

It's become tradition and an expectation around here for the TCF crew to bring you their thoughts on each round of the NBA playoffs. And, as always,



we aim to please. So a few of the hoops writers for the site got together and pounded their first round thoughts into words. Feel free to take a look, compare our picks to selections and talk about via email with the writers or in the forum section.

And away we go:

Sam Amico

East

Magic over the Bobcats in six.
Hawks over the Bucks in seven.
Heat over the Celtics in six.

Suns over the Blazers in five. Nuggets over the Jazz in seven.

Cavs-Bulls

Bulls forward Joakim Noah likes to run his mouth, and his ridiculous predictions of "shocking the world" have not been overlooked by the Cavs, particularly LeBron James. The Cavs are much deeper, better-coached and, unlike the Bulls, have a true superstar. And thanks to Noah's trash

talk, the Cavs now have a superstar who is angry and extra-motivated. At one point, the Bulls may have had a chance to extend this series to six games. Not anymore. Cavs in four. Thanks, Joakim.

Erik Cassano

East

- (2) Magic vs. (7) Bobcats: Magic
- (3) Hawks vs. (6) Bucks: Hawks
- (4) Celtics vs. (5) Heat: Celtics

West

- (1) Lakers vs. (8) Thunder: Lakers
- (2) Mavericks vs. (7) Spurs: Mavericks
- (3) Suns vs. (6) Blazers: Suns
- (4) Nuggets vs. (5) Jazz: Nuggets

Cavs-Bulls

The Bulls head into this series on a wave of emotion, leapfrogging Toronto in the final days of the season to claim the East's final playoff spot, and making good on Derrick Rose's playoff guarantee in the process.

The Cavs, on the other hand, have been marking time until the regular season ends. LeBron hasn't played in well over a week. Resting starters and key bench players, and not really trying all that hard otherwise, the Cavs lost the last four games of the regular season.

On top of that, Shaq is back, and Game 1 will be his first game action since thumb surgery nearly two months ago.

Considering all of that, you should be able to excuse the Cavs if they take a game or two to find

their stride in this series.

It's possible that the Bulls will steal one of the first two games in Cleveland. And they might be able to split the next two in Chicago. But if this series is tied at 2-2 headed back to Cleveland for Game 5, don't start hyperventilating. That's right about when the Cavs should finish sanding the rust off, and right about when the Bulls' emotional high should wear off.

The Cavs are one of the two deepest teams in the league, along with Orlando. They have the ability to out-talent all but a select few teams in the league. After a couple of games, the essential differences between the Cavs' talent level and the Bulls' talent level will start to become evident. No matter how out of sync the Cavs are to start the series, within a few games, their foot will find its way to the Bulls' throat. Just don't panic in the meantime.

Cavs in 6.

Jesse Lamovsky

East

Boston 4, Miami 2
Atlanta 4, Milwaukee 1
Orlando 4, Charlotte 2

West

Los Angeles 4, Oklahoma City 1
Denver 4, Utah 2
Phoenix 4, Portland 1
Dallas 4, San Antonio 3

Cavs-Bulls

First things first- the Bulls are not the demoralized Pistons team that Cleveland took to the woodshed in last season's first round. Chicago comes into this series on a roll, winners of ten of its last fourteen games. It's a young team built around the star power and Derrick Rose and the

grit of Joakim Noah- and they don't particularly care for the Cavaliers. The Bulls will play this series with a great deal of energy and passion.

Now here's the cold water for Chicago. The Bulls have a hard time scoring, averaging just 97.5 points per game during the regular season. There is very little in the way of a consistent outside shooting or low-post threat. Other than Flip Murray and Brad Miller there is sparse depth off the bench. With Ben Gordon in Detroit and John Salmons in Milwaukee this is a less explosive, less versatile Bulls team than the one we saw take Boston to a seventh game last season.

Cleveland's biggest problem in this series may be conditioning. The team's stars didn't played much over the last week of the season- Shaquille O'Neal didn't play at all after late February- while the Bulls have been essentially playing Playoff basketball for the last month. Don't be surprised to see the Cavaliers jump out to a big lead with lots of energy in Game One- then crash. Actually, I think the first game is going to be very, very tough. But if Cleveland wins that one, the skids will be greased. Chicago will be game, but Michael and Scottie can't help them now.

