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How Dwight Howard Makes the L.A. Lakers the Perfect Threat to the Miami Heat



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Nine months away, it is easily the sexiest of the potential 2013 [NBA](#) Finals matchups--the [Los Angeles Lakers](#) vs. the Miami Heat.

While some NBA pundits rightfully refuse to cross off the [Oklahoma City Thunder](#) from their list of contenders, odds are on the Lakers meeting the Heat for the title-deciding series next June.

The Heat took the Larry O'Brien Trophy this summer, and it looked like the LeBron Era was finally about to begin. Even after signing sharp shooters Ray Allen and Rashard Lewis, though, the Heat have quickly lost their status as unquestionable championship favorites.

After acquiring Dwight Howard and Steve Nash as well as bringing in Antawn Jamison and Jodie Meeks, the Lakers appear, on paper, the perfect team to beat the Heat.

As constructed, the Lakers have the potential to be more dangerous than Miami because Lakers G.M. Mitch Kupchak has assembled an incredibly well-balanced squad. Indeed, the Lake Show will boast a starting lineup featuring players in the following conventional roles: the ball distributor, the shot-creator and scorer, the wing defender, the inside post presence, and the defensive and rebounding anchor.

The Lakers have elite players to cover all aspects of the game. Even with a roster featuring four potential Hall-of-Famers, they are not duplicating their skills anywhere. Like the Celtics back in 2008, L.A.'s starters complement each other's strengths and cover any real weaknesses.

On the other hand, while they have clearly learned to play well together, the Heat still struggle at times because their two best players--a versatile combo-point-forward and an isolation penetrating shooting guard--have similar tendencies and skill sets.

Even worse, Miami has no real inside post-presence, whereas the Lakers have the most dominant pivot man in the association.

L.A.'s formidable frontcourt provides an intriguing counterbalance to a Miami team that lacks anything significant in the frontcourt aside from Chris Bosh, who is closer to a stretch-four than a legitimate inside presence. Udonis Haslem defends and rebounds well, but he has seen his role and minutes diminish because of age and injuries.

In fact, Howard instantly transforms the Lakers into the perfect anti-smallball team and thus an anti-Heat team. Every single conference finalist last year--Boston, Miami, OKC, and San Antonio--ran Nellie-ball lineups with power forwards masquerading as centers and swingmen sliding into the frontcourt as fours, and none more often than the Heat.

While these nontraditional lineups add more speed and dynamism to the floor, Howard would absolutely slaughter them.

He simply cannot be defended by the likes of Chris Bosh, Kevin Garnett, or Serge Ibaka. Moreover,

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unlike outgoing Lakers center Andrew Bynum, Howard is able to prevent teams from simply increasing the pace to tire him out or try to run past him. With his freakish athleticism, D12 is arguably the best transition big man in the history of the game.

Just the fact that King James could end up spending thirty-plus minutes defending Pau Gasol is reason enough to worry; if so, LeBron would certainly wear down over a best-of-seven series.

This glaring matchup problem makes Miami playing a true center essential, since the gimmickry of a small-ball lineup might not prove nearly as effective against L.A. Playing Bosh at the five would all but ensure that Dwight will build a house in Miami's paint. We saw what Roy Hibbert did to the Heat in the playoffs, and Miami would only fare worse against Howard.

Thus, Howard's presence will force Miami to abandon its positionless style of basketball and play a traditional center such as Joel Anthony to be able to slow D12 down in the interior.

Given the current group of big men in Miami, it would only detract from the team's offensive capabilities given how Anthony is a black hole on offense.

If the Heat are unable to sign a free-agent center—a task that is all but impossible at this point in free agency—they are going to have a tough time competing against the Lakers.

As a result, the Heat would likely have to play a lineup featuring the offensively challenged Anthony at center. This lineup change would push Shane Battier to the bench, eliminating the sort of spacing threat that gave James and Wade so much room to penetrate into the paint in the playoffs.

Even more, Howard will quickly make the Lakers into a terrific defensive team down-low that can keep Miami's slashers out of the paint.

In the playoffs and especially during the NBA Finals, we saw LeBron and D-Wade refusing to settle for outside shots. Unfortunately for them, Howard is the one big man who can prevent them from relentlessly attacking the basket as they did against the Thunder.

A three-time Defensive Player of the Year, Dwight can defend the paint, intimidate dribble penetrators, and send back shots at the rim. He can accomplish these tasks without fouling either, having [averaged only 2.2 fouls per contest](#) against the Heat last year.

It is apparent why James has posted his lowest scoring numbers against [Orlando](#) over the past few years, and it was not because Ryan Anderson was covering him.

The Lakers are also perfectly suited to beat the Heat for other reasons on defense.

Although Nash is a defensive sieve, the Lakers' weakest defender would play against one of the Heat's supplemental weapons in Mario Chalmers. Nash's biggest defensive limitation is playing on the ball, one that is mitigated by the fact that Chalmers was in the [bottom five in usage rate](#) last season with LeBron and Wade dominating the ball.

The Lakers also have a solid stable of defenders in Metta World Peace and Devin Ebanks for slowing down LeBron. While World Peace has a lost a step defensively, he still possesses the size, strength, and attitude to match up against LeBron.

Meanwhile, Ebanks, while not a household name, is arguably the Lakers' stoutest perimeter defender. When given a chance against Kevin Durant last April, the Trevor Ariza clone frustrated KD and held him to 5-of-19 shooting. At 6'8" and with a long wingspan, Ebanks appears to have the athleticism, height, and quickness to prevent James from singlehandedly taking over games.

Overall, the trade of Howard to the Lakers quickly changed the landscape of the NBA. In a single trade, Kupchak has built the best Laker team since Shaq donned a Purple and Gold uniform.

In turn, the Lakers have gone from candidates for an early playoff exit to title favorites, and the Heat have suddenly become the underdogs.

1. "[Dwight Howard - Los Angeles Lakers - Game Log](#)", Yahoo! Sports.
2. Carlos Chalhoub. "[Style of Play of Point Guards](#)", Basketball-Statistics.com

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