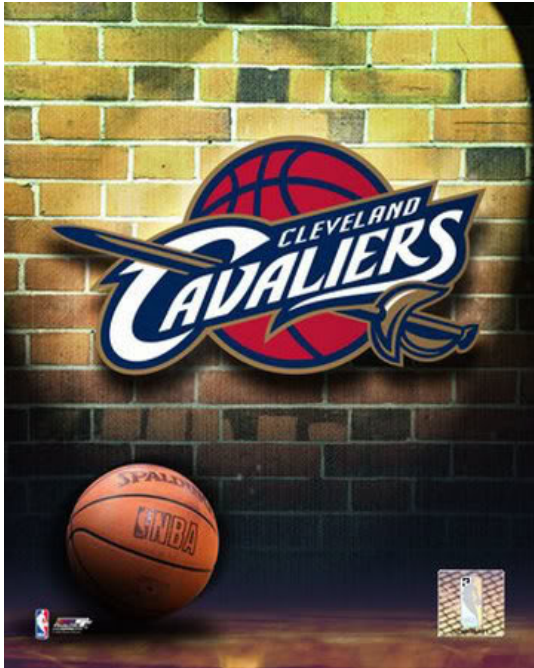


The Roundtable: 2008-2009 Cavaliers Predictions

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, October 27 2008 7:00 PM -

With the offseason pickup of highly regarded point guard Mo Williams, optimism abounds that in an election year ... LeBron James may have in fact found his running mate to win an NBA title. In arguably the most anticipated season in Cavaliers franchise history, they are healthy, hungry, and look poised to take that proverbial next step from title contender to title holder. We asked our writers for a myriad of predictions on the NBA season, including the Cavaliers ultimate fate.



"It's basketball time."

Those three familiar words longtime radio play-by-play man Joe Tait uses every night just before tipoff could no better signify the excitement of Cavaliers fans everywhere as the 2008-2009 season tips off tonight in Boston.

With the offseason pickup of highly regarded point guard Mo Williams, optimism abounds that in an election year ... LeBron James may have in fact found his running mate to win an NBA title. In arguably the most anticipated season in Cavaliers franchise history, they are healthy, hungry, and look poised to take that proverbial next step from title contender to title holder.

Can the Cavaliers live up to the hype this year, or are fans in store for a letdown? Can they end the 45-year Cleveland championship drought, or come up empty like so many other Cleveland teams the past five decades? Is Mo Williams really the missing piece, or is he a piece that does not fit? Can the front court survive an 82 game schedule, or will they become the kryptonite to LeBron's super abilities?

TheClevelandFan.com panel answers those questions and more below:

[Nick Allburn](#): The Cavaliers have flown under the radar this off-season, and after the incredible hype the Browns received, I'm fine with that. After Boston went on to win the Finals early last summer, some were quick to forget that the Cavs came up just five points short in a decisive game seven at the Garden when the Cavs fell to the Celtics in the Eastern Semifinals. The Celtics' home court advantage is essentially what bounced the Cavs from the post-season tournament, and hopefully that will finally impress upon the Cavaliers the importance of the regular season.

With that in mind, I see big things on the horizon for this team. The Mo Williams trade went largely unnoticed nationally, but Williams' presence will provide the Cavs with the legitimate point guard they've so desperately sought, in addition to giving the club a player other than LeBron James who can create his own shot. The back court is loaded with young, talented players and can withstand injury. And obviously, there's no reason to expect anything less from LeBron James than his usual brilliance. Eric Snow and Wally Szczerbiak have big expiring contracts that should yield an extra piece or two at the trade deadline.

