

Balance key to NBA playoffs

Hang on to your hats and polish your picture tubes, folks, because the NBA's second season is just around the corner.

The playoffs, when the already fast and furious action intensifies to a near frantic pace, will begin immediately following the regular season, April 12.

Although a few days remain in the regular season, all but one of the 12 playoffs post season berths have been secured.

In the Eastern Conference — Philadelphia, Houston, Washington, San Antonio, Cleveland and the defending league champion Boston Celtics will play to meet the Western Conference's champions for the NBA crown.

The Atlantic and Central Division winners, Philadelphia and Houston, draw byes while the other four teams joust in two best of three series to decide who challenges the Sixers and Rockets in best of seven battles.

At this writing, the Bulls have the home court advantage in their matchup with Boston. San Antonio appears to have the home court edge over Cleveland. The Spurs and Cavs finished third and fourth in the Central, respectively.

Because of their potential explosiveness, I rate the 76ers a slight favorite to capture the Eastern crown. If that Sixer million dollar forecourt of Julius Erving and George McGinnis is clicking and that high flying fast break is in gear, Philadelphia fans could see their first championship since 1967.

Since the return of all-star guard Doug Collins from an injury that sidelined him nearly half the season, Philadelphia has shown better teamwork. Collins probably moves better than any of his mates without the ball.

Philadelphia has been getting good bench support from 19-year-old Darryl Dawkins, whose board strength and backboard shaking slam dunks are earning him a share of an already overcrowded Sixer spotlight. If you're betting, take the Sixers.

The Celtics, though, have an impressive past history in playoff action, if you call 13 NBA titles impressive. Charlie Scott has rejoined the Celts after a broken arm and will be an asset to their backcourt.

However, the Celts are due to meet



Neil Rudel

Washington, a team that has dominated them all year. If Boston eludes the Bulls, they could complicate the East. The further Boston advances, the tougher it gets. Remember, they've been there before, and in my opinion could give the Sixers a tougher final series than any other East team.

A big surprise this year has been the play of the Central Division, which outshined the Atlantic and will enter four teams in the playoffs.

Houston, the first place team, is much improved since last year. The acquisition of Moses Malone, who jumped from high school to the pros, aided the Rockets' rebounding game. Malone is fifth in rebounding and shot blocking. He leads the league in offensive rebounds.

Coach Tom Nissalke's club is deep and talented but I think it is still a year away from causing too much trouble in the East, despite their first place finish in the Central.

Washington has plenty of playoff experience and will be tough to beat in its Capital Center. Coach Dick Motta, who recently picked up his 400th career win, has done a fine job of molding youngsters Kevin Grevey (Kentucky) and Mitch Kupchak (North Carolina) into the Bulls' attack. If Elvin Hayes and Phil Chenier put together productive playoffs series the Bulls just might press Philly.

Cleveland dipped to fourth place after winning the division last year. The Cavs rely on team depth but lack a genuine superstar. Usually, at least six men score in double figures. Look for the Cavs to nudge the Spurs and stay alive temporarily.

Cross the Mississippi. In the Western Conference, Los Angeles, Portland Golden State, Denver, Detroit and either Chicago or Kansas City are playoff bound.

Contrary to the East, with the

76ers, there isn't a clear cut favorite out West.

Denver and Los Angeles will draw the byes thanks to their division crowns. Detroit will meet Golden State and Portland hosts either Chicago or K.C. in the best of three matchups.

Even though the Denver Nuggets, champs of the Midwest Division, have an explosive front line in David Thompson, Dan Issel and Bobby Jones, their backcourt, I feel, is too weak for Denver to win the West.

Detroit must get by Golden State in the opening round. Big Bob Lanier, the team's leader in virtually every category, is just returning from a broken hand but he will be rusty.

The only playoff spot still up for grabs is being tussled for by Chicago and Kansas City. I think the Bulls would be tougher in the playoffs than the Kings, especially since they've won 17 of their last 20 and are the hottest team in the league.

The Pacific Division should field a more representative threesome than the Midwest. Los Angeles and Golden State are capable of winning the conference.

The Lakers, who posted the NBA's best record, will bank their hopes on superstar, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Stop Jabbar and the Lakers are stopped. Beyond Jabbar the strongest point in the L.A. game is coach Jerry West and his two assistants, Stan Albeck and Jack McCloskey.

However, I rate Golden State, despite its third place finish in the Pacific, as an ever-so-slight favorite to cop the West.

Something tells me Rick Barry led them to an upset NBA title in 1975. Phil Smith, Keith Wilkes and Cliff Ray provide a solid supporting cast. Ray is a strong defensive center and can, perhaps, frustrate Jabbar more than anyone else.

