

## 2004-05 NBA Season Preview - BY MATTHEW HATFIELD Friday, October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004

### Eastern Conference:

Atlantic Division:



1. New York Knicks - Probably class of a worthless division. I know that sounds harsh, but the Nets are the lone club in this division to play over .500 ball the past two years. The Knicks have to know they must win now because the future looks bleak due to some of the moves made by Isiah Thomas to acquire Stephon Marbury and others.

Backcourt has gone from average to exceptional by adding Marbury last season and Jamal Crawford in the offseason. Allan Houston and Penny Hardaway back them up. Frontcourt size still appears missing in my opinion. Somewhere between 40-48 wins.



2. Philadelphia 76ers - Allen Iverson could be due for one of his best seasons ever. New Head Coach Jim O'Brien won with the Celtics and helped them return to the postseason. He brings discipline and emphasis on defense. Samuel Dalembert is the best center in the Atlantic. His rebounding, defense and sparingly scores. Don't be stunned to see the Sixers use Iverson some at point guard. It will allow them to get rookie Andre Iguodala into the lineup alongside forwards Corliss Williamson and Glenn Robinson.



3. Toronto Raptors - Must shoot the ball better and more consistently, plus get some rebounding from someone other than Chris Bosh. Have three very great talents in Vince Carter, Jalen Rose and Donyell Marshall (all of which want the rock in their hands). Signing fabulous ball handler Rafer Alston helps if Alvin Williams does not play up to par. Carter and part of the gang will be dealt if they get off to a sour start and don't recover.



4. New Jersey Nets - Lost Kenyon Martin, Kerry Kittles, Rodney Rogers and Lucious Harris - four integral pieces to their team the last couple seasons. Jason Kidd will be out for the first part of the season (will returned in December of January). Once he gets back we should know sometime around January how good they truly are.



5. Boston Celtics - May try to push it up court more with Gary Payton and Paul Pierce under new Head Coach Doc Rivers. Very young team, including three rookies (Al Jefferson, Tony Allen and Delonte West). Mark Blount performs decent at the center spot. My prediction is Doc will regret leaving the broadcast booth to coach in Boston.

Central Division:



1. Indiana Pacers – People forget that the Pacers won an NBA best 61 games last season and traded Al Harrington to Atlanta for shooting guard Stephen Jackson. As a member of the Spurs in 2002-03, Jackson helped San Antonio win the NBA Championship. He will definitely help spell Reggie Miller at the 2 spot and it may transpire into better play from point guard Jamaal Tinsley.

Indiana does have a number of injuries as we begin the 2004-05 campaign. Head Coach Rick Carlisle won't be bothered by it and knows they just need to be healthy come April. Jermaine O'Neal averages 20 and 10 nightly and small forward Ron Artest is the best defender outside the Pistons' Ben Wallace.



2. Detroit Pistons – World Champs! Detroit shocked the basketball world by beating a Los Angeles Lakers team with four future Hall-Of-Famers. Head Coach Larry Brown showed why he's one of the best if not the best teacher in the game today. The question now becomes can they repeat? Why not?

Detroit does return all starters from last season's team (Ben and Rasheed Wallace, Tayshaun Prince, Richard Hamilton and Chauncey Billups). Mehmet Okur, Corliss Williamson and Mike James are gone from the bench, but GM Joe Dumars brought in veteran forwards Antonio McDyess and Derrick Coleman. I can't give you the reasons why Detroit will fall short of winning their second title. I will tell you, though, that it's so hard to repeat in any sport nowadays and SA was a better Champ and they didn't repeat!



3. Cleveland Cavaliers – King LeBron James is coming off a rather nice rookie season in the NBA. James won Rookie of the Year over Denver's Carmelo Anthony. Cleveland as a team had an up-and-down kind of year. They started off poorly, then picked it up and got in the playoff hunt and then dropped out. Carlos Boozer was a key piece from their team and won't be back. His double-double numbers will be missed and will allow defenses to focus in on Zydrunas Ilgauskas. Jeff McInnis played sensationally coming over from Portland. McInnis and ex-76er Eric Snow will play the point.



