It was predicted to be a demanding week for the NBA's elite in last Monday's edition of this column, and sure enough, it was. Only our beloved Cavaliers finished with a winning record for the week, and even they achieved that mark only by the hardest, while suffering the loss of Ben Wallace in the process. The collective struggle ensured that no one was able to gain, nor lose, any substantial ground in the race for the top overall seed. Jesse Lamovsky gives our readers his weekly look at the race for homecourt advantage for the 2009 NBA Playoffs.

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Three-fourths down, one-fourth to go.

1.) Los Angeles: 48-12: --

Streak: Lost 2

Last 10: 7-3

Last Week: 2-2

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 1: Lost @ Phoenix 118-111

Tuesday, Mar. 3: Memphis
Friday, Mar. 6: Minnesota

The Forum Blue & Gold freight train was derailed a bit this past week. First L.A. scored a season-low 79 points and shot a bone-chilling 29.8 percent in an ugly loss at Denver. Two days later they were outrun by Phoenix 118-111, despite the fact that Steve Nash was sitting on the sideline in a suit and tie. Kobe Bryant dominated the ball in both defeats, taking away the precision in the Lakers offense that brought them to the league's best record. Good thing this week's schedule is forgiving, because next week's- a three-game swing through Portland, Houston and San Antonio- is anything but.

2.) Cleveland: 46-12: 1

Streak: Won 2

Last 10: 7-3

Last Week: 3-1

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 1: Won @ Atlanta 88-87

Monday, Mar. 2: @ Miami
Wednesday, Mar. 4: Milwaukee
Friday, Mar. 6: @ Boston
Saturday, Mar. 7: Miami

The Cavaliers survived a difficult week and took over the top spot in the East from Boston while they did it. They suffered their worst defeat of the season in Houston on Thursday night, but bounced back with a thumping of shorthanded San Antonio and a one-point escape in Atlanta. Next week's schedule doesn't look a whole lot easier- a quick turnaround at Miami on Monday, and back-to-back games at Boston and at home against the Heat. Good thing help is on the way . Welcome back, Joe!

2.) Boston: 47-14: 1.5

Streak: Lost 1

Last 10: 6-4

Last Week: 2-2

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 1: Lost to Detroit 105-95

Wednesday, Mar. 4: @ New Jersey
Friday, Mar. 6: Cleveland
Sunday, Mar. 8: Orlando

It was an uneven week for the defending NBA Champions. They started things off right by annihilating the Nuggets by 38 points in Denver, but were beaten by the appalling Clippers and finished the week with a home loss to a suddenly revitalized Detroit team. With Cleveland and Orlando coming to town next week, the need for Kevin Garnett's healthy and speedy return is becoming more and more urgent.

4.) Orlando: 43-16: 4.5

Streak: Won 1

Last 10: 6-4

Last Week: 2-2

Last Game: Saturday, Feb. 28: Won @ Philadelphia 106-100

Tuesday, Mar. 3: Phoenix
Friday, Mar. 6: New Jersey
Sunday, Mar. 8: @ Boston

The Magic ran in place last week, which is what they've been doing for the last month-and-a-half (10-8 after a 33-8 start.) They got road wins in New York and Philadelphia but coughed up 120 points in a one-sided loss to the Bulls and again proved unable to beat their bugaboo from Detroit. There's a reasonably good chance Orlando will meet the Pistons in the first round, which is pretty much the last thing anyone in Central Florida should want.

Power Ranking for the Week of Mar. 2

•1.) Los Angeles
•2.) Cleveland
•3.) Boston
•4.) Orlando

Player of the Week- Delonte West, Cleveland: Slim pickings with the way the top four struggled, but I'll go with the Poor Man's Dennis Johnson
™
, who came back from his injury to average 18 points, 4.6 rebounds, 3.6 assists, two steals, and nearly 53 percent shooting in Cleveland's three victories. LeBron might be our body, Big Z our heart, but Redz is our soul, and it's really good to have him back. He's crazy glue.

Comprehensive Beat-Down of the Week- Boston 114, Denver 76: Playing the second night of a back-to-back on the road without Kevin Garnett, the Celtics held the Nuggets to their second-lowest scoring output of the season, forced them into 34.7 percent shooting (including 3-of-21 from beyond the arc) shot 14-of-23 from three-point range themselves, and for all intents and purposes wiped Denver off the planet in a 38-point thrashing. The Nuggets had a strange week, getting housed by Boston, handing the Lakers perhaps their worst loss of the season, and losing at Indiana on Sunday.

Spoiler of the Upcoming Week- New Jersey: A game-and-a-half behind Milwaukee in the race for the Eastern Conference's eighth seed, the Nets will host Boston on Wednesday and go to Orlando on Friday.

Game to Watch- Cleveland @ Boston, March 6: First place in the

East might just be on the line when the Cavaliers and C's lock horns in Beantown next Friday night. Cleveland has lost eight consecutive games to Boston in the TD Banknorth Garden, including all four games in the second round of last season's playoffs. The Cavaliers are going to have to win at least one game in Boston to win a championship this year, and this is as good a time as any to do it.

Oh, by the Way: Cleveland's magic number for clinching the Central Division now stands at seven.

And on Another Sad Note: Sympathies go out to the Chicago Bulls for the deaths of Johnny "Red" Kerr and Norm Van Lier, both of whom passed away on Thursday. Kerr was in many ways "Mr. Bull"- the team's first head coach, as well as its longtime play-by-play announcer. Van Lier was the best point guard in that franchise's history, a souped-up John Starks in his day, who combined with Jerry Sloan to form one of the toughest defensive backcourts the Association has ever seen. Both men were class acts and honorable adversaries of our Cavaliers, and they will be missed.