The Cleveland Cavaliers 2007-2008 season tips off tonight at The Q as the Dallas Mavericks come into town for a 8 PM Halloween opener for both teams. The Cavs have been disrespected in the national preseason predictions, with NOT ONE of the 18 writers polled by ESPN picking the Cavs to successfully defend their Eastern Conference title this season in a piece that came out this week. What do our writers think? We all go on the record in this preseason roundtable.

The Cavaliers season tips off tonight at home against the Dallas Mavericks at 8:00 p.m. (ESPN) at The Q. You could not ask for a better opener to the season, as tonight's matchup is a possible NBA Finals preview as you have two of the best teams in each of the Eastern and Western Conferences squaring off against one another.

The Cavaliers made a long playoff run last year that culminated in the franchise's first ever trip to the NBA Finals. Still, there are some skeptics out there whether last year was a fluke run because of one of the easiest roads to the NBA Finals in playoff history, or if it truly was the coming out party for LeBron and the Cavaliers.

The Cavaliers had a relatively quiet offseason, which for a team that got swept in the NBA Finals is somewhat puzzling. The Cavaliers had no draft picks, and really did not do anything in free agency until late, and one of their key big men Anderson Varejao is still missing in action holding out for a new contract.

So, what do we make of all this as the season gets rolling? We polled our writers

here at TheClevelandFan.com to get their take on how things will shake out for the Cavaliers and in the league this season.

(Note: These were written before the announced Sasha signing late yesterday afternoon)

John Hnat: I'm predicting that the Cavs will win in the mid-40s, will be a lower-tier seed, and will be a first-round playoff exit ... IF they stand pat.

IF they sign Varejao, their chances for success go up quite a bit. Varejao does not deserve $10 million per season, but he is the Cavs' most valuable big man. He is the key to everything they do defensively; without him, the shortcomings of the other big men are magnified tremendously.

IF they sign Pavlovic ... their chances for success won't be affected. Danny Ferry addressed this issue well by signing the cheaper, and quite possibly better, Devin Brown.

IF Ferry can trade for a legitimate PG by the trade deadline ... then the Cavs will be the proverbial "team nobody wants to face" come playoff time, and April and May of 2008 will be a lot more fun.

Right now, it's looking like a Spurs - Bulls final to me, with the Spurs bringing home the hardware yet again.

Rich Swerbinsky: By the end of the year the Cavs will have Varejao in tow and will be a better team than the one that beat Detroit to go to the Finals last season.

But will it be good enough this year? Hard to say.

The Cavs play defense, have a "stops" mindset, and have a superstar player capable of carrying the team on his back (Cle/Det, game 5). This is going to make them a very tough out for anyone come April.

Problem is, they have a players coach and their star/leader doesn't treat regular season games like playoff games. They don't play hard every night. LeBron takes games off. Mike Brown doesn't have the balls to demand it.

This will cause them to end up with a middle seed, and potentially be faced with

the prospects of playing a Detroit, Chicago, or Miami in the 1st rd.

When push comes to shove, there's still no great team in the East. Alot of very solid teams, but no great ones. I'd argue that San Antonio, Dallas, Phoenix, Utah, and potentially Houston are all better than the East's best team.

I think the Cavs will win 45-47 games, get a 5-6 seed ... but still have a very good chance to lose in the Finals again. My official prediction? They will lose to the Mavericks in five games in the Finals.

Erik Cassano: Last season, the Cavs were a team built on delicate chemistry. Over the course of the season, the players ever-so-slowly warmed to the idea of Mike Brown's dirty-work defensive philosophy. When they plodded through three rounds of the playoffs, defense actually became their identity for a short period of time.

As the new season gets underway, however, it looks like that chemistry has been shattered and this is a team once again searching for an identity. Defensive breakdowns in the preseason would lead an observer to believe that the Cavs treated defense like a kid treats veggie casserole at dinner. They finished eating the stuff that was good for them because Mom demanded it. Now, they want to raid the Oreo stash and run the floor.

That won't fly with Brown, who will once again try to refocus his team on defense. This might become a yearly event.

As much as Brown tries to impose his will on this team, the Cavs will always take on the demeanor of LeBron James for as long as he continues to wear the uniform. That can be a very good thing when LeBron is inspired to play the breathtaking brand of virtuoso basketball we all know he is capable of. However, it was also a double-edged sword when LeBron openly grumbled about a lack of moves by Danny Ferry this offseason, and conceded that the team was at a

disadvantage without Anderson Varejao and Sasha Pavlovic.

