# THE BIG APPLE: KNICKS VS HAWKS PLAYOFFS ROUND ONE PREVIEW

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With the NBA season coming to a close on Sunday, the playoff picture is locked in. The No. 3 seed New York Knicks will face the No. 6 seed Atlanta Hawks. The Knicks finished the year with a record of 53-29, their most wins since 2013. These 53 wins for head coach Mike Brown are the most by a Knicks coach in their first season since Pat Riley in 1992.

Atlanta is making their first playoff appearance since 2021, where they defeated New York in round one to eventually go on to the conference finals. The Hawks reshaped their roster at the trade deadline, sending guard Trae Young to the Wizards in exchange for CJ McCollum and Corey Kispert. It appeared as if the Hawks were starting fresh, trading Young, who was once the cornerstone of the franchise, and now looking towards forward Jalen Johnson to lead the squad. Johnson had a breakout season, averaging 22.5 points and 8 assists a night.

As mentioned earlier, it looked like the Hawks were ready for another year in the Play-in Tournament, just 26-30 at the All-Star break. Yet they finished the season on a red-hot, 20-6 run, landing at 46-36, beating Boston twice and the top seeded Pistons along the way.

New York got the shorter end of the stick for this playoff matchup. Had the Orlando Magic defeated the Boston Celtics, who rested their starters on Sunday evening, the Knicks would have faced the Toronto Raptors. New York hasn't lost to Toronto since January 2023, winning 13 straight against the team north of the border.

In their head-to-head series, the Knicks took the regular-season edge 2-1, capped off by a 108-105 thriller just a week ago. The game nearly slipped into overtime when McCollum launched a desperation half-court heave at the horn; however, the ball was still on his fingertips as the buzzer sounded. Jalen Brunson led the charge with a 30-point performance, while Karl-Anthony Towns dominated the glass with 22 points and 12 rebounds.

The key for the Knicks to exact revenge on the 2021 first-round loss is asserting dominance down low. Atlanta doesn't have the big men to stop Towns and Mitchell Robinson. Starter Oneyka Okongwu will be assigned to Towns. Tony Bradley comes off the bench for the Hawks and will be on Robinson. Brunson and Towns have figured out their two-man game. Expect Brunson to dish the ball down low to the seven-footer, allowing him to go to work at the rim. Robinson, who finished fifth in offensive rebounding, will be a beast on the boards, swallowing up 50/50 balls to create more buckets for his Knicks.

The role players need to step up for the Knicks. We've seen in the past that long playoff runs couldn't have happened without role-player success. Last season, it was TJ McConnell for Indiana. The speedy 6-foot-1 guard was a pest for every second he was on the floor, grabbing rebounds over players half a foot taller than him, knocking down contested shots and getting steals that shifted the momentum of the Eastern Conference Finals.

Mikal Bridges needs to kick it up a notch, as he has slumped tremendously since March 3, having just one game over 20 points. Bridges showed up tremendously in the second round last season against Boston, picking up a steal at the end of games 1 and 2 that sealed the comeback wins for the Knicks. The former Villanova Wildcat has to replicate last season's playoffs if the Knicks want to get by the surging Hawks.

The Hawks play at a quick pace, ranking fifth fastest in the league. they can knock it down from deep, having finished sixth in three-point shooting (37.1%), which can put a large amount of pressure on the Knicks. Atlanta also finished the season first in assists per game with 30.1. However, the Knicks combat these statistics with their second ranked perimeter defense. Led by Bridges and OG Anunoby, New York is going to harass Hawks shooters beyond the three-point line and try to pick off passes inside. Anunoby will be matched up with Johnson. I believe Anunoby had a First-Team All-Defensive effort this season and will keep Johnson in jail. Johnson averaged 17.5 points against the Knicks this season, which is five points below his season average. If the 24-year-old can get by the New York defense, he can cause some problems.

