

# A clash of the titans seems inevitable

Prediction—Cavs over Magic, Lakers to struggle past Nuggets in conference finals

By MATT SUGAM

With two anticlimactic Game 7s now in the rear-view mirror, the NBA has its final four set with the conference finals just underway.

In the East, the Orlando Magic are trying to stop the “beast of the east” in the Cleveland Cavaliers, who were

dominant all season long and steam rolled their first two opponents in the playoffs.

In the West, the defending conference champions Los Angeles Lakers are looking to get back to the finals to take care of some unfinished business from last season. But a very good Denver Nuggets team, that seems to

be peaking at the right time, stands in their way.

**LeBron and Cavs will continue dominance**

It's amazing the difference a year can make.

Since the Olympics last summer, small forward LeBron James looks like a completely different player, helping make his team look like a completely different team, especially on the defensive end of the floor.

The Cavs boast one of the best defenses in the league, while James has become one of the most dominant defenders in the game.

As good as this Cleveland team is offensively, their suffocating defense led them to the best record in the NBA by causing turnovers which led to fast breaks.

Along with the great defense and King James, the major improvement the Cavs have made is in their point guard play with the addition of Mo Williams. This in turn has helped make shooting guard Delonte West a better player.

With Williams at the point, not only does James have the facilitator he needs, but also a player that can hit those outside shots along with West. Now James has more confidence to kick it out when the defense quickly collapses on him.

The Magic are led by a dominant big man in centre Dwight Howard whose play in the post leads to what Orlando likes to do best, kick it out to their shooters like small forward Hedo Turkoglu and shooting guards Mickael Pietrus and J.J. Redick.

While there is really no stopping Howard, Cleveland should have an easier time slowing him down than the undermanned Celtics did without their defensive leader, centre Kevin Garnett. The Cavs will likely use a combination of centres Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Anderson Varejao along with power forward Ben Wallace to slow down Howard.

While the Magic will give the Cavs their toughest series yet, they stand no chance against James and Cleveland.

They will stop the Cavs from recording three series sweeps, but that's only because they are talented

enough to take at least one game from Cleveland—but that's about it. I'll take the Cavs in five.

**Lakers to grind out another series**

After a tough series against an undermanned Houston Rockets team, the Lakers will jump right into another tough series against the Denver Nuggets.

L.A. has been the favourite in the West all season long, but since the Denver Nuggets acquired point guard Chauncey Billups in a mid-season trade, the Nuggets have become a very close second.

The acquisition of Billups completely changed the fortunes of the Nuggets as the guard has been a floor general. He brings a ton of playoff experience with his years in Detroit where he was the finals MVP, leading the Pistons to the title in 2004.

The 32-year-old Billups has shown he is still one of the best point guards in the NBA in his homecoming. Expect Chauncey to hit some big threes in this series as he looks to lead his hometown team to its first ever finals appearance.

