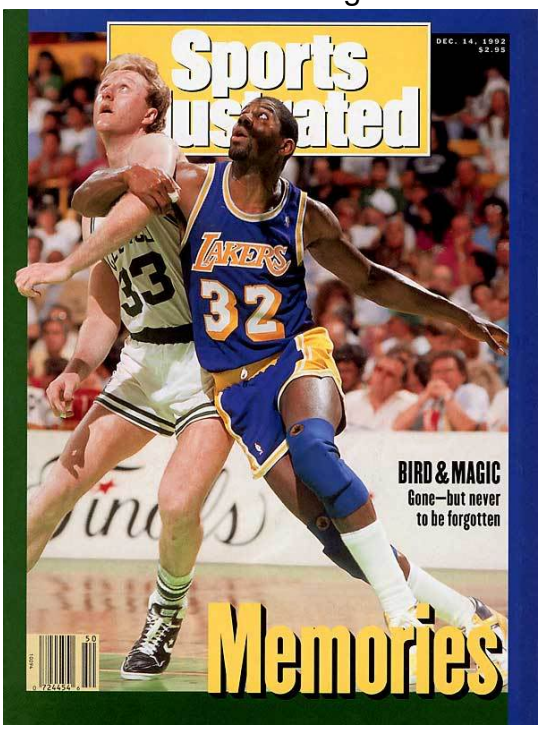
This year, for the 11th time in history, the Lakers and Celtics will decide between them the NBA championship. Game 1 is Thursday in Boston. Opinions are sharply divided in Northeast Ohio over whether it's worth watching the Celtics win a 17th title versus watching the Lakers with a 16th, or whether it would be less painful to simply commit hara-kiri with a serrated butter knife. In Erik's latest, he says he'll be tuning in, and talks a little bit about this ratings rich matchup between the league's most two storied franchises.



Basketball might not be a part of mom-and-apple-pie Americana the way baseball is, but there is one place where the NBA definitely gets one over on Major League Baseball, and does so on the sport's biggest stage.

The Yankees and Red Sox can engage in the most colossal and riveting of playoff series, but because baseball's two flagship franchises share a league, the most that will ever be at stake is an AL pennant. If anything, when the Yankees and Red Sox meet in the ALCS, it seems to render the World Series anticlimactic to the the national at large, outside the city of the NL champ.

The NBA's two most storied franchises, by contrast, hail from opposite coasts and opposite conferences, meaning that when they hook up in the postseason, it's for the the whole bag of cookies.

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the Celtics win a 17th title versus watching the Lakers with a 16th, or whether it would be less painful to simply commit hara-kiri with a serrated butter knife. But we're in the minority, an island of deprived bitterness in a sea of intrigue.

Anyone who has a vested interest in the NBA has to be ecstatic at the rebound of the league's marquee playoff series. Last year at this time, we in Cleveland were thrilled to be seeing our Cavs headed to the NBA Finals for the first time, but the '07 Finals were a national dud even before the Spurs swept the Cavs back into obscurity.

Nobody in the all-important East and West Coast markets cares when the Spurs play the Cavs. It could have been a riveting seven-game series and nary a sliver of TV sets would have been tuned to ABC in Boston, New York and Los Angeles.

This year, the NBA expects, and will almost certainly get, ratings for the Finals that it hasn't seen in years, largely because the all-important casual fans who don't know LeBron James from Jerome James will tune in. They might not know the intricacies of the game of basketball, but they know Lakers vs. Celtics is a big thing.

Certainly, this isn't the Lakers-Celtics rivalry from the days of yore. The long-standing player rivalries aren't there. The players who were Celtics and Lakers for so long that they came to embody the very essence of their franchises aren't there, for the most part.
The Lakers still have Kobe Bryant, on his quest to prove that he's not helpless to win a title without the services of the Big Crutch, Shaquille O'Neal.
The Celtics have Paul Pierce as their drafted-and-bred star. Beyond that, the star power in this series is largely store bought. Kevin Garnett and Ray Allen came to Boston in offseason

trades last year.
Pau
Gasol
came to the
Lakers
in a
midseason
trade this year.

This version of the Lakers-Celtics rivalry doesn't involve the traditional standards of excellence set by these franchises. There are few Magic
Johnsons
, Larry Birds, James Worthies and Kevin
McHales
raised from pups in the ways of winning. There aren't many diamonds in the rough who took the road less traveled to greatness like Robert Parish.

This is the story of a Lakers franchise that was mired in mediocrity a year ago and a Celtics franchise that was a putrid excuse for a basketball team a year ago, and the quick-fix moves their GMs made to get them back to the top.

Of the two teams, the Lakers probably have the most staying power for the coming years. They have the cornerstone superstar who isn't yet 30, the second-option scorer in Gasol who also hasn't yet turned 30, and a young star-in-the-making in center Andrew
Bynum
, whose season ended due to a knee injury in
Jaunary
. If the
Lakers
win the title without
Bynum
, that does not bode well for the rest of the league once
Bynum
is a healthy, shot-blocking, rebounding presence in the middle for the
Lakers
.

The Celtics' big three of Pierce, Garnett and Allen are all on the plus side of 30. The Celtics figure to be a factor in East for the next several years, but as their core ages, they will struggle to reach the level of performance they're reaching this spring. In the end, Boston GM Danny
Ainge
make quick-fix, short-term moves and that's exactly the type of team he got.

Of course, if the Celtics win an NBA title, I doubt anyone in Boston will complain if the Celtics start to backslide in the coming years ... oh wait, it's Boston. Of course they'll complain. But they'll still have the championship hardware to bear witness to their display of ingratitude.

If you like interesting subplots and long, winding, saccharine, sentimental trips down memory lane (and lots and lots of big-market ego-stroking) this is your kind of NBA Finals. If every Yankees or Red Sox World Series title makes you want to stab yourself in the eye with a fork, maybe the Discovery Channel is more your speed for the next few weeks.