

If the Regular Season Ended Today ...

Written by {ga=jdclevelandfan}
Wednesday, January 20 2010 7:00 PM -

Tonight's game against the Lakers is going to have a playoff feel. And it has J.D. Shultz in the playoff discussion kind of mood. If the regular season ended today, the Cavaliers (32-11) would enter the NBA Playoffs as the #1 seed in the Eastern Conference. They'd be playing the #8 seed Chicago Bulls (18-22), and would then move on to play the winner of the #4 Orlando Magic (27-15) / #5 Charlotte Bobcats (21-19) series. In J.D.'s latest, he starts to take a look at the potential bracketing, the maneuvering that may take place these next few months, and how things may end up shaking out once it's playoff time.



If the regular season ended today, the Cleveland Cavaliers (32-11) would enter the NBA Playoffs as the #1 seed in the Eastern Conference.

They'd be playing the #8 seed Chicago Bulls (18-22). The Cavs have played two home games against the Bulls, and are 1-1. [In real life, the Cavs play the Bulls two more times. Both are in Chicago.]

Assuming they rolled past the Bulls (and regular season record be damned, I think they take them 4-0), they'd move on to play the winner of the #4 Orlando Magic (27-15) / #5 Charlotte Bobcats (21-19) series. Now let's not pussyfoot around here, the Cavs wouldn't be excited to play either of these teams.

Not that they're any more talented than the Cavs. Because they're not.

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The Magic, for those of you too senile to remember, shocked the Cavs with some eye-popping and universally-deemed unsustainable shooting in the Eastern Conference Finals last year. Unfortunately, the NBA's well protracted playoff timetable was not long enough to allow the Magic to wilt on the Cavs' watch.

(The Lakers were the beneficiary of that in the Finals.)

But since then, the Magic let their Cav killer, Hedo Turkoglu, walk . . . and the Cavs traded for Shaquille O'Neal to enforce reasonable order within the paint. It sounds safe, but I can't believe it until I see it.

The Cavs have played the Magic once this season . . . in Orlando . . . and tossed them around like they were the Sacramento Kings that we *expected* to see this year, before they turned out to be kind of mini-awesome. [In real life, the Cavs play the Magic three more times. Two home, one away.]

The Charlotte Bobcats have had the Cavs' number this season. They are the only team to beat the Cavs twice, and unfortunately neither of the games were all that close. The Cavs did win the first one . . . thanks to Delonte West's big return night . . . so they're 2-1. [They play them one more time.]

The Magic / Bobcats series could be a long one . . . if the Bobcats keep playing like they're playing (and, for that matter, if the Magic keep playing like they're playing.) If the season, *did* end today . . . as in, right now . . . I'd put my money on the Bobcats, but I'm hoping for the Magic in May.

Maybe that's foolish, but I feel like the Cavs . . . and LeBron James especially . . . really *felt* last year's loss. And in a playoff setting, I think the Cavs will be up for the Magic like they can't be for any other team prior to the Finals.

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Any weirdness can happen in a series against a hot young team like the Bobcats (look at the Atlanta Hawks and the Bulls in past recent seasons), but the Cavs will *not* lose to the Magic in the playoffs this year. If I had a farm, I bet it.

So the Cavs move on (4-1 over the Magic or 4-2 over the Bobcats) to the Eastern Conference Finals . . . a.k.a. the Scene of the Crime '09, a.k.a. the Scene of Daniel Gibson '07.

This other side of this bracket is tough. You have #2 Boston Celtics (27-13), #3 Atlanta Hawks (27-14), #6 Miami Heat (21-20) and #7 Toronto Raptors (21-22).

Even though the Raptors can be a dangerously tough match-up for the Cavs . . . and they are 1-1 against them this season . . . let's be real, there's really no way they get to the Eastern Conference Finals. The Raptors are maybe one significant piece away from contending. And unfortunately next year, they're probably going to be two significant pieces away.

You can't argue with a Raptors / Celtics first round match-up, though. If Boston is supposed to be the Cavs' biggest stumbling block to the Finals in the East . . . the way it falls right now, they're going to have a bloody journey just to get to the Cavs. And in this bracket, right now, they won't make it.

The Raptors will give them a scare, and after Boston advances . . . they'll lose to the Hawks.

The Cavs are just 0-1 against Boston this season, so it's hard to know what to expect. For now, all we know is that with zero '09 /'10 games under their belts, the Cavs couldn't find the on-court chemistry to defeat the Celtics.

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Cleveland will play the Celtics three more times this season. And by the time they (hope to) meet in the playoffs, both teams will have 86+ games under their belts. By then, I'd expect the Cavaliers' on-court chemistry to be well-prepared to show the Celtics just how much we've grown.

The Cavs are 2-0 against Atlanta, but it wasn't easy. They played them in one of those bizarre home-away back-to-backs a few weeks ago. In the second game, the Cavs staged (at least) two major comebacks . . . and both of them may have failed if it weren't for Anderson Varejao's birthday present to LeBron: His first career 3-pointer, which was a true miracle shot.

The Hawks may not be the second-best team in the Eastern Conference (behind the Cavs), but to me . . . if we meet them in the playoffs, they will be our biggest test.

They could very well be this year's "Orlando Magic," and the Cavs need to take the final two regular season games against them very seriously in order to make sure they have the adjustments and the gameplan to handle them . . . so that they don't become this year's "Orlando Magic." Fortunately, both games are in April, so all the cards (face-up or face-down) should at least be on the table.

Honestly, I have no idea whether the Miami Heat have any shot against the Hawks in the first round. They're 1-1 in the regular season against each other, and both games were blowouts.

But I know two things: (1) If Atlanta had Dwyane Wade instead of Joe Johnson, the Cavs season would likely end in that series. And (2) If the Miami Heat win a playoff series, that is probably not good news for Cleveland fans regarding the LeBron 2010 insanity.

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Yes, Miami has control of less than a third of their players heading into next season . . . but since they should be able to swing Wade and another max contract, you don't want LeBron to feel like the winning culture is back in Miami.

It's not an unfavorable portion of the roster either. They have the rights to Michael Beasley, Mario Chalmers, Daequan Cook and James Jones next season, plus Wade if he re-signs. I not really trying to say anything here . . . other than the fact that I'm not wishing the Heat any luck.

And they won't get it. The Hawks have to beat them in this simulation, because I have the Cavs and Hawks in the Conference Finals. The Cavs win 4-2, but only after falling down 1-2. Then LeBron's drive shifts into a new gear, previously unseen, and doesn't look back.

Why bring all this up now . . . in the middle of January?

Because tonight the Cavs play the Los Angeles Lakers at home. They [crushed them](#) in L.A. on Christmas, and now we get to see if they have the chops to bite back. Yeah, if the Cavs win, they would hold the home court tie-breaker against the Lakers.

But beyond that, I want another glimpse into the LeBron / Kobe Bryant face-off.

It's my dream Finals match-up . . . and since they play each other so little during the regular season, I don't know what to expect. Other than that it'll be epic. It has to be.