



# CAN ANYBODY STOP THE WARRIORS?

By Mark Travis/Special to the Caller-Times

In a year full of rich storylines, broken records and tearful goodbyes, there has been a nihilistic undertone about the 2015-2016 NBA season's fate. Ever since the Warriors started the season 24-0, a second straight title has seemed inevitable. On Saturday, 15 teams will embark on a journey to derail the Warriors' destiny.

## FRESH FACES

### KEMBA WALKER

A postseason hero during his college career at Connecticut, Walker returns to playoffs for the first time as Charlotte's undisputed leader after raising his game to a near All-Star level and carrying the Hornets to 47 wins despite key injuries to Michael Kidd-Gilchrist and Al Jefferson.

### DETROIT PISTONS

Stan Van Gundy hasn't taken long to turn the Pistons around. Van Gundy's star duo of Reggie Jackson and Andre Drummond excel in his spread pick-and-roll offense and forward Tobias Harris has fit in perfectly since being acquired from Orlando at the trade deadline. The new-look Pistons will get to make their playoff debut against the top-seeded Cavaliers, a team they beat twice during the regular season.

### C.J. MCCOLLUM

McCollum is a shoo-in for the Most Improved Player Award after joining Damian Lillard in the starting lineup and becoming part of one of only three backcourts in the NBA to have both players average 20 points per game. McCollum already has a couple of impressive postseason performances on his resume after coming off the bench to score 26 and 33 in the first round against the Grizzlies last season, but now he and Lillard are the stars of the show and they have led their team to the postseason in what was supposed to be a lost season for the Blazers.

### HASSAN WHITESIDE

One of the biggest enigmas and bargains in the league, Whiteside has the ability to dominate on both ends of the floor in a manner few players in the league can. He is a devastating pick-and-roll player, a demoralizing shot blocker and he finished the season with 29 assists in 72 games. Whiteside was signed from the D-League on a minimum deal last season, and if he carries the momentum he has built during the regular season into the playoffs, he could command close to \$20 million a year on the open market.

### BRAD STEVENS

During a season when two decorated college coaches — Billy Donovan in Oklahoma City and Fred Hoiberg in Chicago — joined the NBA ranks and received a rude welcoming, Stevens' status reached new heights as his superstar-less Celtics approached 50 wins and gave opponents fits. In a league with so few tenured coaches, expect Stevens, who is



younger than two San Antonio Spurs (Andre Miller and Tim Duncan), to be around the league for a long time.

## SERIES TO WATCH

### NO. 4 CLIPPERS VS. NO. 5. TRAILBLAZERS

Perhaps the only Western Conference series with a result that is not a foregone conclusion, this matchup is also the most surprising. Many pundits projected the Blazers to finish in the lottery this season after they lost LaMarcus Aldridge and Wesley Matthews to free agency and traded Nicolas Batum, but Lillard and McCollum have carried an uninspiring supporting cast to the postseason, with Coach of the Year candidate Terry Stotts playing a major role on the sideline. Meanwhile, the Clippers will try to ease Blake Griffin back into the lineup as quickly as possible with a second round matchup against the Warriors in their sights.

### NOS. 1-8 IN THE EAST

The most astonishing development of the season is that, at least for the first round, the Eastern Conference matchups are way more intriguing than those in the West. While most of the matchups in the West are lopsided, three of the series in the East are toss ups, mostly because the middle four seeds all finished with the same record. Raptors-Pacers is likely the most entertaining series, as it is the only first-round matchup that pits a top-five defense (Indiana) against a top-five offense (Toronto).

## SERIES TO IGNORE

### NO. 2 SPURS VS. NO. 7 GRIZZLIES

In 2012, the No. 8 Grizzlies upset the 61-win Spurs in one of the most shocking first-round series ever. Since then, the Spurs are 16-4 against Memphis, including a sweep in the 2013 Western Conference Finals. The Grizzlies did well to keep their postseason spot in the midst of one of the most injury-riddled seasons in league history, but it is safe to say their playoff run will not last long. Catalysts Marc Gasol and Mike Conley are done for the season and though the Grizzlies play hard and force opponents to grind out games, the Spurs will make quick work of any team relying on the scoring abilities of Lance Stephenson and Matt Barnes.