Cavs in five games.

J.D. Shultz

EAST

Charlotte vs. Orlando. Orlando (in 6).
Milwaukee vs. Atlanta. Atlanta (in 4).
Miami vs. Boston. Boston (in 5).

WEST

Oklahoma City vs. Los Angeles Lakers. Los Angeles (in 6).
San Antonio vs. Dallas. San Antonio (in 7).
Portland vs. Phoenix. Phoenix (in 5).
Utah vs. Denver. Utah (in 6).

Cavs-Bulls

The Cavaliers *must* take the Bulls seriously . . . not because Chicago could steal the series - they can't - but because after almost two months without Shaq, and two weeks of bizarre, preseason-style basketball, the team needs to snap back into playing at a high level. Quickly.

If the Cavaliers lose even one game to the Bulls, Mike Brown will be very disappointed with the reassembly of his defense. The Bulls are the weakest offensive team to make the playoffs in either conference; this season they were 27th in the NBA in offensive efficiency and 23rd in field goal percentage . . . and they finished the regular season as the third worst 3-point shooting team.

No one is expecting the Cavs to re-coalesce perfectly, instantly. But the sooner it happens the better, because the competition is really going to start picking up after this series. And the Cavs *will* be ready . . . as long as they take the Bulls seriously.

Cavs in four.

Nick Allburn

East

Orlando over Charlotte Boston over Miami Atlanta over Milwaukee

West

Lakers over OKC
Denver over Utah
Dallas over San Antonio Phoenix over Portland

Cavs-Bulls

Has an NBA player ever taken more heat for sitting out a few games than LeBron James? It's absurd. Honestly, if there's even a 1% chance of LeBron suffering a significant injury, then you have to sit him. Antawn Jamison almost got hurt in a meaningless game, but the critics are ignoring that. Classic ESPN - just making something out of nothing when the sports news cycle is slow.

Anyway, the Cavs are going to run roughshod over the Bulls. A five game series win is a worst case scenario. Derrick Rose and Luol aren't enough firepower to match up with the Cavs. The Bulls' inside scoring is nonexistent. Joakim Noah is a serious contender for the league's ugliest man. This one isn't ending well for Chicago. Cavs in four, and only because I can't take them in three.

Brian McPeck

East

Orlando over Charlotte in six games.
Atlanta gets past Milwaukee in six games.
Boston gets by Miami in a series that goes the distance.

West

Lakers get past OKC in six games.
I like Utah over a staggering Denver team in seven games.
Phoenix needs five games to get by Portland.
San Antonio over Dallas in seven games.

Cavs-Bulls

I'm not putting much stock in the 'Rust & Trust' issues some folks feel could hurt the Cavs early in this Chicago series. I think Head Coach Mike Brown did the prudent thing in getting some of his guys some R&R and I think Shaq will likely pick up where he left off when he was hurt a couple months back.

This isn't November all over again. The Cavs (and specifically LeBron James) learned that Shaq could be useful and trusted with the basketball down low in order to provide an alternative means of getting into the offense. That trust didn't die when Shaq's thumb was injured. And the big man's game isn't likely to be affected by his lack of repetitions shooting the basketball over the past two months. His shooting percentage will still come down to how many dunks and layups he's able to work for and he'll still blow from the free throw line. Nothing has changed except he's in better shape now than when he left. That tells me Shaq knows what time it is and that he truly believes this team can win the whole thing. The Diesel wouldn't have bothered with the conditioning during his injury if he was playing with the Raptors or Wizards.

Rust and trust aside, the biggest danger to the Cavs is still the Cavs. If they take a game, quarter or critical five minute period of time off they could get bitten by a Bulls team that's aggressive and won't be intimidated by Cleveland. The Cavs toyed with plenty of teams all season only to get interested and dial their intensity up a notch late to get wins. A lot of us figured they were pacing themselves for the playoffs. Well those playoffs have arrived and it's time for that rest and that pacing to pay some dividends.

This series is destined for five games to be played and the Cavaliers will win four of them.