The race for the top seed tightened minutely, but other than that, things stayed pretty much the same, with Los Angeles maintaining the overall lead, Cleveland staying out in front of Boston by two games in the loss column, and Orlando grimly staying within striking distance. Gut-check wins were the story of the week; the Lake Show handled business against two of the weak sisters of the West, the Cavaliers persevered through their toughest stretch of the season, the Celtics continued their Garden dominance of Cleveland, and the Magic climaxed a perfect week with a win in Boston.

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We've got another month-and-a-half to go in the regular season. That's a veritable eternity. But something tells me this dogfight will continue to the finish. Nobody is conceding anything, at least not at this point.

1.) Los Angeles: 50-12: --

Streak: Won 2

Last 10: 8-2

Last Week: 2-0

Last Game: Friday, Mar. 6: Beat Minnesota 110-90

Monday, Mar. 9: @ Portland
Wednesday, Mar. 11: @ Houston
Thursday, Mar. 12: @ San Antonio
Sunday, Mar. 15: Dallas

The Lake Show breezed through an easy week, dispatching the overmatched Grizzlies and Timberwolves by an average margin of fifteen points before kicking back over the weekend. They'll need the rest, with tough road games against three Western Conference playoff teams coming up, including Tuesday's meeting with a Portland team that is 26-5 at the Rose Garden and a back-to-backer against the Rockets and Spurs in Texas. Next Sunday's meeting with the Mavericks is looking like a possible first-round preview, with Dallas presently holding the West's eighth and final playoff spot.

As if things aren't going well enough in So-Cal, the Lake Show has received some welcome news regarding Andrew Bynum's earlier-than-expected return to the lineup. If the Tracy Morgan-look-alike is back by the end of March and has nearly a full month to work his way back into form- that is *bad* news for the rest of the Association. L.A. is probably the most talented team in the NBA without Bynum. With him, they're going to be damned near unbeatable come playoff time.

2.) Cleveland: 49-13: 1

Streak: Won 1

Last 10: 8-2

Last Week: 3-1

Last Game: Saturday, Mar. 7: Beat Miami 99-89

Tuesday, Mar. 10: @ L.A. Clippers
Thursday, Mar. 12: @ Phoenix
Friday, Mar. 13: @ Sacramento
Sunday, Mar. 15: New York

It was a week of highs and lows for the Cavaliers. The highs: a 3-1 record and Monday's oh-so-satisfying comeback win in Miami, when Cleveland rallied from eleven down in the last 7:40, despite the fact that they'd spent most of the previous night sleeping in a parked jet in Atlanta. The low: the Friday night woodshed-whipping in Boston, when the Cavaliers were humiliated by a Celtics team missing Kevin Garnett and dealing with an ankle injury to Rajon Rondo and the third-quarter ejection of Big Baby Davis. Cleveland had a golden opportunity to get the Garden monkey off its back and establish firm control of the East's top seed and couldn't do it.

The Cavaliers need home-court more than any of the other elite team. L.A. has a relatively portable game plan: they're outstanding in the post, and Kobe can generally create his shot no matter where he's playing. Boston needs home-court badly; their role players are far better in the Garden, and their crowd is a major factor. Orlando doesn't get much juice from its lackluster crowd anyway. But the Cavaliers *really* need it. They're a jump-shooting team, and the jumper is usually the first thing that goes out the window in a tough road playoff game. They have no reliable post presence. They're not as talented as L.A. or Boston

one-through-eight. They have a smaller margin for error. Most importantly, LeBron James has struggled badly in series-opening road games.

A quick perusal of the team's playoff record during the LeBron era tells you all you need to know. The Cavaliers have fallen behind 0-2 in all four series they've opened on the road (2006 East Semifinals and '07 East Finals against Detroit; '07 Finals against San Antonio, and '08 East Semifinals against Boston) and in those eight defeats, LeBron has averaged 19.1 points, shot 34.4 percent, and committed 44 turnovers. He has trended upward after those awful starts, putting together great performances in the latter road games- well, not the ‘07 Finals, when the Spurs never gave him that chance- but with the notable exception of the Detroit series in 2007 that early hole, dug as LeBron stumbles around like a man seeking a light switch in an unlit room, has been too deep.

By contrast, the Cavaliers have won all four series in which they've had home-court (the three against Washington; the '07 East Semifinals against New Jersey), gotten out to 2-0 leads in three of them, and LeBron has averaged 28.3 points, shot 43.8 percent, and committed 24 turnovers in those eight games. Ten of those turnovers came in the only loss, the Game Two setback against Washington in the first round of 2006. LBJ is scoring more, shooting more, converting a higher percentage, and making fewer mistakes when the lid-lifters are at home.

This team needs home-court. *LeBron* needs home-court.

It's hard to come back from a 2-0 deficit to win a series. Larry Bird never did it. Magic never did it. Kobe hasn't done it. Michael Jordan only did it once, the same number of times as LeBron. On the other hand, Bird, Magic, Kobe and MJ each had home-court in every round during their respective first championship runs. They were set up for success. LeBron needs that edge, just like they needed it. Otherwise, this Season of Dreams will end in the same nightmare that has haunted Cleveland the last 45 years, and counting.

