

Pros

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ent can't seem to put it together. Akeem Olajuwon (24.8, 13.5) has cemented himself as the NBA's best big man. Otis Thorpe (16.7, 9.6) and Sleepy Floyd (14.2, 8.6 assists) form a solid core.

5. Denver Nuggets — Doug Moe needs to right this team on the slide. Alex English (26.5) and Walter Davis (15.6) can still shoot it, but are no longer spry. Three-master Michael Adams (18.5) combines with Fat Lever (19.7, 9.3 reb., 7.8 assists) for an excellent backcourt. The Nuggets' physical game is a joke.

6. Charlotte Hornets — The Hornets will be worse than they were last year. They lost two of their top rebounders (Tim Kempton, Earl Cureton), their second-leading assist man (Michael Holton) and the leadership and clutch play of Robert Reid (14.7). The only addition who will contribute significantly is J.R. Reid. They will rely on three very streaky shooters: Kelly Tripucka (22.6), Rex Chapman (16.9) and Dell Curry. Tyrone Bogues is more of a liability than an asset, and Kurt Rambis (9.4) is the only front-liner with an idea of how to rebound.

7. Minnesota Timberwolves — Veteran CBA coach Bill Musselman will lead an odd collection of players who were hurt by the loss of Mahorn. The Wolves built with role players from winning teams. Steve

Johnson has proved to be a quality NBA center, and he should speed the development of Gary Leonard. Toni Campbell, Brad Lohaus and Tyrone Corbin are solid forwards, but the backcourt is a question mark.

Pacific Division

1. Los Angeles Lakers — It's hard to pick against a team that didn't lose in the playoffs until the finals. They will look different without Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, but this has been Magic Johnson's team for a long time. Johnson (22.5, 7.9, 12.8 assists) was the NBA's MVP for the second time. Mr. Postseason James Worthy (20.5, 7.5) and Byron Scott (19.6) carry the rest of the offensive load. A.C. Green (9 reb.) bangs the board, and Mychal Thompson and Yugoslavian-import Vlade Divac should take over for Jabbar.

2. Phoenix Suns — They went 55-27 last year, the NBA's third-most dramatic turnaround ever. Once again, however, they will have no inside force, and Tom Chambers (25.7, 8.4) may have to play center. Kevin Johnson (20.4, 12.2 assists), who was unstoppable last year, is the perfect director of the rest of this interchangeable-part, run-and-gun team. Eddie Johnson (21.5) and Dan Majerle are the best off of a weak bench.

3. Golden State Warriors — This team is really weird. They have absolutely no big men (unless you count

Manute Bol or Uwe Blab), but Don Nelson could probably win with the Seven Dwarfs. Who do they draft? Tim Hardaway, a point guard. The Warriors closely resemble Phoenix — lots of 6-5 guys. Rejuvenated Chris Mullin (26.5) and Mitch Richmond (22) lead the way. Russian Sarunas Marciulionis is an NBA scorer.

4. Seattle SuperSonics — This team should win, maybe experience is all they need. Dale Ellis (27.5) leads the offense, but the strength comes from the front line (if motivated). Michael Cage is an excellent rebounder, but will have to play even bigger than 6-9 at center. Xavier McDaniel (20.5), who has gone from an inside force to a jumpshooter, needs to become a go-to man. Derrick McKey is so versatile he has to be

reminded to shoot. Nate McMillan is big question mark, as are draftees Dana Barros and Shawn Kemp.

5. Portland Trail Blazers — After winning 53 games two years ago, Portland slid in at 39-43 last year. Rick Adelman needs to work on the attitude. Kevin Duckworth (18.1, 8) was hurt by the lack of an outside threat, which should come from Byron Irvin and Yugoslavia's Drazen Petrovic. Buck Williams (13, 9.4) finally moves to a good team, but it may be too late. Jerome Kersey (19.2) and Clyde Drexler (27.2, 7.9) have problems with their attitudes and with each other. Terry Porter (17.7, 9.4 assists) is a blossoming point guard.

6. Sacramento Kings — The Kings traded away a lot of talent, but should be better. Wayman Tisdale

(17.5) is a small center, but found new life with the Kings (9.6 rebounds in 31 games). He will move to forward when Pervis Ellison is healthy. Danny Ainge (17.5) has matured into a leader, and Kenny Smith (17.3, 7.7 assists) needs to harness his ability.

