

NBA WESTERN CONFERENCE PREVIEW

MIDWEST DIVISION

Houston Rockets

"Defense carried us to great heights in 1992-93, and that's the foundation we will start with when camp opens in October." Head Coach Rudy Tomjanovich That is a mighty under-statement when you speak of arguably the best front line in the NBA. The Rockets have a solid wall in Hakeem Olajuwon, Otis Thorpe, and second-year forward Robert Horry. The Rockets' backcourt strengthens with the addition of Sam Cassell, their top draft pick out of Florida State. Kenny Smith found his groove last season, becoming the league's top shooting scoring guard. Rudy T. also has Scott Brooks to fall back on.

The Rockets have seen the NBA Finals since 1986 and will soon have to bring in a solid supporting cast in order for Olajuwon to pave the way. Houston looks like the team to beat in this division, but will need to pick it up when it comes to other Western Conference contenders.

San Antonio Spurs

Although the Spurs look like a team that can compete, you still have to ask yourself questions. Will the injuries to David Robinson affect his performance? According to sources, Robinson's recuperations during the off-season has made him stronger than ever. What about the point guard situation? Plain and simple - Lloyd Daniels. Yes that's right, give the ball to the playground legend. If Lucas guides this kid right, and he can become consistent, he will be the perfect point for this team. While Dennis Rodman is trying to fit in, will the Spurs miss Sean Elliot? Sure San Antonio will miss Elliot, a great young pro. But bring a guy like Rodman in and watch this team's stock go up. Rodman played on a selfish Detroit Pistons team. Now he is on a team that depends on each other, Rodman will produce!!!

The Spurs contend heavily in this division. Watch for big things!!!

Utah Jazz

What Utah needs is some revitalization within the team. It is very easy to blame the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympics for fatigue that may have set in All-Stars John Stockton and Karl Malone. Then again, a duo named Mike and Scottie from Chicago happen to be in Spain also. So no excuses!!! If 6'5" Corey Crowder has an immediate impact, this team could blossom right back to the top of the standings. The Jazz will also need big things from 7'2" draft choice Luther Wright out of Seton Hall. The thing to remember is both Stockton and Malone are 31 and 30 respectively, and time is running out. If the Jazz want to make any move at this point, it'll have to be this season, and it will have to depend on the motivation level spurned by the youth on the team.

This is a strange ball club. If their rookies work out, there is some promise for a high playoff seed. On top of that, they'll need to stay healthy all year.

Dallas Mavericks

This Dallas team will begin to shine early in the season. Forget about last year. Forget about the pre-Jimmy Jackson era, when they won only five games. Forget it all!!! This is a team that will get the job done this season. A backcourt duo of Jackson and veteran Derek Harper will sting many nemeses. The addition of forward Jamal Mashburn will actually be the key. He is quick, powerful, has

tremendous leaping ability, and maintains a keen eye from long-range. Rookie skipper Quinn Buckner, who steps down from the broadcast booth, will turn out to be a great head coach. He will relate with his team very well. Dallas will be the surprise team of this division. They will shock many if they squeak out a playoff berth.

Denver Nuggets

This is a Nuggets team that actually could find succession - but won't. They are the type of team that will not allow themselves any success. Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (formerly Chris Jackson) responded last season, being honored Most Improved Player, and should be able to continue great strides. Dikembe Mutombo is a proven threat in the middle, swatting shots and snatching rebounds. The Nuggets also have the talents of Mark Macon, Reggie Williams and Marcus Liberty. The one ingredient missing amongst all this enormous talent though, is experience and leadership. Denver needs someone to come forward and take the upper hand. First-round draft choice Rodney Rogers needed to trim down and will hopefully be ready for a grueling season.

As mentioned, this is a team loaded with talent. The Nuggets just need a leader that will be able to gel all of the players' talent as one. If this is possible, Denver contends. If not, they're a disappointment.

