

Sports

Beautiful chaos: welcome back, NBA craziness

■ After a 2020 season affected by the pandemic, there's plenty of drama yet to unfold in the last week of the regular season

By **Tim Reynolds**
AP Basketball Writer

There was no frantic final few days of the NBA regular season, replete with all the jostling for playoff positioning as well as scoring race that might go down to the wire. And there's never been the added layer of eight teams going to a play-in tournament, which, given its popularity, can already be considered a success before it even starts.

A year ago, there only was something called seeding games that a few teams chose to sleepwalk through, in a bubble, without fans, with eight teams already home for the summer — or spring, summer and fall, as it turned out.

This year, things are much closer to normalcy.

Welcome back, chaos. Welcome back, drama. You were missed.

Here's a short list of just some of the things that the final six days of the regular season will decide, in no particular order: the No. 3 vs. No. 6 and No. 4 vs. No. 5 playoff matchups in both the Eastern and Western Conferences; the four opening matchups for the play-in tournament that is now just a week away; the scoring race between Golden State's Stephen Curry and Washington's Bradley Beal;



John Kuntz/cleveland.com-TNS

Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry looks for an outlet pass guarded by Cleveland Cavaliers center Jarrett Allen on April 15 at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse.

and home-court advantage throughout the entirety of the NBA playoffs.

Oh, and all that is happening in the same week that NBA legends Kobe Bryant, Kevin Garnett and Tim Duncan finally go into the Basketball Hall of Fame, along with two-time NBA champion coach Rudy Tomjanovich and five others — Kim Mulkey, Tamika Catchings, Barbara Stevens, Eddie Sutton and Patrick Baumann.

Much is happening, indeed. A compressed NBA season that seemed in jeopardy

so many times this winter because of virus-related issues is on the cusp of being completed, in full, 72 games for all 30 teams.

It's pretty much a lock that Philadelphia will be the No. 1 seed in the East playoffs, and Utah has the inside track on the No. 1 seed for the West playoffs as well as the top overall spot going into the postseason. And realistically, there are 11 teams in each conference vying for 10 spots in either the postseason or the play-in round, so it's not like there's going to be a surprise

team that gets onto the brackets that will be set when the curtain comes down on the NBA's 75th regular season on Sunday, May 16.

But there is still much to decide. A look at some of what's left:

THE PLAY-IN

The reason this is already a success is because it's one of the few things that is dominating conversations within the league right now, with the exception of Russell Westbrook's run to triple-double history and if the Los Angeles Lakers will have enough time to get themselves together for a title defense.

Imagine this: LeBron James and the Lakers vs. Stephen Curry and Golden State in a play-in game.

Yes, ratings will be just fine if that happens.

Or how about another possible play-in game: Gordon Hayward and Charlotte (if he's back from injury) vs. Kemba Walker and Boston. Probably safe to say such a matchup might mean something to those guys if they face their former clubs with so much at stake.

HOME-COURT ADVANTAGE

Philadelphia, Brooklyn and

Milwaukee will all be home for Game 1 of Round 1 of the playoffs in the East, and Utah, Phoenix and the Los Angeles Clippers are assured of doing so in the West. Denver would need to absolutely collapse in the final week to not grab the last home-court spot over Dallas out West for Round 1.

The last East home-court race may get very interesting.

New York likely has the best chance, though Atlanta held off Washington on Monday to close within a half-game of the Knicks. If they finish tied, the Knicks own that tiebreaker by sweeping the Hawks. The Knicks might start the playoffs with a home game for just the second time in the last 20 seasons.

THE SCORING TITLE

Washington's Bradley Beal won't play again until late this week, at minimum, because of a hamstring injury so Stephen Curry's target score for the scoring crown might be set.

Beal is averaging 31.41 points per game. Curry is the leader, averaging 31.93 through Monday. And don't think this doesn't matter to those guys — Curry needed 22 points on Saturday night to keep the scoring lead after

learning that Beal had just scored 50; he went out and got 49.

The potential is there for the closest scoring race in years. If the final difference in average is one point or less, that will mark just the second such instance in the last eight seasons — Russell Westbrook edged James Harden by 0.7 points for the crown in 2014-15.

It wasn't so long ago that a close scoring race was common: Carmelo Anthony beat Kevin Durant by 0.6 points in 2012-13, Durant beat Kobe Bryant by 0.1 in 2011-12, Durant beat LeBron James by 0.98 points in 2010-11 and 0.4 points the preceding year.

The other stat per-game champions are pretty much clinched: Atlanta's Clint Capela will likely win the rebound title, Westbrook will claim the assists crown, Miami's Jimmy Butler will win the steals title and Utah's Rudy Gobert will finish atop the blocks category in part because Indiana's Myles Turner will not play in the minimum number of games needed to qualify.

This year, the race between Beal and Curry might go down to the wire.

Fitting, in a season where so many other races might do the same.



BED & BREAKFAST

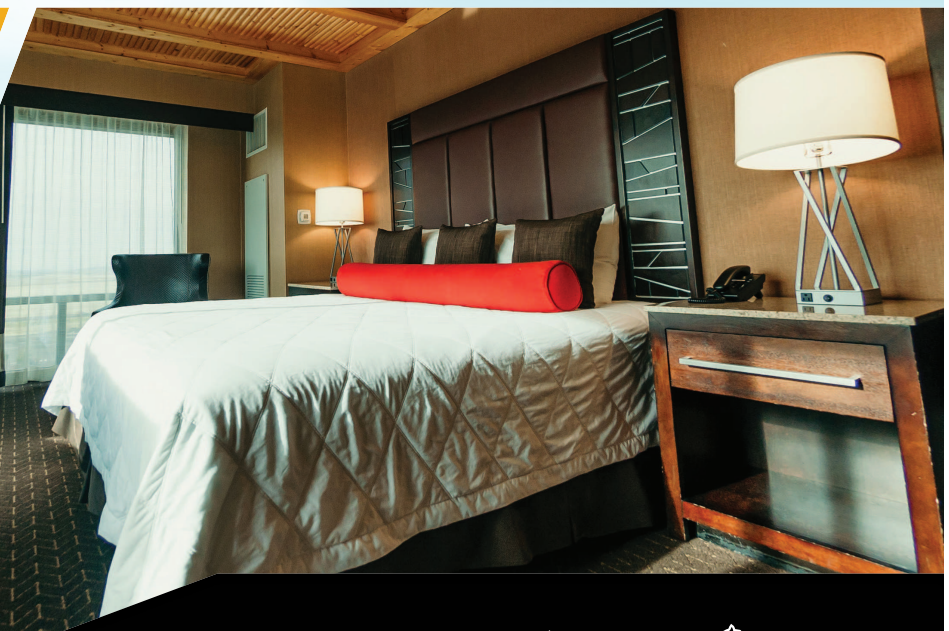
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