Want to know the last time the best team in any given sport came from Cleveland? 1948. The ’48 Indians were clearly the best team in baseball and proved it throughout the regular season, the one-game playoff against the Red Sox and the World Series against the Boston Braves.

Since then? Nada. The 1975-76 Cavaliers might have been the best team in the NBA, but they had only the third-best record and never got a chance to compete for the Championship at full strength. The 1980 Browns were a one-year wonder with a bad defense. The ’86 and ’87 Browns might have been better than the Denver teams that conquered them in the AFC title games- but they weren’t as good as the top NFC teams of the era. The Lenny Wilkins-era Cavaliers were Chicago’s bridesmaid. The 1995 Indians were too young, too inexperienced and didn’t have the frontline pitching to match up with the Braves. The ’97 Tribe didn’t have the closer to finish the deal. The ’07 Tribe was inferior to the Red Sox. And last year’s Cavaliers, despite their 66-16 record, were only the third-best team in the NBA, behind Los Angeles and Orlando.

Not even the 1964 Browns, our last Champion, were the best team in the NFL. They were simply the best on the one day they had to be.

But here in 2010, our day has arrived. The Cleveland Cavaliers are the best team in the NBA- period. They have the best player in the game, a veteran-tough supporting cast and a deep bench. They are healthy at the right time and have home-court advantage throughout the Playoffs. This is, quite simply, the best chance this town has had since ’64 to cop a Championship. And if we don’t get it done this year, well… we may never get it done.

Let the NBA Playoffs, this two-month journey, commence. And we’ll get it started with a preview of all eight first-round series, East and West.

**#1 Cleveland Cavaliers (61-21)**

**#8 Chicago Bulls (41-41)**

**Season Series:** Tied, 2-2

**Memorable Past Series- 1992 Eastern Conference Finals:** The local truism is that the Lenny Wilkins-era Cavaliers were really better than Chicago- the Bulls just had Michael Jordan. That might have been true in 1988 and ’89. It was a dead letter by 1992, though, when the teams met for the right to go to the NBA Finals. By then Chicago was better, and they showed it in a brawny six-game conquest of the Cavaliers. Cleveland got in a couple of shots, though: a stunning 107-81 Chicago Stadium rout in Game 2, and a Game 4 win punctuated by Danny Ferry throwing a wild haymaker at His Airness Himself.

**Capsule:** First things first- the Bulls are not the demoralized Pistons team that Cleveland took to the woodshed in last season’s first round. Chicago comes into this series on a roll, winners of ten of its last fourteen games. It’s a young team built around the star power and Derrick Rose and the grit of Joakim Noah- and they don’t particularly care for the Cavaliers. The Bulls will play this series with a great deal of energy and passion.

Now here’s the cold water for Chicago. The Bulls have a hard time scoring, averaging just 97.5 points per game during the regular season. There is very little in the way of a consistent outside shooting or low-post threat. Other than Flip Murray and Brad Miller there is sparse depth off the bench. With Ben Gordon in Detroit and John Salmons in Milwaukee this is a less explosive, less versatile Bulls team than the one we saw take Boston to a seventh game last season.

Cleveland’s biggest problem in this series may be conditioning. The team’s stars didn’t played much over the last week of the season- Shaquille O’Neal didn’t play at all after late February- while the Bulls have been essentially playing Playoff basketball for the last month. Don’t be surprised to see the Cavaliers jump out to a big lead with lots of energy in Game One- then crash. Actually, I think the first game is going to be very, very tough. But if Cleveland wins that one, the skids will be greased. Chicago will be game, but Michael and Scottie can’t help them now.

**Prediction:** Cavaliers in five.

**#4 Boston Celtics (50-32)**

**#5 Miami Heat (47-35)**

**Season Series:**

**Memorable Past Series-** First meeting in the Playoffs

**Capsule:** Miami blazed to a 23-8 finish in the regular season while Boston went a supremely mediocre 27-27 since Christmas. The Celtics look old, tired and vulnerable against just about everyone, but Miami remains a bit of a mystery- can anyone other than Dwayne Wade do anything in this series? Michael Beasley needs to score the basketball for the Heat to beat Boston, but he only has three 20-plus point games since February 20th. There's still enough gas in the Celtics jalopy to cough them through this round. But they're in major trouble in Round Two.

