

We've been waiting for this ever since LeBron walked off the court in a huff after Game 6 of the Eastern Conference Finals. This edition of the Cavs represents the franchise's best-ever shot at an NBA title, and one of only a handful of Cleveland teams in the past 45 years with a legitimate shot at breaking the city's title drought. But there are some potentially-problematic subplots to the season. This Cavs season is going to be a mouthful, to say the least. It's tough to boil it all down to a couple of paragraphs. Luckily, our stable of writers here at TCF is up to the challenge, as we present our 2009-10 Cleveland Cavaliers Roundtable.



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It's the arrival of the new Cavs season, which gets underway against the Celtics on Tuesday night.

The Cavs are a team heavy on star power - literally. LeBron James and Shaquille O'Neal tip the scales at somewhere around 600 combined pounds. Their personalities are even bigger, so win or lose, this team is bound to entertain on and off the floor.

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Armed with a pair of superstars surrounded by a talented, versatile roster, the Cavs are undeniably among the NBA's powerhouses. But there are some potentially-problematic subplots to the season. Will Shaq mesh with an unfamiliar offense? Shaq will have turned 38 by the time the playoffs roll around, so can he stay healthy and fresh enough to be the postseason difference-maker the Cavs so desperately need him to be? Can the Cavs rely on Delonte West, an extremely important role player who has been hampered by emotional issues, personal problems and a highly-publicized weapons-related arrest in September?

Snaking through all of it is LeBron's impending free agency next summer, and all the columns, soundbites, flirting and tea leaf reading that stands between now and the time when LBJ actually decides where he's going to play after this season.

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Nick Allburn

Cavs record: 63-19, 2nd East

Postseason fate: NBA champions

NBA Finals: Cavs over Spurs

LBJ MVP: No

The Cavaliers, Celtics, and Magic are all very capable of winning the East. Injuries will be a wild card in the Eastern Conference race, as will trade deadline additions. I'm going to pick the Cavs based on their off-season additions (adding Parker and Moon may be almost as beneficial as the Shaq trade), and the fact that Danny Ferry will not hesitate to mortgage future draft picks at the trade deadline in exchange for improving the team this season. The third reason I'm picking the Cavs is blind faith. To channel Fox Mulder, "I want to believe."

The Celtics are old, and it's unlikely that Allen, Garnett, Pierce, and Rasheed Wallace all make it through the season unscathed. The Magic added Vince Carter, but lost Hedo Turkoglu and Courtney Lee, which should prove a lateral move at best. Several years from now Orlando will be thankful that they're not on the hook for years four and five of Turkoglu's contract, but essentially swapping him for Vince Carter is a step backwards for the time being. That said, I'm picking the Magic to win the number one seed in the East over the Cavs by a slim margin.

Keeping Shaq healthy may just be the key to the Cavaliers' season, and that will probably mean preventative maintenance in the form of several games off each month. That might cost the Cavs some regular season games, but hopefully that investment will pay dividends during the second season. The Big Diesel is now playing for a fifth ring that would give him a leg up on Kobe Bryant, and he's also in a contract year. As long as he isn't being held together with spit and duct tape, Shaq will leave everything on the court.

Nobody can say with certainty who is going to win this thing, but right now it looks like there are six teams who could get it done. The Cavs, Celtics, and Magic are the class of the East. In the West, the Lakers are primed to defend their title, while Gregg Popovich can probably rally this incarnation of the Spurs for one more run before Father Time really starts to catch up with Tim Duncan. I'll put the Nuggets into the elite

group in the West also, simply because Carmelo Anthony can go on a tear and win a playoff series against anyone, all by himself. One of those six teams will hoist the Larry O'Brien trophy when it's all said and done.

John Hnat

Cavs record: 63-19, 1st East

Postseason fate: NBA champions

NBA Finals: Cavs over Lakers

LBJ MVP: Yes

The Cavs will win at least 63 games, will earn the No. 1 spot in the Eastern Conference, and will make it to the Finals to face the Lakers. And that's where my crystal ball gets hazy. I can see that series ending in just about every possible outcome. Rather than guess how it will play out, I simply want to grab a big bucket of popcorn and enjoy it as a fan - not only of the Cavs, but of basketball.

