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BASKETBALL FOR THOUGHT by Kris Gardner, e-mail: KGardner@TheHRR.com

The Houston Rockets Should Make the Playoffs

For the last few months, I have said on the radio, on TheHRR.com website and for anyone willing to listen, the Houston Rockets will not make the playoffs this season. A few friends and colleagues agree with me while others disagree with me. One question the naysayers ask me is: "If the Rockets don't make the playoffs under Van Gundy, then why did Les get rid of Rudy?" Good question. I don't know the answer; but, I do believe Rudy's health concerns were a "convenient out" for both Les and Rudy. With **Yao Ming** and **Steve Francis** playing together, the Rockets should make the playoffs; but, I say the team will miss the postseason once again.

First things first, five spots in the Western Conference appear to be lead-pipe cinches to qualify for the playoffs: the defending champions — the San Antonio Spurs; the Los Angeles Lakers; the re-tooled Minnesota Timberwolves; the Dallas Mavericks; and the Sacramento Kings. (No one believes the Rockets are anywhere as good as these five squads.)

Next, the Portland

Trailblazers are better than the Rockets and should be playoff team number six. The Phoenix Suns qualified for



had a laissez-faire attitude. I don't believe certain Rockets (re: **Cuttino Mobley**, **Maurice Taylor**, and **Eddie Griffin**)

The answer: Kelvin Cato.

the postseason last season by edging the Rockets by one game; and, I believe the Suns will be team number seven. Remember this name for the Suns: **Zarko Cabarkapa**. If Zarko stays healthy, he will make a solid contribution for **Stephon Marbury** and the Suns.

The Rockets are grouped with the Seattle SuperSonics; Golden State Warriors; and, the LA Clippers in a battle for the eighth and final spot. I picked the Sonics to qualify. Personally, I believe the way the Rockets are currently constructed is not enough to make the postseason.

New head coach **Jeff Van Gundy** is a 180-degree opposite of **Rudy Tomjanovich**. JVG is a no nonsense guy while Rudy T

will be successful in JVG's system.

As of today, the Rockets do not have a legitimate NBA small forward. **Jim Jackson** is not the answer. Neither is **Eric Piatkowski**. Second-year player **Bostjan Nachbar** has some potential to become the answer at small forward; but, he's not ready, yet, either.

Despite his solid play in the team's last two preseason games, **Moochie Norris** does not strike me as an ideal back-up guard in Van Gundy's system either. Jeff likes his point guards to pressure the ball full court; and, Moochie is not good at pressuring the ball in the half court let alone the full court!

Jeff Van Gundy won

games coaching the Knicks with a "grind it out" mentality which basically wore teams down with physical defense and solid low post offense. Yao Ming will provide the low post offense; however, the physical defense on the Rockets is sorely lacking. Name the Rockets best, and most physical, defensive player. The answer: **Kelvin Cato**. For all of the verbal assaults fans and the media hailed at Cato the past few seasons, Kelvin has become a solid front court player over the last season. The second best defender is probably Jim Jackson then swingman **Adrian Griffin**. Where's Steve and Yao?

Steve is a poor defender. Period. Steve's on the ball defense still needs a lot of work despite the fact he's entering his 5th season in the NBA. Yao Ming can become a good defender; but, I don't see him becoming a dominating presence in the paint. Sure, he'll block some shots (at 7'5, he better); but, he still has to adjust to the physical style of defense in the NBA and be an intimidator.

Decision making will be a sore spot for the team, too; because many of the players are better suited for an uptempo game which is not what Van Gundy preaches.

Add it all up; and, the Rockets will be home again watching the playoffs on tv.