

Quest for NBA title begins

The eight match-ups for the National Basketball Association were finalised after the 82-game regular season ended on Wednesday. Which teams are favourites to go through to the Conference semi-finals?

CHIA HAN KEONG rates each tie.



PHOTOS: USA TODAY SPORTS
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

WESTERN CONFERENCE



Golden State Warriors
(Regular season: 73-9)



Houston Rockets
(41-41)

Can the all-conquering Warriors start off with a 4-0 sweep? Quite possibly, against the dysfunctional Rockets. As long as James Harden is held to below 50 points, the Warriors should be pummelling one of the most disappointing teams of the season.

PREDICTION: Warriors to win 4-0



San Antonio Spurs
(67-15)



Memphis Grizzlies
(42-40)

In 2011, the Spurs were conference champions but were shocked in the opening round by the Grizzlies. This time around, Tim Duncan and Co still looked too strong and multi-faceted for the injury-hit Grizzlies. Then again, that was what they said in 2011.

PREDICTION: Spurs to win 4-1



Oklahoma City Thunder
(55-27)



Dallas Mavericks
(42-40)

Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle continues to work wonders with an ageing squad (Dirk Nowitzki, 37, is still their top scorer). Even so, with Russell Westbrook a constant triple-double threat and Kevin Durant still scoring in bunches, the Thunder look too good to be stopped.

PREDICTION: Thunder to win 4-1



Los Angeles Clippers
(53-29)



Portland Trail Blazers
(44-38)

Much will depend on how well Blake Griffin resumes his low-post dominance in his comeback from injury. If he hits form for the Clippers, the over-achieving Trail Blazers will find it hard to deal with the Clippers' myriad of offensive weapons.

PREDICTION: Clippers to win 4-2

EASTERN CONFERENCE



Cleveland Cavaliers
(57-25)



Detroit Pistons
(44-38)

LeBron James has been on a tear, averaging 28.4 points in the last 10 games and shooting 53 per cent from the three-point line. In this form, no one in the conference can stop him and the Cavs in a best-of-seven series. Yet, the Pistons could cause some consternation with talented young centre Andre Drummond.

PREDICTION: Cavaliers win 4-1



Toronto Raptors
(56-26)



Indiana Pacers
(45-37)

Both teams performed beyond expectations this season, but the Raptors possess a potent backcourt in Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan. The Pacers will hope Paul George resumes his spectacular play-off performances in 2013 and 2014, before a horror leg break stalled his burgeoning career.

PREDICTION: Raptors to win 4-2



Miami Heat
(48-34)



Charlotte Hornets
(48-34)

The Heat have got over the departure of LeBron James, with Goran Dragic and Joe Johnson supporting Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh in offence, while centre Hassan Whiteside being a strong presence in the middle. The Hornets have a strong starting five, but lack depth.

PREDICTION: Heat to win 4-2



Atlanta Hawks
(48-34)



Boston Celtics
(48-34)

An interesting match-up, with both teams eschewing star power for a balanced attack and strong defence all around. The Hawks may hold an edge in experience, but the young Celtics are capable of shutting down even the best teams in the NBA.

PREDICTION: Hawks to win 4-3