

SPORTS

Offseason acquisitions will send Lakers back to NBA final dance

Editor's note: This is the second in a two-part series

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Whoever advances to the NBA finals from the Eastern Conference will face a great team that has come together at the right time. Only a team loaded with talent playing its best could survive the Western Conference playoffs. Six teams from the West — Utah, Los Angeles, Dallas, San Antonio, Phoenix and Portland — have the capability to win it all.

Which one of these superteams will prevail? The Lakers. After watching Detroit celebrate the last two championships, the team of the '80s is ready to capture its first title in the '90s. Los Angeles improved its talent by adding Sam Perkins and Terry Teagle to a team that already had Magic Johnson, James Worthy, Bryon Scott and A.C. Green. If Mychal Thompson and Vlade Divac can provide enough defense and rebounding at center, the Lakers will again contest for the crown. Wouldn't it be great to see Magic leading his troops past the Suns and the Spurs for the Western Conference crown only to face Michael Jordan and his fellow Bulls in the NBA finals?

Here's a team-by-team look at the Western Conference in order of predicted finish.

PACIFIC DIVISION

1. Los Angeles Lakers. Just when the entire NBA was writing off the team of the '80s, the Lakers quickly rebuilt themselves into a powerhouse. By stealing center Divac in last year's draft and signing the incredibly versatile Perkins and guard Teagle, Los Angeles is again loaded. Magic continues to run the show. Perkins is joined by Worthy and Green to form a formidable forward triumvirate. Scott and Thompson must rebound from off-years for first-year coach Mike Dunleavy.

2. Phoenix Suns. Phoenix has the most potent scoring backcourt in the NBA. Kevin Johnson, from his point guard position, is able to nail the 22-footer and distribute the ball to his teammates. Tom Chambers is almost impossible to stop at small forward; he's too quick for big men and too big for quick players. Jeff Hornacek blends in perfectly as a superb spot-up shooter and defender. The Suns get plenty of rebounding and defense from the inside tandem of Kurt Rambis and Mark West, but only a combined 15 ppg.

3. Portland Trailblazers. There is no weakness in the 'Blazers' starting lineup. Terry Porter, Clyde Drexler, Jerome Kersey, Kevin Duckworth and Buck Williams are all legitimate NBA starters. Portland's problem is depth — or a lack thereof. Guard Danny Young and center Wayne Cooper were only marginally effective in their reserve roles. Acquiring Danny Ainge should help, but not if he shoots 44 percent from the field as he did last season. The Trailblazers overcame the injury bug well last year, but they can't afford any this year if they plan to contend.

4. Seattle SuperSonics. Gary Payton may have the biggest impact of any rookie. The Bulls' Michael Jordan was impressed by his tough defense and consistent scoring in preseason games. Payton will try to get the ball into the hands of Dale Ellis, one of the NBA's best three-point shooters. The Sonics also have Xavier McDaniel and the versatile Derrick McKey to look to for scoring. Michael Cage, although a great rebounder, is playing out of position at center, and Olden Polynice helps very little.

5. Los Angeles Clippers. The Clippers have amazing young talent. Ron Harper and Danny Manning could both develop into the NBA's elite class. Someone must motivate center Benoit Benjamin — he'll follow a superb performance with a mediocre one. Charles

Smith is developing well into an offensive force at power forward. Gary Grant gives the team a quality point guard. Rookie Bo Kimble must play well until Harper returns from a knee injury for the Clippers to have a shot at the playoffs.

6. Golden State Warriors. The Warriors have an incredible backcourt. If not for David Robinson, point guard Tim Hardaway would have had a strong case for rookie-of-the-year honors last year. Grouped with Mitch Richmond (22.1 ppg) and Chris Mullin (25.1 ppg), Golden State has its 1, 2 and 3 positions locked up for years. The Warriors tried to remedy the anemic inside play of 32-year-old Alton Lister by drafting rebounding terror Tyrone Hill of Xavier and Iowa 7-footer Les Jepsen.

