

The NBA Today

Will the Bullish Market finally close?

By Chris Brown and Casey Shearer

It's the last week of October. The leaves have changed colors and fallen from the trees. People run about in masks and costumes, searching for candy or houses to teepee. The weather has become cold and now that the World Series is over, the national pastime is past its time (What do you mean the Dodgers didn't win the pennant!). The eyes of the sporting world have turned from the boys of summer to the warriors of winter. Now that the final day of October has arrived there is something very exciting to look forward to besides costumes and Tootsie Rolls. On Halloween night, as all the ghouls and goblins come out to frolic, the stars of the NBA also come out to play. Ahh , basketball season is upon us and we must ponder the 82 game season ahead . With that in mind, we embark on a journey through the world of hoops with our NBA preview.

The Best of the West

The new-look west is almost as loaded as you will be this weekend. No longer will one or two teams dominate. This year there are six teams that have a legitimate shot at playing in the NBA Finals. All of the contenders, with the exception of Phoenix, are strong in the front court, meaning that the success of most teams will depend on who has the most consistent guard play. Let's take a look i.e. at the best and the rest in the west. Utah is the same team that went to the Finals last season, but will be hurt immensely by the loss of John Stockton for two to three months thanks to knee surgery. For Utah to win the vastly improved West again, Stockton will have to fully recover and Greg Ostertag will have to learn the art of making a wide open lay-up.

Seattle gives up Shawn Kemp and gets Vin Baker. We think this improves the Sonics, but they have a major problem in the fact that Nick Van Exel plays bus driver and takes Gary Payton to school every time the Sonics and Lakers play.

At Houston's core reside three weathered veterans who can still ball it up with the best of them. For Sir Charles, The Glyde and The Dream to win it all, Houston will have to trade for a point guard. Matt Maloney, Brent Price and Roderick Rhodes simply do not cut it. An Ivy League player (Maloney), Mark Price's little bro and somebody from USC (Rhodes), you've got to be kidding.

The Lakers should be tough barring another blow up by Van Exel. Having Shaq and Robert Horry for a full season should help. The Portland Trailgangsta, err Trailblazers, are talented on the court, but their off-the-court antics which include smokin' blunts, rolling j's, carrying glocks and mack 10's, and punching people, keep them from becoming serious contenders.

Minnesota will be hard pressed to repeat last year's 40 wins, especially after losing center Dean Garret. The T-Pups now have to rely on 3000 pound Stanley Roberts who has been known to get lost at the buffet a little too often.

Phoenix will be the most exciting team in the league, playing their brand of three-point guard small ball. The additions of Antonio McDyess and Clifford Robinson to a team that already has Jason Kidd, Kevin Johnson, Steve Nash, Rex Chapman, Danny Manning and Hot Rod Williams should make the Suns a much better team. This is one team we would fear in the playoffs. The Clippers made the playoffs last season, it won 't happen again. They 're the Clippers.

San Antonio figures to be the most improved team in the league and a serious contender to win the West. They get David Robinson, Sean Elliot and the Rifleman, Chuck Person back from injuries, plus #1 draft pick Tim Duncan. The Spurs sport perhaps the best frontline in the NBA, but the back court of Vinny Del Negro (the Italian stallion) and Avery Johnson leaves a little to be desired. The bottom line: You're not going to win a title with Avery Johnson at the point.

Suckremento . . .errrr Sacramento has Mitch Richmond and that's it. We've been hearing rumors that some San Franciscans were angered over our article about the Dodgers and the Giants. Well, they should be happy to know that Golden State sucks and has no prayer of making the playoffs. Vancouver is getting better, but they are still a few players away from contending for a playoff spot.

Dallas is a disaster area and Don Nelson is not going to be able to salvage it.

Denver has no one. Nuff said.

The Beasts of the East

The East, although not as deep as the West, should be improved from last season when there was only one good team in the entire conference. The question in the East, as it has been since 1990-91, will be if anyone can knock off the Michael Jordan-led Bulls. If someone is going to do it, this will be the year.

Chicago still has MJ, but will be without Scottie Pippen until January due to foot surgery. Chicago also lost Brian Williams to free agency without adding anyone of note. The champs appear human, but Mike should have enough tricks up his sleeve to get them to the finals. Miami will have a chance as long as Pat Riley is coaching them. Without Alonzo Mourning for the first month of the season, the Heat should be cooled down, but we think Riley will find a way for this team to win ugly. Speaking of ugly, we move on to Patrick (no knees) Ewing and the Knicks. They seem to be the same tired crew that lost to Miami last year after the NBA punked them by suspending half the team. New York adds Chris Mills, a fat out-of-shape swing man, meaning they'll still have to deal with the fact that they can't beat Jordan.

Detroit has perhaps the game's second best player in Grant Hill, but come up a little bit short when it comes to big men . Other than Brian Williams, the Pistons best-known big man is 17-year veteran Rick Mahom, whose claim to fame is having the biggest ass in the NBA. Trust us, it's bigger than Barkley's and Stanley Roberts's.