4. Milwaukee Bucks – In my opinion, did it with smoking mirrors last season. Terry Porter will need big seasons once again from Michael Reed and Desmond Mason in order to make the playoffs. They can score the basketball, but lack the beef inside to be a real competitive force in the Eastern Conference. I'd be stunned once again if the Bucks won 41 games or more.



5. Chicago Bulls – Don't have the mature, experienced talent to win the Central Division or probably even make the playoffs. The last time they did qualify for postseason action some guy named Michael Jordan led them to their sixth title in eight years. Kirk Hinrich and Ben Gordon makeup a good, young backcourt. Luol Deng and Chris Duhon are polished rookies out of Duke. Eddy Curry is due for a breakout season in my mind. Chi needs Tyson Chandler to produce and have someone step up at SF.

#### Southeast Division:



1. Miami Heat - SHAQ!!! Will he be the master of the basketball universe come June? The big fellow has promised the city of Miami a championship. When and if he does are the two things that remain to be seen for the new Heat Diesel.

Dwayne Wade had a wonderful rookie season at the point for Stan Van Gundy's Heat. Miami could use another big man and maybe one more shooter. Having that said, I think this team will compete for a title right away with veterans like Eddie Jones (one the top defenders in the league), Wesley Person and Christian Laettner. Michael Doleac provides a serviceable backup to Shaq at center and the Heat should run some pick-and-rolls with him. Watch out for Udonis Haslem and Keyon Dooling - those two could blossom pretty fast playing less than 30 minutes per game.



2. Orlando Magic – What really grabs me about this Orlando team, which lost 61 games last season (most in the NBA) is the fact they lost Tracy McGrady to Houston, but might win 20 more games! Cuttino Mobley and Steve Francis combine to score 32 points per night, bring down ten rebounds and dish out 9.4 assists. Dwight Howard will have time to slowly come along as a rookie. Jameer Nelson gives them depth in the backcourt. Grant Hill is the healthiest he's been in years and Hedo Turkoglu was picked up to provide some outside shooting. Much improved basketball team from top to bottom.



3. Washington Wizards - Let's remember the Wizards struggled mightily vs. the worst team in the league last year (Orland) and went 25-57. Weeding out Jerry Stackhouse and Christian Laettner, while acquiring Antawn Jamison should help slightly. The two big bodies are there up front in Kwame Brown and Brendan Haywood. Washington just hopes for more consistency from them and fewer turnovers from scoring guards Larry Hughes and Gilbert Arenas (19.6PPG).



4. Atlanta Hawks – Bad, bad basketball team. Yes, the Hawks did improve Status for 2004 by getting forwards Antoine Walker and Al Harrington. But is this Hawks group really any better than the one that had Shareef Abdur-Rahim, Theo Ratliff and Jason Terry? I think I rate them both the same: pretty bad and fortunate if they are to win 30 games under new Head Coach Mike Woodson.



5. Charlotte Bobcats - Youthful bunch of misfits headed by Connecticut rookie Emeka Okafor. Tamar Slay and Gerald Wallace are two high flyers fans love to watch play. Other than that, not much else to say about a team I think struggles to win 10 gms.

### Western Conference:

#### Southwest Division:



1. San Antonio Spurs – Logical choice to win their third NBA Championship in a span of seven years. **Best off-season addition outside of someone named McGrady, Martin or Shaq: Brent Barry.** That's right – Brent Barry, the son of NBA Hall-Of-Famer Rick Barry, who once played for the Golden State Warriors in his day.

Barry will give them the outside shooting they lacked during the playoffs when they lost to the Lakers in four straight after winning the first two. San Antonio had the shooters in Stephen Jackson and Steve Kerr. When they retired it forced them to constantly pound Tim Duncan. Also, losing David Robinson at center hurt them extensively. Don't worry Spurs fans – Duncan will get his touches. There will just be development of guys like Manu Ginobili and Tony Parker. Best team in the West!