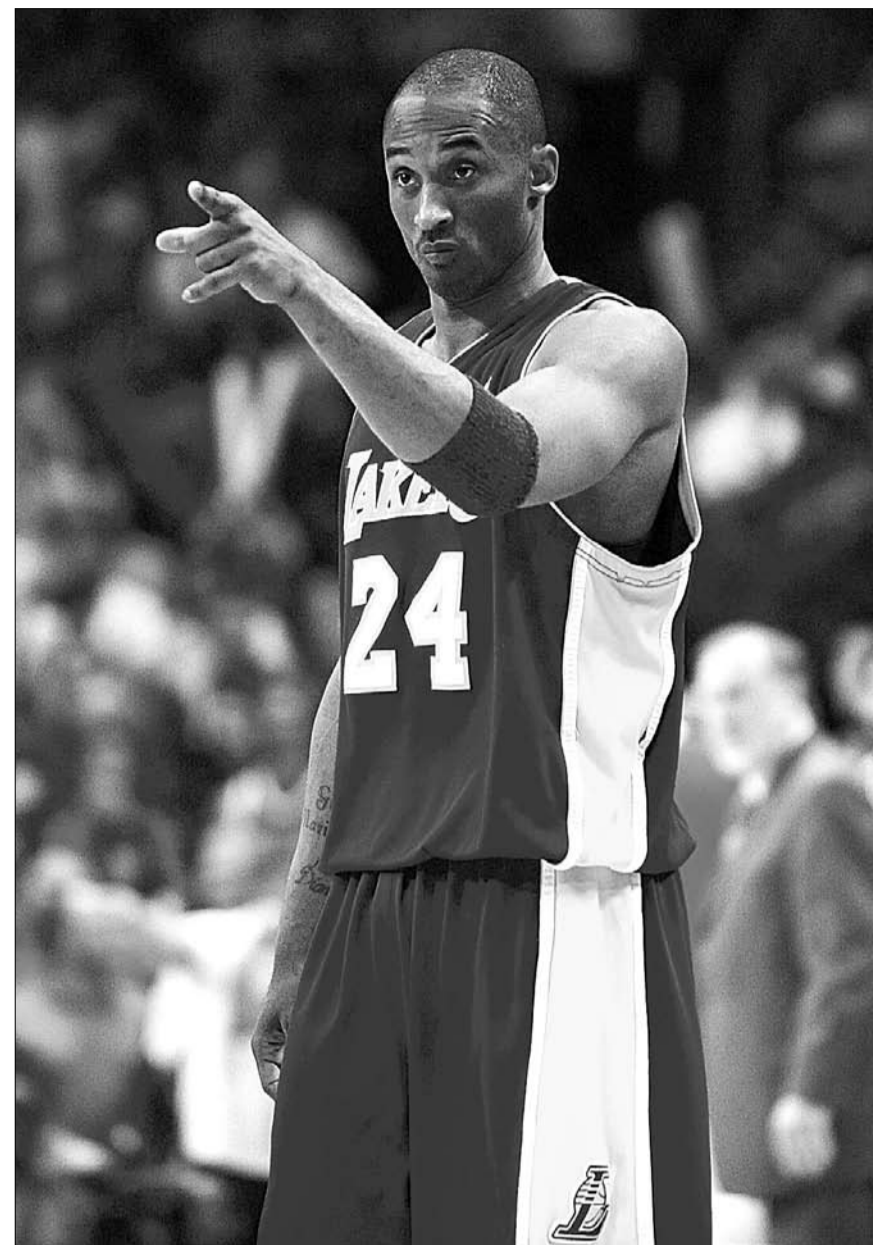
Small forward Carmelo Anthony along with Billups will carry Denver's offensive load. “Melo” is one of the most prolific scorers in the league and has quietly established himself as one of the top five players.

The Nuggets also match up better in the post with the Lakers because, quite frankly, after Rockets centre Yao Ming went down, they had no chance in the paint with a 6–6 power forward matching up against 7–0 power forward/centre in Pau Gasol.

Then comes shooting guard Kobe Bryant.

With the doubters already out on the Lakers' ability to make it back to the finals, Bryant will come out looking to prove his team is still the best in the west.

Bryant will have an easier time against whomever the Nuggets throw at him defensively than he did against the Rockets' small forwards Shane Battier and Ron Artest, who are arguably the best defenders against Bryant. But even they could not stop Kobe, as there is really no stopping Kobe. You can only try to slow him down.



**I WANT YOU:** Kobe Bryant is not ready to pass the torch to King James quite yet. RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES

In the end this will be a wire-to-wire series with some great playoff games. I'll take the Lakers in seven.

**Kobe vs. LeBron**

So this leads to the match-up the NBA and its fans have been waiting for—Kobe vs. LeBron.

Will there be the passing of the torch with James winning his first championship or will Kobe continue his reign as the best in the NBA and

get his fourth ring? It's a bit early to say with the conference finals still ongoing, but the match-up would be the ultimate clash of the titans.

But if Denver does pull the upset (I don't think Orlando has a chance of doing so), a Carmelo vs. LeBron match-up wouldn't be too bad either.

Matt Sugam also writes for *The Daily Targum* at Rutgers University.



**EASY DUNK:** LeBron James is considered by former Laker great Jerry West to be the best player in the game today. ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES

## Wimbledon's new roof gets stamp of approval

LONDON (Reuters)—It was blustery, cold, cloudy, and drizzly over southwest London—just the kind of weather fans had prayed for last Sunday when Wimbledon unveiled its new multi-million-dollar retractable roof over Centre Court.