All playoff series have an X-factor, a player who dominates when it's needed most. For the Knicks, it's none other than their captain in Brunson. Brunson loves the bright lights; he averaged nearly 30 points last playoff run and 32 the year prior. He must shoot the ball well, especially during crunch time. He did that effectively in their last matchup in Atlanta, where the 2025 Clutch Player of the Year scored 17 of his points in the fourth quarter. The X-factor for the Hawks is surprisingly not Johnson; it's Nickeil Alexander-Walker. The cousin of 2025 MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander inked a contract last summer with the Hawks, coming from Minnesota. He averaged nearly 21 points per game this season with Atlanta after coming off the bench in Minnesota behind superstar guard Anthony Edwards. Alexander-Walker torched the Knicks this season, averaging 28 points per game, putting up 36 in their final matchup last week. New York must contain the guard if they want to limit this series to under six games.

My official prediction:

Knicks in five games.

Three of New York's last four playoff series have gone six games. Atlanta is a gritty team, I expect the Knicks to take both games one and two, drop game three, win game four and finish out the Hawks at The Garden in game five.

**Two New York Knicks players give each other a high-five. The Knicks are coming into the NBA Playoffs as the No. 3 seed in the Eastern Conference.** PHOTO COURTESY OF @NYKNICKS ON INSTAGRAM




# A Dynasty in Green: Rory McIlroy goes back-to-back at Augusta in Masters victory

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With a second-straight Green Jacket earned, Rory McIlroy has claimed a seat at one of golf's most exclusive tables. On Sunday, he joined Jack Nicklaus, Nick Faldo and Tiger Woods in the rare feat of consecutive victories at The Masters Tournament.

The 36-year-old Irishman finished 12-under par, carding rounds of 67, 65, 73 and 71 across the four-day event. With a short, tap-in bogey-putt on 18, he secured the win and etched his name further into the history books.

The road to glory was anything but smooth for McIlroy. In his final round, a double bogey on the fourth hole knocked the defending champ two strokes off the lead. His situation worsened on the sixth, when a misjudged tee shot carried him over the back of the green, leading to a two-putt bogey.

As the chances of wearing green started to fade, McIlroy responded with four birdies in the following seven holes, building a two-stroke lead with five to play. The final putt on the eighteenth green marked Rory's sixth major title, following last year's triumph which completed the career grand slam.

Far from a runaway, McIlroy was joined atop the leaderboard on Sunday by multiple contenders in line for a Green Jacket. Amongst this tight pact was 2022 and 2024 Masters champion Scottie Scheffler. With a final round of 68, Scheffler rallied to 11-under par, one stroke short of eking out a comeback. Nonetheless, his performance over the weekend notched his fourth top 5 finish in 2026.

One of the more notable performances of the weekend was that of 28-year-old Cameron Young. His 7-under round on Saturday catapulted him to a share of the lead with McIlroy heading into the final 18 holes. Young's back-to-back bogeys on the front nine allowed Rory to restore his position as the sole leader heading towards the back.

While few surged at Augusta, most crumbled. Unforeseen by many, 2024 U.S. Open winner Bryson DeChambeau aligned with the latter. In his tenth Masters start, DeChambeau got into trouble quickly. Failing to get out of a greenside bunker on hole 11, he carded a triple bogey and finished the opening day four-over.

At the very end of his second round, he found himself once again trapped in the sand. The nightmare scene on 18 caused DeChambeau to miss out on the final two rounds as the season pro fell above the cut by two strokes.

For the winning party, the historic accomplishment was anything but expected. "I just can't believe I waited 17 years to get one Green Jacket and I get two in a row," McIlroy said afterwards. As his record six-stroke lead through 36 holes vanished by the start of Sunday, his performance stands as one of struggle and resilience. Something true to the nature of golf and the art of The Masters.



**Rory McIlroy celebrating with arms thrown up in the air as he gets his second Masters win, back-to-back with his first. His accomplishments has put him alongside esteemed golfers like Nick Faldo, Jack Nicklaus, and Tiger Woods for his consecutive victory.**
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