7. Sacramento Kings. The Kings have a lot of problems. They plan to rely on Miami reject Rory Sparrow or maybe rookie Travis Mays to lead the team at point guard. Are they really expecting to start Mays and Bobby Hansen, a former Jazz role player, in the backcourt? The frontcourt consists of rookie Duane Causewell — a player with absolutely no scoring ability — and another former Utah backup, Eric Leckner. The only bright spot is at forward where Wayman Tisdale, Antoine Carr and Lionel Simmons play.

MIDWEST DIVISION

1. San Antonio Spurs. The Spurs have the league's best starting lineup. David Robinson and Terry Cummings are both all-star-caliber players. Robinson runs the floor better than any other center and improves defensively with each game. Sean Elliot and Rod Strickland are young, talented players that will lead the team for years. The Spurs may have the steal of the draft in 7-2 Dwayne Schintzius — that is if he doesn't disrupt unity. With Willie Anderson and Paul Pressey, the Spurs are loaded.

2. Utah Jazz. Utah's starting lineup is not bad, either. Karl Malone continues to set the standards for power forwards. John Stockton is the perfect point guard for this team — able to hit the open jump shot and distribute the ball on the break. With the addition of scorer Jeff Malone, some of the offensive pressure will be taken off Malone. Utah always has talent, but the Mailman and friends always buckle under playoff pressure.

3. Dallas Mavericks. Dallas could be good, but that is conditional on a few

big "ifs." If Randy White can effectively replace the loss of Sam Perkins, if James Donaldson's ailing knees stay healthy, and if Roy Tarpley can stay off drugs, the Mavericks will be tough. Dallas may start Derek Harper, Fat Lever, and Alex English in a three-guard offense.

4. Houston Rockets. Akeem Olajuwon continues to be the main man. Olajuwon's offensive numbers (24.3 ppg) speak for themselves, but he was also extremely upset that he was not named Defensive MVP last season. The Rockets brought in Kenny Smith to complement veteran Sleepy Floyd in the backcourt. Vernon Maxwell played well after being traded from San Antonio. The Rockets need more than just rebounding out of forwards Otis Thorpe and Buck Johnson.

5. Minnesota Timberwolves. Minnesota makes up in desire and defense what it lacks in talent. Pooh Richardson, Tyrone Corbin and Tony Campbell comprise a competent perimeter game. But power forwards Tod Murphy and Sam Mitchell are not quality starters. The Timberwolves have a plethora of marginal centers: Randy Breuer, Gary Leonard and rookie Felton Spencer. All are taller than seven feet, and Spencer has the raw talent to develop into a good player. Minnesota will be lucky to win 25 games again this year.

6. Denver Nuggets. What is Paul Westhead thinking? This seems to be the pertinent question in Denver, where opponents often thrashed the Nuggets by 30 or 40 points in the preseason. Denver will certainly score and give up the most points of any team this season. Rookie guard Chris Jackson blends in well with the run-and-gun system, but can he defend NBA point guards adequately? Denver's decision to ship veteran all-star Fat Lever may hurt it in the short run. Orlando Woolridge is not the team's post-up savior.

7. Orlando Magic. Rookie Dennis Scott should greatly help this team. But great shooters with little else to offer (read: Glen Rice) have trouble adjusting at first. The Magic are incredibly weak at center. Greg Kite and Mark Acres are potential starters! The forward duo of Terry Catledge and Sidney Green are solid players that will combine for 30 points and 15 rebounds a game. With Reggie Theus gone to New Jersey, Scott, Catledge and second-year big guard/small forward Nick Anderson must pick up the scoring slack.

