and 15 points respectively as Boston's much-celebrated defense struggled to find ways to contain Johnson, particularly when he heats up from beyond the arc.

LeBron is not going to shoot it like Johnson, but he can penetrate and find wide-open teammates when the defense inevitably collapses on him. Play him physically as Washington did? Well, no matter how much contact any team dishes out, it's still tough -- and probably painful -- to stop 6'-8" and 260 pounds of Bron Bron Express from getting to the rim.

The Celtics are a more rugged team than the Wizards, but no one is going to confuse their frontcourt with the Broad Street Bullies. LeBron will win more battles than he loses in the paint, just on sheer size and strength alone.

### **Why you don't want them:**

#### **1. Rajon Rondo was born to play the Cavs.**

Rondo hasn't put up monster numbers so far in the playoffs, but he's been effective, with double-digit point totals in every game except Game 6. With Boston's triumvirate of all stars, it's easy to overlook Rondo. But he's the type of player who makes life miserable for the Cavs.

Rondo is a sneaky-quick point guard who can slither by the Cavs perimeter defense and wreak all kinds of havoc inside. If the Cavs

have to devote extra resources to stopping Rondo, it's going to open up the floor for KG, Allen and Pierce, and you absolutely do not want to face the Celtics in a position where those three can stand around and knock down jumpers because

you're too busy chasing their greased-pig point guard around to stop them.

## **2. For Pierce, this would be personal.**

Back in the days when Paul Pierce was a one-man show, he and LeBron used to hook up in some epic scoring duels.

LeBron

usually got the better of Pierce and the Celtics. So, suffice it to say that over the past five years, Pierce has developed a healthy dislike for losing to

LeBron

and the

Cavs

. Pierce will likely make that known to KG, Allen, Rondo and whoever else is listening should the Celtics and

Cavs

meet.

But unlike the Wizards who were mostly hot air, the Celtics can back it up on the floor.

## **3. 66 wins has to count for something, right?**

Let's not overlook the obvious. The Celtics have three top-tier players on their roster, two of whom (KG and Allen) would seem to already have their hall of fame tickets punched. They have a pass-first point guard, a serviceable bench and the best defense in the league. This is a dang good team. Any way you slice it, if the Cavs

play the Celtics and eliminate them, it would be an upset.

## **Atlanta Hawks**

*Regular season record: 37-45*

*Regular season vs. Cavs: 1-2*

## **Why you want them:**

### **1. A chance to put the suitcases down for a few days.**

The Cavs are 2-1 at home so far in the playoffs, with the lone loss a product of a

final-minute meltdown in Game 5. They were 7-1 at home in last year's conference playoffs, 4-2 in 2006.

That's 13-4 at home versus Eastern Conference teams in the playoffs during the LeBron

James Era. Factor in last

spring's

NBA Finals sweep and the

postseason

home record is still a respectable 13-6. In addition, in the four playoff series in which the

Cavs

have held

homecourt

advantage since 2006, they've taken a 2-0 lead three times.

I'd take homecourt advantage whenever I could get it if I were a member of the Cavs

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## **2. The experience factor.**

Boston and Atlanta might seem like they're at opposite end of the playoff spectrum. But they have one very important thing in common: Both teams have a nucleus of players making their first run through the playoffs together.

Playoff basketball is vastly different than regular season basketball in terms of how players mentally approach each game. So, no matter how much success the Celtics had during the regular season, there is still an adjustment period come playoff time. That's what you're seeing now as the Celtics struggle with their rotations, allowing Atlanta opening after opening to get back into games.

The Cavs are past that stage. Sure, half the roster was rebuilt in February, but the cornerstone tandem of LeBron and Zydrunas Ilgauskas, along with sidekicks Daniel Gibson and Anderson

Varejao

, remain in place from last year's Finals run, which is enough to maintain stability for the playoffs.

That experience advantage should help them somewhat against Boston, but it should help them a great deal against a young team like Atlanta.

### **3. Size inside, or lack thereof.**

If the Cavs draw the Hawks in Round 2, they should once again be afforded a wide advantage on the boards. Atlanta's big man rotation is anchored primarily by Al Horford, Zaza Pachulia and Josh Smith. Smith and Horford are both above-average rebounders, but only Horford (6'-10" and 245) is really a load to handle inside.

Horford is the type of player Ben Wallace gets paid big bucks to put a body on. If Wallace does his job, and Varejao, Ilgauskas and Joe Smith pick up the slack, the Cavs should win the rebounding battle by at least 20 every night.

### **Why you don't want them:**

#### **1. OK, they don't have Tyronn Lue anymore, but...**

The Hawks no longer have uber-pest Lue to dismantle the Cavs from the inside like a dreadlocke d gremlin. But they do have a lot of exceptional athletes who can outrun and outjump any Cav not wearing No. 23.

Smith is a tremendous athlete. Josh Childress is a long, lean wing player who can score inside and out. Horford is quickly becoming one of the best blue-collar players in the game, and Joe Johnson is an A-list shooter. Running the show is the point guard so many Cavs fans coveted, Mike Bibby.

In short, the Hawks have a formidable arsenal of weapons, even more than better teams like the Celtics, Pistons and Cavs. If they can't hurt you one way, they can probably do it another way. Because of that, it's very tough to shut Atlanta down for 48 minutes, no matter your team's level of defensive competence.

## **2. Starring Joe Johnson as Mr. Clutch.**

It's deflating to an opposing team when they've tried everything to stop LeBron from getting to the hoop and he's still collecting three-point plays like a nine-year-old collects Pokemon cards.

Every bit as deflating is watching a red-hot shooter foil your best-laid defensive plans by draining three-balls over your team's defense. Short of fouling, there is nothing you can do about it except watch the ball sail through the net.

Ladies and gentlemen, meet Joe Johnson. A major factor in all three Hawks playoff wins to date. His shooting has confounded the Celtics as the Hawks rallied from large deficits in each of their wins.

If the Hawks advance and Johnson continues to burn nylon with his shooting, the Hawks will never be out of a game, no matter the deficit. And with the Cavs' tendency to slack with a large lead, that's a hungry dog-raw steak proposition.

## **3. "Pressure" isn't in the dictionary.**

When your franchise hasn't been to the playoffs in nine years and your best shooter is several years removed from his last playoff run with the Phoenix Suns, you don't feel a whole lot of pressure. For a 37-win team like the Hawks, every playoff win is a win farther than pretty much everyone outside the state of Georgia thought they'd go.

Contrast that with the burden to perform faced by NBA royalty like the Celtics or Pistons, or the pressure the Cavs face to prove last year's conference title wasn't a fluke. It's like having to play a whole other team on top of your opponent.

It's tough to gain the mental edge against a team that feels virtually no pressure to perform. The Hawks are like a 12-seed in the NCAA Tournament, before they arrive at the Sweet 16 and everyone starts to take notice. For now, Atlanta is enjoying the perks of flying under the radar and taking everyone by surprise.