Minnesota Timberwolves

While many doubt this team, they will be surprised at how the TWolves attack this season. Minnesota will scratch and claw at opponents, now that they have rookie Isaiah Rider within grasp. Rider, out of UNLV, has not come to terms with the team as of yet, but when he does, it'll be dangerous. He will join the attitudes of Christian Laettner, Chuck Person and Doug West. If Rider's endless desire to win, can carry over to his professional career and also influence the play of this team, they will see a big improvement. Minnesota should be on a mission after seeing expansion brothers Miami, Orlando and Charlotte make the playoffs already.

The TWolves will definitely see improvement. The addition of Rider, a player that gives no less than 200%, will spark this team. Maybe not a playoff berth just yet, but its around the corner.

PACIFIC DIVISION

Phoenix Suns

Some very good acquisitions in the off-season, make the defending Western Conference champions look even stronger than last season. First of all, the signing of former Lakers star A.C. Green. This will help Sir Charles Barkley out tremendously. Green is strong and can hold down the fort inside. The Suns drafted some bulk when they chose 6'10", 248-pound Malcolm Mackey from Georgia Tech. Kevin Johnson will have a great year, along with Dan Majerle in the backcourt. Scoring specialist Cedric Ceballos, who suffered a stress fracture in his left foot at the end of last season, will also make a big impact for Phoenix' frontline. Don't think the Suns will miss Tom Chambers at all. Sure he was occasionally able to get the job done, but they have enough tools to do without him. Oliver Miller will come through for this squad.

Phoenix will have a tough time holding off the Sonics, as well as Golden State, but you have to make them the frontrunner for Pacific Division Champ.

Seattle SuperSonics

After 11 years in the league, don't think that Ricky Pierce has lost

that shooting touch. Pierce was the Sonics leading scorer last season (18.4) and will bring that touch back to one of the more talented teams in the league. This is a squad that boasts one of the NBA's best pure shooters in Eddie Johnson, a solid two-way point guard in Gary Payton and of course one of the most devastating forwards in the game - Shawn Kemp. The only problem with this team is age. Pierce and Johnson are both 34 while veteran Sam Perkins is 32. This can be a great ball club, a team that can beat you with their obnoxious and unorthodox style, which generates many points from its defense. Or it can be a team that buries itself slowly and carelessly. Seattle needs to learn consistency and get more production from the offense.

The Sonics will be erratic over the season. They will contend, but won't even make a bit of difference until playoffs time. Under the pressure they'll prove their worth.

Golden State Warriors

Well they've got him. Now they must hope he can turn a cocky and aggressive style into a successful situation. Chris Webber, acquired through a trade with Orlando for the rights to Anfernee Hardaway, will be expected to turn this team into an immediate contender. Realistically, they now have the makings of an NBA contender. Webber will join All-Stars Chris Mullin and Tim Hardaway, as well as multi-talented forward Billy Owens. Sarunas Marciulionis is a hard-nosed one-on-one player that can drive to the basket and draw the foul. Head Coach Don Nelson is about to experience the best season ever. The Warriors will be able to maintain a controlled game, with veterans like T. Hardaway and Mullin running the show.

Golden State will make their mark in the Pacific Division this season quickly. It'll be tough for them to top Phoenix, but they will battle Seattle for second.

Los Angeles Lakers

The L.A. Lakers have themselves a lot of work cut out ahead of them. Not in an exactly bad way, but L.A. will be trying to blend a number of young personalities, which includes some egos, and formulate another great Lakers squad. They made out fantastic in the 1993 NBA Draft, nabbing George Lynch from North Carolina and Nick Van Exel from Cincinnati. What will help this team a great deal, is that it seems as if management has attained patience in realizing that it'll take time to get the team back to where it once was. Veteran James Worthy returns to the lineup, as does center Vlade Divac. A player to watch for in this organization will be Doug Christie. He could be the player that helps turn this team around. As usual this is a team loaded with great guards, now they must produce!!!

Los Angeles will have enough to return to the playoffs for the 18th consecutive year, but its going to take about three seasons to return to the top.