Former Wimbledon champions Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf, along with Kim Clijsters and Tim Henman had been billed to take centre stage for an exhibition event but for once it was not the players who were the main attraction.

At 2.39 p.m. local time, 15,000 wide-eyed fans tilted their heads back in unison as the 1,000-ton concertina structure over Centre Court started unfurling at eight inches a second.

Seven minutes and four seconds later, the most famous tennis court in the world had become an indoor arena for the first time in its 87-year existence, complete with a translucent roof and bright floodlights.

“It sure has lived up to the beauty that has existed here for a long time. It's an exciting change, it's an addition for the players and the fans,” Agassi said before teaming up with wife Graf to take on his European rivals in a game of mixed doubles.

“It's an honour to be part of history here. Any time Wimbledon breaks with its tradition, you have to sign up.”

**Dress rehearsal**

While spectators loudly cheered the moment when the north and south sections of the roof locked together to block out the gray sky and harsh elements, there were some residents who were less than thrilled.

Wimbledon's new innovation had managed to trap two pigeons inside the bowl and they fluttered around in circles desperately trying to find an escape route.

The plight of the birds was the last thing on the mind of the All England Club's chief executive Ian Ritchie, who was using the event as a dress rehearsal for next month's grass court grand slam.

“Technically the closure worked fine. It was interesting to get the feedback from everybody who played on court because the humidity and the air control were one of the big issues for us. So we will analyze some of the data and see how it all performed and that was the major purpose of today,” he said.

Since rain could no longer play spoilsport at Wimbledon, the only fear for the crowd was that a worker

crawling across the roof, casting a Spiderman shadow as he made a routine repairs, might crash through the fabric.

There was no such drama and Ritchie added that it was important for a traditional tournament like Wimbledon to embrace new technology.

“The two things we are trying to address here is people have a lifetime ambition to get a seat ticket here to Centre Court and I always feel terribly sorry for them when it rains and they miss it,” he told Reuters Television.

**Thumbs up**

When the venture had been announced five years ago, Henman had been among the skeptics who were concerned that a “living surface” like grass would get slippery in an enclosed space.

But organizers, who have declined to reveal the exact cost of the project, installed an air management system, which removes condensation from within the bowl and stops the grass from sweating.

Although the roof has arrived eight years too late for Henman, whose Wimbledon hopes were famously spoiled by rain in 2001 when Goran Ivanisevic beat him in a semifinal that spanned three days, the Briton gave the surface his thumbs up.

“We all know what sort of day it's been outside and it's a real treat to be able to play in the conditions inside when it's so miserable, cold, windy, and wet outside,” the now-retired 34-year-old said after teaming up with Clijsters to beat Mr. and Mrs. Agassi in an entertaining contest.

“It feels there is a little humidity in the air ... but in terms of court surface, it's so dry. There is no real effect of there being a roof to the playing conditions. I've only got good things to say about it.”

Agassi added: “I was a little worried the conditions, with the roof being closed, would create a level of moisture and make the court more slippery for the players.”

“I was really impressed with what I saw, maybe I wasn't running even fast enough to slip, but the movement felt good, the court felt very solid and the sound was magnificent. The way the ball sounds here is going to add to the intensity.”

“When you get two people out there who can really play, and move and hit the ball, I think you are going to feel it like a titanic battle that you've not seen yet.”

## Sprint swimming uncharted waters for Phelps

CHARLOTTE (Reuters)—Michael Phelps may be the greatest swimmer of all time but can he be a great sprinter?

That was the question being debated last weekend as Phelps returned to the starting blocks for the first time since the Beijing Olympics at the Charlotte UltraSwim Grand Prix and offered a glimpse of what he might have in mind for the 2012 London Games.

While Phelps and his long-time coach Bob Bowman remain tight-lipped about their London master plan, it is likely to center on swimming's glamour event—the 100 metres freestyle—which seems to hold immense appeal for the 23-year-old.

With 14 Olympic gold medals, including a single-Games record haul of eight in Beijing, Phelps's endurance and versatility have no equal in the pool.

His dominance has not yet extended to the sprints, however, and it is that challenge which will fuel his drive over three years of training.

