



SPORTS

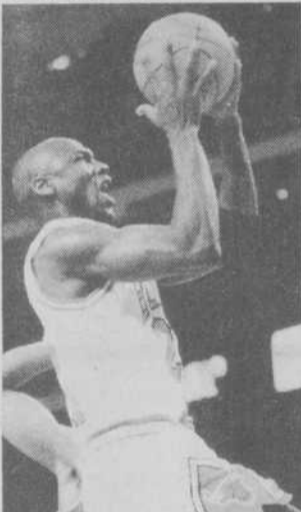
NBA PLAYOFFS TIP-OFF TONIGHT

By W.G. Ramirez

With the open of the NBA Playoffs tonight in Boston, Cleveland, Houston and Portland, interesting matchups highlight the first round of the postseason. Friday the playoffs will continue in Chicago, New York, Phoenix and Seattle.

The most intriguing clash in the Eastern Conference is Michael Jordan and Dominique Wilkins. The two finished #1 and #2 in the NBA scoring race and have supporting casts to complete the scenario.

The most physical matchup of the first round will be in the



Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls are shooting for their third straight NBA title

Western Conference, when Seattle battles Utah, pitting forwards Shawn Kemp and Karl Malone.

The lone team to make the postseason with a losing record, the Los Angeles Lakers, sneaked into the playoffs, for the 17th straight year, as the Western Conference's #8 seed.

The surprise team of this year's playoffs could in fact be the Charlotte Hornets. Unlike the Miami Heat, the first of the recent expansion team's to make the playoffs, last season, the Hornets are physical enough and have the talent to advance past the first round. Charlotte will begin their first-ever post-season venture against Boston.

Here is a closer look at each first-round matchup, and the predicted winner:

EASTERN CONFERENCE

#1 New York v.s #8 Indiana-(Season Series N.Y. 3-1): All-Star center Patrick Ewing has been waiting to sit in the drivers seat, in the playoffs. He and his Knicks are exactly at that point and the Indiana Pacers will experience this, very roughly. New York had an NBA-best 37-4 home record, that includes 20 straight. Charles Oakley and Charles Smith will be able to dominate the front line. Pacers



Alonzo Mourning, Mugsy Bogues, and the rest of the Charlotte Hornets, could possibly face the New York Knicks in Round 2. The Hornets must first get through the Boston Celtics.

star Reggie Miller won't be able to do the job all alone. Inconsistent center Rik Smits must have the series of his life against Ewing, which is unlikely.

Knicks in 3.

#2 Chicago v.s #7 Atlanta-(Season Series tied at 2-2): As mentioned before, the matchup between Jordan and Wilkins will be exciting as ever. In the past, Chicago and Jordan has excelled while Atlanta has struggled. Now the Bulls are struggling to stay on top, and Atlanta could play the spoiler. Jordan and Horace Grant will hope that Scottie Pippen's ankle can hold up, to complete their tenacious defense. If B.J. Armstrong and John Paxson hit their 3's, Chicago will survive. The Bulls will still have their hands full with Hawks' inspired talent. Kevin Willis, Mookie Blaylock and Stacey Augmon. This one will go down to the wire, and unfortunately for Atlanta, the Bulls boast the league's biggest threat when the game is on the line.

Bulls in 5.

#3 Cleveland v.s #6 New Jersey-(Season Series tied at 2-2): Hands down, Cleveland will dominate the injury-plagued Nets. The Cavaliers are in the same bracket of the playoffs as Chicago and could possibly get past the defending champion Bulls. If Chicago gets past Atlanta, Cleveland will be waiting, and licking their chops. Sweep, Sweep, Sweep!!!