**Prediction:** Celtics in six.

**#2 Orlando Magic (59-23)**

**#7 Charlotte Bobcats (44-38)**

**Season Series:** Magic lead, 3-1

**Memorable Past Series- 2002 Eastern Conference First Round:** The last postseason run for the old Charlotte Hornets began with first-round match-up against Orlando. The Magicians had the home-court advantage, but they also had Tracy McGrady as their go-to guy- and Charlotte had Baron Davis. Series over. Baron was baronial indeed, averaging 25.0 points, 9.3 assists and 9.0 rebounds in the four-game series and rolling up back-to-back triple-doubles as the Hornets closed it out in Charlotte. The Hornets then lost to New Jersey in the second round and fled to New Orleans that summer.

**Capsule:** Charlotte is an awfully interesting seventh seed. Despite their expansion pedigree and postseason debut the Bobcats are a veteran team. Larry Brown coached his first NBA Playoff game on April 20, 1977; Stephen Jackson won a ring in San Antonio and was a huge player in Golden State's 2007 upset of Dallas; Theo Ratliff and Boris Diaw are seasoned performers (Ratliff is more "petrified" than "seasoned") and even young star Gerald Wallace was in the NBA two years before LeBron. At 93.8 points allowed they are the stingiest defensive team in the Association, and they play a deliberate pace that is ideal for spring basketball.

They'll need all of that defense and experience against an Orlando team that has been white-hot since the third week of January. The Magicians are 33-8 in the second half of the season, sixteen of those wins by 15 points or more, and if anything they've looked even better than the team that went to the NBA Finals last season.

Other than the fact that they can't handle Dewey Howard (admittedly, a big "other") Charlotte actually does match up relatively well with Orlando. The Bobcats have a lot of size and range on the perimeter; Matt Barnes is an excellent defender but he can't check Gerald Wallace and Captain Jack at once, and the Bobcats also can make life difficult for Orlando's squadron of big shooters. In the last meeting between the teams on March 14th, the Bobcats handed the Magicians the only loss in their last 13 home games. Charlotte probably doesn't score enough to win this series. But they're perfectly capable of making it very interesting.

Prediction: Magic in six.

**#3 Atlanta Hawks (53-29)**

**#6 Milwaukee Bucks (46-36)**

**Season Series:** Atlanta leads, 2-1.

**Memorable Past Series- 1989 Eastern Conference First Round:** Despite a galaxy of stars in the lineup and a 52-30 record, the 1988-89 Hawks were considered underachievers. They had a chance at partial redemption in the first round against an aging and beat-up Bucks team- and they flubbed it. On the same afternoon Michael Jordan hit the Shot in Richfield, shorthanded Milwaukee walked into the Omni for the deciding Game Five and stole the victory to send enigmatic Atlanta home for the summer.

**Capsule-** Milwaukee was the chic pick to steal a series out of the bottom half of the East bracket- until Andrew Bogut's gruesome arm injury two weeks ago. Now, without their charismatic big man, the Bucks are, well… there's an adjective that rhymes with "Buck" and includes an "ed." Atlanta ran to its best overall record since 1996-97 and at third in the East enjoys its highest Playoff seed since 1994. The Hawks still don't have a true center and their crunch-time offense tends to break down into one-on-one vignettes, but they'll still have enough to overcome the crippled Bucks with relative ease.

**Prediction:** Hawks in five.

**#1 Los Angeles Lakers (57-25)**

**#8 Oklahoma City Thunder (50-32)**

**Season Series:** Lakers lead, 3-1.

**Memorable Past Series-** First meeting (I'm not counting the Thunder as being the same franchise as the Sonics. The Sonics are in Seattle.)

**Capsule:** This is perhaps the most intriguing match-up in the Playoffs from a contrast standpoint: the veteran, Championship-pedigreed Lakers from America's most glamorous city versus the youthful Thunder from the hinterlands of the State Formerly Known as Indian Territory. The Lake Show have all the advantages that are supposed to mean something in the spring- the experience, the defending Championship, the coach who was compiling World Title hardware back when Oklahoma City Coach Scott Brooks was waving a towel at the end of the Houston bench. Oklahoma has the youngest scoring champion in NBA history, a huge match-up edge over L.A. in Russell Westbrook, and a Ford Center crowd that will be in full throat for Games Three and Four. It won't matter. The Thunder has a future as bright as the unforgiving sun on the dry grasses of Oklahoma. But it isn't their time yet.

