

The Race For Homecourt: March 23

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Sunday, March 22 2009 7:00 PM -

With three weeks to go in the regular season, the Cavaliers and Lake Show have established themselves as the only real contenders for the top overall Playoff seed, leaving the Celtics and Magic to duel for the consolation prize of number-two in the East. Only one game separates Wine & Gold from Forum Blue & Gold, and while the former continues to set a ferocious pace, the latter was its own worst enemy in an inexcusable home loss - the kind of slip-up either team can ill afford as we pound down the home stretch.



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1.) Cleveland: 57-13: --

Streak: Won 9

Last 10: 9-1

Last Week: 4-0

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 22: Won @ New Jersey 96-88

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Wednesday, Mar. 25: New Jersey
Friday, Mar. 25: Minnesota
Sunday, Mar. 29: Dallas

It's simple. With twelve games to play, the Cavaliers hold a four-and-a-half game lead on the Celtics in the race for the East's top spot. Any combination of Cleveland victories and Boston defeats equaling eight gives the race to the Cavaliers. The teams will play again on April 12; barring a '64 Phillies type of collapse, that game will be meaningless from a seeding standpoint. The real focus is on Los Angeles, which holds the head-to-head tiebreaker. Cleveland will have to finish with a better record outright than the Lake Show to get home-court throughout, but in the East this thing is all but settled.

2.) Los Angeles: 56-14: 1

Streak: Won 2

Last 10: 7-3

Last Week: 2-1

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 22: Won @ Chicago 117-109

Tuesday, Mar. 24: @ Oklahoma City
Thursday, Mar. 26: @ Detroit
Friday, Mar. 27: @ New Jersey
Sunday, Mar. 29: @ Atlanta

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The Lakers are displaying all the aspects of a team on cruise control. They operate in spurts, both good and bad; first blowing a 14-point fourth-quarter lead and losing at the buzzer in Staples to the mediocre 76ers, then sleepwalking through an unconvincing home win over the ramshackle Warriors, and finally blowing away the Bulls with a 69-point second half in Sunday's victory at Chicago. They had a foul to give on Andre Iguodala's [game-winning three-pointer](#) Tuesday night and Trevor Ariza didn't use it, despite being told do to so by Phil Jackson.

Mental mistakes and blown leads are signs of a team that is bored. There is no Western equivalent to the Cleveland-Boston-Orlando brouhaha; the Lakers have had this thing in the bag since Thanksgiving, and their edge is a little rounded off right now. L.A. could very well sweep its seven-game road trip- only the Hawks have a winning record out of its seven opponents- but this has been a careless team lately. That's why, while the Lake Show might be first in the hearts of Dyan Cannon, Jack Nicholson, and that bearded fellow with the Panama hat who sits next to Jack, they're second to our Cleveland Cavaliers in the overall standings.

3.) Boston: 53-18: 4.5

Streak: Won 3

Last 10: 6-4

Last Week: 3-1

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 22: Won @ Memphis 105-87

Monday, Mar. 23: L.A. Clippers
Wednesday, Mar. 25: @ Orlando

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Friday, Mar. 27: @ Atlanta
Sunday, Mar. 29: Oklahoma City

Kevin Garnett returned to spark a much-needed victory in San Antonio on Friday night, part of a week that saw the Celtics maintain their fragile hold on the East's second spot. That hold might not last long- sandwiched between milk runs against the Clip Show and Thunder are visits first to Orlando, with second place on the line, and then to Atlanta to face a Hawks team that has won seven in a row at home. KG isn't all the way back yet- he didn't play the fourth quarter against the Spurs and logged only 17 minutes in the win over the Grizzlies. In the meantime, Leon Powe is now *hors de combat* for the next two weeks, and Mikki Moore hasn't gotten the job done in extended minutes. Never mind the Eastern Conference Finals- Boston's injury woes have them staring into the face of a second-round series without home-court advantage.

4.) Orlando: 51-18: 5.5

Streak: Won 2

Last 10: 8-2

Last Week: 2-1

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 15: Beat New York 110-103

Monday, Mar. 23: @ New York
Wednesday, Mar. 25: Boston
Friday, Mar. 27: Milwaukee

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Only a tough loss in Cleveland kept the Magic from snarling the race for the East's second seed and securing the head-to-head tiebreaker over the Cavaliers. The latter prize is still out there- it's probably irrelevant at this point anyway- but the former is right at hand and will be on the line when the Celtics bring their wounded frontline to the Magic Kingdom on Wednesday night. That's presuming Orlando handles business in MSG on Monday.

You'd like to think the Magic will capitalize on Boston's frontcourt woes by pounding the ball incessantly to their franchise center, but with them you never know. Dwight Howard took fewer shots than any other Orlando starter in the loss to the Cavaliers, and pretty much disappeared in the fourth quarter as Rafer Alston and Rashard Lewis jacked up shots from outside. Part of the problem seems to be the scheme. But part of it is Howard himself. His problems at the free-throw line are well-documented; he's not a great passer, and he doesn't go out of his way to get the ball in crunch time. It isn't that he's "not clutch" or anything like that; he just seems a little too nice to muscle his way into the huddle and bark at his teammates to jump on his back and let him carry them home. He doesn't seem to have that "take-over" mentality. Kobe has the cold glare of the assassin, LeBron the primeval roar; Dwight Howard just smiles and watches Skip to My Lou channel his inner [Isiah](#). It's a striking contrast

At some point, Superman is going to have to get pissed. Wednesday night would be a good place to start. But in the long run, that team needs another piece- someone who can create and who, most importantly, wants the ball and get the hell out of the way. That's not to say I want any part of the Magic in the Playoffs. I'd love to see them stay in the third spot and draw Detroit in the opening round. I'm confident in these Cavaliers, especially at the Q, but I'm not going to lie- Orlando gives me a bit of the willies.

Power Ranking for the Week of Mar. 23

- 1.) Cleveland
- 2.) Los Angeles
- 3.) Orlando
- 4.) Boston

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Player of the Week- LeBron James, Cleveland: Two weeks in a row, and why not? All LeBron did was average 30 points, 10 rebounds, and 7.5 assists- including 43 and the game-winning three against Orlando- and lead his team to its second consecutive perfect week.

Slumping Superstar of the Week- Kobe Bryant, Los Angeles: The legs might be a little heavy for the Mamba these days. In three games last week, Kobe shot 24-for-65 from the field (36.9 percent) and averaged 19.6 points. He scored just eleven in the loss to Philadelphia, although, being Kobe, he still drilled the shot that put the Lake Show in front 93-91 with 6.7 seconds left.

Spoiler of the Upcoming week- New Jersey: The Nets visit Cleveland on Wednesday night and host the Lake Show on Friday night, with L.A. on the second half of a back-to-back.

Game of the Upcoming Week- Boston @ Orlando, Mar. 25: Plenty will be on the line when the Celtics visit the Magic on Wednesday night. A win for Orlando would put the Magic one game ahead of Boston in the loss column, tie the season series at two apiece, and cut into Boston's lead in the conference-record tiebreaker. A win for Boston would keep the Celtics in second place and in permanent possession of the head-to-head tiebreaker with Orlando.