

**2006 NBA FINALS PREVIEW: Thursday, June 8th, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**



Miami Heat @ Dallas Mavericks



Shaquille O'Neal and Dwyane Wade lead the Heat. (Issac Baldizon of Getty Images)



Dallas' Dirk Nowitzki is averaging 28.4PPG. (Jonathan Ferrey of Getty Images)

SERIES SETUP:

First let's look at what these two teams have in common. They both overcame that hump in the way; the Spurs for Dallas and Detroit for Miami. Each team has underwent coaching changes in the last few years. Avery Johnson, a former Champion player, was a player for the Mavs prior to Don Nelson stepping down and Owner Mark Cuban appointing him as new Head Coach. Pat Riley, who is 4-4 all-time in the NBA Finals, won all four of his rings with the LA Lakers, though saw his New York Knicks lose a Gm. 7 to the Houston Rockets in the 1993-94 Finals. Riley then left for South Beach, let Stan Van Gundy take over as he went to the front office right before the start of the 2003-04 season, and returned to coaching during this season. Both Miami and Dallas have identical 12-5 records this postseason. The Mavs swept the Grizzlies and won a Gm. 7 in San Antonio before closing out Phoenix in six games. Meanwhile, the Riley-coached Heat had some difficulty defending the perimeter shots by the Bulls in their six-game series, won four straight against New Jersey after losing Gm. 1 and denied the Pistons a third consecutive trip to the NBA Finals they beat them in Gm. 6 last Friday night. This marks the first Championship trip for the Miami franchise and Dallas Mavs. Oh yea, they've got something else in common. Both play at American Airlines Arena.



Responsible for re-tooling Miami's roster after falling to Detroit in Gm. 7 of the 2005 Eastern Conference Finals, Heat Coach Pat Riley trails only Phil Jackson for the most career playoff victories. (AP)

INSIDE THE NUMBERS:

In Miami's last six playoffs wins, the Heat have shot 52% or better from the field. However, in their two losses in the Detroit series they shot under 45%. On the Mavericks side of things, they have had single digit turnovers in three of their last five playoff games. In the 20-point playoff loss to the Suns they had 14 turnovers and that minimized some of their offensive possessions. Negatively, the Mavs have shot under 50% in 11 of the last 15 games. Also worth mentioning is that Dallas attacks the offensive boards very well – particularly lengthy small forward Josh Howard – so much that they have out-rebounded their opponent in every playoff match thus far. Howard is a key x-factor player for Dallas because when he gives his maximum on the offensive end as well as the defensive end, the Mavericks are really tough to beat. In fact, the Mavs are 25-0 when Howard scores 20+ points. Furthermore, Dallas holds an edge at the foul line, where they've shot a league-best 79% over the past seven years; Miami coming in at about 69% this season. **Super**

Stat: Miami shot a combined 2-for-20 from three-point land in the two regular meetings with the Mavs. That being said – a lot has changed since then.

BREAKDOWN:

There are three ‘stars’ if you will in this series to watch: guard Dwyane Wade and center Shaquille O’Neal for Miami; forward Dirk Nowitzki on the Dallas side of things. If you are looking to see just how versatile the Mavericks are, look no further than Nowitzki, a 7-footer who hails from Germany and sings a David Hasselhoff tune to himself at the free-throw line. By the way, he’s very clutch at the stripe and is as lethal a scorer as this league has to offer (evidenced by his 50-point performance in the Gm. 5 of the Western Conference Finals vs. Phoenix). Conversely, the big fella’ - Shaq Diesel - has never been a really good foul shooter... even a somewhat reliable foul shooter... but does become decent when he has to in crunch time. What is Shaq? He is a 7-foot-1, 320+ pound beast that has three rings and comes into the ’06 Finals having averaged over 30PPG and 10RPG for his career in the Championship round. One of the big keys for Dallas will be getting him in foul trouble and out of the flow of the game by using their transition game as much as possible. Then you come to Wade, a superstar in the making who takes a lot of falls, but as his commercial says, he pops right back up. Detroit, Chicago and New Jersey have all tried to be physical with him and it has translated into him averaging 26.2 points and shooting a lights out 51%. We’ve seen Wade’s jumper grown considerably from his rookie season and defensively, he’s making things happen by turning steals into points for his team. Best of all, he knows how to get to the foul line and doesn’t have a selfish image like some of the premier scorers in today’s game.



