

Preview: Cavs/Pistons

Written by {ga=samamico}

Thursday, April 16 2009 7:00 PM -

The team with the NBA's best record could have the toughest first-round matchup of anyone in the league. At least, that seems to be the sentiment regarding the Cleveland-Detroit series. Of course, that is based on the idea that the Pistons seem to reach the Eastern Conference finals every season. But these Pistons aren't those Pistons. In his latest column for us, Sam I Am breaks down the Cavs first round playoff opponent.



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These Pistons have a first-time head coach in Michael Curry, a second-year point guard in Rodney Stuckey, a star who didn't fit (and won't be playing) in Allen Iverson, and a lot of youth off the bench. Worse, these Pistons seem all too content to mail it in.

Sad thing is, these Pistons have proven they can at least come close to those Pistons. Shooting guard Richard Hamilton is still one of the most efficient and underrated scorers in the league -- and was the ringleader when the team displayed some moxie in late February and early March.

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We all wondered if those Pistons were back. Instead, they quickly went back to being these Pistons by early April. They stayed that way in the season's final few weeks, when they had a chance to get things straightened out, nab the No. 6 seed, and position themselves for a first-round matchup with Orlando, which can't seem to beat these Pistons or those Pistons (or any Pistons anywhere, forever and ever amen).

Granted, today's Cavaliers are more talented than even those Pistons, the ones the Cavs beat in their previous playoff meeting in 2007 -- when LeBron James morphed into a form of Elgin Baylor, Michael Jordan and Oscar Robertson all rolled into one in Game 5.

As for LeBron and the deeper, more-talented Cavs against these Pistons? Well, that doesn't sound tough at all.

HISTORY: The Cavs won three of four this season, including three straight. One of those was a 21-point blowout in February. The good news for the Pistons is they were able to force the tempo and keep the most recent one close, a 79-73 snoozer in Cleveland on the last day of March. Obviously, these teams have a long history between them, with this being their third postseason matchup in the past four years. The Pistons humiliated the Cavs in Game 7 of the 2005 conference semis, but were upset the next season as the Cavs advanced to the Finals.

PLAYER TO WATCH: If there's one advantage the Pistons have had over the Cavs in recent seasons, it's been their ability to coax them into playing a slowdown, drag-it-out, ugly style. That usually results in James standing outside the three-point arc, dribbling, dribbling and dribbling some more as the offense comes to a halt. Then James takes a 25-footer with long, athletic Tayshaun Prince right in his face. LeBron cannot allow himself to be goaded into that type of wasteful nonsense, settling for long jumpers as the shot clock expires. He needs to attack the basket, free himself on the block more often and get the ball out of his own hands (and into those of point guard Mo Williams) when the idea is setting

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up on the offense.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: Rasheed Wallace has seemed disinterested too often this year, and the Pistons have NO chance to make this is a series without him. That's especially the case when you consider that Cavs center Zydrunas Ilgauskas has the potential to go nuts if left open. It will be a key (yet overlooked) matchup, because if Wallace is able to handle Z as he's done in series past, things could be interesting. But Wallace continues to settle for long jumpers and half-hearted defense, then there won't really be much of a reason to watch.

KEY MATCHUP: Cavs power forward Anderson Varejao is the complete opposite of Pistons power forward Antonio McDyess. Varejao has become the starter in the injured Ben Wallace's absence, and Varejao's hyperactivity has been thrilling fans and frustrating opponents for several seasons now. The difference this year? Varejao actually seems somewhat comfortable with the ball. No longer does he treat it like a hot potato that needs to be thrown to someone else the very second he receives a pass. That's not to say he's turned into Larry Bird, but at least his decisions and confidence aren't pathetic. He even will hit the occasional shot outside three feet. As for McDyess, he's the anti-Wild Thing. He's a cool, calm collected veteran who won't get frustrated by the fact Varejao has no "off" switch. And while it's not likely that either Varejao or McDyess will alter the fate of the series, if one can significantly upstage the other, it could alter a game plan.

LIKELY STARTERS: Cavaliers - F Anderson Varejao, F LeBron James, C Zydrunas Ilgauskas, G Delonte West, G Mo Williams; Pistons - F Antonio McDyess, F Tayshaun Prince, C Rasheed Wallace, G Richard Hamilton, G Rodney Stuckey.

COACHING EDGE: Mike Brown won't bring back any memories of Lenny Wilkens, nor will Michael Curry (or in the Pistons' case, Larry Brown). But Brown deserves credit for earning the respect of his players, and especially, his superstar. Brown's biggest issue seems to be the fact his teams rarely are able to

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get anything going offensively when they are out of sync. The Cavs also seem to really struggle in the first five minutes of the third quarter, which makes you think Brown is consistently out-adjusted at halftime. Either way, he is an exceptional defensive coach and has a clear edge over Curry -- a first-time head coach at any level. It shows, as Curry has made some questionable moves (read: bringing Hamilton off the bench) that's messed with chemistry. And it doesn't even seem like Curry himself has a firm grasp of his overall philosophy.

THE CAVS WILL WIN IF: they keep the ball moving and aren't frustrated by the Pistons' attempt to turn it into an elbows-out, feet-on-the-floor brand of basketball. The Cavs played that style the last time they reached the Finals, but have no chance to return if they play that way again. They are at their best when the ball is moving, the players are cutting, and LeBron is finishing (and not beginning) the offense.

THE PISTONS WILL WIN IF: Hamilton, Rasheed, McDyess and Prince all suddenly rediscover what landed them in the Finals in '04 and '05, by buckling down on defense and not getting frustrated with younger teammates -- and getting past the fact Chauncey Billups is no longer around to be Mr. Big Shot. And if they can coax the Cavs into walking the ball up the court and standing around stagnant for long stretches of each game, this will be anyone's series.

REQUIRED READING: A. Sherrod Blakely of Michigan Live; Brian Windhorst of the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

MORON CONVENTION: Iverson said all the right things after arriving from Denver. But when I stood next to him after the team's last regular-season in meeting in Cleveland, my jaw practically dropped when he asked how minutes he played, then responded with "I could play 18 minutes with my eyes closed and a 100-pound truck on my back." Just a few days later, the Pistons shelved him for the year. But to me, the reason this marriage failed was never Iverson's fault. They knew what they were getting when they traded for him -- a guy who needs the ball to be effective, and happy.

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PREDICTION: Cavs in five. The Pistons would have a hard time winning this series even if they suddenly left their miserable season in the dust and finally came together. The Cavs are just that much better. They have a more talented starting five -- including a superstar in James who's even better than he's ever been -- and a deeper, more experienced bench. Even at their worst, the Cavs are far superior these days. And it should stay that way for a while, as the Pistons will never look the same again after this series.

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