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The NBA Needs To Change It's Playoff Format...Now

By Adam McFarland

One great thing about the NBA and commissioner David Stern is that they fix mistakes with their

game. Case in point - in 2003 the NBA switched the first round of the playoffs from a best-of-five game series to a best-of-seven to help ensure that the better team advances. That's why it's mind boggling to wonder why they won't change the playoff format to account for debacles like this season.

If a non-sports fan took a quick check at the 2006 Western Conference Standings and then the Playoff bracket, they would scratch their heads in disbelief. The Dallas Mavericks had the second best record in the conference at 60-22, three games behind conference leading San Antonio. The Denver Nuggets were 44-38, 19 games behind San Antonio. Yet, come playoff time the Nuggets were the #3 seed while the Mavericks were the #4 seed. All because Dallas happens to play in the same division as San Antonio and the top three seeds HAVE TO be division winners. So now Dallas and San Antonio are meeting in the second round of the playoffs as opposed to the Western Conference Championship, where the two best teams should be meeting.

To add to the chaos, the #6 seeded LA Clippers had a better record than the #3 seed Nuggets. Therefore, in their first round series the #6 seed had the home court advantage! This is because the NBA gives the team with the better record the home court advantage...but not the higher seed. Does that make sense at all? If you are going to reward division winners with the top three seeds, shouldn't you also reward them with home court advantage? Or you could just reward the teams with the better record with the home court advantage AND the higher seed! This isn't rocket science Mr. Stern.

If all of that wasn't embarrassing enough, at the end of the regular season the NBA was faced with the worst possible scenario for a sporting event - a game where it was better for each team to lose. The #5 seeded Memphis Grizzlies were playing the #6 seed Clippers with the loser having the inside track to the #6 seed and home court advantage in the first round. The winner would likely get the #5 seed and a date with the Mavericks in the first round. The Clippers "lost" the game and went on to get the #6 seed, home court advantage, and a relatively easy win over the Nuggets in the first round. The Grizzlies "won" the game, the #5 seed, and were promptly swept out of the playoffs by the superior Mavericks.

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The NBA cannot allow this to happen again. It's an embarrassment to their game and to all things sports. There should never be a game where it is in each teams best interest to lose. So what do I propose?

The most simple and logical solution to this problem is to guarantee each division winner a spot in the playoffs, but then seed the teams based on their records with the highest seed always having home court. All ties in record would go to the division winner. This still makes winning the division important - it guarantees you a spot in the playoffs and the upper hand in tie breakers - but also ensures that the best teams get the best seeds and home court advantage. I liken it to the NCAA Tournament - winning the Big Ten or the ACC doesn't guarantee you a number one seed, it guarantees you a spot in the tournament.

Here's what the seeding looked like this year:

1. *San Antonio (63-19) 2. *Phoenix (54-28) 3. *Denver (44-38) 4. Dallas (60-22) 5. Memphis (49-33) 6. LA Clippers (47-35) 7. LA Lakers (45-37) 8. Sacramento (44-38)

*Division Winner

Here's what it would have looked like in my proposed system:

1. *San Antonio (63-19) 2. Dallas (60-22) 3. *Phoenix (54-28) 4. Memphis (49-33) 5. LA Clippers (47-35) 6. LA Lakers (45-37) 7. *Denver (44-38) 8. Sacramento (44-38)

*Division Winner

Amazing! The best teams actually have the highest seeds AND have the home court advantage, all while still preserving the importance of winning a division. This would prevent Dallas and San Antonio from playing in the second round, ensure that Memphis would have home court advantage and not be stuck playing Dallas, and prevent Denver from getting the #3 seed just for winning the division...all while keeping the integrity of winning a division by giving Denver the #7 seed over Sacramento for winning their division.

Please, please do the right thing for next season Mr. Stern and adopt a system that is fair for every team. Don't let this disaster turn into the new BCS. Do what you always do - fix what's wrong.

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recently won honorable mention in the Microsoft Start Something Amazing

Awards and was featured in the February 2006 issue of Tuff Stuff Magazine.

Team Record Under 500—No Problem In The NBA

By Paul Mrocza

Of the four major professional sports in America, basketball is the only one where a team with a .500 or under record has a chance of making the playoffs. In the NHL, where like the NBA a little over 50% of the teams go to the playoffs; clubs with losing records don't come close to competing for Lord Stanley's Cup.