“That's what makes him love it [the challenges],” said Bowman. “It's kind of hard to say let's break the 400 metres for the 10th time, he needed something new.”

Of the five events Phelps swam in Charlotte only two, the 200 freestyle and 100 butterfly, were on his Beijing card and he posted impressive wins in both despite a tumultuous layoff that included a three-month suspension from USA Swimming after he was photographed inhaling from a pipe used for smoking marijuana.

For the rest of the meeting, however, Phelps was forced out of his comfort zone, swimming the 50 metres for the first time since he was a teenager, while testing the waters in the 100 freestyle and 100 backstroke.

**Final frontier**

Olympic 100 metres backstroke champion Aaron Peirsol believes the sprints represent the final frontier for Phelps, who has demonstrated throughout his spectacular career he is not afraid to boldly go where no swimmer has gone before.

“It's one of the last frontiers for him, so I hope he sticks with it,” said Peirsol. “He doesn't like to lose.”

However, losing may be something Phelps will have to get used to as he comes to grips with his new events and a straight-arm stroke that has been compared to Tiger Woods's swing overhaul.



**BUTTERFLY:** Michael Phelps returned to action in Charlotte after suspension. STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES

Phelps had runner-up finishes in the 100 metres back and 100 metres free, both of which were riddled with flaws that left him frustrated but determined.

“It's these times when you come off a meet and you're upset about things, that's the best time to get back in the water and train and that's what I've always done,” said Phelps, after tasting defeat in a final for the first time in nearly a year.

“The 100 is definitely an event I'd

like to start swimming more often and be more of a competitor.”

The sprinters are already casting a wary eye towards Phelps.

“I heard one big guy in the pool was trying straight-arm,” joked France's 50 freestyle world-record holder Frederic Bousquet. “I am very flattered if he's trying to look like me.”

“But the guy can call himself a sprinter, that's for sure. He's going to help us all go faster.”

## Rachel Alexandra pulls off the unthinkable at Preakness

Busting the gender myth in horse racing

By CHERYL CASATI  
Epoch Times Staff

The 134th Preakness leg of the Triple Crown, which ran this past Saturday, will be talked about for generations. It will stand out in people's memories like a legend does. The three-year-old filly that ran away from the top colts is how Rachel Alexandra will be remembered.

Historically, the gender myth that fillies cannot run with the colts has kept many people from even entertaining the idea of bringing their exceptional fillies to the Triple Crown.

Just the fact that Rachel Alexandra ran and won made history. But there is another aspect that is even more impressive—she led from wire to wire.

The 13th position is hardly coveted in any race, let alone a race of this calibre. The horse has to work harder, and run a longer distance if it doesn't move to a place closer to the rail early

in the race.

Jockey Calvin Borel helped the filly win with an excellent ride. Another aspect, which will add to Rachel Alexandra's legend, is that Borel opted to ride her rather than the Derby winner, Mine That Bird, that he had piloted across the wire in Kentucky.

Borel is not regretful about going against the norm and riding this outstanding filly. “I've been in the business 30 years. I know my horses, sir, and I knew she was most probably the best horse I've been on in my life.”

In an interview with ABC news, Mine That Bird trainer Chip Woolley said,

“It's great for horseracing. She's a great filly. My colt's a super-colt, he won the Derby, came in second here.”

Even colts rarely have led the field from wire to wire. It takes a strong heart and endurance as well as speed to run with the top colts and continue to hold the lead from beginning to



**PREAKNESS WINNER:** Rachel Alexandra crosses the finish line ahead of Kentucky Derby winner Mine That Bird. MATTHEW STOCKMANG/GETTY IMAGES

end. Rachel Alexandra did just that.

It seems to be destiny at work that brought this filly to the race, since her previous owners believed the gender myth, and her new owners had to pay a premium fee to be allowed late entry in the race.

**Celebrity status**

Rachel Alexandra has already achieved celebrity status. She has

won the hearts of women around the country and has her own Facebook page!

It is not clear whether she will run in the Belmont. Congratulations to Chip Woolley for saying it's the horse that will let him know if she is ready. Until then it's undecided.

Woolley is a trainer who made a choice fit for the reigning “Queen” of fillies in the USA.