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NBA Playoffs Update: A Second Round to Remember

Qasim Ali, Volunteer Reporter

This is why they play the games.

Forecasting the endings of each playoff series based on historical trends and data can be fun. When those trends continue into the playoffs, constructing a case for which teams will exceed or befall expectations is a satisfying hobby. But this round of competition proved basketball is anything but an exact science. Full of unexpected performances and teams completely changing their identities from game to game, the NBA's Conference Semi-finals were something to behold.

Golden State Warriors vs. Memphis Grizzlies

Winner: Golden State, 4-2

A matchup between a team that's seen it all in the Golden State Warriors and a young and hungry franchise in the Memphis Grizzlies was bound to be loads of fun. Both teams play high-energy defense and have dynamic shot blockers and scorers that make for a visually stunning brand of basketball.

The Warriors dealt the first blow in what would become a scrappy and physical series, eking out a 117-116 Game One victory in Memphis. Grizzlies' star Ja Morant missed a potential game-winning layup as time expired, a rare sight for Morant who had led the league in points in the paint during the regular season. However, the Warriors would not escape Memphis with a win in Game Two as Morant vented his frustrations to the tune of 47 points, single-handedly carrying their offense down the stretch.

Game Two set a physical tone that redefined the series completely. Just under three minutes into the contest, Memphis' Dillon Brooks collided mid-air with Golden State's Gary Payton II in a moment that left Payton II with a broken elbow, and Brooks suspended for Game Three.

From that moment on, the series became a war of attrition. Every loose ball seemed to lead to a panic, and every rebound was a battle of its own. The stats reflected this new physical tone; the team who grabbed more rebounds each game won every contest following Game Two.

Game Four was the beginning of the end for Memphis. The Grizzlies lost in a heartbreaking fashion while playing without Morant, who suffered a bone bruise at the end of Game Three. The Warriors chipped away at Memphis' 12-point advantage in the fourth quarter until they led with 45 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter. Thanks to poor shot selection from the young cast of Grizzlies and the absence of their closing scorer in Morant, Memphis fell into a 3-1 series hole.

Despite a shocking blowout win in Game Five for Memphis, the series deficit proved insurmountable. They would lose in Game Six, ending the series for good. Again, Memphis was out-rebounded by a margin of 25 and the Grizzlies were helpless against Golden State's "Splash Brothers." Warrior guards Klay Thompson and Stephen Curry drained 14 3-pointers and hit too many clutch shots for Brooks' and Desmond Bane's Grizzlies to keep up with.



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Going forward, the question for the Warriors will be how consistently they can rebound the basketball and limit turnovers. Memphis has the aura of a team that can compete soon and could be in for a rematch in the future. Giving Golden State all they could handle without their best player is a testament to their promising young talent. With this playoff experience in the bag, look for Memphis to make a mark in 2023.

Milwaukee Bucks vs. Boston Celtics

Winner: Boston, 4-3

In what was anticipated by many as the series to watch in this round, the Bucks and Celtics did not disappoint. The first six games saw neither team win two in a row, as each contest seemed to be a defensive battle.

The Celtics hung their hat on letting two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo be the focal point of Milwaukee's offense all series whilst taking away his support. They would often leave their undersized Defensive Player of the Year Marcus Smart alone on the "Greek Freak," and would opt to guard the Bucks' shooters closely. This led to Antetokounmpo putting up historic numbers on the smaller Smart as well as an array of Celtics defenders.

The Bucks did not win a single game in this series when Antetokounmpo was the only player scoring 24 or more points for the team. Although Milwaukee lacked their second-best scorer Khris Middleton for the whole series, Boston took advantage and their strategy paid off with a narrow series win.

Nevertheless, Milwaukee found a way to gain a 3-2 lead going into Game Six. With Boston's season on the line, Jayson Tatum put together an all-time clutch performance to keep the Celtics alive. He poured in 46 points and buried clutch shot after clutch shot in Milwaukee, looking like the protégé of the late Kobe Bryant he is.

Game Seven on Sunday was the nail in the coffin for Milwaukee. Fresh off the renewed energy from Game Six, the Celtics successfully employed their defensive strategy one final time, but Giannis was also uncharacteristically inefficient in the paint in the game. That, along with an abysmal 3-29 from behind the arc from his supporting cast led to a decisive 28-point victory for Boston.

For Milwaukee, their ability to take a defensive powerhouse like Boston to seven games without their second-best offensive weapon in Middleton speaks volumes to their defense and team-oriented scheme. But for Boston, they showed a decisive ability to adapt after a brutal Game One loss that may push them over the top as they hope to win an NBA-record eighteenth championship.