2. Houston Rockets – Can Yao Ming and Tracy McGrady mesh? It'll certainly be interesting to watch. **It's very important the Rockets up Yao's minutes to about 32-40 a night.** You will start to see his points, rebounds and blocks go up even more once that begins to take place. The Rockets biggest missing piece is a point guard. Bob Sura, Tyronn Lue and Charlie Ward will all vie for floor leader duties and McGrady may even play some at the point. Jim Jackson is solid defensively and shooting wise at small forward. Juwan Howard and Mo Taylor are somewhat reliable power forwards.



3. Dallas Mavericks – Major overhaul! The Mavs got rid of Antoine Walker,

Steve Nash and Antawn Jamison among others. Owner Mark Cuban countered by bringing in Jason Terry, Jerry Stackhouse and superb center Erick Dampier. In addition, the Mavs drafted Wisconsin point guard Devin Harris. Dallas finally got its center, though you have to wonder about chemistry here. All of these guys – Dirk Nowitzki, Marquis Daniels, Michael Finley, Josh Howard, Terry, Stackhouse, etc. want to shoot the ball a lot. Sacrifices must be made for them to be better and win 50 games again!



4. Memphis Grizzlies – Unlike Dallas, Jerry West and company did not do what they set out to do in the off-season. That was find a center. Lorenzen Wright is decent at best when you consider how injury prone he is yearly. Brian Cardinal is a sleeper pickup from Golden State. Cardinal can shoot the basketball and Memphis needs to shoot a higher field goal percentage in the tougher Western Conference. Head Coach Hubie Brown has done a beautiful job adopting the team first concept. Pau Gasol, James Posey, Bonzi Wells, Mike Miller and Jason Williams all average over 10 points per game. Memphis still needs that 20+ point scorer to be an elite Western Conference powerhouse.



5. New Orleans Hornets – Going to be tough for New Orleans Head Coach Byron Scott. It's been reported Jamal Mashburn will most likely miss the entire regular season. That means Baron Davis' numbers must continue to go up. David Wesley must shoot over 40% (he shot 38.9% in 03-04). Jamaal Magloire and P.J. Brown are the power players that each could go off for 20 and 10 on any given night. The bench is once again traditionally solid with vets Rodney Rogers and George Lynch. Only problem for New Orleans is the other teams in the Southwest Division are simply better.

Northwest Division:



1. Denver Nuggets - Surprise, surprise, surprise! My **Surprise Team of the Year**. Denver went from 17-65 to making the playoffs in the team's first season under Jeff Bzdelik. Believe it or not, Bzdelik has pressure on him to get this team to the playoffs again and possibly out of the first round. Carmelo Anthony is an absolute fantastic player I think will only get better. Adding Kenyon Martin helps enormously. It allows them to rotate Marcus Camby, Nene and him at the four/five positions. Good PG in Andre Miller and outstanding shooting guard in Voshon Lenard. Earl Boykins and Rodney White are difference makers in my mind off the bench.



2. Minnesota Timberwolves – KG the MVP! Kevin Garnett averaged 24.2 points, 13.9 rebounds, five assists and defended tremendously. Minnesota finally got out of the first round, but lost in the Western Conference Finals to LA in six games. Karl Malone outplayed Garnett in two of the playoff games and we could see Garnett come out

even more motivated and more determined come next April. There are some rumors of Wally Szczerbiak being dealt to New York for Kurt Thomas. The T-Wolves need a better center and I think the Nuggets are more complete this season in my opinion. Sam Cassell and Latrell Sprewell are good, aging guards. Could win it all or finish 2<sup>nd</sup> in NW.



3. Utah Jazz – Jerry Sloan is the longest current tenure coach in professional sports. It was expected for the Jazz to miss the playoffs in year one after Stockton and Malone. It was not expected, however, for the Jazz to go 42-40. Andrei Kirilenko has elevated his game to an entire new level. Kirilenko does whatever it takes on offense as well as defense. Also, keep in mind Utah won 40 games without Matt Harpring. Utah's very deep and coached extremely well. And by the way, Carlos Boozer was added from Cleveland and the Jazz will definitely welcome his 15.5PPG and 11.4RPG.