This year in the NFL, where even the Wild Card teams sported a .688 winning percentage, the Kansas City Chiefs were left out of the post-season tournament after going 10–6 (.625). Major League Baseball saw the San Diego Padres win their division and earn a 2005 playoff berth with a .506 winning mark, but they were an anomaly. This season all other MLB playoff teams won 90 or more of the 162 games they played. Over the past five years 98% of the baseball teams that have been playoff bound have won 90 (.556) or more games and none have had losing records. The NBA is different.

In the 2003–04 NBA Playoffs four of the eight Eastern Conference teams that had the honor of making the second round earned records of .500 or below. In the Atlantic Division, the 8th seed Boston Celtics, one of the most winning franchises in professional sports history, touted a 36–46 (.439) record as they headed into the playoffs. At 39–43 (.476) the New York Knicks weren't much better. In the Central Division, New Orleans and Milwaukee, 5th and 6th seeds respectively, finished at .500.

The next year no sub-.500 teams were in the tournament but New Jersey, the 7th seed with a 43–39 (.524) mark, and Philadelphia, the 8th seed compiling a 42–40 (.521) record, were marginal. This year, as we approach the mid-way point of the professional hoop season, it's clear that there's a good chance that as many as four sub-.500 teams—25% of the playoff mix—will be shooting threes and banging the boards in the post-season.

The Milwaukee Bucks, the current 6th seed, are 19–18 (.514); the Philadelphia 76ers, which hold the 7th seed, are 18–20 (.474); and the Washington Wizards, the potential 8th seed are 17–20 (.459). Washington will probably have some stiff competition for that final Eastern Conference position from the 16–22 Chicago Bulls, the 15–23 Boston Celtics, and the 14–22 Orlando Magic.

Although the Western Conference has traditionally been exempt from this dilemma, this year is different. The current 8th seed, the Utah Jazz, is one game above .500 and there are at least three other teams—Minnesota, Golden State, and New Orleans/Oklahoma City—with more losses than wins that are in contention for that spot.

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Certainly a system that's geared towards making the league competitive has its benefits to owners, players, and fans. While teams continue to stay in the mix, this system has the potential to keep hometown fans interested. However, the system leads to inferior teams making it into a post-season where they don't have a chance to compete.

There are a few reasons why the NBA has this problem. However the major reason is, quite simply, money. The NFL has long had a salary cap; the NHL has just instituted one; and MLB has created a half-hearted attempt at one. The theory behind an effective salary cap, such as the type the NFL and NHL have instituted, is that when teams are allowed to only spend a certain amount of money they will be forced to spend it wisely—doing their best to build a competitive team. The other way a salary cap

works is that it prohibits one or two teams from paying exorbitant amounts of money to hire all of the stars, thus leveling the playing field. (This is why the MLB salary cap doesn't really work; it doesn't do this and is not a true cap. It's more of a salary visor.)

Now this may surprise you— the NBA also has a salary cap. This year it's set at \$49.5 million per team. However the NBA has a "soft" cap, a headband really, which translates into numerous loopholes allowing clubs to still break the bank when it comes to salaries.

Because of how it can be manipulated, the soft cap does very little to control spending. This can have some disastrous results for teams and the league. Some teams capture that one star player with a huge multi-year deal but then, because of their own budget limits, can't afford to support him with role-players. And if that primary guy suffers a season ending injury, the entire team's season is over.

Others with the deepest pockets find their way around the cap and scoop up two or three hallmark names, while teams with small bankrolls don't have the power to attract the best talent. Then there are the organizations that spend money on young talent and that talent just doesn't pan out. If a player has a big contract and he's not performing, he's impossible to trade, and he still has to be paid.

The fact is a salary cap is intended to negate exactly what is happening in the NBA; a soft cap is designed to simply get around the basic provisions and safeguards a salary cap offers.

The final result is an imbalance of power, which means you may have 16 playoff positions but you really only have 12 playoff teams. The last three or four slots are filled by non-competitive teams just because the spaces are there.

This year if the Celtics or the Sixers or the Jazz or any of the other clubs hovering around .500 make the post-season will anyone consider them worthy of being potential NBA champions? There's one of two possible solutions for the NBA—a real salary cap or going to a 12-team playoff scenario.

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