

## NBA Predictions...

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They'll need a little more support if they hope to get deep in the playoffs, but I see them getting eliminated in the first round of this year's playoffs



right pieces last year. Now, with the addition of G, Andre Miller, they look like a team that could make.

Key Players: Francis (29.3ppg; 9.7rpg; 4.7apg), Mobley (23.7ppg; 3.7rpg; 2.3apg)

T-8) Minnesota Timberwolves- The injury of G/F **Wally Sczerbiak** really hurt the Timberwolves. Still, they have **F Kevin Garnett** and **G Troy Hudson** leading them. Garnett is an excellent player who can really get it done, but he needs more support to help him when they're struggling. Remember, KG can't do everything. How much can I say about this team?

Key Players: Garnett (17.6ppg; 12.4rpg; 5.6apg), Hudson (16.4ppg; 4apg)

7) Los Angeles Clippers- The Clippers had all the right pieces last year. Now, with the addition of **G Andre Miller**, they look like a team that could make the playoffs. Having an all-star in **F Elton Brand**, a big man in **C Michael Olowakandi**, and an athletic swingman in **F Corey Maggette** helps when you have Miller, last year's top assist man, distributing the ball.

Though the duo of **G/F Quentin Richardson** and **F Darius Miles** is now broken up, the Clippers retained Richardson on the bench which should help them on offense. It will be interesting to see where they land come playoffs time.

Key Players: Andre Miller (15.7ppg; 4.7rpg; 11.3apg), Elton Brand (12ppg; 9.3rpg; 1.3apg), Michael Olowakandi (16.3ppg; 12.7rpg)

6) Seattle SuperSonics- I think this is a very underrated team. I also think **G Brent Barry** and **F/G Rashard Lewis** are two of the most underrated players in the league. Though **G Gary Payton** is urging the Sonics to either sign him or trade him, I think he drops all of his hard feelings when he steps onto the court. It shows, because so far, they are 3-0. Also, don't forget about the high-flying **G Desmond Mason**. It seems he is doing much better this year, and he can still put it down with authority. I think it was a good move to ship **F/C Vn Baker** out, and to import **G Kenny**

**Anderson**. He may not be very happy in a reserve role behind Payton, but they could use him as trade bait if anything ever comes up. Though the Sonics lack a little size, I think they can make up for it with their overall game.

Key Players: Gary Payton (21ppg; 4.5rpg; 10.3apg), Desmond Mason (15.5ppg; 5.8rpg; 1.8apg), Brent Barry (15.3ppg; 4.8rpg; 3apg), Rashard Lewis (12.8ppg; 8.3rpg; 2.5apg)

5) Portland Trail Blazers- The Blazers have a lot of talent, but no team chemistry. You can't just put a bunch of guys together and expect them to play in utter harmony. It all goes back to all the players' maturity.

If they haven't matured as individual players and also as a team, don't expect them to get past the second round, better yet even the first. Their best player, **F Rasheed Wallace**, is getting into arguments with referees left and right. This has to stop if they want to get somewhere. Rasheed must realize that he is the one that can make or break this team, so he must take that responsibility seriously.

As for the rest of them, time can only tell what they can do. I like what I see, now that they convinced **C Arvydas Sabonis** out of retirement. He may not move as well as he did a decade ago, but he still has those pure, basketball instincts. **G Derek Anderson**, **G Damon Stoudamire**, and **G Jeff McInnis** have to step up if the Trail Blazer project is to be successful.

Key Players: Rasheed Wallace (22.3ppg; 7.5rpg), Derek Anderson (14ppg; 3rpg; 4apg)

4) San Antonio Spurs- The Admiral, **C David Robinson**, may be retiring next year, but he's still performing well for an old guy. Of course, you would expect the Spurs to be ranked this high only because of last year's MVP, **C/F Tim Duncan**. I really thought J-Kidd was the real MVP, but Duncan really did have an outstanding season. He led the league in triple-doubles, with 69 last year. But he's not the only one in the spotlight. **F Malik Rose** has also sparked the Spurs,

both offensively and defensively. He will probably be next year's starter after Robinson retires, the injured **G Speedy Claxton** being his only competition. **G Tony Parker** has also kept Spurs up.

Improving his shot was a real adventure for this young, European point guard. I would be surprised if this Spurs team were to fall lower than the 4 spot on the Western Conference Standings.

Key Players: Tim Duncan (20.4ppg; 11.6rpg; 3bpg), Malik Rose (14.8ppg; 9.4rpg; .80FT%), Tony Parker (14.2ppg; 4.8apg)

3) Los Angeles Lakers- Shaq and Kobe: same story for the last three years. But this year, **C Shaquille O'Neal** is sitting out the beginning of the season with a bum big toe. This means it is time to shine for the 24 year old superstar, **G Kobe Bryant**. And shine he has done. Adding 15 pounds of muscle to his upper body, it seems Kobe can play any position other than center. Kobe may seem like the team, but there are other key role players keeping them up to the Western standards. **F/G Devean George** has taken his game off the bench to a starting position because of the six game suspension **G/F Rick Fox** is serving for an all out brawl with Sacramento's Doug Christie. You would think they would be even losing more without Fox, but George is filling the gap Fox left with magnificence. No wonder Laker coach Phil Jackson kept him. They have a couple of new faces in **C Soumaila Samake**, **G Tracy Murray**, **G/F Kareem Rush**, and **Jannero Pargo**. It's quite surprising how these new faces have been more dominant than veteran starters **G Derek Fisher** and **F Robert Horry**. I guess the two only shine during playoff time. Anyway, don't expect the three-time champion Los Angeles Lakers will just fade away without Shaq. Kobe is always still a threat.

Key Players: Kobe Bryant (26.6ppg; 12.40rpg; 8apg), Devean George (13.4ppg; 6rpg; 1.2spg), Shaquille O'Neal (out with toe injury)

2) Dallas Mavericks- Not much of a difference on this team, just more experience. With **G Steve Nash** and **F Dirk Nowitzki** leading the way, who knows where this international team's boundaries lie.

Probably farther when we think. They have many talented players, including **G/F Michael Finley** and **G Nick Van Exel**. This team loves to run, and with this much a talented team, running can take you a long way. Key Players: Steve Nash (23ppg; 3.7rpg; 8.7apg), Dirk Nowitzki (22ppg; 10rpg; 4.3apg), Michael Finley (18.3ppg; 2rpg; 2.7apg)

1) Sacramento Kings- The most talent and team chemistry in the West. You have yourself a slashing ball-handler in **G Bobby Jackson**, a sweet-shooting import in **F/G Predrag Stojakovic**, and a talented big man in **F Chris Webber**. Throw in a couple of key guys such as **C Vlade Divac**, **G Doug Christie**, and **F/C Keon Clark**, you've got a great team. But don't forget their real floor leader, **G Mike Bibby** (injured). He'll be out for a while, but he's the reason why they got so deep in the playoffs last season.

This whole team is the real deal. The only flaw I see in this team is that they are too flashy at times when they shouldn't be. They need to distinguish the times when they can throw a behind-the-back pass and a solid, fundamental chest pass. That is what caught up to them in the Western Conference Finals against the Lakers. Other than that, I see this team being the top team in the West.

Key Players: Chris Webber (16ppg; 10.5rpg; 6apg), Bobby Jackson (17.4ppg; 5.2rpg; 3.8apg), Predrag Stojakovic (17.0ppg; 5.8rpg; 3apg)

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