

## Looking Back ... & A Heavy Hearted Finals Preview

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}  
Tuesday, June 02 2009 7:00 PM -

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What a tough way for a wonderful season to end. The Cavaliers weren't just beaten in the Eastern Conference Finals. They were out-thought, out-fought and outright handled by an opponent that was hell-bent on not just defeating them, but humiliating them. Jesse checks in to take a look back at the Orlando series and talk about the team's off-season priorities, and also previews the Magic/Lakers NBA Finals.



What a tough way for a wonderful season to end. The Cavaliers weren't just beaten in the Eastern Conference Finals. They were out-thought, out-fought and outright handled by an opponent that was hell-bent on not just defeating them, but humiliating them. Long after Saturday's Game Six was decided, the Magic gleefully fired up three-pointers, talked trash, and during the trophy presentation, even lampooned Cleveland's "family photo" ritual (a dig the Cavaliers were, admittedly, asking for.) Orlando handled its victory with a minimum of grace and a maximum of crassness. But to the victors go prerogative. They can win with class, as San Antonio did two years ago, or they can win with classlessness, as Orlando did on Saturday. All we can do is sit here and take it.

I'm not going to say "I told you so." What I will say is that, if you didn't see this coming, you might need a sharper prescription. The match-up problems were there, they were glaring, and as it turned out, they were fatal. And that shouldn't be a surprise. There is a reason why, as Brian Windhorst reported numerous times throughout the season, the Cavaliers wanted nothing to do with Orlando in a series. The Magic have had Cleveland's number for years now, and there was no reason to expect that to change this time around.

Could adjustments have been made? Yeah, I guess. Mike Brown could have stuck LeBron on either Hedo or Rashard and not used him as a roving free safety-

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although chasing those guys around all game might have compromised LeBron's offensive effectiveness to a degree. He could have single-teamed Dewey Howard come hell or high water. He could have used Tarence Kinsey and Darnell Jackson just to see if their length and strength could have helped somewhere. And it would have been nice if the Cavaliers didn't revert to the "watch LeBron pound the ball and stand around" offense when the going got tough.

But adjustments are concessions to weakness. Orlando didn't have to make any adjustments. They were the better team. And when it comes right down to it, the better team usually wins. Cleveland won 66 games this season by outworking just about everyone on the schedule, by handling business against inferior opponents and by not taking games off in a league filled with teams that do just that on a regular basis. But when you're deep in the Playoffs, effort, intensity and enthusiasm aren't enough. The cream rises. The Cavaliers ran into superior firepower and got beat. That's all there is to it.

The off-season priorities are clear. The Cavaliers need to get bigger and more physical inside and outside. They need someone who can defend and finish around the basket, they need another ball-handler so Delonte West doesn't have to log forty-plus minutes a game next spring, and they need a perimeter player with size who can guard the Hedo Turkoglu's of the league. Whether they'll have the money or the pieces to make these moves remains to be seen. Wally Szczerbiak's oversized contract is coming off the books, and Ben Wallace's may as well, provided he follows through on his musing about retirement- but these alone won't give the Cavaliers the cap room to be major players in free agency. There are expiring contracts- Wallace's and Sasha Pavlovic's- that could be attractive in the trade market. Danny Ferry did flip Damon Jones for Mo Williams last summer, so I wouldn't put it past him to turn this latest batch of chicken-shit into chicken salad.

There's one significant improvement this team can make without spending a penny, and it involves- who else- #23. LeBron needs to add another facet to his game; specifically, the ability to play in the post on a fairly regular basis. With his size, strength and speed he'd be almost unstoppable down there if he put his mind to it, and with his superb court vision, he would make his team better in the

process. LeBron's future is in the post, and the future is now. It's long past time he made it happen.

