

A Clearer Picture

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As the dominoes fall in this first night of the NBA Free Agent frenzy, there has been no shortage of money spent and surprise deals. From Kemba Walker proving Quinn Redmond's prediction right and signing with the Celtics to the shocking trade of Jimmy Butler to the Heat, the A-list free agents have taken no time to choose where to play out the next chapter of their careers. Headlining the early wave of free agent news was the Brooklyn Nets, who not only brought in Kyrie Irving as expected, but also won the Kevin Durant sweepstakes. As a result of this, the elation of Knicks fans has diminished as they settled for the consolation prize of Julius Randle after striking out on the top names of this class.

With news on more player signings pouring in by the hour, only one thing is for certain: the landscape of the league next year is becoming clearer move after move. Although the upcoming season will unquestionably be tougher to predict than it has in recent years, I believe the contenders and playoff teams have revealed themselves. Even with Kawhi Leonard's future destination still up in the air, the majority of the top tier guys have cemented their landing spots and more importantly provided a solid forecast of next year's playoffs. Looking closer at this, I will lay out my predictions for next season according to all of the signings so far, and separate the contenders from the pretenders.

Playoff Predictions

Western Conference	Eastern Conference
1. Los Angeles Lakers	1. Philadelphia 76ers
2. Portland Trail Blazers	2. Milwaukee Bucks
3. Golden State Warriors	3. Boston Celtics
4. Houston Rockets	4. Brooklyn Nets
5. Oklahoma City Thunder	5. Toronto Raptors
6. Utah Jazz	6. Miami Heat
7. Denver Nuggets	7. Indiana Pacers
8. Dallas Mavericks	8. Detroit Pistons

First off, I'd like to say that these projections were made before Kawhi Leonard chooses his new team, so his deal could alter these rankings. However, considering he is favored to sign with the Lakers, I see the Lakers as a very safe bet to win the West for the first time since the Kobe Bryant days. Working down the list, I believe many familiar faces will be around come playoffs next year, but only a select few ultimately have the star power to hold the label of Finals contenders. In an era dominated by star power, I believe the short list of teams that could make their way to the Conference Finals in the West besides the Lakers are the Rockets and the Warriors. Both of these team's chances will rely heavily on the health of their aging rosters, but I feel teams like the Blazers and Thunder who have been close in the past don't have enough in the tank to push past the second round. As for the East, I believe the loaded 76ers will prevail through their immense level of talent despite some health concerns with Simmons and Embiid. Right behind them, I believe the Bucks could give them a run for their money, as well as the Celtics and possibly the Nets as well. For the rest of the league, I'm sure there will be some nice stories of improvement and hope for the future but there isn't another roster with the necessary fire power to be around come June 2020.

What This Means for the Rest of the League



Perhaps the biggest snub of my playoff projections was the rejuvenated New Orleans Pelicans, however I believe they are still a year away from playoff contention as their young core finds their place in this league. They possess the talent and potential to even become a top 3 seed a couple years down the road but need more experience as a unit to make any run beyond the first round of the playoffs. I also have the San Antonio Spurs falling out of the playoffs not because I question their coaching, but because their roster is old, and the team hasn't brought in many noteworthy reinforcements that could flip the script.

Another team I have falling out of the Western Conference playoffs is the Clippers after they've appeared to come up empty handed in the most prestigious free agent class of all time. After overperforming last season, I don't think their team of high energy 6th man type guys will be able to keep up with the big boys in a packed conference. Flipping to the East, I have the Heat replacing the Magic in the playoffs next year, but the bottom 3 teams in that conference will be irrelevant anyways so it won't move the needle too much.

Should Kawhi Leonard pack his bags to join the Lakers, I don't see how they come short of a Championship in 2020. Until Kevin Durant gets back on the floor the year after that, there will be no team that will be able to match up with their elite lineup barring any injuries. The Golden State Warriors will likely be their biggest threat in the Western Conference Finals, but D'Angelo Russell is no Kevin Durant, and the team will surely miss Andre Iguodala both on and off the court. On a last note, I feel the Nets were the big winners of today, followed by the 76ers and the Heat. The Knicks stole the show as the biggest loser of the day, but the Clippers were definitely no far behind them.