The Cavs' weaknesses at this point are front court depth and the lack of a lock down perimeter defender. Those problems could be rectified by trading the aforementioned expiring at some point during the season. The front court depth is especially worrisome. Ilgauskas, Varejao, and Wallace all have injury histories and JJ Hickson is at this point largely an unknown. Cavs fans needs to keep their fingers crossed, because if just one of those guys goes down, the Cavs will be dangerously thin up front. These weaknesses will not deter me from picking the Cavs to win the Finals this season, as I think the pieces will fall into place at just the right time for this club. I predicted that the Cavs would lose to the Spurs in the Finals two years ago; here's hoping I'll get this one right, too.

[Sam Amico](#): Other than LeBron James, the one thing the Cavaliers really have going for them this season is depth in the backcourt. There's Delonte West, Daniel Gibson, Wally Szczerbiak, Sasha Pavlovic and newcomer Mo Williams -- and they've all been in camp together for the first time.

Of course, without Williams, the guards don't look nearly as daunting. But his ability to penetrate and create shots for others should improve everyone's game, opening up good looks at the basket for his backcourt-mates. And that's saying

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something, because Szczerbiak, West and Gibson can really knock 'em down from the perimeter.

On the other hand, I have two fairly big concerns entering the season:

1. The frontcourt scoring.
2. Pavlovic.

Let's start with the frontcourt. The Cavs had to surrender Joe Smith (to Oklahoma City) as part of the Williams trade, and they'll miss his toughness and shooting. He was the lone big man who could provide points when Zydrunas Ilgauskas was out of the game. Ben Wallace and Anderson Varejao can't be counted on to produce points, so unless the Cavs play Big Z for 48 minutes, or rookie J.J. Hickson suddenly turns into the next Shaquille O'Neal (not gonna happen in either instance), they'll be hurting in this department.

As for Pavlovic, well, I'm worried. He is maddeningly inconsistent, takes bad shots, has had about one-half of a good season in his entire pro career combined, and isn't exactly a team player. Unfortunately, Mike Brown absolutely loves him, giving Pavlovic chance after chance after chance to prove himself - chances that most of Brown's other players would never get (read: Szczerbiak). Pavlovic should be the Cavs' last option off the bench in the crowded backcourt, but he's likely to start. I'm not kidding when I say Brown's misuse of Pavlovic could lead to the Cavs' downfall this season - unless, of course, Pavlovic suddenly turns the corner.

So what we have here is a team with all the makings of an Eastern Conference champion, as LeBron (and to a lesser extent, Williams) makes everyone that much better.

But the bottom line on the Cavs will boil down to how well they are coached, how well they mesh, and how well they can defend when it matters most. Goodness knows, they should be much better on offense.

My prediction: The Cavs will finish 54-28, win the Central Division, and advance to the conference finals, where they will lose again to the Celtics in seven games. Next season, however, they will win it all.

Erik Cassano: I have two primary concerns about the Cavs, outside of the

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bodies of Ben Wallace and Zydrunas Ilgauskas completely breaking down. One, I'm concerned they're going to coast through the early season, following the example of their leader. LeBron might be in full-on energy conservation mode for the '08 portion of the schedule after spending his summer reclaiming Olympic gold for Team USA.

The good news is, there are others on the roster who can now pick up some of the slack, and should be expected to do so. Chief among them is new acquisition Mo Williams, he of the 17 points and six assists over the past two years. At 6'-1" he's not big enough to dominate, but he is fast enough to break defenders down off the dribble and get to the basket. As long as he doesn't try to do too much, Williams should be an excellent pickup. He might not be a true point guard, but he's easily the fastest backcourt player the Cavs have had since Terrell Brandon -- or maybe even the late '80s, pre-knee injury Mark Price.

The offense should be improved with Williams' addition, something fans have been pining for over the last five years. But Mike Brown is all about defense, and it remains to be seen how long it's going to take for this group of players to reach the defensive level Brown desires. That's my second concern. Offense can win regular season games, but defense wins in the playoffs. Hopefully finding a new level of offensive production won't lull the Cavs into a false sense of security that they don't have to play top-notch D to win.

