

**Basketball Weekly – BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**  
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This is the final NBA Basketball Weekly I will do for the year. That being the calendar year of 2004, and it was right around this time last year that the entire basketball landscape changed drastically. It was on December 21, 2003 that Karl Malone suffered an injury that was without a doubt the most serious of his career, the most serious one in the Lakers' tumultuous season and the most deafening to the league. Big deal you're thinking right? The Mailman is not what he used to be and when someone's in their 40's the body tends to begin breaking down. Well, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the team had the best record in the league prior to his injury, were in 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the division when he came back and in the playoffs he was the reason they got by Minnesota and San Antonio to reach the NBA Finals. Basketball fans will never know whether or not the Lakers quartet of future Hall-Of-Famers would have been able to defeat Detroit to win the NBA Championship had Malone not re-aggravated his knee. But who's to say he would not have made a difference against Rasheed Wallace after pestering MVP's Tim Duncan and Kevin Garnett in the previous series'?

**Last December I told my father, a die-hard San Antonio Spurs fan, that the 41-year-old Malone was the most essential ingredient towards a team winning a championship.** He (Karl) was the most important player in the league in my opinion and it was why the Lakers, Spurs and others pushed so hard in the 2003 off-season to acquire his services. He (my dad) kind of laughed at it, but the numbers simply do not lie. **And according to Phil Jackson in his book, Karl was clearly the most important player by the end of the Minnesota series.**

Since Malone struggled in the few Finals games he played he's yet to return to the court. A lot has changed since then including all-star players' homes like Shaquille O'Neal (Miami), Kenyon Martin (Denver), Tracy McGrady (Houston), Steve Nash (Phoenix) and most recently Vince Carter, who I'll get to later. Kobe Bryant, a former teammate, recently accused the married Mailman of making a pass at his wife Vanessa. Karl adamantly denied the accusations and will likely play somewhere other than Los Angeles. More controversy was sparked, and once again, Kobe's feud with Shaq was brought up. The former LA duo faced off on Christmas Day in what was the most anticipated game of the year. The game went to overtime, and without the Diesel, who fouled out, Miami prevailed behind spirited play from Dwyane Wade and role players like Christian Laettner and Wesley Person. Kobe got his 40+, though missed what would have been the game-winning three-pointer. **I've said on record that at a comparable age Kobe is better than Michael Jordan. I've also said there's not a better talent in the league than him. However, the one thing Bryant has done wrong is push help out the door. Jordan didn't do that and he bought more into the team concept. No Jackson, no O'Neal and now no Mailman equals enormous pressure on Bryant. Right now the Lakers lack muscle inside and it shows in their 15-12 record. Kobe's going to have to muscle it up just to get them to the playoffs with Vlade Divac unable to contribute much.**

To sum everything up, whoever gets the greatest power forward (in my mind) to ever play the game (provided he does come back) has the inside track on winning the title come June. San Antonio and Miami are the top two teams without him and only improve their chances with John Stockton's former running mate.



**Kobe Bryant** (seen here with former teammate Karl Malone) has alienated himself from much of the NBA according to those who follow him closely. Bryant has found out very quickly that it's not so easy without the big guy Shaquille controlling the paint.

**Bzdelik Out:** Earlier this week the Nuggets announced the firing of Head Coach Jeff Bzdelik. Denver's had trouble working together in the half-court set on offense as it shows up statistically. In addition to ranking 19<sup>th</sup> in points per game, the Nuggets are 17<sup>th</sup> in three-point field goal percentage and tied for 2<sup>nd</sup> worst overall in defensive field goal percentage. What's it all mean or add up to? Voshon Lenard's absence has had a larger effect that some may have thought when he went down in the season opener. Still, it goes beyond the box score and the handwriting was on the wall. Kiki Vandeweghe made the coaching move for a reason. Since he paid so much money for K-Mart he wants more than an early exit from the postseason, which at this point looks like what they will get if team even makes it there. Michael Cooper excelled in his playing days in the league, had success coaching women for the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks and saw the opportunity when he joined the coaching staff. Personally, I don't think this team makes a huge turnaround from 13-15 unless some deals are made before the deadline.

