

Pros

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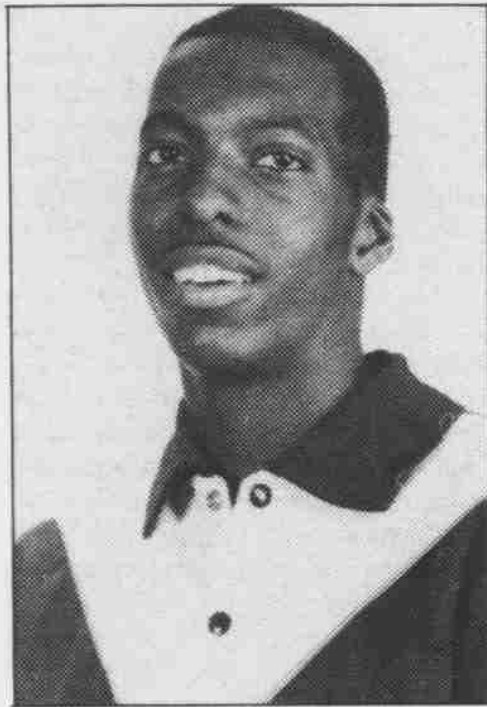
James Edwards and Bill Laimbeer are the league's best pure-shooting centers and have the banger outlook. Joe Dumars (17.2) may have surpassed Isiah Thomas (18.2) last year, and both are backed by the often unstoppable Vinnie Johnson. The Pistons received almost no offense from their forwards, but Mark Aguirre should help and Dennis Rodman and John Salley provide the intangibles.

2. Chicago Bulls — They made the Eastern Conference finals, fired their coach, and should be even better this year. Michael Jordan (32.5, 8.1 reb., 8 assists) alone makes this team a championship contender. B.J. Armstrong needs to contribute right away as the only real point guard. Ditto for Stacey King up front. Scottie Pippen (14.4) and Horace Grant (8.9 reb) are blossoming, and Bill Cartwright had an excellent playoffs, but the rest of the ranks are thin.

3. Cleveland Cavaliers — The Cavs exploded on the scene last year, but will limp into 1989. Mike Sanders went to the Pacers, while Larry Nance (17.2) and Brad Daugherty (18.9, 9.2) will be out for at least a month after surgery. Daugherty is one of the best, but is still soft and flopped in the playoffs. The injuries will give John Williams a chance to shine, but the front line is thin. Mark Price has become one of the NBA's best point guards (18.9, 8.5 assists) and deadliest shooters. Maturity can only make Ron Harper (18.6) even better.

4. Atlanta Hawks — Mike Fratello could be under fire if this talented team fades again. The Hawks boast the NBA's best big men, led by Moses Malone (20.2, 11.8). He should benefit from a little rest provided by Kevin Willis and Jon Koncak. Dominique Wilkins (26.2) is still a superstar, but had trouble meshing with Moses. The Hawks' problems are at guard. Glenn Rivers plays excellent defense and can score, but averaged fewer than four assists.

5. Indiana Pacers — Last year's strong finish may point this franchise



John Salley, a few years ago

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Western Conference, Midwest Division

1. Dallas Mavericks — After last year's disappointment, the Mavs should return to their 50-win ways. James Donaldson (injury) and Roy Tarpley (drugs, injury) are huge question marks for a potentially excellent front line. Adrian Dantley didn't mesh at all last season but is one of the NBA's best scorers ever. Versatile Sam Perkins comes off the bench with bangers Herb Williams and Randy White. Rolando Blackman (19.7) and Derek Harper (17.3) are a solid backcourt duo.

2. Utah Jazz — The Jazz must recover from their stunning playoff exit last year. Karl Malone (29.1, 10.7 reb) is simply the league's best power forward, and John Stockton (17.1, 13.6 assists) is only a little Magic away from being the best point guard. The NBA's best sixth man, Thurl Bailey (19.5), may back up rookie Blue Edwards. Mark Eaton is a dominant defensive force.

3. San Antonio Spurs — Larry Brown's dreams have come true. With the addition of Sean Elliot and David

Robinson, the Spurs will be the NBA's most improved team. Throw in Terry Cummings (22.9) and Frank Brickowski at forward and Willie Anderson (18.6) and Maurice Cheeks in the backcourt, and you have the rest of

the Midwest shaking in their high-tops. The bench is nonexistent.

4. Houston Rockets — It's hard to believe a team with this much tal-

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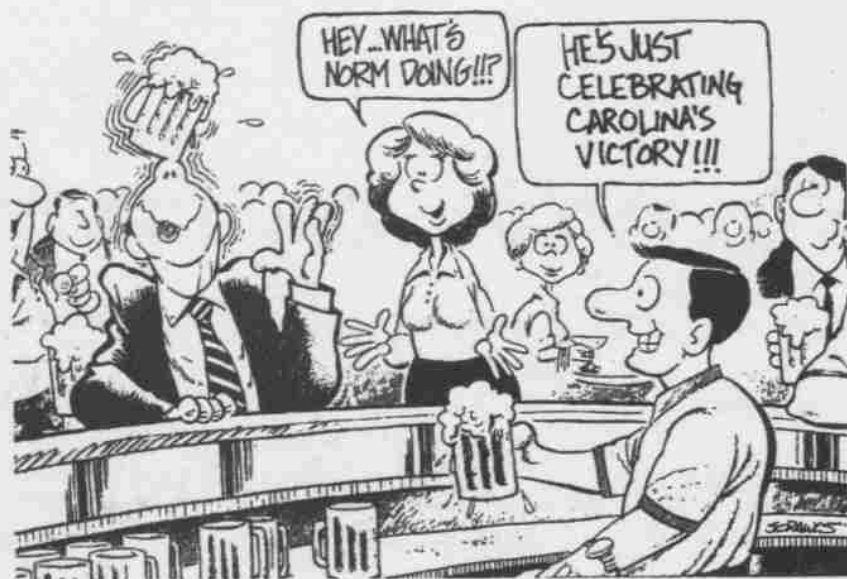
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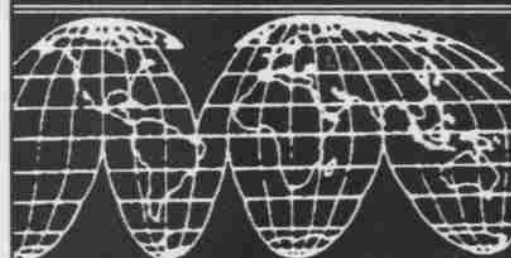


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