

The Race For Homecourt - April 7

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Monday, April 06 2009 7:00 PM -

Well, the fun is over, for the time being at least. Just when it appeared the laughin', dancin' fake-photo snappin' Cleveland Cavaliers had taken a stranglehold on the top overall seed, their grip was loosened considerably by back-to-back thumpings in the middle of the week. Once three games behind the Cavaliers, the ever-enigmatic Lake Show was able to reduce the deficit to one, through no great effort of their own. The thing is still wide open as we swing into the regular season's last full week.



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1.) Cleveland: 62-15: --

Streak: Won 1

Last 10: 8-2

Last Week: 2-2

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Last Game: Sunday, Apr. 5: Beat San Antonio 101-81

Wednesday, Apr. 8: Washington

Friday, Apr. 10: @ Philadelphia

Sunday, Apr. 12: Boston

The Cavaliers lurched through their worst week in nearly two months, with the dual low point the embarrassments in Washington and Orlando. They'll have a final chance to put the Wizards in their place, followed by a trip to Philadelphia (where they've won their last four) and then the capper- a Sunday matinee at the Q against Boston. Wins over the Wizards and 76ers would clinch the East for Cleveland. Clinching the top seed will take longer. Ben Wallace [should return](#) some time this week, so the Cavaliers will finally be able to field a full rotation when the Playoffs begin.

So despite those twin nightmares last week, this train is still fully on the tracks. Still, the thrashing in Orlando was disquieting. It was the second time the Magic had dismantled the Cavaliers this season, and the second time they'd forced Cleveland to lose its collective composure. The Cavaliers quit last Thursday, just as they did in the earlier visit to Orlando in January. The Magic are a long team- they run 6'5" and 6'10" and 6'10" and 6'11" at the two-through-five positions with a 6'6" sixth man, and four of them can create *and* have range beyond the three-point line. They are tall enough to shoot over Cleveland's perimeter defenders and make shots difficult for the smaller Cavalier guards, and they have the premier shot-blocker in the game to counter LeBron's freight-train drives to the basket. They are bigger and faster than the Cavaliers, and they can get pretty much every shot they want, whenever they want. It's just a piss-poor match-up.

Now, I'm not saying the Cavaliers *can't* or *wouldn't* beat Orlando in a series.

They'll have a

[hand](#)

[King in the](#)

and the

home-court Ace in the hole, and those are good cards to have against anyone.

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Get them to the last five minutes and it becomes a playmaking contest between LeBron and Hedo Turkoglu. Advantage in that case: Cavaliers. But the Magic are for real. They have shown themselves capable of embarrassing the Cavaliers, and they are very capable of winning a series from Cleveland, even without HCA (they do have the East's best road record, after all.). And to anyone who wants to glibly claim that Orlando's outside shots won't fall in the Playoffs, well, last time I checked the Cavaliers take a jumper or two themselves.

I would not mind seeing the Magic get knocked out early.

2.) Los Angeles: 61-16: 1

Streak: Won 3

Last 10: 8-2

Last Week: 3-1

Last Game: Sunday, Apr. 5: Beat L.A. Clippers 88-85

Tuesday, Apr. 7: @ Sacramento

Thursday, Apr. 9: Denver

Friday, Apr. 10: @ Portland

Sunday, Apr. 12: Memphis

Despite their sixth loss in seven games to the mighty Charlotte Bobcats and an artistically unimpressive week as a whole, the Lake Show still managed to gain ground. They've got one more game to make up with the Cavaliers and five to do

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it, but they may not be able to afford a loss in that stretch and will have back-to-back games against red-hot Denver- winners of seven in a row and twelve of thirteen- and in Portland, where the Lake Show haven't won since the 2004-05 season. The Nuggets and Blazers are playing for position and home-court: the Lakers are playing for the rather abstract goal of opening at home in a Finals that may never come to pass.

3.) Boston: 58-19: 4

Streak: Won 4

Last 10: 7-3

Last Week: 2-0

Last Game: Friday, Apr. 3: Beat Atlanta 104-92

Wednesday, Apr. 8: New Jersey

Friday, Apr. 10: Miami

Sunday, Apr. 12: @ Cleveland

Despite playing without Kevin Garnett, the Celtics survived a short week unscathed, turning back Charlotte's upset bid in double-overtime and knocking off the Hawks in Atlanta. Boston's priorities are two-fold: hold off the Magic for the East's second seed, and get KG back in reasonable health for the Playoffs. The former is difficult but doable. The latter is more problematic. Nobody seems entirely sure as to the extent of his injury: the initial diagnosis was a strained knee tendon, but now there's talk of "loose cartilage" and surgery after the season. In fact, the idea of KG undergoing surgery this season was [apparently](#)

floated

and

then dismissed when it was determined that the rehabilitation time would stretch well into the postseason.

