

Photo of the Day |



UConn Softball plays Bryant University in Storrs, Conn. on April 14, 2026. The Huskies defeat the Bulldogs 6-0. PHOTO BY SYDNEY CHANDLER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

SPORTS SPECTRUM:

NBA Playoffs: Eastern Conference

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Play-In

The Charlotte Hornets, with a 44-38 finish, secured their first winning season since 2021-22. Backed by a major midseason turnaround and a league-best net rating since January, they advanced to the final stage of the Eastern Conference play-in tournament after defeating the Miami Heat in an overtime thriller.

LaMelo Ball scored the game-winning layup with 4.7 seconds left in overtime, scoring 30 points, grabbing 10 assists and five rebounds. Miles Bridges had a breakout game, with 28 points and nine rebounds. Coby White, recently traded from Chicago, had 19 points yet hit a crucial turnaround three with 10.8 seconds left in regulation to force overtime.

On Friday, they'll face off against the loser of the Wednesday night matchup of the Philadelphia 76ers vs. Orlando Magic.

Orlando is a team that thrives off of their defense. They currently own a 113.6 defensive rating (13th in the league). They lead the league in forcing turnovers, anchored by Jalen Suggs. They have an offensive rating of 114.2, which is 18th in the league.

The Magic's net rating increases by 7.6 when Suggs is on the floor versus when he is off. In the NBA, a +7.6 swing is the difference between a top-tier contender and a lottery team. To win against a team like the 76ers, they will need to prioritize the minutes that he's on alongside working on the minutes that he's off.

A lot of the questions around the 76ers have been about the health of their star center, Joel Embiid. There's a 7.3 on-off differential in the net rating of the team when he is there or not there. The defensive rating has especially taken a hit if Embiid is sidelined, which reports indicate he will be for the Play-In Tournament.

Tyrese Maxey has led the team, achieving a high usage rate and an average of +3.2 contributions per minute. With Andre Drummond serving as the starting center in Embiid's absence, this team tied with the Magic for the 7th seed. Rookie VJ Edgecombe has emerged as a bright spot on this team, alongside veteran Paul George, who is averaging 17.3 points.

Detroit (1) and Boston (2)

The Detroit Pistons, under J.B. Bickerstaff, have completely changed the direction of their

franchise. Only two years removed from a history-defining losing streak, they have been led by Cade Cunningham's all-star leap and Jalen Duren's dominant interior presence.

The Pistons are second in defensive rating (109.7). Their +8.2 net rating suggests that this team is not a regular-season fluke, and Detroit plans to make a postseason run with a well-oiled machine in the Motor City.

The Boston Celtics were looking at a lot of potential adversity after Jayson Tatum tore his Achilles in a series in which they were quickly down 2-0, courtesy of two blown 20-point leads. That Celtics team was the epitome of "live by the 3, die by the 3." They were third that year in both 3-point attempts (3,459) and 3-pointers made (1,268).

This year, Jaylen Brown has emerged in Tatum's absence with a suffocating defense (107.2 opponent points per game, first in the league). Having successfully navigated a roster overhaul that saw key veterans, like Jrue Holiday and Al Horford, depart, Joe Mazzulla's squad enters the playoffs with more experience than any other contender in the bracket.

Raptors vs. Cavs - Something to Prove against the Status Quo

For the Raptors, this is their first playoff appearance since their first-round exit in 2021-22. It was a full-circle moment for All-Star Scottie Barnes, who is the only remaining player from that 2022 squad—his leadership being the glue that got them here.

Alongside Barnes, Brandon Ingram leads the team in scoring. RJ Barrett and Immanuel Quickley are other notable players, balancing youthful energy with a veteran presence.

Toronto swept the regular season series 3-0, but Cleveland's trade deadline acquisition of James Harden changes things a lot. Harden has immediately injected elite playmaking and scoring into the Cavs' lineup, averaging 25.4 points and 8.1 assists this season. His presence creates a terrifying backcourt dynamic that Toronto didn't have to account for during their three regular-season victories, turning this series into a completely different tactical puzzle.

If they want to avoid the idea of an early exit, the rest of the team needs to help Harden and Donovan Mitchell, who are the main focus of their offense. Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen make up a frontcourt that

few teams can break through on defense. Cleveland has the size and experience to punish any mistakes. Max Strus is a secondary scorer, and Dennis Schröder and Larry Nance Jr. are veterans on the bench.

The Cavs have a reputation—being heavyweights in the conference but facing early exits. In 2022-23, they lost in the first round against a New York Knicks team led by the recently arrived breakout Jalen Brunson. In 2023-24, they lost in the conference semifinals to the eventual champion Celtics, and in 2024-25, they lost to the Pacers off of what could be construed as a historically poor performance.

Knicks vs. Hawks - A True Test of Grit

The New York Knicks entering this series are fundamentally different from the squad that fell in the Eastern Conference Finals last year. Following the firing of Tom Thibodeau, new head coach Mike Brown has led the team to a nearly identical 53-29 record but with a philosophy that emphasizes offensive flow over the "grind-it-out" style of the past.

But that flow hasn't always been smooth; even though the team is still a top-three seed, Jalen Brunson has had to carry a huge load of usage (29.1 PPG) because the wings haven't been consistent on offense. The most obvious problem is that Karl-Anthony Towns isn't getting enough playing time. He is averaging his lowest scoring numbers since his rookie season because the team is still trying to find a way to balance his elite perimeter gravity with Brunson's ball-dominant playstyle.

Ultimately, the Knicks' hopes of advancing will rest on their defensive floor, anchored by Mitchell Robinson and Miles "Deuce" McBride. In Brown's system, Robinson remains the premier rim protector, while McBride has solidified himself as one of the best perimeter defenders in the league, often taking the toughest backcourt assignments to free up Brunson.

For New York to survive an explosive Atlanta offense, they will need Robinson to win the battle of the boards and McBride to act as defensive engines against a Hawks team that has found a second life after moving on from their former franchise centerpiece.

The Atlanta Hawks have completely changed since they traded Trae Young to Washington in January. Atlanta is no longer a heliocentric team; instead, they have become a self-



Asa Newell of the Atlanta Hawks hits a dunk in a game against the Miami Heat. The Hawks will face the Knicks in the first round of the NBA Playoffs. PHOTO COURTESY OF @ATLHAWKS ON INSTAGRAM.

less, united group that finished the season on a hot 13-2 run in March.

Veteran CJ McCollum has stepped in as the calming backcourt leader, providing 20+ PPG and veteran poise that was missing earlier in the season. He is flanked by first-time All-Star Jalen Johnson, who has blossomed into a point-forward threat, and reigning Most Improved Player Dyson Daniels, who serves as the Hawks' defensive engine.

With center Onyeka Okongwu anchoring the paint and the addition of Nickeil Alexander-Walker to the rotation, the Hawks enter the Garden not as a one-man show, but as a deep, cohesive unit capable of dismantling the Knicks' defensive schemes through sheer ball movement and athletic versatility.