

**Basketball Weekly - BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**  
**National Basketball Association - Friday, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004**

A week of NBA basketball is in the books and this season might be more wide open than ever before! Last year the Los Angeles Lakers led by four future Hall-Of-Famers in Shaquille O'Neal, Karl Malone, Kobe Bryant and Gary Payton were the favorite over then reigning champion San Antonio. From the Phil Jackson, Kobe and Shaq saga, to Payton's discomfort with the triangle offense and the unusual knee injury to Malone, LA was unable to defeat the Detroit Pistons in the NBA Finals. The off-season was nothing short of tumultuous for the Lakers as the team flirted with hiring Duke's Coach K to replace the Zen Master, the Diesel went from So. Cal to South Beach, Bryant's sexual assault case being dropped, Payton going to Boston and the Mailman pondering retirement. And let me not forget to mention the players changing teams aside from Shaq and Payton. Kenyon Martin went from New Jersey to Denver, Lamar Odom and Caron Butler were part of the Shaq deal going from Miami to LA, Tracy McGrady was traded to Houston for Steve Francis and Cuttino Mobley and Steve Nash return to Phoenix where he began his pro career. All that and much more so let me get down to what's caught my interest not even midway into November.

It really shouldn't be long before Knicks rookie small forward Trevor Ariza out of UCLA supplants Tim Thomas in the starting lineup. Thomas, a Villanova product, has not done well since joining the Knicks before the trade deadline last season. On the other side of the coin, Ariza looks like one of the steals of this past NBA Draft as New York got him in the second round. His mid-range jumper is evident as the 52.2% shooting depicts that thus far and he also ranks #9 in steals per 48 minutes. Ten points, five rebounds and three assists ever night from him would be great since the only two players that are playing better than him is the backcourt tandem of Jamal Crawford and Stephon Marbury.



**Knicks rookie forward Trevor Ariza is averaging around 10PPG, 5RPG and 3APG off the bench.**

Two dangerous teams to watch out for in the Western Conference are Utah and Phoenix. The Jazz more so because they are coached by one of the finest men in the game of basketball - Jerry Sloan. It's really incredible that Sloan has yet to win Coach of

the Year during his illustrious tenure in Utah, which by the way is the longest current stay with a club in the three major professional sports (NFL, MLB and NBA). Russian phenom Andrei Kirilenko has already thrown his name into the hat for Defensive Player of the Year. Kirilenko's long wingspan reminds those of Scottie Pippen back when he helped the Chicago Bulls win six titles from 1991-1998. He's really taken over the leadership role of the team following the final games played by future Hall-Of-Famers John Stockton and Karl Malone together in Salt Lake City. Through five games, Kirilenko has sent back an NBA best 29 shots, gone to the free-throw line 42 times and ranks fifth in steals per game. Like Utah, the Phoenix Suns are 4-1 and could have remained undefeated had they been able to shut the door at Cleveland on Wednesday night. That's what might get the Suns in trouble - finding ways to close out games. They're an up-tempo, athletic, quick basketball team that will score points at will. Offense is not a problem with paint players Shawn Marion and Amare Stoudemire, perimeter threats Joe Johnson, Casey Jacobsen and Quentin Richardson and newly acquired point guard Steve Nash formerly of the Dallas Mavericks. Marion leads the charge defensively and Nash really has been huge distributing the ball more than in past seasons. They'll get up big in games and it will be vital to step it up as a team on defense down the stretch.

Denver's a strange team and the Lakers are, too. The Nuggets lone two wins thus far have come on TNT televised Thursday night games hosting Minnesota and Detroit. Denver (2-4) will have to play without Voshon Lenard at shooting guard (injured for season) and Head Coach Jeff Bzdelik is on the hot seat early on. Some lineup moves and possibly going out and signing/trading for another shooting guard and an additional body to play on the low block must be considered. We know what Carmelo Anthony, Kenyon Martin and Marcus Camby offer, but Earl Boykins is the real catalyst for Denver. As far as the Lakers go, it's early and at 3-3 they are in the midst of back-to-back road games at Orlando and Houston to end a four-game road trip. How serious the plantar fasciitis Kobe Bryant has is a question right now some are asking. And many Lakers fans wonder when and if Karl Malone will be back. LA's gotten encouraging performances from Caron Butler and especially Chris Mihm, though could definitely use Malone like any other team in the league could use the Mailman.