The bottom line is LeBron doesn't seem to have a very enthusiastic attitude about the upcoming season. The late signing of Pavlovic might help raise his spirits a bit, but when the King is trudging into the season, don't expect his teammates to provide the antidote. And don't expect a lot of wins in the short term.

Having said that, I'll make my prediction under the assumption that Varejao signs relatively early in the season, and both he and Pavlovic reclaim their roles on the team.

The Cavs will go 48-34 and finish in third place in a tightly-packed Central Divsion. They'll make it to the second round, where the Pistons will exact revenge for last year's playoff upset.

For the record: My take on the revamped Boston Celtics, whom a lot of people are picking to go all the way to the Finals: Yes, the East is ridiculously weak, but it still usually takes at least a year for a team that has undergone that extreme of a makeover to jell. Boston will make the playoffs, maybe even win a round, but I don't see them getting past Detroit. Not yet.

Conference Finals: Detroit over Chicago, San Antonio over Dallas

NBA Finals: San Antonio over Detroit in six. Spurs win back-to-back titles for the first time.

Tony Lastoria: The Cavaliers made a great run in the playoffs last year, and made it to their first ever NBA Finals. But, after the euphoria of the fun wore off, and the offseason progressed, it became increasingly clear the Cavaliers may be in line for a step back this season.

The Cavaliers did very little this offseason to improve the team. Yes, they were restricted because of the salary cap, no draft picks, and nothing really available in free agency. But, for a team with the same flaws present they had going into each of their last two playoff seasons, it would have been wise to maybe make a few changes in the offseason with a trade or two. Apparently, Ferry is going to stick it out and make those changes on the fly during this season.

The Cavaliers got a huge break last year in the playoffs with the #2 seed. They played arguably the worst team in the league in Washington in the first round, and a weak New Jersey team in the second round. That meant they were only tested when they got to the Eastern Conference Finals against Detroit, and they historically had given Detroit fits in the past and history rang true again with their series win over the Pistons. Reality set in with the four game sweep against the Spurs.

The first half of this season is going to answer a lot of questions. Was the playoff run last year a mirage? Or, was it the start of bigger and better things? Unfortunately, until this season plays out some, I have to side with the former. The Cavaliers got a lot of breaks with the playoffs last year, and I do not see them getting them this year. Plus, while the Cavaliers did little to improve, the teams around them continue to get better.

The Cavaliers finish the season 48-34, get the fifth seed, and get bounced in the first round. The Finals: Detroit vs. Dallas

Hiko: For the sake of argument, let's assume that Sasha Pavolovic and Andy Varejao rejoin the team. Essentially, they are the same team as last year. One could say that both Daniel Gibson and Shannon Brown will have another year's experience (and with Shannon, any contribution would be like having a brand new player). So it would be understandable to assume that this year's team will be just as good - if

not better - than last year's Eastern Conference Champion.

Unfortunately, I don't see them repeating as Eastern Conference Champs. The Bulls continue to improve, Dwayne Wade will be back for the Heat, the Pistons will still be good, and the Celtics should be much better. The Cavaliers run was fantabulous last season, but this is still a one star team with serious issues on offense. And there's not much to trade, since there's only one player on the Cavs that's really that marketable. I see them being about a four seed and probably getting knocked off in the second round of the playoffs.

In the East, I see Chicago and Detroit making it to the Conference Finals, with the Suns and Spurs doing the same in the West. Suns finally break through, but the Bulls do not, so we have another totally underwhelming NBA Championship series featuring Phoenix and Detroit, and the Pistons get their pride ripped to shred in a quick 5 games.

Ben Cox: I'd say the Cavs will at least match last season's 50-32 record (even without Varejao and Sasha) simply due to Daniel Gibson starting from Day 1 and LeBron's continued growth (he's allegedly in great shape and playing in the post). I don't think Varejao and Sasha will set them back (at least as far as their record goes) because they blew some games to bad teams last season (the Atlanta's, Boston's and New York's of the league). But that's the thing with this Cavalier squad, you don't know how they'll show up on any given night. They have the talent to win 55 games, but they have to stomp on the bad teams and not let up (and they haven't done this in recent years).

