One more round remains until the NBA Finals, and thus far everyone is on schedule. The prohibitive favorites made it through the conference semifinals - the Cavaliers with flying colors, the Lake Show somewhat less so. Meanwhile, Denver continued to impress, and Orlando, after some grievous slip-ups, found its heart just in time to knock off the wounded Celtics and prevent a re-match that a lot of us wanted. No doubt, the four best teams in the Association are still alive as we head into the third week of May. Jesse previews the NBA Conference Finals. And you'll be shocked by his predictions.

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Party time is over. It's about to get harrowing, folks.

Western Conference Finals

#1: Los Angeles Lakers (65-17)

#2: Denver Nuggets (54-28)

Season Series: Los Angeles leads 3-1

Memorable Past Series- 1985 Western Conference Finals : The Nuggets and Lakers were the NBA's highest-scoring teams, but the fireworks in this series were decidedly one-sided in L.A.'s favor. The Showtime Lakers averaged 132 points and finished off Doug Moe's Nuggets with a 153-109 Game Five rout. Denver's chances, slim from the start, were doomed when Alex English suffered a thumb injury late in Game Four that knocked him out for the remainder of the series.

Capsule: The once-flaky Nuggets have ridden the leadership of Chauncey Billups, the scoring of Carmelo Anthony, the unexpectedly clutch play of J.R. Smith and an improved defensive mindset to their first conference finals berth since 1985. They've looked mighty impressive getting there, too- seven of their eight postseason wins have come by double digits, and their only two losses have come by a total of four points. To be fair, their competition- the flat-lining Hornets and the unimposing Mavericks- has been less than stringent. But good teams are supposed to dominate inferior opponents, and that's exactly what Denver has done.

Meanwhile, as the Nuggets impressed, the Lake Show continued to mystify. L.A. needed all seven games to subdue the crippled Rockets, who were without Yao Ming for the final four games of the series. Once again, the effort and intensity were inconsistent. The Lakers are playing a dangerous game. At some point, they're going to catch up to an opponent that doesn't let them get away with being mercurial.

The question is whether or not that opponent is Denver, and the answer here is: No. Even in their denuded state the Rockets were a very tough match-up for Los Angeles, with the quickness of Aaron Brooks and two premier defenders to throw at Kobe Bryant. Denver doesn't have these advantages. Chauncey Billups has been superb this postseason, but he isn't going to run away from anyone, even the slow-footed Derek Fisher. And the Nuggets have no equivalent to Battier or Artest. Denver likes to run, a strategy that plays right into L.A.'s hands. The Lake

Show got its reprieve in round two. It will be easier for them this time around.

Prediction: Lakers in six.

Eastern Conference Finals

#1: Cleveland Cavaliers (66-16)

#3: Orlando Magic (59-23)

Season Series: Orlando leads 2-1

Memorable Past Series- These teams have never met in the Playoffs.

Capsule: I hate this match-up. Despise it with the intensity of a thousand suns. Orlando couldn't be a worse opponent if it was put together with the express purpose of beating the Cavaliers in a series. Everywhere the Magic are strong- specifically, a low-post presence and height on the perimeter- the Cavaliers are weak. Orlando's two regular-season victories over the Cavaliers were no accident. Cleveland's small backcourt had a hard time getting open looks against the rangy Magic defenders- Mo Williams shot a chilly 38 percent in the three games and in the two games Delonte played he averaged a meager 6.5 points. Orlando is a much, much better defensive team than credited, and they showed it against the Cavaliers in the regular season.

Now, I know what you're saying: *the Playoffs are different than the regular season, Jesse!* And they are. But the Playoffs don't make Courtney Lee, Hedu Turkoglu and Rashard Lewis any shorter. They

don't make Dwight Howard any less imposing as an interior presence. Don't be fooled by Dewey's unimpressive post game against Boston. Kendrick Perkins is a very good post defender, far superior to anyone Cleveland possesses in that area. Dewey will get to his spots against the Cavaliers more than he did against the Celtics. That means a collapsing Cleveland defense, and that means open three-point looks aplenty for Orlando's squadron of bombardiers. And don't put too much stock in Orlando's recent history of late-game folds. The Magic had their mettle tested against Boston and they passed with flying colors. Those adhesions are probably broken for good.

What advantages do the Cavaliers have? Well, first and foremost they have the game's transcendent player in LeBron James. They're rested, healthy, and possess a vast storage of confidence. They're a superb defensive team. And they have at least a little more experience deep in the Playoffs than Orlando. Is that going to be enough? I just don't think it will be. The Magic simply match up too well. If I'm wrong, I'll walk to Canossa and smile every step of the way. You faithful readers have my contact info- you can hammer me in the most colorful language you feel like employing if the Cavaliers pull this bad boy out. Believe me, that's what I want. That's what I need. But right here, right now, I just don't feel the faith.

Prediction: Magic in six. And God help me.