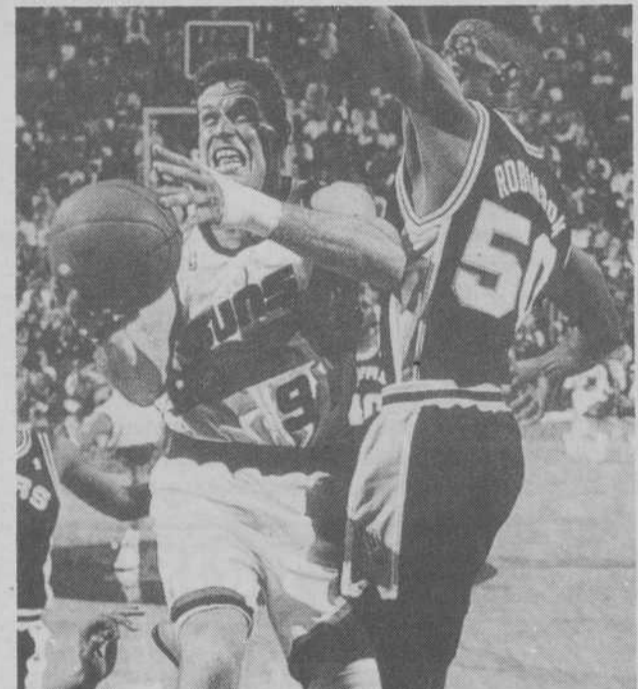
Cavaliers in 3.

#4 Boston v.s #5 Charlotte-(Season Series Boston 3-1): Most think that the outcome of this series will be based on Boston's playoff experience and Charlotte's lack of. Truth of the matter is, Charlotte will be able to handle the pressure, with Larry Johnson, Alonzo Mourning and Kendall Gill on the job. If Gill consistently cans his jumper, count on seeing Charlotte face New York in Round Two. Boston will have to depend on Reggie Lewis, Xavier McDaniel and Sherman Douglas. LJ and Alonzo literally have the talent of

Dan Majerle, and Richard Dumas, along with seasoned veteran Danny Ainge will devastate the Lakers, as did Portland in last year's opening round. With A.C. Green and Sedale Threat posing as L.A.'s keys, the Lakers better hope that James Worthy has a little *Magic* in his game.

Phoenix in 3.

#2 Houston v.s #7 L.A. Clippers-(Season Series Houston 4-0): Houston could very well be Phoenix's biggest threat in the Western Conference. Hakeem Olajuwon will challenge Barkley for league MVP and also has an outstanding supporting cast. Otis Thorpe, Kenny Smith, and Robert Horry will be able to unleash their talents, in warm-up



The San Antonio Spurs have a well motivated coach. John Lucas inspires his team a lot, and that will have an effect on their game against Portland. A second-round affair with Phoenix is not unlikely

three people. Mourning can get caught up in the "showtime" but he'll straighten out real quickly. Hey, he's from the Thompson regime at Georgetown.

Charlotte in 5.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

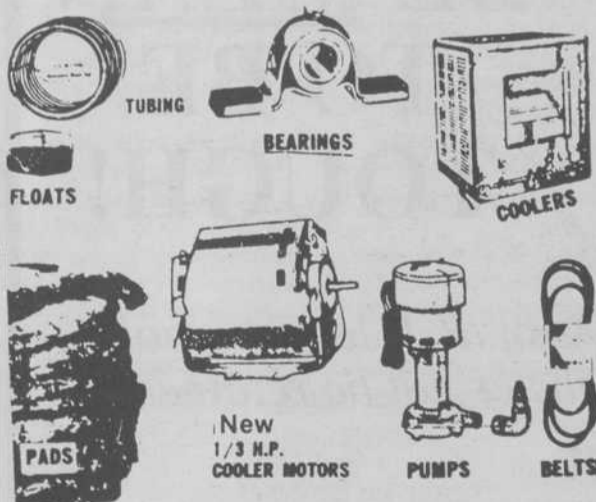
#1 Phoenix v.s #8 L.A. Lakers-(Season Series Phoenix 5-0): From the best-of-the-best, to the best-of-the-worst. The L.A. Lakers slipped into the playoffs somehow, somehow, and will now have to pay the price by facing the league's top team Phoenix. Charles Barkley - no explanation needed. Although Kevin Johnson is injured,

for Round 2, against the Clippers. Ron Harper played good, solid ball. Mark Jackson tends to slump in the post-season, but may pull out a good series. Danny Manning will have to be the glue to keep things together for L.A.

Houston in 3.

#3 Seattle v.s #6 Utah-(Season Series Tied 2-2): A very physical series for both teams in Round 1, with Kemp and Malone headlining the show. The one thing that Seattle will need is a near perfect series by Gary Payton. His play must be (See NBA, Page 15)

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