**Prediction:** Lakers in five.

**#4 Denver Nuggets (53-29)**

**#5 Utah Jazz (53-29)**

**Season Series:** Denver leads, 3-1.

**Memorable Past Series- 1985 Western Conference Semifinals:** Led by high-scoring forwards Darrell Griffith and Adrian Dantley the Jazz went only 41-41 in the regular season but surprised Hakeem Olajuwon and Houston In the first round, grabbing the Game Five clincher in the Summit. But Dr. Dunkenstein and A.D. weren't nearly enough against high-octane Denver in the second round. Averaging 125 points per game, Doug Moe's Nuggets blew away their Rocky Mountain rivals in five quick games.

**Capsule:** Jerry Sloan's Jazz shrugged off a mediocre start to post a 34-12 record since January 8th. But with Carlos Boozer out of the lineup they flubbed their chance at home-court advantage, dropping the season finale at home to the Suns. That's bad news against the Nuggets, the only West Playoff team without a winning road record. Utah is especially reliant on its rabid home crowds, but the Jazz will have to play the first two games of the series on the road against a Denver team that, while in a funk ever since George Karl began undergoing

cancer treatments, still displayed a marked superiority in the season series between the teams.

**Prediction:** Nuggets in six.

**#2 Dallas Mavericks (55-27)**

**#7 San Antonio Spurs (50-32)**

**Season Series:** Mavericks lead, 3-1.

**Memorable Past Series- 2003 Western Conference Finals:** The upstart Mavericks stole home-court with a Game One victory in San Antonio, but the veteran Spurs struck back with three straight wins to take a commanding 3-1 series lead. Dallas won again in San Antonio to cut the deficit to 3-2 and seemed well on the way to tying the series as they led Game Six by 13 in the fourth quarter. The Spurs then ripped off a 23-0 run and coasted home with a 90-78 victory and the conference title. San Antonio won all three games in Dallas during the series.

**Capsule:** This is a tough one to call. On one hand Dallas has dominated the head-to-head series with San Antonio of late, overpowering the Spurs in five in last season's first round and winning three of four this season. The Mavericks are 23-6 since mid-February and own the second best record in the West despite having the worst point differential of the conference Playoff qualifiers (which is why John Hollinger, who loves point differential, is down on them.) The Spurs, behind the brilliant play of Manu Ginobili, are 18-8 since late February and with Tony Parker back in the lineup are relatively healthy for the first time in a long time. Dallas seems to match up very well with San Antonio, and the Mavericks are probably the deepest team overall in the West, so they get the nod here. But this series should be an absolute barnburner.

**Prediction:** Mavericks in seven.

**#3 Phoenix Suns (54-28)**

**#6 Portland Trail Blazers (50-32)**

**Season Series:** Trail Blazers lead, 2-1

**Memorable Past Series- 1990 Western Conference Finals:** It was the first West final since 1981 that did not feature the Los Angeles Lakers, but the talented Blazers and youthful Suns made viewers forget all about the boys from Inglewood. The teams held serve at home for the first five games, than Portland came from behind late in the fourth quarter to eliminate the Suns in Game Six, 112-109 at Phoenix.

**Capsule:** "White-hot" probably doesn't do justice to how Phoenix has played for nearly the last three months. Since falling to 26-21 after an overtime loss to Charlotte on January 26th the Suns are 28-7. Amare Stoudamire has flashed MVP form down the home stretch, while Steve Nash has enjoyed his best season since the back-to-back MVP runs in the middle of the last decade. The Blazers, meanwhile, are now without the services of Brandon Roy, who took his place on Portland's ever-lengthening injury list last week. I'm not sold on Phoenix as a title contender- they're without Robin Lopez and really aren't good enough defensively to get out of the West- but it would be very difficult for the Suns to lose this series. Portland probably just wants to get this snake-bitten season over with before someone else gets hurt.

**Prediction:** Suns in five.