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4-20-2022

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Recommended Citation

Ali, Qasim, "The 2022 NBA Playoff Field" (2022). *The Spectator Online*. 586.
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The 2022 NBA Playoff Field

Qasim Ali, Volunteer Reporter

Have you been looking for a reason to start following NBA basketball? Look no further than the 2022 NBA playoffs.

The 2022 post-season field is easily one of the deepest in terms of quality teams that made the playoffs. But which teams are truly here to raise the Larry O'Brien Trophy? Who are here simply to compete? Which teams are happy to be here at all? This article will break the playoff field down into the contenders, the wild-card competitors and the probable first-round-exit teams.

Not here for a good time, not here for a long time either

East No. 5 seed: Toronto Raptors

The Toronto Raptors aren't poised to go very far this year thanks to their lack of interior defenders. Unfortunately, they drew one of the best post finishers in the NBA in the first round as they look to defeat Joel Embiid and the Philadelphia 76ers.

Look for the Raptors to put up a fight in the first round; let me remind you that just three years ago they hoisted the Larry O'Brien trophy. However, they will likely be outclassed by superior talent near the rim with 76ers' star James Harden being one of the best finishers in the league.

East No. 6 seed: Chicago Bulls

The Chicago Bulls sat at the top of the Eastern Conference just two months ago with a record of 39-21. Injuries decimated their lead, as Chicago would go on to lose 15 of their final 22 games, tumbling to the sixth seed in the playoffs.

The Bulls have also lost all 19 of their regular-season games against the top three teams from either conference. Despite having two All-Stars in Zach LaVine and DeMar DeRozan and a league-leading impenetrable defense at the start of the season, the Bulls have slid. Now, their systematic problems when defending the pick and roll makes them unlikely to make a run.

East No. 8 seed: Atlanta Hawks

The Atlanta Hawks are a feast-or-famine team. They finished second in the league this year in offensive production, but were among the bottom five teams in defense.

Atlanta will face one of the toughest defensive teams in the Miami Heat. Look for the Hawks to try and get their pick and roll game started with Trae Young, but they'll likely be countered once again by the shifty Heat on defense.

West No. 8 seed: New Orleans Pelicans



Just barely sneaking into the playoffs by way of the play-in tournament, the New Orleans Pelicans aren't going to stick around for long. They are ranked in the bottom half of the league in offensive rating and their defense is mediocre at the best. The Pelicans take on the Phoenix Suns who possess the best backcourt in basketball. Without a timetable for forward Zion Williamson to return, the Pelicans will likely disappear from the field in the first round.

The Wild-Cards

East No. 1 seed: Miami Heat

The first-seeded Miami Heat land in the wild-card category because they lack star power. Their fundamental pick and roll defense with Defensive Player of the Year candidate Bam Adebayo will choke out teams like the Hawks in the early rounds. But when it comes time to trade blows with offensive powerhouses like Brooklyn or Philadelphia in a potential seven-game series, they could be in trouble.

East No. 2 seed: Boston Celtics

With 25 wins in their first 50 games, the Boston Celtics looked like they would disappoint for a second straight season.

That narrative didn't last long.

The C's would end the year with 26 wins in their final 32 games, an impressive winning run that skyrocketed them into the second seed in the east. Boston certainly thanks their throttling defense and blowout wins for this turnaround.

The Celtics fall in the Wild-Card category because they face the more potent Brooklyn Nets in the first round. Boston will need their stellar perimeter defense to continue as they look to overcome one of the most dynamic offenses in basketball.

West No. 4 seed: Dallas Mavericks

The Dallas Mavericks are an interesting team to project. They struggled early in the season but found consistency as the year went on. All-Star guard Luka Dončić continues to look like the future of the league and could be poised for a run this year.

The Mavs finished sixth in defensive rating. After making crucial roster changes midseason, the Mavs jumped from 16th in offensive rating to ninth after trading for Spencer Dinwiddie and Dāvis Bertāns.

However, their status as a competitor remains in question. Dončić suffered a calf strain in the final game of the regular season and will miss the beginning of the playoffs. Since Dončić makes that offense go, Dallas will need to find new ways to score while he recovers.

West No. 5 seed: Utah Jazz

The Utah Jazz are one of the best 3-point shooting teams in the NBA. But they have the worst turnover differential of any playoff team, averaging two more turnovers per game than turnovers forced this season.

Utah's upside is limitless, as they are top 10 in both offensive and defensive rating this season. They will need to play a clean game every night to avoid another frustrating exit this year.

