

Basketball Weekly - BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

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I'm going to peer into my crystal ball this week and make some bold predictions. First let me start with the Dallas Mavericks, who got away with a big time traveling call Thursday night in their overtime win over the visiting Houston Rockets. Dirk Nowitzki truly had a spectacular offensive game scoring 53 points and making plenty of free throws along the way. Late in the game with the Mavs down a point, Nowitzki drove, picked the ball up and put it on the floor again. A few of the Rockets players looked around waiting for the traveling call and nothing came. Nowitzki met Yao Ming at the hoop and drew the foul, which was Yao's sixth and final one of the night. Boy did Dallas get a huge break or what?

The man who's not getting any breaks is the injured Michael Finley, whose only participated in five games thus far. Right now the Mavs are flooded with guys who can play small forward or shooting guard. Jerry Stackhouse for one loves to shoot the ball. Stackhouse was acquired from Washington in an off-season deal and he joins, Marquis Daniels, Josh Howard, Nowitzki and Jason Terry as men that can play either SG or SF. Terry's been more of a point alongside Wisconsin rookie Devin Harris, but that's a moot point right now. Bottom line is this: Finley can be dealt to a team that's in dire need of a scorer at the shooting guard position in exchange for another big body the Mavs desperately could use. Don't be surprised to see the trigger pulled on a deal.



A minor altercation with a fan doesn't mean much nowadays after the Pistons-Pacers brawl back in November. However, it may have been the final straw that broke the camel's back when it comes to Michael Finley, whom I believe will be traded real soon or prior to the trade deadline.

Another prediction I've been talking up for weeks is the move of Jason Kidd. Kidd, also hurt right now, has expressed his discontent with the team, particularly management. During the summer New Jersey unloaded All-Star power forward Kenyon Martin, Lucious Harris, Rodney Rogers and Kerry Kittles. Four key contributors are gone from the Nets team leaving Richard Jefferson as the lone guy who can do exclusive things in the half-court set. New Jersey simply cannot generate offense in the half-court, much less transition without Kidd in the lineup. To think things will change is not impossible, though unlikely with the Nets sitting at 3-12 in the cellar of the Atlantic Division. Either Jefferson goes or Kidd goes in my opinion.

So who will be takers for some of these players? Good question - glad I asked it to myself. Portland's a team on the cusp of making the playoffs. They also are one major injury away to Zach Randolph from being very mediocre. Portland always shuffles their roster every couple of years and definitely would love to have a slasher and defender like Jefferson. Right now Damon Stoudamire, Derek Anderson and Nick Van Exel all do not fit in that system. Each guy came up into the NBA as point guard who don't mind taking in excess of 15 shots per night. Van Exel has played too well to be traded so it's probable either Anderson or Stoudamire is dealt.

My bold prediction on Jason Kidd is that he will go to the Lakers. Stunning news? Not really, maybe for some people. Kobe Bryant has distributed the ball nicely and has gotten others involved like Chris Mihm and Brian Cook, who had 25 points in the team's road win over Milwaukee earlier in the week. What the Lakers aren't doing right is doing the little things. Getting that defensive rebound, cutting off passing lanes to the basket, etc. Also, Chucky Atkins is not really a scoring point guard. He needs to focus in on playing defense and letting guys such as Kobe, Kareem Rush and Cook taking shots. Vlade Divac's return makes them even better at passing the ball.

My bold prediction on the Chicago Bulls: Either the Head Coach is going bye-bye or some players will be sent packing. I know, not much of a bold prediction there with the Bulls. Things just have not been good in Chicago since Michael Jordan left.

What's wrong in Utah? Injury - that is to Andrei Kirilenko. There are three teams in the Western Conference people expect to do well. They are Utah, who started off red hot and have cooled off, Houston (struggling to find itself and have chemistry issues) and Denver (see parenthesis for Houston - same exact thing). Can Tracy McGrady and Yao Ming share the ball together? Can the Rockets find a point guard? Hmm.... Kidd to Houston? Hard to say, but Denver has two point guards that really aren't complete point guards in Andre Miller and Early Boykins. Miller and Boykins are not complete floor leaders in the sense they cannot find a consistency in running the offense (passing first, shooting first, etc.). Utah is having it's share of problem due to the hot start and Kirilenko getting hurt.

Three Misleading in the West: The Clippers, Sonics and Suns (to a very small degree) have misleading records. I don't think the Suns are the best team in the West, but I do believe they are better than Sacramento and capable of reaching the second round of the playoffs. No, the Clippers are not the best team in Los Angeles. They've got to beat the Lakers at Staples Center, which is something they find extremely hard to do. Seattle is the best three-point shooting team in the league. On the low block, down in the post, inside - not even close. Not enough productive big bodies inside to compete with the San Antonio's and Minnesota's of the world. One - Danny Fortson - will not cut it for the Sonics. A season makes an enormous difference for the Cavs and LeBron James. Last year they started the season 0-13 on the road. Right now they are playing good basketball on the road and Zydrunas Ilgauskas saved their season with a desperation 3' vs. Phoenix. Had he missed that shot Cleveland would have fell to 0-4! Big, big, big bucket!