When I say that the Cavs will win "at least 63 games," I mean exactly that. I truly believe this team has the potential to be one of the best teams in NBA history. GM Danny Ferry has taken last year's 66-16 team - a legitimate 66-16, I may add, as they trounced the majority of their opponents - and replaced the three weakest links in the rotation (Ben Wallace, Sasha Pavlovic, and Wally Szczerbiak) with three significantly more productive players (Shaquille O'Neal, Anthony Parker, and Jamario Moon).

They have the potential to be scary good. The only reasons I haven't committed to a higher win total is because it's generally not wise to predict an extreme event, and winning 65-plus games in the regular season is definitely an extreme event.

The Cavs should leave the gate quickly - 12 of their first 17 games are against teams with .500 or lower records last season. The toughest part of their schedule will be the four weeks starting with Christmas week - the Cavs will hit the West Coast for four games (including Dallas, Phoenix, and the Lakers on Christmas Day), come home briefly, and then rack up more frequent flier miles on a second road trip that includes Denver, Portland and Utah, among others.

If the Cavs can survive that stretch of the schedule, they should be in great shape, as the second half of their season will

include a nearly three-week stretch at home and no road trips lasting more than two games. Once the playoffs roll around, I expect them to hot knife/butter their way through the first round and probably the second as well, and then prevail in a return match against the Magic.

Because I have to make a prediction, I'll say that the Cavs will win, and that LeBron will earn a second MVP trophy to go with his first ring. (Everything I just said about predicting extreme events be damned.)

Cleveland fans, remember to enjoy this ride - this team could well be the best team that we will see in our lifetimes, in any of the three major sports.

Sam Amico

Cavs record: 67-15, 1st East

Postseason fate: NBA champions

Finals matchup: Cavs over Spurs

LBJ MVP: Yes.

The Cavaliers are deeper, more athletic and flat-out more talented than at any time in the LeBron James Era. People predict Shaq may not being able to play all 82 games. Yeah, well, so what? They have another starting center on the team in Zydrunas Ilgauskas. They dramatically improved the bench with Z, Anthony Parker and Jamarion Moon -- and could get lifts from J.J. Hickson and Daniel Gibson (let's keep our fingers crossed). So even if everything goes wrong, this is a 60-win team. If all goes right, or close to right, it could be a 70-win team.

The key, really, is Coach Mike Brown. It will take him some time to figure out everyone's role, and how to best utilize everyone. He has more weapons than ever. Using each to the best of his abilities will be a challenge. That means the Cavs will be a better team later in the year than they first appear. It is LeBron's turn to win a championship (actually, his FIRST championship), and

GM Danny Ferry made the right off-season moves to make that happen.

There will be a few bumps, for certain (i.e. Delonte West's situation, injuries). Still, aside from anything drastic happening, there's no reason the Cavs can't bring a championship to Cleveland. There may be a team or two that is as talented as the Cavs, on paper. But no one is better.

Erik Cassano

Cavs record: 63-19, 1st East

Postseason fate: NBA champions

NBA Finals: Cavs over Lakers

LBJ MVP: Yes

I'm invoking the Gary Waters Rule with my Cavs predictions. A while back, when Waters was still the coach at Kent State, he gave a postgame press conference during the MAC Tournament, during which talked about a recent conversation he had with a player. The player was upset about not reaching a statistical milestone during the season.

"Did you set it as a goal prior to the season?" Waters asked the player. The player said no.

"Then don't be upset if you didn't reach it."

As Cleveland fans, we've all been burned

repeatedly by disappointment after a massive buildup of expectations. Last season's Cavs team is the latest in a long line. But the bottom line is, if I think this Cavs team is good enough to win a title, and I do, then I should pick them to win the whole ball of twine.

