

NBA EASTERN CONFERENCE PREVIEW

CENTRAL DIVISION

Charlotte Hornets - Yes, believe this! The Charlotte Hornets will conquer this division in 1994. This team is loaded with plenty of talent and will shine this year. The combination of Larry Johnson and Alonzo Mourning pits one of the fiercest frontlines in the NBA. Mugsy Bogues' up-tempo style blends him right into the Hornets' passing game. Dell Curry is awesome coming off of the bench and will see a promising season, not having to get caught up in the Kendall Gill saga anymore. The Hornets are ready to emerge as a mature team, but will need the support of its head coach Allan Bristow. No second guessing - 'just do it.'

Atlanta Hawks - This team will surprise some folks. The addition of Lenny Wilkens will add years of coaching experience to a team ready to erupt with success. Wilkens will finally enjoy the talents of a small forward he desired in Cleveland - Dominique Wilkins. He will also enjoy a team full of athleticism, something else he lacked in Cleveland - pure athletes. Wilkens will be able to formulate some pressing and trapping defenses with speedsters Mookie Blaylock and Stacey Augmon in the backcourt. The only thing Wilkens may miss is center Brad Daugherty, settling for 6'10" Kevin Willis. He also has rookie forward Doug Edwards, leaving the option of using Willis at center. Hawks will contend!!!

Chicago Bulls - With No. 23 now appearing at Chicago Stadium in the rafters, things will be different on North Michigan Avenue. Many believe Scottie Pippen will need to fill Michael Jordan's shoes for the Bulls to succeed, but the truth is, it shouldn't be that way. Pip and the rest of the guys - Horace Grant, John Paxson, B.J. Armstrong and the rest of the Bulls - have always said that they give over 100% all the time. Well if they've always put forth that much effort, where are they going to get more? Answer: Toni Kukoc. The 6'11" Croatia has the skills of a guard, and could be just the person that the Bulls need. If Kukoc can make the transition, the Bulls will still contend. Bottom line: Obviously they're not the same without MJ, but they're not, all of a sudden, the worst either.

Cleveland Cavaliers - The Cavs are too good! They are too deep! Too experienced! All these things have been said about Cleveland, yet they still haven't won anything. Their blame will always be on Jordan's success against them, but that isn't completely justifiable. First of all, it was a good move for the Cavs and Lenny Wilkens to depart. Second, replacement Mike Fratello could be good for the organization. His rough, unorthodox style may be able to drive motivation into the Cavs. The only thing that this team lacks is some sort of excitement. This is a team that boasts a major front line averaging 6'10" - John Williams, Larry Nance and Daugherty - but finished 22nd in rebounding. How? They've developed a "nice and soft" image, and this should be Fratello's main priority - toughen up the team!!! If the Cavs can create some noise, with Gerald Wilkins and Chris Mills coming off the bench, this Cavs team could finish in the Top 3.

Detroit Pistons - Those Bad Boys of Motown are slowly diminishing away. Dennis Rodman is now in San Antonio. Detroit's first round draft picks (#10 and #11) were guards Lindsey Hunter and Allan Houston.

With the fact that veterans Isiah Thomas and Joe Dumars are getting older, the Pistons seem to be rebuilding right around the vets.

The addition of Sean Elliot will be a nice change of pace for the team. Here is a player that comes to this team from a place where teamwork and teammates are most important. His genuine playing skills will reflect on this team. Watch for many changes with this organization over the season. Besides, Isiah has already stated, "First Magic, then Larry. Now Michael. I'm beginning to feel lonely." Thomas will retire sooner than most think.

Indiana Pacers - Larry Brown takes over the helm at Indiana and it could be signs of promise. Brown, a guy that has had 13 winning seasons in 14 years as a pro coach, guarantees that this will not be the same ol' Indiana Pacers. Reggie Miller and Pooh Richardson will try to heat things up in the backcourt for Indiana. The duo were teammates at UCLA, and under Brown's guidance, should work well together. Brown will enjoy working with Detlef Schrempf, the only NBA player to rank in the Top 25 in scoring (19.1), rebounding (9.5), and assists (6.0).