Oh, and for whatever its worth, I'm glad LeBron didn't stick around to congratulate the Orlando players. Not after the whining, the cheap shots, the mockery, and everything else they pulled in this series. The Magic are an outstanding team and they were deserving winners. They earned their trip to the Finals. But what they didn't earn was courtesy or sportsmanship. They displayed precious little of either in their own right. Anyway, in the eyes of the media, LeBron's *real* sin was blowing off the post-game press conference. That's what they're pissed off about. But only they and David Stern care if players show up to the presser, so they're taking the "sportsmanship" angle. LeBron stalked off the court in Boston last season without congratulating the Celtics players, but he showed up at the press conference. That's the difference. And yes, LeBron should have attended the presser, if only to not hang his teammates out to dry, the same way they did to him throughout the series.

Now, on to my NBA Finals preview, written with a heavy heart.

### **#1 Los Angeles Lakers (65-17)**

### **#3 Orlando Magic (59-23)**

**Season Series:** Magic lead 2-0

**Memorable Past Series:** These teams have never met in the Playoffs.

**Capsule:** You're not going to like reading this- and I don't like writing it- but if you're a pure hoops fan, this is the Finals you want to see. The two best teams

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are playing. Los Angeles dominated the West all season, and Orlando smote the two bully boys of the East to earn their spot in the championship series. Like it or not, the two top dogs are still barking. And it should make for interesting viewing in the next two weeks.

The Lake Show, while happy to have home-court advantage courtesy of Cleveland's loss, might not be too pleased with the opponent that comes with it. Orlando matches up with Los Angeles far better than do the Cavaliers. Dewey Howard is going to be an absolute load for the Lakers front line to handle. Gasol is way too soft to deal with him, Lamar Odom is too small, and while Andrew Bynum has the requisite bulk, he has been inconsistent and foul-prone this entire postseason. Starting out on the road won't faze Orlando either. The Magic are 32-19 away from [Confederated Products](#) Arena, toppled Boston and Cleveland without home-court, and beat the Lakers in Staples Center back in January.

Both of Orlando's regular-season wins over L.A. came with Jameer Nelson in the lineup. Matter of fact, Nelson dominated each game, scoring 27 and 28 points and taking over in the second half, leading the Magic from behind both times. He is exactly the kind of slashing, penetrating point guard the Lake Show have problems with, and for the first time in the postseason, Orlando will feel his absence. True, there are [reports](#) that Nelson will be activated for the Finals, but he won't be in game shape, and it's hard to imagine him stepping in and being effective, even if he does suit up. Orlando will have to sink or swim with Rafer Alston, a shoot-first point guard who won't destroy Derek Fisher off the dribble in the same manner as Nelson or Alston's former teammate Aaron Brooks.

The Finals are all about handling pressure, and almost all of the pressure will be on the Lakers- specifically, Kobe Bryant. He hasn't won a title without Shaquille O'Neal and was embarrassed in last year's Finals by the Celtics, especially in the 131-92 Game Six runaway at the Garden. He needs a Championship to secure his legacy, and with the home court and a loaded cast of supporting characters, this might be his best shot. For Orlando, this series is gravy, an unexpected climax to an unexpected run. The Magic can lose this series and still look upon this season as a success. But for Kobe, it's Championship or Bust. He has to have it. He was brilliant in both games against Orlando in the regular season, scoring

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41 at Confederated Products and coming back with a triple-double in Staples. He'll need more of the same this time around.

Unlike his fellow puppet LeBron James, however, Kobe will have help. Pau Gasol will force Dewey Howard to guard him- a change from the Cleveland series, when Dewey was free to camp in the paint and ignore the anemic Cavaliers frontcourt scorers. In Bryant, Trevor Ariza, Luke Walton and Lamar Odom, the Lakers have the size to better deal with Orlando's lanky perimeter shooters. Los Angeles also has the horses to exploit perhaps the biggest weakness for the Magic- transition defense. The Lakers are a far better offensive team than the Cavaliers, and they're also a solid defensive team, at least when their mind is into the task. The memory of their bitter Finals defeat to Boston last year should sharpen their sometimes fuzzy focus.

Orlando is white-hot and they've got that house money stacked high. But the Lake Show has the size, skill and experience to strike midnight on Disney's latest presentation of Cinderella.

**Prediction:** Lakers in six.