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2023 NBA Playoffs: New Faces and Favorites Highlight the Field

Qasim Ali, Sports & Opinion Editor

Each April, following a brutal 82-game regular season, 16 NBA teams strap in for a playoff push towards their final goal: A championship.

That last effort has been made even more interesting by the newfound parity in the association. The dismantling of superteams has opened up the playoffs to the point where there is no true favorite to win the whole thing (see: the 2017 Golden State Warriors). Instead, we see a hierarchy of squads vying for any advantage they can find.

Joining the madness are five teams that missed last year's playoffs. One of those squads is the Sacramento Kings, a franchise that had held the longest postseason drought in North American sports—16 years—until their 48-win campaign this season.

Star guard and Clutch Player of the Year De'Aaron Fox has been at the center of the dramatic turnaround. Fox, a notoriously quick guard, averages five points per game in clutch time minutes (meaning the last five minutes of any game where a team trails by five or fewer points)—the highest of any player with more than five clutch games played.

But the Kings aren't the only new playoff team accustomed to battling for each win. The New York Knicks and Cleveland Cavaliers also have a knack for exciting finishes. In fact, the Kings, Cavs and Knicks all rank in the top 10 for most clutch games played this season. Whether you're a die-hard fan or more of a casual viewer, these teams are bringing a nail-biting brand of basketball to the postseason.

You might be thinking, "Close games are exciting to watch, but do these teams have a real chance to contend?"

Well, if defense wins championships, Cleveland may have the best chance to take home some hardware in June. They lead the NBA in defensive rating and points allowed, anchored by Defensive Player of the Year finalist Evan Mobley. With star guards Darius Garland and Donovan Mitchell—the latter of whom scored 71 points in a game this season—leading the charge on offense, Cleveland's first playoff run in decades without Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James may prove fruitful.

In terms of the odds-on favorites to win it all, the Boston Celtics, Milwaukee Bucks and Phoenix Suns headline the pack.

The Celtics, who represented the Eastern Conference in last year's NBA Finals, have made a name for themselves on the defensive side of the ball. Thanks to the stellar individual talent they possess, in former Defensive Player of the Year Marcus Smart and anchor Robert Williams, Boston can lock up any of the premier talent in the playoffs.

All-NBA forward Jayson Tatum has impressed for Boston offensively as well. In fact, he became the first player in the storied Celtics franchise to average 30 points per game for an entire season in 2023.

The Bucks will be stiff competition for the C's in the east. MVP candidate Giannis Antetokounmpo, star two-way guard Jrue Holiday and closer Khris Middleton will be making a bid for their second championship in three seasons. Unfortunately for Milwaukee, Antetokounmpo suffered a back injury in the team's first playoff game with their postseason rival Miami Heat. The Heat, playing the

Bucks in the playoffs for the third time in four seasons, know this team well– spelling danger for Milwaukee.

The Suns find themselves in a similar situation, as they face a brutal first round opponent in the Los Angeles Clippers. Treading water with a record of 32-28 before the All-Star break in February, the Suns, who made the Finals in 2021, traded for future Hall of Famer Kevin Durant. With Durant, one of the most efficient scorers of all-time, the Suns closed the year strong—so strong that they went undefeated in games Durant played in. They'll need Durant, along with star Devin Booker to carry the scoring load as they compete with LA's defensive ace, Kawhi Leonard.

Those three squads will have more chances to contend down the road though. For the Philadelphia 76ers and Denver Nuggets, this may be the end of their unproductive championship windows.

The Sixers put together four 50-win seasons in the last six years but lack even a conference finals appearance in that span. Their Most Valuable Player (MVP) candidate Joel Embiid is in the middle of his prime. But his co-star and offensive orchestrator, guard James Harden, has the option to test free agency after this run. If Harden leaves, the Sixers will need to rethink their entire roster. 2023 will be the most important playoff run Philadelphia has seen in years.

While the Nuggets don't have the same impending roster crisis, their lack of postseason success despite two MVP seasons from center Nikola Jokić is worrying. As the Western Conference's first seed, the Nuggets have major expectations this year. If they fail to succeed despite another wonderful season from Jokić, there could be major changes in the Mile High City this summer.

The stage is set. The expectations are sky-high for some of these franchises, but only one team can take home the Larry O'Brien Trophy. Now that you know their stories and the stakes involved, enjoy the fray.