

The Cavs. The Magic. The Breakdown.

Written by {ga=samamico}

Monday, May 18 2009 7:00 PM -

Yesterday, Jesse Lamovsky shocked our readers with his stunning prediction of the Magic in six over the heavily favored Cavaliers. Today, we turn to grizzled NBA veteran writer Sam "I Am" Amico for a thorough analysis of the series, and his thoughts on how things are going to go down once the opening tip is tossed Wednesday night at 8:30 PM at The Q. Does Sam share Jesse's concerns? Sam breaks down the Cavs/Magic series for us in his latest column.



There are several points to consider when talking about the Eastern Conference finals between the Cavaliers and Orlando Magic:

* The Magic are coming off a series in which they eliminated defending champion Boston in Game 7 on the Celtics' home floor. They won two straight to finish it off, ending the Celtics' perfect all-time record (32-0) when leading a series 3-2.

* The Magic have dominated the Cavs in recent seasons, winning eight of the past 11 meetings. They are 3-1 in their last four games in Cleveland -- barely losing the most recent game at Quicken Loans Arena on a controversial three-second call (on Dwight Howard) in the closing moments.

* A few weeks later in Orlando, the Magic embarrassed the Cavs by handing them

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their worst loss of the season (116-87 on April 3).

* The Cavs have LeBron James and the Magic don't. The Cavs also have the home-court advantage and experience in these types of situations, as three starters -- James, Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Anderson Varejao -- played in the Finals two seasons ago.

* Again, the Magic just wrapped up a seven-game playoff series. Before that, they beat Philadelphia in six. Meanwhile, the Cavs will have had nine days off after sweeping Atlanta. They have yet to lose a playoff game this season.

What does it all mean? We're about to find out. In the meantime, here's a look at the matchups:

Center - Zydrunas Ilgauskas vs. Dwight Howard

Clearly, Howard is younger, stronger and more nimble, but this is still an intriguing matchup for a couple of reasons. First, Howard is most effective when playing near the basket, and particularly, above the rim -- while Ilgauskas, despite standing 7-foot-3, hasn't looked down at the rim in years. He has become much more comfortable facing the basket on the perimeter, a deadeye shooter who's lethal if you leave him to stop a penetrating LeBron James or Mo Williams (are you listening, Dwight?). Also, Big Z should not be overlooked on D. He may lead the league in flat-footed blocked shots (if there were such a category), and while he and Anderson Varejao aren't nearly as physical as Boston's frontline, Howard is likely to find them to be even more pesky. EDGE: Orlando.

Power Forward - Anderson Varejao vs. Rashard Lewis

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This could spell trouble for the Cavs, and often does. The reason? Because Lewis is so effective on the perimeter, with the range and ability to penetrate as a shooting guard. And while Varejao and backup Ben Wallace are good team defenders, neither is an on-the-ball, lockdown type. The further away from the basket they get, the worse they become. That's the opposite of Lewis. Best of all for Lewis, Varejao will barely make him work on defense (same goes for Wallace). Lewis can't completely ignore the Wild Thing, but he doesn't need to overly exert himself either. And that, of course, will free Lewis to help on James. The Cavs best bet here is to play Joe Smith a lot, which is something that's very likely to happen. EDGE: Orlando.

Small Forward - LeBron James vs. Hedo Turkoglu

No question, James has just as big of an edge here as he does over everyone else in the league. But Turkoglu shouldn't be completely overlooked -- not after the job he did on 2008 Finals MVP Paul Pierce in the previous round. Did Turkoglu shut down Pierce? Uh, no. But he did frustrate him from time to time, and kept Pierce busy on the defensive end. Granted, LeBron is the most complete package in the league, a better all-around threat than Pierce so he has the clear advantage here, obviously. At the same time, Turkoglu presents more problems for James than anyone James has faced in the playoffs so far. EDGE: Cleveland.

Shooting Guard - Delonte West vs. J.J. Redick

Actually, it's hard to tell who will start for the Magic in this series: Redick, or rookie Courtney Lee. Redick was the starter against the Celtics as Lee worked his way back from a major injury to the sinus cavity. And while Redick may not be the defender Lee is, he should get at least a little of the credit for helping to make Ray Allen so miserable, shouldn't he? At the same time, you can't expect Redick to defend LeBron -- something Lee did fairly well (or as well as can be expected) during the regular season. Lee has also been more consistent offensively than Redick. But when Redick gets hot, you better watch out. He's also a wonderful free-throw shooter, a department in which the Magic are severely lacking. Either

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way, West is superior. He's perhaps the most underrated backcourt defender in the league, and is a strong finisher near the basket and pretty good perimeter shooter. He can also play point guard in a pinch. No in the Magic's entire backcourt is as versatile. EDGE: Cleveland.

Point Guard - Mo Williams vs. Rafer Alston

Boston's Eddie House isn't the only player Alston once felt like smacking upside the head. He and Williams also had a brief (although clearly less violent) run-in earlier this season, when Alston was still a member of the Houston Rockets. Alston did a decent job on Williams in that game, but unlike Williams, Alston does not have the greatest player in the game to feed off of. Alston sometimes looks tight, as if he's still trying to figure out when to shoot, when to pass, and who wants and needs the ball where. Meanwhile, Williams have fit seamlessly into the Cavs' scheme. He hasn't been as great during the postseason as he was during the regular season, but he's still been pretty darn good. And Cavs' opponents had better run for cover if he gets any better. EDGE: Cleveland.

Benches

Joe Smith has the been the Cavs' answer man in reserve ever since returning to the team following a brief stint with Oklahoma City. Need a basket? Smith's your man. Need some hustle plays, a big rebound or defensive stand? Again, turn to Smith (and Cavs coach Mike Brown often does). Need a positive example on the floor and in the locker room? Well, Smith will be there. Assisting his cause in the frontcourt is muscle-bound and hustling defensive presence Ben Wallace. The good news for the Magic is Marcin Gortat has been quite the find, offering tons of energy plays and a little power in the low post. Meanwhile, the Magic's Mickael Pietrus is one of those athletic swingmen who can play (and especially, defend) practically any position. He has proven to be invaluable against the Cavs. In the backcourt, the Cavs will be relying on the three-headed long-range bombing of Wally Szczerbiak, Daniel Gibson and Sasha Pavlovic -- while the Magic will turn to either Lee or Redick, depending on who doesn't start, and veteran point guard

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Anthony Johnson, whom Brown described in one word: "Solid." EDGE: Cleveland.

Coaching - Mike Brown vs. Stan Van Gundy

Brown kept his promise and turned the Cavs into a quicker-paced, more opportunistic team, and his opening up of the offense was a big reason the Cavs finished with the league's best record and have won every playoff game so far. Of course, if the Magic thought Boston's defense could be tough, well, just wait until they get a load of Cleveland. Brown is the mastermind behind that strategy as well, and his ability to make adjustments seems to improve by the game. As for Van Gundy, his unmatched passionate behavior on the sidelines often carries over to his team on the floor. He can match wits with anyone when comes to Xs and Os, and while Brown won the award, no would have been protesting had Van Gundy won coach of the year. EDGE: Even.

Overall, the Cavs have more experience playing in big playoff series and the best player in the game. While these teams may be even on paper ... well, as Kenny Smith said on TNT, LeBron James will rip that paper apart. And he will indeed be the difference in this series.

PREDICTION - Cavs in five.