**Denver power forward Kenyon Martin should make the Nuggets more formidable inside come playoff time.**

Tonight Miami visits San Antonio in a battle of 4-1 teams. Both I believe will face one another in the NBA Finals next June. Don't take that to the bank this year. Last season I had the Lakers over Detroit and both got there. Of course, the ending was not one of Hollywood proportions for big Lakers fan Jack Nicholson. Some pleasant surprises early on in my book would be Washington, Orlando, Toronto, Seattle, Utah (as mentioned earlier) and the Clippers. Yes, the Clippers. Elton Brand continues to produce fantastic numbers year in and year out on what is normally a bad team. And it may be bad again, but Head Coach Mike Dunleavy has this team believe in his system and right now the Clippers have plenty of life. Bobby Simmons has contributed nicely, Corey Maggette works hard without complaining (had 19 rebounds the other night vs. Detroit) and Chris Wilcox is starting to develop. I'll go out on a limb and say this: the Clippers will NOT finish last in the Pacific Division. Okay, that's not much of a limb to be honest. Seattle's Ray Allen is one of the most **UNDERRATED** players and outside shooters in the game. Amazing to me he doesn't get the attention of someone like a Paul Pierce, Vince Carter or even Allen Iverson. Danny Fortson gives them some much need muscle on the inside and Luke Ridnour's done well filling in for Brent Barry, now a member of the San Antonio Spurs. Dallas is playing better defense (**FINALLY**). They have an NBA best record of 5-1, although it makes me wonder if this Dallas team will be exactly like the one that had the best league mark two years ago and lost to Tim Duncan and company in the Western Conference Finals. Out in the east the Wizards are getting it done without Kwame Brown and Etan Thomas, two players that are required to make an impact if the Wizards stand a chance to qualify for the playoffs. Turnovers still are an issue if you ask me. Antwan Jamison is an above average scorer who will get 20+ on any given night. How he, Larry Hughes and Gilbert Arenas (arguably their most dynamic, yet #1 turnover problem player) handle the basketball will ultimately determine whether or not we see Washington get a spot in Eastern Conference Playoffs.



**Actor and #1 Lakers fan Jack Nicholson probably won't see his team return to the Finals unless they are able to find solid players at the point, power forward and have Kobe play the season of his life!**

Finally, Orlando's Grant Hill deserves some kudos as does the Nets' Alozo Mourning. Hill has had to deal with injury after injury after injury. Zo meanwhile has recovered from kidney transplant to become maybe the third best center in the East (if you don't count Ben Wallace a center) behind Zydrunas Ilgauskas of Cleveland Shaq.

### **Hatfield Power Rankings: 11-12-04**

1. San Antonio - Ginobili, Parker and Barry make them up-tempo material.
2. Miami - Udonis Haslem and Malik Allen are the two guys benefiting from Shaq.
3. Utah - Early, but Sloan for Coach of the Year and Kirilenko for Defensive POY!
4. Indiana - Tell Ron Artest to put a lid on it, please!
5. Detroit - I can't rate them too low. **No higher than 4<sup>th</sup> seed in East - Mark it Down**
6. Phoenix - Fastbreak team that can score 100 or more every time out.
7. Minnesota - Going to battle Utah and Denver all year long in that division.
8. LA Lakers - Don't believe they're struggling as much as one would think.
9. Orlando - Johnny Davis has a fine nucleus provided no injuries occur.
10. Houston/Seattle/Toronto - McGrady, Allen and Carter know how to score at will.