Well, it's officially basketball season. The NBA's Halloween opening night doubleheader is now underway, and the Cavs get things started tomorrow night at The Q against the Wizards. Papa Cass finishes off his NBA Preview, with this, his look at the Western Conference.

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

1. Dallas Mavericks (61-21)

Dirk Nowitzki is aging about as gracefully as you can expect an NBA player to age. Approaching 10 years in the league, he has gotten even better. Of course, he opts to shoot over his defenders instead of driving past them, which helps save wear and tear.

The revamped defense installed by coach Avery Johnson is really what has lifted this team to title contender status. This team should be the reigning NBA champs, but owner Mark Cuban led a teamwide implosion in last spring's NBA Finals.

2. San Antonio Spurs (59-23)

I guess you know you're good when a second-round elimination sparks a torrent of "What's wrong with the Spurs?" comments.
As with Detroit, the sharks are circling what is largely being viewed as an aging roster. As with Detroit, don't call the undertaker just yet.

As long as the nucleus of Tim Duncan, Manu Ginobili and Tony Parker are together and healthy, this team will be a title contender.

3. Phoenix Suns (57-25)

If you could get some kind of guarantee that Amare Stoudemire would be on the floor dropping in 20 and snagging 10 each night for 82 games, the Suns would be a title contender. But you can't. Even though Steve Nash and Shawn Marion have been downright Hurculean in their

effort to compensate for the loss of Stoudemire, the Suns still need their lean, athletic center in the lineup to vault past Dallas and San Antonio.

As of now, they have him. Will that be the case in February?

4. Sacramento Kings (54-28)

Mike Bibby and Brad Miller are the two cornerstones of the team. The x-factor is Ron Artest. If coach Eric Musselman can keep the flaky forward in check and his mind on basketball, the Kings are a dangerous team.

5. Los Angeles Clippers (51-31)

The Clips still aren't a terribly deep team. But if Sam Cassell can start to hand the point guard baton to the talented Shaun Livingston in an effective way, it's going to enable their powerful starting lineup to carry the load, much like they did a year ago.

It's hard to get your mind around: the Clippers could be in the NBA Finals in a couple of years.

6. Denver Nuggets (47-35)

It must be a testament to the coaching ability of George Karl, because the Nuggets are lugging around a lot of dead weight on their roster.

This is a team that still employs the vastly overpaid Kenyon Martin, then went out and signed Nene and Reggie Evans to huge contracts in the offseason.

Did I mention none of them score? When it comes to putting the ball in the hoop, it's kind of Carmelo Anthony or bust.

7. Los Angeles Lakers (46-36)

This is Kobe. This is all about Kobe. Kobe initiates, Kobe finishes, Kobe defends, Kobe passes. Kobe can do it all very well when he wants to. But, 81-point games aside, he just isn't having a lot of luck as a one-man show. It's not that Kobe doesn't have some teammates who can play. Lamar Odom is a Laker, for crying out loud. But Kobe is the best at everything on the Laker roster, and that just isn't going to work.

8. New Orleans Hornets (44-38)

This team was sinking a season ago. They didn't' even really have a home. Now, they are apparently re-committed to New Orleans and have a promising cast of characters. Chris Paul arrived in the draft, then Peja Stojakovic arrived in free agency. Then the Bulls, flush with the heady rush of signing Ben Wallace, pawned Tyson Chandler off on New Orleans for P.J. Brown.

The result is a Hornets team that should be respectable once again.

9. Memphis Grizzlies (42-40)

The loss of Pau Gasol for several months obviously hurts. But the rest of the roster is also in a state of transition. Gone are Bobby Jackson and Shane Battier, arriving are Rudy Gay and Stromile Swift. The Grizzlies might have to take a step back this year to take a step forward in the future.

10. Minnesota Timberwolves (41-41)

Slowly, Kevin Garnett's celebrated athleticism is starting to wane. Slowly, he will transform into a back-to-the-basket post-up player. He's not quite there yet, but the Wolves are in need of an infusion of athleticism.

Ricky Davis isn't it. The Wolves are banking on rookie Randy Foye to take some of the heat off the aging legs of Garnett. Regardless, the Wolves are in need of restocking, and all the while, Garnett is getting older.

11. Houston Rockets (38-44)

Tracy McGrady and Yao Ming are tremendous talents, but they aren't really peanut butter and jelly. McGrady does his thing, Yao does his, and the rest of the roster just kind of fills in the space around. Then Yao or McGrady gets hurt, and the team just becomes undesirable to watch.

12. Utah Jazz (35-47)

If you like fundamental, old-school basketball, Jerry Sloan is your coach. Unfortunately, Slaon hasn't had a Jeff Hornacek, let alone a John Stockton or Karl Malone, on his roster in recent years.

The ballyhooed free agent signings of Carlos Boozer and Mehmet Okur haven't really gone as anticipated, and the point guard spot has been a revolving door pretty much since Stockton's retirement.

Andrei Kirilenko is the guy who has to make it all happen. With him healthy, the Jazz could conceivably fight for a playoff spot. Without him, 35 wins is a dream.

13. Seattle Supersonics (32-50)

The trio of Ray Allen, Luke Ridnour and Rashard Lewis is the only thing giving this roster any teeth. Beyond that, Sonics fans will be treated to the limited low-post game of Chris Wilcox and the here-and-there scoring of Kareem Rush.

But there are more important things at work in Seattle. Job 1 is keeping the franchise in the Pacific Northwest. Taking away the Sonics, the only Seattle team ever to win a title, would be a

crime.

14. Golden State Warriors (26-56)

And we're supposed to be impressed that Don Nelson is the coach of the Warriors again? Who exactly does he have to work with? Mike Dunleavy? Baron Davis?

Not exactly Chris Mullin and Mitch Richmond, is it? Of course, Mullin is the GM now, so a lot of the slop this upcoming season is sure to produce will end up in his lap.

15. Portland Trail Blazers (21-61)

The draft day acquisition of LaMarcus Aldridge is the first of what must be many brushstroke necessary to return the Blazers to respectability. This franchise has been allowed to wither on the vine for more than five years.

There is no one on this roster that inspires anything beyond indigestion. Zach Randolph is overrated to Kenyon Martin proportions. Beyond that, there is a big man corps of Raef LaFrentz, Joel Pryzbilla and and Jamaal Magloire.

Tell Blazer fans to go to sleep, and don't wake them until the draft lottery in April.