4. Portland Trail Blazers – Mo Cheeks on the hot seat? The former 76ers Assistant and player cannot afford for his Blazers to get off to a sluggish start. Portland's one of those teams that would have no problem making the playoffs in the Eastern Conference. Zach Randolph's good for 20 and 10. Joining him in the frontcourt will be Theo Ratliff, Darius Miles and Shareef Abdur-Rahim. Portland's always been fabulous at home, though unusually lost 16 home games in 03-04. Blazers have to do better at home and one of the point guards – Damon Stoudamire and Nick Van Exel – must establish himself as the main man, while the other one gets traded.



5. Seattle Super Sonics – Could very well be the worst team in the Western Conference with one of the most underrated players starring – Ray Allen. Allen's one of the finest three-point shooters netting nearly 40% of his treys. Allen cannot do it alone. Rashard Lewis, Ronald "Flip Murray, Luke Ridnour, Nick Collison and Danny Fortson are those men that will be counted on to provide the help. I don't think they will and Seattle is headed for another season with 45+ losses. Nate McMillan to be fired first?

Pacific Division:



1. Los Angeles Lakers - Despite all the changes, I've got the LA Lakers winning the Pacific Division. That's with an asterix because they need Karl Malone back before the all-star break. Don't get me wrong, the Lakers are far from being a championship contender now that Shaquille O'Neal is in South Beach, Gary Payton is in Boston and Derek Fisher plays with Golden State. Kobe Bryant can have an MVP type season. What's going to be key is whether or not Lamar Odom can achieve star status,

the endless list of small forwards manages to get the job done and paint points do not become an issue. Vlade Divac and Brian Grant are the new duo in the middle.



2. Phoenix Suns – Will finish anywhere between first and third. The Suns haven't had Shawn Marion and Amare Stoudamire healthy for an entire season it seems. Steve Nash gives them the point guard they've been yearning for since Stephon Marbury was dealt to New York. Quentin Richardson is another huge transaction for the Suns. Richardson will split time with Casey Jacobsen and Joe Johnson (16.7PPG). Two things Phoenix Head Coach Mike D'Antoni wants to achieve: Make the playoffs by not being plagued by injuries and not allow the center position to be a liability.



3. Sacramento Kings – Trust me – the Kings are not as good as some think. Vlade Divac was a big part of that team and now he is with arch rival Los Angeles (Lakers). Not to mention, Sacramento has not had a healthy Chris Webber the past two years. Peja Stojakovic wants out of Sacramento and Greg Ostertag cannot get the job done backing up Brad Miller at center. Doug Christie and Mike Bibby are quality guards. Bobby Jackson leads the bench and if he is not healthy the Kings might very well miss the playoffs and Rick Adelman be out of a job come 2005-06!



4. Los Angeles Clippers – Elton Brand averages 20 points and ten rebounds. Corey Maggette scores 20 per night. None of that matters. Because the fact of the matter is – the Clippers stink and will always stink unless something dramatically changes. Kerry Kittles replaces Quentin Richardson at shooting guard. Mark Jaric steps into the starting lineup as well. Again, the Clippers will be battling Golden State for fourth place in the Pacific Division.



5. Golden State Warriors – Losing Erick Dampier hurts more than gaining Derek Fisher. Adonal Foyle's not bad playing center and his expertise is swatting shots. Although, Dampier is no longer playing limited minutes so how productive he can be 30+ minutes a night is questionable. Mike Dunleavy needs to have his breakout season. Jason Richardson has won the last two Slam Dunk Contests (if that really means anything). Year one for Mike Montgomery turns out to be very rough and very long!

#### AWARDS & MORE:

<b>MVP:</b>	<b>Kobe Bryant</b>	<b>LA Lakers</b>
<b>Coach of the Year:</b>	<b>Jeff Bzdelik</b>	<b>Denver Nuggets</b>
<b>Defensive Player of the Year:</b>	<b>Ben Wallace</b>	<b>Detroit Pistons</b>
<b>First Coach to be Fired:</b>	<b>Nate McMillan</b>	<b>Seattle Sonics</b>