## STAR SPOTLIGHT

### RUSSELL WESTBROOK

In any other season, Westbrook's maniac triple-double rampage and assist binges might make him an MVP favorite, but with Curry's Warriors and Leonard's Spurs creating so much separation



Thunder guard Russell Westbrook had an MVP-like season and could be big if the Thunder want to dethrone the Warriors.

from Oklahoma City, the Thunder have had a relatively under-the-radar season. Westbrook, often maligned for his shot selection and volume, climbed to second on the assist table this season and his pick-and-roll partnerships with Steven Adams and Enes Kanter are two of the most dangerous in the league. In a matchup with the defensively-challenged Mavs, expect Westbrook to terrorize them with high screen and rolls.

### KYLE LOWRY AND DEMAR DEROZAN

The Raptors have been on the precipice of elite status in the East for three seasons, but they have fallen apart in the playoffs the past two years, with disappointing first-round losses to the Nets and Wizards. Toronto's two All-Stars will have to perform better than they have in postseasons past to get Toronto to the conference finals, which is what its expectation should be. If the Raptors fall short of their goals again, DeRozan's impending free agency will be even more interesting.

### PAUL GEORGE

Although he finished far off the MVP pace he started the season at, George remains one of the happier stories of the season after making a successful recovery from the broken

left leg that kept him out nearly all of last season. George scored a career-best 23.1 points per game for the revamped Pacers, and he will be a tough challenge for Toronto in the first round.

### BLAKE GRIFFIN

Griffin brought a lot of negative attention upon himself after he broke his shooting hand punching a Clippers' equipment manager in January, and he has played five games since returning from his suspension and a lingering quad injury. The Clippers played well without Griffin for the most part, but they will need him near his peak to get past the Blazers and challenge Golden State in the second round. This is a critical time for a Clippers core that many believe is growing stale, and the team might be due for a makeover unless they can showcase some staying power during the next month.

### TIM DUNCAN AND DIRK NOWITZKI

The NBA said goodbye to one of the legends of a moribund era when Kobe Bryant scored 60 points and hit the winning shot in his finale Wednesday, which begs the question: How much longer will two of his biggest rivals keep the flame burning? Nowitzki seems more likely to play past this season than Duncan, but after the Mavs had to scratch and claw to get into the postseason this year, it is tough to tell how many more dog days he wants to endure. It is impossible to know how many more times we will see either Duncan or Nowitzki on an NBA floor, so it is better to be safe than sorry and enjoy these iconic big men before it is too late.

## THE PICKS

### WEST

**Golden State vs. Houston:** Warriors in 4

**San Antonio vs. Memphis:** Spurs in 4

**Oklahoma City vs. Dallas:** Thunder in 5

**L.A. Clippers vs. Portland:** Clippers in 6

### EAST

**Cleveland vs. Detroit:** Cavs in 6

**Toronto vs. Indian:** Raptors in 5

**Miami vs. Charlotte:** Heat in 6

**Atlanta vs. Boston:** Hawks in 6

## AWARD BALLOT

### MVP STEPH CURRY, PG, WARRIORS

Picking the best player on a 73-win team is a decent rule-of-thumb for an MVP ballot, and it helps that Curry just wrapped up one of the best offensive seasons in the history of basketball. Curry finished the season with an inconceivable 402 3-pointers, shaming the former record holder: Himself when he hit 286 3s last season. If you apply that 40 percent increase to another Bay Area sporting record, it is like Barry Bonds following up his record 73 home runs by hitting 102 the next season. Considering Curry missed three games and sat out in the fourth quarter 19 times, maybe he could have pushed for 500 if the Warriors weren't so dominant.

### DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR KAWHI LEONARD, F, SPURS

Back-to-back trophies for Leonard would make him the first perimeter player to win Defensive Player of the Year twice since Sidney Moncrief won it the first two years the award was given. Leonard has been the best defender on the league's best defense, and at 24, he might have a shot at tying Dikembe Mutombo's record of four DPOY trophies before he is done.

### ROOKIE OF THE YEAR KARL ANTHONY-TOWNS, C, TIMBERWOLVES

Towns was so impressive in his rookie season that you can have a legitimate debate about which Kentucky big man has a brighter future, him or Anthony Davis. Towns is already a top-five center in the league, and with his compilation of skills and elegant efficiency, there is no telling how good he will be in a few years.

### COACH OF THE YEAR TERRY STOTTS, BLAZERS

There are so many deserving choices in this category this season, including two from the same team (Luke Walton and Steve Kerr). Let's go with Stotts, who got the most out of the least and did a fine job coaching a team assembled mostly of spare parts and project players.



Is this year Dirk Nowitzki's last go in the playoffs?