As for Varejao and Pavlovic, they really have only three options. 1) Show up before the season starts. 2) Show up at some point mid season. 3) Hold out the entire season. Scenario one is looking less and less likely. Scenario three would be a really dumb move on their part, as the Cavs will still have their rights next summer. So scenario

two is probably the most likely and I'd say Pavlovic will break first, as he is the more unproven of the two and has more to lose (since teams are more likely to overpay for a big man than a swing man).

I fully expect Shannon Brown to take Pavlovic's place in the rotation (which is why I see Sasha breaking ranks before Anderson). He's athletic and I think he can play (remember, the Cavs were high on Daniel Gibson but still took the chance on losing him to grab Brown). I think this will be LeBron's year to win the MVP. He showed off an improved jump shot in the World Championships, Brian Windhorst has reported that he's actually playing in the post in the preseason and he even had laser eye surgery (so imagine he'll be able to now that he can see). Larry Hughes will wear out his welcome this season. His jumper is terrible and we're beginning to see Cavs fans turn on him. I hope it doesn't get too ugly, but I fear it might.

The Kobe Bryant saga will (obviously) have a huge impact on the season. If he goes to the Knicks, they'll make the playoffs, but as a lower seed. If he goes to the Bulls, I say they take the conference. If he goes to the Suns or the Mavericks, they'll take the West (and if I'm the Suns I'm calling the Lakers every 5 minutes offering Barbosa, Marion and Diaw for Kobe and Odom).

Kobe is the wild card, but as things stand currently, I think the Cavs will face the Bulls in the ECF. I'm not even remotely worried about the Celtics. The three stars are old and they can't afford an injury. Unfortunately, both Pierce and Allen missed significant time last season and Garnett has a ton of miles on him. Plus they have no bench or point and they're still coached by Doc Rivers. Scary! The Western Conference Finals will pit the Suns against the Spurs. Fortunately, I think the Cavs will be in the Finals again. Unfortunately, I think we'll see a similar beating put down by the Spurs.

Todd Dery: So our Cleveland Cavaliers are going into the season as

the Eastern Conference Champions. I hope you all enjoyed it last year while you could, because I think its regression time in Cleveland. 2006-07 was the perfect storm. Finishing the last day in the two spot, missing the Heat and the Bulls, and knocking off the Pistons in the Eastern Finals.

Welcome to 2007-08, where GM Danny Ferry did nothing to improve the team in the offseason. They will start the season without three key members of the rotation, Anderson Varajao, Sasha Pavlovic and Eric Snow. Their minutes will be taken by a combination of Dwayne Jones and Cedric Simmons in the frontcourt, and Shannon Brown and Damon Jones in the backcourt. I think Varajao eventually signs a long term deal and we won't be seeing Pavlovic in a Cavs uniform again. Shannon Brown's play will assure that.

Somehow, Ferry will have to add a piece or two during the season, because the way the current roster is constructed, their is little depth and not nearly enough talent sans LeBron James to make another deep run, even in the weak Eastern Conference. At best, this team is a 4-5 seed, and that is only because they have James. I think the Cavs lose the 4-5 first round matchup to the Orlando.

Eastern Conference: Toronto over Detroit

Western Conference: Phoenix over San Antonio
Finals: Phoenix over Toronto

Brian McPeek: This is a Cavaliers team that has regressed from the

team that appeared in the NBA Finals in June. Certainly, you can't argue that they're more talented. They didn't get better through the draft and they didn't get substantially better through free agency. And you're also now dealing with the absence of two key performers from last year's club in Sasha Pavlovic and Anderson Varejao. No telling when those guys are back in the fold.

The Cavs also return aging veterans Eric Snow (after he recovers from knee surgery), Zydrunas Ilgauskas, Damon Jones and Donyell Marshall. None of these guys is getting younger or better at this stage of their careers. And that leaves you with Lebron, Drew Gooden and a couple of kids in Daniel Gibson and Shannon Brown to count on. If you're not getting better in th NBA, you're getting worse. LeBron will will this team into the playoffs as a 5 seed or so and he'll see numbers rise across the board in doing so, but I can't see the magic of last season replaying itself.

I also can't see the Cavs crossing the 50 win mark this season. I'd love to say last year's run gave them the experience and the motivation to reach that same level. But talent reigns supreme over a playoff run from last season and the Cavs stood still in that department while others in the East improved. Expect the Cavs to make the playoffs but drop out in the Eastern Conference semi-finals despite AV and Sasha returning 20 games or into the season.

Gibson and Brown will make some strides, Gooden will show up once or twice a week and the Cavs will hope to clear some cap room and some roster spots for the 2008-2009 season.