Philadelphia 76ers vs. Miami Heat

Winner: Miami, 4-2

Missing their MVP candidate Joel Embiid to start the series due to injury, it would be on former MVP James Harden and budding star Tyrese Maxey to generate offense for the Philadelphia 76ers. The problem with that plan was their opponent, the Miami Heat: One of the most versatile defensive teams in basketball.

Without Embiid garnering defensive attention inside for the Sixers, Miami let their talented on-ball defenders go to work on Harden and Maxey. While they did not negate the duo completely, Miami held them in check. Considering that Philadelphia had the lowest scoring bench of any team this season, that was all they had to do.

Going into Game Three with a 2-0 series lead, the Heat looked poised to make this series a short one. Embiid had other plans, suiting up for Game Three with a mask to protect the fractured orbital bone he sustained in the team's previous playoff series. Philly would take Game Three on their home floor thanks to an impressive defensive showing, and it was clear that simply having Embiid on the floor would be enough to spark their team.

Game Four would be another Sixers win, punctuated by James Harden's return to form. He scored 31 points, outdueling Jimmy Butler's 40 for Miami. The Sixers barely escaped that game, and it was clear they needed more team scoring along with production from Harden to compete.

The Heat asserted themselves as the better team in Game Five. They held Embiid and Harden to just 25 shot attempts and got 10 or more points from seven of their players. The Sixers had just three double-digit scorers in comparison.

Game Six was more of the same, as the Heat comfortably won the game and Harden attempted just two shots in the entire second half. The Sixers ranked last in bench scoring in the regular season, proving reliant on their star scorers to get it done. In contrast, the nights where Jimmy Butler was not scoring most of Miami's points down the stretch were wins for the Heat because they have a bona fide supporting cast that benefits from playmaking rather than being bystanders.

Going forward, the depth and defensive connectivity of the Heat should continue to help them contend. For the Sixers, they should take some notes on the Heat's roster construction to support Embiid and Harden as they enter another tumultuous offseason.

Dallas Mavericks vs. Phoenix Suns

Winner: Dallas, 4-3

The 64-win Phoenix Suns dominated this series on their home floor in Games One and Two. Dallas Mavericks star Luka Dončić averaged 40 points over the two losses and was the only hope Dallas had of countering the Suns' balanced scoring attack. In the beginning, the Mavericks looked outmatched, as their poorer defense from earlier in the season was starting to show.

When the series shifted back to Dallas for Game Three, something odd happened. Suns' guard Chris Paul, now 37, seemed to regress in scoring. As the orchestrator of the Phoenix offense, they relied on him to penetrate the defense and make smart passes to exploit Dallas' defensive attention.

After scoring 28 points on 11 baskets in Game Two, Paul inexplicably fell apart. In the final five games of this series, Paul amassed a staggering 18 turnovers to 18 made shots, a mind-boggling statistic for any player. It was revealed after the series that Paul had played on an injured quad. Whether it impacted his play following Game Two has not been confirmed.

The Mavericks capitalized on Paul's vulnerability, tying the series 2-2 in Dallas. Just as quickly as things started to favor Dallas, the Suns stomped them out in Phoenix again to take a 3-2 series lead. Phoenix's superstar guard Devin Booker could be seen taunting Dončić throughout the blowout. Luka and the Mavericks took offense, and Dončić even yelled, "everybody acting tough when they up," while leaving the arena that night.

After another win in Dallas, the Mavs would make Booker regret his actions in Game Seven. The Mavericks looked terrible in the desert thus far, losing by a combined 57 points in their previous three games there. They would need an unprecedented effort to take Game Seven and the series.

They got just that. The Mavericks jumped out to a 30-point halftime lead, punctuated by a Luka Dončić ankle-breaker. More impressive was his supporting cast, who finally came out to play in Phoenix. Guard Spencer Dinwiddie finished with an efficient 30 points off the bench and Dončić's budding co-star Jalen Brunson scored 24 of his own. On the other hand, Phoenix's star tandem of Devin Booker and Chris Paul did not record a made shot until the team was down 40 points in the third quarter.

The Mavericks played arguably the best defensive game in the franchise's playoff history to force the duo into a historically rough night. They surrendered just 65 points before the Suns finally waved the white flag and withdrew their starters from the 33-point loss in the fourth quarter.

It was a statement series for the Mavericks, who had never won a playoff series with Dončić before 2022. They proved in Game Seven that they can bring their high-powered defense on the road with them, and it will be paramount as they take on Stephen Curry and the Golden State Warriors. For Phoenix, it was a tough way to end their storied season. With Chris Paul aging and their status as the best team in the NBA this season, 2022 truly felt like one of the last shots to get this current team a championship. At any rate, it is back to the drawing board in the desert.