The first round of the NBA Playoffs was very good to the Cavaliers. While the Wine & Gold breezed through their opening-round series and spent a week getting healthy, their main rivals were fighting through wars of attrition that took a heavy toll physically and mentally. Both the Celtics and Magic survived, but at a cost, and both teams will be shorthanded the rest of the way. It would have been nice to see Boston, Orlando and L.A. go down, but we really can't ask for too much, at least not this early in the game. Jesse previews round two.

The first round of the 2009 NBA Playoffs is in the books- and what a round it was. With the exception of Cleveland's four-game demolition of Detroit, every series went at least five games, with two - Atlanta/Miami and the amazing Boston/Chicago duel - going the full seven. There were a couple of mild upsets- Dallas over San Antonio, Houston over Portland- and some surprisingly tough fights, like the ones the 76ers and Bulls put up, but in the end the heavy favorites advanced, although in some cases only by the hardest.

Along with the favorites, it's also been the postseason of fresh faces. Three of the final eight - Atlanta, Denver and Houston - haven't been this far since the Clinton Administration. Detroit and San Antonio, two of the league's sturdiest stalwarts, are already out of the running. It's only fitting that the final year of this decade has seen a changing of the guard in the Association's pecking order.

And really, things couldn't have worked out much better for the Cavaliers. While the Wine & Gold breezed through their opening-round series and spent a week getting healthy, their main rivals were fighting through wars of attrition that took a heavy toll physically and mentally. Both the Celtics and Magic survived, but at a cost, and both teams will be shorthanded the rest of the way. It would have been nice to see Boston, Orlando and L.A. go down, but we really can't ask for *too* much, at least not this early in the game.

The preview of the second round:

Western Conference

#1: Los Angeles Lakers (65-17)

#5: Houston Rockets (53-29)

Season Series: Lakers lead 4-0

Memorable Past Series- 1986 Western Conference Finals : The defending-champion Lakers went into the series a heavy favorite over the young Rockets. But behind their Twin Towers tandem of Ralph Sampson and Akeem Olajuwon, Houston dominated, taking four straight after a Game One loss and clinching the series on Sampson's buzzer-beating turnaround jumper. L.A. lost just twice in the Western Conference Playoffs during the ‘80s- both times to Houston.

Capsule: Freed of first-round anchor Tracy McGrady, the Rockets advanced for the first time since 1997. But now their problems begin anew. Houston actually matches up fairly well with Los Angeles; they've got Yao in the middle to offset the

big Lakers frontcourt, the best pair of perimeter defenders in the game in Artest and Battier to at least slow down Kobe Bryant; and the quicksilver Aaron Brooks will be a tough cover for Derek Fisher. But without McGrady the Rockets don't have a scorer to keep up with Kobe if he gets hot. And Artest's mouth continues to write checks his body can't cash. Coming out and saying that Kobe (and LeBron) isn't as good as Brandon Roy won't help Houston's cause in this series. We saw what happened the last time Artest badmouthed the Mamba. It didn't work out well for Crazy Ron. Neither will this series.

Prediction: Lakers in six

#2: Denver Nuggets (54-28)

#6: Dallas Mavericks (50-32)

Season Series: Nuggets lead 4-0

Memorable Past Series- 1988 Western Conference Semifinals: The explosive Nuggets had home-court advantage but were without second-leading scorer Fat Lever and sixth man Jay Vincent for most of the series- and Dallas took advantage. After spotting Denver a 2-1 series lead, the Mavericks took the final three games, closing out the Nuggets in Game Six behind strong efforts from Rolando Blackmon, Sam Perkins, and Sixth Man of the Year Roy Tarpley.

Capsule: Maligned in recent years for postseason flops, Denver and Dallas will roll into their series playing their best basketball of the season. After stumbling in the first round five straight years, the Nuggets imported some resolve in the form of Chauncey Billups and stormed to their first playoff-series win since 1994. They finished off New Orleans in spectacular fashion, crushing the Hornets by a record

58-point margin in Game Four and wrapping things up with a 107-86 Game Five rout. Dallas was nearly as impressive, dominating San Antonio and handing the Spurs their first opening-round loss since 2000. Denver swept the season series between the teams, but they didn't do it in overwhelming fashion; three of the four games were decided by a total of seven points. The Nuggets have the edge in size and explosiveness, but the Mavericks are a confident team right now. More importantly, the enigmatic Josh Howard is playing well. He averaged 18.8 points per game in the victory over San Antonio, and will need to put up similar numbers for Dallas to pull off the upset.

Prediction: Nuggets in seven

Eastern Conference

#1: Cleveland Cavaliers (66-16)

#4: Atlanta Hawks (47-35)

Season Series: Cavaliers lead 3-1

Memorable Past Series: These teams have never met in the postseason.

Capsule: The reward for the Hawks after winning their first playoff series since 1999 is a quick turnaround and a trip to the Q to take on a fresh, well-rested Cavaliers team. Atlanta is a solid, balanced team, but they have severe match-up problems, especially up front, where they don't have the size to contend with Cleveland's front line. They've struggled on the road this season, going just 16-25 away from Phillips Arena. They also might be afflicted with "happy to be there" disease; they made their season by advancing in the Playoffs, while

the Cavaliers have goals that extend well beyond the second round. Atlanta's season, alas, will not.

Prediction: Cavaliers in five

#2: Boston Celtics (62-20)

#3: Orlando Magic (59-23)

Season Series: Tied 2-2

Memorable Past Series: 1995 Eastern Conference First Round: The eighth-seeded Celtics stunned the top-seeded Magic in Game Two at Orlando, but Shaq, Penny and Co. recovered and clinched the series with victories in the final two games played at the old Boston Garden.

Capsule: The Celtics and Magic meet as expected in the second round, but both teams had a tougher-than-anticipated time getting to this point. Boston barely survived a marathon seven-game series against Chicago, while Orlando had to go six games to overcome a Philadelphia team they were supposed to dominate. Neither team is particularly healthy; the veteran Celtics are without Kevin Garnett and Leon Powe, while the Magic, already shorn on Jameer Nelson, lost Courtney Lee thanks to Dwight Howard's flying elbow. Howard should have a field day against Boston's depleted frontcourt, and Rajon Rondo, Ray Allen and Paul Pierce should have their way against Orlando's weakened backcourt. In the end, it will come down to experience and home-court, and the Celtics, even in their enervated state, have both.

Prediction: Celtics in seven