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Chris Mannix>NBA POWER RANKINGS

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Surging Mavs threaten new No. 1

Story Highlights

Kobe Bryant and the Lakers drop three spots after losing three straight
The Cavs are No. 1, but the Mavericks are riding an 11-game win streak
The Magic and Heat both moved up, while Chicago takes a big step back

If the season ended today, the top of my Coach of the Year ballot would read as follows:

1. **Scott Brooks**; 2. **Jerry Sloan**; 3. **Scott Skiles**.

But there is a dark horse candidate who keeps popping up in my brain: **Rick Carlisle**.

Certainly Dallas should be good, what with two All-Stars (**Dirk Nowitzki**, **Jason Kidd**) and the reigning Sixth Man Award winner (**Jason Terry**) on the roster. But the Mavs' stunning success -- namely an 11-game winning streak and the NBA's best record since the All-Star break -- after the deadline deal that brought **Caron Butler**, **Brendan Haywood** and **DeShawn Stevenson** to Big D is a credit to Carlisle's ability to blend players with a variety of offensive talents into a cohesive unit.

If the Mavericks somehow stay hot for the rest of the regular season -- a tall task in a rugged conference -- it will be hard to keep Carlisle's name off the top of the ballot.

(All stats and records are through March 7.)

NBA Power Rankings

- 1  **Cleveland Cavaliers** (49-15)
The Cavs don't need fill-in starter **J.J. Hickson** to play like an All-Star in **Shaquille O'Neal's** absence, but some consistency would be nice. After dropping 37 total points on New York and New Jersey, Hickson scored five in back-to-back games against Detroit and Milwaukee.
Last Week: 2
- 2  **Orlando Magic** (44-20)
The starters -- particularly a chippy **Matt Barnes** -- took center stage in Sunday's win over the Lakers, but Orlando's bench has been the big story in a lot of its wins. Orlando's reserves have contributed 20 or more points 55 times (powering a 39-16 record in those games) and 30 or more points in 38 outings (29-9).
Last Week: 3
- 3  **Dallas Mavericks** (43-21)
The Mavs' offensive juggernaut continues to roll along. In the last six games of their 11-game winning streak, Dallas shot 51 percent from the floor, 36.3 percent from three-point range and 86.2 percent from the line while averaging 108.3 points.
Last Week: 5

**Los Angeles Lakers** (46-18)

4 Here's the thing about the Lakers with **Kobe Bryant** in the lineup: They don't dish. During their three-game skid, L.A. is averaging 15.3 assists. During the four-game winning streak while Bryant was out with an ankle injury last month, the Lakers averaged 21 assists.

Last
Week: 1

**Denver Nuggets** (42-21)

5 With a star-studded starting lineup, the Nuggets don't need much production from **Arron Afflalo**. In fact, 10 points ought to do it. Denver is 21-6 when Afflalo scores 10-plus, which he has been doing more frequently recently. After scoring more than 10 in eight of his first 30 games, Afflalo has posted double figures in 19 of his last 33.

Last
Week: 4

**Utah Jazz** (40-22)

6 One reason to consider the Jazz contenders this season: They are winning on the road. Utah hasn't gone .500 on the road since the 2000-2001 season and it was a combined 32-50 away from home the last two seasons. This year, it is 15-14 on the road and has won nine of its last 12 outside the friendly confines of EnergySolutions Arena.

Last
Week: 6

**Phoenix Suns** (40-25)

7 After a stellar February, **Robin Lopez's** game is starting to tail off. After averaging 12.9 points last month, he's putting up only 5.5 points this month and has yet to crack double digits in rebounds. What's worse, Lopez has been getting abused on D: **Nene** (14 points to three for Lopez), **Chris Kaman** (24-5), **Carlos Boozer** (15-10) and **Roy Hibbert** (22-4) have outplayed the starting center.

Last
Week: 7

**Atlanta Hawks** (40-22)

8 "Steady" is a good word to describe **Marvin Williams'** play this season: He's averaged 10.0/10.1/10.6 points in his first three full months of the season. But he's been better than that recently, averaging 17 points and 10.3 boards in the Hawks' three wins last week. Said coach **Mike Woodson**: "It takes so much pressure off everybody when he's scoring and rebounding."

Last
Week: 8

**Boston Celtics** (40-21)

9 Don't tell **Ray Allen** his game is declining. The 34-year-old averaged 20.0 points in February, his highest for any full month this season, and is averaging 18.4 points since the All-Star break. Against Washington on Sunday, Allen connected on two clutch three-pointers in the final 1:33 to help extend the Celtics' winning streak to four.

Last
Week: 10

**Oklahoma City Thunder** (38-24)

10 Road losses are the hallmark of most young teams. Just not Oklahoma City. The Thunder's 19 road wins are the second most in the Western Conference, and that total is four short of their overall victory total last season. OKC has won seven of nine on the road, including victories last week at the Clippers and Sacramento.

Last
Week: 9

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