7. Los Angeles Clippers — Team Jinx did it again. Danny Manning is out indefinitely, and Danny Ferry jumped to Italy. Benoit Benjamin looked like he was ready to finally dominate (20, 10, in his last 22 games), then held out. Charles Smith (16.3) had an outstanding rookie year, but kept getting hurt. Reggie Williams was a bust, and future star Gary Grant is turnover-prone. Ken Norman (18.1, 8.3) is a lone solid spot. Jay Edwards was a draft steal, and CBA All-Star Carlton McKinney should help.

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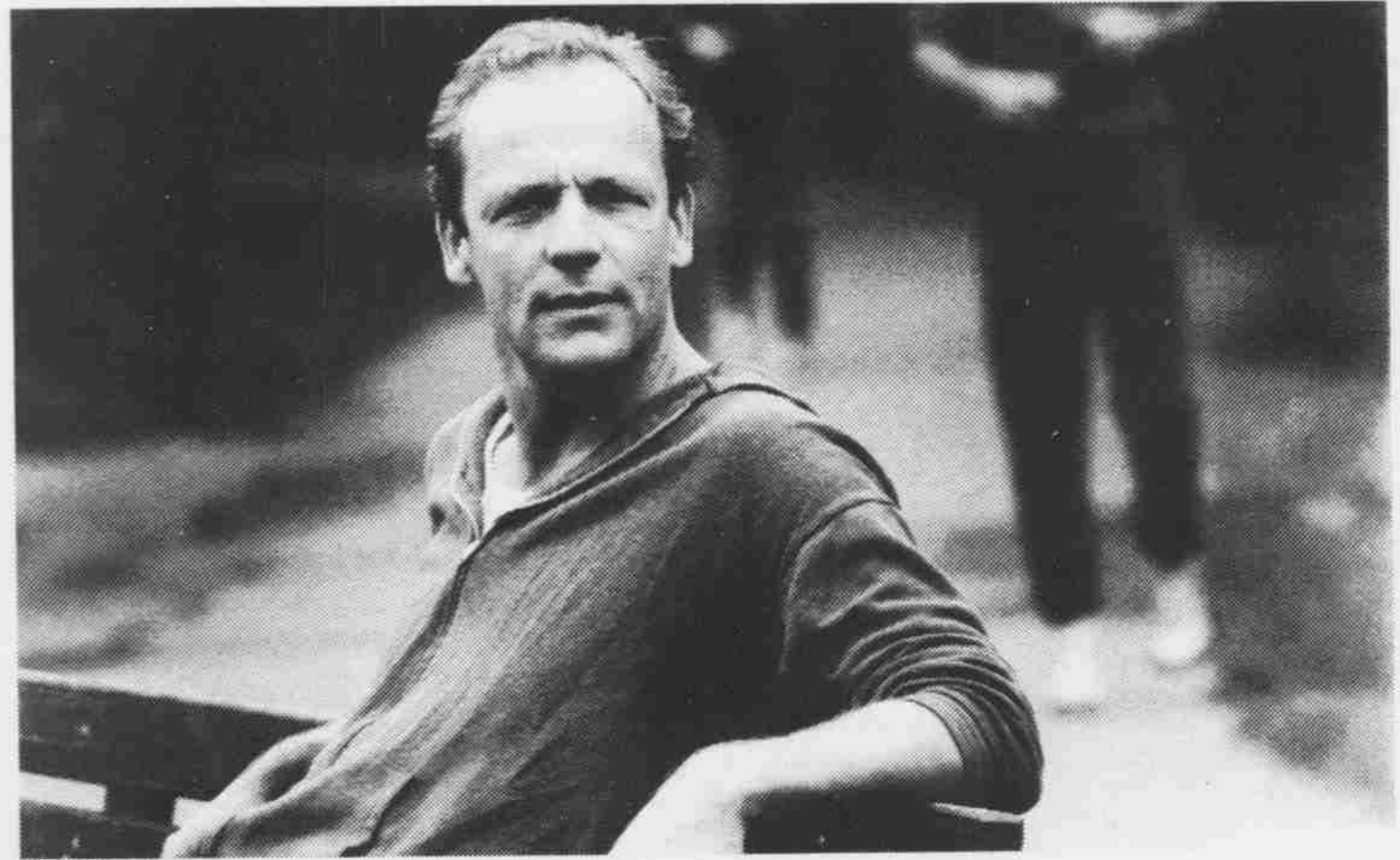
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