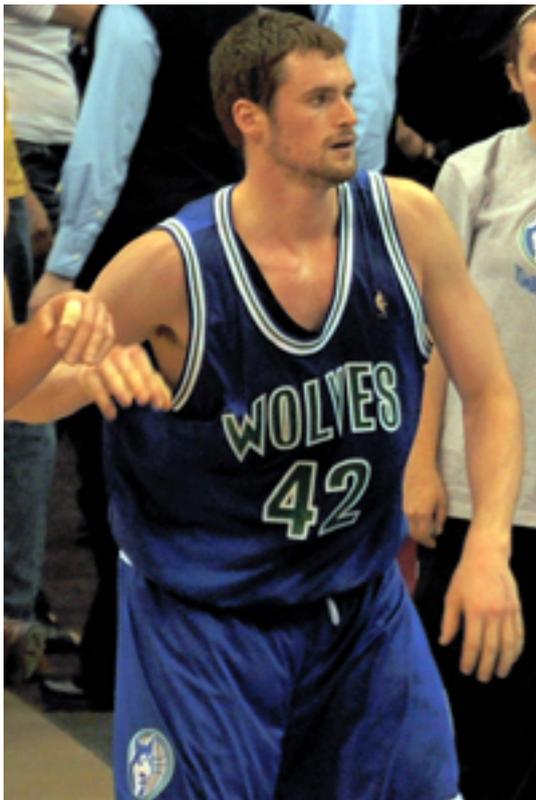


## The NBA quarter pole assessment

Written by Ryan T. Scott

Friday, 17 December 2010 13:31

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The Los Angeles Lakers have participated in the last four NBA Finals. With the additions that they made during the offseason, it would seem that they are well positioned to potentially win a fourth 3-peat for coach Phil Jackson. The Lakers are less dominant than Jackson's former teams with the Lakers and Bulls, but they still have the same late game Zen to be able to pull out the close ones. For a Lakers fan such as myself, that approach is real annoying – I wish they would just whoop up on teams like the Bulls and Michael Jordan used to do – but at the end of the day, they have been to the dance before, and know where the bathroom is.

On the other side of the country, the Boston Celtics have a bad taste in their mouth because of their loss to the Lakers in last years' Finals. The Celtics have also added Shaquille O'Neal since last year, and Shaq is still Shaq when he needs to be. No matter what anybody says to me, Shaquille O'Neal is the most dominant force on a basketball court I have ever seen. If Shaq were to concentrate on basketball completely, rather than brand building trips to Harvard Square and such, then I'm fairly confident that he could still perform close to the level of his past dominance. Shaq has been savvy about his body size, and thus staying healthy, so that he can extend his playing career. It's completely understandable that Shaq focuses so much time on his commercial presence, so I really don't fault him – as the Bone Thugs and Harmony song says, "gotta'make that money man." But somehow, I think that lack of focus will be a last second deal breaker if the Celtics were to face the Lakers in the Finals again in June 2011 (yes, we're already talking about 2011. 2010 has been a good one...did I mention the Lakers won the Championship).

Yes, I do think that the Lakers and Celtics will meet again at the end of this season, but the Miami Heat have certainly peaked everyone's interest with their improved performance of late. It's hard to imagine that three-star players on the Heat can beat five-star players on a team with longstanding comraderie such as the Celtics. The addition of center Eric Dampier to the Heat

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has given them a veteran presence at center, but it's harder to imagine Shaq not eating Dampier's lunch if it comes down to it. Thus, the Heat's supposed run at seven or eight championships (that's what LeBron said, I'm just repeating) may have to wait at least one more year.

After those three teams are a bunch of teams that are very interesting, and fun to watch – the NBA has a good product going this year – but they have little chance to knock veteran teams out of championship contention. The Oklahoma Thunder may head that list, with their combination of MVP candidate, forward Kevin Durant, and guard Russell Westbrook; who is playing well enough to get some sniffs of MVPness himself. The fact that the Thunder have a few other strong pieces in addition to their leading two stars, leaves them only one “big dude” away from being able to take a serious run at the Lakers. But they are still one big dude away. The Denver Nuggets are out of the 2010 gate well. Carmello Anthony is handling his desire to be traded very professionally, but the fact that he has one foot out the door cripples a team that has a lot, but not enough, confidence to beat the Lakers.

And of course creeping up on every team is the new and improved Minnesota Timberwolves. Sure I'm slightly kidding when I say that, but the Timberwolves have some really good things going. One of the most important of those “things” is the fact that the Timberwolves have plenty of serviceable “big dudes”. Just because a team doesn't have a Shaq or Dwight Howard at their center position, doesn't mean that they can't have a presence of big dudes in the paint. The combination of Milicic, Koufous and Pecherov gives the Timberwolves a steady dose of “big dudes.” But the Lakers lead the league in quality big dudes, and if that element is healthy, then the first quarter of the season suggests that a familiar script may unfold for the 2011 season – I hope. It will get very interesting for the Timberwolves when point guard Jonny Flynn comes back from injury. I think many underestimate Flynn's ability.

The Chicago Bulls, New York Knicks, and Indiana Pacers are interesting, as far as other teams in the Eastern Conference go, but only a few teams in any year are serious championship contenders. Those teams, and teams like the Timberwolves, have to settle with being very good entertainment, and works in progress. But if all those teams keep drinking milk, then Kobe Bryant will eventually retire and allow somebody else to wear the ring. For now, they must all kiss that ring. That Kevin Love is something else on the boards though.