It took Alonzo Mourning 13 seasons, numerous surgeries and a life-threatening kidney disease to fight, but he’s finally in the NBA Finals for the first time ever. (Getty Images)

The pluses in the Mavericks’ corner: depth, rebounding, versatility [as eluded to earlier] and the quickness in their backcourt. Jason Terry and Devin Harris have caused opponents problems in the playoffs, and really played a major part in them finally getting over the hump that is the San Antonio Spurs. Does Miami have a distinct coaching edge with Riley, a wise veteran that has been eight times before, vs. the ex-player that is many years away from the mid-life crisis? Sure – they might – but then again, Johnson was the NBA’s Coach of the Year and made the necessary lineup adjustments in the previous rounds. Here he will likely put DeSagana Diop, an improving center, to start in the middle and have Erick Dampier spell him, and also use defensive specialist Adrian Griffin on Wade while Harris (9.9PPG during season) comes off the bench. If he comes off the

bench, Harris will be one of three players on the Mavs roster that scored at least nine points a game during the season; the other two being Marquis Daniels (10.2PPG) out of Auburn and 6th Man of the Year candidate Jerry Stackhouse (13PPG). I, myself, do not see Keith Van Horn being much of a factor off the bench since his jump shot kind of died a couple years ago; it is not nearly what it used to be. As far as emotional team leaders go, point guard Darrell Armstrong will hardly see the floor, though is a strong voice on that Mavs bench. All in all, Dallas is favored by some because they have home-court and have proven before that they can win on the road, something they'll need to do to send this series back to Dallas if they lose one of those first two games at home.

Miami has two of the best pluses you can find: one is numbered 32 and the other wears #3. After that combo, you dig deep and find playoff-tested veterans that get a golden shot at a ring they may never get again. Gary Payton, who played much better in the Detroit series this time around than two years ago in the Finals with the Lakers, is making his third trip to the Championship. It's not like he has flourished amazingly in the backup point guard role, but he's done a solid job and he and Jason Williams have performed up to their potential to this point. A guy like Heat center Alonzo Mourning, another former All-Star that has been relegated to the bench, is a very passionate emotional force for Miami. His shot blocking helps out and you can't find many – if any – better backup centers in the league than him. Their bench doesn't end with Mourning and Payton; they also have small forward James Posey, who two years ago with Head Coach Hubie Brown [the guy that will be calling these finals on ABC w/Mike Breen], was the Memphis Grizzlies' go-to-guy at times offensively as they made their first playoff appearance in franchise history. Posey came through on the defensive boards, hauling in 11, in Gm. 6 of the East Finals vs. Detroit. He's also got the ability to knock down the open jump shot on the perimeter, which they will definitely need throughout the series. Like Posey, you could call Miami starting power forward Udonis Haslem underrated. Haslem is counted on more for his rebounding than his scoring and provides a physical presence the Heat want underneath with so much of the attention on Shaq. At times look for him to be guarding Nowitzki and what he wants to do with him is have Dirk play with his back to the basket. Nowitzki is what I'd call a 'face the basket player' who yes, has improved the 'total package' of his game – going in the post included – but still desires to take those 15-20 foot jumpers. In my opinion, I feel the two key guys from the last series vs. Detroit are going to be the key guys [along with someone like Posey] once again in this series. Williams and forward Antoine Walker, perhaps the team's top candidates to have a surprise 20-point game, need to be on cue with the three-point shots. Williams was huge in Gm. 6 vs. the Pistons, while Walker needs to play like he did against New Jersey.

Pick: Miami in 6. Having role players that are hungry for a ring (see Zo and GP) and have big-game experience should pay off here. As should having those two star players – Shaq and Wade. Both have the ability to come up with dominant performances to bring Coach Riley his fifth NBA Championship. They're two players who eat up single coverage defensively and often command double teams. The key for Dallas will be to get Shaq in foul trouble and working on D'.