

Contenders? Or Pretenders?

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Sunday, January 24 2010 7:00 PM -

Cavalier fans -- and many scribes -- are still crowing about sweeping two games from the defending NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers. But the real challenge to the Cavs this postseason might not even come from the Lakers. Of course, there's our old friends in Boston and Orlando, the teams that have knocked the Cavs out of the playoffs the last two seasons. And there are some new teams starting to emerge in the East. The Hawks have taken another step forward, the Bobcats are emerging and have had the Cavs number, and the Bulls are surging after a rough start to the season. Jerry Roche breaks down all the NBA contenders in his latest piece.



Cavalier fans -- and many scribes -- are still crowing about sweeping two games from the defending NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers. But the real challenge to the Cavs this post season might not even come from the Lakers (who have the league's best record but must play 24 of their remaining 39 games away from the friendly confines of the Staples Center).

Oh sure, our old friends in Boston and Orlando are to be respected, but the Eastern Conference -- much more competitive than it's been in many years -- could be the scene of at least a few playoff upsets. Charlotte has beaten the Cavs

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two out of three times. And don't look now, but Atlanta and Chicago are improved enough to actually unseat one or more of the favorites.

In the Western Conference, Denver, San Antonio, Utah, Dallas and even Oklahoma City have extremely good teams -- each of which stands a decent chance of giving the Lakers a run for the berth in the NBA Finals.

Here's a brief rundown of the top challengers to the Cavs, and why they're top challengers:

CHARLOTTE BOBCATS

Larry Brown's Bobcats have been hot lately. They're allowing just 92.8 points per game, best in the league. They've got a bona fide all-star in Gerald Wallace, who had 31 points against the Cavaliers on Nov. 27 in Charlotte and 19 points and 11 rebounds in the Jan. 3 match at the Q.

The Cavs' defensive strength is in the paint, but the Bobcats have excellent long-range shooters in Wallace, Stephen Jackson, Flip Murray and Raymond Felton. Which means the 'Cats pose some extremely bad match-up problems for the Cavs -- much as Orlando did last season.

The Bobcats are limiting opponents to a field goal percentage of 43.1, sixth in the league.

Though the Cavs won 90-79 on Oct. 31, they lost 94-87 on Nov. 27 and 91-88 on Jan. 3. Don't look now, but the Bobcats are dangerous with a capital "D."

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BOSTON CELTICS

Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce, Ray Allen. Make no mistake: if those three are all healthy come playoff time, the Celtics will be trouble.

Even though Garnett has missed 11 games due to injury, the Celtics still own the Eastern Conference's second-best record. They are second in the league in defense, allowing just 93.8 points per game, and their point differential ("The Diff") is plus-6.02, third-best in the league behind the Lakers and Cavs.

The Celtics have already disposed of the Cavs in their only meeting this season, even though it was the first game of the year, when Cleveland coach Mike Brown was still tinkering with his line-up and three new starters were still getting used to playing together.

The Cavs have two games left at Boston and one more against the Celts at the Q. If Garnett is healthy (hell, even if he's not), these will be all-out free-for-alls, as the Celtics are the closest thing the Cavs have to a hated, heated rival.

ATLANTA HAWKS

Yes, the Cavs have beaten the Hawks twice, 95-84 at Atlanta Dec. 29 and 106-101 at the Q on Dec. 30. But both games were knuckle-biters.

The Hawks also have been hot lately, taking over the top spot in their division from the Magic. They have the fourth-best point differential in the league at plus-5.78. They have Joe Johnson, who scored 15 points against the Cavs on Dec. 29 and 35 points on Dec. 30. They have former Orlando guard Jamal Crawford (26 points on Dec. 29), and high-flyer Josh Smith. Those guys are scary.

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The Cavs have two games remaining with the Hawks, including the season finale at Atlanta -- and won't that be interesting!

CHICAGO BULLS

Do not count the Bulls out as a contender to reach the Eastern Conference finals. They have one of the most dynamic young guards in the league (Derrick Rose), a pure shooter at stretch forward (6-9 Luol Deng) and the league's second-leading rebounder (much-improved 6-11 center Joakim Noah, an Andy Varejao clone). Not only that, but they're holding opponents to just 43.9 percent from the field, fifth-best in the entire league.

The Cavs split the first two games with the Bulls, both at the Q, losing 86-85 on Nov. 5 and winning 101-87 on Dec. 4. They must visit Chicago twice yet this season.

ORLANDO MAGIC

Once (last year!) a thorn in the Cavs' side, the Magic have regressed this season. On Nov. 11 at Orlando, the Cavs rolled to a surprisingly easy 102-93 victory.

The biggest difference between the 2008-2009 and the 2009-2010 Magic is the absence of one Hedo Turkoglu, who buried the Cavs in the Eastern Conference finals last season with his dead-eye outside shooting. Stretch forward Rashard Lewis is not having the season he had last year, either. And Vince Carter is shooting a miserable 38 percent from the floor.

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Bulky center Dwight Howard, who was once thought to be the brightest future star in the league, has not yet taken his game to another level. He's still a beast within five feet of the basket, but move him a few feet farther out -- as Shaq-Daddy can do -- and he becomes a virtual *persona non grata*.

In recent days, the Magic have fallen to second in their division behind the Hawks, but they still boast the fourth-best record in the conference.

The Cavs have three games left with the Magic, including two at the Q.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

We could go into great detail on the best teams in the West, but they become inconsequential if the Cavs don't make it through the East meat-grinder. In descending order of importance, here they are:

Los Angeles Lakers - Defending champs; Kobe Bryant, Pau Gasol, Andrew Bynum, Ron Artest, Derek Fisher, Lamar Odom, ex-Cav Shannon Brown -- perhaps the deepest roster in the league.

Denver Nuggets - Beat the Cavs 99-97 on Jan. 8 without league-leading scorer Carmelo Anthony; terrible match-up problems for the Cavs with Kenyon Martin, perennial-thorn-in-the-side Chauncey Billups, Nené; point differential of plus-5.65 (second in the league).

Dallas Mavericks - Cavs are 1-1, having lost at Dallas Dec. 20 when the Mavs were without Dirk Nowitzki; excellent depth that might carry them far into the playoffs: Shawn Marion, Jason Kidd, Drew Gooden, Jason Terry, Erick Dampier.

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Utah Jazz - led by the hated Carlos Boozer (19.3 ppg, 10.6 rpg), the Jazz have been hot lately; excellent shooting team with 48.7 percent from the field, which ties Boston for best in the league.

Oklahoma City Thunder - Scott Brooks' young, hungry, defensive-minded team has high-scoring Kevin Durant leading the way; Thunder give up 43.7 percent from the field (third lowest in the league) and 95.7 ppg on defense (fifth lowest).