Having a less-talented roster in recent years forced the Cavs to work harder at defense to win. Now they have as much offensive talent as they've ever had in the LeBron Era. Offense is the path of least resistance and it's more fun to play than lockdown defense, but if the Cavs reach the playoffs without the right defensive mindset, they'll be ripe for the picking when they face Boston or Detroit -- or even Orlando, which should be a much-improved defensive team.

That's where the leadership of LeBron and especially Wallace comes in. They will be the players expected to get this team's priorities straight. They do need to win more games in the regular season this year, but the real prize is in June, and they'll need to D up to get there.

Doug Hayden: Fresh off of his stomp through the Olympics and eager to secure a better position in the playoffs, LeBron will have the Cavs out of the gate with relatively more energy than usual for the regular season. Of course, this being the mostly meaningless NBA regular season and with the team adjusting to

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having an actual point guard, it won't be nearly as easy as the Beijing victory tour. The season will start off relatively well, however, and the fans will definitely be entertained by having an actual honest to Mark Price point guard.

After that, the Magic 8-Ball goes 'Reply hazy, try again in February'. Trades and injuries change the landscape, teams will surprise, others will run the white flag, and the NBA that comes out of the trading deadline will likely not resemble the one that we start the season with.

As it stands now, barring injuries, disaster, and what Danny Ferry can pull from his bag of tricks, I see a 50 to 55 win season with definite first and likely second round home court advantages in the playoffs. Boston is Boston and should finish with the best record in the East, Detroit could be in the mix but is in the middle of a youth movement, Orlando is still Dwight Howard and eleven guys named Moe, and I wait to see how badly the Carlos Boozer karma effect affects Elton Brand and the Sixers before assessing their chances.

Out West, Portland, San Antonio, New Orleans, Houston, and Utah will scramble for rights to see who gets thumped by the Lakers. Dallas, Phoenix, Denver, and Golden State could all raise the white flag and one will likely wind up again with 50 wins and a single ping pong ball.

The playoffs will see the Lakers cruise, while the East is a bloodbath. The Eastern Conference finals will come down to another seven game showdown between Boston and Cleveland, with Mo Williams being the difference maker for the Cavs. The Finals will be a seven game Kobe-Lebron showdown and my Cavs homerism and belief in LBJ says the Wine and Gold will rise the first banner in C-Town in forty-four years.

Hiko: What is the theme for the Cleveland-based sports teams in 2008? Hightened expectations, disappointing results. The Indians were one game away from the World Series in '07, and then '08 went Splat! The Browns were a tiebreaker away from the Playoffs in '07, and then '08 went Poof! The Cavs were one game away from beating the eventual NBA Champions, and then...

Certainly, the Cleveland teams are mutually exclusive. It can be nothing but coincidence that the Indians and Browns followed exactly the same pattern. There is no conceivable connection. Yet, I cannot help but feel that the Cavaliers will suffer the same fate, to a somewhat lesser extent.

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With merely the acquisition of Mo Williams, this team is talking Championship. They weren't a Championship caliber team last year, and I don't think they are now. I'm afraid that the expectations on Williams in particular and the team in general will go south, at least initially. The bigs are aging and injury prone. The outside shooting is still suspect. The Defense should remain solid, and LeBron James is still LeBron James, so they should make the playoffs. But I don't see them getting any further than they went last year, not unless they can play the Wizards in every round.

Sorry to be a downer, but I'm not gettin' my hopes up any of these teams any more until they prove it's worth the effort.

John Hnat: I can't believe I am about to do this. For the first time in my life, at least since I was a kid and thought that Cleveland teams would win titles every year (I also believed in Santa Claus back then), I am predicting that a major Cleveland sports team will win a championship.

That's right. I'll say it again: The Cavs are going to win the 2008-09 NBA Championship.