Portland, with Bill Walton, will host either Chicago or K.C. Same story here as in L.A. The key to the team is the center, Walton. Both Walton and Jabbar were UCLA stars and between them won five of a possible six NCAA titles. Center is a good position to have a winner.

If there is one word that could sum up the NBA this year, it's balance. Anything can happen in the playoffs. Predicting the NBA's second season is not an enviable task.

One year older — one year better

Experienced softballers optimistic

By JIM LOOSE
Collegian Sports Writer
Lady Lion softball coach Pat McTarsney has an extremely optimistic outlook for the upcoming season, the reason being she has nine returnees from last year's squad, six of whom are starters.

This has to be a definite advantage, McTarsney said, because they've been through it before. "We've been able to spend less time learning and more time practicing," she said. "The returning girls know the offensive and defensive patterns we use and can help the others to learn them."

To many it may not seem to be such an advantage, since the Lady Lions were 4-8 last year. Although McTarsney was disappointed with the team's performance, she said the Lady Lions weren't really as bad as the record indicates. Penn State lost four one-run games and often outthit its opponent, she said, but just couldn't take advantage of the hits.

McTarsney has her entire outfield back, headed by senior Pam Hoyes, who hit .242 last year. Joining her will be sophomore Diane Dixon, a .258 hitter last season, and junior Roana Fuller. Fuller hit

.200 last season, while playing only three games.

The right side of the Lady Lion infield remains intact. Senior Cathy Cronin is at first base and junior Janet Scinto is at second. Cronin and Scinto were the team's leading hitters last season, batting .333 and .360 respectively. They were also two of the team leaders in runs batted in, with five for Scinto and four for Cronin.

Freshman Jan Carlson has been tabbed by McTarsney to begin the season at third, while Beth Ney, a senior, will be back as catcher. Ney batted .286 last season and knocked in seven runs to lead the team in RBIs.

The only unsettled position on the Lady Lion team is shortstop, where three candidates are competing for the starting berth. Returning junior Lee Stang heads the list, which also includes newcomers Dee Dee Berard and Debbie Malone. Malone is also a pitcher. McTarsney has indicated she may use the three shortstops on a rotating basis.

"This is a strong, or perhaps even the strongest, infield we've ever had," the coach said. "Overall I think we're going to be a good defensive team."

Regarding her team's offense, McTarsney thinks she has a better hitting club than last year. The coach looks to Scinto and Cronin to repeat their good performances of last season and hopes for Ney to deliver some power. "Also," McTarsney said, "we have the potential to be an aggressive baserunning team." Hoyes led basestealers last season with six swipes.

McTarsney is also pleased with her pitching staff, which she said includes "five competent pitchers."

"It's the largest pitching staff I've ever had," the coach said. "Usually we're lucky to get two pitchers."

The staff is headed by Janice Presel, a transfer student from Ogozta, and Malone. Both are righthanders with good speed, McTarsney said. Presel uses a windmill windup, while Malone uses a slingshot delivery.

Ney, Cronin and Hoyes are the only seniors on this year's squad. McTarsney looks to them to provide leadership for the team, along with Carlson, who the coach said has "a good background and plays a smart game."

As far as weaknesses go, McTarsney can't pinpoint any

particular area. "I'd just like to be a little stronger and more consistent," she said. "What we have to do is prepare really well and be up for every game," the coach said.

McTarsney doesn't know what to expect from the opposition. "You don't really know from year to year how tough they'll be," she said. The schedule has been expanded this year to include Temple and Slippery Rock. The only time the Lady Lions have ever met Temple was two years ago in a state tournament, while they have never faced Slippery Rock.

McTarsney's only pessimistic note about the season is the condition of the Lady Lion field. The coach had hoped to be able to practice on the field and be accustomed to it, since the first three games are at home.

However, part of the field was accidentally plowed up this spring when adjoining fields were being prepared. It's doubtful now whether the field can be prepared for Saturday's opener against Temple.

Even though the team will probably not have the advantage of playing on its own field, McTarsney said they still have the psychological advantage of playing at home.

O'Brien says strike won't affect season

SAN ANTONIO, Tex. (AP) — National Basketball Association Commissioner Lawrence O'Brien said yesterday a possible strike by NBA referees will not interrupt the remaining league games or the playoffs which begin next week.

O'Brien told a news conference that the NBA has contacted two groups of officials who are ready to step in should the league's regular referees strike.

He said the referees include officials from the minor Eastern League and officials

who were trained previously to step in as possible third officials in NBA games. Two referees officiate each NBA game.

O'Brien termed "irresponsible and unconscionable" comments made by Richie Phillips, the attorney for a group of 24 NBA referees who voted unanimously Monday to strike the league playoffs.