West No. 6 seed: Denver Nuggets

The Denver Nuggets thrive from moving the ball efficiently. That starts with having one of the best passing bigs in the history of the NBA in center Nikola Jokić.

The Nuggets finished third in the league in assists as a team too. But with the sheer amount of passing came plenty of turnovers as Denver finished with the fifth-most turnovers this season. Playing a defensive powerhouse in the Golden State Warriors in the first round, they will need to clean up some of the dirty passes to pull off the upset.

West No. 7: Minnesota Timberwolves

The Minnesota Timberwolves are the top-scoring team in the NBA, and for good reason. With young shot creators peppering their roster and a dominant center in Karl-Anthony Towns, the Wolves are going to look to score quickly in the shot clock each time down the floor.

But with their league-leading pace and young roster, they tend to ignore the small details. They

failed to box out often during the season and gave up the sixth-most offensive rebounds to opponents in 2022. Their prioritization of speed has led to miscommunications on defense as well. Minnesota will have to slow it down at times or the little things will be their fall.

The Contenders

East No. 3 seed: Milwaukee Bucks

2021 was a magical year for the Milwaukee Bucks, who secured their second NBA championship fifty years after their first. Their 2022 season showed their critics that last season was not a fluke.

Although they struggled defensively at times unlike in previous seasons, every one of Milwaukee's key contributors improved offensively. Star forward Giannis Antetokounmpo harasses teams inside and has been more than enough to anchor the paint with former All-Star Brook Lopez.

Despite Milwaukee's improvements, they were one of five playoff teams who averaged more turnovers than their opponents in 2022. Clean ball handling and more of their vaunted perimeter defense will be key going forward for the Bucks.

East No. 4 seed: Philadelphia 76ers

The Philadelphia 76ers entered 2022 with heavy expectations. They were lifted when they made a blockbuster trade for former Brooklyn Nets guard James Harden at the mid-season trade deadline.

Harden brought playmaking to a team lacking a true floor general and took the Sixers to the next level. Instead of simply relying on MVP candidate Joel Embiid to score near the rim, the 76ers now have more options to spread the floor thanks to Harden.

But to get Harden, Philadelphia gave up major bench depth. As a result, the 76ers ended up with the third-worst scoring bench in the league. So, the main question for Philadelphia remains: How will they compete when their star players are taking a breather?

East No. 7 seed: Brooklyn Nets

With arguably the most talented ball-handler ever in Kyrie Irving at point guard and four-time scoring champion Kevin Durant, the Brooklyn Nets have a lethal one-two punch to knock out any team in the playoff bracket. Unlike other teams, the Nets' plan can simply be to get the ball in Irving's or Durant's hands and get out of the way.

Despite a prolific scoring offense, the Nets defensive struggles could be catastrophic against the Celtics. But fortunately, they could be getting star defender Ben Simmons back from injury in the next two weeks. Until then, they must leverage their offensive firepower to outscore Boston.

West No. 1 seed: Phoenix Suns

Faced with the demoralizing reality of losing the NBA Finals last season, the Phoenix Suns didn't back down. They compiled a franchise-record 64 wins and dominated the NBA during the regular season. They enter the playoffs as the disputed favorites to win it all.

The Suns finished top-four in both offensive and defensive ratings. Phoenix's backcourt duo of Devin Booker and Chris Paul are arguably the best in the league and they do not need to fret about getting their own shots.

However, their weakness is rebounding. The Suns were consistently out-rebounded by opposing offenses in 2022. If opposing teams are able to capitalize on second-chance opportunities, the Suns could be in trouble.

West No. 2 seed: Memphis Grizzlies

The Memphis Grizzlies, like Minnesota, are among the youngest and fastest teams in the association this season, ranking third in pace in 2022. The Grizzlies are consistently able to force turnovers and score in transition which is key to winning crunch-time games.

What sets them apart however is their elite all-around defense; the Grizzlies are fourth in the league in defensive rating.

West No. 3 seed: Golden State Warriors

The Golden State Warriors finished first in defensive rating 2022, relying on their fluid switching and key double teams all year to harass star players. In addition, the Warriors boast some of the best shot creators in the NBA right now with Stephen Curry and Jordan Poole. It is clear to see why the Dubs are among the best teams in basketball.

The Warriors are 26-1 when totaling 30 assists as a team in 2022 though. So, look for Golden State to emphasize ball movement when running their offense.

The playoffs are a completely different ball game. Some teams improve from the altered pace and atmosphere while others will crumble. Projections and predictions only do so much in the end, but it is essential to get an arm around the unexpected nuances of the game before watching these squads face off.