I see the Cavs finishing the regular season 53-29, which will be good for second place in the Central Division (Detroit will be ahead of them) and third overall in the Eastern Conference (Boston will have a better record too). That will give them a tough road, as they will need to win two playoff series without home court advantage. Lucky for them, they are the one team that is absolutely built for the playoffs. And the biggest boost comes from the eight extra minutes of LeBron James (as opposed to Sasha Pavlovic, Tarence Kinsey, or Joe the Plumber) that they get once the playoffs start.

I suspect that the Cavs will get out to a rather fast start, thanks to a favorable schedule in the early weeks (13 of the first 23 games are at home, with many of those games against projected lottery teams). I foresee a lull around January, when the lack of big man depth will come home to roost, exacerbated by a Western road trip. That will lead GM Danny Ferry to pull the trigger on a deadline deal to bring a big man (Brad Miller?) in exchange for The Expiring Contract Formerly Known As Wally Szczerbiak. That move will give the Cavs a boost leading into the playoffs ... and you know what I think will happen from there.

I look forward to either The Mother of All "Told Ya So"s or a steaming

bowl of crow next June.

Jesse Lamovsky: With Mike Brown sporting a born again-hard goatee and, hopefully, a born-again productive offense, the burden of becoming a championship team falls to a frontcourt that is beset by questions of age and uncertainty. Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Ben Wallace are both on the north side of forty, both have been plagued by back problems and other maladies, and it isn't a sure bet they'll be healthy and ineffective throughout the season.

Which brings us to the twin X-factors for the Cavaliers: Anderson Varejao and J.J. Hickson. Varejao never really got going last year, and at times seemed more interested in showing off what passes for an offensive game, but when he's playing within himself, his activity and athleticism are among the keys to Cleveland's defense. Hickson, the rookie from N.C. State, has displayed plenty of raw talent, but it remains to be seen whether he can contribute this season. If Varejao is Varejao, and if Hickson is, say, Paul Milsap, the aging big men can be used judiciously and kept relatively fresh for the stretch drive.

With the addition of Moe Williams, the re-signing of Boobie Gibson and Delonte West, backcourt play shouldn't be a problem, and LeBron should be spectacular as always. If the frontcourt falls into place, the sky is the limit.

Tony Lastoria: In a year where the Indians, Browns, and Buckeyes have all failed to live up to expectations, the Cavaliers are starting up just in time to give all Cleveland fans something positive to look forward to. The Cavaliers seem to have all the intangibles in that they have one of the NBA's top two stars in LeBron James, a suffocating defense that picks it up ten fold come playoff time, a core of exciting young players, tons of postseason experience, and an owner who will do what it takes to get the players needed to win a championship.

All that said, Cavaliers fans should expect a huge parade and celebration on East 9th Street next June after winning an NBA Championship, right? Not so fast. While the Mo Williams trade looks good on paper and fills a huge need on this team, it remains to be seen if he fits this team. Remember, most Cavaliers fans were excited when they landed Larry Hughes three years ago, but look how that turned out. Also, the Cavaliers have issues on the front court with a rapidly aging Z and Ben Wallace as the starting power forward and center combination. Wallace is well past his sell-by date, and Z could hit that wall this season. Varejao is a quality backup and first big off the bench, but beyond him there is little to get

excited about. Hickson is raw and really should have nil impact this season. Where are they going to get consistent scoring from that bunch? In addition to that, there could be issues at shooting guard as you have Boobie Gibson who has proven to be injury prone his first two years in the league, and who knows what we will get out of Wally Szczerbiak.

For the past few years, there has always been talk that "this year will be the year they Cavaliers will treat the regular season like it matters" and then they go out and play it and it is the same old story. Some feel that the Cavaliers finally understand the importance of having a great regular season since they saw firsthand how important that extra home game was in their series last year with Boston. I for one don't see this changing at all. They'll come out fired up the first week or two, then fade and be inconsistent until early February where they will turn it on and finish strong going into the playoffs.

