For much of the decade, the NBA's Western Conference was the alpha dog of professional basketball. If you wanted to find the NBA's best teams, you usually didn't have to look east of the Mississippi. But as the decade draws to a close, the pinnacle of the NBA has a decidedly Eastern flavor. The stage was set last year with the Celtics' NBA title. This season, the Cavaliers and Magic have formed the other two prongs of a three-way battle. All three teams are on pace for well over 60 wins. Erik Cassano takes a detailed look at The Beasts of the East in his latest.

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best teams, you usually didn't have to look east of the Mississippi.

From 2000 to '07, the West won six of eight NBA titles, all by the Lakers or Spurs. The two times in that period that an East team did rise up and win an NBA title -- the Pistons in 2004 and the Heat in 2006 -- the basketball-watching public viewed it as a major upset.

But as the decade draws to a close, so is the West's dominance in the NBA's lead pack. The
Lakers
are there, the Spurs and Hornets are still really good, but the pinnacle of the NBA has a decidedly Eastern flavor this year.

The stage was set last year with the Celtics' NBA title. This season, the Cavaliers and Magic have formed the other two prongs of a three-way battle. All three teams are on pace for well over 60 wins. All three teams have occupied the top spot in the conference at some point this season.

It appears the trio of teams will engage in a neck-and-neck horse race for the conference's top seed, a race that will only grow more frenetic and confusing as the end of the season draws closer.

So what is the real scoop on these three contenders? Here is some food for

thought on the Cavs, and how they match up against the East's other two elite squads.

Cleveland Cavaliers

What makes them dangerous to Boston and Orlando:

1. LeBron James. As if you didn't know. He's the best player in the conference, and no one else can change a game the way he can with his combination of size, speed, vision and smarts. A motivated LeBron is a threat to beat any team, anytime.

2. The Cavs are statistically the best defensive team in the league. They surrender the fewest points per game in the league and typically stifle opposing field goal percentages at a rate that is at or among the league's best defenses. Good defensive basketball generally trumps good offensive basketball in the playoffs.

3. They're 20-0 at home. If the Cavs get homecourt advantage throughout the playoffs, beating them will be one tall order for any team.

What makes them vulnerable:

1. A sometimes-stagnant offense. LeBron still has some bad habits in his system, among them a tendency to hold the ball too long, take bad shots and coast for stretches, and that can rub off on the rest of the team.

To his credit, LeBron has never coasted in a big game, but when he cradles the ball and constantly hoists 20-footers, he stalls the offense. Generally, it happens when LeBron tries to take over a game and play one-on-five. LBJ consciously knows he doesn't have to play the hero in every single game this year, but once in a while, his subconscious could use a refresher course.

2. Perimeter defense. Until Delonte West returns from a broken wrist, the Cavs will be without their best perimeter defender. Even with him, Boston and Orlando present
matchup
problems because Mike Brown's defensive game plans dictate that his players concentrate on taking away high percentage shots inside, then work their way out

to defend the lower-percentage shots on the perimeter.

That is a good philosophy, except when the other team heats up from the perimeter. Boston's Ray Allen is among the best shooters in league history, though he's lost a step or five in recent years. Paul Pierce can put on prodigious shooting displays from downtown as well. But the real danger is in facing Orlando.

The Magic possess a couple of 6'-10" mad bombers in Hedo Turkoglu and Rashard
Lewis.
Jameer
Nelson is no slouch from long distance, either. With a mostly-undersized backcourt
, the
Cavs
(as currently constructed) would likely need to rely heavily on the shot-challenging capabilities of their taller wing players --
LeBron
, Sasha
Pavlovic
and Wally
Szczerbiak
-- to prevent Orlando from conducting a three-point shooting clinic.

Odds are Orlando wouldn't be able to stay smoking hot from long distance for an entire playoff series. But they'll be able to do a lot of damage if their shooters get consistent open looks.

Myth about the Cavs: They don't have a lot of frontcourt depth.

Everywhere Mike Brown has turned this year, he's gotten production out of his big men. When Z went down with a broken foot, Anderson Varejao moved into the starting lineup and J.J.
Hickson
absorbed some minutes off the bench, with decent results. Darnell Jackson is a foul-committing machine, but can play effective minutes for short stretches. Even Lorenzen
Wright got in on the act, starting a couple of games last week when Ben Wallace had the flu.

Orlando Magic

What makes them dangerous to Boston and Cleveland:

1. Mismatches. With 6'-10" Hedo Turkoglu and Rashard Lewis and 6'-9" Brian Cook capable of hitting shots from anywhere on the floor, your frontcourt
defense is going to be taxed to the limit in facing the Magic. And that's before considering how you're going to stop Dwight Howard.