Without question, the East's third seed is the dead man's hand. The team filling that spot faces the prospect of beating three sixty-plus-teams to win the title, while starting and finishing each of those series on the road. The 1995 Rockets almost did it- they beat the 60-win Jazz, 59-win Suns, and 62-win Spurs on their way to the Finals, all without HCA- and like those Rockets, the Celtics are the defending Champions. But they have too much loose cartilage to repeat the feat.

4.) Orlando: 57-19: 4.5

Streak: Won 2

Last 10: 8-2

Last Week: 3-1

Last Game: Saturday, Apr. 4: Won @ Atlanta 88-82

Tuesday, Apr. 7: @ Houston

Wednesday, Apr. 8: Memphis

Friday, Apr. 10: New York

Saturday, Apr. 11: @ New Jersey

Were it not for a home loss to Toronto, the Magic would be in sole possession of second place in the East and uncomfortably close to Cleveland's perch at the top.

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They still trail the Celtics by a half-game in the overall standings and a game-in-the-half in conference record, the tiebreaker if the teams finish with the same record (they split their season series 2-2.) The last three games of the week shouldn't be too tough, but Tuesday's trip to Houston will be. Orlando has lost four of its last five against the Rockets and Dwight Howard has struggled with Yao Ming in the head-to-head match-up between the two big men.

Power Ranking for the Week of Apr. 6

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

Player of the Week- Dwight Howard, Orlando: Superman averaged 23.2 points, 15.3 rebounds, and 2.2 blocks and shot over 61 percent from the field to lead the Magic to three wins. His poor performance from the free-throw line (10-of-21) helped doom his team in the loss to the Raptors, but he made up for that hiccup with a monster effort Saturday in his hometown of Atlanta: 21 points, 23 rebounds, four blocked shots, and a neat 9-of-12 from the stripe in Orlando's 88-82 victory.

The State of Mamba's Shot (Cont.): A thaw finally materialized to break the ice-bucket chill of Kobe's stroke- momentarily, at least. After bending the rim at an 11-of-28 clip in the loss to the Bobcats, Kobe went 17-of-30 in the wins over Milwaukee and Houston, including a deadly effort against the defensive-minded Rockets: 7-of-11 from the floor and 4-of-6 from three-point range. But he shot just 5-of-15 in Sunday's win over the Clip Show, as the L.A. Varsity nearly frittered away a 19-point fourth-quarter lead.

Bynum Back Shortly: With Andrew Bynum [feeling good](#) and targeting a return to the floor [very soon](#) , the Lakers will be able to withstand Kobe's shooting problems should they continue in the Playoffs. Bynum will be rusty at the outset but there is an

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immediate benefit to his mere presence- it moves Lamar Odom back to the bench, bolstering a reserve unit that has been inconsistent at best lately. Likely first-round opponent Dallas will probably provide only token opposition, so L.A. can afford to work Bynum into the rotation during the Playoffs.

The Decline of Western Civilization: Dallas isn't the only clay pigeon in the once-dominant Western Conference. San Antonio is

[done](#)

. Denver is too small. Houston doesn't have a playmaker to counter Kobe. Utah is inept on the road. New Orleans is injury-riddled and on the verge of being broken up. More and more the pre-eminence of the East becomes clear, while the West looks increasingly like its 1980's counterpart, when a bunch of pretty good teams annually battled for the right to be

[beaten](#)

by

[Showtime](#)

in the

[conference](#)

[finals](#)

Can they be Red, Hot and Rollin' Enough? Portland, young and Playoff-bound for the first time since 2003, poses the biggest immediate threat to Lake Show hegemony. The Blazers have size, versatility, and a legitimate closer in Brandon Roy, one of the best home-court advantages of any team in the Playoffs- with the Blazermaniacs sure to be in full throat- and a recent history of owning L.A. at the Rose Garden. Their inexperience shouldn't be a negative factor; if anything, being young and dumb will help them in an underdog situation. Ultimately it comes down to holding serve at home *and* being able to win at Staples Center at least once. Portland has the best chance to do both. Will they? Eh, probably not. But they could.

Game of the Upcoming Week I- Boston @ Cleveland, Apr. 12: This outcome likely won't have any bearing on Playoff seeding- at least as far as the Cavaliers are concerned- but its psychological value might carry over into May. Cleveland

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has beaten the Celtics ten straight times in the Q, including three times in last year's Eastern Conference Semifinals. Provided the teams make it far enough to re-match, Boston will have to win at least one game in Cleveland to repeat as NBA Champions. Stealing one on Sunday would give them the notion that they can.

Game of the Upcoming Week II- Denver @ Los Angeles, Apr. 9: While L.A. struts, Denver streaks. The Nuggets are a home morsel with Oklahoma City away from carrying an eight-game winning streak into the Staples Center and they now hold the West's second seed. A win at L.A. would all but clinch home-court for Denver in the first two rounds of the Playoffs, before the Lake Show delivers the reckoning.