

# THE PROS by John Cairns

The first punch was thrown after only three minutes of the National Basketball Association season. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar of Los Angeles grew tired of elbowing with Milwaukee's rookie Kent Benson. With one blow he floored his six-foot-eleven-inch, 245 pound rival. The consequences however, were less favorable. He was expelled from the game and later fined \$5,000. That's the stiffest penalty in league history. Worse still he suffered a broken hand. There was actually a similar incident several years ago. That time Kareem broke bones when, in frustration, he punched a backboard. In any case, he'll be sidelined indefinitely, and his team will sorely miss him.

## PACIFIC DIVISION

Even without Jabbar initially, the Lakers should be contenders in the west. Russell, Don Ford and Kenny Carr will help secure second place behind Bill Walton and the Trail Blazers. Portland has no intention of yielding its hard-earned championship.

Led by Alvan Adams, Ronnie Lee, and Paul Westphal, the Phoenix Suns will be a strong third. Despite sharp shooting Rick Barry, the Golden State Warriors will manage only fourth. In Seattle the Super Sonics will continue to have problems. With Fred Brown and Slick Watts both reportedly unhappy, and with a number of new players, coach Bob Hopkins has his work cut out.

## MIDWEST DIVISION

In the midwest Denver will be pressed by Chicago and Milwaukee. In Brian Taylor the Nuggets have finally got a crack playmaking guard.

Superstar David Thompson was fourth in league scoring last year, and is bound to improve. The progress of the Bulls at the end of last season should continue. Norm VanLier, Wilbur Holland, Scott May, Mickey Johnson and Otis Gilmore are excellent starters. The Chicago defense is especially strong. The Bucks are young, but talented. Kent Benson, Marques Johnson, Ernie Greenfield and Dave Meyers are all highly touted. Inexperience is the only potential downfall.

Detroit, Kansas City and Indiana will fight for the remaining spots. Marvin Barnes and Bob Lanier must both be in top form for the Pistons. The Kings are depending on Lucius Allen, Tom Burleson and Ron Boone. The financially troubled Pacers are also lacking on the court.

## CENTRAL DIVISION

Rebounding star Moses Malone, along with guards Cal Murphy and John Lucas, will lead the Houston Rockets to first in the Central Division. The biggest challenge will come from Cleveland. With Walt Frazier joining Campy Russell, Austin Carr and Nate Thurmond, the Cavaliers are strong. Featuring Elvin Hayes and Phil Chenier the Washington Bullets will manage third.

The bottom half will be led by the New Orleans Jazz with Pistol Pete Maravich and Leonard "Truck" Robinson. Neither the San Antonio Spurs, nor the Atlanta Hawks are particularly impressive. Look for the Hawks to finish last.

## ATLANTIC DIVISION

The east is the home of

the amazing Julius Erving. With him, Doug Collins, Henry Bibby and Lloyd Free, the Philadelphia 76'ers are a cinch for first. Although John Havlicek is aging and Dave Cowens is faltering, the Celtics will be second. Jo Jo White, Charlie Scott and Sidney Wicks are the keys. On paper at least, New York looks good for third. Knicks Earl Monroe, Spencer Haywood, Bob McAdoo and Jim MacMillan

are stars. Randy Smith, Ernie Di Gregorio and Adrian Dantley will keep Buffalo out of the cellar. That dubious honor is reserved for the New York Nets.

All told, pro basketball should have a good year. Most teams are financially stable, and the league is well balanced. After eight days of play, the Suns are the only unbeaten team. The Nets are the only winless one.

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