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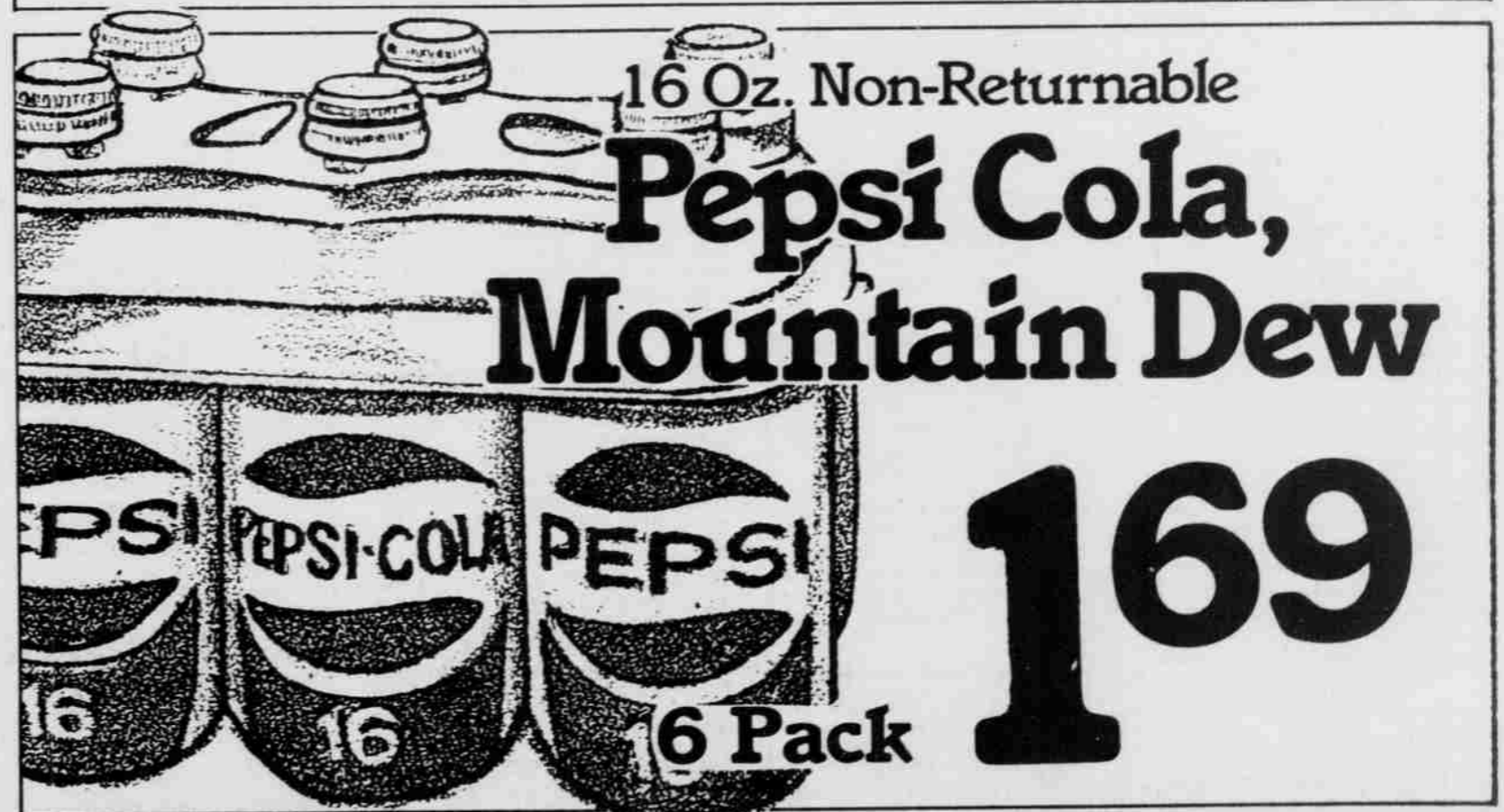
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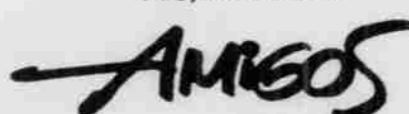
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