Detroit is still the better regular season team, so the Cavaliers will find themselves behind them at season's end and likely staring at a #4 or #5 seed with a 51-31 record. I've said all along I felt like the 2006 playoffs were our best shot at a title when the East was watered down and in transition and Miami got to play Dallas in the Finals. That is not the case anymore as the East continues to improve every year and it should be a war in the playoffs this year among the top five-six teams. The Cavaliers have been fortunate to matchup with Washington in the first round in each of the last three seasons, but this year they get a much tougher task in Philadelphia in the first round. They squeak out of that matchup only to get thumped by Boston again in the second round, this time in six games.

Brian McPeek: I'm not falling for the old banana in the tailpipe routine.

Let John Hnat and Erik Cassano and whoever else wants to plan a parade in June get you all lathered up with visions of 55-60 wins and an

Eastern Conference championship.

Nope.

I know my place and the role I need to play. I'm the guy who predicted a World Series Championship for a 3rd place AL Central club.

You heard it here first: LeBron James regresses and does a terrific Ricky Davis impersonation. Z and Big Ben are non factors. Mo Williams is Keith Hernandez in short pants.

32-50 at best. More than likely a lottery pick in the '09 draft. Welcome to the club Tyler Hansbrough.

My work here is done.

[Rich Swerbinsky](#): The Cavs won 46 games last season. They had a terrible start (9-14) and were without Andy and Sasha. They lost all 8 games LeBron missed due to injury. They played 17 road games on the second night of back to backs, the highest total in the league. They went 4-13 in those games. The schedule shapes up much easier this season. Then you add in that Mo Williams guy.

But more importantly, there are two major things different from last year. One ... after sleepwalking through the '06-'07 season then rallying to go to the Finals, this team realized the regular season actually does count last season when they lost all four road games against the Celtics and were forced to go into Beantown to play game seven. Secondly, and as scary as this sounds, I think LeBron brings his game to a new level this season. I think we will see improvements in his regular season leadership, defense, and confidence off the heels of essentially captaining the US team to a gold medal in Beijing at age 23.

56-26 this season.

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The Cavs/Celtics will be the #1 and #2 seed and meet in the Eastern Conference Finals. You can bank that. And it probably goes seven games again. The team with the better regular season record gets that game at home, and then will advance to, and beat the LA Lakers in the Finals in six games.

I'll say it's the Cavaliers. And for the first time ever, in a decade of talking sports online, I am predicting a Cleveland team to win a championship.

Tee it up Lucy!



Nick Allburn

Sam Amico

Erik Cassano

Doug Hayden

Hiko

Record	57-25	58-24	55-27	53-29
Atlantic	Boston	Boston	Boston	Boston
Central	Cleveland	Cleveland	Cleveland	Cleveland
Southeast	Orlando	Orlando	Orlando	Orlando
Northwest	Portland	Utah	Utah	Portland
Pacific	LA Lakers	LA Lakers	LA Lakers	LA Lakers
Southwest	New Orleans	Houston	New Orleans	New Orleans
Finals	Cavs over Lakers	Spurs over Celtics	Spurs over Cavs	Cavs over Lakers
NBA MVP	LeBron James	LeBron James	Chris Paul	LeBron James

John Hnat

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Jesse Lamovsky

Tony Lastoria

Brian McPeck

Rich Swerbinsky

Record	53-29	55-27	51-31	30-52*
Atlantic	Boston	Boston	Boston	Boston
Central	Detroit	Cleveland	Detroit	Cleveland
Southeast	Orlando	Orlando	Orlando	Miami
Northwest	Portland	Utah	Portland	Utah
Pacific	LA Lakers	LA Lakers	LA Lakers	LA Lakers
Southwest	New Orleans	San Antonio	San Antonio	San Antonio
Finals	Cavs over Lakers	Cavs over Spurs	Lakers over Celtics	Spurs over Celtics
NBA MVP	LeBron James	LeBron James	Kobe Bryant	Tim Duncan