**Miami On Fire:** The Heat are blazing through the month of December. Miami enters Thursday night's game versus Detroit on a current league best 12-game winning streak. Opposite of them will be the reigning champion Pistons, who are the only team to hold Miami under 80 points this season. Another Shaq-Wade triumph and Miami will finish December 14-1. Credit Stan Van Gundy for making some lineup changes. Rasual Butler is coming off the bench, while Damon Jones has entered the starting rotation and faired well. Defensively, guys like Laettner, Udonis Haslem and Wesley Person are

better than you may think. Only thing missing might be another consistent 15+ point scorer.

**Rockets In Need Of Point Guard?** Houston's combo of Tracy McGrady and Yao Ming hasn't exactly turned into Shaq & Kobe, Stockton & Malone, Jordan & Pippen, Magic & Kareem, you get the picture. What's missing is someone bringing the ball up the court and enabling T-Mac and Yao to make plays with or without the basketball.

**Vinsanity In Jersey:** Can Vince Carter make the Nets a top-notch contender in the Eastern Conference? The forecast is highly doubtful. New Jersey realized it was a mistake not retaining Martin or any of the other key pieces from a three-time Atlantic Division Champion team. Jason Kidd is back and does have two excellent athletes to get the ball to on the wing. Richard Jefferson and Carter are explosive finishers, but will the lack of a healthy, productive middle man keep them from winning the division? It probably will, so those teams in need of a point guard (Houston - that means you) better have the phone right by them to make trade proposals for Mr. Kidd, whose hinted at his unhappiness.

**Boston & Philadelphia:** Gary Payton and Samuel Dalembert are the two most likely players to get dealt from either team. Why? Teams want a point guard like Payton and a big body that has potential similar to Dalembert. Both Boston and Philadelphia have been very streaky and appear nothing more than #7 or #8 seeds in the East best case scenario.

**Washington's Trio:** Despite a loss on Wednesday to the Pistons, the Wizards are one of the teams on the rise in the Eastern Conference. The trio of Gilbert Arenas, Larry Hughes and Antawn Jamison has been the reason. Arenas, Hughes and Jamison average more points than any other trio in the league. Hughes has worked on his shot selection and focused in defensive wise, Arenas' turnover total is decreasing game by game while the steal total remains near the top and Jamison seems more comfortable in Eddie Jordan's system. The Wizards are playoff primed and believe they're good enough to make noise.



**Steve Nash of the Suns and Miami's Shaquille O'Neal are the top candidates for MVP just ahead of LeBron James, Kevin Garnett and Tim Duncan.**

**Matthew's Power Rankings: 12-31-04**

1. Miami - Stan Van Gundy's lineup moves are paying off heading into January. Rasual Butler is much more suited to playing as a reserve for about 25 minutes.
2. San Antonio - Pretty amazing to think this team has only lost once in their first 15 home games. Tony Parker's maturation will make them even tougher on off. + defense.
3. Phoenix - Really struggled vs. the defensive minded Spurs on Tuesday as Steve Nash had a season low in assists, Shawn Marion shot 2-11 and Quentin Richardson went 0-7.
4. Seattle - Best outside shooting team in the league, but like Phoenix, resemble the regular season version of the Dallas Mavericks two years ago. Need a big-time post guy.
5. Minnesota - An 8-8 road record is, well, average. Minnesota is not as cohesive as a team as they were last year. Now it's reported Troy Hudson is disgruntled and wants out.
6. Cleveland - LeBron James gets all the pub on this team and nobody is trying to make that secret. However, Drew Gooden has been terrific averaging 10.2 rebounds per game.
7. Orlando - Magic want a backup point guard and I ask why? Jameer Nelson went 5-5 the other night in a loss to the Knicks. Allow a league worst 101.5PPG - must improve.
8. Dallas - Surprisingly lead the association in rebounds and are 2<sup>nd</sup> in steals. If they could just play better against the conference's elite then they'd be really dangerous.
9. Sacramento - As long as injuries don't set in, Sacramento's capable of going far in the playoffs and perhaps challenging the Spurs to represent the West in the NBA Finals.
10. Tie - Detroit/Indiana - Yes, the two brawlers. I'm not high on either, though anybody has a shot in the Eastern Conference. Detroit just has to stop losing those easy games.

Honorable Mention: Los Angeles Lakers and New York Knicks