Milwaukee Bucks - These 'young bucks' will need to strengthen together and eventually become a good, solid team. Last season Milwaukee was last in the league and rebounding and had one of the weakest offenses. Todd Day will eventually blossom into a dynamite player, but must first learn the little things about being a good pro. He needs to control his game more, which will lead to hitting key open jumpers. He will also need to pick up his free-throw percentage. Blue Edwards is a hard worker and proved he deserves the playing time he gets, something he lacked in Utah. If draft pick Vin Baker can

put some bulk on, and maintain some agility, this could be a team to watch in years to come.

ATLANTIC DIVISION

New York Knicks - This will be the year of the New York Knicks. Patrick Ewing will have his finest year ever, and even possibly win the regular season-MVP trophy. Pat Riley will guide this team perfectly, now that his main obstacle to winning the NBA Championship is out of his way - Jordan. John Starks can go out and play his game every night, this season. Riley will have to tame Greg Anthony a tad, put mystique in Doc Rivers and breathe new life into Rolando Blackman. Remember, this isn't a team that has "just lost" to the Bulls in the playoffs, this is a team that has gone from 39 to 60 wins in two years under Riley's guidance. Hard work will pay off this year, as the Knicks head to the NBA Finals.

Orlando Magic - Other than the Charlotte Hornets, the Magic look to be the team of the future. One year after introducing the game's next icon to the NBA, the Magic now add to the roster Anfernee Hardaway, a player compared to Earvin "Magic" Johnson. While many question the trade on draft day, forward Chris Webber to Golden State for Hardaway, Orlando believes that Shaq and Penny (Anfernee) will bolt this team from the bottom to the top. If Brian Williams can put some "umphh" into his game, he could handle the power forward spot consistently. He had an impressive showing in their summer league. It'll be interesting to watch this team develop into an Eastern Conference power. Long-time assistant Brian Hill has replaced Matt Guokas, who never had a chance to finish what he started. Hill has to be careful not to disrupt what Guokas has put together.

New Jersey Nets - The Nets will need to see a big year from Derrick Coleman and Kenny Anderson if they plan to contend. The Nets will feel the loss of Drazen Petrovic, who died in a car accident in Germany, and certainly won't be able to fill the gap immediately. New Jersey acquired Kevin Edwards through free agency and drafted Rex Walters out of Kansas, but that still may not be enough. Over the objections of Head Coach Chuck Daly, Nets General Manager Willis Reed was able to acquire Benoit Benjamin, sending Sam Bowie to the Lakers. Daly may be able to bring out the quality in Chris Morris, and Rumeal Robinson will be superb off the bench. The Nets also acquired former UNLV star Armon Gilliam, who last year averaged 12.4 points per game with Philadelphia.

Boston Celtics - The emotional impact of losing Reggie Lewis, not to mention the bitterness over what is considered to be an unnecessary death, will make this an extremely rough season to endure. Obviously, the Celtics won't be the team they would have been originally projected to be, and will have to deal with a 40-year old veteran and a group of players hesitant to take over the leading role. Robert Parrish won't last much longer, and Alaa Abdelnaby plays like he is content coming off the bench every so often. The addition of Acie Earl, drafted out of Iowa, could be a positive thing, but he will still need a few years to mature in the league. Xavier McDaniel provides the needed attitude in this team and can produce

in clutch times. Dee Brown and Sherman Douglas will be the backcourt, which will be inconsistent, because they are two shaky players that can hibernate at any time. Boston will struggle this year.

Miami Heat - After becoming the first expansion team to make the playoffs, the Heat were looked upon as a future Atlantic Division power. Now, they look like just another game on the schedule for most teams. Hopefully, for Miami's sake, Steve Smith will be able to bury his knee problems and get on with his career. Fluctuating from three positions, Smith averaged 16 points, 4.1 rebounds, and 5.6 assists in his injury-plagued 1992-'93 season. Rony Seikaly and Glen Rice must step to the front and guide this team, which includes: Brian Shaw, whose mental stability is questionable after the sudden death of his parents in a car crash earlier this summer. John Salley, whose experience and wisdom of the league will help out alot. And, Bimbo Coles, who saw many minutes at point guard last year, and can shoot the rock. Miami is back where they started in inauguration year. The Hornets and Magic have flown by, and the Heat are now the pups. A few years away...

