

The Race For The #1 Seed

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Sunday, February 01 2009 7:00 PM -

With a little more than half the NBA season gone, four teams have pulled away from the rest of the pack and turned the race for the top overall playoff seed into an exclusive competition. Two-and-a-half games separate the Celtics, Lakers, Cavaliers and Magic, while four games separate the four from anyone else. The four teams lead their divisions by fifteen-and-a-half, eleven-and-a-half, twelve and nine games, respectively. The only competition left is with each other. Jesse Lamovsky takes some time out to handicap the race for our readers.



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Of the remaining teams in the overall playoff picture, only San Antonio seems capable of making the big four into the big five. But the Spurs face a stretch of eleven out of fourteen games on the road, including the eight-game, transcontinental Rodeo trip which begins Monday night. The mercurial Hornets aren't doing themselves any favors by losing at home to the likes of Golden State. Houston is, as usual, beat up. Denver, Portland, Dallas and Atlanta don't look capable of heating up enough to overtake the teams at the top.

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So even at this relatively early juncture, it seems safe to assume that the eventual owner of the top overall seed will be one of Boston, Los Angeles, Cleveland or Orlando. Assumption made, I'm going to chart the four-way race each Monday, updating the standings and previewing the week ahead. In a league that is more top-heavy than it's been in over a decade, the home-court advantage is even more vital than usual, especially in the Eastern Conference. Aside from injuries, it is the most important factor in whether or not the Cavaliers are able to put themselves in optimum position to win Cleveland's first major sports championship in since 1964.

1.) Boston: 40-9: --

Streak: Won 11

Last 10: 10-0

Last Game: Sunday, Feb. 1: Minnesota: Won 109-101

Tuesday, Feb. 3: @ Philadelphia

Thursday, Feb. 5: L.A. Lakers

Friday, Feb. 6: @ New York

Sunday, Feb. 8: San Antonio

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The once-slumping Celtics have righted the ship with a vengeance, but this could be a tricky week with games against rested 76ers, Knicks and Spurs teams that are all playing very well. Fever-ridden Kevin Garnett probably won't play in Philadelphia. The easiest test might be against the Lakers, without Andrew Bynum and on the second night of a back-to-back.

2.) Los Angeles: 37-9: 1.5 GB

Streak: Won 2

Last 10: 7-3

Last Game: Saturday, Jan. 31: @ Memphis: Won 115-98

Monday, Feb. 2: @ New York

Wednesday, Feb. 4: @ Toronto

Thursday, Feb. 5: @ Boston

Sunday, Feb. 8: @ Cleveland

Early reports say that Bynum's knee injury isn't as bad as the one he suffered last year, and L.A. would probably still hold on to home-court in the West Playoffs even if he misses the rest of the regular season. But home-court in the West wasn't enough for them last year, and won't be this year either. Bynum is the most

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physical player on the finesse Lakers and his presence will be missed on the road. Los Angeles is 25-3 against the West, but only 12-6 against the East. With the Celtics and Cavaliers on the docket, it's imperative for the Lake Show to handle business against the undersized Knicks and struggling Raptors.

3.) Cleveland: 37-9: 1.5 GB

Streak: Won 2

Last 10: 7-3

Last Game: Feb. 1 @ Detroit: Won 90-80

Tuesday, Feb. 3: Toronto

Wednesday, Feb. 4: @ New York

Sunday, Feb. 8: L.A. Lakers

With only three games scheduled, the Cavaliers have the lightest workload of any of the big four. They also have Zydrunas Ilgauskas back in the fold, which is a good thing: Cleveland is 26-4 with the big fella in the lineup, 11-5 without him. Avoiding a series sweep at the hands of the Lake Show is the main challenge.

4.) Orlando: 36-10: 2.5 GB

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Streak: Won 3

Last 10: 8-2

Last Game: Feb. 1 @ Toronto: Won 113-90

Monday, Feb 2: Dallas

Wednesday, Feb. 4: L.A. Clippers

Friday, Feb. 6: @ Indiana

Sunday, Feb. 8: New Jersey

Orlando is reclining in the comfy chair this week. Three of the Magic's four games are at home in Amway Arena and the only road game is against a Pacer team on the second night of a back-to-back. Orlando is the only team in the top four that doesn't play on back-to-back nights this week, and the only one that doesn't face another member of the club. It's a golden opportunity for the Magic to fatten up against relatively soft competition while the Celtics, Cavaliers and Lakers beat up on one another.

Power Ranking for the Week of Feb. 2

- 1.) Boston

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- 2.) Orlando

- 3.) Cleveland

- 4.) Los Angeles

Spoiler of the Week- New York: The streaking Knickerbockers (seven wins in eight games) host the Celtics, Lakers and Cavaliers at Madison Square Garden this week, with L.A. shorthanded and Boston and Cleveland on the second night of back-to-back games. They won't take them all, but I'm thinking they'll take one. Which one, I won't hazard to guess.

Game(s) of the Week- Los Angeles @ Boston; San Antonio @ Boston; Los Angeles @ Cleveland: The Lakers visit the top two teams in the East, while the Celtics host the top two teams in the West.