This is the first time the Cavs have entered a season with widespread title expectations since ... well, ever. Last season's team, with the addition of Mo Williams, was expected to improve over the previous season's 45-win effort, quite possibly enough to win the East if everything fell into place. I pegged the Cavs as a 55-win team heading into last year. I didn't think they were quite good enough to win the NBA title, so I predicted a loss to the Spurs in the NBA Finals. Of course, they vastly exceeded expectations with a 66-win regular season, but the postseason played out as advertised before the start of the season: a deep playoff run, but no championship.

The Cavs were still one or two pieces away. This summer, The Missing Piece arrived more like The Missing Whole Thing. In one of the more aggressive moves you'll ever see an NBA GM make, Danny Ferry acquired Shaquille O'Neal, who will be charged with leveling the low-post playing field against the likes of Dwight Howard, Pau Gasol, Andrew Bynum and Kevin Garnett. At 37, he's a few years past his prime, but still 7'-1" and well over 300 pounds, which means he's still a load to handle in the post.

As an added insurance policy against the tall, athletic wing players of the Lakers and Magic, Ferry brought in tall swingmen Anthony Parker and Jamario Moon to play perimeter defense. The Parker addition might end up becoming a lifesaver if Delonte West's situation remains unstable.

Ferry punctuated the offseason by taking a gamble on still-injured Leon Powe, who could provide even

more low-post beef if he can return in time for the playoffs.

It was an offseason equal parts bucks, brains and balls. For a team fighting to keep their superstar MVP, it was the best kind of offseason to have. And I think it was enough to finally get a parade through downtown Cleveland next June.

Chris Hutchison

Cavs record: 64-18, 1st East

Postseason fate: Conference finals

Finals: Lakers over Celtics

LBJ MVP: No

There is only one goal to this upcoming season. Getting to the conference finals is not good enough. Getting to the NBA Finals is not good enough. That's been done before with lesser teams. Especially with the mysterious nature of LeBron's future in Cleveland, the 2009-2010 season is *Championship Or Bust*.

So I look forward to the regular season with very little joy. It's a meaningless footnote on the way to the playoffs. Very little good can come of it, and considering the disparity between the haves and have-nots in the NBA, there's little chance the Cavs finish with less than 60 wins and a high playoff seed.

The season won't really begin until the playoffs do, and it will likely be a three-team race again in the East, between Orlando, Boston, and Cleveland. If the Cavs run that gauntlet, they'll likely get the Lakers in the Finals. Sadly, I don't see them winning two or three series against these elite teams. Cleveland struggled against the top teams last year, and I think that will continue. One could argue the Cavs are a better team now than last year, but I don't see that they've improved that much athletically to keep up with the endless talent stables that the Celtics and Lakers (and even Magic) have. Not to mention that the pressure on this team will be tremendous, especially considering the possible ramifications of failure.

It's probably just the beaten-down Cleveland fan in me talking, but this season scares the crap out of me.

Tony Lastoria

Cavs record: 58-24, 2nd East

Postseason fate: Conference finals

NBA Finals: Lakers over Celtics

LBJ MVP: Yes

I see a lot of parallels between this current Cavaliers run and that of the Cleveland Indians back in the '90s. In 1995, the

Indians were the best team in baseball, but ran into a matchup problem with the Atlanta Braves in the World Series as they found they did not have enough above average starting pitching and that there were some holes in the lineup (Paul Sorrento) that could be exposed. So, that offseason the Indians went out and signed Jack McDowell to fill out the rotation, let Sorrento go and signed Julio Franco to help bring in a professional hitter, who they thought would be better adept at handling advanced pitching in crucial situations or games.

In somewhat similar fashion, the Cavaliers did that this offseason. The Cavaliers were the best team in the NBA last year through the first six months of the season, but a matchup problem along with some

questionable coaching did them in against a red hot Orlando Magic team in the playoffs. The Cavaliers were exposed in the paint as soft and also lacking length to defend the perimeter, so to answer these flaws GM Danny Ferry went out and traded for Shaquille O'Neal to beef up the frontcourt and then signed Anthony Parker and Jamario Moon to add some much needed length and versatility to the backcourt.