2.) Boston: 49-15: 2

Streak: Lost 1

Last 10: 6-4

Last Week: 2-1

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 8: Lost to Orlando

Wednesday, Mar. 11: @ Miami
Friday, Mar. 13: Memphis
Sunday, Mar. 15: @ Milwaukee

It wasn't a banner week for the team with the most banners of all, but it could have been a lot worse. The Celtics barely avoided a fourth-quarter collapse in New Jersey, blowing a 12-point lead and needing a last-minute rally to stave off the Nets. They took apart the Cavaliers in the statement game of the week, scoring sixty second-half points, and finished things off by losing at home to Orlando without the services of KG or Rajon Rondo. 2-1 isn't great, but it's a damned sight better than 1-2, as close as this race is.

If nothing else, the game against the Magic simply showed how important Rondo is to this team. He's maybe the league's top rebounding and defensive point guard, and his forays to the basket are the key to Boston's success. He's every bit as irreplaceable as any of the Big Three, if not more so- especially since Stephon Marbury has to this point shown no signs of being a major contributor. In twenty dismal minutes against the Magic, Starbury had four points, three turnovers, zero assists, and a game-worst -14. That won't get it done.

4.) Orlando: 46-16: 4

Streak: Won 4

Last 10: 7-3

Last Week: 3-0

Last Game: Sunday, Mar. 8: Won @ Boston

Monday, Mar. 9: @ Detroit
Wednesday, Mar. 11: Chicago
Friday, Mar. 13: @ Washington
Sunday, Mar. 15: Utah

Aside from that rather one-sided tiff between Stan Van Jeremy and Shaq, it was a pretty good week for the Magic. They went undefeated- including their first win in Boston since November of 2006- pared a half-game off their deficit in the race for the top overall seed, and are in the midst of their longest winning streak since mid-January, before Jameer Nelson went down. The Magic won't have much time to enjoy their Boston breakthrough, though; they visit their Detroit nemesis on Monday night, the first game in a weekly slate that ends with a visit by the Jazz, the league's hottest team.

Power Ranking for the Week of Mar. 9

1. Los Angeles
2. Boston
3. Orlando

4. Cleveland

Player of the Week- Paul Pierce, Boston: Prince Paul was at the epicenter of the Celtic renaissance, pouring in 31 on 12-of-14 shooting in the 115-111 win at New Jersey on Wednesday and dominating the head-to-head match-up with LeBron James on Friday. He didn't play very well in Sunday's loss to Orlando, going 5-of-15 and surprisingly missing four of ten from the free-throw line, but he kept his team afloat with sensational efforts in the first two games of the week.

Honorable Mention- Mo Williams, Cleveland: Mo' Better Baller averaged 25 points, shot 56.8 percent, hit 15-of-21 from beyond the arc, and made 19 of 20 free throws for the Cavaliers this week. He took over in the fourth quarter of both victories over Miami and was pretty much the only member of the team to show up in Boston, scoring 26 points in Friday's loss.

Kick-Ass Non-Scoring Line of the Week- Lamar Odom, Los Angeles: Lamar's shot wasn't dropping last Tuesday night against Memphis- he hit only 1-of-8 from the field and missed both of his free-throw attempts- but he augmented his meager two-point total with 13 rebounds, eight assists, and six blocked shots in his team's 99-89 victory.

Overachieving Scrub of the Week- Leon Powe, Boston: Was that Leon Powe out there last Friday night against the Cavaliers, or some mutant amalgamation of Bill Russell, Dave Cowens and the Chief? Hard to tell, with the ex-Cal Golden Bear going 9-of-11 and establishing season highs with 20 points and 11 rebounds off the bench in Boston's 105-94 victory. Powe going off on the Cavaliers in the Garden is nothing new: in his last three regular-season home games against Cleveland dating back to February of 2008, Leon is 18-of-23 from the field. Of course, it helps the shooting percentage when you're continually being left unguarded two feet from the hoop.

Game of the Upcoming Week- Thursday, Mar. 12: Los Angeles @ San Antonio: The West's top two teams meet for the third and final time in the regular season, with the season series currently tied at one apiece. In their last meeting on January 14, the Spurs parlayed a late Roger Mason three-point play and a

controversial traveling call on Trevor Ariza into a 112-111 win, in one of the best games of the season so far. The Lake Show is in no danger of being overtaken at the top of the conference- they currently lead the Spurs by eight games- but a win would go a long way toward bolstering San Antonio's confidence leading up to what looks like an inevitable Western Conference Final between the two superpowers.

And Best Wishes go out to... former Cavaliers coach and Bad Boys ringleader Chuck Daly, who is battling pancreatic cancer. The dapper Daly enjoyed a long and distinguished career in the game: four consecutive Ivy League titles and an undefeated regular season at Penn in 1971, Billy Cunningham's brain for the great 76ers teams of the early ‘80s, the best 9-32 coach the Cavaliers ever had, and finally a two-time World Champion in Detroit. Next to Phil Jackson, no other NBA coach of the last twenty years has more successfully molded oddball personalities off the floor into cohesive units on it. Pancreatic cancer is one of the worst kinds to have, but if there is any consolation to this bad news, it's that Coach Daly, at 78, has lived a long and rich life, and has reached the summit of his profession. Not many of us can say that.