

Meandering through the NBA with misplaced merriment

SCHAEFER CITY — *There was a life-sized Manute Bol poster in the background, ample beverages and an R.E.M. tape in the foreground, and five National Basketball Association prognosticators in the mental battleground of the living room.*

Moving westward in their mental trek across NBA country, they dissect every divisional contender in their path, from the dankest corners of the Boston Garden to the sunniest spot on the L.A. freeway. To begin, the Atlantic Division . . .

Bob: The Celtics will win the Atlantic Division despite their lack of bench strength. I mean, they have Rick Carlisle playing 20 minutes a game.

Rich: Fred Roberts. Fred Roberts is the answer.

Bob: What's the question? Who's the worst-looking sixth man in basketball?

Mike: But they've also got Dennis Johnson.

Bob: He's ugly too. But the Celtics will win anyway, with Philadelphia close behind. Charles Barkley is going to kick some serious butt around the league.

Mike: But is this really Julius Erving's last year? Or is he just going to tour the league and get all his going-away presents and then decide to stay like Kareem did?

Rich: With the Doc gone, I have seen the future of the league and his name is Spud Webb.

Bob: The Hawks are going to be good. Spud won't get all the time he got last year, but the Hawks will win. I don't see anyone challenging the Hawks in the Central.

Art: The Bucks! Jack Sikma!

Bob: Jack Sikma is a disease — just look at what he's done to Don Nelson's figure since he's been there.

Art: The Bulls can take it — Granville Waiters, Jordan.

Bob: You can't win with a bald center playing underneath.

Mike: Jordan might not even be the best player in his division.

Bob: Whaddya mean? Who else? He's the best player in the league.

Mike: Best scoring player. If you want to talk about everything else, I'd take Sidney Moncrief.

Art: Does Jordan elevate the play of those around him?

Bob: You want to elevate Granville Waiters?

Art: That's the difference between Jordan and Bird. Bird makes other players around him play better.

Bob: He makes other players around him white.

Art: The Cavs will be good this year. Ron Harper, Brad Daugherty, John Williams, with Keith Lee and Mark Price off the bench.

Joe: Who've we missed? . . . The Pistons.

Bob: How does Bill Laimbeer lead the league in rebounds every year?

Art: Because he gets to work against Chuck Nevitt in practice. That toughens him up.

Mike: But Vinnie Johnson sure had some playoff series a couple years ago.

Art: And remember when Buzz Peterson hit those 11 straight shots against LSU?

Mike: Okay, let's go around the room

and pick the two division winners in the East and which one will go on to the finals.

Art: The Celtics and the Bucks. The Celtics will win.

Rich: Boston and Milwaukee. Boston.

Joe: Philadelphia and Atlanta. Philadelphia.

Mike: Boston and Milwaukee. Milwaukee will finally go to the finals.

Bob: Boston and the Hawks. The Hawks will take the East. Let's head west, Midwest division.

Art: There's one word — Houston.

Bob: Houston followed closely by Dallas. Dallas is in for a good year. Al Wood's playing well for them.

Rich: Yeah, and they still have Derrick Harper.

Art: Derrick "Timex" Harper. A few years ago they were tied late in the game with the Lakers in the playoffs and he dribbled out the clock.

Bob: And then he tried to give Dick Motta a high five.

Art: Don't look past Houston, even though they don't have a point guard. They have Rodney McCray — one of the most underrated players in the league.

Bob: And they have the best player in the league for what he is supposed to do — Akeem Olajuwon.

Mike: In kick-boxing basketball maybe Akeem would be the best.

Art: How 'bout the Denver Nuggets? They play great for the talent they have, they just don't have that much.

Joe: Then there's Sacramento.

Art: They retired No. 6 for the fans

at the beginning of the year for being the sixth man. After one year!

Mike: How 'bout that Joey Kleine? Can he flat play or what?

Bob: We should put Joe Kleine, Greg Dreiling and Jon Koncak in a bag, mix them up and see if anyone can tell them apart.

Art: The Big White Guys. Anyway, I have seen the future of the NBA and he's playing for the Spurs — Alvin Robertson.

Mike: He's everything Darryl Walker ever wanted to be.

Joe: Is that it? We doing the West now?

Mike: What's in the West besides Los Angeles?

Bob: There's the best backcourt in the NBA at Golden State with Chris Mullin and Sleepy Floyd.

Rich: Best backcourt for drug pushers.

Art: Great cast of characters there at Golden State. You've got Chris Washburn — "We're building our franchise around Chris Washburn."

Bob: They still have Joe Barry Carroll — haven't been able to trade him yet.

Art: I think Joe Barry's taken Washburn under his wing. You see why Washburn isn't starting anymore? He missed one practice and was "inattentive" at another.

Joe: Was he watching the cheerleaders or something?

Art: You gotta think the Lakers will win it again.

Joe: I think Jack Nicholson will have a big impact.

Mike: It's hard to overestimate what he does for that team.

Joe: Did you know he has season tickets for the L.A. Clippers so he can have good seats when the Lakers play there?

Art: The Clippers? Benoit Benjamin is the most appropriately numbered player in the league — double zero. And they have pretty good management. You gotta like a team that finishes in fourth place and their pick in the draft is Duane Polee from Pepperdine. These guys have got a plan.

Rich: And their No. 1 pick form last year? They traded it to Philly for Joe "Jelly Bean" Bryant.

Bob: All right, time to pick the western finalists and the NBA champions.

Art: Lakers take an over-confident Houston, who succumb to the disease of complacency. Then they beat the Celtics 4-0 in the championships.

Rich: Denver will beat the Lakers and Boston will beat Denver 4-2.

Joe: Lakers will beat Dallas and then take the Sixers in six.

Mike: Lakers over Dallas in seven. And because Alton Lister is now in Seattle, the Bucks will win it all.

Kareem will be driven into retirement by Paul Mokeski.

Bob: Houston will beat the Lakers in six and the Hawks will beat Houston in seven. Spud Webb will wear a championship ring.

Mike: Only if he buys it from Craig Hodges.

Rich: I have seen the future . . .

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