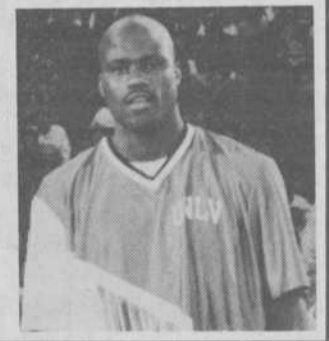
Washington Bullets - Now that center Kevin Duckworth has arrived from Portland, Pervis Ellison will finally be able to develop and display his skills at power forward. The acquisition will also find Tom Gugliotta swinging out to small forward, which will be threatening to the opposition. If Gugliotta plays at big forward, rookie Calbert Cheaney could jump in at small forward, canning J's all night. If he gets a hot hand, finds a groove, and plays a touch of D, he'll be dangerous!!! Though Washington is banking on an unstable group, they will still have to try and mesh together. If not, clean house.

Philadelphia 76ers - While the 76ers really believe that Shawn Bradley will make a difference, the rest of the Atlantic Division will be cruising by. To try and reinforce the middle, adding some bulk to Bradley's presence, Philly went out and got veteran Moses Malone. Their No.1 pick last season, Clarence Witherspoon, made the loss of Charles Barkley a bit bearable, but not enough. Jeff Homacek provided some hope, averaging 19.1 ppg. Philly has no hope, even with their lanky 7'6" rookie. They will struggle with an inconsistent backcourt, and will be searching for help on the frontline by mid-season.

RIDER SIGNS WITH TWOLVES

Isaiah Rider, former UNLV standout, signed with the Minnesota Timberwolves Wednesday afternoon. Rider was the last first-round draft choice to sign a contract.

The seven-year, 25.5 million dollar contract makes Rider the Timberwolves' highest-paid player.



Willie Will's BEST BETS

THIS WEEK'S BEST BETS:

- New Orleans -3 v. Phoenix
- L.A. Raiders -4 v. San Diego
- San Francisco -12' v. L.A. Rams

THE BEST DOGS ON THE BOARD

- Miami +1 v. K.C. Chiefs
- Detroit +4 v. Minnesota

OVERALL: 24-22-2 -.521%

A LOOK AHEAD

The Saints will crush the Cardinals coming off of two losses. A matchup of two big rivals from the AFC West, but the Raiders will demolish San Diego. The Niners will beat up on the Rams extremely bad. San Francisco will release alot of frustration on L.A. The Dolphins will be well prepared for this game. It is a matchup of two AFC powers, but in Don Shula's house. Don't trespass!!! Smilin' Joe will get knocked out of this game. Minnesota is not all that you saw on Monday Night. They'll have an emotional letdown against Detroit. The Jets and Giants will battle for supremacy of the Meadowlands, and score alot of points while they're at it. Boomer will have a great day at the office. But don't count out the Giants, who can explode at any time. Leave the side alone, nail the OVER!!!

THE BEST TOTAL 4-THE WEEK

- N.Y. Jets v. N.Y. Giants
- OVER the 37'

LAST WEEK: 2-4 -.333%

A LOOK BACK

- Pittsburgh -2 v. Cleveland
- Green Bay -6' v. Tampa Bay
- Chicago -3 v. Minnesota
- N.Y. Jets +2 v. Buffalo
- Detroit +2' v. L.A. Rams
- New Orleans v. Atlanta
- OVER the 42

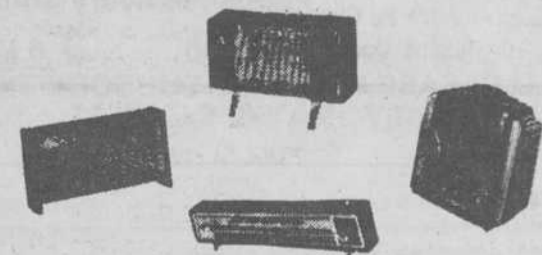
What a terrible week, hitting only one-third of my picks. Pittsburgh falls on their face, the Bears fall short, and the Total misses by one. Obviously the Jets prove to be a fluke. The Packers were a nice call, easily handing Tampa Bay defeat. And of course, never bet the Rams as a favorite!!! Especially against a first-place team!!!

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