The referees also authorized, by a 24-0 vote, a strike call by their executive committee during the

remainder of the season.

O'Brien said the NBA still has received no official word from the National Labor Relations board that the referees' group has been certified as a collective bargaining unit.

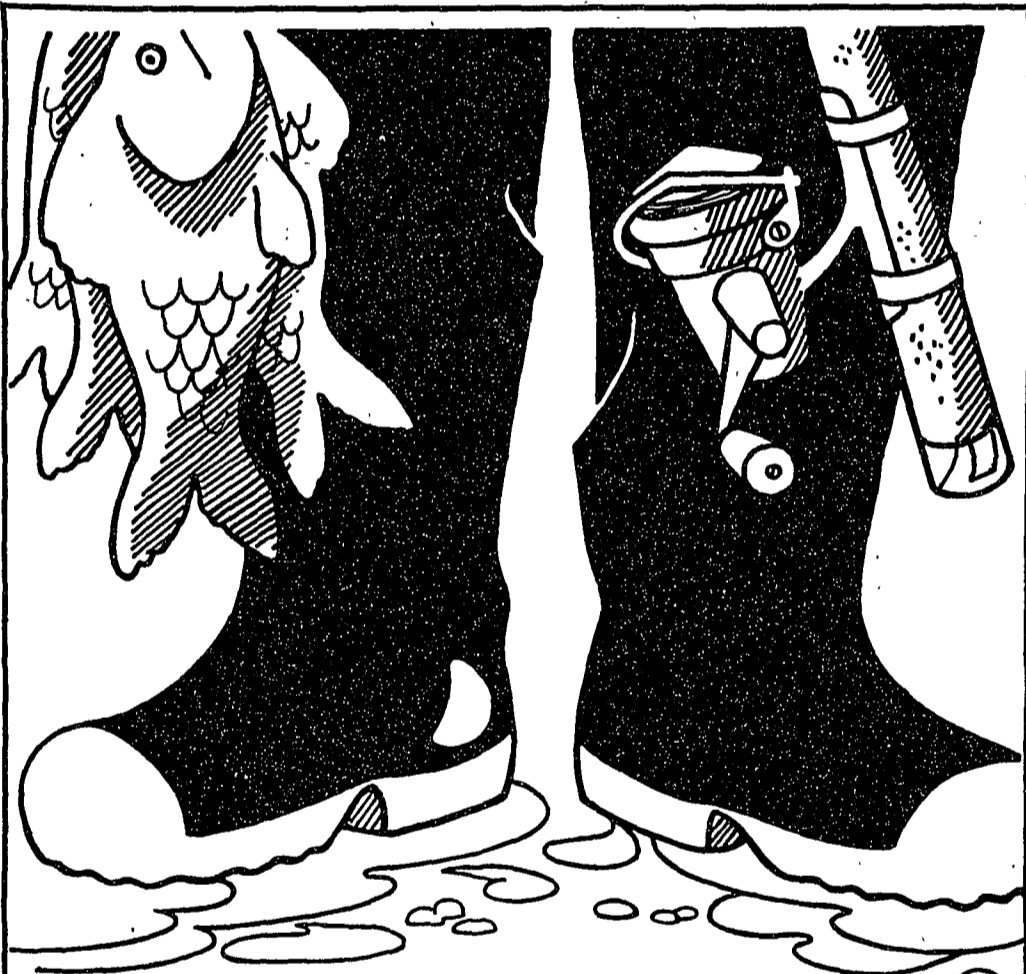
O'Brien noted that the referees' existing contract does not expire until the end of the current regular season April 10. He said a strike by officials before then "could very clearly cause significant damage to the NBA."

"I want to tell you that we

will hold the officials that engage in that kind of act responsible. Legally responsible, for any damages that might be incurred by those acts," he said.

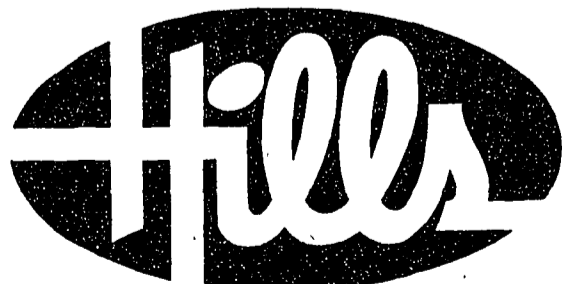
O'Brien challenged Phillips' statement that NBA officials earn \$18,000 per year.

The NBA commissioner said the \$18,000 pay is for the seventh-month regular season for rookie officials only. He said salaries for officials currently range to a top of \$38,722 for a seven-month pact.



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