Portland Trailblazers

The biggest plus for this team last season was the fact that Cliff Robinson was named the league's most outstanding Sixth Man. The 'Blazers sputtered to 51 wins last year, and saw their 1992 Western Conference championship team turn into a middle of the division squad. They still boast the talents of Clyde Drexler, but will he ever Glide again? Terry Porter, Jerome Kersey, Rod Strickland and Buck Williams all return for the cause. An off-season trade sent Kevin Duckworth to Washington for Harvey Grant, brother of Bulls' forward Horace. Grant could actually spark some life into this team.. The players that really need to motivate this team will be Strickland and Drexler. Although they could probably get along without a true center, Chris Dudley will take Duckworth's spot.

Portland is an iffy ball club. Middle of the division they'll remain.

Los Angeles Clippers

Poor Danny Manning. A solid basketball player without solid support. New Head Coach Bob Weiss figures to strain one more productive year out of Manning before his stock rises for the free agent market. A nice addition to the team will be guard Terry Dehere, drafted out of Seton Hall. Dehere will join veteran Mark Jackson in the backcourt. The frontcourt doesn't exactly look to shabby with Loy Vaught joining Manning. Ron Harper is expected to move down to small forward full-time to make room for Dehere. This is a team that could post 40-45 wins on the season, but won't because of lack of consistency. Stupid mistakes will hinder their success also.

Don't expect the Clips to take over the City of L.A. just yet, they'll be underneath the Lakers this year.

Sacramento Kings

Will this team come close to winning 40 games this season? Nah!!! Injuries plagued this team last year, and now they must prepare to work together in arguably the toughest division in the league. Bobby Hurley will join the Kings, and hope to add some, Whoomp-There It Is, to a team that needs it so desperately. Mitch Richmond and Lionel Simmons will need to pick up the pace for the team, while point guard Spud Webb will have to direct these guys to winning ways. The Kings will struggle and will need a few years to build any type of contention team.

Bottom line is this: the Kings will improve, but only within themselves, not amongst their rivals. When filling out that office pool, pencil in the Kings at seventh.

HEATERS




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Willie's BEST BETS

THIS WEEK'S BEST BETS:
Pittsburgh -2 v. Cleveland
Green Bay -6' v. Tampa Bay
Chicago -3 v. Minnesota

THE BEST DOGS ON THE BOARD
N.Y. Jets +2' v. Buffalo
Detroit +1' v. L.A.Rams
OVERALL: 22-18-2 - .55%

A LOOK AHEAD
"The Steelers will crush the Browns, even in the Dog Pound. An AFC rivalry it is, and yes the Browns have shown promise, but Sunday it's all Pittsburgh. "A matchup of two big rivals from the NFC Central, it'll be all Green Bay over the Bucs. "The Vikings don't average more than 12 points per game this year. Besides, the Bears will get revenge from last year's meeting on Monday night. "The New York Jets will stun all, as their veterans provide leadership in a home victory over the Buffalo Bills. You might want to make a Money Line parlay with the OVER in this game. "Los Angeles will choke, just when you thought they deserved to be a favorite - NOT!!! "New Orleans and Atlanta scored a ton of points in the first meeting, where we capitalized on the OVER also. These two teams will be battling on offense all day long!!! OVER! OVER! OVER!

THE BEST TOTAL-4-THE WEEK
New Orleans v. Atlanta
OVER the 42

LAST WEEK: 4-2 - .667%
A LOOK BACK
N.Y. Giants -8 v. Philadelphia
Cleveland -5' v. Cincinnati
Houston -6' v. New England
S.F. 49ers +6' v. Dallas
L.A. Rams +1' v. Atlanta
Houston v. New England
OVER the 37
Ahhhhh!!! After two straight weeks of pushing out, finally a winning week. All of the Best Bets came through, while the dogs got put out on the porch. The Oilers and Patriots got the job done with the OVER. Also mentioned last week, was a small OVER bet on the Rams/Falcons game - Winner!!!