The NBA season tips off Tuesday night as the Bulls/Heat and Suns/Lakers take the hardcourt for the opening night TNT doubleheader. Papa Cass is here with his NBA preview, tonight taking a look at the Eastern Conference. Heat, Cavs, Bulls, Pistons, Nets ... who does Cassano like in the loaded East this year? His Western Conference preview will post tomorrow night.

Visit the Papa Cass weblog at http://papacass.blogspot.com/

1. Miami Heat (57-25)

Not often will you find a conference where the top team doesn't even sniff 60 wins, but this year, the even-Steven East is just that.

Miami is more the team to beat by default. They won the title last spring, and deserve the spoils that accompany it. Armed with what is still the best one-two punch in the conference in Shaquille O'Neal and Dwyane Wade, the Heat are the team to beat until someone proves otherwise. And someone just might.

2. Detroit Pistons (55-27)

Rumors of the Pistons' demise are greatly exaggerated. While everybody has been harping on the fact that they lost Ben Wallace to rival Chicago, nobody has seemed to notice that the rest of the roster has remained remarkably intact. Losing Ben Wallace hurts, but I have a hard time believing that a team that still boasts Rasheed Wallace, Rip Hamilton, Chauncey Billups and Tayshaun Prince (for my money the best two-way player in the conference) has suddenly faded into oblivion.

3. Cleveland Cavaliers (54-28)

Two things need to happen for the Cavs to become a legit threat to reach the NBA Finals: One, Larry Hughes has to stay away from injuries that keep him out of the lineup for months at a time. Two, they have to buckle down on defense.

A lot of prognosticators (who shall remain nameless) finger the Cavs as a team of mismatched parts. I think the variety of playing styles on the roster is actually a strength, as demonstrated in the playoffs. Cleveland went small and quick against Washington, big and strong against

Detroit.

Of course, the alpha and omega here is LeBron James. Without him, everything above is moot.

4. Chicago Bulls (50-32)

Yes, they signed Ben Wallace. Yes, they drafted Tyrus Thomas. Yes, they are a heady, gritty team led by a heady, gritty coach in Scott Skiles with a sharp knife of a GM in John Paxson.

When you get done drooling, remember that they still have no inside scoring and their backcourt is largely undersized. Grit and toughness can get you a long way. But when the likes of Shaq, D-Wade, LeBron and 'Sheed are standing in your way, it won't get you to the top.

Most underrated free-agent loss: Darius Songaila, now in Washington, who was pretty much the only low-post scorer the Bulls had for the past couple of years.

5. Washington Wizards (48-34)

With Gilbert Arenas, Antawn Jamison and Caron Butler, this team is scary good at putting the ball in the hoop. If they can turn games into score-fests, they can rack up wins.

If the entire Central Division falters (not likely), the Wizards can make a run at the NBA Finals. But here's thinking they are a bit too finesse and not quite deep enough.

6. New Jersey Nets (46-36)

The nucleus of this team is getting old. Jason Kidd is past his prime, Vince Carter is on the verge, as is Richard Jefferson. Having said that, this should still be an exciting team to watch, a threat to win a playoff series, and the favorite to win the incredibly weak Atlantic Division.

7. Indiana Pacers (44-38)

We know the Pacers have one of the best coaches in the league in Rick Carlisle. His mettle is really going to be tested this year. Not only are the Pacers facing their first season in ages without Ron Artest, they surprisingly lost the guy who was supposed to take his place when Peja Stojakovic bolted to the Hornets.

That leaves world-famous gun toter Stephen Jackson as the team's best player. He's good, but not centerpiece quality.

8. Boston Celtics (41-41)

A lot of this hinges on whether Paul Pierce can stay healthy. He's been in the league for a decade and his body is starting to wear down. But Pierce still needs some help. The Celtics are in desperate need of a comeback season from Al Jefferson, or somebody, to achieve a playoff

berth.

9. Milwaukee Bucks (40-42)

I'd like to say the Central Division can once again send five teams to the playoffs this year, but I just don't see it happening, and I think the Bucks are going to be the odd man out.

Andrew Bogut has shown some signs of injury problems, and without him, there is no real inside presence to offset Michael Redd's perimeter bombing. Charlie Villanueva just isn't consistent enough to pick up the slack, though I did like the trade.

10. Orlando Magic (40-42)

While you were sleeping, the Magic have been quietly accumulating a cache of impressive young talent. In addition to the blossoming Dwight Howard, the Magic hosed Detroit for the services of Darko Milicic, who is also blossoming away from the Pistons crucible.

Orlando isn't quite there yet, but they'll be a playoff regular in the next decade.

11. Toronto Raptors (38-44)

Another team quietly amassing some great young talent, but it's going to take a while to build something. Signing Chris Bosh to a contract extension this summer was a start. Now, first overall pick Andrea Bargnani has to develop an inside game to go with his outside game. If he does, the Raptors will be no stranger to playoff appearances, either.

12. Charlotte Bobcats (32-50)

A step behind the Magic and Raptors, but Charlotte is also building a nice arsenal of young players. Adam Morrison will be able to score on this level, but will he be able to defend his position? Ray Felton looks like a real-deal all star running the point.

13. Philadelphia 76ers (30-52)

This team is just getting way too old. Chris Webber isn't going to replicate the nearly 20-and-10 season he had a year ago, and while Allen Iverson remains one of the greatest offensive players in the game, he's not young himself. This team is going to be hampered with ping-and-ding injuries all year.

14. Atlanta Hawks (27-55)

When a team manages to land Joe Johnson and Speedy Claxton in consecutive offseasons, you'd think they'd really be building toward something. But these are the Hawks, and the rest of the roster is either really young or really unimpressive. Oh, yeah, Claxton's hurt, too. Mark them down for a spot on the draft lottery show next April.

15. New York Knicks (24-58)

The scary thing is, if this team had any real leadership, they'd be going places. A backcourt of Stephon Marbury and Jared Jeffries is nothing to sneeze at. Channing Frye is an exciting young frontcourt player, and I don't think first-round pick Renaldo Balkman is the running joke everyone thinks he is.

Alas, James Dolan and Isiah Thomas are running the show, so put the Benny Hill theme on the stereo, sit back, and watch the hilarity unfold.