2. Stan Van Gundy. His striking resemblance to adult film star Ron Jeremy is a running joke, but beyond the "Hedgehog" references, Van
Gundy
is a damn good coach. Much like Mike Brown did in his first couple of years with the
Cavs
, Van
Gundy
has taken an offensive-minded team and gotten them to play
fundamentally-sound defense. A Stan Van
Gundy
team will always be a well-prepared and well-coached team.

3. Dwight Howard. He averages 20 points, 14 rebounds and 3 blocks per game. He's a beast.

What makes them vulnerable:

1. A lack of size inside. Once you get past Howard, Orlando's inside presence consists of Tony Battie and Adonal Foyle, with a little help from Lewis. The Magic might be able to out-shoot a lot of their shortcomings, but they are primed to get bruised and battered inside by Boston or Cleveland (or Atlanta or Detroit) in a playoff series. They are, in a word, finesse.

2. An overreliance on the three-ball. The Magic jack up an average of 26 three-pointers per game, making an average of 10.5, for a 40.3 conversion percentage. That's pretty good. But it's a high risk/high reward proposition. Much like a gunslinger quarterback, the Magic live and die by the deep ball. Building so much of your offensive attack around low-percentage shots could come back to

bite them if the shots stop falling.

Myth about the Magic: No one is paying attention to them.

Cavs fans can dispense with all the "Magic are going to sneak up and get us" talk and Magic fans can pull the plug on the "No one respects us" talk. The Magic are not going bump in the night anymore. They're the worst-kept secret in sports. They've arrived, the national media is stroking them, they're soaking up their share of the spotlight. If they ambush any team in the playoffs, that team gets what they deserve.

Boston Celtics

What makes them dangerous to Cleveland and Orlando:

1. They're the champs. They've been to the summit, they know what it takes to get there, they've already proven they can win a championship together. Come playoff time, the burden is still on the Cavs and Magic to knock them off.

2. Stopping the Big Three is asking a lot. And I'm not talking about Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce and Ray Allen. Allen can score, but come playoff time against top-flight defenses, he will be reduced to a one-dimensional specialist. The Big Three I refer to is
Garnett
, Pierce and
Rajon
Rondo.

Rondo is arguably the most important cog in the Celtics' attack. He is the penetrat

or who draws in defenses and creates open looks for Pierce and Garnett. That's especially important as Garnett has aged into a second-decade player and has traded in his low-post game for a mid-range jumper.

3. TD Banknorth Garden is quite possibly the most hostile playoff environment in the league. Staples Center in Los Angeles and our very own Quicken Loans Arena will certainly get into the conversation, but the Celtics' house will be filled with thousands of loud, obnoxious, likely inebriated Red Sox fans looking to keep their voice boxes conditioned until October. Gloria James doesn't want to know what they're saying about her whenever LeBron is within earshot.

What makes them vulnerable:

1. A suspect bench. Sure, the Celtics are still winning at a tremendous clip this year, but there is no denying that this is a team minus James Posey and P.J. Brown from last year's title team. The bench is thin when compared to other contenders, especially the Lakers and Cavs. Boston could have less of an ability to absorb injuries and fatigue.

If the Celtics were actually considering signing noted locker room hand grenade Stephon Marbury if and when he became a free agent, that a sure sign that Danny Ainge

and Celtics management have spent more than a little time fretting over their bench depth. They know it's something that could be exposed over the course of a seven-game series.

2. A lack of team speed. The Celtics do many things well, but running the floor isn't one of them. We saw it in the Cavs' January 9 win over the Celtics: If you can speed the game up, you can take them out of their comfort zone and possibly tire out their 30-somethings sooner.

Myth about the Celtics: They're the biggest band of crybabies in the NBA.

Kevin Garnett's constant act of taunting the opposition, screaming and beating his chest like an amphetamine-crazed Ray Lewis has certainly gotten old. Anyone west of the Massachusetts state line is sick of hearing Paul Pierce referred to as "The Truth." Unfortunately, however, you must be without sin to cast the first stone. And the fact is that strutting, preening, taunting -- and especially whining -- is an epidemic in the NBA.

LeBron is among the league's biggest ref-whiners, following in the grand tradition of Tim Duncan. Dirk Nowitzki does it. Kobe Bryant does it. Rasheed Wallace sure as heck does it. So while the Celtics might have taken a sense of entitlement and verbalized arrogance to something of an extreme, they're far from alone in the league.