At the outset the moves look like they should help the Cavaliers with their versatility to handle any opponent this season, and especially in a postseason series. All this probably won't immediately translate to more wins. In fact, I think they will take a noticeable step back in the win department from 66 last year to 58 this

year. Almost nothing went wrong for them all season last year, and the Eastern Conference continues to improve, so I think they will regress more to the mean winning in the upper 50s and still landing a top three seed. Plus the expectations are through the roof right now for a Cleveland fanbase who so desperately need something to get excited about and invest all of their energy in with the Browns and Indians mired in a seemingly endless tailspin.

The Cavaliers are without a doubt a title contender, but the road to a title as we saw last season is long and tough. Injuries and luck can have a dramatic affect on the outcome of a season. Boston will be very hungry and much healthier this season. Orlando got a taste of success last year and

will have a thirst for more this season. And many other teams in the East are improved like Toronto, Washington, and Chicago. It will likely come down to an epic best-of-seven series with the Celtics in the Eastern Conference Finals, but unfortunately I see the Cavaliers coming up short again losing in what will go down as a series for the ages. I hope I am wrong.

Jesse Lamovsky

Cavs record: 57-25, 2nd East

Postseason fate: Conference

champions

NBA Finals: Lakers over Cavs

LBJ MVP: No

Last season the Cavaliers finished with an NBA-best 66-16 record but were ultimately doomed by their lack of depth, backcourt size, frontcourt scoring, and a horrible Eastern Conference Finals match-up in the Orlando Magic, who had all of those things in abundance.

Give credit to Danny Ferry and Co. for recognizing those shortcomings and moving to correct them. Into the fold is a pair of tall defensive swingmen in Jamarion Moon and Anthony Parker. Joining them is the biggest addition any team made in this off-season: Shaquille O'Neal, who will provide the massive paint presence this team has lacked for the entirety of the LeBron James Era.

Still, questions remain. Will troubled glue-guard Delonte West be mentally healthy enough to contribute? Will the 37-year-old O'Neal stay healthy and happy long enough to pitch in for a championship run? Will Mo Williams pull another Judge Crater act in the Playoffs?

We know, barring injury, that this club will win a lot of games in the regular season. But the true measure of Cleveland 's progress will come in May and June, and not until then will the questions be answered.

Brian McPeck

Cavs record: 60-22, 1st East

Postseason fate: NBA champions

NBA Finals: Cavs over Spurs

LBJ MVP: Yes

I'm excited by what the Cavaliers did in the off season after their disappointing playoff performance against Orlando. Unlike the previous offseason, where the Cavs seemed to build to beat the Celtics only to ultimately face the Magic in the Eastern Conference Finals, the Cavs this summer drafted and signed players that not only filled their need

for bulk in the middle of the court but also solidified the wings.

Shaquille O'Neal is, pardon the pun, a huge acquisition not only because of his size but also because of his presence. He is the "Godfather" of post players despite getting long in the tooth. That presence still has value. Jamarion Moon and Anthony Parker should give the Cavaliers the size and athleticism that they previously lacked.

There is one rather large fly in the soup other than potential chemistry issues. Actually, it is a brain chemistry

issue, and it belongs to Delonte West. West is a huge part of what the Cavs do and he's a "glue guy"; in that he can, and does, fill any needed role and does so capably, if not spectacularly at times. If his mental health and/or legal issues cause him to miss multiple games or become a sideshow, then the Cavaliers' performance on the court could suffer. West isn't a deal-breaker but what he does can provide the margin between a championship and just another playoff run that ends in disappointment and feeds the uncertainty that surrounds LeBron James after the season ends.

But I'm going to hope against hope that West can get his life in order and do what he does on the court with a minimal disruption to those around him.

I'm also hoping James will announce his intentions to remain a Cavalier at the world championship parade.