

The Magic have defeated the Cavs this season. They won in convincing fashion twice in Florida, besting the Cavs 99-88 on Jan. 29 and administering a 116-87 butt-whopping on Apr. 3, Cleveland's worst loss of the season. The lone contest in Cleveland went to the Cavs, 97-93, on St. Patrick's Day, but was a closely-contested game until the end. And there is a faction of fans that is terrified by this matchup. Erik Cassano tells us why the Cavs can -- and should -- beat the Magic over the span of seven games.



There is a first time for everything. And here in the city that Charles Barkley loves to hate, Cavaliers fans are definitely breaking new ground.

We might be the first fans of an 8-0 playoff team to reach a meltdown-crisis point before the conference finals even tip off.

Maybe that's stretching it a bit. But there definitely are some fans among us who think the Cavs are a mighty ocean liner steaming toward an iceberg named the Orlando Magic.

The soil is fertile for naysayers who are looking for reasons to be pessimistic. The Cavs so thoroughly dusted the Pistons and Hawks in the first two playoff rounds, it looks like they were hardly challenged. And if you think the Cavs were hardly challenged through their first eight playoff games, it would follow that you would start wringing your hands over what might happen if they were to face a stiff challenge from an opponent capable of defeating them.

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While the Cavs have spent nine days cooling their heels -- and maybe gathering some inevitable rust -- between each playoff round, the Magic have been hard at work. They've played 13 playoff games to the Cavs' eight. In the final two games against the Celtics, they rallied from a 3-2 series deficit, won a Game 7 in Boston, and may have grown a playoff spine right before our very eyes.

A number of the matchups would seem to favor Orlando in a series against Cleveland. The Magic play tall on the perimeter with 6'-10" sharpshooters

Hedo

Turkoglu

and

Rashard

Lewis, and 6'-6";

Mickael

Pietrus

. The

Cavs

play small with 6'-1" Mo Williams and 6'-3";

Delonte

West starting in the

backcourt

, and 6'-2"; Daniel Gibson coming off the bench. No one in the

Cavs

' big man corps would seem to be able to match the skill and athleticism of Dwight Howard. Courtney Lee and

Rafer

Alston are far from an elite starting

backcourt

, but they are pesky enough to neutralize Williams and West to a great degree.

With all the damning evidence, why bother even tuning in, then? The Cavs' season surely ended the instant Orlando walked off the floor in with a series win in Boston, right?

Before you get set to euthanize and eulogize the Cavs' season before Game 1, let

me erase the blackboard of your mind. If you count yourself among the doubting Thomases, let me set the record straight: The Cavs can -- and should -- beat the Magic over the span of seven games. Let me give you some reasons why.

## 1. Shouldn't it be obvious? LeBron James

If I were to be allowed only one witness to make my case as to why the Cavs should win this series, I wouldn't hesitate in calling No. 23 to the stand.

In last year's playoffs, LeBron tried to save the Cavs' season by getting into a scoring duel with Paul Pierce. The Cavs lost Game 7 in Boston, and the seed was planted for the prime-of-career, league-MVP force that emerged this season.

It's going to be extremely difficult for any team to deny LeBron what he wants. And what he wants right now is a championship. Orlando probably doesn't have the ammo to stop a truly-motivated LeBron over the span of seven games. Howard might be able to bother him at the rim, but that might mean foul trouble, early and often.

Beyond Howard, it's hard to see who is going to hold LeBron in check. Turkoglu doesn't possess the quickness or the girth. Lewis has the height, but also lacks girth. What it probably means is a lot of help defense and double teams on LeBron, and a lot of open looks for the Cavs' shooters.

## 2. Zydrunas Ilgauskas can open up the paint

Z plays a slow, plodding brand of basketball, brought on by his height, advancing age and multiple pieces of metal in both feet. But if he's swishing his tiptoe 20-foot jumpers, it will look like poetry in motion against Orlando.

If Z keeps making his shots, sooner or later Howard, or Marcin Gortat, or whoever is playing center for the Magic, will have to venture out of the paint to contest Z's

shots. When that happens, lanes can open up for the Cavs

' ultra-quick trio of penetrators

--

LeBron

, Williams and West -- to scoot inside for shots or to draw fouls. When those three are getting to the rim, the

Cavs

' offense is purring like a finely-tuned engine.

### **3. Delonte West can play taller than his height**

It might seem like a stretch to ask a 6'-3" guard to take a turn checking a 6'-10" forward like Turkoglu or Lewis. But how about a 6'-8" guard?

West is listed at 6'-3", but with long arms that allow him to guard and contest the shots of taller players. West is a legitimate option to slow Turkoglu or Lewis on the perimeter. He won't block any shots against a 6'-10" player, but if he can stay close to his man and put a hand in his face during every shot, that might be defense enough.

### **4. Howard can rebound. The rest of the Magic ... not so much**

Howard can be a one-man wrecking crew in the low post. But when he's on the bench, the Magic's lack of quality big man depth can be exploited. Gortat and

Tony

Bat

tie

are Orlando's two primary bench

big

, and though

Gortat

did an admirable job filling in for Howard during his one-game, first-round suspension, he's probably not going to outplay any starting-caliber opponent for long stretches.

Gortat averaged 4.5 rebounds per game during the regular season, in 12.6 minutes per game. That still made Gortat the Magic's fourth-leading rebounder after Howard (13.8), Lewis (5.7) and Turkoglu (5.3). In the playoffs, the disparity has become even greater, as Howard has jumped to 16.6 boards per game, with Lewis at 6.2 and Turkoglu at 3.7, a half-rebound better than Gortat's 3.2. Gortat is playing an average of 11.7 minutes per game in the playoffs, while Lewis is averaging over 40 minutes and Turkoglu over 37.

Compare that with the Cavs, who have LeBron at 9.8 rebounds per game in the postseason, along with Anderson Varejao at 7.3, Zydrunas Ilgauskas at 6.6 and Joe Smith at 5.1. The Cavs might not have a Howard to dominate inside, but their rebounding workload is spread much more evenly across the frontcourt.

## **5. Live by the three, die by the three**

The Magic have been the best road team in the league over the past two years. To a team that has tried to protect their home court the way the Cavs have, it would seem like Orlando would pose a direct threat to their comfort zone.

But a big reason why the Magic have been able to take their game on the road is because they rely heavily on perimeter shooting, which tends to travel well because the size of the ball and the rim never change.

The other side to that sword, however, is that the three-ball is a fickle mistress, capable of stalling out your offense as easily as it can propel you to wins.

In the NBA, a 40-percent three-point shooter is considered very good. That means if you miss six three-pointers of every 10 you take, you are among the best in the league. It's the definition of a low-percentage shot. For a team like the Magic that lacks many other ways to put the ball in the hoop, it's a high-risk, high-reward proposition. And the percentages say Orlando won't stay hot from downtown over the entire course of a seven-game series -- certainly against a team like Cleveland that emphasizes perimeter ball pressure on defense.