

Cavs, Celtics go at it again; Nuggets covet Z

Written by {ga=samamico}

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It happened on opening night, way back in October.

Shaquille O'Neal was making his Cavaliers debut. So were Anthony Parker and Jamario Moon. Delonte West wasn't in uniform, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas was. So was J.J. Hickson, but few envisioned him as the starting power forward back then.

It was the Cavs and the Boston Celtics, live from Quicken Loans Arena, on TNT.

If you remember, the Cavs built a big early lead, then showed a lack of cohesiveness in the end, dropping a 95-89 decision. The Cavs who had been built to win a championship showed that they still had a long way to go (especially after losing the following night in Toronto).

Fast forward nearly four months later.

The Cavs own the NBA's best record at 44-14. They had won 13 straight games heading into the All-Star break. West has battled back from his emotional disorder, displaying stability on and off the court. Shaq has become considerably more comfortable with his teammates, and his teammates with him. Hickson proved himself as a starter, then moved back to a reserve role, having been replaced by Antawn Jamison, who was part of a trade with Washington that sent Ilgauskas to the Wizards.

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Meanwhile, the Celtics have stumbled a little, dropping to as low as the fourth-best team in the East (they are currently third at 36-19). Since October, they have lost all four games of their season series against Atlanta. They've suffered injury and illness, and a slight decline in productivity from guys whom are considered their stars -- such as Paul Pierce, Kevin Garnett and Ray Allen.

Allen even became the subject of trade rumors in February, as the Celtics started to feel like maybe what they have isn't good enough to overtake teams like the Cavs and Orlando Magic. (Interestingly, one report had Allen going to Washington for Jamison, who of course, is now with the Cavs.)

Today, the Celtics are trying to keep it together. The Cavs, on the other hand, are trying to keep their championship dreams alive.

And now they meet again, nearly four months later, live from TD Garden in Boston. Again, the game will be televised on TNT.

Again, the Celtics are dealing with a couple of issues, the most notable being Pierce's sprained right thumb, which may keep the star forward out of the game. His backup, Marquis Daniels, may also sit out with the flu. Then again, it's highly unlikely either player will want to miss a game like this.

That's not to say all has been perfect for LeBron James and the Cavs. They had lost three straight for the first time this season immediately following the All-Star break, then needed James to play one heck of a final 1:36 for the team to best normal New Orleans the other night.

Just like the last time they faced the Celtics, the Cavs are trying to implement a major addition on the fly. Last time it was Shaq; this time it's Jamison.

Like Shaq, Jamison changes the whole dynamic on both ends of the floor. After all, LeBron has never played alongside a power forward who score like this before. On top of that, O'Neal no longer has anyone to back him up, now that Ilgauskas is still working out a buyout with Washington and trying to figure out his future (more on that in a moment).

For now, the Cavs are a very good team in transition, a team that is also trying to prove that the Celtics are on their way out.

So while we're a long way from opening night, both the Cavs and Celtics still have plenty they would like to prove. And there's no better way for either team to find out how far it has come since October than to do this dance again.

Nuggets Coveting Z

Ilgauskas is expected to be bought out by the Wizards by the end of the week, possibly

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Thursday. There is a snag, however. [According to NBA.com](#), "Ilgaskas will likely have to leave more on the table in exchange for his freedom than he had hoped."

The report went on to say that the Wizards may want considerably more than the \$590,000 trade kicker is due, that they "going to be firm in holding out for the most money possible -- likely \$1 million or more -- from Ilgaskas."

Also, Ilgaskas' agent, Herb Rudoy, told the website that he plans to speak to teams other than just the Cavs once a buyout is reached.

Denver is one team that Rudoy said is particularly interested, saying the following [to the Denver Post](#) on Wednesday:

"There hasn't been a day go by that I haven't heard from Mark (Warkentien, the Nuggets vice president of basketball operations). He had a great relationship with Z (in Cleveland). Mark has been very aggressive to convince me to convince Z."

Atlanta, Dallas and Utah have also made it known they will heavily pursue Ilgaskas.

Sam Amico is covers the Cavaliers and the NBA for NBA.com, and is a regular contributor to SportsTime Ohio and The Cleveland Fan.