Atlanta has a very good team that simply isn't playoff-tested. If the Hawks could ever find a small forward they might be in business Tyrone Corbin does not cut it. The Hawks and Dikembe

Mutombo could surprise some people this year if Alan Henderson can contribute off the bench. Cleveland acquired Shawn Kemp and will not be the sleeping pill that they were last year. However, Kemp is an over rated head case and the Cavs will suck and Kemp will flip out again.

Indiana should be the most improved team in the East this season. New coach Larry Bird gets a healthy Rik Smits and newly acquired Chris Mullin to take some of the load off Reggie Miller. Plus the Pacers add Austin Croshere from Providence College and Crossroads High School in Santa Monica, CA, our alma mater. Croshere will take the NBA by storm simply because he went to high school with us.

Orlando has moved Penny Hardaway from the point to the two guard spot and will be a better team because of it, but will need more production from Horace Grant to have a chance at doing anything. New Jersey should be improved with the addition of Keith Van Horn to go with Sam Cassel, Kerry Kittles and Jayson Williams, but is still thin in the middle with Stinka, err, Yinka Dare, whose name translates to "he who has no game what so ever." Milwaukee looks to be much better this season as well. Terrel Brandon and Ray Allen make up an exciting back court and the departure of Vin Baker means that this is Glenn Robinson's team. However, this team lacks a quality center and unless you have Michael Jordan on your team (sorry Luc), you cannot win a title without a quality center. Philadelphia coach Larry Brown has a whole bunch of head cases to deal with from star point guard Allen Iverson, to Derek Coleman, to Jerry Stackhouse. The additions of Tim Thomas, Eric Montross and European rookie Marko Milic should help, but even Larry Brown won't be able to get this crew to the playoffs this year.

Washington has a talented team led by Juwan Howard and Chris Webber and their two point guards, Rod and God, Strickland and Sharrngod . The Wizards are a bunch of underachievers who if they ever put it together might be good, but they won't, even with God on their side. Charlotte has Glen Rice and that's about it. Vlade, Vlade, Vlade (we still love you). The chain smoking Yugoslav is Godlike. Toronto is trying to get better, but Marcus Camby keeps fainting and GM Isiah Thomas's patience is wearing thin. Look for Toronto to bring up the rear of the Central division.

Boston and Rick Pitino are simply forming a University of Kentucky grad school. Pitino has former Cats Antoine Walker, Rick Mercer and Walter McCarty and not much else. Pitino shelled out a lot of cash for Travis Knight and Andrew DeClerq and we're wondering why. Call the trash man because the Celts will be garbage.

Breaking it Down

Now that we've briefly familiarized you with all the teams, the question remains, who will win? Most people seem to be of the opinion that you simply can't stop Jordan so the Bulls will win it all again. Well, what do we say? To paraphrase Paul Simon, "Who are we to blow against the wind?" Chris and Case that's who. Why? Because only one team can be the champions, and this year it will be the Los Angeles Lakers. All of you gamblaholics and part-time college students can call your bookies now and get the early line. Like the Luniz, we got five on it.

What makes us think the Lakers will be able to plow through the tough Western Conference and then vanquish the champion Bulls? First, the Lakers will have (knock on wood) the benefit of

having Shaquille O'Neal and Robert Horry for the entire season. This will allow the team to develop a chemistry and cohesiveness that they lacked last season. The addition of Rick Fox will make the Lakers more versatile and give them another solid player on both ends of the floor. Kobe Bryant is a year older, an inch taller, stronger, and better. By the end of the season, the entire league will be buzzing about a kid who's younger than us. The Lakers win the West because the gangsta, hoopa, Nicky Van Smack always abuses Gary Payton and Seattle, Utah won't be the same without Stockton, Houston is too old, Phoenix is too small and San Antonio has Avery Johnson at point guard (even Vinny can't make up for it). LA then should be able to dismantle the Bulls for a number of reasons. First, Luc Longley cannot carry Shaq's jock strap, the Diesel will be dunking all day long against the Aussie. The Lakers will be battled and hardened after their trip through the Western Conference and the Bulls will be fatigued. But how are they going to stop MJ you ask? The answer is simple: EJ. Eddie Jones is the only defender in the league that Mike cannot abuse. In two contests last season, Jones held Jordan to 9/30 shooting in one and twelve points in the other. Like his shoes, Eddie's game is smooth as butter. Add to all these things that Jack Nicholson could kick Gene Siskel's ass (give Ebert some more popcorn, Gene) and it all becomes clear, the NBA is going to be awesome this season, knowing that the season will end with the Los Angeles Lakers defeating the Chicago Bulls in six games to become the new Champions of the World.

Casey Shearer B'00 has Kurt Rambis' styles.

Chris Brown B'00 has signed underpants from Vinny Del Negro.