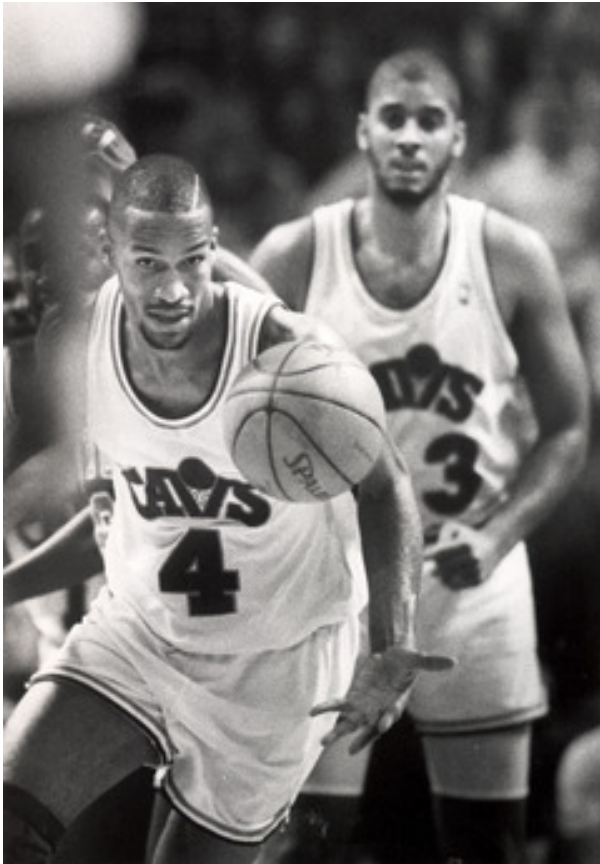


Is This the Best Cavs Team Ever?

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Friday, April 09 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Monday, April 19 2010 6:23 AM



With the Cavs continuing to win despite key injuries and showing new strengths seemingly each week, the discussion is well under way over bars and dinner tables across Cleveland:

Is this the best Cavs team we've ever seen?

We'll have to wait a couple of months to see if this year's edition of the Cavaliers can lay claim to the title of the best team in the game. In one of those quirks of the NBA, little that happens over the grueling six months of the regular season actually factors into the debate. Fair or not, the issue will be determined almost entirely during two months of long, sweaty nights as the playoffs loll through the spring and into the summer.

But the question of whether or not this Cavs team is the best the city of Cleveland has ever had can begin to be fleshed out now. A world title would certainly wrap up the discussion with a pretty little bow, but in the meantime, there are several angles to consider.

Most notably, you must define the emphasis you put on the regular-season victory total. If this is weighty, then last year's Cavs squad will most likely rank higher in your estimation than this year's, since it won a franchise-record 66 games and this year's Cavs will capture a few less.

So if this year's Cavs win say, 63 games, three less than a year ago, playing essentially the

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identical schedule, doesn't that mean that the 2008-09 team still must be considered the best ever?

Anyone who seriously follows sports knows it's more complicated than that.

For one thing, the Eastern Conference is stronger overall this year than it was a year ago. For another, while the opponents are the same, the ebb and flow of the 2009-10 schedule has been a bit more challenging, particularly at the outset, when the team was just putting the pieces together and played seven back-to-back games in the season's first five weeks (last year's team played only four over that same period) and 25 of their first 42 games on the road, including two west coast trips.

And those pieces are another topic of discussion. With the return of Zydrunas Ilgauskas, the core of the 2008-09 team remains intact. To that core, you've added perennial All-Stars in Shaquille O'Neal and Antawn Jamison, sprinkled in formidable forces on the perimeter in Anthony Parker and Jamario Moon, and in essence kicked in another starter with the rise of J.J. Hickson. Any one of these players is more valuable than the only three marginal contributors lost from last season: Ben Wallace, Wally Szczerbiak, and Sasha Pavlovic.

So even though they'll win less games, this year's team is clearly better, right?

Hang on.

What if – God forbid – they get their nightmare matchup in the first round of the playoffs and somehow the Charlotte Bobcats stun the world and upset them? That would make losing to Orlando in last year's conference finals look pretty good, right? Keep in mind three years ago the Dallas Mavericks won 67 games and snagged the top seed in the West only to lose to the 42-victory Golden State Warriors in six games in the first round.

Of course, Cleveland fans don't need to be told this. We remember all too well the spring of '89.

Up until last season, the 1988-89 Cavs were considered by many to be the best team in franchise history. All the shrewd maneuvering of GM Wayne Embry and head coach Lenny Wilkens over the previous three years paid off with a magnificent young team that had everything: strength down low with Brad Daugherty, shot-blocking dominance with Larry Nance, bench depth with Hot Rod Williams, a perfect point guard in Mark Price, and a daring, athletic shooting guard in Ron Harper. This team didn't just win, it blew people away, and stood at 43-12 in March. They were poised to dethrone the Detroit Pistons in the East, then blast past the aging Lakers in the Finals.

But we know the rest of the story. Injuries struck and the team limped across the finish line of the regular season, though still won a then-team-record 57 games. Hopes remained high going into the playoffs, especially when the Cavs were paired with the Chicago Bulls, whom they'd defeated all six times they'd played during the regular season. Cue Michael Jordan, who scored

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something like 8,000 points that week and single-handedly ended the Cavs' dream season with a circus-clown last-second shot in the deciding Game Five. The best team in Cavs history never even saw the conference semifinals.

Three years later, that same core (sans Harper) came back together from far-flung injuries to once again win 57 games. This time, however, the Cavs managed to get through the first round, then advanced past Boston in a memorable seven-game semifinal series, only to fall to you-know-who in the conference finals. Consequently, the 1991-92 Cavs leapfrogged the 1988-89 team in many fans' minds as the franchise's best ever. Though if you put the teams side by side, the 1988-89 Cavs were clearly superior, both statistically and in terms of roster makeup.

Similarly, the 1992-93 team also gets overshadowed by its predecessor's satisfying playoff run. These Cavs overcame a shaky start to win 54 games and once again finish second in the division to Chicago. They squeaked past New Jersey in the first round, but then were neatly swept away by Jordan and Co. in the conference semifinals, forever cementing them beneath the 1991-92 edition.

Here too, the 1992-93 squad looks better stacked up against the team from the year before, thanks in part to the addition of shooting guard Gerald Wilkins, who came as close as anyone could to replacing a young Ron Harper.

One last example, and perhaps the best, is the storied Miracle of Richfield team of 1975-76. Statistically, there wasn't much special about this team. It won its division, but just a modest 49 games. Were it not for the epic seven-game series against the defending conference champion Washington Bullets played out before delirious crowds at the Coliseum, the '75-'76 team would be remembered fondly, but not reverentially. This was a team that was greater than the sum of its parts, whose strength couldn't be conveyed through numbers. A handful of forgettable Cavalier teams over the years have been clearly "better" than the Miracle team. But it will always be included in any discussion of the franchise's best ever.

Like it or not, how a season finishes is the most dramatic (and in some cases, unfortunate) factor in how a team is remembered. A marvelous six-month regular season can be rinsed away and forgotten in six days. Or conversely, as we witnessed three years ago when LeBron took the team on his back and carried it into the NBA Finals, a mediocre regular season can suddenly be catapulted into legend.

So is this year's Cavs team the best we've ever seen? Probably.

But for the definitive, Magic 8-Ball answer: "Ask Again Later."