

Trail Blazers prepare for the Memphis BBQ

Grizzlies vs Blazers

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photo by Andrew Kocjan

Finally! The Blazers season stumbles to a close and now, it's time for playoffs! This time last year, there was excitement and optimism because the Blazers had a strong starting five, with nearly everyone hitting their stride at the right time. The same cannot be said for this year's team, as they enter the playoffs injured, battered and on a four-game losing streak. Unlike last year's opponent, the Houston Rockets, who play little to no defense at all, this year's opponent, the Memphis Grizzlies, thrive on their defensive play. The Grizzlies have given the Blazers huge problems this season. Memphis won the season series 4-0, holding the Blazers to under 100 points in all four games. I don't see this playoff series going any different.

Memphis matches up well at every position and the Blazers are not even close to healthy. LaMarcus Aldridge, Nicholas Batum, Arron Afflalo, Chris

Kaman, Dorell Wright and C.J. McCollum are all either battling nagging injuries or will be unavailable for some or the entire first round. That doesn't even take into account the loss of "Iron Man," Wesley Matthews, who has been out on injury since March 6. All of this does not look like it will add up to a winning playoff series in 2015. That being said, Blazers fans can take pride in knowing their team won their first outright division championship since the 1998-99 season.

Blazer fans will point to the fact that Memphis is dealing with their own injuries, but their current lineup is better than any that the Blazers can put on the court right now. If the Blazers had a healthy group of players, the series might extend longer, although it's safe to assume the result would be the same. The Blazers playoff run will be short and sweet, like Memphis barbeque. Pencil the Grizzlies into the second round.

Rip City is back in the playoffs and Blazer fans should be excited.

As usual, the west had a wild finish. Teams ranked No. 2 through No.6 in the conference were all tied or within a game of each other. Of the four possible draws for a first-round matchup, Portland got the most favorable with Memphis.

The Grizzlies ended the season in a mini-slump - going 5-5 in their last 10 - similar to Portland. The Blazers have had inconveniently timed injuries down the stretch - losing Wesley Matthews for the season, Arron Afflalo for the start of the playoffs and other minor ailments - but they're not alone. Two of the Grizzlies' best guards, Mike Conley and Tony Allen, are also limping into the postseason. While the loss of Matthews hurts the Blazers, the rise of second-year guard C.J. McCollum has helped ease the pain. Allen Crabbe has also done a nice job filling in during Matthews' and Afflalo's absence and he should see an increase in minutes until the latter returns.

Memphis' strength is in its frontcourt, lead by Marc Gasol and former Blazer Zach Randolph. Portland also has

strength, experience and most importantly, depth. LaMarcus Aldridge, Robin Lopez, Chris Kaman and even the young Meyers Leonard will all play key roles in this series. While Leonard may not be the biggest bruiser or best defender like some of the other posts, his ability to knock down perimeter shots will be important. Drawing Randolph or Gasol out of the paint will free up room for Aldridge and Damian Lillard to operate. His overall athleticism will also help the offense.

Despite similar lineups, these two foes play drastically different styles of basketball. Memphis likes to slow the game and pound the ball inside. Portland excels when they run and push the tempo. If the Blazers are able to control the pace, they should be able to score easy and often on a tough Grizzlies defense.

Portland showed last year they wouldn't be fazed by having to win on the road and that should be the same this year given the team's added experience. The Blazers have been tremendous at home and the Grizzlies are the second worst team on the road of the four possible opponents.

ZL: I'm taking the Grizzlies in five games.

BT: I see Portland winning a tough, gritty series in seven games.